



The Otford Society Newsletter

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Societies

AUGUST 2003

OTFORD BECALMED AT LAST



JUNE 23rd 2003, warm with blue skies above, was a day in the life of Otford to be remembered.

It was on that Monday morning that the ultimate traffic calming scheme came to the village. Access through Otford High Street was closed to all vehicles while repairs were made to Mill Bridge. As in Berlin forty years earlier, East and West were separated, friends and relatives lived on either side of a divide. In Otford, nothing like it had been known since the old iron bridge over the Darent was swept away by floods in 1968. Although ample warning had been given, there were many who could not believe their eyes. Bemused motorists turned up at the barriers refusing to believe the truth of the "road closed" notices. Long used to the constant stream of traffic, the roar of the motor bike, the bulk of the heavy lorries, the unthoughtful speeding car, the calm that descended was to be savoured.

Swiftly a footbridge for pedestrians was installed over the Mill race, and villagers settled for trudging across to make their way to shop, surgery or pub. Aged allotments

holders could be seen carrying garden tools to their plots, enjoying like children the pleasure of walking in the middle of road. Residents settled down to a routine to cope with the ten weeks ahead, but while peace and calm appeared to reign, there were rumblings beneath the surface. In what would have been a peak period for trade, the shops in the High Street were feeling the pinch. Not more shoplifters than usual; less trade. Pubs, too, appeared to have less custom. For those who actually lived in the street, a sigh of thanks for the silence, and probably a wish that it would go on for ever. On Sundays the two Churches with doors wide open to let in cooling air, enjoyed the peace and quiet of the Sabbath unknown for many years. At Pickmoss, the owners were able to put up a ladder for the first time with its feet in the road, and clean the outside windows.

For those from the West bank who wished to drive to the village centre, a trip of six miles via Bat & Ball, or the five mile detour around Shoreham was necessary. Strangely, with the absence of traffic, a new community atmosphere and camaraderie prevailed. News and views could be exchanged with fellow walkers in a way not possible when passing in a car. Long-time-no-see old acquaintances were greeted and village ties renewed. Similarities to the hurricane and the snow storm of 1987 were brought to mind ... except that now the weather was perfect.

The bridge itself, thought by the Engineer-in-charge to date from around 1920, had failed the 40 ton load test, and like some other bridges in Kent urgently needed to be rebuilt for safety's sake. Although not Listed, a problem was the adjacent Listed Buildings at the 16th century Bridge Cottage and Late Georgian Grange on the north and south sides of the road. The builders, BAPTIE, contractors to KCC, agreed to replace the stone parapets in the original manner. Also essential services pipes lay unavoidably close to the surface. These would be enclosed in steel pipes and encased in concrete.

The river below once served the water mill, beneath which it still flows. The mill

itself was burned down in January 1924. Dick Foster, whose photograph appears elsewhere in this Newsletter, all his life told the story of how as a small boy he had witnessed the event. Alas, I don't believe his words are set down for the record.

The expected life of the new bridge is 120 years, so the message to all bridge-build watchers is "Make the most of it - they may never pass this way again!".

The other Otford bridge, that over the Darent which replaced the Bailey Bridge in 1973, has also received some maintenance work, including a waterproofing that should last for many years. To complete the project, the High Street will be re-surfaced from Rye Lane to the Pond, and a new pedestrian refuge installed close to Rye Lane/Pilgrims Way West junction. Work has already taken place to improve the drainage of surface water as it rushes down Rye Lane into PWW by lowering the kerb for a soak away. Time will tell whether this is effective, or just a convenient turning point over the verge for heavy vehicles.

The Otford Society was promised by the SDC Highways Dept that more elegant signs, avoiding clutter and more appropriate to a Conservation Area, would be provided. It is true this was dependent on the traffic calming scheme which did not materialise, but we hope the Parish Council will continue to press for this in the interest of an improved street-scene.

We are told that the Bridge repairs, at the time of writing, are ahead of schedule, and the old stones which were set aside on being dismantled are being replaced in their original positions. The foreman is reported to have told a passer-by, when challenged on this, that anyone who thinks otherwise should point out which stone is in the wrong place, and then change it himself!

K.L.G.

Barbara Darby is making a video of the event for the Heritage Centre.

