

Boroughbridge and District Historical Society

Keeping in Touch – September 2020

Dear Members,

Here we are at the start of autumn. What a strange year this has been so far. As Covid 19 spread across the globe we all had to get used to a 'new normal' and words taking on a new meaning: social distancing, bubbles, self-isolation, R rate etc. How strange it seemed at first only to be seeing the people we love on a computer screen; how unnatural not to be greeting others with a hug or a handshake; how confining to have to don a mask when entering a shop. Yet we have somehow adjusted to the demands placed upon us and, at least for now, the infection rate is at a manageable level. The challenge now is to get the economy and schools safely working again so as not to blight an entire generation. I sincerely hope this can be done in a way that retains some of the positive features of lockdown: less pollution, less commuting, greater flexibility through working at home and so on. It is hard to see in the moment how momentous certain events are. In the case of Covid 19 I think we are all aware that we are living through a unique time and that the virus is serving to highlight and accelerate certain trends that were already underway.

BDHS had to cancel the summer meeting programme and the annual coach trip. Our Anniversary Celebrations will be rescheduled once the threat from Covid 19 has passed. As things stand it is difficult to predict when this will be. The committee felt it was best not to organise society meetings at least until January or even later, given the age-profile of members and the challenges of ensuring safety for all those attending meetings. Please be reassured that your membership of the society will continue, and no payment is required for the 2020-2021 season for the time being. We will clarify what, if anything, we charge once we have a definite date for recommencing with meetings.

I hope you enjoy the content of this newsletter. Mike Tasker has written a moving piece about World War 2. In reading it I couldn't help but think how far off the mark commentators who have compared Covid 19 to World War II are. We are certainly living through challenging times, but Mike's article reminds us of the enormous sacrifices made by local people in the war years. Judge for yourself when you read it.

I have done a bit of research into Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*. This book, I think, offers a fascinating perspective on our current crisis; there are real similarities in official responses to rising infections and people's attitudes. My conclusion is that little changes in human nature over time. Again, see what you think.

There are also some profiles attached to this e-mail of some North Yorkshire characters who deserve to be remembered for their achievements. Thanks to Linda for her involvement in the project that led to their production. If you do not receive newsletters by e-mail and want copies of the profiles these can be provided but with a charge made to cover printing costs. Please ring me on 01765 608963 if you need me to arrange printing.

Peter Fleming, Chairman

Remembering World War II

Mike Tasker

With the introduction of the lockdown on 23rd March, along with many other organisations, the activities of the Boroughbridge and District Historical Society had to be put on hold. Alongside several other events which had to be cancelled was the 75th anniversary of VE Day memorial event in Boroughbridge, planned for 8th May. The Society should have had a significant presence at this event with the display boards depicting the town's involvement in the war and its 'Boroughbridge in WW2' book. Sadly, the Corona virus pandemic put paid to this chance to acknowledge the contribution and sacrifice made by the town and its people in WW2. As we know there are many new residents in the town who perhaps have no knowledge of the events in the local area at that time, and who may well have been interested to learn something of the impact the war had.

The weather in May was the sunniest for many a year, and in Knaresborough where I live now, there were street parties all around despite the lock down. Since I could not show our display in Boroughbridge I put up the display, flags, bunting and all in my front garden. It certainly attracted interest from the neighbours - such a shame that it was not possible to show it in Boroughbridge as intended.



It was a timely reminder, lest we forget, that the people of Boroughbridge were totally caught up in the events of WW2. Many of its young men were enlisted into the armed forces and took part in conflicts in theatres of the war all over the world. Memories came

flooding back of the events of those years. There were stories of heroism and tragedies, bravery and courage, endurance and perseverance.

An army camp had been established in the grounds of Boroughbridge Hall which extended right up to the York Road, so soldiers were constantly present in the town. With Dishforth airfield only two miles away there were always airmen around the town too. Local organisations including the Home Guard, Royal Observer Corps (ROC), Air Raid Precautions (ARP), Fire Service, Civil Ambulance Service, Police and Special Constables were all called into action and put on red alert, in anticipation of German bombing and a possible invasion. There were evacuees from the big cities brought into the town and settled with local residents. Local young women were conscripted into the forces or to work in the armament factories at Farnham and Thorpe Arch.

