

# POTTON HISTORY SOCIETY

OLD CALABAR Poultry, Chicken, & Game Meats.

## POTTON AND DISTRICT HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY

THE SIXTH

### Annual Show

Of Flowers, Fruit, Vegetables,  
Butter, Eggs & Honey, Poultry,  
Pigeons, Cage Birds, Rabbits,  
and Cats.

will be held

On Thursday, August 15th, 1912  
in the Grounds of

**MANOR PARK, POTTON,**

By kind permission of F. Gouldthorpe Smith, Esq

All Classes are open to residents within an 8 mile radius of Potton  
and all members' exhibits are free of entry fees. In addition to  
the ordinary prize list

**2 Handsome Silver Cups, & Silver Medals**

will be awarded.

Special Engagement of the  
**BEDFORD SILVER PRIZE BAND.**

Prices of Admission:

2 to 4 o'clock, 1/- 4 to 6, 6d. After 6, 3d.

Children under 12 half-price.

*All Prizes will be paid on Friday, August 23rd  
at the Parish Room, from 8 to 9 p.m.*

R. Elphick, Printer, Potton.

**Old Calabar**

OLD CALABAR Bird Seeds of all descriptions.

NEWSLETTER NO. 8

### POTTON MARKET SQUARE - A NEW EDITION

The human race, we are led to believe, is naturally curious about its environment. As a teacher I make regular use of this assumption in motivating pupils.

A local History Course at Gamlingay Village College in the mid '70's brought me into my first real contact with local history documents of my own town. My curiosity was aroused not only because I discovered that others had lived their lives out in 'my' town but because the documents began to 'beg' for analysis. I could find out more about the Market Square on which I was born by analysing census returns and trade directories. At once I realised that I had a few pieces of a jig-saw that I might be able to piece together and even contribute a few new ones.

With the formation of Potton History Society in the Autumn of 1977 I came into contact with others with active historical minds and knowledge of events and documents I had not yet come across.

Having been brought up in one of the Square shops I began to take an interest in how shops had changed on the Square. Eventually I had enough material to produce the first edition of 'Potton Market Square' in 1981. This was 40 sides of A4 paper produced on my own typewriter and on school duplicating equipment. Due to the friendly co-operation of a resources technician I only had to pay for the cost of materials. We sold 200 copies at 50p each over a period of 3 years and made a small profit. The first edition may have been imperfect in quality of printing, but it aroused interest, prompted others to contribute new material and started the Society's highly successful set of publications.

Having exhausted the first edition I set myself the task of producing a second edition which was to update both quality of production and content.

The demands of my teaching career and my young family have made progress towards reprinting much slower than I had originally hoped, but finally in January 1987 Lion Press of Sandy printed 500 copies of a 48 page A5 booklet at a unit cost of under one pound. The cost of printing has been borne by the Potton History Trust Fund with money accumulated from the sales of recent publications.

Both time and costs have been reduced by the use of a school computer which has made the process of typing the text much simpler. Hiring a typist is expensive and instructions can be misunderstood making re-typing of parts of the work necessary. Access to a word processor makes life much easier for the local historian. Material is typed into the computer and can be stored on floppy discs - the text of the new edition is stored on one piece of treated plastic smaller than one page of the new booklet! Changing text is very easy and copies can be produced on a printer. Thus providing the printers with 48 sides of A4 text ready for printing has become straightforward for anyone with access to the hardware and with the time to do the research and typing.

My thoughts turn to a 3rd Edition (!) which will fill in the 'modern period' from 1940 onwards. I hope that all members who read 'Potton Market Square' will contribute their own memories, however recent, to enable a comprehensive final Edition to emerge.

Meanwhile I hope members will promote the new publication to friends and relations. The sooner most of the 500 copies are sold the sooner the Society will be able to afford another publication.

Peter Ibbett

\* Potton Market Square - 2nd Revised Edition, 48 pages, £1. Available from 31A Royston Street or Tysoes.

### LETTER BOX DESIGN

Letter boxes came into being some time after 1657 when Cromwell created the Post Office under the control of a Postmaster General responsible to Parliament and Charles II confirmed this arrangement.

As the modern conception of letter post dates from 1840 as a result of the great postal reforms of Sir Rowland Hill it is most likely many years elapsed before household letter boxes were in general use. Even today there are some houses without the necessary provision for the delivery of letters and newspapers.

My dictionary defines a letter box as 'a box for receiving letters for or from the post', but these days household letter boxes are used for the delivery of letters, circulars, National and Provincial newspapers, as well as free papers which in Potton are of 7 different titles.

But there is a lot more to a private letter box than meets the eye, or hand, as anyone delivering mail or newspapers soon discovers.

There are the 'ground-level' variety that necessitates bending down, and sometimes almost doubling-up in order to push the missive safely through. This type frequently has the added advantage of an extra strong spring enabling the flap to return with a prompt 'snap' whilst the post person or paper girl/boy is still in a vulnerable position.

