



THE HIGH WYCOMBE SOCIETY

MERRY CHRISTMAS

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newsletter



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Constructive Consultations in Action

The Autumn began on a high note with a special meeting at Bucks New University to review the Town Centre Master Plan during its public consultation period. "Now we know how to get a good attendance at a meeting" Jerry Unsworth, WDC Director of Planning and Sustainability, said in his opening remarks, crediting the High Wycombe Society with that achievement. "Just what the High Wycombe Society *should* be doing!" was the general verdict on the event. That's not to say there was unanimity in the room. We were all actively encouraged to engage with the subject matter and express our individual views. A lively session resulted.



Like many who attended, I found myself vacillating between wanting to share in the idyllic vision of a vibrant town centre, and worrying about the projected traffic volumes and journey times. There's no

doubt that transport issues could make or break any future plans for our town. There's a new name for Transport at the County Council this quarter, too: Peter Hardy, Cabinet Member for Planning and Transport, lost no time in seeking a meeting with the High Wycombe Society and its Transport Group, the first of many, we hope.



Meanwhile many members were alarmed and dismayed by the invasion of the Rye by bulldozers, flattening a section, prior to its reseeded and use to provide four new football pitches. The footballing fraternity, who had been consulted about this, supported the initiative with an enthusiasm not matched within our Society.

There has been general unease, too, about the reported future move of Wycombe museum. What will happen to the much-loved gardens and the Scheduled Ancient Monument if Castle Hill House is sold? Your Executive Committee were pleased to be invited to a meeting with Cllr Katrina Wood and Elaine Jewell, Head of Community Services, to discuss our interests and wish to be consulted. It is early days yet as far as the proposed museum move is concerned but a constructive dialogue has begun.

Jackie Kay



Wishing you A Bright Start to the New Year! We have been offered two tickets courtesy of Wycombe Swan to the production of "On Golden Pond" in January (24th-26th). We will be raffling these at our first Quarterly Meeting of the New Year on 13th January, so please come prepared to part with an extra pound or two for raffle tickets and you could be the lucky winner! All proceeds to Society funds.



...caring about our town: past, present and future

Registered Charity No. 257897

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Planning This Quarter

THREE KEY issues this Quarter: one is the Government's ongoing progress, if that is the right word, with the devastating new National Planning Policy Framework. Another is our District Council's continuing work on the Town Centre Masterplan. And then there's what's happening up near Handy Cross – several important developments taking place simultaneously, making a great deal of work for the Group. Thank goodness for email which means that we do not have to wait until our next monthly meeting to sort out our thoughts together. But we also decided the Group would benefit from one or two additional members (*see p.12*).

Town Centre Masterplan and Delivery and Site Allocations Document The Society was privileged to hold a special meeting on 28th September when WDC's Director of Planning and Sustainability, Jerry Unsworth, and his Team Leader for Environment and Infrastructure, John Callaghan, laid on a special presentation for our members. A very successful event, it was attended by 100 members of our Society and the public, and it helped the Group put together the Society's response to the consultation. The Society fully backed the proposal, in the long run, to remove the Abbey Way flyover which makes such a mess of our town centre, but, in conjunction with the Transport Group, stressed how important it is for the new road arrangements not only to cater effectively for East-West traffic along a re-routed A40 but also not to make conditions worse on the town's key north-south through route, the A404. In our view, this may mean dispensing with the proposal to turn Easton Street and Queen Victoria Road into two-way roads and possibly even with the "greening" of the northern section of what is now the Marlow Hill roundabout (the "Swan Frontage" area).

We also commended the Council for adopting our proposals in the previous consultation to promote different "character areas" in the town centre, and submitted a "visionary" document, arguing for a comprehensive upgrading of Frogmoor to foster a "café culture" and a strengthened "cultural quarter" around the Swan Theatre. We asked for the river to be opened up to the maximum extent (there are still suggestions that the Council planners are looking for just a small area of water here and there), and we asked for sunny seating areas to be provided beside the river. Elsewhere, we opposed Duke Street Car Park becoming multi-storey. We also argued for the future Local Plan to require sufficient parking to be provided in new developments everywhere, so that it does not overflow on to local streets. Finally, we stressed that the Council, as Planning Authority, must insist on a higher standard of building design in the town centre.

Handy Cross Sports Centre Redevelopment In November, WDC's property department staged an exhibition on new proposals for the redevelopment of the Handy Cross Sports Centre site, now to contain a completely new Sports

Centre building on the site, but the running track will be moved to the Buckmaster site near John Lewis, and the Synthetic Turf Pitch to John Hampden Grammar School. The proposals for a "coachway" are back, albeit a more modest building, collocated with Park & Ride and adding to the public transport options for longer travel journeys. The Group responded on behalf of the Society, asking if it was right to shoe-horn so many new offices (and yet another hotel) on to what will become a very crowded site, and calling for a design that the town can be proud of on this important "gateway" site. We queried the internal road designs and, more importantly, the damaging impact that the plans might have on traffic on the A40, in Cressex and on the entrance to the town, particularly when taken with other developments in the area (*see below*).

