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From the Editor

In this issue we present our second article on Wrest Park, by C J P Martin of the Wrest Park History Research Group, which covers the disastrous fire which put paid to the house’s role as a military hospital and eventually, after the death in action of Lord Lucas, led to its sale, breaking the almost 700-year link between Wrest and the Grey family and its descendants (page 5).

The publication of the second Wrest Park article exhausts my stock of previously unpublished articles and, apart from a very welcome book review, the rest of this issue and possibly future issues will have to rely on material previously published by local societies or items I have found or written myself.

The second article in this issue is by Jane Dale from the Biggleswade History Society and falls into the category of articles previously published by a local society. By observing and then researching the information on a surviving gravestone in St Andrew’s churchyard she found a tale of an horrific death on the then nearly new Great Northern Railway in 1857 (page 10). Jane was then able to research the family history of the unfortunate William Pickett, who incidentally was claimed by the press to be a prodigious father – a claim Jane was able to disprove! Apologies to members of the Biggleswade Society who have read this article recently, but it was deserving of a wider audience and shows what an active society Biggleswade is.

So please, if you want your society’s research to be available to other societies in Bedfordshire and this to be a journal covering all aspects of the county’s history and the activities of local societies, put your fingers to the keyboard and send in your contributions. Remember they will be available on the Society’s website soon after publication in HIB.

As mentioned, we have a very welcome review of Bedford’s Musical Society: A History of Bedford Choral Society, by Michael Benson, contributed by Richard Morgan (page 15). The book is volume 94 in the Bedfordshire Historical Record Society series and charts the history of the Musical Society from its foundation in 1867.

As a tailpiece there is a forgotten story of an early motor-car accident in Langford which took the life of a well-known judge on holiday from India (page 16).

I make no apology for repeating the Capability Brown information (updated) and the Postcard Collection notice from the last issue in ‘Notes and News’ (page 3). Both are still relevant and there was practically nothing else to hand, apart from the Rippington Manor visit. Please let me have your information for this section. We will have Stuart Antrobus’s article on the Postcard Collection in the next (Autumn) issue of HIB.

TED MARTIN
Notes and news

Spring Event: Visit to Rippington Manor. This most enjoyable visit took place during a day of torrential rain showers on 11 May but was not spoiled by the weather. We were given a tour of this ancient manor house by the owners, with a commentary on the many pictures hung in it and the personalities associated with it in history. There was a very good attendance by our members and the afternoon closed with a very generous afternoon tea.

A reminder to enjoy Capability Brown’s landscapes in Summer 2016. Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown designed more than 200 landscapes for, and with, the very rich. Today they can be enjoyed by us all; with our families, or as walkers, historians or photographers.

During summer 2016 a Capability Brown Festival, celebrating the 300th anniversary of his birth, is being held and well publicised. An internet search for CB300, or for the Capability Brown website, www.capabilitybrown.org, will give information about events being held all over England. Several of his most beautiful landscapes are open to the public and within easy reach of Bedfordshire.

Stowe Landscape Gardens (National Trust) are less than 35 miles west of Bedford, and are where he laid the foundations of his career in the 1740s. He developed the Grecian Valley and was Clerk of Works for some spectacular buildings there. In 2016 the Temple of Concord and Victory will be open as a visitor hub and there will be a programme of talks and entertainments.

Wrest Park. Jemima, Marchioness Grey, and Capability Brown were friends for many years. He modified her gardens at Wrest Park in Central Bedfordshire (English Heritage) but left the majority of the gardens as they were, and did not alter the long formal canal or the side canals. There is a monument to the creators of the gardens which notes the ‘professional assistance’ of Lancelot Brown, one of only three monuments to him in the country. For information, telephone 01525 860000.

Wimpole Hall. He developed the park north of her house at Wimpole, too (National Trust), less than 20 miles east of Bedfordshire. At Wimpole in 2016 you will be able to enjoy new Capability Brown displays and events, stroll through the shelter-belts and around the lakes which he designed, or enjoy the views from the Folly which he built.

