

## Bringing the Past Alive!

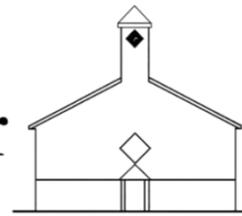
# FRIENDS OF CHATHAM TRACTION



Guess who? Archivist, Elspeth Millar gets in the spirit at the exhibition *The Medway Heritage Bus: bringing the past alive*. On 4 September 2021, members of the Friends of Chatham Traction were in the MAC foyer to answer questions about their remarkable restoration of the Medway Heritage Bus. See the front cover and page 16 for more details; photograph by Rob Flood.

If undelivered, please return to:  
Medway Archives Centre, 32 Bryant Road, Strood, Rochester, ME2 3EP.

# The Clock Tower



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The Friends of Medway Archives  
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## Bringing the Past Alive!

On 4 September 2021, members of the Friends of Chatham Traction were in the Medway Archives Centre foyer where the latest exhibition about their work, *The Medway Heritage Bus: bringing the past alive* was on display. The team was there to answer questions about the bus project. Pictured are (left) Richard Bourne (Chairman) and Wendy Mesher (Vice Chairman). More on page 16; photograph by Rob Flood.

### ALSO INSIDE

Chatham's Dock Road Tragedy – Brian Joyce marks the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of the worst road accidents in British history.

### PLUS

The new FOMA website!

The Christmas event at the Medway Archives Centre!

## The Dock Road Tragedy



On Chatham Dockyard's perimeter wall, heading towards St Mary's Island and just before the St George's Centre roundabout, an oval plaque commemorates the deaths of 24 royal marine volunteer cadets aged 9 – 13 years who lost their lives in Dock Road on the night of 4 December 1951. On page 31 Brian Joyce relates the tragic and moving story of what happened 70 years ago.



## The Dock Road Tragedy



Find out more in Brian Joyce's moving article on page 31 and on the inside front cover.

## Remembrance Sunday, 14 November 2021



**'When you go home, tell them of us and say  
For your tomorrow, we gave our today.'**

From the memorial to the April 1944 Battle of Kohima; John Maxwell Edmonds (1875 –1958)

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## *Chairman's Letter*

Elaine Gardner



Hello and welcome to the last *Clock Tower* of 2021. Life seems to be getting better but who knows what it will be like by the time this reaches you!

It was lovely being able to welcome Christoph Bull to a *live* talk on 10 September; the audience was small but it actually happened! We were entertained with Christoph's lively talk about the Earls of Darnley, the Bligh family and evidence of their name both around the Cobham/Gravesend area and their origins in Ireland where they once held extensive property. It was also great to have Norma Crowe join us at the talk, and on page 13 you can read Norma's reminiscences of her extraordinary career thus far.

By the time this is published we will have held our second face-to-face talk on 12 November at St Nicholas Church hall with Jeremy Clarke talking about Percy Fitzgerald, his Dickens Collection and connections with Charles. The Fitzgerald Collection is held at MAC. We also will be holding a special Christmas event at MAC on Thursday 16 December to coincide with their booksale. In the afternoon, starting at 2pm, Amanda Thomas, our Editor, will be giving two talks: *Victorian Diseases* (with a footnote about Covid-19), and then after a break, *From Pagan Merriment to Puritan Misery. The Banning of Christmas in the English Civil Wars*. Amanda will also be selling and signing her books, including the latest, *The Nonconformist Revolution* – all at a special discount price!

I went to a most interesting talk by Claire Gapper at Rochester's Eastgate House in October entitled *The Nine Worthies*. I have to confess I was ignorant of these worthy men - three Pagans, three Jews and three Christians – some of whom seemed more powerful than worthy to be honest! They included Hector, Alexander the Great, King Arthur, and Godfrey de Bouillon who was the first crusader to reach Jerusalem and rule there for a while in the eleventh century. These worthy men became popular from the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries and featured in a variety of ways in print and decorative forms in large houses, including nine statues along the front of Montecute House in Somerset. Each had their own specific flag or banner by which they were identified. At Eastgate House, under the paint and plaster on the third floor, wall paintings of two of these worthies have been discovered. Their flags reveal them as King Arthur and Godfrey de Bouillon and it is assumed they were drawn there at about the time the house was built as such decorations seemed to die out in the mid-seventeenth century. Might this have been Cromwell's disapproval of all things decorative? At the end of the talk those of us who wished to risk the dodgy stairs leading up to the third floor were able to go and see the wall paintings. At the moment they have only been partially uncovered and are awaiting sufficient funds to complete the task. Perhaps then the staircase will be made safer to enable all to see them.

To finish, we have some great news! The new Local Studies Librarian to replace Norma Crowe has been appointed. She is Adele Martin-Bowtell and will join MAC in early November. We look forward to meeting her.



A very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to all our members and readers!

## New Members

A warm welcome to new FOMA member Peter Bursey.

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## Secretary's Report

Chris de Coulon Berthoud

Well, we've passed through the darkness of Allhallowtide, the clocks have gone back, and we return to the gloomy evenings of winter.



The Medway Archive Centre's doors are fully open again and the Centre is looking forward to receiving your calls and bookings to come and use all the resources for your research interests. It has been a good time to look back and remember those we have lost, and to remember the importance of staying safe from the ongoing pandemic.

*Chris' Allhallowtide display at home!*

## About The Clock Tower

*The Clock Tower* is the quarterly journal produced and published by the Friends of Medway Archives (FOMA), [www.foma-lsc.org/index.html](http://www.foma-lsc.org/index.html).

### Editorial deadlines

Please note, the deadline is the **last** Monday (or Tuesday when a Bank Holiday occurs) of January, April, July and October. Articles, letters, photos and any information to be considered for inclusion in the journal must be received before this date by the Editor, Mrs Amanda Thomas, [editor@foma-lsc.org](mailto:editor@foma-lsc.org)

**The copy deadline for Issue 65 of *The Clock Tower* is Monday 31 January 2022, with publication on Wednesday 23 February 2022.**

### Publication date

The fourth Wednesday following the editorial deadline.

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### Front Cover Accreditations and Website Information

The logo for *The Clock Tower* was designed by Bob Ratcliffe.

The banner design (incorporating the logo) and the title *The Clock Tower* were designed by Dr Alexander Thomas.

*The Clock Tower* is also available at [www.foma-lsc.org/newsletter.html](http://www.foma-lsc.org/newsletter.html)

*The Clock Tower Index* (<http://foma-lsc.org/journal.html>) is updated by Nic Nicholas.

### Further Information

Further information on the Medway Archives Centre can be obtained on the MAC website <https://cityark.medway.gov.uk/> or by writing to Medway Archives Centre, 32 Bryant Road, Strood, Rochester, Kent, ME2 3EP. Telephone +44 (0)1634 332714; fax +44 (0)1634 297060; email: [malsc@medway.gov.uk](mailto:malsc@medway.gov.uk)

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Editor of *The Clock Tower*, Amanda J. Thomas is an author, linguist and historian with a particular interest in social and medical history; she was born in Chatham. Her books include: *The Nonconformist Revolution*, *Cholera - The Victorian Plague*, and *The Lambeth Cholera Outbreak of 1848-1849*; she also contributed to Dr Andrew Hann's *The Medway Valley a Kent Landscape Transformed*. Amanda has worked on a diverse number of television historical documentaries for the BBC and Channel 5, including most recently *London's Greatest Bridges* with Rob Bell.

More details on page 28.

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## Medway Archives Centre

32 Bryant Rd, Rochester ME2 3EP; 01634 332714; malsc@medway.gov.uk

### Opening Hours and Visiting

Opening hours have returned to normal. Our reopening has been planned in a cautious way to ensure that we can review all of the practical issues involved in running the service safely. We will keep these opening arrangements under review.

We are now accepting drop-in visits for published materials and photographs if there is space in the search room. An appointment must be made to view original archive material and use microfilm or fiche readers

Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm, Saturday 9am to 12.30pm, Wednesday and Sunday closed.

### How to Make an Appointment

Email us at malsc@medway.gov.uk to make an appointment and to discuss which items you wish to consult. For original archive material you must give at least 3 working days' notice of your intention to visit. For all other material (such as books, maps, photographs) we just require 1 working day's notice. When you book we will ask for your name and contact details so that we can keep in touch with you about your appointment.

## Obituary

### Barbara Marchant



It is with great sadness that we announce the death of FOMA member, Barbara Marchant.

Local Medway historian Barbara Marchant was the founding member of the Strood Heritage Society, set up to promote the history and interests of the people of Strood. She devised an historic walk of the town for visitors which was also popular with local residents. Barbara was born in Kent, and although she and her husband moved away to Watchet in Somerset when they retired, Strood, the Medway Towns and Kent were always close to her heart. We were informed of Barbara's death by her daughter, Melanie Ellis who wrote, 'She spent many happy hours researching things in the Medway Archives ... She researched on all sorts of topics including Chatham Dockyard, local history and gardens, ice houses, Coade stone and also Anne Pratt. We have donated some of her Anne Pratt books to the Archive. Mum passed away on 5th July 2021.'

Barbara was a regular contributor to *The Clock Tower* in its early days, writing the following articles, *A Stroll through Strood* (November 2006), *Strood's Famous Botanist – Anne Pratt* (February 2007), and *My Little Dormouse* (August and November 2013).

FOMA chairman, Elaine Gardner recalls time spent with Barbara when she was still living in Medway: 'I can remember, years ago going on a tour of secret Rochester gardens that she organised one summer when there was a garden show on the Esplanade. We went to the garden behind the old Tudor house on Boley Hill, the garden of the Archdeacon's home next to the Vines, the gardens of the Huguenot residents and the Six Poor Travellers if I remember rightly. Her research on Anne Pratt also helped when I was putting together a talk for FOMA on some of Medway's less well known notable women.'

We send our sincere condolences to Melanie, and all of Barbara's family and friends.

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### Margaret Ratcliffe

We were saddened to hear, just as we were going to press, of the death of Margaret Ratcliffe, widow of the late Bob Ratcliffe and mother of Andrew Ratcliffe. Margaret passed away suddenly on Monday 1 November at Medway Maritime Hospital. Details of the funeral will be circulated to those who knew Margaret, and we send our sincere condolences to Andrew, the Ratcliffe family and friends.

## The FOMA Website Gets a New Look!

Alexander Thomas

Dr Alexander Thomas is an early-medieval archaeologist, researcher, and website designer. His PhD on the ninth century Danelaw Boundary was recently awarded by the University of Bristol. Alexander serves as FOMA's webmaster.



A newly refreshed FOMA website - <http://foma-lsc.org/> - was launched back in September, with a new design that is now more mobile and tablet-friendly than ever. The fluid design means each page layout adapts to the screen you are using.



A screenshot of the new website. The home page now includes images of FOMA highlights from the last few years, and of historic Medway buildings. Pictured are Sir Robert Worcester KBE DL (left), then FOMA Vice President (now Patron), and MALSC Borough Archivist, Stephen Dixon, at An Evening with Sir Robert Worcester: commemorating the 400th anniversary of the voyage to Jamestown, USA on 24 May 2007 at the Guildhall Museum, Rochester, Kent. This image appeared on the front cover of Issue 7 of The Clock Tower, August 2007.

The creation of the new design was aided using an open-sourced code library called Bootstrap. Bootstrap is a long-established open-source code library, used by many other websites, that was created by engineers at Twitter in 2011. The integration of this library has meant the introduction of a new collapsible navigation menu for mobile screens, variable page functionality across devices and full screen width content for all devices. Open-sourced icons from the web-based library Font Awesome have been deployed across the website to aid accessibility.

Dynamic content – such as the events list on the homepage as well as the search systems for FOMA's De Caville Index and the FOMA Collection – feel much more a part of the website than they may have been previously. Their functionality – such as the ability to print from a page – now adapts according to screen size.

