

## Joan Alys Helen Mary Parsons, Leamington Aviator



Joan Parsons was born in Parkeston, Dorset on 8th October 1906, the daughter of Rev. Randolph Cecil Parsons, a descendant of the 2nd Earl of Rosse. Little is known of Joan's early life but the family came to live at 19 Avenue Road, Leamington, when her father retired from his last parish in Warwickshire. What is known is that Joan was a musician and piano teacher. In the early 1930's advertisements appeared in the Leamington Spa Courier as follows:

*"MISS JOAN PARSONS, L.R.A.M. (PIANISTE). Pupil of Mr Evelyn Howard-Jones. Is open to Public and Private Engagement and home visits."*

The 1930s were heady, enticing days for would-be aviators. When an inheritance came Miss Parsons' way, she used it to learn to fly at Bonnicksen's Aerodrome in Harbury Lane, gaining her Royal Aero Club Aviation Certificate in September 1933. Five years later, Joan spent more of her inheritance on a Miles Sparrow Hawk plane, with the aim of flying to Cape Town. Having told her parents she intended to visit friends in Reading, on 7th May she embarked on her epic journey across Europe and Africa.

Her outward flight took her over France, Italy, Greece, Egypt, Sudan, Kenya, Tanganyika (now Tanzania), Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and South Africa, but it was not without problems. A crash-landing heading towards Cape Town on 24th May meant that the plane had to be dismantled, and pilot and plane loaded into a railway wagon for a 20-hour train journey to Cape Town, where it took nearly 5 weeks to rebuild the plane.

Miss Parsons' flight home started on 1 July 1938, as she retraced the route of her outward trip. On 4th July she made a forced landing at Uga, a village where she bathed in the river, watched by local children. On reaching Egypt, she took a different route home, via Libya and Tunisia, Sardinia and France. The intrepid Miss Parsons landed at Reading on 9th August, but bad weather prevented her immediate return to Leamington where a civic reception was planned. To the great relief of her parents, she finally arrived home on 11th August, three months almost to the day after she set off. A year later, she gave a 20-minute interview about her daring feat on BBC Midlands Radio.

During the 2nd World War Miss Parsons spent a brief time, a mere month, in the Air Transport Auxiliary delivering new planes. She hit the local headlines once more in May 1940, when The Courier reported a letter she had written to makers of Spa Water Toffee, *M S Moore & Co*, informing them that she lived on the toffee throughout her epic flight, and giving Moore & Co permission to use her name in advertisements if they wished, as she believed RAF airmen flying night raids in Europe would benefit from a supply of the toffee.

Joan hit the headlines again in November 1943, this time when she appeared in Court. *"Joan Parsons, was fined £5 to-day at Leamington, Warwickshire, for failing to comply with a Ministry of National Service direction to work in an aircraft factory."* It appeared that after two days at a bench, Miss Parsons wrote to the firm complaining that she had been molested by a labourer. (He tickled her under the arm.) This so played on her nerves that she could not continue, and she left, declining to return for fear of further aggression. The letter was signed, "Joan Parsons, Leamington's airwoman of African fame."

The complaint was considered grossly exaggerated. The labourer was a reputable workman, who was trying to keep her happy. In evidence, Miss Parsons said her father was a clergyman. The labourer was a "rough man" who irritated her and was very objectionable. She added that she had been treated very well abroad, and in Africa she had been looked on as a goddess. The Goddess, as reported above, was fined £5. Miss Parsons resumed advertising music tuition in the local press, until January 1947, when she moved to 12 Addicott Road, Weston Super Mare. She continued to advertise and teach music, dying at Addicot Road on 20th September 1989, shortly before her 83rd birthday.

*Barry Franklin*

### Kathleen Louise Hanks 1914-2006

"Miss Hanks" to many, but "Kathy" to close friends, was born in December 1914, just as the 'War to end all Wars' was beginning. She came to Leamington when she became a lecturer at the Coventry College of Education at Canley (now the Faculty of Education, University of Warwick), and soon joined "The Lit", - The Leamington Literary and Philosophical Society.

