PROBUS RECORDER

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CHAIRMAN'S NOTES – *Roger Ellis*

How appropriate that I am writing this epistle to you on the morning of Sunday 28th November when HM Government has announced the restrictions it has re-imposed on the wearing of masks and on travellers returning to the UK.

I know we have all had a difficult year and a half, and I have wondered in the past few months whether we were right to re-commence Probus meetings. I have to say that I have no regrets about doing so.

Even if you are fortunate enough to live with a wife/partner, I venture to suggest that the various lockdowns might have caused problems from time to time. Everybody needs his or her own space occasionally, and this is why the coffee mornings on the Town Meadow organised by Alan Poulter have been so valuable. I have travelled up from the metropolis of Martock to join you all, and in recent weeks and have been lucky enough to secure the autographs of Frank Sinatra and Freddy Mercury!

On a serious note, it has been great to see our Probus members again and I hope that the few who have been reluctant to join us will do so in the New Year. Everything we do in life bears a risk, and all we can do as individuals is to assess that risk and take the precautions we think are necessary to reduce it to the minimum we think is acceptable.

I have always worn a mask in shops, and the West Somerset Railway is one of the only heritage railways to require its staff and customers to still do so. I must admit that the majority of our customers are happy to comply with our request. Should Gillingham Probus ask members to wear masks at meetings? At present I think the answer is no, as the decision whether to do so or not should be left to the individual.

Let us hope we are not heading for further lockdowns - and of course I wish you all a happy Christmas and a Safe and Well New Year. It has been a privilege to be your Chairman.

WELFARE and SOCIAL NEWS – *Gordon Banks*

Welfare. As I report, the weather has turned decidedly wintery, and I suspect that we are all moving into hibernation mode! Whether it stems from this or not, there is very little to report at the moment.

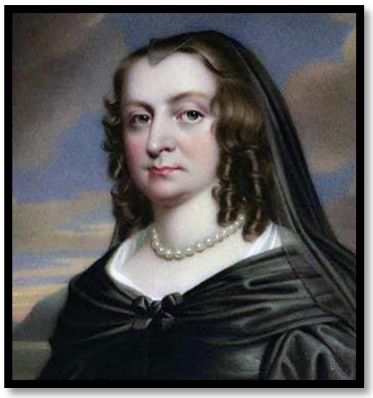
- **Brian Garton** remains in his Care Home, but Sid is still hoping to find carers in order that Brian can at least return home for Christmas.
- **Ken Stedman** continues to experience leg problems, but soldiers on.

REPORTS ON OUR NOVEMBER TALKS

The Formidable Women of Kingston Lacy

David Beardsley 2 November

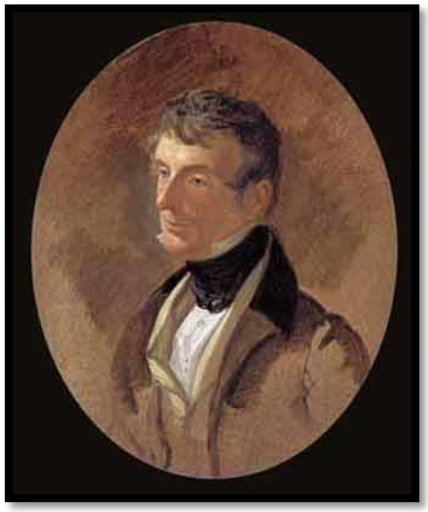
David Beardsley had kindly agreed to this talk at relatively short notice, following on from his interesting talk about the Russell-Cotes Museum. Due to his knowledge of French and Latin, David has had access to many historical documents at Kingston Lacy spanning past centuries up to and including the 20th.



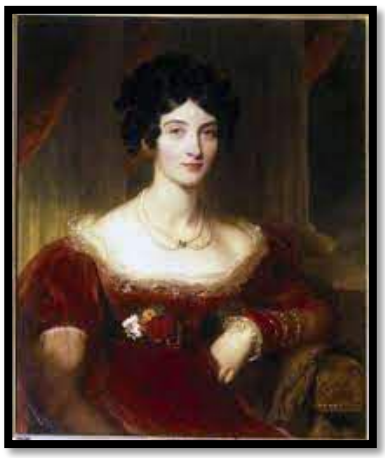
Prior to the handover to the National Trust in 1981, Kingston Lacy house and its 16,000-acre estate was the family seat of the Bankes family, who lived at Corfe Castle until its destruction during the English Civil War. **Sir John Bankes** was the attorney general to Charles I and had purchased the estate. His wife **Mary** (the first 'formidable' lady) outlived her husband having borne 13 children. She was a meticulous housekeeper and defended Corfe Castle (her husband had gone off to fight for the King) during sieges until it fell to the parliamentarians. She died in 1661.