## News and Events

Calendar of Forthcoming Events and Exhibitions

## FOMA Talks and Events

All events are subject to change and to government guidance for public gatherings. Further information will be available on the FOMA website ([www.foma-lsc.org](http://www.foma-lsc.org)), our Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/fomalsc](http://www.facebook.com/fomalsc)) and sent to members via email, where appropriate.



## The Friends of Medway Archives Centre Christmas Event

**Thursday 16 December 2021**

The Medway Archives Centre

Book Sale 12 noon

Talks 2 pm

Amanda Thomas will be talking on the following:

*Diseases in Victorian Times – with a footnote on Covid-19*

Exploring the causes and effects of the most common diseases of the Victorian era. The talk includes a discussion of the possible causes of the current Covid-19 pandemic and how lessons could have been learnt from the past.

Refreshment break

*From Pagan Merriment to Puritan Misery.  
The Banning of Christmas in the English Civil Wars*

The ancient celebration of Christmas and how the development of Protestantism caused it to be banned at the height of the English Civil Wars.

to you because of a research [sic] I am doing in our community to the crash of a Vickers Wellington bomber here on May 31, 1942. One of the crew members was sergeant James Herbert Holmes at the 156 Sqn RAF. He and the other crew are buried at the Public Cemetery of Vorden, The Netherlands. Sgt James Herbert Holmes was born in Chatham on Sep 26, 1912. He joined the RAF on July 17, 1940.

In the near future we want to publish a book about these brave men and erect a memorial in our neighbourhood Linde, to have the opportunity to commemorate them. Also about sgt. James Herbert Holmes we want to write a biography, but it seems to be very difficult to track down information about him. Do you have information about this sergeant? We hope you are able and willing to be of some help.

Thank you in advance,

Yours truly,  
Freerk Boekelo.

Ian Smith discovered the following information:

Good afternoon Freerk,

Further to your recent email I have found out the following:

James Herbert Holmes:

Service No 1181184. Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve 156 Sqn.

He was an Observer.

Date of death 31st May 1942.

He was born on 26th September 1912 in the Medway registration district of Kent [Catharina Clement later discovered in Gillingham]. In 1939 he was a Fireman at 186 Evelyn Street, Deptford South East London. Mother's maiden name was Fairbrother.

For further information I would suggest that you contact the Medway Archives. I can contact the local press to see if they can help but that may take a few weeks. Please let me know.

Hope the above is of help.

Regards and best wishes,  
Ian H Smith.

Catharina Clement later ascertained:

James Herbert Holmes was in the Merchant Navy in the 1930s and the records confirm he was born at Gillingham on 26/9/1912. He was a second mate ref R100671. 5 foot 9 inches tall, hazel eyes, fair complexion, medium hair colour and had an appendix scar. Served on several ships.

By the beginning of December 2020, Freerk Boekelo had tracked down Holmes' descendants in New Zealand, allowing him to piece together the final pieces of the story.

On 13 October 2021, he wrote:

I am pleased to let you know that I my (Dutch) concept about sgt/observer James Herbert Holmes is ready to published.

The (final) English translation of the final story will be translated next week. As soon as possible I will send you the final story. Meantime I like to attend you on a webpage <https://omkijkpunt.nl/en/> and <https://omkijkpunt.nl/zwerfkei-als-herinnering-aan-crash-in-linde/> (last page unfortunately only in Dutch, but I guess Google-translate will be of sufficient help).

Best regards,  
Freerk Boekelo.

A new page – *My FOMA Account* – has been added to provide easier navigation for logged in members, and to make it more obvious on how to log out. A link to this page is provided on all the FOMA website pages; it is linked twice on *The Clock Tower* encrypted issue pages.

It is quite amazing to reflect on how much has changed in web design since FOMA started to have a web presence in 2006. In 2006 the smartphone was in its infancy with Blackberrys dominating the market. PDAs with phone apps - or Pocket PCs – were the closest thing to the touchscreen mobile phones of today. The market, or even the idea, for tablet computers did not even exist.

Since the introduction of the iPhone in 2007 and the iPad in 2010, the design of websites has been utterly transformed. Back in 2006 you would normally have viewed a webpage on a desktop computer, and as such there was only a need for one website layout. Now websites can be viewed anywhere in the world and on various screen sizes. Website designs need to account for this need for layout fluidity, as well as for the demand of dynamic user-generated content. The new FOMA website refresh was designed to embrace these changes.

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## *Industry on the Medway: A photographic display at Medway Archives Centre*



The exhibition (pictured above), curated by Ella Alalade and Chris Lilley, opened in the Medway Archives Centre foyer in September 2021 and runs until Saturday 27 November 2021. No appointment is necessary – just drop in during our normal opening hours.

See page 10 for further details on the background to the exhibition.

*Photograph, Amanda Thomas.*

## Medway Archives Centre News

Elsbeth Millar



Hello *Clock Tower* readers!

Medway Archives Centre has now returned fully to our normal service – we returned to normal opening hours in July but kept appointments for all visitors. We are now able to offer a drop-in service for those wishing to consult published material, maps, and photographs. Further details on our current service are available on our webpages, [www.medway.gov.uk/archives](http://www.medway.gov.uk/archives). Please continue to make an appointment in advance if you wish to access original archive material.

### Events and exhibitions

We have a fantastic new exhibition in the foyer area (see pages 7 and 10) which has been curated by Ella Alalade and Chris Lilley, our Digital Archive Assistants under the Kickstart scheme. The exhibition, *Industry on the Medway: a photographic display*, uses photographs from the Local Studies Photographic Collection, which Chris and Ella have been digitising. The exhibition runs until Saturday 27 November and is available to view any time until then during our normal opening hours.

From 7 December until February 2022 we will host Rikard Osterlund's exhibition about Chatham's Victorian portrait photographers. The exhibition looks at the photographers themselves as well as the techniques they used to capture portrait photographs of local people.

On 16 December we will host a book sale (12pm-2pm) followed by two talks from Amanda Thomas, one entitled, *Victorian Diseases* and the other, *From Pagan Merriment to Puritan Misery. The Banning of Christmas in the English Civil Wars*. Further details of the book sale and talks will be circulated later in November.

### Recent material donated to Medway Archives Centre

#### Archives:

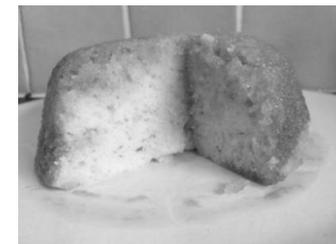
- Minute book from the Men's Adult School, Vicarage Road. Covers part of WW1 period. Includes minutes of meetings and details of classes, plus newspaper cuttings relating to the school (ref DE1301)
- Documents relating to Court Lodge Farm, Cuxton, and Ifield Court Farm, Gravesend. The papers generally cover dates between approx. 1905 and 1930, with some earlier documents. For much of the time the farms were run by a partnership Moore and Miskin (M&M) (ref DE1302)
- Deeds, wills and other legal documentation from CES Fisher, Solicitors, Nelson Rd, Gillingham, which relates to properties and people in Medway. 1816-1996 (ref DE1303)

## Readers' Letters

We welcome letters and emails from readers with their comments. If you have anything you would like to say please email the Editor, Amanda Thomas, Editor, at [editor@foma-lsc.org](mailto:editor@foma-lsc.org), the FOMA Secretary, Chris de Coulon Berthoud at [berthoud@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:berthoud@blueyonder.co.uk), or visit the FOMA website, [www.foma-lsc.org/index.htm](http://www.foma-lsc.org/index.htm) or our Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/fomalsc>

### The Rochester Pudding

In the last issue of *The Clock Tower* (Issue 63, August 2021), we published a recipe for Rochester Pudding, recently uncovered at the Medway Archives Centre (MAC) from *The Chatham News*, published in March 1939.



Photograph, Elaine Gardner.

18 August 2021.

Dear Elaine,

I have just read through *The Clock Tower* (Issue 63) and found the article on the inside back cover about *Rochester Pudding*. Imagine my excitement after seeing the pictures and reading the recipe when I recognized one of my mother's delightful desserts! We used to enjoy it with added golden syrup poured on top but referred to it, slightly inaccurately, as treacle pudding.

I am certain that my mother learned the recipe from her mother (Ellen 'Nell' Foreman 1893-1995), in which case its provenance should go back in time well before 1939. In fact, from a quick check on *Wikipedia*, Lyle's Golden Syrup was first canned and sold in 1885!

I cannot cast any light on how it came by the name *Rochester Pudding*. My maternal grandparents lived in Strood, bypassing Rochester and moving to Chatham during the 1920s. Thank you for a wonderful reminder and I hope Peggotty's or Café Nucleus are persuaded to revive this dish.

Regards,  
Michael (Jennings).

### Sgt James Herbert Holmes 156 Sqdn RAF

A year ago, the Medway Archives received an email from Freerk Boekelo in the Netherlands regarding the crash in World War Two of a Vickers Wellington bomber on May 31, 1942. Holmes was on board and he and the other crew members are buried at the Public Cemetery at Vorden in Holland. It was a similar correspondence to that which we had first had with Henk van der Linden and the subsequent unravelling of the story of the First World War Live Bait Squadron. Catharina Clement at MAC began to help track down more information, and also enlisted the help of Ian Smith, Chairman of the Medway Branch of the Kent Family History Society.

5 November 2020

Sgt James Herbert Holmes, 156 Sqdn RAF

Good evening,

My name is Freerk Boekelo (62) from Linde, Vorden, The Netherlands. I write this email

## A Poem for Christmas

Janet King



*I was born in the workhouse ! (All Saints Hospital) on Elizabeth Ward, and spent the first twenty years of my life living and working in Chatham. I became familiar with the high street as I worked at the west end and lived at the east end. I still live in Medway and am interested in its history, an interest kindled by one particular teacher at school.*

### Smells of Yesteryear

I remember the smell of boiling clothes  
coming from the Burco,  
Mixed with the smell coming from the stove, of boiling meat  
Both vying to be camouflaged by the smell of polish.  
The smell of Mansion polish had a definite smell.  
But I much preferred the smell of lavender.  
The whiff of ironing with its damp cloth  
outwitted by the whiff of scorched linen - threatening to go up in flames  
Infused the air.

Outside yellow fog invaded our nostrils, while, on the bus, the smell of wet raincoats  
warming in the sun  
Wasn't to be out done by the gas works where you took your bad chest;  
the tarry vapours eased the congestion clogging your tubes.  
The smell of tar continued in the home.  
Coal tar soap added perfume to the freshly laid tar we played with in the road.

Shops had their own particular smells.  
Sweet shops emitted a sickly-sweet air, one mixing with it a bad-housekeeping smell.  
I remember the seed and corn merchant smelling vaguely similar to the hardware store.  
Whilst the saddler smelling of hides also made bags and purses for you to purchase.

Christmas had a variety of scents.  
Pine cones on which we painted their tips;  
The Christmas tree, a small fir, smelt of a pine forest;  
Satsumas and oranges gave a tang to the air;  
Brazil, walnut and hazelnuts each had their own unique smell  
And crackers, when pulled, give off a puff of smelly air.  
We consumed all sorts of drinks: alcoholic smells most enticing as only alcohol can.  
Cigars and pipes - smoked with relish - gave us a celebratory start to this smelly season of  
good will.

Have a stinkingly stonking Merry Christmas!

