



PRESIDENT: J Scott McCracken BA FSA MIFA

VICE PRESIDENTS: Viscountess Hanworth, Lionel Green and William Rudd

BULLETIN NO. 152

CHAIRMAN: Peter Hopkins

DECEMBER 2004



PROGRAMME DECEMBER-MARCH



Saturday 4 December 2.30pm

Morden Baptist Church

'Sherlock Holmes in Streatham'

John Brown, who produces the useful *Local History Reprints* series, is a well-known member of and speaker to the Streatham Society, and is also one of our own members. The subject he has chosen certainly sounds intriguing!

Morden Baptist Church is in Morden town centre, on the corner of Crown Lane and Grasmere Avenue.

Saturday 15 January 2.30pm

Martin Way Methodist Church Hall

'The History and Development of the London Underground'

Neil Lloyd's slide talk on this big subject will include explanations of the presence of Pullman cars at Baker Street; the brick wall of Leinster Gardens; and the Metropolitan Railway's ventures into the building industry!

Martin Way Methodist Church is a 10-minute walk from Morden town centre.

It is on bus routes 164 and 413, and there is a car-park.

Saturday 5 February 2.30pm

Mitcham Library Hall

'Brickwork in Surrey to 1850'

A 'hands-on' expert on bricks of all periods, **Ian West BSc ARICS** will give an illustrated talk on the history of the manufacture and the use of bricks in Surrey until the early Victorian period.

Mitcham Library is in London Road and is served by many bus routes. There is a small car-park.

Monday 28 February 7.00 for 7.15pm

Park Place, Commonside West, Mitcham

Annual Dinner for Members and Guests

Please see enclosed application form

Saturday 5 March 2.30pm

Martin Way Methodist Church Hall

'The Evolution of the English Manorial System'

A fully illustrated talk by **Lieutenant-Colonel J W Molyneux-Child**, himself a lord of the manor. He will relate the story of the English manor from its beginnings, and describe how some ancient traditions are kept alive today.

See above for location of Martin Way Methodist Church.



The Society's events are open to the general public, unless otherwise stated.

You are invited to make a donation to help with the Society's running costs.



A VISIT TO DENNIS SEVERS' HOUSE, SPITALFIELDS

In September a group of 17 members of the Society enjoyed **The Experience** of visiting this house, which is a time capsule created by Dennis Severs, an artist who lived in the house in much the same way as its original occupants might have done in the early 18th century.

Dennis Severs, who died in 1999 aged 51, was born in Southern California, and as a child discovered through books and photographs the “English light”, which was warmer and richer than the clear light of his home country. He was determined to come to England and discover it for himself. Through watching old black-and-white adaptations of Dickens’ stories he also became fascinated with the English way of life of that period.

He first visited England in 1965, and then in 1967 when only 18 he came to live here as a student, and it was ‘love at first sight’!

Once settled here he looked for a house of his own, and also commenced collecting objects from street markets and salerooms to put in his house.

He bought 18 Folgate Street in 1979, not with the object of restoring it, but to bring it to life as his home. Armed with a candle, chamberpot and bed-roll he moved in and started sleeping in each of its ten rooms, to get the feel of the place. He then set out over time to create a different mood or atmosphere for each room, to reflect the spirit of the various ages.

He decided to create one room at a time, starting with the basement kitchen, which still contained an original dresser, fireplace, lead plumbing and sash windows.

Gradually the objects collected over the years were positioned on walls, dresser and table. Dennis Severs, as a foreigner in a host country, could not apply for renovation grants, and had very little money. Food was often found abandoned by the stalls in the nearby market, and fires made with wood from pallets left behind by the stallholders. Friends would come along and stay and enjoy the ‘experience’, and often lend a hand with household repairs.

Eventually Dennis decided to invent a family of Huguenot silk-weavers by the name of Gervais – later changed to Jervis – to be the imagined inhabitants of the house. As you visit each room in turn, lit by fire and candlelight, you are invited to look and listen for evidence of the Jervis family. In the kitchen there is food on the kitchen table waiting to be cooked, the remains of a half-eaten meal by the sink and freshly baked cakes on the dresser.

Listen and you may hear creaking floorboards when no-one is present, chiming clocks, and a faint sound of muffled voices in another room. This is what Dennis Severs called a “Still Life Drama”.

From the kitchen and cellar in the basement the visitor passes upwards through the house to drawing-rooms, dining-rooms and bedrooms, all furnished with the appropriate furniture, ornaments and paintings, and all with evidence of and clues to the existence of the fictional family, the Jervises.

One particularly atmospheric room is the Smoking Room, where the “Still Life Drama” re-enacts a version of Hogarth’s picture *A Modern Midnight Conversation*, which is on the wall above the fireplace. Smashed glasses litter the hearth. Opposite the painting is the table with the remains of the previous night’s drinking for all to see. The punchbowls, the upturned glasses, the puddle of wax from the fallen candlesticks are all there.

We as visitors are invited to tour this house as respectful observers, and silence is expected as you move slowly from floor to floor drinking in the atmosphere. The house has not been set up as a heritage site, nor a museum, but as a unique experience which requires you, the visitor, to be transported into another world – if you want to be!

As Dennis Severs says at the end of his book,

“And, dear visitor, take this as the motto of the house:

AUT VISUM AUT NON!

(Oh, for God’s sake!) You either see it or you don’t.”

[For those wishing to visit 18 Folgate Street, it is open to the public on the first and third Sundays of the month 2.00-5.00pm. £8 per head. Tel: (020) 7247 4013.

Dennis Severs’ book *18 Folgate Street* published by Vintage and Chatto & Windus 2001 costs £10.99 in paperback.]

Sheila Harris



Photograph by Desmond Bazley

VISIT TO THE MORDEN MOSQUE

On Thursday 7 October no fewer than 35 members and friends of the Society met in London Road outside the Baital Futuh mosque. The striking complex of buildings was gleaming beneath the blue sky of a sunny autumn morning as we were greeted by Mr Nasser Khan, Vice-President of the UK branch of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Association. He was our principal guide for our tour, though three of his colleagues also accompanied us, including the imam, who is from Ghana. We learned that, though there are Ahmadiyya communities in 170 countries, their strongest support is in the Indian sub-continent and in Africa. We were also told (but not by him) that Nasser Khan had given up his job, and three years of his life, to see the Morden project through. It was formally inaugurated in October 2003.

The Ahmadiyya are a branch of Islam who follow the teachings of Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1914), who was born in Qadiyan in rural Punjab, and whom they believe to be the true Messiah. As a small sect within Islam they often encounter prejudice, but they are a peace-loving community with a creed of 'Love for All, Hatred for None', and for them the *jihad*, or 'holy war', is one of example and teaching, not militancy.

The Morden building, once a 'state of the art' bottling plant for Express Dairies, on a big site next to Morden South station, had been standing empty for years when acquired by the Ahmadiyya. Inevitably the fabric had suffered, and there was also a large squatter population of pigeons. However the structure was basically well-built and remained sound, and its new owners have most ingeniously adapted the old building to provide spaces for all kinds of use. The mosque itself is new.

At Muslim gatherings, such as weddings, it is the custom that men and women eat separately. So there is a very large dining-hall for women and one not quite as large for men! A third hall, marked out with several badminton courts, also has a stage, and is used for a variety of activities. This last is at basement level, where there is also a large library under construction, and where the old plant-room serves its original function, but with more sophisticated machinery nowadays. There are schoolrooms too where children from the age of about six learn to recite the Qur'an in classical Arabic. Higher up in the building a new mezzanine floor has been inserted, but also some of the old accommodation has taken on a new life, and there is now ample space for offices, meetings, classes and conferences.

No expense has been spared on the mosque, which is behind the old dairy buildings. We all, I am sure, found it a most beautiful and impressive building – very simple, and very well thought out. One of the minarets is the old works chimney ingeniously disguised, but the rest is entirely new. (The minarets are symbolic only – they are not used to summon people to prayers.) It is mainly clad in reconstituted marble, and the dome is covered with stainless steel. The approach is up a wide flight of steps, beside which water flows over a commemorative inscription – a reminder of the streams of Paradise.

