

Folkestone & District Local History Society

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CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

At the March meeting we welcomed guest speaker Mary Smith who presented her most interesting and fascinating talk entitled 'A Schoolgirl's War'. Mary said up until recently she was head teacher at Maidstone Grammar School for Girls and while she was there they made two absolutely fascinating discoveries: the first one was to discover that one of the underground air-raid shelters which was dug for the girls back from the war years was still there. In 2013 they hired a contractor to clear the concrete from the steps leading down to the door, after which they entered the shelter, with a KCC Health and Safety Officer following, to check the air quality for them, and they found the shelters pretty well intact.

Mary said she was able to trace the school's history during WW2 from the art teacher, Miss Keen's wartime scrapbook of her paintings, recording all the war years; also the school magazines, recording the pupil's memoirs; the school log books; and more than fifty pupils, now in their 80s and 90s, who Mary managed to trace.

1938 was a good year for Maidstone Grammar School for Girls, they began by celebrating the school's Golden Jubilee; and a new school which was being built to replace the original Victorian building which was seriously overcrowded.

On Sunday 3rd September 1938 Neville Chamberlain, the Prime Minister, broadcast that the country was at war. Due to the fact that the air-raid shelters were not built. Miss Bartels, the headmistress, wrote to the parents on 12th September, two days before the term was due to begin, telling them not to send their daughters to school until they heard from her. When the school opened, the pupils only had part time schooling due to the number that could be accommodated in the air-raid shelters. Part-time schooling continued for many months because 240 pupils and their teachers from King's Warren School in Plumstead were evacuated to Maidstone to share the brand new school buildings at Maidstone Grammar Girls' School. The girls had to carry their gas masks with them all the time (I remember it well!) and if they left it at home they were fined one penny.

All through the talk Mary was showing Miss Keen's images of pupils in the air-raid shelters, the cooks bringing the meals to the air-raid shelters and serving them, etc. Mary also spoke about the Battle of Britain and that Maidstone was badly damaged because it was on the flight path to London.

Mary also said that out of the fifty pupils that she managed to trace, 25 of them have been back to the school and went down the air-raid shelter. She also said that WW2 is in the school curriculum for junior school pupils and that school visits to the shelter can be arranged.

Mary then signed copies of her book entitled "A Schoolgirl's War – The story of life in World War Two", which she was selling for £10.00.

In the final paragraph of Mary's book she wrote: *I would like to pay tribute to the immense resilience, spirit and courage of these wartime schoolgirls and their teachers. I am in awe of their powers of endurance and their seemingly unflinching good humour. Their accounts are profoundly moving and inspiring, and it has been an honour to bring together in this book those stories and Miss Keen's beautiful illustrations.*

Forty-six people attended the meeting eight of whom were visitors.



Dinner In The Trenches, 1940.

At the April meeting we welcomed member & speaker Terry Begent who presented his talk entitled 'List it or lose it'. Terry started his talk on Folkestone's heritage by looking at what is being protected, what should have been protected and how we might protect things in the future. He went on to say all through history people have been demolishing historic buildings and the first Act to protect buildings was by Henry VIII's daughter Queen Elizabeth I in 1559. In 1882, 300 years later, the Ancient Monuments Act created a list of ancient monuments to be protected which included Stonehenge but the only place in Kent was Kits Coty. Further Acts also compiled a list of buildings which were damaged during wars that were of particular interest and were not to be knocked down but restored or rebuilt. Then after WW2 councils were instructed to make a list of buildings to be protected and they produced more specific lists. The next major step was in 1975, which was the European Heritage Year, and a major step forward for Folkestone when over 100 buildings were listed, but there were things listed that arguably didn't need protecting. English Heritage was later established as the official body whose job was to preserve monuments and buildings and subsequently this organisation has become Historic England.

Terry then talked about the categories of listings, starting with Grade Two which was the lowest; Grade Two Star which are buildings considered a little bit more important and deserving of better protection for which you are not allowed to change the outside of the building. The highest level of grading is Grade One, for buildings which are of exceptional interest. For Grade One listings, Historic England will not let you do anything unless it is approved and they can send inspectors to check, for example, that you are using the right cement etc.

The requirements for the listings are from an architectural and historic interest. One point of interest is that all buildings before 1700 all are listed providing they consist of the original fabric; from 1700 to 1840 most buildings are listed; and after 1840, because so many buildings were getting listed, Historic England have started getting a bit more fussy; after 1945 they are very careful about what is selected; and any building less than 30 years old is only listed if it is of outstanding quality and is under threat.

He went on to say that Folkestone only has 125 listed buildings and we are way behind other towns in Kent. We have 56 residential, 11 pubs, 9 churches, 23 commercial premises, and 25 miscellaneous things, mainly listed in 1975.

