

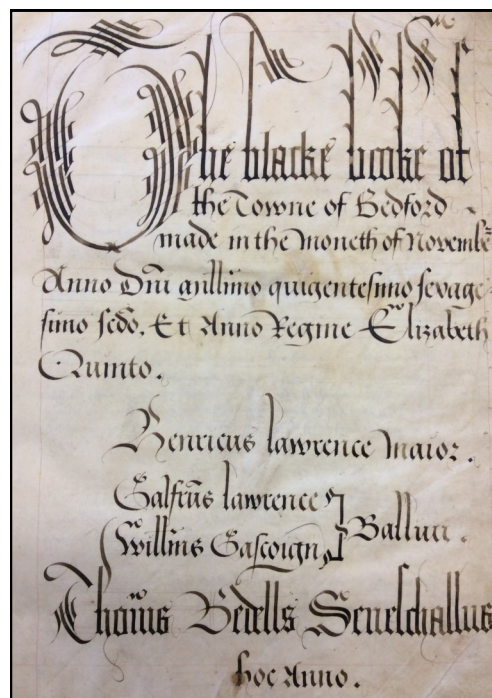
### THE UNSUNG RECORDS OF BEDFORD BOROUGH

The final lobby exhibition for 2016 marks the 850<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bedford's Royal Charter by showcasing items representing town officialdom and status. The exhibition is a rare opportunity to see one of the oldest documents held by the archives and the earliest surviving record of Bedford Borough; the Royal Charter of 1166 granted by Henry II [ref: BorBA1/1]. However, the exhibition also showcases the second oldest charter in our collection, which was granted by Henry III to the burgesses of Bedford (prominent townsmen and merchants) in 1227. This charter is replete with a beautiful Great Seal [right]. The second Borough charter is much more explicit than its earlier predecessor. The charter of 1166 makes known to Henry II's loyal subjects that the burgesses could *continue* to enjoy the customs and liberties to which they were accustomed under Henry I. However, the document does not elaborate on those 'customs and liberties', and earlier charters do not survive. Instead, it points to the liberties enjoyed by Oxford at the time, which we know from Oxford's charter of 1156 included the right to have a gild merchant, the right to have their own court and freedom from trade 'tolls', or duties. The charter of 1227 is explicit, however, confirming the burgesses' right to hold a gild merchant, freedom from trade tolls and customs, in line with the freedoms enjoyed by the citizens of Oxford and a no longer extant charter issued by Richard I. The 1227 charter also confirms that Oxford was an important benchmark for Bedford's governance. It instructs the burgesses to contact the 'citizens of Oxford' if issues arise concerning their rights, and to accept Oxford's judgement as final. Two other documents in the Borough collection from 1556 and 1729 [ref: BorBA1/24 & BorBA1/30] show that Oxford was indeed a point of reference for Bedford on the appointment of town officials.



Ref: BorBA1/2, Henry III seal

Another important record is what's known colloquially as the 'Black Book of Bedford' [ref: BorBB1/1 right, frontispiece], which forms part of an important collection of records documenting the proceeds of the Court of Common Pleas. The Court of Common Pleas was heard before the Mayor and Baillifs of the town and dealt with cases of common law, specialising in property and debt. The 'Black Book' was begun on 5 November 1562, during the reign of Elizabeth I and contains bye-laws and corporation oaths, fines taken by the Court of Pleas and copies of deeds enrolled by the Borough. The three versions of the bye-laws listed in the book, given an unrivalled insight into the early modern period, with rules covering areas such as the 'clean keeping of butchers row' (the Shambles) and the 'gooseditch', the keeping of animals, and the conduct of burgesses in the council chamber. Bye-law no.3 states: 'if anie burgesse discloses his fellowes counsell in general service concerninge the Kinge or this Corporation or if same burgesse in anie aseemblie in the Councill chamber or common hall for the general service of corporation breake the peace or offer to drawe anie weapon, to forfeit 21 shillings to the Chamber and to be committed to prison by the Maior for the tyme beinge'. Hopefully today's proceedings are a lot less confrontational!



Dr Rachel Bates  
Archivist

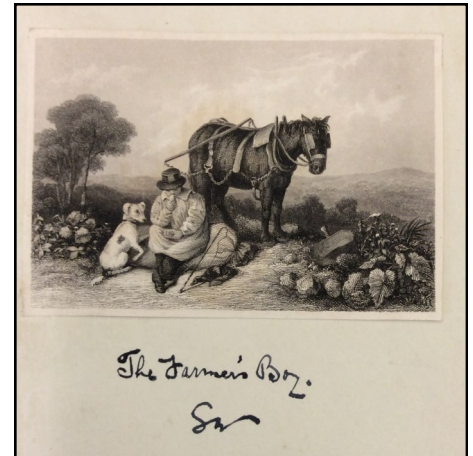
Ref: BorBB1/1, Black Book of Bedford

## 250TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE POET ROBERT BLOOMFIELD

Robert Bloomfield was born 250 years ago on 3rd December 1766 in Honington, Suffolk and moved to Shefford in 1812. On a house opposite what is now *The Brewery Tap* in North Bridge Street, Shefford, a modest plaque informs the passer-by that 'Robert Bloomfield, the Pastoral Poet, died here, August 19th 1823.' The poet's father was a village tailor, who died of smallpox before the child's first birthday. Despite humble and poor circumstances the family was literate. Robert had some access to books, while his mother, Elizabeth, ran a village school. His formal education, however, ended when he was eleven. At this time he went to work on the farm of his uncle William Austin in Sapiston, a few miles from Honington. This experience provided the material and emotional impetus for his most successful poem, *The Farmer's Boy*. On June 29 1781 he travelled to London to learn the trade of his brother George, a ladies shoemaker. Here he gained access to newspapers, periodicals and books and listened to popular public speakers. His story from this time is that of the self-taught poet.

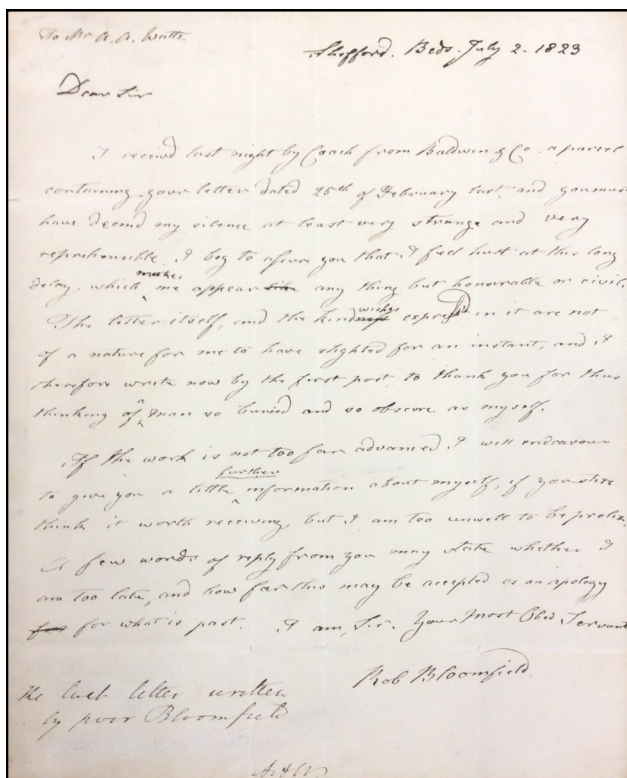
He composed *The Farmer's Boy*, he said, while working at his shoemaker's bench, holding the lines in his head until opportunities arose to write them down, and was eventually able to publish the poem through the patronage of the Honington radical campaigner Capel Lofft. The poem sold 26,000 copies in 3 years, a bestseller of the time. It is a poem in four parts following the seasonal round on his uncle's farm. But the figure at its centre is not Bloomfield himself. He is Giles, a rustic lad with a pointedly rustic name for whom 'The fields [were] his study, Nature was his book'.

Further volumes of poetry followed, *Rural Tales, Ballads and Songs* in 1802, *Wild Flowers* in 1806, and *The Banks of Wye* in 1811. However, he tired of London, writing to a friend: 'I want to get well under a hedge, and cannot find one to my liking....'. As a result of his fame, he had lunched in 1810 with Sir Charles Osborne at Chicksands Priory, and in 1812 he was offered the house in Shefford. Unfortunately, he was never fully accepted in Shefford and fell on hard times.



Z338/10: *The Farmer's Boy* engraving

His last years were afflicted with anxieties and ill health, despite the care of his devoted daughter Hannah. As the town had no burial ground at that time, he was buried in the churchyard at Campton. His headstone can be seen alongside that of his Shefford friend and patron, the clockmaker and antiquarian Thomas Inskip. 'Heav'n permit that I may lie / Where o'er my corse green branches wave,' Robert had written.



Z338/15: Robert Bloomfield's last letter, July 1823

The first Robert Bloomfield Society was formed in 1904 by a rector's daughter from Meppershall near Shefford, Constance Isherwood. She was responsible for the placing of the plaque in that year on his house. Visitors to Campton may find a further commemorative plaque inside the church, on the south wall. It quotes his lines 'Then bring me nature, bring me sense, / And joy shall be your recompense.' This was erected much more recently, in 2003, on the initiative of a renewed Robert Bloomfield Society, formed in 2000.

Bedfordshire Archives holds many interesting documents relating to Robert Bloomfield. Information about the Society may be had from the website: [robertbloomfieldsociety.blogspot.co.uk](http://robertbloomfieldsociety.blogspot.co.uk)



## WEAVING NARRATIVES: EXHIBITIONS AT BEDFORD AND LUTON

This time last year, in our Autumn 2015 newsletter, we announced that in 2016 we would be launching Weaving Narratives, a community arts project where participants would be given access to the archive collections to inspire them to produce work showcasing not only their talents but the holdings of Bedfordshire Archives Service. We had no idea what to expect, but the inspirational and overwhelming talent, ingenuity and breadth of imagination of our participants was beautifully showcased in two exhibitions, at Bedford and Luton, which took place recently. The pictures below give you a taster of the works of art shown to over 250 people across two weekends in September.



Left and Right:  
Two Bridges and Two  
Coats of Arms by Kathy  
Johnstone



Above: Don't Label Me  
by Jill Reynolds



Above: Goldington Power Station by  
Wendy Watmough



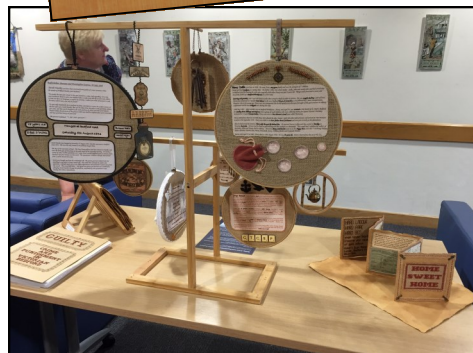
Above: Silver Street by Helen Macintosh



Above: Our Bunting by Aragon Lacemakers



Left: The Floral Hall  
by Deborah Colgrave



Above: Guilty: Crime & Punishment in  
Victorian Bedford by Fran Wortley



Above: The Place Where I  
Live by Jenny Spouse



Above: Nursery Rhyme Tiles, Victoria Ward,  
Bedford Hospital by Anne Marie Stijelja



**DON'T FORGET!** The next Weaving Narratives Exhibition is at Flitwick Library on Thursday 13th October (3.30-6pm), Friday 14th October (9.30am-6pm) and Saturday 15th October (9.30am-4pm).

## 'REWRITE HISTORY' COMPETITION

At the End of October we will be launching the '2016 Rewrite History Challenge.' This is a creative writing competition open to all Key stage 2 to Key stage 5 students studying in Bedfordshire.

We have made selections from photographs and extracts from written documents catalogued in the archives and we would like an original story up to five hundred words or an original poem of no more than twenty lines using one of the sources as inspiration. What actually happens in the story or the poem is up to the student. We are looking for stories with interesting characters and a great plot or poems that have the ability to make us feel something about the source that was selected.



Ref: Z1306/1/32/1 - one of the selected photographs

The competition is open until **10<sup>th</sup> February 2017**. Stories or poems will be entered into either the Key stage 2-3 category or the Key stage 4-5 category. Initial judging will be carried out by members of the Archives Service team who will select eight finalists. We are proud to announce that local award winning author Kate Milner will select an overall winner from each category. Prizes will be awarded to both the winners and their schools. The winning and highly commended entries will be compiled in an anthology with a copy presented to the winners and their school.

The winning entries will be announced in April 2017. For details on how to enter and our terms and conditions; please email: [rewrite.history@bedford.gov.uk](mailto:rewrite.history@bedford.gov.uk). Good luck to all entrants.

**Clare Davison, Learning Officer**

## NEWS

We are holding a series of workshops, sponsored by Bedfordshire Local History Association, over the next couple of months, aimed at local history groups, parish councillors, churchwardens, societies and organizations who may have or are considering collecting historical material and making it available to others. The sessions will cover collecting and appraising material (13th October), copyright (27th October), data protection (10th November), digitisation (24th November) and recording communities (8th December). Each session is from 10am to 12 noon. Please see our website [www.bedford.gov.uk/ArchiveEvents](http://www.bedford.gov.uk/ArchiveEvents) or contact us to book a place.



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**CHRISTMAS OPENING HOURS:** We are open **Wednesday 28th & Friday 30th December only**.  
We re-open on Tuesday 3rd January 2017.



## EXHIBITION & TALK - Bedford Borough: 850 Years

Our exhibition from October to January is 'Bedford: 850 years. Signs and Symbols of Town Status.' To coincide with our exhibition, on Thursday 1st December 2016 at 1pm, there will be a free lunchtime talk, 'Off The Record: Untold Stories of Bedford Borough', looking at unofficial Bedford and the less glamorous aspects of life in the town using overlooked records of the Borough including public health, housing and law and order. We have 20 places available, to book a place email [archive@bedford.gov.uk](mailto:archive@bedford.gov.uk) or telephone 01234 228833.

We welcome ideas and material for future issues. Published by Bedfordshire Archives Service, Riverside Building, Borough Hall, Bedford MK42 9AP. Tel: (01234) 228833 E-mail: [archive@bedford.gov.uk](mailto:archive@bedford.gov.uk) Online at: [www.bedford.gov.uk/archive](http://www.bedford.gov.uk/archive)

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