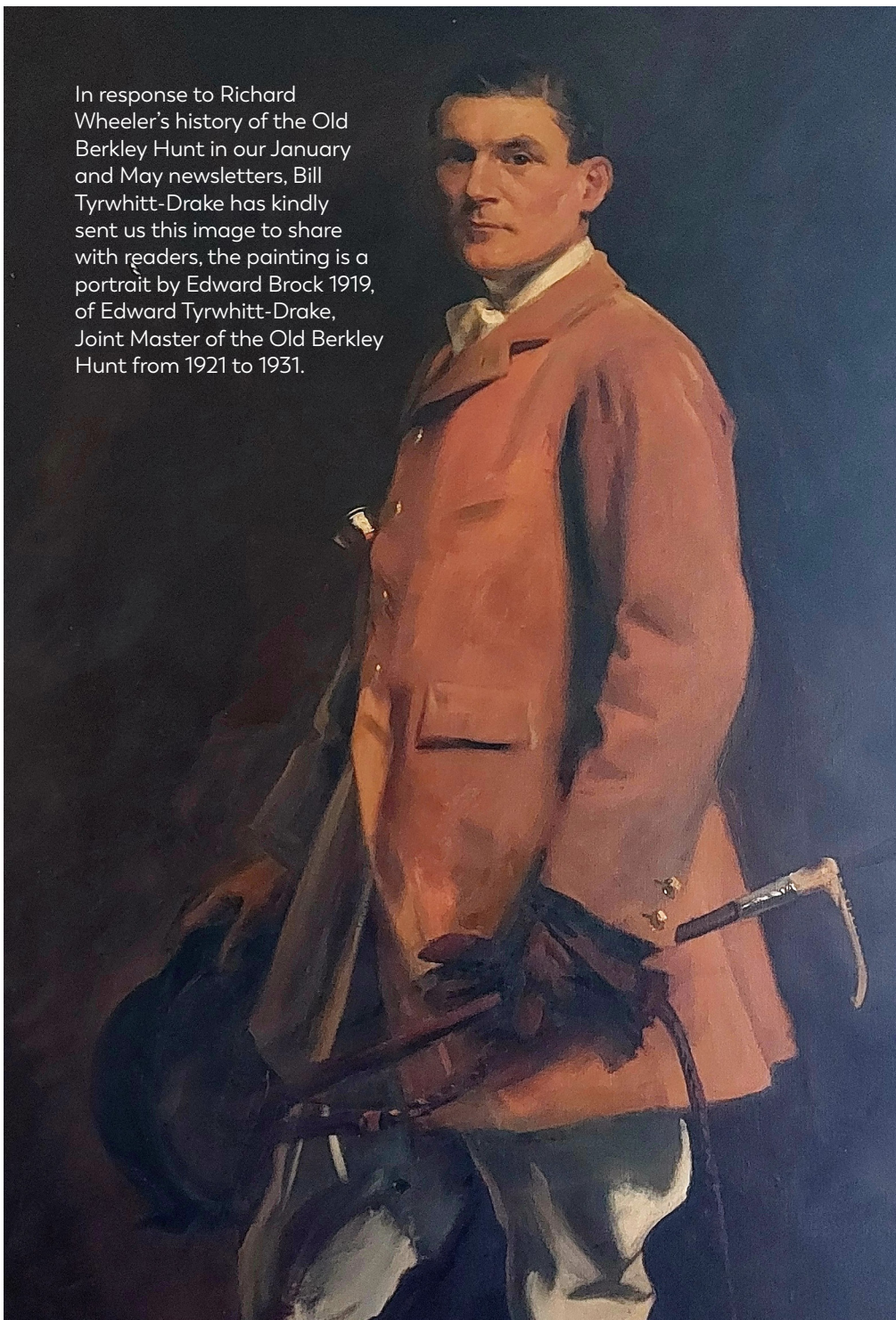


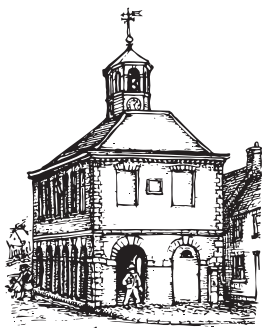
SEPTEMBER 2025



AMERSHAM SOCIETY
FOUNDED IN 1956
NEWSLETTER

In response to Richard Wheeler's history of the Old Berkley Hunt in our January and May newsletters, Bill Tyrwhitt-Drake has kindly sent us this image to share with readers, the painting is a portrait by Edward Brock 1919, of Edward Tyrwhitt-Drake, Joint Master of the Old Berkley Hunt from 1921 to 1931.





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Little girl with gasmask – see
“Home Fires and Havens” page 41

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Editorial

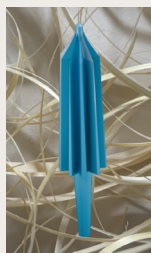
Welcome to the Society's latest newsletter. It's been a glorious summer and, as I write this, Amersham is basking in sunshine and keenly awaiting the results of this year's Britain in Bloom competition. The judging took place in August, the Regional results will be announced at the end of this month and an overall National winner at the end of October – we, I hardly need to remind you, were overall winner's in 2022, can we do it again? Our thanks must go to the unstinting efforts of the enthusiastic Bloomers.

The Society is holding its 69th AGM on 20th October which will be followed by a talk from a representative from Helen and Douglas House, a charity founded in 1982 which enables children with life limiting illnesses to live their short life to the full.

Please do come along and voice your views on any matters you'd like us to make representations on, on your behalf, for instance planning issues. Since May's newsletter two new unexpected planning propositions have been made public: A revised proposal for 46 houses on land south-east of Whielden Street (see page 47), and the surprise one by Lidl for a new supermarket opposite the Chiltern Lifestyle Centre where local residents had expected much needed housing.

On the back cover you'll find our programme of talks up to next May, it's an eclectic mix as usual which we hope you'll find interesting. Remember if there is any topic you like covered by a talk please do let Yvonne Suckling know.

In this issue you'll find articles about Amersham's recent past which have shaped the town both physically and socially along with reports of our last three talks - one of which relates to life here during WWII. Did you know the background to our museum and how it's run, I didn't, so in place of an article about future exhibitions Briony Hudson has written about what goes on behind the scenes of "a must see" museum. Finally there is the usual "What's that object" article. But before you turn to page 34, can you recognise the related objects (from the museum) and their use, in the two pictures?





The Chairman's Annual Report

Following the installation of our “Town Map” at the Memorial Gardens, our initiatives to install further interpretation boards at Church Mead and Barn Meadow came to fruition in our 69th year. In July and December 2024 the Town Mayor, Dominic Pinkney, unveiled our display panels giving information about the scarcity, vulnerability and ecology of chalk streams and the history of our own River Misbourne. These are now reproduced on the Society’s website at www.amershamsociety.org/misbourne-display-boards along with further information, lots more pictures, and guidance for a riverside walk. Many thanks are due to Graham Cook, Brian Withington and the trustees of the Dulcie Denison bequest for their generous financial contributions which helped make this possible, to Steve Catanach and his team at Amersham Town Council for the installation, and most of all to Peter Borrows who led both these projects from start to finish.

Our support for Amersham Museum continued with a grant of £750 towards their acquisition of “Pensive Woman with Flowers” by Little Missenden artist Mary Henrietta Dering Curtois (1854-1928). As well as being a fine painting, the artist is of great local interest, playing a broad role in both local and national activities, notably in the suffrage movement nationally through the Artists’ Suffrage League and locally through the Mid Bucks Suffrage Society.

She was also a founder member of the Bucks Art Society, and of the Chiltern Club of Arts and Handicrafts, and part of a wider artistic and activist circle. We hope to see this new acquisition as centrepiece of the Museum’s 2027/28 exhibition to commemorate the centenary of the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act.

We’ve continued to keep a careful eye on Listed Building and Planning applications. One ongoing concern is to ensure that developments to convert the old Maltings to residential use are focussed on ensuring adequate vehicular access and parking and mitigation against possible flooding. We’ve also commented on early stage proposals to develop a 32-acre battery site near Mop End Lane and we’ve co-ordinated responses with The Gardens Trust and Amersham Town Council to recommend refusal of HS2’s 7 proposed secure compounds in the historic parkland of Shardeloes.

For the Society Committee, the year has seen some retirements after valiant service. Our thanks go to Carol Chesney who has passed the baton for monitoring planning applications to Geraldine Marshall-Andrew, to David Cash whose initiatives to raise our profile in Amersham-on-the-Hill have been transformative and to Dorothy Symes who retired from the Chair of our Events Committee after many years exemplary service to the Society

including 4 years as Chair of the Society. Many thanks to them all. We are also very pleased to be able to welcome formally to the Committee John Morgan as Hon Treasurer and Yvonne Suckling as Chair of our Events Committee. New members of the Committee are always welcome, there is always more that we could be doing and any member who is interested to find out more is encouraged to speak informally to any Committee member by phone, email or simply by tapping us on the shoulder at one of our 8 meetings a year.

