
Chairman: Dr Alan Thomson

Secretary: Dr Heather Falvey

Treasurer: Mr Paul Cassidy

Chairman's Report

Nearly 40 years ago, in 1985, the Hertfordshire Record Society was set up by Lionel Munby as an offshoot of the Hertfordshire Association for Local History. The executive committee was chaired by Frank Kilvington, then headmaster of St. Albans Boys' School, and Lionel Munby was secretary; other members included Peter Walne, county archivist, and Robin Harcourt Williams, archivist at Hatfield House.

The same year that the Society came into being it published its first volume, edited by Tony Palmer, and consisting of extracts from churchwardens' accounts from the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean period, showing different parochial responses to the Elizabethan Reformation. *Early Stuart Household Accounts* followed, edited by Lionel Munby, and containing extracts from the accounts of William, second Earl of Salisbury, of Hatfield House and the house book of the Countess of Gorhambury. These offered a fascinating account of the lifestyle of the aristocracy, detailing the food and drink they consumed and the guests they invited to share their meals.

Subsequently, Peter Walne and Audrey Deacon produced *A Professional Hertfordshire Tramp: John Edwin Cussans (1837-99), Historian of Hertfordshire*. The next volume, edited by Robin Harcourt Williams, was the *Salisbury-Balfour Correspondence: Letters exchanged between the Marquess of Salisbury and his nephew, Arthur James Balfour, 1869-1892*.

The Society continued its publications with materials from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, before publishing the *Hertfordshire Lay Subsidy Rolls 1307-1334*. These very early documents were edited by Janice Brooker and Susan Flood, both members of staff at Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies, with an introduction by Dr. Mark Bailey of Cambridge University, and a forward by Dr. Harold Fox from Leicester University, both prominent local historians.

Susan Flood has long been our general editor, and we continue the practice of inviting contributions from outside experts, where appropriate. Since then the Society has attempted to publish a volume a year, although perhaps not always quite on time! However, we have managed to successfully cover a range of subjects and periods, publishing memoirs, diaries, letters, accounts, wills and inventories. This year, I am delighted to say, we plan to publish our fortieth volume.

Alan Thomson

2024 AGM Venue

This is to be held at the Old Town Hall, High Street, Hemel Hempstead, the street where also stands the magnificent church of St Mary. Building of this church began in 1140 and took 40 years to complete. The small market town that grew up around the church was granted a charter by Henry VIII in 1539. Its ancient High Street is a hidden gem, containing several listed buildings, including the Old Town Hall, built in 1851-2. The current building is in Jacobean-style brick, with stone from the Totternhoe quarries. Gadebridge Park is nearby, and the walled Charter Gardens, probably part of the site of the original manor house, the Bury.

(from text accompanying *Hemel Hempstead Old Town Heritage Trail* map)

Heather Falvey

By the Numbers: Numeracy, Religion, and the Quantitative Transformation of Early Modern England, Jessica Marie Otis (Oxford UP, 2024)

In her fascinating study of the complex transformation of English numerical practices during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries one of the topics considered by Otis is the transition from Roman numerals to Arabic numbers. She explains that Arabic numbers were adopted piecemeal fashion, with writers choosing the contexts where they would be most helpful. They were initially used for the sole purpose of recording the number of years since the incarnation of Christ (e.g. 1560), and then gradually the days of the month were written in Arabic numbers. This practice is apparent in parish registers, and she uses as one of her examples the registers kept by Thomas Hassell of Amwell (HRS, vol. V). For example, under 'Anno Domini 1602', Hassell recorded 'Elsabeth Smyth an auntiant mayd dyinge from John Rolf's of the Heath was buried the iiijth of Aprill beinge Easter Daye 1602'.

