



Cholesbury-cum-St Leonards Local History Group



NEWSLETTER No. 8
2004/05

Chairman's Introduction

It seems only yesterday I was writing the introduction to last year's newsletter, yet a full twelve months seem to have flown past and have been added to what we generally call our history!

I will start as is the tradition by briefly reflecting on an excellent programme of talks for the Society's 41st year. If I were to highlight one recurring theme for the season just gone it would be "*every picture tells a story*", starting with John Credland's talk on the early days of Photography illustrating how the first photographers produced pictures full of valuable information about how lives were lived then. Neil Louden's talk about Boats in Stony Stratford would have been an unbelievable story but for the luck of being recorded by photography. Last but not least an intriguing, if somewhat racy, talk about the goings on at Stowe and West Wycombe in the 17th / 18th century would not have been half as amusing if not for some risqué photographs. I was told afterwards by Richard Wheeler that, given his experience of what local history groups are usually like, he had planned originally to censor the talk but judged from the enthusiasm with which his slides were greeted by everyone that we were obviously a sophisticated bunch so he decided to risk a few extra pictures! The 2003/4 season concluded in the best traditions of the Society with a well attended AGM and Members' Evening at which we were entertained by a presentation of photographs from Brian Rice contrasting views of the villages in the past and present. This seemed to be enjoyed by all so I think we might plan to do something similar again.

The principle aim of this Society, as set down by the founding members over 40 years ago, is - *to seek out and record all aspects of life in Hawridge, Cholesbury, Buckland Common and St Leonards and to rouse the interest of the community in the place in which they live.* This is just as relevant today as it was then and should justly remain the keystone of the Local History Group's objectives. At our recent AGM, I suggested it was important the Society does not rest on its laurels but keeps this purpose in mind to ensure a successful future for the Local History Group.

The Committee has been discussing how we could achieve this by increasing the awareness of the

history in our midst, both for those who live here and those who visit. A healthy start has already been made on several fronts. Last September we published the 5th in the series of Local History Walks commissioned to celebrate the Golden Jubilee and the Society's 40th anniversary. We hope that for those of you who have tried one or more of these, having some information about what is seen on the walks has made them all the more enjoyable. Please don't forget the Walk around Cholesbury and Hawridge on 12th September. See inside for details.

Making the Local History Group archives more accessible to members and others with an interest in local history is another project with the same aim in mind. You will see in the *Notes on the Archives*, penned by Shirley Blomfield, the excellent progress that is being made to start to catalogue and make more accessible the modest but important archive which has carefully been assembled over many years. We have also taken the first steps to make contact with H&C School and the local nursery school and playgroup to see how we can, in simple ways, offer our facilities to a younger age group as part of their educational activities.

For the past two years we have been fortunate to include an account by Mrs Margaret Probert of her recollections of life here in the 1920s and '30s. In this final article we learn something about the people and their occupations. Our thanks go to Mrs Probert for her valuable contribution to our archive. I hope it might encourage some of you to pen a few words on your recollections, which I know would be of great interest to others and further enrich our archive.

This is the eighth newsletter and, having included a postcard last year, we thought we would add some further pictures this time. My thanks, as Editor, go to Sylvia Watson who has brought all the contributions together, making its production as smooth as usual.

The forthcoming season's programme, offers a wide-ranging selection of themes and speakers to surprise, inform and hopefully amuse you, concluding with a combined AGM and Members' Evening next May, for which we would welcome contributions, large or small. Together with the Committee, I look forward to seeing all of you in October.

Chris Brown

Our History Group was founded with the object of encouraging an interest in the history of our surroundings. The Society has always kept this in mind when planning its programme of evening talks and occasional exhibitions

Local History Walk 12th September

Our first event after the summer break is a new venture. There will be a **Local History Walk around Cholesbury and Hawridge on Sunday 12th September. Convene at 2pm** at the gate into St Laurence Church, Cholesbury just off Parrotts Lane. (As parking is limited we suggest parking any cars near to the Village Hall.) The walk will end back at the Village Hall in good time for a well-deserved 'Cholesbury Tea'. Everyone is welcome, young and not so young. So if you would like to know a little more about your local surroundings such as the Hill Fort, the building and some of the people who used to inhabit them, please do come along. A collection will be taken for LHG funds. For further information contact Shirley Blomfield or Chris Brown (contact details on the next page).

