BUSHMEAD PRIORY

A picture of Bushmead Priory decorates the front page of this issue as a reminder of the very enjoyable 2006 Local History Conference hosted by Colmworth and Neighbours History Society, which was reported on in the summer issue. The Priory, founded circa 1195 by William, Chaplain of Colmworth and endowed with 28 acres of land by Hugh de Beauchamp, became an Augustinian priory after William’s death in 1215. Throughout the following years the priory prospered through gifts and grants. After the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII the property passed into the hands of Sir William Gascoigne of Cardington. In 1562 Bushmead estate was sold to William Gery of Cambridgeshire and it was the Gery family who developed the mansion over the next 200 years and beyond. The site is now in the care of English Heritage and those members that were unfortunate enough to miss the Conference visit will have the further possibility of visiting Bushmead next Spring or Summer when it is open at weekends.

2007 LOCAL HISTORY CONFERENCE & ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The 2007 Local History Conference and Annual General Meeting will be hosted by the Ampthill & District Archaeological & Local History Society and will be held on Saturday 19th May 2007 in the Houghton Conquest village hall. A full programme of interesting talks and visits is being organised for your enjoyment and full details will be announced in the next issue.

Please note the May date. The Conference date has been brought forward to avoid the clash of dates with local and national events that inevitable occur on Saturdays in June.

This change has allowed the Association to arrange a group visit in June and, therefore a guided tour of Southill Park, the home of the Whitbread family, is proposed for the 7th of June 2007. An appropriate visit in the light of the publication of “Plain Mr. Whitbread” by S. C. Whitbread in February, see the item on the back page. Please make a note of these important dates in your 2007 planner.

CAN YOU HELP? ARTICLES URGENTLY WANTED

HISTORY IN BEDFORDSHIRE requires more articles so that it can be published at regular intervals throughout the year. Bring the results of your own or your society’s work to the attention of a wider audience. Articles around 1700 words, somewhat less if containing illustrations, will fill two pages but shorter articles are equally acceptable. Longer topics can be accommodated by splitting the article into parts and publishing them in consecutive issues. Society Secretaries if you wish to publicise a special event to a wider audience we will be happy to include it in our events page. We look forward to hearing from you. Next copy date for publication November 25th 2006.
A Brief History of St. Leonard's Hospital, Bedford

Stephen R. Coleman

Even at the end of the 18th century the built up area of Bedford south of the river had hardly expanded beyond the confines of the King’s Ditch: the surrounding land was still predominantly agricultural. Amidst this stood St. Leonard’s Farm, a complex of buildings set within a close in the angle between what are now London and Elstow Roads just south west of the future site of St. John's Station. Oddly, St. Leonard's Farm and the two closes adjoining to its north and south formed a narrow extension of St. John’s parish, Bedford, almost entirely surrounded by the common fields of St. Mary’s parish, Bedford, until they were enclosed in 1799 (Fig. 1).

The origins of St. Leonard's Farm lay in the medieval Hospital of St. Leonard for the sick and lepers, to which the earliest known reference occurs in a charter dated 1207 (VCH Bedfordshire, I, 1904, pp. 398-9). Originally it had 6 brethren, one of whom acted as the master. In the early 14th century the premises may have been enlarged at the same time as the route from Elstow, which passed through their site, was diverted to a more easterly position. This annoyed the Abbess of Elstow whose dispute delayed its approval until 1308. However, a few years later the house seems to have become impoverished for, in 1331, an indulgence was granted for the repair of the chapel of the Blessed Mary and in 1353 the brethren obtained a licence to beg alms. No documentation has been found to suggest the size or composition of the medieval building complex or its exact position.

Little is known of the Hospital after this time although, in 1518, it obtained the grant of a fair to be held there yearly on the eve and feast of St. Leonard, the 5th and 6th November (VCH Bedfordshire, III, 1912, p. 22). Later documentation indicates this fair continued well into the 19th century (BLARS: X 55/21, 1702; R 1/9, 1773; R Box List Catalogue, 1868). Interestingly a Plan of St. Leonard's Farm made in 1773 shows the close on the south side of the main buildings to be divided into areas called Cow Fair and Horse Fair, presumably the location of the annual fair (BLARS: R 1/9).

The Hospital held agricultural lands and other property, including several buildings, throughout Bedford during the 13th-16th centuries from which it derived rents (BLARS: FN 325, 339, 349; TW 30, 63, 173, 209-11, 214, 436; X 67/3, 5, 8, 18, 20, 27; Calendar of Patent Rolls, Edward III, 1374-7, 1916, p. 433). However, at the time of the great survey of monastic lands recorded in the Valor Ecclesiasticus in 1535, immediately prior to the Dissolution, the total value of the Hospital was only £20/6/4½ (VCH Bedfordshire, III, op. cit.). Although recorded in the Valor the Hospital was not

Figure One: Bedford south of the river in c. 1799 prior to Enclosure (BLARS: XI/1, Award Book D)

(Cont. on page 3 Column 1)
A Brief History of St. Leonard’s Hospital, Bedford (cont. from page 2 col.2)

suppressed during the Dissolution. This means, unfortunately, that it does not feature in the detailed accounts of the Court of Augmentations.

It appears to have been in lay hands in 1556 but in 1575, when it was said to have been concealed and detained from the Crown for many years, Queen Elizabeth granted the site to Richard Senhouse at a rental of 100s. for 21 years (VCH Bedfordshire, III, op. cit.). This lease does not seem to have been effected for, in 1577, the Hospital and its lands in Bedford were granted to John Farnham. It then passed through the hands of various families, including Albany, Campion, Cobb, Barton and Hough. In 1747 the property was inherited by Edward Woodcock who in 1750 sold it to the Duke of Bedford. The various 17th and early 18th century deeds which provide a record of these transactions refer generally to St. Leonard’s Farm, which it had become, and its lands. Unfortunately, they provide no detail of the farm site itself and its buildings (BLARS: Russell Estate Deed Catalogue Volume I, p. 338; X 55/21; AD 8/24). St. Leonard’s Fair continued with the profits belonging to the farm estate.

