

Potton History Society



Newsletter Number 19 Autumn 1995

Potton History Society Committee:-

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.....	Jack Hutchinson
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Registered Charity number 290895

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

Mr J Hutchinson Potton 260322
Mr G. Howe Potton 260935
Mrs M Leigh Potton 260426

Acknowledgements:-

- Mr K Lawrence for the Society logo
- Our continued appreciation to Mr Witten for displaying and selling our publications in Tysoe's Hardware Store.
- We also thank the following for their continued support by advertising our meetings;
Lindsay's Bakery, Tysoe's Hardware Store,
Burgoyne Middle School, and Sandy Upper School.

Society news

At our **April** meeting we travelled back through the mists of time with Stephen Coleman of the County Council's Planning Department. His collection of slides included aerial views of many of the county's archaeological sites from the earliest ring ditches to medieval fishponds, clearly demonstrating what a wealth of history lies hidden beneath the fields of Bedfordshire.

In **May** we took advantage of the summer evenings to begin a new project for the Society, recording details of the gravestones at the cemetery. This first exploratory visit showed that there is a vast amount of work to be done over the next few years. We found that some of the earlier stones are already deteriorating, or completely obliterated, so these must be dealt with as soon as possible.

Our coach trip for 1995 was planned for **June**, to catch the best of the summer weather. The Greensand Ridge, a geological feature of the Bedfordshire countryside, was the subject of our attentions this year. The trip was preceded by a talk on the history of the region by Mrs Vivienne Evans, who stepped into the breach at very short notice when the planned speaker was not able to attend. Mrs Evans set the scene for our visit to an area where poor soil quality had played an important role in land usage and ownership through the centuries.

July proved to be another headache for the programme secretary when, for the second month running, the speaker withdrew at the last moment. Instead of seeking an alternative speaker, an evening was compiled around various items which had recently been under discussion. Topics included a model of the Shambles currently under construction by Keith Lawrence, the Delta car from Potton Manor which may shortly become available to the Society and a book on the history of the Richardson family which had been added to the archives.

Those who attended the **August** meeting found that instead of the usual formula of sitting back and listening to a speaker they were having to do the work themselves. Since the Society began in 1977 Mrs Yates has maintained scrapbooks of all the Potton events recorded in local newspapers. These scrapbooks make fascinating reading, as our members discovered, but in order to make them useful to future historians they need to be indexed and so another important task was begun.

September brought the return of Anne Harvey, to keep us up to date on her latest research into Emily Shore and her family. A most exciting development has been the discovery of some of Emily's original drawings, of which only a very few were included in the published diaries although it was apparent from the text that she was a prolific artist.

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Forthcoming Programme

Nov 23rd	Potton in 1945	7:30 start
Dec 7th	Pictorial Entertainment	
Jan 25th	The History of Radiation	D Guttery
Feb 22nd	The Great Northern Railway	G Howe
Mar 28th	Whittlesea and its museum	K Mayor
Apr 25th	Markets & towns in medieval Beds.	Dr M Bailey

Regular working evenings have taken place at the research rooms throughout the summer months, our thanks to all who have given up their time to come along and help. Our large collection of posters has been sorted and indexed and some of the bookcases and cupboards are now neatly stacked and labelled. Although good progress has been made, the filing trays are still collapsing under the weight of their contents so there is still much to be done and meetings will continue this winter.

Progress has been hampered recently by the need to spend several of our working evenings preparing for the photographic exhibitions which are an important part of the Society's role in the local community. It is hoped that one or two of our members may like to become involved in this task on a regular basis; the collection is already mounted and captioned and filed according to content. Preparation for an exhibition mainly involves selecting suitable items from the files. If you would like to help, please contact any committee member.

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You will have noticed on the front cover of this issue the Society's new logo, designed for us by Keith Lawrence. This will in future be used on all our correspondence and literature. Keith has also made a sign incorporating the Society name and the logo which can be used either free-standing on a table display or mounted above our exhibition boards. This will greatly increase the publicity gained from the many exhibitions which we attend. Our sincere thanks to Keith for putting in so much time and effort on our behalf.

Another of Keith's hobbies is model-making and he has recently been working on a scale model of the Shambles, using photographs from the Society's collection as the main source of information. Unfortunately we have no photos of the interior, so this has relied largely on guesswork. If you have memories of the Shambles, particularly the inner passage and courtyard please contact Mary Leigh on 260426.

