

WELLS LOCAL HISTORY GROUP

NEWSLETTER No. 7 February 1998

CHAIRMAN'S CORNER

Thanks to your support and interest the group is growing steadily and gathering strength. We now have 85 members who support our talk evenings, and a small but increasing number are banding themselves into interest groups.

It is from these groups that the important work of researching and recording the town's history will come. It is important that the committee gives help and support to the formation of the groups. It is equally important that members are prepared to get involved. Please tell us what you would like to do or what skills you can offer when the need arises.

John Christmas

TIMES PAST

100 years ago

At the end of the last century Wells had its fair share of bad luck. In 1880 the lifeboat overturned and eleven crewmen were lost and then, in 1898, disaster struck again. It was almost exactly 100 years ago, on Tuesday 22nd February 1898, to be exact.

At that time Wells was the Coastguard headquarters for the section of the coast running from Cromer to Hunstanton, and periodically supplies were brought in by sea in the torpedo gun boat HMS Alarm.

On Tuesday the 22nd the Alarm arrived at 5 o'clock and gave the usual blast on her whistle. This was the signal for the

Coastguards to launch a boat and go out to collect the stores. The Coastguard commanding officer was away on leave and Chief Boatman John Devlin was in charge. The weather was bad, with a bitter northerly wind picking up the waves and a strong tide running. Unfortunately, the only boat that the Coastguards had was a small four-oared gig which was quite unsuitable for heavy seas. Nevertheless John Devlin decided to go, and took with him a crew of four.

Another coastguard by the name of Williams was so concerned about the party setting out that soon after they had left he went down to the end of Beach Road to keep a look out for them. When he got there he saw that their boat had turned turtle and there was someone hanging on to the upturned keel. Williams signalled back to the quay for help and then went into the water to rescue his colleague.

When help arrived Williams had saved Devlin and both men were lying on the beach completely exhausted. Devlin was taken home but unfortunately he died that night. Williams, who had not been in the water so long, made a full recovery.

A search was organised and on Wednesday morning two bodies were recovered followed by two more a little later on. Unfortunately, with the second two bodies they also found the upturned remains of the gig from HMS Alarm. It was then realised that the disaster was

even greater than had been thought. A message was sent to the Alarm who confirmed that when the coastguard boat failed to turn up, they launched their own boat with the stores. The naval boat was manned by an officer and five crew, all of whom perished. A total of eleven men lost their lives that day and, putting aside for a moment the grief experienced by the navy families, in Wells eighteen children lost their fathers and five women were widowed.

This story serves to remind us how dangerous the sea is and how brave were the men who battled with it for their livelihood, before the days of outboard motors, inflatable dinghies and dry suits. It is also another example of instinctive and selfless reaction to help a comrade in difficulty, even if it means risking your own life; a characteristic still found in the Coastguard and Lifeboat services.

To commemorate the event a service will be held on the Quay on Sunday 22nd February at 2 p.m. Also a memorial flag pole will be unveiled which will commemorate both the tragedy and the visits of the Dutch cutter Albatross. The Service will be followed by coffee and **an exhibition of artefacts relating to the tragedy in the Maltings Hall**. All members are invited.

J.F.C.

45 YEARS AGO

On Saturday, 31st January 1953 there was a great storm in the North Sea with the wind in the north west. The tide was due to peak at 8 p.m. but by 5 p.m. it was over the quay, and it kept on coming in. It went on to break the channel bank in two places and flood the town, causing much damage to

property and much hardship. Along the East Coast 300 people lost their lives that night, but fortunately Wells escaped without any such loss.

The Oral History Interest Group would like to talk to anyone who can remember details of that night or of the following morning. They are particularly looking for people who were directly involved as helpers or those who were helped.

If you were involved or know of someone who was, please tell John or Alison Christmas

NEXT MEETING

How much do you know of the history of the railway into Wells? Did you know that there was a tunnel between here and Fakenham? Or that there was a wooden trestle bridge over the river Stiffkey, which now lies buried under an embankment? Or the day that ... well, if you want to know about these things make sure you come to our next talk on **Wednesday, 4th March**, when **Adrian Vaughan** will tell you the whole story: **The Story of Wells Railway**.

