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BLHA AGM & ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2017
Saturday, 24 June 2017
at Priory Methodist Church
Newnham Avenue, Bedford (MK41 9QJ)

The Conference theme will be

BEDFORD THROUGH THE AGES

Keynote Speaker:
MIKE LUKE
(Albion Archaeology)
on
The Great Ouse Valley in Early Times

Full details of the programme and booking arrangements will be in the Spring 2017 issue of History in Bedfordshire (HIB).
We know that being a member of the BLHA is a great way to meet other historians, enthusiasts, and societies and learn more about Bedfordshire’s history. Another benefit of BLHA membership is the opportunity to meet other Society’s officers, to discuss issues of mutual interest and to learn how others do things. So,

**IF YOU ARE**
a Society Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer, Programme Secretary, or committee member

**WOULD YOU**
like to meet people from other societies in Bedfordshire to discuss topics of interest?

**SUCH AS:**
*programmes*: compiling, production, distribution, etc
*venues for meetings*: availability and cost
*society finances*: membership fees, meeting fees, raffles
*speakers*: availability, performance, cost
*publicity for your activities*: websites, posters, Facebook, Streetlife, etc
*how to reach new members*
*visits*: organisation, transport, venues

**THEN:**
you might be interested in attending an informal meeting hosted by BLHA to discuss these matters in working groups to pool the knowledge available.

**SO:**
if you are interested, contact:
Colin West, at colinjohnwest4@gmail.com
by 28 February 2017.
Notes and news

Motor Meet at Wrest Park in 1907. Researchers at Wrest Park have found some very interesting photographs from Bedfordshire Archives which show a meeting of the Bedford Motor Club (or perhaps ‘Auto Club’ – they are not sure exactly what it was called) at Wrest Park in July 1907.

The following information was gleaned from local newspapers of the time:

Beds Automobile Club Meet at Wrest, 2 August 1907. In 1907 Mr Whitelaw Reid hosted a meeting of the Beds Automobile Club at Wrest Park. Approximately 60 cars participated, with their rendezvous in the Main Street in the village before they lined up and motored down through the Lodge Gates and into Wrest Park. The cars were parked in a square on the grass outside the mansion’s north entrance. The guests made their way through the house and out onto the terrace where they were welcomed by Mr Reid. They spent half an hour strolling around the gardens ‘which are evidently the pride of the courteous gentleman who represents one of the greatest nations of the world, with a kindness and simplicity which at once won the hearts of every one of his two hundred guests’ (Bedfordshire Mercury). After a photo of the host and visitors was taken on the terrace, they were then entertained to afternoon tea and American ices in the eastern wing. After thanks were expressed by the Club, Whitelaw Reid gave a short welcome address and apologised for having to leave them to go back to London. He had made the trip to Wrest specifically for the Club’s visit. He had sent staff from Dorchester House to look after the guests and their chauffeurs were also well looked after in a large room near the coach yard.

But the date they have for the event and the date given in the above article do not seem to tie up, which itself will need some investigation.

The first photo shows some of the cars with an informative caption:
The caption reads:

**BEDFORDSHIRE MOTOR MEET, WREST PARK.** Wrest Park belongs to Lord Lucas, but the tenant is Mr Whitelaw Reid, the United States Ambassador. Built on a French basis, the mansion was erected by Earl de Grey in 1839, and the gardens and grounds are laid out with great taste. The pleasure part of the grounds was originally laid out by Henry, Duke of Kent, in Queen Anne's reign and abounds in statuary. There is also a serpentine lake. The ambassador is a keen motorist. At his invitation the Bedfordshire Club met there recently.

The second photograph shows a group of the attendees seated outside the mansion:

The final photo is a panorama showing all the cars which attended the event:

The researchers at Wrest Park are very keen to find out as much as they can about this event: such as any information about the make of the cars, the
numbers of the attendees and who they were. If you can help please e-mail: Wresthistoryvolunteers@english-heritage.org.uk

**Secret rooms with beautiful wallpaper.** The July 2016 issue of the *English Heritage Members’ Magazine* featured two rooms at Wrest Park which had been hiding some beautiful wallpaper which was discovered during renovation. One has 18th century hand-painted exquisite Chinese wallpaper, ‘a fine example of Chinese craft at the time’. The other room is papered with 19th century French scenic wallpaper which is the only design of its time known in Britain and is extremely rare. The wallpapers had been preserved behind boarding on the walls thankfully placed there by someone unknown to preserve them. Visitors can see the wallpapers on guided tours on the first Sunday of every month at £3 per person. Telephone 01525 860000 for more information.

**Coin hoard.** A significant hoard of very valuable ancient coins has been found on Henlow Common. Coins from the era of Alfred the Great were mentioned. The British Museum have scanned the area and found more. The area is now clear of metal objects. Since the coins were found on common land and discovered without permission, there may be an inquiry at a commoners’ court.

