

NEWSLETTER

Dunstable & District Local History Society
No. 58 June 2021



Chairman's Notes

Welcome to another special 'lockdown' newsletter: we are producing some extra issues during the times of Covid so we can all try to keep in touch.

Most of this edition is devoted to the Manshead Archaeological Society, which has closed down after many years at the forefront of exciting discoveries about Dunstable's past. We think it is important to publish Manshead's story and make it available to a worldwide readership via our website.

● We are hoping to resume our monthly meetings in September but nothing is certain and much depends on government advice and the feasibility of using the Methodist church hall once more.

● Meanwhile, we have held our annual meeting on Zoom, at which the following committee was elected: chairman John Buckledee, vice-chairman Hugh Garrod, treasurer Patricia Larkman, membership secretary David Underwood, committee Liz Bentley, Chris Charman, Jenny Dilnot, John Stevens and Rita Swift.

● It is great to welcome Liz and Chris as new members of the committee. David Turner continues to edit the newsletter and Phillip Gillam kindly stepped in to audit our accounts during the illness of David Fookes.

● We were profoundly shocked to learn of the unexpected death of Joan Curran, such a stalwart and irreplaceable member of our society. There is a short article about Joan inside this newsletter. We gave details about Joan's funeral on our website, there were many references on social media and the Gazette published her photo on its front page. But it's a sad example of how abnormal our lives have become during the past year to discover that, even in the middle of June, many local people had still not heard of Joan's passing.

● Suitably gloved and masked, some history society members have manned a stall at two Dunstable markets to sell some of the old Book Castle history books donated to us by our president, Paul Bowes.



The History Society market stall on May 15th

Despite some bad weather Rita Swift, David Underwood, John Stevens, Liz Bentley, Jenny Dilnot and my wife were kept busy and raised £206 for society funds. We were visited by King Henry VIII (see photo) and we had to explain to him the difference between a divorce and his marriage annulment at Dunstable Priory. You would have thought he would have known!

● If all goes well, the society will have a tent in Priory Gardens for Archaeology Day on Saturday, July 24.

● Your chairman has also had to brave a Microsoft Teams meeting

of the council's Community Services Committee to talk about the society's work.

● The society has manned a gazebo in Grove House Gardens as part of the council's Queensway Hall of Fame event, for which we tried to assemble a list of all the rock bands who appeared at the hall. This hadn't been done before and hopefully will provide a feature in a future newsletter. We have become experts on the work of Hawkwind and Tears For Fears, whose popularity was no surprise, but it's been remarkable how many people have waxed lyrical about Tom Paxton and the band called Squeeze (Jools Holland was a pianist).

● At the time of writing, it seems that our Dunstable Leading Ladies display will open at last in the Priory House exhibition area during July. This has been a major project for us, featuring a host of talented and pioneering females ranging from Lucy Dales to Faye Tozer. David Turner and myself were working on it long before anyone had even heard of Covid and it has proved unexpectedly difficult. For instance, we couldn't trace any suffragettes and we never managed to find out anything about Dunstable's first girl guide captain, apart from her name (Miss N. Wright). One false trail led us to a lady who enthusiastically fetched from her attic a mass of her grandma's guiding memorabilia, but (alas) it was from another town.

John Buckledee





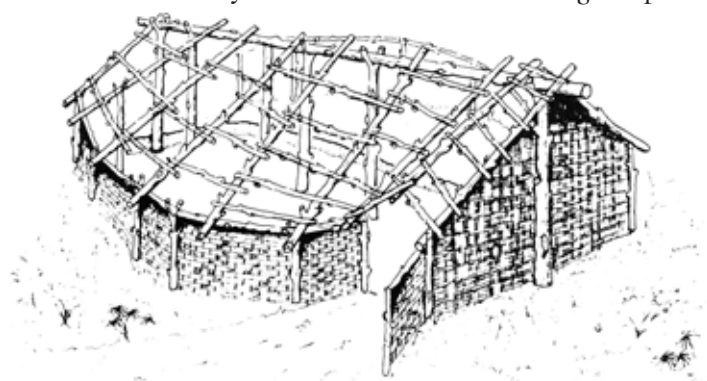
The Manshead Archaeological Society closed its doors in 2020 and passed much of its collection to the History Society. Here is a history of the Manshead taken from the article by Joan Schneider, published in the Bedfordshire Archaeological Journal in 1992 (Volume 20, page 96).

PUDDLEHILL

In September 1951 a skeleton dropped from the quarry face into the Houghton Regis chalk pit. News of this reached the curator of Luton Museum, Mr Charles Freeman, and he invited the Luton Grammar School Archaeological Society to investigate. News, however, had also reached Les Matthews in Dunstable. Unaware of Luton Museum's involvement, he obtained permission from the quarry manager to excavate with his friends. So, through no-one's fault, began a rivalry, and sometimes an unfortunate hostility, between two groups of amateur archaeologists which it took all Mr Freeman's tact to smooth over. Les Matthews' introduction to archaeology had been through the excavations on the Five Knolls during the 1920s, when he was a lad living nearby. The interest then kindled was pursued through the 1930s with the help of fellow Rover Scouts, and finds from their investigation of a Bronze Age site at Totternhoe quarry required identification at the British Museum. Here Les met Mr Christopher Hawkes, a meeting that began a lifelong friendship.