Luton Hoo. Brown also produced a special landscape at Luton Hoo, now the setting for Luton Hoo Golf and Spa Hotel. On Sunday, 24 July their gardens will be open to the public for the National Garden Scheme Open Day. For more information, telephone 01582 698808 or 01582 485438.
Luton Hoo Walled Garden. Brown also designed the Luton Hoo Walled Garden which now belongs to the Luton Hoo Estate. It is being restored by volunteers and is open on Wednesdays between May and September. See their website for further information: www.lutonhooestate.co.uk

Southill. The great man worked at Southill (Central Bedfordshire) in the late 1770s. For more information contact Sue Parke by email:
SParke@southillestate.co.uk

National Trust owns about 15 landscapes attributed to Brown. An important early example of his work is Croome in Worcestershire. A later example is Berrington Hall in Herefordshire, where he worked with his architect son-in-law, Henry Holland. Information about special Capability Brown events at National Trust properties can be found on the National Trust website.

If you are unable to visit many of these sites, Bedford National Trust Association’s Talks Service can offer local groups a choice of two one-hour talks: ‘Lancelot Brown, Life and Landscapes’ or ‘From Stowe to Sheringham’. The latter compares the work of Brown with that of Humphrey Repton. Contact the Talks Co-ordinator Dorothy Jamieson, on 01234 404879 or email: dorothy.jamieson@ntlworld.com for details.

Don’t forget the postcard collection at Bedford Library which Stuart Antrobus has completed arranging into six albums by town, village and subject. The albums may be viewed on Tuesdays (when the Heritage Library in Bedford Central Library is open) and by appointment at other times. To read more about the collection please see Stuart’s article in the BAALHS magazine (a reference copy is held at Bedford Central Library):
http://www.baalhs.org.uk/blhmag.htm

Contact: Christine Conboy, Local Studies Librarian, Bedford Central Library, Harpur Street, Bedford MK40 1PG. Tel 01234 718178:
www.bedford.gov.uk/libraries
In August 1914, at the outbreak of war, Auberon (‘Bron’) Herbert, 9th Lord Lucas, offered the family seat of Wrest Park to his friend Winston Churchill (First Lord of the Admiralty) for use as a military hospital for naval ratings, with all upkeep expenses to be borne by the family.

Over the next two years, Wrest would in turn become a convalescent home for wounded soldiers – the very first English country house to be so – and a fully operational ‘hub hospital’ in conjunction with Woburn Abbey, taking patients directly from the front line. For most of this period the extraordinarily talented Nan Herbert, Bron’s sister, played a pivotal role, managing the operation from recruiting the nurses to arranging provisions and managing the throughput of patients, as well as being heavily involved in actually treating patients.

Officially Wrest Park had 150 beds but occasionally this reached 200 before patients were moved to a ring of local convalescent homes such as Hinwick, run by the Orlebar family. In total, 1,600 men would pass through Wrest’s three hospital wards formed from the ground floor reception rooms and the first floor bedrooms.

However, Wrest’s life as a celebrated military hospital came to an abrupt end on 14 September 1916 when the house was seriously damaged by fire. Our knowledge of the day’s events is drawn from the diaries of Nan Herbert herself.

It was in the late afternoon of a fine day on 14 September 1916, just as the air was turning chilly, when smoke was seen rising from the roof at the south-east corner. At about 5.30pm the Resident Surgeon sent an orderly up to the roof to investigate. He found that sparks from a defective boiler flue had caught old roof timbers, initiating a fire in the roof and in a room off B Ward on the first floor.

The bugle was sounded and the House Fire Team ran to attack the fire but could not hold it. A Private Sore (Telephone Orderly) summoned the Wrest Park Fire Brigade, who arrived at about 5.45 with their steamer drawn by a motor. Wrest Brigade’s 2nd Officer, the aptly named Silsoe King, was actually cycling home when he heard the fire alarm and immediately turned round to call out the crew. But the strength of the fire proved too much for them as well and a wider ‘district call’ for further assistance was sent out at 6.25 to Bedford, Shefford, Ampthill, Luton, Woburn Abbey and Kings Walden. At 7.10 and 7.20, respectively, the Letchworth and Hitchin Brigades were called.

