

NEWSLETTER

BALDOCK MUSEUM AND LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

The Museum - "Royal Jubilee" and "Baldock in 1953"

The new display in the Museum is "Royal Jubilee" which shows how royal events have been celebrated in Baldock since Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887. It is a partially re-worked and shortened version of the display that was put up in 2002 with a new display of objects. Recently a photograph album was donated to the Museum which included photographs of the celebrations in Baldock for the 1935 Silver Jubilee and the 1937 and 1953 Coronations. We have been able to include some of these in the display and, using the many photographs of buildings decorated in 1953, we have also mounted a smaller display called "Baldock in 1953". This display shows many shops and buildings that have now

long gone. It is on the staircase landing but a copy is available at the desk for those unable to ascend.

The Jubilee display will come down at the end of the Summer as its time will have passed by then. We are considering replacing it with "Baldock's Turnpike : Baldock and the Great North Road in the Coaching Age" which was shown for a few days in 1997 in the front of Musgrove's Maltings in the pre-Museum days. If anyone has any objects we could display in the cases relevant to that theme please telephone 892640.

Edna Page and Elsa Miller

We have lost two very faithful members of our Society since our last newsletter. Probably most of you will already know that Edna Page died last January and will have read the obituary in the Baldock Mail. Edna loved this town and its Church and the enormous contribution she made to the life of both would fill this page to relate. She seemed to be involved in almost everything, usually very quietly and unobtrusively, but it is her contribution to this Society that concerns us here.

Edna was one of the founding members of the Baldock History Society in 1992 along with her close friend Nora Penfold (they seem to have done most things together and we can hardly mention one without the other). The previous year, having recorded the memories of Baldock past from some of the town's oldest inhabitants and having gathered a huge collection of photographs, all of which was expertly edited by Maureen Maddren, they published "Baldock Voices". The great success of this venture sparked an interest in the town's history that surely provided the impetus for the founding of this Society and encouraged the publication in quick succession of a companion volume of "A Baldock Scrapbook" and Vivian Crellin's two books on medieval and Tudor Baldock. Considering that Edna was the most prominent advocate for a museum on the Committee (at

the time when a Museum became a possibility) it is perhaps not too much to say that there might well have been no Museum if there had been no Edna.

Edna served on the Committee until November 2004 when both she and Nora stepped down. However they continued to attend the Museum and provide refreshments at meetings for which Edna always baked her own delicious biscuits. She also dealt with enquiries about 20th-century Baldock history and sometimes with the press. Her wide circle of acquaintance proved invaluable in attracting volunteers and donations of objects for displays. Like Eileen Crellin, who died last year, she was a source of wise advice in awkward situations and was always encouraging to those running the Museum.

The other member was Elsa Miller who died in June after a very long and piteous illness. Elsa and her late husband Paul were great supporters of this Society and, amongst other charitable work at Wimpole Hall and locally, were amongst our most enthusiastic museum attenders. Elsa was one of the very few volunteers who would attend the Museum for five hours on a Wednesday but she had to resign a few years ago because of her increasing ill health.

May both these good ladies rest in peace.

A Museum Proposal in 1926

The idea of having a museum in Baldock is actually somewhat older than the foundation of the Baldock Local History Society in 1992. An item in the Citizen of 17th September 1926 tells us that at a meeting of the Baldock Urban District Council earlier in the week Mr W B Raban had “put forward the question, in view of the fact that the history of Baldock was likely to be rewritten at no very distant date, and the great numbers of archaeological relics recently unearthed near Baldock, whether the time was not ripe for starting of a Baldock Museum where all the specimens might be exhibited of interest to the visitors to the town”. The proposal was received favourably and was left to the General Purposes Committee to see if something could be arranged, perhaps in the Town Hall.

Mr Raban was referring to the archaeological discoveries of William Percival Westell, curator of the new Letchworth Museum, who had been invited to explore Walls Field by the farmer, Mr Hart, who had unearthed large pieces of ancient pottery and human remains after steam ploughing for the first time. The excavations of 1925 and 1926 on the site had led Westell to conclude that this was the site of a previously unsuspected Roman town.

Westell took his discoveries to Letchworth where they became the centrepiece display of the new museum. The keeper of British and Medieval Antiquities at the British Museum described them as “at least the second finest collection of Roman burial groups in Britain” after his visit in 1928 and this after only four seasons of “digs”.

Mr Raban’s proposal was no doubt prompted by the thought that the relics of Baldock’s past should be displayed in Baldock rather than Letchworth, a thought that has often been expressed since. (The imminent closure of Letchworth Museum and the removal of the objects to Hitchin will take them a little further away.) The view of the present Baldock Museum on this subject is essentially a practical rather than an emotional one. The excavations in Baldock have produced tens of thousands of artefacts, the vast majority of which would be of no interest to a museum visitor but vital to the understanding of the site. If a Baldock Museum had been set up in 1926 to become a repository for these discoveries it would have had to accommodate all the material, not just the exciting items, and employ an archaeologist to deal with it all. It must have been obvious then, that the Town Hall was not a suitable repository for these objects and that there was no prospect of a new building or the necessary staff to man it.

Evidently these considerations must have weighed heavily with the General Purposes Committee, especially bearing in mind that they may have realised that the finds to date were just the tip of an iceberg. The exact reasons they gave are not (yet) known but the museum proposal came to nothing. If it had and if a council-run Baldock Museum had survived the creation of NHDC, then today that museum, like Letchworth’s, would probably be closing and the objects shipped to Hitchin – imagine the rumpus that would have caused!

Coming Events

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| Thursday 26th July | “Ramblings through the History of Weston” | <i>Richard Clements</i> |
| Thursday 27th September | AGM, Quiz and Buffet Evening.
(The AGM lasts about half an hour and is painless! Otherwise this is a purely social occasion so please come and support the Society. There will be an admission charge of £2 to cover the costs of the buffet) | |
| Thursday 22nd November | “Milestones and Turnpike Roads” | <i>Michael Knight</i> |

*All meetings at Baldock Community Centre at 8 pm.
Non-members always welcome at £1.50 (AGM excepted)*