

Touchpaper

THE WALTHAM ABBEY NEWSLETTER

March 1996

ISSUE 17

EDITORIAL

A slight change to the front page in this issue is due to a technical 'colour' problem. Instead of a Blue banner headline we have, on this occasion a Green one, but hope to return to the traditional 'Light Blue Touchpaper' in future issues.

The re-registration exercise has resulted in a few lost souls but has also generated a large number of new registrations such that our numbers remain at about the 400 mark!

You may recall that there appeared to be a problem with booking the Town Hall for the reunion this year; this has now been overcome and a date in October has been booked, see later in this issue.

Response from readers has been quite exceptional so far this year with a record number of articles; please keep it up!

Norman Paul
Editor

CONTENTS:

TOUCH BYTES
letters and reports

PAINTING THE PAST

EFDC MUSEUM &
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

SITE NEWS

OBITUARY

1996 REUNION

GARDENING CORNER

MISCELLANY

TOUCHPAPER PUBLICATION ADDRESS

Building All
DRA Fort Halstead
Sevenoaks
KENT
TN14 7BP

Phone: 01959 51 5632
Fax: 01959 51 6023

TOUCH

from a 'Worktaker' in RGPF

Many thanks for registering us and the copy of Touchpaper. Both our fathers were employed at the RGPF. Joan's dad was the site Fire Brigade Officer and his family occupied No.8 Powder Mill Lane before, during and after the war. My father was firstly a millwright at RSAF and went to RGPF on promotion in about 1935 in the Engineering Department until his retirement in 1960.

I was a 'worktaker' which was a departmental grade and supervised time keeping of industrial employees, was involved in the make-up of their pay and translated this into labour costs. An intimate knowledge of the site's geography was an essential requirement. During my time as a worktaker for BWD at Quinton Hill the RDX plant was built and set in operation. A contemporary of mine at RGPF, Colin Lawson, thought it was a 'quaint old place'; I thought it was fascinating.

Arthur Wilson.

Another Northampton Probus tale.

"I haven't seen that chap leaning against the bar here before but he does look familiar No! It can't be! The lunch bell sounds and there is a surge to the dining hall. I wait for the new chap at the door and ask "Do you know Waltham Abbey?" "That's where I came from " he answers.

"Have you heard of the Abbey Singers?" "I was their secretary" he replies. Then he stops, peers at me and in a deep bass voice exclaims "Good God! It's Vic, I haven't seen you for 25 years."

Well, perhaps 25 years is a long time but it was actually 59 years ago that I first saw Colin Lawson riding his bike at the Royal Arsenal, followed by Donald Hodge on foot.

Vic Clifford

You can't get away from us ...

There I was standing on my own taking a few photographs of a waterfall, in the hills of southern Spain in the middle of winter. A group of tourists arrive and one walks up beside and starts photographing. His face seems familiar and then, like his camera, it clicked! Standing next to me was Ron Gooding!

You meet former WA colleagues in the most unexpected places. Anyone care to calculate the odds of this sort of meeting, I can only guess they must be similar to winning the lottery.

Roy Atkins

...A Happy New Year to you all. When I visited the Building Research at Christmas I saw John Rowley who told me about 'Touchpaper' and has since sent me copies of recent issues. I left Waltham Abbey in 1962 and worked for 30 years at Building Research and have been retired now nearly 4 years. It was very interesting to see the names of so many old friends on the register and reunion attendance lists. I am very sorry to hear that John Kemp is no longer with us (we worked in the same area in the mid '50s) but he is well remembered. There are a dozen or so names I remember well, or quite well, and a few more I am not sure of. I was particularly pleased to see Geoff & Margaret Williams names there.

I have visited Waltham Abbey a few times recently - mainly for walks in the Lee Valley Park - it would be interesting to be able to see what is left of what I knew as ERDE.

Jack Patient

Would you believe that it's 1st December and I have only just read the September Touchpaper? Two hectic a personal life at the moment with three and a half weeks mountaineering in Nepal followed by 2 weeks in hospital having 'iron work' taken out of my right leg (put in 2 years ago). I have relocated to Wyton with logistics Command RAF so there's been work to do as well. It's actually a good working environment and has been a good move overall.

