

Desford and District Local History Society

Newsletter

Spring 2018



A Very Enjoyable AGM

President: Caroline Wessel.

Chairperson: Bernard Grimshaw. Treasurer: Dennis Casson. Secretary: Angela Thomas.

Committee members: Pat Crane, Jane Crowson, Molly Marcus, Gwyneth Reed, John Richards, Steve Thorpe, Pam Wocha

Once the formal reports, election of officers and the break for refreshments was over, there followed four very thoughtful and entertaining mini talks given by some of our own history society

members. The volunteers were given no longer than ten minutes each - quite a feat.

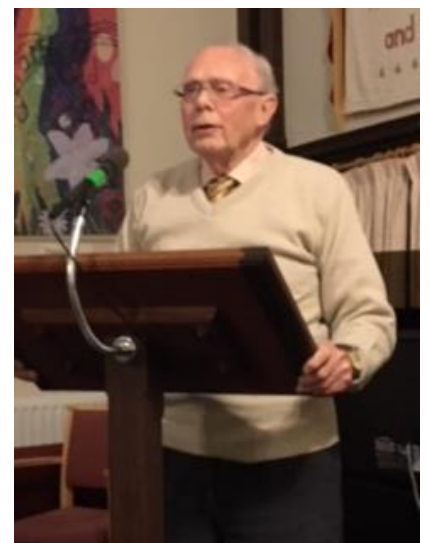
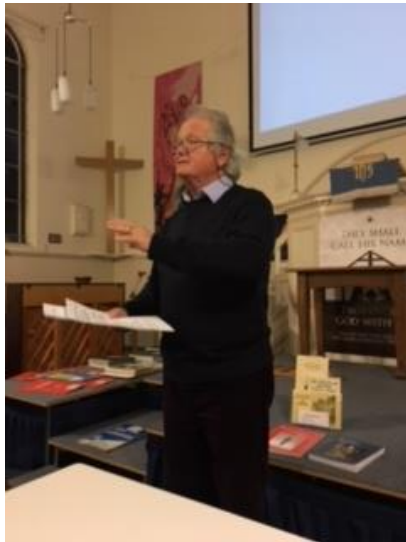
Bernard Grimshaw was first to entertain and enlighten us. He gave us a thought provoking talk about the philosophy of history.

Peter Wocha followed telling us about his research into the Wocha family tree and the discovery of his Huguenot ancestry. It highlighted how immigration had helped bring diversity to the East End of London where he was born.

Huw Thomas then, with the use of many old photographs, regaled us with his personal memories of his own childhood in South Wales in the late 1940's.

Finally, John Russell gave us his own amusing and quirky potted version of some aspects of American/English History.

It was a thoroughly enjoyable and revealing time for all those present.



More snippets of Desford history as supplied by Caroline Wessel. (Source from snippets as collected and recorded by Mrs Kathy Emmerson in the 1950s)

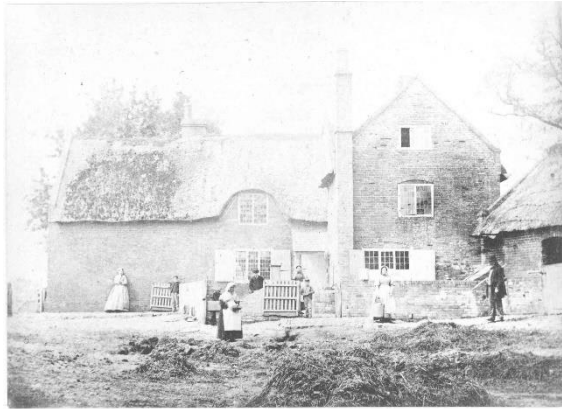
Did you know there was a ship named after this village? It was called H.M.S. Desford and was one of eighteen Seawards Defence boats built during 1953.

They were an entirely new design of naval vessel, their purpose being to detect, locate and attack hostile submarines, including midget submarines in inshore waters such as the approaches to large ports. They were 117ft long and 20ft wide and required a crew of nineteen. H.M.S. Desford was transferred to the Ceylon Navy and renamed Kotiya. In 1964 she was struck by a typhoon in Trincomalee harbour and sank. Later she was salvaged and scrapped. This photograph (Wikipedia) is actually of H.M.S. Droxford, similar to the H.M.S. Desford.



Do you recognise these buildings? (Photographs obtained by our archivists.)

