

# Local History Link

Keeping you in touch during the coronavirus emergency

No. 2

Welcome to the second edition of *Local History Link*, the newsletter for members of Leigh Estuary U3A Local History Group. Thank you for your positive comments about the first issue, which sounds as though you all enjoyed. And we'd like to thank all the many contributors to this second edition, and hope more of you will join in and provide items for inclusion in future newsletters. So, please keep them coming!

Articles, features, photos, etc., should be emailed to Jim at [jsanctuary28@gmail.com](mailto:jsanctuary28@gmail.com) or post to 28 Darlington Grove, Leigh-on-Sea, SS9 3LG. Thank you for your participation and we look forward to reading some interesting and entertaining items. In the meantime, keep well and keep safe.

Tony, Tricia and Jim



## MEMORIES OF POTTERY COTTAGES

I was born and bred in Pottery Cottages, Leigh Road, which were a row of properties situated opposite Marguerite Drive. Originally, they had housed workers employed at Victoria Pottery, which closed in 1898, and had stood on land bounded by Leigh Road, Leighcliff Road, Victor Drive and The Broadway. The cottage next to ours had a shop at the front, owned by Edgar and Birdie Culliford, which sold sweets and cigarettes. The couple had no children and always welcomed me and gave me sweets.

In the cottage on the other-side of us lived a Mrs Clements. She was an elderly lady, who always wore a white apron and, to my young eyes, seemed rather formidable! On the corner of Leighcliff Road and Leigh Road was a derelict cottage called Berries. We used to play in the garden where there was a large walnut tree, so we never lacked walnuts at the appropriate time.

Next to the Corona cinema, which opened in 1929, on the site of the old pottery, was the Doom Pond (see



photo with the Pottery Cottages in the background) and three allotments, one of which was my father's. I often helped him and recall that he grew good crops. He had a bucket attached to a long rope which he used to draw water from a seemingly ever-full well. That's when my interest in gardening was first awakened.

Further along Leigh Road, next to the Doom Pond was a row of shops, opposite where The Broker stands today. In WW2, the basements of the shops were used as large air-raid shelters, which some residents slept in every night. We never did as we had an Andersen Shelter in the garden, where we took cover when the bombing was bad. There were many

empty houses in the neighbourhood and these were requisitioned by the army, so there were many troops around.

In June 1940, North Street School where I attended closed when the Government introduced a general order for evacuation. My parents would not let me be evacuated so my education came to an abrupt halt. Eventually, a class was opened in someone's house, where about ten children aged between 5 and 12 attended, including me. I stayed there until North Street School reopened in 1942, where I remained until I went to Westcliff High School.

We lived in the Pottery Cottage until 1957, when my family moved to a larger property in Lord Roberts Avenue. **Kay Woodward**

Thank you, Kay, for this interesting article recalling your early years living at the Pottery Cottages. I expect some of you have vivid memories of the time you were evacuated from the town during the Second World War and I'm sure we'd all like to hear of your experiences. So please put pen to paper and email or post your recollections to me for publication in a future edition of *Local History Link*. **Jim Sanctuary**



Westcliff High School for Girls evacuees arriving in June 1940 at Chapel-en-le-Frith, Derbyshire, where the school had been relocated for the duration of WW2.



Evacuee children boarding a train at Southend Central Station on 2<sup>nd</sup> June, 1940. A label showing their name and destination was attached to the coat of each child.

## MY LIFE AS A RAILWAY PORTER

In the summer of 1954, I was working as a railway porter at Southend railway station. Southend-on-Sea at that time was a very exciting place. The town had recovered from the war years and was busy competing with resorts like Blackpool to be the leading holiday destination in the UK. Each day, thousands came as trippers to Southend for an exciting time at the seaside. Few people had cars and the trippers came in their crowds by train.

In those days, there was a comprehensive system of railway porters throughout the railway. Even in rural stations there would usually be two railway porters to assist the passengers. At Southend Central Station (see photo) there would be a full team of 7 or 8 porters, plus the Chief Porter, to help the thousands of trippers.



During the summer months, trains would arrive every 5 minutes between 9.00 am and midday and it was our job as porters to get all the passengers safely off each train within 5 minutes. In this time, we also had to close the carriage windows and, if necessary, clean the windows with rolled up pieces of newspaper. Finally, we had to check that all the carriage doors were shut. The trains, loaded with passengers, came mainly from the North London area and it was estimated that there would be more than 20,000 passengers arriving each day. We porters had a similar problem with the returning trippers in the evening.

