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The Leamington Society Newsletter

August 2020

Chairman's Notes

The town of Royal Leamington Spa has many reasons for thanking Robert Nash for his years of unstinting service as Town Clerk. Robert is to retire shortly and in recognition of his work the Leamington Society has made him an Honorary Member. We wish him a long and happy retirement.

The Town Council were a generous donor to the Pump Room Gardens restoration. The gardens and bandstand now look impressive and, despite the cancellation of The Peace Festival and other events, have been enjoyed by many this summer.

The observant, however, will have noticed that all is not yet complete; the even more observant will notice the cracks and bumps in the surface of the paths. We are extremely grateful to Archie Pitts for tirelessly pressing WDC for more than a year to finish off this project satisfactorily, supported by Ian Bradbury, a retired civil engineer professionally qualified to comment. Archie has now stepped down as the Chairman of the Friends of the Pump Room Gardens, and we are delighted that Ian has agreed to take over. Coincidence or not, since he became Chairman the bandstand steps have been built yet again – at last properly.

You will see in this newsletter details of our forthcoming online meetings. We are hoping that in addition we can arrange topical events at short notice.

The government's proposed planning reforms are a huge worry to many, and we wait

Events and Talks

Making Histories: New responses to the Ceramics Collection

Lily Crowther
Thursday, August 27th, 7.30

Looking ahead – what the railway can do in a 'new normal'

Ian Baxter
Thursday, October 22nd, 7.30

Witch

Finbar Hawkins
Thursday, November 27th, 7.30

to see the full local implications. More on this anon.

On a happier note the District Council has applied for significant Government funding, which if successful, will at last transform Spencer Yard including the United Reform Church, and repurpose the Town Hall as a useful well used building for the future. The Town Council are enthused by the plans for the Town Hall which bodes well. We live in hope.

Sidney Syson

Coming talks. These will be conducted using Zoom. The code necessary to connect will be circulated by MailChimp in advance of each meeting.

Making Histories: New responses to the Ceramics Collection, Lily Crowther

Joint meeting with the Friends of Leamington Art Gallery

Lily Crowther, history curator at the Leamington Spa Art Gallery, will talk about the Gallery's ceramic collection and how seven contemporary artists from the Midlands have responded with their interpretations. Their items form the current exhibition at the Art Gallery – which you may now visit on booking a slot.

Looking ahead – what the railway can do in a 'new normal'

Arranged by the Friends of Leamington Station

Ian Baxter will review the ways in which the railway network can respond to and support the new post-Covid 19 world, look at some of the initiatives happening in the Midlands, and add some good, old fashioned Great Western reflections.

Ian Baxter is founder and President of the Friends of Leamington Station, created as result of a stimulating talk he made to the Society in 2004 while a senior manager at Chiltern Railways. The FLS have not looked back since then.

We are delighted he will be speaking to us again

Witch

Joint meeting with the Leamington Literary Society

Finbar Hawkins will talk about his forthcoming novel *Witch* set in the Civil War and the witch hunts of 1646-7. It is a novel about Magick and realism, siblings and family.

He will speak about the power of books and making them beautiful, lyrical, living things and how he created the illustrations to accompany his first novel.

Finbar is Creative Director at Aardman Creations, of Wallace and Gromit fame.

Distribution of this newsletter

While the country remains subject to restrictions due to the continuing pandemic, the Society will distribute its Newsletter by MailChimp. A small number of hardcopies will be printed for members who do not use email.

Archie Pitts

Being Mayor of Royal Leamington Spa

I thought I knew Leamington. Yet it was only when I became Deputy Mayor that I fully appreciated its dense fabric. There are so many good and remarkable people among us: they work with charities; they work for religious organisations, schools, civic bodies, musical and sports societies; students volunteer in their adopted community, and they work in business and industry, bringing employment and prosperity. We need them all, and as we have lately realised, the most valued are not necessarily those who get the recognition or reward they deserve. We all depend on each other.

Covid-19 has frustrated my wish to represent the Town as Mayor at the many events which celebrate these selfless contributions. I am also sorry not to play a larger role in the formal civic life of the region. But my biggest regret is not being able to support my chosen charities to anything like the extent I would have wished, as most of the Mayor's usual fundraising events are near-impossible at present.

