

Potton History Society



Newsletter Number 21 Autumn 1996

Potton History Society Committee:-

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|-------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Chairman | George Howe |
| Secretary | Mary Leigh |
| Treasurer | Anita Lewis |
| Programme/Publicity Secretary | Peter Ibbett |
| Committee Members | Boo Matthews |
| | Jack Hutchinson |
| | John Kirkby |
| | Norman Parry |
| | Tony Crossley |
| Newsletter Editors | Mr & Mrs Leigh |

For access to the archives in our research rooms just telephone the key-holders;

Mr J Hutchinson Potton 260322
Mr G. Howe Potton 260935
Mrs M Leigh Biggleswade 314024

Acknowledgements:-

Many thanks to Mr Quince for supplying the necessary equipment for our pictorial entertainment last December.

Our continued appreciation to Mr Witten for displaying and selling our publications in Tysoe's Hardware Store.

We also thank the following for their continued support by advertising our meetings;

Lindsay's Bakery, Tysoe's Hardware Store, Burgoyne Middle School, and Sandy Upper School.

Society News

This year has seen a very varied choice of topics at our monthly meetings and some excellent speakers to talk about them. PHS member Derek Guttery got things off to a good start in **January** when he shared with us some of the knowledge he had gained during a lifetime's interest in the history of radiation. Equally fascinating was his collection of early radiation equipment which was on display at the meeting.

February was the turn of our chairman, George Howe, speaking on his favourite subject of railways, in this case the Great Northern and its links with East Bedfordshire. It seems that his interest is shared by many as we can always guarantee a large audience when 'railway' appears on the poster.

Next came a talk which had to be cancelled the previous year so we were especially pleased in **March** to welcome members of the Whittlesea Society who told us about their corner of the world and how they have fared in running their own museum. Some exceptional slides of Whittlesea and the Fens added to the pleasure of this evening.

The hall was packed again in **April** to listen to Dr Mark Bailey, a speaker whom we had been trying to entice to Potton for several years. At last he was able to fit us into his busy schedule and give us an insight into the early development of towns and markets, a topic of particular interest in a town such as Potton with its long history of markets and fairs.

Our outdoor meeting in **May** was a victim of bad weather conditions but as usual we had an alternative programme waiting in the wings. The cancelled cemetery survey gave us an opportunity to look back at the churchyard survey which took place in the early years of the society, and also to hear about some of the resulting information gained from that first survey.

In **June** county archivist Chris Pickford drew another large crowd when, as a prelude to the coach trip, he gave an armchair tour of North Bedfordshire. His collection of slides and vast local knowledge provided an excellent taste of delights to come for those lucky enough to have tickets for the trip.

Member and ex-chairman Norman Parry has spent many hours ploughing through the legal jargon and appalling handwriting of the wills of Pottonians of the past 500 years. In **July** he put together all the interesting bits for our entertainment and painted a unique picture of everyday life in bygone Potton.

Our local evening in **August** brought together a miscellany of items which ranged from family trees to yet another will and from war medals to commemorative beer bottles. In many ways this was the best meeting of the year as it brought together so many different contributions from members and friends.

A last minute change of plan was called for in **September** when the scheduled speaker had to postpone his booking. Luckily our programme secretary Peter Ibbett was due to give the October talk, so he was able to step into the breach a month early with a look at Potton in the 18th and 19th centuries, as seen through the eyes of the Richardson family.

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There have been some changes to the committee since the last AGM. Rex Whitfield has reluctantly resigned his position, owing to pressures of work. Fortunately we did not have to complete the year with a vacant seat as Norman Parry agreed to rejoin us and was co-opted onto the committee in May.

A fall in membership has been a cause for concern over recent years but the trend seems to be reversing again now. This year we have finally crept above 90 for the first time in the life of the Society so thanks to all of you who have spread the word about us - please keep up the good work!

Our fame is spreading far and wide, and this year, as well as our local exhibitions at the Church Flower Festival and Potton Show, we put in an appearance in Shropshire. At the British Legion Exhibition. John Kirkby set up a display on the story of the wartime air crash at Deepdale and the recent visits to Potton by members of the lost pilot's family, hosted by the Society. This story is well documented in our archives, accompanied by some excellent photographs, and thus created a great deal of interest at the exhibition. Our thanks to John for taking the display to Shropshire and especially to Patricia Yates who made all the arrangements for the two visits from New Zealand and also mounted all the material gathered on this story.

