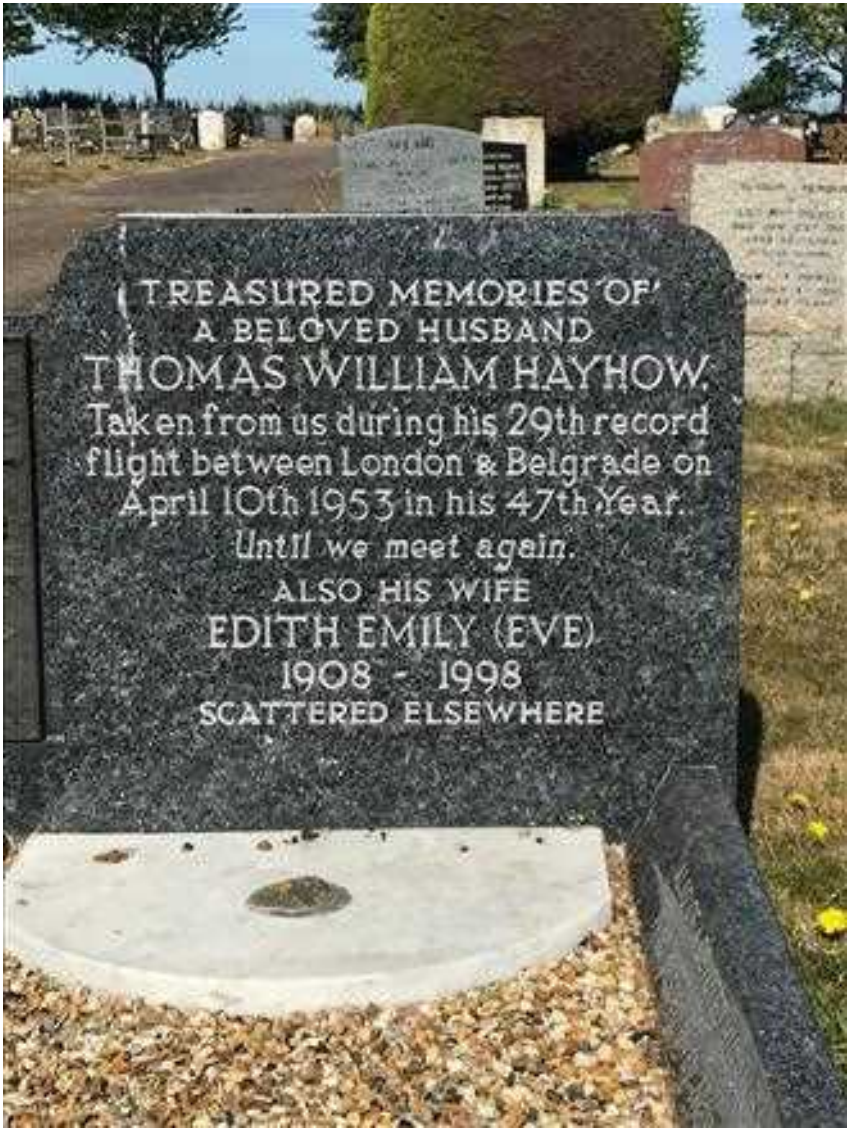
# Wells Local History Group Newsletter




## Number 73 – New Year 2020

The appeal for stories from the “home front” during World War II was so successful that there wasn’t room to fit them all into the last issue. Those not included last time can be seen in this issue from pages 6 to 15 inclusive. As there are still several years before the (80th anniversary) of the end of the war is commemorated in 2025, we are happy to receive any others that come to light before then!

The much-written-about archive room is now almost ready in the Wells Maltings. Most of the paper archives are now stored away in filing cabinets, and the task of building a good index so that individual items can easily be found, will begin very soon. We are currently deciding what computer equipment we need. Bob Brownjohn has kindly donated some items, but we know that we will need several other items including a printer, paper and slide scanners, and some other items. We already have a few volunteers but could still do with more before we plan to open to the public in the Spring. The current intention is that we will be open one morning and one afternoon each week, with two people acting as stewards at any one time. The hope is that we can get enough volunteers so that people only have to act once a month each.

For the last few issues of this newsletter I have been in the happy position of having more articles waiting to be printed, than we had space for. The stock of these is however, now dwindling, so if you have an article within you, I would be very pleased to receive it. Wells history covers all periods from before the Romans to “just in the memory” of the oldest inhabitants in the town. I am confident that we still have a lot to learn!

**Keith Leesmith**

## World War Two Diary – follow-up

In the six years that I have been editing the Newsletter, no article has received more feedback than the diary, which appeared in the last issue. With the diary came an appeal to ask if anyone could identify the writer. This puzzle has now been solved.

Lesley Jarvis had originally seen the diary when part of our archive collection was stored in the Wells Library and found it so interesting that she decided to copy it out. Ironically, it was Lesley and I that found the answer to the author question, because the two of us have been sorting through the archives, coming from various sources, for the new archive room in the Maltings. There are in fact two copies of the diary, and the one that Lesley had originally found was missing a few pages at the end. The first of these identifies the author – **Helen Lucy Mayes.** The other pages continue the diary during the "big freeze" of 1947 and these are interesting enough that they will be found a place in the Newsletter.

Again ironically, it turns out that Mayes is also the maiden name of our treasurer Maureen Dye. She decided to undertake some research to find if there was a family connection. No relationship has been found, but Maureen did find plenty of interesting facts about Helen Lucy Mayes which follow:

In the 1939 census she was living at "The Warren" in Warham Road, Wells. Hence the bomb damage mentioned in 1943 (did the Luftwaffe believe that the carrot factory was of high military importance?!). She was married and of

private means and received Post War Credits for the extra tax that she paid to fund the war. In 1946 she was listed as a member of the Wells WI, and in fact her name appears on two certificates displayed on the wall there still, recording the members at the time of presentations to past presidents – Mrs. Smith, and Mrs. Flint. She died in North Walsham in 1968 at the age of 82.