New Methodist Hall

THE Methodist Church in the High Street has set itself a target of £475,000 for the building of a new hall behind the Church. This would replace the 25-year-old brick built hall and the much older timber structure. The aim is to provide a modern hall more suited to present needs and with more adequate provision for the village community at large. There will be a meeting area and five other meeting rooms, a large kitchen, some office accommodation, store-rooms and washroom facilities, with easy access areas for the disabled, as now required under building regulations.

The Church says that 10% of money raised by the Church family, a figure expected to be £25,000 will be given away in order that the project maintains the outward focus of the Church.

The planning process has to be negotiated, and no doubt there will be some problems to be overcome. The architectural style will reflect that of the modern library. While the wooden building has no doubt served its purpose very well, its disappearance should improve the look of the area.

The chapel was built in 1935 on Bookers Field by W.P. Banks of Dunton

Green at a cost of £1,840 and 8 shillings (£1,840.44). Bill Fordham of Leonard Avenue was the site foreman. The intention was that it would become the Church Hall when a large new church was built on the vacant plot adjoining. All this fell through when Green Belt legislation was introduced and the expected expansion of Otford failed to materialise. A portion of the land was sold to the KCC for the new library in 1977 to raise money for the current brick building, which itself was replacing a pre-war wooden hut.

New construction of this importance is rare in the Conservation Area. Two of the most recent examples, the Catholic Church and the Library, are regarded as good examples of design, fitting in well with the High Street scene. A new Church Hall and Community Meeting Place will be awaited with interest.

K.L.G.

A building fund has been set up. Otford Methodist Church Treasurer: Mrs Rosemary Cracknell, 23 Warham Road, Otford, Sevenoaks, Kent.

EDDIE FORDHAM

THOSE who knew Eddie Fordham will be sorry to learn of his death at the age of 83. He was born in Otford, and lived here almost all his life. He served as a Parish Councillor for a while under the chairmanship of Frank Weston, and was the first Chairman of the Allotments Association set up as a management committee under that Council. He remained Chairman for 13 years.

He was a wonderful, knowledgeable amateur gardener, winning the local cup many times, as well as the County Championship. In his day Otford allotments were regarded as among the best in Kent and were awarded the County Shield.

In earlier days he had been a keen footballer, leading Otford in the post war years. It was said that he was the best Captain Otford had ever had.

The Fordham family had moved to Leonard Avenue from Greenwich in 1916 to avoid the Zeppelin raids. Eddie's older brother, Bill, helped to build the Methodist Church in 1935, as mentioned in the article above. He, too, was well known in the village, living in Evelyn Road until eight years ago.

K.L.G.

village cricket

July 2003

A 19th century cricketer is portrayed in our Millennium Mosaic in the High Street. Cricket has certainly been played since early days in the Sevenoaks district, but Otford Cricket Club was not founded until 1912. Perhaps Otford's most famous cricketer is David Fulton, Captain of Kent.

The fortunes of the village club have been mixed. There was a time when the Club had its own notice board in the High Street, but the decline of national interest in the game has affected the sport at all levels.

Nevertheless Otford Cricket Club survives, and it has recently enjoyed something of a revival, with new players and a new league. JOHN LEWIS, member, player, ex-captain and now filling perhaps the most difficult post of all, Fixtures Secretary, reports on the state of the national game at local level.

Both the sun and modest good fortune have smiled on the start of Otford's first season in the Kent County Village League.

At the moment of writing, the village has won five and lost three of its games to sit in the upper half of the league table.

The club's decision to apply to join the league was not straightforward. The village was a joint winner of the Bat and Ball Village League last year and there was a consensus among players that the team was strong enough to try to take a step up.

There was also the risk that if we did go forward, we could find ourselves slipping backwards and losing key players. But the Bat and Ball success occurred only after several lean years. Could the new momentum, fostered by former skipper David Oliver, be sustained?

The decision was not painless. The club lost at least one much valued player to another club. And there is a financial cost involved. The new league's rules, for example, required the purchase of a handsome, but costly second sight-screen.

In addition, we have to field our own

umpire, usually in the comfortable shapes of club stalwart, David Gilbert, or club chairman and "chief photographer" Steve Ballard. We have to master, too, new systems of fines and bonus points for runs scored and wickets taken.

Has it been worthwhile?

The final verdict must wait, but from my new seat on the boundary my answer is "Yes". The stronger opposition has produced more thrilling encounters and provided a new challenge to players.

The players themselves will tell you they could have won another two fixtures to put them up with the leaders, but then cricketers are always discussing what might have been.

