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Bicester Historian

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Oxford House and its Ethnographic Dealer

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Whilst sorting through “stuff” the other day I came across a 17th century trade token for a G. Burrowes of Bisseter – Ironmonger. I Googled the name and place and this led me to the website of the British Museum, who not only had a token like mine but eight other examples from Bicester, along with some Roman coins and several examples of bank notes from Tubbs Bank, Bicester. You can view these via the museum website. But what caught my eye was a photograph of a building in Bicester (right) described as Oxford House, Bicester, 1900.

The accompanying text reads: *“Oxford House, Bicester, Oxon. from Margaret Ellis 27.2.91 granddaughter of W.D. Webster.*

Curator’s comments: W.D. Webster traded in tribal art from his home in Bicester, England.”

For those who don’t recognise the building, this is the white building that stands on the corner of King’s End and Oxford Road. The conservatory at the rear has long gone and some rebuilding took place

after a fire there many years ago. But the general layout remains the same. It was once a coaching inn – “The Oxford Arms”, and a ladies’ collegiate school in 1870. The YMCA may have utilised it at one stage and in the 1960’s it was used as a school for children from local USA military families. More recently it has

provided sheltered accommodation for single parent families.

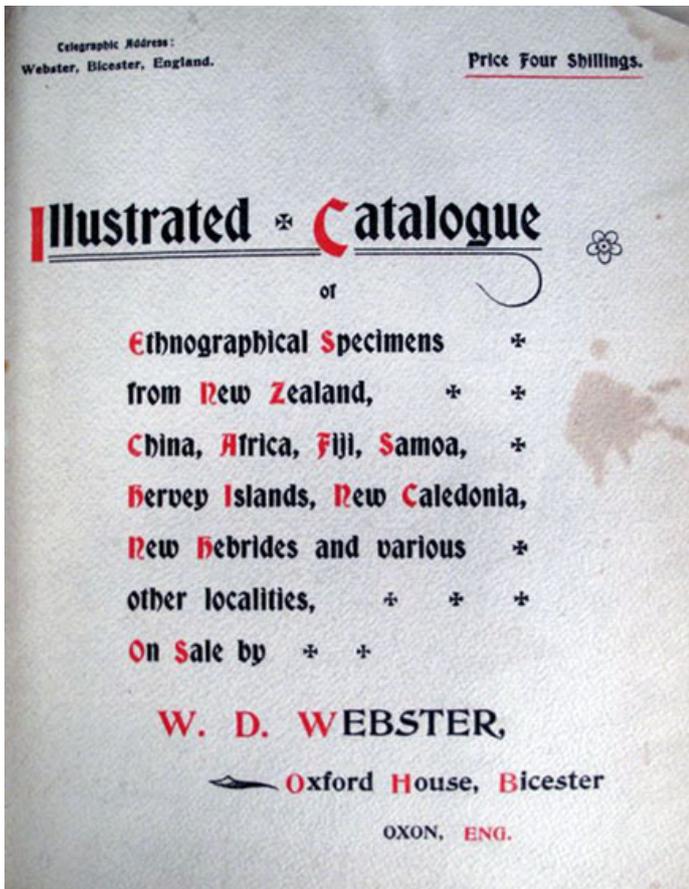
But who was this W.D. Webster who lived there from c. 1890 – 1901?

William Downing Webster was born in Greenwich, London in 1868. By the age of 12 he was attending a Quaker School in Somerset. The school had strong ties with the Lake



District (where George Fox founded the Society of Friends – the Quaker Movement), and his mother also came from that area. In 1891, he was working just south of the Lake District, as an artist in stained glass decorations. That same year, at the age of 22, he married Agnes Harrison, of Bowness-on-Windermere. On his marriage certificate he described himself as a window designer.

He became a dealer in ethnographic antiquities during the 1890s, which is when the family moved to Oxford House in Bicester. They had three children, one of whom died whilst young. Webster becomes one of the foremost ethnographic dealers of the last part of the 19th century.



