

Abingdon Area  
Archaeological and Historical  
Society

[www.AAAHS.org.uk](http://www.AAAHS.org.uk)



**NEWSLETTER - SPRING 2008**

**40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Issue**

**Remember 1968?**



- ◆ MG became part of British Leyland
- ◆ Communists launch Tet offensive in Vietnam
- ◆ Soviet forces invade Czechoslovakia ending Prague Spring
- ◆ Student riots in Paris and other European cities
- ◆ Dr Martin Luther King, Jr and Robert Kennedy assassinated

**And AAAHS founded. Our keynote lecture (and Lambrick lecture) is on 15<sup>th</sup> May. Roger Thomas will speak on the Archaeology of Abingdon 1968 – 2008: 40 years of AAAHS**



## ABINGDON 1968

I came to Abingdon in 1968 when it was a small, thriving market town, home of M.G. Cars and Morlands Brewery. Most of the inhabitants either worked at the factory or the Brewery, making it a close-knit community.

At the time there was a new shopping precinct which was only half-finished, and the new Woolworths had not been built, their store was in a small shop down the High Street which is now known as "Cargo".

I always liked going to the cattle market, to see them being auctioned. All the public houses in the vicinity were allowed to stay open all afternoon. On market day the square would be packed with stalls, and sometimes there would be so many that some of them would have to go under the County Hall. When the square was not in use cars were allowed to be parked there.

The only entertainment I can remember was the Regal Cinema, every time I went there it was nearly full, even though it was nearly always cold. I used to like going for walks, and my favourite one was down Caldecott Road, to see Caldecott house, which was a Dr Barnado's home. I was invited several times to go to firework displays. I some times walked down Bridge Street to the river and the Old Gaol was all closed up.

Just a couple of miles outside the town was the R.A.F.Camp and that year the Queen made a visit to see a display for the Golden Jubilee that year.

Since then there have been new estates built, new supermarkets, a multi-story car park and a bypass. All these things have made changes, some good and some bad. Abingdon may have changed, but I hope the traditions will never be forgotten.

*Jenny Devanney*



On its 50th Anniversary in 1968, the Royal Air Force saluted Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second with this formation of 31 Jet Provost aircraft at Abingdon Airshow. (picture courtesy of Peter Goodearl)

## Meetings Programme:

All at the Northcourt Centre starting at 7.45pm. Members free. Visitors welcome (£2.00 entry)

**20 Mar 2008 Trevor Davies:** A little less work and a little more time: Self-improvement, entertainment and leisure in Victorian Abingdon

**17 Apr 2008 Brig. Chris Gallaway:** Ditchley Park; then and now

**15 May 2008 Roger Thomas:**  
The Archaeology of Abingdon 1968 - 2008; 40 years of AAAHS

**19 Jun 2008 Various Members:** Members/open evening

## Outings

The outing to **Oxford Town Hall** has now been confirmed. Meet at **Thursday 24th April, 11.30am**. Tim Cox will be showing us around the Lord Mayors parlour, council chamber, assembly room and old library as well as the main hall and city plate.

## Chairman's Report

It hardly seems possible that Mrs Lucy Hales' original letter to the North Berkshire Herald, calling for help in recording Abingdon's threatened archaeology was written forty years ago. The Abingdon and District Archaeological Society had been born. Early enthusiasm for excavation around the town was quickly joined by that of members with interests in historical research and by 1974 the name of the society had been changed to the Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society to reflect this.

This year our May lecture meeting will be rather special to celebrate this milestone. Featuring Roger Thomas (a founder member at age 11), reminiscing on "Forty Years of Archaeology in Abingdon", an exhibition reminding you all of all the fun we've had over the years plus wine and nibbles, this will be an evening not to be missed.

Forty years on we are still going strong! In fact the year has started spectacularly with the relaunched, *even better* Ock Street Exhibition and the publication of Ock Street Remembered. It's a while since I've seen the museum so humming with visitors. I hope you all had a chance to visit because I would have liked to have had more time to go back and have another browse.

Meanwhile many of you continue to enjoy our monthly lecture meetings where as always, we try to provide a mix of the local, the exotic, the archaeological and the historical. Meetings always end with refreshments and a chance to

socialise and swap notes with fellow members. We also provide information about other local societies and events which might be of interest.

Whilst on the subject of information can I encourage those of you with internet access to make use of our AAHS website and also our own discussion group. This is a great way of finding out more about the local area and to share information with others. Recent topics have included the “mystery” nonconformist cemetery excavated at the Vineyard, the Abbey fishponds (were they *Abbey* ponds?), reminiscences of past Abingdonians, Caldecott House and Clarke’s clothing factory.

