

Tonbridge Historical Society



[Tonbridge Historical Society \(www.tonbridgehistory.org.uk \)](http://www.tonbridgehistory.org.uk)

NEWSLETTER Autumn 2023

Introduction

Hello everyone. I am the new editor of the newsletter and would like to take a few moments to introduce myself and to point out the new layout. Firstly, it is updated into a new 2-column format and issued, to those who wish it, as an electronic document. Where possible, there will be inclusions of colour photographs as a means of brightening it up and making it more welcoming. Secondly, it is hoped that the newsletter will be taken electronically by as many people as possible: ideally a sizeable majority. The reasons for this stem principally as a cost-saving device and secondly, for ease of issue. There are, additionally, other advantages arising from taking the newsletter this way. In particular this: embedded in the text are hyperlinks upon which, when clicked, will allow interested readers to obtain further information which cannot, for brevity, be included in the main body. Try clicking the link to our own website above.

I hope you like it. Let me know if you don't!

Best wishes,

Geoff Rishman

From the Chair

Firstly, I would like to take this opportunity to say, on behalf of the Society, a big thank you to Anthony Wilson and George Buswell for their sterling work in producing the Society's newsletter since Spring 2010, producing some memorable issues. Anthony introduced the booklet format, illustrations and articles etc, being ably assisted by George. After 13 years, following the publication of the Spring 2023 issue, both Anthony and George have decided to stand down.

So, it's welcome to our new two column format edited by Geoff Rishman. I trust you will find the newsletter as interesting and would welcome your feedback.

Also included, within the newsletter, are details of our forthcoming programme of talks which include some returning old friends as well as new speakers to the Society. We start with a Tonbridge connection by Doug Lindsay on Colonel Stephens, which is the last of our rescheduled talks due to the disruption caused by Covid - how time flies!

Finally, I hope you have all enjoyed the summer weather and I look forward to meeting you all again in September.

David Phillips

The programme for 2023 – 2024

14/09/23: Doug Lindsay

Colonel Stephens: The Father of Light Railways

Doug was born and bred in Maidstone and has been resident in Tenterden for over 30 years. A lifelong railway enthusiast and active volunteer on the Kent & East Sussex Railway, currently involved in the Heritage and Museum side, but formerly a director and full-time commercial manager. He has an avid interest in Kent's transport history and lectures on Kent's railways to groups throughout the country. Doug's illustrated presentation will cover Colonel Holman Fred Stephens the 'Father of Light Railways', covering his many Light Railways, both locally and around Britain, which were all run from his office here in Tonbridge.

12/10/23: David Carder

Kent's Tudor Defences

Henry VIII's break with Rome and the subsequent fear of invasion by the French and Spanish, particularly after their peace treaty in 1538, led to England's largest defence building programme since the Anglo-Saxon period. New gun-forts were built along the south coast, from Kent to Cornwall, and on both sides of the Thames Estuary. The talk will cover the background of the building programme and take a detailed look at what survives today.

11/11/23: Andrew Mayfield

1. Royal Parks at Greenwich

The Greenwich talk will focus on Andrew's role as community archaeologist for *Greenwich Park Revealed*. This is a multi-million-pound National Lottery Heritage Fund project, to restore and conserve Greenwich Park. He has been working on sites across the park, from Saxon Barrows to a Magnetic Observatory and from an air raid shelter to a Charles II landscape! The talk will cover the history and archaeology of this much-loved park.

2. Archaeology of Shorne Woods Country Park

As a counterpoint, Andrew will also be talking about the archaeology and history of Shorne Woods Country Park. One of Kent County Council's largest and most visited parks, the site has everything from Mesolithic

flint scatters, to a medieval manor, a World War Two RAF camp and even a clay works!

14/12/23: Michael Smith

Tom Crean: The Unsung Hero of Antarctic Exploration

Tom Crean was the unsung hero of Antarctic exploration whose incredible exploits exploring with Captain Scott and Ernest Shackleton were overlooked for 80 years. Crean, who ran away from home at 15, served on three expeditions to the Antarctic, spent longer in the ice than either Scott or Shackleton and outlived both men. He was among the last to see Scott alive near the South Pole in 1912 and returned to the ice to bury his frozen body. Crean was also a major figure on Shackleton's Endurance expedition to the Antarctic exactly 100 years ago. But Tom Crean could never speak about his exploits and took his remarkable story to the grave. Michael Smith, who wrote the only account of Crean's life, explains why. Michael Smith is an authority on polar exploration whose books have sold over 300,000 copies worldwide.

