

BACS

Newsletter January 2004 No. 42

Benenden Amenity and Countryside Society

Dates for your Diary:

16th AGM – Wednesday 11th February, at 7.30pm.
Clean-Up Day – Saturday 27th March, from 9am.
Spring Walk – Sunday 23rd May, at 2pm

Broadband in Benenden:

Members may have read and heard a great deal about Broadband in recent months, but what is Broadband and why do we want it in Benenden? Broadband is the common term for a high bandwidth internet connection, and it enables people to access the internet over 10 times faster than is possible with a standard phone and modem. It also enables people to access the internet without blocking the telephone line. This means that for a monthly fee of about £15, you can gain an internet connection with no associated call charges despite the connection always being on.

In an increasing number of areas, BT offers a Broadband service on existing BT telephone lines, which works by separating the voice and data signals. This is called ADSL Broadband and it could become available here in Benenden, if enough people demand it. No cables need to be laid under the road and no telegraph pole needs to be upgraded. All BT need to do is upgrade the local telephone exchange, which due to its expense, will only be done if enough people register an interest in the service.

According to the BT website, the 'trigger level' for Broadband to be enabled at the Benenden exchange is 400. At the time of going to print, the 'pre-order level', on the same website, was 134. If you go to www.bt.com, and then click on broadband, you can view the latest pre-order level yourself. You can also register an interest, and bring that pre-order level closer to 400, by completing a small on-line form. Broadband campaigns are also being organised in local towns and villages by Weald Broadband. Their site may also be of interest, and can be found at www.wealdbroadband.co.uk.

AGM:

This year's BACS AGM will be held in Benenden Village Hall at 7.30pm on Wednesday, 11 February. Following the formal part of the meeting, Paul Donovan, Chairman of Cranbrook Historical Society, will give us a short talk titled "Parish Boundaries in the 1830's". Refreshments, including mulled wine, will be served at the end of the meeting. All are welcome, whether members or not.

Spring Clean-Up Day:

Everyone is invited to help out in the Spring Clean Up Benenden Day, which will be held on Saturday 27th March. We shall be helping the Parish Council to clean up the major roads within the parish, as well as the Village Green and Glebe Field. Volunteers should meet outside the Village Hall at 9.00am. Rubbish sacks will be provided, but volunteers may wish to bring their own gloves.

Spring Walk:

This year's Spring walk will start and finish at Pypne Manor and will be hosted by Miss Pat Thoburn on Sunday 23rd May. It will commence at 2pm and should take about 2 hours. Following the completion of the walk, tea will be served from around 4pm to 4.30pm. It is possible to attend for just the tea and to appreciate the garden. Everyone is welcome to attend.

Subscriptions:

Membership is currently £2 for an individual and £5 for a family. Subscriptions are now due for 2004, and David Grief will be contacting you shortly with a renewal form. If you know of anyone who may like to join BACS, you can contact David Grief, who will ensure a form is sent. Members receive a quarterly newsletter, which contains details of events being organised by BACS, and items of local interest from around the parish.

Your committee:

Full details of your committee are printed below. If you have any questions regarding subscriptions, please contact David Grief. If you have questions or concerns regarding planning matters, please contact Ernie Pollard. If you would like to comment on the newsletter, contribute an article, or if you would like to receive it by email, your contact is William Davies. For any other questions about BACS, please contact the Chairman, Alan Milne.

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Village Historic Trails

Attached is the last in the series of Benenden Walks, which was much the most difficult for Ernie Pollard to write. He felt he could not complete a set of walks without including the village centre. Ernie admits that there may be many members who know the route and the buildings particularly well, and would therefore in particular this time welcome any comments and criticisms.

All of the Benenden Trails will soon become available in a small booklet, and the first four can now be viewed on the internet, through the High Weald web-site at www.highweald.org. If you can't find the correct page, below is the exact URL, which you can type into the address bar on your internet browser.

http://www.highweald.org/about/visitor/walks_details.asp?routeID=91

Trail 8. Village centre.

To complete the walks in Benenden, we take a stroll around the village centre. The whole of this walk is within the den of Benenden, which once belonged to Bilsington Manor on the edge of Romney Marsh. By Domesday the den was an independent manor, Benenden Manor, one of only five early manors recorded in the Weald.

