

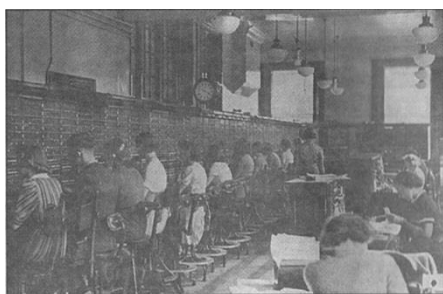
The Leamington Omnibus

Newsletter of the Leamington History Group

Spring 2016

A Wartime Telephonist

In a recent interview with Betty Monica Still, Betty recounted her work as a telephonist up to and through WW2, in Leamington and Coventry. She was born on 13 March 1921 at 4 Victoria Road Leamington. When she was five, the family moved to 42 Willes Road, her home until she was married. When Betty left the girls' grammar school aged 16 she went to train as a telephonist at the GPO. She finished school one Friday in July 1937, and started work the following Tuesday, as Monday was Bank Holiday. There was a six-week training course, and in her words, "I hated it". Intent on finding a more interesting job, Betty enrolled in an evening class for shorthand and typing lessons but on completion realised that she had no choice but to carry on at the telephone exchange, which was then on the first floor of the old Post Office. There were a few surprises, - to begin with,



the minimum height requirement of 5' 4", (to enable operators to reach the bank of switches, as in the photograph left), the preference for only taking on girls from Leamington College, Kings High and other Grammar schools, working to the wartime 24-hour clock, and the curious "split duties", whereby the eight-hour working day was split into two shifts, 0800-1200 and 1600-2000, with the afternoon off. Although Betty didn't care for her original training, she got on very well with the job and with her colleagues. In 1939, Betty became a trainee supervisor. She also

carried out some training in a "school room" set aside on the upper floor at the post office. WW2 brought a great influx of government departments and officials who took over the big houses on Kenilworth Road and Newbold Terrace. Officers from Canada, Czechoslovakia and Poland, Government Officials and the Camouflage Unit billeted in the town meant a huge increase in the volume of work. As the GPO exchange could barely cope, another exchange was built on the floor above, so that there were 20 positions on each floor. No-one working there could understand why, when there was the constant threat of bombing, something as vital as a telephone exchange should be built in such a vulnerable spot at the top of a building. This odd thinking was not confined to Leamington: it was not widely known that the Ministry of Supply, based at Warwick Castle, had an exchange built at the top of Caesar's Tower (the only tower with electricity). Again, the workforce could not fathom the rationale of building a telephone exchange at the top of the tallest tower for miles around. The work there was highly secret and so the government brought its own operators and supervisors from London. When they were on leave Leamington supervisors had to go to Warwick to cover: 'ordinary' operators wouldn't do because of the secret nature of the work.

Betty worked throughout the war. She was interviewed for the senior post at Nuneaton telephone exchange but not appointed, as she was then engaged to be married. As in many other professions, regulations at that time forbade the appointment of married women to senior posts. Betty's 'demotion' on her marriage in 1944 caused some embarrassment when she began work as an ordinary operator in Coventry amongst colleagues who had known her earlier as a supervisor.

During the war telephone exchanges had become more automated to cope with the volume of traffic and were being constantly updated. When a new post-war exchange was being planned for Wise Street in Leamington, those who had been employed during the war were asked to "volunteer" at the old exchange whilst the new one was being built, so enabling current staff to be trained in the latest equipment. There was also an exchange on Spencer Street built in about 1959, just off a little cobbled road to the right behind Spencer Street itself. By this time, Betty's children were teenagers at secondary school, so she went back to work as a so-called "volunteer", working for four hours a day either in the mornings or in the afternoons. Only a few years ago, a group of the wartime telephonists all kept in close touch and still met up Until regularly. Sadly, Betty is now the only one left.

The Tabor Family of Leamington Spa



What are the chances of finding a photograph of your ancestors included in a Calendar published by a Local History Group? Quite high, according to the experience of at least two Leamington families. David Tabor and his nephew Andrew Swann each bought a Calendar for 2016, - and were thrilled to find the Tabor family in the image for June. Here is a little of what later came to light about their family which goes back at least five generations locally. The Tabor family came to Warwick from Wiltshire, most probably when William, a journeyman cork cutter, came in search of work. His son James Henry Tabor was a painter by trade. He married

Jane Bovington of Warwick at St Nicholas' Church, Warwick where their first child, Florence Ellen was baptised on 11 July 1869. They moved to Leamington before the birth of James Henry (Harry) in December 1870, to lodgings in one of the poorest parts of the town, notorious for damp and overcrowding, - Wells Buildings in Brook Street.