Barry Ransley

..Tony Kinloch tells me of 'Touchpaper' and I would very much like to be put on the circulation list. I think I first went to ERDE in winter 1953 and retired in December 1977 on my 58th birthday.

I hear from Mrs J Bellamy of some of the developments from time to time.

Please give my greetings to my old friends and colleagues.

Wilf Dukes

DEADLINE DATE FOR NEXT ISSUE:

Mid May '96

write

fax 01959 516023

or

phone 01959 515632

BYTES

A Reply ...

Yes Vic, It was the Jim Jeacocke, fortunately for the world there is only one! The tale (Touchpaper 16) however has become tangled in the telling or the remembering, or both, and I recently had the opportunity to check this with Ron Lancaster.

My story is this, and I am sticking to it: I had been one of HM Inspectors of Explosives in the Home Office for a few months when I received a letter from an R Lancaster who wanted to start a 'one man' fireworks factory. I sent him the standard replay that the S of S was not inclined to such foolishness and thought that was the end of it. Not a bit, came a further letter, 'Can I come and see you and talk about fireworks matters?' Eventually a burly (rather less so than now) figure was ushered into my office and I jocularly remarked "Take a pew." Finally I was convinced that he knew more about fireworks than all the inspectors, including me, put together. I dashed upstairs to speak to the second inspector (Don Simmons, ex Chem II Guncotton factory in the War) who confirmed that I should go ahead and I gave Mr Lancaster an application form which, when returned showed: name - R Lancaster. calling - Clerk in Holy Orders. Remembering my greeting, even I was confounded and we have often laughed about it since.

The tale of the 2 sheds and the arisings therefore is even more interesting. The Wizard fireworks factory at Chedburgh nr Bury St Edmunds (Dicky Doe's present hide-out) closed while in full production and I was asked by the liquidator to render the site safe. With a colleague (Arthur Reed ex ROF Bridgwater) we surveyed the site and found about five and a half tonnes of unfinished fireworks which we had to burn. Having had an interesting 5 minutes when we dumped a tea chest of "hummers" on a fire to be chased by them all over the burning ground we discovered a hoard of 3 burst maroons (the sort that were to give us the 4 minute warning) and decided that we could not put these on a fire. We, therefore, stuck them in the ground covering an area of about half a tennis court and put a large fountain about a yard away and another one a yard from that. We lit the first and ran for cover; eventually a spark hit no.2 and a spark from that lit the maroons. They were soon all in action; I am sure El Alamein must have been something like that. All the dogs for miles around were barking. In the evening we called in at the local to wash the gunpowder out of our throats and the local inhabitants ...

...were complaining about the noise. The local sergeant (whom we had previously told of our activities came in and was fallen upon by the throng. He took a long draught of his pint and pronounced "Them two gentlemen's from the 'Ome Office, they can do what they like". End of discussion, but Happy Days.

The two sheds came from this factory as I was prepared to allow them to be used for firework manufacture. The rest, much to the annoyance of the locals who saw them as cheap garden sheds, I destroyed.

Jim Jeacocke

Sad News...

...I've just heard that Leslie Greenwood passed away last September. I'm not sure how many years Leslie was at Waltham but it must have been a very long time.

Regards

Tony Kinloch

.....many thanks for the issue of Touchpaper. Since leaving ERDE I re-married and moved from Woollard Street, Waltham Abbey to Saffron Walden.

Blanche Webb

Comings and Goings ...

A number of 'movements' have come to our attention:-

Diane Howes retired at the beginning of this month. I'm sure we all wish her the very best.

Jim Burgess managed to finish his escape tunnel and is now working for the Ordnance Board in London - shortly to relocate to Bristol.

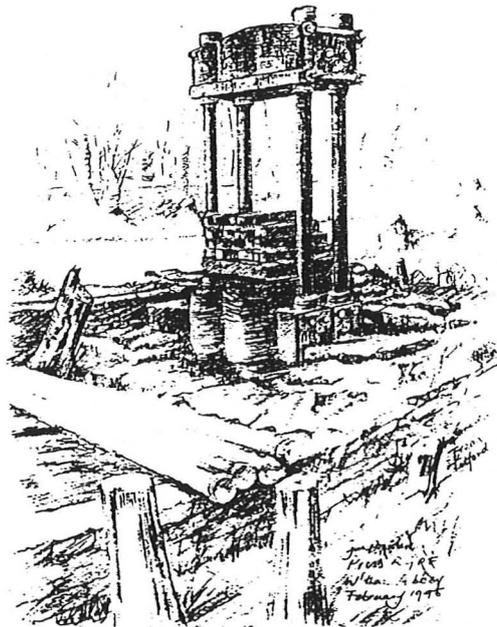
Best of Luck Jim.