Kingston Lacy House was built by Ralph Bankes, the son of Sir John and Lady Bankes, between 1663 and 1665.

The next Bankes family lady of note was **Frances Woodley** (1760-1823). Frances was a society beauty, and her marriage to **Henry Bankes II** brought money into the family. She had 7 children and took an active interest in the children's welfare and development. She also kept a detailed medical diary, which provides a useful insight into children's illnesses and the medicines in use at the time. Her money helped to revamp, redesign and improve the house. Her husband Henry Bankes was an MP who mainly lived in London.

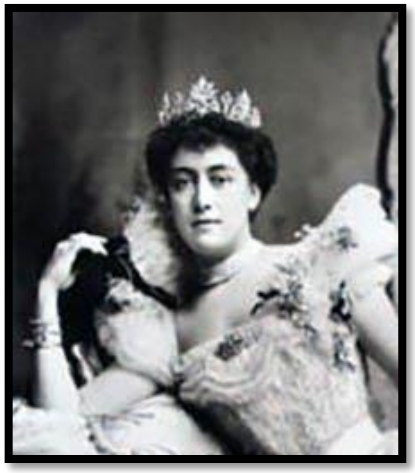


William John Bankes (1786-1855) was the second of Frances and Henry's five children, and the eldest surviving son, who became known as '*a bit of a character*'. After going on the 'Grand Tour' - as did many of the Upper-Class men of the day - he travelled extensively to the Near East and Egypt. He was a close friend of Lord Byron and was an avid collector. He never married and was ultimately exiled due to his homosexual activities. By fleeing the country, he became an 'outlaw', and to avoid seizure of his house by the crown, he signed Kingston Lacy over to his brothers, George and Edward Bankes.



However, **Anne Frances Bankes,** Countess of Falmouth (1789-1864) who was William John's sister became the next 'formidable' lady linked to the estate. She came back periodically to Kingston Lacy after 1841 following her husband Edward Boscawen's death and helped her brother William in the reorganisation of the house, acting as project manager, the house having been signed over to George, William's brother.

Walter Ralph Bankes (1853-1904) inherited the estate in 1869 at the age of 16, and married **Henrietta Jenny Fraser** (1857-1953), a society beauty younger than her husband. Walter died unexpectedly of a heart attack at the age of fifty-one, and once again a widow was left to run the estate until her son (**Henry John Ralph Bankes** (1902-81)) came of age.



Henrietta was another 'formidable' woman who assumed responsibility for running the Kinston Lacy household and estates as well as looking after her family. In doing so prior to the outbreak of WWI, Kingston Lacy became a popular place to be visited by royalty and other important people of the age. She remained the lady of the house during the First World War when she helped turn the majority of the servant's quarters and outbuildings into a hospital for returning injured soldiers.

Of note also, but not directly one of the 'formidable' women of Kinston Lacy, was one of Henry John Ralph's two sisters - **Viola** (1900-1989) – the other was Daphne who remained unmarried. Viola led quite a bohemian London-based lifestyle until her marriage to an Australian doctor Norman Bruce Hall in 1927, when her mother, Henrietta, did not attend the wedding since she disapproved of her daughter. Viola became known as an author for her book recounting her upbringing - '*A Kingston Lacy Childhood*'.

Henry John Ralph - known as **Ralph** - married Hilary Strickland-Constable in 1935, but when she died in 1966, he became somewhat of a recluse, cutting ties with his two children and becoming close to his housekeeper, Mrs O'Connell. Upon Ralph's death in 1981, he bequeathed Kingston Lacy and Corfe Castle to the National Trust, the largest donation the trust has ever received.

