

The Leamington Omnibus

Newsletter of the Leamington History Group

Winter 2016

**Annual General Meeting,
January 23 2017, at 7.30 pm,
Dormer Conference Centre, Dormer Place.**

The meeting will be chaired by Cllr Ann Morrison, Mayor of Leamington.

Committee elections are due this year, including the post of Chairman, and there is one vacancy, owing to the retirement of Jo Clark. Other members are willing to stand again, if required.

We are looking for a new member able to take on a committee role, such as Programme and Meetings Secretary. Nominations should be with the Secretary four weeks before the meeting, and should have the agreement of the nominee.

An Agenda and Reports from the Chairman and Treasurer will be circulated three weeks before the meeting, and some hard copies will be available on the night.

After the business meeting, Barry Franklin will give a short presentation about Miss Joan Parsons, Leamington Music Teacher and Aviator.

*N.B. Subscriptions, which remain at £10 per person per year, are due at this meeting.
There will also be an updated Gift Aid form available.*

Current Committee:

Barry Franklin, Chairman	Michael Pearson, Vice-Chairman
Terry Gardner, Treasurer	Ian McCutcheon, Assistant Treasurer
Margaret Rushton, Secretary	Mick Jeffs, Minutes Secretary
Jo Clark, Tessa Whitehouse, Maggie McGreevy, Tom Lewin	

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

New Street Cemetery



A recent plan to re-vamp the old cemetery in New Street has raised a number of concerns, not least because those hoping to carry out the "improvements" see the space simply as a public amenity akin to the recent Pocket Park on High Street, needing to be made more family friendly, with various added attractions. One plan was to install sustainably-made play equipment and benches, fruit trees, vegetable-growing areas and a shed to house gardening equipment.

In a letter to the Leamington Courier, former Chairman of Leamington History Group Alan Griffin spoke for many of us when he wrote: "I am not alone in having serious reservations about plans to create a 'nature park' in one of the town's

former burial grounds in New Street. I can but wonder what the relatives of the two thousand souls buried in the plot might make of [the] plans to turn it into a 'vibrant, well-loved attraction for local people' and to 'really develop the site to its full potential' whatever that may mean. I cannot conceive of a less desirable use for such a sacred and contemplative space as a burial ground.

Quite apart from any aesthetic considerations, I question why such miniature 'nature parks' are needed at all in this locality when there are many hectares of public, maintained nature reserves at Welches Meadow and Leam Valley both within easy walking distance of New Street even for an old arthritic character like me. In terms of open space, there can be few towns in England of comparable size to Leamington with anything like the area of parkland/green space that we enjoy. On a personal level, I have for some years responded to enquiries from genealogists about family members interred in the six historic burial grounds in Leamington of which New Street is one. Twice in recent years I have taken enquirers to New Street to show them the last resting place of their ancestors.

It seems somewhat premature to be drawing up plans of any description for this piece of land, the use of which is in any event constrained by statute under the Disused Burial Grounds (Amendment) Act of 1981. The proposals to develop the site into a 'vibrant, well-loved attraction' seem to many of us to be quite at odds with our notion of such spaces as places of quiet reflection to be treated with dignity and respect."

Campion Boys' School, Leicester Street

I grew up in Gresham Avenue, in the days of the Prefabs. After Lillington County Junior School many of us went to Campion School just down the road in Leicester Street. Life wasn't too bad there. In my day, we didn't have much of a school uniform. We mostly had hand-me-downs from older brothers.

We learnt metal work with Mr Faulkner, a tall ex-RAF man who was always very smartly dressed. Mr Walton taught woodwork. *He* wasn't very tall, in fact many of the lads were a lot taller than he was, but he was very good at woodwork, and he got us making stools, bird tables, chairs, even. Mr Justice and Mr Bill were the sports teachers, - we did mainly football and cricket, but with no school field, we had to walk from school in Leicester Street to Victoria Park. It took about 30 to 40 minutes to get there and by the time we had changed into our football kit it, we only had about half an hour's play. Then we got changed and made our own way home. I don't think that would be allowed nowadays! We also learned about gardening. The school had a small plot of land halfway up Leicester Street where we grew potatoes, cabbages, lettuces, - all the veg. At the back of school there was a passageway leading into Queen Street where there was a sweet shop, and at break time, unbeknown to the teachers we used to run down the passageway and into the shop to buy blackjacks, gobstoppers, all kinds of sweets. Those were the days!



Terry Wills

Photographers of Leamington Spa: Robert L Graham (1844-1925)

Robert L Graham (thought to be his trade name, rather than his given name) was born in the east end of London in 1844. He may have been the James Graham, who, with business partner William Suter opened a photographic studio at no 6 Parade in 1868, and who, with Suter, appears as a lodger in George Street on the 1871 Census. It was their business that 'R L Graham' took over in 1873. He rapidly established a reputation as a first-rate portrait photographer, built new studios and extended into the building next door.



