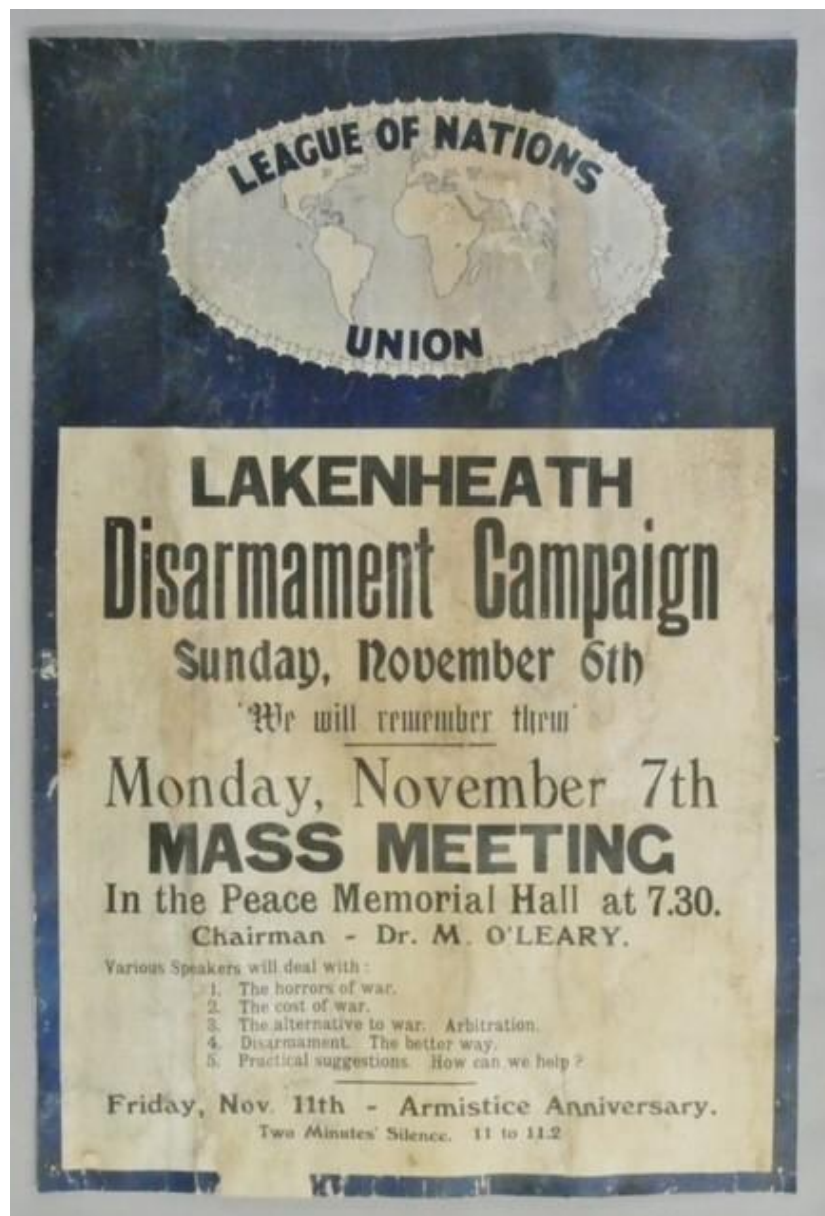


The League of Nations: The International Peace Movement in Lakenheath.

This is the story of the discovery in Lakenheath of an old and very badly damaged poster which has found a safe home in the Special Collections Archive of the Cambridge University Library, an archive of international importance. It shines a light on two compelling issues of the 1920's and 30's - disarmament and world peace, and it led to the discovery of the activities of the Lakenheath branch of the British League of Nations Union which was active between 1927-1938.

The interest of Nicholas Burnett, who undertook conservation of the poster, and senior academics at Cambridge University Library was evident from the time they were first consulted. Most importantly we recognise with gratitude the generosity of the anonymous donor who in the end guaranteed the safe survival of this unique poster.



The 1932 poster after conservation. Held by Cambridge University Library. (Broad sides. AA.9.61)



Representatives of the Heritage Group and Cambridge University Library at Duxford, Imperial War Museum.

Left to right. Hermione Brown, Michael Tuffs, David Jones, Dr Jill Whitehead, Associate Director CUL, Dr Suzanne Paul, Head of Rare Books, and Nicholas Burnett, Museum Conservation Services.



The main entrance of Cambridge University Library.

The International League of Nations.

In 1920 following the devastation of WW1 the International League of Nations was inaugurated by a covenant which had been signed in 1918 as part of the Versailles Treaty by Great Britain, France, Italy, and Japan with the aims of promoting international justice, collective security and peace between nations. To begin with the USA were not members even though the original idea had been proposed by President Woodrow Wilson. By the end of 1920 41 countries had joined representing 70% of the world's population*.

*ungeneva.org/league-of-nations/overview

Following the 1914-18 war there was a strong belief that war and its causes should be prevented at all costs. In the years following the inauguration of the International League the British League of Nations Union set out to involve the population of the country through the establishment first of regional, and then local branches.

Lakenheath Village.

Our village had suffered grievous losses in the war. An estimate of men liable for conscription based on the 1911 Lakenheath census suggests that around 24% died- roughly a quarter of the working population of the village, a loss all too noticeable in the village. It has been said that there were "lots of aunties" in the village. Despite this loss, or perhaps because of it, the village quickly raised the money for the War Memorial and Peace Memorial Hall and both were in place by 1922.

For centuries farm labouring had provided the most common employment for men in Lakenheath. Deaths in the war coupled with the agricultural depression of the 1920's particularly affected the Brecks in West Suffolk. Land was often left uncultivated because land-owners had difficulty finding tenants to farm the land, leading to a consequent reduction in farm labouring jobs and even occasional work could be hard to find for those who had survived the war. The 'pennies' earned digging gravel on the warren must have been the saving of some families.

Note: It wasn't until after WW2 that a determined effort was made by the government to reorganise land use in the Lakenheath Fen.

In Lakenheath some villagers wanted to go further than the commemoration of the 'fallen' with a war memorial and Peace Hall, and in 1927 a public meeting was organised to hear about the International League of Nations. Alderman Lusher, representing the Regional League of Nations Union was the main speaker.

The Peace Movement in Lakenheath.