Some of the steam engines used on these trains were fascinating. The modern engines - the 4-6-2s - were busy on the normal commuter traffic and so old engines were brought out of retirement for the tripper trains. This was interesting for the railway 'buffs' amongst us.

From time to time I was needed as relief porter at other stations down the line and sometimes I was lucky enough to travel to the relief station on the engine footplate with the engine driver and his stoker. (I don't think this would be permitted today due to health and safety rules.) The Chief Porter was called Jim and he told me many stories about the railway, and even suggested a career on the railways.

However, things changed a few years after I left when the famous Dr Beeching came along with the aim of saving money on the railways. The first thing that he did was to get rid of most of the porters, so nowadays you will rarely see a porter, except on the busy mainline stations. The second thing he did, and is better remembered for, is cutting many of the railway branch lines.

Working as a railway porter with so many good men, all so enthusiastic about the railways, was a great experience and one I have never forgotten. **Tony Bullock**



## MEMORIES OF BLENHEIM PARK

Jim's article on Brickhouse Farm brought back some happy memories of growing up for me. Not because I can recall the farm or farmhouse itself, but because Blenheim Park (see photo below) was my stomping ground as a youngster. I was born and raised in Broomfield Avenue in one of the social houses, as Jim referred to them, and built on the site of the farm for families after WWII, we referred to them as simply council houses. My walk from home to school took me past the corner of the park. My school, Blenheim Infants and Junior, was and still is located alongside and overlooking the park.

At weekends, me and my mates would spend many hours in the park, climbing trees and generally no doubt



being a nuisance. I remember the ditch along the western boundary of the park was an ideal spot for hiding when playing certain games and trees all along here gave us the ideal climbing apparatus.

Along the north side and alongside Mountdale Gardens was a small pond. I think it is still there, but not having been back for many years I cannot be certain – I must pay a visit. In those days, it was not fenced off and of course that gave great opportunities to explore the wildlife, bringing home a newt or water boatman was not uncommon, and I doubt a fence would have stopped us anyway.

Time fades the memory and whilst I do remember the children’s playground area, I

am not convinced it has always been there. Maybe another member can recall when those facilities were first provided.

The Park was never far from mind as I attended senior school because the walk from home to school along Mountdale Gardens still involved walking past the Park and our winter cross- country runs always seems to involve at least one section across or around the Park.

As I grew up and had left senior school, I continued to enjoy sports, and played some of my rugby in Blenheim Park. The changing facilities were basic and whilst, so long as someone remembered to switch it on, we had a trickle of hot water after the game to shower. There was never heating in the changing area and plucking up the courage to venture out from a cold changing room to an even colder rugby pitch in the midst of winter was a challenge itself. But once you got into the game you quickly warmed up and it wasn’t long before you were back in the cold changing room and that never forgotten smell of liniment oil.

I certainly recall the “new” fire station being built and so must have seen the old farmhouse, but to be honest I cannot picture it in my mind at all. Maybe as kids we were just too scared of what lurked behind the walls of that old property to go anywhere near it. **David White**



**David White** has been in contact with local writer and historian **Dee Gordon** who has recently joined U3A and is planning to lead Creative Writing Group 2 as soon as the current coronavirus restrictions are lifted. Dee has given permission for extracts from her books to be included in *Local History Link*. The following is the first of Dee’s articles and I hope to publish many more. Her website is [www.deegordon-writer.com](http://www.deegordon-writer.com)

EXTRACT FROM  
***PEOPLE WHO MATTERED IN SOUTHEND AND BEYOND***  
BY DEE GORDON  
**ENA BAGA 1906 – 2004, ORGANIST**

Ena Rosina was born in London of an Irish mother and Italian father. Her father conducted a cinema orchestra at the Angel, Islington, but the family moved to Southend when Ena was a child - apparently for the benefit of her health. She had three musical sisters - Florence, Celeste, and Beatrice - who formed an ensemble called Bagatrix. It was Florence, ten years her senior, who was apparently the first woman to play a cinema organ - at the age of 16.

By the 1920s cinema organists were less in demand, but they evolved as a cheap alternative for a full orchestra. By 1925, Ena was playing at the Strand Cinema in Southend and the Kingsway in Hadleigh (no longer in existence) and also played at the Palace Theatre, Westcliff on Sea and the Palace Hotel in Southend. She moved on to the New Gallery in Regent Street, London, and the Tivoli in the Strand, London. Talking pictures meant that Ena entertained cinemagoers between films rather than during them as her father had done. Her style gradually became flamboyant - in dress and demeanour. It seems that organists really were the pop stars of the inter war years. She also did music hall work, and even played at Balmoral for George V and Queen Mary in 1932.