Programme of Talks

Once again the **Programme of Talks** by visiting speakers, both acknowledged experts or enthusiastic amateurs, provides much variety, ensuring an opportunity to be entertained, even pleasantly surprised and at the same time maybe even learn something new or be reminded of one's own experiences in earlier times, perhaps as a child.

| 2004 – 2005 PROGRAMME | |
|--|---|
| FRIDAY 1 OCTOBER 2004 8.00pm for 8.15pm Cholesbury Village Hall | REMINISCENCES OF TWO EVACUEES TO BUCKINGHAMSHIRE Mrs Cherry-Anne Evans and Mrs Lisbeth Lloyd |
| FRIDAY 5 NOVEMBER 2004 8.00pm for 8.15pm St Leonards Parish Hall | DOWNING OF DOWNING STREET - HERO OR SCOUNDREL? Mr Henry Roseveare |
| FRIDAY 3 DECEMBER 2004 8.00pm for 8.15pm St Leonards Parish Hall | THE BLACK DEATH IN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE Mr Julian Hunt |
| FRIDAY 7 JANUARY 2005 8.00pm for 8.15pm St Leonards Parish Hall | RESISTANT WOMEN Mr Hugh Davies |
| FRIDAY 4 FEBRUARY 2005 8.00pm for 8.15pm St Leonards Parish Hall | CHENIES MANOR: ITS HISTORY AND GARDENS Mrs Valerie Edwards |
| FRIDAY 4 MARCH 2005 8.00pm for 8.15pm St Leonards Parish Hall | THE WENDOVER ARM CANAL Mr Roger Leishman |
| FRIDAY 1 APRIL 2005 8.00pm for 8.15pm St Leonards Parish Hall | THE NATIONAL ARCHIVE AT KEW Mrs Ann Morton |
| FRIDAY 6 MAY 2005 8.00pm sharp Cholesbury Village Hall | MEMBERS' EVENING AND AGM Members and Visitors are welcome to a social evening when members will give short talks on subjects of their choice. |
| MEMBERSHIP £6.00 PER ANNUM – VISITORS WELCOME: £2.00 PER MEETING | |
| <i>Coffee and Biscuits are served and a collection is taken</i> | |

About the Speakers

While keeping 'close to home' as often as possible, I have also been fortunate in finding speakers on subjects further afield, which sound intriguing and about which we ought to know more.

Evacuation during the Second World War was undoubtedly traumatic, but must ultimately have had a beneficial influence on our October speakers, for they are still both in Bucks: **Mrs Cherry-Anne Evans** was a teacher at John Colet School, Wendover, and her sister, **Mrs Lisbeth Lloyd**, worked in the X-Ray Department at Stoke Mandeville Hospital.

Mr Henry Roseveare is a former Professor of History at King's College, London, and author of a number of works on financial history and on the Treasury.

Mr Julian Hunt has long qualified as an 'old friend'. Having retired from various permutations of Buckinghamshire County Records, he is now a freelance lecturer and writer on Local History.

Mr Hugh Davies is a guide and lecturer at Bletchley Park, with a special interest in wartime covert operations.

Mrs Valerie Edwards is Chief Guide at Chenies Manor as well as being Founder and Chairman of Ballinger Decorative and Fine Arts Society.

Mr Roger Leishman is a retired civil engineer and currently vice-Chairman of and Restoration Director for the Wendover Arm Trust.

Mrs Ann Morton is a Principal Assistant Keeper of Public Records at Kew, education being her speciality.

Members' Evening. Finally, as always, the Committee urge and, we hope, encourage members to participate in our end of season Members' Evening. This is when amateurs' enthusiasm on any subject comes to the fore. It has always been a success, and we look forward to maintaining this record.

George Cobby

Cholesbury-cum-St Leonards Local History Group Committee

| | | |
|-------------------------------|--|----------------|
| Hon. President: | Mrs E Money The Old Manor House, Cholesbury Common HP23 6ND | (01494 758235) |
| Chairman & Editor: | Mr C Brown Rays Hill Farm, Rays Hill, Braziers End HP5 2UJ | (01494 758890) |
| Deputy Chairman: | Mrs P Thomas Cherry Orchards, Cholesbury Common HP23 6ND | (01494 758460) |
| Secretary: | Mrs S Watson Benton Potts, Hawridge Common HP5 2UH | (01494 758914) |
| Treasurer: | Mrs S Clarke Beechwood, Jenkins Lane, St Leonards, Tring HP23 6NW | (01494 758567) |
| Programme Secretary: | Mr G Cobby 188 Amersham Way, Little Chalfont, Bucks HP6 6SF | (01494 762954) |
| Archivist: | Mrs S Blomfield Chambers Green Farm, St Leonards, Tring HP23 6NP | (01494 758314) |
| Committee Members: | Mr B Rice 13 Chiltern Cottages, Buckland Common, Tring HP23 6NQ | (01494 758131) |

Website: www.cholesbury.com

Snippets -

Founder's Prize

George Cobby was the deserving recipient of the Founder's Prize, voted on at the last AGM. We look forward to hearing about his choice of book, which will be presented to him at a meeting during the year.

