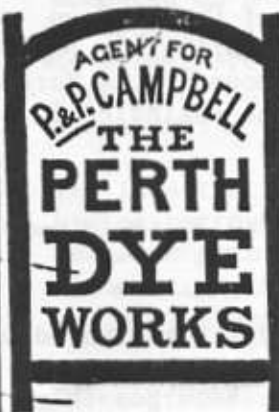


POTTON HISTORY SOCIETY

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Newsletter No. 7

OBSERVATIONS

1985 will, no doubt, be remembered as 'the year of publications' in the annuals of Potton History Society.

'Pictures of Potton, Vol.2' was duly launched on July 13th. Mr.F.G.Simms, former Chairman of Potton Town Council, who had written the Foreword during his period of office, performed the opening ceremony in the Market Square. After this event, interest was rekindled in our previous work.

Sales to date (13.2. 86):

'Pictures of Potton, Vol.1'	1,313 (sold out)
'The Great Fire of 1783'	554
'Pictures of Potton, Vol.2'	845

Copies have been sent to relations and friends world-wide.

Such successful results would not have been possible without the help of the Committee and Society members. Mrs.D.Wilkins and Mr.& Mrs.M.Ibbett offered to sell books in their Market Square shops, namely F.T.Cox (until November 1st) and Tysoe and Son. This generous action has kept the books in the public's eye.

The History of Potton Consolidated Charities, which has been a lengthy project, was eventually issued on November 22nd. Printing costs have been subsidized by the Charity Trustees, who had requested that the account be written. I would like to record my appreciation of the support given to me by the Trustees and my grateful thanks for the proposal that the book be dedicated to Ralph Yates. All publications will continue to be available from Tysoe's and 31a Royston Street, Potton.

Under the Copyright Act of 1911, copies of our books have been sent to the British Library, the University Libraries of Oxford and Cambridge, the National Libraries of Scotland and Wales and the Library of Trinity College, Dublin. A truly impressive list!

Patricia R.Yates.

MIGRATION

Nowadays, few of us can expect to remain in the same location for the whole of our life. Migration, to and from other parts of the country, and even overseas, is accepted as normal. Is this a modern phenomena following on from the 19th and 20th century improvements in transport or were there always adventurous men and women who thought nothing of moving in order to improve their economic situation?

The idea that the rural inhabitant rarely moved outside his or her own parish has been largely discredited by research into Census Enumerators' Returns and earlier documents such as parish registers, apprentice records and ecclesiastical deposition books.

The registers for Potton in the period up to 1812 show that there was considerable movement of people. If the parishes immediately adjacent to Potton are excluded, there are still 120 entries for people from other parts of Bedfordshire, 46 from Cambridgeshire, and 34 from Huntingdonshire. From farther afield there are single mentions of Shropshire (1752), Worcestershire (1724), Dorset (1799) and Dublin (1748). From the London area there are 30 entries, the earliest being in 1710.

What must be remembered is, that prior to 1753, there was no requirement for place of origin to be quoted in register entries, so that some of the people, whose names are mentioned, are very likely to have originated elsewhere. To some extent this is confirmed by a study of the names which occur in the register. Before 1812, about 1,500 surnames appear in the records. Of these, over a quarter have only one or two entries, and even allowing for the fact that there was no standardised spelling, many of these do not have a local origin. More than half of these entries refer to marriages. A possible explanation is that they were servants or workers living in Potton for a limited period before settling elsewhere.

Entries in the burial and baptism registers are more of a puzzle. Why was Mary, the wife of Humphrey Clare, buried in Potton, when the family name does not appear anywhere else? Similarly, why was Charles, son of Robert and Elizabeth Bentham, baptised in Potton? No other entries refer to the same name. There are many other instances of a similar nature.

Any study of migration becomes much easier with the advent of Census returns in the 19th century. In 1851 the population of Potton was just under 2,000. Of these, 68% had been born here, 24.5% came from within the three counties of Beds., Cambs. and Hunts., but it is the remaining 141 people who are the most interesting. One had been born in Ceylon, one in Germany, two in Scotland, two in Ireland and one in Wales. Thirty-three of the pre 1947 English counties are recorded in the birthplaces of the remaining 127 people. The discrepancy in the figures above is because there were seven people who didn't know where they were born!!

