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# PONTARCH

Pontefract & District Archaeological Society.

*Editor: Eric Houlder, Past-President.*



## EXCURSION TO EGYPT,

By Barbara Stewart,

It was dry and not too cold when we left Pontefract at 6.30 am on Tuesday 27th October 1992. There were thirty of us in the group, some of whom had visited Egypt before on Government Conducted Tours.

After an uneventful journey we arrived at Heathrow Airport where we were met by the Tour Operator, Anthony Bales, and received last minute instructions. The flight took 4 hours 40 minutes. On arrival at Cairo Airport, we were met by our courier, an attractive young Egyptian woman named Manal, who escorted us to the Atlas Zamalek Hotel.

The following morning we left the hotel and travelled in an air-conditioned coach to visit the Mosque of Ali Mohammed, situated within the walls of the fortress which was built by Saladin in the C12. Next we visited two Coptic churches which seemed small and rather gloomy after the splendour of the mosque. One was called the Hanging Church because it was built on a steep slope. The church which was undergoing restoration, was



a small, rather primitive, building with a few ancient ikons and a fresco of faded wall paintings in the Roman style. It was damaged during the recent earthquake. The Church of St Sergius was built over the now water-logged crypt where the Holy Family lived after their flight from Jerusalem into Egypt. Emerging from the gloom into the sunlight we walked along the sandy, litter-strewn path towards the underground railway. Hastily boarding the train, to the consternation of the guard because we were in a 'woman and children only' compartment, we journeyed to the Egyptian Museum.

In the museum we saw many of the artefacts unearthed during excavations. Notably those from the tomb of King Tutankhamun, a king of the 18th dynasty, whose tomb was discovered in 1922 by the English Egyptologist, Howard Carter. This was also the year in which Britain gave Independence to Egypt. There was a gold-inlaid chair studded with precious gems, three gold beds each ornamented with

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representations of animal-headed deities, the famous mask of Tutankhamun and the sarcophagi in which the mummy was enclosed. Small statues known as 'servants', one for each day of the year for which the dead Pharaoh had to make an account of his deeds to the god Osiris. Samples of ancient correspondence in the form of small inscribed tablets of stone, walking sticks with the curved end carved into the representation of an enemy whose image could be crushed into the ground at every step and a hinged wooden 'camp-bed', were just a few of the fascinating glimpses into a now vanished lifestyle. There was a whimsical family group of seated clay figures depicting a dwarf and his royal princess wife and two children. The dwarf cared for clothing and was also a jester. All the artefacts were remarkable for their delineation and colour. We saw a small chamber, its walls covered with illustrations depicting the necessities and luxuries requisite for the departed. These were intended for the use of the spirit which could enter, causing the scenes to come to life, enjoy the 'provisions', then leave the chamber until the next desired visit.

There were huge statues representing the supposedly hermaphroditic King Ahmenhotep IV who changed his name to Akhenaten and founded a monotheistic cult of the Sun-god, Aten. Nearby was a sculptured head of his beautiful wife, Queen Nefertiti.

We returned to the hotel for a short respite before leaving for Giza and a *son-et-lumière* performance at the site of the pyramids.

Overhead the crescent moon, juxtapositioned with the planet Venus, glowed

against the soft darkness of the Egyptian sky. With a dramatic blast of music the display began with the illuminating of the Sphinx. Bathed in golden light this mythical creature symbolised the very essence of ancient Egypt and evoked an emotional impact on the audience. After the performance we returned to the hotel driving past contrasting scenes of western affluence and third world squalor.

Life is hard for most Egyptians, 45% of the people over 15 years of age are illiterate although education is now encouraged. Unfortunately, during the recent earthquake of 12th October, 960 schools were damaged and many children lost their lives in the resulting stampede for safety. Small, crumbling mud-brick houses and dilapidated apartment blocks testify to the poverty of the country. Tiny pavement shops cluttered with household items, fruit and vegetables, and sides of meat hanging open to the flies, stalls selling drinks and the use of hookah pipes line the dusty roadside in the little villages. Here and there we saw groups of tents which may have housed some of the victims of the recent earthquake.

On the third day we visited Saqqara which is 15 km south-west of Cairo. We passed scrubby banana trees and high walls woven from reeds where, unseen by us, dates lay drying on the ground. Palm trees, reeds and sandy rubble bordered the roadway. A colossus of Rameses II and a large alabaster sphinx are practically all that remains of the ancient capital of Lower Egypt, Memphis. We saw part of the necropolis of Memphis which covers a large area. The earliest remains discovered are the large mud-brick tombs or mastabas, some of which we

entered. They were decorated with demotic hieroglyphics and frescoes depicting river scenes, boats, fish, hippopotomi an people wielding harpoons and nets. To the south of these early tombs lies the Step Pyramid which was built for King Zoser circa 2650 BC. We peeped through holes at a statue which has been encased in stone for thousands of years. Here Pepy II reigned for 94 years. Swathed in muslin shawls and slithering across the sand we began to realise just what the desert was all about.

Whilst we were there Mr Berry shook hands with one of Rommel's men who was visiting Egypt for the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of El Alamein. He had been a prisoner-of-war in Yorkshire, which seemed something of a coincidence.

We lunched at an open air restaurant on pitta bread, olives, chicken kebabs and rice. Later we were entertained to a song and a dance by the two women who had baked the bread. The bakery was in the open air and consisted of a primitive clay oven and not much else.

On the way from Saqqara to Giza we passed through fertile land where mangoes, oranges, vegetables and alfalfa flourished. The efficient system of irrigation was instigated in the C19. Water lilies are a problem on many canals because of their denseness.

We visited a carpet school where weavers produced lovely items in wool and silk. Many of the weavers were small children, 6 or 7 years of age. These children welcomed us with smiles and showed us how they wove the carpets. The patterns grew quickly as their tiny, nimble fingers twisted the threads. Not a few of us wept

at the sight of these infant workers although we realised later that they were better off than many of their contemporaries outside the factory. At least they were clothed and fed and were learning a trade. So many children we saw appeared to have little hope of improving their lot in life.

There are three pyramids in the group at Giza. The oldest and largest in the group was built by King Khufu (known to the Greeks as Cheops) and took twenty years to build. The second is that of King Kharfe (known to the Greeks as Chephren). The third pyramid was built for King Menkaure (known to the Greeks as Mycerinus). The builders laboured for four months each year, during the period of the Nile flood. All had been plundered in antiquity and few grave goods remained.

The Great Sphynx is a mythical creature composed of a human head and the body of a lion. It dates from the reign of King Khafre who was the fourth king of the fourth dynasty and reigned circa 2550 BC.

The camel drivers vied with one another for our trade and we were pulled this way and that to the accompaniment of much shouting. Eventually Manal sorted things out and we mounted, two to a camel. Pauline clung on behind me and we swayed along, hearts in mouths, as the great beasts lurched across the uneven sand. The gaudily coloured saddle cloths were as coarse as coconut matting and rasped our legs. One driver tried to hold Bob and Peggy to ransom. Altogether we decided that it was an experience we would rather not repeat.

(to be continued....)

# THE INAUGURATION OF THE Y.A.S. AT PONTEFRACT, AUG. 31ST 1870

by Hugh Pickard, with acknowledgements to *The Pontefract Advertiser*.

The Huddersfield Archaeology Association arranged a visit to Pontefract on Wednesday 31st August 1870. The members duly arrived at Pontefract's one and only station, Monkhill at 11am. in a special train of First Class carriages. They came from all parts of the West Riding including Huddersfield, Leeds, Bradford, Wakefield and many other places. They were met at the station by the Mayor and a number of other important gentlemen representing the town and the surrounding area. The Mayor gave a speech of welcome and a reply was given by the society President, Lieutenant-Colonel Brooke. This was followed by the Secretary, Mr. Fairless Barber, giving instructions on the arrangements for the day. One interesting order was to be sure to obey his whistle which would indicate that the party was moving on to the next venue. The whole company was then guided by Mr Tew to the remains of Swillington Tower.

On arrival, he mounted a wagon and gave a talk about the tower where he said Thomas of Lancaster passed his last night.

Following this, the members were led to the castle grounds. Seats had been arranged for the ladies 'near where once was the Porter's Lodge'. When all were assembled, a special General Meeting of the society was held in the open air. The President moved several changes to the rules 'in a view to extending its operations and usefulness'.

The new name was to be the Yorkshire Archaeological and Topographical Association and the objects 'to examine, preserve and illustrate the history, architecture, manners, customs, arts and traditions of our ancestors and especially to further the collection and preservation of materials for the history and topography of the County of York'.

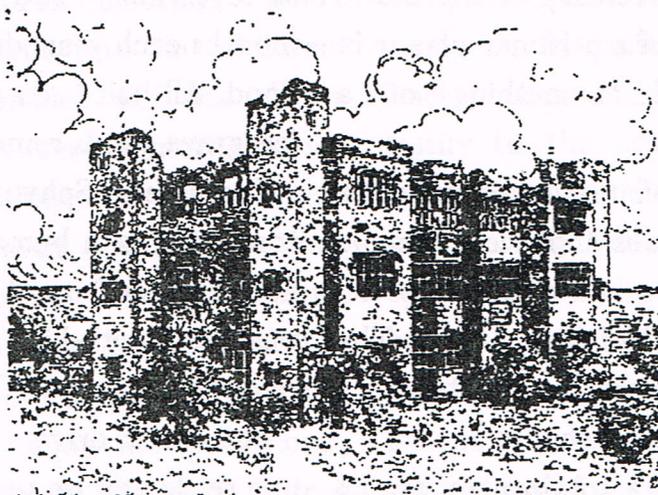
After the formalities were completed, Mr Tew was called upon to give a history of the surrounding neighbourhood with special reference to the castle. During his talk he referred to a five feet map of the borough on which were shown 'siege works and lines of circumvallation'. Actual points in the castle he needed to indicate were marked by flags which had been erected earlier. The talk was divided into the following sections which are given in some detail in the Advertiser:

1. Romans; 2. Saxons; 3. First Family of Lacies; 4. Second Family of Lacies; 5. Lancastrians; 6. Richard II; 7. Civil

War; 8. The Sieges; 9. A Description of the Castle.

The company were then given a guided tour of the castle grounds including the Keep and the Magazine.

From there, after many whistles from the Secretary to encourage stragglers to follow, the members moved to the Hermitage where Mr Fowler gave a talk. Entry was made specially for the occasion via Dr Wright's garden as the original entry from Southgate had been blocked up for safety reasons. The next port of call was the Town Hall (the Old Town Hall - Assembly Rooms were not yet built). Here was a specially prepared exhibition. Many local people had loaned items of historic interest and a full list was given in the Advertiser. It included the Town Charters and many other documents, paintings, maps, plans, models, coins and artefacts found in the area. After the party had seen the exhibition it was then thrown open to the general public.



*New Hall by Percy Rhodes, as it appeared when the Y.A.S. Inaugural Meeting delegates visited in 1870.*

At this stage the society members were divided into groups to inspect other buildings of interest in the town: 1. St Giles' Church; 2. Mr Heptinstall's house with its Elizabethan mantel-piece and decorated ceiling; 3. the cellar beneath the Malt Shovel Inn.

These visits were followed by a 'lunch,' perhaps we would term it 'dinner' at the Red Lion Hotel. The President took the Chair with Lord Houghton on his right and the Mayor on his left. The

Vicar of Pontefract, Dr Bisset, said Grace. The President drank to the success of the Borough and to the Mayor and Corporation. The Mayor responded and proposed good health to Lord Houghton. The latter's speech included a comment that he would have preferred the Association to be named West Riding rather than Yorkshire but he wished it success.

After the meal the whole company moved off to All Saints' Church where the Vicar, Sir Thomas Blomefield, gave a conducted tour and a brief history of the building. The last visit which must have been into the evening was New Hall where again Mr Tew did the honours and gave an account of its history. We are not given further information but we can surmise that the tired members of the new Yorkshire Archaeology Association would return to Monkhill Station to board their carriages headed by a steam locomotive of the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway.