



WALBERSWICK

LOCAL HISTORY GROUP

NEWSLETTER NO: 73

February 2024

Newsletter Editor's report

As mentioned in the last newsletter, 2023 was a particularly busy year with exhibitions and talks. One of our planned talks had to be cancelled at the very last moment as the speaker could not safely travel to Walberswick due to the torrential rain. Using various communication pathways attendees were contacted and only four people actually turned up at the Village Hall for this talk. They were most understanding though and thankfully, the rain had stopped by then. The cancelled talk was **Shorelines: voices of Southwold Fishermen**, based on Bob Jellicoe's book of the same title. I was particularly sad about missing this talk as the book references two of my ancestors, one from Walberswick and one from Southwold. According to an earlier chronicler of Southwold life, Ernest Cooper, my great grandmother's father, James May, "*met the headless woman on the Gunhill, the day on which he and John Hurr rescued Robert English, after his twin boys had already been drowned*". Hopefully later in the year we will be able to see the author and listen to him and the voices of a bygone age (date to be arranged).

Forthcoming Talks/Speakers

- **Saturday 2nd March 2024 at 7.00 pm in the Village Hall - Family, Friends and Art in Edwardian Walberswick, an illustrated talk by Keith Roberts.**

A fully illustrated talk about a network of artists that worked in Walberswick before the first world war. The central focus is on the artists Francis (Fra) Newbery, his wife and daughters and their social network of family and friends in the village, including E.A. Walton and Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Many of the dozens of paintings that were produced in and of the village at that time have never been seen in public, and many of these will be shown and discussed.

Keith, and his wife Nicole (a great granddaughter of Francis Newbery), have both been visiting Walberswick for over sixty years, and this talk is based on a chapter from their work in progress – a book about the extended Newbery family and the social context of their art practice – research facilitated by their families archives.

After the talk there will be a chance to socialise over a glass of wine. Members attend free, guests £5 on the door. To reserve places please email: ewright123@btinternet.com

- **Saturday 11th May 2024 at 6.30 pm in the Village Hall – WLHG Annual General Meeting (AGM)**
The AGM directly precedes the talk below. Guests may attend but cannot participate in the AGM.
- **Saturday 11th May 2024 at 7.00 pm in the Village Hall - "Following the Silver Darlings"**
Margaret King will talk on the story of Scottish Fisher women who came to East Anglia.

TBA - We hope to have the ever-popular Charlie Haylock back in the Autumn.

These talks are free to members and £5 for guests of members and can be booked through Edward Wright (see below).

If you know someone who would like to join WLHG or just attend a talk then please email us in good time before the talk at ewright123@btinternet.com. It's good value!

Our 2023 Christmas talk was "**Southwold Railway – Past, Present and Future**" by John Ridgway, Newsletter Editor for Southwold Railway Trust. It was held at the unusual time of 4:00 pm on a Sunday. Given that we had a roomful of people attend on a cold, wet and windy afternoon the switch to a Sunday seemed to pose no problem and may even have been a popular move. Certainly next year we may do the same for at least the Christmas do. Please let us know if you have an opinion by mailing Edward Wright at ewright123@btinternet.com.

John Ridgway asked me to mail him the articles we did recently on Walberswick station masters and the local problems when the railway closed abruptly. He was impressed by the items in the old newsletters and is to meet Pat Lancaster, our archivist, to see what else we have got. He also asked if any of our members have any railway memorabilia that they would be prepared to share with the Southwold Railway Trust. If you do have anything then please get in touch with Pat and she can facilitate matters (patlancaster@btinternet.com).

During the Q&A session following John's talk the "Chinese" issue was raised. This gives me an easy introduction to our first article by Kevin Murphy. Kevin's article on W G Sebald though is not strictly history but, as he says "*a mixture of memoir, history, travelogue and biography but he is always mixing fact with invention*".