Our specialist groups continue to flourish, with the diggers currently writing-up the Bayworth excavation. You don’t need any experience to join them, (just a willingness to bond with Medieval pottery)! For those actively involved in historical research, the history group continue to meet and share ideas several times a year at 35 Ock Street. If you are mining the archive face alone and feeling isolated – don’t be – there are others out there!

Other chances to get involved include joining our guided tour of Oxford Town Hall, or helping out at this year’s “Clubs and Societies Day” at the Guildhall, where we will be manning a stall as ever.

Do get involved, enjoy yourselves and see you all the next lecture!

*Rachel Everett, Chairman*

## **Ock Street Remembered - An Abingdon Community**

The book of the Ock Street exhibition is out now, and available from both book shops in Abingdon and in the Museum.

## **AAHS Membership and Treasurer’s Report**

So far this year we have 86 paid up members of whom 26 are families. Unfortunately this is slightly down on last year mainly because several past members have resigned as they are no longer able to attend lectures due to increasing age and infirmity. Hopefully the interest in the society generated by the excellent Ock Street exhibition will result in some more new members.

We have given a grant to the Ock Street group to help pay for the exhibition and also £500 towards publishing their book but we are confident that most of this will be eventually be repaid by the book sales.

I note from last year’s newsletter that our previous treasurer was looking in to the possibility of subscriptions to be paid by standing order. The committee has discussed this but unfortunately we are unable to do this at present, so our apologies to those who were hoping to pay by this method.

*Sally Ainslie tel: 01235 529720 [membership@www.aaahs.org.uk](mailto:membership@www.aaahs.org.uk)*

## Local History Group

Michael Hambleton gave his analysis of a pamphlet written by an Abingdon man of the seventeenth century, John Atherton, who had a serious disagreement with the Baptist leader, John Pendarves. He seems to have decided that there was no scriptural basis for Pendarves's religious authority, and then was indignant to find himself excommunicated. The interest was in the light that the tract throws on the relations among the various religious groupings that pullulated at that time, the names of Pendarves's leading associates, and the hitherto unknown location of the early Baptist meetings - what is now the Roysse Room in the Guildhall.

Dick Barnes and Judy White have had access to some documents - a family history and an autobiography - of Ron Williams, the former Abingdon greengrocer, which seem to be full of interest and worthy of publication. Some further contact with the family seems indicated.

Ron Dell brought greetings from the newly-formed local history society at Sutton Courtenay which, he explained, has a full committee but so far no members. There's a lot of history at Sutton Courtenay crying out for research, and we wish the new group well.

And, back on the Baptist theme, Michael and I discussed the bell from the Tomkins almshouses, now in the museum, with its rather gnomic inscription. The problem is that we have no evidence that the unfortunate Nathaniel Tomkins referred to, hanged in London in 1643 for alleged Royalism, was related to the Abingdon Tomkins family.

The next meeting will be on **Tuesday 27 May**.

*Manfred Brod*

## A Request from Sunningwell primary School

"We are looking for some help to unpick the history of (possibly to physically unearth) the footings of a pair of cottages that stand in a spinney owned by our school. Recently we have had to clear some of the area and remove dangerous trees so that children can enter the space. In so doing we have found a range of objects, pottery and ironwork (mostly C20th), pathways and possibly the chimney stack.

From a 1930s auction document we believe the cottages may date back to Tudor times. Sadly the cottages were demolished shortly after the sale.

We are very keen that the children be involved in the process and have already been advised that the museum at Woodstock will help us to identify and date finds, I hope to arrange a trip to the museum soon. In addition we would very much like some enthusiastic, knowledgeable volunteers to help do a 'Time Team' style investigation on the building itself."

If you can help, please contact Anita Leech (Class 3 Teacher, Sunningwell Primary). Email: [anita\\_joy\\_leech@hotmail.com](mailto:anita_joy_leech@hotmail.com)

## **Abingdon Joint Environmental Trust (JET)**

Elizabeth Drury is the Society's co-opted member on the Abingdon JET. Recent discussions by the JET which might be of interest to our members include:-

Members of JET agreed to give the Ock Street Heritage Group a loan of £500 towards the publication of a book to go alongside the 'Ock Street Remembered' Exhibition, The loan is to be repaid if and when sales of the book allow.

The poor state of the wall in Stratton Way and also the wall between Stratton Way and Withington Court was discussed. The Trust would like to see the appearance of the walls improved. There is however a problem with identifying the owners.

