

AVON LOCAL HISTORY & ARCHAEOLOGY

Newsletter 142 *April – June 2015*

ICONOCLASTS AT IT AGAIN

Reports that islamic fundamentalists have destroyed ancient statues in Nimrud prompt two thoughts. First, that such acts boost the importance (and value?) of the Assyrian reliefs displayed in Bristol city museum. Second, that the history of western civilisation also has included defacing and breaking of images. Iconoclasm broke out in the eighth and ninth centuries in the eastern church. In England it got going under Henry VIII (not only his



wives lost their heads) and Edward VI, driven by calvinistic distaste for catholics' use of images as devotional aids. Eamon Duffy's *The stripping of the altars* (Yale 1992) tells the story, with much local detail. Many once catholic churches in our area contain decapitated or defaced

images: Nicholas Orme and Jon Cannon describe some in their *Westbury-on-Trym: monastery, minster and college* (Bristol Record Society 2010). In ALHA booklet no.11 Joe Bettey recounts the removal of images after 1550 at St Werburgh's, Christ Church and All Saints Bristol, Yatton, and St Michael's, Bath. Image-breaking resumed during the English civil war and the commonwealth, motivated by similar religious beliefs. A one-off but high profile act of iconoclasm was Dean Elliott's 1876 dawn raid, under sectarian pressure, on the figures of fathers of the (catholic) church on Bristol cathedral's new north porch. Joe Bettey tells the story in 'Contrasting clerics in nineteenth-

Material for **Newsletter 143** by **23 June 2015** please

Magazines and books to Hardings Cottage,
Swan Lane, Winterbourne BS36 1RJ
jonathan.harlow@uwe.ac.uk

Details of events to website manager,
Flat 1 Chartley, 22 The Avenue, Bristol BS9 1PE
lawrence@hazels.u-net.com

Other news, comments, and changes of contact details
to membership secretary,
5 Parys Grove, Bristol BS9 1TT
wm.evans@btopenworld.com

century Bristol,' in his *Historic churches and church life in Bristol* (B&GAS 2001). More recently, Banksy upended a pot of paint over the head of a representation of an angel, still on display in Bristol museum a few metres from the Assyrian reliefs. The artist presumably invites us to share his contempt for what the sculpture stands for, be it religious belief or superstition, museum managers' artistic tastes, or those victorian values which prime minister Thatcher selected for conservation. Media commentators deplore the fundamentalists' actions as acts of primitive barbarism. Others see them as the misguided expression of unjustifiable religious beliefs, likely to surface in any culture at any time. Religious intolerance is not always the motive for iconoclasm: 'smash' is a key word in the vocabulary of the hard left, whether marxist, trotskyist, or just anti-capitalist radicals who didn't want a Tesco in Stokes Croft. In New York, Prague, Budapest, Bucharest, Kiev and Baghdad it was the statues of the oppressors that people pulled down. No one knows how the new caliphate will pan out. To destroy every religious or secular image, of which there must be thousands of millions, will take a long time. Meanwhile it behoves us and our elected representatives to look after what we've got.

William Evans



Images: Jon Cannon and BM&AG

ALHA LOCAL HISTORY DAY 2015

ALHA's 2015 **Local History Day** will be on **Saturday 18 April** at **UWE's Frenchay** campus. The topic will be *The rocky road to democracy: from king John to mayor George*. A flyer and booking form accompanies this Newsletter. Apologies to Dr Harlow for the programme giving his talk the wrong title: it will be *Revolution and religious freedom in 17th century Bristol*.

One of the benefits of the venue moving from UWE's St Matthias campus to Coldharbour Lane – stunning views at <http://www.uwe.ac.uk/facilities/estates/projects/lecturetheatre refurb.shtml> - is an infra-red audio system, which attendees who are hard of hearing may prefer to the more familiar induction loop. If you'd like to try it out, do say when you book, so we can order enough.

NEW ALHA MEMBERS

Welcome to **Shoscombe Local History Project**, whose 20 members work on local history of Shoscombe, Wellow and North Somerset, and offer help and information about canal, railway and coalfields in their area. Contact Mrs J Withers, Tanqueray, Single Hill, Shoscombe BA2 8LZ, 01761 435 735, wITHERSD@talk21.com

Welcome also to **Bristol Aero Collection Trust**, whose museum is due to open at Filton in the spring of 2017. See <http://www.bristol aero.org/>, which has a history section.