We start games well. The opening bowling attack of Roger Selleck and Kevin Page must be one of the best in the league. I never fancied facing Roger, even in the nets. The pair is supported by the seam-bowling of Aman Kirmani and skipper Mark Stevens and the off-spin of "Doc" Oliver and the leg spin of Alex Smith who, with a bit more consistency, could win matches by

himself. Nick Thompson provides another good option.

The batting often rests on sound foundations built up carefully by Ed Piper. Adam Jones, Simon Bailey, Peter Richardson, Steven Lemmon, both Alex and Richard Smith, Nick Thompson and, of course, Roger Selleck and Kevin Page contribute regularly. The batting can go down to No. 11 and the order could easily be reversed. I have visions of Peter Richardson whipping a ball off his middle or leg stump to the mid-wicket or square leg boundary in what can be described as a pull-sweep. It must be disconcerting for opposition bowlers. I can imagine them using rougher language.

Of course, the game is the thing, but venues add enjoyment.

As Fixture Secretary, I would naturally claim we already possessed an interesting non-league fixture list before joining the new league, playing regular fixtures at established grounds like Beckenham, Bromley, Holmesdale and the historic Sevenoaks Vine.

We begin our season at more rural Stonewall Park, in the grounds of the local manor. The manor is the home of Matthew Fleming, until recently the Kent CCC captain. With luck there may be point-to-point racing on the other side of the road. At Hollingbourne, we turn off the Pilgrims' Way at the Dirty Habit pub and follow a track over the hill, coming suddenly on the club's superb cricket bowl and pavilion. Against Wadhurst we are on top of the top of the world, sorry Weald, with magnificent distant views.

I like the story (no doubt imperfectly remembered) of the famous English Test player Patsy Hendren who went unrecognised into a bar in Australia, admitted to playing a "bit of cricket" and was invited to make up the eleven of the local side. The ground sloped steeply and the famous Test player spent most of the game out of sight, waiting for the ball to appear, literally out of the blue.

Wadhurst is a bit like that. It slopes sharply at one corner. I remember one of our younger players running so hard downhill after a disappearing ball that he ran headfirst into the hedge at the bottom, with painful results.

Only twenty minutes walk up the path from Otford is Shoreham's beautiful ground. Painter Samuel Palmer walked the hills with William Blake and others. I don't think they ever played cricket. The Shoreham club was established only some 30 years after Palmer's stay. I have not the space to go into the delights of other grounds like Plaxtol, Shipbourne and Offham.

The new league adds more attractive venues. You could conduct a literary and historical tour of the grounds on which the village now plays.

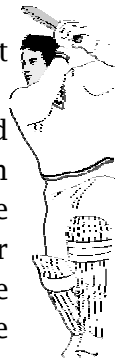
You could start at Otford, only a long hit from Archbishop Wareham's palace. The current grounds look a picture. This is thanks to early work by Ted Hewitt, before he moved to Edinburgh, and the huge efforts of the current groundsman, Jeff Hilder. He has to travel from Redhill to do the square. Dave Knell nurtures the outfield.

At Penshurst we play under the walls of the ancestral home of the Sidneys. Sir Philip was not only poet, statesman and soldier, but also the author of the first literary criticism in England and *Arcadia*, the best of Elizabethan romances.

Sennocke, of course, plays against the background of Knole, home of the Sackvilles and Dukes of Dorset. At least one Duke played cricket and owned the Vine ground now in the hands of the club.

Eynesford has its castle and Lullingstone, but I personally look forward to playing Eynesford on a hot day next year when there are couples strewn on the grass, ice creams galore and a real Londoners' day-out atmosphere. Not everybody's half of lager, but a delight to me.

Sissinghurst is a pleasant ground with the red brick tower and home of the



Sackville-Wests closeby. Groombridge, in another delightful setting, is next door to the old railway station that does or did run steam trains to Tunbridge Wells and back. Fancy a nostalgic trip to Tunbridge during the tea interval!

Cranbrook, with its "Cathedral of the Weald", has more historical associations and, of course, its windmills. Leigh provides an ideal village green setting. Outwood is apparently outstandingly beautiful, surrounded by trees and with an excellent wooden pavilion, complete with white wicker fences.

Mention of windmills reminds me of the picturesque Meopham, with the cricket square on the village green. At one end is a pub actually called The Cricketers.

We played a friendly there in July and lost a 40 over game.

Even this, however, held consolation. Leo Harris, a 13-year-old Otford colt, brought into a weakened side, took five Meopham wickets for 30. His performance underlined the potential of Otford's blossoming youth sides. Each week in summer more than 50 youngsters receive cricket coaching from three qualified coaches.