The Greensand Ridge Trip

The success of the two day trips to Ramsey and Crowland prompted a third excursion from Potton on Sunday 25th June. One theme of these trips has been to start from Potton and to try and show its connections with other areas. The Greensand Ridge runs across Mid-Bedfordshire linking us with Ampthill, Woburn and Leighton Buzzard via the Greensand Ridge walk.

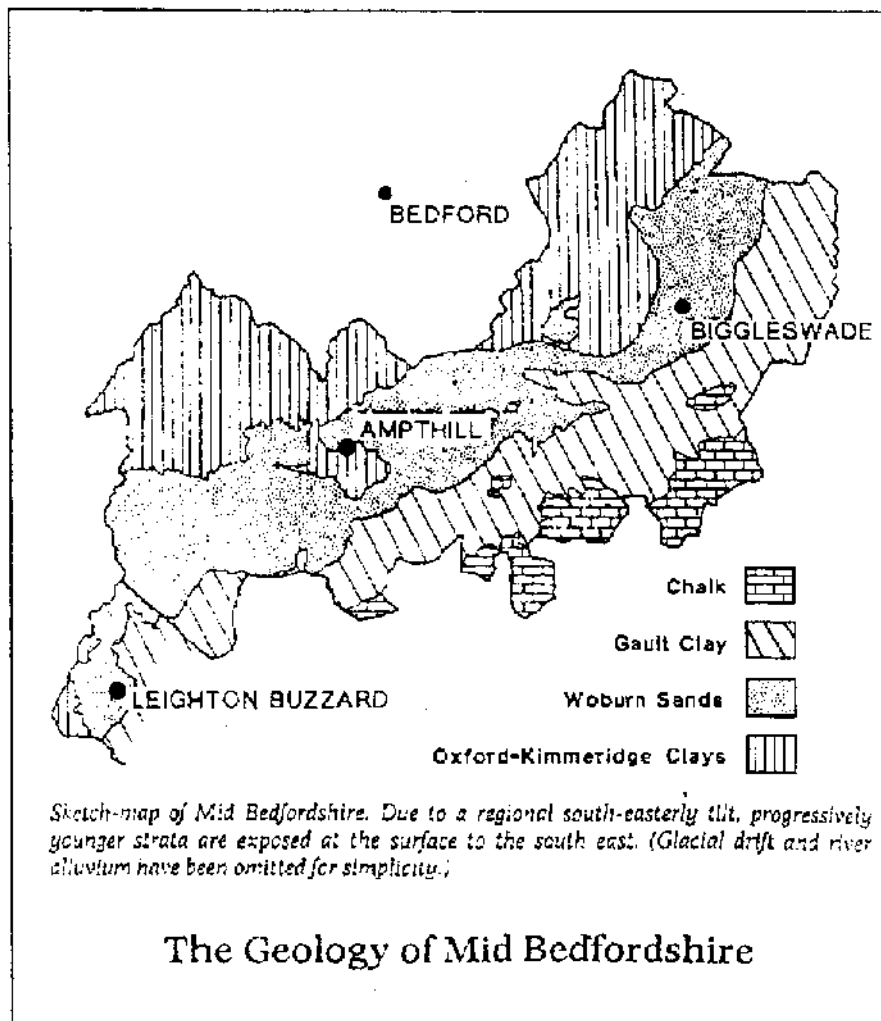
A party of 50 assembled on the Market Square on a dull morning accompanied by a tinge of East coast mist that had got bored with the North Sea and had wandered inland. Our coach made its way along to the start of the Greensand Ridge walk at Gamlingay Cinques and then moved on through Emily Shore country at Woodbury, past Sandy market garden soils that had once been part of heathland famed throughout England for its flowers and wildlife.

The East Coast mist was wrapped around the upper half of the Sandy Heath transmitter as we past Everton and another of the Greensand estates at Hassels Hall before passing by evidence of ancient man and Roman Occupation on the Ridge at Sandy. Crossing the Ivel by way of Girtford Bridge the party passed through Moggerhanger before winding its way into Northill and to Ickwell Green with its nearby Bury Estate.

