

Lowestoft Archaeological and Local History Society

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Society website: www.lowestoftlocalhistory.co.uk

What's On in 2014

9 Oct 2014 "Overpaid, Oversexed and Over Here!" – Ian McLachlan provides an account of the American servicemen who served at air bases in East Anglia during World War 2.

23 Oct 2014 "Working in the textile mills – a personal story" – related by Jo Harper
plus A talk (*title to be announced*) by Paul Durbidge.

13 Nov 2014 "A Suffolk Soldier's Story – Clifford Bunn MM" – by local historian Ivan Bunn.

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 Report

If you haven't yet had an opportunity to visit the Lowestoft Museum in Everitts Park to view 'The Past Underfoot' exhibition, about the excavation that took place over a number of years on Bloodmoor Hill, and the Anglo-Saxon finds revealed there. I would remind you that the Museum (now open every day from 1.00 till 4.00) will close for the winter at the end of this month. Next year, it is intended to use the new cases for relevant archaeological items from our collection, and some more of the Bloodmoor finds at present in storage with Suffolk Archaeology. These treasures will be on show for the first time and I think that anyone who has seen this year's display will have been impressed by the attractiveness of the cases and quality of the exhibits.

Marylin Duerden – Chairman

Recent talks and meetings

11 September 2014 – "Georgian History of the Fisher theatres" – by Sarah Hirons

Sarah said the Theatre was very important for entertaining the general public in the 1700s, as at that time events and entertainment were almost exclusively local. Travellers carrying papers, bills and posters spread the latest news of events and from time to time brought advance notice of visiting fairs, concerts and plays. She continued with a brief outline of the key members of the Fisher family involved with the development of the Fisher Theatres, starting with Actor/Manager and founder David Fisher I. He was born on 26 December 1760 in Norwich, Thorpe, third of eleven children, and was the founder of this dynasty of actors, to be followed by four successive generations of Davids, all involved in entertainment.

Trained as a carpenter, he found employment in the early 1780s with the Norwich Theatre Company where his magnificent singing voice was welcomed. He married an actress before leaving in 1792 to join a touring troupe run by William Scraggs that was quickly renamed the Fisher and Scraggs Company. The partnership flourished and many handbills exist showing the variety of their productions. Scraggs died in 1808 and four years later his son left the company, leaving Fisher as supremo of what by then had become a successful, touring family theatre business. It was renamed the Norfolk & Suffolk Company of Comedians. The actors' wages, their transport and their shows were financed entirely through seat takings. Occasionally benefit shows were held to support individuals in hardship. At first, performances were held in any convenient premises, but David Fisher

embarked on an ambitious theatre development plan. The first new theatre, in 1812, was at Wells-next-the-Sea, followed by another at Lowestoft. By 1828 eleven others had been adapted or built throughout Norfolk and Suffolk. In Bungay *The Belle's Strategem* opened on 28 February 1828. That theatre, financed by subscriptions, remains the best preserved of all the circuit with its original façade, even the pit under the present floor, and much of the interior relatively unaltered.

The Company of Comedians toured the 13 theatres in rotation over two years, spending two months at each venue playing four nights a week, and such was its popularity that little else stirred the social calendar during its visit. Folk in the town suspended all other activities, even weddings, said Hannah Moore of Bungay in a letter to David Garrick. The theatres had two rows of boxes, a pit and a gallery and were built to a standard size so that scenery and props would need no adaptation on arrival at the next venue. Permission was required at each town before theatres could perform and a surviving notebook for Bungay shows their officials were J Bedingfield Esq., Rev. C Bruce, A Elswood Esq., (Clerk to the Magistrates) and M Kingsbury Esq., Town Reeve.

David I's only daughter Elizabeth, a gifted and beautiful actress died young, but sons David II, Charles and George carried on the tradition. David II, born 1788, was a fine actor, violinist and scene painter. After two years with the company he went to London, even performing at Drury Lane as stand-in for star Edmund Kean who was unwell. Kean was reportedly very jealous of the reviews earned by David II. The latter returned to the family company but left again in 1831 to teach music. Second son Charles was an outstanding singer and musician who also played Drury Lane, but returned to the circuit in 1832. Third son George was an academic as well as a fine actor and in 1826 left the company for a time to become Master of Swaffham Academy. In 1832 he wrote a massive tome entitled *A Companion and Key to the History of England*, but acting was in his blood and he rejoined the theatre.

Benefit nights were sometimes held to augment the actor's salaries, and bespoke audiences arranged by the local gentry, or by the Masons, the actors often being Lodge members. Handbills would carry the names of these local theatre enthusiasts who ensured good turnouts. When the other 12 theatres weren't in use, during the company's touring periods, the dressing and other rooms would be let to non-competitors and provided a good income. David II injured a leg in 1832, forcing him to leave the company to follow a musical career – he played violin in Norwich as well as being a comedian and singer. He was also a dedicated family man and paid great attention to his children's development and education, including music and singing skills.

