



# ***THE BRIDGTONIAN***



***SUMMER 2016***

## Editorial

This is the "Summer" edition of your magazine. Your editor has been waiting for summer to come along, having missed our few days of really hot weather several weeks ago. This morning I realised that August had arrived and so I decided I should wait no longer for summer but compile the magazine anyway. Perhaps by the time you receive your copy the weather may have improved considerably. Let us hope so.

In the previous magazine I made two requests and I am extremely disappointed at the lack of response to both of them.

This was my first request: *"Many of you must have interesting stories or recollections of times gone by, stories that would be of great interest to our other readers. Please take a few minutes to jot them down and pass your words to one of our team who, in turn, will pass them to me. You do not have to be a good writer or a good speller. You can write your thoughts in note form if you wish. I will then edit the story for inclusion in our magazine."*

So far I have had no response at all to this request. I can only put together a magazine if people give me information. Without it there will be no magazine. Yet I know from talking to many of you that you are full of interesting stories and snippets from the past. Please jot them down. I will do the rest.

My other request was for ideas for suitable advertisers. Advertisements will help to pay for the magazine production. As you will see from the price on the front cover it is an expensive process.

On the bright side, please make sure you have booked Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> October to come along to our Annual Open Day at the Social Club, Walsall Road. We are determined to make a few changes to the set-up this year. Don't miss out.

*David Williams*

*1<sup>st</sup> August 2016*

## BEFORE TELEVISION

*In our last edition there was an article called **BEFORE TELEVISION**, which reminisced about the days when **wireless** was king. Readers were asked to send in their contributions about their favourite programmes.*

XX

*Peter Bates used to live in Longford Road. Here are his memories:*

I can remember that one of my favourites was Dick Barton, Special Agent.

But my all time favourite was Valentine Dyll, your man in black! He had a really scary voice.

I remember sitting in the middle room of our old house in Longford Lane. The room had four doors to it and had a curtain for keeping out the drafts from the cellar doors. I was sitting at the table, carving knife in my hand, listening to the radio. I was on my own and I was listening to Valantine Dyll, the Man in Black. It was a story of a couple who had lost their only son at sea..... and the story was called "The Monkey's Paw".

It was a magical paw, a paw which gave them one wish. Naturally they wished for their son to come back. At that moment there was a loud knock at the door. They opened it to see their son stood before them. He was dripping water and seaweed yet he had been dead for a month.

At that moment a gust of wind blew our cellar door open, blowing the curtain in the air. My hair stood on end and I gave a loud scream. I dropped the carving knife that I was holding and bolted out of the back door. I didn't stop running till I reached my Uncle Tom Turner's house in North Street.

Needless to say I never ever listened To Valentine Dyll on my own again!

## **J. Wood & Son**

Oliver Wood was born in 1901 in Norton Canes. His parents, together with an older brother and sister, had earlier emigrated to Australia. They spent several years there before returning to the family roots. Having built a house in Norton Canes, Oliver's father eventually started a grocery business in Heath Hayes. Following a grammar school education, Oliver served as an apprentice with another local grocer where, unfortunately he lost part of a finger operating the bacon slicing machine. Later he joined with his father and the family business prospered, so much so that they started up an additional wholesale business.

Oliver married Ruby Simcox, a Heath Hayes butcher's daughter, in 1929. Ten years later, now with three children John, Barbara and Gillian, the family moved to Bridgtown. Initially they rented "Brookfield" and the adjacent warehouse from the Wootton family. Then came the war and with it severe rationing. However, the business slowly expanded, despite having to share "Brookfield" with army officers. In due course the war ended and eventually rationing did too. Oliver's acumen now persuaded him to move into the "Cash and Carry" business. What was a small family business now began to expand. Under the guidance of manager Reg Maddox, and with his son John moving into the business too, the vans of "J.Wood & Son" were regularly seen throughout a widening area.

Oliver was a prominent member of the Cannock business community, serving for many years as a magistrate and J.P. As an able musician, he came to organise many fund-raising concerts for forces funds during the war and, subsequently, for many church and charitable causes. He was a staunch Rotarian and a regular golfer. Gradually he retired from business, which itself ceased to trade around 1985.

## LIFE IN 1930s BRIDGTOWN

*In our last edition we published the fourth extract from the memories of **Norman Seedhouse**, son of Howard Seedhouse. Norman now lives in Norway but has sent us memories from his childhood. Here is the fifth extract from those memories. Last time we heard about the weekly routine associated with Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays. This theme continues here.*

.....