The alarm had also been sent to the Royal Engineers (Signal Service Training Centre) based at Haynes Park and the Bedfordshire Rifle Volunteer Corps training depot at Ampthill.
In the meantime, hospital staff and walking wounded, thoroughly drilled in fire practice, started evacuating the 156 patients onto the terrace and the lawns. Matron Nan had the Orangery cleared for the more serious cases. Sister Rogers had B Ward patients (first floor of the mansion) brought down immediately and A Ward patients (the Drawing Room and Library) were wheeled directly out onto the terrace. Sister Warner waited to clear C Ward (the ‘Batchelor’ wing to the east of the mansion) which was relatively unaffected. All were removed safely including a recent input of 80 casualties, of which 40 were cot cases.

The Duchess of Bedford arrived from Woburn with motor ambulances and cars which together with the Wrest Park ambulances quickly removed the most serious cases to Woburn Abbey and Ampthill Training Depot. The nurses also decamped to Ampthill where they were provided with beds and pyjamas. Some 200 Royal Engineers, commanded by Colonel Leigh, and the ‘Bedfords’, commanded by Majors Stevens and Nelson, then set about removing furniture, books, china and pictures from the house, and keeping back a crowd of interested locals who had come to watch the fire.

The Wrest Park Brigade under Captain Cecil Argles and 2nd Officer King had begun pumping water from tanks on the roof, which had been installed when the house was taken over as a hospital, but early on these had started to run dry. Ampthill Brigade, with a steamer, and Shefford Brigade under Captain Haddow with a manual engine, were the first outsiders to arrive. They were
followed a few minutes later by Hitchin Brigade under Captain C L Barham with a powerful steam engine, drawn by three horses abreast, and a hose-reel on horseback. The Letchworth Brigade under Captain Bullmore arrived 10 minutes later with a motor engine followed by Luton, under 2nd Officer Andrew, with a motor engine, having made the 11 mile journey in 22 minutes – achieving 40 mph on occasion! These were followed by Bedford Brigade, Woburn Abbey and Kings Walden. London Brigade, with a steamer, from Holloway, arrived at 10pm having completed the journey in an amazing 65 minutes and apparently made a grand entrance down Ladies Walk and through the gardens.

Bedford Brigade, however, six men captained by Chief Officer Corby, encountered some ‘difficulties’. First, on the way, pre-arranged ‘assistance’ from the Royal Engineers in Haynes Park with a motor engine to help the horse-drawn Victoria steamer up the hill caused the fire engine to veer off into a hedge! Then, after successfully splicing the tow rope and making it to Wrest Park, the team made a fatal mistake of priming the engine with petrol, not water, which caused further delays!

Initially, Luton Brigade pumped water from an underground tank in the house courtyard whilst Wrest Park and Hitchin engines pumped from the fountain basin halfway down the garden. Bedford, Ampthill, Woburn Abbey and Letchworth engines were placed at ‘Long Water’, the centre-piece oblong lake running north-south in the garden to pump water up to the house. On arrival of the large London engine, Wrest Park and Kings Walden were moved to Long Water and the two, more powerful, engines, London and Hitchin, were used to deal with the fire nearer the house. Superintendent Burrows of the London Brigade took a hose through the house and ran upstairs, valiantly attacking the fire in the roof which was spreading towards the central domes. Simultaneously, Hitchin Brigade went up the fire escape attacking the fire on the east side to prevent it spreading in that direction. Together with Letchworth men, they then joined the overtaxed London firemen.

After five hours, by 03.00 on Friday morning it was thought that the fire had effectively been ‘knocked out’ and with orders given to stand down most brigades had left by 04.00.

Thankfully, however, Hitchin and Wrest Park remained on standby in case of a further outbreak, and indeed, shortly after the other brigades left, the fire broke out again. The Wrest Park Brigade pumped from the ‘Long Water’ to the fountain, and Hitchin then relayed water from there up into the house. Finally, at 08.00 Captain Argles declared that all danger was over.

Much was made of the rivalry between the brigades and their effectiveness. Discounting bias from local newspapers it appears evident that Bedford Brigade was indeed ill-equipped due to their horse-drawn steamer and lack of hose. Ironically they actually held a special committee meeting 10 days later on 25
September to agree an invoice to be sent to Lord Lucas to pay for damage to their engine! It amounted to £34 15s, to cover repaired wheels, new tyres and the use of the engine for 9 hours at £9 5s, including amounts for ‘gold lettering’ on the engine and hose box. There is no record of payment of this invoice but the balance book of the service jumped at the next committee meeting on 13 November.

Perhaps one positive result of this incident was that at the end of the war Bedford Brigade ceased to be a volunteer service and came under control of the borough.

London and Hitchin Brigades were both praised for their equipment and capability.

The effects from the house – clothing, hospital equipment, bedding and furniture – were spread out over three acres of the grounds, some in the open but mostly under marquees. The hall had apparently been under 12 inches of water, and by 07.00 on the morning of the 15th severe incoming storms hit Wrest, so now the problem was from flooding. Dawn that morning saw at least 100 people clearing the lawns and bringing items back into the house away from the rain. Thankfully, teams of Royal Engineers were available to help, and, commanded by Lieutenants Innes and Stevens, set about fixing temporary tarpaulins on the roof and providing assistance right across Wrest Park. The family’s items, including paintings had all been removed to safety.

Lord Lucas arranged for the staff involved to be treated to a visit to the Luton Palace Theatre and awards were made to many individual staff members including Nurse Catherine Maciver.

It was soon evident that the fire damage to the roof, upper floor and water damage to lower floors meant that reopening the hospital quickly was out of the
question. One of the hospital trustees, a very close friend of Nan, J M Barrie (the creator of ‘Peter Pan’), wrote to Bron, Lord Lucas, explaining that Nan was exhausted from running the hospital and fearing what the effect might be on her health if he added restoration of the house to full military hospital capability. After lengthy meetings with the trustees and staff, and then having discussed the issue with the Director-General of Army Medical Services, the difficult decision was taken to close Wrest as a hospital.

After some argument with the insurers it was agreed that the damage would be covered by insurance and repairs costing £20,000 were subsequently made to the roof and rooms, although the damage was so extensive that repairs would take well into the following year, and indeed were still underway after the arrival of the new owner in 1917.

Shortly afterwards Lord Lucas was posted overseas as a Royal Flying Corps spotter pilot over the Western Front. In bad weather on 3 November 1916 his plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire and came down behind enemy lines. His observer, Lieutenant Anderson, was taken prisoner, but Bron died of his wounds.

Nan had always been close to her brother and was devastated by the news. Not in the best of health herself, she took the decision to sell Wrest Park which was subsequently completed the following year. The estate was bought by northern industrialist John George Murray in 1917, thus ending the almost 700-year link between Wrest and the Grey family and its descendants.

*Picture source: English Heritage Private Collection*

C J P Martin

*Wrest Park History Research Group*
Written in Stone: 
An early accident on the Great Northern Railway

Philip Rutt’s excellent guide book to the Parish Church of St Andrew, Biggleswade (published in 2011) tells us that the old gravestones were removed from the churchyard in the late 1950s and that it was such an arduous and slow task to dig them out that a tractor and chains were employed to do the job, regrettably breaking many stones in the process and losing them for ever.

So, a lot of local history was lost, for there is much to be learned from inscriptions on gravestones, but the up-side of the clearing of the churchyard and, later, of the removal of the front wall, was that a fine, uncluttered view of the church across a wide expanse of lawn was opened up.

You can see, from the photograph taken in recent years that a few gravestones have remained in situ. These are mainly the more substantial monuments to ‘the great and good’ of old Biggleswade, although those that once had railings around them no longer have them. Mary Tealby, founder of Battersea Dogs’ home, still retains her memorial in situ, as do members of the Lindsell family and a few others.

Although most of the upright stones were removed, some that survived their uprooting were propped against the side walls of the churchyard, where they may still be seen. Many are the worse for wear now but it is worth taking a look because there are interesting stories to discover.

