

Village Echoes

In a year which sees the 100th anniversary of the start of the Great War, the Goudhurst and Kilndown Local History Society has reached its own 50th anniversary. In July 1964 a few interested people got together with the intention of forming a new local history society; a committee was chosen and the newly named "Goudhurst and Kilndown Local History Society" was born. The initial committee comprised: Mrs Katharine Hedley Vickers (Chairman); Miss Joanna Barnard (Vice-Chairman), Dr Gosset (Treasurer), Mr Eric Goodsell, (Archivist), Mr Carwithen, (Kilndown representative) and Len Pierce as Secretary, a post he was to hold for the next 33 years, while remaining a member until his death, aged 102, in December 2011. The membership subscription was set at five shillings (25p) per annum and the decision taken to hold meetings on the first Tuesday of the winter months (i.e. November to March) in the Church Room.

The first meeting was attended by 55 members, and Christopher Hussey of Scotney Castle was welcomed as President of the Society. The first speaker was Dr Felix Hull, the County Archivist, who spoke on Goudhurst material stored in the County Archives office in Maidstone. It should perhaps be mentioned at this point that a previous Goudhurst Village History Society was started by John Druce in 1934 and, apart from a break during the war, only really ceased with his death in 1951. That society had accumulated a significant amount of material which, by 1964, had long since been deposited at the County Archives. Consequently although the membership of the newly formed society consisted of people who knew Goudhurst well, the fact that the previous society's records were no longer easily accessible meant the "new" society effectively started from scratch. Ken Bronwin became Archivist in 1968 but by the mid-1970s this job was considered too much for one person, and Gordon Batchelor, who had joined the committee in 1969, was given the job of "Director of Documents", i.e. taking responsibility for the paper-based archives, whilst Ken looked after any artefacts. Len Pierce, who as secretary dealt with many local history requests, mostly from Americans tracing their family history, as well as doing his own research, also began to accumulate a wealth of documentary information. Today (2014) the society archives are kept in one place and the 'job' is done by one person.

The programme of talks for the first season shows that Dr Hull was followed by speakers talking on "Aspects of local history", "The history of Goudhurst church", local government past and present, and hop-growing in England. Members were also encouraged to give talks themselves and, in January 1965, four members gave a combined talk about their experiences in Goudhurst during the Second World War. As time passed, other members ventured to the County Archives and, by the 1970s, Len Pierce and Gordon Batchelor had become permanent fixtures in the programme list, the latter especially with his illustrated talks based on the information he had uncovered. Goudhurst is also fortunate in having the Jubilee and Coronation books compiled by Alfred Tiffin in the 1930s, so, when he paid a rare visit to the parish from his home in Adelaide, Australia, in September 1976 it is not surprising that the report of the meeting at which he was the guest speaker stated that "the room was packed to the doors" and that although the "seating proved inadequate, no-one minded".

Perhaps inspired by the example set by Tiffin the Society has also been active in the publishing sphere. Although hopes to publish a book on the history of Goudhurst to

celebrate the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977 were unsuccessful, the society did publish "Parish Past", a series short essays on various aspects of local history, researched and written by Gordon Batchelor in 1991. In addition, living within in sight of Bedgebury Park encouraged Gordon to write a book (published in 1996) on the Beresfords of Bedgebury Park, which also contains a considerable amount of information about the history of Kilndown. In 2001 Bill Musgrave produced the Goudhurst and Kilndown Millennium Book based on the format used by Alfred Tiffin and covering years since 1937. All of these, as well a forthcoming book on Goudhurst and Kilndown during the Great War, are still available from the Society.

Technology has also changed considerably during the last fifty years. The early printed programmes note that some talks were illustrated (but not how), while others refer to "visual aids" – whatever that meant. However, by the mid-1970s, speakers were beginning to use slides and nowadays nearly all the speakers booked by the society use PowerPoint presentations with which to keep their audience's attention. As access to the internet and email has grown, so has the way people contact the society – they no longer write letters but send emails – and the Society has begun to develop its own website. In addition the advent of digital photography makes it much easier not only to record aspects of parish life but also to copy items of local interest held in archives elsewhere and often in private hands.

However, fifty years on, the meetings are still held, only the months and venue have changed. The society meeting season now runs from October to May, (excluding January).

Local History Society
Email: info@goudhurstlocalhistorysociety.org
Website: www.goudhurstlocalhistorysociety.org