



# LEIGHWAY

The newsletter of the Leigh Society  
An eye to the future with an ear to the past in the heart of Leigh

## FRANK BENTLEY

As most of you will by now know, our President, Frank Bentley, passed away in September aged 88.

Those of us who worked with Frank at the Society, met him at our meetings or were involved with the Sea Scouts will know what a wonderful gentleman Frank was. A jovial soul who couldn't do enough for anyone.

From the Society's point of view we have lost a dear friend who steered us through many stormy meetings with his expertise in planning and development, gave talks at the Heritage Centre for the younger visitors and who can ever forget his one man band at the Comicals? He led from the front and was always up front, honest and adorable.

We will all miss him terribly and our heartfelt sympathy goes to Kathleen and the family.

Frank Bentley – a son of Leigh

## FROM THE EDITOR

Happy new year everyone, I hope, like me, you did not spend your Christmas in bed with the flu. What with that and the snow I can't say I'm sorry to see the end of 2010.

Having said that it was a very good year again for the Society, several new members and some very successful outings.

We look forward to some very interesting talks this year which are listed in Dear Diary.

We also have some major issues coming up in terms of planning, with the application for the Hospice and the introduction of the Localism Bill. There is a short, and I hope not too boring, resume of what the Bill contains in terms of how it might affect communities like Leigh.

So lets start the New Year off with a bang with our first Leighway of the new decade. Happy reading everyone.

Remember the next Leighway will be in the Spring so if you feel the urge please submit your articles to me by 28 February at [Carole.mulroney@btinternet.com](mailto:Carole.mulroney@btinternet.com) or via the Heritage Centre, 13A High Street, Leigh-on-Sea SS9 2EN.

Carole

## ISLE OF WIGHT 25-29 APRIL

There is still some availability for the Isle of Wight holiday. If you are interested please contact Ann Price on 710324 or at 15 Henry Drive, Leigh On Sea, SS9 3QQ

## NOT SO 'SWEET' FANNY ADAMS FOLLOW UP

The article in the last Leighway sparked interest from member Terry Pond who knows the area where Fanny came from very well. Tinkers Hole is due north of Creeksea between Endway and the road to Althorne. And to prove it Terry has kindly sent in the following recent photograph.



## THE TOTTENHAM OUTRAGE FOLLOW UP



On 23 January 2011, the 102<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the Outrage, the local church held a memorial service and unveiled a commemorative plaque to Ralph Joscelyne at the Mission Hall in Mitchley Road outside where Ralph died.

## LUNCH ON THE WILTON

Many of us recently enjoyed a fantastic lunch on the Wilton and we would like to express our thanks to all the Wilton contingent who made it such a great meal, to all the helpers who set up the hall and especially to Pat Gaskell whose idea it was and who organized it all.

## DEAR DIARY

All our talks are held at Wesley Hall, Elm Road Methodist Church at 8 p.m entry charge of £1 for members and £2 for visitors. Our events and others for your enjoyment are as follows –

16 March – Rayleigh through the Looking Glass – Mike Davis  
19 March – Quiz at the Den at 7.30pm  
13 April – AGM – Memories of the Essex Coast DVD  
11 May – Paglesham Natives – Mr & Mrs Roberts  
12-20 June - Leigh Art Trail  
18-19 June – Leigh Folk Festival  
31 July Fishing Festival  
17-18 September – Old Leigh Regatta  
12 October – Thames Sailing Barges A Past and A Future – David Gibson  
9 November – Southend Old and New – Simon Deacon  
25 November – Christmas Lights Switch on

## THE QUEST FOR THE WHITE WEED

It all started when one of the members of our Leigh U3A (University of the Third Age) Local History Group brought pictures of her late husband's boat with her to one of our meetings. She talked about his years spent fishing out of Leigh and mentioned that in winter he fished for "white weed". "What's that?" most of us asked. So I had to find out more about it.

