

VILLAGE PROBUS CLUB OF HARPENDEN



BULLETIN



AN OCCASIONAL REPORT ON CLUB ACTIVITIES

Issue: March 2025

13 February

David Butler's Induction

New member David Butler was warmly welcomed to the Club by Chairman Colin Robinson with presentation of our induction pack including Club Tie and Pin.



17 February

Amazon Fulfilment Centre Visit

A grand total of 18 VPCoH Members, partners and friends gathered in the entrance to LTN4, the Dunstable Amazon Fulfilment Centre, with some wondering what to expect. Following John Bryant's valiant but abortive pre-lockdown attempts to book us a visit, we were more successful now that Amazon have reopened the opportunity for greater numbers, up to 25 per session. The booking process appeared more difficult than it actually was, so it was with some trepidation that all those who had expressed interest would gain entry on the day!

We had organised ourselves into self-drive car-sharing from Harpenden to find our way there and be met cheerfully by our host Sylwia who opened the security formalities per the copious Amazon Tours emails, which we all passed... She equipped us with hi-tech badges and personal audio kits, then welcomed us with the Health and Safety briefing for an automated warehouse. With her colleagues Adrina and Katrina she led us (with several others booked on the same tour) into the three-storey main building, past one of the two staff cafeterias, for our 10.30 a.m. Tour, starting with an order-picking demonstration. The level of automation is awesome, with the whereabouts of each of the 7 million or so available items known all the time to the computer system, being carried in free-standing "towers" which are themselves transported at high speed by small motor units to the appropriate picking station for the human operators to load into tote bins for onward progression to packing stations. There they are put into those ubiquitous "smile" boxes with that crumpled brown paper, closed with computer-generated lengths of sticky tape and conveyed through the "SLAM" units where the order address label is applied, towards the shipping area.

Unfortunately, the process of stowing incoming deliveries in the towers was not yet available to visits but we had a good look at the open floor where 20,000 of them manoeuvre with no collisions and without any human intervention. Despite the automation, around 1,700 people are on the payroll at Dunstable, needed to despatch the hundreds of thousands of packages produced through 24-hour operation, shut down only for Christmas and New Year's Day.



Our thanks went to Sylwia and her colleagues for this photo from a fascinating and hugely informative visit. We repaired to The Market Cross next door for lunch which concluded the visit happily...

Report by Visits Group Leader - Alan Falconer

18 February

February Walk

Having volunteered to lead the February walk in the absence of anyone else I decided on a simple route based on Ashridge with lunch at Bridgewater Arms. Alas my easy way out was thwarted by treacherous terrain. I decided on the Upper Valley Lea Walk which is, in essence, part of the route of the Dunstable to Hatfield railway line but now having a tarmac surface. Dining to be at Marquis of Granby at the bottom of Crabtree Lane but plan thwarted by pub now closing on a Tuesday lunchtime as well as Monday. So, the Amble Inn, Station Road was where David Butler, Sandy Bisland, Bryan Coventry, Jim Davies, Alan Falconer, Tim Potter, Richard Upton and I gathered.

The Amble Inn was formerly the Dolphin (from 1963) and before that (from 1937) the Railway Inn and originally The Great Northern Inn in 1861. The Dolphin was not named after a dolphin that used to play in the River Lea but after Dolphin Smith a local farmer based in Mackerye End and who in 1955 gave the land for the "new" All Saints Church in memory of his son who had been killed in the Second World War.

The single-track railway line opened in 1858 and was closed in 1965 and we started our walk in earnest at the old Harpenden East Station site. Now Waveney Road and where there were two platforms being the only such point between Luton and Welwyn. The junction box was sited at the bottom of West Way whilst the land on the other side of the tracks was a goods yard and where manure from the London Zoo elephant house was unloaded to feed the nearby greenhouse tomato crop. Goods the other way also included watercress grown where Coldharbour Lane now sits. In the 1940's about 8-10 passenger trains a day plus goods including Vauxhall cars and tanks and occasional passenger specials carrying football crowds.

The route travels alongside Coldharbour Lane on the right and housing on the left including crossing Ox Lane. We then crossed Westfield Road and where shortly after we came across the site of the home of Roman snails and found an empty shell. Onwards with railway on one side and fields down to River Lea on the right then crossing Cooters End Lane at East Hyde. No time for a diversion to the previously visited Greek Orthodox Church of St Charambos (former Holy Trinity Church) graveyard where the Wernher Mausoleum lies. The Wernhers being the former owners of Luton Hoo and at time of death of Julius in 1912 said to be one of richest men in Europe – worth £12m.

Under the main railway line bridge and on our right the start of the land occupied by East Hyde site of Thames Water i.e. the sewage works. Nearing West Hyde Road, we could clearly see the outlets dripping the sludge known as “sewage cake” and used as fertilizer – some chemical recovery also takes place. Very little smell and local residents do have a phone number to use if the smell becomes intense and a sweet-smelling chemical is then added.

By now we were at the old Luton Hoo Station (New Mill Station until 1891) with the platform edge very visible. Station House extended lengthwise as well as upwards. Was said to be the only station with canopies on three sides and built to protect Royalty from the weather when visiting Luton Hoo. Prince of Wales who became George V alighted there in 1878.