The family put East Anglia on the map in the world of theatre, and took additional bookings in eight towns outside their own circuit, evenly spread across the two counties. David Fisher I died in Dereham just four years after the Bungay theatre opened and son Charles took over and ran the company until its final demise in 1844 when the theatres were sold off. The end was brought about by the spread of railways, and easier public access to towns and cities, allowing theatre lovers to reach shows without having to wait for the local circuit players. Despite selling their theatres the Fisher family continued in entertainment. David III worked first in Glasgow, and then in London with Henry Irving and Charles Kean – Queen Victoria described him as a "most gentlemanly actor". David IV performed later with the D'Oyly Carte and finally, David V acted in films in America.

When Bungay arts and theatre followers attempted to purchase the Fisher Theatre in Bungay, it was approximately 157 years since the closure of the Norfolk and Suffolk Company of Comedians (when the building sold for £500 to be turned into a Corn Hall). The most recent of a great many occupants since that time had been a failed wholesaler, and the receiver required £100,000 just to secure the premises for the arts group. After many trials and fund-raising efforts totalling more than £1.5m, the Theatre is now successful, handsomely refurbished and has a promising future.

25 September 2014 – "Down in the Drink – Planes over and in the sea off Lowestoft" – by Bob Collis and Simon Baker

The combination of these two expert historians and authors produced an excellent talk and slide show. The town was the victim of sea and air attacks in WW1, and the speakers briefly outlined that occasion. Fortunately the damage and casualties were light compared to WW2, but the sense of alarm had been no less great for residents.

Taking the form of a diary for WW2, from which excerpts are given below, the presentation covered aircraft and crews from both allied and enemy forces that crashed in the North Sea. As most of the planes were destroyed,

photographs and paintings had to be used to illustrate different types to the audience. Many crews perished but research had produced several photographs of those very young fliers who heroically supported their side's cause, although probably wishing themselves elsewhere.

A wartime base for several types of smaller warships, minesweepers and rescue vessels, and one of the closest ports to occupied Europe, Lowestoft was the focus of many air raids between 1939 and 1945. October 1939 saw the first enemy reconnaissance aircraft over the town but it disappeared out to sea after circling nearby parts of Suffolk. The air war proper began on 21 June 1940 when two high explosive (HE) bombs landed, causing slight damage but no casualties – then, on 3 July, without warning, a Dornier Do17 dropped seven HE bombs east of Rant Score and a further twelve on the town centre – there were three deaths and the CWS store in Clapham Road was destroyed.

6 September 1940 an RAF Hampden bomber returning from a daylight raid ran out of fuel and ditched off Lowestoft. The crew of four were brought ashore uninjured by the trawler *Ben Hur*. Subsequently it was found to be pilot David Roman's second ditching for the same reason in five days. A year later he was shot down and killed over Norway in a Fortress B17 – he was awarded the DFC. Remains of the Hampden were trawled up in July 2014.

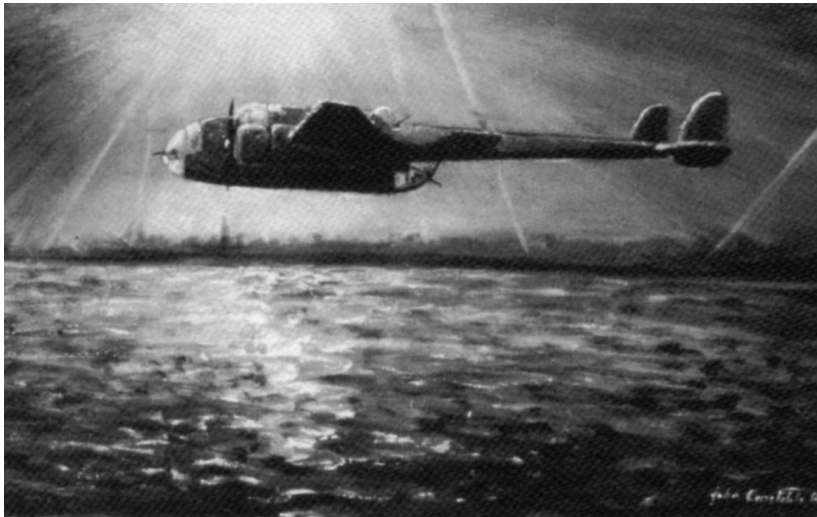


Image © John Reeve

PO Romans DFC and his crew about to ditch their RAF Hampden bomber off Ness Point – 6 September 1940.

