

The Leamington omnibus



A Sad Anniversary



This issue starts I'm afraid with some bad news. You will all have read about the serious fire that destroyed much of the Bath Place Community building in late September and of the impact that has had on many of the voluntary organisations formerly based there. The seeds of the History Group were first sown at Bath Place with the formation of the Archive Project, and all of our early meetings were held there, as was much of the IT training that we all benefited from. Although we no longer used Bath Place on a regular basis, we know many of the volunteers there and we sympathise with them and all users of the building in what has been a devastating experience. It seemed particularly ironic that the fire occurred on the eve of the 150th anniversary of the opening of the old Bath Place school,

fortunately we were able to host some of the anniversary celebrations at South Lodge. We wish them well in their temporary new home in the old library building in Avenue Road where we plan to hold some of our future meetings. More of this on the Notice Board section on the back page.

EDITOR

History Group Member Jeff Clarke was a pupil at Bath Place School just after WW2, until he left to take up an Apprenticeship at Henry Griffiths' jewellery factory at the age of 15. He has recorded these reminiscences of his schooldays with Margaret Rushton.

Schooldays at Bath Place school

He remembers the overcrowding, in the Infants, Juniors and Seniors, - who had to have their lessons at the Urqhart Hall in Leam Terrace. Because the school was then a Church School, everyone but the smallest infants had to go to the service at the Parish Church on Wednesday mornings. If older pupils were late, - and Jeff sometimes was, - they had to go to the Infant Class and "work" there until it was time to join their proper classes.

The cane was a feature of school life too, - and Jeff had the cane more than once. The cane or a ruler rapped across the knuckles was used for any misdemeanour, from getting spellings wrong to getting into a fight. The male teachers were almost all former military men and strongly believed in firm discipline, - of the "Spare the rod, spoil the child" variety, - but they could also be kind (in an emergency!)

In Jeff's time at Bath Place, there were still Air Raid Shelters on the playground behind the school, stretching from the back wall to Lower Avenue. There were blackout curtains on a metal pole, fastened to the inside of the wooden doors, and children often used to run in and out, especially when there was a staff meeting and they were left on the playground to amuse themselves. Jeff ran in one day, and collided with something that made him see stars. He stumbled out into the light, horrified to see blood on his hands where he'd felt at his head. An older pupil went and knocked on the (locked) school door, keeping it up until an irate teacher appeared and she was able to explain about the injury. The wound was cleaned and bandaged, and then Mr Foster, the Head teacher, rushed Jeff out to the main road, where he flagged down a horse and cart from the railway station. The cart carried parcels, but Jeff and Mr Foster were hoisted up on to the back, legs dangling, and driven hotfoot to the Warneford Hospital for stitches. The metal pole had just missed Jeff's eye, - and he still has the scar above his eyebrow to prove it! *To be continued*

Local History A to Z

We plan to make this a regular feature of the Newsletter and to include in it some lesser-known local history topics. The column 'takes off' in this issue with the letter 'A' and a local aeronautical story from sixty years ago.

AW 52

Long before Concorde went into service and as long ago as 1943, the Coventry firm of Sir W G Armstrong Whitworth developed an experimental, tail-less jet aircraft, the AW52 which became known as the Flying Wing. This aircraft had no fuselage or tail section and was essentially a large fixed wing powered by two Rolls Royce Nene jet turbines. It was the first of its kind in the world and was developed as a prototype for a planned six-engined passenger version.

Whilst on a test flight East of Leamington on Monday May 30th 1949, the prototype aircraft was at 3,000 feet when it began to oscillate violently and pilot J O (Jo) Lancaster, fearing the



plane was about to break up, bailed out. The plane which was on the secret list crashed in open country near Leamington Hastings. Jo Lancaster parachuted to safety and landed in a field at the rear of The Cuttle inn at Long Itchington narrowly avoiding 'touch down' in the adjacent canal. It was the first ever deployment of the Martin-Baker ejection seat in an in-flight accident.