An example of one of his sales catalogues is shown here. They were always illustrated with drawings of the objects on sale. He staged a number of exhibitions at Earls Court. He supplied ethnological objects to the major continental museums and General Pitt-Rivers was an important customer in the U.K. Many of the objects on display at the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford were supplied by Webster.

It did make me think that maybe here was a person who deserves a “blue plaque” to be erected in his name on Oxford House!

Some of you may have heard of the Benin Expedition of 1897 when a UK force of troops captured, burned and looted Benin City, bringing to an end the West African Kingdom of Benin. Much of the country’s art, including the Benin Bronzes, was looted and taken to Britain. 40% of the art was accessioned to the British Museum, some works were given to individual members of the British Military as spoils of war, and the remainder was sold at auction by the British Admiralty to pay for the expedition, with many of the items being sold by sales

held by Webster in Bicester.

One of the few pictures of William Downing Webster shows him standing between two pairs of intricately carved ivory elephants tusks. The photograph is believed to have been taken in the conservatory seen in the 1900 photograph of Oxford House.



What happened in the following years is unclear. For personal reasons Webster had to sell his entire personal collection in 1904.

In 1906, his wife Agnes filed for divorce. The petition includes the following details:

- Webster had treated Agnes with great unkindness and cruelty and had frequently abused her and had used threats against her.
- In and about the month of May 1900 at Oxford House, Webster had knowingly and wilfully and recklessly infected Agnes with venereal disease.
- Whilst under the influence of drink, Webster threatened to shoot Agnes with a loaded revolver.
- Webster had frequently committed adultery with divers women.
- Webster had frequently committed adultery with Eva Cutter.

Webster did not contest the divorce and Agnes was granted £1 /week alimony.

Eva Cutter, was also an ethnographical and antiques dealer, based in London. She became the professional and personal partner of Webster. They were married in 1907 and lived in London.

Webster died from alcoholism in 1913. A sad ending but an interesting story to add to the history of Oxford House. But maybe not “blue plaque” material!!!

- Bob Hessian

Roll of Honour

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

Aircraftman Basil Thomas Mitchell, of Weston-on-the-Green.

Died: 1st November 1940 Aged: 19 Served in: Royal Air Force

Sergeant Robert Daniel Smith, of Portsmouth.

Died: 27th November 1940 Aged: 19 Served in: Royal Air Force
(Died on service at RAF Bicester, buried at Caversfield)



Bygone Bicester (Taken from the Bicester Advertiser)

3rd November 1860

IMPRISONMENT FOR MALICIOUS DAMAGE

At the Petty Sessions this week, William Ayres, of Bicester, appeared before Captain Style, R.N., charged by Caroline Nelson, of Bicester, with having, on the 20th of October instant, wilfully and maliciously damaged a pair of sheets and a counterpane, her property.

Mrs. Nelson disposed that last Saturday evening she was at home, talking to a man from Launton. Ayres came in and challenged the man for some beer. She went and fetched a quart. She afterwards found Ayres on the bed with his clothes and dirty boots on, and he damaged her things to the amount of 1s.

Defendant pleaded guilty. He was ordered to pay 10s costs, and damages 1s. He had been convicted three times previously.

In default of payment he was committed for 14 days imprisonment.

23rd November 1900

THE WATERWORKS QUESTION

A debate took place at the weekly meeting of the Bicester Guild on Wednesday evening on a proposition brought forward by Mr R. Stockley "That an efficient outside water supply is a necessity for the community of Bicester."

In some lengthy remarks Mr Stockley said he was convinced an efficient waterworks scheme for Bicester was a great need. It would be a boon to the inhabitants, and probably restore the reputation which the town had lost through the late epidemic of typhoid fever. He illustrated his views on the matter under the three headings (1) necessity from a sanitary point of view, (2) such a supply alone can adequately meet the needs and convenience of the inhabitants, and (3) it is necessary in order to raise the reputation of the town and improve its trade generally. On each of these points Mr Stockley very ably enlarged.