The war interrupted Les's regular observation of the quarries near Dunstable, but he resumed after returning from naval service. So it was that he and his friends were ready to investigate the archaeological site revealed in 1951 at Houghton Regis. There was no doubt of the urgency of rescue action on the site, which became known as 'Puddlehill'. It began with a race against the mechanical digger, working in wintry conditions, and Mr Freeman was anxious lest enthusiasm and haste might be leading to destruction of recoverable evidence. He wrote to Les on the 8th November 1951 stating: 'It needs very careful handling indeed and I am asking the University of London Institute of Archaeology whether they could send down a supervisor to give advice on the work. It will probably involve the Luton Corporation in considerable expenditure, but it seems to me the only way to get a real picture of the happenings on that site.' Les replied on the 9th November 1951: 'I am sure that you are quite correct about the importance of the site at Chalk Hill and I feel that it should be investigated by competent authority and that you have taken the right action... A mechanical navvy is no respecter of prehistory and the method we have adopted has been to remove as much evidence as possible before the whole thing was swallowed up.'

The Puddlehill operation was expected to be over within a few weeks, but in fact co-operation from Mr Cox, the quarry manager, and the number of sites, from Neolithic to Saxon, which were exposed as time went by, meant that archaeological work was almost continuous on Puddlehill for fifteen years. On several occasions during that period



John Bailey's impression of a Saxon building excavated at Puddlehill

Les believed that 'we have virtually finished there now and can begin preparing the final report', but each time something fresh turned up. No London expert was found willing to take over supervision of the site. By March 1952 it was evidently felt that the ad hoc digging group should become an organised society and the inaugural meeting of the 'Manshead Field Archaeology Club' was held. The name of the Manshead Hundred of Bedfordshire was chosen to embrace the intended area of activity: it included Dunstable, Leighton Buzzard and neighbouring districts, but not Luton.

Mr Freeman continued to support both the groups working on Puddlehill. He sent equipment and advice: 'I think it would be a very good idea to keep a complete record of the club's activities in the form of a journal right from the beginning of its foundation. You may be intending to do this but, if not, you will find that such a journal in future years is invaluable from many points of view identifying finds, providing the history of the club, and as something to show interested people from time to time.'

On 7th April 1952 Les sent him the duplicated interim report of the winter's investigations. They covered Early Iron Age, 'Belgic' and Roman features.

Throughout the summer up to a dozen workers were digging at weekends and in the evenings. They had the use of tools etc. lent by Luton Museum and stored at the Cement Company premises, since the club had as yet little property or storage space of its own. A member with a cine camera made a short black and white film, which includes the excavation of a girl's skeleton found lying in an Iron Age ditch. It was several years before the next film, this time in colour, was made. From then until about 1980 excavations, post-excavation work and outings were intermittently filmed, creating a valuable record. Photographs were, of course, always part of the record, but dependent on the presence of a skilled photographer. It was not until the late 60s that Les acquired a good camera and could keep his own site record, and in 1986 the Society itself purchased a camera. The Puddlehill site was partitioned between the Manshead and the group which was now constituted as the South Bedfordshire Archaeological Society.

Since the sections of ditch allotted to each turned out to be part of the same enclosure, it was not surprising that demarcation disputes and disagreements over method sometimes threatened in what John Morris once called 'trench warfare on Puddlehill'. However, at the close of the 1952 season, the South Bedfordshire Society withdrew from the site, leaving the Manshead in sole possession, and Mr Freeman suggested in September 1952 that they should 'carry on independently' of the Museum stating 'that is not to say that I am no longer interested but merely that you will be freer agents.'

WORKERS EDUCATIONAL ASSOCIATION

The excavators felt the need to learn and applied to the Workers Educational Association for a tutor. Mr Jacques at Cambridge took immense trouble to find the right person, consulting several eminent archaeologists. The first Manshead students enrolled in October 1952 for Prehistory with Miss Isobel Smith. The Manshead has had reason to be very grateful to the WEA, the Cambridge Extra-mural Board and their tutors. Prehistory was followed by the Romans and then the Dark Ages, so beginning the association with Dr John Morris, which lasted until John's death in 1977. In the summer of 1954 the Cambridge Extra-mural Board arranged for Dr John Alexander to conduct a training excavation on Puddlehill. Over the years John Morris's courses changed from pure instruction to collaboration in the preparing of a report on the Puddlehill site. Later Dr David Trump helped the Society



Puddlehill 1964: young members excavating Saxon Building 4. Ray Harris is on the left. Sue Turner (nee Day), Les Matthews and Terry White are standing on the raised area

to keep up to date with techniques and thought in archaeology.

In March 1953 a second interim report on Puddlehill appeared. Finds were displayed at a hobbies exhibition in Dunstable in October, attracting much interest and bringing in new members, including Ernie Hawes, who became the secretary of the Society from 1955 until 1968. The Associated Portland Cement Co asked for a similar display to be mounted at their works. Several members, including Les, joined the Nottingham University training excavation at Great Casterton in 1953.

ROMAN VILLA AT TOTTERNHOE

On the 12th September 1954 Les wrote to John Morris saying: 'I think I've found a Roman Villa in the middle of a cornfield at Totternhoe. I visited the site at the invitation of the farmer who told me that his plough hit the flint walls of a Saxon Church and sure enough whacking great flints lie about on the surface. By probing I hit floors at different levels... A borrowed spade and a little rabbiting produced a tiled floor – a mortar spread of yet another and loads of Roman pottery... The site is situated in a lovely setting surrounded by hills and on good grain-producing land... just the place for a wealthy house!

