

February 2025

Hi All,

Despite the cold miserable day, we had a very good turnout for our first meeting of 2025 on Monday 10th February. We had 43 members and 7 visitors, and so a total of 50, and we had an excellent presentation by Richard Churchley.

We do have a problem with parking at the Oasis Christian Centre, which has very limited parking, as we should only park there for our meetings from 1pm to 4pm and we have only three designated parking places.

On the remaining pages of the Newsletter, we have:

Page two is the 'Coming Events' section.

Our next Meeting will be on Monday 10th March 2025 and is presentation by Peter Borg-Bartolo entitled 'The Lunar Society'.

Forge Mill Needle Museum has now reopened with a full range of exhibitions and events and I have given a general overview. I plan to do the same for Redditch Local History Museum next month, which has had a major update over the winter months.

Pages three and four is a report on our February meeting event 'Merrie England's Folklore Calendar: Through the Year in Custom and Song. A Presentation by Richard Churchley

Pages five, six, and seven. We have a communication from an early Redditch (Headless Cross) resident William Purser, who would like to share his stories with other residents. He has written an early memory of growing up in the area and I thoroughly enjoyed reading it. I hope that you will to and I am hoping that he will give us some more of his memories.

Page eight. Has a preview of the Heritage Open Day at Forge Mill Needle Museum on Sunday 21st September 2025 and a mention of our 2025 leaflet.

Next Meeting.

Monday 10th March 2025 and is detailed on page 2.

The meeting will be, as always, at the Oasis Christian Centre starting at 2.00 pm.

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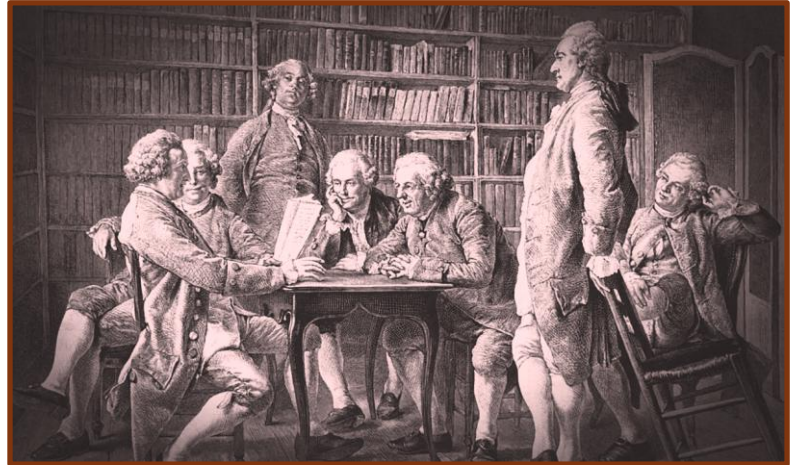
Coming up

Our next Meeting is on Monday 10th March 2025
and is presentation by Peter Borg-Bartolo entitled 'The Lunar Society'

The Lunar Society of Birmingham, active from 1765 to 1813, was a group of prominent industrialists, scientists, and thinkers in England.

They met monthly, often on full moon nights, to discuss scientific and technological advancements that significantly contributed to the Industrial Revolution.

The Society included prominent figures like Matthew Boulton, James Watt, Erasmus Darwin, Josiah Wedgwood, Joseph Priestley, and William Withering. This should be a fascinating talk for anyone interested in our industrial heritage.



The Forge Mill Needle Museum in Redditch, Worcestershire, delves into the town's history as a major needle-making hub during the Victorian era. Opened by Queen Elizabeth II in 1983, the museum showcases original water-powered machinery and intricate needle-making exhibits. Visitors can explore the ruins of Bordesley Abbey, which date back to medieval times, providing a fascinating glimpse into the area's monastic history. The museum highlights the craftsmanship and innovation that defined Redditch's industrial heritage, offering a unique and insightful experience into the lives of the workers who played a pivotal role in this important industry.

<https://www.forgemill.org.uk/web/>

Merrie England's Folklore Calendar: Through the Year in Custom and Song. A Presentation by Richard Churchley

For our February meeting, historian and musician Dr. Richard Churchley presented "Merrie England's Folklore Calendar: A Year in Custom and Song".

Richard – who kindly stepped into this slot at short notice when our original speaker had to withdraw – took his audience through the year discussing the cycle of traditional seasonal customs, familiar and unfamiliar (and often very odd!) accompanied by relevant folksongs and tunes. Folkloric history and songs vary by location due to their oral origins. Over time, it is the history of the behaviour and beliefs of ordinary people that is constantly fascinating and unexpected.