All will be revealed at our next meeting on Tuesday 20th March and in the next newsletter



Future Events for your calender

Tuesday 20th March: Hunter or Hunted by Katie Bridger.
Desford Free Church at 7.30 p.m.

Sunday April 15th: The Leicestershire Archaeological & Historical Society History Fair at Beaumanor Hall, Woodhouse Eaves. Theme WW1 and the aftermath. We have joined with Newbold Verdon History group in producing a WW1 display.

Wednesday 25th April: Snibston: Visit to Century Theatre, Coalville. Presentation & backstage tour. Cost: £4 includes tea & biscuits. Visit lasts approx. 2 hours. Car sharing can be arranged. Max. no. 25. Please sign up at the meeting on March 20th when more details will be available.

Friday May 4th (Ibstock Community College) & **Sat. 5th May** The Palace, High Street, Ibstock: Ibstock Historical Society. Exhibition WW1 (including Desford's display).

Sunday June 10th Desford Carnival with our display about Desford Airfield put up by our archivists.



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Summer 2018



Very Busy and Enjoyable

The last few months has included two fascinating talks and a very interactive visit to the Century Theatre at Snibston.

The talk about the Life and Times of Sir William Turville, (1416 - 1560), given by Katie Bridger on March 20th was very well attended and proved to be most informative.



Sir William Turville was a Leicestershire justice of the peace, landowner and litigant who lived through both the Wars of the Roses and the English Reformation, and who found himself on the wrong side of the law. It seems that most of William Turville's life was spent in trying to enclose lands he believed were his by right as a member of the aristocracy and the fact that his relatives had land in Thurlaston where his parents are buried. Most of her information for her very detailed research was taken from legal documents, especially those that were litigations against him brought by various plaintiffs complaining about

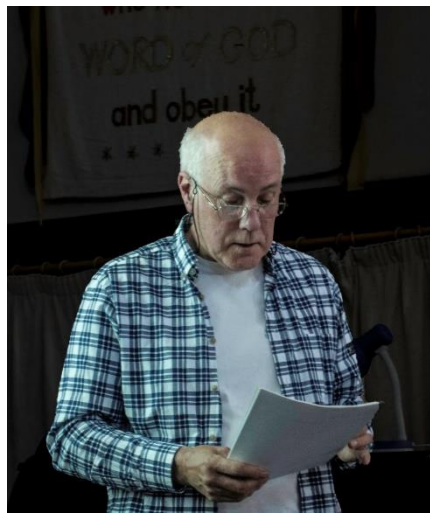
his enclosures of land. Two of the local plaintiffs from the local gentry, Humphry Stafford and Francis Puttney Esquires were particularly vociferous in their allegations about the unlawful enclosure around Croft Hill. She showed many of the documents that still exist and it was clear how long and arduous the task must have been. From her evidence it was obvious that William Turville was not a popular man.

He is buried at Aston Flamville Church.



The next talk on Thursday 15 May by Brian Thurnby Court, one of more than 50 houses have been demolished since 1900. Here is a Dennis Casson for those who could not

Thurnby Court was one of Leicestershire's extravagant houses. The house was belonged to James Alexander Jackson, a



Screaton was about in Leicestershire that fascinating report from attend.

shortest lived, but most completed in 1870 and wealthy American from

Philadelphia. He made his fortune in cotton broking, including running the blockade during the American Civil War.



The house cost about £250,000 to build (approximately £20million in today's money). It had a marble hall, 17 bedrooms, racquet court, its own gas works and some underground stables with a resident blacksmith. The style of the building was a typically eclectic Victorian design - a mixture of Gothic, French and Italian influences as well as Scottish Baronial style features.

James Jackson and his wife

Caroline are recorded as living at Thurnby Court in the 1871 Census. Fifteen servants are also listed on the census including a cook, 4 maids, 4 grooms, a coachman and a gardener. The servants came from different parts of Britain, including Swansea, Shropshire and Bath.

Though James and Caroline are recorded as husband and wife, they were not married. There is a record of their marriage in London later in 1875. Caroline was from Leamington, the daughter of a surgeon, Richard Jones.

In the 1881 census the number of servants was down to 7 and in 1891 there were just 5 servants recorded in the census. The Jacksons moved out of Thurnby Court later in 1891 to live in London.

The house was let to the Checkland family on a ten-year lease. Mr Checkland was the owner of Desford Colliery, (Shown in this photograph). James Jackson died in 1896.

