

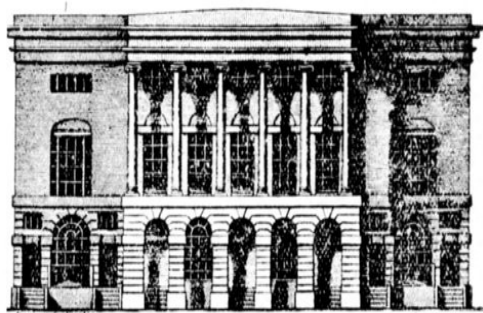
The Leamington Omnibus

Newsletter of the Leamington History Group

Spring 2013

From Paganini to Pepperoni: The story of the Parthenon

Few, if any, of the shoppers pushing their trolleys round the aisles of the Iceland supermarket in Bath Street would know that the renowned violinist Paganini had once played in a room upstairs. It is doubtful they would know that Charles Dickens and William Thackeray both came there to give readings to packed audiences, or that the first regular screenings of moving pictures in Leamington were shown there in 1909. The building in question still has the name Parthenon picked out on the front and in its day it was one of the grandest public buildings in the expanding town of Leamington Priors. In 1819 the well-known actor/manager Robert Elliston, then lessee of the Drury Lane theatre in London, commissioned architect Samuel Beazley to design a multi-purpose building for the Bath Street site he had recently acquired. The cost of the building was said to be £25,000 a quite extraordinary sum and equivalent to over a million pounds at today's values. Apart from a public library and reading rooms, the new building known as the Assembly Room, also



provided lavish accommodation for Elliston and his ten children and suites of rooms for card playing and for the sale of books and fancy goods. The crowning glory of the new complex was a luxurious ballroom 82 feet in length on the upper floors, lit by five huge ormolu chandeliers each with thirty-five burners, a room which Elliston probably had in mind using as a dance studio for his wife Elizabeth who was a dancing instructress. Niches around the walls held statues of the muses. The exterior of the building was no less impressive with an arched arcade at ground level above which was a large portico with six Ionic columns supporting the entablature.

Over the years the Parthenon played host to social occasions of every sort both musical, literary and religious. It was variously known as the Royal Assembly Rooms and in more recent times as the Music Hall when it housed a fine organ built by Elliott & Hill of London. What soon became clear however was that the provision of such a well-appointed venue was altogether too ambitious for a small provincial town. Within a few years Robert Elliston was declared bankrupt and the imposing Ionic columns had been removed by his son Henry, being re-erected it is said in front of the new Congregational church in Spencer Street.

It had a comparatively short existence as a cinema, under a variety of managements and names, showing early silent movies and by 1920 was advertising Vaudeville shows and Music Hall and cabaret acts. By the time of the Second World War, it was being run as the Embassy Rooms and Blue Cafe under the patronage of the redoubtable Mrs MME Fowler.

In 1968 a serious fire destroyed the interior of the building, parts of which were by then derelict, the ground floor being used as a retail shop by a firm of gents' outfitters. The structural damage caused by the fire was such that the entire facade fronting Bath Street had to be rebuilt. The upper floors were converted into flats and that is how the Parthenon remains to this day, almost two hundred years after it was built as one of the town's first public entertainment venues. A rather inauspicious end to one of Leamington's finest and most significant early buildings.

Alan Griffin



STOP PRESS!

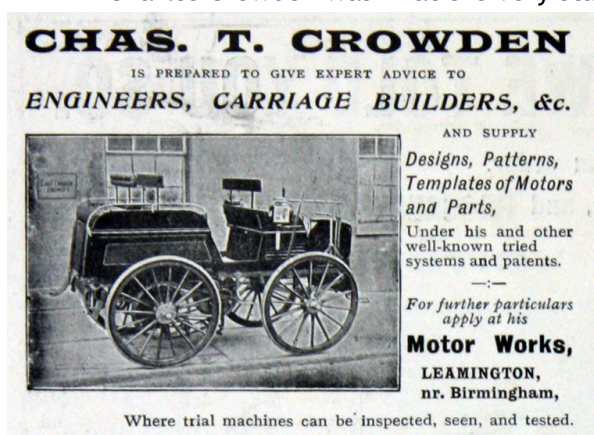
On 25th February 2013, Leamington History Group proudly celebrated its 5th birthday. From a small group of 25 in 2008, we now boast over 100 members

Leamington's Motor Car Heritage: Charles T Crowden 1859 -1922

Charles Thomas Crowden, an early automotive designer and engineer, settled in Leamington with his family, in Eastnor Grove in the 1890s.

