

# HARPTREES HISTORY SOCIETY



**NEWSLETTER No 15**

**AUGUST 2023**

As we approach high summer the History Society committee is putting together the final touches to the new season of talks and outside visits. These will be firmed up during the next fortnight and in time to be included in this year's issue of The Harptreenian which goes out to print at the end of the month. I can confirm that our first meeting of the new season will be at West Harptree's hall on Wednesday 27 September when Colin Budge will talk to us about 'Local Roads and Bridges – problems and improvements from c1300 to c1800'. This will start at the usual time of 7.30pm and will be preceded by our AGM at 6.30pm. All are welcome.

The new membership season commences in September. Existing Members and Friends on our circulations lists will receive an email later this month with details on how they may renew or join. Forms will also be available in East Harptree shop from the beginning of September and at the Society meetings.

In this issue of the Newsletter, as well as our usual snippets, we have an update on Project Newton, together with information on the recently commenced restoration of Pensford's viaduct.

We have often included a 'Mystery Item' for you to identify. These have included artefacts from the editor's collection but perhaps a reader can offer something for the next issue? It would be nice to have some interaction with our readership!

If you have anything to share with readers in future issues don't hold back. As always, if you have any queries about the Society, events or suggestions or comments on our publications, do contact us at [info@harptreeshistorysociety.org](mailto:info@harptreeshistorysociety.org)

Editor: Nick Roberts

## **News**

### **Project Newton Update**

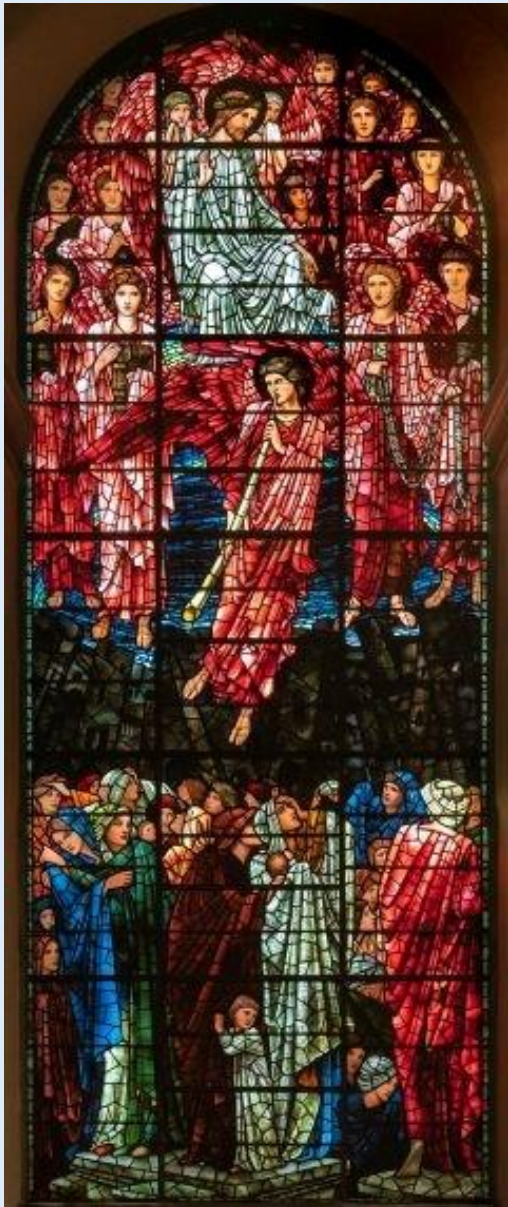
**Guy Stobart**

The project is now into the snagging phase which is likely to continue until the early Autumn.

Earlier in the year the Project Newton team applied for permission from the church equivalent of the local planning authority (the DAC) to

- Display the Norman/Romanesque stones and the early Gravestones in the north-west corner of St Laurence
- Install steps from the footpath on the northern boundary into the churchyard (to assist access and to protect the historic fabric under the grassy mound)

The Project team is currently awaiting the response from the DAC meeting, which was on 17th July. The team can then start planning what will be put up and when.



