

Contents

From the Chairman

1

Events and Promotions

2

Civic Society News -

Newsletter Editor Required - 5

Outlaw King - the background - 6

Recent Talks -

WW2 Arctic Convoys - 8

Role of NCC - 8

Mediaeval Medicine - 10

Update on Barracks Project - 11

Other Items -

End of an Era at Tweedmouth - 13

New Hotel for Berwick - 13

Women's Rights - 14

Covid 19 & Global Warming - 15

In Search of my Father's Story - 17

Sandra's Berwick Puzzle - 24

Office Bearers

24

FROM THE CHAIRMAN

All Civic Society activities are on hold. We wish all members well and hope we can overcome this upheaval.

If there are any members who are self-isolating and require groceries or medication to be delivered to their doorstep then they can access the local aid network by contacting either.

Cllr Anne Forbes - 07827 294221

Cllr Georgina Hill - 07753749755

Pre this situation, Berwick had embarked on a new phase of developments. Construction was underway for the new jetty at Berwick Port and the new Leisure Centre, plans submitted for the long-awaited new Hospital and a major funding bid through the Borderlands Growth Initiative for a new theatre, cinema and conference centre for the Town.

We can hope that this progress can be continued, and construction work resumed but, as with so many things, we will have to wait and see. The long-term impacts on the national economy cannot be

fully gauged. We cannot know yet how this will impact public sector regeneration spending and private sector confidence which has been evident in the town recently with housing and other private sector developments such as the recently opened new Premier Inn and the Retail Park which was another construction site about to pop up.

Ian Dods

EVENTS AND PROMOTIONS

The AGM on the 8th April has had to be postponed so the present Office-Bearers and Executive Members will stay in place until such time as they can be re-elected with perhaps some additions. Our Vice-Chairman, John Webster has already indicated that he will retire after the AGM. Great thanks are due to John for the excellent way he has compiled the bi-annual Newsletters, managed the website and set up the Membership system.

To cover the last six months; If anyone thought there would be a natural dip in interest in Remembrance Sunday after the Centenary of the ending of World

War I in 2018, they could not have been more wrong. The event in 2019 was extremely well supported with great generosity.

We held our own Main Guard service on Monday, 11th November. As has become customary, the Scouts and Cubs led by Paul Marshall and Mayor, Anne Forbes, had placed 651 crosses to commemorate the fallen of Berwick, Tweedmouth and Spittal. Chairman, Ian Dods, was joined by the Reverend Canon Alan Hughes who conducted the service. Major Lance Thornton, KOSB, who read the Exhortation and Piper, Andrew Smith.

As always, we were delighted to welcome Longridge Towers Junior School and pupil cornet player, William Allis gave his best ever rendition of the Last Post and Reveille. A poppy wreath was laid on behalf of the School which was a touching gesture.

Afterwards refreshments were provided in The Main Guard which was organised by Catherine Seymour, Anne Humphrey and Julia Butler to whom we accord thanks.



Scouts & Cubs Placing Crosses

The Christmas Party, which was also General Election Day !, took place at Tweedsyde, Castle Terrace. John Meachem and his daughter, Tiffany, had very kindly agreed to hold the event in their lovely, newly refurbished home. Everything was arranged beautifully, and torches were lit on the outside courtyard. John and Tiffany had also provided musicians which added to the festive atmosphere. Forty-six attended with a few absences due to illness. The much-enjoyed buffet and wine had been organised by the Dryden family.

On 27th February, Ian Dods and Zoreen Hill visited Berwick Academy to present our annual award. The recipient this year was Caitlin Todd who is a very impressive student who has carried out a large amount of charitable work, taken part in local musical events as a drummer and represented the county in Sport. She is hoping to attend either

Durham or Newcastle University. We hope she will achieve this with the current uncertainty of how exam grades will exactly be awarded. Also, in attendance at the ceremony were teacher co-ordinator, Richard Johnson and Deputy Head, Steven Gibson.

The Society has sponsored one of the U3A Nature Trail Line Boards. Unfortunately, the launch party had to be cancelled but they did formally open the Trail which can be accessed online, and residents can walk through as part of their one daily exercise, keeping to the current social distancing rules. This can be accessed via the website; www.tweedandcoast.org.



Society Sponsored Nature Board

Also included is a photograph of a seat placed on Berwick Pier in memory of Alan Faragher who died on 14th April 2019.

Husband of Ann, he was a prominent Berwick personality, a successful businessman, stalwart

of the Lifeboat and an active participant in many Civic Society activities in the past.



