



# *Greater Wigston Historical Society*

White Gate Farm, Newton Lane, Wigston Magna, Leicester.

## **BULLETIN 70**



St Wistans Church. Wistow.

## **PROGRAMME OF MEETINGS - OCTOBER 2004 TO FEBRUARY 2005**

### **\*\* Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> October 2004\*\***

Leicestershire's Secret War- Enigma, Beaumanor Hall & the Bletchley Park  
Connection - Hugh Davies from Bletchley Park

**7.30p.m. Wigston Magna Methodist Church. By Ticket only**

### **Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> November 2004**

History of the Quakers - Malcolm Elliott

7.30p.m. U.R. Church Boys' Brigade Rooms.

### **Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> December 2004**

Christmas Social with quiz, games & supper

7.30p.m. U.R. Church Boys' Brigade Rooms.

### **Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> January 2005**

Calke Abbey - Mrs. Gillespie from National Trust

7.30p.m. U.R. Church Boys' Brigade Rooms.

### **Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> February 2005**

A.G.M. followed by A Look at Gertie Gitana - Tony Lawrance

7.30p.m. U.R. Church Boys' Brigade Rooms.

The Bulletin is published three times a year on 1st February, June and October.  
Articles etc. (which are always welcome) should be submitted to the editor three clear  
weeks before the publication date please.

Editor: Tricia Berry, 7 Wensleydale Road, Wigston. Leics. LE18 3RX.

## **FRONT COVER**

The Bulletin cover this time features St. Wistan's Church at Wistow. The present building is mainly C13 but with evidence of an earlier Norman structure notably in the nave and part of a doorway east of the porch. Almost certainly remodelled in 1746, the large arched plain glass windows, pulpit, box pews, plaster ceiling, reredos with Ten Commandments and iron rail are typical of that time and are rare survivals in Leicestershire.

There are impressive monuments to members of the Halford family including Sir Henry, Royal Physician to four monarchs, who died in 1844.

St. Wistan's is a quiet peaceful spot and it is hard to relate it to the murderous happenings in the days of Prince Wistan.

## **JUNE MEETING**

On a beautiful warm summer evening, (yes we did have a few!), members gathered in the square in Market Harborough for a guided walk by well known Leicestershire guide, Colin Crosby. He commenced by explaining that the town was created in the 12<sup>th</sup> century as a market town, mainly for agricultural produce, situated at a new crossing on the River Welland in the parish of Great Bowden. It was very successful and pressure for building land led to the town being laid out in long strips with narrow road frontages known as Burgess plots. Houses were often constructed at right angles to the street and passages created at the side to allow access to the rear where court yards of more houses were built. Many of these features can still be identified today.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century prosperity derived from the manufacture and marketing of worsted cloth and from the many travellers using the new turnpikes, especially between Leicester and Northampton and on to London. Five coaching inns evolved to cater for their needs, the Swan (later Three Swans), Talbot, Peacock, Three Crowns and Angel. The latter having stable facilities for 90 pairs of horses. Later, new manufacturing trades were introduced, particularly when the Symington brothers arrived from Scotland and started factories for the production of food, notably soups and table creams, and underwear, notably corsets and the world famous Liberty bodice. Today it is still a thriving market town attracting shoppers from a wide area, though the cattle market has moved from the High Street to a site near Gartree prison, and industries as diverse as battery and snack food manufacture, and a travel company offer employment.

Our tour took us up and down the High Street where the following were amongst notable features pointed out and described. The war memorial to casualties of both world wars and Boar War memorial gardens behind gates salvaged from Gopsall Hall. The Lloyds/TSB building erected in 1876 as a private house designed by Joseph Goddard and with carvings by Samuel Barfield, both of whom worked on Leicester's clock tower. The Century Hall Baptist Church erected in 1929 on the site of a previous one where Thomas Cook regularly worshipped. St. Dionysius church the earliest part dating from 12<sup>th</sup> century, notable for its fine steeple and the fact it has no grave yard, burials taking place in neighbouring Bowden. The Independent Chapel designed by William Flint and long associated with minister Philip Doddridge the hymn writer. The Old Town Hall built in 1788 by the fourth Lord Harborough as a shambles. The Old Grammar School built in 1614 by Robert Smyth, a Merchant Taylor, on sturdy posts, the underneath to serve as a market space.

