



Issue: 14 August 2023

# BLHS Newsletter

The monthly newsletter for Bicester Local History Society

## Annual General Meeting

As usual, the September meeting will be our AGM. This is your chance to raise any matters that you think need addressing regarding the Society, as well as to vote in the committee members for the following year. It also marks the start of the 2023/24 membership year, so subscription renewals will be due.

The AGM will be followed by a short talk by Bob Hessian.

This meeting will be held in the Clifton Centre on Monday 18th September at 7:30pm.

## 2024 Calendar Launch

Our calendar for next year will go on sale in October, with an official launch at the October meeting. It will be based on a theme of Transport. The talk at that meeting will be a presentation of the photographs we've chosen and the history behind them.

This meeting will be held in the Clifton Centre on Monday 16th October at 7:30pm.

## To be or not to be? ... A Question from the Chairman

*"To be, or not to be: that is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing, end them?"*

*- Part of Shakespeare's soliloquy spoken by Hamlet (Act 3, Scene 1)*

Hamlet's father has been murdered and Hamlet is contemplating suicide. No, I'm not contemplating that at all – I was trying to think of a heading for a question I want to pose for members – would you like "to be" a BLHS committee member? Or maybe a "helper", "volunteer", "assistant", "writer", "archivist", etc., etc. – you don't need to be a committee member to participate in these activities, yet they are important activities that help towards the smooth running of the society.

Until recently, we've had a committee member who has written up and circulated the minutes of committee meetings – however, it doesn't need to be a committee member who does that task – although the person would have to attend such meetings. Another important task is the writing up of the monthly talks at the Clifton Centre. A word for word account is not required but a summary of the presentation would suffice. If you are the only person doing this task then it can become a chore, so maybe a small team of 2 – 3 volunteers could take on the responsibility of doing this?

As for the Committee – I did look at definitions of what a committee is. It does of course depend on what purpose the committee has. We're not a company, and we're not a committee serving a board of directors. We are a committee, appointed by the membership, to further the aims and objectives of the Society – people need to read what these aims and objectives are by reading our Constitution. I've listed some of them below:

## Dates For Your Diary

AGM agenda and committee nominations deadline

*1st September*

Bicester Advertiser local history article

*7th September*

September newsletter submission deadline

*8th September*

2023 BLHS AGM and talk

*18th September @ 7:30pm*

Bicester Advertiser local history article

*5th October*

2024 BLHS Calendar talk

*16th October @ 7:30pm*

- To pursue original research that is made available to all;
- To organise talks and courses that will provide members and the general public with relevant information, knowledge or skills to pursue individual or group research;
- To mount a programme of activities on topics relevant to the history of Bicester, the locality and the County of Oxfordshire;
- To build a local archive of documents (or photocopies of documents), illustrations and artefacts relating to the local history of Bicester and the surrounding area;
- To arrange guided local history walks in Bicester and the surrounding villages;
- To gather oral histories;
- To mount exhibitions of an historical nature;
- To create and maintain an internet Bicester Local History Society website;
- To publish a range of books, leaflets and resource materials relating to the local history of the area;
- To act as a resource for material and information for schools, libraries, media, museums etc;

We attempt to do most of these, but we can't do it all on our own. We could do things better, but we need your help.

I like the following comment:

*...the basic purpose of a committee... [is] to determine through its collective wisdom, which is usually superior to that of any one member, the best solutions to a problem.*

Finally, going back to Hamlet: *"To die, to sleep; To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;"* I remember at school (62 years ago!) the English drama teacher getting me to read this out loud in class and at the time I wondered "what the hell is this all about!?" No Google in those days to give you the answers!

- Bob Hessian

## 19th Century Women Travellers and Explorers Talk

At our talk back in May, Dr Kathleen Bradley explained that, when talking about 19th century women travellers, it was important to remember the society within which they lived and what was happening at the time, as they gradually became able to travel more freely than they had been able to previously. Britain was being transformed by industrialisation and had a large empire around which it was possible to travel. There was also a big movement from the 1850s onwards for emancipation, and women had a lot more opportunities for higher and secondary education.