The resolution was seconded by Mr L. Newby.

The negative side of the question was taken up by Mr T. Grimsley (vice-chairman of the Urban District Council), who argued that any question of waterworks should be properly brought before the ratepayers, and if they said they wanted them he was willing they should be established. There was plenty of water obtainable in Bicester itself, and of the best quality, and danger of pollution could be avoided by simply boring instead of digging wells and bringing the water to the surface by means of pipes, in the same way as Mr Fane had done at Bicester House and Mr Kingscote had done at Stratton Audley.

He contended the fever epidemic arose through bad drainage, and was of the opinion that the ill reputation of the town was caused through it being described and talked of as a "fever stricken area" than to its actual condition. Even waterworks would not insure them against fever. If the people considered the town in such a good financial position that it could afford to have waterworks "with a nice tap close to hand" let them be established. If the ratepayers wanted waterworks as a luxury he did not see why they should not have them, but as a necessity they were not required.

He moved "That an efficient outside water supply is not a necessity for the community of Bicester." Mr E.C. Bird seconded.

Mr Hudson mentioned that for two years the ratepayers had returned waterworks candidates at the head of the pole, thus declaring they wanted waterworks. Mr Grimsley ought therefore to be favourable to their establishment in conformity with the statement he had made that night. He was himself once opposed to them but someone who had been bereaved through fever reminded him that it might visit him next. He saw at home loved ones with whom he could not bear to part, yet who were running this risk, and from that day he dated his conversion. He now regarded the policy of the anti-waterworks party as a great mistake, and was convinced that an outside water supply was a necessity

for the town.

Mr Evans said that contamination of the water from an external source could still happen and so he agreed with the suggestion of bringing water to the surface by pipes and had heard a practical man say that anywhere in Bicester it could be done if the boring was properly carried out. Instead of spending £10,000 on waterworks they might sink, if necessary, 100 of these pipes and still not spend so much. With waterworks everyone would not have water in their houses and many working people would have to go farther even than now to a standpipe. It was a thing the town could not afford.

Mr Hendriks observed that if anyone was convinced by what had been said by Mr Grimsley they must be very easy of conviction. He had given no reasons for the position he took up. He alleged there was lots of pure water in Bicester, but how could he prove it? Efficiency of supply meant three things; plentifulness, convenience, and non-liability to pollution. He should not like to say there was no pure water in Bicester, but he would say there was plenty of impure, and if the people were asked if they wished good water brought near them the invariable reply would be "yes".

As to the liability of pollution, statements had been made concerning the geological situation of the town, some of which were right and some very far from it. Their soil was corn brash, and into this the drainage had been leaking for years. His own idea was that the soil was soaked with sewerage, and under these circumstances did they not realise that every time they sank a new well they added a fresh danger?

The Chairman expressed himself heart and soul in sympathy with the resolution. On the amendment being put to the meeting 11 voted for it and 24 against and it was declared lost. The Chairman then put the motion and the voting was the same 24 for and 11 against.

The proceedings concluded with the National Anthem.

15th November 1940

EVACUEE SOCIAL CLUB

With the influx of women refugees into the town, many of them with young children, those ladies and gentlemen who have worked hard for their welfare were faced with the problem of finding some means whereby these unfortunate people could meet together, away from their billets, and spend some hours in useful occupation, both socially and otherwise. As well as where the children could receive better attention than has, perhaps, hitherto been possible. The problem was solved by the acquisition of the premises formerly occupied by Mr L.O. Payne, gent's outfitter, on the Market Square, and transforming them into a social and welfare club.

The work completed, there is now a large room on the ground floor, with suitable lighting and heating arrangements, and upstairs has been provided a children's playroom, which will undoubtedly prove a boon to the mothers. Facilities for hot baths, washing of babies' clothes, sewing classes, social afternoons, children's welfare, etc., have been provided, and it is

hoped that occasional whist drives will be possible.

