

The Leamington Omnibus

Newsletter of the Leamington History Group

Autumn 2014

Charles Guernsey, Lord Aylesford

We are delighted to announce that Lord Aylesford of Packington Park, whose ancestors played such a major role as landowners in the early years of the Spa, has kindly agreed to take on the role of President of Leamington History Group, following the death of Toby Cave in May.

Guided Town Walks

Members may recall that last year the LHG agreed to take over the management of the Town History Walks from the Town Council. This year with the support of the Council we again ran a programme of walks from June through to September. We improved our publicity programme to include leaflets, fliers, posters and features in both local newspapers. Our excellent website also carried full details of the walks. We worked with the Leamington BID, Leamington Looks Back, Heritage Week and The Leamington Society organisers in order to widen the appeal of our walks programme.

Offering a variety of themed walks and general town walks we were able to attract a considerable number of walkers, some of whom were able to join different walks and enjoy a different historical experience. To date (15 Sept) a total 422 walkers have been on the 32 walks so far. This has been a remarkable increase (some 25%) on the numbers attending over the same period last year. Also we were very pleased to support the Town Council's twinning celebrations by providing a guided walk for around 50 visitors from the German town of Bruhl. In September we assisted at the Mayor of Leamington's Charity Tea by providing a guided walk for the guests and raising monies for the Mayor's charities. Once again it has been an extremely successful year for the walks programme helping to develop and improve the status of the Leamington History Group both in Leamington and further afield.

If you would like to join our group of guides we offer good support, in house training sessions and the opportunity to meet lots of interesting people. Please contact the secretary, Margaret Rushton, for further information.

*Michael Pearson
Vice-Chair*

Cemetery Walks

During the 'Leamington Looks Back' festival at the end of June, Leamington History Group ran five very successful walks around Brunswick Street Cemetery, the largest in Town. The three guides, Alan Griffin, Allan Jennings and Barry Franklin, researched and photographed a number of memorials, highlighting some of Leamington's famous and not so famous former inhabitants. They were delighted with the support they received and the very good interaction with the participants. Over a hundred people went on the walks, and the small booklet giving details of the walks and the graves viewed very quickly sold out and went to reprint. A second series of walks was arranged for Heritage Open Weekend in September. The second edition of the booklet is available at South Lodge, Jephson Gardens, price £3.50

Barry Franklin

Ranelagh Gardens, "The Vauxhall of Leamington," 1811-1846



Mr John Culliss Nursery.

Leamington's ten acre Ranelagh Gardens were situated in old town over the canal bridge in Brunswick Street. No doubt named in imitation of the famous Ranelagh Gardens in London, Leamington's gardens were created at a time when

leisure for most people was scarce, when a holiday was just one day, and offered undreamed of extravagance and beauty, and an opportunity to take gentle exercise along well-planted gravel paths. A weekly season ticket allowing admission from 6 am until 10pm cost two shillings, or one guinea for a family ticket.

Bisset's *Guide of Leamington Priors* (1814) describes "Beautiful Public Walks, Shrubberies, Fruit, Flowers and Pleasure Gardens are laid out at the South end of the Village, called Ranelagh Gardens, the property of Mr Mackie." Moncrieff in his *1818 New Guide to the Spa of Leamington Priors*, adds: "Ranelagh Gardens, the Vauxhall of Leamington, are improving every season; and, with their various amusements, are well worth seeing."

Beck's *Guide* of 1839 gives a fuller description: "The Ranelagh Gardens: - The establishment of these Nursery Gardens and Pleasure Grounds, which took place in 1811, added very much to the attractions of the Spa; but on their coming into the hands of their present intelligent proprietor Mr Cullis in 1814, they underwent material improvements. Since that period, whatever is rare in botany has been added, and neither cost nor exertion spared, to afford a sense of amusement at once pleasing, rational and healthful to the numerous visitors who resort thither. The range of hot houses, 300 feet in length, contain a very extensive and unique collection of exotics; the ground is tastefully laid out in fruit, flower and pleasure gardens, shrubberies, gravel walks, etc; and the plants arranged after the manner of the Jardin des Plantes, at Paris. A large assortment of Green-House and Herbaceous Plants and Seeds are constantly on sale. The handsome conservatory is heated by hot water, with Witty's patent gas furnace & pipes."

