

Summer Newsletter Issue
No: 21, June 2011



Lexden celebrates the Royal Wedding April 29th



Programme of Events

13th July

“Essex Martello Towers”
by Roger Kennell

13th August (Saturday)

No meeting, but Summer BBQ
at Tim & Carol’s, Little Glebe,
Spring Lane, Lexden
Tickets: Members £5.00, Non-
members £7.50 (in advance
only - not available on the day)

14th September

“Foul Deeds & Suspicious
Deaths”
by Patrick Denney

12th October

“Colcheter’s Hidden Treasures
- A Miscellany”
by Mark Davies

9th November

“Paragon or Prude: Women
in the Police”
by Dr Maureen Scollan

14th December

Christmas Party
Tickets to be purchased in
advance - further details in the
next issue of the magazine.

Meetings

Lexden History Group meetings are held on the 2nd Wednesday of every month at 7.45pm in St Leonard’s Church Hall, Lexden, except August when there is no meeting. Entry £1 for members, £3 for guests, refreshments included. Annual membership £15 for single, £20 for family living at same address.

Web address: www.lexdenhistory.org.uk

Editorial

The April speaker, Steve Knight gave us a most interesting presentation all about British post boxes. As a result it got me thinking about our own post boxes in Lexden. So I set out on a photographic safari hunting out examples from our different Monarchs starting with Queen Victoria. You can see the results on the back page. We have examples in Lexden, from every reign including a very rare Edward V111 in Glen Avenue, of which there is only one other example in the whole of East Anglia. The anonymous pillar boxes of 1879-87 bear no royal cipher and one stands in Lexden Road near Ashley Gardens. I now find I cannot pass a pillar box without trying to identify the cipher. For further reading on post boxes I can recommend "Old Letter Boxes" by Martin Robinson. Shire Library - ISBN 978-0-74780-446-8

Our AGM on 11th May was well supported, with members enjoying refreshments after a slideshow and talk by our Chairman, Dick Barton. Unfortunately, our President, Andrew Phillips was unable to attend due to ill health. He was unanimously voted in as our Honorary President for another year. I know we all wish Andrew a speedy recovery.

LEXDEN HISTORY GROUP CALENDAR.

This year, we intend to produce a LHG calendar displaying members' paintings and drawings of Lexden and the surrounding area. Would any members who paint and draw like to submit their own work for possible inclusion for the 2012 calendar? It does not matter how long ago these were done. Please email photos or bring your pictures to me, initially, so that I can pass them on to the Committee members who will be responsible for the calendar. My email and phone number are on page 11. **The print deadline is the July meeting.**

SUMMER BBQ 13th AUGUST.

Tickets for our Summer BBQ need to be bought in advance from me. For details see page 11.

OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF CHILDREN....."I asked my mum why we said 'old men' at the end of prayers at skool, I don't know any old men apart from granpa."

"A mosque is a sort of church. The main difference is that its roof is doomed."

"I would like to be an accountant but you have to know a lot about moths."

Old Retainer at Lexden Park

Whilst perusing the nineteenth century census details of Lexden Park I noticed that one servant, Ann Maria Ainsworth remained with the Erringtons for over thirty years. She

John died two years later in 1844. Ann continued living above the bank with the Errington family, her children visiting occasionally. George Errington inherited Lexden Park from Fanny's widowed mother

Lexden in the early 19th Century



was born in Lexden in 1814 and in 1841 is working as a servant with the family above the Mills, Bawtree, Errington and Co. bank in the High Street. George Henry Errington had married Elizabeth (Fanny), the daughter of one of the bank directors, John Fletcher Mills. In the same household was John Tayspill, a banker's clerk, and he and Ann were married in 1842. Two children, Elizabeth and Edward, were born, but

and their large family moved in. Ann Tayspill then worked as Lady's Maid to Fanny, who died in 1861. She then became housekeeper. In the household in 1871 was her sister, Amy Ainsworth, employed as a servant.

