

Back Then...

Farnsby
Street
1967



The Swindon Society Newsletter - May 2025



...And More
Recently
April 2025



AGM
Agenda
Inside!

Welcome to the May Newsletter

Our May meeting is the time for our AGM. However, over the past few years, we have honed this procedure, and we are now able to run through this mandatory task quickly so that we can swiftly move on to the good stuff!

As usual, we will be voting in the new committee for the forthcoming year, along with the various posts within that committee, and an auditor for our accounts.

As you know, for the past year, we have been two committee members short, including the post of Membership Secretary. Hopefully, you'll agree that this hasn't affected our ability to keep up the good work and provide the same enjoyable evenings we always have. However, this has all taken a little more effort from the remaining committee members and ideally, we need to spread the load a little more... and that is where you can help!

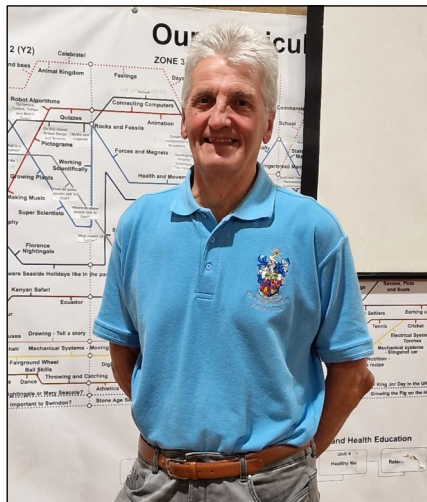
We are earnestly asking if you could please consider joining the committee. It really isn't that difficult and you don't have to know all about Swindon to do it. Your thoughts and ideas are what is important, and about an hour and a half of your time once a month - that's it! So please, give some serious consideration to joining the committee. You can simply volunteer during the AGM, and if you do - that would be great! We think our society is brilliant, and with your help... long may it continue!

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Swindon - This Is Swindon
by
Andy Binks
9th April 2025

We had a treat of a talk from our revered chairperson Andy Binks who informed us that this would be his 200th presentation. He prefaced it by saying it would be a bit about Swindon and a bit about all sorts; and he wasn't always sure what would be coming up next!

We began (of course) with a view of a train in the station because that is where you'll here the announcement referenced in the title of the talk and then Andy showed us the old platform four being demolished in 1972 and the construction of the Hambro Life building above the station in 1973, with a second view of this from Wellington Street to help place it. We then had a photo of the new Zurich offices (Unity Place) which has been built just across the road from the old



Debenhams building and we had a typically beautiful Denis Bird photo of it, in all its brutalist glory.

Andy had a few more photos of Wellington Street over the years for us, as it has changed quite a bit - we saw Duck, Son & Pinker, the Railway Mission, Foss' Hotel and Pristons the dentist (at which point Andy also reminded us that there was another dentist on Wellington Street called Tooth's). We then returned to the former Hambro



Life building (now called Signal Point) where Andy had an image of the empty interior (plus two other local historians – Graham Carter and Jon Ratcliffe). Andy had wanted an image for the front cover of the book he wrote with Peter Timms - Swindon Works Through Time - and waited four hours on the top floor to capture it. Andy then showed us an aerial photo of A Shop

with Newburn House in the foreground (which stood at the end of Dean Street). Another Works photo followed, this one of the last Western Hydraulic Engine and the team who worked on it – plus Mr. Binks! This was swiftly followed by the last payday in the Works, then A Shop burnt out and in the process of being demolished.