Helen Lucy had been born to a farmer and his wife in Sculthorpe in 1886 and was baptised there in the church of St. Mary and All Saints. In 1912 she married Frederick John Mayes, who was a dairy farmer and they originally lived first at High House Farm in Billingford, before moving to Home Farm Worthing. It looks as if they came to Wells in 1931. In 1912 they had had a son – John, who features heavily in the originally diary.

**Keith Leesmith, Lesley Jarvis, & Maureen Dye**

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## The Big Freeze 1947

<u>February</u>
9th Snow fell nearly all day and night, and it's freezing hard
10th The snow is as high as my road fence. I cannot get out of the garden; my front door is completely blocked. Tonight, a man came and opened my east door.
11th Bitterly cold, many lorries and cars in drifts.

Italian prisoners are clearing the streets, sand and salt is being spread and a snow plough is working. No trains can get here from Walsingham or Holkham. Buses take people

to Heacham and Walsingham to get the train. One train got here on the 13th but the line inspector refused to let any more through, as the piled-up snow might fall. My milk is dropped in the garden, the door won't open. Dr. Hicks lost his car, but it was found today and dug out of a drift.

March

5th Deep snow again, no train here until 6 o'clock, line blocked. Wells is now cut off, no papers, no bread delivered, no road traffic

6th No trains at all. Four trains tried to clear the line between here and Warham, but it is impossible. The snow is now higher than the hedges, the Stiffkey and Warham road is completely blocked. I walked on the snow over the top of my garden fence onto the main road. One lorry has now got over the fields, the snow deepest opposite the Lime Works. Still no papers, I found a loaf of bread lying on the snow in the garden thank goodness and some milk. This is awful. I am still shut in. The council men have cleared the snow from the porch and made a pathway to my road gate and opened it.

7th No trains out of here on either line, no letters or papers. Crowds of men now cutting the snow to clear the line, one-way traffic on this road, cars got to Warham.

9th Letters arrived; papers delivered again.

10th The first train left here for Norwich today since Tuesday.

15th An all snow special ran between Fakenham and Wells. The train consisted of over a score of wagons taking tons of snow from drifts on the tracks. While the operation was in progress, all other trains were cancelled, and passengers were taken from station to station in buses starting at normal times. The snow train was working over the single-track line running via Walsingham and Wighton taking snow from the cuttings to prevent further drifts and to mitigate flooding when

the thaw comes. The snow was removed to the valleys and unloaded below the track. Forty men travelled on the train.

**From the diary of Helen Lucy Mayes**

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## Aunt Audrey's War

When war broke out in 1939, my aunt Audrey was 21 and working in the engineering department of AEC, Southall Middx, manufacturing buses, lorries and motor coaches.

Audrey was in a reserved occupation but when her boss who owned a small boat was sent to the evacuation of Dunkirk, she asked to be released and joined the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service). She was sent to Pontefract in Yorkshire and spent a month being kitted out, drilled by a fierce male sergeant major and signing the Official Secrets Act. They did all sorts of tests to establish the girls' ability and Audrey came out in the top grade and was able to choose a job. She went for Signals as that sounded the most exciting and joined the Royal Corps of Signals in Y section. Here the fact she had learned Morse Code in the Girl Guides stood her in good stead and gave her a head start in training.

The unit was sent to the Isle of Man for six months training and Audrey said the crossing was very rough and she was seasick. The girls' job was to listen into the Morse signals being sent from Germany (one got to know the sound of the particular group you were listening in to as it was like getting to know a certain voice). They never knew the results of their labours as it was all passed onto Intelligence at Bletchley Park to work out. Because German prisoners and other men

were on the island the girls got the same rations which meant they were well fed (lots of sandwiches and cocoa every night). Also, soap wasn't rationed which meant they could buy as much as they liked and send some home. There were also dances held and one night Audrey was asked by this man if he could walk her back to her billet. It turned out that in actual fact he was a spy, but obviously she didn't know this at the time.

After training the unit moved to Harrogate and were billeted in a large girls' boarding school. One day a notice went up for volunteers to go overseas. Audrey was one of three chosen to go to Egypt to make up the numbers on the original company sent out 18 months previously. The date of embarkation was top secret and theirs was the first convoy to travel through the Mediterranean. Until now all ships had gone the long way around past the Cape of Good Hope. They landed safely in Port Said and went by train to Cairo. Finally, via Alexandria to a small seaside place called Sidi Bishr. The first three weeks were spent sleeping in a tent in the sand before a place in a hut became free. It was during this time in Egypt she met her future husband Bob who was in the regular Army and came to Sidi Bishr for R&R as it was cooler on the coast. The sights and smells of Egypt must have seemed very exotic to a girl who had never left England.

Audrey spent 3years in Egypt coming home to be sent to Derby for further training which would have sent her who knows where. However, the war in Europe finished and she was demobbed in April 1946 to go back to her old job at AEC.

I had always known Aunt Audrey had been in Egypt during the war, but was under the impression that she had served with the Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps. It wasn't until shortly before her death at 89 in 2007 that she told me what she had really done; and because she had signed the Official Secrets Act, Audrey hadn't even told her husband Bob.

**Lynne Bishop**

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## Home Front Memories - The Nelson Club, Wells

We are grateful to members of the Nelson Club, Wells, for sharing their memories of the home front in war time Wells and the surrounding area, and the local work undertaken by their relatives.