Charles Crowden came to Leamington and the motor trade via an early interest in engineering and tool-setting in Bath, fire-engine design in London, safety-bicycle development, and finally, the Great Horseless Carriage Company, at the Motor Mills in Coventry. In 1884 Crowden designed a pioneer bicycle, - still being exhibited in Birmingham 19 years later, alongside the latest model. He acquired his first motorised transport patent in 1896, when employed as chief engineer at Humber and Company cycle manufacturers in Beeston.

Charles Crowden was in at the very start of the British motor industry, when the earliest

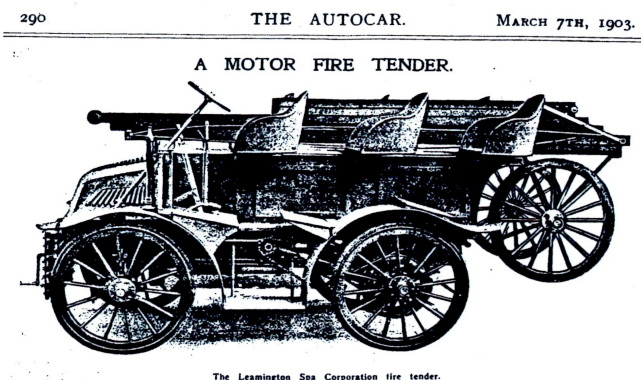


Daimler, Humber and Pennington vehicles were being designed, built and tested. He was clearly a leading light in the industry. In January 1897, *The Autocar* reported that "...great progress is made in the factory of the GHCC. It is only two months since Mr Charles Crowden got to work at Coventry, and we have seen the first half-dozen of the carriages that are being put through." Nonetheless, by 1898, keen to develop designs of his own, Crowden left the GHCC, having acquired the old Mulliner carriage works in Packington Place, Leamington. In his new Leamington works, Crowden experimented first with steam and paraffin-powered models before moving on

to petrol. In 1900, he produced a 5-horsepower dog-cart. In 1903, he supplied Leamington

Corporation with their first motorised fire engines. He later built fire tenders for Worcester, Leicester and Norwich Union. Mr Crowden also made local media headlines for a number of reasons other than his talents as a designer and motor manufacturer: - a case at the County Court in 1900, relating to a patent for improvements to motor traction, and a second when an employee driving a Crowden car was in collision with a horse and trap en route from Southam.

Although Charles Crowden retained a business base in Warwickshire and continued to develop motors, he moved in 1905 to Kent, as consulting engineer on a number of products, including the development of automatic sprinklers, and, during WW1, machine guns. He died in Nottingham in 1922.



The Leamington Spa Corporation fire tender.

Margaret Rushton .

A NEW METHOD OF ADMINISTERING THE MINERAL WATER OF THE ROYAL LEAMINGTON SPA. By JAMES THOMPSON, M.B.

In April 1874, in an effort to promote the health-giving benefits of English mineral water and to defend English Spas against a popular perception that those of Germany were more beneficial, Dr James Thompson wrote to the British Medical Journal in London, recommending the drinking of Spa mineral waters. Dr Thompson analysed both the mineral content of the waters and those who "took" them, whom he divided into categories, - those who were able to stay close to a spa and benefit from having the mineral waters directly from the springs, those who took the waters in

bottles or jugs, and a third category who never visited a spa, but were compelled to buy a very inferior product, bottled water. In his paeon of praise for spa water, Dr Thompson continued:

“Something must also be allowed for the change of air and scene, and the pleasure resulting from a visit to a town where every surrounding object is a thing of beauty. There must be benefit in exchanging the smoky dusty air of a city for the clear, bright, and health-giving atmosphere of such a town as Leamington, which is a town of gardens, and its sanitary condition closely looked after by competent authorities”

According to Dr Thompson, the water of the Royal Pump Room Well, when freshly drawn, contained nearly four inches of gas in each pint and was consequently bright, clear, and sparkling. However, when it had been standing for some time, it became dull, insipid, and “rather unpalatable” and a larger volume was required to produce what he described as the normal effect. At the time Dr Thompson was writing, the Leamington Seltzer Water company, a mineral water factory of some size, had already been established in the town. The Seltzer Water Company used water from the weakest spring, and further diluted it with distilled water. After discussing the problems with Kinmonds, another Leamington manufacturer, Dr Thompson proposed to take the water from the strongest well, (at the Royal Pump Room), allow it to stand, covered, for 48 hours, filter it through flannel, then force through it carbonic acid gas under pressure. The Spa water was then to be bottled in French syphon bottles, maintaining the water's medicinal qualities and keeping it fresh and sparkling for up to three days. Thus Royal Leamington Spa water's “virtues [would be] preserved, and ... the great medicine of Nature ... supplied ... in a pure and

unadulterated state”. The advertisement (above) shows that Kinmond's of Kenilworth Street, Leamington, were still advertising and selling the product widely half a century later.

