



Chester HISTORY & HERITAGE

Newsletter from Chester Community History & Heritage | SUMMER 2015

A Skeleton in the Cupboard

By the middle of the 18thC the cost of caring for the poor of Chester had become a great burden on the individual parishes so in 1757 it was decided to build a general Workhouse or House of Industry, for the whole of the city, and the following year work began on a "four square rectangular brick building round a courtyard, at the north west extremity of the Roodee".



Chester workhouse

According to www.workhouses.org.uk tragedy struck ten years later – at 2am on 24th February 1767, a disastrous fire broke out at the Roodee workhouse used for spinning cotton. The building, which then housed 200 children in addition to the adults, was totally destroyed. The fatalities included sixty children, twelve men and five women – seventy-seven in all. A report in the *London Chronicle* recounted the horrifying scenes of inmates running naked from the building, while others jumped from windows and the roof. A party of thirty men was employed to dig out the bones and dead bodies but without success – it was assumed that they had all burnt to ashes.

The Poor-house is situated near the river, the lodging and other rooms large and well aired; 15 or 16 beds in a room, made of chaff or straw, and much infested with bugs. No small apartments for married people. The Poor in the house at present are chiefly aged persons and children. Old women spin flax and pick oakum. Children at 10 years of age are sent as apprentices to Manchester and other places. About 11 deaths annually in the house. (1797 Survey of the Poor in England).

People ended-up in the workhouse for a variety of reasons. Usually, it was because they were too poor, old or ill to support themselves. Unmarried pregnant women were often disowned by their families and the workhouse was the only place they could go during and after the birth of their child. The mentally ill and handicapped poor were often consigned to the workhouse and incidentally, until 1918, receipt of poor relief meant a loss of the right to vote. Each new arrival at the workhouse would go through a fairly involved admission procedure - paupers were stripped, bathed, and issued with a workhouse uniform. An inmate's own clothes would be washed and disinfected and then put into store along with any other possessions they had and only returned to them when they left the workhouse. Those who were capable of it were given a variety of work to perform, much of which was involved in running the workhouse. Until the building of the railway viaduct in 1840 which obscured most of the view of the workhouse from the city, its looming, gloomy presence would have been a constant warning of what could happen if anyone fell on hard times...

The weekly bill of fare is as follows: Breakfast— Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday—Broth and bread; other days— Milk gruel and bread. Dinner— Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday—Beef, potatoes, etc.; Monday, Wednesday—Butter, milk and potatoes; Friday—Beef, soup and potatoes; Saturday— Oatmeal hasty pudding. Supper—Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday—Bread and butter ; other days—Milk, gruel and bread. One lb. of bread allowed each day to grown persons, 6oz. beef on meat days, and 1 pint of beer; children in proportion. Butter milk served on potato and hasty pudding days. (weak beer was served to all in place of water which could be contaminated)

The annual numbers of inmates rose from 2,724 in 1810-11 to 7,011 in 1817-18. The House of Industry was extended in 1819 by the addition of a block for pauper lunatics on the west side of the building. This cost about £700 and averaged around twenty-two inmates. A school for 50 infant paupers was added in 1823 at a cost of £523. In 1821, a warm bath was installed in the main house.

A Boys School was opened in Bridge Street in 1869.

The local newspapers carried regular reports of trouble from the inmates – fighting, turning up drunk, or refusing to work. However the workhouse itself was not above reproach...in 1858 a Doctor Bedford challenged the Board of Guardians with various complaints including the fact that as it was sited next to the Gas Works and on the river bank the building was often shrouded in fog and the terrible fumes from the Works enveloped the area. They laughed at his concerns, talked over him and generally ignored his worries. The Cheshire Observer took up the fight and lambasted the Guardians as having "at least one skeleton in the cupboard" as they had discovered that the casual poor – both men and women – slept on bare boards, without a fire, clothing or straw, huddled together under a thin sheet in even the worst winter weather. The newspaper also highlighted the fact that children were crammed together, the sick sleeping next to the more robust and that conditions weren't much better for the longer term inmates. As a result of this crusade a Poor Law Inspector visited and reported the institution as providing "inadequate care".



Workhouse refectory

In 1873 a new Union Workhouse was founded in Hoole and the Roodee premises taken over by The Chester Preserving Company and later Davies Confectionery. The new workhouse was not without its problems however and in years to come it – and its successor the City Hospital – became the subject of many tales of hardship and hauntings.



