

Pitstone Local History Society

Newsletter Spring 2001



PLEASE RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP

ADULTS £6 CONCESSIONS £4

FAMILIES £9

**USE THE FORM AT THE END OF THE
NEWSLETTER.**

The **Annual General Meeting** will be held on
Thursday 17th May at 8.00pm in the **New
Committee Room at Pitstone Memorial Hall.**

The entrance to this comfortable room is at
the **back** of the hall. The room has been
booked for all future meetings. Attendance at
meetings has been very steady this year.
Perhaps a ground floor venue and upholstered
chairs will encourage you all to come and
bring visitors with you. The hall is nearly
opposite the Museum on Vicarage Road
Pitstone.

Changes are afoot for both the Committee and
the Trustees this year so your attendance is
important. The Society's change of name has
also to be ratified by the membership

Programme

**All to take place in the New Committee
Room of Pitstone Memorial Hall**

Thursday 17th May 2001

Our Annual General Meeting will take place
first of all. Then Gill Arney, our Museum
archivist, will illustrate a slice of local history
from museum resources.

Thursday 21st June 2001 * Straw Plaiting**

Veronica Main is the resident straw plaiter at
Luton Museum. She is in great demand for her
talks and straw plait tuition. I recently
attended one of her workshops at Wingrave.
This time I have not booked her for a
workshop. She is to give us an introductory
talk with slides.

Thursday 19th July 2001 * Cheese and Wine at Pitstone Green Museum**

This will begin at 7.30pm in order to take
advantage of the light whilst we can. This
always proves a popular event and gives
members and friends alike the opportunity to
view this year's improvements in the Museum.
All we need to do is to book a beautiful balmy
evening. We intend to hold a raffle during the
evening and would be grateful for any prizes
that you may wish to contribute.

Thursday 20th September 2001 * The Religious Houses of Bedfordshire**

Vivienne Edwards is our speaker on this
occasion. Although she will mainly be
concentrating on Bedfordshire she will briefly
venture into Hertfordshire to include the
Benedictines of St Albans Abbey as well as
numerous other types of monastery and
nunnery including those with members of
Cistercian and Augustinian orders

Sue Lipscomb

Programme Secretary

Help needed

Open Days make a good day out for many people and they show the Museum at its best. To keep up the standard, help is needed in the catering department. The work is not too demanding and you get to meet the visitors who can be very interesting people. If you would like to give it a try ring Helen Hickson on 01442 823894

Val Rayner would also like to hear from more crafts people. If you have a craft or you know anyone who would like to demonstrate and/or sell their work please get in touch with her on 01296 661967

Ford End Watermill - A New Lease

The 25 year lease on the mill signed in 1979 expires in April 2004. Because of the time it takes, we need to start thinking about a new lease shortly in order to prepare for formal negotiations with Paul Jellis, who now farms at Ford End and is our landlord. Then solicitors will have to be engaged. However, before we do start to negotiate, the Executive Committee agreed that the views of members should be sought at the AGM on the 17th May. A motion will therefore be put to the effect that the Society should go ahead with a new lease. Why should we accept responsibility for the mill any more? What are the pros and cons?

The Society has been involved with the watermill since 1965 and members have put in a lot of effort, time and money over the years into preserving, then restoring, it to working order. It is now a nationally significant mill of its type. Our objectives have been to "maintain and preserve, by voluntary effort, Ford End as a working example of a farm watermill in the late 1800s, as part of the local heritage, for the benefit of the community and as a practical resource" (Mission Statement). We have been very successful in meeting these objectives and have received praise and appreciation from many organisations and individuals. The visitors' book contains numerous entries like "excellent restoration of an old mill", "a real Mill-enium treat!", "great to see a mill working". A nationally

known millwright, in quoting to renew the spur wheel cogs, wrote "Your mill is delightful - a real treasure of local history and a most important example - now rare - of a vernacular country mill which has survived the rigours of changea very well presented mill". Every support should be given to the Society to maintain this mill in order that present and future generations can continue to enjoy this wonderful example of local history". Which really says it all. Officers of the Mills Section of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) are more than satisfied with the way the mill has been preserved and restored, echoing the comments of the millwright above. They have given constant encouragement to our work and clearly what we have achieved is appreciated in the national context - Ford End is now well known throughout the mills fraternity as a working corn mill producing stone ground wholemeal flour for sale to the public. The local community, notably Ivinghoe Parish Council, is very pleased with what we are doing to preserve their local heritage and is very supportive. Indeed the Local Entertainments Committee gave a grant of £200 to pay for the dressing of the millstones. However, it is in the educational field that the mill has shown its real value. In the 3 years to December 2000, 5998 children and teachers have visited it, many coming from the Dell Farm (Whipsnade) and the Chiltern (Ivinghoe) Outdoor Study Centres. Teachers' views can be summed up by the comments of a headmaster whose school visits 4 times every year "Absolutely brilliant; the children find it so interesting and informative. It fits well into our teaching".