One of the first ever travel guidebooks was written by a woman called Mariana Starke (1762-1838) in the early 1800s. She was an extraordinary woman, born and raised in Epsom, who, in 1798, travelled to Italy as a companion of a sick relative. On her travels she wrote her first guidebook "Letters from Italy between the years 1792 and 1798". This was in two volumes and noted places to stay, to visit, distances between places, and the costs of food and accommodation. She also devised the forerunner of the star rating system, using exclamation marks instead of stars. She wrote books every time she travelled, which were published as pocket guides.



Mariana Starke (1762-1838)

When you were travelling by carriage it was often slow and uncomfortable, with the risk of highwaymen, accommodation which could be horrible, and food which you were unfamiliar with, so a guidebook was important. She travelled up until her death in 1838 in Milan, on her way back to England from Naples.

Fanny Trollope (1779-1863) born Frances Milton, was the mother of the novelist Anthony Trollope. She married Thomas Trollope in 1809 and they had seven children, six of whom survived to adulthood. In 1817 her husband leased a farm, although they had no farming experience, and built a large house there. When an agricultural depression hit, their 12-year-old son died of tuberculosis, and Thomas' expected inheritance didn't happen, the family moved to a run-down farmhouse. Fanny then took the unusual step, in 1827, of travelling to the United States with her son Henry and two daughters, to join a socialist community in Tennessee. However, the community turned out to be in a malaria swamp, so Fanny and her family moved on to Cincinnati, Ohio, where she attempted to set up a wax works attraction, but failed and moved on to Memphis, Tennessee, to help black slaves. This was also a disaster; however, it did result in her first book "Travels in the United States and Domestic Manners of the Americans" which was published in 1831. She was critical of the United States and commented that; "I don't like

their manners, I do not like their opinions” which became very popular and was quoted all over in the press. The book was a bestseller, enabling her and the family to move back to London. However, despite producing three more books in two years, the family got into debt again and had to flee to Bruges. Within a year her husband died and the family returned to England. But in 1843 she fulfilled a lifetime dream and moved to Florence. There she continued to write, producing six more travel books and thirty-five novels. She died aged 84 and was buried near four other members of the Trollope household in the English Cemetery in Florence.

Jane Elizabeth Digby (1807-1881) also travelled a lot, but for very different reasons. She came from a very wealthy family, and her life was dedicated to romance. She travelled throughout Europe and the Middle East,



Jane Elizabeth Digby (1807-1881)

further than most women both socially and geographically. She was brought up by her maternal grandfather, the 1st Earl of Leicester, then, at the age of 17, she was introduced to society. Her family arranged her marriage to Edward Law, 2nd Baron Ellenborough, who became Governor General of India in 1824. He was seventeen years her senior, wealthy and a widower. He really did not like Jane, and they only had one child, who survived two years. Jane then fell in love with an attaché at the Austrian embassy, Felix Ludwig Johann Friedrich, Prince of Schwarzenberg, and ran away with him to Paris. She obtained a divorce from Edward in 1830 and lived in Paris with Felix and their two sons. After the affair with Felix ended, she travelled to Munich where she became the mistress of King Ludwig I of Bavaria. He arranged for her to marry Baron Karl von Venningen and they had a son, Heribert, and a daughter, Bertha. However, in 1838 she had a new lover, Greek Count Spyridon Theotokis. Karl released Jane from their marriage in 1842 and took care of their children. They remained friends for the rest of their lives. Jane converted to the Greek Orthodox faith and married Spyridon in Marseille, France. They had a son, Leonidas, who died tragically by falling out of a window. To complicate life further Spyridon was appointed aide de camp to the King of Greece, with whom Jane also had an affair, and who was the son of King Ludwig I of

Bavaria. By now she had six children, spoke eight languages, and was interested in sculpture, painting, and archaeology. After an affair with Thessalian general Christodoulos Chatzipetros in 1853, she left Greece to travel to Syria where she met the love of her life, a young Bedouin nomad called Abdul Sheik Medjuel el Mezrab. He was her guide to Palmyra and was an educated man who made a living breeding sheep and horses. The two were married under Muslim law and she took the name Jane Elizabeth Digby el Mezrab. They divided their time between his tribes in Palmyra and Damascus. She wore local dark dress, went barefoot and smoked a hookah pipe. She was respected by the tribe and sometimes accompanied her husband when the tribe became involved in inter-tribal warfare. Their marriage was a happy one and lasted until she died, 28 years later, from fever and dysentery. She was buried in the Protestant Cemetery in Damascus, with a headstone of carved pink limestone from Palmyra.

