

# Elstree & Borehamwood Museum Friends Newsletter May 2015 Issue Number 8



## *THE GREAT WAR REMEMBERED!*

The 15th to 17th of January saw considerable activity at the museum. The exhibition to celebrate 75 years of Hillside School was removed after a very popular run of over 3 months and replaced by 'Over by Christmas', a look at Elstree and Borehamwood during WW1. Among the many exhibits are examples of Princess Mary's 1914 'Gift Box' containing cigarettes or sweets. Over 400,000 were distributed to servicemen by Christmas Day 1914. The story boards concentrate on the effect of the war on the local population. One poignant memory is of the Annual Sports Day held at Elstree School on the Monday Bank Holiday, a day before war was declared. It was to be the last joyous occasion before the local community and the world was plunged into the devastation of 'The Great War' that would last for over 4 years.

On the evening of the 17th January a special event was held to showcase the new exhibition. The reception was held in the museum, and surrounding area, with plenty of snacks and drinks available for the guests as they enjoyed a preview of the exhibits. A screening of the film 'A County at War' (Life on the home front in Hertfordshire) followed in the main hall, and Borehamwood Light Operatic Society performed songs from WW1 which the audience joined in enthusiastically. In attendance were the deputy Lord Lieutenant, Stuart Nagler, Mayor and Mayoress of Hertsmere, Cllr Carey and Shirley Keates and Mayor of Elstree and Borehamwood, Cllr Pat Strack. Over 100 people attended and the evening was a great success raising useful

funds for the museum as well as its profile within the community. There are many people to thank for this very enjoyable evening from the ticket sellers to those who served the food and drinks. Special thanks must go to Clive & Elaine Butchins for championing the event from conception to successful conclusion. It was a great start to the new year for the museum.



Museum Trustees, Cynthia Barker (left) and Mary Hanson at Schopwick Place

On Saturday 14th March another special event was held at Schopwick Place in Elstree for the 'Friends' of the museum. It was an opportunity to 'meet and

greet' friends and volunteers both new and of long standing whose contributions and support is essential to the running of the museum.

A glass of wine, cup of tea or coffee and a splendid and varied buffet made for a very pleasant afternoon. There was a prize picture quiz and a very interesting talk by Ann Lawrence which provided an insight into the early days of the original Drayton Road museum of which she and her husband Alan were founder members. Dave Armitage, Museum Manager, reminded everybody that 7,500 visitors have enjoyed the exhibitions at the new museum since it first opened its doors on the 18th November, 2013. A long way to go but we must be doing something right! Further events are planned in the future as we attempt to expand our circle of 'Friends', so please stay with us.

Well done to all involved and many thanks to Ann and Norman Shuker for once again inviting us to their home and providing a wonderful venue.

## ***READ ALL ABOUT IT! - GHASTLY MURDER!***

In late October 1823, Radlett and Elstree made the national newspaper headlines with a sensational murder. The victim was William Weare and the subsequent investigation and trial caught the public imagination and was avidly followed as the gruesome details of the events unfolded in the newspapers.

The four main participants in this grisly story were all gamblers, chancers and frequenters of the London 'Hells' (seedy gambling clubs that flourished in that era and where fortunes could be won or lost on the turn of a card).

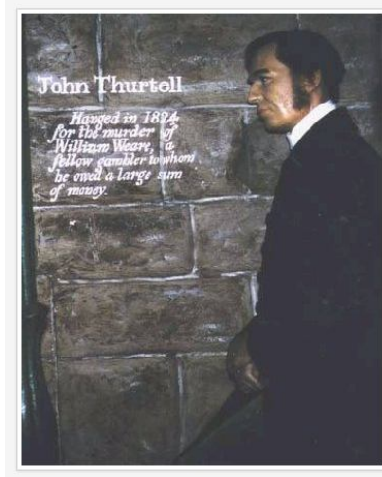
**William Weare (the victim)**, began his working life as a waiter at the Globe Tavern in Fleet Street, and subsequently became an official at a gaming house. A billiard player, regular race goer, with a love of shooting, he lived in Lyon's Inn, Holborn with his sporting dogs and was regularly seen exercising them in that area. Well dressed with gentlemanly manners he was rumoured to keep large sums of money about his person, having a deep mistrust of banks.

**Thurtell (the murderer)**, was the son of a highly respected merchant in Norwich who was also an Alderman of that city. Through his father's influence, Thurtell gained a commission in the Royal Marines and on returning to civilian life became a fabric manufacturer in Norwich. His business took him to London where he became infatuated with the seedy 'sporting world' to such an extent that his business failed and he went to live permanently in London, becoming an amateur boxer, promoter and gambler. He briefly leased the Cock Tavern in Haymarket but his licence was suspended due to a string of unpaid bills and his descent into the criminal world continued.