Alan Faragher Seat

The meeting programme with guest speakers has been extremely interesting, varied and well attended. On the 9th October, we held our combined meeting with The Berwick History Society when Leona J Thomas gave a talk on The Russian Arctic Convoys in 1942 which was told in her father's memoirs. The report of this talk was written by James Bruce, Chairman of The History Society who is himself very knowledgeable about Russia.

For the 13th November meeting, we were very pleased that Max Adams, the charismatic, acclaimed biographer, archaeologist and expert on woodland and tree histories gave a talk entitled; "What shall we do with all the Trees?". He has been a popular contributor to two of The Berwick Literary

Festivals. The subject of trees is very topical, and Max Adams stressed the vital importance of them for the Global environment and the soil, not just the trees themselves. He writes about the subject in his latest book; "Trees of Life" published by Head of Zeus on 14th November 2019.

On January 22nd, Director of Planning at Northumberland County Council, Rob Murfin gave a well-received talk on planning from a strategic, policy and personal viewpoint.

The speaker on the 12th February, Sandra Gann, an engaging and accomplished speaker, gave a talk on; "Myths, Magic and Mediaeval Medicine". Then on 11th March, Sir Philip Mawer assisted by Barracks Site Manager, Sophie Howard, gave an eagerly awaited update on The Berwick Barracks Project.

Reports on these meetings appear later in this newsletter.

An interesting calendar of Events for the 2020/2021 season was in the process of being compiled before the Coronavirus crisis. We hope that the programme can be rescheduled soon.

Zoreen Hill

CIVIC SOCIETY NEWS

NEW NEWSLETTER EDITOR REQUIRED!

Just to say that I will not be standing for re-election to the Executive Committee at the AGM as I have taken on new commitments with two organisations in Edinburgh that I have been involved with for some time.

Apart from that, as many may be aware, I am only an occasional weekender in Berwick and so rarely can attend the monthly talks, and even the Executive Committee meetings often require me to make special trips down for the day.

I have produced the newsletter and looked after the website for about five years now and took these jobs on to help, as the newsletter editor had just left the area when I joined the Society. I think it is now time to hand over to a full-time resident who has better local knowledge and contacts.

So, this Spring newsletter will be my last, but it does allow a good six months for a member to come forward and take on what is an

interesting task in support of the Society. So, what does the job involve?

Two newsletters are produced annually: in spring and autumn. The content, you will know as a reader, includes reports from the Chairman and Treasurer plus summaries of monthly meetings, plus articles of general interest entirely of the Editor's choosing. I have enjoyed input from Michael Cullen over the years, who, I am sure, will continue to contribute interesting items.

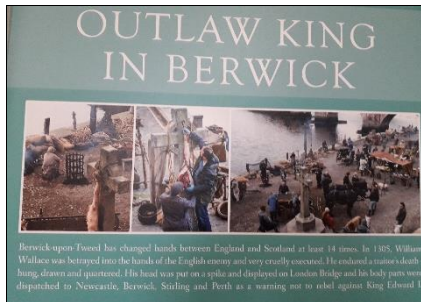
No special technical expertise is required other than a familiarity with Microsoft Word or similar software package and a knowledge of how to paste photographs into the body of the text. The document is in A5 page size with two columns per page although the overall layout is entirely up to the Editor. I normally convert the newsletter to PDF format for emailing to the printer.

I shall of course help during handover to a new person by explaining any issues of concern.

John Webster

OUTLAW KING

THE BACKGROUND STORY



In January 2019 I was invited to a meeting at the Main Guard, together with some regular stewards and committee members, to discuss ideas for that year's exhibition. I suggested putting together a display about the filming of The Outlaw King when Sigma Films from Glasgow came to town in October 2018 and it was agreed.

A crew descended on Berwick a week before filming to prepare our Old Bridge which stood in as London Bridge. The Quayside was transformed into a medieval marketplace. A tax office set was built at the end of the tunnel leading through to the Youth Hostel. The dock became the production hub for wagons, equipment and crew, with

marquees for catering and costumes and make up.

All the hotels ,B&Bs and holiday lets were filled with actors and crew members the star of the film playing Robert The Bruce was Chris Pine and his personal chef, Jamie Kemp stayed with Ian and I for three nights in our B&B The Anchorage in Woolmarket.

On the first day of filming I was at the Tweedmouth side of the Old Bridge with my sister Shirley and friend Joanne to watch the action a lot of beautiful horses with actors in chainmail were cantering across the bridge. It was amazing to see all the cameras filming shots from different angles, and to realise how many times they had to refilm the various shots.

