

Greater Wigston Historical Society

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

## BULLETIN 84



**PROGRAMME OF MEETINGS – AUGUST 2009 TO FEBRUARY 2010**

**Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> August 2009**

Life on a Tudor Manor – Alison Coates  
7.30p.m. U.R. Church Boys' Brigade Rooms.

**Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> September 2009**

Leicester Children's Holiday Centre at Mablethorpe – Peter Daisley  
7.30p.m. U.R. Church Boys' Brigade Rooms.

**Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> October 2009**

The First Railway through Wigston – Fred Hartley  
7.30p.m. U.R. Church Boys' Brigade Rooms.

**Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> November 2009**

Naseby Battlefield Project – Patrick Crecraft  
7.30p.m. U.R. Church Boys' Brigade Rooms.

**\*Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> December 2009**

Social evening with Quiz & Local Picture Library identification session  
(with a seasonal drink & mince pie)  
7.30p.m. U.R. Church Boys' Brigade Rooms.

**Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> January 2010**

The Leicester Line Canal – Mary Matts  
7.30p.m. U.R. Church Boys' Brigade Rooms.

**\*Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> February 2010**

A.G.M. followed by 'Where I worked' contributions from members  
7.30p.m. U.R. Church Boys' Brigade Rooms.

**\*Please note** there is more information about these two evenings on page 6.

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The Bulletin is published three times a year on 1<sup>st</sup> March, July and November. Articles etc. (which are always welcome) should be submitted to the Editor, Tricia Berry, three clear weeks before publication date please.

## FRONT COVER

Jim Colver's drawing this time is of Lyddington Bede House in Rutland. The Manor of Lyddington had long been owned by the Bishops of Lincoln. Initially only farming took place there but in the 14<sup>th</sup> century the Bishops built a grand residence for use as a retreat. At the Dissolution in 1547 the property was seized by the Crown. In 1660 what remained was passed to Lord Burghley, who salvaged the east wing of the old palace and converted it into almshouses for a few poor men and women in the community. In return the occupants were expected to be usefully engaged in some handicraft and attend church regularly. These remained in use for over 300 years until well into the 1900s.

The building retains some original stained glass in the large windows bearing the arms of various bishops, and sections of intricately carved wooden ceiling cornice. There are some 16<sup>th</sup> century rooms complete with their fireplaces.

It is managed by English Heritage and open from April to October.

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## MARCH MEETING

In March the Society welcomed Peter Cousins, Chairman of the Leicestershire & Rutland Family History Society, who described the sources available to trace a soldier who had died in World War I. He used the search for his wife Ann's Uncle Cecil to illustrate how this can be done.

68.8 million people served from all countries in this war and 370,000 Commonwealth troops have no known grave. The heaviest losses occurred in the Somme area of France and over the border into Belgium. The biggest memorials in these areas are the Thiepval to the missing and the Menin Gate at Ypres. Tyne Cot is the largest cemetery but there are hundreds of smaller ones dotted about the landscape. Some contain allied casualties who were buried close to where they fell and some are for forces of a particular country.

Loughborough's Carillon Bell Tower Museum has a complete set of books with biographical details of casualties, and a CD 'Soldiers who died in the Great War' has also been produced. These are a good place to start as they should give the Regiment and army number. Most original records can be found at the National Archives, Kew (TNA). They hold the surviving Service Records, (about two thirds were lost as a result of enemy action in WWII), War Diaries and Medal Roll Index Cards. The Imperial War Museum and Regimental museums can also provide more information.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) was established soon after the war to maintain the cemeteries and memorials and record the casualties in their 'Debt of Honour Register'. Their records give the cemetery or memorial entry for any named soldier and also the location. These days all the records mentioned except the War Diaries can be found on the web site of the relevant institution. Commercial family

history sites such as Ancestry also have many of these records. Sometimes just 'Googling' a name can bring results.

