

Lowestoft Archaeological and Local History Society

Volume 40 Number 1 – **NEWSLETTER** – January 2012

Society website: www.lowestoftlocalhistory.co.uk

What's On in 2012

26 Jan 2012 "Sinners in the Saints?" by local historian Terry Weatherley

9 Feb 2012 "The effects of The Plague in Suffolk" by author and historian Pip Wright

23 Feb 2012 "1836 Poor Law Emigration from Blything" by member Myra Kestner

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

I hope you all had a very nice Christmas and will have a prosperous New Year.

Last year Paul Durbidge told us about an exploratory archaeological dig on the site of a house that was No 1 High Street, which was next to Arnold House. The last house built on the site was demolished in the late 1950s. Some members took part in this dig during the first week of November and some interesting features were discovered. The work was carried out in conjunction with the Heritage Centre and, as a result, the Society has received a cheque for £500. Many thanks must go to Paul for this effort in acquiring this funding. Hopefully, the excavation will be continued during the coming year.

Ron Ashman – Chairman

-

Details of recent events:

10 November 2011 – "The History of Belle Coaches" by Robert Shreeve

Robert began with the history of the company started by his grandfather, Benjamin Shreeve, who as a young man at the end of WW1 worked locally for United Automobile Services. He was keen and was soon given more responsibility, then promoted to foreman driver. Around that time he brought an early double-decker to Lowestoft from the manufacturer at Bishop Auckland, a two-day journey. Always ambitious, he decided to start his own bus business by obtaining a small charabanc, of which a number had then appeared, these often being converted from army surplus lorries. Some vehicles were built on Model-T Ford chassis

(many left-hand-drive) with either solid or pneumatic tyres. The public were then celebrating the end of the war, often by enjoying excursions to seaside and country venues, either taking family bookings or annual firm's outings on high-days and holidays. Benjamin then found himself competing for passengers with United, and other rival charabancs on the circular service through Oulton Broad, and in 1922 he took on Charlie Day as a partner.

There were no rules regarding pick-ups, and vehicles would make risky overtaking manoeuvres to get to the stops first. This, along with a price war, caused bad feeling and could not have been pleasant, or comfortable, for passengers. Eventually the Corporation saw the need for Hackney licences to be issued, which meant that operators could only use agreed routes, destinations, and pick-up points.

In 1924 he set up as Shreeve & Co., adopting a black and maroon livery with gold letters for his vehicles. His son (also named Robert) began riding the charabancs, talking to passengers, and soon acted as conductor. Despite his extreme youth the lad was able to continue in that role. Often, at the end of season in those early days passenger carrying dried up, so the charabanc body was removed to storage with the original lorry-back put to use for the winter carrying coal. During the General Strike in the 1920s they had carried mail. The vehicles were gradually improved, with more glazing and better seating, and the 1930s saw Holiday Camps appear, and school contracts, bringing more work. The new Road Traffic Act stipulated drivers must be aged 21 before they could obtain a public service vehicle (PSV) licence and conductors 18 years old. Shreeve & Co. now owned 7 coaches, the biggest having 32 seats, and competed with at least six other companies for local business. Just before WW2 they repainted their Classic coaches in blue and cream and changed the company name to Belle Coaches.

The outbreak of war meant no fuel for pleasure use and disaster loomed, although Belle Coaches secured some work moving evacuees between Lowestoft and Weston-super-mare. To keep occupied, Robert arranged with his father to purchase a lorry and they contracted for airfield building work. Belle Coaches were now ferrying soldiers to many destinations, and between 1942 and 1945 had almost non-stop business taking staff to airfields. They had moved from their operating base at a garage in College Road, Kirkley, to Horn Hill in 1942 but at the end of the war, had a worn-out fleet. Attempting to short-circuit the waiting list for replacements they decided to build their own vehicle bodies (surreptitiously using experienced local workers). They were soon forced to use legitimate labour but continued fitting almost all of their own coaches until 1964, when the complexity of engines and electronics, plus competition from mass-produced rivals put an end to it. Since the 1960s new vehicles have increasingly been sourced from abroad and are now hugely expensive.

As opportunity arose, Belle Coaches were able to take over some local competitors from Lowestoft, Beccles, Leiston and Saxmundham. This brought very useful school contracts including some from the US airbases at Bentwaters and Woodbridge that were to last for many years, and at one point in the 1960s the fleet numbered around 60 vehicles. As well as school services there were excursions from the Royal Plain, theatre bookings and mystery tours. However by the end of the 1970s more people owned cars and business had slowed. At this time young Robert made a decision to stop working overseas and join his father in the company. First they were able to buy Nightingale Coaches, from Beccles, and then equip a larger repair shop in Lowestoft. Business with local clubs having large memberships was still fairly good but as they entered the 1980s, to widen the appeal, they began to design their own tour routes, including overseas. The fleet was selectively trimmed to about 40 vehicles and in

1995 the Uggeshall and Beccles offshoots were closed leaving Lowestoft and Leiston, where the workshop is now centred. The 'Lazy Days' name and 'Classic Coaches' have remained popular and book well, particularly the perpetual favourite 'Mystery Tours'. Customers like the company policy of local passenger pick-up and set-down. At the present time all tour companies are suffering from a downturn in school services and the huge increases in the cost of fuel. Other controls on pollution and traffic congestion are now applied to add to the problems, but few companies have succeeded in maintaining a record of family ownership like Belle Coaches, lasting over 90 years.