Andy then spoke about how he went with Bob Townsend to meet a woman who was organising the new Swindon Works. We saw a photo of the three of them, but unfortunately Andy couldn't remember her name! We then saw an aerial photo of the many train sidings on what came to be the Jane Austin Electrification Training Centre close to the Cocklebury Roundabout. The centre existed to train drivers



how to drive electric ones - but only a short time later, it is now redundant. In the same sort of area, Andy moved on to a photo of the Oasis dome, with Signal Point in the background. The dome looks pristine and Andy said the photo was from 1975/6 so it had only just been built. Andy then showed us some more recent photos of the crane and caravans

being used in the Oasis car park, where filming for an Apple TV series was taking place. The crane was huge – taller than the dome! We then saw a hearse being lifted by a (different) crane by Lakeside Garage on Marlborough Road – something Andy spotted happening and took a photo of because it's not something you see every day.

Andy then showed us a photo collage of the Swindon Heritage Magazine logo – specifically the O. In every one, there was an image of the Works hooter.

Now I own a full set of these magazines, but had never noticed this detail and it seems that Andy hadn't either until Graham Carter pointed it out to him one day! We also saw another collage which showed all the blue plaques which Swindon Heritage have put up - definitely more than I had realised (I think I counted 13). We then saw the problem of the ivy on the Goddard Arms, which has to be cleared on a regular basis for the plaque to be visible - usually by Andy going up a ladder. The newest plaque went up in Taunton Street only a few weeks ago, on the 4th April and was unveiled by Heidi Alexander MP to commemorate James Hurst, the first GWR locomotive driver. Andy reminded us that there is more information about Mr. Hurst in the Swindon Heritage Magazine (Summer 2016 edition).

Circling back round to the subject of the hooter, Andy told us that he had actually blown it several times whilst working 'inside' in his role as a maintenance fitter and revealed that when you were stood next to it, you could hardly hear it. Hard to believe when it could be heard several miles away at Lydiard House. We then saw several photos of Andy, firstly on top of the sand tower, complete with a beard, and then with four fellow apprentices in suits and bow ties in 1973. We then saw a photo of the brass foundry interior (which is now where Suits Direct is in the Outlet Village). This is where the remains of a pliosaur were discovered in 1975, when they were digging the foundations out for a new machine. Work shut down to get the bones out and they were laid out for inspection by the Mayor and others.



Andy then moved onto another type of dead creature - whales. In the 1950s and 60s there was an international tour of three dead whales - Hercules, Goliath and Jonah. They were transported in huge trucks (the biggest ever built in Europe), with refrigerators inside the bodies and they visited Swindon during their tour, stopping in the town centre. Andy described the whole thing as very, very weird! Something else that now

sounds weird is the fact that in the British Rail Western Region (BRWR) Staff Association bar in the Mechanics' Institute, you could get a pint for 10p and hear (from the room above) XTC practice the songs that would become the albums English Settlement and Mummer. And Andy used to do just that!

We then moved on to football, with Andy showing us a photo of Frank Burrows, who played for Swindon Town and was a member of the Society for a few years. When he passed away in 2021, his funeral in Gorse Hill was attended by some big footballing names, including Harry Redknapp. Andy showed us some photos of him in attendance

at the funeral and told us a brilliant anecdote of how Harry drove into Swindon and had forgotten about the Magic Roundabout and refused to drive across it (having apparently had trouble in the past). So, he parked up and a postie offered him a lift to his destination, thus Harry Redknapp arrived at the funeral in a Royal Mail van!

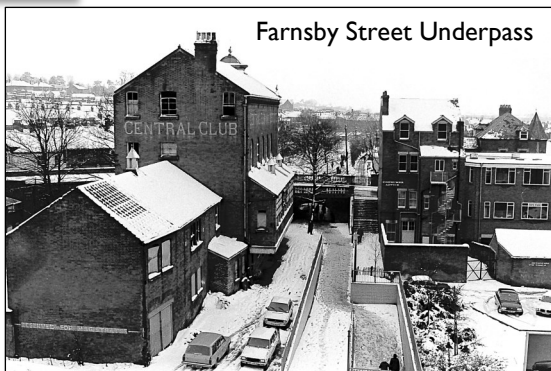




Brunel Street 1970

We saw some vintage photos of STFC training – by carrying railway sleepers and jumping over a rope. The interesting bit in these photos though is the gas works in the background. It had Swindon painted on the top of it, and Andy told us that this was the case in all big towns and it was done to assist air navigation. However, these names were painted over during WW2.