For anyone wishing to study migration in and out of Potton, I would suggest that the 4 Census Returns, held by the Society, offer an ideal opportunity for the study of a topic which has not figured very prominently in our work to date.

N.J.Parry

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A VOICE FROM THE PAST

Potton House School, now the Post Office and former D.I.Y. shop, catered for boarding and day boys. Trade Directories provide the following information:

PRINCIPALS

1839	Philip Chapman
1850	John Claydon
1869	James Holme
1876	F.Lowe
1877	A.Norris

A letter from a former pupil has recently come to hand and provides interesting reading.

Wareham House,
Dorchester,
Dorset.
Oct. 24th 1911

Mr.F.B.Saville

Dear Sir,

I received the sample of plants and they are a good lot of plants. I will take 10,000 now and I shall want some more a little later on. I am sending you a cheque for 30/- (£1.50). If the other sorts are smaller, then I don't mind....send them off as soon as you can. I think I could sell thousands. If you could send me a list of what sorts you have, there is none about here, and when people see mine, I know they will want some.

You will pardon me when I tell you who I am. Well, I was born in Gamlingay, two miles from Potton. I used to walk to Potton School. Mr. Homes (Holme) kept the school next to Bond Smith's (Fine Fare).. John Fane, Butcher, was with my Aunt Paine (12 Sun Street) until she retired and went to live in Sandy..

Mr. Homes told me that I was one of the worst scholars he ever had. Well, I got on well in the world, really as well as any of them. I came to Dorchester with under a Sovereign in my pocket and worked myself up until I became Jubilee Mayor of the County Town, and once since. I wrote and told Mr.Homes I was Mayor, and sent him an invitation to my banquet. He was a Wine Merchant then, I think, in Saffron Walden. He wrote back and said it could never be for I was the dullest scholar in the school. Never mind. If he has done as well as I have, I don't mind. He married Miss Strickland, the Brewers daughter.... do the best with my order and I shall be thankful to you.

Yours faithfully, James Paine.

According to Dorset's County Archivist, James Paine was elected Mayor on November 9th 1895 and re-elected the following year. He attended Council meetings from November 10th 1890 to October 4th 1919, serving as a Councillor and later as Alderman. Unfortunately, no other information was given. We still do not know why James went to Dorchester nor how he became one of the town's leading citizens.

FAMILY HISTORY - THE ROBARTS, continued

Emery Robarts, boot and shoe maker, wife Martha and children, William and Emma, left for Natal on Sept. 22nd 1849. Transcripts of several letters connected with the family have been received from their descendant, William Robarts, of Zululand.

Brother James, writing from Potton on May 6th 1850, expressed interest in the cost of boots and shoes, and in the price of leather. Apparently, the Natal News had been consulted, without success, for such information.

Thomas Balfe, clock and watch maker, had promised to keep a diary of local activities, but a recent event was worthy of mention. Respectable townfolk, wishing to 'kick G.Smith and Lloyd out of office as Churchwardens' had signed a memorial requesting the appointment of Mr. Carrington. Although G.Smith was the Rev.Bidwell's warden, he decided to resign as he had no wish to serve with Mr. Carrington. No doubt, much discussion ensued!

Two years later a request was made for leather and Emery's father had sent off a supply as a gift. More could be dispatched on the receipt of money, '30/- or 50/- a piece!'. The package had been sent on a steamer, the 'Sir Robert Peel'. It was suggested that if ever Emery was short of work he could go about 'hawking Stay Laces, Pins, Needles- perhaps a flourishing trade'.

By June 1854, letters appear to have been lost and the exchange of news, difficult. As gold has been found in Natal, James wonders if Emery has become involved. 'You will recollect digging is back aching work, it would not suit me. But the larger the nuggets, the easier the work, at least, the most pleasant'. Reference is also made to Mrs. Robarts' poor health. (Her Christian name is never mentioned!)

Martha, writing to a friend (late 1854) states that 'Mr.Robarts has had a very nice little house erected for me to live in the country, about 2½ miles from Durban. He rides out every evening after business hours.' The garden contained orange, lemon and banana trees and 100 pineapple plants. A request was made for flower seeds.