While working at the Gaumont in Camden Town, London, in 1940, a bomb destroyed the organ, and she



she moved to the safer environs of the Tower Ballroom, Blackpool, replacing the famous Reginald Dixon on his radio broadcasts when he left for the R.A.F. Ena apparently played here every night until the end of the war, returning to London in 1945, to cinemas making room for Cinemascope at the expense of organs such as the Wurlitzer. Her signature tune was *Let's All Go Down the Strand*, later replaced by *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*.

Her fame was such that she was featured in a 1956 episode of *The Goon Show - The Mighty Wurlitzer*. Between 1957 and 1962 Ena visited South Africa to entertain the Italian workers building the Kariba dam. She was also responsible for composing many short pieces of light music (including *Bagatelle*) and

recorded a few albums. Luckily for her, by the 1960s the Hammond organ was widely available and she was able to play the new smaller instrument at Joe Lyons's in Tottenham Court Road and at the pub she owned with her husband. She was not averse to including such material as *Can't Buy Me Love* and *Hey, Jude* in her repertoire. From 1969, she reached new audiences through Radio 2 with *The Organist Entertains*. Ena even appeared as a guest in a couple of episodes of television's *Upstairs Downstairs* and as herself in the 1992 film of *Chaplin*. Sister Florence became musical director at the National Film Theatre and died at the age of 94. Ena continued performing until the age of 93, and survived two husbands, Reginald and James.

© DEE GORDON 2005

Sources: *Southend Standard* 20.8.04, [www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk), [www.capslockoff.blogspot.com](http://www.capslockoff.blogspot.com) and [www.madcornishproject.co.uk](http://www.madcornishproject.co.uk)



## GARDENING FOR BOYS



Many schools in the town have made spirited attempts over the years to introduce pupils to the pleasure and benefits of gardening and one of the most successful was Westcliff High School for Boys, whose Garden Club was set up by knowledgeable gardener and science teacher, Harry Smith - or 'Black Harry' as he was irreverently known by the boys - in the late 1930s. Harry was an active member of Leigh Horticultural Society, holding the position of Chairman from 1952, until his passing in 1974. Vegetables, fruit and flowers were grown in an area on the eastern boundary of the sports field, extending south to the boundary with Manchester Drive. The Garden Club was a popular pursuit for many boys and under Harry's expert guidance top

quality produce was cultivated. This became very significant when the ‘Dig for Victory’ campaign was being promoted by the Government during the Second World War. The photograph on the previous page, taken in September 1939, gives a good indication of the extent of the garden. A vast range of vegetables were cultivated, including potatoes, parsnips, peas, cabbages and cauliflowers, and a large selection of salad vegetables. Flowers, including Sweet Peas, were also successfully raised in the garden. In the 1960s, two bee hives assisted fruit pollination.



The horticultural endeavours of the members were so successful that Harry entered produce from the Garden Club in Leigh Horticultural Society’s Flower Shows and also the Royal Horticultural Society’s prestigious London Flower Shows. The photograph on the left shows Harry watching the boys as they arranged their exhibit of soft fruit at the 1955 RHS Summer Show. In the early 1960s, Harry was joined by another keen gardener, fellow science teacher, Peter Fry, who took over running

the Garden Club when Harry retired in the mid-1960s. Sadly, Peter has also passed away.

The club’s records reveal that in the 1963 RHS Summer Show, the Garden Club achieved first prize for three varieties of blackcurrants, and third prizes for Malling Exploit raspberries and Lobjoits Cos lettuces. An exhibit of blackcurrants was Highly Commended. Careful records were kept of the yield of each variety of vegetable and fruit, the effects of pests and diseases, and quite often the boys also recorded the popularity of certain varieties. In the club’s 1963 report, members logged that a heavy crop of apples was grown, but that ‘every single one was stolen before reaching maturity’, and ‘considerable damage done to fruit cage’! In the 1960s, about fifty boys were members of the Garden Club and a prize awarded to the boy who did most for the club during the year. Interestingly, a few Old Boys have suggested that from the 4<sup>th</sup> Year, those not interested in rugby were seconded to the Garden Club!



When the club finally folded in the late 1960s, the site of the garden was grassed over and once again became part of the sports field. And today, all that remains of the Garden Club is its tool shed (seen in the distance in the photograph on the left) and, of course, the cherished memories of the boys, whose first experience of gardening was first sparked by the enthusiasm of Harry Smith and Peter Fry!