Ann's family had lived in Colchester for several generations. Her father Thomas Ainsworth was a chair maker and in 1841 was living in

Maldon Road with his wife, Mary, daughter, Mary Ann (Ann's sister) and his sister, Susan. After Thomas died in 1859 Susan and her niece, Mary Ann, moved to 11 Military Road, Colchester, where Susan died in 1880 and Mary and her sister, Amy, continued to live there working as needlewomen.

Interestingly, in the early 17th century the Tayspill family had been closely connected with a previous owner of Lexden Park, William Mott, one time Bailiff of Colchester. He was godfather to some of the children of the rapidly extending family of Jooris Tayspill, which in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, had migrated from Flanders to Colchester with many closely related groups. The Tayspills soon became among the wealthiest and most important families in the town, issuing their own halfpenny trade tokens, with their children and grandchildren marrying into other leading local families, Creffeild (this is the correct spelling!), Round, Winnock, Langley and Gray and another Huguenot family, Rebow (Rebau or Reboe). Other descendants include the Benham family, printers in Colchester in the 19th century, and William Gurney Benham, Mayor in 1909.

The Dutch Congregation of which the Tayspill family were leading members were fined the huge sum of £6000, half the total sum levied

on the town by Fairfax after the Siege of Colchester, and this was paid by donations from the closely-knit group. Jooris Tayspill's son, George Tayspill, saymaker, had also become very wealthy and in 1666 bequeathed over £3000 to the town.

By the 19th century John Tayspill's family still appeared to be well educated. Ann's sisters-in-law, Elizabeth, Sarah and Charlotte, can be followed through succeeding censuses working as governesses to wealthy families and running their own school in Marylebone, London, with 10 pupils between 12-16 years and two live-in servants. Her other sister-in-law, Eliza Tayspill, b1809, emigrated to Launceston in Tasmania in 1832 where she met and married Henry Dowling, who later became Mayor of that town.

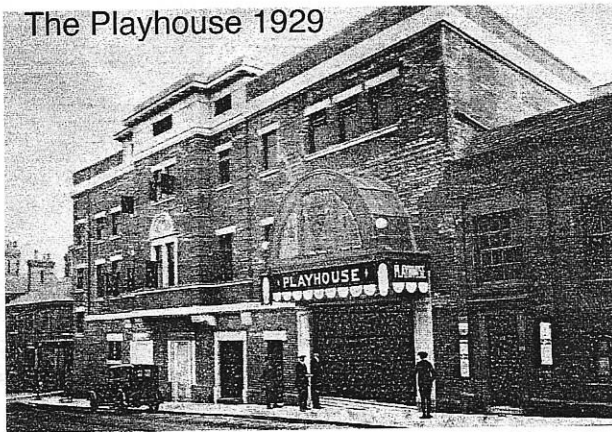
By 1881 Ann was living in Hampstead with her daughter, Elizabeth, and by 1891 she had moved to Herne Bay in Kent with Elizabeth "living on her own means". I was amazed to find her there again in 1901, this time the household also included two aunts, aged 84 and 82. Her death was recorded at Blean, Kent in 1919 at the remarkable age of 105!

Liz White



Colchester Playhouse - Bernard Polley

EH Bostock of circus and menagerie fame, in 1905 also owned the Hippodromes in Norwich and Ipswich and was keen to acquire the Colchester Hippodrome, but the deal fell through. In following years he built cinemas in East Anglia, and was always keen to get into Colchester. The opportunity came in 1928 when the Bostock company acquired a site in St John's Street and built the Playhouse Theatre. He engaged John Fairweather as architect and TR Partington as builder, and his son, Douglas Bostock looked after the new building's



progress. All was ready for opening night on Monday March 18th 1929 for the first performance on stage of the musical comedy "So Here Is Love", direct from London's Winter Garden Theatre.

In 1932 Bostock sold his interest in the theatre to Associated British Cinemas (ABC), and the latest Western Sound system was installed - seat prices ranged from 4d to 1/6d, both in the stalls and circle.

