

*Pitstone & Ivinghoe  
Museum Society Newsletter*



*October 2007*



**The partly assembled Amanco Engine from Lacey Green Windmill**



**Work on the new building at the Museum**

## **Chairman's Report**

It is with great regret I have to tell you that owing to my continual health problems I shall not be standing for re-election as Chairman at the AGM in November.

I shall however, retain my membership of the Society, so will see you at various times and functions.

To all members of the Executive Committee my sincere and grateful thanks for your kindness, help and advice during my term of office.

## **Kit Kite**

## **Museum Report –October 2007**

Mid September is a time of big changes at the Museum. The last of the public open days has been and gone and, unless we have any more private bookings ahead of us (which we haven't this year), we can start on more major building or restoration tasks which in summer would prove to be uneconomical due to time taken to move stuff out of storage for just a week or two and then put it all away again to be tidy for an open day.

By far the major task ahead of us now is to complete the new buildings at the end of the Sheepyard. This has been progressing through the summer months so that now we have repaired drains, a concrete floor and short brick walls around the periphery and we are erecting the woodwork, some of which we have already prefabricated. Things are looking good for a completion of the structure by Christmas (if we don't have as much rain in the autumn as we did in summer) leaving the winter for fitting out, decorating, and moving in. One thing to come out of this is that Joe Marling has discovered that he cannot only lay bricks but quite enjoys it.

We did not do an accurate costing of this building project. We knew that bricks would cost us several hundreds of pounds, wood many more, and corrugated roofing the same, and so on for all the other costs resulting in a finished building costing in the middle thousands. We knew we wanted it, we needed it, we could do it, and we could afford it so we went ahead. Before we are too far advanced in our other project for which we obtained planning consent, the northward extension to the Science & Radio Room, we shall have to take stock of our finances. We think there is enough money in the kitty, but we shall need to know just how much has to

be spent to finish the Sheepyard building, and how much we need for some of the other ongoing projects next year.

The performance of the new grass mower has, on the whole, exceeded my expectations. There have been breakdowns: on 3 occasions, these have been fixed fairly promptly under guarantee, and the fourth was classed as fair wear and tear, probably by me trying to cut wet grass too short causing the whole mechanism to stall due to a huge wad of soggy grass clippings jamming the cutters. The machine has an hours-run counter and by the end of the year, we shall have been cutting grass for slightly under 100 hours. We know now how much work we need to allow for next years grass cutting. The hand mower has remained virtually unused all year as the new ride-on has proved capable of cutting the lot. The only other grass cutting we need to do is by using a strimmer. Our strimmer is quite old; I have not used it myself yet, but I am told it is very tiring from both noise and vibration. Maybe we need to save up for a more friendly machine. We really need to put in more strimming hours next year to keep the site looking tidier.

The restoration of the large Amanco engine from Lacey Green was virtually complete when we hit a snag. When we acquired the engine, the Lacey Green people had been in the process, 12 years previously, of fitting a new key to one of the flywheels. Lets not get technical about this; suffice to say that “fitting a key” properly is a very skilled job. I have done several in my life, including three at Redbournbury Watermill in quite demanding positions. I have also refitted one there which started to come out having been initially fitted by a professional millwright. I had partially fitted the new key in the Amanco flywheel and judged it to be safe for a short run of the engine. It was on an open day and several visitors were interested to see (and hear!) the engine run. After 20 minutes running the key suddenly dropped out; the net result is a crack in the hub of the flywheel. This can be repaired at virtually no expense but a lot of effort and this is underway.

The restoration of the hayloft above the Meeting Room has been on hold most of the summer but will resume when the weather becomes bad, it is a nice indoor job for John C, Nigel, and Ken. Please don't ask me what will eventually be in there, but ideally, we would like it to be open to the public if we can satisfy safety and fire regulations. Now that we have removed all the clutter, and a century and a half of cobwebs, cement dust, and filth it could be a place with character if we can furnish it and light it sympathetically.

