

# NEWSLETTER

## BALDOCK MUSEUM AND LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

### Town Hall

The Town Hall Group had a preliminary meeting with NHDC officials before Christmas to give an outline of their proposals. These proposals seemed quite well received and those members of the group present felt encouraged and fairly confident that progress can be made. We have to present the full business case in the next two months so that a decision can be made by the Council in March.

Whatever that decision might be the Museum faces an uncertain future. If the Council decide to sell off the Town Hall (subject to Charity Commission approval because the land was gifted by Thomas Pryor) then there is little prospect of the Museum finding another home and our collection would be transferred to North Herts Museums. If however the Council agree to the THG proposals we would probably carry on as present for at least another year but beyond that the future of the Museum would be dependent on the success of the venture. If all seems to be

progressing satisfactorily by that time we will use our carefully hoarded funds to reconfigure the Museum into a "Heritage Centre" that will be an integral part of the new Town Hall project. The idea of this being that as all spaces within the building are needed to generate revenue, then the Museum must not occupy useful space but must become a "museum round the walls" with display cases set into corners.

In this scheme there is unlikely to be much storage space and so most of our collection may have to go to North Herts Museums for storage. It will not therefore be available to researchers and so the Museum will no longer be a museum in the true sense of the word - hence the change of name. This may seem like a retreat from our original aims but, bearing in mind that the realistic alternatives, it presents a new opportunity to reach a wider audience.

### Coming Events

<b>Thursday 26th January</b>	"George Orwell's Life in Wallington"	<i>Dan Pinnock</i>
<b>Thursday 22nd March</b>	"The Stories Behind the Names on the Pirton War Memorial 1914 - 1918"	<i>Derek Jarrett</i>
<b>Thursday 24th May</b>	"Baldock's Houses: Tales of the Unexpected"	<i>Jane Havercroft</i>
<b>Thursday 26th July</b>	"Ramblings through the History of Weston"	<i>Peter Handy</i>
<b>Thursday 27th September</b>	AGM, Quiz and Buffet Evening.	
<b>Thursday 22nd November</b>	"Milestones and Turnpike Roads"	<i>Michael Knight</i>

*All meetings at Baldock Community Centre at 8 pm.  
Non-members always welcome at £1.50 admission so please bring a friend*

### Herts Memories

We have been asked to inform our members of the Herts Memories website ([www.hertsmemories.org.uk](http://www.hertsmemories.org.uk)). The idea is to create a "Community Archive" created by the public. Other towns and villages have put all sorts of things in their sections but the Baldock entry was (up to Christmas) somewhat thin although a couple of items have now been entered.

So, if you have any memories of Baldock past (long past or recent past), of living or working here, of people or events, of churches, shops, farms, fairs, the Bondor, SERL, coronation celebrations, Soap Box Derby, wartime, etc etc, you can either contribute to the website directly via an editor or take a written item into Baldock Library. Photographs would be particularly welcome. For more information ask for Fiona O'Connor in the Library.

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## Robert de Baldock

Some of our members may have read the article about Edward II's chancellor in the October issue of the Baldock Mail in which he was identified as being of, or related to, the Catel family of Baldock and as having a brother called Thomas. Since then the source of much of Robert's story, the early 14th century "Pauline Chronicle" (so-called because it was written by someone connected to St Paul's Cathedral) has been consulted.

The Chronicle tells us that Master Robert's brother was indeed Thomas Catel of Baldock, a member of one of the town's prominent families which flourished between c 1280 - 1340. The earliest record of gifts to St Mary's Church (still on display in the church) are from William and Walter Catel, both of whom served as jurors for the town in the Assizes. It is not possible to create a family tree for any 13th/14th century family in Baldock but we can make some deductions from tax assessments of the period. These appear to show two branches, one somewhat wealthier than the other. In 1313 for example Thomas (who was a wool merchant) was shown as being assessed for tax at over twice the amount of Reginald Catel from which we may presume that Robert was a younger son of the wealthier branch, not the youngest for there was a younger brother, Master Richard, who also entered the king's service. It is quite likely that the William Catel who made the gift to St Mary's in 1289 was their father but there is no means of proving it. One of the earliest existing coroner's rolls tells of a man from Barrington (Cambs) who was killed a few days before the 1285 fair in "Cokestrate" (Hitchin Street) outside the door of the "Capital messuage" (large house) of William Catel on the north side of the street. This may well have been Robert's home and he was probably about 12 -14 years old at the time, perhaps already ordained in minor orders and serving, and receiving his education in St Mary's Church, or rather the "Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary" as it was then called. At 14 he would have left home for Oxford University.

The Chronicle adds some further details of Robert's unhappy fate to those given in the Baldock Mail. For example in 1326 it tells us that when the Queen's army arrived in Baldock: "Thomas Catel, brother of Robert de Baldock then chancellor of the lord king, was seized, and all his property destroyed, and he was taken to a certain castle. "Three months later he received a letter of protection from the new regime and, presumably, was released.

Meanwhile Robert's manors and properties were laid waste and his treasury plundered. He was captured in Wales and taken to Hereford where he was brought before the justices and charged with "all the crimes" which Sir Hugh Despenser had been accused of and had, that same day, before the whole city of Hereford, been drawn (disembowelled), slowly hanged and then beheaded. Indeed it is clear from the proclamations of the new regime that Robert was considered to be equally culpable, and the court accordingly convicted him. He escaped the hideous fate of his companions because the Bishop of Hereford claimed him as clergy and took him into his custody in his house in London but the bailiffs and citizens claimed that the Bishop had no power of custody within the city and took Robert to Newgate. There he languished for five or six months then, "in great suffering and in chains, in exceeding squalor and misery he died." As a canon of St Paul's his body was claimed by the chapter and taken thence from the prison and there "the canons and other ministers of that church, with all honour and solemnity which was fitting to show a fellow canon, consigned him to burial in the graveyard of the canons." This seems a rather courageous show of sympathy for the fallen Chancellor in the circumstances and indicates a degree of respect and fellowship.

The Chronicle relates an interesting sequel to the events of 1326. The Canterbury Provincial Council met at St Paul's in 1329 and excommunicated all those responsible for the horrific murder of the Treasurer, Bishop Stapledon. Two of the ringleaders (one had stabbed the Bishop in the neck, the other had shouted "kill him, kill him" and provided the butcher's knife to hack off his head) separately went to seek absolution in Rome and returned to receive public penance at St Paul's. The passions of the mob had given way to bitter remorse as human reason was restored and, looking back on these events one is again struck by that odd mixture of evident piety and cruel violence that was such a feature of medieval life. Who knows how many churches, hospitals and other charities were built on the proceeds of such remorse?

These events also throw an intriguing light on the Baldock of those days. Did it, or St Mary's Church which was ambitiously enlarged at this time, benefit from the connection with powerful men? And, when Edward II and his court celebrated Christmas here in 1318, did he stay at the home of Robert's brother?

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