Arabic numbers also facilitated calculations. Previously Roman numerals were used for recording amounts and counters and counting boards were used for calculations (various methods are explained). Another noticeable transition is where individual entries in an account are in Roman numerals but the sum total is in Arabic numbers. Otis argues that the accountant had used Arabic numbers to calculate the total, probably on a wax tablet (scrap paper was too expensive), and then entered the result in the account. Some of the examples that she cites are from the churchwardens' accounts of Ashwell and Knebworth (HRS, vol. I). Thus the Ashwell churchwardens recorded various receipts for the two

years ended 3 April 1580, the last one being 'Received of Mr Nashe for the house of Mr William Clarkes by the hands of William Waler and Henry Trige churchwardens the yeare of our Lord 1580 the some of x s *Summa totallis* 8£ 7s'. At Knebworth in 1605, the payments of Richard Gurley and John Cockell include 'Item paid for ii belropes, iiis viid', and 'Item to two labourers for one dayes worke, xvi d', the sum total being 7£ 5s 5d.

Heather Falvey

William Wilshere's tree nursery and plantations
(previously published in the *Hertfordshire Garden Trust* Newsletter, autumn 2020.)

William Wilshere was a Hitchin attorney, articulated in 1769 as a clerk aged 14 to Richard Tristram, a childless widower, whose home and legal practice he inherited in 1785. An active and enterprising professional, Wilshere gradually acquired over 160 acres of land in Hitchin, as well as estates in Walsworth, Pirton and Shillington. He loaned large sums of money to Samuel Whitbread, and acquired a tenth share in the Whitbread brewery.

Whilst researching the extensive gardens of Wilshere's home, *The Hermitage*, in the centre of Hitchin, I discovered the Farm and Garden Memoranda Books he kept from 1809 until his death in 1824, now in the Hertfordshire Archives. The gardening entries record visits to nurseries near London in 1811, long lists of plants he wished to buy, tips on cultivation, his attempt to identify varieties of apples and pears in his fruit trees, and yields of fruit, including pineapples and grapes. He records the trees growing in his nursery, many of which were placed in the neighbouring parish of Great Wymondley. By 1809, when William Wilshere began his Farm and Garden Memoranda books, he had been called to the Bar, then appointed a Justice of the Peace for Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire. He was also making a profit from his tree nursery. Many of his trees were sold to local landowners - always through intermediaries.

A memorandum dated October 1809 noted his price of 65/- to 70/- per hundred for larches. In 1809-1811, as well as 1,000 larches, he sold 550 Scotch firs to the Reverend Lynch Burroughs of Offley Place, who had diverted the main Hitchin-Luton road in 1805 to enlarge his park. In 1812 he sold trees and shrubs to Lord Tavistock, eldest son of the Duke of Bedford, and to Mr. Lee Antonie of Colworth, Bedfordshire.

Other trees were for Wilshere's own property. On his father's death in 1798 he had inherited a farm in Great Wymondley, and in 1806 he bought the Manor of Wymondley, though not the manor house. Great Wymondley was enclosed in 1811, giving Wilshere a compact block of land in the north of the parish bordering Hitchin, where he began planting trees. A later note records the planting of 900 oak, ash and elms trees in the Hanging and the Hill Plantations (now the Upper and Lower Plantations), 200 black poplars in the Willow Plantation, and 700 firs, spruce and larch in other

plantations, shown on a map of Wilshere property in Great Wymondley of 1868.

The Willow Plantation, besides tall willows, contains hybrid black poplars. As well as many younger and probably self-seeded trees, the Upper Plantation includes mature oak, beech, lime, horse chestnut and ash, while the Lower Plantation, where there are springs and a pond, has willows and poplars. Today the trees in both plantations are congested and have grown very tall in their search for light. Five of the larger oaks in the Upper Plantation have an average girth of just over 8 feet and one oak near the edge of the Lower Plantation measures 10 feet 6 inches.

It is impossible to be certain that these surviving trees were planted by William Wilshere, or by his nephews, who inherited the estate, but this enterprising Hitchin lawyer was responsible for creating an attractive wooded landscape in what was once an open field. Many of us who have enjoyed walks during lockdown periods have cause to be grateful to both William Wilshere and the plantations' current owners.

Bridget Howlett



Wymondley © Bridget Howlett

Review of John Carrington, *Farmer of Bramfield, His Diary, 1805 - 1810, vol. 2 and John Carrington Junior's Diary May 1810-December 1812*, edited, and with an introduction by Susan Flood (HRS XXXIII, published 2022) (previously published in *Local Population Studies*, no. 110, spring 2023, pp 89-90).