An equally interesting letter box is the one with a draught excluder in the form of a duster or cloth wedged firmly in position on the inside creating the difficulty of removing the obstacle before anything can be delivered. When the flap also has a strong spring the hazard of finger-trapping is again encountered.

There are those with a curtain on the inside of the door impeding delivery, vertical and horizontal letter boxes, and those actually sealed up with a firmly attached label stating - 'No free papers please'.

The short narrow variety will usually accept average size mail, but not newspapers unless segregated into two slimmer papers delivered separately. On a windy day this can become a major operation.

But there are normal letter boxes, ample in size, easy to open. There should be no problems. The newspaper or letters slip neatly through the letter box straight into the open jaws of a large dog lying in wait.

Lastly there are the houses without letter boxes. Usually these households supply a tin or box with sufficient room to accommodate both mail and newspapers which proves an agreeable arrangement. When there is no such provision then it is a case of ingenuity!

It could have been a lot easier in the days of person to person delivery by horseback. At least a letter or such like could be thrust through an open first floor window.

Ellen Cameron

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**I AM UNDER AN OBLIGATION.**

when you entrust your footwear to me for  
Repair, to do my best.

**CONSCIENTIOUSLY I DO MY DUTY,**

helped by years of experience, modern  
machinery and best material.

**G. F. MAYSTON,** (at the Sign of)  
**THE WHITE BOOT,**  
**POTTON and BIGGLESWADE.**

### A POSSIBLE LINK WITH THE GUNPOWDER PLOT

One of the incompletely documented sections of Potton history is the part played by the Spencer family. They are known to have owned land in the area until the early part of the 19th century. Their ownership is remembered by such place names as Spencer Farm and Spencer Close. The problem is in discovering when they acquired the land and when they disposed of it.

A recent publication in the National Trust History series states that the Spencers bought their present home Althorp from the Catesby family in 1508. The Catesbys lived at Ashby St. Ledgers about 8 miles from Althorp. Both families came from the same background - yeoman farmers - who made fortunes from sheep farming and who in the process were responsible for the depopulation of a number of villages including Althorp destroyed by the Catesbys, and Wormleighton by the Spencers.

In 1605 Robert Catesby of Ashby St. Ledgers was the instigator of the plot to blow up James I and his parliament, an event which is commemorated on November 5th every year. Only the man who was to set off the explosion is remembered, all the major plotters being forgotten or relegated to the odd reference in history books.

After the failure of the Gunpowder Plot, as it is now known, Catesby and his fellow conspirators, in their attempt to escape, reached Holbeach Hall in Staffordshire where they were caught by a sheriff's posse. In the ensuing fight Catesby was killed and his accomplices were captured and returned to London for execution. The Catesby lands were subsequently sold.

What has this to do with Potton? Possibly nothing, but on the other hand it may explain the Spencer connection with Potton.

In the Potton registers for 1621 the burial of a Mrs. Jane Catesby is recorded on 19th October. The fact that she is shown as Mrs. indicates some standing in the community. It was very rare at that time for any title to be given unless the person concerned was a major landowner or was distinguished for some other reason.

There are no other entries referring to Catesby in Potton or the surrounding area.

Is it possible that the Spencers purchased Catesby land after 1605 and that the land included some in Potton, or is there some other explanation?

Norman Parry

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DID MARCONI COME TO POTTON?

The above question is not an unlikely one. Not many realize the Italian Guglielmo Marconi, who is often referred to as 'The Father of Wireless', once lived in Bedford.

Marconi's father was a wealthy Italian landowner with a villa and estate at Bologna, Northern Italy. His mother was Irish, Annie Jameson, a former opera singer and a member of the Irish whiskey family Jameson.

Marconi had an elder brother Alfonso, nine years his senior. An English education was wanted for the elder brother so he was enrolled at Bedford School for the period January 1876 to Easter 1880. His mother Annie and Guglielmo, aged 2, came with him. The family stayed at a rented house in Bromham Road, Bedford. As well as being taught English at home, the stay in England, even though Guglielmo was young, must have improved his knowledge of the language.



He spoke English with only a slight Italian accent and there is no doubt that the teaching by his mother and living in Bedford was an asset in his business life and when dealing with English speaking employees and customers.

Not much else is known about the Marconi family stay in our county town. When Alfonso's education was over they returned to Italy in 1880.

Guglielmo was back in England in 1896. Now aged 22 he had developed his method of sending messages 'without wires' and came to demonstrate it to the British Government, H.M. Services and the Post Office. In July 1897 The Wireless and Signal Company (later to become The Marconi Company) was formed and registered in London, and the world's first factory for making wireless equipment was opened at Chelmsford, Essex in 1899.

Marconi lived in England and made it his base and spent many hours here travelling to Italy and to his other stations and overseas companies for business purposes. Many long range wireless stations were erected in England and Ireland, shore stations were built for mariners and wireless equipment was fitted on ships and operators provided to work the equipment.

