

Back Then...

Old Mill Lane
Junction
1976



The Swindon Society Newsletter - February 2026



And
Now...

February
2026



Welcome to the February Newsletter

Here we are then, February already and a steady move towards lighter evenings - and hopefully better weather!

We have an interesting evening for you tonight; a presentation by Graham Carter entitled *The Life and Death of Charles Collett*.

Graham's talks are very informative and I am sure we will all leave this evening with a better understanding of Charles Collett the man - and that he was more than just the Chief Mechanical Engineer for the GWR. Enjoy!

As always, don't forget to send me (or hand to me) your pieces for the newsletter. I'm gradually getting more contributions, which is absolutely fantastic! Please, keep it up!

If you want to contribute, just send your stories to me at:

angie.phillips@ntlworld.com
info@theswindonsociety.co.uk

Health Hydro The Past - The Future

Presented by

Andrea

14th January 2026



Courtesy of Better Leisure

Andrea began by telling us about the history of the Health Hydro.

The building was opened in 1892 having been funded solely by GWR workers - not the company. It was originally called the GWR Medical Fund Baths and Dispensary. Later, in 1948 when the Fund was dissolved due to creation of the NHS it became the NHS Health Centre and Milton Road Baths. Later again, in 1986, following the relocating of medical services to Carfax Street, the Council took over responsibility for the building. At this time, some refurbishments were carried out prior to re-branding, and the Well Women Centre and various complimentary therapists took occupancy of the "dry side" of the building. This is when the building was renamed the Health Hydro.

Andrea commented that, amazingly, despite its age, the building has not fallen into a bad state of disrepair, predominantly because this historical building has always been in use; the pools are the 3rd oldest indoor swimming pools in the country.

In 2019, the building received a Grade 2* listing status. We were told that the addition of the star is very important as this means the whole building is protected, not just the outside. Its listed status is important due to its social history not just the architectural features. Only 6% of the UK's listed buildings share this designated status.

The concept of the building was years ahead of its time. It contained everything under one roof for the railway employees - washing and leisure facilities, as well as health and welfare

Although initially opened in 1892, the building expanded over the next 20 years, and we saw photo evidence of the parts that were initially missing. It was eventually completed as we know it now in 1911, the dental suite was the last bit to be added. It had separate entrances for the medical side and the baths and also had separate waiting rooms for the men and women waiting to see the doctor or dentist.



So why was it built? Well, the railway arrived in Swindon in 1843 and New Swindon was born. Thousands of men and their families came from all over the country to work at the GWR Works. This created a need for medical facilities and bathing facilities. By 1844, the workers had already formed the Sick Club which provided for men who were unable to work due to injury in the Works. So a bit later, in 1847, the Sick Club evolved into the Medical Fund, which covered workers and their families. It was agreed that compulsory contributions would be taken from the worker's wages to pay for the provision of medical help for those who needed it, free of charge at the point of care. This was the first compulsory health fund for industrial workers of its kind and grew into the most comprehensive in the country.



The first swimming pool for employees was built in 1868 and was situated within the Works. This is where the Swindon Amateur Swimming Club (ASC) was first formed - and it is still thriving today! But the premises were too small, so they had to knock through the wall and place a railway carriage alongside to house the changing rooms.

In 1871 the Medical Fund Hospital opened (now the Central Community Centre) providing beds for injured workers. Inside, there was also a dispensary and doctors' surgery and in 1876 Park House was built to house the doctors. By 1880, medical needs were increasing so suggestions for



one building to house everything was put forward. A piece of land was purchased in 1885, and plans were drawn up for the GWR Medical Fund Baths and Dispensary. All the materials used for the building were made in the Works, with the exception of the internal glazed bricks and floor tiles, which came from Stoke on Trent.



There were no bathrooms in the worker's homes so keeping clean was hard. Initially, there were 6-8 slipper baths in the Mechanics Institute building but that was not sufficient. So, it was agreed to build an additional bath house at the rear of The Barracks. The baths moved again into a new building in Taunton Street when The Barracks later became the Methodist chapel. Later still 32 individual baths were housed in a new building that was next to, but initially separate from, the new Medical Fund building.

