



Winter 2024

LEIGHWAY 72

LEIGH

CONSERVATION

AND HERITAGE

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DEAR DIARY 2024

Last year was difficult for talks so if anyone hears a speaker (who hasn't already done the rounds) and thinks they would be suitable for our sessions please contact Carole. We wanted to broaden the subjects to create interest so you will see some changes in our programme content.

We are hoping to hold an open day at the Community Centre on 6 April with speakers

17 April—AGM and a talk on the environment by our Company Secretary, Cathy Cottridge

15 May—Women War Artists, Dr Banting TBC

19 June—the return of Paul Carver, City of London Guide content TBC

18 September—River Thames Society, Peter Finch.

Dear Member

Happy New Year to you all.

Within your Leighway you will find 2 important loose letters. One relates to updating our GDPR requirements together with an SAE for its return.

The other relates to payment by standing order which we hope those who don't currently pay in this way would like to take up as it aids our admin and ensures your membership does not lapse unless you want it to.

If you have successfully completed the instruction previously sent to you to your Bank to pay the 2024 subscription renewal to our new account with Metro Bank, then many thanks and you can ignore the rest of this note.

We know some members were confused by our original note and for that we do apologise. In order to try and simplify matters we set out below what needs to be done.

A new standing order form is enclosed with your Leighway.

This is in two parts.

Once completed in full, one part needs to be sent to your bank and the other part returned to us (our membership secretary) so that we have a record of members paying by standing order. You may wish to post this to the address on the form or if you prefer email, then please address to: cathycottridge@gmail.com

(Please note that we cannot send the copy to your bank)

Again, please accept our apologies for any confusion and we thank you for your continued support which is such a help to the Centre.

FOSMS

We are very grateful to the Friends of Southend Museum who have recently ceased operation for a further donation of £1250 to the Heritage Centre.

It is very sad to see such an organisation close and its true to say all such organisations are feeling the pinch. But its great that they are helping other organisations to continue to look after our heritage.

The Bees & the Birds (and the Fungi)

The timing of this edition comes at a near-perfect time for me – well almost! Leigh is again under a covering of heavy cloud & it's raining: definitely not a day for outdoor photography so I don't feel I'm missing much by sitting at my computer.

Arboreally speaking, autumn was very late this year & it seemed to take ages for the leaves to turn. In the absence of bees &



Magpie Inkcap

butterflies, I decided to go looking for fungi. Success even before I arrived in **Belfairs Woods**, with Magpie Inkcap & Sulphur Tuft fungi in the central reservations around Highlands Boulevard (now, sadly, de-rewilded by our new council) & then a colourful Fly Agaric. As I am sure you know, 'toadstools' are the visible fruiting bodies (the 'flower') of subterranean fungal organisms & can contain millions, even billions, of spores. There are said to be over 15,000 species in UK alone. Foragers are mostly

interested in harvesting edible varieties but I'm not really that brave*. I just love the vast array of colours & forms & will definitely be looking for them from now on, especially in the autumn & winter. Keep your eyes open as you walk around Belfairs. The woodland between the fairways has lots of fallen trees & many interesting fungi – highlighting the essential recycling these organisms undertake.



Sulphur Tuft



Fly Agaric

**And you shouldn't be either, unless you know they are safe (all of the above are poisonous!)*

Changing weather patterns, whilst a long-term issue, can bring some advantages. It was a good year for some butterflies. I spotted a recently-scarce Wall (Brown) on my **Manchester Drive** allotment patch & saw several Jersey Tiger & Hummingbird Hawk moths as well as a good crop of White Letter Hairstreak butterflies closer to home. Sadly the editor says 'No space for pictures' but you can see far better efforts online, if you wish.

Two Tree Island continues to offer flocks of Curlew, which come close to land at the eastern end at high spring tides. The western lagoon is attracting large flocks of Knot & Dunlin, along with Grey & Ringed Plover, Avocet, Lapwing & Oystercatcher (many looking rather brown until they get their new black feathers) et al. Also Snipe as well as the usual mixture of ducks. I even saw a few Brent geese there last weekend (but was pleased they were not joined by



Curlew bickering over a space



Flock of small waders on the saline lagoon

hundreds of their friends). Around high water, Monty's Lookout offers the spectacular prospect of seeing & hearing, thousands of small wings beating in the sunshine. It's a great place to spend an hour – but the new hide (deliberately) offers little protection from the elements, so wrap-up warm on cold or windy days.