Harry Edwards officially retired earlier this year and received a good sending off at a local hostelry. He has already been nobbled by Jock McDougall to take up golf and has enrolled at Harlow College on an history course.

Dave Tisley has recently joined DRA at Fort Halstead - Welcome to the fold Dave!

PAINTING THE PAST - A PRIVATE VIEW

This account is a sequel to my notes "Watermills & Watercolours" in the September '94 Touchpaper. You may recall that I encouraged Freda Titford to visit the North Site to record, in water colour paintings, the historic buildings, boats, bridges etc, to be found there. The decontamination of the soil and clearance of trees which were threatening some of the archaeological remains continued into the autumn of 1995. During that period we were permitted to visit the site whenever the opportunity arose. The arrival of a letter in August from Kate Carver, keeper of the Epping Forest District Museum in Sun Street, asking Freda if she would like to present an exhibition in Jan '96 quickened the pace somewhat. The work took on a new urgency and, apart from a few days break to celebrate Christmas, we both worked steadily until January 7th 1995. The next day 53 pictures, now framed, and including 3 large pieces (22" x 31") of "Historic Brickwork", "Decorative Map" and "Wild Flowers of RGPF", were collected and transported to the Museum.



EPPING FOREST DISTRICT MUSEUM

Mention was made of the the EFD Museum Community History Exhibition from 12th April to 12th May 1996 on the theme of 'Things of Value 'in our last issue with a request for volunteers to set up a local committee. Only one person indicated an interest so far. If any of you would like to help with this project I now think it best if you contact Kate Carver of the EFD Museum direct.

WALTHAM ABBEY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

MANY OF YOU VOLUNTEERED FOR THIS PROJECT AT THE REUNION LAST YEAR AND WE HAVE NOW RECEIVED A FURTHER LETTER FROM DAVID STANNERS, ONE OF THE NORTH SITE TRUSTEES ELECITING FURTHER SUPPORT:

Dear Supporter

Following the annual site visit in October last when I broached the above subject and obtained several volunteers willing to become interviewers I met Ken Hall and Steve Hussey of the Essex CC Archives in Chelmsford. They have offered tape recorders and other basic tools of the trade but, more importantly, a one day training course in interview technique at Chelmsford.

The list of volunteers below will need to be added to in order to complete the project speedily. I should therefore be pleased for other volunteers to register with Norman Paul or with me direct. Candidates should also say whether they can attend the training session and give a preference of which day of the working week they could attend.

Sincerely

David Stanners

*67 Park Grove Road
Chiswick
LONDON
W4 3RU*

tel: 0181 994 3496

current list of volunteers:

