



FOLKESTONE & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER No. 32 – Autumn 2007

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT by Alan F. Taylor

The June meeting was an illustrated talk on The Romance of Inn Signs by David Harper. David took us for a tour around Kent showing us various inn signs and telling us the origins of the sign. In some cases David said the brewers had got it wrong. Sixty-five people attended the meeting five of whom were visitors.

At the July meeting we welcomed back our member/speaker Hilary Tolputt who gave her talk on The Zeebrugge Raids. Hilary said the raid was planned to block Zeebrugge to stop the German U-Boats, which were sinking our merchant ships at an alarming rate, from using the harbour. The raid took place on the night of 22nd April 1918 St. George's day: Block ships were sunk in the Zeebrugge canal; a submarine packed with explosives was forced through iron girders of the viaduct and then blown up. The daring efforts of our troops and navy were not without terrible loss of lives and injury, 206 personnel were killed and 412 wounded or missing. For their bravery there were 11-VC's awarded and 629 other decorations. Among the local men killed were Lieut. G.N. Bradford, Pte. Parks, Pte. Linkin, Pte. Hart and Pte. Couchman. Twenty years later May 1938 local people remembered the dead by building St. George's Church. The foundation stone being laid by Mrs Bradford in memory of her three sons killed in WWI.

On Saturday 7th July forty members and guests set off by coach on the annual outing to Hidden Essex and The Secret Canal. We picked up our guide at Danbury on the A414 just east of Chelmsford, where we stopped for coffee.

We then made our way to Burnham-on-Crouch where we stopped for lunch and walked along the waterfront where there are three yacht clubs and some very nice old buildings some clapboarded. We then made our way to the Paper Mill Lock in the Chelmer Valley where we boarded the 'Victoria' for a two hour cruise on the Black water (near Maldon) after which we joined our coach and returned home.

I would like to sincerely thank Tom Leftley for arranging what I thought was a very good day out.

At the August meeting we welcomed John Grimwood who gave us his illustrated talk Hellfire Corner – 20th century History on the Kent Coast. The talk started at Dungeness and went along the coast to Ramsgate. John started by telling us about the sound detectors at Greatstone and that there were 100 built on the south coast for WWI. They collected sound from approaching aircraft. John's talk then took us along the coast to Ramsgate telling us about all the military installations. Sixty-two people attended the meeting, ten of whom were visitors.

The Leas Cliff Halls 80th Birthday Week: For one week in July, Ken and June Paine had their books recording the history of the hall on show from 10am to 4 pm. In the Box Office foyer the

B.B.C. film 'The Peoples War' was shown every thirty minutes.

There were two tours of the building each day, Ken leading the morning tour and June the afternoon. Over 200 people booked tours! A lot of new material for their history books has been received for which they are very grateful.

Mr Stephen Levine the General Manager presented Ken and June with a clock as a token of thanks for documenting the history of the hall from the days of the Leas Shelter.

There was also a photographic display in the Pagoda from Alan Taylor's collection, which ran for the month of July. It created a great deal of interest especially for those unable to manage the tour.

Well over 300 people came to the exhibition including evacuees from WWII, visitors from Canterbury, Dymchurch, Dover, Whitstable, Ashford and Maidstone also a lady from Australia.

Dates for your diary: Christmas dinner at the bowls club Friday 7th December 7 pm for 7.30 pm, cost and menu to follow.

We would like to welcome our new members: Kay Cornish, Maggi Garlinge & Thelma Whittaker

As you know the Folkestone and District Local History Society is a very successful and forward looking society, both with its monthly meetings, talks and social events.

However, in order to continue in this vein we would like to take this opportunity to invite more members to participate in the management of the society by becoming committee members/officers. The involvement required would be attendance at six committee meetings throughout the year and occasional assistance at monthly meetings. I know of your continued interest and support, therefore I hope you will consider the above.

The A.G.M. is on October 3rd at 8 pm at the Holy Trinity Church Hall. I look forward to hearing from you shortly.

Kind regards,
Alan F. Taylor

Michael Bentine's Wartime Memories

When war was declared the Bentine's made provisions to secure their house in the event of an air raid. Along with the sticky tape, criss-crossed over the windows as advised by the ARP, they also bolted the two halves of a ping-pong table to the inside of their dining room windows. Michael's elder brother, recently married, volunteered for the army and was recruited into the Honourable Artillery Company; Michael (too young) and his Father (too foreign) made do with volunteering for the Civil Defence organization the ARP.

