

GREATER WIGSTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY
White Gate Lodge, 97 Newton Lane, Wigston Magna, Leics.

BULLETIN 114

1st JULY 2019



This postcard view of Newgate End was sent in 1924. It gives some idea of the layout of the Wigston Lunatic Asylum (see the article within). The house on the right is where John Blunt lived and the one behind with just the chimneys visible was the asylum building.

The card was sent by Mollie Padbury to her parents in Essex. She tells them she is “having a lovely time and it is absolutely beautiful down here. You will see by the X’s on the card where I am stopping”.

Was she aware of the house’s previous use?

PROGRAMME OF MEETINGS – AUGUST 2019 TO MAY 2020

Wednesday 21st August 2019

Afternoon Guided Walk round ancient Leicester with optional tea at Wygston's House, meet Jewry Wall Museum 1.30p.m. Booking essential, own transport.

Wednesday 18th September 2019

The Winstanley Family of Braunstone – Helen Catterwell (**note change of subject & speaker**)
7.30p.m. Wigston College Concert Hall, Station Road, Wigston. LE18 2DS

Wednesday 16th October 2019

Thomas Cook and The Temperance Movement – Neil Crutchley
7.30p.m. Wigston College Concert Hall, Station Road, Wigston. LE18 2DS

Wednesday 27th November 2019 (note change of date)

Gunpowder Plot - Sally Henshaw
7.30p.m. Wigston College Concert Hall, Station Road, Wigston. LE18 2DS

***Wednesday 18th December 2019**

Christmas Social and talk on Edith Piaf – Julie Ede
7.30p.m. Wigston College Concert Hall, Station Road, Wigston. LE18 2DS

Wednesday 15th January 2020

Rise & Decline of the Coaching Trade in Market Harborough – Dr Len Holden
7.30p.m. Wigston College Concert Hall, Station Road, Wigston. LE18 2DS

Wednesday 19th February 2020

AGM followed by Presentation of Pictures of Wigston – Mike Forryan
7.30p.m. Wigston College Concert Hall, Station Road, Wigston. LE18 2DS

Wednesday 18th March 2020

No Greater Enemy: Leicester & the Influenza Epidemic of 1918/19 – Cynthia Brown
7.30p.m. Wigston College Concert Hall, Station Road, Wigston. LE18 2DS

Wednesday 15th April 2020

In Search of Daniel Lambert – Philippa Massey
7.30p.m. Wigston College Concert Hall, Station Road, Wigston. LE18 2DS

Wednesday 20th May 2020

The History of Milestones – Helen Crabtree
7.30p.m. Wigston College Concert Hall, Station Road, Wigston. LE18 2DS

*Please bring £2 on the night towards the cost of refreshments, guests will be charged £3.

The Bulletin is published three times a year on 1st 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.

Society's website: www.wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk

Chairman: Mike Forryan's email: chairman@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk

MARCH 2019 MEETING

THE LITTLE THEATRE, PAST AND PRESENT

There was a full house to welcome Mike Bull to talk about the Little Theatre Past and Present. Mike is a teacher by profession and has been a member of Leicester Drama Society for many years, taking part in drama, comedy and pantomimes.

The Little Theatre is the home of Leicester Drama Society and is so called because it is a member of The Little Theatre Guild of Great Britain, an umbrella body for many local amateur theatre companies who all own their own buildings, the nearest being at Market Harborough. The Company produces 10 or 11 shows a year plus the famous pantomime, all acted by amateur players with many of the support staff also amateurs.

The Society was formed in November 1921 when three local business men who were interested in theatre, Frank Clulow, Herbert Pochin and Walter Martin, got together in the Turkey Café in Granby Street and founded the initial group. The first play opened on 12 June 1922 at the Opera House, it was a performance of *The Silver Box* by John Galsworthy. In 1930 a former Baptist Chapel and Rechabite Hall in Dover Street was purchased for conversion into a theatre. The original curved windows on the top floor and decorative brickwork at roof level are still visible. The first play was 'A Florentine Tragedy' by Oscar Wilde.

A major blow was delivered to the Society in 1955 when on Wednesday, 21 April at 1am a fire broke out in the theatre. On the previous day there had been a money raising rummage sale and a local homeless man, a former soldier, had attended the sale and hidden himself in the building for the night. His cigarette caused the fire. The stage and the wall behind it were destroyed, eight fire engines attended and flames were 100 feet high. The alarm was raised by the landlady of the Dover Castle, a pub opposite the theatre who saw her interval drink trade going up in smoke (there was no bar inside the theatre at the time so audiences requiring interval refreshment nipped across the road). It took three years to rebuild the theatre during which small productions were put on in the much smaller Haywood Studio in the basement, and also at the Association Hall. This latter was the name of the hall within the nearby YMCA building, and originally used for Christian lectures. The first play in 1958 in the rebuilt 350 seat theatre, was 'Tiger at the Gates' by Jean Giraudoux.

The Theatre is a registered charity run by a board of Trustees who are all volunteers. The organisation chart would have reflected the biggest theatre companies in the country and showed what a complex and people orientated organisation a theatre company is. Most of the people involved are volunteers but there are some paid employees in key posts, from set creators to cleaners. Mike said it generally took six weeks to put on a single show and as many as 75 people could be involved.

The theatre has some renowned presidents and patrons, perhaps the best known being the late Sir Richard Attenborough who started his acting career at the theatre. Although Sir Richard died in 2014 the trustees decided not to name a replacement for some time out of respect. Other well known names associated with the Drama Society are the late Tim Piggott Smith and Sir Anthony Hopkins, Gervase Phinn and Richard Cadell and his puppet, Sooty.

