

Back Then...
Westcott Place
1974



Bumper
Summer
Edition

The Swindon Society

Newsletter - Summer 2026



And
More
Recently
July
2026



Welcome to the Summer Newsletter

Welcome to a brand new season of our amazing Society! What a lovely summer we have had - though too hot for some, including me.

During the last few months, your committee has been working very hard behind the scenes to secure a brand new venue for us. Our meetings will now be held at Commonweal School 6th Form Block, and what a treat it promises to be - we can't wait for the first presentation which, as is becoming a tradition now, is David Bedford, with a talk entitled "Another Dip Into The Collection".

Our new venue has a lovely big screen, tiered seating and lots of parking, right outside.

Finally, don't forget, if you want to contribute to the newsletter, just send your photos, memories and/or stories to either of the emails below.

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



Queenstown (not Kimmerfields)

Presented by

John Stooke & Kevin Leakey

13th May 2026



Well, after a slight delay getting into the hall, the May meeting kicked off, as planned with our AGM. As usual, we worked speedily

through the process, with members voting in two

new committee members, Ray Norman and Julie Collett, who will replace David Bedford and Kevin Leakey who are stepping down. During proceedings, we also voted in our new chairperson, Debra Melsom. Then it was on to the presentation.

Kevin Leakey is the resident expert on Queenstown - literally, but handed the presenting reins to John Stooke for this one.

We began with a note on the Oxford influence on the district which remains visible today in street names such as Merton, Turl, Oriel and Carfax, all borrowed from Oxford landmarks and colleges. Photographs taken by Kevin in Oxford illustrated these street names, along with views of Turl Street featuring Harry Prater's Garage and Skurray's Mill.

The audience was then given the explanation behind the name Queenstown; with Queen Victoria on the throne, many new streets and districts were being named in her honour. Alexandra Road, for example, was originally intended to be Queens Road, but was renamed to avoid confusion with nearby Queen Street. Instead, it took the name of Alexandra, wife of the Prince of Wales and future queen consort.

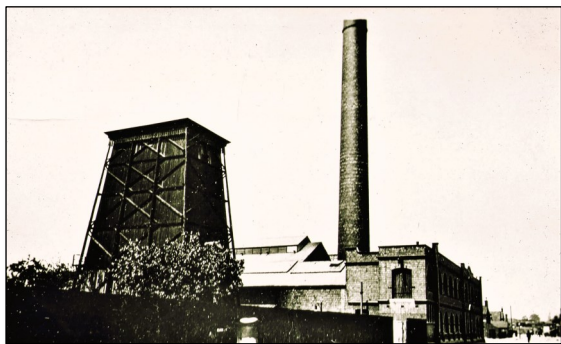
Aerial photographs offered another fascinating glimpse into the district's past. One image of Wellington Street was thought to have been taken from a balloon, while another showed the area around the Whalebridge roundabout, including the Walker Jackson garage. The Railway Mission on Wellington Street also featured, followed by a sketch of St John's Church on Aylesbury Street. A daughter church of St Mark's, St John's was later demolished, probably in 1958. Its churchyard later found more unusual uses, including storage for barrels from John Groves Brewery and, later still, double-glazing materials.



Attention then turned to Queenstown Infant School, built in 1881 with room for around 300 infants. From there, the talk moved to the development of electricity generation in the area, initially created to power Swindon's tram system. Swindon Corporation purchased and demolished Lower Eastcott Farm before building the generating station. Although power generation later transferred to Moredon Power Station, the original frontage of the building survived until quite recently.



Several photographs charted the history of Swindon's trams. One showed the Whale Hotel in the background while electricity lines were being



laid, followed by images of the 1904 tram parade in Regent Street and photographs of the tram drivers, then known as "motor men". Other images included the tram sheds near Carlton Street car park and the old bus station with its distinctive glass walkway.