When I "googled" it I came up with lots of sites dedicated to the sale of cannabis seeds and found that it is also a farming pest in Australia, better known to us as Hoary Cress. Then I was given a copy of an article from the Journal of Marine Biology from 1956 describing the biology of "Sertularia Argentea". This article said that a fishery had developed at that time for certain hydroids collectively called white weed. The main centre of the industry was the Thames Estuary, where the hydroids grew in extensive beds, on a bottom of sand and shells on which the weed could be fished commercially by boats equipped with simple iron rakes. The article concludes that the exploitation of white weed was unlikely to be detrimental to fisheries and that many fishermen believed that the constant harrowing of the sea bed by rakes was beneficial and of assistance to many fish during feeding. In fact, as it was not a plant, but the skeletal remains of colonies of marine hydrozoans, it was more acceptable to customs officials when exported from this country than if it had been a type of vegetable seaweed.

I later struck lucky in finding an article in a previous edition of "Leighway" by Frank Bentley. In this article he concluded by supposing that a little of what was a boom industry in the 1950's might linger on. So at the recent Fishing Festival I asked one of

the fishermen if he knew anyone who still fished for the stuff. He replied that he had only last year raked it up on a regular basis and taken it to be processed in Hadleigh. When I asked him what it was used for he told me it was sent abroad and used in aquariums and by florists. He had also been told it was used to line coffins in Japan.

In the meantime my friend in the U3A had arranged for me to meet with a retired white weed fisherman. She also supplied me with a photo of her brother in law making metal rakes for white weed fishing in his back yard in Rectory Road, Leigh in the 1950's. When I later met with the fisherman he told me that

indeed her brother in law had been one of the best hand welders supplying the fishermen with the 6 feet to 8 feet long rakes. He wasn't the very best though; another man had that honour, because the trick was to cut a narrow piece of metal in a zigzag across the middle lengthways to make the teeth of the rakes.

I found out that the white weed industry was a truly local one and that although there were processing stations at Shoeburyness and Southend it was for years carried out in the back yards and gardens of the fishing families. They not only fashioned the enormous rakes which were "shot" over the stern of the boat and trawled along the sandbanks, but the weed was then taken back home, thoroughly washed to free it from sand and mud, put through old washing mangles and then taken to home workers to be bunched. The bunches had to be made of regular lengths and tied, they were then collected and left on racks to dry before being soaked in glycerine and dyed green or red.

The fisherman could remember white weed being processed in Pleasant Road in Southend before the war by an old character who refused to divulge the secrets of his processing methods. He collected it by hand from mud banks off the Isle of Grain. He said that originally it was just brought in with the catch and sold to anyone who wanted it. However by the 1950's it was fairly easy to get an analysis done of types of harmless dyes to use so it was fished and processed at home. It was then that the commercial possibilities emerged and it was boom time in the 50's and 60's with boats queuing to shoot their rakes. In the winter when the weather was bad this was the ideal catch and some boats could accommodate four rakes on the back. All sorts of craft turned up to try their hand and barbed wire was trailed overboard and even a lawnmower was tried. You had to know where to find it as colonies could completely disappear, but then it would be found the next year where it hadn't been before. There was plenty to be found if you knew what to look for and it commanded high prices too, so anyone with a small craft was trying to fish for it.

The obvious question is what was it all used for and where did it go? I was told it had been sent to the USA, Canada, New Zealand and even Belgium. Someone said they had seen a restaurant decked with it in the states and it was used for bonsai type trees in model making for film sets and model railways as well as for aquariums and in flower arranging. Demand dropped by the 1980's and so did the price and I don't know what the reason for this was. However I found a website in Canada using it for little floral arrangements to give as gifts and in 2008 it was sold as the "Neptune Plant" a miracle "air weed" and falsely claimed to keep flies away.

Some readers may remember when it was displayed in a corner shop now a café in the Old Town. The fact that it is still processed locally means that it is still worth fishing for, but the boom years are over. If anyone has any further information about white weed fishing or about its uses I would like to hear from them.

Jennifer Simpson



"fishing" for white weed

## A CANADIAN MISCELLANY

We have received several emails from Brian Mendes in Canada who has been rummaging through previous Leighways and has passed on several items of information (below) and would like some help on others.

Brian emigrated to Canada in the 1950's. His family moved to Leigh in 1935 and lived in a rented house in Leigham Court Drive. His first school was the kindergarten run by the nuns of St Edith's Covent.

