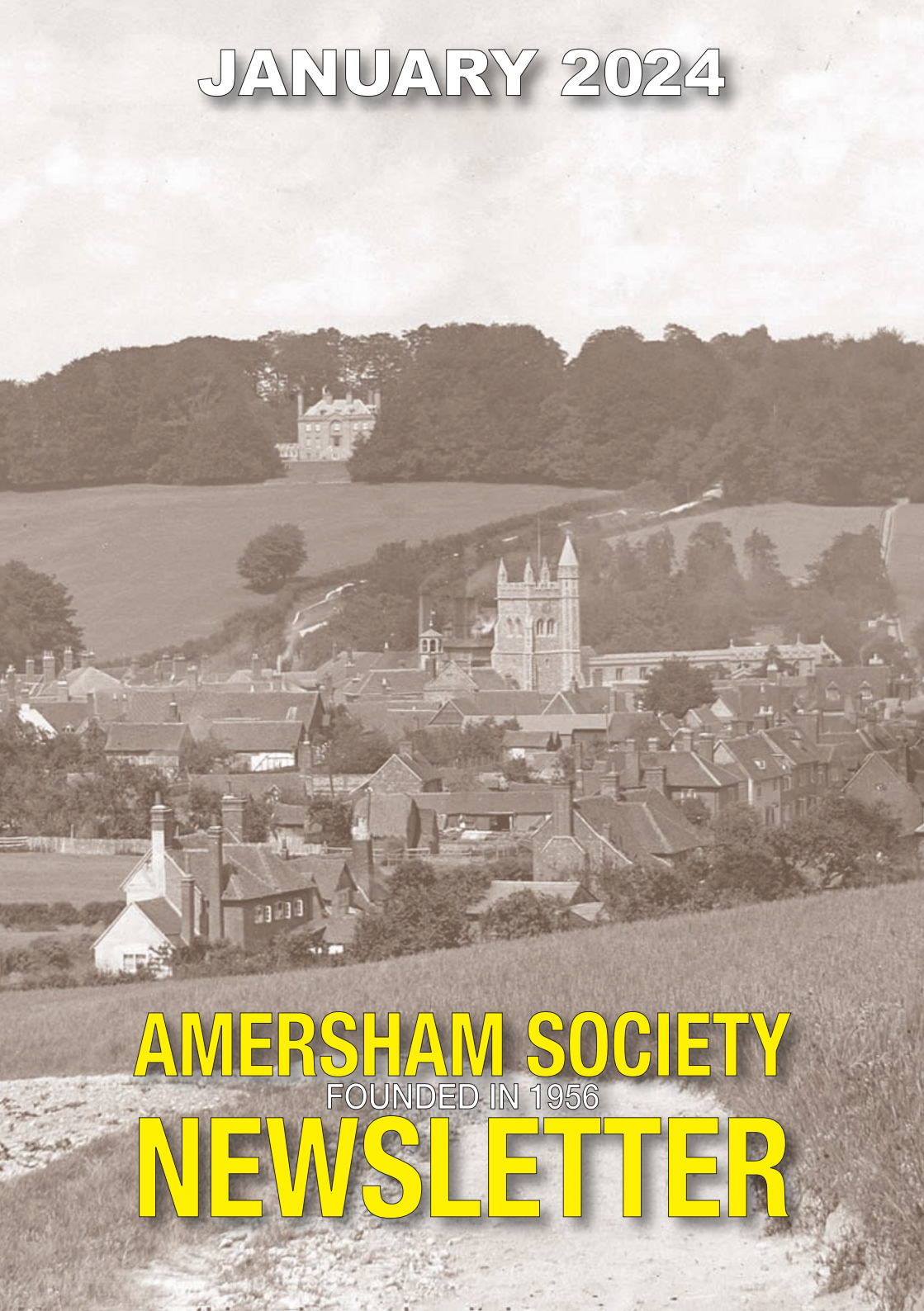
JANUARY 2024



AMERSHAM SOCIETY

FOUNDED IN 1956

NEWSLETTER

CONTENTS

Cover photograph: Taken by George Ward in 1905.
Courtesy of Amersham Museum, see page 27.
Photograph opposite: Parsonage (or Rectory) Wood in spring by Roly Gross – Amersham Photographic Society.

Editorial

Happy New Year and welcome to yet another Amersham Society newsletter. The underlying theme through this year's magazines will be Nature in and around Amersham starting with two articles: one about our most prominent natural feature, woodlands (page 18) and the second about chalk loving plants you'll be able to find in flower over the next three months (page 34).

Whilst the articles and reports in this issue are all new, the newsletter format remains unaltered. Members very kindly agree to write about our varied talks; in this one we have reports on the landscape that never was (page 6), the recreation of nine lost muses (page 28) and the work of the Bucks Search and Rescue dogs (page 42). We also invite local people with extensive knowledge in their chosen subject to write articles we anticipate will be of more than passing interest to the citizens of Amersham. In this issue, as well as woodlands there are histories of Bricky pond and the Old Amersham almshouses along with an update on the progress of HS2. By chance I came across a collage in Amersham Hospital taking as its inspiration a poster produced by London Transport exactly a hundred years ago promoting a train service that did actually stop in Amersham! The making of it can be found on page 40. Then, following on from the article in September's issue about Elangeni and the museum's purchase of the Colenso's

family album, Nick Gammage, a Trustee and volunteer at the museum, has written an extensive article about the friendship between them and one of our former Prime Ministers, Ramsey MacDonald. I find this article very sobering; it's about two wealthy families with homes in Chesham Bois in the early 20th century (when my parents, and probably yours, were children), however their wealth couldn't spare them the anguish of childhood and early adult mortality so prevalent at the time.

This time the ***"Can you identify this object"*** is not from the museum, but the pavement in the High Street - it's perhaps obvious what it is, but the question is what was it used for?
And, with this ring in mind, it's amazing the wealth of information you'll find on the museum's website; for instance the two oxen in the picture accompanying Peter Borrows article was taken by well-known photographer George Ward in 1918 and the two oxen are called Dumpling and Pudding!

Our small events team has come up with a diverse and interesting programme of talks for this year, some with intriguing titles: ***"The journey to Chalgrove field", "Bagels and Bacon"*** or what about ***"Man on the spot"***? The full range can be found on the "2024 Programme" which accompanies this newsletter. You can also find details of all our activities on the Society's website. One thing to note is the different venue for our March talk. Almost half our membership live in Amersham-on-the-Hill, so as a trial we are holding this meeting in the Large Barn Hall, adjacent to the Chiltern Lifestyle Centre - it's a 17th century barn, part of the ancient farmstead known as Woodside Farm.

I wrote in the September's newsletter that after 14 years, Dorothy Symes is stepping down from our events team. This leaves a vacancy for someone to join this small friendly group and help plan the Society's outings and talks – and you do not have to be a committee member, something which may have deterred ideal candidates. You will enjoy a gently introduction planning 2025 (this year's programme is complete). I'm reappealing here as disappointingly the vacancy remains. If this role appeals to you please contact our Secretary, Geraldine Marshall-Andrew.

And finally I must thank Elena Morgan, our website Manager, for her general advice, proof reading and several of the photographs in the compilation of this issue.

Subscriptions 2024

Amersham Society Subscriptions 2024

This note is to remind you that your **Annual Subscription** to the Amersham Society became due on 1st January 2024. The amount remains unchanged at £11.50 for an individual member, or £17 for two family members living at the same address. We do not issue membership cards. Almost certainly, by the time you read this, you will have already paid your subscription on about the 2nd January whether by direct debit or by standing order, without having to do anything. Thank you.

If you pay by **direct debit** (our preferred method) your bank statement will say something like GoCardless (AmerSoc) or perhaps something less comprehensible. GoCardless is the agent we use to collect the direct debits. Some members see GoCardless on their bank statement, think it's a scam and cancel it. Please don't – it's not a scam, it's us!

If you pay by **standing order** (no longer available to new members), nearly all our members have now corrected them to reflect the increases in subscription in 2012 and 2017, but if you have not, you will soon receive an e-mail or a letter from me asking for the balance. If, sadly, your partner or spouse died during the year, did you remember to change the subscription from **£17** to **£11.50**? We cannot change your standing order – you have to do that. Of course, we are happy to accept the excess as a small donation. If you would like to pay in future by direct debit, rather than standing order, please e-mail me at peterborrows@cantab.net and I can arrange for that to be set up.

If you are one of the handful of people who 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, please e-mail me at peterborrows@cantab.net and I can arrange for both the 2024 and subsequent payments to be taken by direct debit.

If you are not sure how you pay, or for any other problems, please e-mail me at peterborrows@cantab.net or phone 01494 728422.

Finally, do you receive the E-alerts which we send out about once a month? These give you reminders of forthcoming events and sometimes include new information not in the printed programme, eg social events. If you are not receiving this, it's probably because we don't have your e-mail address – please e-mail me at peterborrows@cantab.net. If you are two family members living at the same address, it can be helpful if we have both addresses on our database. Again, just e-mail me with the information.

