

Tam O'Shanter Times

Spring 2012

Issue 57

264 members!

We now have 264 members as at March 1st. This is a massive increase from a low of 28 in February 2011. As well as the subscriptions and donations from all these members it also valuable when we apply for grants and support from various establishments. A big thank you to everyone.

Membership rates are £5 / address / year. due on the 1st April. New members joining after November 1st will not be due for renewal until April the following year. If a membership form has been included with your newsletter then you are due for renewal. Please make cheques payable to: Wirral Urban Farm Association.

We regularly send updated information out by email. If you haven't received one yet and would like to then please send an email to tamoshan@wirral.gov.uk indicating that you are a Friend of the Farm and we will add you to our mailing list. Likewise, if you want to be removed from the list, please let us know. We may eventually send out newsletters by email, where requested, once we have mastered the technology!

To celebrate the Queen's Jubilee we are planning to



hold a bar-b-que, probably on Saturday June 2nd after the farm has closed. This will also be a fundraiser for the Bidston Archaeology Group who are planning to build an Iron Age Round House to use as an educational resource. We are aiming to sell tickets to Friends of Bidston Hill, the farm, Flaybrick Memorial Gardens and Bidston Archaeology Group. We will email members again with further details nearer the time. If you have not left us with an email address and are interested then please leave a message at the farm office.



Wirral Urban Farm Association Annual General Meeting

7.30pm Wednesday 16th May 2012
at the farm

Come along to the AGM and have a cup of tea or coffee while you find out more about the urban farm and how you could help us keep it open for future generations. Your support and contribution is very important to us. Hope to see you there.

The mystery of Tam O'Shanter Cottage

Why did Robert Lea, a stone mason, choose Tam O'Shanter as the subject for the carving which is embedded in the wall of Tam O'Shanter cottage on Bidston Hill? There is no known explanation, so some may call it speculation...

Richard Lea came to live in the cottage in 1837, almost 50 years after Robert Burns had written Tam O'Shanter (in 1790). Presumably the story had remained well known and popular all that time; it does have classic ingredients; it is a sort of spooky ghost story; it has witches – touches of Macbeth; it is a “naughty” story, bawdy, verging on debauchery; and it has a moral with a lesson to be learned.

Today it is unlikely that a short story in poetic form (and for English people written in an often incomprehensible dialect!) would ever attain such popularity (although I suppose it could be argued that a song like Benny Hill's “Ernie” has achieved such notoriety!). We have to remember that in the early 1800's there was no TV, no radio or cinema, few theatres and concert halls and so most entertainment must have been “home-made”: singing, dancing, games – and reading, or in days when not everybody could read, having stories read out loud to them. And there are stories, even today, that have stood the test of time which can be read or listened to time and time again and still give pleasure, stories like Little Red Riding Hood, Peter Pan, Alice in Wonderland and for adults names like Sherlock Holmes and James Bond appear to have attained some sort of immortality.

There is evidence of that lasting popularity of Tam O'Shanter in 1830, forty years after it was written and seven years before Richard Lea came to the cottage: two stone statues arrived in Liverpool at No 26 Church Street. They were statues of Tam O'Shanter himself and Souter Johnny, his drinking partner. When they had been put on show in London, King George IV himself had gone out of his way to see them – as well as 80,000 others! In Liverpool thousands of people were happy to queue up and pay a shilling to see the statues. A shilling: that sounds like a lot of money in 1830 and unimaginable today, unless it was something like Tauten Khamun – or a Paul McCartney concert! Was the story of Tam O'Shanter especially popular? Was there some sort of ‘special relationship’ on Merseyside because of the statues?

All well and good, but none of this would fully explain Richard Lea's choice of subject for his cottage on Bidston Hill in 1837. There would have been many other candidates; Nelson, Wellington – or Queen Victoria herself who had just acceded to the throne in 1837. Or why not the windmill up on the hill? And why did he come to the cottage in the first place – a stonemason? At

first glance you can look across the road and see Flaybrick cemetery – plenty of work for a stonemason there. Wrong! The cemetery was the source of stone needed for the docks and new town of Birkenhead which was growing at an amazing rate just down from Bidston Hill across towards the Mersey.