We would probably never have known about the horrible death of William Pickett on the railway line were it not for the inscription found under the ivy covering his broken white headstone that leans against the wall near the entrance to St Andrew’s church car park:
The inscription reads: ‘Sacred to the Memory of WILLIAM PICKETT who was accidentally killed on the GREAT NORTHERN RAILWAY Oct 13th 1857 Aged 66 Years.’

The main Great Northern line opened in 1850 from a temporary station in Maiden Lane, London, to Peterborough (King’s Cross station opened later, in 1852) and in that same year (1850) Biggleswade became the first place in Bedfordshire to have a main line railway station, on the new Great Northern line. So, as this was an early accident on the railway in Biggleswade, it was worth investigating who William Pickett was and the circumstances of his death.

He proved elusive in searches on genealogy websites, despite the fact that his approximate year of birth (1791) could be deduced from his age at death. And, despite occurrences of the names Pickett and Piggott in the Biggleswade area, he was clearly not from a local family.

He was not recorded in Biggleswade in the 1841 and 1851 censuses, neither could he be positively identified anywhere in the censuses in England in 1841
and 1851, since his place of birth could not be established. His death was registered at Huntingdon because it occurred on the line near Great Stukely. Some useful information about him was found in his will, made in Biggleswade in December 1853 and proved in 1858, which revealed that he was a bricklayer and surveyor on the Great Northern Railway and lived in Biggleswade, so he had been resident in the town probably for no more than five years when he died. He left everything to his wife Sophia but no other relatives were mentioned.

The *Biggleswade Chronicle* did not exist before 1891 so it was necessary to search the British Newspaper Archive online for a report of the accident. The most detailed, and shocking, report was in the *Isle of Wight Observer* of 24 October 1857. Don’t read beyond the words ‘under the wheels of the coal train’ if you are of a squeamish disposition!

‘FATAL ACCIDENT.

Mr William Pigott [sic] Inspector of bridges on the Great Northern Railway, was killed on that line while in the discharge of his duties on Tuesday week, under the following circumstances:— The deceased was walking on the down line near Huntingdon, when he observed a coal train approaching in the opposite direction. To avoid this he stepped on to the up line, although this is contrary to the orders of the company, which strictly enjoin that all persons shall step completely off the railway in such cases, and the Parliamentary train coming up at the moment the unfortunate man was knocked down and killed on the spot. The driver made every effort, by blowing the engine whistle and by shouting, to warn the deceased of his danger, and the latter did make a desperate jump at the last moment, but the buffer of the passenger engine struck him on the shoulder and threw him under the wheels of the coal train. The body was shockingly mutilated; the head was severed completely from the body, and was seen to roll over for some distance, and the trunk was much lacerated. The deceased was 66 years of age, an old servant of the company, and greatly respected. When the intelligence of his death was communicated to his wife it gave her such a shock that she has not been able to speak since. The deceased has been twice married and has had about 30 children.’

A short report in the *Leeds Times* of 17 October added just a little more information:

‘On Tuesday, Mr Pickett, the Great Northern Company’s Surveyor of Bridges between Peterboro’ and Hatfield, was walking towards Huntingdon, upon the down line of rails. When about a mile and a half from that town a coal train approached, when he stepped from the down line upon the up line, and a train from Peterboro’ came up, and before he could get clear of the line the buffer of the up train caught him, twirled him round, and he then fell under the coal train, when about three of the trucks and the brake van passed over him. He was literally cut to pieces, his head being found about ten yards from his body.’
From the will and the *Isle of Wight Observer* report we now knew William had been a bricklayer and railway employee, we had a wife’s name, Sophia, and knew there must also have been an earlier wife – and about 30 children in all! That many children, although not impossible, seemed highly unlikely. Armed with the extra information and a good measure of curiosity, it was back to the genealogy websites. Finding Sophia and her children was easy. Here are the search results:

1826. William Pickett married Sophia Pool at St James’s, Piccadilly, Westminster. William was about 34 and Sophia 22.

1827–1841. Baptism records of five children: Sarah Susanna (1827); Elijah (1830); Frederick (1831); Sophia (1833) – all four baptised at St John’s, Horsleydown (Bermondsey, Surrey), father’s occupation given as bricklayer and home address as Dock Head. Fifth child Thomas William (1841) born and baptised in Walworth, Surrey, appears in later records as William.