Brian would like to know what happened to the Terrier Royal Artillery battery that was based in the drill hall at Eastwood (the terminus for the Number 17 bus). Brian was active in "Q" Battery 482 (mixed) RA. TA right up to the time he emigrated. He wonders if anything has been written about its final days - does anyone know or have memories of this? Here is one of several pictures Brian has sent, copies of which are being placed in our archives.

Q Company on Parade



Brian's second area of interest having read Mavis Sipple's article some time ago on Hamlet Court Road in the 1960's is in respect of the ANERLEY SCHOOL OF BALLROOM DANCING.

Brian strongly suspects it was in the same location where his mother, the late Vera Mendies, established the HAMLET SCHOOL OF BALLROOM DANCING in 1944. Prior to WW II the studio had been occupied by a junior ballet school and when Brian's mother rented the premises the mirrors and balancing rails were still in place. Brian knows that his mother gave up the school due to health reasons, but does not know whether or not someone took it over to continue as a ballroom dancing school. Brian would be interested to learn if any of our members have memories of the ballroom dancing school. This is a photo of Brian taken at the Anerley Road entrance in September 2010. Brian believes that the studio space now serves as a Lawyer's office.



Next in Brian's list of memories is a distant snatch of memory of the principal of Haddon Court College, Mr. Metcalf frequently referring to Anthony Nelson Keys and his brother John Paddy Carstairs, both prominent film directors. Brian has

looked up the online biographies for both but found no connection with the Borough or having attended the School. Anyone got any knowledge of this?

Brian would very much like to connect with any former pupils of the school.

And finally, this picture shows a single decker bus used on the No 19 Westcliff Motor Services sea front route some years ago. Does anyone have a similar photo of the single decker bus type that was on that route **BEFORE** the one illustrated. Perhaps, someone has a snapshot in an old family photo album or has a book on the subject of old motor buses.



Brian would be grateful for feedback on any of these items and can be contacted at [briwilmen@rogers.com](mailto:briwilmen@rogers.com) or through Carole via the Heritage Centre.

## OLLIE AND STAN RIDE AGAIN

Last edition's article about the visit to Southend of the famous comedy duo sparked a memory from member David Stooke who remembers for us his trip to the Odeon to see them in action.

"The article in the September Leighway on Laurel and Hardy in Southend reminded me of the most exciting day of my otherwise rather humdrum childhood. My cousin and I were taken to the Odeon performance in August 1952 and, in the unbearably thrilling build-up to the great event, I well remember the Southend Standard's front page picture of the boys on their hotel balcony, Olly exhorting Stan to breathe in the salubrious air of Southend. Is this picture still available from the newspaper archive, I wonder?\*

The event itself was a marvel. Granted the sketch itself was a thinnish vehicle, my cousin and I were nevertheless transported by a truly amazing half hour. Recalling the impression the duo made, I would pinpoint two features: the almost balletic elegance demonstrated by the very large Hardy and the mobility of facial expression - visible all over the Odeon - that Laurel was still able to exhibit.

The climax of the evening was the queue at the stage door culminating in the carefully written and personalised autographs which remain today as the most prized possessions of a showbiz collector whose hobby has been lifelong.

As for Stan and Olly, my happy memory serves to convince me of their justly-earned reputation as the greatest double act ever to come out of Hollywood - or anywhere else for that matter. We were privileged to have them in Southend and I was privileged to see them!

David Stooke

\*Does any member or the Leigh Society know if the picture still exists?

## WHAT A CARRY ON

With Essex winners of both the X Factor 2010 and Strictly Come Dancing 2010, Essex seems to be a county with plenty of talent.

Of course we all know about Helen Mirren and in past issues of Leighway we have learned about other actors who hail either from Leigh or close by.

2011 marks the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Joan Sims, one of our best loved comedy actresses and star of the Carry On films.

Joan, who was known as The First Lady of Carry On, was born Irene Joan Marion Sims on 9 May 1930 in Laindon where her father was the station master.

It is said that her performing debut was on the Laindon railway platform, where she would entertain waiting travellers.

Following attendance at RADA Joan had a cameo appearance in Doctor in the House (1954) as the sexually repressed Nurse Rigor Mortis. A series of roles followed until in 1958 Joan received the script of Carry on Nurse and this was the start of her 24 Carry On films, making her the longest serving female member of the team.

