

BLHA Spring Visit – 25th April 2006

We have arranged for a party of BLHA members (which includes members of member societies) to visit Drayton House, near Kettering in Northamptonshire. Drayton House has been a family home for almost 1000 years. The core of the house built by Simon de Drayton dates from the year 1300, while the transformation it underwent during the late 17th and 18th centuries are of particular architectural interest.

The house, which passed to the Sackville family in 1770, is not open to the general public, visits and study days being arranged solely for groups with a special interest. We have arranged a guided tour of 1½ hours' duration, commencing at 2 pm – there is much to see. We regret there are no facilities for the disabled.

The cost of the visit will be £10 per head, inclusive of tea served with home-made cakes.

Travel will be by private car. Booking forms have been sent to members, societies, etc. Places are limited, so book early. Booking closes 31st March, or earlier if all places are booked.

2006 BLHA ANNUAL CONFERENCE & ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The **2006 Annual Conference & Annual General Meeting** will be hosted by **Colmworth & Neighbours History Society**, and held on **Saturday 17th June 2006** in Colmworth Village Hall. Registration and coffee will be from 9 to 9.30 am. The AGM will commence promptly at 9.30 am. BLHA members who wish to attend the AGM but not the Conference are welcome. There will be no charge to attend the AGM.

The Conference will commence at 10 am, after the completion of the AGM, and an interesting programme of talks and local visits will continue until 4 pm, with a break for the buffet lunch. Tea will be served from 4 to 4.30 pm.

The talks include: "*Bedfordshire & the Sailing Navy 1660-1815*" by Dr. David Davis MA DPhil (Oxon); "*The Female Vagrant Pauper*" by Jaquie Fillmore BA MSt (Cantab). One tour will give delegates the rare opportunity to visit nearby Bushmead Priory; however the priory interior has stairs and uneven floors that may be difficult for those with mobility problems, but the outside and site as a whole are attractive.

Parking will be available in the adjacent village hall car park. The Village Hall, its facilities and the Church are fully wheelchair-accessible. The fee for the day, including buffet lunch and refreshments, is £12 a head. Only delegates who have booked a place are entitled to attend the conference. Additional booking forms and full programme details are available from Mrs. Janet Smith, telephone 01234 376487, email bramblesmiths@btinternet.com.

REGISTER OF SPEAKERS

Following representations from several member societies, it was agreed at the last Committee meeting that the BLHA will undertake the compilation of a **Register of Speakers**. We will be asking all societies to provide details of speakers they have in recent years engaged to talk to their members. Once we have these details, we will then approach the individual speakers and ask them whether they wish to join our Register. Those wishing to join will be asked to complete a simple form to find out what they talk on, the equipment they use, and which parts of the county they are willing to travel to. As it will take some time to collect all the information, it is envisaged that the final Register will not be available until the Autumn. In order to comply with the Data Protection Act, we have to seek the permission of the individual speakers, and this also means that we can only provide copies to those societies that are members of the BLHA, for their sole use for the purpose intended.

BEDFORDSHIRE LOCAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION COMMUNICATIONS

History in Bedfordshire regularly requires suitable articles for publication to enable regular issue dates to be met. We will also publish Societies' special events that they wish to bring to the attention of a wider audience – we now distribute over 600 copies per issue. Latest copy date for the Summer edition is 1st April 2006.

The next meeting of the **Bedfordshire Local History Association's Committee** will be held on 30th March 2006. If you wish to bring anything to the attention of the committee, or have any queries relating to these meetings, the Secretary can be contacted by email at secretary@bedfordshire-lha.org.uk.

LEIGHTON BUZZARD FIRE SERVICE – A HISTORY**Maurice Blackman**

In 1683, 12 fire buckets were bequeathed by Thomas Meriden, to be hung in the Bell Loft 'near his seat' in All Saints (Leighton Buzzard Parish) Church. This is the first record of provision for a fire fighting service in the town. This followed a major fire set during the Civil War by Parliamentary forces. A petition to Parliament for £14,369 restitution two years later was apparently unsuccessful.

