

Tonbridge History

Spring 2011

TONBRIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Photo above: Tonbridge en fête for the coronation of King George V in 1911. The ceremonial arch stood at the south end of the High Street – see page 7.

From the Chairman:

This spring we can look back on the celebrations of the THS 50th Anniversary with enjoyment and some pride. Members have been most appreciative and the committee has received lovely comments. Founder Stella Hardy, though too frail to attend the events, thoroughly enjoyed her piece of the splendid cake.

As we move towards the AGM on April 7th, changes are looming. Gill Cowlard who has masterminded the catering for all our events of the last five years, is stepping down. Even more dramatically, Shiela Broomfield, who has been such a marvellous Secretary for the past 15 years, has also decided to stand down. We are fortunate that Madge Woods has volunteered to make herself available for election as Secretary.

The year ahead should be full of interest.

Jenny Poxon

Society News

Tonbridge Historical Society

Founded: 1960

President – Joy Debney

Past Presidents – Stella Hardy MBE,
Joan Thirsk CBE, Christopher
Chalklin

Committee

Chairman – Jenny Poxon

Vice Chairman – Audrey Barber

Secretary – Shiela Broomfield,
8 Woodview Crescent, Hildenborough,
Tonbridge TN11 9HD

Treasurer – Pat Mortlock,
6 Keswick Close, Tonbridge TN9 1LP

Minutes & Archives – Sally Robbins

*Pictorial Records Collection and Kent
History Federation Liaison*
– Pat Hopcroft

Programme – Shiela Broomfield and
Jenny Poxon

Publicity & Website – Anthony Wilson

Social Events – Gill Cowlard

Summer Visits – vacant

Other Committee members:

George Buswell

Deborah Cole

Vanessa King

Madge Woods

website: www.tonbridgehistory.org.uk

Subscription: £7 per person (£3.50 for
under-18s), due on 1st March annually
for the following season.

A Membership Renewal Form is
distributed with this Newsletter.

From the Secretary

This is the time of year when I put in a plea for help especially on the committee – we are still lacking a Visits Organiser and also someone to organise the lecture programme. For the time being Jenny Poxon and I are putting together what we hope is going to be an interesting programme starting in September. Full details will be sent to you in the summer.

We are also looking for someone to take over from Gill Cowlard as Social Events Organiser. Gill has done this job splendidly for the past few years but is now standing down. I am sure that you will agree with me that the tea and coffee before the lectures makes for a much friendlier atmosphere and it enables people to chat and get to know one another. If you would like to know more please contact me.

Nominations for any of these posts, signed by the nominee plus at least one other member, need to be with me by 24th March 2011. Of course we are also able (and willing!) to co-opt anyone.

This is my last report as Secretary as I am standing down after 15 years in the post. I have very much enjoyed this position but feel that it is more than time to hand over the reins to someone else. I intend to continue as leader of the archaeological group as archaeology is my main interest.

I am so grateful for the help, support and friendship given to me by the Committee which has, of course, changed over the years enabling me to work with many different and equally fine people. I am so glad that I was able to help steer us through the important

50th Anniversary Celebrations which, I know, so many of us have been able to enjoy. Thank you too to all the members – without you we could not have such a thriving organisation within our lovely town. *Shiela Broomfield*

Founder Members

In the last *Newsletter* I wrote that four of the people present at the inaugural meeting in February 1960 had belonged to the Society continuously since then. In fact the number was five, comprising Stella Hardy, Joy Debney, Christopher Chalklin, Roger Resch and me. All but Stella, who is in poor health, attended the Golden Jubilee Lecture in October 2010. *John Boulding*

Forthcoming events

Thursday 10th March, 7.45 pm in the Angel Centre. Talk: ‘The Salomons of Broomhill – Immigrants and English Gentlemen’.

Thursday 7th April, 7.30 pm in the Angel Centre. Talk on the work of the KCC Heritage Conservation Team and recent discoveries in Kent, preceded by the 2011 AGM.

Recent meetings

The 2010 – 11 programme of talks has so far provided a wide range of varied and interesting topics.

