

Touchpaper

THE WALTHAM ABBEY NEWSLETTER

September 1996

ISSUE 19

EDITORIAL

Looks like we're stuck with a green banner headline for the foreseeable future, never mind!

I see that I said in my last editorial that it would soon be summer and here it is getting cold and dark again and winter can't be far off!

Despite some sad reported losses our numbers are still increasing as more and more of our colleagues are being hunted down. This issue is accompanied by the annual issue of the full register - please remember to keep us up to date with changes throughout the year, especially if you move house!

The Reunion is not far away now and already a large number have booked. We are hoping for a bumper turn out again this year so post your booking form as soon as possible.

Norman Paul
Editor

CONTENTS:

TOUCH BYTES
letters and reports

ABBHEY NEWS

OBITUARIES

OTHER REUNIONS

1966 WA REUNION

GALLERY

DEADLINE DATE FOR NEXT ISSUE:

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TOUCH

Change of Work Address..

As you can see from this letterhead my job is now based at Abbey Wood. I'm fortunate to have excellent lodgings only 3 miles away and return home to jolly Waltham Abbey a weekends. I have to confess that the 'modern' open plan work environment here is not nearly as bad as many of us anticipated and there are positive advantages in terms of communication and fostering team spirit. I still keep in touch with my old Department and, now things have settled down, I plan to make regular visits to Fort Halstead 'in the course of duty.' As you will appreciate, a prime objective is to arrange meetings at venues in London and its environs for Mondays and Fridays. So far I've been very successful!

Jim Burgess

London to Abbey Wood

Further to the letter above it should be noted that a number of other ex-Waltham members have now relocated from MOD London to Abbey Wood. These include: Geoff Hooper, John Wright, Ike, Peter Hart and Eric Baker as a consultant. Eric says he thinks of this group as the WA Mafia!

NEWS ON THE INTERNET

1. Hi! Can't remember whether I passed on Frank Baker's address in the US but can you send him a registration form;
Rheometric Sci. Inc. 1 Possumtown, Piscataway,
New Jersey 08854, USA.

I remember when Frank and myself managed to get ourselves on a 'jolly' to Paris to visit SNPE at Vert Le Petit. In showing off his prowess in French when checking in at the hotel he managed to translate his name into French and was quite upset when the receptionist told him she didn't have a reservation for 'Dr Boulanger'. It is possible, I shupposhee, that we may have had a little drink on our way there.....!

Regret I won't be able to get to the reunion this year - it's 'Er Indoors birthday and she doesn't seem to think that the prospect of me crawling up Monkswood Avenue on my hands and knees (as I once did after an afternoon lock-in session with mad Murphy in the Angel) counts as a fitting birthday outing. Women, Eh?

Best Wishes, Roy Carter roy@recarter.demon.co.uk

2. Have just read the June issue of Touchpaper and thanks once again for 'keeping me in touch'. It was great to learn that Ron Rapley's son Alan will be the captain of the British Olympic Swimming Team and I wish him well. It will be interesting to see how they do against the Aussies! I thoroughly enjoyed last year's reunion and hope I get the chance again soon. Should any of you wish to get in touch with me, my address is: 13 Weber Street, East Brighton
Victoria 3187, Australia

Best Regards

Peter Pearce pearce@ssmd.mrl.dsto.defence.gov

..I am living in hopes of making a more practicable arrangement of getting to next Octobers' Reunion and hope to see many of my friends there. I enclose a copy of my 'memoirs' which include 'chunks' of my time at Waltham Abbey that may be suitable for Touchpaper articles.

John Gooding

And fascinating reading it was John! I hope to abstract some relevant parts for future issues, so, watch this space! Ed.

