

The Leamington Omnibus

Newsletter of the Leamington History Group

Spring 2017

Charles Richard Burgis: A memoir of an old-fashioned grocer, by his great-grandson James Burgis

Charles Richard Burgis was descended from a line of traders in Oxfordshire going back to the late 17th century. Some of our ancestors were millers in Benson, and I have a certificate of Indenture of a James Burgess, dated 1761, from his apprenticeship to Henry Goodwin, a Tallow Chandler and Soap Boiler in Benson.

Born in 1831, C R Burgis was apprenticed to his uncle, a grocer in Henley-on-Thames, but in 1855, at the age of 24, he decided to work for himself and moved to the Regency town



One of the most Extensive Stores in the Provinces

DEPARTMENTS:

Grocery and Provisions	China and Glass
Tea and Coffee	Ironmongery
Cooked Meats	Brushes
Wines and Spirits	Stationery
Cigars and Tobacco	Fancy Goods
Drugs and Perfumery	Toys and Games
Toilet Goods	Electro-Plat
Patent Medicines	Circulating Library
	Books, Etc.

LUNCHEONS, TEAS, &c., in LUXURIOUS CAFE

The **Bedford Stores** PROPRIETORS: Burgis & Colbourne, Ltd.
LEAMINGTON SPA GENERAL PROVIDERS

of Royal Leamington Spa. The Spa was growing quickly, with many wealthy residents and great-grandfather rapidly established himself as a successful grocer. Twenty years later, he joined forces with another grocer, James Colbourne, to buy premises fronting the Parade, the main shopping street. This joint venture prospered and as adjoining premises became available, they bought them and expanded both along the Parade and along the street behind, Bedford Street. The business was made into a limited company with £100,000 capital in 1874.

C R Burgis had a family of 11 children. The second child and eldest son, Charles Coles Burgis, born in 1858 and my grandfather, James Frederick Burgis, the fourth child, born in 1861 were the only two family members who maintained any interest in the business. James Frederick founded an accountancy practice, Burgis and Bullock, and became Secretary to the company and Charles Coles was the wines and spirits manager for a time. The 'old man' was a stickler for good business practice. He was the first in for work, sitting on a high stool at the entrance and woe betide anyone who was late. He hated waste. There was no adhesive tape in those days, and string was an expense to be kept as minimal as possible. If an errant packer cut off two long ends he was made to pick them up and tie them together. That packer soon learned to master the 'slip-knot'! There was one old-timer who had begun work as a cellar boy, whose first task of the day was to clean the boss's office, known as the 'holy of holies' in the depths of the cellars. He then had to place a silver salver, with a crystal tumbler, a bottle of whisky and a bottle of Malvern water on the desk there. C R Burgis arrived for work at about 7:30am and went into his office. At 11am he would go up to the café to join other professionals and traders, (aka the "Cads' Coffee Club") who gathered at that time for coffee and a look at the newspapers. It was then the cellar boy's job to go and clear away the dirty glass and the 'empties' from the office.

Burgis and Colbourne Ltd, were marketed as 'General Providers' and had built up a very good business in wines, spirits and beers between the world wars, helped by their delivery service by motor van in the 1930s. The cellars were quite extensive and I remember traditional un-pasteurised Guinness, Worthington and Bass beers being bottled in them. The Guinness was not brewed in Park Royal, London, but was shipped in wooden barrels from Dublin. Good wines were bottled by hand from original oak casks shipped in from France.

I first worked in the 'Bedford Stores' during school holidays in WWII. I spent the mornings in the Grocery packing warehouse, weighing sugar (rationed then) into small blue 1lb bags and washing soda into 3lb. grey bags. I was taught how to 'flat-wrap' loose tea by one of the counter assistants. The wrap was secured purely by folding. When the time came to return to school for the new term and the General Manager presented me with a 10/- note I thought I was a millionaire!

