

# Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society

[www.AAAHS.org.uk](http://www.AAAHS.org.uk)



## NEWSLETTER - SPRING 2009

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**Time Team at work at Radcot** (picture courtesy of Channel 4)

For 3 days last May Channel 4's 'Time Team' visited 'Garrison Field' at Radcot Bridge Farm to look for remains of 'Queen Matilda's 12<sup>th</sup> century castle. They had been invited by Professor John Blair, of Oxford University and geophysicist (and AAAHS member) Roger Ainslie, who had been investigating the field.

Tony Robinson and co. were helped by members of the AAAHS and found remains from the Roman, Medieval and Civil war periods. They also reconstructed a "Perriere" (a small version of the trebuchet siege engine).

More at: <http://www.channel4.com/history/microsites/T/timeteam/2009/radcot/index.html>  
and [http://www.unofficialtonyrobinsonwebsite.co.uk/pages/tt\\_2k9/radcot.html](http://www.unofficialtonyrobinsonwebsite.co.uk/pages/tt_2k9/radcot.html)

## Meetings Programme:

All at the Northcourt Centre starting at 7.45pm. Members free. Visitors welcome (£2.00 entry)

- 23 Apr 2009**     **Bill King:** The River Thames at War
- 21 May 2009**     **Tim Allen:** The Lambrick Lecture
- 18 Jun 2009**     **Various Members:** Members/open evening
- 17 Sept 2009**     **AGM:** Speaker to be announced
- 15 Oct 2009**     **Maureen Mellor:** to be announced
- 19 Nov 2009**     **Pat Minns:** RAF Abingdon
- 10 Dec 2009**     **Christmas Social:** The Mummers  
Please note the December meeting is earlier in the month than usual!

## Outings

**Monday 18<sup>th</sup> May**, 2.30pm - Ditchley Park trip

**Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> July**, 10.30am - Pendon Museum trip

Details from Jenny Devanney ([local@aaahs.org.uk](mailto:local@aaahs.org.uk)).

## Committee

The AGM is in September – your chance to joint the committee. If you'd like to put yourself forward, make yourself known to any committee member at a meeting or email [secretary@aaahs.org.uk](mailto:secretary@aaahs.org.uk)

## Chairman's Report

It is a great pleasure for me to be writing my first Chairman's Report, especially as the wonderful spring weather is lifting everyone's spirits.

The past few months have been busy ones. Our lecture programme has been up to its usual high standard, with talks on the geology of our area, on Neolithic pits, on conserving historic buildings in Oxford and (by our own Julia Brocklesby) on the Hittites. The Christmas social was enlivened by a small contingent from Earl River's Regiment of Foote, part of the Sealed Knot Civil War re-enactment society. This group (of men, women and children!) gave us

many fascinating insights, both into the lives of Civil War soldiers and their families, and into what it is like being an active member of the Sealed Knot.

The diggers are now working at Daisy Banks (the Abbey Fishponds Nature Reserve on Radley Road) where they are using a combination of excavation and survey to try and find out more the medieval fishpond (see below). The work will contribute to a wider project about 'Abingdon's Lost Abbey', for which the Vale Council has got Lottery money. Tim Allen is co-ordinating the researching and writing of a booklet on the Abbey. Any Society member who thinks they might like to help in some way with the project should contact Tim Allen ([t.allen@oxfordarch.co.uk](mailto:t.allen@oxfordarch.co.uk)) with a copy to Ann Berkeley ([ann.berkeley@whitehorsedc.gov.uk](mailto:ann.berkeley@whitehorsedc.gov.uk)) who is the overall coordinator.

The Society's Local History Group also continues to flourish, with lectures in February on Sutton Courtenay and (forthcoming) in May on the Abingdon riots of 1327.

The Society has also started to become more actively involved in planning and development issues affecting Abingdon heritage. We have responded to three consultations from the Vale Council: on the Old Gaol scheme (where we are very concerned that the important archaeology, which includes a Roman building discovered by the Society in the 1980s, is properly dealt with); the former Hathaway's shop in the High Street (where a rather drastic refurbishment of this important historic building is proposed); and the Council's draft 'Local Development Framework', which identifies land at Tithe Farm for possible new housing. This is right next to the Roman building found by the Society in its first excavation, back in 1968, and clearly an important area. We hope that our responses will help planners and councillors to appreciate just how important, and how valued, the town's historic heritage is.

