



# Hitchin Historical Society

President Priscilla Douglas

# Newsletter

Issue number 37 - July 2012

## Come Dine With Me?

### The AGM

This year's AGM took place at Church House on Thursday 22nd March; around seventy members attended. They elected Phil Rowe as Chairman and two new members to the committee, Peter Moss and Caroline Frith, who become Membership Secretary and Programme Secretary respectively. Grateful thanks were expressed

to outgoing Chairman, David Howlett.



Phil takes the chair  
(Photos: S. Walker)



Terry Knight presents the Hine award to Mike Clarke and Richard Whitmore

### The Reginald Hine Award

This year we had no hesitation in giving the award jointly to two people who have each published works, in different formats, which have raised awareness of and introduced people to quite separate branches of Hitchin's history. One is Dr Mike Clarke for his *Cold Baths Don't Work*, a book about the history of mental health care in the Hitchin area; the other is Richard Whitmore for his DVD *A Century of Old Hitchin on Film*.

Founder member Terry Knight presented them with their certificates and the little silver cup which will adorn the house of each recipient for six months.

How could I refuse the invitation from our esteemed Chairman? Part way through a very pleasant evening with Scilla and Phil, he presented me with a compact disk, explaining that all I needed was on the disk, and by the way, would I mind having a go at compiling the next edition of the Newsletter? Another offer I couldn't refuse! Zena's many other commitments have caused her to stand down as editor, but she will continue to manage the HHS website. Our thanks go to Zena for her excellent editorship over a number of years.

As I write this, the wonderful Hitchin Festival is in full swing. I live away from Hitchin and have had the opportunity to attend just one event, the very thought-provoking talk by Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews *The Archaeology Of Us*. Keith referred to the loss of Rose Cottage and the fact that the Crown House site was redeveloped without any archaeological assessment being carried out. The bulldozing of the site will most likely have destroyed any archaeology that may have existed.

In these times of cuts, constrained finances and relaxed planning rules, there will be increasing pressure to take development short-cuts. We must all be aware of how easily our heritage can be lost forever. John Lucas

### Bill Bowker: 4<sup>th</sup> July 1932 - 26<sup>th</sup> April 2012

Bill the Aviator, by Richard Whitmore



In 1961, Bill Bowker founded *Farm Aviation (Hitchin) Ltd*, one of the first aerial crop-spraying companies in the East of England. Consisting then of just one specially adapted Tiger Moth biplane, it was probably the smallest as well. Bill was also responsible for developing Rush Green airstrip beside the Codicote Road, three miles south of Hitchin. An old boy of Hitchin Grammar School where his father taught mathematics, Bill trained as an engineering apprentice at De Havilland, Hatfield.

He already held a pilot's licence when he was called up for National Service in the Fleet Air Arm; ending up flying jets from aircraft carriers.

*Farm Aviation* acquired the Rush Green airstrip in 1963, and when the company was wound up after ten years Bill continued there, trading as *Bowker Air Services*.—Continued on Page 3.

### Aidan Hyland Lawes - died 1st April 2012

Andrew Fell-Gordon writes, "It is with great sadness that we report the untimely death of Aidan Lawes. Aidan was for many years in charge of publications at the National Archives, and a keen advocate of the use of digital technology and the internet for making historical data more accessible.

An active member of the Hitchin Historical Society, he initiated a project to make the contents of the Hitchin section of the 1912-13 property survey (the Lloyd George 1910 'Domesday' Survey) available on the web. The project is being continued and it is hoped that, on completion, it will be a fitting memorial to Aidan's scholarship and imagination."

Aidan took early retirement at the end of 2008 because of ill-health, and following a serious operation at Harefield Hospital at the beginning of this year, he died aged 54. Our thoughts are with his family.

## New Year Hitchin Quiz—Answers

Have you been scratching your head since the new year, trying to solve the quiz? Relief at last—here are the answers (and explanations) to Leslie Mustoe’s brain-teasers!