Book Sale

Do you have any books on local history? We are planning to have another book sale at the next Members' Evening so if you have any books you are looking to dispose of during the year, particularly any history books, please bring them to any meeting during the year.

I See No Ships!

Next year there will be a nationally organised series of events to commemorate the 200th Anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar. We already have one connection from the villages with the battle and are beginning to plan how we can participate as a local history group. So if you know of any, however tenuous, we would love to hear from you.

Notes on the Archives

Did anyone see the Saturday magazine of The Daily Telegraph earlier this Summer where the Social Stereotypes article featured "The Archivist"? I thought that I had kept the cutting and was intending to quote from it but alas, I cannot find the piece of paper. Do not think that the archives of the group are maintained in the same hit-and-miss manner, the system instituted by Evelyn Money of recording loans from the archives (and their return) continues to be strictly monitored! I am pleased to say that a number of items have been requested and would encourage you to contact me if you wish to have access to any of the items that are held in the "Black Box".

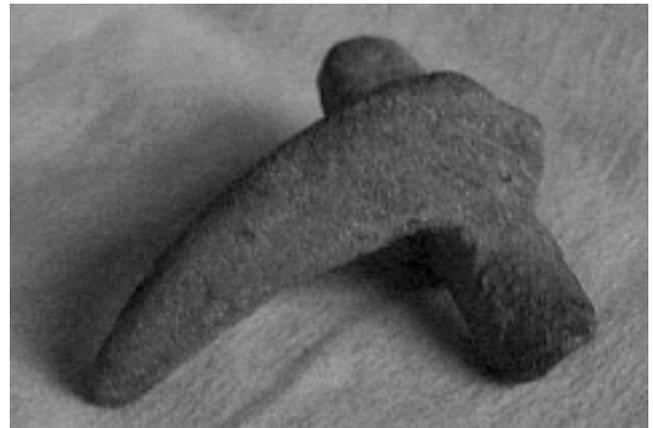
A project that has developed since our Millennium activities is research into the names of fields, footpaths and roads. In the collection we have a book entitled Johnson's Surveyor of the Highways Account Book, with entries dating between 1859 and 1879. The directions to the surveyor include that he must keep "a just and true and particular account of all money" and how it is used on the repair of the highways, and that the book "be open to inspection of every inhabitant rated to the Highway Rate of the parish". Failure to follow the directions will "render yourself liable to a forfeiture of *Five Pounds* for each default". The names of the men working on the roads are recorded, together with where they were employed and the nature of the employment, the number of days, rate per day and total payments. There are references to familiar surnames, Rais (and Raise) Hill and Hook (Oak?) Lane, breaking flints, getting gravel and cleaning roadsides, and refreshment for men.

The working group of Sandy Clarke, Paddy Thomas, Sylvia Watson and myself have continued work on the Catalist database. This will be an ongoing project. There is a long way to go to complete the catalogue of objects in the Black Box that are included in the original index, and we are also gathering new items, which have to be accessioned and recorded. Anyone interested in getting involved with this task is welcome to get in touch with me.

A recent addition has been the bell that used to be in the little chapel that was pulled down at Buckland Common. This has been returned by Mr Alan

Chambers, whose grandfather farmed at Chambers Green Farm, and who is also related to the Brackley family. We were pleased to welcome Alan and his wife and friends at the May meeting.

The visit by the metal-detecting group to the fields at Hastoe turned up some interesting finds, including coins from the reigns of James I and Charles I and a silver rupee from the East India Company dated 1825. I thank Ros Tyrrell from the Buckinghamshire County Museum for letting me have copies of photographs of some of the items found and was pleased that the finders donated some pieces to the Local History Group. Among the items now in our collection is part of a 1st-century brooch (of the Dolphin type, I am informed) and it was interesting to see similar pieces in the collection at the Ashmolean Museum when we visited on the group outing in June.



This visit is reported elsewhere in the Newsletter and members will know that we have a replica of the Bronze Age sword found in Gearys Wood at Hawridge, the original of which is on display in the Ashmolean. I was interested to see in the National Trust Newsletter for this region that the Ashridge Estate also have a replica of a Bronze Age sword, produced, as was ours, by David Parish of the Bucks County Museum, and on display at the Ashridge visitor centre.

