

Lowestoft Archaeological and Local History Society

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Society website: www.lowestoftlocalhistory.co.uk

What's On in 2011

10 March 2011 "Roman Norfolk" by John Davies – Chief curator of Norwich City Study Centre, John is an expert on Roman Britain, particularly Roman Norfolk.

24 March 2011 "One of the last Horsemen" by Ron Ashman – another tale from Ron having local interest, this time detailing part of his grandfather's life on the farm.

14 April 2011 "Aircraft Archaeology" by Ian McClachan – an authority on the USAAF in wartime, Ian brings evocative descriptions of 'digs', courage, sacrifice and bravery.

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 in Oulton Broad, Everitt's Park will re-open on Monday 18 April, and we hope that lots of visitors will be coming to look round the exhibits.

Voluntary Stewards will be needed to help, and please get in touch with Ray, our Treasurer, if you can give a few hours time each week.

On the 23 June, the church outing will visit Covehithe and Wangford Churches, and the meal afterwards will be at the Five Bells Inn, Wrentham.

With best wishes, **Lilian Fisher**

Details of recent events:

10 February 2011 – "The Archaeology of Rabbit Warrens" – by Tom Williamson

Tom gave an interesting and fast-moving tale of the introduction of this non-indigenous mammal to Britain by early invaders, and how they controlled its management. Historians are undecided as to when rabbits were first brought into the country – certainly the Romans bred them for meat and fur, as did the Normans. However, buried remains have also been found in earlier settlements. The Romans were known to have kept them in hutches, which makes sense with an occupying force that might be required to move territory at short notice. The Normans followed a distribution plan to start with, where rabbits were introduced on island sites or close to the coast. As these animals are not best suited to the British climate the warrens had to be carefully sited and planned. Rabbits detest damp, and heavy or clay soils, and it is because of this that warrens are traditionally sited on higher, sandy or peaty ground, particularly on heaths and moorland. Originally, just the wealthier people would have been able to afford rabbit meat, at that period a luxury food. The skins were of at least equal value and had a number of uses. A rabbit might be worth the equivalent of one week's wages to a medieval labourer. Religious enclaves found rabbit meat an ideal way to feed their inmates, making a welcome change to fish from their existing ponds. Trained keepers, known as warreners were employed to look after, breed and control their valuable charges. Landowners who enclosed public land for rabbit breeding often fell foul of angry

locals, who resented losing the right of use of their common, so poaching became a problem and some violence ensued.

As young rabbits mature, they are by nature inclined to seek new territory and much of the keepers' time would be devoted to limiting this tendency. One favoured method was to build roughly rectangular mounds of light soil, called pillow mounds, sometimes having rounded corners. These would contain a few planned burrows, created during construction by a cut-and-cover method of trenches roofed with stone slabs. The rabbits would extend the burrows themselves as they multiplied. The basic pillow mounds were produced by hand-digging two parallel trenches, and throwing the spoil inwards to form a central heap with sloping sides. This had to be no wider than the digger could reach without walking on the mound and compacting it, as this would have made the ground too hard for the rabbits to dig. The height of the mounds varied from 2ft to 6ft above ground level, the side trenches giving good drainage and extra space for the burrow openings, making the latter easy to find when the rabbits were to be harvested. Once the mound was of sufficient size it would be covered with a layer of impervious material to prevent the ingress of rain. The warrener had to continuously maintain this waterproof top covering. Although the width of a mound was limited, the length could vary considerably, sometimes running the full extent of the warren, or even continuing around all sides of an enclosure, making it very suitable for containing the rabbit stock. In this event the inner face of the mound would be almost vertical with an inward overhang of gorse at the top to discourage rabbits from trying to leap over. Mounds could be linked at right angles; less common were circular or cross-shaped designs but types varied from one area to another.

Over the centuries, the use of warrens spread across the whole country, including Scotland and Wales, but were probably most popular in the English southern counties and moorland. The warrener would normally have a house or lodge on site with living accommodation, plus at least one extra floor for processing the meat and fur. If the owning estate was large there could also be a deer park and adjoining stock ponds for fish. Establishing a warren often meant the value of adjoining lands became limited, due to non-stop predation of crops by the rabbits. In many cases the frustrated next-door owner would decide to also produce rabbits, and this seemed to work well – warrens of 1000-acres plus being recorded, and many clusters of smaller ones. Pillow mounds mostly came into use after the Napoleonic Wars, and a few even date to the late 19th century. They were not always needed if the contour of the land was sufficiently steep, as in some high, western areas of moorland. The soil in other places allowed rabbits to burrow quite naturally and might be bounded by water or outcrops of rock. The banks and burrows of a warren formed an attractive home, but another way to keep the stock on site was by regularly feeding them turnips or similar root crops. This relieved pressure on the neighbour's crop but was not a foolproof system.

