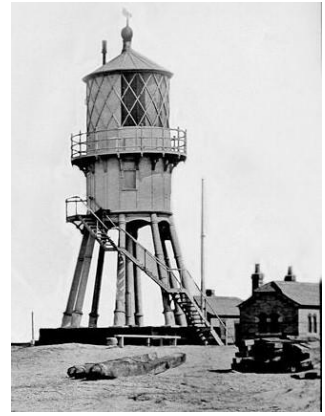


# Society News

The Lowestoft Archaeological and Local History  
Society Newsletter

November 2023

Editors:- Ron and Irene Ashman



## **The Lowestoft Multi-Storey Block.**

Reading the recent press reporting on the multi-storey block here in Lowestoft and the need for expensive repairs to various parts of the structure reminds me of the time in the early 1960's when I was involved in its construction. As a carpenter for G Wimpey I joined a seven man pouring gang shortly after the piling had been completed and we were tasked to form shuttering around these prior to the pouring of the first concrete slabs. There was much ground disturbance right across the site as various service trenches and foundations were dug and it was not long before I noticed numerous pieces of broken fired biscuit ware and small pipe like sections. Although I was not aware at the time it was all connected with the production of Lowestoft Porcelain just across the road. The shear range of material was considerable. Fragments of blue and white Chinese porcelain, Lowestoft porcelain biscuit ware, wasters, remains of 18<sup>th</sup> century glass bottles, slag and lots of animal bones, the latter mostly revealed during digging the foundations for the old peoples home. It seems the right thing to do so I wrote to the Town Clerk to inform him of what was lying on the surface of the ground and mentioned I had recovered a number of the items with a view to a possible Museum in the Town. The reply was not friendly the letter saying I was to stop collecting and to hand over anything recovered to the Borough Librarian Mr James. It was obvious that there was no interest by the powers to be over the development and I was later told that some recovered material was being hidden amongst piles of bricks on site to be collected later with money being handed over in the local public house. During my year working on the block my liaison with the site agent was good and he allowed me to search areas after work was finished for the day providing it did not hold up any of the development. This resulted in the recovery of several boxes of biscuit ware and glazed fragments which are now housed in the Lowestoft Museum which otherwise would have been lost

## **Children in coal mines.**

by Ron Ashman

On Teletex last month there was a piece about a man who has made it his mission to rediscover long forgotten coal mines in Wales. At the bottom of an abandoned mine shaft in the remote hills he was shocked to see a tiny pair of boot prints next to his own. They looked fresh but had been made about 200 years ago by little children working in the coal mine, the last people to set foot in the passage.

This information was of no surprise to me as when I was tracing my family history I discovered much about the working of the coal mines in this country. I come from a long line of coal miners who started in the mines of Somerset, worked in the mines of South Wales and Yorkshire.

Children as young as 5 years old were employed in coal mines over all of the British Isles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and most possibly in earlier centuries as well. This practice was not restricted to young boys, as young girls and young women were employed below ground as well, doing the same work as the boys and young men.

However, in 1842 the Government passed the Mines and Collieries Act, and the Children's Employment (Mines) Report that came out alongside the Act, that stated all females of any age and boys under the age of ten were not allowed to work in the mines.

Hewers or Getters, depending on which part of the country you are in, were the oldest and strongest members of the family, almost always grown men or strong youths. Their job was to work at the coal face cutting the coal from the seam with a pickaxe. They were the only underground workers who would work continually with a candle or safety lamp, as they needed the light to see the coal face and providing light to other workers cost the mine owner money.

The youngest boys and girls would usually sit in total darkness for twelve hours at a time opening the doors in the passage, waiting to let a coal tub through the door. They couldn't leave their post for a minute just in case a door needed opening. Whilst boring and pretty frightening, it was an important job for the safety of the mine and miners, the doors were opened and closed to allow fresh air to enter the mine and to remove stale air and dangerous gases.

Entire families would often work at the mine, the pay was very poor and so families tried to earn as much as they could by sending their children to work too. The pay for children was very low compared to the other workers. One young boy said he had to work as his father had died and his mother needed the money.

The jobs they did had a downside for those who worked 12 hour day shifts, as for much of the year they usually saw sunlight only once a week, on a Sunday.

