

# The Leamington Omnibus

Newsletter of the Leamington History Group

Autumn 2015

## The Eavesdropper



A long-standing occupant of Leamington's Parish Church has only recently come to light, - the "Eavesdropper" spotted by Rev Christopher Wilson, tucked away high up among the roof beams. It was suggested that the face smiling down on the congregation might be that of a former vicar, possibly even Rev Craig, who in Victorian times carried out extensive rebuilding of the church at his own expense. However, buildings all over Britain, including Hampton Court Palace still have the same kind of carved wooden figures tucked up in the rafters, - a stern, permanent reminder to be on your guard, that 'walls have ears', - and wherever you may be, there is always

someone watching and listening. In mediæval times Eavesdroppers were a warning not to engage in gossip or intrigue, and it looks as though the Eavesdropper at the Parish Church may have been part of the original building on that site, transferred to the new building as a link with the past. The 'Spy in the Sky' may well now operate by satellite, - but the idea behind it is not new.

*Text and photograph: © Alan Griffin*

## Annual History Day



The Leamington History Group's Annual History Day, held at All Saints' Parish Church on Saturday 5 September proved an outstanding success. The Church provided a welcoming venue for the many Local History Groups who came to showcase their research and wide-ranging publications. Well over 400 visitors enjoyed the displays and presentations, and bought an amazing number of books. The café staff were

delighted to be kept busy from start to finish. During preparations for the day, we had a surprise visitor, looking for the tomb of Ben Satchwell. To our astonishment and delight, the visitor turned out to be Abigail Baker from Australia, a direct descendant of Ben Satchwell on her mother's side. Here she is at the tomb of her ancestor, in the churchyard.



*Photos : © A Jennings, M Jeffs*

## Leamington Free Guided Walks

The 2015 Season of walks has been the most successful series so far, helped by lovely sunshine in August in particular. We have had record numbers, particularly on evening walks, with growing interest in the widening range of themes we have offered. A number of new guides have come forward, each with a walk on a theme of personal interest, - Leamington south of the river as far as Charlotte Street, the Pubs of old Leamington, Wartime Leamington, William Thomas and the building of North East Leamington, North West Leamington, and The Parade and the Town Hall. Next year we hope to expand the themed approach further, and would be interested to hear from you if you can contribute a further topic and would be willing to lead a walk.

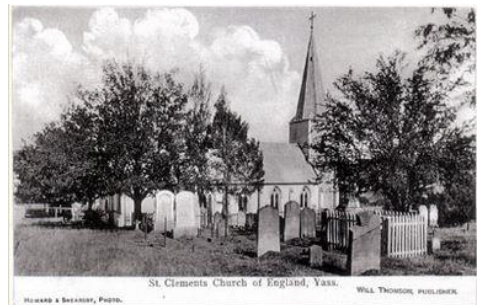
*Michael Pearson*

## Alfred James Shearsby

You may be surprised to learn that All Saints Church, Leamington Spa, has a connection with Yass, New South Wales, but it does! The Yass & District Historical Society are researching the life and times of the late Alfred James Shearsby (1872- 1962), an esteemed long time resident of Yass and a descendant of William Shearsby of Leamington Priors. Alfred's father William, a carpenter by trade, (born about 1811) and mother Elizabeth Barris Clarke, were both parishioners of All Saints, where they married in October 1831. Unfortunately, William died not long afterwards aged only 27. Elizabeth subsequently married John W Briley, also at All Saints, in 1844.

Thereby hangs a good tale, because the Brileys with their son Edwin and William Shearsby Junior, travelled to Australia in January 1855 on the maiden voyage of the sailing ship 'Ralph Waller'. After crossing the line, on 22 March the ship hit fields of ice. At 8 pm that evening, the ship was holed and in under half an hour had 15 feet of water in the hold. Thanks to heroic efforts by the crew who manned the pumps for 79 consecutive hours, the Captain who lowered a sail to cover the hole, and the work of the ship's carpenter, to the great relief of all on board, the ship managed to make it safely to dock in Melbourne by 9<sup>th</sup> April.

Young William went on to settle in Sydney, where he married and his son Alfred was born in 1872. In 1899 Alfred, an established employee of the Australian Joint Stock Bank, moved to Yass, where he spent the next four years. In 1903, Alfred was appointed relieving manager at Wentworth, a small country town at the confluence of the Murray and the Darling Rivers, but resigned shortly afterwards and returned to Yass, where, apart from three years in Sydney, he spent most of the rest of his life. In 1908 he married Ethel Grace Chambers at St Clement's Church Yass, and their daughter Grace Ethel was baptised there in 1910.



St. Clement's Church of England, Yass. WILL THOMSON, PUBLISHER.



In Australia, the first Mechanics' Institute was established in Hobart in 1827 to promote interest in science and literature, by regular meetings addressed by interesting speakers, and the creation of libraries and museums. As Alfred had long had interests outside the sphere of banking, he joined the Yass Mechanics Institute [left] in 1899, and found his personal niche. He took on a number of roles at the Institute and served on the Committee in 1902 & 1903. In August 1902 he was appointed Museum Curator, and the following spring, on the point of transfer to Wentworth, he was elected to Life Membership.

If it were not for the highly productive life of Alfred James Shearsby, Yass and Australia would be much the poorer in geology, photography, art, science, philately, writing and community progress associations. Alfred was unstoppable: a true *polymath*, a person of wide knowledge or learning.

He published articles in the Yass Tribune newspaper, took thousands of photographs, produced artwork of a professional standard and undertook the identification of the many geological features of the district. Much of this is held in an extensive Shearsby archive at the Yass & District Historical Society, curated by Marion McCarthy, former archivist of the Y&DHS, who researched Shearsby's life in the days before computers and the internet. And all this started in the growing Spa town of Leamington Priors, at the other side of the world. Could there still be some living relatives of the Shearsby family out there? We would love to hear if there are.

*Peter Bindon, and Tony MacQuillan, Yass, 2015*

### A Rather Fortunate Accident

There are times in local history when stories are hard to come by but there are also those rare occasions when you just happen to stumble on a story that is waiting to be told. That was what happened when Barry Franklin quite literally caught his toe on a ledger stone, - a flat gravestone, in Leamington Cemetery in Brunswick Street. Barry rang me to say that he had discovered the grave of an Admiral whose life ought to be researched for inclusion in the small guide book that we were about to publish about a group of interesting individuals buried there. A quick look through my copy of *'Who's Who in Nelson's Navy'* revealed several pages of biography about the man in question, Vice Admiral Sir Jahleel Brenton. The story became even more interesting, since the stone also bore the following words, "Transferred with other remains from New Street Cemetery March 1958".

For a long time, I had been fielding ancestry questions sent to the Parish Office at All Saints, and within a few days of Barry's message, I received an email from Richard Sinker in Guildford, enquiring whether anyone knew of the burial place of his great-great-great-grandfather who had died in Leamington in 1844 and whose name just happened to be Vice Admiral Sir Jahleel Brenton! It was everyone's lucky day.



Over the next few weeks' lengthy exchanges of emails between Guildford and Leamington, Richard filled in many of the details of his ancestor's naval career. He referred me to a biography written in 1846 by an Anglican Clergyman, Rev. Henry Raikes. Astonishingly, a facsimile edition of Raikes's memoirs taken from an original in the library of Harvard University, is available on Amazon, so at the click of a button, it was duly ordered and arrived within a couple of days. Hardly light reading, since it runs to over 650 pages and weighs the best part of four pounds, but an interesting source nonetheless.

We were thus able to piece together the career of one of Nelson's illustrious Captains. Richard supplied us with a copy of an early miniature of Jahleel Brenton [left] and a later portrait made when he was Lieutenant Governor of the Greenwich Naval Hospital. He also mentioned that Jahleel was a very competent water colourist and made sketches of the actions in which his ships had been involved. When back on shore he commissioned some of the leading maritime artists of the day to produce large canvasses from them. Thanks to this, the National Maritime Museum have paintings of all the ships that he commanded and the actions in which they took part in the wars against France and Spain. Reproductions of these were purchased from the museum shop for use in a display.

