



LEIGHWAY

The newsletter of the Leigh Society
An eye to the future with an ear to the past in the heart of Leigh

Lancashire so have no knowledge of the area.” Can anyone help?

HELLO READERS EVERYWHERE

This time of year sees another Leighway to keep you cheery over the winter months. The Society’s website is attracting a lot of interest and we are getting regular queries for information. If you have any information on any item please contact Carole on carole.mulroney@btinternet.com or via the Heritage Centre or the person stated in the article.

DEAR DIARY

All our talks (in bold) are held at Wesley Hall, Elm Road Methodist Church at 8 p.m entry charge of £1 for members and £2 for visitors. For your information we have also listed other events for your diary.

19-20 September – Leigh Regatta

14 October – Films of Southend and Leigh, Old and New - Westcliff Film and Video Club

18 November - The Saxon King – Ken Crow, Southend Museum

12 December – Carols on Strand Wharf

COMICALS

We have decided that everyone needs a bit of cheering up in the depths of February so we hope to hold a Valentine’s Comicals, details in next Leighway.

As ever anyone who would like to take part with an act is very welcome to do so and should contact the Heritage Centre with details. WE NEED SOME NEW TALENT

CHALKWELL MEMORIES

A Mr McLean has also contacted us through the website in search of information about Chalkwell as follows –

“I am trying to find details of where my father grew up, Leigh and the area around Chalkwell. His uncle owned a garage in the 40’s that was based on Woodfield Road in Chalkwell, and we are trying to locate where this was exactly, what it was called, and if there may be any photos of this particular area from that time. I believe that the garage was later converted in some form to manufacture of boats of some description. Unfortunately my fathers memory is not what it was, so he finds it difficult to recall many details of the area throughout the late 30’s and 40’s, and our family now lives in Southport

PLUMBS COTTAGE

The Plumbs Yard Project is now completed and we will be winding up the Charity and the Company and passing the remaining funds to the Leigh Heritage Centre charity.

The project has ended with the publication of a very comprehensive pack prepared by members of the Society with the help of Dawn Purkiss and the artistic assistance of local artist Howard Robinson. We thank them both for their tremendous input.

The outcome is a very professional package which is already being hailed as a great success by visiting schools.

The production of such a package was one of the conditions of our lottery funding and well and truly establishes the Heritage Centre as an education resource for schools. Thanks to everyone involved.

A LITTLE BIT OF LEIGH IN NORTH CAROLINA

If you want to get away from it all and yet stay in Leigh this house is for rent on Hatteras Island on the North Carolina coast for \$690 a week and its called Leigh-on-Sea!!!!



4 bedroom, 3 bath oceanside house, located in Salvo.

In 1953, a 72-mile stretch of the Outer Banks from Nags Head to Ocracoke Island was set aside as the USA’s first National Seashore. Today, most of Hatteras Island remains protected by that designation and is one of the country’s most visited National Parks. The Cape Hatteras National Seashore encompasses some of the most historic and environmentally fragile real estate in the world.

Perhaps we can get a coach trip together!!!! WHO WAS REV GILBERT?

This picture was purchased at a recent postcard fair in Leigh. On the reverse it says 'The Rev J Gilbert, Leigh-on-Sea'

Does anyone know which church the Rev Gilbert served at as it would be nice to let them have this picture for their archives.



LOOKING FOR VIOLET

Through the website we have received the following request from Joanne Maddock who is researching her family tree. Many of her ancestors lived in Leigh in the 18th and 19th centuries, and also further back; these include the Masons and Thompsons (Goldspring and Golden).

The reason Joanne is contacting us is because she is searching for information about a relative who lived in Leigh in the 20th century. She is trying to find out about a Violet (Vi), full birth name Violet Olga T Lordon, born 1905, or she may well have used the surname Barton instead of Lordon. Apparently Violet drove a three-wheel convertible (this was probably in the 1930s). She was brought up by Olive Frances and William George Barton who lived in Whitstable. The whole Barton family appears to have moved to Essex in the 1930s. Violet died in Leigh in 1978. She lived at Lawn Cottage. Violet married Maxwell C Harrison in 1936 and it is thought he was a policeman. Maybe Violet has descendents who still live in Leigh and Joanne would be interested in contacting them.