From the Archives

The contribution from Dick Dedman in the last issue, where he quoted an epistle from Eric Pembridge regarding Dr Johnson's instruction on notebooks, reminded me of the practice of C.S. Bryant who preceded him in the office of DMXRD. In my first introduction to explosives in 1929 I was working at the bench where I could look through the reagent bottles and see CSB anxiously looking around the pieces of uralite board for just where had he pencilled down his weighings? One morning, we came in to find the lab very wet where the water pump had split its rubber connection to the mains. All the adhesive labels had washed off the bottles and for weeks we were trying to remember the contents of the bottles.

My early work was on research towards an improved nitrocellulose and my first days at RGPF was to scale up my process for a higher nitrogen content NC. Unfortunately it caught fire and I found myself working on Initiators instead! To come back to July 1966, my second archive book has now been published and has had good reviews from the press and the public. The publishers are well pleased and it completes my literary/photographic efforts - for now at least.

'Gudge' Taylor

FROM OUR SUMMERFIELD FASHION CORRESPONDENT...

All across Royal Ordnance, business suits are now out of fashion. In their place comes 'Company Workwear.'

Everywhere you look people are cloned in natty grey polyester trousers and bomber jackets which would delight the heart of any Quick-Fit fitter. Gone is the sartorial elegance of the dark suit and white shirt. Now people are happily disporting blue polo shirts under the grey polyester. The team spirit that this creates has to be experienced to be believed! Interviewed, staff remark that the clothes are 'easy-care', especially the trousers where the stitched-in crease saves considerable effort on the ironing board. It is most pleasing to note the finishing touches of the clothes with the company logo emblazoned on the jacket and polo shirt. This means that, at a glance, you can see how many employees are in the Co-op during lunch hour. The crowning glory of the garb however, is the delicately embroidered wearer's name picked out in blue on the jacket. Now even the most reticent employee is known to all. As always, there are a few Luddites who remain in the old fashioned clothing. Your correspondent hopes that these unenlightened folk will soon be brought into the fold as the stark colours of traditional wear contrast strangely with the soft muted tones of 'Workwear.'

Paul Burnham

..rather a belated piece of news - George Wilmott passed away at the end of March after a series of troubles at the age of 78. This was shortly before I entered hospital for a knee replacement which was not immediately successful, leaving me housebound for 9 weeks. I believe George was at the Powdermills before the war and was hoping to find someone who knew his history but, with my limited mobility I have not been able to find any. During the past week my knee has begun to show some extra movement but not enough to turn the pedals of my bike! What rubs it in was the 83 year old in the next bed who had 115° movement when his plaster was removed and I, a young 76 could only muster 60°! I'm sure I will be able to reach the WA Town Hall by October and look forward to meeting old friends.

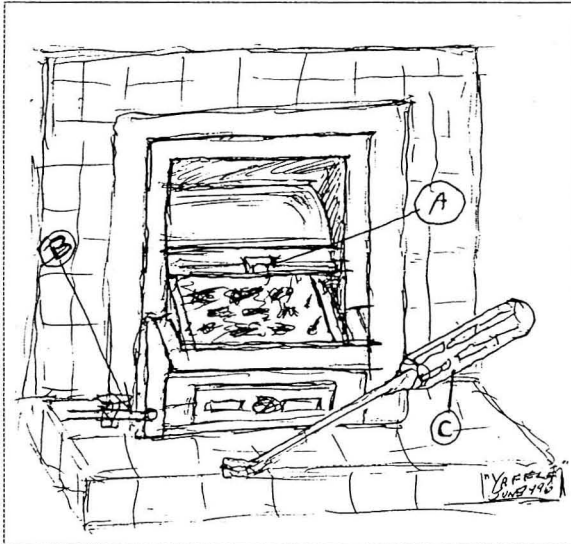
Stan Wills

BYTES

In the June issue Bryan Howard was asking if anyone had memories of the old Tenant's Association. The association did valiant work in the early days; getting the building defects put to rights. One of the recurring subjects of discussion was the "Marathon" open fire/central heating installation. Perhaps the enclosed screed may jog someone's memory.

Bob Rainbird

To ex-ERDE Housing Estate Tenants - Do you recognise this monster?