We then saw a photo of Brunel Street and then the Farnsby Street underpass and Andy enquired whether we knew what had happened to Brunel Street – it wasn't just flattened for the redevelopment of the town centre. All the rubble was used to line the bed of the canal – so Brunel Street moved several hundred metres away to a new home. The final few photos were a bit of a whirlwind and I didn't quite capture them all; but one did

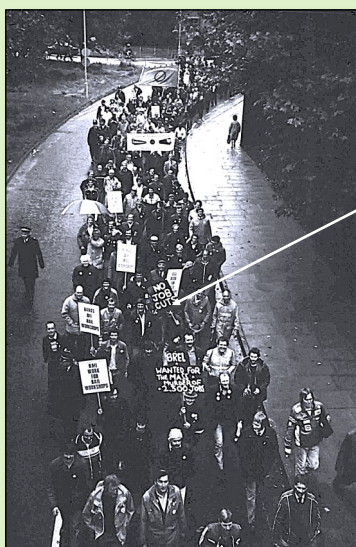


Farnsby Street Underpass



stand out – a group of women which Andy described as the Kitchen Mafia. I don't know who they were – but don't forget to grab a biscuit and a hot drink after the meeting!

Kelly Blake - April 2025



It's A Small World

This was a bit weird!

A little while back, I came across the picture on the left and I was convinced I could see our Andy Binks amongst this huge group of BR workers on a protest march - What are the odds?

I asked Andy if it was him... it wasn't, but I was still gobsmacked because amazingly, he knew who it actually was! Again, what are the odds?

Andy informed me that this look-a-likey chap was actually a bloke called John Charlesworth.

So there you have it - John Charlesworth is Andy's doppelganger and, thankfully, there's only one Andy Binks!

THE SWINDON SOCIETY

Agenda for AGM

14th May 2025

- Welcome
- Apologies
- Approval of Last AGM Minutes (8/05/24)
- Matters Arising From Those Minutes
- Chairman's Report
- Treasurer's Report
- Election of Officers
 - Committee
 - Chairman
 - Vice Chairman
 - Secretary
 - Treasurer
- Election of Auditor
- Any Other Business



Chairman's Words 2025

So how is the Swindon Society faring as we approach the end of another season?

Quite well has got to be the answer. Membership remains steady and I believe we are doing very well indeed, yet there are a few things we can improve upon.

The role of Membership Secretary remains unfilled, and it would be great to tick that box. Not the biggest task in the world but one that is very important for sure. Of course, a couple more committee members would be nice too. Please, please do think about joining us to prolong the life of our very successful group.

Our programme this past year was varied and covered all the things we all like, which is anything and everything about our great little town of Swindon; and I am sure it was the envy of other groups.

Please can you all think about maybe giving a presentation yourself. Please be assured you would get all the required help you need. Everything you currently see comes with much hard work from your committee; they are all so enthusiastic and committed to the cause. Just imagine, you too could make a big difference to the future of our Society. Please do have a think about this.

We had an excellent start to the current season with our "Open Day" at Lawn Community Centre, which was a great success. Consequently, we are planning to do it again on 20th September 2025, and any assistance from anyone would be greatly appreciated.

I must thank you all for your continued support, but we must keep improving all the time and not be complacent at all.

Finally, many thanks to your committee for their continued work and enthusiasm, and once again to all members for your excellent support.

I would like to think we are doing something well, but I am always open to feedback, comments and help.

