



Civic Society of St Ives

Annual Report 2013

THE CIVIC SOCIETY OF ST IVES

The Civic Society of St Ives was formed in 1968 to fight the proposed plans to route the St Ives Bypass down Ramsey Road, across The Waits, Holt Island and Hemingford Meadow.

The siting of the St Ives Bypass as it is today is a result of our early campaigns.

The Society continues to care for the beauty and character of the town, as well as working to stimulate public interest in civic matters and to provide an information service for those who wish to know more about the town's history and development, and of the surrounding area.

Its web-site can be found at:

www.stivescivic.org.uk

The society is a member of:

The Campaign to Protect Rural England

www.cpre.org.uk

and

The Cambridge Antiquarian Society

www.camantsoc.org

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CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

It scarcely seems a year since the last Report was written and once again I am writing it in July to allow time for compilation, printing and distribution for our AGM in October.

The first item is one of thanks to you all for your continued support of the Civic Society. It would be impossible to run your Society without your enthusiasm, subscriptions (due in September) and attendance at our monthly Meetings.

We have had a busy year with many of our activities involving work with other organisations including Local Government. This has been done without losing sight of our aims – to conserve and preserve our heritage whilst raising public awareness of the Town's history and surrounding countryside. This does not mean that we are a Society preserved in formaldehyde – far from it. We recognise the inevitability of change and seek to influence it in a way which allows us to meet our aims. However, if challenge becomes inevitable then we will take it on in a dignified yet forthright manner which traditionally goes back over 40 years (please see the later article on the original St Ives Bypass).

Many will remember Bob Burn-Murdoch MBE retiring at the turn of the year. We contributed to his farewell by appointing him a Life President of our Society. We also joined with the Friends of the Norris Museum in presenting him with an original painting of one of his favourite views of St Ives commissioned from Richard Bolton. Helen Giles is now the Curator and is setting about extending the premises in a most innovative but traditional manner.

We currently stand at the beginning of an era of great change. The HDC Local Plan to 2036 projects limited Brown Site building in and around Town but also includes up to 4000 houses being built at RAF Wyton. Whilst there will be geographic separation from the Town, the affects will be felt by us all. We have serious concerns about roads, drainage and sewage and have represented these concerns to Local Government. We will continue to press for acceptable solutions which protect the Town from over-saturation of traffic and take account of the fragile drainage and sewage system.

For the time being and, I hope the future, we have found that working with Local Government has produced many benefits. Some of our work has been diplomatic prodding and some has been more direct. We have been pleased to have our views welcomed, accepted and actioned. We should certainly not claim all the credit but we have had a benign influence on the following:

The completion of the refurbishment of the New Bridges (CCC)

The restoration of the damaged Priory Barn wall (HDC Conservation Team)

Further work on the Old Bridge Chapel (CCC)

Refurbishment of the Old Bridge lighting (TC & CCC)

A new development within our Society has been the birth of the St Ives Archaeology Group (STAG). The synergy amongst our Society, the Norris Museum and STAG is plain and most welcome.

Our Involvement with the Town Team continues. Currently we are working with the Team and Town Council to establish and categorise the footpaths in and around Town. Once designated, Groups and volunteers will walk the routes and report on their condition. The resulting information will be sent to Local Government for action. This is only one example of the many actions taken by the Town Team.

You may have heard of J D Wetherspoons making a bid for the Warehouse Clearance Shop. Potentially the introduction of such a facility, whilst popular with some, carries a serious threat to the pubs and restaurants in the Town. Many of these operate in Listed Buildings and harsh economic competition on a national scale could result in reduced maintenance or even closure. I for one do not relish walking past boarded-up Listed Buildings either by day or night.

On a happier note we enjoyed a unique visit to Houghton Hall in Norfolk. It was a marvellous opportunity to see magnificent paintings restored to their original setting of 234 years ago when the Walpole family sold them to Katherine the Great.

I will finish as I started – by saying thank you to your Committee for their hard work and dedication. They are:

Pat Allan

Basil Belcher

Helen Eveleigh

Peter Newbould

Richard Probyn

Barbara Richmond

Peggy Seamark

David Stewart

Barry Wills

Abi Luter (our Minute-Taker) and Brian Richmond (Webmaster).

Thank you for reading this and enjoy the rest of the report.

Peter Baker

Chairman

Civic Society of St Ives Statement of Income & Expenditure
as at 30th April 2013

<u>Income</u>					<u>Expenditure</u>						
	Year to			Year			Year to	Year			
	29/04/13			2012			29/04/13	2012			
	£			£			£	£			
Subscriptions/Donations	2,951			2,796	Hall Hire		403	362			
Slepe Hall Donations	590			0	Annual Report		678	785			
Visitors	72			69	Speakers		332	275			
Memorial Fund	0			4,064	Memorial Fund		0	3,905			
Social Evenings	222	325			Social Evenings		293	292			
Raffle	76	298	115			Raffle		50	343	56	348
Interest						7 Insurance		200	200		
Gift Aid	583			340	Antiquarian Soc Subs		13	13			
Heritage Weekend	129			40	CPRE Subs		34	34			
Trips	2,060			0	Trips		960	100			
Falklands Talk	229					Carnival Stall 2011		0	10		
Jubilee Beer	585					Donations/Gifts		2,775	367		
						Administration		440	351		
						Postage		120	46		
						Phone		72	32		
						Travel		0			
						Web Site		24	656	40	469
						Heritage Weekend		96	108		
	£			7,497			7,756				
							6,490	6,976			

Balances from
30 April 2012

Current account	3,721
Deposit Account	6,709
Total	10,430
<u>add</u>	
Surplus for year	1,007
Deposit Account Interest	5
Total	11,442
<u>less</u>	
2012 Payments	484
£	10,958

Balances at
30 April 2013

Current account	4,770
Deposit Account	6,714
Total	11,484
<u>add</u>	
Receipts after Period end	0
<u>less</u>	
Cheques yet to be presented	525
£	10,958

Report to the Trustees & Members of The Civic Society of St Ives, Charity No 257286, on the Accounts for the year ended 30th April 2013 which are set out on the attached.

Respective responsibilities of trustees and examiner

The charity's trustees are responsible for the preparation of the accounts. The charity's trustees consider that an audit is not required for this year under section 144 of the Charities Act 2011 (the Charities Act) and that an independent examination is needed.

It is my responsibility to

- Examine the accounts under section 145 of the Charities Act,
- To follow procedures laid down in the general Directions given by the Charity Commission (under section 145(5)(b) of the Charities Act), and
- To state whether particular matters have come to my attention.

Basis of independent examiner's statement

My examination was carried out in accordance with general Directions given by the Charity Commission. An examination includes a review of the accounting records kept by the charity and a comparison of the accounts presented with those records. It also includes consideration of any unusual items or disclosures in the accounts, and seeking explanations from the trustees concerning any such matters. The procedures undertaken do not provide all the evidence that would be required in an audit, and consequently no opinion is given as to whether the accounts present a 'true and fair' view and the report is limited to those matters set out in the statement below.

Independent examiner's statement

In connection with my examination, no matter has come to my attention:

- (1) Which gives me reasonable cause to believe that in , any material respect, the requirements:
 - a. To keep accounting records in accordance with section 130 of the Charities Act

- b. To prepare accounts which accord with the accounting records and comply with the accounting requirements of the Charities Act have not been met; or
- (2) To which, in my opinion, attention should be drawn in order to enable a proper understanding of the accounts to be reached.

Signed : D McGoff ACIB BSC (Open) Date 20th July 2013

Name Dianne McGoff BSc (Open)
4 Seathwaite, Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire, PE29 6NY

TREASURER'S REPORT 2013

The year's accounts have been independently examined and approved. The Examiner's report and statement precedes this report.

Overall we have ended the year with a £1,007 surplus reflecting the income for the Houghton Hall trip but not its major cost which will be incurred next year. The trip is expected to yield a small profit.

This year's income and expenditure is substantially the same as last year thanks to the income and related costs against Trips, Jubilee Beer Sales and the Falklands Talk.

In the year we have made the final donation to the Town Council for the provision of heritage plaques throughout the town and for the provision of a story board to Ingle Holt (Holt Island). The latter being financed by the Slepe Hall Old Girls Association.

We hold reserves for future expenditure, but as a small charity, we have no reserves policy.

We have again, this year, sponsored one of the 'Music on the Waits' concerts with a £350 donation.

Gift Aid remains important to the finances of the Society, contributing £583 this year. Any member who pays income tax can have their subscription included in our future applications by completing the forms available from Helen Everleigh or me.