A short season of excavation began, and the first cuts found a concrete floor so close below the surface that in the dry weather it was possible to brush the topsoil away and expose it. Soon after, the remains of hypocausts were uncovered. There was great local interest. Les reported again to John on 21st September: 'I'm afraid the locals have had a Roman holiday on our work – hundreds of people have walked and jumped all over it.'

The brief season left many questions unanswered, and in 1956 a further investigation was made. It was hoped that other seasons could follow, but this has never proved possible.

Also in 1954 the first of a series of popular 'Brains Trusts' was held in collaboration with the South Bedfordshire Preservation Society. Dr Gerald Ashton, who, with Mrs Ashton, had given much support to the Society, was asked to become President, a position he held until 1982. In December the official title of 'The Manshead Archaeological Society of Dunstable' was created.

During 1955 Dr Morris introduced a radio series on 'The Dark Ages'. It took the form of a discussion among experts of different aspects of the topic, with Les Matthews representing the interested layman. The starting point was the finding of the Totternhoe villa.

The new secretary, Ernie Hawes, inaugurated winter lectures, a dinner and dance and a coach outing. The latter started a tradition of being very enjoyable and also losing money.

A SEARCH FOR PREMISES

The Society still had no premises of its own. When Les was asked in 1962 to speak to the British Association for the Advancement of Science on 'The Problems of the Amateur Archaeologist' he recalled 'The amount of material now being discovered began to become embarrassing, and it became a problem where to keep it. The tools

went out of the garden shed, the coal came out of the coal bunker on to the garden, the front room became littered like a Victorian parlour, there were skeletons under the bed, and there were perpetual rows – 'if you don't remove those old bits of bricks, I shall throw them on the fire! It became essential to acquire a headquarters where site drawings and the classification of pottery could be carried out.' Feelers were put out to see if Dunstable Council could provide premises for a museum, including rooms where Society members could work on the finds, and in 1955 the Town Clerk wrote that at present nothing could be done, but that when the Civic Centre was built, room for a museum would be provided at Priory House.

The search for a work room continued, and in December 1956 Dunstable Borough Council offered a condemned property, 22 West Street, at a nominal rent. The Manshead had an HQ at last. It was timber-framed, gaslit and with an open fire. Old crates were collected from the market to build fires of alarming size and ferocity. Few members owned cars, and for the grand removal of 5 years' accumulated finds from the Site Director's house to the new HQ, the rag-and-bone man's horse and cart was hired with members following on foot. Post-excavation work could now be carried on throughout the winter evenings.

A meeting place regularly open to members, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, was very important to the vitality and success of the Society. It meant a thriving social life as well as the opportunity to work on finds and reports. There was space for the ever-expanding library and to store equipment, and members and visitors could see and handle examples of local finds. When No. 22 was to be demolished, in 1963, Dunstable Council, after a period of anxious uncertainty, provided another property, slightly less ancient and quirky. After 1956 six different premises were occupied. The moves were always stressful, with some loss and damage to material almost inevitable. We were therefore very glad to have been undisturbed and unthreatened by demolition since 1973 when rooms at 5 Winfield Street were made available and in May 1993 the Society purchased it, with the help of a generous gift from Dr Ashton and others. Children from local schools visited the premises to learn about archaeology and Dunstable's early history, to see and handle the finds.

A ROMAN SITE AND SAXON CEMETERY

By 1957 the membership numbered 61, and the subscription was doubled, to ten shillings. Some Luton members formed a sub-group, under Terry White. This was to deal with a Roman site revealed by housing development at Gooseberry Hill, and the group ceased its separate existence after excavation there finished. Another housing site, at Marina Drive on the border between Dunstable and Totternhoe, exposed skeletons of a Saxon cemetery in its foundation trenches. The jewellery and other grave goods were deposited in Luton Museum, who contributed £10 towards the cost of the excavation, along with £15 from Luton Corporation.

DAWN CHORUS

Les was as interested in the countryside as he was in archaeology, and in May 1957 he inspired the first of what became a regular, semi-official, Society event: the Dawn Chorus. On this legendary occasion ten members met before daybreak on Totternhoe Knolls to listen to birdsong, and saw a ghost.

BEDFORDSHIRE ARCHAEOLOGICAL COUNCIL

In January 1958 Les proposed approaching other Bedfordshire archaeological societies to discuss forming a county society. This was the first move towards the creation of the Bedfordshire Archaeological Council, but the Manshead had always been fiercely independent and its committee was divided on the idea of this link. It was not until 1959 that the membership (with three opposing) agreed to the proposal. This led to the formation of the BAC. The Society was always conscious of the importance of publication. Puddlehill was on its conscience, but it was impossible to produce a report while the excavation continued.

The Marina Drive cemetery was a different matter: the production of a report, with the assistance of John Morris, became first priority. To issue interim reports on excavations, and to keep members in touch, the first Manshead Magazine (price 9d) was rapidly produced in October 1958 – too rapidly and light-heartedly for its critics. However, the editor, chastened, introduced No. 2 in January 1959, writing ‘we cheer ourselves with the thought that the criticism of the last number is a good healthy sign and means that the Society is very much alive. It also raises the issue of the form that this magazine will take in the future. Is it to be a magazine containing occasional frivolous articles or are we to appeal to a wider public and to produce an archaeological magazine containing only serious studies?’ By 1965 the Magazine had increased its solid content and adopted the title of Manshead Journal. No. 31 appeared in 1991. Because some members found the contents heavy going and regretted the absence of less serious items, a Newsletter, usually appearing twice a year, was instituted in 1966.