Wishing you all a happy & healthy 2024 (& beyond).

Rijel

THEN AND NOW— MONOMETER HOUSE



A familiar site in Rectory Grove, Monometer House is a very prominent building. In a recent random purchase on ebay I bought some small business card samples which clearly show as in the first picture, what is now Monometer House but then, Nicholas House. Does anyone remember anything about this. I was intrigued by the title 'Guppy Paper', which I had never heard

of, but found it was known to others.

Now I am sure that the samples I bought were a really run of the mill job for them and they have probably never thought about Nicholson House since so concentrating on the property and Leigh this is what I found.

Monometer House is immediately adjacent to No 126 Rectory Grove and sandwiched between it and Grange Road. The Kelly's Directory for 1973/4 shows nothing on this site, so until at least that date it appears to be a vacant plot of land—does anyone remember? Was it just scrub or was it used for something else?

Looking further at its later name of Monometer House the Monometer Company was founded in 1913 in Birmingham by Isaiah Hall and remains in the Hall family today. Originally producing castings for the printing industry in a foundry in Birmingham and then a small range of furnaces was developed to melt the type which was used for printing in those days. So the printing connection follows on to this day.



Moving through the decades the furnacing accomplishments of the Company led to them playing a big part in the war effort of World War 2 and eventually moving to Southend in the 1940s. By the 1990s the Company's furnacing technology was spreading around the world.

Forever expanding its technological advancements in furnaces and foundry equipment, the Company continues to service the world, a global company from little old Leigh-on-Sea. And Guppy Paper—well the company was William Guppy & Son, later Guppy Paper Ltd, wholesale paper merchants. Sadly it didn't make it to its 100th anniversary, having been dissolved in 2010.

DON'T CALL ME GERTY - THE LIFE AND TIMES OF GERTRUDE WILLMOTT

by her Great Niece—Laura O'Connor

Gertrude Willmott was my Great Aunt, and I always thought she was quite a character.

I remember her from when I was a toddler in the early 1950s, until she died in the late 1970s. My grandmother, who lived with us in Westcliff, was Aunt Gertrude's sister.

For the 25-odd years I knew her, and for a long time before that, she lived at 87 Leigh Hill in the Grade II listed building now known as Herschell House, but in Gertrude's day (yes, "Gertrude" ...never ever would she respond to "Gerty" ... Oh, goodness me, no!) it was called Ivy Cottage.

She was born around 1890, and was ahead of her time, behaving very independently, learning to drive and in general being an early exponent of "Women's Lib". She was very stylish, well-educated and full of life, but never became tied down to matrimony. This attitude to life continued right until the end, with her rarely worrying about what other people thought of her very individual lifestyle.

In her younger days, she was a pianist of concert level, and took a job playing the all-important mood-music for the silent movies in the Kinema theatre. She still played wonderfully until, as she aged, a touch of arthritis in her fingers hindered her.

After World War Two she became the live-in housekeeper at Ivy cottage. Her employer was an eminent doctor. This was a very risqué situation for an unmarried lady in those days. There was a grand piano in the doctor's house, and it was still there when I used to visit her, after she had inherited the house from him. She continued to live alone there, in Ivy Cottage, until she died in about 1979.

Whenever I visited Aunt Gertrude as a child or young adult, (although she wouldn't allow us to call her Aunt Gertrude, she never insisted upon the "Great" part of her title) the only thing I didn't like was the stuffed fox's head mounted on the wall above crossed riding crops. She was an excellent horse rider, and owned a horse that she rode to hounds, as well as just for leisure. Apart from her love of this blood sport, I was fond of everything about her and her beautiful house.

I was always especially intrigued by the secret fresh-water well, hidden under a flagstone in her kitchen, and also by her adamant statement that in the Grade II listed Prospect House next door, which she also owned, there was a ghost, from Tudor times. The local mayor, Mrs. Vera Smith, lived there at the time, and agreed it did feel haunted.

The main part of Ivy Cottage was quite open-plan and was always sparkling clean and smelled of fresh flowers and lavender polish. Her cosy living room, however, was different. Although clean and tidy, this was much more cosy and was where Gertrude spent most of her time. The armchair had a "fur" covering on its back, and this matched the rug on the hearth. These were goat-skins, I discovered, and had come from two of her pet goats, when they had died of old age. Waste Not, Want Not, was definitely a motto of Gertrude's.