Our deposit account has been transferred from Santander to The Cambridge Building Society giving us a marginal improvement in interest and utilising a local business

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Annual subscriptions are being maintained at the current level of £7 for single membership and £12 for household membership.

Subscriptions are due in September Payment can be made at meetings, by standing order or left at the Norris Museum in a named envelope. Standing Orders are preferred and forms for this are available at any meeting from Helen Eveleigh or me.

Basil Belcher

Treasurer
July 2013

MINUTES OF THE 44th ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Held on 19th October 2012, at the Free Church, St Ives

1. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE:**

Debbie Townsend, Annie & Robin Waters, John & Sheila Rhodes, Angela Owen-Smith, Dick Forway, David & Judith Stewart, Peter Newbold, Pat Akers, Julia Bruford.

2. **MINUTES OF THE 43RD ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING:**

The minutes had been published in the Annual Report. It was proposed by John Smoothy and seconded by Ian Penfold, that the minutes were accurate and should be signed by the Chairman. Passed unanimously.

3. **MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES:**

Nothing to note.

4. **CHAIRMAN'S REPORT:**

- I will not read out the words from the Annual Report but instead will update it and give an overview using specific examples.
- I'll start with conservation. During the year the bridge chapel window glazing was completed, so at least we now have a weather-proof chapel following the earlier roof repairs. Remaining to be done is re-rendering of the chapel's interior, and something which came to light during the open days - the maintenance of the platform jutting out above the river.
- As far as the new bridges / flood arches are concerned, some 16 have been refurbished in this last season. This makes a total of 26 arches. Our sincere thanks must go to the Bridges Department of CCC. I am in constant touch with them, and they have even offered to replace the name plaque in the centre. However, English Heritage turned down the application as it would mean removing original but illegible stonework from the bridges. Perhaps an interpretation board will turn out to be the solution.
- Following on from last year's report, the War Memorial work was completed in time for Remembrance Sunday 2011. A last minute appeal to the owners of the former Discount Warehouse Shop to tidy up their frontage resulted in the windows being painted white – a good move as all was very scruffy and untidy inside.
- Not all has been successful, but we keep trying. Re-instatement of road / pavement surfaces will be a priority for this year. In-

roads will have already been made by Basil Belcher. However, there is much to do and I fear it will be a slow grinding process.

- We continue our involvement with the Town Plan on which our Town Council took the brave decision to have it run by the Community – that's us. Your Society has representation on the Action Teams of Community, Economy, and Transport / Environment. Issues that we are wrestling with are the oddly sited bus stop, traffic congestion, youth activities, cycle survey, signage and many others. However, as with national economic matters much rests with confidence, optimism and evidence. You will want to know that our MP has backed our endeavours as have County, District and Town Councillors. Indeed some Town Councillors are members of the action teams. One of the big challenges is to bring together the earnest and disparate groups in the town. Not the easiest of tasks, but will serve our Society well to have a unified and vibrant Town proud of its heritage. To this end Michael Purchas and I undertook the Mary Portas bid, ably assisted by Debbie and Peter Townsend to achieve a strong link between heritage and retail. Our bid failed, but the fall out has been considerable with further backing from our MP, and invitations to attend National forums and meetings.
- All of the foregoing might sound very expensive but these projects and initiatives have not cost your Society a penny, merely a lot of hard work and time.
- To the future – we have joined forces with SITI (St Ives Town Initiative) in a bid to save the Octagon. In this we also have support of the Conservation Team at the District Council, District Councillors and Officers. Its early days yet, but I'm optimistic that we will have a positive outcome.
- In another area of town, Wellington Street, another initiative is in progress. The proposition is to paint a professional mural in the street, depicting the trades and crafts of the old Fish Street. We are keeping a weather eye on these developments and have involved the District Conservation Team. Thus far the early sketches look interesting, historical and informative. When we have a final sketch I will show it at our monthly meetings.
- Pretty much everything I've reported involves working with other agencies – co-operation not confrontation being the watchwords, and I hope you will agree that it brings results. We will continue to reach out to others in a bid to influence, gain support and achieve results.
- Sometimes however, a more robust approach is required – and nowhere is this more apparent than in the strategic planning pro-

cess. While we accept the need for necessary change, we also challenge the resilience of our infrastructure to cope with additional housing planned for the period up to 2036 – especially roads. We have a seat at this table and will continue to plug away whilst protecting our heritage.

- Another area where the town plugs away is the St Ives in Bloom. This year we were again only a couple of points away from Gold with a Silver Gilt Award. We should take considerable comfort from this as many towns take 14-20 years to get to this stage. We have done it in four, so next year we're 'Going for Gold'.
- Talking of Going for Gold, this is what your Committee has been doing for the past year, and I would like them to stand up so that they can be appreciated, also Brian Richmond, Val Jones and the Free Church Staff. Thank You.

That concludes my report.

5. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE CHAIRMAN'S REPORT:

Nothing to note.

6. TREASURER'S REPORT:

The Treasurer's Report and annual accounts for the year had been published in the Annual Report.

Proposed by Bridget Smith, seconded by Bob King.

7. ELECTION OF OFFICERS AND COMMITTEE:

Chairman: Mr Peter Baker was re-elected as Chairman. Proposed by Nick Dibben, seconded by Colin Sanderson

Hon Secretary: Mr Pat Allan – proposed by Nick Dibben, seconded by Colin Sanderson and elected.

Hon Treasurer: Mr Basil Belcher – proposed by Nick Dibben, seconded by Colin Sanderson and elected.

There were 5 nominations to re-elect Committee members:

Helen Eveleigh
Richard Probyn
Barbara Richmond
Peggy Seamark
Barry Wills

2 new Committee Volunteers:

Peter Newbould

David Stewart

Proposed by Tony Baraclough and seconded by Bridget Smith *en bloc*.

The Chairman thanked the Committee for their hard work during the year. The Chairman also thanked the outgoing Committee members Peter Plowman, Diane Gough and Bruce Luter for all their sterling work. Val Jones is also moving on and Abi Luter has volunteered to replace her whilst Mike Davison and Howard Sercombe have offered to take speakers notes at our open meetings.

This section would not be complete without paying tribute to the late Tony Burgess who was a major force in so many of the Town's activities, including our Society while, amongst other things, he steered us through the 40th Anniversary Commemorative Plaques Project.

8. ANY OTHER BUSINESS:

Appointment of an accounts examiner. Diane McGoff be appointed for the period to the end of the 2013 AGM, proposed by Barry Wills, seconded by Judith Costley

There being no further business, the Chairman closed the meeting at 7:50pm.

CIVIC SOCIETY of ST. IVES
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
18th October 2013
AGENDA

1. Apologies for absence.
2. Minutes of the 44th Annual General Meeting.
3. Matters arising from the minutes.
4. Chairman's Report.
5. Matters arising from the Chairman's Report.
6. Treasurer's Report and to accept the Accounts for the year to 30 April 2013.
7. Election of Officers and Committee.
8. Any Other Business, including:
 - a. Appointment of an accounts examiner for 2013-2014

Resolutions:

Accounts Examiner: To appoint Ms. D McGoff, BSc, ACIB as independent accounts examiner until the conclusion of the 2014 Annual General Meeting.

SUMMARY OF TALKS 2012 – 2013

The new season began on 21st September 2012 with a talk by Les Millgate:
The History of Duxford Airfield



'We Sweep the Skies'

On 21 September 2012 Les Millgate, who had flown Meteors from the Base, spoke on "The History of Duxford Airfield". His account on the provenance of this airfield stretched from 1916 to the present day. Quite an achievement given that the talk lasted 45 minutes and covered 97 years.

Les started with the Royal Flying Corps operating from canvas tents on a grass airfield in 1916. The aircraft of the day were basic bi-planes but they paved the way for more advanced machines. This was important as the value of Air Power was increasingly recognised as the Great War progressed. In 1917 there was an acceptance that Air Power was here to stay and Duxford (and Fowlmere) became proper airfields instead of Farmers' fields. Three hangars were built at Duxford and they are still in use today.

The RAF was formed, ironically, on April Fools' Day in 1918 and from then until 1924 Duxford was used as a Training Base operating Bristol Fighters commonly called the Brisfit and a good aircraft of the time. In 1924 along came the Sopwith Snipe and then 2 Fighter Squadrons replaced the training outfits.

