

ALCESTER & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY
MONTHLY NEWSLETTER
MARCH 2016



Toothill's Harness
Makers shop in
Alcester High St. Circa.
1914. (ADLHS
Collection)

www.alcesterhistory.org.uk

FEBRUARY MEETING: The meeting began with the business of the AGM. Chairman Alan Godfrey gave a resume of a successful and busy year for the Society beginning with the removal of our archives to space provided for us at Church House in the heart of Alcester. We had a wonderful selection of speakers throughout the year and two successful outings to Oxford and Winchcombe were organised during the summer months. We also had a stall at the annual street market from which we gained several new members and made healthy sales of our various publications.

The finances of the Society remain relatively healthy and indeed a small profit was made during the year. This year's small rise in subscription rate from £3 to £5 per person should ensure that this situation continues.

John Shakles, our much loved bookseller at meetings and a committee member for many years had decided to stand down from the committee and was warmly thanked for all his hard work over the years including a stint as vice-chairman. All the remaining committee members had signified their willingness to continue and they were thus re-elected *en-bloc*.

Following the AGM and a break for refreshments, our speaker for the evening took the floor. Graham Smith of Redditch, and a teacher for over 36 years, gave a wonderful illustrated talk on Edwin and William Smallwood of both Redditch and Alcester. The Smallwood almshouses which stand in Birmingham Road, Alcester, today, remain as a monument to the family.

The family were, however, benefactors to both towns and donated large sums toward the eventual founding of a hospital in Redditch, still operating under the NHS and still known as the Smallwood Hospital; and also almshouses in both Redditch and Alcester. Certainly the Smallwood Almshouses on Birmingham Road in Alcester and adjacent to the cemetery, will be a familiar landmark to many Alcesterians.

The Smallwoods were needlemakers in a business started by William Smallwood senior, who, as a young man was apprenticed at William Bartlett & Sons. He married Elizabeth Bartlett in 1807 and subsequently set up his own business and went into partnership with John Wright, a surgeon of Birmingham, wherein they perfected a process which we would now call 'electro-plating' to make 'gold' tipped needles.

The story of the Smallwood family's rise in prominence was told against the political and social background of the times, including the great Reform Act, the rise of the Chartist movement and increasing awareness of Public Health.

The Public Health Act of 1848 gave local authorities the power to set up local Boards of Health and to find the means of providing basic health care for the local population. Edwin Smallwood was appointed to the Board of Health and in 1873 Dr Herbert Page produced a damning annual report citing Redditch as '**one of the most unsanitary towns in England**'. Though it was another 30 years before a hospital actually opened, following a bequest of £5,000 from Edwin when he died in 1892.

Edwin's brother William had moved to Alcester as a young man and remained here for the rest of his life working as an auctioneer and maltster in Priory Road, in premises attached to the Golden Lion. William, as the only surviving member of the Smallwoods, with no wife or children of his own, had built up a considerable fortune and became a true philanthropist helping many people in need and making a massive donation of £15,000 toward the building of the Redditch Smallwood Hospital.

In his eighteen eighties he was a really rich man and embarked on building the alms-houses in Birmingham Road for elderly tradespeople who had fallen upon hard times. Altogether it is thought that he donated some £50,000 to various charitable causes and, between them, the two Smallwood brothers can be said to have given more financially, than anyone else to the towns of Redditch & Alcester.

NEXT MEETING: Another fascinating insight into the past will emerge when our speaker in March, Ann Langley, examines **Victorian Village Life**. Mrs Langley is a volunteer at Warwick Record Office and also the Secretary of her own village Local History Society. The story is based around a Victorian school log-book which paints a fascinating picture of village life, warts & all! The next meeting will be on Wednesday 9th March at St. Benedict's Sixth Form Centre commencing at 8.00pm. Visitors are welcome.

SUE FISHER