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Although we were not able to do any work on the cemetery survey at our evening meeting in May, several of our members have been continuing the work throughout the summer. The result is that the first quarter of the old section has been completed, so many thanks to those who have helped so far and please carry on as long as the weather permits. The importance of completing this task was recently brought to the fore when a minor road accident resulted in two headstones being smashed and subsequently several of the broken pieces disappeared. The details from these stones had already been recorded and so the information was not lost.

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The Bedfordshire Local History Conference

The series of conferences organised by Mid-Bedfordshire societies continued this year with a return to Biggleswade in June. The one-day conference featured talks on the Kingfisher Way development in the Ivel valley and the progress of excavations at the medieval site at Stratton. Walks were arranged including a visit and brief talk in the Church. The day concluded with a talk on Surnames. The series is likely to continue at Dunstable next year with Potton following in 1998.

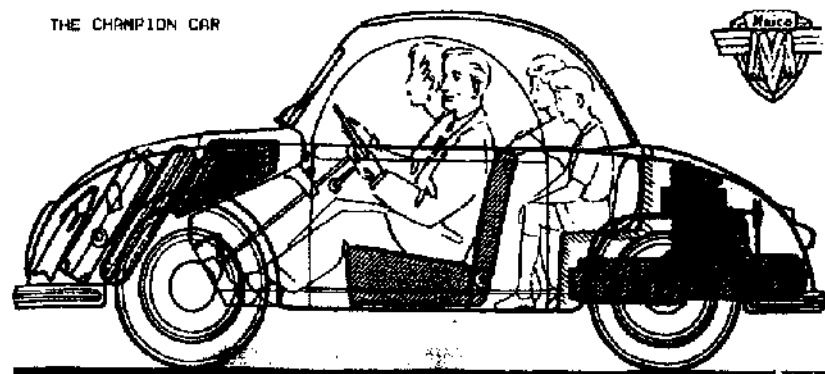
Peter Ibbett

The Return of the "Potton Car"

The Potton "Delta" car, which left Potton Manor in 1977 for Beaulieu Motor Museum, has returned to Potton, and has been seen by many at the Cockayne Hatley Jazz Festival and at the Potton Show in September. The car was offered back on loan to Potton, in the care of the Potton History Society, in 1995. After lengthy negotiations regarding the terms of the loan, it was collected from Beaulieu in July 1996. I hired a trailer and drove to Beaulieu with Gloria, my wife, - with some trepidation as I had never towed a car before. How would we load it and tie it on? We need not have worried. The mechanics at Beaulieu were most kind and helpful. They had cleaned the car and proceeded to load it for us and secure it - so tightly that we had great difficulty in releasing it on arrival! They also insisted in showing us around the museum - which is most impressive. Even if one is not a car enthusiast, the sight of the beautifully preserved old cars is well worth a visit. The cars are mostly in running order. They told us a story of Lord Montague (the owner of the museum) who invited an American friend to drive a lovely 1910 vintage car in a rally. He had a weeks instruction and set off. Very soon, however, he took a corner too sharply, and demolished the side of the car. The Lord's comments are not known! It was 6 months before the restoration was complete.

The drive home was uneventful - although, several times I cursed the driver of the small red car which was following us too closely! We stopped 3 times en route, the last time in Potton for photos, and on each occasion people rushed across to see the strange car and ask about its history. Removing the car from the trailer on arrival provided some excitement. I sat in the car to steer it as it rolled off the trailer. I then found I could not stop the car as the foot brake was not working. In the nick of time, I discovered that the hand brake was operative - thereby avoiding an embarrassing incident.

What of the history of the car? The story is told in full detail in the booklet "Potton Manor - an Enigma", compiled by Mr T.C.M. Ball for the P.H.S. It involves the strange character, Mr Otto von Smekal, who, with his partner (to use a modern term), Eva Pokorova, owned the Potton Manor in the post-war years. Some may remember them driving the car around Potton. One lady told me recently that she lived on the Biggleswade road and remembers that the car would often run out of petrol before it reached Potton (it had only a small tank). As a consequence, her father kept a can of petrol to offer to Mr Smekal on these occasions.