The presentation continued with glimpses of local businesses that once formed the commercial

heart of Queenstown. These included the Co-op Bakery in Station Road, Southern Laundry, John Webb's timber merchants and Stads printers. There was also Priston's dental surgery on Wellington Street. John recounted how, when Swindon Borough Council began purchasing properties in the area, the dentist famously refused to move. The site now forms part of the bus station development.

Mike Beale's café, remembered as a central point in Queenstown, was also featured.



Wellington Street/Bus Station

The next section of the talk focused on the canal bridges that once ran through the district. A map identified Bullens, Fleet Street, Stone, Queenstown and

Whale bridges, all important thoroughfares in their day. Illustrations showed Stone Bridge, also known as John Street Bridge, and the John Street Basin, with the Queenstown Club visible in the background. The club has since relocated to Dudmore Road - in Walcot.



Queenstown Bridge



1890

Further illustrations depicted Queenstown Bridge with Elm Villa behind it, followed by a painting and photograph of Whale Bridge. This bridge survived longer than the others before finally being dismantled. Kevin

revealed that he had managed to salvage and preserve two pieces of the bridge himself, during construction of the Whalebridge roundabout.

The final part of the presentation returned to local retailers and businesses, including Niblett's Aerated Water, on the corner of Milford and Cheltenham Streets, Tunley's picture framers on Gloucester Street, Duck, Son & Pinker, Steve's Camera Shop, and Roy Franklin's off-licence and tobacconist. The evening closed with some photos of pubs and fires in the area, though unfortunately I had to rush away to serve up some late teas and coffees, so didn't quite capture all the information I'm afraid. With thanks to John and Kevin for all their work on this one.

Kelly Blake - May 2026

*** Important Information ***

The Swindon Society is unable to manage or moderate individual interpretations of presentation content, and presentations cannot be reviewed or evaluated in advance. Any views, opinions, or statements expressed during talks and presentations are solely those of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Swindon Society or its committee. Thank you for your understanding.

Programme 2026 - 2027

September 9th	Another Dip Into The Collection	David Bedford
October 14th	Andy Binks Wears Pink Pyjamas	Andy Binks
November 11th	World War 1	Mike Pringle
December 9th	Members' Christmas Party	Everyone
January 13th	Trip Week	Rosa Matheson
February 10th	Old Town Through The Centuries	Graham Carter
March 10th	North Wessex Way	David Mitchell
April 14th	Kingsdown: A Lost House, Its Heraldry, And The Landscape Past And Present	Debra Melsom
May 12th	Mini Talks (Preceded by the AGM)	Various Speakers
June 9th	Summer Outing (TBA)	Everyone

*We meet at 7.30pm on the second Wednesday of the month at:
Commonweal School - 6th Form Block,
The Mall, Old Town, Swindon SN1 4JE
(except for June, July and August).*

Directions to Commonweal School - 6th Form Block (Please also refer to the map on the back page of this newsletter)

The easiest approach to the school is to drive along Goddard Avenue and turn into Commonweal Road. Drive to the end of this road and directly opposite you will see access to the school car park - see the photo on the back page (see the red arrows on the map). Once you've parked, the entrance is just off the car park (see the yellow arrow on the map). Go up the stairs to the right just inside the door and you will find us there and we will show you the way to the Keith Defter Auditorium. If you need to use the lift, please ask and someone will be able to assist you.



Commonweal School is steeped in history, which makes it a good fit for an historical society like ours.

It was believed that Reuben George himself chose the name Commonweal for the “common good” that was always close to his heart.

In 1927, the school opened its doors to 270 students of all ages.

In September 1939 the school population increased to 530 with almost every available space being converted into classrooms.

The school has managed to evolve around the various academic changes over the years and is currently an academy, specialising in performing arts.



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.



