



Issue: 62 October 2019

Bicester Historian

The monthly newsletter for Bicester Local History Society

Then and Then and Now



Back on the 21st September we successfully took part in two events promoting Bicester's history and heritage.

Bicester Festival was in full swing across many sites in the town, one of which was our Priory display, outside the dovecote in Old Place Yard, with open access to see inside the dovecote and guided tours around the priory site (pictured below).

We also displayed a collection

of views of the town as part of the "Then and Now" exhibition in St Edburg's Church (pictured above). This included some old photographs, together with identical views taken in 1988 and 2019, showing just what has changed over the years.

Both events were very well received. The church logged more than 250 visitors over the day. So we all look forward to taking part, with similar success, next year.

- Matthew Hathaway



Contents

- Bicester, From a Brook 2
- Roll of Honour 3
- Talks Update 3
- Bygone Bicester 4
- When Bicester Paid Tolls 5

Dates For Your Diary

- November Newsletter Submissions Deadline
1st November
- Bicester Advertiser Local History Article
7th November
- Bicester's Great War Talk
18th November - 7:30pm
see page 3
- St Edburg's Church Christmas Tree Festival
6th-8th December
- BLHS Christmas Social
16th December - 7:30pm
see page 3



Bicester, From a Brook Passers-by in Causeway

This is the fourth in a series of articles that were originally published in the Bicester Advertiser in 1932.

Here is the quiet little village of Burncester six hundred years ago.

The place is by no means isolated. On the north side a trackway has been made to Bucknell. Along it, on his caparisoned horse rides Sir Richard de Amory from Bucknell Manor, clad in chain armour and bearing his shield, attended by the four men at arms whom he has to provide for the service of the King. He rides into the village and, looking about him, sees quaintly built houses of that time. "These English have their houses made of sticks and dirt", said the Spaniards of that day; they were speaking of our custom of erecting cottages of wood and clay. If a crack appeared in a wall, a handful of mud would repair it -

"Imperial Caesar, dead and turned to clay
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away."

Sir Richard passes one or two shops, of a sort. There is, for instance, a tailor's which has a "frippery" or clothes stall, and where the proprietor is making a long tunic as worn by the men of cross ribbed hosiery. Near the brook, a small brewery, where the malt is being crushed - Burncester's first urban industry which gave the town a good name for its beer. Sir Richard's horse picks its way carefully along the rough, rutted road - a street far from clean in this insanitary time. There is garbage of all kinds in the gutters and an open sewer slowly rolling its contents to the polluted brook. Even the house interiors are in a bad state for the clay floors are covered with rushes and as these are rarely removed the bottom layer has probably been there for twenty years. Here comes a two-horse litter, a kind of dog kennel on poles borne by a horse in front and another behind, carrying a lady of quality. There will be no lights in the street when darkness has fallen, and curfew is rung at eight o'clock on one of the church bells to put out the domestic fires.

Along the Causeway comes a highly important person, no less than the worthy Prior, he has emerged from the monastery entrance (in Church Lane) and is mounted on a horse with gilded saddle and bridle, attended by a groom in rich crimson livery. Observe his fine travelling cloak, which has a hood lined with white fur; on his head a hat with feathers; leathern gloves on his hands. As he proceeds he passes one of the brethren on foot - the



A Black Canon, from an old print.

Bursar or treasurer of the Priory, simply dressed in a long black cassock and a four-square black cap called a baret (biretta); the top of the head shaved in circular form to represent the Saviour's crown of thorns; this monk is, in fact, one of the Black Canons. Perhaps another of the monks has gone for a walk in the other direction by passing out of the country gate (which would be somewhere near the Cemetery Lane gate of the present cemetery) and along "the back lane" to the hamlet of Bignell.

Still in the village, Sir Richard will notice a portly doctor of physic, rich with the profits of the Black Death plague caused by the lack of sanitation. He sees a hollow-cheeked clerk of Oxenford who is on a visit to his native place; a beggar of the countryside; a pardoner with his wallet full of pardons all hot from Rome, and perhaps also other people known to the poet Chaucer of the Canterbury Tales. Chaucer, by the way, is remotely associated with Burncester in this period, - not because of his visits to Woodstock, ten miles distant, but as a relative of the Duke of Lancaster, owner of Bignell Manor till the estate passed to the Crown in the same century and came therefore to be known, as King's End.

Sir Richard will observe that the monks, having finished building their priory and its church, have proceeded to enlarge the parish church by adding the south aisle (the aisle furthest from the



The Prior goes riding.