Son William is mentioned with great pride. 'He can read very well and write a little bit. As we are living in the country, he is not able to attend school, so he spends an hour or two in the day over his books.'

Martha admitted that her health was poor. She had been told by her Doctor, who had found her ironing, that if she 'meddled' with such work, he could not cure her.

In a letter to niece Emma, dated March 1855, a request was made for a box of old clothes, shawls, ribbons or 'anything in the drapery line, even a shirt for your uncle'. Such items, apparently, were very costly.

Although Martha felt stronger, a 'bad cough' and 'difficulty in breathing' continued. William had become nurse to his sick mother, and 'with his sleeves turned up', provided hot flannels for one or two hours at a time, 'never complaining, although it might be in his play hours.' He would say, when asked if he were tired, 'when you are easy Mother, I shall be glad to play.'

Domestic help cost 15 shillings a month, plus board. A Kaffir had to be kept to make up the fire, wash dishes etc. Although her husband wished her to have extra help, she declined, not wishing to increase expenses. Emery had worked hard to keep up the payments on his business, and was much respected.

Daughter Emma, whom Martha had referred to as being very pretty, did not survive the sea journey. Son, Walter James, born in 1850, only lived three months. Martha, herself, died of Tuberculosis in 1855.

William, aged seven at the time of his mother's death, lived to achieve much success as a Surveyor and Architect, becoming City Engineer in Durban. He was also Mayor of this city. Several of his designed buildings have been declared National Monuments.

A happy end to such a sad story.

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100 - NOT OUT

The ninth programme of monthly meetings is now underway, with the 100th meeting due on April 24th. The speaker will be Mr.M.Ware from the National Motor Museum, Beaulieu. Peter Ibbett has been Programme Secretary since the formation of the society, and he looks back on his unbeaten century of local history meetings.

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When I attended the first committee meeting of the newly formed Potton History Society in October 1977, I had no idea that I was starting on a decade of programme organising! I should have realised that when I suggested our new society would need a Programme Secretary, that I would be appointed. I was uncertain whether I had the skills to do an unfamiliar task, but set to work to fulfil my new role. I am sure that none of us, on that Autumn evening, could have predicted the success we have achieved.

I have been taken to task from time to time for stating that the Programme Secretary has an easy task. Surely, the smooth running of our meetings must involve a great deal of time and effort? In fact, few Programme Secretaries could have had an easier hundred evenings to organise. Local History speakers seem to be ever abundant. The main difficulty is to make a selection for the coming year, rather than having to spend time hunting for contributors. In our eight years to date, I have had only a handful of refusals, mainly due to a speaker moving or having too much work to do. Our speakers are ever reliable, and only one meeting has been altered due to impossible winter travel conditions. Only three of our hundred meetings have had to be rearranged at short notice, and in only one of those cases did we consider ourselves let down. For a programme organised one year in advance, there are far fewer problems than a Programme Secretary has a right to expect!

The main nightmares that Programme Secretaries suffer from are speakers or audiences failing to arrive! I have yet to face this situation. We could always cope with the non-arrival of a speaker by drawing on the resources of

our active society members. Indeed, another factor that has impressed me over the years, is the contribution we have made to our own programmes. In fact, 43 of our first 100 meetings have been taken by committee members, either as individuals or as a group. Our programme has maintained a blend of society generated talks, together with the contributions of guest speakers, both on topics specific to Potton, and on those of general interest. No-one could have a more helpful committee, providing both ideas and contributions!

The success of our next 100 meetings will depend on the continued efforts of an active co-ordinated committee. With the support of the growing population of Potton, excellent local history programmes will be provided.

Peter Ibbett, February '86

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A VISIT TO REMEMBER - February 25th 1978

After some correspondence between the Society's Secretary and the Solicitor of the late Eva Pokorova, permission was eventually obtained for Norman Parry and I to take photographs of the interior and exterior of Potton Manor.

Before entering the grounds, via the locked main gates, we were asked to sign a document stating that the photographs obtained would be for the sole use of the Society, and that the Solicitor be provided with a copy of each picture. No information must be given to journalists, and what we were about to see was to be regarded as confidential until the estate had been dealt with.

