

THE WYCHWOODS LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY 1981-2002

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Wychwoods Local History Society – The First Twenty-One Years

Our Society came of age in 2002., In setting down its many achievements during that time, I make no apology for name dropping throughout this article, as these are the people whose sterling efforts have made the Society the success that it is. Many you will know, other friends are sadly no longer with us. But how did it all start?

During my work as a district councillor in the 1970s and 1980s local residents, especially the elderly, often told me snippets of local lore and legend. I realised there was a whole lot of fascinating information out there, gradually being lost as folk died or moved away. Another Shiptonian, Mike Linfield, was interested in copying and preserving old photographs and we both felt that a local history society would be an asset to the community. So the evening of Thursday 2 April 1981 in Shipton's Beaconsfield Hall saw 'The Inaugural Meeting of the Shipton and District Local History Society', with John Steane (Keeper of the Field Section, Oxfordshire County Museum Services) booked to give an introductory talk.

To our astonishment, well over 80 people attended. John Steane gave us every encouragement and many useful suggestions including the exhortation to 'write everything down'! Twelve people volunteered to form a steering committee, consisting of chairman: Geoffrey Giles; deputy chairman: Mr H Smith; treasurer: 'Johnny' Johnson; secretary: Norman Frost; meetings secretary: Gillian Stone; editor: Commander Rob Long; archivist: Jack Howard-Drake. Other committee members were Jack Chapman, Mike Linfield, Joan Smith, myself and, briefly, Michael Harman.

After several committee meetings to hammer out a constitution and programme, we changed the name to The Wychwoods Local History Society, and affiliated to the Oxfordshire Local History Association (OLHA). Initially the Society met four times a year, twice each at Milton and Shipton. At the first meeting on 22 September 1981 the chairman, Geoffrey Giles, spoke on 'Tracing your Family History', and in January Milton's Tom Barrett gave us 'The Story of Shipton Gasworks'. These were followed by 'Recording Oral History' and 'Vernacular Buildings'.

For the majority of members now who are just content to enjoy the social stimulation of a monthly speaker, it is worth recalling the original aims of the Society: 'To foster interest in the local history of the area, to preserve past records, to carry out local surveys, to record all the work carried out and to place copies of such records in the archives of the Society and of suitable libraries'. A number of projects were recognised from the outset as being of high priority: a record of gravestones in Milton; a record of field names; a hedge species count; the compilation of a map of all historical and interesting sites; tape recordings of elderly folks' memories and dialects and as complete a photographic record as possible of buildings and sites. This was quite an ambitious programme to contemplate, and I think we overestimated the number of members who would be prepared to be actively involved. So there were a few false starts, but a lot of good work was done from the beginning.

Mike Linfield and Norman Frost concentrated on their photographic recording and Gwen Allen led a group of about twenty members on successful hedge-counting forays. An early task was the indexing and transcription of Shipton Court estate papers loaned from the parish council. A group transcribed the 1851 census returns from villages in the 'old' parish, which included Shipton, Milton, Ascott, Leafield, Lyneham, Langley and Ramsden. (Since then, subsequent decades' returns have been completed and 1901 is now in progress.) Neither the recording of village buildings nor the oral history project got off the ground in the early days. The first newsletter published in autumn 1981 contained an appeal to members for old photographs, maps newspapers and items of historical interest. This first season saw 88 members and two editions of the newsletter.

After the first AGM in April 1982 the committee comprised Geoffrey Giles (chairman), Norman Frost (secretary) and Mr and Mrs H Smith, Jack and Joan Howard-Drake, Mike Linfield, Jack Chapman, Gwen Allen, Margaret and Frank Ware and Sue Jourdan. Frank Ware took over the treasurership, I became membership secretary, with Sue Jourdan and Joan Howard-Drake undertaking temporary secretarial duties. Six meetings were arranged for the following year plus the AGM, with a fund-raising members' evening planned for the following January with a few displays of the society's activities. Jack Howard-Drake took over production of the twice-yearly newsletter after the death of Rob Long. Under the auspices of the Family History Society the Howard-Drakes started transcribing Shipton parish registers from 1538-1899, the Giles Ascott and Leafield and the Ashtons Fifield, Idbury and Bould, a task which was to take several years. Meanwhile in the winter of 1982/83, several members attended a series of 'Introduction to Archaeology' evening classes given by Clare Halpin. Little did we realise, as we squeezed onto the tiny chairs in the Wychwood School, what a seminal moment this was to be in the history of our Society, as she described the hitherto unheard-of activity of fieldwalking.