NEW ALHA COMMITTEE MEMBER

Welcome to Veronica Bowerman, author of booklets on Henleaze and much else, now living in north Somerset, who has kindly agreed to lead and advise a subcommittee on how ALHA can make use of Facebook for the benefit of members and the public.

ALHA's website address is now

www.alha.org

Bob Lawrence will maintain a link from the old address for a little while.

NEW ALHA BOOKLET *Public health in Victorian Bristol: the work of David Davies, Medical Officer of Health* by Peter Malpass &

Michael Whitfield is ALHA's latest chart-topper. An order form accompanies this newsletter.

ALHA SUBSCRIPTIONS DUE

ALHA's financial year starts 1 April. An **application form to renew membership** accompanies this newsletter. Many thanks to those who have already paid. If you'd like to pay your sub by standing order (saves time, memory and postage, and the committee does not envisage changes in subscriptions in the near future), please ask the treasurer for a form. ALHA's membership now comprises over 90 individual members and 89 groups and societies, who represent over 11,040 individuals.

ALHA SUMMER WALKS 2015

Jan Packer, ALHA secretary, writes:

Our planning of the summer walks is a little delayed this year as our long-standing organiser, Mike Hooper, is in the process of handing over to Laurence Burt. Accordingly, we can only give notice of the first of our walks at this time, so please see further notices, newsletter updates and/or our website for details of June, July and August.

Our first walk will be on **Monday, 11th May**, meeting **at The Shallows at Saltford at 6:45 for a 7pm start**. Our walk, led by Laurence, will take us past Kelston Brass Mill.

We know many of our members look forward to these walks and will have hoped to see a full notice included in this newsletter, but please bear with us and we shall issue details of the rest of the programme as soon as we are able. We all welcome Laurence to the role and look forward to see what he has in store for us.

EVENTS IN PROSPECT

Bristol Central Reference library is planning an exhibition on the *romanticist poets in Bristol*, for the spring of 2015.

Archaeology Day School: Buried Treasure Sat 25 April, 10.30am – 4pm Bristol Museum & Art Gallery £35/£30. Age 16+ A chance to get up close and personal with some of our archaeology collection's most precious objects, and find out what you can – and can't – call treasure.

The **Assembly Rooms and Roman Baths, Bath** will be hosting a symposium about the *Beau Street Hoard* (17,577 silver Roman coins found on the Gainsborough Hotel site in 2007), **Wed 22 – Fri 24 April 2015**. Booking necessary, but places are free. You can book through www.romanbaths.co.uk or www.eventbrite.co.uk. It will be preceded by



a free lecture, on **Wednesday 22 April** in the Pump Room, by Richard Abdy, curator of coins and medals at The British Museum, who has led on the research and conservation of the hoard.

An account appeared in the last *Newsletter of St Edith's well*, or Eddywell, next to Saint Peter's church in Bristol's castle park. On **Saturday 2 May 2015** it was hoped to hold an event in Castle Park to raise awareness that the well is still under the paving, but Bristol City Council has raised objections, so **the event is OFF**. As the paving needs to be relaid for safety reasons, that may give archaeologists a chance to investigate.

The *South West Area Family History Fair* will be at the **Winter Gardens, Weston-super-Mare 16 May**: £3, children free. www.swag-fair.co.uk

The **British Association for Local History's** local history day will be on **Saturday 6 June** 10.30-4.30 at the Quaker meeting house, 40 Bull Street, **Birmingham**. Angus Winchester of Lancaster University will talk on *the local history of common land in a European context*. £35 (£25 for BALH members) includes hot drinks and sandwich lunch. Cheques payable to BALH and SAE to BALH(L), 7 St Mark's Rd, Salisbury SP1 3AY.

After Margaret Spufford: English Local History Now is a conference at the **University of Roehampton 19-20 June**; talks will

address her interests in early modern social history. www.roehampton.ac.uk/Research-Centres/Centre-for-Hearth-Tax-Research/After-Margaret-Spufford (or search 'after Margaret Spufford').

Frenchay Tuckett Society's Vintage Vehicle Day will be **Saturday 11 July** and may include a rebuilt version of the 28 litre FIAT which captured the world speed record in 1911: 228 kph. The event coincides with the village flower show, and vintage buses will give free rides between the events.