It's spring now, but summer will be upon us before we know it, so we are already starting to look ahead to the Open Evening (18 June). If anyone has any work they would like to talk about, or display, please contact the Meetings Secretary, Jenny Devanney ([local@aaahs.org.uk](mailto:local@aaahs.org.uk)).

In the meantime, enjoy the sunshine, and I look forward to seeing as many of you as possible at meetings, on outings or involved in projects!

Roger Thomas, Chairman

## **Digging Report - Abbey Fishponds**

As Roger mentioned, the digging team are currently investigating the medieval dam and that is to be found in BBOWT's Abbey Fishponds Nature Reserve, Radley Road, Abingdon. The excavations form part of a community archaeology project aimed at providing a wider understanding of the influence/significance of the Abbey and its 'satellite' properties in and around the town. The results of these investigations, incorporating this current

research, the Abbey site itself and parts of Northcourt Farm will be made known to the public in a proposed booklet (36 pages I gather), on display boards and via public talks/lectures.

Abbey Fishponds NR encompasses a wet, Y-shaped valley located between Barton Court Farm and the Barrow Hills complex – two important archaeological sites destroyed by housing development. Radley Road forms its northern border with Audlett Drive running along the southern end. The nature reserve currently consists of two areas of fenland vegetation and reedbeds separated by a 3.5 metre high dam and surrounded by trees and shrubs on the valley sides. Public rights of way run along the length of the dam, east to west and from north to south following a stream (of no known name – any ideas?). The two fenland areas were once fishponds until some time after the dissolution of the Abbey in 1538 (lake mud deposits had stopped forming around AD 1560 according to Parker, 2006) when lack of maintenance such as dredging resulted in the ponds undergoing successional change from open water to their current boggy habitat types. These ponds are documented as being part of the Abbey's property (apparently they are mentioned in the Domesday census of AD 1086 according to Bond, 1979) and they once provided fish (presumably carp) for the monks.

Currently we are digging a trench in the medieval dam structure as nothing is known about its method of construction or its true age. The widely assumed early 14<sup>th</sup> Century date for its creation seems to be on the young side if the environmental, radiocarbon and documentary evidence are to be believed. Adrian Parker of Oxford Brookes University took a core sample from the peat in the northernmost 'pond' and observed that vegetation characteristic of a lake formed abruptly in this location and was in existence by the early 11<sup>th</sup> Century (his radiocarbon date of AD 1050 supports the Domesday census date, see above). Thus, the dam may be 300 years older than thought previously although this remains to be demonstrated archaeologically. There are indications on aerial photographs that the current position of the dam lies on the same alignment and in the same location as a possible Roman or Iron Age trackway that may have crossed the marshy site from east to west. As yet we have no evidence for an earlier trackway and we may never see this far down beneath the main dam structure because of the high water table within the peaty soils and the presence of legally protected water voles along the stream that cuts through the dam. However, we will attempt an investigation if it is possible.

So far as we can see dam construction involved the tipping, alternately, of sandy silts and wheelbarrow (?) loads of gravels presumably originating from fairly close by. An old pond once situated on the north-west corner of the Nature Reserve may have been formed as dam building materials were quarried.

Finds so far are probably all residual and include Neolithic flint flakes and domestic animal bones, with a few sherds of 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> Century medieval pottery. The flints may have come from the famous Neolithic Causeway Camp

that lies between the two upward pointing 'arms' of the Y-shaped nature reserve or from the two adjacent sites at Barrow Hills and Barton Court Farm.

Bob Eeles

## **Membership Secretary's Report**

I am pleased to say that this year membership subscriptions are broadly similar to last year. Although family memberships are down by 4 this is more or less offset by an increase in individual memberships of 6 making a total of 90 subscriptions so far.

Sally Ainslie AAAHS Membership Sec.

