

190X

"STAND AWHILE AND ADMIRE"

A History of the Saffron Walden Museum

by Len Pole

In September, 1832, three gentlemen strolled across the grass in front of the ruined keep of Walden Castle, deep in conversation. They were talking about the possibility of putting up a building for use as a museum, as well as for other purposes. One of them owned the land; this was Lord Braybrooke of Audley End, nobleman, scholar, and antiquarian, who, in furtherance of his rural interests was involved with the newly-formed Horticultural Society and was anxious that it should have a suitable place to meet. Another of the men was Jabez Gibson, of the well-known family of maltsters who had recently taken up banking. He was the most interested of all in starting a Museum. The third was John Player, a man of many interests, who had already put together a 'museum'-like collection of his own. He retired to Walden after having to give up his job at the Admiralty in London for health reasons. He was an Overseer of the Poor and was at that time developing his ideas about spade husbandry as a practical way of alleviating poverty.

These were not the only people interested in the idea of starting a Museum. They were sometimes joined in their deliberations by Thomas Spurgeon, a surgeon in the town. Later in the decade, Joshua Clarke, a maltster, and his brother Joseph also became involved, the former as Hon. Curator, and the latter as a day-to-day administrator. Jabez' brother, Francis, Gibson, was also interested at this early stage.

Ideas about a Museum were first put to paper in September 1832, in preparation for the Horticultural Society's Annual Dinner, following the Annual Show. John Player's account in his autobiography appears to be almost a verbatim record of his speech at the dinner. It includes the following: "In consequence of a proposal of Mr. Jabez Gibson's, we have an idea that there will soon be at our disposal, at a reasonable rent, a convenient apartment for our books, into which also may be introduced the first germ of a Museum and who can say that this little beginning of a Waldensian Museum may not at least rival some in situations less favourable to collectors". The house was probably the one adjoining what was then called the Cattle Market which was used as the venue for the first meeting of the Natural History Society on November 22nd, 1832. However, it is clear that this was only being used as a meeting place at this time. That the Bury Hills was thought of as the most suitable site for the Museum is confirmed in a letter from Lord Braybrooke to John Player, also quoted in his autobiography: "What I should most like would be to see the ground between the Church and the Castle

converted into a garden and the ruin fitted up as a Museum without the external appearance of the walls being altered or disfigured." In addition, rough notes in Player's hand, bound into one of the Registers in the Museum, corroborate this. In September, after the site visit with Lord Braybrooke, John Player, Jabez Gibson, Thomas Spurgeon, Francis Gibson and Mr. Youngman met at the Castle "... and thought it reasonable to lay out the Bury Hills and build a Museum if it could be done".

It was done. Lord Braybrooke, in his "History of Audley End", published in 1838, but written in 1834-5, reports: "a large Museum was erected in 1833, which already contains a great number of interesting specimens in natural history and other curious objects. There are also rooms provided in the same building for the Horticultural Society, and the members of the Literary Institution, who assemble occasionally to read papers upon subjects not connected with theology or politics". What is most interesting about this description is that it refers to only that part of the present building west of the Great Hall. The author goes on in his description: "Adjoining the Museum a spacious room, to be called the Agricultural Hall, capable of containing three hundred persons, has just been completed by the author of these pages, as there was no place adapted to public meetings in the town; but the principal object is to accommodate the Walden Agricultural Society".

There is therefore no doubt that a building existed for the purpose of being used as a Museum before 1835; this is confirmed by the terms of the lease drawn up 13th October, 1834, between Lord Braybrooke and 12 gentlemen of the town charged with the responsibility of administering the new building (this group later became known as the Castle Hill Society) which refers to "All that building thereon lately erected and built by the said Richard Griffin Lord Braybrooke and now used as and for a Museum (except the large room at the East end of the said Museum called the Agricultural Hall ...". However, there is also no doubt that the house adjoining the Cattle Market continued to be used, for according to the minutes of the Natural History Society for February 11th, 1835, "the interval between 31st December and the present has been occupied in removing cases and specimens from the House so kindly and so liberally lent to this Society since its first institution to the new Building on the Castle Hill". There is no evidence that the house was opened as a Museum at any time, and there is plenty of evidence that the new building was not opened as a Museum before 12th May, 1835. This comes from the minutes of the Natural History Society, from Player's introduction to the Abridged Catalogue, and from manuscript notes of Nathan Maynard, the father of the first paid Curator of the Museum, who himself started a small private Museum in Whittlesford: "for 15th May 35 I have been to Walden today to see a new Museum which has been opened there this week in a new building near the ancient Castle...

