Web Workshop at Redborne Community College, Ampthill

On Saturday 2nd March 2002 from 10.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m. the Bedfordshire Local History Association will be holding a Web Workshop at Redborne Community College (North site), Ampthill. The Internet now provides ready access to a mass of information, resources and guides of value to local historians of all kinds. However, it is not always easy to identify sites of quality content and those likely to be of the greatest use. This day-long workshop will be a comprehensive introduction to local history on the web: it will highlight the most useful sites, provide an opportunity to view them and demonstrate how to find others through links or search engines.

The initial sessions will be led by Nicola Avery from Bedfordshire Libraries who has been responsible for establishing and maintaining their web site, and by the Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Service which also has a substantial site. They will explain the contents of these but will also share their extensive knowledge of others in the local history sphere, whether private, professional, academic, local, regional or national, besides providing a basic introduction to accessing the Internet. Suggestions from participants of sites worth investigating will also be welcome.

We will be using one of Redborne's main computer rooms, so that sessions either side of lunch (provided) will be devoted to all participants gaining hands on experience of the web at their own machine. No previous knowledge will be expected, but in fact no experience of computers or computing is necessary to get started. However, assistance will be provided if you don't wish to surf alone! Remember also that you don't need to have a computer of your own at home to access the web as terminals can now be used in libraries, record offices and other such centres.

During the last session those interested in setting up their own web site or one for their society or organisation will be provided with a simple guide to the issues which need to be considered in creating such a site by Jason Doherty, Cultural Heritage Strategy Officer for Bedfordshire County Council. As Museums Development Officer Jason was responsible for establishing his own web site which included provision of host facilities for several of the county's local history societies.

Cost of the day will be £5.00 to include coffee, tea and a buffet lunch. A registration form can be obtained from the Secretary: Elisabeth Field, 29 George Street, Maulden, Bedfordshire, MK45 2DF (Tel: 01525 633029, E-mail: elisabethfield@aol.com). Free car parking is available at the North site, if this is full there will be space in the South site adjacent.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2002

The AGM of the Association will be held on Saturday 18 May 2002 at 2.15 p.m. in Todddington Village Hall. The agenda and other details will be sent to members in advance, as usual. After the business of the AGM is completed there will be a break followed, at 3.00 p.m., by a talk entitled 'ENGLISH LOCAL HISTORY: THE STATE OF THE ART' given by Dr Kate Tiller, Reader in English Local History, University of Oxford, Dept. of Continuing Education. Dr. Tiller gave last year's Phillimore Lecture to the British Association for Local History and the new edition of her book, 'English Local History: an Introduction' should be published in time to have copies on sale at the AGM.

A topic to be considered during the AGM will be whether the Association should have its own website. At present the Association does not have its own separate website, although we are mentioned on one or more websites maintained by other organisations. These sites however do not have the resources to maintain and regularly update a list of current BLHA events. To do this, we would have to run our own site. Your Committee feels that this would be a considerable commitment, not just for current committee members but for future ones too, if the job is to be done properly. We don't want to embark on this without the agreement and commitment of BLHA members – you may well need to provide the effort in future years when we have left the Committee. This issue will be on the Agenda for our AGM on Saturday 18 May 2002. Do think about it, please, and help us come to a decision.

Some Exhibition space is available, contact Elisabeth Field at the address given in the previous article or your editor contact details page 4. Refreshments will be available after the talk. Visitors are welcome. Car parking is free.
LOCAL NEWSPAPERS: 
AN ACCOUNT OF AN INDEXING PROJECT
ALAN HUNTER

Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Service, BLARS, has a range of local newspapers going back to the 1830’s. These papers are a valuable source of information but the lack of indexes severely limited their use, although some years ago a start had been made on indexing the "Bedfordshire Mercury". With the encouragement of the former county archivist, Chris Pickford, I took over the task in 1991. The index though not, as yet, continuous, covers about 80 years of change. Eventually I completed the run of the "Mercury", covering the years 1837 to 1907 although there are some years missing from the Archives' holdings of this newspaper. I have made a start on indexing the "Bedford Times" from its first issue in 1845 and at the moment I am continuing into the 1850’s. (The title later became the "Bedfordshire Times").

Whereas with the index to the "Mercury" extracts are from village reports only, coverage from the "Times" includes the whole newspaper, even the ads. Additional to the "Mercury" index, that for the "Times" lists Bedford not only as a whole, but also the town's separate parishes.

The most obvious users of the index are expected to be local and family historians. However, many others may find it useful, for example those seeking information on subjects as diverse as property, occupations, health, crime, migration, poverty and other matters that concern the social historians.

