

THORPE HISTORY GROUP

Newsletter - Autumn 2021

This edition

Update

During the summer the Group has put on several outdoor events. In June, Dale Wiseman led a walk around north Thorpe highlighting the development of the area during the 1930s. In July, Joanna Barker gave guided tours of Chapel Lane, and later in the month Dale took people round the former St Andrew's Hospital site. All were well supported and we intend to put on a similar programme next year. Our September tours on the arrival of railway in Thorpe and the rail crash of 1874 are now fully booked.

Weston Wood

Background to the wood included in the development proposals for the Pinebanks site.

Boat Builders and Boat Yards of Thorpe

The second of our articles by Malcolm Martins covers the emergence of the Norfolk Broads as a holiday destination and growth of the boat hire industry.

Poppy Trail walks in November

This November the Thorpe History Group, in collaboration with Thorpe Town Council, is putting on three guided walks to commemorate the Thorpe men killed in World War 2 who are recorded on the war memorial at River Green. The walks will cover three areas in Thorpe, highlighting the homes of the men who died and providing the background to their military service. Each walk will take about 90 minutes.

The Poppy Trails will be on:

Friday 5th November from 10.30 – Yarmouth Road west side

Friday 5th November at 1pm – Spinney Road area

Sunday 7th November at 1pm – Yarmouth Road east side

Space is limited so booking is necessary. Please contact Nick Williams at spinney72@aol.com or 01603 438766.

There is a charge of £3 per head with the proceeds to be donated to the Royal British Legion's Poppy Appeal.

Thorpe Place – Weston Wood

Weston Wood is a wooded hollow on the edge of the Thorpe escarpment that has been used by local residents as a place of recreation for generations. It is accessible from both Western Avenue and Hillcrest Road (via the footpath beside Weston Wood Close). Despite it being commonly known as Weston Wood there appears to be no recorded connection to the Weston family who were brewers in Norwich and owned property, including Thorpe House, in Thorpe. They did however own a wooded area to the west.

Weston Wood is included in proposals for the redevelopment of the Pinebanks site by Berliet Ltd where 725 new houses will be built there, on the adjoining former Langley school site, and at Griffin Lane. The proposals indicate Weston Wood will be public open space. You can view the proposals at <http://www.pinebanksproposals.co.uk/>

Weston Wood is a hollow, raising the possibility it was once a pit where marl was extracted although I could find no evidence to confirm this. Marl was spread on land to combat soil acidity and increase yields and could be chalk, clay or other minerals. There were several marl pits in Thorpe, including one at the top of Chapel Lane and another between Tower Hill and School Lane. The marl would have been transported by cart or loaded onto wherries at the staithe on Yarmouth Road.



For many years there was a tower, or belvedere, in Weston Wood. Like the tower at Pinebanks, which was built much later, it provided splendid views over the valley of the river Yare. In his book 'Thorpe St Andrew: A Revised History', Trevor Nuthall outlined the history of the tower which was known as "Thompson's Folly" and suggests it had been built around 1750 by the Norwich brewer John Thompson or his son Nockold Thompson who succeeded him in the family business and owned property in Thorpe. The firm produced a strong ale known as Thompson's Nog. The tower was described as a round flint building containing three rooms, one above the other. It was still

there in the mid 1950s, albeit in a state of dereliction, when the photograph above was taken, but nothing remains of it now.

By 1841 Weston Wood formed part of an estate known as The Grove owned by John Green Crosse which included a large house or farm where High House now stands. The area now covered by Weston Wood was described as pasture and woodland. Crosse was the Surgeon at the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital and renowned for his expertise in removing gall and bladder stones; so much so that the hospital became nationally recognised for this most delicate and potentially fatal operation. Crosse was also a Fellow of the Royal Society and a man of whom it was said 'there is scarcely a medical or surgical society in Europe of which he is not a member, as well as being an honorary member of the most eminent societies in Asia and America'.

Following Crosse's death in 1850 Weston Wood and other adjacent properties were acquired by the Birkbeck family. The amended Tithe map of 1895 shows it as a wood or 'plantation' of some five acres which formed part of William John Birkbeck's High House estate where he lived with his family. The area surrounding Weston Wood was gradually built over during the 1930s and the wood is now flanked by houses on all sides. In recent years it has provided a valued green space, used by dog walkers and others including residents taking a short cut from North Thorpe to the river green – avoiding the traffic on Thunder Lane. It is to be hoped, even with the new development, that historic Weston Wood will be retained for the public to enjoy.



