



LEIGHWAY

The newsletter of the Leigh Society
An eye to the future with an ear to the past in the heart of Leigh

CHAIRMAN'S ANNUAL REPORT

The loss of our President, Frank Bentley, during the year, was a great blow. We miss him hugely, but he has left us with many happy memories and we will always be grateful for his help and support over many years. Frank enjoyed helping with school parties at the Heritage Centre and this work continues and goes from strength to strength. We consider this to be a very important function of the museum and the effort put in by the stewards and other helpers is invaluable and much appreciated by children and teachers, often illustrated by charming letters of thanks.

Your committee continues to work hard on your behalf and I am sure that their efforts and the support of all our members helps to make Leigh the special place we want it to be.

Our AGM is early this year, on Wednesday 13th April, and I look forward to seeing you there.

Ann

SECRETARY'S REPORT

As David Atkinson has outlined in his article, the Leigh Society was formed to protect Leigh's unique and historic character from unwelcome development. The 4 Leigh Conservation Areas being established, the Leigh Society's Planning Sub-Committee continues to monitor and comment on planning applications in these areas at our monthly committee meetings. Thanks to Elaine, Alan, Carole and our local architect, David Greenwood, these are now brought up on screen and our comments and objections are submitted by Carole to the Borough Council.

Thanks to Dec all our slides have now been put onto disc and can now be viewed on our power point projector. We can now show them not only from time to time at our meetings, but to school parties and groups at the Heritage Centre.

The next task is for our archive material, and we have lots, to be catalogued and recorded properly. A group needs to be set up to work on a regular basis on this. Interested members should contact Carole or myself.

We are affiliated to the CPRE and River Thames Society who work to protect countryside, green belt and the Thames from bad and harmful encroachment.

I represent the Society on the Borough Council's Conservation Working Party, also attended by Alan Crystall in his capacity as a Leigh Councillor on the Borough Planning Committee. At the moment, appraisals of the Leigh Conservation Areas are being

worked on and upgraded and other areas of the Borough deemed to be of special merit are being looked at with a view to local listings. We are also represented on the local amenity societies Conservation Forum which meets from time to time to look at local planning issues of concern to us all. Carole and I attend these meetings.

The Leigh Town Council has formed an Old Town Community Group which enables businesses and residents in the Old Town an opportunity to discuss problems and put forward ideas for improvements. This is chaired by Carole wearing her Leigh Town Council hat, and I attend on behalf of the Society.

Socially, I would like to make special mention of our enjoyable outings arranged by Ann. In April we look forward to the visit to the Isle of Wight. It will now include watching the Royal Wedding at the hotel in Shanklyn.

Our meetings are fairly well attended and we do hope they give people an opportunity to hear what is going on and make their views known to the committee. Thanks to all concerned.

Thanks to all our members, who by their membership, help to support the aims and efforts of the Society.

Margaret

OUR AUDITORS

It is that time of year when we need to say our thank yous to people who assist in the Society's work. We would like to say a particular thank you to David Cannan and Taylor Viney & Marlow who undertake our accounting.

DEAR DIARY

All our talks are held at Wesley Hall, Elm Road Methodist Church at 8 p.m entry charge of £1 for members and £2 for visitors. Our events and others for your enjoyment are as follows –

13 April – AGM – Memories of the Essex Coast DVD

11 May – Paglesham Natives – Mr & Mrs Roberts

12-20 June - Leigh Art Trail

18-19 June – Leigh Folk Festival

31 July Fishing Festival

17-18 September – Old Leigh Regatta

12 October – Thames Sailing Barges A Past and A Future – David Gibson

9 November – Southend Old and New – Simon Deacon

25 November – Christmas Lights Switch on

ST GEORGE'S SCHOOL, HADLEIGH ROAD

The site of the school has had a very high profile in recent years and yet again there is an appeal in respect of its redevelopment. However, this little snippet is to find out information about the site when it was a school.