Indexed items are entered line-by-line on numbered cards with the newspaper’s date. Where the reference may not be found easily, page and column numbers are added. Entries in imperial measurements are given their metric equivalents. Some entries may appear twice. For example:

‘Jn. Smith, Toddington, poaching at Ampthill’,

would appear on both 'Toddington' and 'Ampthill' cards. General items covering the County as a whole appear under 'Bedford'. Though the two newspapers may be considered local, they include a considerable amount of national and international news. Out-of-county references are not included except where there are local connections. A report from, for example, the Crimea, would not be included but activities there by Bedfordshire soldiers would be.

A newspaper report, which may be a few lines or a full page, usually has to be reduced to 7 or 8 words on a single line on the index card. The abstract is aimed to be informative and an attempt made to relate it to the imagined user. Mostly, though not always, the newspaper report will carry a headline. To ease the job of the searcher a reference is made, where possible to the headline. For example, with 'Shocking Assault' above a three-paragraph report of a robbery at Shefford the index card could read: -

‘Mrs M. Smith, milliner, 65, Stotfold assaulted at Shefford Fair’.

Thus personal name, occupation, age, residence and the news that there was a Fair in Shefford are all given for a specific date. The word 'Assaulted' leads to the headline.

The index is filed on green cards in the parish index cabinet. The newspapers are available on microfilm in the BLARS search room.

During indexing, extracts have been made on a large number of subjects. These vary from fire services, to women's matters and to the military. These references appear in BLARS listings. Subjects checked for individuals range from Post Office telegraphs to church restoration, from wildlife to Jewish matters and from archaeology to Shefford inns and brewing. My own interests include agriculture, both local and national, meteorology, railways, coaching, Wrest - in Silsoe parish and my own village of Haynes. These references are available as County Record Office Transcripts - their short title being CRT’s.

The change in the newspapers is especially marked in their reports concerning transport. The early papers, until the coming of the railways, contain many references to coaching. Then come accounts of planned railways, some of which were never started. The effect of railway building can be gained from village and petty sessions reports as the Midland Railway was extended through the county in the mid 1850’s. Later come accounts of improvements and the inevitable complaints. Time - tables are given for many years.

Change, too, is reflected in agriculture. For example, gleaning is reported in 1851 and 1854, but machinery is increasingly used and at the end of the period, tractors are noted. The research work on the Woburn Estate is reviewed from time to time. There are various references to aspects of the great depression of the 1890's, notably bankruptcy to
unemployment. From the same period there are accounts of market gardening especially from the Sandy area including crops grown, the great quantity of produce, the efficient transport to London, the Midlands, the North and even further. There is mention of parsley being exported to Paris.

There is change too under the heading of 'wildlife'. Birds, such as ospreys (November 1850) peregrine (November 1851) bitterns (February 1892, February 1893) are all recorded. There are numerous reports on otters and a stag was killed in Leighton Buzzard (January 1892). Unusual events such as nests with eggs during the 1847 - 8 winter are noted, while white swallows (October 1891) and white sparrows (October 1850) were also observed. In May 1902 cuckoos calling and nightingales singing were considered a usual event in Bedford.

Some changes have taken a long time to come about. The "Bedford Times" in December 1853 has a plea for the introduction of decimal coinage. There was very strong support from the Local School Board in October 1890 for a full metric system. (I'll express a personal prejudice here, fervently wishing that the Board had been listened to). At about the same time, November 1890, the "Mercury" carries an account supporting the building of the Channel Tunnel.

Another extract from late 1890 but on a somewhat different subject:-

"...a Clophill boy...being ill...was attended by Dr. Ambler. It being supposed that the child had swallowed an insect, treatment was used and from him was brought a large brown lizard, which it is believed he took in when small, in drinking well water..."

Again from the "Mercury", 18 June 1892, Potton Fire Brigade competition :-

'...to see which pair of men would be the quickest in taking the engine from the house to the brook and connecting the hose sufficient to reach the Market Square...'.

The prize, for the two, was a gallon of whisky!

Language appears to have changed also, judging by the report, 14 November 1896, of the gentleman who gave :-

'...a suggestive lecture on Shakespeare...'.

THE 1901 Census

The 1901 census for the UK became available for public inspection at the beginning of the year. After a fanfare of publicity a fully indexed version was placed on the Internet but unfortunately the number of people who logged on in the first few hours overwhelmed the system which then crashed. A number of attempts have been made to relaunch the site after modifications with, as yet, no lasting success. In the meantime however, the census (without the full index) can be accessed by personally visiting the Public Record Office in London or certain other chosen Record Offices around the country such as Norwich. The section of the census for Bedfordshire is available to be examined at the Record Office in Bedford and the Central Library. Copies for the appropriate local areas of the County can be examined at certain local libraries such as Biggleswade, Flitwick and Luton.

