

# Newsletter

HALESWORTH AND DISTRICT MUSEUM : 2011

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## A DISTANT PROSPECT

*Brian Holmes describes the inspiration behind this year's exhibition*

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Picture this scene. You are standing on one side of a shallow valley. On the horizon, about a mile distant, a line of low, red-roofed, white-walled buildings marks the site of the town. Immediately ahead, a church tower stands out, dominating the skyline. Part of the town is obscured by trees which lead down towards the floor of the valley where a watercourse runs. Two vessels are travelling along the water, one a keel and the other a wherry, identifiable by the type of sail they carry. They appear to be sailing towards the lower part of the town, possibly to moor at the quay.

In the foreground, two women are walking towards you carrying what seem to be bundles of wood. Riding away from them is a man seated on a white horse and leading another, black, horse. He seems to be waving to the women. Behind them the land slopes down towards the waterway. Cattle and sheep are grazing in the meadows. Tall trees on either side of the scene frame the view of the distant town.

This is a view of Halesworth from Castle Hill (on Holton Road), sketched by an artist named Gilbert in 1847. Twelve years later, in 1859, the railway embankment would block the view for ever. It is this sketch which inspires the new display at the Museum for the 2011 season, to commemorate the opening of the River Blyth Navigation 250 years ago in 1761.



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## THE COMING OF THE NAVIGATION

*To coincide with the opening of the 2011 Museum Exhibition, Mike Fordham describes the birth of the Blyth Navigation 250 years ago.*

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In the 18th century, Halesworth was a town of small businesses supplying a local urban market and the needs of the surrounding countryside, where dairying and cattle-rearing still predominated. Butchers and leather workers were still important, while linen weaving had replaced woollen cloth production, with hemp being grown in small fields in the rural areas nearby. Research has also shown that Francis Butler and his son were making clay pipes in Halesworth, although the site of the small factory is unknown. George Suggate a well-known clockmaker possibly had a workshop in the Thoroughfare, and a brickyard off the Holton Road.

In 1753 a group of businessmen and landowners decided to improve the river Blyth so that boats of 20-30 tons could sail from Southwold harbour to Halesworth. The hope was that the new navigation would enable keels and wherries to carry grain from Halesworth and surrounding villages to Southwold harbour, returning with cheap coal to fire the furnaces of developing rural industries. The leading entre-preneur for the enterprise was a Halesworth brewer, Thomas Knights. Knights' property included three public houses in the Town: the Black Swan, the Green Man with adjoining brewing offices in the Thoroughfare near the river, and the Angel with 16 acres of meadow. Knights hoped that the Navigation would solve his financial problems by increasing trade and prosperity in the Town. On the 4<sup>th</sup> May 1753, John Reynolds surveyed the river and produced an estimate for the work of £4,614. A number of shopkeepers and innkeepers were persuaded to subscribe towards the cost of an Act of Parliament. However, there was some opposition to the scheme from merchants who tried to discourage trade on the river, while others felt that Reynolds' estimate was far too high.

On 1<sup>st</sup> April 1757, the Act to make the River Blyth navigable from Halesworth to Southwold was given the Royal Assent. Between 1757 and 1759 Langley Edwards of Kings Lynn carried out several surveys. He subsequently prepared a cheaper scheme than Reynolds', costing £3,000, which was accepted by the Commissioners. By 1761 subscriptions had raised a total of £3,587. (Only £225 came from Halesworth.)

In 1759 James Collison, the contractor employed to make the Navigation, began to dig out new cuts and deepen nearly 5 miles of the Blyth above Blythburgh Bridge. The River Commissioners provided a 'Horse Mill' to scoop out the water and barrows and planks and other materials. The work began on or before the 19<sup>th</sup> November. The Contractor was allowed to employ sufficient men, not less than 40, to finish the next summer; and to pay a weekly subsistence not exceeding 8s a week for each man.

The New Cut was a wider and straighter channel running from the Blyth to the new quay basin east of Halesworth Bridge. The 'Navigators' dug out the basin, while bricklayers and others worked on rebuilding bridges and constructing five new locks. Two brick locks were made at Halesworth and Wenhaston Mill and wood faggots were used for the other three, at Mells, Blyford and Bulcamp.

Initially, the main attraction of the Navigation was the potential for cheaper transportation of coal for malting, brewing and lime burning in the town. A keel or wherry would be able to transport nine chaldrons of coal from Blackstone Quay to Halesworth in one day. By road the same amount would need four heavy wagons, each pulled by four horses.

In July 1761, the first keel with a cargo of coal reached Halesworth.

