



PROBUS RECORDER

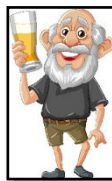


THE NEWSLETTER OF THE PROBUS CLUB OF GILLINGHAM, DORSET
(www.probus-gillingham-dorset.org.uk)

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July 2025

Chairman's Notes

Phew! This weather is beginning to get a bit challenging! I hope everyone is following the health advice and keeping hydrated.



This month has seen my delight in having a full complement of a committee immediately challenged with news that our Scribe, Steve Baines is leaving us to be nearer family. While I know that getting volunteers to fill Probus positions is like drawing hen's teeth, I appeal to you to come forward and help us out.

We are also losing John Adams who, at 94, has decided that he can no longer attend. I shall miss his company, and we wish John and Hazel well. Further to that, I have just received a phone call from John Walker who unfortunately is not renewing his membership.

While I am not panicking with numbers seemingly steadily falling, be assured that the committee is pursuing means of increasing our membership. However, as I have said previously, it is something that every member can help with. I believe we must try to be as relevant and forward looking as possible, and to that extent letters have been sent to local press, and Peter Grange has been exploring the creation of a Facebook page. 'Fingers crossed' - we will receive some interest from these efforts.



Finally, I have arranged the summer **BBQ on the 12th of August**, this year back at **The Crown in Marnhull**. The price is £24.50 per head. I hope as many of you as possible attend one of our feature annual events. I have invited Yeovil Probus to the BBQ, as we continue to forge links between our two clubs.

John

WELFARE & SOCIAL

Welfare

It appears that now we have Dave Hooker looking after our interests, matters go quite quiet! He reports that there is virtually no change from the situation given in last month's report.

Social - July Club Events

8 th July 2025	Aviation Around Poole Bay 1910 – 1976 <i>Kevin Patience</i>
22 nd July 2025 (Wives/Partners)	The Geology & Wines of Madeira & the Canaries <i>John Pett</i>
	Members' Lunch <i>The Virginia Ash, Henstridge</i> <i>- 12.00 for 1pm</i>



JUNE TALKS

TALES FROM THE MID-DORSET COAST

Mike Spencer
10th June 2025

Mike Spencer has delivered a number of interesting and amusing talks to our Probus branch. This talk was a series of disparate, entertaining historical facts and anecdotes about the stretch of the Dorset coast from Abbotsbury to Portland, including Chesil Beach and the adjacent villages.

Abbotsbury, known today for its ruined abbey, swannery and tropical gardens, had an industrial past and its own six-mile railway, built to carry iron ore and shale. For many



years there was a tradition of singing negro spirituals in its pubs, which originated from a group of shipwrecked black sailors.

Langton Herring does not have a war memorial. It is a 'Thankful Village', the only one of its kind in Dorset and one of only 53 in England that did not lose men in the Great War. In fact, it is an even rarer 'Doubly Thankful Village' that survived two world wars without loss.

Chesil Beach is notorious for shipwrecks. Some 1,800 wrecks have been recorded along its 18-mile stretch. 'Saving' wreckage was a local pastime, in which whole families participated.



It is said that, when the ship *Hope* - having sailed from Amsterdam - went down in 1749 carrying £50,000 in gold and silver, as many as 10,000 people came out to help themselves to the wreckage. So many people in the locality were involved in scavenging for wreckage that it proved difficult to find juries to convict attempted prosecutions. An



associated pastime was smuggling, which again was a family affair. Hiding the contraband from the Revenue Men involved some ingenuity. Casks were hidden under the water, their location marked by floating sticks. Contraband was also hidden in graveyards, a theme of J Meade Falkner's *Moonfleet*, an 1898 novel set in this location.

Fishing in double-prowed lerrets¹ was a more legitimate occupation. In the days when shoals were plentiful and could be scooped up in seine nets, the record catch for one day was 63,000 mackerel.



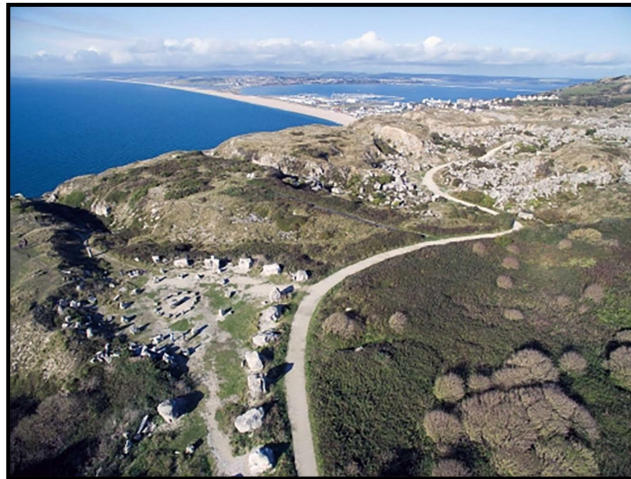
During the Second World War, anti-tank traps were installed on Chesil Beach, and they are still in evidence today. The Fleet lagoon inside Chesil Beach was used to test Barnes Wallace's prototype bouncing bomb. This was initially a spherical design based on a golf ball, complete with dimples, although later models adopted a different design. Trials of the bomb were 'Top Secret', so much so that when a Wellington Bomber attempted a trial run in December 1942 it came under fire from naval gunners in Portland. Fortunately,



¹ A 'Lerret' is a traditional Dorset boat designed specifically for use off the Chesil Beach. [See more.](#)

they missed. Later in the war, Portland and Weymouth were major assembly points for troops taking part in the D-Day landings.

