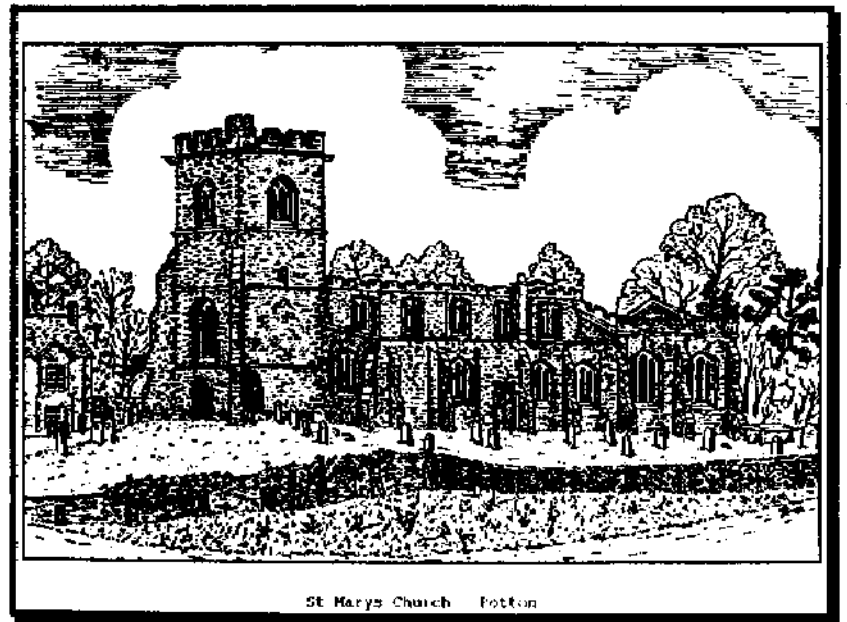


# Potton

## History Society



Number 14 Spring 1993

**Potton History Society Committee:-**

Chairman	.....	Norman Parry
Secretary	.....	Mary Leigh
Treasurer	.....	Anita Lewis
Programme/Publicity Secretary	.....	Peter Ibbett
Archive Secretary	.....	Patricia Yates
Committee Members	.....	Boo Matthews
	.....	Jack Hutchinson
	.....	George Howe

For access to the archives in our research rooms just telephone the key-holders;

Mr N. Parry .... Potton 260728  
Mrs P. Yates ... Potton 260328

**Acknowledgements:-**

Thanks to Mr Lawrence for allowing us to use his drawings of the church, featured on the front cover and Brook House on page 7.

We also thank the following for advertising our meetings; Lindsay's Bakery, Tysoe's Hardware Store, Burgoyne Middle School, and Sandy Upper School.

## **Society News:-**

Our AGM last November ( report in next issue ) was followed by a pictorial guided tour of Potton, ably led by Norman Parry, as we investigated the origins of our street names.

In December, Peter Ibbett devised a quiz using material from the archives. Newcomers and Old Pottonians alike were able to take part in this light-hearted event, as well as sharing the festive refreshments.

At the January meeting we were set the task of extracting information from the 1891 Census and all enjoyed the opportunity to delve into a record of Potton as it was 100 years ago. Rex Whitfield has volunteered to continue this valuable work.

The next meeting saw Potton Community Centre bulging at the seams when Angus Nudds, a semi retired game-keeper from Tetworth Hall, spoke to one of our biggest ever audiences. Although he raised some controversial points, Mr Nudds' wealth of knowledge about the ways of the natural world could not fail to fascinate the listener.

In March we travelled far afield when Harry Arch gave us an insight into the history of emigration to America, starting way back in the 1600's.

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For several years a slide show presentation has been made by PHS to first year pupils at Burgoyne Middle School as part of their studies. This is now being extended, as the new National Curriculum requires second year pupils to carry out a study of the town or village in which they live. Our archive secretary has been able to supply further material for the school to use, thus making their task much easier.