Afterwards Edna Taylor offered, on behalf of us all, many thanks to Colin for a most enjoyable evening.

## **AUGUST MEETING**

Peter Clowes took us on a nostalgic trip into the past for this meeting. Introducing David Orton who had come along to help with the complicated projection, he ran the

film 'Vanishing Village' produced by a TV company in the 1960s, while simultaneously showing slides of the same area taken in the 1990s. The contrast was of course tremendous. Great swathes of countryside disappearing in the 30 year interval as Little Hill, Wigston Harcourt and The Meadows housing developments took shape. He continued with more slides accompanied by his knowledgeable commentary and some additional contributions from the audience.

Peter had done some advertising for this event and it was good to welcome several visitors to the meeting some of whom decided to join the society.

Edna Taylor had suggested the content of the evening to remind her of the way Wigston was when she first arrived to live here .....? years ago! She thanked Peter warmly for a most interesting and nostalgic evening.

### **SEPTEMBER MEETING**

Another 'away' meeting this time was our visit to the Unitarian Church, East Bond Street, Leicester, arranged for September instead of August at their request to avoid clashing with holiday arrangements.

We were met by the minister, Rev. Arthur Stewart, who explained the difference in doctrine and belief between Unitarians and other Christian denominations. There was no particular founder, such as John Wesley for the Methodists, rather groups formed independently of each other in various parts of Europe. The movement began in England in 16<sup>th</sup> Century at the time of the Protestant Reformation. John Biddle was an early focus based in Gloucestershire and the South and an early chapel was established in Essex Street, London.

Leicester's Unitarian Church was built in 1708, and is the oldest significant brick building in the town. It has four bays, two storeys, hip roof and a substantial balcony, all original, though the box pews were replaced during a Victorian restoration. A school room was added in 1839 and has now been converted into offices and a glass social room built as recently as 2001. The church was initially built and used by two congregations, one Independent the other Presbyterian, both with their own ministers. However, differences arose in time and the Independents departed and became Congregationalists and the remaining Presbyterians became Unitarianists.

In 1835 the old Leicester Corporation was reformed and Mayors could be elected. Previously non-conformists had been barred from taking any civic office, being an MP, practising any profession or attending Oxford and Cambridge Universities. The first seven mayors elected under the new rules were members of the Unitarian congregation and this gave rise to the church being referred to as the Mayors' Nest! Even today there are three active Leicester City Councillors who attend services there.

Many of Leicester's leading citizens were members of this congregation. Such as Thomas Paget, Edith Gittins, Thomas Fielding Johnson, Dr. Lilley, William Gardiner, William Rowlett, Annie Elizabeth Clephan, Joseph Whetstone, Benjamin Russell

Gimson, Joseph Dare and the Wykes family. A Memorial tablet to William Rowlett 1813-1883, choirmaster, stated that he married Elizabeth Sharpe on 26/7/1837 and it is thought to be the first marriage in a non-conformist place of worship in England.

Rev. Stewart was warmly thanked for a really most interesting evening.

### **REMINDER - OCTOBER OPEN MEETING - BLETCHLEY PARK**

Don't forget we are at the Wigston Magna Methodist Church for this one, and it is a Ticket only open meeting. Members should already have their tickets. Do spread the word among your family and friends, it should prove to be a most interesting evening. Visitors' tickets cost £3 and can be obtained from Tricia Berry 2880156 or Tony & Di Lawrance 2205450.

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### **TENANTS AT BUSHLOE HOUSE**

Bushloe House, the present Council Offices, was designed and built in 1850 by Stephen Fry for his own occupation. Stephen was a noted architect who practised from offices in New Street, Leicester and lived in New Walk. He specialised in church restoration and enlargement and this particular interest was very likely kindled early in life as he was brought up in Desford where his father was the Rector.