The women's prayer hall is below ground, and, as there is a high water-table in the locality, the building team faced some technical problems – but these were solved. It receives daylight, but preserves privacy, by means of hi-tech translucent plastic wall panels at ground level. The floor is covered with deep carpet (American) in broad stripes of restful green, and at one side, behind a glass wall, is a crèche. The men's prayer hall above has as its ceiling the great dome with windows all round. The same striped carpet is on the floor, so that worshippers can range themselves tidily. The *mihrab*, a simply decorated niche, indicates the direction of Mecca. Off the vestibules of the building are beautifully equipped washrooms for the worshippers, who are required to cleanse themselves before praying.

Friday prayers from the mosque are transmitted by television all round the world, with simultaneous translation into seven languages. The translation room is at the London Mosque in Gressenhall Road, Southfields. This opened in 1924, its construction having been funded by women of the Ahmadiyya movement, many of whom contributed their jewellery to the cause.

One of the traditions of the Ahmadiyya is loyalty to and support of the community in which they live, and in Morden they are keen to be friendly and considerate neighbours. We were certainly made most welcome, our questions were fully answered and we felt that our interest was valued. At the end of our visit there was a lavish spread of sweet and savoury nibbles, soft drinks and tea, before we were taken to the comprehensive bookshop near the gate. We finally came away impressed, touched, and better informed.



Photograph by Desmond Bazley

Judith Goodman

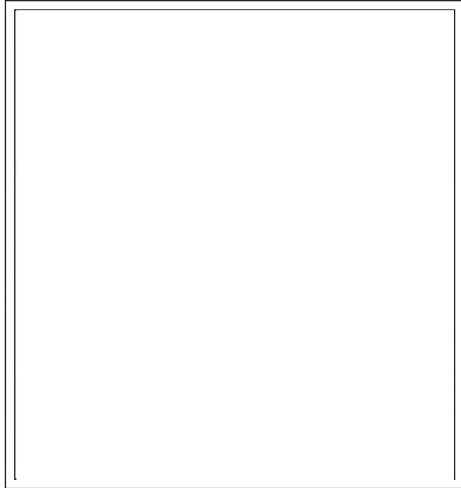
‘THE MILLS AND GARDENS OF THE UPPER WANDLE’

There was a large audience for John Phillips, Sutton’s Heritage Projects Officer, when he spoke to us in October. He explained that the retreat of the Ice Age had shaped the River Wandle. This had an influence on the flow of the river, making it ideal for the numerous mills which over the years have lined the river.

Grand houses also grew up along the Wandle. Carew Manor was built in the 16th century. As with other houses along the Wandle, Carew utilised the water in the landscaping of water gardens. A moat once surrounded it. In the 18th century the moat was filled in and replaced by a lake in front of the house. There was also a lake at the back.



Carew Manor in a print of c.1830, showing one end of the western lake



*Black Swans at Culvers, Carshalton
Illustrated London News 27 Aug 1859 p.203*

Carshalton village had examples of houses where the water had been used in landscaping. Lower Pond formed part of the landscape of Stone Court (now the Grove Park). Sir John Fellowes laid out formal gardens around Carshalton House (now St Philomena’s School). Water was used in Carshalton Park to form the grotto canal. As the name suggests the canal (now usually dry) leads from a once elaborately decorated grotto.

The upper Wandle was home to a variety of mills. For instance there were several leather mills along the river. At Butter Hill and Beddington there were snuff mills. One of the most interesting mill owners was William Kilburn. His mill was in London Road, Wallington, opposite The Grange. He experimented with natural dyes and produced some beautifully patterned printed fabrics. Examples of his work can be seen in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Advances in technology were the reason for the decline of the Wandle mills. The coming of the steam engine meant that there was no longer any need for water power.

John Phillips had some excellent slides and, entirely without notes, gave us a fascinating and informative talk.

Sue Mansell

PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORD PROJECT

I am pleased to report that following discussion at a special meeting on October 29, and agreement to the proposal at the AGM, the Society has agreed to proceed with a Photographic Record Project. The objectives are:

- (1) To establish and archive a photographic record of buildings, scenes, activities, events, people, etc. in the Society’s area of interest, which will be of value to current and future local historians and members of the Society. The Surrey History Centre has kindly agreed to accept photographs for professional archiving.
- (2) To keep copies of the photographs for perusal by members of the Society, e.g. in albums at certain meetings, and for possible use in exhibitions, Society publications, etc.
- (3) To liaise with other organizations and individuals to encourage or persuade them to provide existing photographs of potential historical interest for archiving.

These objectives are a challenge, and it remains to be seen whether they can all be achieved! Much depends on the efforts of members who will take photographs – thanks to those who have volunteered so far. The Society has established a budget to cover the costs of film, and the printing and storage of photographs. We have set up a Committee to manage the project, chaired by myself, and the first tasks are to identify and prioritize the subjects to be photographed, and to establish the procedures for recording, cataloguing and storing photographs. One priority will be to record subjects that are known to be about to disappear, or events that will not recur, so we welcome information on these cases – e.g. locations to be re-developed, ‘one-off’ future events, a retail or industrial activity of historical interest that is coming to an end. Our volunteer photographers all live in the Merton/Morden area, and we would welcome the involvement of somebody who lives in the Mitcham area who would be better qualified to identify subjects of interest in Mitcham.

If any members have photographs that they are prepared to lend or donate for purposes of archiving, please telephone me, so that we can make arrangements to receive the photographs along with as much information as possible about the location, the date, etc. Don’t forget, photographs of the local area and its people/activities taken in the last twenty years or so, as well as older ones, will be of value to the historians of the future!

David Roe

TONY SCOTT relates the story of a family drama that had important and lasting implications for the spiritual life of Mitcham:

THE INFLUENCE OF THE OXFORD MOVEMENT IN MITCHAM

In the 1830s and 1840s a 'wind of change' was blowing through the Anglican Church. It has been described as a revival of the conservative, patristic, sacramental form of Anglican piety, and its immediate cause was the supposed menace to religion of the contemporary religious and political liberalism. It was nurtured against a background of the 'Broad Church' theology, the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 and the Reform Bill of 1832. All of which were quite revolutionary for their time.

It is somewhat surprising that a religious revolution originating in faraway academic Oxford should have had a significant effect in Mitcham a decade or so later.

The start of the Oxford Movement, as the religious revival movement was called, is usually ascribed to a sermon preached on 14 July 1833 by John Keble from the pulpit of St Mary's University Church in Oxford. Keble sought to arouse the Church to the dangers of the liberalism then thought to be prevalent. This ideal was taken up by other leading Anglicans in Oxford, notably Edward Pusey* and the vicar of St Mary's, John Henry Newman. Newman published the first *Tracts for the Times* in September 1833, and by 1841 90 tracts had been published, a large proportion coming from Newman's own pen. Newman's studies of the writings of the early Fathers of the Church eventually led him to believe that the Catholic Church was the 'One Fold of Christ'. In 1843 he resigned his post as vicar of St Mary's, and two years later became a Catholic. He was ordained a priest of the Oratorian order in Rome in 1847. On his return to England he founded the Birmingham Oratory, and, later, the one in Brompton Road, London.

In Mitcham at this time the Simpson family were pre-eminent. William Simpson (Jun.), born in 1819, was the eldest son of William and Emily Simpson. Before her marriage the previous year his mother was Emily Cranmer, a member of the family who had been lords of the manor of Mitcham Canons since 1656. The role of lord of the manor fell to William (Sen.) upon the death of his brother-in-law in 1828.

The Simpson family were all members of the Anglican Church, and William (Jun.), the eldest son, went up to Trinity College, Cambridge. There he became interested in the Catholic faith, possibly as a result of the *Tracts* of the Oxford Movement. He was received into the Catholic Church in 1843, together with his wife Winifred, much to the disgust of his parents.