Prior to the 18th century, fires were fought by any townspeople attracted to a fire, frequently using thatch hooks and other implements stored in parish churches. In 1666, the first insurance company was founded in London, specifically to compensate insured persons for fire losses. Over the next fifty years this idea spread and developed and the insurance companies realised they could reduce their losses if they formed fire fighting units. Brigade activities were initially limited to protecting the properties insured by their own company and buildings carried the company symbols, many of which survive to this day in Leighton Buzzard as in many other towns in the country. Eventually insurers realised that they might also reduce their risk by fighting fires in properties neighbouring their customers. Membership of fire brigades conferred some immunity from press gangs by an Act of 1707. This, together with 'magnificent' uniforms, provided incentives to join.

By the 1770s, nearly sixty policies had been written for properties in Leighton Buzzard by two companies active in the town, the Sun and the Royal Exchange. Policy holders included 6 farmers, 5 surgeon/apothecaries, 4 yeomen, 3 drapers, 2 gents, 2 inn holders, 2 bakers, 2 wool staplers, a hemp dresser, a peruke maker and a variety of other trades. In 1781, the Royal Exchange representative, attorney David Willis, became convinced of the benefit of such policies and insured himself.

In 1706, an Act of Queen Anne's reign empowered parishes to buy pumps and form brigades but provision of such publicly funded services was slow and parish engines were considered unreliable. Races between parish and insurance company pumps were common since the first at the scene of a fire received a reward irrespective of their (frequently negligible) contribution to fighting the fire.

In 1810, the Country News section of the *Gentlemen's Magazine* reported that on 20th January 'this morning the newly erected buildings of Mr Jackson, fell monger at Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire, were discovered to be on fire, but by the active exertions of the inhabitants of the town, the flames were fortunately got under without any serious loss to the proprietor'. It may be that this and similar occurrences convinced the Leighton Buzzard vestry to adopt the Lighting and

Watching Act 1833 and form a committee. No details can be found of its actions. In 1830 and again in 1833 the Lighting & Watching Acts permitted parishes to fund inspectors and fire engines. By 1848 though, Leighton Buzzard has two fire engines and 2 brigades including a 'promising if not efficient' horse drawn engine. This is taken from a report in the Bedford Times of a display of fire fighting paid for by Kent United Fire Office in thanks for saving insured premises adjacent to a fire. A hand pumped engine of this time still exists on display at Leighton Buzzard Library, manufactured by Shand Mason who exhibited at the 1851 Great Exhibition. Pumpers could earn one shilling (5p) for the first hour dropping to sixpence for subsequent hours but plus free beer when the fire was out. A typical pump required two teams of twenty to keep up pressure and thus could be quite a charge on the parish. In France, firefighters are still called 'pompiers'.

In 1885, Superintendent J Young had to apologise for poor service at a fire due to lack of horses and the absence of firemen due to Boxing Day. On 3rd September 1891, the new Urban District Council took over responsibility for the engines and service from the parish under the provisions of the 1858 local Government Act. Mr Ruggles was Captain of the brigade, a post he held until at least 1902. The UDC formed a Lighting & Fire Brigade Committee with Cllr. W S Page in the chair. To help them with their duties, their next meeting in November was held at the engine house and Town Hall, the building still standing in Market Square and now known as the Old Fire Station after its purchase from Mr Mills of Stockgrove Park, then Lord of the Manor, by the UDC for that purpose in 1919. This rush of generosity did not last and in January 1931 we find the committee rejecting the purchase of alarm bells to be installed in firemen's houses at £1 each since 11 were requested and only 7 were needed. In March of that same year, the brigade distinguished itself by rendering immense help at the wreck of the 'Royal Scot' at Leighton Buzzard station, notably freeing a trapped mother and child after 4 hours. In April, the town lost Percy Dean Payne, fire chief like his father before him. Percy Paine formulated the rules of the Leighton Buzzard brigade in 1916 and his father was responsible for replacing manual pumps with reamers, probably soon after Superintendent Young's problems and the formation of the UDC committee.

