



THE BRIDGTONIAN



WINTER 2015/16

Editorial

Firstly, as your editor, I must begin by making an apology. This Winter Edition of your magazine normally appears before Christmas but has been delayed this year by my commitments in other areas. Consequently this is the second Editorial that I have written. The first was written with Christmas in mind and therefore is no longer relevant.

Our Annual Event at the Social Club in October was another big success. Most people seemed to like the new layout of the displays and, yet again, there were a good number of people in attendance. There is always room for improvement though and we have noted a few ways in which we think we can improve things for next October.

In November Paul Bedford came to talk to us about the local war memorials and his new book which enlarges on the lives of those men who made the ultimate sacrifice.

Our Christmas celebrations were led by the talented local choir Bel Canto. Numbers present this year were well down on previous years but a good morning was enjoyed by everyone.

In January we shall be enjoying a talk by Rev Peter Hart about how he came to make the change from professional footballer to vicar. I do not think there can be many similar stories. In February we have two of our own members reminding us about times gone by in New Street and Longford Road. We look forward to hearing Bob Meek and Peter Bates.

The next edition of your magazine will appear as usual in March.

David Williams

10th January 2016

LIFE IN 1930s BRIDGTOWN

*In our last edition we published the second 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 third extract from those memories.*

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Free time

Father had a six-day working week and two weeks holiday in each year, a very normal state of affairs in those days. It now surprises me just how much he used to achieve in his spare time. Apart from his carpentry, he also worked an allotment behind the bungalows on the Watling Street. When he went there I had a free ride by sitting in the wooden wheelbarrow, which he had also made himself. Here, alongside other villagers, he grew as many vegetables as he could; enough potatoes to feed us for the year; they were hoed up, dug up, and some reburied in a mound. This seemed to have the effect of preserving them for winter use, though how this worked I have no idea.

In season, an evening's work ended with wheeling a barrow full of fresh vegetables home and into the cellar until they were required, no such thing as refrigerators in those days. On dark winter nights father worked either in his shed or with fretwork patterns, cutting shapes out of plywood for various practical and decorative purposes.

On his free day, Sunday, he was fully occupied with Bethel Church, both with the Sunday School as well as with both morning and evening services. He worked morning, afternoon and evening as he was school secretary, a steward and a trustee. When a communion service was to be held father prepared the bread and wine while I watched. Non-alcoholic fruit juice was poured into the decanter and Taylor's bread was sliced into neat cubes. Rows of tiny glasses were checked for their cleanliness before being re-placed into their special wooden carrying box.

One of my early memories is of walking up the street with father to join a small crowd who were witnessing the Union Jack being lowered to half-mast. King George V had died. It was 1936. The Prince of Wales succeeded him as Edward VIII, but remained the uncrowned king as the abdication crisis intervened. Postage stamps depicting the crown set to one side of his portrait, as well as souvenirs produced in anticipation of his coronation, were suddenly useless. His brother, the Duke of York, took his place and was crowned in his stead as George VI.

Street Life

The street was the place where things happened. This is where we played, met our friends, made our plans and kept out of our parents' way, while they got on with the daily business of keeping the home running.

One nearby family made an impression on me. The mother was always busy but never too busy to talk to me; there were seven children in the family from a grown-up daughter down to a small baby. I was friends with a boy who was somewhere in the middle of the family. They had insufficient chairs for the family to sit down to a meal together. When father came home from work he sat down to eat his meal but five of the children just stood around the table to eat their meals. Devoid of tact, I just stood around and watched while I waited for my friend to finish. How much better off we were at my home where we could all sit down for our meals together. My friend's family were truly "hard-up", a real-life example for me of what poverty was like.

It was in the street where we met the outside world. The dustbin lorry came round once a week to empty our bins of the ashes raked out from our coal fire. Other kinds of rubbish were rare as most other things could be burned in our own fire grate or fed to the hens. The men lifted the dustbins on to their backs and tossed the contents through one of the sliding hatches at the side of their lorry. Clouds of grey dust surrounded their work.

More to come next edition. Ed.