**William Probert (accomplice)**, was the son of a farmer and a man of colossal stature who was fortunate enough to marry well and start a business as a wine merchant. He failed dramatically and was said to owe £22,000 pounds to creditors on his bankruptcy. He was imprisoned in Kings Bench prison from where he somehow managed to continue trading.

**Joseph Hunt (accomplice)**, was another chancer and gamer, always flashily dressed, bewhiskered and a regular visitor to theatres, gambling dens and places of amusement. His main claim to fame was as a singer.

Thurtell had lost the enormous sum of £300 to Weare in what Thurtell considered to be a fixed game of blind hookey (a card game of chance). He conceived a plan with Hunt and Probert to exact his revenge. He invited Weare, Hunt and Probert for a weekend of shooting at Probert's cottage in Gills Hill Lane, Radlett and they duly set off from London on Friday 24th October 1823. Thurtell and Weare led the way in one gig (a two wheeled carriage) with Hunt and Probert following in another. The party raced along the Edgware Road, calling at taverns and overtaking one another along the way as they set forth on their boozy, sporty and ultimately murderous weekend. They stopped at numerous taverns along the way, consuming vast quantities of brandy & rum.



Thurtell's waxwork in Madame Tussauds

At about 8pm, close to Gills Hill Lane, Thurtell tried to shoot Weare, but the pistol misfired and Weare attempted a desperate escape. Thurtell caught up with him and rammed the pistol into Weare's skull with such force that blood, hair and brain tissue were left in the barrel - then for good measure he cut his victim's throat with a sheath knife.

Hunt and Probert arrived soon after in their gig and Weare's body was thrown into a fish pond in the garden of Probert's cottage. The pond was so shallow that Weare's toes were visible above the water and the following Monday night the body was moved to a larger pond near Elstree close to the junction of Watling Street and Allum Lane.

Despite the murder there was considerable drinking and merriment in Probert's cottage that Friday evening and it went on well into the early hours. After supper Hunt sang several songs over the grog (rum and water) and Thurtell gallantly presented Mrs. Probert with the gold chain he had taken from Weare's body. However, Thurtell had left the knife and pistol by the roadside at the murder scene, where they were found by some farm labourers on the Saturday morning. They had met Hunt and

Thurtell at the same spot where they were apparently trying to remove the evidence.

There were no police at this time but word reached the magistrates who called in the Bow Street Runners. Soon John Thurtell, Probert and Hunt were arrested. Honour among criminals soon fell by the wayside as Probert and Hunt turned King's Evidence, pointing the finger at Thurtell and disclosing the location of Weare's body.

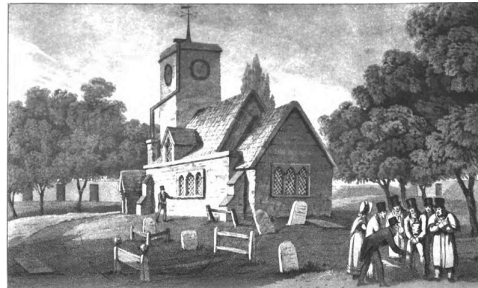
The body was recovered and an inquest was held at the Artichoke public house, Elstree, whose licensee, Mr Field, was foreman of the jury. The jury were shocked by the murder of Weare, which was described as 'cruel, barbarous and bloody'. William Weare's corpse was examined by Doctors Ward and Kendall, of Watford. Cause of death was severe blows to the skull, by the pistol, causing pieces of bone to lodge in the brain.

William Weare was buried in St Nicholas church just before midnight early in November, attended by a large crowd of mourners, many carrying lanterns before and after the coffin. Having been brutally murdered, dumped in a fishpond, removed and dumped in a larger pond in a weighted sack you would hope that the unfortunate victim would be allowed to rest in peace. However, in order to confirm the testimony of an ostler at the White Horse in Edgware, it was decided to exhume the body for identification purposes and this was duly carried out one dark and stormy night (no cliché intended). When a lantern was shone on the opened coffin it became obvious that no further identification of Mr Weare would ever be possible and he was reinterred where he remains to this day, although the exact spot would seem impossible to identify.

On the 4th December 1823 the trial of Thurtell, Probert and Hunt took place at Hertford Assizes and drew thousands of spectators to the town. Such was the publicity and speculation that it was questioned whether the defendants could possibly have a fair trial. The proceedings were not without some humour. Hunt was questioned about the supper indulged in immediately after the murder: "Was the supper postponed?"—"No, it was pork." When someone was asked about the character of Thurtell, the answer was that he must be a gentleman because he kept a 'gig'.

Thurtell and Hunt were found guilty and sentenced to death. Probert who had turned King's Evidence was released.

John Thurtell was publicly hanged outside Hertford jail on January 9, 1824, aged 29, having admitted his guilt saying 'I am quite satisfied, I forgive the world'. The day after his death, his body was dissected as was the practice of the day. A waxwork of Thurtell was displayed in Madame Tussauds for 150 years and his skull is now on display at the Hunterian Collection at the Royal College of Surgeons in London.