Causeway). He returns over “St Mary’s Bridge” at the end of the Causeway and rides a short distance along the London road. If he intended to journey to Town he would not go by way of Station road and past the Ambrosden turn for that road was not constructed till many years afterwards. He would proceed in an exactly opposite direction, taking the road to Stratton Audley, thence via Marsh Gibbon and Grendon Underwood to Aylesbury. Blackthorn had no connecting road direct to Burncester then. On the left hand side he sees small pieces of arable land called “buttes” (the junction of Buckingham and Banbury roads was known for many years as Butts Corner), and he knows that they, like all the fields around here, belong to the lord of the manor of Burncester who has his tenants for all the land except one-fourth, which is his “home farm”. By this time the simple agricultural slave of the early English settlers had become a tenant at a given rent, payable either in money or in kind. “Rent” is the English for “feorm” (Latin, firma) giving rise to “farm” and “farmer”.

There was to follow the revolt of the tied labourers; the scarcity of labour through the Black Death, the branding of runaway labourers with a hot iron and at length the massing of small allotments together into large holdings. No newspapers were printed at this date, but information filtered through, and gave topics of conversation. John



Skynnere, the baker, no doubt spoke to William Peyntour, the colourman, of the great success of Cresay battle, and the death of Robert Bruce.

Roll of Honour

The following are the local men who died in the Second World War, 80 years ago this month.

Cabin Boy Peter Rouse, of Hardwick.

Died: 14th October 1939 Aged: 16 Served in: Royal Navy - HMS Royal Oak

Pilot Officer James Doan Cody, of Ontario, Canada.

Died: 31st October 1939 Aged: 23 Served in: Royal Air Force
(Died on service at RAF Weston-on-the-Green, buried at Caversfield)

Pilot Officer Robert Ernest Cox, of Launceston, Tasmania.

Died: 31st October 1939 Aged: 26 Served in: Royal Air Force
(Died on service at RAF Weston-on-the-Green, buried at Caversfield)

Flying Officer Dennis Richard Dale Green.

Died: 31st October 1939 Aged: 22 Served in: Royal Air Force
(Died on service at RAF Weston-on-the-Green, buried at Caversfield)



Talks Update

Over the next few months we have a varied itinerary of talks that we hope will prove very interesting.

Monday 21st October

Liz Woolley returns to tell us about Oxford’s suburbs in her talk, **Oxford’s Base and Brickish Skirt**.

Monday 18th November

Everyone’s favourite newsletter editor attempts to tell you all the story of **Bicester’s Great War**.

Monday 16th December

Our usual **Christmas Social**. Programme to be announced.

13th October 1893

THE HARRIERS' CLUB

The new gymnasium, situated near the Market Place, was opened for practice last night. A good number of members turned up for their first instruction under Sergt. Instr. Fullerton, 2nd V.B.O.L.I., of Oxford, which was gone through with success, being witnessed by a number of town tradesmen.

There is no doubt that Sergt. Fullerton will be the means of strengthening the club with members, owing to his excellent knowledge of how to handle the apparatus connected with a gymnasium, and the manner in which he imparts it.

The gymnasium is lighted with eight powerful paraffin lamps, and is made warm and comfortable. The floor has a thick coating of sawdust, to prevent injury to members in case of a fall, and soft mattresses are provided for placing under the more dangerous apparatus. Almost everything that a gymnasium requires is provided and fitted up, so that there will be no time lost on a practice evening in fixing apparatus.

The building will be lighted and prepared every Monday, Wednesday and Thursday evening. The instructor attending on Thursday from eight till ten.

1st October 1926

NEW WESLEYAN CHURCH - STONE LAYING CEREMONY

Thursday last week was a red letter day in the annals of Wesleyan Methodism in Bicester, when the foundation stones of the new church in Sheep Street were laid in the presence of a large congregation. The church, which will be known as the "Grainger Hargreaves Memorial Church", will occupy a prominent position in Sheep Street at a cost of some £7,000, and it is hoped to be completed for opening about the middle of next year.

The Rev. W.H. Rolls, Superintendent of the Circuit, presided and among those present on the platform were the Rev. Ernest Green, the Rev. Thomas Kirkup, the Rev. A. Fretwell (resident minister), Mrs Granger Hargreaves, and others. The service commenced with the hymn "This stone in faith to Thee we lay", this being followed by a prayer by the Rev. Green.



A general view of the ceremony.



Rev. Green lays the first stone to the memory of the late Rev. Hargreaves.

Rev. Fretwell said the promised amount towards the sum required was £4,185, but the amount received to date was £1,786, so that there was a large difference between the amount promised and the amount paid in. He hoped that difference would be very much diminished before the day was over. The Connexional Grant of £750 would not be paid over until three quarters of the total amount required had been paid in.

