



PROBUS RECORDER



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

Issue No. 237
October 2024

Chairman's Notes

Time for another Chairman's report!! How quickly the months fly past.

The Past. During September I was unable to attend the meeting on 3rd and John Owen kindly stood in for me - for which many thanks. Later in the month we were treated to a talk by Peter Gill on Musical Satire in the 20th Century, which was most entertaining and brought back many great memories – certainly for me! Following this, a small group of us enjoyed lunch at the Udder farm shop.

The Future.

- The Club meeting on the 29th October is a 'Ladies Invitation', which is to be followed by lunch at the Crown at Marnhull.
- The Club Christmas Lunch is to be held at the Old Brewery on Tuesday 26th November.
- The Chairman's Christmas Dinner is scheduled for Thursday 12th December at the Royal Chase Hotel in Shaftesbury.

Current. The post of Welfare Officer remains unfilled, and I would ask anyone who feels able to come forward in order that we can all be kept abreast of our fellow members' state of health.

Personal. Margaret and I visited Turkey which, as always, was most enjoyable despite some very long days in 30°C temperatures. We spent three days in Istanbul, one day in Tekridag on the north coast of the Sea of Marmara, and four days in Gelibolu on the Gallipoli peninsular. Visiting the battlefields is always a humbling experience. Our main objective this year was to meet up with wonderful Turkish friends who we have come to know over the years, and this was certainly achieved. Later in the month, I attended the Harvest Festival St. George's Chapel, Langham. This little chapel is delightful and is now the only thatched church in Dorset.



The Club's Committee continue to give me much support – for which my grateful thanks.

Andrew

SOCIAL

Social - October Club Events *(Editor)*

1 October 2024 <i>(Men only)</i>	It's Not What You Say <i>Alan Jones</i>
15th October 2024 <i>(Men only)</i>	Atlantis <i>Richard Hutley</i>
29th October 2024 <i>(Wives & Partners)</i>	A Peculiar Victorian Enterprise <i>Brian Margetson</i>
	Lunch – The Crown at Marnhull <i>12:30pm for 1pm</i>



OUR SEPTEMBER TALKS

The Postcard Detective – Posted in the Past

Helen Baggott
3rd September 2024



Helen Baggott is a ‘deltiologist’ - a collector of postcards. She not only collects postcards but investigates all she can find out about the people involved in the correspondence and their contextual social history. She has written and published three books on the theme of “posted in the past”.

Postcards first came into widespread use in the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century and were a hugely popular form of communication from the 1890s to the end of the First World War. They were used extensively to send quick messages, in much in the same way as text messages and social media are used today. They had both a domestic function: a means of communicating with friends and family; and a commercial use. Tradesmen such as builders would use postcards for quotations and advertising.

Part of the popularity of postcards was that they were cheaper to send than letters, a ha’penny, rather than a penny. The postal system was also remarkably quick and efficient. There could be half a dozen postal collections a day and it was not uncommon for messages to be sent and received the same day. The arrival of the



The popularity of the postcard declined from 1918, when the price of stamps was raised to a penny, removing the price differential with letters. However, those that survive provide a rich archive and an insight into the lives of ordinary citizens in the past. To the determined investigator, they represent a snap-shot view of the concerns and pre-occupations of our ancestors and shine a light on economic and political events and changing social mores.

When Helen shared some of this information online, she was contacted by a woman in the USA who happened to be researching her family tree at the time. It turned out this was the granddaughter of Gilbert's brother Charles Freeman, who had emigrated. Further information came from a member of the audience at a talk that Helen gave in Minehead: Gilbert's name and service number are included in a long list of dead guardsmen in the Order of Service for the memorial service at St Paul's Cathedral in 1919.

A postcard sent to California opens up a family history of social deprivation and emigration. New data sources appear. For instance, postcards sent to children in hospital reveal a wealth of information through the Historic Hospital Admissions Registers Project (hharp.org). For example, the Great Ormond Street Hospital has a continuous record of admissions that goes back to 1852.



in Cleethorpes. His daughter became a teacher.

