

WIGSTON HERITAGE

GREATER WIGSTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

AND

GREATER WIGSTON HERITAGE CENTRE



Magna Sunbeams, 'Peter Pan' 1964 - see page 9

BULLETIN 132

July 2025

FROM THE CHAIRMAN



Thank you to everyone who attended the AGM in February and for giving me the great pleasure of accepting the role as Chairman of this Society. There has been lots happening over the last 3 months, and I want to start by thanking all those members of the Committee who help and support me and the Society, together with so many others too.

As you will know, by the end of February we had to move our Heritage Centre to new premises in South Wigston, and Peter Cousins was able to liaise with OWBC to co-ordinate the opening with the launch of the mural which overlooks Albion Street in South Wigston and features Orson Wright. A walk identifying some of the prominent buildings was followed by a buffet lunch at the Menphys Centre. I met so many lovely people that morning, many of whom offered GWHS their help and support too. This was followed later in March by the launch of the 2nd mural in Leicester Road, Wigston, which features some well-known places.

During March, I was at Leicester University for their Celebration of Heritage hosted by their Heritage Hub Director, Dr Sarah Scott and hope to continue our links with them for the foreseeable future.

May brought the excitement of a visit to Buckingham Palace as an acknowledgement of the Society being granted the Kings Award for Voluntary Service and I was thrilled to be joined on the day by Anne Lucas, whose father Duncan had founded GWHS in 1980 with the aim of establishing a Folk Museum including artefacts of Wigston life. Although we didn't actually get to meet any members of the Royal family, we were at one point close enough to touch several of them (William & Katherine, Edward & Sophie) and now have many, many treasured photographs and memories of a truly special day.

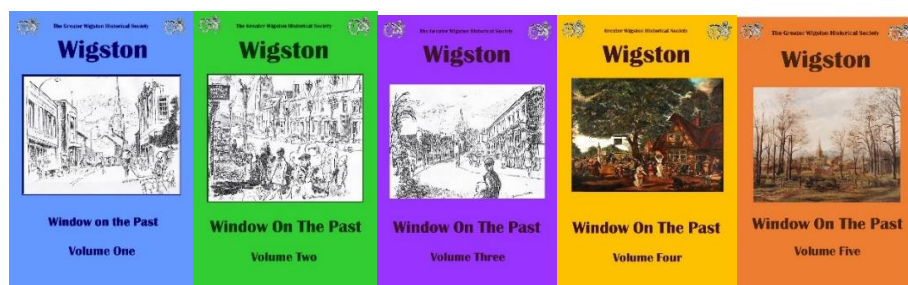
The end of May found us on Bell Street, Wigston for the St Wistan's Day Medieval Fayre, organised by OWBC. Whilst several of our members joined us for our book sales, I spent lunchtime joining the Bacanalia Border Morris Dancers – multi-tasking!

Judith Proctor

Email your Chairman: judith.chairmangwhs@gmail.com

GWHS Books: *Wigston – Window on the Past* Series

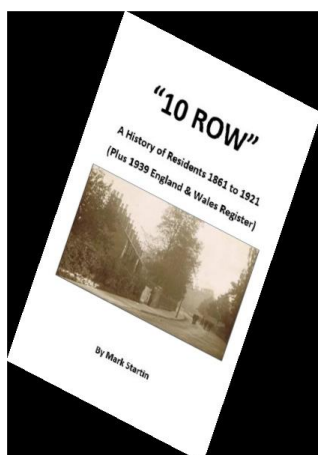
Available Now



Details at:

www.wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk/GWHS-ONLINE-STORE.html

10 Row – A History of Residents 1861-1921



A unique and fascinating insight into a part of Wigston history revealing the lives of people who lived at 10 Row between 1861 and 1939.

Researched and written by
Mark Startin

Price £10

available from the Heritage Centre
and at monthly meetings

Society's website: www.wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk

All enquiries to: secretary@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk

The Bulletin is published three times a year on 1st March, July and November.

Articles etc., (which are always welcome) should be submitted to the Editor.

