



The Leamington Omnibus



Surprisingly, practically nothing has been written about the war years in Leamington or of local people's wartime experiences. Some recent research into those unfortunate Leamington residents killed by wartime bombing, suggests that the war years are a period in urgent need of recording. Such a project is something that almost every member of our group can contribute to in some way. Many of our members will have first-hand experiences to share and even us wartime babies will have heard stories from family members that are worth recording. All of us know elderly relatives and friends who lived through the traumatic events of the Second World War.

We would like to invite each and every one of you to participate in a major project to research and document Leamington at War with the object of producing a book of that title as an end product. We already have a number of contacts to follow up and some photographs and documents relating to the war years. If you would like to be involved please let me know so that we can effectively manage the project and support those involved.

Editor

Local history A to Z letter F

Firefighting in the village of Leamington Priors

It is fairly certain that the eighteenth century village of Leamington Priors had only the most basic equipment for use in the event of fire. Although larger towns and cities might boast one of the early manual fire engines, in villages up and down the land the firefighting equipment generally consisted of a few strategically sited water-filled barrels and some leather buckets. These might be provided by the Lord of the Manor and not infrequently by the Vestry.

The exploitation of the saline springs and the rapid increase in the population of the village raised concerns about the inadequacy of such arrangements in a town where modest half-timbered cottages were making way for grand terraced houses, four storeys tall.

The first reference to a fire engine in Leamington is in 1824 when the Leamington Priors Vestry asked the All Saints' Churchwardens to provide 'a place for the reception of the fire engine'. By September of 1824 the engine house in the churchyard had been completed and a fire engine provided by the Birmingham Fire Office was installed.

What must be appreciated is that there was no recognised means of raising an alarm of fire and that even when the engine had been sent for there would be at most only two or three people who actually knew how to operate it and no designated group of townsfolk to get it to the scene of an incident. From the moment the engine house doors were thrown open, the entire operation relied almost entirely on help from well-intentioned members of the public to manhandle the engine to the

fire and then to man the pumping handles.

In the Summer of 1825 The Leamington Paving Act was passed which enacted *inter alia* a number of building regulations covering the provision of party walls, the use of thatch for roofing and more importantly, the Act authorised the appointment of Improvement Commissioners with wide-ranging powers among which was the legal authority to purchase and maintain fire engines 'belonging to the said parish of Leamington Priors' and to levy a parish rate for the purpose.

The ongoing expansion of the new town led to decades of civic browbeating as to the inadequacy of the firefighting arrangements then in force. Building insurance dates back to the period following the Great

afforded adequate protection, thus reducing any financial payments they might have to make in the event of a fire. Apart from these insurance engines, many owners of large houses and country estates owned fire engines for the protection of their own property. In 1833 Matthew Wise offered to give the parish of Leamington Priors his engine when the Vestry again raised concerns about the level of protection.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Birmingham Fire Office had supplied three manual fire engines to the expanding town. These were housed in part of a shed in the Commissioner's yard in Court Street, next to the Parish Workhouse. A long ladder is said to have been hung on the wall in Regent Grove.

The Birmingham Fire Office engines had been taken over by the Police Committee by 1837. The Commissioners arranged for one of their men to operate the engines when required and the Parish Constables no doubt had some part to play but there was still no organised fire brigade of any description to man any of the appliances which would require at the very least ten men per engine to operate the pumping handles.

A lack of use and of any regular maintenance or testing meant that the leather hose and pump fittings quickly perished. The Vestry Minute Books contain numerous references to equipment being 'decayed', 'rotten' and 'not fit for use'.

It took a fire of serious proportions to bring about a fundamental change in the ramshackle and inefficient arrangements for fire protection. In June 1850 the extensive premises of Mr John Dowler, Upholsterer and cabinet maker of Regent Place were completely destroyed in a fire. The damage was assessed at £30,000 a huge sum which in today's values equates to about £2 million. In the weeks following the fire, the correspondence columns of *The Courier* carried many letters critical of



Typical early 19th century manual engine

Fire of London in 1666 and it was the insurance companies which provided most of the firefighting hardware nationally until the middle of the nineteenth century. In some of the larger towns and cities they established the first professional Fire Brigades. In less populous places such as Leamington, they were ready to donate manual fire engines which would ensure that the properties on their books would be



the lack of a properly equipped and trained Fire Brigade in Leamington. Such was the urgency with which local issues were addressed in 19th century Leamington that a further six years were to elapse before these aspirations were realised. In July 1856, a local coal merchant Thomas Muddeman proposed the establishment of an efficient Fire Brigade and in September of the same year the Police Committee reported that an Honorary Fire Brigade of sixteen men had been formed. Half of the volunteers were plumbers, others were connected with the building trade and one (Henry Davis) was a chemist.

