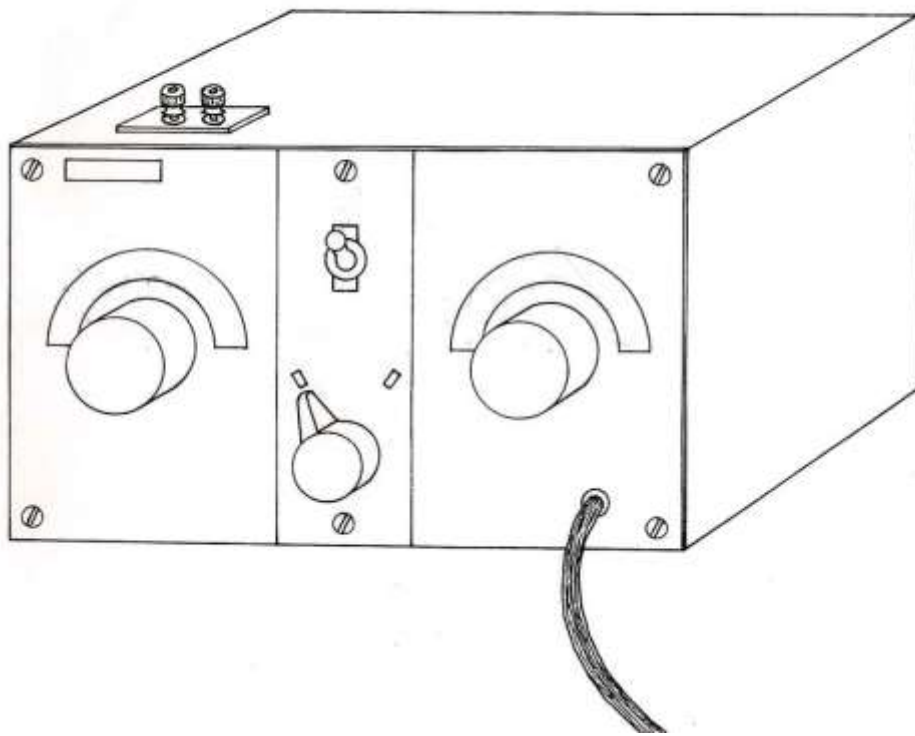


# AYLSHAM LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY



Volume 8 No 6

August 2009

The **JOURNAL & NEWSLETTER** is the publication of the Aylsham Local History Society. It is published three times a year, in April, August and December, and is issued free to members. Contributions are welcomed from members and others. Please contact the editor:  
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Cover illustration. Second World War radio transmitter. Courtesy of the British Resistance Organisation Museum, Parham, Suffolk.



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SOCIETY

**JOURNAL & NEWSLETTER**

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At the end of another year, following an excellent Spring Social Event at St Giles House, Norwich, and a very memorable summer outing to Wingfield College, we hope for a good attendance at the AGM on 1 October. Stephen Pope will talk about the history of Gressenhall Workhouse afterwards.

In the interim we should wish to draw particular attention to the Committee's new venture, "Window on Aylsham" on Sunday 13 September. For notices on these and the Autumn Courses please see the back cover inside and out.

The new season's speakers have been arranged provisionally as follows.

Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> October. '*The History of Gressenhall Workhouse*', by Stephen Pope following the AGM

Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> October. '*Norfolk Textiles*', by Lynda Wix

Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> November. '*Norwich Shoe Trade*' by Barbara Miller

Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> January. '*History of Cromer*', by Alistair Murphy

Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> February. '*Archaeological Prospection in Urban Areas*', by Ken Hamilton

Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> March. '*Norwich Silver*', by Dr Francesca Vanke

Many thanks to the contributors to this issue. Ideas and copy for future parts would be much appreciated.

# THE LAST MESSENGER IN CHURCHILL'S SECRET ARMY

Jill Monk

(introduced by Lorene Rouse)



In the event of a Nazi invasion of Britain there was already a secret army of saboteurs trained to harass the Germans from behind enemy lines. In hundreds of typical English villages what looked like a normal population actually included spies, demolition experts, assassins, and secret radio operators. They were all part of Churchill's Secret Army, The Auxiliary Units.

The Auxiliary Units were the only *in situ* ready to operate guerilla army in place in Europe before the arrival of the Germans and included a network of subterranean bases.

Jill Monk's father, Dr Alec Holman, a veteran of the Battle of Jutland in the First World War, was too old at the outbreak of WW2 for the Naval Reserve and was recruited into the LDV, later the Home Guard, by Colonel Purdy as their Battalion Medical Officer.

Some time during 1942 he was recruited into the secret Auxiliary Units' Special Duties Section (Churchill's Secret Army). He kept his Home Guard uniform because it was a good cover. He regularly went out of the house ostensibly to go to Home Guard meetings but would never take part in any of their parades.

When Jill, aged 15, was on holiday from boarding school at Cheltenham she was recruited by her father as a runner and collected messages from secret dead letter drops for transmission by her father.

A radio transmitter had been installed under the duckboards of the Anderson shelter at The Beeches on Pound Road (later re-named Holman Road).

Jill's story:

“Later on the radio transceiver was replaced in the cellar under the house. This was approached by lifting floorboards in the ground-floor billiard room. You pulled a ring in the floor and the thing folded upward. You went down the cellar steps and let the floor down behind you so once the rug was replaced it was not obvious you were there. It had originally been a coal cellar so they filled in the chute outside with concrete and cobbles matching that already in the yard and you couldn't tell where the old joined the new.

