

# The Leamington Omnibus

Newsletter of the Leamington History Group

Autumn 2019

[www.leamingtonhistory.co.uk](http://www.leamingtonhistory.co.uk)

## Mary Hart, 98 Brunswick Street, Leamington

Local Leamington resident, Mary Hart, caused quite a stir on Saturday 2 July 1870 at 10.15 p.m. when she tried to drown herself by jumping off Castle Bridge, Warwick, into the River Avon. Mary, aged 31 years, was hauled before the magistrates for the crime of attempting to commit suicide.

Originally from the village of Steventon, Berkshire, Mary Maria Huggins had met and married Thomas Hart on 25 February 1861. Although Thomas was local, being baptised at St Nicholas, Warwick on 9 February 1840 and brought up in the area, he relocated to Appleford, Sutton, Berkshire where he worked as a Railway Policeman. At some point before 1870, the couple had reason to move back to Warwickshire. They set up home at 98 Brunswick Street and Thomas gained employment as a labourer at the Foundry.

Mary was adamant and open about the fact that she intended to drown herself, in spite of this being illegal. She went on "hands and knees" in front of the two young men, Messrs Barnet and Cox who saved her, shouting "Fare thee well, leave me." She then ran away from Police Constable Bickley towards the meadow but was caught and escorted to Jury Street Police Station. On hearing the chimes at 12 o'clock, she declared: "Oh let me go, I will not hear the chimes play again."

Appearing in the dock with a black eye, Mary, to her husband's rage, spoke of her unhappy marriage and his threats to murder her. Mr J Moore, Deputy Mayor and Magistrate told her that it was "very rash for you to attempt to destroy yourself," to which a very unrepentant Mary replied, "I wish I had done!" Moore did suggest though that anything against her husband could be brought before the magistrates!

A desperate but brave Mary told the court that, "[Thomas] had done something in the place where he came from, and had repeatedly told her that if she disclosed it to anyone he would murder her; but she would out with it someday." When Moore committed her for the Summer Assizes, Mary exclaimed "Thank you, I shall be away from him then; I shall have my revenge on him yet!" But sadly, this was only a short reprieve. Within a fortnight (16 July 1870), her case was thrown out and she was returned to living with Thomas at number 98 Brunswick Street. Six years later, 1875, she was dead at the young age of 36 years.

Uneducated and without the potential to support herself economically, Mary was reliant on her husband and staying in an unhappy marriage. Mary's story not only highlights Victorian society's attitudes towards suicide but also her relationship with her husband, her inferior status and the risk of domestic abuse. And of course, key questions remain. How did Mary die? What terrible thing had Thomas allegedly done in his past? How did Mary get her black eye? Did she get her revenge? And what happened to the elusive Thomas, after Mary's death?

*Stella Bolitho*

**Stop Press: Leamington History Group Local History Day,  
Saturday 28 September 2019 at All Saints Parish Church 10-30-3.30.  
No admission charge. Church Café open all day for light snacks**

## Homes Fit for Heroes: The Origins of Leamington Council Housing in the Inter-War Years.

The end of the First World War in 1918 created a huge demand for working-class housing in towns throughout Britain. In 1919, Parliament passed the Housing Act, a piece of ambitious legislation which promised government subsidies to help finance the construction of 500,000 houses within three years. As the economy rapidly weakened in the early 1920s, however, funding had to be cut, and only 213,000 homes were completed under the Act's provisions. The 1919 Act – often known as the 'Addison Act' after its author, Dr Christopher Addison, the Minister of Health – nevertheless marked a highly significant step forward in housing provision. It made housing a national responsibility, and local authorities were given the task of developing new housing and rented accommodation where it was needed by working people.

Leamington Spa Borough Council advertised tenders in October 1919 to build the first houses under the new legislation. The sites chosen were Leicester Street, opposite the now demolished Central School, and Claremont Field, Tachbrook Road, opposite The Wheatsheaf Public House.



By early 1920, work was well underway on both estates, but inevitably, there were delays because of a shortage of bricklayers. So many had lost their lives in the 1st World War.

Two types of three-bedroomed houses were built on both sites: a parlour-type (with an additional living-room) and a non-parlour type (with just one downstairs room and a

scullery). Every house had its own generously-sized garden.

In spite of shortages, building gained pace. The first houses were completed in Leicester Street in December 1920, backing on to Leamington Brickworks. Ironically, the Leamington Courier reported that the houses were being built with *Kenilworth* Bricks. Through rights of tenancy, one family has occupied the same house in Leicester Street since that date, - for almost 100 years.

Before long, both the Leicester Street and the Claremont Field estates were occupied and the Council went on to acquire Rushmore Farm in 1926 and the land to the west of the Great Western Railway. Here they built houses based on a design by Arthur Wakerley, architect, businessman, politician and former Mayor of Leicester. The houses became known as the Leicester type. Similar houses were also built in Pound Lane Lillington.

With the acquisition in 1930 of the Shrubland Hall estate, the former property of Leamington landowner Matthew Wise, off Tachbrook Road, the Council embarked on the next phase of development, only to have it halted by the outbreak of WW2. The estate was not completed until almost a decade later.

*Barry Franklin.*

*Photographs: Prospect Road (left above) ©Mick Jeffs; Wakerley House Builders © Joe Claydon.*



## Guided Town Walks

Once again we have to congratulate Michael Pearson and his team of volunteer Guides on a highly successful season of Town Walks. Between them, from mid-June to mid-September, the Guides cover a wide range of themed walks, from Blue Plaques to Ironfounders and the Architects who helped to shape the elegant Spa town almost two hundred years ago.

