



**Hitchin
Historical
Society**

Registered Charity No. 280746

Newsletter

Issue number 56 – January 2021

From the President – Robert B Williams

When invited to become your President not only was I very surprised but I felt somewhat under qualified to perform the role. My predecessor, Scilla Douglas, set such a high standard and nowadays not a day passes without me thinking, what would Scilla be doing?

My first duty has to be thank you all for so steadfastly sticking by us during these most difficult times. It's not an easy task to hold together charities and societies such as our own when so little can be put on offer due to the restrictions we all know about.

Secondly and very importantly I must also thank our committee for so keenly keeping the 'show on the road', I greatly admire their most obvious vigour. It is frustrating in the extreme to compose programmes of events, visits and line up lectures and then witness them all being cancelled. Do stand by tho', these activities will be reinstated!

Special thanks go to Simon Walker and his support team for their hard work on selecting, editing, producing, and selling 'Hitchin- Glimpses of the Past'. There have been many complimentary comments about this fine and fun publication. Sales of the book have gone well, particularly to newcomers of our society and the younger residents of our much-loved town.

May 2021 be a year of celebration; we have all experienced unique times but there is so much to look forward to and what wonderful strides have been made in the field of science. History plays such a major part in forming our future so it will be my aim to encourage more of our young to join our Society. We need them and I would like to think that they value us. Do please link up with me in this quest and make a resolution to bring in at least one new young member next year.

It would be most remiss of me not to thank here Pam Skeggs, our most proficient secretary. Pam works tirelessly on behalf of us all and we are most fortunate to have such a diligent organiser with total commitment to our Society.

May you have a Very Happy New Year with nothing like Covid-19 to bother you or spoil our fun together!

From the Newsletter Editor – Pamela Skeggs

'Hitchin: Glimpses of the Past' sales were good, so we had an additional run of 200 printed, so do think about buying this interesting book if you have not already done so.

Simon Walker, who edited the book, says there is plenty more material from our Journal for at least two more volumes, and he has been working on 'Hitchin: More Glimpses of the Past' and 'Hitchin: Yet More Glimpses of the Past'. Just think! They would seem to be an easy choice as presents for the next three years...

As secretary I regularly receive enquiries from members of the public about Hitchin and with help from the Team, have responded to people on various topics.

If you have an item that you would like to submit to the newsletter, please email me. However, I cannot guarantee every suggestion will be used.

2021 Membership – Peter Moss

The Committee has decided that there will be no need to renew your subscription for 2021 so it is a free year's membership.

Some members have very kindly decided not to amend their Standing Orders for renewing their subscription and for the Society to treat the payments as donations. Some other members have also made donations. The Society is very grateful for these gifts.

You will not receive a new membership card for 2021. Please can you retain your 2020 card and note that your membership number(s) remain unchanged.

Please ensure that any changes of your email, phone or home address are notified to the Membership Secretary using membership@hitchinhistoricals.org.uk or in writing to 12 Matthew Gate, Hitchin, Herts. SG4 9EQ.

Market Theatre, Hitchin

EXCITING NEWS! “Smell of Lavender” The debut novel by our very own artistic director and acclaimed playwright, KRS Foster, is available to order. It is a glorious story of love and grief, set in Hitchin in 1851, against the background of the flourishing lavender industry. Go to www.krsfoster.co.uk to order yours now with a percentage of profits going towards helping the theatre to survive.

HHS Film brings happy memories for granddaughter

A Mrs Diane Kok emailed Tilehouse Street Baptist Church from South Africa seeking information about her grandmother who lived in Tilehouse Street. Mrs Kok has lived in South Africa for 70 years. Her grandfather, Mr Day, was a basket maker. He and his family lived at number 12 next to the Three Tuns pub. Diane knew that her grandparents and their family worshipped at THS Church probably from about 1912. She herself was born in Foxholes during the Battle of Britain when it served as a maternity hospital. Janet, the Church Administrator, passed the query onto Sam Hallas who has been looking through the Church’s archives.

Sam was not able to find the marriage certificate for Diane’s grandmother to help with the query, but he remembered that Mr Day appeared in the HHS film *The Tilehouse Street Story* which appeared on the first Society DVD, *A Century of Old Hitchin on Film*. He made an extract from the video for Mrs Kok to see. The film, made by the short-lived Hitchin Cine Society, is based on a talk given by Reginald Hine. In it a couple of Cine Society members are seen visiting venues around the Street with commentary recorded by HHS’s Richard Whitmore.

The film shows the couple visiting Mr Day’s workshop in the basement of number 12 and shows him weaving some baskets. Diane wrote, “I was very excited to watch the documentary as I remember my Grandad’s workshop very well. It was in the basement of the house with a cobbled floor and at the top of one wall was a grating which was level with the pavement. He told me that the local children used to stop and have a chat with him through the grating. I remember my Mom telling me that she and her siblings would get into trouble if they peeped over the wall to see what was happening in the pub next door.

