

Dotton History Society



Newsletter Number 24 Spring 1998

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

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Acknowledgements:-

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,
Harper's Barber Shop, Burgoyne Middle School,
and Sandy Upper School.

Society News

At our **October** meeting we were taken on a journey, along the North Norfolk coast, with Mr H Brown as our tour guide. His selection of slides were an absolute delight, and must have been taken on all the sunniest days of the year. We looked at scenes both familiar and unfamiliar along the short stretch of coastline from Brancaster to Cromer. Mr Brown accompanied his slides with a talk which detailed all the most fascinating historical facts about each scene.

As usual the **November** meeting was preceded by the Annual General Meeting, at which the existing committee was returned en bloc. A nomination had been received for Mr Ken Lawson and as it had been decided to expand the committee to ten members if possible, he was welcomed as an additional member.

This meeting heralded the completion of the Society's first twenty years. To celebrate this event a special slide presentation had been compiled outlining the most important events of our first two decades, both within the Society and in the town.

Our **December** meeting generally takes a lighter tone, in preparation for the festive season, and this year we began with a slide presentation from the Rivers Authority which gave more information about the 1947 floods in the Fens. This was followed up with some Potton scenes from the archives and a more recent collection of Potton scenes and some happy reminders of our summer coach trip, supplied by Keith Lawrence.

In **January** we began our 21st Anniversary year with a programme devoted to the buildings of Potton and the men who created them. Using material from the archives, Peter Ibbett was able to demonstrate how the town has progressed from the earliest timber frame buildings to modern times when a local company has adapted the timber frame concept for use with modern methods. Details of listed buildings in the town showed the vast range of periods and styles, most of which can still be seen today.

Another important aspect of everyday living was investigated in **February**, when we looked at the way agriculture has developed in the area, from the earliest days when strip fields dominated the landscape under the manorial regime, through the creation of deer parks, the radical changes brought about by the two enclosures acts, and finally back again to today's open landscapes. Gerry Barker demonstrated some of the hand tools which were still in common use in the area when he came to the district and we ended with some archive film of more local tools and demonstrations of steam ploughing.

Transport provided the theme for our meeting in **March**, when we looked at the various means by which people and goods have come into and out of the town over the centuries. We looked at old maps for evidence of the earliest routes into the town. The coming of turnpikes provided some of the earliest documentary evidence of local routes and they continued until the arrival of the railway, thanks to Captain Peel. When first bicycles and then cars and buses came into use we found plenty of pictorial evidence in the Society's slide collection.

---ooOoo---

Although we are a history society, there are many skills needed for the successful running of the group which are in no way linked with those of a historian. One local resident has used his carpentry skills to convert an old kitchen cabinet into a unique purpose built storage system for our photographic collection. As the collection is mounted on a non-standard paper size, it has always proved impossible to buy a suitable cabinet for it's satisfactory storage with the inevitable result that the sheets are becoming ragged around the edges. We shall now be able to maintain this valuable section of our archives in good order for future generations. Our most grateful thanks go to that gentleman for giving up his time on our behalf and completing such a magnificent job.

Bringing such a large storage cabinet into use will mean that the area of the research rooms which has previously been used as a dumping ground for various bits and pieces will have to be tidied and organised. This exercise is long overdue and work has already begun on these improvements. A very large set of map drawers which was recently donated can also be brought into use as part of this re-organisation and will provide excellent flat storage facilities for our numerous larger maps and posters.

A project which has been ongoing throughout the summer and autumn of 1997 came to fruition in November with the publication of the revised edition of "Potton Manor - An Enigma". Since the publication of the first edition, ten years ago, many new facts have come to light and the author, Trevor Ball, was persuaded to rewrite the text to include this additional information. Nothing is ever as easy as it might seem, and before work could begin, help had to be found in scanning the original text onto computer disc. An appeal to our members fortunately proved successful and Chris Miles was able to supply the necessary equipment and knowledge to perform the task. The rising costs of printing caused a few more headaches among the committee, but finally the hard work paid off and five hundred lovely shiny new books were delivered in time for the AGM. Our thanks go to everyone who contributed to the success of this project, but especially to Trevor Ball, who not only wrote the text but co-ordinated all the other aspects of a major publication. Now we must concentrate on a sales drive to recoup some of the costs.

