

# Dotton History Society



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## Potton History Society Committee:-

Chairman	George Howe
Secretary	Jean McLennan
Treasurer	Anita Lewis
Programme/Publicity Secretary	Peter Ibbett
Member	Sean Hendy
Member	Mike Horgan
Member	John Boston
Newsletter Editor	Mary Leigh

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

Mr G. Howe ..... Potton 260935  
Mrs J McLennan..... Potton 260234

## Acknowledgements:-

Our appreciation to Camerons Newsagents for selling our  
books and to Potton Post Office for selling our tea towels.

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

Lindsay's Bakery,  
Tysoe's Hardware Store,  
Potton Library  
Potton Post Office  
Clayton's Butchers

## Society news

The **April** meeting welcomed the curator of the Letchworth Garden City Museum who presented a talk on the early days of the town. Letchworth was the idea of Ebenezer Howard who had the vision of mixing the best of town and country by setting up a private company to build and run a garden city. The new venture soon attracted a number of progressive minds including some Arts & Craft movement architects and suffragette sympathisers. Letchworth developed as a 'Dry town' with no public houses due to a strong Quaker and Methodist movement amongst the 'Pioneers'. The character of Letchworth was partly defined by its planners who defined Upper; Middle and Lower Class areas in contrast to the more mixed areas found in most towns and villages a century ago.

At the **May** meeting our speaker was Alan Waring of local Community Station 'Radio Biggles'. His interest in our airwaves went back to the days of Pirate Radio and using old radio equipment. Alan was inspired by a Clacton Local radio set-up to create a community-based station in Potton to serve the local area. Although only being licensed to operate for a small part of a year Radio Biggles has built up an impressive range of programmes featuring local talent and people and looks set to develop further in the future. The Society holds a range of audio material and would be happy to copy and return any material relating to Potton.

The Listed Buildings of Potton featured in our **June** meeting. George Howe lead a group around the centre of Potton whilst Peter Ibbett provided an illustrated presentation in the Community Centre. Potton has a wide range of listed buildings including the Grade 1 Church and timber framed buildings originating in the Tudor and Stuart eras. The fire of 1783 stimulated a crop of Georgian buildings, which give the town some of its distinctive character. As well as dwelling houses, listings for Potton include a milestone, old gravestones, an engine shed and a former railway station. Further information about some of the listed buildings can be found on the newly launched society web site at [www.pottonhistorysociety.com](http://www.pottonhistorysociety.com).

In **July** printer Reg Brown from Soham gave a presentation on Letterpress printing. His talk outlined the methods used since the invention of printing and how his skills are still useful in the present digital printing era. Many small towns like Potton had their own printer publishing a range of material on their own press. The printers business situated on the northern side of Potton Market Square was owned by Hercock in the late 1800's and then by Elphick's before finishing with Cox's in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The Society has a range of items printed locally in its collection and these have been an invaluable source of information. Some of these items can be found on our new web site.

The **August** meeting detailed the work that has been done to create a web site of archive material. George Howe and Peter Ibbett outlined how a small archive begun by Patricia Yates had grown to over 8000 captioned photographs, 30 years of scrapbooks, five full filing cabinets; several shelves and bookcases, a range of storage boxes and a 1950's car. Jean McLennan explained how she had continued Mrs Yates' photographic collection and taken it into the digital era. Alan Rothery has indexed the map collection and showed how his colour coding system made it easy to locate rolled maps. Janet Norman and John Boston were responsible for working through the document collection, reorganising and indexing with the aim of producing an interactive updatable web index. Sean Hendy demonstrated the web site ([www.pottonhistorysociety.com](http://www.pottonhistorysociety.com)) he had designed for the Society and outlined some of the ways in which it could develop to enable all those with an interest in the history of Potton to help contribute to a growing community archive.

Chairman George Howe shared with us some of the information from his research into the history of the Hutchinson family at our **September** meeting. His talk revealed that the first known reference to a Potton Hutchinson was in 1816. The family was to develop into one of the largest in the town. Some of the family emigrated as far as Canada and South Africa in mid-Victorian times and later. Members of the Hutchinson family became involved in local politics

and in sports such as football, bowls and cricket. Edward Hutchinson served in WW1, rising to Sgt Major with bars and served with distinction at the battle of Loos. In common with many local families nicknames were common and the Hutchinsons passed some of theirs from father to son. In football four Hutchinson nicknames are included in:- 'You Mark Oakley while I diddle goss'!