Churches: the Parish Church (Grade 2 star), All Souls (built 1894, Grade 2), St Martins (built c750-900AD, Grade 1), St Peter's (built 1862, Grade 2), St Savours (built in 1890, Grade 2), Christ Church (Grade 2), Holy Trinity (Grade 2 star), United Reform Church (Grade 2).

Commercial Premises: Ingles Manor (Grade 2, converted into 17 offices and the stables at the back converted into commercial use), 12-16 Church Street (the building which was the Citizens Advice Bureau), 149 & 151 Sandgate Road, The Old High Street (just about everything has been listed), the Kentucky Fried Chicken building at 88 Sandgate Road (formerly the Post Office), the Halifax Building Society (formerly the Gas showrooms designed by Seaton Dahl in art deco style and listed in 1987), Grace Hill library & museum (Grade 2 listed in 1975), Lloyds Bank, the Masonic Hall, the Town Hall, and the last commercial property was the Royal Bank of Scotland.

Other Things: Leas Lift (first listed in 1989 and Terry said he was involved in the running of it, a lot of work was done to get it listing upgraded to a 2 star), the black bollards leading to the Parish Church, the paving stones and lamp bollard in the church yard, the Viaduct, Darlington Arch, the Victorian Pillar Box (constructed 1866, opposite Holy Trinity Church and listed in 1975), a K6 telephone box (next to the Victorian Pillar Box), an electricity distribution box in Bathurst Road, the Town Cross and Sundial, cobble stones in Bournemouth Road, the Bandstand, the War Memorial (first listed in 2010, Grade 2 star), the Cairn Memorial, the Pulhamite Caves, the Swing Bridge, East Head and the Lighthouse (listed in 2012), the William Harvey statue and the Sidney Weston Fountain (listed in 2019).

Terry told us about listed things that have sadly gone: a statue by the Metropole, number 2 & 4 High Street (formerly Plummer Roddis department store), and the plinth in the grounds of the Bayle Battery which one time had a statue on it.

Terry finished by speaking about the Local Lists brought in by the Government so that towns can make a list of buildings that don't quite qualify for Historic England listing, but their historic status can be considered when planning application is sought. These can be buildings, places, sites or even landscapes.

Sixty-five people attended the meeting seven of whom were visitors.

At the May meeting I was the speaker and I presented my talk entitled 'The History of Folkestone Lifeboat Station' which is comparatively short as the service was discontinued in 1930 in favour of the Hythe and Dover Lifeboats.

After the loss of the sailing ship *Benvenue* off Sandgate, on the 11th November 1891 there was much concern about the lifeboat facilities at Seabrook, many people thought they were inadequate. Just eight days after the disaster there was a public meeting held at the Folkestone Town Hall. A lifeboat committee was formed in accordance with the wishes of the local residents; the Chairman elected was Councillor Stephen Penfold.

The first lifeboat came in 1893 she was 38 feet long, 8 feet wide, self-righting, and rowed 12 oars double banked; she was fitted with three water-ballast tanks, provided with plugs and pumps, by means of which water could be readily admitted or pumped out; she also possessed the latest improvements with all the other characteristics of the boats of the institute in way of self-righting, self-ejecting water etc. She would promptly self-right if capsized with all the crew and gear in, masts up and sails set. The cost of the boat, carriage and equipment was defrayed by Miss Curling of Denmark Hill, London and as desired by her the boat was named *J. McConnel Hussey*.

The lifeboat house was built just east of the Victoria Pier by local builder Hayward and Paramor at a cost of £659.

The crew was made up of volunteers from Folkestone fishermen, Richard J. May Coxswain, Stephen Cook second Cox, G. Philpott bowman, with crew members: E. Major, S. Penny, J. Wilson, W. Hall, R. Carter, J. Alton, W. May, G. Spearpoint, G. Featherbe, W.H. May, F. Featherbe, and G. Down.