The Southwold Railway and the Chinese Emperor by Kevin Murphy

That the carriages on the Southwold Railway once belonged to the Chinese Emperor is established local fact – almost! An article in The Times from 1938 entitled "Death comes to the dragons" recounts "a local legend" that some undersized engines and other rolling stock were shipped to China but the Chinese, to whom at that time railways were unknown, did not want "...those dragons let loose in their country." The Companion Guide to East Anglia (John Seymour, 1982) mentions the railway "...locally famous because the carriages for it had been manufactured for the Emperor of China." In The Southwold Railway Children (1999, page 59), Tom Pascall remembers that the "lovely little toy railway" was built for sale to China but the Chinese "ratted" on the deal and so the rolling stock came to Suffolk.

The narrator in W.G. Sebald's The Rings of Saturn (1992) walks across the Bailey Bridge, commenting that it "...was built in 1875 for a narrow-gauge railway that linked Halesworth and Southwold. According to local historians the train that ran on it had originally been built

for the Emperor of China. Precisely which Emperor had given this commission I have not succeeded in finding out...The only thing the uncertain sources agree on is that the outlines of the imperial heraldic dragon...could clearly be made out beneath the black paintwork of the carriages..."

Sebald was wrong about the bridge. First, the date of 1875 is doubtful. The railway was incorporated by Act of Parliament in 1876 and opened in September 1879, so it is unlikely that the bridge was already there in 1875. More importantly, the railway bridge cannot have been the bridge that the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* would have seen when he walked there in 1992 because the railway bridge was a swing-bridge, that was demolished at the outbreak of war in 1939 as a precaution against possible German invasion. The current fixed Bailey Bridge was constructed after the war on the foundations of the old railway bridge.

Was Sebald also wrong about the Chinese Emperor?

None of the many available descriptions of the rolling stock suggest a Chinese connection. Over its period of operation from 1879 to 1929, Southwold Railway had four locomotives: two built in 1879 by Sharp Stewart & Co. Limited; one built in 1893 by the same company; and a fourth built in 1914 by Manning Wardle & Co. Limited. They were initially painted green, subsequently blue with red lining, the livery of the Great Eastern, and finally three were black and the fourth green. There were six passenger carriages built by Bristol Tramway and Carriage Co Ltd, initially painted white with black lettering and subsequently dull red with white lettering. (See Barrett Jenkins, pages 23 and 24, Clark page 42). There is no mention of a Chinese Emperor or imperial heraldic dragons.

So where did these stories originate? The first clue I found was in the unpublished papers of Jessie Mabel Browton (1882-1971), who lived at Blythwyc Cottage, Walberswick. She was a trained and talented artist and also kept journals, recording local history. A copy of her manuscripts can be seen in the archives of the Walberswick Local History Society. She writes of the railway: "...most of the rolling stock was purchased at cut price as it had been ordered for the ill-fated Woosung Tramroad but never delivered, hence the story that the carriages came from China and were originally painted yellow with green dragons on the side..."

An internet search for Suffolk and the Woosung Tramroad leads to an Ipswich local history site (<https://ipswichhistory.com/tag/woosung-road/>), which tells the story of Richard Rapier (1836-1897) of the company Ransomes and Rapier based in Ipswich. Nineteenth century China was seen by many Europeans as ripe for commercial exploitation if transport connections could be improved by a railway. The Chinese were resistant, considering that these flame-breathing machines would disrupt their feng shui. In 1872, Rapier conceived the idea of sending the Chinese Emperor his own toy train with the aim that this would demonstrate to the Imperial Court the delights of railway travel. This idea foundered on diplomatic obstacles but Rapier continued to burnish his Chinese contacts. In 1875 a delegation from the Woosung Railroad Company visited Ipswich and eventually engaged Rapier to provide a whole railway system.

Sadly, shortly after the line was opened, a suicidal Chinaman lay on the track and was decapitated. This confirmed to the Chinese that the new technology was suspect. The Chinese authorities exercised their right to buy the line, announced its immediate closure and tore it up.

There are two connections between this story of the short-lived Woosung Railroad and the Southwold Railway Company.

First, Richard Rapier, who was a passionate advocate of using light narrow-gauge railways to open up the countryside, was an early and enthusiastic promoter of the Southwold Railway and ultimately its Chairman (<https://www.icevirtuallibrary.com/doi/pdf/10.1680/imotp.1897.19382>).

