

Times Past

Issue No. 39
Summer 2011

STORRINGTON & DISTRICT MUSEUM
Preserving Yesterday for Tomorrow

Arthur Francis Bell (1875-1918)

Roger Simpson describes the local poet, his family and friends

Arthur Francis Bell has a local reputation as an accomplished minor poet, but his forebears also deserve some recognition.

His father, William Warden Bell (c1808-88), was born in India and worked there for the East India Company's civil service before settling near Fareham, Hants, in 1856. After his first wife died in 1864 he married a neighbour, Mary Brace (1835-1908), in 1866 and then had five children who survived infancy. The Braces were great sailors (Mary's father was a captain, her uncle a rear-admiral), soldiers, landowners or London lawyers, but Mary's sons differed in that they all went to Oxford University: Charles (1868-1954) and William (1877-1912) to Keble, Arthur to Hertford. The first two entered the church, but as Arthur's legs were injured in a childhood accident he remained largely homebound. Census records show him living with his parents in Hastings (1881/91) and Brighton (1901). After his mother's death he is found at Hove in 1911, a 'gentleman of private means'.

He was writing poetry during these years on the south coast. One of his verse monologues, 'At the Other Bar', was a tale of an Oxford dropout drifting about the world before discovering the woman he had once seduced and abandoned was now a London prostitute. This was dedicated to Cyril Starkey (1902), a fine classical scholar who was then teaching privately in Hove. Probably also dating from this time is Bell's other verse monologue, 'Frimutelle of the Grail', a very original account of a Grail King's longing to escape his circumscribed role.

By September 1913 he was resident at The Studio, Storrington, but he must have known the area much earlier because when he visited the ailing George Tyrrell at Storrington in July 1909 it was as an old friend, according to Maud Petre. During this Storrington period, from



Courtesy The Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton and Hove

1913 to his death in November 1918, Bell's literary career blossomed, and his success is appropriately reflected in Edward Ertz's contemporary portrait of him (now in the Brighton Art Gallery). He issued *The Dear Land of the Heart*, which collected his verse (1913), wrote a foreword to Cook's *The Book of Sussex Verse*, which included four of his poems (1914), then published a very readable literary history, *Leaders of English Literature* (1915), and a scholarly edition of *The Poems of Gray* (1915). Seven more poems, fourteen prose pieces and four drawings of local scenes appeared in the posthumous collection, *The Happy Phantom*, edited with a memoir by Maud Petre (1919).

Remarkably Bell's writing avoids reference to his numerous relations. And despite proclaiming himself a Romantic, he makes no mention of his own childhood,

upbringing or disability. He may softly lament an unhappy love, but typically he celebrates the terrestrial paradise he found lying a few miles around Storrington, its rural landscape, picturesque villages and idiosyncratic folk. Very determinedly he displaces his own family by continually asserting the value of friendship: many poems carry personal dedications, three to Hilaire Belloc and his family, and others to George Tyrrell, Maud Petre, C. F. Cook, Kenneth Hare, Mary Luard, M. H. Oakeley, H. S. Powell, Edward Stott and Gabriel Gillett. And, for the last-mentioned, Bell writes 'To a Derelict', the one poem, I believe, in which the personal mask drops. Its ostensible subject is a crippled Boer War veteran:



Bugler here in the dingy street
Mid a crowd of children gaping wide
At your crutch and ribbon and shattered feet,
Things they half marvel at, half deride.

Bugler, blowing your gallant lay
And dreaming back to the death-swept hill,
What need to tell you the truth today
The kindest bullets are those that kill?

Times Past

The editors are keen to see a wide range of contributors to the newsletter, which is published three times a year.

Articles and pictures on the Museum's activities or any aspect of the history or social and cultural life of Storrington and District will be much appreciated.

If you have suggestions for articles but do not want to write them yourself, please also pass these on.

We will need copy for the next edition by early November, but if you have a piece in mind for a later newsletter, do let us know.

The editors look forward to hearing from you!



Above: scenes from this year's Stewards' Lunch, held on a sunny July day in Pauline Archibold's beautiful West Chilton garden

The Weald—what happened to it and why?