- |    |   |   |
|----|---|---|
| 1  | Expel a tomb raider. (8)  | BANCROFT (Lara Croft is a fictional character with the appellation ‘tomb raider’.)      |
| 2  | A king of note (4)  | OFFA (OF+FA; FA is a note in the DO, RE, MI...sequence)                                 |
| 3  | Did he have a leaning towards medicine? (6)                       | LISTER (To ‘list’ is to lean.)  |
| 4  | Did Gabriel stay here? (3, 5, 3)                                  | THE ANGEL INN (This inn was in what is now Sun Street).                                 |
| 5  | We have the large drink. (3,6)                                    | THE BIGGIN (THE+BIG+GIN)  |
| 6  | Andy, Una and Rob make it. (6, 4)                                 | BUNYAN ROAD (Anagram of AndyUnaRob)   |
| 7  | Article round Algeria? (3, 7)                                     | THE LAIRAGE (THE+ anagram Of ‘Algeria’)   |
| 8  | Fred and Judy couldn’t sail up here. (3, 6)                       | THE AVENUE (‘We’re a Couple of Swells’)   |
| 9  | Bill was faster. (7)  | BENSLOW (Bill and Ben)  |
| 10 | Her Majesty’s pleasure for the listener. (5, 6)                   | QUEEN STREET (Sounds like ‘Queen’s treat  |
| 11 | The measure of the man for Bertie. (6, 4)                         | JEEVES YARD (Bertie Wooster’s man(servant)+Yard)  |
| 12 | Gospeller meets alien: sounds fishy. (6, 5)                       | MARKET PLACE (St Mark; sounds like ‘plaice’)  |
| 13 | Turn to a London suburb. (8, 4)                                   | WINDMILL HILL (To ‘wind’ is to turn; Mill Hill is a London Suburb)                      |
| 14 | He doesn’t borrow the good book inside. (8)                       | LAVENDER (‘LENDER’ outside AV - Authorised Version)                                     |
| 15 | Running water not for her? (5, 3)                                 | RIVER HIZ (‘HIZ’ sounds like ‘his’)   |
| 16 | Totes clubs around. (5, 5)  | BUTTS CLOSE (Anagram of the first two words)  |
| 17 | Pay pirates to recover shipwreck, we hear – it’s not cool. (7, 3) | RANSOM’S REC (RANSOM+SHIPREC-HIP; HIP means COOL and ‘we hear’ means sounds like)       |
| 18 | Did he go to school with Wilshere (not Jack)? (5)                 | DACRE (Wilshere-Dacre School)   |
| 19 | Limpet roll an unlikely possibility. (8, 4)                       | PORTMILL LANE (Anagram of ‘limpetrollan’)   |
| 20 | Dance round a satellite. (6)                                      | BALIOL (BALL around IO; Io is a moon of Jupiter)  |
| 21 | No branch of mathematics? Just the reverse at college! (6)        | GIRTON (NOTRIG reversed; trig(onometry) is a branch of mathematics.)                    |
| 22 | Rook yard – a different place. (4, 4)                             | YORK ROAD (Anagram of ROOKYARD)   |
| 23 | Stirling’s round the bend! (5, 6)                                 | MOSS’S CORNER (Stirling Moss was a racing driver)                                       |
| 24 | Tiger prowls around a light without a break. (9)                  | WOODLANDS (WOODS around LAND; to ‘alight’ means to land.)                               |
| 25 | Love grim learner – grim. (5, 4)                                  | GROVE MILL (L is learner; anagram of LOVEGRIML)   |
| 26 | Prepare to fire after golf. (4, 5)                                | COCK HOTEL (To ‘cock’ a gun and H for ‘hotel’ follows G for ‘golf’.)                    |
| 27 | Settle with Geordie Muriel. (6, 4)                                | PAYNES PARK (to ‘pay’ is to settle; Geordies come from the NE; Muriel Spark, novelist.) |
| 28 | Ah, bless them – what a mess! (3, 8)                              | THE SHAMBLES (Anagram of AHBLESSTHEM)   |
| 29 | Audibly steals item of underwear. (8, 4)                          | RUSSELL’S SLIP (‘Russell’ sounds like ‘Rustle’.)  |
| 30 | Shields purchase – that’s about right. (12)                       | BUCKLERSBURY (A ‘buckler’ is a shield; +BU(R)Y; R is short for ‘right’.)                |
| 31 | Could be in St Petersburg. (9)                                    | HERMITAGE (The Hermitage is a museum in St Petersburg.)                                 |
| 32 | Poor Clare is near. (4, 5)  | NUN’S CLOSE (Poor Clares are an order of nuns.)   |

