

**January 2022**



**AMERSHAM SOCIETY  
NEWSLETTER**





Cover : A Common Blue Butterfly on Bird's-foot Trefoil  
and Fairy Flax by Dominic Turner. See page 44  
Inside : The River Misbourne at Amersham by Elena Morgan.

## CONTENTS

- 2     **Editorial**  
Guest editor Edward Copisarow.
- 3     **Society News**  
Update from your Committee.
- 5     **Subscriptions 2022**  
Message from Membership Secretary, Dr Peter Borrows.
- 6     **Amersham Society Outing:  
Winchester and the Gurkha Museum**  
Report by John Suckling.
- 10    **Bulstrode – Magnificence and  
Scandal on our Doorstep**  
John Suckling reports on a talk by Denise Beddows.
- 16    **The History and Work of Scannappeal**  
Dorothy Symes reports on the talks by Lisa Trivett, Director of Scannappeal, and Dr Chris Foote one of the Founders.
- 20    **Changing Wildlife in the Chilterns**  
Angela Carter reports on a talk by John Tyler.
- 24    **A 19th Century Rector of Amersham**  
A biographical sketch by Barney Tyrwhitt-Drake.
- 26    **Conserving the Market Hall**  
Annie Hamilton-Pike reports on the works now underway.
- 28    **Flight of Fancy: The Best Stairs at Shardeloes**  
Marian Miller investigates a speck of sky-blue paint.
- 30    **HS2: Save the Misbourne**  
Campaigner Jim Conboy explains.
- 36    **Old Apples of Amersham**  
Can you help Derek and Judy Tolman find more varieties?
- 40    **The lowdown on the lockdown  
at the Amersham allotments**  
Allotmenteer Adrian Porter digs up some stories.
- 44    **The Rainforest on Amersham's Doorstep**  
Marieke Bosman describes our Chiltern chalkland habitat.
- 50    **Amersham Museum News**  
An update from Museum Director Emily Toettcher.
- Noticeboard**

# Editorial

Dorothy Symes is having a well-deserved break from editing your newsletter with this issue, and I had no idea what to expect when I stepped in as guest editor. It's been an absolute delight: so many people have gladly volunteered to write contributions and send in photographs that we have got the bumperest bumper issue that I can remember.

I want to say a special thanks to first-time contributors Angela Carter, Adrian Porter, Marieke Bosman, Marian Miller, Derek and Judy Tolman and Jim Conboy, and great thanks too to those who have contributed before, for kindly doing so again.

There are only two regrets; I was hoping to include something about some of Amersham's canine residents, because dogs have been such good company in these difficult times... if you have a tale to tell about a dog's life, do please think about sending a letter to the editor for the next issue. And the other regret was that whilst I thought Editors had big postbags of "*Letters to the Editor*" I received none at all; so this is a plea that if you do have a story to share, please put pen to paper (or finger to keyboard) and drop a line to Dorothy before the end of March for inclusion in the May newsletter.

I know that the choice of a butterfly for the front cover of a winter newsletter is controversial, we're so used to having a snowy scene, but I hope the Common Blue over the chalk meadows of Amersham will remind us all in these dark winter months of the sunny day when we may all meet again. Lena Morgan has not only provided many of the other photos, she has also helped enormously in finding the perfect screenshots from our Zoom talks to illustrate the articles by our reporters.

And finally, Danny Robins, our designer, has been Patience personified and hugely supportive in enabling me to bring this wonderful mixture of social, architectural and natural history together with its snapshots of local life in a vibrant Chiltern market town. Whether you send a photo, letter, article or volunteer to edit a whole newsletter, I can thoroughly recommend getting involved.

**Edward Copisarow**



# Society News

It was a busy autumn for the Amersham Society with our first outing for two years and a continuing programme of talks, all very well-attended thanks to the eAlerts sent out by our web manager, Lena Morgan. We marked the 30th anniversary of the Amersham Museum becoming independent of the Society with a special donation.

As we start the New Year, our 66th, we have a full calendar of new events, most members have renewed their subscriptions automatically by GoCardless, and this bumper newsletter goes out with great hope that our January meeting will be the last we have to hold by Zoom for a while and we can get back to meeting face-to-face.

Many thanks to all those who attended the Annual General Meeting back in October, the same Committee of six was re-elected, but we are definitely not a closed shop and if you might be interested in finding out what's involved in being on the Committee, our Chairman Dorothy Symes, whose phone number is on the back of this newsletter, would be very pleased to hear from you and to introduce you to some of the other members of the Committee. You don't need to have lived in Amersham all your life to be on the Amersham Society Committee, so new members are every bit as welcome as longstanders. And if joining committees isn't your thing, there are plenty of other ways to get involved. This issue of the newsletter is guest edited for one issue only by Edward Copisarow: perhaps you would like to have a go at doing one too...or maybe you could start with just one article: every member of the Amersham Society has at least one story to tell. Or if that sounds too ambitious, why not join our team of volunteers who hand deliver the newsletter in their street?

The new calendar year marks the start of our new membership year and we are always pleased to hear from people who would like to join the Amersham Society for the first time. If you have a new neighbour who you think might like to become a member too, do please get in touch with Dorothy Symes or Peter Borrowes, who can provide you with a sample copy of the newsletter and a membership form for you to pass on.

We rarely talk about planning matters in the newsletter. George Allison carefully monitors all Planning and Listed Building applications in and around our historic Old Town and we seldom have cause to raise any objection. However, in 2021 we did raise our concerns when faced with an application to build a road in the historic Grade II\* Listed parkland at Shardeloes, near the walled garden. The impact on wildlife and the historic landscape would have been immense, so we were hugely relieved when Bucks Council refused permission.

Finally, we wish all our members a happy and healthy New Year, and hope to see you soon on Zoom and in real life too before many more weeks elapse.

**Amersham Society Committee.**

(Dorothy, Edward, Geraldine, George, Lena and Peter)



# Subscriptions 2022

This is to remind you that your Annual Subscription to the Amersham Society became due on 1st January 2022. The amount is unchanged since last year, £11.50 for an individual member, or £17 for two family members living at the same address. We do not issue Membership Cards.

If you pay by direct debit, there is nothing for you to do. In fact, by the time you read this the money will probably already have been taken. Thank you. Your bank statement will refer to GoCardless (which is the agent we use to collect the direct debits). It may say GoCardless(AmershamSoc) or something less comprehensible. Unfortunately, we can't do anything about this (well we could, but it would cost us a lot more).

If you pay by standing order, in most cases the money will already have been taken from your account. Nearly all members have now corrected their standing orders to reflect the increase in subscription in 2017, but the few who have still not done so can expect a letter or e-mail from me shortly – unless you are quick to send me the shortfall. If, sadly, your partner died during the course of the year, did you remember to change the amount? Only you can change the standing order, I can't do it for you. Of course, we are happy to accept the excess as a small donation, but please let us know. If you want to change to direct debit for future payments, please contact me at [peterborrows@cantab.net](mailto:peterborrows@cantab.net) and I will make the necessary arrangements.

If you are one of the few people who still pay by cash or cheque, almost certainly you have NOT yet paid. Please send the money to me at Troye Cottage, 32 Whielden Street, Amersham, Bucks HP7 0HU. Please do it NOW before you forget. Alternatively, if you would like to pay in future by direct debit, send an e-mail to [peterborrows@cantab.net](mailto:peterborrows@cantab.net) and I will arrange for both the 2022 and subsequent subscriptions to be taken in that way. I'm sorry, if you don't have an e-mail address, we can't set up a direct debit.

Finally, do you see the regular E-alerts that we send out from time to time? If not, that's probably because you haven't told us your e-mail address. You are missing out if you don't receive them because they remind you of forth-coming events and, if we are still using Zoom for our monthly talks in place of meetings at the King's Chapel, they give you log on details. We sometimes organise social events which are not on the printed programme. So, if you haven't done so yet, please e-mail me at [peterborrows@cantab.net](mailto:peterborrows@cantab.net) so I can add your e-mail address to our spreadsheet. If you are two family members living at the same address, it can be helpful to let us have both e-mail addresses, in case something goes wrong.

**Dr Peter Borrows**

Amersham Society Membership Secretary

# A visit to the Gurkha Museum



Courtesy of the Gurkha Museum

John Suckling reports on the Amersham Society Outing to the Gurkha Museum in Winchester on Wednesday 22 September 2021.

It was a bright sunny day for the Amersham Society's visit to Winchester specifically to visit the Gurkha Museum. With 24 Society members and guests the 85 seater Heyfordian coach allowed plenty of room for social distancing.

After "*picking up*" passengers from the usual places of Amersham Station and the Swan, the coach set off for an uneventful journey to Winchester.

Some passengers were a little perturbed when the coach continued down the M3 passing the exit to Winchester but the coach driver had done his preparation, and in order to approach the Museum entrance from the right direction he had to arrive from the south rather than the north. As we neared our destination it transpired that the entrance to the Museum's grounds was very narrow and with a large long wheel base coach there was some doubt as to whether it would get through. What followed was a master class in coach driving. The tension in the coach was palpable as the driver slowly, delicately manoeuvred his large vehicle through the smallest of entrances with millimetres to spare earning a well-deserved round of applause.





The Gurkha Museum

Having got through the entrance parking was easy where we were met by a Gurkha who led the way to the Museum to be met by Martin Brooks, past Chairman of the Amersham Society, who as a former officer in the Gurkhas is now Chairman of the Museum Trustees.

After some welcome refreshments, Martin gave a brief welcome before introducing the Museum's Director Dr Daren Bowyer, who gave a 45 minute talk on the creation of the Gurkha regiment and its achievements over its long history. What might have been a dull monolog was an interesting, intriguing presentation from the formation of the regiment to the present day.

