

The Leamington Omnibus

Newsletter of the Leamington History Group

Winter 2015

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

7.30 pm Monday 25 January 2016

Dormer Conference Centre, Dormer Place

Nominations for the posts of Assistant Treasurer and Assistant Secretary (Programmes & Meetings) plus one vacant committee place, should be lodged with the Secretary by Monday 11th January 2016.

Where have all the shoe shops gone?

It was unthinkable at one time to buy shoes from anywhere other than shops just selling shoes. Every need was catered for from a selection of styles, sizes and colours for ladies, gentlemen and children. Service was a priority and assistants frequently climbed ladders to find the customer's choice.



From Smiths in Clemens Street, along Bath Street and up the Parade there were shoe shops in abundance. Freeman Hardy and Willis had three, with one in Bath Street, one on the Parade and another along Regent Street. This was the shop that everyone knew with prices and quality to suit all pockets. Close behind in popularity was Stead & Simpsons with a branch in Bath Street and another opposite the Town Hall. Pughs was a small family business in Bath Street which closed in the 1960s.

Melvilles, in Victoria Terrace sold Clarkes shoes which were considered the best footwear for children. They had a special department and was the only shop in town that measured the child's foot.

Progressing up the Parade we had Agers and Barratts and John Plant. A few doors away was Randalls which I remember as a child, with its tantalising window display of ballet and dancing shoes. Close together were Lotus, Englands and Southorns. The latter had been in the town centre since Victorian times, the makers of bespoke footwear for the gentry of a bygone era.



The early sixties saw the arrival on the Parade of Lilley and Skinner, Manfield and K Shoes, and next door to Woolworths was Collins. These stores were very popular with the youngsters who were looking for quality as well as the latest in fashion. I spent a lot of money in these stores and regretted their loss to the town.

Along Regent Street was Wyles, a family shoe shop. This shop took the Provident Cheque which was a boon for families with children. The same also applied to Aftons, a small shop along Regent Grove.

Slowly the smaller family owned shops faced closure with the import of cheaper styles from abroad. Chain stores started selling shoes, mostly on a self-selection basis, giving up the one to one customer service. Now it is commonplace to put a pair of shoes in the shopping trolley amongst the weekly groceries! With more affordable prices and changing fashions, repairs went by the wayside and we lost the shoe hospital under the Bridges and the smaller family-run cobblers around the town.

Now, if we want to buy shoes in town it is difficult to find the choice that we were familiar with half a century ago.

Tessa

Whitehouse.

Benjamin George Bowden and the 1946 *Streamline Cycle*

The streamline cycle, shown here in an early press photograph, used a new energy-storing device



calculated to revolutionise cycling by storing energy when travelling downhill and releasing it on climbing. It was designed by Ben Bowden, a well-known Leamington industrial designer and consulting engineer, to be displayed at the Britain Can Make It exhibition in London in October 1946. Mr Bowden, who came to the Midlands to work in the car industry in Coventry, had most recently designed the Healey Elliot, a 2.4 L sports car, which was in 1947 the first British car to break the 100 mile an hour barrier. In WW2 he designed an armoured car which was used by King George VI and Winston Churchill.

The futuristic lightweight aluminium bicycle, which Bowden called 'The Classic' created substantial public interest initially but British bicycle manufacturers at the time were reluctant to invest in the high degree of re-tooling needed to produce it. Bowden felt that the bicycle had reached its climax so far as design and methods of propulsion were concerned, and so he developed a special device incorporating a dynamo and motor set to store energy while the bicycle travelled downhill and release it on climbing hills. He claimed that the device would generate sufficient power to overcome the additional resistance given by a 1-in-10 gradient at a speed of 5 mph. The cycle had an electrical bell operated by pushbuttons. On each handlebar twist-grip controls operated the brakes. There were built-in front and rear lights and the machine was completed by a small dashboard incorporating a minute radio set and loudspeaker. It looked entirely unlike any bicycle on the road at the time and even today its styling remains unmatched. It was a roaring success at an exhibition at the Town Hall in July 1947, although one small boy was overheard to remark, "Wot, no engine!" It was referred to by the press as "The Tomorrow Cycle," and less flatteringly, as "this lightweight oddity"

