

Potton History Society Newsletter

POTTON Cricket Club.

A CONCERT

OF
VOCAL & INSTRUMENTAL
MUSIC

Will be given in the

Board School Room, Potton,

ON

FRIDAY, APRIL 25th, 1884,

In aid of the Funds of the above Club.

In addition to Ladies and Gentlemen residing in Potton,
Messrs. MEAD, SPRING, and GREEN of Sandy,
and Miss FOSTER, of Wrestlingworth,

Have kindly promised their assistance.

*Reserved Seats (numbered), 2s. ; Second Seats,
1s. ; Third Seats, 6d.*

Tickets to be obtained of Mr. C. J. Hercock, Market Place, Potton,
where a Plan of the Room may be seen.

An early application for Tickets is respectfully requested.

DOORS OPEN AT HALF-PAST SEVEN, TO COMMENCE AT EIGHT
O'CLOCK.

POTTON CHORAL SOCIETY.

A CONCERT

Will be given

ON WEDNESDAY NEXT,

December 16th, 1874, in

THE SCHOOL ROOM,

Adjoining the Wesleyan Chapel, POTTON.

Admission: Reserved Seats, (numbered), 2/-;
Second Seats, 1/-; Third ditto, 6d.

*Doors open at half-past Seven, Concert to commence
at Eight o'clock.*

Tickets may be had at Mr. H. BERRILL'S, Market
Square, POTTON, where a plan of the Room
can be seen.

H. BERRILL, PRINTER, POTTON.

Number 12 Summer 1991

A Surprise Package

A fascinating glimpse into the social life of Pottonians from 1866 to 1891 has recently been revealed after receiving a collection of posters and programmes from Mrs.E.Gardner, nee Stapley. Stored for 25 years by her sister after being removed from their aunt's house, Mrs.E.M.Banes, 31 Horslow Street, the collection has now been given to the History Society.

The earliest leaflet advertises the first of a series of 'Penny Readings' to be held in Mr Youd's Wool Rooms on November 2nd 1866, with the Rev.W.C.Bidwell in the chair. The programme consists of readings, recitations and musical items and tickets, costing 6d for reserved seats, 3d for front seats and 1d for back seats, could be obtained from three Market Square business men. For the season ending March 29th 1869, £18.14s.7d had been received for the eight meetings held. Payments amounted to £18.14s.6½d, making a profit of ½d! These included the cost of: removing chairs, lighting and sweeping room, hire of van to remove chairs, printing, tuning piano, beer (4s8d), hire of piano for the season (£3.3s), paraffin and Mr.Youd for the hire of the room (£1.1s.). An item dated November 21st states 'Policemen and others, refreshment, 1s6d'.

Mrs.Robarts and her pupils 'assisted by others from a distance' gave a concert of Vocal and Instrumental Music in the Teeswater Town Hall on January 4th 1876. As the tickets cost 25 cents, perhaps this concert was given in Canada? Printed in capitals at the base of the poster are the words 'God Save The Queen'.

In the 1880's Potton had active Choral and Orchestral Societies and on December 20th 1889 they combined to give a concert consisting of 60 performers. The venue was the Board School, the conductor Mr.E.Storr,

Headmaster, and the leader of the orchestra was Mr.W.Robarts. The violin soloist at a concert given by the Orchestral Society on February 6th 1891 was Miss Ethel Stapley, aged 9. Profits from concerts were sometimes donated to Potton Cricket Club, Mr.Storr (conductor, vocalist, cellist and pianist) being a very keen member.

A 'grand entertainment' was held in the Board School on April 12th 1887. The poster states 'Living Waxworks will be exhibited and will wax bright and mirthful when wound up. Children will dance in fancy costumes. Tableaux Vivants will be taken from Scenes in History and Romance. The Potton String Band have kindly consented to attend.' The cost of tickets ranged from 6d (2½pence) to 1s.6d (7½pence). All proceeds were to be given to the District Visiting Society for the Poor Sick.

The Band of Hope gave an entertainment in the Wesleyan School Room (now the Salvation Army Citadel), on April 9th 1891 which included Japanese and British Flag Action Songs and Musical Drills by Band of Hope Members.

An impressive poster headed 'Department of Science and Art, South Kensington' advertises the 'Potton Science School and Art Class Session 1890-1891.' The eight Patrons listed include the Rev.G.Evans Gwynne M.A., S.Whitbread Esq. M.P., Viscount Baring M.P. and J.Poole Wagstaff Esq. J.P.,D.L. The eight Potton Committee Members had been approved by the Department. Subjects taught were: 'Principles of Agriculture' and 'Drawing - second grade freehand, model and perspective.' Examinations were to be held in May 1891 and certificates would be awarded by Her Majesty's Examiners. The teacher for both subjects was Mr.E.Storr!