In 1940/41 the Luftwaffe made its presence felt and although the town was spared, bombs falling on the airfield at Linton on Ouse shook the town. The bomber airfield at Dishforth was also a potential target keeping the local population on constant tenterhooks. There were planes in the air throughout the whole of the war, mostly bombers from local airfields, but the fear of German planes was ever present, with the ear splitting wail of the siren at the New Row police station when enemy aircraft were in the area.

Several local soldiers were involved in the evacuation from Dunkirk and the later evacuation from St Nazaire where Godfrey Craggs from Stump Cross sadly lost his life alongside some 4000 others when the rescue ship *Lancastria* was bombed and sunk. Our young men were in the desert war in North Africa, the far east in the Burma campaign against the Japanese, the fighting through Italy, the DDay landings and the fighting through France and Germany. At the same time there were local airmen making their mark in the fighting in the air, and certainly not to be forgotten was the significant contribution of local lads in the Royal Navy.

During this lockdown summer there have been significant events besides the VE day celebrations making headlines in the media. There was 100 year old Burma veteran Captain Tom Moore with his incredible fund raising activities. There were memories of the Dunkirk evacuation, the DDay landings in Normandy, the death of our beloved Vera Lynn amongst others. They prompted memories of events in the Boroughbridge area and the stories of some of our locals who took part in ferocious fighting in battles in various parts of the world.

In the army John Clayton, brother of Bernard Clayton was in the Green Howards. In the war from the start he took part in the Dunkirk evacuation in 1940. He then fought in the desert war against Rommel's Afrika Korps where he was awarded the Military Medal for his leadership and bravery in the blood bath of Wadi Akrit. Then in 1944 he was one of the first ashore in the DDay landings. He fought on through France and Germany to the end of the war. There was no let up for him, he was a very brave and accomplished soldier.

Also in the army was Bob Horner who fought against the Japanese in Burma with the Chindits in the brutal fighting in the battle of the Admin Box. Those soldiers fought in malaria infested jungle enclaves surrounded by Japanese who took no prisoners. Their only supplies were by air drops from the RAF and American Airforce. Bob survived the war but then when he was homeward bound his ship hit a mine in shark infested waters off Singapore. Fortunately, the ship did not sink and he made it back to the UK. Burma was certainly no picnic.

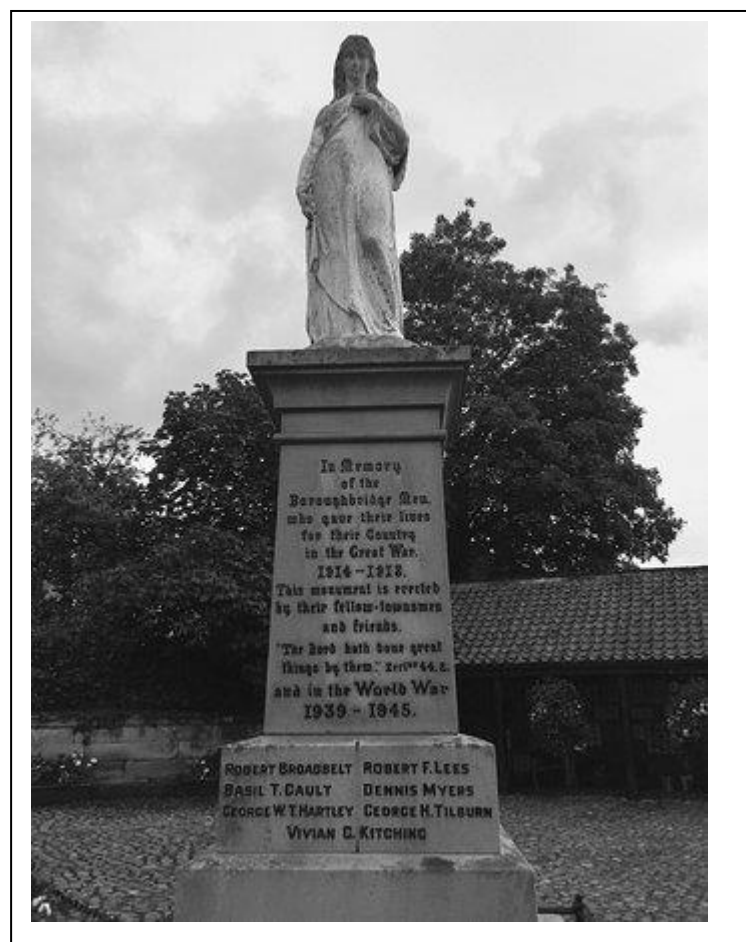
Several local soldiers took part in the battles through Sicily and Italy, and the story of Stanley Ward is sobering. He was a farmer in Milby before being called up. He fought in the desert war, then in the invasion of Sicily where he was badly wounded. He was taken to the casualty field hospital but had to wait three days for treatment. He was almost left for dead but groaned when he was moved. Eventually when it was his turn to be taken for treatment he miraculously revived. He had his leg amputated, also the little finger of his badly damaged right hand. He was repatriated to the UK, was in and out of hospitals for many years, fitted with an artificial leg and had operations to his damaged right arm. After a long period of recuperation he returned to farming in Milby. With the help of his son, despite his considerable war injuries, he then ran the farm for some thirty years. How he managed the physical work of farming with such handicap is beyond imagination. A remarkable achievement following such adversity by a determined and resilient man.