The great film epic "Gone with the Wind" was screened for a 3 week run in November 1942. There were two separate screenings each day with all seats booked in advance. During the war years occasionally the Ministry of Information would put on a free film show on Sunday afternoons: one such show included "Canteen on Wheels", "Mr Proudfoot Shows a Light" and "Sinews of War."

In 1950 there was a revival of stage shows on a monthly basis, either variety, review or pantomime, interwoven with the annual operatic productions and special "one-offs", like the play "Emperor Constantine" presented by a consolidated company of local amateur companies to commemorate the Festival of Britain in 1951. Many famous names of stage and radio appeared on the Playhouse stage, including Max Miller, Harry Secombe, Bruce Forsyth, Benny Hill,

Tommy Cooper and Old Mother Riley. The top price seat at this time was 5/- (25p). By 1958 the variety shows were dropped in favour of the latest screen films.

The whole building was updated at the cost of £75,000 in 1962 and was renamed the ABC - the reopening ceremony was performed by the film actor Richard Todd.

In 1969 EMI took over the ABC (Playhouse) and ran it until 1981 when in

August of that year the last film was screened. Bingo replaced the films as the "Gala Social Club". Today of course, it is known as Wetherspoons.

On a personal note, from 1957 through to 1971 I worked back-stage with the annual Colchester operatic productions and recorded my memories of that annual week in November: the stage door off Chapel Street, lead into a cramped back-stage area. Stone steps on the left went up to stage level where immediately ahead was the heavy wooden door leading onto the stage: the door was opened by a stage-screw because the broken handle had not been replaced! This door carried the notice "No entry onto the stage without the Stage Manager's permission." There were two dressing rooms on this level and four more reached by mounting a stone staircase on the first and second floors. Right at the top was an aperture onto the fly-floor. From here scenery battens and curtain-pulls were operated.

The dressing rooms were sparse and dull: a few chairs and tables with make-up benches and mirrors surrounded by a battery of electric lights. For operatic week the dressing rooms had to accommodate some 60 or so performers with all their costumes and gear - not leaving much spare space.

From stage-door immediately right was a room known as "the Lodge", presumably for a stage-door keeper when the theatre employed such a person. Stone steps continued downwards to under the stage, which during the shows was called

"the green room" which served many purposes - chorus make-up area; refreshments for the cast; store for costume hampers; furniture; orchestra rest-room etc. On stage left (that is from the actors' point of view) a second narrow stair-case ran down to the green-room.

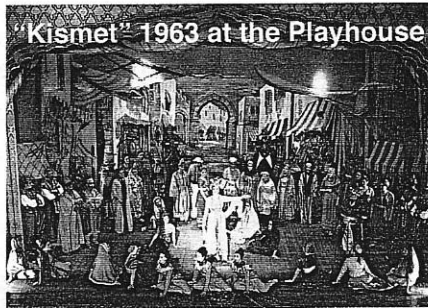
The stage was rather cramped because the cinema screen was raised into the fly tower and sound boxes had to be stored up stage, leaving a somewhat restricted acting area and storage space for scenery. For my first few years at the Playhouse the electrical control board with the dimmers etc was

crammed into the side of the stage. The cinema's chief projectionist came down from the film projection box to operate the bulky machine, and grumbled all the time because he did not like working with "amateurs!"

Each year the work commenced on Saturday night. After the last film had been shown the scenery was unloaded

from a lorry parked in Chapel Street. The stage crew would work through to the early hours, returning on Sunday morning for the "fit-up" ready for dress rehearsal in the evening, usually running long past midnight. Although somewhat tired with all this work, there were six evening performances and one matinee to cope with during the week before everything had to be dismantled after the last show so that the picture-house could return to be a cinema.

I certainly would not do this for a living, but thoroughly enjoyed all those times working with fellow amateur enthusiasts back-stage!

