

# GREATER WIGSTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

White Gate Lodge, 97 Newton Lane, Wigston Magna, Leics.



## BULLETIN 116

1<sup>st</sup> MARCH 2020



This is an artist's impression of the last coach leaving Market Harborough for Manchester in 1837 and was part of the splendid talk given to the Society by Len Holden entitled 'The decline of the coaching trade in Market Harborough'.



## **PROGRAMME OF MEETINGS – MARCH TO DECEMBER 2020**

### **Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> March 2020**

No Greater Enemy: Leicester & the Influenza Epidemic of 1918/19 – Cynthia Brown  
7.30p.m. Wigston College Concert Hall, Station Road, Wigston. LE18 2DS

### **Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> April 2020**

In Search of Daniel Lambert – Philippa Massey  
7.30p.m. Wigston College Concert Hall, Station Road, Wigston. LE18 2DS

### **Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> May 2020**

The History of Milestones – Helen Crabtree  
7.30p.m. Wigston College Concert Hall, Station Road, Wigston. LE18 2DS

### **Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> June 2020 (note change of day)**

Visit to Lamport Hall, Northamptonshire  
With refreshments, times to be advised

### **Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> July 2020 (extra event)**

Special 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebrations  
To be held at Wigston College Concert Hall, Station Road, Wigston. LE18 2DS  
Details to be advised

### **Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

Afternoon guided walk in Oakham – Jill Collinge, Blue Badge Guide, to be followed by pub meal  
Time to be advised

### **Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

The Magic of Radio – Bridget Blair from Radio Leicester  
7.30p.m. Wigston College Concert Hall, Station Road, Wigston LE18 2DS

### **Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> October 2020**

The Country Railway Station – Brian Johnson  
7.30p.m. Wigston College Concert Hall, Station Road, Wigston LE18 2DS

### **Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> November 2020**

Foxton Locks & the Inclined Plane – Mary Matts  
7.30p.m. Wigston College Concert Hall, Station Road, Wigston LE18 2DS

### **Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> December 2020**

Christmas Party & Quiz with nibbles & drinks – Singalonga Entertainment with “Banjo Dez”  
7.30p.m. Wigston College Concert Hall, Station Road, Wigston LE18 2DS

The Bulletin is published three times a year in March, July and November. Articles etc., (which are always welcome) should be submitted to the Editor, Hannah Evans, three clear weeks before publication date to [bulletineditor@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk](mailto:bulletineditor@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk).

Society's website: [www.wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk](http://www.wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk)  
Chairman: Mike Forryan's email: [chairman@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk](mailto:chairman@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk)



## **NOVEMBER 2019 MEETING** **THE GUNPOWDER PLOT**

For our November meeting we welcomed Sally Henshaw who gave a most interesting and detailed account of Guy Fawkes and the gunpowder plot.

Guy, born 13/4/1570 in York, was the second child in a family of four siblings. His father died when he was eight after which his mother married a recusant Catholic (from the Latin word recusare meaning “to refuse”). It referred to a Roman Catholic who did not attend the services of the Church of England as was required by law). When Guy grew up he converted to Catholicism, sold the estate in Clifton, Yorks he had inherited from his father and left for Europe.

He fought well in the siege of Calais in 1596 and by 1603 had been recommended for a captaincy. That year he travelled to Catholic Spain to seek support for a Catholic rebellion in England, but without success. It was at this time that he adopted the Italian version of his name, Guido. He returned to England in 1604 having written a memorandum that the new King James I (a protestant who became king that year) was “a heretic who intended to have all the Papist sect driven out of England”. He joined a small group of English Catholics, led by Robert Catesby, who planned to assassinate the King by blowing up Parliament and replace him with the monarch’s nine year old daughter Princess Elizabeth.

There were ten main plotters – Robert Catesby, John & Christopher Wright, Thomas & Robert Wyntour, Thomas Percy, Guido Fawkes, John Grant, Robert Keys & Thomas Bates (Catesby’s servant). Also three more who were recruited for their money & horses – Francis Tresham, Sir Everard Digby & Ambrose Rookwood & a further three helpers John Wyntour & Humphrey & Stephen Littleton. Our speaker thoughtfully handed out family trees which showed that all the plotters except Guido were in some way related to the same few connected families. Six were members of the Throckmorton family whose descendants still live at the family home, Coughton Court in Warwickshire. This property is now managed by the National Trust and has much information about the happenings of the time and where a priest hole has also been discovered.

The group held secret meetings during 1605 to form their plan of action. Some of them had specific duties such as Ambrose Rookwood who was responsible for purchasing the gun powder, and Sir Everard Digby who was to kidnap Princess Elizabeth, arrange a marriage for her and declare her the queen.