The Leamington Courier of May 19th 1877 announced: "Mr Graham, the well-known photographer of the Parade has recently opened a new studio at the top end of the Parade opposite the Clarendon Hotel, which is replete with every modern appliance. The show, reception and waiting rooms are spacious and decorated with much taste. In the corridors are various exotic and greenhouse plants, whilst the studios are adapted to the production of every known effect and adjunct which the sitter may desire: comfort, elegance and taste, energy and skill."

Mention the word photography to most people in Victorian times and they would inevitably think of such a studio. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century at least one sprang up in every High Street in the country. Competition soon brought prices down. By 1880 Mr Graham could advertise 'cartes de visite' (visiting card sized photographs, 2½" x 4") for 12s a dozen, 'cabinets' (4¼" x 6½") for 30s a dozen, with 'Re-sittings given without extra payment if not approved.'

In April 1987 over 40,000 photographic glass negatives were found in the cellar of a shop in Augusta Place Leamington during repairs following burst pipes. It is not known how or when so many of Graham's plates found their way there, so far from the studio. The County Record Office was alerted, and when staff arrived, they were confronted by an extraordinary sight: the builders had broken down a false wall in the cellar, and discovered a great pile of broken glass, containing many thousands of complete negatives, and some remnants of furniture which were thought to have been props from the Graham studio. As the building work required immediate removal of the negatives, weighing several tons, Mr David Graves, owner of the building, generously donated the plates to the County Record Office. With the assistance of a Manpower Services Commission scheme, the CRO then mounted a salvage operation, culminating in cleaning, conserving, printing and cataloguing the collection, followed up by an extensive display at Leamington Art Gallery and Museum and a write-up in the Courier, in an effort to track down surviving relatives of the sitters.

Most of the negatives which had survived well enough to print dated from the early part of Graham's career in the 1870s, when Graham used a collodion-based emulsion to carry the image on the surface of the glass plate. This survived the damp conditions in the cellar far better than later gelatine-based emulsions. Graham's studio flourished up to the First World War, and he died a wealthy man, with a home in Clarendon Avenue as well as the two buildings on the Parade. Sadly, there was no-one to take on the business and give it a new lease of life in the changed circumstances of the 1920s. The studio finally closed in 1925 around the time of Graham's death.

Joe Claydon

[Portrait (above) by RL Graham, © J Claydon]

Tessa Whitehouse Reviews

Monday 24 October: Peter Coulls: *A Walk Down Memory Lane.*

Local history enthusiast, Peter Coulls, has built up a large collection of pictures of Leamington and the surrounding area and as he showed the images, Peter invited members to share their memories and anecdotes. It is not just the pictures themselves that are fascinating but small, insignificant details that have been captured and preserved forever. Why is that bicycle there, who are those people? There are so many things that add interest to the picture – a dog in a window, blinds over shop fronts, a bath chair, a solitary person in the street, children playing – the list is endless. Many memories were revived, of buildings long vanished pubs and shops. Of special interest to the writer was the fire at Hayes furniture shop in Bedford Street in 1951, as just 3 weeks before, her new bed had been purchased from there! Sadly, so often pictures were taken but no one ever imagined that many decades later groups such as ours and families would love to know why or who the people were. No one ever thought to record the details of the event and today with digital images and the internet being the preferred mode this is becoming more prevalent. If details are recorded at the time and copies made, imagine the pleasure it would give to a future local historian. This was a special trip down memory lane. Thank you Peter, - carry on collecting!

Monday 28 November: Margaret Rushton: *Milverton Lawn, 15 Warwick New Road, aka Sunshine House, aka Goodway House.*

Our secretary, Margaret Rushton saved the evening when our guest speaker was unable to attend: she spoke to us of the research she had done into Milverton Lawn, 15, Warwick New Road. During her teaching career Margaret acquired some plans of this large house inspiring her to trace its history. It was built for a large Victorian family and over the years, had a number of interesting and sometimes eccentric owners, eventually becoming a preparatory school for boys in 1921. This was so successful that it moved to larger premises in Warwick and became Emscote Lawn School.

In 1924 the house was bought by the Royal National Institute for the Blind and renamed Sunshine House. The building was adapted to accommodate young children with visual impairment. A swimming pool was added and substantial playground equipment provided stimulation and amusement for the children. A local company donated a bus to enable children to familiarise themselves with this mode of travel. The children were taken to paddle in the nearby park, to ride donkeys at the seaside and with the help of local fundraisers, to the pantomime in Coventry. A pub provided a Christmas party and presents from Father Christmas. Children generally remained at Sunshine House until the age of seven, when they transferred to more formal boarding schools for the blind. The children were so happy at Sunshine House that some cried when they went home for the holidays, knowing that their families were unable to fully understand their needs and newly acquired independence. As time progressed, with improvements in medical care, fewer children were born with visual impairment. Following the Warnock Report in 1978, although some children moved on to specialist schools for the blind, special needs education enabled many children to be supported in mainstream schools where they could learn and achieve alongside sighted children.

The Sunshine Home closed in 1985 and after a long gap, the grade 2 listed building was modernised and converted into apartments, whilst retaining many of the original features. The name can still be seen on the gateposts, a reminder of a building that many Leamingtonians remember with great affection.