In 1814 the British attempted to annex Nepal into the then British

Empire. During the fighting British officers were impressed by the bravery of the Gurkha soldiers and encouraged them to join the East India Company. Gurkhas served as troops for the Company during a series of skirmishes /wars from 1817 to 1857. It was in 1857 during the Sepoy Mutiny that the Gurkhas remained loyal to the British. The Gurkha regiments ultimately became part of the Indian Army when it was formed. After Indian independence in 1947 four Gurkha regiments joined the British Army where they have continued to serve in a number of deployments since 1948. Gurkhas have seen service in the Malayan Emergency, security duties in Hong Kong, Brunei, Cyprus, Kosovo, East Timor, Sierra Leone not to forget the Falklands. They are perhaps best known for the



The Gurkha Mess

*Courtesy of the Gurkha Museum*

khukuri, a unique knife with a curved blade, and they have maintained their reputation from the 1800s of being fierce, brave and tenacious soldiers.

Dr Bowyer's talk was an excellent foundation for the subsequent visit to the Museum itself where elements of the Gurkha's history were vividly illustrated. As with all Museums there was much to see and read. The displays were varied, ranging from medals to uniforms and dioramas of different actions in which the Gurkhas had been involved. The Museum was informative, well laid out guiding the visitor through the regiment's history and achievements.

The visit to the Museum was the end of the formal arrangements for the day, with the one remaining message that the coach, parked at the Gurkha

Museum, was leaving at 4:30pm if you wanted a ride home. Society members and guests went their various ways. Some partook of the opportunity for a curry lunch at the Gurkha Museum. Others stayed in the museum or visited other Army museums on the site whilst others ventured into Winchester to visit the sights of the town dominated by its Cathedral.

By around 4:15 pm the 24 travellers had returned to the Gurkha museum where there was a gathering for the traditional group picture prior to departure and the extraction of the coach from the museum grounds via its small entrance.

As we entered the coach it was apparent that the driver had been thinking about getting the coach back on to the road. It transpired that there



was extended brickwork on top of the entrance columns and he worried he might clip them when manoeuvring on leaving. To this end he enlisted one of the Gurkhas from the museum to help as we left. As the coach approached the entrance the enlisted Gurkha leapt into the road to hold up the traffic.

After some tense moments, and with the help from our Gurkha, the coach was on its way back to Amersham with once again a round of applause for the driver's skill.

The driver was to become the star of the day as on route to the M25 via the M3 he learnt that there were difficulties on the M25 and he diverted via Basingstoke and Reading to avoid the problem and we arrived back in Amersham within two hours of leaving



Winchester Cathedral

Photo by John Suckling

Winchester. We subsequently learnt that the M25 was closed for an hour!

Thanks to Dorothy and her helpers for an excellent informative day out in glorious sunshine and should you get a chance to visit the Gurkha Museum, do, it is well worth it.

John Suckling



Amersham Society Members with Gurkha Meghbadadur Rai

Photo by John Suckling

# The Splendour and Scandals of a Buckinghamshire Mansion – Bulstrode

The Amersham Society gathered by Zoom, on Wednesday 29th September 2021 for its first talk of the 2021/22 season.

The subject of the presentation by Denise Beddows was **Bulstrode.**

The Buckinghamshire Mansion of Bulstrode is some twenty miles from London just off the A40 between Gerrards Cross and Beaconsfield. Whilst little known outside the area it is equally a mystery to many local residents. Over the passage of time the estate has seen at least five different mansions on the site which have been occupied by some fascinating people. This talk was an insight into their lives. Denise started with The Drury Family, who lived in London in Drury House on Drury Lane. The house was eventually demolished to become the famous theatre. The family lived for several generations at Bulstrode. One of their descendants was Mary Todd, whose ancestors were slave and plantation owners in America. This was a little surprising given who Mary Todd married. She became Mrs Abraham Lincoln, a man who was a main abolitionist of the slave trade.



Mary Ann Lincoln (née Todd)

The next resident of Bulstrode was Ambrose Bennett, known as the “Drunken Judge”. As a landowner it entitled Mr Bennett to be a Justice of the Peace, despite the fact he had no training or knowledge of the law.

The wealth of Mr Bennett was not earned but inherited through his father and uncles. For some reason he loathed and detested people of the Quaker faith which was an issue considering the area of Buckinghamshire in which he was resident. This resulted in an infamous incident outside the Griffin. Having received word of a Quaker funeral Bennett hired a group of local “roughnecks” who on his instigation waylaid the funeral procession resulting in the coffin falling to the ground and exposing the corpse. Bennett refused to allow the mourners to remove the corpse, where it lay all day before he had it removed and buried in unconsecrated ground, which in those God-fearing times would have been horrific. Bennett decided to get married and again chose to upset the Quaker community by enticing the fiancé of a prominent local Quaker to be his bride using his considerable wealth. However, the marriage was not a happy one. Mrs Bennett thought Bulstrode too rural and insisted on a house in London where she squandered Bennett’s money on lavish entertainment and clothes. The Judge meanwhile was unhappy and managed, probably as result of too much drink, to set the house on fire and it burnt to the ground. Bennett was beset by debt and could not afford to rebuild so he sold the estate and went to live with relatives in



Wikimedia Commons

George Jeffreys,  
1st Baron Jeffreys of Wem

Virginia. To his horror, on arrival he found that his relatives and most of the local community had changed their religion and became Quakers! So he took himself off to other relatives in Jamaica where he caught swamp fever and died.

Some time in the 1600s the next person to build a house on the site was another judge but one who was more notorious, the “Hanging Judge” Jeffreys. He suffered from a kidney complaint and when suffering pain issued ill-considered judgements. Jeffreys supported King James I. When the King fled to France the plan was that Judge Jeffreys would follow, but he made the mistake of stopping for refreshment en route and was arrested. He was committed to the Tower of London where he died from his kidney disease.





William Bentinck, 1st Earl of Portland

One of the next prominent people to own the estate was Hans Willem Bentinck who was a childhood friend of King William. Bentinck helped organise William's marriage to the then King's daughter Mary and William's passage to England. In return he gave Hans Willem the 800-acre estate of Bulstrode. Today the estate has shrunk to 39 acres. It is alleged that King William was bisexual, and Hans Willem was his lover. Bentinck built a very large house with a huge Palladian front. The grounds surrounding the house were also of a significant size and would have provided major employment for local people. Bentinck was made Earl of Portland and later his son became Duke of Portland.

One of their descendants was known in his life time as "Sweet William" because of his kind disposition but there could be other reasons. He married the daughter of the Earl of Oxford, who as an only child became very wealthy, and was said to be the richest woman in England. Unusually for the time she was well educated, and she used her wealth to try and educate others, particularly women, setting up the "Blue Stockings" a group which met regularly at Bulstrode. She began a museum acquiring artefacts from around the world, one of which was the Portland Vase. She also encouraged the gathering of plants, shrubs and trees from around the world, all of which were planted at Bulstrode. Even to this day there are

rare and exotic specimens growing in the grounds. She also established a zoo. As one of the most splendid estates in the area it was regularly visited by the King and Queen when they were in residence at Windsor Castle.

In 1812 the Dukes of Portland had the house remodelled along the lines of the house at Strawberry Hill in Twickenham and adopted a crenulated style. The Palladian mansion of Bentinck was knocked down and replaced by a classic gothic style. Unfortunately one of the descendants of that Duke and Duchess managed to lose the entire family fortune by investing in a scheme known as the South Sea Bubble and so everything was sold off including the estate of Bulstrode.

The estate was purchased by the 11th Duke of Somerset. The Somersets were an old established family with lot of property. The 12th Duke decided to rebuild the house at Bulstrode yet again in 1860 and the Victorian style house was finished by 1862. It was probably an expensive build, for inside there are carved Italian marble pillars and ornate gilding; it remains as the present house. Bulstrode became home at this time to a celebrated beauty; the wife of the 12th Duke, Jane Georgiana, participated in an event lasting several days, attended by the nobility of England, in which they dressed in medieval costume and took part in various activities such as jousting. One of the events was effectively a beauty pageant which was won by the Duchess who received a scroll proclaiming her the most beautiful woman in England.

The Duke and Duchess of Somerset had three daughters and two sons. The daughters all married off quite happily, but their sons didn't fare so well. The younger son was the intelligent one, it was hoped he might be a diplomat and sit in the House of Lords. Unfortunately, whilst on a world trip to acquaint himself with world affairs, he was eaten by a bear in India.

Ferdinand, the elder son, was an adventurer and did not want to sit in the House of Lords. He took part in the Italian campaign with Garibaldi and various other skirmishes around the



Edward Seymour, 12th Duke of Somerset

world and luckily avoided ever being wounded. However, he was unlucky in love and his proposals for marriage were not accepted. One day whilst strolling in Hyde Park he came across a beautiful woman in distress who had run away from her domestic post because of cruelty. Being an honourable gentlemen, he offered her money to help her return to her family but it transpired she was gypsy, one of ten children and her parents lived in a caravan. Ferdinand decided to take her back to his London flat, entrusting her to the care of his

Bulstrode House today



housekeeper until he could get some references and find her a job. Weeks and months went by and he fell in love with the young lady, whose name was Rosina Swan. He persuaded her to change her name to Rosa with the possibility of passing her off as a Spanish aristocrat, and tried to make a lady of her. He taught her to speak French, how to ride a horse, which knife and fork to use and the social niceties of society. They moved to Morocco and lived happily in a bohemian society but his health was not good; he had TB, or as it was known then, consumption. By this time they had a daughter and Rosa was pregnant with his son so they came back to England and established a house in an area of Brighton known as Kemptown where men often lived with their mistresses whilst their wife and children were in London. Rosa recognised his health was getting worse and sent word to the Duke and Duchess. Meanwhile

Ferdinand, whose health was deteriorating rapidly, was in his London flat putting his affairs in order. The Duchess, with one of their daughters, arrived to find him almost breathing his last, but with time for him to explain about his common law wife and children. The Duke and Duchess were kind-hearted people and they took Rosa and the two children to Bulstrode. In the following years they raised their grandchildren with every privilege they might have expected if they had been legitimate. Rosa had a house built in the grounds but was never quite part of the family taking her meals with the servants. Rosa eventually married the children's French tutor and moved to France where she also died from consumption.