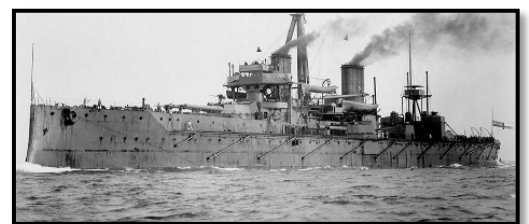
Portland, an island up to 1839 when the causeway was built, is famous not only for its Naval base, now closed, but for its prisons, its quarries and the idiosyncrasies of its population. Records show that Portland limestone, which shares the qualities of Portland Cement in name only, was transported to London as early as the fourteenth century.



Quarrying was a closed occupation with traditions, practices and superstitions carrying down from father to son. In 150 years of parish records, only one illegitimate birth was recorded. When unmarried couples found they had a pregnancy to deal with, the respective families stepped in to sort out a resulting marriage.

Portland residents have a reputation for being slightly peculiar and in-bred! As examples, the town has allegedly had a Town Cryer with a pronounced stutter, as well as a member of the Observer Corps who was completely blind! And reportedly, one resident habitually wore two left boots, but claimed to have avoided discomfort by wearing them on different feet on alternate days. To this day, the word 'rabbit' is taboo. In the current Century, advertisements for the animated film *'Wallace and Gromit and the Case of the Were-Rabbit'* had to be modified before the film could be promoted in the town.

In 1910 when HMS Dreadnaught visited Portland harbour, the crew were ordered to host a high-level delegation for the Prince of Abyssinia and his retinue. The visit duly took place, despite the lack of a common language. The visitors enthusiastically shouted "*bunga-bunga*" at everything they were shown. It later transpired that the visit was a prank conducted by Horace de Vere Cole and members of the Bloomsbury set. Later, during the First World War, when HMS Dreadnaught rammed and sank a German U-Boat, one of the telegrams of congratulation read simply "*bunga-bunga*".



Melcombe Regis on the north shore of Weymouth Harbour has the dubious reputation of being the entry point for bubonic plague, the Black Death, in 1348. Weymouth's association with sea-bathing dates from the fact that George III, in his more lucid moments, used to visit the town and take a dip for restorative purposes. The British sea-side tradition is supposed to derive from this. The King's connection with Weymouth was immortalised by the figure of a man on a horse cut into the chalk of Osmington Hill above the town. The depiction was controversial at the time because it pointed away from the town and looked as if the king was in a hurry to leave. In 1928, the town became the focus of great public attention when a local Baptist minister predicted that there would be a tidal wave at 3.53p.m. on Tuesday 29 May. Crowds flocked to witness the event. Quick as a flash - nothing happened!



The Chairman thanked Mike for his interesting and entertaining talk. After inviting questions, he closed the meeting.

Steve Baines

OVER 80 YEARS IN MILTON A TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE

Sam Woodcock – 24th June 2025



Our member Sam Woodcock was brought up in Milton-on-Stour. His father and paternal grandparents were shopkeepers in Gillingham, while his maternal grandparents were farmers at Bugley, a hamlet just outside the town. He left Gillingham in the mid-1960s for a career teaching in the East End of London and returned fifty years later to his childhood home.

This series of recollections of life in Milton and accompanying photographs started just before Sam was born in 1941. In the Autumn of 1940, bombs dropped on Milton and Gillingham. The four that dropped on Milton fortunately missed all the houses, although one dropped 20 yards from Sam's parents' back door as they sheltered under the stairs. This one failed to detonate, but, as an Army bomb disposal team didn't succeed in finding it, it is presumably still there. The crater it left used to fill with water in rainy weather and has now been lined as a pond. Sam's mother, Phyllis, described the experience of the explosions as the "house going in and out". The possible target was the searchlight at higher Redmoor farm, but it may have been a case of a bomber randomly jettisoning its bombs when returning from a raid elsewhere.



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A woman and her child, called Paul, who were from Gillingham were billeted with Sam's mother in Milton during the war. Sam's father was away in the Navy and Paul's father was in the Army. The arrangement was directed by the authorities to free up a flat in Gillingham. Milton Lodge, now known as Milton Manor and these days an Air B&B, was a children's home. Officially known as a '*Home for Waifs and Strays*', it was run by the Church of England Children's Society. One of the nurses who came to Milton to work at the Home remained living in the village until her death quite recently.



VE Day 1945 was celebrated with a picnic at Stourhead. Phyllis travelled there by bicycle, with the young Sam riding pillion. They were forced to take a circuitous route due to military road closures around the airfield at Zeals. There is a picture of Sam and Paul with armfuls of picked flowers on this day. Earlier this year, on the eightieth anniversary of VE Day, Sam commemorated the event at the same spot on the estate. One of his earliest recollections was of an old man in a motorized wheelchair. This was the owner of Stourhead, Sir Henry Hoare, who was, it seems, more tolerant of flower picking than the National Trust is today.



