

# The Leamington Omnibus

Newsletter of the Leamington History Group

Autumn 2013

As the local tourist industry draws to its autumn close, and the new school year begins, we look back at how Leamington was once perceived, by a 19<sup>th</sup> century tourist, and more recently, by a 20<sup>th</sup> century schoolgirl. Today, we can find out almost everything there is to know about a town we plan to visit, via travel guides, television and the internet, but what was it like for visitors to the fledgling Spa?

William Charles McCready was an early commentator, as the extract below, dated 1808, amply demonstrates.

*The summer months in Birmingham were diversified by a short stay in Leamington, then a small village consisting of only a few thatched houses, - not one tiled or slated; the Bowling Green being the only one where moderate accommodation could be secured. There was in progress of erection an hotel of more pretension which I fancy was to be the Dog or Greyhound, but which had some months of work to fit it for the reception of guests. We had the parlour and bedrooms of a huckster's shop, the best accommodation of the place; and used each morning to walk down to the springs across the old churchyard with our little mugs in our hands for our daily draft of the Leamington Waters.*

Mr McCready may have confused The Dog with the New Inn, in Bath Street which was built about 1793 when he was a boy. It later became the Bath Hotel, and is now the site of a supermarket (The Dog was the old inn in High-Street, successively Sinkers Hotel and Copps Hotel. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the site, 16 -24, High Street, became a family draper's, Palmer's, then Renton's. It is now a terrace of separately owned smaller shops).

1. Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, another occasional visitor was one R S Surtees, of 'Jorrocks Jaunts and Jollities' fame, lawyer, editor, novelist, sporting writer, and above all, and keen huntsman, who came to ride with the Warwickshire Hounds of his friend Mr Thornhill. Surtees considered the town 'that great wen called Leamington', - a blight on the landscape, brought about by the rapid expansion of the new industrial towns in the Midlands and North coupled with the advent of the railway, and the consequent fear that the only possible outcome would be the spoiling of good hunting country.

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Leamington-born Jill Walters remembers her first school,

St Albans Preparatory School, 28 Clarendon Square, (North side) Leamington Spa

My parents had a disagreement when I was a five-year old about to start school. My father wanted me to go to the local authority school nearby, but my mother, thinking I would be frightened there, preferred St Albans Prep, the fee-paying private school in Clarendon Square. I was a pupil there from 1944 to 1947.

The headmistress, Miss M M Matthews, the only teacher and owner of this very small educational establishment, was an old lady, possibly even in her eighties, who wore long dark skirts usually secured with a safety pin and had her thin wispy silver hair done up in a bun from which long strands were always escaping. She ruled her dozen or so pupils between the ages of five and twelve quite firmly and I, for one, was quite scared of her.

Our classroom, in fact the only room for the entire school, was on the first floor of an elegant house overlooking Clarendon Square garden and it was there that we spent the whole of our school day. There was a mid-morning break to consume our one third of a pint bottle of milk which in winter would be frozen solid with a pillar of milk forcing off the cardboard top. Fortunately the bottles were thawed for us in a saucepan of hot water heated on a two-ring gas boiler in the corridor. At mid-day we went home for dinner – yes, dinner – before returning for the afternoon session.

The curriculum covered arithmetic, reading, writing, essays, French and collects, the last of which we had to learn by heart and which I never comprehended. I'm not too sure how Miss Matthews organized the teaching of such a varied age range but I have clear memories of my helping an older boy with his arithmetic by explaining things to him but not doing it for him. Presumably that was permitted. I remember that I had great difficulty learning to tell the time, as the clock on the mantelpiece had Roman numerals. Another problem for me was going to the toilet, because you had to ask permission to go, and it wasn't always given and, moreover, as the lavatory was situated at the end of a long, lonely corridor, one was rather reluctant to make the journey and tended to 'hold on.' A recipe for disaster! The highlights of the school year were the spring visits to a private wood where we picked bluebells, (highly illegal nowadays), and the autumn trips to Northumberland Road to gather conkers, though I don't remember actually playing conkers.

Initially my parents and I lived in 'rooms' in a house in Beauchamp Avenue and then later we had a flat in Portland Street. Once, walking back to school in the afternoon I did something I was forbidden to do: I walked through the garden in Clarendon Square though I was supposed to stay on the road. As I emerged on to the street I was confronted by a man on a bike who invited me go for a ride with him. I politely declined and shot up the steps opposite and into school where I told my teacher. My mother's reaction when I got home later that afternoon was to contact the police.