**The Home Guard – Albert 'Bert' Marshall**

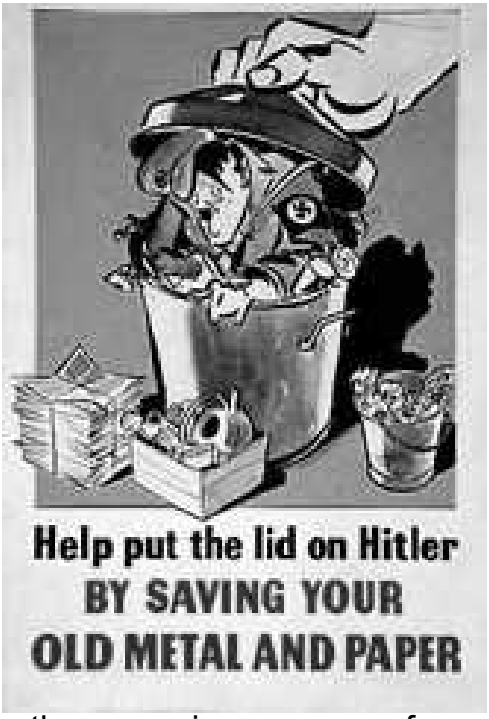
Recollections by his granddaughter, Mrs. Diana Groom (nee Marshall). Additional contribution by her husband, Mr. Alan Groom.

This much treasured photograph of Bert Marshall, which was taken in 1939, depicts him standing proudly to attention in his home guard uniform at the rear of the Marshall family home in Westfield Avenue, Wells. A veteran of the First World War, and member of the Wells Town Band, Bert was to serve in the local home guard for the duration of the 1939–45 conflict.

Diana Groom has fond early memories of her grandfather, having lived with him and her grandmother Rose Marshall (nee Sizeland) at 17 Westfield Avenue until the age of 10, when in 1944 she went to live with her mother in Wighton.

By 1944, a number of Bert Marshall's relatives had been evacuated from London and were also now living at her grandparents' home in Wells. Bert had been born in London and arrived in Wells around 1911 with the travelling fair, when he met and married Rose Sizeland from Black Horse Yard.

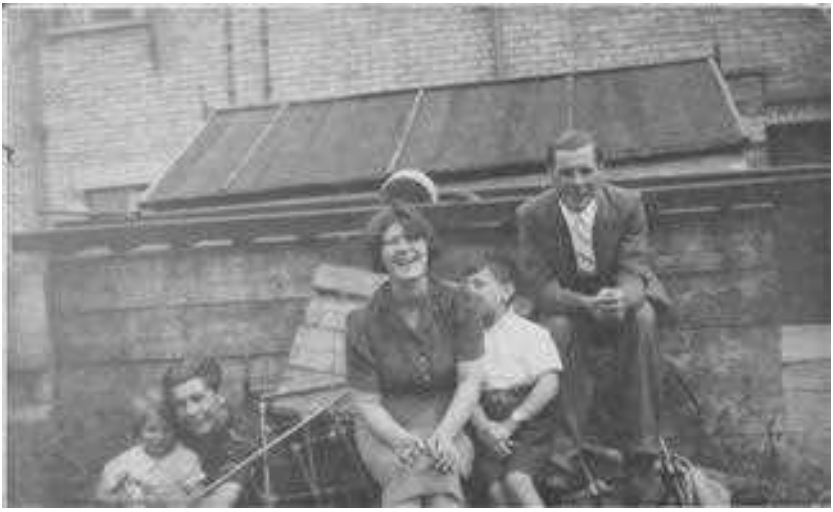
Although only five years old in 1939, Diana has clear memories of the Marshall family gathering up all household metal objects they could in order to aid the war effort. This was piled up at the back of 17 Westfield Avenue to await collection. She also remembers other families in the Avenue doing the same thing, and many iron railings being cut down around the town. Memories are stirred to this day when walking by what is now the Lifeboat Inn, where the stumps of the old railings can still be seen set in the base of the perimeter wall.




Standard Road / Polka Road was an area of Wells that the young Diana Marshall knew well, having attended Wells Primary School and where she vividly recalls the many occasions when the town air raid siren was sounded and the children were ushered into the school's air raid shelter that had been constructed against one of the school perimeter walls. Once in the shelter "we would sit and sing songs".

The rationing of food is her other recurring memory of war time Wells. Although grateful for the vegetables that were grown in their garden, the feeling of hunger was constant as the rationing of basic food stuffs grew. Bread was not rationed but bakers were not permitted to use white flour.

Also taken at the rear of 17 Westfield Avenue, this photograph (from left to right) shows Diana Marshall (Mrs Groom), with her uncle, Arthur Marshall. Aunt Molly and Alan Monk (relatives from London), are seated in the centre. Alan Monk attended Wells Primary School during the war years. On the far right is Diana's uncle Robert, who served in the North Africa campaign and was taken prisoner in April 1941. He remained a prisoner of war until 1945. The group are sat around scrap metal that the family, like others in the area, had assembled for collection to aid the war effort.



Bert Marshall did not share the stories of his time in the Wells Home Guard with his young granddaughter, but her husband Alan Groom was fortunate to hear his father James Groom, tell of his time in the Wighton Home Guard. Cuckoo Lodge was a strategic look-out point on the border of those areas covered by the Wells and Wighton Home Guard units. In fact the two units would undertake alternate shifts at the Lodge, near where a search light was mounted on Market Lane.

In the early days of the war, before the local Home Guard were fully equipped, Alan Groom remembers that not only did his father not have a uniform but a rifle was shared between the night and day-time patrols. One morning after Alan's father had completed a night duty, he instructed Alan to deliver the unloaded rifle to Bert Allen's shop in Wighton on his way to school. Bert Allen was an officer in the Wighton Home Guard and James Groom had already pushed the ammunition through the letter box of the shop on his way home from night patrol. After the Wighton Home Guard had been issued with uniforms, Alan fondly remembers the great coat. When his father was not out on a night-time patrol, Alan would spread the great coat over his bed for additional warmth.

## The Home Guard – Robert ‘Bob’ Gunton

Recollections of his daughter, Mrs. Helen Dunne (nee Gunton).