Burial of William Weare at St Nicholas

Joseph Hunt was also sentenced to death but, in recognition of his cooperation, his sentence was commuted to transportation to an Australian penal colony for life. He

was taken to Botany Bay, where he rehabilitated. After serving his time, he gained his freedom and started a life in Australia, marrying and raising a son and a daughter. He became such a respected citizen that he served as a police constable in Bathurst, New South Wales. He died in 1861.

William Probert was never punished for Weare's death. However reports of his involvement in the newspapers meant he was reviled and became a social outcast. Unable to find work, he resorted to crime to support himself and his wife, and in 1825, at the age of 33, was hanged at Newgate Prison for stealing a horse, worth £25, from a relative.

Besides the gruesome details, the murder was also sensational because it exposed the seedy London clubs of gambling and amateur boxing to a public who were largely unaware of it. As more details were published of the underworld which Thurtell and Weare had inhabited, there were increasing calls for something to be done. The case continued to excite public interest throughout the century with visitors even taking pieces of the blood spattered hedgerow close to where the murder took place. Sir Walter Scott visited the scene and declared it a perfect spot for murder with its labyrinth of intricate lanes. He did concede however that the pond in Probert's garden was a totally unsuitable place for hiding a body.

If there is a lesson for all of us in this sad and sorry tale it must be, as all the adverts remind us:

**'PLEASE GAMBLE RESPONSIBLY'**

## Museum Outreach News

March has been a busy month for the museum's Education Team, with two class visits to the museum and a presentation booked at another school.

Two classes of 8-9 year olds from Summerswood School took part in a programme of workshops based on the current 'Over by Christmas' First World War Exhibition. The morning started with a whole class Power Point presentation on Elstree and Borehamwood in 1914. The children were then divided into three groups and, on a rota basis, followed a Museum Trail, investigated local maps and handled a range of artefacts related to WW1.

This was the first opportunity for Vania (Community Learning Officer) to assess the programme of activities which she had created specifically for the First World War Centenary exhibition and delivered in collaboration with Jane Toyne from the Hertfordshire Library Service. The feedback has been very positive. As one teacher said 'The museum staff were very friendly and helpful throughout the session, the children and I found them very approachable and we were encouraged to ask any questions that we might have had about the exhibition. I will definitely consider visiting the museum again for any future topics. Thank You!'

Monksmead School are booked to participate in the same programme after Easter with a class of 9-10 year olds.

At the end of March, members of the Education Team visited Cowley Hill School and delivered a short presentation on 'The Changing Face of Borehamwood' followed by a mini handling session. This has proved very popular and is in fact the third time that we have visited the school since the opening of the Museum at Shenley Road.

A big 'Thank You' to all the volunteers who have helped in delivering such a successful programme: Dave Armitage, Lynda Marshall, Palma Crabbe, Helen Stamp and Melody Mallett.

The 'Words in The Wood Literacy Project' exhibition at 96 Shenley Road is a close collaboration of 13 local schools within Borehamwood, Shenley and Elstree aiming to foster a climate of inspiration and creativity. This year's project took 'Where the Poppies Now



A Summerswood School pupil examining a silk postcard from WW1

Grow', a book written by Hilary Robinson and illustrated by Martin Impey, as a stimulus for a shared literacy focus across participating schools. The resulting Exhibition showcased the work produced by the pupils.

Vania organised, with the help of volunteers, the Museum's stand at the exhibition and arranged for the participation of Dan Hill from Herts at War, who provided an exhibit of

First World War artefacts which visitors could handle.

### Forthcoming Events in 2015

**Saturday, May 2nd (11am-4pm)** - The museum will be represented at the Piazza event next to All Saints Church.

**Saturday, June 6th (7pm-9.30pm)** - A 'Friends' event at the museum including a talk entitled 'Europe Erupts' (WW1 from the German perspective) plus the film 'A County at War'. If you wish to attend this event please book by phoning Brenda Treacher on 0208 207 1187 or email: 'friendsofeandbwmuseum@hotmail.co.uk' by 30th May.

**Sunday, June 21st (2pm-4pm)** - Annual museum history walk - details to be announced.

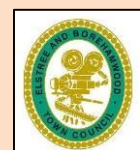
**Saturday, June 27th (12-5pm)** - The museum will be represented at 'Families Day' in Meadow Park.

**Tuesday, June 30th** - WW1 exhibition at the museum ends and the museum closes for 2 weeks.

**Tuesday, July 14th** - The museum opens with a new exhibition to celebrate 30 years of Eastenders.

Elstree & Borehamwood Museum  
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Borehamwood  
Hertfordshire  
WD6 1EB  
Tel 01442 454888

Open 12pm - 6pm Tues, Wed & Thurs  
10am-3pm Sat



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