Boat Builders and Boatyards of Thorpe St Andrew Part 2

The second of our articles by Malcolm Martins covers the discovery of the Norfolk Broads as a holiday destination and the growth of the boatyards which met the demand for hire craft. By the 1880s the attractions of the Broads was being publicised by writers such as George Christopher Davies. His guidebook, "The Handbook to the Rivers and Broads of Norfolk and Suffolk" was first published by Jarrolds in 1882. He also wrote a number of other books and lectured frequently about the Broads. His obituary described him as "The Man who found the Broads."

Early arrangements for hiring boats were haphazard – anyone wishing to hire a wherry or yacht for a week on the Broads had to make their own arrangements. But, in 1907, a London accountant called Harry Blake came to the Broads on holiday. He realised that all of the boat yards tended to act independently from each other, making things difficult for the holiday maker. He recognised that if it were easier to hire a boat then they could be let for longer each year. Hitherto the season had only been six to eight weeks long. In 1908, the first "Blakes" charter catalogue appeared. It featuring only one boatyard - Collins' of Wroxham. Their bookings doubled as a result. His 1916 edition featured Harts and Hazells. In fact so successful was his letting agency that by the time of the First World War he represented all of the big yards and the hire business as we know it today was born.



Alfred Ward pictured with his family

Alfred Ward

One of the first people to recognise the potential of this new industry was Alfred Ward (pictured above with his family). His father, William Ward, was an army pensioner who had been the licensee of the Dukes Palace Inn in Norwich before moving to the Thorpe Gardens (now the Rushcutters) in 1912. After his death in 1913 his wife Kathleen became the licensee, assisted by her two sons Alfred and Sidney who hired out skiffs from the pub.

In 1919 upon his return from military service as a pilot Alfred started building boats to hire out in the workshop that took up the space under the large dining room where there were doors that opened onto a slipway. Alfred was the woodworker and Sidney the engineer. Alfred was a clever man who had been a pilot in WW1 and he even built his own car. He was also a skilled artist. He subsequently hired land opposite the pub on Thorpe island next to the railway line and erected a large shed where he built holiday cruisers including Sea Wolf, Seamew and Siskin. As well as being in the Blake's catalogue Ward produced his own brochure. The business grew and his wife Eva was roped in to boil the sheets in a large copper and hanging them in the garden. They soon employed four full time staff and on Saturdays, which was turn round day when customers collected and returned boats, an additional five staff were employed.

Alfred lived in a houseboat, moored outside the Thorpe Gardens, but in 1929 when his daughter Muriel caught rheumatic fever, caused by living in damp conditions, he moved ashore. In 1935 Alfred and Sidney bought Thorpe Old Hall from Major Cubitt, to use as a base for their boatyard, and engineering works. By then they had a fleet of 22 boats and employed eight full time employees. Their largest boat 39 feet long by 11 feet wide and could accommodate luxury accommodation for seven people. To make room for Sidney's engineering shed in 1936 they pulled down the old chapel and also built wet and dry boat sheds. When war came in 1939 Thorpe Hall was commandeered by the Army and their boats were dispersed around the Broads to provide obstacles to enemy aircraft landing. Fortunately the yard obtained a contract from the Admiralty to make ship's wheels which kept the workforce employed until the end of the war.

John Henry Jenner

John Jenner's family were from Lowestoft where they owned steam drifters. In 1923 John sold them and bought the Town House from Percy Curl for £2,000 where he established a boat building yard. The Town House had room for his two sons John and William and their families. John Henry remained living in Lowestoft High Street. The Town House also had 400 feet of river frontage where two large black two storey boat sheds were erected after the demolition of Newbiggin's observatory. They built three yachts and then bought two ex-naval pinnaces and fitted them out for hire on the Broads. Named Water Nymph and Frolic they were 50 feet in length and drew four feet of water and because they were so large they needed a professional skipper – usually John or William.