### Weekly Routine

Thursdays were spent dusting and cleaning at home: the red earthenware tiles on the kitchen floor and the linoleum everywhere else had to be washed or brushed. Shelves and sideboards had to be dusted. Our coal fires and the frequent raking and emptying of ashes were responsible for ensuring that there was a regular deposit of dust over most things. There was no vacuum cleaner in those days. Another Thursday job might be that mother took out her sewing machine and treadled away making items for the family, which included most of her own clothes as well as those for the children.

Friday was baking day. The bread we ate was brought home by father from his bakery job and it would have been unthinkable to have had bread from any other bakery. The exception to this was, of course, when mother filled the house with aromas from her own bread baking. No-one could object to home baked bread fresh from the oven. Also she always baked a weekly cake to be served on Sundays and a regular supply of pastry tarts large and small. I loved baking days and was always ready to help "clean out" the mixing bowl.

On Saturdays mother went out to buy the joint of meat to be roasted the following day. It was usually beef, which the next day father would carve with due ceremony, dressed in his white apron, having previously sharpened the carving knife on his steel. On Saturday nights we all had to have a bath. Bath night involved taking the zinc bath off its hook on the wall in the kitchen and placing it on the rug in front of the fire in the living room. Cold water, and then hot water, was then added in the right proportions. Then, when all was ready, in I sat and was lathered all over until I was sufficiently clean. Then I was hauled out and towelled and dried in front of the fire. Later it was the same procedure

when my parents bathed, although this time it would be the long 4 foot tin bath that was unhooked from the kitchen wall and carried into the living room, although I was never allowed to see this performance. The procedure of heating water in the large kettles on the fire and then filling the bath must have been the same for them. However, to empty the large bath would have been a two-man job, carrying it to the drain outside in the yard.

Daily cooking took up a lot of time. Convenience foods did not exist then and nobody had a refrigerator. Chickens from our own shed had first to be killed by father using his humane killer, a kind of guillotine. They then had to be plucked and stripped of their feathers before being cleaned out internally. Plucking a bird was usually done over the small zinc bath in order to collect the feathers in the best way possible as, later, they might be used for stuffing pillows or cushions. I used to help and my reward was to keep the long feathers in order to make Red Indian headdresses. If rabbit was on the menu then mother skinned and cleaned it out, always hoping that she could use the furry skin for something. When I was a little older these “cleaning out” sessions became impromptu biology lessons, with mother pointing out and explaining the functions of the various internal organs.

In the evenings there was always some handwork to be done. There was the darning of socks and other sewing repairs. There was the knitting of jumpers and pullovers or even the making of rugs. These were made from any leftover or re-used pieces of material.

.....

*In our next edition Norman will tell us about the special day that was Sunday. He will also comment on money issues and remember his early schooldays. We look forward to that. Ed.*

## Cornelius Whitehouse' Hedgehog Factory



Soon there will be nothing left of the old Cornelius Whitehouse' Hedgehog Factory. Its demolition has been recorded in photographs. There is one on the front cover and one on the back cover as well as the two shown on these pages. Your society, however, has ensured that the importance of this factory is never forgotten. A noticeboard will be erected on the site to remind locals and visitors alike of the significance of this place. When the new houses are built make sure that you visit the site to read the noticeboard for yourself and see the hedgehog motif commemorated in a unique patio design.



We are sure that modern housing will be better for the village than a derelict factory site. The main thing is that the factory and the people who worked there are remembered for their significant part in the history of Bridgtown. As a History Society we are pleased to have played an important part in ensuring that this happens. The noticeboard will be part of a series of boards that will be appearing in the area. When they are all complete they will form a Heritage Trail which future generations can follow. Bridgtown's growth and development will never be forgotten.

## HISTORY SOCIETY NEWS

The society is still working hard to record the history and development of the village we all claim as our spiritual home.

Currently there are two aspects to this side of our activities. Firstly we are determined to write a proper history of Bridgtown so that future residents will know and understand our proud heritage. All of “the team” are working on this long-term project. The book, when it is written will catalogue the growth and development of our village and include many stories from days gone by. It will probably take about two years before this enormous task is completed. We are hoping to produce a proper hard-back book. This will be a financially demanding task as the book will be very expensive to produce and we do not see its production as a commercial activity but as an historical necessity. I am delighted to inform you that we now have high hopes of obtaining the funding necessary for this substantial task.

The other aspect of our plans concerns the making of a heritage trail around our district so that locals and visitors alike are reminded of our proud heritage. Latest information on these plans appears on page 12.

We are still very disappointed with the response to our request for **World War 1** memorabilia for a display we are planning to mount at some relevant point before 2018. We are sure that there are things hidden away that people have forgotten about. Please search your homes to see if you have anything that you can lend to us to commemorate the Great War. So far we have collected information but **no pictures at all**. Can you help?