Ownership was transferred to Caroline. The Checklands moved out of the house in 1901, Caroline having declined their offer to buy the house. From 1904 to 1907 a group of French nuns rented the house. By the time Caroline died in 1911 at a house in Belgravia, London, Thurnby Court stood empty. The property was sold in 1913 for £2,350 and became part of some questionable deals.



The final months of Thurnby court are not well documented. It was bought in 1914 by a Mr Heath, a builder/speculator. It was demolished by dynamite in 1916.

The ornamental lake of Thurnby Court is now part of a development called Lakeside Court in Thurnby village. The original stone summer house stands on the island in the lake.

Brian Screaton published a book about Thurnby Court. The society purchased a copy, which is available for members to borrow.

The Century Theatre A Theatre on Wheels

April 25th saw 26 members meet at the Century Theatre, Snibston, for a fascinating and amusing afternoon. A report back from Angela Thomas with photographs by Huw Thomas follows.

We were met by 2 volunteers whose dedication to keeping the theatre running was immediately obvious.

In the auditorium we were regaled with a history of the theatre from its conception by John Ridley, theatre enthusiast and engineer at Sketchley in

Hinckley, to its building by John Ridley, Dick Bull and Rob Robinson between 1948 and 1952, for approximately £20,000. Money to build was raised by private subscription. Famous contributors include Lawrence Olivier, John Mills, Enid Blyton and Agatha Christie. The name 'Century Theatre' was chosen by the three founding fathers chiefly because it was non-committal, holding no political, social or religious implications.

We saw vintage footage of the theatre being moved between towns. No mean feat as the 200 seat auditorium and stage are built on four 33ft long by 10ft wide ex-military trailers. Many famous people have appeared on its stage early in their



careers; Dame Judy Dench, Helen Mirren and Tom Courtney to name but a few. The crew and actors all lived and travelled with the theatre. The theatre toured to many places, travelling the roads before motorways, its last years being spent in Keswick. When Keswick got a permanent theatre, the Century Theatre was 'folded up' for the last time and came back to Leicestershire and its final resting place at Snibston.

At Snibston it has had a new foyer added, with bar, 'mini museum' and toilets!





These days there is a full and varied programme, including many international acts. We completed our visit by inspecting the 'underneath' of the theatre, the changing rooms and backstage.



A highlight was being on stage, complete with lights, curtain opening and music and Pam Wocha 'volunteering' to give us a performance to music of 'The Stripper' (she only removed her scarf !!).

A building such as this would not happen today - Health and Safety, protective clothing, hard hats were nowhere to be seen. A unique experience.'

More snippets of Desford history as supplied by Caroline Wessel. (From snippets an archive as collected and recorded by Mrs Kathy Emmerson in the 1950s)

In 1898, the Wesleyan Methodists paid an annual rent of £12 for what is now the Village Hall to use as their chapel as shown in the photograph.



Vine Cottage, 23 Main Street. Was once part of the estate of the Chamberlin family who owned much of Desford. When Vine Cottage was sold in 1901 the tenant William Gregory and his wife, Alice, were the tenants and William was the village shoemaker. The story was told that he was so anxious to get the property when it was auctioned that he bid against himself. He died in 1922 and was the last person to be buried in the old Baptist church graveyard in High Street.

Future Events for your calender

For those interested in hands-on archaeology, this summer the University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS), in partership with Rutland County Council and the Market Bosworth Society, have an oppourtuniy for volunteers to take part in community archaeology project, 'Bosworth Links Dig 2' (21st - 22nd July). **For more information see the ULAS web site.**

Sunday June 10th 2018. It is the Village carnival at sport in Desford. The History Society will be putting up a display with picture from the archives.

P.S. There is a slim chance that the Desford aircraft might fly over!

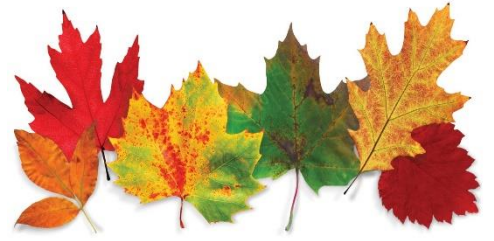
Saturday June 30th. Day visit to Cheltenham arranged by Margaret and Colin James.