**From the Editor**

‘The crisis has past and it’s daylight at last’ (W S Gilbert, *Iolanthe*), appropriately, from the’Nightmare’ song, but in this context relating to the cache of future articles for this publication. Thanks to Richard Morgan, we have, in this issue, the first part of his interesting article on Dr George Witt, a stalwart mayor of Bedford in the first half of the 19th century, with the promise of a second part in 2017. I have also received promises of further articles from the Wrest Research Group and also permissions to reproduce articles that have appeared elsewhere and, in addition, a contribution from across the Atlantic concerning the life of an emigrant from my own village of Langford. So, for possibly the most part of next year, we have enough material for the articles section.

However, this journal should also reflect the activities of Bedfordshire’s local history societies. I am aware that some societies do not conduct research but undertake the equally valuable role of keeping alive their community’s story and, especially, making it known to incomers by publications and events as development increases across the county. To those societies who do conduct research into their locality’s history, I would say please tell us about your activities. There is no need to wait until you have it all neatly cut and dried, keep us informed of your progress and I will ensure you get as much space as you need with photos as well and will also publish your final results as an article if you wish. It’s your publication, so please use it.

TED MARTIN
New Light on Dr George Witt 1804–69:  
Part I: Early life and Bedford, 1804–49*

Origins of Dr Witt
Dr Witt will be familiar to everyone in Bedfordshire as the Mayor of Bedford whose name appears on the plaque on Bedford Bridge. For non–Bedfordians he is probably best known for his collection of (ahem) phalluses which he bequeathed to the British Museum, where it is reputedly still housed though not readily accessible. Readers will be relieved to hear I have nothing further to say about this aspect of Dr Witt’s life. However, even apart from or despite this, he was a distinguished man, an MRCS and FRS who won a place in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Yet there are curious gaps in his life and much of his career is obscure. This is the first of two articles to explore new sources about him.

The *ODNB* states that George Witt was born in 1804 and gives his father’s name as Matthew, Perpetual Curate of Ticknall-with-Chalke [should be Calke], Derbyshire, and Second Master of Repton School, and says vaguely that George was born in Cambridge or Northampton. Almost all this is wrong. George Witt’s matriculation on 20 Oct 1828 at Leiden University in Holland states that he was born at Swaffham Prior in Cambridgeshire.¹ He had been baptised there on 23 May 1805, the son of Matthew Witt and his wife Sarah née Woollard. This parentage is confirmed by George Witt’s dedicating his Leiden University thesis to his ‘dearest brother John Maling Witt’. Witt’s father Matthew was a farmer in a very substantial way – worth £5,000 at the time of his death in 1824,² and he is clearly not the Revd Curate in Derbyshire who died in 1837.

We know the date of George Witt’s birth only from a memorial window in Trumpington Church, Cambs.³ The window commemorates several of the family including George’s elder sister Amy and his younger brother Samuel. The inscription in the window states that George was born 25 March 1804.

It will be noted that his parents waited over a year to have him baptised. In fact on 23 May 1805, no less than three Witt children were baptised: James, Henry and George. Matthew Witt and Sarah Woollard had been married by licence at Fen Ditton, Cambs on 22 December 1795. However, only one child, a son called Charles, was baptised there on 23 January 1798. Amey [sic] Woollard Witt was baptised at Swaffham Prior on 27 May 1802, followed by James, Henry and George in 1805. Is this a case of twins or even possibly triplets? No, for a Witt family Bible shows that James Maling was born 15 April 1799 and Henry was born 26 December 1800.⁴ The Witts waited up to six years to get these baptisms performed. Mr Geoffrey Woollard speculates that Matthew Witt had some sort of difference of opinion with the incumbent at Swaffham Prior at the
time. But this still does not explain why there was no objection to baptising Amey at Swaffham Prior in 1802. Furthermore, George’s youngest brother Samuel also waited a long time for baptism (nine years).5

Matthew’s farming is all in and around Cambridge. Fen Ditton is 2.5 miles NE of Cambridge, Swaffham Prior a further 5 miles NE.

Matthew’s will of 2 February 1824 (proved 25 May 1824) sheds no further light on these matters. It named Charles and James as executors and made clear that only Samuel was under 21.6 No other children are named though the Will speaks of ‘my other Sons and Daughter’, implying one daughter and at least two sons alive. In fact the Inland Revenue Death Duties papers list all the children except James Maling the elder, which implies they were all alive in 1824.

The probable reason why the ODNB writer got so much about Witt’s origins wrong is interesting. Dr Witt kept a book of press cuttings, inscribed in gilt lettering on the spine ‘Local Squabbles 1824–49’ and this ended up in the British Library.7 It contains nearly 200 items about his Bedford years: press cuttings, and more importantly printed ephemera of all kinds – applications for public office, annual reports and electoral and other posters. Item 97 in the book is a death notice from some newspaper of the Matthew Witt of Derbyshire. This is the only personal notice of this type in Local Squabbles, and the ODNB writer must have presumed it was there because it was about Dr Witt’s father. I am pretty sure the Derbyshire Matthew is a relative – perhaps a cousin.8 He was the clergyman who married George Witt to Elizabeth Hedley in St Mary’s Bedford on 22 August 1832.