Researching postcards throws up a plethora of random information about how people lived and thought in the past. Research into the lives of strangers, with whom one has no connection, can seem intrusive. Helen acknowledges that there are sensitivities about digging up other people's family histories. The historical records do not give a complete picture and there is a danger of misinterpretation. She is, however, clearly hooked on the process. Her keen interest is certainly infectious and the basis of an interesting talk.

The Acting Chairman thanked Helen for a fascinating and entertaining talk. After inviting and chairing questions, he closed the meeting.

Steve Baines

Musical Satire of the Twentieth Century

Peter Gill

17th September 2024



[Peter Gill](#) is a musician, entertainer and historian of popular culture. His talk on comic songs of the last century was expertly illustrated by performances in which he accompanied his renditions on an electronic keyboard.

Peter started his whistle-stop tour of comedy songs of the Twentieth Century with examples of songs that were popular during the First World War. These helped to keep up the morale of combatants and the rest of the population on the Home Front. Many of the well-known songs of the time were irreverently adapted by the troops to reflect their gallows humour and their salacious concerns. Thus, *It's a Long Way To Tipperary*



became the *It's the Wrong Way to Tickle Mary* - and *Mademoiselle from Armentieres* gained countless variations and additional verses with explicit sexual and scatological themes. The soldiers' black humour and bawdiness was an escape from the awfulness of their situation.

Songs with topical and risqué references were a staple of the Music Hall and the tradition of bawdy songs goes back centuries. In the UK, during the 1920s and 1930s the comic song gained some respectability and middle-class appeal through the plays and performances of **Noel Coward**, whose clever words and ever-so precise diction poked gentle fun at the pretensions and social mores of the time. *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*, written on a train in the Far East was a product of a time of colonialism. It managed to be jingoistic and self-deprecating at the same time. It mixes national pride and a sense of the ridiculous that survives as a cultural characteristic to this day.



Meanwhile in America during the inter-war period there was a flowering of musical talent. The works of **Oscar Hammerstein**, **Ira Gershwin**, and **Richard Rogers** and **Lorenz Hart** blended witty libretto with catchy music. **Cole Porter** was an accomplished musician and great wordsmith. He prided himself on being able to compose a song for any occasion. His *Miss Otis Regrets* was composed from an overheard conversation over dinner.



The highest paid entertainer in Britain during the 1930s was **George Formby**, who extended his Music Hall stage persona into films, in which he invariably played the gormless but well-meaning Lancastrian. *When I'm Cleaning Windows* captured the popular imagination in 1936 with its cheeky-chappie sexual inuendo. John Reith, the autocratic and puritanical Director General of the BBC called it a "disgusting little ditty" and refused to broadcast it.

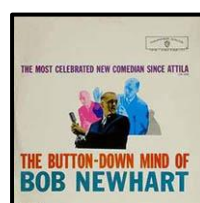
The period after the Second World War saw the growth in popularity of the Review. These stage productions were given a much wider audience and great commercial success by the introduction of LP recording. A live performance of **Flanders and Swann's** *At the Drop of a Hat* is credited as the first of such recordings, produced for EMI by George Martin (of later Beatles fame). Other record companies and other performers soon jumped on the bandwagon - **Peter Sellers**, **Bernard Breslaw**, **Bernard Cribbins** to name a few. Slightly edgy humorous songs also attracted other performers.



Lonny Donegan rose to fame on the back of the Skiffle craze of the late 1950s. His 1960 hit *My Old Man's a Dustman* may have originated from a First World War song (*My Father was a Fireman*) with its reference to cor-blimey trousers. It poked gentle fun at the working class from which Lonny Donegan had himself emerged. Performers from other genres, it seems, could not resist a comic song, (just as everyone now has to record a Christmas song). Folk singer **Jake Thackeray** and comedians **Jasper Carrot** and **Billy Connolly** built their careers around them. In America, Country Music star **Johnny Cash** recorded 'A Boy Named Sue' at the San Quentin State Prison in 1969. Rock legend **Cream** included *Your Baby has Gone Down the Plughole* on their album *Disraeli Gears*, a song that did nothing to enhance their reputation and is best forgotten.