- Records relating to Captain Thomas Baker (1793-1871), Captain of East India Company ships, later a farmer, JP for Kent/Rochester (ref DE11136 add)
- Deeds for a property in Gillingham, 9 and 9A Nelson Road, 1868-1987. (Transferred from Shropshire Archives) (ref DE1307)

### Publications:

- Dan Gardner, *Walking Wainscott*. Dan has also deposited some photographs into our Coronavirus (Covid-19) Community Archive [https://www.medway.gov.uk/info/200372/coronavirus/1121/medway\\_coronavirus\\_covid-19\\_community\\_archive](https://www.medway.gov.uk/info/200372/coronavirus/1121/medway_coronavirus_covid-19_community_archive)
- A collection of books dating from the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, including works by James Phippen and William Lambarde, donated in memory of Simon George McCandlish
- A collection of Anne Pratt books [kindly donated following the death of Barbara Marchant, see page 5].

The material is currently uncatalogued, but please let us know if you are interested in learning more about the material or wish to visit MAC to use any of it.

### New Online Research Guides

The popular BBC series *A House Through Time* has led to more visitors keen to discover the story of their property and its occupants. We now have a useful guide on our home page called *Research house history at Medway Archives*. We also have a research guide on researching nonconformist history (see also pages 18-20 and 24-28) and will also soon have guides on researching industrial history and using the newspaper collections at MAC. The guides can be accessed via our homepage [www.medway.gov.uk/archives](http://www.medway.gov.uk/archives).

### Staffing

We were very sorry to see Chris and Ella leave on 19 October. They had been with us for six months (the length of employment on the Kickstart scheme) and had done fantastic work on listing and digitising sections of the Local Studies Photographic Collection - and creating a brilliant foyer exhibition whilst they were doing that - and on transferring our digital records currently held only on *removable media* (things like CDs, DVDs, external hard drives). As Medway Archives Centre has been digitising material for a long time, and since the *Medway Ancestors* project in 2005, we have a large collection of digital records.

It is important that we proactively look after these and have workflows in place for bringing new digital records (such as digital photographs) into the collections. This proactive approach to managing digital records is called Digital Preservation and the ultimate aim is to ensure that digital records remain accessible and usable over time. In the six months Chris and Ella were here they logged and backed up over 50,000 records previously held on CDs and other removable media, ensuring other copies of these records exist in case of any disk failures. We are hoping to get another two Kickstart placement employees in the new year to continue this work and to help with creating collection-level catalogue records.

I am also very pleased that we will soon be welcoming Adele Martin-Bowtell to the Medway Archives Centre as our new Librarian. Adele has previously worked for Medway Libraries as a children's librarian and is coming to us from the library service at UCA Rochester.

## Industry on the Medway: A photographic display at Medway Archives Centre

Helen Worthy

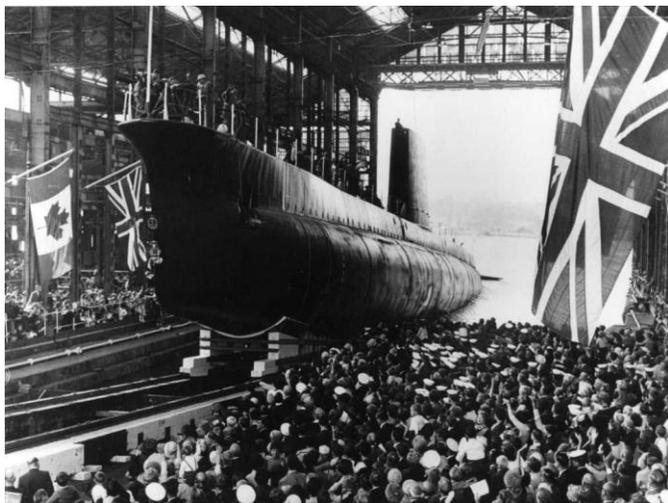


Our current exhibition has been curated by Ella Alalade and Chris Lilley, Digital Archive Assistants at Medway Archives Centre under the UK Government's Kickstart Scheme. Their roles have included digital preservation work - ensuring that the digital records that we receive into the collections at Medway Archives Centre are safeguarded - as well as digitisation of the Local Studies Photographic Collection. Our exhibition is the result of this second workstream.

The River Medway has a rich history of manufacturing industries along its banks. Amongst the many images digitised by Ella and Chris are photographs of brickmaking and cement-making, of engineering and industrial machinery, and of ships, planes, and barges. Some of these images have been selected for the exhibition, but these are a small proportion of our collections, and there are thousands more available online or to view in person. Here Chris and Ella tell us a little more about themselves and choose some of their favourite photographs which did not make it into the exhibition.

### Ella Alalade

Since starting this role and apprenticeship, I have learnt more about how far Medway's history goes back. Digitising photographs from Rochester and the Chatham Dockyard has taught me about the important contributions made toward national history. Aside from that, I enjoyed researching on shipbuilding and submarine-building, and helping with making retrievals.



*Launching of HMS  
Okanagon at Chatham  
Dockyard 1966  
CHA/AN/DYD/SHP/O/9*

## The 1<sup>d</sup> History Lesson

Michael Jennings

*Michael Jennings trained as a Dockyard apprentice but is now a retired consulting engineer. Born in Chatham, he has lived in the Medway Towns all his life. In addition to his engineering qualifications, he has an Open University degree in politics and economics. Local history and genealogy have been a passion for over 50 years. In researching his own family tree he has discovered many cousins who are no longer 'lost'! He is currently a volunteer Steward and Event Host leader at Rochester Cathedral and a member of the Association of Men of Kent and Kentish Men.*



*Following on from his recollections of pre and post decimal coins in the May issue of The Clock Tower, Issue 62, FOMA member Michael Jennings delves deeper into the history of the old penny.*



It is probably fair to suggest that the pre-decimal coinage was far more attractive than the smaller, lighter decimal coins introduced in 1971. But the old coins were not just a means of buying and selling or artifacts for numismatists to collect! Each coin was a history lesson! The penny minted in 1948 (pictured) is a good example.

First, the obverse, or *head* depicts the monarch, in this case, King George VI. The lettering is heavily circumscribed Latin text which reads: GEORGIVS VI D:G:BR:OMN:REX F:D:IND:IMP. In full: GEORGIVS VI DEI GRATIA BRITANNIARUM OMNIUM REX FIDEI DEFENSOR INDIAE IMPERATOR (George the Sixth, by the Grace of God, King of all the Britains, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India).

The use of Latin tells the student of history that the country which produced this coin is a long-established monarchy with roots that go back to Roman times. In combination with other coins there are six monarchs named George, eight each named Edward or Henry, three called Richard, and four named William, two each named Charles and James, not forgetting two called Mary and of course, Queen Elizabeth I and II. Truly a long dynasty without including monarchs whose name occurred only once (Stephen, John, Anne, Victoria).

The monarch is king of ALL the Britains, which implies Empire, a fact underscored by the title Emperor of India. He is king by the Grace of God, the Defender of the Faith which tells us that the Kingdom has an Established Church supported by the monarch (allied to the Latin script, historically the preferred language of the Catholic Church from which the Church of England devolved).

The reverse shows text written in English, the language used now around the world, arguably because the British Empire was so large that truly the sun never set on it! The Empire, of course, preceded today's Commonwealth, a voluntary association of 54 independent and equal countries.

The date relates to the Christian calendar, reinforcing the connection to the Church and that Britain has an Established Church that is Christian. However, the picture on the reverse shows a seated Britannia armed with a trident and a shield. This is clearly indicative of a British Empire based on sea power the Royal Navy being the instrument that not only defended Britain but projected its power around the world, and the Merchant Navy again, serving worldwide trade. The lighthouse is also significant in this respect showing that the nation is aware of the perils of the sea and seeks to protect its seafarers.

Meanwhile, attempts were being made to help survivors emerge from their shock and grief. In January 1952, eight of the ten boys who had escaped serious injury were taken on a ten-day break to Orchard Leaze, a Civil Service Clerical Association guest house on Hayling Island. They visited HMS *Victory* at Portsmouth and were given coach tours of Hampshire. At the end of May, fifteen survivors were weekend guests of the City of London Sea Scouts on their ship, *England* which was moored near the Tower. In August of the same year, sixteen boys, most of whom had been among the injured, spent a week in Margate, financed by the Royal Marines Association and the Mayor's Fund of Margate Council. They stayed at Honiton House School which was empty of boarders during the summer holidays. The cadets swam, visited Dreamland, attended cinemas and variety shows and were given coach trips to view the illuminations on Margate and Ramsgate sea fronts.

By the time of the first anniversary of the accident, there were suggestions that a youth club should be set up as a memorial to the boys. On the day itself, pedestrians passing the site of the tragedy noticed a glass jar containing a small posy of flowers with a message attached. It read: "There is no youth club needed to remind us how much we lost on December 4 1951. From a mother without her little son."

The local newspapers marked the anniversary of the appalling tragedy every ten years, relating the events of 4 December 1951 and enabling the survivors to tell their stories. In December 1981, Dorothy Dunster, John Samson's conductress on that fateful evening talked about her own indelible memories. A few days before the fiftieth anniversary, the late Prince Phillip unveiled a memorial plaque close to the site of the accident, and as illustrated above. Despite the passage of time, the memory of the events of that dark December evening has lingered in the folk memory of the Medway Towns and probably always will.

#### IN MEMORY OF

Anthony Aindow, Colin Batty, James Blomeley, John Burdett, Brian Butler, Arthur Calvert, David Charles, Raymond Cross, James Cunningham, Allan Evans, Peter Eyre, John Lee, Rodney McBride, Garth Mossop, Laurence Murphy, Richard Ongley, Albert Rose, James Scott, James Shepherd, William Stone, John Thorndycroft, David Tickner, James Trigg and Keith Walker.



*Photograph, Elaine Gardner (November 2021).*

#### Notes

\*Images are from Brian Joyce's personal collection, originally printed in the *Daily Herald*, *Daily Mirror*, *Yorkshire Post*, *Manchester Evening News*, and *Birmingham Daily Gazette*.

Two brief British Pathé films of the funerals can be viewed online:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RLg0Q7LIjK0>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WdeSgwqZaSk>

Further images can be found on the inside front and back covers of this issue.



*The spinning room at Chatham Dockyard 1902 CHA/AN/DYD/WRK1/5*



*Women working at the Ropery in Chatham Dockyard c.1900 CHA/AN/DYD/WRK/4*

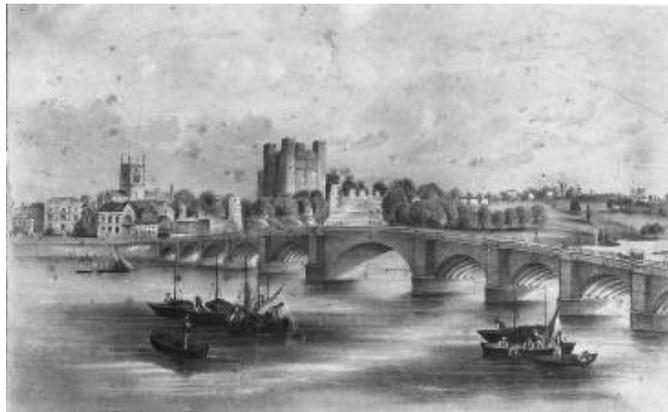
*For more information on women who worked at Chatham Dockyard, see Hazel Thorn's article on page 29.*

#### Chris Lilley

I've really been enjoying digitising our photographic collection, we have a lot of great pictures, and going through them can feel like a journey through time. I've always had an interest in technology and history, so it's been interesting learning and practising how to use computers to preserve these snapshots of the past for the enjoyment of generations to come. The pictures I've chosen are of barges on the River Medway, not only a pillar of industry for the time, but also rich in culture and sharing deep bonds with those on the River Thames, so much so that a canal system was constructed to connect the two rivers, allowing barges to sail from one river to the other without having to sail around the Hoo Peninsula.