RAF Daws Hill and Abbey Barn South This is now a huge issue. Taylor Wimpey have plans for 500 new homes at Daws Hill and Berkeley Homes have plans of a similar scale for Abbey Barn South. WDC's policy in the Core Strategy is that Abbey Barn is a "reserved" site, to be developed only when it is needed to meet housing targets, but Daws Hill can be developed immediately. The Society's position is that Abbey Barn should not be developed in any timescale, and that even Daws Hill should not be developed until there are feasible and acceptable proposals on transport links. So far there is a wholly unrealistic proposal to upgrade Winchbottom Lane. One thing unfortunately is clear: transport links in this modern age must include roads for motor cars, whether one likes it or not.

John Lewis As we go to press, John Lewis have just submitted a planning proposal for their Handy Cross store to be allowed to sell clothing and footwear, the extra sales area coming from conversion of "back office" space. Two members attended a pre-application presentation by the Partnership. The Group decided this would be an acceptable change, bearing in mind that Asda already sells such goods, but requested sight of the transport studies, which are now available.

National Planning Policy Framework The Group submitted its comments on the proposed NPPF to the Government one day before the deadline. We and all environmental groups in the country

have grave reservations about the “presumption in favour of sustainable development” but the Government ploughs on. We said: “We do not believe the planning system should be perverted into the role of a tool of economic growth. As set out, a presumption in favour of ‘sustainable’ growth would mean any development that the lawyers could successfully argue is ‘sustainable’.” We disagreed with the provision for “neighbourhoods” (parish and town councils) to create “neighbourhood plans”, saying it “imposes too much pressure on neighbourhood communities who may lack the skills and experience to fulfil the proactive planning role proposed”. We also took issue (of course) with the provision which prevents neighbourhoods from proposing *less* development rather than *more*. It is this text in particular which makes an utter mockery of the Government’s declared intention of devolving power to local people.

The Localism Act 2011 Yes, the Localism Bill became an Act on 17th November. Although some of it is the essential underpinning for the NPPF, it ranges far wider than merely planning. One bit we do like is Section 25 on “predetermination” which states:

A decision-maker is not to be taken to have had, or to have appeared to have had, a closed mind when making the decision just because the decision-maker had previously done anything that directly or indirectly indicated what view the decision-maker took, or would or might take, in relation to a matter.

This comes into effect on 17th January 2012. It should avoid a repetition of the farcical situation

that occurred on the stadium proposal, when councillors who had previously indicated their opposition were prevented from participating in the Cabinet vote.

William Bartlett site Catalyst Housing eventually, under pressure from WDC and ourselves to improve overlooking of onsite parking, amended this important application for 108 dwellings and commercial premises on the Grafton Street site. Despite lingering doubts by some about the density, this is a satisfactory outcome, since the site incorporates a new stage in the Council’s plans for a riverside walk from the Desborough area to the town centre.

Red Kite Housing Readers of the *Bucks Free Press* will know that, as part of the scheme to transfer the District’s council housing to a not-for-profit tenant-led landlord, Red Kite Housing, WDC have announced that they intend to transfer associated green spaces to RKH as well as the homes themselves. Our concerns were raised over the fact that they propose to transfer some green spaces, e.g. near Hicks Farm Rise and in Downley, which seem to have nothing to do with nearby council housing. However, the Council have themselves stated that RKH will be covenanted to maintain the land in its existing use and with existing public access, and the Planning Group has checked that the Local Development Framework provides the necessary protection for these areas “except in exceptional circumstances”.

Chris Woodman



“Downsizing his activities” - Chris Woodman – a hard act to follow.

Photo by Stuart King

Chairman’s Jottings

Readers of this vibrant and informative Newsletter may already know that a new Editor, Jackie Kay, and a Deputy Editor, Malcolm Connell are now installed to lead our publication into the future.

This Society has always been fortunate to have enjoyed splendid Quarterly Newsletters from past editors: Jack Scruton, John Gore and (newly retired) Chris Woodman. The literary standard has remained constantly high and latterly Chris Woodman has taken desk-top publishing to new heights.

It is therefore entirely appropriate for me to thank Chris Woodman for his remarkable record of achievement over so many years. This has been in addition to his contribution to the Society as a member of the Executive Committee and of the Planning Group. Until recently Chris was also a member of the Transport Group, but made the wise decision to downsize his activities. Well Done Chris! You are now firmly established in the annals of the Society as an excellent editor and an all round “Good Egg”.

Roger Lawson

A Blustery Day at the Mill

11th September, 2011

It was the end of the summer and the third Mill Open Day of the year. There was promise in the weather and water in the river; not as much as we would have liked, but enough. Well, in reality the weather was rather windy and this made for some interesting times putting up the gazebos for the various stalls. Still, none of them actually took off and eventually everything was tied, or weighted, down. If it wasn't, then it was probably going to end the day blowing across the Rye. The stalls dealing with paper, such as Publications, were noted during the day to have gained a large number of interesting rocks and half bricks on display. That's one problem the millers don't have, almost everything is too heavy to blow around. A lot of it is too heavy to lift!