email: bulletineditor@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk

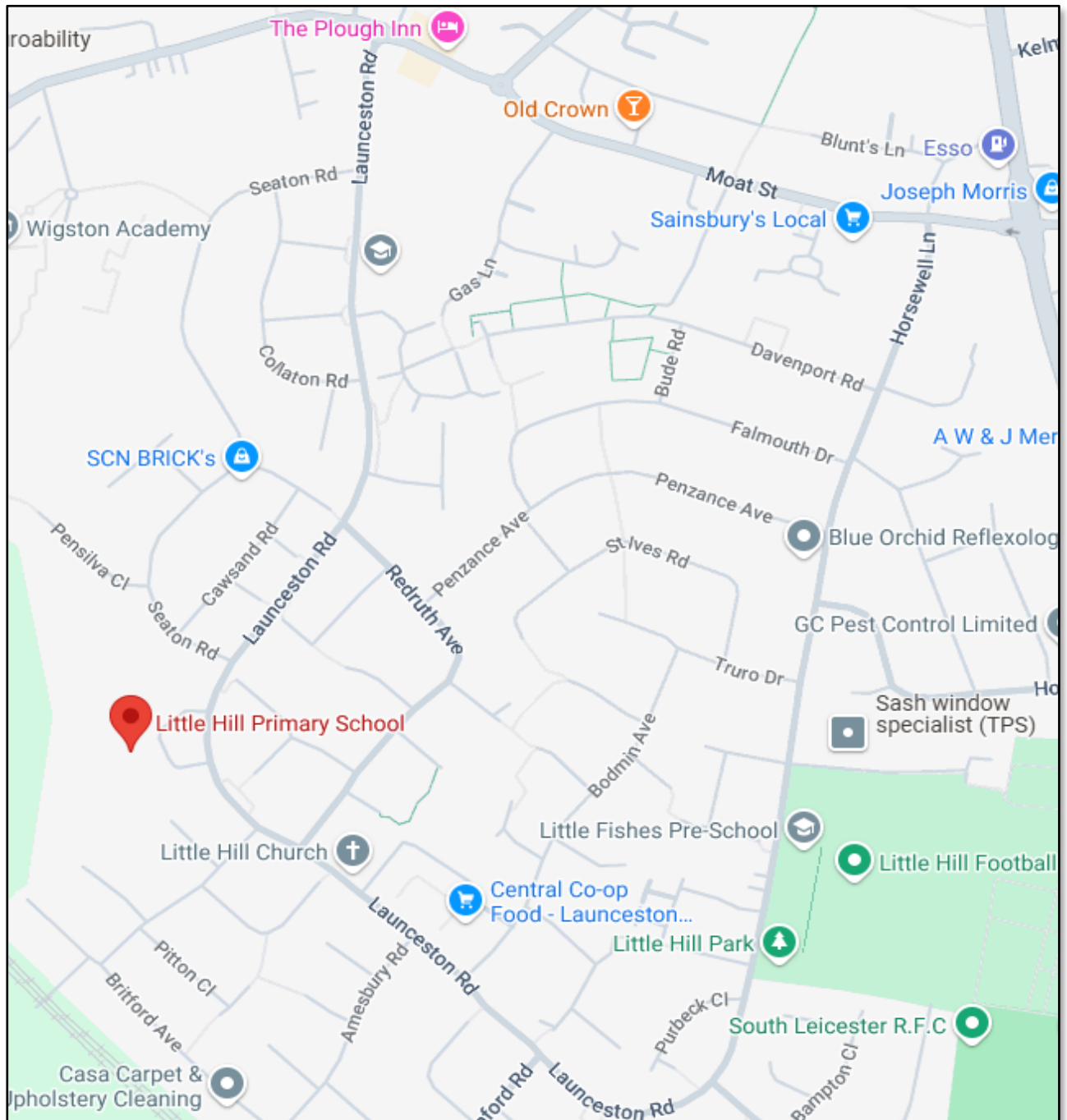
four clear weeks before publication date.

GWHS Upcoming Meetings

Little Hill Primary School, Launceston Road, Wigston LE18 2GZ

Accessible from Launceston Road or Horsewell Lane

Parking is available on site.



Evening Meetings

Most talks are illustrated with PowerPoint and pictures.

JULY NO MEETING

Tuesday 19th August
OUTING - Desford Heritage Trail

Tuesday 16th September
NOEL CHAVASSE
The only man to win 2 Victoria Crosses in World War 1
Peter Cousins

Tuesday 21st October
REVOLT AGAINST THE POOR LAW
The history of the Poor Law and Workhouse in Leicester from the
1830s through to the 20th Century
Ned Newitt

Tuesday 18th November
LADY JANE GREY
Sally Henshaw

Tuesday 9th December
CHRISTMAS PARTY
plus MYTHS OF MIDDLE EASTERN DANCE
Dancing, Talk & Demo

Refreshments & Drink: £4.00 for Members, £5 for Visitors/Guests
As soon as you know you are coming along, please book your place(s) by contacting:

bookings@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk

The Committee looks forward to welcoming you,
thank you, Ann Cousins

PLEASE NOTE TIMES FOR ALL EVENING MEETINGS:

DOORS OPEN AT 6.45PM, MEETINGS START AT 7.15PM

Admission to meetings is free to members - Non-Members £4 per person

Any enquiries please contact – enquiries@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk

GWHS DAYTIME TALKS

When the Heritage Centre moved into new premises in the Fenix Pharmacy in South Wigston, we had to find a new venue for our so-called Afternoon Talks. Now referred to as 'GWHS Daytime Talks', from October 2024 onwards, these will take place in

**THE SHEILA MITCHELL PAVILION, PEACE MEMORIAL PARK,
LONG STREET, WIGSTON MAGNA**

OCTOBER TO MARCH

OPEN AT 2.30pm – TALKS WILL START AT 3.00PM

APRIL TO SEPTEMBER

OPEN AT 9.30am – TALKS WILL START AT 10.00AM

THURSDAY 10th JULY @ 10.00am

**The Rise and Fall of Stephenson's Leicester Swannington Railway
Malcolm Riddle**

THURSDAY 14th AUGUST @ 10.00am

Simon De Montfort by Stephen Marquis

THURSDAY 11th SEPTEMBER @ 10.00am

**Legal Leicester - The Streets and Voices of Greyfriars
Iain Jones**

THURSDAY 9th OCTOBER @ 3.00pm

**Shackleton's Lost and Forgotten Men
Stuart Mucklejohn**

THURSDAY 13th NOVEMBER @ 3.00pm

**More Than Just Jam and Jerusalem
A short history of the Women's Institute
Sue Lobb**

Talks, still at **£4 per person**, can be booked at:

bookings@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk

Opening of the Greater Wigston Historical Society's New Heritage Centre and the Unveiling of Two Murals in Wigston Magna and South Wigston

