



A Registered Charity (No. 1016770)
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The Newbury Society

August 2020 Bulletin

From your Chairman

For the Newbury area, the effect of the Coronavirus pandemic has reduced over recent months, but as we go to press there is a slight increase in the number of reported cases. The situation is still a little uncertain, and we have cancelled the meeting due to take place in September (a talk about horse chestnut trees by John Handy), which will be reprogrammed for next year. The next meeting in the programme is therefore the Society's AGM in October. If this is to go ahead, as we hope, we will confirm arrangements nearer the time.

News about parking charges at Donnington Castle and development plans for the Narrow Boat site are reported separately, and new flats are going up in Market Street, in the development described by the developers as an "urban village." The saga of the Newbury football club site continues; a study looking at alternative sites suggested that there is no realistic alternative site in Newbury.

As always, we would welcome any news or local concerns you have.

David Peacock Tel: Newbury (01635) 524017

Robert F. Willis 1947 – 2020

One of the mainstays of the Newbury Society over many years, Robert F. Willis, died earlier this year (April 28), during the Covid-19 "lockdown".

Bob Willis' parents lived in Pelican Lane, Newbury, and he went to Speenhamland primary school and joined the choir of St. Mary's church at Speenhamland at the age of six. He moved on to Park House school and then to courses in electronics, including a course at Portsmouth Polytechnic.

He went to work at Culham Laboratory, and then on to AWRE Aldermaston, where he served for over 25 years as a scientific officer, involved in computing. He took early retirement in 1994.

In the 1970s he joined the Newbury Society, which was launched in 1973. He became a member of the committee, editing the regular newsletter and later combined this with development of a website, as "webmaster." He was on the committee for over 20 years, serving with people like Mike James, Gwynneth Bullock and Jeremy Holden-Bell. As he wrote in 2002 in his last editorial for the newsletter "Our mission statement is to make Newbury a better place in which to live, work and play..."

"He was passionate about Newbury" said his wife Charmian, adding that he considered some of the new developments in Newbury to be out of keeping with the town.

He was involved in a number of voluntary organisations, serving as Trustee of the Newbury Volunteer Bureau (as it was called) and as a governor of his old school, Speenhamland, and he was a member of the Kennet and Avon Canal Trust. He was a regular choral singer, singing in the choir of St. Nicolas' Church after St. Mary's closed in the 1970s, and singing with the Cromwell Singers. He was also interested in organ music, and served on the committee of the Newbury Organists' Association.

He was born with a mild form of cerebral palsy, which gave him a stammer and affected one side of his body, but he was determined not to let this be a disadvantage. He was a keen supporter of the Keevill unit at Speenhamland, which incorporates children with physical disabilities in the full life of the school.

For several years towards the end of his life he suffered from dementia, but continued to live in Grove Road, with just respite care before he went into Winchcombe Place earlier this year. He died there on April 28, aged 72.

He was cremated at West Berkshire Crematorium in June, and his ashes were interred at St. Mary's, Speen, in early July. He leaves his wife Charmian, who served with him for many years on the Newbury Society committee. Among those attending the funeral were his sister Bettine and her husband, together with their son and daughter. Charmian Willis said that numbers had been limited because of coronavirus, and they were hoping to hold a memorial service at a later date. About his character, she said: "He was persistent. He would try anything once."

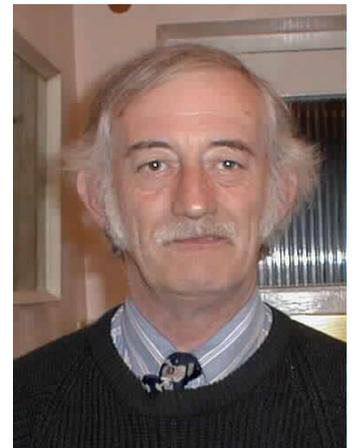


Photo: <http://robert.willis.newbury.net>

Bone Mill on the Kennet

Recent work has uncovered some traces of a little-known mill, sited on the banks of the Kennet not far towards Newbury from Ham Mill. It is usually known as the Bone Mill because that is how it is labelled on the 1880 Ordnance Survey map of the area, but it was dismantled before the end of the 19th century.

This is one of the mills which was drawn by John Constable, when he came on a sketching tour of the Newbury area in June 1821. His sketch shows a building on the south bank of the Kennet, with a sweeping thatched roof and a tall thin chimney. A second sketch is understood to be the same building from a different angle, with wooden canal-side rails appearing in both. It was on the same trip that he sketched the best-known image of a Newbury barge, or Kennet barge, which was significantly larger than a narrow boat because the original locks on the Kennet were much wider than they are now.

