THORPE HISTORY GROUP

Newsletter - Autumn 2025

Our next talk:

Friday 31st October 2025
7.30pm
St Andrew's Centre, Thunder Lane

Paintings of Thorpe

A illustrated talk on how Thorpe has been portrayed over the years

John Balls

Admission £4 per head

Details of next year's programme are on page 8

Archive Day
On very hot Saturday in June we held a well-attended Archive Day so people could view some of the items from the Janet Smith Archive. There were also displays on the Thorpe Railway Disaster and on the Red Cross in Thorpe. But the main event was a showing of a film on Bomber Command veteran Ray Parke. There were also films showing Thorpe during the previous century.

Thorpe People – Archibald Thomas Pechney 1876-1961

Archibald Thomas Pechey was born in London on the 26th of September 1876. He was the son of a wealthy corn merchant and could boast an esteemed lineage through his mother's side of the family, the Vallentines. He was related to a former Sheriff of the City of London, Sir James Vallentine, and the Victoria Cross hero, John Franks Vallentine.

Pictured are (left to right) Archibald, his son in law Johnny Cradock, daughter Fanny Cradock and son Charles)

Educated at Repton, he was destined for a career as a merchant at the London Corn Exchange. This he would do until 1910, when he began writing for ‘The Winning Post’, a publication that highlighted horse racing and the stimulating gossip of London society. This experience would plant an acorn that would inspire Archibald’s creative mind and talents; paving the way for a highly successful future as a novelist and dramatist.

Adopting his mother's maiden name, he began to write under the pseudonym of Arthur 'Valentine'. He would become a household name who could hardly fail to appeal in the inter war years, writing about bold topics such as mixed bathing, a school for kissing and the perils of kilt wearing. His works of renown would include 'Leaves of Memory' (which was inspired from his time at Repton), 'One Good Turn', 'Blue Pool' and 'The Adjusters Series'. Archibald was also an accomplished lyricist and dramatist. He and the composer James W. Tate wrote the lyrics to 'A Batchelor Gay' and 'A Paradise for Two' for the 1917 musical operetta 'A Maid of the Mountains' and contributed lyrics to Tate's 1909 musical 'The Beauty Spot'.

But it would be as a playwright that Archibald would find his fortune. In 1922 the producers Tom Walls and Leslie Henson (father of the late Nicky Henson) discovered Archibald’s comedy farce 'Tons of Money' and instantly saw its potential. It tells the story of a indebted inventor who inherits a fortune and soon loses it. The play opened at the Shaftesbury Theatre in April 1922 before moving to the Aldwych Theatre, the home of the famed Aldwych Farce

troop. The show would come to a close after 737 successful performances, and made Archibald a very rich man.

Archibald's success would have an enormous effect on his family. He fell in love with the heady and exciting Bijou Handcock, the daughter of a wealthy businessman. Bijou was sixteen, sixteen years younger then Valentine when they married in 1908. Two children would follow, Phyllis in 1909 and Charles in 1911. Phyllis was named after Phyllis Court where the two had met when Archibald was already engaged to someone else. He gave everything up for Bijou who he simply adored and drove him to distraction. It would transpire that the two were world's apart and opposed in practically every interest and subject.

Bijou had a ferocious taste for the finer things of life, as indeed did Archibald and the success of 'Tons of Money' would feed their taste for a life of luxury; large comfortable homes, winters in Nice at the best hotels and evenings out at the casino. Their children were spoilt, indulged and privately educated. At the time of the opening night of 'Tons of Money' Archibald was in debt to a tune of £2,000. This would soon be settled as in 1922 he would pocket £7,000 from the farce, the equivalent of £200,000 today!

Archibald and Bijou's spending would soon catch up with them and they found themselves flitting from one residence to another. They moved from Herne Bay to Swanage, then to Bournemouth and finally to Thorpe St. Andrew, keeping one step ahead of their creditors and the taxman. They lived at Larchwood on Yarmouth Road from about 1927 until 1930. The years of frivolous squandering put them in financial difficulty and Archibald had been brought before the Norwich Bankruptcy Court in 1930 owing more than £3,500, which would be £168,739 today. One debt alone came to about £20,000 at today's values.

Needing to raise money to meet his debts Archibald sold the film rights for 'Tons of Money' and that of another play called 'Compromising Daphne'. Unfortunately this was not enough and his debts would still be outstanding by the time of the outbreak of the Second World War. It was at this time that his marriage to Bijou broke down and they parted ways. He left Larchwood for the prestigious Vicars Close in the shadow of Wells Cathedral in Somerset where he lived for several years. He would eventually settle in Shepton Mallet. Archibald would find new love with a much younger woman and caused a stir when, in true romantic fashion, the couple fled to Gretna Green in order to marry. He worked under the new pseudonym of Mark Cross, and completed his hundredth book in his final year. Archibald Thomas Pechey passed away at the Springfield Nursing Home in Pilton, on the 29th of September 1961. Archibald, who was known as 'Val' to his friends, would be remembered fondly as a man of remarkable ability and great friendliness, who was greatly loved. It is sad to say his legacy would end after his death: his books are no longer in print although Alan Ayckbourn would revive 'Tons of Money' in the 1980s. One must smile with a touch of sympathy of how Archibald's most successful piece of work would mirror his own misfortunes.