She didn't just do the Carry Ons though and appeared on the stage between the various films.

When the Carry On series ended in 1978, Joan became a familiar face on TV in a number of highly successful sitcoms and prestigious classic drama adaptations such as "Martin Chuzzlewit" (1994).

In later life Joan became something of a National Institution as the only surviving major Carry On star from the early days.

Unfortunately she suffered in her later years with ill health and died on 28 June 2001.

I wonder if commuters from Leigh looked forward to Joan's platform performances as they wended their way to the Smoke.



Joan's mother, Gladys Ladbrook had been born in Great Wakering, the daughter of a brickmaker, whilst her father John Henry Sims came from Poplar but in 1911 was a railway clerk living at St Helens Road in Southend.

## HAUNTED SOUTHEND

Dee Gordon, whose local books many of you will know, is preparing a new book to be entitled 'Haunted Southend'. Dee is interested in all "stories" and especially illustrations. So if anyone has info on a story Dee has not already researched they will be rewarded with one of the books from her back list ... so do have a think!

You can contact Dee at [deegordon@btinternet.com](mailto:deegordon@btinternet.com) or at 14 Royal Terrace, Southend on Sea SS1 1DY.

## CHRISTMAS 1964

### Memories of Leigh Swimming Pool and a Christmas Bathing Belle

Our thanks to Karen Mayo for this great picture of her Mum, Vera Jane Mayo taken at 10.30am Christmas morning 1964 at Leigh Swimming Pool.



The snow lay all about. The Lady Saville was nearby. The steam trains were still running. The little kiosk that ran beside the pool was owned by a Mr Stumpy who was the ringmaster at the Big Top Circus in London.

## STORRINGTON SCHOOL

People do use our website and this is a recent email received following on from earlier Leighway articles.

'Good morning

I have recently come across your fantastic articles about Leigh whilst searching the web for items about Imperial Avenue, Westcliff. Like many others I am interested in family history and have been trying to find out more about the history of the home I grew up in as a boy and young man.

The article by Brenda Cartwright mentions Storrington School and this is my area of interest.

I lived at 61 Imperial Avenue, Westcliff on sea which was at one time Storrington School. I would dearly like to find out more about the school and find if possible any old photos. I have been in touch with the Essex library who have some limited information but I am now wondering if any of your members would have any knowledge they can pass on. I realise that this was many many years ago but some second or third hand information may have been passed down.

Once, while playing in the garden, I dug up an old school broach with the school name on it but alas have no idea what became of it. The house when we first moved to it, about 1959, was in a very bad state of repair having I think been used during the war for one of the services. I was always led to believe that there had been a searchlight battery in the tennis courts behind but this may be totally wrong. I do remember my father burying vast amounts of army beds and general rubbish in a very large hole he dug in the garden.

You will see from my email address that I now live in Australia so you can understand why it can be hard to get at information. I am hoping to be back in England in January, Heathrow being open, and will try to get to see what the library has.

Many thanks even if you can't come up with anything.

Warwick Charlesworth

If anyone can help Warwick please get in touch with him at [bodgie@optusnet.com.au](mailto:bodgie@optusnet.com.au)

## A SALUTE TO THE LEIGH COASTGUARDS

With the threat of cuts hanging over the Coastguard Service and many stations threatened with closure, this is a short article about the history of the service and some of the men and their families who manned the Leigh Coastguard Station.

Before the establishment of HM Coastguard, the Board of Customs was responsible for collecting duties payable on imported goods and preventing smugglers. Additionally, in wartimes, Preventive Officers were appointed to prevent the coming and going of passengers and exchange of intelligence and correspondence with France as well as to hinder smuggling.

During 1698, after lengthy discussion between the Board of Customs and the Treasury, the first peace-time force for 'the guard of the coasts of Kent and Sussex' was formally established.

The function of the Riding Officers, as they were called, was to prevent the movement inland of smuggled goods which had eluded the Revenue cruisers at sea and the customs officials in the ports. The Riding Officers operated in Kent and Sussex: the Revenue Cruisers were largely confined to the Kent, Sussex and East Anglian coasts and the Thames estuary, until the end of the eighteenth century, when they covered the English and Welsh coasts.