The next son, Richard, went up to Oriel College, Oxford, in 1839, where he must have heard Newman, still vicar of the University Church, preach virtually weekly. Richard Simpson graduated and became an ordained clergyman of the Church of England. He returned to Mitcham in 1844 at the age of 24 to become vicar of Mitcham, a post under the patronage of his parents. Probably as a result of his years at Oxford, and contact with Newman's preaching, Richard Simpson resigned the living soon after Easter 1846, and within a month was received into the Catholic Church, together with his wife. One can imagine the gossip and speculation around the parish church in Mitcham at that time. Virtually immediately after his resignation Richard and his wife left Mitcham and embarked upon the 'Grand Tour' of Europe. When they returned they set up home in Clapham.

The youngest son, Robert, was born in 1825, and in 1842, at the age of 17, went up to St John's College, Oxford, where he too became influenced by the Oxford Movement, and Newman in particular. He became a Catholic in 1845, the same year as Newman's conversion. He left Oxford before graduation, and studied for the Catholic priesthood, subsequently being ordained in Rome in 1849.

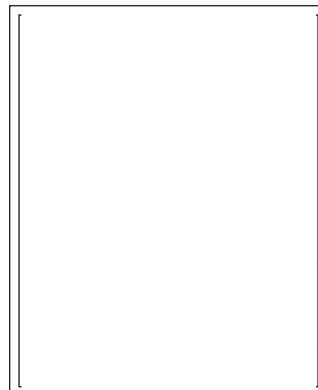
The only daughter of William and Emily Simpson, and the youngest of the family, was also named Emily. She was received into the Catholic Church in 1848 at the age of 22. Four years later she entered the Franciscan convent at Taunton, where she remained until her death in 1883. Her parents stayed Anglican all their lives.

The Catholics had further reason to thank the Simpsons and the Oxford Movement.

In 1853 William Simpson (Jun.) and his wife Winifred set up a small school and a Catholic Mass centre in their house, Elm Lodge, Cricket Green. It is from this that the present SS Peter and Paul Catholic church and the school of the same name at the Cricket Green have grown. The site of the original chapel, which is now a small part of the present school site, was donated by William Simpson (Jun.) in 1861, and the site of the present church was given by Winifred Simpson in 1880.

*For an account of Edward Pusey as a young schoolboy see *Lord Monson's Schooldays: Reminiscences of Mitcham 1804-1809* published by this Society.

John Henry Newman preaching at St Mary's church, Oxford 1841
(Picture taken from S Foister Cardinal Newman 1801-90 National Portrait Gallery 1990)



LOCAL HISTORY WORKSHOP

Friday 13 August. Five present. Peter Hopkins in the chair

- ◆ **Lionel Green**, who is working on his book on Merton priory, discussed, mainly with Cyril Maidment, how many courts there were at the priory. It was agreed that there were three – Great Court, Middle Court and Inner Court.
- ◆ Still on the subject of the priory, **Cyril Maidment** had brought along for discussion the 1866 revision of the 1805 Merton Abbey estate map (copy in the Local Studies Centre). Lionel and Peter joined in.
- ◆ **Judith Goodman** reported on the John Innes centenary celebrations in Merton Park [see *Bulletin* No.151]. In a 19th-century history of British ceramics (a subject she is interested in) she had by chance come across the full text of the William Knight indenture of 1690 relating to ‘Merton Mill’. William Knight was a “Pottmaker” in St Botolph without Aldgate, London. Judith thought that the fact that the mill was then being used “for Grinding Colours for the Glazing of White Ware” would have meant special grindstones, as these would be mineral materials. She didn’t know of any other Wandle mills that had been used for this particular purpose.
- ◆ **Don Fleming** pointed out that on this very day 300 years ago the battle of Blenheim was fought, and won by John Spencer Churchill, Duke of Marlborough. Therefore his subject would be Lady Diana Beauclerk, artist, who, before her first marriage, was Lady Diana Spencer. The Spencers always named the first girl child of each generation Diana. Lady Di, as she was known, lived for a time in the late 18th century at Mitcham Hall, where she may have painted or drawn scenes of Mitcham? She died in 1808 at Richmond, where she had a house. She was 73.
- ◆ **Peter Hopkins** had found references in the account rolls of the Rectory of Morden, among the Westminster Abbey muniments, to ‘Estbury’ and ‘the manor of Westbury’, both within the medieval parish. These two names appear from the middle of the 14th century. Peter suggested that ‘Estbury’ would appear to be that part of Morden which was within the manor that, later that century, became known as Ravensbury. ‘The manor of Westbury’ could only be the Abbey’s manor of Morden. There is also mention of ‘the court of the hospital of Morden’, referring to Merton Priory’s Spital estate between Green Lane and modern Farm Road (the ‘farm’ in question being Spital Farm).

Don Fleming

THE THREE KINGS – from the postbag

Lionel Green has another suggestion for the derivation of this pub name [see *Bulletin* No.151 page 4]. The year 1066 was known as the Year of the Three Kings! What an inn sign that would make – Edward, Harold and William!

John Pile cites Larwood and Hotten’s *English Inn Signs* of 1866 (rev. 1951), which links signs of *Three Crowns* with *Three Kings*, and the Magi.

THE NATIONAL MONUMENTS RECORD REVIEW

In the autumn of 2003 we were sent a long and very detailed questionnaire by the National Monuments Record, which is part of English Heritage. They were seeking the views of a whole range of societies, other bodies, and also some individuals, about the future priorities of the NMR. Committee members took some time and trouble to fill in their responses, which we averaged out (there was quite a range) and returned. And now we have been sent a 36-page brochure and a letter from none other than Sir Neil Cossons, Chairman of English Heritage, in which he thanks us for participating in the survey, to which there had been 898 responses.

The brochure outlines the NMR Review’s conclusions and recommendations. The proposed mission for the NMR is for it to be put in place as *the* national archive of England’s historic environment. Online access to archives, resources and services; partnership with other bodies, including the voluntary sector; education at all levels; and a positive approach to marketing are all seen as key areas to be developed.

The full report is at www.NMRreview.org or can be obtained from Pauline Gallaher, NMR, English Heritage, Kemble Drive, SWINDON, SN2 2GZ.

JG

LOCAL HISTORY WORKSHOP

Friday 8 October. Five present. Cyril Maidment in the chair.

- ◆ **Judith Goodman** had recently bought a copy of W G Bell's *Where London Sleeps: historical journeyings into the suburbs* (1926), which has an interesting description of Merton Abbey of 80 years ago and a brief account of Lieut.-Col. Bidder's excavations, together with a photograph.

She mentioned that there was to be a retrospective exhibition at the Royal Academy of the work of Sir William Nicholson, a one-time (admittedly brief) resident of Mitcham [see page 11].

On the trail of sculptor R J Wyatt (1795-1850) she had been to Leeds to see an unpublished thesis on the life and work of this neo-Classical sculptor with Merton connections – he carved the Smith monument in St Mary's church, and his father owned Merton Cottage. Wyatt had been born when the family was in Oxford Street, next door to the Pantheon (site of a Marks and Spencer store).

- ◆ **Peter Hopkins** had brought along a letter from Richard Milward to the local press about Southside House and its persistent myths, in which he pointed out - once again - that it is a mid-18th-century building (not earlier); it was two houses until well into the 20th century; it was never lived in by the Penningtons; and it was not visited by the Prince of Wales in 1850. At least the owners no longer claimed that Nelson and Lady Hamilton used to visit!

Peter would be attending a session at Surrey History Centre on 16 October called 'Manorial Documents Unmasked', which he expected to find useful. John Pile, a postal member, but once of Morden, would also be going.

Peter had also been mapping properties in Surrey linked with Merton Priory, both those adjoining Merton and others further afield.

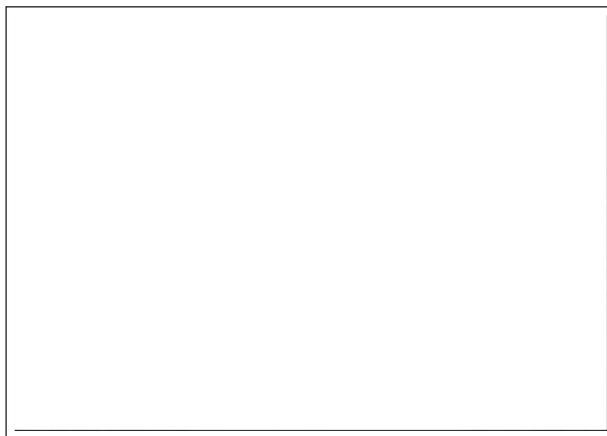
There had been an e-mail enquiry to St Mary's Church, Merton Park, from a descendant of Sir Robert Burnett, of gin fame, and once of Morden Hall, and he had been able to pass on some references.

- ◆ It was the history of her own house in Cannon Hill Lane that **Sheila Harris** spoke about. An Aldershot man had bought a batch of photos at a car-boot sale, which included some, dated 1955, of the back of the house and the garden, and had taken the trouble to send them to her. And she herself had found in the roof space two old letters which cast a rather shameful light on the personal life of one past resident! The house, unusual in design, dates from 1913 and stood surrounded only by fields for more than a decade, until the Whatley estate was built.
- ◆ **Cyril Maidment** introduced a discussion about the exact nature and location of the tunnel or "subterranean passage" that connected Nelson's Merton Place with its pleasure grounds on the other side of the turnpike road (see Peter Hopkins' *A History of Lord Nelson's Merton Place* pp.31-2). Or were there two? Nelson refers to one being "made" later on – or it could have been a rebuild. References in Chamberlain, Laughton etc (all much later, of course) suggested that it slanted under the main road from SW to NE, towards Haydons Road.
- ◆ **Bill Rudd** spoke about distinguished correspondents from Te Awamutu, New Zealand, who are descendants of Richard and Eleanor Howard, once of Mitcham, but whose monument is in Morden. He had previously sent them Monty's book *Textile Bleaching and Printing in Mitcham and Merton*, which has much to say about the Howards. They had also been helped by Rosemary Turner, and her late husband Steve, of East Surrey Family History Society. Bill had now met the New Zealanders and taken them to Richard Howard's Wandle Villa, at Phipps Bridge, which they had photographed.

Judith Goodman

Dates of next workshops: Fridays 28 January and 17 March at 7.30pm at Wandle Industrial Museum.

All are welcome to attend.



*Uncovering the north wall of the church
from Where London Sleeps (1926)
The man in the picture is probably Col. Bidder's gardener.
One of the stone coffins is also visible.*

**DR IAN LAWRENCE, who now lives in Dorset, has sent us his memories of
A WAR-TIME CHILDHOOD IN RAYNES PARK**

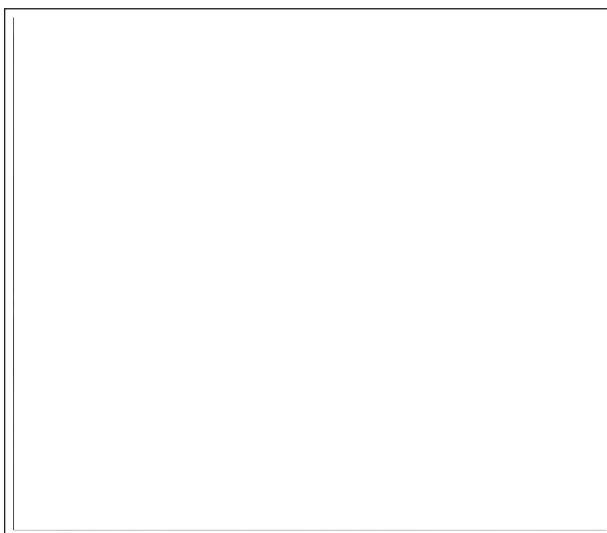
In Evelyn Jowett's admirable *Raynes Park - A Social History* (Merton Historical Society, 1987) there is a gap between chapter 9 ('The inter-war years, 1919-1939') and chapter 10 ('Epilogue: 1945 and after'). It is, perhaps, a gap which needs filling, covering as it does a period of intense social upheaval, physical danger and environmental destruction. Personal memories of my childhood in Raynes Park could fill only a tiny element of such a chapter, but may help to suggest some of the themes which further local history research could explore.

My family lived in a house in what is now often called 'The Apostles', although this was a description never used in the 1940s. These twelve streets running between Kingston Road and Approach Road in the north and (what later became) Bushey Road in the south had mostly been started between 1890 and 1907 and were at that time collectively called the Bushey Mead Estate. By 1939 this was a well-established community of between 3000 and 4000 inhabitants. It was locally served by a variety of small shops in Kingston Road and Approach Road which included (see Kelly's 1938 *Directory*) grocers, greengrocers, butchers, tobacconists (usually combined with confectioners and newsagents), a post office, boot repairers, bakers, ironmongers, fishmongers, drapers, clothiers, a wool shop, off-licences, a hair dresser, chemists, a dairy, a furnishing store, an optician, a doctors' surgery and a welfare centre or 'clinic' as we called it. There were also 'dining rooms' and 'tea rooms' (not cafés) available and at least two laundries. Throughout the war being able to walk (or run) to local shops within easy reach of our home was very important, particularly during the worst periods of bombing. Milk and coal were delivered to households, mostly by horse-drawn vehicles.

Food rationing meant that we had to register with certain shops for supplies, but there were also serious wartime shortages of goods that required more widespread searches. In addition to the shops on the north side of the railway line, there were also available the bigger shops in Wimbledon such as Ely's and Kennard's, accessible by the 77a bus (via Merton) and the 604 trolley-bus along Worple Road. Ely's was always fascinating to children because of its central cash-till system operated from each counter by aerial lines carrying small containers for cash and receipts. To me it seemed like a train set operating on the shop ceiling. The attraction at Kennard's was a tea room with its own group of live instrumentalists, including for a time an all-female band. There were rarer trips to Kingston, but none, I believe, to Morden, less than a couple of miles away.

During the major London 'blitz' of 1940-41 we mostly lived in just a couple of rooms during the day and in an Anderson air-raid shelter at night. This was situated at the bottom of our garden and equipped with (I thought) comfortable little beds, electric lights, a wireless (radio) and thermos flasks of hot drinks. For me it was a comfort zone in which I (apparently) could sleep through anything. We were supplied with canvas sheeting to replace broken windows in the house and tape to cover the cracks. The windows were heavily blacked-out with thick curtains every night, providing us with a degree of insulation. Air-raid wardens (the ARP) regularly checked that no light could be seen from the streets and of course there was no street lighting and motor vehicles were allowed only minimally bright head lights. Apart from public transport and essential goods vehicles, much of Raynes Park was at times almost traffic-free and children could play in the streets of the Apostles in relative safety.

During the middle period of the war, bombing in the south-west parts of London became more sporadic and families tended to return to sleeping in their houses. Many children who had been evacuated to country districts returned to Raynes Park and some notion of normality was reinstated. I stayed with my parents throughout the war but my school life was erratic. I was a pupil at Raynes Park Council School situated in Whatley Avenue. This was the school that had been built in 1909 in a (then) green-site area at the end of Botsford Road. It was a three-tier school with separate entrances to infant, junior and senior sections. While I was there the infants and juniors were in classrooms on the ground floor and seniors (by then only girls of 11-14) were on the upper floor and quite separate. This was the school that was later re-named as the Joseph Hood School and later still, the Merton Adult Education Centre. We all called it the Whatley Avenue school.



*Trams and trolley buses at Wimbledon in the 1940s
(Merton Local Studies Centre)*

Early in 1940 we had received the following handwritten *Memorandum to Parents*:

H.M. Evacuation Scheme: School Parties

The following is a list of articles that is recommended by the Government for each child to carry:

1. Warm clothing and overcoat or rain-coat should be worn.
2. Gasmasks should be carried complete with box, in a small haversack (Lefevre's, Wimbledon, will secure a supply at 6 pence, Woolworth's also supply a useful article at 6 pence). I recommend wrapping gas-mask container in grease-proof paper in addition to the outer covering. Names may be stitched on webbing with piece of tape.
3. In their luggage children should be supplied with the following change of clothing: GIRL - one vest, combinations or pair of knickers, one bodice, two pairs stockings or socks, handkerchiefs, cardigan. BOY - One vest, one shirt with collar, one pair of pants, one pullover or jersey, one pair of knickers [ie knickerbockers or short trousers], handkerchiefs, two pairs of socks or stockings. ADDITIONAL FOR ALL - Night attire, comb, plimsolls, towel, soap, face-cloth, toothbrush, if possible, change of shoes.
4. These things should be contained in a rucksack or haversack, leaving the arms free and avoiding fatigue. No blankets or cutlery to be taken.
5. FOOD: The following is recommended for the day of evacuation: Sandwiches (egg or cheese), packets of nuts or seedless raisins, biscuits, barley sugar sweets rather than chocolate, apple, orange. No bottles should be carried.
6. Stamped addressed postcard (to be forwarded after arrival).

One can only imagine the turbulence that this letter created. The emotional trauma may have been greater for the parents than the children for some of whom it may have seemed like a great adventure. But, as Maureen Waller has recently described in *London 1945*, the family dislocation caused by the evacuation programme was widespread, deeply felt and often long-lasting. For those that remained at school, the classrooms became half empty, classes were amalgamated and the lessons were often interrupted by the air-raid sirens when we would be guided down to the long concrete shelters in the school playing field. Strangely enough, these occasions were usually a source of pleasure rather than terror, for our teacher used to read to us in the semi-darkness - I especially remember being enthralled with my first encounter with *The Wind in the Willows*. We did, of course, have to take our gasmasks with us. On one earlier occasion the school wrote to all parents as follows:

The SURREY EDUCATION COMMITTEE have decided that in the children's interest they should be given Gas-Respirator drill in school. This is purely a precautionary measure and the co-operation of Parents is asked in the following ways:

1. Please allow the children to bring their gas-masks complete with container to school tomorrow afternoon.
2. Please impress on the children the need to use every care when carrying the mask to and from school.
3. Kindly see that the child's name is clearly marked on the top of the container: the mask itself should not be marked.

By 1942-43 the classrooms were all full again, often with 40 children to a class. It was only in the autumn of 1944 that disruption returned to the school, with the arrival of V1 and V2 rockets which caused a lot of parents to keep their children at home. Raynes Park was, however, spared destruction on anything like the scale that London's eastern boroughs had to endure and so life appeared to continue on much the same lines as the previous two years. By this stage I was a very enthusiastic cinema-goer. For my parents, the cinema seemed to offer the only escape from an intensely pressured way of life, and so I was taken to the cinema often twice a week. The small Rialto cinema (at the corner of Pepys Road) was our 'local', with a regular change of programme on Mondays and Thursdays. The air-raid alarm was situated just opposite the cinema and if it sounded during the showing of a film a notice would appear in the middle of the screen informing us that an 'air raid was taking place'. The format was usually a main film preceded by a news bulletin and a 'B' film. They were nearly all in black and white, with occasional Technicolor films from the US, including the Disney fantasies aimed at younger audiences. My own favourites were the original Tarzan black-and-whites which my contemporaries and I would dissect for weeks on end. For our parents there were filmstars such as Shirley Temple, Tyrone Power, Claude Rains, Myrna Loy, Margaret Lockwood, Deanna Durbin, Robert Taylor, Hedy Lamarr and Cary Grant. Within relatively easy reach were also the Regal, Elite, Odeon and King's Palace in Wimbledon, and the big Odeon at Shannon Corner.

During the quieter periods of the war we made good use of the many open spaces that Raynes Park and Wimbledon had to offer. On the south side of Bushey Road (or the 'Arterial' as it was often called) there was easy access to playing fields such as Prince George's, Joseph Hood and Messines and to Cannon Hill Common where I could float my boat on the lake and watch the ducks and swans. Before the war Cannon Hill had also boasted a delightful tea-room or pavilion in the middle of its well-cut grassy slopes, but this probably closed sometime in 1940. In the northeast corner of Prince George's (where the sports centre is now situated) there was an Anti-Aircraft ('ack-ack') Battery with rapid-firing guns and search lights. It was very active during the blitz and we thought of it as our own personal defence system. We were also made aware of train-mounted ack-ack passing through Raynes Park Station at times.

Wimbledon Common added much wider and wilder expanses of open country. It had ponds (Rushmere, Queensmere and Kingsmere), Caesar's Camp and a windmill, all of which, in my narrow wartime environment, seemed like a wonderland. In the later years of the war my friends and I would go cycling there for as long as our parents would allow. Family outings on bicycles were also then a regular summer activity and we shared tandems with other families on trips as far as Box Hill. I suppose it could be argued that plenty of outdoor activity, combined with a diet cut down to its essentials (which included for me one-third of a pint of school milk daily), led to the creation of a fairly healthy generation. We certainly became generally taller in later life than our parents.

During 1944-45 the opportunities in secondary education created by the Butler 1944 Education Act became a challenge. My parents were offered many options: the new Secondary Moderns, Technical, Art or Commercial schools in Wimbledon, and three grammar schools for boys, Rutlish, King's Wimbledon or Raynes Park County. It was the last of these that I joined in September 1945, then beginning only its eleventh year of existence. From my present perspective it still surprises me how little time it took for us to forget the war and its many hardships. What the 1945 intake could not take into account was the fact that many of our teachers had in that same autumn just returned from active service overseas, perhaps after witnessing the most appalling suffering and deprivation. To us everything seemed new and exciting, and even if rationing was to carry on for another five years, there were bright lights everywhere, cars in the streets, cricket at the Oval, holidays at the seaside, theatres reopening, the London Philharmonic once a month at Wimbledon Town Hall and all the cavalcade of post-war freedom.

BOOKS FOR CHRISTMAS

Eric Montague's latest *Mitcham History* is a companion volume to *The Cricket Green*, covering **Lower Green West**. Chapters deal with the Green itself, The White Hart and the old buildings adjoining it, the Cricketers, The Vestry Hall and the fire brigade, the Sunday School and the National Schools, Hall Place, and other old houses around the Green. Readers are already familiar with Eric's writing, so suffice it to say here that at £4.80 to members (£5.95 to others), it is available at meetings or by post from Peter Hopkins.

Two new books on Surrey's history have recently been published. ***Roman Surrey*** by county archaeologist David Bird, is available from Tempus Publishing Ltd, The Mill, Brimscombe Port, Stroud, Gloucestershire, GL5 2QG (01453 883300) at £17.99 + p&p. There are several matters of local relevance in the book. The traditional interpretation of the invasion of AD41 places the landing at Richborough in Kent, followed by a battle at a crossing of the Medway. However, it is possible to argue that the main landing was in the area of the Solent, and the famous river battle may have been on the Wey or the Wandle (p.23). On p.43, David discusses the evidence for a Roman posting station at Merton. On p.50 he considers the significance of flue-tiles found at Merton which might suggest the presence of a bath house and therefore perhaps an inn, unless it is reused building material from elsewhere! A little more support for the suggestion that the mound in Morden Park may have been a Roman burial mound comes from the identification of two other likely Roman barrows along the line of Stane Street, at Ewell and at Pulborough in Sussex (p.134). David explores the relationship between landscape and settlement in Chapter 6. Because of the high level of demand from London for fuel and timber he suggests that much of the London Clay region would have been used as managed woodland. Some of the villas and roadside settlements in clay area may have served as centres for the woodland industry.

The other recent Surrey book is ***Towards a New Stone Age: aspects of the Neolithic in south-east England***, edited by Jonathan Cotton and David Field, available from York Publishing Services Ltd, 64 Hallfield Rd, Layerthorpe, York, YO31 7ZQ. at £28 + £3 p&p.