During 1959 membership reached 100. The early 1960s saw the end of an era in the Society: the top of Puddlehill, with its concentration of archaeological features, had gone. Winter digging was no longer necessary and members went field walking, or scrub clearing on Totternhoe Knolls. The end of excavation on Puddlehill, often falsely predicted, really seemed in sight at last. Other sites were investigated and rescue excavation switched for a while to Totternhoe quarry and even across the county border to Pitstone. This latter was really rather far from Dunstable to maintain regular digging, but the Manshead returned there when necessary, co-operating with Aylesbury Museum and the Pitstone Local History Society.

Quarrying at Puddlehill switched to the SE face of the pit and interest rose again when Neolithic pits and a Saxon village and cemetery were found. In 1965, however, quarrying ceased, and 15 years of archaeological excavation on Puddlehill ended in 1966. Membership included up to 20 ‘students’, some of them were girls from Queen Eleanor’s School, Dunstable, working for a Duke of Edinburgh’s Award. The average age of members was very young, most of the active adults being in their 20s and 30s. John Morris, describing the Society in 1964 wrote of ‘an unusual archaeological society in Dunstable; unusual because its large membership is mostly made up of weekly wage-earners; very largely of young people who thoroughly enjoy each other’s company’.

ANCIENT DUNSTABLE BOOK

1962 saw the publication of the first Bedfordshire Archaeological Journal, containing reports on the Friary Field. The Society had hoped to produce a cheap, popular booklet on Marina Drive for local consumption. The academic articles in the journal and its price of 35 shillings did not fit this description. An independent publication was therefore planned, to coincide with Dunstable’s charter celebrations in 1963. Its scope was expanded to cover local archaeology from earliest times up to the pagan Saxons. Les wrote the first draft in six weeks, urged on and assisted by Jean Collins, editor of the Magazine since 1960. Ancient Dunstable was published in May 1963. Donations and advertising made a price of 5 shillings possible. It was sold at the Dunstable Pageant, (in which Society members took part), from market stalls, in local shops and by members in person (all Les’s friends and workmates were expected to buy copies) and the first print of 1,500 went within a week. Another 1,500 were printed, finally selling out by 1970.

FRIARY FIELD

A pointer towards things to come was the excavation in 1963 of a well under a Dunstable High Street shop: this contained much Roman, as well as medieval, material, and when redevelopment in Dunstable began in 1964, rescue work showed there could no longer be any doubt that the Roman settlement of Durocobravis had lain near where Watling Street and Icknield Way still cross in Dunstable town centre. The Society had been formed for rescue excavation and by the 1960s had built up a stock of experience and practical expertise. With Puddlehill finished they were therefore faced with the problem of maintaining momentum and keeping their hand in. There was much



Members of the Manshead Archaeological Society in Friary Field in 1965 with Bill Pilkinton, Maxene Miller, Andrew Amos, Molly Pilkinton, Ernie Hawes, Les Matthews, Eric Michell, Richard Pilkinton and Ray Harris

post-excavation work to be done, but without a current excavation general interest might flag and membership fall away. This would not only be a pity for those concerned, but would also mean that if a call came to a threatened site there would be no pool of practised excavators to answer it. Permission was therefore obtained from Mr Bernard Stevens, owner of the Friary Field, to begin excavation there, and in 1965 a new phase of Manshead history began.

Puddlehill veterans shared a language of catch-phrases, nicknames and in-jokes. They look back with strange nostalgia to the bracing bleakness and wide horizons of the hill. Les, in his acknowledgements in the final report, wondered ‘Why on a Sunday morning with an icy wind blowing frozen snow into drifts, could I follow cycle tracks up the hill to be greeted by a young man without coat or gloves who told me that I was 10 minutes late? Why do people do this? Why not stay at home and look at icicles hanging by the wall from the comfort of the fireside? Is it a sense of duty we have to these faceless, nameless people who have gone before us and, by handling their pottery, looking again at the holes they dug, making them live again in memory? Perhaps saying thank you for giving us the chance to hear the larks singing, to watch the plover weaving in the sky, or to glory in the colour of wonderful sunsets and to sit on the hill after a hot summer’s day.’

The pleasures of Friary Field were more genteel: tall trees, lush grass, privacy; a new generation of excavators grew to feel at home there, grateful guests of Mr Stevens for the next 15 years.

DUNSTABLE SWAN JEWEL

The foundations of the domestic buildings of the Dominican Friary were gradually exposed as digging continued. It was, however, within 3 weeks of work commencing a new member, Maxene Miller, made the Society’s most famous find: the ‘Dunstable Swan Jewel’, now celebrated as one of the British Museum’s medieval treasures. A treasure trove inquest followed and a visit from a TV crew. As excavations progressed, Romano-British features succeeded monastic walls, and a specialised team, including Bob Paton, a trained skin diver, was formed to excavate a 28 m deep Roman well. Mysterious cross-shaped pits were discovered, in regular rows. They remain a mystery. When skeletons began to appear, buried on the same alignment, it was thought that the whole might have been some great building incorporating foundation burials. It became apparent, however, that while the skeletons were late Romano-British, the crosses were medieval and presumably linked in some way with the Friary. A road scheme threatened the Friary Field in the early 1970s and the Manshead, feeling their resources were insufficient to carry out a complete excavation in a limited period, invited Dr Ian Stead, with a team from the Department of the Environment, to work there in 1972-3. Manshead diggers did not feel they were welcome in the visiting team, so they instead carried out small excavations elsewhere in 1972, and in 1973 arrangements were made with Dunstable Borough Council for a major excavation on the future SW Quadrant car park. Full-time work was necessary to cover the site in the time available, and for the first time money, provided by the Council, was paid to a member to