Thomas Percy gained access to a house in London that belonged to John Whynniard, Keeper of the King’s wardrobe. It is claimed the group attempted to dig a tunnel from there to the Houses of Parliament, however as no evidence of this has been discovered it may not have been the case. The plotters did however definitely lease a storeroom which also belonged to Whynniard. It was filthy, unused, and directly underneath the House of Lords, providing an excellent place to store and use the 36 barrels of gunpowder they had acquired. However in late July the ever present threat of the plague delayed the opening of Parliament until the 5<sup>th</sup> November.

As the famous date approached a few of the by then 30 conspirators became concerned for the safety of fellow Catholics who would be present at the opening. Lord Monteagle received an anonymous letter warning him to stay away. Despite hearing of the letter via Monteagle’s servant the conspirators resolved to continue, believing it to be a hoax. Monteagle’s suspicions had however been aroused and he showed the letter to King James who ordered a search of the cellars. Fawkes who had taken up his station late the previous night was found in possession of matches and arrested. The barrels of gun



powder were discovered hidden under piles of firewood and coal. He suffered the usual punishment for the time and at least eleven of the other conspirators were hunted down and suffered a similar fate in late 1605 and 1606.

Lord Monteagle's full name was William Parker, 4<sup>th</sup> Baron Monteagle. He was a Catholic and was married to Elizabeth nee Tresham, sister of Francis Tresham, one of the conspirators, who was thus his brother in law. His situation must have caused a huge conflict of interest.

Tricia Berry

## **DECEMBER 2019 MEETING** **EDITH PIAF AND CHRISTMAS QUIZ**

For our first Christmas meeting at Wigston College about 80 members and visitors welcomed Julie Ede to talk about Edith Piaf. Julie had previously talked at a Society meeting in 2018 on the subject of Eleanor of Castille.

Edith was born on 19 December 1915 in a street gutter in Paris, her mother was Annetta Miallard, better known as Line Marsh, a street singer and circus performer, and her father was Louis Gassion a contortionist. She was named after Edith Cavell, the British nurse who had been executed by the Germans two months earlier for assisting French soldiers. She was fed on red wine, not milk! Edith was given to a relative to be brought up in a Paris brothel and at the age of four was taken to a convent to help cure an eye defect and be weaned off wine. She returned to the brothel but later, aged 14, went to live with her father in a circus where she first began to sing in public. Louis Gassion was said to have fathered 19 children with various women but he was a friend of Simone Bertaut who claimed to be one of Edith's half-sisters. In 1933 Edith had a child who died aged two years, but Simone got her a top part in a show and Edith adopted the first of several stage names.

Eventually she met Louis Leplee who gave her a job in his night club and adopted the name Piaf which was Leplee's nick name for her and meant in English 'the waif sparrow' (she was only 4ft 8ins). Although she suffered from stage fright and created her own black dress which was to become her trademark, the crowds poured in to hear her sing. She was implicated in Leplee's eventual murder and this caused her career to collapse. She tried to start again in a distant coastal port and then returned to Paris only to be ignored. She became well known with the military and as a result became a drinker again but was still ignored in Paris.

Eventually she became a lover of Raymond Asso but could not break into the Paris scene. She met up with Marguerite Monnot, a composer but she preferred men and wine! War broke out and Raymond was called up so Edith again contacted her half-sister Simone and met up with Paul Chan, a chef. He tried to improve her lifestyle. Eventually she met Jean Cocteau who wrote a play for her which was a hit. Then, Paris fell to the Germans who reopened the clubs and bars and wanted Edith to go to sing in Germany, but she would only sing in French and so entertained French troops in P.O.W. camps.

She returned to Paris and in the spring of 1944 met Yves Montand whom she asked to marry, but then broke off the relationship when he became almost as popular as she was. In 1948 she met Marlene Dietrich in New York and met Marcel Cerdan, a champion boxer, who made her feel loved and wanted to marry her but could not as he was not divorced. It was at this time that she met the then Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip.



On her return to New York she asked Marcel to join her, but his plane crashed on the way which Edith blamed on herself and started taking pills and drinking. She became a street singer and sank to great depths again. Eventually she met Charles Aznavour. Unfortunately a car crash caused her so much pain she took morphine and became addicted to it. But she met Jacques Pills and married him, her first husband, in 1952, She had wanted a church wedding, the ceremony was eventually held in an amazing setting in New York. She was cured of morphine addiction but returned to alcohol. She toured the States and was said to have earned 300 million francs in royalties, she said she would die if she ever stopped singing. She spent time in Stockholm but became very ill and rushed back to Paris to recover.

She had a number of affairs and one man, Charles Dumont, wrote the song 'Non, je ne regrette rien' (No I have no regrets). In 1962 she met Theo Lamboukos, a hairdresser 20 years her junior, when she performed from the Eiffel Tower, and married him. Again she became ill but managed to carry on performing during the bad winter of 1962/63. Edith went to live in the South of France but died in Grasse on 10 October 1963. She was devoted to her country and her audience.

The evening continued with drinks and nibbles and the popular pork pies as well as a raffle with a number of brilliant prizes. After the traditional excellent quiz, concocted by our Chairman Mike Forryan, we all wished each other a Happy Christmas, and wended our way home.

## **JANUARY 2020 MEETING** **THE RISE & DECLINE OF THE COACHING TRADE IN MARKET** **HARBOROUGH**

For our first meeting in the New Year, a record, we had our highest ever number, one hundred, members and visitors to welcome Dr Len Holden to talk about the coaching trade in Market Harborough. Len is Chair of the Harborough Historical Society.

In fact his talk ranged beyond the boundaries of the town stretching to London and to Leicester and all points north. Despite the romantic view of coach travel we all see on Christmas cards and chocolate boxes, the reality is that it was a dreadful experience and one to be avoided. Daniel Defoe, in 1724, said that roads north of Dunstable were of very soft clay and in Leicester even worse. Horses were known to die because of the difficult conditions. Although what we now know as the A6 and usually named London Road in all towns and villages on its route, the former A50 Welford Road was also a popular route to the capital from Leicester, the A6 becoming more popular as Harborough grew in size and the road was made more accessible through the town. The roads were so bad the passengers sometimes had to alight and push the coach and of course there was always the threat of the highwayman, Wigston man, George Davenport being the local culprit. There were so many problems with coach travel that for some journeys local people would often walk, when distances seemed not to be a problem. People also went on pilgrimages over long distances lasting several days. Freight was carried in wagons with very wide wheel rims and many horses, also by packhorse with the freight on their backs, hence the low parapets of some bridges.

In 1555, the Statute of Labour required parishes to force residents to mend the roads without pay. Then in 1722 the Turnpike Act enabled companies to be set up to build roads of which the A6 was one. There was a second Act in 1746 which required companies to make a profit and so tolls were introduced, these were so unpopular that there were riots. There are still signs of the old toll houses to be seen on the routes today. The turnpikes changed the route from the A50 to the A6 which caused more traffic round the back of what we know as Kibworth Harcourt today, there was a fatal accident which resulted in the modern route being constructed, it must have been the first bypass. Floods



resulted in stranded coaches with passengers being put up in village pubs. Tolls were increased during popular travel times and a further Turnpike Act in 1767 required the provision of milestones.

In 1784 the first mail coach service commenced based on a timetable, at that time it was taking two days to travel from London to Leicester, this was reduced to one day with the improvements brought about by the turnpikes. The mail coaches often carried an armed guard and other road users were expected to give way with nothing holding the mail up.

There were 64 pubs in Harborough at one time or another which became very busy on market days. The main pubs were the Kings Head; the Angel; the Three Swans; the George, now demolished; the Talbot, now the Wild Wood restaurant and the Bell where Oliver Cromwell stayed after Naseby. In the 1760s there were six coach firms operating from Harborough with there being 20 coaches from Manchester and Leeds to London each day, this was an 18 hour trip with the fare being 40 shillings inside and 20 shillings outside, clearly not a cheap form of travel.

However, of course coach travel by road gave way to coach travel by rail which meant that many experienced people lost their jobs, it needed experts to change horses and get the coach on its way, perhaps like today's racing cars changing tyres. The railway arrived in Harborough in 1809 and killed the coach trade to London almost immediately. Before this freight traffic was being carried more efficiently on canals which often bypassed towns. As a result of all this employment, Harborough became wealthy and stone and brick houses replaced wooden structures. Pubs began selling gifts to travellers (what's new today?) with stilton cheese, Melton Mowbray pork pies, Bakewell tarts and Pontefract cakes all being popular in their areas. The coaches themselves had names such as Peveril of the Peak; the Flying Machine; the Courier; The Telegraph and The Regulator. Following the demise of the coaching trade, factories sprung up in Harborough to provide employment and wealth again.

An altogether very informative and entertaining talk, well presented, to start the year off.

Colin Towell

## **SOCIETY ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

### **CHAIRMAN'S REPORT 2019**

What an exciting year for the Society, with all of our normal excellent Speakers and Outings, mixed with some new challenges for the Committee.

