



FOLKESTONE & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER No. 8 – Autumn 2001

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT by Alan F. Taylor

The Society has come to the end of another year and I am sure you will all agree it has been a very successful one. The membership was slightly down from last year, the total of paid-up members being 119. A well balanced of events was presented with an average attendance at the meetings of 59. I am confident the programme for the coming year will be equally as good thanks to the hard work of our Secretary Peter Bamford and his wife Anne.

Our Annual Open Day was held at St. Andrews Church Hall, Surrenden Road on Saturday, 21st October and featured an excellent display of Cheriton Past and Present by Peter and Anne Bamford that created a lot of interest. Equally successful was the large screen video projector showing films of old Folkestone. Additionally there were albums of postcards for visitors to browse through and the bookstall, plus the library stand displaying archive Cheriton material. All in all it was a very successful day.

On 23rd November the Society broke new ground by way of a dinner at the Boating Pool Restaurant to celebrate the millennium. Over 60 members enjoyed a memorable evening and thanks are due to Tom Leftley for organising such a successful event.

Over the past year, the Society has presented photographic displays in Folkestone, Cheriton and Sandgate libraries and also the Parish Church and All Souls Church; quite an achievement and thanks to all who gave their assistance.

Our annual visit to the Heritage Room, Folkestone Library took place in May, where Janet Adamson brought us up-to-date with the latest developments with the library and museum. We were then allowed to browse through the Heritage Collection, including the items held in the back room that are not normally accessible to the public.

This year's Annual Outing was a visit to the Courage Shire Horse Centre at Maidenhead followed by a three-hour cruise on the Thames from Henley to Reading. Once again, many thanks to Tom in arranging a day greatly enjoyed by those members who went.

Tom, our Treasurer, also ensured we had another good year financially. However, sadly, he is standing down this year following fifteen years of sterling service and on behalf of all members I would sincerely like to thank him for all his dedicated hard work. Tom will be greatly missed by the Committee, but we will all still look forward to still seeing him at meetings.

Your Committee for the past year has ensured the Society has functioned productively and I wish to thank them all for their hard work. Peter and Tom have already been mentioned, while our Vice Chairman Chris Phillips made the announcements at meetings and compiled the reports for the Folkestone Herald. Trevor Page (and his wife Margaret) successfully ran the raffle for another year, as did David Fundrey and his wife Joyce with the bookstall. Martin Easdown and Linda Sage compiled the newsletters with dedication, while Eileen Frankland and her husband Eric kindly provided their home for committee meetings. The other two committee members Don Gregory and Caroline Groombridge also played their part by providing constructive ideas throughout the year. Last, but not least, I would like

to thank Mary Hunt and the members who assisted her in ably providing the refreshments.

We are still without a representative at the Kent History Federation meetings, however if you are interested in taking on this post then please see me. The Society will pay your expenses to attend the four meetings per year held in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Maidstone.

The Society warmly welcomes the following new members who have joined over the past year: Miss A. Cullingworth, Mr R. Dutt, Mr R. Forsyth, Mrs S. Hamilton, Miss J. Mills, Mr N. Reed, Mrs H. Tumber, Mr & Mrs W.E. White and Mr & Mrs Williamson.

We announce with regret the deaths of Mr R.L. Doust (former member) and Mrs D. Marrin (Folkestone Antiquarian Bookshop).

That concludes my fourth report for the year 2000/01.

THE ALHAMBRA THEATRE

Notes compiled for Mrs A. Hetherington from material in her possession and that held by Folkestone Public Libraries. Additional material supplied by Martin Easdown and Eamonn Rooney.

Benjamin Elgar acquired a beerhouse at Sandgate from Mrs Sarah Chester in 1846. It appears that he died within the next few years, and that his widow, Martha (or Mary) Ann (née Wilson) married Robert Rigden, a gardener at Cliff House, and that Mr Rigden took over the beerhouse, which was erected on the site of an old forge. He is listed in an 1849 directory as a beer retailer and from 1851 as proprietor of the *Bricklayers Arms* in the same property. The 1851 census lists the occupants of the *Bricklayers Arms* as Robert Rigden (31) publican, Mary Ann (37) wife, Harriet A. Elgar (7) daughter, Benjamin E. Elgar (4) son, Elizabeth Rigden (2) daughter, Mary A. Rigden (1) daughter and William Wilson (12) nephew.

