

Bedfordshire Local History Association (BLHA) AGM & Conference 2012

The BLHA 2012 AGM and Conference were hosted on Saturday 9 June at The Poplars Garden Centre Learning Zone in Toddington by the Ampthill & District Archaeological & Local History Society (ADALHS). The AGM was opened by BLHA Chairman Brian Lazelle who, after thanking Willington HS for hosting the 2011 Conference recalled a successful programme for the year including a BLHA talk and visit to the Luton Hoo Walled Garden and a presentation by the County Record Office on their databases. He also mentioned an event to be held in October at Colmworth.

The Association's webmaster and Newsletter Editor, Ted Martin, would welcome any help that members feel able to give.

The Treasurer was pleased to announce a surplus of £347.29 on the year.

Conference

After welcoming Conference guests to Poplars Learning Centre, ADALHS Chairman Kevan Fadden introduced the first speaker Mike Turner who had worked at Wrest Park for 29 years, first as a research scientist and latterly as Estate Manager in close contact with English Heritage in researching and restoring the Gardens.

Fires in Stately Homes & their Outcomes: 'Ruins, Restoration, Rescue'

'Ruin': *Witley Court in Worcestershire* was built in 1665 and improved several times by its first family, remodelled by a new owner the First Earl of Dudley, and eventually bought in 1920 by carpet manufacturer Herbert Smith; during these times Royalty often visited. Sadly, a fire in 1937 was well under way before outside help arrived and the house was badly damaged, although the East Wing survived. For some reason the insurance company refused to pay out and after being sold to a scrap dealer the house was completely stripped out. It was acquired in 1972 by the Government and eventually came under the wing of English Heritage: it still looks fantastic from the outside but is a 'magnificent ruin'.

'Restoration': *Uppark House in West Sussex*, built in the 17th century, was acquired by the National Trust in 1954. During replacement in 1989 of lead on the roof, a builder inadvertently set fire to the roof timbers. Although the first appliances arrived within 17 minutes the fire became so fierce that despite the efforts of 156 firemen using 27 engines, one of the most historic houses in the county was destroyed. The situation was not helped by the fact that water supply was a problem – even the swimming pool was emptied! Many of the paintings, pieces of furniture and ornaments were saved by being passed from the burning building along a human chain. After a great deal of discussion it was decided to restore the building completely and it is now a jewel in the crown of the National Trust, having been re-opened in 1995.

Rescue: *Wrest Park*, is situated in nearby Silsoe and is now looked after by English Heritage. During WWI the present house, which was built in the early part of the 19th century, was used as a military hospital. One day in 1916 a small fire (caused by a defective flue) was discovered in the roof at around 5.30pm. After smoke was noticed, a lad was sent to run up and back down three flights of stairs to report on what was happening! At the time the house held 156 patients, many convalescent and including a number of amputees. All were taken to safety while the fire was being extinguished by engines from local fire stations, and most engines had left by 4.30am. Luckily some were still in place to put out a resurgence of the fire some time later, and in this case disaster was averted. Mike added as a postscript to his talk that smoke detectors are now fitted in all areas!

Lost Houses of Bedfordshire

Simon Houfe is an art historian and biographer who has lived most of his life in Ampthill; his famous grandfather Professor Richardson deplored in 1952 the loss of many great houses and the subdivision, e.g. as flats or offices, of many big houses. Whilst Simon realised that such buildings could not and should not survive for ever, he argued that the decrease in their number resulted in more than the disappearance of a privileged lifestyle. For instance, Ampthill originally consisted of Ampthill Palace, Ampthill Park and Ampthill House and were depended on by the village population, who serviced these great places. In many cases huge local resources were lost through the years due for instance to the fecklessness of owners, changes in their circumstances, buildings being handed down, and absorption of smaller into larger estates. He had found that larger estates were more likely to survive than smaller ones. The Russell's of Woburn Abbey had been one of the worst families in 'gobbling-up' land, having destroyed in their time 10 mansions by not wanting to have local competition! Many, such as Clapham Park and Stockwell Park, had been sold because their owners did not wish to be on the edge of expanding areas. The Civil War had caused changes in the circumstances of, for instance, Bushmead Priory and Toddington Manor, and WWI in particular had resulted in the death of numerous heirs to

estates; troops billeted in 'big houses' had not generally been sensitive to their surroundings. Simon showed paintings or photographs of some 'lost houses' including Harlington Manor, Houghton House, Eggington House and East Hyde (these two built for Huguenot families and very similar to each other in style), Battlesden Manor and Shuttleworth, the latter now being a Conference Centre.