Two more of our past publications which have long been out of print are Volumes 1 and 2 of "Pictures of Potton". Advances in technology mean that it may be possible for these to be reproduced using laser-copying techniques, thereby making these much sought after books once more available. The samples we have received are of an extremely high quality and we are therefore investigating ways of raising sufficient funds to cover the initial printing costs of this project and hope to have further news for you shortly.

Recent additions to the collection

On his retirement from work, PHS member Ken Lawson decided to make a record of his life history and the Society is honoured to have been presented with a copy of his biography for the archives. As Ken has lived for most of his life in Potton, his memoirs are not only a personal record but also an account of everyday life in the town during the last 70 years. Let us hope that he has begun a trend which will be pursued by many more residents. I am including a few short extracts later in the newsletter which I hope will wet your appetites - the complete volume is available for members to borrow.

Methodist Chapel.

The last Methodist service was held at the Chapel Street building on 5 September 1974 and the chapel was subsequently sold to the Salvation Army. A safe containing documents relating to the chapel and its congregation was passed to the Trinity Methodist Church in Biggleswade, although Potton was not part of that circuit but was connected to Huntingdon.

Recent renovations to the Trinity Church have enabled the Trustees to research the history of their own congregation and building before their documents are finally deposited in the Bedford Record Office. Neil Alston, who has volunteered to carry out this work, has lent the items relating to Potton to our Society for study and eventual transfer to the C R O. A preliminary look at the documents shows that there is information on the original building in 1847, the building of the Minister's house in 1891 and the major rebuild of the Chapel in 1931. The names of many of the supporters of the Chapel appear and when the study is complete it will be possible to add another chapter to the history of Potton's religious communities.

As information becomes available details will be published in future newsletters.

Forthcoming Programme

May 28th

Potton for the Cup

There have been many great sporting moments recorded in Potton's history! Come and find out about the highlights in local sporting events. We would love to hear your sporting memories.

Jun 25th

From Charity to the Internet

An evening devoted to the history of education and schooling in Potton, from the earliest mention in the 16th century right up to current developments. Do you remember Miss Cave?

Jul 23rd

'I Never Knew That Was There!'

Come and join us in an evening ramble around the town, to find out more about Potton's hidden past.

* Early start ... watch for times*

Aug 27th

They Walked Our Streets

A selection of past inhabitants of the town who have found their way into our records. A chance to find out about famous Pottonians or tell us about those we have missed.

Sep 24th

The Mystery at the Manor

Potton Manor has provided a number of fascinating stories over the last two decades. Are there more? Trevor Ball will reveal all in this update to his research.

Oct 22nd

Musical Anniversary

Watch out for further details of our 21st Anniversary Dinner

No meeting in the Community Centre this month

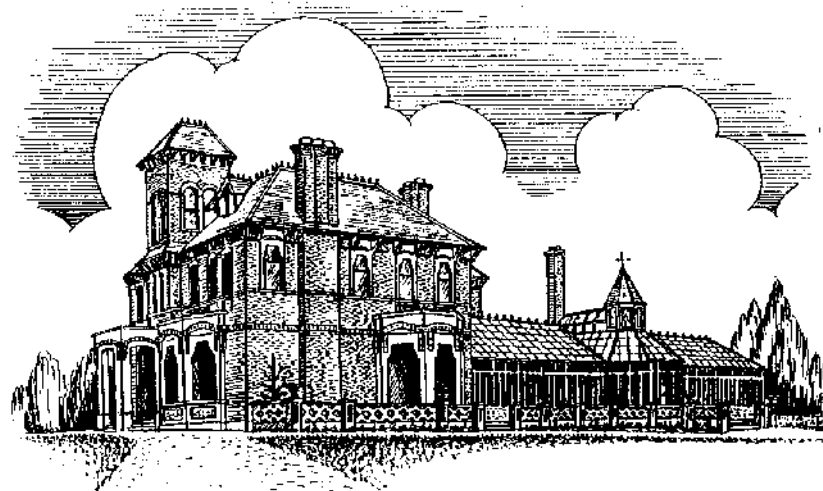
Nov 26th

Potton Celebrates

How has our town celebrated the important events of the past and what are we doing about that forthcoming event - the millennium.