How I should love the opportunity of visiting a collection of this sort when I please. This day set apart for the public at one shilling each - I entered my name in a book kept there for the purpose". This was the only time non-members of the Society or their guests were allowed in to the Museum before the 1880s. The Museum on the first floor of the new building was being made ready during the first months of 1835, and was duly opened for the first time at 11 a.m. on Tuesday, May 12th, the Revd. Robert Fiske delivering an address to the Company in explanation of the objectives of the Trustees. Refreshments were then served.

From May, 1835, onward, the Museum was open to subscribers on one afternoon a week in the summer months. It closed each winter and was then re-opened, in the words of Herbert Collar, a later Curator, "with great ceremony" each succeeding May, with a lecture by an eminent scholar. The handbills printed each year to remind subscribers of the re-opening and that subscriptions were due stated "Admission by ticket only". This arrangement continued until the 1880s. The first mention of the Museum being more generally open is in Hart's Almanack for 1887 where it is said that application can be made "on the premises to Mr. Maynard, Curator". In addition, the Almanack staged the Museum to be "Open 9 - 5 every day, except Sundays, Good Friday and Christmas Day, admission by subscription ticket, order of the Trustees ... or application to the Curator". Somewhere about this time, daily admission without charge commenced, and with the addition of Sunday opening, a tradition started during the First World War, and re-established in 1936, has continued to this day.

What was the Museum like in 1835? Nathan Maynard has left us the only contemporary description by an outsider of what the Museum contained when it first opened. "Stuffed birds and animals - shells, birds' eggs, nests, skeletons and several bones of the mammoth - a beautiful rhinoceros, stuffed, which stands in the centre of the room, Indian curiosities, insects, casts of heads, medals, minerals, petrifications, etc., etc., head of an elephant, of a hippopotamus, horse, cow, etc." The head of the elephant could be part of the one which was later set up in its entirety.

The story of the elephant is worth telling, since it soon became the single most famous object in the Museum. It arrived, together with a large number of other animals and birds, as a result of a letter written by Hannibal Dunn, one of the founder members of the Natural History Society, to his brother Robert, of Algoa Bay, South Africa, in 1833. At a meeting of the Committee in December of that year, the receipt of a bill from Robert Dunn for all the items he had sent, amounting to £422. 8s. 2¹/₂d, was reported. The Committee adjourned to consider its reply to this "remarkable circumstance". After some delay the animals arrived and Jabez Gibson agreed to purchase

some of them; others were offered to Museums elsewhere. The elephant was one of the animals purchased by Gibson, and was eventually set up in the Museum in 1837. The skin was prepared by Thomas Smith, a local tanner, and stuffed with straw over an iron frame by William Spieler, a blacksmith. The work was directed by Joseph Clarke, who made a model elephant to act as guide. Filling the great skin with straw was obviously thirsty work; in a surviving copy of the bill, 9¹/₂ gallons of beer was paid for (at 2s. per gallon). The bill totalled £24 1s. The elephant occupied pride of place in the Museum, as can be seen in the frontispiece to the abridged catalogue, published in 1845.

The Museum room very quickly became too small. In 1837, Lord Braybrooke agreed to add two large rooms at the back, one on the ground floor and one above (now the "Worlds of Man" gallery), together with two other small rooms, referred to as 'a cottage', for the caretaker to occupy. It is likely that the upper of these two rooms was immediately filled with the objects displaced by the arrival of the newly mounted elephant. In 1838 and 1839 the Essex Literary Journal supplied first-hand accounts of the re-opening ceremonies. The earlier correspondent described the displays briefly, adding that he "must seize some other hour when the throng is less gay and the laugh less loud to notice in detail the varied relics here gathered ...". The lecture on this occasion, by Professor Adam Sedgwick, lasted for three hours!

One of the most notable additions to the collections in 1838, remarked upon by the Essex Literary Journal, was the Lion "Wallace" (now in 1985 restored to its former glory). He was famous in life as the first lion successfully reared in captivity in this country, having been born in Edinburgh in 1812. He took part in the last and most notorious fight with dogs in Warwick in 1825 and died at the ripe old age of 25 in 1838; this was an especially remarkable age for a menagerie animal, since they were often badly treated and malnourished. He had belonged to Wombwell's menagerie which was famous throughout the land. George Wombwell was born at Duddenhoe End, and donated a number of animals to what he regarded as his local Museum, as well as to other places, including Cambridge University.