The first of these was our outgrowing the facilities at AGE UK in Paddock Street. The maximum people allowed was 80 and this we exceeded on many occasions, so, we had the task of finding a new larger venue. Finally we found a new home at The Hall, Wigston College, Station Road, Wigston Magna where we can cater for over 200 people. Hopefully this will meet our needs for the foreseeable future.

Our second challenge was to find storage space for the Society Archive. We were helped in this task by Mark Mitchley, the Head of the Wigston Academy Trust, who has allowed us to rent a room on campus but with external access at all times. We took control of the facility in May and with a major effort by the Committee and volunteers we were able to open the Wigston Heritage Centre to the public in September.



Our next challenge was to find a new outlet in Wigston for sale of our DVD's after AGE UK decided not to sell them on our behalf. This has now been solved with Neville Chadwick photography in Long Street becoming a sponsor for the Heritage Centre and our new Wigston sales outlet.

Our other challenge was to find a replacement for our Bulletin Editor, Tricia Berry. Tricia had completed over 31 years in this role and it was with great sadness that she has relinquished the job. Hannah Evans has stepped up to the role and has taken over for the forthcoming edition with help and support from Tricia.

2020 will also be a busy year as it is the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Society and we are planning an event in July as a thank you to our members.

**I would like to thank the Committee for all their hard work during the year which has enabled the Society to achieve its targets.**

Mike Forryan Chairman.

### **GWHS MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY'S REPORT 2019**

At the start of 2019 we had 147 members. Through the year we had a few resignations for various reasons, but a record breaking 27 new members which gave us a final membership at the end of the year of 163.

Sadly 2 members passed away, namely Jean James who was a long-standing member and Brigette Simpson who only joined at the beginning of the year and died very suddenly in December.

We had 72 visitors, which was another record breaking number

So we are increasing all the time which is great news but it is making my lists longer and longer.

Linda Forryan Membership Secretary

### **TREASURER'S REPORT**

These are the accounts for the year ending 31 December 2019 showing comparisons with 2018.

#### **INCOME**

In total all three ongoing sources of income: subscriptions, visitors' fees and donations are £291.50 or 21.4% more than last year. Subscription rates were not increased (and have not been increased this year) and showed an increase in income of £113.50 from last year due to increased membership. There was an increase in visitor's fees. All donations except for a special donation of £100 to cover the cost of new audio equipment have now been shown separately against the costs of the Heritage Centre. The cost of the audio equipment is shown in 'sundry'

The takings from the Christmas evening were more than last year and resulted in a surplus over the costs



## **EXPENDITURE**

Lecture fees were over £100 less than last year. There were 8 paid lectures in the year with an average cost of £41.25 compared with an average of £54.00 in 2018.

Bulletin costs were higher in 2019 due to increased membership numbers. But it must be said that the Society receives a fantastic and very reasonably charged service from Hamilton Forms.

Both officers' expenses, costs of posting the bulletin and minor sundry expenses and Pay Pal fees were higher than last year but there was a saving on website fees.

Miscellaneous expenses of £321.50 are less than last year but include the audio equipment for use in this hall and the cost of an insurance policy which the Society has had to take out for the first time.

## **VISITS**

The visits in 2019 to Stoughton Airfield and for the conducted tour of Leicester city showed a small loss mainly because we have had to pay a deposit for a visit in 2020.

## **DVDs:**

### **Wigston with Two Steeples, Bridge to Bridge and Mix of Memories**

Total profits on DVDs this year were £805.15 (after writing off the complementary copies of the new MoM DVD) all of which has helped to fund the Heritage Centre.

There were sales of 241 DVDs in the year with the majority of 178 being the new MoM DVD which came out early in 2019. Therefore, total sales of all DVDs since the start are 1009 which means that Rainbows have received donations of £1009. During the year Age UK ceased selling the DVDs on our behalf, but until this happened, they had received £919 in donations. All DVDs are priced at £10 and may be purchased at the Heritage Centre, at Neville Chadwick photographers in Long Street or by ordering through the website.

Once again sincere thanks are offered to all involved in making and selling the DVDs.

## **CALENDARS**

Our second calendar was printed for 2020. By the end of 2019, 152 had been sold. The remaining calendars were all sold in January. All costs were written off in 2019 resulting in a profit of 218.37 which again has helped to fund the Heritage Centre.