Please contact Joanne at joanne.matthews@virgin.net if you can help in her search.

HMS MOHAWK

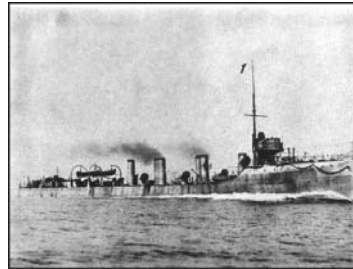
Did a member of your family serve on HMS Mohawk during World War 1? This photo comes from an album donated to the Society by a member of the Kirby family. Unfortunately the sailor is nameless in the album. But from his cap we can see he

served on HMS Mohawk. The picture was taken at a Southend studio.



The HMS MOHAWK was built by Whites in 1907 as a Torpedo Boat Destroyer of 865 tons and was armed with 5 x 12 pounders and 2 x 18 inch torpedo tubes. She had a maximum speed of 34 knots. In 1914 she was attached to the Sixth Destroyer Flotilla and was a tender to HMS ATTENTIVE.

Shortly after this she was commanded by Commander E R G R EVANS, CB, (Evans of the Broke)* and was employed on the Dover Patrol until she was severely damaged as the result of striking one of the first German mines laid in the area.



HMS Mohawk

* Admiral **Edward Ratcliffe Garth Russell Evans, 1st Baron Mountevans of Chelsea** KCB DSO known as "Teddy" Evans, was a British naval officer and Antarctic explorer. He served as second-in-command on Robert Falcon Scott's ill-fated expedition to the South Pole in 1910-1913 and as captain of the expedition ship *Terra Nova*.

CONSERVATION AREAS

As members will know there are 4 conservation areas in Leigh and the Society is consulted on all planning applications within them. It is a constant battle to take a balanced approach to the quite legitimate aims of property owners to make alterations to their properties whilst at the same time ensuring that the conservation areas are preserved and enhanced wherever possible. The drive for house extensions rather than moving creates additional pressure.

English Heritage has recently run a campaign called 'Conservation Areas at Risk', with the intention of revealing how many of England's 9000 conservation areas are at risk and from what. They asked every local authority to complete a questionnaire on the condition of their conservation areas.

It was found that 1 in 7 were at risk and many others have serious problems. The problems fall into 2 categories, namely, what owners and residents do or fail to do to their properties and how the council maintains the streets and public places.

EH would like to see councils use the powers they have to control inappropriate minor alterations etc and to pay more

attention to public elements of the areas by ensuring streets are not cluttered, pavements are repaired etc
The top 10 threats to conservation areas are–

unsympathetic replacement of doors and windows
poorly maintained roads and pavements
the amount of street clutter
loss of boundary walls, fences or hedges
unsightly satellite dishes
the effects of traffic calming or traffic management
alterations to front elevations, roofs and chimneys
unsympathetic new extensions
the impact of advertisements
neglected green spaces

EH state that past experience proves that

1. a conservation area is much more likely to improve over the next three years if there is a Heritage Champion in the authority. *Southend Borough Council has appointed a Councillor to oversee this area.*
2. Conservation areas with Appraisals or Article 4 Directions are almost twice as likely to improve in the next three years as those without. *Southend Borough Council is undertaking reappraisals of the conservation areas in Leigh.*
3. Conservation areas with community support are more than twice as likely to have improved over the last three years as those without. *The Leigh Society is the focal point for community support for the conservation areas.*

EH also surveyed estate agents which gave an insight into how purchasers and vendors' actions can harm conservation areas. This is what they said -

- unsympathetic replacement windows and doors, particularly plastic/PVCu, is the single biggest threat to property values in conservation areas
- poorly maintained highways or paving and unsympathetic extensions and alterations are also considered to be particular problems
- original features tend to add financial value to properties and help a property to sell more quickly
- a well-maintained conservation area adds to the value of the properties within it. Confidence in the area keeping its character and the attractive environment are the two key reasons
- residential properties within conservation areas sell for more than equivalent properties not in a conservation area
- a minority of their clients have a reasonable understanding of the additional controls in conservation areas.

This latter point is interesting as the Leigh Society and the Town Council has been lobbying for some time for the Borough to supply copies of conservation area guides with local searches and to estate agents so that purchasers and vendors alike understand their responsibilities. This is one of the recommendations of the EH report and we are pushing at an open door and will continue to pursue this.