On 4th October 1858 he opened a room, newly built on at the back of the premises, as a concert room and music hall, as evident from this extract from the *Folkestone Chronicle* of 9th October 1858: '*On Monday evening last, Mr Rigden, the landlord of the 'Bricklayers Arms, opened a new room he has had lately erected at the rear of his premises for the purpose of having musical entertainments, etc. The hall, which is 65 feet long by 25 feet wide, and proportionally high, is lit by three handsome glass chandeliers descending from the roof, with branches for gas, at intervals, along each side. The spirit, which has dictated the erection of this fine room, is very creditable to Mr Rigden. A concert was given on the above evening, when Madame Blewett (pianist and vocalist), Mrs Marion (a pleasing ballad singer), Mrs Barnes, Mr J.A. Gellis, not forgetting Herr Rosencrant the Negro melodist and tambourine player - who astonished many by his extraordinary performances on ten tambourines at once - gave a very pleasing entertainment, which was further enlivened by some very capital dancing in ballet costume by Miss Anne Zelleta, from the London theatres. A large number of persons were present and seemed much to enjoy the entertainment provided for them.*'

Around 1867 the name was changed from *Bricklayers Arms* to *Alexandra Hotel*. The *Folkestone Express* in March 1868 carried an advertisement for the *Alexandra Music Hall* (in connection with the *Alexandra Hotel*): '*open every evening at 6.30. The Hall always crowded! A change of entertainment every week!*'

Bob Rigden was described as a well-built, striking figure of a man, who used to stand at the entrance to his premises wearing a velvet smoking cap ready to prevent any drunken soldiers from entering! He was also said to be equally

adept at removing them once the effects of his alcohol began to cloud their judgement!

December 1875 saw the beginning of the full time professional career (after odd engagements) of Charles Coburn ("The Man who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo"). Writing in his autobiography, Coburn says: '*Sandgate, where I started my first complete professional year, is a small township on the south-east coast of Kent, and about three miles west of Folkestone; it depended chiefly for its support and progress upon the adjoining military camp of Shorncliffe. Our audience consisted mainly of soldiers, supplemented by local citizens and fishermen from Folkestone. The prices of admission were low, but the sale of large quantities of beer and other refreshments formed the chief source of revenue to Mr Rignell (sic), the old and worthy proprietor of the Alhambra Theatre of Varieties.*

On a very dark Sunday night in December 1875, I arrived at the railway station, a mile or so from Sandgate. I had only the sum of fourpence on me, so I left my small amount of luggage at the station and started out to find the hall, my friends - their names were Vincent and Russell - and refreshment, and a place of abode. It was so dark that I had some difficulty in finding my way along the sea road, and the roar of the waves on the shingle quite near me, producing a feeling of awe and mystery and a longing for company.

When I got to the Alexandra Hotel, to which the Alhambra belonged and was attached, I found it all closed, and I had some difficulty in arousing anybody to attend to me. At last old Mr Rignell looked out of an upper window and demanded, in his peculiar rasping voice, "Who's there?" He probably thought that the loud knocking originated from some tipsy belated soldier. I explained, and asked him if he knew where Vincent and Russell were lodging. He directed me to "The Frenchwoman", a Mrs Hogben, wife of a fisherman with a good old Kentish name.

Those in the house had not yet gone to bed, so when I asked Mrs Hogben if two comedians lodged with her, she said "yes", and showed me upstairs to their room. I knocked, and an unfamiliar voice called "come in!" On entering the room I found myself in the presence of two men whom I had never seen before. I apologised for my mistake, or the landlady's and said I wanted to find Vincent and Russell. The taller man replied assuringly "oh, it's alright, old man. Vincent and Russell are staying with Mrs Philpott in Chapel Street, near here." I thanked him and withdrew.