As well as additions to the collections, there were occasions when the opposite occurred. The most notorious time was in October, 1842, when a quantity of gold and silver coins were stolen. A surprising element in the story is the speed with which the Trustees acted, particularly Joseph Clarke, who went to London, obtained the consent of Her Majesty's Government to put up half the reward money, obtained a list of the missing coins and had a poster printed advertising the reward of £100, all within two days of the theft. And this before the days of telephones, and even before the railway

puffed as far as Wendens Ambo! There were several suspects, the most likely being John Wright, the son of the caretaker of the building. In December, 1842, an old friend of his called Abbott claimed he saw Wright go into a coin-dealer's in Aldgate and sell some old coins. John Wright was arrested and brought before the Saffron Walden magistrates. However, the dealers could not positively identify him and it was not possible to prove that the coins sold were the same as those taken from the Museum. Wright was acquitted. Joseph Clarke was most annoyed at this. In some notes he left he says: "... we do not consider that we have done with either him or the magistrates yet".

A comprehensive listing of the collections was made by John Player in 1844 and published the following year. It was said to be the first illustrated catalogue to a Museum to be published in this country. As well as descriptive chapters, it contained an illustration of the inside of the Museum, with elephant, rhinoceros, giraffe, the panels painted by Cipriani, some Australian aboriginal weapons, stuffed birds and Roman pottery. The catalogue itself included sections on birds, reptiles, fishes, etc., as well as the then popular subject of phrenology, also specimens illustrating the "habits of various nations".

This latter topic was becoming a speciality of the Museum which it has maintained with greater or lesser enthusiasm ever since. The first such items were donated by the Marchioness Cornwallis, consisting of samples of lace-bark from the West Indies made up into a child's dress and cap of about 1830. Two early collections, from south-eastern Australia and the Pacific Islands are of international importance. Both were donated by the men who had collected them. John Helder Wedge was a surveyor in Tasmania, whose father lived in Shady Camps, and who was one of the earliest settlers of the Werribee area near Melbourne in 1836. Most of the aboriginal objects were collected there, but some came from New South Wales' aborigines living in Tasmania. The other man was George Bonnet who had been employed by the London Missionary Society to inspect their missionary stations particularly in the Pacific area. He travelled around the world between 1821 and 1829. His connection with Saffron Walden was tenuous; he knew Revd. Griffinhoofe, vicar of Arkesden, an early supporter of the Museum, and presumably became aware of the Museum's existence through him.

The need for more space to house the ever-increasing collections continued. In 1842, Lord Braybrooke was approached with a proposal to raise the ceiling in the Agricultural Hall and insert an extra floor to be used by the Natural History Society, but this was turned down. A second proposal, for an 'ornamental gallery' at the west end of the Hall, with an entrance from the Museum Room through a

doorway in the chimney breast, met with a similar fate, but has recently been revived.

The fame of the Museum was still spreading in the 19th century. This may have been partly to do with the inclusion of the elephant in the Great Exhibition of 1851. The Trustees had agreed to a request from the Exhibition's organisers to borrow it, so that an Indian howdah could be displayed on it, despite its African origins. The removal of the beast from the first floor, down the stairs and out through the front door must have been very carefully executed, as there could only have been a few inches to spare. The sight of it travelling to London (probably by train from the recently-opened station at Wendens Ambo) no doubt created a stir.

Despite the good reputation that the Museum had at this time, finance was becoming an increasing problem. The Trustees had to dig into their pockets regularly, as the Treasurers' accounts show.

Documents from the archives also indicate an atmosphere of decline slowly settling over the Museum between the 1850s and the 1870s. Nevertheless, there were important additions to the collections, including the two clunch mantelpieces from R. D. Thurgood's house in the Market Square, which was pulled down to make way for the cattle market in 1855.

In 1872 the Museum at Sudbury in Suffolk found itself in such a bad way that the collections had to be sold. Fortunately for this Museum, William Murray Tuke attended the sale and bought a number of items, many of which were later deposited here.

A similar fate might have befallen this Museum had it not been for the beneficence of George Stacey Gibson who in the 1830s endowed the Museum in such a way as to give it a new lease of life. It was not simply a matter of direct financial help. Gibson was responsible for the extension to the Town Hall in 1879, which included an Assembly Hall, rendering the Agricultural Hall redundant as a meeting place. It was therefore agreed that the Natural History Society should take over the entire museum building. He was also responsible for the payment of the Curator as well as for other expenses attendant upon the re-organisation of the Museum.

The first paid Curator of the Museum was George Nathan Maynard, of Whittlesford. Although he was first employed as a Caretaker, it was soon realised that he had a much greater range of skills than any of his predecessors. Since his father had made collections of his own, Maynard was already familiar with some of the requirements necessary for the proper organisation of museum collections, which was exactly what was required at that time. His first tasks related to the physical movement of material from the first floor to the

newly-released space in the Agricultural Hall and elsewhere on the ground floor. He also started to keep records of new acquisitions in bound volumes, a procedure which is still kept up today. His Registers are thankfully filled with his drawings which have helped enormously with the problems of identification. In addition, the work which we now call conservation was an important part of his duties, although the treatment methods used in the 19th century are quite different from those in use today. Little distinction was made, for instance, between conservation and restoration, in which some attempt was made to make the object 'look like new'.

