

HEXHAM LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Newsletter 46

Autumn 2006

Tom Corfe: An Appreciation 1928-2006

Marjorie Dallison

When Tom and Sheila Corfe arrived in Hexham in 1986 the Local History Society was already well established and provided a good range of talks and outings, but Tom brought to it a different focus and a wider background; his enthusiasm was infectious. When in 1991 the opportunity arose, he accepted the role of secretary without hesitation. Even at that early stage he was anxious to promote research activity and to produce something tangible, including an adequate guide to the town's history and heritage. The years that followed showed no lessening in Tom's energy and enthusiasm. Interest was focussed on St. Mary's Chare in the Spring of 1990, with an exhibition in the Queen's Hall produced by Tom and by Sheila who did the art work. Both Hexham Local History Society and Hexham Civic Society backed the exhibition.

In 1991 the first *Hexham Historian* appeared with Tom as editor, and there has been an edition of the magazine every year since. These volumes represent a considerable body of information, research and scholarship about Hexham and its past, all very largely due to Tom's energy and enthusiasm. *Hexham Heritage* was written and produced by Tom in 1991 and a second edition followed in 1996. In 2004 the story of the Hexham riot was retold in his book *Riot: The Hexham Militia Riot 1761*, and recalled in a re-enactment in the Market Place. August 2006 saw the arrival of Tom's last book *Hexham Lives*, an attractive and readable collection of biographies of Hexham worthies from the 7th century onwards.

Concern for the future of the town led Tom to become the secretary of Hexham Historic Trust in 1996, involving many prominent local figures, and drawing attention to important matters of conservation, signage and other relevant issues. Similar concerns led to his setting up Hexham Guild of Guides, which Tom adapted, from the Civic Society's existing programme of guided walks around the town. Another side of his character was his practical approach, which was seen in the many tours Tom organised. From day outings to longer holidays, all was carefully and thoroughly planned, not only for local societies but also for regional organisations like the Society of Antiquities in Newcastle and at national level, the Historical Association.

One characteristic, which will have made Tom known to many people in Hexham, was his love of acting. As a member of Queen's Hall Theatre Club he appeared in sixteen productions, playing a wide variety of parts in plays both classical and modern. His interest in people and his lively imagination enabled him to enter into the characters that he portrayed with sensitivity and vigour. Two especially memorable performances were as the narrator in *Under Milk Wood* and as the father figure in *Voyage Round My Father*. Tom's last appearance was as the hearty English gentleman Sir Oliver Surface in Sheridan's *School for Scandal*.

Many of us were delighted when Tom earned the title *Brain Of Britain* as a result of winning the BBC radio quiz, which revealed him as the man of learning that he was, but with his scholarship, as always, lightly worn. He was never pompous, and had a lively sense of humour. A man of many gifts and many interests; we in Hexham are the richer for the wonderful legacy that Tom has left us in pamphlets, books, talks, lectures and visits. His gift with words, his clear concise style and his enormous energy and enthusiasm will live on to inspire other generations to appreciate the Hexham that he loved so well. MED

**Report from the
ANLHS AGM**

Ted Wall

The Association, of which this Society is a member, held its 40th Anniversary AGM at Stannington on October 28th. There was a good attendance from representatives of the County's Societies and Groups. Most of these gave Reports on their activities, news and events. As in previous years, it was reported that some Societies were closing because of inability to find members to serve as

Officers. However most were flourishing and there was a useful exchange of ideas and experience. Ted gave a brief account of our activities, membership (we appear to be the largest Society), and publications, and reported the sad loss of Tom Corfe. Elections of Officers were held and Dr. Elizabeth Ashton became the new Chairman. Since it was the 40th Anniversary, awards were given to past Officers and others who had given distinguished service to ANLHS over the years. As well as the usual bookstalls, there were also special displays. Our publications were popular with buyers.

The business Meeting was followed in the afternoon by two speakers: Lindsay Allison Jones gave us details about 'the Great North Museum'. This is the £27 million extension and remodelling of the Hancock Museum in Newcastle and looks set to be a major asset to the region. It is to open in 2009 and as well as drawing on the Hancock's resources, it will include items from the collections of the Antiquaries, the Hatton Gallery, the University (the existing Museum of Antiquities at the University is to be demolished), and the Shefton Collection including its important ancient Mediterranean art and archaeology. The Museum is designed to cover a comprehensive range of subjects in a modern interlinked way.