Northampton and Bart’s
We next hear of Witt at Northampton where in 1820 he was Pupil Residing in the House under Dr W C Kerr at the General Infirmary. George Witt’s elder brother, Dr Charles Witt, had been appointed as House Surgeon there in 1822.9 John Campbell (probably of Blunham House, Biggleswade) who in 1828 proposed Witt for his post at Bedford added that Witt took charge of a Northants parish during a typhus epidemic.10 Perhaps this was at Byfield: ‘We learn with regret that typhus fever continues to spread so extensively in the village of Byfield in this county, that scarcely a day passes without some fresh instance of its infection.’ 11

He also briefly became House Surgeon at Northampton Infirmary in probably 1825 – but only for three months.12 Why did he leave?

He then spent a year or so as a surgical student at St Bartholomew’s Hospital in London, starting on 22 January 1825 and serving under Mr Vincent.13 His brother Charles had also been at Bart’s.14

The following year he also sat the examination – that is to say appeared before a panel of 10 surgeons including the President and two Vice–Presidents to
answer questions orally – and gained Membership of the Royal College of Surgeons on 21 April 1826.\textsuperscript{15} He never graduated to be a Fellow of the College.

**The East India Company and cholera**

He joined the East India Company to serve as an Assistant Surgeon at least before his MRCS examination. Witt’s old pupil master Dr Kerr at Northampton had been born in Bombay and may have encouraged him in this.\textsuperscript{16} He did not get to sail until about eight months later, serving on HCS *Inglis* (Capt Samuel Serle).\textsuperscript{17} The ship’s Journal starts at the East India Docks on 28 December 1826, but Witt probably joined the ship a few days later on 3 January 1827.\textsuperscript{18} The *Inglis* returned to the Downs on 8 July 1828 and Witt was paid off on 23 June having received £47 19s 8d after deductions. This figure includes a curious 10 shillings for ‘Grampus’.\textsuperscript{19} Others also have this item in their pay packets. A Grampus was a whale – perhaps Witt and others of the crew captured one and its meat kept the ship going; hence the recompense. Unfortunately I can find nothing in the ship’s Journal which sheds light on this.

Captain Samuel Serle was born in 1783 and this was his eighth voyage with HCS *Inglis*. His surgeon, a Scot called John Lawson, also had a long career on the *Inglis*, having served first as Assistant Surgeon, then as Surgeon from 1818.\textsuperscript{20} The *Inglis* was a big ship at 1,289 tons, built in Penang in 1811. As befits such a ship she had a large crew – 146 including no less than 6 Mates and 6 Midshipmen (one of whom deserted!). It was also carrying 21 passengers and 277 troops (45th Foot and 3rd Light Dragoons), as well as several of their wives and children. Four infants were born on the voyage so Witt would have gained obstetric experience as well as practice of other kinds of surgery and medicine.

The cholera epidemic on the *Inglis* at Saugor on the Bay of Bengal formed the topic of Witt’s thesis for his MD at Leiden University in 1830. The thesis is in Latin. It contains an acknowledgement of thanks to Dr Archibald Robertson, another of the Physicians at Northampton, and is dedicated to Capt Serle and to Witt’s brother John Maling Witt. The thesis is a workmanlike job, describing the disease generally and the epidemic on this particular ship – a controlled environment with a relatively small group of people, all on the same diet, exposed to the same risks, and receiving the same treatment. Witt describes two forms – weak (asthenica) and strong (stenica). These terms relate not to the severity of the disease, but to the strength or otherwise of the patient. Modern sources suggest that 80% of sufferers experience relatively mild symptoms and the remaining 20% have severe symptoms resulting in death.\textsuperscript{21} Witt stated that out of 140 officers and crew on the ship, 36 caught the disease. Of these, nine were what he calls strong disease sufferers so caught the mild form and all recovered, and 27 were weak patients so caught the more serious form. Of these, 12 died. If his identification of the two forms is correct, this is a surprisingly good
result. Examination of the ship’s Journal corroborates Witt’s figure of 12 deaths, and makes clear that none of the passengers or soldiers died. Most of these had mercifully been disembarked at Madras, before the Inglis reached Saugor.

Saugor is on the Bay of Bengal at the mouth of the Hooghly River, up which ‘country ships’ would have transported goods and passengers destined for the capital of British India at Calcutta. To effect these transits the Inglis remained there two and a half months in the hottest time of the year (8 June to 24 August 1827). Capt Serle’s Journal does not mention the word ‘cholera’, but he does note the sick, starting with 15 ill on 9 June rising to 27 on 29 June, down to 11 on 17 July and rising again to 27 on 11 August and then receding to 18 by the time they left Saugor. Of course not all Capt Serle’s sick would have been cholera patients. Capt Serle also notes deaths and burials at sea, from 18 June onwards. One is significant: ‘Mon 25 Jun took the deceased [Rd Spalding Quarter Master] about a mile from the Ship & committed him to the deep with the usual ceremony.’