Then at the bottom where the coal used to fall, they put the radio transmitter and receiver on a shelf. In front of it they fitted an electric stove which was on an asbestos board and you had to know just where to put a very thin knife into the side to undo a catch and lift out the stove to get to the radio. The aerial was fitted to the chimney-stack, which was very high, and disguised as a lightning conductor.

The rest of the cellar was fitted out to look like an air-raid shelter so that any German invaders would think that it was where the poor Brits were hiding from German bombers.

We never knew where our radio messages went to. We never knew anybody else who was definitely in the same job. If you don't know anyone else who is in it, in the event of invasion you can't give anyone away.

Dad never showed us any papers except the code we used to send messages through. I can't remember how often code-sheets were changed, either weekly or fortnightly. You placed a sort of plastic thing over it and picked out the words that made up the code. All our messages were in spoken language, we didn't use Morse. The code, as I remember it, did not alter one letter for another but one word for another. Occasionally I used to send messages for my father – they might have

sounded sense to a foreigner but after being encoded they were a bit like gibberish to me. I think the substitute words we used were something to do with a patient or a sick call my father was pretending to make.

Signals personnel would check the set and charge the batteries and they would bring the replacement code-sheets with them. They generally used to turn up around lunchtime knowing they would get a decent meal. They came in uniform but this was not necessarily a breach of security. Our house was not overlooked in those days and anyway men in uniform were around everywhere. We got to know them quite well. I have no experience how the code-sheets were disposed of and I was not aware that we were supplied with morphine tablets to self-destruct if caught. As my father was a GP that was probably a matter for him.

If I was riding or out working I would note troops on the move or camped in woods or anything of that sort. Immediately I went home we coded up a message to say who and where they were because I would see their shoulder flashes, and approximate numbers and what sort of armament and vehicles they had; were there tanks or bren-gun carriers; and did they have guns with them? The information was all coded up – my mother was the “Cypher Queen” – and sent through as an exercise to keep us in practice for the real thing.

We were also involved in regular planned exercises. We had to listen to our radio at certain times in case there were incoming messages. They were usually just to warn us that there might be an army exercise going on and we would re-double our efforts to describe them. I don't know whether we had firearms but I was taught to use a revolver and rifle. We fired them locally in a weapons pit and rifle range on Marsham Heath. It is still in use.

On one occasion assuming our radio station had in some way been knocked out, I had to take a message over to a drop in woods at Hempstead near Holt. I went across country at night with my nice black horse ‘Merry Monarch’ which wouldn't show up in the dark. It was about two in the morning when I arrived and tied the horse up well away from the drop.

I got over the gate into the wood and was grovelling about under a rhododendron bush looking for the drop when I heard a stick crack. I lay absolutely still as a man came walking up the main path. He leaned

against a tree and lit his pipe. I was lying there hoping not to wheeze or sneeze and getting cramp in every limb. Eventually he went away.

I never did know who he was but he was probably primed to keep a lookout for messengers such as me. I was so scared of being caught I just belted out of the wood and got on my horse and made for home. It was only an exercise, I know, but realistic. I had been warned that if the Germans came and we were caught we would be treated as spies and the interrogation wouldn't be very pleasant, we knew what we were in for if caught.

By the time the war was over I had joined the WAAF. My older sister arrived back home to help my father.

We weren't paid for what we did. Would we do it again? Certainly. We just did whatever came to hand to get rid of Hitler and the War. Nothing high flown or romantic but just determination, like so many others, to avenge all the deaths including my own brother. Life in those days was a serious business.

My father was just a busy doctor going visiting his patients. I was just a brat riding horses. Dad in particular as a doctor would be intelligence gathering whilst doing his rounds. We didn't know anything about it to start with.

It was a worry that in the event of us being discovered the Germans might take revenge on the rest of the town. We knew we would be in a fair amount of danger and we just hoped we would not be caught".

Text courtesy Aylsham Womens Institute

Images courtesy British Resistance Organisation  
Museum, Parham, Suffolk

Further Reading:

Hoare, A. (2002). Standing up to Hitler.

Ed. 2. 246 pp. Countryside Books, Newbury.

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Army. 266 pp. Frontline Books, Barnsley.



## The Church of St John of The Cross

Jim Pannell

If you pass down White Hart Street in Aylsham, there are several places of worship. The Catholic church of St John of The Cross is on the left hand side as you approach the bend in to Gas Works Hill. At first glance, the building appears fairly recent. A second glance reveals a small, brick building, lower than the rest of the more modern church, and clearly of older brickwork. The construction of that small chapel leads us back to the history of the Shephard family of Erpingham.



Chapel of St John of The Cross, Aylsham.

Samuel was born the first child of eleven to John and Charlotte Shephard in Erpingham in 1822<sup>i</sup>. He was a student at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge and took Holy Orders.<sup>ii</sup> By 1851, aged 29, he was living alone in Wickmere<sup>iii</sup>. He was the Chaplain to the Aylsham Union Workhouse for many years<sup>iv</sup>, and the vicar of Calthorpe from c.1851 to c.1892<sup>v</sup>. By 1861<sup>vi</sup>, Samuel was living with his family back at Erpingham.





Memorial to Samuel Shephard in St John of The Cross Church.