The early days of the war had little effect on Folkestone, and indeed the only drama to occur was the short-sighted decision to evacuate city children to the town. Only by 1940 when the German Armies were advancing west at a rapid rate did become apparent to relocate these, and the local children in mass evacuations. In their place the population was maintained by the arrival of troops preparing for embarkation to France. The troops marching from Shorncliffe and down the Road of Remembrance was a sight that brought great sorrow to the eyes of Michael's mother, her childhood sweetheart had made the same journey in the Great War and was never to return home to her from Flanders fields.

Folkestone began to lose its young men rapidly as they volunteered for the services, Michael getting closer to the age where he could volunteer had apart from his Civil Defence duties to suffice with attending numerous farewell parties across the town. Needless to say many of the young men were not to return to Folkestone. By the time the Battle of Britain was raging and the RAF was in urgent need of volunteer flyers, Michael volunteered to see action as a pilot. He filled in his forms, passed his medical, and was then refused by a pompous flight lieutenant from Administration, who rebuked him with the words "*We can't have non-Europeans in the Royal Air Force.*" A similar experience befell his Father who having volunteered for the LDV (forerunner of the Home Guard) was eventually asked to leave on grounds of his being Peruvian by birth. So the two made do with their activities in the ARP. One episode sticks in Michaels mind and is worth retelling now.

Just prior to the German invasion of Holland, Michael and two other junior members of the civil defence were detailed with an antiquated ambulance and ordered to set up station on the Leas in order to carry out a series of air-raid exercises. They chose to locate themselves opposite the Leas Cliff Hall near the statue of William Harvey, a suitable location for junior medics. The three young men stood waiting for action attired in Steel helmet, rubber gauntlets, wellies and anti-gas suits, waiting for the arrival of the casualties. But no casualties were forthcoming, only mild mannered mirth from passers-by wondering at the outfits of these three young men. It eventually dawned upon them that there had been a hitch, and that the casualties, now extremely overdue, were probably not coming. So in order not to have wasted the entire morning, they decided to act upon their own initiative and to accost passers-by into becoming volunteer casualties. Few people were willing to oblige, 'far too busy' was the common response, till along came a small elderly man, whom Michael recognized as a retired Admiral and member of his mothers bridge club. This be-suited and bowler-hatted gentleman was only too happy to oblige, so they laid down a blanket on the grass for him and began to evaluate his injuries.

It was decided to make him a blast-victim and to diagnose him with a fractured femur and a severed femoral artery. The injuries then were scribbled onto a label, which was then attached onto the willing gentleman's waistcoat. Michael then sought to apply a tourniquet around the femoral artery (close to the top of the thigh) and gave him two splints secured with two triangular bandages. Then in accordance with official instructions he wrote 'Tourniquet applied' and the time '11.30am' on the gentleman's forehead, using his mothers black eyeliner. This was done so all the medics who came into contact with the casualty would know when the tourniquet was applied and at what intervals (20 minutes) it was to be loosened to allow blood flow. The other medics looked on admiringly at the swift and calm professionalism that Michael had shown, the casualty himself with an appreciative smile asked, "Will I be all right?" In reply Michael grinned and nodded vigorously, thus dislodging his loosely secured tin-helmet, which like a guillotine fell off his head and hit the elderly casualty in the middle of his bald pate.

The elderly admiral was knocked out in an instant. The three young medics stood there for a while in shock, trying to take in this new and unexpected course of events. "*Get him into the ambulance and rush him to the Victoria hospital*" Michael ordered as they began to regain their composure. Studying his victim Michael noted that he was deeply unconscious and breathing uneasily, what had he done? Concussion at best, hairline fractures of the skull quite possibly. He applied a dressing to the new wound, secured it with bandages around the head (from the chin up) and erased the eyeliner from his forehead detailing his previous wounds, and wrote in its place 'Fractured skull.'