And so the usual peacetime comings and goings continued during the inter-war years seeing aircraft like the Gauntlets and Tutors (Cambridge UAS) operating over our skies. But in 1938 World War 2 was looming and Duxford started to become more serious. 19 Squadron armed with Spitfires were sta-

tioned there. It was at this point that Les reminded us that the War started on 1 September and not 3 September 1939!

Just before the Battle of Britain, and after the Phoney War, things became far more tense. The Operations Room became increasingly busy as it received reports from Uxbridge about hostile Luftwaffe Bombers coming over the Channel. Now the heat was on as Fighters were scrambled to meet the incoming forces. At this time there was much tactical discussion about how best to use our Fighters; individual Squadrons or the "Big Wing" concept involving several Squadrons operating as a single unit. On one of the Big Wing Sweeps Douglas Bader was pictured landing at Duxford.



And so the War ground on but in 1943 the United States Army Air Force (USAAF) came into Duxford with the P51 Mustang. This was an extraordinary Fighter (a couple of months from planning to construction). It had the ability to escort Bombers to and from their German targets. When the RAF came to operate the Mustang they replaced the American engine with the Rolls Royce Merlin. Have you heard the Merlin's unique sound or growl in the skies this Summer? If so it will be from a Spitfire or the Lancaster.

After the War Duxford reverted back to the RAF and saw Meteor NF 14's (Nightfighters) and the delta winged Javelins based there. Sadly, Duxford was eventually closed in 1961 when it was deemed too far North and inland to be strategically viable.

A long period of uncertainty followed and in 1977 Cambridge County Council joined with the Imperial; War Museum (IWM) and Duxford Aviation Society to buy the runway and give the abandoned Base a new lease of life. The rest is history - the IWM at Duxford today is a world leader with its wide and varied collection of aircraft, tanks and even the original 1940's Operations Room.

On the 19th October 2012 Bridget Flanagan talked about:

The Changing Landscape above the Thicket Path between Houghton & St Ives

It wasn't the irresistible attraction of the AGM which brought over 60 members out in the pouring rain on 19th October but the prospect of learning more about a much-loved local landscape feature. Bridget's first slide summed up how we feel about The Thicket:

Thicket Road, a tree lined footpath that meanders by the vestiges of rich grasslands and wildflower meadows that once covered farmland throughout southern England. Here be cowslip, yellow rattle and green winged orchids, and vernal grasses that give hay its distinctive sweet smell. As we walked along, the skies cleared, the sun dappled the path with light and warmth, and there seemed no better place for a man and a dog

A map of 1728 shows a path alongside the river west of St Ives and south of the old brick yards on which the original St Ives Golf Course was built, but otherwise the town was separated from Houghton by open country. Houghton Hill is an outcrop of Elsworth Rock which by its nature could not be cultivated on the exposed southern slope. As a result it supported an area of ancient woodland known as The Thicket. Ash and field maple were coppiced in former times, and the age of the wood is confirmed by the presence of spurge laurels. Even today, seen from across the meadows south of the river, the tree-clad hill looks as it must have done hundreds of years ago, with no trace of building. This is because the houses that have been built since that early map was drawn are well-hidden amongst the trees, largely invisible both from the river below and from the road above. Much of Bridget's talk described how those houses came to be and who lived in them.

The first evidence of building appears in a map of 1830, which as well as indicating the path by the river also shows Hill Cottage, just south of what is now the A1123 at the top of the hill. Nothing is known of who lived there, but in a map of 1887 Houghton Hill House and Home Farm were marked in almost the same spot. This impressive country house, standing in 89 acres, was built in 1841 for Mr Gilbert Ansley, clearly a man of substance who chose probably the best site in the area and planted many fine trees in the surrounding park-

land. This map also shows The How, a mid-19th century residence which even today remains well-hidden amongst the trees. At the Houghton end of The Thicket the first grand development was the house now known as The Cedars. It was built in 1854 for that very well-known local businessman and philanthropist Potto Brown, and was originally named The Elms. The southern aspect is particularly attractive, and the large garden contained many glass-houses producing fruit and vegetables for the table. Mr Tilbrook was the head gardener, and he was still cultivating it on a commercial basis at the end of the century after the Browns had left; today only fragments of the old market garden remain, the land having been sold for housing.

George Brown, Potto's second son, lived briefly in the Cedars but then in 1868 built his own house across the lane and took the name The Elms with him. George was a keen gardener and kept detailed diaries of the changing seasons in his beautiful grounds, which are still a delight with magnificent conifer trees and carpets of spring bulbs. The grounds also contain evidence of the very earliest occupation of Huntingdonshire - a bronze-age burial mound. George's daughter married artist Charles Whymper, who painted the grounds in all their glory in 1881 (the painting is in HDC's collection). A family called Frazer bought The Elms in the early 1900s and subdivided the plot to build Thicket Lodge. After the Frazers the house became the HQ of a biological research company, and when that closed the future of the site was in some doubt. Happily a developer saw the potential, and in 2008 the first of 23 luxury apartments created from the main house and its outbuildings went on sale, with the original gardens preserved largely intact.



The Thicket from New Road Hemingford. Who says there aren't any hills in Huntingdonshire!

In 1887 Houghton Grange was built in Elizabethan revival style for Charles Harold Coote on part of the land surrounding Houghton Hill House which became available after the death of Gilbert Ansley's widow. It was clearly intended to make a statement about its owner's wealth and importance, with beautiful landscaped gardens and ponds extending to 39 acres; the plot was later divided to create Houghton Bury for Harold's son Mervyn. In 1924 The Grange was sold to Henry Perkins, owner of Wood & Ingram nurseries, but his fortunes declined in the stock market crash of 1929 and he sold to Dr Gregory, a Harley St physician. The doctor had ambitious plans drawn up for a spa centre based on The Grange, but WWII intervened and the grounds housed a POW camp. In 1948 the Animal Health Trust established a poultry research station and much new building took place (including an ugly extension to the main house), but since the research facility closed in 1992 this Grade II listed building has lain empty and been reduced to a sorry state.

Bringing the story of Houghton Grange up to date enabled Bridget to turn to the future, as this land is central to a plan to extend new housing west of St Ives along the crest and upper southern slopes of Houghton Hill. The first stage of this development had already begun, with the move of St Ives Golf Club to its new site and the sale of the part of the course north of St Ivo School. The next phase, to build a further 495 homes further up the hill and including the land around Houghton Grange, proved controversial, as residents of Houghton objected to their community effectively being joined to St Ives. They applied for a judicial review of the process and this, together with the recent changes in the Government's planning regulations, caused HDC to produce a new district plan*. Bridget made an impassioned plea for the preservation of what she called the unique "pocket" landscape of river, meadows, hillside and woods, maintaining that housing development would inevitably spoil the pristine view westwards from St Ives bridge and also north from the Hemingfords. She argued that worthy organisations worked hard to try and preserve the heritage of the built environment, but the landscape setting, which gives settlements and individual dwellings their context and purpose, may have been taken for granted. She showed the audience six 19th century paintings of local scenes to make the point that landmarks such as Houghton Mill would be much diminished without the surrounding beauty of their settings. The artists had opened people's eyes then to the delights of our local countryside, but in the 21st century, by tending to focus inwards on our towns and villages, we may have once again lost sight of the value and importance of the landscape in which they are set.

** By the time you read this the plan will probably have been adopted. We can only hope that the landscape of The Thicket has been saved for future generations*

Brian Kell then spoke to the members on 23rd November 2012 about:

Whittlesey Straw Bear Festival

Born in Chester-le-Street, County Durham Brian became interested in folk music and song at a young age, then at 15 started singing in folk song clubs. Later he danced with a newly formed Morris team, and his interest in folk music continued after his move to Stevenage in 1972. In January 1979 he moved to Whittlesey, where the following year he suggested the tradition of the dance of the straw bears be revived. Brian explained that this will not be an academic presentation – just observations of how the revival of folk song and dance has developed. His talk was illustrated with projected pictures, as well as singing two songs unaccompanied, in the style of folk singing.

Brian went to the Whittlesey Society in 1979 with the suggestion that the Straw Bear festival be revived. Brian read from a transcript of a document '*Rattlebone and Ploughjack*' which made reference to someone who, on Jan 11 1909, met a straw bear in Whittlesey. He showed pictures of the straw bear being led around the town by a handler, who held the bear on a rope and leading him, the bear entirely shrouded in straw. At around that period an attempt was made by a police inspector to ban the practice on the grounds that it was little more than disguised begging. The practice was more likely stopped because of WWI.

