

PAST TIMES

GALLEYWOOD HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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WIDFORD: A Lost Village?

As the Society aims are to promote an interest in history not only of Galleywood but also its surrounding areas; I thought that it would be interesting to look at one of our neighbouring village – Widford.

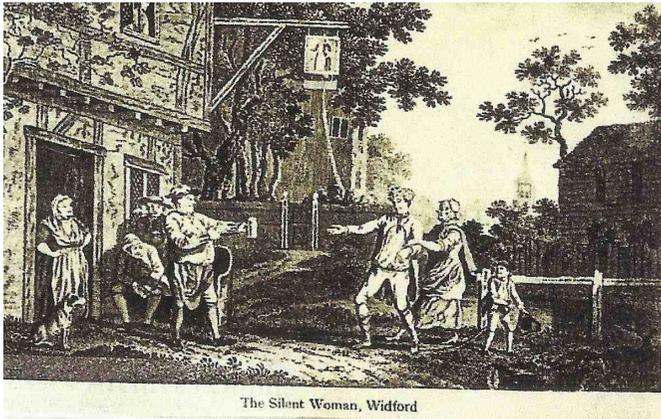
Why have I described Widford as the ‘Lost’ village? The village has long lost its separate identity when it was incorporated into the Borough of Chelmsford. Over the last sixty or so years the village has been effectively bypassed and even in fairly recent times its entrance into *Wood Street* has been closed. Nowadays when one walks along the village street, it is difficult to imagine a time when it was a busy and bustling village on the main road into London – ‘The Great Essex Road’ – long before it became known as the A12 in 1922.

Back in 1861 D.W. Collier In his *The People’s History of Essex* recorded a population of 184 people and commented “*Taking the road London-ward, now almost deserted for the rail...along which, twenty years ago, flowed the stream of traffic from Suffolk and Norfolk, and more than sixty stage coaches passed to and fro daily...*” Of course the coming of the motor car in the 1900s rapidly changed all that!

The Village Hall has survived and dates back to November 1911, and adjacent to the Hall is the late Victorian inn called *Sir Evelyn Wood*. This unique name recalls Field -Marshal Sir Henry Evelyn Wood, VC, KCB, GCMC (1838-1919), who was the County’s most outstanding Victorian Army commander; he was awarded the V.C. in 1858. In 1903 he became the first person to be appointed a Freeman of Chelmsford.

Also the village once had another inn with a unique name – *Silent Woman* – this was situated on the main London road, directly opposite the present *White Horse*. The inn’s sign board depicted a woman with her head cut off! The sign board is now housed in the Chelmsford and Essex Museum in nearby Oaklands Park. On the reverse of the sign is a portrait of King Henry VIII, hence the theory that the woman depicted was Anne Boleyn. It is also

believed that the inn was previously called *The Good Woman*, referring to St Osyth, who was martyred by the Vikings.



This Print is thought to date from circa. 1800.

The most familiar Widford sight to travellers is surely the Parish church of St Mary the Virgin on the A414 road and what has become now become known as Chandler's roundabout. It is the third church to be built on the site. The present church was built at the expense of Arthur Pryor, who was a wealthy brewer and lived in nearby Hylands House. He commissioned the celebrated architect, James Piers St Aubyn, to design and build the church at a cost of £4-5,000. It has been described as in "*High Victorian Gothic in the prevailing decorated style*". The church has a graceful tower and a tall splendid spire rising to 145 feet, which makes it quite a landmark. The church was completed in 1862; the first service was held on 22nd July. Of course, eleven years later Arthur Pryor commissioned the same architect to build St Michael and All Angels church in Galleywood.

St Mary's church is now a Grade II listed building, as indeed is the large stone pyramid memorial in the Churchyard. It is in memory of the Viscountess Sarah Falkland of Widford Hall, who died in 1776 aged 62 years; the memorial stone was designed by a George Gibson and was completed in 1778. It is evident that John Constable, the famous painter, visited the church and churchyard sometime during July-October 1813 because a pencil sketch of the Memorial appears on page 3 of his Sketchbook, which is now in the Victoria & Albert Museum. The church he visited would have been the earlier building which dated from 1604. Arthur Pryor along with his wife,

Elizabethgravestones, are to the immediate left of the Church gates: he died in September 1904.