This event added to the number of 'odd things' I had already heard from local people about the 'goings on' at The Manor after the war. I knew that the house had a lovely ballroom as dances had been held there in the past. But, after the war, The Manor was sealed off, and much secret activity had taken place. All this, however, did not prepare me for what I was about to see.

On entering the building, it was clear that it had been broken into, and much valuable material stolen. The place was in a shambles!

The first surprise was in the hall, for on the wall was a picture of the pre-war Mercedes team, signed by each of the drivers. I wonder where it is now? Off the hall was a sitting room containing a thread-bare suite, and little else, apart from a stack of Motor Sport magazines, going back to the 1950's.

A second surprise was in the kitchen, for it had been turned into a laboratory, with bottles of chemicals everywhere, even in the pantry and scullery. Where cooking was done, I never found out, nor saw an alternative area.

Upstairs, there was Eva Pokorova's bedroom, where she seemed to have lived all the time. Newspapers covered the bed. Other rooms had been turned into a drawing-office, with racks full of blue-prints. The bathroom was a dark-room and a further laboratory contained optical and electrical equipment. At the top of the house, the rooms of the former servants were empty.

However, the greatest surprise was downstairs in the ballroom, or what was left of it! I could not believe my eyes as it was full of heavy equipment. In the centre was a huge structure, topped by a glass dome and a fan. Around the room were work benches, parts of cars and a sports car body and chassis, with its small engine at the rear. The windows were shuttered, but in the gloom glimpses of the ballroom could still be seen in the lovely ceiling, wall mirrors and decorated cornices. But the contents of the room were the incredible part. For what purpose had all this machinery been assembled? Outside, in the Conservatory, were two Champion cars, one of which had been seen around Potton some years before.

The whole visit was an experience which I shall never forget. Many questions were raised. What was it all for? What is the story behind what we had seen?

Thanks to Mr. Michael Ware of the National Motor Museum, where much material was deposited before the house was demolished, the story behind the cars of Potton Manor has been pieced together, and it is hard to believe that it is true, and not a 'James Bond' story.

The photographs taken on our visit will form part of the display at Burgoyne School on April 24th 1986.

T.C.M. Ball

Reference: Thoroughbred and Classic Cars, May 1985
Potton History Society Archives.

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POTTON OCCUPATIONS - 1881 - 1884

In my recent talk, 'Potton in 1885', (November 1985), I presented the results of some research into the changes of occupation in the town over the last 100 years. Members may be interested in some of the figures I uncovered in looking at three historical sources:-

- a. 1881 Census Returns for Potton
- b. 1885 Trade Directory for Potton
- c. 1984 P.O. 'Yellow Pages' for Bedford.

<u>Type</u>	<u>1984</u>		<u>1885</u>		<u>1881</u>	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<u>Land</u>	15	16	34	27	333	51
<u>Leisure</u>	14	15	32	26	23	4
<u>Manufacture</u>	15	16	2	1	18	3
<u>Self Employed</u>	15	16	13	10	167	25
<u>Traders</u>	23	24	39	32	101	15
<u>Transport</u>	14	15	4	3	16	2

The following points are some that arose from the table:-

1. Occupation types are my own classification. 'Leisure' covers Inns, Pubs, Brewers etc.
2. The 1881 census covers all those in residence at the time, but the 1885 and 1984 figures come from commercial sources, and may not be comprehensive.
3. The 1881 figures are for the 42% who gave occupations. 58% of the inhabitants were children, scholars or housewives.
4. Figures do not take into account the contribution of wives.
5. Comparisons are not easy to make!

Conclusions

The decline in land workers is confirmed with a fall from over half the working male population in 1881. A decline in public houses and in small traders has been replaced by a rise in small manufacturing units and car services and garages. Figures can be presented to give different viewpoints, but they seem to confirm some of the impressions that we have of the past. In future newsletter articles I hope to look in more detail at some of the implications of the figures in the table.

Meanwhile, if members have old Telephone Directories or 'Yellow Pages' from the last few decades, they would be a valuable source of information about changes in Potton's commercial life.

Peter Ibbett, Feb. 1986

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<p>It is interesting to note that, to date, 2,564 photographs have been mounted and indexed under approximately 40 headings and sub-sections. Thus, many aspects of local life, both past and present, are being preserved for posterity.</p>