Samuel converted to Catholicism. His sister Susanna was the first of the siblings to convert, and Elizabeth, Charlotte, Philip and, finally, Sam followed her<sup>vii</sup>. Samuel may also have been influenced by the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Orford, Horatio Walpole, who also became a Catholic at about this time. Samuel resigned his living at Calthorpe and sold Erpingham House to his brother<sup>viii</sup>. Then he, Charlotte and Elizabeth moved from Erpingham to White Hart Street in Aylsham<sup>ix</sup>. They moved in to what is now known as Abbot's House<sup>x</sup>.

The sisters discussed the need for a Catholic church in Aylsham, but Samuel died in 1898<sup>xi</sup>. There are records of Samuel's year of death as being 1896, 1897, 1898 and 1899, but death indexes and his gravestone indicate the year 1898. There is also some doubt as to whether he was living in White Hart Street or in Coltishall by this time.



The gravestones of Samuel Marsh (right) and his sisters Charlotte and Elizabeth (left).

The Anglican vicar at Erpingham refused to bury Samuel with his family, and he was buried at Calthorpe church<sup>xii</sup>. The two sisters had a chapel erected in the grounds of their house, and dedicated to the memory of their brother Samuel. The chapel was formally opened on April 8<sup>th</sup> 1899, and there was a celebration of its centenary on 6<sup>th</sup> April 1999. Inside, there is a brass memorial to Samuel. The chapel is similar in size and design to the chapel already built by the youngest sibling, Philip, at Abbot's Hall, and which can be seen alongside the lane between Banningham Road and Drabblegate. Both are built of brick with gothic style windows and have a stone cross above one gable end of the roof.

The sisters lived and died in Aylsham; Charlotte died in 1917 aged 91, and Elizabeth died in 1927 aged 90<sup>xiii</sup>. Elizabeth left the house in White Hart Street to the diocese. She was buried with her sister and next to her brother Samuel in the north side of the graveyard at Calthorpe church.



Picture of St John of The Cross that was treasured by the Shepherd family for many years, and now hanging in The Church of St John of The Cross, Aylsham.

Part of the White Hart Street site was sold for redevelopment after the war, and the church was built in 1961<sup>xiv</sup>. The little chapel was thoughtfully incorporated in to the new building, and now serves as the vestry of the church.

When Samuel's grandfather, also Samuel Shepherd, moved from Happisburgh to Erpingham House, he brought with him a picture of St John of The Cross. His son, John Shepherd, kept the picture hanging in the same room, as did his grandson Samuel Marsh Shepherd.

Members of the congregation helpfully showed me around the very well-kept church. On the wall below the balcony is the picture of St John of The Cross which had been in the hands of the Shepherd family for many years, and became the inspiration behind the church's unique dedication. The church is certainly not functioning with one family now;

there is a thriving congregation of over 90 attending weekly, and the church reflects their commitment to their faith. There is a real sense of community, and a strong partnership with a village in Cambodia; a far cry from the little, local chapel, but surely a church of which the family could be proud, whatever their perspective.

## References

- <sup>i</sup> Talk given by Magdalen Goffin, great niece of Charlotte and Elizabeth Shephard, at the centenary ceremony marking the opening of the Catholic Church. Aylsham Archives.
- <sup>ii</sup> 1841 census
- <sup>iii</sup> 1851 census
- <sup>iv</sup> Aylsham Directories
- <sup>v</sup> census returns for 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891
- <sup>vi</sup> 1861 census
- <sup>vii</sup> as <sup>i</sup> above
- <sup>viii</sup> notes on the church by Samuel Shephard (nephew to Samuel Marsh Shephard). Aylsham Archives.
- <sup>ix</sup> Death Indexes
- <sup>x</sup> as <sup>viii</sup> above
- <sup>xi</sup> Death Indexes
- <sup>xii</sup> as <sup>i</sup> above
- <sup>xiii</sup> Death Indexes
- <sup>xiv</sup> as <sup>i</sup> above

## Further Information

- Aylsham Local History Society vol. 5 no. 10 has interesting background information in ‘Parson Woodforde’s Visitor’ by Magdalen Goffin, the Eastern Daily Press report describing the opening of the Catholic Chapel, and a brief note on the centenary celebration.
- Details of the church of St John of The Cross and the history of local provision for Catholic worship can be found in ‘The Church of St John of The Cross 1899–1999’ by I.M. Andrews.
- Further information on the person, St John of The Cross, can be found in the Aylsham Archives, provided by Dr Sam Shephard.

## Gospel Hall, Aylsham

Roger Polhill



The Gospel Hall in Cawston Road, now Emmanuel Church Hall, was erected for the Plymouth Brethren in 1891.<sup>1,2</sup> It was designed by George Skipper and an original watercolour in his hand survives in the hall. The caption reads “Gospel Hall – Aylsham for George Pretty Esq. – George J. Skipper F.R.I.B.A. & F.W. Skipper, Aylsham – Norwich”. By 1891 George Skipper was 34 and well established as an architect in Opie Street, Norwich. During much of the 1880s he had been involved with commissions in the West Country, notably for the Clark family, quaker shoe manufacturers in Street, Somerset. His younger brother, Frederick, trained as a surveyor, had joined the firm in 1889 and they were engaged on major projects in Cromer, the Town Hall in 1890 and the Grand Hotel in 1890–1891.<sup>3</sup>

Colin Skipper, grandson of Frederick, observes that George Skipper was married for the second time in 1891.<sup>4</sup> Rachel Bareham lived in North Walsham, the daughter of Robert Bareham, a farmer and veterinary surgeon from Paston. Like George Skipper himself, the family belonged to the fellowship of Plymouth Brethren. Colin thinks it is quite likely that the Gospel Hall in Aylsham was taken on as a

courtship gesture during this very busy time of George's life. It is the only religious building that he is known to have designed.