Stephen Matthews from Vancouver was recently going through some of his late mother's papers and noticed she went to a girls school called St George's School in Leigh-on-Sea during the late 1920s and into the 1930s. Steve wonders if any readers have info on the school or how I can find some info on it. The only document he has is a O.G.A. (he believes this means Old Girls Association) from 1934.

So did you go to St George's? Do you have any information which would help Stephen. Please contact Carole at carole.mulroney@btinternet.com or through the Heritage Centre.

'HOME' TO REST

Has anyone, like me, walked down Church Hill, and noticed the impressive gravestone with the Celtic Cross? I have often wondered about the family buried there, for their names appear in the Leigh Parish registers, but they were not from Leigh and they were clearly wealthy. So this edition's challenge was to find out about them.

The grave is that of Maria Henderson, the wife of Francis Const Baker. The gravestone tells us that Maria was from Blackrock, County Dublin and lived in Leigh between 1864 and 1875. On her death in Dublin, where the family had returned, and in line with her express wish, her husband brought her 'home' after 30 years and she was buried on St Clement's Day 1905 and the Cross was erected by friends of her Leigh Bible Class.

The family appears in the Leigh Parish registers because most of their children were born here. Francis was a Gentleman by profession. He was born in Fitzroy Square, London, one of the original Georgian Squares, in 1831. Fitzroy Square was a speculative development intended to provide London residences for aristocratic families. In 1861 the family were at 14 Fitzroy Square which is now St Luke's Hospital for the Clergy.

Maria Henderson was the tenth child of James Henderson and Anne Peacock, and she was born on 26 December 1839 at Blackrock. As a young woman she lived with her brother, James Alexander and she taught his younger children. This was where she met her future husband Frank Const Barker. Frank Barker was one of James Alexander's business friends. All the Barker family used the middle name Const after a Mr Const of Piccadilly who was a barrister and wealthy business friend of Frank's father and who had left the family money when he died (more of him later).

Frank and Maria were married in Belfast on 15 September 1862 and lived at Sorrento House, Dalkey, Co. Dublin. They had eight children.

Their eldest child, Margaret Frances Const Barker (Meta) founded St Christopher's College for Nursery Nurses at Tunbridge Wells which was later taken over by Barnardos. She died in 1934. Their fifth child, William Gerald Const Barker died in 1884 in Australia and is also commemorated on another face of the Leigh gravestone.

The family were living at Leigh House in 1871 and had a governess, head nurse, cook, housemaid, nursemaid and footman.

And now to Mr Const who gave them all their middle name.

According to the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Francis Const (1752-1839) was a legal writer of dramatic epilogues and prologues and had numerous theatrical acquaintances, including Sheridan. He possessed, as a life interest, an eighth share in the Covent Garden Theatre.

Const was called to the bar at the Middle Temple in 1783 and lived at 5 Pump Court in the Middle Temple from at least 1799 until his death. He edited several editions of Edmund Bott's Laws Relating to the Poor and was chairman of the Middlesex magistrates and the Westminster sessions. Const acquired a fortune of £150,000 by speculation during his early life and left legacies to many of his friends including the Bakers.

As a barrister he worked with Sir William Garrow (have you been watching Garrow's Law on TV recently?)

He also defended Peter Heywood, the lone charged officer of the Bounty mutineers. Const did "earnestly recommend" him "to His Majesty's Royal Mercy." A few weeks later the King pardoned him.

1953-2011 SAYING GOODBYE TO OLD BELFAIRS SCHOOL

Readers may be aware, Belfairs is closing its doors for the last time in July, ready to move into the new school in September; the old buildings will then be demolished.

The School is extending an invitation to all those who have been part of Belfairs in the past to help it commemorate almost 60 years of history. The School is planning, amongst other things, an afternoon of tours, a commemorative brochure, an exhibition of photos and memorabilia...

You may want to take the opportunity to take a last look at the old school buildings, or to meet up with old friends, or share anecdotes or memories through photos, writing, or simply letting one of the team record your stories.

The School would also like to establish a permanent museum record of the old school in the form of memorabilia, old uniforms, photos, and so on...

Events planned for July include an afternoon of tours and refreshments, where you can have your photo taken for posterity in your old form room perhaps, or in front of the school buildings; an exhibition and performance evening where the official hand-over of the keys will take place alongside a range of performances including the famous Wind Band, conducted by the evergreen John Weeks.

Please email thebigevent@belfairs.southend.sch.uk or write to Sharon Williams at Belfairs School, Highlands Boulevard, Leigh on Sea, SS9 3TG

A WHITE WEED UPDATE

Following the article on the white weed trade last month, member Tony Carr has sent some further information.

The white weed factory was at the bottom of Tony's garden in an alley at the rear of 1076 London Road, which later became Stones Electrical. The alley ran from Cranleigh Drive to Station Road and the 'factory' was a converted two storey building previously garages and workshops.

Raw weed was washed and dyed there and the smell was rancid. Bags of dyed weed were issued to 'home workers' including Tony's mother, who made up the bunches by hand and was paid accordingly.

Tony's uncle, Eddy Frost owned a bawley and gave up fishing to convert to 'weed raking' which paid better. His boat was moored in Leigh Ray.

HOW OUR SOCIETY BEGAN 40 YEARS AGO

by David Atkinson, Co-Founder and Vice President of the Leigh Society.

Over 100 people crammed the small hall of Leigh Community Centre on 22nd March 1973 to launch the Leigh Society. Chairing the meeting was Pat Brown, the no-nonsense chairman of the Leigh Ratepayers Association. The Evening Echo reported him as saying: "We will try to preserve things in Leigh worth preserving, especially the conservation area". He reminded us that the destruction of the Old Town began in 1854 when the Shoebury-Fenchurch Street line 'cut down' 25 weather boarded houses. The meeting elected Ken Strowlger as Chairman, Elaine Crystall as his Deputy, Vivienne Huxter as Secretary and her husband Dennis as Treasurer. Also elected by acclamation was our first President, the much loved local historian Sheila Pitt-Stanley whose family had been in Leigh since 1597. She said: "To record and collect data on the history of Leigh has been the main aim of my life, and dear to my heart".

The meeting agreed a number of motions proposed by the foundation committee: the acceptance of a constitution recommended by the Civic Trust to whom we had become affiliated, and the establishment of four project groups - to survey and report on the Old Town, to build up a reference library of books, maps, prints and photographs of Leigh's past as a permanent record, to restore the Old Bank House perhaps as a library and museum of Leigh's history, and to involve young members. An executive committee was elected to replace the foundation committee to implement the Society's objectives. It held a fund-raising dinner in Oscar's Restaurant and the Society's first public exhibition two years later. The Heritage Centre, the Endeavour Trust and Plumbs Cottage were successes to come. For me, the Leigh Society, together with the Leigh Dunkirk Memorial in St Clements Churchyard, are the proudest achievements with which I have been associated in the area I represented for three years on Southend Council.

However, the establishment of our Society as a civic amenity group was never inevitable. Nor was the designation of Leigh Hill as a conservation area which was a necessary precondition for the Society's existence. Official recognition that Leigh was worthy of such preservation took persistence and persuasion against a frustrating lack of vision and appreciation of this 'jewel in Southend's crown' on the part of our civic leaders and officers. Indeed, many of them regarded the Old Town as an 'eyesore'. In 1958, Leigh's doughty Councillor Mrs Vera Smith JP presented a petition of 14000 signatures to the Council urging for the preservation of Leigh's character and heritage. It had no effect. Then, in 1969, despite of new petition led by architect Ron Cox, the Planning Committee refused to recommend an order to designate Leigh Hill a conservation area on the grounds that the Borough Architect did not feel that its buildings satisfied the criteria for establishing one.

The minute (160) reporting this decision to the full Council was on the agenda of my first meeting of it, on 5th June 1969, following the May elections at which I had been elected to join Mike King and Clive Abbott representing Leigh Ward. I used my maiden speech to urge that this minute be rejected, and moved its reference back for further consideration by the Planning Committee. It was! In response it was decided to seek the guidance of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government responsible for conservation matters. The Ministry sent its expert Roy Worskett to see Leigh Hill for himself. He must have been impressed. Not only did he favour early conservation, he recommended extending the original area (the

so-called "33 acres") westwards to include Church Hill with its weather boarded terraces and the south side of Broadway West with the library and gardens. Consequently, on 6th May 1971, the Council approved a new Planning Committee minute (1667) to designate conserving the enlarged area exactly in line with Mr Worskett's recommendations. Furthermore, to prepare a 'local list' of buildings following a survey, and "to decide where and in what manner steps might be taken to preserve and enhance the character and appearance of the area". The survey would be undertaken by the Borough Engineer and Borough Architect who would review existing development plans, the flow of through traffic, and the buildings in need of restoration including the Old Bank House which was threatened with demolition. Tree planting, paving, advertising, street lighting and 'furniture' would all be scrutinised, and all interested organisations consulted. The subsequent report: LEIGH-ON-SEA CONSERVATION AREA, published in May 1972, contained everything we had called for. The conservation of Leigh Hill was underway ! Now it needed its own amenity society to stimulate public interest and involvement.

At this point, my good friend John Pettitt, who ran an antiques shop at the bottom of Leigh Hill, and I, together with our wives Audrey and Sue, decided to seek to establish such an organisation "for people interested in taking constructive action and, co-ordinating with the Council, to ensure that the area's character is preserved and restored". Our letter in the Evening Echo called for volunteers to help us form a foundation committee to write to my address marking their envelopes "Leigh Hill Society". In it we said that "in no way would the Society be politically motivated or be merely one of protest". Those who came forward met for the first time in Foxwood Place on 5th October 1972, and subsequently at John and Audrey's flat in London Road, and at Alan and Elaine's house on Leigh Hill. Less then six months later the Leigh Society was launched. I still have my first membership card recording my subscription of 50p as "Received with Thanks" by Treasurer Dennis on 15th February 1973, "to be renewed a year later, and to notify any change of address to the Secretary" (his wife!). Inside were printed our Objectives. The glossy grey front reproduced the Society's first logo or emblem based on the perpendicular stained-glass window in the north aisle of St Clements Church showing the tide washing at the feet of a fisherman carrying a basket. Behind, resting on the pebbled beach, is a bawley with a net strung from the mast to dry. In the background is the sea wall and typical Leigh weather boarded houses among trees, whilst the whole scene is silhouetted by the tower of St Clements - a guide to generations of returning fishermen.



This logo has since been replaced by the Society's current design - a fishing boat inside a cockle shell, from the coat-of-arms of the Leigh-on-Sea Urban District Council which lasted 26 years until its incorporation into Southend in 1913.

As the Foundation Committee of the Leigh Society first met on 5th October 1972, so I suggest that Friday 5th October 2012 should be commemorated as our 40th Anniversary. That is next year. Sadly, our co-founder John Pettitt, and our first President Sheila Pitt-Stanley are no longer with us, but many of the

original members of the Society are, and we can be traced ! How should this landmark anniversary be celebrated whilst we are still around ? A dinner in a pub or restaurant in the Old Town ? Or in the House of Commons, courtesy of our Vice-President David Amess MP? Or a more modest event - a buffet reception in our own Heritage Centre ?

Over to you, dear readers, and to our officers. We have a year-and-a-half to make it happen!

! David Atkinson, February 2011

AUTHORS NOTE: It must be evident that this is a personal recollection of the events which led to the conservation of Leigh Hill and the establishment of the Leigh Society by one who was present. Having checked all the dates from my diaries and facts from appropriate Council minutes and reports, I shared a first draft with Vivienne Huxter, Elaine Crystall and my ex-wife Sue who have kindly accepted it as accurate.

