

A Step into the Past

ST PETER'S VILLAGE

by ALAN LEE



Provost Marshal

After a coach journey of just under an hour we arrived at the attractive and lively village of St. Peter's near Broadstairs. We gathered outside the parish church of St. Peter the Apostle, which gives the village its name, and were greeted by our tour guide and a Provost Marshal of the 95th Rifles. The tour, which was less than a mile of flat walking, consisted of meeting costumed characters of olden times who would bring the past to life.

Commencing our walk we entered the flint and stone church that dates from 1070. After a brief talk by the guide we

moved into the vestry where Richard and Mistress Culmer awaited us. Richard was a prominent local landowner, farmer and shipwright who died in 1495.

As we were leaving the church we were stopped by Brother Thomas, a Canterbury monk, who drew one of the earliest existing maps of Thanet in 1414. The original is on loan to Trinity Hall, Cambridge. As we moved through the churchyard, one of the longest in England, certain graves were brought to our attention. Amongst these were the oldest grave, that of William Norwood buried in 1623, Emma Fagg, a noblewoman who served as a nurse under Florence Nightingale in the Crimea War, Isaac Watts who designed HMS Warrior the first of the 'ironclad warships' and 'The Kentish Samson' a local smuggler who performed great feats of strength who died in 1742. After greeting two ladies dressed in their Sunday best we were accosted by a soldier looking for French spies. He pointed out the lookout in the



Richard and Mistress Culmer



Brother Thomas



British Soldier



Reverend John Wesley

Around the corner on the village green the famous Reverend John Wesley was waiting, close by the local supermarket. This building still retains the original external characteristics of the old barn, part of Mockett's Farm, that was used to garrison soldiers during the Napoleonic Wars. Crossing the green we met two ladies who told us about Richard and Sarah Mockett and their house. Built in 1682 and known as the 'Old Farmhouse', their initials are still visible above the front door; it is now owned by the present Mayor. At the far end of the green stood



The Old (Mockett) Farmhouse

church tower and explained that during the Napoleonic Wars the tower was used as a signalling post, always manned by an officer and ratings from the Royal Navy. In recognition of this St. Peter's Church still claims the right to fly the white ensign.

the village policeman by the stocks, which can still be used legally as the Act of Parliament has never been repealed; this is also a popular place for wedding photographs. Next to this is the village sign, a winner of a Daily Mail competition inspired by a speech in 1920 concerning the revival of village signs, given by the Duke of York, later King George VI.

We then entered the local hall for a very welcome refreshment break of tea/coffee and biscuits.

Heading down the High Street we arrived at Nuckell's Almshouse and met Ann Nuckell and Thomas Wall, who had



Village Policeman



Ann Nuckell and Thomas Wall

been the master of the old workhouse. In 1805 this was demolished and a new one erected by Thomas Brown, at his own expense, to accommodate 47 inmates, some of whom made an appearance from around the end of the building. In 1834 Ann provided the sum of £700 for the Reverend John Hodgeson to purchase the property and convert it to an almshouse for 10 widows. One of these ladies, the worse for drink, was pursued across the lawn by an overseer.



Nuckell overseer with an inmate

Leaving this turmoil behind us we moved on to the Coves, probably so named



Miss Olive Raven

because of the caves, in the garden, cut out of the chalk and once used by smugglers. The lady of the house, Miss Olive Raven, could not stop long as she was on her way to send a letter.

Turning into Ranelagh Grove we paused at the memorial on the site of where, in 1952, an American USF84 Thunderjet had crashed killing the pilot and three local people.

As we walked down the street we were accosted by a woman speaking with a very strong French accent. We had found the spy. My daughter Denise, ever helpful, pointed down the street to a soldier and said they are looking for spies. With a hurried 'thank you' the woman disappeared.



Denise with the French spy

As we neared a flint cottage, once at the entrance of Ranelagh Gardens, Charles Newbolt and his wife were in the garden talking to another lady. In 1818



Charles Newbolt with his wife and friend

Newbolt, the landlord of the Red Lion, purchased several acres of land from John Mockett and had constructed a bandstand, pavilion, refreshment tents and walkways. At the time this proved to be

very popular, attracting as many as 800 people for breakfast and 400 for the evening entertainment. The Reverend John Hodgeson later purchased the Assembly Rooms and part of the grounds to establish Lovejoy's Boys' School. This took its name from the school for the poor started by Elizabeth Lovejoy in 1694.

We were then accosted by Necromancer, a French conjurer, who performed a couple tricks whilst Miss Pearce, an opera singer, was standing on



Denise with Necromancer



Miss Pearce

her doorstep nearby taking the fresh air.

Halfway down Tippeddore Lane a German nun, Sister Benedicta, told us how she came to the area after she had been forced to leave Germany. She purchased Minster Abbey in Thanet and had it renovated. She then directed us into the garden of Blagdon Cottages where the head housekeeper, Mrs Lawrence and James the groom were waiting. Within a few minutes they were joined by Joss Snelling, a smuggler, who had a barrel of rum for them. These cottages used to accommodate the servants who worked in the large house next door. One feature in the garden was a large wooden barrel, now used to store water. It would originally have contained 100 gallons of rum from the West Indies.

Saying our farewells we made our way to the rear of



Sister Benedicta



Mrs Lawrence, James the groom and Joss Snelling

the Red Lion and saw Doctor Raven and two nurses who were soon joined by a female mortician. The current inn dates back to 1876.

Before that it was a single story with a thatched roof. This had been used as an isolation hospital for smallpox.



The Mortician with Dr Raven and two nurses



The original cellar, which still exists, as well as storing barrels was used as a morgue and was home to a number of cadavers awaiting burial, these being lowered through a trap door in the floor.

Across the road stands the Baptist



Overseers of the poor

Church. This was opened by the Reverend John Wesley as a Wesleyan Chapel on 28th November 1788 but was taken over by the Baptist Church in 1797.

Crossing Vicarage Street we returned to the parish church and on entering the vestry, the old seat of local government, we were met by three of the Overseers of the Poor, a man and two women. For centuries the vestry was also where the churchwardens met to discuss highways, public amenities and collected rates. They also organised the destruction of vermin and - believe it or believe it not - a rat ran across the floor closely followed by the rat catcher.



The rat catcher

Before we left the church we admired the wonderful ceiling and visited the children's corner. This had been refurbished in the 1960's by Mollie Blake in memory of her mother Annette Mills of 'Muffin the Mule' fame.

We then moved off to the Red Lion where we enjoyed a most welcome pub lunch and a drink. Returning to the coach we all agreed that very many thanks must go to Pat Hooper for organising such a wonderful and enjoyable day out. I must find out how she managed to arrange for the sun to shine the whole day!

PS There are now 110 people involved in putting on the tour, all of whom are volunteers. The first tour of 2008 will take place on May 15th. More information can be found on the web site <http://www.villagetour.co.uk>