08/02/24: Natalie Cohen

Smallhythe Excavations

Smallhythe is perhaps best known as the home of famous Victorian actress Ellen Terry but recent archaeological excavations by the National Trust and Archaeology South-East have shown that activity at the site stretches back over 2,000 years. In the medieval period, the site was used for shipbuilding, with a number of royal vessels built there for Henry V and Henry VIII during the 15th and 16th centuries. As a unique survival of a medieval shipbuilding site, Smallhythe is highly significant for the study of nautical archaeology of the period. Evidence has also been discovered showing Roman activity at the site, including tiles stamped with the sign of the Roman fleet – The Classis Britannica.

14/03/24: Bob Appleton

A227 Road from Gravesend to Tonbridge

Bob will present a trip down the A227 on old picture postcards of over 100 years ago, from Gravesend to Tonbridge but including some diversions along the way.

Bob Appleton lives in Tonbridge but comes originally from Gravesend. For over 50 years, he has built up an extensive collection of historic postcards covering local history across parts of North Kent.

11/04/24: Pat Mortlock

The Worthies of Tonbridge

Pat's talk covers how the subjects of the plaques are chosen and the criteria used in these decisions. With a resumé of information about those chosen, she will cover the progress so far, along with definite plans for the future.

Archaeological Matters

Our Archaeology Officer, Shiela Broomfield, would be happy to answer any query relating to local matters of interest in this field. Additionally, she is a member of the Kent Archaeological Society (KAS). KAS have a website which you can access by clicking here: [Kent Archaeological Society | Kent Archaeological Society \(kentarchaeology.org.uk\)](http://KentArchaeologicalSociety.org.uk)

If you simply wish to peruse their latest newsletter, then click here: [KAS Newsletter May 2023.pdf \(kentarchaeology.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com\)](http://KentArchaeology.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com)

Membership

At the last committee meeting it was decided, after careful consideration of the Society's finances, that the membership fee be fixed at £12.00 per member or £20.00 per two people living at the same address until 2025 / 2026. Also, the November double meeting will be included in your membership but members may make a donation if you so wish.

However, you will still need to book your place to enable catering requirements to be assessed; guests will be charged £5 as before.

David Phillips

'The Titanic Disaster – Local Connections'

With the Titanic back in the news recently, here are some extracts from the coverage of the original disaster which appeared in the Tonbridge Free Press newspaper in April 1912:



'Considerable consternation, as everywhere else, prevailed in Tonbridge when the news became known, and this district has not escaped the results of the disaster.'

John Simmonds, whose fate is not yet known, was on board, on his way to America from Leigh. He previously worked at Duke and Son, of Peshurst, as a cricket ball maker.

Mrs Helen Twomey, who was known in Tonbridge, was also a passenger on the ill-fated vessel ... on her way to take up a position with the Bishop of Indianapolis.' We also regret to announce that Col J.J. Astor was one of the victims. He is cousin to Mr Astor of Hever Castle.

Amongst the drowned stewardesses was Mrs L.V.Snape, who until recently lived at the "Flying Dutchman" Inn, Hildenborough. Her husband died only last November in Hong Kong, and his young widow – she was but 22 years of age – had only been back a few weeks when she accepted a post on the Titanic, only to meet with an untimely end. Deep sympathy is felt for her parents and other relations.

SAFE IN NEW YORK. The many friends of Miss Nellie Barber of Peshurst, Lady's Maid... who was on the Titanic, received with pleasure the glad news of her safety on Saturday. She cabled from New York that she had safely arrived there, and the cablegram was placed in the window of Mr Eagleton's business premises. [Tailor's shop at 42 High Street, Tonbridge.]

But for the persuasion of his father, Mr Hatton, son of Mr Hatton, greengrocer, of High Street, Tonbridge, would have travelled by the vessel, but fortunately he set sail for America by the boat leaving just previously.
Anthony Wilson

Rochester Airport

Ever since I was a 6-year-old, on my way to Singapore following my Royal Naval father's 3 year posting to that delightful country, I have had an enduring love of aviation and flying machines. For a young lad, gazing down on the cotton-wool "landscape" of the clouds below, it was a truly magical experience. As an impecunious young father, it took me till I was 30 before I gained my flying licence. Now, with an, albeit rather old, aeroplane based at Rochester, I pondered the history of the airport.

The connection to Tonbridge is, admittedly, rather tenuous – but I live here - and Rochester is, of course, in the same county! Of immense interest is the enduring connection between Rochester and BAE systems: the 7th largest defence contractor on the planet! This, on our doorstep, fantastic!