## **HERITAGE CENTRE**

Although, the receipts and payments for the Heritage Centre take up only one line in the accounts, the transactions behind them are considerable in number. The impact of the Centre on the bottom line this year is actually a surplus of income over expenditure of just over £1000 but we have to expect one or two large bills in 2020 for work done to set up the building and its security for our use. We have received several substantial personal donations and sponsorship payments for which we offer our sincere thanks. We have also benefited from £500 in grants from O&WBC and a further £200 has been received in 2020. Apart from the cost of donations for the room hire, general expenses have been mainly about setting up the computers and purchasing sundry equipment and consumables.



## BANK BALANCES

At the end of the year we had £7201.81 in the bank compared with £6027.53 at the end of 2018. This is an increase of £1174.28 resulting from surplus income from our ongoing operating activities.

## SUMMARY

All in all, another successful year financially. This reflects a year of hard work put into organising meetings, visits, DVDs and calendars, but most importantly the setting up of the Heritage Centre for which we must thank Mike and Peter for driving this forward. All activities except the visits as explained earlier made a surplus.

The accounts have been examined and approved by Gary Davies. I have a signed copy. My thanks to him for his work and he is prepared to stand again.

I present these accounts for your approval.

Colin Towell      Treasurer

### GREATER WIGSTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY RECEIPTS AND PAYMENTS ACCOUNT YEAR ENDING 31 DECEMBER 2019

#### RECEIPTS

	<u>2019</u>	<u>2018</u>
Subscriptions	1360.00	1246.50
Visitors fees	192.00	114.00
Donation for audio equipment	100.00	
<b>total income from meetings</b>	<b>1652.00</b>	1360.50
Christmas meeting	241.65	193.00
Sale of books	8.00	153.25
Bank interest	2.00	1.25
sub total	1903.65	1708.00
Visits, this year	943.50	1118.00
	2847.15	2826.00
Donations	1420.25	90.50
DVD sales	2487.00	227.90
CD Sales	17.00	
Calendar sales	802.00	731.50
	7573.40	3875.90
<b>Brought forward:</b>		
current a/c	5194.04	4941.82
paid in and not credited	152.00	116.76
cheque not presented	-321.13	-312.80
Owed re Castor		-100.00
subs/donation recd in adv		-14.50
deposit a/c	1002.62	1001.37
	6027.53	5632.65
DVDs non cash Adj		
	<b>13600.93</b>	<b>9508.55</b>

#### PAYMENTS

	<u>2019</u>	<u>2018</u>
Lecture fees	330.00	432.10
Bulletin & Programme print	176.88	145.66
Room Hire	370.00	360.00
Officers' expenses	192.37	118.35
sundry	321.90	351.50
Website fees	50.00	71.00
<b>total running costs</b>	<b>1441.15</b>	1478.61
Christmas meeting	161.10	143.05
sub total	1602.25	1621.66
Visits, this year	1019.00	993.75
	2621.25	2615.41
Costs of Heritage Centre	1396.18	
DVDs	1789.35	252.85
commission due not yet paid bfd		-99.00
add cost of unsold DVDs bfd	40.50	45.00
add cost of w offs & comps bfd		45.00
less cost of unsold DVDs cfd	-148.00	-40.50
DVD Cost of sales	1681.85	1681.85
Cost of CDs	8.71	
Cost of Calendars	583.63	612.76
	6291.62	3431.52
<b>Carried forward:</b>		
current a/c	6874.52	5194.04
paid in and not credited		152.00
cheques not presented	-677.33	-321.13
	6197.19	
deposit a/c	1004.62	1002.62
	7201.81	6027.53
DVDs non cash Adj	107.50	49.50
	<b>13600.93</b>	<b>9508.55</b>



## **WEBMASTER'S REPORT**

The current hits on the website homepage since 5 October 2017 when the site was revamped is 14,082, which works out at 123 per week.

The total hit count to all the pages added together within the site is over 56,000, an average of almost 460 per week, showing that many viewers are bookmarking and visiting many of the pages frequently.

If you Google "Wigston History" our website now comes up as the first website listed in the index. The Heritage Centre page has had 1,600 hits in a short time and added to the page is a YouTube link to a video tour of the Centre, created recently by Mike Forryan and narrated by our good friend Dave Andrews of BBC Radio Leicester. The Heritage Centre page also has a link to our FREE search service for family history research or queries. Using the online form will send your enquiry directly to the Centre for our experts to look at for you, whether you are just starting out on your research or whether you have hit a brick wall.

The top viewed page, with over 6,000 hits, is our Photo Archive, where we have over 10,000 indexed photographs of the Wigston area. At the Heritage Centre this is also the most looked at part of our archives.

There are over 40 different pages of information on the website for viewers to look at and research the Greater Wigston area.

