

Bedfordshire Historical Record Society

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Newsletter No 1

The whole purpose of a society like ours is to explore, interpret and make available old documents and records of all kinds so that historians, academics and the simply curious can learn from our past and our ancestors' way of life. For more than a century this Society (BHRS) has been doing this and members, both individual and institutions like universities and libraries, have been receiving an annual volume of transcribed documents and interpretation of original research.

The internet age has given us an extraordinary new opportunity. We have digitised 100 years of volumes so all of them are now available online. Perhaps the most exciting part of that is that they are searchable for key words and phrases so any topic in any volume can be found quickly.

For Bedfordshire historians there is an even greater bonus. BHRS was given the copyright and the entire collection of the Bedfordshire Magazine, a quarterly historical journal touching every aspect of life in Bedfordshire. It ran from 1947 right through to 1999 and is packed with pictures and insights into the county's life through the centuries. The quality of the work it contains is excellent, including many learned articles as well as insights into local history.

Every nook and cranny of life in the county gets examined and Digital Heritage Library has made each volume searchable by single words. Alongside this gift of copyright many of the hundreds of high-quality pictures carried in the magazine were donated to the County Record Office in Bedford. They show the buildings, countryside and the treasures of Bedfordshire. Some are precious records of places and ways of life that have since disappeared.



In exploring how to further the Society's aims by making this resource known to a wider section of Bedfordshire people and the academic community a visit was arranged to the Record Office to look at the picture archive. The onion shed, shown on the previous page, was of immediate interest since it was an attractive building but mostly because it was a reminder of our rich agricultural heritage. The photograph was taken in September 1988 and in pencil on the back says it is a derelict 19th Century onion drying shed. "The onions were laid on the floor of the upper chamber which had wire netting over upright timbers." The caption writer remarks that the "hinge irons on the upper door are interesting." The picture also shows the wire netting piled in front of the shed. The shed was "near Biggleswade" but its exact location was to be kept secret at the request of the owner. Does this shed still exist?



Another set of pictures that appeared of immediate interest were of Chicksands Priory taken in 1978. This ancient monastic establishment was at the time the top-secret cold war United States listening post, but the Bedfordshire Magazine was clearly given access denied to the public.

Some of the pictures duly appeared alongside a two-part history of Chicksands in subsequent magazines. Above is the exterior of the building itself and below (not possible to publish at the time because of the Official Secrets Act) is one of the "elephant cage" - the vast metal structure used to collect cold war radio data that has now been demolished and has disappeared from the landscape.

The purpose of this newsletter is to alert all members of the Society to this wonderful new resource now available to them, and to tempt historians and the curious everywhere to become new members.



Membership costs will rise to £20 a year from 2024 to reflect the more realistic cost of producing an annual volume - however, it also allows digital access to all past volumes published by the Society since 1912 at £4 each and all editions of the Bedfordshire Magazine free. It is a goldmine.

To join the Society and get the necessary passwords for access to this cornucopia of information and fun contact: Margaret Evans bedfordshirehrs@gmail.com

The website is: <https://www.bedfordshirehrs.org.uk/>

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