

Local History Link

Keeping you in touch during the coronavirus emergency

No. 10

Welcome to edition No. 10 of *Local History Link*. We start with Tony's excellent overview of the early history of Leigh and, in future editions, we hope to feature articles on specific periods in the development of the area. Please email articles, photos and favourite recipes to Jim at jsanctuary28@gmail.com or post to 28 Darlinghurst Grove, Leigh-on-Sea, SS9 3LG. As usual, keep safe, keep well – and also, keep alert!

Tony, Tricia and Jim



THE EARLY HISTORY OF LEIGH

Following the last Ice Age, the climate returned to normal in what is now south-east Essex, with dense forests emerging. For thousands of years there were no people in these forests. The Stone Age hunter-gatherer people gradually came into the area but left little trace of their occupancy, apart from the stone tools and axes which they used.

About 3,000 years ago, these Stone Age people were replaced by inhabitants who had learnt to use bronze for the manufacture of weapons and tools. In 1880, a small bronze hoard was found in Leigh, and in 1926 a larger bronze hoard was found in the area of Flemming Avenue and Tankerville Drive, close to Prittle Brook. This was the very first evidence of a human settlement in the area. A bronze hoard would mean that there was a bronze foundry present and hence some local area of habitation.

The Bronze Age peoples were replaced over the next 500 years by further communities from the Continent, able to work with iron to produce better weapons and tools, and also wheels for carts and war chariots. Civilisation developed rapidly in the area and a large part of east Essex, including our area of Leigh, formed a small state. The people were called the Trinovantes.

In 55AD, the Roman army invaded Britain and the whole of the country, including our area of south-east Essex, became an outpost of the Roman Empire for 400 years. It is believed the Romans came to the area of Leigh during this time. Although there are no traces of any Roman buildings, many Roman coins have been found in Leigh. One large cache of Roman coins was unearthed when Belfairs High School was being built. After 400 years the Romans left. There then followed a gradual invasion of Angles and Saxons, and our area of Leigh became part of the kingdom of the East Saxons. Saxon coins of the time of Alfred the Great (ca. 847-899) were found in West Street, Leigh, in 1892.

In the 9th century the area was raided by the Vikings and they established a fort at Benfleet, from where they could harass Saxon ships sailing up the Thames. This led to the Battle of Benfleet in 894, the Viking army retreating through Leigh towards Shoebury. The Battle of Ashingdon was fought nearby where Canute and the Vikings defeated the Saxon army under Edmund Ironside (990-1016). For some years after this, the Leigh area remained under Viking control.

In 1066, the Normans under William the Conqueror ruled England after their victory at Hastings. The Domesday Book was completed in 1086 and chronicles the first written record about Leigh, or *Legra* as it was then known which literally means 'a clearing in a forest'. In the Domesday Book, it is described as 'a manor house' and covered an area of roughly 120 acres. It notes that stop-nets or 'kiddles' were in placed at the water's edge to catch fish on the out-going tide. It also reports that there were about 100 sheep and five cows. The total population of the community was about 40 people. The manor was held by a 'freeman' named Ranulph, who had been a soldier in the Norman Army at Hastings.

So, from this small beginning Leigh developed and during several centuries of the Middle Ages it became an important seaport. With the coming of the railway to Leigh in 1854, the little fishing village began to develop into the great and pleasant residential conurbation that it is today. **Tony Bullock**

THE HOUSE WHERE WE LIVE

Amanda and I have lived in the same house, since August 1976. In September 2008 we received through the post a handwritten letter, addressed to "The Occupier". It started as follows:

Dear Occupiers,
At the moment I am researching a tragedy that happened in your house in February 1921 known as "the Leigh Tragedy". The house known as "Highbury" was owned or rented (my grandfather was an Estate Agent) by Mr William Weare, his wife Nellie and three young children (11, 9 ad 8) in February 1921. Nellie gassed herself and her three children in one of the bedrooms

Well, the letter went further, but I'm pausing at this point to remark that here was a letter rather different from the bills and junk mail that Amanda and I are accustomed to receiving. We read on. Even before we reached the end - and it wasn't a long letter - we had decided that the writer definitely had the right Whitstable woman in her 80s, Mrs Pat Graham (née Weare), a daughter of that older son mentioned above; and she was looking to come to terms with her family's past. The letter did give some details of the incident, and it mentioned contemporary newspaper accounts of the deaths, the inquest and the funeral, of which we could have copies if we wished. Pat Graham's account said that the deaths happened overnight, and her grandfather had to break through a panel of the bedroom door when he went upstairs in the morning looking for Nellie and the little ones.

Well, remembering back to the days when we did our own decorating, we knew that one of the panels of that bedroom door had been repaired many years before. Little had we suspected that the breakage had a grim story attached: a man's quest to find his wife and children when all he would find was four lifeless bodies on the bed. There is a sequel to this whole sorry tale, but when she first wrote Pat knew only sketchy detail. She knew William Weare had drowned himself "some years later", but she didn't know where or when.

Over the years we have been able to piece together a pretty full picture of what happened. Nellie had bought from an ironmonger's at 87 Leigh Road (now Rowlands Pharmacy) some flexible metal tubing to channel the kitchen gas supply into the bedroom, and she used blankets and paper as a door-seal to help the gas do its job more effectively. We've read a harrowing account of the funeral, and the detailed inquest account. Time wasn't wasted before inquests back then: the bodies were discovered on Friday morning, and the inquest at the Park Hotel steamed ahead on the Monday, barely 72 hours later. A cynic might cast doubt on the thoroughness of this procedure, especially when a lodger in the house, who knew Nellie "very well", was "unable to say" whether the marriage was happy. And it should be noted that for some six months Nellie and the youngsters had been sleeping apart from William, allegedly in the interests of the children's health.

William Weare was in fact a seasoned letter writer, with several letters appearing in the 1900s in local newspapers in connection with the public library service, which at the time was quite a new animal and was also William's profession.

He was stirred into writing a letter to the Southend Standard in the wake of police evidence given at the inquest. The police inspector had described the room as poorly furnished and dirty. In response William goes into minute detail with measurements of the room itself, the fireplace, the window and the bedstead; and he points out that the door and the wardrobe need to be able to open, imposing further limitations on space. He gives intricate detail of the bedding, and he suggests that the description of the room as "dirty" is a slur on his late wife's reputation.

We've also managed to find a press report of his suicide, which occurred in the river Wey at Guildford in September 1926. The inquest to this death was told that William had reported the previous month to Guildford police because he thought a warrant was out for his arrest in connection with the 1921 deaths. The word

"delusional" was used in newspaper reports of this inquest.

In 2008, Pat Graham was wanting to come and see “the scene of the crime”, and to do other things, such as visiting the cemetery, to help bring closure. There was also clearly an element in all this of her wanting to revisit her own childhood: she lived in the town herself as a child. For our part we were keen to find out as much as we could about the whole case partly through sheer curiosity, and partly through a wish to help Pat. We didn’t feel any emotional involvement in the events, and we didn’t feel the house and room were suddenly tainted. That being said, we do wonder whether, if we had been armed with this knowledge in 1976, we would have been quite so keen to award the room to our daughter when she arrived in 1979.

In the years since we received that first letter we have had further contact from time to time. Pat came to see us, and the damaged door, in 2012, and on that day, she tried some field work at the cemetery. Or rather, cemeteries: it would seem that the remains were moved at some point from unconsecrated to consecrated ground. Records are not clear, partly (it would seem) because a fire complicated matters at some stage. We don’t even know if we’re talking about Sutton Road or North Road, let alone the precise location of the hallowed(?) plot. Pat’s driver in 2012, or rather his Satnav, took her home on the A127, so her further wish to see her school was dashed. The school was Queenswood, which later became the ‘Old Westcliffians’ clubhouse in London Road, at the corner of Oakleigh Park Drive.

We continue to exchange information as and when we come across it. We sent Pat a 93rd birthday card the other week, and in exchange received a post-card/photo of “Stevens and The Girls - Concert Party 1927” (see photo left).



We have yet to find out if one of the girls was linked to Pat, but she thought we might want to try and find out who “Stevens” was. Well, job done: “Stevens” was a songwriter, who actually performed in the 20s in Southend, with his “Girls”, or one summer with his “Jolly Boys”, in the Kursaal Gardens. There were then at least 3 Concert Parties (a music hall style of entertainment) in our seaside area. George Alex Stevens, to give him his full name, lived most of his life (when not touring!) in Lambeth.

He had at least two brothers who were also entertainers. George wrote plenty of songs, upwards of 2000, but he was reported on his death in 1954 to be “penniless”. You’ll have heard of at least one of his songs: On Mother Kelly’s Doorstep. **Andy Archard**



TOMMY COOPER AND OTHERS

Reading Tony’s account of having to visit backstage at the Cliffs Pavilion to treat Tommy Cooper, reminded me of the time myself and my wife, Sandra, went to see Mr Cooper at the Talk of the South - what later became TOTS, then TOTS 2000, and finally TALK nightclub, before closing for good at the end of last year. You’ll all know the venue overlooks Southend seafront and is accessed via Lucy Road adjacent to the Seaway car park. This must have been in the early to mid-70s when it was normal for well-known TV stars of the day to travel around the country performing at local venues to smaller audiences. As Tony said in his article, Tommy Cooper was one of the funniest of all comedians and his zany sense of humour certainly appealed to both Sandra and myself. I recall we both greatly enjoyed his act but just a week later we had tickets, again at Talk of the South, to see Bruce Forsyth (see photo), another big name of course in the 70s. Bruce came out, did a particularly long show, engaged closely with the quite intimate audience who sat around with him in the middle. As was his style, he would take the mickey out of many of those watching and enjoying the show and in particular picking on one poor woman to be the butt of many jokes. (At the end of his performance he

presented this lady with a lovely bouquet of flowers for taking it all in such good humour.) I remember us leaving and both commenting that we were surprised but we actually enjoyed Bruce's show more than Tommy Cooper's performance a week earlier.