One of the many objects moved downstairs in 1880 or 1881 was the elephant, which took pride of place in the new arrangement. The first floor galleries were refurbished to accommodate the increasingly important collections of ceramics and glass, most of which were accumulated through the generosity of William Murray Tuke and Henry Stear, who was the local Medical Officer of Health at the end of the 19th century. The Museum was sufficiently improved by 1887 to be given first class status in a report prepared by the British Association for the Advancement of Science. It is a particularly interesting document as it gave for the first time an overall picture of museum provision throughout the country.

In 1904 Guy Maynard took over the Curatorship from his father. He had grown up in the building and perhaps it was this which encouraged the use of the Museum for teaching which characterised his time here. Up to the end of the 19th century, Museums were not thought of as places suitable for popular education. Those who were already knowledgeable could derive some benefit from such places, but others had little point of contact with the museum displays. Although pupil teachers at the Training College had been borrowing objects for a number of years at the end of the 19th century, and proprietors of schools had been allowed to bring in up to six pupils at any one time, there were no concessions to ignorance in the way the Museum was laid out or labelled. Guy Maynard changed the arrangement of one of the ground floor rooms in 1915 so that children could sit down and be shown things from the collections. He also produced a number of explanatory drawings of the way the area of the town looked during different historical periods, and used other ways of telling children about the development of the town. He was probably one of the first curators in the country to place such emphasis on teaching within the Museum. He also set aside an area for the preparation of new displays, another interesting development for such an early period.

The Museum was kept open during the first world war, although it was subjected to heavy wear and tear from soldiers on leave or stationed nearby. After one was caught trying to wrench the

donations box off its plinth, visits by soldiers were restricted to the weekends, when military police were on duty at all times.

The Trustees were again concerned about lack of space at that time. In 1913 they bought some cottages in Castle Street behind the Museum (nos. 36 - 40) with the intention of knocking them down and extending the Museum building northwards. Fortunately for those living there now, the war put a stop to their plans. In 1914 the Curator moved into one of the cottages, releasing his rooms in the museum for displays; local geology was put in one, and the results of the Walden Survey in another. The Walden Survey was directed by George Morris, a history master at the Friends' School, who worked closely with Guy Maynard, and succeeded him as Honorary Curator for some years. The Curator's former living room in the Museum is now part of the special exhibition area. The other cottages were let or later sold.

In 1918 Maynard left to work at Ipswich Museum, where he pursued a distinguished career. After some time he was replaced by Hubert Collar, who had had no previous experience of museums and therefore worked together with George Morris. The Natural History Society experienced another period of extreme financial difficulty in the 1920s and 1930s, in common with many other museums up and down the country. The same problems, of lack of space in an ill-maintained building, beset Mr. Collar as they had beset the other curators.

In 1923 the so-called bird room also contained tapestries, war relics and oak carvings! Since some finance came from the Natural History Society, he sought to increase its membership; he also solicited help from local societies. In 1921 the Amateur Dramatic Society donated half the proceeds of one of its productions to help the Museum. In 1923 and 1924 the amount put in the donations box declined, but not the number of visitors; this was possibly a sign of harder times, or an indication that the Museum was less well appreciated.

One cause for celebrations during this period was the occasion of the joint centenary of the Literary and Scientific Institution and the Natural History Society and its Museum on July 9th, 1932. There was a reception by members of the Tuke family in the afternoon, followed by short talks held in the Parish Room, the Museum and the Castle ruins, and a concert, also in the Castle ruins. The confusion which has subsequently arisen about the timing of both this celebration and the recent 150th anniversary stems from the lack of distinction that the organisers of the centenary celebrations made between the Natural History Society and the Museum. As the above account has, I hope, made clear the first formal meeting of the Society took place in November 1832, the first opening of the Museum in May 1835. The two occasions were kept quite separate by William

Favill Tuke during his talk on the 'Early History of the Literary and Scientific Institution and the Museum', given in 1932, even though its title is confusing.

With the condition of the Museum building deteriorating and additions to the collections continually being made, it was inevitable that some 'rationalisation' of the older collections would take place. Some of the larger mammals, like the giraffe, were disposed of in the 1920s. During and after the second world war, attention turned to the ethnography collections. The famous Hawaiian feather cloak had been packed away for safe keeping during the war. It had been given to the Trustees by the Rector of Widdington in 1830, he having received it from his brother-in-law, who was chief attendant to the King and Queen of the Hawaiian Islands during their visit to this country in 1824. The cloak is a most splendid and important piece. It was decided after the war to sell it through commercial channels, so that repairs could be made to the roof of the Museum building. It was bought by the Royal Scottish Museum, together with a small number of other Hawaiian objects, and is now on display in Edinburgh.