It is paying off. In July the Otford under-elevens won a plate competition at a Holmesdale knock-out competition,

receiving a silver salver and individual medals.

Thanks initially to the work of Angie and Mark Stevens, supported by Tony Rose, the Kent Cricket Board District Development Officer, the club now fields four age-group teams, under 15, 13s, 11s and 9s.

Marcus Owen and Alex Jones have both played for Sevenoaks district sides. Angie comments: "The colts have improved tremendously and now play much better as a team."

There are records of Meopham Cricket Club playing on the green in 1773, but local experts tell me there is evidence cricket was played there in the 1730s or earlier. Hambledon is talked about as the home of English cricket, Sevenoaks Vine has a proud history, but if you believe locals the first cricket in Kent, possibly England, was played at Meopham.

I wonder if Leo knew this.

John Lewis

The club is still looking for new players. It wants to form a second team, providing an easier stepping stone to the league eleven for colts. Help with the colts and ground preparation would also be welcome, as would support during our games. Contact Angie Stevens (01959 523881).

JOHN BOOKER

It is sad to record that a link in the long history of farming in Otford has been broken with the death of John Booker of Frog Farm, Pilgrims Way West. He had lived all his 71 years on the family farm. The house itself was built in 1908, but the Booker family connections with Otford go back many years, at least to early Victorian times. "Otford in Kent" (Clarke/Stoyel) writing of the period around 1872 says of John Booker (grandfather) that he was "a ... capable farmer, whose family had lived in Otford for many years. Originally his farmhouse had stood on the South side of the High St. by the Methodist Chapel* ..." (*This refers to the old Chapel next to Pickmoss). Frog Farm has been the site of many Roman archaeological finds, the most important being the discovery of a large Romano-British cemetery by the Otford and District Historical Society in 1968.

The Bookers raised cattle and sheep on their land, and many residents will remember the pleasure of calling at the house for fresh eggs, and seeing the hens freely wandering over the land.

Speaking for myself, I shall long recall the memory of seeing John, or his brother striding across the fields in the early morning, shirt-sleeved in the frost, to tend the cattle, the very picture of the sturdy English yeoman.

K.L.G.

Elsie Browning of Hilldrop Farm contributed many charming cameos on village life to the Newsletter, and we have missed her word pictures of village characters. However, her son Tom came across these notes she wrote some time ago. She calls them:

ODDS AND ENDS

IN Ernest's time, and up to the Second World War, everyone knew everyone in the village. When people died, and mostly in their own beds, Mrs Keely came to lay them out. Her husband, a very bent old man, used to do a few hours hoeing at Hilldrop.

The funerals were managed by the local builder. He came to measure up, and made the coffin; his workmen were the bearers and the charges according to the family's means.

It was possible to get small defects such as a leaking tap or burst pipe put right straight away.

Dick Foster, who did odd jobs of carpentry about the house, arrived with his slippers in his hand. "Do you remember Jimmy Go-Lightly the poacher who lived in Pickmoss Lane?" I asked him one day. "Remember him!" exclaimed Dick, "Didn't I make his coffin, lay him in it, put his cap on and screw him down!"

Daughters cared for their bed-ridden mothers often for years at a stretch. I met one such daughter whose mother had recently passed away at home. "I am sorry to hear about Mother," I said, "I hope she did not suffer." "Oh no," she replied, "I went up to see she was all right, and she just said 'Cheerio' and died!"

A baby was left for some hours outside a village shop. Dick Foster recognised it and wheeled it home to the rose nursery at Telston Lane. The mother, Mrs Ivens, whose mind was on a book she was writing, had forgotten all about her child.

One of Jack Nash's plumbers could make a very squeaky voice come from various directions to everyone's amusement. He carried his tools in a bag made by himself from a richly patterned carpet which he had "found" in the attic of a big house where he had been sent to work.

Bill Marshall, who at one time lived in The Bird House in Knole Park, worked for some years after retirement age for Charles and Cecil. He firmly believed that "everyone should be knocked on the head at sixty".

Whilst milking the cows behind the long brick wall at Bubblestone*, Cecil heard a child on The Green say, "Mummie, that's where The Rustics live."

