

BEDFORDSHIRE LOCAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION

# HISTORY IN BEDFORDSHIRE

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For HIB: Editor: Ted Martin, 2A The Leys, Langford, Beds SG18 9RS  
Telephone: 01462 701096. E-mail: [ed.martin39@btinternet.com](mailto:ed.martin39@btinternet.com)

For BLHA: Secretary: Clive Makin, 32 Grange Road, Barton Le Clay, Bedford MK45  
4RE

Telephone: 01582 655785

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# BLHA AGM & Conference 2017

Saturday, 24 June 2017 at Priory Methodist Church, Newnham Avenue, Bedford

Report by Stuart Antrobus

The annual summer BLHA conference, held for the first time in Bedford, was attended by 89 people including representatives from 15 local history societies from Amptmill, Bedford, Biggleswade, Clapham, Colmworth, Harlington, Ickwell, Langford, Luton, Old Warden, Roxton, Thurleigh, Toddington and Wrest Park (Silsoe). The Conference was hosted by Bedford Architectural, Archaeological and Local History Society (BAALHS), with the theme of 'Bedford Through The Ages'.

Mollie Foster chaired the BLHA AGM, which preceded the Conference. Reports on the BLHA's work over the last year were read and the accounts approved.

Bob Ricketts, President of BAALHS, then introduced Bedford's elected Mayor, Dave Hodgson, who welcomed delegates to the conference and spoke of the importance of valuing our local history and our historic buildings.

Jeremy Oetgen of Albion Archaeology gave the first illustrated talk on how modern archaeology is revealing the changing landscape and early settlement within the Ouse Valley. This provided an overview to the early history of Bedford.

Bob Ricketts, also Editor of *Bedford Local History Magazine*, then showed how the River Great Ouse shaped the town's development and economy, which set the scene for the historical walking tour, provided for those attendees wishing to take part in a circular walk of Bedford's Castle Mound, River Embankment and Town Bridge. Delegates were taken by coach to the Bunyan Meeting in the centre of town and two groups went off in opposite directions on the same walk, led by Town Guides, John Dixon and Doreen Watson.

Those who preferred to stay at the Conference venue were treated to a fascinating illustrated talk on the work of the Royal Aircraft Establishment (RAE) at Thurleigh, revealing the enormous range of post-Second World War research and innovative engineering which contributed to such world-renowned achievements in aeronautics as Concorde, vertical take-off and landing aircraft, automatic landing systems, airport landing aids, automatic landing in fog and devices to enable the use of aircraft to and from aircraft carriers.

Margaret Carpenter and her team of volunteer caterers treated delegates to a superb buffet lunch and there was an opportunity afterwards to see an interesting range of displays by some of the local history societies represented at the Conference, as well as a good range of local history books, maps and other items provided for sale by Peter Budek of Eagle Books, Bedford's independent, specialist bookseller.

Pamela Birch, Manager of Bedfordshire Archives, gave the first of the afternoon talks – a detailed look at how to do buildings research by looking at the evidence for the occupants of Numbers 1–4 St Paul’s Square, a range of buildings including Bedford’s earliest remaining secular property, which have been recently restored. This included insights into the lives of the occupants over the centuries.

Next came a look at local politics from the 1930s, as Bob Ricketts looked at why Bedford was one of the last similar-sized towns in the country to create a rate-aided public library and how a local Harpur Trust school headmaster led a successful ‘Free Library movement’ campaign for it.

Tea and an enormous range of Margaret Carpenter’s legendary cakes provided an afternoon break before David Fowler, Co-Chair of the BAALHS Conservation Committee, showed a range of slides of interesting Bedford architecture. These included outstanding buildings which were destroyed in the 20th century and others which had been saved, thanks to the earlier Bedford Society and, more recently, the work of BAALHS in monitoring plans for any changes to the townscape which might result in outstanding architecture and historically-significant buildings being destroyed, whilst also supporting initiatives, such as the award-winning Bedford Borough Town High Street restoration of key buildings.

The Conference once again provided local historians from around Bedfordshire the opportunity to get together to share ideas, show what they are doing locally and enjoy the opportunity to socialise with like-minded people, as well as learn about the history of the host-venue’s locality, in this case, the county town of Bedford with its long and distinguished history.

Thanks must go to Bob Ricketts and his team of Conference planners for a very full, interesting and well-run day, as well as to the Administrator of Priory Methodist Church for providing ideal venue facilities.



