

# The Leamington Omnibus



## A South Leamington home in the 1950s Part 1

A lot has been written about Leamington's wells and churches, and everyone now surely knows all there is to know about its beginnings. I am writing of life, seen through the eyes of a child during the 1950s in the side streets, away from the town centre, in the streets where ordinary people lived ordinary lives.

The street where I lived was the most important street in the world. It was home, it was the focus of my life, and above all, the centre of my universe. It was where I made all my plans, my hopes, my dreams. It was a street of friendliness, where people took pride in their homes, no matter how humble. Garden paths were always swept and the pavement outside each house kept neat and tidy. Everyone had time to stop and talk, if only to say, "Good Morning". Corner shops were a natural feature of the landscape in the Leamington beyond Clemens Street and the canal bridge, - a world away from Genteel Leamington and taking the waters.

The 1950s were the austere years following the poverty of wartime restrictions. Ration books were still in use, but consumer goods were becoming more accessible to everyone, courtesy of hire purchase and the Provident Cheque. Until now, people had always made their own entertainment but this was gradually falling into decline with the advent of television. Childhood games were changing, as we found new heroes and villains on TV. The one-eyed monster, no matter how big or small, became an essential piece of furniture in what had once been 'the front room', used only on high days and holidays.



I lived with my parents and younger brother, Peter, around whom all my childhood memories revolve. A sister Doreen, and a brother, Michael, arrived a few years later. Another brother, Keith appeared on the scene when I was eighteen.. In the early post-war years, accommodation was scarce. Court Street, Brook Street and Scotland Place were being cleared for redevelopment. Being allocated a council house on the Kingsway estate, at Southway or Lillington was like reaching the Promised Land!

Home for us was a mid-terraced house, one of four houses in 'Evelyn Place' Tachbrook Street, between Brunswick Street and Hitchman Road. All four houses were alike,, with a bay-windowed front room, a back living room and a brick-floored kitchen which we thought was more appropriately called a scullery. At the back, there was a paved yard with an outside lavatory, its wooden box-like seat being scrubbed every week. Dad eventually built a large shed to store coal, and later, our bicycles. A few weeds grew by the dustbin and the pig bin. Pre WW2, each house had railings round the well-tended small front garden, but these were taken down, along with the church railings, for the war effort.

The four houses of Evelyn Place were all owned by the Russell family and were rented out by Locke and England, the estate agents. Mr Montgomery, the rent man, called each Tuesday morning for the rent, - 11 shillings a week. My parents had taken the house before their wedding in September 1939, and we stayed until April 1962, when the council re-housed us. The houses were not very well-maintained. It took a lot of begging and pleading to get any repairs done. All the front doors were painted the same hideous mud-brown, with patches of peeling blistered paint. At one point, Dad offered to buy paint and decorate the front of the house, but he was turned down.

**Tess Whitehouse**

### Your stories

A number of our members have been committing their memories and reminiscences to paper recently and with the consent of the writer we hope to print extracts from some of these in future issues of The Omnibus.

Tess Whitehouse (née Chapman) starts the ball rolling with her recollections of childhood in Leamington in the 1950's, the first extract of which is printed above as Tess wrote it. If any of our readers are minded to put pen to paper about their life experiences, we would be delighted to publish the results. Editor



## Local history A to Z letter E

### Empress Eugénie

On a cold Sunday morning in December 1860, an elegant lady and her entourage walked from the Regent Hotel to the Roman



George Street chapel

Catholic chapel of St Peter in George Street to attend divine worship. The crowd of onlookers huddled round the church gates bore witness to the fact that this was no ordinary church-goer. Although the lady who joined the congregation on that Advent Sunday was travelling *incognita* as the Comtess de Pierrefonds, all those present knew exactly who the lady was who had reserved a suite of fifteen room at the Regent Hotel because her identity had



Eugénie & the Prince Imperial by Winterhalter

been revealed in the newspapers. She was the most powerful woman in the world and one of the most glamorous, celebrated and ultimately tragic figures of the nineteenth century. Her real name

was Eugénie de Montejo, a Spanish Countess, better known throughout Europe as Empress Consort of the French and wife of Louis Napoleon, the Emperor Napoleon III. A small girl recalled many years later how she was very worried when she heard the news of the visit of the Empress to Leamington since she expected her to bring an army!