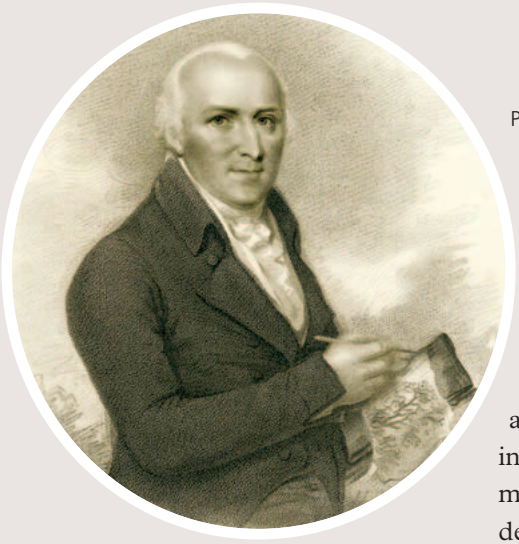
Dr Peter Borrows *Amersham Society Membership Secretary*

Repton's 1794 Red Book for Shardeloes

a talk by Barney Tyrwhitt-Drake

Barney Tyrwhitt-Drake has form. The family historian of the Drakes, who have long been associated with Shardeloes, Barney had previously given well received talks to members of the Amersham Society in 2000 and 2001, and more recently in 2020. A bumper audience turned out to hear him again on a story of what might have been if …..

Shardeloes Red Book, photo by Elena Morgan



Portrait of Humphry Repton,
print after Samuel Shelley

Humphry Repton was born in 1752 and established himself as a landscape gardener in 1788, when he was 36 years old. He was subsequently recognised as the last great landscape designer of the 18th century and the successor to Lancelot Capability Brown, who had died in 1783. He rose to fame following the preparation of a scheme for the Duke of Bedford's estate at Woburn Abbey, and altogether designed some 400 landscapes and gardens. Some of them will be familiar today to members of the National Trust, such as Tatton Park in Cheshire, Uppark in West Sussex, and Dyrham Park in Gloucestershire. Repton differed from Capability Brown however in that, whereas the latter implemented his designs himself, Repton left his client to carry out the necessary works. As we shall see, not all of Repton's designs were therefore implemented.

Repton presented his advice to his clients in the form of Red Books, a reference to their characteristic red covers. They were a perfect medium for him to display his writing and artistic abilities. He wrote to his clients in flattering and deferential terms, commenting on the existing landscape and describing how he could improve it. He included his own water colour paintings of the landscapes, sometimes using an overlay so that his client could readily appreciate the 'before' and 'after' effect of his proposals. The Red Books were, Barney suggested, a very effective 18th century sales aid, and indeed Repton left his business card inside the books whenever he presented them. Many of the Red Books still survive, including the one Repton prepared for the Shardeloes Estate.

Business Card :
H. Repton - Landscape Gardener.
Hare Street, near Romford, Essex

Courtesy of Amersham Museum

The Shardeloes Red Book, prepared in 1794, now belongs to Barney's fourth cousin, Bill Tyrwhitt-Drake, who lives in Hampshire but is still the Lord of the Manor of Amersham and Patron of the Living at St Mary's Church in the Old Town. Barney showed us a painting of the Drake family by John Hamilton Mortimer, dating from about 1778 - William Drake senior sits surrounded by his wife and his six surviving children (four sons and two daughters). His marriage had brought new wealth to the family, which had enabled him to rebuild Shardeloes to a design prepared by Stiff Leadbetter and a young Robert Adam. The painting shows William and his family discussing the new plans. A prominent globe depicts William as a man of the world, a book as a man of literature. His eldest son, William junior looks on, and beside him the next eldest son, Thomas. William senior chose to move to London for health reasons in 1791 and made over the Shardeloes estate to William junior. It was William junior who invited Repton to visit the estate. William senior died in 1796, but William junior had pre-deceased him, dying in 1795, shortly after the Red Book was presented. William junior had married twice and had daughters but left no male heir. The estate therefore passed to Thomas. From Humphrey Repton's perspective, this was an unfortunate sequence of events. William junior was an aesthete, a lover of the classics and literature. Thomas, on the other hand, was a hunting man and showed little interest in the Red Book or in its proposals for landscaping the estate.

A little bit of background about Thomas. Thomas Drake had changed his surname to Tyrwhitt in 1761, when he inherited the Lincolnshire property of Sir John De la Fountain Tyrwhitt, a descendent of his great great aunt, Mary Drake. When he inherited Shardeloes on his father's death in 1796, he changed his name again to become Thomas Drake Tyrwhitt Drake. The Tyrwhitt-Drake surname continues to this day.

So, what was in the Red Book? A map of Shardeloes Park shows a fruit and vegetable orchard in a walled garden which we can still see today as we drive along the A413 towards Little Missenden – it is on the left-hand side of the road, just before the HS2 ventilation shaft on the right. School Lane is clearly visible, too. Repton's conclusion after his survey was that the park was already very good, but that he could make it better! He proposed a grand new ride, with a carriageway down from the house to the road, the A413, and then a tunnel (a souterrain) under the turnpike, taking the ride up the south-facing slope on the other side of the road and into the woods near Hyde Heath. There, Repton proposed a new pavilion, where the Drake family would take a picnic while enjoying the glorious views back towards Shardeloes House. The ride would then head east towards the Rectory at the top of Rectory Hill (now, of course, known as the Old Rectory), before heading back downhill to Shardeloes. Barney was keen to note that the A413, which at one time had crossed the Shardeloes estate to the south of the lake, and indeed the lake itself, are both shown in Repton's drawings as we know them today. The Red Book contains a series of delightful water colours expressing these ideas. Repton did not seek dramatic changes to the landscape, but his 'before' and 'after' paintings identified the removal of some trees and the planting of others to soften the view in various parts of the estate. One such shows the view from the house down the valley towards St Mary's Church, although the sharp-eyed claim that Repton has put the church tower at the east end of the church instead of the west.

As we know, Thomas, the inheritor of Shardeloes in 1796, had little interest in implementing Repton's scheme. His passions lay elsewhere. Repton's vision of a souterrain beneath the A413, of a splendid ride around the estate, and a grand pavilion high on the northern slopes, from which to gaze upon the lake and beyond it the magnificent stately home – none of these proposals was implemented. But the Red Book - which after the talk we were allowed to examine with white-gloved hands – this treasure remains to tell us what might have been if …..

David Cash

Watercolour from Shardeloes Red Book, photo by Elena Morgan

The vent shaft site before work started in 2016

Photographs by Keith Hoffmeister and the Chiltern Society.

HS2 – where is it?

Keith Hoffmeister tells us

Shortly after the Government announced the route of a new high speed railway through the Chilterns (opening date 2026 at a cost of £32b) the HS2 Amersham Action Group was formed (in 2010) to oppose the plan. In our May 2019 issue George Allison wrote an article raising the very real concerns we had (by this time the opening date was *"sometime between 2028 and 2033"*, with 2033 gradually becoming the accepted date) and the likely cost had tripled to just under £100b. Then in January 2022 Keith Hoffmeister came and spoke to us with an update on the project. Two years on and a lot has happened (including the cost, which is now estimated to be - anybody's guess), and a lot that won't now happen, so I invited Keith for the latest update, he writes:

The sink hole is very close to Shardeloes House

The ten-mile long HS2 Chiltern Tunnel will run from alongside the M25 at West Hyde to South Heath near Great Missenden. The twin bore tunnel will have four ventilation shafts and an intervention shaft not far from the tunnel exit. The third of these is the Amersham vent shaft situated in Whielden Lane, Amersham. The two tunnel boring machines digging the tunnel have passed under the River Misbourne (for the second time) and the A413 and are continuing up the hill towards the tunnel portal just north of Frith Hill. They are due to exit the tunnel in February or March.

Last May the machine digging the west tunnel paused for maintenance between Shardeloes and Shardeloes Lake. Following an unexpected mechanical issue an unplanned stop was necessary. This second stop took place in close proximity to a dissolution feature. When the machine restarted, a ground movement led to the creation of a sinkhole. The hole was approximately six metres in diameter and five metres deep and thirty-two metres above the HS2 tunnel. In September, the existing topsoil and subsoil material was removed from the base of the hole which was then backfilled using chalk material from the Little Missenden vent shaft site. Once the ground has stabilised the subsoil and topsoil will be reinstated and tied into the existing grassland, and the whole area reseeded.

Construction of the Amersham vent shaft itself is nearly complete and services are being installed within the shaft and a connection made into the tunnels below. Construction of the single storey headhouse building is now underway. This will cover the top of the shaft and will be the main building visible above ground. Its design has been controversial to say the least, and was originally intended to be a feature clearly visible from all directions with metal fins on the top and illuminated at night.

The vent shaft as at June 2023

Building on feedback and advice from Buckinghamshire Council, a new design will see the height of the circular single storey building reduced by more than two metres and the 'crown' of steel fins replaced with perforated zinc panels to help match the natural tones of the surrounding landscape. The new design will also see the weathered steel boundary wall replaced by a more traditional stone wall made of flint. The stone is naturally occurring within the Chilterns and flint facades have been a prominent feature of local architecture for hundreds of years. The buildings will have spiral shaped walls echoing the shape of the site and the shaft beneath. Extra planting will be provided on the A413/A404 side of the site.

According to HS2 'The ecological design of the site will significantly improve biodiversity by integrating with the existing surrounding habitats and through the creation of species-rich calcareous grassland with areas of planting, basking banks and bat/bird boxes further

The approved access route for HS2 traffic to all the construction sites from Amersham to Stoke Mandeville is via the A413, the A355 to Beaconsfield and the M40. There are currently around 350 HGV movements daily in each direction around the Amersham bypass and Gore Hill.