I was also a regular visitor in my younger days to the dances that were held monthly at the Cliffs Pavilion on a Saturday evening. I used to visit with my good school friend, another Tony, who later also became a doctor. There were no discos in those days and dances were always to live music; we saw many of the great names from the late 60's including Ike and Tina Turner, Alan Price (remember his *Simon Smith and the Amazing Dancing Bear*, plus he was originally with the Animals – another group I went to see several years later at the Cliffs, but that was cancelled at the last minute. I managed to get my first speeding fine on the way home!) We also saw The Tremeloes, Georgie Fame and the Blue Flames, and numerous others now long forgotten. So, thanks Tony, your article brought back many happy memories. **David White**



DAVID WHITE'S FORK BISCUITS RECIPE

This an old Mary Berry recipe that I use to make some quite yummy biscuits. It is also quick and so easy that the grandchildren can enjoy making them too. I usually make double the amount given below adding currants to half the dough and keeping the other half plain. I find in my oven they are cooked just fine in 15 minutes. Warning – they never last long in our household! Makes 12-16 biscuits and you will need two baking trays, lightly buttered.



Ingredients:

100g Softened Butter

50g Caster Sugar

150g Self-Raising Flour

Currants/Sultanas (optional)

Instructions:

Preheat the oven to 180°C /fan 160°C/ gas 4. Measure the butter into a bowl and beat to soften. Gradually beat in the sugar and then the flour. Bring the mixture together with your hands to form a dough. Add in the currants or sultanas if you wish. Form the dough into 12-16 balls about the size of a walnut and place spaced well apart on the prepared baking trays. Dip a fork in a little water and use this to flatten the biscuits. Bake in the preheated oven for 15–20 minutes until a very pale golden. Lift off the baking tray and leave to cool completely on a wire rack.



WHAT HAPPENED IN ESSEX ON THE DAY YOU RECEIVE THIS EDITION OF **LOCAL HISTORY LINK**

June 1st 1541 – The demolition of Barking Abbey began under direction from Henry VIII's Court of Augmentation with Richard Riche as its Chancellor.

WILLIAM FORSYTH, PIONEER OR CHARLATAN?



One of the earliest shrubs to bloom in our gardens is the ubiquitous, yellow-flowered Forsythia, named after one of the founders of the Royal Horticultural Society, William Forsyth (1737 – 1804).

Scottish by birth, the young Forsyth made his way to London, working firstly at the Apothecaries Garden in Chelsea, and later at Syon House, the home of the Duke of Northumberland. He returned to Chelsea in 1770 to take up the position of Head Gardener, where he constructed one of the first rock gardens, with stone from the Tower of London and lava rock from Iceland. He also exchanged plants with other botanical gardens, greatly increasing the diversity of horticultural collections throughout Britain and Europe. In 1779, he moved to Kensington to become gardener to George III. It was there that he corresponded with John Wedgwood, son of the great potter, about forming a Horticultural Society, later to be become the Royal Horticultural Society. By this time, Forsyth was at the top of his profession and highly regarded in horticultural circles.

But sadly, it is not the illustriousness of his horticultural achievements that Forsyth is to be remembered, but rather a most unfortunate episode that resulted in many of his peers declaring him to be a charlatan. This was in the early days of the Napoleonic Wars, at a time when the Royal Navy was very active and good oak for shipbuilding was in short supply. Forsyth claimed to have invented a ‘plaister’, a secret concoction he claimed could render the timber of derelict oak trees ‘fit for the Navy as though they had never been injured’.

The Admiralty was naturally very interested in Forsyth’s ‘plaister’ and the Government was persuaded to pay him a large sum of money to disclose the secret formula. Forsyth published a best-selling treatise on his ‘plaister’, and the formula was also published in *The London Gazette*. However, a number of prominent gardeners experimented with his treatment and quickly revealed that it was quite useless. Forsyth was exposed as a fraud.

His humiliation was to be short-lived, for he died within a few months following the disclosure of the worthlessness of his ‘plaister’. Yet, despite his failings, Forsyth was a fine gardener and horticultural pioneer. Remember him when you admire the spring-flowering shrub named in his honour. **Jim Sanctuary**

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Lianne Loveday sent in the following article, which she says came from her father a long time ago, and thought it might be of interest to members ‘of a particular age’ – born before 1945!