Y Allen

R Carter

M McLaren

E Baker

R Doe

R Morrell

C Beck

R Fisher

J Rowley

S Bell

M Gough

R Treadgold

J A Burgess

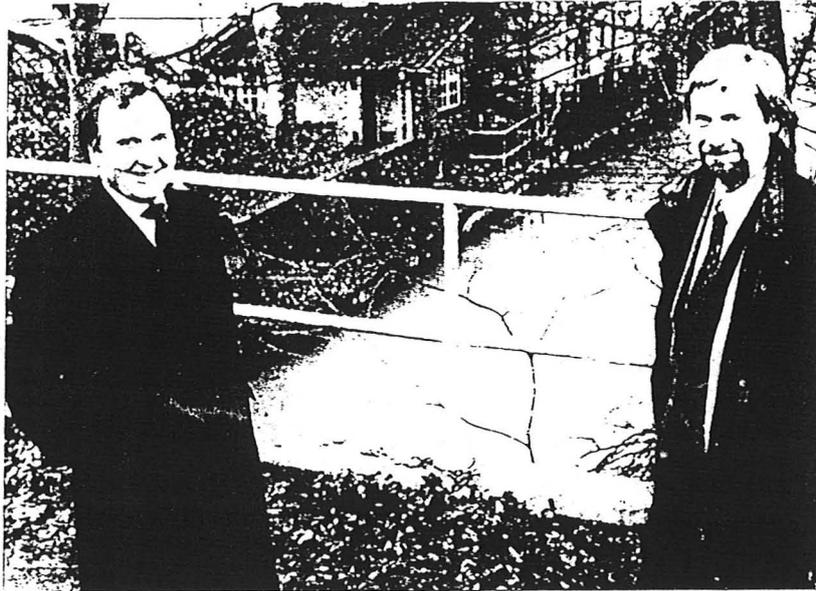
G Lock

M Williams

SITE NEWS

SOUTH

Lee Valley Developments has said that it will not build the M25 Waltham Abbey Link Road unless it gets the go-ahead for a business park, 430 homes and a golf course on the old South Site. The company is a 50-50 venture between British Aerospace and Trafalgar House. The original planning application was refused on appeal but the company has submitted a revised plan to develop a business park to the north of the proposed link road and a residential development to the south of the road leaving a golf course in the area south of Black Ditch.



Trafalgar House Property Director Henry Williams (left) with Dr Malcolm Green from Royal Ordnance, examine part of the site due for redevelopment.

The major concern for any development is the possible contamination and the Trafalgar House Property Director has said that "Firstly, all buildings will be demolished". The company's clean-up strategy is, wherever possible, to keep all material on site. "Anything found 'not natural' will be stripped and the soil used to build the golf course. Any heavily contaminated material will go to a contained clay site dug underneath the golf course."(! !)

Outline plans with Epping Forest Council are unlikely to be discussed before June and the proposal will then go before the Department of the Environment as it involves Green Belt land. If permission is granted work will begin in 1997.

NORTH

Housing developments continues at the south end of the North Site but the rest of the Site is in 'limbo' until funds are in place for the proposed museum plans to commence.

It is unlikely that much will be evident on the site for some months but there is much committee work going on behind the scenes.

In Memoriam

Charles Erwood

Charles died in early November last year. His origins were in the Eltham area and he first started work in a sugar refiners lab near Woolwich and joined the service just before the start of the war at the Woolwich arsenal. He was then seconded to Inter Services Research Bureau where he met Joan and later married her. He survived severe stomach injuries and the loss of two fingers when a delay unit he was dismantling went off prematurely. Charles was transferred to ERDE Waltham Abbey in the spring of 1948 to form the nucleus of JSRG when the JSRB Aston House Labs were sold to the Stevenage Development Corporation. He was moved from JSRG to SPR in 1970.

Charles was a quiet and conscientious man. Few of us really knew him until we spent 14 days (and nights!) together in the New Forest on a training course. Our HQ masters decided we led a too sheltered life at WA and sent us to get some 'field experience'. During that period we learned of his attention to detail and subtle sense of humour. Charles commuted from Welwyn to Waltham Abbey throughout his time there. For many years he did the daily journey in a very rare six cylinder K3 MG Magnette, it would now be a collectors car.

We send our condolences to his wife Joan and their two sons.

1996 REUNION

ADVANCE NOTICE

We have now managed to book the Town Hall for this year's Reunion.

The date to put in your diaries is :-

Friday 18th October

More details in our next issue.

THE GARDENER'S X-FILES

Chris Evans recently reminded me of the following incident which occurred in my lodgings in Enfield back in 1949.

The landlady's husband was a very keen and a very good gardener and rented an allotment just off the great Cambridge Road in Edmonton. The soil was very fertile with the added benefit of water available from an adjacent brook. My landlord had obtained, from a friend, some pumpkin seeds which purported to be a Giant variety. These he planted on several compost heaps and with good husbandry coupled with the excellent growing conditions produced half a dozen enormous pumpkins. You will have to believe me when I tell you he had to bring them home each separately in a wheelbarrow. The biggest one was so huge that he not only had difficulty in getting his arms around, but had great difficulty in lifting it. As he had spent his early life as a blacksmith and farrier you can have some idea of how heavy was this monster vegetable. It weighed around about 1 cwt (that's about 47 kilos!) or more.