Amelia Edwards (1831-1892) was already a successful novelist and poet by the time she began travelling, in fact her first poem was published when she was seven. She was born in Islington and educated at home by her mother. She chose to become a writer and journalist, and between 1855 and 1870 she wrote multi-volume novels and would contribute articles to newspapers such as the Morning Post and Saturday Review. She wrote popular books on history, art and drama, criticism, and poetry. She was a feminist, who supported women's suffrage, and was committed to changing the status of women. It was not until her journey to explore the mountains of the southern Tyrol that she began to write about her travels. Her “Untrodden Peaks and Unfrequented Valleys: A Midsummer Ramble in the Dolomites”, published in 1873, became a popular book. Her books were all illustrated with her drawings and photographs. From this point on travel dominated her life, and in 1873 she and a few friends travelled on a houseboat along the Nile from Cairo to Abu Simbel. When visiting the Pyramids, she wanted to look at them, rather than climb them. She also sketched the temple at Abu Simbel for her book, “A Thousand Miles up the Nile”, published in 1877, which was a bestseller. At the same time, she publicised the conditions and the complications of Egyptian politics which, she argued, might prove disastrous for Egyptian archaeology. After the journey she gave up full-time travel writing, moved and dedicated the rest of her life to Egyptology. She campaigned for a fund to conduct the excavations in the Nile Delta. Her next book was “Pharaohs, Fellahs and Explorers”, published in 1891,

which was based on a series of fundraising lectures she had made in the United States. By this time, she had accumulated academic and financial support, which helped set up the Egypt Exploration Society which sent out at least one expedition to Egypt. When she died in April 1892 in Weston-super-Mare, she left her money to fund the first British chair in Egyptology at University College London and left her archaeological collection to the Petrie Museum in London and the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. She donated a sculpture of herself to the National Portrait Gallery and she was awarded several honorary degrees, which was then quite unusual for a woman, by American universities and a civil pension of £75 per annum from the British government for her services to literature and archaeology.

In Highgate there is a blue plaque which marks the house where Mary Henrietta Kingsley (1862-1900) spent her childhood. She was born the daughter and oldest child of physician, traveller and writer George Kingsley and Mary Bailey. She had a brother called Charles and her uncle was Charles Kingsley, author of "The Water Babies". She was educated at home, mainly reading the books in her father's extensive library, together with acting as her father's secretary. Eventually the family moved to Cambridge where she remained until her parents died in 1891. Her father had left her some unfinished notes of African customs which Mary was to complete. She managed to get a contract with Macmillan's publishers to write a book on her travels and this provided her with a reason to travel. Her father left her financially independent, but she had to partially finance herself by carrying cloth to sell on her journey to Africa. Her first journey in 1893 was to a relatively unknown Congo in Africa by cargo boat. Here she studied local customs, collected specimens, and made notes. On her second journey, the following year, she explored two more rivers in that area accompanied this time by four Africans. She travelled by canoe through mangrove swamps encountering crocodiles and gorillas, mixing freely with cannibals and dangerous tribes. She survived a fall on a spike, and waded through swamps, often emerging with her dress covered with leeches. She travelled rough, as she said in her books, and survived. She also climbed one of the highest mountains in West Africa and was only the second European climber to do so. She brought some amazing specimens back with her, all of which she donated to the Natural History Museum. She also brought back all kinds of bronzes and objects, some of which are in the Pitt Rivers Museum. Back in her childhood home she wrote her first book "Travels in West Africa", published in 1897. This was a huge success because of her humour. In 1899 her second book "African Studies" was published. She was very much a radical and very critical of colonialism. In 1899, at the outset of the Boer War, she undertook her final journey, this time to South Africa. She put herself at the disposal of the British authorities, who asked her to nurse the Boer prisoners. Here she treated people with enteric fever and, after two months, she caught the fever herself and died of heart failure.



Mary Henrietta Kingsley (1862-1900)

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- Mark Lewandowski

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