We all ultimately depend on the processes and finite resources of the earth. I see parallels between the interconnectedness of life in our Town with that of the natural world. We are using and despoiling our planet's resources at a rate that is unsustainable and losing species with which we are co-dependent. The systems of our planet are vulnerable, and we are now at risk of damaging those. Thinking



Susan Rasmussen in full regalia

globally but acting locally, I have chosen the Warwickshire Wildlife Trust as one of my two charities.

Some of the land WWT owns or manages is in or near Leamington, so we can all be directly involved. WWT is about so much more than preserving habitats for iconic animals of the British countryside. Every organism, from the microbes in the soil up, is cherished as part of an interdependent system, just as in Leamington every individual and organisation creates a community in which we can all thrive.

Artists interpret the world and excellent ones present it anew for us but we all know that performing artists and their companies have been hit harder than most during the lockdown. Motionhouse is a name we all recognise and associate with excellence. With the Town Hall as its new home, the company is moving into the geographical heart of our community, giving us more chance to celebrate its presence and feel proud that it is part of the Leamington scene. Dance will be even more accessible, whether we are watching, learning or performing. We need more movement and more joy in our lives. For that reason I am supporting this jewel of our Town as my second Mayoral charity.

I hope many of you will not only join me in supporting these charities but participate whenever possible in the civic and fund-raising events that add to the life of our town.

Susan Rasmussen, Mayor, Royal Leamington Spa

18 years as Town Clerk of Royal Leamington Spa

Stepping off a train on a cold January evening, gave me an inauspicious introduction to Royal Leamington Spa. It was a Town of which I had only the most fleeting association – recipient of a Royal Charter, once renowned for its curative spa waters, located somewhere in the West Midlands – such was the sum of my understanding of the place that was to become a significant part of my life over the next 18 years.

On taking up the post of Town Clerk at the newly formed Town Council, at that time the third largest Parish authority in England, I quickly discovered a Town of considerable variations: fine architecture juxtaposed with mid Victorian terraced housing; declining traditional industries such as Ford and Automotive Products and expansive new high tech developments; an expanding and ethnically diverse population.

The Mayor of the day, whose election I witnessed on only my second visit to the Town Hall, asked if I was prepared to work from a blank sheet – his words spoken with humour but they contained more than a hint of truth. I inherited the former Clerk's tools of the trade, a telephone, typewriter, filing cabinet and the assistance of the Mayor's Chauffeur – the Council's only other employee.



Town Hall



Leamington's Coat of Arms

As Town Clerk you quickly realise the importance of strong and lasting partnerships. Whether through organisations such as the Leamington Society, local residents' groups, charities or indeed individuals, Leamington Spa is truly blessed by the variety of opportunities available to its citizens to contribute to the life of their Town. That they have done so is to be seen at every turn: the renovated Pump Room Gardens, resplendent after many years of decline; the refurbished Memorial to the Czech soldiers at Jephson Gardens; the Blue Plaque trail; the local amenity spaces nurtured by local green fingered residents. That is not to diminish the unseen influence that these Groups and individuals bring to bear on those charged with making decisions, most recently evidenced in the Leamington Spa Neighbourhood Plan. Without the benefit of this relationship, the role of Town Council would be considerably diminished.

Leamington faces many challenges, but history tells us that it always has and, in every case, risen to the new demands of the time. It can do so again secure in the knowledge that the collective will of its Parishioners can be harnessed for the common good.

Robert Nash, Town Clerk, Royal Leamington Spa Town Council

A mystery solved

A visitor to Leamington asked the Society to help identify an object suspended from a beech tree above the River Leam near York Bridge – photograph supplied by the visitor.

We were glad to help. It represents a beech husk and made by Alfreda McHale in 1995 while at Warwickshire College <http://alfredamchale.com/>. It won a prize and was purchased by Warwick District Council for permanent display.



Archie Pitts

Changes to the Planning Process

The Government and the press have long blamed the ‘shortage’ of houses built on a slow and cumbersome planning process. The fact that there are up to a million approved houses still unbuilt surely belies this.

In fact, house building has been largely dependent on ‘the market’. Developers have built where and when they can sell and nowhere else. The planning process has borne little relation to actual overall needs and never considered what is best for our communities or the environment.

It is obviously easier, and more profitable, to build on virgin land than the more difficult ‘brown-field’ sites within the town boundaries. Standard, nationwide solutions have been churned out and any ‘sense of place’ a rarity.

This avoids authorities or developers spending time and money on architects, engineers and planners thinking in depth about more difficult urban sites or relating what is built to actual housing needs, like enough affordable housing; single person housing; self-built houses, and houses not dependent on car ownership. Sustainability and space standards are often at the legal minimum.