Have you visited any interesting historical venues recently? If so how about telling others about it. Just e-mail your piece to: mollymarcus@aol.com. Pop in a picture if you can. Thanks

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Autumn 2018



The Summer began with another successful talk from Peter Liddle about life in the Roman Countryside of Leicestershire.

Held in the church, with its two viewing screens, it brought in extra visitors; always welcome to swell the numbers and add to the funds.

An Enjoyable Visit to Thurnby

As a follow-up from the talk about Thurnby Court in May, a visit was made to the Village of Thurnby on the 14th August.

Thurnby Court itself was demolished by dynamite in 1916, eventually to be built on. The only remaining evidence of the splendid grounds is the ornamental lake, formerly used for skating in the



From This
to This



winter, and the gazebo, a listed building, constructed of Charnwood stone and originally thatched.

Pat (Crane) was our guide taking us round the Thurnby and Bushby Heritage Trail.

We walked in lovely sunshine for about one and a half hours looking at over 20 houses from different periods. Included in this we saw the Queen Anne style house that had belonged to Claud Bennion. He was the son of Charles Bennion who had owned Thurnby Grange which, for forty years, was the home



of Charles Bennion, a business man, manufacturer and philanthropist who purchased Bradgate Park for use by the people of the City and County of Leicester. He is buried in Thurnby Church and commemorated in a window in the church which we saw later.



The time passed quickly with so much to see; though we were all glad a meal had been booked at the Rose and Crown. Thurnby is definitely worth a visit if you are out that way, though the official guide does provide interesting details.

Have you visited any interesting historical venues recently? If so how about telling others about it. Just e-mail your piece to: mollymarcus@aol.com. Pop in a picture if you can. Thanks

The 2018 Annual Trip to Cheltenham

Another beautifully organised trip by Margaret and Colin (James). This time to Cheltenham on the 30th June. The weather could not have been better, lots of sunshine and two guides who certainly



knew what they were talking about. Dubbed the capital of the Cotswolds, it began as an Anglo Saxon village over 1200 year ago. It is also known as Cheltenham Spa and is located on the edge of the Cotswolds. We were taken on a route that gave beautiful examples of Regency buildings, its parks and the unmissable Neptune Fountain whilst being entertained by the story of how the town became a spa town. The accepted local legend is that the original spa was 'discovered' when pigeons started gathering around the spring, thus alerting Mr Mason who owned the land around the spring to the water's special qualities. This is why pigeons feature so much on the town's images. It was the royal visit by King George III in 1788 that really 'put Cheltenham Spa on the map'.

More snippets of Desford history as supplied by Caroline Wessel. (From snippets an archive as collected and recorded by Mrs Kathy Emmerson in the 1950s)

John Weet owned and worked a windmill at Newpit Lane, where the Primary School now stands. He and his wife, Betsy, lived in a house now demolished called Huxley Cottages, next to Welford House on High Street. They had a room where they sold corn and flour and the room had bins all around it and scales to put the sacks on. On one occasion John worked all through the night because of several days lost through waiting for a wind which was strong enough to turn the sail. He was a Parish Overseer, miller and wheel wright, with a sawpit and a forge in the shop in his yard, and he also made coffins. Mrs Weet died in 1896 from shock, after seeing a mad dog shot in her kitchen.

Future Events for your calender

September 18th: 'Elsie May Dearest' given by Sally Prytherch

November 20th: 'Battle of the Beams' given by Terry Sheppard, Charley Heritage Trust.

2019 AGM

As the short talks at the AGM were very popular this year we intend to have more at the 2019 AGM; hence giving plenty of notice. We would be really pleased if some members would offer to do a talk. (10 minutes maximum). The talks can be on any vaguely historical subject: - local, national, family history, items you have collected or something very special to you. It can be serious, (but not too serious) or amusing and light-hearted. You can just talk, do a digital presentation or bring an object/objects to talk about.

Please contact a member of the committee if you would like to take part.

This is your society and your chance to participate!

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Winter 2018



A Christmas message from our Chairman Bernard

At Christmas time, a Chairman's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of the AGM in January. Next year, as ever, we need your help as members.

Firstly. After several years of successfully arranging our main summer visit, Colin and Margaret James want to pass the baton on. The 2019 trip is sorted and they will see that through, but the work for 2020 needs to start next year. Colin and Margaret and your committee will give every help and support, but we need someone with enthusiasm and the time to prepare our 2020 trip. Please step forward: if doing so at the meeting is too daunting, give me a ring (07963221831) or e-mail me on grimshawmfc@gmail.com for a chat.



