

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - January 2007

The Secrets of the Box

At the January meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society, Tony Weston came to reveal The Secrets of the Box - a family writing box dating from the 1820s. He had inherited the box from his mother, but it was in a poor state of repair, and he decided to have it properly restored. It was made of rosewood, with brass inlay, mahogany and leather inside, with kingwood on the edges. From what could be seen of the box, he was fairly sure there was a secret compartment - but he could see no way to get into it. He found a specialist restorer of brass inlaid furniture in Caversham -- and he discovered the way to reach the secret compartment.

The 3 drawers and larger area in this compartment were found to be stuffed with papers, all neatly folded and tied with pink ribbon, but they were not connected to Tony's family, and had apparently laid undisturbed for over 120 years. The search then began to find out who the papers related to, and who the box had belonged to. Having been folded for so long, many were difficult to read. Many were shop receipts, and there were letters and other documents - such as a list of presents the owner had received when aged 12 -- dated 1825.

The receipts were from tradespeople in Newark, in Nottinghamshire, and many retained 1d stamps added as a way of paying duty on the goods. What was also notable was that most goods were bought 'on account', and often not paid for until some months after they had been received.

The receipts bore the name of a Mrs Scales - obviously a lady of some substance, as orders included 35 lbs of bacon (as a single order, in 1873), a cashmere dress etc (price £1-17-6d) etc. The bills revealed that dealings with 'a dealer in French corsets', a 'milliner and mantle maker', a mercantile and fancy stationer', etc - all in Newark, and all with elaborate bill headings. Weekly magazines cost 6/- for the year's supply ! A bill for a pair of white corsets and some lace revealed a house name, whilst another - for whisky - to Mr Scales showed that she was married at that time (1871). A block tin kettle - at 5/6d - added a street to the address, one from the brewers added Thomas as Mr Scales name, and £3/5/6 paid for 3 doctors visits was charged to Mr Scales, "The Factory" - so it seemed that he was in a manufacturing business. More intriguing was a bill from Thomas Scales to Mrs Scales for linen cloth at 9d per yd - on which she received discount of 1/4d - and seemingly charged back to the business!

Comparison with old and modern maps identified Hawton - about 2 miles from Newark - as the village where Thomas Scales had a small estate, and the Hawton Linen Mills. The mill made the linen for the Newark smock - the usual clothing for the local agricultural labourers, and also purple linen used by Queen Victoria's household. The details in the various census returns showed Thomas to have employed 10 men, 3 women and a boy there in 1871, although Thomas had retired by 1881. Further searching revealed that Mrs Scales - Mary Anna - had come from Cudworth, in Yorkshire, whilst at the time of their marriage, Thomas came from Islington, Middlesex. The linen mill had been started by George Scales (Thomas's

father) in 1793, and although offered for auction in 1846, Thomas had taken over in 1850. It was sold to a Mr Morley in 1874, and closed down in 1889 - mainly because its product was so good, it never wore out!

Tony was able to tell of much more social history from the Victorian era - and he showed us many of the documents, and the beautiful box in which they were found. He also revealed how the hidden compartment could be opened - but that we will keep a secret!
