

# Desford and District Local History Society Newsletter Spring 2017



## Bernard Grimshaw is the Society's New Chairman

53 people attended our AGM on 17th January. Grateful thanks were given to retiring chairman Colin James for his hard work and commitment. Angela Thomas, our secretary for many years, is carrying on with most of her previous jobs but the minutes and newsletter have been re-allocated to other volunteers. Grateful thanks to those committee members who remain for another year. Thank you to all of our members who have re-joined for another interesting year. Once business was dealt with, we were treated to a fascinating talk by Janet O'Donovan about her 'project'

### Janet's Project

Janet had been invited to talk about **The Desford Tapestry**. Her aim is to create an heirloom in stitch of the history and life of the Desford Area; the times past and present. The tapestry will be embroidery, not woven and will comprise items individually stitched then pieced together on a background but it will be **more** than stitch-work: it will have an educational and community aspect.

The whole idea began with a viewing of the Sedbergh Tapestry, followed by 2 years of research and practice. Since retiring Janet has had the time to develop The Loving Hands Group who meet monthly and stitch and knit for various charity projects; giving a core of competent people who can deliver the project. At present re-

cruiting helpers, completing the design, increasing community involvement raising funds and looking at photos are all being tackled. This is truly HISTORY IN THE MAKING.

To find out more contact:

Janet O'Donovan: 01455 823205: [janetmaryodonovan@talktalk.net](mailto:janetmaryodonovan@talktalk.net)



### Tues 21st March: A talk by Steve Ware 'Vulcan to the Sky'

Over 40 people, including many visitors, attended Steve's enthusiastic and detailed history of the Vulcan Bomber. Using a short video those attending intensely felt inside the extremely cramped cockpit soaring revolutionarily delta wing design nuclear bomber. When it was 1982, all the spare parts were Wallis family at Bruntingthorpe. It Airshow though 2015 saw its last touch down. Future plans include the building of large new premises in Doncaster to house the plane and allow visitors to see it once more.



**Future Event: Tuesday 16th May Victoria Park, London Road & the Via Devana** by Caroline Roberts



**Two family photographs**



## The End of An Era In Desford

When Mrs Kathleen Taylor passed away in February, aged 101, it was also the passing of an era. For Mrs Taylor had grown up in Desford, where her father was the publican of the Blue Bell Inn, and even in old age she had very sharp and acute memories of her Desford Childhood.

And this was the name of a small book published in 1996 that brought together her many and varied recollections of a village that in the 1920s

was still rural and where life was simple but people were happy. Her charismatic and kind father, Mr Starbuck, was a central personality in the village and - as the only car owner - undertook many useful tasks: taking the doctor on his rounds, delivering brides to church, transporting people to the railway station after leaving their horses and traps at the Blue Bell stables, and collecting blocks of ice essential for making ice cream, sent by train from Leicester to Desford. The chapters of the book include The Blue Bell; Schooldays; Church and Sunday School; Friends, Neighbours and Leisuretime; Jitties; Shops; Calendar Feasts and Customs; and Sad Times. In the final chapter entitled 'Looking Back', Kathleen ponders on all the wonderful and adventurous things she has done in her life, but says "none of these things can ever take away the joys of my childhood, or the love of my parents".



**Mr Starbuck's car**



**The Blue Bell Inn**

Mrs Taylor's funeral took place at Nuneaton Crematorium on February 3rd. Former Desford Rector, Reverend Richard Sharpe, delivered a memorable service in which he quoted liberally from Mrs Taylor's delightful reminiscences recorded for all time in 'A Desford Childhood'



**Kathleen Taylor**



# Desford and District Local History Society Newsletter Summer 2017



## So far ...

It has been a very busy time since the spring newsletter, with talks and visits. Perhaps the most memorable has been the annual trip on 10th June to King's Lynn & Sandringham, impeccably organised by Colin & Margaret. On arrival at King's Lynn a small party went on to Sandringham to look at the Queen's Christmas home. The rest of us were split into 2 groups and shown around by guides, both of whom had an expert knowledge of the history of the town. They were excellent and the time flew by as significant events and buildings were explained to us. There was much to see and hear. King's Lynn was once one of the most important ports in England and as a result has a wonderful selection of old buildings and architecture. There are narrow cobbled streets, grand squares and an attractive riverfront. There are apparently more listed buildings in King's Lynn than York! It was also the home town of Captain George Vancouver, who circumnavigated the globe in search of the northwest passage eventually lending his name to the famous Canadian city and island. There was a feeling amongst our group that we had only scratched the surface of Kings Lynn and that it was very much worth a return journey at some later date. On the way home we stopped off at The Collyweston Slater for an excellent meal, much needed for tired but satisfied bodies.