There have been many Papers and Reports recently addressing problems with our current arrangements, including the updating of the planning process. These documents present ideal visions for the future, including quality of design.

The bureaucratic complexities of the planning process do need re-examining but are at

least a check on the quality of development. The Government's current hurried proposals to speed up housing supply, simply to allow a free-for-all for brown field sites will surely risk huge abuse and have a devastating effect on quality standards in cities, towns and villages. For instance two stories can be added to houses with impunity and space standards are bound to be reduced since greed is a motivating factor in the commercial housing market.

There might be a consequent scramble for Authorities to increase their Conservation Areas (since these will be one of the sectors which will be exempt from this arrangement) to avoid the plunder. This will consequently create a two-tier situation, segregate communities and distort house values.

Richard Ward

1 Mill Street

It was back in November 2018 when my wife Dessie and I were walking in Jephson Gardens that we looked over at Urquhart Hall and mused that it would be a great building to use for our Make Good Grow idea. At that time, I had just sold my company, Rant & Rave and was developing a philanthropic idea of using professional skills for charitable work as a volunteer, but with maximum social impact and importantly, with a beginning and end to the volunteer project. Anyhow, we walked across to the lovely building and saw that there was a 'sold' sign on it, but that a planning notice on the wall showed that the intended use was for apartments.

The Planning Notice had expired so the next morning I called the Agent and they said it had come back on the market an hour ago. For us, it felt like fate, so we viewed that day, and fell in love with the beauty of the building and its historic heritage. The rest, as they say, is history.

We learned that in 1905 Sarah Urquhart bequeathed it to her daughter for use as a community hall. Prior to that, it had been a chapel and even housed a military group during the first world war. It has been a community place for a long time, and also owned by the Sikh Community. After we bought and started to show people round, the story began to unfold – people had been married there, danced with their future wife for the first time, played bingo, indoor footy, took Karate lessons, and even done Karaoke!

We bought it from the Life Charity as their national HQ, but they had found it too large and had moved out. It was in remarkably good condition and has the most amazing wooden ceiling on the upper floor. We set about refurbishing the building and if you pass it now, you will see the new windows that somehow bring it back in time and give it added strength and presence. Inside, we are making it a co-work, a place where businesses, young and old can work together and rent anything from a desk to an office on a very short-term basis, hence very flexible. There will be a café, meeting rooms, a lovely event space, and even a podcast and video editing studio. You can get more information and a video at 1millstreet.com



Nigel Shanahan and 1 Mill Street

Our philosophy is ‘Do Well, Do Good’ meaning that we can all thrive, even in these dire situations, but we can also do good. That is why we use the strapline ‘Smart co-work with a heart’. We have already launched *Make Good Grow* in the building, so that members can use their skills to positive social effect, and we intend that charities and social enterprises will be able to use the facilities on a free of charge basis.



We hope that you like what we are doing. The café will be open on 14th September and you are very welcome to come in and check us out. Just ask for us.

Nigel and Dessie Shanahan

Urquhart Hall during 20th century

The hall stands on the site of Mill Street Chapel, which was also known as Lady Huntingdon's Chapel, both of whom followed Calvinism. Eventually the chapel came into the ownership of All Saints Church under the Reverend John Craig. A prominent member of the congregation, Sarah Urquhart, offered to pay for the building of a new hall and Parish Room after the old chapel had been demolished. The cost was about £3,000.

Building started and an inscribed stone was set into the building and laid by Mary Urquhart, Sarah's daughter on May 31st, 1905. It officially opened on 28th September 1905.

The Hall had many uses for meetings of all sorts of groups and societies, some connected to the church like parish meetings, Boys Brigade, and musical evenings. In 1906 arrangements were made for the provision of a rifle range for Leamington Church Lads' Brigade, and the range was formally opened at the Urquhart Hall.

Gradually many groups started using the Hall, but by 1914 war was looming and Urquhart Hall became a billet for members of the local 213th Army Troops Company Royal Engineers. In August 1922 a memorial plaque was placed in the Hall in remembrance of them.

The Hall resumed its use as The Church rooms and again many groups used it.

Post 1945 Bath Place School also used it for lessons until 1964 when, following a fire at the Loft Theatre, it became their temporary home for four years. From 1981 it was owned by the local Sikh community until 2004 when the Life organisation moved in. For the last few years it has remained empty with failed planning applications. It is great now that it will have a new life as '1 Mill Street'.