### Archive news

After 30 years of collecting material the Society had a growing problem. Its material was on private property with limited access and the lack of a real index. We needed to know what we had got, where we had put it and a method of improving access. Producing a web site containing the archive material of the society has been a goal for several years but there was a lack of expertise and digital material to use. Grants from the former Mid Beds Council enabled the purchase of computing hardware and an A3 scanner, which have enabled a start to be made on digitising the collection. The problem of producing an active web site was solved when Sean Hendy joined the Society and set about creating a site as a project for his Web design course (see page 14). "We never thought that we could have such a professional site so quickly" was the response of the committee to the results. The new site went live earlier this month at [www.pottonhistorysociety.com](http://www.pottonhistorysociety.com).

### Forthcoming Programme

- Nov 26<sup>th</sup> The Tysoe Ledger** **Peter Ibbett**  
7.30pm A series of Ironmongery Ledgers from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to  
start for mid 20<sup>th</sup> century reveal the ups and downs of running a  
AGM local Ironmongers shop as well as the names and  
shopping lists of some of the customers
- Dec 10<sup>th</sup> Pictorial Potton –Potton from the Air**  
Beat Santa to the best local chimney pots! A selection  
from our archives of Arial photographs from the 1920's  
to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### The History of Potton Flower Show (cont.)

A suggestion for a best Kept Garden competition had been made and agreed on. I have no record of the winners but Chris Cooke, as secretary, in her report to the AGM stated that with twelve entries it had been well received. The judges had trouble dividing small gardens from large, so it was decided to have 2 classes and 2 cups.

The 1978 show was the first to include photographs. This proved to be popular and boosted the entry numbers. I note that it was costing about £100 to run the show, today's committee wish that was all it cost now. This AGM was to be the last for Mike Carlisle, who wished to stand down. Roger Brewer was elected in his place with Chris Cooke remaining as Secretary and Mike Robinson as Treasurer. It was at this meeting that Mrs Freda Ansell and Mrs Janet Norman were to be invited to join the committee. Also discussed was running a Spring Show but it was decided not to pursue the idea.

At the following Committee Meeting, Mrs Ansell declined the chance to join the committee. Various things were proposed for fund raising in the early summer and at the show. In May a jumble sale was to be held on the Market Square, the forerunner of today's plant stalls. A trip by coach to Bressingham gardens was discussed, £70 for coach hire, 50p entrance and 30p for children. Those were the days! It was finally decided that it would be difficult to fill a coach so the idea was dropped.

Minutes of June 1979 gave us details of the Jumble sale with receipts of £75.01 and expenditure of £8.82 leaving a profit of £66.19. 30 years later this amount seems minuscule compared with today's takings and expenses. Creeping inflation, I suppose.

First mention of the History Society appears in the minutes of the Committee Meeting just before the 1979 Show, Mr Ball would do a display of models and he would like to film the show on behalf of Potton History Society.

The 1979 AGM reported a successful show on a sunny day. Sandy Silver Band played for the first time and added to the occasion. Mike Robinson showed a healthy bank statement for the year. The Garden Competition only had 6 entries and would be discontinued the following year. Ray Bylett announced his resignation from the committee, also Chris Cooke, who had been Secretary for the past 2 years. Margaret Johnson was elected to replace her.

The first Committee Meeting of 1980 saw the arrival of new blood in the form of Marilyn Britton and a certain Colin Buxton. A decision was made to have a class for commercial growers but this turned out to be a bad idea with no entries being received. Further bad news was that the price of admission to the show would be increased to 20p. Early inflation! This was offset by increasing prize money to 1<sup>st</sup> 40p, 2<sup>nd</sup> 30p and 3<sup>rd</sup> 20p.