It is a privilege to be in charge of the collection and I hope that you will be inspired to make use of the interesting information to be found in the archives.

Shirley Blomfield

Snippet - Walk Leaflets

There are 5 leaflets in the series of *Jubilee Walks in the Hilltop Villages* to commemorate the 50th year of the Queen's reign and the 40th Anniversary of the inauguration of the Local History Group. The walks are: -

1. Cholesbury Hillfort, 2. Hawridge Common and Heath End, 3. St Leonards and Grim's Ditch, 4. Hawridge Mountain and The Vale and 5. Dundridge and Braziers End. Copies of all the walks will be available at Local History Group Meetings and other events in the villages or can be obtained from the Cholesbury LHG website.

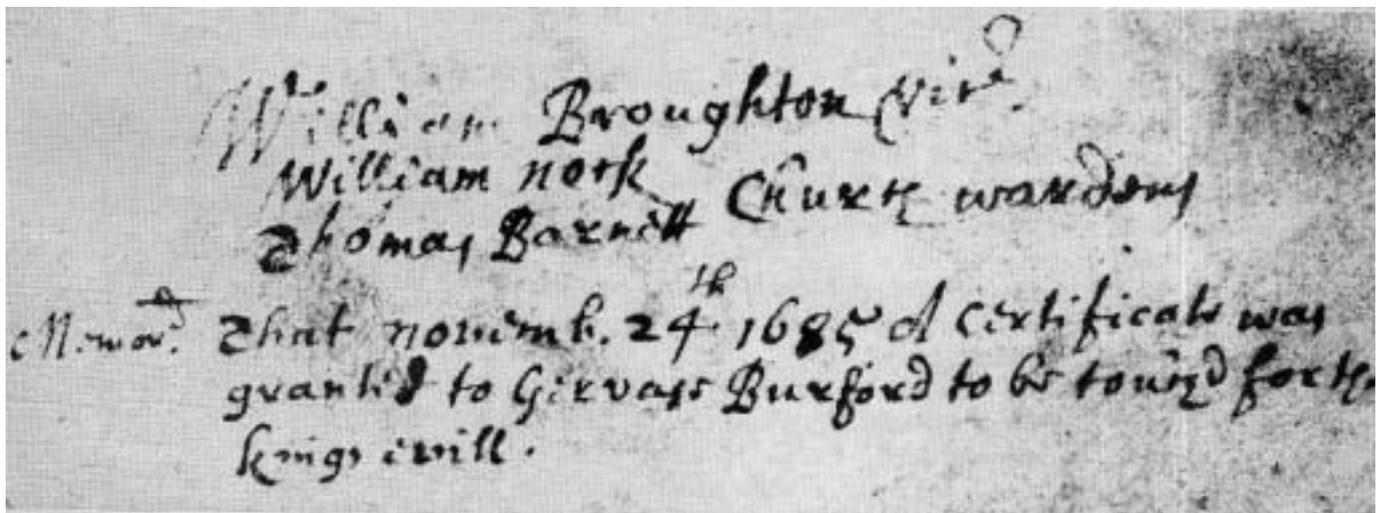
The History Group Library

The Library is growing. Five new titles were added to the list this year. Wendy Austin, the author of “Tring Personalities” and “More Tring Personalities” is one of our regular speakers. “Water from Wendover”, published by The Wendover Arm Trust, is written by Shelley Savage.

The other two books were kindly donated by one of our members, Carys Gadsden. The first is a Chess Valley Archaeological and Historical Society publication called “The Roman Chilterns” and the second is an excellent reference book “Village Records” by John West.

“Village Records” was first published in 1962 but has now been re-written and enlarged. It is not a book for the faint hearted or the light browser, but a serious and very practical guide to finding documents and material to research local and family history and how to make sense of what you find. There is a vast county by county source list and a comprehensive bibliography. Throughout the book, Dr West uses a series of documents from one village, Chaddesley Corbett in Worcestershire, as illustration. He describes how to use county maps, monumental brasses, hearth tax returns, land tax and tithe returns, manorial court rolls and many other sources of information including private records.

In the book, where photographs of documents are used, there are dimensions and, if necessary, a transcript as in the extract below from the Chaddesley Corbett Parish Register:



Size of Register: 18 x 36cm: length of extracts: 2.5 x 6cm.

The transcript reads...

