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Bicester Historian

The monthly newsletter for Bicester Local History Society



A Christmas Journey from Town

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Christmas in 1795! And here is the first stage-coach that ever ran from London to Bicester, and vice-versa, preparing to set out on a snowy morning, on its journey to the little Oxfordshire town whose roads and roofs are mantled with a thick spreading of snow.

Fast expresses now and smooth, easy running on the rail-road rather than the King's highway, but do not jump to the conclusion that our stage-coach, if slow, was leisurely.

"Change horses, sir!" says the proprietor of an inn on the road, to an old gentleman who has asked a question, "Why we changed them while you were putting on your spectacles and looking at your

watch!"

The old-fashioned coachman to a heavy coach - and they were all heavy down to latter times - bore some analogy with the prizefighter, for he stood highest who could hit hardest. He was generally a man of large frame, made larger by indulgence, and of great bodily power which was useful to him. To the buttonhole of his coat were appended several whipcord points, for which he was sure to have occasion on the road, for his horses were whipped till whipping was as necessary to them as their harness.

In fair play to him however, he was not solely answerable for this: the spirit of his cattle was broken by the task they were called to perform - for in those days twenty-mile stages



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Dates For Your Diary

Christmas Social Event

16th December - 7:30pm
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Bicester Advertiser Local History Article

2nd January

January Newsletter Submissions Deadline

3rd January

Cotswold Stone Barns Talk

20th January - 7:30pm
see page 2

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where in fashion and what was the consequence? Why, the four-horse whip and the Nottingham whipcord were of no avail over the latter part of the ground, and something like a cat-o'-nine-tails was produced out of the boot, which was jocularly called "the apprentice". And a shrewd apprentice it was to the art of torturing, which was inflicted on the wheelers without stint or measure, but without which the coach might have been often left on the road. One circumstance alone saved these horses from destruction; this was the frequency of ale-houses on the road, not one of which could then be passed without a call.

A fast coach had very nearly a horse to every mile of ground it ran - reckoning one way, or "one side of the ground". Proprietors of coaches found out, though they were a long time before they did discover it - that the hay and corn market was not so expensive as the horse market. They had, therefore, one horse in four always at rest, or, in other words, each horse lay still on the fourth day, thus having the advantage of man.

In practice, perhaps, no animal toiling for man, solely for his profit, led so easy and so comfortable a life as the English coach horse. He was sumptuously fed, kindly treated; and, if he did suffer a little in his work, he had twenty-three hours in the twenty-four of luxurious ease. He was often seen to kick up his heels when taken from his coach after having performed his stage of 10 miles in five minutes under the hour. The average price of horses for fast coaches was about £25. Fancy teams, and those working out of London, were rated higher - about £30; but taking a hundred miles of ground, well horsed, the former was about the mark. The average period

of each horse's service did not exceed four years in a fast coach; perhaps scarcely so much.

Well, here is Christmas Eve, and our old gentleman is anxious to begin the journey from London to Bicester in anticipation of the following day. At the appointed time the coach, which we will call the "Regulator" appears at the door of the London inn. It is a strong, well-built drag, painted chocolate colour, decked all over with gilt letters - a bull's head on the doors, a Saracen's head on the hind "boot", and drawn by four strapping horses. Here comes the coachman in neat white hat, clean doe-skin gloves, well-cut trousers and dapper frock.

"What room in the Regulator?" says our friend to the waiter, as he comes to announce its arrival.

"Full inside, sir, and in front, but you will have the gammon-board all to yourself, and your luggage is in the hind boot."

"Gammon-board! Pray what is that? Do you not mean the basket?"

"Oh no, sir," says John, smiling, "no such a thing on the road now. It is the hind dickey, as some call it, where you'll be as comfortable as possible, and can sit with your back or your face to the coach, or both, if you like."

"Ah ha," continues the old gentleman, "something new again, I presume." However, the mystery is cleared up; the ladder is reared to the hind wheel, and the gentleman seated on the gammon-board.

