

Lowestoft Archaeological and Local History Society

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Society website: www.lowestoftlocalhistory.co.uk

What's On in 2010

28 Jan 2010 "A Box of Delights" by Terry Weatherley – curiosities discovered in local auctions. Yet another interesting topic discovered and presented by this versatile local historian.

4 Feb 2010 "The Society's Winter Meal" – the Committee have again booked Lowestoft College for Thursday 4 February. Cost per head is £17.00 – arrive 7.00 pm for meal at 7.30 pm.

11 Feb 2010 "The Great Yarmouth Archaeological Map" by Ken Hamilton – Ken will provide an outline of this fascinating historical document.

Most meetings are held in the SOUTH LOWESTOFT METHODIST CHURCH HALL, at the corner of LONDON ROAD SOUTH and CARLTON ROAD, at 7.30 pm (Entry via LONDON ROAD SOUTH)

Please ring bell if the door is locked

Chairman's Column

Tonight we look forward to our first talk of the season, with Terry Weatherley explaining his '*Box of Delights*'. Then on 11th of February we welcome Ken Hamilton to tell us about the '*Great Yarmouth Archaeological Map*'.

Our Broad House Museum is now closed for its winter overhaul and reopens at Easter. We would welcome anyone who could volunteer as a steward for the new season, even if it is just for one or two afternoons per week. Opening times are 1.30 to 4.30 pm, and we need more helpers as we now have to have two on duty at all times.

Ray, our Treasurer, has been organising the Society's winter meal that takes place on 4 February at Lowestoft College, and has now placed your advance orders for the menu. Remember payment is due tonight (cash or cheque is acceptable) so that he can settle the bill on the evening.

With all good wishes for the New Year, *Lillian Fisher*

Details of recent events:

12 November 2009 – "A History of Sparrow's Nest Theatre" – by Brian Soloman

Retired Lowestoft amenities officer, Brian Soloman, gave members a history of Sparrow's Nest Theatre, well illustrated with photographs and playbills. He recalled joining as assistant (in 1964) to Alf Beckett and working in an office at the Esplanade. The building at Sparrow's Nest currently housing the War Memorial Museum and Café was originally Cliff Cottage, the summer residence of Robert Sparrow of Worlingham Hall (hence the name), and was purchased for a public park by Lowestoft Corporation in 1897 (the Jubilee bridge over the adjacent Ravine was built the same year). In the early days entertainment took place under a large tented awning on the lower garden level. This was destroyed in a gale in 1912 and a new Pavilion organised on the site in record time by Mr S W Mobbs, council engineer, opened in 1913. The surroundings were much more open in those days as the trees (along with those in the adjoining Bell Vue Park) had not matured, and the Nest became an attractive and popular venue for local and travelling events. Probably the greatest visiting artist was world famous negro singer Paul Robeson, in 1933, but a string of other stars from stage and wireless performed at

various times. They included entertainers Elsie and Doris Waters (Gert & Daisy) who were unceremoniously thrown out when the Royal Navy commandeered the Nest for a training base at the start of World War II, renaming it *HMS Europa*. The Navy adopted and adapted the theatre, allowing suitable naval shows and concerts to take place from time to time, also building an office nearby (converted to a bar post war). The trainees boarded with local families, and on leaving many went to local ships as well as to the commissioned naval vessels using the port.

Lowestoft entertainments manager, Alf Beckett got the shows going again in 1946, including a summer season featuring stage and radio stars supported by a range of musical acts. Such names as Billy Dainty, Hedley Claxton and Dick Emery topped the bill. The booking fees at that time seemed remarkably low but television was in its infancy and its major stars had not appeared – the summer season lasted from 12 to 16 weeks on average. A series of ‘Dazzle’ shows came in the 1950s, then Ted Kent’s ‘Starlight Rendezvous’ in the 1960s. Charity Midnight matinees and local productions, including many successful appearances by the Lowestoft Players, filled out-of-season slots, and the perennial Robbie ‘at the Organ’ kept the daytime visitors entertained while they sat in the attractive gardens (inside if wet). Alf Beckett retired in 1971 and Brian took over as amenities officer, booking skiffle stars Chas Mc’Devitt & Shirley Douglas among the acts for his first show. After this, Bunny Barron brought in artistes like sophisticated duo Bob and Alf Pearson who appeared in summer seasons that went on until 1978. However, the show that broke all records for revenue featured Bernie Clifton in 1977. Later on, audiences had fallen somewhat so alternative concerts were tried to boost business, including a split season, but ticket sales did not substantially improve. Despite increasing competition from TV and films, the theatre managed to continue until 1984 when the traditional style all-star ‘Summer Show’ returned bringing the likes of Danny la Rue, Val Doonican, The Nolans, Ken Dodd Frankie Vaughan and Alan Price. Sadly, the theatre building was literally crumbling and forced to close in September 1988 when the last live show was ‘Joe Brown and the Bruvvers’. After 73 years, the hastily erected theatre could not be resurrected so events were switched to the newly refurbished Marina in the town centre. Sparrow’s Nest theatre was demolished in 1993 but the public gardens remain and, fittingly, some entertainment lives on. A small annexe of the theatre has been turned into a mini-cinema that is home to the thriving Lowestoft Cine & Camcorder Club.

