

Back Then...
Sanford Street
Taken From
Edgeware
Road - 1974



The Swindon Society

Newsletter - May 2026



And
More
Recently
October
2020



Welcome to the May Newsletter

Welcome to the last meeting of the season (can you believe that!) We still have our summer outing to enjoy - a tour around the Health Hydro - and we will let you have more details about that soon.

So, a slightly earlier start to our meeting tonight and first up is the AGM, which we will hopefully quickly whizz through. And then we will be on to the good stuff - our main event entitled Queenstown (Not Kimmerfields) presented by John Stooke and Kevin Leahey.

Just so that you know, you can find the AGM agenda on the centre pages of this newsletter.

Finally, here's my usual reminder that anyone can contribute to the newsletter. Just send your memories and/or stories to either of the emails below. Remember - this is YOUR newsletter!

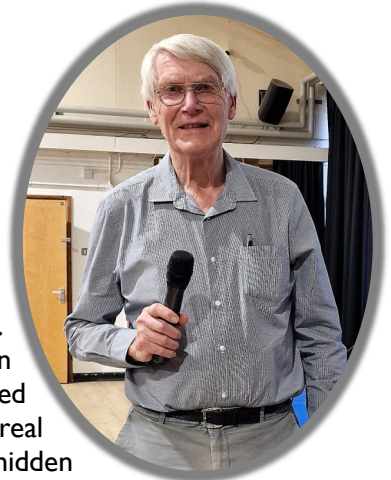
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South Swindon Green Trail

Presented by
John Farrow
8th April 2026

We had a fascinating presentation from John Farrow in April about something I had never heard of before - the South Swindon Green Trail. Although I recognised many places from my own walks, I had no idea this 9km circular route existed right on my doorstep. The talk was therefore a real revelation, highlighting both familiar scenery and hidden details.

John began where he starts his walk - at Shaftesbury Lake in Park South. Having completed the walk earlier that day, John shared his observations, including bluebells in bloom along the route towards Coate Water. At the entrance gates, he pointed out an unusual detail: one gate was painted black while the others were green, something I had never noticed before. A 1920s photograph from the Local Studies Dixon-Attwell collection showed the gates once attached to a fence, making them much more functional! In the background of this historic image, the



home of Richard Jefferies could be seen.

John then explained the origins of Coate Water. Built in 1822 on Mr Wyndham's land, the reservoir supplied water to the Wilts & Berks Canal, as Swindon lay at the highest point along the route. Covering fifty-two acres and holding 122

million gallons, it remains an impressive structure and is now a Site of Special Scientific Interest. Other images included ice skating during the winter of 1963 and the avenue of lime trees, planted just 35 years earlier but already well established.

The route continues past the pitch and putt course and between the golf course and the M4. This stretch offers both wildlife and history, including an old railway culvert from the Midland & South Western Junction Railway. We also passed Nightingale Farm (a Grade II listed building) and Casso's Wood, where eight hundred trees had been planted in memory of Cassandra Clunies-Ross. Although two stone circles were believed to be nearby, John was unable to find them.



The Wish Hounds



Wildlife sightings included robins, primroses, sloe bushes, and a new badger sett, though its occupants remained elusive.

Next, the trail enters Croft Country Park and goes past the Wish Hounds sculpture from 1994. While clearly depicting dogs, John explained that “wish” was derived from an old Sussex word meaning marsh. The route then continues into Wichelstowe. Here, we passed East Wichel Park, home to a confirmed stone circle (something John could confidently identify

given his experience as a tour guide at Avebury), as well as a Tiny Forest.