Many people can recall seeing the Flying Wing. The sound of jet engines was fairly uncommon back in the late nineteen forties and given the low altitude that the plane frequently flew at, its appearance seldom went unremarked. Colin Jennings recalled one such occasion

‘As a fourteen year old boy I was in the Pump Room Gardens when I saw this extraordinary sight in the sky, a plane without a fuselage or tailplane flying very low from West to East. It was quite unlike anything I had ever seen in a book or film. When I got home and told my family about this strange aircraft we discovered that it was called the Flying Wing. I am sure some friends who I told about it thought it was all the product of an overwrought imagination’ Alan Griffin remember seeing it fly over his home in Southam and his parents stood in the back garden and witnessed the accident that befell it on that May afternoon in 1949.

A second prototype continued to fly with the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough until 1954 when development ceased. Sixty years on, the American aviation company Northrop is engaged in research for a large multi-engined plane based on the ‘Flying Wing’ principle which Armstrong Whitworth had successfully demonstrated in the AW52.

Footnotes

J O (Jo) Lancaster was born in 1919 and flew heavy bombers during the Second World War. He completed 54 operations including participation in the 1000 bomber raids. After the war he became a test pilot for Saunders-Roe and Armstrong Whitworth and clocked up over thirteen thousand hours on a wide variety of aircraft of all types.

The Martin Baker company is still in existence manufacturing ejection seats. The lives of 7,300 pilots have been saved thanks to their seats.



An artists impression of the Armstrong Whitworth design for a six-engined Flying Wing with accommodation for passengers within the central wing area.

How a Leamington 'lad' lost the Irish Crown Jewels and his life

Arthur Edward Vicars was born at Winton Lodge in Holly Walk in Leamington on the twenty seventh of July 1862. He was the youngest of four children born to William Henry Vicars, a retired colonel in the 61st Regiment of Foot, and his wife Jane. The family lived in some style as befitted a retired Army officer and employed a nurse, lady's-maid, housemaid and a children's maid.

As a schoolboy Arthur Vicars spent much time with his half-brothers in Ireland and also developed a great interest in heraldry and genealogy. He subsequently pursued a career in genealogy and in 1893 the 29 year old Vicars scaled the pinnacle of Irish genealogy by becoming Ulster King of Arms with a suite of rooms in the imposing Bedford Tower in Dublin Castle. He was made a Knight Commander of the Victorian Order.

One of his responsibilities as King of Arms was for the safekeep-



ing of the seal and insignia of the Order of St Patrick frequently referred to as the Irish Crown Jewels. These jewels including diamonds and rubies were worn by members of the Order on ceremonial and state occasions and were kept in a safe in the library in Vicars' rooms. Their

value was equivalent to £2 million in today's terms. On July 10th 1907, King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra were due to visit Dublin for the investiture of a new Knight of St Patrick at which the jewels would be worn.

Unfortunately for Arthur Vicars however, a few days before the Royal party arrived in Dublin, the safe in Vicars' office in which they were normally stored was



found to be unlocked but worse still, much worse, the regalia had disappeared. The theft was clearly an 'inside job' since both the Irish police force and the detective staff had their headquarters in Dublin Castle! Although Vicars continued to deny any involvement in the theft, it was reported that the King wished him to be suspended from the Office of Arms and he was compelled to resign.

In his enforced and premature retirement, Arthur Vicars moved to Kilmorna House in County Kerry where he was known to regularly entertain members of the British Army. This was a particularly risky, nay foolhardy,

thing to do at a time when the Irish were engaged in an armed struggle for independence.