On the second day ,I went to Sandgate at 9am, when I looked down Chris Pine was sitting on a horse and next to him was my favourite Scottish actor Tony Curran. I spent most of the day watching as much of the action as I could ,though occasionally we had to be moved by security, so camera angles were kept clear.

At about 6.45 pm we heard a shout of "It's a Wrap" and a cheer went up from the Quayside. The extras came up the ramp on to the bridge

to go to the dock to get changed out of their costumes. Among them some locals and our Mayor Gregah Roughead who was dressed as a medieval merchant.



Shirley and I and another friend Joyce went into Barrels Ale House and sitting at the bar was Tony Curran, I had a quick word with him, telling him how much I admired his performance as Vincent Van Gogh in Doctor Who. Then Chris Pine walked in, a Hollywood A - Lister, who played a young Captain Kirk in the newer Star Trek films, he was joined by my guest Jamie and Tony I could not believe two of my favourite actors were in Barrels and they were lovely.

My historical heroine is Isabella The Countess of Buchan who crowned Robert The Bruce King of Scotland and as a result was imprisoned in a cage in Berwick castle by Edward the first. I really wanted her story to be told in the

exhibition as the only reference to her in Berwick is a road called Countess of Buchan Way.

With the help of Louise Dryden, who sent E-mails for me to the film company and Netflix, we managed to obtain film props and screenshots. I was asked not to put much text on the information boards just enough to say what went on during filming, a lot of locals let me use their photos which was a big help.

Last year, many people came to see the exhibition, there are lots of lovely comments in the guest book including one from a friend of the director David McKenzie. Ian and I went to Edinburgh to see Outlaw King in a cinema The Old Bridge looked amazing with CGI medieval London in the background and even better the Quayside with CGI Tweedmouth Moor in the distance, and Berwick named on the screen. I loved every second of it.

Sandra Dods

RECENT TALKS

ARCTIC CONVOYS DURING WWII

In October it was Berwick Civic Society's turn to host our annual joint meeting, in which we gained a terrific insight into the experience of those who braved the Arctic Convoys in World War II. These notoriously perilous missions from Loch Ewe were a vital lifeline to the Soviet war effort, ferrying tanks, armoured cars, weapons and other supplies.

Leona J. Thomas's father Leonard worked in the engine room of HMS Ulster Queen, and kept a detailed diary, on which he based his memoirs.

It was not least interesting to learn about the significance of the Tirpitz, the flagship of Germany's Baltic fleet and the heaviest battleship ever built by a European Navy.

Just the threat of the Tirpitz emerging from its Norwegian lair was enough to scatter an entire convoy. When this happened in

June 1942, the merchant ships were left to fend for themselves in a disastrously unequal struggle with U-Boats and the Luftwaffe.

Among a wealth of other fascinating details, we also gained a proper understanding that the western allies didn't have solely altruistic motives. The USSR paid for the cargoes it received in large quantities of gold and silver bullion - some of which apparently ended up at the bottom of the Clyde!

James Bruce

THE ROLE OF NCC IN URBAN DESIGN

The Civic Society heard a talk from **Rob Murfin**, the Director of Planning at Northumberland County Council, on Wednesday, 22nd January at the Parish Centre.

Rob Murfin, who joined NCC in February last year, had previously been the Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council and, before that, Head of Planning Services at Derbyshire County Council.



He gave an overview on various issues around planning policy and shared his views on how to secure; “thoughtful design”.

He said that lower cost housing developments should not necessarily mean compromising on quality, saying that; “good and thoughtful design need not cost {relatively large amounts of} money.

Rob spoke of the importance of local input when it comes to s101 agreements, which is when developers provide money for, or directly provide, some local benefit, as part of their planning agreement. He explained his previous work at other local authorities to ensure that local initiatives were supported in this way.

He covered a range of topics including neighbour planning and the impact of climate change and emphasised the need for “evidence based” planning. He also said that

he would always defend, for example, replacing windows in conservation areas; “like for like”.

Rob also spoke of issues particular to the Berwick area. He said that Berwick was rich in historic and other assets which are both historic and marketable. He talked of the delicate balance needed to ensure that development and progress here did not undermine these assets which he referred to, comparing to other places as; “a dream to have”.

He spoke of how Berwick has typical urban design challenges, as faced elsewhere, flagging up the common problem of the provision of adequate car parking for both residents and visitors.

In terms of current Berwick projects, he mentioned the Northumberland County Council bid for major funding for the Maltings through the Borderlands growth deal, adding that we should never underestimate the role arts can play in regeneration and economic development.