All construction work at the site is due to be completed in April/May 2025. There will then be a pause before the railway installation works, system testing and commissioning. Trains should start running sometime between 2029 and 2033, with the later date the most likely, rather than 2026 as originally planned. Initially services will start from Old Oak Common in West London. Services won't start from Euston until at least 2031 and possibly ten years later than first stated. In peak hours there will be just six trains per hour rather than the fourteen rising to eighteen that was originally planned.

Keith Hoffmeister

You can see pictures of the impact on the Chilterns in the HS2 Photo Diary on the Chiltern Society website. https://chilternsociety.org.uk/hs2-photo-diary/

Community Investment and Social Value

…or mollifying money?

There was an article in "HS2 Update, Chiltern Tunnel / Summer 2023" which describes some of the projects supported by its Community and Environment Fund. Overall £40m is available which has surprisingly not been reduced despite the phase north of Birmingham being scrapped.

This prompted me to discover how much Amersham has undoubtedly benefitted from this largess, so without comment, here is a list of the funding that has been awarded to, or is in the process of being applied for by groups in Amersham.

Amersham Band Rehearsal Hall	**£75,000**
Scout Jubilee Hall, Rectory Hill	**£75,000**
Amersham Cricket Club	**£65,330**
St. Michael's Church, Community Hall	**£56,100**
Amersham Football Club	**£55,000**
Mobile Museum	**£16,080**
Market Place, Old Amersham	**£15,000**
St. George's C of E infant school	**£1,500**
Warm Spaces, Amersham	**£,500**
Total as at November 2023	**£359,510**

The common towards South Road, c.1905

Photo courtesy of Amersham Museum

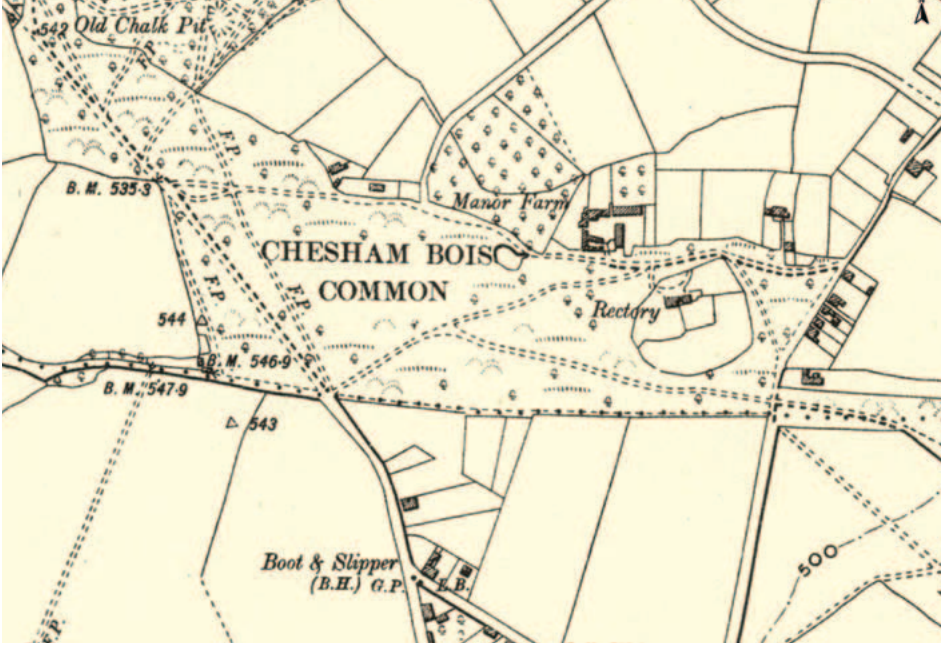
In this article, Jill Harris, looks at the history of Bricky Pond and its recent restoration. Jill is a local, born in Amersham, moving to Chesham Bois over 40 years ago. She is a Parish Councillor and was deputy leader of the pond restoration project in 1995/6. Currently she is chairman of the Parish Council's Common and Woodland working group which manages the pond.

Chesham Bois Common consists of some 40 acres of amenity woodland, including bridleways, footpaths and dells, as well as two large open areas. One of the open areas alongside North Road contains Bricky Pond.

At the turn of the 20th century, the common was an open expanse of turf with small groups of trees and clumps of bracken and gorse. It had a number of small ponds and dells, but only Bricky Pond was ever recorded on maps. Research into the history of the pond shows that it is recorded on all OS maps (which used a scale of 25" to the mile) dating from the late 1800s.

The pond is featured on a map that is part of a survey commissioned by the Duke of Bedford in 1736, but a 1716 tithe map prepared for Viscount Cheyne does not show the pond.

The pond is believed to have been formed as a result of clay diggings for brick making, hence its name. Brick making began around the early 17th century with kilns often being fired by furze that grew on the common. The closest brickworks to the pond appear to have been in a meadow behind Laurel Court, at the corner of North Road and Long Park.



Map courtesy of the National Library of Scotland

Map showing the common with the pond. Ordnance Survey 1897(1900)

Older residents recall skating on the pond in winter and boating in the summer. Carts would be driven into the shallower part of the pond so that the wooden wheels would swell, thus improving the efficiency of the brakes on the steep hill down into Chesham. There is a story, albeit unsubstantiated, of an unfortunate horse complete with milk cart attached, being stuck in a sinking bog at one end of the pond.

Bricky Pond is a major feature of the common and it is fed entirely by surface water so is subject to seasonal variations in water level. By 1995 it had become very overgrown and had virtually dried up and a group of parish councillors and local residents joined forces to restore the pond. Before any work started, a full survey was carried out and a plan formulated in conjunction with the London Ecology Unit, Landscapes Naturally and the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers. The pond needed to be dug out and relined, and various options were considered. It was decided that, being a dewpond, traditional methods would be best. Puddled clay is the traditional method for lining porous waterway bottoms. To "puddle" simply means to pound clay and water together into a dense mass which resists water penetration. Puddling breaks down the clay's structure, closes fissures and forces out air bubbles. The clay becomes very plastic, just as happens when it's made into pottery. The group was introduced to a local company which specialised in puddled clay lined ponds and work was set to start mid-December 1995.

Three Valleys Water installed a standpipe and hose for the duration of the project so that water would be available for the puddling of the clay and also to fill the pond. Local volunteers, including Guides, Scouts and Chesham Bois schools were recruited to help with replanting.

At 6.30am on Tuesday 19th December a lorry arrived to deliver the first 20 tonnes of Oxford Blue clay and having tipped it near the pond, the driver found he was stuck in the mud.

Photos courtesy of Jill Harris

The pond during and after 1995–1996 restoration

Despite efforts to dig it out, it was nearly two hours before he was finally freed. That night it poured with rain and the pond, which had been dry for so long, was rapidly filling with water so a pump was hired to discharge the water into adjoining clay pits so that work could continue. Before the end of the day, the excavator had got stuck in the mud and couldn't be freed. That night, temperatures fell and what water was left in the pond froze, as did the pump. Everything had to be thawed out before work could restart. Further attempts were made to pull the digger out, but the main arm sheared off so a tracked vehicle had to be brought in to pull it out. The clay was fighting back!

Later that same day when checking on progress, the project leader was pointed in the direction of large cans of diesel where the workmen had carefully placed what turned out to be a World War ll high explosive hand grenade, complete with its pin. Police were called, and the area evacuated while bomb disposal experts made it safe.

When work restarted after Christmas the workmen discovered that where the digger had sunk into the clay the previous week was actually where the deepest deposits of clay had been dug for the original brickworks dating back to the 18th century. For safety reasons the hole was filled with hardcore.

A further 150 tonnes of clay was delivered and a Family Puddling Fun Day was held on 30th December, where around 300 people came to help tread it in to help line the pond. Despite the freezing cold weather there was a great sense of community, helped by hot drinks, barbecue and raffle supported by many local businesses.

Photo by Elena Morgan

Bricky Pond today

The main work continued without further incident and was completed by early February 1996 followed by the planting of oxygenating, marginal and emergent plants.

The pond project was supported by various grants, one of which required some form of event to celebrate the completion of the restoration. The first village fete took place in June 1996 and was opened by John Craven who at that time lived nearby. Most of the voluntary organisations which took part in that inaugural event still take part today.

Maintenance was originally done by volunteers, but it soon became clear that regular work was needed so professionals were brought in.

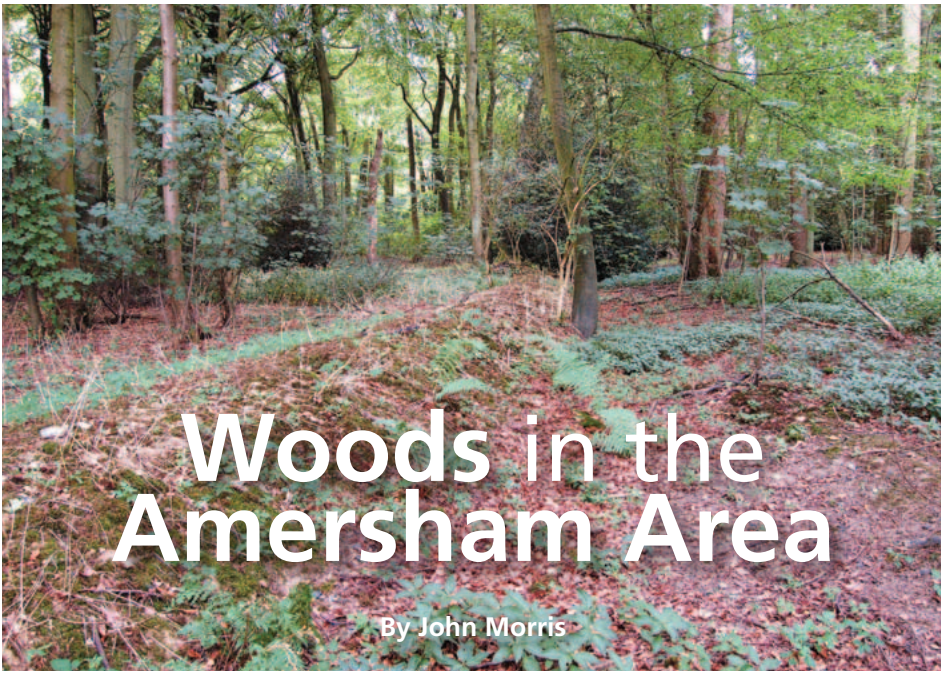
Over the past five years or so the pond has begun to deteriorate partly due to lack of rainfall and also the growth of pond vegetation. It has been suggested that it may be leaking and that it should be lined with a butyl liner.