Studying the material received has been most rewarding. We now have information on the Town's leisure

activities and cultural pursuits, and understand the pleasure thus derived to lighten the load of the hard-working people of the time. Newspaper cuttings will now be studied to gauge the public's reactions to these events.

Copies of the 12 posters will be on view at the Potton Show on September 7th 1991.

Patricia R. Yates.

POTTON PENNY READINGS

The LAST of the Series for the Season will be given

On Friday Evening, March 29th, 1867,

In Mr. YOUNG'S

LARGE ROOM,

ROYSTON STREET.

JAMES WAGSTAFF, Esq.

WILL TAKE THE CHAIR.

PROGRAMME.

<i>Reading</i>	" Sketches in Manchester "	Mr. Wm. Judd.
<i>National Song</i>	" God bless the Prince of Wales "	
<i>Reading</i>	" The Huguenots Battle Hymn "	Mr. J. F. Judd.
<i>Chorus</i>	" March of the Men of Harlech "	
<i>Reading</i>	{ " Mr. Pickwick and his Friends fall } into the clutches of the law "	Mr. Breckon.
	" A Selection of Airs "	
<i>Reading</i>	" A Curtain Lecture by Mrs. Caudle "	Mr. G. Kitchin.
<i>Reading</i>	" Mary the Maid of the Inn "	Mr. M. Gibbs.
<i>Song</i>	" Tramp! Tramp! Tramp! "	Mr. Douse.
<i>Reading</i>	" The Gridiron "	Mr. W. J. Arnold.
<i>Glee</i>	" Spring's Delights "	
<i>Reading</i>	" The Brothers of Birchington "	Mr. W. Smith.

NATIONAL ANTHEM.

Local History Conference

In July of 1989, Martin Lawrence of the Harlington Heritage Trust organised a conference to which representatives of Local History Societies in East Bedfordshire were invited. The aim of the conference was to encourage the exchange of ideas and to bring about more co-operation between societies for the mutual benefit of all.

The success of the first conference resulted in the Biggleswade Society agreeing to host a similar event in 1990. This took place on 9th June, the same day as Biggleswade Carnival, although this was not intentional.

At an earlier meeting of the four local societies it had been decided that the theme of the conference would be the publication of information and the various ways in which societies could communicate the knowledge collected by their research to as wide an audience as possible.

After the initial reception and welcome by Mr. Horace Dilley delegates moved to the Social Club at the Brewery for the morning session when two speakers from Bedfordshire Rural Community Council spoke about Parish Maps. Alison Holden the Countryside Officer, and Terry Westlake the Rural Development Officer used a video and examples of maps already produced by communities in Bedfordshire to explain the concept of Parish Maps and the various forms that they can take. The use of the word "map" is not strictly correct in this context as to most people it has the meaning of a factual representation on paper of physical features on the ground. As the two ladies explained, a parish map can be anything that the producer wants to record, it can of course include buildings, roads etc, but can also include the plants and animals which occur in the local

environment. The message was that one should use one's imagination to produce something which although not necessarily a work of art would be appreciated by the community; if it turned out to be a work of art then so much the better.

After an excellent lunch provided by the ladies of St. Andrew's Church delegates re-assembled in the Chapter House for the afternoon session in which two contrasting aspects of local history publication were presented.

Jim Brown, the author of the book "Gamlingay" spoke of the years of research and hard work which went into the preparation of his manuscript. Although he had help from many sources he had still found it necessary to learn medieval Latin and to decypher the various scripts used in old documents. As those of you who were at our meeting when Jim described his work will know, he had had considerable advice and encouragement from the late Rowland Parker and he again paid tribute to the man to whom he referred as the grand-father of his book.

The production of the manuscript was by no means the end of the story, publishers, even those who specialise in history books were not particularly interested in what they saw as something which would only be of limited interest. Eventually Cassell decided that they would publish and the book appeared in 1989 but as Jim pointed out, the financial rewards were not large.

The Gamlingay book did not contain any photographs. In contrast, the final speaker Mrs. Yates, had taken as her subject "Photographs in Local History". Some would argue that photographs, limited as they are to the period after 1850 can only represent a small fraction of history but to many people this is enough. If they can relate photographs to their families or

to events which they or their families were involved in then that is sufficient.

Mrs. Yates showed how selection of suitable photographs and accurately researched captions had enabled this Society to produce three books which had sold well. Mrs. Yates also showed how the use of photographs could enhance the presentation of talks to organisations such as societies and schools; quoting the success of our street evenings as an effective example.

The use of photographic material in exhibitions such as the recent Church festival was also mentioned as a means of enabling a wider audience to appreciate the work of societies.

The presentations by the speakers at the conference were much appreciated by the delegates but the organisation particularly in respect of timing and the limited space available for displays left a lot to be desired. It is hoped that lessons will have been learned from this and that the next conference at Flitwick in 1991 will be free from the frustrations which marred this occasion.

