



Peterborough and District Family History Society Newsletter

February 2021

From the editor...

January has seen a myriad of weathers. As I sit at my kitchen table writing the sun is shining, birds are singing and the snowdrops and daffodils are peeking their heads through. However, only a week ago the garden was under a covering of snow and the children in the village were sledging and building snowmen. Going back further, at the beginning of January, my garden was under a foot of water as the village drains struggled to cope with the torrential rain.

These weather conditions can be difficult to cope with today but how much more arduous did our ancestors find the vagaries of the British weather. In autumn food for the winter would have had to be preserved in some way to last until Spring returned. Before motorised transport winter may have cut off villages for weeks at a time. But at the same time rivers and flooded fields froze for skating both for leisure and competitions.

Do you have story to share about either your experiences of weather or your ancestors? We would love to hear from you. **Sadie**

From the Chairman...

With what do we associate February? I seem to remember an old saying: 'February fill-dyke' implying that this is the month when we get an extra amount of rain. Looking out of my study window as I write this, snow abounds after the heavy fall yesterday (25 January). We already have floods. So what else for February? Why, Valentine's Day, of course, on the 14th. A day to remember our loved ones. It struck me that this might give you another family history project. How did you meet your partner: how did your ancestors come together? You may not have much to work on, but give it a go as this 'lockdown' continues, give free rein to your imagination, and perhaps let Sadie have your results for the next newsletter or e-Journal.

Looking ahead to March, we have an official census to take part in, and further ahead to 2022, the release by 'Find My Past', of the 1921 census. Good hunting.

Michael



Although the area which the PDFHS covers is on the back of each journal we may know very little about how that area developed. This is a brief history of Peterborough



The Guild Hall, St. John's Church and Peterborough Cathedral



PETERBOROUGH

Back in 1992 we published in our Journal an article by Jan and Alan Johnson about Peterborough in response to questions from one of our overseas members. With new members since then, both in the UK and overseas, and recent changes in the City's status, it is time to update that article to help our current membership.

Where is Peterborough?

It is 80 miles due north of London. Cambridge, until recently the county town, is 40 miles to the south-east; Huntingdon, a former county town, is about 20 miles due south. Until 1964 Peterborough was officially in Northamptonshire (Northampton is 40 miles south-west). The Anglican diocese of Peterborough stretches south-west through Northamptonshire. The A1, 'The Great North Road', which for 1500 years was the main route from London to Edinburgh, passes within 5 miles to the west of the old city, but with the expansion of Peterborough in the past 25 years, the new western suburbs reach the A1.

What is the Soke of Peterborough?

Forget the old joke about it having the highest drunkenness rate in the country - whether true or not! Although Peterborough was in Northamptonshire, the county officers (Sheriff, etc.) did not have jurisdiction in the city and part of north Northamptonshire - the area known as the Soke of Peterborough.



It originated in Saxon times and was the area over which the Abbot of Peterborough had sole jurisdiction directly under the king. Over time the abbot was given more powers so that by the reign of Henry VIII any offenders were tried in the abbot's

court, not the king's. He could hang thieves, and keep the fines paid by other offenders.

When, in 1361, Petty and Quarter Sessions were set up with justices and judges directly answerable to the king, the Abbot was unique in that he had the powers to make the appointments.

Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries in 1539, and the Abbot's powers reverted to the crown. They were granted back to the new Bishop when the diocese of Peterborough was formed in 1541. In 1576 Queen Elizabeth I transferred the powers to her Secretary, Lord Burghley who lived in the Soke at Burghley House, Stamford. He and his successors, the Marquesses of Exeter, became Lord Paramounts of the Soke of Peterborough and Custos Rotulorum (Keeper of the Rolls & Records).

In 1888 local government was changed, bringing into being County Councils who increasingly took over control for all aspects of life. Because of the influence of the 3rd Marquess of Exeter the Soke became an administrative county separate from the rest of Northamptonshire.

In 1964 the Soke merged with Huntingdonshire as the County of Huntingdon and Peterborough, and in 1974 they were absorbed into an expanded Cambridgeshire (along with the Isle of Ely).

Finally, on 1st April, 1998, Peterborough was granted unitary status, and now its own council is once again responsible for local affairs.

How did Peterborough get its name?

Originally the place was called **Medehamstead** - the Farm/Homestead in the Meadow - and was at the first place from the sea where the River Nene could be forded.

In 655AD an abbey was founded here by King Paeda of Mercia (a kingdom which covered most of the middle of England at that time). It was dedicated to St. Peter, St. Paul and St. Andrew.

The abbey survived until 870 when the Danes burnt it to the ground and carried off the treasure. For 100 years the site was a ruin but during that time King Alfred had beaten the Danes and his descendants had become kings of all England. In 972 Bishop Aethelwold persuaded King Edgar to re-found and re-endow the abbey.