Helen Dunne recalls that her father, Bob Gunton, was issued with his own rifle and clearly remembers the cupboard in the house where he kept the gun and ammunition under lock and key. He served in the Home Guard from their home on Bidewells Farm, Toftrees from 1939 until about 1943, when they moved to a remote farmhouse west of Colkirk. He did not possess a uniform in those early days of the war, being identified as a member of the Home Guard by the wearing of an armband.

Although residing in a more rural location, the war was never far from the door of the Gunton family. An air raid shelter was constructed on the farm at Toftrees and Helen particularly remembers the little beds they had inside. On one occasion an incendiary bomb fell just down the road from their farmhouse. Fortunately, it only ignited an old tree stump, which was extinguished by the local Home Guard.

Helen and her family were to experience a far more frightening air raid after their move to the Colkirk area where they had no air raid shelter. Their new home lay to the east of the airfield at West Raynham and the only protection afforded the farmhouse was a low wall of straw bales that had been placed around their home.

One night the Gunton family heard the air raid siren sound at the airfield and it was not long before numerous enemy aircraft filled the night sky. Before the bombs began to fall, the family had run from their house to shelter in a nearby ditch. Bombs landed in the fields around their home and as the family lay in the ditch, Helen tried to get up out of the ditch so that she could see the 'fairy lights'. It was the following morning when the Gunton family could fully appreciate the devastation caused by that air raid. They and their home had miraculously escaped unscathed, but the numerous bomb craters that covered the fields around their farm was a sobering sight. Following that air raid, Helen's father searched the craters and collected together some of the incendiary bomb casings. They were then painted and displayed as ornaments in the Gunton home. Unfortunately this unique trench art has not survived the test of time!

**War Reserve Constable – Francis 'Frank' Stubbs**

Recollections of his son, Tony Stubbs.

Frank Stubbs was a strong man. He was over 6 feet tall and by all accounts handy with his fists, no doubt an ideal individual to police the streets of Wells at that time, as large numbers of soldiers, airmen, sailors and other auxiliary forces came into the town. He was not a Norfolk man by birth and had emigrated to Canada in the 1920's where he had worked as a lumberjack. He had returned to England in the early 1930's, initially settling in Northamptonshire where his son Tony was born, before taking up a position as gamekeeper on the Holkham estate in 1937. At that time the family lived in the bungalow on Lady Anne Drive.

The first Tony knew of his father joining the local police was when he arrived home in his uniform, having cycled from Holkham to Holt where he had been sworn in.

Tony saw little of his father on duty as he would report to Wells police station on Church Plain where he worked under the resident Sergeant Garnham, although in addition to Wells, his 'patch' did cover Holkham, Warham and Wighton. It was a full-time position that Frank performed for the duration of the war and he was always considered to be on duty. The Stubbs family had no telephone in their bungalow on Lady Anne Drive and contact was made with Frank via a telephone call to the Victoria Hotel.

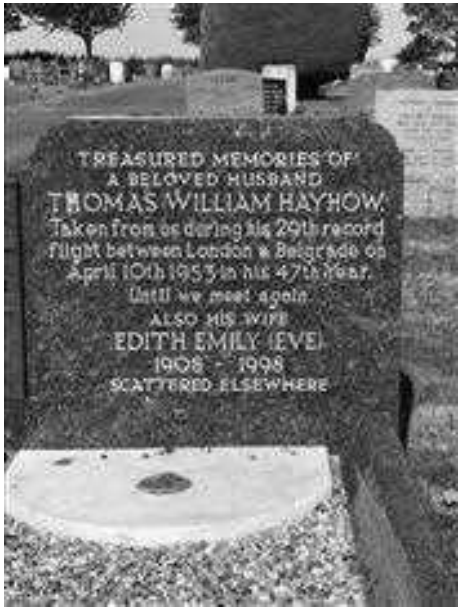
Tony learned nothing about his father's work whilst the war went on, although he did start to tell him amusing anecdotes later on in his life. Although not a big drinker, Frank Stubbs was well known around the pubs of Wells at that time. The visiting of licensed premises by the local constable would be expected but the consumption of alcohol by an on-duty officer was a disciplinary matter that Sergeant Garnham was keen to enforce. One day the sergeant thought he had finally caught Frank in the act, catching him at the bar of a local hostelry and demanding an explanation for him being on those licensed premises. Fortunately for Frank he had spotted the sergeant approaching and swiftly concealed the pint of beer under his cape. It was a source of great amusement to the other customers as Frank calmly stood before Sergeant Garnham telling him that he was just checking that everything was in order on the premises. It was a classic love/hate relationship between Sergeant Garnham, the supervisor, and Frank Stubbs, the subordinate.

In September 1943, a number of burglaries were committed in the town that included both domestic homes and business premises. The local Co-op had been stripped of food stuffs, and all ration books were taken. When finally caught it was revealed that the offender was a local deserter from the army. Tony Stubbs recalls his father telling him about a conversation around that time between Sergeant Garnham and an army officer, in which the sergeant defiantly declared that no one would dare break into the home of the local police sergeant. Sergeant Garnham was a revered character in Wells at that time but the army officer was keen to make his point that no homeowner was safe from being burgled. Sergeant Garnham's defiance continued, at which point the army officer produced a clock that he had concealed about his person. The shocked Sergeant Garnham demanded "Where did you get that from?" "From off your mantel piece", replied the army officer.

One story that involved Tony himself, he never did dare tell his father. As a young boy, Tony would spend a lot of time down on the beach at Holkham Gap. Although out of bounds and mined, the beach was surprisingly easy to access from the landside at Holkham. One day he collected a number of unexploded mortar bombs that had been fired onto the beach during training exercises. Having unscrewed the tail, he piled the devices together on the beach and set light to them. The resulting explosion was deafening, lighting up the woods with a white flash in both directions for some considerable distance. Tony ran home and watched the army, police and fire brigade respond to what was thought to be the start of an invasion!