Norman Parry

THE CONTINUING SAGA OF POTTON MANOR II

It still never fails to surprise me that the book on Potton Manor is still selling which perhaps indicates a continuing interest in the "enigma".

I thought I would give a further report, since I wrote in the last newsletter, of the latest pieces in the jigsaw.

A surprise telephone call from the solicitor of the Smekal estate informed me I could collect some pictures and documents from him. The framed photographs were those once hanging in the manor house at the time of Madame Pokarovas death. Nothing of real note apart from a picture of the pre-war Mercedes racing team. The backings of these pictures were a strange collection of all sorts of old prints, etc, but one had a blueprint made by Smekal. This blue print is the only one we have in the Society's archive of the many thousand that were destroyed when the house was demolished. (or were they?) I feel some still survive somewhere - can you help?

The photographs showed the work that Smekal was engaged in at the Skoda works, such as on a tram and electric generating units. There were also pictures of his work on the "Delta" car engine and of him in a racing car before the war. (The type of racing car is a mystery - I referred it to Mr Ware of the National Motor Museum but he has, as yet, not identified it)

The documents consisted of papers relating to Madame Pokorova including her passport, immigration papers and family photographs.

Amongst the family photographs was one showing Madame Pokorova, her husband, and a daughter. This confirms what we had heard about a daughter but not as we thought in UK but in Czechoslovakia.

The other photographs showed her family and places but, of course, they have no data on them to say who and what they are most frustrating. (Are your photographs dated with captions?)

Another unexpected piece in the jigsaw I found in a motor magazine which showed a picture of Madame Junck (aged 90) at the Essex Motor Show. She was a friend of the Smekals, and we have several photos in the Society's archives of them together. So I wrote to the Editor of the magazine and obtained her address in Prague. I wrote to her, asking about the Smekals, but I am afraid, to date, have had no reply. Perhaps she has forgotten about the Smekals or does not wish to recall that time.

As I wrote before I have no doubt more pieces of the Smekal jigsaw will come to light as time goes on, raising more questions than they answer, I expect.

If you would like to know more about the Manor - then read the book!! (available from Tysoes)

TCM Ball

Figure 2 Extract from an 1841 census enumerator's book for Preston (Lancash)

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City or Borough of Preston Enumeration Schedule.

Parish or Township of Preston

PLACE	HOUSES	NAMES of such Persons who abode therein the preceding Night.	AGE and SEX		PROFESSION, TRADE, EMPLOYMENT, or of INDEPENDENT MEANS.	Where Born		
			M.	F.		Parish or County	Country	Foreign
Smyth St.	1	Henry Harrison	25		Blacksmith			4
		John	25					
		Henry	1					
		Richard	3					
	(1a)	Thomas	1					
		Richard	25		Blacksmith			
		Richard	25					
	(1b)	William	25					
		John	25		Blacksmith			
		Richard	25		Blacksmith			
do		John	15		Blacksmith			
		John	15		Blacksmith			
		John	15		Blacksmith			
		John	15		Blacksmith			
do	1	Richard	40					
		John	15		Blacksmith			
		Richard	15		Blacksmith			
		John	15		Blacksmith			
		Richard	15		Blacksmith			
		John	15		Blacksmith			
		John	15		Blacksmith			
		John	15		Blacksmith			
		John	15		Blacksmith			

The Bedfordshire Times, 24th March 1899.

"Early in the present century there existed between Potton and Sutton a small roadside ale-house over the door of which was the following inscription:

Butte beere, solde hear
by Timothy Dear

Com tak a mugg of mye trinker-cum-trink
Thin a ful kart of my verry stron drink
Harter that trye a cann of titter-cum-tatter
And windehup with mye siv'nty-tymes-weaker-thin-
water.

It must be left to experts to identify the different kinds of drink indicated by the whimsical designations given in this doggerel. There would appear to be a gradation both in the quality and the quantity of the drinks offered. Only a mug of trinker-cum-trink is suggested; but as a quart of very strong drink is proposed, this latter drink is presumably the weaker of the two. Then comes a whole canful of something else - which ought to be weaker still; and the indefinite wind-up is to be made upon a drink enormously weaker than water."

To date, no other reference to Timothy Dear has been found. A William Dear was at the Queen's Head, now 22 Sun Street in 1814 so the quotation above could relate to that establishment. It would be interesting to know where the sign originated, how long it remained in use and more important, what was the source from which the Bedfordshire Times obtained this information.

