

**Spring 2020**

# TOUCHPAPER

The Newsletter of the Royal Gunpowder Mills Friends Association  
Registered Charity No. 1115237

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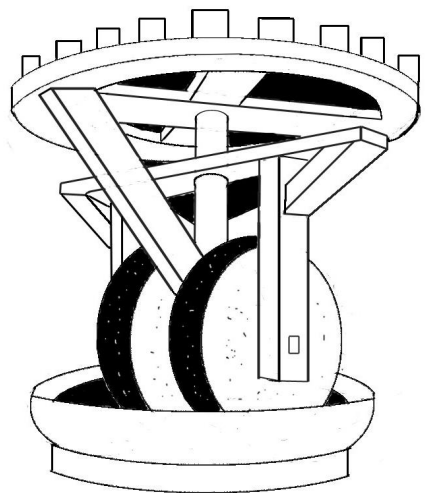
**Theodore Hook c 1810**

**Obituaries:**

**Sheila Higgins**

**Barbara Coe**

**Julie's Nature Column**



**Spring 2020**

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**Deadline for the next issue is 22nd May 2020**

# Chairman's Chat

Welcome to 2020. With Brexit done and dusted what else is there to say other than I hope you survived the excesses of Christmas and New Year relatively unscarred.

I hope you saw Martin Ives and myself on Flog It! Apparently it was well received, even people in the pub recognised me, fame at last.

The Mills opened for business at half term, or would have done if it wasn't for the storms. However on the Monday we were back to business with I must say a good attendance.

It is expected that it will be business as usual throughout this year although a final decision on opening dates has yet to be published. The web pages for the site are at this moment being updated. There is little to report on the PGL plans for the site but things should be a little clearer after a proposed meeting with the trustees of the OpCo in a week or two. One thing we do know is that the number of buildings they require has been reduced. We should be able to say something more definite in the next issue. Your committee has been considerably depleted in the last few months by illness the most serious being that of the Secretary who has heart problems.

The weather has precluded many outdoor activities so the Green Hut has still not been top coated. However the large Stentor rocket motor on the entrance walkway which had become rather shabby has been recoated and it looks good. We will continue to tidy up and paint the other items here ASAP.

As far as I am aware both of the railways are in an operational condition and will be available to visitors on selected dates during the summer. Don't forget to come round and see us if you can.

*Dave Sims*

# Editorial

Welcome to this year's first issue, if you opt for the printed version you may also have the email version at no extra cost, just email me and I will arrange this. The advantages of the email version are that some images are in colour which one can enlarge for better detail.

Thank you to all those who have renewed their subscription, those who have not done so will find enclosed, or attached, a renewal form. Please try to renew before you lose the form. Also enclosed or attached is a form for booking the Reunion lunch which follows the AGM on the 15th May. You are welcome to just attend the AGM for which there is no charge but the lunch and activities that follow are a very good way to meet old friends and maybe make some new ones. Details of cost etc appear on page 18.

In this issue we have some letters, which are rare these days, in times past much of the newsletter was occupied by the short tales and comments on articles, all made interesting reading.

My thanks as always to those who have contributed, without material I cannot produce Touchpaper. I hope you all find something of interest in this and the following issues this year.

*Brian Clements*

# The New River

The New River is neither new nor a river. It was opened in 1613 and every inch was dug by hand. Its purpose was to supply London with fresh drinking water taken from the River Lea and Chadwell Springs close to Ware, as well as other springs and wells along its 40-mile course at the end of which it flowed into the Round Pond, in Islington. The finished channel followed a route along the western bank of the Lea Valley with a gentle slope of about 5" in each mile starting 10 feet above the 100-foot contour line and ending 8 feet below it. It was a tortuous route because each time a tributary entered the valley, the New River progressed along the northern bank until it could cross the stream on the level and then return along the southern edge. Over the centuries, as new civil engineering techniques were developed, the course was straightened and shortened, with embankments, aqueducts and tunnels. There is a marked walking route called the New River Path. It is a 28-mile footpath which follows the course of the New River from its source to its original end at New River Head, close to Sadler's Wells theatre - where water from the river was used to flood a large tank to stage an Aquatic Theatre at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1946, the water supply to New River Head was truncated at Stoke Newington with the, now 20 mile, New River ending at the East Reservoir as the Woodberry Wetlands.