Peter Hopkins

WILLIAM NICHOLSON – OF MITCHAM

From 30 October to 23 January there is an exhibition called **William Nicholson (1872-1949): British Painter and Printmaker** at the Royal Academy, the first major retrospective for more than 60 years of this prolific but elusive artist. Father of Ben Nicholson, and father-in-law of Ben's wives, Winifred Nicholson (née Roberts) and Barbara Hepworth, he was the founder, with his first wife, painter Mabel Pryde, of a dynasty of artists, some of whom are better known today than he is. Perhaps this exhibition will re-establish his reputation.

As Eric Montague mentions in *The Cricket Green* (Merton Historical Society 2001) Nicholson lived briefly at Elm Lodge, on the corner of the Green and London Road. He had eloped with and married Mabel early in 1893, and they had settled in Denham, near Bushey, where Ben, their first child, was born. Mabel's artist brother James joined them there, and he and Nicholson began a successful collaboration, as the 'Beggartstaff Brothers', designing posters for plays and magazines. William and Mabel moved house more than once before taking a lease on Elm Lodge and moving in in 1897.

Mabel died in the 'flu epidemic of 1918. William married again, but that marriage was not a success, and the couple parted. Marguerite Steen, a successful novelist in the 1930s, who became William's lover in his last years, wrote a breezy biography of him in 1943. This is how she describes the Mitcham episode:

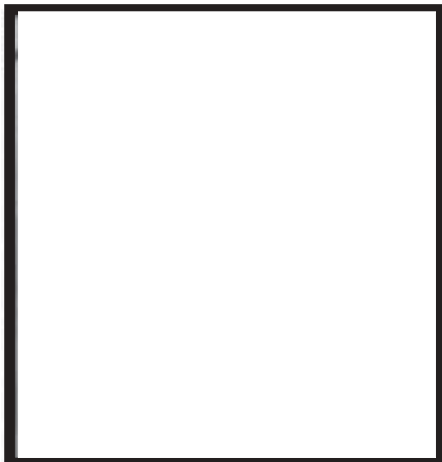
"Mabel, enjoying herself immensely, found the house, and one day brought him the lease, which he signed for five years. He was hardly conscious that the furniture was being carted out under his nose, that he had only a chair and a table to work upon, when she informed him that the new house was ready, and that William was to catch an afternoon train, which she would meet, and take him to the new home.

"He missed the train, got involved with other matters, and ended by catching the last train, which got in at midnight of a black night, pouring with rain. His only companion in the railway carriage was a cheerful drunk, who declared he knew every inch of the common, and would show William the way; but after they had been stumbling about in the dark for something like an hour, and were soaked to the skin, William's confidence in his escort died.

"He and Mabel had had a signal whistle at Bushey, and at last, worn out with wandering, with the rain beating into his face and running down the back of his neck, he stood still and sent the thin little summons ringing into the darkness. At last came a faint reply, and, William whistling, and Mabel answering, at some black hour of the morning he stumbled into his new home.

"There were trees, and some garden, and the common to wheel the perambulator on; but in spite of the five years' lease, they were out of it within a few months of Tony's birth on April 23rd, 1897."

Nicholson declined to be considered for membership of the Royal Academy, but served for five years as a Trustee of the Tate Gallery, and was knighted in 1936, probably on account of his portraits – he painted about 250. Nowadays however these are considered secondary in importance to his many landscapes, and especially to his still-lives. He also did book illustrations, and in 1926 he wrote and illustrated *Clever Bill*, a delightful story for small children (recently re-issued). But some of his most attractive work is the early woodcuts, and these were what he was producing while at Mitcham. His *Alphabet* and his Jubilee portrait of Queen Victoria were published to acclaim. Many of these images are still familiar today, as is his painting of *Miss Jekyll's Boots* of 1920, though not all of us can instantly name their creator.



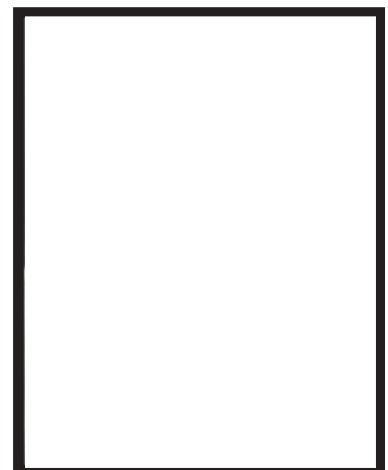
Queen Victoria, published 1897

(The authors separately but simultaneously thought a piece about Nicholson was timely.)

There is a nice little story about the young Nicholson meeting Whistler for the first time. The great man complimented him on his picture of Queen Victoria, and Nicholson modestly said that she was a "wonderful subject". Whistler, known for his quick wit, and not averse to a pun, responded, "You know, Her Majesty might say the same of you"!

Do go to the Royal Academy and get to know this appealing and interesting artist.

Judith Goodman and Ray Ninnis



A was an artist, published 1898
(This is a portrait of himself as a pavement artist)

N.B. There is a new biography by Sanford Schwartz called *William Nicholson*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2004.

THE WANDLE IN LITERATURE – an occasional series by Judith Goodman

2. Camden, Drayton and Pope

William Camden (1551-1623) was educated at Christ's Hospital, St Paul's School and Oxford, and then undertook many years of antiquarian travel throughout much of the country. He became headmaster of Westminster School in 1593 and was Clarenceux King of Arms from 1597 until his death. His name is perpetuated in that of the Camden chair of history at Oxford, which he founded, and that of the Camden Society, which was founded in 1838 to publish documents relating to the history and literature of this country and later amalgamated with the Royal Historical Society. In 1586 Camden published the fruits of his antiquarian labours as a long prose work *Britannia*.¹ He wrote, as was then customary for scholarly works, in Latin. There are a few references in this text to the Wandle, and for that purpose he latinised the name into *Vandalis*. Apparently he was the first to do so, but unfortunately this has led some people in later generations to imagine that an original Roman name had survived. Alas, this is not so. We do not know if the Romans had a name for this river at all. *Hlida burna* or *hidebourne* it was to the Saxons, and probably not until the 16th century did the Wandle acquire its present name, which appears to be a back-formation from the name of Wandsworth.

Sadly, from our point of view, Camden did not really have much to say about the Wandle. As translated by Richard Gough in 1789 he wrote:

“The clear little river **Wandle**, full of excellent trouts, rises not far from [Cuddington] at *Cashalton*, and passing by *Morden* leaves on its west bank *Merton*, situate in a most fruitful spot ...”

“The Wandle is after [Carshalton] increased from the east by a little stream rising at *Croydon* ...”

And he mentions “*Wibbandune*, now commonly called *Wimbledon*” as standing on the west bank, as well as the “little town of *Wandlesworth*” at the mouth.

Britannia was reprinted several times in Camden's lifetime, the sixth, greatly enlarged edition appearing in 1607. Though it was a prose work, it contained some fragments of an anonymous poem *De Connubio Tamae et Isis* ('Of the marriage of the Thame and the Isis'), which is now considered certainly to have been written by Camden himself.² Interestingly, Edmund Spenser (c.1552-99) had planned by 1580 an *Epithalamion Thamesis* (a poetic dissertation on the 'marriage' of the Thames), but this had not materialised.³

Not long after the publication of *Britannia* there appeared what the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* calls the “great topographical poem on England”. This was *Poly-Olbion* by **Michael Drayton** (1563-1631), which was published in instalments between 1612 and 1622. Drayton was only one of several writers to have read and been inspired by Camden's work. The Wandle duly makes its appearance, but now in verse:

“The **Wandal** commeth in, the *Moles* beloved
mate,
So amiable, faire, so pure, so delicate,
So plump, so full, so fresh, her eyes so
wondrous cleer:
And first unto her Lord [the Thames], at
Wandsworth doth appeare,
That in the goodly Court, of their great
soveraigne *Tames*,
There might no other speech be had amongst
the Streames,
But only of this Nymph, sweet **Wandal**, what
she wore:
Of her complection, grace, and how her selfe
she bore.”

All of which is very flattering to our little local river.

*Part of a map that accompanied
the first edition of Poly-Olbion*

1 S Piggott 'William Camden and the *Britannia*', *British Academy Proceedings* Vol.37 (1951) pp.199-217 is an interesting discussion.

2 P Rogers 'Windsor-Forest, *Britannia* and river poetry', *Essays on Pope* CUP 1993 p.56

3 Rogers *op. cit.* citing J B Oruch, 'Spenser, Camden and the Poetic Marriage of Rivers' *Studies in Philology* LXIV (1967) pp.606-24

Alexander Pope (1688-1744) liked to make fun of antiquaries, but took some themes for his poem *Windsor Forest* (1713) directly from Camden – and dignified the Wandle with the ‘Latin’ name of *Vandalis*, even though he was writing in English. His only recorded comments on Drayton are disparaging, though scholars have found several analogies in the river section of *Windsor Forest* to Drayton’s work.⁴ Compared with Drayton’s expansive and leisurely style Pope is pungent and crisp. Here is Pope’s Father Thames as a classical river god surrounded by his attendants:

“... First the famed authors of his ancient name,
The winding *Isis*, and the fruitful *Thame*:
The *Kennet* swift, for silver eels renown’d;
The *Loddon* slow, with verdant alders crown’d;
Cole, whose dark streams his flowery islands lave;
And chalky *Wey*, that rolls a milky wave;
The blue, transparent *Vandalis* appears;
The gulphy *Lea* his sedgy tresses rears;
And sullen *Mole*, that hides his diving flood;
And silent *Darent*, stain’d with Danish blood...”

Pope has a more ambitious aim than his predecessors. In this very royalist poem he piles on the topographical detail as the swelling Thames rolls grandly towards the sea – and the Thames is the symbol of a great nation. What could have been just a pastoral poem becomes a propagandist tribute to Queen Anne and her peaceful reign.

⁴ Rogers *op.cit* p.55.

LIONEL GREEN has discovered

A CONUNDRUM FROM THE PAST

The following story has been extracted from a letter dated 18 April 1963 from our first President, Colonel H F Bidder, to Miss Evelyn Jowett, our first Secretary. He records that, while he was conducting archaeological excavations on the site of Merton priory (1922-25), he went to stay with his wife’s cousin Arthur Forman in Scotland. The Formans had been practising a form of planchette called Ouija, whereby the letters of the alphabet are placed in a circle on a smooth table-top, A wineglass is placed upside down in the centre and two or three people place a finger on the foot of the glass.

The colonel and Arthur Forman guided the glass, whilst Vivian, the colonel’s wife, wrote down the letters to which the glass moved as they called them out. To make the planchette work, a subject has to be selected and questions addressed to the wineglass. If it reacts you find your finger being carried by the glass, first in circles and then to a letter.

The subject chosen by the colonel was, not unnaturally, Merton priory, and he asked, “Was there anyone there that knew it?” Apparently the Ouija dislikes being stumped, and the answer was “Yes”! He then asked some questions about the buildings, and received vague but not wholly inappropriate answers. He then asked, “What was the Rule of the priory?”, hoping to receive the reply that it was Augustinian. “... The glass whizzed to letter after letter, but appeared to be talking nonsense...” Colonel Bidder did spot the word *lex*, and he addressed it severely and asked for a repeat. “The glass started off at a great pace and we called out the letters which Vivian wrote down. I was very disappointed as it appeared to be talking nonsense again. But when we came to examine Vivian’s script the letters appeared in this order:

“Rex est Rex, et est Magister;
Hic est Lex, geret bene semper.”
[The King is King, and he is Master
This is the Law; it always sustains well.]

The colonel states that he was certain he had nothing to do with directing the glass consciously and that Arthur Forman was not in the least a classical scholar and, conscious or unconscious, could not have composed the double rhyming couplet.

“It must, I think, have been invented by my subconscious self – rather cleverly, for it is very close in form to couplets on medieval tombs... But if it was my subconscious self that had taken charge, it was very inadequately informed. It had apparently thought that the Rule asked for was some sort of tag for the canons’ guidance, and had invented this very plausible one on the old lines. The sentiment, I should think, was about the last that anyone connected with the priory at the time of the Dissolution would have expressed... I can’t think the couplet had come into existence before. I certainly had never met it and I cannot imagine the circumstances that would have called it forth, other than Ouija’s mistaken view of the question’s meaning. It is odd that the subconscious should have access to parts of one’s equipment, and not to other parts.”

Colonel Bidder was keen that this correspondence be put among the records of Merton.

RHODES-MOORHOUSE ...

Recently I was devising a local history walk for the Sutton/Wandle Valley branch of the Ramblers Association. The route I planned included a circuitous stretch between Morden Recreation Ground and Morden Park, by way of the footpath past the allotments, taking us past Rhodes Moorhouse Court. Why and whence the name, I wondered? So, of course, I asked Bill Rudd.

This is what I learned.

These dwellings are part of the post-war extensions to the Haig Homes development for past members of the RAF. Flying-Officer William Henry Rhodes-Moorhouse was a peace-time member of the Auxiliary Air Force, and was with 601 Squadron, based at Tangmere, by July 1940. His outstanding fighting record including shooting down a Junkers 88, a Dornier 17 and two Messerschmidt Bf 109, and a half-share in destroying two Dornier 17 and a Heinkel 111. He had already won the Distinguished Flying Cross. Then on the 6th September there was a heavy Luftwaffe wave over the south-east, and Rhodes-Moorhouse's Hurricane was shot down in flames over Kent - one of 26 RAF losses that day. They were heavily outnumbered, though the Luftwaffe losses were much greater. The name Rhodes Moorhouse Court however recalls not only William Henry, but also his father. In 1915 2/Lt. William Barnard Rhodes-Moorhouse had won the Victoria Cross for his raid on Courtrai on 26 April. He died of his wounds shortly afterwards.

Bill lent me F K Mason's encyclopaedic *Battle Over Britain*, published in 1969 by the McWhirter Twins, which covers the campaign day by day, and from which he extracted the above details. (Note that the book spells the name with a hyphen.)

... AND WALLEY

It is to be hoped that the plaque to Sgt Peter K Walley, another Battle of Britain pilot, survives the building work at Merton College. He died on 18 August 1940. As the inscription states: "It is recalled with pride that, knowing he was about to crash, Sgt Walley bravely managed to guide his badly damaged aircraft over nearby houses, thereby safeguarding the lives of the residents." Walley, who was another Hurricane pilot, was with 615 Squadron based at Kenley. He was only 20.

JG

IN BRIEF

- ◆ An interesting article in *Contract Journal* of 8 September 2004, called '**Hole lot of digging**' describes how Wates, the contractors for Countryside Properties at Merton Abbey, have to work in co-operation with the archaeologists. It includes an interview with David Saxby of MoLAS, who has been involved throughout.
- ◆ Interest in Thomas Becket, educated at Merton priory, never fades. A new version of **Jean Anouilh's *Becket*** is on for a season at Theatre Royal, Haymarket, with Dougray Scott and Jasper Britton in the lead rôles.
- ◆ The current exhibition at Merton Heritage Centre, until the end of January, is called '**Tavern in the Town**'. With so many of our pubs disappearing, this celebration of the 'local' is timely. The Centre is open Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays 10 am – 4pm. Tel: 020 8640 9387

THE SOCIETY'S STORE

Thank you to those stalwart members who helped load the archaeological archive into the van to go to the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre, and still had the energy to take the shelving apart! The rest of our collections are to be moved to the Morden Park changing rooms, Lower Morden Lane, on **Saturday 11 December**. We will be clearing our room at The Canons from 10am. As much **help** as possible would be appreciated!

SOUTHWICK – A CORRECTION

John Pile has recently visited the village of Southwick, Hants, and reports that its church remains in use for its original purpose. The building that is now a computer centre, as noted in our coach trip report in the September *Bulletin*, may have been a chapel, or perhaps a school, in its previous life.

A WRITING FAMILY OF CANNON HILL

In 1960 there was a literary sensation when a first novel by a young Irish woman became a worldwide bestseller, with instant translation into several foreign languages – though it was banned in Ireland itself, and also, if I remember correctly (I was there at the time), Australia. This was *The Country Girls* by Edna O’Brien, and it was written, in the space of three months (or even three weeks), in Merton – at 257 Cannon Hill Lane, to be exact.