In the USA, notable practitioners of the satirical song included **Tom Lehrer**, a Mathematics professor, whose 'Poisoning Pigeons in the Park' was considered by the BBC to be too darkly humorous for British sensibilities! **Allan Sherman** popularised a long tradition of fatalist Jewish humour with his 1963 'Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah'. **Bob Newhart's** album 'The Buttoned-down Mind of Bob Newhart', and his sequel albums were all hugely popular.



Musical satire depends in part on topicality and relevance to the listener. The lyrics of Noel Coward or Tom Lehrer can be appreciated today, because they send up the concerns and pretensions of their age. Other artists' efforts seem rather dated. The humour in George Formby's songs comes from a different age. The sexual references in Chuck Berry's *My Ding-a-ling* are rather obvious and tiresome. **Billy Connolly** remains something of a National Treasure, but his send-up of Tammy Wynette's 1975 '*D.I.V.O.R.S.E*' does not now seem all that funny. The satirical bite of **Eric Idle**'s *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life* derives from its juxtaposition with a crucifixion. The song itself is neither satirical nor funny.



Poking fun loses its edge over time. The exception to this rule is **Victoria Wood**, whose merciless depictions of the mundanity of life and relationships still seem as relevant today as they were in the 1990s. Having said that, it is possible that later generations may be somewhat bemused by references, in *Let's Do It*, to 'hostess trolleys' and 'flameproof nighties'. They may also fail to appreciate the irony and absurdity of the use of *Woman's Weekly* - a periodical full of knitting patterns and housewifely concerns - as an instrument of sexual arousal!

The Chairman thanked Peter for a highly entertaining and well-performed talk. After inviting questions to which Peter responded fully, the Chairman closed the meeting.



A Member's Tale

Growing Up in Milton and Gillingham

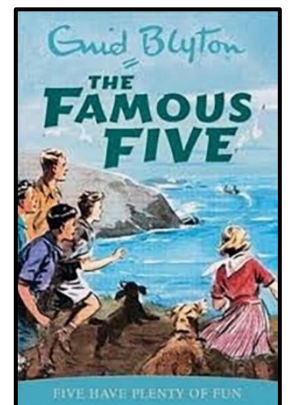
Sam Woodcock



For those familiar with Blyton's 'Famous Five' stories or Ransom's 'Swallows and Amazons', my childhood in the 1940s and 1950s in the Gillingham area typified that era. When one looks back to childhood the summers were always long and hot, the winters cold and snowy. Maybe they were, maybe they weren't, but that's how I remember them. In those carefree days one could go off for a cycle ride and not return till tired and hungry at dusk. The fields and country lanes were our playground, tall trees a climbing challenge. Rivers and streams were for damming, swimming and rafting with tin tubs, planks of wood and string. Grazed knees were bandaged with a hanky. Sadly most of these things are denied the modern child!

Brought up in Milton-on-Stour, my father and my paternal grandparents were shopkeepers in Gillingham, while my maternal grandparents were farmers at Bugley, a hamlet just outside the town. My mother, typical of her generation - a 1940s wartime housewife - kept house and ran a few animals on our small-holding in the centre of the village.

Born in the early years of WW II, like many of my generation, my memories of those days are rather hazy. Some things do feature



strongly - searchlights, aeroplanes, army convoys, blackouts and sweet rationing! I learnt much later as an adult that those army convoys we witnessed were in fact the troop movements prior to 'D' day, whereby the roads and lanes were chock-a-block with soldiers, army lorries and motor bikes. As a child at the time, this was nothing out of the ordinary; we knew no different, surely it had always been like this? I said 'we' because for the duration of the war another family were billeted with us - a mother and her son (the same age as me) lived with my mother and myself, our respective fathers being away on active service. So I now had a 'brother' and an 'aunt'. I suppose looking back on it we were the forerunners of today's same sex marriages!

However it wasn't till my father returned home from the Navy and bought me a small bike and a dog called George that my life really took off. On my bike with George running alongside, I ruled the World!

Summer for me in the village of Milton was having adventures with our gang - abseiling down the quarry face with frayed rope and pulleys; damming the River Stour to make a swimming pool; and constructing soapbox go-carts for racing down the hill (little traffic in those days!). Summer holidays gave us ample opportunity to explore the labyrinth of country lanes on our bikes, each day expanding our knowledge of the network in ever increasing circles. We never knew where we would end up - but that was half the fun!