**Steve Adcock**

# THOMAS WILLIAM HAYHOW – PIONEER AVIATOR




A wander around a churchyard or cemetery will often provide intriguing insights into past lives. Such was the case when I first saw the memorial stone for the above in the Town Cemetery. The stone records: *Treasured memories of a beloved husband THOMAS WILLIAM HAYHOW. Taken from us during his 29th record flight between London and Belgrade on April 10th, 1953 in his 47th year.*

I was particularly interested, not only in the subject of his death, but also in the fact that my wife has a cousin who was married to a member of the Hayhow clan until he died a couple of years ago. Although not a common name, it is one of those that runs through the history of Wells.

Thomas William was born in Holkham in 1906 but left the area soon afterwards when his parents moved to London. In fact, the parents returned to Wells in 1941, presumably at retirement, as his father, also Thomas, would then have been in his 60's. The parents settled in Milton House in High Street, where they lived out their days, often visited by children and grandchildren.

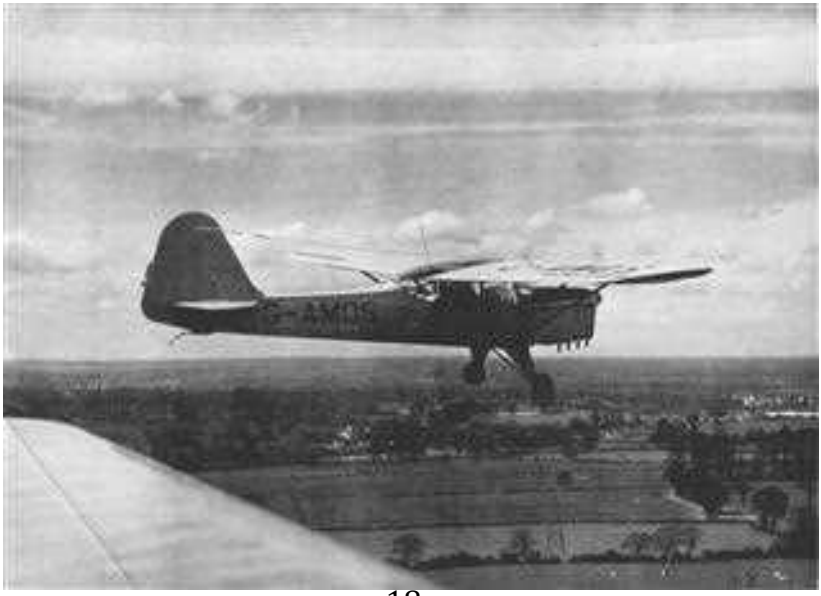
We know little about the early life of Thomas, including what he did when he left school, but judging from his later life I suspect that he was somehow involved in engineering, possibly automobile engineering. During the war he served as an engineering officer in the Merchant Navy – no other details have come to light at present, other than the fact that he was discharged at some time in 1946.

On the first of January 1947 he started a business In Thornaby-on-Tees – The Stockton Shipping and Salvage Company. The business had taken over an old abandoned shipyard, across the water from Stockton on Tees, and at its inception was employing seventy men, in the process of dismantling vessels. Obviously, just after the war there were many vessels that had come to the end of their life and the business appears to have thrived. Thomas was the managing director, and fellow directors included Rosser and Norman Chinn of the Lex Garages Group. This was obviously a mutual arrangement as Thomas was also a director of Lex Garages.

So, he obviously had an interest in cars as well as ships. This was confirmed in October 1950 when we went to an auction at Thorpland Farm in Fakenham and purchased a 1903 Gladiator car for £600 (a little under £20,000 at today's prices). He purchased this in the name of Weybridge Automobiles Ltd, a company operating from the old Brooklands race circuit, which he was also a director of.

As the car was in perfect working order, he intended to take it on the London to Brighton car run the following month, but unfortunately his house was burgled the night before the run and so he got a friend to drive it for him. The car received two punctures along the way, but otherwise made it successfully to Brighton.

But of course, it wasn't ships or cars for which Thomas is remembered, but aircraft. The early 1950's was an odd time for aircraft. Early jet fighter planes had been used during the war, originally by the Germans and Italians and then later, thanks to Frank Whittle by the British. The world's first commercial jet airliner, the de Havilland Comet, was being prepared to go into service, and as early as 1947 an American jet-plane had broken the sound barrier. Despite all this, at the same time amateurs were still flying aircraft that had changed little for the previous quarter century. Aircraft races were still taking place, and records made and broken between different parts of the world.



Tom, or Tommy, as he was by this time calling himself, was very much into all this. He brought himself a small aircraft called an Auster Aiglet trainer and named it Liege Lady. He entered for the Daily Express air race in September 1951 along the coast of southern England and came second, out of sixty-three entrants, winning himself a prize of £500. He used the money the following Easter to start his next passion

– setting and/or breaking records for single-engine aircraft. Over the Easter weekend he managed to break eighteen of them between London and various European capitals, including Paris, The Hague, Brussels and Copenhagen, amongst others. During the rest of the year he added further records including London to Stockholm, Berne and Madrid.

On the 10th of April 1953 he set off to try for his 29th record – London to Belgrade. He took off from London in the morning and arrived in Munich to refuel at noon. He immediately set-off again and was then heading over the Alps to Belgrade. He was never heard of again.

Newspapers the next day reported that the weather in the area was “very bad”. A Yugoslav airliner flying from Paris to Belgrade reported very heavy storms which it did not think the Liege Lady could survive. Over the next few days aircraft and “more than a hundred mountaineers” searched for the plane. It was finally spotted several days later, upside-down in a snow field.

This was national news; articles appeared in The Telegraph, Daily Express, and various other national newspapers. The family kept them all in a scrapbook (which they have kindly let me copy). Unfortunately, most of the articles are undated, so it is difficult to piece together the actual timeline of what happened next.

