

# Bedfordshire Local History Association Annual Conference

Saturday 2 June 2018

Hosted by Clapham Historical Society

at Clapham Village Hall, Clapham, Bedford, MK41 6BS

This year is the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Association's formation. However, as Martin Lawrence reminded us, there have been annual conferences of Bedfordshire local history societies held since 1988. Quite an achievement!

Preceded by the Association's AGM, chaired by Mollie Foster, there were three sessions in the morning and three in the afternoon, interspersed by another superb lunch for which Clapham Historical Society is renowned.



Mollie Foster  
Photo by Stuart Antrobus



BLHA AGM  
Photo by Stuart Antrobus

**Session 1** was given by **Des Hoar** from Sharnbrook Local History Society, who outlined the enormous potential for local historians of the GIS [Geographic Information System] computer software and its application to historical research. This was inevitably quite technical but by using his own experience in creating and publishing interactive maps of Sharnbrook he was able to convey something of the ways in which information can be overlaid on historic and present day maps to convey graphically findings about an unlimited range of topics. The Sharnbrook project had looked at land ownership in the parish and the speaker showed how it was possible, using this system, to make comparisons across the county or even wider.



Des Hoar  
Photo by Stuart Antrobus

**Session 2** was a fascinating, very-well illustrated look by **David Fowler** (Chair of the Bedford Association of Town Guides) at three Bedfordshire men who were each outstanding in their various ways: Sir Joseph Paxton, Frederick Burnaby and John Whitehead.

Paxton rose from humble origins as a farmer's son in Milton Bryan to become an innovative gardener and glasshouse designer of repute, who created, most famously, the incredible glass building in which was held London's international Great Exhibition of 1851 in Hyde Park, and which later was moved to Sydenham in Kent and was known as the 'Crystal Palace'.

Fred Burnaby, whose father was a Bedford clergyman, was a larger-than-life Victorian soldier and adventurer (and possibly a British 'spy'?). He flew gas balloons in his spare time and was the first to cross the English Channel in this way. When on leave he would take on incredibly long and arduous journeys into the Russian Empire and little-known Asian countries, often on horseback. He wrote popular books relating all these adventures and became famous as a dashing 'Flashman-type' character.

John Whitehead was a serial entrepreneur businessman and self-publicist who created a factory during the First World War to build some of the country's first military aircraft and later went on, after many business failures, to create in Bedfordshire a 'pyramid selling' scheme under which he invited people to 'invest' in his large-scale Cox's Orange Pippin apple orchards (the largest in Europe) at Cockayne Hatley.



David Fowler  
Photo by Stuart Antrobus

For the **third session**, before lunch, delegates were offered a choice: staying at the venue for an illustrated talk by **Pamela Birch**, County Archivist, on one of Bedfordshire's most famous architects, Sir Albert Richardson; or moving out of the venue to Clapham's historic Saxon church for a well-informed village history talk by local historian, **John Woods**.



Pamela Birch  
Photo by Stuart Antrobus

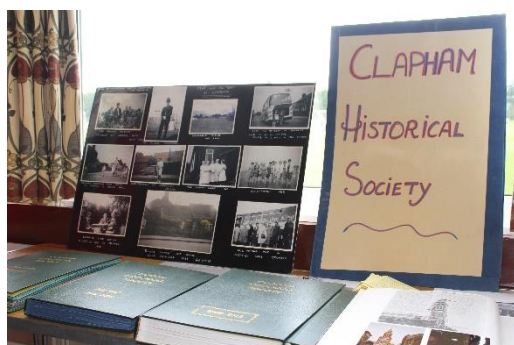
Because, perhaps, so many of those attending had had the chance to hear the village history talk before, on one of the three previous occasions when Clapham has hosted the conference, the majority stayed for the illustrated talk on some of the architectural drawings which have been deposited at Bedfordshire Archives from the Amptill office of Professor Richardson, who was also a lecturer on architectural history and President of the Royal Institute of British Architects. The archive is of 230 bundles containing some 40,000 drawings, only 3,000 of which have so far been catalogued. Pamela Birch showed a wide range of drawings, some technical, some artistic impressions, of a wide range of Richardson's buildings – commercial, domestic and ecclesiastical. All those attending will now spend the rest of their lives looking for Richardson's famously-distinctive small round windows which were much-loved by him.

A three-course lunch in the Hall, including a choice of hot main courses, with attendees sitting at very-tastefully decorated round tables, allowed for chatting with fellow local historians from around the county. It's this aspect of the annual conference which is so important and has members of societies attending year after year.



Hall set up for lunch  
Photo by Stuart Antrobus

That and the opportunity for societies to set up stalls showing what they have been doing over the years and, often, the publications they have produced.



Society displays  
Photos by Stuart Antrobus

In the afternoon, **Sue Jarrett** (Chair of the Eatons Community Association) of Eaton Socon presented a lively slide show on this unique settlement on the Great North Road which has been in two counties over its long history – Bedfordshire and (now, mainly, since 1965) Cambridgeshire. Its location on such an important highway, with its coaching inns, celebrity visitors and changing fortunes (with the creation in 1971 of the A1 bypass), provided the speaker with numerous anecdotes.



Sue Jarrett  
Photo by Stuart Antrobus

**John Hele** (Amphill History Forum) gave the last of the presentations – a look at the two great houses of Amphill: Park House, still lived in but by four households, and Houghton House, thought of as the inspiration for the fictional ‘house beautiful’ of Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, now a historic ruin. The story of these houses was one of wealthy landowners wanting to show off, of changing fortunes over time and aristocratic rivalry.



John Hele  
Photo by Stuart Antrobus

The final session to the day was an informal chance for **society representatives**, if they wished, to give feedback on what their societies have been up to recently or to make suggestions as to how BLHA might, as the umbrella organisation for the county’s historical societies, facilitate workshops which would help develop skills or share expertise.



**Martin Lawrence** (Vice-President of BLHA), as the leading person who set up the organisation, concluded the Conference by giving a historical perspective to the last 25 years. He thanked Mollie Foster and her Clapham Historical Society team who had so generously hosted this year's conference (for the 4<sup>th</sup> time!) and the BLHA officers and committee for their on-going commitment.



Martin Lawrence  
Photo - courtesy of the BHRS website

Members are looking forward to the 2019 conference, which is to be hosted by a newcomer to membership of BLHA – **Bedfordshire Gardens Trust**. It will be held at **Poplars Garden Centre, Toddington, LU5 6HE**, on **Saturday 22 June 2019**.

#### **Societies which attended the 2018 Conference:**

Amphill & District Archaeological & Local History Society, Amphill History Forum, Bedford Architectural, Archaeological & Local History Society, Bedfordshire Gardens Trust, Carlton & Chellington Historical Society, Clapham Historical Society, Colmworth & Neighbours History Society, Dunstable & District Local History Society, Harlington Heritage Trust, Langford & District History Society, Maulden History Society, Potton History Society, Sharnbrook Local History Society, Willington Local History Group, Wrest Park Research History Group and individual members, plus the Eagle Bookshop and Bedfordshire Archives.

There was a combined total of 53 delegates, speakers and helpers at the conference.



Andrew Sewell – the Eagle Bookshop  
Photo by Stuart Antrobus

**Report written by**

**Stuart Antrobus**

3 June 2018