Introduction to Chalgrave Church

Before delegates went to visit Chalgrave Church (dating back to 911), they were given some information about it by Kevan Fadden who besides being founder chairman of the Ampthill Society was on the committee of the British Pitt Rivers Archaeological Awards for 18 years, chairing it for 16. While showing an 1815 Fisher painting of the church he quoted an opinion by a visitor in 1846 that it was 'deplorable in appearance, neglected, damp and dirty' with in one part 'ladders, brooms and many other abominations'. Although the church had some beautiful specimens of architecture, there was a hole in the roof for smoke to escape, attic windows in the roof of the nave were poor, and it was whitewashed everywhere. The Fisher painting shows a tower the top of which crashed through the roof after being hit by lightning in 1889; it was not until 1931 that repairs were completed, and then not to the former height. Excellent wall-paintings which include one of the best collections of heraldic shields in the country were found after the whitewash was removed, and were protected in the manner, approved at the time, by a covering of beeswax dissolved in turpentine and applied hot. This effectively sealed the surface.

In the 1970's Kevan met Dr. Clive Rouse who as a student worked on the paintings during the winters of 1932-3. He said that time has shown that natural moisture in the stone causes the surface to lift and destroy the paintings. Although Dr. Rouse had retired he said he would be happy to give his advice free if someone was prepared to re-clean them before deterioration took place. He had fond memories of the church and it was on his conscience. The ADALHS reported this to the then County Archaeologist David Baker who to his credit set the restoration in motion. Kevan discussed the wall-paintings, pointing out features to be noted during the group's visit. Many of the paintings had in the past been covered by religious texts (in addition to whitewash which actually helped the works they were intended to deface) some of these have been allowed to remain.

Following a delicious lunch provided by Poplars Pantry, the first post-prandial talk was given by John Little who had been born on the site, his grandfather Jesse Little having started Poplars Nursery in 1924 after buying the land on which it still stands. John has recently converted an area known as 'Toddington Bore Hole' (but where investigation has found no water) into a Nature Reserve which is used for educational purposes.

The Lost Hamlet of Wadelow

John Little confessed to having been fascinated in his youth by the book *Toddington: Its Annals and People* (by Joseph Hight Blundell and published just after Jesse Little bought his land) and in particular by a reference by Matthew Parris to 'the great house of Wadelow' being 'like a palace' and having a 'lead-covered gateway' (which was probably opposite the current entrance to Redhills Farm). Blundell states that the origins of the Wadelow family and the hamlet of Wadelow, which abuts 'Betons Demesne', the site of Poplars Nursery, can be traced back to 1200, and Old Park Farm was apparently the Deer Park to the Wadelow estate. Paulinus Peyvre, having been granted in 1234 all Hugh Wadelow's estates at Wadelow and Chalton, built a house there a few years later but sadly in 1248 'our new and best house at Wadelow burnt' and the 'great house' was built. John said that as a child in winter he had skated on low-lying areas which flooded and then froze; he believed these were possibly the remains of Wadelow's 'stanks' (fishponds) which were referred to in a 1394 document. The last mention of the great house was made in 1498. Many THS members will be familiar with the 1581 map of Toddington (cut up many years ago into 20 sections, possibly for convenience of handling) by Radulph Agas, who prided himself on being able to 'write small' and included an incredible amount of detail in the map. Some time ago John went to the British Library – with magnifying glass - to inspect it in an attempt to discover more information than could be deciphered from copies, and was stunned by the quality of workmanship. However, clearly all trace of Wadelow had gone by the time the map was made. It is his dream that some day funds may be found to make a copy of the entire Agas map which could be displayed in the entrance to the Learning Centre.