"All right!" cries the guard, taking his key-bugle in his hand, and they proceed at a steady pace to the tune of "Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled" and continue at that pace for the first five miles.

"I am landed." thinks our friend

to himself. Unluckily, however, for the old gentleman the Regulator was about to show tricks. Although what at a later date was called a slow coach, she is timed at eight miles in the hour through a great extent of country, and must of course make play where she can, being strongly opposed by hills lower down the country. The Regulator, moreover, loads well, not only with passengers, but with luggage, and the last five miles of the stage have the reputation of being the best five miles for a coach to be found at this time in England. The Regulator goes some!

"What did that rascally waiter mean by telling me this was a slow coach?" grumbles the old gentleman.

Here is the next stage, and horses are changed almost before the old Bicester can say "Jack Robinson". Through towns and villages goes the Regulator, the guard's key-bugle sounding a merry call as the rumbling coach passes through the cobbled streets; over hill, over dale, past coppice and spinney, with changes at ten or more stages, and at last the Regulator rattles into Bicester town!

And that is how they travelled in the old days.

It is on record that at a dinner held in the Thatched House Tavern, St James' Street, London, during coaching days Sir Henry Peyton, Bart., presented a beautiful cup with a coach and four horses modelled on one side to Charles Holmes, driver of the Blenheim coach from Woodstock to London for having driven the coach for twenty years without an accident; sixty-five miles every day or somewhere about twenty-three thousand miles a year. Sir Henry Peyton had a great regard for the coachmen of the road.

Talks Update

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

Monday 16th December

Our usual **Christmas Social**, complete with quiz, refreshments, and plenty of festive cheer.

Monday 20th January

Dr Tim Jordan comes to give us a systematical look at **Cotswold Stone Barns** and their place in the rural economy.

Monday 17th February

Mark Lawrence tells us all about the **Picture Oxon** project.



8th December 1893

THE BICESTER DOG SHOW

Many years have elapsed since the Bicester Corn Exchange presented such a spectacle as it did on Wednesday last, on the occasion of the first dog show held in the town.

Several towns in the neighbourhood have been able to boast of such a show, with its many advantages and interesting features. But despite the many elaborate and encouraging accounts of these ventures, it was left to the present year for a few enterprising gentleman in the town and vicinity to form such a show for Bicester. But it is satisfactory to state that the result of their labours was an unqualified success.

In the formation of a show the most important feature for ensuring success is the securing of a batch of good officers, and at the outset it was extremely fortunate that such a worthy president as Viscount Valentia should be secured, and following up on that the appointment of such an efficient secretary as Mr E.F. Holt and a hard-working committee composed of R.D. Thomas Esq; Messrs Gordon Walsh, E.F. Tanner, E.H. Fuller, J.J. Godwin, W. Shillingford, E. Castle, T. Brown, N. Long, C. Hammond, R. Wood, and A Nickols. Naturally the principal share of the work fell to the lot of the secretary, who with his previous experience of such ventures was well drilled in the work, but he was admirably assisted by the members of the committee, and on the show day by Mr A.E. Seymour.

From any standpoint the success of the show may be gauged, for it cannot be denied that the excellence of every feature surprised even the most ardent admirer. The number of entries was about 300, with an average in each class of about 11; the quality of the exhibits, seeing many had gained prizes in all parts of England, exceeded all expectations; and the interest shown by the outside public was so keen that over £20 was taken at the door. The first two features are of course interesting and on their merits rest the welfare of the show, but it is on the last feature that the committee can heartily congratulate themselves, for it clearly showed that their efforts were held with satisfaction in the locality. Even the committee only reckoned on taking about £7, for they no doubt thought the interest in dogs was limited, but to their surprise there were more admirers of the canine animals than they anticipated, including many of the nobility, clergy and gentry in the vicinity.