Miss Hanks was a prominent figure in The Lit, which was founded two years before her birth. She chaired the Society in 1961-2, and again a decade later, eventually becoming Vice-President alongside George Hall. Miss Hanks was a popular lecturer and speaker, whose talks to the Society reveal the breadth of her interests: topics ranging from Science Fiction to Children's Poetry, but it is as the mastermind of the three Leamington Local Historians' "bibles" that she is perhaps now best remembered. During her time as Secretary, she, with the help of George and Nickie Hall recorded and collected the reminiscences of many older Leamington residents, members and friends, which were transcribed and published by The Lit, as 'The Leamington We Used to Know', (1997), 'More Looking Back' (1980), and 'A Last Look Back' (1983). Her article on Leamington Slum Clearance Ltd, based on material originally published in the Leamington Courier reveals her skills as journalist, historian, and political analyst. It is still a rich source of information for present-day researchers. It also reveals Miss Hanks' strong social conscience. She was a fervent supporter of the 'Ban The Bomb' movement, and went on many protest marches until unable to, for health reasons. She organised mini-bus trips to Upper Heyford in Oxfordshire, where once a month we walked round the American base. She also organised many outings to places of interest, with a carefully arranged stop for afternoon tea and cake on the way home. Kathy's charity coffee mornings at Guys Cliffe Road were legendary, - often followed by lunch, home cooked by Kathy herself.

Miss Hanks had an extensive library, which she was happy to share with friends and visitors. She was very fond of children, and when she was small, my daughter loved to visit her. On Twelfth Night, she always held a special tea, with Twelfth Night Cake, and someone would become Queen or King for the rest of the day, a tradition still widely retained in France.

Although a little frail by the time of the threat of building on Victoria Park, Kathy appeared at the protest meeting dressed as Queen Victoria, pushed around the Park in a wheelchair. As her health failed, she moved to live with her sister in Trowbridge, where she died in November 2006 at the ripe old age of 92. She left very strict instructions about her funeral, which in spite of her many years as a member of St Mark's, was to be carried out at All Saints. She was buried in a private family ceremony at Brunswick Street Cemetery.

*Margaret Watkins.*

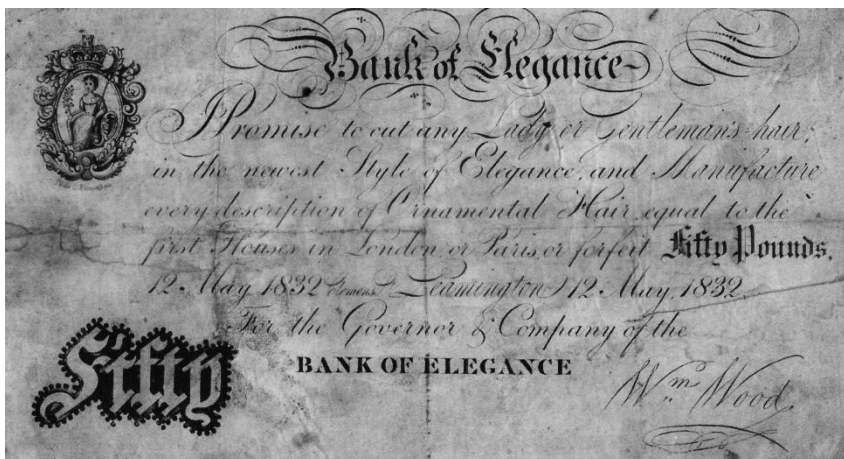
## Heritage Open Days 2017

Once again, South Lodge had a very creditable number of visitors (139) over the four afternoons of Heritage Open Weekend, and in spite of the rain, the Cemetery Walks on Saturday and Sunday afternoon attracted good numbers (41). We had our usual quota of local visitors, curious to see the inside of the neat little listed building at the gates of Jephson Gardens. There were, too, visitors from the wider Midlands area, and tourists from Germany and Fontainebleau, - we hope that they were not disappointed to find no architectural equal of the Palace of the Sun King. One New Zealander came in search of the house in Avenue Road where his uncle, a doctor with the Ambulance Division of the Czech Army, had been billeted. Sadly, as often happens in Leamington, the house had been demolished long ago, to be replaced with flats.

## Local History Day, Saturday 16 September 2017

We marketed the History Day as 'The Event of the Year', - and it certainly lived up to expectations, with seventeen groups taking part and 505 visitors through the door over the course of the day. Thanks to a hard-working band of volunteers who helped to set up, worked hard all day *and* stayed to clear away at the end, we had compliments on all sides. Mayor Caroline Evetts, accompanied by her husband and Mayoral Consort John, opened the event after touring all the displays. We were, of course no strangers to John, - a founder member of Leamington History Group, with us since the earliest days at Bath Place School, where he had once been a pupil.

