

# NEWSLETTER

BALDOCK MUSEUM AND LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

## Museum

This last year has been a good one for Museum attendance because for the second year running we have had over 700 visitors, something we have not managed to do since 2002. During the six intervening years the figures have varied between 453 and 650 so this sudden jump in 2009 and 2010 is quite encouraging. There are several factors that have contributed to this. The closure of Church Street to traffic and its availability for use during special

events like the Baldock Festival and the summer and winter fairs, have drawn more people past the Museum than used to be the case. The Museum is also a little more visible with the swinging sign outside and this too draws in more passing trade. Also the present display on SERL has attracted many visitors and on its opening day during the Festival we had 291 visitors, 60 more than our previous record on this day.

## Coming Events

**Thursday 27th January** "Restoring St Mary's Church Tower" - An illustrated talk explaining the problems encountered and the very interesting solutions by a team of excellent craftsmen - by Rhian Dodds

**Thursday 24th March** "Stories of Baldock Soldiers before 1900" - Some of the experiences of military life in the days of the Empire - by Janet Waters

**Thursday 26th May** "A Glimpse of Stocking" - The première of the new short film about Kayser Bondor and an explanatory talk by the director Eileen Kenning.

**Thursday 28th July** "Baldock Houses: How to turn Detective on yours" - by Jane Havercroft

**Thursday 29th September** AGM, Quiz and Buffet Evening.

**Thursday 24th November** "Prehistoric Norton" by Keith Fitzpatrick Matthews

*All meetings at Baldock Community Centre at 8 pm.*

*Non-members always welcome at £1.00 admission so please bring a friend*

### Museum Opening Times

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

### Committee Officers

Chairman: Brendan King	892640
Secretary: Stephen Childerstone	893900
Treasurer: John Merrett	893738

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## The Deserted Village of Caldecote

**H**ot on the heels of the “Excavations at Baldock 1978–1994 Vol 1” reported in our last newsletter another report on a local excavation has become available at Baldock Library. This is called “Caldecote, the development and desertion of a Hertfordshire village” by Guy Beresford.

Some of you will perhaps have visited the pretty little medieval parish church of St Mary Magdalene (which has recently been restored from a derelict state) and wondered what had happened to the village it had once served now comprising only the old manor house and half a dozen farm cottages. This report sets out to answer that question and although it is primarily an archaeological report it is of great interest as a piece of local history using, as it does, documentary evidence to interpret the findings from the extensive excavations of the ancient village.

The occupation of the village appears to have occurred in the 10th century and there is much interesting speculation about how the small parish and manor of Caldecote came into being, the opinion being that it may once have been part of Newnham much as Baldock was once part of Weston. Certainly the plots on which the houses of the village were built were part of an earlier (9th century?) field system.

Being a small parish of only 325 acres (of which the lord held over a third “in demesne”) it could only sustain 15 households and the parson in 1321, not much more than it had in 1086, so perhaps 70 people in total. By that time the countryside was being badly hit by a series of harvest failures and livestock epidemics which resulted in a severe famine in 1315–17 in which large numbers perished, locally much land was left unploughed for lack of men and beasts. Then came the Black Death, probably in the spring of 1349 wiping out perhaps 1/3 rd of the population and, in 1362, another plague caused further devastation.

The huge loss of population caused considerable wage rises and an abundance of vacant land for those peasants with the energy and ability to take advantage of the situation. The manorial lords found themselves at a disadvantage in the face of these market forces and the old system of work on the lords’ demesnes undertaken by their villeins began to crumble away as lords competed for labour and tenants.

In a manor like Caldecote with its small population and few people available to till the land, this problem may have been even more acute and it seems that the lord at that time (the Abbott of St Albans) concluded that the solution was to amalgamate all the holdings of the manor, together with his own demesne, and redivide it into six farms of about 50 acres each. The author of the report makes a good case for suggesting that the Abbey may have provided the materials for building four or perhaps five substantial new farmhouses to replace the 16 former cottages of the villeins in order to attract new tenants. Whereas the earlier structures were probably built of cob (clay) and of limited durability, the new farmhouses, built around 1360 were built to last and did so until they were gradually deserted in the 16th/17th century leaving the whole parish to be farmed as one unit by the Manor Farm built on the site of the former manor house in the 15th century.

This remained the situation until the 1970s when the church was declared redundant, the ruinous early 18th century barns of the farm were demolished and its lands incorporated into one large agricultural estate farmed from Newnham Manor Farm. If Caldecote was indeed once part of Newnham then the wheel of history has almost turned full circle.

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## WANTED

**W**e are thinking of doing a display about Norton End and its general area. If you have any interesting photographs, objects, documents or stories connected with that area please could you contact 892640.

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