One stall that did not have its display blowing around was that of High Wycombe Honey. They have been with us for



The Honey Stall

Photo: Stuart King

several years but regrettably they have given up bee keeping so this was their last sale of locally produced honey. So, thank you Raymond and Sylvia and we look forward to the possibility of some beeswax candles next year.

Since it was National Heritage weekend, and also due to the activities of the Society Publicity Officer, a lot of people were aware of the open day so public attendance was good. Dry and sunny also helped. There was plenty of interest shown in the Mill, the Society and the other stalls and displays. It was heartening to see a good turnout of Society members and others who helped get everything ready, manned the stalls and then took it all down and cleared away again later. The Pann Mill Group would like to thank all of you for your efforts and hope that you will perhaps do it again next year. The first date to put in the diary is the Sunday of National Mills Weekend, 13th May, 2012.

Those readers with internet access who would like to see a short film of Pann Mill including the sad demise of the old mill, are recommended to go to YouTube where there is a delightful video produced by none other than our president, Stuart King. Just search for "Pann Mill" and choose the item by "cesking".

Malcolm Connell

News and Views

Tony Fooks and Jackie Kay represented the Society at the Bucks New University Graduation Ceremonies in September. While doing so, the opportunity arose to invite the Vice Chancellor, Ruth Farrell, to come and talk to the Society in January 2013, an invitation which she readily accepted.

The Association of North Thames Amenity Societies (ANTAS) held its AGM on 22nd October at which Tony Fooks was re-elected as Chairman. Chris Woodman was also elected to serve on the committee. The main subjects on the agenda were the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), the Localism Bill and Civic Voice.

Frances Presland shared the substance of the above presentation on NPPF with members who attended the Forum for Affiliated Groups and Members (FAGAM) meeting in November.

Peter Batchelor and Jackie Kay attended a promotional event for the Buckinghamshire Historic Towns Project. Sandy Kidd and David Green presented the results of this three-year project which has included the production of very comprehensive digital maps detailing the heritage assets in our towns. These will shortly be made available online.

Talks and Walks

Several Society members have given talks to groups this quarter resulting in a number of donations to Society funds. On 7th September, Frances Presland gave a talk on the Industrial History of High Wycombe to the local St John's Ambulance branch. At the beginning of October, Margaret Rayner and Christine Clark talked to a group of Wesleyan Ladies about a number of the Wycombe Pioneers of Progress. On 19th October, Tony Fooks and Chris Watson talked about Planning to a lively group of ladies called the Wycombe Sparklers. Jackie Kay has been invited to talk to Naphill Neighbours in May 2012.

As part of the Freshers' week activities at Bucks New University, the High Wycombe Society offered a Guided walk around the town centre. Sadly we could not compete with the various commercial enterprises eager to acquire student business – there were no takers. Undeterred and following the success of Sally's cemetery walks last summer, the Programme and Membership group are exploring some new ideas for future guided walks. Watch this space!

Successful Local Listing

FOLLOWING MY briefing on the local listing project at the Society AGM in April this year, I am pleased to report a fairly successful result in the first tranche of nominations submitted by the Society to WDC for their consideration. We submitted 18 nominations and details of the results, or latest situation at the time of writing, are as follows:

Twelve buildings were approved to be added to the Local List – Decision papers are expected to be published shortly.



Bowerdean School

Clock House

Crown House
SchoolFactory at 8 Temple
EndGordon Arms Public
House

Old Court House

Pann Mill

Priory Road School

Terraced Houses,
Temple End

Terriers Green House

The Grange

Wesleyan Chapel

Two further nominations were initially approved BUT their owners made objections:



Loudwater Factory

Hudson's Factory

Policy guidelines require the Council to write to owners of nominated properties to see whether they have any objections. English Heritage states that all objections should be weighed against the criteria, those from the owners carrying the greater weight. In these two cases the Council decided to go with the owners' wishes. My personal view is that it's a shame the owners felt it was against their interests to have their properties Locally Listed. The Loudwater factory is one of the early "Modern Movement" commercial buildings left surviving in the Town. The Hudson's Furniture Factory is one of the few remaining which identifies our furniture heritage.

Three Buildings were found not to meet the criteria:

2-4 Stuart Road

Boat House on the Rye

Corner House,
Totteridge Road

Numbers 2-4 Stuart Road and the Boat House both lie within conservation areas which already provide a level of protection.

I know the Boat House is not an architectural masterpiece but I am sure many Wycombe people find its low-key character and charm in keeping with its natural Rye location.

The purpose of Conservation Areas is to maintain their character. In the case of 2 Stuart Road that character was lost when lovely Edwardian sash windows were replaced by inappropriate PVC. It is my understanding that Local Authorities do not have power to protect this sort of detail within Conservation Areas.