The mill has been financially successful, having made a surplus every year since April 1994. For example, in 1999/2000, the excess of income over expenditure was £2232. It is a financially viable enterprise and currently has no need to call upon the Society for support. A strong credit balance of more than £1000 has been built up which will help to ensure its future financial independence.

Moreover, the mill has been restored to such a level that, apart from the hurst frame supports for which grant support funds aid could be sought, as far as can be seen, no major expenditure is anticipated in the foreseeable future, although renovation, repair and restoration will have to continue.

To advise us in this work, we have engaged the services of a technical consultant on a travelling expenses basis. He has had 45 years experience of mills, milling, millwrighting and mill recording. He is a SPAB Mills Section committee member and owns and operates his own mill in Oxfordshire. The mill is a listed grade II building. It is also a provisionally registered museum, a status which gives standing as we have to maintain minimum nationally set standards and which opens the doors to obtaining grants towards the cost of projects, like renewing the spur wheel cogs. For this we received a grant of £1138 towards a total cost of £1200 from a fund administered by the Science Museum.

Those are just some of 'upsides', but as in all aspects of life there are 'downsides' as well. The mill is no exception, so what are the possible problems associated with it? Firstly, there is no apparent successor to, or understudy for the mill manager who is now 70 and who cannot continue indefinitely. Whilst his being unable or unwilling to continue might cause a hiccup, there should be no real problem for the Society; it could still look after the mill but on a reduced scale - on a 'care and maintenance' basis - until a new mill manager comes forward. This is what happened in the past with no serious impairment.

Secondly, the mill dam is leaking and since the greater part of it is in the Society's compound, it may be held responsible for it. The dam was examined by a hydrological engineer in April 1995 and whilst confirming that it was leaking, he did not think there was any cause for real concern. Had there been, he would have said so to cover himself. If remedial work became necessary, it would be expensive, but grants

would be available provided the mill remains a registered museum. However, the heavy rainfall during the winter months, filling the mill pond to the brim and creating a lot of water pressure has had no apparent adverse effect. It has been a good test.

Thirdly, volunteers to help at the mill when open to the public and with school parties are both falling in numbers and increasing in age and infirmity. This problem is not unique to the mill and is one for the Society as a whole, as with other societies. It is noteworthy that the majority of volunteers working at the mill on restoration etc. are not Society members - they are just interested in mills and milling.

Several who help when the mill is open are also non-members. Some of you may have worries about the future, say, for example, if the Society found itself in a position of not being able to look after the mill for any reason. The present lease contains 'get-out' clauses by which the Society can give one year's notice of quitting, or 3 months if the Society is wound up. There is no reason why similar clauses should not be included in any new lease. Not to sign a lease would mean losing everything we have worked for and achieved, for let there be no mistake, if we were to abandon the mill, it would be totally abandoned for there is nobody who would look after it. Un-cared for and un-maintained mills have a propensity for rapidly falling into disrepair and decay, thus threatening their very existence. Furthermore, without a lease, the mill would cease to be a registered museum and curatorial and financial support would disappear. Also, the Society would have to repay the grant of £1138 for the spur wheel cogs. Considering everything, the future of the mill looks optimistic provided the Society remains in control, otherwise it is doubtful whether it will have any future at all.

David Lindsey

Odd item

I have found an account book for 1850 in the museum. It details somebody's daily

expenditure at the local shop. The family ate beef, hand of pork and mutton. They bought 2 B pepper 2d, 1 candles 5d (doz?), mealflour 1/9 1/2 eggs 1d each and other everyday items such as soda and blue 4d, suet 3d and melts 3d but does anyone know what was 3 Ribspear 1/4 1/2 or pluck 1/2 1/2

Museum Report

Having reached the end of our closed season things did not go quite as planned. We only had two projects envisaged, these being to complete the layout of the Black Shed and then work on the new meeting room. In the last week or two the Black Shed project has moved fast and we will hopefully finish before the first Sunday opening. We now have limited access to the new meeting room, sufficient to keep everyone busy. There still remains about a third of the room for Jeff to clear and it is now unlikely that the room will be completed before the end of the year. Amongst our volunteers, Alan and Michael are applying their carpentry skills to the repairing or replacing of rotten parts of the doors and windows in the new meeting room and Peter Keeley is looking after all the electrical work. At least Jeff must be happy, he has a new gate, all painted in Ashridge red just outside his house and his clock has been repaired, the dials refurbished and the clock painted.

Jack Brampton has been working away on his mechanical man which operates one of the winnowers and it is quite something to watch when its all going. Malcolm has been busy restoring a chaff cutter and knife cleaner, both looking very impressive with their gold lettering. I have had to cover the ceiling of the science rooms with heavy polystyrene sheets as condensation from the outer roof has been dripping onto the false ceiling boards, turning them black with mould. Ken's Allis Chalmers tractor is making headway but it has not been the weather for that sort of work. We have another recruit from the engine club, Maurice Wingrove, who has just retired in his trade as a plumber. He came to the museum on Easter Monday and gave a

demonstration of lead working which proved very interesting for our visitors.