As the entries continued to pour in, it was evident to the committee that the Corn Exchange, despite its capaciousness, would be far too small to bench the dogs. But, fortunately, additional places adjoining the Exchange were available, the Billiard Room to the Crown, and the yard (undercover) on the right of the building being very easy of access. All the entries were benched by Spratt's appliances, and by the aid of these no room was lost.

In the Corn Exchange the arrangements were perfect, and with the exception of a few ferocious animals who had rather too much chain, visitors had nothing to fear, and the same remark applies to the other places of exhibition. At times, especially in the afternoon, it was certainly rather a nervous proceeding to pass by some of the animals when there was a crush. But taking into consideration the fact that the committee were placed in difficulties as to benching the numerous exhibits there was very little to complain of.

The schedule contained classes which afforded as much variety as possible - from the stately mastiff and St. Bernard to the pretty little toy terrier - and the interest was greatly supplemented by the local classes and the special prizes given by gentlemen in the town and neighbourhood. From a local point of view perhaps the Bull dogs, Bull bitches, and Schipperke were the most important. In the former class there was a splendid exhibition. "The Nob" was a very nice bodied dog with a good skull, and the excellence of this was equalled by "Stratton Billy", one of the old-fashioned white bull dogs. Both these were the property of Mr R.D.F. Thomas, of Bicester. "Cyclops", the property of Mr A.S. Coxon, was a splendid animal but its excellence was totally eclipsed by "King Orry" and "Doekleaf", belonging to Mr S. Woodiess, the latter being classed as the best dog in the world.

Of the Bull bitches, Mr S. Woodiess's "Breda" was of course the best, but that was well seconded by Mr Thomas's "Bicester Kit", which was a rather good broad bitch well made up, and ran very close for first place. "Bicester Jill", owned by the same gentleman, was a very nice typical all-round bitch.

In the Schipperke class the honours were nearly all carried off by local persons. "The Sprite" was rather light of bone but had good ears, and "The Spartan" and "The Scamp" also had failings in this direction. "The Saint", belonging to Mr Gordon Walsh, secured the special, and with the exception of being light of bone had many good qualities, and the succeeding exhibit by the same gentleman had good head and ears. Mr R.W. Young's "Little Tich" was a fair specimen, but the best of the class was Mrs Kathleen Flinter's "Somebody's Boy", which was a splendid animal, the only improvement that could have been desired being a little better head. This dog has won many prizes, special for mention being a second at the Crystal Palace Show, so that judging from this standpoint our local exhibitors can heartily congratulate themselves on their exhibits. On the whole, the quality showed surprised the judge.

The special prizes naturally caused a great deal of excitement among exhibitors. The guinea prize for the best dog in the show being awarded to Mr Woodiess for his Bull dog "Doekleaf". The judging took place in the yard of the Crown Hotel, and was watched by a good number of people.

31st December 1926

CHRISTMAS IN BICESTER

For Christmas day there was quite old-fashioned weather for about the first time in the twentieth century. It was also a somewhat unusual Christmas in some ways. Falling, as it did, on a Saturday caused a long cessation of trade and business and a series of what may be called Bank Holidays. Friday evening saw business establishments close, and in most cases not until Wednesday morning did things get going again.

Whether this state of affairs suited everybody is a moot question.

To many it came as a boon and a blessing, giving a reasonable time for holiday-making and relaxation from everyday work. To others this long stoppage of business must have been a serious strain, coming as it did at the end of a year which has been one of the most disastrous which has been known in the industrial world.

Most people, however, seem to have been perfectly prepared to take full advantage of the quite exceptionally extended holiday. One effect on Bicester was that the town filled up even more fully than usual with family parties, visitors and others, spending their Christmas "at home".

Let it be hoped that here and elsewhere, this opportunity for longer personal intercourse between those who have but seldom the chance of celebrating such occasions may have done something, if even but a little, to bring about that much-talked-of condition of affairs known to those who preach it as "the brotherhood of man", industrial peace, and the final ending of all feuds, personal or international.