One 8 years old girl said she opened the door in the passage and went to the pit at four and sometimes half past three in the morning and come out at five and half past. She did not like being in the pit.

Older children, both boys and girls, would have a belt, or tarred rope, fitted around their waists, from the front of this was a chain, and at the other end of chain was a hook. These children would attach the hook to a sledge upon which was a tub full of coal and then crawl off on all fours with the chain running between their legs. In Somerset the tub would contain between 1.75 to 2 hundredweight of coal. The passages, or roadways, were not always level, they could be on an incline or decline. Also, many journeys had to be made each shift. This method was used in narrow and small passages. In a debate in the Lords on the 1842 Act, it was reported that some passages were 20 to 22 inches wide, and the reason they crawled was because there was insufficient headroom to stand up. In larger roadways bigger tubs with small wheels were pulled by one child as described above with another child pushing behind the tub, moving the coal from the coal face to the pit bottom ready to be taken to the surface.

In the Lords debate it was reported that one woman had designated this labour as "horse work". It was also stated in this debate that "in consequence of the women and children being worked beyond their strength, they were unfit to attend public worship on the Sabbath".

I am not sure how long it took within the mining industry to implement the Act, but I expect it was not done quickly.

My father and grandfather were both Hewers in the West Yorkshire coal mines. Some of the coal seams were thin and my father told me due to the lack of height he often removed the coal from a seam with a pickaxe laying on his side. Early in 1939 my father left the mining industry and joined the Royal Artillery, although mining was to be a reserved occupation, I do not think he was happy with the lack of safety at the coal face as he said he had been in some incidents of roof falls. (My grandfather told me that after the mines were nationalised in 1946, safety was considerably improved). Later in 1939 in the early stages of WW2 young miners were so eager to get out of the mines they took the opportunity to volunteer for the armed forces which created a shortage of labour. From December 1943 young men were conscripted to work in the mines, these became known as the Bevin Boys.

Coal mining was not the only industry to use young children, they were also used in many other working roles.

## **The Hobland Whirlwind.**

by Ron Ashman

The father of one of our members, Society Secretary Jenny Hatton, witnessed a whirlwind in Hobland and wrote a letter describing this to the Tornado and Storm Research Organisation. The following is their reply.

*Many thanks for your letter of 11 October about a whirlwind at Hobland in 1937.*

*The type of whirlwind you saw is known as a dust devil or land devil (in the Middle Ages they were believed to be the work of the devil). They occur in warm, sunny weather in summer, often in hayfields or stubble fields. Most of them last for such a short time that they are not even seen much less reported, so your letter is most useful.*

*I was particularly interested in your remark that these whirlwinds are locally known as 'harvesters'. I have very little information on the local names given to whirlwinds, although I do know that on many parts of East Anglia they are called 'Rogers'.*

Jenny's father called this whirlwind a 'harvester', she would be interested to hear from anyone who knows of any alternative names for these whirlwinds. The contact email address is [lahs@btinternet.com](mailto:lahs@btinternet.com). or you can speak to Jenny at a Society talk evening.

From Wikipedia, in Australia a Dust Devil is more commonly called a 'Willy willy' and in Ireland they are known as a 'Fairy wind'.

If you are not aware where Hobland is, it is located between Hopton and Gorleston, in the area behind the Captain Manby restaurant, (next to the roundabout at the end of the dual carriageway before the J.P Hospital).

## **Meetings for 2024**

- |   |                   |
|---|-------------------|
| 25 Jan: The Commonwealth War Graves Commission                  | by Tony Thurston  |
| 8 Feb: From Botany Bay to Kew Gardens: The Life of Joseph Banks | by Sue Pearce     |
| 22 Feb: The Blythburgh Iron Age Gold Coin Hoard                 | by Dave Wollweber |
| 14 Mar: The Prunier Trophy 1935- 1966                           | by Ivan Bunn      |
| 11 Apr: The Story of Walpole Old Chapel and its Community       | by Miriam Stead   |
| 25 Apr: Lowestoft 1944: The Year the Tide turned                | by Bob Collis     |
| 9 May: Family Historian talk TBA                                | by Janis Kirby    |
| 23 May: Annual General Meeting – All members welcome to attend. |                   |

As this is the last Newsletter for this year, we would like to thank everyone who has sent in articles, and would like to wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.