Now that the physical works phase is almost over the project team is starting to address the main activities aspects of the Project which will include:-

- Education: All the Teachers from East Harptree Primary School and some from Ubley are spending an Inset Day (1st September) at Bristol Museum to brainstorm how the School Curriculum can be adjusted to reflect local heritage (physical and natural) both in and around St Laurence and in the Chew Valley. Bristol Museum has been commissioned to help with this work and will be giving the school access to the Harptree Hoard coins they hold and other artefacts that can be used to assist teaching. It is part of what is hoped will develop into a longer-term relationship with Bristol Museum.
- Wall painting restoration talk: It is hoped that Ruth McNeilage can come and give a talk in the Autumn about the wall paintings in the Chancel the restoration of which she led.
- The interpretation aspects of the project will kick off this Autumn. This will include an opportunity for you to be involved in the research parts of the interpretation. More news on this will follow.

The church is attracting a steady stream of new visitors. A team from Birmingham Cathedral visited recently to view the Stained Glass in St Laurence. They have a big restoration project on their four Burne Jones Stained Glass windows (see photo to left).

(<https://www.visitstainedglass.uk/location/birmingham-cathedral>) and wanted to see what we had done to our Karl Parsons Window (Karl Parsons was a follower of Burne Jones).

More information about Project Newton's Activities can be found at:

<https://eharptreechurch.co.uk/download/activity-plan/>

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What have chocolate, Bristol's history and the arts got in common? Well, a new arts project is currently underway as part of the Bristol 650 celebrations. It is called Edible Histories, and throughout this year five objects that tell the story of Bristol, and which have been selected from museums and other venues, including Aerospace Bristol, Bristol Zoo Project, Tyntesfield, Glenside Hospital Museum and M Shed, will be on display with a rather unusual replica alongside.

The 1-2m sized replicas of the objects are being created in fairtrade chocolate by the award-winning Bristol chocolatier Zara's Chocolates and wrapped in gold foil and then displayed with the original pieces at their venues. It started in March but runs through to 15 October. For further information see: <https://visitbristol.co.uk/whats-on/edible-histories-p3280473>

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You might have seen on the local news recently that conservation work has commenced on Pensford's viaduct. This striking Grade II listed structure is made up of sixteen arches of differing widths and heights, supported by tall tapering piers in the centre and thicker shorter ones at the sides. Constructed in stone it is 332 yards in length and reaches a maximum height of 95 feet. The viaduct was originally opened in 1874 to carry the Bristol & North Somerset Railway over Chew Valley.



The last passenger train to travel over the viaduct headed northwards in October 1959; after that, the line was only used for transporting goods. Apart from occasional excursions, the line was officially closed in July 1968, after flooding in Pensford weakened the structure.

It was listed in September 1984, was put on sale for £1 to the public the same year, but the associated liabilities meant there were no takers. National Highways and the Historical Railways Estate carried out renovation work in 2003 to the surface to improve drainage.



The current work involves re-pointing the parapets with emphasis on preventing further water

damage to the stonework's joints. To complete the repairs safely a specially designed scaffolding rig will move on tracks – moving the 300m length of the viaduct, both sides. For more information see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-66207616>

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## Snippets

### Lace and refugees

Steve Ward

The manufacture of lace has been associated with Belgium for centuries, where it was primarily produced by the poor for the rich, who decorated themselves and their houses with the luxury fabric. Belgium was invaded by German troops in August 1914 and the lace industry with its 50,000 women workers more or less collapsed overnight due to the shortage of raw materials and the dearth of customers – Belgian lace had always been a niche export product. A quarter of a million Belgians, including many lace makers, fled to Britain and were generally welcomed with open arms. (That was, and remains, the largest ever single displacement of populations into the UK.) The photograph here shows a lace butterfly, some 10 cm long and 5 cm high. I found it in a job lot of 'stuff' in an antiques shop, attached to a piece of paper stating that it was made by a Belgian refugee in 1915 and was a ticket for "Follies".



If only we knew who made it, under what circumstances, how and why it became a ticket, and what "Follies" were? A theatre or music-hall production, perhaps? In any event, the butterfly is a touching and beautiful memento from a time when Britain readily opened its doors to hundreds of thousands of people fleeing conflict.

### Who was Eldred Walker?

Sue Emmett

You always learn a lot about people at their funerals – often things that you wish you had known before.

According to the obituaries that appeared in the paper when local man Eldred Walker died in 1947, in his 80<sup>th</sup> year, he was then the oldest agricultural correspondent in the country. He had,

apparently, started writing for the press at the age of fourteen, and for many years continued the "Hither and Thither" columns in the Western Daily Press, covering a multitude of local subjects.