There is one other county connection. The Marconi Company supplied and installed wireless and direction finding equipment in many airships that were built and operated from Cardington, the R38 and R101 being two.

As our Newsletter is really only concerned with Potton and the history of the area and most of this article is not, I thought it nice to imagine that 'The Father of Wireless' may have passed through the town with his mother and brother when on an outing through Bedfordshire.

Roy Rodwell  
Chelmsford





The town itself is not shown in great detail but there is enough to build up a partial picture. It is easy to imagine that the market square has remained unchanged over the centuries and indeed all the buildings we now see on the south side existed at the time the map was made. The west side, however, appears to have been at least partly open onto Hogg Hill, which could give an explanation as to why, when the great fire struck some 29 years later, it did not spread to the south side of the square.

Three inns are named around the market square, The Crown and The George on the north side, and The Dog on the east side, all of which were destroyed in the fire. No doubt there were others, perhaps smaller. The main areas of habitation were concentrated into the four central sections, although "homestalls" on the adjacent fields indicates that there were a number of individual farmhouse sites on the outskirts. "Houses" on the northern side of Bull Street perhaps means that the wealthier residents of the town were to be found there, as all other references are to mere cottages.

Several interesting features are shown which would have been essential to any town of the period. Allom's Pond, at the top of Horn Lane, provides a reason for the very wide sweep of the road on this bend. Another pond is shown, although not named, at the junction of King Street and Gamlingay Road, an area which even now is liable to flooding. On the northern outskirts of the town were found the pound for the incarceration of stray animals, and the pest house for the incarceration of sick people. This last building is actually illustrated on the map by a delightful drawing of a single storey cottage.

The Lammas meadows, running alongside the brook in a broad band right across the middle of the parish, would have been wetter land, used to produce a good crop of hay. Only when this crop had been harvested

would the villager's animals be allowed onto the land. At other times of the year the livestock would probably have grazed the heathland which lay to the north-west of the town. Pig Nut Hill, to the south-east, conjures up images of the locals driving their pigs along the footpath to the hill where they would grub out the roots of the pignut, a plant of the carrot family.

The major roads in and out of Potton in 1754 followed very much the same course that they do today, but the map does give one hint of a change from even earlier times. The road leading from Sutton and passing across the top of Bury Hill was named as "London Way". This road continues straight on for some distance beyond its junction with Hatley Road, but even at that time came to a dead end just before it would have merged with the Gamlingay Road. As the term "way" is of Saxon origin, it is possible that this could have been a major route back to the Dark Ages. This same road has another point of interest at the sharp dip on the Sutton side of Bury Hill crossroads, named "Lizards Hole" on the map. I wonder if any local residents have used this name in more recent times?

Drove roads were widely used in the Middle Ages for the movement of livestock to and from market. Such a road by-passed Potton along the western boundary of the parish, where an open strip of land at the edge of the fields is marked on the map: "Along here is (upon sufferance) the drove way from St. Ives to Biggleswade and London." This would have remained in constant use until the coming of the railways a hundred years later, provided a faster means of transporting animals.

Another map of the parish was drawn almost 80 years later, in 1832, for the second Enclosures Act, and although the time between the two is relatively short, all the details of the old tracks are missing, presumably as a result of the Enclosure Acts. Undoubtedly, whereas the second map could almost be of Potton today, the first gives us a true glimpse of the past.

Mary Leigh

### OBSERVATIONS

The Society's hundreth meeting was held in style at Burgoyne School on April 24th 1986. Mr. Michael Ware, Curator of the National Motor Museum, had honoured us by accepting our invitation to talk about the research work he had undertaken in trying to solve some of the mysteries connected with the 'Cars of Potton Manor'. The organisers were delighted to greet over 200 interested persons to what proved to be a memorable evening. Material collected by Mr. D. Chapman and Mr. Ware will soon be in the Society's hands, and it is hoped that a booklet will be produced on the subject.

On September 6th 1987, over 400 photographs were on public display on the occasion of that splendid annual local event, the Potton Show. Many visitors voiced their interest in the pictures which depicted various aspects of Potton life, both in the past and present. Since then a further 100 photographs have been loaned for copying.

We have been invited to participate in two events this year; the Church's Patronal Festival, from July 3rd-5th, and the Potton Show on September 12th. Our thanks are extended to the organisers for including the Society in their programme. As we have, to date, 2863 mounted photographs, the choice of subject will be varied.

On April 25th 1985, Mr. Nigel Pibworth gave an excellent talk on the life and times of the Rev. John Berridge, Vicar of Everton from 1755 to 1793. A letter written by this gentleman gave us a valuable contemporary report of the 1783 fire of Potton. It is a pleasure to me to state that Mr. Pibworth's 'extensive and thorough research work' will shortly be published under the title 'The Gospel Pedlar'.

Through the kindness of Mr. & Mrs. M. Ibbett, our publications continue to be available at Tysoes.

Patricia R. Yates.