Some other items 'disappeared' with less notice taken of them by the Museum authorities. The period after the war was a time when a few enthusiastic collectors of ethnographica scoured the country's smaller museums knowing they contained many forgotten items. What is surprising in the case of Saffron Walden is that so little of note was disposed of in this way - a pair of feather rosettes and some pieces of barkoloth, some of which were more recently sold at Christies.

Mr. Collar retired as Curator in 1948 after 27 years' service. His place was taken by a Mr. Andrews, still remembered by some as a gaunt gentleman in a black cloak. When he arrived, he remarked that he found the displays 'a meaningless jumble', but, like his predecessors, he soon learned that it was impossible to do anything meaningful with them in the financial situation that prevailed at the time. However, in 1952, he started a school loans service, offering specimens such as insects, birds, coins, tokens and stone age items to the increasing number of schools that were interested in using the Museum. It may have been partly the pressure that this interest brought to bear on the Essex County Council which resulted in small amounts being granted by the Council's Education Committee to the Museum to assist in maintenance. It was also as a result of increasing concern being shown by the Borough Council, particularly through the Town Clerk, Mr. H. C. Stacey, that rate support became a regular element in the Museum's finances during the 1950s. By 1957 the Councils were of the opinion that some representation on the Museum's Committee of Management was necessary in view of their increasing involvement. As a result of discussion between all the

interested parties, a new body was formed - the Saffron Walden Museum Society, with its Management Committee, in 1958.

New officers were also employed; initially Dorothy Monteith, who had been writing a detailed thesis on the development of the town, followed by Gillian Chapman (later Spencer). It was Mrs. Spencer who put forward and later implemented the most far-reaching changes in the layout and organisation of the Museum since 1880. It involved setting aside some of the areas formerly used for display as storage rooms. The new displays included only a selection of the material available for each topic rather than every object the Museum possessed, as they had done before. The less palatable side to this reorganisation was that many of the natural history specimens were disposed of. This created much controversy in the town, particularly when it was discovered that the new Management Committee intended to get rid of the elephant and other remaining tropical mammals. Despite this opposition, the elephant was sold to a family in Bath, and could be seen for some years afterwards standing beside some trees in a garden. A recent search in Bath has not resulted in a single piece of the skin or framework being located.

The reorganisation work was undertaken with financial assistance from the Carnegie UK Trust. A great number of changes took place, not only in the Great Hall, where new cases are installed, but also in the first floor galleries. The work was continued by Suzanna Davis after Mrs. Spencer left, and later by Graham Hunter. The Management Committee still found it difficult to make ends meet, even with grants from the local authorities (including the Rural District Council by this time). The Committee had once again to consider selling items when the opportunity came in 1966 to purchase the freehold of the old school building on Museum Street. The purchase was agreed, but only at the cost of some valuable gold coins. The increasing maintenance costs of the main building were also giving cause for concern. Once again the problem was temporarily solved by selling collections, but the Management Committee was beginning to realise that to continue to solve the Museum's financial problems in this way would end up with a finely maintained building devoid of collections. A longer term solution was needed.

Whatever is to be said about the reorganisation of local government in 1974 and the creation of the new District Council of Uttlesford, there is no doubt that it came into existence not a moment too soon for the Saffron Walden Museum. After lengthy discussions between the new Council, the Essex County Council and the Museum Society, not to mention consultations with the Chagrilles Commission, alterations to the Society's constitution were agreed. The museum buildings and collections were placed on licence to the District Council, who accepted responsibility for

their maintenance and the remuneration of the staff. Thus, for the first time in its existence the Museum was given the possibility of financial stability, which allowed realistic long-term planning to take place. In the past ten years the Museum staff have been able to implement major improvements in every area of the Museum's activities - not just in the galleries but also behind the scenes, with the provision of a conservation laboratory for the treatment of all the varied collections, and with atmospherically controlled areas for the storage of reserve collections and study collections.

The most important project facing the Museum in the next few years is the reorganisation of the Great Hall. The displays have not been radically altered since 1960; in addition, a great many items have been added to the collections since then, within the disciplines of natural history and archaeology, much of which is worthy of display. The project therefore includes the insertion of a balcony on three sides of the room (a distant echo of one of the plans of the 1840s!) which will double display space, as well as provide for extra study and storage areas. Another important element in the scheme is the lift which will, for the first time, allow access for the disabled to the whole of the Museum.