Rob spoke of the need for a considered, focussed approach to projects in the town and mentioned, in particular, proposals being currently developed around the future of the Quayside. He added that, as with every other place he has been, there are criticisms in equal measure of both the planning system being too restrictive and that permissions are

granted too readily. He said that, as a planner, if these criticisms are around 50/50 it is probably an indication that you are doing something right and planners should not fear being unpopular.

Rob answered a range of questions and listened to feedback from the audience. He was asked about the recent damning audit report into NCC's planning department, before his time, over the Lugano application for the Dissington Garden Village project near Ponteland.

He said that he had joined NCC following these problems and emphasised his commitment to ensuring that these issues were put behind NCC and that the public could have confidence in the local planning system.

The meeting was chaired by Civic Society Chairman, Ian Dods and was well attended.

Zoreen Hill

MEDIAEVAL MEDICINE AND CARE

At our February Meeting **Sandra Gann** gave an illustrated talk on mediaeval medicine and care.

She described the practice of medicine in the Middle Ages being rooted in the Greek tradition based

on the four humours linked to the four elements and the need to maintain balance for good health.



She described various practices ranging from bloodletting to the importance of plants in mediaeval medicine. Most people could not afford the few doctors who were trained at this time the more common practitioners being apothecaries, alchemists and the widely used 'cunning folk', usually women, with an accrued knowledge of folk lore using plants and superstitious rituals. All practitioners, whether professional or amateur, needed a good knowledge of astrology as the position of the planets played an important part in both diagnosis and remedy.

Sandra also described the monastery hospitals and smaller Maison Dieu that offered care for the needy and travellers, often those suffering from leprosy. We had examples of hospitals ranging from St Bartholomew's in the City of London to the Church of the Holy Trinity at Soutra near Lauder and the four wonderful examples of medieval hospitals here in Berwick.

In the 13th century they were very clear the soul was more important than the body, but the care and attention given to patients of these hospitals would have been a welcome relief from the worries of fire, famine or fever in the community.

Sandra Gann

UPDATE ON THE BARRACKS PROJECT

A well-attended meeting of the Civic Society on Wednesday, 11 March heard **Philip Mawer** and **Sophie Howard** (English Heritage's manager in Berwick) provide an update on the project to rejuvenate Berwick's Grade 1 listed Barracks.

After reminding members of the recent history of the project, Philip identified the changes in the context in which it is being undertaken. Tightened financial circumstances meant that a persuasive vision and business case for the redevelopment of the Barracks would be even more essential if the significant capital needed (previously estimated at some £15.0 million) was to be raised. The Barracks site was large and complex, with Grade 1 listed buildings, many do not open to the public, requiring constant maintenance and several different partner organisations undertaking activities there. So the team working on the project had looked carefully at other large heritage sites being redeveloped to see if there were lessons to be learned which could help Berwick achieve success.

Sophie described the research she had undertaken into sites including Chatham Historic Dockyard, New Lanark, Saltaire and Somerset House. Several conclusions could be drawn from the experience of sites where regeneration had been successful. These included the importance of developing a clear, shared vision for each site's future; rigorous attention to ensuring a site remained financially sustainable

into the future; a mix of complementary activities on each site which together highlighted its unique nature; strong governance; and creating supportive links with the local community.

Philip said that, with the help of funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and from English Heritage, the Project Group - which included Northumberland County Council as well as the partners on the site - was working hard to develop a convincing plan for a sustainable future for the Barracks. This included looking carefully at the historic collections held on the site and by Berwick Record Office; weighing up what were the limits of acceptable change for the buildings on the site, given their listed status; and assessing the funding and governance options to secure the site's long term future.

A report drawing all these strands together was expected to be published before the summer holidays. While it was impossible to predict at this stage what it would say, it seemed likely to point towards a phased redevelopment of the site, using a mix of public and private funding, with a substantial cultural, heritage and archival presence on the site alongside other activities. It was also clear that, to be successful,

the site would need to be managed imaginatively and as a whole, rather than as a collection of separate activities. Whilst this would inevitably involve compromises, all the partners in the project were committed at a senior level to achieving a successful outcome.

During a lively discussion session, Civic Society members explored some of the issues and options being considered. The speakers concluded by thanking the Society for its consistent support of the search for an outcome which would both serve the interests of Berwick and the Eastern Borders and do justice to the Barracks themselves, which would next year celebrate their 300th anniversary.

Georgie Hill

OTHER ITEMS

THE END OF AN ERA AT TWEEDMOUTH



I was disappointed in early February to cross by the old bridge to Tweedmouth and to see that Hopes, the small newsagent near the docks, had a closing down sign in the window. I went in past, as I often did, and spoke to the shop keeper.

In fact, the shop was closing finally a couple of days later, after 125 years of trading by the same family, this being the fifth generation to run the shop.