Chesham Bois Parish Council sought advice from BBOWT and commissioned a Great Crested Newt survey, a botanical survey and an invertebrate survey, to be followed by a restoration and management plan. Details of these can be found on the Parish Council website https://www.cheshamboispc.org.uk/services/commons-woodland/

Overall the pond is in good condition and is not leaking. The Council is following the advice in the management plan, where major work is carried during the winter months, so visitors to Chesham Bois common should soon see improvements.

The Council installed new seating around the pond in May 2022. The rustic benches were made using timber from trees which had been felled following the tree safety advice.

Jill Harris

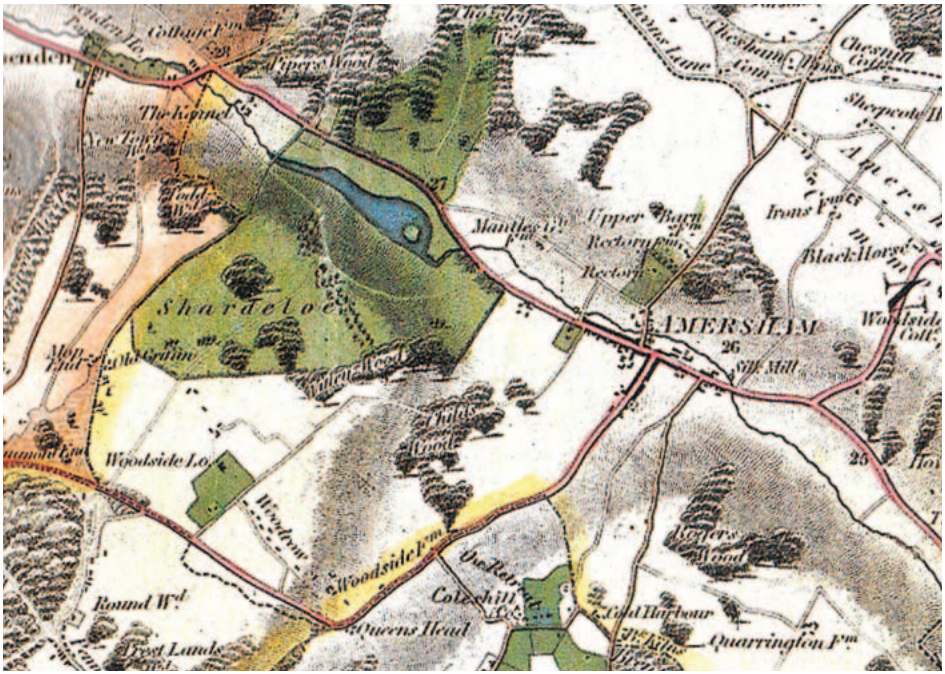


Woods in the Amersham Area

By John Morris

Rogers Wood, old wood bank.
This is within Rogers Wood (east of Gore Hill), with typical ancient woodland flower species: dogs' mercury and the white dead stalks of bluebells. A boundary bank can be clearly seen. Such earthworks could denote the original boundary of the wood*, if this was the case with Rogers wood, then it has expanded naturally over time through lack of traditional management. Alternatively, such a mound could denote a parish or ownership boundary.
* an excellent example of this can still be seen around Parsonage woods.

John has worked in the Chilterns for forty years offering advice and assistance with woodland management. He started in 1983 running the Chiltern Society Small Woodlands Project which evolved into a registered independent charity, the Chiltern Woodlands Project, which ran from 1989 until 2020. For much of that time John was based in the Chilterns AONB office. Since 2020 John ran a Test and Trial for Small Woods for 18 months, as part of the Defra research for the new Environmental Land Management Scheme. He now runs his own woodland consultancy business. This includes helping the Royal Forestry Society to manage Hockeridge and Pancake Woods at Ashley Green. He gives the Chiltern Society advice on their woodland sites, including Captains Wood in Chesham.



Taken from Bucks Archaeological Society publication.

Copy of a part of the 1825 Bryant map of the Amersham area.
Which shows different names for some of the woods.

The Chilterns are a densely wooded area, with over 23% woodland cover in the AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty – a protected landscape). This is more than double the 10% average amount of woodland for England. The woods here are distinctive being mainly beech high forest, adding local character to the Chiltern Hills. The woods give height to the hills and change with the seasons. Around 60% of the woods in the Chilterns are ancient; this is defined as having been continuously wooded from before 1600 AD. As a result they are richer in specialist flora that depends on woodland cover, such as bluebells and other rarer plants. Note this does not mean that the wood contains old trees! There are two main types of ancient woodland – firstly those that are semi-natural, composed of native trees which have grown naturally from seed, such as beech, oak, ash and wild cherry. Bois Wood and Rectory (or Parsonage) Wood are local examples. Then there are woods that have been replanted on ancient woodland sites - known as PAWS (Plantation on an Ancient Woodland Site). These may be planted with conifers, pines, larches, spruces and firs, or mixtures with beech and other broadleaves. These plantations were intended to be commercial crops. Many woods had to be replanted due to wartime over-exploitation. The Forestry Commission, now Forestry England, was formed after the First World War to grow a supply of timber needed by industries. Examples of plantations are Second Wood and Weedonhill Woods.

There are also other more recent woods, including on common land that has become more wooded once grazing ceased, e.g. Chesham Bois Common where ash, oak and sycamore are the main trees.

Woods in the Chilterns were historically important as a source of woodfuel, and many of the trees would have been cut down for firewood or charcoal at a young age using very basic hand tools such as axes or billhooks.

With the industrial revolution and canals bringing coal to London for fuel, the market for firewood declined and the trees in the Chilterns were allowed to grow larger. This then became the resource for the bodgers, the local chair leg turners who worked in the woods using pole lathes to turn beech and ash. Chesham and High Wycombe became centres for woodworking and furniture industries. Oak, elm and cherry trees were also used in local building. These trees were felled using two man saws, to be converted in sawpits in the woods into smaller planks and beams that were easier to transport. Sawpits are a feature of Chiltern woods and show two things, one that there were sizeable trees growing that could be cut up, and secondly that the soils did not collapse into the pit when it was dug. Ancient woods normally have a bank and ditch on the boundary, often with a coppiced or laid hedge, and the shape of this feature can help in the understanding of the wood's history.

Many woods in the Chilterns are found on the tops of the hills on the poorer clay with flint, stony ground that was hard to farm. However recent Lidar surveys show that many ancient woods have developed on what was earlier more open farmed landscape. The better agricultural land is on the chalk hillsides and valley bottoms.

Threats to woods in the area include development for roads, housing, and also fragmentation with woods being treated as extensions of gardens. Some woods are becoming overgrown with garden escapes, such as evergreen laurel being a problem. There are now more deer in the Chilterns than there have been for centuries, with roe and muntjac being the commonest in the Amersham area. Deer browse on young saplings and also impact the ground flora. They are the main reason why plastic tree tubes are now used to protect planted trees. The introduced American grey squirrel causes bark damage to young pole staged beech, oak and other trees. This causes internal scars damaging timber and may kill the top of the tree above the bark damage. Also, over the last decade a new fungal disease has been killing ash trees, making them brittle and liable to collapse.

Timber is a renewable resource; we can grow more trees to replace those that are used. People have been using small trees, such as those produced by regular coppicing, since they started making fire, using tools and building shelters.

Woodland management is regulated by the Forestry Commission who issue licences when trees need to be felled. Grants may also be available, but these change over time and some of the replanting and woodland creation that we see today is the result of past incentives and rules. Some woods are also covered by Tree Preservation Orders which mean that Buckinghamshire Council need to give approval for any works.

John Morris

Do you recognise this retaining wall by the Misbourne at Pondwicks?

The mystery concrete wall (on the right)

Pondwicks meadow, looking east showing one of the new backwaters

Photos by Elena Morgan

The local water company (Affinity Water) has recently been making some improvements at Barn Meadow and Pondwicks in an attempt to get the river Misbourne closer to its natural state and restore some of the wildlife. In places they have narrowed the channel and made it less straight, less canal-like. This should result in a faster flow of water to wash away the fine silty sediment and expose the flint gravel characteristic of chalk streams. They have planted some typical chalk stream plants and scattered some wild flower seeds which they hope will grow and strengthen the bank.

However, when the water is plentiful in winter it can flow over these barriers but still stay in the wider channel. On Pondwicks, they have also created two backwaters (scrapes), ponds to contain flood water. These will be permanently wet and so be suitable for a variety of plant and animal life.

