

COMMEMORATING THE LUTON PEACE RIOT



Many postcards were produced of the peace parade and the aftermath of the riot but few combine the two. Doc Ref: Z1360/75/10/23/18

The signing of the Treaty of Versailles on the 28th June 1919 marked the official end of the First World War. The 19th July 1919 was set aside as a day of national celebration and across the country local councils had been making preparations to mark the occasion. Although many looked forward to celebrating peace after suffering through the hardships of war, for some the peace celebrations rang hollow. In particular, returning ex-servicemen who had hoped to return to 'homes fit for heroes' instead found themselves in a country strained by food shortages and high unemployment.

In July 2019 Luton commemorates the centenary of the Luton Peace Riots which occurred over a three day period between the 19th and 21st July

1919. The summer display in our reception area reviews the events leading up to the riot and its aftermath using material from collections held in the archives.

An important moment in the lead up to the riot came when the Discharged Sailors & Soldiers Association (the Luton branch of the National Federation of Discharged and Disabled Servicemen and Seamen, an association which aimed to improve the lives of ex-servicemen and their dependents) asked Luton Town Council for permission to hold a drumhead memorial service at Wardown Park. The request was refused by the council on the grounds that allowing the DS&S to hold their own service would exclude other associations. Although the group had been offered the use of other venues in Luton, such as Popes Meadow, the decision of the council was seen by many in Luton as insensitive and callous and added to existing tensions between the public and a council increasingly perceived as out of touch.

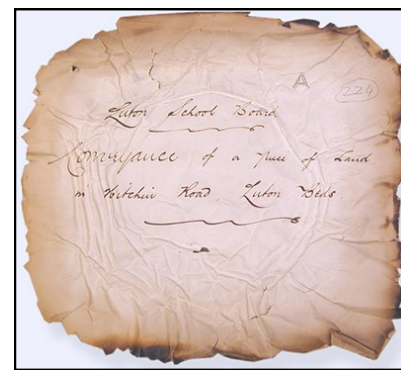
Relations had not been helped by earlier decisions in planning for peace celebrations, such as the refusal to allow women, despite their contributions to the war effort, to attend a subscription banquet on the grounds that a building could not be found large enough to accommodate both male and female guests. This same banquet allowed councillors and their guests to attend for free whilst the rest of the populace had to pay 15 shillings for a ticket which was beyond the means of many ex-servicemen. These tensions erupted outside Luton Town Hall on the 19th July when, after the peace procession, a mob charged the Town Hall and vandalised the interior before setting fire to the building. Rioting continued into the early hours of the 20th July with crowds vandalising and looting businesses close to the town hall. The start of the working week on the 21st July brought the majority of the rioting to a close, with a few sporadic outbursts dealt with by Luton Borough Police leaving the Town Council and people of Luton to reflect on the events of the past three days.

Whilst preparing this display I found that over the same period there had also been similar disturbances in Coventry, Swindon and Manchester regarding soldiers' pensions and the high unemployment rate. What I thought of as an isolated incident suddenly became part of a wider tapestry which showed the deeper sense of anger, not only in Luton, but in urban areas throughout the country in response to the rapid changes in society brought on by the First World War.

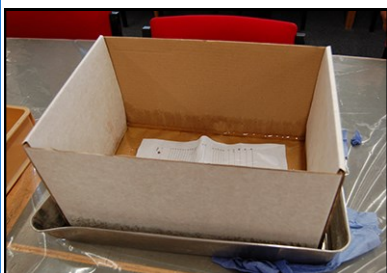
Helen Bates, archivist

DISASTER RESPONSE TRAINING MAY 2019

When Luton Town Hall was burnt down 100 years ago some documents were recovered from the building (see picture) but many more are believed to have been lost in the fire or from the water used to extinguish it. Conscious that disasters can happen, all archive services have a plan to enable recovery of the archives should a disaster occur. The plan has to be kept up-to-date and the staff need to know what it says—indeed this is a requirement of the standard for archive service accreditation.



Our closed week gave the perfect opportunity for us to carry out training on our plan and so on the 1st May the staff at Bedfordshire Archives & Records Service met to complete a review of our Salvage Plan. We discussed safety measures in the event of emergencies such as fire and flood and looked at consequent risks to our collections. From the catastrophic such as fire and flood to the horrors of mould damage - and the difficulties of handling and attempting to dry large volumes of wet paper, parchment, leather and books, before the mould sets in. We concluded that prevention is preferable to cure!



We conducted hands-on experiments. We compared the water resistance of corrugated flat-packed boxes commonly called 'archive boxes' and which are usually used for records management storage with our archive boxes.

Within half an hour the former was soaked with

a puddle of water inside and a very soggy bottom. Over two hours later the archive box was still going strong—the lid was damp but the inside was perfectly dry.



