

Tonbridge History

Spring 2012



W. GALE The Sole Provider to the World

TONBRIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Above: With traffic and pedestrians drawn at miniature scale, William Gale's shoe-shop looks suitably grand in this late 19th-century advertisement. The shop, adjacent to the Little Bridge, was one of the longest-surviving in the High Street. William was followed by his son, Nelson Gale, and boots and shoes were still being sold there until the end of last year, when it became yet another charity shop.

From the Chairman:

It's always a pleasure to receive the new edition of this Newsletter. My favourite pieces are the items on the quirkier aspects of Tonbridge History which George and Anthony are able to highlight for us.

As the THS membership steadily grows and includes everyone from those new to the area to founder members with vast knowledge of the town, the Newsletter has something for everyone.

So – many thanks to the editorial team and all who contribute items from their own research. You give us both information and entertainment.

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 – George Buswell

Secretary – Madge Woods,
56 Derwent Road, Tonbridge, TN10 3HU

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

Minutes & Archives – Sally Robbins

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

Publicity & Website – Anthony Wilson

Refreshments organiser – vacant

Other Committee Members:

Shiela Broomfield

Deborah Cole

Gill Cowlard

Vanessa King

website: www.tonbridgehistory.org.uk

Subscription: £7 per person (£3.00 for under-18s), due on 1st March annually for the following season.

Non-members are welcome as guests at all meetings on payment of £2 at the door (£1 for under-18s).

A Membership Renewal Form is distributed with this Newsletter.

From the Secretary

Another year has passed and still we are looking for a Programme Organiser. If you feel you can help with this please note that nominations for a post on the committee, signed by the nominee plus at least one other member need to be with me by 5th April 2012.

On the other hand perhaps you would just like to help with the refreshments at the monthly meetings.

If you pay tax our Treasurer would be grateful if you would complete a new Gift Aid Form so that we can amend our records accordingly.

Enjoy the rest of the season.

Madge Woods

Recent meetings

In September Pat Mortlock opened the new season of lectures with a talk on *The King's Supporters* – the mothers and wives of Henry VII and Henry VIII. She gave a fascinating insight into their importance and influence, including Henry VII's mother, Margaret Beaufort, described by Pat as 'the mother-in-law from hell'. Married at 12, a mother

and widow at 13, she yet lived to see her grandson crowned as Henry VIII.

At our October meeting, archaeologist Paul Bennett shed new light on a place much in the news, *Benghazi* in Libya - potentially the 'Venice of North Africa'. Three cities have occupied the site. 'Sink-holes' from the first, ancient Euesperides, survive but are being lost to bulldozers. It was supplanted by the Greek city of Berenice and eventually by modern Benghazi. The speaker described his work in Libya over many years, and his involvement in planning for the preservation of the country's important heritage.

The November double lecture meeting saw Dr Ann Kneif talking first about *Women Munitions Workers in World War II*. They faced the risk of 'TNT rash' with their skin turning yellow and their hair red. After the usual excellent tea, she described the life of the *Bevin Boys*, young men directed down the coal mines in World War II to make up for the miners who had joined the army. Conditions were hard but they did stay in hostels designed by Billy Butlin and, eventually got a medal to mark their service - in 2000!

In December there should have been a talk by the 'Time Team' archaeologist Raksha Dave but she unfortunately was ill and so at short notice Chris Broomfield stepped in to speak on *Oral History, Fact or Fiction?* This was based on examples from his wife Shiela's family history, which included a shotgun death and the fascinating story of William Henry Skinner (later George Henry Mason) who deserted from the British Army twice and then served with the Canadian Army in World War I and after a back injury had to have his legs

rubbed with cotton wool!

Members braved bitter weather in February to hear Anthony Wilson explain, with the aid of illustrations from the 'Illustrated London News' of the time, *How They Built the Crystal Palace in four months flat*. The feat was made possible by Joseph Paxton's brilliant modular design, and the contractor's blissful freedom from the constraints of planning enquiries and 'health and safety'. It was the Duke of Wellington who saved the day (allegedly) by proposing sparrowhawks be brought in to clear the Crystal Palace of its flock of roosting birds.

Acquisitions

Leather Boots: Chris Rowley, Chairman of Leigh Historical Society and organiser of the recent investigation of the Powdermills site (between Tonbridge and Leigh) has donated artefacts and other material from the investigation to THS. The most interesting item is a pair of men's boots, found buried at the bottom of a filled-in sluice. They were sent away for examination by an expert who identified them as size 5 Derby-style leather ankle boots dating to the late 19th century



Boots unearthed at the Powdermills

and probably deliberately placed in the sluice as a 'Rite of Termination' when it went out of use. The boots were sent to the University of Lincoln for a two-year conservation process before being returned in 2011. Over 20 buildings at the former gunpowder mills were excavated in a three-year programme, and two books have been published about the work.