*Barges and boats sail the river Medway by Rochester bridge in the early 19th century, artist unknown, LSP000199*



*Barges gather beneath Rochester bridge, overlooked by Rochester castle and cathedral, artist unknown LSP000204*

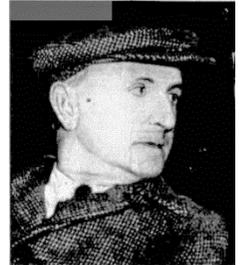


*Bargemen flock the river Medway in their barges by Rochester bridge, with Rochester castle and cathedral as a gorgeous background beneath a surging sky, Rochester bridge 1830, drawn by Geo. Sheperd & engraved by H. Adlard, LSP000350*

John Samson's barrister established a new point in his favour. Cadet Alan Brazier testified that for reasons of smartness, some of his fellows tended to pull their tunics over their white waist belts, which, the barrister implied, would have made them less visible, had they done so, on the ill-lit Dock Road that gloomy evening. However, this point was minimised by the prosecuting counsel, who got Samson to admit that he COULD have switched his headlights on that night. Samson added that he had thought it "unnecessary", an expression picked up and repeated by newspaper headline writers the next day. Samson also admitted that there had been little oncoming traffic which would have been dazzled if he had used his lights.

The jury of nine men and three women found the tearful busman guilty of dangerous driving but recommended leniency. The judge accepted this, and instead of receiving a possible prison sentence, Samson was fined £20 and banned from driving for three years. The driver had taken his savings with him to London and paid the fine there and then. However, the ban would have been more problematic for the fifty-seven-year-old bus driver.

Samson avoided the crowds waiting outside the Old Bailey by leaving through a side door with his solicitor. He then went to a small café nearby, where he expressed to journalists his deep sympathy for the bereaved families and his gratitude to the jury, who had taken his mental strain and sleeplessness into account when recommending leniency. The Transport and General Workers' Union, who had paid for his defence and had supported him throughout, issued a prepared statement on his behalf:



"I shall never forget the memory of that night when all those poor lives were lost, and it will always be with me. Members of the public have been very decent to me and I have received 1,500 letters from all parts of the country. All this has helped me considerably. I just now want to get back to work and to renew my life."

Like many of his fellow bus workers, John Samson (pictured\*) lived in Luton; his home was in Albany Road, where he resided with his wife. He appears to have continued to live in the then tight-knit Luton community for most of the next twenty years. It is unclear whether he returned to driving duties after his ban expired. Samson died in 1972.

In the immediate aftermath of the accident, a public inquiry had been promised by John Maclay, the Minister of Transport in Churchill's government. However, he told the House of Commons in February 1952 that this would not happen after all, arguing that it would serve no useful purpose; it was likely that it would merely cover the same ground as Samson's trial. There was outrage expressed at this by Arthur Bottomley, the Labour MP for Rochester and Chatham and other parliamentarians. Large protest meetings were held in the Medway Towns and eventually the Government capitulated.

The Committee of Inquiry issued its report in July 1952 and made several recommendations. The major one was that drivers should use dipped headlights on badly lit roads and that this recommendation should be included in a rewritten *Highway Code*. The report said, "There can be little doubt that the accident would not have happened if the driver had used his vehicle lights in addition to sidelights". The Committee also recommended that organised marchers should carry a white warning light at the front of the column and a red one at the rear. In fact, in the wake of the Dock Road tragedy, the Admiralty had already ordered this stipulation. Other recommendations included more spending on badly lit roads, with central government subsidising lighting authorities if necessary, the installation of *cats' eyes* on more roads and better briefing by youth organisations and schools organising the movement of groups of children on public roads. Bishop Chavasse had hoped that some good would come out of this awful tragedy and it looked as if his prayers had been answered.

the twenty-four boys. John Samson left the court in tears. As he did so, an unnamed mother screamed: "My son, my son, he killed my only son. You took my only son. My God, I'll never forgive you for this, I won't!"

Meanwhile, the mayors of the three towns had opened a fund for the boys' funeral expenses, and donations flowed in from all over the country. Three of the boys who were Roman Catholic were buried on Monday 10 December after a service at the Church of Our Lady in Gillingham. A fourth, Anthony Aindow, was also given a private funeral. The other twenty boys were buried on Wednesday 12 December after a joint service at Rochester Cathedral. Their coffins were arranged in three rows in front of the High Altar, each covered with flowers and a Union Jack and guarded by white-gloved Royal Marines with their rifles reversed.



*Illustrated London News.*

The Cathedral was packed with more than two thousand mourners, including the families of the dead, representatives of the government, armed services and council members and officials. Dozens of ambulance staff stood by to treat mourners who might be overcome. The funeral service, which was relayed by loudspeaker to crowds outside, was conducted by the Dean of Rochester, the Reverend Thomas Cricks, assisted by Anglican and Non-Conformist clergy. The lesson was taken from St Mark's Gospel – *Suffer Little Children to Come unto Me*. In his sermon, the Bishop of Rochester, Dr CM Chavasse, reminded the congregation that twenty-four children were killed on the roads every ten days: "The slaughter of the innocents," as he called it. This, he also said, went by almost unnoticed, but the Dock Road tragedy had moved the conscience of the nation. Perhaps the issue of road safety would now become a priority. Then, as Royal Marine musicians played music by Elgar and Handel, the coffins were taken from the Cathedral and carefully placed on flat-backed naval lorries. One hundred and sixty Royal Marines acted as bearers, some drawn from the few remaining at Melville Barracks and others from Royal Naval ships anchored at the Dockyard; many had been brought in from Portsmouth and elsewhere.

The cortege drove slowly through the main streets of the Medway Towns, escorted by naval police on motorcycles. The five-mile route from Rochester Cathedral to Grange Road Cemetery in Gillingham was lined by silent crowds. In the cemetery itself, more than a hundred sailors formed a guard of honour on the path to the naval enclosure. Two of the boys were interred privately and the rest of the coffins were buried in a row of small graves. Bus crews and some of the surviving cadets were waiting at the gravesides. Buglers sounded the *Last Post* as the coffins were lowered into the graves whilst simultaneously, muffled bells could be heard pealing from Rochester Cathedral.

Despite the verdict of Accidental Death at the inquest, John Samson still faced charges of dangerous driving. Because the Kent Assizes were not due to meet in Maidstone until March, the Central Criminal Court in London agreed to hear the case against the busman on Monday 21 January 1952. The packed Old Bailey heard much of the same evidence given to the inquest jury the previous month, with Dorothy Dunster, Lieutenant Carter and others repeating their testimony.

## Reflections on Local Studies: From Rochester upon Medway Studies Centre (RUMSC) to Medway Archives Centre (MAC) in 26 years.

Norma Crowe

*In July, Norma retired from her role as Local Studies Librarian at the Medway Archives Centre, and as reported in the August issue (number 63) of The Clock Tower. Here she relates the details of her fascinating career.*



*Norma Crowe pictured on 7 July 2021 with FOMA Chairman, Elaine Gardner. The FOMA Committee gathered at MAC to say goodbye to Norma and here Elaine presents her with a bouquet and Honorary FOMA Life Membership. Photograph by Rob Flood.*

My library career began in Oxford's Radcliffe Science Library in September 1979. Two years later I went to Newcastle Polytechnic to obtain a Post Graduate Diploma in Librarianship. I then chose to work in public libraries and had posts in children's services in London and Southampton.

Meeting my future husband, Stephen led to a move to Kent and work at Erith College of Technology as site librarian for A Level and B TEC courses. I took a 3-year career break when our two daughters were small. The time at home with the family was special but I began to consider a return to work in 1993. It wasn't easy; I felt a loss of confidence and skills. The introduction of computers to the workplace had been happening whilst I was at home, and working practices were really changing. So instead of applying for professional jobs I returned to Erith College of Technology as a library assistant where I was able to adjust to the working environment and to using computers in an interesting but non-professional post.

In March 1995 I spotted an advertisement in the Library Association Record for the post of Heritage Officer at RUMSC. Kate Woollacott was the Manager of the Centre at the time, and she was kind enough to explain to me what was meant by Heritage Officer. It sounded fascinating, so even though I had no local knowledge and more in hope than expectation I applied for the post. I was truly amazed when it was offered to me! I began work at the Centre in May 1995, embarking on a journey of discovery which lasted for 26 years; the longest and the best part of my working life.

There have been many changes over the years, afforded by the arrival of computers and the formation of the Medway Unitary Authority in 1998. Here are a few of the major ones:

- The Centre was created in 1993, combining services offered by Kent County Council and Rochester upon Medway City Council. It was a difficult balancing act!
- In 1995 RUMSC had a Centre Manager, an Archivist, two part time Local Studies Librarians, a senior archives assistant, an archives assistant, a local studies assistant and a receptionist.
- The receptionist/secretary answered the phone and typed our letters. Meeting notes, letters and presentations were written out long hand by staff and were typed up by the secretary.
- There was a clear and somewhat unhelpful distinction between the roles and responsibilities of archive and local studies staff.
- Our visitors and regular users were abundant. There were lots of people researching their family history and many others using the Centre's resources to look at aspects of local history
- Indexes were created by staff and volunteers. Many of these were handwritten. A fine example is the Census name indexes created in the 1980s - 1990s.
- We had no computers. Library catalogues and other indexes were on microfiche.
- Exhibitions were created by photographing or photocopying images and typing captions. Cut and paste was our usual method of production. Display items were mounted on polyboard, a method which I was sad to relinquish, and which I note has now been re-introduced to good effect.
- Until 1998 when Medway Council came into being the Studies Centre did not hold much material about Gillingham because it was a Borough Council holding its own records and was a separate library group within the Kent County Libraries structure.
- A number of staff members came and went in the following years including the second Local Studies Librarian. There were many gaps between appointments, in fact over my 26 years I spent almost eight years as the only Local Studies Librarian in post.

When the Unitary Authority came into being the Centre was re-named Medway Archives and Local Studies Centre (MALSC). Kate Woollacott changed jobs and my mentor, Senior Archives Assistant, Pat Salter retired, which was a blow. But the loss was softened by that great character Derek Moore who took her place. I enjoyed working with colleagues on various outreach projects, especially Sandra Fowler with whom I developed the Victorian and Edwardian history detectives programme which we delivered to primary schools in the Gillingham area in the late 1990s.

Over the years one of the major difficulties has been storage. A lot of my time was spent moving reserve stocks and past exhibitions from one place to another - from old Rochester Library to old Chatham Library, to the Castle View Store, to the pallet store in the Civic



*Illustrated London News.*

The jury heard testimony from Driver Samson, Dorothy Dunster, Lieutenant Carter, some of the surviving cadets and various other witnesses. The main points at issue were the state of the street lighting in Dock Road, the organisation of the cadets' march, specifically the absence of warning lights at the rear of the column, and most important, Samson's reliance on side lights and the speed at which he had been driving his bus.

All witnesses agreed that the lighting in Dock Road was always inadequate. Even Lieutenant Carter admitted, "I would not describe it as good when compared with the rest of Gillingham." In fact, it transpired that as a post-war austerity measure, one of the two bulbs fitted inside each lamp had been removed. The witnesses also agreed that the single bulb in the lamp adjacent to the accident was out. Lieutenant Carter and his lay preacher friend George Dixon both claimed that the bus had approached them at between 40 and 50 miles per hour, but this was disputed by Samson. In his evidence, the driver said forcefully, "I have never seen a driver go down there at 40 miles per hour, never. As for a bus going down there at 40 miles per hour, well, I should think the driver would be mad."

Samson and other witnesses asserted that buses hardly ever used headlights on Dock Road for fear of dazzling oncoming drivers: "This is because there are so many cyclists and Dockyard employees leaving at the same time and getting all over the road. You have to watch them and go very slowly." Joseph Creighton, the driver who had driven his bus towards Pembroke Gate immediately before Samson, made the same point. Busmen using headlights angered many oncoming motorists, "and they would try to make [bus] drivers going down switch off their headlights," presumably by flashing their own lights at them. However, Lieutenant Carter argued that the main rush from the Dockyard had been an hour or so before the accident, and that as 6pm approached, there was little if any oncoming traffic. Samson accepted this. Lieutenant Carter was asked whether there were standing orders to those in charge of marching columns to display warning lights at night. He replied in the negative, adding, "If there had been orders to carry them with cadets, I would certainly have carried them out."