It was discovered that Uncle Cecil spent two months in France before being injured and returned to hospital in Leicester. He was sent back to the front and lost his life on the Somme. Cecil's brother Sid was recorded as missing and it was found he had joined a ship's crew.

After some questions and discussion the Chairman, Mike Forryan, thanked Peter for a really interesting and helpful talk.

### **APRIL MEETING**

For April the Society welcomed retired vicar of the parish Rev. John Green who spoke on his 'Thoughts on the History of Wigston Magna'. Father Green first served in Wigston as curate in 1961-65 and returned as vicar 1973-2000, during which time he gathered much information about the parish, from the records, through his work, and from contact with the descendants of previous inhabitants, who visited while researching their ancestry.

He started with the origin of the name which is from the Danish, Vikings Tun, and evolved over time into Wigston, though the parish itself is still called Wigston Magna. All Saints' churchyard is very small and the gravestones were arranged round the edge in the 1950s. Interesting ones include that to Mary Bingley (see page 9), and one to an 'honest publican'. The memorial to Richard and Goodith Bruin, records their combined age of 152 years, because they died on the same day. When the churchyard became full in 1850s burials took place at St. Wistan's until the cemetery was opened in 1880.

St. Wistan's, formerly known as St. Wolstan's, became a shrine to St. Wistan who was murdered at Wistow 2/6/849. It contained a jewelled statue and there was a Holy Well nearby. It is considered to be on a par with the shrines at Walsingham and the one to Thomas O'Beckett at Canterbury.

The parish of Wigston Magna had belonged to Lenton priory in Medieval times, and at the dissolution lapsed to the Crown. During the reign of Elizabeth I it passed into lay hands. Lady Weld bequeathed the patronage to the Company of Haberdashers and Christ's Hospital, jointly. The Glebe land providing the rectorial great tithes was the old Rectory Farm, with farmhouse next to All Saints', and land stretching south of Station Road into the later created South Wigston. The small tithes due to the vicar came from a farm to the south of Newton Lane which is aptly named Glebe Farm.

There are reminders within All Saints' Church of many of the old Wigston families. Such as the Baddeleys of Wigston Hall, whose memorial East Window contains five panels showing religious scenes and the letter 'B' repeated many times. George Davenport, who became Rector of Houghton le Spring, near Durham and replaced the church silver in 1671 and has a window dedicated to him. Hiram Abiff Owston's fine mosaic memorial, and Elizabeth Clarke who founded the almshouses in Long Street, also gave the Italian

font and other items. There are also memorial tablets to the Seddon, Pochin, Ragg, Oliver and Davenport families and to James Pigott, vicar who died 28/12/1812 aged 76 years.

Afterwards, the Chairman, Mike Forryan, thanked Father Green for a most entertaining and informative evening.

## **MAY MEETING**

The first of our summer outings was to Willoughby Waterleys when, on a lovely warm evening, 30 members and friends enjoyed a short walk round the village led by fellow member, Dorothy Gurr. Starting at St. Mary's Church which is a charming little building, hard to find as it is approached up a path past the high brick walls of the Old Rectory and Yew Tree Farm. It is believed to be Norman, though heavily restored over the years. The tower is original and contains five bells.

We then walked down the main street looking particularly at the distinctive Manor House built in 1693, one of the first brick built residences in Leicestershire. The Primitive Methodist Chapel built in 1877, the Old Post Office (both now converted into private houses), and the school built in 1846 which closed in 1964 and now serves as the village hall. Next to this is the General Elliott public house. The reason for its name is not now known but there were two General Elliotts, one an officer in Wellington's army and the other a Governor of Gibraltar who defended the Rock against attack by Spain in 1779.

Many villagers were once occupied in the framework knitting and boot and shoe trades, and their cottages survive, one aptly bearing the name Griswold House. At the end of the village is the Old Hall, built as a moated farmhouse in c1620, but much enlarged and modified in 1712.

