

Chairman's Comments

As we tick the days from the Advent Calendar the year end rapidly approaches. In January we will celebrate five years since our first tentative steps in 2009. True, we have experienced many happy times together. Even with little formal research we have discovered what an actively remarkable place Bridgtown was from its very beginnings in 1861. We have recovered many photographs and artefacts to cherish, record and maintain.

As a society we have re-established vital links with the local school, with the local church, with the Parish Council, even with local industry and, most importantly, with local residents. We can be proud that we have become a sort of gelling agent to ensure local continuity in what has now become a growing village again.

So where do we go from here? Regular members will be aware that core membership comprises mostly retired ex-Bridgtonians and our organised activities have accordingly related to this fact. Inevitably, some of our founding members are no longer with us and, like so many similar societies, membership shows a steady decline.

We have been fortunate to enjoy excellent accommodation both at the Community Centre in the Ramada complex and at Bethel Church. However, like all successful institutions, it is vital that we plan forward to ensure adequate and well-financed facilities. We are currently reviewing such a situation. One or two significant factors will play a part in our deliberations.

- A review of our current administrative structure.
- The effect of the recent planning approval to build houses on the old Cornelius Whitehouse factory site.
- The return to our team of one of our founding members, Patrick Corfield.
- We are conscious of the need to provide input from younger potential members and encourage ideas and suggestions towards this end.

Tony Pearson, December 2013

“THE LOCAL”

Derrick Middleton was looking through some old photographs recently when he was struck by the number of pubs and clubs that there used to be within approximately a mile of the centre of Bridgtown. This set him thinking and he compiled the following list of 21:

North Street

The Castle, better known as The Dog.

Union Street

War Memorial Club

Watling Street

Fleur de Lys

The White Lion

The Royal Exchange

Hawkins Social Club

The Black Cock

The Red Lion

The Four Crosses

Walsall Road

The New Inns

The George

Bridgtown Social Club

Bridgtown Tavern

The Anglesey Arms, also known as The Knob

(This is now The Stumble Inn)

The Robin Hood

The Red Cow *(by Gilpin's)*

Cross Street

The Crystal Fountain *(which moved to St. John's Road in the 1930s)*

Walkmill Lane

The Vine

Along “the New Road”

The Woodman

Coppice Lane

Hawkins Social Club

Wedges Mills

The Star and Garter *(now The Chase Gate)*

Do you know of any that have been forgotten? Please let us know your memories of any of these establishments.

Irene Sambrook is one of our members who now lives in Stone. She has provided us with an account of her father's life, written by himself. Irene is the daughter of Olive Harris (nee Smallman). The Smallman family kept the Fish & Chip shop in New Street years ago. Irene's Dad didn't come from this area originally but his story is well worth reading as it is a poignant reminder of times gone by. Eventually Irene grew up in Wedges Mills.

The Story of William Harris

In his own words.

I was born on 8th January 1922. Eventually I was to have three brothers and three sisters. We were a very happy and large family. Although poor we were always kept clean and our clothes were always kept in good repair. My father had ten brothers and often used to joke about being able to field a football team. All of them were respected locally as runners and my father used to compete under the name of Jim Barclay, all over the north of England. He had been in the merchant marine as a steward and would enthral us with his stories of the sea.

In 1914 he joined the Durham Light Infantry as a soldier and found himself in camp on Cannock Chase. That was how he came to meet my mother. After the war they married and settled in Rugeley where father worked at Brereton Colliery. Their colliery residence was "two up and two down". There was no bathroom, no hot water and no electricity! I well remember "The Great Event" when gas was installed. Electricity existed but to us it was like living on Mars would be to today's children. It was something that would happen in the future! The toilet was an earth closet at the bottom of the garden. Seven of us lived in that house. Mom & Dad had one bedroom and we five children shared the other one. In those days there was no Social Services, no health visitors but none of us ever suffered any serious illnesses. Perhaps people would not allow themselves to be ill because they wouldn't be able to afford a doctor's bill!

We went to the local church school at Brereton and I received a brutal but good education. Caning was the order of the day. Nowadays teachers would be sent to prison for meting out such treatment! Nowadays I look back and think that the nation was trying to produce a hungry, disciplined race who would eventually fight the Germans and win.

I can vividly remember the 1926 strike and all the suffering and degradation it entailed. As children we would march to a soup kitchen twice a day and there receive a mug of hot soup and a piece of bread. I saw my parents sit at our table and, while we children were given food, they chose not to eat because there would not have been enough for all of us. Even so I can remember father entering track events in different parts of the midlands and donating his prize money to the local soup kitchen.