Oadby, Wigston and South Wigston Borough Council was recently awarded a grant from the UKSPF (United Kingdom Shared Prosperity Fund) as part of a national campaign to improve the appearance of town centres. The main result was three new murals: -



Oadby



Wigston Magna



South Wigston

Unfortunately, the Greater Wigston Historical Society didn't become involved in this project until the Oadby mural had been completed and the Society was only involved up to a point in the design of the two Wigston murals – I'll let members decide which they like best or think most appropriate.

It was also decided to combine the unveiling of the South Wigston mural with the opening of the new GWHS Heritage Centre which had to move from the Wigston Academy Campus because of proposed new developments there.

The final event funded by this grant the *St. Wistan's Medieval Fayre* held in Bell Street, Wigston Magna on 31st May 2025.

Recent Meetings

18th March – Medieval Pilgrimages from Leicestershire, Peter Liddle



Examples of the souvenir badges pilgrims would have purchased

Leicestershire's renowned archaeologist, Peter Liddle, gave a very interesting and informative talk on Medieval pilgrimages. In the Middle Ages the Church encouraged people to make pilgrimages to special holy places called shrines. It was believed that if you prayed at these shrines you might be forgiven for your sins and have more chance of going to heaven. Others went to shrines hoping to be cured from an illness they were suffering from. The most popular shrine in England was the tomb of Thomas à Becket at Canterbury Cathedral.

When Becket was murdered local people managed to obtain pieces of cloth soaked in his blood. Rumours soon spread that, when touched by this cloth, people were cured of blindness/epilepsy and leprosy. It was not long before the monks at Canterbury Cathedral were selling small glass bottles of Becket's blood to visiting pilgrims. Another important shrine was at Walsingham in Norfolk where there was a sealed glass jar that was said to contain the milk of the Virgin Mary. Pieces of the 'true cross', thorns from the 'Crown of Thorns' even *Ampullae* filled with 'Christ's blood' could also be bought.

St Wistan's Church was Wigston's site of pilgrimage bringing visitors and income into the village.

15th April – Highfields - Leicester's First Suburb - A story of corporation corruption, bankruptcy, and a local hero, Richard Warren

Richard Warren was a policeman who stomped the streets of Highfield's for over 30 years. Richard informed the meeting that Highfields area was originally granted to six freemen (burgesses) by Simon de Montfort. In the 19th century the area was designated for housing the wealthy but nearby town's Workhouse and railway lines running through resulted in potential house buyers moving to Stoneygate. He also mentioned the famous 'Green Bicycle Murder' of 1919. More on this case in the November Bulletin.

An Age Before Television

Before the arrival of TV in most homes during the 1950s, people needed to generate their own entertainment. Pianos and other musical instruments for homemade singalongs were more common as was a greater participation in local amateur cultural organisations. The GWHS archive is full of photos and articles on such amateur self-entertainment efforts dating back to the 1920s. This article highlights some of those amateur societies and organisations revealing a wide range of activities that not only entertained but also facilitated the development of individual talent of those involved.

The Story of the Sunbeams

Started in the late 1940's, by Mrs Joan White, the juvenile troop she called 'The Magna Sunbeams' filled the huge gap in entertainment of that kind in the Wigston area. Having been a well-known singer and dancer before her marriage, under her maiden name of Joan Humberstone, the now Mrs Joan White decided to set up a ballet and dance school to pass on the benefits of her well-earned knowledge to the young children in the Wigston and surrounding areas. After a while Mrs White decided to put on public shows to give the children more experiences and to let the parents of the children see how much they had learnt and progressed.

So, in the Summer, The Magna Sunbeams, as she now called them for performances purposes did a few Variety Shows but the main showcase for the youngsters were the Winter Pantomimes. At the beginning public reaction to the pantomimes was modest in both, total of pupils and shows. Realising this and always looking forward for progress, Joan White asked a member of a prominent Wigston family who lived nearby, Laurence Wilfred Broughton, known as 'Wilf', if he'd contribute some original, good, songs for the pantomimes, starting in 1955. Not knowing music, Wilf, who lived only a few doors away from me, contacted me and asked me to put them down on manuscript for him. This I did but as he'd only done a few he suggested, to which Mrs White agreed, that I also contributed a few songs for this first pantomime with original music, and I, too, wrote a few.

