



FOLKESTONE & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER No. 16 – Autumn 2003

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT by Alan F. Taylor

You are probably aware that this year's newsletters were brought forward one month so I have enclosed the programme for next year (from November 2003) and your subscription renewal form. This does not mean you have to pay your subscriptions before October, but if you are planning to pay at the Annual General Meeting it will give you a chance to fill-in the subscription renewal form before coming to the meeting. We are not increasing the subscriptions this year so they remain at Single £7.00, Family £12.00 and Senior Citizen £5.00.

While on the subject of the AGM, we need committee members for the coming year, so if you would like to serve on the committee please contact the Hon. Secretary Peter Bamford or myself; we would be delighted to hear from you!

I thought our June meeting 'Life as a foot soldier under Wellington' was something rather different: a superbly executed re-enactment by four soldiers consisting of a sergeant, two riflemen and a drummer all in uniforms of the period. They began the evening by marching the length of the hall with rifles at the slope whilst being drilled by Sergeant Brian Bamford (the brother of our Hon. Secretary!), and then Brian and his men proceeded to give us a most interesting talk and demonstration. They even fired their rifles, but not loaded with ammunition of 22mm lead balls I hasten to add! The talk gave a fascinating insight into life as a foot soldier of the period.

The Annual Outing 'A Medway Mosaic' was held on 26th July. We left Folkestone at about 8.30 a.m. and made our way to Rochester, where we picked up our guide and proceeded to Aylesford Friary, still a living and working community who make furniture, pottery etc. After a short break we had a guided tour of 'Dickens Country' taking in Cobham, Meopham, Gravesend and his home at Gads Hill before returning back via Strood to Rochester. We spent two hours there for lunch and then boarded the paddle steamer 'Kingswear Castle' for an afternoon cruise viewing Upnor Castle, the tree-lined banks of Short Reach, the Napoleonic Fort at Hoo and Dartnet Ness before arriving back at Rochester at 5.30 p.m. On the way home we stopped at Chrispin's fish restaurant at Teynham for an evening meal before returning to Folkestone at 8.15 p.m. I am sure those of you who went on the outing will agree that it was an excellent day out (apart from the inclement weather!) superbly organised by Tom Leftley. I would sincerely like to thank Tom for arranging such an interesting outing.

I would like to extend a warm welcome to the following new members: Mr S. Morford; Mrs S. Coggin; Mr & Mrs Searby, Mr T. Foley and Mr P. Scarth.

On a very sad note I would like to announce the deaths of members Alan Boyt, who was tragically killed in a fire while on holiday, and long-standing member Sara Ann Johnson-Mortimer.

A GLIMPSE AT THE HISTORY OF THE HYTHE VENETIAN FETE

1860 - 2003

The Venetian Fete was first held in 1860 and was considered a novel feature of Cricket week, one night being given over to taking to the waters of the Royal Military Canal. There were Rowing Skiffs, Punts and Indian canoes, hired for the occasion from Mr Gravener who at that time was licensee of the boating rights. All were decorated and had strings of lights. There were also nightlights hung in jam jars, quite a hazard on blowy evenings, apart from a need for a copious supply of matches! Music from banjos and guitars could be heard as the craft passed by, offering happy and unsophisticated entertainment for all on the canal banks.

The fete was continued on an annual basis in September until the mid-1920's when it fell due for the Hythe Chamber of Commerce to organise it and take on the financial responsibility. They were whole heartedly supported by the Mayor and Corporation.

Mr Gravener's boats and craft were still being used, but the more daring among the entrants were seen to lash two together in order to stage a larger tableaux. A Venetian Fete Queen had her own float and presided for that one day only. By now different 'classes' of display had been made, historical, humorous and cultural. Also hundreds of fairy lights were lit around the bridges and trees, and many floats had their own lighting for the dusk parade.

For a few years the Fete lapsed until, in 1934, a Venetian Fete Committee was formed and the water pageant began once again. In 1935 the Mayor of each Cinque Port was invited to attend and this has become a tradition to the present. Over the ensuing years various attractions have been added such as aerobatic displays of bombing moving targets on the water with bags of flour. Anything less Venetian can hardly be imagined. Water sports have been indulged in as well - and some spectators have been more than a little damp on occasion. The end of the Fete is a fireworks display.

During the 1930's it was suggested the Venetian Fete should obtain Charitable status in order to use any surplus funds for 'the local old people', but this

was never carried forward. However, a series of contributions were made to the Old Peoples Welfare Committee to start and maintain Venetian Club for the elderly residents of Hythe.

Over the years thousands of pounds have been donated to local charities.

The Fete continued annually until 1939 when W.W.2. intervened. After the war, in 1946, it was decided to revive the Fete once again, but the question was posed about suitable craft on which to stage the tableaux. After some searching a number of collapsible pontoons were located and acquired from a Naval disposal unit in Surrey. These pontoons allowed more ambitious stagings and therefore the Fete became more sophisticated. Susequently they were replaced by a fleet of the Committee's own floats which were made by local craftsmen.

This once again produced more ideas, and fluorescent lighting was introduced along with portable generators, both on the banks and the water. Shortly after water fireworks joined the spectacular.

Until 1954 the fete was still an annual event, but then it was decided to hold it every two years as the event had grown so much over the years. An average of 25,000 to 30,000 people were in attendance and this was a tremendous job to organise and support.

Until 1977 a portable stage had accommodated the visiting Mayors of the Cinque Ports. To celebrate Queen Elizabeth II's Jubilee it was decided a permanent stage should be built. Local people, clubs and societies, along with shop owners contributed to make this possible. A bonus of this stage is that on pleasant summer evenings Band concerts can take place there, making an evening stroll very enjoyable indeed.

By 1982 the cost of mounting the Fete had risen to over £20,000. The Executive Committee and the Trustees agreed to convert the Society into the Hythe Venetian Fete Charity Society Limited by Guarantee. This it was felt would safeguard some of the financial worries in the future, and provide the spectacle to be enjoyed by many more people in the years ahead.

Hythe Venetian fete has gone from strength to strength, and has now added side shows, a ferris wheel, and demonstrations by local shopkeepers of their crafts and wares. There are a number of tents where local products can be sampled before settling down to watch the now world famous Hythe Venetian Fete.

Tune and Ken Paine

THE FOLKESTONE VIADUCT 1843

One of Sir William Cubitt's (1785-1861) many works, he was engineer-in-chief to the South Eastern Railway. The viaduct is 780 feet in length with 19 arches each of a 30 foot span. There are two lines of rails with room for gangers to work protected by the parapet. The piers taper down slightly from the spring of the arches, and batter also transverseley. They are nine feet wide at the base with a brickwork depth of 36 feet. They have a facing of 9 inches of brickwork in header and stretcher courses, the arches being formed of four rows of brickwork. An imposing structure of nearly 100 feet in height, an example of engineering which could be called fine architecture.

Two years in the building it originally spanned the Foord valley of open fields with a stream running through it to the harbour. Through the years the scene beneath the viaduct has changed to a road, Foord Road and housing, also for some years the Gas Works was nearby.

A vulnerable structure the viaduct passed through World War One, 1914-1918, unscathed. However, during W.W.2, 1939-1945, tie rods were inserted across the tops of the arches and two concrete buttresses were constructed at each end to give further strength. In 1942 a bomb fell close by, causing some minor damage. The strengthening work had done its job well.

Our Folkestone viaduct is by no means unique, and others in England and abroad can be found that are longer and higher. Nevertheless, it is a fine piece of engineering of which Folkestone should be justly proud.

June Paine

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