There was a Bicester market on Friday, but it was a gathering of the holiday order. A brief visit to the market revealed empty pens, and very few of the frequenters of the market visible. With the Christian festivals falling each year on a different day of the week, and markets being held consistently year in, year out on the same day of the week without any reference to the Almanack, these things will happen, but do no harm to anybody.

The churches at Bicester had their usual services. The parish church had been nicely decorated by the ladies who undertake this loving task, and their devices of flowers, holly and evergreens did credit to them. The decorators were - Miss Coleman (High Altar), Mrs Tompkins (Lady Chapel), Mrs Harris and Mrs R. Goble (pulpit), Mrs Finch (font). The collections on Sunday amounted to £3 3s 4 1/2d, and at Crockwell Mission Room 11s 4d. Holy Communion was celebrated on Christmas Day at 7am (when there were 83 communicants), 8am (150 communicants) and 11:15am (22 communicants). On Sunday evening carols were rendered by the choir. The vicar also took the celebration at Caversfield at 11 o'clock on Christmas Day and the Rev. C.D. Read at the Bicester Poor Law Institution, when seven communicated.

Wesleyans and Congregationalists held a combined service at 11am on Christmas morning at the Wesley Hall, conducted by the Revs. D.A. King and Alfred Fretwell.

On Sunday evening at Wesley Hall, after a shortened evening service, a special carol service was held, Mrs Alfred Robinson being the soloist.

The inmates of the Poor Law Institution spent a pleasant time. Besides the gifts from the Guardians they received sixpence each from an anonymous donor. Holly had been given by Miss Dewar, and the staff had decorated the dining hall and wards with evergreen, lanterns, etc, and there was quite a Christmassy appearance. Breakfast consisted of ham, coffee, etc. For dinner there was roast beef, pork, and mutton, vegetables, and plum pudding, etc; beer for those who desired it, and lemonade. Cake and other dainties were given for tea. Mrs and Miss Coleman, Miss Wright, and Mr Leonard Noble assisted in waiting on the old people. In the evening a concert and carol-singing took place, songs being given by Miss Wright and the portress, Mrs Titcomb. Each man received an ounce and a half of tobacco, two oranges, apples and packet of sweets, and each woman two oranges, apples, packet of sweets, and half lb. of biscuits.

Only two patients occupied beds in the nursing home at Christmastide. The interior of the building had been decked with a charming device of paper wisteria made by the nurses. The following gifts had been received: Turkey, plum pudding, ham, evergreen, Mrs Tubbs; fruit, Mrs Mountain; biscuits, Mrs Scott; chicken and mincepies, Mrs Deeley; mincepies, Mrs Truman, Mrs Grimes; flowers, etc, Mrs Gosling; paper flowers and holly, Miss Ivy Nelson.

The staff at the Post Office experienced the usual busy Christmas season. There was an increase in the number of parcels, etc dealt with at Bicester both for delivery and despatch. Whereas most local people followed the request to post early, the influx of letters and parcels came with a rush. But the postmen, as ever, rose fully to the occasion.

25th December 1959

CAKES AND CAROLS

Did you ever see 150 Christmas cakes side-by-side in one room? There they were last week, the proud work of 150 boys and girls at Highfield School.



The four cakes which won special praise are pictured here with the four youngsters who made them. Left to



right: John Eccles, 15, from Weston-on-the-Green, who aims to be a chef; 14-year-old Pamela Leach, from Blackthorn; 15-year-old Wallace Cross, from Fringford; and 15-year-old Dushanka Culic, a Yugoslav girl who lives in Bicester.

More of the cakes are pictured here, with house-craft teachers Miss L. Creswell and Mrs B.E. Hall, and some of the proud girl cooks.

Also in the festive spirit this week, pictured above, is Miss Ruth Williams and some of the boys and girls from Brookside Primary School at the school's annual carol service.