The design and construction of the New River is wrongly attributed solely to Sir Hugh Myddelton. It was Edmund Colthurst who first proposed the idea, obtaining a charter from King James I in 1604, to carry it out – at his own expense. After surveying the whole route and digging the first 2 miles, Colthurst, having spent £200, (£42,000 today) encountered financial difficulties. Work stopped at Amwell Pool, for 5 years, while he tried to raise more funds. In the end, Myddelton, a London goldsmith, undertook to complete the work,

starting in late April 1609. He, very sensibly, appointed Edmund Colthurst to be the overseer of the project and paid him a regular wage. The channel, now 10 feet wide, progressed southwards through St Margaret's, Hoddesdon, and Broxbourne to reach Wormley, where work stopped again on 27th January 1610. This time it was Myddelton who ran short of money. In addition, he was being frustrated by two local landowners, who were strongly opposing the plans to cut the channel through their lands.

The project was rescued by the King personally, whose house and lands at Theobalds Park were to be crossed by the river. James proposed that he should provide half the costs of completing the New River – in return he would take half of the profits. Indeed, the King commanded that no-one should object to the work "...upon paine of his majesties highest displeasure...". The landowners



rapidly withdrew their objections and work resumed in November 1611, crossing the King's lands at Theobalds in April 1612. There is a postscript to King James' involvement with the New River. On 9th January 1622 King James was out riding in his estate, when his horse stumbled. The king was thrown into the frozen New River and only his legs could be seen above the ice. The event is commemorated with a rondel displayed on the gates of Cedars Park, where the palace once stood.

Driving west along the M25, few people realise that the first bridge after Junction 25 is not an ordinary bridge – it's unique, it carries a river over the motorway.

Just south of where the M25 would be built, the New River turned westward around the valley of the Cuffley Brook on a 3½ mile diversion which went as far as Whitewebbs, before returning past

the Adath Yisroel Burial Ground in Enfield, to resume its southerly course. This loop was cut off by the mile long Docwra embankment in 1859.

Another westward loop soon follows, two miles long, around Enfield. Most of this route is still in water, but as a civic amenity; the water goes to waste at the end of the lake in Enfield Park. The New River water flows through three pipelines between Southbury Road and Park Avenue before crossing the Salmons Brook over the Clarendon Arch. It then makes its way through Winchmore Hill and Palmers Green to disappear underground at Myddelton Road in Bowes Green. It resurfaces near Alexandra Palace. This late 19th century route cut off two large original loops totalling 5 miles.

The New River then flows through Hornsey and down “the Ladder”, where ten suburban residential roads cross the river with less than 250 feet between each of them. It runs across Finsbury Park and goes under Green Lanes and Seven Sisters Road to arrive at its current terminus at the magnificent Stoke Newington Pumping Station or The Castle Climbing Centre, as it is locally known. It was built to resemble Stirling Castle, to pacify local residents who didn’t want an ordinary “pumping station” to spoil their neighbourhood!

Originally, from here, the 2¾ mile Holloway Loop around the Hackney Brook went west beyond Holloway Road, almost to where Holloway Prison would be built and returned close to the south of the future Emirates Stadium, to go under Green Lanes and into Clissold Park. This was the first of the loops to be shortened, in 1619, just 6 years after the River opened, by building an aqueduct over the Brook. Then, 250 years later, the loop was further shortened by piping the river under Green Lanes from the pumping station to the Park. The lake in Clissold Park is part of the original course. The remaining two miles to the Round Pond used to flow on the surface but was piped underground in the second half of the 19th century.

The broad grass centre of Petherton Road, where the River used to run, is the start of an easy-to-follow walk to Douglas Road and Colebrook Row and Duncan Terrace to the Angel, then on to the



New River Head and the Round Pond, where “ On 29th September 1613, was the first issuing of the water into the New River, before the Lord Mayor, Aldermen, Recorder, and a worthy company who stood to behold it”



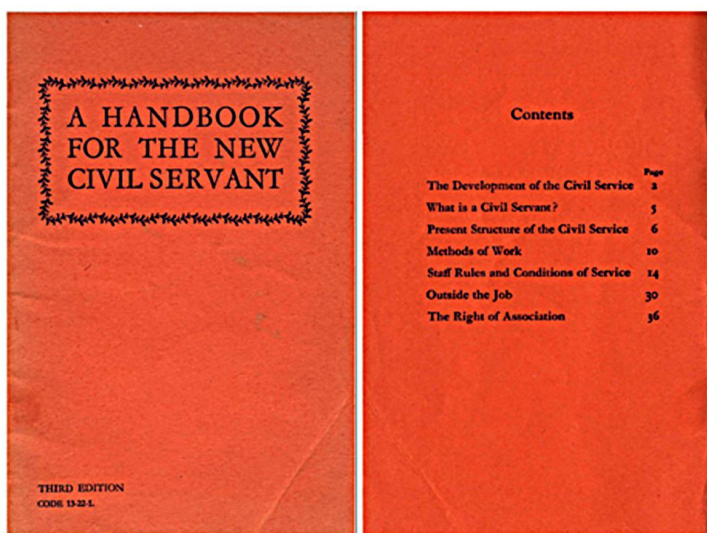
Among that worthy company, were Sir Hugh Myddelton and Edmund Colthurst, the two men who had brought the New River from Chadwell Spring to Islington and provided London with fresh drinking water.

**Richard Thomas**



# Handbook of the New Civil Servant 1949

In the Summer 2015 edition of Touchpaper I commented that shortly after Jock McDougall passed away, his sister Sheila had given me a document titled “Advice on the composition and form of technical reports” which was issued by the Ministry of Supply in October 1954. This was a brilliantly written, down to earth document, penned in the sort of clear, precise and unambiguous language that is all too rare today. I gave a couple of extracts from the document. Whilst sorting out some of my old papers I came across another such guide book; the “Handbook of the new Civil Servant 1949”. This is a similar jewel, and I give below a short extract from this:



“From the very first you must learn to be precise and honest in your work. You must fully appreciate the problem to be solved; you must then collect and check all the relevant facts, and set them out clearly and fairly. Don't take anything for granted: there is always more than one point of view, and it may be dangerous to accept somebody else's statement without verifying it for yourself. Don't be lazy and

try to pass off a guess as an accurate figure or statement; it may not be questioned, but if it is you must be prepared to justify it. If you see a snag, or a difficulty, or a point which you don't understand, don't ignore it in the hope that nobody else will spot it; it is your job to straighten it out, or if you can't, at least to point it out to your chief and let him deal with it. Whatever shortcomings civil servants may have, they must never be found wanting in this kind of honesty. Moreover, you must be accurate. You must learn the importance of using words in their exact meanings, so that they convey, to somebody you have never seen, exactly what you intend to convey, and not just something roughly approximating to it. If there is any ambiguity in your phrasing somebody is sure to misunderstand; so say what you mean, simply and clearly. Keep your sentences short and avoid officialise”.

I think that it was about the 1980's (maybe earlier) that “Management-speak” began to infiltrate our workplace and this sort of clear and precise language gave way to vacuous bureaucratic drivel specifically designed to confuse those “not in the know”, and to make the originator feel self-important. I recall one such case in the immediate post-Waltham Abbey days when the Defence Research Agency (DRA) was being formed up. It was a “Brave New World” and a colleague of ours (actually ex-Waltham Abbey but a good chap nevertheless) was giving a presentation on the way forward for the fledgling organisation. One of his slides heralded the words “Enunciate Strategic Architecture”. What on earth did he mean, I asked him? He shifted uneasily from foot to foot in an embarrassed sort of way. “Does it mean “Make a Plan” I asked him? He reluctantly admitted “Yes”. Why did he not say so? Silence!

Hopefully in due course we will all see the error of our ways and revert to the sort of plain English that we used more than half a century ago.

**Geoff Hooper**

# Royal Society of Chemistry and Transport Plaques

Most of the recent articles in Touchpaper relating to the work of the Establishment have been about the time when it was an active research establishment, including the excellent articles by Jim Burgess. I thought therefore that for a change I would write something about events immediately after the site was re-opened as a heritage attraction. We have had two plaques presented to us in recognition of the site and the work done on it.

## Royal Society of Chemistry

On 17th April 2002, the Royal Gunpowder Mills were presented with a “Historical Chemical Landmark Plaque” by the Royal Society of Chemistry in recognition of the ground-breaking work that the establishment had carried out over the years.

*The inscription reads “For over 300 years explosives and propellants were developed and produced on this site. Work performed here has been influential in the development of the Bouncing Bomb, Kevlar and Ejector Seat technology. Established in the mid-1660s and bought by the Crown in 1787, the Mills had an international reputation for their production methods and quality. By the 20th century the Mills were producing and researching newer explosives and propellants such as cordite and TNT. In 1948 the Mills ceased production but carried out research until 1991”.*

The presentation ceremony was a high profile affair, covered by local press and television. The proceedings started in the theatre, where I gave the “standard” lecture on the history of the site, starting with the earliest recorded manufacture of gunpowder on the site and ending up with a brief resume of the post-WW2 chemistry work. This was followed by the video that is shown to visitors to this day.



The presentation ceremony then took place outside Building A203, the former library and lecture theatre. Note that this photograph was taken before the “Secret Island” era. On the left back row is the then Chief Officer Robert Taylor, who had taken over from Robert Saunders who had been the first Chief Officer. Next to Robert is Jim Jeacocke; his wife Peggy is in the front row. In the middle of the back row, receiving the plaque is Trevor Knapp, then Chair of the Operating Company and now a member of the Foundation Trust. He is being given the plaque by Dr Giachardi from the Royal Society of Chemistry. It now resides in the Company Boardroom in Walton House.

