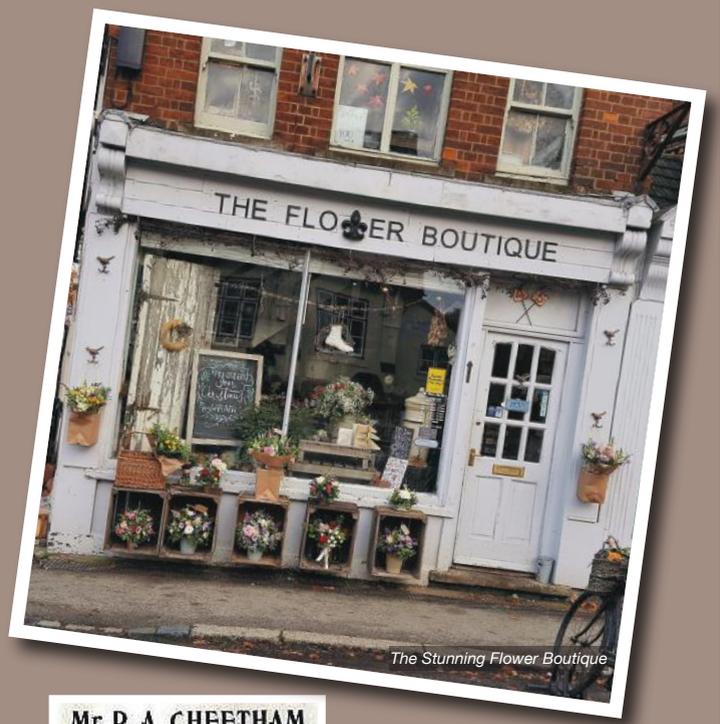


THE ARTS

JOHN BEST, CHAIR
ARTS GATEWAY MK

Woburn Sands

I'm looking this month at Woburn Sands, one of the places in Milton Keynes I've not previously explored. Lots of history there, and not to be confused with nearby Woburn. It's more closely linked with Wavendon, Aspley Heath and Aspley Guise. I'm grateful to several locally knowledgeable people who have pointed me in helpful directions. Before this article my preconceptions extended to a library and two garden centres but I've now explored much more.



The Stunning Flower Boutique

History

The earliest evidence of settlement is an Iron Age hill fort dating from around 500 BC, Danesborough Camp just to the southwest. Edward Burrow writing a local guide in 1905 described the experience of earlier coach-travellers on the nearby Roman-built turnpike as, "A welcome break in the long and tedious journey from London to the North. Passengers eagerly looked out for the pretty village beside the turnpike road where they knew full well that a warm welcome awaited them. The approach to Woburn Sands behind four good horses, must, in the summer time, have been an exhilarating experience." Maybe a little idealised, even for a publicity spiel, but nonetheless describing an agreeable place to drop by and mentioning the C18th Swan Hotel.

Catharine of Aragon, residing at Amphilhill in the early C16th, is reputed to have taught the art of lacemaking locally, at which the women of the area soon became skilled, together with straw plaiting and hat and bonnet making. There were also jobs extracting Fuller's Earth used for cleaning, bleaching and finishing wool and cloth. Much later it has been used for industrial and military decontamination, dermatology and cosmetics, and in film special effects, where it produces a much bigger bang. Local production of this versatile cultural raw material ceased in 2004.

The village, known as Hogsty End, was one of Wavendon's four 'ends' (along with Church End, Cross End and Lower End). By the early C20th it had a reputation as a health spa, still evidenced by the several rest or retirement homes in the town.

There's an interesting strand of local Quakerism in the C17th. In 1664 eight Hogsty End Quakers had their

goods confiscated for not attending church. Local Quakers held a wide variety of roles (fetch the thesaurus) including apothecaries, linen-drapers, grocers, shoe makers, milliners, woolcombers, cordwainers, pewterers, ale conners, maltsters, websters, theakers, smiths, lacemakers, wigmakers, hairdressers, bruesters, tanners, also chirurgeons (Tyeth Spencer, 2006). How's that for a creative sector! Quakers developed a series of Meeting Houses from 1700, including one that would for a time house the library. The town was becoming a mature urban settlement.

The old and new names

The Victorians took a dislike to the name, preferring something that conveyed more grace and sophistication. The modern name combined the cachet of the Duke of Bedford's impressive estate, with hints both of a spa town and the Greensand Ridge nearby. When in 1846 the Bletchley and Cambridge Branch of the London and North-Western Railway came, the station adopted the new name and the transition was complete.