CHRISTMAS AT BETHEL



Saturday 5th December 2015



A Brief History of Bridgtown

The mill in Walk Mill Lane is supposed to date back to the early sixteenth century, being quite close to the old Roman Road, Watling Street. There was also a toll-keeper's cottage on the Walsall Road but not much more.

In 1859 there was Long House Farm on the Watling Street and 6 houses on the Walsall Road. Soon after that the land was developed by the Wolverhampton Building Society after the opening of the local collieries. Streets were laid out and houses were built. The Bridgtown Estate belonged to the then Lord Hatherton. Its boundaries were Watling Street, Bridge Street, Walsall Road and North Street. The land on the other side of North Street was known as the Bridgtown West Estate and belonged to a Mr. Cotterell. The name Bridgtown was almost certainly devised because of the high numbers of bridges and, indeed, it seemed to be impossible to enter Bridgtown without crossing either over or under a bridge!

The Walsall to Hednesford railway line had been constructed between 1856 and 1858, causing the level of the Walsall Road to be lowered considerably near to the junction with Bridge Street. Soon afterwards came the development of the canal system and the construction of the 13 locks between Churchbridge and Leacroft. Bridgtown had superb communication links, by road, by railway and by canal. By the time 1870 came the village was growing rapidly and was considered to be a fine example of modern planning. By 1880 people were talking about Bridgtown becoming bigger than neighbouring Cannock and residents were demanding their own railway station.

As well as the collieries came the pioneering work of men like William Gilpin and Cornelius Whitehouse, developing industries that made use of local coal supplies. So it was that Bridgtown was a thriving energetic community all through the first half of the twentieth century. Then it was that the nature of industry began to change and planners wanted to separate housing from industry. The days of Bridgtown seemed to be numbered and the village came near to extinction in the early 1980s. But planners did not reckon on the spirit and will of the Bridgtown people. The village lives on and now regeneration continues apace!

John Wood Warehouse

Phil Jones lives in Wolverhampton but attends our annual event each year. Following our 2015 event he has written to us with his reminiscences of the short period when he worked at the wholesale provisions warehouse of John Wood in North Street. For Phil it was his first “gainful employment” after leaving school before continuing his education elsewhere. He says that the 7.45am start was a “bit of a shock” but the 4 pound notes in his first pay packet made it all worthwhile.

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On arrival, I was sent to see Mr. Maddox in the office, for payroll details. Then I had to report to Les Teece who was the “gaffer”. His wife Nancy was also able to help me out, rather than struggle unaided in the first few days.

We were distantly related to the Woods, via the “Rowley” family tree. John’s father Oliver Wood JP was the owner and he lived in the adjacent Brookfield House. It would appear that the Maddox brothers were responsible for the day-to-day running of the company.

The main tasks involved loading up boxes for the “shop orders”. I became very familiar with the now-obsolete brands such as Oxydol, Rinso and Camp Coffee. My height was useful in reaching the higher shelves as there was not much regard to “health & safety” in those days. Sadly, I never had the opportunity to go out on the delivery vans.

There was a small fleet of vehicles, large and smaller vans, which were in a pale yellow livery. The vans were lettered in black, shaded in gold. Another feature was the letters B I G, which matched a sign in the shops and stood for Brookfield Incentive Group. This was a quantity discount scheme, which helped the smaller shops to maintain a reasonable profit. The drivers of the larger vans had a “mate” to do the unloading. The only I can recall was a famous local boxer by the name of Billy Williams.

Mr. Hackett, who I met at the recent Bridgtown annual event was the driver/salesman who had Billy as his assistant, and was able to confirm the success of this local boxer in the midlands and further afield.

The fleet of vehicles, as remembered by Mr. Hackett, consisted of two flatbed lorries for fruit & veg, a minivan, two vans of approximately half a ton each, and a number of larger vans of three tons capacity.