We were then given a conducted tour of the theatre, (by power-point pictures of course). This showed the foyer; with the display boards for local artistes to exhibit their work; the bar; the Moira Haywood Studio theatre (all good little theatres have a studio for a small audience, in this case 40, and intimate productions); the library and archive room with records of all productions including

the script and technical details; the workshops and auditorium. The latter was rebuilt after the fire without a rake but this was later changed so that the rear rows were higher to enable the audience to have a better view. Tales were told of audience members sitting on the front row of the raised rear seats, which had a gangway in front of it, getting wet during some parts of the annual pantomime when actors traditionally race around the auditorium. We saw backstage with the trap, used mainly in pantomimes, and the lighting bar and fly rigs capable of holding 13 backcloths.

We were told that after each production many of the props and the scenery are destroyed because there is no room to store them, however, some are recycled and costumes are retained for future use and for hiring out, a good money raiser. Stage sets have changed over the years from full scenery to strategically placed furniture and curtains. With such a long history, the Society has produced the same plays twice or more over the years and photos of the stage clearly show the changes.

Mike then illustrated the way in which each production is chosen, rehearsed and staged. There were some intriguing shots of set design stages from models to the real thing. We then heard of some plays over the years including one in 1928 'A bit of Love' which was shown in the Association Hall. Others included 'Julius Caesar' in 1937 with Richard Attenborough and 'Entertaining Mr. Sloane' in which Joe Orton took a part. During the years 1964 to 1989 The Drama Society performed an annual production at the open air cliff side Minnack Theatre in Cornwall.

Mike concluded by giving an insight into the Society's expansion plans which, with the closure of the adjacent Anchor Centre, are now close to becoming a reality. An excellent talk, full of information and well presented.

APRIL 2019 MEETING LEICESTERSHIRE IN THE 1940s and 1950s

Another good turnout of members welcomed David Bell to recount his memories of growing up in the 1940s and 1950s in Melton Mowbray. Many recalled his previous visit to talk on the 'Privies of Leicestershire' some years ago. As well as a book on that subject he has written about 35 books on local themes and his first, Ghosts and Legends of Leicestershire is now being reprinted.

In those two decades the Co-op featured large in peoples' lives wherever they lived, and we did not have to remember too many numbers, but the family's dividend number was one we did remember and many still do today. The Co-op delivered milk to the door and this was paid for by tokens bought at the local shop, blue for normal milk and green for sterilized. There were not many fridges around so milk bottles were stored in a bucket of cold water in a cool spot. There were daily deliveries. The Co-op shop in Melton had a wire and cylinder system for cash to be sent from the counter to the cashier's office and the change returned in the same way. Always intriguing for a young person.

The other place to purchase necessities was the corner shop, of which, of course, there was one on every corner! These sold everything from vinegar to paraffin, both from a barrel into your own container. Sweets were sold by the ounce and kali came in a cone which was sucked up through a liquorish straw or from a finger dipped in. The corner shop provided many young people with a Saturday job and David was no exception, owners were very often 'local characters' (say no more). There were many travelling shops often selling specialist items such as hardware, meat, fish, tea and bread. The barber visited individuals' houses, the visit was dreaded and often he was not good and had only one style.

School loomed large in all young peoples' lives, at junior school the sexes were divided but if you passed the 11 plus you went to a co-educational grammar school. Dreaded visitors to the school were the nit nurse and the dentist, the latter brought his own pedal operated drill and at David's school was nicknamed 'Killer Ward'. The nit nurse was always called 'Norah' and brought with her a fine comb and some dreadful smelling oil. If a nit was found you were isolated in class and it was killed by squashing it against the thumb nail!!! School dinners were easily recalled due to their poor quality, overcooked potatoes and brussels sprouts, boiled meat, tapioca (fish eyes in glue or frogspawn) and of course a pupil must eat the first course before he got any pudding. Then there was 'going out with girls' not so much going out with them as just talking to them.

David then turned to holidays, at first mainly to Skegness or Ingoldmells. A taxi took the family to the bus or train station. In 1945, the first holiday after the war was to Blackpool when the family took its own supply of eggs, on arrival visitors were met by young lads with carts to carry the luggage to the holiday accommodation, some families went all the way to Blackpool by taxi. Most buses were red (Bartons and Midland Red) but Lincoln Greens were also seen in Melton, they had drivers AND conductors. Buses were used for Sunday School outings, always to Wicksteed Park where there was a wait for an hour to get on the water splash (is it any different now?). Bikes were bought to get to school and to visit friends, those with drop handlebars were something to aim for. Later on Vespa and Lambretta scooters were popular, but no Mods and Rockers, they were just used to see friends. Then came cars: Morris Minors and Morris Travellers. When boys started smoking, a packet of five cigarettes would be shared with your friends.

Then the wireless was recalled (not a radio mind you) with Dick Barton at 6.45pm later replaced by the Archers. Have a Go, ITMA and the Goon Show were all favourites. Graham Chapman of the Goons also went to Melton Grammar School and appeared there in a production of Macbeth. (He had previously lived in Wigston as his father was a police inspector here at one time). David produced a receipt for the purchase of a wireless set and noted single figure phone numbers in Melton and that the receipt was signed over a postage stamp.

Although there were two cinemas in Melton next door to each other, the Regal and the Plaza; there were also travelling cinemas. The introduction of U, A & X categories of films was mentioned but if you were under age trying to get into an X film you had to remember not to ask for a half price ticket! David mentioned the transition from the front row to the back row when he started to take a girl to the cinema. The Saturday matinees were recalled when the kids on their way home after the show acted out the cowboy or gangster film they had just watched. The cinemas in Melton were owned by the Scarborough family of which the present day actor, Adrian Scarborough, is a relation.