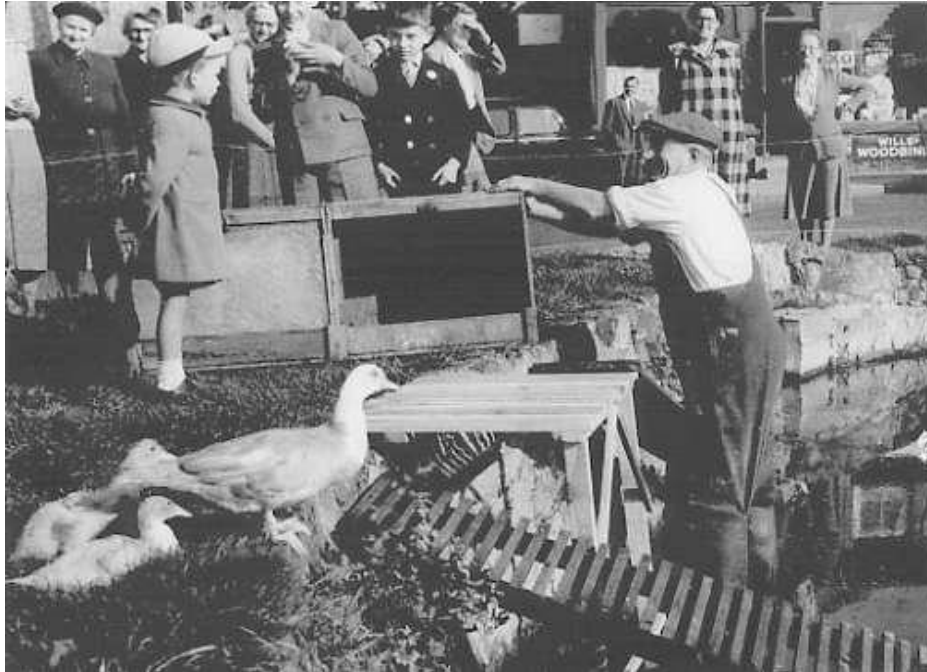
Cecil and Charles worked for their father for no wages for some years, as did Willie and Mary Glen, the children at Sepham Farm. Like the horses, they were shod, bedded down and given a good nosebag. Charles remembered having to ask his father for a suit to wear to a young farmers' party, and his disappointment in the very cheap one he got. His sister Violet bought him a calf which he reared and sold at a profit, and they soon found means of making money from her poultry keeping. She longed for training in horticulture, but her place was in the home. She acquired knowledge by reading and learning from friends, and became an authority on plants and flowers in the village.

At the age of sixteen (1879) Ernest Browning drove cattle from behind "The Castle" at St John's to Bexley. He had a good dog with him, and he rested along the way while the cattle grazed on common land. He returned barefooted, his boots having been worn out on the journey.

One day, when Charles was sixteen, he called at Groves, the butcher, and was asked to help Percy, the son, a little younger than Charles, to kill a bullock. The butcher's shop (now Stan's, hairdresser) had a slaughter house behind. Percy came riding round on the animal's back, and Charles pole-axed it before Percy had time to get off!

Elsie Browning

* The W.I. garden on The Green now stands in front of this wall.



Dick Foster launching the first Muscovy duck, Ada, and her ducklings in Otford pond in 1953, watched by the young Tom Browning. In the background is the well known figure of Mrs Baker of Station Road, standing in front of Knight's grocer's shop.

GARDEN PARTY 2003

The Society regrets that for the first time our annual members' garden party was abandoned, mainly due to two factors, problems over venue and the difficulties arising over the 10-week closure of the High Street until the end of August. However, we now have offers of gardens for 2004, so we should be able to plan well in advance.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING MAY 2003

There was an excellent turn-out. A "Thank you" from the Chairman to all members who made the effort. A friendly and lively discussion took place on village matters, with many members participating. Although we have no "big issues" at the moment, the Membership Secretary appealed for contact to be made with new residents, with the aim of recruiting them to the Society. He also said new Liaison Officers were needed. Contact Vincent if you can help. The Executive Committee was re-elected.

Dates for your Diary

Village Party Pieces scheduled for 1st November, with Fish & Chip supper, is also in danger of being abandoned. No volunteers with "Party Pieces" have yet come forward. Last year £200 was sent by Otford Players, sponsors of the event, to Kent Air Ambulance.

AUTUMN MEETING

October 2nd, 8pm, Memorial Hall

Speaker to be announced. Please watch Press and Notice Boards. The future direction of the Otford Society is likely to be a talking point. Please try to attend and make a contribution to the debate.



Otford Society

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