The two children, Harold St Maur and Ruth St Maur, lived quite privileged lives and were said to be nice people but all their lives they suffered from "bar



sinister", the stigma of being illegitimate. Harold became an MP and fought bravely in World War One. He spent much of his time and money trying to prove his parents were in fact legally married, which would have meant he could have inherited the title and the Bulstrode estate, but never managed to do so. Ruth became very upright, a suffragette who supported the striking match girls in London. She was generous, establishing a women's library in London and spending much of the money she was left when the Duke and Duchess passed away on good causes. As she was illegitimate, she could not marry a Duke, but she did marry the 4th son of the Duke of Portland as he was unlikely to inherit the title. She had three sons, one of whom died as a baby from typhoid, and two daughters. Ironically the two sons became Dukes of Portland, so whilst unable to marry a Duke, she was the mother of two. Ruth held gatherings for intellectuals, authors and playwrights one of whom was George Bernard Shaw. The story of Ruth's parents inspired him to write *Pygmalion*, which of course became the film "*My Fair Lady*".

During World War One Bulstrode became a hospital for officers and other ranks. In World War Two Bulstrode

became a training college for women of the RAF, specialising in communications and codebreaking, with close ties to Bletchley Park. Later it became occupied by male members of the RAF. The visitors' book kept at this time showed a number of distinguished visitors passed through, including the head of the American Army Dwight Eisenhower, Guy Gibson of Dam Buster fame and Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

In 1958 the estate was acquired by a religious organisation called The Bruderhof Community, a closed religious order with early roots in Germany. They did not mix locally and the local Gerrards Cross community were suspicious of them. This concern was underwritten when the whole community left overnight and moved to South America.

The estate was then sold to another religious order who was much more open, WEC International a group who trained missionaries for work overseas and they would have lots of open days. WEC were in residence for 50 years until they too had to give up the estate.

The house has been empty since 2016 and some parts have been vandalised but it has been purchased and work has already begun to turn it into a luxury hotel and spa.

**John Suckling**



Denise, under the pseudonym D J Kelly, has written a paperback book called "**Bulstrode - Splendour and Scandals of a Buckinghamshire Mansion**" in which she includes a lot more detail than it was possible to cover during her enjoyable and informative presentation.



After the Amersham Society Annual General Meeting on 27th October the Director of Scannappeal, Lisa Trivett, gave a lively and inspiring talk about the work of this local charity.

Members were delighted to welcome Lisa and to hear from her about the work and achievements of this amazing Buckinghamshire charity. We also welcomed Dr Chris Foote one of the founders of Scannappeal and a resident of Old Amersham.

## How Scannappeal Started

Chris Foote began by explaining how and where Scannappeal started all those years ago in the 1980s. It was an exciting and rather miraculous

time for advances in healthcare and medicine. Antibiotics were developed in the late 1940s early 1950s and these of course led to great changes in healthcare and in treatment outcomes. Then the introduction of scanners during the 1970s and 1980s led to further almost revolutionary changes in medical treatment. Chris was at the time a physician at Amersham and Wycombe hospitals.

Before scans were available it was difficult to determine accurately some

## Where it started

Dr Chris Foote



Gillian Mortimer



Philip Wilkinson



Sir Stuart Burgess



Kenneth Cork

medical conditions without looking inside the patient's body. The only way to be sure of the cause of many problems was for the surgeon to perform an *"exploratory operation"* or laparotomy. These sometimes confirmed to the doctors that nothing further could be done for the patient, except to provide the best possible care. The new hightech equipment gave doctors a clearer idea of a problem without the need for an exploratory operation and in the beginning patients were referred for scans to hospitals in London, Oxford and Bristol which were among the first to have scanners.

Chris told us that doctors in Buckinghamshire "lusted "to have scanners available in the hospitals where they worked. And in 1987 a group of doctors meeting in Chris's garden discussed how they might achieve this ambition. These doctors had amazing vision and a strong can do attitude but the machines were expensive and the doctors did not initially have experience of raising such large sums of money. Eventually a group was formed to advise on fund raising. It included those with great experience of financial management and the energy to move things along.

The group included Sir Kenneth Cork. Sir Kenneth was a remarkable man, with a great breadth of expertise and interests, the best insolvency adviser in the country, but also Vice-Chairman of the Arts Council, Chairman of the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Royal

Ballet and the Philharmonia Orchestra, a former Lord Mayor of London, and Chair of the Royal Opera House. One Sunday Chris telephoned the amazing Sir Kenneth to discuss fundraising and he responded immediately *"if it's important come now"* and offered to meet that evening to discuss what should be done. Sir Stuart Burgess, Chairman of Amersham International, also offered to help financially and other influential people joined the Scannappeal group. Gillian Mortimer was appointed as Secretary and Administrator, a tower of strength who shouldered much of the responsibility for getting things going. A caravan was provided in front of Amersham Hospital as a base for the charity, although eventually this blew over in a gale and a portacabin replaced it.

In spite of this encouraging start, all was not plain sailing. At the time that Scannappeal was being set up, there was a worldwide financial crisis. The charity needed to raise £500,000 for the first scanner but six months into the fundraising efforts, they had collected only £14,000 and local industry could not at the time help financially. The decision was therefore taken to go out to local donors and these became the real heroes of the story.

The first major fundraising campaign was for a scanner for Wycombe Hospital. Scannappeal needed to raise £200,000. This sum was underwritten by Amersham International. There followed a period of blood, sweat and

tears but also as Chris was keen to point out some fun too. It was quickly realised that the best way to raise money for the equipment was to approach the local public. The Scannappeal volunteers visited sports clubs and societies, schools and churches. The Appeal was launched in 1988 and after 18 months £200,000 had been raised as the deposit for the first scanner, which was for Wycombe Hospital and by the time that the new scanner had arrived from Japan the total amount had been raised. Chris had run several half marathons and many people who had benefitted in some way from the new equipment supplied by Scannappeal, or who had family members who had benefitted, generously donated money, sometimes modest amounts, that importantly soon added up.

### **What Happened Next**

At this point Chris handed over to Lisa who paid tribute to all Chris's work and commented that he should be very proud of his achievements. She explained that as a local Buckinghamshire girl she felt very privileged to be working for this local charity about which she felt passionate. Lisa then

continued with the next instalment of the wonderful story of Scannappeal.

Since 1987 the group had aimed to provide the best possible diagnostic equipment to three Buckinghamshire Hospitals, Wycombe, Amersham and Stoke Mandeville and also organised outreach to other smaller hospitals in the county and to patients living in adjacent counties. The group wanted to do more than the NHS was able to achieve and they aimed to provide a Rolls Royce service covering hospitals in Amersham, Wycombe and Stokenchurch. It has become a fabulous charity supplying state of the art equipment to these hospitals. The charity has remained true to its original aims - there was a great need for the specialist equipment. Chris and his colleagues raised the funds to purchase it for wherever it was needed, and in doing this made a big difference to patients in our large county.

The small appeals programme is reactive. For example when one hospital needed a DEXA scanner to measure bone density Scannappeal was able to help with the purchase of this using their General Fund. The charity also





helped with Major Appeals for equipment, which could cost anywhere between £120,000 up to £1.5 million, which was the cost of a state of the art MRI scanner recently provided to Wycombe hospital. Over the years Scannappeal has met many different appeals for hospital equipment, such as heart scanners which give amazing clarity to cardiologists, or breast scanners to help with early detection of cancer or the new MRI scanner which is less noisy than the earlier models and gives results more quickly.



Lisa then went on to give us details of revolutionary new technology, the surgical robot, which allows the least invasive surgery and reduces the risk of complications and infections. The surgeon has control but this equipment allows a precise operation with magnified vision and faster recovery for the patient. The robot will be used particularly for colorectal, urological and gynaecological surgery. Scannappeal have launched an Appeal to purchase this equipment for Wycombe hospital.

Sir Stuart Burgess remains involved with the charity and is a patron. Sir William Baxter is Chairman of Scannappeal. Lisa emphasised how



enormously important all the volunteers were for the charity. There are at present 160 volunteers, who spread the word and help with the mammoth task of fund raising. Many celebrities such as Cilla Black have helped to raise the profile of the charity. And Scannappeal often receives money through legacies. Lisa mentioned Scannappeal's work with the Old Amersham Business Association and the Christmas evening that was due to be held on 3 December. Sadly in 2021 during lockdown there has not been much opportunity for general fund raising, but there are a variety of exciting events planned for 2022. Next year will be the thirty fifth anniversary of the founding of Scannappeal and the organisers intend to make a splash planning some big events. They are extremely proud of the work of the charity and are determined to ensure that Scannappeal continues to provide hospitals in our county with the best possible equipment.

**Dorothy Symes**

# Changing Wildlife in the Chilterns

At the Society's November meeting by Zoom,  
we welcomed back local storyteller John Tyler.  
Angela Carter reports.