The information available from the census is of interest not only to family historians but to all those interested in the local history of their parish. Every dwelling, whether occupied or vacant, their number of rooms (if less than five) and new houses being constructed are all given. The age, where born, the profession or occupation of each of the local population, their children or children of others living with them and visitors, their relationship to the family head, whether employers, employees or 'on own account' and if working at home gives a snapshot of the life in the area at this time. Some disabilities of people are recorded under the descriptions of 'deaf/dumb, blind, lunatic, and imbecile/feebleminded. Comparison with previous censuses will indicate changes to housing, population mobility, trades, professions and other demographic factors in the area over the 60 years since the once a decade detailed censuses were commenced.

BEDFORDSHIRE HERITAGE WEBSITE COMPETITION

The BEDFORDSHIRE LOCAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION is holding a BEDFORDSHIRE HERITAGE WEBSITE COMPETITION as their contribution to the Local History Week (4-12 May 2002); the Award for the best site will be presented at our AGM (see page 1). Completed entry forms must be submitted by 31st. March 2002. Please contact Elizabeth Field (address on page 1) if you need a form.

Websites should be based in Bedfordshire and deal predominately with Bedfordshire Heritage matters to be eligible. Web pages within a larger website with a broader remit will not be considered. The contents of the entry can be local history or broadly Heritage based. A description of the website, on one side of a sheet of A4 please, should be attached to the entry form. The description should answer the following questions :-

1. Why did you create this website?
2. What is its purpose or objectives?
3. How did you go about developing it?
4. Were you successful in gaining finance for this?
5. What are your plans for the future development of the site?
The BALH Regional Conference, hosted by the Bedfordshire Local History Association in September, provided an interesting day for the delegates, although the number of attendees from Bedfordshire Societies was a little disappointing. Six short talks by speakers from various organisations, under the general heading of Promoting Local History Through Partnerships, described a range of different experiences in linking with others to further the cause of local history.

Over the lunch period there was time to wander round the stands and meet delegates from outside the County. Stephen Coleman took those delegates who felt energetic on a rapid but informative tour around the historical parts of Marston Mortaine, including the Church and its detached tower. During the tour he pointed out pertinent features of building and their relation to others indicating how the early village developed. Meanwhile the remaining delegates stayed to watch a video made by Toddington History Society which had been the subject of the talk by Tony Walker.

The day ended with a lively discussion led by David Short, supported by a panel drawn from the two Associations. A set of resumes of the papers given will be issued to the attendees as soon as possible.

WILSTEAD (WILSHAMSTEAD)

Christine Papworth has informed us that she is researching the history of Wilstead for a book to be published next Summer. If you have any information that may help, her e-mail address is christine.papworth@ntlworld.com

New Publications

Bedfordshire Churches in the 19th Century Pt. IV Appendixes and index. Edited by Chris Pickford, A5. Pb. Published by Bedfordshire Historical Records Society. This completes this wonderful series with information on the newer churches, which were not covered in the previous volumes, and a valuable index.

New Publications

126th. Coy Canadian Forestry Corps by Herman L. Porter, A5. Sb. 32 pp. 33 photos. first published 1918 reproduced by Ampthill & District Archaeological & Local History Society £5.00 + p&p. This little book written by the sergeant, who took over the operation of the Canadian Y.M.C.A. at their Ampthill Operation after being wounded at Vimy Ridge in the Spring of 1917, describes the operations of the Canadian Forestry Corps who felled large tracts of woodland along the Greensand Ridge and prepared the timber for use at the front for trenches, underground field hospitals and headquarters bunkers. Highly mechanised for the time, they brought their own timber mills and built light railways. He describes their interaction with the local population, frosty at first as the locals saw their beloved woods denuded and admiration and affection as time passed.

Yelden Past and Present produced by The Yelden Study Group, 156pp. 60+ pictures, £12.50 or £14.15 inc. post. Considerably updated from the earlier book, this new edition provides an illustrated narrative and insight into the history of the village from prehistoric times to the present day.


Girls in Blue The Story of the Luton Girls Choir by Christine Turner, Qto. £18.99.

Girls in Blue recounts the story of the unique musical phenomenon that was the Luton Girls Choir. Founded in 1936 it became internationally famous, performing for 41 years until the death of its founder and musical director Arthur Davies.

The author was born in Luton and spent all her working life in the Luton library service, on retirement she met Arthur Davies’ secretary Peggy Coggins and volunteered to write the history of the Choir. Peggy Coggins, who spent 28 years involved with the Choir, worked closely with Christine to produce this book.