Website

Recent additions to the THS website include the complete text of the diary of a German PoW, Vinzenz Fetzter, from 1944-48, much of which time he spent at Somerhill Camp in Tonbridge. It has been translated by THS member Joyce Buswell, and tells a remarkable, and in places moving, story.

www.tonbridgehistory.org.uk/archives/war-diary.html

From the Archives

A booklet entitled *Tonbridge for the resident, the holiday maker and the angler*, published c.1896, includes this item from the town's history:

'In the year 1317 evidently the town stood in need of general repairs, for we find among the records of the State Paper Office that "the bailiffs and trusty men of the town of Tunbrigge were authorised to levy tolls for enclosing and paving the town."

Among the articles to be taxed, upon being brought into the town, were grain, cattle, hides, salt meat, fresh meat, pigs, salmon, sheep, goats, hogs,

sheep-skin, goat-skin, lamb-skin, hare-skin, fox-skin, and squirrel-skins, cloths, linen, canvas, cloths of Ireland, worsted, wine, honey, wool, iron, lead, tin, wood, herrings, fish, silk, salt, flour, cheese, butter, timber, charcoal, nails, horseshoes, lampreys, oil, &c. This virtually meant a tax upon everything – a very simple and effective method of bringing about local improvements.'

Tonbridge's Medieval Well

A report was published in the 2011 volume of *Archaeologia Cantiana** covering the archaeological excavations carried out in 2005 on the site of the former cattle market off Bank Street. Amongst the finds was a timber lined well with a diameter of 1.3m. The oak lining was dated by dendrochronology to the summer of 1116 and it appears to be the largest well of its kind excavated in Britain to date. The size suggests that it was built and used by a community rather than an individual household. The well is now under Anison Street.



The dark features are the oak lining of the well. Its depth is not known.

*Available in Tonbridge Reference Library

ERECTED IN THE 60TH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
QUEEN VICTORIA
 A. D. 1897.

Jubilee Quiz: Which Tonbridge building commemorates the last time we celebrated a royal Diamond Jubilee? (Answer on page 8).

Farewell, Wallace and Tiernan

Tucked away on its site in Tudeley Lane since the 1950s, Wallace and Tiernan once employed 600 people, making water chlorination equipment and much else. Their products were installed on the liners Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth, and also helped purify the fountains in Trafalgar Square. Much of their output went abroad, saving lives by combatting water-borne disease.

The firm – now part of Siemens – closed the Tonbridge site at the end of last year, moving production to Wales and office staff to Sevenoaks. Before they went they invited THS representatives to visit to pick out photographs and other archive material

we felt should be preserved, and we were glad to do so.

The aerial view, below, is from the 1960s and shows Wallace and Tiernan buildings at the upper right. The site was originally Priory Mill and Farm. The miller's house can be seen in the foreground. The flour mill behind it was powered by a waterwheel fed from the Bourne stream near Somerhill. The wheel itself no longer survives.

Demolition work on the more recent buildings is due to start on 12th March 2012. The oasts are not currently under threat, but they are not listed and their fate depends on how the site will eventually be redeveloped.



Priory Mill and Farm in Tudeley Lane in the 1960s

Banking crisis hits Tonbridge

*Crises in the banking world are nothing new.
Two centuries ago there was one in Tonbridge.*

On 7th December 1812, the town's only bank, in the upper High Street, failed to open its doors. The Tonbridge Bank had finally run out of money and was unable to repay its creditors.

The historian Arthur Neve blames the collapse on the fact that the Bank's partners 'probably knew very little about the technicalities of banking' and one of them 'was of extravagant habits and spent money very freely'. But Tonbridge was not alone. Dozens of single-branch Country Banks went under at this time, victims of a monetary crisis brought about by Britain's foreign wars.

An eye-witness account of one such collapse (in Exmouth) describes 'the honest tradesman, living in credit ... returning home with a broken heart, unable to pay his debts, or provide for the support of his family', 'the aged parent who had ... amassed a little sum to bequeath to his children, robbed of his all in a moment', and 'the helpless widow ... who had placed her little property in [the Bank's] hands ... now reduced to penury and obliged to look forward to the workhouse as her last asylum'.

It may not have been quite that bad in Tonbridge, however. Creditors of the Tonbridge Bank met together on 14th December to appoint a committee to sort out the failed Bank's affairs. Six months later, creditors were paid one-quarter of what they were owed, and other instalments were promised,

though it is not clear whether these were actually received.



George Children

Ultimately it was the Bank's partners who had to pay up. The Tonbridge Bank had been set up in about 1792 by two wealthy local landowners: George Children of Ferox Hall, on the corner of Bordyke (now part of Tonbridge School) and William Woodgate of Somerhill. The third partner

was William Scoones from the family of lawyers whose practice eventually became Thomson, Snell and Passmore in East Street. It was hoped that the bank's debts could be discharged from the sale of land owned by Children and Woodgate, but in the end their homes had to go too. By 1817 both men had been declared bankrupt and Ferox Hall and Somerhill were up for sale. George Children in particular had been a much-loved figure in the town. On his death in 1818 his body was returned to Tonbridge for burial, where he is commemorated by a touching memorial in the Parish Church.