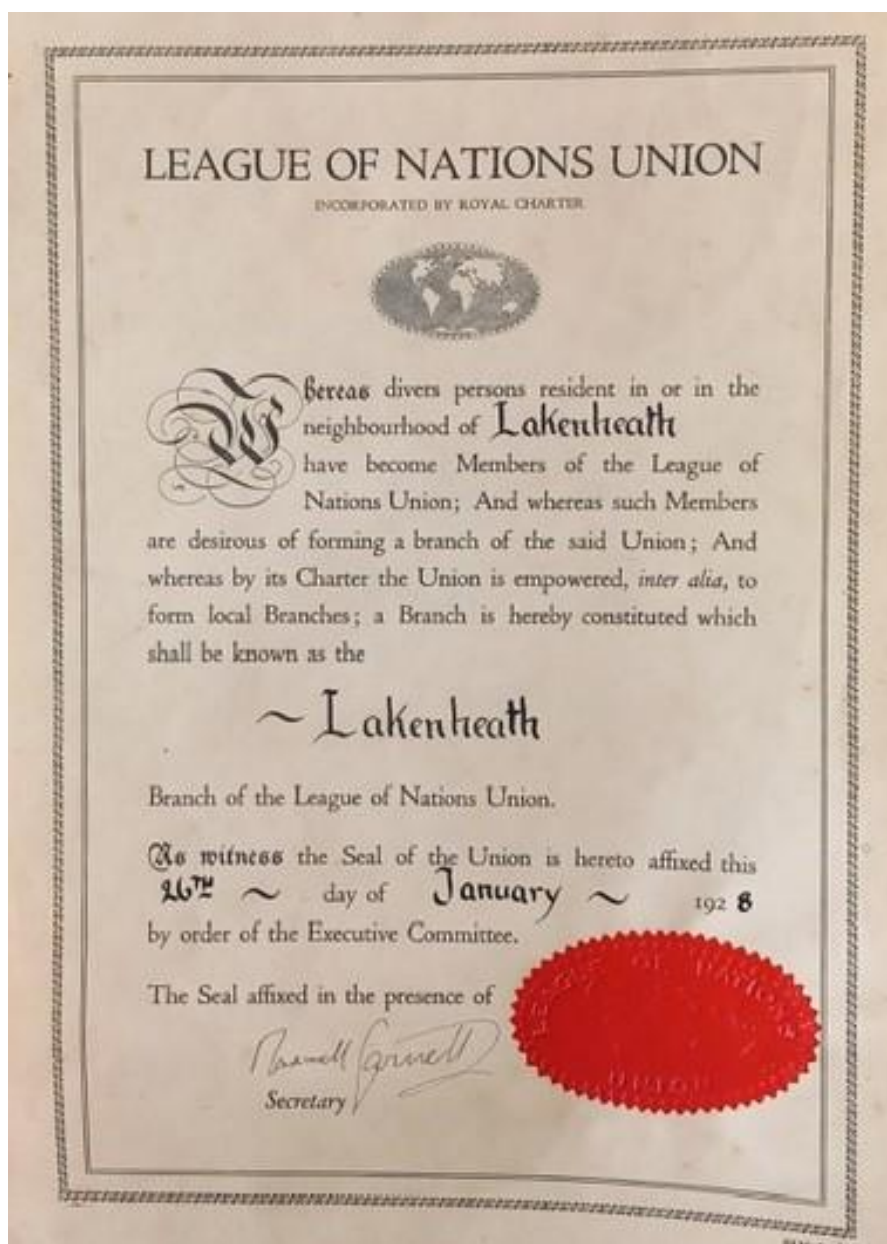
The Lakenheath branch of the League of Nations Union is first mentioned in the Bury Free Press on 19th November 1927.

"There was a large attendance at the Peace Memorial Hall, Lakenheath on Tuesday evening under the aegis of the Norfolk and Suffolk League of Nations Union."

“.....The vicar, [the Rev. Isaac Morris] presided, supported by Ald. Lusher, County Alderman Robt. Bilsland and Dr A J Pickworth. The Chairman hoped the large attendance meant they would have a large enrolment meeting.....”

“He [Ald. Lusher] was delighted to see such a large number of young people present..... perhaps the most notable feature of that recent observance (referring to the recent anniversaries of the Armistice Day) was that little or nothing [was] heard of the rejoicing and exaltation which marked the advent of the Armistice in 1918..... People were asking whether we were paying our debt to those who laid down their lives in that great struggle by doing all we can to make another war impossible?”

The meeting resulted in “a gratifying number of members coming forward” and discussions followed under the chairmanship of the vicar about forming a branch of the Union for Lakenheath which was enacted in 1928.



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By 1928 the local branch was active [i]. Further newspaper articles reported the successes of the local branch; one suggestion was that the formation of a junior [youth] group be considered. The Lakenheath Branch went from strength to strength and in 1931 it was decided to organise a 'Mass Meeting', which, as we discovered later, took place in 1932. The Bury Free Press report of the AGM of 1933 recorded 114 registered members, each member paying a one shilling annual membership fee. There had been seven meetings during the year at which members discussed international affairs and considered their responses to the rearmament/disarmament debate. One thing soon became very clear; this was not just a 'social' group. Bury Free Press. (Henceforth BFP) 25th March 1933.

