

NEWSLETTER 138

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Recent meetings

The town of Waltham Abbey has undergone many changes in its long history, which was the subject of Pat Gray's talk in September. It was a settlement in Saxon times and grew in size and importance after the foundation of the priory in the twelfth century, but owes much of its later prosperity to its proximity to the River Lea.

October found us hearing about another market town, Romford, with a different character. Cathleen Jones described vividly how markets probably came into existence and what changes have occurred in the 750 years since the town's first Charter was granted. The agricultural aspect may have gone, but an open air market is still an attraction for many people in spite of the growth of other types of shopping areas.

Georgina Green, well known for her talks on many aspects of Epping Forest, spoke in November about the Buxton family. Involved in brewing and banking, they were interrelated with several other notable non-conformist families including the Barclays, Frys, Gurneys and Hanburys. There were many branches of the family; from the sixteenth century in Coggeshall; they had connections with places as far apart as Norwich and Weymouth but much of their charitable influence was in Essex. Both Thomas Fowell (living at Warlies near Epping) and his brother Edward North (at Knighton near Buckhurst Hill) had major roles in the preservation of Epping Forest from urban development.

With that in mind, and harking back to the subject of our December 1996 meeting:

William Morris visits Loughton

Just over a hundred years ago on the morning of 7 May 1895 a group of well dressed Victorian gentlemen alighted at Loughton station and headed at once towards Epping Forest. The group included two of the finest nineteenth century English architects, Philip Webb and William Lethaby as well as a rather rotund gentleman who was addressed from time to time as 'Topsy'. He was in fact William Morris returning to the forest he knew so well as a child.

The reason for the visit was a locally well-known letter he had written to the *Daily Chronicle* published on 22 April 1895 addressed to 'The Experts of Epping Forest'. In this letter he castigated the members of the Corporation of London for the way they were treating Epping Forest since they had become responsible for it under the 1878 Act. What is not widely known is that his letter brought a sharp reply from Professor Fisher (author of the standard work on the Forest of Essex) in the same paper on the following day. The heading was 'IS EPPING FOREST BEING DESTROYED . . . NO!'. Fisher pointed out all the fine work the Corporation had already undertaken and drew attention to the fact that the forest they had been given the task of conserving was very different from the one Morris knew as a boy. In particular the activities of the lord of the manor (and lesser Loughton residents) had caused the loss of many hornbeams which Morris was especially concerned about. The long letter ended asking pointedly 'when did you [Morris] last visit Epping Forest?'



William Morris

It is interesting that such was the reputation of Morris in his later years that the Court of Common Council of the Corporation met under the chairmanship of the Lord Mayor to discuss the points Morris raised.

The next letter from Morris was published on 27 April and contained the confession that he had not visited the Forest for at least ten years and that he would try to make amends as soon as he could. It was for that reason that with a group of friends he walked from Loughton via Monk Wood to Theydon Bois (where I am sure they refreshed themselves in a local pub) and then returned via Fairmead to Chingford station – quite a walk by any standard.

It would be pleasing to record that Morris withdrew most of his critical remarks. He at least agreed that the action of the lord of the manor in felling trees along the Clay Road prior to selling building plots had caused an 'ugly scar' in one of the loveliest parts of the Forest. Interestingly, following Georgina Green's recent talk on the Buxton family, Morris singles out Edward North Buxton as the one verderer who would most like to destroy the special character of the Forest!

In October of the next year Morris died having never visited this area again. Who was right it is difficult for us to decide today. As our President is well aware the way Epping Forest is managed at present can still arouse strong feelings, which perhaps shows just how much local people care for this precious survival of the once great Forest of Essex. We should however bear in mind that for Morris (and Edward North Buxton) Epping Forest was primarily a place where those living in poor housing in the East End could enjoy a day in the countryside. They never envisaged either horse, let alone mountain bike, riding in the Forest and could have had no idea that much of it would become what today we call a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and envisage all the conflicting opinions about the role of the Conservators that this would raise.

Personally I think if he could return today, Morris would be delighted with Epping Forest and the care the Conservators take of it. The scars of the Clay Road have long been covered, the lord of the manor was not in the event able to build houses along Earl's Path, the Hunting Lodge has been excellently restored, and because of the

Corporation's purchase of 'Buffer Land' Epping Forest is now larger than the Forest Morris visited on 7 May 1895.

