

Lowestoft Archaeological and Local History Society

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Society website: www.lowestoftlocalhistory.co.uk

What's On in 2010

11 November 2010 "Tolhouse, Great Yarmouth's Medieval Gaol" by Les Cole – closed in 1878, this building is now used as a museum – its history stretches back over 800 years.

25 November 2010 "East Anglian Goldsmiths 1500–1740" by Mary Fewster – a history teacher for 27 years, Mary has also studied the Great Yarmouth Herring Industry.

27 January 2011 "Glass and Brass" by Terry Weatherley – another inimitable topic will be presented by this local speaker. This time the subject deals with aspects of church decoration.

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

Our museum at Broad House has now closed for the winter months. As this is the last Newsletter until January, we send seasonal greetings to on-line readers and those who cannot attend the next meeting. Reservations are coming in well for the Society's winter meal at the college. If you have not booked already, please see the note overleaf.

At our last committee meeting we discussed a revised format for the Society talks after autumn 2011 – designed to help keep our finances within budget. Final details will be worked out in the spring. Our treasurer has managed to secure a digital projector for us at a very reasonable cost; this is a welcome facility as many speakers now use this computerised system. It will make illustrating talks much simpler, and we ought to keep up to date.

Please remember we are still looking urgently for a volunteer Programme Arranger and replacement Vice Chairman. Look at our website, listed above, for additional news of Society events past and present.

With best wishes, **Lilian Fisher**

Details of recent events:

14 October 2010 – "Beccles in the First World War" by David Lindley

David Lindley explained how the First World War affected Beccles from 1914 to 1916. While showing a comprehensive set of pictures, he quoted the letters and diaries of several local conscripts describing conditions at the Front, balancing this with local newspaper reports. Over 1500 people from Beccles served in a number of different regiments and locations, and 218 of them made the ultimate sacrifice (higher than the national average). 1914 began with wintry conditions and normal celebrations and everyday news and events continued (the Suffragettes were causing a stir and Maj. Barrett was fined for not producing his driving licence) the Sir John Leman High School had just opened, a state-of-the-art building; but serious thoughts of conflict came in early August, although some took the view that any war would be of short duration. Sir Edward Beecham of Langley Park decried publicly the use of money for military purposes, but promptly reversed his opinions when war was unavoidable (he was to lose his eldest son in battle quite soon). By 11 August many Territorials had

been mobilized locally – 3000 gathered in Norwich marketplace ready to go to the front. Now horses were being requisitioned and sent off by rail (70 went from Beccles) for duties overseas pulling heavy guns. Volunteers for the army were offered payment of £1 if they signed up by 8 September – many did, as there was great enthusiasm for the war.

The Germans were already occupying parts of France and Belgium at this stage, and the first British troops arrived to find thousands of displaced and frightened locals fleeing from major centres to escape the invaders. Near Antwerp, allied forces were pushed back and forced to destroy an emergency bridge over the River Schelde to stop the advancing enemy, whose observers sometimes used captive balloons to direct gunfire. Both Norfolk and Suffolk Regiments took heavy casualties – in one engagement the Suffolks were reduced to 3 officers and 217 troops from an original 1000 men. Anti-German feeling had started in Britain and a Beccles photographer was targeted – he explained he was Latvian (Russian) and was in fact an ally. Despite the fighting overseas, some social events continued and raised useful funds for good causes. Streams of wounded now came back to tell their story. Many doctors here volunteered their services and went to the front where they worked incredibly long hours through the carnage. Dr Fox, a Beccles GP, worked near the front and his team treated between 1000 and 1500 casualties daily (numbers were so great that some waited up to three days for treatment). Families through the town and surrounding area lost many fathers and sons whose names are recorded on the local memorials.

At Christmas 1914 the famous truce took place, with Allies playing football and exchanging food and small gifts with their foes. Food was an essential everywhere – even Shipmeadow workhouse allowed a bit extra for Christmas and also allowed couples aged over 60 to live together for the first time. In 1915 the Press issued a call for sandbags needed for overseas. Reports came back of sniper actions in France and Belgium, and the troops had an endless round of trench digging, fatigues and sentry duty. Both sides mined the opponent's trenches causing more heavy casualties. In June, Dr Fox was employed at Ypres, where a typhoid outbreak took the lives of 20,000 innocent people. Simultaneously Allied forces were returning to the UK from the unsuccessful Gallipoli campaign where thousands more troops had been killed and injured. The following year the liner Lusitania was sunk by a German submarine in the Atlantic with the loss of 1000 passengers – altogether a dreadful period for overseas news. The Beccles papers reported many stories of East Anglians involved with the front line but also listed a rash of minor local offences ranging from fighting and prostitution to accidents involving horse-drawn carriages. David concluded by saying schools were then giving confidence-building lessons on the Empire; also that the Manse, in Fredericks Road, was used as a hospital for wounded servicemen and, on one special day, King George V came to East Anglia by rail to review his troops at Gillingham and Worlingham.