There were many more memories of the time including: street parties after the war and for the Coronation, rock and roll and D A haircuts, teddy boys, bath night (once a week), syrup of figs and Luxe soap, Rinso washing powder and comics such as Eagle, Dandy and Beano. The talk raised many questions and recollections in members' minds and was a real journey down memory lane.

MAY 2019 MEETING

CATHEDRALS, ROOF TOPS & MORE – RESTORATION OF OLD BUILDINGS

Another full house of members were pleased to welcome Dr. Jonathan Castleman D.Sc., until recently a joint group managing director of the Leicester firm of Norman and Underwood. The company is known worldwide for its work on repairing historic buildings both at home and abroad. It was founded by brothers in law John Underwood and Thomas Norman in 1825 and was based originally in two small cottages in Freeschool Lane in the city. The business expanded on its much

enlarged site until 2003 when it was forced to move to make way for the new Highcross shopping development on which, ironically, it carried out work. The factory is now based on the Scudamore Road industrial estate.

Jon explained he is the seventh generation of the family to work at the firm having started as an apprentice plumber and worked his way up. His title was awarded in recognition of his contribution to the preservation of historic buildings. The company has many divisions to carry out this work which includes re-roofing in lead and other materials, stained glass restoration, stone masonry and plumbing. Jon was proud to point out that the firm recycles old lead by sand casting, a traditional method which was first used in the 1890s. The company can receive as much as two thousand tonnes of used lead per week for this re-reprocessing. The end product is many rolls of lead which need transporting to wherever needed and then raised to roof level, a weighty task indeed! The firm also became the saving partner of the two hundred year old Taylor Bell Foundry in Loughborough which has enabled it to carry on trading successfully.

With the very wide location and type of building that he has worked on Jon had many tales to tell and facts to deliver. Projects have included: Chatsworth House, Royal Albert Hall, Ritz Hotel, St Paul's Cathedral, Hardwick Hall, Chequers (both during Margaret Thatcher's and Tony Blair's time in office), and York Minster after the disastrous fire which melted the lead on the roof, as happened at Notre Dame recently. In 1953 the firm worked on Westminster Abbey using all sorts of hand tools and working off crawler ladders with an old caravan for a site hut; no health and safety and welfare regulations then. All had to be finished in time for the Coronation.

Other projects have included Lincoln Cathedral, Salisbury Cathedral, Canterbury Cathedral which is a fifteen year project but presently on hold. Windsor Castle, Hampton Court Palace and Sandringham where the firm made a lead planter to celebrate the Queen's diamond jubilee. It goes without saying he has met a great many very famous people.

At one time Jon actually lived in Israel when he worked on a three year project to re-roof the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, there were 18 tonnes of lead used on the lower roof and another 18 tonnes of gold plated brass sheets for the Dome itself. Another project was the British Embassy in Moscow and also our Embassy in Seoul where local men carried out the work at first but it leaked and Jon was required to go out and put things right. An unusual place to have to go to was the Falkland Islands to work on the Governor's residence, Port Stanley House. Another job at long distance was on the Hong Kong war graves commission chapel.

However, one of Jon's most famous projects was to make the lead coffin for the burial of the remains of Richard III. At the time there was controversy about where he would be buried so Jon made contact with both York and Leicester just in case. He got the job but of course the lead coffin is encased inside a wooden coffin. On the day of the procession from the university to the cathedral he was asked to weld down the lid of the lead coffin in order that it was tightly sealed. He managed to add inside "made by Jon Castleman of Leicester". There were other lead coffins found at the Grey Friars during the excavation for Richard and Jon was asked to open these too. He still keeps in touch with Michael Ibsen, the descendant of Richard III on the female line, whose DNA proved so vital in confirming the king's identity.

Any talk about lead would not be complete without mention of the theft of lead, clearly a massive problem and very costly. For this reason sometimes stainless steel, copper or zinc is used instead. Also alarms are now much more sensitive.

Jon concluded by saying that he sold the business in a management buyout about two years ago, because his children did not want to join the business. He is now 'back on the tools' where he started 35 years ago, working for a restoration specialist.

A fascinating talk including a world tour of famous buildings by power point. Jon generously donated his fee to LOROS.

JUNE 2019 MEETING VISIT TO LEICESTERSHIRE AERO CLUB & AIRPORT

Threatened rain and thunderstorms did not materialise for our visit to Leicestershire Aero Club at Stoughton Airport. This was only two days before the longest day of the year and following a prolonged period of low pressure and lots of rain, so in terms of the Society's record of weather conditions for summer visits it was a good evening.

The talk, tour and buffet matched the weather and were very good. We assembled, as instructed, in the car park next to the control tower for a 4pm start, early arrivals watched several helicopters taking off and hovering, perhaps the pilots were having lessons, there was some small plane activity as well. We were escorted to the quite luxurious club bar on the first floor just under the control tower itself where we were given a talk on the history of the club by member and pilot Anne French.

Leicestershire has always been interested in aviation. As early as 1826 there was a balloon decent in Belgrave Park watched by thousands. The Leicestershire Aero Club was founded in 1909 soon after the first powered flights by the Wright brothers and Bleriot. It could have been as early as 1899 if Percy Pilcher had not tragically died in a gliding accident at Stanford Hall near Lutterworth.