In 1947 we moved to Solihull where my father's employer, the Rover Company, had had houses built for their staff. When my mother was looking for a school for me, this time within the State system, she was told that after my private education that although I would probably be able to read I would be no good at anything else so would be put in a class one year below my age group. This duly happened, but before you could say 'Jack Robinson' I was moved to a class one year above my age group! So my education couldn't have been so inadequate at my former 'dame school.'

Perhaps Miss Matthews had once been a governess – who knows?

Jill Walters

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Last Orders in William Street



Strange how we often fail to pay much attention to buildings that we frequently walk past. I have often walked along William Street at the rear of Brandon Parade, but it wasn't until I had passed that way several times that I noticed the large two storey building adjacent to an open space currently used as a car park. My curiosity was aroused further by a hanging sign above the main door with the words 'The Malthouse' on it. Below the sign was a stone plaque now painted blue with the following legend picked out in white: '1871 CW'. The main doorway appeared to have been partially filled in at some time but was quite obviously an eight- foot wide cart entrance when the place was first built. So who was the

enigmatic CW who erected this building 140 years earlier? Enter the inquisitive, bearded local historian.

The premises are now let for commercial use but none of the occupants knew anything of the early history of the building. One said that he had been told that the CW referred to the Charles Wells Brewery. I somehow doubted this because I knew that the Charles Wells Brewery was local to the Bedford area and having 'googled' the name, I soon ruled Wells out since the company wasn't in any event founded until 1875. I won't bore you with many twists and turns of the story but I eventually managed to unravel the history of the Maltings. There was no reference in any of the local trade directories of the period to anyone with the initial CW and when I went back again to look at the sign I could see that what at first sight I'd taken to be a letter 'C' was in fact a 'G', and the initials GW began to make sense. The Maltings were built in 1871 by a Leamington publican named George Warren, who was landlord of the Leamington Tavern in Tavistock Street. George and his wife and eight children were in the 1871 census and I then found out that he had died in 1887 at the age of sixty-five.

One of the most revealing pieces of information that I uncovered was a sale notice in the Courier newspaper of 17 December 1887 for 'that newly erected freehold Malthouse situate in William Street, Leamington, built and occupied by the late Mr George Warren.' This not only detailed the extent of the premises and their contents but it also mentioned over 2000 bushels of barley



which I worked out to be about 90 tons. I still can't make up my mind whether such a quantity was purely to satisfy the thirst of George's own customers or whether it suggests brewing on a much larger commercial scale. The sale notice also refers to 'the late Mr Warren's Brewery' but the location of this is not known. It might well have been the pub in Tavistock Street.

It was quite a challenge to track down the story but it has to be said that all of the information is in the public domain, if only you know where to find it. If you need a bit of help for advice with your own lines of enquiry we at the Leamington History Group are here to help. Happy sleuthing!

Alan Griffin

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Captain George Vancouver.  
Born 1757, Kings Lynn - died 1798

Captain George Vancouver was famous for his voyages of discovery, mainly the 1791 -1795 voyage along the west coast of what is now America and Canada. Most of the bays and inlets etc. along this coast owe their modern names to Captain Vancouver, most obviously Vancouver Island. Previously Vancouver had been with Captain James Cook when he had tried to map the coast from California to Alaska, and find the North-West Passage. Vancouver also nearly suffered the same fate as Captain Cook. The 1791-5 expedition was an attempt to do better than Cook's previous voyage which had been blighted by bad weather.



George Vancouver National Portrait Gallery

On his return to England George Vancouver became involved in acrimonious quarrels with the family and friends of William Pitt, which eventually led to a physical fight, in which George was saved by his elder brother Charles.

What has all this to do with Royal Leamington Spa? Not a lot as far as George is concerned, but whilst George was responsible for mapping the North-West Pacific coastline, Charles was one of the commissioners responsible for the layout of the modern field system in Milverton during the 1803 Enclosure of the five large open fields which comprised the parish. Charles was an agriculturalist and a proponent of the eradication of the open field system, which, whilst it had served well for over 1,000 years had become a disincentive to the modern farming methods needed to feed the expanding population of the early 19th century.