The features of the painting are accurately rendered in the building. Colin Skipper says that it was by then usual practice for George Skipper to sketch out the concept of a building and then quickly lose interest. It was left to his brother Frederick and members of his staff, up to 50 at one time, to handle the quantity surveys, draw up the builders' plans and supervise the works. A second look at the painting shows George Skipper's skill as an artist, a profession for which he trained at the Norwich School of Art, but was persuaded to give up for a more secure livelihood by his entrepreneurial father. To impress the sponsors the building is made quite impressive by the perspective of the front elevation lowered and widened to dominate the picture.

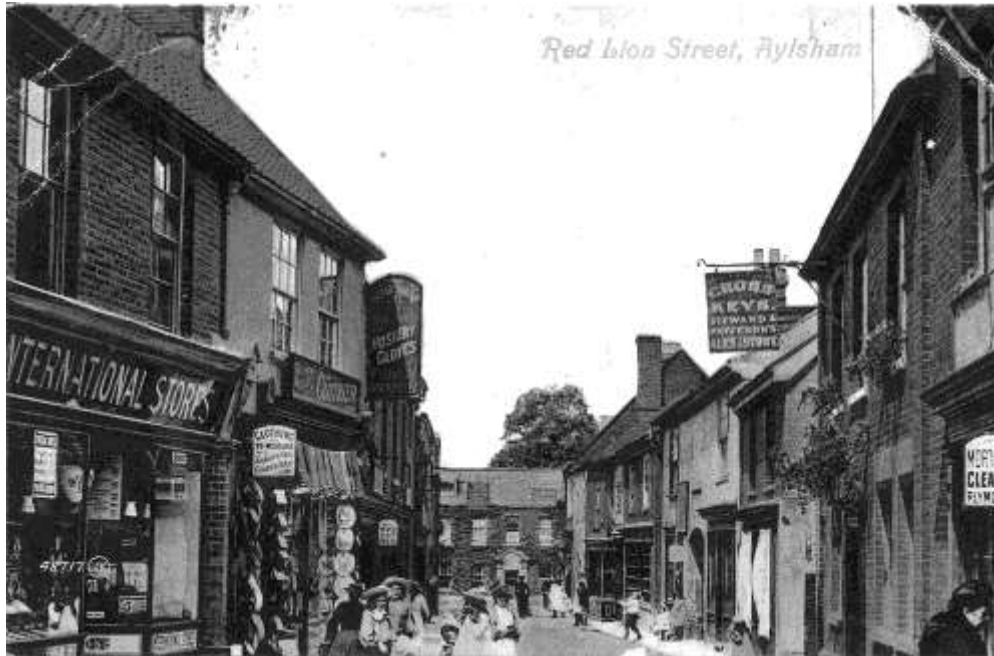
In the 1989 Nonconformist Chapels Survey, done by the Norfolk Archaeological History and Research Group (NAHRG),<sup>5</sup> Jane Nolan, then Chairman of the Aylsham Local History Society, and Ivan Morris describe the Gospel Hall as a charming, small brick building, domestic scale, but with stone features and decorative brickwork; well cared for. David Summers<sup>6</sup> comments that he suspects that the budget for this building was rather tight as Skipper has lavished any real expense on the front façade while keeping the other elevations very simple, even austere in treatment. For the front he has employed several classical motifs to emphasise the entrance door. At the time of this building he thinks Skipper was experimenting with various styles and in his opinion this design is not entirely successful when compared with the flare he exercised on other projects of this period.

The building is 17.1 m long and 7.9 m wide.<sup>5</sup> Behind the porch the Hall had, by the early 1940s at least,<sup>7</sup> a small inner lobby with doors right and left into the main hall, heated by a tortoise stove that had its back to the inner wall of the lobby. At the east end of the main hall was a baptistry covered with wooden slats that could be removed to expose the font. The baptistry was lined with tiles and had steps in to it to allow for total immersion. It was fed by rainwater from the roof, the inflow from the north, the outflow to a ditch on the south. Behind the baptistry was a small raised dais for the preacher and on either side doors to the two rooms at the back. The northern room had a copper in the south-west corner to heat water and the north-east corner was walled off as an earth

closet with an entrance from behind the hall. The small room to the south, with a fireplace, was used as a prayer room and for Sunday School. In the 1970s the hall was modernised, the tortoise stove removed, and double doors inserted at the back of the inner lobby to provide the entrance, the space to the right converted into a store and to the left into a toilet. The baptistry was covered over with a slightly raised dais, and the rooms at the back opened out, with a kitchen to the north and a sitting area to the south, a gas fire installed in the fireplace. The main hall had wall heaters and modern lighting. Chairs now replace the benches and folding tables are provided. It currently forms a convenient venue for a range of religious and secular activities.