The boys in the front row were from King Harold School, dressed up, not very convincingly, as “powder monkeys”; small boys whose job it was to ferry gunpowder from the powder magazine in the hold to the artillery pieces on board Royal Navy ships.

The connection between the chemistry of Waltham Abbey and Powder Monkeys is a bit tenuous; I can only assume that it was for the benefit of the media.





## Transport Trust

The second plaque presented to us was on 8th November 2009. This was a Red Wheel awarded to us by the Transport Trust. The Plaque reads *“Extensive canal and rail system dating from 1735, serving Britain's major explosives works. Home to 3 of UK's 26 cast iron aqueducts”*.



Left to right in the picture are the actor Timothy West CBE, Trevor Knapp (then Chair of the Operating Company), Neil Marshall of the Transport Trust; Ricki Gadsby (then Mayor of Waltham Abbey) and the actress Prunella Scales CBE

For the Transport Trust, Neil Marshall described the Royal Gunpowder Mills as ‘... a jewel...’ with a remarkable contribution to both social history and the industrial production. He spoke of the site as having helped make the River Lee a remarkable supply chain for industry and of creating the wealth that enabled Britain to become a powerful global force. He described the award of the plaque as ‘... a mark of respect to one of the greatest integrated manufacturing facilities in Britain...’.

Timothy West, a well-known waterways enthusiast, commented that there was no better place than the Royal Gunpowder Mills to showcase and celebrate Britain’s industrial heritage, featuring as it did a dispersed plant interlinked by canals at three levels connected by locks and metal aqueducts, along with a narrow-gauge railway network. He unveiled the plaque which is on the wall outside the library/lecture theatre.

**Geoff Hooper**



## **Jim Burgess Chapter 19: A Story from Lydd**

A mine-destroying weapon of the 1970/80 era was known as Giant Viper. It consisted of a considerable length of reinforced rubber tube filled with an aluminised high explosive rolled up into a coil. It was launched out over the mine field by means of a rocket attached to the head end. Although effective when operating 'properly', the weapon system did, however, suffer from some disadvantages.

From the performance point of view, the tube could distort/stretch under the influence of the force applied by the rocket and this could occasionally cause a break in the continuity of the long, cylindrical, explosive charge. If this break left a sufficiently long gap (or gaps) in the explosive, the detonation would not propagate past the break and a significant quantity of the explosive would remain undetonated.

Manufacture of the charge was very labour intensive. Slits were cut in the tube at comparatively short intervals and the explosive stemmed in by hand, the slits being subsequently sewn up.

I've mentioned earlier the work done to explore the use of commercial explosives for military applications and a slurry explosive would seem to have advantages over the conventional filling for Giant Viper. In principle, the explosive could be mixed on site and pumped down the empty Giant Viper tube, which would have already been deployed, by means of a pump truck of the type already developed commercially.

We arranged to 'hitch a ride' on some mine clearance trials planned by our 'friends' at RARDE near Sevenoaks in Kent.

The trials were to be carried out at a range near Lydd, not far from Dungeness, on the South Coast. It was arranged that our explosives and other accoutrements would be taken to Lydd the day before and placed in an appropriate magazine. Because we had no mixing facilities or pump truck at the range site, the charges were pre-prepared at Waltham Abbey. The explosive, which had a gooey consistency and could be made to flow, was filled into polythene tubes about 2m in length and 75mm in diameter.

I was informed by my colleague from RARDE that we should arrive at Lydd at 07:30 in the morning.

It became very clear that some assistance would be needed in the conduct of these trials. In addition to my 21C, I decided to take two Industrial Staff (semi-skilled workers) in addition.

At this point, I should mention that the industrial Staff regarded the scientist's attendance at trials as additional 'paid holidays' in which little effort, either physical or mental, was expended and much socialising took place in pubs over extended lunchtimes. Whilst it can't be denied that attendance at trials could often be pleasurable as well as interesting and exciting, their notion of trials work was decidedly rose-tinted.

Lydd is scarcely a holiday resort. The whole of the area consists of acres of unremitting shingle beach. The only significant landmark was the massive edifice of, what was then, Dungeness 'A' Nuclear Power Station. In the foreground from the military base could be seen the detritus from numerous military exercises and decades of explosives trials.

The start of our journey to Lydd was not auspicious. It had been arranged that we pick up the two Industrial lads at about 05:00. Being Autumn-time, it was dark and with a full moon. The first collection went according to plan. Arriving in front of the second one's house, we found it in darkness. My 21C knocked on the door fairly gently so as not to disturb the neighbours. There was no response. After a minute or so, the exercise was repeated with the

door-knocker being applied more vigorously and for a longer period. I found myself reminded from my school days of Walter de la Mare's The Listener:

*'Is there anybody there?' said the Traveller,  
Knocking on the moon lit door;  
And his horse in the silence champed the grasses  
Of the forest's ferny floor:  
And a bird flew up out of the turret,  
Above the Traveller's head:  
And he smote upon the door again a second time;  
'Is there anybody there?' he said.  
But no one descended to the Traveller;  
No head from the leaf-fringed sill.*

Just before the door-knocker was applied for a third time, an upstairs window was opened and a woman's voice was heard. "Oo the 'ell's that?" was the message, delivered with palpable irritation. My 21C endeavoured to explain by addressing the window and without wakening the neighbourhood. With regard to the latter aim he was clearly unsuccessful. as lights started to appear in the windows of the properties close by. The woman's voice could be heard again but less distinctly as she turned from the window to arouse her slumbering husband. After a couple of minutes, she shouted out of the window. "E's just comin'". The wait, punctuated initially by muttered words of matrimonial discord to be heard through the still-open window, seemed interminable and it was a full twenty minutes before the fellow finally appeared. Without any word of apology, he said. "I 'ad to 'ave me breakfast didn't I" and, after a pause, "I forgot to tell me wife I'd got an early start..." "You forgot it yourself", thought I!

Despite our delayed start, we weren't late in arriving at the Lydd military base. We met up with the trial organiser and set out to collect our explosives and other bits and pieces.

We soon learned why we'd been asked to arrive at the range so early. The magazines seemed a long distance across the shingle from the administrative centre. We were transported there by means of a narrow gauge railway of the same type, we thought, as the Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch Railway which passed not far away. The rolling-stock was hauled by an ageing diesel locomotive the progress of which was very slow - maybe about three miles an hour.

On arrival at the magazine, which was opened by a dour, taciturn fellow who seemed to have appeared from nowhere, we man-handled the wooden boxes etc. on to the trucks. Another half-a-mile or so down the narrow gauge line took us within walking distance of the range. We unloaded the boxes of explosives onto the shingle and, with the help of a hand-barrow, moved them in several instalments to the vicinity of the range.

With the removal of the last hand-barrow of 'goodies', the driver of the diesel locomotive returned to his train and bade us a cheerful farewell as he made off to return to base.

Long before this point, I'd developed an uncomfortable feeling about how the day was likely to turn out!

As if to echo my thoughts, one of the industrials shouted after the train driver as he mounted the engine. "When are you coming back, then?" "Oh, when the range closes— at about 4pm" the driver replied with a final wave.

Visions of a protracted lunch of sandwiches washed down with a couple of pints of fine ale evaporated from the minds of my two industrial companions and their countenances became downcast, if not sour, as they gazed over the expanse of desolate beach, especially that of the one who had to be wrenched from his marital bed in the early hours of the morning. Even they realised that there was no chance of walking back to civilisation over nearly a mile of shingle, the stones of which were particularly uncomfortable to walk upon.

In the event, matters were even worse than that. Only one of us had brought any food, the remainder believing that we'd be feeding in luxury. The range had no running water in which to wash our hands or indeed to drink and only two of us had brought any water. Once we'd started handling the explosives our hands became dirtied. The slurry explosives were particularly bad in this regard. Although the open ends of the polythene tubes were nominally sealed some of the explosive had managed to leak out. It was gooey in consistency and impossible to remove completely without running water. The one chap who'd thought to bring some food didn't feel able to partake of it because of the 'contamination' of his hands.

There was a lot to do and the time passed quickly with little opportunity to dwell on the deprivations — which was just as well.

Thankfully, the diesel train arrived at 4pm 'on the dot' and we were able to clear up and return unused explosives to the magazine without delay.

The return to base provided an opportunity for hands to be washed and footwear to be wiped of explosive residue.

Happily, the trial itself went well from a scientific and technical standpoint and much was learned from it.

However, even the journey back to Waltham Abbey was fraught. My 2IC had chosen to use his personal car as a 'Ministry' one was not available. In those days, the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge was only a dream in someone's eye and the crossing of the Thames at that point was dependent on the Dartford Tunnels. Some distance before we reached the tunnel, the oil filler-cap of the car became detached. Volumes of hot, oily smoke billowed from beneath the bonnet and we were forced to pull into a lay-by. There were no mobile phones in those days and the two Industrial lads drew lots to walk back in search of a phone and/or a garage. It seemed an age before help arrived in the shape of a van from a garage. It was, by that time, nearly dark! The mechanic had brought with him some oil and a variety of filler-caps. Fortunately a cap was found which fitted reasonably well.

The rest of the journey was passed in almost total silence!

My suggestion to our Industrial friends, as we approached Waltham Abbey, that they might care to accompany us on another easy-going, pleasure-filled trial was met with moans and groans which were clearly interpretable as ‘not bloody likely: not if we can help it.’

I had no idea when we embarked on the Lydd trial that it would turn out the way it did and whilst it did put a stop to comments about the scientists having ‘all the pleasure’, for a while at any rate, I really had hoped that the lads would have derived some enjoyment from the excursion.

**Jim Burgess**

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## **WARGMFA 2020 AGM/Reunion**

### **Friday 15 May 2020**

10.30	Coffee/Tea	Mixing House/Saltpetre House
11.00	AGM	
12.00	Reunion	Cafe
12.30	Lunch	Cafe
13.45	Group Photograph	TBA
14.00	Land Train	Roundabout
15.30-16.00	Farewell	

If you would like to attend the Reunion Lunch there will be a charge of £10. Please complete the booking form enclosed with this Touchpaper and return with your cheque to the address below.

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**Daphne Clements**



# *Letters*

## **Archiving of Touchpaper articles**

Thanks to Mike Evans for the very detailed and informative articles on Experimental Gunpowder ( Spring and Autumn Touchpapers ) and to Geoff Hooper for similar on Saltpetre .

This is just to record that as well as entry in the Index of Touchpaper articles, WATI, all articles dealing with activity at the Mills are entered in the main digitised Mills Archive – WASC.

## **Les Tucker**

## **Gasholders**

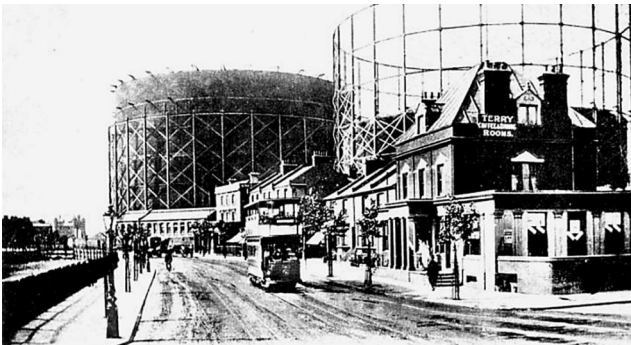
The controversy over the recent demolition of the East Greenwich gas holder has highlighted the Marmite type love it or hate it debate which has arisen over this subject.

On one side the IA enthusiasts and a segment of the public which regard gas holder preservation as a laudable exercise respecting the achievements of the past and on the other opponents in the IA community and that segment of the public who regard gas holders as an unloved relic of a defunct technology and preservation as a ‘ crass ‘ (description used by a prominent IA enthusiast) artificial gesture e.g. description of the apartments within the Kings Cross complex as ‘ dumping ‘, loved only by trendy architects – not entirely true, a prominent IA commentator has described the Kings Cross development as the best example of gasholder adaptive re-use in Britain, even although strictly speaking it is only the guide frame.

from the point of view of significance of the technology the East Greenwich holder was particularly important for preservation as it was regarded as cutting edge gas technology when it was erected and the entire complex, including the holder tank itself, was in preservable condition and would have been highly visible.



**Aerial view of  
East  
Greenwich  
gas holder  
showing  
holder tank**



**East Greenwich  
gas holders in  
Blackwall Lane**

Maybe gas holders are one for the purists. What did the patrons of Terry's Rooms next door think of the monoliths looming above them? Maybe they didn't even notice it, or viewed as a model of civic technical achievement.

**Les Tucker**

## **Some Thoughts on HS2**

I recall attending a lecture given at an Engineering Society meeting on HS2. Anticipating some new developments on 'Magelec' I was disappointed to learn that the only real improvements had been made by the Japanese in reducing wheel noise using covers and improving a more efficient pantograph pickup of power, otherwise it was still a 'wheels on rails' system.

The lecturer then drew attention to profitability of continental H.S.Ts. It seems that Paris to Rouen was profitable but Paris to the Riviera was not! The analogy for UK HS2 was that London to Manchester would make money but any further to, say, Newcastle would make a loss.

A further point was raised in that any rail journey would consist of:

- a) Home to railway station
- b) HS2 to nearest station to destination
- c) HS2 station to destination.

Clearly the parts a) and c) would be more than likely to offset any time advantage gained by HS2 on the overall journey time. It seems odd then that the HS2 element, which ought to be more efficient on a long journey, goes against the observed Paris-Rouen profitability!

**B C Howard**

# Theodore Hook c 1810



The playwright and novelist Theodore Hook is perhaps best remembered as being the perpetrator of what must surely rank as one of the most elaborate hoaxes ever. Although the exact details differ in almost every report of what happened, it would appear that whilst strolling through London in 1809 with fellow playwright Samuel Beazley, Hook's companion remarked on the quietness of the street through which they were passing. Hook

wagered a guinea that within a week he could make it the most talked about spot in London.