In 1892 the Medical Fund Baths & Dispensary opened; built in a Queen Anne style, designed by J. J. Smith of Swindon. I think Andrea said there were 60 bathing cubicles, divided into first, second and third class. If anyone spent too long in the bath the superintendent would pull the plug from the other side of the wall! Changing cubicles were provided poolside for the swimmers. There were 76 large cubicles and 46 smaller ones. Andrea showed us old photos of the small pool, which at that time was for women and children - the large pool was only for men to use. She also showed us a photo of the women's swimming club, which still exists and is the third oldest club in the country. The small pool originally had a stained-glass window but was quite soon filled in when the building was added to. There is now a mural in place of the window. The woodwork around the pool was originally dark (now painted white). Andrea commented that the extra detailing to the finish was quite lovely considering it was utilitarian.



1905 - Courtesy of STEAM

We were then shown a photo of Walter Barkwood with an impressive array of swimming medals and trophies on display. He went on to become an official, but little is known about him. If you have any information about him, please let Andrea know.

Then it was on to the big pool, pictured with decorative hanging baskets. The pool is 36 yards long; the longest swimming pool in Wiltshire. We saw herringbone style brickwork tiles around the window; sadly, a hundred years later, these were painted over in white. Andrea commented that surprisingly, considering the age of the building, not many of the wooden runners or windows need replacing as pitch pine seasoned timber was used in construction.



During the summer the water to heat the pools was piped all the way from the



GWR Works. In the winter though, it was too cold, so the large pool was boarded over and used for concerts, roller-skating and majestic balls and dances, etc. Lots of bands played there and we were

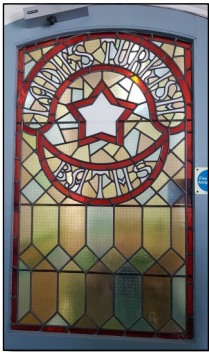
informed that King Edward VIII once attended a dance for an hour or so, prior to his abdication. Next was a photo of a Liberal rally, headed by Lloyd George; the place was packed out!

And during WWI the same space was commandeered as a hospital from August 1914 to June 1915. This was a temporary arrangement until Chiseldon army camp was completed.

We saw an old photo of the dispensary; in later years this same area was utilised as a café, and then a gym. Other uses for the building included chiropody clinics, hair salon, dental surgery and above the hair salon was a committee room. We could see that some of the lovely, glazed bricks had been replaced but the floor was still original.



We saw a photo of the Turkish baths (which are officially the oldest continually functioning Turkish baths in the country) and the plunge pools. The ladies' Turkish baths were situated directly above the men's so they could utilise the rising heat from below; we saw a photo of the lovely window in the entrance door to the ladies' facilities. Next up was the men's urinals with more glazed brickwork on the walls and the original fixtures still looking great.



In 1948, when Nye Bevan rolled out the NHS, it was largely based on the workings of the GWR Medical Fund and ran in much the same way - obviously on a much bigger scale. At this time, the NHS took over the facilities, and the building was renamed as the NHS Health Centre and Milton Road Baths. However, in 1986, the medical centre was moved to Carfax Street, and the building became the responsibility of the Council. It was refurbished and re-invented, housing complimentary medical treatments and the Well Woman Centre, as well as the swimming baths. Although still owned by the Council, Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL) took control of the facility in 2014, but without investment, by 2017 the building was run down and in need of renovation. A suggestion was put forward to convert the building into flats, but *Friends of the Health Hydro* fought against this, desperate for the building to remain functional for the benefit of the community. They put in lots of bids to fund repairs.

Restoration finally started in 2021, following funding of £1.5 million from SBC, £5 million from the Swindon Town Deal, £435,000 from Historic England and further funding allocations from GLL. Andrea informed us that essential work is being prioritised, and the facility will open up in stages. This initial funding has supported the first stage and included:

- Repair to the building's façade on Faringdon Road
- New energy efficient glass in the roofs and new roofs.
- New plant for all the building's needs and making it future-proof.
- Removal of the slipper baths and conversion into a new reception with a gym and fitness suite
- Roof and gutter repairs
- New ventilation systems
- A new access to new changing facilities (level to the baths)
- New boiler and filter system for the big pool
- New heater for the Turkish baths
- Complete new electrical supply for the whole building.