Our talks from September to June continue to be exceptionally well supported and attendance levels were fortunately unaffected by our move in early 2025 from Wednesday evenings to Monday evenings, better enabling us to fit in around the busy calendar of our kind hosts at the Kings Chapel. We also built on our successful test of holding our last meeting of the season in Amersham-on-the-Hill. Last year we packed out the Barn Hall, so this year we booked the larger Drake Hall and once again attracted non-members to their first Society meeting. Our grateful thanks must go to the Marshall-Andrews family for their setting up of chairs and serving the wine for these summer meetings and also to the 8 volunteers who contributed their write-ups of the talks for the newsletter.

Our newsletter has also seen a change this year with the retirement of our

brilliant graphic designer Danny Robins following completion of the May 2025 newsletter. It's been a vintage year with well-received articles on the history of the Old Berkeley Hunt, the 18th century canal that almost came through the middle of Amersham, and the 17th century story of Joan Drake, the heiress who brought Shardeloes to the Drake family, as well as contributions on the origins of local place names, the 400th Anniversary of Dr Challoner's School, local voluntary organisations and even local variants of games of marbles. Many thanks indeed to Danny for all his work to elevate our newsletter to such a delightful journal. I must thank John Catton our editor, all our contributors of articles and photographs, and a very big welcome to our new graphic designer Seema Davis, who will make her debut with this, the September 2025, issue. As always we'd love to hear from you about anything relevant we can include in future editions of this newsletter..... remember it is written and published for you!

Our webmaster Lena Morgan has created and maintains our amazing website. All our newsletters are now available to read online and the site is constantly updated with current news and information on forthcoming events, heritage projects and other activities. Online versions of our town map and display panels as well as key facts about the Society are publicly available there. And for those who don't look at the

website as often as they should, it is Lena we need to thank for the timely e-alerts reminding us of upcoming meetings.

Another change we have seen during the course of this year was our need after 8 years to increase the annual membership subscription. It was the longest period any of us could remember without a price increase but the cost of printing the newsletter and posting to those who have moved away from Amersham but still want to keep in touch has risen sharply in the last couple of years. The need to update standing orders has led to a flurry of information where double memberships had sadly become single and of others who had moved away without remembering to let us know. But the great news is that we still have about 340 paid-up members actively enjoying the fellowship and participation in our thriving local Society. Many thanks to Peter Borrows whose systematic

attention to detail as Membership Secretary over the last 7 years made possible such a smooth change.

Having run at a small annual deficit for the last couple of years, the increase in membership will enable us to break even in the next financial year. With the completion of the display board project our reserved legacies and donations have now been fully expended, but thanks to the careful stewardship of our Hon Treasurer John Morgan, our reserves remain sufficient to keep us operating smoothly.

As we embark on our 70th year we have fresh ideas germinating for newsletter articles, the talk programme is complete, and we hope there will be new sections on the website to share the memories of those of our members who are old enough to remember something of Amersham life over each of our 7 decades.

Edward Copisarow

Annual General Meeting

The Society's Annual General Meeting will be held in the Kings Chapel on Monday 20th October 2025 at 8.00pm.
(To be preceded by a glass of wine or soft drink at 7.30).

Agenda

- 1 Apologies for absence
- 2 Minutes of the 2024 Annual General Meeting and business arising
- 3 Chairman's Annual Report
- 4 Honorary Treasurer's Report and Statement of Accounts
- 5 Election of Committee Members and Officers
- 6 Any other business

The Annual General Meeting will be followed by:

- Discussion of topics raised by members
- TALK: This will be given by a speaker from Helen & Douglas House



The Birth of Metroland

Map showing how small London was in 1900, Hampstead is in the countryside

Ralph Hilsdon is an amateur rail historian and has been a volunteer and ambassador for Amersham museum for the past five years giving enthusiastic talks on their behalf. I attended one of his talks last year: on the origins of Metroland. Whilst I was aware of some of the detail, I knew little of the foresight, opportunism and advertising that went into creating Amersham-on-the-Hill. Here Ralph tells us the story.

People on the Move

The Industrial Revolution from about 1750 to 1900 was a period of immense change; the country moved from an agrarian economy to an industrial one. Employment in factories ballooned leading to an exodus of the population from the countryside to new and existing cities. Manchester's population grew from about 10,000 in 1700 to over 400,000 by 1850. London grew from one million to about six million during the nineteenth century.

Living conditions in these rapidly growing cities were appalling. Entire families would often live together in single

rooms sharing unhygienic sanitary facilities. Disease was rife and lifespan short. The situation in London's East End was particularly bad as demonstrated by the Charles Booth poverty maps. *(In the 1880s, motivated by the scale of London's poverty, social reformer Charles Booth conducted surveys into working class life. As a part of this inquiry, he produced maps that coloured residential streets according to the wealth and social status of their inhabitants. They also proved that the problem of poverty was worse than first thought).*

At the start of the 20th century, London was geographically small, north of Regents Park there were still open fields. To improve conditions, our cities and particularly London, needed to grow outwards and to do this they needed reliable and affordable public transport. William Gladstone's 1844 Railway Act had sought to increase commuting, by laying down minimum conditions on the Rail companies to achieve this. However the companies resisted and the so called "Parliamentary Trains" were typically inconveniently timed.

The Birth of Commuting

The private railways companies had shown little interest in commuters. It was coal, goods and long distance passenger traffic that generated their profits; slow frequently stopping commuter trains were considered a nuisance and discouraged. But as the twentieth century approached, companies with less lucrative goods traffic saw an opportunity. Commuter services into Liverpool Street, Fenchurch Street, London Bridge, Charing Cross and Cannon Street were developed and mass construction of predominantly modest terrace housing soon followed to the east and south-east of the capital. London began to grow outwards rather than upwards. As a result the population density of central London is a quarter of that of Paris, although both regions have similar overall populations.

The World's First Underground Railway

Housing wasn't the only issue facing London; the city streets had ground to a halt! To ease traffic congestion, Charles Pearson, a solicitor at the Corporation of London proposed building an underground line from Paddington to Farringdon linking the main line railways along the way. From the initial proposal in 1846, it took until 1863 before the line opened.



Despite the unpleasant travel conditions from running steam trains in tunnels, it was an immediate success! It was soon followed by the separate Metropolitan District Railway (now just District) opened in 1868 completing the Circle.

Sir Edward Watkin MP became chairman of The Metropolitan in 1872 and was the driving force behind its expansion: Eastward to Moorgate, Westward to Hammersmith, North-West to Harrow (1880), Chesham (1889) and Amersham to Aylesbury (1892). Later branches were built to Uxbridge, Stanmore (now Jubilee line) and Watford.

Financial Challenges

The new extension stations underperformed, most of the towns and villages served were small with agricultural economies. Chesham with less than 10,000 residents was the most significant industrial town. Earlier main lines had taken the prime routes and reached further to the Midland and Northern industrial cities. The railway needed modernising and electrification and the central section faced new competition from the newly opened Central London Railway (now Central Line).

New Management took Command

In 1904 Sir Charles McLaren Bart took over as Chairman and Robert Selbie joined as general manager in 1908. Their plan to boost revenue was simple (and revolutionary) if the traffic wasn't there, they would create it!

Uniquely, the Metropolitan Railway had been able to retain acres of surplus land alongside their tracks after construction of the line. They realised this could be developed for profit and importantly would generate future passenger revenue. A nominally independent company, "Metropolitan Railway Country Estates Limited," was setup.

The Marketing of Metro-land

The Metropolitan Railway was an early adopter of marketing to generate traffic. In 1915 a clumsily named booklet "The Guide to the Extension Line" was renamed "The Metro-Land Guide," the rest as they say is history!

One of the set of embroideries depicting Metro-Land magazine front covers on show at the museum



These annual guides promoted the countryside the line served as a place to visit for recreation, but more importantly as a place to live. The “Live in Metro-land” slogan was even engraved on the carriage door plates!

The illustrated guides gave comprehensive information on the places the line served, from journey and season ticket details to schools, golf courses and recreational facilities, with wonderful pictures and words.

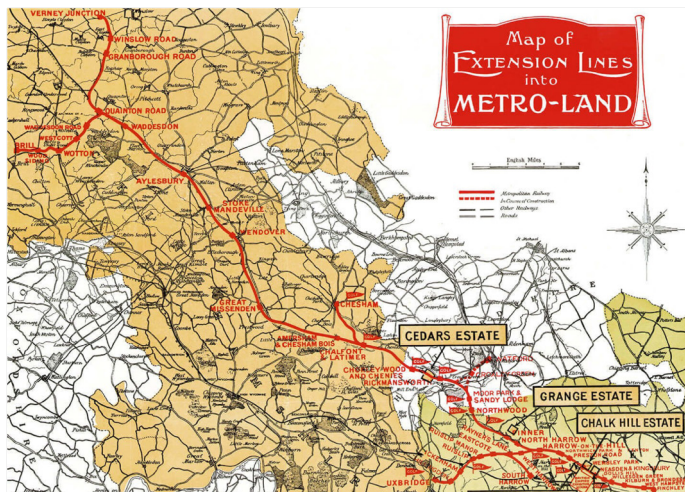
“IF YOU ARE SEEKING A HOME – LARGE OR SMALL, OLD WORLD OR MODERN YOU WILL READILY FIND IT IN METRO-LAND – THE GLORIOUS COUNTRYSIDE EASILY AND QUICKLY REACHED BY THE METROPOLITAN RAILWAY.