The three medics carefully lifted the stretcher and attempted to put in the back of the ambulance. This ancient ambulance, and its stretcher was designed with grooves in the floor into which the u-shaped runners on the stretcher were intended to fit. But try as they might they couldn't get the one into the other, it kept getting stuck. Try as they might they couldn't get it all the way in, so the poor admirals feet were left sticking out the end of the ambulance, with no way that they could get the door shut. As they tried once more to push the stretcher in they chanced upon the reason for its getting stuck, the Admirals hand had got caught in the groove and was jamming the stretcher, the harder they pushed the more broken fingers he sustained. They now dare not move him at all, then Michael had a brainwave, he took his tie off and closing the doors as far as he could, tied the rear door handles together. "*Get him to the hospital before we kill him, I'll phone the casualty department and tell them we're on the way. Don't wait for me. Just get the poor old sod there.*"

Michael rushed to the nearest telephone kiosk, and reached there in time to witness the 18-year-old driver struggling to start the ambulance in order to get away quickly. As is inevitable in these situations, he tried too hard and flooded the carburettor. The phone got through to the casualty department and Michael prepared them for the arrival of a real emergency, only neglecting to tell them that he was the cause of all his victims' injuries. Message through he raced back to the ambulance to assist in its starting, the engine suddenly burst into life and the ambulance roared off at some speed. Heading towards Earls Avenue, the vehicle was going too fast to take the sharp turn, with two wheels off the ground the vehicle looked in danger of tipping, but worse yet the centrifugal force was so much that the tie, holding the rear doors shut, snapped under the pressure

and like a torpedo the stretcher shot out of the back of the ambulance only to crash feet first at the statue of William Harvey.

At this point, Michael ran home in tears. Home, being three miles away, meant that on his arrival he was in some emotional state. Having explained to his father the terrible things he had just done and witnessed, they managed to phone through the hospital; the admiral had arrived and was according to the ward sister, as well as could be expected. After three days a kindly matron allowed him to visit, but with the cautionary words, "*Don't stay too long, the shock of seeing you again might kill him.*" Then as a consolation she added, not to worry though, the admiral was clearly a hardy old gentleman. In Michael went, and was confronted by the staunch old sailor propped up on pillows, head swathed in bandages and left arm in plaster supported by a metal splint. Plaster splints also supported his legs, raised in traction.

In hindsight, Michael recalls it was a little unnecessary for him to enquire of the old gentleman "*Hello sir, do you remember me?*" Although he was a little taken aback that the response should be gentle chuckling, what have I done to him "*Brain damage!*"

As it goes the Admiral, who was to live for many more years, was reflecting upon the humorous side of the events, for that morning his wife had told him "*Go for a nice walk along the Leas. It will do you the world of good.*"

Potted Biography of Michael Bentine

1922 – Born in Watford, Hertfordshire of Anglo-Peruvian parentage. Moving to Folkestone the following year.

Educated at Eton College, he returned to Folkestone just prior to the outbreak of war. Refused entry into the RAF due to his mixed parentage in 1940 he found work in a touring company. It was whilst appearing in a Shakespearean play, wearing 'doublet and all', at Hyde Park that military policemen from the RAF came on stage and arrested him for desertion. Unbeknown to him he had been conscripted into the air force, and due to the peripatetic nature of working with a touring company of actors; the letter informing him of his conscription never arrived on time.

Having completed his flight training, he was second last in line for a set of Typhus inoculations; the bottle being empty was re-filled, but mistakenly using a pure culture of Typhoid. He was seriously ill, finding himself in a coma for six weeks, and awakening with damaged eyesight, the other airman died. Unable to fly he was transferred to Intelligence and seconded to MI9 a unit that dealt with resistance movements and escaped airmen. His superior was Airey Neave of Colditz fame.

At one stage in his military career he was posted to Hawkinge, where his local knowledge came in very handy for his colleagues. In 1945 he took part in the liberation of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

Following the war he resumed his career in show business, spending some time in Australia he decided to focus on comedy and founded the Goon Show with Spike Milligan, Peter Sellers and Harry Secombe; appearing in the first 38 shows. He left the Goons to work on his own radio series, and remained on good terms with all of them.

During the 1960's he undertook the first Hovercraft expedition up the Amazon River, a crack pistol shot he also helped form the counter-terrorist wing of 22 SAS squadron.

Having a keen interest in the paranormal he wrote a couple of books on the matter and towards the end of his life was president of the Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena.

In 1995 he was awarded the CBE for 'services to entertainment' and was also the proud recipient of the Peruvian Order of Merit. He passed away in 1996.

Some of the programmes Bentine appeared in were:

The Goon Show (1950-52), Round the Bend in Thirty Minutes (1959), It's a Square World (1960-64), The Golden Silents (1965), Michael Bentine's Potty Time (1973-80)

Andrew Taylor

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