[*The Raven Room, The Maltings, Staithe Street at 7.30 p.m.*]

SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS

Oral History Interest Groups

The group is continuing with its programme of self instruction in how to make good recordings. Current projects include collecting reminiscences of Wells before the second world war; recording experience of the 1953 and 1978 floods; and collecting views of

present day life in Wells for the "Millennium Collection". The group will welcome new members.

John and Alison Christmas

Millennium Project

Preparations for commencing research on the selected subjects have now been completed. The Project team met on February 11th to make a start on gathering information for the Texts which, when completed, will be matched to photographic slides to be taken during the summer months of 1998/99. The whole will then be collated into a programme which it is hoped to present to our

The Walk Round Guide

The six of us involved with this have decided that we cannot conveniently cover the whole of Wells in one walk. We will concentrate first on the town inland of the quay, leaving till later a second walk covering the extensive maritime interest. We have met and agreed on the route of the first walk; [perhaps the temperature on a December afternoon discouraged argument!], starting at the Tourist Information Centre in Staithe Street and extending inland as far as Market Lane before returning by a different way. We are now busy collecting information about the many features we think worthy of comment en route. We hope that between us we'll get it all right!

Brian Scott

Genealogy Group

Following the talk given by Mrs Joy Lodey on TRACING YOUR FAMILY HISTORY, several members expressed their interest in meeting from time to time to discuss the many methods by which our research can be advanced, and to offer mutual help in the solving of the problems that inevitably arise when we try to trace our families back through the centuries.

An initial meeting will be held on
Monday 23rd February at 7.30 p.m.

at

Crugmeer, Croft Yard, Wells. Croft Yard is the continuation of Bolts Close [the Post Office is on the corner], and our house is in the yard behind the old Favor Parker building [now flats]. There is parking for cars. If you would like to come along, please do not hesitate to telephone me on 01328 710358

Ian Hamel-Cooke

EDITOR'S SOAPBOX

This is the second newsletter with me as Editor. The suggested publication date was rapidly approaching and I had no material. Then, items appeared at the eleventh hour. I felt for Fleet Street editors and understood their need for 'Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese'! Fleet Street and the pub are now history and sudden undreamt of oblivion.

Wells has its Church Room but, with the intended sale, it, too, will be gone. Demolition will change the built environment of Church Plain in a matter of hours. This is surely now an urgent subject for recording. What was there before the Church Room was built?

Who built it? Why was it built? Who designed it? Who paid for it? Who used it?

Who would have thought ten years ago that the gantry over the quay and associated building would, in 1998, be high class flats? You may have read in the press that the Field Study Centre is under threat of closure. Could this be an estate of bungalows? There is plenty to record in Wells and tales to tell.

In Newsletter No.6, I asked for tit bits of local history. My contribution is "Why is my bungalow named 'Ingleborough'?" According to Ruth Groom [now deceased] the area of Grove Road was Glebe land and on that land was a mound with a huge pine tree, around which she and other children played. The Rector at the time was Rev.Ingle. When Ruth's mother had the bungalow built in 1936 it recalled their happy days in the name of 'Ingleborough'. Most of the pine tree is still in the garden.

Madge Smith has posed the following query:

Whalebone Yard

I remember Billy Tuck saying that his father buried a whalebone somewhere in this yard. But I don't know the full story. What I would like to know is:

- where is the whalebone buried, exactly?
- where did the whalebone come from? Had it been lying around in the yard before it was buried, or what?
- did that particular whalebone give the yard its name, or was it always called Whalebone Yard?
- if not, what was it called?

- what was the Christian name of Billy Tuck's father?

If you know anything about the history of the Yard or have any anecdotes to share, please let the Editor know. Then, perhaps, we could print some answers in the next newsletter.

THANK YOU....

To Wells Town Council for their recent grant of £50 to buy film for the Millennium Project, and for a promise of possible help in the future.

Is there anyone out there.....

..._who has the necessary skills and equipment to take over the production of our newsletter?

We are primarily looking for someone with a PC running Microsoft or similar, compatible program as we have the use of a laser jet printer which uses these facilities - and it produces copies very, very cheaply. [Alternatively, someone with any suitable program who also has a laser jet printer would be good.] A machine with the facility for importing photos and drawings would be wonderful!

Unfortunately, the present producer, as well as being very busy, does not have compatible equipment. The newsletter is therefore having to be photocopied, which is a more expensive operation.

So ... IS there anyone out there? ? ?

If so, please contact the Editor.

Editor:

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Ingleborough

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