We began in *September* with a talk

by Luke Ramsden, Head of History at Tonbridge School, on one of France’s most famous rulers – the so called ‘Sun King’, Louis XIV. Luke saw him as a prototype European tyrant, memorably describing him as ‘Stalin without a telephone’, but also said it was more ‘absolutism by negotiation’. The *October* talk to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Society was held in the main hall at Judd School, a splendid setting for a fascinating talk by Lord Robert Sackville who gave a personal insight into what it is like to live at and be responsible for a stately home such as Knole.

After the most enjoyable special drama event and tea in *November*, our *December* talk on the South Eastern Railway also proved popular; John Arkell and Dan Garrett showed how much can be learned from the scrutiny of historic photographs in the THS collection. The *February* meeting saw a very well illustrated talk by Dr John Williams on the factors affecting the origins and growth of towns in Kent, using evidence from a wide range of sources but particularly those provided by archaeology.

Acquisitions

Neolithic hand axe: I can now give further details of the superb flint axe which has been donated to the Society. This was mentioned at our 2009 AGM and I will bring it to a future meeting for members to see. It was found before the war in the stream next to Slade School by Mr Ernest Robinson whilst erecting telegraph poles for the GPO, and it is his grandson – whom I happened to meet socially – who has kindly presented it to our society.

An expert at Maidstone Museum, Angela Muthana, has studied the axe

and writes: 'It is certainly a magnificent specimen and has not been used. I suspect that it was not destined for grinding, though grinding or polishing was often carried out during the Neolithic period. I note a beautifully executed tranchet flake – [the flake] removed from the tip of the axe which was done to make an effective, sharp cutting edge. The material is a good quality flint, which may well have been deliberately mined from one of the flint mines on the Sussex Downs – although we can't know this for sure'.



The axe, drawn by Lesley Feakes (Kent Archaeological Society Fieldwork committee)

At present I keep this splendid artefact on my desk enjoying it every time I look at it. It is also very tactile and evocative of prehistoric man. It will eventually be deposited in the THS artefacts collection, with a report and drawings, and I shall make sure it is recorded on HER (come to the AGM in April and hear all about HER!). *Shiela Broomfield*

Hall and Co.: In the early 20th century Messrs Hall and Co., 'Motor Body Builders and Automobile Engineers' designed and manufactured car bodies in Tonbridge to go onto chassis made by several different companies, in addition to being agents for several major French manufacturers. The photo shows one of their fine products, and is one of several



sent to THS by Mrs Janet Drewett, whose husband's grandfather, Arthur Drewett, was one of Hall's craftsmen. Hall's works in the High Street was later replaced by the two unsightly shopfronts between Wilkinson's Opticians and the Humphrey Bean.

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Archaeology and Tonbridge Historical Society

Whilst re-reading the interesting article on the beginnings of THS in the previous *Newsletter* I realised that nothing had been said about the not inconsiderable contributions that our Society has made to archaeology.

According to the minute books many discussions about forming a group took place but nothing happened until James Money requested helpers for the excavation of an iron-working site at Withyam. In 1965 he formed a group in Tunbridge Wells and this eventually became the archaeological group of THS with James as the Group Leader. By this time THS had become affiliated to the Kent Archaeological Society and Group 11A of the Council of British Archaeology – the forerunner of CBA SouthEast. A dig at Moat Farm, Leigh gave the opportunity for members to gain experience here and also at Castle Hill in the early seventies.

In 1971 Anthony Streeten was co-opted as Mr Money's representative and various small scale excavations took place in Tonbridge including Lansdowne Road, most of which have been reported in *Archaeologia Cantiana*. In 1975 Andrew Webster became Group Leader with Mr Money as adviser. Andrew revitalised the group and held regular meetings, arranged small excavations, including the Vauxhall Furnace site and an investigation of the route of a Roman road. Members also helped at the Iron Age hillfort at Garden Hill in Ashdown Forest and a medieval pottery kiln near Hartfield. I attended many of the monthly meetings and also took part in most

of the excavations. In 1979 Andrew moved to Canterbury and I took over the Group helped by Gerry Imeson. By this time Andrew had asked me to help him on a mediaeval excavation in Sussex – Huggetts Farm near Buxted and I took this over with the owner of the farm. We had much useful help from THS members.