We returned for a most enjoyable supper at the village hall before listening to a presentation on the Willoughby Embroidery. This truly impressive piece was worked on a frame between 1981 and 1996 by members of the Women's Institute. It measures 9'10" x 4'6" and between working sessions was pulled to the ceiling by ropes and pulleys. It is worked on linen, mainly embroidered in long and short stitch, with some appliqué. The motifs all represent village life and include field names, flora and fauna, a street map, village events, school, church, bell ringing, occupations, hobbies, buildings and people.

After a thoroughly enjoyable evening our chairman, Mike Forryan, thanked Dorothy and the Embroidery Fund ladies for a thoroughly pleasant evening.

## **JUNE MEETING**

Our June outing to Lutterworth was led by Blue Badge Guide and tour operator, Colin Crosby. We met outside the distinctive town hall which was designed in 1836 by Joseph Hansom, perhaps best known for his development of the Hansom Cab. Other examples of his work are the Leicester Proprietary School in New Walk, later to become the museum, and the former Baptist Chapel in Belvoir Street, now part of the Adult Education College.

Lutterworth was a coaching centre on the road from Leicester to Rugby and consequently had several important coaching inns. Now only the Fox survives as a public house, but some of the other former inn buildings have other uses such as the Denbigh Arms, which has been converted into flats and is known as Denbigh Court.

The town has retained many of its historical buildings, some thatched, some with wooden beams visible within their brick work indicating their cruck built origins, and some with Georgian frontages added, typically with two and a half storeys and sash windows. Off the main roads we walked down the Cutchel, an old name for an alley.

Some notable buildings were the former Ebenezer Chapel still with its Britannia Fire Insurance plaque, and now a private house, and the large Lutterworth House, (built 1821/2 to the design of William Firmadge), which once served as the H.Q. of Ibstock Brick Company, and is now believed to be a private residence once more. The 1842 Police Station, the oldest in England still used for its original purpose, and Western House c.1820, the home of Gideon International, and of course the beautiful 13<sup>th</sup> century St. Mary's Church.

Lutterworth is associated with a number of distinguished people including Sir Frank Whittle who developed his jet engine there. He is commemorated by a bust in the town centre and a stunning full size model of the first jet powered plane on the roundabout. Another such from a completely different era was Rev. John Wycliffe, a former master of Balliol College, Oxford, who was Rector of Lutterworth 1374-1384. He was the first person to translate the Bible into English. A controversial figure, sometime after his burial his bones were dug up, burnt, and then thrown into the River Swift.

The Chairman, Mike Forryan, thanked Colin for a really interesting and enlightening walk.



L to R: Tricia Berry, Ruth Granger, Annette Bramhall, Colin Crosby, Colin & Sue Towell & Linda Forryan.

A pretty view along The Cutchel

## OBITUARIES

Sadly two members have passed away since the last issue of the Bulletin.

**Pat Powdrill** died on Easter Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> April. She had joined the Society in 1995 and was a staunch supporter of our meetings and outings (often bringing a group of colleagues from Willow Hairdressing to the latter). She will be much missed at the Society and also at the Framework Knitters Museum where she was such an active member of the Fundraising Group.

**Mary Cullen** died on 25<sup>th</sup> April. She had joined the Society in 1999. She was a familiar face at meetings until recent times when poor health prevented her from venturing out in the evening.

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## NEW MEMBERS

It is very pleasing to report that since the A.G.M. in February, thirteen new members have joined the Society. The committee would like to extend a warm welcome to them all. We hope they find their membership rewarding, and our speakers and events interesting. We are always pleased to have suggestions for future talks on any historical subject but especially on Wigston and district.

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## DECEMBER MEETING

The Committee has decided, for this December at least, not to have a speaker but instead to make it a social/working evening. There will be a quiz and our Chairman will also bring along the Wigston & District Picture Library. Some of the images lack the 'who, when and where' identification and it was thought to be a good opportunity, with a number of members present, to try and add some of this vital information. We shall be serving a seasonal drink and mince pie, for which there will be a charge of £2 00. This will be collected on the night.