Ricard spoke for about an hour with no visuals, just him and his accordion, and in this brief report I can only cover a fraction of the fascinating story.

He began with folk plays performed by troupes of amateur actors, traditionally all male, known as mummers or guisers. These plays usually depict characters in combat, with the defeated character being revived by a doctor character. They usually performed seasonally, especially around holidays like Christmas, Easter, and Plough Monday. Since the purpose of the actors was to make a collection for themselves, they were heavily disguised, sometimes with black faces, so their neighbours would not recognise them.

Richard included songs throughout the presentation which the audience could join in, the chorus was usually quite simple!

An example was the 'Pace Egging Song' which goes:

First Verse: Here's one, two, three Jolly Lads, all in one mind.

We have come a Pace Egging, and we hope you'll prove kind.

And we hope you'll prove kind, with your eggs and strong beer,

And we'll come no more nigh you until the next year.

Chorus (after each verse): Fol-a-day, Fol-a-day, Fol-a-day-roo-die-day.

Moving on from Mummers to the Maypole Dance which takes place on May 1st. Richard discussed how complicated the dance round the pole was to obtain the interlacing. Poles could be erected for the occasion or be permanent. There are a number of towns/villages in England who claim to have the tallest permanent maypole!



Top: Richard with his 'Mummers doctor's hat' and accordion

Middle/Bottom. Modern Mummers events.



Merrie England: page 2

Another 'join in' song which we had with Richard singing and on the accordion was 'John Barleycorn,' which goes:

First Verse: John Barleycorn is an hero bold as any in the land,
For ages good his fame has stood and will for ages stand.

The whole wide world respect him no matter friend or foe,

And where they be that makes too free he's sure to lay them low.

Chorus (after each verse): Hey, John Barleycorn, ho,
John Barleycorn,
Old and young thy praise have sung, John Barleycorn.

Morris dancing is a form of English folk dance. It is based on rhythmic stepping and the execution of choreographed figures by a group of dancers in costume, usually wearing bell pads on their shins, their shoes or both. A band or single musician, also costumed, will accompany them. Dancers may use sticks, swords, handkerchiefs, and other implements.

As with most folk traditions of the time the performers were disguised as they were collecting for themselves and did not want to be recognised. Morris dancing first appeared in England in the 15th century. Its earliest surviving mention dates to 1448 and records the payment of seven shillings to Morris dancers by the Goldsmiths' Company in London

Top: Dancing around the maypole

Middle : An example of Morris dancing as performed today.

Bottom: Wassailing in the snow. (plenty of rough cider required!)

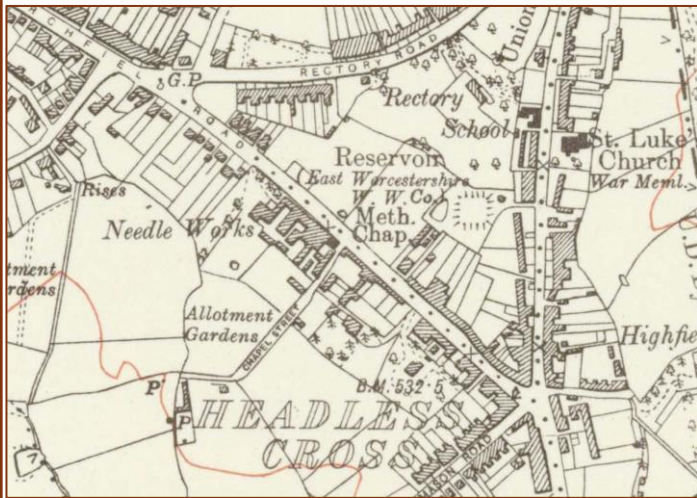


The tradition of wassailing falls into two distinct categories: the house-visiting wassail and the orchard-visiting wassail. The house-visiting wassail, which traditionally occurs on Twelfth Night (January 5), is the practice of people going door-to-door, singing and offering a drink from the wassail bowl in exchange for gifts. The orchard-visiting wassail refers to the custom of visiting orchards in cider-producing regions of England and singing to the trees to promote a good harvest for the coming year. This is the one which is most common today as, basically, it is an excuse to drink copious amounts of rough (scrumpy) cider.

As I mentioned at the onset, Richard spoke for about an hour and gave a very wide range ranging discourse on the different folk traditions throughout England. He added to this with songs and Morris tunes using his accordion and I can only give a very brief overview of the meeting. Needless to say, the presentation was much appreciated by the audience who showed their satisfaction in the usual way. Richard stopped on for the refreshment break so he could chat with members and visitors.

