

# Potton History Society

Beds. County Council Election

MARCH 4th, 1913.

—  
VOTE FOR



**Gouldthorpe Smith**

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NEWSLETTER NO. 9

### Current Research on the Manors of Potton

When Mrs Yates gave me the reference HA 275-308 Court Rolls 1666-1793, it was with a strange feeling of excitement that I ventured to the Record Office in Bedford.

What secrets about the Manors of Potton would I be able to discover? What mysteries solve? What doors unlock?

Boldly, I asked to see pages 275-308, but the archivist patiently explained to me that perhaps just the first page would be more than enough for one visit.

I agreed silently and waited for page 275 to be found for me. When it arrived, page 275 comprised nine sheets of rolled up parchment - all covered in the smallest writing and all written in Latin (which was the usual language for legal documents of the day).

My excitement turned quickly to apprehension which in turn gave way to feelings of dismay.

Thirty three x nine pages of Potton history are all waiting to be translated, decoded, deciphered, and eventually interpreted in such a way, that we can gain a better picture of the manors. Can it be done?

It is possible that some of the documents are written in middle Latin (Latin used in the Middle Ages) and not in the Latin we learned at school. This has still to be determined. One thing I know for sure. The translation task will be a 'long labour of love'.

I have had a promise of help with the work from a friend in London and hopefully, any progress can be featured in our future newsletters.

All that I can say at this present time, is

that page 275 of the Court Rolls is concerned with the Manor of Potton Much Manured and the Court of Baron Burgoyne.....the tale is yet to be told, the story unfolded.

Anita Lewis

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#### The Owners of Potton Manor

Over the last two years I have been continuing the research carried out by Mr Michael Ware of the National Motor Museum who was interested in the activities of the last owner of the manor, Otto von Smekal.

I have broadened Mr. Ware's work by researching the previous owners of the manor as far back in time as was possible. They have turned out to be as interesting as Smekal, and raised many questions; some still unanswered.

For example; the land, which lay in the four authentic manors of Potton, that made up what we today know as "The Manor" was consolidated by a family called the Underwoods. A description of an "ancient mansion" is mentioned as belonging to them on this land. Where it was situated is a mystery but a few clues have come to light in my researches to enable me to hazard a guess.

A later owner, James Poole Wagstaff son of the man who built the manor house in 1870, known then as Holland Park, was married to a woman who subsequently was found to be already married. That caused quite a stir in Potton!

The next owner, Gouldthorpe Smith, a car dealer, came from Sheffield and later left. Little is known about him, or why he came to Potton, despite researches in the Sheffield Record Office.

Life at the manor during the time of the next owner, William Smith, was told to me by a Pottonian who worked there. It gave me a wonderful insight into the running of the house, especially as the main interest was coursing. One of the front rooms was used as a food store for the dogs!

During World War 2 the manor house was used as a billet for the army and I managed to trace someone who was there at the time. His recollections were fascinating and sometimes comical.

After the war, it was used as a German prisoner of war camp and again I was fortunate to track down an ex-prisoner of war who stayed on to help the Smekals. His knowledge of this time and of the Smekals was a great help in my investigations. Recollections of both these people have been taped to go into the Potton History Society's archives.

But of course it is Otton von Smekal, who is the most interesting of all the owners. To try and find out about him and Madame Pokorova I have written to many people in places such as Czechoslovakia, The Pentagon in Washington, USA, various addresses in Sheffield, motor museums etc.

As always there have been "dead-ends" or red-herrings but also some surprises and useful information. Although many questions about them still remain unanswered the "story" of Smekal is coming together and I hope to tell it at our November meeting.

Having started on this research it will go on and on as I have no doubt that further material will emerge, thus more questions will arise as the years go by.

T C M Ball

Although little is known about Frederick Gouldthorpe Smith's private life, an electioneering document dated March 4th 1913 reveals that he had involved himself in local public affairs:

'Beds. County Council Election.

To the Electors of POTTON, SUTTON, COCKAYNE HATLEY and WRESTLINGWORTH.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

I have been asked by a representative body of local ratepayers to stand for the County Council, and being deeply interested in local affairs and having plenty of time to devote to them, I am very glad to do so. My experience as Chairman of the Potton Parish Council for the last three years has given me an insight into local conditions which would stand me in good stead as a County Councillor.

GENERAL POLICY

In matters concerning the Public Health, Education and Maintenance of Highways, and all other County Business, I am in favour of enlightened progress, but guarding against waste of money.

ALLOTMENTS and SMALL HOLDINGS.

In a district where Small Holdings are a conspicuous success, I consider that the County Council should do all in its power to encourage the movement, and to help suitable applicants to secure land both for market gardening purposes and for supplying the labourer's family with food.

HOUSING

I have done my best to meet the demand for healthy homes at a reasonable rent by building cottages at Potton: and I hope to extend these operations in the near future.

I am convinced that houses built by private enterprises can be let at a lower rent, than those erected by Public Authorities, unless they are subsidized by the ratepayers.

POTTON WATER SUPPLY.