The Corner House on Totteridge Road, nominated as a fine example of a Victorian house with corner shop, fashioned in Gault bricks, and occupying a significant site in the local landscape, was not accepted due to the alterations and shutters installed on the shop front side of the property.

Other related issues:

We also nominated Rayners Lane Gate House at Loudwater, but I am pleased to say that this had already been Locally Listed.

The Council did inform me that they want to extend the conservation area boundary from the Frogmoor viaduct up to the corner of Benjamin Road. At the time of writing the High Wycombe Conservation Area amendment to incorporate an extension to Temple End has not yet been taken forward. The intention is to do so with other Conservation Area boundary amendments.

The following is an outline of the WDC criteria for Local Listing;

Any site or structure (note, not necessarily a building) provided it is not already statutorily protected and meets the designation criteria particularly if it can be shown that it contributes to the character of an area and is valued by local people.

1. **Authenticity:** all suggested buildings or structures should be substantially unaltered and should retain significant original features.
2. **Architectural Interest:** buildings or structures that are an example of a style of building that is particular to the local area; designed by notable architects, engineers or designers; or an example of a particular technological innovation in building type, material or technique.
3. **Townscape Significance:** building groups, structures or features, which help form an attractive local character; good examples of town planning/layout; or notable or key landmark buildings or structures.
4. **Historic Interest:** assets that are associated with an important historic figure; have strong community development significance; are associated with any important local historic events; or are good local examples of assets illustrative of particular aspects of local history.
5. **Archaeological interest:** assets whose physical remains have significant potential to contribute to understanding of local history.

Since I have been undertaking this project I have come to realise that our town has many possible nominations and I already have other possible ones filed. Hopefully I will find the time to research these and put some forward. If members feel they have nominations that meet the above criteria please let me know.

Finally I would like to thank Society Members who assisted me with this project and the Officers at WDC for their help and advice.

I can be contacted by email at peterbatchelor@hotmail.co.uk or telephone: 01494 446182.

Peter Batchelor

(An expanded version of this article will be available on the Society web site in the near future - Ed)

Note: Photographs reproduced within this article were mostly taken by Peter Batchelor as part of the Local Listing Project. Some images have been digitally enhanced by Malcolm Connell.

Visit to the Mayor's Parlour

SIXTEEN Society members visited the Mayor's Parlour and Wycombe District Council Chamber on August 23rd. On entering the Mayor's Parlour, members were greeted by the Mayor Cllr Chaudhary Ditta, dressed in his ceremonial robes and accompanied by Jane White, Mayoress and Cllr Ditta's predecessor as Mayor, and the Mayor's daughter Shabiah. Having warmly welcomed his visitors, Cllr Ditta handed over to Frances Alexander, former Mayor and long-standing High Wycombe Society member, to tell us about the history of the mayoralty.

We learned that the history of Wycombe's mayor can be traced back almost as far as that of the Lord Mayor of London. It was after the last battle between Stephen and Matilda, which took place in the Wycombe valley, that the people of Wycombe decided that they wanted greater independence. The first step was to gain a market charter, which was granted by Henry III in 1237. The next was to be granted the right to appoint a Mayor, the reigning monarch's representative in the town. The first mention of a Mayor was in 1285 with the first that we know by name, Roger Oughtred, being appointed around the turn of the century. Thereafter, as each new monarch came to the throne it was necessary to negotiate a new charter. It was with some awe that we looked at original sealed charters signed by Tudor Queens Mary and Elizabeth I.

For almost 500 years the Mayor had considerable power in the town. Change came with the local government reorganisation of 1974 which removed the Mayor's administrative authority. Although High Wycombe decided to keep its Mayor, he or she now has only a civic role, representing the town at civic, ceremonial and charity events and promoting the town.

Frances Alexander concluded her talk by inviting us to study the regalia that had been laid out for us including the magnificent gold Chain of Office. She pointed out that the Wycombe swan on the badge that hangs from the central pointed oval link of the chain has eagle's feet and an eagle's beak, a symbol of the determination of the people of Wycombe to stand up for themselves. The Mayoress has a beautiful 18ct gold chain with aquamarines and amethysts which was presented to the town in 1928 by Mayor Aleck Stacey. (For

further information about Aleck Stacey's extraordinary life see p.11 - Ed)

The great gold-plated mace is 1.4m long, topped with a crown and decorated with the arms of William and Mary. The Mayor has a mace bearer to carry it for him on civic occasions. New member John Aspinell had a chance to feel its considerable weight while

posing for a photograph with the Mayor. Far easier to carry is the elegant Silver Stick, presented, like the mace, in 1694 and carried by the Mayor on civic occasions.

During our visit we were pleased to present a copy of our book "Wycombe Pioneers of Progress" to the Mayor, to be kept in the Mayor's parlour for reference by future mayors and their guests.

After a break for tea we moved to the Council Chamber. Here we were able to get the feel of sitting in the seats used by councillors during official meetings while Frances Alexander and Cllr Ditta answered questions relating to the conduct of such meetings. With the memory of the rejection of the proposal to build a stadium

on the Air Park fresh in our minds, it was not surprising that the pros and cons of Cabinet government featured in this discussion. Cllr Ditta drew this session to a close by urging everyone to come to meetings of the Cabinet, Council and its various committees, to raise questions at these meetings and to play an active role in the democratic processes of the town.