Colin Oakes has known the hall since he was a boy, cycling from Norwich in early years of the Second World War with his father, who preached both in the Baptist Church in White Hart Street and in the Gospel Hall.<sup>7</sup> Communion was held on Sunday morning and the gospel service was at 6.30 in the evening, with a blackout after dark and a checkpoint at the entrance to the town. The fellowship at Aylsham had always been a separate entity and belonged to the open rather than the exclusive part of the Plymouth Brethren. The Sunday School had established a good reputation and held its own among the various denominations of the town in the stakes for summer charabanc outings to the seaside. Billy Graham's evangelical visit to England in 1947 was the touchstone for a particular Aylsham ecumenical movement to establish a fellowship between several denominations. This was led by Evan Coghlan, encouraged by Major William Batt of Gresham Hall and Dr John Hackett, GP in Aylsham. John had his roots in the Church of England while his wife Meg, from Guernsey, had been brought up in the tradition of Plymouth Brethren. Richard Pooley was Secretary of the Cawston Road Chapel, as the Gospel Hall community was now known, the role gradually passed on to Colin Oakes. 1984 was pivotal in the ecumenical movement with Billy Graham preaching in Norwich at Carrow Road. The Baptist community in White Hart Street had reached low ebb, the minister, the Rev. Bert Alcock, having to sell off the manse in 1983 to maintain the fabric of the Baptist Church. The Rev. Andy Curtis was invited to be pastor of the Baptist Church in 1990.<sup>8</sup> He was from a non-Baptist tradition and a keen ecumenist. He attended a conference at Swanage where he met John Williams, formerly from the

Tabernacle, a long-time friend of Colin Oakes and now pastor at Rushton. The two independently concluded that the churches should get together. Ecumenical study groups at the homes of John Hackett, Geoffrey Loynes (Chief Cashier of Barclays Bank) and Colin Oakes led



Red Lion Street in 1911, showing George Pretty's shop between the International Stores and the shop of Horace Laxen, baker and confectioner.

to the formation of the Emmanuel Church in 1994 and the designation of the former Gospel Hall as a church hall for the community. The church with its dynamic minister Robin Wilding, appointed in 2006, now has a flourishing congregation with many young people.

The caption on the picture says the hall was designed for George Pretty. Hearsay from Richard Pooley has it that the building was sponsored by Henry Page, who was later to dominate the commercial scene in Aylsham with his North Norfolk Supply Stores, and by the Roys of Wroxham.<sup>7</sup>

The census returns indicate that George Pretty was born in Green Street, Hoxne, Suffolk (see article on Wingfield College later in this issue) in 1863, son of William, a licensed hawker. By 1881 he was a grocer's assistant in Beccles and in 1891 he was 28, manager (grocer and draper) in Red Lion Street, Aylsham.<sup>9</sup> He was married to Julia, manageress, from Wretton, and had a three-year old son George and a two-year old



daughter Nel. He also housed a grocer's assistant and a draper's assistant as boarders, and employed one cook/domestic servant. By 1901 he is listed as a draper and grocer living with his wife and son, a boarder and a servant. Julia Ann Pretty died in 1897 and he remarried in 1898 to Julia Pleasance Roy<sup>10</sup>. By 1901 George is listed as a draper and grocer trading in Red Lion Street, also housing a boarder and servant.<sup>9</sup>

It is evident that in 1891 George Pretty would not have been in a position to sponsor the building of the Gospel Hall and appears to have been acting for others. In 1903 his first advertisements appear in the Aylsham Almanac with the claim that his business had been established over half a century. This ties in with the trading of the Page family. William Page, born in 1822, was a grocer and linen draper in Red Lion Street from 1850 to about 1856, before moving to the Market Place.<sup>11</sup> His son, Henry Page, born in 1857, took over the business when his father died in 1876. His advertisements in the Directories refer to shops in the Market Place and Red Lion Street from 1890 to 1896, the period that George Pretty is recorded as grocer's assistant, but not from 1900 onwards, when George seems to have acquired the Red Lion Street shop. The shop, now called Kayes, was sited north of George Clarke's hardware and furnishing store, later the International Stores and now Aylsham Computers. On the other side was Horace Laxen, baker and confectioner, in the premises occupied until 2008 by Jeff Harvey.

George Pretty died on 26 October 1929 and is buried in an unconsecrated grave in Aylsham Town Cemetery.<sup>12</sup> He left his estate in equal parts to his son George William Pretty and his daughter Nel, now called Lillie White Evans.<sup>13</sup> His wife Julia had been well provided for in the will of her father Alfred Roy and is not mentioned. George William Pretty, also referred to as a grocer and draper, was buried next to him just a year later on 29 October 1930, having died in the Hellesdon Mental Hospital.<sup>12</sup> The shop was bought by James (Jas) Flaxman Bond, who had lived in the town since 1912, had bought a grocery in Millgate Street in 1922 and by now had businesses also in Norwich and Stalham.<sup>11</sup> For a few years he traded in Red Lion Street under the name of Bond & Pretty, later under his own name as "head-to-foot outfitter".

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**AYLSHAM,**  
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Advertisement for George Pretty's Household Stores in the Aylsham Almanack, 1911, with its claim "Established over Half-a-Century".

By 1891 Henry Page was well established as a grocer, spirit and ale merchant, tailor and draper in the Market Place and in Red Lion Street.<sup>11</sup> At the time he was unmarried and had moved from premises over the shop to Norfolk House (then called Hungate House) in Hungate Street opposite what is now the veterinary surgery. His main premise was on the corner site of the Market Place now occupied by Lloyds the chemist, but his wine business was in vaults under the Town Hall.<sup>14</sup> A couple of years ago the entrance to a tunnel from his garden in Hungate Street was unearthed.<sup>15</sup> In 1940 he left a bequest of £3000, the income to be

distributed annually to needy residents of the town.<sup>1</sup> The North Norfolk Supply Stores continued as a prominent feature in the town until 1959.