The EH report acknowledges that local knowledge and expertise can be of enormous help to local authorities in the active management of conservation areas and there are lots of

important things you can do to help keep it special (some of which we already have or do):

- make sure your local authority has an adequate regime of development control and is willing to take rapid enforcement action against unauthorised work
- comment on planning applications and tell the local authority about other local concerns
- encourage all local residents to follow English Heritage's good practice guide for householders *Looking After Your House* (<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/server/show/nav.20808>)
- help the local authority to prepare a local list of buildings of architectural or historic interest and lobby them to deal with those at risk. *The Leigh Society will take an active part if it becomes aware of such issues.*
- get involved in preparing a Village or Neighbourhood Design Statement and then agree a strategy for putting it into action. *This is effectively done through commenting on the Conservation Area appraisals which are taking place at present.*
- carry out regular audits to identify street clutter and other local eyesores, including poorly maintained pavements, memorials, street furniture and public spaces – and then talk to your local authority about what needs to be done. Download an audit form from www.english-heritage.org.uk/saveourstreets
- Local amenity societies and groups can identify neglected buildings in conservation areas, and, where appropriate, invite the local authority to take statutory action. Urgent Works Notices allow councils to carry out emergency work on neglected listed buildings in conservation areas. They can also use Repairs Notices to force an owner to carry out emergency works to preserve a listed building.
- Amenity notices can be used by Councils to take action in conservation areas. Because they apply to 'any land' and not just buildings they can be used to deal with other problems such as broken walls and fences, accumulated rubbish or overgrown gardens and hedges.
- Anyone concerned by litter can apply to the Magistrate's Court for a litter abatement notice. This is a useful tool for encouraging landowners to clean up neglected road verges and railway embankments where accumulated litter has become a damaging eyesore.

If you want to see the whole Conservation Areas at Risk document go to the English Heritage website.

PLANNING

The fight was lost unfortunately to prevent the old Swanleys newsagents in the Broadway being turned into an amusement arcade. But this site continues to give problems due to unauthorized works which changed the frontage completely. The Society has been very vigilant in this respect as Swanleys had a distinctive frontage which has been destroyed. We are just waiting to see the droves of middle aged women stampeding to the one arm bandits as was claimed to be the largest proportion of the likely clientele!

An appeal into the unauthorised change of use of the florist next to the Estuary Bar to part of the Bar was heard in July. We

objected to the proposals as it meant the loss of yet another retail outlet. The restaurant use was refused but the enforcement notice was found to be defective so for the moment the use as it is stays unless the Council serve another Notice.

In the Old Town we have been active in trying to prevent posters being put up on 'Junipers' these were advertising events at the Boatyard restaurant and were most unsightly in the Old Town Conservation Area.

Like many others we have objected to the expansion of Southend Airport and have also made detailed comments on the Council's new Design and Townscape Guide and the reappraisal of the Old Town Conservation Area.

In this time of recession people are turning to extending their properties instead of moving and there have been numerous applications for all different sorts of extensions which we have had to review and comment upon.

AND THE BAND PLAYED ON

Many of you will have read the excellent book 'Spirit of the Sea' by Gordon Parkhill and Graham Cook written to celebrate the centenary of the Salvation Army in Leigh in 2002.

The front cover carries this photograph of the Salvation Army Band in 1902/3 under the leadership of James Ashman Wilder.



James is third from left standing

A few years later in 1908 James and his family emigrated to Canada and lived in Stratford, Ontario.

True to his calling James and his brother were leading lights in the Stratford Salvation Army and James continued there his leadership of the Stratford Band as can be seen in this photo sent by James' grandson, Richard Wilder who now lives in America and has recently joined the Society.



1905 - STRATFORD ONTARIO S.A. BAND - BY JAMES A. WILDER (GROSS)

BOY RACERS – SPEEDWAY AT LEIGH?

Can anyone help with another quest for local information?

Many of our senior readers will recall speedway racing at The Weir, in Rayleigh between 1948 and 1974. This was just one of many well documented tracks which opened in the post-war boom and fell victim to redevelopment.