Audience at the Conference



Display by Bedfordshire Archives



Bedford's Mayor, Dave Hodgson and  
BLHA Chair Mollie Foster



BLHA AGM

All photos by Stuart Antrobus

## Notes and news

**BLHA Autumn event.** Our Autumn Event will be a visit to Sulgrave Manor in the afternoon of Saturday, 30 September, in south Northamptonshire. It is a Tudor and Georgian house built by the direct ancestors of George Washington, first President of the United States. Civil War, financial ruin and a shipwreck led Washington's great-grandfather to seek a fresh start in the New World. The visit will include a guided tour of the gardens and the house, plus a cream tea. For full details and the booking form see page 5.

**Remember them by sharing the memory.** When attending a funeral or remembrance service there is usually a tremendous amount of information contained in the eulogy. This gives a new perspective on the life of the person you had known in just one aspect of their life. Annette Bygraves realised what a unique insight eulogies can give to the way people are remembered. Annette approached Bedfordshire Archive service to find out whether eulogies were collected. Archives had some in family collections but eulogies did not arrive in the archives very often but they could see that they had potential as archives. Archives worked with Annette to establish a way in which eulogies can be submitted to them for posterity. Full details are on the specially created webpage: [www.bedford.gov.uk/archiveeulogies](http://www.bedford.gov.uk/archiveeulogies)

**BLHA Autumn Event**  
A visit to  
**Sulgrave Manor, Nr Banbury**  
Saturday, 30 September 2017, 1.15 to 4.15pm  
Guided tour of house, gardens and afternoon cream tea

Sulgrave Manor was built by Lawrence Washington, George Washington's five times great grandfather, in the mid-1500s.

The original Tudor features can be visited on one of the house tours including the Great Hall that was the heart of the house where Lawrence Washington, his wife and eleven children lived. Other original elements of the Washington's Tudor house are made up of the entrance porch, the Great Chamber and two smaller rooms on the first floor. In 1700 the North Wing was added. This sits at right angles to the Tudor section and contains the Oak Parlour and Great Kitchen at ground level and bedrooms above.

The western section of the house had been destroyed when the house was purchased in 1914 and today this has been replaced by the Director's quarters that were built in the 1920s, with the porch once again taking its central position at the front of the building.

When the house was to be opened to the public in the 1920s the garden was re-designed by Sir Reginald Blomfield. The garden remains largely unaltered since this time and today visitors can see formal hedges and topiary, an orchard, herb garden and beautiful borders for all seasons.

The Sulgrave website is: [www.sulgravemanor.org.uk](http://www.sulgravemanor.org.uk)

We hope you will be able to join us in what will be a fascinating afternoon.



**Date and time:** Saturday, 30 September. The tour commences at 1.15pm, we expect to close the day at 4.15pm after a house tour, garden tour and cream tea.

**Location :** Sulgrave Manor is in the village of Sulgrave just off the B4525 road from Banbury to Northampton. Address: Sulgrave Manor, Manor Road, Sulgrave, Banbury OX17 2SD

**Cost and booking:** The cost of the event is £15.60 per person, this includes the house and garden tours followed by a cream tea.

To secure a place, **cheques must be received by Friday, 1 September. The number of places available for this trip is limited, so early booking is advised.** Full details are on the following booking form.

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BLHA Autumn Event - A visit to  
**Sulgrave Manor, Nr Banbury**  
**Booking Form**

Please reserve .....place/s @ £15.60 each for the 'BLHA Autumn Event'.

I enclose a cheque to the value of £..... payable to: *Bedfordshire Local History Association*

Receipt of the booking form will be confirmed by e-mail.

Name(s):.....

.....

.....

.....

Address:.....

.....

.....Postcode:.....

Telephone:..... Mobile (for contact on the day).....

E-mail:.....

To which Society do you belong?:.....

Please return the form with payment by **Friday, 1 September 2017** to:  
Colin West, BLHA Committee, 14 Fieldfare View, Wixams, MK42 6BL  
Telephone: 01234 743752      Email: colinwest4@gmail.com

# From ploughboy to missionary: The life of Arthur Hills: Part 1

*[Langford & District History Society received Arthur's memoir from Amanda Hills Podany, Arthur's descendant, together with the following overview written by her. It is notable that Amanda used Langford's books in her research which reinforces the importance of local research and publication, not only for ourselves but for descendants researching family history. Editor.]*

Arthur Hills was born in Langford, Bedfordshire on 1 June 1869 and was baptised on 24 February 1870. Over the first 40 years of his life he moved from the hardships of life as a poor ploughboy, leaving school at 12, to the comforts (and challenges) of a public life as a respected missionary in the City of London, and a friend of the Bishop of London.

