

Lowestoft Archaeological and Local History Society

Volume 40 Number 8 – **NEWSLETTER** – November 2012

Society website: www.lowestoftlocalhistory.co.uk

What's On in 2012

8 Nov 2012 "In the Footsteps of the Famous" by Paul Scriven – a different topic for many of our members

22 Nov 2012 "Visit Lowestoft Cine & Camcorder Club" – we meet at their Sparrow's Nest cinema venue

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

At the Trustees meeting held on 17 October the revised Society Constitution was approved. Copies will be available on the Secretary's table.

Don't forget that the last meeting of 2012 will be on 22 November and will be held at the Cine Club in Sparrows Nest. (See page 2 for more details). Following the Christmas break I hope to see you all at the first meeting on 24 January 2013 when Terry Weatherley will take a closer look at the treasures of Sutton Hoo.

Ron Ashman – Chairman

11 October – "The Herring Girls" by Chris Unsworth

Chris has studied the history of the Scots girls who worked a 12-week season in Great Yarmouth in the early 20th-century heyday of the autumn herring fishing. However, he acknowledged the 'girls' (they varied in age from teens to matrons) would have already worked for curers at fishing ports on Scotland's west coast, working their way up via the Orkneys to Shetland by early summer and, as the season progressed, on down the east coast to the substantial East Anglian 'home' fishing. Their work was repetitive, but required a high degree of manual skill in gutting and packing the herring harvest, not to mention an iron constitution to survive the often, bitter cold of outdoor work in October and November at Yarmouth and Lowestoft. The critical quirk of nature that allowed this continuity of work, over six months, was that along the coast existed several sub-species of herring that bred and matured at slightly different times of year. These fish varied in size, requiring the use of nets having a suitable gauge to maximise the catch in each area. Herring girls normally had a fishing family background – Scotch fishing families often owned, or at least had shares in their boats, unlike English fishermen who usually worked for owners based at a port, where they may also have owned or rented an office and space at the local fish docks. Depending on the size of catches, the gutting work varied in intensity, but the girls usually found time to meet relatives whose boats were landing herrings at the nearby quay. Scottish fisher-folk did not work on Sundays so that often caused pressure on Saturdays.

Most fishing ports had areas (plots) where the unsorted herrings could be tipped into large open-topped wooden troughs called *farlanes*, then salted by the coopers. Teams of girls, each consisting of two gutters and one packer surrounded the troughs. The gutters leaned over, selected the fish and with one deft twist of their knife removed the gills and gut, dropping the waste into the gut tub and the cleaned fish into a range of up to seven tubs behind them, marked for selected size and quality. An experienced girl gutted an average 50 to 60 fish per minute. The packer meanwhile transferred the cleaned fish into pickling barrels, each holding about 900 to 1200 fish of the selected size. Fish were packed belly up with heads to the side of the barrel; alternate layers were laid at right angles and sprinkled with salt, which gradually melted to form the pickle. When the barrel was full the fish were

left for several days to settle; the pickle was then drained off and saved – more fish would then be added to fill the barrel before the cooper re-sealed the top, the pickle was poured back in, and the bung replaced. The full barrels were branded with the grade of herring and a stamp to show their port of origin. The latter could be traced in case of complaint – important when they were exported as far as Germany, Poland and Russia, where the curer's inspectors would be based.

In the early years the *farlanes* stood low to the ground, causing the gutters some severe back problems, but later, they were raised to a better height by adding wooden supports. Teams of girls became expert and then kept together as they could earn more, sometimes packing over thirty barrels in a day when conditions were favourable. Hours were long, the girls starting as early as 6am and sometimes working until 7 or 8pm, all for a payment of less than 1/- per barrel. Surprisingly, over a six-month season, their pay was equivalent to, or better than, the annual earnings for a farm worker of that time. Any spare time was spent knitting, walking or going to the shows at the *Hippodrome*.

Curers were responsible for booking the visiting teams in advance, paying each girl a 10/- sign-on fee [*arles*] and for their travel (30/- return by train in the early 1900s, including their wooden trunk [*kist*] full of belongings). Curers also provided a subsistence allowance for each girl of a few shillings per week. Lodgings would be found with local families who looked forward to the annual extra income from letting their rooms, and many friendships developed, with girls returning for years to the same household – some marrying into local families. Their work clothing was normally old, cast-off items, covered by an oilskin skirt, and heavy leather boots (replaced by rubber boots post-WWI) as the workplace would be a sea of mud. Due to the condition of the clothing, some landladies in Yarmouth put up brown paper or oilcloth to protect the walls – anticipating their rooms needed to be fresh for the following summer holiday lets. Oilskins and boots were removed and stored in the yard. The cold outdoor climate and rock salt, along with the wet fish, was very hard on their hands and gutters used cloth wrappings to protect their fingers. Even so, the number having to attend the dedicated local first-aid dressing stations and rest houses was very high.

The herring seasons went through good and bad times over the years, sometimes experiencing a glut, where very heavy catches would have to be dumped back at sea or sent for fertilizer on the farms, as there was no market for herrings either cured or fresh. In 1939 war disrupted the trade and by the 1950s traditional voyages gradually came to an end, falling catch rates making them unprofitable. Machinery had been invented to gut the fish, removing the need for the girls' expertise, and cheap diesel fuel allowed boats to make extended voyages. The bonanza was over!