“The family went to chapel three times on a Sunday and they were never allowed to spend any money on that day. My Mom loved dancing and if she wasn’t home by 10, her father would march onto the dance floor to take her home!”

A further excitement was that Diane was delighted to see that the lady who opened the door to the visitors in the film was her Grandmother. She can’t wait to show the film clip to her children!



Mrs Day at the door of No 12

The Hitchin Trafalgar Ghost

A spooky tale – pure fiction, or might there just be something in it?

Hitchin's Tilehouse Street, that narrow sloping street of very old houses and premises situated on the western perimeter of the town centre, boasts many of the oldest buildings in Hitchin with some dating back to the 16thC., although a few were 'modernised' during the Georgian era by the replacement of their medieval front elevations with Georgian-style brick frontages. Tilehouse Street was until recent times a very busy thoroughfare, as late as the early 1980s still carrying major 'through' traffic from Hertford to Bedford and the Midlands and providing a link to the busy A505 route to East Anglia. To the immense relief of its inhabitants and their fragile properties it was finally by-passed by a new link road, becoming a quiet no-through road to vehicular traffic thus removing the threat of serious damage from the unrelenting vibrations of heavy goods vehicles.

As well as one or two large private Georgian residences and an old farmhouse, Tilehouse Street formerly hosted several public houses and ale-houses, and over time small businesses sprang up in the several courtyards nestling behind high archways that would once have allowed the passage of horses and carts, private carriages, or perhaps a coach, for stabling or deliveries.

The tale

Several years ago, my wife Beverley and I attended a 'ghost walk' around the town, one of many Hitchin Festival events. As we ascended Tilehouse Street, to my great surprise our guide regaled us with the following yarn, recounted here to the best of my recollection. As with all such tales of the supernatural it is down to the individual and their personal beliefs as to how much credence to give.

The courtyard known as Tim's Yard from the business which until recent times operated there, formerly contained a cottage inhabited by a man and his wife. Over a period of time she became somewhat annoyed by the figure of a young lad of particular appearance who, it is alleged, would in broad daylight occasionally be glimpsed peering in through the window, but who had disappeared by the time she reached the door and looked about. On one occasion, the figure making yet another unwelcome appearance at her window, the wife called her husband to chase the stranger away. He went outside to challenge the inquisitive being but there was nobody to be seen, just a peculiar trail of wet footprints (this on a dry day) leading out of the courtyard into Tilehouse Street. Following the trail, the husband turned into the street expecting to see the lad nearby, but the only person in sight was a postman on his round.

The man asked the postman if he had seen the strange figure, who the wife had described as a small person appearing to be of about twelve years of age with his hair in a greasy queue (pigtail) and wearing a soaking wet cloak. The postman claimed he had not seen anyone coming out of the courtyard, and by then the wet footprints had faded. However, the postman allegedly made a written report of the encounter to his employer although as with many such yarns this cannot now be substantiated. Myth went on to allege the mysterious Tilehouse Street apparition had a Trafalgar connection – when or how this became attributed to the figure is unclear but begged to be investigated!

It was said that a family named Wright (spelling uncertain) inhabited one of the large houses situated on Tilehouse Street, close to the courtyard in question. Their son had joined, or been placed in, the navy and the story went that on 21 October 1805 he was present at the Battle of Trafalgar but had drowned during (or perhaps more likely after) the battle itself, his 'ghost' subsequently returning to Hitchin to seek his family. The apparition had given the impression of being lost, peering through windows presumably trying to find his family.

'Fors' and 'against'

So, was there a young Wright 'drowned' at Trafalgar? Possibly part of a prize crew put aboard one of the captured French or Spanish ships immediately after the battle, but which subsequently foundered or was wrecked during the ensuing violent and protracted storms?



From the description of the apparition, it seemed that the young man was indeed of a naval background, by his supposed age and appearance most likely to have been a midshipman and therefore classed as an officer. However, a check of the accepted list of British officers killed at Trafalgar showed there was none by the name of Wright, or any variation of that name [1].

From personal Trafalgar researches and much background reading I was aware that at least one ship involved in the battle bore crewmen from Hertfordshire – for example, Ordinary Seaman William Pallett from the village of Aston just outside Stevenage was ship's butcher of the third-rate *Bellerophon* (74)*, Captain John Cooke [2]. Were there more? Ship's captains often recruited locally, and Captain Robert Redmill of the third-rate *Polyphemus* (64)* lived in the former hamlet of Saunders Green, Stevenage, not four miles from Hitchin. Conjecturally, in the context of the tale, it would not be beyond the realms of possibility that Redmill knew the Wrights of Hitchin and could have been persuaded to take young Wright on board as Captain's Servant or as a midshipman. N.B. Research by the late Stevenage historian John D. Amess provides convincing evidence that Redmill's house is now The Granby public house.[3]

*A 'third-rate' ship was defined as a 'line of battle' vessel carrying between 60 and 80 main guns (indicated in number in brackets after the name of the ship) on two gun-decks, although additional heavy short-range guns known as Carronades were also carried on the upper deck. These latter were not counted as 'main guns' for the purpose of classifying the ship.