ANSWER: It's the "Marathon All-Night Burning Open Fire with Back Boiler".

This was the latest thinking by the Ministry of Works at the time the houses were built and was intended to heat the whole house via hot air ducts drawing in cold air from the hall and expelling hot air into the bedroom. Alas! Hot air maybe, but with the addition of smelly fumes. In houses where coal was burnt visible tendrils of smoke crawled out of the vents! Smoke from coal was probably preferable to the invisible CO which might have been present when burning coke. One, over vociferous, tenant who complained about this phenomenon was punished by having the whole chimney breast and flue demolished and rebuilt.

There were various theories as to why this monster was called the Marathon:

[1] For easy lighting it was equipped with built-in gas jets (A). Having lit the jets the drill was to "run like hell" before the gas/air mixture in the flue reached explosive limits. Hence, one needed the fleetness of foot of a Marathon runner. We could always tell when next door lit their fire by the dull "crump", as of a distant bomb, followed by muffled curses. One lady in The Cobbins rushed into her neighbour's for help when the explosion blasted hot coals, not only over the carpet but also over the cat waiting patiently expecting a gentle warmth.

[2] This voracious monster gobbled up fuel faster than any other heating appliance I have seen. Keeping it supplied needed the stamina of a "Marathon". It wouldn't have been so bad if it had warmed the room when the weather was cold. Due to being on the leeward side of the hill and subsequent downdraught, when a cold N or NE wind blew the fire gradually went out! In warmer weather with a good S. Westerly the room became like an oven. The fire then burnt so well that the water boiled in the boiler with alarming thumping noises and snorted steam from the expansion pipe in the loft. Cogniscenti would stop this by bypassing some hot water through a long 1" bore copper pipe snaking through the loft as a frost damage limiter. This coil could be a menace to the uninformed if they left the valve open in summer when the immersion heater was on. Reverse circulation resulted in a tank of lukewarm water and an electricity bill of "Marathon" proportions.

[3] The drill for all-night burning (in theory) was to lower the sliding plate (B) using a massive heavy cast iron tool (C). The plate was normally parked over the top of the sloping back boiler. Due to the unbelievably heavy cast iron construction (no doubt due to stringent MoW durability requirements) operating this sliding plate required the strength of a "Marathon". Eventually tarry deposits ensured that the sliding plate was cemented firmly to the boiler when tools such as hammers and jemmys were essential requirements.

One final thought. The Marathon was made at Coalbrookdale, which as any industrial historian will tell you was the first place in England where effective smelting and casting of iron was carried out in the 18th century. I wasn't surprised to find, shortly after moving in, that spare parts were not readily available as the thing was already obsolete. I believe that the MoW had to threaten the builders in order to get parts specially cast.

Through joining a group interested in Copperplate hand writing I was put in touch with Ron Treadgold as at one time I worked in the Drawing Office at ERDE as it was then. Quite a coincidence, though our paths never crossed, my few years at ERDE spanned the early 50's. Ron sent me some interesting items on the 'Powder Mills' and a copy of Touchpaper (issue 14). He suggested that I write with a view to being added to the circulation list. My surname at the time of working at Waltham Abbey was CARTER.

Doreen Wykes

(The original letter was beautifully written in copperplate but this is the best that I can do. Ed.)

WALTHAM ABBEY NEWS

NORTH SITE

Apparently nothing can happen on the Museum development until the result of the Lottery grant application is known. We have heard, however, that a Dame Jennifer Evans (I think from English Heritage) is visiting the site in August and a decision is expected in September.

Perhaps by the Reunion we may have some news.

SOUTH SITE

RO have issued a contract to a professional archæologist, Steve Chaddock, to survey buildings on South Site and compile an history of use since 1945. The site work is expected to be complete by the end of August when it is anticipated that development will begin - by pulling down the buildings!!

RSAF

We are told that the RSAF site has been sold for housing development to 'Fairview'. Rumour has it that the quality of these houses will be suited to rehousing the notorious 'Broadwater Estate' inmates and that the Enfield Lock residents are 'Up in Arms!'