Editor's Note: Mr. Len Polo became Curator of the Museum in 1974. He continues to keep the high standard set for the Museum in the past. Among his innovations is the Walden History Gallery; and numerous small specialised exhibitions keep up local interest in the Museum.

THE STORY OF WALLACE OUR LION

by Mary Whitoman

Wallace is no legend. He existed as a famous lion of the 19th century, bred in Edinburgh, hence his name. He was the undefeated hero of the notorious lion and dog fights (a revival of the sport of the Royal Stuarts) that took place for years at Warwick, although angrily opposed in the national press.

But why does Wallace (stuffed of course and lately refurbished) stand so heroically in the Museum of the little town of Saffron Walden where he has been on view since 1838, shortly after his demise? The answer can be read in the Museum's first catalogue of 1845:-

Fam. Felidae

Lion Barbarus Grey (The Lion Wallace)
Presented by Mr. G. Wombwell.

This animal is remarkable as the first lion bred in this country and was during his life of 25 years in the collection of Mr. G. Wombwell, surviving his battle with the dogs at Warwick, several years.

The name of Wombwell - Woomell in Essex - figures unobtrusively in the entry, but it is around George Wombwell, famous showman, that the whole story revolves. Born 1777 in Duddenhoe End, a small village outside Saffron Walden, he had from childhood the uncanny ability to handle any animal or other wild creature. At twenty he was working as a shoe maker in London and in his spare time watching shiploads of wild animals from distant countries being unloaded at the London Docks to satisfy the growing curiosity of an ignorant public.

By chance he bought for £75 two large boa constrictors because most dealers were nervous of snakes. Not George Wombwell, who quickly and confidently established a rapport with them. He began to exhibit them and within a month paid off their purchase price. The experience was to shape his future; the desire to own a collection of animals was fired by every visit to the Docks, and his energy and ambition were so powerful that by the time he was thirty he had set his menagerie on the road.

From the first it was an outstanding success. In time he had three menageries and they were to travel over the United Kingdom for the next hundred years. His first menagerie with its large iron cages on wagons drawn often by as many as six horses, rumbled along the rough country roads to the fairs of big and little towns, the most important of all being St. Bartholomew's Fair in London. The animals were said to be kept healthy by the jolting and bumping that gave them involuntary exercise!

Moreover, Wombwell developed early a flair for showmanship. His wagons bore terrifying pictures of savage beasts and his natural command over animals could set spectators' blood tingling. This was important because the rivalry between Wombwell and other early menageries such as Atkins and Hiltons was intense. The racing to be first at a Fair could even end in physical violence with tent poles, while animals roared and even escaped and caravans overturned.

The taming of wild animals had a grim history, such as the breaking of a performing bear's bones to prevent the fatal hug, the barbarous torture with red hot irons, the whip, the continuous loud

clanging of metals and drums to terrorise them into submission. These were now being replaced with what was known as 'gentling' - patience and kindness and 'rewards' to build up a pattern of trust between man and beast. This of course has now been long understood and was instinctive with the gifted Wombwell. It enabled him to appear daring when he entered the cage of a large and fierce animal and must have fascinated the young Princess Victoria when he appeared at Windsor before and after she was Queen. Altogether he gave five command performances.

Why then did he betray his gift by reviving the brutal lion and dog fights of Stuart times in 1825? Was it ambition for publicity, or the fortune that the betting world promised in this so-called sport? Costs of maintaining his menageries were high - he is even said to have lost a collection crossing the Irish Sea, and the fights promised a high cash flow. So we find him in the Old Factory Yard on the outskirts of Warwick. On two sides of the square empty windows for spectators, each paying for one to five guineas for a seat. The other two sides of the square contained a colourful collection of cages on their wagons. In the central hollow stood the main cage, with bars widely spaced to enable the dogs to run in and out freely.

Fighting dogs were usually of the mastiff, bull terrier or lurcher breed, the lurchers known for their wide mouths. Before the show they were on view at "The Green Dragon". Fight had been brought up on the previous night and locked in a shed together. They fought violently amongst themselves and in the morning the keeper found one dead and another badly injured. Surprised, he said: "They shouldn't of fought; they was on the same side!"

The six remaining dogs, straining at the leash, were led into the arena where the lion from his travelling cage regarded them with the same mild curiosity he had extended to the 500 spectators. He was the handsome Nero, the public's favourite for many years. When amid cheers George Wombwell appeared, Nero's cage was moved close up to the big cage. Wombwell joined the lion, then passed through to the large cage "Nero following him as tamely as a Newfoundland dog".