He wrote a memoir in 1913 about his life to that time. This version of it only includes his childhood in Langford. The manuscript of the memoir was carefully typed, with handwritten annotations by Arthur. There was no cover page, and no explanation as to why he wrote it. Twice in the manuscript he quotes someone as speaking to him as 'Arthur', and elsewhere he is 'Mr H' and 'Mr. Hills'. He does not name his wife, his children, his parents, or any of his siblings in the memoir, though their names are known from public records and family memories.

The memoir survives in the form of a photocopy, kept by his grandson Brian Hills, though the original is lost. A few misspellings and typos have been corrected in this copy, and subheadings have been added as an aid to the reader. Arthur himself began to add subheadings towards the end of the manuscript. He also pasted in a photograph and two letters. I have added some other illustrations, along with some footnotes.

Arthur was the third in a family of 10 children (six girls and four boys), who were born to Edward Hills (1846–1911) and Mary Ann (Jordan) Hills (1847–1919). His oldest sibling, Elizabeth, was born two years before him, in 1867, and his youngest sibling, Dorothy, was born 24 years after him, in 1894, when his mother was a remarkable 47 years old.

The family lived in Langford in a row of cottages called 'The Pits' during Arthur's childhood. This was described in an 1874 conveyance as follows: 'cottages in the Pits, Langford – plot of ground on part of which said cottage now stands (30p) frontage – 116ft (southwards) next public road to Edworth.' This suggests that the cottages were located on what is now Cambridge Road (which later becomes Edworth Road).<sup>1</sup>

A modern book about Langford concurs: 'Quite why Cambridge Road was known as the 'Pits' is unclear. It could have been because of gravel extraction operations in earlier years, or because of the digging of coprolite in the 19th

century. Coprolite is fossilised dinosaur droppings which have a high phosphorous content, and it was used extensively in Bedfordshire at that time.’<sup>2</sup>

Census records show the family’s address to have been 94 The Pits in 1871 and 1881. Arthur’s father had grown up at 78 The Pits, and Arthur’s future wife, Lydia Potton, grew up at 79 The Pits. In 1861, before Arthur’s birth, the Hillses were almost all engaged in the production of straw goods, as plaiters, cutters, and dealers, but over time, with the decline of the straw trade and consequent loss of income, the family moved into agriculture.

A school entrance record shows that Arthur enrolled at the Langford Church of England Lower School in 1877 when he was seven or eight years old, but he left five years later, to become a ploughboy and to contribute to the family’s income. During this time he became increasingly determined not to drink, and instead to live a virtuous life, as recorded in his own words.

As described in his memoir, Arthur left home and moved to London on his 15th birthday, in June 1884. His mother’s brother had found employment for him there, and for several years he worked as a gardener in Highgate Cemetery. His parents and siblings followed him to London when he was about 18 years old, in 1887.

On 28 September 1890 Arthur married his former neighbour, Lydia Potton, at St John’s, Upper Holloway, near Highgate cemetery, where he worked. Both of them were around 21 years old at the time. When the census was taken in 1891 they were living at 213 Dartmouth Park Hill, Pancras (also near Highgate). A little more than nine months after their wedding, on 5 July 1891, their first son, Frederick Arthur, was born. By this time the young family had moved a few houses away, to 101 Dartmouth Park Hill.

Meanwhile Arthur’s parents were living nearby, in Pancras, and his father, Edward, was working as a gravedigger. His brother Simeon had followed in Arthur’s footsteps and had become a gardener, while his sister Clara was a domestic servant, and three of his younger siblings were in school.

For almost seven years, Frederick was the only child of Arthur and Lydia, but in 1898 a second son, Percy Bernard, was born. By then, the Hillses had moved to Walthamstow, North East London, seven miles away from their original home near Highgate. This move was necessary because Arthur had found his calling and had become a Missionary to Coalies and Carmen in East London, as described in his memoir. He had also taught himself to play the harmonium, an instrument he used in his missionary outreach.

In October 1899 Frederick was enrolled at Ackmar Road School, at age 8. This means that the Hillses had moved again, this time to Fulham, as a result of Arthur taking a post as a missionary in West London. In 1900 Arthur and Lydia’s only daughter, Doris Mary, was born. When Doris was only one month old, in May 1900, the family seems to have been living in temporary digs, according to the census.



They were at 4 and 5 Granville Theatre, Fulham, an address they shared with several other, unrelated, people, including George Parker (60), George and Helen Harris (35 and 31 respectively), and Reginald Wright (20). The magnificent Granville Theatre had been opened in 1898, and must have included some residential apartments.<sup>3</sup>

By March 1901 they had settled into the home provided by the London City Mission. This was at 1 Mimosa Street in Fulham. Frederick was 10 years old and may have enrolled at Emanuel School at around this time. The school, at the edge of Wandsworth Common, was only 2.5 miles from the family house in Fulham, so Frederick was able to attend without boarding there. In April 1902, records show that Percy enrolled at Ackmar Road School, at the age of four. Percy later followed Frederick to Emanuel School.

The last of the Hills children was born in 1905, a third son, Arthur David (known to the family as David). Lydia and Arthur were both now 36 years old and Arthur was well established as a City Missionary. His name even appeared in *The Times* in May 1907: he was scheduled to speak at the 72nd annual meeting of the London City Mission, a meeting chaired by Sir Ernest Tritton.

By the time the census was taken in 1911, the family had moved again, though staying in Fulham. They were now at 3 Blake Road, and had two other people living with them, perhaps as boarders: Alice Lilian Brew (age 28), and James Edward Codd (age 41). Arthur was out of London at that time, visiting the family of someone named James Lykes (age 43) in Rushden, Northamptonshire. He does not mention this trip in the memoir, so there is no way of knowing why he was there.

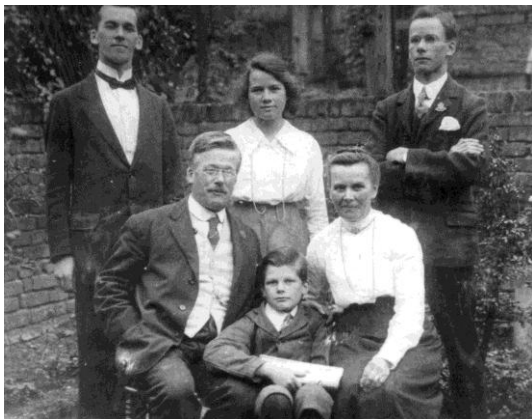
In that same year, the census shows that Arthur's mother, Mary, was 63 years old and was still living in Highgate, with her unmarried daughters Ruth (25) and Dorothy (16). Arthur's father, Edward, had presumably died before this. Arthur's sister Dorothy was working as a domestic servant. (She was four years younger than Arthur's son—her nephew!--Frederick.)

The memoir ends in 1913, right after one of Arthur's greatest triumphs – a Festival for the Coalies, held at Fulham Palace, and with Princess Louise, daughter of Queen Victoria, in attendance. This event was covered in the press and as many as 5,000 people are said to have been present.

There is no conclusion to the memoir, and it seems as though Arthur intended to continue to write it. Perhaps he did so, and the rest is lost. Or perhaps the beginning of the Great War moved his attention away from writing. As noted in his obituary, which is attached at the end of the memoir, Arthur Hills served from 1914 to 1916 in the Soldiers' Christian Association with the British Expeditionary Force in France. From 1917 until shortly before his death in 1940 he was secretary of the Paddington Wharves Mission Thrift Society.

Arthur and Lydia eventually moved to 34, Liddell Gardens, Kensal Rise, which was where they had been living when Arthur died on 2 August 1940.

Their son Frederick had become a teacher of mathematics, teaching at St Paul's School, University College School, and Emanuel School. Percy became a manager for Dunlop.



*Left: The Hillses, c 1913. Back row: Frederick (1891–1975), Doris (1900–1988), Percy (1898–1983). Front row: Arthur (1869–1940), David (1905–1941), Lydia (1869–1955)*

Daughter Doris worked as a shorthand typist for the Royal Navy, starting in 1918, and later became an assistant to Sir Branson Albery, the eminent theatre manager. David served in the military in Egypt and later became a chartered accountant, but died of cancer in 1941 at 36, just a year after his father

Arthur. Lydia lived for 15 more years after Arthur's death, dying at age 86 in 1955.

Arthur and Lydia had seven grandchildren, one of whom died shortly after birth, 10 great-grandchildren, and (to date) 18 great-great-grandchildren. The family has spread out across the globe, with descendants living in Los Angeles, North Carolina, and Rochester (in the United States), Mexico, and Abu Dhabi, along with the United Kingdom and there are still some Hillses in Langford.

AMANDA HILLS PODANY

## References

1. <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/rd/71df9f3c-34c4-46ec-a552-50d75877f524>
2. *Langford Through the Lens*, Vol. 1 (2014), 69.
3. <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/29855> It is unclear where the address "4 & 5 Granville Theatre" was located within the theatre. The theatre was demolished in 1971.