The Swindon Society - recording the changing face of Swindon

2.2K likes • 2.7K followers



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COMMONWEAL

<https://commonweal.co.uk/celebrating-100-years-of-learning-community-achievement/>

SAVE

SATURDAY 17TH
JULY
2027
SUMMER FESTIVAL

DATE

**WEDNESDAY 23RD
SEPTEMBER 2026**

HISTORICAL PRESENTATION BY ANDY
BINKS FROM THE SWINDON SOCIETY
AT THE COMMONWEAL SCHOOL

THE

**SATURDAY 17TH
OCTOBER 2026**

Open day at The Commonweal School with displays and archive material from the last 100 years. The event will be in collaboration with the Swindon Society's annual open day. All old Commonwealians welcome.

Thank You Mr Chairman

As you know, at the end of last season, Andy Binks resigned from his role as chairman of our society after having served for many years.

A previous chairman, David Lacey, quite rightly claimed that Andy's input had lifted the Society to a much stronger position, which is certainly true. We have a robust membership now and much of that is due to Andy's dedication.

As a token of appreciation and a thank you from the Society, Andy was presented with an apple tree: the variety is called "Nuttty Russet" (very apt!).

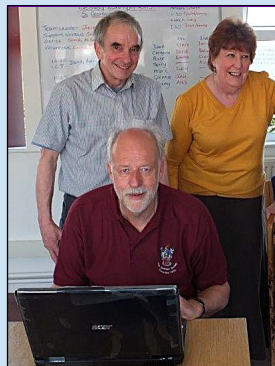
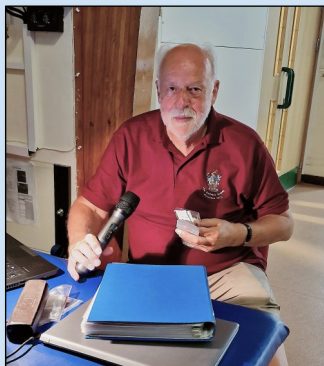
Andy said "Thank you all for my magnificent gift from everyone. I was so, so happy at such a lovely gift, which I assure you will find pride of place in our garden". He went on to say, "When there are enough apples for a pie, you will hear more".



Thank You David Bedford!

When you have grown up in Swindon and know the history like the back of your hand, the greatest skill is to pass that knowledge around to others. This, indeed, is something David excels at with an enthusiasm that immediately draws you in.

His talks for The Swindon Society are always extremely well attended, as are his talks to other groups and societies. We are looking forward to more!



As a long standing and well respected member of the committee, David will be missed from around the table steering us in the right direction when needed! However, we'll still catch up with him at our presentation evenings.

David had a vast input in collating and producing all of The Swindon Society books - no mean feat! And these

are an enormous part of our legacy.

David is a long standing supporter of Swindon Town FC, come rain or shine, win or lose - he will have more time now to enjoy the forthcoming matches!

The committee would like to publicly thank David for his many, many years of service to The Swindon Society, which we believe to be around 37, both as a member and a committee member. He deserves his well-earned rest and we wish him all the best as he steps down.

Jennie Bridges - July 2026





**Summer
Outing
10th June
2026
a visit to**



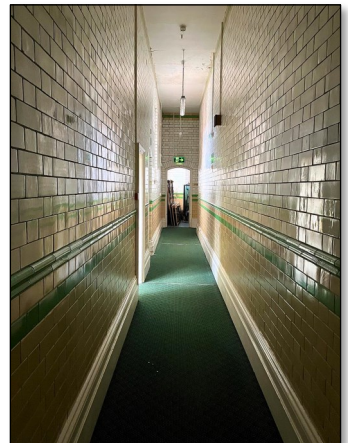
The Health Hydro & The Cricketers

Our summer outing in June was really a visit of two parts, and that's how you'll find this review is written, as I was unable to visit The Cricketers after our trip behind the scenes at the Health Hydro. Angie will provide the details for that part of the visit.