The records show that the club was established on 4 September 1909 at a meeting at the Bell Hotel (of blessed memory) in Leicester, this means that the club could be the oldest flying club in the world. It owned no planes at that stage. The town council was very forward thinking and encouraged the formation of the club feeling that air travel was the thing of the future and the best way to get around. Flying was quite a craze at that time and cash prizes for as much as £10,000 were being offered for contests such as the longest distance that could be reached into Europe (won by Tom Sopwith with 177 miles in 3½ hours). In 1912 the club's planes were used to fly the Leicester Daily Post over to Skegness where they were dropped in the right places, during the holiday fortnight. Also at this time flying pageants were popular and aerobatic flying was all the rage, those watching being worried that the pilots would fall out when performing loop the loop.

On the outbreak of war in 1914 all civil flying was banned but the Club raised money for an aeroplane to be given to the Canadian troops stationed in the Leicester area, 40,000 people turning up to see it at Western Park. It was soon destroyed on active service but a replacement survived and went over to Canada after the war.

In 1919 local competition from Northampton and Coventry spurred the club on to acquire its own airfield and Desford was chosen, still a farmers field at the time. A club house was provided in the form of an old chicken hut adapted by the well known Leicester firm of En-Tout-Cas (still in existence and based in Oundle). In 1929 the club President, Lindsay Everard (of the brewery family) presented the club with its first aeroplane, a DH60 Gipsy Moth G-AAIF which was named The Quorn. The following year the club left Desford and the President opened a second airfield, to be used by the club, at his property at Ratcliffe on the Wreake. It was opened by Sir Sefton

Brancker, the director of Civil Aviation. Flying was of course only for the rich and famous, because of the cost, the club members including the Prince of Wales and the Duke of Gloucester as well as the likes of famous female flyer, Amy Johnson. This attracted worldwide attention as people flew in from abroad as well as locally for the hunting season.

A successor chairman, Mr. Lees, opened an airfield in 1930 at Husbands Bosworth (still in use for gliding today). At this time there were only 38 civil aerodromes and landing grounds in the country, and three of these were in Leicestershire at Desford, Ratcliffe and Husbands Bosworth.

Eventually the Council realised that Leicester needed its own commercial airport and land at Braunstone Frith was identified, and the airfield was built in 1935/36. Services to Bristol and Norwich were started at a fare of £3. Passengers could fly to Paris and back in a day and night flights (the first in the UK) were established. An agreement was made with the aero club that they would move to Braunstone Frith and manage the aerodrome for the city, while at the same time having their own separate flight office, clubhouse, fuel supply and hangars. A huge air pageant officially opened the aerodrome and even club planes were paraded down Granby Street watched by thousands.

The 1939/45 war ended private flying again, and the company formed at Leicester ceased trading and the airfield closed. After the war the club was not allowed to return to Braunstone and looked for a new site, eventually returning to Ratcliffe when it was released by the RAF in 1947. When Sir Lindsay Everard (knighted for his service to aviation) died unexpectedly in 1949, it meant another move. It was realised that the Ministry of Defence airfield at Stoughton was available. This had been constructed in 1942/43 for use by Stirling bombers, aircraft supplying the French resistance and then Dakotas working with the 82nd Airborne Division. It was abandoned in 1947. The airfield was at 450ft above sea level (in Leicestershire!!!) but even then had to have three feet stripped off to level it. By 1955 the land was returned to the Co-op Society and leased to the Club. By 1959 the club had 900 members and subscriptions were three guineas with petrol at 1/7½d a gallon. To get a pilot's license all that was necessary was to fly solo two or three times. Happily the club are still there today.

After the excellent talk, with the sounds of a working airfield in the background, we split into small groups to accompany club pilots on a tour of the hangars, one of which, housing a large number of small aircraft, dates from its construction in 1942. The planes and their very often cosy interiors were really intriguing, especially to those used only to the passenger compartments of holiday jets. Another modern hangar contained a large turntable so that only a comparatively narrow entrance allowed storage of the 5 or 6 planes.

We were then served an excellent buffet while able to chat and look out over the airfield to such far off places as Charnwood Forest and Ratcliffe Power Station. All in all a great summer trip.

Reports by Colin Towell

OBITUARY

We were very sorry to learn of the death of Jean James on 20th April. Our sincere condolences to her husband Maurice and their family at this very sad time. Both Maurice and Jean joined the society way back in 1995, and have attended meetings regularly in the 24 years since.

OMISSION IN BULLETIN 113

When writing an account of the AGM in the last bulletin, under the heading Election of Officers unfortunately the position of secretary was omitted. So this is to confirm that we do have a most hard working and capable secretary, Ann Cousins, and apologies to her for this error.

40th BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS

Next year marks the 40th anniversary since the society was formed in 1980. Celebrations to mark this milestone are in the early stages but please note the date will be 25th July 2020.

CHANGE OF MEETING PLACE

Don't forget we start the new indoor season in September with a change of venue. Please see the notice attached to the front of this bulletin for more detail.

THE GREATER WIGSTON HERITAGE CENTRE

This new project, a library and heritage centre, is situated in Station Road close to the swimming baths. GWHS have already received two donations towards the setting up costs:

“The Society would like to thank Peter Cousins for his generous donation of £50 towards the new Great Wigston Heritage Centre. He made the donation at the meeting on 17th April and confirmed that this was part of the revenue from the Heritage and History day held at Age UK on 9th March this year. Thank you Peter. Mike Forryan – Chairman”.

“On returning from holiday after Easter, I received in the post, addressed to Wigston Heritage Centre, 10 x £10 notes totaling £100, with a note saying this is a donation towards the Heritage Centre to help it along in its early days. The identity of the donor is confidential. They wish us good luck with this venture, and I would like to thank the donor on behalf of the Greater Wigston Historical Society and the Heritage Centre for their generosity and to assure them that it will be put to good use. Ann Cousins – Secretary.”