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## **Forthcoming Programme**

### **May 27th Sandpits Walk**

An outdoor evening to visit the sand pit on the Deepdale to Sutton road. A family exploration into the depths of history.

### **Jun 24th Ramsey**

The chairman of the Huntingdonshire Local History Society will outline the history of the town, whose Abbey gained a gift of land in 960 AD. in a document which mentions Potton.

### **Jun 27th The B1040 to Ramsey**

Historical trip along the ancient route from Biggleswade to the Fens. See the Notice Board ( at the end of the news letter ).

### **Jul 22nd Eynesbury**

Peter Ibbett, our Programme Secretary, has been exploring the history of the town where he lives and will lead a visit.

### **Aug 26th Local Evening**

Our popular Summer meeting built around a variety of members own work and contributions.

### **Sep 23rd The Life of Emily Shore**

A talk given by Anne Harvey about Emily, who died aged 19 in 1839 and who left an extensive diary.

### **Oct 28th The Enclosure of Potton**

Norman Parry, our Chairman, has researched the changes in Potton leading to the Enclosures Act which has given rise to our present landscape.

### **Nov 25th AGM &**

#### **Potton is Burning**

Potton has suffered a number of fires including the Great Fire of 1783. Society members present an audio/visual evening.

### **Dec 9th Pictorial Entertainment**

Our popular end of year dip into the pictorial archives.

## Fourth Mid-Beds Local History Conference

On the 27th June 1992 - after several months of planning and organisation by Peter Ibbett, our Programme Secretary - Potton History Society was host to 37 delegates representing 11 groups from the Mid Beds district. We were fortunate in being able to make use of St Mary's Church as well as the church hall, on a warm summers day. The theme chosen was **Local History;- Development or Stagnation?**

Chris Pickford, County Archivist, made the introductory speech in which he outlined the need for a county wide Local History Association. Following this the delegates broke up into 5 groups, discussing the topics of membership and finance, publishing, involvement of members, the county scene and archives.

After a buffet lunch and a guided town walk the delegates reassembled to examine the findings of the morning's discussion groups. A final break for tea was followed by a few words from Maggi Solly, Bedfordshire Museums Officer, outlining some developments in the pipeline, including the trial of a travelling museums display.

Peter Ibbett rounded off the day with his proposals for a joint history project. Our thanks go to Peter for his careful planning which made the day such a success.

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Since the conference took place, Bedfordshire Local History Association has held its inaugural meeting and a steering committee has been elected to formalise the association's objectives. Potton History Society has made a donation towards the start-up costs.

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*A letter received from P S Steer-Jones, the chairman of the Roxton and District Local History Society reads as follows;*

Dear Mrs Leigh,

### Mid-Beds Local History Conference

At our meeting last evening it was agreed by the delegates who attended the Conference last week that a letter of congratulations be sent to your Society.

We all felt that it was a useful and rewarding day and this was in no small way due to the splendid organisation and obvious care that had gone into all the arrangements.

Well done!

Yours Sincerely

P S Steer-Jones

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### Memories of the Mid Beds Conference

Tea for two or was it forty two;

This is just a few words to keep members upto date with the activities of the self named **Catering sub Committee**. What sports those ladies are; I gave them their instructions and off they went to make salads they had never heard of before - and in such quality. The result was a magnificent spread to present to the participants of the Mid Beds Conference. One lady was heard to remark that she thought the catering had been done by professionals ie .... Tredgetts! While another asked if we were available to do the catering at future conferences. We had fun and the visitors enjoyed good food and service.

My thanks to all who helped; especially .... Beryl Howe, Beryl Mountain, Vera Parry, Mary Leigh, Boo Matthews and Joyce Hutchinson.

Anita Lewis

## The Journal of Emily Shore

*Most children keep a diary during some part of their childhood but few are kept or retain their interest. One childhood journal was partly written in Potton 160 years ago and was featured as part of the Christmas Quiz. The following items give a feel of the style and content of the journal written by Emily Shore in 1831 when still aged only eleven:-*

" Our family consists of papa, mamma, and five children. Papa is curate, during part of the year, for Mr Cust, Rector of Cockayne Hatley. Papa takes pupils; his greatest number is six.