By the March meeting things were beginning to take shape. Roger Brewer had a quote from Mid Beds Council for printing 1000 copies of the schedule at £9.72+VAT which was accepted. Two months later news was received that the printing price would be £18 for 800 copies, collated and stapled. Market day was to be 10<sup>th</sup> May, jumble to be sorted the previous evening. Ray Coombes said he would be leaving the area in the year so he would have to resign. He was thanked for his help over the years.

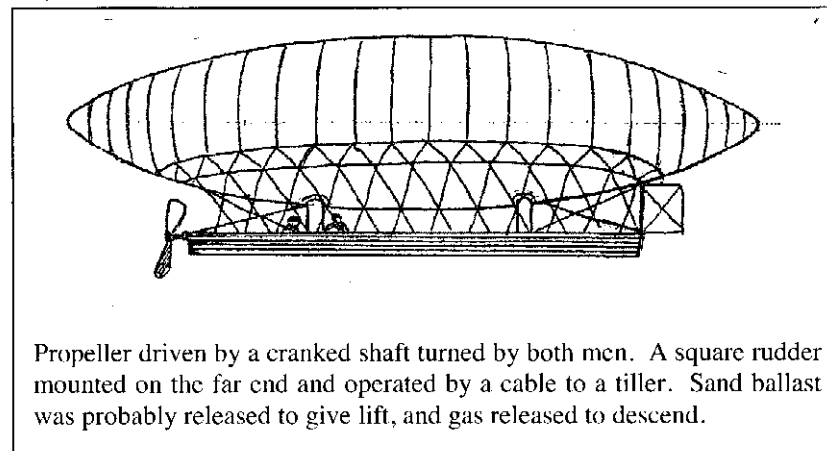
The 1980 Show was even more successful with entries up from 468 to 648, a move in the right direction. Margaret Johnson enjoyed her first show but regretted that she could not continue due to other commitments. In a year of changes Marylin Britton was elected as Secretary, Tom Messenger and George Culpan wished to resign. New members were Cliff King, Doreen Richardson and Joyce Small. With the show growing it was decided that a bigger marquee was needed for next year. There was talk of enlarging the show and it was decided to call it Potton and District Show.

Colin Buxton

To be continued

## A Dream Too Far

On the 8th August 1884 two French officers coaxed their 'Dirigible' from Chalis - Mendon to Villaconblay and back. This was the first human balloon flight under control. (So called 'Dirigible' from the Latin for 'Steerable').



Propeller driven by a cranked shaft turned by both men. A square rudder mounted on the far end and operated by a cable to a tiller. Sand ballast was probably released to give lift, and gas released to descend.

The early observation balloons used in battle to locate enemy positions in W.W.1 could only go up and down. They became an easy target for German aircraft of the day and the observer scouts had to bale out by parachute very quickly when under attack. Whilst the action was going on in Northern Greece near the Bulgarian mountains it was recorded that a new observation balloon was shot down almost every day by a 'Red German Plane'. These low level attacks over tree tops and mountain terrain didn't give those scouts much leeway for safety. However, we cunningly loaded one of these balloons with a 300lb charge of explosives which when fired on blew up and also brought down the 'Red Devil' himself, whom we buried with the usual military honours.

After W.W.1 the testing of larger rigid airships was carried out with British built copies of the 'Zeppelin' - R34 and R36. As early as July 1919 the R34 had flown the Atlantic both ways under the command of Major Scot in a fraction of the time for a sea passage. This caused a sensation on both sides of the Atlantic especially as it

was found there was two stowaways on board, a young rigger and his tabby kitten. The R36 had been used by the Metropolitan Police to direct traffic at the 1921 Royal Ascot race meeting, the first instance recorded of an airborne police traffic control post, kept in touch by wireless with officers on the ground. The press on board were able to write their copy and drop it to couriers on the ground by parachute, to be whisked away to Fleet Street by motor-cycle.

Then in 1922 the Conservative M.P for Uxbridge, Commander Dennistoun Burney, proposed it would be quicker to contact the far flung corners of the Empire in a fraction of the time taken by sea, as aircraft of that time were still primitive, cramped and in need of frequent fuel stops, whereas, airships were the liners of the skies and could transport large amounts of freight and passengers.