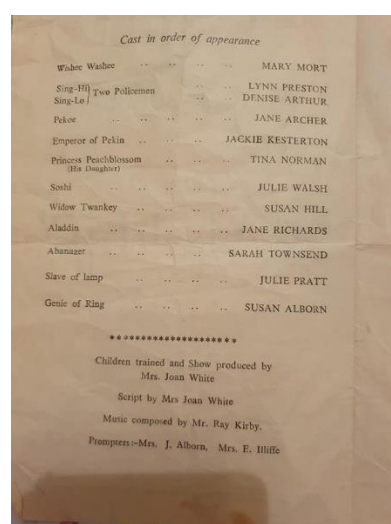
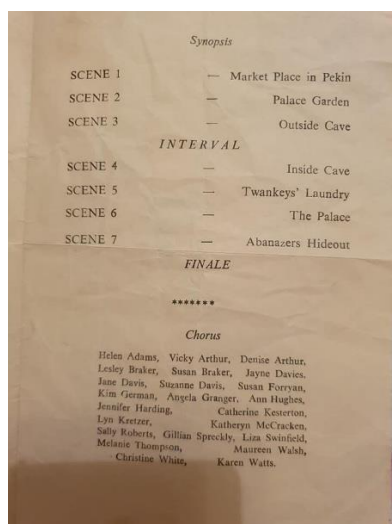
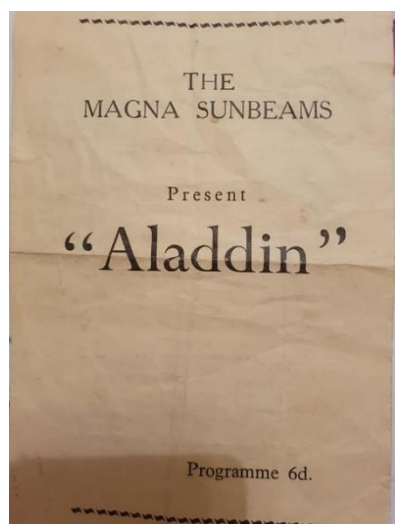
The pantomime was *Cinderella*, script by Joan White. I see from my records that Pauline Burdett and Christine Wood were the ugly Sisters in it. The pantomime had a modest reception, from the public so for the next one, which was to be *Dick Whittington*, featuring Janet Williamson as Dick Whittington and Maureen Shephard as 'his' Cat. Joan White asked Wilf, who had been a locally successful 'Stand-Up' comic before the 1939 War, if he could write comedy into her script to which he agreed while still writing a few songs for the pantomime.

By now I was writing the bulk of the songs as different types and styles of songs and music were needed. It was noticeable that more pupils were now joining the ballet and dance classes, which meant more dancers on stage and more

atmosphere which was conveyed to the larger and more enthusiastic audience under the spell of the compact dancing and specially written songs and music. Wilf Broughton's *The Grenadiers*, *Dance of The Parasols* and my *Sitting on A Fence* plus *Keep Fit Girls* chorus line song were loudly applauded. It was obvious after this that as well as the smaller ones, larger stages and halls were needed to show off the rapidly growing and popular form, of entertainment on view, Church, halls were not as a whole, built for large scale productions.

The next pantomime, *Aladdin* saw further changes under our new status as things were beginning to snowball. Wilf Broughton took over the script writing with comedy included and I was given the task of writing all of the special music required, Wilf being too busy to write any. In *Aladdin*, Pauline Burdett was Aladdin, Joan White's daughter, Kathryn, Widow Twankey and Mary Kirby Abanaza the wicked uncle. Around this time the Summer Shows were beginning to get more attention and audiences and dates, and the shows always contained excerpts and songs from, the previous pantomime and a short play or two written by Wilf Broughton. It was from then, on that the three pantomimes *Dick Whittington*, *Cinderella* and *Aladdin* were rotated year by year with new material added to the script and new songs alongside the well-loved and still demanded old ones, all original stuff.

The programmes for each pantomime or variety show were quite good and explanatory, being three pence (3d) in the old money and admission fees were 2sh for adults (10p today) and 1sh for pensioners and children (5p in today's money). The cost of hiring church rooms and school halls was reasonable enough so that charities profited from the shows as it was always a full house.





In the 1960s the Magna Sunbeams really 'took off' as word of mouth and local media began to praise in glowing terms the pantomimes, the young performers and all concerned in the shows; even the oldest inhabitants of Wigston said that nothing like this had ever been seen before in Wigston or in Leicester in their lifetime – such originality. Soon, Abington, Bushloe and Guthlaxton Schools had to be hired to hold all those who wanted to see the pantomimes. In February of 1963 in the space of two weeks, the pantomime *Dick Whittington* at Abington for the Muscular Dystrophy Research Fund and then at Guthlaxton for their School funds drew a total of 700 people! No wonder Joan White viewed this pantomime as the most successful of them all.

During the 21 years Mrs White ran the shows, I was concerned in 15 of those years, nearly every known charity and organisation, had been helped, often saved, thanks to the Magna Sunbeams. No appeal for help and shows were ever turned down, and many hospitals were visited on request. I remember us going to Stretton Hall and getting a tremendous reception from patients, nurses and staff. Afterwards the matron wrote to me asking if I could send her the vocal and piano score (manuscript) of the Sunbeams finale song *Cheerio* (Until We Meet Again) as the patients loved it so much and enjoyed singing it, she wanted to make it their signature song. Naturally, I was only too pleased to oblige. It is worth mentioning that one of the songs in that year's show, *When You Wish Beneath a Star* reached

the final 6 in the Songwriters' Guild of Great Britain's Song Contest (now the British Academy of Songwriters, Composers and Authors - B.A.S.C.A.) of 1964.