We began our evening at The Cricketers as the meeting point for everyone, before their allocated time slot across the road at the Health Hydro. I arrived to find it was virtually standing room only, which is always a really good sign at a Swindon Society event. My group was one of the earliest tours of the evening, so we made our way to the Health Hydro after only a relatively brief period at The Cricketers; I was disappointed to miss out on the cake I had seen on offer!

Over at the Health Hydro, we met with our guide Gerry Hannon from the Friends of the Swindon Health Hydro in the reception area. Unfortunately, our visit coincided with evening swimming lessons, so there was a little bit of shunting back and forth as we endeavoured not to get in anyone's way whilst we heard a little bit about the centre's recent refurbishment. Gerry told us that most of the £6 million funding for the work is actually hidden, because it was the plant room and a few other behind the scenes places that needed most of the money. Nonetheless, the initial changes as you enter the building are impressive, with the gym equipment in the former foyer and a direct link to the ground floor changing rooms, rather than having to traverse the stairs several times for access, as was the case previously.

We moved from the reception area, past the new gym and towards the changing rooms and pool. For obvious reasons, we didn't look around the changing rooms but having been for a few swims myself since the re-opening, I can tell you that it is a huge improvement and I have been very impressed. We did go up onto the viewing balcony of the main pool, and whilst it has been refreshed, it is largely unchanged and in need of a bit more work (funding allowing).

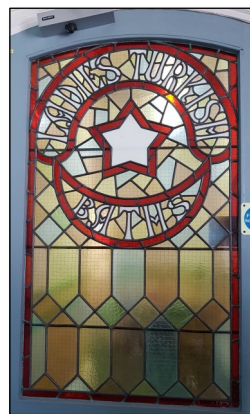


This was where we once again got in the way of the swimming lessons - there were many parents watching from the balcony, so we beat a hasty retreat so as not to inconvenience them any further. As Gerry reminded us, when the Health Hydro was first built in 1891-2 it was bathing, rather than swimming that formed its primary function, as bathrooms were not common in most houses at the time, including the GWR workers' homes in the Railway Village. As the main pool was heated by steam-power, in the

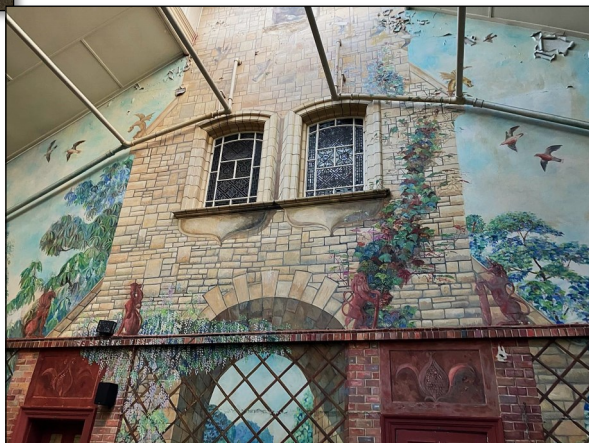
winter it would be closed for swimming and boarded over for events such as dances

and concerts. During World War One, the boarded over pool also served as a hospital ward.

We moved out of the publicly accessible areas and into the behind-the-scenes part of the tour after this. We wandered through various rooms in various states of usage and decay.



There was a beautiful original stained-glass window in the door of the Turkish baths (saying exactly that) which Gerry told us had been boarded up in the 1980s for reasons unknown. Perhaps there was a worry about breaking it - I can't think of any other good reason to board up something so functional and yet beautiful. There were a number of rooms we saw as we made our way



through the building, and they were all full of original features. In one, which was latterly used for yoga and dance classes, there was a fireplace with some lovely tiling. In general, the tiles throughout the building on the "dry side" were actually glazed bricks, in what I believe was the original cream and green livery, also later adopted by Thamesdown Borough Council in their 1986 relaunch of the Health Hydro.