## Arthur's Memoir

### Childhood in Langford

Rocking the cradle in which there was a younger brother, with one hand, and straightening straws with the other as women put them through a machine which sorted them by size as part of the process for the straw plait-making in a Bedfordshire village, are among my earliest recollections.<sup>1</sup>

Nor shall I ever forget the astonishment when my father got me out of bed very early one cold and starry morning to take me with him to Hitchin market to sell these straws. I had never before seen stars shining in the morning. 'Does God light up His heaven like this', I thought, 'when we are asleep?' And then: 'I wonder if this is the Judgment Day the people talk about?' There was not a cloud, but only stars, stars, and more stars, and not a sound to be heard. The peculiar light terrified me. I was too frightened to speak, but the wonder of it still remains.

*The Hills family c 1875: Mary Ann (Jordan) Hills with (from left) Arthur (b 1869), Clara (b 1875), Simeon (b 1871), Elizabeth (b 1867)*



I helped my father to get the small bundles of straw from the steamer, where they had been all night in burning sulphur, to be bleached to the correct colour. We loaded the donkey cart with these straws, ready for market. For me to go to Hitchin market was a great event. The intense cold and not going at more than three miles an hour, made the eight miles to Hitchin seem a never-ending journey. (Above left: Hitchin Market)<sup>2</sup>



When I think of the folks who told stories to frighten the little ones into good behaviour I feel that someone ought to have said a word, and not too kindly either, for our protection. They pictured to us the fate of small boys who used to be sold to chimney sweeps for 'Climbing Boys'. (They referred, of course, to the time, not so far back, when orphans and illegitimate children were often sold for this purpose.) When the moon shone so that its markings were clearly visible signs, some told that this represented the fate of the man spoken of in the bible as gathering sticks on the Sabbath and I was suitably warned of my fate if I persisted in wrongdoing. The effect of these stories on some of us meant the worst fears, and frightful

dreams, while strange footsteps after dark made me quake and run into hiding. I was scared beyond the telling, and suffered much in this way.

And again – some would select the time of a heavy thunderstorm to tell us what they thought the ‘Judgment Day’ would be like. Not only when the elements were at war, but you had only to upset some of these older folks to find them telling you about the judgments of God on children who did not behave. The whole idea of God seemed to be in catching folks doing wrong and punishing them. This view of God made me dream of fire and brimstone coming down from the sky and devouring everything outside our house. I well remember an aged man, watching a good crop of sparks coming from a railway engine one evening as it passed our village, describe fire and brimstone coming over the whole earth something like these sparks. That kind of talk has, I believe, done much to produce that mass attitude to religion, which we now see.

Like most little children I used to listen with much interest when the old folks were telling stories of their young days, or when one of the few who were able to do so would be reading a story to neighbours in each other’s houses on long winter nights.

I remember being thrilled as I listened outside an unfastened door to an old man who had been a dealer in rags, bones and old boots as he told of two powerful dogs he kept which, harnessed to a small vehicle, conveyed himself and his goods at a fast rate, and even went up ‘Whip Jacks Hill’ with half a ton. He expressed himself on political matters, too, and explained that because teams of dogs like his went faster than the ‘Gentry’ with their horses and carriages they saw to it that an Act of Parliament was passed to prevent the ‘Poor Man’ using dogs in this way. I also stole near the same door and heard the now antiquated temperance story, ‘Buy Your Own Cherries’ read,<sup>3</sup> and I remember the comments of sincere approval from the women.

About this time – I could not have been more than five years of age – I heard someone say that ‘money grew when you put it in a bank’ and by some means or other I secured a sixpence, made a hole in the only bank I knew, that opposite our house, and buried it. My disappointment can be imagined at never being able to find that sixpence again.

### **Punishment of children and animals**

There was, so far as I know, no Society for the Protection of Children, or animals, and recollect that brutal punishment was meted out to us as youngsters on a lavish scale. A good stick from a hedge nearby did duty for the mother’s use on both boys and girls, but it was usually the father’s job to administer the proper corrective to the boys, and as soon as the lad saw his father unfasten his leather body belt he knew that he would soon be face downwards across his knee and feel how cruel that belt could be.