Edna was 28 and had been married for six years to Ernest Gébler, who was 17 years her senior and also a writer. He had been born in Wolverhampton, but grew up in Ireland, where his father, a Jewish Czech, established himself as a principal clarinet in a new orchestra. After a novel based on his Dublin childhood Gébler published in 1950 *The Plymouth Adventure*, about the Pilgrim Fathers, which became first a bestseller and then a successful film of the same name, starring Spencer Tracy. He had lived for a while in America, where there had been a failed marriage and several affairs, before returning to Ireland and buying a farm in County Wicklow. Here he had met Edna, “a girl in rubber boots and a feathered hat”. Gébler had charm and lean good looks. It seems likely that the attractive ‘older man’, Mr Gentleman, who lured young Irish girls away from their families, in Edna’s early novels is modelled on him. His *A Week in the Country* (1958), which he described as a “powerful, psycho-political novel” had done moderately well.

The Géblers, with their two small boys, Carlo (he was also sometimes Carlos, sometimes Karl) and Sacha, had only recently arrived in England. Edna later said that *The Country Girls* wrote itself – while she cried at having left Ireland.

An article in the *Merton & Morden News* of 15 January 1960 records an interview with the couple, prompted by the imminent publication of *The Country Girls*. Incidentally, both the reporter and the Géblers seemed to think they lived in Morden. In fact their part of Cannon Hill Lane is well inside Merton, as is all of Cannon Hill Common, which their house faced.

The *News* reporter apparently addressed most of his questions to Gébler, whose fourth novel *The Love Investigator* was due out in June. The reporter wrote, “Leaning backwards in his chair, with a smile on his handsome features, Mr Gébler said, ‘Yes ... It too will be a best-seller’.”

Only at the end of the article does Edna’s voice emerge. She had nearly finished her second novel, to be called *The Lonely Woman* (it was published as *The Lonely Girl*, later as *Girl With Green Eyes*). And she said to the reporter, “Of course, most women novelists who are now well-known have been rich or childless... They had a room of their own and a private income ... My time for writing is limited to an hour or two hours in the morning. Often there isn’t any time at all.”

When I re-read the third in the sequence of *Girls* novels, *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, in which the girls have come to London, and in which the word ‘bliss’ is ironic, I was so struck by the setting of Chapter 2 that I wrote to Edna O’Brien to ask if it was indeed an evocation of a frozen Cannon Hill Common in the bleak winter of 1962-3, and she confirmed that it was.

The Géblers’ marriage broke up. Edna left, but Ernest and the boys (mostly) stayed in Cannon Hill Lane until about 1970. *The Love Investigator* and Ernest’s remaining books, and plays, had only moderate success. He died in 1998. Edna of course is very much alive and has gone on to write many more novels, plays and other works. Their younger son Sacha is an architect. But Carlo Gébler, like his parents, is a writer. He has produced novels and also several works of non-fiction, including, in 2000, a highly praised and very readable, though often bleak, memoir, called *Father & I*. The dedication is ‘For my mother’. Quite apart from its literary merit, and its portrait of an unusual, and difficult, man, it has considerable local history interest for us, with its account of childhood life in Merton and Morden in the 1960s, especially his memories of school (probably Hillcross) and of Cannon Hill Common, though – you are warned – these scenes are sometimes chilling.

Sources:

Merton & Morden News 15 January 1960, p.6

Electoral Registers

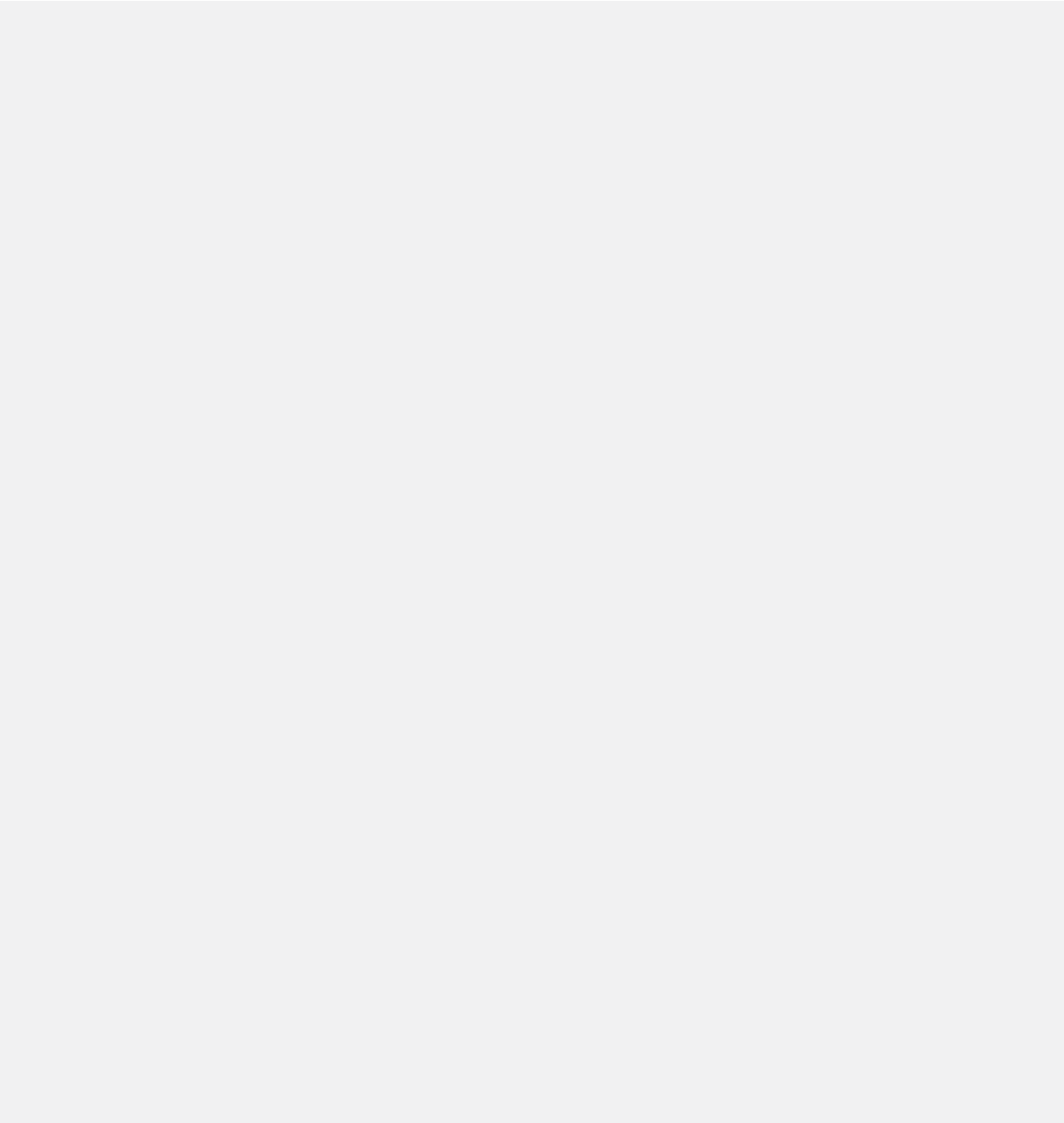
R Pine ‘No Saint in Ireland’ (obituary of Ernest Gébler) *The Guardian* 24 February 1998

N Roe ‘Country Matters’ (profile of Edna O’Brien) *The Guardian* 2 October 1999

C Gébler *Father & I: A Memoir* Little, Brown 2000

Carlo
Gébler

Judith Goodman



The minutes of the AGM are enclosed with this Bulletin.

A Word from our Membership Secretary

By this time of year subscriptions are overdue. Please note that, to ensure continuity of membership in 2004-2005, outstanding payments should be sent to the Membership Secretary:

Letters and contributions for the Bulletin should be sent to the Hon. Editor. The views expressed in this Bulletin are those of the contributors concerned and not necessarily those of the Society or its Officers.

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