

# Potton History Society



Newsletter Number 23

Autumn 1997

## Potton History Society Committee:-

Chairman .....	George Howe
Secretary .....	Mary Leigh
Treasurer .....	Anita Lewis
Programme/Publicity Secretary .....	Peter Ibbett
Committee Members .....	Boo Matthews
.....	Jack Hutchinson
.....	John Kirkby
.....	Norman Parry
.....	Tony Crossley
Newsletter Editors .....	Mr & Mrs Leigh

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 .....	Biggleswade 314024
Mr N Parry.....	Potton 260728

## Acknowledgements:-

Our continued appreciation to Mr Witten for displaying and selling our publications in Tysoc's Hardware Store.

We also thank the following for their continued support by advertising our meetings;

Lindsay's Bakery, Tysoc's Hardware Store,  
Harper's Barber Shop, Burgoyne Middle School,  
and Sandy Upper School.

## Society News

The spring and summer months have seen a great diversity of events at our members meetings. In April, Albert and Pamela Ormerod returned to Potton with yet another of the fascinating tales they have uncovered in the course of their family history research. This time a chance mention of a wooden leg found in a relatives attic finally led to the disclosure of not just one, but two disastrous railway accidents which affected the life of their ancestor.

At the May meeting members were asked to help out with the listing and indexing of some of our archive material. A varied selection of items were brought from the Research Rooms to give everybody a greater opportunity to see the type of material we are collecting and to give members more involvement in the running of the Society. A special thank you to those who also took files home to do more indexing.

Our outdoor evening was held in June, on one of the wettest June days imaginable. The rain had almost stopped by the time we met up and our members were joined by a record number of visitors to find out more about the secrets of Tempsford Airfield. Although there is very little left of the airfield itself we were delighted to be allowed to see the private museum collection of John Button, which gave a far greater insight into the wartime activities.

The annual coach trip, which has become the highlight of the Society's year, took place at the end of July. In preparation for the trip around the southernmost parts of the county, our speaker was Marian Nicholls, Principal Keeper at Stockwood Country Park. She gave a brief history of the park and its acquisition by the Luton Museums Service, accompanied by an excellent set of slides which whetted our appetites for the delights of the visit to come. A full report of the trip can be found on page 14.

Family History is a topic which has introduced many people to the world of Local History and in August we planned to find out more about families in Potton. First we heard from Patricia Yates, who includes among her Potton ancestors members of the Manning and Bartle families.

Her research included not only names and dates but also a wonderful collection of family and local photographs and reports from local newspapers. Next came Jack Hutchinson who spoke of his father, who left Potton to take part in the Boer War. This story was inspired by various items of memorabilia which have been passed down through the Hutchinson family. Finally Norman Parry showed how his own family history has been recorded with the aid of a computer package. Once the relevant data has been recorded in the files, not only will the computer draw up your family tree but the information can be transmitted world-wide through the internet, thus reaching branches of the family which have scattered far and wide.

At our September meeting we were entertained by yet another Society member, Laurie Jordan. For the past two years he has been photographing inn signs in many parts of the country, and as a consequence of this hobby has learned much about the derivation of the pub names which inspire some wonderful works of art. Topics as varied as heraldry, religion and travel have all been encompassed in the study of signs which most of us take for granted when we pop out to the 'local' for a quick pint.

The September meeting also saw the attainment of a very important milestone in the history of the Society when for the first time our membership list reached 100. Perfect timing as we reach the end of our second decade.

---ooOoo---

Several projects have been ongoing during the summer months. The most reliant on some good summer afternoons is the cemetery survey, which has kept a number of our members busy this year. The recording of gravestones may sound like a morbid occupation but many a family historian will tell you what a fascinating place the local cemetery is, and what a mine of information. Thanks to our helpers, we have now completed the recording of the oldest, and therefore most vulnerable, sections of the cemetery and it is anticipated that the whole task may be completed within the next two years.

