Elstree & Borehamwood Museum Friends Newsletter September 2014 Issue Number 6



TIME TO CELEBRATE OUR FILM HERITAGE!

On Thursday evening, June 12th, the museum was taken over by Elstree Screen Heritage for the installation of their temporary exhibition celebrating 100 years of film making in Borehamwood.

In January 1914, Neptune Studios began operating on the 7 acre site now occupied by the

BBC. The studios were the finest in the land at the time with laboratories, a projection theatre, dressing rooms with running water and a 70' long 'dark' stage (the largest in Europe). In the absence of natural light, the sets were lit with arc lamps powered by a gas fuelled generator. The studios made many films



The 'Elstree Screen Heritage' exhibition

including patriotic productions supporting the war effort but as the conflict continued the problems became insurmountable and they closed in 1917. However, the seed had been sown and in the following years Borehamwood was to grow into the 'British Hollywood'.

The exhibition celebrates that pioneering entry into the film industry and shows a timeline through the decades to the present day and, of course, looks forward to the future.

One wall features the top twenty films made in the town and many of our younger visitors could not believe that such blockbusting films as *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Star Wars* and *The Shining* were made here.

There is also the back end of a London Transport bus as a graphic reminder that the 1963 film Summer Holiday (Cliff Richard's most successful film) and the spin off films from the TV series On the Buses were produced here. The exhibition is well worth a visit and runs until 13th September.

On Saturday, October 4th, a new exhibition to mark 75 years of Hillside School will begin. The museum will be open as usual in the interim.

As you are aware storage of our exhibits, not currently on display, has been a problem in recent months. They were stored at Safestore in Stirling Way until early June and have now been relocated to a recently refurbished facility in Balmoral Drive.

On Sunday, 8th June, the museum volunteers

were invited to tea (or Pimms No.1) and cakes at Schopwick Place in Elstree, the home of Ann and Norman Shuker. The weather was perfect and we spent a very enjoyable afternoon walking in the beautiful gardens and talking to old and new members. Many thanks to Ann and Norman.

The ever popular Families Day was held on Saturday 28th June in Meadow Park. The event and the heavens both opened at midday but despite the disappointing weather there was a good attendance. Our stall with Lynda Marshall, Matt Caro and Alan Robins in attendance was well received and hopefully we have made some new friends.

As part of its commitment to involve all members of the community in the area's rich, local history, Elstree & Borehamwood Museum launches a reminiscence group for the over-60s in October. Meeting monthly from 10.30-11.30am, at 96 Shenley Road, Going Down The Village, will give participants an opportunity to share memories and stories over a cup of tea. The first meeting in October will focus on Shops and Shopping in the village using photographs from the Museum's collection. A range of topics will follow in subsequent months. Admission is free and there is no need to book. Further details can be found in the Town Crier and on the museum's website: www.ebw-museum.co.uk. For queries on this or any of our projects please phone the museum on 01442 454888.

A Walk back in Time

The annual history walk led by Dave Armitage was held on Sunday, 29th June. The weather was just about perfect and after a short shower remained warm and dry throughout the 2 hours. A good turnout of 28 walkers met at 2pm at The Grove Medical Centre near the entrance to Borehamwood shopping Park for the guided tour through some of our local history.

Before WW2 there were Nissen Huts housing troops from the Royal Ordinance Corps on the site now occupied by the Kinetic Business Centre. The troops did some of their training in the studios.

Walking down Theobold Street towards the station we passed the 1871 shopping parade once known as Robinson's Folly, The Wellington, The Old Crown and The New Crown (now sadly awaiting its fate). Robinson (the footbridge over the railway was named after him) was ridiculed at the time for his 'follies' but nearly 150 years on his shops are still here and in constant use.

The Old Crown dates back to at least 1769 although rebuilt in the late 1800's. It is now the commercial premises of J.A. Michell, makers of high quality record turntables. If you have a spare £2,000-£4000 you could buy one!

Before the New Crown was built in 1906 an animal pound with a pond stood close to the site. Stray farm animals would be left there for collection by their owners. A large cottage in its own grounds was also here, although we have no details and it remains something of a mystery - any information appreciated.

Walking across Allum Lane we reassembled at the Deacons Hill, Allum Lane junction. The entrance to the railway station which opened in 1868 was originally on this side of the bridge and to the right were the gates of the Elstree Brick & Tile Company.



