

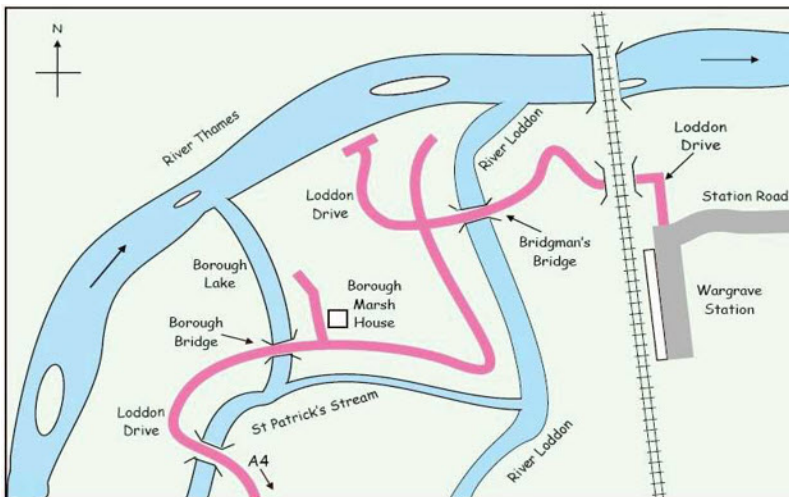
Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - February 2014

The History of Loddon Drive

The Wargrave Local History Society's February meeting was an illustrated presentation by Patsy Roynon on the History of Loddon Drive. We were especially fortunate that Patsy was able to join us, as the whole area had been under flood water for some time.

Patsy took the audience on a 'virtual walk' along Loddon Drive, starting by Wargrave Station. Early maps of the village show that there was nothing but fields to the west of St Mary's church, and on the Shiplake side of the River Thames the 19th century maps marked the land as 'liable to flooding'. Although the railway line to Henley was opened in 1857, there was no station at Wargrave until 1900. It was the opening of this that prompted the initial development of what is now known as Loddon Drive.



The River Loddon flows northwards through the area to the River Thames, which forms the northern boundary, whilst two other watercourses - St Patrick's Stream and Borough Lake - flow from the Thames to also feed into the Loddon. Borough Lake forms the western boundary and St Patrick's Stream the southern, thus creating an island on which most of Loddon Drive is situated.

Many Loddon Drive residents used to use Wargrave station to commute to London - the station had 2 platforms, a station master

and 2 porters, and regular passengers would find their daily papers - with their name on - on the waiting room table. The roadway alongside the railway to Loddon Drive from the station is a private one, belonging to the boatyard, over which Loddon Drive residents have a 'right of passage'. Access to Loddon Drive - itself a private road. - is through a low bridge under the railway. This can be the source of problems for residents, as in order to give sufficient headroom for vans to get through, the road dips. It is thus liable to floods, which do not drain away easily. At one time, pedestrians were able to use steps to go up and cross over the railway line, but now are provided with a raised catwalk under the bridge. Even so, the catwalk was under 18" of water in mid-February this year.

The first house built on Loddon Drive was on the left under the bridge. Dating from 1903, it was called Bon Accord - and maybe was built by agreement with the Great Western Railway, as it had a private gate to access the station platform. The other houses on the section of roadway before the bridge over the River Loddon are on the right-hand side, and have river frontage. In many cases, houseboats had been used alongside the weeping willows for families to spend idyllic summer



weekends by the river in the 1920s and 1930s. Many of the large plots of land subsequently had 'slivers' of land taken off to make several smaller properties.

Following the severe floods of 1947, many of the early residents moved away. Amongst those who bought a property at that time was Bryan Westwood. He was an architect, who had previously lived on a boat on the tidal Thames. Within the grounds was an Edwardian boathouse, and he converted this into a most unusual home, into which his family then moved. Built over a creek, the conversion preserved the boathouse, with living accommodation above the boat dock.

A 1930s picture of another house showed some substantial bollards alongside the river's edge to prevent boats from drifting onto the garden when the river level rose and becoming stranded when the level fell. In some cases, the original shack houses grew out of boats that had been beached in this way, although many houses have since been rebuilt - sometimes more than once. Often this has included raising the level to lift it above the anticipated flood level.