Best wishes

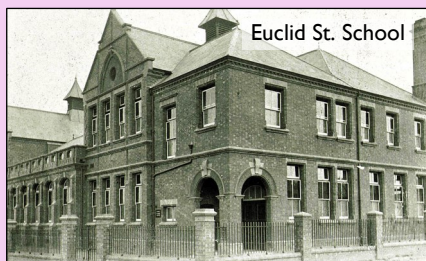
Andy Binks

Foreword: *Christine Senior's mother, Muriel Baker (nee Proffitt), sadly passed away in June 2024. Fortunately, she left behind a wonderful legacy of documented childhood memories which Christine has kindly allowed us to reproduce in our newsletter. As Muriel wrote such detailed memories of her life, it is being published in instalments over a few newsletters. I found her stories fascinating, and I hope that you do too.*

My Childhood Memories (Final Part)

As it was war time, the town was full of soldiers, airmen and airwomen. When I was 16, I went with Mum to the forces canteen in Faringdon Road. The canteen was organised by the churches in Swindon and managed by Nellie Watson. The girls served while the others made sandwiches, etc. and did the washing up. We went by bus and after we cleared up, a taxi took us home. Nellie gave us any leftover food so we were able to feed the chickens for several days. I remember the time when six men in a different uniform came in and one asked for cheese and jam sandwiches. The Americans had arrived! I said he could have one or the other but not both as they were on ration. Nellie became very friendly with an American. He came as often as he could to see her, then he went overseas and was sadly killed. Nellie had sent him a wallet for Christmas and this was returned to her. She gave it to me. It was very sad and she never married. Once I joined the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service) I never saw her again but I did use the wallet for several years.

When I was 15, I joined the Girls Training Corps - GTC. We trained in Euclid Street school in the evenings. We wore a navy skirt and battledress top. We went on a do-it-yourself course at the college which I found very useful over the years. We were taught to wire plugs, change fuses, solder, change



Euclid St. School



Plaum's Pit

t a p washers, painting, etc. We also had a choir but can only remember singing in a concert once - perhaps we sang for our parents. I still remember the song we had to learn.

Doreen and I also went to night school to learn first aid and home nursing. No television to keep us occupied in the evenings in those days! In the summer

we went swimming in Plaum's pit and for long bike rides. Once we cycled to Savernake Forest and as we sat having a picnic, a truck driven by black Americans went past, they were transporting bombs into the forest. They shouted out every time they went past that they would be along to see us when they finished. We didn't wait for them and cycled home. I felt sorry that we

didn't stay as the black GIs were treated badly by their white counterparts. I heard afterwards that one of the bombs had exploded in the forest and several soldiers were killed.

Doreen remained at Wills until she joined up, however, I wasn't keen sitting all day stripping tobacco and Mum insisted I left because of how the nicotine was affecting me, so I looked for another job. My dad heard of a job going for a cashier/bookkeeper at Mac Fisheries in Old Town which I got.

I didn't have to serve fish but the smell got into my clothes. With the boats being sunk and food rationing, everyone was after fish but it was in short supply. There would be a queue at the shop every morning when I arrived, just to see if there would be any fish arriving from the main shop. Farmers would bring in rabbits and it was amazing how quickly Mr Newman, my boss, could skin a rabbit. Eggs were also on ration so we had to stay open just to sell packets of breadcrumbs and eggs. Most shops closed once any fish was sold and the staff went home.



I used to travel to other branches when their cashier went on holiday. I stayed a week in Bridgewater and on the first day there, when I woke up, I found it was D-Day. I also travelled daily to Bristol by train for two weeks, arriving at 9.30am and returning about four hours later as the staff didn't keep the shop open just to sell eggs!

I used to cycle to work in Old Town and then cycle home for my dinner - three miles at least each way. In those days most people ate their main meal at 12.30pm. I had two hours for lunch. When I was able to get some fish, I

would call into the town hall where Vera was working in the Food Office and give it to her to take to Grandma's where she and her parents were staying, having left London due to the bombing.

