

The Leamington Omnibus

Newsletter of the Leamington History Group

Summer 2016

A Leamington knife discovered in Argentina



Leamington History Group recently received a message asking for help from Alberto Guido Chester, a knife historian and researcher based in Argentina who had acquired a "gaucho" knife probably made in the early 19th Century and stamped 'Hobson Cutler Leamington'. Alberto had not been able to find much useful information about 'Hobson', but further searches turned up a John Hobson, Cutler, at 164, Parade, Leamington in 1881 and so, given that there was a ready source of basic material in the flourishing iron foundries in contemporary Leamington and Warwick, he assumed that John Hobson was manufacturing

cutlery in the town, and was looking for confirmation. What Alberto did not know was that most iron masters here made domestic products such as cooking ranges, and door furniture, or industrial items such as drain covers, water pipes and gutters, iron fencing, balcony railings and gates. At that time, British cutlery was made largely in Sheffield, and often bought wholesale by traders who then stamped the items with their own imprint. On further inspection, Alberto concluded that his knife was a re-purposed blade, originally probably a carving or bread knife, transformed for rural use. He went on to discover in the Courier online archives two items about J Hobson, Esq: John Hobson, Cutler, who advertised a dozen knives for a guinea, announcing a move to 63 Regent Street in October 1882, and a year later, also in October, the same John Hobson fined for riding his bicycle during the evening *without a lamp!*



Further local searches showed that John Hobson was born in Wellington, Shropshire in 1853, and married Sarah Anne Williamson at All Saints Church Leamington on 27 April 1887. They had four children, Robert John, (1888) Elizabeth Mary, (1891), Eleanor Marjorie (1893) and Elsie Catherine (1897). By the time of the 1901 Census, John Hobson "Gun Maker and Cutler", was widowed and Sarah's sister Catherine was taking care of the family with the help of a 14-year-old servant named Gertrude Bayliss. Ten years on, Catherine had become the second Mrs Hobson, Robert was an Electrical & Mechanical Engineer, his two older sisters were Students and Elsie, the youngest was still at school.

John Hobson's business prospered: the family moved from their home over the shop at the corner of Bedford Street and Regent Street, to a substantial property in Sherborne Place, Clarendon Street, where they remained until John's death in 1945, aged well over 90. After Catherine's death, Marjorie and Elsie, the two sisters still living at home, moved to 27 Arlington Avenue, where they lived comfortably on their investments for the rest of their days, attending services at the Parish Church and supporting a Coventry 'Grey Lady' who lived with them as their companion. However, there still remains an unanswered question, - how did one of John Hobson's knives find its way to Argentina?

Margaret Rushton

Checketts' Corner



Checketts' Corner, to the uninitiated, is the area of South Leamington where Tachbrook Street crosses Brunswick Street. It was a focal point, a landmark. You bought your bus ticket to Checketts' Corner when you clambered aboard in town. The nearby bus stop was where, bereft of a shelter, potential passengers 'enjoyed' many a draughty and wet wait in inclement weather, heading either for town, Lillington, Cubbington or Warwick, in one direction, or the Lockheed Works, Whitnash or Bishops Tachbrook, in the other.

Checketts' Corner derived its name from the Checketts family, stonemasons, who had a yard, workshops and a showroom on the corner site for as long as anyone could remember. Mr John Albert Checketts, the owner when I was growing up came from a family of stonemasons. His father John and grandfather Benjamin Checketts had all been in the trade before him, though not always on that site. They were a hard-working local family, and interestingly, when Benjamin and John died relatively young, until there was a son old enough to take over, their widows, Anne and Emma Elizabeth each took on the management of the family business and in census returns were designated 'Stonemason', - at that time a highly unusual job for a woman!

From our house, 50 Tachbrook Street, two doors away from the Corner, the sound of hammering and chipping stones could be heard all day long. The yard was always full of stones in various stages of preparation, and if we children ventured in there, we were very soon sent packing, - although we did occasionally manage to watch one of the Checketts' craftsmen carefully tapping out another "In Loving Memory." Beautifully carved stones, memorials and vases were displayed in the showroom and the adjoining yard, - to be viewed by us from a discreet distance, when the boss was not around. When my grandmother died, Mr Checketts did us proud, with her memorial vase beautifully inscribed "Mary, a beloved wife and devoted mother."

Mr Checketts continued to work at the yard until retirement in the early 1960s, sometimes hitching up a trailer to CDU 45, his beloved black Morris car, to deliver a memorial to a customer or to the cemetery just along the road. He died at home at 15 Farley Street in the summer of 1964 aged 76. His yard became the base for the Heatweld Engineering Company, and later, a whitegoods store. More recently, the buildings were demolished to make way for a block of flats, but it is still known by older locals as Checketts' Corner

Tessa Whitehouse

Lodgings in 'Leafy Leamington,' anyone?

Some years ago, when I was an apprentice at AP, I met an Italian whose Grandfather had run a Lodging House in Satchwell Street, in the days when the area was said to be "challenging", - when policemen walked down the street in threes and the children who lived at the pub were kept out of the way indoors on Saturdays!

My colleague remembered his grandfather taking down part of the bannister in the lodging house, and replacing it with a rope fixed to the wall at the top and tied to the newel post at the bottom. He tied knots in the rope about 20" apart, allowing someone space to hang over the rope to sleep, so for 4d you could rent a space on the rope. For 5d, you could go upmarket and have a bed, - but that didn't guarantee you clean sheets: if you wanted a *clean* bed, that cost more still. There was often uproar in the house in the morning, when lodgers refused to pay because they had slipped down the rope during the night, piling up on the unfortunate man at the bottom!

Alan Goldstraw April 2016

2017 'Old Leamington' Calendar

As we have for the past four years, we will have 'Old Leamington' Calendars on sale from the end of August, at South Lodge, Jephson Gardens on Tuesday mornings and at monthly Monday evening meetings. They will also be on sale from Committee members, and on other weekdays at the Visitor Information Centre at the Pump Rooms, and at our major trading outlet, Anthony Eden, Hairdressers, in Clarendon Street. At £5 a throw, there cannot be a better bargain anywhere in Leamington!

2016 Leamington History Group Local History Day

All Saints Parish Church, Saturday 3rd September, 10.30am – 4pm

This year's theme is 'Celebrations', - Royal or otherwise. Come and support us and the twenty or so Local History Groups/Associations of Friends as we showcase our varied research interests/findings and publications. Jacqui Kirk (the Leamington Library's very own 'Genealogy Genie') and her group can help you trace your family history, and Allan Jennings will have his latest offerings for sale. There is the LHG archive of images to explore, and many more enthusiasts to consult. What are you waiting for?

Our Guided Walks to Explore Historic Leamington Spa 2016

From Tuesday 21 June until mid-September, LHG will again be offering free guided walks of the town. From June until the end of August walks will take place every Tuesday at 2.30 pm and every Wednesday at 7 pm. Walks then continue until mid-September at 2.30pm on both days. We will be offering themed walks, with full details on LHG website, www.leamingtonhistory.co.uk On Saturday 10th September and Sunday 11th September, for Heritage Open Weekend there will be additional walks round Brunswick Street Cemetery (starting at 2nd entrance, Whitnash side), at 2.30 pm each day.

Private group walks can be arranged at any time during the year subject to guides' availability. For these walks, there is a small charge of £3 per person (minimum £12 per group). Please contact Margaret Rushton, secretary of the Leamington History Group on 01926 424659 for bookings or email mcholly5560@gmail.com

All guided walks (except the Cemetery Walks, - see note, above) start from the South Lodge at the entrance to Jephson Gardens opposite the Royal Pump Rooms. Most walks are suitable for all ages and abilities, each one lasting between an hour and ninety minutes. No advance booking is required. Just turn up and meet the guide at the advertised start time. Please let the guide know if you have mobility, hearing or sight problems. Dogs on a lead are permitted.

Please note: - For Health and Safety reasons, walks will be restricted to 20 persons per guide. Please turn up early to avoid disappointment.