The house they were standing by was number 54 Berners Street, just north of Oxford Street. Mrs Tottenham, a widow, had until that moment led a quiet, secluded life. Hook changed all that. It took the writing of around a thousand letters, but he did it.

He and Beazley took a room in a lodging house across the street the following week and watched, entranced. The joke started to unfold at around 5 a.m. on 27th November when the first person – a chimney sweep – turned up. Then another, and another, and another – until a dozen sweeps had appeared and been turned away.



They were followed by twenty wagons, each loaded with a ton of coal. Then came cartloads of furniture, a hearse accompanied by funeral coaches, assorted medics and a midwife, cartloads of beer, clocks, carpets, potatoes and even a pipe organ with half a dozen men to install it. Also answering apparent summonses from number 54 were coachmakers, clockmakers, wigmakers, opticians and a variety of other tradespeople. By now the streets were becoming congested, not helped by the arrival of shoemakers, haberdashers, hat makers, butchers' boys and a queue of pianos. There followed the purveyors of wedding cakes, fishmongers, bootmakers and fifty or so chefs bringing 2,500 raspberry tarts. A selection of domestic staff arrived hoping to take up one of the positions that had been advertised.





Adding to the mayhem was a large crowd of laughing, unruly spectators who gathered to observe the bizarre event. Before long carts were overturned and fights broke out and onlookers helped themselves to the ale which had been delivered.. The street was sheer pandemonium. But there was more to come. Mere tradespeople were not enough for the mischievous Hook, who had written to a selection of dignitaries, informing them that Mrs Tottenham was on the point of disposing of her considerable fortune. Among those turning up were the Lord Mayor of London, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Governor of the Bank of England and the Lord Chief Justice. To cap it all, the Duke of York then arrived, together with an escort of cavalry befitting his position as Commander-in-Chief; he had been informed that one of his mistresses lay dying there.

Hook was for a time the most unpopular man in London, so much so that he considered it prudent to leave the capital for a while. His escape gave the language a new expression: "To hook it".

Hook had, however, won his bet and the Prince Regent was apparently so tickled by reports of the hoax that he gave him a job as Accountant General and Treasurer in Mauritius, with a handsome salary of £2000 a year. He was the life and soul of the island from his arrival in October 1813, but a serious deficiency having been discovered in the treasury accounts in 1817, he was arrested and brought back to England on a criminal charge. A sum of about £12,000 had been abstracted by a deputy official, and Hook was held responsible. He ended up in clink for a couple of years.

The house occupied by Mrs Tottenham at 54 Berners Street has long since been demolished and is now the location of the 5\* Sanderson Hotel. It is hardly a thing of beauty externally. In fact it looks more like a university tower block built in the 1960s or 1970s.





**Geoff Hooper**

## **The following questions were set in a GCSE examination in Swindon, Wiltshire**

These are genuine answers (from 16 year olds)

Q. Name the four seasons

A. Salt, pepper, mustard and vinegar

Q. Explain one of the processes by which water can be made safe to drink

A. Flirtation makes water safe to drink because it removes large pollutants like grit, sand, dead sheep and canoeists

Q. How is dew formed

A. The sun shines down on the leaves and makes them perspire

Q. What causes the tides in the oceans

A. The tides are a fight between the earth. and the moon. All water tends to flow towards the moon, because there is no water on the moon, and nature abhors a vacuum. I forget where the sun joins the fight

Q. What guarantees may a mortgage company insist on

A. If you are buying a house they will insist that you are well endowed

Q. What are steroids

A. Things for keeping carpets still on the stairs      (Shoot yourself now , there is little hope)

# Obituaries

## Sheila Higgins 1927 - 2019

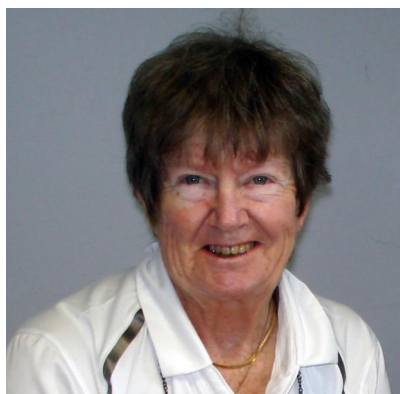


Back in spring 2015 I reported on the passing away at the age of 93 of an old friend and colleague of ours of many years' standing, Jock McDougall. He had come down to ERDE from Scotland in 1959 and from 1973 he lived in Leaview, Waltham Abbey. There he was frequently visited by his sister Sheila Higgins, whose home was in Barrhead near Glasgow. She