More donations have followed and we have also received £300 from the Oadby & Wigston UDC community grant fund. Our first sponsor Inkrite, of West Avenue has donated a printer. Other donations are bookcases, tables and chairs, three computers, a laminator, binder, TV with video player, pens & pencils and a visitor sign in book, together with tea, coffee and tea towels etc. All the electrical equipment will be wifi connected. Our grateful thanks to all for their generosity, and also for the help and support from Wigston College.

FRONT COVER PICTURES

Linda Forryan, our membership secretary has decided not to continue creating those lovely drawings for the front page of the bulletin.

“We shall miss them and on behalf of all members I would like to thank her very much for creating them over the years. Thank you Linda. Tricia Berry - Bulletin Editor.”

WIGSTON LUNATIC ASYLUM

The last bulletin took a look at workhouses so this time we will move to another very tragic aspect of human life, mental illness. This as well as the physical kind has always been a part of the human experience. Today some types of this tragic affliction can be cured or at least controlled by drugs and enlightened therapy. Sufferers in the past were not so fortunate. Nothing could really help them with the limited knowledge available, though various methods of treatment were tried. Others whose indisposition was only temporary could make a good recovery, though might be liable to further attacks in the future.

The first establishment in the world for the mentally ill was the Priory of St. Mary of Bethlehem, Nr. Bishopsgate, London, which was founded in 1247. Much later, in the 16th Century, the building was vacated at the Reformation and given by Henry VIII to the City of London as a hospital for poor lunatics. It became known as the Bethlem Hospital and was at the time the only public institution for the insane in the country. The word 'bedlam' is a corruption of this name. The Bethlem Hospital subsequently moved to Moorfields to a site now occupied by Liverpool Street Station. Then in 1813 to Lambeth Road, to a new complex part of which now houses the Imperial War Museum. Finally in 1931 it transferred to Beckenham, South London.

No distinction was made between those born with a congenital condition and those who developed a disorder later in their lives. Understanding was truly limited, the word lunatic actually originated from the belief that there was a connection between mental illness and the moon. Mild cases were absorbed into the community, and if victims had relatives and friends available, they fared reasonably well. Most communities had their village idiot. If they got into trouble they were likely to be put in goal, in the workhouse or house of correction along with anyone else. It was only the more seriously disturbed who needed to be admitted to an asylum, or those where a cure was believed possible, or those whose family could afford to hide their embarrassment.

One of the first purpose built asylums for the insane in London was St. Luke's Hospital in Old Street. This was completed in 1782 and was erected to relieve the pressure on Bethlem. It was run by a Dr. Battie whose name is familiar today as a slang word for insanity.

The 1744 Vagrancy Act had allowed dangerous lunatics to be detained by a warrant signed by two magistrates. No medical certificate was required and the chance of subsequent release was poor. These people had to be sent to workhouses and houses of correction at the time. There was a huge increase in the population from seven to twelve million, during the reign of George III (1760-1820). This together with the effects of the Industrial Revolution led to a vast increase in the numbers of paupers and also lunatics. By the end of the 18th Century there was over-crowding and parishes began contracting out their disturbed inhabitants to private madhouses as they were called. There was consequently a large increase in the numbers of these private establishments, from twenty at the beginning of the 19th Century to one hundred in 1844.

George III had his attacks of insanity in 1788, 1802, 1804 and 1810 and this increased public awareness and understanding of the condition. The first Parliamentary Act for regulating private madhouses was introduced in 1774. This made it compulsory for all lunatic establishments to have licences which controlled the number of pauper and private patients that could be accommodated. They had to be inspected regularly by two local magistrates and a physician and make returns to the Royal College of Physicians of all admissions and discharges.

Fitting into the National pattern, the first establishment for the care of the mentally ill in Leicestershire was a private madhouse in Leicester which was founded by William Arnold in c1740. Mr. Arnold (c1695-1770) was a Baptist preacher and a baker as well as an asylum proprietor. His son Thomas trained as a physician in Edinburgh and came back to Leicester to manage his father's asylum. It was situated in North Bond Street now part of St. Peter's Lane, but later transferred to a house called Belle Grove, in Belgrave Gate, Leicester.

Dr. Thomas Arnold (1742-1816) became very famous, he was known to George III, though not invited to treat him. He wrote two books on the care of the insane. Between 1801 and 1812 he admitted at least 141 private patients, half from outside Leicestershire. One of his better known patients, in 1804, was the popular Baptist preacher, Rev. Robert Hall.

The Leicester Infirmary which opened in 1771 had specifically excluded "persons disordered in their senses" until a specially built extension, after many delays was opened in 1794. This was the first public accommodation for the insane in the area and was for poor patients but not paupers (i.e. parish maintained). It was financed by public subscription and occasional legacies. Dr. Thomas Arnold was appointed Chief Physician. He was already the holder of this post at the main infirmary.

Concern in 1807 about the insane poor led to the appointment of a Select Committee "to enquire into the state of criminal and pauper lunatics, in England and Wales, and of the laws relating thereto". This committee found that the treatment of paupers boarded in private mad houses depended "wholly upon the good conduct of the keeper". This report led directly to the County Asylums Act of 1808 whereby counties could, authorised by the magistrates and at the expense of the ratepayers, build County Asylums, either singly or jointly with a neighbouring county.