Philip Beaumont explains

After the Romans left Britain in the fourth and fifth centuries AD new occupants arrived and sought suitable sites for their families. The north of what became known as Sussex and originally the land of Anglo-Saxons was probably well occupied; "spoken for" and later faced the largest and deepest oak forest in Europe where only trees prospered in the clay soil. It was a problem for which the newcomers had an answer, their own plough which was very suitable for ploughing in heavy soil.

The Romans had used a plough suitable for light sandy soil because their ploughs needed only to turn over the top soil, whereas Saxons were able to push the soil forward and backwards thus making furrows. There was still the problem of felling the mighty oaks, although they no doubt went for the younger and thinner trees first. The principal tool was the axe both in war and felling trees. But this did nothing at all to tame the forest, and the Weald remained impassable for hundreds of years. The real destroyer was yet to come.

A rapid growth in population and in demands for oak timber for homes, ships and iron led to a much smaller Weald. Ships alone plus the increase in the iron trade

left much of the south devoid of trees so that the likelihood of England without warships to keep watch on the Channel and the French led to bans on tree felling in both southern Sussex and the remaining Weald which remained a barrier to expansion and travel.

The nearest shipyards capable of constructing warships were on the Medway, and wealden trees had to be of a length and thickness more precise than wealden foresters could supply. The whole tree, minus branches of course, had to be dragged down to the south coast and then transferred to ships bound for Kent via the English Channel. It could take as long as a year for delivery and sometimes not delivered at all. The task of dragging a tree from a wealden bog was often too much for a team of bullocks to move, and the whole load was sometimes left to nature.

Nature also had frustration in store for anyone hoping to cross from west to east, a problem only recently eased with the improved roadways such as the A 27. Our rivers head towards the sea very tidily and are separated by "rapes", a device meant to discourage the Conqueror's family from following his example.

The Weald has now mostly disappeared but villages bearing names like Forest Row or Saint Leonards Forest remind us of its importance in shaping our history. Its demise leaves us with a very pleasant area in which to walk and work.



Finders Keepers & Old Tymes

John Wharmby reports

Once upon a time if you found something the finder could keep it. Now half its value belongs to the finder & half to the owner of the ground where it was found. This means that the "treasure" has to be valued and someone has to be prepared to buy it. Hence "treasures" accumulate in the larger museums which are capable of buying and insuring the find.

To date this has not been a consideration for your district museum as the archeological section has been noticeable by its absence. However, interest in the ancient history and archeology of the region is growing and new members have joined your society committee who have an interest in these aspects - hence the small archeological display and interest in acquisitions.

Acquisitions? Have there been any finds?

In September 2005 a 3,300-year-old gold (73%), silver (19%) and copper (8%) biconical, one-inch-long pendant was found near Houghton Bridge and immediately classified as treasure trove. It should belong to our museum but we obviously could not afford it, so we are

looking into having a copy of the pendant made in silver with a thin film of gold covering, by a historical jewelry maker.

An even older find was the bronze age axe discovered on the Downs above the site of the Houghton find. A beautiful example of its kind, it remains the property of the landowner, who has agreed to loan it to our museum for specific exhibitions (Lewis Museum declined to have it on permanent loan). For details about similar finds see *Times Past* No. 26, Spring 2007.

Between Houghton and Storrington, on the Parham estate, the previous park keeper found part of a ring which was over 300 years old and having gone through the exercise of examination by the British Museum, was retained by the finder's son with whom we are in negotiations. The most recent find was of part of a ring, which was determined by the British Museum as worth £20 and ultimately was given to Storrington Museum.

Another recent find was a collection of dramatists who were prepared to take part in an Old Tyme Music Hall event. This was a great function, organised by member Hermin Daley and resulted in a very entertaining evening and a significant profit for the Museum.



Editorial Team: David Bussey & John Wharmby

Published by Storrington and District Museum Society

Website:- www.storringtonmuseum.org

Printed by Horsham District Council at cost as part of their support of S. & D. M.