Summertime also meant adventures on my Grandfather's farm. Harvest saw the visit of the steam traction engine, providing the power to drive the threshing machine. Dog George and I were in our element - George a pure-bred Fox Terrier earned his keep catching rats and mice, while I ran errands and brought food and drink to the workers. Casual labour was used to boost the work force and wages were supplemented with a daily ration of cider, a

small quota from a fifty-gallon barrel kept in the farmhouse under the strict supervision of my grandmother.

I remember being given an empty flagon by one of the men and told to go over the fields to "The Meads" to get it refilled - but on the strict understanding not to tell my grandmother. *"Don't thee say nuthin' me son"* was the actual phrase used. The Meads at Westbrook, just outside Gillingham, is now a private house called "The Chymes". In those days however, it was a beer and cider house. I remember it well - dark and musty, no electricity or running water, a flagstone floor, an inglenook fireplace (not smart like today's pubs!), a dartboard with an oil lamp on a bracket by the side, and a line of barrels at the far end.

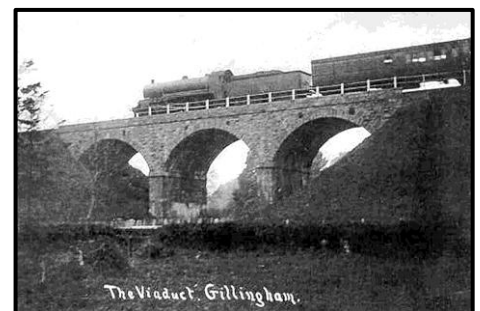


Having got it filled, the return journey was not an easy matter for an eight-year-old, clambering over gates and through hedge gaps lugging a gallon of cider in an earthenware flagon!

Horses provided the farm workforce and like any machinery had to be well maintained. For an eight-year-old to ride a carhorse bareback under Gillingham's rail viaduct with a steam train thundering overhead was quite an experience. The journey was to the blacksmiths in Gillingham, situated just behind the Red Lion (today a car park and the route to Waitrose). Before arriving with two carhorses and a pony, there had to take place a ritual washing of hooves in the ford at Chantry.

The mention of steam trains, brings back memories of the highlight of our summer holidays – namely the annual Sunday school outing to Weymouth. Every year the vicar The Rev. Seager would hire a complete train to take us on this 'pilgrimage'. Hundreds of children from Gillingham and the surrounding villages would muster with their parents or families in the station yard. Sunday School pupils had a roll call and were given 1/- (a shilling!) each to spend. Day pupils were less fortunate. The whole scene was reminiscent of the arrival of wartime evacuee children, but this time buckets, spades, and picnic sandwiches replaced gas masks and suitcases. The whole atmosphere was a buzz of eager anticipation - it was a great adventure as we travelled little in those days!

As the train chugged out hankies were waved to those who stayed behind, and a watchful eye was kept out for 'Granny Mills' waving from her garden wall at Bugley Farm. The journey from Gillingham via Yeovil Pen Mill, and thence on to Maiden Newton and Dorchester was an exciting one, and our arrival en-masse like a football crowd in Weymouth took the town by storm as we all headed for the Jubilee Clock and the beach.



We returned with our shoes full of sand, tired and sunburnt, clinging to our tin buckets, some now slopping over with murky sea water, containing crabs, shellfish, and seaweed - our trophies from a day to remember!



Autumn saw more frequent visits to the Regal Cinema in Gillingham High Street adjacent to the Town Bridge. This "Picture Palace" (which was demolished in the 1960s) was a prime example of Art-Deco architecture. The shell shaped wall lights, the large central Tiffany style coloured glass chandelier, and the chrome framed pictures of 1940s film stars all added to the mystique which held me spell-bound. Like many before me my first fumbling explorations were made in the '1/3ds'.