THE TRAIN SERVICE IS FREQUENT; THE SEASON TICKET RATES ARE LOW; THE EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES ARE EXCELLENT AND THE LOCAL GOLF COURSES BOTH NUMEROUS AND GOOD.”

The Creation of Metro-land

The target market was unashamedly middle class! Metro-Land architecture was conservative rather than revolutionary, so called “Tudorbethan” styling for housing and shops. By today’s standards, the housing density was low with generous sized plots.

Metroland developed along the line creating new communities from the Kingsbury Garden Village near Neasden to the last and furthest from London, the Weller Estate in Amersham.



ON THE CEDARS ESTATE, RICKMANSWORTH



£975 FREEHOLD
DEPOSIT £50

A VERY unique Detached Model Residence, represented in fact with excellent elevations, and hand-made out the gabled roof.
The Property forms an attractive little home, and enjoys many features usually found in more expensive houses, and is extremely suitable for a small family. The planning is most economical, the floor area devoted to Living and Passage being related to entrance, thereby admitting of the maximum use being obtained of the space.
The Ground Floor has a Living Room, 13 ft. by 11 ft. 6 in., with French doors to Garden, Dining Room, 12 ft. by 11 ft. 6 in., Kitchen, fitted sink, boiler, etc., and a small out.
The First Floor has two Bedrooms, 13 ft. by 11 ft. 6 in., and a Bath Room, 12 ft. by 8 ft. 6 in., and a small Single Bedroom. Bathrooms with fitted Closets, ideal for a small family, or a small out.
The accommodation can still be improved by the addition of a deep bay window to the Dining Room at a small cost.
The Property has been erected several times on various parts of the Estate and the price includes a Plot of Land with 40 ft. frontage and 120 ft. depth, or a larger area can be obtained. The house is well lit, electric light and hot water are sent for complete, close from water and drainage.
For details of repayment scheme see page 7.



Details of the developments complete with housing plans and pricing were included in the Metroland magazine.

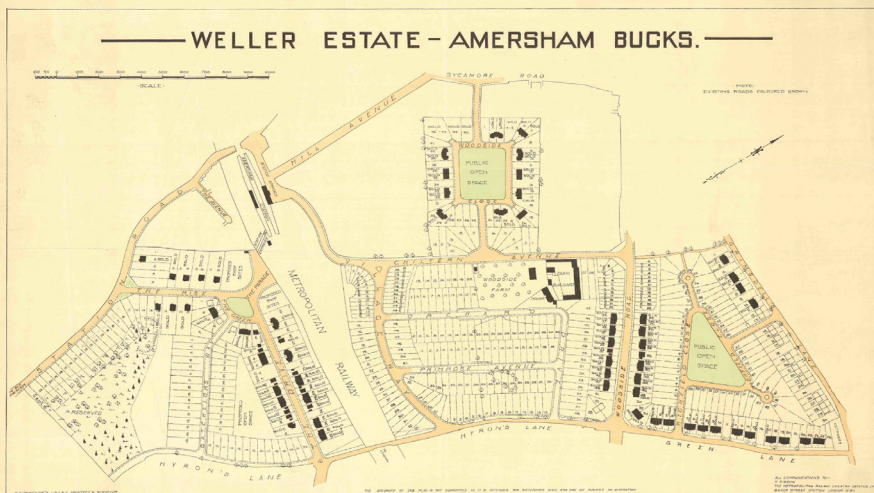
Such was the popularity of commuting that the new towns along the Metropolitan expanded rapidly during the inter war property boom helped by the more readily available mortgages. Metroland towns were where the growing professional class workforce aspired to live.

Pullman services were introduced enabling well-heeled commuters to enjoy breakfast and/or dinner on the train.

Other lines out of London were quick to copy the Metropolitan's lead, creating new suburbs and their own commuter traffic.

Amersham's Weller Estate

This was the last and furthest from London. The land was bought from the estate of George Weller of the local brewing family for £18,000. It was launched in 1930, it consisted of 78 acres of land north and south of the station between Grimsdells Lane and Stanley Hill Avenue, not all of the 535 houses and 51 shops planned were built. It comprised of four types of houses, ranging from £875 to £1,200. They can be found around the station; Woodside Close, The Drive and The Rise.



The End of Independence

The Metropolitan Railway ceased to exist as a separate company in July 1933 when the London Passenger Transport Board (LPTB) was created - combining the Met with the other underground railways as well as tram and bus services.

The LPTB's advertising followed a similar strategy but no longer confined just to the Met. However by 1933, the two Metropolitan tracks north of Harrow were clearly inadequate for the fast, slow and freight trains so Metroland advertising had to be curtailed.

They obtained powers to double the number of tracks to four to Rickmansworth in 1935 and immediately started construction. Work was halted by World War II, restarted in 1956 and finished in 1960 - although only as far as Moor Park.

Until 1961 the Metropolitan Line operated as far as Aylesbury. Trains were steam hauled between Rickmansworth and Aylesbury which involved a rapid changeover of locomotives at Rickmansworth. Following the completion of electrification to Amersham in 1961, services to Aylesbury were operated exclusively by British Railways diesel services, now Chiltern Railways. "A" Stock trains (A for Amersham) operated from 1961 to 2012, at which time the stock was the oldest on the Underground, having been in service for over 50 years.

The Metropolitan Railway didn't invent commuting, but it did invent Metro-land. Today, the term "Metroland" is widely used to describe leafy city suburbs and not just London's. It even made it to the silver screen - the 1997 film Metroland starred Christian Bale and Emily Watson.

Ralph Hilsdon

Mabel Brailsford



Mabel with her mother

*There have been some remarkable people living in Amersham. One such person was Mabel Brailsford. A chance find led Wendy Tibbitts, a volunteer researcher and Trustee for 10 years at the Amersham museum, to research her life and write "**Mabel Brailsford: A Wartime Journal, 1941-1943**", (Amersham Museum, 2016. Regrettably the book is now out of print).*

I first came across the name of Mabel Brailsford whilst cataloguing the archives of Amersham museum in 2005. I found three slim exercise books of her handwritten account of life in wartime Amersham. They had been donated to the Museum by someone who had found them in a drawer of a piece of furniture bought at auction. I later transcribed them and was astonished to read this interesting first-hand account of life in Amersham during WWII. Within the 40,000 words were descriptions of wartime deprivations; the problems of sharing her home with billeted Londoners; the shortage of domestic staff; growing her own produce and local cultural events. Amersham welcomed refugees from Europe as well as bombed-out Londoners, who with local residents would attend concerts at the music studio in Chestnut Close, and once a month there would be cultural and self-improving talks. These meetings were stimulating



Mabel with her mother and brother

for Mabel and she seemed to relish the variety of people she met there. She had personal stories to tell about them all. From her journal we first learn about Ticciati, Motesiczky, Canetti, and many other famous musicians, artists and writers that lived in Amersham at that time. She was a well-educated middle-class spinster and her journal writing reflects her background. She has an extensive vocabulary that she uses in an interesting but old-fashioned way. We get the impression that she was a slightly reserved, shy person, who didn't make friends easily, but when she did they were firm friends for life and she was always willing to help anyone. Her means of transport was a basket-fronted bicycle.

One of the Amersham refugees, Elias Canetti who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1981, described Mabel as "a small frail, very ancient woman, with a wobbling head", but there was more to Mabel than appearances suggest.¹

Mabel Richmond Brailsford was an author, translator and sister to the early twentieth-century Socialist writer, journalist and broadcaster, H.N. Brailsford.² She and her mother, Clara, moved into Greylands, a three-bedroomed bungalow (now demolished) in London Road East, Amersham, in 1923. She was 48. They moved there after the death of Mabel's father, Edward, a Wesleyan Methodist Minister. His last post was Superintendent of the Ilfracombe circuit in Devon where he lived with his "helpers", Clara and Mabel.³

Mabel was born in Mirfield, Yorkshire on 22 November 1875. Her brother, Henry Noel Brailsford (known as Noel) was two years older. Because of their Father's Ministry the family relocated around Britain every 3 or 4 years. The constant interruption to their education meant it was unlikely that either of the children had the chance to make close friends and so they relied on each other for companionship. They both liked music. Noel played the Cello and Mabel the piano, and both had a fondness for literature. Later Mabel went to a Methodist girls boarding school in Birkdale, Lancashire, but although bright and studious she was not given the opportunity to go to University like her brother. She was fluent in German and had knowledge of French and Italian. Apart from occasional courses in German Literature

“for my
books are
me – the
best part
of me.”

in Edinburgh, and a six month educational visit to Berlin, she remained her mother's life-long companion and never married.

She played the piano for her father's services and in 1907 she compiled and published a book of hymns for church services. In 1910 she published her first book called, *Susannah Wesley, the Mother of Methodism*. She then turned her attention to Quaker history and published *Quaker Women* in 1915. Whilst living in Amersham she often attended services at the Friends Meeting House in Whielden Street and her best friend was Emily Bolam, the wife of the Meeting House warden, Elder, and town carpenter, George Bolam.

It was in 1927, after her move to Amersham that Mabel completed her book, *A Quaker from Cromwell's Army*. Her most renowned book, *The Making of William Penn* was published in 1930. This book is still in print. The frontispiece is a wood-cut of Bury Farm in Old Amersham where William Penn courted his first wife. The artist, Clare Leighton, was Mabel's brother's companion at the time of publication.