## **Treasurer's Report**

Unfortunately our treasurer has recently resigned due to moving house. It appears that expenditure on room hire and insurance has increased somewhat this year. Also a recent inspection of our Portacabin has revealed that urgent repairs are needed to the roof. The cost has been estimated at about £200 although this may increase when the full extent of the problem has been revealed. However, sales of Abingdon in Camera and Ock Street Remembered should bring in some profit and sales of the Nigel Hammond books, which we bought at a very reduced price, have been good so hopefully we will cover our costs this year.

Sally Ainslie AAAHS Acting Treasurer

## **Local History Group**

The meeting of 10 February was well attended, and Ron Dell gave us a fascinating illustrated talk on Sutton Courtenay. It's a village whose buildings history goes back to 1066, or very nearly, and has a wealth of everything from its Norman manor house to lots of solid farm buildings, modernised, tidied and still in use. It has seen important people, from Henry I's queen, Matilda, to a couple of 20th century prime ministers, one of whom declared war there and the other, smoking his pipe, planted a walnut tree.

Ron has very kindly offered to lead a guided walk round Sutton Courtenay some evening next summer.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday 12 May, when Paul Sayers will present the results of his current project. He is revisiting the Abingdon riots of 1327, a

very fraught chapter in the history of the relations between the pre-charter town and its ecclesiastical overlord. It will be interesting, and I expect there to be some rather intense discussion!

*Manfred Brod*

## **Dates for Your Diary: Some talks with a historical bias:-**

**Oxford Civic Society** Magdalen College Auditorium, Longwall Street, Oxford at 7.30 for 8pm, Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> April: Oxford Churches since the Oxford Movement by Geoffrey Tyack.

<http://www.oxfordcivicsoc.org.uk/Programme/Apriljulyprogramme.pdf>

**Radley History Society** School Hall, Radley Primary School at 7.30pm, Monday 11<sup>th</sup> May: "The Early History of Cowley" by Rosanne Butler.

**AAHS Local History Group** 35 Ock Street, starting 7.45pm, Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> May: the Abingdon Riots of 1327 by Paul Sayers (plus opportunity for socialising and informal discussions over coffee).

**Oxford Civic Society** United Reform Church, Banbury Road, Oxford at 7.30 for 8pm, Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> May: "Oxford Sculpture", a talk covering the last 9 centuries by Katherine Shock.

**Berkshire Family History Society** Vale of White Horse District Council of White Horse Branch, Long Furlong Community Centre, Boulter Drive, Abingdon at 7.30pm, Monday 15<sup>th</sup> June: Sinners and Villains (Talks from the Archives) by Carl Boardman.

**Abingdon Anglo-German Club** Abbey Chapel, Checker Walk at 7.30pm. Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> June: "Cultural Consanguinity in the Works of JMW Turner and Joseph Haydn" by Dr Brien Masters.

## **Abingdon, a History**

The Society has recently been approached by Simon Thraves, Commissioning Editor for Phillimore & Co.Ltd, who have published a number of illustrated town histories. They would like to produce a volume on Abingdon and are looking for a prospective author. The book would be a maximum of 144 pages and approximately 30,000 words long with around 150 illustrations.

If anyone is interested could he/she please contact Jackie Smith, email [pfsmith@supanet.com](mailto:pfsmith@supanet.com) for further details.

## **Poor Law Administration at Abingdon, Berkshire, before 1834** **by Dick Barnes**

The Society now has in its archives a bound copy of the thesis submitted by Patricia Stewart in May 1978 for the degree of M.Sc. in the Faculty of Economics in the University of London.

This work is based largely on the records from 1799 to 1834 of the overseers of the two Abingdon parishes, which were held at St Helen's church. It thus covers the latter years of the long period when the parishes of St Helen and St Nicholas each had their own poor law administration, with workhouse, overseers, and poor relief. The detailed account of Poor Law administration in the Abingdon parishes is set against the wider scene of Poor Law elsewhere, the additional relief given by many local charities, and the general economic state of the town at that time.

In 1834 the poor law administrations of the two Abingdon parishes and eleven rural parishes were amalgamated to form the Abingdon Union with its new workhouse in Oxford Road, which was to serve the local community for the next century. The thesis includes a copy of an illustrated description of the new workhouse, and further details are given in Peter Higginbotham's work, see [www.workhouses.org.uk](http://www.workhouses.org.uk).