In the course of digging out these ponds a buried wall was uncovered, see photo. It's at the edge of the stream, at the western end of Pondwicks, near to the Maltings, next to the channel leading to one of the backwaters. Nobody seems to know what it was for, or when it was built. We've looked at all the references to Pondwicks on the Museum web site and all the photos tagged with Pondwicks on the Museum's database, but nothing gives any clue.

Do you know? Have you got any photos that might help? If so, please get in touch with me at peterborrows@cantab.net.

Peter Borrows

Very Old Friends:
James Ramsay MacDonald and the Colensos of Chesham Bois

By Nick Gammage, volunteer and Trustee at Amersham Museum

Frank and Sophie Colenso at Elangeni. The shadow of the photographer is probably their daughter Irma

Ramsay and Margaret MacDonald with their daughter Joan

Striking photographs in a newly discovered Edwardian album bring to light a previously unrecorded friendship between the families of Labour Prime Minister James Ramsay MacDonald and his wife Margaret and their Chesham Bois neighbours, social campaigners Francis and Sophie Colenso of Elangeni.

The album, which once belonged to the Colenso family, has now been acquired by the Amersham Museum through a generous gift from the Amersham Society. Alongside powerful portraits of the Colensos at their now long-demolished home Elangeni sit a remarkable group of photographs from around 1906 of Ramsay and Margaret MacDonald and their young children haymaking with the Colensos at Elangeni.

The Colensos of St John's Wood built Elangeni on farmland in 1901 as a country home and in March 1905 the MacDonalds' rented Linfield cottage in Bois Lane - also as a weekend retreat. The two families' connections with Chesham Bois and their pioneering social campaigning have been well-documented in articles on Amersham Museum's website (*). But what has not been known before now was that these influential Chesham Bois neighbours were also good friends.

The front of Elangeni showing Sophie with one of her daughters

Research in the MacDonald and Colenso family archives prompted by these photographs uncovered many letters which reveal that this was a warm and lifelong friendship which spanned more than 30 years. In a letter to Ramsay MacDonald's son Malcolm in June 1935 to congratulate him on his promotion to the Cabinet as Colonial Secretary, Sophie looked back on the long and close association between the two families:

"Remembering what a help your father was to Mr Colenso in his struggles for justice for the South African natives, I feel the Colonies can safely be left in your hands"

and she signed off:

"Your old (very old!) friend,
Sophie J Colenso"

Other letters reveal that in fact the two families knew each other well before the MacDonalds leased Linfield in 1905, which makes it possible that the Colensos were behind the MacDonalds' choice of Chesham Bois for a weekend retreat. Sophie's father Sir Edward Frankland (1825-1899) and Margaret MacDonald's father John Hall Gladstone (1827-1902) were among the most eminent Victorian scientists and were friends, their families often visiting each other. Sophie tells MacDonald that Margaret's sister Florence (his sister-in-law) had been her bridesmaid in 1880 and reminds him that she and Frank had first met him at the home of Margaret's father. This must have been after Ramsay MacDonald first met his future wife Margaret Gladstone on 13 June 1895 and before Gladstone's death in 1902 – at least three years before they rented Linfield.

The MacDonalds and Colensos were bound not just by social campaigning but by the shared experience of a series of devastating family tragedies. Condolence letters in the MacDonald archives sit alongside a silk ribbon that once tied a child's funeral wreath, which make the photographs of those carefree young children and their mother in the hay meadows even more poignant.

Linfield (the cottage Ramsay MacDonald rented in Bois Lane)

The MacDonald childern
Left to right :
Malcolm, Alister, Ishbel, David and the dog, Malcolm

"Much as I love all your dear children, little David always held the biggest place in my heart and we shall never forget his sweet loveable ways. The hours we have spent with your dear little ones are among the happiest in our lives and we shall miss his dear little face from among them more than I can possibly say."

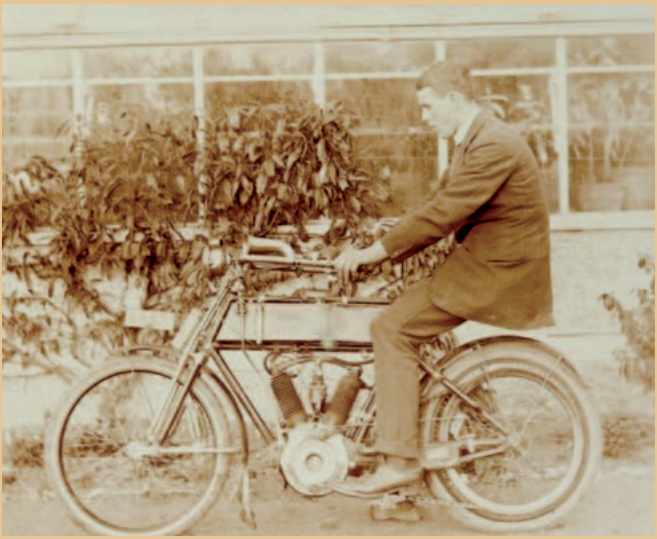
The album contains two intimate photographs of four of the MacDonalds' six children. As a number of photos carry the dates 1906 and 1907 it is likely these are Alister (born in 1898), Malcolm (1901), Ishbel (1903) and David (1904). Joan was to arrive later (in 1908) and their sixth child, Sheila, in 1910.

In February 1910 the MacDonalds suffered the devastating loss of their five-year-old son David from diphtheria in the London Fever Hospital. Frank and Sophie knew all too well what it was to lose a young child: in July 1882, their first-born Esmond had suddenly taken ill and died aged just seven months at her parents' home in Reigate.

Sophie and her daughter Irma both sent messages of sympathy to the MacDonalds, with Irma (then aged 24) recalling the MacDonalds' happy family visits to Elangeni with their children:

The card attached to the ribbon which tied the Colensos' funeral wreath reads: *"In ever loving memory of our darling little David, from Mrs Colenso, Eothen, Irma and Sylvia"*

More tragedy was to come. Four months later in June 1910 Frank died at Elangeni, aged just 58. In September the following year Ramsay MacDonald, too, was suddenly widowed when his wife Margaret died aged just 40 after contracting blood poisoning, leaving five children.



Nigel Colenso
on his motorcycle

Frank Colenso's father
Bishop John Colenso

Two years after that, in 1913, Sophie Colenso lost another child prematurely in tragic circumstances when her only surviving son Nigel, aged 23, was killed in a shooting accident in South Russia while working as a mining engineer. There are striking portraits in this album showing Nigel in his later teens, astride an early motorcycle and on horseback.

The MacDonalds and Colensos were drawn together too by their campaigning on a number of pressing social issues, most notably in favour of women's suffrage, against the worst horrors of war and against the treatment of native tribesmen in Britain's South African colonies.

Francis (Frank) Colenso (1852-1910) was the son of the controversial Bishop John Colenso (1814-1883), first Anglican Bishop of Natal and tireless campaigner for the Zulus against what he saw as ruthless British colonial rule; Frank, working in London, lobbied

Parliament and the British Government tirelessly on the Zulus' behalf. This lobbying intensified in March 1906 (the period of that idyllic Elangeni haymaking) following the Natal government's over-reaction (a view many shared) to a native revolt against a harsh new Poll Tax. The self-governing colony arbitrarily declared martial law, arrested the Zulu rebels, tried them without a jury in courts martial and condemned twelve to death.

The MP through whom Frank channelled his efforts for the condemned Zulus was none other than his new Chesham Bois neighbour James Ramsay MacDonald, then a rising star in the fledgling Labour Party, newly elected in 1906 as a Member for Leicester.

There can be no doubt that the MacDonalds shared, passionately, the Colensos' concern about what was happening in Southern Africa. In 1902 Ramsay and Margaret had visited South Africa in the aftermath of the Boer War and were appalled by what they saw. MacDonald's vivid account of that journey carries harrowing accounts of the trenches and indiscriminate revenge-burnings of Boer farms by British troops, which clearly forged his life-long belief that war achieves nothing.

There is a stark personal reply from MacDonald to Frank Colenso dated 30 March 1906 in which he "privately" reveals what Winston Churchill (Churchill then a Colonial Affairs Minister in the Liberal Government) thought of how the Natal colonial government was behaving:

"The whole situation is most critical. I had several interviews with Mr Churchill yesterday upon his invitation and I can assure you privately that he is really in a great state about it."

It is not clear from the letters whether Frank began canvassing Ramsay MacDonald's support after the two men became Chesham Bois neighbours in 1905 or whether they had discovered their shared interest before that.

Pacifism, another shared interest, was of growing importance through MacDonald's political career and his refusal (initially) to support Britain's decision to declare war against Germany in 1914 brought him vitriolic criticism. The war raised complex issues, too, for Sophie Colenso. Her mother was German, she and her children bi-lingual and they made regular visits to German relatives and friends. Census returns show the Colensos employed German servants at Elangeni.

From the outbreak of war Sophie urged MacDonald to take up the plight of German internees and prisoners of war. He explained that while he was sympathetic, he could not do this publicly without him appearing even more pro-German than he was already being painted. In a reply to Sophie from November 1914 about conditions in internment camps he refers to picking up her letter at Chesham Bois. This indicates he was still renting Linfield cottage at the outbreak of the Great War, a decade after first leasing it.