There was a gasp of amazement, then more cheers as the first three dogs were unleashed and darted between the bars to attack the lion. But Nero who had only experienced kindness and never known an enemy, faced the dogs as if he did not know what was expected of him. The dogs had no such doubts. They hurled themselves at his throat, bit his nose, tore at his mane. With a roar of pain his mighty paws brushed them off - unhurt, they returned to the vicious attack, tearing at his neck and tender dewlap. Again and again he shook or brushed them off, using only his paws but never his teeth to defend himself.

The cheers of the crowd subsided uneasily as the lion endeavoured to get away from his tormentors. What kind of a fight was this! At last Wombwell ordered the dogs to be called off. Nero crawled back to a corner, torn and bleeding. Desperately, Wombwell revived him with buckets of water, suppressing any feelings of remorse at what he was doing. Perhaps in the second round Nero would show a lion's rage.

It was not to be. The last three dogs were fresh and fierce for the fight. Again, Nero used only his paws. This time the dogs ripped him because he was unable to use his paws properly as he tried to keep his footing on a floor wet from the sluicing. It was a piteous ending, the derisive cries of the crowd aimed both at Wombwell and the defeated Nero.

However, Wombwell was not yet defeated. With his reputation at stake, he was preparing to risk bringing on the young lion, Wallace, very strong, tamed but not trained and still uncertain.

His announcement of the new contestant apposed the crowd who were now confident in their dogs. Wallace stood quite still as the dogs rushed through the bars and leapt to the attack. Wallace replied instantly by clapping his paw heavily on one and seizing the second in his teeth, and with a shake, walking round the cage as if he was a cat with a mouse. Then he shook him off and picked up the first, still stunned, and repeated his disdainful walk as if trained to do it. The dogs had to be dragged to safety through the bars while Wallace sat on his haunches in obvious anticipation of the next two.

Twice more, with variations, Wallace dealt with his attackers. Thus, in one appearance, Wallace established his reputation. During the years of his battling, larger, stronger and more numerous dogs had to be found to bring the necessary drama to the cruel sport.

The years went by and even the most victorious lion must fight his last battle. Yet in death Wallace was still to remain 'rampant'; for George Wombwell presented his champion to the new Museum in his home town - Saffron Walden. He was put on view to the public and for the occasion of the present 150th anniversary celebrations he has benefitted from some expert rejuvenating treatment.

The nose was all covered with scars, but few are visible on him as he stands ready to greet the visitors of today.

- - - - -

Footnotes: At one time Wallace lived in a veritable jungle in

Saffron Walden Museum. Many of his animal companions were sent by Wombwell from his stock, but there was also another local boy, Robert Dunn, an African hunter, who regularly supplied specimens of his trophies to order, including an African elephant which was loaned to the Great Exhibition of 1851, his huge rhubarb cars draped with rich embroideries to disguise him as an Indian elephant. His parade on a trolley through Walden to Audley End Station was cleverly caricatured for "Punch" by the Victorian artist, John Leech. When the Museum was modernised in the 1960s the jungle was dispersed, but Wallabe remained.

George Wombwell retired 1865 and his original menagerie was carried on by his widow until 1872, when it was disposed of in Edinburgh. Show No. 2 went to his niece, Mrs. Edmunds, who carried on until 1884 when the greater part was taken over by her son who sold it to the Bostock family. Another niece had married into the Bostock family and for years this was famous as Bostock & Wombwell, fair and circus proprietors. The smallest show, No. 3, was given to a Wombwell nephew but it soon declined. Something of the original family genius was to be seen in the "Captain" George Wombwell who could control five large lions in a comparatively small cage with just a narrow willow whip. He died as late as 1940.

Editor's note: Mrs. Whiteman points out that the article on Wallace is all correct as the old Hone's Book of Days in the Library has so many contemporary facts about it. She adds that there are still Wombwells living in the area.

CORRIGENDA

In the Journal of Spring, 1985, No. 27;-

- (a) On page 83, sub-section (g) Wilkes, on the 6th line of the first paragraph the words "Turner Collin's Daughter" should read "Turner Collin's Sister".
- (b) On page 84, sub-section (h), on the 3rd line, "H. T. Turner" should read "H. T. Horner".

THE UNDATED CHARTER GRANTED (IN DUPLICATE) BY HUMPHREY DE BOHUN, EARL OF HEREFORD AND OF ESSEX, CONSTABLE OF ENGLAND, TO THE BURGESSES OF THE BURGH OF WALDEN.

by H. C. Stacey

On August 23 last year the Saffron Walden Weekly News published a picture of the Town Clerk holding one of the framed Charters, granted "around 1236", he said. Previously the Council had decided that "next month discussions will open to decide whether the town should celebrate the Charter's 750th anniversary in 1986". That decision was taken at a public meeting in September, chaired by Town Mayor Harris, without regard to the 1897 Leach Opinion that the charter date was not 1236, but c1298-1321.

