

HISTORY IN BEDFORDSHIRE

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BLHA Annual Conference 2010 and AGM

AT POTTON

Saturday, 5 June 2010

Registration 9 am

AGM 9.30 am

Conference 10 am to 4 pm

The 2010 Bedfordshire Local History Association Conference will be held on Saturday, 5 June 2010 at Potton, hosted by the **Potton History Society**. Registration will commence at 9 am at the Church Hall followed by the AGM of the Association at 9.30 am. The Conference will commence at 10 am and will move to St Mary's Church at 10.15.

No charge will be made for those who only wish to attend the AGM. The Conference will finish at 4pm. Lunch and refreshments are included in the Conference fee.

In the morning there will be talks on **'The Challenge to 21st Century Historians'** and **'The Web and the Future'** and an exhibition of PHS materials followed by a choice of two guided walks. There will be three talks after lunch, two on Web-related history activities and **'They Walked Potton's Streets'**, about notable people in Potton's history.

Cost for the day including drinks and lunch: £17; free parking at the Church Hall. Closing date for applications, Saturday, 24 April. Send cheques payable to Potton History Society to Mr J Boston, Secretary, 21 Spencer Close, Potton, Sandy, Beds SG19 2QX.

Notes and news

The Association's new website is up and running and can be found at www.bedfordshire-lha.org.uk. Association secretaries have been circulated to provide contact details for the site and should send any further corrections to the BLHA secretary. Societies may advertise their forthcoming programmes on the site. Langford History Society's site has also recently gone live at langfordhistorysociety.org.uk

Local and Community History Month will be held from 1–31 May 2010, sponsored by the Historical Association, to increase awareness of local history,

promote history in general to the local community and encourage all members of the community to participate. There will be activities across the UK which will include trips, library exhibitions and local lectures. Each year the event goes from strength to strength, and a searchable database has been created where organisations can register their events. For further details contact simon.brown@history.org.uk

The former **W H Allen engineering works** at Queen's Park, Bedford, closed in 2000 and the site has been redeveloped with new housing. Established in 1880 in Lambeth, London, Allen's moved to Bedford in 1893–94. They made turbines, pumps and diesel engines. During the First World War up to 3,400 people worked there. From 1989 they concentrated on diesel engines as part of the Rolls-Royce Group. One of their engines can be seen at the Kew Bridge Steam Museum.

[**Reference:** Michael R Lane, *The Story of Queen's Engineering Works, Bedford: History of W H Allen, Sons & Co, Ltd* (1995). Courtesy of Bob Carr and *GLIAS Newsletter 245*, December 2009.]

Stewartby Brickworks. The plant closed in February 2008 when about 200 jobs were lost. There were once 130 chimneys in Marston Vale – four at Stewartby survive and they are listed, together with two kilns there. The works was still intact in August 2008. [Courtesy of Bob Carr and *GLIAS Newsletter 245*, December 2009.]

"Three Market Towns" is a DVD production covering the past and present of Biggleswade, Potton and Sandy and the history societies of Biggleswade and Potton were closely involved. "Three Market Towns" is presented by BBC 1's Pam Rhodes, and it is produced by Axiom Video Productions. The film looks at the past and present of the three towns and uses a wide range of interviews and images including newly filmed material, old photographs and archive films. The DVD is available from various shops in the towns or from Axiom Video Productions, 16 The Green, Beeston, Sandy, Beds SG19 1PF (Tel: 01767 691401), price £15 (+ £2 p&p).

Woburn Heritage Trust has advised us of the following event: **Open Gardens and Scarecrow Competition**, Saturday, 19 June, over 12 gardens to see, scarecrows, refreshments and plant stalls. Further information, tel 01525 20631.

The Women's Land Army in Bedfordshire during the First World War – Part 1

STUART ANTROBUS *who has written the definitive history*, We wouldn't have missed it for the World: the Women's Land Army, 1939-1950 (Book Castle Publishing, 2008), now turns his attention to the First World War in the article below. His website Bedfordshire Women's Land Army, hosted by Bedfordshire Virtual Library, currently attracts over 100,000 hits per year.

Urgent labour needs in Britain during the First World War (1914–18) led to a revolution in the role of women in the workplace. The fact that millions of men had been drawn out of production into the armed forces, plus the need for armaments to feed industrial-scale warfare, led to women being drawn into factories and especially to munitions production. By the end of 1916, food shortages, thanks to the enemy's blockading of merchant shipping including food imports from the Empire, plus a shortage of male labour on farms, brought about a call to women to partially replace or supplement the work of men in the fields.