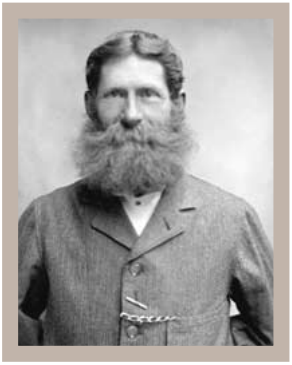
MacDonald and Sophie Colenso died within a few months of each other in 1937. MacDonald never lost his love of Elangeni and Chesham Bois. Writing to Sophie shortly before his – and her – death that year he describes fondly catching sight of Elangeni just a few days earlier as he walked down a road to the west of Chesham Bois, passing under the railway bridge and walking beside the watercress beds on his way to Chenies.

The photographs in this album provide us with our clearest picture yet of the Colensos and their long-demolished home Elangeni in its heyday (or perhaps haydays!). They also bring to life, vividly, an enduring relationship between *"very old friends"* in two remarkable families.

* NOTES – https://amershammuseum.org/ then see various articles under references: 1 Margaret and Ramsay MacDonald, 2 MacDonald family and 3 The Colenso family and Elangeni.

George Ward

Chronicler of Amersham life through his camera lens



This year Amersham museum has selected twelve (13, if you count the cover) of George Ward's evocative images, depicting rural life here between the years 1888 and 1930, for its 2024 calendar.

George lived in Amersham all his life, serving the community as a councillor for many years. He was born in 1860, one of eight children. His parents had moved from Hughenden a few years earlier and his father became the Foreman Carpenter at Weller's Brewery.

George's first job was a delivery boy for the Bucks Advertiser, which was printed in Amersham at King's Chemist in the Market Square. Ebenezer, the son of the proprietor, had a camera, and it was he who taught George about photography. By the 1880's, George had become a painter and glazier at Weller's Brewery but was also recording daily life in the town with his own camera.

He took a number of photographs of Elmodesham House for the Cheese family including one of their maid, (Elizabeth) Bessie Eagles from Malvern (also one of eight children), whom he married in 1886 at Chenies Baptist Church. George and Bessie were married for 50 years.

Initially the couple lived in Tan Yard, when George became the first manager of the newly expanded gas works. His duties included lighting all the gas lamps in the town every evening. During this time, his interest in photography and engineering grew and he became known as a watch and cycle repairer.

In 1890, George handed over the role of manager of the gas works to his brother Fred and set up a shop on the Broadway where Bessie sold crockery and toys, and where he built his first photographic studio. A talented musician, the shop also sold sheet music and instruments, and in 1892 he founded the Amersham Temperance Band, now the Amersham Band. He acted as bandmaster and musical tutor for every instrument and was also an accomplished ballroom dancer.

By 1896 he moved to larger premises opposite the Market Hall where Bessie expanded her shop to sell tea, coffee and tobacco. In the spacious yard behind the shop, George manufactured the 'Wizard' bicycle and had a repair workshop, which sold spare parts.

1902 George was registered as a car repairer and soon purchased his own car called the 'Orient Express'. He took many photos of cars and bicycles, an interest his sons George, William and Cornelius shared. George and Cornelius took over running the Garage and Cycle works in 1909.

He died in 1943 and Bessie continued to live at 20 High Street until her death in 1966 when she was 101. George's glass-plate negatives, an important part of the Amersham Museum collection, are a memorable legacy of life in the town from 1890 to 1930.

My thanks to Alison Bailey, who supplied the biographical detail, and to the Amersham Museum for the image.

Stowe: Recreating Apollo and the Nine Muses

Edward Copisarow reports on our evening talk last June

© National Trust Images / Hugh Mothersole

Our speaker was Gillian Mason, Cultural Heritage Curator at the National Trust, and the project visionary and lead for the recreation of the nine lost Muses that formed such an integral part of the historic landscape at Stowe. The timing of this talk couldn't have been better as the Society's annual summer outing was to Stowe Gardens two weeks later.

Stowe is a living work of art and is considered to be the birthplace of the English Landscape Garden. Architectural, artistic and natural elements seamlessly blend alongside cultural references and classical iconography. The World Monuments Fund has described it as '…one of the most beautiful and complex historic landscapes in Britain.'

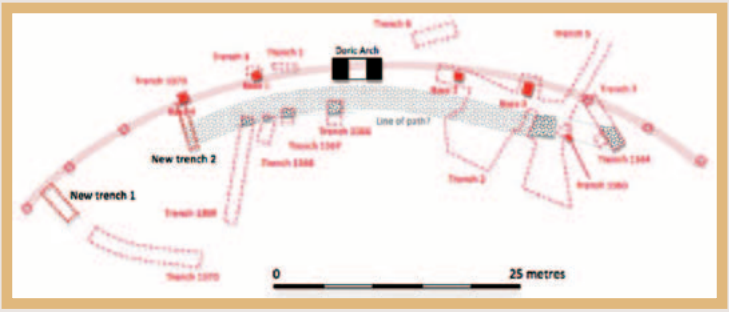
What is particularly remarkable about Stowe is the vastness of scale, so huge in fact that it brought together the leading architects, artists and designers of the day in the creation of a single idealised landscape where built and green elements work in harmony. It inspired Thomas Jefferson's garden at Monticello and Catherine the Great's landscape at her summer palace, Tsarskoye Selo, and has continued to serve as an inspiration worldwide ever since.

© National Trust Images

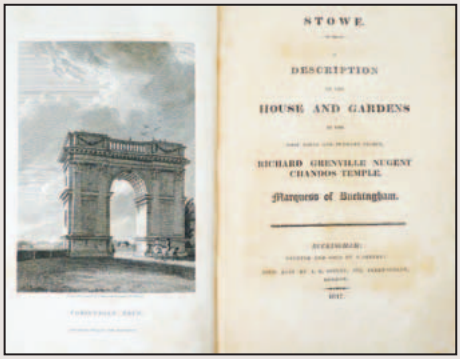
The transformation, which took place during the 18th century, was commissioned by the Temple-Grenville family (subsequently Viscounts Cobham and Dukes of Buckingham) who owned Stowe from c.1589 – 1921. In its heyday the landscape was a great tourist attraction. Benton Seeley's 1744 *"Description of the Gardens of Lord Viscount Cobham"* effused, *"As they are esteemed, by Persons of the most exact Taste, to be the finest in this Kingdom, and perhaps in Europe..."*

© National Portrait Gallery NPG 286

But the expense of maintaining Stowe was vast at the end. By 1845 the Duke of Buckingham was said to be the 'greatest debtor in the world', so in 1848 there was a great 40-day auction of the bulk of the treasures at Stowe. The decline continued until the last of the garden statuary was sold in further auctions in 1921 and 1922. Then finally Stowe School purchased what was left of the house and garden in 1923. However a corner was turned some 30 years ago, when the gardens were taken over by the National Trust, and the house transferred to the Stowe House Preservation Trust, whilst still used by the school. In the gardens, three decades of restoration, reunification of landscape elements, reinstatement of historic planting, monument restoration, statue recreation and reinstatement of historic views have brought back a great sense of what an 18th century visitor would have experienced. The work is far from finished and there is a particular emphasis now on the recreation of statues and their settings.



The greatest of the features completely lost was a glade centred by a statue of Apollo surrounded by statues of the Nine Muses, each set into a niche of foliage, and affording views through the surviving central Doric arch to the Palladian Bridge beyond. The reinstatement of such a feature was not without complexities. The landscape had gone through several iterations, so it was imperative to determine the moment in time which was to be recaptured whilst not destroying the surviving remnants of previous and subsequent landscaping. All the statues were lost, there was no comparable complete set surviving anywhere else in the world so there were many questions to answer concerning authenticity versus spirit, what was the design intent, what archival and physical evidence was there to work with, how much detail needed to be created again from scratch and how would the identifying iconography of each of the figures be represented in a consistent manner. Having examined these questions, there were some very practical considerations from planning permissions, raising the money, selecting designers, workshops and materials, and also knowing when to compromise – there was no way of moving the 20th century golf course which had encroached slightly onto the site.



Archival research revealed that the original statues had been of lead, and there was sufficient evidence to attribute the sculpting to van Nost. They disappeared in the 19th century, perhaps in a lead theft; the 1848 auction catalogue recorded

"The statues…formerly stood near this spot, but were of lead, and have long since been melted."

Gillian explained that traces found on other lead statuary of the period indicated that the Muses at Stowe when first installed were likely painted to simulate stone.

Next it was necessary to define clearly the aspiration of the project, and Gillian cited the two quotes from contemporary correspondence which had informed the vision. The first was from Madame du Bocage's Lettres sur l'Angleterre, published 1770 describing

"A hill called the Parish transformed into a Parnassus contains an Apollo and the Muses"

and the second from Elizabeth Montagu writing to Lord Lyttleton in 1768 in which she said

"I found Lord Temple employed in making…a new hill for the muses on the verge of the old Elysian Fields… The Muses and Apollo are arranged on either side of the Arch upon the brow of the hill…"

Researching the statues involved looking at surviving Stowe statues as well as other versions of the same subjects from the classical to 18th century interpretations. More widely, depictions in paintings, searching for other work attributed to van Nost and relevant literary references.

More archival research included looking at engravings and drawings, estate papers/accounts, early guidebooks, garden plans and maps, sale catalogues and even poems waxing lyrical on the beauties of Stowe.

This was supplemented with archaeological research to identify the foundations and exact positions of the plinths for the original statues. From this the spacing of the new statue group could be deduced along with the route of the 18th century path to be reinstated. Gratifyingly the archival evidence demonstrated that some of the original planting had actually survived and could be utilised in the positioning of reinstated scheme.