Alfred Roy was born in Burnham Market in 1838, the eleventh of twelve children and followed his father William's trade as a carpenter.<sup>10</sup> After he married Sarah Rix from South Creake they moved to Reepham where Alfred had a small grocer's shop at Hackford as well as continuing his woodwork. In the late 1880's he bought Gothic House in Hungate Street, Aylsham,<sup>11</sup> which had recently been remodelled in gothic style by William B. Sutton, whose inscription can still be seen above the front door and further down the garden on the south-facing wall.<sup>16</sup> Alfred's father William joined them and died in 1892 aged 97.<sup>10</sup> The attic, until recently at least, still had large work benches that must have been hoisted up by pulleys outside.<sup>16</sup> The eldest daughter, Julia, ran a girls school in the house from 1892 until she married George Pretty in 1897. She died without children in 1949.<sup>10</sup>

In 1891 the second daughter, Catherine (Katie) was 23. She started business with her younger brothers, but in 1901 she married her cousin Herbert Roy and they set up their own shop in Helhoughton near Fakenham.<sup>17</sup> Alfred junior was 18 and went with his father to Blickling Mill, where he became manager.<sup>10</sup> The youngest boy Arnold was 16. At 14 he is said to have been given a donkey no-one else could catch and used it to pull his soapbox barrow to neighbouring villages selling oranges and other items from his father's shop to make a few pennies. By 1891 he was a draper's apprentice in Norwich and not long after went to London where Alfred junior had already set himself up in business. In 1895 Arnold persuaded his father to buy him a village store in Coltishall, which his father did on the condition that Alfred and Katie should join him. Before the turn of the century Arnold had moved to Wroxham and begun the business there.

Alfred Roy the father died in 1915. The shop in Reepham was sold and, after his wife Sarah died in 1922, Gothic House and considerable other property in Aylsham passed to Julia and George Pretty.<sup>18</sup> They sold a considerable part on to the Postle family, who had a barber's shop in Gothic House during the 1920s.<sup>16, 19</sup> The young solicitor's clerk who drew up Alfred's will in 1915 was Richard Pooley, later Secretary of the Cawston Road Chapel.<sup>18</sup>

It might be surmised that young Alfred Roy sat on a hard bench in the new Gospel Hall dreaming of a future that could hardly have envisaged what they later named “The World’s largest Village Store”. The story of the Gospel Hall also shows how four cohesive non-conformist families with an eye to retail trade and the professions could prosper in the second half of the nineteenth century and leave their mark on the next.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to the Rev. Robin Wilding for his encouragement and the courtesy of making available the picture of the Gospel Hall. My thanks also to the numerous people who have kindly provided information for this article, in particular Barbara Dew, John Matthews, Colin Oakes, Jim Pannell, John Pumphrey, Colin Skipper, David Summers, Bruce and Jill Tulloch. Assistance from the Aylsham Town Archives, the County Record Office and Roys of Wroxham is also appreciated.

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## Methodism and the Agricultural Unions

Lynda Wix



Primitive Methodist Chapel, Mill Road, Aylsham, built 1887, now Masonic Hall.

The connection between Methodism and the agricultural Unions in the 1870s is well documented. Nigel Scotland in his book *Methodism and the Revolt in the Field* has made a detailed study of this subject in Lincolnshire, Suffolk and Norfolk. Here are the names of men, mostly agricultural workers, unlikely ever to be recorded in Directories, but part of our local history.

There is mention of the union meetings on Alby Hill in Aylsham of the labourers forming a society when they met on the bowling green of the Star Inn and were addressed by a Wesleyan Methodist minister Reverend E Stibey in 1872.

The movement towards agricultural unions was driven by the 1871 Act allowing legal recognition of Trades Unions which coincided with a bad harvest that year. The backwash of corn prices after the Napoleonic wars, the introduction of machinery during the nineteenth century, combined with the long hours, low wages and poor housing had fuelled the discontent.

The Church of England, in the eyes of the agricultural labourers, had become associated with the gentry, the farmers and the JPs. Scotland writes of how Methodism offered self respect, self government and self reliance. Training in literacy meant that you could read the Bible but also Union literature. Being given confidence to speak in public meant you could preach in a chapel service but also address a union meeting. There was an emphasis on salvation now which included material betterment. James Ayton of Itteringham said at the Star Inn “if we could be good men and live to God....if we all mean what we say and do alike, we shall soon improve our condition”.

In Norfolk 273 out of 525 agricultural union leaders were Methodists. James Applegate of Aylsham was President of the Aylsham League at the same time as he was a Methodist local preacher. He, with Stanley Blogg and Stephen Bird were Trustees of the Union District in 1874. Stanley, a Primitive Methodist, was a labourer and became Vice President 1875–1876. Stephen, Primitive Methodist, was a bricklayer who in later life was a farm labourer at Woodgate Farm, Aylsham.