In the RAF there was Bernard Clayton, the Lancaster pilot who survived 82 of the most perilous bombing missions over enemy occupied territory in Europe. Like all aircrew he put his life on the line every mission he flew. The average survival rate for bomber crew was only 5 missions. He was a brave and skilful pilot who endured many hazards, eventually ending his wartime flying in the elite 617 dam-busters squadron. He was awarded the DFC, CGM and the DSO, the most decorated serviceman from the local area.

There was Doug Lofthouse, aircraft engine fitter who endured the 1941-43 bombing in the siege of Malta, surviving the most intensive enemy bombing anywhere in the whole of the war. In 1943 when food ran out he survived the last two weeks eating nothing but tomatoes before the battered Royal Navy was eventually able to get supplies though. He never ate another tomato in the rest of his life.

In the Royal Navy there was Harold Pearson who was the leading sick birth attendant on the navy's most modern battleship HMS Prince of Wales in the battle against the powerful pocket battle ship *Bismark*, which had already sunk the pride of the British Navy *HMS Hood* with the loss of 1,500 lives. The ship was badly damaged by shell fire from the *Bismark*, and he would have had to deal with horrific casualties, but he survived the battle. He was also in luck later in the same year when his ship was sunk by Japanese torpedo bombers off the coast of Malaya. He was picked up and rescued by a support ship. He certainly had an eventful year.

There were many other local servicemen with similar stories to tell, some enduring horrific experiences, many showing great bravery and unbelievable



endurance. Our local lads did their duty in the country's hour of need. The local war memorials record those who made the ultimate sacrifice, they are truly the ones who gave their lives for the freedoms we enjoy today. We shall never forget them.

A Journal of the Plague Year

A Journal of the Plague Year by Daniel Defoe has been a source of fascination for centuries, with its stories of “the face of London now indeed strangely altered”, where, over 18 months in 1665 and 1666, the city lost 100,000 people, nearly a quarter of its population. It can perhaps in 2020 give us a fascinating perspective on our own ‘plague year’.



Illustration from a 17th century pamphlet on the effects of the plague on London.

Interestingly, *A Journal of the Plague Year* is not, strictly speaking, a first-hand record. It was published in 1722, more than 50 years after the events it describes. When the plague was ravaging London, Defoe was around five years old. Defoe claimed that the book was a genuine contemporary account. Its title page states that the book consists of: “Observations or Memorials of the most remarkable occurrences, as well public as private, which happened in London during the last great visitation in 1665. Written by a citizen who continued all the while in London. Never made public before”.

Defoe credited the book to HF, understood to be his uncle Henry Foe. However, can we really believe this? This same writer also claimed that *Robinson Crusoe* was written by a man who really lived on a desert island for 28 years, and that his book about the celebrated thief *Moll Flanders* was written “from her own memorandums”.

This poses the historian a challenge. The journal is not a true primary source (an account written by someone directly involved in the events). Nevertheless, it

seems to chime with other accounts that were genuinely contemporaneous. It is possible, indeed likely, that it was at least based on Defoe's uncle's journals. It is certain that Defoe himself did a lot of research into his subject and used his considerable talents to bring it to life. Most historians believe it to be an accurate account.