But it would seem that the aircraft was seen from the air after a few days and was reached shortly after by a party of Mountaineers made up of American servicemen and local guides. Tom’s body was not in the wreckage, and it appears that he managed to release himself and was trying to get to shelter. His body was eventually found 600 yards from the plane, and it was thought that he had died of exposure, rather than as a result of the crash. Subsequent enquiries decided that having encountered the blizzards, Tom tried to turn back towards Germany, but ran out of fuel before he could reach it. The plane was burnt to avoid it being confused with missing aircraft in the future. Tom’s body was brought back to civilization where a postmortem was carried out which confirmed the earlier speculation that he had died from the effects of the cold rather than the crash. When relatives arrived from England he was cremated, and his ashes brought back to Wells.

Local flying enthusiasts took parts of the burnt-out Liege Lady and used them to build a memorial to Tom near the crash-site. Tom's ashes were buried in Wells on the 22nd of June 1953. The funeral service was attended not only by friends and family but by representatives of his various companies and fellow flying enthusiasts. So, an unassuming gravestone in Wells Cemetery carries quite a story!

I would like to thank Tom's nephew; John Hayhow, who visited the town last spring and has kindly allowed me to copy the family scrapbook of Tom's flying exploits. This will eventually be available to all in the Maltings Archive Room. If anyone has any information concerning Tom, particularly his earlier life, I would be very pleased to receive it.

**Keith Leesmith**

## Sheep and Horses

Mike Welland's fascinating account of the annual summer horse races on Wells beach (Newsletter 65, Spring 2017) poses the questions, what prompted the first races in 1798, and why did the series suddenly end with the 1821 meeting? The answer must lie with the Holkham Sheep Shearings.

Thomas William Coke had introduced local gatherings to discuss farming matters soon after inheriting Holkham, but it was in 1798 - the year that the Wells horse races were first noted - that large-scale 'Shearings' were first reported in the local press. For the past few years he had been developing Longlands, at the southern edge of the parish, not only as the centre of his home farm but also as a show farm, culminating in that year with the construction of a 'sheep shew house'.

Henceforth, large-scale house parties, bringing together dukes, MPs, Americans and 'liberal men' from all over the country and abroad, were accommodated in the Hall for the three days of the Shearings. Hundreds more, including tenants and other local farmers, joined them each day to inspect and discuss local farms, new breeds of sheep and cattle and inventions of farm machinery. Most then returned to the Hall for dinner: 90 guests each day in 1799, rising to 700 on the last day of the 1821 meeting. These were noisy, spirited occasions marked by numerous speeches and toasts. The dates, invariably at the beginning of July, coincide exactly with the Wells horse races. Although the races barely feature in the estate account books and were not apparently organised by Holkham, they were evidently introduced as an additional convivial entertainment for the assembled company on the day after the Shearings.

Any gathering at Holkham in T. W. Coke's time was inevitably strongly political in character, for he prided himself on being the epitome of a Whig country gentlemen. This explains the emphasis pointed out by Mike Welland in the notices for the first meeting in 1798, when Mr. Le Geyt was given a larger typeface than his competitor's. I have been unable to trace the identity of Le Geyt, owner and rider of 'Daisy Cutter', but it is significant that he was riding in blue and buff – the Whig colours.

Many of the other named participants were close connections of T. W. Coke. The 4th Earl of Albemarle, William Keppel, was a close friend who became one of the leading racehorse owners of his day. The Hon. Mr Anson (later Viscount Anson) was Coke's son-in-law. T. W. Coke junior was not his son (the future 2nd Earl of Leicester, who was not born until 1822) but his nephew and current heir presumptive.

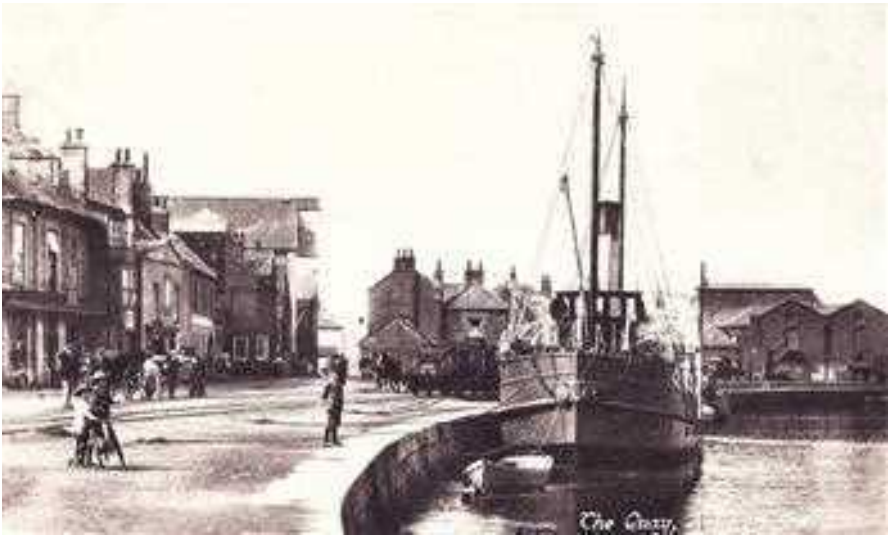
One of ‘the Hon. Miss Keppels' (daughters of the Earl of Albemarle) who attended the 1819 meeting was indirectly the cause of the disappearance of the races after 1821. Coke had been a widower for over twenty years but in February 1822, when he was nearly 68, he took everybody by surprise by marrying Anne Keppel, his god-daughter, fifty years his junior. The first of their five children, a son and heir, was born ten months later.

Domestic life suddenly came to the fore at a time when Coke, always a charismatic and active host, had begun to find the Shearings exhausting. Moreover, widespread agricultural depression after the end of the Napoleonic Wars was affecting even the Holkham estate; rents were in arrears, but Coke's expenditure had outrun them even in more prosperous times.