became a good friend to many of us and was very much a part of the Waltham Abbey community. Sadly Sheila passes away on 5th December 2019 at the age of 92. The funeral was held at the Woodside Crematorium in Paisley with subsequent refreshments at the Paisley British Legion Club where her friends and her extended family from both Barrhead and Burnley enjoyed a really good drink in her memory. Sheila was a lovely, bubbly, lady who thoroughly enjoyed the regular "meets" of ex-ERDE friends and colleagues at the Crown in Romeland on Friday lunchtimes. She was very close to her brother Jock, but that did not stop her keeping him firmly in order, not infrequently reminding him of his shortcomings. Jock did not mind because she made him some excellent meals. Sheila is survived by two sons; Matt and Ian, who also used to visit the Abbey and are good friends to a number of us. I passed on to them, and to Ian's wife Helen, the condolences that many of you had expressed, for which I think that they were very touched.

Geoff Hooper

## Barbara Coe 1944 – 2019



Barbara Coe was born in 1944 in Elephant & Castle. She met Bill through friends and they became inseparable, marrying in 1976. They shared a love of music and were fervent Spurs supporters, and one of the last things we heard from Barbara was that a nephew had taken her to the Spurs shop where she spent a lot of money on branded items.

Barbara worked in a mixing house on South Site, she and her husband Bill were long standing members of the Friends.

Barbara and Bill were stalwarts at the “PERME” club during the 1980’s and early 1990’s before the demise of the club in 1993, both serving behind the bar. They were also leading lights at the British Legion where we used to have the original reunions.

She began volunteering at the Royal Gunpowder Mills back in 2005, and tackled various volunteering roles with dedication and a cheerful manner in spite of health issues about which she was never heard to moan. She always greeted us with a smile and remembered to ask about our families and our lives. All through her volunteering she supported the education team by preparing the equipment for the children to use, making up packs for each class and also helping in the classrooms with the art activities. She helped for many years in the café, clearing tables and washing up in a sometimes very busy environment, the hard work she put into this was extremely valuable to the running of the Gunpowder Café. In more recent years she also volunteered in the shop where we would all say hello as we passed by.

She was a pleasure to work with, gave immense support to the charity through her hard work and will be missed by all who knew her.

# Julie's Nature Column

I've had a few extra walks around the Mills recently to see if I can spot something different and also get a feel for what's going on with the wildlife during the early part of the year. The Red Kites have returned and hopefully they will be nesting again. Their original nest looked full of new branches, but storm Dennis has removed a few. Fingers crossed that this won't put them off and that they will rebuild. I shall be keeping a close eye on the area.



The Alder trees have been full of flocks of Siskins, Goldfinches and Chaffinches. The Goldfinches also have a preference for our London Plane tree feeding on the seed pods outside Walton House, it's really nice to see them thriving at the Mills.

I've had to call out swan rescue a couple of times, once for a cygnet and again for a grown adult. Our pair of resident swans will chase any rivals away, swans are very territorial. The reason for calling out swan rescue is because any displaced swans need to get back in



the water to leave the site, but they know they will be chased. The grounds are surrounded by high fencing and there aren't many suitable places for a swan to take flight, being a heavy bird they need a bit of a runway to get airborne. This photo is of a rather large male swan waiting patiently to be rescued.



Our nest boxes on the trees are starting to fill up with Blue Tits. I would be surprised if there are any vacant boxes left. Birds check out nesting sites very early in the year and although spring hasn't quite arrived yet you can be sure that the birds are busy with nest building. I would think that with the recent ongoing stormy weather our boxes will become essential nesting places...worth fighting for.



The two Blue Tits in the photo were doing exactly that, squabbling in the tree with the nest box. They locked together and floated down to the ground right in front of me and continued to fight.



The deer are still keeping a low profile, had lots of glimpses and one nice moment where they came over to me to see if I was putting any food out...how could I not when I'm right near the food store.

Blossom has been out early on some of our trees and on a warm sunny day the blossom is covered in Honey bees. I've seen a few Bumble bees already and the odd butterfly. I doubt that they will stay out for long with the weather being so changeable. A few daffodils and snowdrops are in bloom and it gives the feeling that spring is almost here.

I have spotted a few foxes and muntjac around the Mills, they are normally gone in a flash, but this time I think I took them by surprise as you can see in the photo.

The fox is doing its best to lie low and keep still until the very last moment. It was catching some early morning warmth from the sun. The muntjac was oblivious to me, possibly counting on the fox to react to danger. This is the second time that I've got a photo of a fox and muntjac hanging out together. The fox poses no danger to the muntjac, foxes go after much smaller prey.



I hope to bring you more stories and photos in the coming months, Spring being such a busy time for wildlife will hopefully give me lots more opportunities.

**Julie Matthews**

**Mills Nature Conservationist**