Summing up, the Coroner asserted that in his view, driving with sidelights only, as was the common practice, did not amount to criminal negligence on Samson's part. Furthermore, Lieutenant Carter had not broken any regulation by not carrying a warning light at the rear of the column. On the question of the speed of the bus, Coroner Harris believed that the estimates of all witnesses, marchers and bus passengers alike, were unreliable. Carter and his friend George Dixon assessed Samson's speed, "... in what I call a moment of alarm, when they saw this enormous thing - and these buses are enormous - right on top of them. I am going to say that it is very dangerous to accept the estimate of Lieutenant Carter, who said he based it on a time and distance basis." The same applied to George Dixon's testimony. There was therefore no evidence that Samson was driving at an excessive speed.

The jury was out for eighty minutes. They then returned a verdict of Accidental Death on

immediately four Royal Naval ambulances with three naval doctors hastened to the scene. Emergency lighting was also quickly dispatched to the ill-lit spot. A sailor phoned Chatham Police Station about five minutes after the crash, and patrol cars sped to the incident. Civil ambulances soon arrived and those among the dead and injured who had not already been rushed to the nearby Naval Hospital were driven at high speed to Chatham's All Saints and St Bartholomew's Hospitals.

Rescuers were met with a scene of carnage. Naval personnel wept as they picked their way through the casualties. A petty officer was quoted as saying, "As soon as I heard of the accident I rushed to help. I saw some pretty grim things in many places throughout the war, but this was too much for me. I had to come away." The Dean of Rochester and several naval and hospital chaplains arrived to try to comfort the injured.

The ten boys who were shocked but uninjured were told by Lieutenant Carter to report back to the cadet room at Melville Barracks and get their names recorded. They were then dismissed and returned home to relate their stories to horrified parents. The parents of the casualties needed to be informed as soon as possible, which was difficult at a time when relatively few homes had telephones installed. When the names, addresses and whereabouts of the cadets and the condition they were in could be established, police were dispatched to knock on doors. SOS messages were flashed onto cinema screens to try to reach parents out for the evening. Distraught relatives soon began to arrive at the area's police stations and hospitals, and an attempt was made to create order out of chaos by forming a centralised information point at Gillingham Police Station. As with telephones, car ownership was relatively low. Public spirited motorists volunteered to shuttle frantic parents between their homes, police stations and hospitals.

Once the dead and injured boys had been removed, police isolated, investigated and photographed the scene and some of the debris was cleared away (pictured). After a brief inspection had established that GKE 69 was safe to drive, it was taken to Luton Depot for thorough scrutiny.

This was the country's worst-ever fatal road accident and was the front-page story in national and regional newspapers the next day. By the time Wednesday's evening editions were published, it had been verified that twenty-three boys between the ages of nine and thirteen had been killed outright or had died in hospital. John Burdett, of Beatty Avenue in Gillingham died a few days later, bringing the final total to twenty-four. At least a further eighteen had been injured, some seriously.

The mayors of the three towns visited grieving parents the next day, and hundreds of messages of sympathy arrived, including those from the King, the Prime Minister, the local MPs and the Mayor of Rochdale, whose football team Gillingham FC were due to play the following Saturday. An inquest was held on Friday 14 December at the Royal Naval Hospital, in the same room as that held for the victims of the HMS *Truculent* disaster the previous year. Driver Samson had his eyes tested a few days before which confirmed that his eyesight was good. Meanwhile GKE 69 had been thoroughly inspected for defects that might have contributed to the accident, but none had been found.

The East Kent Coroner, WJ Harris reminded the members of the jury of their main responsibility: they needed to determine whether what happened in Dock Road on the evening of 4 December was an accident. If not, was there sufficient criminal negligence to justify a charge of manslaughter against Samson? He added that possible offences of careless or dangerous driving were not matters of concern for an inquest jury. They should be left to the police.

Centre annexe, to the Dockyard, to the basement of Riverside 1, to Gillingham and finally to Medway Archives Centre!

Another problem has been the level of funding. Making the case for adequate budgets to purchase, maintain and preserve local studies stock often felt like a futile task. We could have achieved so much more had the funds been available. Archivist Stephen Dixon was a master in obtaining external funding for archives projects, and FOMA has helped tremendously in this. I am hugely impressed by all that Elspeth has managed to do in the short time that she has been in post.

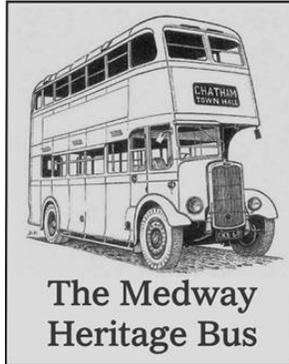
The arrival of public access computers really began to alter things from c. 1999 onwards. Folk did still come to the Centre, but increasingly this was rendered unnecessary by the number of records which could be accessed online. Gradually, (or even quite quickly) family history research was becoming a stay-at-home, solitary endeavour. BUT we had a group of retired folk (mainly chaps) who came to MALSC on a regular basis, meeting together to discuss old times, look at records, identify photos and help with exhibitions and events. With hindsight they were our first volunteers, although in the early days we had no formal arrangement with them. They just liked being at the Studies Centre! They shared their local knowledge and helped with indexing. MALSC was a centre of activity and comradeship, and my days were greatly enriched by these folk, the majority of whom are no longer with us. In particular I think of Reuben Childs, Jack Hooper, Mick De Caville, Roy Murrant, Tessa Towner and Vince Rogers. Bruce Aubry worked doggedly at creating a name index of the 1890 census, and Doris Herlihy helped with sorting and indexing the ephemera files, work which continues to this day thanks to volunteer and staff input. Bob Ratcliffe was a regular visitor, helping with many exhibitions and talks, as did Jean Lear. Members of the Short Brothers Commemoration Society figure largely too. Looking back it is the interaction with my colleagues and with our users and supporters that has made my time in the job so enjoyable. Sharing their interest and tapping into their life experiences is a privilege.

Together we created a host of exhibitions, outreach activities including Local and Family History Open Days, social events, talks, school visits and training courses and even a dramatized reading. With the members of Short Brothers Commemoration Society we collected material and reminiscences of working for this iconic firm when it was based in the Medway Towns. And in recent times (until Covid put a stop to it) we were able to hold a series of enjoyable reminiscence meetings in the foyer at MAC.

Much of the pleasure of my job stemmed from working with wonderful colleagues. They are so numerous, but I must give particular mention to those who helped me in the early years: Kate Woollacott, Pat Salter, Janet Knight and Sandra Fowler. Also to Derek Moore and Cindy O'Halloran. And it goes without saying that the current MAC team is great. There is such a wealth of talent there. We supported each other through some dark and difficult times and I am immensely grateful to all my colleagues for sharing their expertise and their enthusiasm. It was a privilege to work as Heritage Officer and Local Studies Librarian for so long and to help to promote Medway's fascinating history to folk near and far.

## The Friends of Chatham Traction Bringing the Past Alive!

In February 2019 (*The Clock Tower*, Issue 53) Richard Bourne, the Chairman of the Friends of Chatham Traction described how the group was formed in 2007 with the aim to 'to create an educational and community resource around a former Chatham Traction bus.' Things have moved on considerably since that time with the restoration of the Medway Heritage Bus (MHB), the GKE 68, and as documented in previous issues of *The Clock Tower*.



A similar bus  
in service  
circa 1950.  
Photograph  
John H.  
Meredith.

The Friends have aroused some considerable interest over the restoration of the bus and this September were invited by the Medway Archives Centre (MAC) to collaborate in an exhibition charting its progress. On 4 September 2021, and as illustrated on the front and back covers, Richard Bourne and members of the Friends, including Vice Chairman, Wendy Mesher, were on hand in the MAC foyer to answer questions about the restoration of the bus and the tremendous work the group is undertaking in the interests of Medway's history.

Richard Bourne writes:

The opportunity to display what we were about in promoting the Medway Heritage Bus was most worthwhile, and our message would have been spread to people who may not normally have come across us. We're very grateful for the opportunity.



broken. Samson did not turn on his headlights, relying on the bus's side lights as usual. He later said, "I don't think it was too difficult to see, but it was very dark. I could see far enough, as I thought, to see anything looming up. When I got to that dark patch, I could not see anything."

The cadets had just reached that pitch black spot. Lieutenant Carter was at the back of the column and was standing on the edge of the pavement when he spotted Samson's bus heading down the hill. He later testified that he had shouted, "Keep well in, boys, there's a bus coming!" He then turned away from the bus but, "I heard a terrific noise. I can't quite sum up what the noise sounded like, but it might have been the screeching of brakes or something like that. I turned my head and I saw the bus coming straight towards me."

Twelve-year-old Lance Corporal Alan Brazier was one of the NCOs supervising the new recruits at the rear of the column. Like Lieutenant Carter, he was on the pavement when he heard the bus approaching. He looked round and saw how close it was. He told the inquest a few days later, "I saw it coming and I thought it was too late for it to miss us. I shouted, 'Look out!' I pulled Jarrett on to the pavement when I shouted. Three other boys jumped on to the pavement and they and Jarrett weren't injured." Thanks to Alan Brazier's swift and brave response, for which he was commended by the Coroner, only one of his eight-strong platoon was killed.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Carter was knocked to the ground where he lay stunned for a while. He was unsure whether he had been hit a glancing blow by the bus or had been struck by the boys falling around him. Driver Samson knew something had happened, but as yet, he did not know what. In his statement to the police that night he said:

"I suddenly felt as if the bus had run over a lot of loose stones or something. The steering wheel wobbled in my hand ... I applied my brakes immediately and stopped within a few yards. I thought I had hit a car or something which had been on the road without lights. I jumped out of the cab to see what had happened. There was a lot of screaming and shouting and I saw I had run into a squad of cadet boys.

I had been using my two wing lights when driving down the road. I very seldom drive down there with my headlights on. I was keeping well in on the side of the road and could see the kerb. The rear rank of the cadets was not carrying a light and, with their dark blue uniform, it was not possible to see them."

Dorothy Dunster (pictured)\*, Samson's conductress was standing on the platform at the rear of the bus. She had also felt a series of bumps. She said:

"I was not afraid but just began to wonder what had happened. Sammy did not know at first what he had gone over until afterwards. I felt his brakes go on and the bus stopped. I got out. I called out to Sammy, 'What's happened?' He replied, 'I don't know.' He did not sound alarmed. He did not realise that anything had happened. He got out of his cabin and said, 'What have we hit?'

We walked up the road and I saw the youngsters lying on the floor. Poor Sammy said, 'What have I done?' That was all he said. Then he just stared. He was stunned and dazed. He could not believe it. I went to try and help the kids, but I couldn't do anything. I have no nursing experience".



The expertise in dealing with unexpected civil emergencies gained during the war had not been lost. A sentry at the gates of the Naval Barracks raised the alarm, and almost

A streetlight was out at the Naval Barracks end and both drivers broke with custom, switching on their headlights to cope with the unexpected darkness. Cox was just able to make out a column of boys, half on and half off the pavement ahead of him and was able to drive round them.

Chatham's historical link with the Royal Marines had virtually ended by this time; most had been withdrawn from the area about eighteen months earlier. Since then, the local cadets had been absorbed into the Portsmouth Group Command. The final connexion between the Royal Marines and the town of Chatham would be broken in 1960 when staff from the Pay and Records Office left. Thus, the fifty-two cadets assembled in a very subdued Melville Barracks a little earlier on that dark December evening.