The path then climbs steeply to the Old Town Railway Path. A distinctive house on the slope stood out for John, due to the two Citroën 2CV cars parked outside. At the railway bridge, concrete blocks installed during the Second World War as anti-tank defences can still be seen. Heading west along the path, stones engraved with poetry add interest, whilst Mill Lane featured a curious road sign declaring it permanently closed due to ice! John also shared that the nearby land cannot be developed because of a medieval sunken village. From the canal bridge, John described terrapins living in the water and



showed aerial photographs taken before the development of Wichelstowe. Historical images of Skew Bridge followed, along with a video about its construction, narrated by Society member Roy Cartwright.

Continuing towards Kingshill, we saw the Bowl Barrow at Rushey Platt (a scheduled ancient monument) and a canal-themed play park. The trail then followed the route of the old canal towards the town centre, passing Cambria Bridge with its striking murals and Milton Road Bridge, shown in a 1977 photograph. Entering Wharf Green, we saw an image of the Blondinis sculpture from 1987, now located at St Mark's Recreation Ground.

Along Canal Walk, John highlighted commemorative paving stones marking the canal's route, though he humorously noted their wavy alignment, which did not match the canal's straight path. We were shown the former Golden Lion Bridge, and its familiar lion perched atop the Golden Lion pub, as well as an eerie AI-generated video recreating the historic scene. Further images included Canal Walk in its retail heyday, featuring shops like Topshop and Jessops, and changing views of The Parade over several decades, including the new Bus Boulevard.



The journey continued along Fleming Way, passing the sites where Skurray's Mill,



Garrards and B&Q used to stand, and then back in the present; the newly opened Popeyes restaurant. At the former York Road Bridge we saw a photo of "gongoozlers"-people who enjoyed watching canal activity. Following the Eastern Flyer route, we passed under Marsh Farm Bridge and reached the frequently flooded subway at Marlowe Avenue. Fortunately, conditions allowed us to

continue onwards, taking in a new housing development on the former Oakfields School site and a Swindog sculpture from the 2023 Big Dog Art Trail.

The final stretch included another Tiny Forest and a community orchard at Buckhurst Field, as well as Lower Walcot Farmhouse (aka Baileys Farmhouse) on Shrewsbury Road, now owned by SBC and used as supported housing. We also saw Buckhurst Skate Park and images of Holy Rood School and Holy Family

Catholic Church during their construction. We then returned to Park South where Marlowe Avenue meets Shaftesbury Avenue, along the green corridor beside Dorcan Brook, known as the Richard Jefferies Parkway. This leads back to Shaftesbury Lake and completes the circular route.

This engaging talk revealed the depth of history and interest along a route I had unknowingly walked parts of many times. Now that I know about the South Swindon Green Trail, I look forward to exploring it properly myself.



Lower Walcot Farmhouse 1995

Kelly Blake - April 2026

*** Important Information ***

Please note that all views expressed in talks and presentations are solely those of the speakers and do not reflect the position of the Swindon Society or its committee. Thank you for your understanding.

Joyce Murgatroyd's Painting at Museum & Art Swindon



<https://www.museumartswindon.com/whats-on/the-human-experience-reflections-on-swindon%E2%80%99s-art-collection/>

You might be interested to know that there is a painting by Joyce Murgatroyd in the Swindon Art Gallery.



Tayebeh's reflection:

This artwork may seem like a simple still life at first, but the artist shows more than everyday objects. Textures, soft light, and composition reveal meaning in daily life. The jug can symbolise humans, and the apples represent life and the passage of time. Calm, natural light, highlights the beauty in small, ordinary moments. The arrangement is peaceful but imperfect, reminding us that life is never fully fixed or safe. The painting encourages viewers to slow down and notice the importance of ordinary things. Similar approaches exist in Iranian art. Overall, it teaches us to see normal objects in a deeper, renewed way.

*Apples and Pitcher, undated
By Joyce Murgatroyd (1916-2017)
Oil on canvas*

Her painting is included in the current exhibition entitled *The Human Experience: Reflections on Swindon's Art Collection* which runs until the 5th June 2026.



Chairman's Words 2026

Hello all - It's the final countdown...