Start at the crossroads (Grid Reference 806330). The Old Manor House is on the north west angle beyond the Queen's Well. The crossroads were once to the west of the Manor House, but were moved when the north-south turnpike road, created initially in the 1770s, was re-routed and straightened in the early 1800s. The road west to Rolvenden was a branch of the turnpike road and the increased traffic must have greatly contributed, to the development of the village centre along The Street. The roads were gated and tolls collected as late as 1870.

Walk east towards the village centre on the north side of the road. On the left is St George's Club, built by Lord Cranbrook of Hemsted House in 1881 as a Working Man's Institute. Its position, commanding the crossroads, led to its use by the Home Guard in 1940 when invasion was expected daily. The upper floor was protected from gunfire by sand bags, causing concern in the parish council who thought the floor would collapse. The fine copper beeches may be as old as the building.

St George' Club is one of a number of buildings in the centre of the village designed by George Devey; the next house, 1 Laurel Cottages, is another – added to older cottages. His distinctive style, known as Kentish Vernacular, harks back to older wealden buildings.

Shops and services along The Street have changed with needs, Blacksmith, cobbler, garage, bank, butcher (a long survivor), draper, chapel, sweet shop and others have come and gone, but unlike many villages, shops along The Street survive and flourish.

William Cobbett walked down New Pond Road and along the Street on Sunday 31st August 1823, assessing the state of the country as he went. Amongst his many dislikes were Methodist parsons and he was dismayed to hear one "bawling" in a house on The Street. On reaching the stocks on The Green he wrote, "I never see any feet peeping through the holes, anywhere, though I find Methodist parsons everywhere". It is said that discontented workers removed the stocks when the church was restored in the 1860s.

Cleveland cottage has "mathematical" hanging tiles, mimicking brickwork. It was presumably built by the owners of the 17th century house Clevelands, facing The Green. Clevelands had the earlier name of Green Lodge and was the home of two Sarah Clevelands, mother and unmarried daughter, in the 1800s. The elder Sarah was the daughter of William Ward, an energetic but disorganised steward of the Hemsted and Hole Park estates, who ran into financial trouble and fled to France at the age of 79. He lived in France until he died 15 years later. His story is told in the book *Benenden Letters*.

On the edge of The Green the new village sign commemorates the Benenden cricketers, Richard Mills and Edward Gower Wenman. Both played for Kent when they beat an all-England side in 1842. Cricket has been played on the green since the late 18thC.

The Green was common land of Benenden Manor. Several houses along the northern side of The Street were encroachments on The Green, which then, around 1800, lay on both sides of the road. The gardens of Clevelands and other older houses were also encroachments. Much earlier, when The Street was a drove road, we can envisage the drovers and their pigs arriving in the den of Benenden in the autumn and spreading out over the common land on both sides of the road. The grassland would have been rough, perhaps with scrub, nothing like the smooth sward of the cricket outfield.

Soon on the left is Chestnut House, once a post office, with attractive cast iron columns. Similar columns can be seen, mostly on commercial premises, in several local towns and villages (and at C&M hairdresser's, earlier in the walk), perhaps most, like these at Chestnut House, are mid 19thC.

The Gibbon School, built in 1609, has a bold inscription under the eaves telling us that its founder was Edmund Gibbon. The Gibbons were wealthy clothiers and their lands included Hole Park in Rolvenden and Pump Farm (Pympne Manor) in Benenden. Edmund left £100 in his will to found the school and a later Edmund Gibbon left Beacon Hall Farm (then School Land) to endow it. Baldwin's stores next door, is a medieval house, the oldest of those around the Green.

Newman (in Pevsner's *Buildings of England*) calls the war memorial "pompous"; how could he! The seated female figure, perhaps Peace, perhaps Motherhood, is simple and graceful, a welcome change from memorials with overtly military themes. The civilian deaths caused by flying bombs are recorded on the war memorial, reminding us again that Kent was in the front line during the last war.

Cross the road, back past the Bull and along the edge of The Green towards the church. The Bull is on the first map of Benenden in 1599. It has been the venue for many public meetings, such as the parish vestry and the turnpike trust. Memorably, a shot was fired at the Overseer of the Poor at a meeting in the Bull in 1830 (it missed - he bent his head at the critical moment, like de Gaul in *The Day of the Jackal*). Later in that year, militia were called from Cranbrook to suppress riots here. A meeting of farmers at the Bull had been disrupted and higher wages demanded. Again, we can imagine the scene - farmers, workers and soldiers milling about; tempers short, arrests made and the Riot Act read.

