



LEIGHWAY 74

LEIGH

CONSERVATION AND

HERITAGE

Summer 2024

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DEAR DIARY 2024

18 September—River Thames
Society, Peter Finch.

Talks are at Leigh Community
Centre in Elm Road 7.30pm
Members £2, visitors £3

A new programme of talks for
2025 will be listed in the next
Leighway—see page 3 for dates for
your diary

Dear Member

My this year is moving fast. We have used this time in carrying out the major works needed for the heritage centre and there are more planned. So the scaffolding will go up in September in order to revamp the outside to match the inside's upgrade.

We have noticed over this year that interest in days out has dwindled—possibly due to the cost as coaches are so expensive, so we are exploring the idea of more local trips out with a small minibus. We have also noticed that the change to our talks programme, by broadening its scope of topics, has worked well with much larger audiences and the use of facebook to advertise. We will be expanding this further next year. But for now I leave you with the prospect of a great talk on 18 September by Peter Finch of the River Thames Society—hope to see lots of you there.

A reminder if you are writing us a cheque it must be made out to Leigh Heritage Centre Ltd which is our 'trading' name.

Best wishes **Carole**

COLIN SEDGWICK MBE

It is with great sadness that the Old Town lost one of its true characters recently. Colin could always be seen in the High Street and at Mike's Boatyard, organising, always with an opinion on what was right or wrong for the Old Town.

But he was a gentle giant and the most stalwart of people, having been involved with the RNLI since the age of 16 and from his youth a member of the Chalkwell Bay Sea Scouts.

Pat Gaskell and Carole attended Colin's funeral at St Augustine's Church in Thorpe Bay and this turned out to be a revelation. Colin did so much and was integral to the organisations to which he belonged, with many tales from his colleagues and friends. It was a true celebration of a long life, well lived in service to the community. In the Heritage Centre we will miss seeing him driving his various machines up and down the High Street and Carole will miss his very early morning phone calls about something he had a problem with in the Old Town. Rest in peace Colin.

A DUNKIRK HERO REMEMBERED

By Fraser Marshall, Trustee, Leigh-on-Sea Endeavour Trust (www.endeavourtrust.co.uk) with additional thanks to Mr Bruce McComish for research.

Next time you take a walk down the Old Town take a look at the western flank wall of the heritage centre- a new plaque has arrived commemorating a special Dunkirk hero, not from Leigh, but irrevocably linked to us.

May 30, 1940. Dunkirk, France—Nearly 340,000 British, French, and Belgian soldiers were trapped on the northern French coast behind a narrow, hastily constructed defensive perimeter. It was barely seven miles long. Nazi aircraft strafed and killed and killed the exposed soldiers hunkering on the beaches.

The heroic British Expeditionary army sent to help the French defend against the Germans had been defeated. French army remnants barely hung on as the German Blitzkrieg crushed them. The Belgian army, no match for the German tank divisions, fought bravely but were forced to surrender.



Virtually the entire British military command and the core of the British army were staring at complete annihilation stranded on the coast of Dunkirk. German victory over all of Britain seemed inevitable.

For days, efforts had been underway to bring the men back to England. The water depth was far too shallow for the big British ships to get close in to take the men to safety. The British Expeditionary army was desperate. The best that was hoped for was to rescue maybe 40,000 to 50,000 of the men. The rest...their fate was unthinkable.

Britain needed a "Hail Mary Pass" *to save the men. Britain needed the impossible.

May 29th, a "Hail Mary Pass" order was issued for all boats and crews along the S.E. coast of England.

"Senior Naval Control Officer, London

Requisition all motor yachts 30 ft. overall and upwards, not drawing more 3' 6" to proceed to Southend Pier forthwith, with volunteer crew and there to go to Sheerness with 3 days food and full complement of fuel."

British Naval High Command commandeered all civilian boats in the S.E. of England to rescue the men trapped and dying on the Dunkirk beaches.

Naval officers were assigned to organize groups of these civilian craft. 850 Small boats answered the call. Nearly 250 would be sunk in the rescue operation.

Jewish Naval Sub. Lt. Martin Solomon was assigned to organize the fishing boats along the Thames estuary near Leigh. He performed his mission and then took personal command of Leigh's entire fleet – six flat-bottomed fishing boats, "Cockle Bawleys." The Leigh boats were perfect for rescuing the men at Dunkirk. The boats were over 30' long and 10' wide. They could float on barely inches of water. They could ferry the men to deeper water where large British warships awaited. They could load their "Little Boats" up with men and sail them back to England. The Little Boats of Leigh did both.