24th December 1993

WELLHEAD IN MEMORY OF FORMER COUNCILLOR

A former town clerk and councillor, Mr Raymond Bainton, will be remembered in Bicester thanks to his family.

His widow, Mrs Dorothy Bainton, and relatives have paid for a stone canopy and bass for a well in the grounds of The Garth, where the town council has its offices. Until now only a manhole cover has marked the location of the well. She and the town clerk, Mrs Ann Graham, are pictured here with town councillor Mr Charles Brees, who suggested to the council that it should be given a proper wellhead.

Mr Brees said: "The new wellhead will be a suitable memorial to Mr Bainton. It is very generous of the family to pay for it." The well is used by the council's gardeners in dry spells. A steel grill that can be locked has also been installed along with a bucket on a chain.

Mrs Bainton said: "My husband loved The Garth and its gardens, and we as a family thought it was something we could do in his memory."



Bicester, From a Brook A Royal Visitor

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

A modern electric lamp is such an advance upon an iron pan filled with burning pitch that there is an amazing contrast with Bicester street lighting of four hundred years ago. As the sketch shows, the public lamp standard of that day was fashioned of nothing better than a rough pole, with side pieces as steps, up which the lamplighter climbed to apply his torch. Yet these "fallots" as they were called, served their purpose to some extent in the days of highway crimes till they were superseded by the

oil lantern.

Now we have arrived at the period when one of the different versions of Bicester's name was "Burcester" and it will therefore be so styled throughout the present instalment of our historical pageant of the town. Much has happened since the second of the Tudor monarchs, Henry VIII, came to the throne. Burcester people no longer see their old friends the monks walking to the White Cross or along the village street. By order of the Vicar-General, Cromwell, a visitation has been held, and the Priory dissolved. Long before this there had



been a warning when the Archbishop of Canterbury, in great state, with the Cross of Canterbury carried before him, had come to the village. Local folk now watch axe and pick destroying the Priory Church, stone by stone, whilst leaving the other buildings of the monastery untouched. A few fragments were saved from the wreck and placed in the Parish Church. Two panels with figures of knights are among these - you can see them high up on a wall.

Today, Tuesday 11th September 1526, Burcester is agog with excitement for it is known that His Majesty King Henry VIII, Defender of the Faith, is on his royal way to the place - now a small town - on his progress from Winchester to Ampthill in Bedfordshire. Well might the

villagers, thronging the Market Place, gaze with some curiosity on the be-whiskered face of the stout king. Their interest would probably have been keener twenty years later, by which time His Majesty had married six wives. History does not record where he stayed in Burcester. Probably it was in the Market Place, and it may have been at the premises now occupied by Mr C.S. Curtis, for these buildings indicate a house of some size and importance in days gone by.



Bannister seems to be an old Bicester name. We read of a Richard Bannister living in the town at this period.

Let us take a walk through the Market Place at this date, and note that we have the choice of three inns here - "The Swan" (now Ambrosden House) and "The Cross Keys" - afterwards sold for £450 - or "The Six Bells" if we decide to go to the end of the Causeway. Here is the shop of John Hunch, the grosser (grocer), who sells nearly everything under the sun from gingerbread to a mousetrap. He is a grosser because he belongs to a company of merchants who sell by the gross; his earlier name was a "pepperer".

Along the causeway from the direction of Middleton Stoney, comes a hawking party, and among them the vicar, Master Florence Volusey, who, like most of the clergy of that time, is "more learned in riding and hunting than in divinity". They ride horseback, falcon on wrist, and carry a pole to continue the sport on foot where it is marshy ground.

Gooseberries are seen for the first time in some Burcester gardens. Outside at the "bottes" the men are practising archery. There is no school for the children to attend, though when he can spare the time the vicar makes some attempt at elementary instruction. A troupe of strolling actors comes to the town and performs a miracle play.

The King grants the Priory property to the Duke of Suffolk. The great court is held at Burcester each Easter Monday and the inhabitants who fail to attend it are fined one penny.