In *A Complete History of Royal Leamington Spa* in 1901, Dudley wrote, "Under the care of Mr Cullis, the Ranelagh Gardens reached the zenith of their prosperity, and for years they were the resort of visitors, for whom a band was engaged, to discourse popular music. On gala days, they were the chief attraction, and in the evenings there were, after 1821, fireworks, balloons, etc."

It would appear that it was hoped that the Ranelagh Gardens would provide a permanent site for recreation, entertainment and amusement. Sadly, this was not to be. Eclipsed by the Jephson Gardens when they opened in 1846, the Ranelagh Gardens were auctioned following the death of John Cullis in 1849, reverting to Nursery Grounds and passing through a number of hands before being sold early in the twentieth century to Sidney Flavel & Co. for industrial development.

Jo Clark



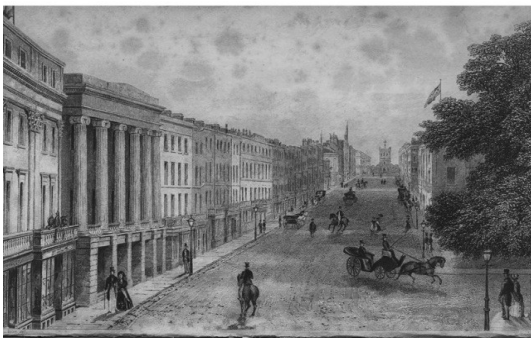
A Leamingtonian looks back

Chris Robbins, now an established 'Aussie' artisan baker, paid a return visit to his old home town in August. He joined us for coffee at South Lodge, reliving old memories, and the following week,

thanks to Maggie McGreevy, he was able to meet old colleagues Janet Owen, Pam Gilbert and Peter Hudson. Chris emigrated to Australia in 1984, to join his parents and siblings. He grew up in the prefabs in Buckley Road, Lillington, and attended Lillington School and Campion Boys' School in Leicester Street. Retracing his steps over the familiar roads of his youth brought back so many memories. Chris was astonished and moved to see how little the area had changed, apart from the houses built on the old allotments, and the Walnut Tree pub transformed into a small supermarket. He vividly remembers carol singing with a group of other small children at The Grange on Cubbington Road, - offering the standard fare of a chorus or two of one carol swiftly followed by "We wish you a Merry Christmas", in the hope of a generous tip. Some things never change!

When he left school, Chris went to work at Romback's Bakery, followed by a stint at Houghton's. He worked at Sabin's and then moved to Elizabeth the Chef, - all of course now long gone, but the skills he learned here in Leamington are still with him: he reminisced with Maggie about making meringues at Romback's in Wise Street, an experience that has stood him in very good stead. At home in Adelaide, he specialises in Banbury Cakes, Bakewell Tart and figures made of meringue. Animals are great favourites, so much so, that he has to continually clean the window of his shop, smeared by sweet-toothed children gazing longingly on the figures inside.

Seeing is believing - but is it?



Take a look at the engraving of the Parade in this article and in particular take a close look at the classical portico on the left of this image, the Palladian style building with the Ionic columns. This engraving first appeared in Hopper's History of Leamington Priors published in 1842 and has been reproduced in several more recent histories of the town including John Drew's history published in 1978. There are many 19th century engravings of the Parade prior to and after 1842 but none show this building or

anything remotely like it. So what are we to make of this seeming contradiction?

There is little doubt that the rather imposing building shown never existed save in the imagination of the man who made the ink drawing all those years ago. The artist was thoughtful enough to write his name on the bottom corner of the drawing and that is really the answer to this conundrum. It is signed 'Jackson'. J G Jackson was a Leamington architect and land agent who obtained many commissions for designing buildings in and around the town. A study of the engraving indicates that the building shown is what started life as the Bedford Hotel. The hotel was sold in 1854 and the building was subsequently purchased by the Leamington Priors & Warwickshire Bank who added a new and totally different stone facade which exists to the present day on the premises now owned by HSBC bank.