"Admiral Ramsey, in command of 'Operation Dynamo,' (the evacuation from Dunkirk), said of the Leigh boats, "The conduct of the crews of these cockle boats was exemplary. They were all volunteers who were rushed over to Dunkirk in one day. Probably none of them had been under gunfire before and certainly none of them under naval discipline... Yet they maintained perfect formation throughout the day and night and all orders were obeyed with great diligence even under actual shellfire and aircraft attack."

Solomon was described as a bit overweight with a youthful, affable face. He did not look like what was needed. He was exactly what was needed. One look into his eyes, and one saw steel grey hardness of command, determination, and courage.

* American football term for a desperate attempt with small chance of success—we would call it a Forlorn Hope.



Solomon sailed back to England with rescued soldiers. He returned to Dunkirk only to have his ship sunk by German aircraft.

Solomon wrote:

"I went through the unpleasant experience of being machine-gunned in the water, after we had been sunk, by four very persistent Junkers 87 diver bombers. They even dropped incendiary bombs in an attempt to catch any floating oil on fire. They have not got much mercy, those Germans. I then had to swim for seven hours towards a place that was already occupied by Jerry and eventually got back to England in charge of a French fishing boat, dressed as a French sailor, only to be arrested as a spy!"

He had been injured by the bombing. He was exhausted. He was suffering from extreme exposure. Back in England, he was hospitalized for months. Solomon was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for gallantry for his part in the Dunkirk evacuations and received a second Distinguished Service Cross for rescuing men in Tobruk harbour while under heavy tank fire during the North African campaign. He would be Mentioned in Dispatches, a high military recognition, for his service in Egypt. His service in the Eastern Mediterranean remained shrouded in secrecy. He was believed to have been associated with British intelligence – M 16, of James Bond fame.

After the war, Solomon went into private business, some say "Export Import." In March 1956, he married a Spanish-born Norwegian cabaret star nicknamed "Miss Freckles," Vida Bendix. Three months later, his body was found in Madrid's Crillon Hotel. His death...mysterious. He was 41 years old.

Early in 2024, the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation (JASHP), working with Martin Sugarman, JASHP's U.K. partner and a noted Jewish military historian, author, educator, and archivist for the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women. Together, an effort was begun to place a public historical interpretive marker honouring Solomon as the Commander of the famed Leigh Boat Flotilla that rescued so many from the desperate Dunkirk shore.

With the Endeavour Trust and Leigh Heritage Centre join them in honouring Sub. Lt. Martin Solomon by siting the plaque on the Heritage Centre for all to see. And remember.

DATES FOR 2025

Get these dates in your diaries now so you won't miss out on our new programme of talks for 2025. All starting at 7.30pm at the community centre.

19 March

23 April—AGM

21 May

18 June

17 September

Topics to be announced, hopefully in the next Leighway

MR. W. J. CHIGNELL'S CAMPAIGN AT LEIGH.



MR. W. J. CHIGNELL.

Mr. W. J. Chignell, to whose untiring work and tact Leigh is largely indebted for having secured amalgamation with Southend without being involved in needless legal expenditure bears an honoured name in the public life of this part of the County.

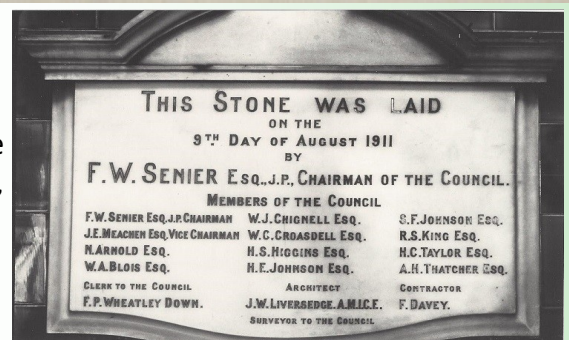
Years ago when Southend and Leigh were comparatively small places Mr. Chignell's father was Piermaster at Southend. He held the office for nearly twenty years, and his decision to take part in the public work of the town as a member of the Town Council met with general approbation, and he was returned to the Council with a big majority. He was afterwards elected an Alderman, and continued in that position until the time of his death.