However, his legacy does not end there. What of Bijiou? She too would go on to marry a much younger man and died in 1949. His son Charles would wonder through life aimlessly trying different professions, ending up penniless and living on handouts from his father and sister. It would be Phyllis who would go on to find a career that would rival that of her fathers. She would go on to write under the name of Frances Dale. Her publishers soon realised that

her name was not worthy enough to find popularity. “Why not write under your father's name?", she was asked. This strong minded woman would not have any of that. After changing her surname by deed poll in 1942 and abbreviating Frances, she would go on to become a renowned restaurateur, writer and celebrity television chef. She would simply be known as the flamboyant and indisputable Fanny Cradock.

This article was kindly provided by Joseph Scoles who has a great interest in Pechney and has researched his life.

Recent talks

Since our last newsletter we have had two well attended talks. The first in April was given by Caroline Jarrold on ‘The Jarrolds in Thorpe’. The family traditionally had strong links with the village, with members living at Pine Banks, Walpole House and Roxley House. Caroline recounted the growth of the family business in some detail, their origins as drapers in Woodbridge before moving to Norwich in 1823. It was the four sons of the second John Jarrold who built up a major printing and publishing business. It became known particularly for publishing Black Beauty by Anna Sewell which was a major success.

As the London Street site became crowded they built a printing works on Whitefriars, that, during the 1990s printed large runs of colour magazines and guide books. The shop was redesigned in 1904 by the celebrated architect Edward Skipper whose offices were adjacent. In the 1960s it was expanded as the next door Corn Exchange was bought and demolished to provide the store that exists today. Caroline finished by outlining the many activities of the Jarrold businesses, including the redevelopment of the Whitefriars site and a proposal to convert the yarn mill to a hotel.

That was followed in May by an excellent talk by Linda Pargetter from the Wherry Maud Trust. Linda has been involved with the trust since 1979 when it decided to restore a wherry and found the Maud which had been left to rot in a dyke. She recounted how it was recovered and transported to a boatyard at Upton where it was restored in a process that took five years.

The Maud was a trading wherry, built at Hall’s boatyard at Reedham and owned originally by Walter Christmas Bunn who used it to transport timber to Jewson’s yard in Norwich. Later it was used to carry granite sets, and wire netting from Barnards works in Norwich to Great Yarmouth. It later passed into the hands of the Thorpe based dredging contractor Hobroughs before being used to carry sugar beet to the Cantley factory. It was subsequently sunk at Ranworth broad.

After being restored the Maud entered the water again in 1995 and since then has been a regular site on the broads – carrying passengers and participating in wherry meets with other surviving wherries such as Albion and Hathor. Linda concluded her talk by showing a short video on Maud sailing on Breydon Water in company with Albion.

Thorpe Youth Centre

Ann Weber, who lived in Thorpe for 30 years, has passed on her memories of the former youth centre on Longfields Road.

Ann says ‘The building is still there, in front of the Swimming Pool. It was a well organised and well supervised Youth Club. Only open during term times and weekdays, 7pm to 10pm. Not only for Thorpe residents. Think you had to be 14.’

The facilities included:
Table Tennis, Table football, Snooker and Batinton (like Badminton but with a bat.)
Record player, Coffee Bar with lounge. Art Room,TV Room for Top of the Pops.
Entertainment. Record Hops(, Discos)
Live music Pop Dances see ticket
Visited another Youth Club,
Old Time Music Hall we performed for OAPS in Thorpe
Pancake Races.
At weekends there were trips to Larling,

In 1968 a 20 mile Sponsored walk was arranged with certificates awared to those who completed it.

Ann went there in 1967.and was on the Members Committee who made suggestions etc. She went to a city school but lived in Thorpe.

Ann commented that she ‘Didn’t know when it closed. Met someone when I was walking round Thorpe recently in Longfields Road and we both said how good it was and a shame it’s gone. I know of a couple who met there who later married’.

We are very grateful to Ann for sharing her memories with us.

Signal Box Sign Returns to Thorpe

Early in 2025 John Alborough from Suffolk sent an email to Thorpe Town Council offering the Council the original Whitlingham Junction sign which used to be located on the station signal box. John's father Cecil was given the sign in 2000 when the signal box was removed. His father Frederick had manned the controls from 1923 to 1940. Cecil worked at Whitlingham Station from the 1950s. The sign is a wooden backed sign with solid cast lettering fixed with brass screws.