William Tyndale: The Tyndale Society, celebrating its 20th anniversary, will host the 9th *International Tyndale Conference* at **Hertford College, Oxford 1-4 October 2015**. Speakers include Dr Ian Mortimer and Prof Brian Cummings. The Conference will cover many aspects of Tyndale's work, including his non-translation texts. Tyndale's legacy and contribution to our language, history and culture is now the subject of a major re-appraisal. The results of research on newly discovered archive material and the unearthing of what is probably Tyndale's manuscript translation of Erasmus' *Enchiridion* will also be discussed.

Options range from a full conference package, with residential accommodation



in Hertford College and all meals, to just a single day. Supporting events include three 'ploughboy' sessions, a gala dinner, a concert by the English Chamber Choir, and a tour of Tyndale's Oxford. www.tyndale.org ; or enquire David Ireson at tynconf@gmail.com.

ALHA's 2015 annual general meeting and the 2015 Joe Bettey lecture, hosted by ALHA member **Abbots Leigh Civic Society**, will be held at Leigh Court, Abbots Leigh, on **Wednesday 14 October**, not the 15th as stated in the last *Newsletter*.

Bristol & Gloucestershire Archaeological Society's event to celebrate the 700th anniversary of the birth of Bristol topographer *William Worcestre*, whose book Frances Neale

edited for Bristol Record Society in 2002, will be on **Saturday 31 October**, in Mshed.

MUSEUMS WITH MONEY...

Arts Council England has awarded grants of nearly £500,000 to five museums in our area. **Glenside hospital museum** is to get £23,000 to improve administration and business planning. **Royal West of England Academy** has £124,000 to help increase visitor numbers. **SS Great Britain** is to get £350,000 for a range of improvements, including displays. ALHA member **Dr Jenner's House, Museum and Garden** at Berkeley has been awarded £62,000 to start a volunteer programme, improve access and restore the garden. The **Holburne Museum, Bath**, gets £138,000. The money comes from a 'resilience fund' aimed at helping museums to adapt to economic, environmental and social changes, not least by taking advantage of digital technologies. <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/apply-funding/funding-programmes/museum-resilience-fund-2015-18/> And in his budget speech the chancellor of the exchequer promised £2m towards **Bristol Aero Collection**.

... AND MUSEUMS WITHOUT

Alan Freke writes: There is no further news on the future of **Frenchay Village Museum**. Despite a Section 106 Agreement signed by North Bristol NHS Trust and South Glos. Council last December that was intended to secure the freehold for the trustees, nothing has happened, and we are left in suspense not knowing if our future is secure or not.

Meanwhile... in May we have a visiting exhibition by the **Greater Fishponds Partnership** that will last three months, but until then the exhibition about the WWI Cleve Hill VAD



Hospital in Downend has been extended. Besides the postcards of staff and patients collected by two sisters from Frenchay who were VAD nurses there, there are now two sketchbooks collected by VAD nurses. We also have further information on one of those nurses, Amy Hill, who married an Australian soldier, and moved to Australia. She had a younger brother Harold, and we now have a photograph of Harold from his niece. Harold is

significant as his is the last name on the unique WWI Scout War Memorial in Downend outside Sainsbury's. Frenchay Village Museum is just inside Entrance 'B' of Frenchay Hospital, and is open Sat. and Sun 2-5, and Wed. 1-4. Admission free.

<http://www.frenchaymuseumarchives.co.uk/MuseumPage01.htm>

ALHA GRANTS

ALHA has long offered small grants to ALHA members to facilitate local history research and publication of the results. Work supported has included a history of scouting in Weston-super-mare, a history of a south Bristol comprehensive school, and research into the Yate area. Not many members have applied for these grants, which can now be awarded for any activity within ALHA's charitable purposes. Details from the treasurer or the secretary.

