The 2009 AGM and Conference was hosted by Clapham History Society on Saturday 13th June by The Clapham History Society. The AGM was opened by Martin Lawrence, (Vice President) who had acted as interim Chairman for 2008-9. In his report he commented that the past year had been a transitional year for the Association, as it steers a new direction for the future. In March 2008 members indicated that the Association was an important part of the heritage community in Bedfordshire, providing a voice for the local history societies. however, change was needed. There should be less emphasis on the organisation of events and more on the development of the Association's approach to outreach and electronic communication. In response, a new web master has been appointed and further web design capacity has been offered and plans are under way to improve the web-site. The first steps towards a greater degree of virtual governance are able to be implemented, with greater electronic feedback from societies to be encouraged.

Mike Turner presented the audited accounts for the past year which showed the Association had all but broken even in the year with a satisfactory balance of £1,270.30 at year end. He recommended that the membership fee remained unchanged for the coming year. The accounts were accepted.

Brian Lazelle was elected Chairman for 2008-9 and took the chair for subsequent proceedings.

Mike Turner (Ampthill & District Archaeological & Local History Society), treasurer; Janet Thornton (Bedfordshire Family History Society), secretary and Veronica Sims (independent member) were re-elected to the committee.

Martin Deacon of BLARS replaces Kevin Ward as ex-officio committee member. Since the meeting Mollie Foster (Clapham History Society), Linda Reed (independent member) and Ted Martin (Langford History Society) have volunteered to assist the committee and will be co-opted at the next committee meeting.

In Any Other Business a request was made for earlier detailed information to members about events, particularly about the AGM and Conference, but it was emphasised that communication is a two way affair. The Speaker List is to be updated, and articles are always wanted for the BLHA Newsletter.

BEDFORDSHIRE LOCAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION (BLHA)
AGM & CONFERENCE 2010

The 2010 Local History Conference and Annual General Meeting will be hosted by the Potton History Society and will be held in the St. Mary’s Church Hall (next to the church), Hatley Road, Potton on Saturday 5th June 2010, ample car parking is available.

A full and interesting programme is promised including a visit to a local place of interest so make a note of the date in your forward planner for 2010. More details will appear in our next edition and on www.pottonhistorysociety.com

Archaeology Review

The Archaeology Review will be held on 10th October 2009, hosted at Stockwood Discovery Centre Luton. Topics include Health in Roman Dunstable, Excavations at the Biddenham Loop, Iron Age coin moulds from Braughing and Community Archaeology in North Hertfordshire.

Tickets cost £15, which includes a buffet lunch, 9 speakers and a review booklet.

We still have 50 tickets left so if you are interested in booking a place please contact me.

Please pass this on to anyone you know might be interested or forward this around your society or friends.

Tim Vickers, Archaeologist, Museums Luton, tel. no. 01582 547969.
Autumn 2009

WOAD IN BEDFORDSHIRE
Vivian Billington

Introduction
The dye plant woad (*isatis tinctoria*) was grown from very early times for the rich blue dye which could be produced from its leaves and forms the basis of blacks, greens and other dark colours.

My interest had been aroused in 1987 after a family historian from Yorkshire, who shared my interest in the surname Pickering, asked if I would look up a couple of events for her in the Maidwell Northants. register, as she was unable to get to the Northamptonshire Record Office (NRO) herself. On doing so I was intrigued to notice one Pickering described as 'of the woad', and others as sojourners and earlier references to woadmen from 1712 to around 1800.

At that time I knew little about the woad plant (*Isatis tinctoria*) except that it was source of a blue dye and that it was considered an exhausting plant which could not be grown on the same land for more than 2 to 4 years at a time. Therefore the growers had to keep moving to new land, not necessarily in the same county. I realised this would be a problem for anyone searching for woad-people ancestors. It would be like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack.

I decided to find out more and contacted the NRO, which fortunately had a file on woad. This included descriptions of woad growing in the 19th century, agreements between landowners and woadmen, a newspaper advertisement of 1797 for 'sward land' on which to grow the crop and, most importantly, a manuscript index of baptisms, marriages and burials from 43 parishes in Northamptonshire and Rutland between 1640 and 1798. I decided it would be an interesting project to try and expand this index. I tried to familiarise myself with the names in the index and read what I could on the subject. I also contacted family history societies to seek and offer help.