After Lloyd George became the Prime Minister in December 1916, a new Food Production Department was set up and Rowland Prothero, MP, formerly the Duke of Bedford's chief Land Agent, was appointed President of the Board of Agriculture (until September 1919). This led to a more interventionist but de-centralised system of direction to farmers through the locally established War Agricultural Committees (formed in the autumn of 1915), to replace the *laissez-faire* farm policy of the past. One major initiative was the establishment of a so-called Women's Land Army (WLA) of voluntary but paid mobile female workers organised under Meriel Talbot, a senior civil servant who was appointed Director of a new Women's Branch of the Board of Agriculture. Able-bodied women aged 18 years and over, with the consent of their parents, were to be recruited, trained for six weeks and offered to farmers to assist with milking, care of animals and work in the fields.

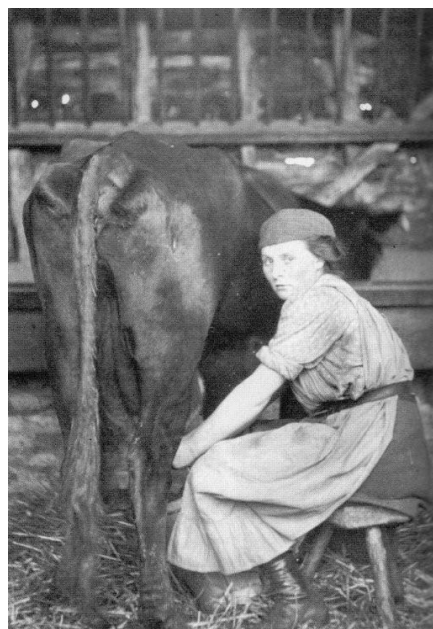
However, getting inexperienced women to take the place of men was no easy task. First, farmers were prejudiced and innately conservative with regard to women's roles in farming and were reluctant to take them on. Traditionally, women were limited to tasks in the dairy, looking after hens or tending to young livestock such as lambs, and this work was taken on mainly by members of the farmer's family. Only at harvest time was this opened up to farm labourers' wives and older children to do field work such as potato-picking or stooking the corn.

Secondly, persuading women who had not previously worked on the land was not easy, since the status of a woman land worker was seen as socially inferior to that of the domestic servant and was poorly paid. And, even if a woman was inclined to do her bit for the country when at war, the practicalities

of finding suitable clothes and footwear were considerable in terms of cost and would certainly inhibit recruitment for anyone other than the well-off who would not be so inclined anyway. Yet the Government had initially targeted middle-class urban women since they believed they needed 'the right type of women who would create a favourable impression on the farming community'.

Bedfordshire Women's War Agricultural Committee first met on 26 February 1916 (as an offshoot of Bedfordshire War Agricultural Committee). Its Executive Committee chairman was Mrs Madeline Whitbread of Southill Park and Mrs Nora Whitchurch of Great Barford House, Sandy, the secretary, and it had regular meetings at Shire Hall, Bedford. Sub-committees took responsibility for Finance, Training and Hostels, Central Selection and Allocation of Workers, Luton Selection and Allocation, and Women's Institute propaganda to support recruitment. In June 1917, Miss H M Dymock of Bedford, an organising secretary appointed by the Board of Agriculture, opened an office at 15A St Paul's Square, Bedford.

The county map had been already divided into 14 districts by Mr Trustram Eve, Chairman of the Bedfordshire War Agricultural Committee, and now suitable women district representatives were recommended by county councillors and appointed by the Board of Agriculture. These were to be the people to whom farmers applied for women to work on the land and were also responsible, in turn, for appointing volunteer 'village representatives' who would register all local women farm workers.



Kathleen Hull milking at Bridge Farm, Great Barford, c 1914
(BLARS Slide 5175)

A Women's National Land Service Corps (WNLSC) had been established, nationally and women were encouraged to sign on at Labour Exchanges but local initiatives were seen as more likely to be successful. Meetings were arranged to 'rouse interest'. Demonstrations and competitions in women's farm work, including milking, handling and management of horses and calves, driving stock,

ploughing, hoeing corn, weeding and setting out roots, were held at Mr Anthony Chibnall's farm at Biddenham on 8 June 1916.