The second speaker was Peter Carter who introduced 'St Oswald's Way' which is the new Northumberland long-distance walk. It covers a total of 94 miles from Bamburgh to Heavenfield. Guides covering the six sections are available now, printed on weather resistant paper. Peter gave details of the route, which uses existing roads and footpaths and part of the St. Cuthbert's Way. He spoke about the life of Oswald and his short reign immortalised ('spun'?) by Bede. Incidentally he said that he understood that the misleading NCC notice at Heavenfield was to be replaced by one which gave a more accurate version of the events including siting the battle south of the Tyne (cf Hexham Historian No.7). *Ted Wall.*

News

*****Lecture on 14th November: change to advertised programme*****

Members will note from the programme card circulated at the beginning of the year that the next lecture was due to be delivered by Peter Ryder together with Tom Corfe. Peter has kindly agreed to give a talk on his own but instead of the advertised topic it will be on Non Conformist Chapels with particular emphasis on a chapel near Darlington. This should prove to be an interesting talk because much of the information is a result of Peter's very recent research.

Diary Dates

Saturday 2nd December 2006

On 2nd December there is going to be a Northumberland and Borders History Fair at the Wentworth Leisure Centre organised by Colin Cargill Events. The fair will run from 10am to 4pm and there will be a variety of stands and displays. The Society is hosting a stand to encourage new members, publicise our programme of events and sell publications. If you would like to help staff the stall willing volunteers are very welcome. Come and encourage more people to join! If you would like to help, if only for an hour, please contact Helen Rutherford 01434 601990 or h.j.rutherford@fsmail.net. Please come along and lend your support to this event.

ANLHS News

Tom has an article in the latest issue of *Tyne and Tweed* entitled "The Great Flood at Hexham" describing the night of 16th to 17th November 1771 when the Tyne flooded its banks and destroyed property and took lives.

ANLHS Provisional Programmes for 2007 (dates to be confirmed)

April: Day School, 'Mining in Northumberland', at the Woodhorn Centre.

June: Round the County Day

October 27th Members Day and AGM at Stannington Village Hall.

Northumberland Record Office

Is now open again and in new premises at Woodhorn Colliery (see advance outing information) There is a new website with lots of information at www.experiencewoodhorn.com/

Newcastle Central Library is now closed until early 2009. The library is undergoing a complete rebuild (no more 'streets in the sky') and the Local Studies and Family History section is now located at the Exhibition Hall, off Ceremonial Way, the Civic Centre. For more details telephone: 0191 2774119 or e mail:

newcitylibrary@newcastle.gov.uk

Information Wanted

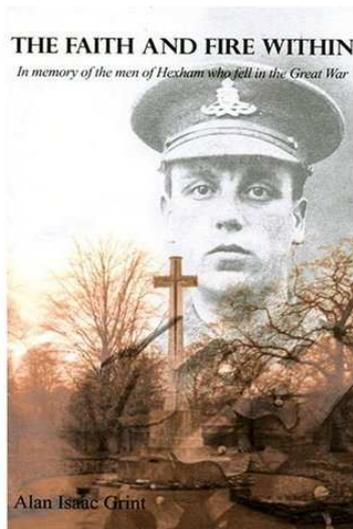
Burn Brae Cottage

Josie Nicholas of Acomb (telephone 01434 603067) is looking for photographs and any information or recollections of Burn Brae Cottage, which she believes was the coach house for Burn Brae. Anyone who can help can contact her on the above number.

Book Reviews

The Faith and Fire Within Alan Isaac Grint
(Ergo Press) £14.99

This is a book written by a member of the society about the battles of World War 1 and the 232 men of Hexham who fought and died in them commemorated on War Memorials in Hexham and elsewhere, not just on the battle fields of Europe but at sea, in Egypt, India, Salonika and Gallipoli. All but forgotten except possibly by later generations whose sole recollection is often just a name.



Alan Grint takes the reader through the battles one by one and the men of Hexham who died in them. He has researched the background of the men, their occupations, which branch of the service they were in, what battles they fought in, how they died and where their memorials are, resulting in a book of over 300 pages full of detail gathered from painstaking research. Grint has

scoured the pages of the *Hexham Courant*, tracked down correspondence and visited cemeteries in the fields of conflict.

This book is a tribute to those men who died for their country. Remember these were not conscripts but volunteers. The First of July was the ninetieth anniversary of the Battle of the Somme when twenty thousand soldiers died or were wounded on the first day. The book is a timely reminder of what the country suffered in those terrible years

This book can only have been a labour of love by Grint. It is a must for anyone interested in the First World War or with a relative who died in it. At £14.99 it nowhere covers the cost and effort that has gone into its publication and Alan Grint must be congratulated on such a worthwhile project. *Rodney Higgins*.