Rumours of war in the late 1930s led the government to increase central control through legislation (Air Raids Precautions Act 1937) and the formation and funding of the national Auxiliary Fire Service. More legislation and reorganisation followed and in 1941 the National Fire Service was formed, albeit with the promise of a

return to local control after the war. Local control was restored but at county level and Leighton Buzzard's

LEIGHTON BUZZARD FIRE SERVICE – A HISTORY

(continued)

brigade and premises was taken over by Bedfordshire, subsequently amalgamating with Luton in 1974. In that same year, the UDC (by now, Leighton-Linslade) lost control of the Old Fire Station to South Beds District Council, a body which at the time of writing are trying to lease the building for commercial use, notwithstanding a covenant with Mr Mills that the building be retained for public use.

That post war period was not without incident. In 1950, the then chief, E R T Stanford said that a new station was urgently needed. Consequently, in 1957, the old Manor House, Lake Street, one time home of Borrowers' author, Mary Norton, was demolished to provide an access road for the new station and in 1962 the station was opened. Also in 1957, the town found itself in dispute with the Luton Rural District Council over the brigade's supply of water in tankers after a bore hole failed. 1957 was also the year that the town sent its first radio message to its Bedford HQ in relation to a fire at the Black Horse public house - still in business at the junction of North and West Streets today. Four months later, in August, the town's early 19th century manual pump was found tucked away in a UDC yard from where it was removed to Luton Museum for cleaning and restoration, returning eventually to the town's library where it can be seen today.

Three years later, the town suffered the bizarre experience of an arsonist who was found to be a police constable. On 17th September, 1960, Police Constable Ferris was found guilty at Bedford Quarter Sessions of setting fires at a garage, a transport company, a grocers and a tea shop. 'I knew I was doing it, I was in a dream' he said. He was given two years probation and admitted as a voluntary patient at Arlesey Three Counties Hospital.

At the time of writing Leighton Buzzard's fire service in common with others across the country is faced with more change with the plans for mergers across county boundaries for efficiency. 2005 is the 20th anniversary year of the major fire that almost destroyed All Saints parish church where our story started. Thomas Meriden's bequest has long since vanished but we must hope that almost 200 years of fire fighting will continue to be successful in preserving this ancient market town.

Sources include many original documents and newspaper records in Bedford Archives, microfilm of the Leighton Buzzard Observer in the town's library, log books and other original 20th century records at the town fire station, records of insurance companies at The Guildhall Library in London and various secondary sources for background.

BLHA Representative on BLARS User Panel

The Bedfordshire Local History Association requires someone from the wider membership, who uses the Bedfordshire & Luton Archive & Records Service, to represent its interests on the BLARS User Panel. If you would like to volunteer your services, please contact the Secretary or a committee member. If you would like to discuss the role of a user panel member further, you can telephone Nigel Lutt, Operations Manager for Outreach on 01234 228833/34 for an informal discussion. Below is an abstract from BLARS description of the User Panel's activities and as you can see it is not too time consuming.

"Here in Bedfordshire, we have always taken a pride in offering a good quality user friendly service - with personal attention - to all visiting users of our public search room and researchers who contact us by post, telephone and e-mail. The award of national Charter Marks - for excellence in public services - in 1993, 1996, 1999 and 2002 shows our commitment to customer care, efficiency and value for money. However, we recognise that there is always room for improvement. In 1992 we set up a User Panel as a forum for the exchange of information and ideas between users and staff.

"The panel of regular users of our service, and often of other Archive Services, meets two or three times a year to discuss plans for changes, and acts as a sounding board for suggested improvements. It is not a management committee, but a group of interested friends with whom we can have frank and useful discussions about weaknesses in our services and the way to put them right.

"Members also help on an occasional basis with specific jobs between meetings. This includes advice and consultation on customer feedback, including considering matters raised through the Service's complaints procedure which allows dissatisfied customers to refer specific difficulties to the Panel. We are always looking for additional people who might wish to serve as panel members.