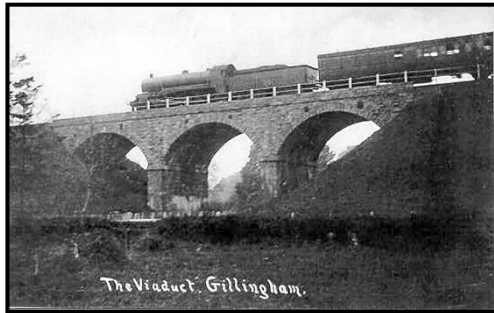
After the war, there were 20 small farms in and around the village. Milk was collected from farms in churns from wooden stages beside the road, the remains of one of these can still be seen near Kendall's bridge. Also next to the white iron railings, there is a set of steps which were used for collecting water from the stream. The village shop was run by a Mr England. This later became Steel's. Henry Fricker operated a mobile shop delivering supplies, originally using a pony and trap.

Forge Garage was formerly a working forge, where Freddie Vincent, the village blacksmith worked well into his eighties. With his walrus moustache, his hot and noisy workshop and his threats to sell meddling children to the gypsies, he was a frightening figure to the young Sam. His son had been killed serving in a battleship during the First World War. In later years, Sam came to appreciate his fund of local stories. Fred Vincent was amongst the guests pictured in the wedding photograph of Elizabeth Hill. Her sister, Elsie, attended the primary school in Milton in the 1880s and went into service in London. As a maid, she lived an 'Upstairs-Downstairs' life and got to travel with her employers around Europe and America.



The village hut was originally a wooden building, constructed by the military during the First World War. It was black from the heavy layers of creosote it had accumulated over the years. It was the venue for clubs and amateur dramatics. There was a youth club, a men's club, a Mother's Union and a WI. Sam remembers one Sunday School Christmas party at which the Christmas tree was decorated with real candles. The hut did not burn down on this occasion, but it was later considered a fire hazard and was no longer used.

The Sunday School carried on, however. Sam recalls an outing to Weymouth, which involved the Reverend Seager hiring a train and giving all the children a shilling each to spend.



Reverend Seager had been an army Chaplain who had been awarded a medal for administering to the troops on Dunkirk beach. Another Milton resident, Blandford Matthews had the distinction of being awarded medals for gallantry in both World Wars.

Sam showed a picture from 1946 of the locals setting off from the Fir Tree pub for an outing to Weston-Super-Mare, accompanied by several beer barrels to ensure a good time. The pub no longer

exists, but the village maintains community events organised around the church, the school and the scout hut. The “new” school was opened in 1965. Bill George was its headmaster for thirty years. Sadly, the village shop and post-office closed, despite a protest march through the village. The lending library has also disappeared. Sam’s mother worked part-time as a librarian at the lending library. He remembers her covering the books with brown parcel paper. Sam still has one of these books.

The Chairman thanked Sam for a fascinating talk, expertly delivered, and for giving us insights into village life in times gone by. After inviting questions, he closed the meeting.

Steve Baines



ENDPIECE (Editor)

With apologies to **The Hereford Times** – April 2019.



Recently, a female copper arrested a 22-year-old soldier of the Parachute Regiment temporarily stationed at Credenhill (Herefordshire) on Special Forces selection who was found fornicating with a pumpkin in the middle of a field on the Callow at night.

The next day, at Hereford magistrates court, Lawrence was charged with lewd and lascivious behaviour in a public place, public indecency as well as drunk and disorderly conduct. The accused explained that he was passing a pumpkin patch whilst walking on his way home from a drinking session at Saxtys wine bar when he decided to stop to urinate in the field.

'You know how a pumpkin is soft and squishy inside, and there was no one around for miles, or at least I thought there was no one around,' he stated. Lawrence went on to say that he walked over to the side of the field, picked out a pumpkin that he felt was appropriate to his purpose, cut a hole in it and proceeded to satisfy his pressing need.

'Guess I was really into it, y'know?' he commented with evident embarrassment.

In the process of doing the deed, Lawrence failed to notice an approaching West Mercia Police car on rural patrol and was unaware of his audience until WPC Brenda Taylor approached him. *'It was an unusual situation, that's for sure,'* said WPC Taylor. *'I walked up to Lawrence and he's just humping away at this pumpkin.'*

WPC Taylor went on to describe what happened when she approached Lawrence ...

I said, *"excuse me sir, but do you realise that you're having sex with a pumpkin?"*

He froze in the beam of my torchlight and was clearly very surprised that I was there, and then he looked me straight in the face and said, *"A pumpkin? Shit ... Is it midnight already?"*

The court (and the judge) could not contain their laughter. Lawrence was found guilty only of being drunk and disorderly and fined £10.00 and sent on his way.

The Hereford Times wrote an article describing this as *"The best come-back line ever."*

The MoD spokesperson stated that Corporal Lawrence had been returned to his unit.