William Broughton Vicar
William nock
Church wardens
Thomas Barnett

Mermond. That November 24th. 1685 a certificate was granted to Gervais Burford to be touched for the Kings evill.

However, if you want just one chapter to dip into that brings history immediately to life, it is the one called ‘Probate Records: Inventories and Wills’. For example, it is impossible not to be intrigued by the inventory of goods made after the death of a William Lyte in 1615. In his Hall, one of the items listed is “4 brass pots, 1 dabnett, 2 pannes” and another “3 payles, with dishes and spones and other treen ware”. The author provides a glossary to help with deciphering inventories. Sadly it does not explain ‘dabnett’.

Please use your library. If you want to borrow any of the books contact me. I will send you a list of titles and you can collect a book directly from me or your choice can be brought to a meeting. I usually bring a small selection of books (limited by weight) to each meeting for members to browse through. Suggestions for new books are welcome.

Paddy Thomas

Metamorphoses

Sandy Clarke's postcard of 1960s St Leonards in the last Newsletter has encouraged me to pen a few remarks about the house pictured in it: DUNDRIDGE COTTAGE. This is not a family history, nor an extended one of the house, because documentation prior to 1900 has so far not been traced. The four photographs illustrate the changes to its external appearance throughout the last century.

The original timber-framed house is believed to date from the late fifteenth century. It was a "one up, one down" with a cowbarn, thatched, with wattle and daub walls, the exterior ones brick-faced, probably in Victorian times. Photograph 1 shows its appearance at not later than the turn of the century. The late Bert Gomm, one of the founder members of the Local History Group, gave me the photo and believed it dated from the 1880s



The lady outside the house is almost certainly Mrs Phoebe Gilbert, and she doesn't look very old here. She died in 1916, aged 87.

When we moved into Dundry Cottage in 1978, locals told us that they remembered animals being shepherded into the barn, but at some time in the 1950s windows were installed, the floor concreted, and the ceiling lowered. A granny flat was added to the north side of the house.



Like much else that was undertaken before our arrival, external appearance hid numerous internal faults. Further alterations were carried out in the 1970s: the barn's small windows were replaced by six-foot long "fish-tank" ones, necessitating the cutting down of more old timbers.

At the opposite end of the house a modern kitchen, admittedly badly needed, was badly built, without



planning permission: single-skin, with eight-foot plate-glass windows, and a flat roof (for sunbathing!). Obviously a weekend DIY job. What a wonderful television series it would have made! By the time we could afford to do something about it, replacement was imperative.

So between 1981 and 1991 we put our stamp on Dundry Cottage. We did not want to alter the house out of all recognition, but it made sense to add a bedroom above the new kitchen, and windows were designed to blend with the original one. Internally, we used old oak whenever possible, took down false ceilings of cardboard and painted lining paper to expose original roof timbers.

The cowbarn, now rechristened the Banqueting Hall, particularly benefited from this, and we were especially pleased that we had thought to restore small windows, as we had not known of the existence of the 1958 photograph at the time.



From the outset we had wanted to create a comfortable home. This could not be done without making considerable but sensible alterations. Conservation was never far from our thoughts and, internally at least, we knew that we had achieved this.

I have written about my former home of twenty-two years with the aims of the History Group's founding fathers in mind. Why not record what you have, especially if you intend to alter what you have? You will be making a useful addition to the Group's archives.

George Cobby

Memories of Buckland Common

This memoir, the final of three published in the Newsletter, has been contributed by Mrs Margaret Probert (formerly Rice, née Eggleton), who was born at Browns Lane, Hastoe, where she lived from 1923 to 1933, when the family moved to Buckland Common.



6 Row Cottages stood on the site where the bungalows below Browns Rise now stand, the houses of Browns Rise being built in what were formerly the gardens. In 6 Row Cottages, my grandmother, Julia Terry, lived at No.1, at No.2 the James family, at No.3 lived 'Cherry' Penn, No.4 not known, at No.5 lived the Eldridge family and at No.6 the Harding family.

Up Bottom Road on the right was a social hut built by subscription on land donated by the owner of Buckland Wood Farm, the Rothschilds. The caretaker was Mrs Harry Penn who lived in Little Twye Cottages. Opposite the social hut lived the Evans, Warr, Brackley and Creed families. At the Britannia Public House I remember you could buy a large 'Wagon Wheel' biscuit for half an old penny. Lew Collier, Ernie's uncle, had a house and also a piece of land round the corner from "*Excels*" bungalow, where he kept farm machinery. The big house on Gilberts Hill was built by 'Ikey' Clarke and for years it was the village shop and Post Office. The Holloway family lived at Dundridge Cottage.