Following a report in 1833 in which it was shown that there were 164 poor lunatics in the county and only 22 asylum places available, the Leicestershire County Lunatic Asylum was built, in 1836, to replace the by then inadequate infirmary facilities. This building still stands today and is now the Fielding Johnson Building at Leicester University. Designed by William Parsons it was erected by the magistrates of the county to comply with the requirements of the 1828 Amendment of the County Asylums Act. It cost £17,948 which sum came partly from the county rates and partly from a subscription fund. Initially designed to take 104 patients it stood in large grounds of 72 acres. Over the years the building was enlarged and in 1845 to comply with the Act of that year a union was formed with Rutland so that patients from there could be admitted. It then became known as The Leicestershire & Rutland Lunatic Asylum. One of the honorary physicians in 1846 was Dr. Arnold (a son of Thomas). In 1869 overcrowding was again a problem and the borough had to make separate arrangements for town patients. Land was purchased at Humberstone and a borough asylum opened there. This was subsequently named the Towers Hospital.

The county asylum moved in 1908 to a new purpose built complex at Carlton Hayes, Narborough. Both this and the Towers Hospital have long since closed.

In the county a private asylum has been traced at Hathern, Nr. Loughborough. This was owned by Samuel Marriott and was in business in 1810 and 1811 during which time it received eight patients, two of whom had been certified by Dr. Arnold of Leicester. No more has been discovered about this asylum and there is no local record of its existence.

The only other private asylum in Leicestershire appears to have been the Wigston Lunatic Asylum. Research undertaken into its history has touched on a small part of the history of the parish of Wigston Magna in the first half of the 19th Century. As the asylum was a family business it has also

focused on the Blunt family who came to live in the village and serve the local people, as surgeons, for two generations.

The earliest record so far discovered of a member of the Blunt family in Wigston is in 1797. In that year Edward Blunt (1772-1843) duly paid land tax for a house and land he leased in the parish. Edward was a young surgeon born and brought up in Loughborough, where his family had lived for at least two generations. On 18/6/1799 he married Mary Thornton (1777-1860) at All Saints' Church, Blaby. Mary and her family lived at Blaby Hill, Blaby.

By 1801 Edward had leased more land and had also bought the house, a large three storey property known as The Cedars, in Moat Street, which once displayed a prominent cedar tree in the front garden. This house happily survives though much of the grounds are now built upon. It has since been divided into three separate dwellings and is known as 64, 64a and 64b, Moat Street. Edward held his surgeries in rooms at the rear of this house and patients accordingly used to approach from that direction through the lanes. The path they used became known as Blunt's Lane as it still is today. Edward and Mary had two children, a daughter Sarah (1803-1839) and a son Thomas Edward (1807-1858), both children were baptised at the Independent Chapel in Long Street, now the United Reformed Church.

Edward was one of nine siblings but it is his older brother John (1762-1826) also born in Loughborough, who is most relevant to this article. John also trained as a surgeon and had settled in Jury Street, Warwick where he established an asylum for the mentally ill. In 1809 he decided to move to Wigston, it is not known if he brought any patients with him. He purchased a dwelling house with cottage, outbuildings and 7 acres of land in Newgate End, from Ebenezer Goodrich and another, the executors of William Goodrich deceased. Some fifteen years earlier in 1794 members of Wigston Parish had produced a leaflet appealing for funds for a lunatic asylum. It is not known if John Blunt's arrival was a belated response to this appeal or whether there had been an asylum in the village before his arrival. In any case his brother Edward would have advised him of the need for an asylum and informed him when suitable premises became available.

It can be assumed that Wigston House, as the asylum was named, would have needed little adaptation for its new role. The situation was ideal, quiet, private and out of the way, yet close to all amenities. The building might have been organised to provide a communal living room for each sex for the private patients, with separate rooms for sleeping and more secure accommodation with small or barred windows for any seriously disturbed. Wealthy patients, if not dangerous, would often live with the proprietor, in his house, as one of the family. Interestingly there were 'air funnels' for heating, an early form of central heating and probably much safer than open fires. The adjoining yard would have been enclosed by a high wall and used for exercise, it contained two pumps for washing down the dirty and incontinent, as well as for drinking water etc.

John converted another building on the site, which had previously been used for wool storage, into a house for himself. It had a yard, outbuildings, gardens and orchard, and was situated at the far end of Newgate End at right angles to the asylum and faced east across the fields to Horsewell Lane. It had a formal entrance from Moat Street, with a drive along what is now Cedar Avenue, through an orchard and gardens to the house. Much later, in the early part of last century it was known as 97, Moat Street.

John's move to Wigston proved a profitable one. He admitted at least 9 new patients in 1810 and a further 15 in 1811. The maximum he was licensed to keep was 10 male and 10 female at any one time. The income this provided together with his earnings from general practice made him a

wealthy man. He invested his surplus money in the purchase of additional property. In 1811 he bought 7 acres 23 perches to the south of Cooks Lane, late the property Sarah Astill. The following year he bought Yew Tree House, yard and garden and 20 acres, from the estate of Daniel Goodrich. Yew Tree House is on the corner of Newgate End and what is now Gas Lane.

Eight years after John's arrival in Wigston the middle aged bachelor must have caused quite a stir when he decided to get married. His bride was Ann Tebbutt (c1791-1859) thirty years his junior. She was born in Sutton Bassett, Northants but at the time of her marriage was "of this parish". They were married by licence at All Saints' Church, Wigston. In the years that followed the couple had three daughters, Ann Burnett born in 1818, Rebecca in 1819 and Elizabeth in 1823.

John's business affairs continued to prosper. In 1820 he bought a house, garden and workshop with half an acre of orchard near Brick Kiln Close, on the corner of Welford Road and Moat Street. In 1823 he made a final purchase of 12 acres to the North of Cooks Lane. This brought his total holding to approximately 47 acres. Some of this land was let to tenants, while some was owner occupied suggesting he had an interest in farming.