Also includes AGM Note the 7.30pm start

NOW AVAILABLE



POTTON MANOR - an ENIGMA

Research Report No 4

by T.C.M.Ball

With fully revised text, additional information and new photographs.

On sale at only £3.00, you can obtain your copy from Tysoes Hardware Store or at members meetings or by post (please include 50p postage) from The Secretary, 8, Station Road, Biggleswade, SG18 8AL.

The Photographic Collection

Photographs have always constituted an important part of our archive collection and in the loving hands of Patricia Yates (ably assisted by Trevor Ball), the majority have been carefully mounted and captioned. This task involves a great deal more than would at first seem obvious, as in many cases research is needed to fully identify the content of each picture. At the last count, the number of mounted photographs had reached 5539, mounted on 2017 pages.

This thorough preparation has meant that when the Society is called upon to provide a display, it is merely necessary to decide upon the appropriate topics and then to select mounted sheets from the folders. From the beginning the sheets were divided into various subjects, but as the collection grew many of the groupings have become over-large, requiring further sub-division. I am ashamed to say that also, after sheets have been used for an exhibition, they have frequently not been returned to their correct place in the file. All this has meant the whole collection needed taking firmly in hand and completely sorting and re-classifying.

Our prayers were answered and Mrs Yates came to our rescue. Much of her spare time throughout the winter has been spent working on our behalf to bring things back into good order. All the books of photos have been reduced to a manageable size and re-labelled and the sheets have been numbered so that they can easily be filed in the correct place in future. Now the collection can be put away in the new cabinet and hopefully will continue to expand in years to come.

Our somewhat smaller collection of slides is undergoing a similar process of reorganisation and indexing, thanks to George and Beryl Howe. This collection is much used at our members meetings and also by the many members who give talks to other organisations throughout the year.

Now for the bad news!! Sadly our good fairy is abandoning us and we must find a new person or team to take care of new additions to the photographic collection. Boo Matthews has volunteered to co-ordinate the operation in future with assistance from Ken Lawson. If there is anyone who would like to become part of the new team, please get in touch at the earliest opportunity.



As well as collecting old photographs the Society has a policy of recording any changes that are currently taking place in the town and here too we are needing your assistance. After many years as official photographic recorder, Trevor Ball has decided to hang up his camera. We hope to find a small band of keen photographers to step into his shoes and each take an area of the town to watch over and record when necessary. Once again, volunteers please get in touch as soon as possible

The Life and Times of an Ordinary Pottonian

My schooling carried on in a normal way until war was declared on 3 September 1939. I remember the day (Sunday) very well indeed. My mother had a skin complaint (eczema) which meant that she could not do the weekly washing, so her sister, Mercy did it for her. She lived in a council house in Sheffield Close, and one of my Sunday jobs was to take the dirty washing to her. She met me at her doorway, very upset, and told me to get home as fast as I could because we had just declared war on Germany and Hitler was sending his bombers over straight away. I believe I must have broken the world record going home, fully expecting to see masses of enemy aircraft coming over Potton, with me as the main target.

Schooling obviously was affected, with evacuees coming from London, and exercises were carried out in case of air attacks. Gas masks were issued and had to be carried at all times. Anti-blast walls were erected and windows were taped to prevent them from shattering. Black-outs were strictly enforced, and everything seemed unreal. We lived very close to the railway, and my father was a plate-layer - he used to worry about the track being damaged by bombs. I remember one night, when we were sitting at home listening to the nine o' clock news, he shouted "quick, get under the table!". The 9.15pm train from Bletchley to Cambridge was due, and we heard the sound of German planes overhead (they had an irregular engine beat). The next thing we heard was the whistling of bombs seemingly coming in our direction.

They actually fell about a mile away at Deepdale, where two cottages were demolished by them. Dad had to go out and check for any damage to the track, but all was well with it. Luckily no one was hurt this time. The next day the area was crowded with people looking for remnants of the bomb for souvenir. I had a large piece of metal which I kept for many years.

