

Back Then...

Rehoboth
Baptist Chapel
Prospect Hill
1968



The Swindon Society Newsletter - March 2026



And
Now...
March
2026



Welcome to the March Newsletter

It's hard to believe that Spring is here already, and I was recently thinking - does anyone remember seeing the words "SPRING HAS SPRUNG" written out in daffodils on the banks of the Great Western Way, en route to Royal Wootton Bassett? I have tried really hard to look for them over the years but the trees have grown so big and thick on the bank that you can't see the daffodils for the growth. Let me know if you manage to see a glimpse; you have to be a passenger to get a good look.

Tonight we welcome Tim Bryan with a presentation entitled *Iron, Stone & Steam: Brunel's Railway Kingdom*. I'm sure you'll agree that it sounds really interesting; I for one am really looking forward to it. Enjoy!

I would just like to say many thanks to those who have sent me their words for the newsletter. It's lovely to see it full of various people's memories and stories, it makes it so interesting! Send me anything you want to and I will do my best to find images to accompany your words and complete the article.

You can hand me your pieces, or send them to me at either email address:

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

The Life and Death of Charles Collett

Presented by

Graham Carter & Michael Roberts

11th February 2026



In February we had the pleasure of Graham Carter presenting to us on the subject of Charles Collett, Chief Mechanical Engineer of the GWR Works in arguably its most important period. Unfortunately, Graham's co-presenter Michael Roberts was unable to attend, but Graham did a sterling job alone.

Although less celebrated than figures like I.K. Brunel or Daniel Gooch, Graham argued that Collett was one of Swindon's most intelligent and influential individuals. Despite his impact, Collett is commemorated only by a picture in STEAM and by Collett Avenue, and he lies in an unmarked grave in Wimbledon. Just one book has been written about him - *C.B. Collett: A Competent Successor*. Graham aimed to right these wrongs in the presentation, and he certainly won me over on Collett's importance.

Graham began with the biographical details of Collett, prior to him becoming Chief Mechanical Engineer. He was described by Graham as being an unusual man for his

time, due to his vegetarianism, opposition to bloodsports and acceptance of alternative medicines. He succeeded G.J. Churchward, a charismatic and hands-on manager, whereas Collett was quieter and more reserved. Born in 1871, he attended Merchant Taylors' School and joined the GWR in 1893, rising rapidly through the ranks and becoming Works Manager in 1912. He oversaw major developments, including the building of A Shop, which was (at the time of its completion) one of the largest covered buildings in the world. Collett also led significant wartime efforts during WWI, such as producing 100 locomotives to be built and shipped to France, adding extra trains for the carrying of 37,000 troops, and building the first ambulance train just 22 days after the outbreak of hostilities. He received an OBE for his contributions.

Courtesy of Swindon Libraries



**Charles Benjamin
Collett OBE**



King George V

Appointed Chief Mechanical Engineer in 1922, Collett oversaw what Graham described as the GWR's golden age, until his retirement in 1941. His achievements included the design of the Castle, King, Manor and Hall classes, new tank engines, and extensive rolling stock design. His first King Class locomotive, King George V, was shipped for exhibition to America, which was a great success. Graham

also told us about the challenges which Collett navigated, such as: the Great Depression; railway grouping (where the smaller railways were absorbed into the "Big Four"); the royal visit by King George V and Queen Mary; increased competition from road transport; the loss of his deputy William Stanier to LMS; and personal tragedy with the death of his wife Ethelwyn in 1923, aged just 47.

Graham then told us how, after Ethelwyn's death, Collett became reclusive and increasingly involved in



Royal Visit

Spiritualism. In his retirement, he lived in Wimbledon with Blanche Cooper, a medium, and her husband Henry. He also later developed a close connection with renowned medium Gladys Osborne Leonard. She was allegedly able to contact Ethelwyn and, after her death in 1943, Blanche too. Collett died in 1952, leaving his estate to Leonard and being buried in an adjoining plot to the Coopers.

According to Graham, Collett's legacy remains significant: 90 preserved steam locomotives are of his designs, and many engines in Thomas the Tank Engine and even the Hall Class locomotive used as the Hogwarts Express trace back to him. Both are major global brands, quietly furthering the legacy of Collett. Railway nostalgia is largely built around these very recognisable engines of Collett's era. A recent crowdfunded effort to mark Collett's grave was halted when notes from Collett were found in STEAM's archives, revealing he did not want a gravestone. However, this was a disappointment to Graham and Michael, as they wanted to memorialise a great man. So, Graham described how an alternative memorial was made instead, interring a copy of Collett's biography in stone and placing that by the grave.



Olton Hall Loco

Graham's presentations never fail to disappoint. Making everything interesting, he knows his stuff backwards and I look forward to whatever he brings to the Society on his next visit up at the front of the hall.

Kelly Blake - February 2026



Appeal for Committee Members

We are delighted to say that a couple of members have come forward and offered to serve as committee members in the forthcoming year. This is truly wonderful news and we would like to extend our grateful thanks and appreciation to those individuals.

However, even though this is very good news, ideally we would still like a couple more committee members to get us up to our full complement, if possible - so there is still time to consider joining us. Maybe you have been thinking about stepping forward, but were wary of doing this by yourself - now could be the perfect time to do something about it and join us with the others.

Just so that you know, the present committee will continue to stand until May, when we have our AGM and vote in the committee for the next season. Remember, it's not difficult or time-consuming (about 1½ hours per month) and you don't need any specialist knowledge about Swindon, just lots of enthusiasm!

Thank you for taking the time to read this and understanding why we continue to ask for help.

Here's hoping for a full committee for next season!

Your Swindon Society still needs you!



Memories of Old Town - Part Three

Following on from our February newsletter, we now have the results of the research on Mrs Cullinan of Lawn Lodge, Old Town by Membership Secretary, Debra.

Debra says... *In the February newsletter I said I would visit Christ Church to see if Emily Cullinan has a gravestone. Recently, on a drizzly Saturday afternoon, I found her plot - Grave 477 in the Northern section. It is a lovely area beneath a beautiful tree, but I was disappointed to see Emily didn't have a gravestone. However, there was another Cullinan gravestone on the exact spot, for T. B. Cullinan and, most intriguingly, it was a Commonwealth War Grave.*



This sent me down another rabbit hole of research to try and find out who T.B. Cullinan was and how he could be related to Emily Cullinan. Little did I know that I would find out all about him, his relationship to Emily and that subsequent research would reveal another local connection.

To cut a long (research) story short, I discovered that Thomas Brady Cullinan was born in Ennis, County Clare, Ireland on 15th May 1906. Known as Tommy, he was the son of Frederick George Cullinan (1860-1925), a Major during the Boer War serving in Ireland and later a long-serving Sheriff for the town of Ennis, a position he held for 35 years. Tommy's mother was Emily Frances Brady-Brown; her family lived at Feighmore, Carrahan, Quin, County Clare. So, I'd found the connection – Emily was Tommy's mother!

Tommy started out as an amateur jockey in 1923, aged 18, and in 1927 he became a champion amateur. That year, he came to England with Frank Barbour, a wealthy, eccentric, linen thread manufacturer from Ulster, and the former owner of the small, beautifully fashioned chestnut 'Easter Hero'. Tommy then turned professional in January 1928.

Tommy went on to win the Irish Grand National in April 1928 riding 'Don Sancho' and that same year he rode 'Billy Barton' to second place in the Liverpool Grand National. 'Billy Barton' was trained in Wroughton at the Barcelona Stables owned by the Hon. Aubrey Hastings,



Tommy Cullinan

the youngest son of the Countess of Huntingdon, his full name was Aubrey Craven Theophilus Robin Hood Hastings. (Hasting's son was Peter Robin Hood Hastings (1920–1964) later renamed Peter Hastings-Bass; his daughter is Emma Hastings-Bass and the mother of broadcaster Clare Balding). Hastings was an aristocrat, jockey, polo player, and one of Britain's most successful early-20th-century National Hunt trainers. Billy Barton's trainer was Ivor Anthony who worked at the Barcelona Stables, and who took over the running of the stables with Mrs Hastings after Aubrey's death in 1929. Anthony specialised in top-level National Hunt horses. Therefore, at the height of his career, Tommy had professional ties to the local area as well as Swindon being the then home of his mother.