The main customer for woods was Marriotts, which was located between Foster's Corner and Withingtons in High Green, Cannock. The customer base was mainly a large number of village and corner shops over Cannock Chase, in an area bounded by Stafford, Lichfield and Walsall, though there may have been others further afield. The TV show "Open all Hours" typified many such retail outlets. Some clients collected their own orders from the "Cash and Carry" section. One such was Mr. Gorman who ran a knitwear company in Hednesford.

To the left of the yard were some older buildings, probably agricultural in origin. The processing of "cooked meats" took place in a converted loft, and the pungent "fatty" smells were a constant reminder.

I left in October 1963 with a pay packet which included a £5 note, and some memories of a fascinating local enterprise.

Phil Jones



Another photo of Christmas at Bethel

HISTORY SOCIETY NEWS

The social aspect of our society is great. There are many opportunities for former residents of Bridgtown to meet up and remember times gone by. These things often happen at our annual event in October and at our regular monthly meetings and coffee days. However there is also a serious side to what we do. We are determined 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. It will be an expensive process too, so we are working on trying to get a lottery grant to enable it to happen.

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. Many of you will already have seen our first large display board outside Costa Coffee at Churchbridge. We envisage about ten such signs around Bridgtown and district, but again this is an expensive process with each sign costing nearly £2000. The order in which these signs appear will depend on who we can get to fund them. At present our plans centre on North Street near to the traffic lights, on the old Cornelius Whitehouse site in East Street/Walsall Road and on Longford House. In addition we are looking at the placing of commemorative plaques on the homes where our more famous former residents lived.

We are still asking for **World War 1** memorabilia for a display we are planning to mount at some relevant point in time. 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?

Christmas Carol Quiz

Many thanks to all those who were prepared to make their brains work overtime doing the carols quiz. I had 7 completed ones returned to me but only one was totally correct, from Rosalind Williams. Congratulations.

Two of the carols defeated many people. No 13. "Yes Lord" which was from the carol "Mary Had a Baby" which is sung more by choirs than congregations.

The other was 37. "How Bleak was the wind on the Hill". This was from "How Dark was the Night of His Coming". This carol is based on an old text written originally in Welsh, but put into the words of the carol by Frederick Pratt Green who was a Methodist Minister. It is often sung also to a Welsh Tune.

I wonder what I can find for you next!!

Sheila

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THANKS

Sheila also wants to thank all those people who have donated raffle prizes and tombola prizes over the past twelve months. She also sends thanks to those who have regularly purchased raffle tickets. Raffles and tombolas have been a good source of raising money for the society. The team recently expressed their grateful thanks to Sheila for all her hard work in organising these activities.

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EATING IN THE UK IN THE FIFTIES

- None of us had ever heard of yoghurt.
- Jelly and blancmange was only eaten at parties.
- If we said that we were on a diet, we simply got less.
- Healthy food consisted of anything edible.

Fred Thurstance has provided us with this press cutting from some time in the 1940s:

Cannock Pin-up Girl



FOR the third time in her short life, eighteen-year-old Mrs. Alice Elizabeth (Betty) Dawson, only daughter of Mr. and Mrs. W. Thurstance, 10 Railway-street, Cannock, has won a beauty contest.

On Wednesday of last week, at a dance in the Public Rooms, Cannock, she was chosen pin-up girl for Cannock. In last year's Merchant Navy beauty queen contest she was "Miss G.E.C." and at the last Cannock Flower Show, when she was one year and nine months old, she gained top marks in a baby competition.

Mr. Dawson, who was eighteen on Tuesday, was married about a month ago to A.B. Raymond Dawson, who was on embarkation leave last weekend.

The judges who selected her as pin-up girl were Mr. and Mrs. Oliver Wood, and the M.C.s were Miss Dora Richards and Mr. Jim Leighton. Music for dancing was supplied by Frank McCannell's band. The prize was a permanent wave given by the Elite hairdressing saloon, Queen's Square, Cannock, and the proceeds were for the servicemen in Prestwood sanatorium. Including donations, the sum realised was £58, and each patient is to receive a parcel of comforts.