Volume 1 contained the content of John's diary from 1798 to 1804 and was published in 2015 (as Hertfordshire Record Society, vol. 26). The second volume is his diary from 1805 until his death in 1810 and adds that of his son, also named John, who continued a diary after the death of his father.

The diary is a fascinating insight into the concerns and day-to-day life of John Carrington. He was born in 1726 and initially was a gardener at Tewin Water House. In 1760 he became the tenant of Bacons Farm, Bramfield and his daily diary reflects this work. Bramfield village lies about three miles north west of Hertford and about the same distance east of Tewin. Many of his interactions lay with these local markets. He did not

start a diary until shortly after the death of his wife in 1798. At that stage, aged 72, the diary was a reflection of his work, his support for others in the community and more formal undertakings as a member of the Bramfield Vestry. The entries in this volume concern the period from 1805 until twelve days before his death. The second part of the book covers the diary entries of his son. It maintains a similar narrative, but in language and style you can see the change from the earlier entries.

The diary contains much of interest, commenting on food and drink, prices acquired for various crops, the weather and other nuggets of useful, sometimes vivid, summaries of difficult events. There are fascinating records which, where possible, are cross-referenced with other public records and provide much opportunity for further research and enquiry.

I would particularly recommend the comprehensive glossary and index of names and places for all those interested in both the time frames and locations. The diary is well researched, contextualised and not only allows the voices of the individual to shine through, but provides an appropriate level of intervention to aid the reader in understanding the text. The text therefore becomes accessible to all. It provides details for those readers interested in this particular area, but, more importantly, an opportunity to reflect on the wider agricultural situation at the time.

Rowena Burgess



Village of Bramfield, c.1960, © Susan Flood

Berkhamsted St Peter Churchwardens' Accounts, c.1584-1660, edited by Nick Brown, assisted by Christine Whittingham (HRS XXXVIII, published 2022) (previously published in *The Local Historian*, vol. 53, no. 4, Nov. 2023, pp 367-368).

The Hertfordshire Record Society began its publications in 1985 with Tudor Churchwardens' Accounts edited by Anthony Palmer; it is now to be congratulated on having completed publication of the county's best surviving collections of churchwardens' accounts with this volume on Berkhamsted St Peter. The society has been well served by the editor of this volume Nick Brown and his assistant Christine Whittingham. They have provided a

crisp and clear introduction, helpful advice on main topics covered by the accounts, and useful technical apparatus like a glossary of terms and a short bibliography. The accounts themselves are laid out clearly in customary format of receipts and disbursements, and local historians will glean much from the latter for entries often specify by name those who have undertaken work. Given the very full lists of those to be taxed when raising funds for church repairs that occur fairly frequently throughout the period covered, it should be possible to learn much about individuals within this parish community.

Typical of these kinds of records, it is not always clear what year we are in: we start around 1584, find things more reliable after 1590, before encountering a gap between 1632 and 1637, running into real problems with the 1640s and 1650s. While it is regrettable, a strength of this material lies in how concerned these churchwardens were for the care of their church. Indeed, we get a glimpse of that for 1631, when repairs were carried out in advance of a visit from the bishop, and a rating assessment survives for 1637. We also see that churches in the area were being inspected by royal command in 1632. Even better for those interested in the various church restoration campaigns of the early modern period, these records provide evidence of church repairs in 1605, not long after Archbishop Whitgift's survey of churches in 1602, and also in 1613, possibly as a result of Archbishop Abbot's Metropolitan Visitation.

We learn less about the nature of repairs carried out, other than generic costs of building materials, bells, and plumbing, than we do about who was taxed to raise the funds. Yet this is one of the strengths of the material, for along with details of rents from church property and frequently interspersed payments for the poor, we learn a lot about the people in this community. Inventories of church goods and utensils appear periodically; an interesting list of books acquired by the church appears at the end of the glossa. This was a congregation that complied with the canons of the Church of England, and was in regular contact with the archdeacon and officials.