Across the river from here is Cape Farewell, (or Faieirewell on old maps, meaning mouth of the beautiful stream) located at the point where the Loddon joins the Thames. The house can only be seen from the river, and still has no road access. All the building materials for the original long low thatched house had therefore to be brought onto the site by boat. At one time it was owned by Sir George Broadbridge, one-time Lord Mayor of London, who named it Wargrave Place. In 1948, it was bought by the Long family. Sadly, a disastrous fire took hold, destroying the house in an hour and a half - its remote location meaning that nobody could bring help. It was soon rebuilt, however, although without thatch for the roof!



Several houseboats were moored along the banks of the Loddon, from the 1910s. Gradually, those developed into land-based homes, such as Laughing Water, which was originally built just after the end of World War 1. The house was rebuilt twice following fire damage - in the 1920s and the late 1930s. It was subsequently replaced around 10 years ago by a rather larger property.

Returning to the roadway, Loddon Acres was built in about 1906 by Mr. Oppenheimer, then President of the National Rose Society. The rose garden of 51 beds is said to have taken the gardener three whole days to weed. Patsy described it as 'the most perfect river house to live in'. When a previous owner had sold part of the grounds, he kept a triangular piece of land - like many who lived by the Loddon, he wanted to keep a 'presence' there. At one point, it was marked on a map as 'Loddon Acres Tearooms', although such never existed.

Opposite this plot is Peri, which also had origins as a houseboat, alongside the bridge over the River Loddon. Across the river from here, a Mr. Bridgman lived at River Close. Until the mid 1930s, the only way to cross the river towards Wargrave station was to swim or use a canoe. Mr. Bridgman, an 'energetic barrister' therefore bought sufficient land to build a bridge, which opened in 1936. Originally leased by the Borough Marsh residents, Bridgman's Bridge was eventually bought in 2006 by Loddon Residents Ltd. The latter are responsible for the upkeep of some 2 - 3 miles of road and the three bridges giving access to the island. The Loddon Residents' Association minute book records that even in 1945 the maintenance of the bridges and the rights to use them were of concern.

Beyond the bridge is a cross roads, leading to various properties on the island. In 1924, the Sonning Land Company, who were involved in gravel extraction and the building of the A4 Twyford by-pass, proposed to develop the whole of the island. They issued a prospectus offering building plots along Loddon Drive, and a network of other roads, but there were virtually no buyers, even though the prospectus map marked many

plots as 'sold', including some on roads which were never built. Eventually, the local authority refused planning permission due to concerns about drainage and services. In the 1950s, however, a number of homes were built in this area - again often starting as houseboats before being brought onto the land and then developed. Many of the early houses here were built of timber, and rested on saddle stones or similar to lift them clear of flood waters. However, it was only in 1957 that mains electricity became available on the island, and all of the Loddon Drive area still relies on private wells or bore holes for their water supply. Further along Loddon Drive, there are several other houses nearer to the brick bridge over St Patrick's Stream. Amongst these is the oldest house on the island, which was a farm house dating from about 1760. The house includes some Norman stones, dating from around 1125, which might have come from Reading Abbey when that was demolished. Until Bridgman's Bridge was built, the only access to these was along a track from the A4 road. Until the mid 1980s, all of the island area was within Sonning parish, although it is now part of Wargrave.

The area has long been liable to floods, and Patsy concluded by showing a number of pictures of the road and house gardens under water.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, March 11th, which will be the Society's Annual General Meeting, when the programme of meetings for the coming year will be announced. The new programme begins on Tuesday, April 8th, when Elizabeth Hazeldine will tell us about the history of Fillets Court at Henley - the location of a 14th century house from the 14th century which is now the site Phyllis Court. Then on Tuesday, May 13th, Caroline Stanford will give an illustrated talk on the Work of the Landmark Trust, which is based at White Waltham., and has been caring for at risk historic buildings for almost 50 years.

The meetings start at 8pm in the Pavilion, on the Recreation Ground. For more information, visit the Society website www.wargravehistory.org.uk
