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A Walk to an Iron Age Hill Fort. The Association has arranged a guided walk to an Iron Age Hill Fort in the grounds of the RSPB at The Lodge, Sandy, on Saturday, 18 September, from 10am to approx 12 noon. The cost is £2 per person payable on the day but numbers are limited. To book contact the BLHA Treasurer at Alan_Feasey@Yahoo.com

The BLHA Conference and AGM was held on 5 June hosted by Potton History Society. After the AGM the Society provided talks about their activities as well as a talk from Pamela Birch of BLARS on the county web scene. Delegates enjoyed either an informative town walk or a tour of Potton churchyard. There was also a talk on Potton's past citizens by Peter Ibbett.

A Painted Landscape – a watercolour exhibition of 1800s Bedfordshire landscapes. Watercolour paintings and local history feature in a new exhibition, *A Painted Landscape*, at Wardown Park Museum, Luton, running from 24 April to 14 November 2010, showing Bedfordshire before railways, tarmac roads and industrialisation. It explores paintings by Thomas Fisher (1772–1836) and George Shepherd (1784–1862). Entry is free and there is free parking at Wardown Park Museum in Wardown Park, Old Bedford Road, Luton LU2 7HA: www.wardownparkmuseum.com

Open: Tues–Sat 10am–5pm, Sun 1pm–5pm.

Historypin. Social movement 'We Are What We Do' joined forces with Google to create Historypin – a digital time machine allowing people to view and share history in a new way. Historypin uses Google Maps and Street View and hopes to become the largest user-generated archive of world historical images and stories. The public may upload and pin their own old photos, and the stories behind them;

users may layer their old images onto modern street views. Have a look at

www.wearewhatwedo.org/generations

Leighton Buzzard & District Archaeological and Historical Society has written and published *Millers and Methodists* which looks at the history of Leighton's mills and the families who ran them, most of whom were leading Methodists in the town.

The book grew out of a study of the history of a member's home in King Street which led to investigating three families which dominated milling in Leighton, starting with the early 18th century Flemons dynasty. They helped to found, support and sometimes lead the Methodists in Leighton and this is documented. There are many illustrations of mills, churches, family trees and maps. The book is available at £5.50 (which includes post and packaging) from Paul Brown 01525 374050 or e-mail paulbrown5@mac.com

Bedfordshire's first blue plaque

On 23 October 2009, the mayor of Leighton-Linslade Town Council and the staff and pupils of Leighton Middle School made history with the unveiling of the first 'Blue Plaque' in Bedfordshire. It honours Mary Norton, author of the children's stories series 'The Borrowers'. The unveiling was performed by the Town Mayor, Councillor Karen Curzon, in the presence of Mary Norton's daughter, Anne Brunsdon, granddaughter, Professor Charlotte Brunsdon, and several other members of the family.



Mary Norton's daughter (Mrs Brunsdon), granddaughter (Prof Charlotte Brunsdon) together with Leighton-Linslade Mayor, Cllr Mrs Karen Cursons

The unveiling followed a short reception and concert by pupils in the school hall, one of several buildings described by Mary Norton to older

members of the family. The plaque is installed on the front face of the Old House building of Leighton Middle School, easily visible from Leighton Buzzard High Street. This building was one of two houses in the town occupied by Mary Norton's family – the Pearsons – when they lived here during her childhood. Recognisable features of the house and grounds are mentioned in her stories.

Blue plaques are traditionally installed by English Heritage and correspondence about a plaque for Mary Norton started in 2004. Mary Norton fulfilled the criteria for qualification by: *Eminence* – winning awards for her fiction during her lifetime, including the Carnegie Medal in 1952, the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award and the ALA Distinguished Book award. *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* was made into a very successful film by Disney and at least two of her Borrowers books were serialised by the BBC. Many are still in print after 50 years. *Human Happiness* – you only have to read one of her books to realise she qualifies. *Name Recognition* – she is well known to have been a resident of Leighton Buzzard, and the school which now occupies the house makes a point of educating pupils in their heritage. *National Recognition* – this was left to English Heritage to judge. *Timing* – Mary Norton was born 10 December 1903 so had then (2004) just passed her centenary. She died in 1992. *Site Significance* – the house and grounds are the setting for The Borrowers series. She told the *Daily Mail* in 1958: ‘ . . . It came very much from my own childhood, when we lived in a big old house in Leighton Buzzard and played with tiny theatrical dolls that I involved in terrible tragedies.’ *Visibility* – the front of the main house faces on to the High Street of Leighton Buzzard and the bus turning point for all the buses bringing shoppers to the town. The site was (and still is) clearly visible all the way down the High Street.