By now, too, the songs and compositions for the pantomimes came to a total of 28 for each show, comprising tap, ballet, join-in songs, comedy, ballads, chorus line ones, descriptive, even classical pieces, a vast range of lyrics and music and styles. All the enormous popularity and success of the pantomimes meant much hard work for Joan White, the mothers of the children, not forgetting some of the fathers, and, of course, for the children, ranging in age, roughly, from 4-years-old to 15-years-old. This also applied to the costumes, to fit the higher standing of the shows. I remember once myself co-writing the script, composing all the songs and music, making the props, working the curtains and also the lights, white and coloured. My collection of programmes, tickets, posters and photographs plus newspaper cuttings show clearly how the Magna Sunbeams momentum rolled on each succeeding year. I also have a cassette tape of an *Aladdin* public performance; a copy of the script for this, co-written with Joan White, in which Jane Richards took the part of Aladdin, Susan Mill was Widow Twankey and Sarah Townsend as Abanaza.

In 1962, Wilf Broughton resigned and I co-wrote the script with Joan on *Aladdin* and *Cinderella*, but in 1964 owing to health problems I was unable to carry on with the Sunbeams, who performed *Beauty And The Beast*, *Peter Pan* and *Red Riding Hood* in my absence, scripts by Joan White, including a few of my songs from previous shows but containing mostly popular songs of that time and published classical pieces. I returned to the *Aladdin* pantomimes of 1967-68 and the following *Dick Whittington*. A reoccurrence of my illness meant that I took no part, except for the odd song or two, in what was to be the final pantomime of the Magna Sunbeams' long and record-breaking career, *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs* as Mrs Joan White had reluctantly announced that she was giving up her work with the juvenile troop owing to pressure of business. The principal parts in this final pantomime were taken by Gillian Spreckley (Snow White), Jackie Kestarton (the Queen) and the Seven Dwarfs were played by Sally Roberts, Catherine Chesterton, Melanie Thompson, Susan Braker, Christine White, Kathryn McCracken, and Jayne Davis. The role of the Prince was taken by Lynn Preston.

Thus, after a little over 21 years since the birth of the Magna Sunbeams it all came to an end. Many of the pupils moved over to the Wigston School of Dancing run by Mrs Gwen Spencer and occasionally Joan White helped out there, especially at the piano. (Joan White is now Mrs Tom Sketchley). The full and complete story of the Magna Sunbeams would fill a lengthy book, though I doubt if it will ever be written, so maybe this short version will record its place in local history.



'Peter Pan', 1964

The tailpiece to this article is that in honour of my work for and with the Sunbeams, a Concert Tribute was organised by the late Hubert Mogford, who did so much to publicise the Sunbeams, on 18 October 1978 at Abington High School with pupils of Mrs Gwen Spencer's Wigston School Of Dancing performing extracts from some of the pantomimes I had written for during the lifetime of the Magna Sunbeams. The dancing to some of the ballet type music I'd written was particularly outstanding, as was the lady pianist. I felt proud to have been a part of something we may never see the like again. Joan White was in the audience and, like me, she must have been close to tears as the packed house rose and applauded at the end of the show, it was as much for her as it was for me. I still have a copy of that programme.

Since then, I have moved on into other musical spheres, including the music for an American Musical in 1985, which, was published and performed, but that is another story except to say that the experience gained in that long period of time with the Magna Sunbeams was a great help in that respect. I'm sure that the Sunbeams will live on in the hearts of all those concerned in it, as it will in those who saw and heard it. Some of the young performers of those days are now mothers themselves, even grandmothers, what a tale they can tell their own children.

Raymond P. Kirby

Ray Kirby died on 18th April 2007 at his home after a long illness. He joined the GWHS in 1991/92. He was well known locally for writing songs and music for bands, music societies and pantomimes. He was very much involved with the Magna Sunbeams dance group, who put on variety shows and pantomimes. He helped from their formation in the late 1940s until 1964 when he had to give up due to ill health. In 1969 when the founder retired many of the children joined Gwen Spencer's Dancing School. Ray wrote a history of the Magna Sunbeams which featured in the Society's Transaction No: 82.

Anglican Young Peoples Association (AYPA)

During the 1940s, the Anglican Young Peoples Association (AYPA) was formed at St Thomas' Church, South Wigston, and with the Dramatic Society (STADS) put on very good productions. The Anglican Young Peoples Association, or AYPAs as it was known, touched the lives of many teenagers and young adults in Wigston during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. It originated in Canada and was brought to St Thomas' Church in 1948 by the Revd. Ken Pickett, a curate who had previously served in Canada. Soon afterwards, Father Henry Hughes, curate of All Saints, formed a branch in Wigston Magna. AYPAs had four principles for its programmes: Worship, Work, Fellowship and Edification. Worship was part of the programme and over 30 members would attend Evensong on a Sunday evening. They would go for a walk together into the countryside afterwards, calling into a public house for refreshment on the way. AYPAs members kept the Church and its garden clean and tidy.