The subject of our sketch "follows in his father's footsteps." Early in life he became interested in public work, his first appointment being as an overseer for Prittlewell (which includes Southend and Westcliff), the election being made by the Prittlewell Vestry. He afterwards became one of the most prominent members of the Southend Town Council, serving on that body for several years. On going to live at Leigh he soon became engaged in the public life of the district, being appointed an Overseer, and afterwards a member of the Council. His championship of Leigh's interests in connection with amalgamation secured for him a host of additional friends, and not a few enemies, who clung to the idea that Leigh would be better served by its own Council than by amalgamation with Southend with its larger interests. Mr. Chignell fought the good fight unflinchingly through thick and thin, and that he triumphed is to the lasting credit of the town. Had Leigh been compelled to join forces with Southend after a long and costly legal battle, there is little doubt that the good government of the place would have been attended with much difficulty and perhaps have never been completely brought about until those engaged in such a struggle had left the arena.

No better tribute to Mr. Chignell's abilities could be paid than that contained in one of the many letters which he has received supporting his candidature. The letter, which was from one of Leigh's most prominent residents, ran:—

"I have much pleasure in signing your nomination paper, as I feel quite sure the interests of Leigh can be safely left in your hands."

William's name is on the foundation plaque of the UDC in the police station offices. He lived at the Nest on Marine Parade, Leigh. He died in 1934, having lost a son in the Great War.



AND SO TO THE FATHER— WILLIAM J CHIGNELL



William J Chignell was the first Pier Master, and was in situ when the new Iron Pier was completed in 1890. He was also in charge of the foreshore, (which included control of the boats and boatmen loading on the Pier Wharf), the Pier Hill buildings, sea defences, bathing huts and stations, the Pier tramway and tolls on the steamboats.

When told that he was expected to write out the Day Admission tickets and look after the mortuary as well, he complained bitterly.

He was replaced in 1891 soon after the Iron Pier was completed, and died in 1902 and is buried in St John's Churchyard near the top of Pier Hill.

William Joseph Chignell lived most of his life in Grove Terrace in Prittlewell and had a varied career before becoming Pier Master, he was a licensed victualler and innholder and then a draper. Just what were the qualifications for being a Pier Master, one wonders!

THEN AND NOW—WAITROSE, LONDON ROAD



Thanks to member Teresa Doyle for this picture of the Waitrose site pre supermarkets.

Teresa recently posted this on Facebook and many came forward with their memories of the site as a dairy in the 1970s and later as Howard Stone, next to the bungalow which was a dentist at one time and further along Wilcox, newsagent and Tibbles Fishmongers.

Thankfully we have maintained the architecture of the buildings to the west and their ornate tiling.

If you have any old photos of Leigh sites where we could do a 'then and now' please let Carole know and we will cover them and add them to the Heritage Centre archives.

The Bees & the Butterflies and, and, and...

A wet spring & early summer meant that, countrywide, people have been bemoaning the lack of bees, butterflies & hoverflies. June and July have at last brought more flying activity.

Great Wood, which forms much of Belfairs Woods Nature Reserve, is a prized site with many species of butterfly. Butterfly Conservation & Essex Wildlife Trust have an ongoing programme of coppicing to encourage Cow Wheat, the larval plant of the Heath Fritillary (this, once common, butterfly was known as the 'Woodman's Follower' because it frequented recently-coppiced sites). The species is now established here.

I have also been lucky to see the magnificent White Admiral. Larger than its more common 'Red' cousin, it flies high & fast, occasionally coming down to feed. Sadly, both species will probably be gone by the time you read this. But go looking next year. Late-June – please keep to the paths.



Gatekeeper butterfly



Magpie moth

But you may still see large yellow/green Brimstone butterflies flying powerfully though the woods. Or the tail end of a good Gatekeeper season (this one was in my garden).

And don't just look out for butterflies. There are some spectacular day-time-flying moths around now. I chanced on this lovely Magpie moth while I surveyed (almost non-existent) bumble bees on Belton Hills. Recent research has revealed that night-flying moths are more efficient pollinators than bees!

And *you* can help nocturnal insects by extinguishing, or at least, minimising outside night-time illumination, (which confuses their navigation). *Thank you*

In the summer, my attention turns to insects but I haven't forgotten our waders. Avocet have again nested successfully on the Two Tree saline lagoon, with more chicks than 2023. Oystercatcher were again successful too. And it was the first time I have seen Common Tern there (though I didn't get to see their offspring). As we enter autumn, we can also expect flocks of Black-tailed Godwit and Ringed Plover. I encourage you to visit Monty's Lookout at the west end of the island. Best time to see aerial activity is around High Water at a decent spring tide.