The town of Royal Leamington Spa, population about 16,000 had for the very first time a body of men properly trained and equipped to deal with the dangers of fire. The small market town of Southam, population about 1,600 had formed such a Brigade over forty years earlier.

Spare a copper

There is in the local history section of Leamington library a volume of newspaper cuttings collected by writer George Morley in 1891 from editions of *The Courier* newspaper among which is this extract from an essay written by a boy of thirteen:-

"Some people call it fun to have a game at cricket or football, or having a row up the river, &c., but for boys the best fun of all is to give the coppers a little paperchase. And when one of them sees a shiny lobster coming up the street when they are having a game, he calls out, "I spy blue I spy black, I spy a copper in his shiny hat." This gives all the others warning, and they all run up the street. And the policeman runs them about six yards and then he is tired, and the boys stand and laugh at him and call out, 'Ha, Boo &c.'

A High time in the Pump Room Gardens

The fashionable town of Leamington Spa attracted a host of big-name performers from all branches of the Victorian entertainment industry. One of those who came here was the world renowned tightrope walker Charles Blondin.



Exactly 150 years ago the great Blondin made a tour of Great Britain and gave a series of performances.

Blondin was born in 1824 at St. Omer in France, his real name was Jean-Francois Gravelet. He trained as an acrobat and tightrope walker and after emigrating to America became famous for crossing the gorge below the Niagara Falls on a tightrope. He performed this a number of times always with a different theatrical variation:

blindfolded, in a sack, pushing a wheelbarrow, on stilts, carrying his manager and on one occasion sitting down midway while he cooked and ate an omelette standing on a chair with only one chair leg on the rope.

On a July evening in 1851 and two years after his Niagara crossing, seven thousand people gathered in and around the Pump Room Gardens to witness Mr Blondin's aerial walk. People were clustered on top of the battlements of the old parish church steeple, some clung to the chimneys in Dormer Place and others squatted precariously on nearby roofs. The rope was a hundred feet above the ground supported by metal tripods on either side of the gardens. The be-medalled Blondin arrived in a carriage drawn by two horses as the Volunteer Rifle Band struck up Handel's tune *See the Conquering Hero Comes* from Judas Maccabaeus. Blondin performed some of the usual feats including crossing the rope carrying a sack on his back whilst blindfolded. There were the usual theatrical feints and simulated loss of footing and the performance concluded after about forty minutes with Blondin crossing the rope with one of his assistants on his back.



Blondin died from diabetes in London in February 1897 and is buried in Kensal Green cemetery.

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1926 Courier advert



Looking forward

Our next meeting on Monday July 25th is a Powerpoint presentation by member Allan Jennings which Allan has titled *Leamington Then & Now 1946 - 2009*. Allan has collected a lot of new material which has not been seen before and his presentations are always light-hearted with a lot of good-natured audience participation.

We take a break in August and return on September 26th when we will be holding a *Member's Forum*. This will be an informal evening where anyone can share with us the fruits of their research. If you need help in putting together a simple slide show or a Powerpoint presentation we have the equipment and expertise to help you.

LHG website

If you have internet access, please have a look at our website and email the webmaster with your comments. The webteam of Ronnie Goldstein, Mick Cullen and Robin Stott took over the content of the former Bath Place History site and have had more than a few difficulties in adapting and adding new material to the site. The site is still very much a 'work in progress' and if any reader of this Newsletter has expertise in web page design, the team would welcome your advice. Contributions to the content of the site are most welcome.

Looking back

We held our first Local History Fair at South Lodge in mid May and this proved to be a very worthwhile function. The Sydenham, Lillingon and Leek



Wootton history groups also took part and mounted displays which aroused much interest. We plan to hold a similar function again next year in larger premises and with the participation of family history groups, local museums and record offices and other local history and archaeology groups. No date is fixed but it will almost certainly be in May at a central Leamington venue.

Tuesday drop-in sessions

Just a reminder 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. We are indebted to Antony Flint and Warwick District Council for the continued use of South Lodge each week. The drop-in sessions have borne much fruit and have become a fundamental part of our mission to popularise local history and to give it a somewhat less elitist image.

The Omnibus

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

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

Robert Dudley exhibition



Leamington Museum & Art Gallery currently has an excellent exhibition about the life and times of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester and Queen Elizabeth I's favourite. Dudley owned Kenilworth Castle and founded the Lord Leycester Hospital in Warwick. After you have been to see the exhibition go to look at Kenilworth castle and come back via St Mary's church in Warwick where Dudley is buried in the magnificent Beauchamp Chapel.

Puzzle Corner

Answer to last puzzle

The bronze figure on the Leamington war memorial is identical to a Toft figure on the Streatham (London) war memorial.

Question

The HSBC bank building on The Parade is quite distinctive and for many years housed The Bedford Hotel. What extraordinary feat is Jack Mytton said to have carried out there as a wager in 1826?