Bicester Local History Society
Established 1968

BLHS Newsletter

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The monthly newsletter for Bicester Local History Society

St Giles Fair talk - by Tim Healey

St Giles Fair has excited wonder throughout its centuries-old history. Developing from the mediaeval St Giles parish wake, it would become famed for the boisterous crowds drawn to its amusement rides, booths and sideshows. This talk will tell the story of the fair from the earliest times to the present day, also encompassing other seasonal sprees around Oxfordshire – the Witney Wakes for example, and Charlbury's Forest Fair.

This meeting will be held in the Clifton Centre on Monday 17th February at 7:30pm.

The Message in the Map talk - by Nick Millea

The message in the map: What is the cartographer telling us … and why? We shall look at a series of maps with a critical eye – what really is going on with the image presented to us, and are we missing something? Bicester will be central to our deliberations.

This meeting will be held in the Clifton Centre on Monday 17th March at 7:30pm.

Oxford Bus Museum talk - by Frank Collingwood

The Oxford Bus Museum has its origins in the Oxford Bus Preservation Syndicate, which was set up in 1967 by a group of bus enthusiasts. They had the foresight to see that buses and coaches of significance to previous generations should be saved and preserved for future generations to enjoy before they were lost for all time. Beginning with just one vehicle, which can still be seen and ridden on today, the number of preserved and restored vehicles has grown, and the museum now contains around 40 vintages buses and coaches, including a number of unique vehicles, the earliest dating from 1913. The museum specialises in collecting, restoring and running buses and coaches that spent most of their working lives in Oxford city or serving the public of Oxfordshire. As the collection grew, permanent premises were needed, and since 1984 the museum has been at the old railway station yard in Long Hanborough.

This meeting will be held in the Clifton Centre on Monday 14th April at 7:30pm.

Garden Archaeology talk - by Dr Stephen Wass

For the past decade landscape archaeologist Dr. Stephen Wass has been working, mainly for the National Trust, developing a better understanding of some of our greatest historic gardens. Investigating properties ranging from the medieval park at Baddesley Clinton, through seventeenth-century

Dates For Your Diary

February newsletter submission deadline
2nd February

St Giles Fair talk
17th February @ 7:30pm

Message in the Map talk
17th March @ 7:30pm

Oxford Bus Museum talk
14th April @ 7:30pm

Garden Archaeology talk
19th May @ 7:30pm

Public Health in Victorian Britain talk
16th June @ 7:30pm

gardens at Hanwell and Packwood to the great landscape garden at Stowe, Stephen has used the techniques of archaeology to gain a better understanding of their construction and development and will be sharing some thoughts on how garden archaeology can support our understanding of some key moments in history.

This meeting will be held in the Clifton Centre on Monday 19th May at 7:30pm.

Poverty, Pestilence & Public Health in Victorian Britain talk - by Dr Simon Wenham

Britain may have been the 'workshop of the world' in the Victorian period, but the sceptre of poverty and pestilence loomed large over the lives of many of its citizens. A large proportion of people were not only close to the bread line, but repeated epidemics decimated whole swathes of the population. This talk explores the wealth and health of the British during the Victorian period and the State's struggle to improve conditions.

This meeting will be held in the Clifton Centre on Monday 16th June at 7:30pm.

Bicester Red Cross records

For anyone interested in the work of the Red Cross in Bicester over the years, a collection of archive items held at the Oxfordshire History Centre have now been made available to view online.

The register of soldiers admitted to the VAD hospital during World War One can be viewed here:

https://heritagesearch.oxfordshire.gov.uk/records/O78/A1/1

Two scrapbooks, one belonging to Dorothy Mountain covering 1913 to 1978, and one covering 1932 to 1982, can be viewed here:

https://heritagesearch.oxfordshire.gov.uk/records/O78/MS1/1

https://heritagesearch.oxfordshire.gov.uk/records/O78/MS1/2

And all the photographs extracted from the above can be found here:

https://heritagesearch.oxfordshire.gov.uk/search/all:combined/0_100_grid/all/score_desc/COS%3A2017.7.%2A

Christmas Music & Song through the Ages Talk

Ian Giles, an eminent and influential performer on the Oxford folk music scene, and beyond, brought his hurdy-gurdy, melodeon and drum (a copy of a 17th century war drum) to enhance his presentation about Christmas music and song from the past. He also sang a number of popular and less well-known songs and explained their history and relevance to the festive season.