Barcelona House and Stables



The Convent

Barcelona House and Racing Stables had been located at The Pitches, Wroughton since 1890. It was demolished and replaced with the Convent of the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Spirit in 1969. That too ceased to be in 2002, and the modern houses of St Helens Gardens now occupy the site.

(My father was born at The Pitches in January 1930, and he tells me he remembers seeing Ivor Anthony, and his brother Jack, around the village. He says you could hear the horses neighing at Barcelona Stables from their cottage. He also said Mrs Hastings gave him a pair of boots that once belonged to Jack).

In 1930, Tommy achieved the unique unofficial National Hunt Triple Crown by winning the Grand National riding 'Shaun Goilin', the Cheltenham Gold Cup riding 'Easter Hero' and the Champion Hurdle on 'Brown Tony', all in the same season - an unprecedented feat at the time. Shaun Goilin had been a chance ride. Tommy had been due to partner 'Easter Hero' but switched mounts when that horse fell lame. (The English meaning of 'Shaun Goilin' is 'John the Fairy'). Tommy said after his win, 'I think there must be something of a fairy

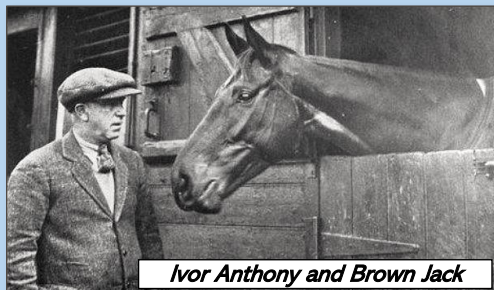
**JUMPING ON THE
HARD AT TOTNES**



**CAPTAIN AND MRS. GILBERT KING
AND (CENTRE) TOMMY CULLINAN**

about him, judging by the way he carried me to victory at Liverpool, he gave me a most marvellous ride'.

However, without doubt the best known and best loved horse ever to have been trained at the Barcelona Stables in Wroughton was the cheese sandwich-loving 'Brown Jack' who we've all heard of. (That's another story for another day!)



Ivor Anthony and Brown Jack

Tommy later served as a Gunner in the Royal Artillery, 90 Battery, 35 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment during WWII. Based at RAF Benson in Oxfordshire in the spring of 1940, on 11th April, tragically Tommy Cullinan was shot dead by a nervous sentry as he was returning home after a night out on the town – well, that was the story put about at the time. Contemporary reports described the circumstances of his death as an accident, and precise details were withheld at his inquest for 'reasons of national interest'.

The sad truth is that Tommy, aged 33, took his own life. His death certificate records that Tommy... 'shot himself in the heart with his service rifle whilst the balance of his mind was disturbed'.

Tommy was buried at Christ Church, Swindon on 16th April 1940. On 19th April 1940, The North Wilts Herald reported details of his funeral. His mother, Emily Frances Cullinan attended (recorded in her husband's name of Mrs F.G. Cullinan).

The Funeral

Several well-known people from racing circles were among the mourners at the funeral on Tuesday at the Parish Church, Swindon.

The coffin was covered with the Union Jack.

The service and interment at the Parish Church were conducted by Canon J. Gilbert.

The principal mourners were Mrs. F. G. Cullinan (mother), Mr. John Cullinan (brother), and Mrs. T. A. Sutton.

