

NOVEMBER  
2023

# Newsletter

PROTECT OUR PAST AND IMPROVE OUR FUTURE

## The Leamington Society

Registered Charity  
516078



Hello and here is our November issue, welcome.

It is with great sadness that we share the news of the passing of two Janets - Janet Alty and Janet Storrie - both passionate about Leamington, the planet, and life. In various ways, they contributed a lot to our town and to the work of the Leamington Society. They have inspired many and we hope that their work will be continued by others.

There are lots of interesting developments and plans in the pipeline for South Leamington (Wych Elm Park, the Parish Church Courtyard, Sky Garden to name but a few), and you will find several articles about those in this and the next newsletter.

Do stay in touch via email at [contact@leamingtonsociety.org](mailto:contact@leamingtonsociety.org): ideas, comments, articles and images are all gratefully received. I would like to thank all the contributors to this newsletter and Jenny Dickins for proofreading it.

You may consider gifting the Leamington Society membership to your family and friends. Merry Christmas!

*Ignaty Dyakov-Richmond, Editor*

### Winter and Spring Events

*All in the Oddfellows Hall,  
22 New St, Leamington Spa  
CV31 1HP*

Wednesday, December 13th at 19:30  
Muir and Norden  
*David Howe*  
(pre-Christmas gathering)

Thursday January 11th at 14.30  
Restoring Lord Leycester Hospital  
*Heidi Meyer*

Thursday, February 8 at 14.30  
The future of transport in  
Leamington: a panel of three  
speakers

Wednesday, March 13 at 19:30  
Our smaller green spaces  
*Nigel Briggs*

Wednesday, April 10th at 19:30  
Coventry Heritage  
*Ian Harrabin*

Wednesday, May 8th AGM

JOIN THE SOCIETY AT  
[WWW.LEAMINGTONSOCIETY.ORG/JOIN-US](http://WWW.LEAMINGTONSOCIETY.ORG/JOIN-US)

## Chairman's Notes

Despite some dull and damp October days, it was very encouraging to see a number of new businesses opening in the town centre.

Although there are still too many empty shops, plans to attract new retailers to the town and to make the town centre a bright and interesting place are having an effect, helped by the support of the Future High Streets Fund. New developments, such as that in the former House of Fraser store, soon to be opened, will bring more people into the town centre, adding to its attraction to retailers. Watch out also for BID Leamington's Love Leam app intended to inform visitors of town centre events, and offers.

Implementation of plans for the Creative Quarter should also attract businesses, bringing back life to neglected areas of the town. The Fold in Spencer Street, opened on 12th October, is an ambitious new centre for Leamington's production

and creative industries. Work on the Town Hall will follow. Comprehensive plans to transform this important building into a creative hub, and to provide more space for other events, should be completed by summer 2024.

Work on the transformation of the Pump Rooms shop area into accommodation for WDC frontline staff could also start in November. A final decision on the planning application, due to be made at the October meeting of the Planning Committee, was postponed until November. If the permission is granted, despite numerous objections, the work is expected to last around three months.

November as always brings seasonal happenings, which will continue into December with the Lantern Parade and Santa at the Royal Priors. The Leamington Society November event, shared with the Literary Society, will feature the well-known local author, Celia Rees.

Our Christmas event will be a talk by David Howe on Frank Muir and Dennis Norden, who will be remembered by many members. This will be accompanied by seasonal refreshments.

Do come along. Both of these evenings are well worth looking forward to.

*Barbara Lynn*



Children's area at the 'Lost Leamington' exhibition

## Creative Quarter: History, Development and Possible Futures

*Review of Talk by Ian Davison, Leader of Warwick District Council, on 14th September, 2023*

The talk by Ian Davison covered a lot of ground. It was a generally positive review which, while acknowledging problems, saw the concept as being beneficial for Leamington. After looking at which buildings were now included in the Quarter, Ian reviewed progress on each of these, concluding with a consideration of how beneficial the development would be for the town.

Spencer Yard being the most advanced, he considered this first. Pictures showed the impressive restoration of the United Reform Church Chapel, now the Fold, ready to welcome tenants, as well as views of other restored buildings.