1841 census. Sophia (aged about 35) living with children Sarah, Elijah, Hannah and William in St Mary parish, Newington, Lambeth, but her husband was not with them. Children Frederick and Sophia appear not to have survived, as they were not with the family in this or any later census. Hannah (no baptism record found) was six, so was born c1835.

1851 census. The family had left South London and William was now a railway employee. Sophia (aged 47, born in Burnham, Bucks, described as a rail labourer’s wife) was living in North Maskham, Nottinghamshire, with her three sons: Elijah (21, a bricklayer’s son), William (10) and the latest addition, George (5, born in Walworth). The two daughters were not there; Sarah was most likely married and Hannah, at 16, was probably a live-in housemaid somewhere. Once again Sarah’s husband, the elusive William Pickett, was not with his family.

1853. We know, from William’s will made in that year, that the family was now in Biggleswade.

1857. We know that William was killed on the railway in that year and buried in St Andrew’s churchyard.

1861, 1871 and 1881 censuses. Sophia did not remarry. She remained in Biggleswade for almost 30 years until her own death, and can be tracked in each census in Back Street, where several GNR employees lived, close to the station and the railway. After George she appears to have had no more children. In 1861 she had George (an apprentice), Elijah’s wife and two grandsons living with her. In 1871 her son Elijah, an unemployed bricklayer, was living with her and her 11-year-old grandson, George, and there were two lodgers in the house. Sadly, grandson George died in 1875 (aged 15). He is buried in Drove Road cemetery. By 1881 Sophia was 77 and the only one of the family still in Biggleswade.

1886: Sophia died at the age of 82. She too is buried in the Drove Road cemetery.
Conclusion: There is evidence for seven children of the second marriage. If a few more were stillborn or died in infancy between censuses the maximum would be ten. Research into William’s first marriage proved difficult but yielded results:

**c1791.** No baptism record could be found for William but it would be safe to assume that he was one of several children of Philip Pickett, a bricklayer of Streatham, and later of Tooting Graveney, Surrey, and his third wife, Ann.

**1811.** William married Maria Whale at St Martin’s in the Fields, Westminster.

**1817.** Notes in a parish Examination Book for Tooting Graveney show that Maria applied for support while William was absent: ‘Maria Pickett (wife of William Pickett, settled at Westminster); he has gone away to work.’ The pre-1834 Poor Law required applicants for relief to be examined as to their place of legal settlement. Westminster would be asked to pay.

**1811–1821.** Four baptisms at Tooting Graveney: triple baptism (1819): Philip Alexander, Ann and Rebecca; and (1821): Alfred.

**After 1821.** The trail went cold. We have to assume that Maria died after 1821 and before William’s remarriage in 1826. We do not know who cared for the children after their mother died, or even whether all four survived. They were not found in the 1841 census but Philip Alexander showed up in 1851 in Greenwich, as a bricklayer with a wife and children.

**Final conclusion as to 30 children:** Misprint! William probably had 13 rather than 30 children, unless he had an unofficial wife or two – after all, he was not at home in any census and worked away during his first marriage but that was not unusual for bricklayers, especially in the boom years of railway construction with all those tunnels, viaducts, bridges and stations to build. We may not know all about William but we do know his broken remains lie at St Andrew’s, somewhere under the lawns.

Jane Dale

Editor’s Note: This article is reprinted from the *Biggleswade History Society Newsletter*, Number 370, February 2016, by kind permission of the Editor, Jane Dale, who is also the author of this article. If you would like to publish the results of your local research in HIB and thus make it available to other societies in Bedfordshire and then online on the BLHA website, please contact me at the addresses on page 1.
Book Review


Bedford’s Musical Society was founded in 1867 and apart from an interregnum between 1933 and 1941 has flourished ever since. It has changed its names a few times, being now the Bedford Choral Society.

