

The Leamington Omnibus

Newsletter of the Leamington History Group

Summer 2017

Fire!



History Group members are often asked by visitors to South Lodge if we can explain the significance of the two small painted metal figures high up above R D Bennet, Estate Agents, in Euston Place. They date back to a time when it was mandatory to show the logo of your insurer, in order to be sure of having the Fire Services attend should your premises catch fire.

Possibly the worst fire ever to have occurred in Leamington happened in June 1850, when a prominent Leamington businessman, John Dowler, suffered a catastrophic fire at his upholstery and cabinet-making workshops, showrooms and family home in Regent Place. The fire took hold at about 1 am, with the Dowler family and staff and several neighbours barely having the time to flee the buildings, let alone rescue clothes, property, and in Mr Dowler's case, cash, business papers and securities. The Town Engine, based in Court Street, attended within ten minutes, but had to summon reinforcements. Mr Matthew Wise allowed the use of his personal fire appliance in Gloucester Street, supported by the Warwick Engine placed strategically in Bath Street, but by 2.30 am, Mr Dowler's showroom, workshop and family home, was reduced to "falling ruins". By 4 am, the Coventry Engine which belonged to the Sun Fire Office, was hard at work trying to protect adjacent buildings. Mr Dowler's entire establishment was totally destroyed. Others too suffered extensive damage, - not only by fire: the united efforts (and efficiency) of the engines to put out the fire left ten inches of water in the passage at the rear of the houses. The embers smouldered on for a further twenty-four hours, with further damage to extensive stores of valuable seasoned timber, carpeting, furnishing fabrics, etc. It was thought that the eventual damage amounted to £30,000, and Mr Dowler was only insured for a tenth of that sum. His twenty workmen, all family men, also suffered, - their tools were destroyed, and their plight such that Mr & Mrs Wise opened a public subscription to support them. Sadly, too, what the Courier described as "questionable characters who had congregated on the spot" took advantage of the situation to plunder the items of furniture rescued from nearby buildings and carried out to the nearby churchyard and the new burial ground. They also plundered the ruins, picking up sovereigns, partially melted teaspoons and other items of cutlery.

The cause of the fire was never discovered, though with so much combustible material and chemical products including varnish and naphtha to hand, it is hardly surprising that the fire took hold so quickly.

Allegations about the inadequacy of local fire engines caused William Suckling, Secretary of the Birmingham Fire Office to rush into print partially in their defence, but largely to offer his makers' first class replacement, one of unquestionable efficiency, and in his words, more appropriate for "the protection of a town of such growing importance as Leamington."

Leamington History Group Annual History Day

This year's open History Day will take place on Saturday September 16th at the Parish Church, from 10 am - 4 pm. As usual, many local History Societies and local historians will be showcasing their research and publications. Entry is free. The Church Café will be open, and although we are asked not to park in the churchyard, there is ample parking in nearby streets. Spread the word, and put the date in your diary!

Where are the Plaques of Yesteryear?



Leamington 2017 free guided Town Walks got off to a splendid start on 20th June, opened by the Mayor, Caroline Evetts. Walks organiser Michael Pearson made an interesting discovery as he led a 'tennis-inspired' group walk at the start of Wimbledon Fortnight. The plaque erected outside Major Harry Gem's former home in Regent Grove in 1972 to commemorate the centenary of his founding of the world's first table tennis club, has vanished! Enquiries have led nowhere. We can only conclude that this historic marker was unceremoniously 'dumped' when the new glass-fronted offices were built on the site.

Southam History Fayre and Valuation Day

Saturday 20th May marked the start of a new venture for Southam Heritage. The Group's first history day hosted by St James' Church, saw the successful launch of a new book by Southam-born author and former LHG Chairman Alan Griffin, entitled "Wartime Southam 1939-1945." Locke and England's valuation team had a long queue of interested visitors hoping for an "Antiques Roadshow" moment of discovery, and one LHG member had his hopes confirmed. He had inherited his grandfather's pocket watch, returned to the family, with the glass cracked and one hand of the watch detached, after the owner's death in the trenches of northern France exactly 100 years ago in 1917. The watch itself is not of very high value, but as the family have researched their grandfather's story, and have photographs to go with it, the suggested value at auction rose to over four figures. A very gratifying outcome! Leamington History Group and Lillington Local History Society had adjoining stalls and were pleased to welcome a steady stream of visitors and old friends throughout the day.



Leamington's Feisty Women.

Penguin Books recently published in Britain a wonderful book, for girls aged 7 to 70 and beyond, entitled "Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls, - 100 Tales of Extraordinary Women", by Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo. It tells in words, photographs and artists' impressions the stories of some notably feisty young women.