Confusingly, the Board of Excise had its own Revenue Cruisers and its own officers called Riding Officers: these covered the entire country and were concerned with the collection (and preventing the evasion) of excise duty.

In 1809 the Government established a Preventive Water Guard to operate in coastal waters, to tackle any smugglers who had managed to evade the Revenue cruisers. It was also responsible for giving assistance when a ship was wrecked. In 1816 the Preventive Water Guard was placed under the control of the Treasury and all but a few of the Revenue cruisers passed to the Admiralty, while the Riding Officers remained under the Board of Customs. In the same year a new shore-based service, the Coast Blockade, was established by the Admiralty to complement the existing forces. This new service consisted initially of 92 officers and men and was stationed along the coast between the North Foreland and Dungeness to capture smugglers as they came ashore.

The existence of so many different preventive services resulted in duplication of effort and in 1822 (with the exception of the Coast Blockade which would remain under the Admiralty) the Board of Customs was formed. In 1831 the Coast Blockade was also absorbed into the Coastguard. These preventive forces employed nearly 6,700 men at the time of amalgamation.

After the Crimean War - during which the Coastguard first functioned as a reserve force for the Royal Navy - control was transferred to the Admiralty. For the next 70 years the service took on additional responsibilities, ranging from defence of the coasts, the more ready manning of the Royal Navy in the event of war or emergency, the protection of the revenue, assisting vessels in distress, taking charge of wrecks, operating life-saving apparatus, participating in the lifeboat service, searching for mines and torpedoes lost at sea, and performing sundry duties in connection with signals, telegraphs, buoys, lighthouses, wild birds and rare fish washed ashore.

The above information is taken from the National Archive Guidance Note and is hereby acknowledged

The records of the Coastguards at Leigh come from 3 main sources. The Coastguard records themselves which have been painstakingly researched and can be viewed at <http://www.genuki.org.uk/big/Coastguards>, the Leigh parish registers and the Leigh Census returns.

As can be seen from the history there is a blurring of the different groups in the early years and this is reflected in the titles of the men who worked at Leigh.

As would be expected the men moved from station to station and although some were in Leigh for some years others were only here for short periods. Even so they managed to produce a number of children baptised in Leigh. The following is just a taster of some of those who were more connected to Leigh

The first entry in the parish registers is the death at 63 in 1815 of John Loten, the Collector of Customs. He had been kept busy in Leigh as smuggling was a very lucrative pastime. For in 1781 a sale at the Customs House of contraband items and boats seized included 680 gallons of gin, 82 gallons of brandy, 47 gallons of rum, 275 quarts of port, 120 quarts of claret, 33 yards of calico, much foreign china and a sloop and small sailing boat. In 1802 Mr Loten noted that he had made a seizure every day in the month of July.

His son, also John, took over, and is recorded as being the Commander of the HMS cutter the Safeguard in quarantine service. A new (the current) Customs House was built in 1815.

John junior had married Mary Ann Going of a local family and they were to have 3 children in Leigh before John died in 1827.

In 1814 George Poynter was a Riding Officer at Leigh who appears to have come from Asheldham on the Dengie peninsula. Again the coastguard service ran in the family. George's son, Robert, married a Leigh girl, Ann Segars, and for many years was Chief Boatswain of the Weston-Super-Mare Coastguard. His sister, Mary Ann, married into the Turnnidge family.

Thomas Sankey Gowlland was born and died in Kent but had seen service in Ireland and the Scilly Isles before he came to Leigh where he was stationed in the 1850s. He is a very interesting man and more information on him and the Gowlland family in general can be found at <http://www.gowlland.me.uk>. Here he is resplendent in his uniform



Leigh also provided a home grown Coastguard in the person of William Kirby born in 1868 who was the coastguard officer at Bridlington in 1901.

## HELPERS' LUNCH

We would like to express our thanks to Jane Lovell who organized as very successful lunch for Heritage Centre the helpers recently. Much appreciated.

## THE LOCALISM BILL

After much media hype the long heralded Localism Bill was issued just before Christmas.

The Bill is the Government's flagship legislation to create the Big Society.

