BEDFORDSHIRE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

A workshop has been arranged on the above subject by the BEDFORDSHIRE LOCAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION's Research and Publications Working Group to take place in Harlington Parish Hall on Saturday the 10th of October 1998 commencing at 11.00am and finishing around 3.30pm. The purpose of this workshop is to share information on any aspect of town or village life in the County during this period. From the wide ranging knowledge of the local societies and our individual membership it is hoped to have a variety of presentations ranging from a single object or photograph to an insight into major piece of research in order to make the day as interesting as possibly and to satisfy the widest spectrum of interest.

The event will contribute to our response to the “Histories for the Millennium” initiative being co-ordinated by the Studies in Family and Community History Group at the Open University.

Your Committee has selected as our focus Bedfordshire in 1851 with the aim of including an exhibition or talk on this topic in the programme for the year 2000.

It is suggested that delegates and visitors bring a packed lunch, coffee and tea will be provided.

A small charge will be made to cover the cost of refreshments and hire of hall.

If you can contribute and have not yet contacted Martin Lawrence on 01327 860663 please help to make this event successful by doing so as soon as possible so that the programme can be finalized.

YOUR NEWSLETTER REQUIRES YOUR HELP!

This newsletter urgently requires articles, news items and illustrations for publication in future editions to enable it to be issued on a regular basis every quarter. It can only survive with your help. A visit to the records office any day of the week reveals a hive of activity as individuals burrow into the archives on their quests for facts from the past. Don’t keep the gems you discover to yourself share it with other interested readers, who knows, they may have information you need. Articles around a 1000 words form about a page of the newsletter. Illustrations, up to A4, can be scanned and adjusted to fit, all we ask is that ownership of copyright is known and permission to publish has been obtained where necessary for drawings or photographs. Small items, snippets of historical information etc. welcome.

Make this newsletter fully representative of all the valuable research in local history that is happening in the County and use it to reach all corners of Bedfordshire and beyond. After all it is, or should be, the mouthpiece of its members.

Please address all correspondence to the editor at the address on page 4. Last dates for receipt of copy for inclusion in January edition is Dec. 16th and for April edition is Mar. 15th.
HISTORY IN BEDFORDSHIRE

IN SEARCH OF A DUCK DECOY

KEVAN FADDEN

My interest was aroused when reading through The Bedfordshire Historical Record Society Survey of Ancient Buildings Vol. 111, 1936, I found an article on a duck decoy by Kings Wood between Ampthill and Houghton Conquest. A copy, reproduced below by permission of The Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, shows his research and gives a good insight into their use.

LOCAL DUCK DECOYS by J. STEELE ELLIOTT.

The name 'Decoy,' like the contrivance it refers to, is no doubt of Dutch origin, and connected with the Dutch word Kooi or cage, for taking these wildfowl. Decoys date back at least to medieval times, but at that earlier period the ducks were driven from extensive areas of water into netted enclosures, a method that would only be possible during the moulting season of the adult birds, or before the young ducks were sufficiently strong on pinion.

The decoy of later years, which dates back in this country to about the middle of the xviiith century, could be restricted to quite small areas of water, frequently an acre or less; in this latter type the ducks had to be enticed into it, and not driven as in the earlier form.

Such a decoy had the advantage of being worked through the whole season, save in severe frosts.

There were decoys in many English counties and a few in Ireland and Wales. Their success depended upon their situation, and those in such favourable counties as Lincoln, Essex and Norfolk obtained the heaviest bags. Upward of 10,000 duck of various species have been recorded as taken at a decoy during one winter, but this was under the conditions of a century since, Nowadays a season's bag of 1,000 fowl would be very exceptional, even on the most attractive waters. Some few decoys only took sufficient duck for the owner's personal needs.

