

ALCESTER & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

MARCH 2015



Flood at end of
School Road, 1914

(ADLHS Collection)

www.alcesterhistory.org.uk

LAST MEETING: In the time honoured fashion of our Society, February's meeting began with Annual General Meeting. Chairman Graham Downie gave his report on a very successful 40th anniversary year culminating in our two day photographic exhibition at Alcester Town Hall in July, when attendances exceeded all our expectations with almost 400 people attending during the weekend. Graham reported upon a succession of very well attended meetings throughout the year with the highlight being a special guest speaker, Dr Chris Dyer of Leicester University, whose marvellous talk produced a record attendance of over a hundred and fifty people.

At the end of his report Graham announced that he would be standing down as Chairman with immediate effect. President David Moulson then thanked Graham for leading the Society very successfully for at least, the last 15 years. The President then presided over the election of a new Chairman. As there were no other nominations, Vice-Chairman Alan Godfrey was elected, unopposed, as the new Chairman of the Society.

Following a break for refreshments Graham Downie again took the floor, this time in his guise as speaker for the evening. His talk entitled **Showmen and Fairs of the Black Country** echoed a life-long interest in the subject in question and amply displayed his skills as a speaker. As Chairman of the Fairground Association Graham is also an acknowledged expert on the subject.

The zenith of the popularity of fairs in England was from the mid-19th century to the first quarter of the 20th century. The arrival in a town or village of a fair with its noise, lights and clamour plus unique musical sound together with exotic animals and wonderfully ornate rides, all drew people like a magnet when other sources of mass entertainment were often few & home-made at that.

Graham Downie's talk focused mainly on the life and career of Pat Collins, possibly the greatest showman England had ever seen. Originally from Ireland he made his home in the Black Country and built an empire of fairgrounds which travelled all over the country. Some of the most notable fairs were the Birmingham Onion Fair and Hanley Wakes in the Potteries.

The 'Wonderland Show' which Pat Collins introduced to the public in 1907 must have seemed unbelievably exotic to those who first saw it and provided a welcome escape from workaday lives.

As well as travelling the country with various huge fairs, Collins shrewdly, often bought the land on which the fairs were held and thus needed no permission to hold them.

Abberley and Kinver were both nearby places of recreation for the people of the Black Country to visit at holiday times and so, of course, fairs were held there too with special excursion trains bringing the hordes from early morning to evening.

This marvellous talk was beautifully illustrated with a range of rare photographs of the fairs themselves, fairground people and rides and the various members of Pat Collins family.

SUMMER EXCURSIONS: This year we will be organising two trips during the Spring and Summer months. The first, for members and friends, will be a visit to Oxford on Saturday May 23rd. The coach will leave Alcester at 9.00am arriving in Oxford, outside the world famous Ashmolean Museum at approximately 10.00am. You may visit the museum if you wish or simply explore the sights and sounds of Oxford at your leisure, or, do both! We will provide a guide book for each person. The price will be £12 per person and we will be taking bookings at the next three meetings.

Our second excursion in July will be an evening visit, by coach, to **Tewkesbury Heritage Centre**. More details to follow- [bookings for this trip will not be taken until May.](#)

SUBSCRIPTIONS: Any of our members who are not able to attend meetings regularly are welcome to send their subscriptions to me by post – 37, Corinthian Court, Stratford Road, Alcester, B49 5AY. For this year, subscriptions remain at £3 per person, plus the cost of postage if you receive your Newsletter by post. Cheques should be made out to 'Alcester & District Local History Society'.

NEXT MEETING: At our next meeting on Wednesday, 11th March, we will again be welcoming a returning speaker, Robin Hill, now retired as Curator of Hartlebury Museum in Worcestershire. Many will recall Robin Hill's wonderful, interactive talk on the formation of the Women's Land Army which he gave three years ago. On this occasion he will focus on Marjory Wright, a prolific photographer who chronicled country life in Worcestershire and Shropshire throughout her life from 1889 to 1973. The talk is entitled **A Lifetime Through the Lens** and will obviously be profusely illustrated.

Meetings are held at St Benedict's 6th Form Centre, Alcester and commence at 8.00pm. All are welcome to attend.

SUE FISHER.