26 November 2009 – "The Anglo-Saxon Burials at Lakenheath" – by Joanna Caruth

Joanna Caruth, with the help of excellent slides, told members about finding an Anglo-Saxon man who had been buried with his horse. Joanna is Senior Project Manager with Bury St Edmunds Field Team of the Suffolk Archaeological Service and worked on this dig. In 2001 the team was given the chance to do further work within a known area of ancient occupation on the American airbase site at Lakenheath in Suffolk. Roman remains, both early and late, had confirmed their presence on this area up to approximately 400AD. Archaeologists worked there in 1987, returning between 1977 and 1999, and in addition to Roman burials the various digs had uncovered two Anglo-Saxon cemeteries holding a total of thirty-six graves. The pagan cemeteries were probably in use for about 30 years but most burials occurred between 470 and 480AD. Similar finds to these were anticipated in 2001, where redevelopment of the base accommodation was again in progress, but what they actually discovered was truly amazing. The site was special for several reasons; first it was secure against night-hawks; second the hastily erected wartime buildings had shallow foundations, meaning there had been minimum disturbance of the ground archaeology; the cemetery area included large chalky deposits that, unlike sand, helped preserve bone; finally the team were given plenty of time to work. Excavation began, and the archaeologists discovered little in the first few days. However, 2m² trial holes by builders further across the site revealed clear signs of burials in the mixed sand and chalk. Machines removed the top surface and after hand stripping of subsoil an incredible number of graves appeared, eventually totalling 268, covering a large area. Graves were E–W aligned (with very few exceptions) with the head at the west end. Although they were not in rows there were only a few instances where graves overlapped.

Over several months the diggers patiently removed ten centimetre layers, recording and photographing finds (in the sandy parts just staining) as they progressed, eventually recording the whole cemetery except for a small area that runs under the road. There were sufficient bones to reveal the numbers of men, women and children and generally more grave goods were found with the females – these included brooches, wrist-clasps and thousands of decorative beads. Only two burials of individuals contained swords or spears, suggesting the local tribes were not of warlike disposition. Fifty burials were logged before the rare ‘man and horse’ grave, surrounded by a shallow ditch, was discovered towards the south end, centred in a clear area believed to have held a burial mound. It was well preserved and beside the skeletons held a large sword and two spears, plus numerous remains of harness fittings and a large bucket, probably to hold food for the horse in the afterlife. The male horse had been about 6 years old and the heavy pony type common to that period. Carbon dating fixed the

burial as late 5th century. It was not a royal grave, but was of higher status than most others on site. By sheer luck a modern sewer pipe that divided the site missed this grave by inches. British Museum conservators were invited to carry out the recovery of the very fragile weapons and horse harness that were afterwards reconstructed in their laboratories. TV's *Meet the Ancestors* team visited, Julian Richards *et al*, and working from the bones produced painted reconstructions of both man and horse. As well as inhumations the cemeteries contained numerous cremation urns, many of East Anglian origin. Four cremations contained horses. There will be several years of analysis and recording needed before a fuller picture of these early inhabitants and their life can be published. Hopefully the Society will get a follow-up report when the analysis is complete.

The Society's Annual Report on last year's activities is now available from the Treasurer, price £2.00.

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Obituary: Peter Clayton

We regret to announce the death of Peter Clayton, who after a long illness died late last year. Peter and his wife Kathleen joined us in February 2000 and enjoyed the talks and trips out with the Society. They both helped as stewards at the museum and were active with U3A courses. Peter will be missed.

NB – Replacement required for our retiring Programme Arranger, John Knowles

John stands down from this summer, by which time he will have sorted most the programme of talks for 2010/11. Can we please have a volunteer to take over this important position? There is help available, and a list of possible speakers on file, but we are also looking for members' suggestions on new topics or outings. As in the past, talks from Society members' are very welcome and help keep costs down. We need to confirm a replacement by the AGM, in order that John has time to explain how the booking system operates. Your committee would like to acknowledge the excellent job John has done, and the fine topics he arranged for us over the few past years.

WUFFING EDUCATION AT SUTTON HOO – Saturday Study Days

The winter list of lectures from this body, held during January, February and March, includes several that could be of interest to members. The full study days offer nationally recognised speakers, tea and coffee throughout, free parking and access to the NT site and exhibition. Prior booking is essential.

Full details and cost are listed on their website at: www.WuffingEducation.co.uk or ask at Society meetings.