As no British manufacturers came forward, in 1949 Bowden considered having the bike manufactured in South Africa but changes in import policies there prevented that taking place. In the early 1950s, Bowden moved to Michigan in the United States and in 1960 began production in fibreglass instead of aluminium, abandoning the hub dynamo and adapting the assembly, and giving it a new name: The Spacelander, to capitalise on interest in the space race. It was originally produced in five colours, Charcoal Black, Cliffs of Dover White, Meadow Green, Outer Space Blue and Stop Sign Red. It originally cost \$89.50 which made it one of the more expensive bicycles on the market. Although the Spacelander with its dual headlights and rear lights built into the body frame of the bike, was produced for just one year, after a revival of interest in it as a collector's item in the 1980s, it remains the most sought-after middleweight bicycle ever made. The follow-up Bowden 300 E, which also had a fibreglass body, is even more rare: very few are known to exist. Spacelanders can be bought on eBay for upwards of \$800. A set of lights can be acquired for a similar amount.

Benjamin George Boden was born on 3 June 1906 in North Kensington. He died aged 91 on 6 March 1998 in Florida. He came to Warwickshire as a car designer and by the 1930s he had become chief body engineer for the Humber car factory at Coventry. In 1945 he left to form his own design studio in Leamington Spa with John Allen. The studio, Allen-Bowden Ltd, at 4 The Parade, was one of the first such design firms formed in Britain, and was known to work in collaboration with other designers, - Achille Sampietro, for example, developed the chassis of the Healey Elliot. In the United States, Ben Bowden worked on the early Chevrolet Corvette and the Ford Thunderbird. His futuristic

bicycle was again produced briefly in the late 1980s, when the first reproduction, modified to improve durability, sold for \$4000.

Margaret Rushton

The Leamington Omnibus

Winter 2015

Mousell Brothers, Removal Contractors and Storers

The Public Hall, built in Windsor Street in 1853 was the headquarters of one of the largest removal contractors and removers in the United Kingdom in the late nineteenth century. Mousell Brothers set up their spacious warehouse and offices, at a time when it was not uncommon to sell house contents by auction when moving from one property to another, and simply buy new on arrival elsewhere. As the business prospered Mansell brothers set up branches in London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Gloucester, Exeter itself, - and Paris. The four storey Windsor Street premises could accommodate up to 400 separate van-loads of furniture, the contents of up to 200 individual residences, safely under one roof. The premises were kept scrupulously tidy and maintained at a steady dry temperature by system of heating "with hot water," moths were kept at bay by Persian insect powder and naphthaline crystals, and chemical "Fire Queen" extinguishers placed on every floor to guard against the outbreak of fire. (Mr Cooksey who had joined the business in the early days from Exeter, being a trained exponent of the use of these latter). As a further precaution against fire, electric lighting was installed throughout the building.

Furniture was transferred from floor to floor by means of a hoist so that once numbered and registered, it could quickly be retrieved on demand by the same method. Mousell Brothers owned 350 Pantehnicon vans for the removal of goods by road rail or sea, and employed experienced packers: they were noted for their care in packing and reasonable charges. A representative would attend by appointment regardless of distance to provide clients with an estimate of the eventual cost. In addition to the warehouse in Windsor Street, Messrs Mousell also had a branch storage depot in Chandos Street, a reflection of the constantly increasing requirements of the business. The Windsor Street site included a large public room known as The Public Hall which was extensively used for auction sales, public lectures, concerts and recitals, and in April 1888, the Cabmen's Supper, sponsored jointly by Messrs Mousell, Lucas, Blackwell & Arkwright's Brewery, and Irwins of Bedford Street, who provided the table decorations and potted plants. In May 1893, they generously sponsored a music concert in aid of the widow and children of a recently deceased clergyman who had been a classics tutor in Leamington.

Mousell Bros Ltd were not without problems: in 1881 a former employee and resident of Windsor Street set up in competition with them as a packer. He advertised regularly in the Leamington Courier as a former Mousell Bros packer and offered cheaper rates! A few years later, Mousell's had to take a client to court for failing to pay in full the account for packing and removal of her property from Leamington to Folkestone. On receipt of her property the client had signed the dispatch note, complimented the foreman on a job well done and gave him a tip of five shillings, - and then refused to pay in full on the grounds that some items were damaged or missing. Mousell Bros therefore retained one chest belonging to the client and only surrendered it when judgement was given in their favour after evidence was taken from the auctioneer from Locke's who had taken the original inventory, supporting Mousell's claim that many of the goods were not of the first quality and could not have been damaged as claimed in transit. On another occasion Messrs Mousell posted a notice in the Leamington Courier to the effect that within a month of the notice, certain goods, unpaid and unclaimed "for some years," would be sold to defray the costs of keeping them.