1912 was an auspicious year for Widford. In April Chelmsford Golf Club, which had been formed in 1893, finally left their first course on Galleywood Common, and moved to a new eighteen-hole course on land to the south of the village, which had been provided by Sir Daniel Gooch of Hylands House.

Then on 20th June St Mary's church was the scene of a most remarkable 'society' wedding when Claude Grahame-White, who was then the most famous aviator in the land, married Dorothy Taylor, a New York heiress. Several of the guests were leading airmen of the day and had landed their aeroplanes on the lawns of Hylands House, where the wedding reception was being held. As the married couple left the Church, Benny Hucks, a famous Essex-born aviator, flew over the church and dropped confetti on the married couple. *The Times* newspaper called it "*the first air-wedding*"!

It should be noted that this was less than three years since the first manned/ powered flight in the country.

In December 1914 the Royal Naval Air Service, which was responsible for the Air Defence of the country, opened a small night landing ground at Widford, on what is now the Widford Industrial Estate. The landing ground was closed in September 1915. However, on 1st July 1936 the old landing ground was used by the British Empire Air Display team, one of the last 'Flying Circuses' of the 1930s. It was claimed that over 2,000 people attended the event and 38 joy-rides were given at 3s per head.

Another of the village's iconic landmarks is Britvic art-deco clock tower, which dates back to 1955 when Britvic opened its new factory on *Westway* at the then new Industrial estate.

Sadly it has only been possible to briefly comment on some aspects of Widford's long history.

Our Next Meeting

Wednesday, 13th November 2013 8pm at Keene Hall:

The Nuns and their School at New Hall.

A talk by Tony Tuckwell.

Tony Tuckwell, M.A.(Oxon), MBA and DipEd is a Governor of New Hall School Trust. He has had a long and successful teaching career: from 2000 to 2009 he was the Headmaster of King Edward VI Grammar School. Back in September 2011 he gave an interesting talk to the Society about New Hall up to 1799. His forthcoming talk will cover the Nuns' story from 1642 in Liege, Belgium – their enforced migration to England 1794 and their school at New

Hall from 1799 to the present day. It sounds like a most interesting and informative talk.

And Our Annual General Meeting.

I have enclosed Membership Renewal Forms; it would greatly help Ken, our Treasurer, if you can complete these before attending the meeting. It would be even better if you could send them directly to Ken, in order that he can complete your Membership card.

Graham Mundy, our Chairman, will be seeking new members for the Society's Committee. Madeleine Howard is resigning after many years on the Committee due to other commitments and her presence on the Committee will be sorely missed. It means that we are now left with just five Committee members. If you feel that you would like to offer your services and enquire into the requirements of the Committee (we meet four times a year – a fortnight before the main meeting for on average one hour), perhaps you might prefer to contact Graham Mundy or Ken Edwards prior to the AGM.

You will also see that the Committee has decided to produce a Flyer (copy enclosed) which lists our planned talks for the coming year. If you would like to receive more copies for friends, please contact those named on the Flyer.

DATE FOR YOUR DIARY

12th March 2014.

Byron Hall and Admiral Byron, grandfather of Lord Byron, the poet.
A talk by John Churchward.

NEWS FROM THE HERITAGE CENTRE.

The display in the Heritage Room during November and December will be 'The local farming community.'

On 26th November at 1.30 pm Chris and Les Whybro will be giving a talk about 'Bearman's Farm'.

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GALLEYWORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY

President Ted Hawkins

Chairman: Graham Mundy. Vice Chairman: Graham Smith.

Secretary: Gillian Parker. Treasurer: Ken Edwards.

Programme Director: Ted Hawkins. Committee: Madeleine Howard.

Comments or contributions to this Newsletter would be welcomed by the editor: Graham Smith
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