

The Leamington omnibus



Travelling Hopefully

The Leamington History Group had modest beginnings in a small but enthusiastic band of local historians based at the old Bath Place school. Few of us who were part of that group imagined that within a few years we would be part of a thriving local history group with a membership of more than fifty, or that we would outgrow two venues.

The 'big news' of 2011 is that our somewhat itinerant existence of late is now at an end. All our future meetings will be held at the Dormer Conference Centre alongside St Peter's church in Dormer Place. This is unquestionably one of the very best hire venues in Leamington and provides facilities of a high order. Since one of our committee members is also a member of the congregation at St Peter's, we qualify for a concessionary hire rate which makes the move even more attractive.

Quite apart from our regular monthly meeting, we also continue to hold a weekly local history drop-in session in South Lodge at the Parade entrance to the Jephson Gardens. We are open from 10.00 am to mid-day each Tuesday morning. Tea and coffee is provided for anyone who calls in for a chat and these sessions have proved to be of great benefit. We have learnt much from some of the town's older residents and have helped a few people with their own lines of research. A chance meeting in the Jephson Gardens with three drama students from Warwick University one frosty morning, led to our helping them with reminiscences and photographs of the Lights of Leamington last held fifty years ago. They have promised to come back to show us the results of their installation.

One of the great strengths of the LHG is its function as an information exchange for local historians and in the willingness of its members to share the fruits of their research with others. Several members have given impressive PowerPoint presentations in recent months, the most recent one of which on Covent Garden Market by Pat and Colin attracted an audience of seventy.

Above all else, the Leamington History Group is focussed on research and on making that research available to a wider audience. Several members have been engaged in a project to transcribe the Willes archive recently acquired by the County Record Office. At least two of our members are doing research for books and others have written down or recorded their reminiscences of Leamington life. Our newly launched website www.leamingtonhistory.co.uk affords everyone a marvellous opportunity to contribute articles and images on just about any aspect of Leamington's past that interests them.

It is clear that there is among our membership a wealth of knowledge and expertise and we would encourage all of you to think about the contribution that you can make to what we are trying to achieve. We will help and support you in every way possible and let no one think that their own recollections are unimportant or in any way unworthy of recording.

The Leamington History Group is in good shape and we look forward to the future with renewed confidence. Robert Louis Stevenson is said to have coined the phrase "to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive". We continue to travel with high hopes and you will be pleased to hear that after a few diversions along the way we have arrived.

Editor

Local history A - Z

Dad's People Carrier

When I was a young lad in the nineteen- fifties, my father was a baker in the small Warwickshire town of Southam. In 1947 he had purchased the old windmill and the bakery business that went with it and my two brothers and I moved in to the small cottage that went

with the mill and the bakehouse.

One of the things that most excited us when we moved there in 1948 , was the fact that for the very first time in our lives, we as a family, were the proud owners of a vehicle. The vehicle in question was a pre-war, royal blue Ford with a registration number I still remember sixty years on,EAC 698. Lest you should think that this was a rather 'flashy' piece of transport for the post-war years, I ought perhaps to make it clear that the vehicle in question played a fundamental part in my father's life. It was in fact the bread van in which each day he did his round delivering bread and cakes door-to-door in Southam and the surrounding villages.

The ten hundredweight van had several slatted and removable wooden trays in the back on which the bread and cakes were stacked for the daily delivery round. There were a number of other things about the van that I clearly remember. The most noteworthy feature of the van's interior was the fact that it had only one seat, for the driver. There was no seat for a passenger and no footwell either on the passenger's side of the vehicle. I am also pretty sure that the accelerator pedal was placed centrally between the clutch and the brake pedal although that didn't strike me as unduly exceptional at the time.

My father was quick to realise that the blue van could be easily adapted as a conveyance for the whole family when the occasion demanded. The most pressing need was for a seat for the principal passenger, my mother. An old Edwardian upholstered chair had its legs sawn off just beneath the seat and this was placed in the front of the van. Here my mother sat in some style but little comfort with her knees drawn up and pressed close up against the dashboard. In a short space of time, three more old

decrepit, wooden chairs were deprived of their legs and with the wooden trays removed from the back of the van we three boys were ushered in to 'our' space through the van's rear doors. The layout of the seating was infinitely flexible since none of the seats were secured to the vehicle in any way. The dismembered chairs had to be placed against the sides so that we could stretch our legs across the width of the van. The only way we could see out was to look through the small rear windows or kneel directly behind my dad to look out through the windscreen.



Since the baking was a seven day a week job and dough had to be mixed on Sunday evenings for the Monday batch, we never had a family holiday as such. What we did have were days out visiting relatives, a number of whom lived in Oxfordshire villages south of Banbury. and well within range of the blue van. I remember that the trips were invariably on a Sunday to fit in with dad's baking. In time he acquired an old upholstered double bus seat which when the legs were cut down made a great replacement for two of the old chairs but which also led to countless arguments as to which of us were to occupy these prestigious seats on forays into rural Oxfordshire.

Fortunately we never had any accidents. Quite what would have happened if my father had had to brake sharply with four unsecured seats in the vehicle doesn't bear thinking about. I don't think we ever did think about it but I have no doubt my mother did. In these days of preoccupation with health & safety, it is easy to ridicule such Heath Robinson solutions but I feel sure that in days gone-by people generally were far more resourceful and inventive than they are today. In the austere post-war years of which I speak, we were still motivated by the make-do and mend philosophy and making best use of the limited resources that were then available. My brothers and I still have fond memories of EAC698 and the many trips we had as kids in the back of the bread van. Dad's very own People Carrier.