Secondly, one of the six men who went to Shanghai from Ipswich and reportedly drove the first train on the Woosung railway was William George Jackson, who on his return to England worked on the Southwold Railway until his retirement in 1916. He lived in Southwold in a house called Shanghai Cottage, where he and his wife used to like dressing up in Chinese clothes and telling tales about his Chinese adventures. It might only have been a small embellishment to one of his stories to suggest that the rolling stock from the defunct Chinese railroad had found its way to Southwold and hence the story that the carriages on the Southwold Railway were built for the Emperor of China.

Note on W.G. Sebald and The Rings of Saturn

W.G. Sebald was born in Bavaria in 1944. He studied German and English Literature first at Freiburg in Germany and then at Fribourg in Switzerland. From 1966 to 1969 he was a German Lektor at Manchester University and in 1970 became a German literature teacher at the University of East Anglia, eventually becoming Professor of European Literature. Driving near Norwich in 2001 he swerved into an oncoming lorry and died at the age of 57. The coroner's report said that he had suffered a heart attack.

Whilst working continuously as an academic, Sebald wrote works of fiction that are hard to classify. He seems to be writing a mixture of memoir, history, travelogue and biography but he is always mixing fact with invention. His narratives meander in seemingly random circles. He includes photographs that he deliberately distorts or mis-labels. Asked about his sources, he often told lies. The effect on the reader is disorientating, which is Sebald's point: uncertainty and unknowability are the essence of human experience.

Sebald's preoccupation was the catastrophic history of Germany in the twentieth century and how the Germany he grew up in immediately after the second world war failed to confront the horror of its past, which was so enormous that it could not be considered rationally and could only be approached tentatively in the roundabout way of his creative work.

Sebald wrote in German but closely supervised the English translations of his works.

The Rings of Saturn seems to record a walk through the Suffolk countryside immediately inland from the coast but anyone who tried to use the book as a guidebook would quickly be lost. Some facts are right; some are wrong. Sights on the walk trigger endless digressions, notably the story of the Chinese Emperor. The narrator crossing the Bailey Bridge is a typical example of Sebald's style. He includes a "photograph" of the bridge, which is grey, blurred, creased and unrecognisable to anyone who knows it. He describes a desolate landscape: "...there is next to no traffic on the river, which is largely silted up". This is just about recognisable when looking towards Blythburgh but hardly descriptive of the landings, boatyards, shacks selling fish, pub and several cafes that are familiar to us all.

Editor's note: The picture to the right is of the Bailey Bridge familiar to us now. However, under the walkway are remnants of the old railway bridge. Many will also know that the Bailey Bridge is named after an engineer, Sir Donald Bailey. Bridges of this design were introduced in WWII as easily erected, temporary structures.



The talk on the Southwold Railway included “**Past, Present and Future**”. WLHG likes to keep non-controversial which usually precludes discussion of the present and future. So, when asked to contribute to the LIONLINK debate Edward Wright kept strictly to history.

What other secrets lie beneath this Area of Outstanding National Beauty?

The landscape to the South of Walberswick is central to the history of the village and contains evidence of occupation for thousands of years. The area each side of Seven Acre Lane and Stocks Lane, together with Manor Field is described by Suffolk County Council as possibly the original site of Walberswick church and settlement. The church was at the bottom of Stocks Lane, the precise location has been debated but it is probably on the Western side. There was a track from the church towards Hoist Covert and Lodge Road.

A glance at www.heritage.suffolk.gov.uk shows the large number of finds in this area; as would be expected, it was the old village of Walberswick. Medieval pottery, bronze pieces and painted glass have all been found here.

David Shirreff's book *The Walberswick Frigate* describes a warship being launched in 1654 into the Dunwich River at Walberswick. She was a large ship; eighty feet long with a draught of twelve feet; the river was deep and wide at that time. She had been built on the riverbank just to the South of the end of Stocks Lane and this is where she was launched. Timber quays and jetties down here would have served seagoing vessels when this was Walberswick's harbour. Trade was international; a 16th century Nuremburg reckoning counter was found at the bottom of Seven Acre Lane. This was a coin-like token used as an aid in calculations, rather like an abacus bead. The river was constantly shifting and as it moved, new structures would have been built and old ones abandoned. Flood defences, possibly dating back to the 16th century have been identified near the Dunwich River from Stocks Lane towards the caravan site. Any work near the Dunwich River risks damage to fragile archaeology associated with the old harbour.