David Beardsley, in giving his talk, painted a picture of the Bankes family where the women had a strong influence on the development and running of the Kingston Lacy house and estate.

The Chairman gave the vote of thanks.

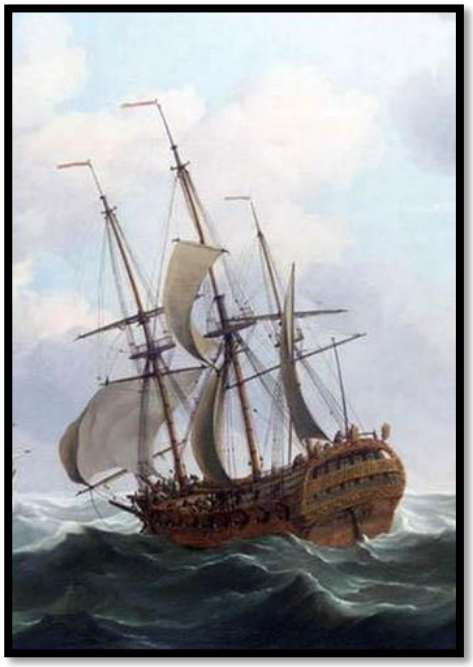
Report: *Alan Jeffs*

'A Freezing Horror' - The Wreck of the Halsewell, East Indiaman - 1786

- Philip Browne

The British East India Company ('John Company') was formed as a joint stock company in 1600 and was established to trade in the Indian Ocean region - in the East Indies, and southeast Asia. It grew to be a massive monopoly trading block, accounting for half of the world's trade in the latter half of the 18th century. The company came to rule large areas of India until the British Crown assumed direct control in 1858. The company ran its own security forces, and its numerous trading centres with European settlements and forts needed to be supplied.

By the 18th century the company chartered many large trading ships, known as 'East Indiamen'. The many Europeans living and working in India and southeast Asia developed their own social structure. It was a time of opportunity for young persons wishing to better themselves, and indeed many fortunes were made as a result. Indiamen were used to transport goods, people and supplies on the way out from Britain, and to bring back basic commodities for sale.



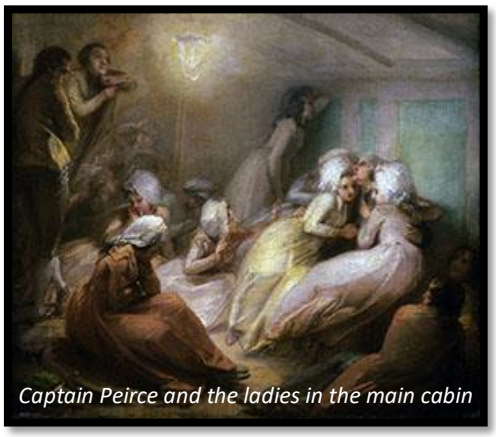
One such East Indiaman was the *Haleswell* (the subject of Philip Browne's talk). She was a relatively large vessel of some 776 tons, launched in 1778. With three decks these ships must have towered over smaller vessels used in the coastal trade round England. Throughout her career *Haleswell* was under the command of Captain Richard Peirce. Peirce, one of the company's most senior captains, had by 1786 become a wealthy man, married with a family, and who was by that time looking forward to ending his life at sea in order to retire to live as a gentleman of means. Although not receiving a huge salary in cash terms, there were various 'perks'; captains of Indiamen were allocated a section of hold storage space, so that they could trade goods on their own behalf, or in partnership with others. By this means a man could amass considerable wealth, thereby increasing their social status. Europeans living and working in India and southeast Asia were hungry for goods from the 'home country' and formed a ready trading market.

The established pattern was that ships embarking from England would do this in the winter to be able to catch the trade winds to carry them on their journey. So, in late November 1785 the Haleswell had moved to Gravesend to take on supplies before starting her third voyage to the East. Then at the end of December she took on passengers, including a contingent of soldiers. Two of Captain Peirce's daughters and two of his nieces were among the passengers. No doubt these young ladies were hoping to find suitable husbands in India with good financial prospects and an acceptable position in society.