Giant vegetables were more of a rarity in those days; there was a lot of mystique about the cultivation of them. Actually, part of the secret seems to be in the seeds themselves. However, my landlord was so impressed with his giant pumpkin that he decided to enter it in the next vegetable show which meant he had to store it safely somewhere for several weeks. For some reason, his idea of a safe place was a small bedside table on the landing at the top of the stairs. The landlord's son was in the Navy, stationed near enough to get home on weekend leave. Naturally he enjoyed a night out with his friends, often coming home late at night and sometimes 'under the weather'.

I was awakened one night by a tremendous bang, followed by a series of bumps as someone fell downstairs. I go up to see what had happened. The table was lying on it's side and the son was picking himself up from the bottom of the stairs. The landing carpet, the stairs and walls were covered in pumpkin pulp and seeds. There were even splashes on the ceiling. It was a terrible mess. The outer skin of the pumpkin had fragmented into quite small pieces. My landlord was accusing his son of being drunk and knocking the pumpkin off the table and down the stairs. His son swore that he hadn't touched it, but that it had dropped on to the landing carpet and exploded. At the time I thought this was a far fetched story but years later, someone (and I think it was Chris Evans) said that large pumpkins, kept for too long, ferment inside building up internal pressure and have been known to explode.

So remember all you keen gardeners out there, if you can't steel yourself to stuff, cook and eat that insipid vegetable, be careful where and for how long you store it. A small DIY Locker magazine would be advisable!

Bob Rainbird

MISCELLANY

Having recently gone onto the Internet I have had an 'e-mail' from one of our colleagues in the New World who has sent several pages of student howlers. We haven't room for them all but a selection follows his greeting. Ed.

Hi There! At last, you guys are on the internet. You may even be able to send Touchpaper on it. Who knows, now that you're wired in you could have a home page on the Web. I attach an essay on student howler. Please share it with the other PERME reprobates. Best Wishes. Doug Tasker (dtasker@relay.nswc.navy.mil.)

"The inhabitants of ancient Egypt were called mummies. They lived in the Sarah Desert and travelled by Camelot. They built the pyramids in the shape of a triangular cube. The Pyramids are a range of mountains between France and Spain.

The bible is full of interesting caricatures. In the first book, Guinness, Adam and Eve were created from an apple tree. Jacob, son of Isaac stole his brother's birth mark. Pharaoh forced the Hebrew slaves to make bread without straw. Moses led them to the Red Sea where they made unleavened bread without any ingredients. Afterwards Moses went up Mount Cyanide to get the ten commandments. David fought the philatelists and one of his sons, Solomon, had 500 wives and 500 porcupines.

Without the ancient Greeks we wouldn't have history. They invented three kinds of column - Corinthian, Doric and Ionic. Socrates was a famous Greek teacher who went around giving people advice. They killed him and he died from an overdose of wedlock.

There were no wars in Greece because the mountains were so high that they couldn't climb over them to see what their neighbours were doing. When they fought the Persians the Greeks were outnumbered because the Persians had more men.

The government of England was a limited mockery. Queen Elizabeth was the Virgin Queen. When she exposed herself before her troops they all shouted 'hurrah'. Then her navy went out and defeated the Spanish Armadillo. The greatest writer was William Shakespeare. He never made much money and is famous only because of his plays. He lived at Windsor with his wives writing tragedies, comedies and errors.

The sun never sets on the British Empire because the British Empire is in the East and the sun sets in the West. The nineteenth century was a time of many great inventions. The invention of the steamboat caused many rivers to spring up. Samuel Morse invented a code for telepathy, Louis Pasteur discovered a cure for rabbits and Madman Curie discovered radium. Charles Darwin was a naturalist who wrote the Organ of the Species.

I recently attended a lecture which included slides showing bomb damage and this reminded me of a story which I first heard from Jack Stoker:

A man and his wife were in bed during the blitz when the siren went rapidly followed by the sound of aircraft engines, anti-aircraft fire and exploding bombs. The man raced downstairs in his pyjamas towards the shelter but realised his wife wasn't following. He shouted up the stairs "Hurry Up!" To which she replied "I can't find my teeth". He rejoined with "Come On! They're dropping bombs, not sandwiches!"

Bryan Howard

