

The Leamington Omnibus



Those members who have been with us over the last couple of years will readily appreciate that the Leamington History Group is not an organisation to rest on its laurels. We are constantly looking at ways in which we can give added value to our members and at cost-effective means of advertising the activities of the group. With both of these objectives in mind, we have decided to 'test the water' this year with a modest merchandising exercise. We have produced an 'Old Leamington' calendar for 2012 and three different designs of Christmas Card. Details and prices of these are given in the flyer accompanying this newsletter. All of the originals have been supplied by LHG members and the calendar and the cards have been printed to an excellent standard by a Leamington printer. We very much hope that you will support us by purchasing these items. They are on sale now and will only be available through the LHG and not from any retail outlets in the town. Quantities are limited so don't delay - shop early for Christmas. Many thanks. Editor



We Will Remember Them Almost ninety years after it was dedicated, the Leamington War Memorial is to have sixteen new names added. There were many reasons why certain names were not included on war memorials at the end of hostilities and in recent years many additional names have been added to memorials up and down the land. Letters in the columns of local newspapers led to a campaign to have a large list of names added to the town memorial. Members of the Leamington History Group have played a major role in researching the service records and census details of all those whose names were put forward for inclusion. After much research, a long list has been shortened and sixteen names are now to be added; eight from the Great War and a similar number from the Second World War. Town Clerk Robert Nash expects the work on the memorial to be completed by the Autumn with a re-dedication taking place sometime prior to Remembrance Sunday.

Changing places

The first in an occasional series featuring Leamington buildings which have been demolished within living memory.

The Theatre Royal – Regent Grove

The Leamington Theatre Company was formed in 1881 and it commissioned London architect C J Phipps to design a 1,200 seat theatre for its site adjoining Denby Buildings in Regent Grove. Local builder John Fell was awarded the contract for the theatre at a cost of £10,000. The foundation stone of the new Theatre Royal was laid by Lord Brooke on May 23rd 1882 and it opened on October 2nd of that year with a performance of 'The Lily of Killarney' directed by Sir Julius Benedict.

The theatre hosted many artistes over fifty years before closing as a live entertainment venue in 1934. In 1935, it reopened as the Regent cinema, the town's fourth, with a magnificent Compton organ. Never financially successful however, the cinema struggled on until closure in the 1970's. The building was demolished in 1984 and the site used as a car park before being developed in recent years for private housing.



The Theatre Royal photographed by Baker c.1900

Leamington Local History Fair

On Saturday May 19th 2012 we shall be hosting a major one-day Local History Fair at Dormer Hall. It is planned to invite other local and family history societies, museums, record offices and amenity groups, in fact any organisation within Warwickshire whose primary aim is related in some way to local history. Our secretary Margaret Rushton (01926) 424659 will provide further details for prospective stall holders.



Local history A to Z – G

RAF Station Gaydon



Most Leamingtonians know about the Heritage Motor Centre just down the Banbury Road at Gaydon but I suspect that far fewer are aware of the Gaydon site's former existence as an important

RAF bomber station during the Second World War and in more recent times as a training base for the V- bomber force that carried Britain's nuclear deterrent in the period of the 'Cold War'.

RAF Gaydon came into use in June 1942 as part of no 12 Operational Training Unit (OTU) operating twin-engined Vickers Wellington bombers crewed mainly by Canadians. Its primary function was the training of crews on the Wellington, (known throughout the RAF as 'The Wimpey'), prior to their posting to operational squadrons. Apart from the



Gaydon Wellington with LAC Bill Fitchett. 1943

round-the-clock training flights, the Gaydon aircraft were flown on a number of sorties during Operations *Grand National* and *Starkey* against the Pas de Calais area in 1943. Crews were also engaged on a regular basis in what were called 'Nickel Raids' to drop leaflets over enemy-occupied France. This was standard practice for the crews at the end of their course so they could gain operational experience with minimal risk. Flying training ceased at Gaydon on 1st July 1945. During the preceding three years, twenty-three of the station's aircraft had been lost along with forty-seven aircrew including two members of the Belgian SAS.

Gaydon was briefly occupied by No 3

Glider Training School but was then put on to a Care & Maintenance basis until 1953 when major re-construction work was carried out on the base. John Laing was the main contractor for the construction of what was, in most respects, a completely new airfield, with a runway 9,000 feet in length.

During the 1950's, the British Government had invested heavily in a programme to design and develop several long-range, supersonic jet aircraft, capable of delivering the British nuclear bomb. The design of these so-called V- bombers, the Victor, Valiant and Vulcan was fundamentally different from anything that had gone before and in January 1955 No 138 Squadron was formed at Gaydon as Britain's first V-bomber training squadron, part of No 3 Group Bomber Command. Thus began a new chapter in the Gaydon story.

Pilot training on the Valiant and Victor bombers was carried on at all hours of the day and night and the noise of these large four-engined jets carried for miles across the flat Warwickshire plain. It was suggested that the screams of the jet engines was endangering the health of people in the villages around Pillerton Hersey at the end of the Gaydon runway. An elderly lady wrote to the Gaydon CO to complain that aircraft vibrations had caused her clock to jump off the wall and smash. Gaydon's skilled mechanics soon had her clock ticking again and a station carpenter repaired the damaged case.