Bedfordshire is one of the counties in which no decoy has been recorded hitherto; in the adjoining county of Herts, one only, and that at The Hoo, near Welwyn, and in Hunts. there was one at Holme Fen; both of these have long since been done away with1. In a map of Houghton Conquest, dated 1797, at the County Record Office (Fig ), and again in the Enclosure Map of 1808, a decoy is indicated about half a mile N.N.W. of Houghton House and N. of King's Wood. The sites of the ‘Old Decoy,’ the ‘Decoy Meadows,’ Decoy Spinney' and Moats are also marked. The plans on both maps are similar; they show a rectangular construction, which is puzzling, and does not conform in any way to the usual planning of a later date decoy. A visit to the actual site with Mr. Chas. Oldham, F.L. S., helped us little, as there is no definite indication of any part of the actual decoy site at the present time; and the water-logged ground has evidently been drained. The date of this decoy probably coincides with the erection of 'Houghton House,' for the service of which it was no doubt constructed; this would carry it back to the very early years of the xviith century, when the modern form of a duck-decoy had barely been introduced into England. I think we can safely conclude that we have on these maps one of the earlier and far less common forms of a trap or cage device, where the pond was equipped with a netted tunnel-like enclosure, under which the ducks were enticed with food and then trapped with a falling shutter. Probably the earliest decoy known in the country is at another Houghton, in Nottinghamshire, on an estate map of Tempsford which can be dated as of the early xixth century, another decoy is shown. The site of this decoy was found to be still very definite. It is one of later type, oblong, and so-called crab-shaped in form, with four curved pipes leading out from the angles. This decoy actually stands within the Huntingdonshire border in a small plantation immediately S. of Hill Farm and N. of Cold Airbour Farm, but the Bedfordshire boundary actually encloses it on the W. side. The adjoining round is still known as the 'Coy Field. 'Bryant' indicates this decoy in 1826. The "Fowler's Meadow" at Little Barford is met with in the Tithe Apportionment map of 1844. It is a meadow of about 24 ac. behind the Manor House and Church, and bounded on the far side by the river, a likely enough site in former times for a small decoy and at the present day a frequent haunt of wildfowl.

The discovery was discussed at the February 1998 meeting of the Ampthill & District Archaeological & Local History Society and as a result some dozen members walked through Kings Wood on Sunday 15th. February to see if any traces remained.

1Payne-Gallway: Duck Decoys, 1886.

Detail from pre-enclosure map 1797
In search of a Duck Decoy. (continued from page 2)

Unfortunately even though a map had been provided it was of too small an area and the exact site was not located. A trip to the Record Office on the following Wednesday soon established where to look and also provided some further information.

'The Domestic Expenses of a Noblemans Householde 1678' records that Lord Ailesbury paid a woman for half a year at 6d per week to look after the duck decoy.1

Prior to the Enclosure Award the Decoy meadows were owned by Lord Ossory and were passed in exchange to John Gudgeon of Park Farm in 1808. This supports the suggestion that the ducks would have been for use in Houghton House.

The following extract from: Account of Houghton Conquest, its Church, and its Rectors, by Dean L. W. Burgeon, brother in law of Archdeacon Rose*. Records the demise of the decoy.

'In 1838 then, as already explained, many traces of the former state of things lingered on in Houghton, some of which are now disappearing or have already disappeared. The road past the Rectory House could be traced all the way to the ruins of the site and the ponds or decoys in "Coy Meadow" (as it is still known) all existed embosomed in foliage in the hollow. The ponds have since been filled, the trees grubbed up and the land ploughed over.'

A further visit by the Society located the actual site of the decoy. It had been filled in as described above but a shape similar to that shown on the map could be made out, using a combination of shallow indentations and changes in grass colour. The main moat shaped feature was very clear and was unmistakably that shown on the 1797 map. The illustration in Fig 1 is a reconstruction of what we consider the decoy was like during the final phase of its use, using evidence from the ground and the map. The low relief showed where the water would have been leaving a number of islands where ducks could live and nest, safe from predators. The area to the north was not so well defined due to drainage ditches put in when the decoy was destroyed. Earlier maps suggest that the west channel of the southern moat like feature was not connected at its upper and lower ends to the horizontal channels in the earlier phase of its existence. Traces of the northern water are not now visible on the ground and it is drawn as shown on the 1797 map. The Society will watch the site and attempt to obtain some aerial photographs, which may give more detail to our findings.

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Fig. 1 Probable layout of duck decoy in final phase of its use

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# Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, volume 32, page130


Dean Burgeon was vicar of St. Mary's Oxford and afterwards Dean of Chichester. He died in 1888.

Archdeacon Rose died in 1873 and is buried in Houghton Conquest churchyard.