Into Jenkins Lane, and there lived the Jefferies family, Mr and Mrs Tom Creed, the Penfold family, and the Rice family at Dunmovin (now Sundial). Opposite, in a wooden bungalow called the Nutshell, lived Sam Howard. For many years Sam courted Bessie Bishop from the White Lion. Until fairly recently there was a seat outside the pub dedicated to the memory of Sam. Alf and Lizzie Bishop were the landlord and lady of the White Lion, then a Benskins owned pub. They had the use of the field that ran down to Bottom Road, in which they kept a couple of Jersey cows. The cows were milked and Lizzie would separate the cream, some of which she would make into butter, which she would then sell.

There was a visiting butcher, Denny Rance, who came from Wendover Dean. My grandmother would

put half a crown in a dish at the end of a dresser, so if she happened to be up the garden when he called, Denny would open the unlocked door, and leave the weekly meat plus some streaky bacon, and take his money. There was also a baker called Bob Warriar who came from Tring. He would come once or twice a week whatever the weather. From Chesham came Mr Gower the oilman, he also brought washing powder.

There was a regular bus service that came from Chesham via Bellingdon and Oak Lane. Originally the bus terminated at Buckland Common, but later the service was extended to go up Bottom Road, Gilberts Hill, Jenkins Lane and back to Chesham. There was also a bus that you could get at Cholesbury. This bus ran between Chesham and Tring, via Wigginton.

My mother was a firm believer in village conservation and keeping customs and footpaths open. Up to the age of 80 she never missed a Parish Council meeting, and she regularly walked the Parish Bounds. She regularly attended whist drives and Church and other fund raising activities. When she moved out of 8 Chiltern Cottages, she was one of the original occupants of one of the bungalows in Bottom Road.

The only employment in the villages, apart from agricultural, was Rodwell's Brickyards (opposite Chiltern Cottages) and Brown's and Dunton's Brickworks in Shire Lane. We had a District Nurse / Midwife for many years called Nurse Coles who lived in a bungalow at the top of Sandpit Hill. Our local 'Bobby' was PC Topham who lived in the then police house at the top of Rays Hill by the Windmill and who travelled around all the villages on his bicycle. He was 6' 6" and broad with it, so you never gave him any cheek!

Margaret Probert

Summer Outing to the Ashmolean

June 26 was a very wet day, but 18 of us enjoyed this year's Summer Outing to the Ashmolean Museum. We entered Oxford on the excellent Park and Ride system, although we were drenched in the short interval between parking and riding!

*'It was not Napoleon who founded the Ashmolean –
He hardly had a chance, living mostly in France'*

E Clerihew Bentley

It was John Tradescant who founded the original collection in Lambeth, known as The Ark. His son, John, added to The Ark, and made its treasures accessible to the public. Up until then collections were privately owned and seen only by the privileged few. After the death of the younger John Tradescant, the collection passed to Elias Ashmole.

The Ashmolean was opened in 1683 by the future James II and is the largest museum in Great Britain. It is open 6 days a week and admission is free. We went on the '*Treasures of the Ashmolean*' guided tour. The museum is huge – and one can only see a fraction of its treasures in a single visit. Here are a few of the highlights we enjoyed.

