



Smoke Signal

Affiliated to Cheltenham Art Council

Leckhampton Local History Society's Newsletter



Planting of the 'Coronation Oak' at Leckhampton

Recently advertised for sale on eBay was a miniature silver spade that commemorated the planting of an oak tree at Leckhampton on the occasion of Edward VII's coronation in 1902. It was 20.5cm long and weighed 77grams – see photo on page 2. The English hallmarks indicated that Thomas Latham & Ernest Morton of Birmingham made it. I felt that the only resting place for this unique object should be in Cheltenham and – to cut a long story short – obtained it on behalf of the Museum, where it will in due course be on display in the new Local History Gallery.

Leckhampton celebrated the Coronation of King Edward VII, on 9 August 1902, in grand style. Following a church service at noon, a dinner was served in the Parish Hall to all parishioners of the same age as the King and upward (ie 60 and over). Then there were games for younger folk in the school field and at 4.30 pm all children up to the age of 16 residing in or attending any of the schools in the parish sat down to a 'meat tea'. The climax came at 6.30 pm, when Mrs G B Witts performed the ceremonial planting of 'The King's Oak' in front of Leckhampton Parish Hall.

This event is captured in the above photo, which shows Mrs Witts in the act of covering the roots of the tree with soil. To commemorate the occasion, she was presented with the small solid silver replica of the spade, suitably inscribed. Regrettably the tree did not survive long, though this is not surprising, given its position close to the pavement and the hall itself. However, as indicated above, the silver spade fortunately did survive.

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Recent Events

Thursday 21st November

Ian Hollingsbee gave a thrilling talk on the prisoner-of-war camps and hostels in Gloucestershire including the camp for German POWs at Leckhampton Court.

Thursday 17th October

A fascinating bring and tell evening. The speakers and subjects included an unidentified metal object found by Terry Moore-Scott at Ashleworth and Averil Murray on her great-great-grandfather, an ironmonger and skater of Witney amongst other interesting topics.

Thursday 19th September

Ian Willox told an informative account of story of the Bayeux Tapestry.

Dates for your Diary

Thursday 19 December: The individuality and integration of Leckhampton and Cheltenham. Dr Anthea Jones will review aspects of Leckhampton's independence from Norman times through to the early nineteenth century and its subsequent integration into Cheltenham Borough.

Thursday 16 January: Cheltenham Worthies - Aylwin Sampson. An opportunity to learn about some of our renowned Cheltonians.

Thursday 20 February: Research Reports Open Evening. Find out more about Leckhampton Local History Society research.

Meetings are held on the third Thursday of every month, 8pm at Church House, Painswick Road, Cheltenham.

Appeal for Information

Kate Houston is researching the history of the Leckhampton Players. Please send any information or photos of theatrical persons in Leckhampton to katehouston2000@yahoo.co.uk

Help us save paper!

If you are not already receiving this newsletter by email and would like to do so, please let the Editor know by emailing julieannsharpe@gmail.com



Miniature silver spade presented to Mrs Witts on planting the Coronation Oak in 1902. It measures 20.5cm long, weighs 77grams and is inscribed, "presented to Mrs. G.B. Witts on her planting Coronation Oak, Leckhampton August 9th 1902"

(Continued from front page)

Mrs Witts was the wife of George Backhouse Witts, who had been Chairman of the Leckhampton Local Board until Leckhampton was incorporated into Cheltenham in 1894, and he remained an influential figure in the village. For example, he later led the defence of the 'Leckhampton Stalwarts' who had protested against the enclosure of Leckhampton Hill. He kept the relevant correspondence in a metal box, marked 'Leckhampton Hill Papers', and some years ago I was able to acquire this box from the estate of the late Jean Bendall. Appropriately, it now houses the Local History Society's 'Bendall Archive'.