This snug living room was right next to her equally homely kitchen. The thing I remember most about this room was that when she tapped gently on the draining board, out from a crack where the sink joined the wall would creep a big black house-spider! Not my favourite species, by a long way; but when you live all alone, with none of the usual pets, you need some living creature to talk to, don't you.

At the back of Ivy Cottage there was a lovely shady veranda, with a rocking chair in which Aunt Gertrude would sit overlooking what, to a child, was an enormous garden, sloping down towards the sea. This was before the new houses were built along the road, blocking the sea view from the veranda. Even to the adults, the garden was certainly very big. It was a haven for wild birds, as, in addition to an orchard of mixed fruit trees, there were about 10 mature woodland trees, and many rambling flowering shrubs. Gertrude loved her wild birds very much indeed, and some became almost tame. Like with her spider, birds were a great source of company for her.

As well as several out-buildings, there was a conservatory in which lived Mimi. This was a bantam hen, sitting on a nest containing one egg. I remember her well, and liked to stroke her golden feathers. She was a very friendly hen, and was a Gertrude's main pet. Sadly, Mimi's egg never hatched, though she seemed content to sit on it every day of her life from when she laid it until she died aged about 15 years.

Great Aunt Gertrude had kept chickens and goats all through the war, providing her with eggs and milk, but Mimi was all there was left of any "livestock" that I can recall seeing. Many types of fruits and vegetables grew in Gertrude's huge garden, and by storing the excess produce, either in one of her many out-houses, or indoors, she was almost self-sufficient all year round.

I remember when she came to our hairdresser's salon to have her hair cut, she'd bring us a bag of whichever fruit was in season. Mainly, they had already been pecked by a bird, or nibbled by a wasp, but that was how she knew that they were the sweetest of the fruits, or so she told us. My Mum was always dubious about this explanation!

Gertrude's appearance was "short and stout" with straight hair trimmed to collar length and held back with a hair-band. Her clothes almost always comprised a hand knitted cardigan and skirt, with a nice blouse underneath, and a pair of thick stockings and sturdy shoes.

I was always fascinated by her main front tooth, which I think must have been a loose crown. It wobbled with each breath of speaking that passed it. It was like that for as long as I can remember, yet it never actually fell out.

When I think of Great Aunt Gertrude, the first thing I think of is her love of swimming. By the time I knew her, she was no longer a fast or a powerful swimmer, but she did swim every day of the year. In the summer, when the Westcliff outdoor pool was open, she'd go there whenever she could, driving herself there in her own car. When it was in the pool's closed season, from mid-September until mid-May, she'd swim in the sea.

She loved the sea and owned a rowing boat and a sailing dinghy which she "manned" herself, which was another way in which she flouted the norms expected of a lady of those days.

To go swimming in the sea, or boating, she'd walk down the short distance down Leigh Hill and across the railway bridge to Bell Wharf. There, she would swim every day, timing her trip to the state of the tide. She did this until she was well into her late seventies. Then one day, when she was doing a handstand in the sea, something happened and she ended up with a broken hip...and that was the end of her swimming and her rowing days.

Aunty Gertrude owned not only Ivy Cottage and Prospect House, but also other properties, including one she allowed a friend to build at the bottom of her garden, and to live in it. The agreement was that it reverted to Aunty Gertrude or her heirs upon the death of the owner. A win-win arrangement.

Due to her love of all the wild birds in her garden, and her admiration for Sir Peter Scott, the famous wild bird expert, she left all her properties to the RSPB, when she died aged about 90. She's buried in the Sutton Road cemetery, in the same grave as her beloved doctor.

By Laura O'Connor

Westcliff outdoor swimming pool (now Gentings). On the right is the hatch where female swimmers collected a hanger-cum-basket for their clothes, to be looked after.

Aunt Gertrude centre stage in a totally self made ensemble. Laura is the one in the dark track suit. Photo taken in about 1966-67.



THE INIMITABLE DR MURIE OF LEIGH

This story (for which thanks to Ed Simpson) appeared in the Evening Echo on 29 June 1987 after a journalist, Charles Sawyer, set to work when a relative of the Dr Murie appealed for information about him. Charles said "The story of this man is fascinating and there are many people in Leigh who still remember him." (in 1987). A man who explored the unknown continent of Africa and counted David Livingstone as a close friend. His work was even praised by naturalist, Charles Darwin, but who spent his last years as a forgotten recluse in a tiny cottage in Leigh.