Above is Wilfred Knight in his late teens at the wheel of a left-hand-drive charabanc, with a full load, ready for the off in front of the Palace Cinema, Lowestoft – note the hats, the solid rear tyres and the folding canopy. The left photo is of Arthur Kennedy, just returned from war service in France, waiting with a slightly newer Ford on the Royal Plain. The board in front offers an excursion to Fritton Lake and Loddon at just 3/- per head.

Coach owners are not known, as both drivers worked for a number of local firms before finally switching to Lowestoft Corporation Transport.

24 November 2011 – "How well do you know your town? – Some unusual features of Lowestoft" by Ron Ashman

Ron produced a refreshingly different talk by highlighting and testing the members' knowledge on items of Lowestoft from outside the High Street. He started with the 5-storey building in Kirkley, now St Aubyn's Court, originally constructed in 1896 as semi-detached villas. Part was to house John Bruce Payne MA, head-master of nearby St Aubyn's College – originally in Cliff Road, the College soon extended into a new building (having halls and classrooms) on the corner of Carlton Road – the remainder of the villas was to serve as dormitories for the pupils. The villas and college were designed by John Louth Clemence and built by the Lucas Brothers, who also collaborated with Morton Peto. The 1901 census lists the following people at the college: John Payne (proprietor), his wife and daughter, two assistants (matron and nurse) and ten servants including a cook and second nurse. All these looked after 56 pupils and two boarders – the latter studied mechanical engineering. Ron discovered that Norman Jewson, from the local building family, studied there before going on to Cambridge, eventually becoming an architect. The College closed in 1902 but is remembered in five local roads: College Road, St Aubyn's Road, Payne Street, John Street and Bruce Street. By the 1920s the villas formed a 50-room boarding house, run by Albert Thornhill, with weekly tariff varying from 2 guineas to £ 2. 5s. 6d. according to season (the college halls were occupied by St Aubyn's Motors). A little later the boarding house changed hands, becoming The Towers, which continued until the 1940s when it was converted to flats, which remain in use today.

In Kensington Gardens is a slim monument topped by a winged lion. This is dedicated to Richard Henry Reeve (a solicitor who had purchased the title Lord of the Manor of Lowestoft). He died in 1888 and his cousin, Mary E Franey, erected the monument at the Royal Plain. Designed as a fountain, it was criticised in a contemporary press item as "...dangerous to children" because it had no surrounding rail. When one was fitted the pedants claimed the children could now swing from it into the water. The problem was neatly solved after WW1 when the site was required for the town War Memorial, and the Reeve monument, minus fountain basin, moved up to Kensington Gardens. It appears in the photograph below taken by Henry Friston in 1922 at the opening ceremony. The sunken bandstand site was converted between the wars to form part of the electric boating lake.

A shop-front in Kirkley on the corner of Parade Road South carries the name of the Lowestoft Co-operative Society. Ron explained that in 1925 it fronted the Overland Model Dairy. Kelly's Directory of 1927 listed it as the Co-op Model dairy and clean milk depot – that stayed until at least 1961. Members of a certain age will remember that later it became Wally Gooch's motorcycle shop, and then the Pot Black snooker club.

Adjoining buildings just north of the bridge bear iron plaques; one reading J Barnes, St Miles Foundry & Iron Works, Norwich and the other J.W. Brooke, Adrian Works Lowestoft. In 1874 on his return to England J.W. Brooke opened an iron and brass foundry, which he named 'Adrian' after the place in which he had worked near Detroit, Michigan, USA. The company made a variety of metal components for building and industrial use and his son, John Mawdsley Brooke, was made works director in 1897. By 1899 they built their first 2-stroke engine, and their first car was produced in 1902. They supplied and fitted a sophisticated six-cylinder chassis in 1910 to the eccentric Swan Car, conceived by Robert

'Scotty' Matthewson for use at Swan Park in Calcutta. It is said that fairground specialists Savage of Kings Lynn built the body, which had red and amber eyes that glowed at night. Hot water from the radiator could be sprayed from the beak, and an 8-note-keyboard Gabriel horn powered by the exhaust played tunes. In 1911, as car making was falling off, J.W. Brooke opened their own shipyard at Lake Lothing, fitting engines exclusively made by the Adrian Works, and rapidly grew in reputation, with successes at International Motor Boat Races. A large number of their engines went to the Admiralty during WW1. Harry Dowsett acquired the company in 1940 and renamed it Brooke Marine.