Robert Cheetham the town photographer

In 1894 Robert Cheetham is recorded as the photographer of Woburn Sands. He produced a wealth of images including a large number of images and postcards now held in local archives, giving a great impression of what the place was like.

For most of the 20th Century, Woburn Sands remained a small town in rural Bucks. The expansion of Milton Keynes has seen the surrounding green

Mr. R. A. CHEETHAM, Photographic Artist, WOBURN SANDS.



THE STUDIO.
CHILD STUDIES A SPECIAL FEATURE
PHOTOGRAPHY IN ALL ITS BRANCHES
A FINE COLLECTION OF VIEWS OF THE DISTRICT.

Flier for Cheetham's photography,
ctsy MK Heritage

fields gradually disappear and Woburn Sands considerably increase. Today the population of Woburn Sands is about 3,500 and that of the combined settlements of Aspley Guise, Aspley Heath and Wavendon, around 6,000. The development of the former Plysu factory beside the station illustrates the evolution well. Parklands has become a large, mainly residential estate with burgeoning community spirit

around events at the Summerlin centre and the proposed local adoption of the railway station.

Culture in the town

What did I find? I shall start with the Library, which occupied the former Meeting House until moving to its present location, the 1874 former Institute. In Burrow's colourful prose: "The lofty public hall, known as 'The Institute', which was built by voluntary subscriptions, is admirably adapted and extensively used for public meetings, concerts, entertainments, etc." describing "the splendidly-prepared floor for the practice of terpsichorean exercises. On with the dance, let joy be unconfined." Well, Edward, it now houses an excellent and welcoming public library run as a partnership between the local authority and the town council, and with a mix of paid and volunteer staff. In the absence that day of Librarian Nicky Slater, I was informed and entertained by Jan Alder and Judy Thomas, both library volunteers. They steered me towards the large range of activities, celebrations and organisations, as good librarians



The Swan Hotel, welcoming visitors for over 200 years



Woburn Sands band tuba section, ctsy Nigel Clifford



The Sands Singers and Cryers perform period music

do, and gave me leaflets. The library itself houses eight or nine regular events as well as (in my own recent experience) a creative outpost for Arts Gateway's MK Arts Week in October. Confined, but joy of a sort.

Animating the town

The town is blessed with a lot of halls and meeting spaces, several derived from current or former religious buildings. I was impressed to find 42 separate local organisations listed on the Town Council website (seven based at Summerlin, hosting at least 18 separate activities), and to see a calendar of significant events around the year, including the Garden Competition in July, the Remembrance Parade in November and the Christmas Fayre on the last Sunday in November. There's a food and crafts market on the second Sunday of March, June, September and December around the Institute and Memorial Green.

Music

There's music in the town, as evidenced by the Woburn Sands Band. There are currently over 100 members, playing in half a dozen bands. They welcome everyone, and the inexperienced are supported by lessons, instruments, and uniforms. On August Bank Holiday each year, the Band holds its big fund-raising fayre on Mowbray Green with music and stalls.

The Sands Singers are a Community Choir, also open to all comers. Their repertoire covers classical, light and popular, presenting several performances a year. They meet every Friday in the Ellen Pettit Memorial Hall under the guidance of Musical Director Karen Clegg, professional singer with, among others, the BBC singers. Imminent concerts include Saturday 2nd December at Woburn Abbey and 8th December for their Christmas Concert at the Ellen Pettit Hall. The Sands Cryers focus on Renaissance music, and there's strong local participation in the Danesborough Chorus, named after the roman settlement.

For some years the town has held the Woburn Sands Music Festival, originally folk-based but now broader. This year it moved from Edgwick Farm to the town Rec, where it will return on 7th July 2018.

Thespians

Kevin Whateley is a household name living locally. He has appeared in TV programmes such as Coronation Street, Auf Wiedersehen Pet, Juliet Bravo and Peak Practice but is more commonly known for his role as Robert Lewis in Inspector Morse and Lewis. He is possibly the highest profile creative in Woburn Sands and with his wife Madelaine Newton gave a Shakespeare reading earlier this year.

There is also local drama group, the Chameleons, based in Aspley Guise, who have just put on their latest production, Goodnight Mr Tom.

