

Okus Road
Way back,
possibly
1930s...



The Swindon Society Newsletter - May 2023



...and
more
recently
2023





Welcome to the May Newsletter



Hello and welcome to our May newsletter.

Tonight is our AGM and, although that may sound a bit dull, it is an evening that over the last few years has proved to be really enjoyable. After the lightning-quick AGM, you will see your committee's choice of various images, with no particular theme, and they will give us their personal thoughts on each of them... We are really looking forward to it!

In case you did not know, we have two places to fill on our committee for next season. Paul Williams and Kelly Blake are stepping down at the end of this year due to other commitments. I am sure every member would join us in thanking them for their valued support over the years, especially Paul, a former Chairman of the society, many years ago. Thank you both!

By the time you read this, the Coronation will be over, but we could not produce a newsletter without acknowledging this truly historic occasion. So here's to a new era... Long live the King!

Finally, as always, if you have a story or memory to share with us, whether it's yours or from someone you know, please don't hesitate to contact either:

- me - angie.phillips@ntlworld.com
- or - info@theswindonsociety.co.uk

COLESHILL HOUSE IN WORLD WAR TWO

LIZA DIBBLE

12TH APRIL 2023

Liza Dibble presented to us on Churchill's Underground Army, which was based at Coleshill House, near Lechlade. She began by telling us about how the events of World War Two were the catalyst for the establishment of the Army, also known as Britain's Secret Resistance. We learned that the volunteer numbers for the Home Guard by July 1940 was an unprecedented 1.5 million after these events. The British Government were concerned that Britain was next to be invaded by German forces (and Hitler's plan was known as Operation Sea Lion), so Churchill gave power to



Colonel Gubbins for an underground

resistance against potential occupation. (Gubbins was the first in a series of interesting names to feature in the presentation - see if you can spot the others!)

Liza showed us photos of these events and the people involved, leading on to how Coleshill House became a part of the story. Major Henderson was tasked with scouting for a general headquarters for the resistance. Henderson was a part of the Buscot House Hendersons and he travelled far and wide; or just four miles down the road to Coleshill House. In fact, the two estates are so close in proximity that they are now a joint location run by the National Trust!

Liza then gave us a brief bit of history about the house. It was, in her words, "built by a Pratt for a Pratt". The architect Sir Roger Pratt built the house for his cousin Sir George Pratt in the 1650s. By the time of the Second World War, there were just two sisters living in the house, so it was requisitioned for official use and the sisters were relegated to using one wing of the house. Another thing that made the house so attractive to the government, was its distance from the sea. It is nicely land-locked and as any invasion would be by sea there would have been plenty of time for the resistance to act. At this point, Liza showed us a wonderful photo that was taken in January 1941 on the

steps of Coleshill House of all the intelligence officers (including a gentleman called Major Major!). A group photo of the top-secret organisation known as Britain's Secret Resistance – luckily it never fell into the enemy's hands!

We were then told about Mabel Stranks, the Highworth post mistress who was also a part of the auxiliary unit. Agents would get the train to Highworth and then go to the Post Office and ask for three half-penny stamps, but then try and pay with half a crown and say they have no change, and that was the code for Mabel then getting them to Coleshill House for their training. Liza then talked a bit about the training and how the units would operate, and then about Britain's sea defences and how they were massively improved in 1940 to form the "iron line". Part of the training was being given a booklet called *A Countryman's Diary 1939* which actually detailed how to set booby traps, such as "the flesh cutter" rather than any of Highworth's fertilisers, as promised on the cover!




We then had some more detailed images of an underground operational base and its important features, such as an escape tunnel. There was a training one built at Coleshill House and the escape tunnel exits from the ha-ha. There were huge manuals for living in an underground operational base, which specified rules - such as only smoking for 15 minutes of the hour because of the lack of fresh air!

Liza then told us about how Operation Sea Lion was abandoned after the Battle of Britain although auxiliary units were not stood down until November 1944. Units remained secret even after the war, so they were not invited to London to receive medals like the Home Guard were. She went on to tell us more about the underground operational base at Coleshill House. The original base cannot be visited because horseshoe bats have roosted there. (Although there was a sign for many years on the door saying this, it wasn't actually true it was just to keep people out. Liza suggested that maybe the bats had learned to read!) There were a few photos of inside, however the base was only discovered when the escape tunnel collapsed. The bases weren't built to last more than a few years and were supposed to have been destroyed after the war, so tunnel collapses decades later are to be expected.

Liza showed us an aerial photo of the house taken around 1940 which was taken to ensure that none of the top-secret operations were visible from the air. She also showed us a photo of one of the later annexes to the house (built in the 1800s) in the aftermath of either an explosion or being driven into whilst being used for government operations. No-one knows what happened, but it's interesting nonetheless.