Most of the Land Army women employed as volunteers on Bedfordshire farms were members of the Land Army Agricultural sections (LAAS), as opposed to the other two sections, or divisions, dealing with forage (providing food for soldiers' horses) and timber cutting. They signed up for either six months or for a year. By March 1917 pay was 18 shillings (90p) per week and, later, 20 shillings (£1), once Efficiency Tests were passed, with different rates of pay for haytime and harvest. Arrangements were made for two or more women to work together to encourage participation. In 1919 some women were earning 25s to 30s (£1.25-£1.50) per week, which was still low pay compared with that of other industries. This was for nine- or ten-hour days, six days a week, of hard work, normally starting before dawn.

Schemes for instruction of women in 'light farm work' were developed, requiring 6 weeks' experience on approved farms (eventually there were 25 such farms in Bedfordshire), with daily attendance. A maximum fee of 5 shillings (25p) per month was offered to cowmen and foremen who instructed women on these practice farms during the training period. Dairy training began by teaching milking skills 'on the artificial cow'. Free uniform work clothing was provided to these recruits by the committee. It consisted of boots, gaiters, clogs, overall, breeches, hat, jersey and mackintosh. Farmers were allowed to retain these trainees after training, at their own expense, if they wished.

So-called 'practice farms', prepared to train women workers, included those of Mr Alfred Inskip of Shefford and Mr Herbert Inskip at Stanfordbury Farm; Mr Hale in Clifton; Mr Abliss at Woburn; Mr Kestell at Heath and Reach, near Leighton Buzzard; Mr Alington in Little Barford and Mr Ernest Frossell of Box End; the Duchess of Bedford at Woburn. Names of other farmers who provided reports on women in training to the committee included Mr H King, Mr Kestell, Mrs Kendal, and a Mr Tipton. A Reverend E Blackherne of Bolnhurst offered to provide training to women on driving the new motor tractors and advertisements for women volunteers for motor tractor work were put in local papers and in the Labour Exchange in Bedford.



Milkmaids: Misses K Hull, Great Barford; Annie Brown, Hinwick; Eva Smith, Great Brickhill; and May Hull, in a demonstration of milking at Mr Chibnall's Homestead, Biddenham, June 1916. (BLARS WW1/WA5/2/4)

By 29 April 1916 about 140 women in Bedfordshire had registered for work on the land and about 30 of them were undergoing training under a County Council Education Committee Scheme. By 27 May there were 260 women registered under the scheme, in addition to 682 unregistered already working on the land in the county. Green baize armlets bearing a red crown were issued to registered workers to identify them as committed to the war effort. A certificate emblazoned with the Royal Coat of Arms in colour was issued, carrying the following patriotic text: 'Every woman who helps in agriculture during the war is as truly serving her country as the man who is fighting in the trenches, on the sea, or in the air.'

A lapel badge was issued after two months of approved service. Not all those registered found farms prepared to employ them but members who were employed were awarded Good Service stripes for their armbands by District Registrars after each six months of satisfactory work. Four of these stripes could be exchanged for a diamond. The land girls even had their own songs with stirring lines:

'There are many women's armies, but none do work so grand
As they plough and sow and reap and mow – our Women
on the Land.'

Sources

Bedfordshire and Luton archives and Records Service, Bedford (BLARS): WW1/WA1, WW1/WA3, WW1/WA4, WW1/WA5, WWA/6/2, PK8/1.

[To be continued in the next issue of HIB.]

STUART ANTROBUS

Promoting our county

MIKE STRANGE and ROY CHADWICK, both of *Biggleswade History Society*, sent BLHA e-mails concerning *National History Month and Heritage Open Days* and we print them here for comment and, hopefully, action:

National History Month

Are you aware that the month of May is 'Local and Community History Month', promoted by The Historical Association? The aim of the month is to increase awareness of local history, promote history in general to the local community and encourage all members of the community to participate. Activities happen across the UK and include trips, library exhibitions and local lectures. It is a great way for groups to highlight local history and for local people to get involved. Each year the event goes from strength to strength. More can be found on the web site www.history.org.uk.

Biggleswade will be participating with outdoor events, displays in the town library, workshops in conjunction with the library to give people with some learning difficulties the opportunity to learn about local and family history methods. We are also investigating opportunities for events in conjunction with local businesses.

It would be great if Bedfordshire societies could put on a show of strength this year and help to bring our work to the attention of more members of our communities.

MIKE STRANGE

Heritage Open Days

For some years I have been visiting properties that are open on National Heritage Open Days. These, so far, have been around the outskirts of London, particularly Guildford. I have also looked at Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire.