The Woad Plant and its Cultivation
Woad in its first year looks much like spinach beet and in its second year it throws up a single stem with a head of yellow flowers. It needed careful weeding to encourage growth, and in favourable conditions yielded 4 to 5 crops a year. Leaves were picked from June onwards, largely by women and children, taken to a horse-powered mill and ground to a pulp. This was formed into balls or wads, which were placed in open-sided drying racks or ranges to dry in the air. When dry, the wads were powdered and wetted again and then fermented or 'couched' to bring out the colour by oxidisation. This was a skilled and smelly process, and the odour permeated the worker’s clothes and skin. The resulting clay-like substance was then packed into barrels to be sent to dyers. Sometimes the couching process was not carried out on the site, but the dry wads were packed into casks for couching by the dyers.

A select portion of the woad crop would be left over winter to flower the following year to produce seed for future use. It was a crop which required capital and a sufficient acreage to keep at least one mill occupied, so tended to be grown by the larger farmers and landowners and later by specialist woad growers who paid the landowner an extraordinary rent for 2-3 years. In the early 19th century there are reports of areas of 25, 50 and 70 acres being grown. Growing woad had the advantage of removing some excessive richness out of the soil and helping to get rid of soil pests extremely destructive of corn. The land could then be ploughed again for woad in 15 to 20 years time. Examples of this long rotation occur in Farthinghoe Northants., where woad was grown 1649-51, 1695-96, 1718-26 and possibly again c.1780. Also in Farnborough WAR where there were woadmen/sojourners in the registers 1680-81, 1709-11 and again from 1757-1762.

A Nineteenth Century Account of Woad-Growing
There is an account of how one 19th century woad-grower organised his business at Newport Pagnell, Bucks., only a few miles from the Bedfordshire parishes of Millbrook, Ampthill and Bromham, where similar methods would have been used. A Mr. Neal of Watford Northants. rented 25 acres of pasture to grow woad for four years upon sward, after being in the first instance pared and burnt. Mr. Neal brings his own servants with him and upon a spot of ground near to the land which he hires, he erects a millhouse and mill for bruising the woad as soon as it is cut and carried from the ground where it grows and near this house are huts, built of turf and wood, for the families

Cont. on p3 col.1
which he brings with him. Here they remain as a colony for four years, during which time they look out for another portion of sward land, to be cultivated in the same manner. (Extract from General View of the Agriculture of Bucks. by the Rev. St. John Priest, 1813, Chapter 6, Crops section xxxiv).

Parish Registers, Bishop's Transcripts and Nonconformist Registers
These are major sources for tracing woad-people's movements, and particularly useful when indexed by surname and occupation. Unfortunately occupations are not always mentioned and, if they are in registers as labourers, they will probably not be indexed. However I have found some in Bedfordshire registers indexed as sojourners. Other descriptions to look out for include wadman, wadwoman, labrer in ye wadd, wadder, woadman, wadfolk, woaddresser, woad-dresser, of the woad ground or oade ground, or of the woad cabins/cabbens. It has to be pointed out that occupations are not given in every case. A father may be called woadman at one baptism but not at another a couple of years later. Some registers mention almost no occupations, so it is important to familiarise oneself with the recurring woad surnames and those individuals positively identified as woad-people. These may appear in registers from other counties. For instance the register for Burton Dassett Warwickshire is exceptional in having set aside three pages (after burials for 1788) for 'people belonging to the woad'. These pages record 37 baptisms, marriages and burials during the period 1698 -1712. This is invaluable for cross-referencing with registers that mention occupations infrequently.

Maps & Field Names
When considering which parishes to search, it is worth looking for clues on maps, both estate maps and Ordnance Survey ones. The parish name Odell Beds. derives from woad/oade, which indicates how long ago woad was grown in the county. It is interesting to note that the crop continued to be grown in that part of the Great Ouse valley (see listings for Chellington). So far in Bedfordshire I have come across only one relevant field name (a reference in the Victoria County History volume 3, page 44) to 'Cabbin Ground' in Bromham, one of whose descriptions to look out for include wadman, wadwoman, labrer in ye wadd, wadder, woadman, wadfolk, woaddresser, woad-dresser, of the woad ground or oade ground, or of the woad cabins/cabbens. It has to be pointed out that occupations are not given in every case. A father may be called woadman at one baptism but not at another a couple of years later. Some registers mention almost no occupations, so it is important to familiarise oneself with the recurring woad surnames and those individuals positively identified as woad-people. These may appear in registers from other counties. For instance the register for Burton Dassett Warwickshire is exceptional in having set aside three pages (after burials for 1788) for 'people belonging to the woad'. These pages record 37 baptisms, marriages and burials during the period 1698 -1712. This is invaluable for cross-referencing with registers that mention occupations infrequently.