28 October 2010 – "A medical student at Belsen-Bergen" by Dr Gordon Walker (ret.)

Dr Walker told members of his unexpected exposure, in mid April 1945, to the horrors of the Nazi concentration camp at Belsen-Bergen. One of a large group of British medical students originally selected to go to the assistance of the starving population of the Netherlands, Gordon heard their destination had been revised without warning. He joined the others at RAF Lyneham and they headed for North Germany aboard several Dakota aircraft. After a flight dogged by bad weather most of them turned back, but his plane managed to land 16 students near Belsen, within walking distance of the camp that was already in Allied hands. On arrival they made themselves known, were given Red Cross uniforms and got straight on with emergency work in the huts, first sorting the survivors from the dead, giving them water and moving the stronger ones to a larger hall where they could be deloused. The army had cleared the camp of the German guards apart from about 50 who were employed removing the dead to mass graves. Although Belsen was not one of the extermination camps, conditions were dreadful because some 60,000 inmates, including large groups brought from other camps, were packed into 1935-built huts sufficient to hold just 10,000. Large numbers of the prisoners of war had died in a typhoid epidemic, others simply died of the cold, or starvation, and the students quickly found the survivors could not at first tolerate any rich food. Some of the women inmates ran a cookhouse and weak soup was prepared for the newly released – efforts were also made to get them basic clothing. At this stage the prisoners were just about controllable. After 3–4 days more help arrived and a start was made on cleaning out the huts and reducing the three-tier bunk system to two, thus giving more space for the weak POWs to rest and recover. Gordon Walker commandeered a truck to fetch hay for stuffing mattresses to make them more comfortable, and Quaker ambulances helped move the sick people to the newly cleaned huts within the camp. Finally, the more advanced medical students could try out some of their doctoring skills.

Amazingly, many prisoners of war drew on reserves of energy that had enabled them to survive their dreadful experience and senior medical advisors encouraged them. A few of the fitter ones had found musical instruments abandoned by the German military band and entertained the others. As spirits rose, a Captain from the rescuers set up a nightclub of sorts and even organised dances. The medical students lived and ate in a nearby chalet. Additional food had been found that the guards had stockpiled in the camp stores, and plenty of wine. Some three weeks later many of the recovering inmates were able to celebrate VE Day with their rescuers.

The camp had been set up in 1940 to house French and Belgian POWs but by 1942, when it was designated a concentration camp, there were many Soviets and in April 1943, under SS control, several thousand Jews (the latter intended to be exchanged for German POWs held by the Allies). August 1944 saw approximately 8,000 women arrive. The level of overcrowding at Belsen contributed to the high death rate and it was estimated a total of 50,000 perished there. After hostilities finished the medical students made their way back to Britain by various routes. Gordon Walker and another student went by motorbike via Holland but had a very difficult journey. His friend was then ill with typhoid but luckily Gordon came through unscathed and went back to his studies, becoming a qualified GP and joining the family practice in Lowestoft. Not many of his experiences were discussed in the following decades but, at the millennium, a German historian came to Britain with a photographer to interview Dr Walker and record his side of the story. Both German and UK historians have since organized remembrance ceremonies in Britain and Germany, and a large museum building has been erected at Belsen to ensure the history of those events is not forgotten. Dr Walker was a guest at its opening and some souvenirs of his are now among the exhibits.

Final Bookings needed NOW for the 2011 Winter Meal at Lowestoft College, St Peter's Street!

The date is confirmed as Thursday 17 February and the cost per person will be £18.00. The College are anxious that we confirm our place reservations before Christmas, as they have keen competition for their limited space. Please submit your name(s) now, if you have not already done so, to let our treasurer know how many seats you need. It will help if those who have an email address could supply it to the Treasurer [Ray93@talktalk.net] for the menu to be forwarded when it is available. Your payment for the meal will become due at the 27 January meeting.

Annual Report: Please bring any article you may have for inclusion in the report to Ray Collins by our 25 November meeting, or send it to him by post during the next few weeks. Articles may be printed or handwritten. Production of the report is made easier if your article is computer-printed (e.g. from a Word or an Excel file, at 12pt size) but this is not essential. The deadline is Christmas for any printed item – send in a bit earlier please if your article is handwritten.

Please give any items you have for inclusion in the Newsletters to Don Friston, at Society meetings.