Lieutenant Clarence Murrayfield Carter, a thirty-nine-year-old who had risen through the ranks had been the cadets' adjutant for the previous fourteen months. His job that evening was to escort the boys to a boxing tournament at the Naval Barracks. Carter had done this march twice before at night and many times in daylight. He was accompanied by George Dixon, a lay reader at the Dockyard Church. Lieutenant Carter divided the fifty-two boys into three platoons for the march and the leading two platoons were organised to march abreast in threes. They consisted of established cadets wearing uniforms consisting of blue berets, blue battledress with white lanyards and waist belts, and black boots. Carter himself wore a khaki mackintosh over his uniform. The third platoon brought up the rear and was made up of new recruits in civilian clothes supervised by two NCOs of a similar age. They would march in single file.

Carter briefed the boys on the parade ground of Melville Barracks, and then the column moved off down Dock Road. The Lieutenant later said he had instructed the cadets to keep as far to the left as possible. He kept an eye on things by walking up and down the column as they marched and at one point touched two boys on the arm, a signal for them to move back to the rear as they had got out of step. When the marchers reached the Dockyard's Main Gate, Carter ordered them to halt. He gave them a pep talk before they descended the hill towards the Naval Barracks. "I told them they must keep close up, in close formation, especially the recruits behind," he later said.

They then set off in a fifteen-foot-long column down the most dangerous part of their march. The uniformed boys in the two leading platoons were partly on the pavement and partly in the road itself. Carter later estimated that the boys in the road were no more than six feet from the kerb. There were no regulations stipulating that the column should display red lights, flags or any other so-called *warning devices* to alert drivers. The use of such safety measures was left to the discretion of those in charge, and Carter later asserted that if regulations had existed, he would have carried them out.

Meanwhile, GKE 69, the next bus on the Burma Way to Pembroke Gate route after that of Joseph Creighton, was approaching; this was its third journey on the route that evening. It was driven by fifty-seven-year-old John Samson, a former tram conductor who had been driving buses for ten years. His conductress that evening was Dorothy Dunster, who later recalled, "At 5.53pm on Tuesday we left the Town Hall with eight or ten passengers aboard. We reached the top of the hill and stopped at the stop. There was nobody there. I rang him off and on we went. He carried on down the hill the same as we have always done." Later, the passengers also testified that the journey appeared to be normal, with nothing unusual and the bus travelling at the speed they were used to. John Samson testified that he was in top gear and proceeding at about 15 to 20 miles per hour.

As he descended the hill, he noticed it was "pretty dark with black patches." He also noticed that there was a particularly dark stretch of road ahead, presumably where the streetlight was

That's Wendy Mesher, our Vice-Chair, in the photo below. Wendy leads on the social interaction side of things, whilst I do nuts and bolts. Wendy's wearing a uniform tunic of a type worn by bus crews in some areas but isn't strictly correct for Chatham Traction. She hopes to achieve that in the future, though. The ticket machine and leather cash bag are correct!

Donations of any amount towards the final push to complete GKE 68's restoration would be most welcome!

Cheques: please pay to: "The Friends of Chatham Traction" or "FoCT"; send to: Mike Hodges, 8 Pier Avenue, Whitstable, Kent CT5 2HQ.

On-line: bank sort code 40-52-40; account number 00032126 (Please also email michaelrhodges011@gmail.com with "GKE 68 Final Appeal" as the subject so we can acknowledge your participation.)

Gift Aid increases the value of your donation by 25%. If you are not already registered with us for Gift Aid please consider doing so. A form of declaration is available from our Secretary Mike Hodges by email or post.

The Friends of Chatham Traction are always pleased to hear from anyone with an interest in Medway and its transport from whatever era. The organisation's nominal span of interest is from the trams (which began running in 1902) to 1970, when the last Chatham Traction vehicle was finally withdrawn (GKE 65, which had been converted to a lorry/breakdown vehicle in 1954). Further information from Richard Bourne (Chairman); 31 Usher Park Road, Haxby, York YO32 3RX; 01904 766375, or 07771 831653. Email Richard@thebournes.me.uk Or see the website at [www.chathamtraction.org.uk](http://www.chathamtraction.org.uk).



*The Friends of Chatham Traction at MAC: Richard Bourne (Chairman) and Wendy Mesher (Vice Chairman). Photograph by Rob Flood.*

## Nonconformity and the Medway Towns

Catharina Clement



In 2005 Catharina completed a BA in history at Canterbury Christchurch University, and in 2013 a PhD in local history entitled Political and Religious Reactions in the Medway Towns of Rochester and Chatham during the English Revolution, 1640-1660. She has been involved in various local history groups and projects such as FOMA, CDHS, and the Victoria County History EPE projects. She won the 2009 Friends Historical Society Award resulting in a paper on Medway Quakerism 1655-1918 delivered at the Institute for Historical Research and in 2016 at the Friends Library in London. Since 2014 Catharina has worked on a project for the Trustees of Plume Library and the new book (Dr Thomas Plume, 1630-1704: His life and legacies in Essex, Kent and Cambridge) contains a chapter by her on Plume's Kent legacies. Currently Catharina works for MAC.

A series of recent conferences into dissent during the long eighteenth century held at the Dr William's Library in London has concluded that dissent was not a mere continuation from the English Revolution, but changed and developed throughout the eighteenth century to form distinct patterns in religious dissent unique to that period. The Medway Towns, as a group of four or possibly five emerging towns by the end of the eighteenth century, offers the opportunity of a rare insight into a larger religious community that interacted closely and were strongly dependent on each other.

By 1663 nonconformity was established in three of the local communities and the other two villages (Brompton and Gillingham) were to grow or come into existence during the eighteenth century in close proximity to Chatham Dockyard and the military barracks nearby. The *Compton Census* returns of 1676 give about a 16% level of nonconformity across the Medway Towns. However, the distinct evidence that the statistics for Chatham were rounded to the nearest hundred, casts doubt on the accuracy and reliability of those returns. Strood returns were also remarkably low given the evidence of support for the more radical sects in the town during the late Cromwellian period and prosecution of several from the town immediately after the Restoration. Rochester's statistics also seem somewhat skewed given the congregations arrested in the 1660s, licence granted in 1672 and a sect having its own meeting house around the time of the Restoration. Knowledge of three dissenting groups operating in Rochester after the Restoration and one in Chatham, suggests that the truer figure was nearer 25-30%. The emerging names of membership coming to light from wills, baptism/birth registers, prosecutions, trust deeds, list of sufferings (persecutions), leases, family networks, meeting house licences and parish registers or accounts give a more accurate picture for nonconformity in the Medway Towns. In the eighteenth century no fewer than fifteen different dissenting religious groups, as well as Catholics and Jews, were operating within this large urban area which had a population of circa 8 to 9,000 in 1700.

Whilst the developments of the sects are interesting in their own right, a deeper understanding of religious nonconformity in the Medway Towns is gained by exploring the relationships and interactions between the various groups. Fortunately for us, the eighteenth

## What and Why?

### The Dock Road Tragedy

Brian Joyce



Brian Joyce is the author of several books on the history of the Medway Towns, including *The Chatham Scandal and Dumb Show and Noise*. He is a past President of the Chatham Historical Society and was on the FOMA Committee. Brian was born in Chatham and continues to take a great interest in the history of the Towns. However, he now lives in Tyldesley in Greater Manchester. Since moving to the North West in 2014, he has contributed articles to many journals specialising in the history of his new local area.

On Chatham Dockyard's perimeter wall, heading towards St Mary's Island and just before the St George's Centre roundabout, there is an oval plaque (pictured). It reads:



IN EVERLASTING MEMORY  
OF  
24 ROYAL MARINE VOLUNTEER CADETS  
AGED 9 – 13 YEARS  
WHO TRAGICALLY LOST THEIR LIVES  
IN DOCK ROAD ON  
THE 4<sup>TH</sup> DAY OF DECEMBER 1951  
EVER REMEMBERED BY  
FAMILY, FRIENDS AND THE  
CHATHAM MARINE'S CADET UNIT  
UNVEILED BY HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS THE  
PRNCE PHILLIP DUKE OF EDINBURGH, KG, KT.  
THIS DAY 2<sup>ND</sup> DECEMBER 2001.

*Photograph by the author.*

This year marks the seventieth anniversary of what became known as the Dock Road Tragedy. In the early evening of Tuesday 4 December 1951, a bus ploughed into a marching column of Royal Marine cadets in Dock Road, Gillingham. Twenty-four boys aged between nine and thirteen lost their lives. At that time, it was Britain's worst ever road accident and it remains the greatest peacetime tragedy in the history of the Medway Towns.

Dock Road runs from the Town Hall in the centre of Chatham to the Naval Barracks and the Pembroke Gate of the Royal Naval Dockyard; the Gillingham section of this road begins a little beyond the Dockyard's Main Gate. At that point, Dock Road's approach to the Barracks and Pembroke Gate is downhill, with high walls at each side and for drivers, it is rather like entering a roofless tunnel. In the 1950s, bus drivers descending the hill at night usually relied on their sidelights rather than switching on their headlights to avoid dazzling drivers and cyclists coming towards them. It was an observation made by two drivers who drove down Dock Road shortly before the fatal accident. Joseph Creighton, on the Burma Way to Pembroke Gate bus route, and Reginald Cox, the driver of an Admiralty coach, both noticed that Dock Road was even gloomier than usual that December evening in 1951.

She was no stranger to house moves, renting, not owning in those days. From the age of 11 when the family moved from Deal Barracks to Medway, I have found her at nine different addresses. One of these included a spell as housekeeper to a German couple who lived in an Oast House at Stockbury. At this time her second husband was in South America with the Royal Navy in World War Two, and her three oldest children from this second marriage were in the services. The youngest was my mother, and this was just before she was evacuated to Wales, with the girls from a Sittingbourne school. She had joined Fort Pitt at the beginning of the term, only to be moved to Folkestone and then Sittingbourne.



*Queenie Elizabeth Bennett née Farrow, circa 1918.*

During the First World War, Queenie would not have been unique. Like other women she had to work to support herself and her children. We don't know what she actually did in the Dockyard, but the exhibition display used her image as an example of women who were able to work if they wore trousers.

When Queenie later remarried, she had four more children and my mother, Doris is the last living at 96. My mother also worked in the Dockyard on her return from the evacuation to Wales. She went to the cash office doing subsistence pay for the men who stayed overnight or had meals to buy. Staff were locked into a cage with the money and if the air raid sirens sounded, they would go to the shelters and then return to start all over again. They could be there from 8.30am to 8.00pm and she worked five and a half days a week. She earned £2.12s 6d (about £2.60), which was quite good for those days. At first she was paid her wages in cash, and then she had to have a bank account, quite a big deal then. It was Martins Bank which later became Barclays.

A friend who came with me to the exhibition said, "It was compact, but full of small details that may otherwise have been lost in the mists of time. It was very interesting and indicative of how a woman's inclusive role in the workplace came about. The women who volunteered their services at that time were trailblazers and we should be proud of their local contribution to a global war and defence effort. Surprising that some professional roles preceded suffrage – and not the most obvious ones!"

century is much better equipped with surviving correspondence, journals, diaries, memoirs and obituaries than the preceding century. A clear example of this is the diaries and correspondence of John Newton and his wife Mary, which give a twenty-year window into the spiritual life of Chatham. Newton is quite dismissive of some of the dissenting ministers' preaching talents and highly praises others. The survival of many of the dissenting chapels' registers for this period also allows an insight into the membership, their occupations and mobility across the religious spectrum. As in the English Revolution people did not necessarily stay with one group but experimented or progressed across a range of different religious opinion throughout their lives. Many lay people also started to publish religious tracts, giving their views on the religious movements of the day and accounts of their spiritual journey through life. Eighteenth century England stands out for its religious evangelicalism, particularly in the form of the great Wesleyan Methodist preachers such as the Wesleys, but also Independent Calvinists including George Whitefield and Rowland Hill. Their missionary work was on a national scale, but local ministers and groups were equally prepared to spread the gospel to the outposts of their areas. During the second half of the eighteenth century the Medway Towns had its own evangelical explosion with groups as diverse as Baptists, Independents and Methodists competing for local audiences as well as sending men to the outlying villages and remoter suburbs to stake their claim in that community.