In England at this time the weather was atrocious, with freezing temperatures and snow, heavy seas and even ice on the Thames. The weather conditions were so bad that the Reverend Morgan Jones, vicar of the village of Worth Matravers on the Purbeck coast, recorded a note about it: '*On the 4th, 5th and 6th day of January, a remarkable snowstorm, sometimes a hurricane, with the wind at south. ...*"

The Halsewell strikes the cliffs below Worth Matravers.

By 6th January 1786 the *Haleswell* had got into difficulties in the Channel, having sprung a leak in the during a night-time storm. The ship was taking on water, but even with sailors manning the pumps, she eventually began to drive towards the shore. The captain and his senior officer agreed that the ship was lost, and the vessel eventually struck rocks at the foot of a near-vertical cliff near Worth Matravers, at the entrance to a small cave.


Captain Peirce and the ladies in the main cabin

Some of the sailors and soldiers managed to drag themselves out of the sea and find some respite in the cave. The passengers and some officers, including Captain Peirce, his daughters, nieces and some other women had taken refuge in the main cabin, which broke up with the loss of their lives.

Two of the survivors managed to climb to the top of the cliff and raise the alarm by knocking on a door of a cottage in the village. This area of Purbeck contained stone quarries where many of the villagers were engaged, and a party of these men took ropes and other equipment to the top of the cliff in order to attempt to rescue the unfortunates from the cave below. The Reverend Jones and John Garland of Eastington Farm heard of what had happened, and eventually managed to make their way to the site of the rescue attempt and organised the rescuers to keep going (with judicious use of spirits to keep them going!). Eventually 74 survivors were rescued. They were revived at the farm with seasonal cherry brandy and gingerbread.

The tragedy of the wreck caught the attention of the nation. Poems were written about the incident and many written articles. King George 111 actually visited the site of the wreck with his family, and a show about it was even performed at Exeter. Pictures were painted depicting the end of the Haleswell and Richard Peirce and members of his family. The event has been woven into the history of Dorset and is a tribute to those local villagers who placed more importance on the saving of life than the more common west country practice of plundering from shipwrecks.

This was an interesting talk that highlighted the days of sailing ships and their perilous journeys to all who sailed in them. The Chairman gave the vote of thanks.

Report: *Alan Jeffs*

MEMBERS' ARTICLE

'My Cycling Life' - *Peter Grange*

My parents gave me a bike for my 14th birthday. It wasn't very "cool"; upright handlebars, rod brakes, and a Sturmey-Archer 3-speed gearbox. We lived in Brockworth, near Gloucester; you may have heard about the annual cheese roll there. Being just at the bottom of the scarp slope of the Cotswolds there were plenty of hills to climb.

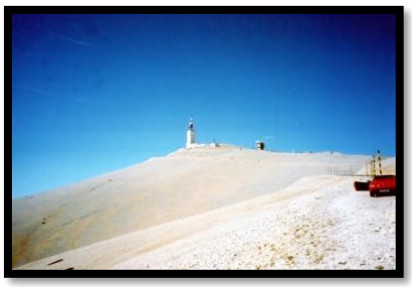
At the age of 17 I went to work in the Ministry of Labour in London, where I met Lynda, but that's for another story. I didn't cycle in London and didn't get another bike until we moved to Scotland where I bought a second- hand Raleigh Blue Streak - 10 gears! I used that mainly for commuting to work but managed to explore some of the Clyde Valley.

After we left Scotland, I had another break from cycling until the early 1980s when I bought a touring bike and started to do some semi-serious cycling. We lived in Ascot and Windsor Great Park was excellent for cycling. One morning I encountered Prince Philip driving a carriage-and-four straight at me on my side of the road. Anyone would think he owned the place! It's very difficult to tug one's forelock whilst wearing a helmet.

My first adventure was the London to Brighton annual charity ride. I persuaded/coerced our son to get up at 4am to get to Clapham by 6am. I cycled to Brighton; he drove the car. We met in Brighton and drove home. I was in our local pub collecting the sponsorship money by 13:00. I'm sure some people didn't believe I'd done it.

With the success of that ride, I set my sights on Lands' End to John O'Groats. I discovered a company which organised a ride in the other direction, so in 1988 Lynda and I drove to Inverness, Lynda's hometown, and I took the train north from there. The bike ride was an interesting and challenging experience, it took fifteen days averaging 60-odd miles a day. It rained on thirteen of those days and on one day the rain was so torrential that we lost a support car in a flood.