Would you like to become a Guide? The group of regular walkers is a very friendly, supportive audience. Our walks are meant to be fun, - they are not a platform for public lectures. Anyone can lead a walk, with a little knowledge and planning, and we can help with that. We offer training, so all you need, (for insurance purposes) is to enrol as a member of Leamington History Group and you can take it from there. The Walks are generously sponsored by the Town Council, and guides are invited to an informal lunch with the Mayor at the end of the season. For a nominal fee per person, we also do booked walks at any time of the year for groups, tailored to the preferences of each group. For more details, please contact walks organiser Michael Pearson, at [mcholly5560@gmail.com](mailto:mcholly5560@gmail.com)

## Heritage Open Days.

Each year in September, Leamington History group supports Warwick District Council's Heritage Open Days, stewarding the display in South Lodge which tells the story of Jephson Gardens from their beginning in the 1830s as an Arboretum through to the present day tourist attraction



with Green Flag status. When Edward Willes' land agent, John George Jackson was instructed to lay out the gardens, he sourced as many trees as he could from all five continents, - including some second-hand specimens. How these trees survived and flourished for so long remains a tribute to the skill of the groundsmen who transported and re-sited them. Archery was first practised in Jephson Gardens, where the All-England Championships were held for many years. Tennis

tournaments attracted large audiences too, but the biggest favourite of all of course was, and still is, for many older visitors, "The Leamington Lights". The display, with its evocative images always attracts most attention, even from those too young to have seen the real thing. Starting in 1951, "The Lights" were set up to celebrate the Festival of Britain, when every evening during August and September the Gardens became the 'Illuminated Pleasure Gardens', - "an enchanting fairyland of colour," according to the first publicity brochure, and attracted more than three hundred thousand visitors from all over the country that first year. For a decade "The Lights" were so successful that the Corporation decided to make them a permanent feature of the town's Autumn entertainment. In addition to the intriguing lighting effects among the trees and flower beds, and the many tableaux to delight younger visitors, there were various other attractions, just as there were in the Vauxhall and Cremorne Gardens of long ago. Inevitably, in spite of the event's popularity, cost became an issue, and the settings and equipment found a new lease of life in Walsall.



## Reviews with Tessa Whitehouse

Monday 24 June: Sheila Woolf: *Here Come the Girls! (Warwickshire's American wives)*

This was a very fascinating talk about American ladies in the 19th century who married English gentlemen and settled here in England, leaving being the social life of cities such as New York. These often well-bred ladies moved in social circles where the ultimate aim was to make a 'good' marriage and the attraction of meeting a titled member of the English aristocracy was very appealing. For a future (English and possibly impoverished) husband the differing laws in America regarding inheritance often played a large part, allowing girls to inherit alongside their brothers.

Ms Woolf has done a lot of research into this culture. She discovered through her interest in the Leigh family of Stoneleigh Abbey that several heirs to the estate had travelled widely in America and had met such ladies. She made it her duty to find out more and her talk took us to New York and plantations in Georgia, finding connections to the slave trade, and one daring lady involved in bringing about its abolition.

Some of the marriages were successful, some childless, and one lady, Juliette 'Daisy' Gordon, soon realised that her husband, Willie MacKay Low, was very fond of fast cars and 'fast' women. The fact that Daisy suffered deafness in one ear from a grain of rice becoming trapped in her ear on their wedding day did not help their marriage and at the age of 45 she eventually sought a divorce. She decided to devote her time to public service and left her home at Wellesbourne Hall to return to Savannah in America, where she established the first Girl Scout movement. Daisy was later honoured in many ways, but her ultimate accolade was the posthumous award of the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Barrack Obama in 2012.

It was clear to everyone in the packed auditorium that Ms Woolf enjoyed telling us these stories of madness, mystery, and intrigue. These ladies knew what they wanted and their charm and money opened doors to another world, and a husband!!

Monday 22 July: Jim Layton and Keith Hancock: *Fire in the Belly: Some Musicians and Music in Post-war Leamington*

For our closing meeting of the summer, we were delighted to welcome the two authors of 'Fire in the Belly', published in 2018, which features the post war pop music scene in Leamington and the surrounding area. In the war years, 'Swing' had been provided by the big bands of the day. In Leamington there was Bob Chimes and Stan Rawlings, (who also provided the music for Lockheed's pantomimes for many years.) As austerity began to loosen its grip, their brand of music was starting to lose favour. Young people were looking for something more like the music coming from America, and being able to put their own mark on the music scene. Groups sprang up on most housing estates, often with home-made instruments, creating their own distinctive sounds and hoping for fame and fortune. And so, we saw the birth of bands like Woody Allen and the Challengers, the Midnights, and Edgar Broughton's Band. Youngsters convened at local coffee houses, at dances and youth clubs, and record shops promoted local groups. 'The Riverside' youth club held a 'Rock around the Clock' jive marathon and in 1958 held a teenage cavalcade in the Pump Room Gardens. The writer remembers attending the latter. It was an exciting time.

Keith and Jim's presentation went on to cover further development and progressive styles of music, but what remains in the hearts of so many locals is the memory of local youngsters *enjoying* their music. For so many of us, the sound of the 1950s is unforgettable. Few groups now remain but Edgar Broughton is still going strong! It was his comment about what music meant to him which inspired the title of the book.