Another £4.5 million bid for funding has been submitted for phase two. This will involve the renovation of the big pool, replacement of windows with energy efficient glass, and stripping of roof tiles to insert insulation. Half a million will be needed for a temporary roof while repairs are underway, which will then be knocked down once repairs are complete. Painted brickwork is being cleaned, hopefully the herringbone wall tiles can be restored too. Improvements include under floor heating for the changing rooms, restoring the doors on the window end of the balcony so that they are symmetrical, relining the pool and removing the lip around the edge of the pool.

Future phases will include work to the Turkish baths, small pool and the dry side area. GLL are keen to sort out the Turkish baths so that they can offer a spa experience. The re-opening of the small pool is controversial due to cost (about £2 million just for that area) but *Friends* are not giving up. A space in the plant room has been left to fit a filter for the small pool, so it is not yet out of the question! Meanwhile the big pool and gym are now open for use so go and have some fun!



Courtesy of SBC

With many thanks to Andrea for a fabulous presentation, I'm sure we all learned something new about the Hydro's history that we were previously unaware of. What a thoroughly interesting evening we all had!

Angie Phillips - January 2026



Appeal for Committee Members

Are there any members out there that would like to come and sit on the committee? It's not difficult or time-consuming (about 1½ hours per month) and you don't need any specialist knowledge about Swindon... we mostly run on enthusiasm!

We ask this question in earnest as some of our long-serving committee members have made it known that they would like to step down from the committee at the end of the season, in May. It's not for any particular reason other than they have spent many years behind the scenes helping to make sure our meetings run smoothly, are interesting, and that everyone has an enjoyable evening. Now, they would quite like to just turn up with everyone else and enjoy the meetings too and not be one of those responsible for ensuring that it all goes to plan. I think you will agree it's not an unreasonable request, and it's only fair as they have done an incredible job over the years.

The thing is, without other members stepping forward to replace them on the committee, we may be a little scuppered. You see it needs more than a few heads to run the Society, indeed the best way for it to operate is with a full committee of approximately 12 members. Of course, the remaining committee members will do all they can to continue running the Society as usual, but with fewer of them having to take on more responsibility, there may be a danger that they too may not want to stay on the committee, and then there will be no Society at all.

Please, please give your consideration to volunteering if you can.
We hope you will all understand why we keep asking this question.

Your Swindon Society needs you!



Memories of Old Town - Part Two

Following on from our January Newsletter, we have more lovely Old Town memories from Derek Hearl, and some research by Membership Secretary, Debra, on Mrs Cullinan.

Derek says...

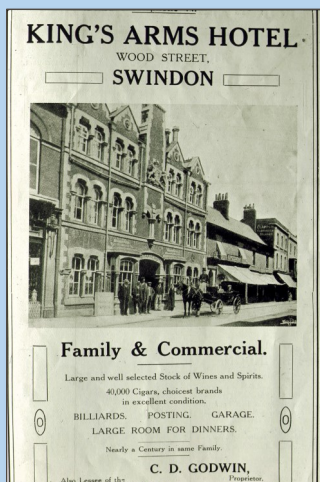
Firstly, my grandfather, Thomas Hazell, owned not only numbers 8-11 Cricklade Street, but also much of the land behind those numbers both sides of the access road to the King's Arms Hotel; on that land he had a series of workshops all of



which I remember very clearly from my childhood.

Secondly, I also remember that what must have been number 7 Cricklade Street was a paper merchant of some description, set well back from the rest of the road, while number 6 had been Sampson's grocer's shop; in Wood Street itself there had been a little sweet shop, a book shop, a gentlemen's outfitters where I got my first long trousers and there was a chemists/opticians, Shawyer and Blake where, knowing that I was short-sighted, I got my first driving glasses from Mr Blake.