Edward Hasted, the great historian of Kent, writing in the 1790s, mentioned the fair for horses and cattle on The Green on its traditional date 15th May. The fair continued into the 1970s, but in the last years was moved to the recreation ground because of damage to The Green. The Green remained the possession of Benenden Manor until 1928, when the third Lord Cranbrook gave it to the village, long after the family had left Benenden.

The Old Livery House was the stables for the Bull, which also had land (The Recreation Ground) where coach-horses could be turned out. Continue past the Vicarage Coach House and the Old Vicarage, with the glebe field behind. There has been a vicarage here since at least the 16th century, but the present building is early 19th century, with the front designed for a wealthy vicar by George Devey.

The church was originally the church of Benenden Manor, later becoming the parish church; the wealden parishes were not defined at Domesday. "Moat Field" on a map of 1777, south of the church, may mark the site of a moated manor house, predecessor of the Old Manor House and more central to the lands of the manor. The site of the moat has not been located.

The first stone church was probably Norman, replacing a wooden Saxon church. Since the comprehensive church guide was written, a Victorian manuscript has been found describing the discovery in 1893 of a "grand" Norman arch, between the nave and tower, part of a Norman Tower of around 1150, long gone. There is a certainly a rounded arch there, concealed under plaster.

The most dramatic event in the history of St George's was the fire of 1672, which destroyed the detached timber steeple just to the north-west of the church. The steeple was some 130 feet high, visible from the channel and "reputed for beauty the second in the realm". The fire severely damaged the church and destroyed nearby houses and shops. The rebuilt church interior was in the neo-classical style of Wren's London churches, but this too has gone and today's interior is largely the creation of Lord Cranbrook and his architect David Brandon in 1861-2.

Several owners of Hemsted are buried in the church, but the most notable family, the Guldefords, are represented only by the grave of Edward Guldeford (behind the organ). He was the last of the family to die at Hemsted, in 1678; earlier Guldeford tombs may have been destroyed by the fire. Admiral Norris, the first John Norris of Hemsted has a fine memorial but Kitty Fisher, famed courtesan and wife of the third and last John Norris, is buried here but has no memorial.

In the north-west corner of the nave are recent additions to the treasures of the village, celebrating the year 2000. On the wall is a tapestry of local scenes, embroidered by villagers; nearby is a book in which villagers write about their homes and lives at the millennium.

The churchyard is a wonderful place in which to wander, with lichen-covered gravestones and wildflowers. A 19th century vicar Francis Haslewood, recorded the inscriptions on the graves, so we know even those that time has now eroded. Buried here are Wenman (the cricketer) and Lansdell (the Overseer who escaped assassination). Richard Grant, junior and senior, are in adjoining graves, each with shields bearing three cockerels. Both were mercers and lived at "Grants" Hill. On the church wall, at the south-east corner, is a tablet recording the vault of the Gibbon, Plummer, Stileman and Cleveland families, relatives of William Ward of Green Lodge (Clevelands). His wife and mother are buried here, but William himself, as we have heard, died in self-imposed exile in France.

Some houses near the church survived the fire or were rebuilt. They were cleared away, by Thomas Law Hodges of Hemsted, in the early 1800s, to create an open prospect of the church. Their removal further concentrated the village centre along The Street.

Walk back to The Street on the west side of The Green. George Devey designed part of Church Cottages, the primary school, perhaps the earliest and finest of his village commissions. in 1861, and Ashlawn. Collingwood Grange, was named after Collingwood Ingram, gardener and ornithologist. Many of his rare trees and shrubs still adorn the garden.

The large Victorian house Ashlawn, which was once even larger a service wing has been demolished, is now converted to flats. It is another George Devey house in the Kentish Vernacular style, this one built for the Neve family. Richard Neve lived at Pullington House and was Steward to the Hemsted Estate; his daughters lived at Ashlawn.

Continue past the Memorial Hall. We have seen Lord Cranbrook's contributions to the centre of the village in Victorian times. The Memorial Hall was built in memory of him, by his relatives and the people of the village after his death in 1906 at the age of 92. The cupola is new, a replacement made to mark the millennium.

Turn left along The Street and back to the crossroads. The 1777 map shows a wide road flanked by fields, with only the King William evident, then a farmhouse. Barracks Row and Laurel House, for example, had yet to be built; perhaps one of them housing the chapel of the bawling parson heard by Cobbett.