Stephen had several reasons for choosing Wigston for his new house. His wife Eliza was the sister of the Rev. Barber who was vicar of Wigston and lived at the vicarage just across the road and his brother Augustine Fry was the village surgeon who lived opposite the church at Kingswood Lodge. Indeed the 2Vi acre plot on which the new house was built had previously been a part of the farm land belonging to his brother's estate. Stephen and Eliza were a young couple in their early 30s with three small children and it is not known whether they had actually moved into the house or not when tragedy struck. Stephen died in Wigston on 13/8/1850 the cause being "Epilepsy, violent delirium 6 days".

The first reference found for the house is in the 1851 census, when it is described as "Mr. Fry's new house". The only occupants in residence on census night were 39 year old, Wigston born, Samuel Hurst and his wife and family. Samuel and his eldest son and daughter gave their occupations as servants, but unfortunately there is no way of discovering who their masters were. Eliza and her children were staying opposite at the vicarage with Rev. Barber. She eventually remarried but does not appear to have ever lived in the house.

The house was however retained by the Fry family until 19/9/1866 when it was sold by Augustine Barber Fry, surgeon of Kibworth, and son of Stephen, to Mr. H. A.

Owston. During the intervening 16 years the house was let to various tenants. This article takes a look at four who can be identified. It is possible to do this through the fortunate survival of a series of church rate books covering the period 1855 to 1867. There are one or two missing years and the first five from Stephen's death in 1850 to 1854 are not covered at all so there could easily have been a further tenant or two during the 16 year period not discovered.

**Archibald Turner** was listed as the rate payer for Bushloe House in 1855 **and 1856**. He had been born in 1808 in Cheadle, Staffs and moved to Leicester as a young man, where he was employed as a weaver in the newly invented elastic web industry. He eventually left to start his own business, modifying and improving the process as he went along. The market for elastic web was huge, it being used for braces, belts and upholstery. His main customers though were the boot and shoe companies, of which there were many in Leicester, who used his strong flexible fabrics as expanding inserts in their products.

Archibald's wife Lydia had died by the time of his residence at Bushloe House but some at least of his four children, Hannah, Luke, Harriet and Archibald junior, probably came with him. He appears to have moved to Wigston for business reasons. By 1855 Turner & Pegg, India Rubber Manufacturers, were trading in Newgate End from premises formerly occupied as a lunatic asylum by the Blunt family, later a Council Depot and now a new housing development. It is not clear whether this was a re-location of his business or the opening of an additional branch. Either way it appears to have only been a short term arrangement with no further reference to trading in Wigston being discovered. Archibald went on to built his very distinctive Bow Bridge Works in King Richards Road, Leicester which has been described as like a Venetian palace with castellated turrets, and the company became the biggest manufacturer of elastic web in the country. Archibald's son Luke is however recorded as occupying a house and land, which formed part of the Wigston site, right up to 1872 but this was probably only as a residence. Luke ran his own very successful elastic web company based in Deacon Street, Leicester.

Archibald returned to live in Leicester, firstly to Bow Bridge House, near his works, then to Westleigh, Narborough Road. He eventually remarried to his house-keeper Eliza Taylor. He died in 1876 and was buried in Welford Road Cemetery, Leicester.

**Henry St. John Joyner** is listed as the rate payer for Bushloe House between **1857 and 1861**. He was born c!812 in West Thurrock, Essex, and his wife c!817 in St. Annes, Limehouse, Middlesex. The couple's first five children Frances, Margaret, Jane, Kathleen and Algernon were born at various addresses within Essex and Middlesex areas. The sixth, Edith, at Knighton and the seventh, Hampden, at Wigston, where he was baptised at All Saints on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1857.

Henry's occupation is variously described as a gentleman, and landed proprietor of houses and a trust or fund holder. In Wigston for the 1861 census he employed two live in servants. By 1881 census the family had returned to their roots and were living in Harrow.

The reason for their choosing to live in Wigston is something of a mystery, though they were a 'wandering' family, with only two of the children being born in the same place, and having arrived in Knighton they were well placed to hear when Bushloe House became vacant.