Editorial

Welcome to our Summer newsletter – let's hope it heralds lots of lovely weather for us all! During the past months the Museum service has been encouraged to make more use of social media, so take a look at the Facebook pages for Chester History & Heritage Centre and our new twitter feed @cwacmuseums for many more photographs and details of what we are up to, as well as the new Cheshire Museums website www.westcheshiremuseums.co.uk and enjoy our engagement with new technology!



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Saturday Extended Opening Hours

We have again been allowed to open on Saturdays from 11am-4pm in 2015 so that we are accessible for those visitors who cannot come in Monday-Friday. The dates are:

9 May

13 June

11 July

8 August

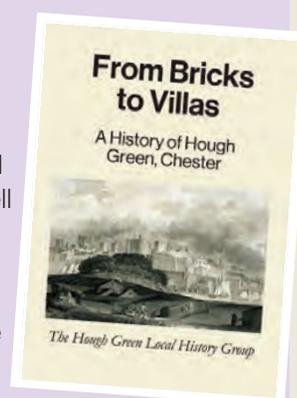
12 September (Heritage Open Days)

10 October

Don't Miss...

From Bricks to Villas

Hough Green Local History Group has produced a fabulous new book covering the last 600 years, noting both the mighty and the mundane. 144 pages, with a wealth of images and written by local experts Ray Carpenter, Pam Corkerton, Carol Farrell and Mike Lloyd this new book is a must both for those with a special interest in the Hough Green area and those who love reading about Chester's past. The book is priced at £14.95 and is available from Ray (01244 671684), Pam (01244 680277), Carol (01244 874955) or Mike (01244 680328).

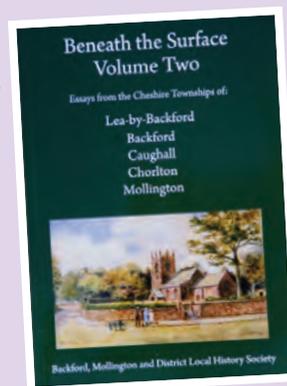


Beneath the Surface – Volume 2

Published by Backford, Mollington & District Local History Society, this is a collection of essays on the history of local people and places. Subjects range from studies of the different families who lived at Mollington Hall, to the horrific events which took place at Gibbet Mill and the life of 'Cobber' Kane, the first R.A.F. ace of WW2. The book is illustrated by both monochrome and coloured pictures.

Price £16 plus postage and packing if required at cost price of £3.

Contact either Michael Richardson (01244 851346) or Ann Marie Curtis (01244 851717)



Watch Out For...

11 July 1pm – 3pm **Button Bouquet Workshop** at Chester History & Heritage, St, Michael's Church. £10, booking essential on 01244 972210. Make a fashionable permanent alternative to flowers.



15 July/12 August 2pm film screening of **Brief Encounter** This poignant film starring Laurence Olivier and Joan Fontaine is a classic.



16 September/14 October 2pm film screening of **The Ghost Train**

Enjoy Arthur Askey at his comical best in this ghostly caper.



These film screenings are free but booking is essential as places are limited.

19 August 1.30pm guided walk with Gerry Tighe, **Our Railway – Life, Death & Rebirth**. (Meet outside the railway station). £5, booking essential at Chester History & Heritage.

7 October 6pm (meet at Hoole Community Centre Westminster Road) **A Ghost Walk** Join local guide John Whittingham as he explores some of Chester's most haunted sites including the grounds of the old City Hospital. The tour ends with a visit to the wonderful Albion Inn. £3, booking essential at Chester History & Heritage.

Past exhibitions

Oh You Pretty Things Up to 27 March



The 1970s was a time of political unrest but it was also the time of Glam Rock and the Space Hopper! This display looked at our outings, local sports teams and entertainments as well as the changing face of our city.

Band of Gold up to 27 March

This proved very popular with our romantic customers who fondly reminisced about their own wedding days. From an elaborate ceremony for Lady Mary Grosvenor in 1894 to a 1970s registry office marriage this exhibition brought back some lovely memories.



Voluntary Action on the Home Front up to 27 March



A centenary display from Chester Voluntary Action highlighting the major events and social issues in Chester from 1914 and the impact of the CVA.

