



PROBUS RECORDER



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE PROBUS CLUB OF GILLINGHAM, DORSET
(www.probus-gillingham-dorset.org.uk)

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Editor's Introduction

We enter 2024 without great ceremony, all the while thinking of and remaining totally supportive of our Chairman as his life undergoes huge change. He plans to return in the near future, but for the time-being the Club's reigns are held by his Deputy, Andrew Tinsley. This edition of the Recorder is slightly shorter than normal but reflects our rather truncated December programme. I hope you find something in it to interest you!

WELFARE & SOCIAL

Welfare – John Owen

Two very sad deaths to announce this month: **Enid Chamberlain** died on Friday 8th December, and **Tom Brain** died the following day. Tom's funeral is to be held at Yeovil Crematorium on Tuesday 16th January, while Enid's funeral is on Monday 8th January at St Mary's Church, Gillingham. Both funerals have been arranged for 12 noon.

Better news is that Jeffrey Hall has completed his treatment and has been given the 'all-clear'. However, he remains under the oversight of the Urology Department for the next 5 years. He still feels some discomfort, but he is working hard to improve his stamina.

All of our recent cataract-operated members seem to have come away unscathed, but yours truly has spent the whole Christmas period with conjunctivitis looking like a red eyed monster. One recommendation from me is to make sure you know where and when emergency pharmacies

operate over national holidays!!

Better luck for all next year – and now for something completely different.

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS GONE MAD

It snowed last night and at **8am** I made a snowman.



8.10am - A feminist walked by and asked why I hadn't made a 'snow woman'!

8.15am - I made a snow woman but my feminist neighbour complained about her voluptuous bosom saying that it objectified snow women everywhere!



8.20am - The gay couple next door threw a hissy fit saying that it should have been two snowmen instead!

8.25am - The vegans down the road complained about the carrot nose saying that veggies are food and not for decoration!

8.28am - I was called a racist because the snowman was white!

8.31am - The Taliban across the road insisted that the snow woman be covered up!

8.40am - The police turned up saying that someone had been offended!

8.42am - My feminist neighbour came back complaining about the broomstick depicting women as domestic slaves!

8.45am - The council equality officer turned up threatening me with eviction!

8.50am - The BBC turned up and I ended up being described as a suspected terrorist, racist, homophobic sensibility offender and trouble maker during difficult weather!

9.00am - My children were taken into care by social services as accomplices to my crimes!

9.10am - Far-right protesters marched down the street demanding my arrest and deportation to RWANDA!

MORAL – WE'RE SURROUNDED BY SNOWFLAKES EVERYWHERE!!!

Social - January Club Events - Editor

9 th January 2024	Member's Talk <i>Alastair Olver</i>
23 rd January 2024	From Trees to Pulp, Paper and Biomass <i>Oliver Lansdell</i>
	Lunch <i>The Crown Inn, East Stour</i> <i>(1230 for 1pm)</i>



REPORT ON OUR DECEMBER TALK

The Malta Convoy

Captain David Parsons – 12th December 2023

Former Merchant Navy Captain David Parsons told us last January about the role and importance of the British Merchant Navy in the 2nd World War. This latest talk carries on this theme, explaining the exceptional efforts to send relief convoys carrying vital supplies to the islands of Malta (‘the George Cross Island’) during that conflict.

Malta, which until independence in the 1960s was part of the British Empire, due to its strategic position in the Mediterranean Sea between Italy and Libya, was an important strategic base used by the British to attack the Axis powers during the North African campaign. From 1940 to 1942 the enemy carried on the siege of Malta with air and naval forces, battering the island with daily heavy bombing. This was the latest in Malta’s long turbulent history. In 1798, the French under Napoleon had ousted the Knights Templar; shortly after this and a British naval victory, the islanders opted for British protection, becoming a British colony in 1813. Now a republic, it gained independence from Britain in 1964.



Due to its deepwater harbour and anchorages, Malta was of vital strategic importance to the British; the Mediterranean was a gateway via the Suez Canal and Red Sea to East Africa, and on to India, Singapore, Malaya and Australia, and also the oilfields of the Middle East. It was recognised that it was essential that Malta should be defended and held on to at all costs.