Similarly, if committee meetings are not your thing, we are looking for helpers with projects like preparing exhibition stands, the Society Christmas Tree and scanning stuff for the Archives. So, if you would like to help, please let me or Angela or any committee member know.

But, pleas for help aside, it is the festive season: I and all the committee hope we have provided a year of talks, visits and newsletters that has met, with your approval and we all wish you and your families Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

The History Christmas Tree in all its glory. Thanks to the people who made it possible.

Visit to; the Edwardian Houses at Leicester University Botanic Gardens on 7th September 2018

12 members of the society took part in this visit. Several of the group had visited the gardens before, but after the tour we all agreed that focussing on the Edwardian Houses gave us an enhanced appreciation of the 'Leicestershire Gem'.

Our tour was led by Peter, a member of the friends of the Botanic gardens. Peter was an excellent guide and greatly contributed to our enjoyment of the visit.

Three of the houses were built during the reign of Edward VIII. They were built in a style that was 'a signifier of wealth and place in society'. Their origins lie in the English Domestic

Revival of the late Victorian period. One of the main architects of this fashion was Sir Edwin Lutyens.

At the start of the 20th century Leicester was a wealthy city. These houses were commissioned by successful businessmen.

1902 - Nether close (renamed Hastings House)

William H. Stevens - shoe manufacturer. Architects were Stockdale Harrison Snr and his son James. They based their design on Old Ragdale Hall, an Elizabethan hunting lodge.

1904 - Middlemeade (renamed Beaumont Hall)

Francis S. Brice - hosiery manufacturer. Architect was Shirley Harrison, younger son of Stockdale Harrison. The house is an example of an Arts and Craft variation on a medieval house.



1907 - the Knoll.

William H. Winterton - brick manufacturer.

Architect was William H. Bidlake. The exterior design is Elizabethan with tall chimneys. The interior is a fine example of the Arts and Craft style.

1927 - Southmeade

Francis S. Brice - shoe manufacturer. This was built as his retirement home. The Architects were James and Shirley Harrison. The style of building has changed.

This is a neo-Georgian building reflecting the proportions and simplicity of classicism.



The University bought these properties after WWII. The upkeep of the houses and gardens became too expensive for the owners.

We completed our visit with tea/coffee and cakes in the ground floor of The Knoll. We were able to view some of the indoor features of the house such as the wood panelling. The inglenook fireplace had blue and white Delft tiles and a hand-beaten copper fire hood

Dennis Casson

Elsie May Dearest: A Snapshot of Life in a Bygone Era

Sally Prytherch came to talk to the Society on September 18th. Her presentation centred on the life of her paternal grandmother Elsie May. She had discovered an old roll top desk that had belonged to Elsie which had contained a whole series of letters that had been written by Elsie's two husbands, which had remained untouched for many years. Sally said that the

discovery had awakened an interest in her family history and she described her research as 'going on a journey'. Sally felt that the experience had changed her life and given her fresh insights into lives lived many years ago.

Elsie May lived from 1899-1997. She was raised in Newfoundpool. She had a strict upbringing. She was very affected by the poverty around her and she wrote an article for a local magazine describing the conditions of poor people in Leicester. She was a committed socialist and this had a bearing on her general outlook on life. She was also interested in theosophy, which explores the nature of divinity on the origin and purpose of the universe. At the age of 18 she ran away to Witham in Essex to marry Harold. In that era such behaviour would have seemed very daring and foolhardy.

Harold came from a large family who had been brought up in the slums of Atherstone. Many of his brothers and sisters died from the conditions in



which they lived. Sally discovered that Harold had a brother called George. He was a 'difficult' child and ended up in Desford Industrial School located just outside Botcheston. It later became Desford Boys School, which was an Approved School and is now derelict: the forerunner to Young Offenders Centres. Apparently, George's name is on a memorial stone at the site of the old school. George fought in The Great War and eventually died of a head injury.

