



FOLKESTONE & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

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CHAIRMAN'S REPORT by Alan F. Taylor

The September meeting saw a talk by Maureen Criddle on Local History Resources. Maureen outlined the places where information could be gleaned starting with the National Archives at Kew. She showed us some copies of documents she had obtained including one for a Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries survey which started in 1941 and also some Canterbury Wills and death duty registers. The National archive website, which has one million Wills on it from between 1354-1858, has a total of 286 Folkestone Wills and Equity documents. Access to all archives from around the Country can be made on the web, other accessible resources include Colindale library for newspapers, the archives at the Imperial War museum, the Theatre museum at Hendon, University libraries, and the BBC website (Peoples War). Her talk attracted 43 members and three visitors.

At the October meeting 51 members came to our Annual General Meeting. Officers standing for election were chairman: Alan Taylor, vice-chairman: Don Gregory, treasurer: Shirley Gregory and Hon. Secretary: Trevor Page. There being no other nominations the officers were elected. The remaining committee members from last year are Peter Bamford, Eileen Frankland, Rita Freitag, Fiona McNeill and Ron Dutt. One vacant position was not filled.

After refreshments a DVD on the Peoples War was shown on a large screen.

The Societies 20th anniversary was celebrated with a meal at the indoor bowls club, Cheriton Road, on Saturday 22nd October.

Thirty-two members and four guests enjoyed a welcome drink after which I said a few words on the starting of the society. The short speech went as follows.

“Back in about 1980 a few collectors of local postcards, photographs and books met in my house about once a month to discuss our latest acquisitions. Among them were Eamonn Rooney, Tom Letley, Peter Bamford, Fred Cook, John Wrigley, Frank Root, Roy Wilson and myself. As our numbers increased we decided to form a history society which started by having discussions with the Family History Society with a view to join them, but due to a number of reasons we decided against that idea. Around that time in 1984 Eamonn, Roy and myself were involved with Charles Whitney compiling the book ‘Pictorial Folkestone’.

With Charles Whitney, Ann Nevill and a few more we started having working meetings at Peter and Annie Bamford’s house in Grange Road.

The Inaugural meeting was held on 14th October 1985 in the hall at Dover College Junior school, Shorncliffe Road, where Charles Whitney was head of history. 22 people came to the meeting. Charles Whitney was elected Chairman, Eamonn Rooney Treasurer, Annie Bamford Hon. Secretary and the committee members were: Rita Rolfe, Peter Bamford, Ann Nevill, Maureen Shaw, Eric Frankland and myself.

For the first three months the monthly meetings were held at the school, the first of which was on 11th November 1985, it was an illustrated talk on ‘Builders and Architects in Victorian Folkestone’ by the late Revd. Alan Gibson, there was 30 people there.

The second meeting held on 9th December, was a lecture on ‘Local History Sources’ by Shepway Archivist and member Maureen Shaw.

The third meeting was on 13th January 1986, which was an informal evening where members brought along items of local interest. It was the first time I had ever seen a 'Stanhope' sometimes called peeps, which consists of a lens of small diameter with two convex faces of different radii, enclosed in a metallic tube (invented, by Charles 3rd Earl Stanhope 1753-1816). I now have one, which contains six views of Folkestone fitted into a silver propelling pencil.

The next meeting on 10th February was held in the Holy Trinity Church hall where we have remained ever since. It was an illustrated talk on 'Local Photographers' by Eamonn Rooney, 40 people came along to this talk and considering there was 6 inches of snow on the ground I think that was a very good turnout. From thereon the Society has gone from strength to strength."

We then tucked into a three-course dinner followed by cheese, biscuits, coffee and mints.

To finish, Eamonn Rooney gave a vote of thanks to the Officers and Committee for arranging an excellent evening for such a memorable occasion.

The November meeting was a fascinating talk by Audrey Wind giving an insight into the work behind the scenes at Bletchley Park and the various machines used for code breaking.

On Tuesday November 8th Rita Freitage and I visited St. Eanswythe's (C of E) Primary School for their assembly to present them with their local history books and the video Memories of Folkestone 1900-1914. This completes our book donation programme for the year.

We would like to welcome new members: Janice McStea, John McStea, Brenda Cannon, Martin Cannon, Thelma Whittaker, Sue Cornell and D. Cornell.