Art Deco Buildings in Luton

Allan Boldero, a retired Engineer who like Mike Turner worked at Wrest Park, has lived in Luton for many years and takes a keen interest in architecture, particularly Art Deco buildings. As he pointed out, Art Deco has its origins in the

1925 French art exposition at La Musée des Arts Decoratifs. His talk was first given to a group which intended subsequently to visit the buildings but he has found that several have disappeared, some in the last year. Due mostly to industrial reasons, Luton became an immigrant town leading to major growth in the 1930s, increasing within 3 years from 60,000 to 90,000 inhabitants. He pointed out that a number of parade shops in the Sundon Park area show Art Deco origins, whilst other buildings with at least some Art Deco influence include those originally constructed for SKF, Electrolux, Vauxhall, a Dickinson & Adams garage, the railway station at Midland Road and the Masonic Lodge in Park Street. The 'wedding-cake fountains' of the (now defunct) swimming pool in Bath Road can still be seen, as can a typical curved window in Ward 4 at the L&D hospital. Where possible the eventual use of a building was reflected graphically in its shape, an example, the Luton Grammar School, built in 1938 had a sextant shaped plan view indicating its educational purpose. Blue Rails, a well-known dwelling in Old Bedford Road and built for the Managing Director of SKF, is an exact copy of an Art Deco house shown at the Ideal Home Exhibition; two other Art Deco houses can be found in Stockingstone Road. When George Street was widened during the Art Deco period, the Savoy Cinema, Buttons Gents' Outfitters and a Jeweller's shop were built as one design block. Other Art Deco buildings in that area include Luton Town Hall and the Gas Showrooms. The Bell Inn (now McDonald's) was refaced to fit in – look up for the evidence!

Valuation Maps & Centenary Appeal

Martin Deacon, Operations Manager at the Beds & Luton Archives & Records Service (BLARS or, as most still think of it, the County Record Office), felt as though he was giving out the Parish Notices at the end of a church Service. He told us that all the County's Valuation Maps and accompanying Notebooks have now been digitised; sooner and much more cheaply than first envisaged, using existing resources. These Rating Valuation Maps, dating generally from around 1927 and about 500 in number are very clear and detailed. E-copies may be obtained through email by contacting the BLARS. The Service has realised that the contact information for the County's History Societies is very out-of-date and has appealed for all Societies to provide updated information. Martin pointed out that BLARS will be celebrating in 2013, one hundred years of collecting and preserving records and making archives available for everyone to use. The Service was started by Dr. Fowler who had founded The Bedfordshire Historical Record Society (BHRS) in 1912. Celebration plans include major exhibitions at Bedford and Luton, a quiz night and an auction. BLARS also hopes to involve local history societies. To start the ball rolling it is asking everyone to nominate a document or type of document which means something to them so that the results can be put on-line and some possibly used in exhibitions and in a commemorative calendar. He suggested that delegates have a look on the BLARS website at the community archive.

Summary & Tribute to Bedfordshire History

BLHA Vice President Martin Lawrence pointed out that in a year of anniversaries and celebrations (mentioning casually that he had declined an invitation to go on a City Livery Barge in the Queen's Jubilee Flotilla!); it was 20 years since the formation of a steering group which had resulted in the founding of the BLHA in May 1993. He paid tribute to the debt owed by Bedfordshire History to Dr G Herbert Fowler. Having in 1910 founded the Lincoln Diocesan Record Society; Dr Fowler went on to gather together a group of 20 interested people. This group in 1912 set up the BHRS, which has published more than 90 volumes of archive material and monographs. Then in 1913 Dr Fowler established what was originally known as the Bedfordshire Record Office (now the BLARS), which was the first County Record Office in England. He left his extensive Library to the BHRS; after several moves it is now housed at Northampton University catalogued and available to the public. Martin commented that this was in fact the 25th conference in a continuous series (i.e. started before the formation of the BLHA and thanked all the societies who had hosted conferences and entertained people through the years. He urged everyone to continue to support the BLARS – it would be a pity to lose such a valuable resource.

In closing the Conference Brian Lazelle gave thanks to the ADALHS for an interesting and varied programme. He urged any member Societies willing to host the 2013 Conference to contact him.

Gill Whitfield

Gill is a member of ADLHS and the Toddington HS. This report was adapted from an article in the *Toddington HS News Letter*.