In 1955 I officially joined the company, as Manager/Buyer of the Provisions Department. One day as he sat at a high desk working out the week's bacon prices, George Wass, an employee of 55 years' standing, remarked: "Seeing you there, Mr. James, reminds me of your great-grandfather. That was his stool you know". I considered this a great compliment until George added, "Miserable old b...r he was!!" (C R was a typical employer of his age and under the 'miserable' countenance he was actually a kind-hearted man and a considerable benefactor to his adopted town.) Indicating a customer one day, the aforementioned George dug me in the ribs and said: "Mr James, - see that woman over there, you watch 'er -- nothin's too 'ot nor too 'eavy for 'er!" - Shoplifting is not new!

I greatly enjoyed managing a department, and just like C R, going to Somerset to select fine cheddar cheeses from the farms and to Leicestershire for blue Stilton. I progressed into junior management and things seemed so rosy. Then a family and directors' dispute resulted in my father being forced to take early retirement at the age of 58. Soon after that the business was taken over by the Army & Navy Stores of London, marking the beginning of another story.

James Burgis

The Mystery of the 'Super- Grabit'



These two intriguing images came with a query about provenance from Mrs Anne Bearne. The Super Grabit appears to be a substantially made spring-loaded brass boat-hook, discovered when clearing the house of an elderly relative. It seems that something similar is still made, from modern light-weight materials, but this example may have been manufactured for use with marine aircraft: under the classification of Aircraft, Marine,



there is a document in the National Archives at Kew, giving a date of 1927.

The hook measures approx. 12 1/2 inches (1320mm) in length. The spring loaded mechanism shoots the open part of the hook forward and locks it shut. It is marked "THE SUPER-GRABIT PATENT" and "LEAM. ENG. CO. LEAMINGTON". What no-one has been able to find so far is **where** the "Leam. Eng. Co, Leamington" operated, and for how long. Can anyone help us out?

The Skater

The 2017 calendar image of a lovely young girl skating on the frozen River Leam brought an unexpected contact: a school friend of her daughter, hoping to be able to track down the original picture. We now know that the skater is the late Jean Trett, née Lancaster, and the photograph was taken in the 'bad' winter of 1946/7. Jean was an avid skater, and a regular at The Rink. She passed on her skills to many generations, both here and in Cornwall where she lived in later life, still teaching well into her seventies!

Annual General Meeting, 23 January 2017

Opened and conducted by Cllr Ann Morrison, Mayor of Leamington, the Annual General Meeting was quickly concluded with acceptance of the new Business Plan, which has been devised to show all members the kind of activities conducted by LHG Committee on Members' behalf, and where volunteer support is most needed. Jo Clark was thanked for all that he has contributed to the Group over many years' support, and as no new members had come forward, the remaining committee members were re-elected for a further term.

Committee 2017/8: Barry Franklin, Terry Gardner, Mick Jeffs, Tom Lewin, Ian McCutcheon, Maggie McGreevy, Michael Pearson, Margaret Rushton, and Tessa Whitehouse.

Memories of an open fire

Many years ago, we all had open fires, which blazed up the chimney on cold winter nights, - but that couldn't happen without a great deal of work.

We ordered coal first from Sheppards at 67 Parade, then James' Coal Merchants, and paid for it weekly. As well as coal, we had £1 worth of logs delivered by lorry, then wheeled round to the shed on a wheelbarrow, and we had coke from the gasworks down the road. Following my older sister Josie, fetching the coke became my job. I pushed an old pushchair to the works, went to the office and paid for a ticket, then made my way to the hopper and joined the queue. When I gave my ticket to the man, my sack was put under the hopper and filled. I then had to struggle with the sack and the pushchair to make it back home to the shed.

To start the fire, Dad made his own firelighters by rolling up newspapers, twisting them into plaits, and putting the smallest pieces of coal on top. Once this got going, more coal was added as necessary. I need hardly add that keeping an even temperature in a room was quite an art, - one not always achieved. On school and work days, we didn't have a fire until the evening, as my mother was generally out shopping, doing her housework or cooking on the gas cooker. Sometimes on wash day, when the weather was bad and clothes couldn't be hung outside, they were put on a clothes horse in front of the fire.