Shuttleworth and its estate village of Old Warden reminded us of the great influence of the estate owners in our region and their ability to change the landscape to suit their tastes. The remains of Warden Abbey recalled the days when the poor sandy soils of the Greensand enabled religious groups to find the seclusion they required as others had done in the Fens.

Haynes is a Bedfordshire village spread out over a number of dispersed Ends illustrating its growth from scattered settlements rather than from a clear centre. Clarendon Hall was in the process of being redeveloped by a modern religious group giving a modern echo to the monks who had colonised several areas of Mid-Bedfordshire in the past.

The route though Houghton Regis and Millbrook enabled a good view to be had of the Ridge and the 'House Beautiful' of Bunyan Fame. It was also a time to imagine the Ridge as a sandbank in a long lost warm shallow sea with sediments gradually accumulating to form the material for the Bedfordshire Brickfields. A trip around the perimeter of the Millbrook vehicle test track and the village of Liddington brought the party to a break at Ampthill Park.



The mists were lifting and enabled the explorers to stand on top of the Ridge and view the Eleanor Cross and look out over the vale towards Bedford. The trip continued past the Bedford Estates at Woburn and on past the sand pits of Leighton Buzzard with its light railway, now a tourist attraction.

Leighton Buzzard High Street was calm and quiet tucked away from traffic and most of the human race. The Swan Hotel provided the travellers with an excellent lunch and the chance to take on board liquid refreshment. The mists had retreated and the warm sunshine prompted a few to explore the source of local ice cream rather than the delights of the local buildings.

We found our way back to Woburn via the Grand Union Canal and Great Brickhill and set about exploring the Heritage Centre with its exhibition of Parish Quilts. The curator of the museum, Mr Arthur Bayntum, provided a guided tour (including his own back garden) and the ladies of the Church served up a welcome tea in the coolness of their building.

The coach passed through Woburn Park and made its way home via Ampthill, Clophill and Shefford. The Greensand Ridge had provided us with an insight into our connections with the rest of Mid-Bedfordshire.

The Coach trip is rapidly becoming an integral part of our programme rather than simply an additional feature. It not only enables members to learn more about how Potton fits into its region but it also provides an invaluable social outing which strengthens the involvement of our members in the society. It also enables George Howe and myself to escape from daily routine to ramble the snow covered lanes of our county learning more about our history!

My thanks to all those who supported us and helped make the day a real success. Plans are already underway to include another Coach trip in next year's programme.....!

P Ibbett

The Richardson Family of Potton, 1600-1800

Written by Anthony Richardson. February 1995, a copy of this work was presented to the Society and I quote from it ...

"Above all other things, this is the story of a family. Living at the end of the 20th century I am acutely aware that my generation may be the last to have observed traditional extended family life in Britain. Until recently, families were only disrupted by untimely deaths, but now a marriage stands just an evens chance of surviving the whims of the partners. The grandson who carries the family name is often swept away from his grandparents when mother goes off with a new partner and moves out of the area. Children may experience a string of step-parents and not even know what their original surname was.

I must start by making a confession. Richardson is not my true name!"

What a way to start a book ... the reader is intrigued and as one reads on, it is not only the history of the Richardson family that is unfolded, it is the history of Potton placed within the framework of the history of England and of the world.

"The first mention of a Richardson in the town of Potton is in the manor records where, in 1567 one Nicholas Richardson is stated to have been fined for a breech of the manor rules relating to gleaning. This is the right given to labouring folk by farmers to hand pick grain for their own use from fields which have already been harvested." *(this tradition goes right back to Old Testament days)* "This Nicholas will certainly have been an ancestor of my family and it is appropriate that he is seen to be poor, by the nature of his crime."

Poverty stalks the pages of social history in the medieval world ... and so the story unfolds across the years. The reader will be particularly interested in the chapter describing the Great Fire of Potton in 1783. To remind you, members of PHS researched this period and produced a programme about the fire.

The William Richardson of 1783 was a basket maker. He

saw his business go up in smoke but as he rented his property (which was probably in the Hogg Hill area) he would have moved to another house and restocked his business with his compensation money. Although his loss was great he was not ruined and there is some evidence that he moved to Horne Lane.