4 February 1941 a Do17 being chased by two RAF Hurricanes dumped its 18 bombs between the harbour and Compass Street. Two residents died and there was extensive damage to buildings. The Dornier was brought down off Corton killing the pilot, observer and radio-operator. The flight engineer parachuted into the sea, was picked up and taken into Yarmouth as a prisoner of war (POW).

19 May 1941 a Messerschmitt ME110 raider based in Normandy emerged from cloud and headed north across the town through a hail of anti-aircraft (AA) fire. It dropped one bomb near the gasworks, detonating some landmines, and one on the north extension that failed to explode. The AA barrage set fire to the plane's engines and it crashed into the sea off Corton where 20 minutes later a patrol boat picked up 20-year-old pilot Hans 'Ulli' Hasse (already a veteran with 56 operations against Britain) and brought him to Lowestoft. In 1977 he sent a 'Best Wishes' telegram to the Mayor of Lowestoft from his home in S. Africa to mark the anniversary of his visit to the town. His crewman was never found but in 1981 two machine-guns were trawled up from the wreck.

14 July 1941 within 24 hours two RAF Wellingtons came down off the town. The first, from Feltwell, heading out for a raid on Bremen, had engine failure at 6,000ft. The plane turned but could not retain height and crashed off Corton injuring the two pilots. They were brought in by a Naval craft and taken to Lowestoft hospital. Unfortunately four other crewmen perished. The second plane, also headed for Bremen, exploded in flames some miles off Pakefield killing all six crew. Two propeller sets were recovered from the Feltwell plane, in 1977 and in 1987.

30 July 1942 an RAF Mosquito intercepted a Dornier Do217 heading offshore at 14,000ft, the pilot using cannon fire to send the enemy plane diving into the sea in flames. A week later, the body of the flight engineer was found on a sandbank and brought into Lowestoft for burial in the town cemetery.

11 May 1943 having engaged in minelaying off Cromer a Do217 approached Lowestoft, was caught in low-level searchlights and crashed into the sea 300yds from Ness Point. The pilot might have been blinded by the searchlight beam but also was inexperienced and on his first mission. Two bodies washed up later but only one was confirmed as from that plane – the two other crewmen were lost.

6 March 1944 a Liberator B-24, returning from the 8th Air Force's first large-scale Berlin raid, came down 3 miles off Corton at 3.52pm having been hit by flak and also damaged by enemy fighters. Witnesses saw parachutes and an air and sea search began. Five of the crew survived and one body was found, but four others were not recovered.

27 March 1944 an Air Sea Rescue (ASR) boat had the sad task of landing the bodies of five airmen at Lowestoft. These crewmen were killed when their Special Duties RAF Halifax crashed in the sea, after an SOS call some 60 miles off Cromer – a further three crewmen could not be found.

9 April 1944 the body of a 22-year-old pilot from Wayne, Philadelphia, was brought into Lowestoft after his USAAF Thunderbolt P-47 crashed 20 miles off the town. One of three planes escorting a bomber mission to Posen, Germany, he had run out of ammunition and was low on fuel. An enemy fighter then closed from astern and the brave Lt. Canizares turned to attack it, thus allowing his fellow pilots to also engage. As a result he ran out of fuel, was forced to bale out, and was hit by the tailplane of his P-47 on exit. He was picked up but never regained consciousness and died shortly afterwards.

30 May 1944 a Liberator B-24, *Red Growler*, was returning with flak damage from a raid on Munster when it successfully ditched 1 mile off Lowestoft. Two life rafts were released by the radio operator and nine crewmen rescued by the Royal Naval Patrol Service (RNPS). One unlucky gunner could not inflate his Mae West jacket and was never found.

During 1944 the VI Flying bombs (*Doodlebugs*) and V2 rockets first appeared, numbers growing as aeroplane raids grew less frequent due to the Luftwaffe losing ground. The bulk of the VI and V2s were intended for London but an occasional one, either faulty or sent off-course by RAF aircraft or AA defences, fell in Suffolk and caused damage. Lowestoft had no air raids in the last few months of the war, but casualties still occurred in and around the town through returning aircraft crashing due to damage or fuel shortage.

Many more details of crashes in the sea and over land, plus photographs and details of damage within Lowestoft are given in the book *'The Air War Over Lowestoft 1939–1945'* published by Lowestoft Aviation Society.

The Society's Winter Meal

The meal will be held as usual at Lowestoft College. Please put names and places required on the form at Society meetings, or email bookings to our Treasurer: ray93@talktalk.net A limited number of 26 places are available at present. Date is Tuesday 10 February 2015 and the cost is £16.50 per head. Please arrive at 7pm, for 7.30pm start.

Society's Annual Report for January 2015: Please provide any items you have prepared for this in writing to Ray Collins at our meetings or, if by email, to ray93@talktalk.net (preferably a Word document) before our last meeting in 2014.

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