The inward-focused sects of the post-Restoration period blossomed in the eighteenth century. Religious toleration allowed them to show their heads above the parapet and worship openly. With less persecution the groups started to express their beliefs publicly for the first time in fifty years and as the century progressed became bolder. By 1750 it was not uncommon for ministers to refute or counter each other in print, as they had done during the English Revolution. David Zaret considered that the latter period underwent a 'pamphlet war', but this aspect of eighteenth-century religious expression is often overlooked. Early Civil War England heard many charges of antinomianism; considered a heresy. With the proliferation of so many sects in the Medway Towns it is hardly surprising that this was again a common accusation levied at more radical ministers or groups. Certainly, the Medway Towns experienced many charges of this nature throughout the century or so in question; in particular Sabellianism<sup>1</sup> (a popular charge against Presbyterians) and anti-Trinitarianism (a Unitarian tenet). These two related topics led to some lively debates and replies in print, culminating in the pamphlet war of 1817-8 between William Giles, Particular Baptist minister at Clover Street, Chatham, and John Cundill, Unitarian preacher at Hamond Hill, Chatham.

Puritan England did not disappear with the restoration of the monarchy and Anglican Church in 1660 but evolved to produce the Wesley brothers and Methodism in the early eighteenth century. They preferred a back-to-basics style of worship and became popular for their outdoor charismatic style of preaching. Accounts by Abraham Brames, a local Methodist minister, and John Newton demonstrate the breadth of religious opinion that could be experienced outside of Anglican worship in the towns in the mid-eighteenth century: Presbyterians, Particular and General Baptist, Congregational, Moravians, Calvinist and Wesleyan Methodist; to this we should also add the Quakers.

This was the century of evangelism. Revolution in both France and America in the latter quarter of the century saw the known world turned topsy-turvy. Into this new environment emerged more radical groups such as the Unitarians and Swedenborgians both of whom had a local presence. A Muggletonian cluster also existed in Chatham at the turn of the nineteenth century. This was a group started in Kent during the English Revolution of the

1650s, which went underground after the Restoration, but never disappeared.

By the nineteenth century Methodism had started to lose its early focus and simplicity, causing a sense of disillusionment and a backlash with splinter groups such as Bible Christians and Primitive Methodists emerging. Both groups were popular in the Medway Towns. Another sect to emerge from this period of religious disenchantment were the Irvingites or the Catholic Apostolic Church, as it soon became known. Speaking in tongues was one of the main early precepts of this sect. Perhaps its appeal to some members of the local Quaker community, who similarly soon would stand up to speak when moved by the spirit, was not that surprising. A local newspaper reporter attended a meeting in Chatham and felt it had all the elements of theatre rather than worship.

In addition, Joanna Southcott followers could be found on Chatham Hill (later known as the Christian Israelites) in the early nineteenth century, recognizable for their peculiar dress and long hair. This group evolved later to become the Jezreelites, responsible for that famous tower at the top of Chatham Hill. So, what have we missed out that had its roots in the nineteenth century Medway Towns? The Plymouth Brethren, Salvation Army, International Bible Students Association (later Jehovah's Witnesses) and the focus of Brian Joyce's articles in this and the last issues of *The Clock Tower*, *The Peculiar*s (see page 24). Many more have crossed our path in the twentieth century but it is maybe a topic for another day.

#### Note

1. Sabellianism is a type of Christian heresy which propounds that God is a single being and the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three different aspects of Him. The Trinitarian view is that these are rather three distinct *persons* within God.



*The Unitarian Chapel in Chatham, built 1802; with the kind permission of Beryl Payne.*

## *Hidden Dockyard Heroines*

Hazel Thorn



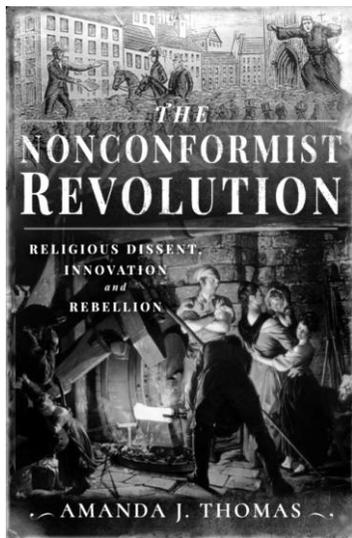
*Hazel was born and has lived in the Medway towns all her life. She spent 30 plus years working in Kent and Medway Libraries and first got into local history working with a blind local history librarian at Springfield. She was one of the AIM group who produced the two volumes of Times of Our Lives recording the lives of the women in Medway, and then Dewponds and Doodlebugs, history of Walderslade for the Kent Arts and Libraries. More recently Hazel helped the late Doris Herlihy with her project on Parkwood. She is on the FPOGA committee and also enjoys photography, crafts, and stamp collecting.*



The exhibition, *Hidden Heroines: the untold stories of the women of the Dockyard* (logo pictured) took place over the summer and closed in October. It was situated at No.1 Smithery, at the Chatham Historic Dockyard and declared open by the Dockyard's first female apprentice, Zandra Bradley, who joined the yard in 1971. The exhibition covered many of the jobs the women did, some with biographies illustrated by certificates and photographs donated by their families, there were also 3D sets and moving projections. An image of the Ropery revealed huge strands of rope coiled into barrels, and in the Colour Loft, Singer sewing machines were a lot more robust than the domestic one my grandmother had. She had told me she was able to buy her machine for 10/- (50p) because she was a war widow - why didn't I ask more questions about that? The exhibition also included a ship's figurehead which stood proudly in an enclosure and a tablet describing the history of these wooden works of art. We saw women masquerading as men working aboard the ships. The film *Carry on Jack* had this in its storyline (as well as the other *ladies* providing services to the men!) There were items in glass cases, uniforms, films and stills covering all manner of work done by women, some replacing the men who went to fight, some in service to the naval staff living on site. There were other interesting facts at lower levels for children covered by moveable portholes and QR codes giving extra film footage and information. Some of the display also included replicas of Dockyard magazines.

I was invited to the launch of this exhibition in Chatham Historical Dockyard as I had a photo (illustrated) of my maternal grandmother Queenie Elizabeth Bennett née Farrow. It was taken, albeit in a studio setting, wearing work clothes, probably in May 1918 as it has a date stamp on the back. She would have been 25 years old, a widow whose husband had died in January 1917 at sea. The photo overleaf was taken just months before her two daughters, Isabel aged 5 and Annie aged 4, died of the Spanish flu within a day of each other, leaving her with just her 3-year-old son, George, who died at sea during World War Two.

*The Nonconformist Revolution* by FOMA's Amanda J Thomas explains how the foundations for the Industrial Revolution were in place from the late Middle Ages when the early development of manufacturing processes and changes in the structure of rural communities began to provide opportunities for economic and social advancement.



Successive waves of Huguenot migrants and the influence of Northern European religious ideology also played an important role in this process. In addition, the Civil Wars provided a catalyst for the dissemination of new ideas and help shape the emergence of a new English Protestantism and divergent dissident sects.

The persecution which followed strengthened the Nonconformist cause, and for the early Quakers it intensified their unity and resilience, qualities which would prove to be invaluable for business. In the years following the Restoration, Nonconformist ideas fuelled enlightened thought creating an environment for enterprise but also a desire for more radical change. Reformers seized on the plight of a working poor alienated by innovation and frustrated by false promises. The vision which was at first the spark for innovation would ignite revolution.

*The Nonconformist Revolution* is available to purchase online and at all good bookshops. Pen & Sword Books, ISBN 978-1473875678.

*The Nonconformist Revolution* has a 5 star rating on Amazon!  
[https://www.amazon.co.uk/Nonconformist-Revolution-Religious-innovation-rebellion/dp/1473875676/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?keywords=the+nonconformist+revolution&qid=1636644875&sr=8-1](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Nonconformist-Revolution-Religious-innovation-rebellion/dp/1473875676/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=the+nonconformist+revolution&qid=1636644875&sr=8-1)

**Amanda will be taking part in the Medway Local Author Fair on Saturday 20 November from 11 am to 3pm at Chatham Library, Community Hub Chatham.**

**Then on Thursday 16 December she will be talking about her new book at the FOMA Christmas event on at the Medway Archives Centre – see page 43 for details.**

## Notes from the Bursey

### Family Archive

Peter Bursey



*Peter grew up in Gillingham and attended Twydall Infant and Junior Schools, followed by the Grammar School when John Hicks was headmaster. Various jobs eventually led him to the Civil Service in Whitehall until he retired in 2007. In 1988 Peter spent five months at Chatham Dockyard on the Gannet project going up to the Public Record Office and the National Maritime Museum archives at Woolwich Arsenal where he discovered the original plans of the Gannet's masts and spars plus an assortment of other useful papers. He now lives in Shaftesbury, Dorset.*

### Part One: 'See the world with the Royal Navy' – William Bursey (1847-1904), Leading Stoker RN, did just that!

William Bursey was one of those young Victorian men who, in around 1864, made a decision to up sticks and explore the world rather than stay in his home town of Ringwood in Hampshire. Not only would he have been stimulated by stories of the Crimean War, but also - no doubt - the sight of awesome new fierce steam trains passing through the town within a hundred yards of where he lived would have made a lasting impression.



Apart from a very brief interlude in 1871-72 he remained in the navy until 1899, although, from 1888, he was a pensioner *ashore* at Chatham Dockyard. During the 1890s he worked as a storeman for Maudslay Sons and Field Ltd, the famous Victorian engineering firm that supplied steam engines to the navy. In 1871, after his first period of enlistment, he went up to London and joined the Metropolitan Police St James' Division where he soon met his future wife Emma Spooner. She had come up from Burnham-on-Crouch and was in service at St Marylebone, however by 1874 William was back in the navy.

*The only known photo of William Bursey, c1899.*

William served on several ships, including the very graceful sloop HMS *Royalist* in the late 1860s; this was on the North American Station. In 1867 Canada was given Dominion status so that it could take full responsibility for its own affairs, and this stimulated trade that had to be protected. In the early 1880s he served on another sloop, HMS *Swift*, on the China Station regularly visiting all the Treaty ports. Again, British trade had to be protected: a short war had broken out between the French and the Chinese in late 1883 - and there was all that tea that the British wanted back home. This was in addition to the opium, cotton, woollens, metals, window-glass, kerosene oil etc. that the Chinese imported from British India and Malaya. Other ships he served on included the *Tyne*, a storeship that served South Africa and the West Indies, also the *Favorite*, a coastguard ship at Queensferry.

The most famous ship William served on was without doubt HMS *Alexandra* during her first commission, 1877-80, as flag ship of the Mediterranean Fleet. Built in Chatham, this was a prestigious vessel: her launch by Alexandra Princess of Wales on 7 April 1875 was also attended by the majority of the Cabinet and over 100 MPs. It was an occasion of national importance, and I expect William Bursey was also there somewhere in the crowd!

The first crew embarked on *Alexandra* in January 1877, including 74 stokers. I expect all the sailors, including my great grandfather William Bursey, were very proud men at that moment. The job of the stokers was to keep the furnaces alight to enable the twelve boilers to create enough steam to power the ship's two Humphrey and Tennant engines. The furnaces faced outwards towards the sides of the ship where the coal bunkers were located. The engines were vertical compound engines and each engine drove a screw propeller. The three masts doubled up as air shafts to provide ventilation and a good uptake of air to the boilers. According to the regulations, the captain had to visit the engine room at least once a day to check that the boilers were being fired up properly. Stokers coming off duty were required to wash themselves properly and put on dry clean clothes before returning to their messes.