A free guided walk leaflet has been prepared for the use of visitors to the town. This will be distributed via the local tourist centre at Sandy and also through various outlets in the town itself. Tony Crossley has been working on the text and Boo Matthews has produced the accompanying map for the leaflet, which is now available. Any suggestions for additional outlets will be most welcome

Society funds have had a considerable boost recently, courtesy of the Woolwich Building Society. The decision was taken several years ago to invest our funds in a high interest account with the Woolwich, so when the conversion to a plc took place we were entitled to receive the windfall payment. A full statement of the Society's financial affairs will be issued, as usual, at the AGM on 27th November.

—ooOoo—

### **The Potton Car**

It is now just over a year since we completed our negotiations with the National Motor Museum at Beaulieu for the return of the Potton Car, and Tony Crossley kindly trailered it back to Potton. We thought it appropriate that the car should be photographed in the Market Square on its arrival and much interest was shown by local people. The car has since been shown at Cockayne Hatley, the Cricket Club Fete and at Potton Show in 1996 and 1997.

We now have an illustrated booklet for sale - 'The Potton Car' - giving the story of the car's life, the man behind it and how it came to a sad end. At only £1 the booklet provides excellent value and is available at Society meetings and from Tysoe's hardware shop. All proceeds are for the restoration of the car.

If anyone feels that they would like to become more involved in this project by donating either money, time, expertise or even bits and pieces that were rescued from the Manor please contact me on 01767 260935.

George Howe, Chairman

### **Recent additions to the collection**

Norman Parry has recently completed the massive task of compiling and collating all the available information relating to the two Enclosures Acts which radically altered the divisions of land in the parish of Potton. The result is documented as **Research Report No. 6 - Land Usage and Enclosures** and is a most valuable asset to the archives - sure to be much in demand by those delving into land usage in the parish.

—ooOoo—

### **The 1997 Bedfordshire Local History Conference**

The ninth in the series was held at Dunstable on Saturday 14th June and was organised by the Dunstable and District Local History Society. These conferences bring together groups across the county who are concerned to develop their work in the field of local history. Our society was represented by Mrs P Yates, Mr M Ibbett and Mr P Ibbett.

The morning session took place in the historic Priory Church and featured a talk on the hidden history of Dunstable as well as one on the history of the Priory itself. There was ample time to talk to others and to view the treasures of the building. After a short walk into the town an excellent lunch was provided. There was an opportunity to view the fascinating Methodist Church before the final session provided by the Book Castle on the problems of publishing Local History. A display provided some fascinating information on Markets in Dunstable including the oldest set of rules in the country from the 13th Century.

Potton will be the host of the tenth conference in 1998. The theme will be **The Millennium Challenge**, with the conference considering how best to make use of the increased interest in Local History that should occur in 2000. The event will take place at Cockayne Hatley.

Peter Ibbett

## Future Programme

1997

### Nov 27th Two Decades of Change

This meeting will start at 7.30pm with our AGM, followed at about 8pm with a look back at how Potton has changed since the Jubilee year of 1977.

### Dec 11th Traditional Pictorial Entertainment

We see out the year with a dip into our archives of visual history, along with some festive refreshments.

## 1998 - 21st Year

I intend to celebrate 21 years of work as the Programme Secretary by providing a whole years programme based on our town and provided by local speakers. I would like to blend those who have knowledge of the past with those who are creating history by their work in Potton today. I am planning to use the following topic areas:-

- |                         |                          |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Working the Land     | 7. Sport in Potton       |
| 2. The Potton Shambles  | 8. Education and Schools |
| 3. Transport and Travel | 9. Celebrations          |
| 4. The Manor Mystery    | 10. Musical Potton       |
| 5. Family History       | 11. Anniversary Quiz     |
| 6. Potton Buildings     | 12. Potton Walks         |

We would like to involve as many local people and organisations as possible. Please let me know if you have any contributions that you could make or can put us in touch with others who might be able to help us produce the best programme yet!