Insurance problems are raising their heads again, particularly following the incident a couple of years ago when a small boy put his fingers in a mangle and another child turned the handle. We now are required to look at the danger problems around the museum site. It is not just tying up wheels that can be turned, there is farm machinery and other equipment that has dangerous bits sticking out all over the place on which children or even adults can climb on or fall against. Trying to fence off everything is a nightmare and would make the job of mowing the grass in and around these objects almost impossible.

In the weeks previous to Easter we were uncertain if we would open following objections from the owner of the sheep in the orchard. I was particularly concerned about not opening as it could lead to further open days being cancelled and possibly for all this year if the outbreak was not cleared up soon. If this happened not only would we lose several thousand pounds income, still have to pay our bills and find that next year our volunteers had found other activities to occupy their time, jeopardising the future of the museum. Fortunately Don Levy came to our aid and saved the situation by arranging for an electric fence to be erected in our orchard to keep the sheep and the public as far apart as MAFF directs.

Easter Monday proved to be a real morale booster for everyone. It gets very hectic on the first open day of the season and there is always something that gets missed. This time I forgot to print the museum guides which are always a money earner. However I did spend the previous afternoon making up road signs. Eventually we had four signs on the road between Dunstable and Pitstone with two signs at each end of Vicarage Road. I think there must have been a lot of people wandering around trying to find something open, as we attracted well over a hundred visitors and the day was a record Bank Holiday earner.

One of our members, Andrew Harries, took

charge of what was a difficult parking situation and as well as solving that problem, asked every visitor where they came from, how they found out about the museum and also noted their arrival time. Andrew is going to analyse the data and send me the results. Initial evaluation indicated that the road signs were responsible for more visitors than any other form of advertising. I would like to find members who are willing to have a sign or signs permanently at home, pop it out on the nearest main road on open days and bring it in during the evening? I will provide the signs but I need the help of members who have access to the Marsworth road, the upper Tring road, the Leighton Buzzard road and the Hemel Hempstead road. Come on you members, do your bit for the Society

Norman Groom Museum manager

Farming News

There are two baby silkies so far in the big yard. They both appear to be gold and take after their father. There are still hens sitting and we hope for more chicks in the near future. Silkies make particularly good mothers and foster mothers.. It is their great virtue. Their drawback is that their skin is black and not appetising to humans.

We have harvested the willows on the Charlie Dixon plantation. Margaret Smith uses them for baskets and garden structures which she displays and sells on Open Days. The plantation is being renewed and maintained by volunteers under Jeff's guidance.

Bess on the Mill



I got into trouble one Sunday in February. John and the Boss had creosoted some of the fencing which surrounds the mill, and forgetting, I ran underneath it several times rubbing my back along the underside of the cross spars. I was covered in creosote and nobody realised until, at the end of the morning we all went to the 'Rose and Crown' for a 'planning meeting' as the Boss calls it, and there were comments on the smell of creosote. It didn't take long for them to realise it was my fault. Apologies to all in the pub. I had to have a good scrub when I got home in an old tin bath using detergent and 'Head and Shoulders' shampoo to get rid of it. No risk of fleas now! The expanded metal has at last been laid on the bridge after delays caused by the bad weather. It looks well and has made the bridge much safer for visitors. The Boss still shudders at the cost.

Handwriting: AMPTON MUSEUM

Last time I mentioned I had been to the Farm Museum to help with the delivery of half a tonne of wheat for this year's milling. Well, on a very cold and misty Monday morning we winnowed it all, that is cleaned it of all dirt, chaff and stalks etc. on the winnowing machine donated to the Museum by Reg Jellis. Ron Ashurst brought his Lister engine to drive it, whilst Chris (from Tring), John and the Boss kept the winnower topped up and bagged up the cleaned wheat. Chris then took it to the mill in his truck where it was put into the storage bins. A very successful day. The pit wheel - that's the vertical gear on the wheel shaft - has 92 wooden cogs and 45 of them have worked loose which means they have to be made tight by 're-wedging' before we mill again. Normally card is used as packing, but the millwright who replaced the spur wheel cogs used canvas as well. We decided to try it and managed to buy just the right material in the curtain dept. of John Lewis's in Milton Keynes. We are now using it successfully, and on the first morning, the team (Bob (from Buckingham), Chris, John and the Boss, re-wedged 20 of the loose cogs which was excellent progress. The special nails we bought have proved to be just right as well. With all the rain we've had lately, the Whistlebrook is flowing well and the mill pond is overflowing. The chalk of the Beacon (our 'reservoir') should now be saturated which will ensure the springs feeding the Brook flow throughout the summer. I do hope the weather picks up before the summer to maintain and preserve the

To end on an unhappy note, the mill has had to be closed to the public and school parties temporarily on account of the foot and mouth epidemic. The Easter Monday opening was cancelled and we shall have to wait to see what happens before we decide what to do about future openings. TTFN

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