The Asylum, however, began to decline and by 1825 the number of patients in residence had reduced to six. This could have been deliberate contraction because of ill health rather than lack of business for sadly John died, aged 64, on 25/9/1826. His burial was not to be found in Wigston but was eventually discovered in a Quaker burial ground in Castle Donington. A note in the burial register mentions he was not a member. Several other burials about this time were also 'not members'. His estate was valued at not more than £1,500, a considerable sum in 1826. He left everything to Ann in trust for 22 years, or until all their children attained the age of 21, when it was to be divided equally between the children, with Ann then receiving an annuity from them of £100 per year. It is strange that John's brother Edward was not an executor and neither he nor his children named in the will. Living close by it would seem natural to leave the management of the asylum to Edward and for him to have been appointed a trustee and to advise the young widow and her three little daughters, the eldest of whom was only 8 years old. Perhaps as the two brothers were both medical practitioners living in close proximity there was some disagreement between them.

After John's death Ann and her daughters moved to Yew Tree House. She employed Joshua Burgess to take charge of the asylum for her. Joshua was a surgeon and apothecary already working in Wigston and had most probably been helping John in his later years. Not much is known about Joshua except that he was born c1797 in Leicestershire (possibly Groby) and that he appears to have been unmarried.

In the 1828 issue of Pigot's Counties Commercial Directory the Asylum is described thus:

"The Lunatic Asylum which has been established here [in Great Wigston] upwards of 20 years, is judiciously situated, in a retired and salubrious spot affording those patients who are capable of appreciating the recreations of country life, all the comforts, domestic and otherwise, that can be applied for their unhappy disorder."

Joshua Burgess continued to run the asylum with a steady 6 to 7 patients but in 1837 the opening of the County Asylum (on the site of the present University of Leicester) presented a serious threat to its future. He inserted an advertisement in the Leicester Chronicle pointing out the advantages of a private asylum. Fortunately the county asylum very soon became overcrowded and had to limit the places available for private chronic cases. As this was the category of patient then housed at Wigston the asylum was able to continue much as before.

Ann's daughter Rebecca came of age on 19/3/1840 and under the terms of her late father's will became the legal owner of the asylum, which Joshua Burgess continued to run. Her two sisters, sadly did not survive their childhood. Baby Elizabeth died on 20/4/1827 (only a few months after her father) aged 3½ years, and Ann Burnett on 17/11/1834 aged 16 years.

The 1841 census return shows Ann and Rebecca living with one male and one female servant. At the asylum Joshua had a male servant and a housekeeper living with him together with two female servants. The seven patients are discreetly listed by their initials only and all but two were born in Leicestershire.

On 15/2/1842 when she was nearly twenty three years old, Rebecca married John Ewins Bennett, a farmer, from Husbands Bosworth. Their marriage at All Saints' Church, Wigston, was witnessed by Charles Holland Baddeley the retired East India Company captain who lived just up the road at Wigston Hall in Long Street. Upon her marriage Rebecca's new husband took over the legal ownership of the asylum. At this time the licence was amended to cover only private patients.

By 1844 Joshua had left the asylum and a Mr. C. Benfield was listed as the proprietor. He was not medically qualified and the 1845 Lunatics Act was introducing at this time much higher standards of care. Local magistrates had to visit more frequently and enforce rigorously the new standards. In a second report in 1847/8 the magistrates did not approve of what they found at Wigston House, and concluded "that though the asylum was formerly open to much objection, it is now in a somewhat improved state". However the Justices still refused to renew the licence. This may have been because neither John Bennett nor C. Benfield were medically qualified. John and Rebecca had to make changes or give up the asylum. They decided to transfer the business to Rebecca's cousin Thomas Edward Blunt who by this time had taken over his father Edward Blunt's medical practice and home, The Cedars in Moat Street. Edward and his wife Mary having retired and moved to Princes Street (now Princess Road) in Leicester.

John and Rebecca Bennett left Wigston and went to live at The Grange, Husband's Bosworth, where John could concentrate on his farming interests. Rebecca's mother Ann moved to Husband's Bosworth too, where she died in 1859 and was buried in the churchyard.

Thomas Edward Blunt like his father was a busy man. As well as his general medical practice he was the District Medical Officer for the Wigston area of the Blaby Poor Law Union. He was one of the two surgeons to the Union Workhouse in Enderby. He also had overall responsibility for the asylum. Wigston's population began to expand from 1841 onwards, from 2189 inhabitants in that year to 2441 in 1851, mainly due to the opening of the Midland Counties Railway in 1840. This giving the village its first railway station and making the area much more accessible.

Life was busy on the domestic front too. Thomas Edward Blunt had married Martha Ward Webb and the couple had their first child Edward Thornton Blunt on 28/8/1840, he was to be followed by five other siblings all baptised at the Independent Chapel (now United Reformed Church). Thomas Edward Blunt's father died at his Leicester home on 4/12/1843 and was buried at All Saints' Wigston. Thomas Edward Blunt being the only surviving child was the main beneficiary. His sister Sarah had married Charles Bowmar, of Leicester, another surgeon, but she very tragically died 10 years later in childbirth.

In 1851 Thomas Edward Blunt employed a young surgeon, Charles Smith Bompas to run the asylum. He was a Baptist and member of the Bompas family who owned a famous asylum at Fishponds, Bristol. The 1851 census shows him at Wigston House which still contained its usual

number of 7 patients. The matron was Martha Webb by them a 70 year old widow who was Thomas Edward Blunt's mother-in-law. There was also a keeper and a servant to attend the ladies. Comparison with the 1841 Census shows two patients were in a younger age range at this time. It also shows that four of the patients were present in 1841 and 1851 suggesting a steady group of chronic patients with few new admissions or discharges.