Very unusually for such a project it was decided to commission a completely new artistic design for recreating the Nine Muses in the spirit of the original. This was all done with reference to the collated body of research. Once the initial design drawings had been accepted, full-size plaster maquettes were created by hand. Specific focus was given to stance, drapery, face, hair and attributes. Of these, the attributes were the key part of the Muse iconography, enabling them to be simply identified. This was a complex part of the commission because each required separate modelling and casting. From the plaster models moulds were made and the statues then cast in composite stone at Cliveden Conservation. The subsequent installation at the heart of the garden was a massive undertaking; the whole operation took three days.

Following completion of the Muses, Gillian's team embarked on a second phase of the project to reinstate Apollo at the centre of the group. The original lead statue was in position at Stowe by 1735, set on a much higher plinth. The modelling was much more complex and required an initial small, ¼ size scale maquette to be made in clay, before being scaled up to the full size plaster maquette. The particular challenge to overcome was the modelling of the lyre and the decision was taken to mould the left arm and lyre separately from the rest of the statue. Fortunately the evidence for Apollo's plinth was well preserved, a Stowe estate account book from 1768 mentions *"mending and writing on the plinth of Apollo"* and there is a historic image recording the shape.

Before final reinstatement, work was undertaken to replicate the setting as exactly as possible. A later 1848 path was removed, the hill reprofiled and the 18th century sunken path, along with lost shrubbery and glade planting were recreated. Gillian finished her talk with a quote from a letter from Horace Walpole to George Montagu written in 1770,

"…you at once see, through a glade, the river winding at the bottom: from which a thicket arises, arched over with trees, but opened, beyond which… is the Palladian bridge, and again over that a larger hill crowned with the castle. It is a tall landscape… comprehending more beauties of light, shade, and buildings, than any picture of Albano I ever saw...The statues of Apollo and the Muses stand on each side of the arch."

Do you know what this is?

When it's not hidden by parked cars, you can see it set into the granite kerb outside no. 39 High Street (a private house).

Originally, there was a tannery located at this point (adjacent to the river) but by 1830 that had been replaced by a slightly less smelly butcher's shop. In the censuses of 1841 and 1851, the butcher was John Rogers. He had died by 1861 but his wife Ann was still running the business. It is possible that James Rogers was running the business before John because John's father was James and a report in The Buckinghamshire Gazette of 6 January 1838 mentioned a James Rogers of Amersham who had been 40 years a butcher.

Ann Rogers was no longer there in 1871 but however by 1891 Joseph Keen was working there as a butcher and he continued beyond 1901. In 1905 he had been replaced by John Gurney who was still there in 1911 and 1921. By 1921, his daughter Rachel was also working in the business. However, the Bucks Herald of 20 July 1934 carried an advert for the auction of 'the freehold butcher's shop and premises … High Street, Amersham … by direction of estate of the late John C. Gurney' and it became a private house owned by J R Buckingham. The daughter of John Gurney, Rachel Shrimpton, was born in the premises in 1905 and later wrote about growing up in Amersham in the Amersham Society Newsletter September 1981.

The photographs from the Amersham Museum collection show the shops of the successive butchers, Joseph Keen and John Gurney.

The clue to the question posed at the beginning, of course, lies in the trade carried out here. This was a tethering ring, to which bulls were attached whilst waiting for slaughter. There are at least two rings set into the kerb near 37 and 39 High Street – how many can you spot? We met one later resident who described how much her grandchildren enjoyed finding 'dinosaur' bones in the garden.

Peter Borrows

Our Natural Heritage: Winter Wildflowers to find in Amersham

Wildflowers are a *"form of permanent geography – markers not just of landscapes, but of their autobiographies"*
Richard Mabey, Flora Britannica.

During 2024, Marieke Bosman, from Wild Amersham, will write about some of the wildflowers growing in and around Amersham along with their historical heritage. We hope this will encourage you to go out and enjoy them and perhaps look for ways to help protect this natural heritage for future generations.*
In her first article Marieke has picked one plant you'll find in flower in each of the months of January, February and March. More plants to look out for will be found in May's and September's newsletters.

Amersham is built on chalk: a rare habitat perfectly suited for wildflowers which grow profusely in traditionally managed chalk meadows and woodland. Wildflowers are part of our 'local autobiography', and would have played an important role in historical life in Amersham. They would have been enjoyed for their beauty, but also actively used as food, in folk medicine, for housekeeping, and in folklore and fairy tales. Unfortunately the encroachment of roads, herbicides use, housebuilding, recreation and climate change on local habitats has pushed our wildflowers, literally, to the edges, with many now only found on unmown road verges, along footpaths or in rough patches wedged between housing, roads and arable fields.

January : Stinking Hellebore
(Helleborus foetidus)

Stinking Hellebore is a native cousin of the more colourful hellebores grown in gardens. Also known as Dungwort, Setterwort or Bear's Foot, Stinking Hellebore likes to live in woodland and scrub, on shallow chalky soil. The whole plant is poisonous, which is why its reported use as folk medicine for worming children was described as 'a violent remedy' and not one we'd advise you to try at home! The plant's dark shiny leaves and lime-green purple-edged flowers have several

Photo by Marieke Bosman

nectaries which contain yeast. The yeast warms the nectar, spreading the flower's scent which makes this plant attractive and useful to pollinators out flying in winter. Stinking Hellebore flowers from January to April.

Photo by Marieke Bosman

February : Sweet Violet

(Viola odorata)

There are a number of wild violets in the UK, two of which love the chalky soil found in the Chilterns. One of these, Sweet Violet, has deep violet or white petals and its spur (the upward pointing tube-like protrusion at the back of the flower) is always lilac. This lilac spur, and Sweet Violet's early flowering, sets it apart from other native violets. A key characteristic is its delightful sweet perfume. In medieval British households Sweet Violet was used as a strewing herb (ie: an early version of room freshener) and also to treat insomnia, headaches and depression. You can find this pretty local plant in hedges, scrub and woodland, where it flowers from February to April.

Photo by Heather Stanley

March : Cowslip

(Primula veris)

Cowslips traditionally appeared from March onwards in chalk meadows. The demise of those meadows has resulted in the dramatic decline of a flower that was historically so common that it was picked in abundance for Easter church ceremonies, strewn liberally on bridal paths and used to flavour English 'cowslip wine'. Cowslip's long stalk topped by pretty nodding yellow flowers has resulted in many other common names, including 'keys of heaven', 'fairy cups' and 'paigles'. In traditional popular medicine Cowslip was used as a sleeping aid and to treat coughs. It is good to see that projects to restore churchyards and meadows and leave road verges unmown are supporting its reappearance.
Let's hope this march of the 'keys of heaven' continues.

*Wild Amersham @ Sustainable Amersham

Photograph by Patrick Hudgell Photography

The Almshouses of Amersham

By Tim Barnard

Tim Barnard is currently one of the trustees of the Amersham United Charities which has responsibilities for the running of the two almshouses in Amersham. Tim and his wife, Elizabeth, moved from Sutton in Surrey in 2004 where, quite by coincidence the recently retired Rector of Amersham, Rev Tim Harper, had been a curate in the church they attended. Tim Barnard's retirement from the law in 2013 coincided with his ordination and he will be known to many of you as one of the two Associate Rectors at St. Mary's Church in the Old Town. He has a keen interest in history which probably stems from having specialised in classical ancient history at Cambridge.

In your walks around Old Amersham, it is likely that you will have noticed what looks like a set of cottages round a small courtyard near the Swan public house. They are the almshouses established in by one of the squires of Amersham, the first Sir William Drake, in 1657. Like the diarist John Evelyn Sir William spent part of his time on the Continent during Cromwell's Protectorate, and it is probable that he would have left much of the detail of the work to his steward, brother and other contacts and friends.

On the other side of the High Street, you may have noticed beside 69 High Street (Wild Eye) a small archway. This leads to the almshouses built in 1875 by Harriett Day. Her family had kept the Swan for many years. These almshouses consist of a single range, and can be best seen from Pondwicks Meadow.

There was once a third set of almshouses consisting of four cottages on the site of the Methodist Church. These were established by the Will of Andrew Hall in 1697, but by the 1890s they had fallen into a poor state of repair and were demolished.

What is an almshouse? What inspired Sir William, Harriett Day and Andrew Hall to provide them? And how are they still relevant today?

The idea behind almshouses dates back to before the Norman Conquest. The oldest almshouse establishment is the Hospital of St Oswald in Worcester, dating from 990. It was founded by the Bishop to provide shelter for the poor. Often monasteries had quarters where the elderly and poor could be looked after by the monks. Religious fraternities, gilds, like the Fraternity of St Katherine in Amersham, also took care of the dependants of their members in the same way. Some almshouses were established by private benefactors, like those at Ewelme in Oxfordshire. With the Reformation and the dissolution of the monasteries and chantries (and of the guilds that supported the chantries) under Henry VIII nearly all of this system of care for the poor was swept away. In theory the parish would have taken on the burden. In practice, it was usually left to the charity of individuals or institutions like the livery companies to fill the gap. The monastic tradition of buildings round a courtyard was replicated in Oxbridge colleges and consciously or unconsciously was often reproduced in the building of new almshouses after the Reformation. In some almshouse foundations – but not those of Amersham – the monastic and collegiate example was perpetuated by the provision of a chapel, a common dining room and an appointed resident official to keep charge

Sir William and his advisers thus had a rich tradition to draw upon when he decided to build his almshouses. Why did he build them? We can't assume that he was not genuinely concerned for the welfare of the poor. He was well-off, but did not marry and had no direct heir. It's possible that his almshouses were partly intended to be his living memorial. In post-Reformation England, great stress was placed by the Church on the faithful to demonstrate their Christian faith by practical works of charity instead of the provision of funds for masses and prayers for the dead. Certainly the 17th century was a period of the building of almshouses by those who had made their money in trade or through the law. So other factors might have been present in his decision.