It is generally accepted that the first speedway event, in the days before the war when it was known as dirt track racing, was staged in Essex at High Beech near Loughton in Epping Forest. Whilst the activities at many of the then well established venues are well recorded, information about other, forgotten, venues emerges from time to time.

Only recently an article about speedway veteran Arthur Pilgrim who now lives near Ipswich revealed there was a speedway track before the war at Leigh. In a telephone conversation Arthur recalled the track was located to the rear of The Woodcutters Arms and had been cut out of woodland. He also indicated that greyhound racing was staged at the venue. A recent visit to the area by Terry Stone, President of the World Speedway Riders' Association 2008 - 09 who lives in Thundersley, revealed no remaining signs of the track

To a speedway historian news of a previously unrecorded venue like Leigh is very exciting and the start of an exercise to find out a bit more about the venue. If anyone recalls Dirt Track / Speedway Racing at Leigh and can shed any further light on this venture which is likely to have taken place sometime between 1935 and 1939 when the outbreak of war closed down all but one speedway track for the duration.

If you can help please contact -

Jim Henry
Joint Editor
The Speedway Researcher
90 Greenend Gardens
Edinburgh
EH17 7QH
0131 664 7185 jjh1950@blueyonder.co.uk

ITS NOT ALL HADDOCK AND SALMON

We are always going on about our famous Admirals from the Haddock and Salmon families of Leigh but here is another one.

Sir Edward Whitaker, (c1660?-1735), although not born in Leigh on 27 September 1692 he married Ann Stephens of Leigh at St Clements. Between 1695 and 1696 he commanded the *Elizabeth*, *Monck*, and *St Andrew*, and was flag-captain to Sir Cloudesley Shovell in the *Victory*. In the 1690s he was living at Leigh.

In May 1699 Whitaker was appointed to the *Portland*, and on 13 January 1702 to the *Ranelagh*, and a month later, on 16 February, he was appointed master-attendant at Woolwich; he held that office throughout the year. In January 1703 he took command of the *Dorsetshire*, one of the fleet which went with Sir George Rooke to the Mediterranean in 1704. In the capture of Gibraltar, Whitaker acted as aide-de-camp to Sir George Byng, commanded the boats in the attack, rallied the men when they were panic-stricken by the explosion of a magazine, and hoisted the English colours on the bastion.

In the battle of Malaga (August 1704) the *Dorsetshire* was one of the Red squadron, and was closely engaged throughout.

Whitaker was knighted soon afterwards, and in 1705 he commanded the *Barfleur*. Early in 1706 he was promoted rear-admiral of the blue and appointed to command a squadron off Dunkirk; in April he convoyed the Duke of Marlborough to Holland.

In 1708, with his flag in the *Northumberland*, Whitaker went out to the Mediterranean with Sir John Leake, and in August he commanded the detachment which co-operated in the capture of Minorca. When Leake returned to England, Whitaker remained in command, and on 21 December was promoted vice-admiral of the blue. A commission of 20 December to admiral of the blue seems to have been cancelled, and on 14 November 1709 he was made vice-admiral of the white. In January 1709 he was relieved from the position of commander-in-chief in the Mediterranean by Sir George Byng, with whom he remained as second in command, ferrying imperial troops and taking part in the failed attempt to lift the siege of Alicante. He succeeded to the chief command again when Byng returned to England in September 1709.

In the summer of 1710 Whitaker also returned to England, and on 26 June he remarried, Ann having died in 1705. He was commanding in the downs, cruising in the channel in 1710–12, and played a major part in the occupation of Dunkirk in July 1712. After declining the post of second in command in the Baltic in 1716 he lived in retirement at Carshalton, Surrey and died there on 12 November 1735.

Edward and Ann had had a son, Edward baptised in Leigh in 1697 and there is also a Captain Samuel Whitaker living in Leigh at the time who may have been Edward's brother.

The burial of Lady Anne Whitaker is recorded at St Clement's on 25 June 1705. Anne is recorded as being buried in linen for which was paid to the poor £2.10s.