Mr Smekal was born in the Ukraine. He was an innovative engineer and worked in the Skoda Car Factory in Czechoslovakia from 1930, and eventually became a Director. His partner, Eva Pokorova, is described locally as "a well-built and formidable person". She was a racing and rallying driver in the 1930s in Germany, and drove in the famous Italian Mille Maglia rally. Otto and Eva spent much of their lives developing a process for obtaining high octane gasoline from coal tar using an "electrical discharge process". No doubt, this accounts for the various fires and explosions which occurred at the Manor during their stay! Mr Smekal was a well known figure locally, driving his sleek SS100 Jaguar car. Eva Pokorova was more reclusive. Local people were never allowed to enter the Manor,

which was surrounded by barbed wire - presumably to maintain the secrecy of their "Delta" process.

Public interest in the new process declined and Mr Smekal decided to exploit the post-war boom in car sales. He proposed to import "Champion" cars from Germany, to modify them mechanically, and to sell them as "Delta" cars (the name of his research company). He obtained an exclusive licence for sale of Champion cars in the UK in 1953. He purchased his first car and, for publicity purposes, he entered it in a National rally in Wales - with reasonable success, considering its small engine. Unfortunately, he was unable to obtain the supplies of cars he needed from Germany, and had to resort to purchasing large numbers of spares and parts to re-assemble into cars. He produced several cars, but lack of finance ended the enterprise. The present car is the original car which he purchased. Mr Smekal died in 1966, and Eva Pokorova in 1977. When the Manor was then visited, two cars were found together with a vast array of car parts. Photos were taken for P.H.S. The "Potton Delta car" was donated to the Beaulieu Motor Museum, together with at least one other car and many spare parts. They later sold a Delta "woody" - an estate car with a slightly larger engine - to the Horsmondon Motor Museum in Kent , where it may be seen.

Incredibly, after some minor maintenance, the tiny engine still runs. Unfortunately the car cannot be driven due to lack of brakes - something that the P.H.S. may remedy in time. The most curious feature of the car is the side window opening : they rotate, rather than move up and down - something of a hazard if one needs to open them quickly. The wheels have the insignia "Delta", and the badge on the radiator has a delta sign with the title " Delta Motor Research Ltd, Potton, Beds".

Tony Crossley (P.H.S.)

Potton Gas Company

closed 1933 approx

I am not able to say when the Potton Gas Company was first started. I can only go back as far as 1925 when I am certain my father took over the Engineering Management from a Mr Mason.

The gas process was carried out as follows: Coal was delivered to the site by a firm called Kitchener of Bull Street, Potton. The main carter was a Mr Crawley. The coal was delivered to Potton Station from somewhere in Staffordshire, a special coal. It was stored in a large coal shed just inside the existing gates at the site, facing the living accommodation.

The coal was taken by wheelbarrow into a "Retort House", the retorts were long brick cylinders blanked off at the back end. They were suspended on fire brick pillars and built into a furnace arrangement so that the coal could be cooked. The front part of the brick cylinders ended in a cast iron mounting which could be capped off and sealed with slaked lime. The cast iron fronts had pipes leading from them into a common manifold from where the products of the cooking of the coal was pumped away for separation and purifying.

After a period of about 16 to 20 hours this process was stopped. Then after 24 hours the resultant coke was withdrawn from the brick cylinders for sale as fuel. The cylinders were then recharged, by hand, by men throwing the coal in with shovels. The cooking furnace was fuelled by some of the coke from the process.

Some of the coke was also used to stoke a steam boiler, this supplied the steam to drive the pumping the process.

There were three by-products; tar, Gas water (a source of ammonia) and the coal gas. The first two went into underground storage tanks, the gas had to be purified. It passed first through cooling pipes outside the main building, then through purifiers containing iron oxide powder. These were 10 feet square and three feet deep. Being filled with the oxide, the top capped, the gas was pumped through into a scrubber. I am not sure what this did but water was used in the process. A constant flame was burning in the main building, the colour of which showed the quality of the resultant cleaned gas.