Current exhibitions

Cheers! The Pubs, Inns and Taverns of Chester 30 March-26 June



Taking a look at our local pubs – many of which have long since disappeared – where friends and family met up after a hard day's work, including The Swan, the Market Tavern and the Mariners Arms. So raise a glass to the old pubs of Chester and reminisce with us!

Spotlight on Blacon 30 March-26 June



Described in the Domesday Book as having four ploughs and a fishery, Blacon is now a thriving township with a renowned community spirit. This foyer display looks at images from our collection and shows how much Blacon has changed over the years.



Future exhibitions

As part of the Chester 175 Anniversary celebrating the lines opening from Chester to Birkenhead and Chester to Crewe in 1840 we are displaying four exhibitions here on the railway theme:

All Aboard! Trains, rolling stock, workers and passengers



Homeward Bound

The railway streets of Hoole, Newtown and Saltney



A Strangers Guide

The 19thc Tourist in Chester



This Train Don't Stop Here Anymore - The Lost Stations

The closure of many local Stations



The exhibitions will run from 1 July – 18 December and we hope everyone will enjoy them – train enthusiast or not!

Made in Handbridge in the 1940s...

Well, I assume that I was!

What I do know for sure is that I was born in the Stanley Nursing Home so I believe that makes me a true Cestrian. I lived in Handbridge until I was 11 and remember the time with great affection, but it's difficult to know which part of my childhood to relate here as otherwise it would be in danger of running into several pages! Housekeeping in Handbridge sticks in my mind as it seems so arduous in comparison to the availability of labour saving devices of today so, as many a tale begins: Once upon a time...



There was an outside wash house which was a hive of industry every Monday morning – all year round – regardless of weather conditions as my mother waded through the laundry generated by eight family members. The water in the boiler (situated in a brick surround) was heated from underneath by coals which my mother carried backwards (sensibly) on a shovel from the sitting room fireplace as a fire had already been lit in the grate. Washing, mangling, (between heavy adjustable wooden rollers) rinsing, (more mangling) was the order of the day. There was a “blue bag” for the whites and starch for the “detached” collars of my father’s shirts. What advertisements now refer to as “stubborn stains” were not treated by some magical biological liquid – no, they were treated to a visit to the washboard accompanied by a bar of soap, a scrubbing brush and considerable elbow grease. On fine days the clean laundry was pegged onto the washing line and hoisted skywards with the aid of a clothes prop. However, inclement weather put a different angle on things and put most of us in a bad mood when we couldn’t see the sitting room fire for a screen of wet washing! Coal fires were the only form of heating in the house but the drying of the clothes took priority over the warming of the family until my father returned from work when it was put aside.

I hated these Mondays (undoubtedly not half as much as my mother did!) but there was one member of the family who looked at it

differently and this was our cat! He slept on top of the boiler, enjoying its residual heat when the work was done and could later be found sitting inside the wall of drying clothes as another of his favourite places was the fireside fender which had a leather stool on either side.

I think he may have slept in preparation for a night on the tiles as he did have slightly frilly ears – the result of the odd squabble with neighbourhood moggies. He was a smashing old puss and the night he died I cried till I made myself sick. The wielding of two flat irons, heated alternately on the gas cooker, completed the washing day tasks until next Monday... however, it was also a good day to use up weekend leftovers and bread pudding full of sultanas lurking under a crusty nutmeg topping was always a bonus.

Sundays were always a day for a roast – chicken being a treat in those days – and apple pie with rice pudding. My mother, (measuring nothing) was an excellent pastry maker and my granddad loved it when there were some trimmings left over – they got rolled out and cut into squares, cooked on a baking tray and were known as “sad cake” – he would have them with butter and jam with his afternoon cup of tea.



I attended Sunday School every week at the Parish Hall on Eaton Road, attired in my best costume – I suspect that this was partly to allow the grown-ups a bit of piece after Sunday lunch. Good attendance got you on the shortlist for a role in the annual church fete in the Rectory garden. I was in it twice and still have the photos. If I remember rightly our Sunday School pianist doubled up as Tawny Owl (4th Chester Brownies – I was a sixer in the Gnomes and can still recite the Brownie promise) but I can’t remember there being much variation in the hymns we sang – The Church’s One Foundation, All Things Bright and Beautiful and Jesus Bids Us Shine of which one verse confused me:

Jesus bids us shine first of all for him

For he sees and knows it (a “knowsit”) when our light is dim. How I searched for that “knowsit” at dusk – if Jesus could see it why couldn’t I?