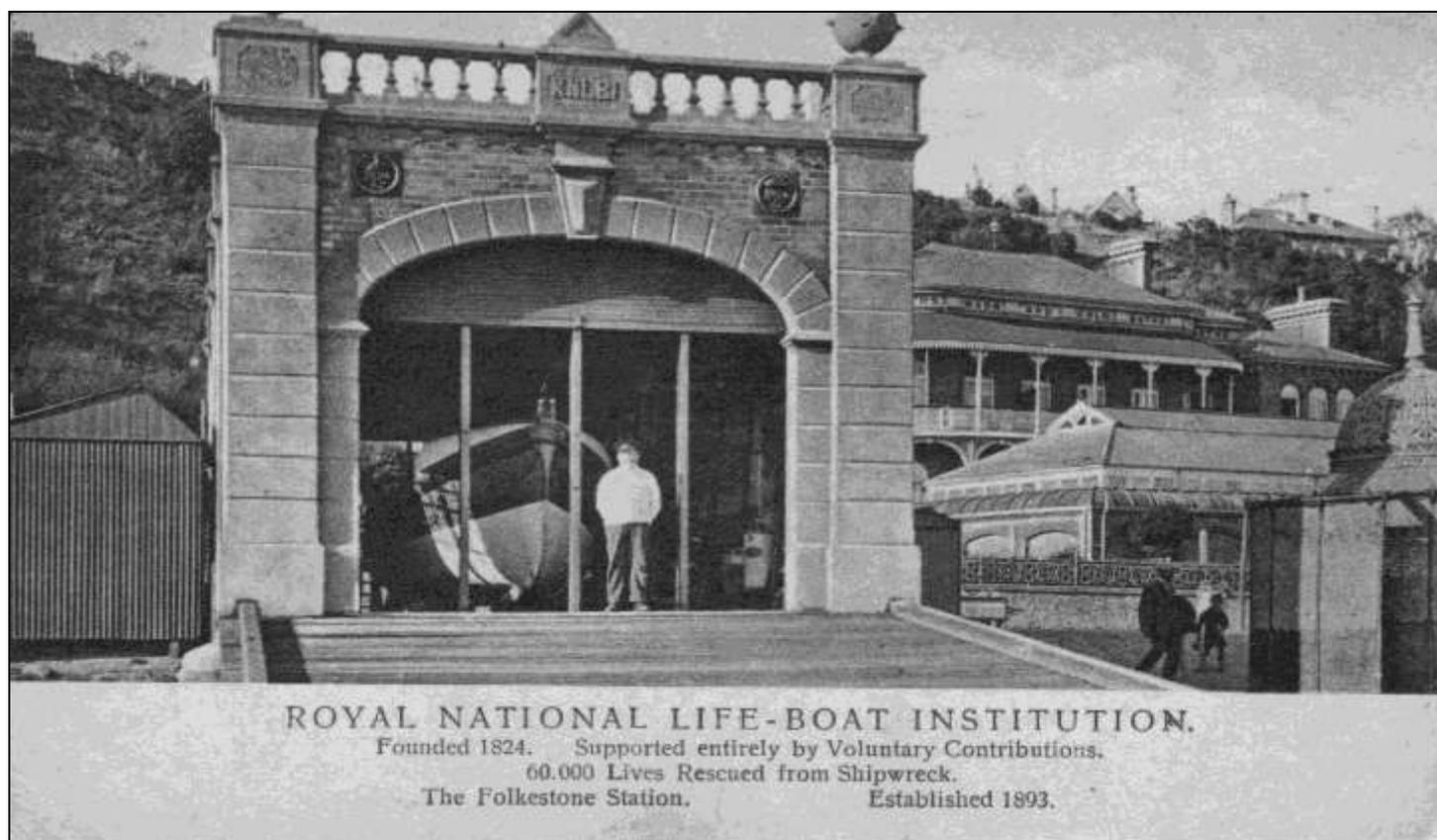
In 1897 Richard May retired due to ill health and he was replaced by Stephen Cook and second Cox was Edmund Major. There were two more coxswains following the retirement of Stephen Cook in 1919 they were W.E. Hart who was Cox for just one year then William H. Baker (1919-1930). Both Stephen Cook and William Baker received a pension and certificate from the RNLI on their retirement.

The *J. McConnel Hussey* made four launches and saved 10 lives during her time stationed at Folkestone. She was replaced by lifeboat *Leslie* in April 1903. She was three feet shorter and had six inches more beam than the previous boat; she was fitted with a centre board and had a flat bottom.

The *Leslie* was in service at Folkestone until October 1930 at which time the station closed this was due to Hythe having a motor lifeboat called *City of Nottingham* and Dover also having a motor lifeboat called *Sir William Hillary*. The *Leslie* was launched on service 21 times saving 16 lives.

The Lifeboat House remained for exhibitions and fund raising until 7th May 1936 when the building was surrendered to the landlord and subsequently demolished.

Forty-six people attended the meeting two of whom were visitors.



We would like to welcome new members: Barbara Golby, Jeff & Hilary Norman, Kevin & Debbie Harvey, Frank & Jenny Barraclough & Colin Coomber.

On a rather sad note I would like to announce that Mrs Brown who ran the Folkestone Bookshop has died. She moved to Eastbourne to be near her daughter after she retired, but remained a member of the society.

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