Maria Eugénia Ignacia Augustina de Guzman y Palafox, Countess of Teba was born in a tent in the garden of her parent's Granada home during an earthquake on May 5th 1826. Eugénia's parents were part of the close-knit ruling class whose common language was French and her adolescent years were spent in a seemingly endless round of costume balls and house parties in fashionable European cities. It was in April 1849 that Eugénia was presented to Louis Napoleon the Prince President at a reception at the Lycée Palace. In December 1851 The Second Empire was proclaimed and Louis Napoleon, the nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte became Emperor of the French. Within eighteen months, the small man with the goatee beard and waxed moustaches and the flame-haired Spanish Countess, now Eugénie (no longer Eugénia) were joined in matrimony in Notre-Dame on January 30th 1853. She was 26, he was 45.

Eugénie filled the role of imperial hostess with ease and with style and the court of the first Napoleon was recreated which it is said surpassed even that of the Tsars in opulence. Costumed balls at the Tuileries were attended by five thousand guests; the German painter Franz Winterhalter



received regular commissions for portraits of the ladies & gentlemen of the court; the Empresses jewellery collection was unrivalled in Europe and she had five palaces at her disposal. Splendour and elegance made Paris once again the capital of Europe.

On the debit side, Napoleon III involved France in military actions in foreign parts from Africa to China and from The Crimea to Mexico and was frequently out of



The Imperial family

the country. On those occasions, he appointed Eugénie Regent, sometimes for long periods of time. She had absolute power and chaired the weekly meeting of the Council of Ministers. By all accounts she was a very effective and competent deputy who showed remarkable tact and good sense in exercising her authority.

In March 1856 and after two miscarriages Eugénie gave birth to a son, the Prince Imperial. She was in labour for almost twenty four hours and nearly died, her doctor said he had never witnessed such suffering. The Prince was her first and only child.

Continental politics in the mid nineteenth century were extremely



volatile and on a January evening in 1858 four Italian revolutionaries attempted to kill Napoleon & Eugénie by throwing grenades into the carriage in which they were being driven to the Paris Opera. The couple were lucky to escape with only minor injuries but ten people were killed and over a hundred and forty injured.

Eugénie represented France at the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 but on her return home it was clear that at both national and international level things were unravelling. Napoleon unwisely declared war on Prussia the



Napoleon III

following year with disastrous results. A swift and comprehensive defeat by the Prussian Army at Sedan left the Second Empire in ruins. Eugénie and her son Louis the Prince Imperial were smuggled separately across the Channel to safety in England. Napoleon III was imprisoned near Kassel in Germany but was released six months later when the family were re-united in England in a large house, Camden Place in Chiselhurst rented by Eugénie.

Life at Camden Place was quiet but there was more grief in store for the Empress. Within two years Louis Napoleon died of peritonitis after several operations for a bladder stone that had afflicted him for many years. Worse was to follow. The Prince Imperial, styled Napoleon IV after his father's death, craved excitement and became an army cadet at

Woolwich. After begging to be allowed to join an expedition against the Zulus and with Queen Victoria's help, he enrolled in the British Army. On the first of June 1879 his reconnaissance party was ambushed and he died under a hail of Zulu spears.

After the death of her husband and son, Eugénie bought a 23-roomed Victorian Gothic mansion, Farnborough Hill and there built a great church with a crypt in which their bodies and her own would lie. A religious community of Benedictines was established to say masses for the repose of the souls buried there.

Eugénie lived on at Farnborough Hill for almost forty years and added a new wing of 18 rooms in which to house her collection of Napoleonic memorabilia. Her old age at Farnborough was spent in



Eugénie in mourning at Farnborough Hill

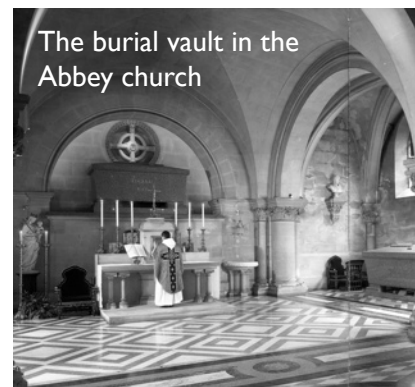
entertaining a stream of visiting crowned heads. She was an intimate friend of Queen Victoria who paid regular visits. The two old ladies carried on a regular exchange of letters frequently bemoaning the infirmities of old



Prince Imperial

age, the Queen addressing Eugénie as 'Dear sister.'