OBITUARY

Peter Harris 1925-2014

Dr Joe Bettley writes:

The study of local history in Bristol benefited greatly from the work of Peter Harris who died on 18 December 2014 after a long illness. He was primarily responsible for the success of the long series of useful and popular publications on Bristol history which were published through the now sadly-defunct Bristol Branch of the Historical Association. Peter was born in Bristol and spent most of his life in the city and had a profound knowledge of its history and architecture. In 1964 Peter revised the book originally published in 1946 by Harold Brown entitled *Bristol, England, city of a thousand years*. He up-dated the whole text and contributed additional chapters on the city docks and the new (i.e. post-war) buildings. This remains a useful and concise source of information. In particular he was well acquainted with the central area which he had known well before all the destruction caused by bombing and the subsequent redevelopment. He was educated at Queen Elizabeth's Hospital and obtained his first employment with the Great Western Railway, working in the signalling department at Temple Meads. This was in the closing years of steam locomotives, and he continued to be proud of having been associated with the highly-regarded G.W.R. At Temple Meads he acquired great knowledge of railway matters

and of the complexities of the various buildings. Although in a reserved occupation, he volunteered for military service during the final years of the war and was sent to Egypt with the Royal Signals Regiment. The lively regimental march of the Royal Signals *Begone, Dull Care* was played at his memorial service. After the war he took advantage of the opportunity for suitably-qualified ex-servicemen to train as teachers, attending Saltley Training College in Birmingham. Having qualified, he returned to Bristol and spent the rest of his career teaching in the city.

He was a man of many interests, including drama and the theatre, helping to save the Theatre Royal after the war, working with young people, the preservation of Bristol's architectural heritage, railway history and, above all, the history of Bristol. He was a long-standing member of *Bristol & Gloucestershire Archaeological Society* and was an enthusiastic supporter of the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association. He was Deputy President and Chairman of the Local History Committee of the Association and Honorary Secretary of the Bristol Branch. After retirement he played a major part in the administration of the Association at its London headquarters. It was a great sadness to him that the Bristol branch failed to attract sufficient committee members and officers and ceased to exist.

For local historians, Peter will be best remembered as the driving force behind the remarkably wide-ranging series of booklets on aspects of Bristol history published by the Bristol Historical Association. These were started in 1960 through the joint initiative of Peter, together with Patrick McGrath, who served for many years as General Editor. Together they recruited numerous highly-respected authors from Bristol University and prominent scholars from elsewhere. Peter served as Assistant Editor and Business Manager, overseeing the printing, storage of copies at his home in Stoke Bishop, getting standing orders, dispatching orders by post and ensuring that copies were available at numerous outlets in Bristol. The first booklet in the series was *The Bristol Hotwell* by Vincent Waite. This sold well and other titles quickly followed. The aim of the series was to provide 'new work as well as authoritative summaries of work which has already been

done'. The early publications were 'issued at the modest price of two shillings in the hope that they will have a wide appeal'. The list of subjects covered was impressive, ranging from the prehistory of the area to the twentieth century and the roll-call of authors includes almost every scholar working on the history of Bristol. Peter himself was persuaded to write No 66 in the series in 1987. This was entitled *Bristol's Railway Mania 1862-1864*, and described the schemes put forward to improve and extend the railways in and around Bristol. The text demonstrates Peter's detailed knowledge of the existing lines and streets, the complexity of the buildings at Temple Meads and the various proposals to create a new terminus closer to the city centre. Following Patrick McGrath's death in 1991 after 77 booklets had been published, Peter became General Editor. The series continued and by 2006 had reached No 118. Sadly, the publications did not survive the collapse of the Bristol branch of The Historical Association, coupled with Peter's increasing ill-health.

The remarkable success of these short, scholarly accounts of so many different aspects of Bristol history was very largely due to the dedicated work and enthusiasm of Peter Harris. Taken together, the booklets provide a splendidly readable account of Bristol history and are a fine tribute to the energy which Peter devoted to the series over more than 50 years.

PUBLICATIONS REVIEWED

Reviews by Dr Jonathan Harlow unless otherwise said

***150 Years of Clifton Suspension Bridge: A Photographic History* by Michael Pascoe (96pp The History Press 2014, £14.99)**

review by Christopher Harlow

Called a photographic history, this celebration of the famous bridge can be enjoyed more as a dramatic history. Mike Pascoe accommodates the casual glancing reader with sufficient pictorial nutrition and tasty nuggets of old prints, but the serious glutton for Bruneliana will find endless and well-documented trencher-work in the text: a text which is supported by illustration but stands also as satisfying and rewarding confirmation of the bridge's heroic conception, embryonic growth to a difficult birth, years spent in seeking the satisfaction of maturity

and finally, emergence as a strong, iconic and lasting memorial to the great man.