The ship was of course at anchor at this time, so a burial immediately from the ship could result in the corpses bobbing up and down in the vicinity for weeks afterwards. But it also perhaps implies a wish to remove the contamination of the corpse as far from the ship as possible. Was this at Witt’s suggestion?

Apart from the cholera outbreak, the only other excitements seem to have been a serious leak in November 1827 – doubtless sorted out when the ship got to China later that month, and a curious episode on the return journey:

Sat 3 May 1828 Saw a strange Sail bearing East. At 8 A. M. Discovered the Stranger to be a Brig of War under Spanish colours, cleared ship for action, Mustered the People at their Quarters and shotted the Guns – at ½ past ten the Stranger sent his boat on board, she proved to be the President of Cadiz (out 4 months bound to Ditto).

Witt is not mentioned by name in the text of the Journal, but this was not unusual. EIC Journals tend to mention individuals only if they qualified for the Commander’s attention in one or other of two ways: by dying or by committing some offence and being punished by the Commander.

**Bedford Infirmary**

It will be noted that Witt applied for a job at Bedford within a month of getting back to England from India. We have no idea why he abandoned his Indian career. His Bedford application was successful and Dr Witt lived there from 1828 to 1849. There are two aspects to his life there: medical, and municipal. His career as a medic is well described by Bernard Cashman in *Private Charity and the Public Purse: The Development of Bedford General Hospital 1794–1988* (North Bedfordshire Health Authority, Bedford, 1988), and I have very little to add to that apart from his connection with the Royal Society.
On 28 October 1828, George Witt matriculated in person at Leiden University and obtained his MD there on the basis of his account of the cholera epidemic on board the *Inglis*.\(^{22}\) A further honour was to follow. In February 1834 Witt’s application to become a Fellow of the Royal Society was put before the other Fellows.\(^{23}\) He was nominated by:\(^{24}\)

- Davies Gilbert, 1767–1839: mathematician, but also interested in astronomy (responsible for the legislation establishing the observatory at the Cape of Good Hope).
- John Lee, 1783–1866: an antiquary and astronomer and owner of Colworth in Beds, so may well have known Witt personally.\(^{25}\)
- William Henry Smyth, Captain, RN: a former Royal Navy hydrographer, lived 1828–39 at No 4 The Crescent, Bedford, where he built his own astronomical observatory. When he moved to Aylesbury in 1840, he rebuilt his observatory. It seems likely that he knew Witt.\(^{26}\)
- G Dollond, 1774–1852: an optician and astronomer.
- William Clift, 1775–1849: was first curator of the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons and with the medical museum connection and the Royal College it hardly possible he did not know Witt.
- Henry Kater, 1777–1835: a geologist, also interested in astronomy.
- John Grover.
- Joseph Smith.
- William Burnett, 1779–1861: naval physician who studied the occurrence of bilious remittent fever in the Mediterranean Fleet, so might have appreciated Witt’s cholera work.
- Edward Stanley, 1792–1862: another medic and MRCS. He had been at Bart’s about the time Witt was there so doubtless knew him.
- James Copland, 1791–1870: he had handle an attack of fever on a ship off Sierra Leone and later wrote a book on cholera and might well have appreciated Witt’s cholera work.
- Nicholas Carlisle: there is a somewhat devious antiquary of this name, 1771–1847, but I cannot find that he was an FRS.

As one would expect there are four medical men in this group, but there are also at least six astronomers. I know of no source which ascribes to Witt an interest in astronomy, but he was clearly curious about all areas of science and could have been enthused by Smyth in Bedford. Equally it may be that Smyth roped in his fellow astronomers to bolster Witt’s nomination. Although I do not know how the other eminent men became acquainted with Witt, they too purported to recommend him from personal knowledge. I suspect that may include personal knowledge of his work from publications, rather than face-to-
face acquaintance. His nomination mentions his *Compendium of Osteology* which had been published the year before.

However that may be, Witt was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society on 5 June 1834. Thereafter he was a nominator of five other fellows: Dr James Heygate, born in Northampton in 1823 and an MRCS and Physician at Derbyshire General Hospital,\(^\text{27}\) elected 6 April 1843, and four individuals all elected at the same time (June 1854). They were:

- Charles May, a civil engineer (Brunel and Herschel were also nominators).
- William Henry Flower, 1831–99, conservator at the Royal College of Surgeons (Darwin was a nominator).
- Sir Charles Locock, Physician to Her Majesty.
- Nicholas Wood, 1795–1865: author of a work on railroads.\(^\text{28}\)

All are nominated ‘from personal knowledge’. Connections with Flower are not difficult to establish: Flower was Smyth’s son–in–law and there was also Witt’s own membership of the Royal College of Surgeons. The connection with Locock goes back to the beginning of Witt’s career; when Witt joined the Northampton Infirmary, William Locock, Sir Charles’s father, was Surgeon Extraordinary (ie *emeritus*) there, and Witt may well have met the younger Locock (who was five years older than Witt) then.