Paul Wells

The Eagle Inn

The Leamington History Group community archive, started at Bath Place, holds two darts team photos from the Eagle Inn – a ladies' team and men's team. No one seemed to know whose photos they were, but after I sent some information in to Peter Gawthorpe at The Courier in January, a lady contacted me.

She is 90 year old Eva Elliott, nee Hollingworth, who lives in Brunswick Street. The two photos belonged to her, and were taken in the late 1940s. Eva had taken them into Bath Place when the history project was set up, and had assumed that they had been destroyed in the fire in 2009. Eva and her late her husband are both on the photo, so fortunately for me, she was able to identify a number of the other players.

Allan Jennings

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The Review Page, with Tessa Whitehouse

The last meeting of 2012, on 17th December, began with a short talk by Robin Stott on his research into the obelisks in the county. What may have seemed a very unusual topic and something that no one may have given any thought to turned out to be most interesting and prompted a lot of questions. As always we all came away a little wiser! Following the raffle for prizes generously donated by members, we were invited to enjoy the Chairman's Warwickshire Quiz, festive refreshments and an opportunity to socialise. Thank you everyone for making the year so rewarding and successful. We look forward to your continued interest in the coming year.

January 2013 began with a very full diary for the months ahead. After a brief AGM, we welcomed Master Peter (Hallett) and Goodwife, Joan, complete with medieval costume, longbows and beautifully crafted arrows, to present the story of English Archery and its significance all over Europe in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries. We were surprised not only by the huge number of arrows needed for each battle and how strong and dependable they were, but the very specific way that they were 'fletched' with swans' wing feathers to be fully effective in flight and achieve their target. Likewise, the grouping of archers in battle according to their status and ability is still reflected in the structure of modern armies. We will never again think of archery without realising its beginnings, its role in the lives of our forefathers, and how much we still owe to it.

February's talk was given by Sandie Evans, on the life of Leamington - born Samuel Whittington Wickes. It was only when Sandie looked at the deeds of her house in St. Mary's Road that she learned that the world-famous entertainer had once lived there. She has made it her labour of love to find out more about a man who devoted his lifetime magic and illusion.

Samuel was born in 1893 to a family of timber merchants. He left home at 12 to follow his dream of becoming a magician in London. Homeless, penniless, still chasing success, Sam almost gave up - until he recalled Dick Whittington. Adopting Whittington as his middle name and turning again, he eventually found the fame he sought, only to have his success halted by WW1. Sam enlisted and was mustard gassed at the Somme, but at the end of the war, his lungs badly damaged, he re-invented his act, becoming his most successful incarnation, - 'The Amazing Chang', who always performed in silence, adding to the air of magic and mystery.

Over the years Sam appeared under several stage names, each bringing him further fame. He performed in America and Europe and became a member of the elite Magic Circle. It is as The Amazing Chang that Sam is best remembered, and for all Chang's performances, Sam created his own sets and props, largely in the building that Sandie and her husband Peter now call home. Sam eventually retired to Wolston Grange, near Rugby. He died on 6th October, 1970 and was buried in the village churchyard.

Thank you, Sandie. A brilliant talk, superbly illustrated.

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.leafingtonhistory.co.uk

Monday Evening Meetings to come:

25 March: Jo Clark
Proud, Pretty and Poor, Royal Leamington Spa 1850-1900

Jo presents the second of his illustrated talks on the history of Leamington, first compiled by the late Bill Gibbons

22 April: David Close
The story of Chedham's Yard

David Close tells the story behind the Wellesbourne wheelwright's yard which won the BBC television 'Restoration' programme

20 May: Geoff Hancock
Severn Trent and the recent upgrading of Leamington's Victorian sewers

(N.B. This is 3Rd, not 4th Monday, owing to the Spring Bank Holiday)