Mabel went on to write *A Tale of Two Brothers: John and Charles Wesley* published in 1954. She also translated two German books into English and wrote Quaker biographies which were published as pamphlets by the Friends Home Service Committee. She said “for my books are me – the best part of me.”⁴

The final surviving journal ends just a month before her mother's hundredth birthday so we have no first-hand account of how she coped with the series of setbacks that followed. Her mother died in November 1944 at the age of 101. This devastating event was followed by the death of Emily Bolam a month later at the young age of 53. By 1945 some of the European refugees were moving back to London, and the cultural evenings stopped. Mabel's musical hero, Francesco Ticciati at the Music Studio, died on 10 February 1949.⁵ He is buried in St Mary's churchyard.

However Mabel's years of caring were not finished. In 1952, at the age of 79, Mabel's brother's health was failing and his severe angina meant that he could no longer manage the stairs to his flat in London so he moved in to his sister's bungalow, Greylands. From here he continued

She showed
her love for
Amersham
by leaving a
legacy to the
Abbeyfield
Society of
Amersham

Mabel with her cat



writing for the *New Statesman*, recorded talks for the BBC, and worked on his last major work *The Levellers and the English Revolution*. Once again the brother and sister resumed their companionship and their shared interests in music, languages, literature, flowers and animals. This companionship was to last for over five years until his death in 1958. Mabel died in Chesham Cottage hospital in 1970 aged 94. After various bequests to charities, she showed her love for Amersham by leaving a legacy to the Abbeyfield Society of Amersham, and they bought 94 Plantation Road where they cared for six residents. They called it Brailsford House. The house was sold in 2003 and so the Brailsford name disappeared, although Mabel's legacy will be the record of life on the home front in wartime Amersham, and a critically acclaimed body of work of religious biographies.

Wendy Tibbitts

1 Canetti, Elias, *Party in the Blitz: The English Years*, (London, 2005)

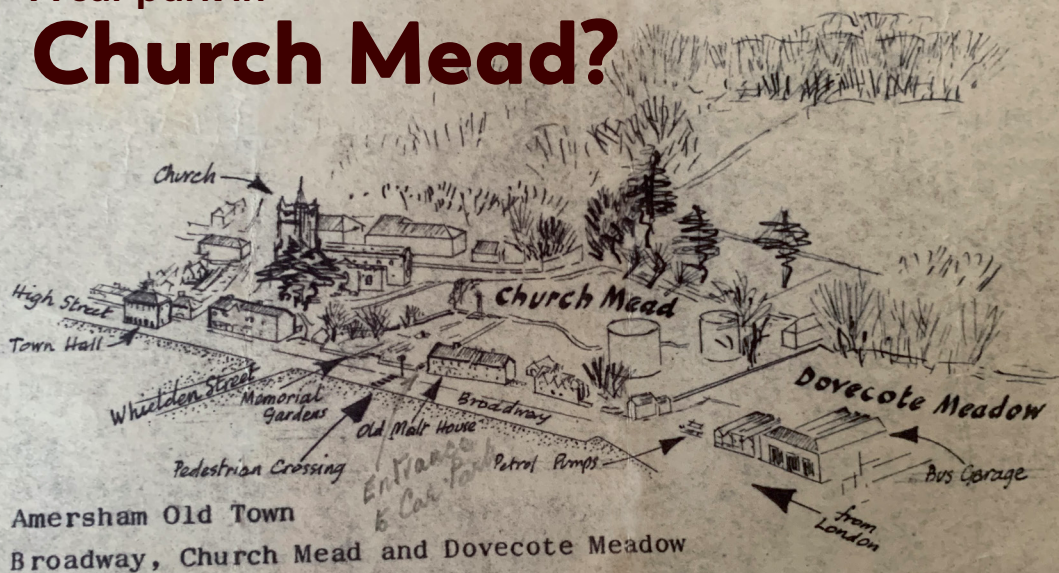
2 <https://amershammuseum.org/history/people/19th-century/henry-noel-brailsford-1873-1958/>

3 Brailsford, Edward J., *The Spiritual Sense in Sacred Legend*, (London, 1910). Dedication

4 Brailsford, Mabel, *A Wartime Journal 1941-1943*, (Amersham Museum, 2016 - out of print)

5 <https://amershammuseum.org/history/people/20th-century/francesco-ticciati/>

A car park in Church Mead?



Undated line drawing by Derek Matthews

Yes, you did read the title correctly. Parking was as much a problem for Old Amersham 65 years ago as it is now and a proposal was put forward to alleviate it by creating a car park behind the Memorial Gardens on a vacant plot of derelict glebe land. The Society's archives reveal through letters and press cuttings how they led the campaign to prevent it being tarmacked over. But, like the construction of the by-pass (see newsletter May 2025), it was almost two decades before Old Amersham got its car park as we now know it.

At a meeting of the Amersham Rural District Council in July 1960, authority was given for council officers to negotiate to acquire the piece of land known as Church Mead adjoining St. Mary's Parish church, on which to construct a car park. Headlines in the Bucks Advertiser of 2nd September screamed "Peace of garden of Remembrance threatened"! The following week the paper reported comments by local residents about the possible new car park: "greatly needed", "an asset to the town", "long overdue" and "present parking is totally inadequate"....but not on Church Mead!

In a matter of days the Amersham Society had amassed some 300 signatures opposing the proposal. The Amersham Parish Council also opposed to the site, saying it “would destroy the sanctity of the Memorial Gardens” and offered an alternative 6 acre site, Dovecote Meadow, a little use allotment site to the east adjacent to the two gas holders and behind the old B&M Motors and the London Transport bus station. See (undated) line drawing by local architect Derek Matthews.

The Amersham Society’s Secretary, Miss. A. Wallis, wrote to both the Minister of Transport and the Church Commissioners to garner their support. Neither could help: the Church Commissioners wrote back saying that they “have no power to take any action”, “any negotiations would be a matter for the Council and the incumbent” (at the time, the Rev T. H. South), whilst the Minister of Transport “regrets that the matter you have raised is not one in which he can intervene”, and that the Society should “make representations direct to the Clerk of The Amersham Rural District Council”. A Catch 22 situation if ever there was one!

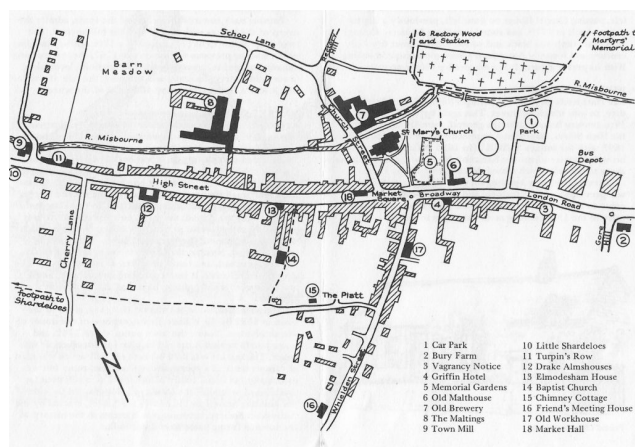
Amersham Rural District Council remained unmoved and placed a notice (under the Road Traffic Act 1960) in the Bucks Advertiser of 8th December 1960, of their intent to acquire 1.4 acres of land known as Church Mead for “use as a parking place for vehicles”, along with 0.1 acres of land forming part of the Old Malt Tea House *, as an access point.

The following January the Bucks Advertiser reported that there were now more than 500 names on a petition opposing the car park and the recently formed campaigning organisation, Amersham and District Residents Association, had also put its weight behind it. On the 20th January the Amersham Society’s chairman (E. Bridgstock Choat) hand delivered a letter to the clerk of the Rural District Council on behalf of 593 signatories, enclosing the schedule of objections to the siting of the new carpark. The Rural District met to discuss the new carpark and in a letter from the Clerk dated 2nd March, the Society was informed that the County Planning Department was to undertake a survey into the “needs of the area” so “it was considered appropriate to defer considerations of all objections received to the car park proposal until the report was completed” (3 – 6 months was

the timeframe given). Following a County Planning meeting the Bucks Examiner of 6th July 1962 quotes Mr. Bridgstock Choat: "Now a plan has been produced which considers Church Mead should become a Public Open Space – with the car park to be located at Dovecote Meadow."

Everybody happy! Not so, purchase the land was thwarted by the new Rector appointed in 1963, the Rev. Allan Campbell. He was asking a high price as he wanted the land for a new rectory and a church car park. Two years passed and in April 1965 the Bucks Examiner reported that he had offered a compromise: to sell the bulk of the site, on condition the church could retain a small portion on which to build the new rectory. This left 2.25 acres of Church Mead as a public open space.

Opposition and objections continued, this time to the building of a new rectory and the church's initial Planning Application in December 1966 was rejected. However approval was eventually granted and in 1973 the Sir Basil Spence Partnership was asked to draw up plans for the new rectory. The modern building we know today was completed in 1985.



Extract from the Amersham Society Town Trail Map dated 1975, showing the original Dovecote car park (1) before it was enlarged in 1979.

Church Mead, with its ancient apple trees, is now a much enjoyed open public space adjacent to the Misbourne as envisaged by the Council, it's also the starting point for the Society's Riverside Walk and the regular Saturday morning 5K Parkrun.