Town Councillor Alistair Fear is organizing the 2008 Heritage Day. I am sure he would appreciate any new ideas that will help continue the success that Heritage Day has been in Abingdon over recent years.

If you have any suggestions that you wish to be put forward to the JET, please let Elizabeth know on 01235 553636.

## **Information on the Old Gaol Proposal**

[http://www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/news\\_views/topical\\_issues/detailpage-2232.asp](http://www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/news_views/topical_issues/detailpage-2232.asp) : Details of the proposals for the development of the Old Gaol, police station and the grounds of Twickenham House.

Also see our website <http://www.aaahs.org.uk/> for the story of the Ghost of the Old Gaol.

And a description of the old police station was produced by the Oxfordshire Building record - <http://www.oxfordshirepast.net/obr/Police%20station.pdf>

## **Try these!**

Some more websites of interest:-

[www.abingdonwalks.co.uk](http://www.abingdonwalks.co.uk)

Ideas for historical (and other) walks around Abingdon

[www.darkarchivist.com](http://www.darkarchivist.com)

Try your knowledge of Oxfordshire's history in this time travelling game

<http://www.headington.org.uk/oxon/index.htm>

Oxford History website – offers a historical tour of every building in The High, Broad Street and St Giles.

## **Dates for Your Diary. Some talks with a historical bias:-**

**Oxford Castle (Unlocked The Key Learning Centre)**, Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> March, 6pm - 7.30pm: **“The Siege Of Oxford - Oxford in the English Civil War”** Julian Munby of Oxford Archaeology. £5pp [www.oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk](http://www.oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk) / email: education@oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk / Tel. 01865 260668

**Longworth History Society**, Southmoor Village Hall at 7.30 p.m. Thursday 20 March. **“Oxford University Press – 500 Years Of History.”** Martin Maw of OUP explains how Oxford University has been involved with printing since the time of William Caxton. Martin covers its growth to become the greatest academic publishing house in the world today, and includes both the story behind the *Oxford English Dictionary* and OUP's part in printing the first edition of *Alice in Wonderland*.

**Sutton Courtenay History Society** (Inaugural Lecture). The Abbey Sutton Courtenay at 8.00pm. Wednesday April 2<sup>nd</sup>. **“The History of Sutton Courtenay”**.

**Ashmolean Museum (Headley Lecture Theatre)**, Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> April, 11am - 4pm: **“The Long Bow - Changing the Face of Medieval Warfare”**. Study day with Magnus Sigurdsson, Master Armourer and Ancient Arms Specialist. £25 incl lunch and refreshments. Tel. book on 278015

**Marcham Society** Annual Lecture, Marcham Church at 7.45pm. Tuesday May 13<sup>th</sup>: Janey Cumber - **“Abingdon after the Abbey”**

**Longworth History Society**, Southmoor Village Hall at 7.30 p.m. Wednesday 14 May. **“Teenage Years In A Japanese Internment Camp.”** Joyce Cotterill, who lives in Southmoor, grew up in China. She unfolds her experience of being interned by the Japanese during the Second World War.

### ***Editor's Notes***

Thanks to all members for their contributions and feedback – all gratefully received.

Please note that the views contained in the articles are those of the contributors rather than the society itself, and contributions may be edited for content.

*Tim Barnett, Newsletter Editor*

## **‘Glebe Field’ Walk by Gozzards Ford**

Whilst searching for landscape and geological information on the streams flowing into and out of Marcham, I was strolling around Google Earth (<http://earth.google.com>) as you do on occasion, when I tripped over a formation – “A Big Round Thing” - which appeared to scream “artificial”.

We have all been enthused by Gary Lock’s lectures on Frilford’s ‘semi-amphitheatre’ and this seemed to be in that category – big, round and looking very un-natural. Zooming in on the feature, worse was to follow. It had TWO barrows associated with it, one 100 m distant north-east and a fainter one 30m to the west! Just half a kilometre south-east lay Barrow Farm. You cannot ask for a bigger red herring in the archaeological world.

The closest formation similar in size (some 250m in diameter) to the BRT (Big Round Thing) was Cherbury Camp, an Iron Age lowland ‘fort’ structure near to Charney Bassett, with the River Ock providing a defensive surround to the fort banks. I forwarded this image to our Chairperson and the SMR at Westgate, asking for opinions. Westgate knew about one barrow but nothing about the BRT, whilst Rachel got excited about Neolithic causewayed enclosures!! A visit now became necessary after first obtaining permission from the owner and farm manager.