In the mid-eighties KAS excavated the Sedgebrook Roman Villa in Plaxtol. I was one of their supervisors and many THS members helped over four years. By this time Dr John Williams had come to Kent and I liaised with him and his staff on watching briefs in our area – often calling on THS for additional help. In the nineties an excavation took place in the crypt of St Nicholas Church, Sevenoaks under the auspices of the Oxford Archaeology Unit, a professional organisation who wished to involve local groups. I helped for over three months. It was a very rewarding and interesting experience.

Some of us have also helped the Otford & District Archaeological Group in their area. Since then I have been on hand to help with other watching briefs and also deal with various enquiries especially with extracting reports for professional units. I have fostered a close relationship with many of these and receive relevant reports. I have also acted as the THS representative on the KAS, CBA-SE and on other committees keeping our Society in the picture.

I plan to continue to contribute to archaeology in any way I can. *Shiela Broomfield, Dip. Archeol., FSA*

Frank Chapman

More than anyone in recent times, Frank Chapman, who died in November at the age of 87, made Tonbridge's history accessible to Tonbridge people. Through much of a long and successful career in journalism, culminating as Managing Editor for the *Courier* group, he sustained a weekly nostalgia column that brought vividly to life the personalities and events of past years. Starting in the 1960s under the pen name 'Ben Botany', and later renamed 'Warwick Diary', it remained a popular feature of the *Courier* right up to the week of his death.

Chapman's brand of history was personal, anecdotal, and sympathetic. Above all it was readable and full of good stories. Often it harked back to his own boyhood in the town in the 1920s and 30s, and to things he saw and heard about at a time when Tonbridge was much more of a close-knit community than it is today.

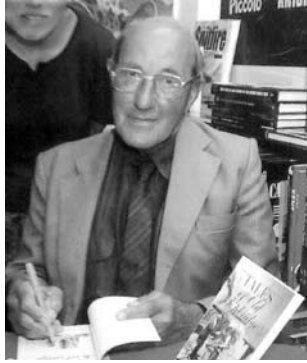
He brought the same qualities of story-telling and sparkling prose to his

books. *The Book of Tonbridge* (1976) though not, by his own description, a 'definitive history', is still the only book to tell the story of the town's past from the iron age almost to the present day.

It appeared soon after the local government reorganisation of 1974 and reflects its author's feeling for the town in a concluding lament that with 'Tonbridge's seat of government banished from the Castle to an old airfield on the outskirts of an obscure village called West Malling', the 'slow tide of apathy' would creep in.

Two more books followed, *Yesterday's Town: Tonbridge* (1982) and *Tales of Old Tonbridge* (1995). Sadly, all are now out of print, though there are copies in the Library and others can sometimes be found on the secondhand market.

Frank Chapman was a remarkable person and an unusually gifted communicator who could not write a boring piece. Tonbridge is fortunate to have had such a man to help keep our history alive. *Anthony Wilson*



Frank Chapman at the launch of one of his books in John Adams' bookshop (Courier)

100 years ago – from the *Tonbridge Free Press*

'Local preacher knocked down and killed'

27th January 1911: 'The many residents of the town who were acquainted with the familiar figure of George Heelis, better known as "Holy Joe" were shocked on Saturday to hear of the terrible end he had met. He had become quite a landmark, having

secured prominence by reason of his somewhat eccentric behaviour as a preacher. He was in the habit of taking up his stand in the by-streets or some vacant spot and there he would loudly denounce the wicked news of the world and declare that the great majority of the people of Tonbridge were doomed to perdition. Motor cars were his pet

aversion, curious to relate, for it was by one of these on Saturday that he met his end.