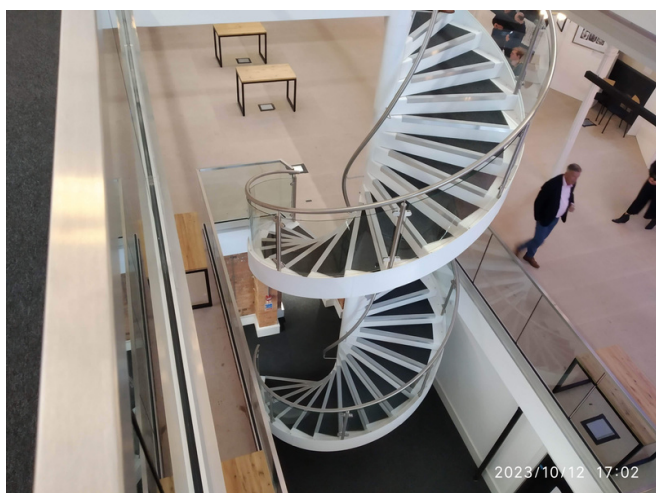
Despite this remarkable transformation he pointed out that the project had met with serious criticism: the Chapel had been leased at a peppercorn rent for a period of 250 years, which meant it had

been virtually given away, and there was little public involvement or benefit, as the leases are to private companies.



Discussing the Town Hall, Ian emphasised the difficulty of using it effectively. It was an imposing building, with impressive internal features, but its rooms were hard to adapt for current needs and it needed significant updating before it could be ready for public use.

Plans for the Stoneleigh Arms and Old Schoolhouse Ian saw as providing most benefit for the public. He did however point out that, although WDC could control what was done to the buildings, it had little control over future use. Coming to the controversial topic of plans for the Pump Rooms, he pointed out that he was not involved in the early decisions. He did however emphasise >>





the important constraints of time and money, and that the plans were too advanced to be changed.

As for possible futures, it was too early to say, but he concluded that however far the project finally progressed, something beneficial would have been achieved and important but unwanted buildings saved for Leamington.

*Barbara Lynn*

## Transforming Leamington

*Review of Talk by Mark Lee,  
Independent Chair of Leamington  
Transformation Board,  
on 18th October, 2023*



My Hometown by Kate Larkin. Photo  
from 'Lost Leamington' Exhibition

Mark began his talk by giving us the bad news. Leamington town centre was no longer the preferred place to shop after

the pandemic. On line shopping had made a huge impact on the bottom line for retailers and many shops were closing or moving to large out of town locations. The news was familiar to our members and deeply depressing for some. Mark soon moved on to list the town's strengths: its architecture, its green open spaces and its location with good transport links to Birmingham and London. He pointed to the green shoots, such as the creative quarter now ready to go in Spencer Yard. The plans for the Stoneleigh Arms in Clemens Street and the old chapel in Court Street were due to go to the council's planning committee and the booming gaming industry was providing well-paid jobs and occupying empty office space in the town.

He outlined the many ways in which the town could be transformed. The councillors from the town, district and county councils were all represented on the Transformation Board and together they could plan changes to transport and highways to make the centre attractive to visitors. The board would look at ways to attract investment, both private and public, into the Old Town and the Parade to offer leisure and cultural activities to replace the former shops.

He stressed the tourist potential of Leamington which is often overshadowed by Stratford and Warwick. There was a need for high-class hotels and restaurants to encourage business and leisure visitors to stay in the town. We already had successful festivals like Art in the Park which brought people in from all over the UK but we could do more.

In the discussion after Mark's talk members stressed the need to cater for students and residents on low budgets as well as wealthy visitors. Mark agreed that there should be a wide range of facilities on offer to accommodate the varied population. There were also questions about the small businesses in Old Town which could feel threatened by new development. These businesses provided good employment opportunities and valuable services for local people. Mark promised plenty of consultation with local residents and he said the Board was keen to move forward with local support.

*Margaret Begg*



### **Wednesday, December 13th Muir and Norden Talk by David Howe**

You are cordially invited to the talk by David Howe. It describes and reflects on the extensive work of the writers and performers Frank Muir and Denis Norden. They worked on the radio and on television, individually and together from their return from the Forces in 1945, dominating both the radio and the television schedules for most of the second half of the century, and winning numerous awards in the process. Examples of their television work include Call My Bluff and It'll Be Alright on the Night. Radio work included the trailblazing sitcom Take it from Here and various panel shows such as My Word.

The talk establishes a picture of them at work in a small office. They worked 8-hour days in their tiny office writing scripts; both were 6 foot eight. Denis said that it was like being married, though they never undressed in front of one another. Neither did either use bad language in their talk or their writing, though they were not averse to innuendo.

*Christmas refreshments will be served.*

## Churchyard Regeneration - Community Garden & Labyrinth



The old churchyard at All Saints Parish Church has long been neglected and is in desperate need of regeneration. Furthermore its community needs an inspiring, creative and relaxing space where nature and well-being can thrive. Volunteers at the Church have teamed up with local community groups and schools to deliver this vision and work is underway on the initial phases of the project.

Autumn 2022 saw the sowing of wildflowers in a secluded garden, which will be at its best from late Spring 2024. Using section 106 funding supplied by WDC, the second phase of development was to plant some new trees and hedging in the main churchyard to show the public that change was happening and engage them in a consultation process. The main initiative this year has been to partner with community engagement specialists Achieving Results in Communities, of Foundry

Wood fame. This partnership allows access to expertise and has already created a cohesive volunteer group to maintain the garden, prepare the ground for more sowing and the planting of additional trees imminently. It also attracted 30 pupils from Year 1 of Clapham Terrace Community Primary School, to spend a morning planting over 200 spring bulbs for spring colour and constructing their own labyrinth from carpet tiles. Other school visits are planned for building bird boxes, insect hotels and much more...

This initial year long engagement is to develop true community involvement with volunteers, social organisations and schools to gain the known restorative benefits of gardening and its links to wellbeing and togetherness.

The funding applications and the construction work in Phase 3, begin in Spring 2024 with the planning of additional community-inspired infrastructure which, at its core, will establish a labyrinth, information





plaques and a revised lighting arrangement for the area as well. The labyrinth, built of ground-level pavements and set into the central garden, will be based on the famous design at Chartres cathedral, which began construction in about 1200. The labyrinth will be many things to many people but at its heart, it is a visual symbol that allows meditation, guides faith, and allows one to reflect progressively to surpass all personal difficulties. As labyrinths are referenced in three key curriculum stages, across numerous year groups, it is planned to increasingly introduce more schools to visit and participate with the whole outdoor learning experience of the project.



The agreement of additional features with other interested parties or organisations, will allow cost calculation and funding prioritisation to ensure the space is used in a shared and constructive manner, creating an environment for peace, reflection, learning and community inspired art and entertainment.

We would expect this development phase to be completed over 2 years depending on funding success.

If you are interested in learning more about the project, or becoming involved, please visit our website:

<http://www.allsaintschurchleamington.org.uk/churchyardregenerationcommunitygardenlabyrinth.html>

Or email

[parishoffice@allsaintschurchleamington.org.uk](mailto:parishoffice@allsaintschurchleamington.org.uk)

*Charles Craft – Development Manager  
All Saints' Church Leamington Spa*

## Sky Garden

This has been a very busy and exciting year since I joined the Leamington High Line community. In December of 2022 I was invited along with others to attend a meeting at 1 Mill St where I was introduced to Derrick Knight. He explained how far he had managed to push the project but that he needed help if it was to stand a chance of coming into fruition. From this we developed the idea of chunking down the project into bite size pieces and that I would join a team focussed on just one section of the disused viaduct on Neilston St, whilst Derrick continued his focus on the viaduct at Court St but also with a steering hand on the whole High Line idea too. This is how the Sky Garden came about.



Our strategy was firstly to create a formal organisation as we felt this would give us more credence when approaching funders or any official organisation. Then we realised we needed to create a bit more of a buzz around Leamington, get people talking about it and doing as much online and in the flesh to sell the project to the local community. Our earliest online presence quickly attracted attention from an engineering company called Rambol who indicated that they liked the look of the project and could offer some expert advice. This we gladly accepted.

By far the most enjoyable part of the project has been getting to know so many people; those who have formed the core of the volunteer steering team and those we have met whilst having a

presence at things like the Canal Festival and Ecofest and through doing presentations to different community groups.

If you want to get involved or just find out more go to our website: [www.leamingtonskygarden.uk](http://www.leamingtonskygarden.uk) and see the upcoming events page. We also have a survey and a just giving page and we would be delighted if you could contribute to either!

Finally, we have a Quiz night on the 14th Dec at BRUBL which is one of the arches on Neilston St and this would be a lovely way to meet the Sky Garden team, have a drink and possibly win some prizes!

*David Snatt*



## Wych Elm Park

Victorians in Leamington left us with a huge amount that shaped our town from Regency buildings to Jephson Gardens. One of the less known of these is Wych Elm Park and Arboretum on St. Helen's Road in South Leamington.

Back in 1851 Dr John Hitchman purchased the site as an Arboretum, bringing in exotic conifer seedlings from around the world. It was the first time that trees such as the Cedrus Deodara and Wellingtonia Gigantea had been brought to the UK. Most of these trees still stand today. There is also an exceptional Ginkgo tree, bigger than the one at Kew Gardens on the path through to Ginkgo Walk.



With the kind permission of Leamington History Group. [www.leamingtonhistory.co.uk](http://www.leamingtonhistory.co.uk)

In 1863 Dr Hitchman decided to build a Hydropathic Establishment next to Tachbrook Street. Hitchman died in 1867 and as hydrotherapy cures fell out of fashion the land and buildings were put up for sale. In 1883 the Midlands Counties Home for Incurables bought the site. They looked after people with illnesses like TB and by 1929 there were 114 patients paying 1d a week.

It continued to be used for similar purposes for over 100 years until it was sold in 1996 for housing development by South Warwickshire Health Care Trust.

Large crowds gathered to witness the demolition of the tower in May 1996 in the process witnessing the end of an era.

As the houses were built it looked as if the pond would be filled in and lost, but a campaign by local residents led to the discovery of the protected Great Crested Newt. The pond and the newts survived and a unique part of Leamington's heritage was preserved.

The tradition of resident involvement has stayed strong. There is an active sense of community and recently a Friends of Wych Elm Park and Arboretum has been formed. The pond has seen a significant reduction in water levels in recent years and the group are developing plans for a major rejuvenation. As Town Councillor and local resident Savita Lekhi says: "We want to create a haven for wildlife that's



full of colour. A place where people can sit and enjoy the peace and quiet, come and have lunch or bring their children. We're so lucky to live in a place with beautiful historic trees and the pond and it's up to us to protect, improve it and hand it onto the next generation."

*Savita Lakhi, Town Councillor*

### **Awards time again - in 2024**

It does not seem long since we celebrated the 2021 Awards in All Saints' Church – a memorable evening and the first since the event was postponed because of Covid. Now we are looking forward to the next Awards evening, to be held on 9th October 2024 at the Well in Augusta Place. This might seem to be too far ahead to think about but in the New Year, all residents will be asked to select the improvements which they think should receive an award.

Just to remind those who do not remember previous ceremonies: Leamington Society Awards are given for improvements to the physical environment of Leamington Spa, that is to the "street scene". These improvements can be something major like the restoration of a period building, or of a shop front, a garden, or a park.

But smaller details also matter, such as carefully restored railings or a wrought -

iron gate. They must have been made in the years since the previous Awards. The Bill Gibbons Trophy is also given for improvements to private residential property.

The following examples might inspire you. In 2021 No 1 Mill Street received an award, as did the newly refurbished Coventry Building Society branch on the Parade. (You can see the Awards certificate on display in the CBS branch.)

In 2018 Temperance at 33 Bath Street and the skateboard track in Victoria Park were each given an award, as were the new Refreshment Rooms at Leamington Station. In 2016 the gates to Strathearn Gardens, Rugby Road, were recognised. The Bill Gibbons trophy has been awarded both to 62 and to 91 Leam Terrace. See our website for more examples.

These awards recognise the work and the creativity which has gone into the improvements selected and are of course greatly appreciated by all those behind the scenes making a contribution, whether the organisation commissioning the work, the architects, designers, or craftspeople.

We are looking forward to another inspiring selection of improvements in 2024. It's never too early to start thinking.

*Barbara Lynn*



## New chapter for Action 21



Action 21 runs the recycling shop in Court Street next to the car park behind the Clemens Street shops.

It was Agenda 21 of the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, which led to the creation of Action 21 in 1996. One of the key pledges in this item was to promote sustainability at all levels, including the grassroots of local communities. Warwick District Council employed a part-time post holder to lead this movement in the district, and after a year Action 21 was set up as a charity aiming to enable local residents to lead more environmentally friendly lives.