Here we have the first hint of a Scottish connection. William Laird had come down from Scotland in 1824 with a dream of building a shipyard and docks to rival Liverpool on the other side of the Mersey. A lot of Scottish workers followed. By the time Richard Lea

moved into the cottage in 1837 the population of Birkenhead had risen from 200(!) in 1821 to 40,000 by 1846. Can we assume that he had moved here like so many others because he knew there was plenty of work for people like him? Navvies would have been housed in the rows of terraced houses being thrown up down by the docks. A

tradesman like himself would probably have been able to afford something better and the proximity of the quarry may explain why he came to the cottage.

You may already sense that I am moving in, quite stealthily, on my explanation of the mystery of Tam O'Shanter. The next question in the detective work: if a stonemason had just arrived in the area, how would he go about getting work? Or better, how would a potential employer (such as the Lairds) go about employing him? The simple answer in the case of a stonemason would be to ask him to show what he could do. This leads to two possible scenarios: Richard Lea went off trying to think of something that would impress the Lairds. A scene from Tam O'Shanter would probably have been the obvious choice. Or did his potential employer set him a task and, being Scottish, sent him off to carve a scene from Tam O'Shanter? – the result being the same in both scenarios.

In a final summing up we are left with the following question: which is more likely – that Richard Lea was such a big fan of Tam O'Shanter that he decided to carve the stone simply for his own pleasure and liked it so much that he incorporated it into the stone work of the cottage – or that he had carved the stone as a showpiece which had secured him employment and to celebrate he embedded it in the stonework of the small extension to the cottage (which looks as though it would have been ideal as a store room for a stone mason's tools).

Alternatively you may take it as a nice little piece of fanciful fiction. One day perhaps it could be written up as a “fairytale”: how Richard Lea came to Bidston looking for work, charmed the Lairds with his sculpture and celebrated by living happily ever after in the cottage still known as Tam O'Shanter today.

R Hughes





Animal update

Look out for our new pigs. Two Oxford Sandy and Black gilts (young females) were bought in December from Teyrdan Hall Farm, Llanellian, Colwyn Bay. One is registered with the breed society as she conforms to the breed specifications and has exceptional breeding potential. She has the official name, Teyrdanhall Alison, after her place of birth and her mother – Darkeye Alison. Her father was Teyrdanhall Alistair.

The Oxford Sandy and Black or OSB had been in decline almost to the brink of extinction when in 1985, the current Breed Society was formed following contact with all known breeders of the OSB. There were 29



herds listed in the first herd book with 15 Boars and 62 Sows. The current picture is very encouraging with the rarest bloodlines hanging on and slowly increasing. Hopefully the Breed is at last safe, although still relatively few in number. There are 4 male and 13 female bloodlines within the breed.

Also look out for chicks and ducklings during the

Easter holidays. We have 7 incubation projects operating at the moment with a further 12 planned later in the year. Bidston Avenue Primary School, Brookdale Pre-school, Redcourt and our own Farm Tots will be hatching chicks whilst St Peters in Heswall, Little Acorns pre-school and Waterside Day Nursery will be hatching ducklings.

We may also have a few extra goats on the farm during the Easter break on holiday from their home in Eastham.

Winter with the Woodworkout

Thanks to everyone that has supported the Woodworkout over the past few months. We have delivered several courses over the winter period including: Skills for Working Life - two groups, adults with learning difficulties and unemployed teenagers (a total of 19 learners engaged), Christmas Crafts (11 adults engaged) a spoon making course (12 adults engaged) and a stool making course (16 adults engaged). We have also work alongside Park Roots and the Princes Youth from Wirral Met College on the Edward Kemp site at the top of Ashville Road in Birkenhead Park where we are building a working well and water feature (25 adults engaged). We will be running Woodcraft courses throughout the summer at a cost of £20 per person per day. Details will be posted after Easter or contact Andy on 07757867104



The Secret Gardens of Oxton. Help needed!

Sunday May 13th

Can you help? We have agreed to provide 45 adult volunteers on the day to cover a 3 hour shift. The task may be a steward in a garden or selling tickets/refreshments or helping with car parking etc. In return, the farm will benefit by taking a share of the profits which may amount to £4 – 5,000. Approximately £100/volunteer! If you feel you can help, or know someone else who can, then please let us know asap. We need to submit our list of volunteers by March 31st.

