

JANUARY 2015

NEWSLETTER

BALDOCK MUSEUM & LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Coming Events:

Thursday 22nd January: “*The Baldock Soap-Box Derbies*”, movie footage and slide show. The 1953-5 soap-box derbies were well organised events that attracted national interest and the surviving film provides a rare glimpse of old Baldock.

Thursday 26th March: “*Norton Manor Court Records*”, David Croft of Norton Community Archaeology Group summarises the information gleaned from the recent translation of this rare set of records.

Thursday 28th May: “*The early Development of a Village: test-pitting in Pirton*”, local archaeologist Gil Burleigh explains the way in which villages, as we know them, came into being in Saxon and early medieval England.

Thursday 23rd July: “*Stevenage Through Time*”, following on from last year’s very entertaining talk on “*Baldock Through Time*”, Hugh Madgin tells the story of our neighbour down the Great North Road and its similarities with Baldock.

Thursday 24th September: A.G.M., Quiz and Buffet Evening.

Thursday 26th November: “*Civil War and Restoration; Baldock in the 17th Century*”, by Brendan King.

All meetings (except the A.G.M., venue to be arranged) **will be in the Community Centre, Simpsons Drive**, at 8pm. Non-members admission £2.

Memberships: single £4, family £6. Payable at our talks or by cheque to the treasurer, Mr. John Merret, 23 Bush Spring, Baldock SG7 6

Change of Venue:

Despite the determination expressed in the last Newsletter to persevere with the Arts and Heritage Centre (the old Town Hall) as a venue for our talks in spite of the difficulties, we have been obliged to give up the struggle and return to the Community Centre for this year’s talks. This is a great disappointment and set-back to those of us who had hoped to make the Town Hall into a venue (as its name implies) for both arts and local historical events. The problems referred to in July have only become worse as the downstairs room has been cluttered up with even more furniture and bric-a-brac. Perhaps it may be possible to return to the Town Hall in the future but, for the time being, we will stay at the Community Centre.

The Name of Baldock.

The most common question that arises at talks about Baldock is: where does the name come from and what does it mean? Whether the same question is asked whenever someone talks about Hitchin, or any other place with a name with no obvious origin, we cannot say but it seems the reason for the frequency of this particular question is due to curiosity about the supposed link with Baghdad. Usually such questions are answered with the perfectly valid explanation that no one knows the origin of the name but that it is unlikely to have such an exotic source. Over the years various people have written on this subject and it may be of interest to our members to summarise their views.

In 1728, Nathaniel Salmon in his *History of Hertfordshire*, apparently citing an opinion already held by others, stated that: '*The reason for this name is said to be from that of Bagdet or Baldach near Babylon, a city belonging to their Order (ie. the Templars) from whence they were ejected by the Saracens*'. This, of course, is wildly inaccurate: Baghdad was almost 400 miles beyond the furthest outposts of the 'Latin Kingdoms' established by the Crusaders and far beyond the Holy Land that they sought to secure. However, it is true that the early renderings of the name of Baldock were the same, or similar, to the Frankish, or Old French (or Italian) words for Baghdad which still survive in English usage as 'baldachin', a rich brocade or canopy. For this reason the derivation of the name from Baghdad was accepted without question by a succession of place-name authorities during the early 20th century and is still commonly given as the origin of Baldock's name. Nevertheless, it seems that there were objectors because *The Place Names of Hertfordshire* (1938) ruled out an alternative, English, derivation ('bald oak', perhaps), observing that '*Any attempt to interpret the final element (ie. -ock) as containing the word 'oak' breaks down on the point that in the 12th century the form in Hertfordshire would clearly have been ok(e) not ak(e). Further, persistent c rather than k [ending] is against the English word.*' Certainly, in 33 instances written between 1150 & 1250 the -ac(h) ending predominates, especially in the 12th century, occurring 23 times in all. Despite this the same authors gave the meaning of Lannock (Langenache in the earliest reference) as long oak.

In 1945 H. C. Andrews, a frequent contributor to the *Transactions of the East Herts Archaeological Society*, expressed doubt about the Baghdad origin largely because there was no link between the Templars and Baghdad and he considered that the name was more likely to refer to a '*bald or bare oak tree.*' In 1968 G. L. Evans writing in *Hertfordshire Past* also cast doubt on the Baghdad

theory and pointed to the similarity in the endings of the early renderings of Baldache, Baldac, Baldoc or Baldok with Langenache or Langenok. This, together with the fact that Baldock and Lannock were both originally part of Weston manor, seemed, to him, to be a coincidence too strong to ignore and as Lannock meant 'long (ie. tall) oak', perhaps Baldock meant 'round oak', presumably in the sense of broad, (bald in Old English meaning round rather than bare).

In 1982, Ken Rutherford Davis rather unconvincingly attempted to overturn these views arguing (despite their proximity within the same manor) that '*Lannock is an independent name with no logical bearing on Baldock*' and then, in a somewhat confusing sentence, appearing to suggest that that the '*Frenchified...Baudak spellings*' argue against the '*native Baldak*'. As all of the surviving documents of the 12th century use variant spellings of the latter and 'Baudac/Baudak does not occur until the 13th century any argument on that basis surely fails. In *Baldock's Middle Ages* (1995), Vivian Crellin argued strongly in favour of the 'round oak' meaning.

So, how is the truth to be judged between these conflicting arguments? To return to the beginning of this article: the fact is no one can know for certain the origin of the name but we may make some deductions. Whilst one hesitates to argue with eminent place-name experts the Baghdad theory does seem rather bizarre. It is difficult to imagine any reasonable explanation for the Templars naming their new town after a Moslem city however wealthy it might be. Furthermore, the theory depends on the assumption that the Templars deliberately chose a name for the town, yet we cannot even be sure that they actually did so. The principal document (written 50 or 60 years later), on which the history of Baldock's foundation depends, says: '*they (the Templars) have built a borough which is called (dicitur) Baudac*' which might just as easily mean that the place was already called Baldock.

The most probable explanation is that Baldach and Langenach, or some such similar words, were pre-existing place or field names within the manor of Weston in the middle of the 12th century. The actual meaning of the names scarcely matters and in any case one suspects that there is much guess work in place-name meanings. Still, if the experts are happy with long oak for Lannock it seems to fly in the face of reason to object to round oak for Baldock. As for Baghdad, it is quite possible that the Templars were well aware of the similarity with this place name of Baldock and perhaps found the coincidence rather droll but that, surely, is all. B.K.