### St Michael’s College, Hitchin ~ 1925 - 1968

We have received the following from the Old Michaelean Association, which may be of interest to some of our members. The school was actually founded in Hitchin, and remained here until relatively recently; as such, it is very much a feature of the town's story.

“The Old Michaelean Association (OMA) have been meeting occasionally over the past, and have amassed a significant archive of material directly related to the College. The collection comprises:

- a collection of school magazines, almost complete, from 1923 to 1968 (also captured electronically);
- 5 folders of annual school photographs (not complete) from c.1922 to 1968 (also captured electronically);
- an electronic database (c. 3000, and still growing) of former pupils that can be searched;
- an electronic database of the 25 boys who died during Second World War service that includes relevant scanned documents etc.;
- a collection of ad hoc photographs and ephemera such as sports programmes, events tickets etc.;
- an electronic version of D H Shaw’s *The History of St Michael’s* and the Catholic Parish of Hitchin (1975) ... This is an authoritative book of 376 pages, 132 photographic plates, fully indexed;
- an ad hoc collection of objects mainly comprising sporting trophies and plaques etc.

The OMA is keen to hear from any ex-pupils, either to accept any memorabilia they may wish to donate and/or wish to make contact with OMA Members. Anyone who attended or who knows of someone who did attend the College may like to contact the OMA at: Old Michaelean Association, PO Box 198, Letchworth Garden City, Hertfordshire, SG6 3ZQ.”

## Current Projects



Stephen Bradford-Best

### Sanders Coach Builders of Hitchin

Stephen Bradford-Best is investigating the history of this local company, the results to be published by the Society in 2013. His research has involved tracking down extant coaches built by the company – remarkably, several do still exist – and travelling across the country to look at them, to make sure they are genuine Sanders coaches. The resulting book promises to be fascinating.

### Maydencroft Manor

Member Bridget Howlett, a senior archivist, has been researching the history of Maydencroft Manor, an elegant moated 14th century house on the outskirts of the village of Gosmore, near Hitchin. The building is believed to have been a hunting lodge used by Henry VIII and its adjacent tithe barn used by John Bunyan to preach in. The house has



Bridget Howlett

been lovingly restored over several years, and Bridget is working towards telling its 700-year story in a publication for the Society in the autumn.

Left: Maydencroft Manor in 2011.

(Photos: S Bradford-Best)



## News in brief

**Membership:** Currently 394

### “Making Tracks”

On 15th September, Holy Saviour Church is holding a railway-themed event, called “Making Tracks” – with stalls, local railway paraphernalia, and reprints of Phil Howard’s book, “Take the Train from Hitchin”, for sale.

### Cabbies’ Hut

We are very grateful to Gary Thorpe who has made and donated to the Society smart new information signs. Gary supplied these to a tight timescale, and they were installed in time for the Queen’s visit to Hitchin on 14 June.

### Minsden Chapel

The Society is working with the Church authorities with a view to tidying the Minsden Chapel site and erecting an information board there. The chapel is now on the English Heritage ‘at risk’ list.