It seems that about 11.30 in the morning he was in the vicinity of the Public Hall and was crossing the road when he apparently noticed a car coming from the London way. It was close upon him and in order to avoid it he stepped back, no doubt becoming confused, and was knocked down by a car coming in the opposite direction. The driver at once applied the brakes and stopped the car, when it was found that the unfortunate man was underneath the centre of the car and it was found necessary to lift the car bodily before he could be extricated. It was then seen that he had received terrible injuries and was practically unconscious. He was at once carried into the Skating Rink at the Public Hall ... Dr. Newton ordered the unfortunate man's removal to the Cottage Hospital where, a few minutes after admission, he expired. The car in question (a 60 horse power Napier) was the property of Mr P. R. Mann of Ely Grange, Frant and was being driven by his chauffeur, Mr W. St. John Jones (at a speed of 10-12 mph).'

Heelis died, but the inquest jury gave a verdict of accidental death after hearing evidence that the car had sounded its horn and that the deceased was very hard of hearing so would not have heard either the car or its horn. There was however a question from a Mr Gibson which is still relevant 100 years later!

'Is there no means of getting a speed limit for Tonbridge? The town is very dangerous since there is a congested and narrow neck at each end and I should like to see a speed limit adopted.'

'Happy Little Tonbridge'

Edward VII had died in 1910 and when the new king, George V, was crowned in the following year the Tonbridge Free Press was seized with patriotic fervour:

June 23rd 1911: 'The King is crowned, God bless the King! A whole nation, in fact a vast and mighty empire, has been for many weeks past preparing to raise its voice in honour to a beloved and revered monarch.'

The impressive and historic ceremony in Westminster Abbey yesterday (Thursday) was the signal for the beginnings of celebrations throughout the land and "Happy Little Tonbridge" as this town has been aptly described showed its loyalty and spirit to no small degree. The people lustily shouted for their King and Queen as with one voice and the National Anthem was sung with such zest and enthusiasm with which perhaps it has never been sung before. In no part of the globe can there be found a more patriotic people than those who inhabit this town which thrives on the banks of the Medway.

The whole of the scheme of decoration in the High Street was on an elaborate scale, including an archway at the southern end representing an ancient stone battlement [see photo on page 1]'

In the evening a beacon fire was lit:

'Notwithstanding the rain, a crowd of several thousand assembled at the upper part of The Drive to witness the fire which was lit punctually at 10 pm. It proved to be by far the largest beacon fire ever seen in Tonbridge and must have been visible for miles around. There was also a display of fireworks and the National Anthem was sung.'

Here and there

Local landmark: Restoration of Hadlow Tower is starting at last, following its compulsory purchase by TMBC and sale to the Vivat Trust for £1. Work on the Grade 1 monument – also known as May’s Folly – is expected to take about two years and includes the provision of a viewing gallery, holiday accommodation and exhibition space. English Heritage and the Lottery are funding the project.



Hadlow Castle in its heyday. Much was demolished in the 1950s.

Farewell to the Workhouse: Work has begun on the demolition of the former Tonbridge Union Workhouse which later became part of Pembury Hospital. It was constructed in the 1830s to accommodate 400 inmates

from Tonbridge and surrounding parishes, replacing the earlier Poor House in Bank Street which later became a school and is now the offices of Warners solicitors. Of the Pembury buildings only the Gothic-style Workhouse Chapel, which is a Grade II-listed monument, will survive.

Courses:

Kent Adult Education: As a taster for an exciting new series of five-week courses beginning in September covering the history of England from 55BC to the present day, THS Committee Member Vanessa King is running a day school entitled *The Time Traveller’s Guide to Ancient Britain* on Saturday 18 June 2011 at the Adult Education Centre, Avebury Avenue, Tonbridge. A series of day schools is also being offered as follows: *Your Weald – Kent* (27 September), *Domesday Kent* (15 October), *Your Weald – Woodland in Autumn* (23 October), and *History – Medieval Kent* (15 November). Details from Charlie Bell, 0845 606 5606 or www.kent.gov.uk/adulted or pick up a brochure from the Adult Education Centre.

WEA: Vanessa King will also be tutor for a six-week WEA Summer Course: *Witchcraft and Magic in Early Modern England*. Thursdays 10-12, starting 28 April, in the Adult Education Centre, Avebury Avenue; fee £39. To enrol contact Jill Britcher