My mother came from the Rugeley area and her maiden name was Mills. Her father must have been born somewhere around 1860 as he often related stories about the second half of the 19th century. He told stories of how people would take sandwiches and walk to Stafford, about 10 miles, in order to see the public hangings in Gaol Square outside the prison. Thousands of people would make a holiday of such a spectacle. He also told that he was a patient of the infamous Dr. Palmer, the poisoner, whose surgery was right opposite my grandfather's home.

My grandmother had a newsagent's shop and I used to accompany my Uncle Bill in delivering papers in a horse and trap. He was a heavy drinker and the horse knew it! It would not pass a public house and would refuse to move on until my uncle had been in for a drink. There were times when he had to fool the horse by going round the back of the pub and pretending that he had partaken. Only then would it proceed. On occasions when my uncle got drunk the horse would always take him safely home. Newspapers were one penny each and two pennies on a Sunday!

Aeroplanes were just being made when I was a boy and I saved up half a crown to take a flight with an air circus over Lichfield, following the course of the River Trent. One day I saw the most wonderful sight of my life at that time, while I was on the school playing field one afternoon. Above me flew the R101. I could see it in all its glory just a few hundred feet above my head. It was making its maiden flight and it was a fantastic sight. Unfortunately it went on to burn up and crash, with the loss of many lives, over France.

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I have found this story fascinating and intend to continue it over the next two editions of this magazine. I hope you agree with me. Ed.

CANNOCK & DISTRICT

What do you know about its history?

An assortment of facts to ponder, gleaned from "The Advertiser" of 1927.

- Many of us know that Cannock is mentioned in the Domesday Book and that it was called Chenet.
- A variety of other names can be found in historical documents. These include Cnot, Canot, Chnot, Canoc, Canoc, Canokbury, Kannoek and Cank.
- Cannock means "a strong oak".
- Henry Francis Cary, the translator of the best-known and popular version of Dante's "Divine Comedy" lived in Cannock in High Green. He lived in the large white mansion familiar to all of us. The house was called "The Green" and the beautiful wrought iron gates were erected in the mid 1700s.
- A sheep market seems to have been held at Saredon Mill.
- In the 1800s a certain Tom Smith of Norton Canes paid the death penalty for stealing a cow.
- A mining tragedy is recorded on 6th May 1824 when Benjamin Potts, an engineer, was descending the shaft of the Wyrley Colliery when he smelled foul air. He signalled to be drawn back up but was overcome by fumes and fell to the bottom of the shaft to his death.
- Poaching was a regular problem. On 17th December 1824 a notice was published announcing that "spring guns and man traps are set in all of the local woods owned by E. J. Littleton".
- There are many records of turnpike toll bars, about as popular in their day as the income tax collector is today! They were a fruitful source of income though. In the year 1823 a toll-bar in Stafford Road gathered in £184. A similar one at Churchbridge brought to its owner £91. These toll-bars frequently changed hands and always went to the highest bidder.
- Cannock markets had a chequered career but were usually held in the town centre in front of "The Crown Hotel", and a cattle market was at one time held at the rear of the building. Back in the 1600s market day was a Tuesday.
- In 1874 beer was brewed on the premises later to be owned by Messrs. Linford in High Green.

HISTORY SOCIETY NEWS

The society is keen to continue to develop but financial issues concern us greatly. It is very rare for a society like ours to be able to finance a magazine like this. We do not charge our members for it and believe that it is the best way to keep in contact with everyone. We hope that you share that view. The charge of £1.00 per copy to non-members barely covers the cost of production.

Nowadays a lot of information is transferred electronically. Some societies contact their members in this way. Would you be interested in receiving your magazine to your computer rather than waiting for your hard copy to arrive. Let us know if that is the case.

Subscriptions are also a vital part of our income. It is therefore with regret that we have to announce that your subscription will have to increase next year. When it is next due on 1st April 2014 the cost will be £7.00 per family membership. We still believe this to be excellent value and will still include your 4 free editions of our magazine.

We hope that you have purchased our latest book “Bridgtown and Beyond” and that you are pleased with it. We are planning on making a little change in our plans for 2014. Our next book will concentrate on the links between Bridgtown and Churchbridge and will be written by John Devey instead of by David Williams. David says he “needs a rest” but will be back with another book in 2015. John is an “expert” on matters Churchbridge and his book should be a good read.

World War 1 memorabilia is needed for a display we are planning to mount with our friends from Great Wyrley and from Cheslyn Hay. Please search your homes to see if you have anything that you can lend to us for the centenary celebrations next year.