Jo Clark

Friends of the Parish Church

On Friday 13 November, Rev Christopher Wilson and the Parish Church Council held a meeting at the church to set up a Friends of the Parish Church Association, with a view

to supporting the bid to restore the church to its former glory. With a stirring musical accompaniment by the choir, visitors were given a tour of the church and its monuments, a trip up to the bell chamber for a brief explanation of the intricacies of change ringing by the tower Captain, and shown a video of the problems which need to be addressed. You can view the video on U-tube, or at www.allsaintschurchleamington.org.uk where you will find further information about the project, and how to become a Friend.
Margaret Rushton

The Leamington Omnibus

Winter 2015

Tessa Whitehouse Reviews

Monday 28 September: Jo Clark: Leamington in the 1980s

Peter Chater, lifelong friend of the late local historian Bill Gibbons, introduced Jo's talk with a short tribute to Bill. Peter often accompanied Bill on his expeditions to photograph Leamington's vanishing architectural treasures, and some of his slides are now in Jo Clark's possession. It was from these that Jo gave us another of his enlightening and humorous talks, on the 1980s when Leamington was going through a phase of demolition and modernisation. We lost buildings of character including Francis's in Bath Street, Harrington House in Newbold Terrace, the Clifton and Regent cinemas and the Jephson Gardens Floral Clock. Many pubs, familiar shops and local landmarks vanished. We gained the Royal Priors shopping mall and the Spa Centre. This fascinating slideshow reminded us how much change has taken place in a comparatively short space of time. Jo obviously enjoyed giving his talk as much as we enjoyed listening.

Monday 26 October: Chris Holland: Rallying to the Cause:

Coventry & Warwickshire 1914 - 1916.

A welcome return visit by Chris Holland with the second part of his research into how this region responded to the outbreak of The Great War, - how all men, regardless of age and social status were expected to enlist, with no exceptions. Those not in uniform claiming to be in reserved occupations such as farming, transport and baking had their appeals turned down, as women could replace them. A perceived lack of patriotism was highlighted by women distributing white feathers. As everyone became involved with fund raising, children were released from school early to help with harvest, 1916 saw the introduction of British Summer time, nurseries were set up to help mothers and many large houses became convalescent homes for the wounded. Hardship and anxiety were prevalent as food prices rose and so did income tax. People moving into the area seeking work, needed accommodation and pressed for higher wages. Life changed dramatically as the heavy toll of human casualties hit home the price of war. Fewer people worked in domestic service and the social life of the country was experiencing the biggest change in its history. Chris ended his engrossing account with the words: "Cheer up! The worst is yet to come!"

Monday 23 November: Jacqui Kirk:

Major Abiathar Hawkes: Leamington Master of Ceremonies, 1833 - 1839

Local historian and genealogist Jacqui Kirk recounted how her interest was sparked in the career and lifestyle of Major Abiathar Hawkes, Master of Ceremonies in 19th Century Leamington, when she discovered in a Courier report of the time that in 1839 he had been presented with four pieces of silver. Her research took her first to Dudley where he was born in 1786 into a family of glassmakers. When Abiathar was twenty one and received his inheritance he joined the militia, buying his way up the ranks and changing regiments via commissions. He married Mary Anne Borrowdale and by the time their first son was born he was serving in Cape Town, but eventually returned to England. In 1824 he was back in Dudley where he became a J.P. Four years later, when changes in the glassmaking industry led to the collapse of the family business, Abiathar came to Leamington, making his home in Chandos House, Warwick Street. He was the only candidate for the position of Master of Ceremonies and after his election, set out to promote the town through all kinds of social activities and was instrumental in the town being granted Royal status in honour of an earlier visit by Queen Victoria. He was a very elusive man, rarely doing anything for long and always looking for a role in life. He died in London leaving only £20 to his very large family. A complex character whose activities

made a very interesting talk.

L H G Committee 2015

Officers: *Chairman*, Barry Franklin, *Vice Chairman*, Michael Pearson,
Treasurer, Terry Gardner, *Secretary*, Margaret Rushton,
Committee members: Alan Griffin, *Ex Officio*, Jo Clark, Mick Jeffs, Tom Lewin, Maggie McGreevy,
Tessa Whitehouse, Simon Yarwood.

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