In January 1983 we found that the fund-raising members' evening with wine and a ploughman's supper had grown to a substantial exhibition and well over a hundred enthusiastic people crowded into Milton Village Hall. Among the visitors was Dr Kate Tiller of the Oxford University Department for External Studies (as it was then) who congratulated us and offered to hold a series of evening

classes in the Wychwoods on 'Sources of Local History', which duly started the following winter. In 1983 Mr and Mrs Smith left the committee due to ill health and we gained Tom Barrett and Sue Richards (as editor), while Jack Chapman became vice-chairman. Membership stood at about a hundred, audiences at meetings averaging nearly seventy at Milton, but only about forty at Shipton, thought in part due to the poor state of Shipton's old hall and the difficulty of parking. Norman Frost was by this time corresponding with overseas members of the Groves family, among others, and we were beginning to get an increasing number of enquiries from folk tracing their families.

Jack Howard-Drake succeeded Geoffrey Giles as chairman in 1984, and Rachel Grant joined the committee as meetings secretary. Norman Frost was busy compiling the Groves family tree, and gave a series of classes to local girl guides who were taking their local history badge. June 1984 saw our first summer field excursion when Frank Ware led a group round the common boundary of the Saxon Manors of Witney and Shipton. In September, eleven members took part in the Society's first fieldwalk. Elaborate preparations were made: we put up a tent, a stove and boiled a kettle for tea and Tom Barrett, a stalwart St John Ambulanceman, brought his first aid kit as if we were operating in the wilds of Africa instead of just down the Ascott Road! Fieldwalks have taken place nearly every year since, although preparations have been greatly simplified! The 1984/85 season saw the pattern of eight meetings established, originally September to May, but since changing from second Tuesdays to third Thursdays with the opening of the new Beaconsfield Hall, meetings have been held from September to June with no meeting near Christmas.

1985 was the Society's busiest year to date. The first journal, Wychwoods History No. 1 was published in May at £2. Set in a typewriter face, it contained an appreciative preface by Kate Tiller, while Sue Richard's original cover design is still used today. In November The Wychwoods Album of old photographs was published, part funded by 385 subscriptions in advance, with subscribers' names printed at the back. Both publications proved extremely popular, and were soon reprinted.

The 1985/86 season was another busy one, with about 200 members including several overseas, a very healthy financial situation, and the production of Wychwoods History No. 2. A group led by archaeologist James Bond Surveyed a medieval site at Upper Milton in May 1986, in July a visit to Ilbury iron age camp was led by Charlie Chambers, and in August we walked no fewer than five fields! (The limiting factor in fieldwalking for us was the time needed afterwards to process and identify the finds). The first 'Village Memories' teatowels printed with old photographs were an instant hit for Christmas. Meanwhile, Rachel Grant suggested and started to organise a detailed survey of St Mary's Church, Shipton, which occupied seventeen folk for at least two years and resulted in three beautifully illustrated volumes of records.

Our second exhibition held at Milton in April 1987 was a milestone for the Society and a resounding success. Despite an entrance charge of 50p, over 500 people queued to see the exhibits which included fieldwalk finds, old medical instruments (enthusiastically demonstrated by Dr Tom

McQuay), histories of Alfred Groves and Sons and of the Groves family, nineteenth-century agriculture, the village constable and many photographs. The day was launched with morris dancers in the car park and the doors finally closed at 6pm with many folk wishing they could have stayed open for two days! May 1987 saw two new committee members – John Rawlins who later took charge of publicity, and Wendy Pearse who was immediately recruited to compile the meetings programme. Some members were able to take part in the professional archaeological dig at Prebendal House under Brian Durham of the Oxford Archaeological Unit, prior to the house's conversion to retirement accommodation. Wychwoods History No.3 devoted to aspects of life in Shipton and Milton in the nineteenth century and based largely upon the research by Kate Tiller's evening class students, who included several committee members, was a joint publication with the Oxford University Department for External studies. A second teatowel was designed and quickly sold out. The meetings were now enhanced by the regular use of a speaker's lectern and microphone and loudspeakers, even if the latter were sometimes temperamental.

In 1988 the county's expert on medieval pottery, Maureen Mellor, spent two days examining the Society's collection of medieval pottery gleaned from local fields and village building sites, for incorporation in her forthcoming monograph in *Oxoniensia*, where the society's contribution is acknowledged. In April we hosted the spring meeting of the Oxfordshire Local History Association, and in May we entertained the national Association of Local History Tutors with tea and displays of our work. 1989 started with a bang with the January meeting taking the form of a Victorian evening's entertainment organised by Daphne Waugh and modelled on a concert held in Milton in 1885. In the summer we visited and entertained members from neighbouring societies, while in October an enthusiastic group under James Bond surveyed the Bruern monastery fishpond, courtesy of Mr David Astor. Babs Richards designed two distinctive earthenware and porcelain mugs featuring buildings in Milton and Shipton; these were marketed by Jack and Peggy Chapman, our teatowel sellers, and proved just as popular. 1989/90 saw Norman Frost retiring from the secretaryship after eight years but staying on as archivist. Wendy Pearse took over as secretary, as well as being programme organiser, a dual role she has played with dedication and distinction ever since. I succeeded Sue Richards as journal editor. In September *The Second Wychwoods Album* of old photographs hit the shelves. At the tenth anniversary meeting in April 1991, ten members gave short talks on a variety of topics and we all drank the Society's health.