And the public car park in Old Amersham? It was finally built in 1972 on Dovecote Meadow. The Bucks Examiner of 10th November that year first mentioned it in connection with "residents' parking problem" caused by an attempt to introduce the yellow-band no-waiting restrictions in the town. It took further 7 years before the car park was extended (1979) to the one we have today, known simply as Amersham Old Town car park, with almost 200 parking bays - far more than achievable in the original Church Mead site.

John Catton

***Old Malt Tea House**

*"*In the late 1930's and 40's the Old Malt Tea House, one of the oldest buildings in the Broadway, was a well-known restaurant. The business included a lunchroom, tearoom, gift shop and bakery. "A steep rickety staircase, led to 'Top Room' where afternoon teas were served, and wedding receptions held". In the mid 1950's jazz evenings were introduced, but in 1959 the then owner, Reginald Padget, put in a planning application to demolish 4' from the west side of the building and create 20 bedroom hotel incorporating a new restaurant. He was, of course, in favour of the*

Church Mead carpark as it would be adjacent to his new enterprise. After his plans were rejected he sold the building in 1963 and after the new owner's unsuccessful attempt to revitalise the tea rooms the whole site was redeveloped. Flats were built at the back of the garden and the building was divided into three separate business premises with accommodation above. Today Grade II listed, the Malt House currently has one empty shop (previously Joules), and Crew Clothing to the front, and an aesthetic clinic, Skin Techniques and Pilates studio at the rear.



Behind the Scenes at Amersham Museum

Museum Garden ©Linda Gould

Like many of you I (your editor) have lived in Amersham (on-the-Hill, in my case) for a good many years and have visited the museum, albeit infrequently, since it opened in 1991. I took along our children and relatives when they came to stay, and we all found it absolutely fascinating. But when leaving I thought, or knew, little about it apart from it being an absolute asset to the town. My knowledge and appreciation of it changed when I joined the Amersham Society 4 years ago. I discovered that it was the Amersham Society that was the driving force behind its inception, although it is now run by a separate charity. The opening sentence on its website sums up its ethos: to “explore life in the town’s past through intriguing objects and local stories”. Fifty four other people have joined the Society since I did, so it got me wondering if they too know as little about the museum, how it’s run and its interaction with the local community. With this thought in mind, rather than write a piece about, for instance, the next exhibition the museum is about to mount, I asked its Director, Briony Hudson, to write about the museum itself.

From the outside, Amersham Museum may seem like a relatively small and simple organisation, but under its surface it’s more large and complicated than you might imagine.

As many of you are very well aware, Amersham Museum opened in its current location in July 1991, building on the strong foundations laid by members of the Amersham Society and beyond, to share the history of the locality from the medieval hall house which still forms the core of the museum's home today. The early pre-history and history of the museum is told comprehensively in the publication written to mark the Society's 50th anniversary by Dr Michael Brooks, Barbara Webber and Christine Standing, and available to all via the Society's website

Writing 34 years later, the museum's core hasn't changed, nor its ambition to engage people with the history of the town and surrounding area. So what happens 'behind the scenes' of Amersham Museum today to allow us to share that history with an increasing and increasingly diverse number of visitors?

Since 2017, our site has embraced numbers 49 and 51 High Street, plus the glass reception which houses our welcome desk and the shop. Beyond number 49, the beautiful garden continues to enthral visitors with its significant range of plants, all with their historical uses described. Inside the buildings, we continue to ring the changes, to ensure that visitors get the most from their encounter with the properties and the town's history, whatever their individual starting points. In the last two years we've opened a new permanent timeline display in the Woodcock Room, and refitted and opened a temporary exhibition gallery, named for émigré artist Marie-Louise von Motesiczky whose charitable trust funded the work. Underpinning these developments was the upgrading of our security systems, refreshed UV filter film on our windows, installation of flexible exhibition panels, and improvements to our storage for collections and shop stock, all enabling us to maximise our use of the restricted space in the buildings. Investment in security and collections care measures allowed the museum to make its first loan from a national collection, Tate, for our *Precious Objects* exhibition last year: the 18th century cloisonné enameled sheep ornaments that Marie-Louise brought with her to Amersham on her flight from Vienna.

Within number 49, we have recently made changes to our displays to better tell the story of the fabulous building. A model of the Tudor High Street (produced by



©Linda Gould

Countess Howe presenting a volunteering award to our Tudor Walks team, March 2025

3D modelling student Milly Mohr), alongside the existing model of the hall house itself now sit side-by-side to allow visitors to navigate the historical context. If you haven't visited since we re-opened in 2017, you would also notice that our displays focused on the 18th and 19th centuries are now entirely upstairs, with more space downstairs for Tudor stories. Having had the museum fully audited for access and inclusion by Buckinghamshire Disability Service in 2023, we have worked through their comprehensive list of recommendations which included moving Tudor interpretation downstairs and making more space for visitors to enjoy the building. With Community Board funding we've installed an additional handrail for the stairs to the first floor, so that more people can make their way up to the 'Tudor dining room'.

Our updates also include an Amersham in Art wall with a changing display of art by local artists and depicting local scenes, and we continue to rotate historical material on show across the museum for its own benefit (allowing it time to rest in dark, cool storage), and so that repeat visitors always have something new to explore. This is also true for the garden, where our brilliant volunteer team keeps it looking good whatever the season. Working with our team of Young Curators who are 14 to 18 years old, this year we've introduced some additional labels to highlight the role that some of the plants play in current medicines, as well as their historical value.

The "we" in this article is doing a lot of work: alongside four part-time paid staff, we currently have around 125 volunteers



Singing group



©Linda Gould

Visitors meeting Mother Savory at
Amersham Heritage Day, September 2024

on our books, from Young Curators aged 14 to those in their tenth decade! Our staff comprises Director Briony Hudson, working 4 days each week, whose role includes building management, fund-raising, programming and exhibitions, as well as policy and strategy. In reality this can also mean emptying the recycling bins, buying refreshments and answering a whole range of enquiries by phone, email and in-person. Our Learning Officer, Hailey Bickham, is the newest on the team, and looks after all of our schools visits and family events. About one-third of our visitors on-site are on a school visit, with the majority of local primary school children joining us for a session during each academic year. From Tudors and Victorians, to traditional toys and guided walks to explore the town's development, children benefit enormously from the object-rich, creative approach to history we can provide.

Our Collections Manager, Emma Treleven, is on maternity leave as I write with Billy Summers admirably filling the role. Billy and Emma are in charge of the 12,000 items in the museum's collection from photographs, maps and books, to fossils, farm tools and dresses. The collections care side of the job includes monitoring for any insect damage, checking light levels, temperature and humidity, identifying conservation needs (and subsequent funding needs), and

constantly improving storage facilities and conditions. Collections management comprises liaising with donors or vendors of potential additions to the collection, and improving the catalogue records of our existing holdings. However, looking after collections is only important if they are then used or accessed, whether that's to go in our own exhibitions or lent to other museums, made available for a research appointment for someone who is interested to know more perhaps for an academic project or family history, or photographed to form part of an article on our or someone else's publication or website. We're about to launch a new online collections section of our website with themed 'galleries' available for people to explore, whether they live locally or around the world.

Our final paid team member, Natalie McNeill, is our Project Administrative Officer, and is often the first port of call for visitors or enquirers. Natalie works on promotion and marketing, helping to manage our volunteer teams, working with our shop and finance volunteers to keep things running smoothly, and supporting all other elements of the museum's work from bookings and events to exhibitions and walks. Natalie's role is fully funded by the Rothschild Foundation, as part of a three-year project – *Creating Connections* - that aims to bolster the museum's impact and resilience, particularly to reach schools, researchers, makers and people with special educational needs and disabilities that do not already know the museum. This three-year project also supports additional time for the other three staff members, significantly increasing the amount of work that we can get done each week.

But the main powerhouse of the museum, as it has been from the start, is the large volunteer team, who are involved in all aspects of our work. Our website and social media are run by 'behind the scenes' volunteers, as is our finance with a volunteer book keeper and treasurer. The most visible volunteer team are the duty managers and stewards on the front desk who greet visitors, and keep the building open and welcoming for 5 or 6 afternoons each week. But volunteers also fully run our guided walks programme, our 'age friendly' reminiscence and singing groups, plus visits to care homes. They support all of our school visits and family activities, give talks on site and externally (to over 1000 people so



'Anthony' our mobile museum

far in 2025), organise events, write articles for external publications, research our own collections and a broad range of local history topics, drive 'Anthony' our mobile museum to events and talk to visitors there, install exhibitions and carry out maintenance in the building, work to care for and manage the collections, and of course act as trustees for the organisation.

So we form our own community within the Amersham community and, more than any other museum that I've worked at, we are the 'home' to not just our volunteers and also our Friends (an organisation set up at the same time as the museum itself), but also to the myriad people who meet here including our 7 to 11 year old Art Club attendees, Young Curators, reminiscence and singing participants, our monthly lacemaking group and our monthly professional Makers' Hub. Through the members of the museum community we reach out to link with so many other communities, with the Amersham Society being a significant 'parent' body and ongoing supporter of our endeavors.

Briony Hudson



Albanian Royal Family, 1928

Local historian Neil Rees returned to the Society in June to continue on the subject of high-profile exiles in England during WWII. His previous talk about the Czechoslovak Government in exile in Bucks (see write-up in Newsletter, September 2024) was particularly well received by our members. This time he told the nomadic story of the Albanian ruling family.

‘Gordon’s Alive’ shouted a thunderous voice!

With a lecture title like “King Zog of Albania” I half expected this to be about a character from Flash Gordon or Dan Dare in the Eagle!

But no; Zog was a real person although his life could very well have been a tale from an adventure comic.

Racing across Europe in a battleship of a car just as WWII erupted, to be saved by Ian Fleming at the last moment and whisked to safety in the UK, King Zog’s life certainly had its moments of high drama and echoes of the Von Trapp family.

The sense of fantasy continues as Zog, which means ‘Bird’, could well have styled himself ‘King Bird of the Land of the Eagles’ (Albania’s epithet).

Following the First World War, Zog, the son of a feudal lord, served as the Interior Minister in the government in 1921, becoming President in 1925 and then King later that year



King Zog

when an Albanian monarchy was established at a time when its neighbours had also decided to 'upgrade'.

But first, a little bit of background on Albania.

Lying east of the heel of Italy 48 miles across the Adriatic it is bordered by Montenegro to the northwest, Kosovo to the northeast, North Macedonia to the east and Greece to the south. Albania's landscapes range from rugged snow-capped mountains, to fertile lowland plains extending from the Adriatic and Ionian seacoasts. Tirana is the capital and largest city.

In the 2nd century BC, the Roman Republic annexed the region, and it remained part of the eastern Roman Empire until the Middle Ages.

The Kingdom of Albania was formed between the 13th and 15th centuries, becoming part of the Ottoman Empire in the late 15th century. As this Empire began to disintegrate around the edges in 1912, the modern Albanian state declared independence and was recognised by its neighbours, which were also former Ottoman provinces.

Being a Balkan country the religions of its population reflect the flows and ebbs of its historical rulers, with Catholics mainly in the North, Muslims in the middle and Greek Orthodox in the South.

Back to King Zog. In the early 20th century Albania was still largely a tribal country and, very possibly to avoid potential internal divisions, though maybe wishing to follow the established European trend of marrying into existing nobility, he asked his ambassadors to start a search of a suitable consort and to send pictures to him of likely candidates. Those lucky to make the final cut were invited to visit. It sounds a little medieval and a bit of a cross between speed dating and Love Island but it most certainly took a lot of the hassle out of finding a partner!

Success took the form of the beautiful Geraldine Apponyi, a half American, Hungarian countess, albeit penniless. Both Zog, a Sunni Muslim, and Geraldine, a Catholic, spoke several languages communicated between themselves in German.

They married in April 1938. Zog was not a supporter of the German Nazi party, but Hitler, with no doubt an eye to the



Hitler's wedding present

future, sent the couple a veritable beast of a car, the Mercedes 540k Cabriolet, as a wedding present. Hitler also gifted the same model to King Farook of Egypt and Stalin of Russia, which might suggest where his other interests could lie.

As it happened, Hitler's present proved very useful as Mussolini, in his vain desire to re-establish the Roman Empire, invaded Albania in April 1939 causing the family to flee, first to Greece, then to Istanbul then to France, via Poland and Scandinavia to avoid Axis countries. They were offered asylum by Great Britain and, following the expedient departure in 1940 of the Duke of Windsor to the Governorship of Bermuda, were offered his former house in Paris.

High society in Paris would have been a bit of an interesting change from Tirana and chasing around Eastern Europe, however the stay was brief following France's sudden defeat at the start of the war and the family and retainers made their way, yet again by Hitler's wedding present, to South West France where they were assisted by the ever resourceful Ian Fleming of British Naval Intelligence to get a passage on one of the last ships to leave the port for Britain.

They moved to London and were initially comfortably installed in the Ritz along with several other displaced European Royals, but once the Blitz began they moved to Parmoor House in Frieth, which was quite close to Turville, once the abode of, surprise, surprise, Ian Fleming.

Parmoor House in Frieth belonged to the Cripps family and Sir Stafford Cripps, a government minister, was born there. It had been remodelled in the 1860s in an 'Italianate Gothic' style and stood in beautiful grounds. The King and Queen arrived there in 1941 and stayed until the end of the war.

By all accounts they were an exotic couple – Geraldine beautiful and glamorous, and Zog described variously as "the last ruler of romance", one of the "cleverest men in Europe" and interestingly "frankly, a cad!"

King Zog, Queen Geraldine and their young son Prince Leka, members of his family, their servants, bodyguards and pets lived in the House whilst his retainers lived in Little Parmoor, and his Ministers and their families were billeted to houses around Lane End. Along with his retinue, it is believed King Zog also arrived with seven crates of gold which were



Wedding of Prince Leka

probably stored in a small strongroom in the cellar and no doubt proved very handy.

Apparently amongst the pets the couple had a goat living in the house which once wandered into the dining room during a meal and ate the table cloth, sending the dishes crashing to the floor.

They had eight bodyguards, who were often seen patrolling the grounds and in the village where they struck up friendly relations with the locals.

Parties were held at the house, and visitors included members of the Cripps family, government officials and sometimes other exiled heads of state including General De Gaulle and Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands.

Queen Geraldine and other Catholic members of the group attended the Catholic chapels at Wheeler End and Marlow. King Zog and Queen Geraldine often attended the cinemas in Marlow and High Wycombe. Prince Leka had a Swiss governess and some local people remember being invited to play with him at Parmoor House when they were children. He was tutored by the headmaster of Lane End School.

Following the war, with Albania under communist rule, they moved to Egypt at the invitation of fellow car enthusiast, King Farouk, perhaps not their best move as President Nasser took power shortly after. There followed a stay in Rhodesia at the invitation of Prime Minister Ian Smith, who had trained as a spitfire pilot at Booker airfield near High Wycombe, but the unfortunate couple's stay was again disrupted when, following the establishment of Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe, who was supported by the Chinese communists, they moved to Spain under General Franco. After Franco's death they settled in South Africa.

Meanwhile with the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, the Republic of Albania was established in 1991 and a strange thing happened. A plebiscite was held on the form of government to be adopted and by popular vote the people chose to re-adopt a monarchy! But, like other 'inconvenient' referendum results the vote was declared invalid.

King Zog was nevertheless welcomed to return and re-acquire a couple of neglected palaces and a villa, but sadly he died soon after his return. He was buried in great style in



Parmoor House

a communal cemetery. This surprising story however does not end there. The state decided the cemetery was not a fit and proper resting place for their ex-King and the coffin was reinterred in a new royal mausoleum with full state pomp and ceremonials.

King Zog (“King” in Albanian is “Mbret” so he is also referred to as Mbreti Zog) ruled from 1925 to 1939 and died in 1991. He is survived by his son and grandson.

Post Script: In 1947 Parmoor House was sold to the Community of St. Katharine of Alexandria, a High Anglican Religious Community which had been bombed out of their previous home in Fulham. In 1995 the last surviving member of the Community, Mother Christine gave the house and grounds to Lady Ryder, better known as Sue Ryder. She accepted it on behalf of The Sue Ryder Prayer Fellowship, an independent charity which is quite separate from her better known eponymous charity. The Fellowship was conceived by Lady Ryder to be a “spiritual powerhouse” for the needs of others. Their website also contains a more historical information (<https://www.srpf.org.uk/about/history/>).

Thank you to Neil Rees for his wonderful style in retelling the story and apologies for any shortcomings in my recollection of it.

David Flett

What are these objects?



Strange aren't they? Unlikely though it seems, they are both one and the same, in so far as they serve the same purpose in a once thriving cottage industry in the Amersham area, that of straw hat plaiting. They are two designs of a straw splitter, an essential piece of equipment for a plaiter to cut a whole straw into narrow splints in preparation for hat making. Hat plaiting is now a critically Endangered Heritage Craft (along with clog making, bellfoundry and wainwrighting – the maker and repairer of carts), defined as “crafts with a shrinking base of craftspeople, crafts with limited training opportunities, crafts with low financial viability, or crafts where there is no mechanism to pass on the skills and knowledge.”

The picture on the left is a modern 3D-printer splitter based on early examples of straw splitters made of bone used by Napoleonic prisoners. The one on the right, known as a Frame Splitter and in the museum collection, is an improved tool introduced around 1815 capable of splitting straws speedily into splints of varying widths.

Having worked with Veronica Main MBE to host workshops in the past, Amersham Museum applied for grant funding

from Heritage Crafts to support straw hat plaiting, and is running beginners' and intermediate workshops with Veronica as tutor this year, alongside commissioning a contemporary straw plait hat to add to the collection, and stocking supplies needed to practise the craft. These include the 3D-printed straw splitters illustrated here, developed by museum volunteer Richard Bacon, and now commercially by Niritek. Veronica had identified that the lack of straw splitters was holding back revival of the skills. The only available splitters were limited in range and had to be imported. Veronica comments: "Now thanks to the hard work and determination of Richard we have local production offering a wide range of splitters. Once again we have the choice enjoyed by straw plaiters in the past."