Our thanks go to Mary Woodman and to Cllr Ditta and his team for organising this informative and enjoyable visit.

Roberta Wilson



New member John Aspinell gets a chance to feel the weight of the mace, while the Mayor, Cllr Ditta, dressed in his robe, looks on.

Photo Chris Woodman

Bucks Local History Network

Six members of the Society attended BLHN, the Buckinghamshire Local History Network day, on Saturday 1st October. We set up a stand with exhibition panels on the lives of the Hon Robert John Smith and the Hon Charles Grey and a stock of books to sell. At the end of the day, in between attending the lectures on the theme of Military Buckinghamshire, we had managed to sell eight books on Wycombe Aviation and seven books on the Wycombe Pioneers of Progress – a successful day.

One of the first visitors to our stall was Mike Farley, former County Archaeologist who has been in the news recently for highlighting the work of the County Archaeological Services. He sought our opinions on the proposed move of Wycombe Museum. His presentation at the event included a slide of Castle Hill House, and during the day we conversed with him about

this and other archaeological remains in the area.



Castle Hill House and Mound (complete with its "castle")

Photo courtesy of Wycombe Museum
SWOP Ref MHW:08570

We have been in touch since as David Snoxell's article below relates ...

Castle Hill Mound - Debunking an Enduring Myth

THE FOLLOWING ACCOUNT is based on an exchange of emails between Jackie Kay, John Gore, Chris Woodman, Chris Low (Archivist at CBS), Mike Farley and myself (David Snoxell). A letter in the Bucks Free Press in September, concerning the possible move of Wycombe Museum from Castle Hill House, repeated a long standing myth:

In the grounds of the museum site in Priory Avenue, is the Norman Mott and Bailey castle – well the remains of it. It was here the Empress Matilda was held on the way to her imprisonment and eventual wintry escape from Oxford Castle during the first civil wars in the 1130s'. (The siege of Oxford was in 1142 and Matilda escaped to Wallingford).

Sadly there is no archaeological or documentary proof for this story. There is no evidence that Castle Hill Mound was a Norman motte and bailey castle or that Matilda came to Wycombe. The sites of 23 motte and bailey castles have been identified in Buckinghamshire but Castle Hill is not one of them. It is just one of those unidentified mounds about which only speculation abounds.

So what are the origins of this myth which has been repeated in recent times by local historians and in museum leaflets?

L J Ashford, in *The History of the Borough of High Wycombe from its origins to 1880*, published in 1960, mentions that Wycombe was besieged by Stephen during the civil war with Matilda and quotes as reference 'Bodleian MSS 864-868'. The Oxford Bodleian Library staff have checked these manuscripts and confirmed that they have nothing to do with Wycombe or Stephen. In his *High Wycombe, A History and Celebration*, Martin Andrew notes "Wycombe was important enough to have had a castle; its mound or motte rises in the grounds of Castle House, now the Wycombe Museum. In 1153, during the civil war of King Stephen's reign, the king besieged Wycombe castle and issued two charters here..... Both charters end with the words 'Apud Wycumbam

in obsidione', that is they were given 'at Wycombe during the siege'. The castle is rarely mentioned militarily again, and presumably fell into disuse; by 1420 it was described as an 'old castell'." The siege was probably 1139, not 1153. In any case Matilda had returned to Normandy in 1148. Sparkes (1982) and Rattue (2002) do not mention the history of Castle Hill.

The Museum has published two leaflets: Information sheet No. 3 by Herbert Green in 1972 refers to the motte and bailey, possibly built by Stephen, and the civil war with Matilda; the second, 'Local History Guides No. 3, A brief History of Castle Hill House' by Lawrence Lineham repeats this account. Another publication: 'A Women's Walk through Wycombe' (1989) claims 'This (Castle Hill) was a stronghold of Queen Matilda in the time of the 12th century civil war when King Stephen ousted Matilda'.

The myth probably has its origins in the Victoria County History of Buckinghamshire, vol 3 (1925) which states 'Owing to its important strategical position Wycombe itself or perhaps a castle commanding the town, stood a siege during the anarchy of Stephen's reign'. A footnote cites "a charter of Stephen tested 'apud Wycumbam in obsidione' in the Calendar of Charter Rolls, vol 2, (1257-1300)."

Mike Farley comments "The same reference is also cited in Cathcart King's *Castellarium Anglicanum*, p28, a magisterial two-volume tome on castles. According to Cathcart King the relevant bit is included in an inspeimus of a charter of Stephen, tested 'apud in obsidione' - the three key words. The Charter Roll copy was taken in 1269 but the original, Cathcart King states, was 'probably about 1138'. This particular charter consists of three-quarters of a page full of grants of land etc by Stephen of which the original no longer (I presume) survives. The context of the three key words is that the original document was witnessed by three individuals 'Ricardo de Lucy et Gaufrido Martel et Osberto Martel *apud Wycumbam in obsidione*' (at Wycombe under siege)."