**Samuel Davis** is listed as the rate payer for Bushloe House in **1862 to 1864**. Samuel was born in Leicester c1801 the youngest child of Henry and Susannah Davis. In 1841 census he was still living at home at The Crescent, King Street with his widowed mother and several siblings. She was of independent means, his occupation was given as a Surveyor of Taxes.

He appears to have spent a period of his working life away from Leicestershire possibly in Somerset for it was there in Bridgwater District in early 1854 that he married Fanny Johns.

He had retired by the time he and his wife came to live in Wigston and was listed as a gentleman in Whites 1863 directory. Their stay was interrupted by his death on 12<sup>th</sup> February 1865 at the age of 63 . He was buried in the churchyard four days later. He had no children, his nephews and nieces and any surviving siblings being his eventual beneficiaries after the death of his widow.

**Charles Berry** is listed as the rate payer for Bushloe House in **1865**, he was still the tenant when the house was conveyed to H A Owston in **September 1866**. Charles was born 10/11/1783 in Romsey, Hampshire third son of Rev. John Berry, Independent Minister there. He was educated for the ministry at Homerton College. In 1803, at the age of only 19, he was appointed Unitarian Minister of the Great Meeting Church in East Bond Street, Leicester (the same church we have just visited). He was to remain 56 years, retiring in 1859.

Described variously as a man of calm and solid judgment; of great learning and classical attainments; a severe critic of literary style and a good musician; a ripe scholar and mathematician; as a preacher he dealt with topics of common life in language, pithy but studiously simple. He was author of a number of pamphlets and sermons, ran a private school for boys, with some very notable pupils, in the North Gateway into the Castle Yard between 1808 and 1838, was one of the founders of the Literary & Philosophical Society and of the Town Museum. He was a close friend of Robert Hall, then baptist minister at Harvey Lane.

He married in 1810, Ann Paget, sister of Thomas Paget, founder of Paget's Bank (later to become part of Lloyds Bank) and first Mayor of Leicester in 1836 after the passing of the Reform Act. They had six children, Charles, Clara, Mary, Edward, Catherine and Thomas, and lived for many years on Narborough Road with garden skirting the river banks.

Ann died in 1870 and Charles on 4<sup>th</sup> May 1877 at Olive Mount, Wavertree, Liverpool, the home of his son-in-law. A memorial tablet in the Unitarian Church states it was "erected by the congregation in affectionate and grateful recognition of long and faithful service".

When Charles Berry's lease expired H A Owston took possession of the property and was listed as the rate payer in 1867. He made substantial improvements, moved in with his new wife and there followed a long period of stability for the house as the Owston family lived there for the next 80 years.

Tricia Berry

Sources:

And further information on Stephen Fry see *Who's Who No: 17 in Bulletin 48* (June 1997).

And further information on Archibald Turner see *Bulletin 61* (October 2001).

*Wigstan Church Rate Books LRO DE384/44,45,46,47,48,49,50,51, 52 &53.*

For H S Joyner, *1861 Wigston Census, 1881 Harrow Census, Wigston Parish Baptism Register.*

For S Davis, *1841 Leicester Census, 1837'online marriage index, Wigston Parish Burial Register.*

For C Berry, *LRO People file, Dictionary of National Biography, Glimpses of Ancient Leicester Pg 358, Agnes Fielding Johnson (Nee Paget), Unitarian Church Baptism Register.*

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## WIGSTON GAS WORKS

At a public meeting in the National School Room on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1857, some discussion took place about the possibility of having a gas works for Wigston, in order to light the streets. An engineer experienced in such work gave it as his opinion that the project, both practically and financially, could be a success. Mr. Thomas Burgess then proposed that a limited liability company be formed, its capital to be £2250 to be raised in 450 shares of £5 each. It was seconded by Mr. Blunt, and another motion, with a seconder, appointed a Provisional Committee to carry out the formation of the company, to be called the Great Wigston Gas-Light and Coke Company Ltd.

All over England such meetings were taking place in villages, towns and cities to take advantage of this substance called gas, not yet for fires or cookers or boilers, but for illumination, especially of the streets.

Throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries scientists had known a little about gasses and they also knew that when coal is heated in the absence of air, it liberates inflammable coal gas. Coke and tar are by-products. In 1792 William Murdock had lit a room in his house in Cornwall and later moved to Boulton and Watt's factory in Birmingham where he lit the whole building, thus increasing safety and reducing expenditure on oil and paraffin for lighting. He went on to do the same for other factories, but each time, the works installed were individual to one firm, and the idea of a large gas works with pipes under the streets carrying gas came later. By 1820, 15 of the main towns of England and Wales has their own large undertakings, and 10 years later this had become 200.

By 1889 the demand for gas had increased significantly and the works needed to be improved and their mains extended. Further capital was needed for this and it was considered expedient that the company should be dissolved and re-incorporated with additional powers, principally the authority to borrow money on mortgage. The authority of Parliament was required for this to happen and on 24<sup>th</sup> June in that year Wigston got its own Act, the Great Wigston Gas Act 1889. This Act authorised the formation of a new company which was named the Great Wigston Gas Company Ltd. The important Ordnance Survey map of 1885 shows the Gas Works in place at the bottom of what became Gas Lane.

To make coal gas, great quantities of coal were needed and this is where Peter Clowes' family comes in. The firm of Eli Bailey, a small transport business, did all the carting for the Wigston Gas Works from the day it opened until nationalisation. They moved coal to the works, coke from the works, gas piping, tar, oxide; everything needed was moved by their carts and eventually lorries.

Eli's daughter, Rhoda, married Charlie Clowes, who drove the firm's first lorry, bought in 1926. Until then, the firm had maintained a fine stable of half a dozen horses, and Charlie used to tell a tale of how one of the horses was so familiar with the route to the works that the carter could pop into a pub for a drink, leaving the horse to carry on by itself. Its load of coal would be tipped out, then it would walk back to the pub, and its carter, fully refreshed, would take over again!

When the gas works closed, some time in the 1950s, the EMGAS magazine of 1955 gave a glowing report on the work of the firm, saying how even on a Sunday they would take a fitter to an emergency job and tackle every job a works lorry might do, even though not in the direct employment of the Gas Board, as it became.

Charlie was the father of our own member, Peter Clowes, who himself worked for many years for Eli Bailey. Peter recalls transporting 35cwts. of coal at a time from South Wigston to the gas works, with one other worker to help him. He remembers the horizontal retorts (ovens) in the days when they were charged by hand, and how they were eventually replaced by a new retort house with new vertical hoppers, self-feeding and discharging.

The by-products were sent to a place in Derbyshire called (Peter thinks) something like Pye Bridge. It took three quarters of an hour to pump the tar into a wagon - 7 loads of it - and it had to be labelled and weighed. The tar was a source of creosote, aspirin and paint; the oxide went into dyes and paint.

All sorts of other activities took place at the gasworks as well as making gas, especially, when gas came to be used for cooking. Sometimes, Peter had to collect old gas cookers which had become greasy after much use. They were cleaned, using water from the Horsewell Lane spring and rain water with caustic soda added. Then they were immersed in a tank of very hot water and lots of steam, which made them like new so that they could be rented out. As Peter says, "Recycling is nothing new".

During Peter's working days, most working class people were able to take advantage of gas for lighting, heating and cooking, but it had not always been so. In the early days of the gas industry, it was only moneyed people who could afford the luxury. This can be seen in a list which Brian found in one of his books. It is an advertisement for George Bower, engineer and gaswork contractor of St. Neots, the same one who advised the public meeting to go ahead and build Wigston's gasworks. Note that Wigston is mentioned in the Towns and Villages list, along with some others in Leicestershire.

What helped the gas undertakings to widen their clientele was the development of the prepayment or penny-in-the-slot meter. By having a meter, the workers could see how much gas they were using and pay for it a little at a time. When the meter was read, a card was filled in, like the example shown, and the meter was emptied. Peter remembers that sometimes they collected the bags of coins which were placed on top of the bags of coal and taken to the gas offices. Imagine doing that now!

