

NEWSLETTER

BALDOCK MUSEUM AND LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Museum News

In this last year the Museum has had 701 visitors, our best year since 2002. This increase can be attributed to the alterations to the town centre. We had a good crowd for the opening ceremony for the town centre and picked up a few more visitors at the Christmas Fair. The Festival Street Fair also brought in a larger number than usual and the use of the pedestrianised Church Street as an extension to the market place undoubtedly drew more people down past the Museum.

The attendance in normal opening times has picked up since the works finished and we have had quite a good summer and autumn attendance. Nevertheless it can still be very quiet at times so please do pop in to the Museum when you can - it's free to members! As to the future of the Museum and Town Hall that is uncertain as ever, but then that has been the situation since we opened in December 1998.

Coming Events

Our good year in the Museum has been matched by the attendances at our talks which have averaged 65 over the five talks last year, none of them dropping below 50. This is a high proportion of our membership of little over 100 people even though the numbers usually include a few visitors. We thank all of you for your support.

Given that our aim is limited to providing talks relating to our local history (or matters that could be indirectly applied to it) we have managed to find quite a variety of subjects over the last 10 years or so. Sometimes this involves taking a risk with an unknown speaker but we believe it is important that we give new people a chance to air their research.

With that in mind we have invited a young lady from Cambridge University, **Dr Natalie White**, to come and air her new research into the significance of the various animal bones dug up during the excavations of Roman Baldock. We hasten to add that she is not unknown to us but spoke recently to the North Herts Archaeological Society and came up with some very interesting and unexpected conclusions. Unusually for us we are having to pay a fee for this talk and so it would be good if as many of you as possible came to give their support.

Thursday 28th Jan	"Food for Thought: Meat and Mourning in Roman Baldock (see item above)	Dr Natalie White
Thursday 25th Mar	"Educating Our Own: 200 Years of Hitchin British School"	Terry Ransom
Thursday 27th May	"800 Years of Baldock Fair"	Brendan King
Thursday 22nd Jul	"Dan Albone the Biggleswade Inventor"	Judy Flack
Thursday 23rd Sep	AGM, Quiz and Buffet Evening.	
Thursday 25th Nov	"The Great Northern Railway (1850 - 1923): A Short History"	Ted Martin

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

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

The Church Spire

Congratulations are due to the Friends of St Mary's and everyone else involved with the Tower Appeal for the splendid, not to say incredible, achievement of raising so much money in so short a time. Also it has been very heartening to see how the town has rallied round to help out.

However (as is so often the way with restoration projects on old buildings) while investigating the state of the tower it was discovered that the spire was also in serious need of remedial work with the lead and copper work coming away from the wooden structure.

The spire, as it is today, was made in 1816 to replace an earlier spire which was "greatly decayed and incapable of being repaired". The new spire was to be rebuilt in the "same form as it is now" but, for some reason, it ended up rather different. The general form was similar in that it was an octagonal spire on an octagonal drum or "lantern", but the earlier structure was sheathed in an attractive lattice-patterned lead-work whilst the present spire is rather plain. There was an improvement in that battlements were added to the top of the tower where once there had been open railings. There are three views of the old spire in the current Museum display.

Over the years there has been some speculation as to the age of the old spire, one suggestion being that it could have been early 18th century. We can never know the answer to this but it is likely to have been much older than that. The old framework was apparently made of oak and the use of that timber in such large pieces suggests that it was built no later than the 16th or 17th century. We might also deduce that as the 1816 replacement was framed in "Memel deal" (Baltic fir) and has lasted almost 200 years (admittedly with a spot of modern woodworm treatment) we must presume that the old oak structure would have lasted considerably longer given reasonable maintenance of the lead sheathing. Considering also that the mid 16th century Reformation and its aftermath brought most church building and improvements almost to a standstill we might rea-

sonably assume that the spire was added in the first half of the 16th century or even in the 15th century when the lead roof of the church was built. Furthermore the latticed lead-work of the spire is a feature of some other late medieval spires.

The present spire, which extends the steeple by 50 feet making a total of 130 feet, is topped by a gilded weathercock. When this was removed during repairs to the spire in 1965 a parchment was found inside relating the circumstances of the erection of the spire in 1816 at a cost of £800; this cost was met by church rates on all Baldock ratepayers. Prior to the cock being placed on the spire it was filled with strong beer at the White Horse Inn at an evening celebration of the "utmost friendship, happiness and conviviality" attended by 15 or so "gentlemen inhabitants of the Town of Baldock". The toasts and songs of the company mostly recalled the late war with France: "God save the king", "Rule Britannia", "Death of Lord Nelson", "Death of General Abercrombie" (sic - at Alexandria in 1801), "Heart of Oak", "When the despots of France", "Old England", "Ye sons of England", etc; with toasts to Wellington and the Army, St Vincent and the Navy as well as the Royal Family, the Constitution, "the town and trade of Baldock", "the snug bit of land in the ocean" and amongst many others, the cock itself.

An obvious absentee from this celebration was Dr John Simpson, the rector. His incumbency seems to have been marked by a series of disputes with the parish vestry. With regards to the spire, for instance, he claimed that, the freehold of the church being his, those old timbers of the spire that could not be reused in the new spire should belong to him and should not be auctioned off to defray the expense of the works as the parishioners intended. The opinion of a Doctor of Law had to be sought and he found in favour of the parishioners who were bound, in law, to repair the spire and therefore were entitled to benefit from the sale of its old materials. In 1828 Dr Simpson was at it again, this time trying to sell part of the churchyard to the parish at an enormous price. Perhaps we will return to that subject in a future newsletter.

SERL

At present there is a display in preparation about SERL, the secret scientific establishment run by the Ministry of Defence in Baldock. We are looking for interesting objects and photographs for the display and would like to hear from anyone with precise information about the alleged KGB spying operation on SERL. Please telephone 892640 or 618248.