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## FEBRUARY MEETING

After the 'business' part of the evening members are invited to give a brief talk on where they once worked. It could be either their own business or as an employee, and does not need to have been in Wigston. It could include former working practices, conditions, duties, earnings, humorous incidents etc. We need eight people to take part, and each talk will be restricted to five minutes. We will need to know who wishes to do this so that we end up with the right number and no obvious duplications. Please give it some

thought and if you feel you would like to contribute to the evening, have a word with Chairman, Mike Forryan or Secretary, Tricia Berry.

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### **LAUNDE ABBEY**

It was extremely sad to learn that the future of Launde Abbey was in doubt, unless £1,000,000 can be raised for repairs and modernisation by September. As it was only last June that we visited that beautiful, peaceful retreat, it is still fresh in the mind, and the management will surely be very grateful for any help anyone is able to give.

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### **LEICESTERSHIRE VICTORIA COUNTY HISTORY TRUST**

Five volumes of the excellent Leicestershire Victoria County History were published between 1907 and 1964 and are available for consultation at the Record Office, Wigston Library and many other venues. Some parts are also online as are volumes relating to other counties. The project, however, was never completed and a great deal of the county still needs to be covered. A Trust has been formed and money now needs to be raised to appoint an editor/co-ordinator to make a start on the work. Groups such as ourselves have been approached to see if we might make a donation and distribute leaflets to encourage members to become Friends of the Trust. This will be discussed at the next Committee Meeting and if members have views on this do please speak to Mike Forryan or any other committee member.

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### **DO YOU HAVE A COMPUTER?**

The Society has undertaken a project to put all of our Transactions and Bulletins into an electronic format to allow access via the web. This is progressing well but we do need some help if possible. If you have a computer and a little spare time, could you help by typing the handwritten documents into the computer? Guidance and assistance is available from Mike Forryan who is running this project. Please call Mike on 0116 2810431 if you can help.

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### **THE MEDIA ARCHIVE FOR CENTRAL ENGLAND (MACE PROJECT)**

The MACE project based in Leicester has been created to help local groups such as our Society to find and preserve old film in their community. Any film found would be processed by MACE and returned to the community for interrogation, cataloguing, presentation, research etc. Duncan Lucas has offered some film and video from our



library, but in order to support a Lottery bid MACE are encouraging groups to officially sign up to the project, which means a commitment to actually work with the organisers on presentations, links with schools etc.

The Committee do not have time to take on such a task but if any members feel they would like to get involved would they please contact Mike Forryan for more information.

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**SOME INTERESTING FACTS FROM THE SOCIETY'S ATTENDANCE REGISTER, COMPILED BY STELLA TWEED WHILE MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY**