If there are any other assets or information pages you would like to see on the site, please let us know by contacting the Webmaster via email at: [webmaster@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk](mailto:webmaster@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk)

## **STEPPING DOWN**

I have decided after 31 years it is time to step down as bulletin editor. Chris Smart and I took over as joint editors from Ian Varey, who was one of the early members of the society. He was at the time heavily committed with the purchase and setting up of the present Framework Knitters Museum.

We started with the 1<sup>st</sup> March 1989 issue, Bulletin number 23, bashing out the contents on electric typewriters. When Chris moved away in 2002/3 I just carried on and we have now reached the 1<sup>st</sup> March 2020 issue, Bulletin number 116.

Hannah Evans has most kindly agreed to take over and I would like to thank her and trust she enjoys the job as I have done.

Tricia Berry



## WIGGY'S CHILD 1926-1939

### **THE SERMONS (Part eight of Doreen Boulter's childhood memories)**

Whit Sunday was our "Sermons" at Moat Street Methodist Church, or "Prims" as it was known to the locals. Weeks before the event, sermons frocks were feverishly sewn and new hats bought for the occasion. Hymn sheets were doled out to the scholars, practices were arranged, and we were expected to learn the hymns off by heart. The primary, meanwhile, had their hymn dinned into small unwilling ears, not only at Sunday School, but at home as well. "Jesus wants me for a Sunbeam" echoed round the house for weeks.

The wooden gallery was constructed at one side of the Church, rising high above the congregation. The choir occupied the front stalls immediately below the organ. Our places on the gallery were allocated during the last practice session. There were morning, afternoon and evening services, and after dinner, relatives arrived for the latter two services, which meant a mad rush round to prepare high tea before we left for church. I had to remove my "Sermons" frock and sit swathed in a large pinafore at mealtimes, "in case I spilled anything down it," said Mother. "Coz" used to take the mickey something awful as I sat there eating my tea.

Before I left home, Mother issued her instructions – "use your hanky and don't fiddle with your knicker leg!" Hankies pushed up your knicker leg had a disconcerting habit of disappearing at vital moments. We girls, resplendent in our "Sermons" frocks, straw bonnets trimmed with bunches of artificial cherries or forget-me-nots, black patent ankle-strap shoes, white socks and gloves; the boys, hair plastered down, hot and uncomfortable in new suits, their new shiny boots squeaking with every step, filed in procession from the schoolroom into church to take our places on the gallery.

After the first congregational hymn, at a signal from our conductor, Sunday School rose as one and we launched into our first hymn. During the sermon, the boys, sitting behind us, used to occupy their time by tipping our hats forward over our eyes or untying ribbon bows. The primary provided distraction when the sermon was overlong, small persons being led out by hand at various intervals. Older scholars were not allowed any such activities. Then came a chord on the piano; a resounding hush came over the congregation, hacking coughs were stifled as the primary lurched to their feet, and with schoolteacher mouthing the words, sang their chosen hymn.

It was during prayers that I dropped my pennies for the collection and they rattled down the gallery steps, "sit still" hissed our teacher, as red-faced scholars strove to recover my pennies. Puce faced, not daring to look across at where Mother sat "where she could see us properly, without having to look round a pillar." I just wanted the ground to open and swallow me up. As this was an unlikely event, I spent the remainder of the service in contemplation of Mother's wrath. She didn't say much, it being Sunday and relations present, just that I had brought everlasting shame upon her in church of all places!

Hellfire and Damnation in the Hereafter was the lot of all wicked people we were frequently told. Mother added her two-penn'orth by remarking at intervals, "all good people went to Heaven, and the wicked went to Hell." Maybe, but it seemed to me the wicked had a high old time of it in this world despite all the thundering from the pulpit about the Sins of the Fathers, The Flesh and The Drink!

"Why is singing and dancing sinful on Sunday?" I asked Mother, "we sing in Church, and there are band concerts in the park on Sundays," I continued, as I watched her threading long pink laces through her new corsets. Mother was concentrating on keeping the laces of equal length. The bones in her old



“stays” were poking through ‘something cruel’ so the new corsets were to be worn for Church that morning, and time was pressing.

“You do ask some questions” said Mother irritably. “Hymns are respectful, and on the Lord’s Day we sing in praise of the Almighty, as we should. As for the band concerts, well, as long as they play ‘proper’ music in keeping with the Sabbath, then it can’t do no harm,” pronounced Mother, surveying her handiwork with satisfaction.

God must have approved, as the band wasn’t struck down dead by a bolt of lightning, not in Wigston anyway!