Always keenly interested in new technological advances she lent her yacht *The Thistle* to a young Marconi for his early experiments with wireless. She learned to ride a bicycle when she was over seventy and climbed Vesuvius when she was eighty. At the age of ninety-three she spent the winter of 1919-1920 at her villa in Cap Martin and travelled on to Madrid to stay with her great nephew Alba in the Liria Palace. It was here on the morning of 10 July that she died peacefully at the age of ninety-four. The body of the last Empress travelled back by train and ferry to her England home. She was laid to rest in the crypt at Farnborough in the presence of King George V and Queen Mary



The burial vault in the Abbey church

and many of the crowned heads of Europe.

Her most fitting epitaph is perhaps a dedication found in a copy of Lord Rosebery's *Napoleon I; the Last Phase* which the author had presented to Eugénie and in which he had written:

*To the surviving Sovereign of Napoleon's dynasty The Empress, who has lived on the summits of splendour, sorrow and catastrophe with supreme dignity and courage.*



## Blue plaques continued

Having written about the Leamington Blue Plaque Scheme in the last edition of *The Omnibus*, I was interested to see in the February issue of the BBC History magazine an article about the history of blue plaques. It came as a surprise to



learn that the oldest surviving blue plaque was erected in King Street in

London as long ago as 1867. What came as an even greater surprise was the fact that both this plaque and Leamington's oldest blue plaque commemorate the same person! Both record the fact that Napoleon III had lived in the property to which they are affixed, in London in 1848 and in Leamington a decade earlier. *The Times* newspaper did its bit for the blue plaque by reporting that Bournemouth Council have recently put up a plaque on Britain's oldest public beach hut built in 1909.

## Library additions

An elderly gentleman recently came into South Lodge during one of our drop-in sessions and handed over a two-volume facsimile edition of Dugdale's *History Of Warwickshire*. Given that the current second-hand value of these is in excess of £220, it goes without saying that we were delighted if somewhat speechless to be the recipients of such a magnificent gift from a person who wished to remain anonymous.

## South Lodge stewarding

We are keen to open up the displays in South Lodge on a more regular basis through the summer months. If you can spare a couple of hours now and again to sit behind the desk and chat to visitors about the displays and about the LHG we would be pleased to hear from you. If you care to call in at South Lodge on any Tuesday morning, one of our committee members will tell you more about it. Stewarding is always done in pairs and tea and coffee making facilities are available. It is really a very pleasant way to spend a sunny afternoon. Why not give it a try?

## Help wanted

We feel sure that our growing membership has within its ranks people with skills of all sorts that we would be glad to use. If you have IT skills or experience with digital presentations/videos or website construction we can put those skills to good use.

If you have experience of mounting displays or archiving or cataloguing please tell us. The LHG committee members would be glad of some help particularly preparing for the Local History Fair in May. Come along to South Lodge any Tuesday and tell us how you can help.

## Register of Members' Interests

We have plans to publish a list of members interests together with details of topics they are currently researching. This will hopefully further their own lines of enquiry and will avoid the possibility of members unwittingly covering the same ground as someone else researching the same subject. Please send brief details of any projects you are involved in to the editor who will publish details in a future edition.

## Puzzle Corner

### Answer

The painted statue in the last edition shows two firemen and a manual engine of the Birmingham Fire Office, one of the early insurance fire companies. It is over Locke & England's estate agency in Euston Place but used to be on the other side of The Parade on a purpose-built ledge above the former offices of Mr Philip Locke who was one of their agents. This building is now the Stonell showroom. The ledge is still there.

### Question

The bronze figure of the Great War infantryman on Leamington's War Memorial in Euston Place was sculpted by Albert Toft. He also sculpted an identical figure for the war memorial in another English town. Where can you see this other figure?



The Omnibus

is edited by Alan Griffin with help from the editorial team of Margaret Rushton and Colin Jennings. The Summer issue will be published at the end of June.

We welcome contributions of any length on all aspects of Leamington history and if you fancy acting as guest editor for a future issue, we can provide a suitable chair and technical support! Please contact the editor at the email address below or by telephone on 314711

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