On a rather sad note I would like to announce the death of two members David Fundrey who died on August 28th aged 77. David served on the committee for seven years and ran the bookstall for four years and Sid Goodsell who died on 23rd September aged 81. Sid was born in New Romney but moved to Chessington in 1947, he was an authority on the history of Dymchurch and the Marshes, he gave us a couple of illustrated talks, one on the Romney Hythe and Dymchurch Railway and the other was Dymchurch to Dungeness.

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

My Memories of "The Pleasure Gardens Theatre" by Eric Hart

I always enjoy reading about the town's one-time illustrious West End hall of entertainment through the annals of Bob Hollingsbee's "Memories" feature, especially those of The Pleasure Gardens Theatre. This opulent structure which stood majestically back from Bouverie Road West was a landmark for so many years, and when viewed from either side in the days of my youth, always reminded me of a giant Zeppelin.

The grand opening in May 1886 as the National Arts Treasures Exhibition by Queen Victoria has been well recorded, as were the names of theatrical 'greats' who appeared on stage there from the late 1880's onward. However, more vivid to me are my own personal memories, accumulated throughout my lifetime, reaching back to the early 1930's, and which I now fondly recall.

In those pre-war years, Folkestone's palatial residences in the west end of the town were home to many wealthy families including the late Lord Baden Powell (the founder of the Boy Scout movement). A Kelly's Street Directory of the time will confirm the names of many titled and influential people residing there, this at a time when many local girls went into Domestic Service, with long hours of drudgery, mercifully only able to find comparative relief after getting married. My only incursions into the west end during those far-off days when class distinction prevailed was an annual visit to the Theatre for the Christmas Pantomime, and where after entering its doors, I would stand in awe, marvelling at the lofty proportions of The Foyer, which put some of London's west end theatres to shame. However, more modest in size was the theatre's auditorium, with its extravagantly ornate plastered ceiling, which left a considerable void between it and the roof, but none the less opulent in design regarding all the gold and red plush upholstery. One noteworthy feature was the generously proportioned stage, stretching back some 40 feet from the orchestra pit, certainly a boon for the scene shifters.

With the onset of the war in 1939, in keeping with other halls of entertainment The Pleasure Gardens closed its doors, but soon burst back into life when E.N.S.A shows were staged for the influx of thousands of service personnel stationed in the area. The letters E.N.S.A provided material for visiting comedians to joke about while interpreting the initials as – “Every Night Something Awful”. Fortunately for me, prior to my joining the R.A.F, I worked for The District Civil Royal Engineers based at nearby Shorncliffe Camp, during which time I served in the R.E.s Platoon of The Home Guard, therefore affording me admission when in uniform. These shows incorporated some of the finest variety acts in the business, always assuring a “Full House”. It was just as well then that when the curtain fell for the Interval, the fully licenced bar was well-staffed, and arguably –the longest in town for the theatrical tradition of coping with the multitude during a short break in the show .

In the grounds adjacent to the theatre stood an elevated Bandstand of rustic design, which I’m told was a draw in Edwardian days. Adjacent to this was an indoor roller skating rink, converted into an Emergency Casualty Reception Area during the war. Needless to say that while working on this project, my young workmate “Ginger” Knowles and I would spend our lunchtimes skating around the floor.

After the war, the theatre presented a number of stage presentations, hardly suitable it might be said for the earlier Victorian audiences, when the bill boards declared “Cavalcade Of Nudes” – hardly evocative of the French Follies Bergere however, for as the curtain rose, it revealed an artistically draped stage with the girls in strictly ‘still’ poses. A conversion to cinema presentations followed this, whereby in order to obtain the necessary length of ‘throw’ between projectors and screen, the projection room was extended back, high above the Foyer, and the screen was set well back from the footlights on stage. Not an ideal arrangement, for the projected beam would sometimes cause distraction when reflecting back from the floor of the stage.