Six years later tragedy struck, when James died aged just over thirty, leaving Jane with five young children to support. She moved first to the back of Grove Place, Brunswick Street, and took in sewing, and then to no 34 Grove Place, where the 1891 Census Return shows Jane as a charwoman, Florence the eldest a dressmaker, Louisa Jane the youngest an apprentice dressmaker, and all three boys, Harry, George Albert and Joseph William were labourers (often a general term for anyone carrying out manual work). Ten years on, and Jane had become a laundress, both daughters were dress-makers, and Harry a market gardener. Jane had a hard life, but lived to the age of 82, dying at home at Eagle Street in 1932. Louisa died in 1951, Florence in 1956, but the longest-living of all of them was Harry, who died in 1964 aged 93!

Joseph William, born in 1874 married Leah Rosina Baylis in 1894. They had seven children, five born at Chilvers Coton, Nuneaton, while Joseph was working as a coalminer and the oldest and youngest born in Leamington. The 1911 Census shows Joseph back in Leamington at 63 Tachbrook Street working as a market gardener, with his son William Henry aged 16 working with him. William later fought in WW1 in the Rifle Brigade and was wounded in action a total of four times, the last time in August 1916.

Joseph's brother, George Albert married Alice Hall from Staffordshire at St John the Baptist Church on 2 July 1899, and they lived first at 2 Clinton Street. George worked in security as a Watchman/Porter, but before long became a Dairyman, taking over the Offchurch Dairy in nearby Regent Place. He and Alice had had seven children by 1911, two of whom did not survive infancy. Even at the turn of the twentieth century, almost a quarter of children died before the age of five, easy prey to epidemics of measles, chicken pox, scarlet fever and diphtheria in the days before antibiotics. Another little girl, Edith Ada, died of Broncho-pneumonia aged two in January 1918. George went on to own a number of properties in the area, one of which, in Gloucester Street, still bears the name TABOR in the tiled entrance to the shop. He died in 1948 aged 76, and Alice in 1959. Their surviving children, Hilda, Albert, William, Mary and George all went on to marry and have families of their own, many of them still living locally. William married Margaret Dancer in 1940. Their children, David, Brenda and June all have strong local connections: David has a son and a daughter, June has two sons and Brenda three daughters and five sons, spread from Warwickshire to Durham and Estonia - and fifteen grandchildren! One of June's sons, Darren, is a hairdresser at Anthony Eden in Clarendon Street and played cricket at Leamington Cricket Club. Andrew, Brenda's second oldest, is the fourth generation on his father's side to work at AP, - but that's another story.

Margaret Rushton, with information from David Tabor and Andrew Swann

The 10.35 to Regent Street



In spite of appearances, you are not trapped in a Harry Potter time-warp! This old photograph, loaned by Allan Jennings, was taken by a Mr T Hull as he waited for the Spencer Street Special, one day in 1961.

(Mr Hull was a member of the Lockheed Camera Club, and this was not the only mind-bending image he produced)

Tim Ward and William Louis de Normanville, Surveyor and Civil Engineer

Artist Tim Ward of *Circling the Square Ltd* is about to embark on the Council's latest public art commission for Jephson Gardens, after preliminary consultations with Janet Storrie, the author of a short biography on de Normanville, pupils of St Peter's Primary School, members of Leamington History Group, and members of the public.

William Louis de Normanville was Leamington's Borough Engineer and Surveyor whose major legacy to the town comprises the Adelaide Road Bridge, the York Bridge and Promenade, the Weir Suspension Bridge, the restoration of the Pump Rooms and the construction of the old swimming pool which now houses the Library, and the revamped layout of the Pump Room Gardens. He transformed the Parr and Wisden Cricket Ground into the Victoria Park that we know today, straightened the River Leam and laid out the Mill Gardens.