**Bedford politics**

For Witt’s career in local politics, *Local Squabbles* is the invaluable guide. At this time, the Corporation of Bedford was the old unreformed body described by C F Farrer.\(^\text{29}\) Witt had been sworn in as a Burgess of Bedford on 3 September 1832\(^\text{30}\) so was eligible to vote or hold office. Thus it was that on 1 September 1834 Witt was offered the Mayoralty in a brief letter from Theed Pearce, junior, Town Clerk: ‘I have the honour to inform you, that at a Common Hall held this day, you were duly elected to serve the Office of Mayor for this Town and Borough for the Year ensuing . . . ’

The letter is printed apart from the date and in this sentence the word ‘Mayor’. The rest of the letter is about the service at St Paul’s church and the opening of Quarter Sessions. Witt accepted.\(^\text{31}\)

The major event of Witt’s Mayoralty which I alluded to earlier was the removal of the tolls from Bedford Bridge. Despite his name being on the plaque, Witt can claim little credit for this. It was all done by the long purses of the Duke of Bedford and William Henry Whitbread,\(^\text{32}\) though this did not stop Witt decreeing a celebration:
The Inhabitants of Bedford are informed that there will be a public Exhibition of FIREWORKS on the River, on Wednesday Evening, the 1st of July, to celebrate the removal of the Toll from the Bedford Bridge. No mention of the Duke or Whitbread. Who paid for the fireworks?

Witt during his mayoralty had various *ex-officio* duties. For example, he was a Trustee of the town’s Trustee Savings Bank, and also Chairman of the Bedford Charity aka the Harpur Trust.

In 1835 the Municipal Corporations Act swept away the cosy corruption of local government for Bedford and many other boroughs. From now on all Councillors were elected by a larger franchise and the Mayor and Aldermen from among the Councillors. It also affected the Harpur Trust which became – to use the modern cliché – ‘a political football’, with allegedly corrupt competition for the position of trustee.

The change to violent party rivalry evidently did not commend itself to Witt. So, when he was nominated as a Conservative candidate for Councilman for Bedford East, he declined to stand and posted the following extraordinary handbill:

At a Meeting which was held last evening my name was selected as one of the parties to be proposed as a Town Councilman for your Ward. I so entirely disapprove of the principle which guided the selection both of Councilmen and the Elective Trustees on that occasion that I shall esteem it a favour if you will vote against me at the forthcoming election.

I have frequently avowed that I would not voluntarily lend my name to an exclusive party list, and lest by my silence I might appear to approve of the proceeding, I take this mode of expressing both my dissent from it, and my regret that the Bedford Charity, calculated to be such a blessing to the Town, should ever be perverted for party purposes.

Bedford, Oct 25 1837

The party rivalry that convulsed Bedford on occasions spilled over into vindictiveness. An attempt in 1843 by Thomas Abbott Green (who had been Mayor in 1839) to nominate Witt as an Alderman backfired spectacularly, with William Rogers proposing William Fish Palmer as a rival:

He would not say anything invidious of Dr Witt: but in performing a public duty, it was necessary to make a few observations bearing on the point. Doctor Witt was a perfect stranger to them – he was not among them at all; he had not yet even been honoured by a return [ie an election] from the town; and he (Mr Rogers) thought it would be unfair to the council to select a person to fulfil the office of Alderman who had not yet been selected by the town itself. It would be throwing dirt in the face of their constituents, and he said it without any reflection on Dr Witt. Dr Witt had either treated the town with contempt – or he had not dared to go to the town to ask their sanction for a seat in the corporation, before aspiring to the office of Alderman. Then he was not deserving of having an honour thrust upon him by them, which the town would not approve of; and why should the corporation presume to anticipate and forestall the people in their
opinion? Public opinion might be wrong sometimes, but it was generally right; let Dr Witt, then, appeal to the people – have their voice in his favour – receive the sanction of the town, and he for one would not object to him . . .

and a good deal more. The vote was a dead heat and the Mayor (Joseph Browne) disliked Witt and after saying:

. . . he had nothing to say against Dr Witt privately; but publicly George Witt was less calculated to fill the office of Alderman than any other person he knew – no person was such a curse to the town while in office, under the Old Corporation, as George Witt – no person had been so vile to the poor as George Witt – no person was so reckless while in office as George Witt – (laughter). On those grounds, and on those grounds alone, he opposed the election of George Witt as an Alderman in the Corporation (hear, hear).37

Accordingly Mayor Browne cast his vote for Witt’s rival.

This humiliation was not allowed to pass unnoticed. Four days later a notice appeared:

To the Burgesses of the West Ward of the Borough of Bedford
We the undersigned Inhabitants of Bedford, desirous to express our Disapprobation of the Calumnious, Unjust and Unmanly attack made upon Dr W I T T, in his absence, in the Council Chamber, on Tuesday last, beg to call upon you to assist us, by promoting his E L E C T I O N To–morrow, in redeeming the Town from the Imputation cast upon it by so disreputable an Exhibition of Intemperate and Unwarrantable Feeling.  