## An Extravagant Promise



19<sup>th</sup> Century businessmen were fond of an eye-catching advertisement, and "Hairdresser and Perfumer" William Wood of Clemens Street, Leamington Priors, was no exception. In 1832, Wood published an advertisement looking suspiciously like a banknote, payable at the "Bank of Elegance." The flamboyant Mr Wood promised to cut and style any Lady's or

Gentleman's hair, "equal to the first Houses in London or Paris", - or forfeit fifty pounds! Whether the forfeit - an enormous sum - was ever exacted is not recorded, but William Wood and his colleague Henry Price continued to work in partnership, moving north of the river as the town expanded. In 1835 they advertised as "Price & Wood, from London, Haircutters, Perfumers & Perruquiers, 37, Upper Parade, opposite the Athenaeum Library." Price and Wood traded together until November 1840, when a formal announcement in the Leamington Courier revealed the end of the business arrangement "by mutual consent." Henry Price continued in business, taking responsibility for all debts, but Mr Wood moved on to other challenges. Watch this space!

John Heller, Redditch.

## Tessa Whitehouse Reviews

**Monday 24 July: Members' Evening**

When we arrange a members' evening we are never quite sure what format it will eventually take and this was certainly true of this evening.

Enthusiastic military historian and researcher Graham Doughty began with a short presentation on the Victoria Cross. He told us why this, the highest military honour, was created and how it is awarded. After the Crimean War, Queen Victoria wanted heroes from all ranks and walks of life to be equally recognised, and presented it herself to the worthy recipients. The medal is made of bronze from a Chinese gun and silversmiths have skilfully engraved details on the reverse of each medal so it is impossible to clone it. It is widely known that there is still metal available from the original source ensuring the continuity of this unique award for many more years.

Margaret Watkins, who is also a member of Leamington Literary Society member then gave us a brief account of the American novelist and short story writer Nathaniel Hawthorne's life and times in Leamington. Although Honorary Consul in Liverpool, Hawthorne lived for a time in Lansdowne Circus, where his home now bears a Blue Plaque. Margaret enlightened us about one of Hawthorne's novels, little known in Britain, *The Scarlet Letter*, a psychological work on the far-reaching and life-changing consequences of illegitimacy in the 17th century.

And now for something completely different! When we arrived we all wondered why guitars and sound systems were being set up in the hall. All was revealed when members Ian McCutcheon and John Woodward began serenading us with 'Shadows' music! Ian's passion is producing his own backing tracks on a CD, some for the most well-known groups in the field. When the music began, complete with all the correct footwork, we were spellbound! Although not strictly local history as most people understand it, Ian and John brought back the 1960s, - a fitting end to a very pleasant evening. We were 'foot-tapping' in our seats!

**Monday September 25: The Victoria Cross and Some Recipients**

A late change to our scheduled programme in September brought the welcome return of Graham Doughty to continue his account of the Victoria Cross and how it is earned. About one in ten recipients survive, earning a pension for life, transferable on death to their widow. As the medal is only awarded to serving members of the forces on active duty, in recognition of the many civilians who performed equally brave deeds, King George V instituted the George Cross and George Medal, equal in status to the military award. Exactly what the holder did to earn this medal is not always known: survivors often chose not to speak publicly about it or their work was of a highly restricted nature and could not be openly recognised. All who receive this gallantry medal are listed in the London Gazette. Graham then talked about Leamington man Henry Tandey, the most highly decorated British soldier of the First World War. He was awarded the Victoria Cross for conspicuous bravery and initiative during the capture of the village of Marcoing. Tandey was born in Regent Street and a blue plaque on the nearby Angel Hotel commemorates him. A housing development in Union Road is also named in his honour.

Another recipient with local connections was Reginald Alexander John (aka Rex) Warneford. He was born in India in 1891 but educated at Stratford upon Avon Boys' Grammar School. He was an irrepressibly high-spirited young man, who shot down a Zeppelin in enemy territory, earning him both the Victoria Cross and the highest award in France, the 'Légion d'Honneur.'

We are very fortunate to have such a knowledgeable, enthusiastic professional happy to return to speak to us at a moments' notice.

Tessa Whitehouse