We had many other scares, and there was a very similar case when some bombs fell at Fred Tear's farm along Gamlingay Road, where several horses were killed or injured. The farmhouse had most of the windows shattered, and as I was working for Fennemores, the local painter and decorator at this time, I had to go and help with the repairs. It seemed that the bombs were again intended for the Cambridge bound train, and I reckon that the Germans were off target, thank goodness.

London was being heavily bombed nearly every night, and we could clearly see the reflection in the sky of the massive fires that were burning there. Now and again we could see aircraft caught in the glare of the search-lights, but we were not to see any shot down in this area. My mum and dad were always very worried as I recall, but to me and my friends it was all a great adventure, although we really didn't understand what was going on. I think our main worry was that sweets were rationed and in short supply.



There were many troop-trains going past our house, and the most vivid recollection I have is when the Dunkirk evacuation resulted in many such trains stopping just outside the station. Within a few minutes it seemed that the whole of Potton turned up bringing tea and refreshments for the weary troops....

When I look back in time, I realise how many changes there have been in the last sixty years, both in myself and the world in general. Firstly the changes in my house itself. It was built in the 1880s specially for the personnel of the railways. There are four dwellings in a row, very solidly built of brick, the outside walls being some eighteen inches thick. The postal address at one time was simply known as the Railway Cottages. The house then consisted of two rooms downstairs and three bedrooms with an outside toilet. The main room downstairs faced the railway and consisted of a large sink, which was used for all purposes, and a built in brick copper which was used for boiling water for baths, wash-days, and at Christmas time, I remember, to boil the Xmas puddings.

For heating and cooking there was a large black grate consisting of an oven and open fire, which needed stoking up at regular intervals. In the corner next to it was a built in cupboard which reached right up to the ceiling. It consisted of three large drawers and shelves up to the top. In the drawers my mother stored, as I recall, all the spare bed linen, table cloths and clothing. On the shelves were stored cups, saucers, plates, glasses and other bits and pieces. On the very top shelf of all, I remember my dad kept a pot of money which he had collected from his work-mates for trade union dues. He had to step on a chair to reach it - it was so high up. Next to the kitchen sink was a large concrete slab, under which dad had built a large cupboard in which was stored saucepans and the like. Dad also kept his tools in it, including a hobbin foot, which he used to mend all our shoes. His only tools were a hammer, a screwdriver, a pair of pincers and a saw, and he could do most minor jobs with them. To bore a hole in piece of wood, he would put the poker in the fire for a while, then push the poker through the wood - and it worked!

The lighting consisted of an oil lamp in the living room and candles for the rest of the house. The front room, through which we had to pass to go to the bedrooms, consisted of just a fireplace, and as it faces north was very cold in the winter, but lovely and cool in the summertime.

The bedrooms consisted of one very large room with a box room, one medium sized room and one very small room. All the windows in the house were of the sash cord type, and they had to be wedged so as to stop them rattling in the slightest breeze. All the bedrooms had fireplaces built in, but these were only used when someone was ill.

I was about seven or eight years old when we first 'saw the light'. Yes, the railway company has the 'ELECTRICS' installed with a 'money in the slot' meter, and a new era begun. What would we do without this, now taken for granted, power? Before this, we had a battery radio, which we had to keep getting charged up at the shop run by the Co-op bicycle men - now we had a COSSOR electric radio on easy payments, installed on a specially built shelf. We had an electric cooker and kettle instead of the range, and an electric iron instead of the one seemingly always warming on the fire place.

The power was provided by the meter installed in the front room, which had to be fed with one shilling (5p) coins regularly: no coins - no power. Many was the time when you were listening to your favourite programme (in my case Dick Barton - Special Agent), or reading a book, when the light/power would go off and you would be left groping for the slot to insert the coin. Every so often this meter would be emptied by the collectors, and we would be given so much discount back. My mother kept these coins in a jug, handy and ready for feeding the machine.

Ken Lawson

Contact any committee member if you would like to join the waiting list for the complete biography. - Ed.