Norman Parry

1 On this schedule we got a very precise statement of address. This is not always the case. Even when a number is given one cannot always be sure of where a house was, for the reason given below:

There are many towns containing long lines of cottage streets, formed by the gradual coalescence of buildings erected by several small proprietors, and in such streets it is not uncommon for each proprietor to give his little road a distinctive

name and to number the houses it contains from one upwards, without the smallest regard to the numbers in the vicinity. In Nottingham there was formerly a long street which was said to repeat its numbers up to three no less than thirty times, and which was the despair of relieving officers and parish doctors. A resident there would give his address as 'the fifth number three on the right hand side as you go up' for such names as 'Marilda Place' or 'Eliza Cottages' had long been swept away. (Drake in Wrightley 1972, p 23)

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No.	Name of Town, Place, or Road, and House or Farm	Name and Surname of each Person on the Right of the 20th March, 1851	Head of Family	Condition	Age or Sex	Rank, Profession, or Occupation	When Born
11	1180 Long St	John Jones	John Jones	Married	45	Labourer	1780
12	1181 Long St	William Smith	William Smith	Married	38	Labourer	1790
13	1182 Long St	James Brown	James Brown	Married	35	Labourer	1795
14	1183 Long St	Robert White	Robert White	Married	32	Labourer	1800
15	1184 Long St	Thomas Green	Thomas Green	Married	28	Labourer	1805
16	1185 Long St	Richard Black	Richard Black	Married	25	Labourer	1810
17	1186 Long St	Henry Grey	Henry Grey	Married	22	Labourer	1815
18	1187 Long St	Edward Walker	Edward Walker	Married	19	Labourer	1820
19	1188 Long St	George King	George King	Married	16	Labourer	1825
20	1189 Long St	John Lee	John Lee	Married	13	Labourer	1830
21	1190 Long St	William Hall	William Hall	Married	10	Labourer	1835
22	1191 Long St	James Young	James Young	Married	7	Labourer	1840
23	1192 Long St	Richard Hill	Richard Hill	Married	4	Labourer	1845
24	1193 Long St	Henry Scott	Henry Scott	Married	1	Labourer	1850
25	1194 Long St	Edward Adams	Edward Adams	Married	0	Labourer	1855
26	1195 Long St	George Baker	George Baker	Married	0	Labourer	1860
27	1196 Long St	Thomas Clark	Thomas Clark	Married	0	Labourer	1865
28	1197 Long St	Richard Evans	Richard Evans	Married	0	Labourer	1870
29	1198 Long St	Henry Fisher	Henry Fisher	Married	0	Labourer	1875
30	1199 Long St	Edward Green	Edward Green	Married	0	Labourer	1880
31	1200 Long St	George Hall	George Hall	Married	0	Labourer	1885
32	1201 Long St	John Lee	John Lee	Married	0	Labourer	1890
33	1202 Long St	William Smith	William Smith	Married	0	Labourer	1895
34	1203 Long St	James Brown	James Brown	Married	0	Labourer	1900
35	1204 Long St	Robert White	Robert White	Married	0	Labourer	1905
36	1205 Long St	Thomas Green	Thomas Green	Married	0	Labourer	1910
37	1206 Long St	Richard Black	Richard Black	Married	0	Labourer	1915
38	1207 Long St	Henry Grey	Henry Grey	Married	0	Labourer	1920
39	1208 Long St	Edward Walker	Edward Walker	Married	0	Labourer	1925
40	1209 Long St	George King	George King	Married	0	Labourer	1930
41	1210 Long St	John Lee	John Lee	Married	0	Labourer	1935
42	1211 Long St	William Hall	William Hall	Married	0	Labourer	1940
43	1212 Long St	James Young	James Young	Married	0	Labourer	1945
44	1213 Long St	Richard Hill	Richard Hill	Married	0	Labourer	1950
45	1214 Long St	Henry Scott	Henry Scott	Married	0	Labourer	1955