My thanks to Mary Fry, wife of the late Peter Fry, for the loan of photographs and archive material, and many Old Westcliffian’s for their memories of the Garden Club. **Jim Sanctuary**

photographs and archive material, and many Old Westcliffian’s for their memories of the Garden Club. **Jim Sanctuary**



**ANSWERS TO MALCOLM’S LONDON UNDERGROUND STATIONS QUIZ PUBLISHED IN LOCAL HISTORY LINK NO. 1**

1. Swiss Cottage
2. Cannon Street
3. King’s Cross
4. Barking
5. Paddington
6. Parson Green
7. Black Friars
8. Mile End
9. White City
10. Leicester Square
11. Royal Oak
12. Turnham Green
13. Tower Hill
14. Waterloo
15. Bank
16. Queen’s Park
17. Shepherd’s Bush
18. Westminster
19. Baker Street
20. Blackhorse Road

Well done if you got them all correct, but no prizes I’m afraid!

“WHAT CAN I DO NOW? ... I’M BORED!”

When my sister returned to work many years ago, I rashly offered to have my nieces for two separate weeks during the summer holidays. They were then 12 and 11 (being just 15 months apart in age): too old to play with dolls and not old enough to go out on their own, so when one day I heard the dreaded words ‘What can I do now? ... I’m bored’ I knew I had to come up with something and fast, but what?

Suddenly, I had a ‘lightbulb’ moment – how about making a film I offered. I immediately added that I would be the camera man (I didn’t want them getting their hands on my beloved old cine camera), Uncle Alan could be the Director and they would be the stars. Having it in mind that the cine films ran for only about 2 ½ minutes, and wanting to pad out the time, I decided that we needed to have a sheet with the name of our



Company (like Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s roaring lion or Rank’s man with the gong). After a lot of thought I suggested that as Uncle Alan always made a mammoth production out of any job that he undertook that should be our name; this produced giggles from them and a glare from him. So duly armed with sheets of paper and colouring pencils (and some considerable time later) they came up with a splendid drawing of a Woolly Mammoth and a sheet of film credits as well.

The plotline was very simple (2 ½ minutes doesn’t allow for too much creativity); an old Professor with a secret formula and an attractive young spy who wanted to steal it. Kitted out in one of my raincoats, collar turned up of course, a pull

on angora hat and a pair of sunglasses the eldest niece was quite happy; the younger one in a suede bomber jacket of Alan’s (well it was the 1980’s after all) much less so until we found some black wool which cut into fairly long lengths and sellotaped to her upper lip made a splendid Zapata moustache.

Silent filming then commenced (no sound in those days); the ‘Spy’ edged along the outside wall (catching my mac all the time) while the Professor sat at a table lit only by candle, (not sure why as this made filming extraordinarily difficult) with his papers spread before him until the ‘Spy’ inflicted a nasty blow to the back of his head with a torch whereupon he rolled dramatically from the chair to the floor and she made off with the papers.

When the film was finally developed and returned (I seem to remember it had to go to Hemel Hempstead) it was very well received by the appreciative audience (Mum, Dad, Grandmother and Grandfather) and indeed the ‘stars’ themselves who then wanted to film the sequel.

We never did make the sequel. No one had a clue how it would end and by the following summer the Professor, who had grown quite a few inches and filled our as well, wanted a much more glamorous role.

However nonetheless the evidence does remain somewhere in one of my cupboards although sadly can no longer be viewed since the projector went many years ago.

Why have I suddenly remembered all this? Well In these hugely unusual and difficult times all the memories came flooding back when I heard myself say: “What can I do now? ... I’m Bored!” **Sue Balkwell**

The photograph is the MGM lion, named Slats, born at Dublin Zoo in 1919, and used as their trade mark on all black and white films between 1924 and 1928. Slats died in 1936 and his hide is on display at the *McPherson Museum* in the town of McPherson, Kansas. Since Slats died, photographs of six other lions have been used for the MGM trade mark image. **JS**



As well as this entertaining article, **Sue Balkwell** has also supplied the quiz for this edition of *Local History Link*, which you will find on the next page. All you have to do is name the film star shown in the cigarette card photograph. You will find the answers in the next newsletter.

Sue discovered the cigarette cards while clearing the shed. Have you found anything interesting when decluttering? Let me know and I’ll share it with your fellow members. **JS**