The 1901 Census..

The following was received from John Wym, a contributor to GenBrit, an Internet genealogical forum and as we all have a few more years to wait before we can access the 1901 census I thought folks might be interested in this brief summary. It was originally published in a well known UK daily paper in Jun. 1903. From the context I think it only refers to England.

Norman Parry

Women and Marriage, Strange Facts in New Census Summary

The newly-issued summary tables of the census of 1901 are full of interesting details about the prospects and conditions of women's life. Marriage, treated statistically, reveals some strange facts. It is scarcely credible, for instance, that there are thirty girls of fifteen years and 162 of sixteen married in England. Roughly, to every six married people throughout the country there are eleven unmarried and one widowed. There are more than two widows for every widower.

Very young husbands prefer wives older than themselves. One husband of fifteen has married a wife of seventeen, and a lad of seventeen has married a wife of thirty-five. A lad of eighteen has a wife of fifty, and one of twenty has a wife aged sixty-five. But by the time they reach twenty they prefer as a whole to have wives about their own age. Thus we find that over eight hundred thousand husbands and wives between the ages of twenty-one and thirty are practically of the same age, or come in the same age groups.

At the time the census was taken one wife out of fourteen was away from her husband. This, however, in many cases means no more than that the husband was absent from home for business or other reasons. There are no fewer than six wives and eight widows who are centenarians, while ten husbands and thirty-two widowers have also passed their hundred years.

There are over a million more women than men in England to-day, ignoring young children altogether and reckoning only those old enough to earn their own living. This makes female labour to some extent a necessity. For every twenty-nine unmarried women over ten years old who do no work outside their own homes thirty-two earn their living. Among married women one out of seven earns her bread apart from her husband.

A comparison between these returns of women's employments in 1901 and the statistics given in the census returns of fifty years before show a striking change. In 1851 there was practically no general occupation open for women of the middle class except teaching. Three hundred, it is true, were druggists, and 106 were engaged in literature. Now practically the whole range of employment outside the Army, the Navy, and the law is open to both sexes alike. Seven thousand women now work as chemists; there are nearly three hundred women undertakers; four thousand work as butchers, and three are slaughter-women. Fifty-eight of them are bill discounters, twelve are shepherds, and one the feminine equivalent of a woodman.

Strong Women

Not alone in more peaceful trades, but in those eminently calling for physical strength women have flocked in. No women work underground in the mines, but 6000 work at the pit heads. Three hundred of these are coke burners and patent fuel makers. Over sixty thousand work in the heavy metal trades, of whom some hundreds are blacksmiths and strikers. The manufacture of jewellery and delicate instruments employs nearly twenty thousand more. But the main employments of women still continue to be domestic service and mill work. There are 1,700,000 domestic servants of various kinds, of whom 300,000 are charwomen and washerwomen.

There is a little army of bargewomen. Over 400 are in the merchant service on the deep seas. Women commercial travellers now number 382. Two are accountants, eighty-six are auctioneers, and several hundreds are employed on railways as clerks, pointswomen, or station attendants.

It is in employments for educated women that the chief advances have been made. There are nearly 300,000 women now employed in professional work, mainly still as teachers. There are 352 women doctors or dentists; 64,000 care for the sick; and nearly 5,000 act as religious teachers, excluding over 6,000 Catholic nuns and sisters. Fifty years ago the Government employed about 2,000 women; now it engages 26,000.

In 1851 there were 106 women engaged in literature and science; now there are within a few of 2,000. For every one employed in the fine arts then nine are now, and photography, the handmaiden of art, gives bread to 3,851 women. There are 6,443 actresses, and nearly a thousand show women.

The darker side

There is tragedy behind the woman worker, and one table shows its depth - the list of former occupations of workhouse inmates. Seventy-seven thousand women are in our workhouses to-day, of whom 45,000 formerly earned their own living in some definite employment. One woman out of every three of these was once a domestic servant. Does this explain the deep aversion of many poor women to domestic service? Nearly 13,000 of these workhouse inmates were once charwomen or laundresses. Four of them were once artists, four photographers; 162 worked as women teachers, and no fewer than 624 were once sick nurses. No woman author yet seems to have come to the workhouse.