G B Witts was the grandson of the Reverend Francis Witts, of Upper Slaughter, who is known today for his *Diary of a Cotswold Parson*. He was a man of many talents: a Justice of the Peace and County Councillor; a chartered engineer, in charge of the construction of the Bourton-on-the-Water to Cheltenham Railway; an amateur archaeologist, discovering and writing about many prehistoric remains in the county; a Lieutenant in the Gloucestershire Rifle Volunteers; Honorary Secretary of the Cotswold Hunt; a dedicated member of the congregation at Leckhampton Church; a member of the Ancient Order of Foresters; and an entertaining speaker, who after giving a talk on 'Leckhampton and the Neighbouring Hills' would finish by singing a selection of Gloucestershire ballads, such as 'The stwuns that built George Ridley's oven'.

Eric Miller

Chairman's Message

I hope you will like the striking new format for Smoke Signal, which takes advantage of more advanced computer facilities. Making the change is a logical step, now that many members say they are willing to receive the newsletter by electronic means; recipients of the hard copy version will benefit too. For this development we have to thank Julie Sharpe, one of a number of enthusiastic new members to join this year. At the same time I must thank Lorna Robson, the outgoing Editor, for all her devoted hard work over the past eight years since she brought out issue No 50. She has maintained a consistently high standard and has ensured that Smoke Signal was both informative and entertaining.

Reminiscences of the two World Wars are to the fore at this time. First, some residents still remember the Reverend Eric Cordingley, who was appointed Rector of Leckhampton in 1940 but spent most of the Second World War as a prisoner of the Japanese. Elsewhere in this newsletter you will read that – miraculously – his diaries and notebooks survived and have just been published, with poignant contemporary illustrations by fellow POWs. Then there is Melissa Webb's amazing World War 1 Museum, again advertised here. I cannot recommend it too highly. The reconstructions of the conditions experienced by the troops at the Front remind me of the 'Antarctic Hut' that was recreated – all too briefly – in the Glebe Cottages beside Leckhampton Church last year for the centenary of Edward Wilson's death together with Captain Scott.

Also there was the talk in November about POW camps in Gloucestershire. If anyone feels that not enough was said about the one in Leckhampton, remember that, although *Leckhampton in the Second World War* is long out of print, there is a chapter about the camp in *Manor House to Hospice*, the history of Leckhampton Court.

Finally, if you have overlooked the membership renewal form that went out with the last Smoke Signal, please make a point of filling it in and sending your subs to Amy Woolcott. Those concerned will receive a separate reminder. The remaining items on the programme should be of wide interest. Many non-members seem to be attracted too, thanks to recent advertising. Do talk to them, if you sit nearby, and perhaps encourage them to join!

Eric Miller



Praise for Society's Publication

In the latest issue of *The Local Historian*, journal of the British Association for Local History, there is a review of Eric Miller's book on the stained glass windows and memorials of Leckhampton Church. It reads:

'St Peter's Church, Leckhampton, [is] a small church but with eighteen high-quality stained glass windows, mostly inserted in 1866. This book contains excellent colour reproductions of the windows, as well as its altarpiece, which is a replica of that at Ghent Cathedral. Information on the donors of the windows is provided in a handsome celebration of the church, its congregation and the work of the Leckhampton Local History Society.'

Copies of the book are still available, price £3.50.

Photo left: Wounded soldier's bed in the Museum. On the wall behind is a painting of Mrs. Grace Ward, Commandant of the Leckhampton Court Hospital 1915 - 1919

World War I Museum

Mere words are inadequate to describe the wonder of Melissa Webb's newly opened World War I Museum. Melissa (born and bred in Leckhampton) has created a virtual shrine to all those who served, fought, were wounded or died during the First World War. It would have been a cause for admiration if a whole team of professional curators had assembled or fabricated the thousands of photographs, paintings, and objects large and small that are skillfully presented in two large rooms, but it is just one young woman's achievement in the space of a few months.

She has been inspired to portray every aspect of life before and during the war, military and civilian, for example: portraits (painted by herself) of the European leaders in 1914, surrounded by photographs of men who later lost their lives; a recruiting centre; a mock-up of a trench with duck-board floor and periscope, black rats prowling in the background; a hospital bed and attendant paraphernalia, including a bath chair; a table where the 'Wypers Times' was being prepared; and a corner furnished with bookshelves and a harmonium, representing Talbot House ('Toc H'), where the Reverend Tubby Clayton provided spiritual solace to the war-weary troops.