Peter Ibbett

Peter can be contacted on 01480 812731

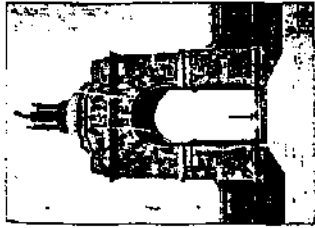
## In Memoriam

Overleaf is a photocopy of a document which has recently been added to the archives. The original measures 13 inches by 20 inches with the central design printed in gold. It was sent to us by Cecil Spriggs, who is a younger brother of Frederick Spriggs to whom the memorial is dedicated.

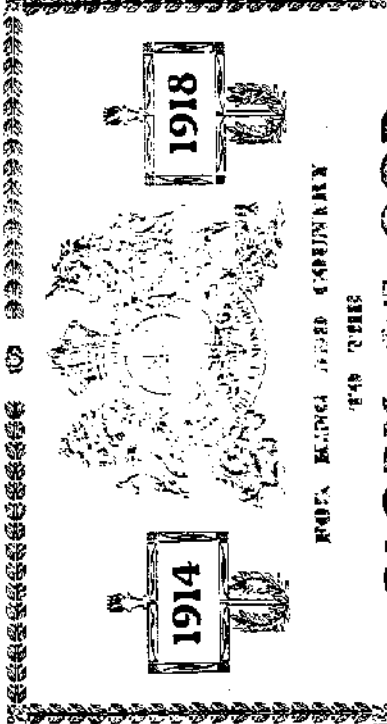
Cecil and older brother Horace ran a boot and shoe repairing business in the Shambles, but it seems that Frederick may have followed a family tradition as a worker at the tannery. The photo below was taken about 1916 and shows F Spriggs with fellow workers at the tannery, displaying the tools of the trade of a sheepskin splitter. In the census of 1891 we find that H. Spriggs, possibly Frederick's father, was recorded as a sheepskin splitter.

Do we have any members who are old enough to remember and confirm that the F. Spriggs in this photograph, is the same man who died in the trenches 2 years later?





SOUTH AFRICAN MEMORIAL



FOR KING AND COUNTRY

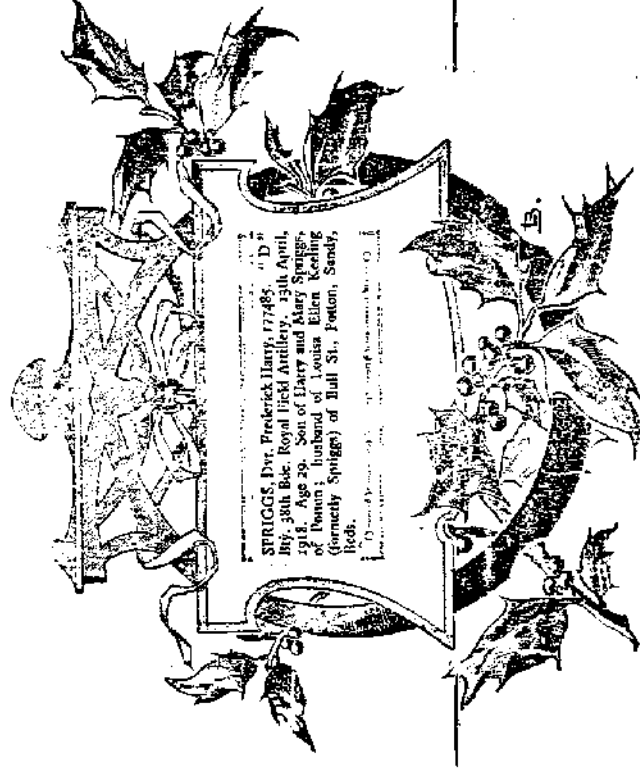
FOR THIS

# GLORY OF GOD

AND

## IN EVERLASTING MEMORY

1917



"D"  
SPRIGGS, Pvt. Frederick Harry, 177485,  
Infy. 38th Bde. Royal Field Artillery. 19th April,  
1918. Age 29. Son of Harry and Mary Spriggs,  
of Dunsen; husband of Louisa Ellen Keeling  
(formerly Spriggs) of Bull St., Foston, Sandy,  
Leob.

