

WALBERSWICK

LOCAL HISTORY GROUP

NEWSLETTER NO: 82

October 2026

Newsletter Editor's report

Forthcoming Talks/Speakers

- Saturday 24th October at 7:00 pm - "*Lighthouses of the East Anglian Coast*". Paul Heiney will be telling us about the rich and compelling history of the lighthouses, from the days when they were no more than bonfires, to the sophistication of the modern lighthouse".
- Saturday 12th December at 3:00 pm – Gen Broad will talk about "*Life in the Women's Land Army*" - this will be the WLHG Christmas event so expect a chance to talk, something to drink and some things to eat.

All talks are in the Village Hall. No need to RSVP, members attend free and a member's guest pays £5 on the door. Seats are on a first come first served basis. We should be happy to reserve seats near the front for those who need them.



This is the third newsletter this year and I am again indebted to Keith Roberts for yet another great article. This time the subject is the kissing bridge. We still all use the name but it ceased to be a kissing bridge a long time ago. The picture on the left shows my grandmother, her sister and her brother-in-law (not certain about the boy). This version of the bridge would be between the two wars. Clearly it provided a photo-opportunity even back then. Who had a camera back in those days?

Talking of a while back we are reviving a newsletter section called "from the archive". This time it is in the form of two poems by Riq Anderson. Riq passed away in 2006 but many people will remember Riq and his work for Save the Children as referenced below by the local committee.

"Over the years Riq has contributed quantities of pies, quiches, cakes etc. for fundraising events for our cause. Huge amounts of money were also raised by his wonderful inspired readings and the tasty suppers that accompanied them. He was a rare character and will be much missed".

John English – Newsletter Editor

The Kissing Bridges in the Edwardian Era by Keith Roberts

This article is dedicated to the late Richard Scott – that erudite and valued friend who first encouraged me to research the Newbery family's visits to Walberswick.

By 1900 my wife's great grandparents, the artists Francis and Jessie Newbery, and their two daughters had, like us, become regular summer visitors to Walberswick. Where they stayed initially is uncertain, but it was around 1902 that the family took over regular summer lodgings at Rooftree on The Street, regularly returning there until finally leaving in 1914, just after war started. In these, their welcome summer breaks, they could both be together and work together, in a context in which their children, their friends and their neighbours were all present as an integral and stimulating part of their collective creative activity. From his studio in one of the fisherman's sheds on the riverbank 'Fra' Newbery painted numerous aspects of Walberswick life, including the fen reeve (covered in a previous newsletter), the windmill, the regatta, the chain ferry and Rooftree.

But there is one singular motif that appears at some point in the work of almost every Walberswick artist — the so-called kissing bridge. Or rather bridges, since there have been at least two of them in recent times. The first arched wooden bridge was placed across the Dunwich River just where it joins the Blyth and provided foot access to moorings, the salt marshes and the dunes. According to Carol Christie (aka Caroline Louisa Pickthall. Ferryknoll, The St. Catherine Press, 1911), it had a sign on it saying 'DANGEROUS'! This is the bridge made famous by Philip Wilson Steer in his extraordinary 1887 painting *The Bridge*. Between the 1880s and around 1908, when the course of the river was shifted, and harbour wall work took place, this bridge was removed, but not before it had been photographed by Emerson, painted by hundreds of artists and featured in dozens of postcards. It was replaced a little further upstream, but after WWI that was in turn replaced by a flat bridge to provide vehicle-access to the flats. Meanwhile, sometime around 1908 another wooden kissing bridge was added upstream of that, close to Valley Farm where a bridge still exists, crowded each summer with children crabbing. Both the original bridge and the later bridge were painted by members of the Newbery family.



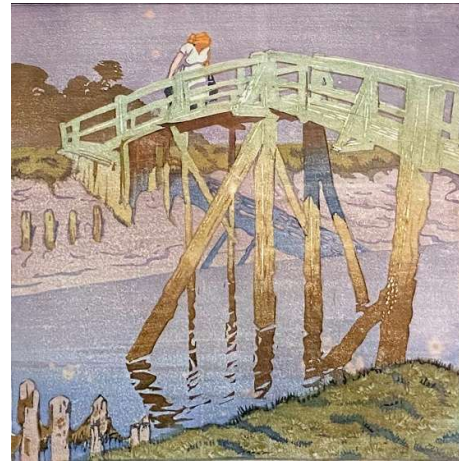
Peter Henry Emerson *Tidal Creek and Old Warehouses South of Southwold Suffolk*. Photograph of the original kissing bridge with the river Blyth in the distance.