Crossed the road with more sewage plant on the right then over the River Lea and Lower Luton Road and reaching the road leading to Someries Castle. Decision time – do we turn back or walk on a further half mile or so to the statues. What statues? Walk on was the cry. We arrived at our turn round spot and there looking across from the path with railway at our backs we saw the grounds of Luton Hoo. Laid out by Capability Brown and one of the three metal statues. The others being Eric Morecambe and a Sea Scout marking the Luton Sea Scout Unit further along Lower Luton Road.



We retraced our steps to the Amble Inn and believe that we may well have set a record for the longest walk in Village Probus history – a mere 7.5 miles.

We were joined at lunch by David Keith, Bryan King and John Powell and again somewhat different for, apart from the usual pub classics several partook of Indian dishes.

Report by Walk Leader - Graham Westwell

18 March

College of Arms Visit

Having travelled to London Blackfriars Station and walked some 200 yards, our party of 20 duly assembled at the College for a prompt 6.30pm start.



We gathered in the Earl Marshall's Court and which is the only room open to the general public. Our host for the evening William Hunt, former York Herald introduced Tom Scott, Rouge Croix Pursuivant and then gave a welcoming talk embracing history of the College with Charter of Incorporation in 1484 but very much active before then. First crest 1127 and used on shields at jousting tournaments. Since 1417 approval by the College has been necessary. Disputes under the Court of Chivalry and pertaining to Heraldry and alleged misuse of crests are held in that room.



The College is the official repository of the Coats of Arms and pedigrees of English, Welsh, Northern Irish and Commonwealth families. NOTE: a Coat of Arms belongs to a specified family or individual and there is no such thing as a Coat of Arms for a family name.

“Executive” is headed through hereditary by The Earl Marshall, the Duke of Norfolk. There are 3 Kings of Arms, 6 Heralds and 4 Pursuivants. In addition to Coats of Arms they attend in all their Heraldry splendour the Annual Ceremony of the Order of the Garter and the State Opening of Parliament. They are responsible for the organisation of State Funerals and the Monarch’s Coronation. Heralds are paid a token amount of salary (William was paid £17.80 per year)) and earn a living by receipt of commissions to create a Coat of Arms. Warning! If you wish to create a new Crest then £9,200 is needed (£ 18,960 for a Body Corporate).

He then moved us through to the “interview” room where we were able to sit down and enjoy a glass of wine whilst William recounted the history of the College premises and told us the story of the splendid wrought iron fencing and double gate and which are not old at all. They bear the inscription 1956 - the year when they were donated. The numbers confused an American lady who was looking for no 130 Queen Victoria Street!

He then developed his theme of what constituted a Coat of Arms, how the Heralds relate them so personally to the individual and how they bring it all together.



And then in to the record room. There is no computer recording just microfiche but only 3 weeks ago started digitising- a mammoth task. If you wish to have a copy of your existing Coat of Arms you have to commission a painting of it. Tom brought from the cupboards some dozen or so books/ledgers many with original binding containing Coats of Arms and supporting pedigrees going back to origination of the College. All recorded on vellum and with the colours as vivid as when first created. There is a set order of procession for Coronations and we were shown literally pages and pages of drawings of every person (s) from a side view perspective of the Coronation Queen Elizabeth 1. We were shown Coats of Arms and family trees for the Royal Family and some with the signature of the Royal personage alongside. Other notable ones included Cardinal Wolsey and Nelson and who, every time he was awarded an honour for such as beating the Spanish and then the French, had his crest updated. Both St Albans and Harpenden Councils were shown. He mentioned Bruce Forsyth’s Coat of Arms include a pair of dancing shoes and showed us the crest of Edward Heath which had steps across the crest representing Broadstairs where he was born.



Then we returned to the Interview Room for a splendid buffet and more wine. Our host, William, clearly loved his role, lived it and his enthusiasm as well as deep knowledge and experience enabled him to deliver an outstanding visit with such detailed and fascinating information in a most humorous and entertaining style.

We departed at 9.00 pm for a fast journey home but alas no such luck. All trains were only going as far as Kentish Town due to a fire alarm problem at Farringdon. Possibility of going to St Pancras and catching a Midland line train to Luton. Some ventured to do that then suddenly a train to Bedford appeared on the board and not very far away!! Three Bridges to be exact. To cut a long story short the majority of us were on the very crowded train that pulled into Harpenden shortly after 11.00pm.

Report by Visit Organiser - Graham Westwell

26 March

March Walk

The eleven members and dog, Mira, who met up for the Whipsnade circular walk were rewarded with perfect Spring weather under a cloudless sky. We set off from the Old Hunter's Lodge soon after 10am and strolled gently through heath, woods and fields, enjoying the sight of red kites and butterflies, to a backing track of skylark song.



A beautifully deep and open valley below the chalk quarry tested our stamina for a while, but before long we reached Dunstable downs and took in the expanse of the view from the escarpment looking towards Ivinghoe beacon and beyond to the west.



We tracked back along the ancient hilltop route that linked the Icknield Way to the Ridgeway, took in the NT Tree Cathedral (a new discovery for a couple of our group) and some recent tree planting, before returning to the pub on the dot of 12.15 for our lunch. A thoroughly enjoyable morning.

Report by Walk Leader - Paul Manuel