The Chairman said the new church would be known as "The Grainger Hargreaves Memorial Church", and they were all pleased to see Mrs Hargreaves present at the ceremony. The service Mr Hargreaves rendered to this district and to Bicester could not be overestimated. He had hoped to crown his life's work by seeing that House of Prayer erected, but God ordered otherwise, and the first stone would be laid in memory of the late chairman of the district.

The speaker then declared the first stone to be "well and truly laid". Subsequent stones were then laid as follows:

By Mr G.W. Hedges, in memory of his late parents.

By Mrs Evenson, in memory of the late Mr William J. Markham.

By Mr Norman Prentice, in memory of the late Mrs T.G. Prentice.

By Mrs Edward Lane, in memory of her late husband.

By David Green Esq.

By Mr A.J. Hounslow, for the Buckingham section.

By Mr J.S. Webb, for Brackley Church.

By Mr Taylor, for Thornborough Church.

By Mr J. Mallett, for the old scholars of Bicester Sunday School.

Then by Mr W. Rose, Mrs Will Hedges, Mrs Starling, Miss Marjorie Layton, Mr A.T.K. Fretwell, Mrs Fretwell, of Hull, Mrs T. Grimsley, Mrs Alfred Robinson, Mrs J.V. Prentice, Mrs George Cannon, Miss Gladys Mallett, and the Rev. Thomas Kirkup.

In addition to these twenty-two stones, bricks were also laid by a number of adults and children.

The service concluded with the hymn "Christ is our cornerstone", and the Benediction, after which a large number of those present adjourned to Wesley Hall, where tea was served.

9th October 1959

NORTH STATION RAIDED

Raiders blew open a safe in the booking office at Bicester North railway station on Sunday night and escaped with over £100.

It was the third safe raid in Bicester during the past six months, and the second in which explosives have been used. Nearly two months ago, on August 15th, thieves broke into Bicester London Road station and stole £90 from a safe in the booking office. Two months before that the Co-op Stores premises in Sheep Street were raided and a heavy safe containing a large sum of money was stolen. The safe has never been recovered.

The raid at Bicester North station was discovered at 7am when Mr J.W. Smith, a porter, arrived at the station for duty. He noticed that a platform window in the goods office, which adjoins the booking office, had been broken.

The raid probably took place soon after 2am, when the last train arrived at Bicester, bringing back local troops from weekend leave. It is believed that the raiders got to work soon after the station lights were put out and the premises locked up for the night.

When Bicester CID officers arrived at the station on Monday morning they found the booking office in disorder. Parts of the wrecked safe were scattered about the floor. Clothing left in the booking office was used by the raiders to muffle the noise of the explosion.

The thieves carried out the raid without making much noise. A signaller on duty all night in the station box less than 100 yards from the booking office did not hear anything.

22nd October 1993

TAKING A DIG AT THE PAST

Motorists hammering up and down the M40 motorway extension between Oxford and Birmingham seldom give

a thought now to the huge construction project it once posed. Massive quantities of materials were needed by the vast army of men and machines that worked long hours, month after month, to complete the task. Three-quarters of a million tons of stone were quarried in just nine months from Stratton Audley quarry, near Bicester, alone for a section of the motorway just north of Banbury.

But the operations there four years ago were not without at least one hitch, as our picture shows. It was taken by Tony O’Gorman, whose welding and engineering skills kept some of the motorway contractors’ machines working, and who worked at the quarry for some time.

The story behind the dramatic incident, in which fortunately no one was injured, began when the operator of the 35-ton Caterpillar digger finished loading the eight-wheel Volvo truck with some 20 tons of material. He then left the digger on a mound to join the truck’s driver at the back of the lorry for a cup of tea and a look at the newspaper.

The near disaster struck when the digger toppled off the mound onto the truck, crushing its cab. Miraculously, both men survived without so much as a single scratch, thanks to a safety regulation which says no lorry driver may remain in the cab while his vehicle is being loaded.



When Bicester Paid Tolls

From the Bicester Advertiser, October 1926

On looking over a copy of the “Bicester Herald” printed in October, 1876, I was interested to notice two advertisements in the paper which seemed to form a peg on which a newspaper article could be hung. They ran as follows:

“*LETTING OF TOLLS - A meeting of the Trustees will be held at the King’s Arms Hotel, in Bicester, on November 15th next, when the Trustees will let, by auction, for ten months from noon on January 1st 1877, the tolls arising at the undermentioned gates, and which tolls are let for the current year as under:*

Bicester Sheep Street Gate and Side Gates, Skimming Dish Barn Gate, Launton Gate, Fringford Hill Gate and

Side Gate, and Souldern Gate and Side Gates, for the clear yearly rental of £547.