The 1841 census gives a good picture of conditions "Potton comes over as being a typical country town. 35% of the population were agricultural labourers. The market gardening in the area is emphasised by the presence of 28 gardeners, while the thirst of the population is indicated by the 17 pubs or beer houses, 16 shoemakers saw to the feet of the workers ably assisted by the professor of chiropody; 3 doctors looked after the health of 1773 people. There were few men of means in the town, the place mostly being dependent on the products of the fields, either directly or indirectly. Potton still seems to be self sufficient. Considering that the whole economy depended upon them, the agricultural labourers bringing up their families on 10/- a week in their 2 roomed cottages don't seem to have been appreciated. The presence of 6 schoolteachers in Potton hopefully meant more literacy. In the case of the Richardson family most men were literate in the mid 19th century but not many women."

Living in Sun House, I was fascinated to learn that in 1841, if you wanted a job done, Sun Street was the first place to try. It was the street of all trades, whether you wanted to post a letter, buy tea, replace a window, purchase a mat or have your calf castrated! Indeed, once having started this book, I couldn't put it down. I just wanted to find out what happened next.

Eventually they moved to live in Biggleswade and finally to Wallsend on Tyneside. "Richardsons remain in both Potton and Biggleswade who are descended from all the Richards and Williams who populated the book. The family were still making hand sewn boots and shoes in Potton Market Square up to 1924."

Perhaps you know of them?

Anita M Lewis.

Land Settlement Association

The first of the Land Settlement Association schemes to help in alleviating unemployment was set up in Potton in 1935, not without some local opposition based on fears of its effect on the local economy and apparently orchestrated for political motives. The trouble started when a Mr Gammons, the executive officer of the LSA saw two cottagers and asked if they would be willing to leave their homes to make room for married miners and their families once their training had been completed. Rumours spread and although the LSA strenuously denied that any evictions would take place and that it was their policy to build new houses on the land which had been given by Percy Malcolm Stewart (later Sir Malcolm) local feelings ran high and a meeting was called for 29th January 1935 with the aim of passing a resolution against the Durham miners coming to Potton.

The man believed to have been the organiser of the meeting was Mr J.A.Whitehead the owner of the Cockayne Hatley estate where he had formed the organisation known as Copo. Ltd. or Cox's Orange Pippin Orchards to which the public were asked to subscribe by purchasing apple trees. Whitehead was a flamboyant character who appears to have been quite good at making and losing fortunes, he was popular with his workers having brought some additional employment to the area in the depressed years of the 1930s but his popularity did not extend to the establishment who regarded his money-making schemes as dubious if not illegal.

The letters which have survived are mainly those from Sir H. Trustram Eve to Stewart. Eve was the senior partner in the firm of J.R.Eve responsible for the Stewart estate management. Although based in London, Eve seems to have been well supplied with information about the local scene by his Bedford office and by Mr. Braybrooks of Potton. It is surprising how fast communication was; modern systems with all their technology

cannot match the exchange of information which took place in the 1930s. On the day before the Potton meeting Eve sent to Stewart a copy of the briefing he had prepared for the M.P. for Mid-Beds, Mr.A.T.Lennox-Boyd who intended to be at the meeting in the company of Mr. Gammons. Not one for mincing his words, Eve was very derogatory in his references to Whitehead, accusing him of leading agitation against the LSA and the Durham men. He mentions that Whitehead had once thought of becoming a candidate for Mid-Beds, as if this in itself was to be deplored ".....any project he takes up is doomed from the start ". After detailing the negotiations with government departments and the part played by Stewart in providing the land and money, Eve again comes back to the subject of the meeting with the remark that "the whole thing is simply this mad agitator Whitehead". The briefing continued with the advice that Lennox-Boyd should emphasize the support for the government's action and should distance himself from the LSA who were bound to make mistakes in the early stages. He points out that the two cottages were not required for the Durham men who would be accommodated in the Manor House and again refers to "the whole thing is this madman Whitehead, you know all about his apple scheme and 10/-", a reference to one of the appeals for money to finance Copo.

