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The Leamington Society Newsletter

May 2019

Chairman's Notes

Spring is a time of hope and fresh beginnings. Will the big change at Warwick District Council bring fresh thoughts on contentious issues and encouragement for us to play our part in tackling climate change: to ride our bikes on better cycleways and address the serious problem of air pollution? We hope so.

The Leamington Society is also making a fresh approach with its Facebook page and website; do look and, even better, contribute photos – via any committee member.

With sunshine, gentle warmth and lighter evenings, now is the time to enjoy Leamington's green spaces.

The Pump Room Gardens project is almost complete so walk about, visit the rain garden, take the wooden chair and tell a tale. Enjoy the Big Victorian Picnic on June 8th, weather permitting, followed by the Peace Festival on June 15th and 16th.

Free Leamington History Walks start on June 18th: Tuesdays at 2.30pm and Wednesdays at 7pm from the gates of Jephson Gardens opposite the Pump Rooms. On August 3rd and 4th there is Art in the Park, with 'Water' as theme. The Society will have a stand – would you please help us staff it?

There is always 'art in the park': Leamington Studio Artists hold exhibitions throughout the year in East Lodge, open Wednesday to Sunday.

Talks and Events

The first two talks in 2019-20 will be

Queen Victoria's portraits

Gill White

Thursday, September 12th

A year as a reporter in Afghanistan

David Heathfield

Thursday, October 10th

The full programme of the year's talks will be announced in our August Newsletter

At the other end of Parade, the Friends of Christchurch Gardens are holding a tennis event on July 20th. What do you know about Christchurch Gardens? On Monday, 8th July Louise Goold (Chairman) is giving a talk on its history, 7.30pm at Holy Trinity.

There are many more green spaces to explore outside the town centre, including the remnant of Dr Hitchman's arboretum at St Helen's Road. At its height his arboretum contained one of the largest collections of fine specimen trees in England: 93 specimens were listed. Few remain but there is a board to help you identify them.

There's much to enjoy and cherish in our amazing town. Enjoy it this summer!

Sidney Syson

AGM 2019

Our chairman Sidney Syson welcomed 40 members to our 2019 AGM, held at Christchurch, Priory Terrace on Thursday 9th May. Apologies were received; the minutes of the previous AGM accepted and signed.

The Chairman's Report and Sub-Committee Reports, which had been circulated, were then presented. The Chairman warmly thanked the executive committee and sub-committees' members for their support and hard work during the year, as well as numerous other members, such as our newsletter deliverers.

The Treasurer reported a continuing healthy financial position. The Chairman's Report and Committee Reports were adopted. Copies are available from the Chairman.

Nominations for Leamington Society

Officers for 2019-20:

Chairman: Sidney Syson Vice-Chairmen: Barbara Lynn, Richard Ward

Hon. Secretary and Membership Secretary: Margaret Begg

Hon. Treasurer: Marianne Pitts

Executive Committee members:

Clive Engwell, Archie Pitts, Carole Sleight, Jef Tuyn.

As there were no other nominations, these were unanimously declared elected.

Clive Engwell is stepping down as Treasurer, to be replaced by Marianne Pitts (for all our accounts – Leamington Society, Friends of Leamington Station, Friends of Pump Room Gardens). Clive will remain a committee member. In turn Marianne is relinquishing her role with the Programme team which Carole Sleight will take over.

Both Clive and Marianne were warmly thanked for all their work.

Paul Edwards agreed to continue to serve as our Planning Representative on the Conservation Area Forum (CAF). Ruth Bennion and Richard Ward are also members of CAF. Richard Ashworth agreed to remain on the committee ex-officio role as immediate past chairman. It was proposed that Ian Salvin be re-appointed as Independent Examiner. A unanimous vote of thanks was carried for his meticulous work in examining the accounts for 2018-19.

Honorary Life membership was proposed for Ian Bradbury for his single-minded work monitoring the quality of the restoration works on the Pump Room Gardens; for Jan and Penny Gillett for their tireless work on our websites; for Margaret and Chris Begg for their work for our society for 40 years. All three proposals were passed unanimously.

There was a break to enjoy the excellent refreshments organized by Ruth Bennion, with drinks catered for by Robin and Shirley Adams.

After the break Roger Beckett told us about the canal system that runs through Warwick District with special emphasis on the section in Old Town Leamington. This is reported more fully below.

England's Green and Pleasant Land

Warwick District has a Local Plan – like many councils across the country – which designates large areas of green landscape for new housing sites. The CPRE (Campaign to Protect Rural England) has for years been engaged in a damage limitation exercise. A newly published survey by the CPRE has focussed on council registers of "Brownfield" (land previously developed). The headline summary is that across England there is enough brown land to accommodate one million homes.

The survey claims that well over half of this land is deliverable within the next five years. So why is green land preferred? Complex social, political and economic factors are at work. Planning in recent years has been very much market led, in a bid to speed up development and reduce perceived regulatory burdens. It's usually easier to develop a green field than to reclaim and design an urban site, and more profitable to sell low density housing. With rampant property inflation, a house as an essential financial asset has dominated thinking in this country much more than in most of Europe, where renting does not equate with poverty.

While government is paralysed by discord over Brexit, other pressing policy issues are left in the pending tray. Housing is one of these, as are air pollution and climate change, on which a Swedish schoolgirl has confronted our politicians with some very awkward home truths. Brownfield land is important because it engages all these issues. The CPRE summary assumes a density of 33-41 dwellings per hectare: higher than WDC's planned "garden suburbs" but quite low by urban standards. This difference is critical to genuinely sustainable public transport as a realistic choice. Higher densities and mixed land use are the key to reducing the need for travel by car. Terraces and flats designed for brownfield sites are likely to require considerably less heating than the typical house on offer from developers of green sites. Of total carbon emissions, transport is high and rising at 26%, while buildings make up 19%.

All of this might seem beyond the remit of the Leamington Society. To which I would say: we may not be around to experience the longer term consequences but we are all part of the cause – with our houses, our cars, and our holidays.

Richard Ashworth

Planning Aid England

Planning Aid www.planningaid.co.uk (or www.rtpi.org.uk/planning-aid) provides advice on planning problems. It is funded by the Royal Town Planning Institute with a team of volunteers who are all professional planners, giving their time for free and also running an adviceline advice@planningaid.rtpi.org.uk.



Planning Aid England
Engaging Communities in Planning

You can have 15 minutes free professional advice, which may be extended into further (more-or-less means-tested) help. Further advice is not given to professionals or organisations who can afford to pay for professionals. Local charities and voluntary groups representing residents of modest means are also eligible – but not Parish Councils.

This is a useful resource which was the subject of a presentation to the National Organisation of Residents (NORA) at its 2019 AGM in early May. We were told that the volunteers did not have enough to do!

Marianne Pitts, NORA Committee member and Treasurer

Centre for Health and Wellbeing: Proposal for Newbold Comyn

The golf course on Newbold Comyn has closed for good. Warwick District Council (WDC), owners of the site, has run a public consultation; the responses have been analysed and recommendations drawn up for its future.

Now there is a unique opportunity for Royal Leamington Spa to become a Centre for Health and Wellbeing, building on its heritage and embracing Newbold Comyn, one of the town's most valuable resources. In addition to meeting national concerns



Newbold Comyn

regarding health and wellbeing, the proposal has the potential to deliver substantial commercial benefits.

Well researched evidence shows that engaging with the natural environment brings benefits to all aspects of health, including mental health and obesity. This proposal would encourage engagement through a range of practical activities.



Currently unused buildings

The proposed Centre would include seven themes:

1. Nature and Wildlife – The natural environment underpins all aspects of our health and wellbeing. The whole site would be managed to increase its wildlife while developing a comprehensive programme of activities.
2. Exercise and Mindfulness – Outdoor activity improves both physical and mental wellbeing. A range of exercise and activities will be developed for all ages and abilities.

3. Future Diet – Our food supplies depend on our natural resources. More consideration for our diet will require new approaches and will impact on both our health and the natural environment.
4. Food Production – As more food is required for ever increasing human populations, consideration must be given to alternative crops and protein sources along with technologies that are more sympathetic to the natural environment.
5. Countryside and Rural Skills – Caring for the countryside can lead to more engagement with nature through participation in rural crafts and skills that both sustain and benefit wildlife.
6. Sustainability and Renewable Technologies – Technologies for alternative energy sources are already advancing. Great changes in attitudes and behaviour will be required to reverse the decline in the natural environment.
7. Education and Adult Learning – Change will only come about through education, learning and communication. Education from an early age should be at the heart of this project

The Leamington Society would like to hear from anyone interested in becoming involved with this proposal.