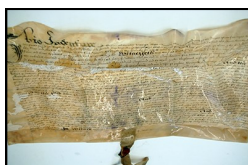
Other risks, from UV light damage, to rodents and insects were also discussed as well as the everyday risks to archival material, principally the risks of human handling with hints and tips on safe handling. We discussed good archive practice which seeks to minimise risk by keeping food, drinks, pens, hand creams or anything wet, sticky or greasy out of the archive workspace. Accidents happen and we are all only human!

CONSERVATION CORNER - Recovering parchment from disaster



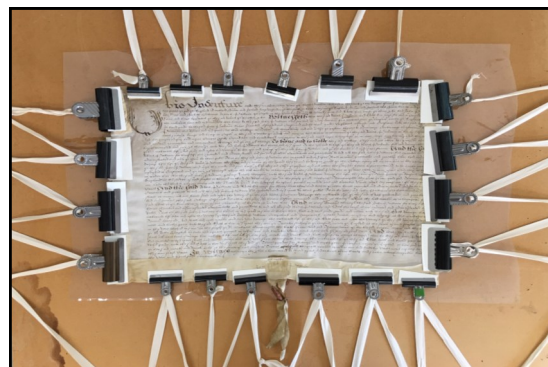
Parchment is made from animal skin by de-hairing with lime, stretching, drying and scraping to the required thickness.

Left: Parchment making at William Cowley's, Newport Pagnell, 1970. Doc Ref: Z50/143/408, 410. Cowleys are now the only parchment makers in England but did you know that there used to be parchment makers in Potton?



When parchment gets wet it loses its structure and becomes slippery, slimy and smelly and the ink may rub off. If it is just left to dry it will shrink and become hard and misshapen. Therefore wet parchment has to be dried under tension, in much the same way as it was when it was manufactured all those years ago.

Alison Faden, conservator



Above: Wet parchment deed being dried under tension in the Conservation Studio

'Holidays' at Home

For the week of 29th April–3rd May the office was closed to the public and you might have thought we were all off on holiday but No! we were busy working away on our collections. We did a lot of sorting, tidying, throwing away duplicates and rubbish, rearranging shelving and by the end of the week we had created some much needed space in the stacks for incoming catalogued archives.

One of the collections we tackled was our own County Records collection (reference CR). This was something of a 'physician heal thyself' task as we knew this reference had sometimes been used more as a records management system and publications store than for material that needed to be kept as archives.

Sorting out this collection reminded us that it was exactly 50 years since we had started the move to our new (and present) home. The move of the 58 tons of archives apparently went smoothly but we then had to wait for our new furniture; when it arrived the desks left a little to be desired.

Dear Douglas:

23rd May 1969

When our very handsome desks arrived, we found that none has a front to the kneehole. Whether this is O and M, or someone else, we have 4 women on our staff, and think that the computer could have considered this. One of us suggested sitting wrapped in a travelling rug, one suggested little curtains across the front of each desk, the most sensible was to get some ply-panels and stick them in. Possibly the best solution would have been for you to have had some intelligent female on your staff. Anyhow, I gather that something may be done in due course, but until it is, the look of your well-planned Record Office could well be spoiled by little lace curtains (or even Victorian fire screens, if available) in front of each desk. Actually, this might be a help so that you can consider it for the main building.

As I keep on saying, the lay-out is excellent, and I reckon we have the best Record Office in England. Thank you very much,

Yours.

An Unexpected Discovery

A recent addition to our collections is the archives of the Robert Hibbert Almshouse Trust, Luton. While cataloguing I stumbled across an unexpected letter (reference X1021/4/9/7) from the son of one of the almshouse residents, giving an insight into his life at Agnews in Santa Clara County, California during the gold rush. In 1891 William Clark wrote to Henry Blundell, an old schoolfellow and now one of the almshouse trustees, enclosing a postal order to cover funeral expenses for his mother and the costs incurred during her final illness. He explained he was suffering from a shortage of funds 'as I had spent every dollar in paying assessments on my 19 mining interests'. He had suffered a particularly difficult two years as his eldest son was now in an asylum suffering from 'the chronic disease' and not expected to recover; his second son had died at the age of 21 after 'a painful illness of 12 months duration, caused by eating too many grapes after a long fast in the mountains, having previously impaired his health working a quicksilver mine' (mercury poisoning would perhaps be a more likely explanation for his death than over indulgence in grapes). Clark seems to have been fishing for an investment in his mining enterprises from Blundell. He explained that his mines had some of the 'richest gold quartz ledges' in California, but they were in an inaccessible position, making mining operations both slow and costly. A small newsletter cutting attached to the letter shows that Clark also owned a ranch where he hoped to dig limestone; this had been tested and found to be of a type which made the 'finest quality of cement'.

William Clark was born in Luton in 1838. In 1861 he was living at Stopsley and working for his father John, a farmer of 200 acres; by 1871 he himself was a farmer employing 15 men and boys, married with three young sons and a step-daughter. Clearly this substantial farm did not stop him deciding to try his luck in America. By 1880 he was living in Burnett, Santa Clara, with his family; his occupation was again listed as farmer. An 1894 voter register for Santa Clara shows he was naturalised as an American in 1881. Agnews was close enough to San Francisco to be caught up in the catastrophic 1906 earthquake. The State Insane Asylum collapsed, burying up to 100 inmates - could one of these have been Clark's son?

Kathryn Faulkner, archivist

No date [c. 1950s?]

Our archivists have had very different experiences with letters lately. Carol has been using the letters of Cyril C Verdcourt written to his mother. Cyril wrote every day and although he doesn't always date his letters he does number them. Pamela has been tackling letters by Bessie Godber and family, which are rarely dated and have become shuffled over the years. Bessie often writes about flowers in bloom which gives an idea of the month. The year can be more difficult unless something extraordinary is mentioned, such as Bessie's thankfulness that her son is not flying to Singapore on a Comet like the one that has just crashed, dating it to just after 2nd May 1953.

Luton 1922

Felixstowe
Wednesday Oct 2nd 18

Dearest Mamma

Don't you think that my numbering of the letters is a good idea. You pay attention to it, don't you? Should you ever miss a day then you can see whether it is my fault or that of the post.

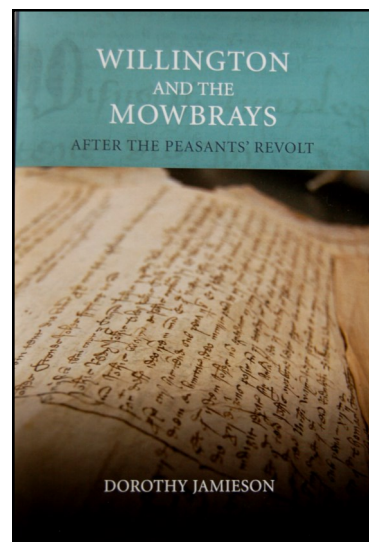
NEWS

From Box to Book

Local historian Dorothy Jamieson only did one year of Latin at school and for fifty years, if she thought about it all, she thought that it was irrelevant; then twenty years ago she was introduced to a large box in the Bedfordshire Archives. The box was full of rolls of old parchment, many of them written six hundred years ago and many of them about Willington, a village which she knew through her involvement with the National Trust's buildings there.

She would be delighted to give her new talk 'From Box to Book' to local groups. It describes her twenty-year project to read and translate many of these documents from medieval Latin into English and to find out about the lives of the people in Willington and their relationships with their Mowbray lords who were very powerful and influential in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The project took her to Arundel Castle, the British Library and part-time courses at four universities. In the end she shared what she had learned by writing a book 'Willington and the Mowbrays - after the Peasants' Revolt' for Bedfordshire Historical Record Society. These books are now on sale at a special introductory discount.

There will be no fees for the talk 'From Box to Book' though donations to the National Trust would be welcome. For details contact her on Dorothy.jamieson@ntlworld.com and details of the book and the special introductory discount will soon be on the Bedfordshire Historical Records Society website.



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Love Bedford Medieval Festival—27th-28th July

Businesses of the Bedford Business Improvement District are funding a weekend festival at the Castle Mound. The free entertainment includes groups and performers from the Medieval Combat Society, The Wythe Retinue, God's Company of Tabor, the King's Executioner, Talented Feathers, A Merrie Noyse Minstrels and Devilstick Peat Fibbs. You can have a go at archery or watch demonstrations. On a local note there will be: tours of the Ice House and Lime Kiln, a chance to go up the bell tower of St Paul's and, last but by no means least, the opportunity for fun, games and chat with us as we man the Heritage Bedford stand outside The Higgins. We will be there from 10.30—4pm on Saturday and 10-4pm on Sunday.

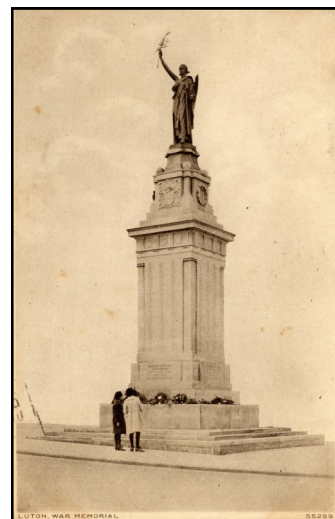
More details at: <https://www.lovebedford.co.uk/events/event.php?event=2019-07-27-love-bedford-medieval-festival>

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Luton Central Library—Thursday 1st August

Our next Bedfordshire Archives on Tour event at Luton Library will be on Thursday 1 August. There will be the opportunity to discuss with an archivist your research queries and a talk 'Between the Wars - Homes for Heroes'. The talk will include the treatment of the men who returned home and the changing world they lived in and the preparations that were being made as World War II approached.

10:30am - 12:00pm Q&A with Archivist
1:00pm - 2:00pm Q&A with Archivist
2:30pm - 3:30pm Talk—*Between the Wars—Homes for Heroes*
3:30pm - 4:00pm Q&A with Archivist



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 Online at: www.bedford.gov.uk/archive

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Luton

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