



# Bicester Historian



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The monthly newsletter for Bicester Local History Society



**Contents**

Marj's Memories . . . . . 2

Roll of Honour . . . . . 2

Village History . . . . . 3

Bygone Bicester . . . . . 2

Talks Update . . . . . 6

Christmas Tree Festival . . . . . 6

## Disaster Averted

We were very sorry to hear, the day before the talk, that our November speaker, and fellow society member, Pat Snelson, had been taken ill and would be unable to give her talk on "A Window into Bicester's Past".

We hope to reschedule her talk for a future date, but at the time it meant that we were left with no talk to fill the monthly meeting that evening. So our Chairman, Bob Hessian, stepped into the breach with an impromptu slideshow based on our 2018 calendar.

Over the last few months we have been working with Coles Bookstore to produce a calendar for 2018 to follow on from the successful calendars we have produced for the last two years.

This time the theme we selected was "hidden Bicester", focussing on the often unnoticed elements from the past which contribute to the town's rich heritage. We have included some of the date stones in Sheep Street, the boot-scrapers in Church Street and Cemetery Road (pictured), the makeshift gun posts on Launton Road, buildings commemorating Queen



Victoria's jubilees (pictured), the town house bell in Garth Park, and the trees commemorating Queen Elizabeth II's coronation in Queen's Avenue (pictured), as well as many others. All with the usual historical events and public holidays.

The calendar is available now from Coles for £6, but mention that you are a BLHS members and you can get your first copy for the discounted price of £5.

As with last year's calendar, £1 from each non-member sale goes into society funds.

*- Matthew Hathaway*



**Dates For Your Diary**

**Canal People Talk**  
*18th December - 7:30pm*  
see page 6

**January Newsletter Submissions Deadline**  
*29th December*

**Westgate Excavations Talk**  
*15th January - 7:30pm*  
see page 6

**AVAILABLE NOW!**

Our new DVD, **Bicester's Buildings**, is on sale now. See the website for more details.

## Marj's Memories Some of What My Mother Told Me

Eliza Massey (Queenie in Flora Thompson's *Lark Rise to Candleford*) had five sons and one daughter, called Annie. Annie married James Ayris from Bicester and they lived in "Gooseberry Square" a square of cottages at the back of where Marks and Spencers is now; it was later called "Albert Place" and "Backway" became Victoria Road. They had more than ten children, but not all of them survived. My Grandfather, James Ayris, was one of the older boys.

My great grandfather, James Ayris (nicknamed Dillo Ayris) worked in Stanford's orchard along the Launton Road. There were a lot of apple trees in that area and Stanfords had a fruit and vegetable shop in Sheep Street. One year, whilst fruit picking a bee stung him in his eye and he had to have the eye removed.

My mother, like most teenage girls in those days (1914) went into "Service" in Fritwell and was there for seven months without coming home. The man she worked for told her that if she could harness up the horse and trap before he was ready to go to Bicester, he would take her with him, so that she could see her father (her mother had died when she was 4 years old). But her boss never gave her time to do it. After working in Fritwell, she went to London for work, with a friend. When she was leaving home, her grandmother (Annie Ayris) gave her 10 shillings. It was possibly all she had. When my mother came home for holidays she always gave money to her Granny whom she loved dearly. Most Bicester people were poor in those days, no pensions when they were old. Annie Ayris died in the Workhouse.

I have often wondered if "Gooseberry Square" got its name because of all the children there; they used to



Eliza's daughter Annie with two of her children

tell children when they asked "Where did I come from?" that they came from under a Gooseberry bush and I, for one, believed it!!!

- Marjorie Dean MBE

## Roll of Honour

*The following are the local men and women who died in the Great War, 100 years ago this month.*

**Lance Corporal Albert David Honour**, of Fencott.

Died: 6<sup>th</sup> December 1917 Aged: 24 Served in: Ox & Bucks Light Infantry

**Lance Corporal Lionel Harsley**, of Beckley.

Died: 17<sup>th</sup> December 1917 Aged: 28 Served in: King's Shropshire Light Infantry

**Lance Corporal Arthur Kirtland**, of Merton.

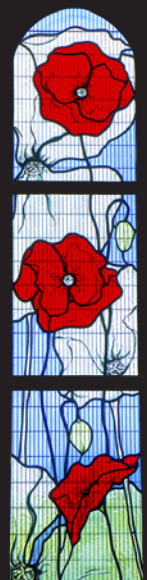
Died: 19<sup>th</sup> December 1917 Aged: 36 Served in: Canadian Infantry

**Private John William Gerring**, of Fringford.

Died: 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1917 Aged: 23 Served in: Machine Gun Corps

**Private William Harry Curtis**, of Stoke Lyne.

Died: 31<sup>st</sup> December 1917 Aged: 19 Served in: Machine Gun Corps



# Village History Somerton

Somerton is a village in the Cherwell valley, about 6 miles north-west of Bicester.