Also in 1851 Thomas Edward Blunt tried to increase business by advertising in the Medical Directory, however despite this effort to expand, after a visit on behalf of the Commissioners of Lunacy in 1852 the licence was withdrawn and the asylum closed. What actually caused the closure of one of the longest lasting private asylums in the county is not clear. Public attitudes were changing and it could be that the middle aged staff then employed were not able to manage the patients without an unacceptable degree of restraint. Whatever the reason after about forty three years the last remaining private asylum in Leicestershire closed its doors for the last time. As a result one or two of the patients were transferred to the county asylum. Charles Smith Bompas moved to become Poor Law Medical Officer for Manchester before emigrating to Australia in 1868.

John and Rebecca Bennett did not have any children so following their deaths the former asylum property and its adjoining land passed to other members of the Bennett family until Henry Bennett Ewins Barwell Ewins of Marston Trussell Hall sold it to Wigston Urban District Council on 25/3/1920. The council used the yard and buildings as a storage depot for many years, but more recently it has been developed for housing.

Tricia Berry

Acknowledgements: My grateful thanks to Peter Carpenter for allowing me to add to his original research as I thought fit. My thanks also to Oadby & Wigston Borough Council for allowing me (many years ago) to view the deeds they hold on the former asylum property.

WIGGY'S CHILD 1926-1939

TEA AND TOAST (Part six of Doreen Boulter's childhood memories)

The coals shifted in the firegrate, sending a shower of sparks flying up the chimney, the bars at the front were white hot, the brass knob on the side oven gleamed in the firelight; the kettle sang quietly on the hob. Mother handed me the toasting fork. "You start toasting the pikelets while I mash the tea" she said. It was a bitterly cold afternoon, with the wind howling round the house. To sit before the fire eating hot buttered pikelets and toast was my idea of bliss.

Our toasting fork had an expanding handle so you didn't burn your fingers when it was held before the fire. The fancy brass fork that hung on a nail at the side of the mantelpiece was only for show, on the top it had a model of Nelson's flagship "Victory".
Came the day when Mother announced we were to have a new fireplace; it was to be a modern tiled grate with the fire in a basket on the floor. "It will do away with all that black-leading" said Mother. My imagination ran riot. How could you have a fire in a basket on the floor? "It's the same as the front room grate, only different," said Mother. I gave up.

In due course, the workmen arrived, the old black fire grate and the oven with its lovely brass knob were removed and the new tiled fireplace installed. At school, I told my playmates all about our

new innovation. “How are you going to do your toast now?” said Mary, always practical, was Mary, “it will drop in the fire.” Too true, at times we had more slices of charcoal bread in the fire grate than coal! However, with practice and fortitude we managed successfully to ‘do our toast’.

Another member of the household who welcomed the new fireplace with enthusiasm, was the dog. At every opportunity, he would curl up on the hearthrug, inching ever nearer to the fire until the hair on his front paws started to smoulder. The smell of burning dog hair pervaded the room, not that he cared, he would move one paw over the other when he became alight, then resume his slumbers, paws paddling the air as he chased his ‘dream’ rabbits through the fields.

SPRING CLEANING

Spring Cleaning in our household commenced with the advent of the chimney sweep. It was a very moving experience. The living room and the front room were stripped of everything moveable. Immovable objects were swathed in old sheets. The brass fender and fire irons were stacked in the kitchen, carpets taken up; the aspidistra was born with reverence round to Aunt Clara next door. No soot was allowed to sully those glossy green leaves. Mother’s beloved fox fur and Father’s bowler hat were removed from the top of the dresser in the front room and taken upstairs for safety. All this was accomplished the night before the sweep cometh!

Next morning the arrival of the sweep was heralded by the chitter bang of his ancient motor-cycle combination. Everyone in the street knew when the sweep turned up, the racket kicked up by his bike and frequent back-firing was enough to awaken the dead! He would come clomping up the entry, Father would soon open the door, “Mornin’ Bill, bit nippy” he shouted, dropping his brushes and rods onto the floor with a clatter. I would hear shuffling noises and cascades of soot would fall as the brushes were pushed up the chimney. There would be more clattering as he gathered his rods and brushes together, and the bags of soot were negotiated for, the transaction carried out at the top of his voice. Clomping back down the entry, he mounted his bike, and after several attempts, accompanied by several kicks to various parts of his machine, his motor-cycle roared into life, and backfiring all the way down the street he made his departure.

The all pervading smell of soot downstairs was soon dispelled, by opening the doors and windows. Curtains were taken down, ready for cleaning, and then began the great clean up. Swathed in pinafores, hair covered by a scarf, Mother and I commenced our labours. Floors washed, carpets beaten on the line, fender and fire irons polished, grates black-leaded (this was before the advent of our modern tiled grate) pictures cleaned “Cows at the Waterhole” and “Vixen and Cubs” once again dominated the walls, and all the ornaments and photographs returned to their rightful places. The aspidistra, fetched from Aunt Clara’s tender care, was replaced in the front window in the place of honour.

“Sweep Days” we had rice pudding. Mother would place the enamel dish, covered with water, in the oven to cook for hours. “It didn’t need no looking after, while we get on” she said. Neither did the stew, placed on the top of the stove; this lasted from Monday to Friday with additions throughout the week. By Friday you could almost cut it with a knife and fork! When Mother dished up that rice pudding, cut in chunks, with a grit-like topping, a sprinkle of sugar, and a spot of milk, I would force it down, crunching away. I never knew rice pudding came creamy until I was whisked off to hospital with the Diphtheria, and it was served in the children’s ward at dinner-time!