In the hearth we had a companion set, with all the tools needed to keep the fire going, - a poker and tongs for the coal, and a long-handled 'dustpan' and brush. First thing in the morning, the ashes had to be taken away, and the whole process started again with an empty grate. The ashes were put in a heap in the garden, to be recycled in winter, when they were very useful, scattered on icy or snow-covered paths, to stop us from slipping. Once a year, usually in the summer, the chimney sweep came, and mother would rush round moving things or covering up the furniture with sheets.

The sweep covered the fireplace, put his brushes through a hole in the middle of the cloth, alternately pushing the brush up the chimney and screwing on additional lengths of the handle. We children "helped" - by going outside to report when we saw the brush poking out of the chimney. Once that excitement was over, the sweep withdrew the brush, bringing all the soot back down the chimney to collect in the fireplace. It was then scooped up by the sweep, or put on the garden plants, which was apparently good for them. Specks of soot lay everywhere. No wonder mother tried to cover everything up. Eventually, she was persuaded to have a gas fire, - but it didn't make toast like the old coal fire.

Terry Gardner Dec 2016

Tessa Whitehouse Reviews

Monday 23 January: Barry Franklin: Miss Joan Parsons, Aviator and Musician

Following the A.G.M. on 23rd January, chairman Barry Franklin gave a short and fascinating talk of his research into the life of Joan Parsons. She was born in Dorset in 1906, pursued a career in music, and moved to Leamington Spa when her father, a vicar, retired. This was the nineteen-thirties and the early days of flying. Joan, a strong minded young woman, took flying lessons and in 1938, bought a plane after she received an inheritance. Telling her parents that she was going to visit friends in Reading, she set off for Lympne in Kent where her plane was ready. She flew across Europe with several stops in France, Italy and Greece before landing in Alexandria in Egypt. Then, following the course of the Nile she headed south. By the time she reached Johannesburg the plane was falling apart, which meant that Joan and her plane had to travel to Cape Town by train! Once her plane was rebuilt, she was ready for the homeward journey. Following largely the same route but taking in Victoria Falls and Tobruk, Miss Parsons eventually reached home. She went on to deliver planes during the war and then returned to her musical career. This astonishing pioneer survived fuelling problems, sandstorms, heat and missionaries in Kenya preventing her from seeing the wildlife. How did she survive? According to the Leamington Spa Courier she almost lived on Spa Water Toffee! What a woman!

Monday 27 February: Sue Tall, The Leamington Young Women's Christian Association in Victorian Times

This was a very enlightening presentation about the origins of the YWCA and the setting up of the Leamington branch. YWCA was set up in the mid eighteenth century by women, for women and its main purpose was for prayer. Whatever their background, girls' lives then were often limited. The YWCA movement was to become the beginning of liberalism and feminism. Women from wealthy families saw in it an opportunity for philanthropy and good work amongst the poor, and the less fortunate were able to escape the confinements of a long working day and meet more people in a congenial atmosphere. Young girls often had to leave home to find work as an alternative to service and shop work. As time passed other opportunities were opened to them and they could enjoy outings to the countryside and the seaside. YWCA Restaurants were set up so that working girls had a healthy meal. An in-house newsletter was published. But always at the heart of the association was the Christian element which ensured families that their daughters were not straying into undesirable company!

The Leamington YWCA branch was established in 1861 in Portland Street, starting as a Bible class with very strict rules. The early meetings were religious and with hymn singing. With a lot of working girls in the town it soon became clear that larger premises were needed and once the necessary funds were raised they purchased York House in Clarendon Place. Towards the end of the Victorian era when girls were becoming more independent there was less need for this type of accommodation. York House closed during WW1 but the Association continued into the 20th century, keeping its Christian ethos providing hostels for war workers.