

Lowestoft Archaeological and Local History Society

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Society website: www.lowestoftlocalhistory.co.uk

What's On in 2011

13 Oct 2011 "Lowestoft Then and Now" by local historian John Holmes

27 Oct 2011 "What has the Ice Age done for us?" by Society member Ray Collins

10 Nov 2011 "The History of Belle Coaches" by coach operator Robert Shreeve

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

To keep you informed of what your committee is doing: At the last committee meeting a discussion took place regarding the updating of the Society Constitution. When this update has been completed the modified document will be submitted for approval by the membership at the Annual General Meeting in May 2012.

The Museum has done well this year with donations showing a 16% increase, shop sales a 4% increase and visitors a 3% increase. The general trend around the county this year has seen a decrease in visitors and income, so well done the Museum Team.

It is planned for the Society members to visit Broad House Museum on Thursday 10 May next year instead of meeting at the Church Hall. Please make a note of this on your membership and events card.

Ron Ashman – Chairman

Details of recent events:

8 September 2011 – "The Battle for Blythburgh Church" by Dr Alan Mackley

The 25-year battle to save St Andrew's church began in the late 1800s when the Bishop of Norwich declared it closed, as unfit for purpose due to dilapidation. Five vicars, two baronets and, among others, William Morris the famous designer and artist, were to be included in those fighting for its survival.

In the Domesday period Suffolk was one of the richest counties and Blythburgh appeared as one of the two daughter churches of St Osyth's Priory. It continued as part of the Manor run by a major landholder and was first rebuilt, in costly fashion, in the 15th century. This was not due to there being a huge population but because the richer inhabitants believed in a life

after death and were prepared to pay for it. The easiest way was to donate a font or, more frequently a window, to their local church to cover prayers of remembrance or provide funding for the upkeep of the church fabric. These donors set a fine example but large churches meant large maintenance bills, and there was a real problem ahead for the remaining less well off villagers. By the 1880s the population of Blythburgh had dropped to around 600 and the upkeep of the church had become a huge burden.

At that period there were virtually no really rich parishioners. Sir John Blois, Lord of the Manor, lived at Cockfield Hall, Yoxford and the Vicar lived in Walberswick but there were 3 large tenant farmers in the area. In 1851 just 35 regular communicants were using a church having seating capacity for 300. By contrast, the Methodist Chapel in the village had 160 regular supporters. St Andrew's suffered a general deterioration in its condition for the next 25 years. Some glass, including that of the east window and south porch was lost during the 1870s. The box pews appear to have been removed about 10 years later and, during this operation, it is recorded that some 15th-century pew ends were uncovered. Rev Sykes was the incumbent from 1879 and around the same period the north east Hopton chapel housed a school, evidenced by some of the benches being drilled to take inkwells. By 1884 the screen had gone, and the east window tracery, with other windows bricked up too.

Efforts were now made to deal with emergency repairs and promote a fund-raising scheme for more permanent restoration at Blythburgh. In the late 19th-century there was public interest in visiting churches to study their architecture, brasses and monuments and the Ecclesiological Society was active. The SPAB had distinct views on what should be done to restore historic buildings but were often at odds with local opinion, and this was certainly the case at Blythburgh. There was a restoration committee formed, led by architect Arthur Edmund Street, that included Rev Sykes, Sir John Blois and his wife, a Mrs Cooper, Mrs Briggs and Mrs Youngs (wives of the 3 main farmers), several influential people from London and elsewhere, plus some churchwardens.

Sir John Blois organised London fund-raising. The famous composers Gilbert & Sullivan arranged a concert at Blythburgh, and there was also a well-supported Bazaar in 1882. The restoration was expected to cost £4,800, a huge amount then. The feisty local committee would not allow the SPAB to see the building proposals. There were five quotes prepared and the committee chose the cheapest, arguing with the SPAB over the method of controlling the works. Disagreements continued for a long time and the London restoration committee was dissolved in favour of the local one. Some work was completed and the church reopened in 1884 with new tracery. Critics complained at the use of cathedral (pressed) glass and because the new woodwork exactly copied the old instead of using new designs. Sir John & Lady Blois left the committee within a year, probably because Sir John disliked Henry Oakes, the new rector, who took over but proceeded to fall out with many of the local enthusiasts, including the architect who walked away from the project.