In 1924 Lloyd George's 1st Labour Government, with the Minister for Air, Brigadier General C.B. Thomson, gave his backing and they pressed ahead with the Airship venture. Thus the 1924 Government funded R101 programme came into being.

Whilst the R100 was being built by 'Vickers' in the private sector the government took on the R101. The huge hangers dominated the Bedfordshire countryside, also the 'Short Brothers' built Shortstown for its workers and the whole complex took shape and flourished to achieve this massive undertaking.

The Royal Airship Works (RAW) with 270 design staff were responsible for turning this airship vision into technical drawings and construction blueprints. Another 700 employees, some on production at Boulton Pauls factory at Norwich and locally, some on fitting out and assembly in the workshops and No.1 hanger at Cardington. The 1924 specifications called for not less than 5,000,000 cubic feet capacity of gas, not weighing more than 90 tons yet being able to cruise at 63 miles per hour for 48 hours whilst carrying 100 hundred passengers, way, way beyond any aeroplane of that day and age.

As the airship was based on the construction features and the fitting out of a ship, it follows that 'Air - Ship' was the appropriate name for those massive cruise liners of the skies, with engines to propel it through the air and its height being controlled by the release of water to rise and of gas for it to descend.

The rigid airship is a lattice like metal framework within which are contained the gas bags and other compartments, the gas bags are secured to the main frames with straps and ropes and the whole is covered with a predoped fabric. Special machines were designed at Boulton Paul's riverside works in Norwich for the manufacture of the 30,000 feet of girder work and tubing, produced to such a high standard that it was recorded that not one section was rejected by R.A.W.

In 'Ships Terms' the R101 had a keel, it had a bow and a stern, was controlled and stressed by rope and cables fitted by riggers (a rigger's red note book I've seen indicates that they used the metric system for their lengths). The R101 had a starboard and a port side, it had cabins, berths and gangways. It had rudders controlled by a helmsman and its height by a coxwain, with speaking tubes to link with the chart and the wireless room. There is the control telegraph board, identical to that of a ship, with dials to indicate ahead, or astern, slow, half or full speed ahead for the engines, each dial operated by a knobbed, rotating handle.

The R101 was fitted with five Beardmore Tornado 525 hp diesel engines - originally developed for railway locomotives in Canada and therefore heavier than really desired. The engine pods also had wind driven generators which supplied all the R101s electrical power. The stench of the fuel and the noise inside those engine pods can only be imagined, hence the need for visual dials to indicate requirements from the control car.

Each gas bag was made from part of the intestines of Oxen, known as 'Goldbeaters Skin' - because of its gas-tight quality. It is

reported that over 100,000 oxen gave their all for R101s gas bags! Girls in the fabric shop were set to work cleaning the intestines, a messy and smelly job - as I'm sure some Pottonians may recall from working in Potton Tan Yard. These skins were glued together then bonded to the canvas to make each bag.

With the predoped and shaped linen outer covers attached to the framework the gaps were taped over and glued into place, then the whole was painted silver. The identification letters and numbers were carefully outlined by the signwriters. Then these were filled in by others with a head for heights, they worked sitting on planks hung from the hanger's roof. (My Dad told me he was one of those who filled in the letters). A book called 'R101. A Pictorial History', shows a couple at work on such a precarious task painting in the letter 'G' on the rudder - one of which I believe to be my father!

The passenger accomodation was on a par with ships of the day, although some of the fittings were not as they appeared, walls and doors were made of flimsy canvas or curtain material. The passenger lounge area was most generous at 62 feet long by 32 feet wide, headroom 8 feet. At each end there was a promenade deck 32 feet long and headroom of 6½ feet. Here there were deckchairs from which to view the scenery through the 8 feet long angled cello windows let into the outer cover of the airship envelope. The dining room was equally ornate, fitted out with wickerwork furniture and wall pillars looking substantial, but were carved from balsa wood. The lounge and gangway from the Bow entrance was fitted with a Royal Blue carpet. (Must have weighed a ton?). There was even a smoking lounge in a sealed compartment.