Briony Hudson

(see also a related object: "Identify this object", page 19, Amersham Society newsletter, May 2023)

You can buy your own straw splitters from Amersham Museum shop or directly from Niritek's Etsy shop, where there are also other innovative splitters available including those specially developed for children and adults with less dexterous hands. A fascinating example of heritage and cutting edge innovation supporting each other!

Lord Byron

Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know



Lord Byron

Byron may have been mad, bad and dangerous to know but quite a lot of people wanted to know about him, dangerous or not, at least to judge from the packed audience for the Amersham Society's April talk by former Oxford scholar, Jeremy Holmes. And to judge by comments at the end, a surprising number of the Society's members did rather wish that they had known him ... whether their husbands would have agreed is another matter.

Born George Gordon Byron, he was the son of 'Mad' Jack Byron, a somewhat feckless army Captain and his second wife, Catherine. She was a snob, rather plain and mean, but her wealth made her attractive to Jack. However, Jack soon abandoned the family and then died, so Byron was brought up by his mother, whom he later demonised. Unexpectedly, at the age of 10, he inherited the title of Baron Byron from a great uncle, and the family seat of Newstead Abbey. This was in poor condition and his later attempts to renovate it contributed to his mounting debts.

Byron spoke with a lisp and was born with a deformed foot which led to him being bullied at Harrow School, although lavish spending bought some relief. He fell in love with a distant cousin, Mary Chaworth, and refused to return to Harrow for a term. When he did go back, he seems to have been involved in a number of homosexual relationships, which of course were illegal at the time, but the risk perhaps added to its appeal for him.

Going up to Cambridge, he immediately made a stir by going into his first formal dinner wearing the full robes of a peer. Undergraduates were not allowed to keep dogs - so he kept a bear! He had a carriage, with liveried servants, and used it to take drunken friends to the races at Newmarket.

After Cambridge, he resided for a time in various London hotels and started the restoration of Newstead. He also got Lucy, one of the housemaids, pregnant but did settle an annuity on her and the baby. Seeing a distant cousin, Anne Beatrix Wilmot, at a party, overnight he was inspired



Constance Smith



Lady Caroline Lamb

to write the well-known poem *She Walks in Beauty*. Although a Romantic poet, he was more in the tradition of Dryden and Pope, than the Neo-romantics such as Wordsworth or Keats. His poem *Don Juan* was described by one critic as the funniest in the English language, although in many ways it reflected Byron's own life as a womaniser. Byron knew the correct Spanish pronunciation of *Don Juan* but anglicised it to get much better rhymes, for example rhyming *Don Juan* with *true one and*, in the same vein, rhyming *Alfonso* with *Oh how my lady doth go on so*.

He had a fixation on the lure of the Orient and wrote *Eastern Tales* on his Grand Tour in 1809. He visited Portugal, Greece, Turkey (where he swam the Hellespont) and Albania and much liked wearing the Albanian costume he bought there. On reaching Malta, he sent a message to the British Governor informing him of his arrival but waited in vain for the Royal salute of guns to which he felt entitled as a peer of the realm. However, one compensation there was meeting, and having an affair with, 26-year-old Mrs Constance Smith. She was a woman very much in Byron's mould; having been captured by the Napoleonic guard she was rescued by a Sicilian Marquess and formed the model for Calypso in his poem *Childe Harold*.



Augusta Leigh

Byron was a prolific and acclaimed poet. In 1812, the first edition of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* sold out within 3 days. He said he woke up and found he was famous. *The Corsair* sold 10,000 copies on the first day. His poetry reflected much of his personal life, 'let joy be unconfined'.

He formed friendships with older women, particularly Lady Melbourne, who was his co-conspirator in amatory affairs. She was the mother-in-law of Lady Caroline Lamb, another of his lovers. This was a very public affair, considered scandalous even in Regency London. It was Caroline who described him as 'mad, bad and dangerous to know', presumably at the end of their tempestuous affair. Almost the same age as Byron, she was somewhat neurotic and had at one time pursued him. He left her for Lady Oxford, 14 years older than him, but with whom he also had a romantic liaison.

Byron was the 19th century equivalent of a rock star, a celebrity who drank wine from a human skull, took drugs and indulged in sexual excess. But he did champion the underdog, supporting Greek independence from the Ottomans and Catholic emancipation. His maiden speech in the House of Lords was in support of the Luddites, opposing the death penalty for those breaking the knitting frames in textile factories.

His mounting debts forced him to consider marriage and Anne Milbanke, an heiress, eventually agreed. She was intelligent and he called her "My parallelogram princess". Although they separated after less than a year, one positive outcome was the birth of Byron's only legitimate child, Augusta Ada. Like her mother, she was a talented mathematician and, after her marriage to the Earl of Lovelace, was known as Ada Lovelace. She became famous for her work with Charles Babbage, producing some of the first papers on computing.

One reason for their separation was Byron's rumoured incestuous affair with his half-sister, Augusta Leigh. Augusta's third child was born within weeks of Ada. There were other affairs, too, for example with Drury Lane actresses. Our speaker was at pains to emphasise that at that time love, sex and marriage were three quite separate



Anne Milbanke



Claire Clairmont

concepts. Even so, Byron's increasingly scandalous behaviour, allegations of incest and sodomy, as well as mounting debts, led him to flee the country in 1816, never to return. Whilst his party was waiting for a ship in Dover, society women apparently travelled to the port in disguise, just to get a glimpse of him.

There followed eight years of travel - with many visits by English society women and affairs with continental women. One story is that on seeing him in Rome a matron told her daughter to avert her eyes, in case the mere sight would corrupt her.

In Geneva he took up with the poet Shelley, Mary Godwin (the woman Shelley had eloped with) and Mary's step-sister Claire Clairmont, with whom Byron had another daughter, Allegra. That was the year with no summer (1816), the result of a volcanic eruption in Indonesia. During that time, Mary wrote *Frankenstein* and Byron wrote *The Prisoner of Chillon*.

Byron moved to Venice, taking a house on the Grand Canal and on the ground floor kept a substantial menagerie - dogs, monkeys, cats, birds, a fox and a wolf - through which visitors had to make their way in order to reach the grand staircase.



Teresa, Contessa Guiccioli

He had a passionate affair with Teresa, Contessa Guiccioli, the wife of an Italian nobleman and they lived together in Ravenna for a couple of years.

He left her to travel to Greece, to further the cause of its independence from the Ottomans. He went first to Kefalonia and put money into a private army, the Byron Brigade. But in Missolonghi he contracted malaria from which he died. He was greatly mourned by the Greeks but his body was sent back to England in a barrel of spirit. However burial in Westminster Abbey was rejected by the Dean on the grounds of his immorality.

Mad, bad and dangerous to know? Yes, but a lot of women did want to know him. What was the attraction? Our speaker did not address this question but my guess would be utter boredom with the empty life of society ladies.

Peter Borrows



Home fires and havens

Amersham during WWII

Three Heads, 1944 by Marie-Louise Motesiczky.
This painting expresses the alienation and sadness of exile.

On a pleasant spring evening in March, we were treated to a trip down Memory Lane with Alison Bailey's talk about Amersham during the Second World War. The talk encompassed a wide range of fascinating glimpses of life at that time and was illustrated with images from the wonderful collection of the Amersham Museum.

Although we saw delightful pictures of families dressed in their best to celebrate VE day, there was evidence of a social divide. However, there were efforts to ensure that the new town (which had grown up around the railway station) was shown at its best with new offices and a parade of shops. If you visit Harris and Hoole for a coffee, you can still detect some of the tiles from the Sainsbury's store - the manager was Mr. Chapman and his trainees lived in a hostel above the shop with a housekeeper to keep it tidy and cook their meals.

New residents had been attracted to live here by the affordable Metroland houses (see article, page 23). The town offered not only a good selection of shops and services, but



Little girl with gas mask

there was then the 700 seat cinema on Sycamore Road showing the new 'talkies' and Sally Latimer's Playhouse Theatre at the top of Station Road (which continued with performances throughout the war).

When war was declared on 3rd September 1939, life changed for the residents of Amersham; Sandbags appeared in front of shops, families were given gas masks and ration books were issued by the Ministry of Food from an office on Sycamore corner for sugar, tea, meat, butter and cheese.

Many local men and women joined the armed forces or worked with the local Air Raid Wardens and the Home Guard; The familiar Green Line bus station on Broadway became a transport depot for army lorries and even tanks. The town was surrounded by soldiers' camps (later used for displaced families). Rectory Wood was full of British soldiers, with many dugouts and slit trenches, and at one point 24 large guns! Members of the Sussex regiment, billeted at Badminton Court with straw-filled mats, were obliged to swim in the Misbourne at the old Cygnet swimming pool. We heard stories of individual local men and women, and were amused to hear of the attraction of the job of boat crew in the Wrens to 'take the first pick of the men' they rescued.

In March 1941, single women aged 20-30 were called up for war work and by mid 1943 80% of married women worked in factories, on the land or in the forces. Many women worked at The Maltings making barrage balloons and air sea rescue equipment and in Chesham factories producing radios and aircraft parts. It was at this time that a radium compound for luminous paint was first produced at Chilcote House in White Lion Road.