At St Thomas' amateur dramatics with an annual pantomime were an important activity. Alec Essam and Bob Hawkins are still remembered for their lead roles in the pantomime. They had the audience in fits of uncontrollable laughter throughout. Ballroom dancing featured high in the programme in the Church Hall, and it is not surprising that couples now celebrating their 50th and 60th wedding anniversaries will say "We met in the AYPAs". Edification featured "Corporate, Mental Action" study together. This was often clergy led. AYPAs members were key to many Church activities with Elsie Starmer leading a thriving Sunday School at St Thomas'. It is not surprising that AYPAs Members followed vocations, Peter Canner and Herbert Fox were ordained and became parish priests. Dorothy Gillam and Janet Perry became teachers. Alan Veasey became a partner in a firm of accountants. Roger Blinstoyle ended up a distinguished Professor of Physics and was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society. Alix Matthews, now in her 90s, will look back to "the great AYPAs days".

AYPAs had the term "young" in its name, but its members would be active in their mid-thirties. Later "Junior AYPAs", led by the seniors was formed for the under-16s. AYPAs was an international organisation throughout the Anglican Communion. UK branches had links with branches in Ghana, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. It was self-governing. In the Leicester Diocese each branch elected two members to the Leicester Diocesan Council. Elsie Starmer, Peter Holmes and Colin Towell, then from Braunstone St Peter's Branch, served on the Diocesan Council. There were also Provincial Councils in Canterbury, York, Wales and Scotland. The All-Britain Council was the final body. All held residential weekends and weeks in different parts of the country. The Regions and Dioceses had AYPAs chaplains who advised on programmes and activities. From St Thomas' Peter Holmes served for four years as All-Britain President and the Revd. Dr Harold Lockley became Chairman of the All-Britain Council.

AYPA published service books and a four volume study series “Unto a full-grown man”.

From 1951 to 1958 The Revd. Dr Harold Lockley was the vicar at St Thomas’, and he was a strong supporter of the organisation. Soon after a branch was started at All Saints in Wigston Magna by Father Henry Hughes. Pantomimes in the former Constitutional Hall written and directed by Fr Hughes are a fond memory of one Society member today. Very often events were tied into the churches calendar. Plays were produced, usually at Easter, and carol singing organised in the streets at Christmas. Gardening groups were organised in the churchyard or to help an elderly person and decorating was undertaken. Speakers could be on any subject much as we have at our Historical Society and even sometimes on a religious or bible study basis.

The St Thomas’ branch also met informally in the church hall and the Clarence pub on a Sunday evening. In the summer there were trips in overcrowded members’ cars to country pubs such as the Cock Inn at Peatling Magna. Because of the Diocesan and national links there were opportunities to meet members from other branches, and this often led to cross city personal relationships, and indeed I met my own wife, Sue, at a joint sports day held on Blaby Road Park for the Leicester branches. We went further afield to evening meetings in Cambridge and Wimbourne and for weekend events in Grantham, Bournemouth, Stourbridge and Leigh on Sea as well as for weeklong summer holidays in Winchester and Durham, the latter being reached on my trusty Lambretta scooter. These especially were amazing times with many characters attending who will never be forgotten.

With all this going for it, why did AYPAs come to an end in the 1970s? There seem to be two main reasons. Youth Leadership was becoming a professional activity requiring training on a par with teacher training. AYPAs members had other jobs and professions. The Leaders were natural leaders. The Church of England appointed Diocesan youth chaplains to oversee youth work. And the role of the “amateur” was no longer there. A further reason was that the AYPAs Councils tended to debate the matters before the Church Assembly (the body before General Synod) and not always reach the same conclusions. As an example, women would have been ordained priest in AYPAs thinking long before they were accepted in the wider church. In a time of National Service, many servicemen found an AYPAs branch a familiar gathering wherever they were stationed.




AYPA group with Harold Lockley vicar early 1950's South Wigston



AYPA Jack & the Beanstalk's cast February 1953, South Wigston

FRIDAY


A.Y.P.A.
PRESENTS

"Jack and the Beanstalk"

A PANTOMIME IN THREE ACTS
— AT —
St. Thomas' Church Hall
FRIDAY AND SATURDAY,
13th & 14th February, 1953 . .
AT 7.30 P.M.

ADMISSION BY PROGRAMME:
Adults 2/- Children 1/-

PROCEEDS IN AID OF ST. THOMAS' APPRAI, FUNI

PRODUCER ...	THE REV. STANLEY T. PURC
STAGE MANAGER ...	ARTHUR WRU
PIANIST ...	GRAHAM PEAR
WARDROBE SUPERVISION ...	ELSIE STAR
SCREVEY ...	MEMBERS OF A.Y.