The R101 with ballast water and gas bags all primed and in balance, the Great Hanger doors were opened wide. And so, after five long years, at 05.45 hrs on Saturday 12th October 1929 with the help of 200 construction workers from R.A.W, 150 Airmen from R.A.F. Halton and 50 unemployed from Bedford Labour Exchange the R101 was manhandled slowly inch by inch by guy ropes out of

the hangar. A great cheer rose from the very large crowd of townspeople lining the Bedford to Shefford Road. There was very little leeway as the huge airship, over 700 feet long and with its 132 feet diameter squeezed through the doorway. It was estimated that four tons of dust blew off her bulk in that light, early dawn breeze.

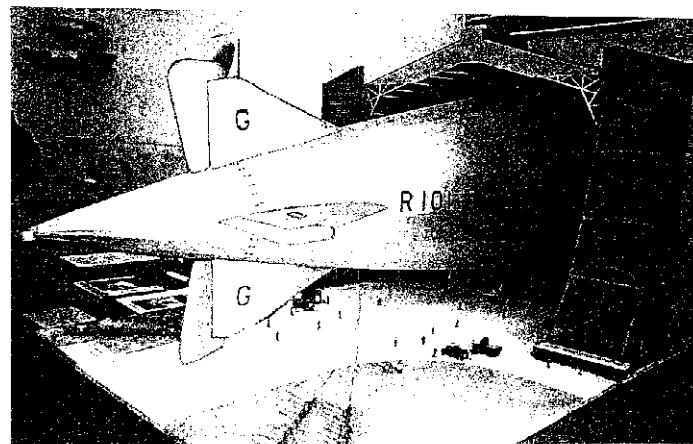
After an hour and fifty minutes for the ½ mile distance to the 200 feet tall mooring mast, in a crablike move, she was winched and moored to the top and shone in all her silvery glory.

Several practice sessions followed, docking and undocking, then on Monday 14th October 1929 the airship slipped her mast at 11.17am. It was warm and sunny with a light breeze and she set off on her first trial flight. She circled Bedford with many an upturned head staring in wonder as the huge airship floated by. She then headed for London passing over Buckingham Palace, Westminster, St. Paul's Church and the City. Returning five hours later to Cardington.

80 YEARS AGO !

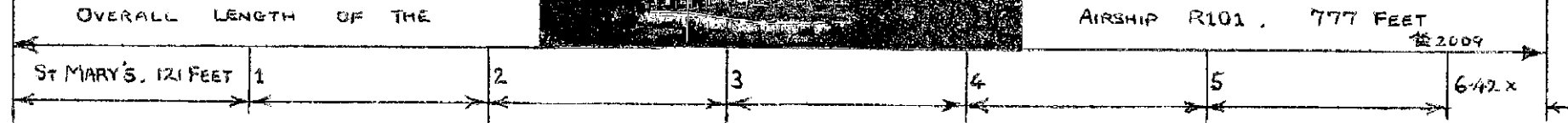
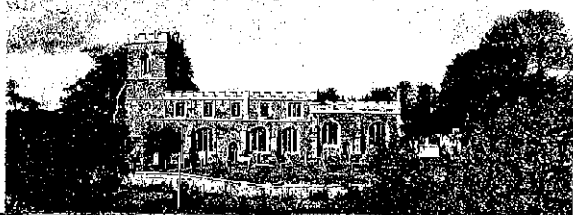
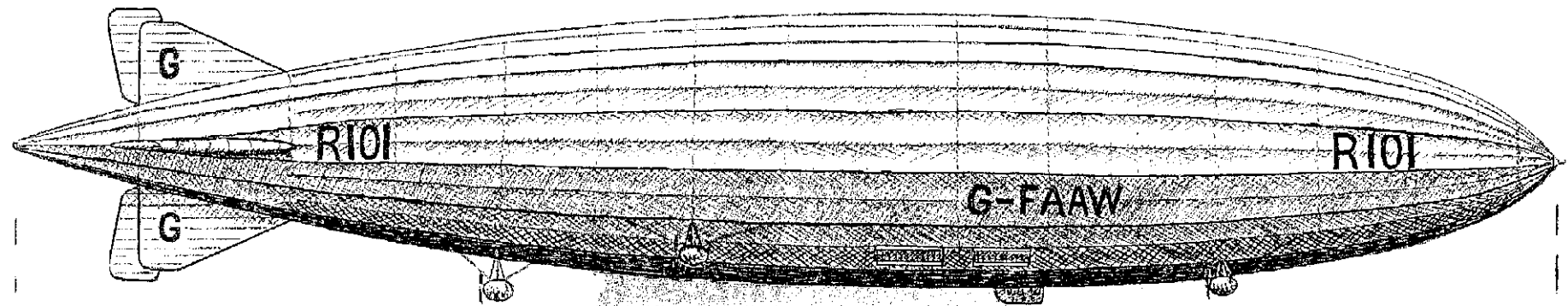
Sadly, for disaster to strike a year later in 1930.