The Dunstable Swan Jewel discovered in Friary Field in 1965

act as site supervisor throughout the week and to co-ordinate the volunteers. There were pits, ditches and wells, Roman and medieval, and the most surprising find was the skeleton of a barbary ape buried in a 2nd century pit. It was in 1973 that the Society received an award from Dunstable Rotary Club for their work for the community

BBC CHRONICLE COMPETITION

In the later 1970s (the road scheme having been abandoned) digging resumed on the Friary Field and its Roman cemetery. The Society entered the BBC Chronicle competition for independent archaeologists in 1979. As one of six finalists we were visited by judges and a TV team. House building was now imminent on the Field and excavation was drawing to a close, but fresh cuts had to be made for the cameras to film, and on the appointed Wednesday unprecedented numbers of members appeared; some had not been seen on the site for 10 years. 'It's like finals day at Wimbledon' the TV director said. The entry was unplaced in the Chronicle contest, but was a runner-up in the Legal and General Silver Trowel for enterprise in archaeology (£150). Interesting excavations permanently available in the centre of Dunstable were good for membership, which in 1975 rose to a record 137. Social activities flourished, including barbecues, firework parties, tramps' suppers, even gymkhanas. There were two memorable Open Days, with fetes, held on the Field in 1974 and 1975. Not every fete offers the chance to be photographed beside a skeleton still lying in its 4th century grave. The social events attracted still more members and an uneasy feeling grew that perhaps archaeology was being swamped. At the 1975 AGM the Chairman Ron Fowler (from 1962) warned of a 'dichotomy' developing, and the factions were referring to each other as 'socialites' and 'eggheads'. In 1976 the social activities were curtailed and unity was restored. Though membership declined, interest in archaeology was once more the main reason for joining.

The Puddlehill Report, the culmination of many years' work, was published as Occupation Sites on a Chiltern Ridge by British Archaeological Reports in April 1976, with a section by Professor C Hawkes. Some members broke new ground in 1978-81 with the construction of an 'Iron Age House' at the Chiltern Open Air Museum, based on one excavated at Puddlehill. The Second Age of the Manshead drew to a close when the Friary Field was taken over for house building in 1980.

PROFESSIONAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Local archaeology had changed a great deal in the 1970s. There was now a professional county unit, and the large-scale redevelopment of Dunstable was over. The Manshead was uncertain of its future role. A backlog of material awaited publication (though interim reports had appeared in the Manshead Journal) but this could not occupy everyone. As in 1965 a 'digging society' was looking for a dig, and throughout the 80s a number of sites were investigated prior to building or road development. Between times the Society kept its hand in at Sewell, not far from Puddlehill. Building material ploughed up in a field near Bidwell was investigated in 1984 and revealed an odd late Roman structure with walls supported on wooden piles in the waterlogged clay subsoil. This was Les's last season as Site Director, a position he had filled almost continuously for 33 years. He was now 74 and felt it was time someone younger took over. Dave Warren

therefore became Site Director in 1985. Ron Fowler, Chairman since 1962, also retired, his successor being Dr Vivien Jones. Friends of Les had long felt he deserved some recognition of his services to archaeology and in 1985 he was elected Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries.

LES MATTHEWS DIES

Memories of the Friary Field were revived in 1988 when an adjacent area was redeveloped and members worked with the professionals from Bedford, exposing the foundations of the monastic church. Les Matthews died, after two years of failing health, in February 1989. Without him the Manshead Archaeological Society would never have existed, nor would it have become an effective force without his personality at its head. Though not always tactful, he could nearly always turn away wrath with cheerful charm. His dogmatic statements occasionally caused offence, but he welcomed argument and was prepared to be converted by good evidence. He set out his approach to his workforce in the 1977 Newsletter: 'We all like finding things, even the Site Director, and the only way to encourage new members into the team is to let them feel the thrill of excavating a piece of pottery...Of course long-standing members also like to find things and I will try to see that everyone gets a chance at the more interesting jobs. But I must make it quite clear that there will be no such thing as 'my hole'. We are a team.'

When members gathered at the HQ on a winter evening and Les was not there, they tended to stand about aimlessly, chatting. Within ten minutes of his arrival everyone was happily at work. Andrew Selkirk, in his obituary of Les in the Guardian, wrote: 'He was a dynamic and forceful lecturer and many a somnolent conference has been woken up when Les strode to the lectern. Love him or leave him you certainly couldn't sleep through him.' In a voluntary group someone who can inspire enthusiasm is probably the most important ingredient for success and this, as well as his own knowledge, experience and ability to read a landscape or a section, was what Les provided. Publications in the 80s included the Roman Cemetery, Saxon Puddlehill and short reports in South Midlands Archaeology. Les had hoped to see his report on the Tottemhoe villa published, but failing health and energy prevented him undertaking the necessary revisions. Ancient Dunstable, long out of print, was thoroughly revised to include the work of the years since 1963 and re-published in 1989 in memory of Les.