Bedford, Feb 28, 1843

The notice was signed by 48 names including Witt’s medical colleague at the Infirmary Dr Mesham.38 Witt was persuaded to stand and returned with a substantial win – 266 votes against 210 for Charles Frederick Palgrave his Whig rival.39 Witt’s friend, John Thomas Brooks of Flitwick Manor, attended a celebratory dinner at Witt’s house and wrote crowing in his diary40:

This was a busy day for Bedford for it was an election into the Civic body and Dr Witt was put in nomination (against his will and protest) by the Conservatives and a Mr Palgrave (a Chemist) by the Whigs and Radicals and with a Radical Mayor, Mr Brown. It was a severe contest. However the Tories won the day and my friend Witt was returned with a large majority. Hurrah!

Witt himself issued a notice of thanks to his supporters:

To the Burgesses of the Western ward of the Borough of Bedford
F E L L O W  T O W N S M E N
It is impossible for me to resist the public expression of my most grateful thanks for your generous, unparalleled, and, on my part, unsolicited exertions on my behalf in the Election of yesterday. Setting aside all personal considerations, there is abundant ground for congratulating the Electors on the result of this contest. The T O W N  O F  B E D F O R D has been degraded, the report of the late exhibition in the Council Chamber has been spread
far and wide throughout all the neighbouring Counties. YOU have marked your sense of the proceedings, and have effectually removed the stigma from yourselves . . .

So Witt was back in the Council Chamber and could again be a Trustee of the Harpur Trust and (for example) take part in the discussions about the proposed railway to connect Bedford to the Birmingham Railway.

Witt’s life in Bedford
On 6 June 1841 George Witt was living in Potter Street, Bedford (the western-most section of the modern Cardington Road). With him was his wife Elizabeth née Hedley whom he had married in 1832, and three servants: George C Adson, Alice Chappell and Mary Archer. Elizabeth was 12 years younger than her husband. The Witts’ next-door neighbours were on one side James Tacy Wing the architect, and on the other Dr George Dixon Hedley, Elizabeth Witt’s brother, and his wife Isabella with one servant: Elizabeth Ekins.

A cutting in Local Squabbles refers to the Potter Street house: on Saturday, 18 February 1843 (days before Witt’s humiliation at Mayor Browne’s hands) the Bedford Mercury reported:

On Sunday evening last, the inhabitants of Potter-street, in this town, were thrown into a considerable state of excitement by the freaks of some ‘micks’ of the Waterfordian school. These brawlers commenced their tricks soon after the hour of ten, by taking the gates, in front of Mr Wing’s house, off their hinges, and throwing them into Dr Witt’s garden – then they pulled up the scraper in front of Dr Witt’s house and fixed it at Mr Pearse’s back door. And to make their performances more complete, and to shew the proficiency they have attained in the school alluded to, took Mr Pearse’s garden roller and deposited it in a moat behind his house. Dr Witt, we understand, came out, and fired two pistols, which caused a precipitate retreat . . .

Other cuttings refer to an accident involving Witt. I give two accounts since they do not agree on precisely what the accident was:

Bedford Times Saturday, April 25 1846: ACCIDENT.—We regret to learn that an accident occurred at Leighton Buzzard [sic], on Tuesday last, whereby our respected townsman, Dr Witt, received some severe injuries. As we are informed, he had driven to the Railway Station, and whilst the servant was taking some luggage out of the gig, the horse started off, and Dr Witt, in attempting to stop it, was knocked down, and received some violent contusions, which have confined him to the house since that period, but we hear that the worthy Doctor is now going on favourably.

And

Bedford Mercury Saturday, April 25 1846: DR WITT.—A severe accident happened to Dr Witt, of this place, at the Railway Station at Leighton Buzzard, on Tuesday last, his horse having started off before he alighted from his gig, by which he was thrown out and met
with several severe contusions, but we are happy to hear he is not so seriously injured as was at first apprehended.

(To be concluded)