Having made the suggestion to the Whittlesey Society that the custom be revived, Brian was given the task of carrying it out! He therefore set about making a straw bear without having any clear idea of how to do it. With a blank sheet of paper he drafted out a costume – using conventional clothing and a frame upon which to attach the straw. The weight of the head was carried on a frame, supported by the shoulders, rather than on the head of the wearer.

Brian succeeded in his task, and after 5 years this annual event started to grow, with more dance teams joining in on festival day. So the event expanded.

For Whittlesey the day starts at 10am until about 3.30pm. Visitors are welcome to watch the parade – the procession goes from the Manor Leisure Centre into the town centre where mass dancing takes place. The straw bear is present on the parade, but then goes off to change! Dance teams perform around the town, but later everyone returns to the market place for the finale. That is the only day on which you will see a straw bear, the next event being Saturday January 12th 2013.

Several colourfully named dance teams take part, including the Witch Men. Whilst this team perform dances from the 'dark side', the event as a whole does not have any pagan connections at all. Brian was very clear on this point. It is a community carnival. There may have been pagan connections way back at its beginnings, but certainly not today in its current revived format. Whittlesey does burn the bear at the close of the annual event, and critics say this is indicative of its pagan origins – whereas in fact it was only Brian's idea, in preference to dumping the bear in a skip.



Brian told us of the wren boys, who also wear straw costumes. They tour the streets on St Stephen's Day. Their song describes the hunting of the wren, sacrificing it, then putting it on a stick, decorate it, then parade it around the town. The belief behind this tradition is, that the ills of the previous year are embodied in the wren, thereby giving everyone a clean start for the new year. It is a ceremony that is observed in Wales, and in Ireland.

Into this mix of folk song and dance came Molly dancers, sword dancers, Pig Dyke with painted, colourful faces. Included was Appalachian dancing, British by origin, having been taken to the Americas by the Irish.

Whittlesey has revived a traditional event, and by doing demonstrates to the people of Cambridgeshire the diverse number of traditions that take place within our islands. The festival is set in January to avoid competing with other events. It is a display of song and entertainment, for schools and local people, where local business expects to it to attract 3000 people for that day, a real bonus for the town.

A book is produced every year, which pays for itself by advertising, listing the various dance teams participating. Not everyone approves the tradition, some even leave town for that week end. But the day is well controlled and organised, in that roads, although closed to traffic, people are employed to control these closures.

Whittlesey considered itself unique in its observance of this custom, but in 1998 discovered a town in Germany who also had a straw bear. 195 have been found in Stuttgart area of Germany. Their straw bear event is held on Shrove Tuesday. These Continental cousins have visited Whittlesey to compare methods. They observed the bunting strung across the streets. Since they didn't have bunting back at home, they use their household washing, similarly strung on lines across streets! The towns of Walldurn , Buchan and Hettengendeuyem have straw bears, whose behaviour is sometimes scary, naughty, even aggressive. Italy also have straw bears, but Italian bears are very naughty. They climb up drain pipes and jump down onto people. There are just two towns in Britain observing the straw bear custom, Ramsey being the other.

Where does this tradition go from here? Brian has now passed his post of Director to someone else, so it is hoped and believed that as an organisation, younger people will come in to continue the folk tradition.

Brian opened and closed his talk with song. Unaccompanied, in the folk singing style, he brought to the evening that flavour of entertainment so typically English.

A website provides further information - www.strawbear.org.uk

On 15th February 2013 we had a very interesting talk by Trevor Gunton on:
Birds & Pits: Reclaimed Gravel Pits and their Wildlife.

Paxton Pits is a nationally important nature reserve bordering the River Great Ouse, administered by Huntingdonshire District Council with the support of several other local bodies and, importantly for fund-raising in these straightened times, by a very active volunteer group called The Friends of Paxton Pits. The 200 acre reserve is a former area of gravel extraction, and work only ceased in the adjoining area to the north in 2011. The fact that the area has since the 1930s been either restricted because of industrial activity or protected by its status as a nature reserve means that it is blessed with many mature trees and dense undergrowth, which encourage a great variety of wildlife.

Heronry North and South are the two main pits where most breeding species of birds are to be found; a third lake plays host to outdoor activities such as sailing. The reserve attracted 100,000 visitors in 2012, ranging from keen bird watchers to those who simply enjoy a walk in delightful surroundings.



Winter at the Pits has its own stark beauty

2012 was far from typical of the changing seasons at the Pits. A very wet spring and summer affected the nesting season, and the prolonged flooding of late autumn and winter has, rather counter-intuitively, reduced the numbers of wild fowl; so much of Cambridgeshire has been under water that the incoming flocks have been spoilt for choice! It is rare for the lakes to be completely frozen, but a couple of really cold spells caused otters and kingfishers to seek out more food-friendly locations. Nevertheless, winter has seen many visiting birds, including golden eye and the rare smew. As spring approaches, and with it hopefully better weather, the Pits really come to life. Grebes take on their summer plumage, and common as they now are it is hard to believe that they nearly became extinct at the beginning of the last century as their plumage was used for making muffs. The quaintly named Plumage Bill of 1921 put an end to the trade and since then grebes have flourished. There is no doubt also that the preservation of former gravel pits as nature reserves has made a big difference to the survival prospects of many wetland species. Herons are ubiquitous, and in 2012 there were 175 breeding pairs at Paxton Pits. However, they do not have sole fishing rights, as competition is provided by cormorants, which also breed at the Pits. They produce 2-3 young, which would definitely not win a chicks' beauty contest, and then disappear to other areas or even countries once the family can fly. There are two islands in the lakes, which are particularly attractive to sea birds. Black-headed gulls are prolific but, despite their beautiful plumage, in the eyes of the public they are seen as a bit of a nuisance. Common terns are – well, common, and oyster catchers, which had disappeared from Cambridgeshire only 40 years ago, now breed at the Pits.

PROGRAMME OF TALKS 2013 – 2014

All monthly talks are held in the Free Church, St Ives at 7.30 pm.
Non-members are always welcome and a donation of £2 is requested to help cover costs.

20 th September 2013	Peter Carter – Poaching in the Fens
18 th October 2013	Annual General Meeting
22 nd November 2013	Fiona Lucraft – Dining at Christmas through the ages
17 th January 2014	Derek R Harris – History of the canal system in England & Wales in words & song
14 th February 2014	Emma Turvey – Conservation of finds from Must Farm, Whittlesey
21 st March 2014	Alan Eade – Mary Rose and the Spanish Armada
25 th April 2014	Mike Davison – History of RAF Wyton
16 th May 2014	Cheese and Wine Party

Please visit our website www.stivescivic.org.uk for programme changes.

STANDING ORDER MANDATE

YOUR ACCOUNT DETAILS

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BANK ADDRESS

SORT CODE

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ST IVES CAMBS BRANCH

SORT CODE

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Surname and Initials)

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CIVIC SOCIETY OF ST IVES



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If you would like to join the Civic Society of St Ives, please complete the form below and send it with your annual subscription to:

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88 Warren Road
St Ives
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Household Subscription: £12.00 per year

Individual Subscription: £7.00 per year

Please complete and return the attached Standing Order mandate
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Mr/Mrs/Ms _____ First Name(s) _____

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Occupation/ _____

Interests/ _____

Comments _____

Spring also sees the arrival of long range migrants from North Africa such as blackcaps and cuckoos, and it is then that seemingly the least charming part of the Paxton Pits environment attracts its most iconic bird; the blooming of blackthorn on the scrubby margins of the reserve heralds the arrival of nightingales. The males are first on the scene, staking out their territory and singing almost continuously. It is now believed that they are not as loyal to their mates as previously thought, so presumably they are intent on captivating the most beautiful female they can find, but there is no doubting the purity and magic of the song heard on a warm spring evening strolling through the Pits. It is estimated that 85% of Cambridgeshire's nightingales live around gravel pits, nesting on or near to the ground where they can be vulnerable to weasels, stoats and even hedgehogs. In 2012 there were 21 nesting pairs at the Pits but, as with so many other species, loss of habitat threatens their future; the planned national nightingale survey was defeated by the bad weather in 2012 and it is hoped to try again this year. Other once common birds such as the lesser-spotted woodpecker, tree sparrow, redshank, bunting, skylark and spotted flycatcher are now rare or have vanished completely, but happily the barn owl is making something of a comeback. It is hoped that by creating small specialist habitats in the reserve more of these birds can be tempted to return. To this end, the development of a further area of pits to the north of the existing public area is an important objective for the future; important species such as sand martins, red plovers and the avocet (the emblem of the RSPB) are known to be occupying this undeveloped area, which is a rich habitat. Frustratingly, health and safety concerns, particularly over access, are stymieing progress.