Later he was a correspondent for the Bristol Evening World, writing under the pen names "North Somerset" and "Old Plough." The Wells Journal saw him as in the front rank of agricultural journalists in the country. For many he was press steward to the British Dairy Farmers Show and was also in demand as a highly respected judge of both cider and pigs! It seems he was the founder of the Gloucester Old Spot Society.

He appears to have lived all his life in the Chew Valley, having been born at Whitehall Farm (now under the lake) and making his home at the Hollies, Chew Stoke, but had travelled widely across Europe and to North America. Indeed, two books he wrote on Canada, published just after WWI, are still available on Amazon.

### **The Harptree Combe well and a ghost!**

**Gill Hogarth**

Gill came across this entry in the **Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser** dated 8 May 1943. There may well be other recollections of the Combe Ghost – please do let us know your stories.



### **Newspaper reports on the Pensford viaduct's construction**

**Nick Roberts**

Knowing so little about the Pensford viaduct I thought I would undertake a quick search in the British Newspaper Archive ([www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk)) to see how much has appeared since its construction. Sadly, some of the references over the years relate to deaths connected to the viaduct, but here are three extracts ranging from the early construction days and problems associated with the construction, to its hoped-for sale in 1993 for £1.

### PENSFORD.

BRISTOL AND NORTH SOMERSET RAILWAY.—The works on this railway are now rapidly progressing in the neighbourhood of Pensford, a great number of navvies, masons, stone-cutters, &c., being employed. There are also a number of men employed at the Pensford viaduct, which, when completed, will be the largest railway bridge in the West of England. There is now every likelihood that this railway will be completed as soon as possible. Messrs. Perry, the contractors, are men of thorough business habits, and the works are being pushed on under their superintendance with the greatest rapidity.

It was next reported in the Western Gazette – Friday 27 December 1872

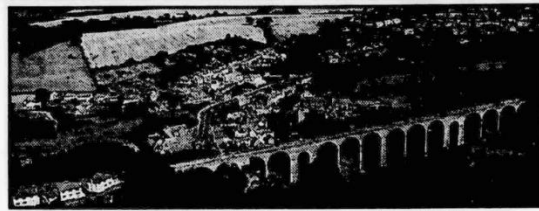
### RADSTOCK.

BRISTOL AND NORTH SOMERSET RAILWAY.—The following is a copy of the Directors' report to be presented at the half-yearly meeting of the Bristol and North Somerset Railway Company:—"Since the last general meeting, held on the 21st March, the directors have, in the unfinished state of the works, refrained from calling the proprietors together until they felt in a position to report more definitely than they could have done earlier in the year. The almost unprecedented continuance of bad weather, and the scarcity of labour, have greatly retarded the works. The alterations necessary at the viaduct and the works upon the embankment at Pensford have also proved much heavier and more expensive than was anticipated, and the contractors have suffered from very serious slips, more especially one to the south of the Pensford viaduct. On these points, and as regards the state of the works generally, the directors refer to the annexed report of the engineer. The circumstances above referred to, all of which were beyond control, have unavoidably postponed the completion of the undertaking. In the absence, however, of any unforeseen contingency, the opening of the line can hardly be postponed beyond March next. The accounts to the 30th June are appended, and the whole of the debenture stock has now been placed. A circular in accordance with the standing orders of Parliament relative to the Bill promoted by the directors for the ensuing session accompanies this report."—The engineer reports as follows:—"The almost continuous rains of the past nine months and the great scarcity of labour have in a material degree retarded the progress of the works. Several slips have occurred in the cuttings and embankments, but almost all have been removed or stopped. The remainder of the work entailed by them will, I fully believe, be completed in two months. The whole of the arches at the Pensford viaduct are completed. The parapets, ballasting, and permanent way laying will at once be proceeded with. The station buildings and platforms are well advanced, and the sidings will shortly be laid in. The remaining work throughout the line yet to be done is of a light and finishing character only, and I quite expect, therefore, that the line will be completed and open for traffic in March next."

And finally, one of the more recent pieces; this one is from *The Bristol Evening Post* dated Tuesday 5 January 1993

**Stone landmark is a New Year bargain but . . .**

# NO TAKERS FOR THE £1



NEEDS ATTENTION: BR's viaduct has been on the market for a year

# RAIL VIADUCT SELL-OFF

**A BUYER cannot be found for a railway viaduct near Bristol — which is up for sale for just £1.**

Pensford viaduct has been on the market for a year but no one is willing to take it on.

The problem is the sheer cost of keeping the listed viaduct standing.