By a providential stroke of luck, the premises Melissa eventually found to house the museum are in a building in Lansdown Road, formerly known as New Court, which was one of the Red Cross Voluntary Aid Hospitals throughout the war. What could be more fitting? The museum is intended primarily as a teaching resource for schoolchildren during the WW I centenary year, but people of all ages will be fascinated by it and will need to go more than once, to take everything in. Whether or not you had relatives who fought in the war, do go and see it, and take your children and grandchildren too.

The Museum is at Maxima Forum, Lansdown Road, Cheltenham GL50 2JA. Opening hours: Monday to Friday 2 pm – 5 pm; Saturday 9 am – 5 pm. The Society has made a donation towards the costs of setting up the Museum.

Eric Miller

Obituary

We were sorry to learn of the recent deaths of Bill and Barbara Madams. They had ceased to be members of the Society in recent years, owing to failing health, but they kept up their interest in the history of the area. It will be recalled that during January 1991 Barbara provided hot drinks to the workmen who were demolishing Victoria House, the former home in Charlton Lane of the Leckhampton Potteries owner Arthur Godwin. When they had finished, the men thanked her by giving her two of the pots that had lain untouched in the cellar of the house ever since the works closed in 1912. These are illustrated in *Research Bulletin* No 2.

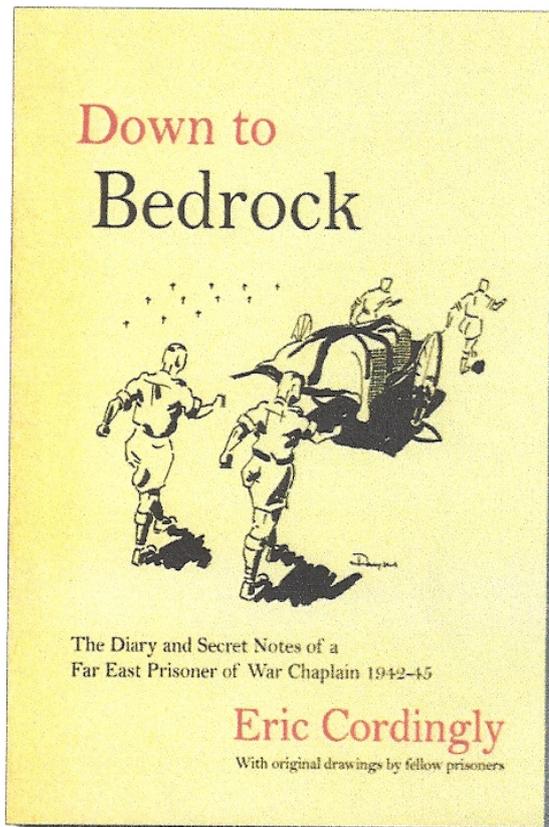
Down to Bedrock

Those who were here during the late 1940s and '50s will remember the Reverend Eric Cordingly, who was appointed as Rector of Leckhampton at the beginning of the Second World War, before being called up to be an Army Chaplain. Having undergone the retreat from Dunkirk, he was posted to the Far East and in no time was captured by the Japanese. He suffered the privations of the notorious camp at Changi and then worked on the construction of the Burma Railway.

Wherever he was sent, he and his men managed to make a place of worship, and all the while his faith enabled him to sustain his own morale and to minister to thousands of fellow prisoners. He kept a diary and some secret notes, which miraculously survived and were only recently discovered. His daughter has edited them and the result is a beautifully produced book, with fresh revelations on every page, made all the more vivid by drawings executed by fellow prisoners.

It finishes with a poignant photograph of Eric standing with his family in front of the old Leckhampton Rectory on his return in October 1945 – immediately opposite the camp for German POWs, whose relaxed regime contrasted with his own experience. The book makes absorbing reading from many points of view and is remarkably good value at £7.99. If you would like a copy you can apply direct to the publisher, adding £1.40 for postage, by emailing sales@art-angels.co.uk or telephoning 01603 620 161.

Eric Miller



Website

You can keep up to date with LLHS's programme of events, publications, research and more at www.llhs.org.uk

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Follow us on our new Facebook page by visiting: www.facebook.com/leckhamptonhistory

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