Quarter Sessions and Poor Law Records:
These can be very helpful in tracing the movements of woad-people, often from one county to another, and in some cases reconstructing a family over many years. The Buckinghamshire Quarter Sessions Records for 12th January 1726/7 records that William Johnson, his wife Mercy and their six named children were ordered to be removed from Haversham near Newport Pagnell, to the sparsely populated parish of Stuchbury near Brackley Northhants., a destination changed on 13th July 1727 to Brill Bucks.. William had been born in Stuchbury Wadd Ground where his father lived and worked as a Wadder. He had been left an orphan at the age of about 4 years, and since then had moved about the country living in the counties of Buckingham, Northampton, Warwick and Bedford, following his father's trade of a Wadder and living in a Wadd Cabin each time. He was baptised 9th April 1671. Stuchbury has no church, but I eventually found William's baptism at Helmdon, where the register records confirmed that he was born at Stuchbury Wadd Ground.

A brother Edward was baptised a year earlier to George and Elizabeth Johnson. William and Mercy's three youngest children were baptised at Haversham between 1723 and 1726 and their daughter Mercy at Farthinghoe in 1721. Mercy Johnson, the mother, had two children by a former husband William Cox, the daughter Anne having been born in Bromham Beds.. It seems that William had also been married previously. A William and Jane Johnson baptised daughters at Blakesley Northhants. in 1697 and 1699, a daughter and son George at Burton Dassett WAR in 1701 and 1704, and a son William at Ot. Houghton Northhants. in 1709, and there was probably at least one further marriage before he married Mercy.

Efforts to follow up the Brill lead were frustrated because I was told the register was in too poor a condition to be consulted. It was years later that a correspondent when searching her own ancestors in Bedfordshire registers, spotted in the Millbrook Beds. register the burial of William Johnson 'of Brill' in 1748 and also the burial of George son of George Johnson 'of Brill' in 1757. This is a particularly good example of how useful Poor Law Records can be in tracing a family over many years in at least four counties.
Dear Editor

As guest curator of ‘Winds of Exchange’, an exhibition tracing the trade, academic and cultural links between Bedfordshire and Japan over the past 150 years, I would be very grateful for any information, or objects, that members of the B.L.H.A. members might be able to supply. Themes to be explored include:- Japanese code breaking at Bletchley Park; Beds & Herts FEPOWs; Japanese acrobats in Luton (1871); Josiah Conder (born in Biggleswade?), professor of Western Architecture in Japan; early Japanese photo albums; Tokyo earthquake 1923; productions of the Mikado; Pilgrim’s Progress; J.P. White (Pyghtle Works); Allens; Liberty; Cranfield; Unilever; Woburn Abbey etc.

The exhibition ‘Winds of Change’ will be held at Bedford Museum, 24th October 2009 – 3rd January 2010. I can be contacted on e-mail mjmaule@yahoo.co.uk

With many thanks,
Marion Maule.

LIST OF SPEAKERS

The BLHA’s speakers list is being up dated at present and any suggestions for additions (or subtractions) should be sent to the secretary or myself as soon as possible, so that they can be contacted to complete the formal procedure.


Denis Argent a professional journalist joined the British army in 1940 at the age of 23. He was already writing for Mass Observation, the social research organization founded in 1937. His political views were decidedly left leaning, virtually communist.

Denis was also a pacifist and in the 1930s a member of the Peace Pledge Union. He applied for exemption from combat service and to be assigned to the Royal Army Medical Core (RAMC). His case was accepted at a Tribunal in June 1940 which recommended the RAMC assignment. However he was posted to the Non Combatant Core (NCC) as a medical orderly.

After some months in uniform as a medical orderly in Barry Docks and then in a remote camp near Haverfordwest, he became frustrated by the failure of his attempts to transfer to the RAMC and in May 1940 he applied successfully for a transfer to Bomb Disposal. After training camp he spent the next two years billeted in Bedfordshire and its his diaries for these two years that are the basis for this volume.

He wrote a remarkable detailed account of street life and other aspects of the Home Front in Luton and Bedford, daily military routine, bomb disposal, war travel and leisure all with the observant reporter’s eye. Denis left Bedfordshire in 1942, ceased to be a conscientious objector and began combat training.

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