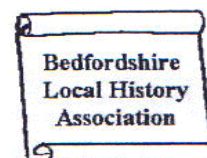


# HISTORY IN BEDFORDSHIRE



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## BLHA – AUTUMN FORUM OF MEMBER SOCIETIES

Earlier in this committee's term of office, we undertook a survey of all member societies to find out exactly what local groups are engaged in and to determine how best we at the BLHA committee may fulfil your expectations. Based upon these findings, we are planning a meeting in November to develop a strategy which could help both the Association and Member Societies to foster a greater interest in Bedfordshire's rich history.

It will be an ideal opportunity for representatives from Societies across the county to meet, renew existing contacts and generate new ones, share successful ideas and together take a fresh look at how we investigate the history of our locality and Bedfordshire as a whole. We have asked Dr Sue Oosthuizen from Oxford to speak at the Forum; her subject, *Exploring Your Local History*, should lead on to a lively discussion that can be developed in the afternoon session.

The Forum will be held in Clapham Village Hall on Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> November 2006. Further details will be made available towards the end of the summer, and we look forward to seeing representatives from all the member societies.

## 2006 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

As this edition of *History in Bedfordshire* goes to press, the 2006 AGM and Annual Conference hosted by Colmworth & Neighbours History Society has just concluded. Over one hundred delegates attended and were treated to a series of short interesting and informative talks that developed the history of the communities in this lesser known, rather isolated, region of north Bedfordshire, from Saxon times to the present day. The delegates were then further entertained and educated by four longer talks with the diverse titles "*Timothy Mathews – the Controversial Curate of Colmworth*"; "*The Female Vagrant Pauper*"; "*The Labouring Man in North Bedfordshire – 1901 Census*" and, to the surprise of some, "*Bedfordshire and the Sailing Navy 1600-1815*". Time was found in a full programme to serve an excellent buffet lunch, have a rare opportunity to visit Bushmead Priory, have a guided tour of St. Denys Church, and visit the medieval dam and fishponds of the manor.

BLHA thanks the Colmworth & Neighbours History Society and all their speakers for all their hard work in preparing and running an excellent and most enjoyable conference, and particularly to Stephen Smith, Chairman and Master of Ceremonies for his effective linkage and smooth running of the programme.

## 2006 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Association's AGM was held immediately before the Annual Conference, and followed the agenda previously circulated to members. Apologies were received from the Chairman, Barry Dackombe, who was abroad and unable to attend; therefore the Vice-Chairman, Brian Lazelle, chaired the meeting. A welcome was extended to the Willington History Group and to the Stevington Historical Trust, who had recently joined the Association, increasing the number of member societies to 28, plus 8 corporate body members. Individual membership had also increased during the year. The Chairman's report from Barry Dackombe, in which he summarised the year's activities and progress, was read to the meeting. The Treasurer's report followed, and its acceptance was proposed and seconded. Members then voted its acceptance.

In accordance with the constitution of the Association, the election of officers and committee took place, and the following were duly elected to the BLHA Committee for 2006/7:-

| <b>Name</b>         | <b>Position</b>   | <b>Society</b>  |
|---------------------|-------------------|---|
| Barry Dackombe      | Chairman          | Amphill History Forum / Amphill & District Preservation Society                     |
| Stella Gibbs        | Secretary         | Roxton & District Local History Group   |
| Mike Turner         | Treasurer         | Amphill & District Archaeological & Local History Society                           |
| Elizabeth Adey      |                   | Luton Museum  |
| Stuart Antrobus     |                   | Individual Member   |
| Diana Dalton        |                   | Maulden History Society   |
| Jacqueline Fillmore |                   | Individual Member   |
| Brian Lazelle       |                   | Amphill & District Archaeological & Local History Society / Maulden History Society |
| John Pitts          |                   | Toddington History Society  |
| Pauline Wolsey      |                   | Friends of Luton Museum   |
| Kevin Ward          | <i>ex officio</i> | Bedfordshire & Luton Archives & Records Service                                     |

The Chairman thanked the three retiring committee members for their valued support in the preceding years. As there was no other business, the meeting then closed. The full minutes with reports will be issued to members in the usual way in due course.