## Nearer to home

In May the University of Leicester opened their dig at Bede Island for 2 open days and invited the public to view the site. They had uncovered a Roman Villa with a large area of mosaic floor (the largest in Leicestershire) So far 6 rooms have been exposed, alongside fragments of pottery. Hundreds of people queued to be taken on a very informative guided tour along the viewing platform. It was a unique opportunity and the finds, including the floor (which will be lifted and preserved) will eventually be displayed, mainly in the Jewry Wall Museum.



## Future Events

18th July: The Bradgate Excavations, a talk by Peter Liddle. Please note that the venue for this is St. Martin's Church at 7.30pm

19th September: The Legends and Folklore of the Apple, a talk by Gareth King.  
Venue Desford Free Church at 7.30pm

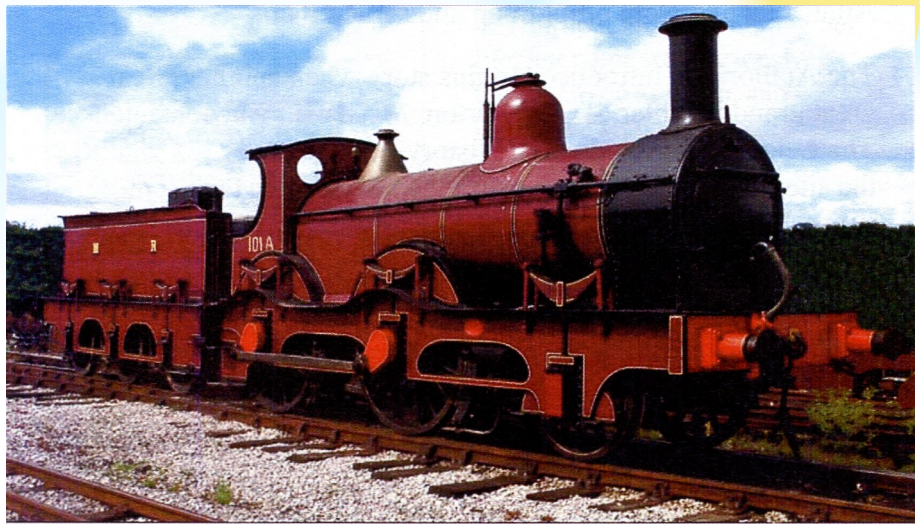
21st November: The Rolling Process at Desford Tubes, a talk given by Paul Neale.  
Venue Desford Free Church at 7.30pm



## Five Die in Desford Rail Crash, 1881

by Caroline Wessel

October 24th this year marks the 136th anniversary of a terrible rail accident that took place at Desford station in 1881. A few days previously a severe storm had damaged the equipment at the West Desford signal box and so the signal-man was obliged to operate the mechanism by hand. Around 9.00 o'clock in the morning a long and heavy mineral train was shunted on to the weighing siding to allow an express train to pass, but the points which had been opened to admit the coal train were never closed again.



“The signals being clear, the express train driver had not the slightest warning of what was about to happen. There was a sudden jerk caused by the engine taking the turn into the siding at such a great speed, and in a moment there was a terrible crash. The engine, with its enormous momentum, leaped from the rails, crashed through the guard’s van of the mineral train, and cleared its way in terrible fashion through six heavily-laden coal wagons, shattering them to splinters, and finally, with a frightful roaring of steam, rolled over on its side across the main lines. The crashing of the timbers of the carriages struck terror into the passengers, and the groans of the dying and injured told how disastrous the collision had been. The engine tender was dashed one way and the engine the other: the front guard’s van was reduced to atoms, only the wheels being left. The guard of the mineral train had a wonderful escape. Hearing the express approaching he put his head out of the window and in an instant saw the fatal mistake, leaped from his van and escaped with his life”.

A special train with doctors on board was immediately dispatched to the scene, where five people were dead and a further eight were seriously wounded, most with multiple fractures, and one victim later had to have his leg amputated. The signal-man Thomas Butler, complained that—contrary to company rules—his box was not kept private and he admitted he was talking to one of the railway’s staff when the accident occurred. He was in a terrible state of mind. At the subsequent inquest on the deceased a verdict of ‘Manslaughter’ was returned against Butler, but at his subsequent trial his defence lawyer contended that the prisoner had been guilty of forgetfulness only, which did not constitute wilful and criminal negligence. The jury—after a long consultation—returned a verdict of ‘Not Guilty’.



Included, excerpts from *The Desford Railway Disaster* (2016) The Leicestershire Industrial History Society.



# Desford and District Local History Society

## Newsletter

### Autumn 2017



#### Talk about the Bradgate Excavations by Peter Liddle

It seems an age since we had this talk in St Martin's Church but, for those who might have missed it, I have included a summary in this newsletter along with a few photographs taken when at Bradgate Park. Being able to see the two screens up high allowed the maximum number of people to have a good view of Peter's accompanying visuals. Though at times it was difficult for some to see, when Peter highlighted focused areas, it was still very engaging.