The account presumably written C. 1880.

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FESTIVAL OF BRITAIN PLACENAME BOARDS IN BEDFORDSHIRE

Alan Sprod of Ampthill has taken the opportunity, since his early retirement, to cycle through the villages and towns of Bedfordshire seeking, recording and photographing village and town placename boards commemorating the 1951 Festival of Britain.

In the course of 662 cycle miles (his longest ride was 76 miles), he has located 135 town and village nameboards bearing the distinctive Festival crest at one end and the Bedfordshire crest at the other. None could be found at Bedfor, Luton, Dunstable, Leighton Buzzard or 11 other locations. Most boards have been well maintained but some were very dilapidated, the one at Harlington had been vandalised.

In about twelve places the boards had been renewed (in one case, Billington, the new board was still in its wrapping alongside the old awaiting inauguration). Alan now intends to visit the records office to discover if nameboards existed for his missing places before visiting those places next year.
AUTUMN COURSES

ROMAN BRITAIN, tutor: Brian Adams, a 20 week University of Cambridge course at 8.00pm on Thursday evenings in the Parish Hall, Harlington. Commencing 24th September 1998. Course fee: £20 per term, (concessionary £15). Contact: Mrs Meryl Parker, 87, Sundon Rd., Harlington Dunstable, Beds. LU5 6LR. ‘phone 01525 873875.

Analysis of archaeological evidence has thrown doubt upon earlier generalizations based on the meagre historical record. Working behind the scenes, Rome played upon the British tribal divisions and gathered several significant members on to its side, well before the invasion of 43 AD. So the relationship between native and Roman was complex and this is shown by Archaeology. Towns formed the basis of Roman civilization, yet several of these novel transplants failed while others succeeded, in the countryside, some villages were fully romanised palaces but others simply modified farmhouses. Excavations have also told much about religious compromises, burial practices and general romanisation, artefacts complete the picture of the complicated hybrid culture.

BEDFORDSHIRE IN THE 1940’s, tutor: Martin Lawrence, a 10 week University of Cambridge course on Wednesday mornings at 10.00am in the Toddington Village Hall, starting on 9th September 1998. Course fee: £24 (concessionary £16). Contact: Gill Whitfield, 17, Alma Farm Rd., Toddington, Beds., LU5 6BG. ‘phone 01525 873825.

An entertaining and enjoyable course using active learning methods including group discussions, listening to music, handling wartime objects and an outing to a relevant place of interest.

Bedfordshire’s part in the war time effort is investigated with the use of documentary material, maps and other sources of evidence. The Home Guard, ARP, WLA and effect of the Evacuation will be considered.

War time entertainment with emphasis on Glenn Miller will be explored, finally reviewing the creation of the Welfare State and the relevance of this period of history to the local people.

EVOLUTION OR REVOLUTION, tutor: James Collett-White, a 20 week University of Cambridge course on Monday afternoons at 2.00pm in the Bedford Retirement Centre commencing 14th September 1998. Contact: Ms. A. Samain, Bedford Retirement Education Centre, 6 Rothsay Gardens, Bedford, MK40 3QF. ‘phone 01234 360304.

This course will look at Bedfordshire’s history from a broad viewpoint to identify the multiple strands in the process of change and provide a coherent framework. The growth of urban centres such as Luton and Bedford will be contrasted with the changes in the villages. The impact of the railways, urbanization and the great agricultural depression will be assessed in the context of local society. The role of the great landowner in society and politics and changes in local government, especially in the relief of the poor, will be examined.

RESEARCHING LOCAL HISTORY, tutor: James Collett-White, a 10 week University of Cambridge course on Wednesday evenings at 7.30pm at Manshead Archaeological Society, 5, Winfield St., Dunstable commencing 23rd September 1998, fee: £22 (£17) Contact: Mr John Currie, 9 Catefield, Luton, LU4 0EQ. ‘phone 01582 591933.

This course will encourage anyone interested in local history to probe deeper into the subject. Acquainting them with various primary sources, written and oral, and introducing them to resource centres that can help. This course will stimulate students to consider changes in the local community’s history and to examine it in the wider context.

Workers Educational Association Courses and Meetings in Dunstable see enclosed leaflet. Further information ‘phone 01582 591933 or 01582 609018.