Memorial, in the sad sense of having been completed some five years after its designer's death, but with no less, perhaps a greater, credit to its creator. And this triumph of completion in 1864/65 is a fitting conclusion to the dramas that went before; the drama of Brunel's striving for recognition when first entering designs as a 24-year-old youth, one already seasoned by the tempering of hope and despair in the boring of the Thames Tunnel; the drama of setbacks from unhappy fortune constantly holding back the bridge's construction; the drama of the other giant



projects which punctuated the engineer's climb to fame.

Do not be put off

by the cover which mysteriously features one of the duller photos of the Clifton bridge. There is more than enough of the entrancingly visual and the "in every respect perfectly satisfactory" (Ch 15) construction inside.

The Local Historian 45.1 (January 2015) has as usual some interesting articles, though, also rather as usual, nothing directly on this region. Ellie Pridgeon provides a comprehensive guide to the sources for medieval wall paintings in England and Wales. The writer appears to consider these to be synonymous with paintings in churches and while this is obviously a big field, one wonders whether there must not have been other murals, less vulnerable to Reformatory zeal. But the article may well awaken an interest and a starter guide to satisfying it. Bonnie White examines food shortages and protests about the unfair distribution of what was available in Devon in WWI. This brings out the tension between authorities maintaining a 'business as usual' attitude and those who were willing to do and suffer their share for a national war effort but not for the enrichment of hard-faced men doing well out of it all. The latter got little remedy at the time, but the experience here and elsewhere perhaps contributed to the pretty effective rationing system adopted in

WWII. Trevor Hopper discusses the Italian ice cream families of the East Sussex seaside: dynasties almost (emperors of ice cream?). A question which he does not address is Why



were they so successful? Was it a matter of trade secrets and special formulae? Or did the great cone-licking public refuse to recognise any but Italian names? Or was it a matter of family culture in which ice-cream was as central and as serious as music for the Bachs? Helen Kavanagh examines prostitution in late medieval Oxford. She finds that it was seldom full-time or organised; mostly 'casual prostitution to avert poverty'. Students clearly made some of the market; but clerics (which would have included all the teaching staff) a good part too: vows of celibacy were a real obstacle to marriage but much less so to the occasional, confessable, ven(ere)al sin. John Lee reminds local historians not to neglect published sources, with a good case-study of Masham in Yorkshire. It is surely a testimony to the present appetite for primary research that such a reminder should be needed.

William Evans has an opinion article considering how far local historians should try (as advised by David Cannadine) to treat more of the respects in which people were alike than of differences in class, gender and religion and so on. A definite no to attempts to impose a gender, class or religious 'angle' on a topic to which it is irrelevant. But even where these groupings do not result in conflict, they more often than not form part of the explanation and reconstruction of different attitudes and actions. And there must be a specially strong case for the study which corrects the bias or blinkers of a previous account. Overall then a case for historians not to abandon but to think about the perspectives they bring to their work.

None of the books reviewed is of Avon interest. Perhaps the item which might be of most general interest is *Ecology & Enclosure*

by Shirley Wittering (Windgather Press 2013), a well-recommended study of the social and economic effects of agricultural developments in Cambridgeshire in the first half of the 19th century - but it costs £35.

Local History News 114 (winter 2015) has a superb rural idyll landscape on the cover - Surrey 1858 and not a stockbroker in sight. It's part of the notice for the BALH annual lecture on common land history by Angus Winchester (part of the BALH Local History Day - See EVENTS IN PROSPECT).

Bristol Industrial Archaeological Society

Bulletin 144 has some brief information about the project to refurbish Brunel's other bridge, the swing bridge over the Avon at the bottom end of the floating harbour, surely familiar to every user of the



Bristol Record Office, together with some riveting photographs. Find out more about this on www.neighbourly.com or at the AGM on April 23 at Keynsham.

Bristol & Avon FHS Journal 159 (March 2015) has the results of the reader survey, showing that Bob Lawrence's regular Internet article is the most popular of all. One can see why: every local historian can profitably make sure of reading it. Winscombe is the parish surveyed this issue and, bless you Andrew Plaster!, a list of primary and secondary sources. Jane Bambury has a good survey of the local worthies to be found in or under Arnos Vale and a guide to the main types of grave.