The Domesday Book of 1086 records that William the Conqueror's step-brother Odo, Bishop of Bayeux, held the manor of Somerton.

In 1230 the manor was divided between two heiresses. Then, in 1245, Walter de Grey, Archbishop of York, granted one of the halves to his nephew, also called Walter de Grey. The de Grey manor house seems to have been on low-lying land near the Cherwell and by 1295 it had a court, dovecote and fishponds.

The manor was passed down through the de Grey family, and then to their descendants, the Deincourts, and then to the Lovells of Minster Lovell. In 1485 Francis Lovell was created 1st Viscount Lovell. He is believed to have been killed in 1487 during the Battle of Stoke Field at the end of the Wars of the Roses. After his death the Crown held the manor for 25 years.

In 1512 the Crown granted the manor to William Fermor of Witney. William built a new manor house above the village, in contrast to the de Grey manor house that had been close to the Cherwell. It remained the Fermor home until about 1625 when Richard Fermor made Tusmore the family's principal home. In the 18th century most of Somerton manor house was demolished, but part of the hall wall still remains.

In the 16th century the south aisle of St James' church was converted into the Fermor family chapel. However, after the Reformation the Fermors were recusants and had a private Roman Catholic chapel at the manor house.

When Thomas Fermor died in 1580 his will provided for the founding of a "free school" for Somerton boys to be instructed in "virtue and learning". The old school building today dates from the 19th century, but includes a late 16th-century window which may be from the original building.



The parish church of Saint James the Apostle

During the English Civil War, Henry Fermor stayed neutral but his kinsman by marriage, Henry Arundell, 3rd Baron Arundell of Wardour, another recusant, was a Royalist who fought for King Charles I. As a result, in 1646 the Commonwealth sequestered Arundell's estates, including Somerton. However a relative bought Somerton from the sequestrators and in 1660 the manor was restored to the Fermors.

In 1815 William Fermor sold the manor to George Villiers, 6th Earl of Jersey. As the Free School accepted only boys, Julia, Lady Jersey, opened a girls' school in the village. A century later George's son Victor Villiers, 7th Earl of Jersey, died and the Somerton estate was sold.

The parish church of Saint James the Apostle is known to have existed by 1074 and a Norman carved doorway in the nave dates from this period. But much of the building, including the bell tower, is Decorated Gothic from the early 14th century. St James' also has features from the 13th, 15th and 16th centuries.

Even after the Fermors moved to Tusmore, the Roman Catholic Mass continued to be celebrated at the Somerton manor house chapel. In 1738 the rector of St James' Church reported that 47 Catholics attended Mass at the manor house chapel once a month. Somerton's Catholics were respectful to the Anglican rector, good farmers, and so neighbourly to Anglican fellow-villagers that there were numerous intermarriages between the two denominations. The rector concluded that the two denominations "are so blended and united together" that it would be inadvisable to enforce the laws against Catholicism that made it an offence to celebrate the Mass or for anyone to harbour Catholic clergy.

Somerton was farmed in an open field system of four fields until William Fermor secured an enclosure act from Parliament in 1765. Thereafter the village's population grew, reaching 400 in the 1841 census.

The stretch of the Oxford Canal between Banbury and Tackley was completed in 1787. It runs along the Cherwell valley and passes between the river and the village. Somerton Deep Lock was built just to the north of the village.

Construction of the section of the Oxford and Rugby



Somerton Deep Lock, on the Oxford Canal

Railway between Oxford and Banbury began in 1845. In Somerton it threads along the valley between the Oxford Canal and the foot of the hill on which the village stands. A bridge carries it over the road to North Aston. The GWR opened a station just south of the bridge in 1855; originally named Somerton, it was renamed Fritwell & Somerton in 1907, although Fritwell is about two miles away. The station attracted the opening of a public house, the Railway Inn. But British Railways closed the station in 1964 and the Inn has since followed suit.