In the reign of Charles II, Parliament passed "An Act for burying in woollen only" – (Oxford DNB)

"For the encouragement of of the woollen manufactures of this kingdom and prevention of the exportation of the monies thereof, for the buying and importation of linen. Be it enacted that from and after the five and twentieth day of March in the year of our Lord, one thousand six hundred seventy seven, no person or persons whatever shall be buried in any shirt, shift or sheet made of or mingled with flax, hemp, silk, hair, gold or silver, or other than what shall be made of Wool only, or be put into any coffin lined or faced with anything made of or mingled with flax, hemp, silk or hair; Upon pain of the forfeiture of the sum of five pounds, to be employed to the use of the poor of the parish where such person shall be buried, for or towards providing a stock or work house for the setting them to work, to be levied by the churchwardens and overseers of the poor of such parish Provided, that no penalty appointed by this Act, shall be incurred for or by the reason of any person that shall die of the plague, though such person be buried in linen."

It was not easy to carry out this legislation. The wrapping of a corpse in linen was an ancient practice and the old custom could not be broken down by Act of Parliament, and its provisions were easily avoided. So another Act, far more stringent, was passed 12 years later in 1690 and it was enacted that within eight days of the funeral an affidavit of the fact of the burial being in woollen should be brought to the minister, failing which notice should be given to the churchwarden or overseer, who would levy on the defaulting person for the recovery of the fine. This new act was very sweeping, but was not more successful than the former one, and long before its repeal in 1812, it had fallen into disuse.

WILLIAM GEORGE ARMSTRONG

A Son of Leigh with an interesting father

Not a name you know? Well William George Armstrong was born on 29 May 1859 in Leigh, the eldest son of Lieutenant Richard Ramsay Armstrong, R.N., and his wife Eliza Susannah Malet of Jersey. William was baptised in St Clement's on 12 June 1859 where his father's profession is stated as 'Navyyard'.

Before we tell the story of William it is interesting to look at his father's exploits.

Richard Ramsey Armstrong (1831-1910), was a naval officer and public servant, who was born at St Peter, Jersey. He joined the navy in 1847, and saw much action in the Crimean war, was wounded three times, promoted for conspicuous gallantry and decorated by France and Turkey. He retired from the navy in 1871 as lieutenant-commander, migrated to Canterbury, New Zealand, and was appointed chief immigration officer and inspector of ships.



Richard Ramsay Armstrong
(courtesy of National Library of Australia).

After an unsuccessful planting venture in Fiji, he went to New South Wales about 1878 and was commissioned by the government to report on Lord Howe Island about 400 miles north-east of Sydney. Soon afterwards he settled on the island intending to cultivate tropical produce, and was appointed registrar of births, marriages and deaths, resident magistrate and postmaster; he also became a hero by saving a wrecked ship.

In December 1881 the government rejected a petition from the islanders for his removal but in January 1882 while visiting Sydney, the director of the Sydney Botanic Gardens accused him of embezzling £30 provided for the supply of seeds. The charge was upheld by the inspector-general of police, after a hasty investigation. The Department of Public Instruction then complained that Armstrong refused to account for money provided to build a school, and in March the government instigated an investigation which brought to light illegal liquor trading. The investigator held a short inquiry where none of the witnesses were sworn and no cross-examination was permitted and reported that three of the main charges were fully proven and, since he also asserted that the post of magistrate was redundant, Armstrong was dismissed.

Aroused by what seemed a manifest injustice, Armstrong began a vigorous campaign of letters to the press and representations to members of parliament; and published pamphlets. In February 1883 the government appointed a select committee which condemned the investigation's methods, questioned the character of the accusers and virtually cleared Armstrong but the bias of the committee was so obvious that the report was

received with some skepticism, and because the investigator had died before it was submitted, the assembly's decision was complicated by respect for his memory. The government offered alternative employment but Armstrong preferred to seek public vindication by compensation. In June 1884 another committee recommended £1000 compensation but settlement was delayed by strong opposition. In 1886 a motion for £3000 compensation was rejected as excessive. In 1887 Armstrong's protagonists reluctantly agreed to a compromise offer of £1500. Armstrong invested the money in station property in New South Wales but later moved to Tasmania where he volunteered for service in the Boer war. In 1902 he moved to Western Australia where he attempted to develop commercial sponge fisheries. He died in Perth in 1910. The Lord Howe Island case was a *cause célèbre* which aroused all the liberals in New South Wales and Armstrong was probably guilty of at least serious indiscretion.