The group ran a recycling shop at the council tip in Princes Drive and with the proceeds was able to employ staff to explore other areas such as green energy, growing local food and green forms of transport. When another charity won the contract at the County Council tip, the charity decided to concentrate on running a recycling shop in Ramsey Road, Sydenham. The shop offered opportunities for volunteers who could gain work experience and build up their confidence, and it provided low-cost household items and refurbished bikes for local residents.

When Ramsey Road was earmarked for housing development the charity moved to premises in Court Street where they are currently based. The location has proved ideal, and the shop has flourished. There is a wide variety of items being offered for sale from furniture, china and glassware to books, toys and bicycles.





The shop welcomes donations and there is vehicle access to the premises from High Street. It is helpful if customers wishing to donate book a slot online at [www.action21.co.uk](http://www.action21.co.uk).

This summer the trustees of Action 21 were delighted to welcome a new manager, Louise Haycock. Louise has a legal background and has wide experience of working with volunteers. The shop is largely run by volunteers who can gain useful work experience checking electrical items, repairing bikes and sorting and displaying donated items. Louise would welcome new team members to help with this worthwhile project.

As we heard at the talk by Mark Lee of the Leamington Transformation Board in October (see the article about that talk above), there are plans for the redevelopment of Court Street, however Action 21 hopes to stay in south Leamington – whether in the current premises or nearby – for years to come.

*Margaret Begg*

**FROM LEAMINGTON HISTORY GROUP:** THANK YOU TO ALL THE MEMBERS OF THE LEAMINGTON SOCIETY WHO HAVE ENGAGED WITH OUR RECENT PROJECTS.

### **‘Their Finest Hour’ Leamington History Project 7 October 2023**

A huge thanks to everyone who attended our digital collection day of memories, stories, and artefacts from the Second World War, as part of the University of Oxford “Their Finest Hour Project.” There was a great turn out and we were able to capture many interesting stories: evacuees sent to dangerous places, a doll from Dunkirk and a 100-year-old Lancaster pilot.

If you have a story to tell, there is still time! Simply use this link and click to share your WW2 story and photographs. <https://theirfinesthour.english.ox.ac.uk/home>

### **Leamington History Group Film Evening 11 December 2023: Monday 11 December 2023**

All Leamington Society members are welcome to join us for our monthly meetings. We would particularly like to invite you to our Christmas Special. Dress up in your finery for our Leamington History Film Evening on Monday 11th December 2023 – 7pm for 7.30pm start. Drinks available to purchase. We will be showing our first two films: “Birth of a Spa Town” and “Leamington’s Victoria Legacy” at 1 Mill Street, Leamington. If you can’t make the evening, here is the film link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AJWO9hskNQ>

## Community Rail Partnership Conference October 2023 in Bicester

Friends of Leamington Station won the first CRP award for Outstanding Achievement – a glass trophy to be displayed at the station. We are the oldest station supporter group so this was deserved. Even before the Friends were founded (in 2004), members of the Leamington Society and railway staff achieved a Grade II listing which protects station land and buildings from unwanted changes.

Both chairmen, Robin Adams and Chris Roberts-Smith, could not attend so I gave a short speech outlining what we do and have done: beginning with the replacement of the War Memorial, listing the 2000+ Great Western Rail staff who died 1914-19. We hold an annual remembrance service for them, including relatives of the Leamington men listed, with a tea after in the railway hut. Other past achievements include the purchase and painting of 20+GWR railway benches in the GWR coffee brown to replace the Chiltern blue ones; decoration of the station staircases and waiting rooms with GWR posters; replacement of two of the four original running-in boards and the booking hall clock; building planters to decorate the end of the platforms where there is no garden and – of course – rescuing the derelict gardens, lampman's hut and coal compound.

There are three gardens. One flat on the platform for passengers to enjoy; the other two, on the embankments and steeply terraced, are visible from the roads. They were neglected since the late Queen's last visit (in 1986?) and required years of weed clearance before replanting. Paul Edwards, retired garden consultant of the National Trust, designed the gardens, including the iconic topiary train yew hedge which is visible to all. Friends built planters for the non-garden platform ends, featuring ever-greens and bulbs.

All this has cost money. Archie Pitts raised £80,000+ since the start: the last £10,000 achieved within days of his death. A short and moving tribute was paid to him at the conference by David Heathfield.