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The Cannock Language

<i>buzzed</i>	late for work
<i>clemmed</i>	starving
<i>conner</i>	cannot
<i>dai</i>	did not
<i>jed</i>	dead
<i>skint</i>	penniless



Christmas Begins in Bridgtown

Christmas 2013 has now officially begun in Bridgtown. On Friday 6th December carols were sung by a nativity scene in the school grounds and the lights lit up on the Christmas Tree. Afterwards everyone retired to Bethel Church for refreshments. The event was sponsored by Bridgtown Parish Council and, in the photograph above, chairman Eddie Smith is pictured with County Councillor Alison Spicer who has been instrumental in supporting Bridgtown events over recent times. Below, the smaller photograph shows the beginning of the singing at school.



How Our Society Started

Here we continue the article written a number of years ago by our chairman Tony Pearson. It was sent to Professor Carl Chinn and part of it was published in the Express & Star in September 2007. We are now reading the parts of Tony's article that have never before been published.

“The Hole in the Hedge” by Tony Pearson

Memories and Reflections of a Bridgtown Boy

The success of Chase High School in Belt Road was embedded in many dedicated teachers. Names that come to mind are Haydn Boot, truly my mentor, Ken Townsend (Tazzer), Miss Bott and Mr. Morgan.

Not only happy memories but many genuine lifelong friendships have followed. I was proud to wear my new school uniform but was forever losing my cap, either to a bit of bullying or as a trophy to pupils from other schools. I remember daily boarding the No. 1 Hednesford bus with my satchel full of a few books and a lot of sandwiches. So-called cooked dinners were not on my menu as budgets continued to be tight.

Apart from the disciplined approach by all staff at my new school there was much encouragement to widen horizons, with additional time allocated to The Arts, especially Drama and Music. I felt at home! I adored being able to act in Drama and also to join the School Choir, which was later known as The Chase Youth Choir. The choir remained open to both pupils and ex-pupils for a number of years, but was rudely interrupted by tenors and basses having to undergo National Service in the forces. Many subsequent musical careers were nurtured during this period. We even performed on the BBC.

I believe it was 1949 when, with great excitement, we travelled by coach to the BBC Broad Street Studios in Birmingham. A record was produced of our performance which, regrettably, my family could not afford to purchase. Our permanent conductor was Haydn Boot and we also had excellent soloists, in particular Norry Watson, who later became Mrs Alan Williams.

Life was becoming more hectic. There was homework (when I could fit it in), school choir, church choir, girls, football (and don't forget Wolves!). Then, when I was fourteen, I was able to join the "in" place – the Big Chapel- Park Street Methodist Youth Club. I really thought I had "made it"! Then I realised that there was a weekly subscription to be paid. Somehow, I managed to scrape the barrel.

I now had a big decision to make. Should I remain at St. Luke's Church of England where I was a choirboy? They also had a good Youth Choir. Or, should I suggest my voice was breaking and endeavour to appear more mature in my own Bridgtown backyard, and stay with the Methodists? I think pragmatism took over and I joined the Methodists, never to look back. Most of my local schoolboy friends seemed to agree that "the Meths" was the place to be. We met two nights each week from 7.30 p.m. until 10.00 p.m. Most weekends the club would field two teams, football in the winter and (sort of) cricket in the summer. We managed to acquire something like a kit for football but I don't remember wearing "whites" for cricket. We began to play tennis, though always with borrowed equipment. We also formed what turned out to be the best Table Tennis team in the district.

There was a wide-ranging mix of males and females. We were no longer boys and girls but youths from 14 to 21 years, again interrupted by National Service. Working-class types predominated but we had a mix of educational backgrounds. There were pupils from secondary modern schools, grammar schools, sixth formers, pupils from Catholic schools and private schools, university students and many members were already in full-time employment. The club had a clear structure and averaged 60 members in attendance each night. We had a male leader and a female leader and an elected Committee of Members. We certainly had disagreements in committee but I can only recall one significant disturbance in the seven years that I was a member.

There was intense competition within the club and even more intense competition with other Youth Clubs within the district. As well as sporting activities we competed in Drama and Public Speaking competitions. We formed a choir attached to the chapel and performed concerts for local charities. Many lifelong friendships, and even marriages, blossomed from the club's activities.

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Tony's article is not only a wonderful personal record of his early life but is a compelling Social History account. We look forward to reading more of it in our next edition. Ed.

THE CHRISTMAS TREE.

Our Christmas tree was very special to our family;
You are probably wondering how special a tree can be.
It was one made by my Dad for us during the war,
But we kept it for many years carefully in store.