Natural predators, mainly vermin, were attracted to warrens – they included stoats and weasels, foxes, cats, hawks and owls. If their attentions got too bad the warrener would contrive traps, including cleverly built converging lines of stones where these were locally available. These subtly directed the vermin into the mouth of the traps. Sometimes a population of escaped rabbits also got out of hand and required culling. A special tunnel or tip-trap was then built with a hinged floor panel positioned above a pit. This panel would be supported, and baited for a time with turnips etc. to get the rabbits used to passing over it. Then the support was removed from the panel and the pit filled rapidly with victims. In the normal management of a warren, the estate owner would tell the warrener to supply a certain number of rabbits for consumption. There would be nets pegged down over all the burrow entrances and a ferret or two introduced from one side of the mound. The frightened rabbits would bolt in all directions and become trapped in the nets, from where they could be easily collected and dispatched.

Many traces of the old warrens remain, often seen best from the air. The smaller mounds have been a continuous embarrassment to archaeologists as they can easily be confused with long barrows and burial mounds. Some of them even have linear markings on top where the original underground cut-and-cover tunnels have subsided to leave shallow trenches, leading to assumptions of religious use. There are some warreners' lodges, traps and vermin guides remaining also to lead the history buff astray. (To cloud the issue, a few genuine barrows have been taken over by wild rabbit colonies.) As rabbits became more common, and prices fell, commercial warrens were introduced, cheaply producing huge numbers of animals and covering large areas. But sadly, the use of rabbit as a major food item declined in the latter part of the 20th century and it is of minor importance in the modern UK shopping basket, although still used in the pet-food trade.

25 February 2011 - "Erosion and the Medieval Settlement at Covehithe" - Paul Durbidge

Paul has been recovering and recording information about Covehithe for about 50 years. What started as a social visit with family and friends turned into a long study of cliff erosion and excavation of features revealed by the falling cliffs.

At the end of the road, which finished at the cliff edge, stood a bungalow called 'Four Winds' and nearby there was a second world war gun emplacement. To the north is Long Covert, a heath that was covered in yellow broom. Near to the heath were five lagoons that had been created following gravel extraction, used in the construction of Ellough airfield and other world war two fortifications. These have all been lost to the sea some years ago.

In 1978 he was approached by Professor Steers from Cambridge to record the amount of erosion, a task that he carried out on 14 March every year up until 2003. In taking these measurements the first action is to select a series of fixed reference points some distance from the cliff edge. In the first year some reference points were lost to the erosion, so he then set these points much further away from the cliff edge.

Over the last 17 years of measurement by Paul, 387 feet of cliff has been lost. Each year the loss is different and at one measuring point the loss over 12 months was 76 feet.

Erosion was bad in the storms of 1970s and in 1953 at Long Covert, Professor Steers recorded 85 feet in one night.

Erosion is not only caused by the sea, as water running off the land can also result in a cliff fall.

Paul noticed on his early visits that the erosion was exposing medieval well shafts and pits. These were later to reveal much of the settlement history.

Destruction by sea action often throws up large blocks of peat. These contain animal and fish bones and often birch tree remains that date back to when East Anglia was connected to the European mainland. Near Benacre Broad lots of flints have been found, together with stone and bronze axes.

To the north, at Long Covert, salt pans have been found on either side of Benacre Broad.

At least six medieval wells have been found in the cliffs. These had been originally dug out with sloping sides then oak barrels were inserted on top of each other into the bottom. The barrels were held together with hazel bands.

From these wells have come a number of interesting artefacts. These include; two wooden bowls, one with the makers mark, found behind the barrel staves; three leather buckets; a small bronze cauldron, made of sheet bronze; lead amphora, which contained holy water and were used by pilgrims ; many pins, needles and pottery, (jugs and flagons).

A cremation burial urn was found about one foot below the surface, in the face of a twenty five foot high cliff. This was a bucket urn (or rather half of one remained). These bronze age pots were not fired, therefore they crumble quite easily. Inside they found the skeleton of a child, sex unknown, of about 13 or 14 years old. This pot is on display in the Lowestoft Museum.

Field walking revealed pieces of coarse ware Roman pottery and Samian ware.

The earliest settlement, situated to the south of Covehithe, was called Southmere which appeared to have an inland harbour. The settlement moved at a later date to near Benacre Broad.