Notes

*I am indebted to Mr Geoffrey Woollard for some of the information in this article.
1. I am indebted to Dr J M van Duijn of Leiden University for this information.
2. Matthew Witt's Estate was valued at £5,000 for death duties (TNA IR 26/1025/f310) – this despite the fact that his executors had sworn to an estate of less than £3,000. The Victoria County History: Cambridgeshire, Vol X, p 291, says that the Witt family by the 1850s had a farm of 800–1,000 acres – large enough now and enormous at that date.
3. For the information in this and the two following paragraphs I gratefully acknowledge assistance from Mr Geoffrey Woollard.
4. James Maling Witt was the second of that name, an earlier child also called James Maling being born 15 Oct 1795, according to the family Bible.
5. The Revd George Leonard Jenyns was Vicar of Swaffham Prior for an astonishing 61 years 1787–1848, fully covering the period of any baptisms of Matthew Witt's children, but as Jenyns was also squire of neighbouring Bottisham Hall, I suspect he may have left the parish to the care of successive curates (Burke's Landed Gentry, 1858, Clergy List, 1841).
6. Consistory Court of Ely VC 52:29 1824, Cambridge Record Office. Charles was a Surgeon in Northampton and James a Farmer in Swaffham Prior at this time.
7. BL, scrapbook, 1855.b.4.
8. The Revd Matthew Witt's Will (TNA PROB 11/1896) mentions his two sisters living in Cambridge.
10. Local Squabbles, 4. (Pigot & Co's National Commercial Directory,1830, p 7.)
11. A search in the British Newspaper Archive for typhus in the Northampton area at this time identifies only Byfield (Northampton Mercury, Sat, 17 Sept 1825) as a candidate. 1825 looks about the right date. However, it is relatively far from Northampton (some 15 miles as the crow flies, between Daventry and Banbury).
12. Local Squabbles, 3.
13. The two years are deduced from Local Squabbles, 3. Bart's at this time had no formal admissions scheme for students but the Diary of Sir Ludford Harvey (SBHPP/HAR/1) gives the above and other information about students. I am indebted to Rachael Merrison, Deputy Trust Archivist at Bart's, for this information. For John Painter Vincent, 1776–1852, see ODNB.
15. Royal College of Surgeons, Examination Book 1820 to 1830, Vol 3, p 121 (RCS–EXA/2/1/2). He is listed as ‘George De Witt [sic] E. I. N. [East India Navy]’. George Cruickshank published in 1811 ‘The Examination of a Young Surgeon’ – the examiners on one side of a semi-circular table exhibiting varying degrees of boredom and inattention, while an unfortunate youth is asked ‘Describe the Organs of Hearing’. The surgeon next to the inquisitor clasps a hearing horn to his ear. He was never a Fellow of the College.
17. Witt's Thesis for Leiden University has a dedication to Captain Serle – for whom see Anthony Farrington, A Biographical Index of East India Company Maritime Service Officers 1600–1834 (British Library, London, 1999) and his Catalogue of East India Company Ships' Journals and Logs 1600–1834 (same publisher and date). Farrington’s Index covers surgeons but somehow missed Dr Witt altogether. HCS stands for Honourable Company’s Ship and is the usual prefix for East Indiamen. The delay in Witt's sailing was not unusual: ships almost always left in winter to take advantage of Trade Winds.
18. The Journal of the Inglis (ie, Log) is at the British Library, India Office Papers, L/MAR/B/301. I get Witt’s joining the ship from his signing for his first wages on 3 Jan 1827 (British Library, India Office Papers, L/MAR/B/30U(2)). Witt is also listed in the EIC list of Surgeons and Assistant Surgeons for 1826–7, BL IOR L/MAR/C/673, but it provides no additional information about him.


20. For Serle and Lawson, see Farrington Index. Lawson was born at Biggar, Lanarkshire in 1796.

21. See for example the International Medical Corps’ web pages at: http://internationalmedicalcorps.org/Page.aspx?pid=475&gclid=CMXz8_WN180CFe...

22. That he went to Leiden in person is clear from Dr Thackeray’s mention of this in the 27th Annual Report of the Bedford Infirmary (Local Squabbles, 8).

23. I am indebted to the Royal Society and Ms Katherine Harrington, Archive Cataloguer there, for this information. It is not possible to know in what order the various nominating Fellows signed their names, so we cannot see who first proposed Witt.

24. All are in the ODNB except Dollond who is in Boase, op cit, n 9, and Grover, Smith and Carlisle whom I cannot identify.


27. Boase, op cit, n 9, gives his dates as 1823–72.

28. ODNB.


30. Local Squabbles, 35.

31. Local Squabbles, 44.

32. Farrer, pp 265–266. Joyce Godber, History of Bedfordshire (Bedfordshire County Council, 1969), p 443. The Duke, Whitbread and other nobility and gentry had already paid over £5,000 20 years earlier to get the bridge rebuilt (Godber).


34. Local Squabbles, 50–51; Godber, p 160; Local Squabbles, 38.

35. Godber, p 446.


38. Local Squabbles, 153. Dr Mesham was also active in local politics and had been Joseph Browne’s predecessor as Mayor (1841).


41. Local Squabbles, 154.

42. Local Squabbles, 157–158.

43. Shown on Brayley’s map of Bedford of 1807 (Farrer, op cit, n 29, facing p 263).

44. Census 1841, HO 107/10/3, pp 7–8. This was the only UK Census that I can find Witt in. He was in Australia for the 1851 census, and in 1861 his house was inhabited only by a servant while the family were away and I can find them nowhere else.

45. Local Squabbles, 152. Theed Pearse appears to have lived about four doors from the Witts in Potter Street.

RICHARD MORGAN
Book Reviews


This book covers Hertfordshire’s rich and diverse milling heritage which includes its long tradition of milling corn, as well as milling a variety of other products, such as pioneering papermaking in the west of the county, gunpowder and small arms in the east and also silk and cotton. There are records of 110 watermills and 71 windmills in Hertfordshire but there is not much evidence of most of them remaining today. Of the survivors, eight are open to the public offering insights into past methods of milling.