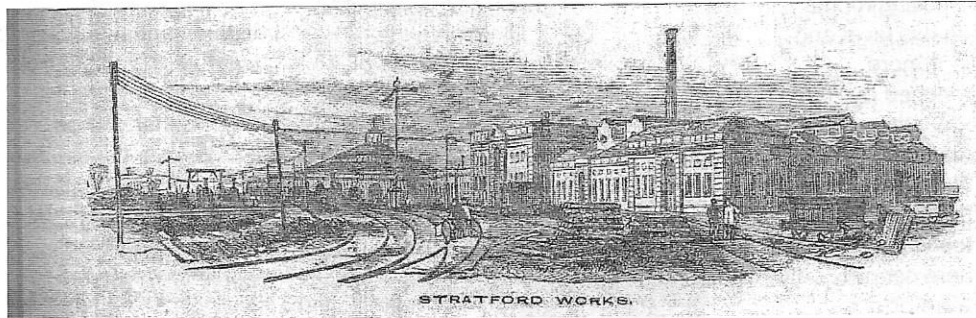


THE DREADFUL EXPLOSION OF THE EASTERN COUNTIES RAILWAY FOG-SIGNAL FACTORY

The above was the headline in the Morning Chronicle of 28th February 1857 reporting on the inquest convened at the Railway Tavern in Hudson Town, Stratford by the Coroner Mr C.C. Lewis. The inquest was to "enquire into the deaths of William Beckingham, aged 25, John Jackson, aged 14 (both servants in the employ of the Eastern Counties Railway) and James Beckwith, aged 56, master blacksmith, who unhappily lost their lives that morning, by the dreadful explosion of the company's fog-signal factory, at the railway works, at the junction of the Cambridge and

feet from the Cambridge line, 102 feet from the public high road and 374 feet from Stratford station. The fog-signal factory was described as a strong brick building, about 40 x 20 feet, with a fire proof roof and a stone floor. Adjacent to it was an old saw-pit fitted with wooden trap doors and served as the powder magazine, from which fortunately for the some 600 to 800 workers on site, the last barrel or two had been removed and placed in the fog-signal house a day or two previously.

No metal tools were used in the fog-signal house, cocoa matting was laid on the floor to prevent sparks from the men's boots, but significantly the Railway Company had no printed rules for the guidance



Colchester lines at Stratford."

Although we regularly complain about being nannied with health and safety regulations this inquest showed the very different approach of people in the middle of the 19th Century. The fog-signal factory usually had about 200lbs of gunpowder in it and although separate from the other buildings on site, it was only 37 feet from the Company's locomotive works, 157 feet from the Colchester line, 170

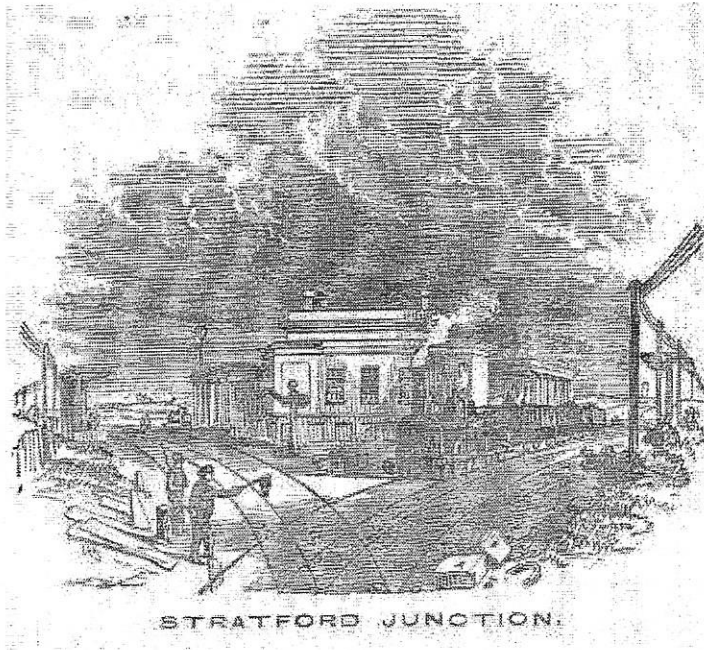
of those involved. The last barrel of powder having been removed from the magazine some days earlier and it was Beckingham's duty to place it in 2lb canisters. It was estimated that there was about 120lbs of gunpowder in the signal house at the time of the explosion, when usually there would be about 200lbs.