Pat Stewart very kindly gave this, one of only two bound copies, to Dick Barnes and he offered it to the Society. We are grateful for this addition to the archives.

## **Charles Alfred Butler alias James Jones** **by Sue Matthews**

My interest in Charles Alfred Butler started when Ray Dauncey sent the Ock Street Group an email saying he had some letters from Charles Butler to his mother in Ock Street, Abingdon. These had been passed down by Matilda Carter, Ray's great grandmother.

On 18<sup>th</sup> September 1851, Charles Alfred Butler - alias James Jones - wrote to his mother Elizabeth Butler from Valparaiso, Chile. Elizabeth Butler nee Dance lived in Ock Street opposite the Cross Keys. In the letter he explained how he had left the Asia in June 1850 - in fact he had jumped ship. In his letter he explained how he travelled into the interior of Chile and lived with the local people whom he found kind hearted. Although to start with he could not speak their language, Spanish, he soon learned. He had worked for an English Doctor in a town called Quillota for about 5 months before he returned to Valparaiso on 20<sup>th</sup> August 1851, when he thought it would be safe to return. The Asia had, in fact, sailed on 15 April 1851. Upon his return to Valparaiso he had found employment within 2 days, working as a groom for an English Gentleman.

Charles Butler had left his employment with Mr Stacey of Shippon, Abingdon in 1845, just weeks before his son, Alfred, was born to Charlotte Hartwell on 18 April 1845. In the letter to his mother he claims that he could not afford a child and the shame was too much for him to bear. He also said that given the chance he would marry Charlotte tomorrow. On that count he was too late: Charlotte married James Commins in March 1850 and was living with him and their young son, James, at Shippon. Young Alfred is being cared for by his grandparents, Benjamin and Charlotte Hartwell of the Abbey.

From Abingdon he made his way to Derby, where on 25<sup>th</sup> June, he enlisted in the Royal Marine under the name of James Jones from Abingdon. On his enlistment papers he is described as being aged 20, height 5 feet 7 1/3 inches, complexion fresh, eyes brown and hair dark brown. On July 2<sup>nd</sup> he was passed fit and joined the Chatham Division.

In August 1845 he was in Chatham writing to his Grandfather, Mr William Dance of Lyford, and told him that he has enlisted, although they must have known by then. He told his Grandfather about the good victuals he was getting morning and night - one pound of salt beef for dinner, half a pint of rum a day and 5 shillings a week - and that they were not like soldiers and do not go ashore but stay with the ship and they could be at sea for 4 or 5 years. When he came home he expected to get between £20 and £30 so that he could buy his discharge. He said he had written to his mother but not had a reply.

On March 4<sup>th</sup> 1846 he wrote to his mother from Plymouth, where he was on board the Calypso. He said that they had sailed from Portsmouth 3 days before but because of the rough voyage they had pulled into Plymouth for a few days. He also explained to her how to collect his half pay from the Post Office. He was under the impression at this time that they were going to sail around Africa; the ship in fact sailed on to Valparaiso. Both these letters were signed James Jones.

His next letter was from Tenerife on 14 April 1846. He describes it as belonging to Spain and its inhabitants as rather dark and short with the land being mountainous.

The next, on 24 May, was from Rio de Janeiro in which he thanks his mother for her letter of 26 March which had been delivered by the Falmouth packet (the express brig). He also enquired after his brothers and sisters and brother-in-law, Ambrose Pearce, and the 'Barton Fellers'.

The Calypso then spent the next 4 years sailing around the Pacific visiting places like Callao, Lima, Peru, the Sandwich Island, Tahiti, the Navigation Islands (Samoa), Somosomo, Fiji - they even visited Pitcairn Island, the home of the famous 'Bounty Mutineers'.

On 29 May 1849 Charles Butler left the Calypso and joined the Asia, just as The Times reported that the Calypso was about to sail for home with 5,000ozs



of Californian gold, 1,000ozs belonging to Mr Sowerkop, and £2,000,000 of species (coins).

On 5<sup>th</sup> June 1850 he jumped ship, according to his letter. His enlistment documents state 'Run from Asia 26 September 1850'. Perhaps they didn't notice he was missing or they thought he would return to the ship.