Out with father on a decorous Sunday Walk, we made our way along Horsewell Lane, through the allotments and over the fields to “Rally” Bridge. Whether “Rally” is a local abbreviation for “Railway” Father couldn’t say. He knew Grandfather always called it “Railway” Bridge. This iron and wooden bridge spans the railway tracks between the fields, climbing the steps to the top, the planks creaked alarmingly as we walked across, nervously, as I glanced down at the gleaming rails below. I was always relieved to reach the other side. It reminded me of the wooden planks on the seaside pier, between the cracks you could see the water swirling underneath. Me, I’ve always been a firm believer in “terra-firma” under my feet!

We carried on over the fields to the canal, crossing the locks and along the towpath to Kilby Bridge. In the fields alongside the little River Sence and the canal, ladysmocks and cowslips grew in abundance. I was not allowed to pick the wildflowers or skim a pebble across the water, it being Sunday, and besides, I might get my Sermons frock dirty. Why activities permitted during the week became sinful on Sunday, were beyond me.

“Thou Shalt Not’s” far outnumbered “Thou Shalt’s” in my opinion

## **GREATER WIGSTON HERITAGE CENTRE OPEN DAY**

The Centre will host its first OPEN DAY on Saturday 14 March 2020 from 10.00am until 5.00pm. If you have not visited the Centre yet, please do come along and see what we have to offer for those with an interest in the Greater Wigston area.

On show for the first time we will have 2 photograph albums of the Bassett Street schools dated from the 1930s to the 1980s. Why not come along and see if you can recognise anyone in the pictures – you may be there!! One album has dates and some names, the other is of miscellaneous undated pictures.

On duty for the day will be our volunteer staff with knowledge of the Greater Wigston area and others with extensive family history research experience.

Take a look at the Centre online:

[www.wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk/Heritage\\_Centre.html](http://www.wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk/Heritage_Centre.html)



## WIGSTON GAS WORKS

At a public meeting in the National School Room on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1857, some discussion took place about the possibility of having a gas works for Wigston, in order to light the streets. An engineer experienced in such work gave it as his opinion that the project, both practically and financially, could be a success. Mr. Thomas Burgess then proposed that a limited liability company be formed, its capital to be £2250 to be raised in 450 shares of £5 each. It was seconded by Mr. Blunt, and another motion, with a seconder, appointed a Provisional Committee to carry out the formation of the company, to be called the Great Wigston Gas-Light and Coke Company Ltd. All over England such meetings were taking place in villages, towns and cities to take advantage of this substance called gas, not yet for fires or cookers or boilers, but for illumination, especially of the streets.

Throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries scientists had known a little about gasses and they also knew that when coal is heated in the absence of air, it liberates inflammable coal gas. Coke and tar are by-products. In 1792 William Murdock had lit a room in his house in Cornwall and later moved to Boulton and Watt's factory in Birmingham where he lit the whole building, thus increasing safety and reducing expenditure on oil and paraffin for lighting. He went on to do the same for other factories, but each time, the works installed were individual to one firm, and the idea of a large gas works with pipes under the streets carrying gas came later. By 1820, 15 of the main towns of England and Wales had their own large undertakings, and 10 years later this had become 200.

By 1889 the demand for gas had increased significantly and the works needed to be improved and their mains extended. Further capital was needed for this and it was considered expedient that the company should be dissolved and re-incorporated with additional powers, principally the authority to borrow money on mortgage. The authority of Parliament was required for this to happen and on 24<sup>th</sup> June in that year Wigston got its own Act, the Great Wigston Gas Act 1889. This Act authorised the formation of a new company which was named the Great Wigston Gas Company Ltd. The important Ordnance Survey map of 1885 shows the Gas Works in place at the bottom of what became Gas Lane.

To make coal gas, great quantities of coal were needed and this is where Peter Clowes' family comes in. The firm of Eli Bailey, a small transport business, did all the carting for the Wigston Gas Works from the day it opened until nationalisation. They moved coal to the works, coke from the works, gas piping, tar, oxide; everything needed was moved by their carts and eventually lorries.

Eli's daughter, Rhoda, married Charlie Clowes, who drove the firm's first lorry, bought in 1926. Until then, the firm had maintained a fine stable of half a dozen horses, and Charlie used to tell a tale of how one of the horses was so familiar with the route to the works that the carter could pop into a pub for a drink, leaving the horse to carry on by itself. Its load of coal would be tipped out, then it would walk back to the pub, and its carter, fully refreshed, would take over again!