There is not a single actress or one woman writer among the 2,844 women in the prisons to-day. No women teachers are in prison, although twelve men are, and no women doctors, though sixteen male doctors are incarcerated. Another painful section of these returns relates to child labour. Seventy thousand girls and 138,000 boys under fourteen now earn their living. Two-sevenths of the girls are employed in cotton mills, and one-third as domestic servants. Of girls of ten at work one toils as an optician, one as a general shopkeeper, eight as dressmakers, and two as dealers. In all, 232 girls of ten are at work, mainly in domestic service.

How others see us.

Amongst correspondence from a fellow researcher in Australia was information on a visit made to Britain in the 1980s by one of her relatives who was looking into the background of her ancestors. The family were in Sutton from 1799 and later generations moved into Potton and Biggleswade.

"I felt it was very important to visit Potton and Biggleswade, in Bedfordshire to see what these villages were like and if they still possessed any clues to the nineteenth century lifestyle. Driving into Biggleswade I found the similarity to the immediate countryside of Northam, where my grand-mother lived in Western Australia, very ironical. In fact of all my touring in the North of England this farming country near Biggleswade could be the only scenery that was comparable to any I'd seen in Western Australia. Biggleswade itself - well, I found it to be quite an unlovely place. What must have been old character styled buildings have now been replaced by modern, dull, purpose-built constructions. There seemed to be no atmosphere, even the modern buildings were extremely mediocre many of the shops lay vacant with 'to let' signs hanging in the windows interrupting their emptiness. An architectural or social historian would find Biggleswade of little excitement, like me it would leave them empty and disappointed. A small book by G.C. Peck tells of a fire on 20th. June 1785 that destroyed 185 buildings. They were replaced hastily and without style due to lack of funds. This could account for the twentieth century dullness.

Visiting Potton I was elated at the distinct contrast to Biggleswade. It is a very picturesque village. I can well imagine what a country market town would have been like. The few modern buildings are quite unobtrusive and merge well into the original Tudor type buildings, still possessing their thatched roofs. The village is small containing only three thousand people. Until 1961 it was for a century 2/3 rds the size. To me Potton portrays a sense of community.

In Memory of Frederick Spriggs

As a result of my article in the Autumn 97 newsletter, a further communication from Cecil Spriggs says "Enclosed is Memorial Card and extract from local newspaper. You will see from the photo that Fred is the one in the booklet. His father was Robert Harry Spriggs who died on May 9th 1931."