Childcare was needed to make it possible for women to work, often for a 48 hour week. In 1941 an American "war effort" federation (equivalent to a UK fund) provided money to build a nursery which was opened in February 1942. The Federation was headed up by Henry Allen, the governor of Wichita, Kansas, and this was the beginning of what is now Henry Allen Nursery School in Mitchell Walk. Amersham hospital became an emergency service and Shardeloes House was used as a maternity hospital, where some 5,000 babies were born.

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Making barrage balloons

Throughout the area incidences of spying activity have been evident. We know that Ian Fleming was involved in delivering secret despatches as personal assistant to a Rear Admiral in Naval Intelligence. He also founded a covert commando unit, and some of these men were observed practising their jumps from the windows of Coldmoreham Farm. Many large houses in Chalfont St. Giles were taken over by the Special Operations Executive for the training of Polish agents and F Section agents who were to be dropped into occupied France including Jacqueline Nearne and Princess Noor Inayat Khan.

Less well known is the way the Bertram Mills Circus family kept their elephants, walking them from Chalfont station to the extensive grounds of their Pollards Wood house. Their son, Cyril, had a top secret career in spying, using his overseas flights to find new acts but also to report to MI6 on Germany's rearmament. He later worked part time with MI5 and recruited a German spy to feedback misinformation.

Although not targeted, the town did not escape bombing entirely. Incendiary bombs rained down during the Blitz in 1940, but only one hit a house on Stanley Hill, where one of the boys grabbed his brother's trousers to put out the ensuing fire, winning a commendation for his bravery. A goat was killed by a bomb in Bois Lane in 1942 and damage was caused to the stained glass in St. Leonard's Church and to Anne's Corner. One bomb which fell and tunnelled under the house did not explode, and the first the family knew was

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the arrival of the ARP (Air Raid Precautions) to defuse the bomb. Most seriously a V1 rocket demolished Red Lodge (in Chestnut Lane) and the bungalow next door, where three people died and 17 were injured.

Casualties also occurred elsewhere to Amersham residents. Commemorated on Chesham Bois war memorial Roddy Mackenzie who was only 21 when he left it too late to bail out from his damaged Spitfire on his way back from France. Wren Aileen Kilburn from Stubbs Wood, killed by a bomb on her hostel in Great Yarmouth, is buried near him in Chesham Bois Burial Ground. On the Amersham memorial is Sgt. Keith Baker who volunteered for the RAF at 18. He was the rear gunner on a Lancaster bomber, confined at the back of a plane, a post known as the 'tail end Charlie'. Spotted over farmland returning from an attack on an oil plant in Germany, he was unable to eject in time when the tail broke away from the stricken aircraft.

But for whom did Amersham become a haven from the changes in mainland Europe? The first Jewish emigres fled from the rising National Socialism in Europe. They could only obtain a visa for domestic work and so came to Amersham as cooks, nurserymaids or nurses, often supported by Jewish families already settled here and aware of their plight.

Early in the war, the Chesham, Amersham and District Refugee Fund Committee was formed, led by artist John Simmons, his niece and Reverend Briggs of St. Mary's. They acquired two rented houses in Ashley Green and Chesham at a cost of £6 a week and supported 12 people mainly from Vienna. Several families took in or fostered refugees including a girl from Czechoslovakia brought on the Kindertransport. Margery Abrahams also bought Piers Place (130 High Street) to build on the back garden for homes for refugees.

Quickly, a vibrant community grew up here, formed of British-born Jewish evacuees, a handful of Jewish families who'd been in the area for generations and local immigrant domestic servants.

They even established their own synagogue in Woodside Road, an incredible achievement when synagogues were being destroyed all over Europe and their congregations murdered. It was one of the German Jewish refugees, Sister



Bust of Marie-Louise
by Mary Duras

Marie-Louise
Motesiczky
Charitable
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Katie Krone, who helped to transform the Old Amersham workhouse into a hospital.

Jewish servicemen worked at Latimer House during the war. This top secret prisoner of war camp was where every German prisoner was processed before moving to a holding camp. Unknown to the prisoners, their every conversation was studied by German-speaking listeners, gathering important intelligence especially on the V1 and V2 rockets, helping us to win the war. Susan Cohn fled to England on a servant's visa, but later worked at Latimer House and Wilton Park working on prisoners' highly classified intelligence files at Latimer House and Wilton Park. She married Fritz Lustig, another 'listener', and the journalist Robin Lustig was one of their two sons. At Latimer House, she came across her former English teacher from Warsaw, but was pleased to vouch for him not being a Nazi so he could be transferred.

We saw a number of famous emigres settle in Amersham and Chesham Bois. The Italian composer and concert pianist Francesco Ticciati came from Maida Vale to avoid the Blitz. The Music Studio at the home of Georgia Pearce, became the meeting point for emigree musicians, writers and intellectuals. Francesco gave piano lessons, concerts and lectures, including to the troops.

Just before the war, Mary Duras left Prague to exhibit her sculptures in Britain lodging at Small Dean farm, and when the troops marched into Czechoslovakia, as a member of an anti-Nazi group, successfully applied for refugee status. The sculpture of a tortured head found in the barn garden bears a strong resemblance to her husband who survived imprisonment in Auschwitz. Well known to Museum visitors was the Viennese painter, Marie-Louise Motesiczky who, although only at the start of her career, left with her mother a very comfortable life in Vienna the day after the Anschluss. The close association with the Marie-Louise Motesiczky Charitable Trust has enabled the Amersham Museum to display much of her work.

The Russian photographer Laelia Goehr first fled Bolshevik Russia as a teenager and then Berlin ten years later. Although a professional musician, she volunteered for the YMCA Snapshots using Kodak donated film to photograph families to send out to service members. Her composer



Submarine crew

Amersham
raised over
£500,000
to support
the Navy
and adopted
a British
submarine
HMS
Unbroken

husband, Walter took up a post with the Gramophone company in London. They lived in Bachelor's Way and their son went to the Turret House School (a preparatory school at the top of Station Road). She was a close friend of Maurice Edelman, politician and best-selling author, who lived on Clifton Road.

Alison's talk rounded off with a spirit-lifting celebration. After the disastrous losses suffered in 1941, Amersham raised over £500,000 to support the Navy and adopted a British submarine HMS Unbroken, which had the unenviable record of being the most heavily depth-charged British submarine. A large thermometer was put up at Oakfield Corner to encourage everyone to contribute. Most towns had one commanding officer to come to a civic event to mark the adoption, but here the town had a visit from the entire crew, recorded in *Picture Post*. Huge crowds welcomed them and all were hosted by local residents, including the Chair of the Amersham Council, Cllr. Alfred Woodley. The highlight of the weekend was a dinner dance with a meal provided by the Amersham Girls Training Corps: soup, pork chops, two vegetables and beer. We heard how the submarine's Jolly Roger flag showed their successes - bars recorded their return after sinking or damaging a ship, daggers marked covert operations and stars represented gunnery action on the coastal railways of Italy.

Christine Standing

Proposed residential development in Old Amersham

There is a triangular parcel of land bounded by Whielden Street, Piggott's Orchard and the bypass with its apex at HS2's extravagant ventilation shaft. In a leaflet distributed around the Old Town, Hawridge Land is proposing a residential development of up to 46 homes (50% affordable) on this site. Our Society opposes the proposals because:

- This land forms part of the 'green ring' which almost completely surrounds Old Amersham, separating the Conservation Area from 19th century and later developments. Old Amersham is probably unique in that the medieval town does not merge with later developments.
- Building would damage iconic views of Old Amersham, eg from the southern boundary of Rectory Wood.
- The leaflet refers to ecological improvements. The plans appear to show the creation of ponds on the site but this would be at the expense of the existing chalk meadow with its profusion of orchids and other wild flowers, which support insects, bats and other wildlife.
- Whielden Street forms the bottom of a valley which rises steeply on either side. In heavy rain, increasingly frequent with climate change, Whielden Street is subject to flooding from run off from the valley sides. Building on the site will reduce soakaway to the chalk aquifer, depleting the aquifer and increasing the risk of flooding.
- Access to the site would require a steeply sloping access road, opposite the main hospital entrance and result in removal of several metered parking spaces.
- The leaflet shows illustrative proposals, with no guarantee that the 50% affordable housing or ecological improvements would survive.

Peter Borrows



Noticeboard

Programme of Talks and Events

Talks are held in the Kings Chapel, 30 High Street, Old Amersham.
(Note: The May talk will be in Lifestyle Centre, Amersham-on-the-Hill)
Coffee, tea and biscuits served from 7:30pm, with talks starting at 8:00pm.

Monday 29th September

The Gerrards Cross Cowboy

A talk by Denise Beddows

Monday 20th October

Annual General Meeting

Followed by a talk from a representative of Helen and Douglas House

Monday 24th November

The Kennedys: Saints and Sinners

A talk by Peter Hague

Monday 26th January

Walking the Beat to Nirvana

A talk by Mervyn Edwards

Monday 23rd February

Butterflies of the Chilterns

A talk by David Dennis

Monday 30th March

The Berlin Airlift

A talk by Roger Mason

Thursday 7th May

The Exile of King Louis XVIII in Hartwell House

A talk by Neil Rees

To be held in Drake Hall, Lifestyle Centre, Amersham-on-the-Hill.

June

Society Outing. *Details to be advised later*

Website: www.amershamsociety.org

General Enquiries: please email info@amershamsociety.org