And now there was a new young heir whose future had to be secured. Coke's agent was beside himself with anxiety. Outlying estates were sold, and retrenchment was the order of the day. In the face of revived family life and new economic priorities, the Shearings and the races did not take place in 1822 and were never resumed.

There is, however, a postscript. Over fifty years later, there was a proposal to re-introduce horse races in association with the Regatta. An approach in 1874 to the 2nd Earl of Leicester, who had always been rather more staid in character than his father, received short shrift. His agent replied to a letter from one F. J. Thorpe, 'I have submitted your application to the Earl of Leicester and am instructed by him to reply that he will in no way assist or admit, as far as lies in his power, the establishment of any races. He does not consider that any rational amusement or enjoyment is to be obtained from them and thinks them therefore an unmixed evil. He will not subscribe towards the Wells regatta in future'.

**Christine Hiskey**



## When Wells ran its own affairs

Wells Urban District Council was the controlling governmental body in the town from its creation in 1894 until it was absorbed into North Norfolk District Council in 1974. Between those dates it was responsible for the building of over 300 council houses; it ran the gas works; it controlled the beach facilities including the Pinewoods caravan site; it dealt with public health, deciding upon the treatment of disease; it provided the town's first mains water supply; it delivered a modern sewerage system with its own treatment plant. It ordered the demolition of unfit dwellings; latterly it was the planning authority. In short it was local democracy at work.

Because it had such powers it drew to its membership influential people in the town. On one occasion there were fourteen candidates for six posts. Among its chairmen over the years were the owner of Wells Maltings ; G. F. Smith, Arthur Ramm local butcher and landowner, Frederick Raven long time headmaster of the school, 'Willy' Hicks local doctor, sailor and Medical Officer of Health and the controversial George Turner Cain; garage owner and retired RAF wing commander. (He was once voted in as chairman by four votes to nil with seven abstentions.) Not all were among the wealthy. Leslie Cox was a local fisherman. From time to time it numbered among its members not only a local teacher but a railway clerk, a retired engine driver and a maltings foreman. Local builder Claude Terrington was vice chairman for a while. Councillors were mostly but not all men. Rachel Chamberlain, another member of the Smith family was for a time vice- chairman. The redoubtable Myrtle French, scion of the fish shop family, was a member for many years. It was she who saved some of the records on which this piece relies from destruction when the council was abolished. She became chairman for a while. Latterly it did its work through

five sub-committees: Finance, Public Health, Housing, the Beach and General Purposes.

Because it was a body composed of local people making local decisions conflicts of interest and of opinion were bound to arise. In earlier days ratepayers, who included some councillors, opposed the change in the charging system by which hitherto, tenants rather than landlords paid the rates and were excused on the ground of poverty. This resulted in a deficit in the Council's accounts. There were frequent changes of chairmanship occasioned by the steadfast opposition of some members to any improvement in the sewerage system – if such it could be called – which poured raw effluent into the harbour. The southern sewer running through Arthur Ramm's marsh was a constant source of dissension. Turner Cain was eloquent in describing the unaffordability of a mains water supply; he opposed unemployment relief after the 1929 closure of the maltings. He was supported by several members including the owner of a local bus company Mr. Dalliston. Fortunately, there were more forward-thinking souls. Much later in the 1960s half the members resigned; over what does not appear from the records. And when Charlie Platten, war hero and opportunist developer closed Sun Yard which lay adjacent to his milk bar on the Quay, a majority of the councillors voted not to enforce the law and to allow the right of way to be extinguished. An attempt to build houses and a factory on the west end allotments included the peremptory removal of allotment holders' sheds; the attempt failed when the Holkham estate refused to release its covenant against development unless it were purely residential.

Relations with the Earl of Leicester were mostly cordial; resolutions were passed expressing condolence over the death of the Earl's son and of the Earl himself in 1949.

Congratulations were sent on the occasion of various family events. The ownership of the Buttlands and therefore the entitlement to rents to its hire were productive of argument resulting in an agreement that the Council could rent it at the cost of a peppercorn. (The freehold was given to the Council pre-war but there are still those who claim that Holkham had never owned the land.) Substantive issues such as the Council's wish to build on East Hills, and the matter of the allotments already referred to as well as the leases granted over the Pinewoods were trickier. Most of the council housing was on land sold to the town by Holkham at prices they could afford.

Much of the Council's work was done by its officers. Until the 1930s the Medical Officer of Health was a full-time officer of the Council. Gordon Calthrop's reports on the insanitary condition of housing were vital ammunition for Sam Peel, councillor for many years and chairman for six of them, in his campaign to get the first council houses built in 1915. Samuel Bloy, sanitary inspector who reported to the Council monthly in the years after the Great War was often up to his waist in foul water clearing out rat-infested and leaking drains. A councillor attempted to get him dismissed because of his efforts to get landlords to improve their property. Fred Rodwell, district surveyor for thirty-three years who retired in 1960 brought to the council's attention the legislative changes which empowered the council to close unfit dwellings by the making of Clearance Orders and the large Improvement Area which gave us the former Ark Royal and Stearman's Yard car park. In his defence and that of his successor Arnold Rogers they wished the area to be rebuilt with houses 'of a very high standard of layout and design' because of how conspicuous the area was from the foreshore and from the new road, never built, which was planned to run from the Quay to Park Road. Rodwell's good intentions were delayed as was much else by the war. His efforts resulted in

the building of Northfield Crescent and Northfield Waye, the extension of Northfield Lane and the building of bungalows intended for the elderly in several locations in the town. One unrealised dream was to provide the town with an east-west ring road, using the former Heacham Railway line which ran from Warham road to the Holkham road to the west. The County Council replied that it would do as a footpath only.

There were various threats to the continuation of the Council. Its position was anomalous: it was tiny compared with its neighbours, surrounded as it was by Walsingham Rural District Council based in Fakenham. Walsingham District had a population in 1951 of nearly 22,000; Wells, which as an Urban District had the greater statutory powers, could muster around 2,500. The world had changed much since 1894 and an attempt was made in 1929 to abolish it as was happening all around. Walsingham became bigger shortly after, as other districts were abolished. Wells managed to resist though the relevant government minister expressed concern about both the poor condition of its housing and the state of its finances.

