



The Leamington Omnibus



Newsletter of the Leamington History Group

Winter 2019

www.leamingtonhistory.co.uk

Annual General Meeting

The 2020 Leamington History Group Annual General Meeting will take place at Dormer Conference Centre, Dormer Place, CV32 5AA, on Monday 27 January at 7.30 pm. Barry Franklin will have served 6 years as Chairman by that date, and according to the Constitution, should not stand again for that office, unless there is no other candidate. Having acquired the nominee's consent to stand, all nominations should be lodged with the Secretary two weeks before the meeting, either by email at secretary@leamingtonhistory.co.uk, or by post to 15 Vicarage Road Lillington, CV32 7RH. Papers will be circulated where possible by email, but some hard copies will be available on the night

December 2019: the end of the Calendar Year, and Leamington History Group looks back, not only at 2019, but at the group's many achievements since its inception as a Community Local History Project, named "History at Bath Place" in 2005.

When the group's Lottery Fund sponsorship came to an end, Alan Griffin set up a Steering Group, which became the foundation of The Leamington History Group. We continued to engage in research and undertake local history projects: sadly, some of our precious archive was lost when the Bath Place School building caught fire during renovations in September 2009. By then we were holding our monthly evening meetings at South Lodge, Jephson Gardens, and using the building on Tuesday mornings as a 'drop-in' - where anyone could call in with photographs, postcards, newspaper cuttings and family stories, which could be scanned and archived on the spot.

When Bath Place Community Venture moved to the Old Library in Avenue Road, LHG moved with them, until use of the building by other groups effectively squeezed us out, and with growing membership, we moved yet again, to the Dormer Conference Centre, at the same time expanding the Tuesday Drop-in to welcome all members for coffee and a chat.

Since the very beginning, we have worked with other local groups and the wider community, giving presentations to other community groups, undertaking work with support groups, visiting care homes and dementia cafés, mentoring university and college students and working with schools. Members have represented LHG on working parties such as the restoration of the Pump Room Gardens, the Blue Plaques Committee, and the setting -up of the 'Windows on Warwickshire' website. We have a close working relationship with Leamington Art Gallery and Museum, and the Local Studies Librarian at the Library. Until three years ago, we supported the Green Spaces group's annual bid for Green Flag Status for Jephson Gardens and worked closely with Laura, the Park Ranger, to develop the family-friendly sculpture trail and her holiday activities for children.

Our website and our members' publications on a wide range of Local History topics have attracted attention from readers as far away as Argentina, Chile, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand as well as Great Britain and Europe. Two immensely popular and successful innovations have to be the annual Local History Day, now held at the Parish Church, and the re-introduction in partnership with the Town Council, of the Free Guided Town Walks, which under the leadership of Michael Pearson and his introduction of the themed walks, have surpassed all expectations. This year alone, more than 600 people attended the walks over the summer, and U3A groups from Ashbourne, Daventry and Buckingham as well as the Dickens Fellowship have had recent tours of Leamington's architectural, cultural and historic highspots.

Leamington History Group can proudly claim to have done more than its share in the last few years to promote Leamington as a historic spa town and cultural centre. We greatly value our town centre base at South Lodge, where local people and visitors alike can be sure of a warm welcome at the Tuesday Drop-in when they call for directions, tourist information, - or to buy one of our books.



Local History Day 2019

Yet again, Saturday, 28th September was for Leamington History Group, our event of the year. The Local History Day was held at the Parish Church with the support of other local groups including Lillington, Whitnash, and Sydenham. The focus this year was "Entertainment" with a captivating display of local groups, bands, musicians, magicians, theatre and cinema. LHG volunteer Bobby Boalch, heard many stories from visitors about the 2 accordionists featured, who little realised that they were her dad and uncle, Bob and Bill Lewin! Many people recalled them playing at the Lights of Leamington from 1951 – 1961. The 'Lights' were a great attraction in the Jephson Gardens and childhood visits hold many nostalgic memories today.

We were delighted to welcome over 600 visitors, many drawn to the event by the launch of 'Shops of Royal Leamington Spa' by Tom Lewin and Allan Jennings, or Allan Jennings and Peter Coulls' 'Leamington and Warwick Tramways' book. But, having made their purchases, they stayed on - for up to 2 hours in some cases! It was an eye-opening experience for many who had not seen the Parish Church staging such a welcoming and friendly event. Let's hope that they come again.