Hugh Howes is also the author of The Windmills and Watermills of Bedfordshire (2009), so it is with some trepidation that your reviewer has to take issue with the opening statement in his Preface to this book that: ‘My researches on Bedfordshire’s mills suggested that, with the minor exception and scant evidence of a pug mill for chopping clay for brickmaking, [Bedfordshire’s] mills were used exclusively for corn.’ I realise that the researches for the Bedfordshire book were carried out before the publication of the article by Daven Chamberlain in Vol 6, No 4 (Summer 2013), of this publication, which pointed out the long history of Langford mill in papermaking from 1746–1798. Chamberlain also suggests that the Simmons archive suggests that Shefford Mill, on the River Flit, may have been involved in paper manufacture around 1814–1819. So, if there is to be a new edition of the Bedfordshire mills book, perhaps this misconception might be corrected?

This paperback is well designed and nicely printed on good paper. One criticism might be that the text type is a little small for aged eyes but the text is well laid out and spaced so, in a good light, should be readable.

The book is heavily illustrated with historic and contemporary photographs including a 16-page full colour section of photographs and paintings between pages 128 and 129. This book could act as a guide to the mills as well as being a comprehensive gazetteer to all known Hertfordshire mills, whether they are extant, in ruins or demolished.

The author shows that many of the water-mill sites pre-date the Domesday Book and carried on their basic functions for many centuries more or less
unchanged. But, in the 19th and 20th centuries, there were radical changes the effects of which fundamentally altered and finally destroyed whole sectors of the traditional milling industry.

Hugh Howes gives the social and economic history of all types of milling in the county, focusing on key technological advances and the opportunities arising from improved transport facilities and from proximity to London which helped the Hertfordshire mills to thrive. But this also undermined them when major corn exchanges were set up in the City and when vast quantities of foreign grain began to arrive at London docks.

How individual millers met these challenges decided whether they survived. One of the methods to do this was to move away from the uncertainties of wind and water and switch to steam and, ultimately, electricity. Up-to-date milling equipment and the availability of imported grain and expanding markets were also crucial.

The book has eight appendices reproducing accounts of mills from the trade press, London docks and the Corn Exchange in Mark Lane as well as the archaeology of Hyde Mill at Ickleford. Appendix 4 surprisingly concerns ‘Mr B Cole’s new mill at Luton, Bedfordshire’ (from 1893) but this is justified by the author’s note that the mill is in Hertfordshire and the mill house in Bedfordshire! There is also a useful glossary, select bibliography, gazetteer and index.

In conclusion, Mr Howes has produced a comprehensive and engaging history of a trade and industry which is connected locally and nationally with our past and is still evident today.

TED MARTIN


This book is volume 8 in the University of Hertfordshire Press series ‘Explorations in Local and Regional History’.

The Joan Thirsk of the title was the leading English agrarian historian of the late 20th century. Her research into regional farming revealed that England was made up of distinct farming regions and each had its own methods of working the land. Her work changed the perception that, before the agricultural revolution, the peasants were dull conservatives who had to be forced to modernise and showed how they could respond to changes in fashion and demand from consumers. She also wrote about rural industry, changing tastes and fashions, and innovations in the rural economy.

Joan Thirsk died in 2013 and this book is based on papers given at a conference held in her honour at Leicester University in September 2014 where
the theme was not to look back but rather to identify the relevance of Joan Thirsk for historians today.

There are 13 papers from distinguished academic contributors, the first one dealing with Joan Thirsk’s work at Leicester from 1951 to 1965 with some biographical detail. There then follow three papers in part I covering ‘Countries, pays and regions’. Part II concerns ‘Farmers and Fields’ and part III, ‘Innovators’. Part IV deals with ‘Consumers’. There are 22 figures spread over seven papers and eight tables over three articles. Bedfordshire gets an early mention on page 44 with regard to the remodelling of field systems in the mid-12th century and the Bedfordshire lace industry is referred on page 115, but the county does not seem to appear elsewhere in these papers which are generally focused on more northerly areas.

This is not a book for the general reader but those historians with an interest in the land and the history of agriculture would find it profitable. There is an article on fashionable dress and accessories in rural England, 1552–1665, illustrated with eight plates (incorrectly described as ‘figures’), which I found fascinating.

All the contributors were inspired by Joan Thirsk’s discovery of a lively, varied and developing rural scene, and follow themes extending her pioneering work in different ways, providing new insights into a world that was being transformed before the Agricultural Revolution.

The book is well designed and printed on good paper and unlike some paperbacks fairly easy to open, though I would suggest that the designer should have allowed more space in the back margin of the page to stop the text trying to disappear into it! There is ample space on the other side of the page to allow this – probably a case of design aesthetics trumping convenience of use!

TED MARTIN

Publication received