Follies of Bristol & South Gloucestershire is a collection of articles by Jonathan Holt published as no 13 of *The Follies Journal*. It is a good collection and well illustrated in colour. OS map references are given for each one. Most of the follies are now venerable in their own right, but I was glad to see the recent nose-diving fish - in brick - on the Bristol-Bath cycle path. There is a short list of Lost Follies, and another of Follies Also Of Interest, though the author does not state his

criteria for relegation to this category. Copies are obtainable for £13 inc p&p (cheques to The Folly Fellowship) from the Membership Secretary, 75 Queensfields West, Bognor Regis, PO21 5SG.

I think that for this price a little more editing might have been expected. The same quote from *Northanger Abbey* appears on pages 2 and 3 as well as on the Contents page (where the cover picture of the Thatched Dairy at Blaise is called Blaise Castle). But it is the organisation of the whole which may give the reader most trouble. Within each section, one for Bristol, one for South Glos, the follies are arranged alphabetically by district, which means that Cook's Folly appears under Sneyd Park. Why in any case the division? Few of us are very clear about just where Bristol stops and South Gloucestershire starts. It would have been easy, and preferable, to list the follies in the Contents or to index them.

ALSO NOTICED

Dave Backwith, Roger Ball, Stephen Hunt & Mike Richardson, *Strikers, Hobblers, Conchies & Reds: a radical history of Bristol 1880-1939*, Breviary Stuff Publications £18.50 347 pp pb 978-0-9929466-0-9

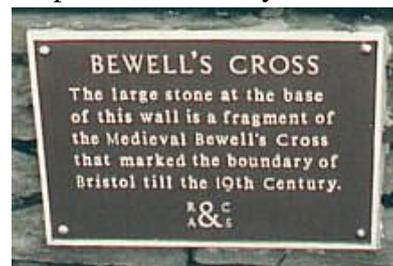
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society's Transactions vol 132, now published, includes:

David H Higgins, 'St Jordan of Bristol: between hagiography, palaeography and archaeology';

Jan Broadway, 'The funeral monument as a forum for women's self-expression in early modern Bristol and Gloucestershire';

William Evans, 'Bishop Monk and the Horfield question'; and

Richard Coates, 'Two Bristol crosses: Bewell's Cross, St Michael on the Mount Without parish, and Bewys Cross,



Kingsweston'.

Dr Harlow would welcome reviews of the above and any other recently published books or articles relevant to ALHA's area and objects.

SOURCES

Gloucestershire Archives' partnership with Ancestry

Julie Courtenay, team leader Gloucestershire Archives, writes:

Gloucestershire Archives has arranged with Ancestry to provide online access to key archive resources for family and local historians. The first set of images - **wills and probate inventories from Gloucester Diocese 1541-1858** - went online in March 2014. Parish registers and bishop's transcripts will be added early in 2015, followed by land tax and electoral registers.

Ancestry has created digital images for the wills and inventories by converting microfilm copies supplied by GA. However, Ancestry is also including wills that were missed from GA's earlier microfilming projects - such as those proved at the Peculiar court of Bibury, Bishop's Cleeve and Withington (all owing their special jurisdiction to having been manors of the Bishop of Worcester before the diocese of Gloucester was founded in 1541). Ancestry's camera team, led by former GA conservator Nick Berkeley, has digitised the parish registers, bishop's transcripts and land tax assessments, with electoral registers well under way. The latter series includes the registers for Cheltenham that are held at Cheltenham Library.

Under the partnership agreement, visitors can access Ancestry for free at Gloucestershire Archives <http://ancestryinstitution.com> and at any Gloucestershire library, and also at the Gloucestershire Family History Centre <http://gfhs.org.uk/the-family-history-centre>

WW1 and BALH

The **British Association for Local History** website www.balh.org.uk has a new section on *Local History and the First World War*. Sections include: an introduction to themes in the local history of WW1 and to BALH's related activities; 11 downloadable short guides to topics for local research from schools to military service records, to war resisters to soldiers' letters and farming in

wartime, with new titles added regularly; Conference reports and news, including *Strangers, Differences and Localities* (BALH and the Institute for Commonwealth Studies) and BALH lecture *Family, Community and Remembrance*, given at the inaugural conference of the Society for One-Place Studies, October 2014; and a list of useful online links. Coming soon, a rolling listing of recent publications of First World War local studies. To suggest a publication for inclusion please send details, including how copies may be obtained, to mail@balh.co.uk with the message title FWW publication.