Michael Pearson, Walks Manager

Betty Cashmore

Betty Cashmore, née Franks, grew up at 34 Lansdowne Street, where her parents ran a greengrocer's shop. In 1946 she married into the Cashmore family, sometime Leamington Bakers. Her father-in-law George was Mayor of Leamington and had Cashmore Avenue and Cashmore School named after him. Having grown up close by and lived in the same house in Villiers Street since she was married, Betty knows the area like the back of her hand. She remembers the Brickyards, the allotments on Campion Hills, and prisoners of war working on the road at the bottom of the hill in Leicester Street. Betty has vivid memories of her long life in Leamington, and is looking forward to publishing a memoir this coming autumn, interspersed with her watercolours and poems. Watch this space! - Ed

Tessa Whitehouse Reviews Monthly Monday Meetings

March 21: Jacqui Kirk, In Defence of the Realm: The Royal Naval Air Service in WW1

The Royal Flying Corps was established in 1912, but at the beginning of WW1 air transport was still in its infancy. It soon became an important means of defence as Zeppelins were already a formidable threat to Britain. Jacqui detailed her research into the 1914 Christmas Day raid on the Zeppelin base at Cuxhaven, where air craft carriers were deployed for the first time; the struggle to defend the waters around Great Britain, Ireland and the English Channel where submarines and U boats were a constant menace, to food supplies, raw materials for industry and the vulnerable East Coast towns and villages. Letters home from daring young pilots left their parents blissfully unaware of what they were really doing, - building the foundation for today's Royal Navy.

April 25: John Frearson, The Speight Family Photographers in the 19th Century

This fascinating presentation into the Speight family's photography business and its connection with Leamington featured Edward Hall Speight, the founder, a schoolmaster in Rugby who first took up photography as a hobby in the late 19th century. Edward Speight had a large family who all went into the photography business in various locations around the country. Of special interest to us was Harrison Speight who by 1898 had set up a studio in Warwick Street, albeit for a very short time. Speight's contemporary images of Leamington produced as postcards showed skilled technical enhancements contrived to suit particular occasions. John evidently relished relating his many 'finds' on eBay, now added to his collection.

May 23: John Berkeley O.B.E., Czechoslovak Soldiers in Warwickshire

The Czechoslovak memorial fountain is a familiar feature in Jephson Gardens. It commemorates the patriots who assassinated Nazi Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich in Prague in May 1942, and all those who died in the savage reprisals which followed. Free Czech Army Soldiers made their way to Britain in 1940 following the German occupation of Czechoslovakia and were eventually posted to Warwickshire. Although their billets spread across the district, the soldiers managed to mix freely: they had transport, visited cinemas, The Blue Café and The Palais and played football against local teams. Meanwhile, a small specially selected group were being trained locally by S.O.E. in sabotage, to support the Czech Underground movement. They completed their mission, but at terrible cost to all concerned. The Czech Army left Warwickshire later in 1942 but they had made many friends. There was a surprise ending to this moving presentation: John Berkeley's father was one of the soldiers, who returned to marry a local girl!

(I am grateful to Alan Griffin for the use of his well-written explanatory leaflet, - T W)

June 27: Allan Jennings, Julius & Bahne Bonnicksen, Gordon Evans & Harbury Lane Airfield

Julius Bonnicksen was the British-born son of a Danish horologist who settled in Britain. In WW1 he joined the Royal Flying Corps as a mechanic and gained experience in flying. After the war, he set up a private flying school on a site at Harbury Lane, where he built up a fleet of Gypsy Moths, and held very popular air displays. At the outbreak of WW2 Julius Bonnicksen joined the RAF and his airfield was used to train pilots to fly light aircraft. His father Bahne was interested in time-keeping and used his horology skills to invent an early version of the speedometer. Their friend, Gordon Evans, also a keen aviator and a talented artist, provided detailed drawings and cartoons of 'flying machines'. After the war, as the business declined, Gordon left to work at Flavels where he stayed until retirement. Though long disused, the airfield buildings remained for many years, seeing a new lease of life in recent years thanks to car boot sales. The hangar is now a go-karting centre and we are all very familiar with the Harbury Lane breakers' yard when looking for a cheap replacement car part!