In 1928, The Park itself was presented in trust for the benefit of the people of Leicestershire by Charles Bennion, a local industrialist who purchased it from a member of the Grey family. Bradgate Park has been a deer park since the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the chances are that most of the park had not been ploughed over. Consequently, any archaeology remained undisturbed and this allowed for a 5-year programme of excavation by the Leicester School of Archaeology.

Evidence has been uncovered of human occupation going back to the Upper Palaeolithic period some 15,000 years ago; flint remains suggest it was one of only a handful of open air sites in Great Britain (similar to those found in the Cheddar Gorge and Little Matlock). Some 5,000 flint types such as those used for projectiles and end- of - blade scrapers point to the area as being some sort of hunting camp. A very small Roman site was also



uncovered.

With the clearance of bracken, which created a heathland environment, it became possible to survey the area by light aircraft, thus revealing banks, ditches, footpaths, enclosures and divisions.



By 1241 Bradgate was enclosed and banks and ditches were used to stop deer getting out though the deer leaps allowed for them to get in. In the Medieval period, the park belonged to the Manor of Groby and by 1445 the Estate was owned by the Grey family, influential nobles in Medieval and Tudor times.

Sir Thomas Grey started to build Bradgate House around 1499. It was one of the earliest fortified mansions to be built in England and one of the first to be built in brick. His son completed the first phase by about 1520. Further additions were made over the following century including waterworks bringing water to the House. The complete house had 2 main storeys and was about 200 feet east to west with 2 wings joined by a great hall and parlour on the north side.

By 1790 though it was in ruins which are now preserved by the Bradgate Park Trust. The only



building that retains a roof is the chapel though that has been much altered over the years. In Victorian times, the ruins became a popular picnic place and subsequent restorations have meant that it has become more difficult to date the various features; bricks often re-used and parts rebuilt, though the Mill building was indeed still occupied in 1841!

Work carried out over the last few years by archaeologists from Leicester University uncovered drains bringing and taking out water, Henry VIII coin and evidence of pottery (early Dutch ware plate indicative of a high-status household) from around 1550. This year work began in the kitchen area including the 2 large fireplaces, though no pottery or bones which would have been often found in such an area. A lot of dating has still to be done about what has been uncovered.

There are 2 more years of investigation planned and more geophysical surveys on another area



before the present project comes to an end. It seems a shame that the excavations done so far will be covered over again to preserve them from further deterioration.

The Archaeology Department at Leicester University are responsible for the on site excavations.

***Article & Photographs by Molly Marcus***

Extra Information: The Bradgate Park Trust working with De Montfort University produced a 3D digital reconstruction of how the building would have looked like in its hey-day. A 3D printed model has been produced from this reconstruction and is on display in the Visitor Centre.



## Reid and Sigrist Prototype Aeroplane, the RS3/4 or 'The Bobsleigh' or simply 'The Desford'

On May 20<sup>th</sup> a group of around 16 members and visitors met at the White Swan at Harringworth for what turned out to be an excellent lunch on their way to see 'The Desford' at Windmill Aviation Spanhoe Airfield near Laxton Northants.

This aeroplane had been stored dismantled for many years at Snibston Discovery Museum. On the closure of Snibston, Mr Carl Tyer of Windmill Aviation undertook its refurbishment to an airworthy standard on behalf of the Leicestershire Museum Service.

On arrival at Spanhoe we were greeted by a man dressed in army fatigues carrying an automatic rifle, he waved us through, much to our relief. We later learnt they were an army first-aid re-enactment group! We then met Carl and were shown around several hangars, each containing 5/6 aircraft, some airworthy but mostly not. He spoke very knowledgeably of the background, history and service life of them in a largely non-technical style.

The Desford was parked outside on the grass and Carl fired up the engines and entertained us



with several runs up and down the grass runway. The aeroplane had been tested and had been passed as airworthy, but the paperwork sadly had not arrived in time to allow him to give us a fly past! However, several private aircraft buzzed the airfield, one landing and later taking off just 50 metres away on the grass runway. Altogether a very interesting and enjoyable visit for all.

The Society has been in contact with two other sources of information about 'The Desford'

- 1) We have been in contact with Mr Ron Webster of Kirby Muxloe who started his working life as an apprentice with Reid and Sigrist who built 'The Desford'. When it was first built in Surrey it was known as the RS3. Later, after it had been rejected by the Air Ministry as a pilot trainer, it was brought to Desford. There it had its extended nose added by Ron, to allow the pilot to lie in a prone position which was designed to stop pilot blackout in tight turns. This was not found to be a success, as the pilot ergonomics were

very poor. The long nose and pilot position gave rise to the nickname of 'The Bobsleigh'. A fuller article about Ron, Reid and Sigrist with pictures of aircraft etc. will be available when the Society gets its website.