It also needs maintenance. Benches need repainting. The planters and gardens are labour-intensive and the founder Friends are all 20 years older. Young(er) and fit(ter) volunteers are always welcome! Meet us any Sunday late morning in the garden.

*Marianne Pitts*

SOME GOOD NEWS  
OUR TRAIN STATION TICKET  
OFFICE IS SAFE! CLOSURE  
PLANS HAVE BEEN CANCELLED

PROTECT OUR PAST AND IMPROVE OUR FUTURE



Street Art in East Grove Street, Leamington Spa

## IN MEMORIAM

### Janet Alty (1937-2023)



Janet Alty lost her husband Christopher to cancer at a very young age, leaving her with a son and daughter to bring up. Christopher had been a lecturer in Alternative Technology at the University of Warwick, and Janet was determined to continue to promote the green issues so close to both their hearts. She campaigned for many years for the Green party, and must have been delighted at

their success last May when they became the largest party on the District Council.

She made an enormous contribution to the local community in other areas. She set up the home teaching scheme recruiting volunteers, including me, to help Punjabi women learn English, and Gaia the wholefood co-operative in Old Town. She helped start the Leamington Peace Festival and the Leamington Canal festival. She was a person with remarkable energy and passion, keen to enable others as well as achieve her own goals. When she became the first Green councillor on Leamington Town Council, she explained to me her aim was to help other younger people promote green values in the town.

For many years she was a keen cyclist and could frequently be seen pedalling hard with green streamers flying from



her basket. She leaves a greener, more compassionate town as a result of her efforts, and she will be remembered as a fierce campaigner for the causes she held dear.

*Margaret Begg*

You can read a longer obituary on the Warwick District Green Party website - <https://warwickdistrict.greenparty.org.uk/people/janet-alty/>

### **Janet Storrie**

Sadly, Janet Storrie died on October 21st. She was a valued member of the Society, and a strong defender of the character of the town which she loved. She was an excellent writer with a keen interest in the history of Leamington. She wrote a book about the elephants of Leamington and the Pump Rooms' cat as well as an account of the role of William Louis de Normanville in creating the town as we know it.

Along with her husband, Peter, who predeceased her, she campaigned passionately to protect the green corridor of parks along the Leam river. Her two children were brought up here, and she remained a loyal member of the Society till the end of her life.

*Margaret Begg*

### **WANTED**

***Enterprising Leamington Project: Celebrating 200 years of industry and creativity – a new local community history book in the making.***

*Enterprising Leamington celebrates the people, skills and communities whose enterprise and ingenuity have shaped 200 years of Royal Leamington Spa's history. From straw hats and award winning toffee to market-leading engineering and world-beating technology, Leamington's industries have helped the town to prosper and cemented its reputation as a centre of creativity and innovation.*

*We are excited to announce our new local community history book in the making - and we need your help! There are already several LS members involved so please join us. There are roles for everyone! Do you like to research/write? Take local photographs? Are you good at marketing, desktop publishing? Can you proofread and edit? Can you donate to support our project? Are you interested in Leamington's history? We will be looking at manufacturing, the motor industry, food and drink, architects & builders, creative Industries – art, craft, design, photography, digital, marketing, advertising; Performing Arts: Music, Dance, Drama; Culture, Literature; TV/Media/Film; Silicon Spa; Business Enterprise.*

*If so, please get in touch as we would love to hear from you.*

[chair@leamingtonhistory.co.uk](mailto:chair@leamingtonhistory.co.uk)

PROTECT OUR PAST AND IMPROVE OUR FUTURE



#### Officers and Committee

Chairman: Barbara Lynn

Vice Chairman: Paul Dickins

Hon. Secretary and Membership Secretary:

Margaret Begg

Hon. Treasurer: Chris Davis

Committee Members:

Ignaty Dyakov-Richmond, Gary Jones

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 the Society's newsletters are the contributors' own and not necessarily the view of the Society.*

TO JOIN THE SOCIETY VISIT  
[WWW.LEAMINGTONSOCIETY.ORG/JOIN-US](http://WWW.LEAMINGTONSOCIETY.ORG/JOIN-US)

#### New Members

*We are pleased to welcome to the Society:*

Tina Hall

***Why not give a friend one year's membership of the Leamington Society for their pleasure and help the Society at the same time? Email the Society [membership@leamingtonsociety.org](mailto:membership@leamingtonsociety.org) for more information.***