The Plan of St. Leonard’s Farm dating from 1773 is the earliest large-scale map depicting it (BLARS: R 1/9). Several buildings are shown with yards between, all fenced. What was probably the main house lay to the south east whilst the remainder were agricultural, including barns and stables. It is impossible to tell whether the latter included former Hospital buildings but they, presumably, occupied a similar site. Figure 2 shows the locations of these buildings transcribed onto a modern map base in order to relate them to the present landscape. Fortunately an illustration of the main house survives in a painting of c.1810 by Thomas Fisher, probably from the south east. This shows it as a large, mainly stone built, structure with hints of possible medieval work (Bedfordshire Historic Environment Record: negative F 584/7).

A map of Bedford made in 1836 and another Plan of St. Leonard’s Farm made in 1840 show the farm for the first time in a post-enclosure landscape. However, both only show the main house (BLARS: Dewhurst and Nicholls Map; R 1/14). That most of the farm buildings to the north and west had been demolished seems to be confirmed by two more detailed plans prepared to show the intended land take by the proposed Bletchley to Bedford railway. Both indicate the intended railway corridor superimposed on plans of the property, one of 1844 for the railway company (LNWR) and one of 1846 for the Duke of Bedford showing the lands sold by him (BLARS: PDR 30/1/6; R 1/443). Both show the main house and two buildings immediately adjacent with the centre line of the corridor passing immediately north of them to finish at St. John's Station to the east, also on Bedford Estate land. Clearly the railway was built through a substantial part of the St. Leonard’s Farm complex and, presumably, the medieval Hospital site. St. Leonard’s Fair (for cattle) was moved to another location.

That the Duke of Bedford was prepared to see his farm property decimated for the railway, including the demolition of the farmhouse, is no surprise as he was a supporter of the line. Indeed, much of the land it crossed through the Marston Vale belonged to him and he undoubtedly gained substantially from the sale of his property. He also profited from sales of timber from his estate woods for fencing and to make sleepers for the line. In fact the Bedford Estate’s record figure for income from woods was achieved in 1846: the new railway opened in November of that year (Godber, J., History of Bedfordshire, 1969, p.512).

The Bedfordshire Magazine

For Sale
The Bedfordshire Magazine
Spring 1949 - Summer 1966,
IRO 70 copies. (slightly incomplete series)
Price £35.00 onto Tel 01223 264030

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The Dunstable & District History Society

The Dunstable & District History Society was formed in 1991 with 32 members and now has a membership of over 180, the members ages range from about 40 to 95 and about 50% of the members attend meetings regularly. There are monthly meetings, with speakers from September to May and outings in June, July and August. Some of these are to places some distance away, for example the Black Country museum, Colchester and Hever Castle and some are nearer home. We issue a free news letter twice a year, which generally consists of a series of articles rather than a vehicle for news.

A few members engage in individual research and a dedicated group is now organising a local history room which has been allocated to us by the Town Council in a building recently lately acquired by them as a community and heritage centre. We are starting work on a database and hope to open the room to the public shortly. We co-operate with the Council, putting up exhibitions from time to time and taking part in their annual ‘Tudor Day’. But the creation of a local history resource in our own room will certainly be our greatest achievement.

New Publications

Plain Mr. Whitbread by S. C. Whitbread, Published by the Book Castle, 12 Church St., Dunstable, Bedfordshire, LU5 4RU. Hbk price £14.99 ISBN 1 903747 74 2, Pbk price £9.99 ISBN 1 903747 75 9, p&p (£3.00 if posted). Book launch 09/02/07.

The Whitbread family have been part of Bedfordshire life since, at least, the thirteenth Century. The author traces the development of the family from small beginnings as peasant farmers in Shillington and Gravenhurst through their move to Cardington, where William Whitbread purchased property in 1639, their action on the Parliamentarian side and the subsequent pardon issued by King Charles II to ‘William Whitbread of Cardington — Gentleman’, to become the prosperous and influential land owning family of Southill in the eighteenth and nineteenth Centuries. In 1742 Samuel Whitbread I, together with two partners, set up in business at the Goat Brewhouse in London and, seven years later, purchased the Kings Head Brewhouse Chiswell Street in the City of London, James Watt helped to introduce steam power in 1785, all of which led to the creation of one of the greatest brewing fortunes of the eighteenth Century and a most notable success story of the Industrial Revolution.

Members of the family became prominent in local and national politics serving as Magistrates, High Sheriffs and Lord Lieutenants of Bedfordshire. Six Whitbreads sat in the House of Commons for a total of 128 years while, at the same time, building roads, bridges, schools and hospitals, improving cottages and the local churches.

The book’s title is derived from the knowledge that at least two members of the family were offered offered peerages but preferred to remain “plain Mr. Whitbread”. This book, originally conceived as a family history for the author’s children and grandchildren, brings to life the family and times they lived through. It will appeal to all those interested in history both locally and nationally.

The author, born in 1937, was brought up at the family home, Southill, Bedfordshire. Educated at Eton and (briefly) Cambridge, rejecting full time careers in politics and the family firm to concentrate on farming & forestry. He has been a County Councillor and Magistrate, was appointed High Sheriff in 1973 and Lord Lieutenant of Bedfordshire in 1991. He was elected to the board of Whitbread in 1972 as a non-executive director in 1972 and became Chairman in 1984, serving for eight years at a time of great change at the Company.