46	1215 Long St	Edward Adams	Edward Adams	Married	0	Labourer	1960
47	1216 Long St	George Baker	George Baker	Married	0	Labourer	1965
48	1217 Long St	Thomas Clark	Thomas Clark	Married	0	Labourer	1970
49	1218 Long St	Richard Evans	Richard Evans	Married	0	Labourer	1975
50	1219 Long St	Henry Fisher	Henry Fisher	Married	0	Labourer	1980
51	1220 Long St	Edward Green	Edward Green	Married	0	Labourer	1985
52	1221 Long St	George Hall	George Hall	Married	0	Labourer	1990
53	1222 Long St	John Lee	John Lee	Married	0	Labourer	1995
54	1223 Long St	William Smith	William Smith	Married	0	Labourer	2000
55	1224 Long St	James Brown	James Brown	Married	0	Labourer	2005
56	1225 Long St	Robert White	Robert White	Married	0	Labourer	2010
57	1226 Long St	Thomas Green	Thomas Green	Married	0	Labourer	2015
58	1227 Long St	Richard Black	Richard Black	Married	0	Labourer	2020
59	1228 Long St	Henry Grey	Henry Grey	Married	0	Labourer	2025
60	1229 Long St	Edward Walker	Edward Walker	Married	0	Labourer	2030
61	1230 Long St	George King	George King	Married	0	Labourer	2035
62	1231 Long St	John Lee	John Lee	Married	0	Labourer	2040
63	1232 Long St	William Hall	William Hall	Married	0	Labourer	2045
64	1233 Long St	James Young	James Young	Married	0	Labourer	2050
65	1234 Long St	Richard Hill	Richard Hill	Married	0	Labourer	2055
66	1235 Long St	Henry Scott	Henry Scott	Married	0	Labourer	2060
67	1236 Long St	Edward Adams	Edward Adams	Married	0	Labourer	2065
68	1237 Long St	George Baker	George Baker	Married	0	Labourer	2070
69	1238 Long St	Thomas Clark	Thomas Clark	Married	0	Labourer	2075
70	1239 Long St	Richard Evans	Richard Evans	Married	0	Labourer	2080
71	1240 Long St	Henry Fisher	Henry Fisher	Married	0	Labourer	2085
72	1241 Long St	Edward Green	Edward Green	Married	0	Labourer	2090
73	1242 Long St	George Hall	George Hall	Married	0	Labourer	2095
74	1243 Long St	John Lee	John Lee	Married	0	Labourer	2100
75	1244 Long St	William Smith	William Smith	Married	0	Labourer	2105
76	1245 Long St	James Brown	James Brown	Married	0	Labourer	2110
77	1246 Long St	Robert White	Robert White	Married	0	Labourer	2115
78	1247 Long St	Thomas Green	Thomas Green	Married	0	Labourer	2120
79	1248 Long St	Richard Black	Richard Black	Married	0	Labourer	2125
80	1249 Long St	Henry Grey	Henry Grey	Married	0	Labourer	2130
81	1250 Long St	Edward Walker	Edward Walker	Married	0	Labourer	2135
82	1251 Long St	George King	George King	Married	0	Labourer	2140
83	1252 Long St	John Lee	John Lee	Married	0	Labourer	2145
84	1253 Long St	William Hall	William Hall	Married	0	Labourer	2150
85	1254 Long St	James Young	James Young	Married	0	Labourer	2155
86	1255 Long St	Richard Hill	Richard Hill	Married	0	Labourer	2160
87	1256 Long St	Henry Scott	Henry Scott	Married	0	Labourer	2165
88	1257 Long St	Edward Adams	Edward Adams	Married	0	Labourer	2170
89	1258 Long St	George Baker	George Baker	Married	0	Labourer	2175
90	1259 Long St	Thomas Clark	Thomas Clark	Married	0	Labourer	2180
91	1260 Long St	Richard Evans	Richard Evans	Married	0	Labourer	2185
92	1261 Long St	Henry Fisher	Henry Fisher	Married	0	Labourer	2190
93	1262 Long St	Edward Green	Edward Green	Married	0	Labourer	2195
94	1263 Long St	George Hall	George Hall	Married	0	Labourer	2200
95	1264 Long St	John Lee	John Lee	Married	0	Labourer	2205
96	1265 Long St	William Smith	William Smith	Married	0	Labourer	2210
97	1266 Long St	James Brown	James Brown	Married	0	Labourer	2215
98	1267 Long St	Robert White	Robert White	Married	0	Labourer	2220
99	1268 Long St	Thomas Green	Thomas Green	Married	0	Labourer	2225
100	1269 Long St	Richard Black	Richard Black	Married	0	Labourer	2230