The first example of cruelty to animals I can remember made a great impression on my young mind. A poor donkey managed to get both wheels of his heavily loaded cart into a ditch, and its owner stood looking on helplessly when two carmen came along, each with a very persuasive whip, and one of them on either side used his whip with such force that the helpless creature could do nothing but rear, kick and lie down alternately till each man got to one of the wheels and was able to lend a hand. When the terrified animal got his load to the roadway he made off at such a rate that he reached his home, about a mile away, long before his owner.

### **Medicine and education**

The doctor was very much in demand, but seeing that few people in our part of the village could pay for his services, the Parish Doctor had a busy time. As this gentleman lived at Shefford, – three miles away – it meant a journey of six miles to get the medicine. I often tramped this distance for the sick folks, and felt quite brave and important in going this distance alone, but it was a great setback to my enthusiasm when I saw this medicine thrown away when the time came for the next bottle.

The Elementary Education Act of 1870 meant much to our village.<sup>4</sup> Some looked upon it as an extra burden for poor people to bear; others said it would make the children lazy and ‘good for nothing’. Nothing was too bad for some people to say about the school.

They pitied us little ones for having to walk the mile on cold, wet days, and blamed the Education Act for any illnesses we had. When boys were old enough to be useful in the fields they would say: ‘Think of it, these boys are wasting their time going to school when they might be working to help their mothers and fathers.’

My mother, I am glad to say, did not join with this crowd. She was very fortunate in having learned to read and write, and knew the value of this accomplishment. I thought my mother very clever, and longed to read and write as she could, and to read and write letters for our neighbours as she did. When the time came that I was able to do this I was in constant demand: It brought me many a meal, and sometimes a coin. I was soon able to write: ‘My dear son and daughter, I must sit down to write you a few lines hoping they will find you quite well as it leaves me at present.’

### **References**

1. Straw plaiting was a major business in Bedfordshire in the late 19th century. The plaits were used to make straw hats. In 1881 there were 15,051 women straw-plaiters in Bedfordshire, but by 1901 there were only 485:

<http://www.hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk/data/occupations/straw-plait.htm>

2. <http://www.hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk/data/answers/answers-2006/ans6-023-hitchin-rose-crown.htm>

3. This story (also a film from 2004) was popular in the late 19th century. The text, in facsimile, is also available on the internet:  
[http://www.childrenslibrary.org/icdl/BookPreview?bookid=kirbuyy\\_00360634&route=all&lang=English&msg=&ilang=English](http://www.childrenslibrary.org/icdl/BookPreview?bookid=kirbuyy_00360634&route=all&lang=English&msg=&ilang=English)

4. <http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformatingsociety/livinglearning/school/overview/1870educationact/>

*Arthur's Memoir will be continued in the next issue of HIB*

## Biggleswade's Laughing Policeman: Charles Penrose (1873–1952)

*[The following article first appeared in the Biggleswade History Society Newsletter in August 2016 and is reproduced here, slightly modified, by kind permission of its author and the Editor of the Newsletter, Jane Dale.]*

I have to admit that I do not usually listen to BBC Three Counties Radio, but, having listened to and enjoyed the Breakfast programme that went out between



6.00 and 9.00 on Friday, 12 August 2016. On that morning presenter Andy Collins ran an entertaining feature on comic songs, with a particular focus on Charles Penrose who is still remembered today for one best-selling record he made in the 1920s under the pseudonym Charles Jolly – ‘The Laughing Policeman’. The song has long been a comic classic and is universally known and loved – or loathed – depending on your personal music preferences.

As Penrose was born and raised in Biggleswade, our Society was invited to contribute to the programme, and at 8.20am our President Ken Page was to come on air on the telephone to talk about Penrose, his background and career, so I listened in from seven o'clock onward and caught the beginning of the feature at 7.20, when an extract from ‘The Laughing Policeman’ was played and it was mentioned that the recording artist was a Biggleswade man, the son of a jeweller and

watchmaker, and a bit of fun was had with a few listeners who commented on the song and attempted to imitate the laughter!

So why this revival of interest in Charles Penrose? This became clear when Collins went on to interview ‘78Man’, Dave Dixey, a collector of old 78 gramophone records who regularly makes available little known and forgotten recordings. He

has recently produced a compilation album of 20 unfamiliar recordings of laughing songs by Penrose and made it available on iTunes and Spotify under the title, '78Man Presents Charles Penrose'. The only song not included, because it is so well known, is 'The Laughing Policeman' itself, first recorded by Penrose in 1923, although a later recording of 1926 is the one with which we are all familiar.