I think there must have been a ladies clothing shop and there definitely was a butcher near or at the archway from Wood Street through to the car park and at the top of the street on the right-hand side there was a baker where I first had scotch pancakes!

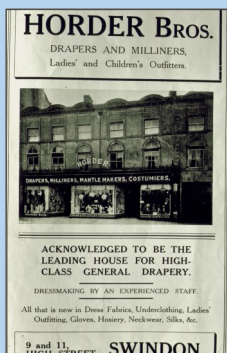




Where High Street was concerned not only was there another butcher shop, probably Smith, which was well known for its marble letters, and I am quite certain that somewhere on the left-hand side of the street there had been a draper's shop, but I cannot remember exactly where it was.



With regards to Mrs Cullinan, although I don't remember anything in particular that we talked about, I do remember once asking her where in Ireland she had been from and she told me Ennis, in County



Clare. Very many years later when my wife and I were on holiday in Ireland, I deliberately went to look at Ennis which I remember was an unremarkable town, but nevertheless it was a kind of pilgrimage.

Derek Heart - February - 2026

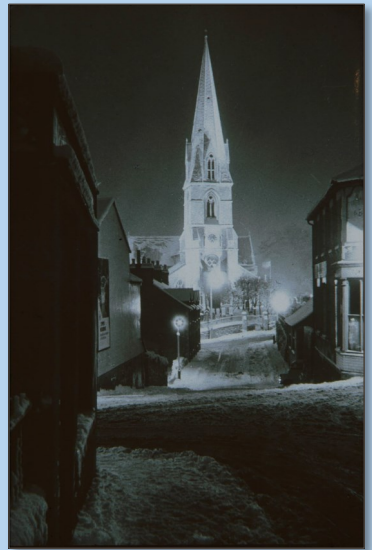


Debra says...

I loved receiving Derek's memories and found it fascinating that Mrs Cullinan lived in the right-hand gate lodge at the entrance of the driveway to The Lawn mansion as it was tiny.



I was so intrigued about this Irish lady living in the gate lodge that I looked up Mrs Cullinan in the '1939 England and Wales Register' for Swindon dated 9 October 1939 to see if I could find her. Sure enough, it lists 'Emily F. Cullinan' as living in 'Lawn Lodge High Street', born 19 June 1876, a widow, with her occupation listed as 'Unpaid Domestic Duties'. I then wondered if she was buried at Christ Church living so close by. I looked at the burial database on the Christ Church website www.christchurchswindon.co.uk and indeed she was! Emily was buried there on 3 February 1961, and her death registration shows she was aged 84. It also gave her grave location and plot number.



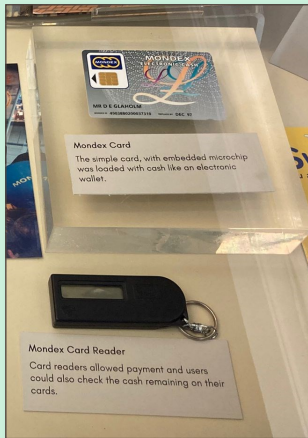
So, I'm off soon to Christ Church to see if Emily Cullinan has a gravestone. I'll write up my findings in the March newsletter.

Debra Melsom - February 2026

Remember Mondex?

I recently listened to a podcast on BBC Sounds all about Mondex and it got me reminiscing. I was only 13 years old when it was launched in July 1995, so until my mum came home with a Mondex card (plus keyring card reader) each for me and my sisters, I was not in the least bit aware of what it was. I hadn't known it was launching or that a dedicated Mondex shop was opening on Regent Street, near Mclloy's. There were 620 locations where Mondex could be used in Swindon, across 1,900 different terminals. These days, with our town centre half empty and online shopping making up approximately 30% of all retail transactions in the UK, I'd be hard pressed to think of 620 different locations in Swindon where it could be used! However, back in 1995 Mondex was pioneering in the way it stored cash as a credit and used a form of chip and pin system for secure use.