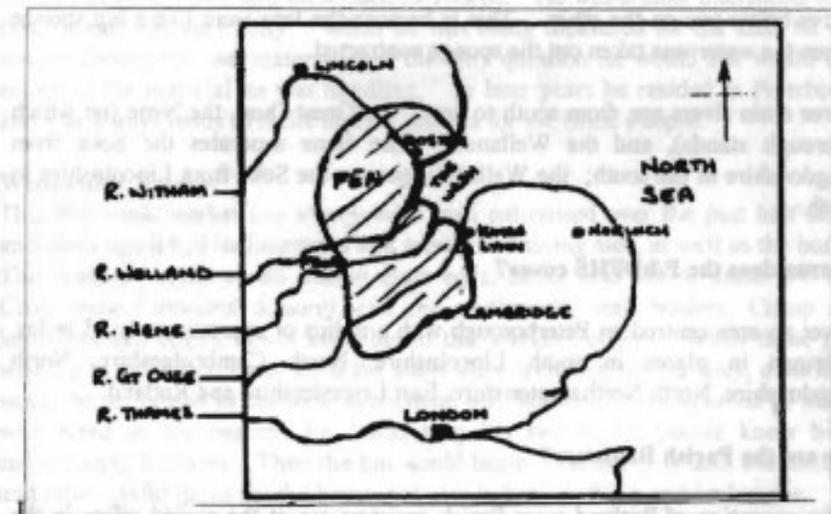
The abbey became rich from the gifts of the people and nobility and a wall was put around it. A walled town was called a Burgh, so the abbey was called the Abbey of Burgh. Its wealth continued to increase so it became known as **Gildenburgh**.

When William the Conqueror won in 1066, local resistance was led by Hereward the Wake who held out in the Fens. His uncle Brando was elected to replace Leofric (nephew of Lady Godiva) who was killed at the Battle of Hastings. Brando died three years later and Hereward raided the abbey, making off with the treasure before the new Norman abbot could take over.

It is from this time that the abbey and embryo town was called the Burgh of St. Peter, which in due course became Peterborough.

What are the Fens?

The fens are a former marsh which cover an area approximately 40 miles wide and 60 miles long. It stretched in a great arc south, west and north of The Wash, and was an extension of it.



In Roman times it had been fairly dry but climate deterioration as well as neglect of the Roman drainage system had meant the area became re-flooded. The problem was three large rivers emptied into this area and meandered around, inundating the countryside on their way to the sea.

Useful websites

Following our January talk , by Clare Moores, on 'The Art of Criminal Conversation' member Mary McCarthy has provided a useful link to the publications of Professor Rebecca Probert, expert on the history of marriage and divorce. Please click on this [link](#).

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Have you tried google books? It is a treasure trove of fascinating books. Some are only extracts but many are the full edition. I was researching the perils of childbirth recently and came across a fascinating publication by Pye Henry Chavasse, 1868, titled *Advice to a Wife on the Management of Herself; during the periods of menstruation, pregnancy, labour, and suckling. Its amazing what our female ancestors had to endure*. Click [here](#) for the link.

Thankyou...

I would like to thank everyone who has sent me an article, snippet, brickwall query or idea for future articles.

I will include them in the newsletters and journals, roughly in date order that I received them, allowing for space limitations and topic relevance.

But please keep sending more in, I love receiving them and they make the newsletter and journals far more interesting.



Within the marsh were gravel islands above the level of the waters. Some were small, a few metres across, others were a couple of miles or more in extent. The islands were inhabited by 'fen tigers', the locals who made a living from fishing and catching the ducks, geese and other waterfowl which flocked to the area, especially in winter.

The islands were also attractive to hermits who were looking for solitude, and at the site of their cells grew the great fenland abbeys of Crowland, Ely, Ramsey and Thorney.

It was the monks who started to drain the fens, but it was not until the 1600s that things really started to move. A Dutchman, Vermuyden, was brought in to drain the fens and confine the rivers to new, straight courses. He worked mainly for the Duke of Bedford who owned large tracts of the fens based on Thorney.

After many difficulties the fens were drained and turned into the most productive farmland in the contry. Also the scenery is unique. It is totally flat with straight, embanked rivers. Many roads run on these embankments. It is quite common to go on a road with a river or dyke 5 metres below you on one side and the farmland 15 metres below you on the other. This is because the fens were like a big sponge and when the water was taken out the sponge contracted.

The three main rivers are, from south to north, the Great Ouse, the Nene (on which Peterborough stands), and the Welland. The Nene separates the Soke from Huntingdonshire in the south; the Welland separates the Soke from Lincolnshire in the north.

What area does the P&DFHS cover?

We cover an area centred on Peterborough with a radius of approximately 15 miles. This brings in places in south Lincolnshire, North Cambridgeshire, North Huntingdonshire, North Northamptonshire, East Leicestershire and Rutland.

Where are the Parish Registers?

With the exception of Rutland most Parish registers are at the record office in the appropriate (pre 1974) county town. The diocese of Peterborough covers the pre-1974 counties of Rutland and Northamptonshire. Most registers not kept in the parish are deposited at the Northampton Record Office.