English Heritage confirmed that their criteria were met but had decided to restrict installation of blue plaques to London. Budget constraints and imminent demise meant that Bedfordshire CC and Bedfordshire and Luton Archive Records Service (BLARS) could not pursue the matter. For similar reasons, South Bedfordshire District Council, declined. Matters rested until 2009 when, linked with a proposed Borrowers educational development, Leighton-Linslade Town Council decided they would support the installation.

Mrs Norton was born in 1903 and died in 1992. She lived with her family in the house for about two

years, according to electoral records stored at Bedford. In 1921 the whole site was purchased by the Bedfordshire County Council for use as a school – first the Cedars Upper School until 1974, then the present Middle School.

A letter was found from Mrs Norton to a teacher at Leighton Middle School in 1981 which confirmed that she lived in the house. *Debrett's 1991* gave her father's name and her literary agents at that time. Electoral records at Bedfordshire County Archives gave the date of first occupation of the house by Reginald Spencer Pearson, Mrs Norton's father. A copy of *The Borrowers*, published fairly recently had some biographical notes, and contact was made with the publishers who enabled me to contact Anne Brundson, Mrs Norton's eldest child. Through her, Mrs Norton's younger brother, Guy, was found, then still alive aged 95 in South Africa, and he said the family left the house in 1914.

So, Reginald Spencer Pearson moved to Leighton Buzzard in 1912, although registers for 1909–11 were not available at Bedford. He first lived in The Manor House in Lake Street, near the town centre, demolished in 1957. Mr Pearson is registered at The Cedars, a Victorian house also known as 2 Church Square, in 1914 but is not shown as living there in the 1915 register. Despite this short occupation, The Borrowers stories are definitely set there so the Blue Plaque is relevant. MAURICE BLACKMAN

The Women's Land Army in Bedfordshire during the First World War – Part 2

STUART ANTROBUS *continues his article concerning the Women's Land Army in the First World War, below. Part 1 was published in our previous issue, HIB 5.3.*

By 19 October 1917 returns from the district Registrars revealed that there were 899 part-time women workers on Bedfordshire farms and 496 full-time workers and a proportion of these were women employed under the Land Army scheme. A Junior Section of the Women's Land Army was announced that month for girls between the ages of 16 and 18 years. In time, as Land Army gangs were established for specific tasks, group leaders were appointed from the land girls.

Accommodation for women agricultural workers was not always possible on the farms where they worked and there was also a need to accommodate mobile gangs of female workers, so hostels were set up. Hostels were opened at a number of locations over the next two years, including: at a farmhouse in Cotton End, Bedford, owned by the County War Agricultural Committee; at Wren Park, Shefford, which accommodated 40 women; at Bourne End, Bletsoe; one in Toddington; and at Cooter's End on the Luton Hoo Estate, near Luton, for 16 women who worked on Lady Wernher's Home Farm. There was a Timber Department hostel at Clophill.

For those women who needed billets when changing from one farm to another and temporarily out of work, there were two hostels in Bedford, one run by the YWCA and the other by the Girls' Friendly Society at 3 Warwick Avenue, Bedford. A Land Service Corps gang hostel was established at Slip End and in May 1918 Wren Park offered itself as a hostel for 'potato gangs' of mobile women workers. Mrs Skinner was the Matron there and a cook-general lived in.



'Will you help win the War?', recruiting leaflet, c 1917 (BLARS WW1/WA5/1/1)

In March 1917, two representatives from the committee were asked to attend a meeting of the Women's National Service Scheme at the Albert Hall, London, to demonstrate what had been achieved. But when the county was invited to provide 11 women land workers to take part in the Lord Mayor's Show on 9 November 1917, the county committee was opposed to the proposal on the grounds that farmers were behind in their work due to the bad weather.