Enclosure usually took three or so years to complete and involved the commissioners running the whole agricultural system of the village for that period, whilst at the same time dividing the large fields into 'farms'. Every agricultural asset of the various landowners was divided, fields, trees, grass verges, everything was thrown into the pot. The task of balancing the various claims, and pride, of the various landowners must have required something approaching the wisdom of Solomon.

*The map and details of Milverton Enclosure can be found in the Warwickshire County Record Office, and a summary and explanation can be found in Leamington Library.*

Mick Cullen

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Town Walks

As reported in the last newsletter, Leamington History Group has taken on the responsibility for managing the Historic Walking Tours of Leamington. Several guides from the previous years agreed to join the new Guild of Guides and also some History Group members volunteered to take part in the programme. Ten volunteer guides proved more than sufficient to provide a full walks programme, on Tuesdays and Wednesdays throughout the summer. So far, the walks have proved extremely successful amongst both locals and visitors. Numbers have been increasing during the season and it was not unusual to have 12 to 15 people attending each walk. We also provided special walks for groups and received a donation in return.

Publicity funding provided by Leamington Town Council enabled us to produce flyers and posters to advertise the walks. A boards were set up outside the South Lodge entrance to Jephson Gardens and the Town Hall. We were featured on Coventry and Warwickshire radio as well as having an hour long programme produced on the walks by Warneford Hospital Radio (Warwick Hospital) . Our website also carried information on the walks.

We will be reviewing the walks programme in November and starting to plan for 2014. If anyone is interested in becoming a guide or can assist with publicity and leaflet distribution please contact Margaret on 01926 424659.

Michael Pearson

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Reviews with Tessa Whitehouse

Members' Evening, 22 July

Well-known military historian Graham Doughty captivated his audience with a look at four local heroes of WW1: Douglas Hillier RN, the first man to be killed, commemorated on the Ufton Memorial, pilot John Mole, Laurence Reeve, lost at sea between July and August 1914, and last but by no means least, Reginald (aka Rex) Warneford, V C. Born in India, Warneford grew up in Stratford upon Avon. At the outbreak of WW1, he immediately joined the Army, but transferred to the Royal Naval Air Service, quickly becoming a confident, skilled pilot. In the very short space of one month in 1915, Warneford earned the V C and the Legion d'Honneur, shooting down the Zeppelin LZ37 in May 1915, only to lose his life in a daredevil air stunt in Paris a month later.

Barry Franklin followed with a short talk on Leamington Slum Clearance Ltd, 1926 – 1947, whose aims were to demolish existing slums and build homes for slum dwellers that they could rent. Starting with land in Lillington now known as The Holt, the company followed this in 1932 with the acquisition of land on Windmill Farm where Windmill Road now stands. 6 houses on the estate had memorial stones set into their front elevation, allowed as 6 people had donated the cost of building one house to the company. One plaque on Tachbrook Road honours Allen Edward Batchelor, a retired barrister from the Oxford circuit and local benefactor. He built a working men's club in Bishops Tachbrook with a mini rifle range and table games, and at Christmas Mrs Batchelor and her daughters donated presents to villagers which were transported in a large bath chair. When Mr Batchelor died his wife donated the south porch and oak door at St Chad's Church Bishops Tachbrook.

Chairman Alan Griffin wound up the evening with a beautifully crafted presentation on a neglected area of the Leamington scene: the many coach houses and stable buildings once attached to prestigious villas and town houses and now largely used as mews houses or offices. A fitting tribute to Leamington's elegant past.

**Committee Members**

**2013-14**

- Alan Griffin *Chairman*
- Barry Franklin *Vice Chairman*
- Terry Gardner *Treasurer*
- Margaret Rushton *Secretary*
- Maggie McGreevy
- Tessa Whitehouse
- Jo Clark
- Mick Cullen
- Mick Jeffs
- Michael Pearson
- Simon Yarwood

All members can be contacted via the Secretary, through the website: [www.leamingtonhistory.co.uk](http://www.leamingtonhistory.co.uk)

**Monday Evening Meetings to come:**

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**23 September: Richard Phillips,  
 Music In Leamington**

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**28 October: Sheila Woolf,  
 The Leighs of Stoneleigh**

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**20 November: Nigel Briggs,  
 The Bridges and Byways of Leamington Spa**

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**16 December: Pat McGarrell and Colin Jennings  
 Seasonal Spice**  
 (N.B. This is 3<sup>rd</sup> , not 4<sup>th</sup> Monday)