Whoever is declared the best bidder will be required to pay one month’s rent in advance, and enter, with sufficient sureties, into an agreement for the punctual payment of the rent monthly in advance.

By order, William Hardman Mills.”

Another similar announcement in the same issue of this journal referred to the Enstone Turnpike Trust and the tolls of Bicester King’s End Gate, Heyford Town, Bridge and Barton Gates, Cuckhold’s Holt Gate, and Kirtlington Gate.

The Act of Parliament which authorised toll-gates, or turnpikes,

to be erected was passed in 1763, and under this statute collectors were stationed to levy small sums of money from persons who used the roads where they were placed. The improvement of the local roads was soon taken up by the landowners and others interested in it.

Turnpike trust bonds were in all cases limited under their respective Acts to a term of years, the supposition being that at the expiration of that term the money advanced on the bonds would have been repaid by the interest, and the improved value of property, by good means of communication having been introduced. For political and other reasons, on the expiration

of the original term of the trust, a Renewal Act was passed, which was brought before Parliament annually, and probably of later years from custom was always agreed to.

Road as Milking Yard

In 1770 the road from Bicester to Aylesbury was repaired and widened. A great deal of the country through which it passed, being still unenclosed, meant this road was put to strange purposes. The continuing Act recites “and whereas much damage hath been done to the said turnpike road by farmers, dairymen and their servants using the same as a milking yard and for foddering cattle, for remedy whereof be it enacted” etc.

It is heavy motor traffic that continues the damage to the roads in the present day!

“The old London weye” states Blomfield’s History of Bicester, “through Grendon continued to be used till the end of the 18th century, and it is not unlikely that travellers from Bicester along that road two centuries earlier may have occasionally fallen into company with the young stage-player Shakespeare in his various journeys between Stratford and London. A tradition has always been current in Grendon that Shakespeare used to pass through that village, and a house is still pointed out as that in which he used to stay to sleep.”

The first toll gate on the Bicester-Aylesbury road was erected at the entrance to the town, close to the house now known as “The Priory”. In course of time, gates sprang up on other roads coming into Bicester

till none of the entrances to the town remained free of tolls. Tolls were all abolished about the year 1880.

The Way they Travelled

With some improvement in the state of the roads around Bicester came new forms of travelling on the highway, and in 1758 the first Post-chaise was advertised.

“At the Crown Inn in Bicester, Oxfordshire, gentlemen and ladies may be accommodated with a new and neat four-wheeled Post-chaise, able horses and careful driver at a reasonable rate by their most obedient servant W. Shillingford. Likewise, Saddle Horses with a guide to any part of England.”

Stage coaches had been introduced into England from Hungary as early as 1580, but the novelty spread slowly, and it was not till 1793 that public coaches began to run between Bicester and London.

“Cheap and easy conveyance, coach sets out from the King’s Head Inn, Bicester, every Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday mornings at seven o’clock to the Black Bull, Holborn, London, and returns from thence every Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings at the same hour.”

A mail cart carried letters to and from Oxford, which was allowed to carry one passenger. “It sets out from The Rising Sun, in Sheep Street, Bicester, to the Cross Inn at Cornmarket, Oxford, every evening between 5 and 6 o’clock, and returns every morning at 6 o’clock.”

In the 19th century travellers through, and visitors to Bicester increased. It was a common daily

sight to see carriages stopping in front of the two chief inns to change post horses. The London coach now accomplished its journey both ways daily. Mail coaches to and from Birmingham broke the stillness of each midnight by the shrill sounding of the guard’s horn as they swept through the empty streets. Every morning at 9:30, a coach from Oxford passed on its way to Northampton, and every afternoon at 5:30 on its return journey.

Coming of the Railway

The year 1845 (remarks Blomfield’s History) was the most remarkable in the history of railways, as witnessing what has been well described “the Railway Mania”. In the preceding year new railways numbered 248, but in 1845 the number was 815. Among those was the formation of a railway from Bletchley to Oxford, to be called the “Buckinghamshire Railway”. An Act of Parliament sanctioning this line was passed the next year, and early in 1847 the road was formed as far as Poundon. In December of that year the works were suspended in consequence of the depressed state of the money market, but three years later the road was continued to Islip.

On October 1st 1850, the completed part was opened for public traffic, and the opening was duly celebrated. The bells of the parish churches rang out merry peals; bands played inspiring airs; the crowds cheered the passing train, and thus, amid much excitement and general interest, this great undertaking was inaugurated.

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