A buyer would have to prom-

By **PATRICK ASTILL**

ise to look after it for years, and that would cost thousands of pounds.

British Rail is currently pumping in cash to keep it safe.

The viaduct passes near homes and the A37 main road through Pensford.

BR Property Board surveyor Paul Dye said: "We have

spoken to all sorts of people about buying the viaduct.

"But it is an ageing structure and the right buyer has not yet come along."

He said BR was prepared to spend money bringing it into peak condition before handing over to a new owner.

"We would like to see someone take it on and we would spend the money if there was a suitable local trust to care for it for years to come," he said.

Cash help could come from BR itself, English Heritage and other groups.

But parish council chairman Fred Webb said it would never be sold — because of the costs involved.

He said: "Who would buy it for £1? They would have to maintain it forever and it is a massive commitment."

"I don't think anyone would want to take it on — BR was

just putting out feelers to see if they could get rid of it."

The impressive monument is closed to the public but its 16 imposing stone arches make it a well-known landmark.

It used to carry the Bristol to Radstock Great Western Railway line into the Somerset coalfields.

It closed in 1968 and the Property Board has had it on the market for a year.

## The Sutton Court Fete August 1866

Sue Emmett

August in Stowey Sutton in the past was traditionally a month for fetes. Throughout the 1860s, there were detailed reports in several local papers of the annual events hosted at Sutton Court by Sir Edward Strachey and his wife.

As is to be expected in August, the weather varied from year to year. Indeed the reporter from the Shepton Mallet Journal observed in 1866: "*Fortunately, the weather was far more favourable on Thursday than it has been for the fetes of the past two or three years, and the "hand-coupled urchins" as they came tripping along the carriage-drive with colours flying, music playing, and the sun shining brightly on their merry faces, presented a much more happy and cheerful appearance than in former years, when drenching storms of rain have overtaken them on their way from the various schools.*"

Present also were "*the whole of the tenantry and cottagers, with their wives and families, ..... the farm labourers, and others employed on the estate. A large number of visitors, personal friends of Sir Edward and Lady Stachey, from Clifton and the neighbourhood, were invited to join the festivities*"

By four o'clock that year, approaching 800 guests had assembled "*beneath a charming avenue of stately trees in the grounds to the rear of the Court.*" There was food and drink, the guests being waited upon by Sir Edward and Lady Strachey. (Presumably they had a bit of help.) A brass band entertained, then played for dancing, the children had sports to amuse them, and, as the reporter enthused "*The old people of the village seated themselves around and watched the dancers as they gracefully glided over the velvet - like carpet of green sward, and a more happy party than that which assembled at the Sutton-court fete of 1866 is rarely seen.*"

Quotes sourced from [www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk)

## **Serendipitous rambling (or idle website browsing with a Harptrees link) Gill Hogarth**

Fothergill, John Rowland (1876–1957) came from a long-established Lakeland gentry family, claiming descent from a Norman baron, and his father was both remote and stern. He only stayed one term at Oxford and drifted into a life of a dilettante and sporadic scholar. He was part of the wild (pun intended) circle of Oscar Wilde and Augustus John, and was briefly married to the artist, Elsa Doris Herring.

Then, much to the surprise of all his friends, at the age of forty-six, he abandoned all his former life, and bought The Spred eagle in Thame, Oxfordshire and made a long lasting and happy second marriage. This was astonishing behaviour for one of his background, but he was so successful at it, the inn became a centre for all the 1920s literary and artistic world. He wrote and published a diary, *An innkeeper's diary* in 1931.

Evelyn Waugh immortalized the Inn in *Brideshead Revisited* when he had Anthony Blanche take Charles Ryder to dinner where they had Spread Eagle's famous Mavrodaphne Trifle.

What has all this to do with the Harptrees? Well, on page 170, he describes purchasing foodstuffs from Athens, France, Norway, Jaffa, and Italy, and seeking out the best local produce and '*cheese from East Harptree*'!!! He goes on to say in the same paragraph '*Real food is a surprise, and simply because the gastric juices fly out to it, whilst they hold back aching at the aromalessness of synthetic, poor or adulterated products*'!!!

### References:

Oxford Dictionary of National biography

<https://grahamthomasauthor.wordpress.com/2022/02/11/the-spread-eagle-thame/>

<https://lostpastremembered.blogspot.com/2015/07/john-fothergill-spread-eagle-and.html>

*An innkeeper's diary* (1931), available to read immediately online at archive.org.