There were 2 gas holders; that is the correct name, one very large about 50 feet in diameter and 20 feet tall, and a smaller one about a quarter the size. These were inverted tanks floating in water suspended on counter-weights which controlled the pressure being supplied to the consumers approximately 2 inches w/gauge.

Donald W Huckle

From the archives

This Account is now due, and should be sent to the Office within 7 days.

A

Dr. to Potton Gas & Coke Company, Ltd.
F. C. CHAPMAN, SECRETARY.
Office Hours—9 to 10.30 a.m.; 2.30 to 4 p.m.; 6 to 7 p.m., except Saturdays.

| | For | Quarter's supply of Gas to | £ | s | d |
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Discovering North Bedfordshire

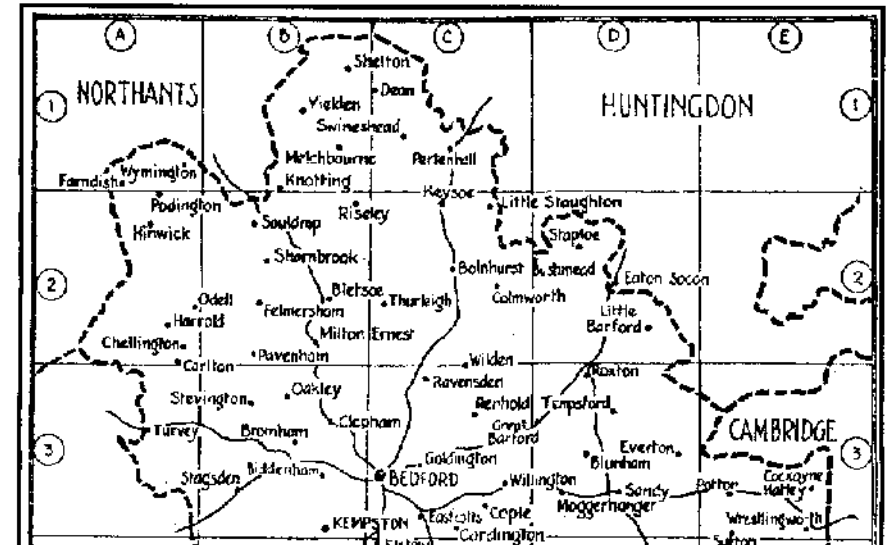
Our 4th Day Trip took place this year on Sunday 28th July when a group of 50 assembled for a journey into the Northern territories of our county. The day was calm and clear as the coach set off towards Sandy with George Howe and Peter Ibbett settling down into their now traditional roles of tour guides.

Blunham was passed with its ancient Mills and Prefabs before the first crossing of the Ouse at Great Barford over its historic bridge. The first of the many distinctive cast iron water hydrants of North Bedfordshire (made in Scotland in the 1930's!) passed by the coach windows. The climb past Creakers Manor to Wilden provided views back to the Greensand Ridge of Mid Bedfordshire. The spire at Colmworth provided an introduction to a feast of church buildings mainly dating back to the era of high Medieval prosperity.

Keysoe provided a rare example of a thatched chapel and a reminder that we were in Bunyan territory with small chapels still providing a testament to the strong Bedfordshire tradition of non-conformity in religion. A stop at Pertenhall enabled a visit to the church lying behind the Manor and the Rectory. A walk through the fields enabled the party to rejoin the coach past a surprised herd of cattle!

Swineshead and Dean revealed distinctive houses and churches before the Northern tip of the county was reached at the Three Shires Post. A run past Melchbourne (Glen Miller played at the house) took us to Yelden with its Norman motte and bailey mounds. The delights of Podington and Hinwick revealed the forgotten North-west territories of the county before dipping back down to the Ouse Valley at Harrold with a stop at its Country Park. The route through the town passed by its picturesque round lock-up near to the former smithy.

The Green Man at Lavendon supplied a good quality ploughman's lunch before the party moved on to explore the Ouse Valley crossing over bridges at Turvey, Harrold, Felmersham, Radwell and Oakley (Stafford Bridge) before arriving at Bromham Mill via Pavenham and Stevington. The Mill provided refreshments, exhibitions and a much enjoyed talk by the miller on the problems of the trade.