B.

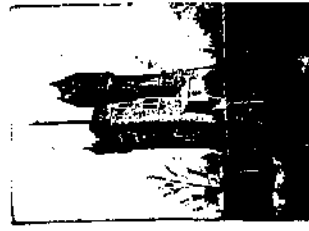
WHO GAVE HIS LIFE IN THE GREAT WAR  
THAT WE MIGHT LIVE  
AND WHOSE NAME IS CARVED IN STONE

AT

- F-PRES
- LOON
- ARRAS
- BETHUNE
- SAINT-QUENTIN
- NEUVE Eglise
- BOURBON WOOD
- PERONNE
- MOUCHY
- BEAUMETRES
- WAVOZERT
- PASCHENDAELE
- BEAUMONT-HAMEL
- CAMBAY
- THEPVAL
- BULLY-GRENAY
- POZIERES
- COURCELLETTE
- COUSILLE



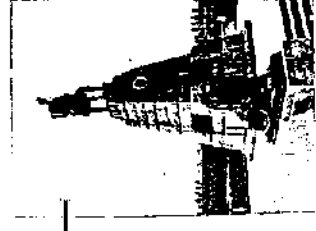
TYNE COT CEMETERY AND MEMORIAL PASSCHENDAELE - BELGIUM



ULSTER MEMORIAL



AUSTRALIAN MEMORIAL



HIGHLAND MEMORIAL

- CAMBIAU
- ELLE
- ACRECHY
- ARMENIERES
- LA HANSELLE
- NEUVE CHAPELLE
- THONES WOOD
- MOYS
- TRICOURT
- GOEMECOURT
- MAHEZ
- HILL 60
- DEULVILLE WOOD
- FRENCH
- ACRECHY
- HAYRESCOURT
- VINEY RIDGE
- HALLECHIE
- BULLSCOURT



## IS THERE AN AUSSIE IN YOUR ATTIC ?.

Over the years there have been a number of contacts with people in Australia who have connections with the local area. Mrs. Leigh Flanders visited Potton in 1994 to see the area where her ancestors, the Britains had lived. A recent letter from her gives details of the Heritage Retrieval Project organised by the Queensland State Library. The aim of the project is to locate letters, diaries, photographs etc... which have been sent back to relatives in Britain by the people who emigrated to Australia in the last century.

A fascinating collection of items has already been discovered. Included are descriptions of the voyages, particularly those of the Flying Cloud, which took 2000 immigrants to Queensland in seven trips in the second half of the 19th. century. These trips were made in much more comfortable circumstances than for those who went involuntarily a few years earlier.

Also found were the papers of Edward Richardson, the Queensland immigration agent in the 1870s. He toured the midland counties of England persuading people to leave, giving them instructions as to what was required, organising passages and helping them to find jobs on arrival. At a time of agricultural depression in this country there were many who were only too glad to exchange the rigours of the work-house for the opportunities offered in a new country and many Poor Law authorities helped families to emigrate.

Although some of those who travelled were illiterate others wrote numerous letters to their relatives. One of the most prolific was Julia Cross who left with her husband George and their children in 1855. From then until 1872 she regularly wrote to her mother in Ely and these letters have been preserved. Similar collections have been discovered in other parts of the country and in Europe. One major find in 1994 was a collection of 180 glass lantern slides taken by a missionary who sent them back home for fund-raising slide evenings for his church in Queensland. The owner, who lived in a Yorkshire village, had the slides stored in his garage and knew very little about them apart from the fact that they were Australian.

The project organisers were very pleased when he donated the slides to them for shipping back to their place of origin, particularly when he also gave them a cedar-wood projector to go with them.

The information above came from a Qantas in-flight magazine. If anyone would like to see the full article, please contact Norman Parry. Although it specifically mentions Queensland, information relating to other parts of Australia will not be refused.