When the gas works closed, sometime in the 1950s, the EMGAS magazine of 1955 gave a glowing report on the work of the firm, saying how even on a Sunday they would take a fitter to an emergency job and tackle every job a works lorry might do, even though not in the direct employment of the Gas Board, as it became.

Charlie was the father of our own member, Peter Clowes, who himself worked for many years for Eli Bailey. Peter recalls transporting 35cwts. of coal at a time from South Wigston to the gas works, with one other worker to help him. He remembers the horizontal retorts (ovens) in the days when they



were charged by hand, and how they were eventually replaced by a new retort house with new vertical hoppers, self-feeding and discharging.

The by-products were sent to a place in Derbyshire called (Peter thinks) something like Pye Bridge. It took three quarters of an hour to pump the tar into a wagon - 7 loads of it - and it had to be labelled and weighed. The tar was a source of creosote, aspirin and paint; the oxide went into dyes and paint.

All sorts of other activities took place at the gasworks as well as making gas, especially, when gas came to be used for cooking. Sometimes, Peter had to collect old gas cookers which had become greasy after much use. They were cleaned, using water from the Horsewell Lane spring and rainwater with caustic soda added. Then they were immersed in a tank of very hot water and lots of steam, which made them like new so that they could be rented out. As Peter says, "Recycling is nothing new".

During Peter's working days, most working class people were able to take advantage of gas for lighting, heating and cooking, but it had not always been so. In the early days of the gas industry, it was only moneyed people who could afford the luxury. This can be seen in a list which Brian found in one of his books. It is an advertisement for George Bower, engineer and gaswork contractor of St. Neots, the same one who advised the public meeting to go ahead and build Wigston's gasworks. Note that Wigston is mentioned in the Towns and Villages list, along with some others in Leicestershire.

What helped the gas undertakings to widen their clientele was the development of the prepayment or penny-in-the-slot meter. By having a meter, the workers could see how much gas they were using and pay for it a little at a time. When the meter was read, a card was filled in and the meter was emptied. Peter remembers that sometimes they collected the bags of coins which were placed on top of the bags of coal and taken to the gas offices. Imagine doing that now!

In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, lighting by gas began to decline, and the lamplighter gave way to the pilot light and time clock. Electric lights took over, but other uses of gas, like heating and cooking, increased. The small gas works probably had their hey-day then, but during the middle years of the century good quality coal reserves were diminishing and became expensive.

With nationalisation, some small works were not economically situated to be supplied by the grid and had to close. Wigston gasworks closed in the mid-50s and Peter went to the Leicester gasworks, where he was better paid and found the work less arduous because of certain labour saving devices to deliver the coke.

The firm of A & W Evans took over the works as a grain store, and then it became a carpet warehouse. A big fire, cause unknown, destroyed the works in the late 60s, and eventually the site was cleared. Everything had burned down except the Gas Offices, now an attractive bungalow. The works had lasted nearly 100 years.

Some of us remember the old gas lights, playing in the street on dark winter afternoons in the mist, under their soft, yellowish glow. Very nostalgic.

**Sources:** In the writing of this article I gratefully acknowledge help from the following: Duncan Lucas who suggested it and lent me his file on the gas works. Brian Bilson for the loan of 2 books on gas. Peter Clowes for his time in telling me about his connection with the gas works.

Edna Taylor



# A Special Date for Society Members

The Greater Wigston Historical Society is 40 years old this year. To celebrate this achievement, the Committee have arranged a special event which will take place on:

**Saturday 25 July 2020**

**The event will be a musical celebration which will take place at:**

**The Hall, Wigston College, Station Road, Wigston LE18 2DS starting at 7pm.**

The celebration is in the planning stage at the moment, and we would like you to keep the date free so that you can join us for this celebration event.

For Society members it will be a **“FREE”** event, and a nominal charge of £5 will be made for any guests you would like to bring. We will let you have further details of the event as soon as possible.

To book your ticket/s please email [tickets@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk](mailto:tickets@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk)

Tell us how many FREE members tickets you require and how many guest tickets you require

**Or telephone Ann Cousins on 0116 2884638 with your details.**

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## SUBSCRIPTIONS

Please note that subscriptions for 2020 are now due. If you have already renewed, thank you very much.

If you have not yet done so, we would be grateful if you could renew as soon as possible using this cut off slip if you like. The rates are £12 Full and £9 Concessionary. Cheques should be made payable to GWHS. We hope you will continue your membership but if you are not doing so, it would be very helpful if you could let the Membership Secretary know.

Member(s) Name &

Address.....

.....

Please send to the Membership Secretary: Mrs. Linda Forryan, 21 Blakesley Road, Wigston, Leicester. LE18 3WD