The same company also ran a Bordeaux to Barcelona adventure crossing the Pyrenees, so I did that next. Some of those mountain climbs are brutal. They are incredibly long, 10 miles or more. In other words, Gillingham to Sturminster Newton of unrelenting "up". However, coming down on the Spanish side I rode nearly 30 miles without pedalling. Lynda flew out to Barcelona to meet me and ended up accompanying me to hospital after I injured my hand dismantling my bike. By the time I'd had my hand stitched and escaped from the hospital the only place still open to eat was McDonalds. Very romantic!



On one holiday with Lynda in Provence I took my bike specially to climb Mont Ventoux, which is a single mountain of some 1900 metres. It has been used in the Tour de France many times, including this year. Tom Simpson, a British cyclist, died ascending Ventoux in the 1967 T de F. It is a mountain of spectacular beauty and even worth driving up if you're in the area. You will overtake many cyclists en route.

In the 1990s I started cycling in France for a couple of weeks in June every year. There is a coach service which transports cyclists and their bikes to France. I always went to the South since it's generally warm and dry! The last four or five of the French trips were done on my recumbent cycle. This is an excellent vehicle for touring, although not manoeuvrable enough for commuting. At much the same time I bought a folding Brompton bike which I used for commuting into London.

Today I do very little cycling, having taken up golf again after a 35-year break. I did take my touring bike out a few times during lockdown when the golf courses were closed but reverted to golf once courses re-opened. However, my trusty Brompton transports me to town - and to Probus coffee mornings on the Town Meadow.

ENDPIECE FOR CHRISTMAS - *Editor*

False Optimism in the Trenches

Even at the distance of a Century, no war seems more terrible than World War I. In the four years between 1914 and 1918, it killed or wounded more than 25 million people. Yet there were still odd moments of joy and hope in the trenches of Flanders, and one of the most remarkable came during the first Christmas of the war, when for a few brief hours men from both sides on the Western Front laid down their arms, emerged from their trenches, and shared food, carols, games and comradeship.

Their truce - the famous '*Christmas Truce' of 1914* - was totally unofficial. Many officers disapproved, and headquarters on both sides took strong steps to ensure that it could never happen again.

The first signs for the British that something strange was happening occurred on Christmas Eve. At 8:30 p.m. an officer of the Royal Irish Rifles reported to his headquarters: "*Germans have illuminated their trenches, are singing songs and wishing us a Happy Xmas. Compliments are*

being exchanged but am nevertheless taking all military precautions."

Further along the line, the two sides serenaded each other with carols - the German "*Silent Night*" being met with a British chorus of "*The First Noel*" - and scouts met, cautiously, in No Man's Land, the shell-blasted waste between the trenches. The war diary of the Scots Guards records that a certain Guardsman Murker "*met a German Patrol and was given a glass of whisky and some cigars, and a message was sent back saying that if we didn't fire at them, they would not fire at us.*"

The same basic understanding seems to have sprung up spontaneously at other spots. For another British soldier, Private Frederick Heath, the truce began late that same night when:

> "All down our line of trenches there came to our ears a greeting unique in war:
>
> '*English soldier, English soldier, a merry Christmas, a merry Christmas!*' Followed later by *'Come out, English soldier; come out here to us.'*
>
> For some little time we were cautious, and did not even answer. Officers, fearing treachery, ordered the men to be silent. But up and down our line one heard the men answering that Christmas greeting from the enemy. How could we resist wishing each other a Merry Christmas, even though we might be at each other's throats immediately afterwards? We kept up a running conversation with the Germans, all the while our hands ready on our rifles. Blood and peace, enmity, and fraternity - war's most amazing paradox. The night wore on to dawn - a night made easier by songs from the German trenches, the piping of piccolos and from our broad lines laughter and Christmas carols. Not a shot was fired."


A German trench in Dec 1914

Several factors combined to produce the conditions for this Christmas Truce. By December 1914, the men in the trenches were veterans, familiar enough with the realities of combat to have lost much of the idealism that they had carried into war in August, and most longed for an end to bloodshed. The war, they had believed, would be over by Christmas, and yet there they were in Christmas week - still muddied, cold and in battle. Then, on Christmas Eve itself, several weeks of mild but miserably soaking weather gave way to a sudden, hard frost, creating a dusting of ice and snow along the front that made the men on both sides feel that something spiritual was taking place.