Portraits of Northumberland, Philip Ham (Ergo Press) £14.99

At first sight this appears to be a book of postcards. The cards were published by Gibson and Son between 1900 and 1920. Most books of postcards, and there are many, show the cards with a title and a small amount of background information. Not this book. Philip Ham has produced a fascinating local history book lavishly illustrated with approximately 100 images from postcards.

J.P. Gibson started taking photographs as early as 1858 at the age of 22. The earliest photograph in the book is of the semi-derelict chapel at the east end of the Abbey, just prior to its demolition. Gibson developed an interest in archaeology and consequently many of his postcards show Roman and other archaeological sights.

The key date for the increase in popularity of the picture postcard was 1902 when the Post Office introduced a 'divided back' card, which allowed space for the address on one side and a message on the other. From that date the production of postcards of local scenes took off with many photographers across the country cashing in on a secondary source of income. J.P.Gibson was no exception. (He also ran a chemists shop in Fore Street, started by his father, William Wilson Gibson, in

1934.) Gibson numbered his postcards so many can be dated with a fair degree of accuracy.

Gibson's son John continued postcard production after Gibson's death but he did not have quite the same enthusiasm as his father. Gibson and Son published over 3000 cards over a period of 20 years and their work provides a valuable insight into Hexham and the County during the early 20th Century. This is a handsome book and a worthwhile addition to the resources available for anyone interested in the people and places of Northumberland. *Rodney Higgins*.

Both books are available from Cogito Book Shop, 5 St. Mary's Chare, Hexham.

Correction:

Please note that the picture captioned Hole Bastle in the last newsletter was in fact Black Middens Bastle. The error was entirely that of the editor and not Mollie Telford who wrote the article. I should, of course, explain that it was a deliberate error designed to see who had taken notice on the outing... there will be a test later.

HJR



Black Middens Bastle



Hole Bastle

Editorial

The Society is taking part in the Northumberland and Border History Fair on 2nd December. The display is being constructed at the time of writing and we have some enlarged pictures from the covers of *The Historian* and other publications to put on display but, to add some personal touches and to encourage others to join, we would like some photographs of outings, or members of the Society pictured next to monuments or buildings linked with Hexham, to add some colour to the stand. If you have any photographs of any events you have attended or anything you think might be fun and relevant, please contact any of the Committee members. All pictures will be looked after and will be copied and returned to you. Any contributions are welcome.

The members of the Committee are still coming to terms with Tom's untimely death. Although we appreciated how integral his contribution was to the Society it is not until now that we have realised quite how much he did to ensure the smooth running of the Society. As a result the programme for next year may be slightly delayed and we trust members will bear with us whilst we appoint a new programme secretary and start the wheels in motion again.

**Outings: advance
publicity**

The outings organised by the Society are always well attended and many members look forward to the variety on offer each summer. J B Jonas has already been busy setting up a trio of trips for 2007 and, to enable member to plan their diaries here is below a sneak preview of the 2007 programme. Dates may be subject to slight adjustment: but it is fairly safe to put them in your diary now.

Sunday 20th May

An afternoon trip to **Finchdale Priory** and **Crook Hall**, in Durham City. The trip will depart Hexham at 12 noon, with pickups at the usual points and return at around 6pm. Finchdale Priory was founded by Godric, a sailor and merchant who decided to become a hermit. St Cuthbert appeared to him in a vision and suggested he set up a hermitage and this small, but perfectly formed priory was the result. In 1408 it became holiday retreat for monks from Durham. Crook Hall is a mediaeval manor house beside the river Wear, with a ghost and Alan Titchmarsh-recommended gardens. (Something for everyone) The timing will allow trippers to visit Durham as well as Crook Hall.

Sunday 17th June

A full day trip to Cumbria, taking in **Brougham Castle** near Penrith, once the seat of the Clifford family and **Hutton-in-the Forest**, the home of Lord Inglewood. Brougham is a ruined castle in a picturesque riverside location. Hutton-in-the Forest comprises a house built over six periods from the mid fourteenth to the mid nineteenth century and the gardens have a wonderful collection of trees as well as topiary and a walled garden. It is hoped that a tour with the estate gardener will be part of the package.

Saturday 21st July

Woodhorn Colliery Museum and the new **Northumberland Archives**.

This will be a full day trip. There will be a choice of two tours (both with limited spaces so early booking will be essential) The first is the Dark Side Tour of the mining complex. This is not usually open to the public. The second will be the Great Woodhorn Tour including coal town and the archive storage pods.

Full details with itineraries, information and cost will be circulated at a later date.

If anyone has any ideas for future issues or contributions for the newsletter please contact Helen Rutherford h.j.rutherford@fsmail.net or 601990. All contributions are welcome.