Going back to his last letter, there is an embossed stamp at the top of the page which has a 4 mast sailing ship and what looks like JOHN BUTLER above it. His father's name was John Butler and Ray wonders if he had taken some of his father's writing paper with him. His mother had also written a note on the letter to her daughter saying that she would like it returned to her. There was also another letter from his brother Frederick, who had joined the army, to his sister. This leaves us with even more questions:-

1. What would an agricultural labourer be doing with headed note paper?
2. Would he really have held onto it for five years and why didn't he use it before?
3. Was it just a coincidence?
4. Did his father die between the 1841 and 1851 censuses or had he gone to Valparaiso? (not likely)
5. Who taught Charles his mother and his brother to write?
6. What happened to him?
7. Did he ever come home?
8. Did his mother hear from him again?

I guess we'll never know.

### **The Abingdon affray of 1571 by Manfred Brod**

It is all too easy to assume that Abingdon's charter set an impervious boundary around the town at which the authority of county magnates ceased. That this was far from the case is shown by an affray that took place on 2 October 1571. The occasion was the Berkshire county sessions that were to be held in the Guildhall on that day.

It was well known that there was hostility between two of the leading county families, those of Sir Henry Norris of Rycote and of Sir Edward Unton of Wadley, near Faringdon. At a parliamentary election earlier in the year, there had been an arrangement whereby Sir Edward would take one of the Berkshire seats, but Sir Henry had reneged and supported Richard Ward, an obscure individual from Windsor, who had duly won the poll, after which he gave or sold some of his offices and properties into Norris hands. The public humiliation, given contemporary concerns about personal and family honour, was too great for Sir Edward to bear.

The leading gentry of Berkshire rode into Abingdon, each with his ceremonial escort of liveried servants. The Unton retinue was larger than any of the others, numbering some thirty men. Their swords had been newly sharpened.

In the Guildhall, following a pre-arranged plan, a humorist among them began to taunt and insult young John Norris, Sir Henry's son, a professional soldier home between campaigns. Norris and his friends walked out of the hall with the Unton men following and turned to face their aggressors in the market place, near the cross. It was market day and the square was crowded. The crowd yelled encouragement and formed a close ring round the combatants, so that they could not stop fighting even if they had wanted to. A passing magistrate climbed the steps of the market cross to call for calm, but was jeered. The county sheriff did the same with no better result. Finally Sir Edward Unton himself came out of the Guildhall, and at a word from him the swordplay came to an end. By then the Norris side had lost one man dead and (probably) five wounded, including John Norris.

A commission of enquiry composed of local gentry met at Newbury on 19 October. They considered some 35 Unton supporters, and indicted 31 of them. The case passed to the court of Star Chamber, the judicial arm of the Privy Council, which concerned itself above all with breaches of the peace. Finally, on 12 February 1572, a formal pardon was extended to all concerned. It is hard to see what else could have been done without the risk of destabilising an entire county. But the Council made its attitude clear by a royal proclamation of 3 January 1572 threatening dire penalties against anyone who maintained badged or liveried retainers beyond his household servants.

On a superficial reading, the affray occurred in Abingdon but might just as well have been anywhere else, and the town as such was not involved. But the list of the Unton men accused of involvement tells a different story. Most of the malefactors came from Wadley or other Unton estates; but two were Abingdon men, and by no means either of the servant or of the hooligan class. Both were resident at Fitzharris. One of them was Richard Smith, whose father had been the queen's bailiff at Radley and several times mayor, and whose brother would be mayor in his turn. Smith, perhaps by his father's intercession, escaped indictment. The other man, who *was* indicted, was none other than the young Thomas Tesdale, who would become wealthy enough to retire from Abingdon to a succession of country estates, and respectable enough to hobnob with bishops and heads of colleges. Almost forty years after these events he would leave money to enrich Roysse's school and to endow Pembroke College.

We may here be somewhere near the beginning of what would be a long-lasting conflict in Abingdon between the avowedly godly faction led by the Tesdale family and that, no less religious but less insistently pious, which would be led by Francis Little and, after him, by the Mayott clan. The Untons were godly, while Sir Henry Norris and his sons were not noted for religious zeal. Charter or no charter, the political winds that blew in the county of Berkshire were quite capable of stirring the leaves in the Abingdon market place.