Figure 3 Extract from an 1851 census enumerator's book for Preston (Lancashire)

The undermentioned Houses are situate within the Boundaries of the

Civil Parish [or Township] of	City or Municipal Borough of	Municipal Ward of	Parliamentary Borough of	Town or Village or Hamlet of	Urban Sanitary District of	Rural Sanitary District of	Ecclesiastical Parish or District of						
Pottou				Pottou	Refflawade	Pottou							
No. of Schedule	ROAD, STREET, &c., and No. or NAME of HOUSE	HOUSES		NAME and Surname of each Person	RELATION to Head of Family	CON-DITION as to Marriage	AGE last Birthday of		Rank, Profession, or OCCUPATION	WHERE BORN		(1) Deaf-and-Dumb (2) Blind (3) Imbecile or Idiot (4) Lunatic	
		In-habit-ed	Un-inhab-ited (U.), or Building (B)				Males	Females					
1	Mull St	1		John Keeling	Head	Mar	40		Butcher	Bedford	Pottou		
				Esther do	Wife	do			Butcher's Assistant	do	do		
				Annie Ashwin	Servt	do			Domestic Serv	do	do		
2	Bo King's Head	1		George Lunnin	Head	Mar	62		Publican & Market Seller	do	do		
				Emma do	Wife	Mar	33			do	do		
				Charles Mann	Step son	Un	16		Agd Labourer	do	do		
				George do	do	Un	14		do do	do	do		
				Frank do	do	Un	10		Getolava	do	do		
				John do	do	Un	4			do	do		
				John do	Step father	Wid	63		Market Garden Labourer	do	do		
3				William Parker	Lodger	Un	44		Shoe Maker	North	Widgou		
4				Thomas Shannan	Head	Mar	32		Farm Labourer	Bedd	Pottou		
				Ann do	Wife	Mar	32			do	Everton		
				Lucas do	Servt	Un	10		Scholar	do	Pottou		
				Emily do	Servt	Un	8		do	do	do		
				Fred do	Servt	Un	5		do	do	do		
				Esther do	Servt	Un	2		do	do	do		
5				John Chapman	Lodger	Mar	51		Plumber	Surrey	Lambeth		
6				David Young	Lodger	Un	50		Farm Labourer	Wid	Pottou		
7	Mull St "Green Man"	1		Thos Perkins	Head	Wid	64		Publican	Chisle	Meldret		
				Ann do	Son	Un	18		Carpenter Journeyman	Wid	Pottou		
				Mariea Furrant	Sister in Law	Wid	22		Housekeeper	do	do		
8				Eizabeth Fyfe	Lodger	Mar	18		Housekeeper	do	do		
				Earnest do	do	Un	10			do	do		
				Elozabeth Manning	do	Un	15		Domestic Serv.	Bedd	Pottou		
Total of Houses...				Total of Males and Females...				15	18				

NOTE.—Draw the pen through such of the words of the headings as are inappropriate.

PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE						Reference—	COPYRIGHT PHOTOGRAPH - NOT TO BE REPRODUCED PHOTOGRAPHICALLY WITHOUT PERMISSION OF THE PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE, LONDON
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THE GREAT FIRE OF POTTON 1783

In 1983 we celebrated the bicentenary of our worst recorded fire by producing an audio-visual programme and a 48 page booklet. In the course of our researches we were able to build up a picture of the disaster that struck our ancestors.

There were a number of questions that remained unanswered about the events of the 14th August 1783 in spite of the contemporary accounts from several papers and a letter from the Reverend Berridge. These agree on many points but differ in others.

The discovery of a new account of the Great Fire gives us a chance to look again at the accuracy of our original sources of information and to illustrate the problems a Local Historian faces in uncovering the truth. The new document comes from the papers of Rev Thomas Oelebar Marsh in "Antiquarian & Topographical Collections" dated December 1798 (BC 529). His account starts by reminding us that Potton was once an important Market Town:-

"This neat little Place is distant four Miles north of Biggleswade pofsefes a good market for Corn Meat Poultry and Vegetables on the Saturday and once enjoyed a Briskness of Commerce particularly in the Wool Manufactory equal to anye Inland Town of similar Extent, but the Shears of Fate were permitted to clip the rising Shoots of its increasing Prosperity for on the 14th August 1783 at One in the Afternoon a most terrible Fire owing to some hay having been prematurely stacked broke out and for five Hours raged violently, nor could the afsistance of Hundreds, or Tons of water incefsantly played from six Engines with the utmost skill abate its Force."

The Morning Herald reported the Fire as starting at 3 o'clock whilst The London Chronicle simply states that it started on 'Thursday afternoon'. The problem of establishing clear facts continues with the efforts to put out the fire.

The Gentlemen's Magazine recorded that there were 'two engines, but fo much out of repair as to be of little ufe' which is supported in the London Chronicle.

The Chronicle and the Gentlemen's Magazine agree that the Fire lasted well into the next day but the Herald ('extremely rapid') and the Rev Berridge ('the mischief was done in four hours') suggest otherwise. Our new account continues:-

"The frequent Variation of the Wind drove large Flakes or rather Sheets of Fire, at its Pleasure, these falling in dreadful Irregularity immediatly spread their baleful Effects and reduced 62 Houses exclusive of Out-Offices to their Foundations. The situation of the Peasants exhibited a Scene of complete Wretchedness, nor were those on whom Fortune had smiled without a Thousand Inconveniences."

The Fire destroyed King Street from Meeting Lane to the Market Square as well as about half the Square itself and part of Brook End. Berridge describes a similar effect of the wind but also adds that if 'the wind had shifted from north to south east the whole town would have been fired.' The accounts of the extent of the immediate damage vary. The Chronicle reports 100 houses burnt down whilst Berridge reports that the best part of the town was lost.

The Reverend Marsh gives us some figures that we have not seen before:-

" The Property destroyed in this Conflagration amounted to £36625 39d and ascertained in the following manner:- £11000 a claim on the Directors of the Sun Life Fire Office, £18435 19d Estimates delivered in (whereof £8203 5 met a Refusal the Parties not being considered Objects of the Charity) and £7197 for which no Estimates were transmitted. To alleviate this fatal Event every Heart beat with unparralleled philanthropy and such was the general spirit of rivalship in Acts of Charity that in a few Months a benevolent Public contributed £6285 which after every Deduction affected to the first Class of Sufferers Sixteen, the second twelve and the third 10 in the Pound."