Events and activities

Crafts for kids

*Sunday April 1st and
Sunday April 15th*

10.30 – 12.30 and 1.30 – 3.30

Suitable for youngsters of all ages. Using paper, card, glue and stuff to make all sorts of things. Free but donation appreciated.

Traditional Storytelling

Monday April 2nd

Wednesday April 4th

Wednesday April 11th

Friday April 13th

1pm – 2pm and 3pm – 4pm

Come and be entertained by our storyteller Fiona Angwin. Be amazed by tales of Fire, Earth, Air and Water. Hear stories brought to life from all over the world from the Isle of Man to the Native Americans.

Designed for ages 4-11 but suitable for all the family

No need to book, just come in and take a seat anytime during the sessions to be whisked away to the land of make-believe.

Carousel Ride

Tuesday April 3rd

Thursday April 5th

Easter Monday April 9th

Thursday April 12th

10am – 4pm 80p/ride

Suitable for small children only.

This event is dependent on the weather and will not take place if raining.

Bidston Windmill Open Days

Saturdays May 12th, June 9th,

July 7th, August 11th,

September 8th. 10am – 12 noon

Run by the Friends of Bidston Hill.

Last entrance to the mill 11.45am.

There is a minimum height restriction for access to the higher floors (1.06m). Children under 11 years old must be accompanied by an adult at all times

Flaybrick Tree Walk

Saturday May 26th

Ring 512 3676 for further details

Bidston Hill History walks

Wednesday 9th May

Wednesday 11th July

10am – 12.30pm (approx)

A gentle stroll over Bidston Hill looking at the history, geology, heritage and wildlife of this wonderful open space. Find out about the windmill, why Bidston had 100 flags, and what did the observatory watch for? Meet at Tam O'Shanter Urban Farm.

Flaybrick History Walks

Saturdays April 14th, May 12th,

June 9th, July 7th, August 11th,

September 8th

11am – 1pm (approx)

Run by the Friends of Flaybrick these walks take you on a stroll through the memorial gardens looking at the fascinating local history, stories and characters of people remembered in the cemetery through their memorials.

*Free, meet at Tam O'Shanter Urban Farm but please book to avoid overcrowding
Tel 653 9332*

Spring Fair

Monday May 7th 11am – 4pm

Stalls and entertainments at Tam O'Shanter Urban Farm, Free Entry

Geodiversity Day

Saturday 21st April

Time to be confirmed

A day of Geodiversity activities, in Flaybrick Cemetery and on Bidston Hill, the event is suitable for the entire family. Learn about rock types and how they are created. Try your hand at the newly produced RIGS Geodiversity trail. Meet at Tam O'Shanter Urban Farm.

Friends of the Farm

Midsummer Social

Saturday 23rd June, from 5.30pm.

All Friends of the Farm are invited to enjoy the farm after hours, a special pleasure on a light - and hopefully sunny! - summer evening. Why not bring your own sandwiches for a picnic tea (hot and cold drinks, cakes etc will be available) and spend a sociable couple of hours among Friends. We'll have a 'brainstorm board' there too, so you can share any ideas you might have for raising funds to support your urban farm.

Thanks to:

Mr and Mrs Lynch for their frequent donations

Charles Brotherton Trust

Peter Vincent

Anonymous donation of £100 in October 2011

The Royal School for the Blind

Friends of the Farm is the working name of the Wirral Urban Farm Association

(Charity number 515789) based at:

Tam O'Shanter Urban Farm

Boundary Road

Bidston, Wirral CH43 7PD

Tel: 0151 653 9332

Fax: 0151 652 4236

Email: tamoshan@wirral.gov.uk

For further information about the farm and past history look at our

old newsletters on the website.

www.tamoshanterfarm.org.uk

Membership

£5/address/year due on the 1st April. New members joining after January 1st will not be due for renewal until April the following year. If a membership form has been included with your newsletter then you are due for renewal. Please make cheques payable to: Wirral Urban Farm Association. You will

receive 3 newsletters per year, an invitation to the AGM and the opportunity to become more involved by joining the committee. We do appreciate donations either through the box in the Animal House or with your subscription.

