

The Leamington omnibus



Local History A to Z

Confederate 'nest' in Leamington Spa

The photograph below, taken in Leamington in 1865, is of former crewmen of the Confederate naval ship, the *Shenandoah*. What circumstances brought these sailors to Leamington at a time when fellow Americans were celebrating the ending of the Civil War?

Four years earlier, the Confederate President, Jefferson Davis, sent his representative, James M Mason, to England. With Britain's reliance on the South's cotton, Davis hoped he might influence the British government to intercede on their behalf. Mason crossed the Atlantic and made his way to Leamington, where his presence was noted by *The Birmingham Journal*: 'Mr. Mason, the Confederate Agent [is] at present staying at the Regent Hotel, Leamington, England.'



The spa town was at the height of its popularity and well-known in American circles. A few years earlier it had been the home of the US Consul, the author Nathaniel Hawthorne, who resided briefly at 10 Lansdowne Circus. The information that the town was now connected by rail to both London and the port of Liverpool, probably reached Confederate ears via Hawthorne's successor, Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, a noted Confederate sympathiser.

Mason was followed by fellow agent, Norman Walker, who set up home with his family, first at 22 Dale Street then 60 Portland Street. A copy of his wife, Georgiana's, colourful diary of their stay can be found in Leamington library. She writes: *'I had scarcely become domesticated before the visits of the Confederates began, & we have now quite a little Southern Society. Mr & Mrs Fry of N. York, & Mrs Leigh reside very near us. Mr & Mrs Westfeldt also; but just now they are absent. Mr & Mrs Dugan, Mr & Mrs & the Misses Stewart, Mrs Hanna & Miss Reynolds, Mr & Mrs Clements, Mr & Mrs Skinner, Capt Flinn, & various others who are here, off & on, compose the little nest of Confederates in Leamington.'*

Soon after their arrival, Georgiana reports on, 'a Confederate wedding at the Cathedral Church [Leamington Parish Church] in the presence of all the Southerners', when Captain Thom, who had 'been wounded in the cause', married 'Miss Reynolds of Kentucky'.

Meanwhile, the Confederate agents were active on government business. Georgiana notes, 'Mr Mason who is here for a day or two called on us this morning in company with Judge Buchanan.' The men were on their way to Glasgow to purchase a ship for the fledgling Confederate navy. Once at sea, the ship was renamed the *Shenandoah* and secretly converted to an armed cruiser, with the aim of capturing and destroying the Union's merchant ships.



The front cover of Georgiana Walker's diary courtesy of Leamington Library

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The war ended in 1865 with a victory for the North. The *Shenandoah* was still on operational duty in the Pacific and out of contact. Mason, now residing at 28 Grove Street, enlisted Britain's help in intercepting the ship. The last surrender of the Civil War came with the *Shenandoah's* return to Liverpool on 6 November 1865. The crew made their way to Leamington, where they were photographed looking glum soon afterwards.

Most of the exiled Confederate families had returned to America by 1868, so the presence in Leamington of southern belles and secret agents was somewhat short-lived.



The CSS *Shenandoah*, flying the Confederate flag, photographed in Melbourne, Australia in February 1865

Article © Jenny St John LHG Treasurer
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A chairman with nothing to sit on.

I have a vivid childhood memory of a garden seat in the back garden of my gran's house. It was painted grey/blue and it stood there year after year, the only changes being an occasional new coat of paint in the same serviceable colour. It was not particularly comfortable. The seat was just wooden



slats, set on sturdy metal supports, - but the back could be moved forwards or backwards, so that you could face first one way and then the other. It wasn't until many years later, after my gran died and the seat disappeared, that I finally realised what a treasure we had lost. The seat was in fact a tram seat, from the Warwick and Leamington trams. I've often wondered where it went. Have you got it in your back garden? If you have, I would very much welcome its return. Terry Gardner. [Editor's note: My parents also owned a similar garden seat, the picture is not of Terry's missing seat but is courtesy of the Lancastrian Transport Trust]

Leamington directories on CD

Local trade and street directories are a valuable resource much used by local and family historians and increasing numbers of such resources are now available in digital form. A Solihull-based company, Midlands Historical Data is one of the leaders in digitisation. They have produced PDF facsimile editions of many Warwickshire directories, poll books and church records held by the county library. Of particular interest to our members is a set of three CD's of Spennell's Directory of South Warwickshire which covers *inter alia* the Leamington Spa entry for each year from 1880 up to 1926. If you would like to gain access to any of these but are unable to get to Leamington Library, Alan Griffin (leamingtonhistory@fastnet.co.uk) has a full set of CD's and will gladly run a search for members seeking information on any town or village in South Warwickshire between the dates mentioned above. If you want to have a look on their website to see what other local volumes are now available on CD go to www.midlandshistoricaldata.org.



From New York to Omaha beach via the Jephson Gardens

In October 1940, a fresh-faced young American named John Buccellato, just out of his teens, enlisted in the United States Army Infantry. His parents who were middle-class Sicilian immigrants lived in an apartment block facing Central Park in New York city. His mother was a milliner.