The *Alexandra* became the flag ship of the Mediterranean Fleet carrying Admiral Geoffrey Phipps Hornby (1825-1895). The captain was Captain Robert Fitzroy (1839-1896) the son of the Robert Fitzroy who achieved fame as captain of the *Beagle* that took Charles Darwin on his five-year scientific tour of South America between 1831 and 1836. A young midshipman on the *Alexandra* wrote, 'Captain Fitzroy was a man with an eagle eye who had the knack of looking at the deck and telling you what was wrong with the highest mast.'<sup>1</sup> It was no ordinary commission as the continuing turmoil had blown up again over the *Eastern Question* - how to handle the decline and breakup of the Turkish Empire. The most memorable event for the *Alexandra* occurred in January 1878 when the Fleet was ordered to the Dardanelles to counter a Russian army approaching Constantinople. The Turks were reluctant to have the British there, not wanting to provoke the Russians, and the Russians certainly didn't either. Their expansion plans were to be at the expense of British interests. The Fleet sailed up the Dardanelles with orders to protect British life and property in Constantinople but then - embarrassment! The *Alexandra* got stranded on a sandbank in full view of the Turkish guns. Apparently a Turkish Pasha commanding the closest fort decided not to fire on the British (how foolish that would have been!) 'out of humanitarian instincts'. The *Alexandra* had already been cleared for action, but common sense prevailed and negotiations together with the Treaty of Berlin later in the year solved the crisis. William would certainly have seen the Russian troops outside Constantinople threatening to attack the city.

Historians agree that a disillusion with religion caused by the First World War hit attendances in both the Anglican and Nonconformist churches during the post war period. The Peculiar People were affected by this trend and by the time Harry Shipp, a longstanding member of the sect died in 1921, their Upchurch chapel had become the village club. At his request, Mr Shipp's funeral service was held there. The chapel in William Street Rainham passed through various hands, including possibly the Christadelphians, and then, like at Beresford Road, it was converted into a private dwelling.

Essex Peculiar had attended Harry Shipp's funeral in 1921 and were in Gillingham for those of Martha Ann Brading in 1927 and Sapphira Hills the following year. This served to remind Medway Peculiar of the origins of the sect, but the bonds between Essex and Kent were loosening. The older, zealous generations had passed. Essex, the original hub of the Peculiar People, was itself losing chapels and besides, they had new competitors. The Christadelphians have already been mentioned, however, the Seventh Day Adventists and Mormons were also sending missionaries into the Medway and Sittingbourne areas.

The Peculiar People's Chapel in Beresford Road in Gillingham became their last remaining centre of worship in the Medway Towns. In 1956, when the sect changed its name to the less esoteric Union of Evangelical Churches, the Peculiar People slipped into history.

#### Notes

1. Catharina Clement wrote a series of articles about nonconformist conscientious objection in *The Clock Tower* from February 2016 to November 2016, Issues 41 to 44 inclusive. These can be read on the FOMA website at <http://foma-lsc.org/journal.html> Please scroll down to view archived editions.

*To find out more about the subject, please turn to page 18 and Catharina Clement's article, Nonconformity and the Medway Towns. Clock Tower Editor, Amanda Thomas' latest book, The Nonconformist Revolution, also reveals more about the history of nonconformity. Details overleaf.*

Some chose the former and joined up when forced to, others claimed exemption as conscientious objectors. One such was Bert Cable, a milkman. When Betsy tackled him on the divine healing issue, he told her that he and his wife had raised twelve children, 'without a single drop of physic or one visit from a doctor.' Horsnell continued, 'Not that we have anything to say against doctors, but we believe that God Almighty is stronger than the best doctor, and we trust in Him.'

He then asked the small group to share their experiences of divine healing. A woman rose to claim that one of her daughters had lost the use of her legs; prayer and anointing had cured her. Another claimed that a working man had accidentally put his head through a closed window. When the bleeding would not stop, one of the brethren was sent for, and after prayer and the laying on of hands, the bleeding stopped.

Horsnell admitted that God did not necessarily answer their prayers instantly: 'There would be no trial of faith if the answer came immediately, so sometimes it was delayed.' The Elder told Betsy that one of his daughters had recently had severe earache which had caused her to scream with pain. Three prayer sessions were required before God relieved her.

There had been several schisms among the Peculiarists over the years, often over the divine healing issue when members' faith was tested. Overall, the position had softened. Betsy Trotwood ascertained from Horsnell that the position among the Gillingham community was that the local Peculiarists would still rely on God to intervene in most cases but ultimately they could use their discretion to summon medical help if desperate: 'Absolute freedom is allowed to every member of the community and all act according to the dictates of their own conscience.' The Peculiarists did not confine their belief in the primacy of conscience to the treatment of illness. In 1898, Horsnell obtained exemption from the compulsory vaccination of his children against smallpox on religious grounds.

This conflict between faith and science continued to be reported in the local press. In 1896, James Gaskin, a middle-aged horse keeper from Upchurch was hit by stomach cramps and vomiting. He was a member of the Peculiar People and rejected medical aid, relying on his wife, the local Elders and the faith of the community to help him. His condition continued to deteriorate, and after ten days, his son sent for a doctor, who diagnosed a strangulated hernia. He recommended hospitalisation and surgery but Gaskin rejected the advice. Gangrene set in and the horse keeper died. At his inquest, the Coroner observed that if this had been the case of a child, the death would have been manslaughter, but that as an adult, Gaskin was responsible for his own actions.

Despite the unfavourable publicity gained by this and other cases nationally, the small sect survived and could even be said to have prospered. Within a few years of this case, Walter Horsnell led his small Gillingham flock into a purpose-built chapel in Beresford Road – now a private house - where the Peculiarists continued to worship for many years. Meanwhile, the sect had spread from Upchurch to Rainham. At first, services were held in a variety of venues in the village which included the Orchard Street School, but in January 1901, the Peculiarists built their own small chapel on open land in the Wakeley Road area. Once new streets were laid out a few years later, the chapel found itself in William Street.

In March 1916, he applied for conscientious objector status at the Gillingham Military Tribunal. As reported in the *Chatham Observer*, he '... urged that as a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, he felt that war and bloodshed were the work of Satan. He could not take the military oath. Human life was sacred, and he could not take it.' His request was denied.



*William and Emma's son William (1876-1961) in 1888 as a Greenwich schoolboy.*

William married Emma Spooner in 1874 and they had five children, three of whom survived. Their first son (pictured), also William (1876-1961), thrived and had a long career in the navy. My grandfather (middle picture below), Charles Bursey (1881-1970), did not meet his own father until William had returned from China in 1884. William and Emma lived in Skinner Street (1876), Britton Street (1878), Saxton Street (1881), Jeffery Street (1888), Victoria Street (1891), and King Street (1899). Emma died in 1899 and, later that year, William married a widow, Mary Ann Satterley. In 1904, William died at home at 85 King Street from a stroke and was buried in Gillingham Cemetery.



*The three children of William and Emma Bursey: William, Charles, and May.*

My full biography of William Bursey has been deposited in the Medway Archives Centre.

#### Notes

1. *A Naval Scrapbook*, Reginald H Bacon, 1924.

## The Peculiars

Brian Joyce



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### Part Two

As has been seen in the previous part (see *The Clock Tower*, Issue 63, August 2021), the sect known as The Peculiars originated in Essex, and its influence spread to East London. However, as Betsy Trotwood found (see below), its third centre was in the Medway Towns area.

In the late 1860s, George Horsnell was appointed bailiff in a farm at Upchurch. He was born in Faulkbourne near Witham in Essex, and as a member of the Peculiar People, brought his religion with him. Within a short time, several labouring and brickmaking families in the village had joined the sect. There is also evidence from the census returns of 1881 that several Essex people had moved to Upchurch and it is probable that some of them did so specifically to join the small religious community established by Horsnell.

George Horsnell died in 1872 and his wife three years later, but the community he had created survived him. By the mid-1870s, two brickfield labourers had emerged as the Elders of the Upchurch Peculiars, James Coppin, an Essex man and Samuel Smith, who had been born just over the border in Suffolk. At this stage, the small group worshipped in a disused wheelwright's shop, but they eventually built a modest chapel in Horsham Lane near the parish church.

Brother Samuel Smith aroused public interest in the Peculiar People in 1876 when he was badly hurt by a fall of earth at Green's brickfield at Ham Green. His employer offered to call a doctor or transport him to St Bartholomew's Hospital in Rochester, but Smith refused all such aid. Instead, prayers were said, Coppin organised a laying on of hands ceremony and holy oil was applied to Smith's body. He soon recovered, thereby appearing to prove that the Peculiars' faith healing really worked.

However, this assumption was undermined a few years later, following the death of Henry Sears, the thirteen-month-old child of a family of Peculiars living at Otterham Quay. On 13 September 1880, the child became sick with diarrhoea. His mother Alice Sears later testified, 'I gave him nothing but laid my hands on him in the name of the Lord.' This appeared to work, and Henry showed signs of recovery – 'The Lord delivered him.' Nevertheless, her son relapsed a few days later. Alice sent for Brother Samuel Smith, who anointed him with salad oil and led prayers. To try to stop the diarrhoea, Henry was fed with cornflour and brandy, but to no avail. Brother Coppin was then called, and there was further anointing, laying on of hands and prayer. The cornflour was augmented by beef tea, port wine, arrow root and milk. Despite all this, little Henry died on 23 September.

Alice Sears later explained why she rejected the idea of summoning medical aid: 'I believe in the Lord, and that He answers the prayer of faith and that He would have raised the child up if it had been His will to do so.' She pointed out that the food and drink given to her son was to nourish his body and not intended as a medicine.

An inquest was held at the Crown Inn at Upchurch. Dr Penfold of Rainham had performed a post-mortem on the toddler and concluded that Henry had died of enteritis, which he defined as exhaustion brought about by inflammation of the mucus membrane of the bowels. He claimed that had a doctor been called and a poultice applied, Henry would probably have survived. The Coroner declared that adults could exercise their own consciences to refuse medical aid, but a child could not. The law said that adults with a responsibility for a child under fourteen were obliged to seek medical aid when needed. Religious scruples did not relieve the adult of that legal obligation.

John Sears, the child's father had been away during much of his son's illness. Nevertheless, the inquest jury committed him to trial for manslaughter. He was found guilty at Maidstone Assizes in January 1881 but the judge, bearing in mind Sears' good character, ignorance of the law and genuinely held religious beliefs, gave him a suspended sentence.

The case of little Henry Sears was not unique; there were similar cases in London and Essex of parents refusing medical aid for their children. If the Peculiar People were known outside their own small world at all, it was for this. Nevertheless, the sect continued to gain converts and spread beyond the Upchurch area. As early as 1886, the *Chatham Observer* reported that the Peculiar People held a meeting in the Gospel Hall in Skinner Street, Gillingham, followed by a march over the Great Lines which ended with an open-air meeting at the bottom.

At this stage, the Peculiars do not appear to have had a meeting place of their own in the town. When the curious journalist Betsy Trotwood visited one of their services, it was in a private house at 70 Nelson Road. The Elder presiding over this meeting was Walter Horsnell, the son of the late George Horsnell of Upchurch. It will be remembered that the Peculiars prided themselves for having no paid officials. Accordingly, in the census of 1901, Horsnell was described as a General Labourer.

As the twentieth century progressed, the number of cases involving Peculiars denying medical treatment to their children dwindled. However, their belief in the primacy of individual conscience was put to the test during the First World War. Like the Quakers,<sup>1</sup> the Peculiars denounced war as an abomination and contrary to Christian teaching. When conscription was introduced in 1916, many members faced a real choice: obey the law of the land, or refuse to fight for conscientious reasons?