Our house in Potton is called Brook House. It stands just within the town, in front of a little brook or ditch. The principal persons in Potton, besides papa and Mr Whittingham, the vicar, are Mr Keal and Mr Moor, surgeons; Mr Youd, a wool merchant; and Mr Smith, a rich farmer.

Potton contains no less than thirteen public houses, besides beer-shops. There is a market every Saturday, a statute and horse fair once a year, and occasionally a show of wild beasts. Potton is famous for fires; about forty years ago it was almost entirely burnt down, and four cottages were destroyed by fire last year.

All the mob of Potton made a great riot to celebrate the passing of the Reform Bill, and paraded the town with the most hideous yells. I do not suppose that any of them understood what they were so noisy about.

I picked up on the grass a palmer-worm, which is a caterpillar, so named because it travels about like a palmer or pilgrim. It has long, thick tufts of black and red hair and a very minute gold spot to each ring; it crawls very quickly. It seems to eat chiefly the leaves of the dock, the vine and the lilac.

We went to Cambridge in the gig, with the two ponies, through the most hideous country all chalky and in some parts the road was wretched. I, however noticed a great many beautiful flowers in the hedges, many of which I did not know. The chief of these was a very pretty flower, called the *Campanula rapunculus*; it is of a deep purple colour, and not tall from the ground. I took it home and copied it.

This evening, as papa and mamma were out in the gig, they saw at the Biggleswade turnpike road a man stretched out dead by the side of the road. It has since turned out that this is a case of cholera. If this dreadful disease reaches Potton it will, I fear, from the drunkenness that pervades the place, prove very fatal.

Gamlingay heath is famous throughout England for the rare flowers to be found there. I wish we lived nearer to it. Amongst the prettiest flowers I have found on it, are the *Euphrasia officinalis*, or Eyebright, and the *Polygala vulgaris*, or Milkwort.

Papa took us all to see certain interesting operations in glass, performed by a man who travels about, and has come to Potton to exhibit for a day or two. He sat at a table, and before him was a little furnace, which contained a flame of intense heat, though it was only kept up by a tallow.

It was now settled that we are to do what we have long had in contemplation, viz. to remove to Woodbury, a good house near Everton. The reason is that we find Potton agrees very ill with our health, while Woodbury is remarkably healthy. "

*The short life of Emily Shore is the subject of our September meeting. The talk by Anne Harvey should be one of the highlights of our year. Do not miss it!*

Peter Ibbett



Brook House  
(Lower Kissinging, near Starncliffe Bridge)

## Rural Unrest

The early part of the 19th century was marked by a considerable amount of unrest in rural areas. Although a number of reasons have been put forward, the basic cause appears to have been poverty. The highest number of incidents occurred around 1830 and are collectively known as the 'Swing' riots, after a fictitious character Captain Swing, whose name appeared as the signatory of a number of anonymous letters addressed to landowners, threatening arson and destruction of machinery.

In their book 'Captain Swing', Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé list 1,475 incidents spread over 38 counties, 16 of which were only marginally affected. Sixteen cases occurred in Bedfordshire in December 1830 ... more of these later.

The riots appeared to have been spontaneous with no co-ordinated attempts to bring about any radical change in the social order but this may have been due to the prompt action taken by the authorities in swearing in considerable numbers of Special Constables and offering rewards for information about unlawful assemblies.

As a result of the 1,475 incidents, 1,976 men were brought to trial, 800 of whom were acquitted, 7 were fined and one sentenced to be whipped. Two hundred and fifty were sentenced to death, 19 were executed and the remaining sentences were commuted to imprisonment. Four hundred and eleven were given terms in prison and 505 were sentenced to transportation; of these, 332 arrived in Tasmania and 149 in New South Wales. No reason is given for the quoted remark that 26 did not sail.