In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, lighting by gas began to decline, and the lamplighter gave way to the pilot light and time clock. Electric lights took over, but other uses of gas, like heating and cooking, increased. The small gas works probably had their hey-day then, but during the middle years of the century good quality coal reserves were diminishing and became expensive.

With nationalisation, some small works were not economically situated to be supplied by the grid and had to close. Wigston gasworks closed in the mid-50s and Peter went to the Leicester gasworks, where he was better paid and found the work less arduous because of certain labour saving devices to deliver the coke.

The firm of A & W Evans took over the works as a grain store, and then it became a carpet warehouse. A big fire, cause unknown, destroyed the works in the late 60s, and eventually the site was cleared. Everything had burned down except the Gas Offices, now an attractive bungalow. The works had lasted nearly 100 years.

Some of us remember the old gas lights, playing in the street on dark winter afternoons in the mist, under their soft, yellowish glow. Very nostalgic.

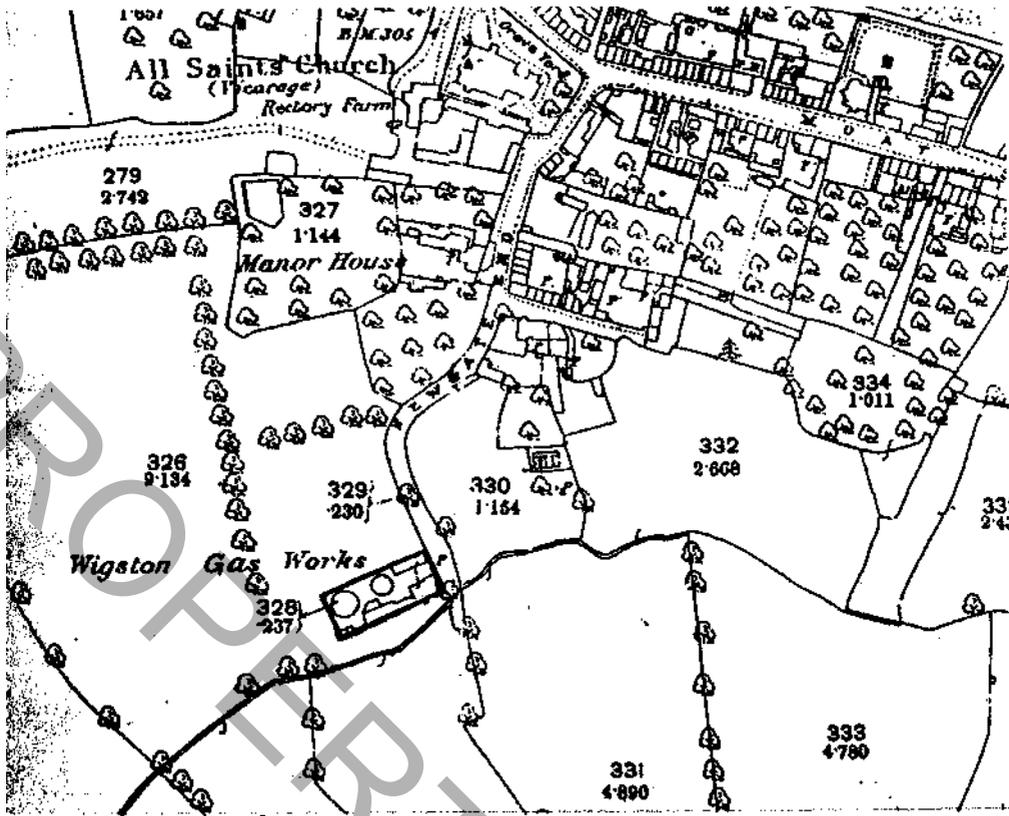
Sources: In the writing of this article I gratefully acknowledge help from the following: Duncan Lucas who suggested it and lent me his file on the gas works. Brian Bilson for the loan of 2 books on gas. Peter Clowes for his time in telling me about his connection with the gas works.

Edna Taylor

TOWNS AND VILLAGES.

Picture Removed.

Part of advertisement for George Bower, engineer & gaswork contractor of St. Neots, showing the many areas around the world where his firm had supervised the installation of gas works.