Mike Farley concludes: "So there you have it. It seems odd that time should be taken at a siege to witness grants of land. The siege seems real enough but whether it was of your mound, or of the earthwork at Desborough, or conceivably of the town (perhaps unlikely as no one has ever claimed that the town was defended) is up for grabs."

A contribution to an internet forum provided some guidance on the Medieval Latin. We learned that "the word 'apud' tends to be used when the exact location is uncertain, particularly with a place name when it means not necessarily within the city limits, i.e. nearby", which could easily mean Desborough Castle rather than Castle Hill.

Farley's reference to Desborough is based on an article by Mark Collard in vol 30 of *Records of Buckinghamshire*, 1987/8, on the excavations carried out at Desborough Castle in 1987. It includes a map showing Castle Hill and comments that Desborough Castle is ideally situated strategically to control the Wye Valley and the road west to Oxford and Wallingford and to observe Castle Hill in High Wycombe. Collard goes on to say "It is known, too, that Stephen himself was 'apud Wycumbam in obsidione' at some stage of the

campaigns during the Civil War (Renn 1968, p.350). It seems most likely that the object of his siege was the motte on Castle Hill, High Wycombe, which lay in the Honour of Wallingford, the domain of Brian Fitz Count, one of Matilda's leading supporters after 1139." Later on in the article Collard notes that a castle at West Wycombe is mentioned in the Winchester Pipe Roll in 1210-1211 and gives Derek Renn's *Norman Castles*, p.350 as the source. The bibliography lists Renn, D.F. 1973, *Norman Castles In Britain*, 3rd edition - presumably 1968 was a previous edition.

So what of the archaeological evidence? A record in *Unlocking Buckinghamshire's Past (a user-friendly version of the county Historic Environment Record, available online - Ed.)* on Castle Hill summarises it as 'once thought to be a medieval motte and bailey castle, may be a post-medieval prospect mound from evidence found in excavation'. A 'watching brief' carried out by Mike Farley in 1998 failed to identify any medieval material. The only finds were 18th century pottery, tile and clay pipe fragments. A watching brief carried out in 1995/6 by the Buckinghamshire County Museum Archaeological Service (BCMAS) during demolition and rebuilding works failed to find any evidence for a ditch surrounding the motte. It is suggested that the mound originated from landscaping associated with the construction of Castle Hill House and has been misinterpreted as a motte.

One is forced to conclude that some historians and archaeologists have allowed their imaginative conjecture to enrich our local history. Sadly the Norman motte and bailey on Castle Hill and Matilda's presence in Wycombe is almost certainly a romantic myth. Come to think of it, it would be quite difficult to stand more than a dozen men on the top of the mound.

David Snoxell

The Bucks Free Press Project

Users of the Local Study Centre at High Wycombe library will be aware that many nineteenth century local newspaper archives are accessible online but that the South Bucks Free Press is not among the titles available in this manner. The only option for researchers wishing to read early editions of the paper is to make use of microfilm readers, and the image quality is often quite poor.

Recently, David Thorpe and the Buckinghamshire Record Society have taken the first steps to address this problem. The films have been scanned and digital versions are now in existence which can be viewed on a computer. I am privileged to have been loaned

the images for the year 1881 which I am helping to assess.

The long-term intent is to make the archives from 1856 to 1945 accessible free of charge online. The task of providing a meaningful index is likely to require a substantial volunteer effort starting sometime in 2012. The project is still at an embryonic stage. However, it is clear that to take part you will need a computer, and must be able to use either a word processor or a spreadsheet, and have plenty of enthusiasm. If you would like to know more, please get in touch with me, although there isn't much to tell yet!

Jackie Kay

Wycombe's Very Own Portrait Painter

ALFRED STEERS was born on 3rd April 1805, the third son of William and Rachel Steers. As a young man, it was recognised that he had a special gift in the art of masculine portraiture. Sir Thomas Lawrence (1769 – 1830), a leading English portrait painter and President of the Royal Academy, saw one of Steers' portraits and offered to send him to Paris for training. But he refused, preferring to continue to follow what was termed 'his Bohemian lifestyle', and remain in Wycombe.

He remained a bachelor all his life, and lived in humble quarters in Frogmoor, his studio being a loft at the back of his brother's carpentry/building premises, approached by a 'rickety ladder'. It was said that he painted hundreds of local people, but all were men, and many landscapes of local scenes.

In about 1869 he received a commission from Viscountess Beaconsfield, wife of Benjamin Disraeli, who wished to have her husband's portrait painted. Let C.W. Raffety, who knew Steers and Disraeli personally, take up the story*:

'He attended at Hughenden Manor on three invited occasions for the purpose and worked on it with great interest producing as *he* thought a most satisfactory likeness, Mr Disraeli himself and his elder brother Mr Ralph Disraeli agreeing, but not the Viscountess, who did not at all approve of it and went so far as to refuse to have it, which fearfully upset poor Steers. He took the picture one day to Hughenden to persuade her to keep it but she still refused and after telling her how hard he had worked at it and how proud he was of it, he asked her why she did not like it, and where it failed as a portrait, and for some time she demurred, but being pressed said "Well Steers, to tell you the truth you haven't got the devil in his eyes!"'