The recent work has been carried out by the Canal and River Trust, as part of work between Newbury and the Hambridge Road crossing of the canal, which involved closing the towpath. Although it is not an archaeological investigation, work has revealed parallel GWR rails grouped closely together to carry the footpath over what was originally the sluice into the mill; and some brickwork and other small finds have also been uncovered.

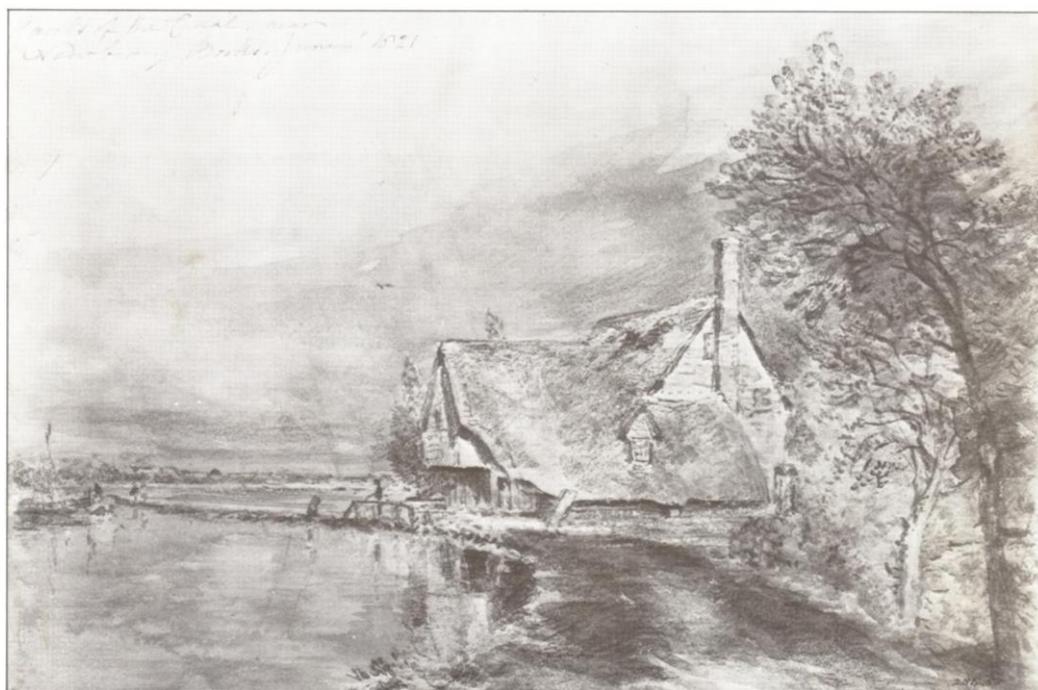
Many of the mills along the River Kennet are on sites which are recorded in the Domesday Book, and probably go back to Anglo-Saxon times, but this does not appear to be one of them. Although it has yet to be researched in any detail, there are no available references before the 18th century. A reference from 1816, when it was up for auction, described it as "Lot 3. A Small Mill, working two pair of stones, in the occupation of Mr Dewse, with a right of passage across the Kennet to a Landing Place by the side of the Turnpike Road, and one Acre (more or less) of Land adjoining the Mill."

A newspaper article from 1913 said it had been run by J. Dowse, and listed it among things which had vanished in the last 60 years, adding "You could smell it some yards before coming to it when the wind was in the right direction" [Newbury Weekly News, June 12, 1913].

The site is on a bend in the river, almost opposite the entrance to Newbury Boat Company. The land drops away sharply to the south, to a parallel channel, but this has been repositioned since the days of the mill. The sluices to the west, which have been rebuilt several times (most recently in 2008), are still known as Bone Mill sluices.

Several of the Constable sketches from this trip are in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

David Peacock



Constable's 1821 sketch of the Bone Mill



The current Bone Mill Sluices in 2006 (above) and 2009 (below) (photos: Graham Smith)



STOP PRESS: As we went to press, the government published its new planning white paper, which proposes some substantial changes in the planning system. More details in future.