The 29th January meeting was well reported, locally and nationally, Miss Coules, a secretary from the Bedford office summarized events as,

"The meeting at Potton last night was a great success. Lennox Boyd and Gammons were there and they sat at the back of the meeting and let Whitehead and his followers speak right up to the point of passing the resolution against the Durham miners coming to Potton. Then Lennox Boyd got up and fired questions at them and smashed them up completely. Whitehead cleverly replied by saying that his daughter had met with an accident and he could not stay any longer as he had to be at her bedside. Then Lennox Boyd spoke for an hour and answered all questions

that were fired at him and finally the meeting petered out with no resolution being passed. It is now assured that the Durham miners will meet with a warm welcome at Potton. They will definitely be housed in the Manor House and looked after by Larby. They will not be parked out in Potton. No tenants are going to be turned out of their cottages ; there has been a further assurance on this point. No man has received notice to quit as was rumoured".

The News Chronicle stated that a resolution condemning the experimental settlement of 40 Durham miners on small holdings in Potton as causing them " to jump from the frying pan into the fire " was withdrawn at a mass meeting. The paper reported Whitehead as saying that although they had every sympathy with the Durham miners in their plight, there were unemployed in their midst and to bring miners to the land in Bedfordshire was as foolish as carrying coals to Newcastle. The resolution was about to be moved when from the back of the hall Lennox Boyd asked that he might say a few words, although subjected to constant interruptions at the start he and Gammons put the case for the experiment with such phrases as "For God's sake do recognise the fact that the conditions of the unemployed men in Durham are a hell upon earth compared with the conditions of unemployed men in Bedfordshire. We must give these men a chance".

The opposition did not completely give up, a further meeting was arranged at the Central Hall, Potton for the 6th. February, this was billed as a mass protest meeting in opposition to the new Land Settlement scheme. The speakers were J.Lovell of National Smallholder's Association ; Prof.Maurice Dod. M.A. of Cambridge and the Chairman was Mr. Harry Chessum. The local contacts of Lennox Boyd and Eve did their homework prior to this meeting, although Braybrooks said that he knew nothing about Lovell and Dod he forwarded the information that Chessum was a Wrestlingworth man who had just come to live in Potton and that " there is not a Potton man taking any interest in

the meeting as far as is known". He also said that Whitehead's name did not appear and that as far as could be gathered he had nothing to do with this meeting. Another un-named writer said that Whitehead had telephoned to inform Lennox Boyd that he, Whitehead had nothing to do with this meeting but that it was an outcome of the earlier one. The writer added that Lovell was a paid agitator who worked for the Liberal candidate and that Dod was a socialist don. The M.P. and the LSA decided to ignore the meeting preferring to regard it as an opposition meeting in the political sense and to have one of their own at some future date, it seems that the people of Potton took the same attitude because nothing further appears in the surviving documentation to indicate that the second meeting generated any interest.

By the 15th. March 1935 the Bedfordshire Times and Independent was able to publish details of interviews with six of the Durham men who were full of enthusiasm at the opportunity being given to them after four years of unemployment and they had nothing but praise for the welcome that they had received from the people of Potton. Mr. F.W.Braybrooks was quoted as saying " I am just looking in to assure them that the people of Potton bear no animosity towards them and that we intend to do everything to make them feel among friends. All the agitation against them has been engineered by people not living in the town and at the recent meetings here and at Sandy no Potton person has been present in an official capacity. The meeting at Potton was more for the purpose of boosting the Smallholders Association than for anything else ".

Although there was a return to the north-east by some of the original " settlers ", Geordie names and accents can still be found in the local area and the Land Settlement Association continued in operation for fifty years until finally being disbanded and its properties sold in 1985.

N Parry

Bring out the Guns!

The following letter, undated but believed to be from June 1939 appears in the Malcolm Stewart files relating to the Land Settlement Association. The writer had obviously heard of the work which was being done in Potton and elsewhere and wished to air her views. Apart from the reference to hikers and the rate of unemployment benefit the letter no doubt echoes the sentiments of many people today.

Brookside Cottage,
Strines,
via Stockport,
Cheshire.

Dear Sir,

There have been a number of allotments or small-holdings in this district - Lancs. Cheshire, Derbyshire borders and the men who had the courage and will to work were all country folk, they have all been failures because :-

1. It took some years of back-breaking to dig up ground which had never before been turned over and loads of stones had to be disposed of.
2. Several seasons of trial and error finally resolved into allotments producing fairly good crops of vegetables, -- but -- the moment the allotments saw a steady future in sight then that piece of ground was wanted - and taken for building.

The men's years of work all thrown away. This happened twice in New Mills and once in Marple. No other well dug or suitable or even any land was offered, it was just " Get out " .