David Shirreff visualised a scatter of cottages down the West side of Stocks Lane, perhaps there is also evidence of the old village on Manor Field and beside Seven Acre Lane.

There has been remarkably little archaeological excavation in this area, most of the discoveries were made by field walkers and detectorists. Everywhere National Grid will be working could contain evidence of the history of the village and the changes that occurred

over thousands of years. What is unique about this proposal is the vast area of historically important land it will affect. No one could have predicted that Roman pot sherds would be found just inland of the caravan site, and no one knows what other secrets lie beneath this Area of Outstanding National Beauty.

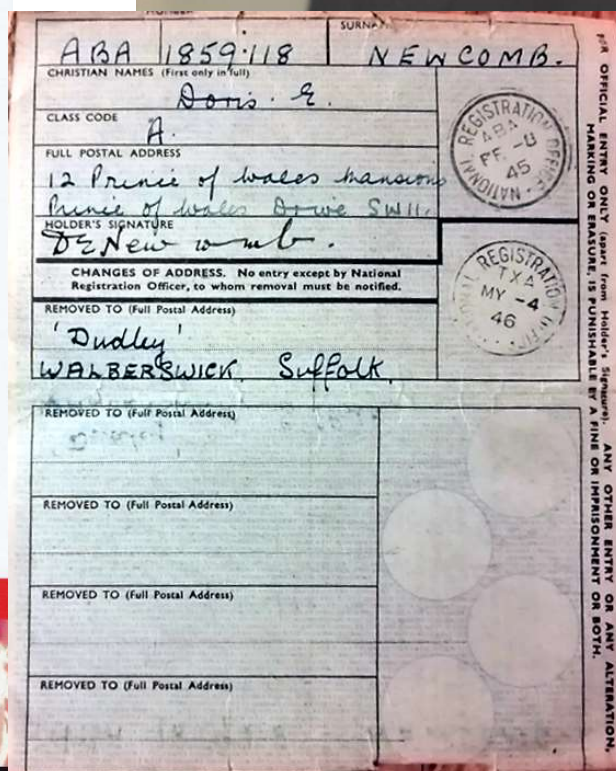
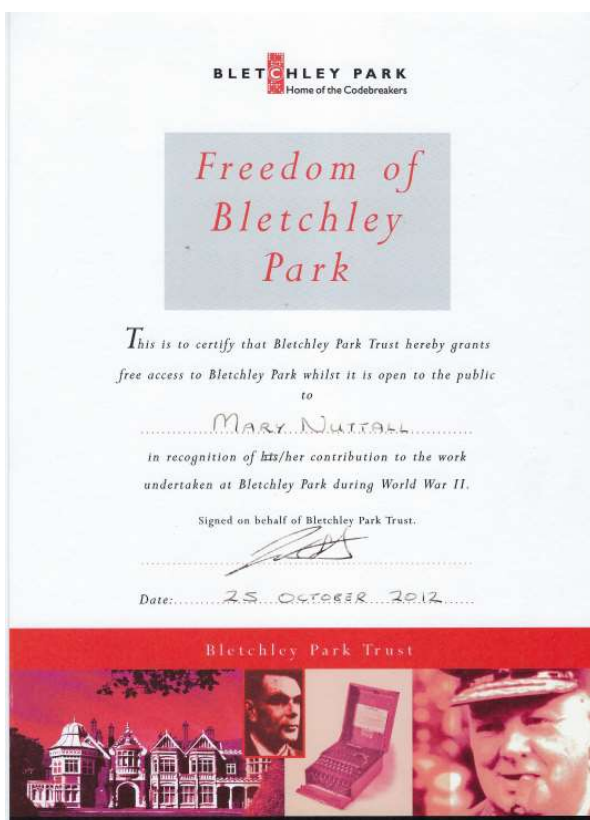
Mary Nuttall (nee Newcomb) Snippets

It is just over a year since Mary Nuttall died at the good age of 97. Mary was a member of WLHG and much has been written by her and about her. Much of this concerned her top-secret war work.