- 2) Our archivists recently visited the Leicestershire Museum Store at Barrow-on-Soar. They hold a number of documents and photos of 'The Desford' and Reid and Sigrist's work. Here are a few facts gleaned from their visit. The 'Bobsleigh' was sold by the RAF around 1947-1950 to Mr T H Marshall at Christchurch Aero Club; then to Strathallan Air Services Ltd of Auchterarder Perthshire. It went eventually to Kemps Aerial Surveys Ltd based at Southampton Airfield. In 1955, it was damaged landing at Felucci Island in The Canaries.

I hope to make my own visit to Barrow records to find out more about this unusual aircraft.

***Article & photograph by Steve Thorpe***

### Extra information taken from Wikipedia

Role: Trainer

Manufacturer: Reid & Sigrist

Designer: Charles Bower

First Flight: 9<sup>th</sup> July 1945

Introduction: 1945

Status: Cancelled

Primary User: Royal Air Force  
(intended)

Number built: 1

Developed from: Reid & Sigrist R.S.1



### Future News/Events:

Advance Notice: 16<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2018 AGM

Early September sees a small group from the Society visiting Kegworth for a guided tour and hopefully more about their visit will be in the winter newsletter.

Another article from Caroline Wessel telling us more Desford history.

21<sup>st</sup> Nov. a talk by Paul Neale entitled 'The Rolling Process at Desford Tubes'



# Desford and District Local History Society

## Newsletter

### Winter 2017



#### A Message from Bernard

I am approaching the end of my first year as Chairman of our Society and have enjoyed it greatly, especially not having to worry about the money!

All of us on the committee, as far as I know to date, hope to put our names forward for next year, BUT WE STILL NEED MORE HELPERS!

So: our AGM on 16<sup>th</sup> Jan 2018 is your chance to tell us if you think we have done a good job in 2017 and put us right if we haven't. Either way, please come and join (or even replace!) us on the committee.

Next year, we want to split the secretarial duties: our secretary to the Society, will continue to deal with correspondence etc. but we want to make a separate arrangement for the taking of minutes.

Pam Wocha has done a smashing job on the minutes of most of our meetings this year, and we need to set up some back-up to make sure all meetings are covered. If you have those skills, please let us



know and join us. Just to be clear, this is not a proposal to alter the constitution: it reflects the need for the Secretary to contribute to the meeting without having to worry about taking notes.

I will make my full report at the AGM, but I must say thanks to my fellow committee members for providing such an excellent programme this year and to all you fellow members for supporting the society so well.

Merry Christmas and a Historical New Year!

Bernard Grimshaw, Chairman

#### A Snippet of Desford History as collected and recorded by Kathy Emmerson.

(Who worked tirelessly and meticulously on the history of the village during the 1950's)

On the site where the Library now stands there once was a house occupied for ninety years by the Lane family. Frankie Lane was a wheelwright and the house was said to be one of the two 'mangling houses' where the villages came to have their laundry squeezed dry in a hand-operated mangle machine. Originally the property was three or possibly four cottages and was demolished in 1966.

(This is one of many sent in by Caroline Wessel. More to come!)



Since our last newsletter came out, there has been a visit to Kegworth in September and a well-attended talk entitled 'The Rolling Processes at Desford Tubes'

### Here is a short report of that visit written by Angela Thomas.

We met at Kegworth Museum, housed in a 19<sup>th</sup>C barn on High Street, which contains many fascinating artefacts reflecting Kegworth's history e.g. framework knitting and agriculture. Sheila, an enthusiastic volunteer was keen to tell us about many of the items and about her life in the village. We took advantage, of the fine weather (rain had been forecast) to set off on our guided walk around the village with Sheila.



Many of the interesting buildings, are allegedly haunted! One being the 15<sup>th</sup>C Cottage Restaurant, a cruck cottage, now hidden under rendering.



St Andrews Church, was our shelter from the heavy downpour which brought a premature end to our walk. The church is one of the largest parish churches in Leicestershire, built in 1387. The coat of arms of King Charles, can be seen above the nave. For those who have never looked around this church, it is well worth a visit.

The visit ended with a pleasant meal at 'The Otter'.

### The Rolling Process at Desford Tubes

(A personal view - Molly Marcus)

The combination of a talk with slides and a video made a very successful learning experience for many who attended the evening. The audience was made up not only of members, but also of those who had worked at Tubes and others who were interested in the manufacturing aspect of the industry. It was saddening to learn that when the machinery was sold to a company in India, it was never used, but lay rusting in a field! For more information visit The Leicestershire Industrial History Society on their website.