Sydney Lee RA (1866-1949) *The Bridge, Walberswick* 1908 Woodcut 15 x 17.5 cm



The kissing bridge, with Valley Farm behind and to the left. This is the site of the current kissing bridge (photo courtesy of Carola Haigh).



Sylvan G. Boxsius (1878-1941) *At Walberswick* Woodcut 21.5 x 20 cm

Fra Newbery painted two large compositions that incorporate the kissing bridges. The first is a large, enigmatic, studio oil painting. George Rawson (Francis Henry Newbery and the Glasgow School of Art 1996 PhD Thesis Glasgow School of Art) tells us that this work, *East of the Sun and West of the Moon* (Sole a Levante e Luna a Ponente, now in the Gallerie Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin), which he dates to 1901 was, “shown in the 1903 *Biennale* (Scottish Section no. 9) and intended by Newbery as a companion piece to *Under the Moon* (1895). It was presented to the City of Turin, almost certainly in gratitude for the knighthood he had received for his work as director of the Scottish Section in Turin’s 1902 Modern Decorative Art Exhibition.” The biennale archives however suggest an earlier date, as it had been included earlier in Room C in the 1899 exhibition.



F.H. Newbery *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*, 1899 oil on canvas, 158 x 220cm. Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin (although it does not appear in their catalogue!).

With its use of the original kissing bridge, Rawson has accurately described *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*, ‘It is concerned with movement, in this case from top left, where fishing boats have just returned from a night at sea, to bottom right. The movement is again described by a group of young girls. Nine of these walk sedately from the direction of the fishing boats, across the bridge, and down towards the foreground. The composition is carefully designed, the solemn procession of figures, some of whom carry posies, is almost choreographed and the girls look as if they have been painted in the studio. They leave the pale moon which stands above the mast of one of the fishing boats behind them and turn their faces towards the sun. Although this is not a literary picture it has literary associations which add to its message, and which may claim for it consideration as a symbolist work.’

A work of this size is clearly a studio piece and how Newbery recorded the bridge is not known. Did he sketch it or do small oil sketches of the bridge on site, or did he use photographs as he did elsewhere in Walberswick? The title is curious, with two possible sources. The first is the tale of the same name from the *Blue Fairy Book* of 1889, that the Newberys with their interest in Nordic folklore almost certainly had a copy of. However, the tale is about a marriage to a Bear/Prince, in the 'monster as bridegroom' category of fairytales and with no obvious relevance to the painting.

The other possibility, which George Rawson discovered, is that it is, 'probably taken from the poem *The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon* in William Morris's narrative cycle, *The Earthly Paradise*. The hero of the poem travels the world in search of his lost beloved whom he knows he will find in the Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon. Accordingly, his hopes are always raised when he sees the sun and moon in the sky at the same time. At one point this phenomenon occurs as he makes land at "Dunwich in the eastland", a few miles south of Walberswick. The procession of self-absorbed young girls who pay little attention to the spectator may also echo the poem's narrative, for when Morris's hero finally found the country he was seeking, its inhabitants were unaware of his presence.

Its symbolism remains enigmatic, however, but it is also unlike any of the other pictures Newbery produced in Walberswick, which are all either landscapes (with or without figures) or family related.



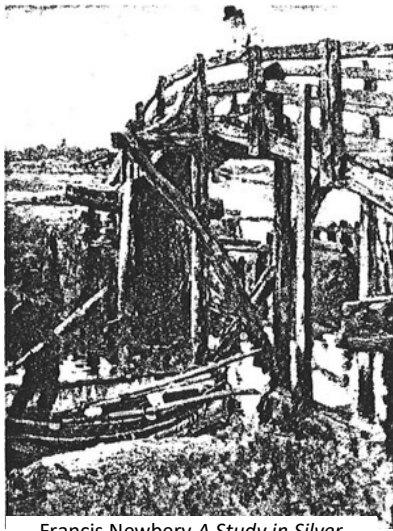
F.H. Newbery *The Shepherd's Star* 1908 Oil on canvas 76.2 x 50.8 cm Gifted to Perth Art Gallery in 1916