Barry Franklin

Coming out of lockdown at Leamington Station

A heroic effort by all concerned.

Leamington Station garden has been worked on two months now and is slowly becoming as beautiful as ever. Gardeners have visited almost daily since the end of

lockdown and hundreds of hours have been spent weeding, trimming, mowing and planting. During lockdown none of the volunteer gardeners were allowed even to visit the station; all we knew is that some station staff were mowing the lawn and watering the planters, for which we are lastingly grateful.

Photographs at the start of July show fuzzy topiary, huge overgrown bushes and masses of weeds – some beautiful like the poppies, some dismaying like brambles and bindweed. The fine Spring had produced lots of roses, all needing dead-heading, and big dry brown patches on the new lawn. The Romneya next to the hut was blocking the door, invading the path along the fence, and even invading the hut interior but



Before



And getting there

looked magnificent in full bloom.

The weeding, pruning and trimming produced more than a dozen builders' bags full of compostable materials – far more than our composting arrangements could handle – so we arranged for a Green contractor to take it away. Now more full bags are accumulating.

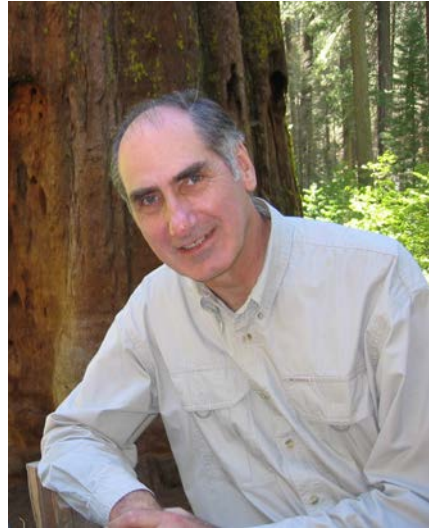
It is a tribute to all our volunteers – with several welcome newcomers – and especially Ruth Bennion who has done more than anyone. Come and see for yourself.

Marianne Pitts

Peter Storrie, 25th July 1942 - 2nd July 2020

Peter, who has died aged 77 after a long battle with cancer, played an active role in Leamington's local conservation for many years. He mixed history and town planning law to defend and preserve many local projects of historical importance from re-development.

Peter was born in Coventry during the Second World War. His career began in the Planning department at Coventry Council – causing amusement in his family by probably being the only person to defend the design of the Coventry Ring Road. As a town planner he worked on innovative and progressive projects throughout his career that he always spoke about with great passion: the design of Runcorn New Town, Larnaca Bay in Cyprus, setting up his own planning business in Nigeria where the family lived for six years and later, back in England, the redevelopment of BMW's engine factory, and urban parks programmes.



Peter Storrie

He was a Member of numerous English Heritage and Town Planning Institutes and Chairman of various West Midland Planning Committees. He felt privileged to work on so many interesting and exciting projects.

He loved Leamington and the local area and dedicated a lot of his time to help preserve it. He successfully defended the redevelopment of Warwick Castle Park, helped protect Victoria Park from redevelopment, and helped restore the Pump Room Gardens. Peter was, for two years, Chairman of the Warwickshire Gardens Trust.

One of his great passions was old cars. He bought his 1934 Invicta car in Cyprus and drove it back to England over the Alps in atrocious weather. He was Chairman of the Invicta Car Club for 10 years, a role he relished until forced to resign through ill health. He also owned a 1963 Alvis TD21.

Peter lived life on his own terms, and it came naturally for him to do what he thought was the right thing. He was sociable, completely genuine and honest; as many have said – a true gentleman.

He died peacefully at home on 2nd July, surrounded by his family. Peter’s family has been overwhelmed by all the kind messages of sympathy and support for which they are most grateful.

Commissioned by the Leamington Society from the family.

New members

Robert Nash

Ben Heyday

Chris and Martina Knight

David and Carol Howe

Andrew and Betty Paine

Officers and Committee

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Vice Chairmen: Barbara Lynn, Apt. 53 Manor House, Avenue Road, CV31 3ND, 01926 831 414

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

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Hon. Treasurer: Marianne Pitts, 7 Kineton Hall, Lillington Avenue, CV32 5DR, 01926 885 532

Other Committee Members:

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Clive Engwell 01926 420 454

Archie Pitts 01926 885 532

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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.