Following the demise of the Tonbridge Bank a 'Tonbridge New Bank' was set up by Thomas Mercer and John Barlow, but this too collapsed after only about two years. This time the creditors got all their money back, with interest, though they had to wait up to 12 years for it. Meanwhile a Mr Thomas Beeching had come to Tonbridge and quietly begun to act as a bank within his draper's shop on the corner of



Cheque issued in 1878 by Beeching's Bank – the one that didn't fail.

Church Lane. His bank survived and prospered so that by 1843 a Beeching son, Horatio, was wealthy enough to purchase the property which George

Children had earlier lost, Ferox Hall. Beeching's Bank had five branches in Kent by the time it amalgamated with Lloyd's in 1890.

100 years ago – from the *Tonbridge Free Press*

'ENFRANCHISEMENT OF WOMEN CONDEMNED'

The campaign by the suffragette movement to get women the vote in national elections was at its height in 1912 but it aroused strong feelings, as shown in this article from the Free Press of 1st March 1912.

'A meeting in connection with the Tonbridge branch of the National League for opposing Women's Suffrage was held on Thursday night last week at the Public Hall chamber. Mr P.L. Bebington B.A. LL.B. presided over a small attendance and excellent speeches were given by Mr A. Potts and Mrs Harold Norris.

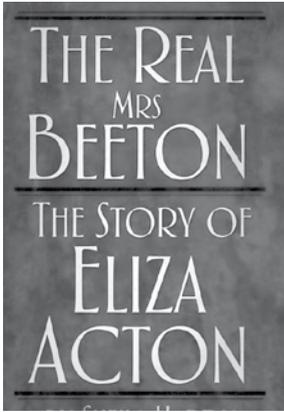
The chairman said he noticed that of the women municipal electors in Tonbridge, they had a majority of antis (hear, hear!). Of 189 postcards sent out, 99 answers were received – 66 were against women's suffrage and 33 for (applause) ... He maintained that there was an essential difference between the

duties required of women and those required of men ... he would rather that women kept out of politics which was run best and most satisfactorily by men.

Mrs Harold Norris thought that the supreme value of women to a nation was their motherhood and if women did insist in taking a share in public work and responsibility this would inevitably suffer ... The suffrage demands meant more than the vote, they meant absolute social equality with men which they could never attain. Instead of being a step forward it would be a step back. ...

A resolution against extending the vote to women was carried by 5 to 1.'

Here and there



'The Real Mrs Beeton'

A new biography has appeared of one of Tonbridge's best known former citizens, Eliza Acton, who wrote her best-selling *Modern Cookery for Private Families* at her home in Bordyke in the 1840s. Delia Smith has described her as 'the best writer of recipes in the English language', and Mrs Beeton pinched dozens of Eliza's recipes for her own book. *The Real Mrs Beeton: Eliza Acton – the Forgotten Founder of Modern Cookery* by Sheila Hardy is published by The History Press (ISBN: 9780752461229, £11.21 from Amazon). Plans have been made to put up a plaque to Eliza's memory outside her Bordyke home.

'Kent in Old Film': A new DVD of archive film is available from Totally Archive, 10 Fraser Avenue, Eastbourne BN23 6BD for £12.99 inc. p&cp. Subjects covered include hop picking, coal mining, trolleybuses, steam trains, etc. Details: www.totallyarchive.co.uk.

Forthcoming History Courses in Tonbridge:

Kent Adult Education Courses (at the AEC, Avebury Avenue)

Five-session evening courses (19.30 – 21.30):

Angry Angevins: starts 18th April

Famine Plague and War in the 14thC: starts 6th June

One day courses, Saturday (unless shown):

Time Travellers Guide to Ancient Britain, 19th May

A Day of Tonbridge History, 9th June

In Search of The Wealden Hall House, Sunday 10th June

Revolt of the People of Kent, 16th June
Historic High Streets: Tonbridge, 23rd June. Details from the Library or www.kentadulteducation.co.uk

Canterbury Christ Church University (at Salomons, near Tunbridge Wells)

27th March: Day School *Local History: The Essential Tool Kit*

24th April (first of five sessions. 10.30–12.30) *Local History: starting and moving on*

W.E.A. (at the Adult Education Centre, Avebury Avenue)

Living and Dying in Medieval Kent: 6 week course from Thursday 19th April (10–12 noon). Details from Jill Britcher, 01233 634410

Jubilee Quiz: (page 4)

The plaque is on the former Wesleyan Sunday School in East Street.