Apparently, about twenty years ago the shop was so busy that three people were employed during the morning period. Interestingly, one of the main blows to trade was the arrival of the mobile phone which resulted in younger people getting their news online and no longer buying a

newspaper and other items during their visit.

It does reinforce the message that if we want to retain our small independent traders then we have to use them and not get everything at the supermarket.

John Webster

AND HOTEL HERALDS NEW ERA FOR BERWICK



The long-awaited Premier Inn opened its door to the public on 17th February and I think a good job has been made in blending a modern building into the surrounding area with a series of steep-pitched roofs that reflect those on The Quays.

I spoke with the hotel's Deputy Manager, Kirsty McLeod, who

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

explained that they offer a total of 60 rooms; 16 double, 20 triple and 21 family, and 3 accessible rooms, which are all priced the same. The family rooms hold a maximum of two adults and two children.

Breakfast is not included but is available for £9.50 per person, with up to 2 children under 16 eating free. There is also an 'all you can eat' continental breakfast available for £7.50 per person.

Kirsty explained that they did not include a large restaurant in view of the fact that there are many nearby but there is a café bar, open 24/7 for residents, that sells a range of drinks, including tea, coffee, a range of beers and spirits, and of course wines. A limited menu is also available consisting of simple bowl foods and a range of pizzas, which are available to residents at any time and non-residents until 11pm.

I imagine the hotel will be popular in view of its convenient location within the ramparts and near the waterfront and its proximity to the excellent range of shops in Marygate, Hide Hill, West Street and Bridge Street, and other nearby streets.

John Webster

In 1876 Miss Lydia Becker wrote to the Town Council inviting it to petition Parliament for women's suffrage. That caused the Town Council some amusement. Later, a rather more robust response was thought by some to be fitting.

When Sir Edward Grey, Foreign Secretary, the Borough M.P., and President of Berwick Rangers Football Club, began to speak at the start of its fund-raising bazaar, he was heckled by two ladies thought to have come from Newcastle. One had a gag stuffed in her mouth and both were bundled out, a reporter present being taken aback at their ruffianly treatment.

Suffragettes made a local appearance with Miss Adela Pankhurst and Miss Fawcett speaking for women's rights and setting up a suffrage stall in the High Street in 1909 and with an Edinburgh-London march passing through Berwick in 1912. Elsewhere, a plan to debag Asquith on a golf course came to nothing but stones broke panes in Number 10's windows, the signal for widespread smashing in London Streets.

A significant local milestone which generated great excitement was the election of the country's third lady M.P., Mabel Philipson in 1923. Controversy of various kinds continued though. Objection was taken to the growing practice of women wearing trousers. '*How would it be if I started going around in a low-cut dress?*' asked a reporter in 1933. Then not everyone accepted that cycling was a proper female activity. Miss Dickinson recalled being chased out of Eyemouth.

Work too sometimes proved contentious. In 1937 a nineteen-year-old bus conductress, working for the United Bus Company, was on duty when '*the bus door swung open and Miss Davidson fell into the roadway. When she was picked up she was dead.*' One correspondent to the Berwick Advertiser subsequently asserted that bus conducting was no fit role for a woman. Another thoroughly disagree, arguing that a girl was perfectly capable of bus conducting while remaining '*fit and healthy*' and was far better off than in domestic service.

A court case that same year seemed to support his argument. A sixteen-year-old girl, Gladys Simms, got a job working in a Bamburgh Guest House.

Happening to miss the bus one morning, she arrived three hours late, and was promptly dismissed. In the case later brought by her father it turned out she worked from 7.00am to 9.30pm, with no half-holiday. The judge found her conduct '*not altogether satisfactory*' but her conditions '*almost slavery*'

Some girls were in any case voting with their feet as there were reports of a *nursemaid famine*'

Michael Cullen

COVID 19 & GLOBAL WARMING

In the Newsletter for Autumn 2019 I included an article under the title "Should we Worry about Global Warming?" and argued that we should, and needed to do something to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions otherwise we would encounter a perfect storm of outcomes such as flooding and other events.

Little did I imagine that only a couple of months later parts of England and Wales would experience rainfall of an intensity and duration not seen before and leading to terrible flooding along the Severn and other areas.

Then to add insult to injury, a couple of months after that, we were struck by the coronavirus pandemic that has effectively destroyed much of the economic growth experienced since the Second World War and caused chaos to the lives and aspirations of millions of people on a global basis.

Perversely, the destruction wrought globally with the grounding of aircraft, a vast reduction in the use of private vehicles, and a slimmed-down public transport offering, has led to a drop in greenhouse and other atmospheric pollutants. This has led to significant improvements in the quality of the air breathed by residents in several major cities, thus improving the quality of life for many.