I loved my Mondex card. I mostly used it on the bus to get to the town centre, usually for work. I had a Saturday job in Swiss Chalet (the bakery, not the pub) when I was 14 so I topped up my card (often using one of the specially adapted BT payphones) with my wages and then I could also use the card in Swiss Chalet to buy lunch or some cakes to take home at the end of the day (when they were cheaper!).

I was definitely in the minority though – I don't recall many other Mondex payments being made at the till, although I do vaguely remember it being quite popular with other teenagers. Let's face it, carrying a little card in your wallet to pay for stuff

definitely made me feel very grown-up at 14 years old. Nowadays, an awful lot of children much younger than that have their own pre-loaded cash cards – which was exactly what Mondex was. It also catered for those who were unable to have credit or debit cards. Like I said – pioneering.

Swindon was chosen to trial Mondex because it was identified as a microcosm of the UK - in 2008 the Office of National Statistics identified it as the most average town in the country and since 1983 it has been seen as a 'bellwether' seat politically – meaning that the way people vote in a general election in Swindon is likely to be reflected in the result of the election as a whole. Although it was also trialled at other locations internationally, Swindon was the largest trial and was therefore arguably the most successful. Whilst the trial came to a quiet end in 1998, chip and pin for credit and debit cards became mandatory in the UK in 2006 around the same time that pre-paid debit cards were also coming into use.



In Swindon, we were asking “what took so long?!”

The short BBC Sounds podcast is still available to listen to as part of the series *The Ideas List*, featuring friend of the Swindon Society, Richard Wintle.

Kelly Blake - February 2026

A Facebook Find

A Young Stephen Fry Is Arrested in Swindon

1

Street Crime UK · Follow 20h · G

The Night Stephen Fry Was Arrested in Swindon — The Hotel Room That Changed British Television Forever

It was a quiet September evening in 1975 when an 18-year-old Stephen Fry checked into a grand hotel in Swindon — and unknowingly stepped into the moment that would redirect the entire course of his life.

At the time, Fry was not a national treasure, not a broadcaster, not a writer, not a comedian. He was a troubled teenager spiralling through what he would later describe as a chaotic and manic period of his youth.

Expelled from two schools, battling undiagnosed bipolar disorder, and deeply unhappy, Fry had already attempted suicide by the age of sixteen. After leaving Norfolk College of Arts and Technology, his life unravelled further when he gained access to stolen credit cards belonging to a family friend.

What followed was, in his own words, a three-month spree.

With the cards in his pocket, Fry travelled across England staying in hotels, eating lavish meals, buying clothes, jewellery and anything else that caught his eye. He later told *The New York Times* that upon receiving the cards he said to himself, "What ho!" — and promptly went "ape".

2

By early September 1975, the journey brought him to Wiltshire.

He arrived in Swindon and checked into what was then the Wiltshire Hotel on Fleming Way, proudly advertising itself as four-star accommodation. Fry later recalled counting the stars on the sign and deciding that such luxury was exactly what life owed him.

He tipped the porter 50 pence — a small fortune at the time — and headed upstairs feeling triumphant.

Still restless, he left the hotel again, purchasing new shoes and impulsively stealing an Ingersoll watch from a jeweller before returning to his room.

Inside, he felt untouchable.

Until he opened the door.

Waiting inside his hotel room were two men in grey suits.

Fry, utterly oblivious, assumed they were hotel staff.

"It's all right," he said cheerfully. "If you can come back and clean later, I'll leave the room free for you in about an hour."

One man asked, "Mrs Bridges?"

"Yes."

"Mr Edward Bridges?"

3

"That's right..."

Only when they identified themselves as police officers did reality finally crash down.

They informed him they had reason to believe he had been using a stolen credit card.

To spare the hotel embarrassment, Fry was handcuffed discreetly — each man keeping a hand in the other's pocket — and escorted down the stairs. A third officer carried Fry's suitcase in silence.

Expecting to be placed into a waiting police car, Fry was instead marched directly across the road.

Barely thirty yards from the hotel entrance stood a large blue sign:

WILTSHIRE CONSTABULARY.

He had committed his crimes almost directly opposite the town's main police station.

"I hope I get special consideration," Fry joked, "for being easy on the legwork."