Sea Urchin fossils



Sea Sponge fossil

River Misbourne, a floating chalk stream

John's presentation of the Chilterns from 100 million years ago until his predictions as global warming increases was an amazingly dense and amusing hour. He *"Saved himself a little time by excluding weekends ..."* Our characteristic chalk landscape was formed from layers of disintegrated skeletons of microscopic organisms that once teemed in the shallow tropical sea which covered a huge area before the shape of the Europe we know today was formed.

Around 50,000 years ago a huge clash of geological plates which preceded the ice age changed that and John likes to think of us now as *"living in the foothills of the Himalayas"*.

As the ice eventually began to thaw herds of bison and woolly mammoth grazed the tough sedges and other plants of the tundra. Just as there are fossils of sea urchin spines and to be found in deeply dug chalk, the tooth of a mammoth might still be found in local gravel pits.



Autumn woods



Roman Edible Snails

Slowly valleys were formed by melting ice and running water and in places a layer of sediment was left on the surface which became a layer of clay which sealed parts of the surface. In areas not sealed the water gradually dissolved the chalk, creating streams and ponds. The climate from about 10,000 BC became kinder and several species of trees started to colonise the landscape. The birch was a successful early arrival thanks to its millions of tiny winged seeds which spread far and wide. The heavy acorn by contrast was markedly less successful relying on the jay who buried thousands for winter food, forgetting a few, thus spreading the oak. Almost the last arrival before the rising seas cut Britain off from mainland Europe was the beech.



When the few nomadic people of the Chilterns started to create settled homesteads in around 5/6,000 BC clearings were made in the dense deciduous woodland to enable them to grow crops and graze their cattle. The resulting chalk grasslands which developed were rich in a huge variety of plant and insect life - a few of which can still be found today [See *Marieke Bosman's* article in this issue - Ed].

The landscape today has settled to a mixture of arable and pasture land. The ancient woodland, once coppiced for fuel and fencing, and later densely planted for tall straight beech for furniture making, is nowadays hard-pressed to renew naturally. The post-war clearance to plant conifer



Beechwood Fly Orchid

plantations is now thankfully being reversed, as in some recently cleared areas mixed deciduous planting has been done.

John concluded with some reflections on the immediate impact of the HS2 construction works and the prospects for the Chilterns in the future in the face of climate change. A visit to the Chilterns in a hundred years time may find the plant and animal species have changed a great deal, but the geology will always provide an historical record to this ancient landscape.

**Angela Carter**



Saffrondrop Bonnet fungus





Six-spot Burnet moth

Gambusia Damselfly

River Misbourne, in a 'parched' state

# A 19<sup>TH</sup> Century Rector of Amersham

© Mariëke Bosman

One of the fascinations of history is the discovery that people thought and acted differently in earlier times, often in relation to differing laws and customs. The appointment of clergy to parishes is one of those things that has changed radically over the last centuries. Nowadays new appointments are mainly in the hands of local bishops and their staff with some local input, but before the 20th century the appointment of a new parish priest was the responsibility of whoever held the advowson or summoning power, typically the Lord of the Manor in which the church buildings were located, often still with the approval of the local bishop.

With the retirement of the Rev. Tim Harper as Rector of Amersham in 2021, we await the decision of the Bishop of Oxford as to who his successor will be. For much of the 19th century such decisions were made by members of the Drake family of Shardeloes as Lords of the Manor, who held the advowson. The Drakes were no different to many other landed gentry families in that the eldest son inherited the land and property while younger sons were often destined for either military or clerical careers. The living as Rector of Amersham was one of the most highly sought after positions in the clergy as it was well paid and came with a substantial Rectory. Unsurprisingly Rectors of Amersham with the surname of Drake are quite common in the 18th and 19th centuries.

One of the more interesting and eccentric Rectors of Amersham in the 19th century was Rev. Edward Tyrwhitt Drake, whose passions in life were mostly hunting, horse racing and cricket. He was a member of the MCC as well as several other gentlemen's amateur cricket clubs. He was reputed to be one of the best lob bowlers of his generation. Lob bowling was essentially

underarm bowling which only gave way to modern overarm bowling styles in the early 20th century.

As a horseman and huntsman he was reputed to dress ready for the hunt before morning service at St Marys, with his clerical vestments disguising his readiness. After the service his groom would be holding his mount at the vestry door and he would ride away as soon as decently possible.

His passion for steeplechasing extended to local point to point races as well as more important national events. Perhaps the pinnacle of his career was when he finished 6th in the 1860 Grand National. However, the Bishop of Oxford did not approve of such sporting parsons, so he adopted an alias and rode as Mr Ekard, (Drake spelled backwards)!

On those Sundays when there was no opportunity to go hunting after the services, he would meet with his parishioners. One of them congratulated him on what he deemed to be a particularly fine sermon. He allegedly replied, *"Of course, I only buy the best!"* And we think that exam cheating by buying essays from others is a new phenomenon...

**Barney Tyrwhitt-Drake**





## Conserving the Market Hall

Built by the Drake family for the use of the people of Amersham in 1682, it wasn't until 1961 that the Market Hall was generously donated to Amersham Rural District Council. The Deed of Gift requires that the Council not only maintain the building and preserve its architectural features, but also to keep it fit for exhibitions, meetings, or other community uses. For the last eleven years the Amersham Society has been concerned about the lack of repair to the building and has engaged with the Town Council to try and raise the profile of the problem at the same time as working with the council to try to identify practical solutions that would make the upstairs an accessible and attractive community amenity. Residents will have seen the scaffolding erected in the Autumn of 2021 on the west end of the hall, which will be extended to the northern side early in the New Year. This marks a great step forward in the preservation of the Market Hall. The works involve a complete renovation of the clock tower, to get the clock working and reinforce the supporting internal structure, as well as repointing external brickwork and redecorating the paintwork. In late November Society Member Annie Hamilton-Pike, who has been leading our Market Hall campaign, and Society Chairman Dorothy Symes met with the new Mayor Councillor Mark Roberts and Deputy Mayor Councillor Jane Barnes with Town Clerk Lizzie Richardson. It was a hugely positive meeting, Annie Hamilton-Pike takes up the story.

The work to the exterior of the building is anticipated to take three to four months so completion is expected in Spring 2022. The budget is £120,000 which the Town Council is meeting out of its £230,000 reserves, as exhaustive searches found no other

sources of funding. Mark, Jane and Lizzie are completely committed to ensuring that the Council meets its obligations under the Deed of Gift, and to improve the hall for community use. There are currently two staircases, one which is incredibly steep and has doors



that open outwards at the bottom (so users have to walk downstairs backwards to open them!). The other is more accessible; there is a possibility that this can be used instead of the other but two staircases are required to meet modern fire regulations. Once you have made it upstairs, the kitchen is in a pretty appalling state and the loo is up a further internal flight of stairs, making it completely inaccessible to all but the most athletic.

The Amersham Society had previously presented the Town Council with plans for a platform lift but it was recognised that if it had the capacity to take two wheelchairs, there would need to be a sealed section made of glass built in the hall to contain it, to comply with fire regs, which would be very intrusive. So, a lift is by no means a certainty. It might be possible to adapt one of the staircases to include a stairlift but an architect is clearly required to look into that, into whether the toilet could be relocated to the current kitchen location and so give level access and also to work out how to squeeze in a kitchen or servery elsewhere. The architect would need to be someone with good experience of working with historic buildings as the Market Hall is Grade II\* Listed.

Of course, any works to the interior will need to be paid for, and the funds will have to be raised from scratch. Right now, there isn't yet even the budget to hire an architect to come up

with plans. And of course, even if the work were to be carried out, there is no guarantee that those community organisations that used to use the Market Hall would return, as there are other options nearby, such as the Kings Chapel and the new town Band Hall.

The Amersham Society will put out feelers to architects who have worked on historic buildings locally, to sound them out about ideas to refurb the interior of the Market Hall so that it is accessible to all, and to make it a really useful community space. In parallel the Town Council has a plan that on completion of the exterior work, they will announce an open day, for local residents and business people to come and have a look and make suggestions for uses to which the Market Hall might be put, and so enable the Council to meet its obligations under the Deed of Gift whilst breaking even financially. The Council's new financial year starts in April 2022, and with the New Year it is hoped that there will be sufficient budget to allow for an architect to be instructed to draw up plans and work out how much money needs to be raised to bring the Market Hall back to the centre of life in the Old Town.

In the meantime, if you have any comments, questions or suggestions, please do get in touch with Annie via the Amersham Society website contact form

[www.amershamociety.org/contact/](http://www.amershamociety.org/contact/)

**Annie Hamilton-Pike**



# Flight of Fancy

## The Best Stairs at Shardeloes

Much has been written about the grand rooms at Shardeloes with their Robert Adam decoration, but what about other, essential parts of the building, such as the stairs? Fortunately we can find out more from the building accounts at Buckinghamshire Archives and a transcription of the architect's account book at the RIBA.

On the 29th May 1758 architect Stiff Leadbetter from Eton (who styled himself surveyor and builder) and William Drake entered into a contract for the building of a new house at Shardeloes, work to be completed by 29th September 1760 at a cost of £4,300.

William Drake, who had been on the Grand Tour and perhaps fancied himself as a gentleman architect, had sketched his own idea of a grand semi-circular staircase. The ever practical Leadbetter realised that this would impinge on the inner court yard, a remnant of the old house, and so proposed a winder stair with landings and lit by sash windows from the courtyard.