The coach meandered back across the county via Thurleigh, Boynhurst and Chawston before reaching home via Tempsford Bridge and Sandy. By the end of the trip North Bedfordshire had revealed that it was an area of charm and historical depth rather than a featureless area of large scale modern farming.

Planning is already under way to explore South Bedfordshire in 1997!

Peter Ibbett

Potton - 1945

Recently the media has provided us with information concerning the last months of the war, and the beginning of peace. By watching News Reels of 1945, we were able to relive, or experience for the first time, the sorrows and joys of those involved.

But what were the talking points in Potton? Having scanned two local newspapers printed in 1945, a picture emerged of a town fully aware of its responsibilities, of its efforts to raise money for the Forces Fund and National Savings Schemes, to produce more foods, to celebrate victory and to plan for the future. So how was this achieved?

On the home front, food was an everyday topic of general interest. The manufacturers of 'Golden Shred Marmalade' announced in January that they were withdrawing their product until the end of the war and the brewers, Whitbread, apologised for the shortage of beer as much was being sent to members of the forces. The Ministry of Food provided the nation with recipes for tasty meals which often included powdered egg. Mothers were encouraged to give their children sandwiches of grated vegetables to provide them with vitamin C as orange juice was not available. Agriculture was of great importance. Potton Farmers Union had 72 members (some coming from neighbouring villages). Those formerly involved with the Home Guard and Civil Defence duties were encouraged to use their spare time to grow food for the home market. Vegetables were also needed for those serving on mine sweepers. At the farmers Union July meeting it was reported that due to lack of regular labour, miners from Derbyshire and Yorkshire would be invited to come to agricultural camps to help in the harvesting of potatoes and sugar beet. Later in the year, New Zealand airmen joined such a camp at Ampthill.

By combining money raised in 'penny a week collections' and from collecting boxes held by the Women's British Legion, Cross Keys public house and Fire Brigade, £1 was sent to each of the 262 Potton members of the forces (more than 10% of the population) as a New Year's gift. In October the fund provided a further £1 for serving men. It was then decided that all money raised during the rest of the year would provide a final supper. This event took place in January 1947 (Picture Book 3 no 139).

From the Nursing Association's June report, one learns it was self supporting and run by a Committee who employed Nurse Barwell, full time and Nurse Payne, part time. During the past year the nurses had paid 2,230 visits, but there had been a decrease in fees from maternity cases as more mothers were cared for in hospital due to the difficulty in obtaining help in the home. The last comment is reflected in the Gas Board's 'Leisure Thoughts' issued in October: "A solution to the problem of domestic help lies not in fruitlessly seeking assistance, but in planning a home where the necessity does not arise".

At this time the Parish Council met quarterly and the three items discussed in January were:- street lighting (£500 being required to bring lighting up to standard - a continual problem), sites for council houses and suggestions for a suitable War Memorial. Eventually a site in Sandy Road was chosen for the council houses and Mrs Cartwright was asked by the R.D.C. for planning ideas which could be incorporated in the new houses as she herself was a council house tenant.

A public meeting was called in April to discuss the possibility of providing the town with a war memorial, and it was proposed by Mr Williams, on behalf of the British Legion, that a good sized hall be erected. The Chairman, Ald. F.W. Braybrooks, read correspondence he had had with the Land Settlement Association who offered 'The Limes', 5 Blackbird Street for that purpose, and 'considerable assistance in its reconstruction'. No comment on this offer is recorded. After lengthy discussion, it was decided that a hall should be erected on the playing fields, if that was found to be in order.

When 'Victory in Europe' was announced on May 7th, people celebrated in truly Pottonian style. After attending services at places of worship, the Market Square was a 'scene of jollity', people dancing to the music of Les Dennis' Band. We are told that 'minor excitement was caused during the evening by the turning on of electric lights in the street, the first time since 1939'. Later in the week, Ald. Braybrooks provided 280 children with a 'Peace Festival' tea which was served by the United Churches Canteen Committee in the Central Hall. To celebrate 'Victory in Japan', which was declared on August 14th similar celebrations were arranged, including a firework display and the relaying of the King's speech in the Market Square. Once again Ald. Braybrooks provided tea in the Central Hall. A number of street parties also took place.