Finally, don't forget our annual Open Day on Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> October. This year's exhibition will contain a few surprises to make it different from those of previous years.

## Heritage Trail – Update

*We are creating a series of matching noticeboards around Bridgtown and District. They will mark the major historic sites and will be followed eventually by a series of wall plaques so that Bridgtown has its own Heritage Trail.*

**The Notice Board (Union Street):** This board is located in a central position on the corner of Union St and North St and ensures the local community are up to date with village news & events. The small garden in which it is situated has been upgraded by the Parish Council, and renamed as “The Leighton Garden” (a tribute to the contribution Dora and Jim made to the village over many years).

**Churchbridge:** The Information Board at the Cannock Gateway Shopping Centre, outside Costa Coffee, has attracted a number of very favourable comments. It describes fully the Canal (with the thirteen locks) and the history of Gilpin’s as a world-famous edge tool company.

**Cornelius Whitehouse Works:** (See pages 8 and 9). The society has arranged for the erection of a noticeboard on this site. A design for it has been completed and, hopefully, the board will be appearing before the end of the year. The Hedgehog Tools factory was central to the original growth and development of the village.

**North Street:** Funding had now been identified for the erection of a new noticeboard in North Street near to the traffic lights. The board has to be placed near the Watling Street end as all other possible sites would be a traffic hazard. We have yet to receive planning permission for this sign but are hopeful that there will be no problem. Initial thoughts are that one side of the board will represent relevant industrial history and the reverse side will be dedicated to the shops. *(The society is now considering the viability of also having a sign at the other end of North Street too.)*

**Other Sites:** A number of other sites are also under consideration. We will keep you informed and would welcome your suggestions.

## THE BRAG STORY

The story begins in 1962 when Cannock Urban District Council put forward a planning strategy that the Bridgtown area would in future years be “primarily for industrial use”. Residents took not much notice of that. Why should they? Bridgtown existed because of industry. They had lived with it all their lives. Ask anyone who lived in Bridgtown in those days. They would remember for example the clunk, clunk, clunk sounds coming from Wynn’s Foundry. They remember the awful smogs that blighted our lives in those days. Industry was noisy, dirty and smelly.

Time passed and people got on with their lives and, as time went by, industry began to change too. Lots of smaller firms and industrial units appeared and the big smelly factories disappeared. But in 1976 came the bombshell! There had been little further consultation with residents since that Council decision 14 years earlier but the local council now decided to act on it and had made more detailed plans. The plan was to demolish all of the houses in Bridgtown over a 15 year period, running down the Primary School and just keeping some of the local shops in order to service the workforce of the new industries.

The first most people knew about these plans was when a notice came through their letterboxes. Local resident Jim Leighton had found out about the plans by accident. Jim sent out the notices and invited everyone to a meeting at the War Memorial Club in Union St. The room was packed and the words used by angry locals to describe the plan were rather more basic than those used by the council officers.

The result of the meeting was that an organisation was formed called BRAG, the Bridgtown Residents Action Group. The depth of feeling was shared by everyone from the Bridgtown area, from professional people and local business people to the humblest workman. Another meeting was called at Bridgtown Social Club which had a larger room but yet again the room was packed with residents! It was at this point that the true spirit of Bridgtown people came to the fore. The council were saying that most of the property in Bridgtown was too old to modernise but the locals were having none of it.

Everyone was determined to show the council that it was not houses that they planned to destroy but a real living vibrant community. The overwhelming

feeling was that the only way to stop council plans was by everyone standing together in order to make their community even stronger. Every opportunity was be taken to act as a community and to raise funds for the cause.

- The first real opportunity to make a stand came with the celebrations for the Queen's Silver Jubilee in June 1977. A massive Village Party was arranged and a Fancy Dress Parade was held. In the parade one of the floats showed semi-detached houses, one half falling into disrepair while one half was looked after and modernised. The message was obvious.
- Loads of other events were held, bringing the community together and raising a "fighting fund" to keep BRAG going.
- All the time letters were being sent to Cannock Council, to the county council, to parliament, to anyone who might have some influence. A letter was even sent to the Duke of Edinburgh following comments he had made about living communities. BRAG members appeared on TV, etc., etc. A large grant was obtained from the Joseph Rowntree Communities Trust to support the cause. However, Bridgtown residents were so determined and proactive in their efforts that the grant was hardly used. Years later the grant was returned to the Trust as Bridgtown had only ever used the interest gained on it.
- One remarkable story is a very unique one. Through a work contact one of the committee arranged a delivery of wood from broken packing cases from a Black Country firm. Volunteers collected up the wood and made it up into little bundles to give to elderly residents for firewood as most houses still burned coal in those days. This so demonstrated the community spirit of "looking after our own" that it became a weekly event. The old folk became so grateful that they began to give donations to help BRAG along. More importantly, it made the community spirit stronger and stronger.

