



PROBUS RECORDER

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE PROBUS CLUB OF GILLINGHAM DORSET - No. 180 - November 2019
(www.probus-gillingham-dorset.org.uk)

Chairman's Notes

At last we seem to have broached the broached the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness, and head for the cosy, bittersweet sense of late autumn. We are almost in November and it has yet to get cold; mind you we seem to be making up for it in rain and damp!

As I muse about Probus happenings since I last hit the keyboard in September, I believe that the most noteworthy events have been provided in-house. First, and once we managed to sort out the Rugby Club's IT linkage for his presentation, we had an informative and enjoyable talk from Sam Woodcock on Gillingham's heritage which he coupled with anecdotes from his personal memories.

The talk provided resonance for those members whose family roots lie in the area, but in the main we were provided with some thoughtful insights into why there is still a need to ensure the preservation of Gillingham's architectural heritage.

As a result, we will probably have become a little more discerning when we are given a follow-on talk next week (29 October) on Gillingham Development under current plans!

A week after Sam's talk, a number of members, wives, partners and friends took an outing that has become a regular fixture in our Club calendar.

David Bryan had arranged a group booking for a concert by the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra (BSO) at the Lighthouse in Poole. He had worked his magic well, and the programme that was on offer was a marvellous selection that went under the name of the 'Great American Songbook', with music from Copland, Barber and Mussorgsky. My thanks to David for arranging this very special and inspiring evening of music.

Now we head into the autumnal 'silly-season' – Halloween and Guy Fawkes Night – when the politically correct and the 'elf'n'safety' crowd attempt to out-do each other in their attempts to be 'correct'. While we all hope that people will be sensible and take all necessary precautions, let us also hope that bureaucracy keeps itself distant! Apart from that, how many are aware that Halloween (All Saints' Eve) actually originated with the ancient Celtic festival

FUTURE EVENTS

29 October

Speaker: Mike Gould
'Future Development of Gillingham'
Lunch at Kimber's Farm Shop 12.30 for 12.45

7 November

Visit to Somerset Rural Life Museum, Glastonbury
Own transport. £5 entrance

12 November

Speaker: Graham Dunlop
'Peacemakers'

26 November

Speaker: Brigit Strawbridge
'Dancing with bees'
Ladies' invitation
Christmas Lunch today at the Half Moon

19 December

Christmas Dinner at Grange in Osborne. Travel by coach

of Samhain, which was to ward of ghosts? Not exactly a Christian ceremony involving the Saints! Enough of such trivia!

We now look forward to November when we are to be treated to a talk entitled 'Peacemakers' and another visit from 'The Bee Lady' - Brigit Strawbridge, with one further talk in December, this being on the history of the National Trust property at Kingston Lacy. These are before the Chairman's Dinner, once again being held at The Grange at Osborne, this time on Thursday 19 December when I look forward to being able to see as many of you as possible. I hope that you will feel able and willing to attend, especially as it is so close to Christmas that it should provide a wonderful full stop to our year's events. *Nick Hall*

Robert Wellen – Bell ringers from Dorset and Wiltshire who died in the Great War – 1 October

Gillingham resident Robert Wellen is an experienced bell ringer (campanologist). In addition to being a member of the local band of ringers at Gillingham Parish Church, he is currently the Master of the Salisbury Diocesan Guild of Ringers (the SDGR), covering the whole of

Dorset and Wiltshire. The Guild was founded in 1882, and currently has approximately 1,500 members. In his capacity as Guild Master, Robert has been involved in commemorations to mark the ending of the First World War, and to remember the bell ringers from the diocese that lost their lives.

The large number of volunteers and later conscripts from towns and villages included young men who were bell ringers at their local churches in the diocese, some of their number lost their lives in the service of their country. The conflict in the Great War of 1914-1918 touched families and communities,



large or small, and almost every band of ringers. The greatest number of bell ringers lost from one tower in the two counties was six; their church was at Edington, Wiltshire.

In 2019 many bells in church towers were the same as rung by ringers 100 years ago, calling people to church by and rung by people enjoying their hobby.

Robert Wellen has worked hard with others to compile a Great War Memorial Booklet, recording known details of who died in that war. He explained that there is a memorial to them, in the South Transept of Salisbury Cathedral; this was rededicated by the Bishop of Salisbury in 2018. Most of the ringers in the early 20th century were manual workers, working on the land, or in service, or gardeners. Most of them served in the Army, and just over half served in the two local regiments, the Dorsetshire Regiment and the Wiltshire Regiment. At the time of compiling the booklet, 90 ringers from the diocese were known to have died in the war.

The front cover of the Memorial Booklet (*see above*) shows an original artwork by the Westbury artist Helen Chester; she was the great granddaughter of Westbury bell ringer Private Fred Kerley, who died aged 32, on 28 August 1914. The artist began incorporating portraits into her work after finding a photograph of Fred, and seeing his memorial in the tower of All Saints Church in Westbury, and realising that 'the only record of his life was a

sepia photograph, a cigarette case and a drawing on a wall'. Robert brought along the actual painting when he delivered his talk. This depicts known ringers who were killed, against a backdrop of the Cathedral, and some of the churches where they rang, with the 15 ringers in the foreground drawn from contemporary photographs.

There is only so much detail that could be included in a short talk, so Robert included the details of a number who died, including the following from this area:

Private Robert Yeatman - formerly of Kington Magna. Died in October 1917, aged 37.

Served in the Army Service Corps, and died of dysentery, having been on a hospital ship, and taken to Durban, South Africa.

Private Seth Suter – From Silton. Died in June 1918 aged 31. Served in the 3rd Btn Somerset Light Infantry. Although previously deemed unfit for military service on three occasions due to a heart weakness, in March 1918 he had been placed in Grade 1 physical fitness, and joined the regiment in May, but died less than a month later in barracks from heart disease following influenza.

The talk reminded us of the dreadful losses in the war, and the young men plucked out of their 'ordinary' existence to serve their country in that awful conflict. By compiling the booklet from various sources, Robert Wellen has provided a valuable lasting historical record.

Alan Jeffs

Sam Woodcock - 'Nostalgic Gillingham' - 15 October

At this meeting we were entertained by one of our own members, Sam, who as a local boy and History Society stalwart in recent years was well placed to present Gillingham, then and now. This was done by means of an on-screen presentation of early photographs, followed by a discussion of what has been lost and what is there now.

The 'tour' began with a picture of a locomotive at the Railway Station taken in the early 1900's, the buildings have hardly altered at all. While now serving as mainly a passenger link, the railway had been initially very much a goods hub, with substantial sidings serving industry which had concentrated in the Station Road area. Gone are a Brick and Tile Works, a distinguished Bacon and Cheese factory, the South Western Hotel (the building still stands), and coal distribution merchants. Moving out of the Station yard and up Station road, there had been milk and egg processing factories, a busy market, (goods and animals), Moloney's factory, making many things but remembered for the smell from its glue making facility. A large timber yard stood about where the traffic lights now are, extending into the now Asda site. All these have gone, most without trace.

Next to Asda is a motor repair garage, started by P O Baker as a horse taxi service around 1900, growing to a major new vehicle supplier in the 1960s. It now operates as Station Road Garage with some family connections to the originator. The original car showroom is across the road, now in use as the Factory Shop.

Most of the buildings at the upper end of the old Station Road remain, but most now in different usage. Sam showed some early prints taken at the top of the road, at its junction with the High Street. To the right could be seen the old Royal (previously Railway) Hotel where Probus met for some years. This is now gone and replaced by retirement accommodation. Looking across the road at the junction is an Estate Agents but the exterior (and some features of the interior) remain much as it had been when it had been a shoe shop for many years (some club members remembering this shop).

Views to the left, down the High Street, show many buildings remaining from 100 years ago, Crocker's building is still very recognisable – a successor to the Stickland Ironmongery and motor business. In the distance can be seen the two Churches, they and the Bank building remain now as they had been almost a century ago.

Sam then reminded us of the Regal Cinema that had stood near the Town Bridge (of Constable fame). This had been a fine little cinema, built in 1934 to a pleasing Art Deco style, inside and out. As was pointed out by a member, it was built (and run) by one R W Robinson, the father of one of our club founder members. It closed in 1963 and has been replaced by shops, one of which now incorporates Swards Furnishings.

Continuing down the High Street from the Town Bridge, on the left a row of cottages have been demolished opening up space for the Town Meadow, a recent asset. On the right, the War Memorial of the 1920s has been moved from near the High Street to the relative safety at the rear of the Car Parks (formerly the Vicarage Gardens). Nearby down what is now Barnaby Mead entrance had been Silk and Grist Mills of some importance in their time, now replaced by Retirement flats. Behind had been the Mill Stream lake, a tranquil backwater utilised for boat trips, especially at the Church fete. Sam recalled that the Boy Scouts constructed a rope Bridge across the River Shreen to connect the Vicarage to the Mill area for this event.

The last part of the High Street is a little wider but the attractive shops once there stand empty and near derelict. Special paving in front of the former Kites fresh fish shop (ice suppliers) have been retained, partly due to Sam's intervention. The Red Lion Inn remains. At the rear one can see signs of rebuilding work done after it was hit by a bomb in the early 1940s.



The lower part of the High street, past Spring Corner and the Phoenix Hotel (a former Coaching Inn) becomes the Square. Structurally it remains very much as a century ago but has become very quiet since the relief road cut off the exit (formerly to Wyke and Wincanton). To hand had been a Chemists, Newsagents, Post Office, Doctors and Slades, a large General Store (*pictured left*). The buildings are there but with little

activity. A former Butcher's shop (one of several in old Gillingham) is now occupied by Scenes, who sell Artistic prints and materials.

Back at Spring Corner and on the right, the Victorian Vicarage (itself a replacement for an earlier one) is now absorbed within Rawson Court, a retirement complex. On the left, the Parish Church of St Mary remains as it was a century ago. Further up the 'Mere Road' we come to the site of the former St Martins House, one time a showpiece of Gillingham's industrial craftsmanship, currently being demolished to make way for a retirement complex. Sam showed early photos taken of this part of Queen Street from the church tower, some taken before the said St Martins House was built. On some of these, in the distance, farmland could be seen coming down to where the present Co-op is at Lodbourne, before Peacemarsh was built on.

Sam concluded with some information on Gillingham History Society and Museum from start-up to present day. So ended this interesting nostalgic tour of our town, which has seen much change in the last century. Industrial activity is around the outskirts now, as is almost all shopping.

Sam was thanked and well applauded for a very interesting look into the past. *Tom Brain*

Material for the next edition should be sent to Richard Clarke on:
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