



Wheathampstead History Society

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News and events

- The **Community Archaeology Geophysics Group** (CAGG) is looking for volunteers to take part in a survey of the Gorhambury side of the Roman town of Verulamium (St.Albans) in August. We will use techniques including resistance, magnetometry and ground-penetrating radar. No previous experience is needed; full training will be given. We work from Wednesday to Sunday throughout August. So, if you think you'd like to spend part of August pushing what looks suspiciously like a lawn-mower, contact Mike Smith for details. mikesmith791195@yahoo.co.uk
- **Next meeting:** There will be no meeting in August so our next meeting is at 7.30 on Wednesday 19 September when Elizabeth Eastwood will talk about Lady Constance Bulwer Lytton and Mary Augusta Ward – the Battle for Female Suffrage.

Notes and queries

The Reading Room

Canon Davys, Rector of St Helen's, arrived in Wheathampstead in 1859. In his autobiography, he wrote:

"There were 30 miles of roads in the Parish and much roadside refreshment for travellers seemed to be demanded. Also there was a terrible plague of thirst, which nothing but alcoholic beverages seemed able to quench. In Wheathampstead with its roads and hamlets, there were 30 public houses while the population was under 2,000. Quarrels, fights and confusion were frequent. One of the late rector's curates had been stabbed, and dishonesty, immorality and everything that was bad were common. A Mayor of St Albans, who knew the neighbourhood well, had once remarked, 'You will have uphill work, for your parish has long had a bad name'."

The Wheathampstead branch of the Church of England Temperance Society was founded in 1879, with Canon Davys as its first President. Under its auspices, the Library and Reading Room opened on 27 December 1883 with a special Christmas evening's entertainment. It attracted "a very crowded audience ... who were particularly delighted by an admirable presentation of "Bluebeard and his Seven Wives" – a surprising choice of subject for a church entertainment, being the story of a wealthy man who marries and murders one wife after another.

The Rector as Master of Ceremonies introduced the tableaux and is reported as enjoying it as much as anyone, though a heavy cold prevented him singing "*The Vicar of Bray*" afterwards.

The evening was intended to be the first of many future entertainments at the Library and Reading Room with the aim of signing up as many new members as possible. There were at that time about 20 honorary members and between 30 and 40 ordinary members. The managers were already expecting a large addition to the interesting books already in the library "which may be a benefit to all who are fond of reading".



The Parish magazine for August 1884 mentions that the managers had put "an excellent guidebook" published by the *Pall Mall Gazette* in the Reading Room to encourage residents of Wheathampstead to go up to London to visit the Health Exhibition, a sign that the Room was being used to spread useful general information.

Farr Brewery's occupation and renaming of the Reading Room 135 years later could be seen as a pleasingly ironic reversal of the original intention. Might Canon Davys be turning in his grave?
Ruth Jeavons