



FOLKESTONE & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER NUMBER 1 - JANUARY 2000

AN INTRODUCTION BY THE CHAIRMAN

The Committee have expressed their wish to introduce Newsletters, it is the first time in the life of the Society that we have attempted to produce a newsletter apart from the Chairman's report for the A.G.M. At this moment in time we are not prepared to say how often they will be published, this depends largely on the response we get from the members. If you have any memories of old Folkestone or handed-down memories we would like to hear from you, or perhaps you would be prepared to do some research and write a potted history on some aspect of local history to be used in future newsletters. You may like to be a bit more adventurous and put together an illustrated talk in which we would give you all the support and help you need. I was given a quantity of slides depicting the demolition of Shellons Street, the lower end of Cheriton Road, Bouverie Road East and the building of the Northern Distributor Road, (Grace Hill to Bouverie Square, 1972). I was inspired by Eamonn Rooney to compile an illustrated talk with these slides which I eventually did. My first ordinance was the members of this Society, I gave a 40 minute talk after the A.G.M. on 11th. October 1989, as most of you are aware I have since put together a number of talks which most of you have seen. I also present the talks to other Societies and organisations. While on the subject of illustrated talks, I would like to mention that three other members; Chris Phillips, Martin Easdown, and Eric Dury have put talks together with the help of the Society. Their talks have also been seen by most of our members and like me they have gone on to present their talks to other Societies and organisations. I think this is a great achievement it is fulfilling part of the Societies constitution, so I will look forward to hearing from some of you in the near future !!

THE ORIGINS OF THE SOCIETY

It all started some 20 years ago when a few avid collectors of local postcards, photographs and books met at my house roughly every month, they brought with them their latest acquisitions, the evening would be spent looking at the images and doing some research. Over the years the numbers increased, one evening it was suggested that we ought to form a history group. Peter & Ann Bamford who were members of the Family History Society suggested we could approach them to see if it was possible to be a subsidiary of the Family History Society. A meeting was arranged with their Chairman, after which we decided to form our own Society, due to the fact that their terms were not suitable for us.

Through the early months of 1985 some six or so working meetings were held at Peter & Ann Bamford's house, 9 Grange Road, Cheriton. The people involved were :- myself, Peter & Ann Bamford, Eamonn Rooney, Rita Rolfe, Pauline Davey, Lesley Parry and Charles Whitney, (who was the head of history at, Dover College Junior School). A constitution was compiled and it was decided to call the Society the *Folkestone & District Local History Society*. The acting officers and Committee for the inaugural meeting were as follows :- Charles Whitney Chairman, Ann Bamford Hon. Secretary, Eamonn Rooney Hon. Treasurer, and the committee, Alan Taylor,

Peter Bamford, Pauline Davey, Lesley Parry and Rita Rolf.

The inaugural meeting was held at Dover College Junior School hall, Shorncliffe Road, Folkestone, on Monday 14th. October 1985. Twenty two people attended who all became members, Charles Whitney was elected Chairman, Ann Bamford Hon. Secretary, Eamonn Rooney Treasurer and the Committee were :- myself, Rita Rolfe, Peter Bamford, Anne Nevill, Maureen Shaw and Eric Frankland.

At the first committee meeting it was decided to meet the second Monday in each month, the venue for the first three meetings was the Dover College Junior School with kind permission of the Principal, (negotiated by Charles Whitney).

Our first talk was on 11th. November 1985 starting at 8 p.m., it was an illustrated talk by the late Rev. Alan Gibson, on *Builders & Architects in Victorian Folkestone*. 30 people attended, they all thoroughly enjoyed the talk and subsequently became members.

Alan F. Taylor.

The Reverend Alan Gibson Nov 1911 – Sept 1999

The Reverend Alan Gibson who died in September will be remembered as someone who lived life to the full both in the church and in the pursuance of his various hobbies.

Alan Gibson was born on November 1st 1911, the only son of Henry Gibson a musician and composer. His mother Susan Spain –Dunk also a composer appears in the book 'Some Folkestone Worthies'. His family on his mother's side can be traced in Folkestone from his grandfather William Dunk the builder back to 1651.

On leaving school at 16 he trained at the Regent Street Polytechnic of Architecture and Design. Following this he worked for his uncles in the family firm of Dunks the Builders where duties included climbing a one hundred and three rung ladder over the Royal Pavilion.

Obtaining a degree in Divinity he was ordained in 1938 and was appointed Chaplain to the forces in 1942. Numerous military postings followed including two spells as Commandant of the Army Chaplains Centre. His dedication to his men included riding a motorcycle along heavily shelled roads to visit them and in Malaya he occasionally accompanied the SAS on jungle patrols. He was awarded the MBE in 1944.

Returning to Folkestone he was Vicar of Sandgate from 1964-1976 and continued to serve the Folkestone area as a clergyman long into his retirement.

At the opening of the Folkestone & District Local History Society he was the first speaker with a lecture on Victorian architecture. Other lectures included Downland Trackways, Bronze Age, Iron Age and Stone Age Folkestone as well as Roman, Anglo Saxon and Norman Folkestone.

He married in 1942 Ailsa Ross-Smith who predeceased him. They had a son David and a daughter Jean.

Chris Phillips Vice Chairman Folkestone & District Local History Society Dec 1999



Book Reviews

By LINDA SAGE

Britain in Old Photographs: Folkestone by Eamonn D. Rooney, Alan F. Taylor & Charles E. Whitney, published by Budding Books Ltd. 160mm x 230mm, 158 pages, 250 photographs. ISBN 1-084015-131-5.

This is a very welcome re-issue of the first volume in the *Folkestone in Old Photographs* series of books, first published by Alan Sutton in 1990 and long out of print. Now housed in an attractive hardback and available only from Ottakers at the bargain price of £7.99, this book is a must if you failed to purchase it the first time around and pretty essential for collectors of local history books this time around because of its different cover.

Though this was not the first book of old Folkestone photographs (*Folkestone: A Pictorial History* pre-dated it by four years), this volume was particularly notable and groundbreaking in showing us the wonderful photographs of the irreplaceable parts of old Folkestone that had been lost, which we had marvelled at during the Society's Latens exhibition in 1989. The narrow cobbled Dover Street (so reminiscent of the Old High Street) and the old fishing and smuggling quarter of Radnor Street and its alleys stand out and how we grieve for their loss. Indeed, the 'Streets and Trades' section of the book is particularly strong, but there are plenty of other photographs to grab your attention including a fine selection of lost churches, transport and fishmarket and harbour, all well-captioned with the relevant information.

The Story of Bobby & Co Ltd through to Debenhams, Folkestone 1906-1999 by J.M. & K.S. Paine, published by the authors. A5 size, 40 pages, 25 illustrations. No ISBN.

The story of Folkestone's most glamorous store began in 1906 when Frederick Bobby acquired C.J. Saunders' high-class drapers at 13-17 Rendezvous Street. The success of his venture led to him outgrowing the store and in 1914 seven houses at 48-60 Sandgate Road were purchased with the intention of demolishing them and erecting a new premises. However, with the advent of the Great War, Mr Bobby kindly offered the houses to the authorities assisting the many thousands of Belgian refugees and their demolition did not commence until 1920.

Unfortunately, shortages of suitable labour and frequent clashes with Folkestone Town Council meant the grand new premises did not open until 6th March 1931. By then, Bobby's was more than just a draper's shop and began to sell everything from perfume to radios. It could also boast of an impressive restaurant with its own resident orchestra. The store remained popular throughout the years of changing tastes and times (expanding once again in 1935) and remains so to this day under the Debenhams name, who had acquired a stake in Bobby's as long ago as 1927.

Society members Ken and June have described all the above facts and much more in this very readable and well-researched booklet, which has a limited print run of 500 copies. There are a number of recollections from former staff members, who also feature in many of the illustrations.

This is a good account of Folkestone's most famous shop and a worthwhile addition to your local history library.

MURDER AND OTHER STRANGE HAPPENINGS AT UNDERHILL HOUSE

By
Martin Easdown

Amongst the local aficionados of ghostly happenings, the mention of the name 'Underhill House' is enough to stir the innermost imaginations of their fertile minds. The former military house, which was destroyed by fire in 1978, was once described as England's most haunted site and there have been reports of disembowelled voices, ghostly old men, phantom soldiers, objects moving by themselves; and that's just for starters! Despite its disappearance, strange happenings continue to be reported on the site to this day.

Erected in 1840 as a home for the brigadier in charge of Shorncliffe Camp, Underhill House was the scene of numerous tragedies during its military life, which is said to account for the strange goings-on. The first tragedy occurred in 1887, when it is thought an Alfred Denne committed suicide at the house, while in 1913 an army officer, heavily in debt through gambling, shot himself in the entrance hall. Later an army padre hanged himself in an airing cupboard off the main corridor because he thought he would no longer be required following the amalgamation of regiments at the camp.

However, the most notorious event in the history of this most unfortunate of buildings occurred on Monday, 1st May 1934 when a maid named May Hiatt (37) was found was found strangled in a bedroom and Charles Jay (40), the brigadier's valet, was found in another bedroom suffering from a gunshot wound from which he never recovered.

On the previous evening Jay had asked Brigadier W.N. Herbert if he could escort Miss Hiatt out of the camp as it was her birthday. Permission was granted, yet another member of staff named Louisa Grenville saw Jay and Miss Hiatt discussing their evening out and thought Miss Hiatt seemed reluctant to go. Miss Grenville then left the house after arranging with Jay for him to leave the door key on the window sill, but upon her return at 9 p.m. she found the key not there and the house in darkness and locked-up. Jay eventually appeared to let her in, but fearing something was amiss, Miss Grenville offered to take a hot water bottle up to Miss Hiatt. However, Jay unconvincingly said she had gone out to a shop and the bottle would be cold by the time she had got back.

An agitated Charles Jay was later seen briefly in the *Britannia Inn*, Horn Street quickly downing a pint of beer, and again at 11.15 p.m. by the brigadier, who remarked how unusual it was to see him up so late and writing a letter.

Early the next morning, Miss Grenville saw Jay come into the kitchen from the garden brandishing a gun before disappearing upstairs. On reaching his bedroom, the valet, upon being called by the brigadier, replied "I am busy for the minute, ask May to bring your tea." before it was believed he shot himself, though no one heard a sound. A call to Miss Hiatt remained unanswered and upon inspection her bedroom door was found to be locked. After finding a key to open it, the brigadier found the maid to be covered with a nightgown and upon pulling it back saw she was dead. A visit to Jay's bedroom found him to be suffering from the gunshot wound from which he never recovered.

In all probability, Jay strangled May Hiatt around 8 p.m. on the Sunday in a fit of jealousy about their relationship. The hot-tempered valet had been roused by rumours May had been seen kissing another man, and by the coolness she had recently shown him. The brigadier later found on his desk the letter Jay had been writing the previous evening which said: 'Dear Sir, I am sorry to cause you all this trouble, also poor dearest May. As you know, I like May very much. There are many people after her.'

The jury at the inquest returned the verdict May Hiatt was murdered by Charles Jay who then committed suicide.