The journal is full of vivid descriptions of the way the plague moved through the different neighbourhoods of London, the precautions taken to fight it, and the chilling progress of the carts loaded with corpses accompanied by cries of "bring out your dead". There are also remarkable insights into human behaviour under the shadow of a pandemic, not to mention instances of misbehaviour and madness, such as that demonstrated by a character called Solomon Eagle who took to parading about the streets off the Fleet, denouncing the sins of the city "sometimes quite naked, and with a Pan of burning Charcoal on his Head".



Solomon Eagle, or Eccles, preaching repentance in the streets of London during the Plague.

The summary below shows how similar responses to Coronavirus have been compared with responses to the bubonic plague.

In the journal we are told the panic began the moment the earliest cases were confirmed. Those with means hurriedly packed their belongings and fled the city. Those who stayed had a range of reactions: many laid siege to the markets, stocking up on provisions before barricading themselves and their families in their homes; some congregated in churches while others consulted astronomers and fortune-tellers; many more, dismissive of the invisible disease or the visible fear it stoked in the masses, continued their lives unabated. These individuals were the first to die.

The government acted swiftly. Invoking emergency measures passed in earlier times, the mayor issued a series of orders that aggressively changed life in the city. Public events and gatherings were banned, schools were closed, and the city was divided into more readily policeable quarters. Infected individuals were

locked in their houses with their families and were forbidden from leaving under the penalty of death. Upstanding citizens, deputized in various capacities as *searchers*, *examiner*, and *watchmen*, were — under the penalty of death — tasked with overseeing this quarantine.

The most aggressive measure taken by the city of London in 1665 was forcing all infected individuals to be locked in their homes with their families, even if their family members were not sick. This “had very great inconveniences in it, and some that were very tragical,” Defoe acknowledges, “but it was authorised by a law, it had the public good in view as the end chiefly aimed at, and all the private injuries that were done by the putting it in execution must be put to the account of the public benefit.”

Many people died because they were confined with sick relatives, but many more were saved by keeping potentially infected individuals off the streets. Defoe stresses that the most prevalent way the contagion spread was via asymptomatic individuals who carried it. “It was very sad to reflect how such a person as this,” he writes, “had been a walking destroyer perhaps for a week or a fortnight before that; how he had ruined those that he would have hazarded his life to save, and had been breathing death upon them, even perhaps in his tender kissing and embracings of his own children.”

A resilient obligation to “the public good” also permeates Defoe’s London. This is most evident in the efforts to remove corpses from the streets and transport them to mass graves. The men tasked with executing this grim work — always from the poorest ranks of society — performed their duties until they succumbed to the disease, at which point healthy individuals took their place. With great admiration, Defoe observes, “It was never to be said of London that the living were not able to bury the dead.”

Although Defoe offers broad praise for how the government managed London — ranging from small measures like banning price gouging to more significant acts such as compulsory quarantine — he laments the lack of viable healthcare facilities: “It was a great mistake that such a great city as this had but one pest-house.”



Made in North Yorkshire

Several months ago we were asked, along with other societies, to nominate famous people from our area for a Local History project being organised by North Yorkshire Archives. Linda Dooks handled the correspondence relating to this project and recently received this message from Elena Leyshon:

Dear Boroughbridge Local History Society,

Communications Graduate, Jessica Highfield, and I would like to thank you for your support with our *Made in North Yorkshire* project so far, we've had some great suggestions and have been able to tell the stories of seven Great North Yorkshire Sons and Daughters.

We have attached our first three profiles. Please feel free to circulate them to your members and others.

We're still accepting nominations for our final three Great North Yorkshire Sons and Daughters, which we have defined as people either born in the county, or those who moved to North Yorkshire and made a positive change. More information can be found on the North Yorkshire County Record Office website, or through the following

link: <https://www.northyorks.gov.uk/made-in-north-yorkshire>

We'd like to thank you again for your time and support, and if you have any questions please don't hesitate to get in touch at madeinnorthyorks@northyorks.gov.uk.

The profiles referred to in the e-mail are attached as pdf files. They are:

The Kearton Brothers – Early Pioneers of Wildlife Photography

Sir George Cayley – The Father of Flight

Ursuls Lascelles – VAD nurse

If viewing this on our website these three documents are available from:

<https://www.northyorks.gov.uk/made-in-north-yorkshire>