Some of the land on which the railway was built belonged to the Free School; some of the money that the GWR paid in compensation was spent on repairs to the school. In the 19th century the village population grew and the school population grew with it. In a

reorganisation of schools in 1930 the Free School became a junior school and senior pupils from Somerton had to go to Fritwell. The school was still open in the 1950s but has since closed.

After the First World War the Rev Dr Barnes, who had been Rector of Somerton since 1875, organised the building of the first village hall. Barnes retired in 1923, then the hall was completed in 1924 and it was named the Barnes Memorial Hall in his memory.

By the 2000s the first hall was suffering from subsidence and a leaking roof. In December 2008 the Big Lottery Fund granted its trustees £311,000 to rebuild the hall for the village. The new Barnes Memorial Hall was then completed in May 2010.

- Matthew Hathaway

## Bygone Bicester (Taken from the Bicester Advertiser)

### 5th December 1863

**PENNY READINGS** - On Wednesday evening last a very interesting lecture was delivered in the Congregational Chapel by the Rev. J Moss, of Bristol. On the subject of "cultivation".

The reverend gentleman opened his address by giving a definition of the word, and after dwelling for some time on the cultivation of things around us, he took up as the leading theme of the evening, man's personal cultivation.

Under this head he spoke of the cultivation of the body. The preservation of health consisted in a great measure to the proper attendance to these three things, viz., food, exercise, and cleansing.

He next spoke of man as intended to be an observant creature. He related several amusing anecdotes in support of this statement, and concluded by impressing upon his hearers the necessity of cultivating character. A great fault among many of the present day was want of decision, and not forming proper connections. These things have often brought, and will still bring, many to ruin.

A vote of thanks was proposed by Mr Hewiett, and seconded by Mr Tanner, who coupled with it a vote of thanks to the chairman, the Rev. J Richards. The meeting then terminated.

### 22nd December 1905

**SEASONAL BENEVOLENCE** - Although Lord Jersey is away from England, his Lordship's kindness has again been shown this season of the year by giving instructions to Mr W.D. Little to Mr F. Manger, of Heyford Wharf, to deliver to every cottager in Lower Heyford, Upper Heyford, and Caulcott 7cwt of best coals. This has been done, and the recipients are most grateful for his lordship's welcome gift.

Meanwhile, through the kindness of Mr C.T. Hoare, each cottager in the two Chestertons has had given them half-a-ton of coal, the aggregate weight being 30tons 10cwt. The coal was supplied by Messrs S. and J. Harris. The same gentleman has caused to be delivered to each of his employees a joint of beef, which was supplied by Mrs S.A. Stevens.



Helping to make the Christingles: Jonathan Attwood, Tom Ottaway, Alexandra Parkinson, and Katie Ottaway.

### 19th December 1947

**CHOIR CONCERT** - Choirs from Bicester and the villages, with a total of 100 voices, gave a carol concert in St Edburg's Hall on Wednesday, arranged by the County Music Committee with the local committee for further education.

Miss Pilkington, and Mr C.F. Smyly conducted, Mrs C. Thompson and Miss W. Hurst were the accompanists, and violin solos were given by Mrs Mary Gotch, leader of the Oxford Orchestral Society.

### 8th December 1989

**A FESTIVE FUND-RAISER FOR CHILDREN** - More than 500 Christingles were created for the annual service at St Edburg's parish church at the weekend.

The service on Sunday afternoon marks the 21st anniversary of Christingles as a fundraiser for The Children's Society. Children donate money to the society and in return receive a Christingle, which is an orange, representing the world, a candle for Christ as the Light of the World, a red ribbon around the orange as the blood of Christ, and four cocktail sticks decorated with fruit, nuts and sweets, representing the four seasons.



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## Ideas a'plenty in Bicester

If you would like to reappear after Christmas disguised as a giant turkey, you can find your feet in Bicester because there is now a huge range of bizarre but very comfortable slippers that will amuse and delight anyone of any age. Apart from the red ones with the big claws, you can turn your lower extremities into two cool dogs in dark glasses or into two giant but inedible carrots. Alongside the imaginative footwear there are

cuddlies in every shape and size. Why not turn your home into a zoo with squeezable elephants and monkeys, or, king of them all, a huge and hairy gorilla? Prices range from £4.99 to £99.99.

There are many bargains in town when it comes to the essentials such as crackers and cards. There are inexpensive chocolate advent calendars and packs of ten Christmas cards at 49p per pack. Christmas crackers can be found at 12 for £1.99. Where would you be without a silly hat for Grandad?