Tim Ward has had a long and successful career in public art and landscape design. Examples of his stunning creations can be seen on his website, www.circlingthesquare.com, where he showcases his company's delivery of high quality community projects, urban regeneration and environmental schemes. In keeping with 19th Century popularity of cut-out figures, Tim proposes an over-lifesize silhouette of de Normanville leaning on an ornamental post & balustrade section of the Adelaide Road Bridge, to be created in 10mm thick marine grade laser-cut steel. The 'statue' and balustrade artwork will include double-sided interpretation panels providing information about de Normanville, plus photographic imagery and technical drawings relating to his life. His left hand outstretched in a gesture of friendship will invite all age groups to interact with the figure, to read the information panels and participate in the artwork. Visitors can shake the giant's hand, stand on the adjoining platform/seat to have their photographs taken or sit with the statue.

The ornamental post to de Normanville's left will incorporate interactive games and tactile panels, and house a geocache for digital interaction. The stainless steel used on the construction of the artwork will be all 316 marine grade, have surface finishes ranging from polished to satin and be layered to create relief details. The steel artwork and signage will be extremely durable, to withstand daily contact from the public and the climate, and remain robust. The figure will be fabricated off site and when installed will extend downwards 450mm with foundation flanges sunk into the ground, concreted into place and turfed over.

L H G Committee 2016

Officers: Chairman, Barry Franklin, Vice Chairman, Michael Pearson, Treasurer, Terry Gardner, Assistant Treasurer, Ian McCutcheon, Secretary, Margaret Rushton

Committee members: Maggie McGreevy, Tessa Whitehouse, Jo Clark, Mick Jeffs, Tom Lewin.

As you will note, the AGM in January brought about some changes: we are sorry to say goodbye to founder-member of LHG, Alan Griffin, for so many years the driving force behind the Group, and to Simon Yarwood, genial colleague and Leamington Town Guide for the past few years. Tom Lewin, co-opted in Spring 2015 was formally elected, as was new Assistant Treasurer, Ian McCutcheon.

Contact members via the Secretary, at the website, www.leamingtonhistory.co.uk

Local History Day, Saturday 3 September 2016

All Saints Parish Church, 10.30am - 4 pm

Please book this date in your diaries now! We are returning to the Parish Church for our annual Local History Day, where many local societies join us in showcasing the astonishing range and depth of community research projects countywide.

We will have displays, and as in previous years, the Calendar will be on sale and Jo Clark will of course have his very successful bookstall. It is a frantically busy day for committee members, and we would be grateful for your help, if only for half an hour.

Please come along and support us.

Tessa Whitehouse Reviews

Monday 25 January: Martin Green: 25 Years of Warwickshire Industrial Archaeology
Hot on the heels of the AGM Business Meeting, Martin Green gave an illuminating presentation on the industrial archaeology of the Midlands and Leamington's place in that context. He spoke of the town's once thriving industries of ironworking and brick-making and their legacy. As the town's once proud traditions declined, Trading Estates sprang up, and as these premises in turn have fallen into disuse, the sites are reverting to residential and commercial use. Lockheed and Ford Foundry have vanished but Flavels continues the ironwork tradition, albeit in range cookers. There is still plenty of evidence in the town of its once strong industrial heritage and a walk around will reveal the work of the craftsmen who made the decorative ironwork of Regency buildings. At pavement level, many manhole covers and plaques still bear the names of their makers. Martin's talk gave us pause for thought: even decaying and derelict sites have their place in history and there is still much to discover.

Monday 23 February: Richard Soans: Soans, a Family Business.

Richard Soans talked about his family's motor vehicle business which was for many years a familiar landmark in the town. The business started in a shed in Kent, with bicycles and motor cycles, spare parts and repairs. WW1 involved the company in the war effort, working with Woolwich Arsenal. In 1919 Soans began their long association with the Ford Motor company selling the model 'T' Ford and becoming a Ford dealer. The hard times of the 1930s brought Soans to Leamington Spa, first on the Parade and then in Dormer Place on the site of the former roller skating rink. During WW2 the company again played its part by helping to maintain military vehicles, and the familiar towers at each end of the building were used for fire watching. In the rapid expansion of the 1950s car trade, Soans were at the forefront of provision of new vehicles, maintenance, repairs and the used car trade, triggering another move to bigger premises in Sydenham Drive during the 1960s. In 1995 the company's association with Ford came to a close and this signalled the beginning of the demise of the brand. Soans was a family business which looked after its staff and customers for 120 years. The derelict site is now awaiting development of new affordable homes. The company was born in a shed and the Soans story has come full circle, as Richard now keeps his family archive in an up-to-date version in his garden!