The accounts offer occasional extra details as when people in January 1631 were urged to attend communion in a seemly manner not rush forward before their betters. Care for the less well-off is a constant element of these accounts as exemplified in notes on the famine affecting the region in December 1630. A typical year captures a community enjoying life with its maypole, ringing its bells in celebration, going on perambulation, and maintaining its church with due diligence. How enthusiastically is not recorded, but the bells were rung on the announcement of Oliver Cromwell as Lord Protector and the later return of Charles II. These are very much the accounts of the churchwardens, overseers and their community, and there is little mention of the clergy who served the parish. John Napier is mentioned towards the end, a rector who clearly survived in the interregnum, as are two lecturers, Thomas Arnold, and Francis Duncombe; but we hear nothing of Thomas Newman and Nicholas Clayton who served earlier. Further research is needed to provide a fuller picture of this community, but the editors have done their job well

and provided an excellent record society edition, full of wonderful material for others to mine as they see fit.

Andrew Foster

Ashwell Overseers' Accounts, 1676-1722 edited by David Short (HRS vol XXXVII, published 2022)
(Previously published in *The Local Historian*, vol. 53, no. 4, Nov. 2023, pp 376-377).

For such a common type of documentation, there are surprisingly few published sets of overseers' accounts. Most of the major urban censuses of the poor from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have come out in print, and there are several calendars of records relating to settlement, removal, apprenticeship, and similar. But the most characteristic, most ubiquitous form of documentation generated by the 'Old Poor Law' remains a rarity on the bookshelves. Yet, overseers' accounts survive in massive numbers, generally straightforward to transcribe, and full of fascinating detail about the lives of paupers and the policies adopted by parishes towards their relief.

The village of Ashwell, a small - indeed declining - settlement in the gentle countryside of Hertfordshire, is lucky. For it now boasts not one, nor two, but three published volumes of overseers' accounts. This new book, produced with care and dedication by the Hertfordshire Record Society, represents the earliest set: running from 1676 to 1722. In some ways this was the heyday of this kind of account. By the later seventeenth century, virtually all parishes were implementing the poor laws pretty diligently. The infamous population pressure of the early part of that century had eased somewhat, and so therefore had the poverty problem, but the amounts being spent generally still seem to have been on an upward trajectory. Either there were significant changes in the social structure at this time (proletarianization perhaps) that brought more people in need of support; or, more simply, parishes found themselves maintaining their poor to a better standard of living. Whatever the cause, Ashwell follows the trend: total disbursements more than doubled from an average of around £50 a year in the 1670s and 1680s to over £110 a year in the 1710s.

Accounts like these can tell us a lot about the poor and the systems in place to relieve them. Yet there are some frustrations here too, though not through any fault of the editors. The most annoying is the decision made by the overseers not to record the name of regular recipients of relief. The accounts are divided into pensions and extraordinary payments, and the pensions sections are accounted for by month. But they do not name the recipients, so any kind of nominal linkage exercise, creating pauper biographies or linking the poor accounts to parish registers, is impossible. If only those parish officers had enjoyed the foresight to render their accounts in such a manner most amenable to twenty-first century scholars.

No matter. The book itself is an illuminating and well-crafted addition to the local history shelf. The editor has done a fine job transcribing the records, and

provided a compendious introduction, and a useful index. He has also put together an extremely handy set of biographies for the overseers of the poor, showing them to be broadly (as expected) representative of the rural middling sort, but also to include a number of Dissenters, even Quakers. It seems unlikely, in this village at least, that the poor law purse was being used to enforce Clarendon Code Anglicanism. Instead, we see a system giving out a wide-ranging and flexible set of payments, from rent to work tools to fuel to clothing.

Each poor law parish was distinctive, though less so than one might necessarily think. The rent of 'clunch pits' to provide employment to the poor and building materials (in this case a chalky limestone) is no doubt unusual, as is the use of the poor rate to pay 'king's carriage', apparently some hangover from the old royal right of purveyance (actually abolished in 1660, so still something of a mystery). But arguably the main thing about these accounts is that they stand as a fairly typical example of rural overseers' papers. In this sense, it is great to have them published in such a well-produced book, for they can stand for many. The editors and the Hertfordshire Record Society should be congratulated on a successful project, and a worthy volume. More of the same, please.

Jonathan Healey

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