Bargain presents come in the shape of a car care kit — just right if you don't know whether they will buy you anything — a foot pump for the motorist with a slow puncture and a tight flat or even knuckle buffers (door edge protectors). If you have more money and don't like doing the wrapping, hurry to the

perfumerie. It's all done for you. Top sniff at the moment is the one carrying Elizabeth Taylor's name. If it is beautifully packaged and as stylish as the first lady of film. You may even solve two present problems in one as there are free gifts with most perfume purchases.

No one in their right minds would buy a puppy as a Christmas present but for homes that already have well-loved cats and dogs there are plenty of colourful treats. There is such a thing as a kitty's Christmas stocking and the lucky puss will, on clawing it open, find some crunchy chews, a ball to roll about and a bell to paw.

Doggie items are just as entertaining. If your dog is a political animal it might like to chew on David Owen MP — there is a very life-like chewy doll to gnaw. If the right is a little hard

to swallow, it might find Gorby more to its taste.

There is any number of useful gadgets, contraptions, tools and articles for the home. Extension reels mean that you can watch the Queen's speech out in the garden if you've a mind to, but the modern mum may prefer the latest electronic kitchen scale, which isn't as expensive as it sounds. For Dad, a trelis. It will give him something to do on Boxing Day. If you don't know what a trelis is, go for socks and ties but if he is a real DIY fanatic you might treat him to a distance estimator, a little digital affair that comes, without batteries of course, at £19.99.

You no doubt end up spending far more on the children's presents than you originally planned. Quite right.

Splash out on something that will bring real happiness to the little'uns such as a pair of Postman Pat wellies. For the very young there is Emma Elephant's play pack which promises "hours of entertainment" — which means hours of quiet for you. Asterix and Tin Tin are on hand as usual to entertain the readers; Desperate Dan heads the cast in the latest Dandy annual.

You may be able to persuade the reluctant bather into the water with Count Duckula's foam bath.

Bicester is also outstanding for food bargains. For those who fancy rich indulgence, the freezer centre offers gourmet ready-meals such as crab mousse auvot sauce cardinale or poached salmon. Tres, tres bon!

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## Talks Update

Over the next few months we have a varied itinerary of talks that we hope will prove very interesting.

### Monday 18th December

Martin Buckland comes to talk to us about **Canal People of the Past and Present.**

### Monday 15th January

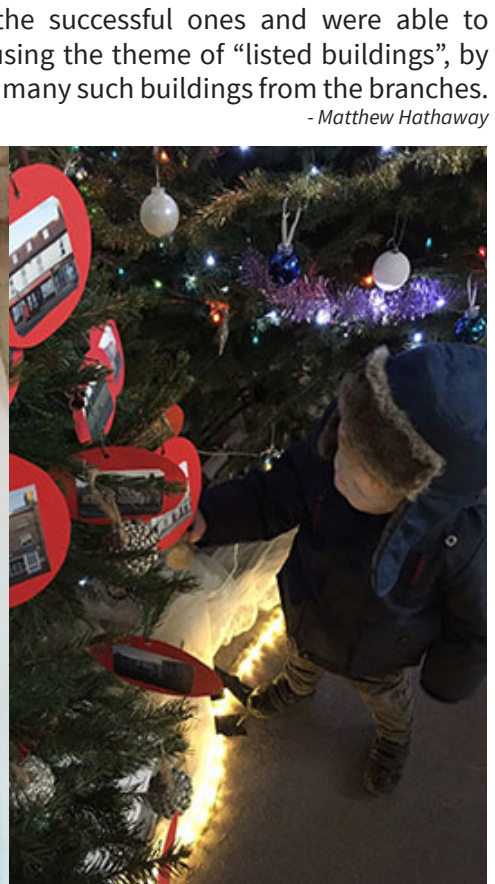
We have Ben Ford's talk on **Excavations at the Westgate.**

### Monday 19th February

Chris Day discusses Oxford University in his talk on **Home of Lost Causes & Forsaken Beliefs.**

## Christmas Tree Festival

Despite the inclement weather, the annual Christmas Tree Festival at St Edburg's Church took place on the 8th-10th December, and was another great success. More popular than ever, it has now reached the point where no more trees can be fitted into the building and some organisations wanting to sponsor and decorate them had to be turned down.



Luckily we were one of the successful ones and were able to decorate our tree, this year using the theme of "listed buildings", by hanging pictures of Bicester's many such buildings from the branches.

- Matthew Hathaway

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