We were brought up before electric washing machines. Grandma had a dolly washer - a tub on a stand with a lid. There was a wooden paddle attached to the lid which would go into the water and a handle on the top of the lid would turn the paddle - similar principle to the first electric washing machines.

We didn't buy sanitary towels. Square cloths with loops on diagonal corners were folded to use held up with a belt round the waist. Soiled towels were soaked in bucket then boiled in the copper.

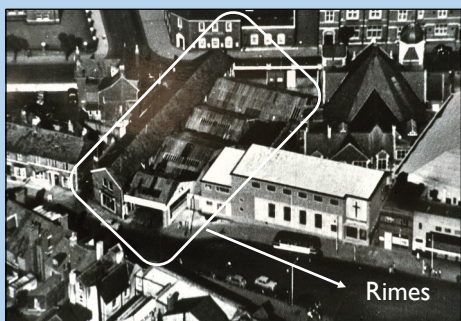


We used flat irons heated on the stove or gas cooker. The irons were tested by putting water on. If it just sizzled, not hot, if a drop bounced off it was hot!

No fridge, some had “safes” outside on the garden wall in a shady place - a box with holes in the sides to let air in. If it was hot outside, milk would be brought to the boil to keep it from turning sour. Milk was delivered but if you needed more, there was a cart going around and you could take a jug and they would dip a measure into the milk churn and sell you a pint.

At 19, Eve had to either go into the services or munitions so she decided to join the ATS. After training, she was stationed at Corsham so was able to come home for the weekend every six weeks. When I became 18 I also decided to join the ATS, and so March 1945 found me at my training camp.

Muriel Baker (nee Proffitt)



2001 - More Than Just a Space Oddity

In fact 2001 was the first operational telephone number in Swindon, and Rimes of Swindon (garage and coaches) were the proud users.

Many readers of this newsletter will remember their location; one end was

opposite the former labour exchange the other was in Princes Street (just down from opposite the Post Office), it was a substantial building used for parking some of the company's coaches, storing parked cars, motorcycles and push bikes. There were about eight fuel pumps plus the HQ for the coach operation; we also did private car hire and left luggage.

So, how did Rimes come about? Albert E Rimes was a real entrepreneur, he actually started as a butcher at 1 Wood Street in Old Town and one of biggest customers was Chiseldon army camp where they delivered the meat. I reckon this is the first indication of transport in the family; delivering the produce in one direction and bringing squaddies into Swindon on the return journey. In due course Albert's name crops up at the Palladium in Rodbourne, a vulcanising business in Devizes Road, Bowmaker House in Wood Street and a couple of businesses in Wroughton.

Somehow the butchery business seems to be fading away but coaches are where the action is and World War Two sadly raised its head, but indirectly it was good for Albert.

Albert was actually my grandfather. Born in 1863, he lived modestly at 15 Groundwell Road with his second wife (I don't know what happened to the first one). He had built up a coach business and had nearly twenty vehicles, some were former wartime Bedford OWBs, and also included half cabs plus a variety of different types, generally Duple designed.

I don't know how many children he fathered, I believe Maurice (my real dad) was the oldest and subsequently became the boss.

Now my surname is Newson - how come? My parents split up when I was about eight and it turned out to be a bit acrimonious. As time passed my mother remarried someone called Jack Newson and in due course my surname changed accordingly. But... garages and coach travel are in my blood, much to my late mother's annoyance.

There are some old pictures available, but I haven't got them!

And... don't ask me why I became an electrician!

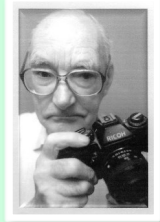


Peter Newson - April 2025

BEANEY CORNER

Here's a few more from the Beaney archive... Do you recognise anyone? If you do, please let us know.

More next month!



Avonmead



Cunningham Road



Carnival... but where?



The Wyvern Theatre Under Construction - C.1970



Fleming Way Underpass - Looking Left (The Shortcut)