It occurred to me as I read the copy bought for my (quite feisty) seven-year old granddaughter, that there have been a number of Leamington residents who would amply fit the bill: Elizabeth Ann Galton and her sister Adèle, who, perceiving the woeful standard of education available to girls from poor homes in mid-Victorian Leamington, persuaded their father to build them a schoolroom for girls in Guy Street, Mary Louise Vellacott, prominent suffragist, Emilie Annie Browne, principal of the first Municipal Art School, Beatrice Whitby, novelist, Ethel Harraden, musician and composer, and Mary Dormer Harris, mediaeval scholar, author, poet and actress. Nearer our own time, there have been a further number of prominent, highly successful head teachers, including Frances O'Shaughnessy and Catherine Cutter, who for forty years managed Lillington C of E School. In the early days of aviation, Joan Parsons certainly broke through the glass ceiling with her intrepid flight the length of Africa, and in WW2, Rosemary Thwaites followed suite in the field of heavy engineering, earning the nickname of "The Convoy Queen." The exploits of Mrs M M M Fowler, owner of the Blue Café at the Parthenon, her blue first aid caravans and her lifetime's tireless work for the Red Cross are still vividly remembered by many. There were of course in Victorian times, local farmer Mary Beamish, the intrepid explorer Alice Rosa Barker and Frances Ridley Havergal, the poet, teacher and hymn writer, recently acknowledged by a Blue Plaque at her old Leamington home in Binswood Avenue. Amongst younger generations, we have also had highly successful sportswomen, - Trina Gulliver in Darts, Olympians Daphne Wilkinson (swimming) and Naomi Folkard (archery), England Cricketer Janet Tedstone and Kelly Sibley in Table Tennis.

So, just a handful, - so far. But every one achieved in her field above and beyond what was generally considered permissible for a woman, at the time. There are bound to be others. Please get in touch if you know of any.

Margaret Rushton

An Evening Walk round London Road Cemetery, Coventry

It is a couple of years or so since LHG members had an outing, so this year, at the suggestion of Margaret Watkins, a member of the Friends of London Road Cemetery, we arranged a guided walk for Thursday 22 June, led by Friends' Chairman, Ian Woolley.

No-one would imagine, as they speed along the busy A4114 in and out of the city, what a treasure hides behind the sandstone wall. The cemetery was designed by Joseph Paxton then at the height of his powers as a landscape gardener, and opened in 1847 on the site of a former quarry. It covers 17 hectares, bisected by the Coventry-Rugby railway line, which pre-dates the cemetery, an Anglican Chapel, a Non-Conformist Chapel and a chapel for Jewish ceremonies. The 'new' part contains a mass grave for the victims of the Blitz in November 1940. There are a number of Commonwealth War Graves, including a Great War VC recipient, and a Belgian serviceman's grave also from WW1.



[Paxton's memorial at entrance]

Joseph Paxton's plans were submitted to the Cemetery Committee in March 1846, and landscaping and tree planting started the following November. The trees include a wide variety of native and exotic trees, Silver Birch, weeping Silver Lime, English Elm and Copper Beech. Notable "originals" include Paxton's own Candelabra Limes. In 1862 a visitor commented that but for the information board by the Prospect Tower, marking the entrance, "we might have fallen into error, the place having much more the air of a gentleman's park than of a city of the dead."

There is a broad, formal terrace, where mid-19th century Coventrians could stroll at leisure, admiring the monuments, the landscape and the planting in equal measure. Cemetery walks were a pastime enjoyed by Victorians, no matter what their station in life. Under the promenade terrace is the "Carriage House", an arched structure closed by sturdy wooden doors. In earlier times it housed a wheeled bier, which was taken to the original entrance gate on London Road, ready to transport an approaching coffin to the graveside, as horse-drawn vehicles were not allowed entry to the cemetery itself. There are a number of handsome listed monuments, where many well-known Coventry industrialists and tradespeople are buried, alongside their workmen, their relatives and their neighbours, and up on the promenade terrace, in what were originally three viewing platforms, there now stand a Portland Stone Cross of Sacrifice, a Great War memorial to soldiers and sailors, an obelisk dedicated to the memory of those from the Triumph and Gloria Works who lost their lives in WW1, and a memorial to John Heritage-Peters, a local artist and Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. After the death of his wife in 1985, the residue of his estate was used to set up a scholarship at the Royal Academy of Art, in drawing, painting and sculpture.

It was a real treat to be guided round the cemetery by such an enthusiast as Ian: a couple of hours in his company flew by, as we listened to his anecdotes, his instructive explanation of the symbols on the headstones, the significance of headstone shape and composition, and so on. In his company, we "saw" priests and preachers, inventors, civic dignitaries, ribbon weavers,

watchmakers, soldiers, sailors, circus performers, and sportsmen, including a bare-knuckle boxer. We left, feeling that there was still much to see, - one of our members confirmed this view, and she has already been on three of Ian's walks! We could take comfort in knowing that the Friends will be on duty at Heritage Open Weekend in September, when those of us not on duty ourselves will be able to go back.

