

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Geoffrey Robinson, The Worlingworth Feast Painting

Geoffrey Robinson gave a very interesting talk about the Worlingworth Feast Painting to the February meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall. It is a painting displayed in St Mary's Church, Worlingworth which commemorated the Golden Jubilee of King George III in 1810.

The Golden Jubilee celebrations had begun on 25 October 1809. They were the first jubilee events organised for a British monarch. The day was a public holiday in London. There were fireworks, gun salutes and feasts. They showed a genuine affection of the people for George III. There was no mention of his occasional poor health, the loss of the American colonies or the King's possibly excessive interest in agriculture which had earned him the nickname, 'Farmer George.' Britain seemed to be in need of events to raise the spirits of the people. The country had been involved in an almost continuous war with France since 1793 which had led to a significant rise in taxation.

The jubilee celebrations concluded with the Worlingworth Feast which was held on 25 October 1810. It was organised by John Henniker-Major, 2nd Baron Henniker. He was an extremely wealthy and influential man. He had extensive estates in Kent and Essex, but his principal landholdings were in Suffolk where his main country home was Worlingworth Hall. The feast was attended by over 4,000 people who seem to have been residents in the Worlingworth area and employees of John Henniker-Major. A huge ox was roasted and considerable amounts of beer were consumed. The event was reported in the national and regional press.

An unusual feature of the feast was that it was commemorated in a painting by an unknown artist. This now hangs in the church at Worlingworth. The painting shows working people sitting on long tables enjoying the beef, bread and beer. There was dancing to a fiddle, hornpipe and drum. Pedlars are shown selling different goods, as if at a fair. A man appears to be taking the King's shilling to enlist in the army, with his wife trying to stop him. Some boys are playing cricket. There also seems to be a wedding party near the church. This is used as evidence that the sketches the painting is based upon were made at the time as parish records indicate that there was a wedding in the church on the day of the feast. The Henniker-Major family are depicted on the fringe of events in front of Worlingworth Hall.

The painting has had a chequered history. The financial problems of the 5th Baron Henniker-Major forced him to sell off much of the estates in the late 19th Century. This was the result of an expensive lifestyle, combined with an agricultural depression and the need to support his 10 children. By then, the family had left Worlingworth Hall moved to Thornham Hall where they still live. The family finances did not improve. The feast painting was part of a sale of family possessions in 1937. It was in a poor condition and was not bought at the auction. It was given to the community and has been displayed in the church since then. It was eventually restored in the 1990s.

The painting is unique as it is a record of social history as well as a representation of an exceptional event. It shows many aspects of the life of a rural community in the early 19th Century.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be on Wednesday 23 March at Rickinghall Village Hall when Chris Johnson will give a talk entitled *Bound for Van Dieman's Land – The tragic story of Alfred Talent of Hoxne*. New members and visitors are very welcome. Further information is available at www.heritagecircle.onsuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy