



FOLKESTONE & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

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CHAIRMAN'S REPORT by Alan F. Taylor

At the Annual General Meeting the officers standing for re-election were Chairman - Alan Taylor, Secretary - Peter Bamford and Treasurer - Shirley Gregory. There being no nominations the officers were re-elected. Don Gregory was elected as Vice-Chairman and joining the committee were Trevor Page and Ron Dutt. The remaining committee members from last year are Linda Sage, Fiona McNeill and Martin Easdown. I would like to thank Don Gregory and Eileen Frankland who stood down after serving their three years on the committee.

This year our Annual Open Day, held on Saturday October 11th, took place at Seabrook Church and featured a photographic display on *Old Seabrook* by Annie and Peter Bamford. I would like to sincerely thank them both for putting on an excellent display. At the bookstall Martin Easdown and Linda Sage were signing copies of their new book *Folkestone in old picture postcards* published by the European Library. There were also albums of Sandgate and Seabrook postcards for visitors to browse through and video films on Old Folkestone to look at. The day turned out to be a great success with a steady flow of people all day.

The new programme started on Wednesday November 5th with the launch of the Society's new video film *Memories of Folkestone 1900-1914*, attended by 102 people who viewed the video on a large screen. However we had suffered a few hair-raising moments before the meeting due to the videos not arriving until the previous Friday. Furthermore the new video projector, which is replacing the one that keeps going wrong, didn't turn up until Monday after noon, just two days before the meeting. We actually started working on the video last February and it would appear our efforts have been worthwhile as it is selling quite well and we are getting some pleasing comments.

I would like to extend a warm welcome to the following new members: Mrs A. Jackson; Mr J. Luckhurst; Miss P. Sturgess; Mrs M. Lewis; Mr A. Goldsmith; Ellen Spark; Mrs C. Carpenter; Mr R. Davis; Zoe Varian; Mrs I. Showell; Mr J. Dean and Mr E. Tomlin.

May I join the Officers and Committee in wishing all our members a Happy Christmas and Prosperous New Year.

FOLKESTONE'S MR ENTERTAINER

The life of Robert Forsyth: Showman Supreme and Local Voice for the people of Folkestone

By

Martin Easdown and David Lorimer

During the first 35 years of the 20th Century Robert Forsyth was probably the most recognisable and controversial figure in Folkestone. Champion of the town's poorer districts through his role as a local councillor, he was also a great showman bringing new and innovative entertainments to the town as the lessee of the Victoria Pier and other concerns.

William Robert John Forsyth was born at Alverstoke, Hampshire in 1869, the second child of John and Elizabeth Forsyth. John Forsyth had been born in Athlone, Ireland in 1845 and aged 12 had enlisted as a bugler in the Royal Engineers at Brompton Barracks, Gillingham. He served as a sapper in the RE for 27 years and attained the rank of staff sergeant. He then left the army for a short spell before re-enlisting in the Transport and Commissariat Corps where he became a barrack sergeant. He died at the Western Heights Military Hospital, Dover on 25th April 1886 aged 41.

Elizabeth Ann Forsyth (nee Lloyd) was born at St Pancras, Middlesex on 4th July 1847 and was betrothed to John at Brompton on 25th June 1867. During their 19 year marriage they had the following nine children together:

Florence Amelia, b. Alverstoke 1868, d. Gillingham 1873
William Robert John (known as Robert), b. Alverstoke 1869, d. Folkestone 23rd November 1934
Percy Lloyd, b. Strood April 1871, d. Gillingham 7th August 1872
Herbert Lloyd (known as Bert), b. Gillingham 25th May 1873, d. 29th January 1928 (said to have been the result of a rat bite)
Leopold Lloyd Rowland, b. Gillingham 18th March 1875, d. Paris 4th November 1955
Edith Frances, b. Gillingham 25th March 1877, d. Hove 5th November 1958
Hugh Laurence (known as 'Big Laurie'), b. Gillingham 8th March 1881, d. Canterbury just after World War II
Garnet Lloyd (in business known as Lloyd), b. Gillingham 28th February 1883, d. Hove 16th April 1956
John, b. Colchester 28th July 1885, d. USA 11th April 1961

Elizabeth eventually came to live in Folkestone with Robert and passed away at 65 Guildhall Street on 13th March 1914.

At the age of seven Robert suffered from a hip disease that left him with a clubfoot for the remainder of his life. However his dynamic personality ensured his disability would not hold him back in life and having an ear for music he learnt to play the piano. He appears to have come to the Folkestone area in the late 1880s as a private pianist and married Louisa Sarah Searauche, who was born in Hythe in June 1865, in June 1889. Robert and Louisa were to have five children together before Louisa's early death at the age of 37 in 1902:

Louie Lily (known as Lulu), b. Folkestone 1890, d. 1987
Dorothy Daisy Edith (known as Dolly), b. Folkestone 1892, d. 12th January 1980
Leopold Robert b. 3 Bournemouth Road, Folkestone 11th June 1894, d. 14 Broadmead Road, Folkestone 7th October 1895
Hugh Laurence (known as 'Little Laurie'), b. 7th February 1897, d. 13th January 1970
Joseph John Charles Roy (known as Roy), b. Folkestone 1901/2, d. Tunbridge Wells 31st March 1947 (as a result of a motorcycle accident)

Robert remarried in 1904, to Edith Florence Smith who is thought to have come from Hythe. They had no children together and Edith survived Robert by 31 years, dying on 17th May 1965 in Worthing.

During the 1890s Robert quickly made a name for himself both as a solo and performer. He claimed in an advertisement advertising his services as a piano teacher in the Folkestone newspapers that he was the composer of comic operas and over 300 songs. Two of his operas were *When George III was King* and *The Maid of the Mill* and another *The Eagle's Wing* was performed at the Winter Garden, Royal Pavilion Hotel on 21st April 1893. His entrepreneurial skills came to the fore when he supplied hotels with dance bands and in 1901 he was also describing himself as a caterer.

Politics was his other great passion and in November 1906 was elected onto Folkestone Town Council as Socialist Member for North Ward, which he was to serve, except between 1909-13, until his death. Robert was a man of unshakeable opinion, believing sincerely in the justness of his cause, who became an outspoken member of the municipal body and a champion of the working classes.

This was to manifest itself in 1907 when in partnership with Garnet/Lloyd he leased the Victoria Pier from the Folkestone Pier & Lift Company at a cost of £600 per annum, £100 less than that paid by the previous lessees Keith Prowse. The two brothers formed the Victoria Pier Syndicate (Folkestone) Ltd and set about altering the rather stuffy, and loss-making, entertainment on offer to something catering more for Folkestone's ever-increasing middle and working class visitors and residents. Fare such as wrestling, escapologists, open air dancing, amusements and beauty contests were quickly introduced, the latter amongst the very first of their kind anywhere. Indeed, in 1908, Robert held the world's first international beauty contest on the pier, though by international he meant shipping over girls from Boulogne to compete with local beauties! The Pier Pavilion became the 'Home of Novelty' and Robert pre-dated Billy Butlin by introducing competitions such as for the knobbiest Knees, Curliest Head of Hair and Jolliest Face, and even racy ankle shows. He was also a keen advocate of moving pictures and flouted the law by showing them on a Sunday in spite of being repeatedly fined. He also took advantage of the roller skating craze in 1909-10 by opening an open-air rink on the west side of the pier entrance in 1910. In the same year he additionally opened the County Rink by the Inner Harbour and was also involved in rinks up and down the country at Dover, Nelson, York, South Shields, Strachsteads and possibly Edinburgh. Robert's flair for providing what the people wanted knew no bounds and he was also involved with the Imperial Ballroom at Nelson, the Casino at South Shields and bandstands and piers at Seaford, Rhyl, Clacton, Dovercourt and Bognor. Locally he ran the Queens Cinema in Tontine Street between 1912-17 and in May 1911 acquired the lease of Dover Promenade Pier, where he opened a skating rink on the deck. However he was rather glad to get rid of this loss-making venture when the Admiralty acquired the pier in 1913.