Leadbetter's detailed specification which formed the basis of the building contract reads (complete with 18th century spelling):

*"Works to best Staircase Vizt.  
The Steps to be of Season'd Wainscot.  
At one End of dittos is to be Iron Rail with No.  
Two perpendicular Barrs fixed upon each Step & the  
rail to be laid with Mahogany & at the other end of  
the said Steps the Walls are to be Lined with plain deal  
Work the height of the Iron rail... The deal work &  
stucco to Walls etc to be painted three times in Oyl of  
a Light Stone Colour, the Iron Work to be painted of a  
Sky blue & the Doors of a Chocolate Colour."*

As it turned out the final result was rather different from each man's vision. Drake brought in Robert Adam, plans were changed, and budgets and timescales duly escalated. With Adam came some of the country's leading craftsmen. The idea of straight iron rails on the stairs was dropped in favour of an elegant wrought iron balustrade.

In October 1763 Thomas Tilston, described in the accounts as a "whitesmyth" and who had worked with Adam elsewhere, received £44 / 2s shillings for "Iron work to Best Stairs with Scrole pannells & Bars Meas'd 63 foot 6 inch att 14 shillings per foot".

The joinery work (for which Leadbetter was responsible) on the Best Staircase included the wainscot (select quality oak) moulded steps, risers and brackets. Timber was transported by river from London either to Hedsor or Leadbetter's yard on the wharf at Eton.



In 1767 the painter Thomas Robinson was paid £16 2s 9½d for painting the Best Staircase and Gallery. This included painting "the scrowl iron work" blue. Traces of the original sky blue paint can still be seen under the present bronze-coloured scheme.

Thomas Tilston died in 1766, as did Leadbetter leaving his executors to sort out the final payments for the rebuilding of Shardeloes. And the final cost? £20,309 1s 4¾!

**Marian Miller**

Last September The Amersham Society was approached by Misbourne Environmental Protection, a group of local environmentalists, geologists and hydrologists who were very concerned about the decision to allow tunnelling for HS2 from Chalfont St Giles to Great Missenden at a depth inadequate to protect the River Misbourne and Shardeloes Lake. A crowdfunding appeal was underway to raise the money to seek Judicial Review of the Environment Agency's permission for HS2 to proceed. Your Committee determined to back the appeal as best it could by using the balance of the Dulcie Denison Will Trust. Michael and Dulcie Denison were long-standing campaigners to protect the lake at Shardeloes and in the 1990s succeeded in limiting extraction from the aquifers upstream of Amersham. In 2021 we were able to underwrite any shortfall from the appeal target up to a maximum of the remaining funds in the will trust. The initial target of £15,000 was reached without a penny of our funding being called upon – showing the very high level of interest and support from local residents.

Jim Conboy, Chairman of MEP tells us more:

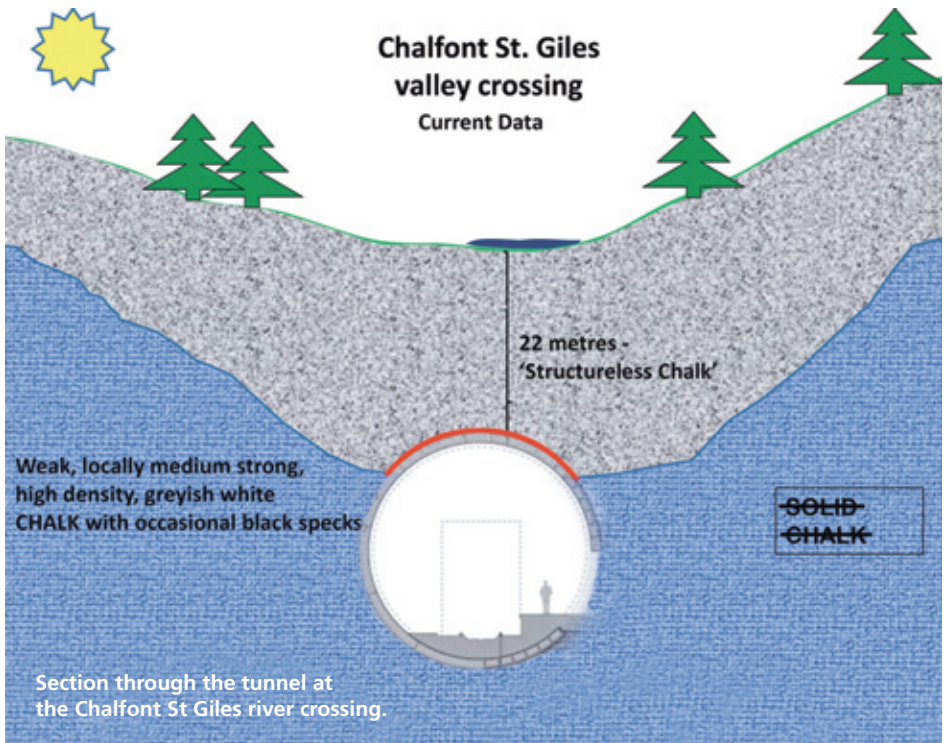
## Save the Misbourne-What from?

**C**halk streams are some of the planet's rarest habitats and 85% of them are found in England. Of the 260 true chalk streams on Earth, 224 of them run through the English countryside, a reflection of the nation's geology and its temperate climate. The River Misbourne is a particularly good example, rising (in wet weather) off Aylesbury Road in Great Missenden, and flowing through Little Missenden, Old Amersham, the Chalfonts, and joining the River Colne near Denham.

It flows from the point where the groundwater level in the Chiltern Aquifer reaches the level of the river bed; water abstraction and dry seasons combine to reduce this level, leading to the upper reaches drying out in late summer, creating a 'Winterbourne'.

Great efforts have been made over the past decade to preserve the streams, by reducing abstraction levels and controlling invasive species. Why is it necessary to start a new campaign to save the Misbourne, when its special status is so widely recognised?





## Tunnel – lack of Vision?

A tunnel is a fairly simple idea – to avoid building a road or railway over an obstruction, why not bore a hole through, to avoid the climb and descent? The designers of the HS2 rail link had other ideas, and proposed a tunnel which starts at the M25, slopes downwards under the Misbourne Valley at the Chalfonts, re-crosses the river near Little Missenden, then climbs to the Chiltern plateau to emerge above Great Missenden (at South Heath). From there, the line descends to Wendover via cuttings, embankments and two viaducts, all within the AoNB. The plan was vigorously opposed during the HS2 select committee hearings, with many environmental

organisations calling for a deeper tunnel, running all the way to Wendover. This was in part due to the poor ground conditions anticipated in the Misbourne valley, based on a limited number of fairly old borehole records, and the condition of the chalk as revealed in nearby quarries. However, the only concession made was to extend the main tunnel by 2.5km, avoiding a short cut and cover tunnel under South Heath – and saving 3 areas of ancient woodland.

After the bill was approved, HS2 gained right of entry onto private land, and started on serious ground investigations. This revealed that the ground conditions were worse than

HS2 had anticipated, and that the solid chalk rock was buried under 22m of chalk rubble at the critical points where the tunnel crossed under the Misbourne, not the 16m assumed in the design. As a consequence, the tunnels would not be confined within the solid chalk, and the tunnel boring machines would be working within the lower layer of the overlaying rubble. This could potentially disrupt the river bed above, letting the river find its way to a lower level, and creating another dry valley where the chalk stream used to be.

### **Shardeloes Lake**

The tunnels pass under the Misbourne for a second time, just to the west of the lake at Shardeloes House. The lake was constructed before 1761, and is retained by an earth dam at the eastern end. Ground investigations indicate very substantial faulting in the chalk throughout the Misbourne valley, and as at Chalfont St Giles, the tunnel boring machines would disrupt the material lying above the solid chalk. This threatens the integrity of the lake bed, and possibly the dam.

### **The Chiltern Aquifer**

The Chiltern chalk hills provide a vast water collection, filtration and reservoir system; rain seeps through the chalk and is then channelled along a network of faults and fractures, towards the London Basin. Water abstracted from the aquifer is remarkably pure, and requires little processing before being piped to consumers. The Affinity water company obtain around two thirds of their supplies from the Aquifer. While they have the right to abstract this water, they do not actually own it, and so the government have issued an indemnity of (at least) £70m to compensate them, if the tunnel construction should interfere with their operations. This may be required, for several reasons –

#### **Turbidity**

A fine suspension of chalk particles in the water prevents it being purified with ultra-violet light. This is an almost certain effect of tunnelling; turbidity was observed in Shardeloes Lake last summer, while HS2 were drilling boreholes close by. Recent works at the Amersham pumping station were undertaken in order to install additional filters, to clarify the water.



Shardeloes Lake looking North; the dam is on the right.

## **Diversion of flow**

Construction of the tunnels may obstruct flow through existing fractures, and open up new fractures, so that the existing extraction points are less productive. This effect may be exacerbated by tunnel grout penetrating and sealing a large volume around each tunnel.

## **Pollution**

Bentonite, a clay like gel, is used to seal gaps around the tunnel during excavation. If undisturbed, it sets rapidly, but large voids or flowing water may prevent this. Network Rail describes Liquid Bentonite as *“highly polluting ... it can cause damage to plants and animals in watercourses”*.

During construction of the vent shaft walls at Chalfont St Peter, some 55 truck loads of Bentonite were lost into the aquifer, with traces of the escape recorded 500m from the works. The most alarming aspect of this incident is that the work was not halted, but proceeded for several months even after the problem became apparent.

## **The Environment Agency (EA)**

Concerns expressed by petitioners during the House of Commons committee hearings were dismissed, on the grounds that the EA would not approve a scheme unless the risks had been eliminated. Under the terms of the act, the EA were given only 56 days to consider the proposal, after which consent would be deemed to be granted. However, they could impose reasonable conditions, when granting consent.