Italy had declared war on Britain in 1942, and for almost three years Malta's capital Valetta

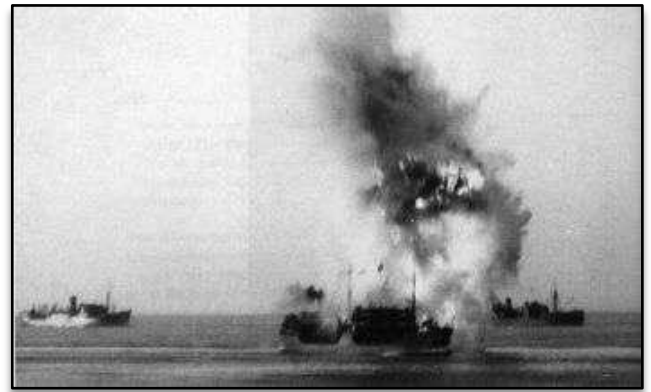
and its surrounding airfields were heavily bombed by the Axis powers, destroying most of the infrastructure; civilians had either evacuated or lived in caves.

A number of attempts were made between 1940 and 1942 to get supply ships - either in convoy or singularly - through to Malta; these suffered heavy losses. Elsewhere there were other disastrous losses at sea, including the PQ17 arctic convoys to Russia, which had resulted in the loss of American ships soon after she entered the war. Churchill realised that a major effort was required, and determined that a large, escorted convoy should be assembled to sail for the relief of Malta (*Operation Pedestal*).

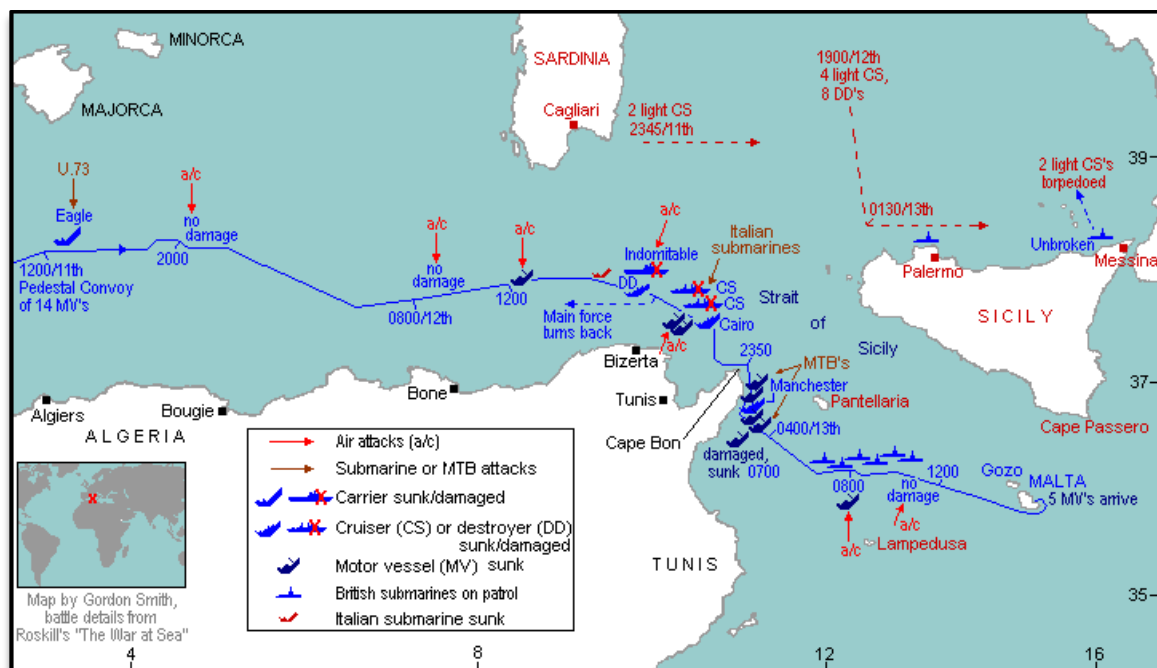


The prerequisite for all merchant ships was that they were to be able to maintain a fast speed of 16 knots. Ships selected included fast cargo liners, which were all placed under admiralty charter. These included ships from the lines of various companies. Each cargo ship had to carry food, general supplies, ammunition, and kerosene on deck. Also included in the convoy was the new American tanker Ohio, placed under a crew of British seaman, under the command of Captain Dudley Mason.