In my opinion the heavily burdened ratepayers of Potton cannot afford an expenditure of £6,000, involving increased rates and rents, which are so high already.

In these and all other matters I am ready to put my business experience and all my powers at the disposal of the public, and I therefore trust that you will do your utmost to record your VOTE on my behalf.'

In spite of the above interest, the family appear to have left Potton Manor in 1914.

### Heritage Centres

There has been considerable talk over the past few years about the possibility of setting up a museum in the East Beds area. A feasibility study, which appeared last November, supported the idea of a museum in Biggleswade but also suggested that Potton, Sandy, Shefford and Stotfold could have heritage centres linked to the museum.

What is a Heritage Centre? The concept was devised by the Civic Trust to rescue something of the past of communities suffering from wholesale destruction caused by the large scale urban re-development which took place in the two decades prior to 1975. During this period many areas of historic character were destroyed, communities were broken up and although new opportunities were created, the advantages of these were outweighed by the new social, economic and environmental problems which appeared.

1975 had been designated European Architectural Heritage Year and the Civic Trust suggested that the techniques of interpretation which had been successfully applied to help the natural habitat could equally well be used in urban areas - the human habitat. If visitor centres in the countryside could get across the message that we interfere with the balance of nature at our peril, then similar centres in towns could reinforce the message that the human habitat is equally vulnerable. A Heritage Centre therefore is a permanent exhibition with the evolution of the whole community as its theme.

The first two centres were set up in 1975 in York and Chester and the number has now grown to around fifty with others planned. Centres can be found in a diverse assortment of buildings ranging from a 13th century Dominican Friary to 20th century museums. Many have used modern technology in the form of audio-visual displays and multi-screen video presentations to re-create years of history.

Many different organisations have been instrumental in setting up centres. In areas where there is likely to be a positive return from tourism, Local Authorities have taken the initiative, but it is surprising how many centres are run by local amenity societies. A good example is the Fleur de Lis Centre at Faversham in Kent housed in a 15th century building where displays on a number of topics depict 1000 years of history. It has a bookshop, an official Tourist Information Centre, an old village store etc. and yet it was created and is staffed by Faversham Society Volunteers.

The amount of work involved in creating a centre should not be underestimated. It needs to be in a central site to attract visitors and must contain ancillary features and facilities of some kind. A shop, a meeting room and a sales area is essential. The latter, not just to raise money because the goods that people buy will provide them with a permanent reminder of what they have seen. A meeting room is important if the Centre is to be used as a forum for discussions on the future of the community.

It would be nice to think that a Heritage Centre could become part of Pottton but can anyone honestly see where the resources are to come from?

Imagine the requirements - a large enough building, finance, expertise staff. The list is long and the purse not very full.

If anyone would like advice about the establishment of Heritage Centres and urban interpretation in general, the Civic Trust's book "Understanding Our Surroundings" costs £4.50 by post from Civic Trust, 17 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AW. The Civic Trust's bi-monthly magazine, "Heritage Outlook" is available on subscription from the same address.

Norman Parry



### C.P.R.E.

The Council for the Protection of Rural England is a national body which has been established for over 60 years. It was formed in 1926 and originally consisted of various member organisations. Individual membership came later and now predominates. The Headquarters of the organisation are in London, the Patron is the Queen and the President is David Puttnam the film producer. The Chairman of the National Executive Committee is David Astor. There are over 33,000 members and a branch in every county or area of the country. There is also CPR Wales and APR Scotland.

CPRE is primarily concerned with planning, the countryside, landscape and land use, access and environmental problems. Its concern for wildlife arises out of its interest for the countryside. It is not a militant organisation. The method it employs are lobbying and discussion, not demonstrating. CPRE seeks to ensure that from the conservation viewpoint the best uses possible are made of local and national resources. Nationally, it has become the most intellectually respected conservation organisation and is one of the few non-statutory bodies consulted by the Government as a matter of course.

CPRE has played an important roll in such issues as the planning system, the National Parks and Green Belts. The national media recognises CPRE, quotes its views and features interviews with specialist staff from the London Headquarters.

Recent involvements have included the Vale of Belvoir in Leicestershire, Sizewell B in Suffolk, Tillingham Hall in the Essex Green Belt, the Channel Tunnel, representation on 4 Government Sub-Committees, the Lyndhurst Bypass in the New Forest, the Broads Bill and a European link through active membership of the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) and contact with the Institute of European



## Environmental Policy.

The strength of the whole organisation is that the Branches can draw on the expertise of the National Office staff and resources for dealing with local issues, while members can contribute 'upwards' towards national policy and make their views known.

The Bedfordshire Branch of CPRE was established in April 1987. At that time there were 40 members in the county who belonged only to the National Organisation as Bedfordshire was the last county to form a Branch. Membership automatically relates to both the National Organisation and local Branch. In the 12 months following its inauguration Branch membership increased to 93 and now includes individual and joint members as well as some affiliated bodies including some town and parish councils.

The Branch Executive Committee includes three Area Secretaries, for North, Mid and South Beds.