In the foyer area of what would have been the original entrance from Faringdon Road, there is still a large mural on the wall, which looks to have dated from the 1980s or 1990s - it still looks in great condition, albeit perhaps a little incongruous with the current surroundings.



This was the area which originally held the doctor's surgery and pharmacy. In later years there was a teen sexual health clinic in the old pharmacy rooms as well as the Women's Branch of the



Workers' Educational Association (WEA).

In addition, there is still a plaque on the wall commemorating the official opening of the Well Woman Centre in 1988, which was opened by Dr. Katherina Dalton who was a pioneer in the field of women's health, specifically PMS. The centre was in operation from the Health Hydro until 2009.

That was the last stop on our tour of the Health Hydro, and where I departed for the evening. But by all accounts, I missed a jolly good time in The Cricketers (as well as a cracking cuppa and slice of cake...)

Kelly Blake - June 2026

You certainly did Kelly! We had a brilliant tour of The Cricketers where we were led through a maze of fascinating rooms where an assortment of items were being stored. What took my eye was an old road sign, an ash can (we think), and even the original Cricketers pub sign!



But one of the best parts of our outing ... was the cakes! They were so delicious and there were plenty to choose from. The teas and coffees flowed and we all enjoyed a good old chat at the end of our tours. I think this was one of the best summer outings we have had.

We would like to say a grateful thank you to everyone at The Cricketers - especially Julie Wright who made all of those outstanding cakes.

We would also like to say a huge THANK YOU to Andrea at the Health Hydro for the two tours she conducted - we enjoyed four tours in total, shared with Gerry.



Angie Phillips - June 2026

Getting To Know Our New Chairperson

A Little Bit About Me - Debra Melsom



Born in Victoria Hospital, I am a true Swindonian. I've lived in Swindon for 58 years (I am giving away my age!).

I lived close to Ermin Street and walked along it to both infants and 'big' school for eight years, with four years walking along the old coffin-way to my junior school.

An old farm track used to run right beside our house in Swindon Road down to the fields that Pressed Steel/Rover/BMW is built on, but the track had long since been incorporated into our garden. Looking at the map within the house

deeds was fascinating, our house once had a name not a number and the long-gone neighbouring farmhouse had been very old - the penny dropped that 'things had been on the land before'. Finding old maps and stories from the local area soon became an obsession along with a complete set of the Encyclopaedia Britannica with its own little wooden bookshelf. So, maps and local history became my life, and I was appointed as Librarian at school because I was so nerdy.

One August Bank Holiday my parents took me to Littlecote House near Hungerford. I clearly remember my visit - the sundial, Mrs Christmas giving the guided tour, the armoury in the Great Hall, the taxidermy Great Bustards in a glass case beneath the Red Staircase, the Cromwellian chapel, the Long Gallery crammed full of Mrs Wills' knick-knacks and cow creamer jugs and the beautiful chandeliers, and... The Haunted Landing where I heard the cry of the ghostly baby - everyone says I made it up or imagined it, but I really did hear it! I started to cry, and Mrs Christmas knelt down, wiped away my tears and said it's OK, many children hear the baby cry, I believe you. I cried all the way home, and recall seeing the Morris Men dancing on the green at Aldbourne through wet eyes.

So, by now, history books, big houses (and ghost stories) joined the obsession with old maps and local history and were my 'hobbies' from a very young age!

In 1979, missing my school outing due to being knocked down by a motorbike on Ermin Street as I walked home from school the previous evening, I was allowed the following day to go (hobble) with a lower year group who were visiting the Town Gardens. This didn't sound too exciting considering that I'd missed the Tower of London and Planetarium, however, we were taken to the old 'Great Quarry' area just outside the Town Gardens, and given a brief geology lesson on Upper Jurassic sedimentary rocks which fascinated me, and then, the best bit, we walked along Westlecot Road, and down the old track off Mill Lane to stand under an old bridge, to

be told the history of the M&SWJ Railway. I was hooked and I still am to this day! A chap I knew back in 1984 who worked at Square D said his colleague had old maps of Swindon with the M&SWJR line on it - step into my story The Swindon Society's Brian Bridgeman. He supplied me with old maps of the entire line annotated in his own hand of areas where I could still see surviving M&SWJR structures and remains along with little handwritten stories, such as the collapsed tunnel in what is now Queen's Park. I still have them!