Through a contact a group of radical students came along to support the cause. They caused a lot of publicity and painted murals with wording such as "You are entering Free Bridgtown". But Bridgtown people were not happy with such an approach. They wanted to fight their cause in their own way.

## The story continues

The fight went on and on but Cannock planners showed no signs of changing their plans. Residents opposed every planning application for more industry but people were also becoming scared as their homes were devalued so much. It became impossible for anyone to get a mortgage in Bridgtown because of the Council plans. People were frightened of losing everything and some tried to sell their houses but they couldn't. Houses changed hands for £200 or £300, this at a time when house prices across the country were rocketing! One house was even sold for £95. But the fight went on! The people of Bridgtown would not give in.

After 5 or more years of fighting their cause signs begin to emerge that the strength of their cause was being recognised and eventually in the early 1980s the council agreed to a status quo. No more houses would be demolished and a plan was formed so that there would be designated "housing areas" and designated "industrial areas" but these would take many years to adjust. But residents had come too far now to stop at this point. BRAG continued to fight for its community and eventually the opportunity arose to form a Parish Council. These plans were accepted and, in May 1988, elections for a Parish Council took place and BRAG as an organisation was wound up. It had served its purpose and marked its place in history. The battle had been won after a fight lasting twelve long years!

- From then on the story is a positive one. A small community centre was opened in North St and Jim Leighton performed the opening ceremony.
- Eventually a service to commemorate the inauguration of the Parish Council took place in Bethel Church.

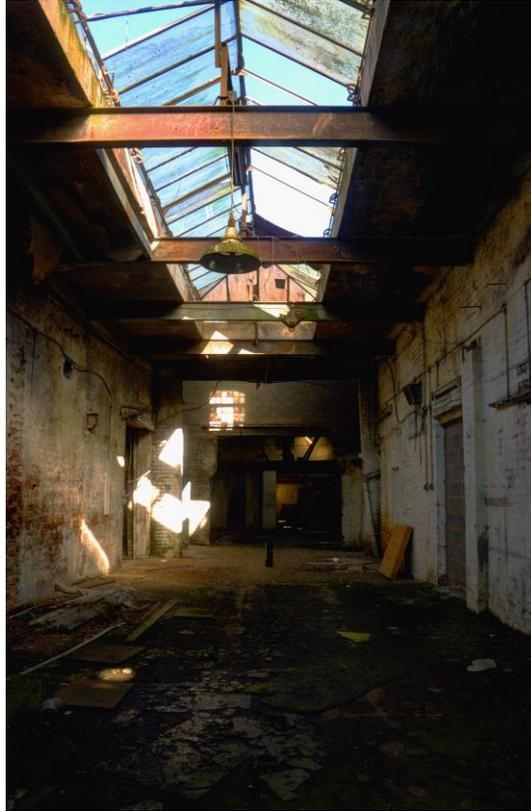
The regeneration of the village has continued. One new housing estate appeared in the 1990s with many smaller developments for apartments, etc., following from time to time. Further housing continues to appear at regular intervals and all changes are positive ones. **But without BRAG Bridgtown would be no more!**

## I'M OLD

I can't do it any more  
And I'm feeling very sore,  
Because I can't do what I want to do!  
I need gadgets everywhere  
To do housework and to care  
Because I can't do what I want to do!  
The electric opener opens tins,  
The electric knife cuts up all things  
Because I can't do what I want to do!  
The rubber gripper opens jars,  
And I drive automatic cars  
Because I can't do what I want to do!  
The chiropodist comes to me,  
I can't cut my nails you see  
Because I can't do what I want to do!  
I can't open up the wine,  
Or lift a heavy pot to dine,  
Walk all day and feel fine,  
Or hang the washing on the line  
Because I can't do what I want to do!  
I need glasses all the time  
Then I can see just fine;  
Without them life is blurred.  
Four pairs I have now, how absurd.  
Because I can't do what I want to do!!!!

*S.J.Jackson*

This will be the last photograph printed showing the last sad days of the old Hedgehog Tools Factory. Soon there will be a bright new housing estate on the site as the regeneration of Bridgtown continues apace.



Thank you Cornelius Whitehouse, one of the founders of Bridgtown, for everything you did for our village.