In the event, the EA accepted the application as presented by HS2 & Align (the contractors) without modification, and also delegated the monitoring of the construction process to the contractors, who are most unlikely to suspend tunnelling in the event of a problem. They also took no action in the light of the more recent ground investigation results.

## **Misbourne Environmental Protection**

MEP is a company formed by local environmentalists, concerned by the failure of the EA to address the problems described above. We applied to the courts for a Judicial Review of the decision, to force the Agency to reconsider its decision.

The deficiencies of the proposed scheme did not in themselves provide adequate grounds for a legal challenge, but the manner in which the decision was reached might have done so; our case relied on

- Mis-interpretation of the Water Framework Directive and Environmental Permitting Regulations
- Failure to consult on an application of wide public interest
- Failure to consider the entire work package as a whole; some vent shafts and the tunnel cross passages are yet to be approved.

We requested an expedited hearing, to take place this year. This would be before the tunnel boring machines reach the first ventilation shaft, and so it would still be possible to increase the depth of the tunnel and reduce the disturbance at the Misbourne crossings.





# Judgement

**Misbourne Environmental Protection  
vrs Environment Agency  
(with HS2 Interested Parties)**

High Court Case No: CO/2565/2021

For further details, and the latest news, see MEP's website  
<http://misbourneprotection.co.uk/>





## Pollution at Shardeloes Lake, May 2020.

**D**isappointingly the application for Judicial Review was refused in November 2021. It was unfortunate that the court was unable to pronounce judgement on the scientific merits of the case, but only on the legal procedures which were followed in reaching the decision – otherwise the outcome may have been very different.


HS2 Action Alliance and HS2 Amersham Action Group, as well as everyone who supported the campaign financially, can be proud that they made every possible effort to protect the Chilterns AONB.

The fact that Align JV, HS2 Ltd and the Environment Agency have assessed the risks as minimal disguises the fact they will open up fissures in the aquifer whilst pumping thousands of tons of cement grout which will then fill

these fissures, with unknown consequences for the waterbodies. The effect of grout migration hundreds of metres from the tunnel, blocking up fissures and disrupting water flow, still risks damaging the spring fed Misbourne which could be lost in places.

Align JV presented the effects of their pollution as “temporary” as they are deemed to comply with the Water Framework Directive, provided that they do not pollute for more than three years.

The Government will not protect our most precious waterbodies, such as chalk streams, from avoidable damage. MEP will be paying close attention to Align JV given the contractor’s promises to the court. The entire liability for delivering this tunnel without impacts to the waterbodies now rests with Align JV.

A photograph of four apples resting on a bed of small, light-colored gravel. The apples are mostly yellow with some red blush. One apple in the top right has a more pronounced red blush. The text 'Buckinghamshire Sheep's Nose 1200' is overlaid in a green box in the top right corner.

Buckinghamshire Sheep's Nose 1200

# Old Apples of Amersham

In the calendar of talks for 2022, enclosed with your January newsletter, you will see that the September talk by Lindsay Engers is to be about growing Chiltern heritage fruit trees. There has been growing interest in ancient fruit varieties over the last few decades, and Amersham has some fine examples of apples which were until recently believed lost. Derek and Judy Tolman of Bernwode Fruit Trees in Ludgershall have made a business from their passion for saving varieties that would otherwise be lost forever.





Two examples of apple survived only in Amersham.

### **Buckinghamshire Sheep's Nose**

An old cider and culinary variety, from the garden of Pauline and Julian Webster, of Copperkins Lane, Amersham, brought to our notice at an Apple Day. When their house was built from 1924 -1925, some traditional old Buckinghamshire varieties were planted. The house was featured in the Architects Journal in 1928 and new trees are seen in the photographs. The original owner confided to the Websters that the apple trees were old Buckinghamshire varieties, one called Sheep's Nose. It is different from other 'Sheep's Nose' apples that exist around the country or have been described in old literature. They get their name from the elongated snout at the crown, usually flattened off. They are usually cider apples, perhaps with a secondary use. This one is medium sized, conical and with smooth green skin becoming straw coloured. The flavour is a little

acid and it cooks well, keeping its shape, and will sweeten and can be eaten raw, late in the year. Though it is a middle season apple, it can be ripe in August in hot years. The cooked flavour is sweet and with a zesty tang, but when just a little sugar is added it is very rich, with a hint of spice and an aftertaste of clove. By November the flavour fades and the texture is soft. Pollination Group 3.

### **Geniton**

Also found at Pauline and Julian Webster's former home in Amersham, Buckinghamshire, the garden was populated with some rare local varieties of apple, around 1926, shortly after the completion of the house. An apple tree growing in the shade of now mature ornamentals had not noticeably fruited for many years. Pauline Webster had written down the name of this tree as Geniton or Jeniton, from a telephone



conversation with the previous owner (and first owner) of the property, at the time they took it over. A few years ago we took cuttings and trees have now fruited here for the past two years. The original tree has now gone, to make way for a house extension for the new owners coming after the Websters. Though the name Geniton is a known synonym of Joaneting, this apple is not the same. It is not quite like other apple trees, having a more slender growth habit and dense clusters of both flowers and apples, between an ornamental crab and a normal domestic apple tree. Though many ornamental and species crabs are quite pleasantly edible, this tree does not appear to be any of them and the fruit, though small, is more on the side of a

domestic apple. The blossom is impressive enough, and is slightly fragrant, but when the brightly coloured fruits hang in dense clusters, the show is spectacular. The individual fruits are small, longer than wide and conical with bright red stripes and broader carmine blushes, maturing to cerise, over a yellow skin. They are crisp, juicy, sweet and with a rather delicate floral taste when just ripe. The flesh is fine textured and tends to be a little translucent. Depending on the warmth of the summer, they are ripe between mid-August and mid-September, but will not last in any worthwhile state beyond the end of October. A beautiful tree, in blossom or in fruit, and with prolific crops of very good small apples. Pollination Group 3.

### **Derek takes up the story,**

“Pauline and Julian Webster have now moved to Prestwood, but we have the contact details for the new occupants of the house at Copperkins Lane. There was a third apple tree there in addition to the Sheeps Nose and the Geniton, but with the name unknown. There might even have been a fourth. We had intended to go back and take cuttings but there was always so much else to go at! We should now return for the last tree (or two).

We first met the Websters at an ‘Apple Day’ held at Collings Hanger Farm, Wycombe Road, Prestwood, hosted by Virginia Deradour there. The Websters brought some apples along and we could not readily put a name

on them. That is nearly always an impossible task given the sheer number of old apple varieties still growing around the country, often looking similar to something still known, but often different. Pauline said that they were given to understand that all their fruit trees were unusual Buckinghamshire varieties, so we made an appointment to visit and took cuttings. There is not much more we can add about the Webster’s trees, we have also been quite busy with other old fruit trees around Prestwood, including at Virginia Deradour’s farm.

Finding trees of local provenance with names intact is quite rare now, but it can still happen. An interesting sideline is that we have recently had



**Bazeley**



**Long Reinette**

several apples DNA profiled and compared with those in the National Fruit Collection. Some trees without names found around Prestwood are the same, but not known in the NFC.

Obviously they are a very local apple variety. In another case, a tree at Prestwood (Prestwood Gold) turned out to be the same as an old tree in Leicestershire which we have here, but otherwise unknown. That suggests a very old variety once widely planted and now rarely to be found. There are many interesting tales when it comes to fruit and local history! No doubt your article will elicit reports of other ancient and anonymous trees around Amersham!"

The roads from Chesham Bois to what became Little Chalfont were lined with farms that all had orchards, up to the 1950s, and so many local gardens

may contain rare survivors. If you have any interesting old varieties of fruit tree, we'd love to hear about them.

Derek and Judy at Bernwode can also be contacted via phone, their contact number is **01844 237415** and their email is [ask@bernwodefruittrees.co.uk](mailto:ask@bernwodefruittrees.co.uk).

Their website details many more local varieties from the area surrounding Amersham, such as **Bazeley** and **Long Reinette** from The Lee, Great Missenden.

[www.bernwodeplants.co.uk](http://www.bernwodeplants.co.uk).

Many thanks to Rosemary Jury and Clare Butler of Buckinghamshire Gardens Trust for their help with this article.



# The lowdown on the lockdown at the Amersham allotments

**A**mersham Town Council runs three allotment sites: the Pygthle in Old Amersham and Woodside Road and White Lion Road in Upper Amersham. There are also two private allotment sites at School Lane and the 'Shardeloes' site, both in Old Amersham. All are part of the Amersham Allotment Holders' Association and contain many plots used by a large number of people from the local area.

As the pandemic hit the UK and we entered the first Covid lockdown in March 2020, there was a great deal of uncertainty about life. Allotment holders were much relieved that allotment use was allowed during lockdown, provided that social distancing and hygiene precautions were adhered to. The timing of the first lockdown meant that many of us could get our allotment beds ready for the main growing season. As a keen allotment holder, I was interested to find out how others had used their plots

during lockdown, and to record their highlights and struggles as a record of social history in Amersham at this strange time. I thought this would be of interest especially as much was written during this time about the mental health benefits of gardening, being outdoors, eating healthy home-grown food and being aware of the seasons. I spoke to ten people who have plots at three of the allotment sites.

As a full-time teacher I often don't have enough time to devote to our plot at the Pygthle allotments. But in March 2020 we moved to teaching from home and over the Easter holidays of 2020, instead of running the school's Duke of Edinburgh expedition in Yorkshire, I stayed at home and started planting seeds ready for a mammoth growing season. It was difficult getting supplies so I made many pots out of newspaper to start off the tomato plants. I had time to experiment making rhubarb wine

and, while normally not into DIY, I even constructed an entire cage to protect the blackcurrants as the birds ate all of them the previous year. Like others, I found great solace in simply spending time at the allotment and I found the community spirit good for the soul.