It was a real pleasure for Barry and me to invite Richard Sinker and his wife Jean to Leamington in May this year to visit the grave of his distinguished ancestor. We took them to New Street Cemetery where the Vice Admiral was first laid to rest in 1844, and then to the grave in Brunswick Street Cemetery. We subsequently discovered the reason for the additional inscription on the headstone: in 1958 a realignment of the roadway in New Street resulted in some remains being exhumed and re-interred in Brunswick Street.

We have put together a display on four panels telling the story of Vice Admiral Sir Jahleel Brenton Bt. KCB, and these formed part of our stand at the Leamington Local History Day in September. The story will eventually be published as a slide show on Leamington History Group website ([www.leamingtonhistory.co.uk](http://www.leamingtonhistory.co.uk)).

It is a good thing for local historians to be taken out of their 'comfort zone' now and again and along paths that they have never trodden before. Living as we do in land-locked Warwickshire, we seldom come into contact with stories relating to the sea and seafarers but I have greatly enjoyed learning about the life of one of Nelson's senior Captains, a subject that I knew little or nothing about a few months ago. In the process, I have developed a great deal of respect and admiration for men like Jahleel Brenton, one of Lord Nelson's 'Band of Brothers,' finally laid to rest a century after he died at Lansdowne Place, Leamington Spa in 1844.

*Text and image: © Alan Griffin*

## *Tessa Whitehouse Reviews*

### **Monday 27 July: Members' Evening**

In July members had the opportunity to speak about their 'pet' projects. Mick Jeffs is well known for his artistic talents and producing sketch map books of the town but this evening he revealed his interest in 'Sucrology', - the title really does exist! Over the years wherever Mick has travelled he has brought back sugar wrappers and has amassed a large collection, now mounted into albums. They range from companies in the Far East and airlines to an example from MacDonalds. An unusual but interesting topic and if anyone is interested, Mick has at least one box of swaps!

In a different context, Margaret Watkins, a member of the Leamington Literary Society spoke about Mary Dormer Harris who was born in Stoneleigh in 1867, but lived the greater part of her life in Leamington. She was the Literary Society's first woman speaker, when women were eventually admitted during the First World War. She was also a great supporter of the Suffragist movement. Oxford educated, Mary Dormer Harris fought to save some of the great buildings in Coventry, already at risk from the council, before the blitz finished the job. She produced a book about women in Warwickshire, and was a founder member of Leamington's Loft Theatre. She was a historian, actor, writer, best known in her lifetime for her scholarly transcription of the Coventry 'Leet' book, and an inspiration to everyone. She died as a result of a road accident in 1936. The year after, friends and colleagues subscribed to a scholarship fund in her memory, which still supports students from all over the district in further education, and there is now also a Blue Plaque in her memory on her home in Gaveston Road.

Simon Yarwood spoke about something that we may all have thought about at some time or other - our ancestry. Not ancestry research using the documents available online and in libraries from the last two to three hundred years, but what makes us who we are today. At one time most people remained in the area where they were born but over time migration, invasion and social changes have caused us to question who we are and who we are related to. Food for thought in an increasingly changing and restless world.

To conclude, Stan Brown's topic was the rise and fall of Lockheed, alias Automotive Products and locally, A.P. He outlined its early years in Clemens Street and the later move to Tachbrook Road. After the First World War when the motor car was becoming more affordable, an outlet was needed for component parts and the company built its future on this. In its heyday the company employed thousands and was the biggest employer in the town. The decline started to set in slowly after World War 2 owing to heavy taxation and later, competition from abroad and the import of parts from the Far East. The demolition of the iconic buildings was a sad loss to the town.

This informal and interesting evening evoked many memories. We look forward to the next time we have such an event.

## **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.leamingtonhistory.co.uk](http://www.leamingtonhistory.co.uk)*