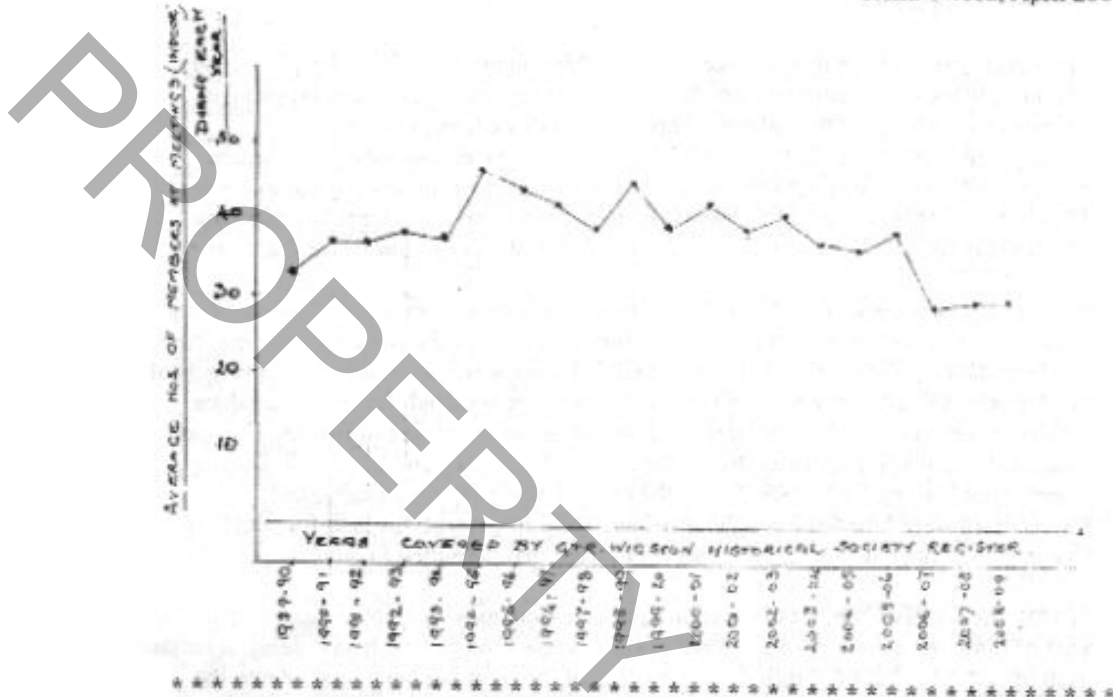
One of the most interesting and pleasing discoveries that I found was that EIGHTEEN members on the first page (for 1990) are still members today. They are Tricia Berry, Doreen (Wiggy Maggy) Boulter, Anne Brown, Richard Carter, Peter Clowes, Pat Connolly, Marion Daetwyler, Heather Goodman, Linda & Mike Forryan, Ruth Harper, Shirley Hensman, Duncan Lucas, Chris Smart, Edna Taylor, Colin Towell, Stella Tweed and Bob Wignall.

The following table gives the number of new members who joined during the year and the best attended lecture:

<b>Year</b>	<b>New Members</b>	<b>Lecture Title</b>	<b>Attendance</b>
1990/91	15	Bygone Wigston Slides – Bill Ward	38
1991/92	07	Genealogy on the Computer – Mike Forryan	41
1992/93	07	More Bygone Wigston Slides – Bill Ward	45
1993/94	11	Vernacular Architecture- David Smith	39
1994/95	14	Aerial Archaeology – Jim Pickering	66
1995/96	09	Coaching Days of England – K F Day	49
1996/97	08	John of Gaunt – D Armitage	47
1997/98	10	1950s Slides of Wigston- Dennis & Edna Taylor	44
1998/99	06	Beaumanor & Herrick Family – Caroline Wessel	55
1999/00	07	Restoring Southwell Workhouse – Susan Smith	48
2000/01	07	Leicestershire Privies – David Bell	46
2001/02	06	Crime in Leicester pre 1914 – R J Gregory	45
2002/03	05	History of the National Trust – Mr. Allison	53
2003/04	03	Enclosure & the village labourer – Mick Rawle	40
2004/05	09	Old Wigston in slides & film – Peter Clowes	43
		History of the Quakers – Malcom Elliott	43
2005/06	09	Thomas Grey of Groby – Jeff Richards	49
2006/07	06	Cardinal Wolsey – David Baldwin	35
2007/08	02	1960s Slides of Wigston – Elizabeth Ward	44
2008/09	01	Sir Frank Whittle & the Jet Engine – Geoff Smith	42

I have also worked out the average attendance for each year commencing with the March Meeting. This is shown as a graph below. Please remember to sign the attendance sheet at each meeting so that an accurate record can be maintained.

Stella Tweed, April 2009



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### GRAVE STONE MYSTERY

One of the many things Father Green referred to in his talk to the Society in April was a very unusual inscription on a gravestone in All Saints' churchyard. It reads:

“Here lieth the body of Mary Bingley who departed this life December 9<sup>th</sup> 1759 aged 70.