The son of this somewhat eccentric father was William George Armstrong who after emigrating with the family at about the age of 16 became a master at Sydney Grammar School and studied Arts at the University of Sydney where he graduated from Faculty of Medicine with honours in 1888.

William was part of the first cohort of students to graduate from the medical school and, as names were read alphabetically by the Chancellor, was the first to be conferred. After graduation, he entered general practice in a tin-mining town in north-western New South Wales then went back to England to obtain a Diploma of Public Health at Cambridge in April 1895. Candidates were required to get practical experience of outdoor sanitary work and William appears to have done this by working in the slums of Whitechapel.

On his return to Australia, he began a career in public health and was appointed Medical Officer to the City of Sydney in 1898 and City Health Officer in 1900. He held these posts until 1913, when he became Deputy Director General of Public Health and subsequently Director. He was appointed University Lecturer in Public Health in 1904, a post he retained for 16 years.

William was one of the pioneers of public health and child welfare in Australia, and early in his career was engaged in the control of an outbreak of bubonic plague in Sydney. He became actively involved in medical moves to reduce infant mortality from gastroenteritis and issued a pamphlet advocating breast-feeding as a safeguard against the disease, which was sent to all mothers as soon as they registered a birth. At his instigation, a trained health visitor was appointed to visit these mothers in their homes. William was also instrumental in the creation in 1914, of a baby health centre in North South Wakes, the forerunner of a state-wide service. The dramatic drop in infant mortality effected in the State between 1900 and 1940 can be attributed largely to his efforts.

A TITANIC DISCOVERY

This year saw the death of the last survivor of the Titanic. It is also the year of a Titanic related discovery in Leigh. Two discoveries in fact very closely linked.

Whilst rooting through the Society's archives we have found the sheet music for a song called 'Goodbye' written by John Mitchell of the Empire Palace, Broadway, Leigh-on-Sea which he dedicated to Wallace Hartley the 'Late bandmaster of the Titanic'



John Mitchell wrote the words and music and the song was performed by Fred Burt and could be sung in public without fee or license (sic) except theatres and music halls. The copy in the archives has written across the top in John Mitchell's own hand 'Accepted by His Majesty King George V' and on the bottom 'With the Author's compliments'.

The words are as follows –

*The scene is a vessel far out in the sea
Fast speeding along in the night
The passengers little think danger is nigh
All around them is merry and bright
The lookout is perched in the crow's nest ahead
When a message rings out very soon
There's an iceberg ahead ev'ry man for himself
But the Bandmaster plays this grand tune*

Refrain –

*Nearer my God to thee.
Nearer the end of life
Would I'd the pow'r to just embrace my sweetheart
who'll ne'er be my wife
Duty I know must be done
Play on tho' dangers nigh
Nearer my God to thee
Thy will be done
Dear lov'd ones I'm going Goodbye*

*All hands to the lifeboats, the ship's sinking fast
As waves o'er the deck quickly burst
'Be British' the Captain cries. All men stand back
Save the women and little ones first
And as the boats swing out a hero still plays
A hero brave Hartley by name
Amidst the commotion quite calmly he stands
And meets his doom with this refrain*

Refrain

We knew nothing about Mr John Mitchell but again due to an amazing coincidence more came to light. The Empire Palace stood on the site of Overton's Garage which has recently been demolished. During the those works a playbill was found. Again this features the name of John Mitchell and advertises the latest cinema treats with the proud boast of being 'The only theatre showing six to eight feature pictures every week'.

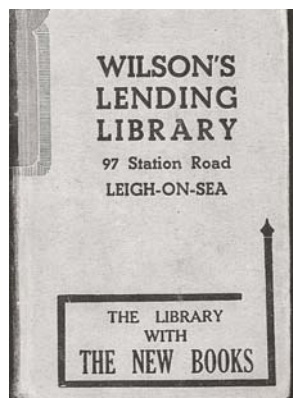


As an incentive to go to the cinema the poster boasts tells patrons that 'trams pass the doors and the Theatre's telephone number is 52 Leigh.

Mr Mitchell was obviously a local philanthropist as this cartoon of 1913 from the local paper shows. Mr Mitchell is being saluted by a fisherman representing Leigh.



HAVE YOU RETURNED YOUR LIBRARY BOOKS?



