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The Leamington Society Newsletter

November 2008

CHAIRMAN'S NOTES

Trees. The Town Council has cash to replace a small number of trees in Leamington. Do you know of any that need replacing? If so, please make your suggestions to Ruth Bennion (01926 421862) before December 15th so she can co-ordinate a list to send to the Council.

Friends' awards 2008. The Friends of Leamington Station have again won two top national awards. First, the Station gardens were classified as *Outstanding* by the joint panel from Heart of England in Bloom and Royal Horticultural Society. This is recognition of the all-year-round efforts of the team of gardeners led by Ruth Bennion and Paul Edwards. Patricia Dent and fellow Soroptomists keep the tubs and planters looking beautiful, and primary school children provide the model train filled with geraniums.

Next came the *Best Station Adoption Group* awarded by ACoRP, a national rail body. This award reflected the work of the last three years – the Roll of Honour, booking hall clock, running-in-boards, replica GWR benches on Platform 2 and heritage railway posters.

The Friends enjoy the continuing support of Chiltern Railways and generous funding from our Town Council, the Railway Heritage Trust and Chiltern, as well as from numerous individuals.

New planning rules. From October 1st new planning rules apply country-wide. These rules are difficult to interpret, not only for the layman but also for many professionals. The WDC website gives information if you are thinking about changes to the outside of your home or if you are concerned about alterations to the local street scene.

Leamington Society Walks leaflet. For many years the Society has published a leaflet describing walks around the town showing our best features – Regency buildings, the gardens, the river and so on. Robin Taylor has rewritten our previous edition. It is available from the Tourist Office (in the Pump Rooms) at 50p. – the same price as for the last ten years at least. Roger Cullimore from WDC provided all the beautiful line drawings. Thanks you to both, Robin and Roger.

Leamington Spa Station Remembrance Day service. This has become a tradition: on the Friday nearest Remembrance Day a ceremony is conducted by Christopher Wilson, the Priest in Charge of All Saints Church, beside the Roll of Honour in memory of the 2,500 GWR men among the soldiers killed in the Great

Dates for your Diary

Meetings and events to
February 2009

Contemporary Issues for Leamington

Chris Elliott,
Chief Executive WDC
Oddfellows Hall,
November 13th, 7.45

Charles II, The Merry Monarch

Dixie Atkins
Oddfellows Hall,
December 11th, 7.45

Blakesley Hall

Stephen Spencer
Oddfellows Hall,
January 8th, 2009, 7.45

*Joint meeting with Literary
Society*

Basil Spence and Coventry Cathedral

Dr Louise Campbell
Pump Room Annexe,
Tuesday February 10th, 7.30

**For more information see
the back page of this Newsletter**

He told us an inspiring story, of a very ordinary boy whose interest in railways came, like so many others of the post war generation, by watching steam engines. It's hard for those born after 1960 to credit the seductive power of these dirty, noisy steamy monsters, but for Pete they provided a highlight that kept him out of teenage trouble.

But this ordinary boy had an extraordinary talent for talent spotting in the world of pop music and this led to a fortune accumulated through association with the likes of Kylie Minogue – money beyond imagination for most of us. At this stage in the life of many rich men it has often gone wrong, as money without precedent is squandered on loose living.

But for Pete Watermen the money provided an entry to the world of railways from his earlier years. Where most of us play with model trains, Pete had the money to buy the real thing, initially and rather surprisingly for a steam fan, surplus diesels. We heard about his iconoclastic approach to the barriers he encountered from top managers at British Rail. Little did they appreciate that not only did this guy never take no for an answer, but also that his fame gave him access to the very top management. And so the collection grew, and so did his experience of running railway operations. This took him right through the pantomime of privatisation in the mid 1990s to the rather more sensible recent rebirth of Network Rail.

Perhaps the most contentious part of the talk was a robust support for the dramatic cuts of the Beeching era. Not for this train enthusiast the misty-eyed yearning for closed branch lines and steam traction, but an altogether more rational analysis of the social and economic conditions of the 1960s which meant that Beeching's policies, or something very like them, were inevitable.

And so to the future. Pete sees an improvement in rail services which is undeniable, and improvements in Network Rail's contract management, which some of us would debate. This was illustrated by his enthusiasm for the so-called High Speed 2 (HS2) line, a proposition for an entirely new system in the same style as HS1 from St Pancras, which would run to the Midlands passing to the west of Warwick. Estimates of cost have so far been about £30 billion; Pete thinks it's more likely to be £90 billion, but still worthwhile. And from a man who has never taken no for an answer that prediction may be worth taking seriously. How many of us will be around to see it, given the vintage nature of the audience, is another story!

Jan Gillett

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Michael Mallett 1932-2008

Although a distinguished Renaissance scholar and hard-working Professor at the University of Warwick, Michael Mallett gave readily of his time and enthusiasm to our local societies. I first met him, over thirty years ago, when Rex and I gave him supper before a meeting of the Historical Society to whom he was giving a talk. His reference to the Palladian heritage of many of our Leamington buildings awakened in many of us a more careful appreciation of the town in which we live.

It is some time now since members of the Leamington Society have been able to enjoy his stimulating and enjoyable lectures which were illuminated by his researches into the history and cultural life of the cities of Florence and Venice, and brought up to date by anecdotes culled from his membership of the "Venice in Peril" committee. He was as good a listener as a teacher and it is not surprising that his quiet diplomacy helped to create a teaching centre for Warwick University in that city.