In July 1917 it was agreed that women might be employed on wet days, if willing, on such work as cleaning out barns, cleaning harness, mending sacks and picking over fruit, but not purely domestic tasks unconnected with agriculture.

Head lice could be a problem with some women workers and in August 1917 medical practitioners were asked to state clearly on medical certificates whether girls' heads were clean. Selection committees were asked to reject volunteers until passed clean. Dr Stacey had recommended that National Service volunteers should have their hair cut short as a preventive measure.

To help make life more tolerable for women farm workers billeted away from home, a scheme was established to provide library books and advertisements were put in local newspapers requesting gifts of suitable books for Landworkers' Libraries to be set up. Similarly, 55 National Service workers were invited to a Christmas treat of entertainment on 1 January 1918 by the Girls' Friendly Society in Bedford. A monthly magazine, *The Landswoman*, was published from 1918 onwards.

Complaints from women workers as to the long hours they had to keep as milkers prompted the

committee to approach farmers as to whether some curtailment of the afternoon's work might be possible. In June 1918, the county committee applied to the Board of Agriculture for permission to hire or purchase bicycles for women workers because of the distance some had to travel from their hostels to their farms. Extra blankets were requested in cold weather for young women in the hostels. Mrs Peacock of Bromham acted as Honorary Welfare Officer for some time.



Carrie Partridge with hay cart at Town Farm, Riseley, c 1916-1919 (BLARS Z50/96/37)

Another important allied development which led to improvements in the lives of women generally in the countryside was the setting up of new Women's Institutes (WIs) in villages, under the auspices of the Board of Agriculture, following the lecture by Mrs Madge Watt on the success of such organisations in Canada and the piloting of several in England and Wales. The Bedfordshire Women's Agricultural Committee approved the idea and decided to enquire of other neighbouring counties as to what they were doing to establish WIs. The first WI in Bedfordshire in 1917, was, ironically, in the town of Dunstable but was closely followed by the villages of Dean and Bletsoe. Early branches focused on war aims such as replacing men on the land, being self-sufficient in food, maintaining village industries and, what later became the iconic image of WIs, jam-making. Mrs Whitbread became the first County Chairman and Mrs Whitchurch the Vice-Chairman, when the Bedfordshire Federation of WIs was formed in September 1919. The secretary was Miss Foster of Wootton.

In 1918 Efficiency Tests for land girls were begun nationally, with examiners selected from the areas where the training centres were. Mr J H Brown, Mr H Humphries and Mr Ernest Frossell acted as Honorary Examiners in Bedfordshire in conjunction with Board of Agriculture officials. Tests included horsework, ploughing, weeding, care of stock and milking. The first ones in Bedfordshire took place on 23 April 1918, highlighting the skills that women farm workers in the county could demonstrate. Cooter's End training centre was one of the places in the south of the county, near Luton Hoo, where Efficiency Tests were held.

The Great War, as it had been known, ended with the Armistice in November 1918 but women continued to work on the land until men eventually

returned after demobilisation in 1919. Land girls took part in the Peace Celebrations of 19 July 1919 at Luton, Dunstable and Bedford. Two Bedfordshire land girls, Tamar Reade and Kate Watts, represented the county at a national rally in London on 27 November and the Women's Land Army was disbanded on 30 November 1919 (not to be revived until June 1939 after which, eventually, over 200,000 young women were to do vital work in food production during and just after the Second World War). A farewell party for Bedfordshire women farm workers was held at Dudeny and Johnston's in Bedford on the afternoon of 28 November 1919. Members were allowed to keep their hat and badge after the disbandment. Bedfordshire's Women's War Agricultural Committee office was closed and the committee disbanded early in 1920.