Jef Aartse-Tuyn and Michael Bunney

Art in the Park (AITP) 2019

AITP returns to Jephson Gardens, for its fifth year, over the weekend of August 3rd and 4th. This free-to-enter event had about 40,000 visitors over the two days last year bringing a huge boost to the wellbeing of the district as well as to the local economy.

The event was inspired by Art in Action which ran for 40 years from 1977 to 2016. Art in Action was held at Waterperry Gardens outside Oxford, brought crowds from all over

the country with 28,000 paying visitors in its last year, over four days. So much so that



it led local artist Mo Finnesey, of Leamington Studio Artists, to argue there should be a similar event in Leamington. We now do.

The Leamington branch of the Rotary Club jointly with Kingsley School have honoured the Festival Director Carole Sleight for her work, helped by many volunteers, for the



Motionhouse performing at AITP 2018

success AITP has become. Congratulations to Carole and her team.

Archie Pitts

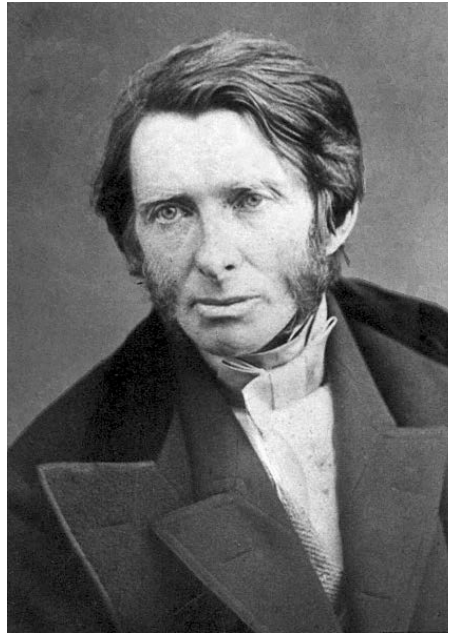
Ruskin Renewed

This year marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of John Ruskin (1819-1900); author, artist, critic, aesthete and all-round Good Guy who challenged the moral foundations of Victorian Britain while a servant poured his tea. Ruskin was born into a wealthy mercantile family and, with no need to make money himself, he naturally frowned upon all forms of commerce. He took a similarly dim view of the industrial revolution, believing that factories and railways had polluted both the environment and the human soul. If he was around today, he would have been an anti-capitalist, Climate

Change warrior *par excellence* and the BBC would have loved him. And of course he would have voted Remain. In this sense he might be described as an early Stephen Fry with spats.

But what connection, you ask with a slight yawn, does John Ruskin have with Leamington Spa? Well, Ruskin ultimately led a long and fruitful life but as a young student at Oxford in 1840 he fell into depression and, more worryingly, developed a nasty haemorrhage, possibly a symptom of consumption. Leamington was at that time the go-to place for all matters of respiratory health and as Ruskin had an eye for tasty architecture (he later wrote a three-volume study of Venice) he put aside his studies and travelled up to Warwickshire without delay, though not by train we hope. He soon found a comfortable berth at No 8, Russell Terrace ‘a small, square brick lodging-house’ where he stayed for six weeks as a patient of the great Dr Henry Jephson. The house is now marked with a blue plaque.

Dr Jephson’s treatment naturally featured the delicious spa mineral waters, both drinking them and bathing in them, though presumably not at the same time. He also had Ruskin up and about on long, health-giving country walks, powered by a course of vitamin pills and a diet of meat, poultry, milk puddings, boiled eggs and sherry, so there was no risk of starvation. Not surprisingly, Ruskin soon felt better on this regime, so much so that inspiration returned, and he took up his pen to write



Ruskin in 1850s, cc

a minor masterpiece, *The King of the Golden River*. This charming fairy-tale has a theme of Christian morality and its setting is the pristine Alpine landscape which Ruskin had visited and loved. He dedicated it to Euphemia Gray, the twelve-year-old daughter of a family friend. It was massively popular in its day and remains the best-loved and

most translated of all Ruskin's works. Effie must have loved it too because seven years later she became his wife.

Ruskin left Russell Terrace after six weeks, refreshed, restored and geared up for literary glory. He sensibly gave up his degree and began an awesome career as social commentator and man of letters. He never visited Leamington again, but he must have often reflected on how the place had helped him. I like to think that if he'd written about his stay he would have entitled it: *The Town That Saved My Life*. I'm sure we'd all drink to that – with spa water, of course.