An iconic resident at the Pits, and the emblem of the Friends

Wildlife at the Pits is not confined to the feathered variety. Wild flowers such as celandine and coltsfoot are prolific, and the Friends have been working to re-create areas of traditional Huntingdonshire flood meadow with species such as orchids and great dodder (the latter now very rare). Damsel flies abound, if you look carefully you may see a grass snake, and a particularly welcome development is the appearance of harvest mice. Brown hares are occasionally seen, and the aforementioned otters are a testament to the quality of the water in the lakes and the adjacent river.

The Paxton Pits nature reserve is a wonderful environment for dedicated wild-life watchers. Its preservation and enrichment for future generations is a joint effort involving as many as 150 active volunteers, and its important educational programme hopefully imbues the young in particular with a love of nature and a desire to continue the work.

In thanking Trevor for his beautifully illustrated talk, the Chairman agreed that local support for such wonderful landscapes was vital (hint – if you haven't visited please do!), and the Civic Society should not just be concerned with buildings and people but with the local environment which enriches all our lives.

Our speaker Trevor Gunton worked for the RSPB at Sandy for 30 years. He is widely known and respected in the world of wildlife conservation, and is a Trustee of the Friends of Paxton Pits, which thanks in no small part to his enthusiasm now has a membership of around 2000. His talk on 15th February 2013 was complemented by a Friends stall selling cards and local scenes.

On 22nd March 2013 Peter Carter spoke to the members about:

3,000 years & nothing's changed. Boats & Eel traps found at Whittlesey.

Peter Carter is the last surviving traditional Fenland fisherman; his family were catching eels using traps as far back as 1470, and he makes his own traps to the same secret design at his workshop in Outwell. Although he sells his eels commercially, Peter is the first to admit that it would be impossible to make a living from trapping, so he also makes nets and various willow products. He is something of a media celebrity and has appeared in print and on film recording his now unique way of life. He is also in great demand for talks, and we were fortunate to secure him for our lecture in April. It would be difficult indeed to capture faithfully the humour and the anecdotes with which Peter regaled the Society, so what follows is but a brief factual summary.

Peter has worked extensively with East Anglia archaeologists, and particularly with the Cambridge Archaeological Unit excavating Flag Fen and related sites near Peterborough. In 2010, the Unit was digging on a site at Must Farm near Whittlesey, identified as a Bronze Age riverside settlement which had collapsed when the piles supporting it caught fire, pitching domestic items from the dwellings into the water. Sinking into the silt, the objects were uniquely well-preserved and their recovery has provided a wonderful snapshot of everyday life in the Fens around 3000 years ago. Peter was invited to confirm the identification of an eel trap found at the site, which looked remarkably like one of his own, called a grigg.



Peter out hunting with one of his traditional eel baskets

The only difference was that modern traps are made with split willow, allowing them to absorb water and sink; the willow of the Bronze Age trap was not split, so Peter surmised that it would have been pegged down to the river bed. The traps would be laid at dusk and collected the next morning. In the case of the find at Must Farm, either the trapper had not returned or the basket had been in the fisherman's hut when the fire occurred, and been deposited in the river along with the other artefacts. Eels were known to be a popular item on the menu in Neolithic times, as their bones have been found at several sites. The remnants of fish traps dating back to 6000 BC have been found in Ireland, believed to be the oldest ever recorded in these islands.



Neolithic trap in situ at Must Farm alongside a modern equivalent



One of the Must Farm Neolithic log boats

Further remarkable finds at Whittlesey suggest how the Bronze Age Fenland eel trappers may have gone about their task. Eight well-preserved log boats of varying sizes, including one so small that it may have been intended for a child, were unearthed in 2012. They are now being treated much like the wreck of the Mary Rose to preserve the timber and safeguard them for the future. Boats would have been essential for getting around in the watery world of the Fens, and it is not difficult to imagine our Bronze Age ancestors paddling just such a dug-out canoe through the marshes to lay their eel traps. They may even have used log boats to trade the rich harvest of fish and wild-fowl with other settlements around the margins of the Fens.

Peter is passing on his family's traditional skills to his daughter, and perhaps the completion of the Great Fen project will once again see eel catchers paddling their dug-out canoes through the marshes in search of their slippery prey!

Veronica Bennett gave a talk on 19th April 2013 about:
Wimpole Hall: Appearances can be deceptive

Veronica is Regional speaker for the National Trust (NT), and a Room Guide at Wimpole Hall, and wants to give not a potted history of the Hall, but rather insights into some aspects of the Hall not obvious to visitors.



It was in 1976 that the Hall passed to the NT on the death of the owner Mrs Elsie Bambridge, elder daughter of Rudyard Kipling. Unlike other grand houses, Wimpole was lucky in that in 1938-39 it came under control of the Bam-

bridge's who refurbished it. Today the house is an imposing site, in Georgian style, with "English gentlemanly reserve".

The first room entered by the visitor is an original room used by Mrs Bambridge from where she could see the driveway, and any visitor who may approach, in order for her to alert the butler to prepare to receive them.

A table of cards and coins and documents are items painted on a table in a style of painting known as *trompoy*, a term derived from the French phrase meaning. 'to deceive the eye'.

The next room is the south drawing room, where the ceiling looks Georgian but is Victorian as are most of the plaster ceilings in the hall, crafted by a Cambridge company. The painting and the chimney piece was brought in by the Bambridge's – the painting is of Master George Graham even though shown wearing a dress. It was usual for boys in those days (1770s), to wear a dress until they were six years of age, at which point of their life they were breeched. That is, put into breeches!

The Hall has some puzzling features; false windows, for example, or windows that have been blocked up. The reason for some of these can be seen in early plans of the house. For example

- Lord Hardwicke wanted to turn three rooms into a gallery for his art collection, so some windows he blocked up.
- In 1730 the library was completed to house books and pamphlets amassed by Lord Harley. Originally the library had five windows along the wall on which book shelves are now situated. Later the fireplace was moved to its present position and three windows blocked up by Mrs Bambridge. The original five windows can still be seen from the outside. Three of these are closed by shutters inside, so as not to spoil the outside appearance and balance of the house.
- Both the conservatory and the Victorian service wing were demolished by Mrs Bambridge, these being in a poor state of disrepair.

In the dining room, are five doors, but only three are functional, two being false. Even the door handle is painted. False doors maintain symmetry to the room, giving it balance. There are a number of false doors in Wimpole, for this same reason.

One of the great glories of Wimpole Hall is the yellow drawing room. This was needed as a grand reception room for entertaining. Wimpole has always been a family home without much space for entertaining, so a staircase was removed, and two rooms combined to form the yellow drawing room. This task was carried out by the architect Sir John Soanes. Some of the blocked-up

windows seen from outside are where Sir John Soanes combined rooms. The interior spaces where this can be seen is not open to visitors, but from the Dutch garden, standing in front of the window of the yellow drawing room the edge of this alteration can just be seen.

The Lord Chancellors bedroom, where the bed is of a particular style, dating to 1780-1790 “looking rather like Brighton pavilion”. The bed had to be dismantled and sent to a National Trust workshop to be restored. During this work it was found to have 253 separate pieces of textiles. The netting needed attention as it was in shreds. Whilst this was being repaired a visitor happened to come upon this work in progress, and suggested it would be better to remake it. When the workers told him they didn’t know how to make netting the visitor said he did know, because he was a fisherman. So he was given the cotton to carry out this task. The result of his work is there to be seen.

Next door is the lord chancellor’s dressing room – a misnomer. In his time this was an upstairs long gallery, and is part of the original house. In such a room a lord chancellor would not have dressed.

Down stairs is the bath 12 x 6 x 5 feet, and holds many gallons of water. It is unusual to find a bath like this. Late in the 18th century, bathing was considered efficacious for health, but baths were usually situated away from the house. Bathing involved something of an outing, to get away from the house. So it is unusual to find a bath inside the house. A shower was incorporated in the design, and a servant would operate the pump. The ante chamber looks as if the walls are of coloured stone, but are just painted to look like stone. The stone bath surround is painted to look like wood, hand rails painted to look like mahogany.

The chapel has indications that Lord Harley had it painted to look like something it isn’t – statuary and niches – four doctors of the church, all suitable subjects for a house of this style. This is considered a fine example of baroque painting. Since Harley’s day the pews have been moved to their present spot against the walls. The pews were reserved for the servants at basements level, the family entered at ground floor level. The family pew looks like a large theatre box – the only religious theme is a vase showing scenes from the life of Christ – painted onto a flat wall to look like a vase in a niche.