However, scholarship was not his only interest. One had only to mention a forthcoming visit to Italy to provoke a lively discussion on the food and wine specialities of the region in question. His knowledge of good places to eat was legion. They ranged, in Florence, from a simple room where one was offered the one dish of the day and the patron's wine while sitting at a long wooden trestle table to the address of a plush

formal restaurant where one could choose from all the variety of food and wines that that sophisticated city had to offer.

The Leamington Society is fortunate in having so many enthusiastic and knowledgeable members and visiting lecturers who are prepared to support its aims. Michael Mallett was such a member. Although we mourn his passing, we can only rejoice that he shared with us his joy in life and appreciation of our own town.

Diana Adams

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At the bridge

It is a harmless foible. I am fond of bridges. I like to see them for much the same reason that I like to see a racehorse leaping over Becher's Brook. A bridge may be only a rough plank thrown over a ditch between fields, or a squat accumulation of bricks humped over a canal; it may be a girder bridge like the one that carries the railway over High Street, or a stone bridge rich with balustrades and arches. Unless it is exceptionally ugly I shall admire it. I shall admire it especially if it is a suspension-bridge soaring over water.

Sometimes I tell people that the suspension-bridge over the Leam, erected by William de Normanville in 1903 on the public-footpath between Lillington and Whitnash, is my favourite place in the world. I may be telling the truth. I saw it for the first time when I was in my pram; only a little later I would poke my head through the ironwork of the parapets, straining against the reins my mother was clinging to as hard as she could. I remember scuttling from one side to the other to watch a leaf accelerating towards the weir and tumbling over the steps. Nowadays, with exactly the same curiosity, I hurry slowly, trying to give the impression that I am a scientist taking observations.



De Normanville bridge

So when I take people round Leamington I always stop and point out how wonderfully our suspension-bridge is situated: the green view upstream, with the islet on the left where the swans nest; the beds of water-lilies by the Mill Gardens; the trees crowning the high ground along Newbold Terrace East.

Then I turn and give praise to the urban view, the unobtrusive opulence of the riverside houses and their walled gardens; the post-office of 1870 (the year of the battle of Sedan); the procession of cool pillars along the Colonnade; and high above everything else All Saints', the Parish Church, the climax, the centre of the town as Lower Manhattan is the centre of New York, only incomparably more beautiful.

But winter is my favourite time, when on a calm evening after heavy rain a surge of water is plunging downwards and the spray is flying and the deck beneath me is trembling and the low sun is stamped in the sky like a red rivet; and when the great disc finally vanishes and the world is suddenly cold, I walk home happy.

Once, I remember, more than twenty years ago, early in Advent I think it was, I stayed a little longer than usual, unwilling to leave. So many birds had gathered in the space between the islet and the waterfall, ducks, geese, coots, moorhens, that no one however clever could have counted them, ceaselessly interweaving, scurrying after each other, waiting for something it seemed, on top of the water it seemed, moving shapes without weight. And as I watched, three or four of them lifted off, involuntarily, helplessly,

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Newsletter Distribution

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The Leamington Society is a registered charity. It is affiliated to the Civic Trust and to the West Midlands Amenity Societies Association. It exists to preserve the heritage and improve the character of Royal Leamington Spa and to encourage high standards of planning and architecture

Charity No. 516078

Unless otherwise indicated, views expressed in these newsletters are the contributors' own and not necessarily the corporate view of the Society.

Events to February 2009

Contemporary Issues for Leamington

Chris Elliot, 13 November, 7.45, Oddfellows Hall

Chris Elliott is Chief Executive of WDC and where the buck stops with the administration of our council, whatever its colour. He may discuss

- the final version of the Grimley Station Area report, now adopted as part of the local planning framework
- the proposed Chandos Street development
- the possible location of new homes to meet government demands for ever more housing to be provided by an ever more reluctant construction industry.

This is your chance to learn more and ask questions.

Charles II, The Merry Monarch

Dixie Adams, 11 December, 7.45, Oddfellows Hall

He was also witty, extremely intelligent and a survivor. After a happy childhood he was plunged into the Civil War ending with the death of his father. After fifteen years of exile he regained the throne and reigned for 25 years.

Misfortune stilled followed him: conflicts with Parliament, anti-Catholic riots; the Black Death and the Fire of London but he showed courage and charm throughout his reign. His numerous mistresses were evidence of this. This talk shows all the facets of this fascinating character with much laughter and some tears.

Mulled wine will be provided after the talk.

Blakesley Hall

Stephen Spencer, 8 January 2009, 7.45, Oddfellows Hall

Located some 3 miles east of Birmingham city centre, Blakesley Hall (Grade II* listed), is a delightfully restored timber-framed Elizabethan house set amidst idyllic grounds and with fine period interiors.

Built in 1590 for a wealthy gentleman, Blakesley Hall provides a marvellous insight into the social aspirations of the Tudor middle-classes.

The Society is planning a trip in the summer to Blakesley Hall; details will be announced in the next Newsletter.

Basil Spence and Coventry Cathedral

Louise Campbell, Tuesday 10 February, 7.30, Pump Rooms Annexe

Coventry Cathedral, designed and built 1951-1962, is one of the most important and controversial works of post-war British architecture. The designer, Basil Spence, had to reconcile the claims of the Provost and Chapter, Coventry City Council, the ruins of the old Cathedral and the array of outstanding modern artists (Epstein, Sutherland, Piper ...) whom he commissioned.

Louise Campbell, a local Historian of Art at Warwick University has spent four years researching its history and Basil Spence's role and her talk will be of interest to all of us.

Note the date, time and venue for this talk

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We welcome as new members

Rodney King,
Alec and Angela Ford