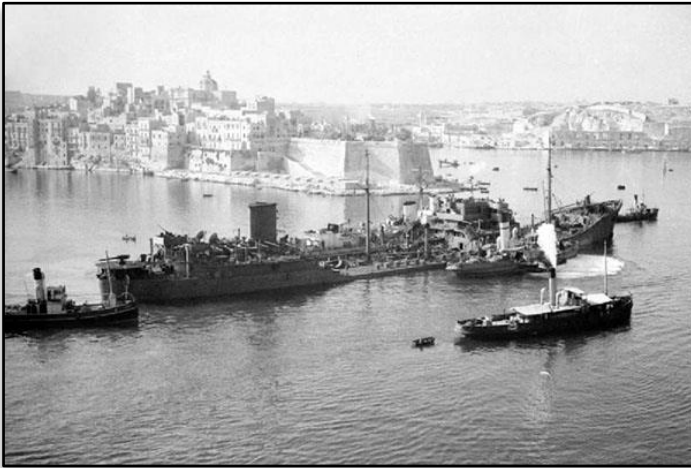
A large naval escort of ships included battleships, aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers, corvettes and supply ships. The convoy departed from the Clyde on 2nd August 1942. After reaching the straits of Gibraltar, the convoy was inevitably spotted by Spanish fishing boats. The Axis forces thus got wind of this, and the convoy rapidly came under sustained attack from then on. The carrier HMS Eagle was sunk by a U boat. There were waves of attacks by Italian bombers, fighters and submarines, causing significant damage. One vessel, HMS Cairo, was so badly damaged by torpedoes that she was scuttled. The tanker Ohio was damaged but continued on towards Malta. The British merchant ships *Glenarchy* and *Almeira Lykes* were sunk by Italian MTBs off Cape Bon, and *HMS Manchester* had to be scuttled after sustaining irreparable damage. This was followed by the sinking of the liner *Waimarama* and the American merchant ship *Santa Elisa*. The liner *Rochester Castle* was damaged too but carried on.



During the morning of 13th August, Spitfires and Beaufighters flying from Malta were at last able to provide air cover for the convoy (37 Spitfires had been flown off *HMS Furious* reaching Malta on the 11th). The liner *Dorset* was finally sunk after bomb damage. By that date only 5 merchant ships remained. An Italian surface fleet had sailed to intercept and finish off the convoy, but fortunately it returned to base without making contact as a result of false signals from the British.



The first remnants of the convoy – *Melbourne Star*, *Port Chalmers* and *Rochester Castle* – arrived in Malta later that day; followed the next day by *Brisbane Star*. After sustaining further damage, the *Ohio* finally arrived in the Grand harbour at Valetta on 15th August.



These heroic actions had finally led to the relief of Malta. There was a heavy loss of life, both in the Merchant fleet and from the RN, and many decorations were subsequently awarded.

Following questions, our Deputy Chairman Andrew Tinsley gave the vote of thanks.

Alan Jeffs



DECEMBER VISIT

Boscombe Down Aviation Collection (BDAC)

6th December 2023

In the words of its organiser, a 'Cheeky pre-Christmas visit' was made to Old Sarum airfield at the beginning of December.

With cold weather and being close to Christmas only 2 of us made this visit; both Peter Lidbetter and I had a great day out and commented many times just how fascinating the collection is and how many members would surely relish the opportunity to come along if another outing is arranged during warmer months.

First things first, all of us who have spent any time in aircraft hangers will remember the smell and cold. The hanger might be out of the wind and rain, but the cold never goes away! BDAC Old Sarum was no different.

We were treated to the concession entry price of £8 – rounded up to £9 as we both went for the gift-aid option. We pretty well had the collection to ourselves, with a host of volunteers all too willing to show us about and share amazing stories.



This might well be an option for grandchildren with an aircraft and/or military interest as a day out – only 30-35mins away from Gillingham and great value. It is also one of the few aircraft collections where visitors can get into the cockpit of a wide variety of fighter jets spanning many decades. My own learning point was that however much I might have yearned to be a 'top gun', my legs are too long, and I would therefore risk losing my kneecaps should I have to eject. We did though meet the ex-Chief Test Pilot at the facility, who had two emergency ejections to his name and had lost 2cms in height as a result! Someone remind me – is there not a rather

exclusive ‘club’ for those who have ejected from an aircraft?¹ Also, ever wondered why Tom Cruise is so short – perhaps all those stunts when he made film ‘Top Gun’!?

In addition to the main collection there is a newly opened WW1 RFC exhibition that covers the early days from the Royal Engineers company that was experimenting with flying kites through the formation of the Royal Flying Corps based at Larkhill, through to the many fighter aces (5 confirmed kills) of that dreadful conflict.



On a personal note, I was able to sit in a *Scout* helicopter again – this time ‘flown’ by Peter in a more sedate way than my last time - which entailed me sitting facing outwards on the rear bench seat, rear doors off - feet on the skid, gun also facing outwards, skimming over ‘bandit territory’; it brought home just how basic these work-horse helicopters were - and still are². Oddly, the pilot of my aircraft also had the same happy look as Peter – must be the fun of thinking, next time I bank hard, we’ll see if the passengers did remember to ‘buckle-up’!