The Lakenheath Peace Poster.

We are grateful to Cambridge University Library for permission to include an extract from the following blog which was prepared for the Library Special Collections website and gives the whole story as we know it now. The text of the blog is coloured grey here to distinguish it from the rest of the text. The original blog is available at:

specialcollections-blog.lib.cam.ac.uk

Note: Sources and references are given at the conclusion of the blog.

THE LAKENHEATH PEACE POSTER and the Lakenheath Branch of the British League of Nations.

This is an account of how an historic poster came into the possession of the Lakenheath Heritage Group, and the impetus it gave to discovering the village's involvement with the British League of Nations Union and the interwar peace movement. The poster is now preserved at Cambridge University Library. (Shelfmark, Broadsides. AA 9.61). We first heard about the poster a few months before the beginning of the Covid pandemic not long after we had added a story to the heritage pages of our Parish Council website about the experiences of a villager, Henry Flatt, at the Battle of Ypres. Shortly after we included a newspaper article from 1927 reporting on a meeting in the village which had led to the formation of Lakenheath Branch of the British League of Nations Union. This prompted a villager to tell us about "an old poster in my friends shed" which had been discovered in the 1980's by Peter and Pat Hale when they purchased their house in Broom Road from a Major Popay who had lived there with his wife Jessie (d.1963) since 1925. [ii] Jessie was the grand-daughter of Dr Pickworth, the long-standing village doctor, who had played an important part in the local branch of the League of Nations Union.

When, years later Mr. and Mrs. Hale downsized, ownership of the house was transferred to their daughter but the poster remained in the shed until in recent times, the need for storage led to its rediscovery. The poster had to go and the 'tip' or bonfire beckoned! After the Covid pandemic the poster was given to the Heritage Group and research into the Lakenheath League of Nations branch continued.

The poster measures 765x500mm and may have been one of a small batch but as far as we know no others exist. The printer is not identified. We sought the advice of Nicholas Burnett of Museum Conservation Services Ltd, who after examining the whole thing told us that conservation was possible. [iii]



The poster as we received it.

We thought that the boards on which the poster was fixed could have been a shop-window shutter, but more important was the idea that the faint scratch marks appearing to deface the word 'disarmament' might suggest some opposition in the village. After some heart-searching the group took the decision to proceed with the conservation which was made possible by an anonymous donation supported by our own funds. Nicholas Burnett carried out the work. This included removing old drawing pins, gentle cleaning, removing the poster from the board and removing old adhesive before re-lining with Japanese paper, infilling losses with wove paper and recreating missing lettering with watercolours. Part way through the conservation process we contacted Cambridge University Library to ask for advice about finding a safe future home for the poster.

The Disarmament Mass Meeting of 1932.

By 1932 the group was well established. Ambitions were high and a mass meeting was planned to encourage understanding of the issues facing the country and a hope that a commitment to the disarmament cause advocated by the League of Nations would be strengthened. The first indication of the 1932 disarmament meeting came in the Bury Free Press shortly after our first sight of the poster. This named Henry Flatt as the first speaker, and directly linked the poster with his experiences at Ypres and his involvement with the peace movement in the village. Also identified were other 'prime movers' in the group, the longstanding village doctor and a local school teacher. [iv]