## Holy Saviour Garden Party

This year’s garden party was sadly not a great success. Those who attended enjoyed the hospitality of our Holy Saviour hosts (who provided the refreshments) and an HHS stall, with much information about the Society’s latest book, *Two Minutes to the Station*, all about the ‘Triangle’ area between Verulam, Nightingale and Walsworth Roads.

The appalling weather and a coincident tennis match in south west London between Andy Murray and Roger Federer combined to ensure a very small trickle of visitors. Better luck next time ... both for us and for Andy!

### Bill Bowker: 4<sup>th</sup> July 1932 - 26<sup>th</sup> April 2012 — Continued from Page 1

Over the course of 25 years, during which the companies acquired more and better aircraft, his crop-spraying work took him and his team all over England; and when work here was quiet, he and fellow pilots would travel to North Africa to spray the vast cotton fields of Sudan.

By the 1980s, when farmers were returning to land-based systems of crop-spraying, Bill began to wind down his business, giving up his pilot’s licence as he approached his sixty-fifth birthday. Late in his career he became a civil servant, working as an inspector for the Civil Aviation Authority.

An ardent conservationist, Bill retained an interest in the forty-acre airstrip until well into the 21st century and did much to preserve its pastoral quality. With family and friends he planted literally hundreds of saplings at appropriate points, many oaks among them. Although aerial spraying is no longer fashionable in this country, the airstrip still thrives as a base for light-aircraft enthusiasts who – like the pioneer crop sprayers before them – continue to share the field with local livestock.

It is sad that Bill has not lived to enjoy the 50th Anniversary of his beloved airstrip next year, but at least its story will be preserved in the Historical Society’s Film Archive. For, over the past year with Bill and Wendy Bowker’s help, we have compiled a film, “How Hitchin got its Airstrip”, which will be premiered at the Queen Mother Theatre Studio on July 11th and 18th at 6 p.m. as part of this year’s Hitchin Festival.

### Bill the Townsman, by Ellie Clarke of *Hitchin Forum*

Bill Bowker was a founding member of *Hitchin Forum*, and what he didn’t know about Hitchin wasn’t worth knowing! He was interested in all transport issues in the town, attended *Hitchin Vision* transport group meetings for many years and helped campaign against speeding traffic on residential roads, and scrap lorries in particular. He was a formative member of the *Triangle Residents Association* and instrumental in getting the Triangle Design Statement prepared, which was ahead of its time with the coalition Government now championing Neighbourhood Plans.

Bill was also a founder member of CASE, the *Campaign Against Stevenage Expansion*, opposing development on the green fields between Hitchin and Stevenage for over 15 years. His career as a pilot of small aircraft gave him a unique perspective on the countryside around Hitchin. He chaired both *Hitchin Forum*’s Town Centre Group and Steering Group at various times, and perhaps shaped the *Forum*’s thinking and action more than any other over its 20 years. His wisdom, wit, support, gentle cajoling and generous personality will be hugely missed in Hitchin.



The Newsletter is published twice yearly by **Hitchin Historical Society**, registered charity 280746, dedicated to informing the public of the history of Hitchin and district, and undertaking research into the origins and development of buildings, organisations, crafts, trades and other aspects of historical interest, and to publish the results of such research.

**PROGRAMME OF MEETINGS — Autumn 2012**

*At Church House, Churchyard, Hitchin at 8 pm on Thursdays, followed by light refreshments*

- 27 SEPTEMBER **THE HISTORY OF PERKINS ENGINES** – A talk about the history and links to the Hitchin family by *Stephen Perry*.
- 25 OCTOBER **A TOUCH OF GLASS: A VICTORIAN MAGIC LANTERN SHOW** – An evening of entertainment using original Victorian magic lantern slides, featuring those from the North Herts Museums' collection, presented by *Tony Brown and Tony Casbeard*.
- 22 NOVEMBER **HITCHIN'S INNS AND ALEHOUSES** – An intoxicating talk by *Mark Pardoe*.
- Friday 7 DECEMBER, 7:30pm **CHRISTMAS PARTY** – Be entertained, enjoy some light seasonal refreshments and socialise with fellow members.

**REMAINING VISITS for 2012**

*Members have already received their booking forms for these visits:*

- Thursday 16 AUGUST at 10.30 a.m. **A WALKING TOUR OF ROYSTON, THE ROYSTON CAVE AND TOWN MUSEUM** – Discover this Hertfordshire town's treasures from 450 years of history from the foundation of the Priory, and the establishment of the town.
- Sunday 2 SEPTEMBER at 2.00 p.m. **ARCHAEOLOGICAL WALK AROUND HITCHIN** – with Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews, NHDC Archaeology Officer. Keith shares his wealth of knowledge about the town's archaeology in a stimulating walking tour.
- Wednesday 5 SEPTEMBER at 7.30 p.m. **HITCHIN MUSEUM** – by arrangement with the Curator, David Hodges. The last chance to see behind the scenes at the Paynes Park site prior to the Museum's relocation to the new Town Hall venue. See the extensive collection before its redisplay and get a sneak peak of the new designs.
- Monday 1 OCTOBER at 10 a.m. **PERKINS FACTORY TOUR and PETERBOROUGH MUSEUM** – A tour of the Perkins Heritage centre and all aspects of the manufacture of Perkins engines with a behind the scenes tour of the newly refurbished museum.

**FILM OF THE ROYAL VISIT**

HHS is preparing "A Royal Day to Remember", a comprehensive film of the recent visit of The Queen, to include photographs and film kindly donated by both amateur and professional photographers and movie-makers. If anyone has film or photographs to donate for possible inclusion we would be delighted to hear from them. They can contact the society via the Secretary, Dr Leslie Mustoe on Hitchin

**HERTS MEDICAL AND PHARMACEUTICAL MUSEUM TRUST:**

Further to the report in last July's Newsletter, the winding up of the HMPMT is about to be completed. Final accounts have been prepared for Companies House and the Charity Commission. The transfer of all the Trust's funds and property to HHS has been put in hand, and HHS will, henceforward, have responsibility for the Physic Garden, and custodianship of the collection of material, including the Perks & Llewellyn chemist shop, under the care of North Herts Museums Service.

The Physic Garden is always looking for volunteer gardeners to work under its very able Head Gardener, Jennifer Dee. If you think you might like to consider volunteering to undertake an occasional (or even frequent!) stint in the garden, please contact our Chairman, Phil Rowe, in the first instance - contact details below.

**THANK YOU!** - Our thanks again to Messrs **John Shilcock** in Bancroft, for generously providing such commodious accommodation for our 'overflow' publications stock.

**Thanks** to the efficient team of Heather and Thomas who always make sure our meetings end refreshingly!

**HHS Committee & Contacts**

<b>Chairman</b>	Phil Rowe	<b>Distribution</b>	Vicki Lockyer
<b>Secretary</b>	Leslie Mustoe	<b>Film Archivist</b>	Richard Whitmore
<b>Treasurer</b>	John Skeeles	<b>Librarian</b>	Audrey Stewart
<b>Programme</b>	Caroline Frith ** and Sue Fisher *	<b>Website Editor</b>	Zena Grant
<b>Journal</b>	Simon Walker **	<b>Publications</b>	Priscilla Douglas
<b>Membership</b>	Peter Moss	<b>Publications (sales)</b>	Vicki Lockyer

(\*\* co-opted members -  
David Howlett and Dr. Gerry Tidy are  
also co-opted members of the committee)

Compiled by John Lucas. If you have an item you'd like to submit to the HHS newsletter or information for any contributor contact any committee member. Website: [www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk](http://www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk)

**Final Fact:** Did you know that on 23rd June 1904, Butts Close was invaded by 'real' cowboys, braves and squaws? *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show* held a one day display in the Close and twenty four thousand people attended, with many more being turned away!