I work at Historic England/English Heritage and have done so for the past 24 years. I am currently a Senior Geographic (GIS) Application Specialist, looking after the systems and data that displays historic maps of varying ages and overlaying them with modern maps of various scale, to see what was once in the landscape, and used by historians, archaeologists, landscape and rivers trusts and property developers.

When the project was running, I was co-Chair of 'The Real Wolf Hall', the ancient historic house near Burbage, the birthplace and home of Queen Jane Seymour. Tasks there included setting up and maintaining their website, as well as arranging an Open Day, attended by authors Alison Weir and Nicola Cornick, historian Tracy Borman, Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen and actor Danny Dyer (related to the descendants of Henry VIII, the four siblings who still live at Wolf Hall to this day) as well as John Seymour the 19th Duke of Somerset. My husband Pete and I were invited to Bradley House in Maiden Bradley where I had lunch in the garden with the Duke and Duchess whilst Pete took photographs of the original Seymour family portraits hanging in the huge stairwell of the house for the Duke's archive records and insurance. Talking of gentry, I took a certain Mr Binks to Wolf Hall on one occasion in 2018, and he took a trip down and along the old Tudor tunnels that run beneath the house and grounds.



Littlecote House

As a qualified Tour Guide, I provided guided history tours at Littlecote House twice every Sunday morning for over 10 years. I regularly participated in open-days where guided tours were part of the event (Band of Brothers Reunion, Antiques Roadshow, etc.) often dressed in Tudor costume. I've appeared on BBC TV talking about the discovery of a rare book in 2008 in an old safe at Littlecote House, now referred to as 'The Popham Notebook' written in the 1660s by John Wallis, a leading mathematician and linguist. I've also conducted guided tours around Stratton St Margaret.

I've been a professional genealogist for 30 years initially researching my own family but then for clients, unearthing ancestors, family connections and unsolved family mysteries. I am currently studying for the Licentiate'ship of the Institute of Heraldic and Genealogical Studies having recently completed an intense study on Heraldry and I attend the City of Bath Heraldic Society monthly.



Brian Bridgeman

Debra Melsom - May 2026

National Memorial Arboretum Alrewas, Staffordshire

I read the article "The Last Blast" by Andy Binks in The Swindon Society newsletter, and thought members might be interested to hear about our recent visit to the National Memorial Arboretum at the beginning of May.

Fred and I had been to the Arboretum twice before; the first time in 2012, and then again a few years later, but we knew there had been a huge number of additions and changes made since our last visit and we wanted to go again.

We already knew that all the memorials are in remembrance of events and wars which have happened since the end of the 1939-1945 war. We also knew that the Arboretum ran a land train with a comprehensive commentary, which we intended to make good use of to have a general look around the area. The guide leaflet told us that there are over 400 memorials.

So, one Sunday, the Bassetts, along with our sons, their wives and a couple of mothers-in-law had a weekend away together and we all explored the Arboretum (Fred and I hired mobility scooters). We were particularly looking for the Scouting Memorial, which we eventually found, but more importantly, we also found - quite by chance - a memorial to victims of mesothelioma, the so-called Swindon Disease.

The Mesothelioma Memorial, which was unveiled in October 2023, is in the form of a Jenga tower. On consulting Google, we found that the stone sculpture was erected to honour all serving and veteran members of the British Armed Forces who had succumbed to this asbestos-related cancer. It also commemorates the members of the Great Western Railway and British Rail who also died from this dreadful disease.