HIGHBRIDGE GARAGE SITE

You will all recall the Highbridge garage next to the Lower Island Way entrance (just over the bridge from the Old English Gentleman for those who can only navigate by pubs). This was recently owned by Gates but has now been flattened to provide a site for MFI, Carpet City and Harveys Curtains.

LEA VALLEY WEST OF NORTH SITE

This area used to be part of the North Site but was cut off when the 'Flood Relief Channel' was dug. A legacy from the old days was a quantity of asbestos and a decontamination exercise is now almost complete. Serves 'em right for pinching the ground in the first place!

In Memoriam

Ron Allen

All those who knew Ron Allen will be sorry to hear that he died suddenly in June from meningitis.

Ron will be fondly remembered by all p1 staff as he was well-liked and spent the whole of his time at Waltham in the same section. Eric Baker, who came from Woolwich to Waltham in 1957, is sure that Ron was already in PR3 then (later to become p1). Ron was a keen amateur astronomer and had his own observatory at the bottom of his garden. When Halley's Comet last appeared in 1986 he was able to keep the scientific staff up to date with it's progress.

After the demise of RO Waltham Abbey Ron was employed as a security guard and many friends and colleagues will recall seeing him in the Waltham Abbey Co-op in that role. We will all miss you Ron.

JESS PYE

Phil Pye's husband Jess died on 15th August in the Middlesex Hospital after undergoing a serious operation. Although he had not enjoyed the best of health in recent years this had not prevented Jess and Phil from enjoying their retirement. On behalf of all her friends at Waltham Abbey we extend our sympathy to Phil and hope to see her at the reunion in October.

Harold Young

We have heard that Harold Young died in the last week of June but have no other details.

Another Reunion...

The following is a combination of 2 separate articles sent in by Eric Baker and Paul Burnham

On 15th June, Waltham Abbey's younger sister, Westcott, celebrated her 50th Anniversary with a reunion of past and present employees. Congratulations are surely due to Jeff Curtis and his colleagues who organised the event held in the Westcott Leisure Centre (canteen as was). Arrangements were excellent. From the outset; the clear approach signposting, car parking arrangements and reception procedures most efficient. Seating and table space both inside and out ensured full enjoyment of a first rate (free!) buffet. As a "PERME/WA only" gate crasher I could have felt an outsider but not so. Jim Glowrie, Dr Panton, Pete Saunders and Jeff Curtis all had responsibilities at Waltham Abbey whilst others had worked at both sites, including; Keith Ledbury, Paul Burnham(*co-author*), Bob Parkinson and Fred Page. Bob was Superintendent P1 for a time and Fred page tells me that he worked in the Drawing Office. Both expressed an interest in 'Touchpaper'.

For those unaware of the current situation at Westcott - there are about 40 people from RO Rocket Motors under Jeff Curtis working on liquid engines, primarily for satellite positioning. In addition the RO Property Services, Environmental Services and Systems Concept groups reside there, as well as DRA personnel and other lodger agencies and private businesses. Most of the site is now available for rent (the sign at the entrance says "Westcott Venture Park") although the RO Liquid Engines unit retains possession of most of Solids, the Bomb Dump, Test Stands and buildings along the main runway - for ex WA-ites the scene is somewhat familiar!

Photographs of old triumphs were on display, together with examples of current liquid engine technology. David Singleton, Head of RO Rocket Motors, made a speech reviewing the history of Westcott and, due to popular demand, offered to sponsor a further reunion next year. Thereafter, any future events will have to be self financing. It was also suggested that, because of the close links between Westcott and Waltham Abbey, thought should be given to a combined reunion (*Comments Please. Ed.*). The sale of raffle tickets and commemorative pens made a profit of £320 to which BAe will add an equivalent sum to the nominated BAe charity for 1966 - the Marie Curie Cancer Research Appeal.

This was altogether a very rewarding and entertaining afternoon.