The book begins with an excellent introduction by Donald Burrows, Professor of Music at the Open University, on the development of musical/choral societies in the provinces, with special reference to Bedford.

Then we have the main text of which over half – perhaps as much as two-thirds – is devoted to describing each concert. The remainder of the book has excellent sketches of the leading lights in the society and especially the conductors. The role of the Bedford schools stands out – especially Bedford Modern in the earlier days. Bedford has also had a number of strokes of musical luck: first, a debt to several Germans who lived in the town and freely gave of their time and musical skills to the society – Philip Diemer and Hermann Steinmetz in the early days and latterly Hans and Kate Frehan.

Secondly, there was the evacuation of the BBC Symphony Orchestra and BBC Singers to Bedford during the war, with a rejuvenating effect on Bedford’s music. Local journalist J H M Sykes wrote an article on this (which the author castigates). Sykes describes those heady days, with Menuhin practising in the Swan, Glenn Miller playing in the Co-partners’ Hall in Ford End Road, and Sykes himself having coffee in Woolworth’s between Sir Adrian Boult on one side and Marlene Dietrich on the other.

The third especial stroke of good fortune was to have the late Sir David Willcocks as the Bedford society’s Principal Conductor for over 20 years. His musicianship, dedication and humour come across well. We have the oft-told story of his way of inculcating the necessity for singers to be always looking at and taking their cue from him. He would clap a handkerchief on his head while rehearsing and then ask some hapless singer what he as just done, knowing full well that the singer had not been looking at him.

For some reason Mr Benson’s text stops at 1991, the year in which the Society celebrated (incorrectly as it happens) its 125th anniversary, and the period since 1991 is covered in a mere five pages by the present conductor Mr Ian Smith.

I have mentioned that most of the book is a list of concerts: the music, the conductor, the soloists, the orchestra or other accompaniment, and what the
press thought. Furthermore a summary of this information is also contained in the 30 pages of Appendix 1. You have to be fairly dedicated to choral music to want to read all this. (As it happens I think I am, having sung in various choirs and choral societies over the years, though not in Bedford.)

The saving grace is what the press thought. Bedford has also been exceptionally lucky in its music reviewers. Marshall Palmer and J H M Sykes stand out as excellent journalists and their accounts are lively and I should guess on the whole their criticism is fair. One reviewer lamented ‘one of the minor miseries of a critic’s life is the fact that ninety-nine pieces of praise which he prints are completely forgotten on the day when he prints his one piece of dispraise’.

Those words are in a footnote on page 94 and I mention this because quite a lot of this journalism quoted is in footnotes. These are in an excessively small type and really tax the eyes. If footnotes are confined to providing in brief form the source of a piece of information, there is good reason to keep them small, but where, as here, the note is 14 lines of text, this is a penance the reader might prefer to avoid.

This is very much a book for those interested in choral singing. It has its longueurs, but there is much to enjoy. RICHARD MORGAN

**Fatal accident in 1904**

Sir William Rattigan (1842–1904), a distinguished judge in India and the grandfather of the playwright Terence Rattigan, was motoring through Langford in July 1904 when his hired Darracq car left the road. As the car approached an awkward turn in the road at 10 mph it overturned:

‘Sir William was thrown against the glass screen in front of the car and Lady Rattigan and the chauffeur were imprisoned beneath the glass screen. Some labourers rushed forward to render assistance and found Sir William was dead. They extricated Lady Rattigan, who was suffering from cuts and shock.’ [Bedfordshire Times]

The body was taken to The Boot public-house which probably indicates that the incident took place at The Boot corner where the road was improved many years later. The Coroner’s inquest was held a few days later at the Corner House, which used to stand on the south side of the junction between The Leys and the High Street. The roadworthiness of the car was not discussed but the coroner needed to decide whether anyone was to blame. The car was hired out by Rawlings of Gloucester Road, London, even though it had previously been in collision with a coal cart. A verdict of accidental death was returned, for although ‘the car was not in a fit condition to go on a journey’, the driver was ‘acting under the instructions of his masters’ and was exonerated from all blame.

[Details from Bedfordshire by Simon Houfe (Pimlico, 1995).]

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