Three candidates presented themselves for the elections on July 5th. The nation was told that results would be delayed to allow service men's votes to be collected from abroad. Alan Lennox Boyd, Conservative, was returned with 13,954 votes. Labour candidate, William Howell polled 12,073 votes and the Liberal candidate, Edward Martell 11,641. According to the North Beds Courier, 1,137 people voted in Potton. (Population in 1931 = 1,955)

The desirability of establishing a rural grammar school was mentioned by Mr T.S.Lucking, Director of Education, at an Education Committee meeting held on July 6th. In seeking to find out the number of children who, under Butler's Education Act of 1944, would go forward to secondary grammar schools, a test, commonly used throughout the country had been adopted. By this test it appeared that in East Beds they could expect about 300 pupils each year to require the grammar school type of education.

By October the newly formed Youth Club had 70 members. Education classes were to be arranged for the winter months.

Much advertising announced Thanksgiving week in November. The opening ceremony in Potton was performed by Ald. Braybrooks. People were encouraged to invest in the National Savings Scheme. Potton's result was £22,399, far exceeding its given target of £10,000. Ald. Braybrooks, aged 77, had the final word on the District's total of £103,546 which he described as 'a mere bagatelle'. He went on to accuse members of the working classes and small market gardeners of storing money away in their houses instead of investing in the Savings Movement. 1945 had been a momentous year for Ald. Braybrooks as he had celebrated 50 years as a member of Potton Parish Council, 30 years as a Biggleswade Magistrate and in April had announced that two members of the well known London firm, Messrs. Garners Limited, were coming into his tannery business.

The War Memorial Committee met again in December. After some delay it had been ascertained through a Solicitor and a King's Counsellor that the Trust Deed in connection with the Playing Fields would not preclude the building of a suitable hall there. 'Other sites had been enquired about but were so far indefinite as to detail'. The Trustees had opened a fund in support of the scheme. A further meeting was to be held on January 14th 1946 to enable parishioners to voice their views!

To get a comprehensive view of Potton during the war years and the following peace, and to see the people involved in the town's many activities, study Picture Book 3, 1940 - 1969, and much will be revealed.

Patricia R. Yates. January 1996

Reference:

North Beds Courier - founded 1909, withdrawn 1972
Biggleswade Chronicle - founded 1891.

OFFICE OF POPULATION
CENSUSES
AND SURVEYS

**INDEXES TO BIRTHS,
MARRIAGES
AND DEATHS**

Microfiche copies of the indexes to the birth, marriage and death records for England and Wales can now be consulted at Bedford Central Library. The microfiche set covers the period from July 1837 to December 1983 inclusive.

To consult the microfiche, please ask at the Local Studies Desk in the Reference Library.

For full details contact the staff at
The Reference Library
Bedford Central Library
Harpur Street
Bedford MK40 1PG
Tel 01234 350931

Notice Board

Archive Policy

As our archive material accumulates over the years, we as a society have to determine which material should be retained in order to further the aims of the Society, whilst not offending any kind donator. This question was raised at our 1995 AGM and I gave an assurance that I would state our policy in a forthcoming newsletter.

As we are the Pottton History Society, our first priority must be to collect items local to Pottton. Items concerning surrounding villages are considered according to their relevance to Pottton and to our collection. As space is always limited, all items will be considered by the committee of the day. When items are offered the committee shall decide according to item, relevance, space and any conditions the donator may wish to apply. Items will be considered whether donated or loaned. Should items become surplus to our requirements they will be offered to the donator where known or offered to the appropriate County Record Office.

George Howe, Chairman

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Notelets

Some of the artistic members of the Society have been hard at work producing new designs for our latest pack of notelets. Depicting the windmill, church, station, smithy, Glanville house and Sun House, the packs containing one of each design are available for only £1.

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Newsletter no 21

The deadline for copy to be included in the next issue is 1st March 1997. Please pass items to Mary Leigh.