Lastly, we heard about the archaeological dig of 2011/12, which didn't reveal quite all that they had hoped, and the replica underground operational base that was built in the early 2010s thanks to a Heritage Lottery grant. As an interesting aside, it was actually built using German bricks! We saw lots of great photos of the replica both during its building and after its completion. It is slightly modified for health and safety reasons as they take school groups and other visitors down there, so a larger escape tunnel and concrete roof was needed. Liza finished off by telling us that this replica can be seen on the second Sunday of the month from April to October and that there are guided walks at Coleshill House for both groups or individual. These can be booked via the National Trust website.

Kelly Blake - May 2023

	Central Library, Regent Circus Swindon SN1 1QG	
	Tel:	(01793) 463238
	Email:	localstudies@swindon.gov.uk
	Website:	www.swindon.gov.uk/localstudies
	Gallery:	www.flickr.com/swindonlocal
		Opening Hours
		Mon: <i>By appointment only</i>
		Tue: 10am to 4:00pm
		Wed: 10am to 4:00pm
		Sat: <i>By appointment only</i>



New Book Planned For The Railway Village



I am hoping to produce a small book about Swindon's historic railway village and would like to hear from anyone who can help.

Any first or secondhand information about living in, or visits to the area, before it was updated in the 1960s, would be welcomed. I am also looking for information about the amenities and meeting places such as shops, public houses and the Mechanic's Institute etc.



Previously unpublished information, no matter how little, documents, plans or old photographs that I could copy, please.

Full acknowledgements would be given in the proposed publication unless otherwise instructed.

Please phone 07393 204338 or email:

p.timms@yahoo.co.uk

Peter Timms - May 2023

Radnor Street Cemetery Walks

Join us on our next meeting of 2023 and find out about some of the people who are remembered here

**Meet outside the chapel at 2pm
Sunday 28th May 2023**

The Radnor Street team, Fran, Noel and Andy, can be contacted on 07968 246792

Please also see the
Radnor Street Cemetery Facebook page



The King's Coronation in Swindon

(An Alternative View)

by Andy Binks



I decided to find out what took place in King Street in Swindon over the years. The answer was... actually, not a lot.

It is thought to be named after builder John King of Swindon in 1865.

In the past, Midland Bank was on one corner and The Rolling

Mills public house on the other. This beerhouse opened in the 1850s and was run by Herbert Spencer. It was auctioned in 1872 and then taken on by Lacock brewers Harris, Cator and Cator. It was extended and taken on by Clinch Brewery of Witney in 1904. Courage swallowed them up and when I visited it several times in the 1970s, it was definitely “down on its uppers”. It eventually closed sometime around 1990-ish.

At one time, Fred Ward ran the Alliance Club in King Street too, but it really is an area with much to celebrate at this time although I doubt if a street party will be held to celebrate in 2023.

Mind you, when I visited in late April 2023, someone had

indeed celebrated, and left an empty pint glass and bottle on the window sill next to the King Street sign (see photo on the next page). So, cheers to someone, who possibly remembered the pub and the club?



Positioned just off Bridge Street and obviously opposite King Street is Queen Street - well why wouldn't it be? Queen Street probably dates from 1855, so was likely named after Victoria, the then Queen.

It was once the home of the Swindon Gas Works which stood roughly where the David Murray John building stands empty today, awaiting a major refit.



Also located here was The Swindon and District Co-operative - home to its teams of decorators, glaziers, sanitary engineers, painters, plumbers and property reps. Likewise, the Swindon Welding and Swindon Joinery Works were sited here and Mr. Chambers lived at number 4, Mr. Lintern at 16 and Mr. Woolford at 17. Oh, and not forgetting the Co-op Funeral Services.



Let's not forget we also have in Swindon... King John Street, built in 1874 and named after the thirteenth century sovereign; and a street built in 1871 called King William Street, all ready for the next coronation.

Thankfully we have had a few pubs aptly named in the town. The Kings Head beerhouse was in Fleet Street from c1864. This closed in 1962 but ran until 1971 as an off-licence.

Then of course we have the Kings Arms in Wood Street which opened around the time of Queen Victoria coming to the throne in 1837, and reputedly is on the site of an old windmill. For a long time, this pub was in the hands of the Godwin Brewing family. It is still very popular, and when it was last redecorated many Swindon-related photographs were hanging on the walls, supplied courtesy of a well-known local 50-year-old history group. It is possibly one of the finest buildings in this town. Well in my view - for what it is worth!

But lastly, I mention one of two pubs, in the history of drinking in Swindon, that I would just love to have frequented. The King of Prussia stood in High Street, Old Town.