Sadly, it is unlikely that we will learn from these recent events and adopt a more sustainable mode of living with a move away from fossil fuels that will leave coal and oil in the ground. This is where it rightly belongs because it was the removal of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere over millions of years, by being trapped as coal and oil, that led to the conditions suitable for human to flourish.

What about coronavirus, or Covid-19 to be more precise? Unfortunately, it is likely that habitat and biodiversity loss globally may lead to more such pandemics. Outbreaks of animal-borne and other infectious diseases such as Sars, Ebola, bird flu and Covid-19 seem to be on the increase. Pathogens are crossing from animals to humans and seem to be linked in some cases to the destruction of previously pristine forest and jungle areas bringing people into contact with some animal species for the first time, and that allows viruses to be transmitted more easily.

This may read like a prophecy of doom as regards global warming and disease but there is hope and it is very clearly enunciated by the much derided 17 year old, Greta Thunberg, who puts it quite succinctly - "don't listen to the politicians and business leaders, listen to the scientists and experts"

That's where things have gone wrong in recent decades with misinformation being deliberately spread for the purpose of confusing the public and preventing a global coordinated response.

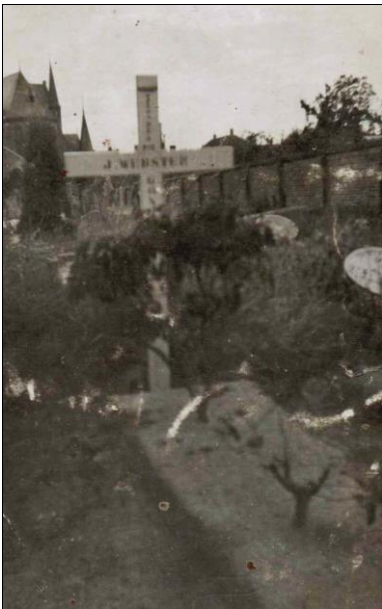
John Webster

IN SEARCH OF MY FATHER'S WW2 STORY

A PILGRIMAGE OF SORTS

Thanks to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, I find that the newsletter is short of its normal content due to cancelled meetings, resulting in fewer reports. That, and the fact that this is my last newsletter, made me think I should indulge in the luxury of relating a personal story that started in my twenties with me asking about the circumstances of my father's death in 1945 and ended in 2015 by my attending commemoration service at his burial place in The Netherlands. The strange chain of circumstances that led to this event will, I hope to make for an interesting read.

John Webster



1945 photo of John's father's grave

My father was killed in action on the 1st January 1945, a few miles

downstream from Nijmegen, while serving in the Royal Engineers. His body was recovered from the River Waal at the village of Druten some weeks later because the winter was severe, and the river frozen in places. He was buried in the village graveyard at Druten and the photo above shows the simple wooden cross erected at the time.

My mother never talked much about his death to my sister and me, other than saying an officer visited her at one stage and told her that he and five others had been laying a boom across the river when they came under fire from a German aircraft. I grew up with little knowledge of the circumstances and frankly didn't think much about it until I was in

my twenties and married. One day we asked my father's sister, my Aunt Sarah, and to my surprise she became very emotional, which was unusual for women of her era, and could only say that he had lots of friends and was still deeply loved and missed, and that was that. She did, however, tell one story that I will classify as:

Remarkable Coincidence No. 1

About ten years after the war, Aunt Sarah was at the small Congregationalist church in Aberdeen when they had a visit from a vicar from an English church. He told a story of having been a padre during the war and when travelling through the war zone in early 1945, was stopped by a local person who told him that they were burying a British soldier that day so he attended the burial. My Aunt spoke to him at the end of his service and asked if he remembered the name of the village. It was of course Druten and my Aunt told the vicar that it was her brother he had helped to bury.

In 1980 my aunt met a neighbour who told her he was going to Holland with British Legion friends to visit the graves of former comrades, so she told him of her brother's grave and the fact that no member of the family had ever

been there. He promised to visit the grave and to take photographs for her to see. This he did but also told her what happened when looking for the grave in the churchyard. They could not find the war grave, and this led to what I shall call:

Remarkable Coincidence No. 2

While looking around, a lady passing by asked if she could help. When they told her they were looking for the grave of a soldier named John Webster she said she knew exactly where it was because she had found the body while working on the family farm by the river side in 1945.