Jenny Bassett - May 2026



VERY SAD ANNOUNCEMENT

We are so very sad to announce the loss of our lovely member, Ann Blackett.

Ann passed away on 8th July 2026; she was 88.

She was a valued member of our Society for many years.

We will miss you Ann.

SWINDON FAMILY HISTORY (WFHS) ARE MOVING!

We will be meeting on
Wednesday 2nd September from 7.15 pm - 8.45 pm

Our new venue is:

COLEVIEW COMMUNITY CENTRE

Everyone is invited to come along and see what we are all about and how we can help you discover so much more about your own.

FAMILY HISTORY

(Don't let your family stories and memories get forgotten)

There will also be tea/coffee... and cake!

We invite you to come along and browse through our local interest files on people, places and events. There will also be people on hand to help you on your way and maybe to help share your family stories.

JUST POP IN FOR A CHAT

We issue a monthly email newsletter containing various articles, and should you wish to contribute something, your input would be most welcome. Please ask if you'd like copies.



From now on, we shall be meeting at the
Coleview Community Centre on the
first Wednesday of each month.



We also hold monthly Zoom meetings.

Feel free to contact us at: swindon@wiltshirefhs.co.uk

Or you can ring us on: **01793 822310**

*We are part of the Wiltshire Family History Society
Charity No. 290284*



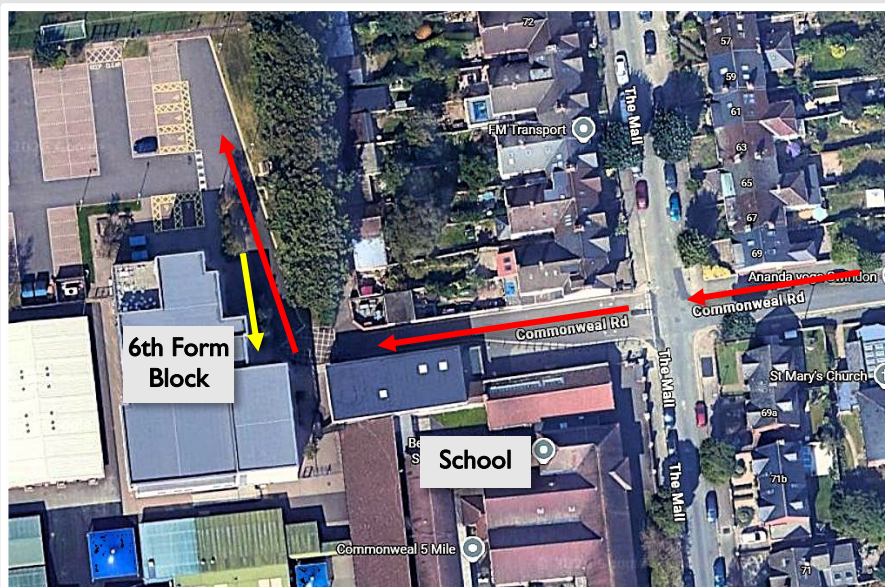
Central Library, Regent Circus
Swindon SN1 1QG

Tel: (01793) 463238
Email: localstudies@swindon.gov.uk
Website: www.swindon.gov.uk/localstudies
Gallery: www.flickr.com/swindonlocal

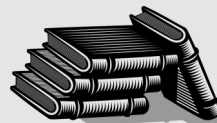
Opening Hours

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

Map to Commonweal School 6th Form Block



The approach to Commonweal School.



Buses to Commonweal School

At the time of writing, the number 22 bus leaves the bus station (Stop X) at 18.57hrs. This route runs along Goddard Avenue. The closest stop to the school is referred to as ***Commonweal Road***. The scheduled arrival time at this stop is 19.05hrs.



A short walk along Commonweal Road will take you directly opposite the school gates.

Unfortunately, there are no buses running at the end of the meeting. However, if you give us advance notice, and live locally, we may be able to arrange for a fellow member to take you home.