In 1992, after eight years as chairman, Jack Howard-Drake retired in favour of Sue Jourdan, while Janet Wallace and Trudy Yates joined the committee, Trudy finally to tackle the recording of oral history. For the next ten years the Society followed its established enjoyable pattern of monthly meetings, covering an astonishing range of topics. Talks given by society members and other local folk often proved among the most popular. But several other highlights stand out. We heard a Michael Aston of Bristol University talk on 'Landscape Archaeology'. Once a Milton resident, he is now famous as Professor Mick Aston of TV's *Time Team*! We heard the Rev. Ralph Mann on the 'Ascott Martyrs', George Lambrick on the Rollright Stones, Brian Durham on the Witney Palace and Tom Hassall on his experience as an oarsman on a replica Greek trireme. We listened to that inimitable storyteller, Sheila Stewart, and heard Beryl Schumer and W D Campbell on 'Wychwood

Forest'. We have enjoyed several beautifully illustrated tours of the Cotswolds with Tim Porter. Shipton old village hall was packed to the roof to hear Dr Celia Miller, the author of *Rain and Ruin*, an edited version of the Victorian diary of a local farmer. Enthusiastic audiences listened to Miss Dor Thomson's and Professor Hall's memories of their former home, Shipton Court, while we have been enlightened on topics as diverse as local railways and canals, sheep-farming, brewing and many, many more. Every meeting has been enhanced by the serving of coffee and biscuits, for many years by Peggy Chapman and her band of helpers and latterly by Jane Barea and Janet Wallace. Our summer excursions have included visits to the water meadows and hunting lodge at Sherborne, Chastleton House, walks round Swinbrook, Burford, Asthall and Worsham and the Chalfords, guided visits to local churches and a tour round the wartime volunteer resistance training ground at Coleshill.

In 1996 Wendy Pearse was interviewed on Shipton Green by two visiting New Zealand historians, and can now be seen and heard on screen in the Wellington museum, telling the story of the nineteenth-century emigrations and the tragic sinking of the *Cospatrick*. After a few years' break, the annual field-walking programme re-started in 1996. In May 1999 the society hosted the county's annual conference of local historical and archaeological societies, *Oxfordshire Past*. Later in 1999 James Bond led an extensive survey of the Norman castle and settlement site at Ascott d'Oilly. In 2000 the millennium was celebrated in grand style with an outstanding exhibition of the Society's work in Shipton's New Beaconsfield hall. The attractions included a 1940s-style kitchen and a thatched Saxon hut with weaving loom and our own friendly Saxon, David Wilson. Also on sale was the Society's latest publication – *That's How It Was* – the story of women in the Wychwoods in the Second World War, and commemorative plates and prints designed by Wendy. About 800 people were thought to have visited the exhibition over the weekend.

2002 saw the publication of the seventeenth *Wychwoods History*, with the last six issues produced by an editorial committee. Our journals' consistently high standard of presentation and content are a tribute to both contributors and editors over the years, with a special mention of Sue Richards' ever-helpful technical guidance. They are deposited in national and local libraries and distributed widely to members both at home and abroad. In addition to our published work, the society's archives contain a vast storehouse of information, including the carefully annotated photographic record maintained by John Rawlins. Two members have the distinction of having had books published: Dr Anthea Jones on *Tewkesbury and The Cotswolds* among others, while Jack Howard-Drakes's *Church Court Depositions* run from 1542 to 1616 in seven volumes.

Membership has been maintained over the years at between 150 and 200 plus, and includes people from various parts of the UK as well as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA. These are often people researching their family histories, and we have been able to supply a great deal of information on local origins to a growing number of enquirers.

Frank Ware retired from the treasurership in 1994, succeeded by Duncan Waugh and currently by David Perceval. Joan Howard-Drake once more became guardian of the archives on Norman Frost's retirement from the committee after fourteen years' service, and I bowed out from the committee in 1996. Over the years, Tom Barrett, Clifford Stevenson, Freida Ashton, Richard Bidgood, Frank Barea and Anthea Jones have also served on the committee. Sadly, Geoffrey Giles died in 1998, while Jack Chapman had served as vice-chairman for sixteen years on his death in 1999. In 2001 we lost both Norman Frost and Peggy Chapman.

As with every organisation, a relatively small band of activists at any one time is engaged in research and in keeping the Society running. Our warmest thanks are due to them all, and to the indefatigable contributors to the journal, but we always need new folk willing to play an active part, otherwise we are in danger of merely becoming history ourselves, instead of actively researching it! The Wychwoods Local History Society is widely acknowledged to be one of the most active and successful not only in Oxfordshire, but also nationally. Let's keep it that way!