Although 'entertainment' was the main feature of our display, Mick Jeffs and Jo Clarke attracted many visitors to their bookstall. Leamington History Group must also give credit to volunteer Joe Claydon, who regularly takes part and is in his element showing people his scrapbooks of newspaper cuttings and photographs. His collections remind us of what present day places used to be like, - a trip down memory lane. Chatting to visitors one can often find a connection and this adds to the pleasure of meeting so many interesting people at events such as this. The repeated success of the History Day is all down to the time, effort and enthusiasm given by so many members of the group. We are already looking forward to next year!

Tessa Whitehouse

Major Thomas Henry Gem (1819-1881) – Pioneer of Lawn Tennis



I have always loved ball games, some more than others of course and Lawn Tennis most all. When I discovered that two of the three most important men in the game's creation had lived in Leamington Spa I was delighted. They were Major Gem and his Spanish friend Augurio Perera. (The third, a Major Wingfield, created something not dissimilar but foolishly called it "Sphairisticke" – Greek for a ball-game, I believe - and bizarrely proposed a court shaped like an hour-glass!) "Tennis" I should explain was originally a mediaeval game, what we call Real Tennis, played by monks against the walls of their monasteries, later by Henry VIII at Hampton Court, and still by us at the distinguished Club in Bedford Street. Lawn Tennis derives from Real Tennis its magnificent scoring system, - climax piled on climax.

Thomas Henry Gem was born in Birmingham, son of a Solicitor and a Solicitor himself, though with all his other interests I wonder how much time he found for work. He and Perera played Rackets in Birmingham and one day, remembering that Rackets needs an expensive building, they allowed themselves to ask whether something cheaper and in the open air might be devised.

It happened that Perera had a large garden at his home in Edgbaston and in the 1860's the two of them experimented and slowly developed the new game. At first they called it 'Pelota', after the Basque game; (the demonstration sport at the Barcelona Olympics in 1992). Afterwards its name became Lawn Rackets and before long the MCC, the Governing body of real tennis as well as cricket, took an interest in lawn tennis and revised the laws of that fledgling sport in 1875.



To use an eighteenth century expression, Gem was "a man of parts", to the extent that very little is known about his wife who I imagine saw either very little of him, or just enough. He was a natural volunteer. He was the first President of the Birmingham Dramatic Club, where he excelled in light comedy. For his local Press he wrote on anything from boxing to horses, and easily turned his hand to verse and songs, - G & S, anyone? He was a founding member of the Warwickshire (Birmingham) Rifles, rising to the rank of Major. It seems, and I believe it, he was a capable after dinner speaker. However, it was as an athlete and sportsman that he was most notable. He played Cricket. In 1859 he helped to found the Birmingham Rackets Club (rackets is not unlike squash). At the age of 43 and in ordinary clothes he ran from Birmingham to Leamington in just over three hours.

By 1873, both Gem and Perera, with their families, were living in Leamington. It was in this town that they founded the world's first lawn tennis club in 1874 along with their friends the doctors Haynes and Tompkins.

Robert Holland

Juan Bautista Luis Augurio Perera (b about 1822 – about 1889) Pioneer of Lawn Tennis

Fortunately, J B L A Perera was usually contented with just one Christian name, Augurio, perhaps because it was uncommon. He was brought to England from Spain when he was four, naturalised in 1856, and in the 1881 census called himself John instead of Juan. With little doubt he would have been bi-lingual, in English and Catalan, perhaps Spanish too.

His father, also named Augurio, was a merchant, bringing into England wine and cigars, the cigars from Havana, then still a part of the Spanish Empire. The family lived in London for ten years and in Birmingham for three before finally moving to Manchester, leaving behind Augurio on the assumption that at the age of seventeen or eighteen he should be capable of looking after the Birmingham Office. He was. His father concentrated on exporting textiles and made so good a fist of it that in 1846 he invested £3,000 (the equivalent now of £75,000) in the rapidly expanding railways. When old Augurio died in 1855 he left his assets to his wife, his eldest son Augurio and his two other sons. It is an educational story.

In 1847, in a Catholic Church in Liverpool, he married an Irish girl, Charlotte O'Donnell, the fourth daughter of a banker. They returned to Birmingham where they had three daughters and a son. Augurio seems to have acquired a civic sense and an Englishman's interest in sport. He played rackets at the Birmingham Bath Street Rackets Club where Harry Gem was Honorary Secretary. It was here that we assume the pair first met. In 1866 he joined the Committee of the proposed Birmingham Gymnasium in conjunction with Harry Gem.