25 October – "Great Yarmouth Gaol – 1835–1877" by Chris Wright

Chris explained that his interest in the history of the Gaol began many years ago when he selected it for his college thesis. Up to the 13th century, when the town was awarded its first Charter, the building was being used as a toll office for collecting dues from markets and local traders. The award brought changes that allowed its conversion for several different uses over the centuries including a courthouse and a temporary gaol, originally with cells below ground level. Early prisons were almost unregulated as to number and type of prisoners, occasionally with mixed sexes recorded – juveniles shared the fate of adults. The division of cells into smaller units housing one or two was far off in the future. Most of the inmates were held for quite short periods (from a day-or-two up to a month if their offences were minor) and the turnover was high. It was not until the early 1800s and the gradual spread of police across this country that a formal prison system was suggested. At this time the population of Great Yarmouth was expanding rapidly – rising from 14,845 (in 1801) to 33,804 (in 1871). Around 1835 in Yarmouth a small number of policemen began to take over from the watch (an earlier body of men who had been employed to keep the general population in order) and from then, the 'Tolhouse' gaol also served as the town's police station. Adjoining buildings had been taken in at some stage and a contained exercise yard made to the rear. Initially the conditions were very basic and cramped, with poor ventilation, primitive sanitation, and light supplied by tapers or candles. The number of bodies confined together no doubt contributed most of the heat. Dividing walls were at most nine inches thick, giving poor sound insulation, and it would have been very noisy, with the inmates finding it difficult to get any rest. Food must have been of very poor quality, and minimum quantity, but even so this was probably preferred to the pre-1833 system where prisoners had to pay for their board and any available extras. Every inmate had to wash, probably once per month, and if required be fumigated. A special room was provided for these last two activities.

The staff at the gaol varied in number but there was always a keeper (probably paid £100 per annum) with his wife who invariably was the matron, a turnkey (perhaps with an assistant), a taskmaster and a cook/barber. After

1844 there would also have been a surgeon on call, and a chaplain (both residing locally). Temporary posts would include a nurse and deputy keeper for busy periods. The keeper would also manage all the prison records and order books.

Prison regulations and standards covering treatment, diet and living conditions etc. had been set out in an 1823 Act but it seems were widely ignored by local governors and staff. Inspectors appointed in 1835 travelled the country's gaols and in Yarmouth regularly reported infringements over a number of years. Punishments for inmates (those on remand had an easier time) varied from gaol to gaol and in Yarmouth they included handcuffs, irons, straightjackets, flogging, restrictions on food, plus additional labour including oakum picking (and for those caught trying to escape, an extension of sentence). The tread-wheel was installed in the yard in 1847 and did serve as a deterrent, as numbers of prisoners fell somewhat. Another penalty was transportation; early on to America, but for later convicts it was Australia from where it was more difficult to get home after release. Some 79 from Yarmouth went there, including 7 women, often sent first to prison ships (hulks) or to a government prison near London while awaiting passage.

Separate classifications brought in for prisoners (in 1850) allowed a range of living conditions, e.g. debtors were kept separate – they could order and prepare their own food, were excused labour, wore their own clothes and could receive visitors. Crimes of the day included horse-stealing, larceny, deserting a ship, vagrancy and (for apprentices) disobedience to their master. Few juveniles were convicted at that time, and many of the crimes were attributed to individuals frequenting low class pubs in the town to indulge in strong drink and the temptations of the flesh.

Murderers were tried at Norwich assizes and, if convicted, were hanged at the castle. The insane usually went to St Andrews mental institution at Norwich, while treatable offenders might be transferred to a reformatory at Buxton, Norfolk, believed run by the Sewell family. A remarkable local woman named Sarah Martin worked as an instructor in Yarmouth gaol and was an early social reformer. She lived nearby and visited frequently, helping the inmates in many ways, encouraging them to take up useful crafts like sewing and basket making. She also collected donations for the destitute or for those who could not work through disablement or illness – and kept records detailing all of her activities. When she died, after her years of dedication to the prisoners, she was buried at nearby Caister.

From 1875 prisoners went to Norwich. Yarmouth gaol remained a police station and remand centre, closing in 1877. The new Library now covers the site of the old prison yard and cells and the Tolhouse building houses a museum.

Society's Annual meal: This is booked for Tuesday 12 February 2013 – arr. 7pm for 7.30pm at Lowestoft College. The charge is £15.00 per head and not many places are left. Please let Ray Collins know if you would like to attend.

Timings and parking for the visit to the Lowestoft Cine & Camcorder Club on 22 November 2012

The Cine & Camcorder Club evening starts at 7.45pm; has a tea interval at 9.00pm, for which there will be a modest charge, and then continues until 10.00pm. Members with travel time limits may leave at 9.00pm if they choose.

The most convenient free car park is opposite the main gates to Sparrow's Nest Gardens, by the roundabout where the bottom of the Ravine joins Whapload Road. From the car park walk through the gates of the Sparrow's Nest and the Club cinema is the white building fairly close on your left. There is a sign on this building.

Annual Report: Please bring any typed or handwritten article(s) you have ready for inclusion in the report to Ray Collins at our outing on 22 November. The deadline is Christmas for electronic items that can be emailed direct to: Ray93@talktalk.net