## A Brief History of the Feoffee Cottages of Toddington

John Viner

On the Sunday after the feast of St. Michael the Archangel in the year 1454, Thomas Wykelwode, the Rector of St. George's Church, and William Grenefeld, the Warden of the Hospital of St. John the Baptist in Toddington, surrendered to ten named Trustees, or 'Feoffees', and their assigned successors some fifty small pieces of their land scattered throughout the parish. These were to become known as the 'Town Lands', and the income they produced was to form the earliest known charitable institution in Toddington, which has survived to this day.

The ground on which Feoffee Cottages now stand is part of the early Town Lands. It is shown on the map of Toddington drawn by Radulph Agas in 1581, where it is marked 'Free to the Towne of Tuddington'.

Much larger than the Feoffee Yard of today, it was in the form of the long narrow strips of the time and amounted to three roods, or three quarters of an acre. From about 1700 to the early 1800s it was known as 'Workhouse Yard', taking its name from the workhouse that stood on the land during that period. Cottages on the site are first mentioned in 18<sup>th</sup> Century documents, which describe five houses and a workhouse belonging to the Charity. The workhouse was let by the Trustees to the parish, but the Overseers, who were responsible for the poor, employed a Master to run it.

By the time of the Charity Commissioners' report on Toddington in 1821, the original buildings on the site had become very old and expensive to maintain. Unlike today, the cottages were occupied rent-free, and the cost of maintaining the buildings amounted to more than half the total income from the rest of the property and land administered by the Trustees. The situation clearly became worse because the Trustees, at their meeting on 10<sup>th</sup> September 1828, agreed that the cottages should

be taken down. The following March, the workhouse suffered a similar fate.

In April 1829 Mr. James Bass, a local builder, was commissioned to build six new houses on the cleared land, and by October of that year Feoffee Cottages had been completed at a cost of £201 17s 3d. These original houses were very different from those of today. Builder's drawings still survive showing a terrace of single storey one-room dwellings with tall chimneys. The walls were of single brick construction with three exterior doors, each serving a pair of cottages. Joined on to the far end of the terrace was a communal washhouse and toilet. It was decided by the Trustees that the houses would be "occupied by widows or maids of good character and not under the age of fifty years".



*Feoffee Cottages as they were between 1866 and 1976. Note the water pump in the centre.*

Only thirty-seven years later the houses were extensively modified. In May 1866 Mr M

Horley drew up plans for adding a second storey, thus giving the occupants a separate upstairs bedroom. This addition can be clearly seen today in the different pattern of bricks used. In addition, the three original exterior doorways were removed and six new individual front doors installed, leading directly into the living rooms of the houses. Some time later, a separate bungalow was built as an additional almshouse. By now, the land occupied by the houses had become known as 'Widows' Yard'.



*Feoffee Cottages today after conversion from 6 to 3 dwellings*

During the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, a pump in front of the cottages provided water for the occupants, but by the early 1900s the well had become unusable and the ladies were obliged to use the pump on the Green. In December 1919, an agreement was drawn up to pay a Mr. Allen one shilling (5p) a year for the use of the pump on his nearby property. When this arrangement came to an end some years later, Edwin Babister, known locally as 'little Edwin', was employed to collect water from the pump

on the Green, for which he was paid three shillings (15p) a week.

At this time, the Trustees began to sell off certain pieces of land in order to provide capital for investment. At the time of the Inclosure in 1800, many of the original Town Lands throughout the parish had been exchanged for about 35 acres at Fancot, but the plots of ground within the Town of Toddington had been retained. In 1935 an offer was received from Wells Winch Brewery, owners of the Sow and Pigs, to purchase the rear part of the long strip of land on which the cottages stood. After some negotiation, the original offer of £80 was increased to £100 and the sale was completed, leaving only the ground and garden occupied by the houses and bungalow, which we now know as 'Feoffee Yard'.