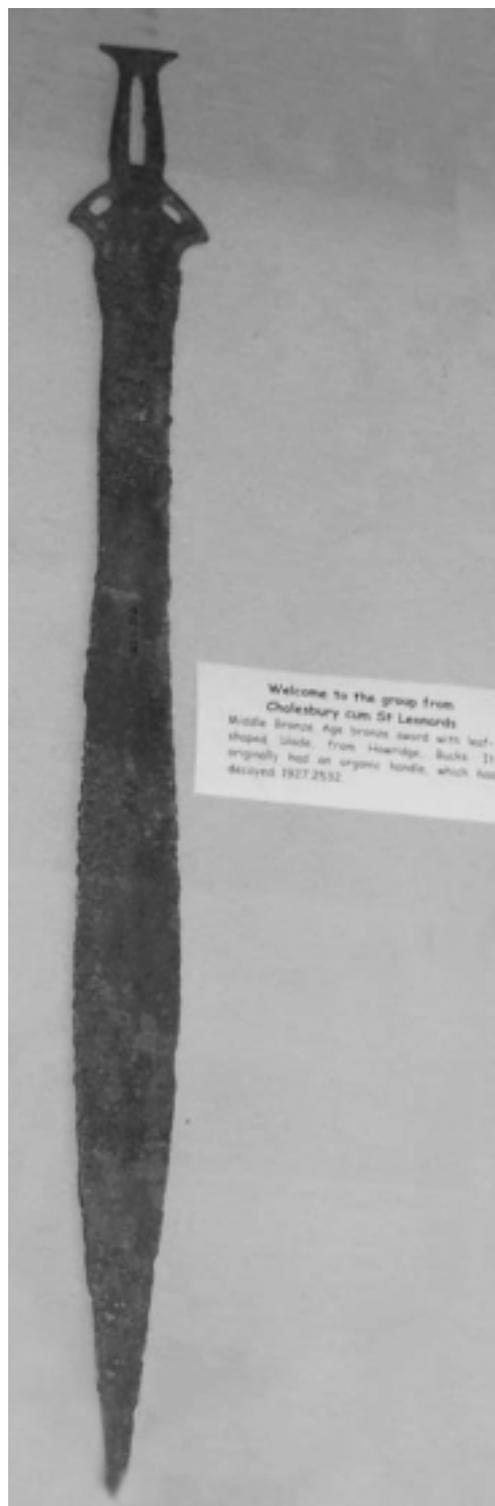
We started by seeing some beautiful jewellery of the 6th and 7th centuries, together with some splendid enamel work, notably the Alfred Jewel found in Somerset in 1693. This is the most precious Anglo Saxon antiquity in the collection with the inscription Aelfred Mec Heht Gewyrca (Alfred ordered me to be made).

We have all heard of Pocahontas, and John Tradescant had travelled to Virginia and acquired Powhatan's Mantle (the father of Pocahontas). This hanging, made of deerskin and decorated with shells, was part of the original Ark collection. In the same room was the lantern said to have been carried by Guy Fawkes when he was arrested, the reinforced hat worn by Judge Bradshaw at the trial of Charles I and the death mask of Oliver Cromwell.

The highlight for us was 'our' sword - the bronze-age sword found at Gearys Wood, Hawridge. The Curator of the museum had kindly added a note 'Welcome to the Group from Cholesbury cum St. Leonards'. For those who saw the replica at the AGM, we are pleased to say the original is identical!

The Ashmolean also has a superb art collection. Unfortunately, the recently acquired Titian *Portrait of Giacomo Doria* (a Genoese merchant) was on loan to Genoa! However, we did see such treasures as a bust by Edward Pierce of Sir Christopher Wren (who looked as if he would blink at any moment), the *High Street at Oxford* as seen by Turner and, of course, *Gilbert Cannan and his Mill* by Mark Gertler. This

shows Gilbert Cannan in front of the windmill on Rays Hill, together with two very eccentric looking dogs, one of whom was the model for 'Nana' in Peter Pan.



As I said before, the museum is huge and we look forward to returning to see more of its treasures on another occasion. Weary and footsore, James and I repaired to the Morse Bar of the Randolph Hotel just across the road for a welcome gin and tonic.

Sylvia Watson

Snippets -

www.cholesbury.com

During the past year more articles about the local history of the Villages have been added to the website. All the walks that we have published as leaflets have also been added. Elsewhere is a diary of parish events, information about the churches and other groups and societies in the four villages. If you are connected to the internet, why not take a look and send us a message to say you have visited and what you think about the website, or suggest other subjects we could cover on the site.

We continue to receive enquiries from other parts of the UK and overseas, asking for help about the history of the area and whether we have any information about ancestors who came from these parts. For those of you who have used the internet to research your family history the most well known site to visit for research, "Cindy's List" will be well-known to you as a repository of links to reputable sites on Local and Family History all over the world. The site is used by those from the US and Canada to seek information about their relatives in the UK and it is with some surprise and pride that we can report our website has been added to the Buckinghamshire section.

Chris Brown

Location Location Location!

I like this entry in an 1861 publication which I came across in the reference section of Chesham Library. It is an entry under Buckland Parish referring to Buckland Common:

"Contains a number of scattered houses, some of which are old. One large house in particular, built of wood and brick, and now divided into tenements, appears to have been of the better class of county residences. On a part of the "common", - a lonely spot - are the remains of a pottery, where the common brown ware was formerly made."

From "History and Topography of Bucks" by J J Sheahan

Shirley Blomfield

Life in the Iron Age –An everyday story of country folk!

During our Society's recent trip to the Ashmolean in Oxford, I was struck by the variety of Iron Age artefacts and yet how little we understand about those who lived in what we romantically refer to these days as the 'Hilltop Villages'. So I thought I would try to pull together some of what is known and what has changed in how lives were lived then and now.