From New York to Omaha beach via the Jephson Gardens

In October 1940, a fresh-faced young American named John Buccellato, just out of his teens, enlisted in the United States Army Infantry. His parents who were middle-class Sicilian immigrants lived in an apartment block facing Central Park in New York city. His mother was a milliner.



Within two years 'Butch' Buccellato found himself in Italy and North Africa alongside his colleagues fighting against the Nazis. In 1944 he arrived in England on board the *Queen Mary* which had been requisitioned as a troop ship. On the voyage from America, the men slept in shifts 'hot bedding' the limited number of bunks available on the ship. By the early Summer of 1944,

'Butch' and a large number of military personnel of many nationalities were in Leamington awaiting orders for their departure for *Operation Overlord*, the allied invasion of Europe.

The GI's found the spa town very much to their liking and they enjoyed their strolls in the Jephson Gardens where on one occasion they found their Australian infantry counterparts honing their marksmanship skills by shooting the ducks on the ornamental pond. The Aussies plucked and dressed the ducks and roasted them over fires fuelled by smashed up wooden park benches that they had 'liberated'.

It has to be said that the American GI's were very popular with local girls. At a dance in the Palais de Danse in Spencer Street, 'Butch' met a good looking girl named Elsie Stanley who lodged with her sister Kit in rooms at 31 Willes Road (Lansdowne Crescent). In due course 'Butch' packed his kitbag for the uncertainties of Omaha beach leaving behind Royal Leamington Spa and Elsie, who was soon to realise that she was pregnant. On March 18th 1945 Elsie was delivered of a daughter christened Pamela Ann.

The story now fast-forwards sixty five years. On a particularly cold March morning, I was cleaning in the Parish Church, broom in hand, when I was approached by a lady who introduced herself as Mrs Pamela Birch who was with her husband Terry. They were quite obviously on a quest. Their

enquiry centred around any baptismal record we might have for Pamela. She had been born at 31 Willes Road in 1945 and had brought with her her Birth Certificate which bore the name of her mother Elsie Stanley. The space for the name of the father was blank and had a line drawn through it. Pamela now picks up the story.

'My mum, of course knew my father's name and she made several attempts over the years to find out what had happened to John Buccellato but all her efforts came to nothing. As I got older, I too became keen to find out what had become of my father but as the years passed I began to think that even had he survived the slaughter on Omaha beach he must surely have succumbed to old age. It was the personal computer my daughter Sally- Anne acquired, and her access to the internet, that ultimately helped us to unravel the story in 1998.'

Elsie and baby Pamela



(continued on back page)

The service records of former U S Army personnel have been available online for some time under the USA Freedom of Information legislation. It didn't take long to access the records and to establish that not only did 'Butch' survive Omaha beach but he was also alive and well and living on the Hudson river north of New York. Within a matter of hours Pamela had spoken to her father on the phone. The following year, daughter and father met for the first time when 'Butch' came over to England. They came to Leamington where the former GI posed on the steps of the house in



'Butch' Buccellato (right) with Pamela and her half-brother Paul Buccellato at 31 Lansdowne Crescent in 1999

Willes Road where Pamela had been born and together they walked in the Jephson Gardens and admired the ducks!

John Buccellato told Pamela how he went ashore on Omaha beach with the second wave assault by the US First Army Division. Many of the young 'rookies' in the first wave attack had been shot to pieces by machine gun fire. Surprisingly one of his most vivid and lasting memories was not the mutilated corpses of his colleagues but the scores of dead fish they had to wade through to reach the beach. After breaking out from the beaches he and his company reached the village of Saint Lo. It

was at this stage that he was stricken with a severe bout of uncontrollable shaking which had nothing to do with the situation he found himself in but something that Butch immediately recognised as a symptom of malaria which he had contracted while serving in North Africa. It was very clear that John's part in the invasion of Normandy had been brought to a somewhat premature conclusion. His commander arranged for him to be taken to the Louis Pasteur hospital in Cherbourg where he spent the next month before being shipped back to the Army Hospital for Pacific & European Tropical Diseases in Swannanoa North Carolina where he spent the next twelve months recuperating.

Pamela tells me that Butch is still going strong at the grand old age of ninety. He has never forgotten his brief wartime stay in Royal Leamington Spa on the long and eventful journey from Central Park, New York to Omaha Beach in 1944. Alan Griffin

Autumn Programme

September 27th

Stephen Baldwin's talk John Wisden & Cricket in Leamington illuminates the life of the famous England cricketer John Wisden and his close connections with early cricket in Leamington

October 25th

Our treasurer Jenny St John anticipates November the fifth in her talk Gunpowder, Treason & Warwickshire about how the Gunpowder Plot was hatched in the Heart of England.

November 22nd

Members Colin Jennings and Pat McGarrell share their research into the old Leamington market square off Warwick Street in their joint presentation on The Rise & Fall of Covent Garden Market.

December 20th

Our Christmas 'get-together' with a light-hearted quiz and seasonal refreshments

Unless otherwise advised all meetings are held at the Old Library (Bath Place Community Venture) in Avenue Road commencing at 7.30 pm.

The Omnibus is compiled by Margaret Rushton, Colin Jennings and Alan Griffin who edits it. We welcome contributions of any length from members on all aspects of Leamington local history however obscure or eclectic.