Eric Baker and Paul Burnham

... and a 'Get Together

The evening of July 5th saw some 17 serving members and ex-ISRG members and their wives gather at Woolcott House restaurant, Great Hallingbury for a most enjoyable meal and social get together. Included in the gathering were; Jim Burgess (now at the Ordnance Board, Bristol), Ron Campbell (ex- Head of Section) and Terry Hardy (ISRG in the early '50s).

The difficulty of selecting a date amenable to all at this time of year meant that several other members who expressed a wish to attend were unable, due to previous commitments.

Although organized somewhat haphazardly as a 'one-off' do (and here I apologize to anyone we may have missed) the general opinion after the evenings' success seemed to be - "let's do it again" - admittedly after a glass or three of the excellent house wine!

Watch this space!

Eric Kendrew

REUNION 1996

If you remember we asked for some early bookings this year to pay for the hall and catering deposits. The list of those already booked is shown here and we thank you for your response.

This is now your last opportunity to book for this years' reunion which, I remind you, is on:

FRIDAY 18th OCTOBER
at the
Waltham Abbey TOWN HALL
starting at Mid-day

Price is £6 per head including
Buffet Lunch and the Bar will
be open.

Please try and book as soon as you
can and in any event, no later than
Friday 11th October.

I shall be away from 9-21 Sep and
again from 5-11 October so bear with
me if you have any queries. I'll deal
with any as and when I can.

(If you can't get a message to the
answering machine on 01959 515632
then a real person can take a message
on 01959 515419).

We've had a good response so far but
hope to double the numbers to bring
us up to last years' figure.

Len Abbott Laura Abbott	Audrey Anderson	Eric Baker	Doreen Bird
Alan Blake Rita Blake	Gordon Bromberger	Jim Burgess	Frances Burgess
Paul Burnham	Arthur Cadman	Pauline Callaghan	Roy Carrington
Win Clark	Barbara Coe	Geoff Colley	Pam Colley
Ernie Cooke	Sheila Cooke	Janet Cooke	Cecil Cullingford
Pam Daniels	Les Dingle	Dicky Doe	Gladys Eckworth
Dennis Eldridge Irene Eldridge	Norman Elliott Joyce Elliott	Chris Evans Janet Evans	Doug Eve
Roy Fisher Mrs Alexandra	John Gooding	Brian Hammant	Peter Hart
Eileen Henshaw	Dave Hewkin	Ron Holt Jan Holt	Peter Honey
Bryan Howard	Diane Howse Kim Henshaw	Rita Hugill	Jim Jeacocke Peggy Jeacocke
Gwen Jones	Dave Manners Ann Manners	Denis Mansell Jean Mansell	Fred Mansfield
Malcolm McLaren	Derek Needham Christine Needham	Ted O'Day	Dick Pace
Jean Paddick	Sid Pegrum	Phil Pye	Ron Rapley
Rita Rapley	Bob Richards	George Savill	John Scrivener Eileen Scrivener
Peggy Sharp	Alan Short Marjorie Short	Dave Sims Brenda Sims	Bert Skinner
Jim Smith	Colin Smith	Malcolm Stewart	Wendy Stewart
Mary Tingle	Peter Tingle	Cecil Wackett	Julie Wackett
John Ward	Dick Watkins Joan Watkins	Kath Weatherstone	John Whitley
Tony Whittaker	Stan Wills	Arthur Witham Gladys Witham	John C Wright Ann Wright

June Wright
Maurice Nicholson

As at the 26th August

WALTHAM ABBEY REUNION 1996

I/We Will/Will not be attending the Reunion this year

Name(s)

(If attending) Remittance Enclosed £.....

PLEASE MAKE CHEQUES PAYABLE TO: N. Paul

RETURN TO: Norman Paul, Bldg All, DRA Fort Halstead
Sevenoaks, KENT TN14 7BP

GALLERY

EXAMPLES OF 'SHEER GENIUS' (his words, not mine! Ed.) FROM DICK EVANS