If anyone has or knows of any mementoes of early Queensland settlement please contact Sandra Joynes, Queensland Heritage Retrieval Project, Australian High Commission, Australia House, Strand London. WC2B 4LA. Telephone 0171 887 5261.

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## MORE AUSTRALIAN CONNECTIONS.

In 1992, in a talk on crime in Potton, mention was made of a Thomas Seamer who was transported to Australia for a number of arson attempts. He was lucky that a capital offence of setting fire to the Royal Oak while his relatives lived there was not proceeded with. Slightly earlier, in 1989, Ms. Patricia Vodden an Australian doctor then working in London had visited Potton and had left with us a copy of her research into her family background which included a Seamer connection.

During the research into the subsequent history of Thomas Seamer, I was fortunate in that I was in correspondence with Mrs. Leigh Flanders in Queensland about her ancestors, the Britains who had lived in Blackbird Street in the late 18th. century. I mentioned Thomas and my interest in him and Leigh obtained full information on his convict record and his subsequent marriage to another transported criminal, Margaret Madigan from what is now Eire. It was then that the connection with Ms. Vodden's family became clear. James Seamer, her great-grandfather was the brother of Thomas. James and his wife Catherine had emigrated in 1854 shortly after Thomas had received his ticket-of-leave (conditional parole).

Thomas and James were members of a family of seven children, the offspring of John and Mary Ann Seamer. John himself was one of a family of eight born between 1777 and 1795 where all the brothers seem to have followed the trade of carpenter and builder and where one of the sisters married Edmund Bumbery who was also in the same line. The Seamer business was run from the Royal Oak but the brothers gradually bought or built other properties in Blackbird Street, Chapel Street and in partnership with Edmund the eponymous cottages in Newtown. Their small estate was short-lived, all the brothers having died by 1853 and shortly afterwards the properties were sold and the proceeds shared amongst nine surviving nephews and nieces.

Of the brothers, William the eldest was said to have left Potton to work in the naval dockyard in either Portsmouth or Plymouth, no one was quite sure which and was presumed dead because nothing had been heard of him for over twenty years. John, the father of the Australians, died in 1834, Thomas in 1844 and James in 1853. The latter two did a lot of work for the Church and Parish, Thomas being the one who, in 1825 submitted a bill for "making New Commandments".

The share in the proceeds of the sale came to about £162 for each of the nine recipients and one cannot help wondering whether Thomas who had just been released from prison contacted his brother and the fortuitous receipt by James of his legacy was sufficient to pay for the passages of himself and Catherine to Australia. The two brothers obviously joined up because Catherine was a witness at the marriage of her brother-in-law Thomas in April of 1855. Thomas did not live to enjoy married life for long as he died in 1860. It is surprising that he lived as long as he did considering the brutal treatment he was subjected to during his term in prison. He left a will in which everything went to Margaret and subsequently she employed a London solicitor to collect Thomas's £162 plus interest and to send it to her.

The story really comes full circle with the receipt in 1995 of a request for information on the Seamers of Potton from Michael Seamer in Floraville, NSW who was a direct descendant of James and Catherine.

He was unaware of the connection with the convict Thomas or with his present-day relations in Australia who appeared in Ms. Vodden's research. A considerable correspondence between us since then has given Michael an impression of what Potton is like today and hopefully what it was like in the past. When he finally manages a visit, which may be some time in the future because he has a young family and a living to earn, he will, in his own words already have "an appreciation of the environment of my ancestors".

Michael ended his last letter of 1995 by wishing us a Merry Xmas & a Happy New Year and "if things start to get a bit bleak in Potton this season please feel free to think of me sunning on my local beach beside the crystal blue Pacific Ocean.". Enclosed was a photograph of Michael, his wife Cathy and son Jack aged two, the 3x great grandson of James Seamer who left Potton in 1854 and who died in 1911 aged 81.

The full story is in the Families section of the society archives should anyone wish to follow it up or should any future Seamer research be required.

Norman Parry

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### AN APOLOGY.

In Newsletter No. 19 a copy of a letter from a Miss Collins to Malcolm Stewart was printed, the contributor wishes to apologise for having quoted the wrong name of the writer. The lady was in fact Miss Phyllis Clayton, all the other facts were correct.

An enquiry made to the North Cheshire Family History Society produced a letter from a niece of Miss Clayton, a Mrs. Priddle in Winchester who gave the information that Miss Clayton had died in 1993 aged 95. She had lived in the same area all her life and was the last of a family who had been there for about 300 years, well known for her outspoken views particularly on country matters. A copy of the letter has been passed to Mrs Priddle where it was a very welcome addition to her collection of family correspondence some dating back to 1859.



## The South Bedfordshire Trip

The fifth in the series of society coach trips organised by George Howe and Peter Ibbett set off at 10am on a sunny Sunday morning on the 27th July. The aim of the tour was to visit South Bedfordshire and thus complete a trilogy of trips covering our county. The party of 47 members and friends ascended Hatley Hill with its views across the clay vale to the chalk of the Chilterns beyond.

The route to the A1 at Toplers hill passed through remnants of medieval landscapes at Millow and Edworth. A pause at Stotfold Mill allowed us a view of the burnt out buildings described by Ron Roper in his talk on Mills earlier in the year. Henlow Camp provided reminders of the war years whilst Stondon contributed a Pirate Ship in the yard of its transport museum!

Shillington church stood out on top of its hill surrounded by a number of Ends including Pegsdon in the shelter of the Chilterns and the Icknield Way. The first of four visits to Barton enabled a detour to the delightful high street at Silsoe which was once a hamlet of Flitton with its mausoleum to the Grays of Wrest Park.

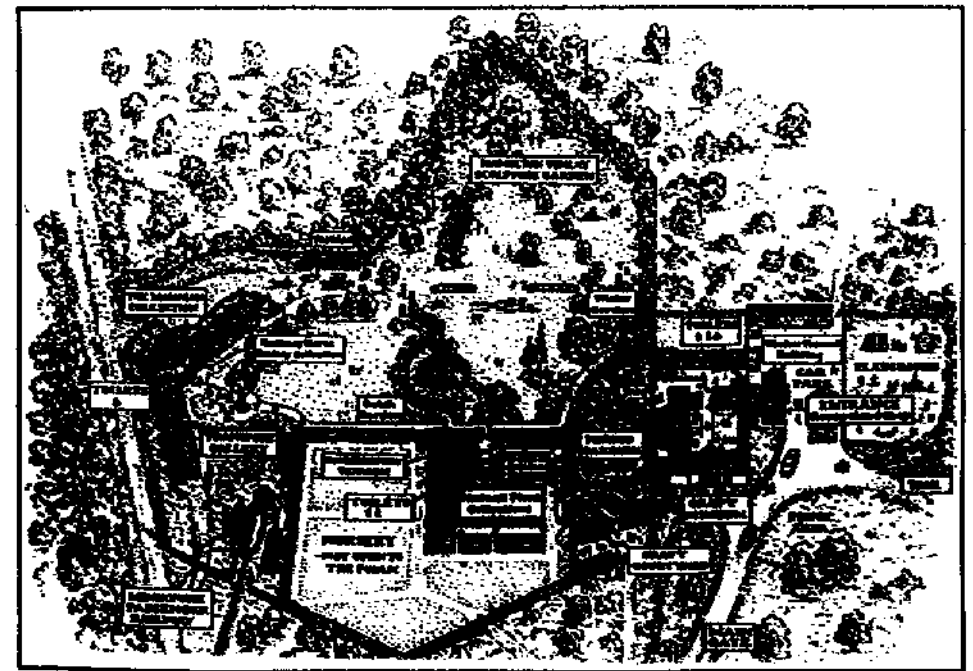
Mr Walker of the Toddington Historical Society provided a short talk on his village before enabling the party to have a look at its central green and buildings. The tour continued past the old Bunyan Oak at Harlington and round the base of the Sharpenhoe Clappers to return to Barton for a Ploughmans lunch at the converted Mill, amongst ancient timbers and historic items.