THE NEWBURY SOCIETY – OFFICERS AND COMMITTEE 2019/20

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COMMITTEE

Dr. Paul Bryant

Yolande Fothergill

John Handy (Trees and Landscaping Advisor)

Parking charges at Donnington Castle

This year parking charges were introduced at Donnington Castle by English Heritage, payable using a mobile phone. The first we heard of it was in the Newbury Weekly News in May, although English Heritage consulted Shaw-cum-Donnington parish council and what they describe as “a number of local stakeholders.” As introduced, the charge is £2 per car, with parking free to members of English Heritage.

The new charge is among several introduced by English Heritage at free-to-enter sites. The status of English Heritage changed in 2015 from that of arms-length government organisation to that of a charity, and with the change in status came a change in funding. It now heavily relies on income from admissions, membership and donations, and was looking for ways to increase its income. Shaw-cum-Donnington parish council raised no objection.

The issue was raised with English Heritage by Anthony Pick, chairman of the West Berkshire Heritage Forum, which represents 30 heritage societies across West Berkshire, including the Newbury Society. As well as the parking charge, he raised concerns about the inadequate information panel currently at the castle (*photograph below*), the possibility of getting inside the gatehouse in future, and about the fact that the last official guide is dated 1964 and has not been reprinted since 1978.

Parts of English Heritage have been working with reduced staffing during the coronavirus lockdown, but the manager for sites including Donnington Castle has responded by defending the need for the parking charge, but willing to co-operate on a new information panel in the future if it conforms to English Heritage’s standards. They say the interior of the gatehouse is not safely accessible in its current form, and funds would be needed if this were to be a future possibility. English Heritage has welcomed a discussion with those involved locally, once working returns to something like normal.

Shaw-cum-Donnington parish council is cautious about publicity for the castle and has raised concerns that over-promoting Donnington could damage the heritage for future generations.

At the moment only a very basic history of Donnington Castle is available on the English Heritage website, and one possibility, raised by West Berkshire’s senior archaeologist Sarah Orr, would be to add the more detailed text of the 1964 guide, written by former local resident and Field Club member Margaret Wood (otherwise Mrs E. G. Kaines-Thomas) of Donnington Dene.

What are your views about the new charges? Do you have any comments to make about access to the castle, or memories of how it used to be?

David Peacock



Planning Applications

Lidl and the Narrow Boat PH

Plans have been put forward for a larger Lidl on the site of the Narrow Boat (the former White House) PH and adjacent 'Bargain Buys' store, on the A4 London Road. This would be in place of the store near the Robin Hood Roundabout and in addition to the new one at the Retail Park.

The proposed new site is within a conservation area, created to protect the boundaries of the Kennet and Avon Canal, and ignored routinely by West Berkshire Council and its predecessors. We have submitted comments highlighting the importance of this conservation area, and six other conservation areas created along the K & A back in the 1980s.

Commenting on applications

A new plan has been submitted for the 1,000-house Bloor Homes development at Sandleford Park (south of Monks Lane), the major part of the 1,500 houses proposed. It was registered by West Berkshire Council in June, with a target deadline for consultation of July 16, although it is not expected to be decided by the council until October.

Over the week prior to July 16, West Berkshire Council was experiencing serious problems with its online access to planning applications, which meant that for most details of the plan were impossible to access online. We reported this to West Berkshire Council and others, asking for a public statement that the deadline would be extended. West Berkshire replied with a statement that, as long as the application has not been determined, it will accept representations on this and other plans. In other words, its official policy is that it will accept comments on planning applications after its deadline for accepting comments has passed.

The Changing Face of Newbury



The current state of progress of the Market Street development

Dates for Your Diary – 2020

(all subject to confirmation due to the Coronavirus pandemic)

Talks are held in the **Parish Room, St John's Church**, St John's Road, Newbury RG14 7PY. Admission is free for members or £2.50 for non-members. **Visitors are most welcome.**

Thursday 8th October, 7:30pm – AGM + Newbury in 2020

Newbury Society chairman David Peacock will be reviewing the past year; talking about Newbury today, some of its attractions, and the range of challenges it faces.

Thursday 12th November, 7:30pm – Mike Robinson: Changes in Agriculture since the Great War

This talk will cover agriculture over the period from after the end of World War 1 up to the present day, with some references to local agriculture; and will therefore cover the period that most people are able to relate to. It will include references to the foundation of the industry, and a review of the future of the industry, with challenges from global warming and changing dietary preferences.

We hope to be able to reschedule the talks we had planned for April 2020 onwards for dates in 2021.