Nationally, some 23,000 women were trained up and took up farm work during the First World War and at any one time during its peak the WLA had a strength of 16,000 members, doing what had previously been seen as men's work on Britain's farms between 1916 and 1919. Most were milkers and field workers but a smaller number were carters, early tractor drivers, 'ploughmen', thatchers, shepherds and in horticulture. Inevitably, some were lured away by higher wages in factories and had to be replaced. The harvest of 1918 was the peak of wartime food production, with almost 2m tonnes of wheat and 3m tonnes of potatoes above the 1916 tonnage achieved.

In Bedfordshire, during the three years existence of the Land Army, some 90 farmers applied for women workers and 550 Land Army members worked, for various periods of time, as registered farm workers, including 150 women who had been trained in the county and others who had received training elsewhere. On demobilisation, 60 land girls in Bedfordshire expressed a wish to stay on the land, if they could, and 44 of these were asked by their employers to stay as permanent workers on their farms.

Meriel Talbot, writing in the last official issue of *The Landswoman*, following the disbandment of the WLA, wrote with gratitude of 'the opportunity for service it has given us, for the manifold experience gained, and for the door opened to women to take their place in the agricultural life of the country'. The appearance of women in trousers, breeches and puttees in villages throughout Britain had brought a real, if temporary, transformation in the image of women. Regrettably, however, the same prejudices against the employment of women on the land which were met at the beginning of the First World War were to be met again, 20 years later, at the beginning of the Second World War. STUART ANTROBUS

Sources and further reading

Bedfordshire and Luton archives and Records Service, Bedford (BLARS): WW1/WA1, WW1/WA3, WW1/WA4, WW1/WA5, WWA/6/2, PK8/1.

Gill Clarke, *The Women's Land Army: A Portrait* (2008); Carol Twinch, *Women on the Land: Their Story during Two World Wars* (1990).

Book review

Pirton – A Village in Anguish: The Story of 30 men from a Hertfordshire Village who Died in WW1, by Derek Jarrett. (Pirton Local History Group, 2009. ISBN 978-0-9512103-3-8, 102 pp, paperback, £9.95, available from the author: dj@jarretts.org.uk, local bookshops and Pirton Village Stores.)

This book is another of the recent books charting local sacrifices in the Great War. Pirton is a village in North Hertfordshire very close to the Bedfordshire border and with many links to our county, not least those of their men who enlisted in the Bedfordshire Regiment.

Derek Jarrett tells their stories, and also the stories of those who enlisted in other regiments, with a sensitive appreciation of the effects of their deaths on their families and on the village as a whole. In many cases he is able to sketch their lives prior to joining up, and those of their parents, and identify where they lived in the village. The arrangement of the material is chronologically through the war and its campaigns, and explanation of these is given.

In addition to photos of the soldiers there are some family photographs of wives and parents and historical and modern photos of village buildings and of cemeteries in France (some in colour). Generally reproduction is very good apart from pictures reproduced from newspapers of the time.

But it is the biographies that intrigue and sadden us: The first to die was Sergeant Major Frank Cannon a professional footballer who played for Queens Park Rangers and West Ham. Sergeant Fred Burton, became a servant to a professor at Cambridge and then butler at Binfield Manor, Berkshire. The Handscombe family lost two of their sons. Corporal Albert Titmuss's wife was a widow for 53 years. Private Albert Abbiss had emigrated to Canada but came back to serve and die. Private Raymond Jenkins, a railwayman who, at over 6ft tall, joined the Grenadier Guards even though, as a railway employee, he was not compelled to join up.

The last Pirton casualty of the Great War was Private Frederick Odell. He joined up shortly before the death of his brother, Arthur. Whilst transporting water to the front line he was shot in the spine by an aircraft machine-gunning the troops. He was paralysed and died from his injuries in April 1919, five months after the war had ended.

In all this is a carefully written, extensively researched and well put together book, which, in spite of the sad subject, is an interesting read. It is very well printed by a firm well known to your reviewer and is mercifully clear of typographical errors, though perhaps a better typeface than Times New Roman could have been chosen.

There is no index, but a detailed table of contents. The Acknowledgements page shows the amount of family and community input to the project. Just one quibble: I find the fashion for italicising quotations distracting in reading and unnecessary; after all, what are quotation marks for? Longer quotations also look so much better if they are set in a smaller type size and in roman type.

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