(The headstone left, for Hannah Harrison Barnes (née Lowe) is a memorial to the foster daughter of the Lowe family, born in London but who lived from the age of 14 in Bulkington. The 'Family Secret' was that she was the illegitimate daughter of Maria Fitzherbert, mistress of the Prince Regent)



Reviews with Tessa Whitehouse

Monday 24 April: Mick Jeffs, *The Stones of Royal Leamington Spa*.

History Group member Mick Jeffs, a keen artist, began his presentation with an explanation of his love of architecture and how the work of John Ruskin, 'The Stones of Venice' inspired him. A holiday in Venice made Mick realise that he could see many comparisons between Ruskin's mid-Victorian work and his own home town! Taking Ruskin's work as a template, Mick looked around Leamington, discovering so many buildings with features such as pillars, mouldings and plaques, which, even if not functional, add to their individuality and charm. Although not a resident of Leamington for long, John Ruskin lived for a time in Russell Terrace, whilst a patient of Dr Jephson.

Mick showed us many images of the town, including mosaics on the Town Hall, stone plaques on the old library in Avenue Road, the Urquhart Hall, the Mill Bridge and many more. There were gravestones of locals including Sidney Flavel and local boxing legend, Randolph Turpin. We saw pictures of the Hitchman Fountain, St John's Church, and old pictures of 'Rossmore' and Harrington House in Newbold Terrace, all having features worthy of note. If we take a moment to stop and look around us we would see so much hidden and interesting detail that makes Leamington Spa the town that has fascinated Mick and become the subject of his artistic talents. Leamington Council's annual programme of commemorating notable and eminent residents with blue plaques on their former homes is adding to Mick's "Stones" prominent landmarks with more planned for the future. This was a very fascinating presentation from a most unusual starting point.

Monday 22 May: Larry Connor: *A Snapshot of Warwick Assizes*

Larry introduced his talk with a brief history of the Assize Courts, held 3 times a year in the County town under the jurisdiction of a circuit judge. Here, criminals were tried for the most serious crimes by the presiding judge who had the power to (and did) impose the harshest sentences. When I was a child I loved to listen to tales my grandmother told. One I had forgotten about until Larry Connor presented his research into crimes committed in Leamington at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, was of a man who in 1907 went home after a long drinking session in a local pub. His fish dinner had been kept warm, but finding it not to his liking, he attacked his mother throwing a lighted oil lamp at her! He was charged with her murder and committed to Warwick Assizes.

Larry also referred to examples of crime driven by poverty and deprivation: one concerned a woman seen walking by the River Leam with her young son and carrying a bundle. Her intention had been to dispose of both the boy and the bundle, in the river. The boy escaped and the bundle was later found to contain a baby. Investigations revealed that the baby had been conceived during the husband's absence and 'disposal' was the woman's only solution. However, there was not enough evidence to convict her of murder and she was acquitted at the next Assizes.

Larry had also delved deeply into the lives of many eminent judges. Beneath the pomp and pageantry was the man, often the father of a big family, who lived a colourful life behind the scenes! This was not just a talk about the history of the Assizes but of the local interests dealt with there. The Justice Centre in Leamington cannot conjure the same atmosphere and sense of tradition as the old Grade 1 listed Assize Court in Northgate Street, but what a fascinating insight into the procedures!

Monday 26 June: David Morse: *The British Home Guard*

Although for many people The Home Guard is now synonymous with Dad's Army, David Morse's well-researched presentation was what the Home Guard was really all about. It was formed from Local Volunteer Groups that were brought together to defend the south and east coasts from invasion. LVGs were men who were not in the Armed Forces but wanted to 'do their bit.' They came from all walks of life and occupations and were all trained to Army standards. Their first 'uniform' was a simple arm band, with Warwickshire the only county displaying names and badges on it. As time progressed, uniforms, helmets, gas masks and satchels for personal items were issued and men (and some women!) were trained to use weapons. Regular training sessions were held in every town and village, in a variety of combat situations and conditions. Poachers, game keepers, farmers and land owners were valued for their expertise and familiarity of the landscape. Some of the Home Guard members lived and trained underground, their knowledge and skills in radio, intelligence and explosives being so top secret that even today no one really knows what they did. Such was the danger of their tasks that their life expectancy was put no higher than 10 - 14 days! It is only many years later that we learned the value of this dedicated force to allow us to live the lives we do today. David's enthusiasm for his topic shone through this all too short account. He will have to make a return visit!