Sir William's almshouses were for six poor widows over the age of fifty. In addition to being provided with somewhere to live, the rents of an endowment of land enabled the residents to be given a gown every two years plus *"a pair of shoes, a pair of stockings and a shift [underwear] twice a year at Christmas and Easter"*, a weekly allowance and firewood. The gowns were to be worn when the residents went to Church on Sunday. The almshouses were remodelled in 1993 to create four dwellings. Today, the residents must be poor single or divorced men or women, and they must have lived in the Amersham and Coleshill area. They no longer have to wear gowns to Church, and no longer receive allowances. Like all residents of almshouses, they must be capable of living independently – the almshouses have no means of providing on-site care.

It would be good to think that once Sir William had built his almshouses and endowed them in his Will with trustees to oversee them all would have been well. But readers of Trollope's *"The Warden"* would not be surprised to know that sadly some abuses crept in as early as 1699, when those living there were not qualified to do so and had to be forcibly removed.

Harriett Day's almshouses were built by her in memory of her parents. The residents were to be poor women of good character, and an endowment was provided for a weekly allowance. We can see how Harriett was consciously modelling the previous age of almshouse building – and she too had no children. Like Sir William's almshouses, residents of either sex are now permitted and there is no weekly allowance. The almshouses were substantially refurbished in 2017, and the quality of the work was recognised by an award from the Patron of the Almshouse Association, the then HRH Prince Charles.

Photograph by Patrick Hudgell Photography

Both sets of almshouses are now managed by Amersham United Charities in accordance with a Charity Commission Scheme. A further refurbishment of Sir William's almshouses is planned in the near future.

How are almshouses relevant today?

Because almshouses are usually locally-based charities, they enable their residents to have the opportunity to live independently in a community at a time when there is a severe shortage of affordable accommodation. The volunteer structure of an almshouse charity enables residents to have their small concerns and needs attended to whilst respecting their independence and without undue intrusion into their lives. In rural areas almshouses are often the only providers of accommodation for those in need. Almshouse charities are increasingly aware of the need to provide good quality accommodation, something that other social providers may be unable to do.

Please note: the almshouses are private property and not open to the public.

The Amersham Collage

This collage, which can be viewed on the ground floor at Amersham Hospital (Whielden Street entrance), was inspired by a London Transport poster designed 100 years ago. Penny Vardy tells John Catton the story behind its inception.

A refurbishment of Amersham Hospital was completed in 2000. The following year a request was put out to the community for donations of art works to be hung on the new bare walls. Chesham Bois WI Craft group responded by producing the collage *"Market Day in Old Amersham"* inspired by a poster seen by Penny Vardy, the group's leader, in Amersham's museum. The poster was designed by Helen Bryce for London Transport exactly a hundred years ago, in 1924; it was one in the series *"Old world villages"* created to encouraging Londoners to enjoy a day out in the country.

Helen Bryce designed posters for London Transport between 1924 and 1926, designing this one of Old Amersham in 1924

The collage took eight members * 18 months to complete, meeting up every couple of weeks. The group worked on the figures first; each member being responsible for two or three of them. A variety of fabrics were used (including cottons, silks, felt, wool and leather), hand stitched onto a calico backing. Penny then worked the back-ground buildings directly onto the base fabric, again using a variety of materials; topstitching was employed to complete the details on the buildings. Finally each figure was stitched into its correct position in the picture.

The view you see is from the pedestrian crossing by the Memorial Gardens, with Whielden Street on your left. The cottages in the centre of the collage were demolished in 1939 following a slum clearance order issued by the local council, revealing the Market Hall as we see it today.

The completed collage was presented to Amersham Hospital on 28th April 2002

* The seven stitchers working with Penny Vardy were: Laura Bennett, Jean Biglin, June Bready, Pauline Burkill, Audrey Gurney, Tina Pearce and Barbara Smith.

Chesham Bois WI, part of the Buckinghamshire Federation of Women's Institutes, was formed in 1970 by a group of young mothers with young children. The group currently has 45 members who meet once a month in the Free Church, Amersham. They organise and enjoy a varied programme of speakers, demonstrations, outings and events.

Buckinghamshire Search and Rescue Dogs

by Dorothy Symes

Once the formal business of the AGM at our October's meeting had been completed, members were able to sit back and enjoy an energetic and fascinating talk about Buckinghamshire Search and Rescue Dogs. Our guest speaker was Jonathan Crowther supported by his watchful young springer spaniel Ted.

At the start of his talk Jonathan explained that Lowland Search and Rescue, of which the Buckinghamshire group was part, covered the whole of England and Wales. There were also Mountain Search and Rescue Groups in different areas of the country. The Charity * receives no state financial payment for the work but charities give some money towards the cost of essential equipment and also the cost of some training for the handlers such as first aid. The handlers also raise money themselves by speaking to various groups such as different clubs and societies, care homes and Crufts. The people who owned, trained and handled their dogs were all volunteers and received no payment for their work.

A member of the audience asked whether other dogs apart from springer spaniels were also used for search work. Jonathan explained that other breeds were also trained for the work. Springers often excel at search work and are sometimes specially bred for it. However, a variety of other breeds, particularly gundog types also do extremely well. It was essential that whichever dog was selected for training in search work had a particularly high prey drive.

The dogs work with their owners and spend many hours training each week and the dog's relationship with its handler is important. The dogs are trained to follow a scent and are not allowed to be distracted from this by, for example, chasing game such as pheasants or rabbits, when out on a regular walk. Dogs selected for search work spend the first two years undergoing intensive training, typically several afternoons a week. The handler can usually judge after about nine months of training whether the dog is going to pass the rigorous test. At the end of the two years intensive training the dogs that pass are given a licence. They work all year round and are rewarded when they succeed in finding a scent item.

Before Ted joined him, Jonathan had worked with another springer spaniel, Henry, as well as a Labrador, Olly, both of whom had now retired. The working dogs live and work with their handlers and when they are too old for the work, or their prey drive has started to wane, they usually continue to live with the owner as pets, which was the case with Henry and Olly.

There are 54 search dogs in the Bucks Lowland Group. The rescue work in which search dogs and their handlers take part can only be triggered by a call for assistance from the police to the group concerned. When the police are notified of a missing person often by a family member they immediately assess the situation. Jonathan then discussed with members of his audience the circumstances in which someone, an adult or child, might be reported missing. It could be someone suffering from dementia, someone with a serious domestic problem or suffering stress at work, depression, drink or drug abuse. A missing child might have been subjected to bullying or some other form of abuse or have serious problems at home. Some people might go missing more than once, and were often found to have gone to the same place each time.

Whatever the reason for the police call for assistance, the person concerned could be vulnerable and would need to be found as soon as possible, his/her life might depend on this. The charity responds immediately it is contacted by the police. When a search has been agreed, individual members of the group are contacted by their head-quarters through a special alarm call. As all the handlers are volunteers, not everyone will be available to respond to each call, but those that are spring into action straightaway. Search work is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Sometimes dogs are injured and in that case, when they recover, they have to requalify.

The dogs work all year round; they are an extra resource for the police. On average there are 36 incidents a year in Buckinghamshire when police may call for assistance from search dogs and this can involve around 600 hours of searching during the year. During 2023 Jonathan has been involved in the successful recovery of one missing person and also found one deceased missing person. The Bucks Search team had dealt with 36 incidents in Buckinghamshire by October this year, (2023) which included 24 call outs. On average the group would be called out 40 – 50 times a year which could involve a total of over 600 hours of search work.

It was an absorbing talk and very reassuring to know that this wonderful resource with such dedicated dog owners and amazingly skilful dogs is available throughout the year.

*The charity, Search Dogs Buckinghamshire, was set up in 2008.
https://www.searchdogsbucks.org.uk/

Copperkins Lane c1940

Image courtesy of Amersham Museum

Amersham Rural Past

place names and their origins

by Alison Bailey

Copperkins

Copperkins Lane is another mysterious local name. Tradition has it that the name derived from copper skins. Named after Romanies who frequently travelled the road to a meeting point at Hyde Heath Pond. However early maps show that local woodland was known as Coppercoins Dell, presumably after a long forgotten archaeological find. By the 1900 map this had become Copperkins Dell. An 1838 map also shows the wonderfully named Maggotycroft Dell on Bois Farm land but rather disappointingly this has never been chosen as a local road name!

Programme of Talks and Events

Talks are held in the Kings Chapel, 30 High Street, Old Amersham.
Coffee, tea and biscuits served from 7:30pm, with talks starting at 8pm.

Wednesday 31st January

The Journey to Chalgrove Field

A talk by Mike Payne about the Battle of Chalgrove Field which took place in 1643 during the Civil War and during which John Hampden was killed.

Wednesday 28th February

Reading the Countryside

A walk in the countryside can reveal so much more about its wildlife, history and pre-history. A talk by naturalist John Tyler.

Thursday 14th March

The Czechoslovak Government in exile in Bucks during WWII

A talk by Neil Rees

(this talk will be given in Old Barn, Amersham on the Hill).

Wednesday 24th April

The Bible in Translation Part Two

A talk by David Morgan.

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