Dixey, clearly very knowledgeable about Penrose's work and career as a music hall performer and recording artist specialising in laughing songs, revealed that he used various pseudonyms, one of which was Merry Andrew, and that his second wife, songwriter Mabel Anderson, with whom he worked closely, is officially credited with having composed 'The Laughing Policeman' under the pseudonym Billy Grey. She also used the name Kay Connor.

To give a taste of what to expect, here are the titles of some of the songs in the album: 'My Giggling Typist', 'A Merry Little Laugh', 'The Laughing Widow', 'Laughing Stuttering Sam', 'Happy Herbert', 'The Laughing Speed Cop' – Do you get the picture? Whether you could listen to 20 such songs at a sitting is for you to decide. I would find it trying!

The radio presenter briefly interviewed Ken Page, our Biggleswade historian, who confirmed that Penrose was indeed a Biggleswade man, that he was born Charles Penrose Dunbar Cawse, the son of a master jeweller, watchmaker and silversmith who had a shop and house on the corner of the High Street next to the 'White Horse'. Ken then went on to say that he used to listen to him on the radio as a boy in the 1930s and during the war, when he was a regular in a radio programme called 'Down at the Old Pig and Whistle'. Ken's father had told him that Penrose was born in Biggleswade and the local accent could be discerned in his voice. Asked whether Biggleswade celebrated its connection with the Laughing Policeman, Ken pointed out that Penrose is commemorated by a heritage plaque on the wall of the house where he was born and spent his early years before his theatrical career began.

For those who are unfamiliar with the history of Charles Penrose here is a brief résumé of his life.

- He was born in Biggleswade on 11 November 1873 and spent his formative years there.
- His father, Richard Cawse, was born in Lambeth in 1846 and came to Biggleswade where he was apprenticed in 1860 to John Jefferies, a well-known watch and clock-maker. Cawse married a local girl and set up in business as a jeweller, watchmaker and silversmith at 3 High Street, where the family also lived. By 1881 there were three daughters and a son – Charles.
- As was expected of him, Charles began his working life in the family business but he also had quite a different talent and as a sideline performed laughing songs at local concert parties.

- By 1894, when the family sold the business and left Biggleswade, Charles was 20 and establishing himself as a music hall artiste, having previously joined a travelling theatrical company.
- He married his first wife, Harriet, an architect's daughter, in 1899 and by 1901 they were living in Putney.
- His second wife, songwriter Mabel Anderson, 14 years his junior, proved to be the most important collaborator in his career as a recording artist of comical songs for various gramophone companies between 1911 and 1933. He also had success in 'Tonight's the Night' at the Gaiety Theatre in London in 1915.
- Charles and Mabel had a son, Peter Charles Penrose Cawse, in 1920 and lived for many years in Covent Garden.
- He made his first recording of 'The Laughing Policeman' in 1923. It was recorded several times but it was the 1926 version that became a popular classic in the 1950s and 60s BBC radio programme, 'Children's Favourites'.
- The Penrose partnership wrote many laughing songs but only 'The Laughing Policeman' is remembered today.
- In the 1930s he was a regular performer on radio and also played small character parts in several British films.
- He played Sergeant Bob Evergreen in 'Down at the Old Pig & Whistle', a popular radio programme during the Second World War.
- He died of heart disease in Kensington on 17 November 1952. Mabel remarried and died in 1972, aged 84.

A more detailed account of the life and career of Charles Penrose may be read in our Society's publication, *Townsfolk of Biggleswade*, Volume 2. To see all 20 titles in the Charles Penrose album and to stream it on iTunes or Spotify, visit: [78manblog.wordpress.com](http://78manblog.wordpress.com)

And there is lots of information about Charles online, including his most famous song on YouTube. Just google his name.

So, dear readers, Biggleswade is more than just a place with a funny name on the A1 – we can boast that it has given birth not only to 'The Laughing Policeman' and the engineering design genius Dan Albone and the first farm tractor (his 1902 Ivel Agricultural Motor) but also Henry Ryland (1856–1924), a world renowned fine artist in the neo-classical and pre-Raphaelite traditions, one of three talented sons of a Biggleswade grocer and draper. And, finally, resting in our churchyard we have the founder of Battersea Dogs' Home, Mary Tealby (1801–1865), a woman ahead of her time.

JANE DALE

August 2016



## A Postscript

I was very interested to read in the August [2016] [Biggleswade] *Newsletter* the piece on my ancestor Charles Penrose. You may be interested in some additional family information in regard to his Biggleswade roots.