In 1949 the new manager was instrumental (no pun intended) in having the Compton organ from The “Rendezvous” cinema in Cambridge transferred there. It was none other than Reginald Dixon the renowned broadcasting organist of the Blackpool Tower Wurlitzer who opened the Cambridge organ in 1935. It’s arrival here heralded the fourth Folkestone cinema to boast such an asset. Sadly – it has to be said that the subsequent reinstallation was something of a Heath Robinson affair, with the pipe chamber dug out in the chalk below the lefthand side of the stage, with the swell shutters opening out into the orchestra pit., where the 2-manual console was sited. Reg Moore was the appointed organist, although his residency alas was of only a short duration, as not so long after, during a live animal act on stage with Russian Bears, one of them unfortunately had ‘a call of nature’, and as a result of the sloping stage, the swell shutters which regulated the power of the organ into the auditorium received a dousing. This sealed the fate of the organ, for with the shutters jammed closed, the sound was unable to penetrate the auditorium.

In 1959 it became evident that the role of this illustrious hall of entertainment was nearing its end as it struggled on with films from the continent including a double bill of Brigitte Bardot films. Meanwhile, April 20th that year saw another Clarkson Rose revue “Twinkle” on stage, while its interesting to note that Eve Williams starred as Maria Zeigler in “The Dancing Years” on stage at the “Odeon” Theatre, together with the FHODS cast from May 4th to 9th. The Pleasure Gardens Theatre’s penultimate Pantomime to be staged was “Sleeping Beauty” Finally at the end of 1960 the theatre eventually closed, but not before the final pantomime “Puss In Boots” was staged. Produced by W & W Dredge. Reg Dixon – the then famous comedian with his singing signature tune “Confidentially” had ‘star’ booking. The final show there holds proud memories for my wife Yvonne and I, as our daughter Marion played the dancing role of “Queen Cat”.

This was the grand finale to the long run of on-stage entertainment spanning well over seventy years before the doors were closed, seemingly with a nonchalant attitude of the then management, for a host of sequined garments, and other theatrical costumes, were abandoned in the dark interior. Fortunately, I was on hand when a Theatrical Entrepreneur from Brighton revisited and had all of this packed into several large wicker baskets which he and I then transported to Folkestone East station goods yard, destined for Brighton.

In the knowledge that the organ was still entombed below stage, I was to wait four years for any further signs of activity after learning that the building was to be demolished. During the cold winter of 1963-4 the Demolition crew moved in. Although uninvited, I ventured inside to witness what I considered wanton destruction, with priority being given to the removal of lead from the roof and a multitude of cast iron radiators, constituting valuable 'scrap' metal. This was foolish in the extreme, as the gigantic overhead water tank feeding the system had not been drained beforehand, with the result that water poured through the Stalls into the orchestra pit where I saw to my horror a set of Tympani Drums floating beside a Grand piano, the legs of which had been removed, in (supposed) preparation for transit. At this point my thoughts quickly turned to the well-being of the pipe organ in the chamber below stage? With the aid of a torch, I brushed aside the dust and rubble until I found the trap door above it, whereupon I was saddened to discover that water had indeed penetrated, which demanded rapid action if any of the instrument was to be saved. I hurriedly returned with a few tools and several candles, which I placed in the chamber for illumination. By this time I was paddling in icy cold water in a desperate attempt to remove pipes and other valuable equipment before the rising water ruined everything. The fine leather-clad Regulators (or Bellows) were alas already immersed in the water, but by using sheer brute force with an axe on the multi-cored electric cables, I was able to salvage the majority of pipes and wooden chests on which they stood. Invaluable to me were the Compton Relay cabinets with their thousands of silver electrical contacts (in similar vein to a Telephone Exchange). Mercifully, I was able to raise all of these before the water destroyed everything, and store all this in a dark corner until I was able to arrange transport the following Sunday morning. Not so lucky was the organ's 5 h.p electric motor and Blower which fell victim to the rising water, and could quite possibly still be there after the site was levelled for what became The Orion Insurance Building and now currently The Police Station.

Looking back, it must have been my sheer determination, and life-long enthusiasm for the cinema organ that made this a success story, culminating in a proportion of the Pleasure Gardens Theatre Compton organ being incorporated into the Standaard organ (ex "Savoy" cinema) installed in my home, together with further items from the former Comptons of "The Playhouse" and "Odeon" cinemas, providing tangible nostalgia in melodic form from what currently is the only functional cinema pipe organ in the county of Kent.

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(Eric Hart August 2005)