What many people living in that part of Warwickshire soon realised was that just off the base and close to the Fosse Way were several huge bunkers stocked with nuclear bombs! What we none of us knew until much later was that Gaydon was part of a strategic plan and in the event of war would be one of the bases to which the V bomber force would be dispersed ready to carry out a retaliatory nuclear strike against any aggressor. The 1960's were strange years to live through. The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 had

brought the world to the very brink of war and the strategic significance of places like Gaydon came into public focus. The writer



Seven of these Handley Page Victors were based at Gaydon in 1957

was at the time an operational fireman whose 'patch' included RAF Gaydon. Having been told that we were to pay a familiarisation visit to Gaydon to actually see the inside of the top-secret V- bombers, prior to the visit, we were all presented with a copy of the Official Secrets Act which we dutifully read and signed. Unfortunately, our newly acquired familiarity with the escape arrangements for the aircraft counted for little when Gaydon Victor XA934 crashed in Combbrook Wood a few weeks later with the loss of four crew and the complete destruction of the aircraft.

The Gaydon personnel were held in high regard and developed excellent relations with the towns and villages in the area. The station was one of only three service units



138 squadron Vickers Valiants on the Gaydon runway. 1956.

to be honoured with the Freedom of Royal Leamington Spa. Each year the incumbent Mayor of Leamington was dined in the Gaydon Officers' Mess and given a flight in one of the station's aircraft along with the CO. Each Summer the station hosted a superb Open Day which featured static displays of aircraft and one of the best flying displays to be seen anywhere. Up to a hundred thousand people attended each year with the consequent traffic gridlock. One of the items on the programme was a



demonstration 'scramble' by the station's Victors, four of which could be airborne in a minute-and-a-half.

With Britain's nuclear capability moving from aircraft to the Polaris submarine, the V bomber force became obsolete and Victor and Valiant training at RAF Gaydon ceased in June 1965. All formal flying at the base came to an end following the departure of the Air Navigation School for RAF Finningley in May 1970.

After closure, some of the Gaydon domestic quarters were used as a temporary transit camp for families from Uganda and other overseas countries who had been displaced from their homes by war and civil strife.

In 1975 the 850 pupils of Southam High School were accommodated there for twelve months following enforced evacuation from their Southam building which had been declared unsafe due to the high alumina cement used in its construction. Jim Skinner the headmaster at the time joked that he knew of no other school anywhere in the world which could land Concorde within its grounds! An amusing little aviation anecdote on which to end the story of RAF Gaydon .

Editor

Tuesday drop-in

A reminder for all new members that each Tuesday morning between 10.00 am and 12 noon, several of our members are in attendance at South Lodge to speak to anyone who cares to call in to chat about Leamington history. We have a scanner there to copy any old photographs or documents that are brought in and there is a good chance that you will be offered a cup of coffee. each week.

The Omnibus

is edited by Alan Griffin with help from the editorial team of Margaret Rushton and Colin Jennings. The Winter issue will be published at the end of December.

We welcome contributions of any length on all aspects of Leamington history. Please contact the editor at the email address below or by telephone on 314711

leamingtonhistory@fastnet.co.uk

Fox captured in South Lodge

District Councils' Heritage & Arts Manager, Jeff Watkin, who had made the short walk across the road from the museum to accept Toby's addition to their collection. Toby handed over a large brass silhouette of a fox which had for many years been the weather vane on the archway leading to the mews at the rear of the Regent Hotel. On the night of the 14th of October 1940, several bombs were dropped on Leamington, one landing close to the Town Hall dislodging Queen Victoria and totally destroying the classical archway at the side of the hotel. A local builder who was employed by Frank Cridlan the Regent's owner to clear away the damage, discovered the fox in the rubble and decided to take it into his custody. Many years later, the builder, knowing of Toby's interest in all things Leamington, handed it over to him and it then spent the ensuing thirty years in his Portland Street cellar. With a house move imminent, Toby decided that the time was ripe for his 'lodger' to find some alternative accommodation. Thanks to Jeff Watkin, the old fox has now gone to earth in the dignified surroundings of the Royal Pump Rooms Museum Collection.



The weather vane can be seen on the right in this old engraving of the Regent Hotel

Leamington by local photographer James Gallagher. All of our lives have been enriched by Toby's enthusiasm for and encyclopaedic knowledge of Leamington Spa and by his warm friendship. He will be greatly missed and our best wishes go with him in his move to Hardy country.