The reason they could not find the body was that it had been buried outside the main graveyard because my father's papers gave his religion as 'Congregationalist', which was regarded with suspicion in the strongly Catholic area of the time. The war grave is now located in an annexe to the main graveyard along with more recent burials of local people, and entered by a separate gate, hidden by a high wall

My first visit to Druten was almost accidental and took place in 1987 during a visit to Dutch friends who had been neighbours of ours in Edinburgh and had then returned home to the north of Holland. One

evening the question arose as to whether my father was still alive and when I said that he was buried in The Netherlands at a place called Druten our friend said, "you must go and visit because my sister lives near Druten and you can stay with her for a couple of days".

So, the next day I made the journey to Druten along with my wife and our 11-year-old son, and eventually found the cemetery and the grave, which was quite an emotional occasion for me.

Then we had one of those mad ideas that you do when young. We wondered if there was an old lady living in the street next to the cemetery, perhaps the one who met up with the British Legion group some years earlier. So, we knocked at a door and met a delightful old lady, Joanna van Beem. Needless to say, Mrs. van Beem knew nothing of the finding of my father's body but took our address and promised to ask around. She did however suggest we visit a dress shop near the church because the woman who worked there was married to the man who looked after my father's grave for the church.

We thanked Mrs van Beem then went to the shop in the village

where another of those strange events took place:

Remarkable Coincidence No. 3

We went into the shop and introduced ourselves and the lady said "what a pity my husband did not know about your visit because he would have loved to meet you but he works in Arnhem" We were sitting there talking with her when the door of the shop opened and in walked her husband. She looked at us and said, "I can't believe it, he rarely comes into the shop when he is at work" She explained who we were and her husband said "I was just passing by after visiting a client and I felt I should come in past". It was a strange coincidence that he did come in during the 30 minutes or so that we were there.

Well, that might have been the end of the story, but some ten years later, in 1998, I received a letter from Joanna van Beem's daughter, Marjan, to say that her mother had asked her to send some photos of the graveyard at the church, which had recently been renovated.

Then, in 2012, I had a letter from Joanna van Beem's grandson, Raymond, to tell me that articles had appeared in the local newspaper "De Waalkanter" asking if any of the older residents

of Druten knew anything about the circumstances surrounding the finding of my father's body.

I asked him to keep in touch and let me know of any developments then in September 2013 I went over to meet Raymond, who took me on a tour of the area and the various battle locations.

He also took me one evening to meet Martien Pardoel, of the 4th May (Liberation Day in The Netherlands) Committee.

Nothing had come from the newspaper appeals and Martien said they should have made the appeal ten years earlier when more people from the time were alive.

This visit did teach me just how much respect the Dutch people still have for the allied soldiers who liberated their country.

I discovered that the residents of Druten had visited my father's grave on Liberation Day every year since the end of the war and looked after the grave and planted flowers.



Martien, John & Raymond meet 2013

When I got back home I decided to do some serious investigation and paid for a researcher at the National Archives to check if my father's company diaries had survived from the period, which they had, and learned more than any of my family had until that time.

He was in the army from 1940 onwards with the Royal Engineers and the records show that his Company, the 91st, was trained in chemical warfare at one stage. I also learned from his army records that he embarked from England on 5th June 1944 and disembarked in Western Europe on June 6th, in other words he took part in the Normandy Landings.

It appears that his regiment saw action in France then in Belgium at Antwerp, then arrived not far from Nijmegen at the end of 1944 with the British Forces on this side of the River Waal and the Germans on the other.

There was an interesting entry for Xmas Day 1944, which reads

“Enemy airborne landings expected and Coy is allotted a certain area of the town in which to organise the defence of other units. C.R.E is responsible for the defence of the whole of the NIJMEGEN area”

On the 1st of January 1945 my father and five others set out in a small boat onto the river at Deest and, according to the Company Dairies, were killed in an accident. The entry simply records that

“Six men of 3 PI were drowned while casting anchors from a barge.”

This got me thinking that the story of the aircraft attack told to my mother by the visiting officer was to maybe glamorise the death rather than saying he was killed in an accident during a war!

Well, that might have been the end of the story, but early 2015 I received an email from Martien Pardoel's daughter, Veronique, on behalf of the 4th May Commemoration Committee at Druten asking if we would like to attend the 70th anniversary celebrations as guests. This was going to be a major event given that few residents of the time were still alive, and this might well be the

last such event. We gladly accepted the invitation.

One entertaining result of this invitation was relayed to me by Raymond van Beem. The local newspapers made great play of the fact that “John Webster Jnr.” was going to attend.



