**A Sign of the Times: Local history told through East Anglian village signs.**

**Sarah Doig – 14 October 2026**

For our October meeting we were joined by Sarah Doig a popular speaker for the Society, Linda advised that this would unfortunately be Sarah's final talk to us as she had made the decision to retire from public speaking.

Sarah began by telling us of the interesting local history that could be gained by looking at village signs. In East Anglian Norfolk had the highest number of village signs at around 500 and Suffolk was second with 350, the sign at Campsea Ashe being thought to be the oldest village sign in Suffolk. Village signs had originated in Norfolk, surprisingly as late as the early 20th century, the then Prince of Wales had commissioned signs around the royal Sandringham estate including those at Flitcham and Wolferton in 1912. The King later described the signs as a "welcome guide to visitors to a strange land".

Following a speech by the Duke of York in 1920 there was a revival of interest in village signs and the Daily Mail held a competition to design a sign with a cash prize given to the winner. Events such as coronations, jubilees and the Millennium tended to lead to the creation of new signs. The sign at Walberswick created to commemorate the 1953 Coronation featuring a representation of a local ship, also has its own story having disappeared and then been returned years later by a couple who had bought it an antiques centre on the South Coast as a garden ornament not knowing its origins.

Sarah explained some of the different types of village signs noting that in many cases the design for the signs had been a cause of much local argument and disagreement. Whilst some signs are very intricate with metal silhouettes some are a more naive design such as the Peakirk duck. There are also signs that incorporate noticeboards and some signs made of mosaic. Sarah pointed out that a number of village signs show the WI initials having been given by the local WI group.

In East Anglia many of the signs were made by the same maker, Harry Carter from Swaffham,

who carved over 300 signs from the late 1920s. Many of the more recent local signs had been made in metal by a local blacksmith Hector Moore from Brandeston whose wife created the designs, such as the sign at Snape. The sign at Witnesham was designed by Giles who had lived in the village.

The 1983 Redgrave sign is double sided and the parish council had tried to depict landmarks, local people and prominent families in the design. The signs at Fordham and Beccles commemorate past royal visits, with other signs showing local sports such as cricket and "bandy" that were important to the village history. Pulham St Mary commemorates the local airship station with a depiction of the "Pulham Pigs" as these were known locally.

Sarah told us that depictions of folk tales and notable residents were also popular subjects for village signs, such as the story of John Chapman, the 15th century Swaffham Pedlar who following a dream is said to have walked to London and on his return to Swaffham dug up two pots of gold becoming a symbol of the town showing the power of following and realising a dream. The Histon "giant" is also commemorated along with the Woolpit 12th century Green Children on the respective signs. In Wetheringsett George Ellis' who falsely pretended to be in Holy Orders and solemnised marriages leading to the 1888 Marriages Validation Act to remove doubts as to the validity of these marriages is shown on the village sign and the Thwaite sign references Orlando Whistlecraft, who kept detailed weather records for over 60 years, by including a sun and clouds within the design. The Wickham Skeith sign commemorates the last "swimming" in the local pond of Issac Stebbings who was accused of black magic in 1825 and agreed to be "swum" to decide his guilt or innocence.

Sarah ended her very interesting and informative talk by encouraging us to look more closely at village signs for the stories they could tell about local history.

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