The afternoon began with a trip through Houghton Regis and Dunstable to the Downs where the travellers were able to buy ice creams and watch not only gliders from the airfield at the base of the Downs but also hang gliding and the traditional Sunday afternoon pastime of kite flying! A run through Kensworth and Caddington enabled the coach to reach Stockwood Park with its captivating Craft Museum, Gardens and Mossman Carriage collection. The beauty of this site was a revelation to most of the party, a number of whom were reluctant to leave!

The route home passed through the centre of Luton and by the Wardown Park home of Luton Museum in the valley of the infant river Lea. The journey continued past Higham Gobion and the Gravenhursts with their beautiful churches. Langford and Biggleswade welcomed us back to our East Bedfordshire home.

The day had been a success with everything going according to plan. I would like to thank our members for supporting the venture and being such enjoyable company. Our trips around the county have revealed what a gem we have on our doorstep!

Peter Ibbett



Stockwood Park - site plan

## PROPOSED EVERTON HEATH AIRFIELD.

In March 1936 the Air Ministry proposed to purchase 400 acres of the Pym estate between the Everton to Sandy road and Potton in order to build an airfield. In a letter from the estate manager, Mr H Preedy to the owner Mr. L.R.Pym who was at that time living near Abergavenny, it was stated that a Mr. R.Colam representing the Ministry had requested details of any tenancies. This information was not passed on because much of the land was unlet as a result of the agricultural depression of the 1930s. The proposals would have meant the removal of trees near Everton Lodge and the building of hangars on the Potton side of the field in the area at the end of Mill Lane. The Ministry wanted to purchase the land and to sow it with grass so that it would be ready for use in 1937. As a result there would be practically no market gardening land left in Everton.

Mr. Preedy suggested an alternative area, the bushy fields near Port Mahon Farm but this was rejected because of the proximity of the Everton Ridge and because the ground was very wet, similarly the land around Highfield Farm was considered to be too heavy a clay soil and there was no public water supply within easy reach.

Mr Pym was not completely against the idea of an airfield, in fact he considered that flying was the means of transport of the future and that less market gardening in the area might be an advantage. In his draft of an answer to the proposals he suggested that annual rents of 30 - 50 shillings per acre should be quoted giving a total rent of £ ?? and that Mr Preedy was to point out that the rents had been rebated by 25% because of the preceding three dry summers.

Whether Mr Pym had invoked the aid of his 'friends in the Air Ministry', as mentioned in the correspondence or not, a letter was received at the end of March which stated that, 'because of the hardship which would devolve on the inhabitants of Everton and Potton the scheme had been abandoned'.

With hindsight it seems strange that this scheme should have been stopped only to be replaced a few years later by the much more expensive building of Tempsford Airfield in the area suggested by Mr Preedy and rejected by the Ministry. One can only assume that in 1936 the 'good agricultural land' and 'need to feed the population' arguments prevailed.

N.Parry

## Notice Board

### **The Age of the Computer**

Even History Societies have to use them and now we have a volunteer who is willing to make a start on the massive task of recording our archive material. Before the work is begun, however we would like to replace the antiquated equipment we have with something a little more suited to the job. If anyone is about to upgrade their computer and is looking for a good home for their old machine, please give us the first option. Alternatively, is any member able to advise and guide us in the purchase of a second-hand machine. Please phone Norman Parry on 260728 if you can help.

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### **Another Appeal**

One of our filing cabinets is now in a very poor state and will shortly need to be replaced. In this age of the throwaway society, if anyone knows of a cabinet in reasonable condition which is about to be dumped, please let us know.

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### **Newsletter no 24**

Your articles, letters, comments and memories are always most welcome. Please pass items to Mary Leigh or any other committee member. The deadline for copy to be included in the next issue will be 1st March 1998.