Decentralisation is the name of the game and the Bill has 6 main objectives –

- To lift the burden of bureaucracy
- To empower communities to do things their way
- To increase local control of public finance
- To diversify the supply of public services
- To open up government to public scrutiny
- To strengthen accountability to local people

One of the factors which affect people on a day to day basis in their communities is planning. We know only too well in Leigh the effect of poor decisions taken by Government Inspectors and, indeed our own Council, and the frustration local people feel at not being listened to when very often they know their area better than anyone.

But will the Bill do anything to improve this situation. Power to the people is all very well but that power has to be supported by administration and finances.

The aim is said to be to allow local communities to have a more definite say in what goes on in their local area. It introduces a series of specific rights that can be exercised on the initiative of local people.

The Localism Bill currently proposes (this is a general list and all of the powers are subject to conditions):

- community powers to save local assets threatened with closure, by allowing them to bid for the ownership and management of community assets.
- neighbourhood plans through a far reaching reform of the planning system to give local people new rights to shape the development of the communities in which they live. The idea is that town and parish councils, and where there are none, "neighbourhood forums" come together to decide where new shops, offices or homes should go and what green spaces to protect - which is then voted on by local people in local referendums. Neighbourhood development orders will be able to define developments which would then not need to obtain planning permission.
- People will be able to trigger referendums on local issues. The results will not be binding - but local authorities will have to consider them when making decisions.
- Elected councillors will be entitled to speak on certain issues without being accused of being biased.

The Bill has a long way to go through Parliament and is unlikely to reach the statute books till the end of the year and will, no doubt, go through many changes. We will try to keep people abreast of those that may affect Leigh.

## THE BISHOP OF CHELMSFORD STEPHEN COTTRELL OF LEIGH

Following the service of Licensing at St Mary le Bow, Cheapside in October 2010 in the presence of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, I attended with other members of the family, the Installation of the new Bishop of Chelmsford, my Godson, Stephen Cottrell.

Stephen was born in Leigh, grew up in Leigh and Hadleigh, went to Belfairs School and attended St Margaret's Church with his parents, brothers and sister. The family spent their summers on Chalkwell Beach like many others with a Council beach tent.

Stephen's grandparents lived in Leigh as did his wife, Rebecca. His parents and Rebecca's mother all live in Leigh now close to the Broadway.

It was a wonderful occasion attended by all the great and the good of Essex, the Bishops of London and Oxford and the Arch Deacon of Canterbury and ecumenical clergy and officers of the Diocese.

With beautiful music and ceremony Stephen was pronounced Bishop of Chelmsford, Stephen, all previous Bishops having been John. Stephen's entry into the Cathedral was accompanied by the Dagenham Drummers and later young dancers and an African choir provided contrast to the solemn ceremony.

However, Stephen brought it all down to earth by telling us that having been born and grown up in Essex he had in fact come home to God's own County of Essex!

In various interviews he has said that Leigh is his favourite place and the views across the estuary are very special to him.

We wish him well and hope to see him in the Heritage Centre sometime.

Margaret Buckey



## QUIZ TIME

Many of you will know that we had to cancel the quiz in December because of the weather. We have now rearranged this for 19 March at 7.30pm at the Den. If you purchased tickets in December these will be ok for March.

If anyone else still wants tickets (payment in advance please) please contact Sally Hayes at [sally.ann61@sky.com](mailto:sally.ann61@sky.com) or on 712894.

## LEIGH IN FRONT

With the help of the Leigh Horticultural Society, Leigh In Front is a competition to be run by the Leigh Town Council between June and September for the best kept front garden in the Town Council's area. This does not have to be a floral front garden so paved areas are eligible, it's the presentation and attractiveness which are the key. Anyone can enter or be nominated and forms will be available locally for the nominations to be made. We will be including a copy of the form in the next Leighway.

## THE MAUNSELL FORTS

On a recent, very enjoyable, trip from the Tower Pier to Whitstable we passed the Maunsell Forts. Standing like something left behind after the filming of War of the Worlds they serve as a reminder of times past.



The Maunsell Sea Forts were small fortified towers built in the Thames and Mersey estuaries during the War for defence purposes. They were named after their designer, Guy Maunsell and were decommissioned in the late 1950s and later used for other activities.