The account of the collection and distribution of money is accurate as the figures agree with those in the official accounts. Two sources mention suggest that 'very few' were insured but the figure of £11,000 quoted is a large sum for 1783 and suggests otherwise.

Berridge mentions one sufferer who was 'insured so deep that people say the fire will set him up!' It is interesting to note that the Royal Exchange Assurance DONATED £110 and Sun Life gave £105 to the collection. We would not expect our present day insurance companies to behave in this way!

The Reverend Marsh finishes his account by reminding us that there are always those who benefit from a disaster and that it provides an opportunity to renew and improve:-

"This Calamity though so severe to many was a rich Harvest to the Sons of art who plied their Hands in rearing Buildings airy in their Construction and elegant in their Appearance."

Our new document adds a few new details but does not help clarify some of the disagreements between our original documents. Contemporary newspaper accounts are likely to rely on immediate impressions rather than hard facts while later ones can draw on accurate facts gathered after the event but will use other peoples recollections which may have changed with time.

The real truth of any historical event is difficult to reconstruct with 100% accuracy as our documents show. The Local Historian must be careful to report the differences in detail rather than select the facts that seem most appropriate to them and pass on to future generations inaccurate information.

Whatever is the real truth behind the Fire it has left its legacy in many of the buildings which are familiar to us today. They have stood in King Street and on our Market Square for over two hundred years and have seen many changes but surely none as dramatic as the events which brought them into being.

Title page from the financial accounts of the committee set up to collect money for the sufferers of the Great Fire Of Potton.

THE
GENERAL ACCOUNT OF THE
LOSSES,
AND
THE STATE OF THE
Collections *and* Distributions,
ON ACCOUNT OF THE
FIRE,
Which happened at POTTON, in the
County of Bedford,
On THURSDAY the 14th Day of AUGUST, 1783.

Almost a hundred years after the Great Fire of 1783, fire was still causing problems in the town, as will be seen in this newspaper article of January 1880 :-

"On Friday afternoon a fire broke out at Messrs. J. & F. Praybrook, fellmongers and wool staplers. The Fire Brigade arrived at an opportune time and rendered signal service, and we trust that their efforts will meet with a better appreciation at the hands of the fire office than has been the case with the payment of the extinguishing expenses for the two other fires which the Brigade has attended since their formation. The expenses at the great fire at Potton in 1878 were not paid until many months had elapsed and then not in full. The Brigade had therefore to trench upon their slender funds to pay for pumpers and water carting. The fire at Stand Alone Farm has not yet been settled for and this has caused great dis-satisfaction not only amongst the members of the Brigade, but also amongst the pumpers. These men ought to be paid with as little delay as possible so as to be glad to offer their services on future occasions. The fire offices ought not to place a Fire Brigade in the humiliating position of being repeatedly asked for payments that the fire office ought to have enabled them to meet months ago. It appears strange that in the case of fire, the loss of the insurer, if it be thousands of pounds, can be settled in a few days and yet..."

The first organised Fire-fighting groups were those employed by the fire insurance companies, each of which maintained its own liveried staff to deal with fires at premises insured by them. The emblem of the Sun Fire Office can still be seen on the wall of the Rose and Crown.

"It is better to travel hopefully than to arrive"

When I put down the telephone I was quite excited at the request to help an Australian visitor trace his ancestors. I thought about all the advice we had received from our speakers at our meetings and began to formulate a plan of action in my mind.

The day arrived when I met my visitor at Biggleswade railway station. He told me his name was RIVERS and that his ancestors had been gardeners near Sawbridgeworth in Herts. He came armed with a name and two telephone numbers. We tried these numbers but they no longer existed. There was no alternative we must go to Sawbridgeworth.

It was a pleasant drive down the A10 and we found the village of High Wych without too much difficulty... then we started asking all the pedestrians and knocking on cottage doors.

We eventually struck lucky - luckier than it would be for the majority of us, because Mr Rivers was a descendant of a very famous family.

In 1725 his ancestor had started the nursery and it was the oldest site owned by the original family. Fruit trees, roses and shrubs were propagated but by the early 1800s roses were beginning to be given greater emphasis. Thomas Rivers published the "Rose Amateurs Guide" which went into 12 editions and is still one of the main reference books for rose historians.

In 1820 breeding trees were started and in 1838 the Early Rivers plum was introduced and it is still the earliest plum. Peaches and nectarenes were also introduced e.g. the Early Rivers and John Rivers varieties.

In 1873 work started with cherries and by 1920 the famous Peggy Rivers and Ursula Rivers varieties were underway.

1890s saw the introduction of pears - particularly Fertility and Conference the latter becoming the most popular pear for garden or market.