Wow! It's now over 10 years since I took on the task of being Chairman of The Swindon Society (and for some time previous to that I was also a fill-in Chairman).

Although, I have thoroughly enjoyed being your chairman, it is now time for me to lead The Swindon Society towards another generation of committee members and step aside.

I am proud of my time in this role, and the honour of this task, and have enjoyed each and every minute of it, but time has run out for me, and it is now time to stand aside and leave the job to another pair of capable hands.

I'm sure you must all be fed up of the same old bloke rambling on at the front at every single monthly meeting - telling you all about the happenings within our fabulous Swindon Society? All that rambling was mostly a hopeful attempt at making it more fun for you to listen to.

So, I will stand down at the AGM and leave the choice of a new leader to the committee and members.

I am so proud of doing the job for so long and I hope that you will all understand and agree with my decision. I will stay on the Committee for a little while longer, and then gradually phase myself away from it all.

The Swindon Society is, I believe, in good shape; it has a good membership, is financially sound and is a very pleasant group to be connected with all round.

It has been a huge honour, and so much fun for so much of the time. The bad news is you will still see plenty of me, but the added bonus is you'll hear less and less of me rambling on and on.

Thanks to each and every single member for making my time as the Chairman so pleasant and enjoyable. It really has been so much fun for me.

Best wishes.

Andy Binks - May 2026



THE SWINDON SOCIETY

Agenda for AGM 13th May 2026

- Welcome
- Apologies
- Approval of Last AGM Minutes (14/05/25)
- Matters Arising From Those Minutes
- Chairman's Report
- Treasurer's Report
- Election of Officers
 - Committee
 - Chairperson
 - Vice Chairperson
 - Secretary
 - Treasurer
- Election of Auditor
- Any Other Business

Reflections of Life in The Works



Following Andy Binks' article last month, we received this lovely email:

I was sent your April 2026 newsletter by my mother, Miriam Saunders of Purton. I am now retired and live in New Zealand in a small coastal town called Whitianga.

The story - *My life in a railway factory* - reminded me of my days in the "Works" which started in 1976, after a year in the training school, and finished when the works closed.

I have attached some pictures showing the full school with the instructors and one showing just the local Swindon intake for the year along with the date stamp.

I completed an apprenticeship as a coppersmith/sheet metal worker which was the trade that bought me to New Zealand to work in the dairy industry. My father also worked in the railways as a tinsmith for a time and my grandfather completed 49 years as a spring maker.



Michael Saunders - April 2026

My Life in a Railway Factory - Part Two

(Psst... I stole the title from a man called Alfred Williams - but please keep that quiet!)



I knew only perhaps two other lads from Commonweal in the names of Clive Roberts and Nigel Hiscock. I remember settling in rather well and the men who were teaching us were very mature, skilled men in their field. Clive, Nigel and I had added pressure to do well because a friend of ours, Chris Smithson, had been "Apprentice of the Year" in the previous year.

There was an interesting mix of men teaching us everything they could so that we would get on well. Mr Angel taught sheet metal work. He appeared to be about 90 years old, and at the end of each shift he shared Swarfega with a queue of us all, putting a small amount on our hands to get them clean. Mr Bevan taught lathe work and Mr Luca was on fitting. He was a very funny man who gave us an idea that we could enjoy ourselves. But Jack Packer on welding was a delight to work for. Whilst being an excellent teacher, he also made it fun for us and we enjoyed his constant banter. Finally, Mr Eburne was in overall charge and boy did we know it!

All in all, it was a great year of learning and come August, each of us was going to go into the big factory knowing which trade we would best be suited to. I had sort of known from the start that Mechanical Engineering was the correct path for me to go on. The Works did seem a great big place to be and was a bit frightening, but soon after September 1971 it came to feel like a second home. We spent time on a variety of sections learning our trade.