Jill, who has had an allotment at the Pyghle for about five years told me how nice it was to have a destination to go to when outdoor movement was so heavily restricted. She used the extra time to organise her plot, build a shed and plant up the beds with seedlings. Jill said the allotments were a friendly place to be. It was only too noticeable how people were avoiding each other on the street, crossing over and not looking each other in the eye. Yet on the allotment, people were keen to talk (at safe distances) and to share news. Time would go quickly. These thoughts were echoed by Justin, who has had his Woodside Road plot for about twenty years. Whilst normally he might go a couple of a times a week, the lockdown meant that he could attend to his plot every day. As he entered the gates of the allotment, he said it was as though he could leave the fear of Covid behind; it became his 'safe space'. At the allotments the birds kept singing, bees and flies were buzzing, and seeds were germinating and flowering. It was a respite from the difficult world beyond the gates. Justin started on a long-planned project, which was to do something about the unused bank full of nettles that ran along the side of his plot. Although nettles are good for nature, he felt there was room

to plant more for pollinators to help increase biodiversity.

Thinking about biodiversity and the condition of the soil was one of the things Peter, at Woodside Road, worked on throughout the lockdown period. He experimented with a system of crop rotation and using green manure to improve the soil. The benefit would be fewer diseases and pests, better soil, no need for digging and no chemicals needed to fertilize or kill so-called weeds. Improved biodiversity meant more pollinators to help vegetable and fruit production.

Some of the allottees noticed a less welcome sign of nature: the larger number of rats around. It may have been because restaurants in Amersham were shut so that pickings around the town were slim for rats, but they descended upon the allotment, and during the first year of lockdown ate all the corn and nibbled at courgettes and beetroots. In the second year, a muntjac deer moved in under cover of night and ate the corn before the rats could get there.

For Marieke (my wife) the allotment was somewhere other than the park where you could meet a friend (at a distance). She would bring a flask of tea and some home-made cake to share (along with the hand sanitiser!). She also started looking more carefully at what she once thought of as weeds but now realised were local wildflowers. This inspired her to start drawing these 'weeds', and so started a project to find and draw a wildflower every day, using ink and watercolour wash. She has



found over 150 different wildflowers in and around the allotment area. Moreover, thanks to the allotment seed shop run by Peter, we had a surplus of seeds and, with further seed donations from other allotteers, she was able to send a huge padded envelope full of seed packets to a scheme that gave unwanted seeds to refugees.

David has had an allotment at the Pygthle for about eight years. He had taken time getting his allotment ready for the growing season, but the extra lockdown time meant that he could be there every day. He appreciated the fresh air and the chance to be able to talk to others. David said that the shared interest in growing flowers and vegetables meant that you had a licence to talk to people that wouldn't be so easy outside the allotments. This feeling was echoed by Simon who had only taken on his allotment at White Lion Road in May, the year before lockdown. The plot had become a little overgrown as he didn't have time to work on it. The lockdown was a sudden chance to sort it out. Simon's oldest son came back home as his university closed, and found the

plot a good place to go and dig out those weeds. For the whole family the allotment was a relaxing place to be, and their first year was very productive, with a harvest of potatoes, corn and onions, courgettes and squashes. Simon also grew flowers to attract pollinators to his plot, which were much admired by walkers on the footpath that crosses the site.

Conchita has had a Pygthle plot since 2012. For her, being at the allotments was a welcome respite from her busy job running the station café kiosk. As the lockdown started, very few people used the trains and therefore there were very few customers. It meant that she could be in the allotment every day. Without a garden of her own, she found it a wonderful place to sunbathe during the long hot summer and to find company and friendly faces. She and some of her allotment neighbours helped to keep the weeds at bay for vulnerable allottees who were told to shield. Conchita shared saved seeds with other plotholders given that seeds were hard to obtain due to high demand and restrictions on shopping. What Conchita



noticed in particular while at the allotment during lockdown was the silence. With no traffic and no jets overhead there was a wonderful peacefulness about the place - with only the occasional police helicopter (presumably looking for errant citizens!). Every Friday at 8pm, along with the rest of Old Amersham, Conchi would bang her compost bin with a trowel, echoing the shout-out for the NHS and key workers.

Nevin (who has had a Pygltle plot for six years) was a supermarket manager during lockdown, and so she was a key worker. As panic buying started, her shop stopped selling clothing and concentrated on food. Nevin said they really were 'feeding the nation' and she sometimes worked from 7am until 7pm. Although this cut down the amount of time she could devote to gardening, she found it good therapy to go to the allotment after work. Seeing the flowers and being able to talk to people about their allotments stopped her feeling like a machine in the shop. She was sad that the yearly Amersham Heritage Day was cancelled due to

Covid; it showcases and awards the best fruit, vegetables and flowers grown in the village and is always a celebration of the season; a marker in the calendar at the end of the growing season and a chance to reflect on the season and look forward to the next one.

So that is a small impression of life at the Amersham allotments at what has been an extraordinary time. I enjoyed recording everyone's reflections on nearly two years of the experiences of lockdown for allotment holders, and hope I have represented them well. My heart goes out to those who lost friends and relatives in the pandemic, or who had a very hard time. I realise how lucky we are to have our allotment sanctuary. And me? After all my work on the black-currant cages, we still didn't get any fruit this year: I think we pruned the berries back too hard! But my rule of allotment life is that you just learn from it and try again - and maybe make a toast (with a glass of that rhubarb wine) that hopefully things will be better next year.

**Adrian Porter**



# The Rainforest on Amersham's Doorstep



Chalk grassland flora at Hartslock BBOWT reserve

**D**o you ever wonder why your Amersham garden seems to produce more flint than flowers? Have you noticed that footpaths in our area go white in summer? And why are there wild orchids in Amersham? There's a simple answer to all of these questions. It's a tale about geology, wildlife and humanity creating one of the most precious natural habitats in the world - right here on your doorstep.

Between 65 and 100 million years ago, warm tropical seas covered the area we live in today. Marine algae with calcite shells left a thick chalk sediment which, over time, developed into chalk rock in which other creatures became embedded and turned to flint. As seas retreated, weathering of this rock mixed with organic material to form



soil on the rock surface. While in some places the soil was thick and stayed in place, on slopes and in river valleys only a thin layer managed to stick to the chalk, in which trees struggled to take root. Stone Age farmers arriving from 4,500 BCE used flint tools to fell these trees for dwellings and firewood and grazed their livestock on the cleared

areas. Over time, farmers realised the chalky Chiltern slopes were not very productive: the lime-rich soil was too thin, warmed up too quickly, and rain and nutrients leached away into the porous rock below, making it too dry in summer. Much of this calcareous lowland grassland was used instead for low-intensity grazing: during Autumn and Winter sheep or hardy cattle cropped grasses and scrub but they were taken off the land in Spring and Summer.

Most wildflowers thrive on poor warm soil if dominant grasses and scrub are kept at bay. The lack of grazing in summer allowed plants to flower and set seed, and in winter the grazers would trample their seeds into the soil, ready for germination in spring. Thus farmers of old unwittingly created a habitat so biodiverse that it is often called 'the European equivalent of the rainforest': over 40 species of plant have been found in a single square meter of chalk grassland. This abundance of wildflowers supports many birds and small mammals as well as hundreds of rare species of invertebrates such as bees, hoverflies, moths, and butterflies; 35 out of 65 UK butterfly species occur here. In turn, they attract further birds, bats and reptiles. The mixed hedgerows that were grown along these fields provided nesting space and berries for birds and a refuge for amphibians, reptiles and mammals.





A Chiltern Gentian at Prestwood Nature Reserve



A walk through a traditional chalk-meadow is a feast for the senses. There's a kaleidoscope of colour: yellow Rock Rose; magenta Knapweed, Red Campion and blue Milkwort. Odd shapes flutter in the breeze: ephemeral Harebells, Scabious pincushions, the lollipops of Salad Burnet, the lace of Wild Carrot, and the dried-flower look-alike that is Carline Thistle. The scent of Wild Marjoram evokes the Mediterranean, and odd names hint at historical, medicinal and folkloric connections: Granny's Toenails, Ladies Bedstraw, Restharrow, Eyebright and Fairy Flax. And then there's the beautiful orchids: Pyramidal, Bee, Common Spotted and many others. We even have our own unique local chalk grassland flower: the Chiltern Gentian. And this floral bounty is humming with the sounds of buzzing bees, scuttling beetles, chirping grasshoppers and singing birds.

Chalkland grassland is unique and wonderful and it is also internationally rare. It is only found in north-west Europe, with 50% in the UK, particularly in southern England, including the Chilterns. Alarming, chalk grassland has now become rarer still: it has been in serious decline since World War II as farmers were forced (through subsidies, policies and market forces) to bring every bit of land into intensive agriculture. Flat chalk grassland has been overgrazed, sown with uniform grasses; or ploughed,



A Common Blue Butterfly on Bird's-foot Trefoil and Fairy Flax.

fertilised and treated with herbicides and pesticides for crops; and many hedgerows were removed. Elsewhere housing, roads, recreational areas, mineral extraction and landfill have replaced the habitat. Patches of chalk grassland too steep for farming or development have often been abandoned and become overwhelmed by scrubs or trees. Climate change is now adding to the pressure. As a result, by 1984, 80% of sheep-grazed lowland chalk and limestone grassland in the UK had disappeared and startlingly, today 97% of all traditional grassland in the UK has vanished. Only patches of traditional chalk grassland remain, usually in nature reserves or as military sites. Interestingly, as road side verges have never been ploughed or fertilised and are mown regularly, many are in fact strips of chalkland grassland.