The gardens are the result of the work of some of the finest gardeners of the times. In 1994 it was restored to the original layout. A naturalistic garden, natural looking lakes created, the park extended and planted with belts of trees.

The Folly is not a genuine ruin – it was built to look like a ruin – and that is what the Wimpole folly is. Built in gothic style, gothic thought of as English but is French. It’s construction uses *clunch* (a chalky clay building material) and

the tower is intended to give a view of the surrounding countryside. The interior is decorated in the gothic style, and the prospect room is on the 3rd floor where the family could look across the countryside onto the land they owned. Wimpole estate then had eleven thousand acres. The house would be visible from here framed by trees, and beyond onto the ridge of hills that run towards Royston.

The last talk was given on 17th May 2013 by Professor Michael Chisholm:

St Ives River Traffic and Draining the Fens

Until the early 17th Century Fenland was a maze of rivers, streams, and man-made ditches and lodes cut by previous generations as far back as the Saxons, and perhaps the Romans, to facilitate trade or drainage. Flooding was a constant concern in this low-lying land, and as early as the 13th Century a Bishop of Ely had commissioned the digging of a cut between the River Ouse near Littleport and the Wash to hasten the flow of river water out to sea. In the early 16th Century a successor, Bishop Morton, sponsored the cutting of a leam between Peterborough and Wisbech to mitigate the disastrous effects of flooding in the lower Nene valley. These and other minor schemes were carried out piecemeal and without any understanding of the region's hydrology, so unfortunately they were largely unsuccessful.

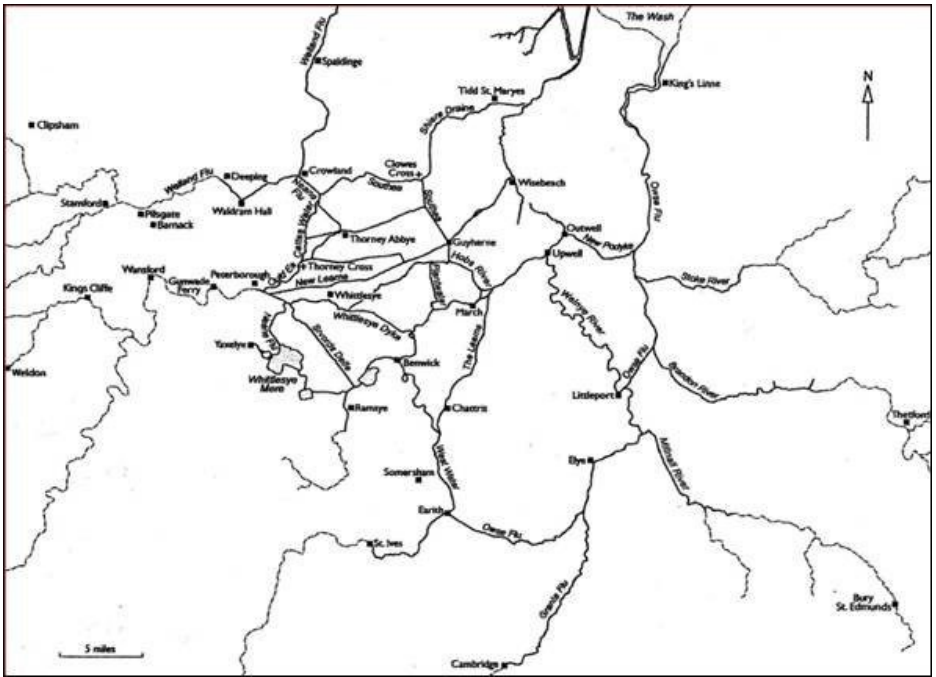
The "land" between the waterways was mostly freshwater marsh and pasture in the south of the region and saltwater marsh in the north. In some areas the water was deep enough to form large lakes, or meres; Whittlesey Mere was the largest freshwater lake in southern England. The marsh was interspersed with islands on which stood modest settlements and the great religious houses – notably Ely, Ramsey, Crowland and Thorney - which came to The Fens in search of the isolation conducive to prayer and contemplation. The main elements of the Fenland waterways were mapped by William Hayward in 1604, and it can be seen that even then St Ives was well-connected both to the sea and to the rivers Nene, Welland and the eastern tributaries of the Great Ouse.

However, the navigable waterways were very circuitous and prone to silting, so it took a long time to get anywhere. As agriculture became more efficient and productive, and as trade generally sought markets further afield, the need to transport goods and produce quickly and efficiently became more pressing. It was also realised that a serious attempt had to be made to control flooding, which was holding back economic development. Improvements on the River Great Ouse upstream of St Ives began in 1618 with the building of several locks and sluices, this eventually reaching Bedford in the 1680s. The terminol-

ogy for these river constructions can be misleading: a sluice was a controlled weir which also incorporated a pound lock of the type we see today, whereas a staunch was a simple gate which dammed water and release it over a section of shallows, enabling boats temporarily to pass. The term staunch remains in use today – at Brownhill for example – even though the structure is actually a sluice!

The main effort to both improve the navigation in The Fens and to drain large areas of marsh for agricultural purposes was entrusted to the Dutchman Cornelius Vermuyden. The Old Bedford River was cut in 1631, but this and other elements of his first drainage scheme did not prove successful. Another, more ambitious plan was drawn up by Vermuyden and completed in 1653, thanks to the patronage of the Earl of Bedford and a group of 14 Gentlemen Adventurers; the scheme was paid for entirely by private investors, who were rewarded with grants of reclaimed land and no doubt made handsome profits from the produce of the rich peat soils. It is a testament to the design that Vermuyden's scheme is still to this day working largely as he intended. However, the drainage work proved controversial at the time, and not just with traditional Fenmen whose livelihoods depended on fishing and wild-fowling; the digging of the New Bedford River in particular was fiercely resisted by the burghers and merchants of Kings Lynn, who feared that the changes to water flows would result in their port silting-up. They petitioned Parliament, but a counter-petition by the supporters of the scheme prevailed. The benefits to Huntingdonshire, Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire were considerable, borne out by a significant lowering of freight costs in the years after the scheme was completed.

The straightening of the river courses and the cutting of the New Bedford River in a straight line from Earith to Denver allowed water to reach the sea more quickly, and thus reduced average river levels in the upstream areas. Even though Vermuyden's plan maintained a channel through the Middle Levels between the Great Ouse and the Nene the depth of water there was minimal, and St Ives' direct connection with the River Nene was effectively severed; thereafter the only commercial route was into The Wash at Kings Lynn and back into the Nene through Wisbech. This general lowering of levels prompted the need for better water management in shallower sections upstream on the Great Ouse and the first staunch was built at St Ives in 1676, meaning that the town was then no longer directly open to the sea. The first pound locks at both St Ives and Brownhill were not constructed until 1835, prompted by a further shortening of the river below Denver which again lowered water levels upstream.



William Hayward's 1604 map of the Fenland waterways
 (Cambridge Archives R59/31/40/1 and OS)

Throughout all these changes, St Ives' standing as an important market town and trading centre was maintained and enhanced. The town's mediaeval fair probably came about because of the favourable intersection of river and land trade routes and a rich farming hinterland; after The Fens were drained the ability to transport agricultural produce and other goods quickly to the sea, and thence to other destinations on the east coast of England, was a major benefit. The same could not be said for all communities in the region; Crowland had been an important centre in the Middle Ages, but Vermuyden's scheme lowered water levels in the River Welland so much that water-borne trade effectively ceased. It is also possible that the operation of the many water mills along the River Great Ouse was at odds with the need to maintain river traffic at times of reduced flow in the summer, but this has not been documented. Indeed, although Vermuyden's scheme achieved its purpose, the outcome was not without its setbacks; silting of channels was a constant problem, and embankments containing the navigation routes at ever increasing heights above a shrinking peat landscape often failed, resulting in disastrous local inundations. Interestingly, the vast water meadows in Huntingdonshire, of which Port Holme is the finest example, were seemingly not compro-

mised by the general lowering of water levels upstream; it is likely that increased run-off from upland areas, particularly during the Little Ice Age in the 17th and early 18th centuries, was sufficient to maintain the rich grazing on the meadows by periodic flooding.

Commercial use of the river in St Ives declined dramatically after the coming of the railways, but fortunately the town's connections to surrounding areas, and particularly to London, were considerably improved by the various branch lines built during the 19th Century. Since Dr Beeching wielded his axe the town has had to re-invent itself, but happily the river is once again a key element of the local economy, now supporting tourism and leisure.