Communication from William Purser

Resident of Headless Cross/Redditch until 1960



I was contacted by William some time before Christmas, and it was nice to have a communication from an early resident of the area. William, as you see from his communication below, would like to share his thoughts with members who may remember the period. I suggested to William that the best way to interest people would be to write of his own experiences and take it from there. William, and I, are of the same vintage, but, sadly, I have no experience of Headless Cross at that time. However, I am sure that there are members who do.

Map above shows the area described by William in 1930 (I cannot find any images of the Rookery)

Below, I reproduce his first two e-mails, and on pages 6 and 7, his amusing story of growing up at the Rookery during wartime. Interestingly, he has written his memories (pages 6/7) in the 'third person'.

I left the town in 1960, aged eighteen, & have never returned except for a few day trips. I was born in the Rookery, Birchfield Road, Headless Cross & went to St Luke's school until 11.

I have very fond memories of the town as it was before the developers arrived...The Rookery has long gone of course but I am hoping to add to my memories of it and my maternal g/mother whose house it was. Her married name was Hartwell.

Do you think you might have a member or two, of a similar vintage, who might be willing to share a few thoughts with me, and write a few words for your newsletter? I now live in the north of Scotland so I am not able to attend any of the meetings, but I will happily become a member.

I have what I hope are sharp memories of pre-1960 Redditch; as a small boy living in the Rookery with my mother until late '46 when my father came home, of people & shops in Headless X, & then the Mayfields until I left home in '60.

The recent talk on Redditch railways - I travelled to school in Bham every day for 7 years on the train. I kept my connection with the town by being in the Air Training Corps between '56 and '60; we met twice a week, occasionally on Sundays - all to be fitted in with massive amounts of very compulsory homework. (My ambition then was to be a fighter pilot...)

My mother's family was extensive and all except two of the twelve siblings lived in the town.

I can vividly recall sitting in the off sales at the Royal aged about seventeen and the bartender telling me I must be related to Billy Hartwell, my maternal g/father, who had been a regular in his time.

A cousin of my father's was GP in the town all his working life - I remember his father, gassed at Ypres who told me stories of the Great War. And so on...

The Rookery at Wartime

Mrs. Harman lived on Chapel Street; she kept a pig in her backyard. Each day the boy carried his small bucket of swill along the back drive and around the corner to the pigsty and watched the pig slurp it up from the trough.

The pig grew until it was not able to turn around and the boy wondered what would happen next.

Then one day he was told not to visit the pig but to help his grandfather in the walled kitchen garden.

Since this was as much fun as visiting the pig, the boy spent a happy hour with his grandfather poking around in the mysterious semi-darkness of the disused coal-heated houses.

They extended along one wall of the garden and once produced grapes, peaches, and perhaps even pineapples.

The boy had of course only seen such things in his picture books.

This was the Rookery, where the boy was born and spent the first few years of his life.

It was an ugly heap of a house set in large gardens which included a tennis court, a bowling green and lots of "walks" through avenues of trees.

They were all places where a small boy could easily find himself marooned on a desert island or having to hack through a dense forest or even trek to the Pole, whatever that might be. The house was set back from Birchfield Road in Headless Cross, behind Heath's Springs factory, both long since demolished.

It occurred to the boy years later that he and his grandfather were the only men in the house.

There was a "warron" which meant not a lot to the boy. (There was a war on – warron!)

He was the only child around, so he was either fussed over or told to "clear off" by the many women who lived under his roof.

Most of them worked down in the town in places like High Duty Alloys, where the hammer sent Redditch folk to sleep every night, BSA or Royal Enfield where work never stopped.

This meant that cooking in the two Rookery kitchens never seemed to stop either. The boy was used to wandering around while women stood at a variety of gas cookers. The smell of hot fat and gas stayed with him for life. Often there were rows, sometimes brief fights broke out and he learned to make himself scarce when one was brewing.

Another lifetime memory is that of a dinner of meat and two veg, minus plate, sticking to a wall for days. He could hide in the back scullery, home of two large copper boilers. Small coal fires beneath them heated water for washing and for cooking the pig swill.

The Rookery at Wartime page 2

He loved the sounds of the water coming to the boil; he also learned to be elsewhere when they had to be emptied.

A few wide steps down from the back door led to the rear yard, wide enough for the milk float to be turned and reversed to the steps.

The milkman poured milk from his churns into a variety of jugs with a long-handled ladle which was stored inside one of the churns.

While this was going on his grandmother would be feeding the horse with bits of stale cake, a carrot or whatever she could find.

The Rookery front door was hidden inside a stained glass covered porch which held a large pot for umbrellas.

The pot reminded the boy of a picture in one of his books: a row of them hid Ali Baba and his forty thieves.

The door was reached from Birchfield Road along a curved drive bordered with huge old rhododendrons.

A tall Monkey Puzzle tree grew in the island of grass which fronted the house. This tree made the boy cross every day he saw it - he could not climb it and why did it have such a silly name.

He was told that even monkeys could not puzzle out how to climb it, but the boy knew there were no monkeys anywhere in the garden so why plant the tree?

The large gardens had been left to the weeds except for the small area managed by his grandfather, who did his bit to dig for victory.

In one corner the boy had his own apple tree, a variety then unknown beyond this small corner of Worcestershire.

The tree was not much taller than the boy; it grew apples no bigger than a duck's egg which could be eaten whole except for the woody stalk.

A Doddin apple, pale green, thin skinned with soft flesh which had a sharp, tasty tang to it.

The boy now has several Doddin trees imported from Worcestershire and growing happily in his garden in the north of Scotland.

A day came when the boy was told he could take his bucket to the pig again. When he arrived, the pig was there but not where he expected it to be.

Now it was hanging upside down from the big iron hook which was stuck out from the house wall.

A closer look proved that it had really been slit down in the middle and it no longer had any insides.

From the pigsty came squeals from two small piglets who had smelled lunch in the boy's bucket.

So that was another good day.

Heritage Open Day 2025

FORGE MILL NEEDLE MUSEUM SUNDAY 21ST SEPTEMBER HERITAGE DAY 2025



Heritage Open Days is England's largest community led festival of history and culture, involving thousands of local volunteers and organisations.

Heritage Open Days 2025 runs from: 12th – 21st September and we have chosen the last day of the festival Sunday 21st September for our open day at Forge Mill Needle Museum.

The event will run from 11.00 am to 4.00 pm.



Redditch History Society 2025 Season
16 years promoting history in Redditch

The Redditch History Society is a local community group, formed in 2009, which aims to provide a range of monthly history presentations, both local and more general, to promote the history of our town, both within the area and more widely, and to encourage members to investigate, document and promote the history of Redditch and the surrounding area.

We have ten Monthly Meetings throughout the year from February to December (we have no meeting in August). Nine of the meetings have the same format with a speaker for the first hour followed by tea/coffee and biscuits (a small charge applies). The April meeting is our Annual General Meeting and includes a history film.

We meet at the Oasis Christian Centre in Redditch on the second Monday of the month (except for changes due to national celebrations etc).

The society publishes an eight-page monthly Newsletter. The newsletter has updates, a meeting report, including the latest presentation, activities, news, information on the next meeting, and short articles written by members and supporters.

It is available via our website at: www.redditchhistorysociety.org.uk/newsletter

We will continue to produce an eight-page edition if we have sufficient material.

The society also supports and encourages members to:

- Create presentations/talks concerning their interests and we are very pleased for members to give their talks at our meetings.
- Produce articles/books on local history and we can publish short articles in our Newsletter.
- Carry out research into our local and regional history.

Of course, we are happy to have members who simply wish to attend our monthly talks. This is most of our members and we are grateful for their support.

For further details of the Redditch History Society visit www.redditchhistorysociety.org.uk
E-mail: secretary@redditchhistorysociety.org.uk or telephone the secretary at 01527 61434

10 - presentation, - charge, which is refundable - same day - our Facebook page, or monthly - at www.redditchhistorysociety.org.uk or telephone the secretary at 01527 61434

Our Leaflet for 2025

The Redditch History Society has now been in existence for sixteen years and, despite a few headwinds along the way, we continue to thrive with a good membership.

We have achieved this with an active Executive Committee, a wide ranging series of talks, a supportive membership and an excellent venue.

We have now issued our 2025 leaflet which is available at our meetings, at the Palace Theatre, Redditch Library, Redditch Local History Museum and Forge Mill Needle Museum. It is also available for download on our website at

https://www.redditchhistorysociety.org.uk/documents/rhs_leaflet_2025.pdf

We have a monthly newsletter (which you are reading!) issued 10 times per year to correspond to our 10 meetings.

Our website extends to well beyond Redditch and has more than 600 visitors a month.