The windows are protected by splinter net, and air raid shelter facilities exist beneath ground level in the basement.

There is no doubt the committee responsible have accomplished a noteworthy achievement, and it will be appreciated by the London women now in our midst. The club will be open daily from 9:30am to 4:30pm, for mothers and babies, and on Sundays visiting husbands will be able to share the club amenities between the hours of 10am and 6:30pm. There is to be a small charge of one penny per week for membership for approximately 100 persons.

The new club presented a very animated scene on Wednesday afternoon, when a large number of the evacueewomen attended for the opening by Lady Bicester. Two of the men evacuees enlivened the proceedings meanwhile, with piano accordion and ukulele music, the company joining in the choruses. Councillor G. Goble (chairman of the Bicester Urban Council) presided for the ceremony, and in addition to Lady Bicester were Mrs L.G. Moir, Mrs L.A. Coker (chairman of the local W.V.S.), Mrs R. Trowbridge (assistant evacuation officer), Mrs Rashleigh, Mrs G.N. Montgomery, Mrs G.W. Lewis, Miss E. Harris (social organiser for the Ministry of Health), and Councillor A.F. Lambourne (chairman of the Bicester Evacuation Committee).

Several gifts of money and toys have been received for the club, as well as a wireless set donated by Mr Eric Trinder and five perambulators, two play-pens and some toys all generously contributed by Lady Brooke-Popham. But there are many articles useful for such a centre still needed.

26th November 1980

DYING STATELY HOME WILL BE DEMOLISHED

The final chapter in the 100 year history of Shellswell House is about to be written. For the derelict mansion standing in Shellswell Park, near Hethe, is to be demolished.

But there is some glimmer of hope that there could be a future, for while the old house is in its death throes there are plans afoot to renovate the coachhouse and stable block into living accommodation and to restore the gardens to their Victorian splendour.

The house has been empty and gradually deteriorating for about 15 years. Signs warning that the building was unsafe have been up for some time.

The present house is the third on the site. In the early 18th century a house was built there which was greatly enlarged by the builder's son, Fiennes Trotman (1743-82). The last house was built in 1874-5 by Edward Slater-Harrison and it incorporates part of the second.

Shellswell estate, known as Shellswell Park, has been in the Harrison family since it was bought in 1782 by Mr Gilbert Harrison, London merchant, on the death of Fiennes Trotman. The estate later passed to the late Mr John Dewar-Harrison who lived at the neighbouring Willaston house on the same estate.



Shellswell House is referred to in Flora Thompson's famous trilogy "Lark Rise to Candleford" as Skeldon Park. Flora Thompson, who lived in nearby Juniper, set much of her books in the area and described Queen Victoria's Jubilee taking place in the park.

The house was a family home until Mrs Emma Slater-Harrison died in the 1940s and it became a billet for officers in the Second World War. After the war it was let to Pickford's for storage for a time and later it was divided into flats.

Since it became empty the house has been subject to vandalism and the weather has got in causing deterioration.

The estate was inherited by the then Miss Lydia Ann Smith in 1968 following the death of John Dewar-Harrison, her godfather.

"The Harrisons were related to me through my mother by marriage," said Baroness von Maltzahn of Willaston, the former Miss Smith. "Demolition is the sad but inevitable end of the house," she said.

Committee & Contacts

Editor:

Matthew Hathaway
editor@blhs.org.uk

Website:

www.blhs.org.uk

Committee Members:

Bob Hessian (*Chairman*)
chairman@blhs.org.uk
01869 350662
Sally James (*Treasurer*)
01869 243804
Sally Dexter (*Minutes Secretary*)
John Roberts (*Membership Officer*)
Matthew Hathaway
Peter Crook

Meetings Address:

The Clifton Centre
Ashdene Road
Bicester
OX26 2BH

Postal Address:

BLHS c/o Sally James
14 George Street
Bicester
OX26 2EG