The second painting to incorporate the kissing bridge, this time the newer bridge, is more closely related to the two paintings of the fen reeve discussed in a previous newsletter (no.79). It shows a local man/shepherd, moving sheep over the bridge from the marshes and toward the village. At one level this is about the dignity of rural labour, a concern shared by Newbery. But the title, *The Shepherd's Star*, also clearly references the biblical account of the nativity, while also deliberately exchanging the star that the Magi followed with the angel who alerted the shepherds. He is using the biblical association to legitimize and heighten our empathy for the shepherd and his work. He heightens that link by placing the shepherd himself at the apex of the bridge, with the sheep curiously following the same curved trajectory down to earth as the children in *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*. Despite the allegorical content, Newbery has been remarkably faithful to the details of the bridge, which can be clearly seen in contemporary photographs.



The kissing bridge that appears in *The Shepherds Star*

Left: Contemporary postcard, courtesy of Harry Edwards. Right: Contemporary postcard.



Francis Newbery *A Study in Silver*
c.1909-1914 Untraced

There is one other Newbery painting of the kissing bridge, sadly untraced, and existing only as a poor photograph. It was exhibited in 1921 at the Royal Glasgow Institute under the name *A Study in Silver*. Fra showed it again the following year, this time under the title *A Bridge of Silver*, in both the Royal Scottish Academy and the Paisley Art Institute. It shows the second bridge, with an elderly man standing on the bridge while a colleague passes underneath, punting in a rowing boat. No allegorical content here, just a sympathetic study of rural men at work, who look as though they may be the same men as those he portrayed in his paintings, *Tales of the Sea* and *Cronies*.



Alick Sturrock *A Bridge on the Marshes* 1919 Oil on board 34.5 x 25.0 cm
(private collection)

Other Newbery family members and friends were attracted to the kissing bridge. The Newbery's son-in-law, Alick Sturrock RSA, visited and painted a small oil, *A Bridge on the Marshes*, showing Valley Farm in the background. It has a fragment of newspaper stuck to the reverse of the frame dated December 1919. However, it is also possible that he made it on an earlier visit during the war, when Alick, who had been a Captain in the Royal Scots, was stationed nearby and was encouraged by

artist Cecile Walton to go and visit her great friend, and later his wife, Mary Newbery (he had been best man at Cecile and Eric Robertson's wedding).



Marion Seward *The Dangerous Bridge* 1907 Pencil and watercolour wash (private collection)

Artist Marion Seward, the Newbery's friend and neighbour whose family stayed in Old Farm, was also attracted to the motif — the title of her fine drawing referencing the notice on the bridge that Carol Christie recorded!

Many years before he returned to paint his famous *Walberswick Scroll*, the kissing bridge was also a subject for deaf artist John Doman Turner, who had received his artistic training by correspondence, from Spencer Gore, and who had taken evening classes with Walter Sickert. Walter Steggles, a member of the East London Group and one of Britain's contributors to the 1936 Venice Biennale, had a studio by the Blyth and painted several landscapes in the village including, inevitably, the kissing bridge.



John Doman Turner *The Kissing Bridge, Walberswick* c.1922
Watercolour 25.5 x 34 cm



Walter Steggles *The Kissing Bridge* Squared-up watercolour sketch on paper 1932/3

The sad, modern replacement for our original, wooden miracle nowadays mostly attracts children crabbing rather than artists, but that old arched kissing bridge will continue to exist in the collection of old paintings that paid tribute to the motif.

From the Archive

Two poems by Riq Anderson passed to WLHG for the archive.

Walterswick Winter

Torned clapboards
Stilted against spring fresh tides
Perches
A dark immobile heron in mud
Blind eyeing winter marmoset
Deaf earring browned rolling river
Still, silent just light
Traces the spare outlines
Starking it against the
Southfolk dawn
No pink
Scarce, thin, uncoloured cloud
Cold welcomes day
Bleakly, unwillingly
East coast winter dawn dismal
Today
But
Today grudges hello to tomorrow

Blythburgh Viewed

A feathered stretch of water
Flat expansive graywide
Quieting a silent estuary
Bird waded and watched
Silently lapping flow
Encroaches welcoming mud
Fuming a thinness of sea over
Soft Suffolk
Calls, footprints, struts and feathers
Navigate the flats.
Focusing eyes and interest
Absorb
A wealth of birding
Viewwidth widens as horizons stretch
Lapping the edge of sight
The world forever unfurls
League by mile displaying
Flat beauty, carpeted coast
Unrivalled in understatement
A High in lowland.