Peter Coady

The Rain Garden in the Pump Room Gardens

What a joy it was to see the new Rain Garden in the renovated Pump Room Gardens earlier in April. Gone are the densely packed trees and shrubs that created a dull and dismal environment at the west end of the park and gone are the unsightly overgrown brambles and shrubs along the riverbank. Now we have an open, uplifting design that lets in the light, opens up views across the park towards the restored bandstand, across the river towards York Promenade, and down the river to Adelaide Bridge.

Although it is early days and the garden will need time to establish and mature, it is a breath of fresh air and already popular with the public. The elevated viewing platform is a favourite place for many, perched on a rocky outcrop with commanding views over the Pump Room Gardens.



Rockery over-looking pump room gardens
and rain pond

The design of the Rain Garden by Ashmead Price incorporates several elements in an ingenious way to create a subtle reflection of the former 1881 rockery and water feature, long since gone. The new pond is part of the sustainable drainage system for the west end of the Pump Room gardens, using water channeled in by the grassy swale near the Linden Avenue to provide surface water storage, as well as being an attractive and interesting garden feature.

Waterside planting around the pond and along the riverbank, will in time bring colour and fragrance to this previously neglected part of the park and will also enhance the biodiversity of the garden and the River Leam corridor. So, we not only have a gem of garden, but also a very practical feature that hopefully will help to drain the land liable to flooding. That's what I call a win-win garden feature!

Peter Storie

Perspectives on Afghanistan with Heidi Meyer

A striking subject, this, much appreciated by a large audience, most of whom had a patchy knowledge of the country's connection with the Taliban, the Mujahadeen, and Al Qaeda, but no grasp of a continuous narrative. Heidi emphasized that she was expressing her own opinion, not that of any UK or USA government body.

Afghanistan is almost exactly five times the size of England and much of it extremely mountainous. Heidi was very taken with its beauty, vitiated though that has been by endemic disorder. Not without courage, she spent five years there, working under Donald Rumsfeld "at the tip of the spear of US policy", advising President Karzai on the Afghan National Security Council. In her talk she concentrated on the history of the country from the coup in 1973 which toppled the constitutional monarchy to create the republic and was racked for decades by brutal civil wars until united under the Taliban, the accepted government of the country.

She listed the country's inhabitants: Tajik; Uzbek; Hazara and the dominant Pashtun, all Muslim. (According to Whitaker's Almanack 80% are Sunni, 20% Shia). The Pashtun tribe extends into neighbouring Pakistan, providing a safe haven for Taliban soldiers. It is not surprising that Osama Bin Laden was eventually caught in Pakistan.

The administration is corrupt: of every thousand dollars of US aid, only one dollar is usually spent on its purpose. Warlords grab the rest. The Bank of Kabul has embezzled

the better part of \$500,000,000, and for this just two people have been jailed for just five years, presumably with remission for good behaviour. The Taliban, idealists to a man, savagely imposes strict Sharia law, and with the best of motives extirpates the Western preference for the education of women. The men seem to prefer boys and lock their women away

I am no pacifist, but war is a serious business. Before the USA, and under Brezhnev, the Russian tanks trundled in. They withdrew under Gorbachev. The adventure became known as “The Russian Vietnam”. The Americans have drifted into their longest war: 18 years. For what? Yet another Vietnam?

This was a first class talk. I went home with a sigh.

Robin Taylor

Visit to Vitsoe, April 2019

Mark Adams, managing director of the company, spoke to a full house of members in the beautiful, light and spacious production building that Vitsoe has created on the Ford



Mark Adams (I) discussing assembly of Vitsoe 620 chair with colleague

© Vitsoe

foundry site. The building runs perfectly North-South. The north roofs are glazed – so

that no artificial light is needed during daylight hours – and the south roofs support solar panels – so the building is self-sufficient in energy until the sun sets. The landscape is of rough poor soil, mixed with rubble and sculpted into large ridge and furrow profiles and has been seeded with wild flowers, which will take time to reach their equilibrium. Remember the poppies last year?

Vitsoe is the Danish name of a British firm producing German-designed furniture which is exported all over the world: it is bequeathed in Wills and changes hands at near-new prices on eBay. South Korea has become a good customer thanks to social media. Images of the elegant, versatile shelving and seating promote world-wide sales, mainly to the USA, so a shipping container leaves the site weekly to travel along the railway track which passes silently past the triple-glazed north window.

Chris White, then MP of Warwick and Leamington, encouraged Mark to consider his constituency for a bigger building when Vitsoe outgrew its London home (also along the Grand Union Canal) with the inevitable difficulties of access. Leamington is central to the firm's (mostly English) suppliers and well connected by road and rail. The building has been conceived and constructed to allow for Vitsoe's long-term expansion. In the meantime the extra space is shared with the dance-circus company, Motionhouse, an unusual and creative partnership which enriches both parties.

Leamington is lucky. Let us hope the Vitsoe model is copied – it must be a good place to work.

Marianne Pitts

Canal Conservation Area, Roger Beckett

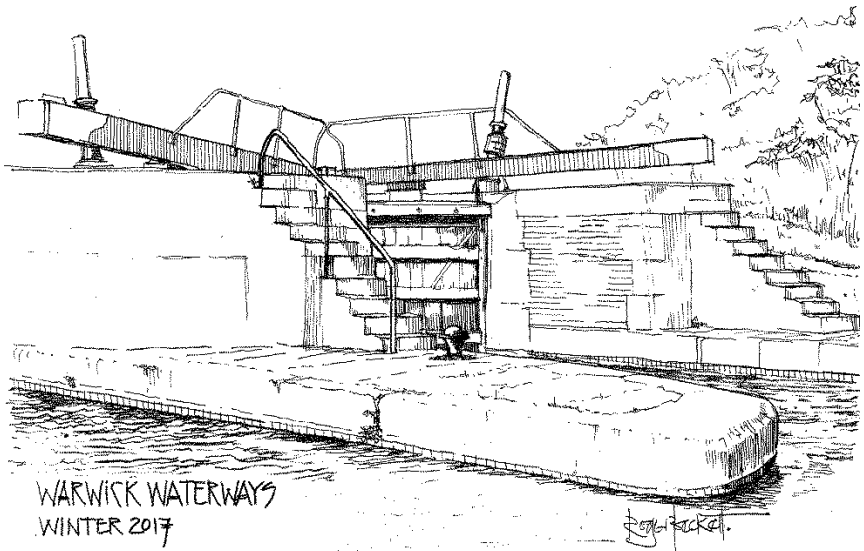
Roger Beckett, architect/planner and expert in waterside regeneration and conservation, spoke at our AGM about the recently adopted Canal Conservation Area in Leamington and Warwick. In his research he has walked the 25-mile length of the Grand Union and Stratford canals (linking London and Birmingham) through Warwick district more than once, noting the bridges, locks, cottages, warehouses and factories alongside the towpaths – and taking good photographs.

The coming of the canals coincided with the earliest development of Leamington Spa. The Grand Union canal was built with manpower and wheelbarrows; it ran *around* the ancient town of Warwick, but *straight through* Old Town in Leamington, where there

was nothing to avoid. In both towns trades and industries and warehouses developed along the banks. Canals were not constructed for people or leisure: they were the transport system that powered the Industrial Revolution, some 50 years before the railway network.

Roger endorsed the student housing *The Union* (developed by Alumno) as a strong structure on the right scale. However he is concerned about the future of the Aga (formerly Flavels) art deco building, which lies outside the adopted Conservation Area.

It was built on the site of the original Leamington Ranelagh Pleasure Gardens run by John Cullis, responsible for planting much of Leafy Leamington. There are parts of the area south of the canal that are significant and need to be included along with that part



© Roger Beckett

of the Leamington Conservation area cut through by the canal.

Canals are not given enough historic attention. Roger's reports to WDC and his photographs are crying out for publication as a book. We hope it gets written.

Marianne Pitts

New members

We are pleased to welcome to the society:

Christine Wilson

Elisabeth Robson

Johnny Quinn

Jack and Sarah Rankin

Penelope Halpin

Andrew Thompson

Ian Bradbury

Officers and Committee

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01926 831 414

Richard Ward, 3 Bell Court, The Maltings, CV32 5FH, 01926 422 750

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Clarendon Crescent, CV32 5NR, 01926 423 822

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Other Committee Members:

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Carole Sleight 07768 617 081

Jef Tuyn 01926 339 085

The Leamington Society is a registered charity. It is a member of the West Midlands Amenity Societies Association and the National Organisation of Residents' Associations. It exists to preserve the heritage and improve the character of Royal Leamington Spa and to encourage high standards of planning and architecture.

Charity No. 516078

Unless otherwise indicated, views expressed in these newsletters are the contributors' own and not necessarily the corporate view of the Society.