

FLHAG Chairman's Report

written for the Group's AGM : Tuesday 23rd March 2021

There are several direct challenges facing an Organisation like a Local History Group at the present time and in our current situation. Coinciding as it did with our Annual General Meeting, the Anniversary of the Start of the Pandemic raises an interesting question: being entrusted with keeping the Village Archive, how should FLHAG be marking the impact of Covid upon our own community? Alongside those terrible statistics of loss of human life and the huge numbers of people whose isolation and stress has resulted in mental and emotional casualty, our History Group plans to think hard about how to collect images and memories, snippets from diaries or wider statistical information and commit it to the recording of the story of our village.

We have previously gone public over how a most kind and timely invitation from the Methodist Chapel Trustees, gives us the chance to expand the Parish Archive from its current location into new cupboards and storage areas within their Main Hall. Not only is this going to provide us with a stable environment, so necessary when the majority of our records are paper documents and photographs, but it also provide us with a working space, with tables and chairs, easy access and kitchen/toilet alongside. Part of the frustration felt by our small Archive Group has been the lack of opportunity to develop its relevance and share its information with even our regular members. Much could be solved if our meetings were able to take place in the same space. So, while also encouraging a greater use of Archive by schools and individuals following up family history etc., we now plan to dovetail where we meet with where the Archive is kept. While it will be sad to leave behind our regular use of the Sancroft Hall, the advantages we will have by being in the same building and offered easy access to the Archive we look after on behalf of all residents, bodes well. For those unfamiliar with inside the Methodist Chapel, it also possesses an ability to be opened up between Hall and the Chapel itself, accommodating us and guests, with a most useful adjoining Car Park right there on New Street.

It goes without saying that our Programme for 2021/2 has proved relatively straightforward in that many of the speakers originally booked for 2020 have kindly offered to repeat their commitment. I wish to add a special vote of thanks to Ken Rowbottom for the way he has negotiated the endless stream of cancellations and yet steered us towards a very exciting diary for the remainder of the year and even well into 2022! In fact it seems to be year for some very special thanks. Firstly to Mary Cufley who is the very 'persona' of our Archive and, while she has intimated that she wishes to stand down from the Committee, we have managed to keep her on board until a replacement is found. Please give this some serious thought. Secondly there are particular thanks to be extended to Janet James, who has been our Village Recorder, quietly and efficiently noting the events and changes within the village for several years. She sends her own Annual Report to the Suffolk Local History Council, as well as placing it into our Archive, whether her notes cover damage to trees and road repairs or commenting on alterations to buildings and decisions about planning. We are looking for a replacement for her too, ideal for someone who gets about the village and enjoys words ! That same Suffolk Local History Council provides us with a body who can give advice and act as a voice for research and articles, providing us with suitable speakers and encouragement. Thanks are also due to Barry Jones who manages our finances; Norman Ansell who acts as Committee Secretary, Philip Eastgate our brilliant Techno' Walla and Mike Cox whose eye for legal detail goes a long way toward legal compliance and smooth administration. Yet again, I find myself saying that we still need to widen our membership in order to be better representatives of the whole community. We're not short of members but we are nearly all of a similar age! Nearly all our Village Organisations face the same dilemma, but in our case this is also really important as the next twelve months is going to see some pretty exciting developments in terms of Archive and we need more help in ensuring it is done in ways that the next generation can find relevant and accessible.

On the cards we still have the prospect of our creating a leaflet for a Tourist & Heritage Walk around Fressingfield and another one taking a wider route to cover the quite remarkable and important ring of medieval Halls that make Fressingfield such an interesting example of living history. We are most certainly not alone in remaining concerned about the future of the Old Stables alongside Sancroft Hall and opposite the Fox & Goose. Two years ago some new discussions began with a voluntary architect but, with any commercial prospects quickly evaporating and other buildings in the Parish making overtures about becoming Village Hubs, there remains no easy and obvious solution. We are very well furnished with Meeting Places across our community, all of which are to some extent in competition. But then FLHAG is also uniquely charged with being concerned for recording local historical knowledge, as we did within the 'Heritage & Character Appraisal' for example, in the recent Neighbourhood Development Plan. It is therefore really important that we record the history of such structures before they become totally obsolete, or worse, face demolition. Whether trees or bricks, artefact or personal records, these things are the stuff of an inheritance for future generations. Sometimes they require preservation or repair, such as the delightful Butcher's Ledger of 1887 we have paid to be repaired and is now to be kept in our Archive. Sometimes such items get caught up in broader visions or get lost altogether. But nothing alters the importance of an organisation like this one, of which I have been happy to serve as your Chairman.

Finally I am using this opportunity to say that I shall be stepping down from a Chairman's role at next year's AGM and so would urge you all to use the next twelve months to look around and ensure those of us retiring can properly hand over our responsibilities. While it is good to meet regularly and enjoy learning about subjects beyond our immediate local environment or cursory knowledge, we remain custodian of the information and data that are essential for authors and interested members of the public. While we shall be applying for grant-aid from the Parish Council to help us fulfil that function, we are also a Group able to add our voice to the many causes and concerns that clamour for attention across such communities as ours. These are matters that will continue shaping the future of this Parish and those others closest to us, from where several of our members also come. So do remain in touch with us and, above all, keep enthusiastic for the things which will determine how future generations come to view the history we ourselves are making.

With my thanks and very best wishes,

Andrew Vessey

*Revd Canon Andrew Vessey
3 The Laurels,
Fressingfield IP21 5NZ
01379 588389 / 07907 318335
andrew.vessey@btinternet.com*