My conclusion is that what we see in the engraving is Jackson's impression of what the street scene MIGHT have looked like had his design for the bank's new frontage been carried out. Much of his work was in the Classical style and he designed and built similar porticos for the original post office in Bath Street and for the Episcopal Chapel, Milverton Hill. There used to be a saying that 'the camera never lies' but in an age of digital-enhancing software, that is patently not true. It is as well to bear in mind that artists throughout the ages have exercised a degree of artistic license when interpreting views so when you look at old engravings and prints, don't believe everything you see.

Alan Griffin

Tessa Whitehouse Reviews

Monday, 23rd June: Jim Layton, *Black People in Warwickshire*

Black people have been in Warwickshire from as far back as the 16th century. Jim's focus was people from Africa and the Caribbean who came to this country through exploration, as courtesans, the military and slavery. With them came imports such as tea, coffee, sugar, spices and pineapples which have gone on to play a major part in our life style today. In large houses it became fashionable to have a black servant. As time went on the immigrants integrated, but never without a struggle. Jim's research highlighted many Warwickshire and Midland connections with Jamaica and the island of St Kitts in particular: there are black servants recorded in Warwick Castle archives and black people featured in the works of Shakespeare. 'Tommy', a Victorian book found in a classroom in Alcester told the story of a black child.

Monday, 28th July: Jacqui Kirk, *Francis Stenton, M.C. Upper Assembly Rooms*

Jacqui's professional life as a family history researcher and her interest in the Regency period 1821 - 1830 provided the background to the life of Francis Stenton, once Master of Ceremonies at the Upper Assembly Rooms, Leamington. Stenton was born in 1788 in Nottinghamshire and led a colourful life which ended in Detroit, U S A in 1854. Jacqui gave us a fascinating insight into the life of a Regency charmer who lived way beyond his means, became destitute and went to prison. If that were not disgrace enough, he abandoned his wife and six children and decamped with another woman to America where he set up home and fathered five more offspring. Isabella his lawful wife died in poverty in London in 1850 without ever receiving her long awaited legacy from her mother's estate, which might well have changed the lives of all those involved in this sadly complex story. The Upper Assembly Rooms, at the corner of Regent Street and the Parade, (later the site of Woodwards), went into decline and were demolished in 1878.

Monday, 22 September: Alice Fookes, *Alice Rosa Barker, a Bustle Abroad*

On Monday 22nd November Alice Fookes delighted us with the tale of her research into the life of her great-great aunt, Alice Rosa Barker, and how she and her family later followed in Aunt Alice's footsteps. (Even with modern equipment, a challenge in its own right!) We heard a fascinating story of a highly unconventional lady whose family moved from Wolverhampton where they owned the Chillingworth Iron Works to Binswood Avenue. The ironworks generated the wealth to allow Alice to combine her love of horse riding and travel, and accompanied by her younger brother she travelled widely in Europe and the Middle East and even to USA, wearing the traditional cumbersome clothing of the period, even when the weather conditions were far from suitable. It was on one of these expeditions in the Dolomites in October 1887 that fate took over. Suffering from hypothermia and altitude sickness but determined to carry on down the mountain, Alice collapsed in the arms of her guide. Her death was widely reported both at home and abroad. Alice was a very strong willed woman who demonstrated that anything was possible given the time and in her position, the finance to do it!

Committee Members 2014

Barry Franklin *Chairman*
Michael Pearson, *Vice Chairman*
Terry Gardner *Treasurer*
Margaret Rushton *Secretary*
Alan Griffin *Ex Officio*
Jo Clark, Mick Cullen, Mick Jeffs,
Maggie McGreevy, Tessa Whitehouse,
Simon Yarwood

Members can be contacted via
the Secretary, through the website,
www.leamingtonhistory.co.uk

October Meeting: Jo Clark, Leamington 1930-1970

Building and restoration work in and around the town was halted by WW2, but after the war, growth resumed nationwide. Unfortunately, in the 60s & 70s many of Leamington's older buildings were demolished, and the architectural style that replaced the Regency/Victorian buildings changed for ever the face of parts of Leamington.

November Meeting: Allan Jennings, James Bisset

A presentation on one of the entrepreneurs of the early days of the Spa, who built the first picture gallery in Clemens Street.

December Meeting: Festive Slideshow and Quiz