

THORPE HISTORY GROUP

Newsletter - Winter 2026

**Our next talk:
Friday 27th February 7.30pm**

The Thorpe Players

David Watson

St Andrew's Centre, Thunder Lane

Admission £4 per head.

Update

We have a full programme of events this year, including four talks. The first of will be on Friday 27th February when David Watson will be speaking about the history of the Thorpe Players and has promised a few surprises. The full programme can be found later in this newsletter.

Some of you who attended John Ball's talk last year on how Thorpe has been portrayed in paintings may remember the picture below that Richard Motley brought along. There was discussion about where it was painted and what it showed but there was no consensus. So what do you think? If you can identify the vantage point do let me know.



Thorpe People – George James Newbegin

Almost within living memory the Town House on Yarmouth Road has been a hotel. It attracted some public attention in October 2000 when Reginald Kray died there after his release from prison. But for many years it was a private house. One of the more interesting people to live there was George Newbegin who lived there for two decades after retiring as a tobacco manufacturer and devoted himself to his hobby of astronomy.

The family first came to public notice in 1835 when James Newbegin senior, then 43, bought John Curr's tobacco factory in the former Bridewell prison. Curr had introduced tobacco manufacturing to Norwich in 1815, and in 1829 had bought the Bridewell for £1,140, when it closed following the opening of the new prison at St Giles Gates. Newbegin lived at the Bridewell with his wife, Susannah, and their large family. The business prospered. So much so that in the winter of 1839 Newbegin announced he had acquired the factory and shop on Guildhall Hill of Waite and Cousins, another tobacco manufacturer. It provided him with a prime location on Norwich Market Place to sell his goods. His workers processed the tobacco leaves, making them into packets of one, two and four ounces, and making cigars and snuff. Two of his sons, James and John, also worked in the business.

By the 1840s James senior was a public figure – serving on Grand Juries, on the committee of the Norwich Public Library and had been elected as a Liberal member of the Board of Guardians. It was not all plain sailing. In the autumn of 1844 he must have been embarrassed to have been convicted and fined £100 for selling snuff that contained a higher proportion of sand than permitted. In mitigation, James claimed it was a first offence and promised there would be no repetition. By 1851 his son James junior had married and moved to Bracondale but remained heavily involved in the business. Three years later he had to take over when his father suddenly died. One February evening in 1854 James senior was reading the paper at his Bridewell home when he rose suddenly from his chair, fell to the ground and died from a heart attack. He was then 62. He was buried at the Rosary in the family plot where, a few months later, he was joined by Susannah. Both funeral services were taken by George Gould, the minister at St Mary's Baptist Church in Duke Street where the family worshipped.

James junior returned to live at the Bridewell and run the business that continued to flourish. In 1861 he recorded he was employing 11 men, 8 boys and 3 girls – many of whom would have been packing the tobacco and cigars. At the time Newbegin and Son was one of five tobacco manufacturers in Norwich. Another of James senior's sons, Edward, also worked in the business but subsequently moved to Sunderland where he set up his own factory. At about this time George Newbegin, the son of James junior, became the third generation of the family to enter the trade. In March 1871 he was forced to take full control when his father died at the early age of 51. He continued to live at the Bridewell with his wife, Maria and their children. He was a keen astronomer and set up a telescope in the factory. Situated within the 30 foot high walls of the former prison, it was not an ideal location and the telescope had to be mounted on a tall column to ensure it could be used.

Astronomy became all absorbing and in 1882 the family moved to a house on the Yarmouth Road at Thorpe St Andrew and disposed of the business. The tobacco manufacturing machinery at the Bridewell was sold and the building disposed of. It later became a shoe factory and subsequently a museum.

George named his new house 'The Observatory' and for the next twenty years devoted himself to astronomy. In the spacious gardens that ran down to the river he had two observation domes (pictured below) built to house his collection of sophisticated telescopes. He spent many hours observing the sun and taking photographs of sun spots that he included in articles he wrote for scientific journals. He was also a member of the Royal Astronomical Society and was elected a Fellow in 1888 – an honour he cherished. George was ever ready to share his interests – he loaned his telescopes to expeditions travelling to India, Mauritius and Spain to view solar eclipses. He also encouraged local people to share his enthusiasm. For many years he opened his observatories to the public each Easter Monday. These events proved very popular - on one occasion there were 241 visitors.



In 1904 George left 'The Observatory' and moved to Surrey. Maria's health was declining and it was felt she would benefit from a move. She died in 1911 and was buried at the Rosary. George lived until 1919 when he joined her. Their son Algernon also took up astronomy and established his own observatory at his home in Surrey. He later lived at Tor Bay until his death in 1965. Following Newbegin's departure, 'The Observatory' was occupied by Ernest Curl, a director of the Norwich department store. It subsequently became the offices for a firm of boat builders before becoming the Town House Hotel.

Reflections on Primrose Crescent

Following last year's guided walk by Dale Wiseman, Gwynn Hermsen has kindly provided her memories of growing up there. We are grateful to Gwynn for her article.

'On 8 August, four members of the Bussey family line (Jean, Adrian, Susan and Gwynneth) joined the history group for the tour. Beforehand, they paid their respects at the grave of their grandparents, Harry (christened Henry) and Kate Bussey in Thorpe cemetery. Harry and Kate previously lived in a cottage on Yarmouth Road, before moving into council housing in Primrose Crescent (at No. 34 then No. 48, dates unknown). They had three children: Henry, Alice (mother to Adrian and Susan) and William (father to Jean, Peter and Gwynneth).