THE LAST MAJOR EXCAVATION

The last long-term excavation site was an Iron Age hillfort at Billington Hill from 1997 to 2007 and the final journal was published in 2014; No. 47. A change in planning legislation was the main reason for the Society's decline: it was realised that construction works were causing mass destruction of archaeological remains and it was made compulsory for developers to pay for the excavation and recording of any archaeology on development sites. Professional units were formed to do this. 'Heritage' is now well recorded but there is little room left for the amateurs who had previously rescued sites from unrecorded destruction.

This led to a decline in Manshead membership and when the Society could no longer afford the upkeep of 5 Winfield Street it was decided to close in 2020. The HQ has been sold and is currently being redeveloped. The accumulated archaeological finds and records are passing to Luton Museum and the Dunstable and District Local History Society.

Over the years many people and organisations were generous to the Society with their money, time and expertise. There were rows, disappointments, problems, but all in all we look back with pride and pleasure.

Joan Schneider

Greeting New Members



We would like to take this opportunity to welcome the following new members:

Marie Montague

Angela Rabess

Manshead Memories



The Manshead Archaeological Society of Dunstable was a huge influence on my teenage years.

It provided me with many of my friends and taught me a great deal, not just about archaeology, but much more and widening my horizons in a way that influenced the way I developed into adulthood.

It was, I believe, 1963 when, with my parents, I was sauntering through the Dunstable Saturday market. In those days it stretched along the west side of the High Street in the shadow of the town hall. There we came upon a stall where Ancient Dunstable was being sold. We bought a copy, which I still have, and got chatting to the stallholder, a Manshead Society member. I would be very welcome to join, I was told, why not come to Puddlehill and see what was going on?

And that's how it all started. From my home in Sundown Avenue at the southern end of the town I would cycle all the way to Houghton Regis and on up to the dig. It was a long ride, and I seem to recall that the digging took place every Monday, Wednesday and Friday evening as well as Sunday morning. Was it really that often? Probably not, but I seemed to be there whenever I had the opportunity.

Winter was different. Evenings saw everyone meet at 'The House.' This was the Society HQ and a hive of activity. Finds would be sorted; pot sherds would be washed, dried and labelled; artefacts would be drawn; plans would be scrutinised and meetings would be held.

ZANY CHARACTERS

The wonder of archaeology, the uncovering of a Britain that existed hundreds, even thousands of years ago was, of course, a huge appeal, but so too were the people, the Manshead members, all of whom were distinctive and often zany characters. To name a few, there was Ron Fowler, Jim Hutt, Richard 'Pagan' Hagen, 'Slithery' Clive, Ray 'Carbon' Harris, Harry Parry, Terry White, Doc Jones, Bill and Mollie Pilkinton, John 'QJB' Bailey, Ron and Frances, Joan Schneider and, of course, Les Matthews. Amongst the younger members were Susan Day and Sheila Smith who, like me, would cycle to Puddlehill. Then there was Julian Tilling, Pam Maycock, Michael Harding and odd friends of mine who, from time to time I would persuade to come along, as well as the various offspring of older members.

TERRY WHITE

Terry White was the sort of person people refer to as a 'larger than life character.' He was a big man, full of fun and enjoyed a drink. He ran the shop, 'Terry White Music' in Luton. Terry was responsible for a sort of sub-dialect that grew up within the Society with such phrases as 'BST brother' and 'Bumgut', which puzzled many a new arrival, (anyone enquiring what 'BST brother' meant was informed that it meant British Summer Time).

Richard Hagen became a good friend. He was a bit older than me and lived nearby on the Downside estate. He was highly knowledgeable about all things old, everything from fossils to antique maps. We would often go 'fossiling' together in the local chalk quarries and each Saturday morning would walk into town to mooch around the market and have a drink in the Old Sugar Loaf Hotel where, one morning, we found ourselves opposite Tommy Cooper who was drinking whisky. One summer we hitchhiked up to the Isle of Skye. It took a couple of days but we got there, found ourselves at Broadford where we pitched my very small canvas tent (no flysheet or groundsheet) and stayed for several days until we ran out of money. Richard was now engaged to Ann. One phone call was sufficient for her to make the journey to Skye and rescue us.

Another good friend was Jim Hutt. Jim used to be a 'teddy boy' and still looked like one. He worked in a local factory and was married to Sandra who was a very pleasant woman and they lived on Poynters Road. Jim too was interested in rocks and fossils as well as archaeology. Anyone meeting Jim for the first time would label him as a rough and ready working-class lad with limited intellect. The reality was quite different. An interest in gemstones led him to making his own gem faceting and polishing machine accurate to an nth of a degree. He had acquired the specifications from somewhere and used lathes and equipment from the factory where he worked. Jim and I would occasionally go on fossil hunts together and on one occasion went to Derbyshire to look for minerals in old quarries and mine workings. For the purpose of our visit Jim borrowed Ron Fowler's car as well as his tent. We were accompanied by Dave 'the Irishman.' I do not remember too much about the adventure as I got incredibly drunk on the Bacardi that the other two insisted on me drinking.

And this brings me on to Ron Fowler, headteacher of Downside Primary School and Chairman of the Society. To me, Ron was cheerful, friendly and full of fun. He drove a big Rover, the one we borrowed to go to Derbyshire, and I would often see him driving at speed along High Street South. Luckily he had a good relationship with the local police. I remember his mantra, 'Brakes are for braking and bumpers are for bumping.'