Raffety continues: 'And this was true, for at this time of his life (65) that wonderful fire but seldom lighted up his face and the eyelids usually drooped, and sitting for his portrait ... came at a period soon after a great political defeat (1868) there was nothing probably to give Steers any indications of the latent "Devil in his eye". Anyway her Ladyship persisted and the artist took the picture away and told his unhappy story to his neighbours, among others to a well known collector of local gossip known as "Bucket" Pierce, County Court Bailiff, who, when Judge Whigham came the following week on circuit, knowing him to be a great admirer of Disraeli, told the whole story, which much interested the Judge. He asked Pierce to arrange for him to see the picture if possible, so the Judge went up the rickety ladder and met Steers who proudly showed the portrait. The Judge was taken with it (and) enquired if it was really for sale, or if the Viscountess might change her mind, and was assured that her decision was final and the Judge could have it if he wished. The price

was named and at once accepted the Judge taking the picture away.

Some years after a friend of mine, then auctioneer to Messrs Hamptons, wrote me that in a sale of theirs at Cromwell Rd there was a portrait of Disraeli by a local artist whom probably I knew, and I might like it. I went up, saw it, and recognised Steers' work at once (and) requested Mr Peck to buy it for me and get it cleaned up, which he did very nicely. The Judge (had) had a special frame made for it with a rose, shamrock, and thistle gilt moulding, much more artistic than any previous portrait of Steers that I had seen.'

Alfred Steers died in March 1877, and the Bucks Free Press included this obituary:

'We record with much regret the death, on Wednesday last, of Mr Alfred Steers, an old inhabitant of this town, and an artist whose work is familiar to many beyond the immediate neighbourhood. Mr Steers devoted himself more especially to portrait painting, in which he had a happy facility, as the walls of our Institute-room and many houses of the town testify; but his talents were not confined to that branch of his art, and he executed some very creditable landscapes, including many bits of Buckinghamshire scenery. He had a genuine love for his vocation: and many will remember the enthusiasm with which he spoke upon all artistic matters and the shrewdness of his judgement thereon.'

Many people thought that Steers' finest work was his portrait of the first Robert Wheeler when he was aged about 70. Robert Wheeler



Could this be the Steers' portrait of Robert Wheeler? Photo: Courtesy of Robert Wheeler (a descendant).

was a brewer, founder of Wheeler's bank in Wycombe, and several times Mayor. We are trying to trace other examples of Steers' work, and would be very interested to hear from any readers who have a Steers' portrait or landscape painting in their possession.

Mike Dewey

*Reference: Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies, Notebook of C.W. Raffety, D/CN/D5/6

Quarterly Meeting

A Final Reflection – or a New Beginning?

ON 21st OCTOBER 2011 we held our Quarterly Meeting in the Oak Room at the Town Hall. The location, made possible by a generous contribution to the meeting costs from Cllr Mrs Lesley Clarke, was particularly fitting for the subject-matter, a Reflection on The Wycombe Pioneers of Progress, our celebration of the centenary of the stained glass windows in the room. The entertainment included three short talks by Oak Room Windows Centenary Project participants as well as some general observations and readings on my part. At the end of the evening, I was pleased to present a copy of our book to the Hospitality Team at the Oak Room in the hope that future visitors could be informed about the windows.

Christine Clark spoke of her varied experiences in “Finding Hannah Ball”- the only lady chosen for a cartouche by Charles Raffety. Christine shared with us: her delights and disappointments in the contents of Hannah’s diary, a copy of which is held in the Green collection at Wycombe Library; her serendipitous encounters while in Stokenchurch searching for Hannah’s grave; her findings on a trip up to London following in Hannah’s footsteps; and her attempts at cold-calling to try to locate living descendants of the Ball family.

Chris Low, Archivist from the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies, spoke of his general approach to biographical research using archive material available in Aylesbury and further afield. During the project Chris had applied his methods to study The Hon Charles Grey, son of the Prime Minister and arguably “the least deserving of a place in the Progress Window”. The man who would later become the Queen’s equerry did next to nothing for Wycombe during his time as MP for the borough and very little is written about him at that time. In pursuit of military and family records Chris found some insights in archives held in Durham.

Mike Dewey presented two life stories of local worthies from the twentieth century whom he nominated as candidates for a 2011 memorial: Aleck Stacey and Frank Adams. Both came from humble beginnings, but at a time when social mobility was improving. At the time of the unveiling of the Oak Room windows, Aleck Stacey was already recognised as a prosperous businessman and had recently been elected as a councillor. Frank Adams was at a much earlier stage in his career, having just made his debut as a footballer with Wycombe Wanderers at Loakes Park.