For further information on the draining of The Fens Trevor Bevis' book "Water, water everywhere" is a fascinating read

"The Historic River" by S M Haslam of Cambridge University is also an interesting examination of the influence of rivers on human life and culture

VISIT TO THE HOUGHTON REVISITED EXHIBITION, HOUGHTON HALL, NORFOLK – 8th June 2013

In west Norfolk there is a cluster of old settlements on slightly higher ground: Walpole St Andrew, Walpole Highway and Walpole St Peter. In Norman times a local family took the name of Walpole. They were landowners and farmers, but politicians and soldiers as well. In 1191 the Walpoles fought, with King Richard I, (Richard the Lion Heart), in the third crusade including the siege of Acre (in modern Israel), which eventually fell to the crusaders. King Richard rewarded those who helped with gifts of land, money and titles and the Walpole family moved from the fens of Norfolk to the high ground of Houghton, north east of Kings Lynn; there they built the first Houghton Hall. Just over a hundred years later they were lords of the Manor of Houghton. The family became a dynasty which reached its zenith in the Georgian period with the Whig politician Sir Robert Walpole regarded as our first Prime Minister. He was knighted in 1725 and created first Earl of Orford in 1742.



Sir Robert was born at Houghton, son of a landowner and MP, becoming an MP, himself, and later First Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer. In that position he lived in 10 Downing Street from 1735 to 1742 where he hung many of his own collection of paintings, only moving them to his newly built Houghton Hall in the early 1740's. He collected over 400 masters of his time, among them Rembrandt, Rubens, Van Dyck and Velazquez.

Built over 13 years from 1722, the Hall is the third at Houghton, and is considered to be a fine example of the English Palladian style, surrounded by 1,000

acres of parkland. Whilst not as large as Holkam, another Norfolk Palladian style hall built around the same time, Houghton was built to impress, with large double-height rooms with relief sculptures, walls and ceilings painted by William Kent and other ceilings in moulded plasterwork.

Through his building work and collecting Sir Robert Walpole amassed large debts, around £40,000 by his death in 1745. The Houghton Estate passed to his eldest son, who only then found out the extent of the debt. Later the estate passed to Sir Roberts's grandson, George Walpole, third Earl of Orford. He didn't help the debt situation, gambling away much of his inheritance, including parts of the Hall. But in 1779 the first Earl's youngest son, Horace Walpole, agreed to help to sell 204 of the most valuable paintings to save the house and the estate.

Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia, was amassing art work from wherever she could, for display in the Hermitage. Her ambassadors were instructed to seek art for sale, and once she knew of the Houghton sale she agreed to pay £40,550 for 204 works, around £50 million today. The masterpieces were shipped to St Petersburg, Catherine was thrilled and by way of thanks, she sent a portrait of herself to Houghton; it still hangs there. Over the years some paintings have been sold out of the Hermitage, but 126 of them remain in the collection.

The errant third Earl of Orford died without issue, as did his uncle and saviour, Horace, the fourth Earl. On his death the Walpole dynasty died out and Houghton passed to the grandson of his sister, Mary, who had married the Earl of Cholmondeley whose estate is in Cheshire. Her family rarely used Houghton and tried to sell it several times, including in the 1860's to the future King Edward VII, but he chose Sandringham instead, because it had more parkland for shooting.

From the early 20th century Houghton has been lived in again and restored, but not much altered, by a new generation of Cholmondeleys, George (the fifth Marquess) who married Sybil Sassoon in 1913. They did much to ensure the Hall would live on and after the death of her husband, and in memory of him, Sybil had the steps on the west front built, to replace those gambled away by the third Earl. The current Marquess, David Cholmondely, and his family now live in the Hall; he is a direct blood line descendent of Sir Robert Walpole. The Marquess found the hanging plans for the paintings in Robert Walpole's desk and this set him thinking and planning the idea of bringing the paintings back to Houghton for an exhibition.

The Houghton Revisited exhibition has been four years in the planning. State Rooms at Houghton have been returned to their 1740's style and a total of 70 paintings and 25 architectural plans, plus silver work associated with Sir Robert Walpole form the exhibition. Sixty paintings have come from Russia, and others from America. Because of the hanging plans found by David Cholmondeley many of the paintings are known to be hanging in the same positions as in Walpole's time. This is therefore a very special opportunity to not only see the exhibition but to see these paintings in their original setting as envisaged by their owner.

Your committee decided to arrange a coach visit, but unsure of the membership's response, decided that after a deadline we would open it to the St Ives branch of the University of the Third Age (U3A). This worked very well and a total of 50 members of the Society and U3A made the trip to Houghton.

As well as a picnic area the Hall has two cafes, and once at Houghton everyone was free to visit the extensive gardens, stables, church, model soldier museum and contemporary art installed over the last 20 years. In reality there was not a lot of cover if the day had proved to be wet, but it was dry if a little cool.

We entered the exhibition from the west front of the hall, via the Arcade. The State Rooms are on the first floor so we walked up the Great Staircase, with mahogany balustrades and original painted wall panels by William Kent. We then entered the Stone Hall, a magnificent stone and marble double height cube of a room with richly carved walls and a decorated ceiling.

The first room was the Common Parlour, with 23 of the paintings on loan . A small room, it included a highlight for me, a portrait by Sir Godfrey Kneller of Grinling Gibbons, the great wood carver, surrounded by a carving, made by Gibbons for the earlier Hall and gilded when it was moved to the new Hall. Next is the Library, a small room not normally open to visitors, with two paintings.

Across the Stone Hall is the Marble Parlour, the original dining room, a space to take my breath away, with a gilded ceiling, carved walls and six paintings, including two each by van Dyck and Campidoglio. Next, the Cabinet Room also has a gilded and painted ceiling, and Chinese hand-painted wallpaper. A four poster child's bed is the main furniture; this was given to Sir Robert's grandson by his godparents, King George II and Queen Caroline. Originally this room was hung with up to 50 paintings including a portrait by Rubens which is now in a museum in Lisbon, too fragile to be brought to the exhibition; in its place was a facsimile giving a good impression of the original.

The Embroidered Bedchamber included just one painting by Nicolas Poussin showing the Holy Family with SS Elisabeth and John the Baptist. This small room is dominated not only by a state bed, a richly embroidered four poster, but also by the wall tapestries and painted ceiling.

Moving on is the Tapestry Dressing Room, hung with tapestries made at Mortlake around 1672 for the previous Hall. There are carved and gilded green velvet chairs and a settee, and again just one painting. This dressing room served the Green Velvet Bedchamber, the next room we entered, hung with Flemish tapestries made to fit into its corners to give an almost 3D effect. The bed was designed by William Kent and is spectacular; a dark green velvet four poster around fifteen feet tall. Kent also painted the ceiling. Three paintings are hung here.

Next we came to the Carlo Maratta Room. The rich wall hangings have been recreated for the exhibition and there are 22 paintings, including six still owned by the Marquess. Seven of the paintings are by Maratta, others are by his followers.

The final state room, the Saloon, is the largest single height room on the first floor, and looks out to the west with views over the lawns and parkland towards the Wash. Again the ceiling was painted by Kent and he designed the woodcarvings, plasterwork and furniture. The room is hung with four large paintings, four not so large and seven smaller ones.

From the Saloon we descended by another staircase with a somewhat incongruous lift in it, back to the Arcade. Here we went to see the extra items - plans and cross sections of the Hall, picture hanging plans and designs for fittings as well as some fine silver items.

Back in the grounds we spent time in the five acre Walled Garden. Originally the kitchen garden, it was laid out as a variety of gardens by David Cholmondeley as a memorial to his grandmother, Sybil, who was instrumental in planning the restoration work of the 20th Century.

The exhibition is open Wednesdays to Sundays and has been "extended by popular demand" until Sunday 24 November. Catch it if you can.