Other district officials from Aylsham are named as William Abbs, RS Constable, Hamblett Huggins, JT Pooley of Blickling and Thomas Watts of Buxton Lamas. Branch officials included Henry Barnard, William Kendle and Charles Postle. Charles worked as a horseman on Burgh Hall Farm and was a Primitive Methodist and local preacher. How many of these surnames are familiar to us in Aylsham today?

The book shows clearly the link between Methodism and agricultural trade unionism in the 1870s. From the next phase of lockouts and agricultural depressions of the 1890s a different style of agricultural trades union emerged in 1906. The Methodist from Marsham, George Edwards, played a great part, but the influence was more socialism and the general trade union movement.

# **SOCIETY NEWS**

## **VISIT TO WINGFIELD COLLEGE & HOXNE**

**Peter Roulstone**

On Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> May 2009, 19 members and guests visited Wingfield College and Hoxne village in Suffolk.

Now a private family home, Wingfield College started life in the Middle Ages as a chantry college and has survived periods of disrepair, been a farm and an arts centre. Our guide for the visit was the present owner Mr Peter Bloor.



The College was founded in 1362 under the will of Sir John (de) Wingfield, who as chief of staff to the Black Prince, fought in France with him and died there suddenly. Not only did Wingfield benefit hugely from the profitable ransoming of French nobles back to their families, but his personal fortunes were bolstered by marrying his daughter into a prosperous merchant family from Hull – the de la Poles. Her husband, Michael, inherited the Wingfield estates and became 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Suffolk. His grandson, John de la Pole, 2<sup>nd</sup> Duke of Suffolk, married Elizabeth Plantagenet sister to Kings Edward IV and Richard III. However, from a position of power and immense wealth, the de la Pole line was extinguished on the execution without trial of Edmund, Duke of Suffolk, brother of John, Earl of Lincoln who claimed the English Throne over his rival King Henry VII. The estate reverted to the crown.

Sir John Wingfield, Michael de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, and John de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk are all buried in the chancel of St Andrew's Church and it was here that our tour commenced.

The parish church was transformed by Michael de la Pole in the 1380s into a collegiate church following the foundation of Wingfield College itself some 20 years earlier. Secular colleges such as this were common in the Middle Ages. The founding of chantry colleges aimed to provide continuous and numerous chants (or prayers) for the soul of the benefactor in order to speed their passage through the obligatory time in purgatory – before ascent into heaven, or otherwise.... The original foundation provided for a Warden and two chaplains. This was later increased to nine chaplains and three choristers as endowments came in. These secular priests lived together under a common rule, but unlike monks did not surrender all their worldly goods or take life-long vows. They were free to walk abroad like other men and could resign from the priesthood. Thus the college provided a supply of resident priests for local parishes and a school to prepare choristers for university.

Only the low tower remains of the church of Sir John Wingfield's day. The nave is light and airy, leading towards the great Perpendicular window in the end of the chancel. Here the clerestory also changes from simple windows in the nave to a "wall of glass" picked out in brick, perhaps from de la Pole's works in Hull.





Beside the marvellously crocketed canopied door to the (now) vestry, lies the tomb of Sir John Wingfield, founder. Across the chancel is the great tomb of Michael, Earl of Suffolk, set in the arch of the arcade. Beside him is his wife, Katherine, and both effigies are made of wood. A lion supports his feet and his head rests on the grimacing head of a bearded Saracen.

However, across the chancel again, lies the finest monument – that of John de la Pole and his wife, Elizabeth Plantagenet.



Their tomb echoes that of John's grandfather, but with subtle differences. The iconography is the same, but the rendering has changed. Now the lion is softer, prouder and the moor is startling and dignified. Also of note are the fifteen misericords in the chancel dating from the College of Priests – surprisingly comfortable – and featuring an acoustic chamber under them as an early form of amplification.

The reformation ended the College of Priests and prayers for the dead, with Anglican reformers destroying the past, physically as well as intellectually. The church today reflects sympathetic restoration in the 1860s.

The College itself, when seen from the road, can be dismissed as unremarkably Georgian – apparently the view of Pevsner! However the 1380s medieval building is immediately obvious when leaving the church by the south door used by the priests to return to the College.



The gable contrasts with the 1780s façade, which was probably the work of Charles Brandon, who was made Duke of Suffolk following the demise of the de la Poles. On closer inspection, the Georgian façade proves cosmetic – with blind windows, some “glazed” solely in paint, the original timber frame showing crossing other windows and an unlikely eaves design for its age. The Georgian makeover remains evident in the fine and original principal rooms either side of the front door.

Much of the rest of the house is unashamedly medieval following careful restoration by Ian Chance, the previous owner. The great hall, probably much shortened, sits at right angles to the main (remaining?) range and behind a long corridor, part of which became the cloisters. The upper rooms are now bedrooms and retain their original character, with interesting additions by the current occupants. A bathroom features a loo by Thomas Crapper and a large Victorian copper bath brought from a previous home in Spitalfields, London. It was also where one of the Bloor’s daughters was born.

Tea was taken in one of two walled gardens and many of us walked in the formal and informal gardens around the medieval fish ponds.



Our visit to Wingfield was preceded by a morning in Hoxne ending with lunch in the Swan Inn – originally a 14<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> C country house for the Bishop of Norwich. It sits by the river near the bridge where legend has it, Saint Edmund, then King of East Anglia, was captured and murdered by Viking raiders in 870. Shot by arrows, he was then decapitated. Searching for the head, his followers found it three days later being guarded by a large wolf. A wolf is thus one of the symbols of St Edmund, along with a crown backed by arrows. A bench end in the church carries a carving of a wolf guarding a head, badly worn by time and usage.