“My Father poisoned me to Death  
 My Mother’s hand will stop my breath  
 Her Womb that once my substance gave  
 Will very quickly be my grave.”

According to the burial register Mary was interred two days later, on 11<sup>th</sup> December 1759. Her surname written this time as Bindley, and she was noted as a widow. There are a few Bingley/Bindley entries in the church records about this time, but they have no obvious links to her, and her gravestone does not commemorate any husband or other relative. Has anybody any idea what this verse really means?

## HORSE RACING IN LEICESTER

As Leicester Racecourse is a close neighbour and some of the land it occupies is actually in the parish of Wigston, the Committee tried to find a speaker on this subject for one of our winter meetings. Unfortunately none could be found so hopefully the following will serve as a compromise.

Horse racing is believed to have taken place in this country as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when English knights returned from the Crusades with Arab horses. The breeding of racehorses developed with continued imports of Arab stallions, and all today's thoroughbreds are descended from this stock. Amateur races also took place, where people would challenge each other to a race across country from one village to the next. The church steeple was used for orientation thus giving rise to the term 'steeplechase' which today still means an obstacle race, over different types of hurdles and ditches etc.

Racing has always been popular with royalty and became known as 'The Sport of Kings' because of its association with James I. He further improved the stock by breeding from the descendants of the swift and spirited Spanish horses which were wrecked in vessels of the Armada, and thrown ashore on the coast of western Scotland. James had a palace built near Newmarket which became the home of organised racing in Britain. The sport continued to grow in popularity during the reigns of Charles I and Charles II. During Queen Anne's reign the foundations of the present day sport were established. Racecourses were founded throughout Britain, including Ascot, the land for which the Queen herself bought in 1711; and spectators were first permitted to publicly place bets.

In 1750 the Jockey Club, was formed in London before moving to Newmarket. It devised a set of rules and a code of conduct and was to oversee and control horse racing in Britain right up until April 2006. Since then regulation of the sport has been merged into the British Horseracing Authority and the Jockey Club concentrates on training and managing its extensive land at Newmarket.

The earliest reference to racing in Leicester is an entry in the Chamberlain's Accounts for 1603 when 5s 8d was spent "*for a gallon of sack and one pound of sugar given to the gentlemen at the horse-running.*" In the same year the Hall Book lists "*9s 4d for a gallon of sack and two gallons of claret given to Sir Thomas Griffin, Sir Wm. Faunt and other gentlemen, at the Angel, at the horse-running.*" In 1613 "*8s 8d [was] paid for a gallon of claret and a pound of sugar given to the knights and gentlemen at the horse-running for the Golden Snaffle.*" Other Hall Book entries in 1674 record "*£4 0s 0d to Mr. Bradley towards the Plates to be run for,*" and in 1690, "*6s 3d to Collonell [sic] Lister's man, when he brought the Earl of Rutland's Plate to Mr. Mayor on 30<sup>th</sup> day of September which was to run for in the Abbey Meadow 5s 0d*" plus "*two and a half yards of ribbin, to tye on the cover 1s 3d by Mr. Mayors order.*"

The above makes it plain that the Corporation contributed substantially to the costs, as did the local gentry, particularly the Dukes of Rutland and Stamford and the Earl Howe. These races were held annually over two days in September at the Corporation's land at

Abbey Meadows, now Abbey Park. The actual racing was organised by a local Race Committee. The entire week was known as race week and was a general holiday for the population who enjoyed bands, dancing, games, sports and fireworks in Vauxhall Gardens, by the River Soar, while the gentry attended social functions and the Race Ball at the Assembly Rooms in the Haymarket.