We are lucky to have in our midst an outstanding example of Iron Age man's influence on the Chilterns. Excavations in the 1930s suggested that Cholesbury Hillfort was constructed between 200 to 100 BC by the Cassivellauni people; a time when there were no towns or roads, and tribes were controlled by chiefs and people spoke a range of Celtic languages. The average height of a man was 5'7" and a woman 5'2" and life expectancy was 35-45 years. From skeletal remains it is known that most people who reached this age suffered from severe dental problems and arthritis.

The hillfort continued to be in occupation probably until the first century AD when Claudius came to Britain. There is no evidence that Roman invaders ever came to this area but the control and order they brought would have rendered the hillfort built for defensive purposes redundant. It would have continued to be used to corral livestock, with the inhabitants establishing homesteads outside, possibly the start of the village we know today.



(Reconstructed Iron Age House - Butser, Hants)

Constructing and defending a hillfort from raiders is no minor undertaking, which confirms that a sizable and well-developed community of over 100 inhabited the hillfort. Felling 10,000 trees to build ramparts and palisades would be a considerable task even today, showing they had advanced skills in tool-making. The location's remoteness would also suggest a self-sufficient settlement relying on agriculture and iron smelting but also trading goods. We take water for granted today, the climate was cooler and wetter then, but the two ponds inside the hillfort were vital to survival of people and animals.

Farmers cultivated 'spelt' wheat (a primitive form of what is now grown) and barley mixed with wild rye and oats on land that had previously been cleared during the Bronze Age. Fields radiating out from the hillfort were small (64sq. metres) - the size that could be ploughed in a day. From the grain, unleavened bread, baked in a clay oven, and porridge were produced. The staple foods of an Iron Age diet also included soups and stews comprising boiled meat to which vegetables such as peas, beans, lentils, brassicas and fat hen, now viewed as a garden weed, might be added. Wild crops such as blackberries and nuts as well as honey and mushrooms were also collected. Animals reared included sheep, cattle and pigs, between them providing meat, milk, wool, leather from hides and bone turned into tools.

Investigations of the hillfort have revealed wheel-thrown pottery shards, evidence of iron smelting and the remains of several domestic hearths. In such homesteads utensils used included wooden platters, buckets and tankards (for beer!), knives, spoons of iron, bone and wood, but no forks, and bronze cauldrons to hang over fires. There may have been some opportunity to exchange goods from time to time, being close to an east-west trade route. Coinage did not appear in the Chilterns until the end of the Iron Age around 50BC, and a gold Belgic Stater was found in 1952 dated from this period, but this would not have precluded bartering for salt from Essex or Worcester or amber and coral brought from Europe.



(Belgic Gold Stater)

Wild animals such as boar, deer, otter, badger and beaver were occasionally hunted, but there is little evidence that fish was eaten. Oxen would be used to pull ploughs and heavy loads. There were fewer dogs than you might expect, which may have been used for herding and hunting. Ducks, chickens and geese would be reared. Hares were kept as pets and seen as mystical creatures; their direction of running foretelling the future. Horses were valued animals reserved for pulling light carts and maybe for warriors to ride, although there is little evidence this was a war-mongering society here in the Chilterns.

Many of the craftsman's tools today have their origins in this period. Axes, shears, knives, hammers, tongs, sickles, chisels, files and awls were all made from iron, sometimes combined with wood or bone.



(Iron Age tools – Bronze axe; iron axe; knife with bone handle; needle awl and shears.)

Despite being called the Iron Age, bronze remained important during this period. Beaten into sheets it was made into vessels and prestige items including jewellery, mirrors and even razors. Weapons such as shields and swords were still produced, although these may have been ceremonial. A slingshot was a more common device. Locally produced iron was probably smelted from about 400BC. Valuable metals, including gold and silver, might be seen in high status families who would also have other bronze or brass items that had been decorated or engraved. The techniques of lathe turning and carving seen even today were developed during this period.



(Any resemblance to local people is totally incidental!)

Textiles were produced from spinning wool, which would be dyed and woven into checked and striped patterns. There was no cotton until after the Romans arrived. Personal decoration with ornaments was both fashionable and functional with highly crafted metal necklaces and bracelets worn by men and women. Brooches and pins were used as clothes fasteners, as were belts on which other items were attached. Glass, in the form of brightly coloured beads and bracelets or as studs in bone ornaments or gaming pieces, was highly valued.

All in all, I guess it is fair to say life in these parts then and now is not that dissimilar!

Chris Brown