It was only in the British sector of the Western Front that troops noticed at dawn that the Germans had placed small Christmas trees along the parapets of their trenches. Slowly, parties of men from both sides began to venture toward the barbed wire that separated them, until literally hundreds of each side were out in no man's land shaking hands.

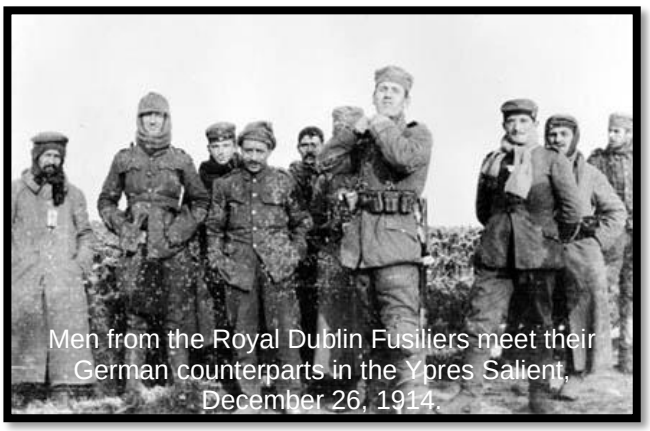
Just how widespread the truce was is hard to say. It was certainly not general - there are plenty of accounts of fighting continuing through the Christmas season in some sectors, and others of men fraternizing to the sound of guns firing nearby. One common factor seems to have been that Saxon troops - universally regarded as easy-going - were the most likely to be involved, and to have made the first approaches to their British counterparts. "*We are Saxons, you are Anglo-Saxons*," one shouted across no man's land. "*What is there for us to fight about*?" The most detailed estimate is that the truce extended along at least two-thirds of the British-held trench line that scarred southern Belgium.

Riflemen Andrew and Grigg (centre) - from London Regiments, and Saxons of the German 104th and 106th Regiments.

Communication could be difficult. German-speaking British troops were scarce, but many Germans had been employed in Britain before the war, frequently in restaurants. Captain Clifton Stockwell, an officer with the Royal Welch Fusiliers who found himself occupying a trench opposite the ruins of a heavily shelled brewery, wrote in his diary:

> 'One Saxon, who spoke excellent English and who used to climb to some eyrie in the brewery and spend his time asking "*How is London getting on?*", "*How was Gertie Millar and the Gaiety?*", and so on. Lots of our men had blind shots at him in the dark, at which he laughed. One night I came out and called, "*Who the hell are you?*" At once came back the answer, "*Ah - the officer, I expect I know you - I used to be head waiter at the Great Central Hotel*."

In most places, up and down the line, it was accepted that the truce would be purely temporary. Men returned to their trenches at dusk, in some cases summoned back by flares, but for the most part determined to preserve the peace at least until midnight. There was more singing, and in at least one spot presents were exchanged. George Eade, of the Rifles, had become friends with a German artilleryman who spoke good English, and as he left, this new acquaintance said to him: "*Today we have peace. Tomorrow, you fight for your country, I fight for mine. Good luck*."



Men from the Royal Dublin Fusiliers meet their German counterparts in the Ypres Salient, December 26, 1914.

Fighting erupted again the next day, though there were reports from some sectors of hostilities remaining suspended into the New Year. And it does not seem to have been uncommon for the resumption of the war to be marked with further displays of mutual respect between enemies. In the trenches occupied by the Royal Welch Fusiliers, Captain Stockwell "*climbed up on the parapet, fired three shots in the air and put up a flag with 'Merry Christmas' on it*." At this, his opposite number, Hauptmann von Sinner, "*appeared on the German parapet and both officers bowed and saluted. Von Sinner then also fired two shots in the air and went back into his trench*."

The war was on again, and there would be no further truce until the general Armistice of

November 1918. Many, perhaps the majority, of the thousands of men who celebrated Christmas 1914 together would not live to see the return of peace. But for those who did survive, the truce was something that would never be forgotten.

Happy Christmas!