A little further into adolescence I experienced the dances at the Market Hall. Situated at the side of the cattle market next to the South Western Hotel in Station Yard, the Market Hall was the mecca for functions ranging from the Saturday night hop to the annual Fireman's Ball. It was here that I first heard the music of Glen Miller and witnessed the advent of Rock and Roll. Unfortunately, by the time that the Beatles appeared on the world stage, our own venue had had its day and was demolished.

The Cattle Market was just one of the many sources of employment in Station Road. When the 5.00pm hooters sounded, the road was choked with the many workers walking and cycling' swarming like ants from Oake, Woods bacon factory, the laundry, the egg packing station, sawmills, glue factory and brickworks. The stench from the rotting bones in the glue factory, the deafening noise of the circular saws, the squeal of pigs and the roar of the express trains made Station Road an intriguing area in my youth.



Winter meant snow, tobogganing down slippery slopes on home-made sledges hastily made from sheets of corrugated tin bent up at the front (lethal, now I think back on it). With winter also came Christmas, an opportunity for my extensive family to come together from far and wide to our cottage in the village, and also to my paternal grandfather's house in Common Mead Lane. We would play games, recite endless poetry, and make music. Grandfather played the violin, Uncle Fred the drums, and Aunt Rose the piano - while the rest of us banged various pots and pans. However when Uncle Billy Hull, the folk singer, began to sing all was hushed. He sang from memory, his eyes closed. We all joined in the choruses with great gusto (oh, how I wish I had recorded his songs!). He was a great character who had a wooden peg leg having suffered an accident shunting wagons with horses at Gillingham Station.



On Christmas Eve in the village we went carol singing. The group was made up from the church choir and the village youth club and was headed up by the school headmaster. We must have looked very similar to such groups illustrated on nostalgic Christmas cards! We perambulated around the village calling at various cottages. Occasionally we were invited inside for mince pies and soft drinks - and for the adults something stronger! As the evening progressed the singing became

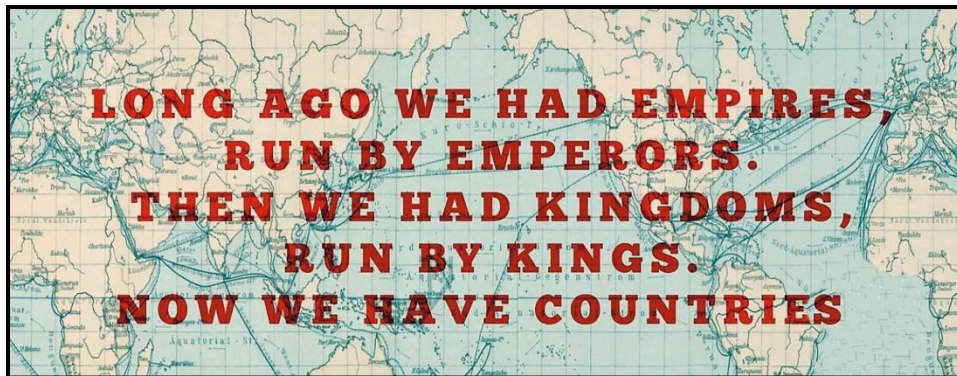
lustier, when we finally ended up at 'The Big House' where we joined the many guests for community singing. In many ways it must have seemed like an excerpt from a Thomas Hardy novel!

I left Gillingham in the mid-1960s for a career teaching in the East End of London, and I carried these memories and many more with me. Fifty years later I have returned to find Gillingham much changed, but none the less vibrant and ready to respond positively to the challenges of the 21st Century.

Sam



ENDPIECE – Editor



Imagine we lived in a world where all cars were Electric Vehicles (EVs), and then along comes a new invention – the “Internal Combustion Engine”(ICE)!

Think how well it would sell: A vehicle that -

- ... is half the weight of an EV.

- ... is half the price.

- ... can be refuelled in a 10th of the time.

- ... has a range of up to 4 times the distance in all weather conditions.

- ... does not rely for its power on the environmentally damaging use of non-renewable rare earth elements.

Just think how excited people would be for such technology – it would probably sell like ‘hot cakes’!!



This edition is being published early because I am escaping to warmer climes for a few days.

My thanks to contributors who have allowed this to happen by providing their articles to fit my schedule!