James Murie was born in Glasgow in 1832 and trained as a doctor. He worked as a physician, pathologist and lecturer in anatomy. His travels began with a visit to the west coast of Africa to get information on merchandise. He then took jobs as a ship's surgeon on a transatlantic liner visiting Africa. Charles said "Murie just missed going on an expedition with his friend Dr David Livingstone but was then selected to become the medical officer, naturalist and official photographer for an expedition to Africa by the explorers John Speke and James Grant. "He cared for the seriously sick of the party, although was ill himself and collected rare and valuable plants, fish, reptiles and animals and had the angry experience of seeing them credited to John Petherick, leader of the expedition, at Kew and the British Museum. "Charles Darwin praised the work of Murie in The Origin of Species and to this day many of Murie's pamphlets and writings are standard works particularly those on marine biology"

Murie, who never married, settled at Canvey Cottage, off New Road, in Leigh with his sister, Ellen Gayford, as his house keeper. Mrs Millie Cotgrove, born 1904, of Hadleigh Road Leigh said "Murie used to go on fishing trips with Leigh fishermen and identified many of the fish they caught. She said "He was an interesting, intelligent and kindly man with a wealth of knowledge of the marine life of the Thames Estuary". He was a member of the Kent and Essex Fisheries Committee. Charles' article finished by saying "He refused all help from local dignitaries and the societies from whom he was entitled to draw pensions. He died in 1928 aged 95 years and lies in a simple grave in Leigh Cemetery with a gravestone he bought himself."

Jenny/Ed Simpson

Comment— sad to say it is recorded at his death that having suffered a stroke he was taken to the infirmary at Rochford Workhouse, no doubt the nearest medical facility—where he died. The press reported - Famous traveler dies in workhouse – for those who only skim the headlines, they would wrongly assume he was an inmate.

GWEN SIMPSON : ARTIST MAKER

It is really great in Leigh during the year to meet and see the many arts, and crafts and hobbies that are practiced by residents and it would be nice to showcase these, many of which are traditional. Gwen Simpson is one such who I met up with at the Allotments Open Day last summer.



From Gwen

My initial background career was as a freelance illustrator, working primarily with pen and ink drawings, and watercolour. Recent developments in my art practice have seen me incorporating a wider variety of materials such as textile and found materials. I am also interested in using plant dyes and in order to further this knowledge took on an allotment at Manchester Drive in March 2022. This has given me the opportunity to grow a variety of plants which I can harvest and use in various projects. Added to this the allotment area also has an abundance of wild plants which I can further investigate. These home grown plants have been used to create dyes and form volume two of my 'Dye Samples' books.

The use of plants and herbs has a deep history stretching back to ancient times. Extracted colour from lichen, roots, berries, bark and flowers were used for a variety of purposes from staining skin, as well as textiles woven from wool and natural fibres. In recent years there has been an increase of interest in natural dyes not only from hobby dyers but major clothes brands who are experimenting with ways to incorporate these dyes into their product line, as they believe this is much more environmentally friendly.

If you have an interesting and unusual hobby or interest please let us know with a short article—it is all part of the diverse life of Leigh

THE NORTH THAMES LITTER PICKING DATABASE

Once again member Clive Webster, a volunteer Thames River Warden has compiled his findings which go into the North Thames Estuary litter picking database, set up in 2015 to record volunteer litter picking events taking place along a 35-mile stretch of Thames shoreline; from Rainham in the west to Shoeburyness in the east.

It is recognised that volunteers play a vital role in maintaining the health of the river. Over 12,000 volunteers have taken part in over 2,000 events (from solo picks to large scale events) and removed over 900,000 litter items from the estuary and nearby towns.

Clive tries to be as consistent as possible so that data can be compared over time. However, he can only record what he hears about - which usually comes through an email or part of a facebook discussion group. Picks that don't get reported in social media won't get recorded : He reckons that at least 15% of volunteer litter picks don't get included. Sometimes the data he receives is incomplete, in which case he tries to make a conservative estimate by comparing the pick with previous picks at the same site, examining photos and taking guidance from any attached narrative. For example, if the recorded pick states that 'there were a large number of plastic bottles and a few cans' he may make a notional entry of x bottles and y cans.