WE ARE THE SURVIVORS

We were born before television, penicillin, polio shots, frozen food, Xerox, contact lenses, videos, frisbees, and the pill. We lived before radar, credit cards, split atoms, laser beams and ball point pens, before dishwashers, tumble dryers, air conditioners and drip-dry clothes.

We got married first, then started living together – how quaint can you be? We existed before teenagers, house-husbands, computer dating and dual careers, when a meaningful relationship meant getting along with your cousins, and sheltered accommodation was where you waited for a bus.

We were born before day-care centres, playgroups, and disposable nappies. We had never heard of FM radio, tape decks, electric typewriters, artificial hearts, word processors, calculators, computers, yoghurt, and men wearing earrings. For us, time-sharing meant togetherness, a chip was something you put in a ‘butty’, hardware meant nuts and bolts, and software wasn’t a word at all. A p.c. was the local ‘bobby’, a monitor served milk at playtime and a mouse had a long tail.

Before 1945, ‘Made in Japan’ meant junk, the term ‘making out’ referred to how you did in your exams, a stud was something that fastened a collar to a shirt and ‘going all the way’ meant staying on a double-decker bus until it reached the depot. Pizzas and instant coffee were unheard of and MacDonald only had a farm. In our day, cigarette smoking was fashionable, grass was mown, and coke was kept in the coal house. A joint

was a piece of meat you had on Sundays and pot was something you cooked it in. A beetle was a creepy-crawly, a gay person was the life and soul of the party, and crumpet we had for tea.

People had a lavatory in the yard, a tin bath in front of the fire and an alarm call was the 'Knocker-up'. A porn shop was the one with the three gold balls outside, a disc jockey was a National Hunt rider with a back injury, and a recycling unit was known as the rag-and-bone man. Debt and illegitimacy were secrets, central heating was an oven-plate or firebrick wrapped in a blanket, a duvet was your Dad's overcoat, and no-one had walked on the moon.

We wrinklies must be a hardy bunch when you think of the way the World has changed and the adjustments we have had to make. No wonder there is a generation gap!



AN ARCHITECT'S GARDEN

Sir Frederick Gibberd was an important architect of the mid-20th century whose major works include Liverpool Catholic Cathedral and the Regent's Park Mosque. But to the people of Essex he is perhaps best known as the planner and designer of Harlow New Town, considered by many to be his finest achievement. Sir Frederick was a tall, elegant man, with flowing white hair, suggestive of a man with an artistic flair. A great supporter of British art, his collection of water-colours, including works by Graham Sutherland and John Piper, is on permanent exhibition at Harlow Civic Centre. He was also a keen gardener, and tucked away in a quiet corner of north-west Essex is a remarkable woodland garden at Marsh Lane, Harlow, his home from the 1950s until his death in 1984.

Featuring shady glades, brooks and pools, alleys and lawns, the magnificent seven-acre garden, situated on the side of a small valley, is the beautiful setting for Sir Frederick's inspirational collection of sculpture, ceramics and architectural salvage, collected in the course of his career. His mantra was that '*garden design is an art of space, like architecture and town design*'. He was an advocate of the 'garden room' concept, '*each with its own character, from small intimate spaces to large enclosed prospects*', a feature popular with other notable 20th century garden designers. In this regard, consider Vita Sackville West's Sissinghurst Castle Garden and Major Lawrence Johnston's Hidcote Manor Garden, each a supreme example of this concept.

Most of the sculptural pieces, which sit so comfortably within the garden setting, were installed during the last twelve years of Sir Frederick's life and include a number of spectacular sculptures by the Dutch artist,

Gerda Rubinstein, now in her late 80s and resident in London. An impressive example of her work is a bust of the architect. The superb ceramic works include a magnificent stoneware pot by the late Monica Young. But perhaps the most outstanding feature of this wonderful garden is the pair of massive 'Roman' columns, salvaged from the old Coutts Bank building in the Strand, which was redesigned by Sir Frederick in the late 1960s. These imposing pillars stand in a woodland clearing, their awesome height dominating the surroundings. Another interesting feature is The Lime Walk, reminiscent of a lofty cathedral nave, the huge trees towering above the visitor on either side of the pathway.

There is horticultural interest throughout the seasons – from spring bulbs, hellebores and primroses, to the dramatic hues of autumn and the resplendent Tapestry Hedge in its spectacular autumnal colours. Hugh Johnson's critique that '*there are few gardens in England where the eye and mind are more consistently stimulated and amused – it is landscape as theatre*', admirably describes this most amazing artistic and horticultural creation.

Although normally open to visitors between April and September, the garden is currently closed and will not reopen until the Government recommendations indicate it is safe to do so. **Jim Sanctuary**