In 1742 due to constantly recurring floods, when horses often had to race up to their knees in water, the race meetings were transferred to St. Mary's Fields. Agnes Fielding Johnson in her book *Glimpses of Ancient Leicester* quotes a description of this course based on the early recollections of well known local inhabitant William Gardiner who said, "*the racehorses made a circuit to the south west of the infirmary; galloping round by the Knighton Windmill, (which formerly stood upon the high ground above the main entrance to the present Cemetery,) to the Aylestone toll-gate, (which stood opposite to the gates of the present cattle market,) and passing by the Rawdykes into the meadow beyond, then called The Flat, at the end of which stood the winning post.*"

With the expansion of the town there was pressure on the Corporation to enclose St. Mary's Fields and in 1806 the race meetings were moved again. This time out of town to part of a large field, owned by the Corporation, which is now the Victoria Park. By this time the old Haymarket Assembly Rooms had also been replaced by the County Assembly Rooms in Hotel Street. This lovely building, which happily still survives today, was designed by London architect John Johnson, a native of Leicester. It opened in 1800, the first function being that year's Race Ball. The Race meetings at the new venue proved very successful and in 1866 a new grandstand was built, and during 1870s the course was railed. At this time it was estimated that 42% of the population of Leicester attended, together with large numbers from the villages, and excursion trains arrived from all over the Midlands, South Yorkshire and London. Additional attractions included menageries, roundabouts, boxing and gambling booths, shooting galleries, photographic artists, bands, fortune tellers and refreshment stalls.

However, the town was still expanding and there was pressure to use the large field for other purposes on non race days. Cricket matches, agricultural shows, military displays etc. were all held there and the area came to be referred to as the Victoria Park, and the grandstand as the pavilion. The many people attending on race days caused such noise and disruption that the residents of New Walk and London Road began to protest. Notable among these was John Biggs, hosier, councillor and sometime MP, of London Road, who presented a petition to the council that there should be free access to the hitherto enclosed course and that gravel paths be laid for walking. These changes would have interfered with the racing. There was also hostility among the magistrates, especially the licensing ones who were led by the powerful temperance and Quaker influence of Edward Shipley Ellis. When the race meetings were extended to three days no alcohol sales were permitted on the third day. The Midland Railway responded by providing a special train to Nottingham Goose Fair instead, and Sunday School outings were arranged to remove the scholars from the bad influences of Race Days.

These and other factors led to the decision by race enthusiasts to acquire their own land away from the town to be used solely for racing. A company was formed, the New Leicester Club and Race Course Company, Limited. The founding directors listed in the Memorandum and Articles of Association were:

John Robinson, Pelman House, Sherwood Rise, Nottingham, Gent

Charles Hibbert, Munden House, Sherwood Rise, Nottingham, Gent

Samuel Robinson, Villa Road, Nottingham, Gent

William Hibbert, Villa Road, Nottingham, Gent

Walter Gregory, 63, Goldsmith Street, Nottingham, Gent

Thomas Stones, Burghley House, Peterborough, Gent

Samuel Wilkinson, Wythwood House, Alvechurch, Worcestershire, Gent.

Each of these subscribers held 5 shares each.

In May 1882 the company purchased 108a 2r 37p of land at Oadby from Thomas, Walter and William Bunney. A further large area of the Oadby Glebe land was leased and later purchased. These two areas of land together were used to create the racecourse. It stretched from the Harborough turnpike road (where the present entrance to the course is) right through to the Wigston parish boundary. An adjoining area of land within Wigston parish was purchased from Mrs. Haymes of Glen House, Great Glen. This stretched as far as Oadby Lane in Wigston and gave a total land holding of 262 acres, though only a long narrow strip was retained and subsequent disposal left the racecourse with an area of c200 acres. This long strip gave the space to create a straight mile, a much coveted advantage, so that the course could offer both Flat and National Hunt Racing.