By 1976 the row of six houses, still lacking separate kitchens, bathrooms and inside toilet facilities, could no longer be considered suitable for modern living requirements. The only solution was to increase the available space by reducing the number of houses. This was achieved by combining two houses into one, resulting in three dwellings, each with ground floor living room and kitchen, and a bedroom and bathroom upstairs. Twenty-five years later, a generous grant from the Housing Corporation has enabled the Trustees to complete a major renovation of the property, with the results that you see today.

All the charities of Toddington are now amalgamated under a scheme of the Charity Commissioners entitled the 'Toddington United Almshouse Charities'. In January 2000 the Trustees placed a plaque on the wall of Feoffee Cottages to mark 546 years of continuous service to the Town.

*Note: "John Viner is a trustee of the Toddington United Almshouse Charities, and is researching the history of the Toddington Townlands Charity from its origin in 1454. Eventually he hopes to publish his results to raise funds for the charity".*

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## A DATE FOR YOUR DIARY

The **2007 Annual General Meeting** of the Association and the **2007 Conference** will be hosted by the **Ampthill & District Archaeological & Local History Society** and held on **19<sup>th</sup> May 2007** at **Houghton Conquest Village Hall**. The BLHA Committee decided on the earlier date as the June dates were clashing with more and more local and national events. The Committee hopes that members will find the new date more acceptable.

## Review of Bedfordshire Wills

**Bedfordshire Wills 1531-1539** transcribed by Patricia L Bell and indexed by Barbara Tearle. Published by Bedfordshire Family History Society (2005). Occasional Paper 3. Price £6.50 or £7.70 (including UK P & P) from the BFHS Bookstall.

Not many family historians are able to trace their line back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and those few who can will be hampered by the lack before 1538 and the scarcity afterward of parish registers. But for those who can identify ancestors from the Tudor period, there are other sources to provide some of the details. One such source is wills.

BFHS has recently published *Bedfordshire Wills* for the period 1531-1539. The wills have been transcribed by Patricia Bell, formerly Bedfordshire County Archivist, and indexed by Barbara Tearle. They are published in continuation of volumes in the Bedfordshire Historical Record Society series:-

BHRS Volume 37 *English Wills 1498-1526*, edited by A.F.Cirket. 1957.

BHRS Volume 45 *Bedfordshire Wills 1480-1519*, edited by Patricia Bell. 1966.

BHRS Volume 58 *Bedfordshire Wills proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury 1383-1548*, edited by Margaret McGregor. 1979.

BHRS Volume 76 *Bedfordshire Wills 1484-1533*, edited by Patricia Bell. 1997.

Abstracts of later wills are gradually being added to the Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Service's excellent website, so that it is becoming easier to fill out the detail of the lives of many Tudor Bedfordshire ancestors.

Wills are a key source for local and family historians, and transcriptions make the material much more accessible. This A5 book of 230 pages includes transcriptions of 353 wills proved in the Court of the Archdeacons of Bedford between 1531 and 1539. The book also includes an index of personal names, an index of place names and a subject index. The personal name index is of great value to family historians, enabling links to be made with those who do not share the same surname. Although only a small minority left wills, many more people will have received bequests, including servants and associates as well as relatives.

The changing nature of the bequests during this period and the objects described add greatly to our understanding of the lives of Bedfordshire ancestors. For anybody with Bedfordshire ancestors whose research has taken them as far back as this period, or if they are approaching it, this book is an essential purchase.

*Also republished in the Occasional Papers series:*

**Bedfordshire Parish Poor Law Papers 1622-1834**, an Index. Published by Bedfordshire Family History Society (2005). Occasional Paper 2. Price £7.00 or £8.05 (including UK P & P) from the BFHS Bookstall.