This photograph is of a book sleeve we hold in our archives. Some of our members must remember this lending library in Station Road – tell us about it.

THE ARCHETYPAL ENGLISHMAN FROM LEIGH



Michael Charles Gauntlet Wilding, (1912–1979), actor, was born on 23 July 1912 in Leigh, the son of Henry Wilding, a soldier and businessman who claimed descent from John of Gaunt and William Howley, archbishop of Canterbury, and his wife, Ethel Thomas who acted with Sir Ben Greet's company before her marriage.

On the outbreak of revolution in Russia in 1917 Wilding's father, who had been working in military intelligence in Moscow, returned to England and Wilding enrolled at Christ's Hospital. He briefly studied art at the London Polytechnic, and then spent a year in Bruges as a café portraitist before accepting a clerking job with the commercial art firm Garlands.

In 1934, exploiting the fact that a girlfriend's father had shares in the British and Dominion Film Company, Wilding was hired as an extra at Elstree Studios and soon found himself serving as stand-in to Douglas Fairbanks junior on *Catherine the Great*.

Wilding worked exclusively on stage until the closure of West End theatres during the 'phoney war' when he returned to films. Initially he took supporting roles in morale-booster such as *Tilly of Bloomsbury* (1940) and *Sailors Three* (1941) but Noël Coward was suitably impressed with his performance in *Ships with Wings* (1942) to cast him as Flagg in the naval combat classic *In Which We Serve* (1942).

Classified as unfit for military duty, Wilding performed with an ENSA party in Gibraltar. After some lack lustre performances and with first choice John Mills still in the forces, Wilding was hired by director Herbert Wilcox to star opposite Anna Neagle, in *Piccadilly Incident* (1946). It proved a huge success, and over the next six years Neagle and Wilding formed the most profitable romantic partnership in the history of British cinema in such films as *The Courtneys of Curzon Street* (1947), *Spring in Park Lane* (1948) and *Maytime in Mayfair* (1949). But Wilding wanted to go to Hollywood and was loaned out to Sir Alexander Korda for *An Ideal Husband* (1948) and to Alfred Hitchcock for *Under Capricorn* (1949) and *Stage Fright* (1950).

Wilding's liaison with actress Marlene Dietrich finally forced Herbert Wilcox into negotiating an American project. But Greer Garson's frostiness meant *The Law and the Lady* (1951) was an uncomfortable experience. Moreover, it received a critical mauling, although Leonard Mosley of the *Daily Express* felt that 'Mr Wilding carries the Union Jack right into the heart of Hollywood. He is truly an international star'.

After returning to Britain, Wilding co-produced several films but his new twenty-year contract was terminated almost immediately as he married Elizabeth Taylor on 27 February 1952; and moved to Hollywood. He signed with MGM, but refused to accept sub-standard roles and was suspended. Jack Warner considered him 'the biggest romantic discovery since Rudolph Valentino' but the films he made - *Torch Song* (1954)—in which he played a blind pianist opposite a hostile Joan Crawford—*The Egyptian* (1955), and *The Glass Slipper* (1956) did little to enhance his reputation.

Only Wilding's private life seemed of interest. The gossip columnist, Hedda Hopper insinuated, that he was having an affair with Stewart Granger and the fact that he won an out-of-court settlement earned him considerable kudos, but that was quickly dissipated by the news that Taylor had left him for producer Mike Todd and that he had been dismissed from MGM for forgetting his lines. Wilding and Taylor divorced in 1957.

He returned to Britain and in the late 1950s married the millionairess Susan Nell, who set him up as the host of her Brighton restaurant, the Three Little Wilding Rooms. However, he detested the work and the marriage quickly collapsed. In 1962 he was asked to help reintroduce the actress Margaret Leighton to British audiences after an indifferent spell in the United States. They married in 1964 and, although Wilding took occasional film roles in *Waterloo* (1970) and *Lady Caroline Lamb* (1972), he devoted himself to her career. In his autobiography, *Apple Sauce* (1982), the man once tipped to be the new Cary Grant admitted that he had always been afraid of performing: 'I was not a born actor and the art of acting never came to me easily'. Margaret Leighton died in 1976 and Wilding never fully recovered from her loss and, following a blackout-induced fall, he died near Chichester from a long-formed blood clot on the brain in 1979.