Kate Bussey died in 1948, at which time the widower Harry was joined in No. 48 by sons Henry and William, plus William's wife Patricia and their baby daughter Jean. Soon afterwards, Harry's council tenancy changed to one of the newer houses at No. 76.

At No. 76 the family unit expanded in the 1950s with the arrival of two siblings for Jean: the household now included Harry, William, Patricia and children Jean, Peter and Gwynneth. Harry passed away in 1962. The children grew up and all had left home by 1973: in 1988 William and Patricia moved to Taverham.

Adrian and Susan lived in Gordon Avenue with their parents, Alice and Percy, visiting their relatives in the Crescent from time to time.

It was very interesting to walk the Crescent with an adult perspective.

Memories were recalled of playing cricket with young friends in the street in the 1960s. This sense of freedom is consistent with Dale Wiseman's explanation of the Crescent's careful and innovative design, which was intended to create a small scale, safe community environment, with no vehicle through routes.

Other fond recollections from the 1950s and 1960s included the regular sight of traders' vans: the coal merchant, the baker, the butcher, the greengrocer and the milkman. These home deliveries gradually ceased in line with modern trends, which included the advent of supermarkets.

Cherished memories are of good neighbours, a secure upbringing, a peaceful and friendly location. In the 1970s and 1980s, changes took place swiftly. These included the "new road" (now the A1042), the arrival of Sainsbury's in Pound Lane and more car ownership in the Crescent. All these differences signalled a new era for the Crescent as well as the Bussey family.

Many thanks from the Bussey family to Dale, Nick and the history group for an enjoyable walk and talk.'

Idle Hour by Moira Thirkettle

I thought you would like to see this painting of 'Idle Hour' on Yarmouth Road by Moira Thirkettle. It and the biographical notes were kindly provided by her son Richard.



Moira Hazel Thirkettle (nee Read) was born on the 22nd of February 1926 in Brooklyn Terrace, Thorpe St Andrew, and married Bernard Henry Thirkettle of Roxley House at Thorpe Parish Church in 1950. The middle of three girls, she lived all her life in Thorpe except during the war when evacuated to an aunt and uncle's cottage in Devon because of the 1942 bombing of Norwich, and for 6 years from 1959 on Dereham Road, Norwich, above her husband's shop. All three sisters had a natural ability to paint and on return to Thorpe in 1966 a set of 'Windsor & Newton' oil paints and brushes was bought as a Christmas present by her husband.

The paintings of Thorpe were all made in 1970, and when the paint ran out the painting using oil on primed hardboard stopped. After retiring from the Norfolk Area Heath Authority, she continued to draw and paint with watercolours and Moira attended art classes but left as she 'couldn't get on with the instructor'. However, she will be best remembered for her outstanding skill at needlework that involved restoration of tapestries at Blickling Hall, Norfolk, and extensive work for the Diocese of Norwich at Norwich Cathedral. Moira Thirkettle died just 11 days short of her 92nd birthday in February 2018.

Last Talk: Paintings of Thorpe by John Balls 31.10.25

On a mild October evening, a large audience gathered in St Andrew's Centre, to listen to John Balls talk about the Paintings of Thorpe.

He talked about 18 paintings by 12 artists who are listed below, giving a short synopsis of each. Most of the paintings were done in the 18th, 19th centuries with just two from the 20th century; Malcolm Cockell (Thorpe Church 2000) and Godfrey Arnison (River Green and Boat and Bottle, Church).

The artists were William Austin, Charles Catton, George Cooke, John Joseph Cotman, John Sell Cotman, John Crome, Robert Ladbrooke, James Sillett, Joseph Stannard, James Stark, Rosalie Tallack, John Thirtle.

The only female artist known for paintings of Thorpe was Rosalie Tallack, who was a member of Norwich Art Circle. John talked about her painting of Thorpe Church c,1880.

Six of the artists were from the Norwich School of Painting (Originally the Norwich Society of Painters), including John Joseph Cotman and John Crome who was a founding member of the Society.

John Thirtle and Joseph Stannard were members of the Norwich School of Painting but formed a breakaway group.

Possibly the most well-known painting was Joseph Stannard's Thorpe next Norwich c.1820; Thorpe Water Frolic – Afternoon 1825 which is in the Castle Museum. If you look carefully, you can see Joseph Stannard in a small boat, and patron of Thorpe Water Frolic, John Harvey in a gondola.

Two of the artists are buried in the Rosary Cemetery; John Thirtle and James Sillett

To enhance John's subject of Paintings of Thorpe, a visit to the galleries in the Castle museum was arranged by John Ward for 20 members of Thorpe History Group to hear about a small selection of Thorpe paintings held there, by curator, Georgia.

Five paintings were described in detail by the curator; John Thirtle's Thorpe Norwich, John Cotman's Thorpe Watering, Joseph's Stannard's Thorpe Water Frolic and Thorpe Near Norwich, John Crome's the Yare at Thorpe, Norwich from the King's Head gardens (now River Garden).

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

A programme of historic films featuring aspects of life in Thorpe and material from the Janet Smith Archive on display, plus tea and cakes.

Free admission.

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 Archive and Film Day on 20th June and the Heritage Open Day walk on Friday 11th September which are 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/>