The building was c17th century in origin, but not a pub until much later. Also on this site, the Smith family ran a very well-known and successful Butchers for decades, until its closure in the late 1970s. The King of Prussia was often in the news, and according to evidence given in an 1866 court case, it had been open since the time of Waterloo! But when did Abba have that hit? At one time the landlord was one Billy Webb who was so large that he could hardly get through the front door. Prostitution, gambling, corruption and so on... You name it and it happened in the King of Prussia.

On a pub crawl of Old Town, this would have had to be the penultimate hostelry to visit, because the last place, the Rhinoceros in Albert Street, was a place even more notorious!

That really would have been a memorable crawl around our Old Town area... Unfortunately, I arrived here much too late.

I hope everyone enjoyed the Coronation weekend.

Long live our King!



Andy Binks - May 2023

Chairman's Words 2023



We are nearly at the end of our season, and I am amazed. Why? Because we have had two full years of presentations since we restarted.

There was a time during those dark days of the lockdowns when I wondered if we could ever restart, but here we are, and now it's time for the AGM so we will try not to delay you too long.

Since we've been back, I think we have had a great run of speakers and for that I am really pleased, but it is getting harder and harder to obtain them. I know you have heard this before, but please give some thought to doing a presentation yourself. It is quite easy and can be such fun and enjoyable to do. If you need any help, I can arrange this for you. Please, do think about this... Thanks.

Next season we will also have a couple of vacancies on the committee if you would like to help. After countless years of voluntary labour, Paul Williams has decided to stand down. The work he has done, often behind the scenes, has been much appreciated by us all. In addition, Kelly Blake, our Facebook editor, has also decided to stand down due to work and family commitments. I know I am not alone in thanking them both for all their work and let's hope we will continue to see them at our meetings.

Our membership numbers are very healthy and the envy of many a group. However, if you have friends or family interested in what we do, please encourage them to attend. We can definitely accommodate them - the more the merrier to be honest!

That's your lot from me for this year. Mind you I imagine you will still be getting your ears bashed at the start of a few more meetings in the future... If elected of course?

Best wishes to you all and thank you for your continued support in helping The Swindon Society to remain so popular.

Here's to the next 50 years!

Best wishes

Andy

ANDY BINKS - May 2023

Martin Vandervelde

It is with great sadness to have to tell you of the passing of Martin Vandervelde, who was involved with The Swindon Society from the earliest days.

Born in the East End of London, Martin always said it was the proper East End of Bow and Whitechapel, dirty, smoky and unhealthy was his description.

His parents married in 1930 and his father had a tailors shop near to West Ham United football ground. In WW2 during the Blitz the family home was bombed, and Martin and his brother were evacuated to Shrevenham. The brothers never got on with this family, so they were moved to Wroughton, near Swindon. This area would be home for all his future life.

Very proud of his Jewish roots, Martin followed his father into the tailoring trade. He had a long running business with a shop in Victoria Road, Old Town called Henry Best.

He married Perry and they had a family, and settled in the town.

Martin had many interests including Swindon Town FC and was very active in the local Rotary.

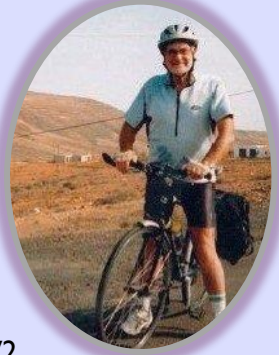
It was at a time when The Swindon Society was talking of leaving Broad Green Community Centre due to parking issues, and we were struggling to find a suitable venue, when Martin organised the move to Goddard Park School through Headmaster Mike Welsh. This has been a very good move for us, and we are very thankful to him, the school, and everyone involved.

Another passion of Martin's was Prospect Hospice. He volunteered and drove a van for them. He also did amazing fundraising too, much of this occurred in the

Canary Islands. With a few friends he cycled around the various islands and obtained sponsorship. In total he raised over £100,000 which was an incredible achievement.

Thank you Martin, we will always remember you.

*Andy Binks
April 2023*



MARTIN'S FANTASTIC ACHIEVEMENTS



Swindon Quiz - Just for fun! Can you answer this?..



Here is another quiz question from Andy. Where is this gate? More interestingly... why is it facing the wrong way? Surely you wouldn't need to see it on your way out would you!..



Think you know? Then contact us at info@theswindonsociety.co.uk

👁️ Last Month's Answer

Last month Andy asked us - what was the first and last film to be shown at

the ABC cinema? Well, the answers are actually just inside the door on plaques either side of the main entrance of building. Now, of course, it's The Savoy pub and this is what they look like:



Finally, here is a bonus question from Diane:

Where would I have been if I was standing with these people? Do you know?



Ronald Helliker Shop - Commercial Road - 1950s



Quantock Motors - Devizes Road 1961