If the ghost was/is not that of an officer of any class (does it still haunt ancient Tilehouse Street? the apparition seemingly only manifested itself in daylight, and I am not aware of any recent reported sightings.....) the next line of enquiry was to conduct a painstaking trawl through the original muster books of the two above-mentioned ships, being circumstantially perhaps the most likely to have born the young seaman. The National Archives at Kew holds both volumes, and whilst I was engaged in other research my willing wife 'volunteered' to trawl through some thousand-plus names in a diligent search for Wrights [4][5]. Disappointingly from the perspective of the yarn the result was that very few seamen named Wright (or similar) could be found in either vessel, and none fitted the age or 'from where' criteria of the subject.

More pressing priorities, not to mention the restrictions imposed by Covid-19, currently preclude a trawl through the muster books of the other twenty-five ships involved in the Battle of Trafalgar – potentially well over fifteen thousand further names plus possibly another four thousand or so from those ships not involved in the battle. Whilst on-line websites purport to provide crew lists, from personal experience I never completely trust transcriptions and whenever possible seek to consult original documents, or at least scans of such.

Can anything of the yarn be substantiated? Was there a Wright family living in Tilehouse Street in 1805? In a twist to the tale, further local research into *Bellerophon's* William Pallett from the nearby village of Aston uncovered the (probably) coincidental fact that a prominent Aston family name of the time was Wright!

Might young Wright have served in one of the six ships dispatched to Gibraltar for victualling before the battle and somehow accidentally drowned? More research is needed but if it ultimately proves to be without foundation it is an intriguing tale to spring from an inland town not best known for its naval associations.

Nigel Hughes

References:

[1] Extracted from "The Royal Navy – a History" by Sir William Laird Clowes Vol 5 pages 157 - 160

[2] The Research Data Base of The 1805 Club – Men at Trafalgar – (based on The Ayshford Trafalgar Roll and other sources)

[3] John D Amess - Captain Robert Redmill RN CB, Saunders Green, Stevenage, Hertfordshire (self-published booklet 2015). See also 'Further reading'.

[4] ADM 36/16498 HMS *Bellerophon* Muster Book (Series 1) 1 April 1805 – 30 November 1805 (National Archive, Kew)

[5] ADM 36/16507 HMS *Polyphemus* Muster Book (Series 1) 1805 June – 1806 February (National Archive, Kew)
Further reading:

Mark West - Captain Robert Redmill CB RN Part 1. Trafalgar Chronicle No. 23, 2013 ISBN: 978-1-902392-23-3

Mark West - Captain Robert Redmill CB RN Part 2. Trafalgar Chronicle No. 24, 2014 ISBN: 978-1-902392-24-0

Mark West – Captain Robert Redmill CB RN Part 3. Trafalgar Chronicle No. 25, 2015 ISBN: 978-1-902392-25-7

Des Turner – ASTON. Jack Pallett's Memories and the Village History. Aston Village History Book Series 2.

Synopsis available via www.astonvillage.tripod.com

2021 Programme – ‘We apologise for the delay to’ - David Howlett

In the autumn it was hoped we might manage some small-scale meetings and activities. But this was not to be and very sadly, conditions under the ongoing public health emergency continue to deteriorate. Restrictions have evolved erratically and at very short notice. It has been impossible, therefore, to arrange any ‘normal’ listing of meetings and events for the new Programme year which should have started in January 2021.

As soon as conditions permit, we will plan such activities and meetings as we can. There will initially be two ‘electronic’ offerings available in January and February (see details below) but, as grateful as we are for these, we are conscious they are not full recompense for the absence of a ‘proper’ Programme. Perhaps, into the summer, it might be possible to arrange some small-scale events/visits and aim for indoor Church House meetings again in the autumn. We will keep you posted but also, if you can, please look regularly at the website (www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk)

Electronic Meetings in January and February 2021

Thursday 28 January at 7.45 for 8.00pm Tudor Hertfordshire – a talk by Marion Hill

Thursday 25 February at 7.45 for 8.00pm Treasures of Hertfordshire Archives – a talk by Janice Brooker.

Please find attached instructions (to email recipients of this newsletter) for joining the talks, which will take place on MS Teams. In most cases you can simply join through your web browser. However, we recommend that iPad users download the app.

20 minutes before the talk starts, and throughout, a colleague from HALS will be available to assist with any technical queries.

On 28 January (Tudor Hertfordshire), please contact janice.brooker@hertfordshire.gov.uk if you have any queries once the talk has begun.

On 25 February (Treasures of the Archives) please contact marion.hill@hertfordshire.gov.uk if you have any queries once the talk has begun.

Marion and Janice look forward to welcoming you.

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This newsletter is published by Hitchin Historical Society, a registered charity dedicated to informing the public of the history of Hitchin and district and undertaking research into the origins and development of buildings, organisations, crafts, trades, and other aspects of historical interest, and to publish the results of such research.

HHS website: www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk