



WALBERSWICK

LOCAL HISTORY GROUP

NEWSLETTER NO: 77 – Philip Kett Special Edition September 2025

Philip Kett: 19 May 1938 - 6 July 2025

"Ask Philip" – in recent years this was something often said within the History Group. Whenever something was in doubt someone was dispatched to ask Philip. That he was so often able to provide an answer relates not only to his actual involvement in so many Walberswick activities but also to him being an insatiable researcher with a large personal archive. From agriculture to rubbing shoulders with academia, Philip seemed at home and talked with authority.

This year the village lost a man born here in 1938 and who had lived in Walberswick for much of his life. This long association, from cradle to grave, in itself makes Philip one of a very small band of people. However, Philip not only lived here, he was part of the life of the village for so many years. Philip served in so many ways but here we remember him firstly as a giant of the Walberswick Local History Group (WLHG). Given his contribution as founder member, committee member and Chair it is only right that we should honour him with a special edition. Knowing Philip he would have been keen to have actually helped in writing this. It is likely that without his review there will be errors! As Pat, his wife, said to me, Philip was a stickler for getting things right.



The above picture is of committee members and helpers preparing for the WLHG 25th Anniversary exhibition in 2016. Pat and Philip Kett are pictured 6th and 7th from the left of the group standing at the back. Philip was Chair of WLHG and had been since taking over from Don Thompson (see later). In line with Philip's management style he led from the front and much of the success of this two-day exhibition was down to his drive and determination. While looking at that picture from 2016 I note that in addition to Philip, three others are also no longer with us. Jayne Tibbles, who also was born and died in Walberswick, Maureen Thompson (see later) and Richard Scott, chronicler of Walberswick characters, are all missed. It remains to be seen whether or not anything on such a scale as the 2016 exhibition can ever be repeated in the future.

At the top of an article Philip sent to me he wrote: "A COLLECTION OF STORIES THAT WILL BE LOST IF NOT WRITTEN DOWN". I think I know what he was referring to. Certainly, with his passing a lot of local knowledge has been lost, though luckily he did write some of it down.

Philip's contribution to WLHG was immense. After he retired as Chair and committee member, he and Pat continued to support the group. They attended the various meetings held in the Village Hall and Philip would always be happy to contribute in his usual way.

WLHG has now been going for 34 years. When asked to write about Maureen Thompson after her death he did not mention his part in setting up the group simply saying:

Don set up the History Group with around 15 interested village people in 1991 and Maureen became a committee member a couple of years later, although she had always been working behind the scenes supporting Don. She took on the position of Membership Secretary collecting all the subscriptions, logging them and keeping everything straight. She also organised the Christmas party with willing volunteers. After she retired from the History Group, she was made a "Life Member" – a position not bestowed on many.

One of Philip's big projects concerned digging holes in people's gardens (with their permission). In his own words...

We would like to say thank you to all the people who offered their gardens to have a test pit dug and also to the extended group who offered. This was a series of four years which is now complete and the results and full report have now been published. The Scheme was run by Access Cambridge Archaeology which is part of Cambridge University using local school children of Years 9 and 10. Over the years, 2013-2016, 152 students took part digging out our village history. From 39 pits, broken pottery from the 1stC (Roman) to 20thC (Lego) have been unearthed. For further information, the following summary was set out at the 2016 History Group Exhibition. [See the full report here.](#)

Philip's research was used to highlight local controversy over the planned development of the site at Bulcamp (BULCAMP WORKHOUSE BURIAL GROUNDS). The WLHG newsletter usually steers clear of current controversies but here is an exception in the August 2004 edition number 24. <http://walberswick.onesuffolk.net/assets/WLHG/WLHG-news-letters/WLHG-NEWS-LETTERS-14-26.pdf>

The Census Project in 2015, with Kay Ungless, was to link houses and families through the census returns which were then available up to 1901 (you can now get 1911 and 1921). This proved to be an ambitious undertaking as the records were often vague about house locations and the handwriting very difficult. The records are still there should someone want to complete the project!

WLHG was not the only group to "ask Philip". In 2020 Philip was amongst a small group of Walberswick people interviewed by Ben Robinson for his BBC series "Villages by the Sea". Walking down Stocks Lane Philip discussed the site of the original Walberswick Church. For more information see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000c78p>

Philip was always happy to write articles for the WLHG newsletter. For this I owe him my personal thanks. It's not always easy to get people to write things but Philip would not only write but write at length. For example, see his record of life during lockdown edition number 62 October 2020 <http://walberswick.onesuffolk.net/assets/WLHG/WLHG-news-letters/WLHG-NEWSLETTER-NO-62-Oct2020.pdf>

Philip used his local knowledge in writing guides to local geography, an example of which can be seen in WLHG Newsletter 65 March 2021 <http://walberswick.onesuffolk.net/assets/WLHG/HISTORY-GROUP-NEWSLETTER-NO-65.pdf>

If you want something doing then ask a busy man. This could be said of a number of village characters and certainly of Philip. Away from WLHG the following are some of the activities Philip was involved with in his public life:

- Trained as an agricultural engineer and later brought his expertise home to Walberswick when he decided to work in the village.
- Member of and Chair of Walberswick Parish Council. The picture below taken from the WLHG archives includes some formidable Walberswick characters (I am told). The Chair here is Ruth Goodwin and I am informed that she was indeed an effective Chair.



WPC 1988-1991

Back row: Mary Allen, Peter Avis, Alison Fisk, Philip Kett
Front row: Barbara Priestman, Ruth Goodwin, Keith Webb
Absent: John Bloomfield

- Standard bearer for the British Legion – he was from an age when National Service was required.
- Looking after the graveyard at St Andrews

- Carpet bowls – This was popular and then “fizzled out” according to Pat. I’m told that the equipment is still under the stage should someone be interested in bringing this back.
- The allotments, including taking payments and managing the water supply.
- Wildfowlers – member and Chair at some time.

Those who attended Philip’s thanksgiving service would have heard about Philip the family man. The following is an edited version of the eulogy given by Philip’s sister-in-law, **Geneva Downes**

Philip was a Walberswick boy, born and bred and had a great love for his village and the surrounding area that he was proud to call home.

The Reverend Russ Gant at Philip’s Thanksgiving Service at St Andrew’s Church regaled an amusing anecdote of Philip accidentally aiding and abetting the escape of a prisoner from Hollesley Bay Borstal and Detention Centre...

The story goes that “One day when Philip was a young man, he was down at the village hall area with some other local lads. He had his motorbike with him when along came a young stranger asking for help. The young man said that he needed to get to Halesworth Railway Station quickly to catch the London train and how could he get there ... catch a bus perhaps? Philip being a generous soul said that he could take him to Halesworth on the back of his motorbike if he liked, and of course, the young man accepted his kind invitation, and so off they went to Halesworth! However unbeknown to Philip this stranger that he had so generously agreed to help, happened to be an escaped convict from Hollesley Bay Borstal, just a few miles down the coast. When Philip returned home from this journey, he was met by a policeman waiting with lots of questions about the whereabouts of a certain young fugitive, to which Philip replied that “he had just taken him to Halesworth Station”. The officer of the law informed him that the young man in question was in fact an escapee from Hollesley Bay! A rather awkward situation for Philip but it later transpired that the police did manage to apprehend the escaped felon before he could get very far.

Philip’s love of Walberswick is borne out by the active role that he has played in village life over the years. Besides being a long-standing member of the Parish Council, he also took an active role in other aspects of the community, from fundraising for the RNLI, helping out at village events such as fetes, fireworks, bonfires, fund-raising for worthy causes and of course the Crabbing Championship.

You name it and somewhere along the line you could bet your bottom dollar that Philip would be involved in some way!

He was also a leading member for many years of the Walberswick History Group and a “fount of all knowledge” to do with the history of the village.

From local tales of famous artists such as Rennie Macintosh and Wilson Steer, the location of the original church, medieval field boundaries and the tradition of Beating the Bounds to in more recent times the tragic WW2 Kennedy aircraft crash site, found after discovering evidence of wreckage whilst out walking.

If you wanted to know anything about Walberswick and its legends and past history then you asked Philip!

Philip unearthed various pieces of ancient pottery over the years, some of which are in The Heritage Hut on the village green.

He assisted archaeologists from Cambridge University who held a two-day field academy with students from local high schools carrying out the excavation of test pits in gardens in the village, guided by professional archaeologists including Carenza Lewis from TV’s Time Team.

And, of course, he became something of a TV personality himself when Walberswick was featured in BBC's Villages by the Sea, talking about historical sites including the site of the first church in the village.

Now Kett is a proud local East Anglian family name and Philip loved to explore his family history, - especially after discovering that he was a descendant of Robert Kett who led the great Kett's Rebellion of 1549 that resulted in the siege of Norwich at Mousehold Heath.

At a Kett family gathering in Wymondham, Norfolk he met a relative who said that there were Ketts who centuries ago had emigrated to Canada, to Prince Edward Island in fact. As result he organised a trip with his wife Pat to Canada to discover further family roots.

Philip also had a love for fishing and natural history, taking his family on many walks exploring nature around Walberswick, with nocturnal expeditions in search of glow worms along the path towards the Bailey Bridge in the dusky darkness, or to listen for the revving up call of the nightjar or the boom of the bittern or the incessant sweet song of the nightingale.

Philip will be sorely missed by his family and friends, and those that knew him.

Earlier this year I visited Philip on a couple of occasions to discuss three articles that Philip had penned but which had yet to appear in the WLHG newsletters. I had been keeping them in reserve waiting for the right time. Articles are like London buses – nothing for a long time and then three come along. Philip had a habit of missing full stops and I knew that I needed to get his approval of my edits. We both seemed to enjoy the chats and on the second visit Philip pulled out a file from his personal archive with pictures of members of my family from long ago.

The following are two of the three articles Philip wrote for the WLHG newsletter that remained unpublished at the time of his death. Listening to the memories of Philip in St Andrews and reading these articles there does seem to be a common theme – pieces of wood.

BEACH COMBING - Memories of my misspent youth by Philip Kett

My parents moved from 4 Church Lane to Common Edge in 1947. This was to the house that my parents had started to have built in 1939 and was stopped with the outbreak of WWII and not finished until 1947. Ever since then we have always been on the hunt or lookout for something, it did not matter what it was, but it had to be useful to us at some point in time. There was wood needed for the fire, there was broken concrete slabs left over by the military from the two camps that had been built in the village (for a crazy concrete path). One of the camps was built at the end of Seven Acre Lane (Holly Hills) and the other near Eastwood Farm. There had also been military stationed around the village in various large houses for all of the war period. The beach was out of bounds to the public having been mined, lined with scaffolding and also having dragons' teeth embedded in the sea bed at low tide, fixed in large blocks of concrete.

But when the beach was cleared for use by the public that was altogether a different game. There was coal to be had when the tides and wind was right, also cut timber, planks and rails of various sizes. When the wind was in a different quarter the coal had come from coal-fired coasters that had been overloaded and some of the coal had been left on the deck that could not be loaded into the bunkers. Drifters and trawlers of the steam-powered variety, very prolific just after the war, they would have been loaded with their fuel from a coal boat that could get under Lowestoft's old swing bridge. The coal boat did not have a hold but loaded the coal on a flat deck, which was so much easier to offload with a shovel onto the trawlers and drifters. They often overloaded their bunkers and in rough weather a lot was lost overboard, which became our gain. But it all depended on the wind direction.

Timber was different. This was new-sawn timber, mostly from the Baltic states, which may have been coming to the UK or passing by on its way to other countries of the world. The holds of the vessels were filled and a mountain of timber was stacked on the deck. This could have been difficult to lash down tight so as the vessel moved in a storm this top-heavy load began to strain and some of the timber would break loose and slip into the sea. The vessel was then in danger of losing more timber so some had to be cast over the side to balance the vessel.

My mother told me of large rafts built out of new-sawn timber which must have been towed down the North-Sea coast and then picked up by a local tug boat and brought into the port of Harwich. The rafts had living quarters built on top of them for the crew to keep an eye on them and attend to any loose lashings.

I got my first taste of beach combing when I was about nine-years old. I had been round to see my friend Richard who lived in one of the cottages opposite The Anchor. He was about five years older than me. There was a shortage of youngsters in the village just after the war. It was a chilly February afternoon, overcast and inclined to sleet and therefore getting dark early. His father said to me, do I fancy a walk up the beach, we are now going. That was OK with me as long as I was home before dark. I had cycled down The Street from Church Lane and it was only a five-minute ride home. So off to the beach we went carrying a couple of sand bags. For those who do not know, a sand bag is a hessian sack about a foot wide when laid flat and about a yard long. It has a tie string inserted about three inches from the top to tie the top when filled. With these two sacks we set off for the beach. Walking along the tide line in amongst the seaweed and other debris were nuggets of coal, which we duly picked up and popped into our bags. When we had half-filled our bags, we tipped one into the other so nearly filling the bag, tying the top so the bag was slightly slack. We left it standing on the beach. Walking further along the beach we then judged when we had passed enough bits of coal to fill our second bag. We then turned around and started picking up the nuggets of coal on the way back to our first bag. If we had judged it right, we would have enough for our second bag, arriving back at our first bag with enough to carry home. The second bag was tied tightly, then both bags were laid flat and the picked up half way down the bag and one half of each bag given a twist. The reason for the twist is that it is easier to carry on your shoulder and was balanced. You may have noticed that we did not carry the full bag any further than we needed to. But now it was carried off the beach home to their house. I managed to get home before it got dark.

As I grew older and got more adventurous I would go up the beach towards Dunwich, past the mill wall, to see what was washed up with which wind direction. This was too far to move wood easily so I used to float it down the Dunwich River until I got to the bottom of Stocks Lane then pull it out of the water. On one trip I came across a large baulk of timber that had been in the sea for a while and was certainly not new but was too heavy to move by myself. It was not very long, about 12 feet, but I had to cut it into two pieces to move it. As luck would have it, that piece of timber laid close to a ditch that drained into the Dunwich River. Once in the water I could handle it. So once cut in half and having got one half into the Dunwich River I went back and collected the second piece, putting a rope around it about one third of its length from the front. Getting it into the water I could now tow it anywhere. I soon caught up with the first piece which was floating on the tide to end up at the sluice. Now, if you have been up the mill wall you will have noticed that the sluice passes through the wall as you get towards the beach. It has got a door on it, for many years after the war it was not replaced. The tricky bit was to guide this baulk through the tunnel under the wall first time. If it did not happen, I was in trouble as the baulk would turn across the tide, which was not very strong but I had to get it right. Twice having got them through the sluice I tied them one behind the other and soon got them to the bottom of Stocks Lane, getting them out of the water and hidden in the reeds for a few days to dry out, later collecting them with my hand cart.

Most Sunday afternoons, my father, myself and Mr English, who lived across from us in Church Lane, used to take a walk, often onto the beach. It all depended which way the wind was

blowing as to which way we went. If the wind was from the south we walked to the north and vice/versa but it was all about keeping the wind on our backs. If the wind was too strong, we chose another path which took us for most time at least under the lead of the gorse bushes and hedges that kept the wind off us.

One of these trips up the beach from north to south put us in touch with a lot of good-sized lumps of coal. We were right up the beach near to where the mill wall meets the beach so out of our pockets came the sandbags which were duly filled. But there was too much for us to pick up so we picked a spot in some long grass, tipped the bags out and went back and filled them again and again until we had cleared the tide line of the bigger pieces of coal, lastly filling our bags to carry home that evening. The coal was collected about a week later by cycling along the mill wall taking some bigger sacks with us, filling the sack loosely and tying off the open end, nipping it in the middle of the sack, loading the sack over the crossbar on the bicycle and pushing the loaded cycle along mill wall and home by Lodge Road. A couple of nights of that and we had cleared our cache. You might think of coal as messy black stuff but in fact one does not get dirty from beach coal, and it keeps the home fires burning.

I have a story that you might like and should try sometime. I had come across five pieces of timber that had been in the sea for some time – about 20 feet long pieces of 4 by 3. They needed rescuing so one night I took my wife, Pat, with me onto the beach. It was a dark moonless night but a clear sky. The moon did not rise until after midnight and we walked nearly up to the mill wall. I put two pieces onto my shoulder and said to Pat, I will carry these pieces back to the Spong bridge and come back and we will carry the other three pieces between us. I must admit, I was gone longer than I had hoped but stomping back up the beach I thought that I would see her on the skyline – but she was nowhere to be seen. The thought had crossed my mind that she would be having kittens when I did come across her. She was lying down on the bank gazing up at the stars and she had no idea how long I had been gone with the wood. But she said she had never seen so many stars; this has been wonderful – you should try it sometime.

The following is another of the three articles Philip wrote for the WLHG newsletter that remained unpublished at the time of his death. Not surprisingly, the subject matter relates to pieces of wood!

TIMBER WASHED OVERBOARD FROM THE SINEGORSK by Philip Kett

Around the 3rd of February 2009 a lot of timber was washed up on our beaches. It came from a Russian vessel that got caught in a storm off the south coast of England. In fact, the vessel lost around 1500 tonnes of its cargo that night. The tides and wind carried the wood along the south coast, around Kent and up to the east coast of England, leaving it strewn along the high-tide line. I had never seen so much wood lying on the beach. I seem to remember the timber floated as far north as Lowestoft. It was a sight to behold. Several people had some of the timber and some had more than they needed. Later the police tried to stop removal of the wood, which was of mixed sizes, in fact any size that was required. What wood that had been removed had helped the cost of clearing up which must have been enormous and most of it that was cleared up was chipped or burnt. I thought that with all



this spare wood lying around the beach with lots of handy sizes I better have some of this. So, one moonless night we went to see if we could get a few good pieces. Whilst we were on the beach gathering some of the wood the police arrived and stopped their car up on the ramp by the village hall, got out and started waving a torch around with a beam as good as any searchlight. We quickly flattened ourselves behind some clumps of marram grass, crawled over the bank and scooted in different directions on the seaward side of the beach, not too far but far enough, still keeping an eye out for any movement from the police car. They were not going onto the beach, just waving their torch about in case they got someone caught in the beam. Not having seen any movement along the top of the bank they left after about 10 minutes after judging all was quiet in Walberswick and on to the next beach. After they left life carried on as normal and we loaded up the wood that we had collected and headed for home.

About two weeks later there was published in the local papers a report for the benefit of those that had taken wood off the beaches that the insurers would like them to come forward stating the amount that they had taken and pay something towards the value of the wood. The money was to go to the RNLI. In the end it cost me £40:00 for my share, but it squared the books.

Finally, WLHG would like to thank Pat and the Kett family for allowing us to celebrate the life of a founding member of one of Walberswick's foremost organisations and to Geneva Downes for allowing us to use her eulogy.