DISARMAMENT CAMPAIGN.—Under the auspices of the local branch of the League of Nations Union, whose energetic secretary is Miss M. E. Moore, a mass meeting was held in the Peace Memorial Hall on Monday. An admirable chairman was Dr. M. O'Leary, and the Secretary had secured speakers for 15 minutes each on: (1) The Horrors of War, (2) The Cost of War, (3) The Alternative to War, (4) Disarmament. Mr. H. Flatt undertook the first and gave a descriptive account of experiences he encountered whilst with the Air Force Transport, and an account of the experience of an observer telephonist in the Ypres salient. Dr. Pickworth dealt with the cost of war, in money, and millions of precious lives, in distress of mind, the maimed, the shattering of faith, and the world unrest of to-day, all the cost of war. The Rev. John Lewis urged that arbitration must be pursued as a means of settling international disputes. The very fabric of our social life was built up by arbitration, he said. The Rev. I. Morris dealt most admirably with disarmament. He maintained that our purpose in this world was Christ's Kingdom, and said that God's ideal for the world was that they should live in peace. He pleaded for limitations of those great engines of war and said that the Christian reason was the best reason. He appealed to the audience to do everything in their power to further the cause of disarmament. The Chairman ably cited Russia as a real blow to civilisation, a disastrous legacy of war. Patriotism was high and great, but Christianity applied was higher, and the line taken by Britain would be a big factor in the disarmament problem. (Applause.) Thanks to speakers and the Secretary were voiced by Mr. W. Flack and Mr. J. Neal.

The 1932 mass meeting reported in the Bury Free Press 12th November 1932

The discovery of the 1932 report was something of a light-bulb moment, providing a date which supported earlier local research which had provided us with a copy of Henry Flatt's observations of Ypres together with notes he made for a talk he was to give. Our problem previously had been that we knew what Henry wanted to say but not when or where he wanted to say it! The article resolved these questions. Henry became an important member of the local League of Nations group. His fears of aerial bombing and the use of gas as a weapon are clear from this partial transcript from his notes from 1918.

Henry wrote:

'The air was stuffy with sodden clothing and humanity unwashed. The Calvary of Ypres. Honey-combed putrid matter for honey. Swept by machine-gun fire and rifle fire then shelled. Terrifyingly we wondered if anything can possibly survive, then stormed by Phosgene, its pear and apple stench or perfume dulls the senses, men almost forgetting its horrors and delay. Then, maddened by the poison they would hurry to their 'posts of battle for civilisation,' the aid post or canteen, there they would stagger as the blood diffused the phosgene through the system and with a cigarette they sink down. Retching-dying, gassed. The Calvary of Ypres..... May the God of Peace keep me from a like experience.'

.....and this from edited extract from his notes for a talk:

'We had just moved into a camp behind Ypres. In fact, there were general camps around about where the troops came to rest, usually there is a few farms about and the people do a good business in supplying coffee, egg and chips to the troops..... One evening 3 or 4 others and myself decided we would go out to supper. We were just enjoying the good things when we heard the drone of a plane, next thing horrors, bone-cracking, doors bursting open, women shrieking and a 'funeral hot-bath.' Jerry had dropped one in the yard. We heard some dropping in our camp so hurried along as the order was, "All men to rush to their vehicles and stand ready with fire extinguishers." We mingled with the crowd and answered the role-call.'

The success of the occasion seems to have further energised the group and was followed up with meetings and lectures by the Vicar, Dr Pickworth and Henry Flatt on a range of topics such as 'The Necessity for an International Labour Organisation, (Dr Pickworth, with the lantern manipulated by Mr. H Flatt: Newmarket Journal and Free Press (henceforth NJ), 21.01. 33).' Bacteriological and Chemical Warfare' (Henry Flatt, delivered by the vicar in Henry's absence due to illness, and 'The Cost of The League' (Dr Pickworth: BFP 21.10.33). It does look as though the Lakenheath Group were preparing the ground for the approaching national Peace Ballot.

The Peace Ballot 1934-35.

The National Declaration, sometimes called the Peace Ballot, was an attempt by the British League of Nations Union to determine public opinion regarding the aims of the League of Nations as they particularly related to Great Britain. It took place between November 1934 and June 1935 and is often regarded as the country's most successful unofficial referendum. The Lakenheath branch started to prepare in earnest. The BFP issued an invitation "to come and hear it (the National Declaration) described at the Peace Memorial Hall" (BFP. 17.11.34), and the Lynn Advertiser (henceforth LA) followed with, "In Lakenheath Rev Isaac Morris gave an address on the National Declaration at a special meeting." (LA 23.11.34).