On an April morning in 1921, thirty heavily-armed IRA men converged on Kilmorna and set the house ablaze using petrol. Sir Arthur Vicars was dragged from his bed and shot dead in front of Lady Vicars. Around his neck the IRA placed a placard bearing the inscription 'SPY. INFORMERS BEWARE. IRA NEVER FORGETS'

No one was ever brought to trial for the theft of the jewels and there was every appearance of a high level cover-up. Arthur Vicars' will was not made public for over fifty years. He had written in it "I was made a scapegoat they shielded the real culprit and thief Francis R Shackleton" (Shackleton was the brother of the polar explorer Ernest and was on Vicars' staff as a Herald) Several other Heralds on his staff ultimately met with unpleasant and highly suspicious deaths. Shackleton himself was later imprisoned for fraud in an unrelated case. He was declared bankrupt and after release from prison lived under an assumed name as an antique dealer in Chichester.

To this day, the whereabouts of the jewels is unknown. Sir Arthur Vicars, the Leamington lad who lost the Irish Crown Jewels, is buried in the churchyard of St Peter's church at Leckhampton near Cheltenham in Gloucestershire where his father lived following a move from less fashionable Leamington Spa.

**NOTICE BOARD****New venue for monthly meetings**

Those members who have been with us since we started at Bath Place will have got used to a variety of different meeting rooms for our monthly talks. We outgrew the Community Room at Bath Place and we are victims of our own success inasmuch as our meet-



ings now attract more people than can be comfortably accommodated in our most recent venue at South Lodge. Our

committee have looked at a host of alternative venues and I am pleased to tell you that as from the February meeting next year, and for the foreseeable future, all of our monthly meetings will be held in one of the larger rooms in the old library building in Avenue Road (seen in the Edwardian postcard above). There is ample parking at the rear of the building and we hope to be able to continue

to provide tea and coffee after the talk. **Please note that the AGM in January will be held at South Lodge and not at the old library.**

Membership

Just to remind everyone that membership of the LHG is due for renewal on January 1st and that the current membership fee is still £10. We think this represents good value and we hope that as many people as possible will agree with us by taking out an annual membership. A membership application form is enclosed with this Newsletter.

Drop-In mornings

We have for some time opened South Lodge on Tuesday morning of each week for anyone to drop in for a cup of coffee and a chat about Leamington history and we shall continue to do this. If sufficient volunteers are forthcoming, we plan to man the South Lodge displays on a more frequent basis from next Easter. If you are interested in helping to steward South Lodge for a morning or afternoon please speak to any member of the committee - you don't have to be a member of the LHG.

Programme of Winter meetings**Monday January 25th**

The Annual General Meeting will be held at South Lodge. After the routine business has been dealt with, we shall be projecting recent acquisitions from our growing community archive. There will also be an opportunity to look at our new website on the LHG laptop and to hear about current research being undertaken by members. You are invited to bring along any post-cards, press cuttings or items of Leamington ephemera that you may have to show to us. Our full programme for 2010 will be available at the AGM.

Monday February 22nd

Our member Jo Clark will present one of the late Bill Gibbons' slide/talks on *Leamington 1900 - 1930*. Many of you will have attended the various talks given by Bill, one of Leamington's best-known local historians who passed away in 2004. Jo was one of Bill's closest friends and his 'right-hand man' in doing the talks around Warwickshire. Jo is now custodian of Bill's slide collection and has carried on where Bill left off with these fascinating glimpses of Leamington in times past.

Monday March 22nd

Chris Holland will present a talk *The Story Behind the Monument* about the Stretton Memorial which commemorates the 29th Army Division in the Great War. The 29th Division mustered in mid-Warwickshire in the Spring of 1915 and many thousands of troops were billeted in and around Leamington prior to embarking for the disastrous campaign in Gallipoli. Chris is the retired Head of History at King Henry VIII school in Coventry and is a well known author and lecturer on military history.

This Newsletter is edited by Alan Griffin secretary of the Leamington History Group.

The views expressed herein are not necessarily those of the LHG.

Submissions of articles by members for future publication in this Newsletter are very welcome.

Please address all enquiries to the editor on 01926 430996 or leamingtonhistory@fastnet.co.uk