Among others present were: Mr. John Beary, trainer, of Tilshead, and Mrs. Beary; Mr H. G. Blagrove, owner-trainer, of Beckhampton, and Mr. Peter Blagrove; Major C. V. Burnside, Lieut. J. P. Robinson and Lieut. C. J. Forbes (A.A. Battery, Royal Artillery), Miss E. Goldsmith, Miss B. Banham, Mrs. B. Corp, Mrs. A. Farr, Mrs. M. A. Head, Miss A. S. Walters, Mrs. R. G. Carpenter, Mrs. A. M. Bell and Mr. B. James.



Work at Cheriton Nursing Home, February 2026

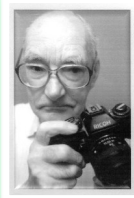
Emily Frances Cullinan's death certificate shows her occupation as 'of the Chalet, Westlecot Manor, Swindon', and that she died on 31st January 1961 at Cheriton Nursing Home, Westlecot Road, aged 84. The burial register at Christ Church shows she was buried alongside her son, Tommy, on 3rd February 1961.

May they both Rest in Peace.

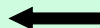
Debra Melsom - March 2026

BEANEY CORNER

Beaney Corner is back this month, albeit a bit smaller. Here are few photographs from the vast Beaney collection. Let us know if you recognise anyone. More to come next month!



Abbey
View



Beech
Avenue



Albion
Street



Research Request from Philip Garrahan

Philip Garrahan is researching the life and work of the Swindon sculptor Harry Carlton Attwood (1907-1985) who was born and bred in Old Town. He became very well known in Swindon and made a number of important public works. Among his pieces are the *Lion* in the town centre, the *Watchers* in Toothill and *Harold Fleming* at the County Ground. Although some commissions for the statues he made were for locations in Swindon, for example in St Luke's church, others came from further afield. He has pieces in Eltham Palace and in the former home of AA Milne. He also painted murals and a few of his important works still survive. Any advice or information which helps to compile a comprehensive list of these and other works would be gratefully appreciated, especially if there are any in private collections. It is known that he often sold his statues inexpensively or gifted them to friends and family, but there is no complete record of these works.

Philip edited *Made in Swindon: a social history 1840s-1940s*, published by Hobnob Press in 2025. He can be contacted at: pgarrahan48@gmail.com.

He writes a free blog about art at this address: philipgarrahan.substack.com

The Bells Ring Out At Sevenhampton Church

I grew up in the village of Sevenhampton, a 20 minute drive from Swindon town centre. From my bedroom window I had an uninterrupted view of the Victorian village church. Church bells are part of our national heritage and deeply rooted in British culture. It's hard to imagine a day when they would fall silent, but unfortunately that's exactly what happened at Sevenhampton more than 50 years ago, ending what many would have regarded at the time as an important part of village life. However, to my surprise something rather unexpected happened during the week leading up to Christmas Day 2025, more about that later.

The first reliable record of a place of worship in Sevenhampton is a reference to the Chapel of St. James in 1393. The Warneford family, owners of the lands surrounding the village who were staunch Roman Catholics, had a chapel built in the village for the purpose of daily Mass. The church, familiar to countless generations of the Warneford family is long gone, the church that exists today is a mere 164 years old.

In 1861, the Lady of the Manor, Harriet Warneford, died and left a substantial sum of money in her will to a trusted friend of the family, Joseph Sewell, a respected solicitor and sole executor to her Ladyship. Early in 1862 a proposal was made to demolish the existing church, described as a rather plain and unsightly building of little architectural merit, and erect a new church on the same site. The cost of the new church was around £4,000 and funded entirely from the legacy bequeathed to Mr Sewell and would honour the memory of her Ladyship. William Pedley, a 23 year-old local architect from Highworth was selected to design the new church, and the family firm of Messrs Pedley & Son were entrusted with the building of the village's new place of worship. The church built in the early English style was consecrated at a service held in September 1863. The lack of a burial ground in the village was also addressed when a graveyard was added - prior to 1863, villagers were laid to rest in the churchyard at St. Michael's Parish Church, Highworth. Wind the clock on 110 years and the church was starting to show its age, the roof needed replacing and the bells had fallen silent after it was decided that



A pen, brush and ink drawing of the former church at Sevenhampton by John Buckler F.S.A (1770-1851) and dated 1810.