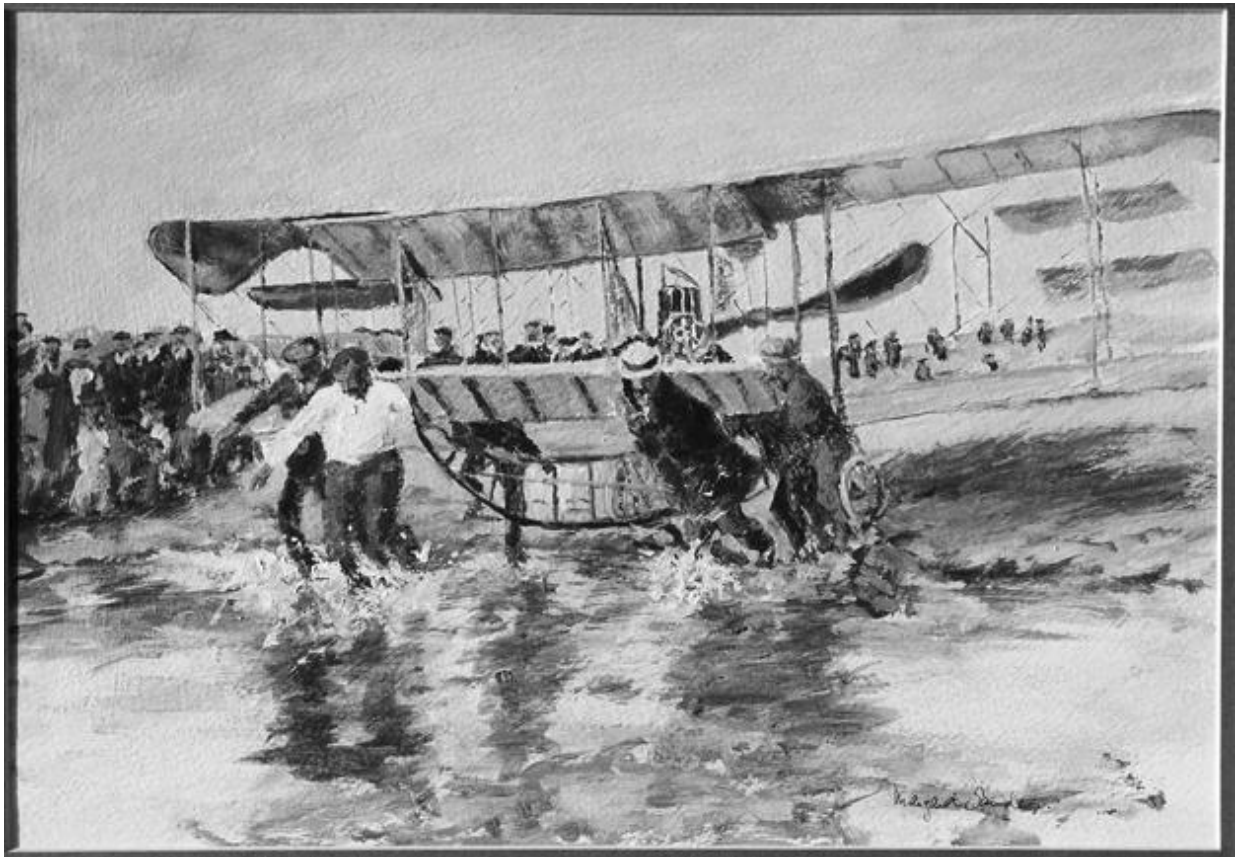
The church was built about 1565 but despite it being a large church, the population it served was never very great. The most recorded was 296 in the medieval period, which by 1995 had fallen to just 27. The church was visited by Dowsing who destroyed many windows. Within thirty years of this visit the building was in a bad state of repair (although this was not through Dowsing's actions). A new smaller church was built within the shell of the original church in 1672.

At one time the village had a pub, called The Anchorage, which stood opposite the church.

On a more modern note, before the first world war, in 1908, what was possibly the first aeroplane flight in Suffolk happened close by. A Capt Haydn Sanders built an aeroplane powered by a Brooke engine (made in Lowestoft) and managed a short flight before hitting some telegraph wires and crashing to the ground. Luckily the captain was uninjured.

Also, a field near the village was used during the first world war as an airfield. Cows were kept on the field to keep the grass short but started to lick the fabric on the aircraft. Unfortunately this had been stuck on with 'dope' and the cows became 'high' on the glue.

Early one morning, Paul was walking along the Covehithe cliff top when he saw a figure approaching wearing a long black coat, three pointed hat, boots and a carrying a cutlass. No, this was not a ghost, he was a member of the cast of a film being made on the beach. A number of films and adverts have been filmed at Covehithe, including two David Copperfield films.



An early trial by Captain Sanders on Kessingland Beach – painted by Margaret Sanders

[Picture supplied by Don Friston]

Vice Chairman's Notes:

On Thursday 25 February the published talk 'Frederick Dodington and the Rule of Three' by Don Friston was cancelled as Don became unwell, and he will probably miss most of the early summer meetings.

Our thanks to Paul Durbidge for stepping in at short notice. Don will be presenting his talk at a later date.

On Thursday 17 February several Society members enjoyed a meal at the Lowestoft College training restaurant called EAST. For those who have not visited the College restaurant, the food is cooked and served by the students where they learn the art of fine catering and hospitality. **Ron Ashman**

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

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