At first glance, the BRT stood out in the field with finer grass than the surrounding area. It appeared to be slightly higher than its surroundings to the northern, eastern and southern boundaries, where rougher, swampier ground prevailed, when compared to the much drier aspect of the BRT.

Walking up the western path into the next field north, Upper Glebe Field, showed rather odd rises and falls in the hedge-line, without corresponding features in the fields either side, debated as field boundaries but of unknown origin, although thought to be early (monasterial, iron age, Neolithic?). This field showed wide shallow pits (some 70m x 30m) although now grassed over and left after stone extraction when the village of Gozzards Ford was being built.

The eastern boundary is formed by the Sandford Brook, which branches around the Barrow Farm Fen, a newly created SSSI (1970) which includes the pits left by peat extraction, whilst to the south is Lower Glebe Field with grazing for sheep and a large Anti-Tank Pill Box.

Back in Glebe Field, along the western boundary was a 30m wide ploughed headland and – Oh Joy! – in the hedgerow was a slightly raised bank corresponding with the edge of the second barrow, which was 28m in diameter but, apart from the hedgerow bank, completely absent, ploughed flat after some 3,000 to 4,000 years since it was raised. A search for the other barrow has, so far, proved inconclusive with nothing showing in the terrain. Glebe Field is now in stewardship [English Nature] so only the 30m wide headland on the western boundary was available for field-walking.





**Glebe Field: Whilst Barrow 1 is obvious, Barrow 2 was much fainter and had been badly cut by the plough. The Big Round Thing is, I now suspect, pure geology with the underlying Corallian limestone closer to the surface - ie only a thin soil cover.**

After my preliminary 'look-see' walk, the Society members were queried as to a date for the field walk proper, set for Sunday, 25<sup>th</sup> November, a fine dry sunny day (were we lucky? Oh Yes!). With six adults and two juveniles, we walked up the 400m north-south stretch and back again, collecting some four dozen items, mostly worked flints (about 20-30 pieces) but with some 10 Roman grey ware pieces and a meagre four or five items of Victorian potsherds – no medieval nor post-medieval at all.

The flints were rather exciting since they nearly all came from near the barrow area, suggesting that this was occupied rather than just the site of an isolated barrow. Rachel, eagle-eyed as ever, found a single tiny piece of Neolithic sherd, fired on one side, not on the other, showing it to be a “bonfire” pot rather than a kiln-fired pot, a very nice end to the walk.

Finally, I dug out the Geological Survey map for the Abingdon area. Oh dear, just where the BRT was located, lay a rather appropriately rounded extension of the coral rag limestone, corresponding much too well with the location of the BRT. Ah, so not an artificial feature after all.

Thoughts about the field:-

You have to stand in the field to appreciate how it would have served local inhabitants 3,000 to 4,000 years ago. The BRT seems a good site for a round house farmstead, with views out across the Vale, the burial barrows of the ancestors adjacent and fresh running water just a short walk distant, although I doubt I could ever prove this, with the field in stewardship and not available for a dig. Perhaps geo-physics might show more but since any early dwelling would have been post and wattle, such signs would be very difficult to detect.

Perhaps it is better to preserve our dreams and look for the next BRT in the landscape?

Roger, wandering dreamy eyed and shivering in the brisker December air.

*Roger Gelder*

## **Elma's Story**

Although the General Strike may not have affected Abingdon directly it brought economic hardship to everyone. It was around this time however that Alfred and Nelly Hewitt bought an empty shop in Spring Road (now converted into houses, 10 and 10a). The previous owner was a Mr Ploughman, landlord of the Prince of Wales (now the British Legion Club), and the price was £190.

It must have been a decision requiring considerable courage. Neither of them was young, and in the previous year and at the age of 47, Nelly gave birth to their only child, Elma. Alfred could not read or write until Nelly taught him; he had a milk round and they lived in digs.

That courageous decision showed great foresight. The Pavlova Glove factory was already established round the corner; the MG car factory began two years later and, in 1932, RAF Abingdon opened. Passing trade came by foot and bicycle, and early morning business often exceeded takings for the whole of the remaining day. And some years later, trade increased even more as men gathered in Ock Street for buses to take them to the car factories in Cowley. Hewitt's, as the shop became known, sold 'everything' but the biggest-selling item was tobacco for roll-your-owns or pipes, or as cigarettes which, in the early days, were sold loose because customers often could not afford to buy them by the packet.