His maternal grandparents were Jonah King, a carpenter and builder born in Southill in 1826, and his wife Mary (née Dalton of Biggleswade) who married in 1846. Mary was the fifth of seven children of Thomas Dalton and Mary Smith. Thomas was a shoemaker and keeper of a beer shop in the 1851 census. His son Thomas was also a shoemaker and two of his other sons were bakers. On that same census, Charles Dalton's address was given as Daltons Yard, listed after Shortmead Street, and the address of his brother James was given on the 1861 census as 81 Shortmead Street. The Daltons were clearly local traders and must have been well known in the town.



Jonah and Mary King had three daughters: Caroline Jane (born 1846 in Southill and married Thomas Fane in 1872), Elizabeth (born 1848 in Biggleswade) and Sarah (born 1855 in Southill, married John Saunderson and had six children). It was Elizabeth King who married Richard James Cranch Cawse, a watchmaker and jeweller, in 1869 and was the mother of Charles Penrose. Her husband Richard was partly responsible for the making of the drum clock, which still hangs proudly in Biggleswade and was

this year [2016] expertly refurbished and fitted with the latest technological governing system.

I am descended from Josiah King, the brother of Jonah. Josiah was born in Southill but later moved to Running Waters farm on the Langford Road in Biggleswade, where my great-grandfather and grandfather were born. Jonah and Josiah were the sons of Joseph King of Southill, who was very religious and a preacher at the Strict Baptist Church there.

What is particularly interesting from the Biggleswade point of view is that Jonah King deserted his wife Mary and their daughters and ran off with her sister Elizabeth. They don't seem to have ever married but had two sons in the 1860s. So the Dalton family must have been the talk of the town and Jonah's father would have been horrified at his son's lifestyle.

We return to Jonah's daughter Elizabeth and her husband, Richard Cawse. They also had three children, who were all born in Biggleswade: Blanche Adeline (1870), Alice Elizabeth (1871) and Frank Penrose (1873). It was Frank Penrose Cawse who was later renamed Charles Penrose Dunbar Cawse and used the professional name Charles Penrose. Charles was not the only 'celebrity' in the family though; his eldest sister Blanche married Shafto Justin Adair Fitzgerald, a very successful dramatist, journalist and author whose books are still reprinted today. Tragically, their only child Desmond died accidentally in 1904 aged four, after falling into a bath of scalding water. The other sister married but was childless.

However, the Cawse family had all left Biggleswade by 1894 and were living in the London area and Charles was pursuing his career as a performer. He married Hetty Lewcock in 1899 and in 1905 they had a son Charles Alexander Penrose Cawse, This marriage did not

last and Charles lived afterwards with his permanent partner and professional collaborator, songwriter Mabel Anderson (I have never found a marriage record). Their son, Peter Charles Penrose Cawse (1920–2009), known as Peter Penrose, went on to become a child actor and later a hugely successful producer, notably at the London Palladium. Charles Cawse, the son of the first marriage, emigrated to Australia in 1923 aged 17.

The piece in the August newsletter said Mabel married again after the death of Charles in 1952. I don't think so.\* On her death certificate she was described as 'widow of Charles Penrose, music hall artist'.

*[\*Editor's note: Gill is correct in this. In fact, it was Charles Penrose's widowed mother, Elizabeth Cawse, who remarried, after the death of Richard Cawse in 1902. In 1907 she married Obadiah Brown, a farmer of Wendy, near Royston and died in 1938. Apologies for the error in the article above, JD.]*

Charles Penrose had a long and varied career, not just the funny songs, but serious acting, pantomime, etc, appearing in films as well as on stage and radio. His performances in the latter are recorded on the *Radio Times* archive site – and I was surprised to discover there that he wrote many of the shows he appeared in:

Search under Charles Penrose at <http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk>

GILL KING  
September 2016

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This issue, published by Bedford Architectural, Archaeological and Local History Society contains five articles, two by the editor, Bob Ricketts, and three by Stuart Antrobus. Bob Ricketts looks into the story and controversies surrounding the development of Bedford's Public Library in the first article and then goes on to tell how you would search for a 'des res' using *McConnells Property Register* in 1910. Stuart Antrobus in the first of his three contributions tells of the statue of Sir William Harpur on which Bedford missed out and then goes on to tell of the Bedford-born military hero recognised by a blue plaque and finally what might have been for Bedford's airship industry. Bob Ricketts reviews two local books and Part 1 of Richard Morgan's recent article on Dr George Witt which appeared in the Winter 2016–17 of this publication. The publication costs £3.50 to non-members of BAALHS from the Eagle Bookshop, 103 Castle Road, Bedford.