The celebration started as a mid-winter gathering of farm workers and their families at a time of year when there was little work available. A pig would be slaughtered and shared among villagers. It eventually amalgamated with the nativity story.

A flavour of a pre-Victorian Christmas can be gained from George Wither's (1588-1667) 17th century carol, A Christmas Carol. It tells us about the decoration of houses; the food available; music-making and dancing, and wassailing and mumming. The line, *The wild mare in is bringing* is thought to be a reference to the new year chasing out the old year.

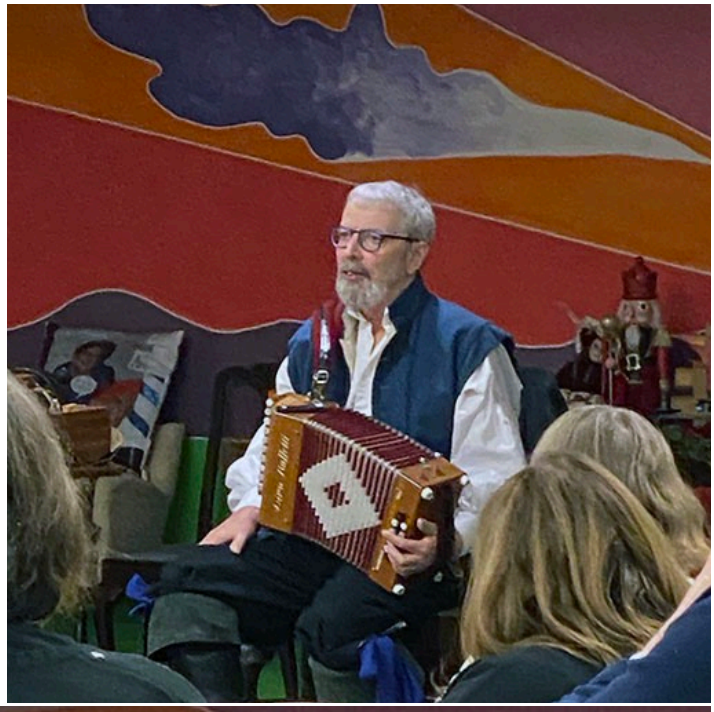
Drive the Cold Winter Away is another 17th century carol which includes the line, *To mask and to mum kind neighbours will come*. Mummers' plays are ancient in origin and are probably based on the concept of Islam vs

Christianity, including, as they do, the characters of St George and the Turkish Knight.

'Waits' existed in most principal towns and cities in Britain from the mediaeval period. They acted as night watchmen and called the hours. They played a variety of instruments and were often accomplished musicians. Ian Giles is a member of the Oxford Waits, who take their name from a real-life band of city musicians who flourished in Oxford during the 17th century.

A General History of the Science and Practice of Music published in 1776 in five volumes was written by Sir John Hawkins and contains valuable information about early 18th century musical society in London.

Morris dancing was a popular activity which dates back to the 15th century. Participants often 'blacked up' as a form of disguise. Residents felt compelled to perform the dances in order to shake the devil out of the village.



Carol singers begged for money in exchange for their singing and a sight of 'the king', which was a small animal or wren in a box. This is recalled in The Wren Boys' Song', a Victorian song.

To bring his talk up to the present day, Ian remarked on the secular carols commonly sung in Yorkshire pubs. Participants can expect to encounter a wide variety of tunes to largely familiar words! *- Sally James*

Committee & Contacts

Editor:
Matthew Hathaway
editor@blhs.org.uk

Website:
www.blhs.org.uk

Committee Members:
Bob Hessian *(Chairman)*
chairman@blhs.org.uk
01869 350662
Sally James *(Treasurer)*
01869 243804
Sally Dexter *(Minutes Secretary)*
John Roberts *(Membership Officer)*
Matthew Hathaway
Peter Crook

Meetings Address:
The Clifton Centre
Ashdene Road
Bicester
OX26 2BH

Postal Address:
BLHS c/o Sally James
14 George Street
Bicester
OX26 2EG