"Special consideration for being such a prannett as to commit a crime within sight of a police station?" replied the officer.

Inside the station, matters worsened.

4

Attempting to conceal his identity, Fry gave a false name during questioning — until a policeman popped his head around the door and said casually:

"Oh, Stephen — one thing I forgot to ask..."

"Yes?"

"Aha! So it is Stephen, then?"

The deception collapsed instantly.

That night, Stephen Fry slept in the cells of Swindon police station.

The following morning he was brought before local magistrates and remanded in custody, transferred in a prison van to Pucklechurch remand centre near Bristol — a young offenders' institution.

He would spend three months there.

Those months, Fry later admitted, were brutal but transformative.

Stripped of bravado, luxury and fantasy, he was forced to confront the trajectory of his life. When he later returned to Swindon to enter his plea and again to stand trial, the magistrates ruled that the time he had already served was sufficient punishment and placed him on probation.

He walked free — with one final chance.

5

And this time, he took it.

After his release, Fry returned to education, enrolling at City College Norwich. He committed himself fully, passed his exams, and earned a scholarship to Queen's College, Cambridge.

There, he joined the Cambridge Footlights — the legendary comedy society that has produced generations of British performers.

From that point on, his ascent was unstoppable.

University Challenge appearances followed. Then comedy partnerships. Writing. Television. Film. Broadcasting. Literature.

The young man who once stole watches and hotel rooms became one of Britain's most respected intellectual entertainers — a writer, actor and broadcaster admired for wit, empathy and honesty.

Years later, hosting the BAFTA Awards in 2013, Fry made a brief joke about "a magistrate who gave me one final chance".

Few realised the line was entirely true.

That chance began not in Cambridge, not on stage, not in television — but in a Swindon hotel room overlooking a police station.

A night in a cell.

A young man at rock bottom.

6

And the moment Britain very nearly lost one of its most beloved voices before he had even found it.

Do people truly change — or are some lives simply redirected by one narrow escape? And how many futures are decided by a single courtroom decision?

#StreetCrimeUK #StephenFry #TrueCrimeUK #BritishCrime #CrimeHistory #Swindon #RealCrimeUK #CelebrityCrime #LifeTurnedAround #SecondChances #UKJustice #PoliceHistory #CrimeAndRedemption #Britishicons

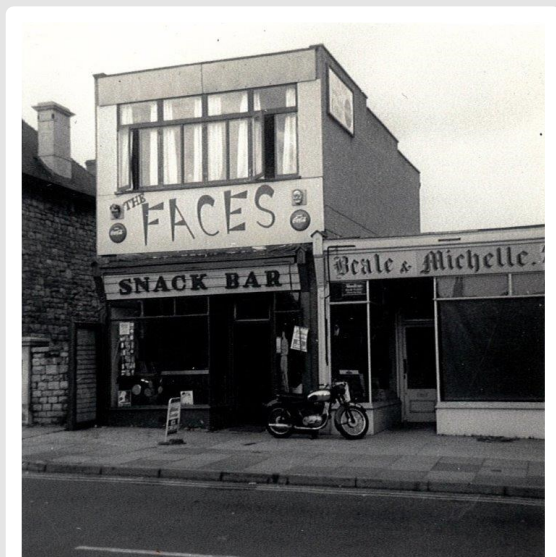


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Sent to me by Kevin Bizley - February 2026

Faces Snack Bar, Gorse Hill - 1953

Commonweal School for Sale - Evening Adver
25th May 1978



LARGE detached 3-bed house with double garage. Well situated in Moreton. £24,500 o.n.o. — Tel. 25221. — PS 29—5

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£5,000 buys a modern studio flat in Wootton Bassett. Whether you are single, retired or just about to marry and set up home, you'll find a modern Barratt Studio Flat at Shakespeare Road, Wootton Bassett, is just ideal. Compact and easy to manage and maintain, easy on fuel bills too. And what's more you will almost certainly find the mortgage repayment is less than paying rent. And because Barratt have special

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The Rear of the Health Hydro in Chester Street - 1973