Mary had a long association with Walberswick as her parents bought Dudley Cottage in 1946, then her Uncle Laurie moved to the village and Mary eventually inherited his house. Below is a copy of her mother's ID card which shows the move of her parents to Dudley (Cottage) from SW11 in 1946.

One interesting fact which didn't come out at her memorial service was that her father worked with Louis Pasteur in India when she was a child – thanks to Angie and Mike for this interesting fact.

To the right is a picture of young Mary. Most people will only have known the older person. I have a mental image of her as a young woman partying on VE Day.



She says in an article she wrote *“Churchill came out onto the balcony of one of the buildings and made the famous speech *“This is Your Victory”*. There must have been tannoys erected, as his words echoed everywhere and the cheering went on, drowning anything else he might have added”*. What a marvellous memory.

The Official Secrets Act prevented many people like Mary from talking about their war-time work for many years after the end of the war. It is hard to believe that the secrecy was maintained until the mid 1970's. The Bletchley Park Trust was set up after the work done there was declassified and the preserved buildings opened to the public. In recognition of her contribution Mary was, in 2012, given the *“Freedom of Bletchley Park”*. Did she ever use it? The roll of honour entry for Mary reads: *“Stanmore September 1944 - May 1945. Bombe operator”*.

Her service certificate can be seen on the Bletchley Park web site.

Pictures taken in Southwold and Walberswick in 1913

WLHG have been fortunate to be given access to some pre-WWI pictures by Genevieve Broad and Peter Hardy, including some shots of the first aircraft to land at Southwold.

Peter Hardy states that the pictures are from a large collection of stereoscopic slides taken around 1913 by his great uncle, Marcus Dawkins, who was political secretary to the 5th Marquess Lansdowne. Lansdowne had held various posts including Viceroy of India and positions in Cabinet, but in 1917 his political career ended abruptly with the infamous *“Lansdowne letter”* to The Telegraph. The letter counselled against exacting revenge on the Germans after the (by then) inevitable victory for fear of provoking another war in the years ahead - and in the backlash his political allies dumped him...



Anyway, Marcus. He had family in Southwold and took a few dozen pictures there and in Walberswick when visiting.

The aeroplane is a Deperdussin flown by a man called Norman Spratt. Peter attached two links, one to a piece of artwork depicting the event, now at the aviation museum in Flixton. <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/mr-norman-spratts-deperdussin-southwold-suffolk-1913-11254>. The other is a link to a picture in Southwold Museum with a narrative. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/southwoldmuseum/34946751115/>

Other pictures are to be placed in the WLHG archives. They really look amazing when viewed in stereo but that is tricky without the right equipment.

To mark the passing of MAUREEN THOMPSON

6th August 1930 - 5TH December 2023

With Maureen's passing we asked another WLHG life member, Philip Kett, to pen a few words about Maureen which we reproduce below.

It is with some sadness that I write these words for the History Group Newsletter, having just heard of the passing of Maureen Thompson.

I first met Maureen and Don Thomson when they bought Greenways on The Green, around the summer of 1988. I learnt that they had been visiting the village for many years prior to their retirement so that they would get a feel for the village. Their retirement was not a "laid-back" one as both of them were full of vim and vigour which was dispensed around the village and in organising committees in equal measure.

Their most favourite organisation was The Local History Group followed closely by the Heritage Hut, just across The Green from their house. Sadly when money became tight, this building was reduced to a few pictures of the coast.

Don set up the History Group with around 15 interested village people in 1991 and Maureen became a committee member a couple of years later, although she had always been working behind the scenes supporting Don. She took on the position of Membership Secretary collecting all the subscriptions, logging them and keeping everything straight. She also organised the Christmas party with willing volunteers. After she retired from the History Group, she was made a "Life Member" – a position not bestowed on many.

Maureen was an avid Bridge player, attending various local clubs – all of whom will miss her.

The village and in particular the History Group has lost a good and loyal friend.

Philip Kett