Information with kind permission of the Oxford DNB)

Michael as a Blue Coat Boy

In Michael's own words –

Because of my father's lack of funds I was sent as a boarder to Christ's Hospital, which charged fees according to a family's means. The school provided a broad education in the best sense of the word, inasmuch as there was no public school style snobbery.

I felt a certain pride in belonging to a school whose traditions went back to the rein of Edward VI. However, I hated the archaic uniform we were forced to wear - long yellow stockings with knee-breeches and a dark blue coat tied about the waist with a leather girdle. This outfit gave us our name - bluecoat boys.

Once a year we marched in crocodile through the City of London to the Mansion House where we were each presented with a newly minted sixpence. Girls would lean out of office windows and whistle and cheer, making us feel as if we were part of a circus.

Picture and text published with permission of Bluecoat School website.



Me at eight in my much-hated school uniform

The Ben Greet referred to was Sir Barling 'Ben' Greet a Shakespearean actor, director and impresario. His Ben Greet Players toured Great Britain and the United States. From 1914-18 he was director of the Old Vic making that theatre a centre for Shakespearean production. Later he concentrated on productions for London schoolchildren.

LEIGHWAY

The next edition of Leighway will be coming out in January so if you have any articles please send them to Carole either by email at carole.mulroney@btinternet.com or via the Heritage Centre by mid December

MEMORIES OF NORTH STREET

Mavis Sipple remembers –

When I came to live in Leigh I was sent to North Street School, it was very different from the little catholic school I had been used to. The classrooms were big and gloomy. Mr. Harvey the teacher sat at a large wooden desk on a raised platform. If he left the desk and walked towards the class there was a shocked silence, we knew someone was in trouble. The double desks were in tiers and bolted to the floor, we had tip up seats, and an inkwell with a brass sliding lid, inside was a small white porcelain pot which was filled up with ink each day from a large jar, by the ink monitor. We had a wooden pen with a detachable nib, woe betide anyone who managed to get a blot on the page. We practised writing every day, one hand on the page, the pen pointing over our right shoulder; deviation meant a slap over the knuckles with a ruler.

All written work was carried out in complete silence. The times table were printed on the wall and every day we chanted the tables. While the boys did woodwork the girls learnt to knit and sew. Our teacher, Miss Cobley was as fierce as a maggot; knitting was a mystery to me, sewing a nightmare. a lost needle was a cardinal sin. I remember pretending to sew with a pin once when I lost my needle.

PE (Physical Education) meant standing in rows doing exercises, games was rounders in the playground, or team games with bean bags or footballs.

The most dreaded happening was the arrival of the nit nurse, we were lined up outside the staff room, one at a time we went in to face Nurse Butcher, who was tall and thin, with long cold bony fingers which she used to rake through our hair. Occasionally a child was kept behind; we all knew he or she had fleas.

Before the morning break we were all given a bottle of milk sometimes in the winter if we were lucky the milk had been put by the pipes to de-freeze, We went out to play - whatever the weather. When it was frosty the boys made huge slides right across the playground, health and safety would have something to say about that nowadays. We played skipping games, hop scotch, 'what's the time Mr Wolf?' and doing handstand up against the wall, our skirts tucked in our knickers.' The boys played marble or conkers. We visited the cold outside spidery toilets only at playtime going during lesson time was strictly forbidden, mostly we tried to wait until we went home.

Once a year in May, came Empire Day. The parents were allowed to stand in the playground and watch as we danced round the maypole and country danced to Irish jigs and Scottish sword dances. Some of us had pointed Welsh hats and little aprons and danced what might have been a Welsh jig. Then we all stood and sang rousing tunes such as 'There'll always be an England' the afternoon was finished off by everyone singing the National Anthem.

Each day started and ended with the whole school assembling in the hall for prayers and notices. Mothers didn't come to school to collect us, we took ourselves home usually stopping at the greengrocer's shop on Rectory Grove to buy a penny apple, or at the paper shop for a stick of liquorice wood or a packet of Nippets.

AND FINALLY

Any opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the particular author and not necessarily those of the committee and officers of the Society.

We rather hope you will like to keep your copy of Leighway but if not please recycle it.

© Leigh Society, Leigh Heritage Centre, 13A High Street, Leigh-on-Sea SS9 2EN