I soon found out Vincent and Russell, and I also found out that the two comedians I had barged in upon were Chirgwin and Collins, two versatile 'nigger' performers who had concluded their engagement at the Alhambra the night before. Thus did I make my first acquaintance with my lifelong friend and fellow-worker, George H. Chirgwin, the 'White-eyed Kaffir', a comedian whom I felt impelled to describe in after years as the cleverest all-round artiste I had ever seen. And I cannot say that I have ever found reason for greatly modifying that opinion!

Robert Rigden died in June 1890 and was interred at St Martin's Church, Cheriton, near to that of Samuel Plimsoll of the 'Plimsoll Line' fame. Thomas Maltby took over the hotel, which remained as the Alexandra, and the music hall, which became known as the *New Alhambra Palace of Varieties*, but also described by Maltby himself as 'Maltby's Mansion of Mirth'. Following the Sandgate Landslip disaster of 4th March 1893, Maltby produced an entertaining guide *The Sandgate Sensational Soil Subsidence: Tom Maltby's Guide*, describing his impressions of the affected area. Priced at one penny, all net proceeds from its sale were given to the relief fund, though Tom Maltby couldn't resist giving his hotel and music hall a plug at the end of the guide!

Maltby relinquished the Alhambra in March 1897 to George Hill of Walthamstow, who following Maltby's lead described it as 'Hill's Hall of Hilarity'. One of his first engagements was James Berry the hangman, who gave graphic accounts of how he dispatched his many 'clients'. His performance called uproar, and amongst those who walked out during the show was the Vicar of Sandgate (who must have had some interest anyway to attend in the first place!) Amongst the many music hall artistes who performed there was Belle Elmore, who was later murdered by her husband Hawley Harvey Crippen in 1910. This was the most notorious murder case of its time, largely due to the fact Crippen and his girlfriend Ethel Le Neve (dressed as a boy) were spotted fleeing to North America aboard a liner and the early use of radio communication played a part in their apprehension. Animated pictures were also shown at the Alhambra on the 'Kinematograph' by Professor Lear, including one showing a rough sea at Sandgate.

In always searching for new and more novel ways to entertain its audiences, the Alhambra always endeavoured to capitalise on passing fame and trends. In 1890, a Cornish fisherman was offered £100 if he succeeded in rowing his old tarred skiff *The Bold Lass* from Lands End to Gravesend, in stages, by a certain time. On his journey he was caught by a stiff south-westerly wind blowing across Dungeness Bay, yet by riding skilfully on the crest of the waves he was able to land safely at the coastguard station in Sandgate. Once he had recovered from his ordeal, he was promptly engaged at the music hall for a week relating his experiences, and the money collected enabled him to continue on the next stage of his journey £100 richer.

The Alhambra continued under various proprietors and managers (including another spell under Tom Maltby from 1901-4) until it was closed in June 1914. By then, it had suffered a decline in popularity following a fire and was struggling financially. The music hall had continued as the Alhambra during this time, though the hotel was variously known as the Alhambra or Alexandra. The popular name was, of course, 'The Bricks'.

A subsequent application for a renewal of the licence was turned down, but on 1st June 1921 it was reopened as the *Sandgate Picture House* after being redesigned by A.R. Bowles into a 514-seat cinema. Unfortunately, its owners South Coast Cinemas went into receivership before the year was up and it was promptly closed, until reopened once more on 20th September 1925. In June 1930 the cinema became a talkie and was renamed the *Rex* in 1939. During the Second World War it was closed again, and though it was reopened following the war's end permanent closure occurred on 9th June 1951. Rayner's Beach Club was established on the site, but it was eventually demolished to make way for flats.

Edited by Martin Easdown and Linda Sage
27 Hampton Vale, Seabrook, Hythe, Kent CT21 5SG
Tel: 01303 230202 Fax 01303 238120 email: marlinova@aol.com
Published by the Folkestone & District Local History Society ©2001
Registered Charity No. 295994