COMMENT AND OPINION

People Like Us? asks Jonathan Harlow

All of us who attempt to make sense of past events face a dilemma. Shall we assume that people in former ages were in general much as they are today, unless we have evidence to the contrary? Or that, in the absence of evidence, they should be taken as alien, unknown quantities? Physiology is a poor analogy. We can readily interpret the people of the past as members of the same species, observing and allowing for the differential effects of diet and disease. But cultures vary much more than bodies do.

Good historians will look first to the evidence, but beliefs, emotions and motivation are like the soft tissues that leave all too little in the fossil record. The evidence when found may tell you more about changes in modes of expression than about changes in what is expressed. For example I am pretty sure that when I were a lad, couples past first youth seldom walked hand in hand in public, whereas today it is common. But it would be rash to infer that folk are more affectionate now than then.

Yet this sort of affection is part of the hugely important complex of emotions and attitudes that go with family. Assuming that absence of evidence meant evidence of absence has certainly led some historians to discount the importance of love between spouses and for children in the past (though the evidence itself is now sufficient to correct this rather unpleasing view).

Religion is another test case, in many ways harder to get hold of. Since few of us now believe in supernatural beings, happenings and

injunctions, the default of ‘pretty much like us then’ may entirely beg the question. Surely there was official belief and nominal subscription. But what did most people really believe? And what would you mean by ‘really’?

For nearly two centuries before the Reformation, there existed an heretical Lollard movement routinely denounced and punishable by death. Bristol was something of a centre (see ALHA booklet No 8 *Morning Stars of the Reformation*). It survived essentially because most people, however conformist themselves, did not peach on their neighbours. What can we infer from this about general attitudes to religion?

Or take Bristol under Charles II and James II. Non-conformists flourished, despite the laws, except in the mercifully brief periods when a rabid Anglican was Mayor and initiated a persecution. So most of the citizens, most of the time, were more or less indifferent to those differences which ministers, conformist and non-conformist alike, reckoned of supreme, of vital, importance? Yet atheism was still abhorred and perilous as Hobbes found; and popery likewise. So what religious beliefs shall we ascribe to the vast silent majority; and how shall we suppose that it affected their attitudes, values and the ends they pursued?

The pragmatic solution must be to assume that, where the evidence is wanting or indecisive, those people were indeed much like us. Whether or not this is the more likely case, it is preferable to supposing their sentiments and motivations unfathomable. But while this approach can save us from leaving a blank, it must always leave a question mark.

CAN YOU HELP?

Alan Freke reports that Frenchay village Museum has inherited 40-years of research into the Fry family (of chocolate fame) carried out by David Fry of Tunbridge Wells, who died last summer. So far FVM has received

five large archive boxes, each full of files, with more to come, including a laptop with much of the research in digital format. There are over 7,300 names on the Fry family tree. Clearly, this demands a lot of work in order to make David’s work freely available to the public. If you have an interest in genealogy, and would like to help with this task, please call Alan Freke on 0117 9570942.

Sarah Murray, of Underfall Yard Trust sarah@underfallboatyard.co.uk, writes: ‘For over 200 years Underfall Yard was the operations centre of the docks, housing the docks sluices, hydraulic lock systems and pump house and complex of buildings and workshops. We are embarking on a major 3 year project, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and others, which will: restore buildings, create a dedicated visitor centre and engage our community through education activities and projects. We will be seeking volunteers for a range of activities, including tour guiding, interpretation, hydraulic machinery demonstration, marketing, research, oral history interviewers and education.

‘We are currently embarking on two linked projects: Research and Oral History. We want to ensure that the rich history of our site is captured and shared as widely as possible and we’re seeking enthusiasts about Bristol, history, engineering, maritime industries etc. who can offer us time to research the Yard and/or interview people about their memories. In return we will provide interesting opportunities and training; pay travel expenses; and welcome you into the Underfall Family! There will be a drop-in session for those who may be interested in volunteering on **Wednesday 1 April, 10am-12pm.**’
www.underfallboatyard.co.uk

DIARY on ALHA’s website, alha.org, covers all events notified to ALHA’s website manager to end of July 2015. July listings will be repeated in the next Newsletter. If you want your event to be listed, please make sure that you send details or a copy of your programme to Bob Lawrence, contact details on page 1 top right.