The cutting reads as follows:-

Death of Pte. Fred Spriggs, of Everton

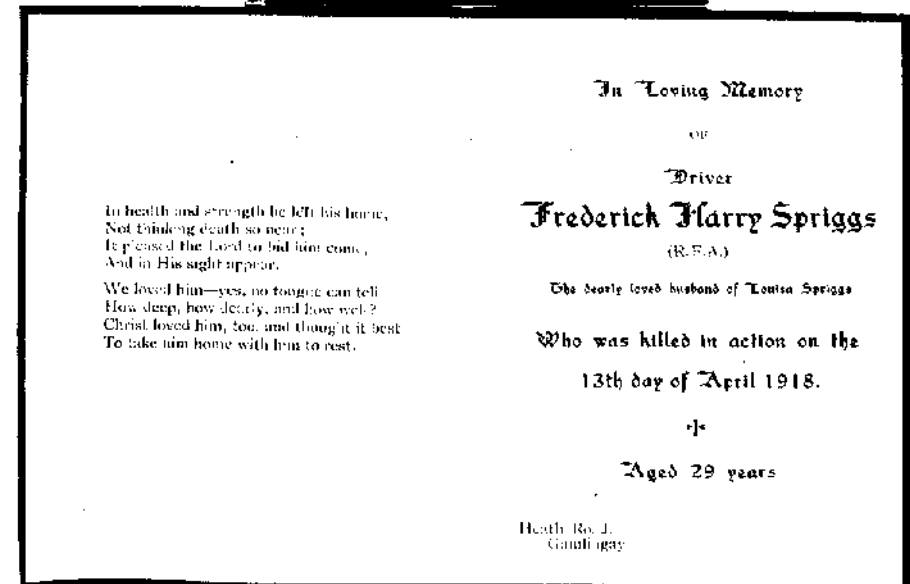
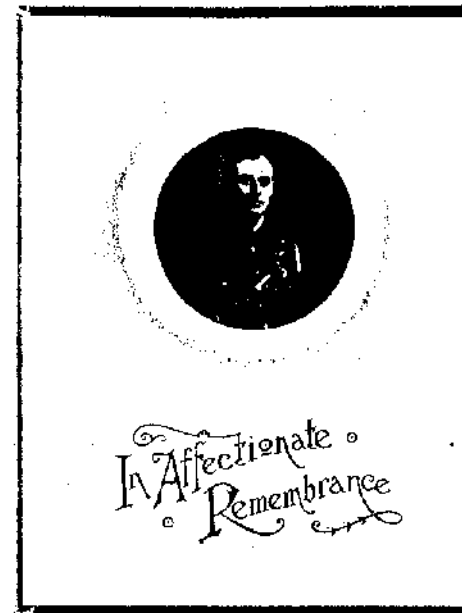
With deep regret the members of the Everton Wesleyan Chapel heard on Saturday that Pte. Fred Spriggs had made the "supreme sacrifice" in the fighting on the Western Front; for, although belonging to Potton he was frequently one of the congregation (Mrs Spriggs was organist for many years before her marriage) and for several years previous to joining-up he acted as instructor and conductor for the anniversary and other musical festivals. The deepest sympathy is felt for Mrs Spriggs, who now resides at Heath Road.

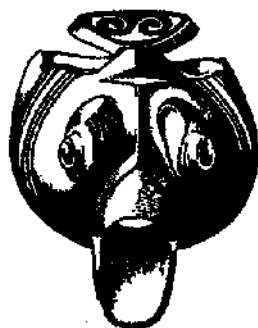
The following letter has been received from his Captain :-
"Dear Mrs Spriggs, - I have to tell you the sad fact that Gunner Spriggs was killed in action on the 13th April in France, between Neuve Eglise and Dranoutre. We were very heavily shelled when firing on the attacking enemy. Gnr Spriggs stuck to his guns with great courage. He was a soldier and a fine fellow, and his death is a loss to us all. We lost many men in the battle on this unlucky day. I sympathise with you deeply in your great loss. - Yours sincerely,

S.V. Atkinson, Captain, R.F.A."

Mr Fred Spriggs will be greatly missed in a wide district. He was of a genial and kind disposition and ready to assist and help anyone. His musical services were highly appreciated in the Wesleyan Chapels at Potton and at the Heath.

The memorial card has a photo of Fred Spriggs on the front and is quite clearly the man in our photo from the Autumn issue.





Bedfordshire Archaeological Council

Bridges of Bedfordshire

ISBN 0 9531531 0 X

by

Angela Simco & Peter M^cKeague

Repairs carried out to Bedfordshire's historic bridges between 1982 and 1994 were accompanied by detailed historical research and archaeological recording. This enabled the county's bridges to be considered as a group of monuments; allowing investigation and analysis of the effects of local topography, maintenance liabilities, transport needs, the availability of raw materials and the influence of wider architectural developments on local bridge construction.

A4 Paperback 128 pages 139 b/w photographs and drawings.
Price £14.50 inc. postage.

Available from:
The Sales Officer,
Bedfordshire Archaeological Council,
14 Glebe Avenue, Flitwick, Bedford, MK45 1HS

Notice Board

Volunteers Please

Another reminder that we are looking for helpers on the photographic front. We need your skills both as photographers and with the mounting and captioning of our photographic collection. You can speak to any committee member to find out more.

--oo0oo--

Bedfordshire Local History Association

The Annual General Meeting will be held on Saturday 16th May, commencing at 14.15. The meeting takes place in the crypt of St Mary's Church, Woburn and will be followed by a talk on 'Code Breaking at Bletchley Park'. Any of our members are welcome to attend.

--oo0oo--

Newsletter no 25

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 September 1998.