Aleck Stacey’s prosperity stemmed from the

opportunity he saw as a coal merchant in the piles of waste sawdust produced by his customers. Not only would they pay him to take them away, but the sawdust could then be ground into wood flour which was useful in the manufacture of linoleum. He invested in many local projects including the Electroscope Cinema and public swimming baths.

Frank Adams overcame the tragic loss of his father at an early age and acquired his wealth primarily from property development activities, but it was for his services to Football that he would always be remembered. He bought the land from Lord Carrington for the town’s football ground.

So to summarise, these are Mike’s nominations:

Aleck Stacey, Wycombe’s First Entrepreneurial Businessman with a Social Conscience, 1910

Frank Adams, Sportsman and Wycombe Wanderers’ Benefactor, 1947

Now it’s *your* turn!

If you would like to take up Mike’s challenge, to nominate a twentieth-century person worthy of inclusion in a Wycombe memorial, please send your suggestions to the Editor. To qualify for consideration, the individual should either have been alive or not yet born in 1911 (when Raffety made his selection) – and must have died before 31st December 2010. Your nomination should include: Full name of the individual, a brief explanation (less than 100 words) of why you think they deserve to be honoured for their services to High Wycombe and, if possible, as in Mike’s examples, a significant date in their career.

Jackie Kay

Note: Copies of our Book “Wycombe Pioneers of Progress” can still be obtained from Ann Simone (Tel: 01494 448773). Price £12



Jackie Kay presenting Harriet Young with a copy of our Book “Wycombe Pioneers of Progress”. The book will be kept in the Oak Room.
Photo: Tony Murphy

Notices

New Members

We warmly welcome the following new members:

Mr & Mrs A Hill and
Mr J C S Harris.

STOP PRESS - THE GUILDHALL

For many years now we have enjoyed being able to hold our Quarterly Meetings in the pleasant surroundings of the Carrington Room at the Guildhall. Our guest speakers have regarded it as a prestigious venue, and Mike White and his team from Wycombe District Council have served us well, setting the room up in just the way we like it, and catering to our specific requirements on each occasion. It was therefore with some sadness that we received the news that, with effect from the end of March 2012, this service would be discontinued. No further details are known as we go to press. We have taken the precaution of reserving an alternate venue for our AGM which is the first meeting likely to be affected by the change.

A Stronger Planning Group

The Planning Group is arguably the Society's most important Group and certainly gets through a large volume of business. Are you able to come along and share the load? We run ourselves on a "collegiate" basis, with no designated leader. We meet in the evening of the first Monday in the month and we have an absorbing agenda covering all the great variety of issues you read about in Planning This Quarter. This is *your* opportunity to influence the Group's work and you will also be able to "specialise" in reviewing plans and applications that affect your particular area.

It is a great help if you are on email – that way, you'll receive agendas and minutes promptly and you'll be able to use the Internet to refer to planning applications and Government developments. If you are interested please either email the group on planning@highwycombesociety.org.uk or phone Chris Woodman on 01494 528106

From The Editor's Postbag:

When you really need someone to take over a Society job, someone does appear! Jackie Kay, still (I think) reeling from her fantastic work on the Oak Room Window, apparently has time on her hands. I, and I'm sure all Members, thank her for volunteering, and look forward to her input.

At the same time, our thanks must go to Chris Woodman, for his years of producing a first class, interesting and informative Newsletter.

Ann Simone

Contributions Please

My thanks to all who have helped with this issue of the Newsletter, the first to be produced by a new Editorial team. (See Chairman's Jottings on p.3). Please send material for the next edition addressed to me as The Editor at 19 Hepplewhite Close High Wycombe HP13 6BZ (01494 534876) by **20th February 2012**, or use our new email address: newslettereditor@highwycombesociety.org.uk

Photographs on the front page: Thanks to Tony Murphy for the photos taken at Bucks New University and on the Rye; thanks to Malcolm Connell for the photos of the Wycombe Swan theatre and the modern sculpture.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Put these dates in your diary **now!!!**

2012	
Friday, 13 th January The Guildhall 7.30pm	Quarterly Meeting: <i>Milling and Baking, Past And Present</i> . Speaker: Stanley Cauvain, Director and Vice-President, Research Activities at Baketran. <i>A reminder: the speaker can be contacted in advance of the meeting on stan.cauvain@btinternet.com if you have any baking problems you would like him to address.</i>
Friday, 13 th April Venue to be determined 7.30pm	AGM and Reports of the Society's Groups. PLEASE NOTE: Venue will be published in the Spring Newsletter.
Friday, 11 th May Venue to be determined 7.30 pm	Quarterly Meeting: Speaker: Colin Cartwright, currently researching and writing a book to be called "Burning to get the Vote" on the history of the suffragettes in Buckinghamshire.
Sunday, 13 th May	Pann Mill Open Day – National Mills weekend.
Saturday, 23 rd June	Civic Day – <i>We have nothing planned at present but do you think we should do something? The Programme and Membership group would be pleased to hear from you if you have any ideas!</i>