Two Thorpe Town councillors, Dale Wiseman and Roger Pointer, travelled to Suffolk to pick up the sign which is seven feet long by 21 inches deep, and very heavy. The Town Council has agreed to adopt and keep the sign with Dale and Roger agreeing to undertake the work involved to restore this antique piece of railway history. The Town Council have agreed an estimated cost of £250 to cover the cost of materials to achieve this work.

The letters were all removed, and the white board was stripped and cleaned off. The letters were all dipped and completely stripped back to bare metal. All the brass screws were cleaned and took on a fresh new look. The top wood capping was worse for wear and was duly replaced by local craftsman Steve Saint. This work took about 3 months.

The board was given four coats of white paint, and the letters each given four coats of black. The existing trim which edges the sign is picked out in dark green to match the colour on the original signal box. Now the work is completed, and the sign is restored, it is up to the Town Council to find a suitable home for this piece of railway and Thorpe history.

Dale Wiseman and Roger Pointer pictured at the former station site with the refurbished sign.

Annual Accounts

Thorpe History Group Accounts Sep 2023 - Dec 2024

			Income	Expenditure
Sep 2023	**Balance brought forward**	**£1,613.08**		
	Insurance			£150.54
	Hire of hall			£208.00
	Fees to speakers			£401.00
	Donation to Ketts Heights			£35.00
	Charge for stall at fair			£15.00
	Display Banner			£115.20
	Velcro for banner			£15.98
	Set up of new website			£780.00
	Maintenance of website			£217.19
	Gowise Print			£628.40
	Boat trips		£54.00	
	Walks		£290.00	
	HODS walk donations		£52.50	
	Income from talks		£1,473.00	
	Sales of Thorpe People		£51.00	
	Donations		£2.00	
	Refreshments			£21.01
	Donations for T/C		£24.55	
	Domain renewal			£60.00
	Sale of books		£3.00	
	Tape for display			£9.90
	Wreath			£25.00
	Total Income 2023-24		**£1,950.05**	
	Total Income (Including balance brought forward)		**£3,563.13**	
	Total Expenditure 2023-24			**£2,682.22**
	Balance at 31st December 2024		**£880.91**	

In September 2024 the committee agreed that the annual accounts should be prepared for the end of the calendar year instead of every September. This set of accounts therefore shows an extra 3 months of transactions.

The major expenditure was the setting up of our new website in autumn 2023. However , due to the extra well attended talks that were held in autumn 2024 in relation to commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Thorpe Rail Disaster our income from talks was considerably increased still leaving us with a healthy balance in December 2024.

Joanna Barker
Treasurer – Thorpe History Group

Programme for 2026

Friday 27th February 7.30pm
Talk: The Thorpe Players
David Watson
Venue: St Andrew's Centre, Thunder Lane

Friday 10th April 7.30pm
Talk: The Geology and Landscape of Thorpe
Tim Holt-Wilson
Venue: St Andrew's Centre, Thunder Lane

Friday 22nd May 7.30pm
Talk: Lakenham to Lowry: The Life and Times of John Brighton
Dale Wiseman
Venue: St Andrew's Centre, Thunder Lane

Saturday 20th June 2.00pm to 4.00pm
Archive and film day
The day will include a programme of films featuring aspects of life in Thorpe over many years and material from the Janet Smith Archive plus tea and cakes.
Venue: St Andrew's Centre, Thunder Lane

Sunday 28th June 2.00pm
Talk: The View from the River Green in the late 19th Century
Joanna Barker
Venue: River Green
Booking required

Sunday 26th July 2.00pm
Walk: Pubs of the Yarmouth Road
Nick Williams
Venue: Outside the Town House
Booking required

Sunday 16th August 2.00pm
Walk: 100 Years of Primrose Crescent
Dale Wiseman
Venue: Cemetery gates, Yarmouth Road
Booking required

Friday 11th September 10.30am
Walk: Chapel Lane
Joanna Barker
Venue: River Green, Yarmouth Road
Booking required via Heritage Open Day website

Friday 23rd October 7.30pm
Talk: Shipwrecks, Sharks and Survival: Harold Higgs and the sinking of the Carnarvon Castle
Helen Murray
Venue: St Andrew's Centre, Thunder Lane

Please note

There is a charge of £4 per head for our events, except the Heritage Open Day walk on Friday 11th September which is free.

Booking is required for some events as numbers are limited. Booking can be made by email to Nick Williams at spinney72@aol.com.

Booking for the guided walk on 11th September can be done via the Heritage Open Day website when bookings open in August.

Getting in contact

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

You can find the Thorpe History Group on Facebook - Google Thorpe History Group to find information and photographs and on our website at http://www.thorpe-history-group.org/