

### "Looking at Old Newspapers" – 11 June 2025 – Pip Wright

For our June meeting Pip Wright joined us for a very entertaining meeting about local newspapers which have been published in Suffolk for over 300 years. A good number of the newspapers survive and provide a vital resource for researching family or local history giving a fascinating insight into peoples lives in the past. Pip explained that local newspapers provided a good source of information and background information for his novels and could often be found in collections held in local town museums.

Old newspapers were generally published weekly being expensive and subject to tax until 1855 with the oldest being made from rags leading to the slang name of the local rag. The oldest papers were generally only 4 pages and passed on information from the London papers. These papers were passed around an area or village due to the cost and the fact that many could not read so one person would read the paper to others. Following the removal of the tax more local papers could then be produced at a cheaper price.

Pip shared examples including letters to the editor, adverts for servants and general stories including in 1872 the first accident reported on the Felixstowe railway. Some of the more sensational items including details of people who had sold their wives, a letter to the editor in 1721 about mermaids, details of poachers, and crimes and punishments including tales of highwaymen and smugglers. Richard Chaplin a well-known local smuggler even advertising when he "ceased trading". Pip explained that the stories in the papers were not always accurate being written to be amusing or entertaining. The papers were also used to publicise details of visits by fairs and travelling entertainments, balloon flights, menageries and travelling zoos including the famous Victorian showman George Wombwell and his famous lion, a visit by Blondin who tight rope walked across the Orwell river and an advert for Charles Dickens' talk in Ipswich.

The local papers were generally very political and advocated a particular view point except for the Bury Free Press. In 1860 the East Anglian Daily Times expanded publication to 6 days a week and by the 1930s the Stowmarket Mercury had expanded to 16 pages although mostly filled with trivia.

Pip ended his entertaining talk with four more recent stories of local interest.

Lorna Fraser

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