Keith Lawrence



A photograph of a model showing the R101 being guided back into No.1 Hanger. to be fitted out with an extra gas bag to increase lift and her final length of 777feet. The Largest Built British Aircraft.

# 80 YEARS AGO



On Monday 14th October 1929 the Airship R101 set off on its 1st Trial Flight, it slipped her mast at 11.17am. It was warm and sunny with a light breeze, she circled Bedford watched by crowds of Bedfordians stunned by the enormous size of her sleek silver lines as she passed overhead. Then the R101 set course for London passing over Buckingham Palace, Westminster, St Paul's and the City returning 5 hours later.

## From the Dark Ages to the Digital Age

It was some ten months ago that I began a course in Advanced Web Design at Bedford College. I found that, in my own way, I needed a focus for the course work and so, with the approval of both the Potton History Society Committee and the Archive Team, I took my first tentative steps in building a web site for the Society.

The advantages to the Society of having a web site were immediately clear to all concerned. I suppose that the most obvious one was that it would give us all a modern platform from which to spread our contacts far beyond Bedfordshire. Not only would we be moving into the main communication channel of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century but we would be building a living entity to which anyone could contribute and which would benefit from repeat viewing. I personally liked the idea that an Australian who discovered that they have family links to Potton, for example, could contact us adding their information to ours and benefiting from our information to them. The possibilities are endless.

Initially the Web Site was viewed as an addition to the work that the Society had been involved in for the past few years of digitising our archive collection. Vague ideas about uploading the finished archive to a remote server (a storage facility for digital information) so that members could search and access the collection proved to be a viable goal. It was decided that it would need some kind of setting that represented the Society and its activities as a whole, hence a web site.

Web sites pretty much resemble a family tree when plotted out on paper and this was how the project was begun. At the top of this tree is a Home Page from which the other main parts of the site can be simply reached by clicking on a menu. The pages on that menu represent the next level of the family tree, which in turn can link down to subsequent levels as the site develops with time.

The design of the web site as a whole was created with the development of the Home Page and much work was put into this by myself under the guidance of the Committee, roughly falling into two camps; design and content. A good example of this in action from a design point of view would be that from my original model Home Page it was decided that the backgrounds to the pages would be made lighter and the size of the type would be increased to add clarity. Finally a Home Page was designed in stages that would provide a 'look' for the web site as a whole. As to content, it was decided to divide the site into seven further pages directly linked to the Home Page, these being the yearly Programme, Publications, the Potton Car, Archives, Membership, What's New and Links to other sites.

Without dwelling too much on a description of each of these pages, I feel that a mention of the What's New page should be made. This page was a late addition within the site's development and was created to be updated on a monthly basis. Its main purpose is to give the site life featuring general news. It also details the next upcoming talk, previous Newsletters (six months behind to encourage new membership) and a featured downloadable Archive Of The Month (starting with a selection of items relating to the 1953 Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II). This page is a good example of how the site will be developed so that it can grow and change like a monthly magazine. In theory the work that follows will ensure that the site is worth accessing again and again.

A good example of a sub level to the main menu is 'A Short History Of Potton' which then links to a virtual 'Tour' of the town including clickable links to a photographic record of each mentioned building. There you go, a good example of following that family tree down four levels. Don't take my word for it, look for yourself at home or in the Town Library. Web sites are made for exploration and half the fun is finding what's hidden within as you work your way down and around the site.