Hobsbawm quoted Bedfordshire as having an adult illiteracy rate of over 60% in the 1830's and over 10% of the population in receipt of parish relief. The Royal Commission on Poor Laws' report in 1834 gave the Poor Laws and unemployment as the main causes of the 1830 riots which involved 6 cases of arson, 4 of tithe riots, 3 of wage riots and 1 each of food riot, assault and 'Swing' letter.

One of the arson cases involved 4 cottages in Potton but no-one was charged in connection with this or any of the other arson cases. Only in two instances were any arrests made; at Flitwick where, after wages meetings involving about 30 - 40 men on 6th December 1830, 4 arrests were made and at Stotfold where two days of unrest on 1st and 2nd December resulted in 10 of the ringleaders being apprehended.

At the January 1831 Quarter Sessions the 4 Flitwick men were described as "part of one hundred or more riotous assemblers"; one received 6 months hard labour and the other 3 men received 14 days. The authorities obviously took a much more serious view of the Stotfold riots which started as wages meetings, with demands for 2/6d (12½p) per day in summer and 2/3d (11¼p) in winter, but became much rowdier on the second day, with agitation against tithes and food shortages. The riots were directed against farmers and parsons and a lot of the details can be obtained from the surviving letters of the Rev. John Lafont, vicar of Hinxworth and curate of Stotfold. Lafont spoils the overall effect of his letters by his somewhat exaggerated claim to have been instrumental in stopping the riots, an action which he hoped would give him preferment.

Ten of the Stotfold men were taken to Bedford and were tried on various charges, not at Quarter Sessions in January but at the Lent Assizes in March. Five were sentenced to death although all sentences were commuted, 2 to 14 years transportation, 2 to 10 years and 1 to 18 months hard labour; the rest receiving from 6 weeks to 1 year hard labour. In the absence of court records it is impossible to discover the reason for the wide variation in severity of sentences. Apart from one newspaper report the only evidence for the so-called arson case at Potton is in the Quarter Sessions records for 1831. One of the High Constables for the Biggleswade Hundred was Catlin Johnson, a Potton farmer living in the Market Square, with responsibility for the parishes of Potton, Sutton, Wrestlingworth, Cockayne-Hatley, Everton, Dunton, Eyeworth and Edworth.

A Quarter Sessions minute of January 1831 authorises:-

Expenses of Special Constables at Potton to quell riots and incendiary fires	= £6 2s 6d
For the fire at Potton	= £6 13s 0d

The following bill appears on the Quarter Sessions records for December 1830, presumably submitted by Johnson:

**2/12/1830** Journey to Hatley and Wrestlingworth to request the inhabitants to attend at Potton on the 4th to be sworn in as Special Constables = £0 5s 0d \*

**8/12/1830** Journey to Biggleswade with constables.

**9/12/1830** Lighted tinder found in some straw in a barn. A stranger seen running away. Watch and Search made after him by 4 constables. = £0 10s 0p

**10/12/1830** A constable on horseback despatched after the above stranger to Everton, Tetworth, Waresley, Gamlingay and Dunton. = £0 12s 6p

Paid 24 Special Constables attending at the fire at Potton this night the 10th = £2 8s 0p

**14/12/1830** Journey to Warden to the Rev. F Neve. Collecting evidence and witnesses for the Magistrates to investigate at Potton = £0 9s 6p \*

Paid 51 Special Constables sworn in = £2 11s 0p

Paid for horse and gig to Biggleswade = £0 5s 0p \*

[ Items marked \* are crossed out, obviously disallowed ]

The above account six pounds, one shilling and sixpence allowed. Signed F H Neve, W H Whitbread

Why Quarter Sessions allowed an extra shilling on this bill is not stated.