My mother was Secretary of Handbridge Mother’s Union for many years which involved a lot of varied and charitable works. I had the task of holding skeins of wool on outstretched hands so they could be wound into manageable balls and turned into garments. My mother was an excellent knitter and some of the wool was used in the creation of small garments (bootees, matinee coats etc.) and taken to a mysterious place she referred to as “the home for naughty girls”. If they were naughty why was my mother taking them gifts? So confusing to a child in the early 1950s.



The ability to cook, knit and sew was taken for granted and I can remember being taught these skills at an early age. My knitting was more limited (it has improved considerably!) than that of my mother – mainly resulting in scarves for my dolls and my teddy bear but on roast lamb Sundays it was my job to stand on a stool and chop the mint. A small child precariously perched and wielding a large knife would probably be a job for social services these days but I loved doing it – and I loved mint sauce. Still do.

I’m sure I’m not alone in these childhood memories and hope some of it has reminded you of your happy times.

Sue Wheeldon.

After the War was Over...

In the two years after 1945, approximately four million British servicemen were demobilised & returned home to be reunited with their families.



Fitting back into civilian life was often difficult. Many men had to look for work as their jobs were not kept open, and what they found did not utilise the new skills that they had learnt. Some returnees turned to crime but for other returning soldiers the war had taken its toll mentally, making the adjustment more challenging. It also took time to repatriate British prisoners of war (POWs), particularly those in Japan.

Life was not easy. Britain had undergone six years of bombardment and blockade, many homes had been destroyed, and there was a shortage of the basic essentials of living, including food, clothing, and housing.



Most people had looked forward to a better standard of living after the war, but rationing and shortages continued. Not all families got back together happily and this is shown in the post-war divorce rate; over 60,000 applications were processed in 1947. (This was not solely due to the war, as recent divorce law reform made divorce easier, & economically possible.)



Extracts from Chester's local newspaper "The Chronicle" (Saturdays) in 1945 show some of these events as people adjusted to life on "Civvy Street".

9 June Welcome home party.

Between 40 & 50 residents & friends of Union Street met in St. John's Parish Room, Vicars Lane, to welcome home Mr. Newton Johnson, who was a prisoner of war for over 5 years. Tea was followed by musical chairs, dancing, singing, etc... Mrs. Argyle the oldest street resident was taken in a chair to join in the fun, & to present Mr. Johnson with a wallet containing notes.

16 June Divorces at Chester Assizes.

Amongst the decree nisi granted were residents from St. Mark's Road, Saltney, and Gresford Avenue, Newton.

23 June "On the Run From Singapore"- Bombs & Torpedoes missed Upton man.

Warrant Officer A.H. Evans (R.E.) who arrived at his home in Upton on Monday after four years abroad, has had many thrilling adventures. He was stranded on a coral island & had to run the gauntlet of bombing attacks by the Japanese... He then crossed the Indian Ocean in a Chinese river boat which was attacked by a Japanese submarine, which fired three torpedoes, but all fortunately missed the target! Now he is enjoying a well-earned rest with his family.

1 September Six serving brothers home together

For the first time in five years Mr. & Mrs. J. Smith, Steele Street had all their six serving sons at home together last week. Jack, Roy, Sydney, Leslie & Noel were on leave & brother Jim arrived from Antwerp to make the party complete.

15 September

News from Siam - Mr. Albert Davies, Bradford street, Handbridge, a former member of Chester Town Council, has received a cable from his son, Sapper Ted Davies, informing him that he is safe in India & hopes to be leaving for home shortly. He has been a prisoner in Siam since the fall of Singapore.

6 October

Escaped from Singapore:- L.A.C. Geo. Lanceley, R.A.F., a staff nurse at the County Mental Hospital, Chester before joining the forces... has written to his wife in Caughall Road saying he hopes to be home shortly. He escaped from Singapore to Java, where he was taken prisoner in February 1942. In his letters he describes the appalling conditions he endured.

20 October Dr. Graves back in Chester – Experiences in captivity.

"I'm very pleased to be back in Chester", said Dr. Philip Graves, who, looking bronzed & well arrived home on Tuesday after four years as a prisoner in Singapore. Dr. Graves is reserved about his treatment by the Japanese because of the effect it might have on relatives of men who are missing or have not yet returned. All he would say was that ¾ of the deaths in his camp were needless & given adequate medical supplies almost all could have been saved. Conditions were very bad, accommodation, food & clothing were deficient & lack of communications cut them off from the outside world.