Unless I am much mistaken if you met Harry Gem you talked about sport, and you might become involved in it, even joining a club and learning how to play Real Tennis. Perera did and he must have had some talent, otherwise I doubt if Gem would have bothered with him. Around Perera's substantial house "Fairlight", there was a biggish garden and the two of them experimented with their new lawn rackets game as early as 1859.

It seems that the two families became close, and that both decided that Leamington was a better place to live than Birmingham. I can understand that. In or around 1874, on the lawns of the Manor House Hotel and with the help of two Doctors from the Warneford Hospital, they played the famous game that Gem had the good sense to record in a painting, an early visual evidence of lawn tennis. From that game rose the first lawn tennis club in the world, thirteen years before the first Championships at Wimbledon!



For some years, Perera continued to spend a part of the year in Leamington and lived for a time with family in Birmingham. The last certain reference to him is his presence in Venice, 24th September 1889, for the wedding of his daughter Carmen Mariana to Le Chevalier Gustave Koppel.

Robert Holland

October 2019: Unveiling the Blue Plaque at Avenue Road, with two of Harry Gem's great-nieces



Reviews with Tessa Whitehouse

Monday 23 September: John Berkeley, *From Pens to Particle Physics*

In September we welcomed back John Berkeley to reveal the story of Brandauer, originally skilled pen makers and now contributors to the large Hadron Collider at CERN.

Few of us, if any, have given any thought how the earliest pens were produced and the craftsmanship involved. The Brandauer factory was established in Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter in the 19th century and was one of thousands of manufacturing establishments producing small precision-made items vital to so many industries. As time progressed pens moved on from swan's feather quills to metal, fashioned by a mainly female workforce, and produced to meet individual customers' requirements. As in all industries, during wartime production was reduced and the factories diversified to meet the needs of the war effort. Brandauer was no exception and went on to produce small components in many fields including aviation parts. After WW2 the fountain pen became popular and Brandauer made the nibs. By this time the company began to supply electrical industries with small detailed parts, such as those once used in record players and other electrical appliances. What then is the connection with the Hadron Collider? - Brandauer products played a vital part in the construction of the world's largest and most powerful machine sited in the tunnel between France and Switzerland. This fascinating talk held a further surprise: the speaker's close family connection! There is still a Brandauer factory in Birmingham which has Grade 2 listed status.

Monday 28 October: Mike Musson, *The London and North Western Railway in Warwickshire*

Mike Musson traced this railway's development and its role in everyday life, serving Leamington Spa, Rugby and the area as far north as Tamworth, transporting coal, milk from local farms, and cattle to market. Railways were major employers, even in wartime, of porters, signalmen and cleaners. The earliest coaches, modelled on horse-drawn vehicles, carried goods on top as well as inside. Small turntables enabled goods to be quickly unloaded and the wagon turned around or transferred to another track. Birmingham and Coventry had substantial Goods Yards, -Birmingham's Curzon Street Yard remains as part of the HS2 railway plans and a retail park now occupies the Coventry site. Of special interest to our members was the role of Milverton Station and its adjoining goods yard. Originally a terminus, the line was later extended to Leamington Avenue Station, bringing coal and other goods to the town.

With many fascinating images, we learned how efficiently the railways were organised and the benefits they brought to towns and villages. Thanks to Dr Beeching, all but main town stations have disappeared and with easier access to their customers, road haulage now transports many types of goods. Faceless container trains do not hold the same fascination as they did when they carried coal and other goods in many different types of trucks! Rail enthusiasts, including myself, can't wait for episode two of this fascinating story.

Monday 25 November: Sue Moore, *The History of the Loft Theatre and its Role in the Cultural Life of the Town.*

To end the LHG 2019 season of talks (The December meeting is a Members' Evening) Sue Moore treated us to a cracking performance of her History of "The Loft", beautifully delivered, via an array of archive photographs, programmes and other ephemera. We learned of the origins of the theatre, in a loft, in a barn in Bedford Street, and of scintillating First Nights complete with black tie. It was not all upbeat, however: there have been leaking roofs and devastating fires, but the show goes on! In true showbiz style, Sue left us wanting more. We all look forward to a further episode, - with perhaps a little more of The Lady in the Van! Sue refused a fee for her talk, preferring that members support The Loft by attending a performance, so come on LHG members, what are you waiting for!