Book review

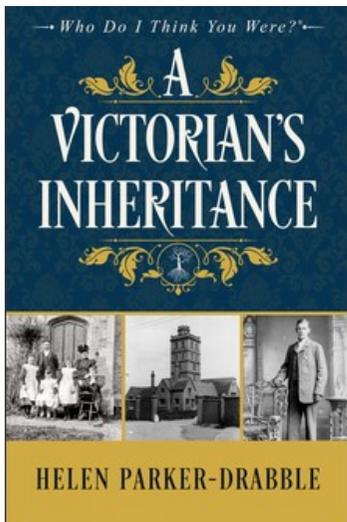
Janet writes that in 1985, as her father retired, he had two things he wanted to do. To go down the Nile and to discover his family history. Janet's sister had a wonderful cruise and Janet felt that she got the better deal being able to spend time with her father going up and down the country researching their family history.

This book tells the history of one of their ancestors Reverend Edward Muckleston MA (1819-1913). He was a fascinating character 'whose life was filled with scandals, many played out in the newspapers'.

I would highly recommend this book, not only because it is a really good read but it also shows any aspiring family history writer what can be achieved when writing about an ancestor.

ISBN-13 : 978-1913551070

This book was reviewed in the January newsletter but there are some exciting links below.

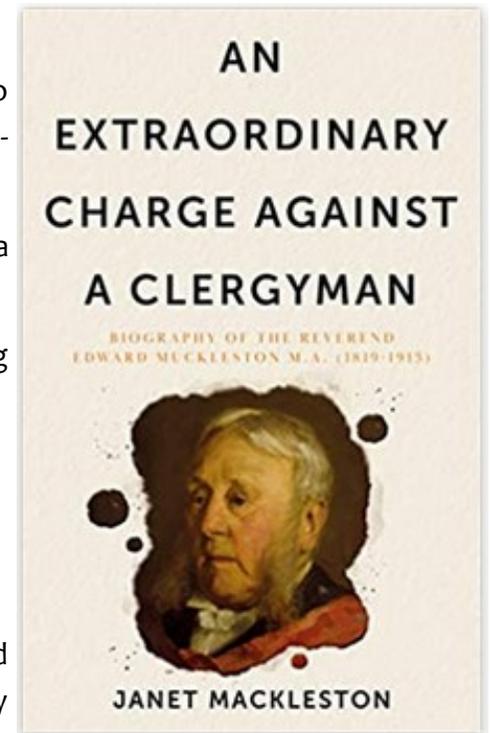


Family history research is a strange occupation. You can collect names, dates and places but what is more difficult to find out is why? Why an ancestor acted the way they did, what motivated them, and what impact that had for their descendants?

In her book *A Victorian's Inheritance* Helen Parker-Drabble sets out to answer some of these questions using current ideas of mental health, psychology and neuroscience. Helen is a counsellor, family historian and genealogist turned geneatherapist and in her book she explores the life and actions of her grandfather Walter Parker, who spent his formative years in Thorney, Cambridgeshire, just a few miles from Peterborough.

This is a fascinating book and if you visit Helen's website you can download the first two chapters for free, just click [here](#) and then scroll down to the bottom of the page. Helen's website is well worth a visit for the other content, just click [here](#).

Look out in the March journal for a longer article about Helen and her writing. *A Victorian's Inheritance* is available on kindle. ASIN : B08P8XF238



How Hard Our Ancestors Worked!



Member John Bradford sends in a wonderful transcription of a newspaper article from 1923, giving an insight into how hard working our ancestors were. John writes:

The John Bradford, mentioned in the article was my g/g/grandfather, born in Great Billing in 1849. Henry Bull was born in 1854. His daughter married a relative of mine. I have no details for Frederick Lane. The article is headed 'A Wonderful Task'.

Three pensioners who did their own harvesting. It says:-

'The whole of the operations of harvesting a field on the Peterborough Road at Eye has just been done by 3 residents whose ages total 228 years. The field was 1 1/2 acres in extent and the men, John Bradford aged 74, Henry Bull aged 80 (?) and Fredk. Lane 74 did the cutting.

1 1/2 of it was done in the old fashioned way, with a hook-stonking, carting and stacking in just over a week.

All the men are retired but they all still do odd jobs and certainly they do not look their advanced age.

Mr Bradford was born in Great Billing and has lived in Eye 32 years.

Mr Bull has spent 53 year as an engine driver, fireman and cleaner for the Midland Railway and Midland & Great Northern Joint Railway.

He was born in Kirk Langley, Derbyshire.

Mr Lane was born at Holbeach Horn, Lincs and has lived in Eye for the past 30 years.'

The photo, above, is of John with his wife Lizzie & daughter Ginny. I do not know when this was taken but Ginny was born in 1872.



FHF REALLY USEFUL Family History Show
Saturday 10th April 2021