Dad took an ordinary wooden broom stale,
Welded thick wire rings to go round it.
He found some more pieces of the thick wire,
And welded them on to the rings making branches.
He made a base so that the tree stood upright,
And cut the wires with the small ones at the top.
We bought a large roll of cotton wool,
And warmed it in front of the fire,
Mum tore it in strips of similar widths,
And we wound it carefully round all the wires.
We used some more to cover the stale,
Making sure all was covered from top to tail.
We then had a tree shape, all covered in snow,
And when we put lights on, how it would glow.
We then carefully unwrapped the baubles we had;
The red ones looked best, but the others not bad.
We decorated the white tree with them all,
Then stood the tree on the sideboard or in the hall.
Sometimes when they worked we adorned it with lights,
And Oh how it shone in the darkness at night.

Our tree was unique, and was really quite special,
All home made from wood and metal.
We did think our Dad was clever,
For making our tree to last for ever.

Sheila Jackson



DO NOT TRY TO MAKE ONE. HEALTH AND SAFETY WOULD REALLY THINK IT DANGEROUS AND IT PROBABLY WAS!!



*Now here is a photograph that
is a little different from those
normally seen in our magazine!*

Jim Hall lived in North Street next to the current newsagents. He was a window cleaner by trade. At the back of his house he had a gymnasium and many local men used to come and exercise there. Jim can be seen in the centre of the above photograph. Can you name any of the other men in the picture? Could you put an approximate date to the photograph?

Jim still lives in Bridgtown. He now lives in the new Vine Court complex off Walkmill Lane.

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I went to the cemetery yesterday to lay some flowers on a grave. As I was standing there I noticed four grave diggers walking about with a coffin. Three hours later they were still walking about with it. I thought to myself "They've lost the plot!"

From the local paper in 1930

TO BE OPENED IN SEPTEMBER

Bridgtown's new Council School – the first of a series to be erected in different parts of the district by Cannock Education Committee- is nearing completion, and it is expected that it will be opened at the end of September.

The school was designed by Mr. S. Harrison, architect to the Urban District Council and Education Committee, and is up-to-date in every respect. It will be equipped on the latest principles and, when complete, will be equal to any elementary school in the county. The cost of the school, which is for boys only, is, in round figures, £7,000.

The school is of brick, with stone dressings and roofed with hand-made tiles, and has an extensive frontage to North Street. The building consists of six classrooms, together with accommodation for the head teacher and his staff, cloak rooms and a central hall. Mr. Harrison has given special attention to ventilation, and each classroom, which is provided with a glass door, opens on to an open corridor. On the opposite side (North Street) of the school are special sash windows, so that there is a through ventilation, and the rooms when the weather permits can be made equal in most respects to an open-air school. Messrs. C. Mason & Sons, of Hednesford, are the contractors for the building of the school, which is to be heated.



“The Bridgtonian”

Our magazine is called “The Bridgtonian” after the school magazine for Bridgtown Boys’ School in the 1930s and 1940s. In previous editions we have reproduced a wide variety of articles from those magazines. This time we look back at the second ever edition, written for Christmas 1931. Three extracts are included..

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Firstly a story by J. Howdle, Class VII:

MOTHER MOON

I was going to the moon. The vehicle which took me was a shell-shaped tube, propelled by a rocket device. After what seemed an interminable journey of several days, my vessel made a perfect landing on that distant planet. The first thing I saw was a huge plain dotted with mountains. In the distance was the dim outline of a city surrounded by a high wall. There were many large towers from which I observed was issuing what looked like a fine spray. There were some men working on the plain, three of whom came towards me. One began to babble in a strange language, much after the fashion of a baby.

They took me to their city; two of them caught hold of me and bore me rapidly away. When we landed I saw that the towers were spraying out rain. By signs the moon man told me that they spouted out water from ten o'clock till one o'clock every day. All the people were hairy and had very big heads. They had no kings or rulers but were all of the same social level. They had cars but of a peculiar boat-like design; these were very speedy, being driven by air screws.

Against the sky was silhouetted a great ring of mountains and these caused the moon to appear to have eyes. The people were heathens, worshipping a monstrous statue with an upraised sword. When we came in sight of this, many were gathered about it., and I observed that a man was bound hand and foot to a chair and a priest stood with a handkerchief in his uplifted hand. He brought it down, the sword descended, and the victim was cleaved in two.

There were many volcanoes shooting forth vivid flames and the lava was guided to the sea. I went to the top of one of the water towers where a great bat struck me in the face and down I fell. Down! Down! Down! Suddenly I stopped with a bump – and woke up. The alarm clock was ringing, and mother was pulling my leg!