RON FOWLER

Ron was married to Dorothy, a lovely lady who died a few years after I joined the Manshead. He eventually remarried, finding happiness with Jackie Milward, one of my contemporaries who was later to become President of the Society.

Bill Pilkinton was the butcher in Markyate and looked a bit like Dean Martin. He was married to Mollie and they had a son, Richard* who was my age and a good mate. There was a period of Sundays when it befell the Manshead to clear hawthorn scrub on Totternhoe Knolls, particularly the site of the Norman castle. The idea was to expose the features – the motte, bailey and ditches. It was great fun and, for two reasons, was very well attended. On each occasion, towards the end of the morning, the Pilkintons would produce a huge package of sausages which they would then cook on the open fires that had been lit to burn the scrub. They tasted good. Then, when the morning came to an end we would descend on the Cross Keys, the ancient public house at the foot of the knolls.

The society's Annual Dinner and Dance was a grand affair. Time has dimmed all my memories of these occasions except one. The dancing consisted entirely of the 'ballroom' genre. Some of women, notably Mollie Pilkinton, would attempt to help me stumble through the waltz or quickstep. I was a hopeless case and succeeded only in scuffing their shoes and crushing their toes. Sadly, with the passing of the years I never improved.

LES MATTHEWS

There was one person who was the very heart of the Manshead, a man who, more than any other, was responsible for its vibrancy, its popularity and success. That was Les Matthews, the society Site Director.

Les held the view that young people should be welcomed and encouraged to take part in the society's activities. He never treated us youngsters any differently from the older members and it was an attitude that was taken up by all the adults without exception. Age was an irrelevancy in the Manshead, everyone was accepted and friendships crossed all boundaries.

Les, true to his title, directed all on-site operations. He was always accompanied by his dog, Patch, a little barrel-shaped terrier. Patch could frequently be seen with a piece of wood in his jaws, sometimes several times his own size. Les and his wife Kath lived at 22 Great Northern Road. When at home he would love to indulge another interest in life, watching westerns on TV! Each Christmas morning he would generously have everybody around to his house for drinks.

SAILOR-FASHION

On one occasion, during the Christmas period, Les and I had decided to take a walk together across the downs. He called for me and my parents invited him in for a drink. Asked what he would like he chose rum. My father poured him a generous helping. Les was an ex-navy man. 'Do you mind if I take it sailor-fashion?' he asked, and promptly swigged it back in one go. I sensed that was a bit of a shock to my parents!

Les, despite working for Vauxhall Motors in Luton, ran a little old van. Sometimes he would decide to make a visit to some site or other beyond our own area and invite me and Joan Schneider to join him. Of course, it was me who had to make do in the rear of the van, perched on a make-do seat with limited outside view.



Andy hanging from the quarry cliff at Maiden Bower. He was inspecting a site believed to be an early henge monument. Ron Fowler is the figure in the foreground. Had health and safety taken the day off?

As well as archaeology and westerns, Les had an interest in ornithology. As such there would be one night each year, around the beginning of May, when he would rise at the crack of dawn to enjoy the dawn chorus of birds. This led to an annual event in the Manshead calendar in which other members would join the ceremony. The venue was Pitstone Hill where we would pitch tents on the preceding evening in readiness for the first light the following morning. Of course, this involved a visit to the pub that evening. I can recall explaining that I wouldn't be joining them for a drink being too young to go to pubs.

But as the months passed my resolve weakened. Visits to pubs were a part of Manshead life whether it was the Cross Keys in Totternhoe or the Star and Garter in Dunstable where members often went after an evening at 'The House' in Union Street. The irony was that the first time a publican asked my age was a good year after I was actually old enough to drink.

Leaving home, going to college, getting married, getting a job – all drew me away from the

Manshead but left me with wonderful memories.

Andy Amos

**Richard Pilkinton gave a talk to the Society in February 2015 about Tring Reservoirs*

Joan Curran



The society was shocked to hear of the death on March 22 of Joan Curran, who had moved to a care home in Somerset only a few days previously.

Joan, aged 93, was a founder member of the society and its first secretary. She had suffered a fall and had been staying throughout the Covid lockdown at a care home in Dunstable. She had moved to Somerset to be near her son and his family.

Joan came to Dunstable in 1961 when her husband, George, was appointed head of engineering and science at the new Dunstable College of Further Education. She used to say that she knew nothing about Dunstable until then, and had to look up its location in an atlas.

They bought a house in Pipers Croft and had two children, David and Hilary. George retired as Vice Principal of the college in 1983 and they planned to move to Tenterden in Kent. But his early death changed that, and Joan decided to stay here where she had made many friends.

WILLIAM RIXSON ANTIQUES SHOP

She was the librarian at Manshead School and had become immersed in local history. A major event was the campaign to save an interesting old building in Church Street from demolition. This was the old William Rixson antiques shop, now the home of the Chez Jerome restaurant.

Joan, together with Vaughan Basham, Barry Horne and John Lunn, raised a fighting fund and uncovered a mass of historic and architectural evidence. This culminated in a local planning inquiry and in 1979 the Government Minister ordered that the building should be preserved.

Joan probably met John Lunn when they were near-neighbours at Pipers Croft. John, then the Priory Church historian, had a little John Bull-style printing press at his house where, in the days before computers



and photo copiers, he produced all manner of booklets. Another local historian was Omer Roucoux, whom Joan may have met at Manshead School where he was a master.