All services were rendered free of charge, and dances by pupils of Miss Richards, who with Mrs. Cooke organised the dance were greatly appreciated.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

Life in the good old days
Was better than you think,
Even though we always washed
Our undies in the sink.
We piled the coal upon the fire,
To keep us warm each day,
And to heat up all the water
For our baths after our play.
Entertainment was all different,
As our sheltered lives we led:
A sing song round the piano,
Before we went to bed.
Toys were few and far between,
Except those Granddad made;
A wooden desk to keep my books
And a cot he painted jade.
We walked the mile long lane to school,
And of course we walked it back.
In classes of forty or fifty
We were kept right on track.
Porridge was eaten to keep us warm
For that long trek each day;
School meals had lumpy gravy
We had to eat to keep hunger at bay.
But parties we had at Christmas,
And celebrations for birthdays too,
No shopping at Sainsbury's for quiches,
Just home-made cakes and jellies would do.
Now I'm so much older
I look back nostalgically
At the life we led when younger,
Do I see it realistically?

S. J. Jackson

Burgess Brothers: Cash Bags

This firm was started in about 1938 by Mr Charles Burgess. He himself had started work at 14 years of age, working at Bumstead and Chandler in Hednesford, where he trained as an engineer in the making of paper bag making machines. From here he went to work in Birmingham. It was at this time that he decided to set up his own bag making company.

Up to this time bank cash bags had been made by hand, but he modified and fine-tuned a machine so that it would make bags of the quality required by the banks. In 1938 the family moved to the old Social Club premises at the top of Park Street. As an interim measure Mr. Burgess had set up two machines in the barn at the bottom of his father's garden in Wolverhampton Road, Cannock. This building is still standing.

At the start Mr. Burgess's two brothers were also in the company, hence the name. After a short time though, they withdrew as they did not think there was a future for the business. How wrong they were!

The company went from strength to strength, also making the paper bands that were used around the bundles of banknotes. After the first few years Mr. Burgess needed to increase production but the Bumstead machines were not able to meet this demand, so he built new machines of his own. These new machines were built to his own specifications and his own design, and they could more than meet the new demands.

At the time of decimalisation there was a need for bags to cover both forms of coinage. At this point the factory could not cope with the extra demand, so more premises were needed. The company owned an office furniture company on the corner of East Street and Park Street, so these premises were also turned over to bag manufacturing.

When the family finally retired the business was sold to a larger company.

Larry Turner

Larry Turner worked at Machin's shoe shop at weekends as a 12 year old. Later, after leaving school, he was employed there for 12 months. At Edgar Machin's he worked on mending shoes. He had to remove the old nailed soles, wetting them first to stop the dust flying. He took off the heels and put the shoe on the last for Edgar to carry out the actual repair. Leather soles were always fitted, nailed and riveted on the old shoe. Eventually Larry was allowed to rivet the shoes himself but there were many different sizes of rivet. Finally he would nail the prepared shoe. When he reached the age of 16 he moved to work at Hawkins' Pit and stayed there for 5 years.

Here are some of Larry's memories:

School: There was a change in leaving dates and the school was not prepared for it, so Larry spent the last 12 months of his school life in the hall doing things for the magazine and lino cutting. He remembers being caned by Mr. Croft, the headmaster.

Play: The rec' and "the bradge" was where they played. The bradge is where the Ramada now stands. He remembers that the Hodgkins lived in the last house before the Anglesey Arms pub.

The war: He helped to build an air-raid shelter in the back garden at Broad Street. It was covered in earth clods and was for two families – the Barratts and the Turners. He remembers going into the shelter when Middle Hill was bombed.

Fuel: He had to bring the coal from the front round to the back of the house.

Pigs: Nearly everybody had a pig. Pigs were killed at home, usually by Bill Lockley. He remembers one pig that got up again and ran around until finally dying.

Goats: They bought a goat from the auction at Penkridge or Rugeley with help from Bill Lockley. This was eventually slaughtered and eaten by the family.

Our front cover shows Jeanette Cartwright enjoying a good read of our latest book "Bridgtown Bits and Bobs". Copies of this book are still available. Do you know anyone who would like one?

The society has now published a total of six books altogether. Have you seen all of them? Copies of all are now available again.