PROGRAMME

Cast in order of speaking:

Jack ...	FRED BIRD
Jill (Jack's Girl Friend) ...	BERYL ANDREWS
Dame Spratt (Jack's Widowed Mother) ...	COLIN CLARK
Nellie the Cow ...	GERALD STACEY ERIC NORMAN
Arfa Mo (Jill's Father) ...	ALEC ESSAM
Sid (the Skid Kid) ...	KINGSLEY SMITH
O. U. Twister (the Junk Man) ...	WALTER SHERLOCK
Chee-Kee-Chops (the Giant's Chinese Houskeeper)	ENID GOODWIN
Rufus (the Giant) ...	DEREK BARNWELL
Chorus ...	A.Y.P.A. MEMBERS

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES:

Act 1

SCENE 1—Village Green	- Morning
" 2—Road to Market	- Later same morning
" 3—Village Green	- Afternoon same day
" 4—Village Green	- Next morning

INTERVAL

Act 2

SCENE 1—Giant's Castle	- Later same morning
" 2—Giant's Castle	- Next morning
" 3—Giant's Castle	- Following day

INTERVAL

Act 3

SCENE 1—Village Green	- Same day
" 2—Village Green	- Later same day

Jack & the Beanstalk programme

Edited by Steve Marquis from an article on the AYPa by Colin Towell and Colin Hames in 2017, based on notes written by the Revd. Peter Holmes in 2014.

Wigston Magna and South Wigston Adult Schools

Two very important local institutions for facilitating and providing wide variety of amateur cultural and social activities for over five decades were the two Wigston Adult Schools. The Adult School Movement took off in Leicestershire during the three decades prior to the outbreak of World War One in 1914. Virtually every village had its own school, usually in new purpose-built buildings. Regular pantomimes, plays, musical performances, even operettas, many accompanied by Charlie Moore's Adult School Band, featured in the years before World War Two. During the 1940's and 50's their main activity was the showing of films and allowing other organisations to use their facilities. Both adult schools were the victims of television and ceased to exist by the end of the 1950s.

For more on these adult schools see *Wigston – Window of the Past*, Volume Five.



Wigston Adult School, Bull Head Street



South Wigston Adult School, Bassett Street

Wigston Operatic Society and the Grotesques

The Wigston Operatic Society was another active and popular organisation during the inter-war years. The Grotesques were a concert party during the same period.



Wigston Operatic Society, Elizabeth Bolton (left) born 1899



Wigston Operatic Society celebrating Empire Day, 1924



The *Grotesques* of Wigston Bruce Freckingham, B Clowes, Reg Humberstone, Kath Lucas, H Howard, Connie Humberstone, Ron Elliott

Edited by Steve Marquis

New House Grange Farm, Sheepy Magna

At our February meeting the speaker in his talk on Henry VII mentioned a medieval barn at Sheepy Magna just a few miles from the site of the Battle of Bosworth which dates from the period. In this article Colin Towell reflects on a GWHS visit to that barn.

Our summer trip (May 2006) this time was to New House Grange Farm, Sheepy Magna. We gathered in the tithe barn for a welcome glass of wine, or home-made elderflower cordial, from our hosts Mr & Mrs Poulson. Then a look at a display of the history of the farm, in photographs, maps and documents. We took a walk outside and looked across the fields to get an idea of the location of the farm in relation to other features in the landscape. Back in the barn, Rita Poulson told us something of the history of the farm which was bought by Mr Poulson's grandfather in 1945. It had in Medieval times, together with several others in the area, belonged to an order of Cistercian Monks from Merevale Abbey. The farms would have been managed by lay brethren who lived on site and were generally established to be within a day's travelling distance of their abbey, which in this case was about six miles away, the Abbey being in Warwickshire, to the west of Atherstone. It was established from one in Reading and endowed by Robert Devereaux, Earl Ferrers. The churches of Mancetter and Orton were connected with the Abbey. The most notable Cistercian Abbey in England is Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire. The farm's huge tithe barn is 143 feet long by 37 feet wide. It has seven board trusses and six bays and is constructed with vast timber supports which rest on stone blocks about one foot clear of the ground. The roof may originally have been thatched, and there is evidence it was once slated. The brick infill of the walls is of more recent date, originally these would have been timber clad. Test borings of the timber dates the barn's construction to c.1506. At the farm yard end, attached to the barn and accessed by a stone staircase, is a Reeve's office which has tally marks scratched in the woodwork. Two doors leading from this office open into the barn about 12 feet from the ground, giving the Reeve a good view of what was happening inside. Following the dissolution of the monasteries the property came into private hands, with the Curzon, Moore (from Appleby), and Vincent families and the Catholic Church being later owners. Rita has done much research at Warwickshire Record Office and seeks other relevant documents through the internet. The Vice Chairman, Mike Forryan, then thanked Mr. & Mrs. Poulson very much for a really fascinating evening, before we went on to the Black Horse in the village for a very pleasant supper.

Newhouse Grange Barn

Newhouse Grange was a grange of nearby Merevale Abbey. The great barn, built in 1506, is probably the largest in Leicestershire. It is 44 metres long and 11 metres high. It is a timber-framed aisled barn with six major trusses dividing it into five bays with a half bay at each end. It has a tiled, half-hipped roof with gablets but may originally have been thatched.

The half bay at the eastern end is cased in stone and has a loft at first floor level which may have been for the Reeve or Granger. Some of it is now encased in brick and it is surrounded by modern farm buildings, so it is difficult to get a view of the outside, but the interior is magnificent. Many modifications have been made over the years, the latest being walls between the bays to facilitate grain storage, but the medieval timber frame is still almost complete with arched braces to the aisle posts and raked struts supporting an upper collar.