South Lodge was the venue for a rather unusual presentation in July. Our president

Toby Cave made a presentation to Warwick District Councils' Heritage & Arts Manager, Jeff Watkin, who had made the short walk across the road from the museum to accept Toby's addition to their collection. Toby handed over a large brass silhouette of a fox which had for many years been the weather vane on the archway leading to the mews at the rear of the Regent Hotel. On the night of the 14th of October 1940,



Toby (left) handing over the fox to Jeff Watkin WDC Heritage & Arts manager Photo courtesy of WDC

several bombs were dropped on Leamington, one landing close to the Town Hall dislodging Queen Victoria and totally destroying the classical archway at the side of the hotel. A local builder who was employed by Frank Cridlan the Regent's owner to clear away the damage, discovered the fox in the rubble and decided to take it into his custody. Many years later, the builder, knowing of Toby's interest in all things Leamington, handed it over to him and it then spent the ensuing thirty years in his Portland Street cellar. With a house move imminent, Toby decided that the time was ripe for his 'lodger' to find some alternative accommodation. Thanks to Jeff Watkin, the old fox has now gone to earth in the dignified surroundings of the Royal Pump Rooms Museum Collection.

Members will know that Toby has decided to move down to Sherborne after living in the same house in Portland Street for over fifty years. Nearly sixty of Toby's friends from organisations with which he had had close associations gathered at The Episode Hotel in Holly Walk in July to bid him farewell. Ruth Bennion of CLARA had organised a celebratory tea party at which Martin Green and Alan Mayes spoke eloquently on behalf of all those present in thanking Toby for the many ways in which he had, over the years, informed and illuminated our knowledge of the town, of architecture, of Industrial Archaeology and a host of eclectic topics. A presentation was made of a framed photograph of

Blue Plaque update There was a good turnout for the recent unveilings of two more blue plaques. Plaques were unveiled at 21 Rosefield Street, birthplace of composer Robert Simpson and at 28 Grove Street the former home of actor and writer Norman Painting.

A further two plaques are to be unveiled this Autumn to commemorate Sidney Flavel and Henry Tandey VC DCM MM. the date for which has yet to be fixed.



Leamington Mayor Alan Wilkinson with BBC Publicity Officer Donald Steel and Elizabeth Higgins of Age Concern at the unveiling of the Painting plaque.



'Tyger, Tyger burning bright'

A century-and-a-half ago, the open land in front of the 'pepper box chapel' (Milverton Episcopal Chapel) between Church Hill and the river was often the venue for travelling shows and circuses. One of the shows to set up there in the Spring of 1851 was Wombwell's Menagerie, of exotic and wild animals. Their stay in Leamington was not entirely without incident as the following article from *The Courier* of April 26th 1851 indicates:-

ACCIDENT AT WOMBWELL'S MENAGERIE - On



Saturday afternoon last, whilst a large portion of our adult and juvenile population were inspecting this popular itinerant exhibition of wild beasts, an accident occurred which providentially terminated less

seriously than might

have been anticipated. A huge elephant belonging to the establishment, laden with children, was paraded along the space between the caravans, and having stepped suddenly on one side, some of the spectators, with the view of escaping the danger of being trodden upon by so stupendous a creature, approached too near a den containing a male and female tiger, both of which instantly seized a young lady by the head. Owing to the prompt assistance of some of the bystanders who dragged her away by her legs, but not until the infuriated beasts had succeeded in drawing the bonnet from her head, together with a quantity of hair, and, thus causing the blood to flow profusely, a fatal result was fortunately

Help us to help you

For most local historians, research is of necessity a rather solitary pursuit. That said, a few extra pairs of eyes are a tremendous help when it comes to such mundane tasks as searching local newspapers on microfilm.

A number of our members are researching specific aspects of Leamington social history with publication in mind and they are frequently passed valuable information from other members who are aware of whatever subject it is they are researching. One of the spin-offs of membership of the LHG is that it acts as an informal clearing house for the exchange of information and sometimes of ideas. In simple terms, we act as eyes and ears for each other.

If you are engaged in research for a specific topic, please share that information with us. We can then draw up and publish within the group a list, showing who is researching what, so that when any of us are trawling through back issues of *The Courier* or *The Warwick Advertiser*, we can make a note of anything that might be of help to you. A simple form is available if you want to register your interests with us.

Autumn meetings

October 24th

Lord Leicester a talk by Jeff Watkin at Leamington Art Gallery

November 28th

Early Allotments in Warwickshire by Anne Langley

December 19th

Festive event with seasonal refreshments, a light-hearted quiz and a talk on Leamington Bakeries by Maggie McGreevey and Eva Sabin

Justice Centre visit

Places on the visit to the Justice Centre in July were limited to twenty and were dealt with on a 'first come first served' basis. We are looking at the possibility of arranging a further tour of the centre for those who were disappointed last time but current reductions in the budget for the Courts Service may rule this out.

Added value for members

All members of the LHG are entitled to attend the meetings of the Warwickshire Local History Society. Their meetings are generally held on a Tuesday evening at the Friends Meeting House in Warwick commencing at 8.00 pm. A copy of the WLHS Winter Programme is available at each of our meeting at Dormer Hall.

Puzzle Corner

Answer to last puzzle

The Bedford Hotel was a favoured haunt of the hunting fraternity in early Victorian times. As a result of a bet, 'Mad' Jack Mytton, a Salopian, is said to have ridden his horse into the Bedford, up the grand staircase and onto the balcony, from which he jumped, still seated on his horse, through the window out onto the Parade.



Question

How many obelisks are there in Leamington (not counting any in cemeteries) and where will you find them?