The cataloguing and entering on to the computer database of our large photograph collection is now well advanced by Sandra. When this project is finished, the next job we have lined up for her is a resumption of cataloguing of new artefacts; this



has been on hold for a year or two now due to lack of resources. Another more urgent job is to check the contents of each room and location to verify that what our computer says should be in there is actually there. I suspect we may be in for some shocks. Already we have discovered that the Blacksmith's Shop, according to the computer, contains nothing. We have a card index though which lists a large number of items.

The AGM will be held, as usual, next month and I hope most of you will be able to attend. There will be some changes proposed for the committee. At present, the committee is down to eight members with one vacancy (Vice Chairman) and one person filling three posts (Norman Groom is Museum Manager, Membership Secretary, and Treasurer). Three of these eight committee members, Kit Kite, and John and Jeanette Wallis, are going to stand down at the AGM leaving just five of us. David Goseltine has volunteered to return to the committee, after a long absence from it, as Chairman. I am taking on a new title as Museum Business Manager and, it has been proposed that Rob Barber be Deputy Museum Manager. Bill Barnard has volunteered to take the post of Membership Secretary as a non-committee member. This still leaves Norman Groom doing two major tasks which is anything but ideal. We also are proposing to have John Childs as Site Manager and Nigel Thompson as a committee member.

**Peter Keeley, Deputy Museum Manager**

### **The Archives**

The extensive collection of photographs at the museum is now almost all scanned onto the computer. The enormous job of sorting them into various categories has begun. This should make them more accessible as they are being sorted into subject matter (i.e. Cement works, canals, farm machinery, harvesting etc.) Portraits and views (by village). All photographs are also coded and entered onto a spreadsheet with a description. This information is also held elsewhere in more detail on another old computer program. This detail will also have to be eventually checked and amalgamated onto the spreadsheet. All this takes a lot of time but will make life easier in the future.

The museum also has a large collection of slides. This mammoth job is another project for the future!

Jean and Mike Morris have already catalogued the contents of some of the rooms. This has been a great help to me and we were able to sit down together and check

their findings against computer records. I will update all this information in due course.

The card index of the main items in the Blacksmiths shop has now been added to the computer records. Some of the smaller tools have been added as a collection.

**Sandra**

### **Bucks Family History Society Open Day**

On Sat 28th July 2007, Pitstone and Ivinghoe Museum Society we invited to have a stand at the Bucks Family History Society open day. We received a lot of interest and were very busy. This was very good publicity for the Museum as many people told me they had no idea it existed. Bill (Barnard) who set up all the computers and Brenda helped me.

**Sandra**



**PIMS stand**

### **Bucks Family History Society Open Day**

This article is reproduced by kind permission **Sally Charrett** of the Royal Horticultural Society and **Fiona McLeod**. It was featured in the September issue of "The Garden".

## **A PLUM FRUIT**

On a recent visit to one of the last vestiges of an old top-fruit industry, Sally Charrett was fascinated by the history of 'the Aylesbury prune'.

Closely resembling bullace (*Prunus insititia*), Aylesbury prunes can crop erratically but, according to local people, are worth the wait.

From a Photograph by Fiona McLeod



### **BRITAIN'S FRUIT ORCHARDS**

steeply declined after the Second World War and those in Buckinghamshire proved to be no exception. 'The Aylesbury prune', a heritage damson-like plum that thrives at the foot of the northern Chilterns, has now become a rarity - even on its home ground. Jeff Hawkins, whose family have occupied Pitstone Green Farm in Pitstone, Buckinghamshire for almost 200 years, grew the Aylesbury prune commercially up until the late 1950s.

When farming started to change a decade or so later, Jeff - something of a visionary man - together with the local history society, collected old farming equipment and had his farm buildings transformed into the Pitstone Green Museum. His prune orchards still exist and lie adjacent to the museum.

### **Stepping back in time**

The origins of Aylesbury prunes seem to be shrouded in mystery. Even Brogdale, home of the National Fruit Collection in Kent, only knew of 'chance seedlings' of unknown parentage found growing in the Vale of Aylesbury from the 1940's. The tree and its fruit closely resemble *Prunus insititia* (bullace) but the fruits are larger, more like a plum; clearly, DNA testing would prove enlightening here.