Additional accounts in the same period are :-

From Francis Pym:

<b>11/12/1830</b> 14 Constables from Everton attending fire at Potton from 6½ - 9½ pm each	= £0 2s 6p
26 Constables from Sandy attending the fire at Potton from 7 - 9½ pm each	= £0 2s 6p
Liquor for constables at the Crown Inn Potton after the fire	= £0 16s 6p

From Charles Barnett of Stratton House Biggleswade.

Fire at Potton. 27 men on duty each	= £0 2s 0p
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Which ever way one looks at these figures they do not add up to the £6 13s 0p paid out by the Quarter Sessions. It must have been quite an exciting evening in Potton with 91 Special Constables on duty. No doubt the landlord of the Crown was quite happy with such a turnout. A report appeared in the Northampton Mercury of 18/12/1830 - "on Friday night the 10th instant a fire broke out at Potton, Bedfordshire, which consumed four cottages occupied by poor persons. A farmyard being very near to the cottages, several barns and other outhouses were pulled down, which fortunately prevented the fire from spreading. The fire is supposed to be the diabolical work of an incendiary. Several persons have been examined by the magistrate but nothing was elicited to warrant the committal of any one".

No information can be found regarding the location of these four cottages but gaps on the 1832 map in the Meeting Lane area point to that as being the most likely site.

The details of the Potton fire appear to be too flimsy to support a case for including it with the rest of the incidents, a point taken up by Alan Cirket in volume 57 of the Bedfordshire Historical Record Society series which deals with unrest over a longer period of the 19th century and to which readers are directed should they wish to pursue the subject further.

## The Scary Sootlers

Sir - I am writing to say how much I have enjoyed the letters of memories of the old days. As Mrs Rimmer says, then we could laugh at our misfortunes, and there was no "Social" to help, like today.

In all the letters about the "good old days" I have never seen any mention of the sootlers. Perhaps this is because they came at Wakes, when most folk were away at Blackpool. Their job was to clean out the mill chimneys when the boilers had shut down. They were divided into knockers and baggers.

The knockers would climb up the inside of the mill chimney, knocking down the soot with their special wide-soled shoes, while the baggers would stand at the bottom, bagging up the soot as it fell.

They wore wide-brimmed hats and goggles to keep the soot of their heads and out of their eyes.

These sootlers came up in gangs from Bedfordshire, where the soot was used to grow fine asparagus - not that any of us could afford such delicacies!

We children were scared stiff of them: all you could see was the whites of their eyes. At night they would dance round bonfires at Wren Nest or Howard Town Mills, to Bedfordshire folk songs played on an accordion. We would creep up and watch them.

They looked like so many devils around that fire. My mother used to say "I'll sell thee to the sootlers if you don't get off to bed!"

Now they are all gone, like so many other things. There's no soot now and not many chimneys. I wonder what they grow asparagus on now in Bedfordshire?

Well I must close now, my eyesight is not what it was. I often think of the old days - I'm 90 now and always worked in the mills. They were hard times but happy times and nobody complained. - Yours etc,

Mrs Ivy Wash  
Stanyforth Street  
Hadfield

*This letter was spotted in the Lancashire Ashton-under-Lyne Reporter. Records of freight trucks waiting at Potton station during this period show that soot was arriving here weekly and sometimes even daily for local traders such as Bond-Smith and Ginn.*

## Notice Board

**St Mary's Church Flower Festival ..... July 2nd 3rd & 4th**  
Potton History Society will have a photographic exhibition in the church hall throughout the festival.

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### **Help!**

Our display boards are in need of refurbishment. If anyone can supply either materials or expertise for this purpose please contact Mrs Yates on Potton 260328

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### **Trip to Ramsey**

A new venture for the society is our coach trip on June 27th, following the ancient route to Ramsey - the B1040. This will be a full days outing, including a ploughman's lunch at Ramsey Museum. The cost per person will be £6.00 . For more information or to book your place contact Peter Ibbett, phone number is Huntingdon 216564 as soon as possible.

Unfilled seats will be offered to Biggleswade History Society so don't delay.

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