Before reporting on the church of St Peter & St Paul at the top of the hill in the village, mention should be made of the ancient moated rectory nearby. It has herringbone brickwork in a timber frame and the size of the moat suggests a seat of some status.

The church is approached from the village through a large restored lychgate and a rambling graveyard with some exotic trees. Arborealism was a popular enthusiasm of 19<sup>th</sup> C gentry. The church itself was built with de la Pole money and to their glory. Like those in many larger Suffolk villages, the church has a tall tower. However inside there is no south aisle or clerestory. Tall narrow windows appear to have been a 15<sup>th</sup>C

attempt to lighten and visually widen the church. They illuminate large wall paintings on the north wall of the nave.



Despite their poor preservation, it is possible to identify the “seven deadly sins and the tree of life” in one, and seven figures with scrolls as the “seven works of mercy” in another. The north aisle houses an interesting village museum with displays and artefacts illustrating the history of the parish. The Hoxne Treasure has a large display. Found in the 1970s, the vast Roman hoard is on prominent display in the British Museum. A fine 15<sup>th</sup> C font with a modern cover in medieval style completes the visit.

All in all, we had a very interesting glimpse of medieval life in Suffolk and we are very grateful to Peter and Jane Bloor (née Greenwood) for giving us such a fascinating tour and a wonderful tea.. Ann Dyball was to be thanked for making the arrangements and Jim Pannell for providing the pictures.

### **Sources**

[www.suffolkchurches.co.uk](http://www.suffolkchurches.co.uk) (Simon Nott)

[Wikipedia.org/Wingfield Suffolk](http://Wikipedia.org/Wingfield_Suffolk)

## Corrections to Report on Dr Victor Morgan's talk in March 2009



Dr Victor Morgan kindly sent this picture of the north window of the Melton Constable church taken by David King to show the Norwich City Arms, depicted in glass in the 1520s.

He also very kindly corrected the script, and I'll just mention some errors I made in names for future reference.

p. 133, last line "de la Poles"

p. 134, l. 1 "Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey"

p. 134, para. 3, l. 7 "Robert Reyce"

p. 134, para. 3, l. 9 "Sir Thomas Knyvett"

p. 134, para. 3, l. 12 "Nicholas Bacon (d. 1579), whose son, Nathaniel built Stiffkey Hall and garden."

**Roger Polhill**

## **Social Evening, April 2009**

Our Chairman, Geoff Gale, organised a highly successful evening at St Giles House, St Giles Street, Norwich on 23 April. The hotel is run by the proprietors of Elderton Lodge where we had our dinner last year. We were a party of about 40 and, as before, had a coach from Aylsham.

We took a new look at the building, which though rather crammed into the street, was designed by George Skipper at the height of his career in 1904–1906 for the London Accident Assurance Association. It has a suitably reassuring façade and lofty proportions through the now unimpressive lobby to a fine staircase to the crowning glory of the Board Room overlooking the street. It was a privilege to be cosseted here. Although the building, as Telephone House, had been the headquarters of BT until only a decade or two ago, this room retains the beautiful timber panelling and carving by the Minns family – of whom Evelyn Minns, one of our oldest treasured members, is a part.

The building was converted to a boutique hotel by a Russian lady on an extravagant scale. In this part, at least, the expense lavished on chandeliers and fabrics all seemed to good effect. The venture collapsed and the present owners have done a fine job in establishing an excellent hotel service. Over drinks David Summers, who had already talked to us about George Skipper in October 2004, pointed out details of the building and features we were likely to miss, such as the Greek key pattern down the stairs, modish from Minoan excavations of the period. We then had an excellent dinner, with high commendation from those who had dined there under the previous ownership. The spacious room was a real privilege for a Society outing.

**Roger Polhill**

### **COURSES IN AYLSHAM AUTUMN 2009 AND SPRING 2010**

Aylsham Local History Society:– The Norfolk Landscape.  
Wednesdays at 2.00–3.30 pm from 23<sup>rd</sup> September. Field day in the Brecklands planned for sometime in October.

WEA:– William Morris by Jill Arnold, Tuesdays at 2.30–4 pm from 22<sup>nd</sup> September (please note the day and different starting time).

Friends' Meeting House, Pegg's Yard, Red Lion Street.

Please telephone Ann Dyball 01263 732627 for further details.

## WINDOW ON AYLSHAM – Sunday 13 September 2009



The Society is hosting the first of a proposed series of free open meetings to show the local history of Aylsham, using the Town Hall Archives and the knowledge of our members, complemented by a public lecture.

Please come along on the afternoon of Sunday 13 September and do urge other people you know to take part in the event. The programme includes a display of archives with an accompanying film show in the Town Hall and talks at Millgate Bridge and the Market Place. Afterwards Kevin Crossley-Holland, the award-winning poet and author, will talk about the influence of history on all our lives.

2–4 pm Exhibitions in the Town Hall, with a film show “Images from Aylsham’s Past” by Derek Lyons and displays of publications and archives.

Refreshments available.

2 pm A 20-minute talk at Millgate Bridge and at the Market Place

3 pm Talks repeated at Millgate Bridge and the Market Place

4.00–4.30 ‘England: an old house layered with memories’, a talk by Kevin Crossley-Holland

5 pm Close