Locals say that prior to the Second World War they were simply known as prunes. But the name 'prune' is actually a bit of a red herring; it does not necessarily refer to the wrinkly fruits we tend to associate with school puddings and custard. There is nothing to suggest that Aylesbury prunes were intended for use as dried fruit, but historically, usage of the word 'prune' is also ambiguous. It derives from the Old

French for plum, *prunne*, and during the Middle Ages it seems that the word *prune* was interchangeably used for dried and fresh. To add further confusion, 'plum' in later centuries referred to any dried fruit (hence the Christmas 'plum' pudding).

Although closely related to plums, the fruits are more damson-like with their tart flavour and are best used for cooking. Their heyday was from the mid-19th century (when there was a proliferation of productive fruit orchards distributed south of Aylesbury) up until the late 1950s, when competition from abroad stamped out the local trade.

For many of the farmers who experienced hard living during these times and who 'grew-to-eat', the prunes were seen as a valuable additional crop to the usual cattle, pig and grain farming. Aylesbury prunes could fetch up to 30 shillings a bushel at Covent Garden and Spitalfields market in the late 1940s.

'There's an old saying in these parts', says Reg Jellis, who picked the fruits when he was a boy: 'They take 25 years to grow, 25 years to live, 25 years to die, feed you when they're alive, and keep you warm when they're dead'.

### **Worth the wait**

Also sometimes called the 'Michaelmas prune', the fruit is an erratic late cropper (from September onwards), a precariousness not made better by its tendency to flower early, making it vulnerable to frost. Nevertheless, when it does bear (a decent crop comes roughly every three years), people say you can almost hear the tree's brittle boughs groaning under the abundance of fruit.

Popular as cooking plums, Aylesbury prunes were used for jam-making and preservation in Kilner jars. Scant corroborative evidence exists for what happened to the prunes after they reached the London markets, but local opinion has it that some were used to dye hats for the Luton millinery trade, while others say that the fruits were taken to Germany to dye submariners' uniforms.

The delectable fruit also makes quite excellent gin and no doubt would be a superb accompaniment, too, for that other world-famous local delicacy: the Aylesbury duck-which, incidentally, was used to graze the orchard grass.

Aylesbury prune trees are available all year round from a handful of specialist nurseries, notably in Buckinghamshire at Bernwode Plants. The owners Derek and Judy Tolman obtained their stock plants from Pitstone Farm seven years ago and sell both grafted and non-grafted types (the former having the advantage of not suckering). 'They are very popular in the local area', says Judy, 'and we sell out every year. Elsewhere, not so many people know about the plant. Trees take about three or four years to establish and are as easy to cultivate as any other fruit.'

In the last few years we have seen a renaissance of locally-produced food. Revived interest in heritage fruit cultivars is reflected in this movement and people are turning to the past to see what old cultivars have to offer. Not only are many of these colourfully-named bygone fruits distinctive in flavour and use, but they often

come with strong local connections and an interesting story. It is thankfully yet another example of how local distinctiveness is becoming valued over the dreariness of supermarket clones. The fruit was grown commercially until the late 1950s

**Sally Charrett** - Editorial Projects Manager for 'The Garden' publication.

***Article Copyright Royal Horticultural Society***

***Note:-***

1. This year the crop was so heavy that three whole trees collapsed under the weight of fruit and around ten boughs each thicker than the average adult thigh broke off. A contributory factor to these disasters were the wind and rain we experienced during August when the fruit was approaching its maximum size.

2. For those born and bred in an era of decimalisation one bushel is equal to just over 36 litres.

**Peter Keeley**

**Programme 2007**

For members who have not attended meetings for some time, the entrance to this room can be found by walking along the lane past the reception buildings and down towards the back of the Museum where there is car parking through the gate, that is open on meeting nights. The entrance is on your left.