The forts were operated by the Royal Navy, to deter and report German air raiders following the Thames as a landmark. The Luftwaffe were dropping a new German Magnetic Influence Mine by parachute from Seaplanes on dissolving tallow lines, the mines sank to the sea bed to be detonated by the steel mass of passing ships

Each fort consisted of a group of seven towers with a walkway connecting them all to the central control tower. The fort, when viewed as a whole, comprised one Bofors tower, a control tower, four gun towers and a searchlight tower. They were arranged in a very specific way, with the control tower at the centre, the Bofors and gun towers arranged in a semi-circular fashion around it and the searchlight tower positioned further away, but still linked directly to the control tower via a walkway

The three forts in the Thames estuary were at the Nore, Red Sands and Shivering Sands .

During the war the forts shot down 22 aircraft and about 30 flying bombs.

Nore Army Fort was badly damaged in 1953 when the Norwegian ship Baalbeck collided with it, destroying two of the towers, killing four civilians and destroying guns, radar equipment and supplies. The ruins were considered a hazard to shipping and dismantled in 1959–60.

One of the Shivering Sands towers was lost in 1963 after a ship collided with it. In 1964 the Port of London Authority placed wind and tide monitoring equipment on the Shivering Sands searchlight tower, which was isolated from the rest of the fort by the demolished tower. This relayed data to the mainland via a radio link.

In August and September 2005, artist Stephen Turner spent six weeks living alone in the searchlight tower of the Shivering Sands Fort in what he described as "an artistic exploration of isolation, investigating how one's experience of time changes in isolation, and what creative contemplation means in a 21st-century context".

Various forts were re-occupied for pirate radio in the mid-1960s.

In 1964, a few months after Radio Caroline went on air, Screaming Lord Sutch set up Radio Sutch in one of the towers at Shivering Sands but he sold the station to his manager who

renamed it Radio City and expanded operations into all of the five towers that remained connected.

Paddy Roy Bates occupied the Rough Sands Fort and set up Radio Essex, later renamed BBMS — Britain's Better Music Station — but is better known for his post-pirate activities. He, or a representative, has lived in Roughs Tower since 1964, self-styling the tower as the Principality of Sealand.

### Project Redsand

The Thames Sea Forts are the last in a long history of British Marine Defences. The Army Anti Aircraft forts have played a significant role in post World War 2 developments. Notably in offshore fuel exploration and drilling platforms. The successful rapid deployment of the Maunsell Forts led to the construction of the first offshore oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico in the late 1940's.

Up until 2003, no serious consideration had been paid to the preservation of any of these historic structures. Now discussion is taking place within Government agencies which will determine the future of the Maunsell Towers.

Project Redsand has been established to secure the Redsand Towers, coded "Uncle 6" during WW2, and chosen because it is the better of the two Army forts, closest to shore and clear of the main shipping lanes.

Several major companies have been involved in ensuring the stability and safety of the forts.

The Department for Culture Media and Sport has considered an application to list the structures. The Project Team are seeking sponsorship and grant aid for the restoration program which will form a Charitable Trust.

The Ministry of Defence is to supply a team of Royal Engineers who, as part of a training exercise will assist working parties at the Fort.

The duration of the restoration program will be determined by the availability of funding. This may take a number of years to realise.

The fort will be restored on a tower by tower basis. Upon completion, each tower will be put to immediate use. The layout of the towers allows various activities including music recording studios, communications facilities, hydrogen from seawater experiments, a wartime and broadcasting museum and possibly digital broadcast. From time to time, the towers may be used for "assault training" by the Royal Engineers Theatre Troops. The general public will have the opportunity to visit the Fort in small groups.

If you want to learn more about the forts go to <http://www.project-redsand.com/project.htm>

## LEIGH SPRING CLEAN

We all want to improve our environment and to this end as part of the Good For Leigh initiative the Town Council is organizing a Spring Clean week 11-18 April. We know that many people take the time to keep their properties looking lovely but the idea is to encourage everyone to do so. Groups, individuals and businesses can all be involved to make Leigh a brighter and cleaner environment for everyone. Watch for the publicity.

As an example in the Old Town this is hopefully going to include a beach clean.

## HENRY PLEASS A LEIGH AIRMAN

Some of you may have seen an article in the Leigh Times recently about the search for information about Henry Norman Pleass an airman shot down in a raid over Germany in September 1942.