A newspaper article written at the time of the consecration of the new church referred to it as a rude, square, unpretentious edifice with a wooden steeple.

they were unsafe to ring. There was no electricity in the church, the interior was lit by gaslight, it was as if you had been transported back to Victorian times. When I was in my late teens, I would occasionally pump the organ at the church services. This involved intermittently moving a lever up and down to pump air into the bellows, which in turn forced air via a reservoir into the organ pipes to make a sound when the organist was playing. On more than one occasion, a slightly irritated organist would find the sound of the organ start to fade as he was playing it, as I hadn't noticed the gauge indicating how much air was left in the reservoir was heading towards empty.

Fundraising for a new church roof began in earnest and various events were held during the late 1970s and early 1980s including whist drives, cheese & wine parties, musical soirees and a flower festival. Eventually enough money was raised to replace the roof, but there were no plans to restore the bells and I for one didn't expect to hear them ring again. On a brighter note, literally, mains electricity was installed in the church, no more pumping of the church organ required!

Imagine my surprise when by chance I stumbled on a newspaper article a few days before last Christmas with the headline - 'Sevenhampton church bells to ring for the first time in 55 years'. Apparently, two local residents had been able to carry out some restoration work with the help of a bell foundry expert, enabling five of the church's six bells to be rung safely. The bells rang out across the village for the first time since 1971 on the evening of the 17th December when the village carol service took place, they were to be rung again on Christmas Day.

My wife, Caroline and I attended the church service at Sevenhampton on Christmas Day and it was lovely to hear the bells ringing out across the village. It was a surreal moment for me as they had been silent for

as long as I could remember, so long in fact, it was like I was hearing them ring for the first time.

Whilst it was great that the bells could be rung after such a long time, major restoration work will need to be carried out including the removal of the original oak bell frame and replacing it with one made of steel. It will be a major undertaking for a small village like Sevenhampton to raise the funds needed to remove the bells, replace the frame, and rehang them for future generations to enjoy.



The view from my bedroom window on a snowy Easter morning way back in 1975.

I'm sure they are up to the challenge as was the case when the roof needed replacing back in the 1970s.



Left: A postcard of St. James' Church dated 1905. It occupies a prominent position in the middle of a field which is the site of a medieval settlement.



Left: St. James' Church as it is today and probably best known for being the final resting place of the novelist and creator of James Bond, Ian Fleming.

Chris Prew - January 2026



Psst... Did you Know?

Remember this image from the back page of our December newsletter?... Well Andy Partridge, of XTC fame, has confirmed that the lady standing third from the left is his mum!



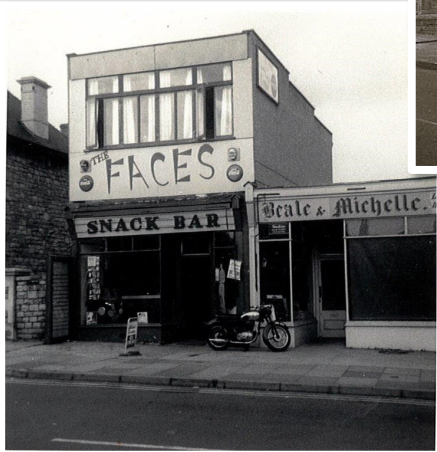
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Website: www.swindon.gov.uk/localstudies
Gallery: www.flickr.com/swindonlocal

Opening Hours

Mon: By appointment only
Tues: 10am to 4.00pm
Wed: 10am to 4.00pm
Sat: 10am to 1.00pm

Below:
Image from last month -
Faces Snack Bar
Gorse Hill - 1953



Above: Same buildings, but note
the petrol pumps outside the
Motor Accessories Shop.
What do we think
earlier or later photo?



Swindon Station c.1905