My first gang was in 3 Shop, under the giant A shop roof, and was run by a man I would in future years become friendly with, Don Matthews. His gang though was not somewhere I enjoyed working on. It was all about deburring and filing rough casting for wheel bogie housings and four weeks of that was not my favourite start in Swindon Railway Works. The Foreman also appeared to take an instant dislike to me as well. His name was Mr Pithouse, and there are no prizes for guessing what my own, never-repeated nickname for him was. After four weeks, I next went into the number 9 shop, DER or BD, on diesel engine repair and rebuild. This was definitely my cup of tea. The blokes in there were knowledgeable and many were so much fun, so learning and enjoying each and every day was absolutely brilliant. The Chief Foreman was Joe Finley, a tough but kind Scot who took a liking to me immediately for some reason; possibly because of my character, and my new-found opportunity to learn was so much more



enthusiastic than the previous month's tedious burr filing under the eye of Mr Pithouse. But I suppose that taught us all that not every job was easy.

Many of the blokes were quite young - well, early 30s and upwards. As a 17-year-old I could be on a similar wavelength and they wanted to have the crack, joke or mess about a bit and enjoy the day. They talked beer, women, football, and all manner of stuff that we could all associate with easily. 9 Shop/DER seemed to have a fair selection of such men, but we also learnt that this was the time to be serious on the job too, which was just the job indeed.

Meeting such a varied selection of men would give us life skills that stuck with us forever to be honest. Many of the apprentice lads played football and some of the men we were taught by did too; some of them at a very high level. Playing for the likes of Vickers, Chippenham and Devizes they would help you understand how you could learn and advance as footballers too. Many like myself never made the higher level but had over 20 years playing in the local leagues. I played well over 500 games for my Saturday team, West Swindon, and many games for Sunday sides, Brown Brothers and Rolleston Arms. Absolutely brilliant! They are still special and brilliant memories as I talk now.



Many other gangs all around the Swindon Works would teach us all sorts about the job we were doing, the way to respect people, and most of all learn our trade to make the best of ourselves in the future, which was most important indeed.

I'm sure my parents noticed the change in my personality, and that I was beginning to be more serious, and learning to be a much stronger character. I learned by mixing, chatting and learning from older men. In later years when I had progressed to the Maintenance gang, I was always given an apprentice to train and learn from me. I think there are a few of them in this room today and I would like to think the lads who came with me learnt the skills as I had done quite a few years previously. I will have to ask some of them next time we meet... I do hope they agree.

So, to sum up, all I can say is:

- Great days
- Great knowledge was learned
- Great people were met
- Great fun was had (and most importantly)
- Great memories were made forever



My final words are about something less cheerful than my time in Swindon Works:

A last and very serious thought about Swindon Railway Works

Another moving ceremony in Queen's Park recently brought the Swindon community together to remember those lost to mesothelioma.

Mesothelioma, known by some as the "Swindon Disease", is a rare and deadly cancer linked to asbestos exposure.

Swindon's industrial history, especially its railway heritage, has left the town with a legacy of suffering as asbestos was commonly used in the railway works.

Thousands are still diagnosed with the disease today, and the pain remains raw for many families. Many have shared their own family tragedies, echoing the deep loss felt throughout the area.

Please spare a thought for every Swindonian who, over many years, has died as a result of the dreaded "Swindon Disease".

Andy Binks - March 2026

(The last blast?)



The Swindon Society - recording the changing face of Swindon

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FACEBOOK



Have you seen our Facebook page recently?

Kevin does a fantastic job and we now have well over two and a half thousand followers!

Don't forget to like and follow our Facebook page.



Quick Quiz



Where in our town would you find these three little beauties?



I assume you are all stumped because I didn't receive any guesses at all!

Here they all are - on the building that used to be called the Fine Art Gallery in Newport Street.



Lorry Crash, County Road - 1940s



**The Co-op Fleet Street Branch
No.16 - Date Unknown**



**Bailey's Dairy, Rodbourne
Road - Date Unknown**