I appreciate that concurrent to these events a great deal was going on that threatened to effect Leigh, Southend and Essex. These included conservation issues such as the notorious "Road to the West", a proposed Leigh Marina Village, and the construction of a six foot sea wall to "flood proof" the Old Town. All these proposals were vigorously opposed by the Sea Front Action Group. Then in 1972 the Government announced the abolition of county borough councils such as Southend-on-Sea many of whose major functions such as strategic planning and highways would, henceforth, be undertaken by new County Councils from 1st April 1974. Elections on 12th April 1973 sent 13 mostly former and current Southend councillors, including Mike King and myself, to County Hall to serve four years. Fortunately, local conservation matters remained the responsibility of the new district councils. Then there was Maplin. In 1969, the Government shortlisted four sites for London's third international airport including a proposal to reclaim land from the sea on the Maplin Sands off Foulness Island. This would, of course, make Southend 'airport city' and necessitate the upgrading of the infrastructure of South Essex. Despite the objections of the Defenders of Essex, the Government accepted the Rosskill Commission's recommendation of Maplin, and the enabling bill went through Parliament. It was abandoned following the oil crisis of 1973. Now, the Mayor of London is proposing 'Boris Island' for a new airport in the Thames Estuary! But, no one seems to have told him that the "SS Richard Montgomery", with its contents of wartime bombs, would have to be removed first, which, as I know from my own experiences, no government has dared to sanction !

Anyway, Southend has been restored as a unitary authority. And the Leigh Society thrives !

And, finally, the author of the Civic Amenities Act, which provides for societies such as ours to affiliate to the Civic Trust, was Winston Churchill's son-in-law Duncan Sandys MP. After a distinguished ministerial career in many offices of state, in his latter years in the House of Commons he drew lucky in the ballot for private members bills in 1966. His interest in the national heritage prompted his choice of bill which was unopposed and became an Act of Parliament the following year. It so happened that I shared a hotel bedroom with Duncan Sandys, now in the House of Lords, when Dublin Airport became fogbound thus delaying our return to London after a meeting of the Council of Europe's Culture and Education Committee of which we were both members in the early 1980's. I took the opportunity to tell the old boy about our Society and what it was achieving thanks to his bill. He was very chuffed to learn how his vision was being realised in Leigh!

REMEMBERING TREVOR BAILEY

Trevor Bailey taught me History and English at Alleyn Court between 1945 and 1952, though, sadly, not cricket. My personal, and in hindsight, treasured recollection of him is that, because he lived 2 doors from us in Bridgewater Drive (Westcliff), my father would drive him in to school with me every morning. Of course, I was in awe of him then in view of what he was already performing for Essex and England about which he was always very modest.

I was not to see him again for 52 years until December 2004 when I hosted a reception in the House of Commons to commemorate the Centenary of the school (for John Wilcox, the son of the founder of the school), at which he was present, looking much the same. In my speech I referred to him as Alleyn Court's most famous "old boy" (he was a student as well as a teacher), and to some of his unforgettable achievements such as saving the Ashes in 1953, and his 7 for 34 against the West Indies at Kingston, Jamaica in 1954, a record which had stood until just a few months before (in 2004).

Although he was appointed CBE and received the Freedom of the Borough, it always seemed to me that Trevor Bailey was never as acknowledged as much as he should have been for what he achieved for English cricket, but he would not have wanted it any other way.

David Atkinson, February 2011



FROM THE EDITOR

As this is our AGM edition which is shorter because of all the other paperwork which has to be included, I apologise to Janet Fisher and Terry Pond who sent articles which I have not got space for this time. They will be in the next edition in September. I have also had to cut down on photos but I hope you still enjoy.

Carole

AND FINALLY

Any opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the particular author and not necessarily those of the committee and officers of the Society.

We rather hope you will like to keep your copy of Leighway but if not please recycle it.

© Leigh Society, Leigh Heritage Centre, 13A High Street, Leigh-on-Sea SS9 2EN