Christmas Tree Festival

Once again BLHS took part in the annual Christmas Tree Festival at St Edburg's Church earlier this month, and once again it was a great success.

For those of you who didn't get the opportunity to go and see it for yourselves, our tree (pictured right) was decorated with a "retail" theme. We used pictures of old shops in the town centre, together with a selection of old adverts for well known products, making it both informative and nostalgic. It was very well recieved and we hope to have at least as much success again next year.

- Matthew Hathaway



Oxford's Base & Brickish Skirt Talk

Back in October Liz Woolley came to talk to us about the development of Oxford's suburbs.

She began by explaining that the city itself had remained within its mediaeval walls until the 1850s, when the first suburban developments began to appear outside the walls. Villages like Jericho eventually got swallowed up in the urban sprawl, but back then they were still separate from the city.

The city's expansion continued, largely thanks to the influx of people from the countryside. Over the following 50 years to 1900 the city's population doubled, whilst the county's population only increased by 11%. People were attracted in by the increasing availability of work and the prospect of higher wages, and they had to be housed.

The university was also expanding. In 1877 Dons were allowed to get married, this added wives and families to the accommodation requirements and meant that the



A terrace in Park Town, the first of the suburban developments.

traditional lodgings were no longer as suitable. So they required housing too.

Most of the land around the city was owned by corporations, colleges or the church. This, coupled with the topography and the road network, influenced the

development of the suburbs. The first development was Park Town, to the north of the city, just off the road to Banbury. It was on land originally set aside for a workhouse and was built between 1853 and 1862. The rent for each property, when they were newly built, ranged from £35 to £50 per year.

The land around Park Town, from St Giles up to Summertown, was owned by St John's College, who leased it for development for 99 years. But no pubs or shops were allowed to be built in the area. Walton Manor, on the west side, was designed by the same architect as Park Town, while Norham Manor, to the east side, was designed by the architect who had designed the Randolph Hotel. Both developments were built between 1862 and 1869, and they were mainly occupied by wealthy tradesmen, widows and college professors.

When the railway works were planned to be built in Oxford, Kingston Road, north of Jericho, was quickly built to house the influx of railway workers, but then the works were built in Swindon instead and so the mass of workers never came to Oxford. But there were still plenty of people to occupy these new, cheaper, properties. Which gave way for the slum areas in the city, like St Ebbes and St Aldates, to be cleared and redeveloped. Local by-laws had come into effect in 1866 which regulated street widths, building heights, room sizes, plumbing and things like that, and finally came the opportunity to bring the city up to



A terrace in Osney Island, built for railway workers.

standard.

Meanwhile, the railways also brought housing development to the west of the city, heading out towards Botley. The land on Osney Island was bought up by M. Hester in 1851, and later developed by him to provide accommodation close to the railway and the main city station. Then in 1868 Christ Church College leased the land between Osney and the railway for development, which became New Osney. And then in 1877 they built Cripple Meadow. Kingerlee became a major developer and landowner in the area, contributing over 300 houses.

The railway again encouraged development south of Folly Bridge, where the line from Paddington originally terminated. But this was mostly small scale developments by private developers and building societies. When the railway line was relocated it left space behind that was also taken up with housing,

eventually becoming Marlborough Road, where rent was typically £14 per year.

The land to the south-east, on the far side of Magdalen Bridge and out towards Iffley and Cowley, stayed rural for a lot longer than the other sides of the city, mainly because it wasn't under the control of one big land owner. It was mostly smaller plots and tenant farmers. It wasn't until the enclosure act of 1853 that the smaller plots began to merge together into larger ones. There was also a toll gate on the main road until 1899 that restricted demand.

But development did continue, and by 1901 the parish of Cowley St John housed 30% of Oxford's population. This then grew even more with the arrival and expansion of Cowley Works. Cowley Road became more retail orientated than any of the other main roads into the city, which also helped attract people to the area.

- Matthew Hathaway

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