Authors

Josephine Cox, writer of extremely successful romantic fiction is most certainly a 'best-selling author', featured in the *Sunday Times* best-sellers list. With over 60 books to her credit the UK Public Lending Rights figures often list her in the top three borrowed authors across the country.

Creative local people

There will be others I've not got to, but among creative people of note I would include almost-local painter Edward Durdey of whom I wrote a few editions back; Nancy Stevens hosts a Sunday Arts show on MKFM; Griselda Gifford is another well known and successful children's author; Poet Liz

Hayward publishes through Cinnamon Press; Steve Hoy supports sound for a number of theatre companies; ceramicist Juan Victor Cobos produces amazing work; and talented designer Grant Kempster lives locally. There's plenty when you start looking.



Artful ceramics by J V Cobos

Places to eat

Tripadvisor reviews a dozen places to eat in the town. I took lunch in Nonna's, a most deceptive coffee shop and listed #1. What starts as an agreeable prospect for a coffee and cake transforms into a labyrinth of rooms off rooms, heaving with happy hungry people and offering an unexpected combination of Italian and Maltese food. I shall certainly return. I was also delighted with my coffee and panini at Baillees, newly reopened by Lee Baillie.

Shops and makers with a difference

Although the town has a good range of shops in the centre with hardware, Post Office, florist, and a Co-op, it clearly has its work cut out to stem the tide of incongruous national chains.



Kevin Whateley, ctsy newtonnews

The Flower Boutique on the High Street was possibly the most idiosyncratic and charming florists I've visited. Taken over in January by Kimberley Mitchell and, during my visit, overseen by Theresa Keogh and Danielle Herbert, it achieves an almost bohemian wildness within a tiny space. Everything is arty, from recycled wood fruit-boxes outside, to the Book art in the window and a great selection of Stuff. I didn't sample their floristry but I'm tempted...

For bins brooms and bottle-openers, Gibson Andrews is the definitive hardware store, a visual feast lost to most high streets under the heavy boots of the DIY sheds. To be cherished.

Linny Lane was mentioned by several people I spoke to, purveyor of seriously posh chocolates and sculptures made in her Wood Street kitchen. Every town should have its artisanal chocolatier but, sadly, very few do.

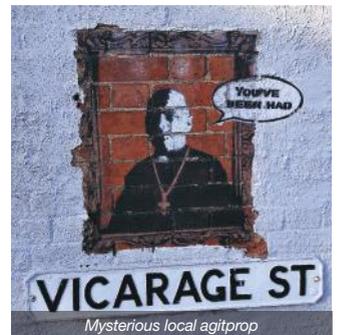
Shoeting Stars started in 2015 by Debbie Chrobok fills a unique child-centred niche in MK, with a tailored service in very-small-and-perfectly-fitting footwear on-line and from her shoe boutique in Russell Street.

Garden Centres

By far the largest retail outlets in the area, technically just outside Woburn Sands, are the two garden centres, Wyevale and Frosts, whose sustained ambition know no bounds. They are both now multi-outlet department stores with a range of indoor and outdoor goods, food and catering that brings people from a distance and, for the most part, seem separate from the town's life-support. This feels like as much opportunity as threat for the town's retailers.

Conclusions

At first encounter Woburn Sands may feel underwhelming but, the more I explored, the more I found. It has looked after its interesting heritage and is embracing some big changes. It has places to meet and places to eat in abundance. I found energy and innovation and was delighted to come upon the mysterious (and unattributed) mural in Vicarage Street which added some anti-establishment challenge into the mix. Maybe a belated reaction by the harassed religious minorities of the C17th history speaking. ■



NEWS FROM ARTS CENTRAL

Coming up on 14th December we have our Annual Public Meeting, followed by our Christmas networking Mingle, both at Arts Central, Norfolk House. Until Christmas we continue with Naomi Johnson's excellent animal portraits in the AC Gallery. Arts Central offers Life Drawing, led by Matt Waruszynski 7pm on 7th

and 21st December; Science Fiction Fantasy and Horror writers workshop 8pm on 8th; Book Club 8pm on 13th; Learn the guitar all day on 16th; then Christmas and roll on 2018.

I shall be canvassing for a core of volunteer organisers to make 2018 happen: no helpers, no creative strands. Let me know if you're interested.



Otter, by Naomi Johnson

To find out more, you can sign up on www.artsgatewaymk.org.uk email me at john.best@artsgatewaymk.org.uk or call us on 01908 241122