Harold and Elsie were often apart because of the nature of his job. He wrote a series of amusing and affectionate letters (discovered in the desk). Some of these were read out by members of the audience during the talk to great effect. Harold became ill and stayed in a convalescent home to recover. Meanwhile Elsie and Harold had a bungalow purpose built for them in Newtown Linford close to the entrance of Bradgate Park. Tragically Harold died of a stroke on July 3rd, 1938 in his early forties. There is a gravestone for him in Newtown Linford cemetery. Elsie was left to bring up 3 children on a pension of 21 shillings a week. She opened her bungalow as a guest house to make ends meet. Elsie met Cyril and married him in 1941. It is thought they met through their common theosophical interests. They moved to Thornton. Elsie died age 98.

The talk was fascinating because it illustrated beautifully how the particular details of a family study can give rise to wider issues in society. Topics such as poverty, slum dwelling, wars, infant mortality, politics, religion, health and family life were all touched on.

David Marcus

The Battle of the Beams

November 10th, 2018

What a fascinating talk from Terry Sheppard of the Charley Heritage Trust this was. He was so enthusiastic and certainly knew his subject and although quite a bit was, for me, too technical, it still was quite riveting, and I learnt so much not just about the beam deflector in Charnwood but also elsewhere.



The building, hidden deep in Charnwood was one of the secret weapons invented during the war by R.V. Jones that interfered with a German invention that used radio beams whereby bombers hit very specific targets in all weathers, by navigating along these beams with extreme accuracy. These hidden installations were able to confuse the navigation system of

the bombers, so devastation was avoided.

Molly Marcus

Short extract from 'WW2 People's War' (An archive of world War Two memories-written by the public gathered by the BBC).

'In the early part of the second World War the Germans began to use a radio beam system which they had been developing since the mid-thirties. It was a guidance system, which used intersecting radio beams to direct aircraft to any particular target in Britain.

A brilliant scientist, Professor R.V. Jones, working for British intelligence was responsible for investigating the German application of this system, and to discover a means of countering it.'

It became known as 'The Battle of the Beams'

From Caroline Wessel

Five members of our Society recently attended a WW1 Conference organised by the Academic Panel of *Centuries of Stories*, a four-year lottery-funded project to discover stories about Leicestershire people during WW1. The event, held at De Montfort University, The Venue, was free of charge and attracted a full audience of over 220 people, who also enjoyed a superb buffet lunch. Hosted by the Record Office's Senior Archivist, Robin Jenkins, seven academic papers of original research were presented on such diverse subjects as Hallaton village in WW1; Leicestershire's part in saving the nation from starvation; changing attitudes to WW1 war memorials; overseas soldiers buried in Welford Road

cemetery; the medical records of Leicestershire regiment soldiers regarding shellshock; what motivated Leicestershire men to enlist; and the world's only university founded as a war memorial - the University of Leicester.

Just a little more about Caroline

Caroline has served on the *Century of Stories* Academic Panel for the past four years and said that one of the greatest pleasures of her involvement was reading the number of fascinating papers submitted to the Academic Panel - though it was very hard to make the final choice as they were all of such high quality. Particularly exciting was the recent discovery of the Leicestershire Regiment' WW1 highly detailed medical record in the Public Record Office at Kew, that highlighted the tragedy of those suffering from shell-shock before it was acknowledged as a medical condition.

Caroline has also said she has Betty's Dickson's alphabetical card index listing details of many, many Desford history items. They should make for fascinating reading our future newsletters. Here is a taster - thanks Caroline in advance of more to come, (Molly Marcus)

ARTISTS-

Frederick Rust lived in Main Street and his studio was the big tin-roofed shed by the footpath. He painted watercolours of many local views, including one of Church Lane in 1897. He shared his studio with Mr T.C. Lawrence, who lived at Bufton lodge, Botcheston and illustrated children's books. In 1898 Desford school teacher, Mrs Orton, was a model for one of Lawrence's pictures that appeared in a children's annual entitled *The Rosebud*.



2019 AGM Tuesday 15th January 2019 at 7.30pm in the Free Church

Attached are AGM minutes for 2018, 2019 Agenda and nomination papers for the committee, which will be elected at the AGM. We welcome new committee members.

PLEASE RETURN COMPLETED NOMINATION PAPERS TO ANGELA THOMAS BY FRIDAY JANUARY 11TH AT 8 OXFORD ROAD.

It would be helpful if you can print out the minutes and agenda to bring to the meeting. Yearly subscriptions (£12) will be collected. Please encourage your friends and neighbours to join the society.

The AGM will be followed by a refreshment buffet. Please bring some finger food to share. The meeting will continue with mini talks and video clips from our archives.

Angela Thomas, Secretary