The creation of a complete working racecourse from what had been just a collection of fields was a huge task. The project gave responsible jobs to a number of local people and welcome contracts to tradesmen. A newspaper supplement written to celebrate the first meeting describes the course thus:

*“The Directors from the commencement have exhibited much enterprise in the development of their venture. No pains or expense having been spared in the preparation of the course and the provision of all necessary accessories. The Course itself may be looked upon as an important addition to the racecourses of the country, of which it is admitted by all ranks among the finest. Situated in the centre of the cream of the hunting districts, within two miles of the Leicester Railway Station, and less than a mile from the Wigston Junction on the Midland Railway....The course commences on the brow of a gently sloping hill within a field of Wigston Church, dipping slightly until the 6 furlong post is reached, where a gradual rise occurs and continues until within 500 yards of the winning post. The finest in the country a splendid view of the whole length is easily obtained from the stands. Four mile steeplechases....when plans are fully carried out. The Grandstand can accommodate 3,500 people....ladies rooms, huge wine and beer cellars, telegraph office, police station with three large cells and room for a superintendent....Although all not yet quite completed it is in working order and it was only three months since work started.*

*Architect for the stands was Mr. Bentley, Old Broad Street, London, Contractor: Charles Bass, builder of Leicester, Clerk of the Works: Mr. Walton of The White Horse Inn, Oadby, General foreman to the builder: Mr. H Sharpe of Wigston. The sub-contractors were – Ironwork: Mr. R.J. Clarke of Leicester, Plumber: Mr. Adams of Wigston, Painter: Mr. E. Hassall of Wigston, Brickwork: Mr. Kellett of Leicester, Excavating: Mr. T. Hutchinson of Leicester, Beer Engines: Mr. F. Warne, Blackfriars Road, London.*

*The whole of the tradesmen have given much satisfaction to the Directors, represented on the spot by Mr. J.O. Beales of Oadby, the Company's Secretary."*

The first meeting took place on Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> July 1883. It was a two day event. £3,000 of extra prize money was offered to increase the attraction of the new venue. The names of the races mainly reflected local sponsorship, on the Tuesday these were the: Gopsall Park Plate, Oadby Selling Plate, Prince of Wales Plate, Leicester Handicap, Sutton Bonington Welter Plate, Bathany Plate. While on Wednesday they were the: Billesdon Selling Plate, Donington Selling Plate, Quorn Cup, Belvoir Castle Plate, Curzon Plate, Bradgate Park Plate and Melton Selling Plate.

An estimated 30,000 people attended over the two days, there was an admission charge for spectators and apart from The Oadby & Wigston United Band, who played selections during the afternoons near the Members' Enclosure, this was a purely sporting occasion with no 'itinerant appendages'. Luncheon was provided in a marquee for the Directors and Members by Mr. Crane, Market Place, Leicester. The ground was laid out under the supervision of Tom Cannon and 140 Police Officers attended, largely to cope with the crowds and ease the traffic congestion upon arrival and departure, though the three cells received their first occupants when four men were arrested and charged with gambling by means of the 'three card trick'.

Initially race meetings were held quarterly and from 1885 extended to three days. In the July of that year Fred Archer rode seven winners in the three days. In 1889 King Edward, when Prince of Wales, visited the course whilst staying with Earl Howe at Gopsall Park. In 1921 Gordon Richards rode the first winner of his great career at Oadby, the first of an amazing total of 4,870 winners.

Recently the Leicester Racecourse has disposed of a small quantity of land at the Wigston end of the course. Off Cleveland Road some houses have been built, and the names of the new roads, Grittar Close and Reynolds Chase reflect the land's past racing associations.

Tricia Berry

**Sources:** *Leicester Daily Post* 24/7/1883 & 25/7/1883, Supplement to the *Leicester Chronicle & Leics. Mercury* 28/7/1883, *Illustrated Chronicle* 18/8/1956, *Glimpses of Ancient Leicester* by Mrs. T. Fielding Johnson, *Modern Leicester* by Robert Reid jnr, 'The Great Carnival of the Year' *the Leicester Races in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* by Jeremy Crump - LAHS Trans LVIII.  
Company Records – LRO: 9D43/134/106, Maps & Plans – LRO: DE2805/11/1-100.