The difference between the two counties is noticeable. Whereas Hertfordshire has some 80 properties open, Bedfordshire can only manage six. Bedford town is very active with organised walks, and there are also many interesting museums, not to mention churches. Surely we should at least mention all our museums on the heritage website. We could also arrange some walks to coincide with the heritage weekend and put them on the website. Our churches, many of which are locked other than on Sunday, could be opened and shown on the site.

Luton, Dunstable and Bedford could and should contribute. Dunstable in the past has organised open days for civic properties. One can only assume that the difference between the two counties is organisation. Could the whole of Bedfordshire be persuaded to work together to promote itself on these three to four days in September? I am hoping to see more than six venues on the website for 2010.

The heritage days are now run by English Heritage, 14–16 Cowcross Street, London EC1M 6DG; Telephone 0844-335-1884. The website is www.heritageopendays.gov.uk

If we can get a few people in each town involved this year, the idea will catch on and grow. All it needs is a catalyst to ignite passion and enthusiasm to motivate Bedfordshire so we can show other shires how it should be done. On the heritage days places are open free of charge, but this could result in return visits and promote extra business for all.

If a number of places are open and do participate, if they are not on the website, they could be overlooked by potential visitors. Getting all the open properties onto the website will be progress. Biggleswade History Society [*and this Newsletter – Ed*] look forward to hearing from you with any comments, whether it is other contacts, your doubts or encouragement, all will be welcome. ROY CHADWICK

[If member Societies' events are notified to the BLHA Secretary they will be put on the Association's website – Ed.]

The Millbrook War Memorial

As a result of the article by Elisabeth Roberts in our last issue, our attention was drawn to the Roll of Honour website, and that it is run from Bedfordshire by Martin Edwards. He started by recording Cambridgeshire war memorials, and then added those in Bedfordshire. Lynda Smith did a great deal of work, covering most of the memorials in the county before her untimely death. However, many of the memorials do have background information on the men recorded, and Martin Edwards will be glad to hear of any additional facts and photos, or probably will link to a local site where there is one.

Elisabeth Roberts was aware of the Roll of Honour website when writing her article, and is a member of BFHS. She has listed the references used in her research at the back of a booklet she is preparing which will be placed in Millbrook Church. These references will include the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website and other references, such as the descendants' memories, various war books, newspaper references, regimental war diaries, etc.

The website might be of interest to members so, if they do not happen to have come across it, the address is given below:

<http://www.roll-of-honour.com/Bedfordshire/MillbrookRollofHonour.html>

Book review

Biggleswade and the Great War: Our Own Flesh and Blood, by Kenneth Wood. (The History Press, The Mill, Brimscombe Port, Stroud, Glos, GL5 2QG, 2009. ISBN 978 0 7524 4966 1, 160pp, paperback, £14.99.)

At first sight this book might seem to be parochial and only of interest to those in the south-east of the county. But this would be a hasty judgement because Kenneth Wood has succeeded in producing a potted history of the campaigns and developments in that 'war to end all wars' intertwined with the personal stories of the volunteers and conscripts from the Biggleswade area and their families. He even includes some emigrants from Biggleswade to Canada who died fighting in Canadian regiments. These stories are made more poignant by extracts from letters home.

Chapter 1 opens with a description of what was going on in the town on the Bank Holiday weekend in August 1914 when war was declared, and then each year of the war has its own chapter, dealing with the major battles and the other theatres in addition to the Western Front.

The final chapter (1918) is followed by an Epilogue telling of the aftermath of the war on the town and in France, with the work of the War Graves Commission. The definitive list of the 199 Biggleswade casualties was published in 1920 to form the basis of the names that appeared on the town's war memorial in 1921. It is reproduced on pages 140–143, and 146, and there is a map of Biggleswade, addresses of the casualties and the streets that existed at the time.

There are six appendices: (1) British Casualties on the Western Front Month by Month; (2) Total British and Empire Casualties during the Great War; (3) Biggleswade Roll of Honour, 22 April 1915 as it appeared in the *Biggleswade Chronicle*; (4) The Learning Curve of the BEF from the Somme in 1916 to the 100 Days in 1918 showing the evolution of tactics in the period; (5) British Army Composition/Strength; (6) the service of the Bedfordshire Regiment Battalions in the war.

There is an index but unusually it is arranged in categories and the soldiers listed have their names with their forename first – but the alphabetical order is by surname. There are a few minor errors, and Passchendaele loses its 'n' on a couple of occasions.

Overall this excellent book is well written, well produced and neatly typeset. Reproduction of photographs is not an issue because the majority of the photos are from the local paper and were subject to the printing limitations of that time.

TED MARTIN

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