The trend this year is downward with the lowest number of recorded events since 2019 (263 down 30% from 2022), volunteers 1,557 (down 10%) and sacks of litter removed 1,904 (down 14%) see Chart 1. But, it would be too simplistic to say that the amount of litter in the estuary is declining because:

1. Traditionally highly-littered areas, such as Thurrock and Havering, have not submitted data this year or last.
2. Major storms, which bring up large quantities of litter have been relatively few and far between.
3. There is a correlation between volunteers and amounts of litter, which means that fewer volunteers produce lower hauls of litter.

So, in order to get a clearer picture of the situation over time, Clive chose two sites that lend themselves to further analysis. Leigh Two Tree Island and Chalkwell beach are popular leisure spots that suffer large-scale visitations and resulting litter during the high season. They are picked regularly and their results are recorded studiously by a dedicated group of volunteers.

Two Tree Island

In 2023, 119 volunteers from Litterless Leigh picked 360 sacks. (2022: 138 picked 321 sacks; 2021: 124 picked 154 sacks) So over 3 years, the amount of litter has steadily got worse not better.

Chalkwell beach

In 2023, 163 volunteers from Southend Beachcare picked 143 sacks. (2022: 191 picked 125 sacks; 2021: 274 picked 240 sacks) So over 3 years, the amount of litter has improved and then got worse.

Conclusion

What is unequivocal is that litter is still unacceptably high in all estuary towns and shows no sign of decreasing. Each year that passes is another lost opportunity to do something about it. Without leaders and people of vision it will continue to worsen and be left to volunteers to clear up the mess.

Clive Webster

Please try and help Clive with this invaluable source of information which should inform us and the Councils along the Thames equally. If you take part in an unadvertised litter pick or are a sole picker please let Leighway* know so we can pass your contact details on to Clive and he can make sure that your results get reported and in turn form a more clear and precise view of what is actually happening and where target efforts need to be made.

*leighway@btinternet.com

THE FINAL IDIOCY

(ie turning the beach you are heading for into a car park for your car)

After a lone successful campaign taking a deputation to Southend Borough Council and overturning the vote to close the old Leigh swimming pool (near Gypsy Bridge - brilliant cheap youth club for teenagers) by 90%, in 1969 a year later I was fired up with the possibility of protest being successful.

Knowing few people at the time and being a newcomer from landlocked Northamptonshire, the beach and sea were very important to me and in fact the reason for having moved here. So when Joscelyne's beach at Chalkwell station was threatened I did what I thought I could do at the time, which was to take my baby of 6 months in a pram with my toddler of 2 years sitting on top with a car table and set up a petition signing table at the beach.

Most people signed and were very positive until the local Tory councillor Mussett for Chalkwell turned up and said, "Go away. This has nothing to do with you, it's my business - it's an eyesore anyway". I was not deterred but saw that a much bigger fight was ahead.

Fortunately the local councillors had picked up the issue by then and an incredible public meeting, chaired by Mike King was filled to the eaves and the campaign to save Joscelyne's was launched. I was late through lecturing at Benfleet WEA and the committee was being formed when I arrived and someone said "What about her?" And so I joined the group and became press secretary.

A very large campaign ensued involving

- A. Green car stickers (on 1 in 2 cars in Leigh probably - slogans changing monthly)
- B. Motorcades
- C. Public meetings
- D. Petitions
- E. Boat sail pasts
- F. Deputations

Eventually the beach was saved and the emphasis turned to the Hadleigh country park in danger of being turned into a "Honey pot". The fight then rapidly turned into the fight against "The road to the west." - A continuation of the seafront road from Chalkwell to the Old Town and over the bridge and probably through the country park. After a long fight of around 6 years, the road was taken off the county plan and the emphasis of the Leigh seafront action group turned to helping other campaigns, such as, the oil refinery on Canvey, the sewage in the estuary, the Boris airport in the Estuary, the one mile of Southend seafront destined to be blocks of flats out to sea (posing as a marina) and latterly, the proposed hospice on the cliffs.

Jane Lovell

THE CONDUIT

We are very pleased and grateful that the 4th/6th Sea Scouts are now cleaning the Conduit area for us. This job was carried out for many years by late member Dr Norman Sutcliffe and the Sea Scouts have helped to get it back shipshape and Bristol fashion for the future.



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 hope you will like to keep your copy of Leighway or pass it on to friends and family, but if not please recycle it @ Leigh Conservation and Heritage, Leigh Heritage Centre, 13A High Street, Leigh-on-Sea SS9 2EN