1 December Airman fined £5 for Assault.

L.A.C. Robert Stanley Rathbone (25), R.A.F. was fined £5 & ordered to pay 7 gns. costs for assaulting Harry Wood. On Sat 20 October Rathbone sought to obtain admission to a dance at Quaintways. Wood who was taking tickets said he couldn't be admitted without a ticket. When Wood turned his back on Rathbone, he received a blow on the right ear which knocked him down!

8 December Chester Airman Fined.

L.A.C. Bernard Charles Stratford (25) R.A.F, Bold Square, Chester pleaded "Not guilty" on Wednesday to driving a car without due care and attention at Hoole on 8 November, & "Not guilty" to having no certificate of insurance defendant was fined £4 on the first charge, his licence was endorsed, & the second charge was dismissed.

Events diary - SUMMER 2015

Lache & Westminster Park Local History Group hold various events and activities – please contact Linda Shuttleworth, shuttleworths@talktalk.net for further details.

JUNE

- 9 Weaverham History Society, University Primary Academy 7.30pm. Major Eddie Pickering, “The History of the Cheshire Regiment”
- 9 Saltney & Saltney Ferry History Group, Drama Studio St David’s High School Saltney Ferry 7pm. Bernard Dennis, “Longbows”
- 17 Pulford & Poulton Local History Group, Pulford Village Hall 7.30pm. Idris Evans, “Journey of the River Dee”
- 19 Chester History & Heritage, St Michael’s Church, Bridge St Chester 1.30pm. Len Morgan, “Babycham and Bitter Beers” slideshow with Len Morgan. £3, booking essential 01244 972210
- 25 Chester Family History Group, Cheshire County Sports Club, Plas Newton Lane 7.30pm. Cheshire Archives and Local Studies, “Estate Records”

JULY

- 11 Chester History & Heritage, St Michael’s Church, Bridge St Chester 1pm. Button Bouquet Workshop . £10, booking essential 01244 972210.

- 14 Saltney & Saltney Ferry History Group, Drama Studio St David’s High School Saltney Ferry 7pm Stephen Shakeshaft, “Chester Uncovered”
- 14 Weaverham History Society, University Primary Academy 7.30pm. Dr Georgina Muscatt, “The Land of the Labyrinth – Minoan Crete”
- 15 Pulford & Poulton Local History Group visit to The Lady Lever Art Gallery – must book with the Secretary by 10 July 01244 571040.
- 15 Chester History & Heritage, St Michael’s Church, Bridge St Chester 2pm. “Brief Encounter” film screening. Free but booking essential 01244 972210.
- 30 Chester Family History Group, Cheshire County Sports Club, Plas Newton Lane 7.30pm. Geoff Johnson, “Getting the Best from your Computer –subscription websites for Family Historians”

AUGUST

- 12 Chester History & Heritage, St Michael’s Church, Bridge St Chester 2pm. “Brief Encounter” film screening. Free but booking essential 01244 972210.

- 19 Pulford & Poulton Local History Group visit to the Poulton dig – must book with the Secretary by 14th August 01244 571040.
- 19 Guided walk, “Our Railway – Life, Death & Rebirth” with Gerry Tighe 1.30-3.30, meet outside Chester Railway Station. £5, booking essential at Chester History & Heritage 01244 972210.

SEPTEMBER

- 2 Backford, Mollington & District Local History Society, Backford & Mollington Village Hall 7.30pm. Lynn Smith, “History of Norton Priory”
- 7 Frodsham & District History Society, Main Street Community Church Frodsham 7.45pm. Professor Graeme White, “The Cheshire Magna Carta in its 800th Anniversary Year.”
- 16 Chester History & Heritage, St Michael’s Church, Bridge Street Chester 2pm. “The Ghost Train” film screening. Free but booking essential 01244 972210
- 24 Chester Family History Group, Cheshire County Sports Club, Plas Newton Lane 7.30pm. Hayley Whitaker, “Cheshire Workhouses”
- 28 Chester Society for Landscape History, Grosvenor Museum 7.30PM. Stephen Guy, “Mercantile Palaces of Liverpool”