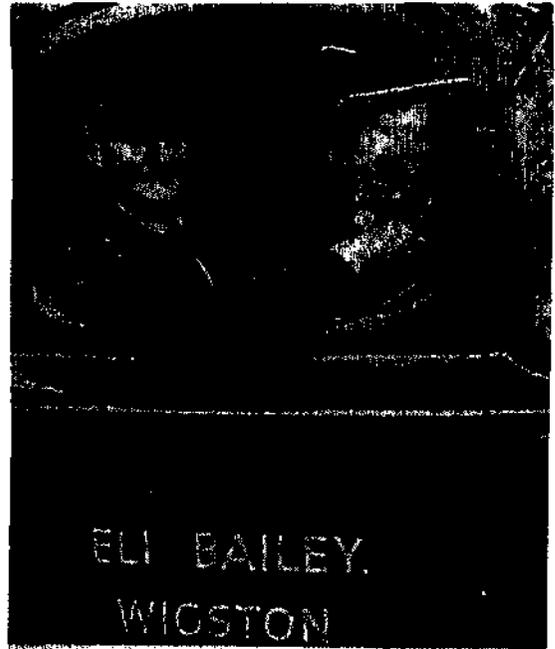


1885 Ordnance Survey Map of Newgate area showing the Wigston Gas Works.

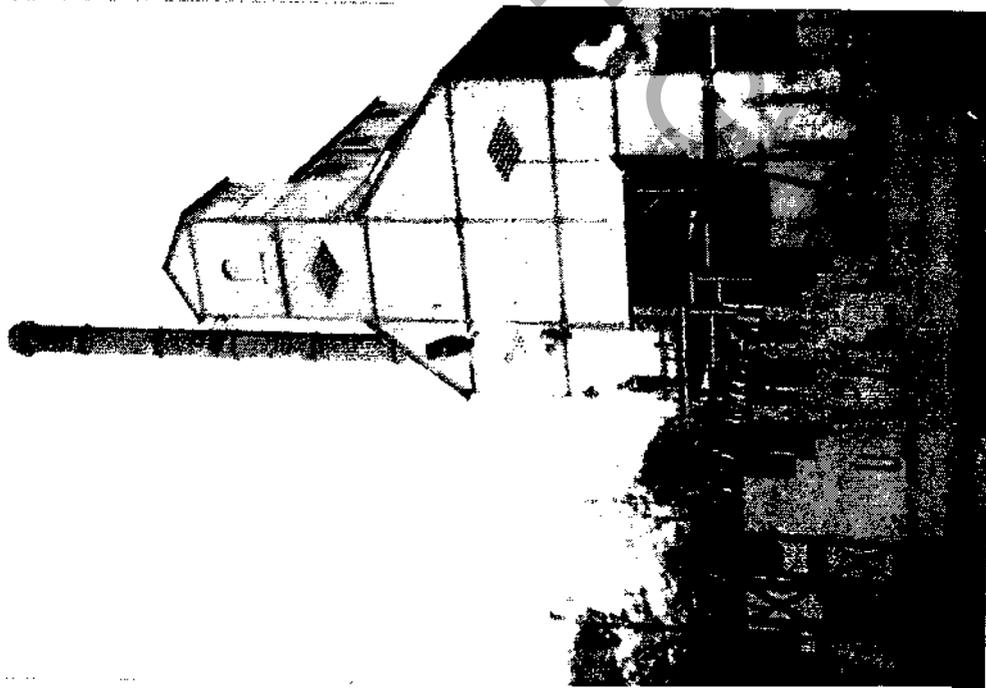
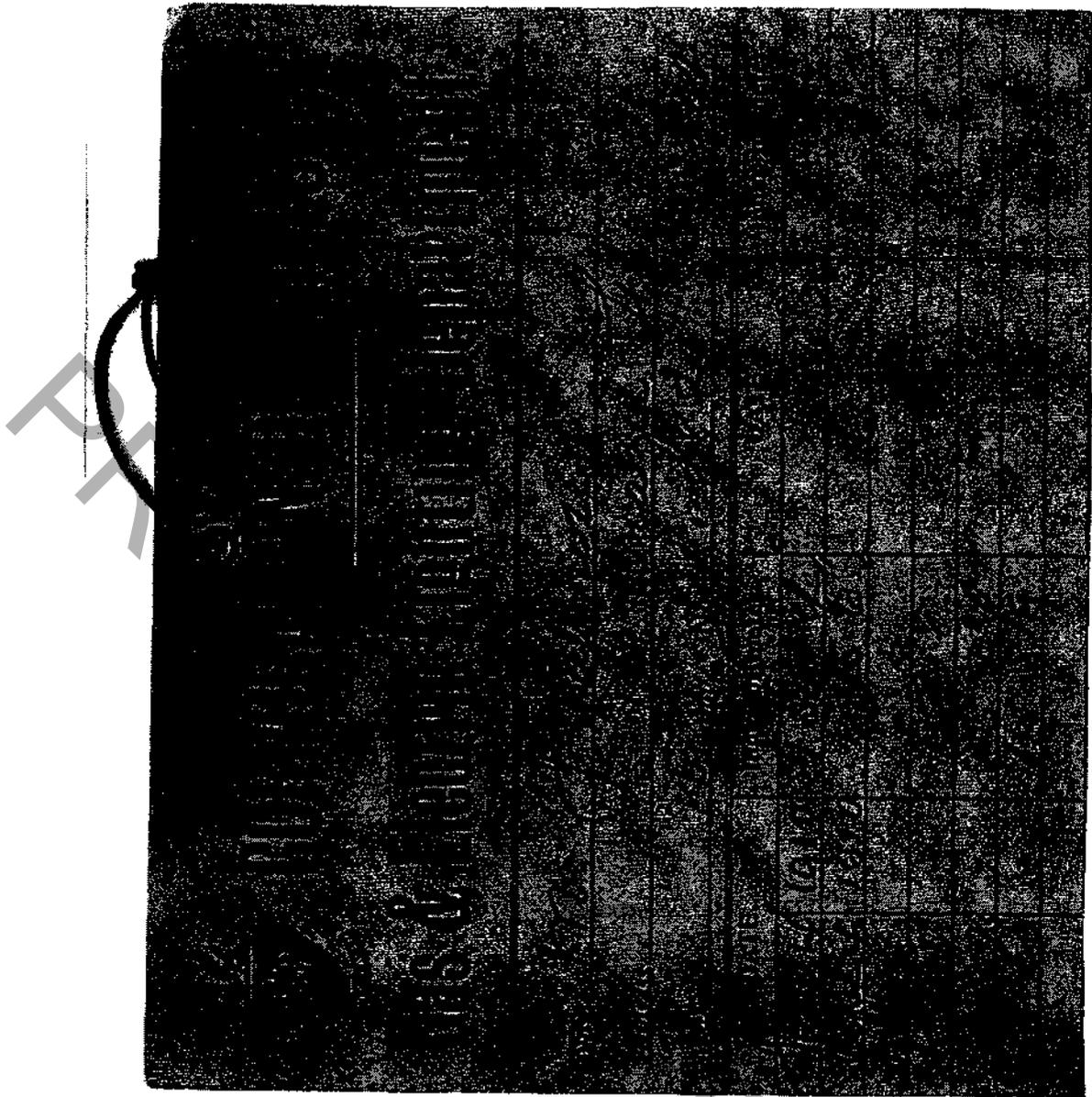


1920s Postcard of the Wigston Gas Works

# WIGSTON JOINS THE PAST



*After nearly 100 years the Wigston works has closed down, becoming one more link on the "backbone" main front Chesterfield to Northampton. For the last time the men of the Undertaking gather together on the office steps; some of them can recall most of the major happenings in the "gas world" for many years past. Mr. Jack Harris (centre), the last manager, is the third generation of a family who have been associated With this particular gasworks since 1883.*



Above - Corporation of Leicester example of the type of swing ticket attached to customers' meters  
Below - Wigston Gas Works when adapted as a grain store by A & W Evans