A similar request came to the Leigh Society and Carole's research found family links to Henry and she was able to make contact with his nephew who now lives in Austria and who gave freely of his knowledge of his uncle including photographs. Our thanks go to him for this wonderful story.

Sergeant Henry Norman Pleass (744631) Flight Engineer from Leigh. Always known as Norman to his family, he was born on 9 March 1914 in Barking, the son of Henry Gard Pleass, a railway clerk, and Grace Wortley.

Norman was the middle child of the family with an older sister, Mary, and a younger sister, Joan. Just before World War 2 the family moved to Leigh-on-Sea, living at 103 Western Road.

At time of war like many young men Norman enlisted in the RAF rising to the rank of Sergeant and based at Downham Market in Norfolk.

His older sister Mary had taken Holy Orders as a Carmelite nun before the war and was based in Oban in Scotland. Ironically Norman did an air gunner's course in Scotland and although he did not see Mary, he was delighted to tell her that having been 'thrown about in the air at 250 mph while trying to shoot more or less accurately, I managed to emerge with 70.5% marks.'

Norman returned to East Anglia to finish his training (which he referred to as 'this period of torment' and to be accepted into a bombing crew. He asked for his sister's prayers to pass his examinations because 'I want this position more than I have ever wanted anything else'.

To his younger sister, Joan, he wrote of the daily life on the base and an amusing story which portrays the serendipity of war.

Having been sent back and forth between Downham Market and Marham Norman was sitting in the crew room at Downham when he was approached by another sergeant who said "Is your name Pleass?" Norman writes 'I thought for a moment that I was transferred to Marham again and I was toying with the idea of giving my name as Mickelwort or something. Remembering the war effort however, I just looked sideways at him and said 'yep'. 'Oh' says he - 'I'm Wren' 'Oh yes', I said, expecting him to come out with some such remark as - 'my grandfather built St Paul's' or something like that. 'Yes' he continued, have you got a sister Joan Pleass?. Of course he turned out to be Mr Wren of...'

His letters thank Joan for supplies of cigarettes and tell her of his games of pontoon with Australians with a Spanish deck of cards of which he described 'all the royal cards had a strong Isabella and Ferdinand flavour except the Queen of Spades who was a dead spit for Miss Freshwater in one of her more difficult moods.' Presumably here referring to an old school teacher held in some awe as he said that whenever he was dealt the Queen of Spades the psychological effect was enough to make him lose.

On 14 July 1942 he wrote to Mary that he had 'just begun my new job in real earnest'. He had just returned from his 'first journey'.

In a wonderful passage in his letter to Mary he says 'I have a queer way of looking at things, but I realise that if by my efforts we may win this war, then it may save the lives of many people who can benefit the world, irrespective of what happens to me.'



Henry Pleass

## ITS SUBS TIME

This is the start of a new Leigh Society year and subscriptions are now due. We hope you are all going to renew your subscriptions and this should be done by the end of March. Subs are £10 which covers the household. £15 if you are overseas.

The Society has done great work in the past year in Leigh for visitors and for the education of local children so we hope that in these straightened times you will see the £10 as well spent and renew your membership.

If anyone wants to pay by direct debit, and we thank those who do already as it makes life a lot easier, then we will be sending a form out later in the year to enable you to do so from next January. Thanks Everyone

## CENSUS 2011

2011 is census year. Census day is 27 March and in the few weeks before that you will receive the forms in the post. It is important that the forms are completed for a number of reasons

- There is a hefty fine if you don't
- A good census return Borough wide has a bearing on the amount of finances allocated to the Council so the better the return, hopefully the more money.
- On a selfish basis it is a very valuable tool for family history researchers in years to come.

Although the date is 27 March the forms will be filled in over a period after that date. Leigh Town Council will be holding some open days (watch the press) to assist those who have difficulty filling in the form.

It is a common misconception that the information is used to get information about people. This is a fallacy. There is no access to the detail of the forms for 100 years. The general figures are extrapolated and are very helpful in seeing how areas are developing and being able to plan where new schools etc are needed. If we've got the money for them of course!!

## AND FINALLY

Any opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the particular author and not necessarily those of the committee and officers of the Society.

We rather hope you will like to keep your copy of Leighway but if not please recycle it.

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