The entrance to Elstree Station and brickfields

Deacons Hill Road was originally a track driven through from Barnet Lane to enable George Monck Gibbs, who lived in Deacons Hill House (now the site of Deacons Heights), to reach the station by pony and trap. He did not have long to enjoy his shortcut however, for in 1881 he died in a riding accident. Herts County Council purchased the road in 1898, called it New Road and it became Deacons Hill Road in the 1920's.

Moving up Deacons Hill Road we were impressed by Hollywood Court on the left, a block of 30 stylish flats built in 1935 and virtually unchanged since.

On the opposite side of Deacons Hill Road there once stood a large house, called The Grange, built for Frank May. He was the chief cashier to the Bank of England from 1873 to 1893. As such his signature appears on the £5 note of that era. In 1893 he was asked to resign following serious irregularities. He allowed a considerable overdraft with no authority and involved himself in serious difficulties by speculating on the stock exchange. The huge sum of £250,000 was set aside by the Bank to meet all possible contingencies. Mr. May vanished from the scene and lived in 'kindly



1892 Frank May £5 note

seclusion' in the obscure village of Batcombe in the Mendip Hills until his death in 1897.

If you had a £5 note at that time you were very lucky indeed. The

wages of the servants employed in houses such as The Grange are interesting. A kitchen maid would earn £15, a cook £20, a housekeeper in charge of all the female staff £50 and at the top of the tree a butler £60. These figures are per annum! - £5 was a lot of money.

In the 1930's and 40's Deacons Hill was a wealthy area of Elstree and many people associated with the film industry lived there. The most famous of these was the prolific film producer Herbert Wilcox and the actress Anna Neagle. They formed a personal and professional relationship in the early 30's and helped to make Borehamwood the British Hollywood. They lived in a house at the top of Deacons Hill Road called Hilltop, and from there in 1936 they watched as The British & Dominions Imperial Studios that Wilcox had built in 1929, went up in flames - it was never rebuilt. Anna starred in the stage play Emma in 1944/5 and changed the name of her house to Hartfield after the childhood home of Emma in the book of the same name by Jane Austin. Anna was married to Herbert from 1943 until his death in 1977.

Continuing up Deacons Hill Road, we turned left into Hartfield Avenue to stop at the rear of Lakeside

Court, in Hartfield Road. This was the site of the brickfields briefly mentioned in the last newsletter. They ran successfully from 1865 until their closure in 1915, but what happened to them afterwards?

Here local historian Fred Hart describes the scene:

'The deserted clay pits quickly filled with water and the whole place became overgrown with vegetation which included many beautiful wild flowers, bulrushes and little white water plants. It was not long before nature took possession; for there were many snakes, frogs and wild fowl, and where there are water fowl, there must be fish'.

It became a secluded play area for many years and was used for swimming, fishing and nature studies. The suitably edited photo below, shows local lads enjoying a swim in the late 1940's. The aqueduct, used for draining water from Woodcock Hill to prevent the pits from flooding, can be clearly seen.



Retracing our steps up Deacons Hill Road, we turned right at The Rise (it does too) and wound our way via Bishops Avenue, Lodge Avenue and Knowl Way to emerge near the top of Allum Lane opposite Nicholl Farm.

Nicholl Farm dates from c1500 on land owned by Lord Aldenham. The farm was tenanted out to Joseph Still in 1908. Later the tenancy went to Douglas Dalton who was famous for his sausages. The pigsty, close to the edge of the road, was a delight to many children throughout the 1950's. A housing development is now underway on the site.

I magine in the early 30's there being only one house, Woodlands, between Nicholl Farm and Barham House on the north side, and four houses between here and the station on the south side. All of these houses were large, with servants, maids and nannies.

Heading back towards Borehamwood the Villa Capri stood on the left opposite Tauber Close.

This was the home of the international operatic star/actor Richard Tauber and his actress wife Diane Napier from 1936-40. Richard made the films Blossom Time and Hearts Desire at British International Studios in 1934/5. He met his future wife, Diane (16 years his junior) on the set of Blossom Time. There are no photos of this house - can anyone help?

Further down on the same side was Hillside (see photo below) previously known as Clockhouse and Barham House. William Putland built the adjacent Coach House (still standing as 2 semi detached houses) in 1789. Barham House was, in the 1820's, the home of Samuel Baker, the grandfather of Richard Burton the Victorian explorer. Young Richard spent a good deal of his time at the house. He even believed he was born there although he was in fact born in Torquay, Devon, in 1821 and christened at St Nicholas church, Elstree.