JOHN HOWES

Loughton, the surname

Loughton is a fairly uncommon, but not unknown, surname. According to the telephone book, there are two in Romford! Mr Michael Loughton was elected to the House of Commons on 1 May for the constituency of Worthing East and Shoreham, and on 2 May we received a letter from a Miss Loughton – a 91-year-old – of Morecambe, Lancs, enquiring of the name's origin. There are of course three Loughtons in the country (the others in Buckinghamshire and Shropshire) and it is not easy to discover which one the first bearer of a name came from. Miss Loughton, who seems to have an excellent memory, remembers an article in *The Quiver* about 1913 showing a picture of Loughton Railway Station, in connection with the visits of poor children to the Staples Road Retreat. If we can trace this, we will print it in the *Newsletter*. Incidentally, Miss Loughton says in her whole life she has never met another person with the name! Nevertheless, Loughton seems more common than Chingford, Waltham, Theydon or Abridge . . .

CHRIS POND

The Family Records Centre

Anyone who has had cause to delve into census records will probably have been to the PRO 'dungeons' at Chancery lane at some time. Earlier this year the census and wills microfilms, and indexes of births, marriages and deaths from St Catherine's House, were moved to a new Family Records Centre at 1 Myddleton Street, Islington EC1. Although primarily set up to cater for genealogists, the new arrangements provide much more congenial facilities for searching the records. Donald Pohl's book *Loughton 1851 – The Village and its People* showed how the census can reveal much of interest about our area; there is an enormous amount of information waiting to be tapped. The FRC is open Monday to Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. at least, and no reader's ticket is required.

Ups and downs of travel

The growth of Loughton and Buckhurst Hill, and to some extent of Chigwell, too, can be ascribed to their proximity to London with good communication by road and railway.

The road through Loughton to Woodford was placed in the care of the Epping Highway Trust by Act of Parliament in 1769, which empowered the Trustees to levy tolls to pay for repairs to the existing road. Between Loughton and Buckhurst Hill the gradient was a problem, and work began in 1781 to alleviate this. By 1784 the line and gradient had been altered to that which substantially exists today by making a cutting at the top and embanking the bottom. In 1834 the New Road from Epping to Woodford was completed, but the old road through Loughton remained with the Trust until it was wound up in 1870.

The coming of the railway, to Loughton in 1856 and Epping in 1865, no doubt contributed to the Trust's demise but the road remained an important link and it had to be maintained by the local authorities. Although a 'lay' of 1883 runs

' . . .
.villa-covered Loughton,
Scene of Whitechapel larks,
Whence early trains run every day,
Heavy with city clerks'

there would still have been many for whom the railway was too expensive a means of travel, and the carrier's cart provided conveyance. The condition of the road varied according to the weather, but the following description is appropriate to the season:

'Just such a day as Johnny's London memories always brought, cold and dry and brisk, found him perched on the cart that was to take him to London again. Besides himself, the cart held his mother and his sister, and the household furniture from the cottage; while Banks, the carrier, sat on the shaft. Bessy was made comfortable in the arm-chair; her mother sat on a bundle of bedding, whence it was convenient to descend when steep hills were encountered; and Johnny sat on the tail-board, and jumped off and on as the humour took him.

All through long Loughton village there was something of a triumphal progress, for people knew them, and turned to look. Bessy alone remained in the cart for the long pull up Buckhurst Hill, while Johnny, tramping beside and making many excursions into the thicket, flung up into her lap sprigs of holly with berries. Already they had plenty, packed close in a box, but it is better to have too much than too little, so any promising head was added to the store. For it was December, and Christmas would come in three weeks or so. And ere that Nan May was to open shop in London . . .

The cart crowned the hill-top, and still Nan May regarded not the show that lay behind, whereof Bessy took her fill for the moments still left. There Loughton tumbled about its green hills, beset with dusky trees, like a split boxful of toys, with the sad-coloured forest making the horizon line behind it. Away to the left, seen between the boughs of the near pines, High Beech steeple lifted from the velvety edge, and as far to the right, on its own hill, rose the square church tower that stood at Loughton. And where the bold curve of Staples Hill lost itself among the woods, some tall brown trees uprose above the rest and gave good-bye. For invisible beyond them lay the empty cottage in its patch of garden, grown dank and waste. The roadside trees shut it out, and the cart stopped on the level to take up Nan May.

And now the old mare jogged faster along to Woodford Wells and through the Green, fringed with a wonder of big houses, and many broad miles of country seen between them; then, farther, down the easy slope of Rising Sun Road, with thick woods at the way's edge on each side, their winter austerity softened by the sunlight among the brown twigs. And so on and on, till they emerged on bushy Leyton Flats, and turned off for Leytonstone.'

Extract from *To London Town* by Arthur Morrison (1899)

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