The committee was weak and nothing much happened until after designer William Morris visited in the 1890s. He bypassed Walberswick, avoiding Rev Oakes, and went direct to the church where he found that the roof was not weatherproof and the porch falling down. Other artists and also agents for the SPAB came and went with the years but still no major work was carried out. In 1905 a new committee formed with the Princess Louise (daughter of Queen Victoria) as Patron. The head of the new National Trust, together with Ralph Blois, Sir John Blois's successor, now put together an 'August' committee to try to get things moving. The capable treasurer was churchwarden C Egerton, from Wangford, and a new architect

named Johnson was appointed. Still the problems persisted and while Ralph Blois and Prince Duleep Singh supported the SPAB, the Blythburgh contingent went their own way. Not surprisingly the total target for the fund was never reached because the frustrated SPAB and much of the financial support also departed. The retained local committee did get the porch sensitively restored but it was not until the 1930s that the essential work was finally done, using modern materials and a more considered approach to restoration techniques.



Herringfleet Church in Suffolk is still part thatched

Photo: Don Friston

22 Sept 2011 – "Round Tower Churches around Lowestoft" by Richard Harbord

Retired architect and historian, Richard set out his findings on the origins of this type of tower, who built them and why they chose a round format. Prior to the 11th century, this country contained mainly Saxon churches built using a mixture of local wood and stone. Then the Normans arrived and from c.1120 introduced the Romanesque style that was to continue over the next 150 years, gradually replacing Anglo-Saxon, although the Saxons liked their own style. Round windows were used continuously during the 11th–12th centuries.

The identification of the builders of round tower churches has proved difficult. Because they often took many years to complete it is likely that a succession of different controlling inhabitants were involved. Experts on church history are non-committed on dates, but it is estimated that up to three quarters of RT churches contain some Anglo-Saxon fabric. King Kanute promoted much church building towards the end of the Viking period, driven by the interest of his wife (Emma of Normandy). At the time in England there were main churches at various centres but not many in E Anglia. They began to put this right around 1040, starting at Bury St Edmunds. She was to marry two kings and worked over 50 years to complete this aim, in general replacing wood with stone. The Conquest brought changes and, by 1075, churches at Norwich, Ipswich and Thetford were all being constructed. The 1080s saw much local church building.

There are 12 round towered churches near Lowestoft, of various designs and size, and slightly fewer in North Norfolk, south of Sheringham; a number of Suffolk ones (example Oulton) are of cruciform design. It seems no western square towered churches appeared in the Norman period, although traces of Norman fabric appear in the body of many local buildings. Norfolk and Suffolk had about 1500 churches all told – many have fallen into disrepair but few have been excavated. It is believed construction started at the east end and finished at the west tower, the latter sometimes built at a later date. Many churches began as private chapels, without bells, and therefore did not require a tower in which to hang them. Full-time parish priests appeared in the 1300s and this created a demand for baptisms, marriages and, of course, burials. Some private chapels converted to offer public services and burial grounds, and rates were reduced in return.

The building process for round towers took a considerable time due to the slow setting mortars used, No more than 3m (approx 9ft) could be raised in one stage else the structure was prone to collapse. Also there was the problem of finding suitable local material. In the days of hand working, and transport using horses or human labour to shift stone and sand, it is surprising what was achieved. In North Norfolk a soft accreted material termed pudding stone was found useful. In Suffolk there was the hard flint available from the beaches or in some places from chalk workings. This very durable material was used, as found, or knapped to provide flat surfaces for finishing or decorating towers. Depending on the commissioning body's finances, a better quality, imported stone such as Barnack or Caen stone might be available. The inside of the tower could either have a spiral staircase constructed of wood or stone, or a series of large ladders to give access to the various floors and belfry, if fitted. Bells gave a good opportunity for donations from the richer parishioners. The west wall of the nave was often used to support a round tower and due to its shape it would have a fillet of stone where the round met the flat surface. Sometimes the tower may be seen, and have access, from the inside of the church. Windows were fitted to light the inside of the tower and sounding apertures allowed the bells to be heard across the area – there is wide variation in the orientation of these windows and openings.

Can anyone tell us about this cottage that appears ready to be demolished in Elm Tree Road?



Annual Report

Perhaps this is a good time to remind all members that the next Society Annual Report will be published and on sale in January 2012. This will contain details of the Society, the Museum and our members, plus a summary of all the talks from 2011; also some interesting articles on subjects not covered at Society meetings. It is good value for money and an excellent reference should you miss any of our meetings.

Please bring any written article you may have for inclusion in the next Annual Report to Ray Collins by our final meeting this year (24 November), alternatively email it to: ray93@talktalk.net or send it on to him by post during the next few weeks – posted articles may be printed or hand-written. Production of the report is made easier if your article is computer-printed (e.g. from a Word or an Excel file, at 12pt font size) but this is not essential. The deadline is Christmas for any item sent by email – please send in a bit earlier if your article is handwritten and is to be posted.

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