"We try to ensure it includes individual users with varied representative interests and from different parts of the County. People representing local history societies and user groups are also invited to attend meetings. We would like to extend the membership to include contributions from members who use our service 'remotely', from the rest of the UK and overseas.

"The role of all user panel members will not be demanding, but members do have an opportunity to influence change. Travel expenses are offered for attendance at meetings and light refreshments are provided."

Public Safety in Church Graveyards**Stella Gibbs**

This matter was discussed at our recent committee meeting, and it was felt that we should comment here to alert members to the fact that churchyards as well as cemeteries may sometimes undergo checks with regard to public safety. This has already been undertaken in parts of an adjacent county, and tombstones that failed a stringent safety test were laid down. No permission was sought from the family, neither were they advised about the action taken, that was deemed necessary as a safety precaution.

We have been advised that what is done with gravestones is usually entirely the decision of individual churches, parishes and the diocese. Only when gravestones are listed and therefore protected must planning officers at district planning departments be consulted. Such listing is rare, as in the case of several old, interesting and well preserved gravestones in Potton churchyard.

There are Diocesan Archaeologists who can advise parishes and comment on their proposals: Bedfordshire is covered by the St.Albans Diocesan Archaeologist, David Baker. The Association of Diocesan Archaeologists have produced a guidance note on "Archaeological Requirements for Work on Churches and Churchyards". There is a section on churchyards which includes moving/removing gravestones. You can access this at www.britarch.ac.uk/adca/projects-issues.html. Another website you may consult which deals mainly with cemeteries is Paradise Preserved at www.english-heritage.org.uk/server/show/nav.1099.

One committee member reported that recent "safety work" undertaken at a churchyard near her home (outside our county) resulted in a scene that appeared as if vandals had rampaged through the churchyard, hurling over gravestones of all sizes and types in their wake.

Some societies may have surveyed their local graveyard or be involved in protecting gravestones by cleaning and having them refurbished. We all would like to see the peaceful beauty of our churchyards preserved, but can understand the 21st century fear of litigation which forces churches to take such drastic measures of precaution. Members may wish to discuss concerns about their churchyard with the appropriate Diocesan Archaeologist.

MEMBER SOCIETIES

As a further step to fulfil our aim to act as a link between our member societies, we wish to start an occasional series of profiles of societies. The Editor requests suitable copy from committees so that their society can be featured in a future edition. We start with one of the most recently formed societies.

Profile on Colmworth & Neighbours' History Society**Thelma Marks (Co-Chair)**

The gestation period for the Colmworth & Neighbours' History Society was a long one. It began by holding a series of lectures on Local History to raise funds for St.Denys' Church, which proved very popular. Patricia Bell gave us two talks, along with Bernard West and Victor Farrer. Interest grew until James Collett-White came in 2002 and enthused his audience with the subject. At the end of the lecture, signatures were collected from those who were interested in starting a local history society, and 25 people signed up. (We now have 54 members).

The name of the society was important, as villages in this area are mostly about 3 miles apart – easy walking distance, which means that they are often connected by marriage. So embracing the 'neighbours' enables research of a much wider segment of the locality.

For the first three years, the committee concentrated on a mixed programme of local and national history, along with visits to villages in the locality. At the request of some members, Martin Deacon from the CRO came in 2005 to show us the way to 'Discovering the History of your House'. By chance, at short notice, the speaker was unable to come the following month, so the committee took the opportunity to fill in a questionnaire during the meeting, to establish the interests and long-term aspirations of the members. Armchair members were reassured that they were very valuable to the society and no-one should be embarrassed to be one.

As a result, a successful Research Group has been formed, which meets every six weeks. It was immediately apparent that members are happiest when researching in groups, where problems and success can be shared, but where everyone can work on their own subject at their own speed.

HISTORY IN BEDFORDSHIRE is published by the **BEDFORDSHIRE LOCAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

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Contributions are welcomed and should be sent to the above address, together with a stamped addressed envelope if the contribution is to be returned. Contributions may be in any readable form, including on IBM compatible disc. If the latter is employed, please consult the Editor before despatch to avoid compatibility problems.

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