Thus, the species-rich rainforest equivalent on your Amersham doorstep is now very rare, fragmented and unappreciated for its importance to local wildlife. Many species of bumblebees, butterflies, farmland birds and wildflowers have unique associations with chalk grasslands and cannot thrive or survive without it. For example, the beautiful Chalkhill and Adonis Blue butterflies feed on the horseshoe vetch, only found on chalk grassland. Fragmentation causes isolation of species that are then at risk of local extinction. Unfortunately, despite its international conservation status, many people simply have no idea about the importance and beauty of calcareous grassland. Conservation efforts often focus on iconic or large species, such as birds of prey, bees or woodland, rather than the intricate ecosystem of chalkland meadows.

So now you know: the flint in your garden is intrinsic to chalk soil; the footpaths go white due to the thin soil being scraped off the chalk; and orchids are a key indicator species of chalk grassland. This is the historic and cultural landscape of the Amersham area, which is beautiful, important and under threat.

Now you know about it, what can you do? Is there hope for these landscapes? The good news is that a number of local and national organisations such as BBOWT, the Chiltern Society, the National Trust,



Pyramidal Orchids in a verge in Old Amersham following reduced mowing by the Council.

Prestwood Nature, the Chilterns AONB and Plantlife all champion calcareous grassland: they collect evidence; educate the public; and protect, expand and connect the chalkland in their own reserves and work with farmers and landowners to help them manage their land for productivity as well as nature. Amersham Town Council is increasingly leaving verges unmown during summer and wild orchids have appeared in several locations – no sowing required.

You can support things where you are in Amersham. Help these groups by becoming a member; signing local petitions, joining their work parties in reserves; or collect data for surveys. At home, try not to fertilise or mow all or part of your lawn in spring and summer and see what emerges. Seeds can lay

dormant for years; some Amersham residents have had orchids appear, but you will find many other interesting species. If you do introduce plug plants or seed, make sure they are native chalkland flora. Support the Council in its attempts to not mow verges so often, and resist mowing verges yourself; perhaps you might team up with neighbours to 'rewild' a verge or other public space; the Rough Around the Edges project of BBOWT can provide support and advice.

But most of all, enjoy this natural abundance and get to know your patch: the harder you look, the more flowers you will find. Apps such as PlantNet, ObsIdentify, PictureThis and Seek will help you with ID. And if you would like to experience what local meadows were - and could be – like again, visit one of the chalk grassland reserves in the area, eg Aldbury Nowers near Tring; Grangelands near Princes

Risborough, Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve near Watlington, Hartslock near Goring-on-Thames, and closer to home, Frogmore Meadows near Chenies, Yoesden near High Wycombe and Prestwood Nature Reserve.

Old Amersham is surrounded by an ancient landscape, a unique heritage that is worth getting to know and protecting. Yet there are no chalkland meadow reserves, large or small, in Amersham. Given its key role in preserving Amersham's built and oral heritage, and the importance of our chalkland habitat, particularly at a time of immense biodiversity loss, might there be a new role for the Amersham Society in preserving this very special natural and cultural heritage? It is worth a thought – and, quite possibly, action.

**Marieke Bosman**

Marieke Bosman is an Old Amersham resident who is passionate about wildflowers and their protection and enjoyment. Her wildflower art is @mrsbloem on Instagram.

With thanks to Karen van Oostrum, Dominic Turner and Edward Copisarow. Information for this article was gleaned from online publications of the Wildlife Trusts, the National Trust, Plantlife, the Field Studies Council, the Chilterns AONB, the Sussex and Kent Wildlife Trusts, Magnificent Meadows, Wikipedia and the South Downs National Park.

This article was written before the Amersham Society talk by John Tyler. Any overlap is entirely coincidental but underscores the importance of our local habitat.



# Amersham Museum News

Before I started writing, I looked back at the piece I wrote for the newsletter in May. At that point, we were just re-opening and I shared with you many of the changes we had been able to make to our interpretation and programming. Over the course of this year those changes have been really well received, with many people attending our new walks programme and children have enjoyed the new trails in the museum and around Amersham.

## Amersham Routes

Since May we've continued to introduce new ways of enjoying the heritage of our local area. With the support of the Rothschild Foundation we have published three new self-guided walks: a walk around the Chess Valley; a walk following drovers' routes; and a walk through countryside from Chalfont & Latimer station to Amersham station. A team of volunteers worked really hard on mapping the routes, writing the text and sourcing the images. The guides can be picked up in the museum or found on our website:

[amershammuseum.org/events/guided-walks](https://amershammuseum.org/events/guided-walks)

In 2022 we will launch a fourth walk, which focuses on Tudor life in Amersham. The launch of this walk will tie in with the martyrs play, which we're very much looking forward to. Having been postponed this year, the martyrs team have been working tirelessly to recruit the cast and to prepare all the costumes, props and backstage equipment required to put the performance together. Look out for more information about the performance in the new year.







## The Return of School Visits

One of the most positive moments has been the return of school visits to the museum this autumn. It has been great to see many of our regular schools back in the museum, covering topics from maps, WWII and rationing, to Victorian Amersham. One of the highlights of the year – much missed in 2020 – is the annual **Takeover Day** project with 90 children from years 1 and 2 at St Mary's School. This year the children came over four visits, learning about old buildings in Amersham and life in the 19th century, followed by learning about food and rationing in WWII. Throughout their visits the children created drawings and crafts to reflect their learning, all of which were displayed for Takeover Day in November. Parents were invited to the museum to see the work and were guided around the museum by their children.

Takeover was superbly managed by our new Learning Officer, **Sarah Minty**, who started at the museum in September. Sarah is working two days a week and will manage all school visits, family learning and oversee our children's accredited art club. We have also appointed a new Collections Manager. **Emma Treleaven** started in October and she is looking after our collection and managing its ongoing development. It's brilliant to have them on board and, already, they have both made a really positive impact on the museum.



## Amersham Before Plastic

In late spring we were delighted to hear that we had been awarded funding for our **'Amersham Before Plastic'** project. Supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, made possible by money raised by National Lottery players, and by Amersham Community Board, the project shares how local people shopped, reused, repaired and recycled sustainably in the past. By exploring oral history interviews, reminiscence sessions and our collections, we have researched how local people shopped and consumed before plastic packaging and pre-packaged food was commonplace. Working in partnership with local community group **Sustainable Amersham**, we have drawn comparisons between historic habits of growing locally, minimising waste, plastic-free packaging and mending, with contemporary initiatives today.

We have created an 'Amersham Before Plastic' exhibition, in the museum and in our mobile museum. The mobile museum will be touring local community events, including local markets. We have already attended the regular Tuesday market in late November and the Amersham-on-the-Hill Christmas event on 4th December.

Through the project we are sharing tips on responsible recycling, encouraging people to share their opinions on packaging, and to make a pledge about reducing their use of single use plastic. To find out more and make a pledge go to:

**[amershammuseum.org/amersham-before-plastic](https://amershammuseum.org/amersham-before-plastic)**

Through the project we are also measuring the museum's carbon footprint – we would love people to help us with this exercise. If you're interested please get in touch.





### 30 Stories for 30 Years

Throughout the year we have been gathering stories from older people as part of our 30th birthday celebrations. We asked people to share a story of being young (under 30) and a memory of the

local area. The result is the production of a booklet of stories, copies of which will be given to each of the participants and archived in our collection.

The covers of the books have been designed and handprinted by members of our children's art club, who also had the opportunity to meet some of the older people and listen to their stories.

The stories have also informed the production of an artwork to be permanently installed in the museum garden. Members of our reminiscence groups, our volunteers and children's art club have been working with mosaic artist **Andrew Wynne** to create

the work. The shape and colours of the artwork are inspired by the medieval Penn tiles in our collection but the contents includes references to the memories shared by older people. We've really enjoyed creating this piece of community art and look forward to seeing it installed in the museum in the new year.

The process of creating the mosaic very much reflects the development of the museum and where it is today, 30 years on, in 2021. Throughout our history we have been supported by you and we continue to flourish through the hard work, creativity and energy of local people. We have grown in all directions – the collection, the building, visitor, volunteer and Friends numbers – and we have expanded our reach through working out and about in the community. Thank you to the Amersham Society for setting us up, for supporting us all the way and for still being interested, supportive and positive about our future.

I wish you all a very happy and peaceful new year and hope to see you in the museum sometime soon.

**Emily Toettcher**

# NOTICEBOARD

## Programme of Talks

The first talk of the year and possibly some of the subsequent talks listed will be by Zoom. We shall let members know when it is possible to change this.

The meetings are held on the last Wednesday of the month and, if by Zoom, open at 7.45pm. The talks start promptly at 8.00pm.

- 26 January     **HS2 – Update on the latest developments**  
A talk by **Keith Hoffmeister**.
- 23 February     **The First Ghosts: Most Ancient of Legacies**  
British Museum Assyriologist, **Dr Irving Finkel** returns to tell us about how the spirits of the dead have walked by our side since time immemorial.
- 30 March     **Boudicca**  
A talk by **Jill Ayres**.
- 27 April     **Oranges and Lemons**  
**Colin Oakes** will talk about some of London's famous churches and explain their connection with some children's nursery rhymes.
- 25 May     **How Plants Control Animals**  
Botanist **Dr Brenda Harold** will explain to us how plants defend themselves against herbivores, occasionally become carnivores themselves, and how their seeds are transported by animals and birds.

### Amersham Society Officers

Chair	<b>Dorothy Symes</b>	01494 434858
Vice Chair	<b>Edward Copisarow</b>	07932 152522
Secretary	<b>Geraldine Marshall-Andrew</b>	01494 433735

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