A public debate followed with Dr Pickworth proposing "That Great Britain should remain a member of the League" with Henry Flatt, (standing in for Dr O'Leary), countering. The proposal was carried but there was no mention of the numbers attending. (LA, 21.12.34 and BFP 22.12.34). Early in the New Year, a sermon by former minister Rev A E Middleton in support of the National League was given in the Methodist Church, "And Man at war with man hears not the love song which they bring" (LA 12.01. 35). The result of the ballot was declared in June. [v] In September the local group discussed the Abyssinia/Italy confrontation, questioning: "What should happen if Italy refused to accept the League's recommendation?" (BFP 28.09.35).

The discovery that the 1935 AGM of the much larger Bury St. Edmunds branch (BFP, 01.06.35) had suggested that the failure of Italy and Abyssinia to accept arbitration was a reason for a reduction in their membership led us to look for signs of a similar reduction in Lakenheath. Newspaper evidence was soon found.

Decline?

There seems to have been a question regarding the future of the Lakenheath group at the September 1936 meeting after which it was reported that a decision had been taken to continue. Mr. J E Goudge, travelling secretary of the Union, had addressed the meeting (LA, 26.09.36). A contrary voice was heard in the village! At the New Year's Dinner of the Lakenheath Conservative and Unionist Association in January 1937, Captain F. F. A. Heilgers MP for Bury St. Edmunds, commenting on the past year from an agricultural standpoint, also expressed his views on the reducing [declining] influence of the International League.

“They had seen the League of Nations, on which they had placed their faith and regarded as a pillar of security, prove to be but a frail reed when the time came. Later in the year they saw the Germans march into the Rhineland and again were very nearly involved in a European war. Still later there came the Spanish civil war and that, far from being a Spanish internal struggle, had magnified until today. He believed Spain has become the cockpit of Europe.” (*Newmarket Journal*. NJ, 09.01.37).

The members of the Lakenheath Group must have been aware of Capt. Heilgers views as their activities continued into the New Year with a meeting which heard about the International League’s work to stamp out illegal drug traffic and the prevention of outbreaks of disease in Spain. £2.2s was to be sent to the fund for refugee children in Spain. (BFP 30.01.37). However, a fall-off in support is again suggested by the AGM in April 1938 when discussion focussed on how the group might be strengthened. The Chairman (the vicar) pointed out “that although the League itself had not yet succeeded in carrying out its ideals the chief aim of the League of Nations is to keep those ideals in the minds of the people.” (BFP, 02.04.38).

A decision was taken to hold a public meeting in the early autumn but no evidence has been found that this took place and a later article reported a meeting at the vicarage at which a guest spoke about the ‘state of affairs’ in Austria and Czechoslovakia (LA, 01.97.38). This is the last reference we have found to the Lakenheath Branch of the League of Nations Union in the press. The developing international situation may have led to some tension in the group and a questioning of ‘what have we achieved?’ Perhaps, ‘was it all worth it’? I wonder if they knew what had happened at Guernica?

Sources and references:

Popay family. Bury Free Press. Prof. Raymond Bonnet.

50 Facts and Figures about the League of Nations. Third edition circa 1936. George Innes, pub The League of Nations Union. London Regional Federation.

Votes for Peace. The National Archives; The report to the Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. July 23 1935. (PREM 1/178).

Lakenheath Heritage Group. The Henry Flatt documents (copies). His notes made shortly after Ypres and his preparatory notes for an address.

[i] *The committee was made up of widely respected inhabitants who were prominent in church and local civil life- Miss Moore, Rev Isaac Morris, Dr Pickworth and others, but notably Henry Flatt. No minutes from any meetings have been found.*

[ii] *In 1925 Percy and Jessie Popay came to live in Jessie’s home village in a house on the outskirts of the village. Jessie, grand-daughter of the influential village doctor Dr Pickworth, worked at the War office in WW1. After the war she taught at Livermere School. Bury St Edmunds. She died, childless, in 1963. Percy continued to live alone in their home until it was sold in the early 1980’s. Percy was wounded at Passchendaele and remained in the army after the war. At the beginning of WW2 he was commissioned, eventually achieving the rank of major, leaving the army in 1953 having served in the British Army of the Rhine. In later life he was an active member of the parish church (Secretary of the PCC) and served on several local committees, particularly the Peace Memorial Hall and the local branch of the British Legion. The PCC placed a window to his memory in St Mary’s Parish Church, Lakenheath.*

[iii] 'Condition: Solidly adhered to an old door composed of three vertical tongue and groove planks (which have woodworm). The poster is badly damaged where it was unsupported along the gaps in the support. This has divided the poster into three vertical sections. More than twenty losses of paper have occurred, several very large ones along the gaps in the support. The poster is discoloured, water stained and abraded. The surface is dirty and spotted by mould. A cross has been cut in the surface through the word 'Disarmament.' This is clearly part of the history of the poster so needs to remain visible after treatment. Drawing pins were used to hold another poster over the front of this one at a later date. Only traces of paper now remain held by the pins and the pins are now rusty. This may affect the poster beneath.' Nicholas Burnett. Museum Conservation Services Ltd.

[iv] Dr Pickworth was the village doctor for the whole of his working life from 1884 to 1923, dying here in 1943. Greatly respected in the village, he was well known in the Methodist movement and a lay preacher of some note, Justice of the Peace, consultant surgeon to the Mildenhall Union (workhouse), County Alderman, Life Governor of Addenbrookes Hospital. He also made fireworks for village celebrations. Henry Flatt (d.1977) came to the village circa 1904 with wife and two, later three, children. Previously employed as a groom in a wealthy family, he came to the village as an insurance agent and later began renting bicycles, mainly to farm labourers. Conscripted in WW1 aged 35 with a wife and three children, after the war he continued to expand his enterprises eventually providing the first taxi in the village as well as his unique concept of a village shop, bicycle sales and repairs and a garage. He then became the largest chicken farmer in the district. In WW2 he was a special constable and later a parish councillor. Miss M. E. Moore taught at Lakenheath school and was a pillar of St. Mary's Parish Church. Regarded as extremely efficient and an authority on church matters, she was secretary to the local branch of the League of Nations Union. We are told that she died in a road accident in the village in the 1950's. Rev. Isaac Morris was an influential and well-liked vicar of Lakenheath from 1919 until 1939. Dr M O'Leary worked as the village doctor for nine years leaving in late 1937. Rev. J Lewis appears only occasionally in press reports and not after the 1932 meeting.

[v] 11.5 million votes were cast out of a possible 30 million with 13 to 1 in favour of support for the League of Nations and 3 to 1 in favour of the use of military sanctions. The majority for the total abolition of military and naval aircraft was 4 to 1. See sources.

Conclusion: The end of the League.

As tension gradually increased in Europe towards the mid 1930's and fascism took grip in Italy and Germany, the calls for Great Britain and France to rearm gradually became louder. When, in 1936, Germany re-occupied the Rhineland which had been demilitarised by the treaty of Versailles, the pressure to rearm became stronger and anti-war voices gradually became muted. Italy's invasion of Abyssinia (1935-36) and the Spanish civil war (1936-39), in which the German air-force was involved led to increased European tension. Henry Flatt's great fear of ariel bombing became a reality at Guernica (Spain) as WW2 loomed and the International League of Nations Union became largely irrelevant. The probability is that the Lakenheath branch simply died away but at least one or two members thought it should be remembered and so the poster was 'put away' to finally end up in Percy Popay's shed.

The International League of Nations was finally dissolved in 1946 and its assets were transferred to the newly established United Nations which to this day continues the pursuit of 'peace and security amongst the nations.'

.....