*This is the first part of a brief history of the Navigation, which the Museum hopes to publish in time for the celebration of the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that first arrival in July 1761.*

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## PRIVATE SMITH REFOUND

*Curator, Mike Fordham, describes how one lady's search for her grandfather recently led to a happy discovery among the Museum's collections.*

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At the end of January this year, I received a phone enquiry at home from a lady in Hampshire. She had recently learnt that her grandfather had spent time in the Patrick Stead Hospital Halesworth, after losing part of his leg in May 1915 during the First World War. It was the only part of his life that the family knew little about. Lin Penny (for that was her name) had found it extremely difficult to find any information about the Hospital during that period and the call to the Museum was hopeful rather than expectant of any real information.

I was able to tell her that the Hospital would still be recognisable, certainly from the outside, to anyone who had spent time there during the 1914-18 War. On the outbreak of the War the Hospital was put to use as a War Emergency Hospital, and up to 1<sup>st</sup> November 1915, 164 sick and wounded from the battle-fields of France and Belgium were treated.

I asked Mrs Penny what her grandfather's name was, she replied that unfortunately it was Smith; Pte G H Smith. I was able to tell her that luckily the Museum had in its collection an autograph book belonging to the daughter of one of the Red Cross Volunteer Nurses who had worked in the Hospital during 1915. The mother, Mrs Moore, took the book into the small ward and got many of the men to sign it. In fact many wrote several lines of poetry or drew pictures. Because I had mounted a display in 2005 about the history of the Patrick Stead Hospital, I had listed the names of all those men and staff who had signed the book and I knew that there were several soldiers named Smith. By this time I had a genuine hope that I might find her grand-father.

Lin Penny then told me that her grandfather had served in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion the Queens Royal Regiment. I have a family connection with the 'Queens' and, while researching the exhibition, the fact that a member of the regiment had ended up in the Patrick Stead Hospital in 1915 and had signed the

autograph book had remained in my memory. I told Mrs Penny that I was 99% sure that a soldier named Smith, a member of the 'Queens', had signed the autograph book and might also be in one of several photographs that had also been gifted to us. At this the call became very emotional. I had to stress that I was at home and not at the Museum, but that I would phone her back after the weekend, when I had checked the files and the original autograph book.

I was right! G H Smith had signed and had not only written his rank and regiment and recorded that he had been wounded in May 1915, but had drawn a picture depicting the Kaisers' wish to devour the whole of Europe on the rest of the page! And I had photocopied it and used it for the exhibition.



When I phoned her and offered to put a copy in the post, her reaction was that she and her husband now wanted to come to Halesworth themselves. I met them in the Museum on the following Thursday, two

minutes after we had opened up. They had already been to the Hospital where the kind nursing staff had given them a tour.

For our part the Museum got a copy of a photograph of Pte Smith, proud in his uniform, and copies of several photographs, one of which was taken in the grounds of the Hospital in 1915. However, the most

poignant item was a copy of the letter and envelope, which had started Mrs Penny's search. It was addressed to Pte Smith at the Patrick Stead Hospital and had been written by his younger brother who was in France (although under age) and had just learnt that that his older brother had been wounded. It was dated at the beginning of June. Three weeks later the boy was dead, killed on his first day in action

## **WHAT'S GOING ON AT THE MUSEUM?**

**Technology:** *This has been the year when we finally moved into the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the acquisition of a laptop (secondhand) to replacing our ageing computer. This has meant that we can upgrade the MODES Compact software that manages our collections, bringing us into line with most other small museums around the country. With the support of our Trustees, who see the need for us to take advantage of the Internet, and with the help of our new volunteer Brian Howard, we are now planning a website for the Museum.*

**Publicity:** *With the retirement of our Publicity Officer, Janet Huckles, after many years of service to the Museum, we begin to see just how important a job she did for us. Fortunately, a new volunteer, Vic Gray, has stepped into the breach. Over the coming months, he will be trying to raise our profile within the area.*

**Volunteers:** *(Without whom we would not exist!). We have been lucky to secure a number of new volunteers to help us as stewards and with the many other little tasks that keep the Museum going. Plans are afoot for a big new project – but more of that later. There is always a pressing need for new volunteers, so if you have a little time to give, what more fascinating place to spend it in than the Museum?*

**Research:** *We have been involved as a partner with the University of East Anglia, Suffolk Libraries and the Suffolk Record Office in the BBC Hands on History Project, an exciting and lively new project to research the history of the town and its shops. The project is still on-going.*

### **THE HALESWORTH AND DISTRICT MUSEUM**

**The Station, Halesworth, Suffolk IP19 8BZ**

**Curator: Mike Fordham (01986 873030)**

**Summer Opening Times** (3 May to 30 September): Tuesday to Friday 10am to 12.30pm; and on Saturday mornings, 10am to 12.30pm, in July and August.

The Museum is an Accredited Museum and a Registered Charity (No. 1002545)