FOUNDING OF THE LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY
Flushed with success, the campaign group decided to keep together and try to create a town museum. That particular initiative evolved into the formation of the Dunstable and District Local History Society in 1991 with Joan as secretary.

STRAW HATS AND BONNETS

She produced whole stream of articles and books about Dunstable's history, based on untold hours of work amidst the documents at the county records office in Bedford, where she served on the user panel

Her book about the Dunstable hat industry, Straw Hats and Bonnets, is only a slim volume, but it is the result of a huge amount of complicated research amongst the deeds of the old buildings and the wills of their owners. She was amazed and flattered to find, a few years ago, that a copy was being auctioned on ebay for many times its original price.

RESEARCHING DUNSTABLE BUILDINGS

In other research she found out that Charlie Coles' old cycle shop in Dunstable was once a disreputable inn, in Jacobean times, called the White Hart, and that the original Saracen's Head in Dunstable stood on the site of what became, in more recent times, the William Hill betting office.

Another of her projects was assembling a collection of photographs of Totternhoe together with detailed captions. This, before Covid, was going to be used for a Powerpoint talk to the history society last January. Her Totternhoe researches led her to write another very detailed book, about the history of Totternhoe quarries, the stone from which

continued overleaf

was used to build many local churches and other buildings. Joan even discovered that Woburn Abbey had stored away a consignment of the stone, to use whenever that building needed renovation.

Among her other books were a history of Priory House in Dunstable and the story of the town's whiting works. She produced numerous well-documented articles for the history society's newsletters, including research into Middle Row, the Old Palace Lodge and the Red Lion hotel, and she wrote a large section of the Medieval Dunstable book.

RESEARCH ROOM

Joan was involved in setting up the history society's research room, originally at Dunstable's Priory House, where her skills as a chartered librarian were invaluable. The room became very much her domain, and woe betide anyone who didn't put books back in the right place.

She went there every week and the room became a busy base where she and Rita Swift produced a series of displays for town events, the most recent being the exhibition about Worthington G Smith. At first these were assembled using scissors and glue but then she discovered that one of our members, David Turner, was an expert on computer printing and design. She persuaded him to spend his spare time on making our exhibition displays much more professional.

Joan was born in Folkestone and was evacuated to Merthyr Tydfil during the war. In later life she became head librarian at Loughborough College where she met George, who had been a chief petty officer in the Fleet Air Arm during the war and had seen action on the Arctic convoys and in the naval battle of Taranto, Italy.

She was an active member of the congregation at the Priory Church, Dunstable, and at St Giles in Totternhoe, where she and her husband lived from about 1970.

She had been an active member of the Bedfordshire Historical Record Society and the Bedfordshire Local History Association.

Joan's ashes have been buried next to her husband's grave at Totternhoe Church, where a service was held on April 8. Among the congregation was the Mayor of Dunstable, Cllr Peter Hollick.

John Buckledee

Sad Farewell

We are very sorry to announce the sad loss of
Joan Curran **David Janes**



Memories of old Dunstable

An anecdote about Dunstable's history emerged as the result of a query to the society from former Dunstable man Patrick Woulfe, now working as an English teacher in Hamburg, Germany.

Patrick's father, Richard 'Dick' Woulfe, was a painter and decorator who was born on the family farm in SW Ireland and came to live in Dunstable in 1939.



Richard 'Dick' Woulfe

GREY HOUSE

One of his most interesting jobs was to repaint the exterior of the Grey House in High Street South. The owner wanted something different, and Dick was asked to create a façade of 3D images of stonework. He was very proud of the result which remained a landmark in Dunstable for many years.

The building, originally a hat factory and then the home (from 1923) of historian Thomas Bagshawe, became a hotel in 1952. Since then it has been Spencer's restaurant, the Blue Rock Cafe and the Four Kings. Today it has been converted into apartments.



The Grey House in High Street South

TEMPERANCE HALL

We were asked to pinpoint the location of Dunstable's old Temperance Hall, which is mentioned frequently in old newspaper reports but which never give the exact address.

So, for future reference, let's record that the hall, built in 1841, stood in West Street, Dunstable, on the corner of Victoria Street, on the town centre side.

It was sold in 1874 when it was described as having an imposing frontage of 40 feet, with a depth and side front in Victoria Street, of 70 feet. The building is now part of a solicitors' office.

The hall was the venue for numerous meetings and concerts, including an event where a party of escaped slaves was given a warm welcome to the town.

The hall is not to be confused with the Temperance Hotel, a later building, which was also in West Street, on the site of what was later to become the Blockbuster Video store (now the Kopernik supermarket).

There was also a temperance hotel in High Street North, a few doors away from the Old Sugar Loaf.

PLAGUE

A Covid crisis? There's nothing new. Old Dunstable documents make it clear that travellers down the Watling Street often introduced 'the plague' to the town. For instance, in 1593, 'Edavard Haile, of London, out of the house of Joan Field, widow', died of the plague. There followed a long list of Dunstable inhabitants who were further victims of the pestilence including, in October, a drover confined to 'the Cage' (i.e. the town lockup). In all, 251 deaths from the plague were recorded over the next 73 years.

PALACE LODGE POND

John Chernowski, a fount of knowledge about the Kingsway area, helped us with some research into the area behind the Old Palace Lodge. There was once a pond there, now dried up, and a hut used as a base by ARP wardens during the war. It was left vacant afterwards and John remembers playing around it and climbing on its roof when he was a youngster.

John Buckledee