David Stewart



Walled Garden



Mediterranean Garden



Weather Vane

THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF ST IVES PARISH CHURCH HALL

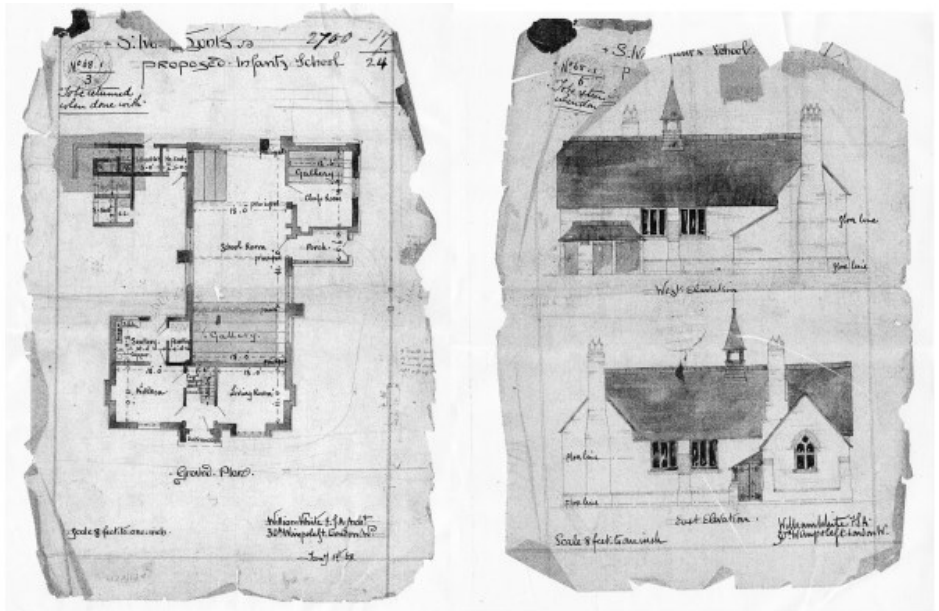
The Church Hall situated in Ramsey Road, opposite the Merchant House pub, is now a popular venue for church coffee mornings, meetings and parties but the building was originally designed in 1869 as the National Infants School with a teacher's house attached. The Parish Church had already built an elementary school for Boys and Girls in 1844 in Station Road (today housing the Cambridge Building Society and Nuts Bistro) with a grant from the National Society 'for the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church throughout England and Wales'. The advantage of the new school building was its proximity to the Church which would enable the Vicar, Charles Goldie, to make use of it as a Sunday school.



Photo: Brian Richmond

Plans for the Infants school dated January – October 1869 by the architect William White, 30A, Wimpole Street, London, survive at Huntingdonshire Archives. The delicate drawings include each of the four elevations, plans of the ground floor of the school, including classroom and galleries, and for two floors of the house, including three 'chambers' or bedrooms on the upper

floor. Outside at the back of the building there are separate earth closets (for toilets) and coal houses for both the school and house.



Why was a London architect chosen? William White (1825-1900) had worked for the firm of Gilbert Scott 1845-1847 and by 1859 was working from his practice in Wimpole Street. He was a prolific designer of buildings, mainly churches and restorations throughout the country. He had built similar school buildings elsewhere and was already working in the local area, having completed reseating and repairs at Oldhurst parish church, enlargement of the vicarage in St Ives and building the How also in St Ives. White's entry in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* records that he went on to design cathedrals in Madagascar (1889) and Pretoria (1890).

The Infants School was designed to take 110 children. One of the earliest mistresses and occupiers of the house was Mary Knight with her sister Eleanor who taught at the Girl's School in Station Road. By 1884 the school had an attendance of about 40 children but as early as 1877 it was struggling financially, along with the other schools in St Ives. The decision was taken by the Borough Council to form a School Board, financed from public rates to oversee the management of all schools in St Ives and to enable parents to

have 'some practical control over the school and the schools would no longer be subject to those fluctuations so common in voluntary schools' (St Ives Borough minutes). The school in Station Road was sold while the Infants building was retained by the Church as the 'Sunday Schools' and the adjoining house let to tenants who would act as caretakers for the main building.

The wide range of activities taking place at the 'Ramsey Road Schools' is recorded in the Parish Magazines 1909-1917 at the Norris Museum. Apart from teaching children, there was bible class for young men on a Sunday, Men's meeting on a Monday evening and practises for three choirs on separate evenings. More surprisingly perhaps, it was also the venue for the All Saints Arthurians' Gymnasium, which met on Wednesday and Friday evenings. The Vicar's news for July 1912 reports that the Gymnasium completed its seventh and most successful season, with about 58 attending. Public gymnastic displays were held in the Hall and at the Corn Exchange. The Scouts also held Rifle Practise there on Saturday afternoons.

During the First World War the schools were taken over by the yeomanry, much to the obvious annoyance of the Vicar, who writes in January 1915, 'I am very sorry to lose the use of our schools; but as they have been commandeered, the least said about it the better'. At the end of 1917 the troops had left and the Gymnasium was again open to all on Fridays from 8-9 pm, with annual membership of one shilling. Activities in the Hall were extended to offer a Social Club for 'lads and boys' on Monday nights and Girl Guides meetings on Tuesday evenings.

Mrs Rita Fearing, who has known the Hall all her life can recall the weekly dances, called '6d Socials' she attended in her youth. There would be dancing to records or the piano, refreshments prepared by the mothers with heating in Winter supplied by open fires. Mrs Fearing like many others celebrated her wedding reception there after her marriage in the Parish Church in 1946.

In the Second World War the Hall was used as a school for children evacuated to St Ives from Highbury Hill. When the population of St Ives increased significantly after the War the town's older children were taught there while waiting for St Ivo School to be built (1955). Many children have attended nursery school started by Miss Grove, which continued until the early 1990s. The building's name was officially changed from 'the Ramsey Road Schools'

in 1964 to the Parish Church Hall to avoid confusion with the new Westfield Junior School, situated further along Ramsey Road.



Photo: Brian Richmond

In 1992 the Hall underwent major refurbishment, paid for by the sale of the house in Westwood Road Cemetery. The ceiling was lowered and new heaters and toilets were installed. Further modernisation has enabled it to continue as the useful and well-loved venue it is today.

Lesley Akeroyd

July 2013

Acknowledgements and references: I am very grateful to Mrs Rita Fearing for details of the Hall from the interwar period. Plans of the Infants school 1869 are reproduced by kind permission of Huntingdonshire Archives (ref: 1133/19A), St Ives Borough Minute book 1874-1884 (HA, ref: KBR4/1), notes about William White (HA, Acc. 5437), bound Parish Magazines 1869-1915 and various trade directories (Norris Museum Library).

HISTORY PRESENTATION BOARDS

In April 2011 Judy Poulter (nee Stiles), the secretary of the Slepe Hall Old Girls School Association, offered the Norris Museum £400 to purchase a cabinet for the museum. However this sum of money was not sufficient to purchase anything for the museum that they would be able to have their name on. Bob Burn Murdoch, then the curator, asked me for ideas.

One of the school lessons was swimming. For this lesson the girls walked from the school, now the Slepe Hall Hotel, to the bathing pool which was on The Ingle Holt. This is now the Sea Scouts Dock Yard. Bob agreed to design a history board for the Holt starting in 1720. The island was then owned by John Picket and called "Pickets Holt". Extra donations were then raised by the association to pay for this.

The completed board was erected close to the island bridge alongside the thicket footpath.



In April this board was presented to the Mayor, Councillor Debbie Townsend, as a gift to the town of St Ives. The old girls have now donated a considerable sum of money towards a second history board depicting the history of the school and Slepe Hall playing field.

Peggy Seamark

Front cover photo: St Ives Bridge (1892) by Thomas Hodgson Liddell

Thomas Hodgson Liddell (1860-1925)

Liddell was one of a number of Scottish artists who worked in the St Ives area in the late 19th and early 20th century. From Edinburgh he moved first to London and then to Holywell, just outside St Ives. He arrived there in 1889 and lived at Moynes Hall, a 17th-century farmhouse still standing at the east end of the village. He painted in a studio in East Street in St Ives until a few years later he moved away to Devon.

Liddell's colourful picture is unusual in that it shows St Ives bridge from upstream. The great majority of paintings and photographs show the bridge's downstream side, because that gives the clearest view of the chapel, built as part of the bridge in the 15th century. The bridge chapel is here shown as it used to be, with the two extra storeys built on top of the original structure in 1736 - and taken off again when the chapel was restored in 1930. It was still being used as a private house when Liddell painted his picture in 1892.

The 17th-century Manor House with its tall chimneys can be seen to the left of the bridge with the spire of the Free Church in the background. In front, near the end of Woolpack Lane, men are stacking bundles of what are probably osiers — the willow wands harvested for basket making in an important St Ives industry of those days. They have brought them in their boat, probably from the island a little way upstream (opposite where the Norris Museum is now) where the osiers were grown.

Signs of another industry can be seen beyond the bridge where the chimney stack of a lime kiln rises above Wellington Street.

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E-mail: artworks@sundial.co.uk