

NEWSLETTER

BALDOCK MUSEUM AND LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Museum News

The new display in the Museum is called "Views of Old Baldock" and we have gathered together about thirty copies and originals of paintings, prints and drawings of Baldock covering the 150 years from the 1780s to the 1930s. Some of these will be familiar to regular visitors, although the reproductions are larger and better than previously. Many are completely new and come from private collections or from Letchworth and Baldock Museums.

One of the Letchworth paintings is a view of Baldock Cross which had been photographed in black and white long ago and a small, poor reproduction displayed in the Museum. We were once told that it had previously been

in the George and Dragon (which can be seen in the picture) but its whereabouts were unknown until the Public Catalogue Foundation published its volume of Hertfordshire oil paintings in public ownership.

The painting is complete but is very dirty with crazed varnish and some details are obscure. However some of the names on the shops are just visible and these coincide with the 1846 directory. A small market is in progress at the Cross on the area known as Market Hill and there appears to be a signature underneath. Peter Freeman kindly went to Letchworth to photograph the painting and then enhanced it on a computer to give the best possible image.

Coming Events

Thursday 23rd Jul	"Memories of Kayser Bondor" (Slide show of the Bondor in the 1950s and 1960s)	Neville Chuck
Thursday 24th Sep	AGM, Quiz and Buffet Evening. (More of a social evening than a meeting and well attended last year)	
Thursday 26th Nov	"Rambles around the History of Wallington" (A very interesting talk on the origins of Wallington and into more modern times)	Dan Pinnock

All meetings at Baldock Community Centre at 8 pm, non-members £1.00

Note

The annual symposium of the Hertfordshire Association for Local History will take place at the Hitchin British Schools Museum on 7th November from 10.00 am to 4.30 pm. There will be six talks on a variety of historical educational topics covering the last four centuries and the Museum will be open during the lunch break. Tickets are £15 (£12 for HALH members) and available from the Museum in Queen Street, Hitchin SG4 9TS (cheques payable to: Hitchin British Schools Trust).

Museum Opening Times

Sunday 2 pm to 4 pm
Wednesday 11 am to 1.30 pm

Committee Officers

Chairman: Brendan King
Secretary: Stephen Childerstone
Treasurer: John Merrett

A Trip up the Tower

The scaffolding on the south face of St Mary's church tower has provided a rare opportunity for a close-up view of the building and its problems, not least the very large chunks of loose render which might fall at any time. An inspection by masons, an archaeologist, an architect and an English Heritage expert revealed some interesting details.

The most remarkable feature was the sheer scale of the moulded surrounds to the belfry windows, something which is not easy to appreciate from ground level. These mouldings had been skilfully re-worked in Roman cement (a type of cement plaster used in the 19th century), but the cement was coming away in large chunks revealing the original badly decayed stonework of soft clunch limestone beneath. This work was done in 1841 when the whole of the rubble infill stonework of the tower was rendered in either "Parker and Wyatt's, or Atkinson's best Roman Cement". The contract was won by the lowest tender (by £5), that of William Bentley, a bricklayer, plasterer and lime-burner of Whitehorse Street, who happened to be the only Baldock tradesman who tendered; a rather interesting coincidence!

The Parish had £250 in hand from the funds of the "15 Houses" charity and proposed to raise a parish rate of one shilling in the pound which would provide a total fund of £450. Bentley's quote was for £302 but that of one Henry Stevens for £477 "with stone windows" seems to have been proposing the proper repair of the clunch stonework. It is a sad irony that, with £450 available, the Parish Vestry chose the cheapest option when a further £27, equivalent to 36 weeks wages for a poor labourer at that time, would have saved the church a considerable part of its present difficulties. The present cost of repairing the church stonework would be about £400,000 which is beyond all likelihood.

The main structural stonework of the tower, the dressed corners that support the rubble walls, was identified as Barnack stone from near Stamford which led to much speculation about the difficulty and cost of transporting it to Baldock, presumably via the Welland or Nene, Great Ouse and Ivel as far as was navigable. Again, taken together with the size of the 14th century expansion of the church, the bulk of the tower and its mouldings, it speaks of a very ambitious project that was, it would appear, never completed.

Another interesting detail, discovered by the mason chipping off some of the render at the base of the battlemented parapet of the tower, was a sloping layer

of tiles. In 1816 the old spire was replaced by the present one and a battlemented parapet built around the top of the tower. Previously there had been no parapet just an open railing fixed to the outside of the tower. This can be seen in three different pre-1816 pictures currently on display in the Museum. These pictures appear to show a leaded, low-pitched, four-sided roof topped by a "lantern" and spire. The pictures are a bit vague but, in some, the roof seems to overshoot the top of the tower and the tiling mentioned above may therefore have provided a base for it.



St Mary's showing the old spire in 1786

The "Ramblings through History" articles in the April/May and June/July issues of the Baldock Mail dealt with the ways in which money was raised for work on the Church in the Middle Ages. There was another means available that was not mentioned because it was seldom used then but which was used for many of the 19th century repairs, that is the Parish Rate. Just as the Parish Vestry, the local council of the time, could raise a rate for the poor or other municipal tasks within their remit, so too could they raise a rate to repair the Parish Church. It was a compulsory rate levied on everyone, Anglican or Dissenter, believer or unbeliever. This, together with the proceeds of the 15 Houses Charity and the offerings and donations of a thriving congregation of 900 or more explains how the Parish was able to afford to do so much in the way of repair and restoration in the 19th century to the ancient church which had probably received only limited attention since the Reformation. It would need an average rate of about £36 per household to meet the present shortfall.