The Jenner fleet grew to 14 motor and 20 rowing boats. By the 1920s Thorpe was becoming a leisure resort and at weekends crowds of people came from Norwich to see the gardens and hire a boat for the day. John Henry died in 1935 and his son John retired soon after. John moved to a house in the village, leaving William to run the business with his sons Jack and Bill.

During the Second World War Jenners suffered because their craft were requisitioned, but unlike other yards were not awarded any war work. The army commandeered the Town House and William & Alice Jenner had to move into a hire boat on the quay until bombing forced them to move to Brundall. Jack was called up to the Royal Engineers and Bill to the R.A.F. Jack Jenner came back from the war with a military medal, to be informed by his father, William, that he had been unable to keep the business going. It had

been sold to George Millbank, an insurance broker. Jack and his brother Bill no longer had a job or a home. Jack moved to Lowestoft where his father had bought a house. Bill got a job as a boatbuilder in Wroxham.



The Jenner boatyard.

Wartime

All boatyards had to stop hiring out boats and most boat builders were called up or had to build boats for the navy. Thorpe was a major centre of boating pre war, but the war gave the yards on the north rivers a major boost, with some lucrative war work. Yards at Wroxham and Potter Heigham were given contracts to build Fairmile motor torpedo boats for the Royal Navy which were 112 feet in length and 18 feet broad. Due to the low railway bridges Thorpe boat yards were unable to build such large craft. Boats owned by Harts were commandeered and moored in Rockland Broad to deter enemy aircraft from using it. Geoffrey worked on the Isle of Wight building Fairmiles. His son Peter worked at Laurence Scott and Electromotors, Richard joined the R.A.F.

Post war

The post war period witnessed boatyards moving back to civilian work and boat hirers looking for customers during a time of austerity. Reggie Hazell resurrected the Hazell name as a new business. He lived at Monk's Barn next door to the Rushcutters and had land on Yarmouth Road to the east

Commander Ashby

Having been used in Rockland Broad as block ships Hart's cruisers were in an appalling condition when they were returned to their owners, three had to be scrapped and the business was struggling. In the 1946 season. Commander Ron Ashby, former Royal Naval officer who had fought in the Far East during the recent war bought 51% of the business from Geoffrey Hart – reputedly using his wife's money. Commander Ashby was an agent for Dodge trucks in Hong Kong and a keen sailor. He joined the Hong Kong Royal Naval Volunteer Resrve in 1937 and when war broke out served as a lieutenant on a motor torpedo boat. After escaping from the Japanese with his crew on his boat he got them the 3,000 miles to Rangoon by travelling at night and hiding in the daytime. You can read more about him at <http://www.hongkongescape.org/Ashby.htm>

Even though petrol was available by 1947 times were hard and eventually Geoffrey sold the remainder of his shares to Ashby who later bought out Richard Hart and his brother Peter. The company had four boats in the Blakes catalogue of 1947 while one, the Ace of Hearts, was under construction. Richard Hart emigrated to New Zealand and was later followed by his brothers Raymond and Dennis after they finished their education. They set up a boat building business there called Hart Brothers Marine. Shortly after his brother emigrated Peter Hart sold his shares and got a job with the Post Office. Soon after this Geoffrey retired leaving no Harts at Harts Cruisers.



Harts cruisers pictured at the Thorpe yard.

Ashby changed the name of the business from Hart to Hearts when he took over. He built an office, which is still there, now used as a bungalow and the yard was enlarged westward by buying more land and excavated the basin as a marina. They built a new boat every year and by 1949 they had six boats and made a profit of £85. With housing in short supply after the war Ashby bought the 72 foot long gunboat Morning Flight from Rochester to live on. In 1965 the business, with 16 boats, was sold to David Millbank of Jenners. It was the eighth yard they purchased that year. In 1968 the Caister Group took over. When they closed Jenners in 1970 Hearts re emerged as a separate business. It was sold to Richardsons of Stalham who closed it in 2002. It is now owned by Roger Wood.

Getting in contact

If you would like to know more about the Thorpe History Group or have something interesting on the history of Thorpe you would like to share please contact Nick Williams on 01603 438766 or email him at Spinney72@aol.com

You can also find the Thorpe History Group on Facebook - Google Thorpe History Group to find information and photographs.

We have a website at <http://www.thorpe-history-group.org/> so do take a look.