



**FOLKESTONE & DISTRICT
Local History Society
www.folkestonehistory.org**

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CHAIRMAN'S REPORT by Alan F Taylor.

At the June meeting we welcomed guest speaker Pete Ewart who presented his talk entitled Victorian & Edwardian Schooldays. Pete said that although schools had always been around it wasn't until the Victorian era that they were improved considerably and available for all children rich and poor. In 1870 a law was passed which made it mandatory for all children aged between 5 -10 to attend school.

The leaving age was then increased to 11 in 1893 however parents and employers of working class children still prevented them from going to school as they were making money in the work place.

When Queen Victoria initially came to the throne schools were for the rich. Most children never went to school and struggled to read or write. Children from rich families were typically taught at home by governesses until the age of 10 years old. Wealthy boys from the age of 10 would then go to Public schools such as Rugby. Girls on the other hand continued to be educated at home.

The poor were initially introduced to school thanks to 'Sunday school' pioneer Robert Raikes, with about 1,250,000 children gaining an education by this method by 1831.

This was all turned on its head however in 1870 with the passing of the Education Act and school began to cater for rich and poor alike. Various names were given to schools including British schools and Ragged schools; the later getting its name from the poor children attending the school.

Schools were different to those we have today. Within poor inner city areas there could be anywhere between 70 and 80 pupils in one class!

The schools were imposing with high up windows to prevent children from seeing out of. Furthermore the walls of the schools lacked creativity and were often bare or had merely text for the children to look at.

Village schools typically had smaller classes however the age groups would be varied. It wasn't uncommon for a 6-year old child to be working in the same classroom as a 10-year old! Due to the size of the school classrooms it became regimented and adopted a significant amount of reputation. Usually this would consist of the classroom teacher writing on the chalkboard and the children copying it down.

Victorian schools had more female teachers than male ones most of whom were not married and they were called 'Miss' at all times. The reason there was mainly female teachers was due to the pay scale. The salaries were poor and men could eared more money elsewhere. The reason most teachers were unmarried was because once married they were expected to take care of their family.

Discipline was huge in Victorian times. It wasn't uncommon for children to be beaten with canes made from birch wood. Boys were caned on their backsides whereas Girls would take the punishment on their legs or hands.

Children were reprimanded for using their left hand to write! This was seen as a punishable offence and made to write with their right hand!

Lessons were basic but focussed on the 3 R's of reading, writing & arithmetic (maths), with the introduction of religion. Children were expected to chant things out loud until they did so without mistakes. The time tables were commonly done this way.

In Victorian times paper was expensive so children used slate boards with slate pencils and once their work was checked the slate board was cleaned off. Before slate boards the youngest children would practice writing in sand trays. This was common for 5-6 year olds before they were ready hold a slate pencil

Victorians used a device called Abacus for arithmetic which was their version of a modern day calculator.

Although Victorian schools are different in many ways to today's classrooms some of the methods used helped shape our education system today. Victorian schools are still used throughout Britain and remain an important part of history.

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

At the July meeting we welcomed guest speaker Bob Preedy who presented his illustrated talk entitled 'Battersea Fun Fair'. Bob said he had been researching the fun fair for over twenty years and had not yet completed the project. The problem was a lack of an archive except in the LCC building on the South Bank and that was mostly about the first year of the Festival of Britain not the Fun Fair so the only source of information is to trawl the trade newspapers in the British Library.

Bob said in the late 1940s we were deeply in debt to America and Canada from both World Wars and yet borrowed 5.2 million pounds to build the inspirational Festival of Britain and Fun Fair. Elsewhere after the war Billy Butlin restarted his holiday camps. Filey was the first to reopen in 1947 and was packed with war weary holidaymakers. Cinemas also experienced a bumper post war period and during 1946 recorded 1400 million admissions. In comparison, today's tally totals 250 million admissions. To provide an attractive design, architects for the Battersea Fun Fair copied the look of Stockholm's 1930 Exhibition and also took inspiration from Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens.

The fun fair at the Battersea Gardens opened in 1951 as part of the Festival of Britain. Aimed at helping people celebrate what was great about Britain, it followed the end of the Second World War and was intended to help divert attention from austerity and rationing. 100 years after the Great Exhibition, the South Bank event concentrated on science and enterprise while Battersea focussed on fun.

Battersea was not finished for the official opening of the Festival on 3rd May but the funfair opened a week later and the gardens opened at the end of the month. It proved a great success and plans were put in place in October 1951 to retain the funfair.

For its first two years it was operated by London County Council but in 1953 was taken on a 21 year lease by a private concern run by Sir Leslie Joseph and caterer Charles Forte. Over the decades many famous fairground families had attractions at the park including Collins, Grays, Biddalls and the Botton Brothers.

In 1972 there was a tragic accident on the Big Dipper with five children killed and thirteen injured. The ride, operated from 1951 by showman John Collins, had a hidden history – being originally

constructed in 1922 at Southport's Pleasureland Park. After the accident, the lack of Battersea's major attraction led to a decline in the funfair's popularity and its eventual closure in 1974.

Bob spoke about the other large gravity ride, the 1956 Water Chute. This was located at the back of the park close to the Big Dipper and replaced the Dragon Mountain Roller Coaster, a rebuild of another Southport ride first operated in 1925. The Water Chute, one of four designed by the Funfair's boss, Sir Leslie Joseph, survived on the site for a few years after the rest of the funfair was removed. It opened when travelling fairground rides visited the site but by 1977 was relocated to Dreamland in Margate, where Jimmy Godden ran it until 1995.

Other novelty rides came from America. Although the Government was deeply in debt, it managed to find £30,000 to bring these fresh stateside attractions to Battersea. It was fascinating to see the Big Dipper's construction with workmen dressed in collars, ties and trilby hats. The popular Riverside Theatre featured Leonard Sach's "Good Old Days" and offered Sandgate actor Hattie Jacques a chance to develop her stage craft. Bob revealed an image of the Guinness Clock and told us four replicas toured Britain in 1951 – 52 with one sited in Folkestone. He asked if anybody knew where it was, I said Marine Gardens opposite the open air swimming pool. Another feature was the 1955 Crazy Cottage now installed at the Amusement Park in Dymchurch. Images were then shown of the hair-raising Rotor ride and the Sky Wheels, one at Battersea and the other built for Margate's Dreamland. Following this an image was shown of a unique Big Wheel which turned normally but then added rotation on the base. The pressure on the side legs was so great that they quickly distorted causing the attraction to be inoperable. Within months the ride was relocated to Porthcawl and eventually finished up at Southport. In 2010 it was offered to Dreamland and Bob had the job of organising its transfer to Margate. Sadly this unique device laid there for a year in the open air before going to Ramsgate harbour to suffer more corrosion.

Battersea Fun Fair was a huge attraction in London for 23 years and is remembered with great affection by millions of past customers.

Forty-five people attended the meeting, four of whom were visitors.

Unfortunately the date of the August meeting had to be changed to Tuesday 7th and held in the church this was due to the church hall being refurbished.

We welcomed guest speaker Jennifer Buchman, Folkestone Town Museum manager, who presented her talk on 'Folkestone's New Museum'. Jennifer started by saying she had been the museum manager for a year and a half now, and that she was involved with the move from Grace Hill library. Samuel Mackie provided the initial core of the museum's collection when he fell on hard times and the only way he could pay off his debts was to sell off part of his collection which was his fossil collection. Some local businessmen bought the collection for £33, realising the value of this collection as Samuel Mackie had written a book about geology. They decided to donate the collection to the town council, but it was before the council was completely formed, so the council tried to find a place to house the collection and rented a room from Mr Dunk in Tontine Street. Meanwhile, in 1868 the 'Folkestone Natural History Society' was formed, with one of its objects being the formation of a museum to house the collection of fossils. So the Corporation made available to the Society a room at the Sessions Hall in the High Street, provided that they maintained it and exhibited the collection to the public. The growth of the collections and the need for better premises caused the Society to join forces with the Folkestone School of Science in persuading the Corporation to adopt the Public Libraries and Museums Acts. After considerable argument in the Council this was done in May 1878. In August 1878 the Harveian Institute offered to make over to the Council the lease of its premises and its library for the purpose of the Public Libraries Acts, and the offer was accepted. The premises were further enlarged and the new library was opened in January 1879. So Folkestone got its first library through the initiative of several local societies, and it proved to be such a success that it soon needed a larger building. This was provided in 1888 when the present Public Library and Museum in Grace Hill was opened by Sir Edward Watkin, the local Member of Parliament, the museum collections and the library being under one roof.

Jennifer went on to talk about what is now in the collection including: fossils, butterflies, moths, stuffed animals and birds, eggs, an Anglo Saxon skeleton from Dover Hill plus other artefacts, Roman finds, Mole Café books, which were signed by military personnel going through Folkestone harbour during World War One. She spoke about the 'Master Collection', donated by Amy Master in 1924, which consists of paintings, drawings and etchings from the 16th and 17th centuries. She said it was very rare, especially for a small town like Folkestone to acquire such a collection.

The last full-time curator retired in the 1940s and the Borough Librarian became the Curator until the reorganization of local government in 1974 when Shepway District Council was created. After the 1940s the museum collection stopped growing so they don't have any modern artefacts and she said this is a notable loss and hopefully they will build on this as their collection grows going forward. There was a brief hiatus in management until Kent County Museum service took over and reorganized all of the museum collections. Much of the collection went into long term storage in the Folkestone library and to various sites in Maidstone. Then in 2007 the museum was officially de-registered from the Museums, Libraries and Archives which reflected KCC's earlier decision to end the museum and to develop a history resource service at Folkestone Library.

She said discussions to form a museum in the Town Hall started in 2013 and in 2017 it opened. KCC did take a bit of convincing to give the collections back to the town. At the moment however the collections are only lent to the museum by KCC who have stipulated that Folkestone Museum must obtain official accreditation that everything meets official museum standards. Once this happens the collections can be formally handed over and also the accreditation will enable Folkestone Museum to acquire bigger collections, loans and exhibits and carry out restoration work on damaged items.

She said at the moment they only have 15% of the collections on display, but they are working to get more on display, with some new display space due in the downstairs part of the museum. Sadly some items are in poor condition, due to decades of neglect and poor storage and even bug infestation. Also some of the natural history exhibits were preserved with chemicals that are highly toxic. Most of the collection is natural history & geology because Samuel Mackie had such a personal interest in these subjects.

She said they had a Herbarium (a rare collection of pressed plants from the early 1800s), and that staff are going to Kew Gardens to learn about how to look after them and hopefully display them.

She also told us about the space used for temporary exhibitions including the one on Chinese Labour Corps and our World War One exhibition. She said that they also put on various workshops and are trying to engage with all ages within the community with events focusing on such subjects as dinosaurs and bugs. The museum has been a great success so far – the expected visitor figures of 30000 in the first year have already been exceeded with c35000 visiting in the first 8 months. Jennifer finished by promoting the forthcoming exhibition on Walter Tull that starts at the end of September and runs through to the end of January 2019 which should be well worth a visit.

Thirty members attended the evening.

The Folkestone & District Local History Society is a very successful and forward looking Society, both with its monthly meetings, talk & photographic displays. However, in order to continue in this vein we would like to take this opportunity to invite more members to participate in the management of the society by becoming committee members/officers.

The involvement required would be attendance at four committee meetings through the year and occasional assistance at monthly meetings. I hope you will consider the above.

We would like to welcome new members: Colin Bailey, & Elizabeth Halstead.

Registered Charity No. 295994.