There are some allotments at Disley, Cheshire which are cultivated by elderly unemployed men. Every weekend they are plundered by hikers and weekenders. When help was sought from the Police they admitted it would need a 24 hour watch and there were not enough policemen in Disley to permit this. It was suggested that the allotment holders should keep watch in turn but no man trying to live on 8/- per week is a match for a healthy young hooligan determined to have self-picked vegetables and fruit.

The question of stout fencing cannot be entertained. What sort of fence could you buy out of a total income of 8/- per week. Also in Disley is another collection of allotments and these are also stripped by young boys from the camp of the Salford Dock Mission. If complaints are made it is never their boys, Oh ! No !. The allotment holders are just plain liars.

No small-holdings will ever be a success until all varieties of thieves and hikers are thrashed for as much as putting one foot inside an allotment fence.

I am not an allotment holder but I live in a cottage with a garden, we must always be on the lookout for these pests. One night the house and garden were left unattended for about half an hour and in that time 30 gooseberry bushes of dessert fruit were stripped despite the gate having a chain and padlock and a spiked top and there are some houses across the road.

One Sunday afternoon (last summer) seven lots of hikers tried to raid my one Keswick apple tree in one hour. If small-holdings are to be of any use they must :-

1. Not be ejected from the piece given or sold to them.
2. Have electrified fences night and day at no cost to the workers inside.
3. A good gun at a low price to shoot rabbits, crows and magpies.

Do you wonder that country folk turn up their noses at working on the land.

If you took out a summons against someone for fruit stealing you only get laughed out of court and it is dismissed as a boy's trick and you are left with a broken fence, a trampled down garden, a lot of stones, a broken window etc. etc.

I am sorry to be a wet blanket but the subject makes me savage but helpless.

Phyllis Collins (Miss)

What was Miss Collins really thinking when she wrote about the need for guns.

N Parry

The Toddington Conference

The seventh Mid-Beds Local History Conference took place at Toddington on the 17th June. Harlington had begun the series on the basis of fostering an attitude of self help amongst the active groups of Mid-Bedfordshire. Societies at Biggleswade, Flitwick, Potton, Langford and Ickwell have all provided excellent days using their own resources.

The Toddington conference was held in a new Village Hall and was attended by around 50 delegates including three from Potton. An introductory talk by Dr Pollard took us through the development of local communities from scattered settlements to the formation of current Parish boundaries and the important part that deliberate planning played over 1000 years ago.

Chris Pickford and Martin Lawrence lead a session on the development of the Local economy in which they stressed the importance of the role of the local landlord. Toddington appears to be a good example of a parish with absentee landlords who looked upon it only as a source of income. The Village suffered much in the last century as Luton and Dunstable grew in importance and the Agricultural economy declined.

The middle part of the day was taken up with a tour of the village. It has a large green which was once used for a market. The secluded Village pond, like our Horse Brook, was used for washing carts and horses. The old mound still stands where the Normans built their defence and the church is a fascinating collection of different styles.

The lunch was excellent as was the final presentation on population changes by Ivan Jones. Toddington did an 'Ireland' in terms of its population decline last century. Unlike Potton there was no railway or Market Gardening boom to sustain the rural population in times of agricultural decline.

The day was another example of the strength of the Mid-Bedfordshire Local History groups and their ability to look outwards as well as maintain their own local interests.

P Ibbett

Notice Board

Voice recording

The committee is looking into the possibility of recording the speakers at our members meetings, particularly those with local knowledge. If any member can offer help or advice on this project please contact John Kirkby on 01767 312381.

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Scrapbooks

At our meeting in August a start was made on the indexing of the Society's yearly scrapbooks. The project will be ongoing until all the books have been completed. The task is quite straightforward and can be carried out either at our archive evenings in our research rooms or in members own homes. If you feel that you could spare a few hours to continue this work please contact Mary Leigh on 01767 260426 or George Howe on 10767 260935.

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Newsletter Number 20

The deadline for copy to be included in this issue will be 1st March 1996. Please pass items to Mary Leigh.

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Bedfordshire Local History Association

Sunday 26th November 1995 - My Life in Ruins, an amusing illustrated talk by the archaeologist and author Tony Rook. 3pm at the Parish Hall, Church Rd, Harlington.