All meetings are held in the Education Room in the Pitstone Green Museum at 8pm.

***ALL VISITORS VERY WELCOME***

**Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> November '07**

**AGM**

Do please come and support our Annual AGM. It is a good opportunity for you to hear about the progress made during the year and it gives you a chance to give us your suggestions for the coming year.

**Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> December '07**

**Members' Christmas Social**

Last year, in spite of dreadfully thick fog, a group of intrepid members turned up to this event, ready to consume mince pies and sausage rolls and listen to amusing and interesting anecdotes brought by the assembled 'throng'. This year, I hope the

‘throng’ might be even larger. Christmas fare will be at the ready and all we ask of you is that you bring something to share with us.

### **Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> January ‘08**

#### **Films from the Archives**

Frank Banfield is returning to our meeting, by popular request. He last entertained us in 2001. He has a vast collection of 16mm cine films, and will choose a selection, mainly of local interest, dating between 1937 and the 1970s.

#### **Sue Lipscomb, Programme Secretary**

NB.

If you would like to be put on Sue's email reminder list, so that you receive an email about a week before each meeting, please send her an email –

**[Sue.Lipscomb@btopenworld.com](mailto:Sue.Lipscomb@btopenworld.com)**

#### **Front Cover Picture**

The Old Range in the Victorian Kitchen at the Museum

#### **Jack Brantom**



For members who know our helper Jack this is a picture of his Dahlias. Despite being in his late 80's he produces this superb show every year which is in all colours of the rainbow. Locally he is known as the “Dahlia Man”.



**Work on the  
new building  
at the Museum**



## **Open Days 2008**

**Easter Monday 24 March**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Sundays of June, July,**  
**August and September**  
**All Bank Holiday Mondays**  
Opening times from  
11.0 a.m. to 5.0. p.m.

## **Committee:-**

### **Chairman**

Kit Kite 01296 668918

### **Museum Manager, Treasurer and**

### **Membership Secretary**

Norman Groom 01582 605464

### **Deputy Museum Manager**

Peter Keeley 01582 792701

### **Secretary**

Brenda Grace 01296 668167

## **Committee**

John Wallis 01296 661997

### **Programme Secretary**

Sue Lipscomb 01296 630578

### **Publicity Secretary**

Anne Ball 01442 822672

### **Trading Secretary**

Jeannette Wallis 01296 661997

## **Other Officers:-**

### **Archivist** (of computer records)

Sandra Barnard

### **Craft Co-ordinator**

Kathleen Haran 01582 792895

### **Newsletter**

Sandra Barnard

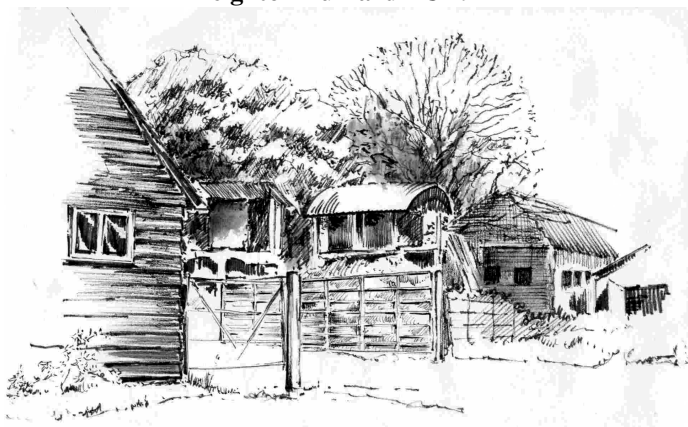
**Note: Last date for articles for next  
copy:-7th January 2008**

## **School Group Visits**

For information on school visits, please  
contact Sue Jones on 01296 660436

**Museum Website:-** <http://website.lineone.net/~pitstonemus>

**Pitstone and Ivinghoe Museum Society**  
**Pitstone Green Farm, Vicarage Road, Pitstone**  
**Leighton Buzzard LU7 9EY**



**Registered Charity No 273931**