The Bedfordshire Branch have dealt with a variety of planning matters that have included housing developments, bypasses, waste disposal and the delapidated condition of an historic building. The biggest event of the year concerned the large scale planning proposals for Sundon Springs, an area which lies within the Green Belt near Luton. Because of the national and local importance of the proposals both the Branch and CPRE Headquarters are following up the matter jointly. A special day was organised when many local and national organisations concerned with conservation, preservation, wildlife and rural life, as well as Parish Councils were invited to send representatives to meet the site developers. Arrangements were made for a site visit and discussion with the developers, followed by a further meeting for representatives of the various organisations to discuss the situation. CPRE

has submitted its views to the County Council and it is thought possible that there will eventually be a public inquiry.

The Bedfordshire Branch has established good relationships with a number of organisations in the county and has a representative in some of these organisations.

The Branch will willingly give its support to organisations in the county when there is real concern on issues such as planning, local amenities, change of use or conservation.

We are, of course, always looking for new members for the greater the number of members the stronger the voice of CPRE nationally.

J Bullard  
Secretary  
Mid Beds CPRE

Conservation Group.

The following report appeared in the Biggleswade Chronicle on June 10th 1988.

'A recently formed Conservation Group, consisting of members of the History Society, met on May 25th to report on their activities to date.

Working in small groups, allocated footpaths had been walked and the flora and fauna recorded. It was noted that several footpaths on the west of the parish were waymarked, but those in the south, leading from the Sheepwalk, were more difficult to locate.

The aim is to photograph the most interesting features of all the paths throughout the year. A display of the work undertaken to date will be mounted for the Lower School's open evening in connection with their 'Protect Our Town TON'

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project. It is hoped to collate the material in booklet form at the conclusion of the appraisal.

Concern was expressed over the outline planning applications, submitted by the Ministry of Agriculture, to develop the Sheep-walk and the field beyond, leading to Horne Lane. The Sheep-walk is the last remaining mediaeval pasture land in the parish, providing a vital open space enjoyed by walkers of all ages. Vehicular access into Bury Hill would be most dangerous and there is already a problem with traffic entering and leaving Horne Lane.

It must be remembered that this land was originally purchased by a philanthropist, Mr. (later Sir) Malcolm Stewart, in 1934, for the purpose of forming a Land Settlement Association to provide homes and work for the unemployed from the north.

The Ministry of Agriculture, which took over the LSA in 1947, seems to be seeking to destroy the rural face of Potton, and in so doing will greatly benefit financially from the deal...!

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## Observations

Although the Quiz Team (Ann Barker, George Howe, Peter Ibbett and Patricia Yates), retained the Joint History Societies' Trophy on April 13th, the highlight of the evening for me was seeing, for the first time, a pencil sketch of Sutton Park House, drawn by Thomas Fisher. This large residence of the Burgoyne Family suffered a disaster in 1825. Writing in his diary of the event, Sir John states:

'March 3rd: Received an express to say that Sutton House was burnt to the ground. Went down there immediately, and found it totally destroyed. It had only last year been new roofed and thoroughly repaired.'

I obtained a photocopy of the sketch from the Cecil Higgins Art Gallery but as the result was rather faint we prevailed upon our Society artist, Keith Lawrence, to make a copy. His excellent work will be one of the many pictures on view at the POTTON SHOW on September 10th 1988.

The Museum Service feasibility study for Mid Beds. was completed last year and a copy of the report has just come to hand. It is pleasing to note:

'Potton Local History Society has an enviably well-organised local archive of photographs and copies of documents'

Our first combined visit and social event took place on June 30th. Members enjoyed a fascinating tour of Cockayne Hatley Church, ably guided by John Foulkes. The Friends of the Church then provided an excellent supper, and everyone was highly appreciative of this new venture.

Our annual Town Walk was partly based on an invitation from Mr. D.Chapman. We were able to tour two Potton Timber Company houses built in the grounds of James Wagstaff's 'Potton Manor', followed by a leisurely stroll round the reclaimed lake. This activity brought to mind previous activities enjoyed by the people of Potton.

## Manor Park, Potton, Beds.

Programme for . . .

Saturday, July 15th, 1911

:: When ::

MR. <sup>MR</sup> MRS. F. GOULDTHORPE SMITH,  
will entertain the Children & Teachers  
of the Potton Council School . . . .

- 2.30 p.m. The 433 Children assemble at the School  
3.0 p.m. Reach Manor Park, and proceed round  
the Grounds.  
Boating on the Lake.  
Selections of Music by Mr. W. R.  
Stapley's String Band.  
3.30 p.m. Pierrot Entertainment, near tennis court  
4.0 p.m. Tea in the Park.  
5.15 p.m. Songs by School Prize Choir. Morris  
Dances, Games.  
5.30 p.m. Pierrot Entertainment.  
Boating on the Lake.  
Selections of Music by Mr. W. R.  
Stapley's String Band.  
6.30 p.m. God Save the King

Patricia R. Yates