During World War One Robert was in the forefront of promoting anti-German propaganda by showing films such as *Under the German Yoke* and *The Child Killers* in the Pier Pavilion. He was also instrumental in calling for reprisals against people of German origin following the terrible air raid on the town on 25th May 1917 in which 72 people were killed. In the following year he stood against the Borough Member Sir Philip Sassoon in the 1918 General Election and put up a good fight by only being defeated by 5,382 votes.

In 1920 Robert moved to his fourth known address in Folkestone, 4 Latham Villas, Cheriton Road, having previously lived at 3 Bournemouth Road, 14 Broadmead Road and 65 Guildhall Street. He was to move again in 1926/7 to 57 Cheriton Road and finally to 10 Downs Road in 1933/4.

Like all businessmen, Robert was not known as the promptest settler of bills and his business accounts were kept very secret, particularly from the Folkestone Pier & Lift Company to whom he always pleaded poverty in order to keep the rent down! Yet his championing of the underdog led him to employ many people on the pier who had fallen on hard times, while Peggy Summers' mother, who was his Secretary and her grandmother who ran the toll, described him as an excellent employer. Robert allowed them to become close friends of his family and they all went out on outings together. Robert's family were also involved in the running of the pier including Big Laurie whose common-in-law wife Elsie Law and her mother ran the pier's tea-room. Later Big Laurie and Elsie ran the William IV pub in Canterbury. Robert's sister Edith married professional violinist George Henry Lorimer and his Lorimer's Jazz Band visited the pier during the 1922 season. Robert's sons Little Laurie and Roy also became involved in the Victoria Pier Syndicate. Roy was the star player of the Victoria Pier Roller Hockey team between 1920-36 and played for the successful England team during the 4th European Rink Hockey team at Montreaux, Switzerland in 1929. Roy later ran a sweet shop with his sister Dolly before being killed in a motorcycle accident, while Little Laurie ran a shop in Rochester before working in a garage.

Sadly during the evening of Saturday, 22nd October 1932 Robert suffered a stroke whilst working in his office on the pier. Fortunately his wife was with him at the time and an ambulance was able to convey him back to his home at 57 Cheriton Road, where he was kept under surveillance. He was back at work in time for the 1933 summer season but never fully recovered his health and died at 10 Downs Road on 23rd November 1934. Following a memorial service at the Parish Church he was laid to rest at Cheriton Road Cemetery on 27th November 1934. A large crowd had assembled at both venues to say a fond farewell to the Master Showman.

Robert's death signalled the end of the Victoria Pier Syndicate, though the pier was to remain in the hands of the Forsyth family for a further two years when Lloyd's Southern Trading Company acquired the lease. Lloyd's earlier involvement in the pier had largely ceased in 1928 when he acquired the Rochester Casino, which he ran until 1938. Known as Lloyd to the business world, but Garnet to his family, Robert's business partner brother comes across as rather a puzzling and somewhat strange character. He was said to have been married three times, yet there is no record of his first marriage to Frenchwoman Solange Giraud with whom he had two children Lloyd Garnet (who later ran a tea shop in Dymchurch) and Solange Rosemary. The later marriages were to Elizabeth Gorf (known as Bella, her sister was also said to be very friendly with Lloyd!) and Alice Felstead. Following his retirement Lloyd moved to Hove, where he was remembered by David Lorimer as having a chauffeur-driven Daimler and an immaculate grey suit with spats, homburg and cane who palmed young David a ten shilling note on departure. A blue and yellow macaw was resident in the living room and a loaded derringer was always kept on the mantelpiece! Lloyd's life met a suitably bizarre end when he committed suicide in 1956 by jumping out of a first floor window. A wealthy man, Lloyd left £25,000 in his will.