Merevale Abbey's Great Barn, built in 1506,

Colin Towell

Wigston 1825 – Strikes and Riots

During the first five decades of the 19th century Leicestershire framework knitters (which at the time made up half the county's workforce) were engaged in an existential fight to preserve their way of life. The years from 1815 until 1830 saw the most intense period in that struggle with regular strikes, lockouts, even riots and Luddite-like attacks on the worst employers' workshops. Two hundred years ago Wigston experienced the most violent incidents in the stockingers bitter battle for survival.



In May and June 1825, Wigston Magna and surrounding villages' framework knitters were involved in yet another long-drawn-out strike. After weeks of hardship, feelings were running high with things coming to a head in May that year. Trouble erupted when one rogue employer, William Thompson in Newton Harcourt, tried to restart his frames. Led by George Hort ¹ "a great crowd of persons" (*Leicester Chronicle*, 18/6/1825, in the report on Hort's trial) attacked Thompson's workshop and destroyed his frames when he refused to stop work. Hort received six weeks hard labour as a result alongside two others who received a month.

The repeal of the Combination Laws in the previous year meant workers could now form legal trade unions, though most of these provisions were removed twelve months later. The recently formed Leicestershire Framework Knitters Union (which is believed to have emerged in 1817 and was one of, if not, the first trade union to be formed in the country) led by its new leader George Hort, quickly made their underground organisation official and marked their entrance by calling on its members to 'turnout' once again during June 1824, resulting in strikes across the county from Loughborough in the north to Hinkley in the south. As part

of their campaign, regular rallies were held in Market Square, Leicester. On Saturday 5 June, the *Leicester Chronicle* covering these rallies, reported that “On Wednesday, [2nd June] their numbers were much increased by the arrival of various divisions from Blaby, Wigston, Glenfield, Anstey etc. etc., among them upwards of 200 women.”. This strike action seems to have forced a temporary retreat by the employers who agreed some moderate wage increases. Industrial peace, however, didn’t last very long and the stockingers of the Wigston area once again came out on strike in the spring of 1825.

The attack on Thompson’s workshop was just one of several similar incidents in the surrounding area during that month. On the same day as Hort’s trial other framework knitters were also in the dock. For example, Richard Taylor of Blaby and John Freer of Wigston Magna were sentenced to two months hard labour for carrying and destroying an effigy of Ann Deacon, wife of the unpopular Wigston hosier, Joseph Deacon. John Irish and Mary Lodge were found guilty of what we would call today ‘violent picketing’. Irish received one month and Lodge two weeks hard labour. Even two of my relatives, Thomas Jordan and his son, also Thomas, of Ratby, were sentenced to two months hard labour for threatening violence against their employer, William Wigglesworth, demanding he pay them more. The *Leicester Chronicle* reported that the magistrates were occupied for five hours with these trials whilst outside the court “hundreds of framework knitters” demonstrated in support of those indicted inside.

In the following month, on 8 June, a riot broke out in Wigston Magna when William Thompson tried to have new replacement frames delivered under the escort of special constables. Thompson described in court what happened as they passed through the village: “...that on arriving in Wigston they were met by 12 or 13 hundred persons shouting and making use of the most violent language, at the head of whom appeared the female defendant (Elizabeth Vann) who seemed to take a very conspicuous part.” During this confrontation, William Vann was accused of driving his cart at the wagon carrying the frames and along with others attacked the guarding constables. William Vann, John Vann, Elizabeth Vann, Thomas Cleaver and Joseph Ivett were charged with causing a riot and assaulting William Tabberer, George Taylor, and others. Much to the surprise and annoyance of the *Leicester Chronicle* (16/7/1825) the jury found the defendants not guilty. Juries often found indicted framework knitters innocent, reflecting the widespread public sympathy for their desperate plight.

On Monday 13 June, a mass demonstration was held in Infirmary Square, Leicester, in support of the strike (which was now widespread across the region) and for those who had been recently sent to the prison treadmills. “There was a most numerous attendance amounting to some thousands of men, women and children of whom a great number appeared to have come from surrounding villages.” (*LC*, 18/6/1825). Hort, who was still in prison, figured prominently amongst the speeches including one speaker who said: “Don’t go to work till

George Hort has done grinding corn!” A sentence of ‘hard labour’ usually meant long pointless hours walking on recently introduced prison treadmills.

The last recorded Luddite-like attack in Leicestershire occurred in Wigston Magna and was reported in the *Leicester Chronicle* on 12 June 1830, when a group of unknown assailants burned down the framework knitting workshop of Thomas Harrison. This action occurred during yet another strike and the bitterness that led to this attack might be explained by these Wigston Parish Vestry (the body responsible for administering poor-relief) minuted decisions: -

“Resolved that ... the Vestry cannot discriminate which of those men were out of employ in consequence of the strike are proper objects of relief they have therefore determined not to give relief to any of them.” 8 June 1830.

“Resolved that no relief be given to any pauper in consequence of the strike unless by finding them work.” 17 June 1830.



During the 19th century Wigston was full of framework knitters' cottages like the one above.

The struggle of the Leicestershire stockingers is covered in my book: *Luddism, Chartism and the Leicestershire framework knitters – A Descent into Hell*. Although this book has sold out, a PDF version is available for free from stephen.marquis@ntlworld.com

Steve Marquis