Above is the Swan Car. It was returned to the UK in the 1990s when it sold at auction for £170,000. It was then subject to a major restoration and now lives on at a new home in the USA.

Left is the opening ceremony at Kensington Gardens in 1922. The Reeve memorial appears in the background on the right.

Ron showed a series of fascinating photos of the area around Station Square with the old Suffolk Hotel, the various bridges and rail crossings, plus one of a man taking seawater from the harbour to be sold for its so-called curative properties. Another picture showed the new

power generating station at the west end of Norwich Road that became operational in 1901. This supplied electricity for the first time to the businesses and better-off houses in the town as an alternative to the existing gas and oil lighting systems. (In 1901 there were 200 consumers, rising to 1,350 by 1911.) From 1903 it provided power for the Corporation trams housed in an adjoining depot in Rotterdam Road. The coal-fired furnaces could heat four Babcock & Wilcox boilers, and Laurence & Scott of Norwich supplied the generators. The building was named the Borough of Lowestoft Electricity Works and Tramways Office. The company remained in 1938 and after WW2 became the Eastern Electricity Board. The Norwich Road works closed around 1971. A separate bird's-eye view showed the Town centre during redevelopment, and the Premier Laundry building, home to the Lowestoft Museum from 1974 to 1984. Much clearance of older buildings took place at the time including the Odeon Cinema and the older Regent Alfresco, then in use as a bus garage, with the new Britten Centre scheduled to be complete by 1985.

Belvedere Road and adjoining Horn Hill were subject to major changes during the last century. The Kelly's Directory for 1925 listed seventeen businesses trading there. The biggest were Jewsons wood-yards, Richards Shipbuilding and Morton's food processing. Jewsons remain, having downsized, but all the rest have gone leaving parts of this area undeveloped today. Lowestoft Co-op oil & coal depot, Craske Ltd, Bessey & Palmer, and George and William Pretty all traded in coal that was brought by rail. The St John's Road car park covers the site of the old GER goods depot (operating between 1859 and 1972) that was connected by a branch line running beside Victoria Road to the Lowestoft to Beccles mainline at Oulton Broad South, as was the Co-op Canning Factory in Waveney Drive. Other traders included Pertwee & Back and Arthur Gouldby (marine and fishing), Lacey & Lincoln (builders merchants), R.F. Boardley (electrical), Public houses and, of course, Belle Coaches who are featured in this Newsletter. A number of smaller companies offering support services to the town were operating during the latter part of the 1900s. The ASDA supermarket has replaced Richards Shipbuilding although the new ancillary buildings beside its car park (on the old Morton's site) have never been occupied. St John's Church was constructed on the corner of Belvedere Road in 1853 but the building materials weathered badly, and it was demolished in 1977 to be replaced by sheltered accommodation.

Ron explained that Henry VIII set up three gun batteries at Lowestoft in the 1500s, each having simple earthworks and three or four guns. One was to the north, one covered the Ness, and the third guarded the channel off Battery Green. An attack in 1549 came not from the sea but from an armed Suffolk band taking part in Kett's Rebellion. They seized six guns and took them away to attack Yarmouth. This failed and the guns were never recovered, being retained by the people of Yarmouth. Lack of ammunition at Lowestoft meant five Dutch Men-of-war lay off the beach unchallenged in 1656. Then in 1665 a Dutch privateer arrived and Major Wilde gathered the Town gunners for an attack. The privateer sailed close and fired a salvo, killing the Major and ending yet another fiasco. In 1781 the battery was substantially enlarged and had a total of 13 cannon, but still there were no actions of import and much time and money was required for maintenance. By 1847 the defences were again in very poor condition and the parish churchwardens sold off some of the church plate to fund the repairs. The battery was removed in 1880 and after the harbour and docks were constructed on the foreshore, the old battery site was effectively cut off from the sea.

Society Meal at Lowestoft College on 28 February 2012

The meal is already booking well but we need support from as many members and friends as possible. The cost is £19.00 per head and always gives outstanding value for money. The menu will be provided as soon as it is available and, as usual, we will print a reminder slip for you to confirm your choice. You may pay by cheque in advance – make cheque payable to LA&LHS – or pay cash on the night to the treasurer, Ray Collins.

Society Outing to Somerleyton Hall and Gardens – Thursday 10 May 2012

This will be very popular venue and the cost is £15.95 per head, which will include your entrance to the Hall and Gardens, plus a buffet meal. We meet at the Hall at 6.30 pm. Please book early by emailing Ray Collins at: ray93@talktalk.net or by using the list provided at the next Society meetings.

Society Outing to Langley Abbey in 2012

Details to be established. Please book provisionally using the list provided at the Society meetings.

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