The image shows a newspaper clipping from 'de Gelderlander'. The headline reads 'John Webster junior komt naar herdenking Druten'. Below the headline is a small photograph of a man in a dark jacket and light-colored shirt, identified as John Webster junior, standing outdoors. To the right of the photo is a short article in Dutch. The text of the article is as follows:

Gepubliceerd op 28 april 2015: Laatste update 28 april, 09:18;

DRUTEN - John Webster junior, de zoon van de Britse militair John Webster die begraven ligt in Druten, komt als eregast naar de Duitse dodenherdenking, de 70e na het einde van de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Martien Pardoel van het Duitse 4 en 5 Mei Comité vertelt dat 'junior' vorig jaar onverwacht bij hem op de stoep stond.

John Webster senior, die deel uitmaakte van de Royal Engineers, ligt begraven op het Nederlands hervormde kerkhof aan de Molenthoek in Druten.

Monday, May 4th, 2015, was the day of the official celebrations and this was quite an amazing day. We were collected from our hotel at about 5pm and went to the church in Druten just in front of the graveyard where my father is buried. In the church a combined choir of 170 singers from The Netherlands, England and Germany were practising then at about 6pm we all gathered outside the church where we met the Mayor of Druten and others.

A procession then headed off, led by a drummer beating out the pace along the side streets where lots of people had gathered and where flags had been hung from several houses. Once we reached the cemetery there were speeches, then my wife, Kath, and I laid a

wreath on my father's grave, followed by the Mayor who laid another. There were some songs by the choir and more speeches before we made our way back to the front of the church and from there headed to the War memorial of Druten where there were more speeches, wreath laying and singing accompanied by trumpets.

Finally, back to the packed church of about 600 residents for the main ceremony, which included me having to give a speech about my father's early life, then music performed by the choirs.



John speaking at the Commemoration

After the ceremony, there were drinks and snacks in the church hall and then an amazing thing

happened, which I shall describe as:

Remarkable Coincidence No. 4

An old man came down to speak to me along with his son to translate. His name was Jo Janssen and he said he witnessed the finding of my father's body in the River Waal near his farm. He had been working with his father when they saw people heading to the river with a cart. They went to find out what was going on and saw it was a British soldier. My father was buried in the graveyard the next day he recalled. Amazing to meet someone all these years later to hear this story. The fact that he was still alive, was at the ceremony and the fact that I was there by a series of coincidences made the meeting all the more remarkable.

Again, this might have been the end of the story but not quite! In August 2019 I received an email from a young Dutch researcher of WW2 events in the Arnhem area to say that he had seen an article in the local newspaper about my attendance at the 70th anniversary event and asked if I could send information about my father because this was an incident he was researching, In return he sent me what he had learned about the action. The fact that the information that follows came to me by such a circuitous route leads me to call this:

Remarkable Coincidence No. 5

On Monday, January 1, 1945, an incident occurred on the Waal opposite Deest. It was clear weather that morning and it had frozen a lot. On that morning, one of the last major German air raids started. The 'Operation Bodenplatte' as this attack was called, was directed against the allied air forces stationed at various airports in southern Netherlands and Belgium. Hundreds of German planes took off from airports in the still occupied Netherlands at around 8 am and flew to the south at a height of ± 200 meters to surprise the Allies on that first January. On the river Waal near Deest, an inspection took place of the floating barrier at the shipyard across the Waal for the protection of the bridges near Nijmegen. This is to prevent the Germans boats and the like from attacking the bridges from the West.

Those of you who have not fallen asleep reading this story may notice a remarkable similarity in this account to the story related by my mother, where aircraft were involved, yet the Company Record records an 'accident' and makes no mention of Operation Bodenplatte, which must surely have been a significant event at the time. Conspiracy theorists may wonder why. Was it an embarrassing episode best left unrecorded or what?

You may wonder why my father has become the centre of so much attention. The simple answer is that he is the only allied soldier buried in the village and so became the focus of the commemoration ceremonies held there every 4th May, and in many towns and villages throughout The Netherlands.

Well, this is the end of my "pilgrimage of sorts" and the reason I relate it here is that friends have said to me that it is worth telling because, as one said, the coincidences described are "so spooky".

Another, of a more religious frame of mind said to me "you can't really believe all these things happened by chance; they would defy statistics. There must have been a guiding hand at work"

I leave it for you to decide.

John Webster

SANDRA'S
"DO YOU KNOW
BERWICK"
PUZZLE



An old door in Berwick-upon-Tweed, which you may have passed many times over the years.

However, can you say where it is?

The answer will be given by Sandra in the next Civic Society newsletter, whenever that may be. Considering the current global lockdown.

Sandra Dods

The Berwick Civic Society

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Website:
www.berwickcivicsociety.org.uk

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