In evidence, Mr Bell of the Eastern Counties Railway stated that Beckingham and the lad Jackson had been employed at the fog-signal

factory for 12 months. It was Beckingham's job to superintend the manufacture of the fog signals, which were tin circular cases, about half an inch in depth, into which Jackson fixed three percussion caps, Beckingham then

not been seen smoking on the Company's premises.

The newspaper gives gruesome details of the injuries to the three dead men, but suffice it to say they died horribly. The signal-house was demolished, major damage was done to the Company's factory and the whole of the window casements in front of Stratford station were demolished. Part of the Cambridge platform was smashed and damage done to surrounding houses as the debris from the explosion rained down. It would appear to have been extremely fortunate that there were not considerably more people killed or



filled the case with gunpowder, fastened on the lid and the boy then taped the lid in order to secure it. There were said to be 144 dozen manufactured signals, stored in the building, which it was estimated would conservatively contain some 44lbs of gunpowder plus 5,184 percussion caps. Beckingham was the only man allowed to handle the powder or to fill the cases. Mr Bell could not account for the cause of the explosion. It was stated that Beckingham had been appointed to the job on account of his sober habits and although a smoker had

injured.

The inquest concluded that the existence of such a factory, with such a quantity of explosives in such close proximity to some hundreds of workers and two main railway lines was fraught with considerable danger to the lives of the public and strongly condemned its existence in such an exposed and public place. It ultimately was agreed "to adjourn proceedings in the hope that the Board of Trade would direct their attention to the case."

Bob Thornhill

President's Column

DROUGHT!

No, not in our gardens. (By the time you read this it may be raining). No, a drought of volunteers.

Once again our hard-working, re-elected Committee can find no one new to lend a hand. Now what would we do if the Committee resigned? No speakers, no meetings, no magazine. Would you just shrug your shoulders and go back to watching telly? Please offer to help. Even if you feel you lack experience, just offer: you can start with a small job.

May I take this opportunity to apologise for letting you down at the AGM, and to thank Dick for taking over at very short notice. Caroline (my wife) has heard some odd rumours, so may I correct any misunderstanding. I do not (thankfully) have a serious health problem - only a nasty condition that makes eating and talking painful, and hopefully, some treatment can suppress. Have a good summer; and don't forget the barbeque.

Andrew Phillips

Chairman's Column

The well-attended AGM reviewed another successful year, the highlight of which was the Group's Lexden History Open Day held last September in Lexden Church Hall.

The retiring Officers and Committee, having expressed their willingness to continue in office, were re-elected for another year. I thank members for their continued support and interest. Details of our future programme are published in our quarterly Newsletter and also on our website:

www.lexdenhistory.org.uk

which Bob Thornhill, our Treasurer, keeps up to date for us.

Secretary Liz is always on the look out for recommended speakers on historical topics. If you hear of any please give details to her.

Summer is upon us – please support our outings and the barbecue. I am pleased to see that the replacement Geoff Pettitt memorial tree, a copper beech, planted on the Lexden slopes behind the Toll House, is doing well. Let's hope this one avoids any vandalism.

Dick Barton

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Lexden History Group

Summer BBQ

from 12.00pm to 4.00pm
on

Saturday 13th August 2011
Little Glebe, Spring Lane,
Lexden

Tickets: Members - £5.00

Non-members - £7.50





Lexden post boxes



Selection of Playhouse Theatre programmes - see Page 6