The Boscombe Down collection houses some of the most famous British post-war fighter aircraft, e.g. *Tornado*, *Jaguar*, *Harrier* and of course the English Electric *Lightning* – prototype and production version.



And here are a few cockpit photos....I have left out the pictures that show me in the most pained and ungainly way folding my less supple frame in and out of these confined spaces and I mentioned at the beginning, the smell ... remember that of oil and aviation fuel permeating every pore?

¹ [‘The Caterpillar Club’](#): an informal association of people who have successfully used a parachute to bail out of a disabled aircraft. - Ed

² Although none are operational in military roles, there are still Scouts in the air; mainly in the UK; as of 2014 there were 10 Scouts remaining on the UK civil register. The current number is unknown.



In amongst everything else, we had the privilege of being shown around the inside of the *Lancaster* bomber cockpit. It was sobering to remember that of the RAF aircrew of some 110,000 – 55,000 lost their lives in defence of our nation and helped to provide the freedoms all generations enjoy today. (Note just one pilot seat in the *Lancaster*.)



Recollecting the talk we had many months ago about Bomber Command – here on the right is the workspace of the *Lancaster* aircrew navigator – using dead reckoning to guide the aircraft to its target, and then home again. And, although there is no photo of it here, remember there was also an astro-navigation dome on these aircraft where the navigator



would take readings from the stars to correct the course and location calculations. Those crews, often little more than teenagers, were more than remarkable.

Oh - and while I am droning on about the place there is also a small collection of drones that you can get right up to and see these how these aircraft are made and propelled.

Finally, here is the *Comet* cockpit that Peter and I were able to sit in to ‘take-off and land’ - without ever needing to worry about the little red handled lever to the right of the left-hand seat (experienced aviators will quickly spot it), which we later learnt was for the undercarriage. The thoughts at the time were ‘Stick with Ryan Air’ – it might be cheap and irritating but at the least the pilots know how to operate their aircraft! Our ‘crash course in piloting’ was conducted by one the volunteers, an ex-commercial pilot who flew Boeing 747s for 25 years. He gave us a book recommendation that is worth reading – ‘*Highest Duty: My Search for What Really Matters*’ by Capt. Chesley ‘Sully’ Sullenberger³.

All in all it was a great day out, and after 4 hours Peter and I were the last there - and could have taken in more of the exhibition if the cold was not beginning to bite.

Report: Mike Madgwick



³ A retired US fighter pilot, diplomat and airline pilot who is best known for his actions as captain of the US Airways Flight that he ditched in the Hudson River in 2009 after both engines were disabled by a bird strike. All 155 people aboard survived. The book is available on e-Bay 2nd-hand for as little as £3.56 with free P&P.

ENDPIECE - *Editor*

We must thank Peter Marshall, *'late of this Parish'* for the article that follows. He appreciates that it is about Shaftesbury rather than Gillingham but feels that it might be interesting for our readers. It does! – and we thank him for providing it. (It came from Peter's "TV Veterans" magazine.)

FRONT COVER

The Ad That Never Went Stale



Carl Barlow then and now.

The Hovis advertisement known as *The Boy on the Bike* which became one of the most loved commercials in British television history has been revived for its fiftieth anniversary. The ad shows a boy making his way up a steep cobble street on a bicycle loaded with bread and delivering it to a baker's shop, then freewheel his way back down. Bill Maynard played the baker.

In 2019, a new version of the ad was shown on British television. It was digitally remastered and featured a re-recording of the accompanying music - Antonin Dvorak's *New World Symphony* - by a new generation of the Ashington Colliery brass band, and retained the tagline: "It's as good for you as it's always been."

The original was commissioned by Collett Dickenson Pearce from Ridley Scott's recently formed production company RSA Films. Written by the late Geoff Seymour and directed by Scott (DP not identified), it was filmed at Gold Hill in Shaftesbury, Dorset and its blend of setting, voice over, music, choice of performers and mini-epic narrative created an uplifting story



The arduous work involved in making the commercial.

soaked in nostalgia for olden times. Or a thick slice of gross sentimentality.

After the commercial was named "the most iconic UK advert of all time" in 2019 following a survey of over one thousand people, Ridley Scott commented: "I'm thrilled that *The Boy on the Bike* is still regarded as such an iconic and heart-warming story which remains close to the heart of the nation."

After the struggle up, the boy freewheels down.

To promote the latest revival, the man who played that boy – Carl Barlow, then 13 years of age, now 64 – recreated the journey alongside another boy.

It can be found on YouTube.