From about 1830 there was a large collection of orange varieties. Most of the collection was sent to

California in 1876. It proved to be excellent and was used to get the orange growing there.

Books published by the Nursery :

1. The Rose Amateurs Guide (12 editions)
2. 1850 The Miniature Fruit Garden which went to 20 editions.
3. The Orchard House - describing growing fruit trees in pots and the early development of commercial glass houses (16 editions)

All this information came from a retired lady who spent 40 years propagating oranges in the Rivers Nursery. She showed us old catalogues, photographs and press cuttings and finally brought the story to the present day.

In the 1980s the BBC produced a series of programmes on the History of Gardens. The Victorian Garden was based on the Rivers Nursery and is, therefore, in part preserved for posterity.

In the late 1970s Thomas Rivers died and his daughter took over the running of the Nursery. Bad advice, inexperience, poor management - who knows - a garden centre was opened but it was a lost cause. Slowly, piece by piece the land was sold off until in 1989 the nursery went finally into liquidation and the site was sold.

Mr Rivers and I drove in through the gates that still said Rivers Nursery. The bulldozers had been at work for 10 days and only 2 glasshouses remained - waiting for the gardeners from Wisley, HQ of the Royal Horticultural Society to come to collect the vines (much of the stock went to Wisley).

A 147 acres of rubble and wasteland awaited our eyes... "if only you had come 10 days ago the lady said", before the bulldozers.

I hope my Australian visitor had a good imagination and

that in his mind's eye he could see the grandeur that had been. The site will soon become a new private hospital - The Thomas Rivers Medical Centre. At least the Rivers name will still be prominent in Sawbridgeworth but I still wonder, would it have been better for my Australian friend to have travelled hopefully and never arrived.

ANITA M LEWIS

FOR YOUR BOOKSHELF

Anita M Lewis

Pictures of Potton Volume 3 (1940-1969) compiled by Patricia R Yates, Potton History Society and the History of Potton Trust Fund (1989) £3.00

150 pictures covering a 30 year span showing a wide range of activities and research is evident in the many background details provided. There are many pictures of people; very valuable in showing what they are doing and wearing at precise times apart from being of interest to the local inhabitants of Potton who can spot their friends and relatives.

Potton Manor by Trevor Ball (1988) £2.50
"An Enigma"

An attempt to answer the mysteries of the owners of Potton Manor.....

Following the history of the Manor from earliest times until the present day.

The story continues still.....

The Market Square by Peter Ibbett £1.00
Potton History Research Report No. 1
Revised 2nd edition 1986.

This second edition has added a great deal to the original. The extra material has come from more detailed analysis and from Pottonians' themselves. The Square is ever changing. It is hoped that more contributions will be forthcoming for a 3rd edition in the future. 26.

Potton Consolidated Charities 1985 £2.50

by Patricia and Ralph Yates

Potton History Society Research No. 3

Published in conjunction with the Trustees

Potton Consolidated Charities.

An account of how the parish administered the "Charitable Donations for the Benefit of Poor Persons."

"Through Visitors' Eyes - a Bedfordshire Anthology

by Simon Houfe (available from bookshops) £12.95

"Biggleswade in Words & Pictures"

available from Biggleswade History Society

c/o 6 Pine Close

Biggleswade

SG18 OEF

Price £2 (£2.50 by post)

"Five Days to Live" The 2nd Battalion Bedfordshire

& Herts Regiment in France 1939-1940.

available from R H Medley

Pant y-Goitre House

Abergavenny

Gwent NP7 9BB

Price £3.60 (£4 by post)

The Kitchener Family History by Dorothy Kitchener

An account of T B Kitchener & Co Ltd

£2.00

Steam Plough Works, Potton, based on

surviving documents and personal memories

of the authoress.

Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape
by Dr. Oliver Rackham, revised edition 1990.

Many members will recall Dr. Rackham's visit to the Society in 1989, when he kindled amongst us a spark of interest in our local woodland. This book is an excellent guide for those who want a fuller understanding of trees and their place in the landscape. Dr. Rackham's enormous depth of knowledge is presented in a way which makes easy reading, helped along by his occasional touches of humour.

Potton is fortunate to have a piece of ancient woodland within its parish boundary and having read this book one can hardly resist the urge to rush out immediately, to start measuring its banks and ditches.

Published by Dent, price £16.95.

* * * * *

Extract from the will of Thomas Burgoyne, d.30 Aug 1546

"To Rich. Clayton the office of woodward and felling of the woods at Potton Wode for life".

* * * * *

Extract from an article by Harbord Campling, which appeared in "Bedfordshire Magazine", spring 1951.

"Potton Wood is still of considerable extent, a lovely stretch of pine and bracken. Both Henry VIII and James I hunted in the wooded hills around Potton."

The source of Mr. Campling's information is not known.

MARY LEIGH