Eventually, Nelly's eldest sister came to live in the flat above the shop; two more sisters were frequent visitors and all three sisters subsequently died there. When Elma married, her husband moved in too. With just three bedrooms, two living rooms and a toilet in the yard, it seems very crowded by today's standards but, at the time, it was probably quite normal. And Hewitt's provided a living for them all.

The shop was open between 6.00am and 7.30pm every day except Sunday, when it closed at 1.00pm. It was becoming hard work for its aging owners

and Elma was taken out of school when she was just 13 so that she could run the shop for them. It was the outbreak of war and the MG factory switched from manufacturing cars to tanks; Elma well remembers them being road-tested outside the shop. Disaster nearly struck some time later when Drew's timber yard (now Abingdon Bathrooms and Kitchens, and just behind the shop) caught fire. The Oxford Mail of 26 May 1956 reports that the smoke could be seen from East Hendred. The Berkshire and Reading Fire Service was quickly on the scene, followed by a fire tender from RAF Abingdon, summoned by an officer who had been buying cigarettes from Hewitt's. Nevertheless it took some time to contain the fire, and not before Hewitt's and some other properties in Spring Road were damaged.

In 1965 two more deaths occurred in the shop: Elma's parents, and they died within 10 days of each other. She decided to sell up but, sadly, the new owners were unprepared for the work it entailed and Hewitt's soon closed. However, behind this story of a successful family business lies another which reflects the harsh realities of life for an earlier generation.

Alfred Hewitt told Elma that he was born an orphan in 'Strangeways Workhouse' around 1880 and that, at the age of seven, he was shipped to Canada as one of the 100,000 'home children'. However, with help from the archives of Barnardo's and the Together Trust, we have been able to piece together a rather different story. In 1893, at the age of 14 he was admitted to Manchester & Salford Boys' and Girls' Refuges & Children's Aid Society, Strangeways because, according to the official report 'Alfred has been living with his father at the above address up to three weeks ago when his step-mother turned him out. '... Father has been very unkind to lad.' It was not until the following year that he was sent to Canada where he managed to save enough from his meagre wages to pay for his own passage back to Manchester two years later. He worked on a farm in Oldham and in 1899 he joined the Midland Railway. There is a rather touching letter, presumably written for him, in which he asks the Refuge for details of his age and other information which the railway required about his background. In 1901 he joined the Royal Army Service Corps as a farrier until his discharge at the end of the First World War.

One of Alfred's comrades during the second drive towards Passchendaele was Frederick Slade. Frederick was a stretcher-bearer who, after eight months of continuous front-line service, became overwhelmed by the carnage he witnessed every day. His reluctance to continue resulted in a 90-day sentence for disobedience and when he again refused to go to the front, he was court-martialed. On 14 December 1917 he became one of the 306 British servicemen who were shot at dawn.

Because Alfred had no family he was given a parcel which had been sent to Frederick by his sister. His sergeant wrote to her from Alfred's dictation; it must have been so difficult for someone with no education to express himself to a total stranger and in such horrifying circumstances. The episode was never again mentioned by Frederick's staunchly-disciplined family who felt shamed by his failure to do his duty. It was not until 2006, when the War

Pardons were announced, that Elma managed to piece this part of the story together.

But the story has a happy ending. The sister to whom Alfred wrote his painful letter was Nelly; they continued to correspond and after the War they got married. Nelly had 12 siblings of whom six died as children from fever or diphtheria. She worked as chief cashier in a London bank, experience which must have contributed to the success of Hewitt's. Why they came to Abingdon is not recorded, but their enterprise became part of the fabric which sustained this little market town for the next 40 years.

All that is now a distant memory of course. Abingdon no longer has a cattle market, manufacturing industries have come and gone, family-run businesses like Hewitt's struggle to survive and consumption of its mainstay – tobacco – is now banned in public places. Elma has seen all these changes; she has never left Abingdon and now lives in St Helen's Court.

Andrew Bax



### **Happy 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

And finally, in this year of anniversaries, we celebrate 80 years since the old Culham Bridge (pictured above) was pensioned off and the “new” one - Bridge no 142 - over the Swift Ditch (or Back Water) was opened. Hidden in the trees on the right as you leave Abingdon and just before the Burycroft, it's not to be confused with the bridge at Culham – that's Sutton Bridge!

The new bridge took 6 years to build. The Oxfordshire and Berkshire County Councils tried to get Christ's Hospital to pay for the new bridge on the grounds that they (and the Fraternity of the Holy Cross before them) had been

maintaining the old one for 500 years – but they met with limited success!

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