The Town Clerk should have been aware of that opinion, because on 2/9/79 I informed him that I had written an article for the Antiquarian Society Journal about the charter and sought permission to see the ancient box or skip in which it used to be kept. Apart from that article, published in the 1980 Autumn Journal, No. 18, Alderman Rowntree's 1951 "Then and Now", p. 10, called attention to a probable "1298" date; and Vol. X, No. 29, of the Friends' School "Avenue", March 1919 (mentioned in my article) refers to the 1897 correction of the "1236" charter date. That "Avenue" series was edited by George Morris who, with a Miss Baker, wrote the 1913 "Survey of Saffron Walden and its Region". The copy of it in the town archives belonged to Morris and was given to me at his death by his friend and colleague, Bernard ("Barney") Jacob.

After hearing Steven Bassett's lecture in the Friends' Meeting House about his excavations, I sent him on 29/1/85 a copy of my Journal article drawing his attention to the Leach Opinion on the Charter date because in his "Saffron Walden to A.D. 1300", published 1982, the name Humphrey de Bohun appears only twice, both referring to his charter dated 1236 - an indication that he could not have researched it.

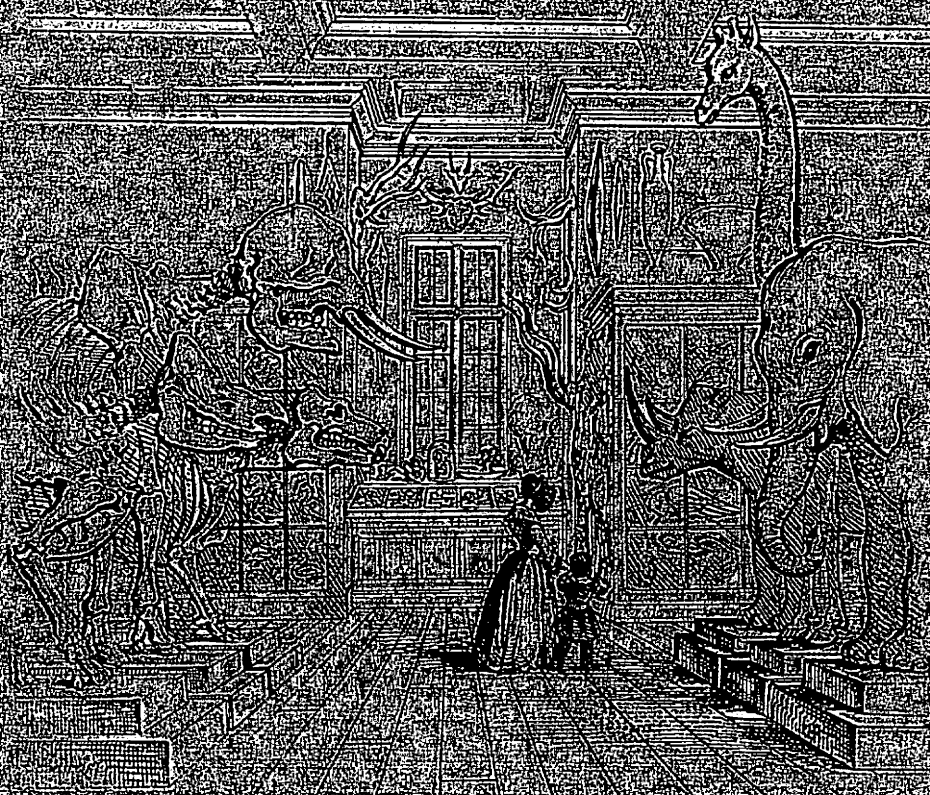
When the Town Clerk questioned the 1897 Opinion, I wrote on Sep. 21 to the Society of Antiquaries but it was not until Nov. 22 that the Weekly News could publish Mr. Heslop's Opinion confirming Leach.

In spite of it, the Finance Committee four days later, on Nov. 26 (min. 186) considered a letter "from the organisers of the celebrations, planned for 1986, to commemorate the 750th Anniversary of Saffron Walden's first Charter" and resolved to loan £500 "towards the celebrations" The Council, in adopting the recommendation, once more rejected expert advice.

From August to May at least, a Festival was intended and publicised in the terms of the above resolution.

SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORY

The occasional journal of the
Saffron Walden Historical Society



NUMBER TWENTY-EIGHT

PRICE 45p

AUTUMN 1985



FORTY-FIVE PENCE

HERST 29 C 79