



FOLKESTONE & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER No. 9 – Winter 2001/02

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT by Alan F. Taylor

The Annual General Meeting on Wednesday 3rd October 2001 saw my re-election as Chairman, Peter Bamford as Secretary and Chris Phillips as Vice-Chairman. Shirley Gregory was elected as our new treasurer and I would sincerely like to thank her for taking up this post; it often involves a lot of unseen hard work behind the scenes. Warm thanks were also expressed for the retiring treasurer Tom Leftley, who not only served in the post for a grand total of fifteen years, but also organised our annual outings, a task he has kindly agreed to continue.

In the last newsletter you may recall I was appealing for somebody to act as our representative at the Kent History Federation meetings, which had been vacant for a few months since Daphne Heaver stood down due to ill health. Happily, Linda Sage has now filled this post and I sincerely thank Linda for taking it on.

Peter and Anne Bamford set up a photographic display of 'Old Cheriton' at All Souls Church, Cheriton on Saturday 8th September 2001 to coincide with the church's two-day flower and music festival. The exhibition created a lot of interest and a number of people purchased copies of some of the photographs. Meanwhile, the photographic display 'Folkestone's Disappearing Churches' was removed from the Parish Church on 17th September 2001 after running for 3½ months. The display was greatly appreciated by all that visited the church and led to a substantial increase in donations for that three-month period.

Our annual open day was held on 20th October 2001 at the Methodist Church Hall, Sandgate Road, where the photographic display appropriately featured Sandgate Road. Visitors were also able to view the large screen video projector showing old films of Folkestone, a display of archive material from the library, a selection of our members' albums of postcards and the bookstall.

We have recently published a booklet entitled 'Folkestone under Water' by Martin Easdown and Linda Sage (reviewed in this newsletter). It sells for £1.50 and if you haven't already got a copy I would recommend you obtain one from our bookstall, the Heritage Room at Folkestone Library or the Tourist Information Office in Harbour Street.

The Society was recently grateful to take possession of a silver cup from the management of the Leas Cliff Hall. The hall's former manager Jo Barnes presented the cup to members June and Ken Paine on 26th November 2001 in recognition of all their hard work in recording the history of the hall and keeping the records up to date. The cup is the Folkestone Competitive Musical Festival Challenge Cup for the best solo performer, children's section. The Mayor of Folkestone Alderman Edward J. Bishop first presented it in 1925 and it was competed for up until 1988.

The Society extends a warm welcome to the following new members: Penny Wright, David Morrey-Jones, Michael Wills and Rita Freitag.

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



Book Review

Folkestone under Water: The Story of the Five Main Flood Years that Hit the Town of Folkestone During the Twentieth Century by Martin Easdown and Linda Sage Autumn 2001. Published by the Folkestone & District Local History Society, A5 size 29 pages, 28 illustrations, price £1.50 (plus 50p p&p for orders by post). Reviewed by **Andrew A. Taylor**.

This new offering from the writing team of Martin Easdown and Linda Sage is their fourth joint local history publication and following the precedent set by their earlier works is a highly enjoyable and enlightening read. It deals with the fascinating topic of the seven most destructive floods that have struck the town of Folkestone in the Twentieth Century, and as one reads the accounts and eyewitness reports of each deluge and views the photographic evidence that has recorded these events, the reader is reminded of the magnificent force of nature and of how futile man's structures are in the face of such an irresistible energy and power.

But this we know already, which is why *Folkestone under Water* is such a valuable tome, for it reminds us that although incomparable to the disastrous floods we witness around the world on our television screens, even sunny Folkestone is subject to the excesses of the elements.

Folkestone under Water concerns itself with the Great Flood of 1909, the two flash floods of 1913, two in 1934, one in 1939, and of course, in our recent memory, the flooding of 1996. Interestingly the authors note that although flooding has been an age-old problem for Folkestone, it is only since the construction of the Victorian sewage system that these floods have caused such havoc to the residents of the town.

The prosaic style makes this an enjoyable read, and the use of eyewitness accounts coupled with many photographs, illustrate for us the scope of these tragedies and the personal upheaval that they brought to the hapless victims who found that bricks and mortar were no match for the terrible might of nature.

In an echo of the two author's sentiments, let us hope that the recent work of Southern Water may finally put to an end the fear of a recurrence of these floods.

This book is a must read, and priced at just £1.50 there is no excuse for not purchasing a copy at either the Heritage Room in Folkestone Library, the Tourist Information Centre, and of course the bookstall at the meetings of the Folkestone & District Local History Society meetings.

**REMINISCES OF A FOLKESTONE SCHOOLBOY IN WARTIME
(PART ONE) by Harold Francis**

Before war was actually declared, it was obvious that something was amiss. The first signs that I remember was a trail run of the black-out, all street lighting had to be switched off, all vehicle headlights had to be masked, and all windows covered so that no lights could be seen from outside in the street. People were also advised to stick about 1½ inch wide heavy brown paper in the form of a diagonal cross on their windows so as the glass would not fly everywhere when hit by a blast from a bomb etc. I stood on the path in front of our house in Dover Road and watched the traffic crawling along; it was quite eerie with everywhere so dark. When the blackout started in earnest, white paint started to appear on lamp-posts, around the mudguards of cars, in fact on anything that would help them see in the dark. Sandbags started to be neatly piled around strategic buildings, such as the Town Hall, which in those days also housed the Police Station, and places that needed to be protected against enemy action such as the hospital, first aid posts and communication centres. Corporation workers and volunteers filled the vast majority of the sandbags from a sandpit adjacent to Stella Maris School. There was also the distribution of gas marks to all civilian men, women and children. The adults and older children had the same type; the younger children had ones made of red rubber with a little snout on them - they were nicknamed Micky Mouse ones. Young babies whole bodies were encased in theirs and the mothers had to operate a pump by hand whilst they were inside. We had to collect ours from the building next to the Public Library on Grace Hill, which has changed its use so many times that it is a job to put a name to it, although at the time of writing I believe it's called Grace Chapel. The masks came in three sizes; large, medium and small, and being a young lad I had a small. Incidentally, there has been a query that I have never been able to find the answer to - after about two weeks we had to return to Grace Hill and have another extra filter taped to the end of the existing one. I appreciate that it was for a type of gas, but which one I don't know. Incidentally, everyone's gas mark was treated the same and the tape can be seen in old photographs and museums.

Recruiting started for members of the public to enrol in the ARP (Air Raid Precautions), later called the Civil Defence. This included wardens to assist the public in the event of enemy action and to make sure that laws regarding the blackout were observed. Then there were the rescue teams, as their name suggests rescuing people from buildings etc that had been hit by enemy action, doctors, nurses and St Johns Ambulance personnel. I must also not forget us messenger boys with our bikes. There was also the call for men to join the Special Constabulary, purely as volunteers to assist the regular police whose numbers had decreased due to many joining the armed forces.

Then at 11 a.m on Sunday, 3rd September 1939, we heard that war was declared. I was just coming up for ten as my birthday as my birthday is in January. I suppose it didn't mean very much to me as being a young lad of nine I had no idea what it was all about, but that moment in time stands out very strongly in my mind. I was standing at the top of the steps in front of our house, when the air-raid sirens started and my mother shouted for me to come indoors. I was pushed under the table with the rest of the family, and all the curtains were drawn. As it turned out it was a false alarm, but it was quite a frightening experience, however it was soon forgotten. Evacuees started to arrive from London about this time, and although some schools were affected in having to accommodate them; my school St Mary's was not.

(to be continued)

MISS IRENE WHEELER 1909-2001

An appreciation by June Paine

Irene Alice, born in 1909 to Henry Hawksworth-Wheeler, a well-known photographer of Folkestone, was the third of four children. Her first years were spent living above the shop in Church Street with her parents, an older brother and sister, and a younger brother called Tom to whom she was closest. At the age of ten Irene and her family moved to The Battery on the Bayle.

The whole family were regular members of the congregation at St Mary & St Eanswythe, the parish church. The children were strictly taught, and Mother was said to be a forceful character.

Upon leaving school Irene trained as a Norland Nanny and up to her mid-twenties felt this to be her career. However she then decided to train as a nurse with the hope of going abroad when qualified. Irene's training was at St Bartholomew's Hospital in London.

Following her final exams, she was awarded a gold medal for her extremely high standard. From here she progressed to become a District Nurse in the East End of London and served there throughout the Blitz.

After the war she joined the Universities Mission to Central Africa, where she worked for a few years in Nyasaland and Tanganyika before moving on to the large remote hospital at Messumba, part of the colony of Portuguese Mozambique. Here she worked tirelessly as Sister-in-Charge. The hospital had 30-35 in-patients, but the outpatients numbered anything from 150 to 500 a day. Most had minor injuries and illnesses, and had travelled long distances to receive treatment.

Irene also held antenatal and baby clinics and acted as School Matron to around a thousand pupils and staff. All this in a place with no electricity or piped water supply, and no water borne sanitation. Irene trained her staff to 'Barts' standards - no mean feat as she spoke little Portuguese and they spoke no English. The nearest doctor was 75 miles and did not feel the hospital to be his responsibility. So Irene, and her faith in the Lord, carried on training new nurses and the Archbishop of Cape Town rewarded her work with the Order of Ethiopia. She was also decorated by the Mozambique Governor General.

On her return from Africa in 1971, Irene settled in a flat at Bayle Court where she lived out the rest of her life. There, looking out of the window, she could see the garden of The Battery where she had played as a child.

Once again becoming a staunch member of St Mary & St Eanswythe Church congregation, and treading daily the already well known territory of Church Street brought her many happy memories of childhood. Small of stature and bright of eye, Irene had only to look over the top of her glasses to drive home a point and was never afraid to say what she thought to both prince or pauper. Her life was that of a true Christian witness and service. Everyone mattered to her, to many she was a true friend, and she will be sadly missed.

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