Within two years 'Butch' Buccellato found himself in Italy and North Africa alongside his colleagues fighting against the Nazis. In 1944 he arrived in England on board the *Queen Mary* which had been requisitioned as a troop ship. On the voyage from America, the men slept in shifts 'hot bedding' the limited number of bunks available on the ship. By the early Summer of 1944,

'Butch' and a large number of military personnel of many nationalities were in Leamington awaiting orders for their departure for *Operation Overlord*, the allied invasion of Europe.

The GI's found the spa town very much to their liking and they enjoyed their strolls in the Jephson Gardens where on one occasion they found their Australian infantry counterparts honing their marksmanship skills by shooting the ducks on the ornamental pond. The Aussies plucked and dressed the ducks and roasted them over fires fuelled by smashed up wooden park benches that they had 'liberated'.

It has to be said that the American GI's were very popular with local girls. At a dance in the Palais de Danse in Spencer Street, 'Butch' met a good looking girl named Elsie Stanley who lodged with her sister Kit in rooms at 31 Willes Road (Lansdowne Crescent). In due course 'Butch' packed his kitbag for the uncertainties of Omaha beach leaving behind Royal Leamington Spa and Elsie, who was soon to realise that she was pregnant. On March 18th 1945 Elsie was delivered of a daughter christened Pamela Ann.

The story now fast-forwards sixty five years. On a particularly cold March morning, I was cleaning in the Parish Church, broom in hand, when I was approached by a lady who introduced herself as Mrs Pamela Birch who was with her husband Terry. They were quite obviously on a quest. Their

enquiry centred around any baptismal record we might have for Pamela. She had been born at 31 Willes Road in 1945 and had brought with her her Birth Certificate which bore the name of her mother Elsie Stanley. The space for the name of the father was blank and had a line drawn through it. Pamela now picks up the story.

'My mum, of course knew my father's name and she made several attempts over the years to find out what had happened to John Buccellato but all her efforts came to nothing. As I got older, I too became keen to find out what had become of my father but as the years passed I began to think that even had he survived the slaughter on Omaha beach he must surely have succumbed to old age. It was the personal computer my daughter Sally- Anne acquired, and her access to the internet, that ultimately helped us to unravel the story in 1998.'

Elsie and baby Pamela



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The service records of former U S Army personnel have been available online for some time under the USA Freedom of Information legislation. It didn't take long to access the records and to establish that not only did 'Butch' survive Omaha beach but he was also alive and well and living on the Hudson river north of New York. Within a matter of hours Pamela had spoken to her father on the phone. The following year, daughter and father met for the first time when 'Butch' came over to England. They came to Leamington where the former GI posed on the steps of the house in



'Butch' Buccellato (right) with Pamela and her half-brother Paul Buccellato at 31 Lansdowne Crescent in 1999

Willes Road where Pamela had been born and together they walked in the Jephson Gardens and admired the ducks!

John Buccellato told Pamela how he went ashore on Omaha beach with the second wave assault by the US First Army Division. Many of the young 'rookies' in the first wave attack had been shot to pieces by machine gun fire. Surprisingly one of his most vivid and lasting memories was not the mutilated corpses of his colleagues but the scores of dead fish they had to wade through to reach the beach. After breaking out from the beaches he and his company reached the village of Saint Lo. It

was at this stage that he was stricken with a severe bout of uncontrollable shaking which had nothing to do with the situation he found himself in but something that Butch immediately recognised as a symptom of malaria which he had contracted while serving in North Africa. It was very clear that John's part in the invasion of Normandy had been brought to a somewhat premature conclusion. His commander arranged for him to be taken to the Louis Pasteur hospital in Cherbourg where he spent the next month before being shipped back to the Army Hospital for Pacific & European Tropical Diseases in Swannanoa North Carolina where he spent the next twelve months recuperating.

Pamela tells me that Butch is still going strong at the grand old age of ninety. He has never forgotten his brief wartime stay in Royal Leamington Spa on the long and eventful journey from Central Park, New York to Omaha Beach in 1944.

Alan Griffin

Autumn Programme

September 27th

Stephen Baldwin's talk John Wisden & Cricket in Leamington illuminates the life of the famous England cricketer John Wisden and his close connections with early cricket in Leamington

October 25th

Our treasurer Jenny St John anticipates November the fifth in her talk Gunpowder, Treason & Warwickshire about how the Gunpowder Plot was hatched in the Heart of England.

November 22nd

Members Colin Jennings and Pat McGarrell share their research into the old Leamington market square off Warwick Street in their joint presentation on The Rise & Fall of Covent Garden Market.

December 20th

Our Christmas 'get-together' with a light-hearted quiz and seasonal refreshments

Unless otherwise advised all meetings are held at the Old Library (Bath Place Community Venture) in Avenue Road commencing at 7.30 pm.

The Omnibus is compiled by Margaret Rushton, Colin Jennings and Alan Griffin who edits it. We welcome contributions of any length from members on all aspects of Leamington local history however obscure or eclectic.