Richard Burton became an Oxford scholar, explorer, archaeologist, diplomat, writer, translator, linguist (he could speak 25 languages in later years), and expert swordsman. He was always looking for new experiences to escape from what he termed 'The slavery of civilisation'. He had the looks to match his adventurous spirit, being 6' tall and athletically built with fierce, mustachioed facial features. His imposing prize fighter looks were made even more impressive when, on one of his many travels, a Somali spear penetrated his left cheek and exited his right removing his back teeth en route. He was left with a permanent, jagged scar.

Heavily disguised he made journeys to the Holy cities of Mecca and Medina, fully aware that detection would mean certain death. His accounts of those travels astounded Victorian society, sold like Harry Potter and made him famous. He spent many months trying to find the source of the Nile (the Holy Grail for explorers of the time) but despite braving hostile tribes and tropical diseases was unsuccessful.

In his later years he translated the Indian Kama Sutra into English (anonymously) and then produced a 16 volume, no holds barred, translation of the Arabian Nights (somewhat more adult than Sinbad the Sailor would suggest) which he published under his own name. When he died in Trieste in 1890 his wife burned all his diaries and manuscripts and 40 years of work, written by this extraordinary man, went up in smoke.

Sir Richard Burton (he was knighted in 1886) must surely be the most interesting and colourful of the prominent people we can associate with our area.

That concluded a most interesting history walk. It was very well received by all who took part and some were able to add their own knowledge, which is always welcome. Many thanks to all - it was most enjoyable.

Museum Outreach News

The Museum's Community Outreach Service has gone from strength to strength with ten bookings from local groups and schools in May and June.

In May the residents of Hill House in Elstree enjoyed a presentation by David Armitage on the history of Elstree village.

At Cowley Hill School, two classes of 7 year olds listened to a short presentation on 'The Changing Face of Borehamwood' followed by an object handling session, delivered by Vania, David and Melody. A visit to the Museum and the Library followed soon after and the children were given an opportunity to explore the museum, follow the Discovery Trail, choose books to read in the Children's Library and study local maps in the Local History Library. Thanks to Lynda Marshall for her invaluable assistance.

A class from Mervfield School also decided to visit the Museum in May, as a follow-up to the museum's presentation which had taken place at the school in February.

St Teresa's School responded to the publicity regarding The 100 Years of Film Exhibition and a Year 3 class came along to view the exhibition. The Discovery Trail, created specifically for the exhibition by Vania, Community Learning Officer, was well received: 'Really interesting and well presented. Pitched at the right level for children.'

In May and June students from Yavneh College visited the Museum to carry out research as part of a project to celebrate 75 Years of Hillside School. This culminated in an interview with former Hillside pupils, spanning five decades from 1939, when the school opened, to the 1970s. The research material and a DVD, 'Hillside Memories' will form part of the commemorative display planned for September in Yavneh College.



An exhibition to mark 75 years of Hillside School will open on Saturday, October 4th, followed on Tuesday, 13th January 2015, by a commemoration of World War 1. Photos or memorabilia from Hillside School or from WW1, that could be incorporated into those exhibitions, would be most welcome. For the WW1 exhibition we are looking in particular, for photos and articles that are associated with Borehamwood and Elstree. Please contact the museum (details below) if you can help.

Happy 95th Birthday Shenley VVI

In 1919 Shenley was a thriving community with a population of 1700 people. Most people worked for the local Industry including shop workers and blacksmiths and many were employed in domestic service.

The WI movement was founded in Canada in 1897 and the Shenley branch opened in late February 1919 with their first president Mrs Richardson who was a prominent figure in the village employing her own butler and residing at the Rectory. She would arrange the tea for members and then leave the meeting informing them of news but would not always conform to the official WI HQ rules. However she organised the library and a picture library in the rectory. By 1924 there were 14 members.

The WI today is still thriving and hopefully will grow from



the present 49 members as a result of new housing developments in the village. The birthday party was enjoyed by all who attended including members from London Colney, Aldenham and Boreham Wood, Various talks and poems were given including a contribution by Mrs. Mckay (see photo left) who joined in 1947 and is still an active

member. There was a lovely buffet and a guiz on 'Know your Biscuits'. Shenley WI meet on 1st Thursday of the month at the village hall at 7.30pm.



Shenley WI on an outing to the Ovaltine Factory in 1943

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Open 12pm - 6pm Tues, Wed & Thurs 10am-3pm Sat







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