The re-organisation of local government in 1972 was nationwide. The trend towards bigger and more regional systems was longstanding. Wells lost its Medical Officer of Health by stages as the officer holder took on wider responsibilities. The office moved from Wells to Fakenham in the 1960s. Planning was administered by the County Council after 1947 though the town initially retained its power of veto. The nationalisation of the gas industry took from the Council a major responsibility which it and its predecessor the Improvement Commissioners had exercised since 1845. Its role in keeping roads in good order was jointly exercised with the County. Post-war plans for the town were inevitably the work of joint bodies.

Informally the same people who were its members had administered the local schools, subject to the visits of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs); the role of the County increased over time. Nevertheless, the Council's abolition and replacement by a council based in Cromer with Wells on its western boundary was a shock. Power moved eastwards and there are still those who regret the change.

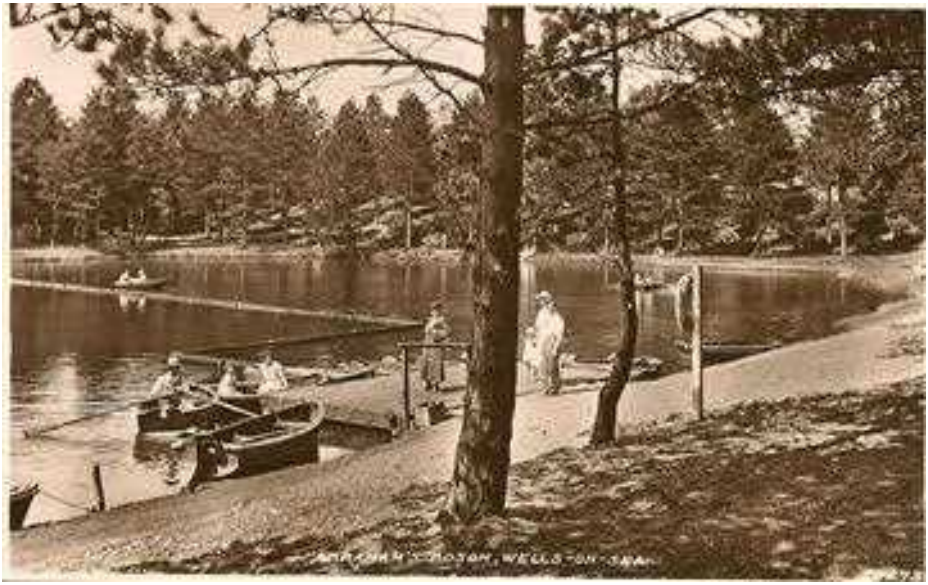
**The Last Meeting of the**
**Wells Urban District Council**
**Two members survive – Suzanne Rands and David (Rocko) Hudson in the centre back row**

It may be that change was inevitable and right. What is also true is that the improvements wrought by the Council in the first half of the century were life changing. Compared with many places Wells was healthy but the incidence of sewage pollution of water sources, the many wells in the town, and the harbour; the fact that most people in the town used closets not flushed by water, but whose use deposited human

waste into wooden boxes cleared twice a week and meanwhile covered with earth, or into buckets, pails as they were called, emptied into carts and then scattered on the fields: these were taken for granted. Wells must have smelt. Even after the provision of mains water and sewerage it took another fifteen years until 1965 before everyone in the town had a flush toilet. The resistance of many landlords was shocking. Likewise, Wells provided more decent homes per capita of population than any town in the region and was active in pressing for more private housing for those who could afford it.

It was not a bad place, rather a go-ahead one, in fact.

**Roger Arguile**



# WLHG Books and DVDs

The following books and discs, published by the group, are currently in print and are available. The first price is for the general public, the second in the concessionary price to members. Members who live out of town may buy post and packaging free, in exchange for the fact that they are generally unable to attend the talks.

Contact:
Nita Spencer, 30a Theatre Road, Wells-next-the-Sea, NR23 1DJ
01328 710501 – jnornita@aol.com

TOWN WALKS: (4 available)

South Route, Central Route, East End Route, West End Route,
£2.00 each, - members £1.50

A SKETCHBOOK WITH NOTES

A collection of the sketches from the above walk books
£2.00 – members £1.50

DVD DISCS (4 available)

1) Wells Harbour
2) Harbour Disc Two – Beach, Floods, Lifeboats etc.
3) Wells Town 1 – Church, Railway, Burnt St., Church St., High St., Polka Road, and School
4) Wells Town 2 – Staithe St., Freeman St., Buttlands, Gas Works, Hospital

All the above a collection of old photographs with commentary by Maureen Dye – last between 30 and 40 minutes each
£5.00 – members £4.00

WHEN I WAS A YOUNG LAD – MEMORIES OF WELLS

Reprint of the book by Geoff Perkins – members only - £8.00

WELLS-NEXT-THE-SEA – A SMALL PORT AND A WIDE WORLD

Not published by us but selling it on behalf of Poppyland Publishing
Roger Arguile – Paperback Version only - £14.95 -members £12.00

# TALKS PROGRAMME

**All at the W.I. HALL, Church Plain – all Wednesdays**

**2020**

**January** no meeting

**February 5th** **2.30pm** Christine Hiskey
*Holkham Revisited*

**March 4th** 7.30pm Nicholas Vincent
*Binham Priory*

**April 1st** 7.30pm Robert & Liz Scott
*Blickling Hall*

**May 6th** 7.30pm Keith Leesmith
*HMS Rockingham (Sponsored by Wells in WW2)*

**May 13th** 7.30pm
*Annual General Meeting & Members' Social Evening*

**The next Newsletter will be published around Easter time**

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