This volume, originally published in 1991, is an index to personal names mentioned in Poor Law documents (largely relating to settlement), contained in the archives of Bedfordshire ecclesiastical parishes. For anyone with Bedfordshire ancestors, it is an invaluable guide to the records available.

Orders may be sent to: Mrs.M.Evans, 14 Beaulieu Way, Bedford, MK41 8NP; enquiries: bookstall@bfhs.org.uk.

## New Publications

**Chalk on my shoes – Memoirs of a Chilterns Childhood** by **Keith T. Norcott**, published by The Book Castle, pb. 320pp 30 illustrations, price £10.99.

Here is an affectionate remembrance of growing up in the 1930s and 1940s in the villages of rural Bedfordshire and the gentle hills of the North Chilterns, where Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire meet. We are taken back to villages like Lower Stondon and Stopsley, and towns like Hitchin and Bedford, when life was slower and simpler than it is today. Here too are descriptions of customs and practices that no longer exist, like the “penny picture” shows in the village hall, the local policeman who dishes out summary justice, and the Queen of the May celebrations. Central to it all is the guiding hand and indomitable spirit of “Our Mum”, who guided the family most of the time, and saw it through the horrors of the war. Full of stories, anecdotes and impressions of the hills and communities of the area, this is a book to trigger memories in those who know this part of the country, and excite curiosity in those who are coming to it for the first time. The intervening years have seen great changes, but the hills still retain much of the charm they had in bygone days, a charm that is reflected in these pages.

**Potton Baptists** by **Stan Evers**, published by the Potton Baptist Church, 80pp, illustrated, price £2.50 plus £1 p&p. Available from Stan Evers, 9 Oak Crescent, Potton, Beds, SG19 2PX. Cheques made payable to Potton Baptist Church.

The author spent about eight years reading Minute Books, two dating from 1800 and 1846, sifting through magazines and documents, besides writing to former pastors and members.

He has written about the people – the Potton Baptists – rather than the chapel. The Potton Baptist Church was founded in 1800 by nine Christians, and opened its chapel in 1802. John Keeling, one of the first two deacons, became a Christian through the preaching of John Berridge, the eccentric vicar of Everton. The author is pastor number 13, having served the church since 1986, and looks forward to celebrating 20 years as the Potton pastor in September this year.

Among the many interesting stories in the book are those of the two young boys caught in the chapel vestry with stolen beefsteaks, of horses running wild in the graveyard one Sunday morning, and of the formidable Miss Richardson who would not allow a visiting preacher to have five hymns instead of the customary four! At times the chapel almost closed, but the tenacious Potton Baptists keep the cause going.

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## BEDFORDSHIRE WOMEN'S LAND ARMY

Local historian Stuart Antrobus has now completed his four-year research into the history of Bedfordshire Women's Land Army. He wrote an interim outline history in two articles in this journal in Winter 2003 and Summer 2004. He is now writing a book for publication in Autumn 2007 or Spring 2008.

Meanwhile, he is publishing photographs and documentary material from his archive, together with background articles, on the world-wide-web through Bedfordshire Libraries. This comprises chapters on the Women's Land Army (WLA) nationally, Bedfordshire WLA, a Bedfordshire WLA timeline, brief histories of individual hostels, Bedfordshire War Agricultural Committee, and a roll-call of over 800 names of Bedfordshire land girls which Stuart has recovered in his researches.

This can be viewed on the internet at [www.bedfordshire.gov.uk](http://www.bedfordshire.gov.uk), click on Libraries (follow the links from Local and Family History); and further material will be added each month until the public launch in November 2006. The quickest way to view it is by entering “Stuart Antrobus” on Google; his is the third item and gives direct access to the History of Bedfordshire Women's Land Army. Stuart welcomes feedback on the site and further information on land army activity from local historians around the county via the email address at the bottom of each page. Eventually the site will include newsreel film and audio extracts from oral history interviews, and will be updated periodically as a result of any further research.

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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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