Aviation, at Rochester, started in 1933. Please click the link for a more complete description ([Rochester Airport Ltd - We intend being here for another 80 years.....](#)).

Rochester was the home of Short brothers who built the Short Stirling heavy 4-engined bomber of WW2.

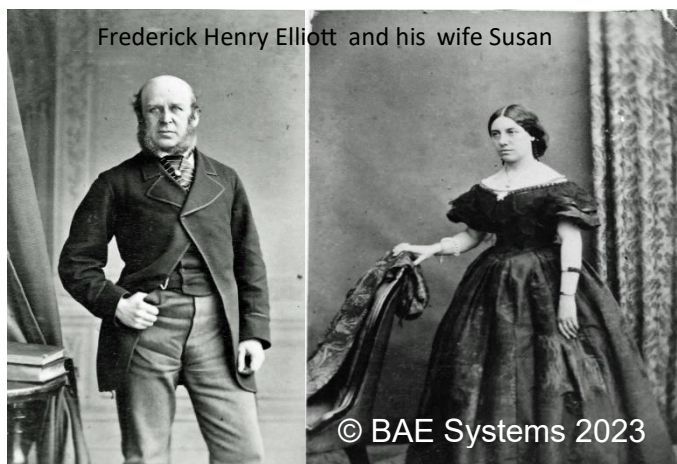
This admirable aircraft could, and should have been, much better but for the short-sighted insistence that its wing span be shortened to allow it to fit the RAF hangars of the day! One Canadian pilot, Murray



Peden, described it thus: "The Stirling was truly a wonderful aircraft which rendered great service as Britain's first four-engined bomber. But for its needless maiming at birth by the short-sighted planners who conjured up the Air ministry specifications, the Stirling might well have outperformed even the great Lancaster. She assuredly was second to none as a sturdy and dependable battler. . .The Short Stirling earned the highest honours, and never received them "except from every pilot she ever bore aloft."

Aeroplanes require quite complex instrumentation, especially the military types. BAE Systems Avionics has an illustrious history. – which can be traced back to 1795! William Elliott (1781 – 1853) was apprenticed to an instrument maker, William Blackwell, in 1795. In 1804, William began his own company making scientific instruments which were used by the great physicist James Clerk Maxwell and others. In 1850, he was joined by his two sons, Charles and Frederick. Charles retired in 1865 and Frederick, when he died in 1873, left the business to his wife Susan. Susan eventually went into partnership with Willoughby Smith. She died in 1880 and was the last of the Elliotts to be associated with what became Elliott Brothers – and eventually, through many mergers and take-overs,

BAE Systems Avionics. Rochester Avionics Archives has a superb website which gives a huge amount of



information on this:

<https://rochesteravionicarchives.co.uk/>

The curator, Chris Bartlett, could not have been more helpful in providing me with a huge wealth of information! I also spent a fascinating and enjoyable morning at Chris' Museum. Thank you, Chris!

So now, I feel deeply honoured to base my aircraft at a place with such a full and illustrious history. I never knew a humble airport could have such a past.



The author's aeroplane looking small and lost in the large hangar constructed for mighty machines!

Geoff Rishman

Tonbridge Priory Ruins

What did the priory look like? Where was it exactly?



These questions, and more are thoroughly investigated in a dossier of pictures compiled by Anthony

Wilson; this is now lodged in the THS archives. The document runs to over 20 pages so cannot be included here in full. However, a PDF version is available to anyone who would like to see it. Please contact either Anthony himself or George Buswell.

100 Years ago

Opening of the Sports Ground

Tonbridge's Municipal Sports Ground (now the Racecourse Sportsground) was officially opened by Lord Hardinge of Penshurst – a former Viceroy of India – on 23rd June 1923. Dignitaries assembled, the town band played, the Royal West Kents mounted a guard of honour, speeches were made, the National Anthem sung and the Union Jack raised.

In his speech, the Council Chairman, Councillor Ives, said that the purchase of the site for £4000 was a wise act. He did not know where they would find so fine a piece of land in England. They had 48 acres as level as a billiard table, in the centre of the town and surrounded by water.

Lord Hardinge said he saw no reason why this magnificent land should not become the finest sports ground in the country. He declared the grounds open and dedicated them to the public for ever.



The future Sports Ground site had earlier served as venue for the annual Tonbridge Races

Anthony Wilson

Memorable Quotes



"If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got."

— **Henry Ford**

For a biography on Henry, click the picture above...