Heath Fritillary butterfly



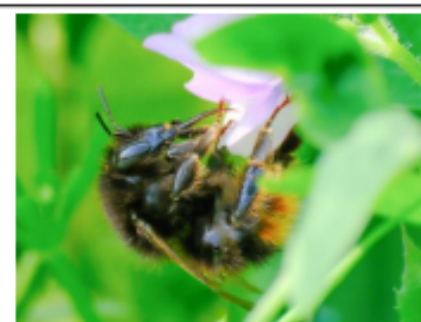
White Admiral butterfly



Common Tern

My regular reader (s? – I hope there is more than one), will by now be thinking – “Where are the bees?” Well, here they are.

My monthly BeeWalk bumble bee survey in Belton Hills has been disappointing – not helped, I fear, by the revamping of planting on Belton Gardens. But In May I was fortunate to spot a Red-shanked Bumble Bee (*Bombus ruderarius*). This scarce species looks like its Red-tailed cousin (*Bombus lapidarius*) but has red hairs on its legs (though you’ll need a decent sized picture to see them). An excellent record.



Red-shanked bumble bee



Large Meadow Mining bee

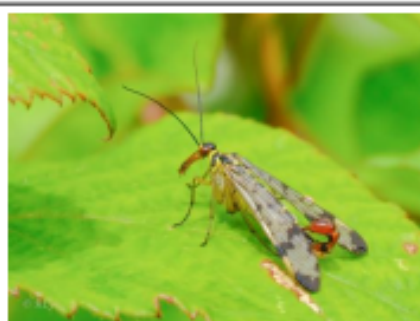
Sometimes one doesn’t need to go far – I spotted some bee activity while walking down the steps to the station. Re-visiting later I photographed this lovely male Large Meadow Mining bee (*Andrena labialis*), with its distinctive yellow face. This is just one of approximately 250 species of solitary bees which we have in UK & one I had not knowingly seen. Still got a few to go!



Wool Carder bee

My garden has, however, yielded less excitement than previous years. I was very disappointed that my favourite, the photogenic Wool Carder bee (*Anthidium manicatum*) was not in residence when I spotted a male investigating one of my bee-hotels. This species loves ‘Lambs Ear’. If you have some in your garden, keep an eye open. Sadly mine did not stay..

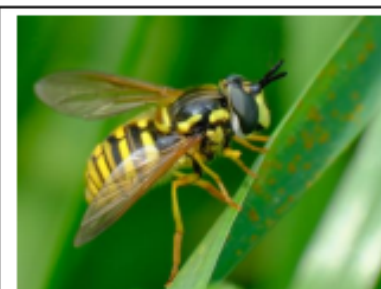
And lastly – I’d like to introduce you to a couple of visually striking **flies**! Yes flies – but not the ones that you may typically try to swat as they buzz around your food! Neither of these examples is scarce but their unexpected appearance is worthy of a second look, I think. Most flies do not have proper antennae but both these have evolved to sport a fine pair of facial appendages!



Common Scorpionfly

The first is a Common Scorpionfly (*Panorpa communis*) -- for obvious reasons looking at the male rear end. Not a sting but part of its genitalia. It feeds on dead insects and even steals prey from spiders’ webs. A male will typically present the (larger) female with a small ‘gift’, prior to mating. Been a good year & I saw specimens in Belfairs Woods and on Castle Drive

The second is a beautiful wasp-mimic hoverfly. Lots of insects have evolved to imitate more-scary cousins to deter predators. Hoverflies are completely harmless & have no weapons of any kind, so many have evolved to look like stinging insects. This Large Spearhorn (*Chrysoxum cautum*) was resting in the rewilded graveyard at St Clements. This is a great site and complements the adjacent Library Gardens, which also attracts many species.



Large Spearhorn

REMEMBERING A VE DAY PARTY

Arising from the recent VE Day commemorations and out photo of the VE Day party on Billet Wharf we had this lovely remembrance from Mrs W Goldsworthy.

My mother (Mrs Lawson), was one of the main organisers and her 4 daughters, including myself, all helped). I was up all the night before making dozens of sausage rolls, etc. Mr Osborne, manager of the Crooked Billet lent us the piano and my friend came with her accordion and we made arrangements for the photos to be taken of the event.

Mrs Lawson's 7 grandchildren were in the party. My sisters made a big iced cake and decorated it with red, white and blue ribbon etc.

We laid the tables shaped in a big U then I had the biggest shock of my life. As I was going over the crossing I saw my husband coming over. I had not seen him for over 5 years. He had come from Germany (he had been a POW). That's why this was the happiest day of my life

Mrs W Goldsworthy'

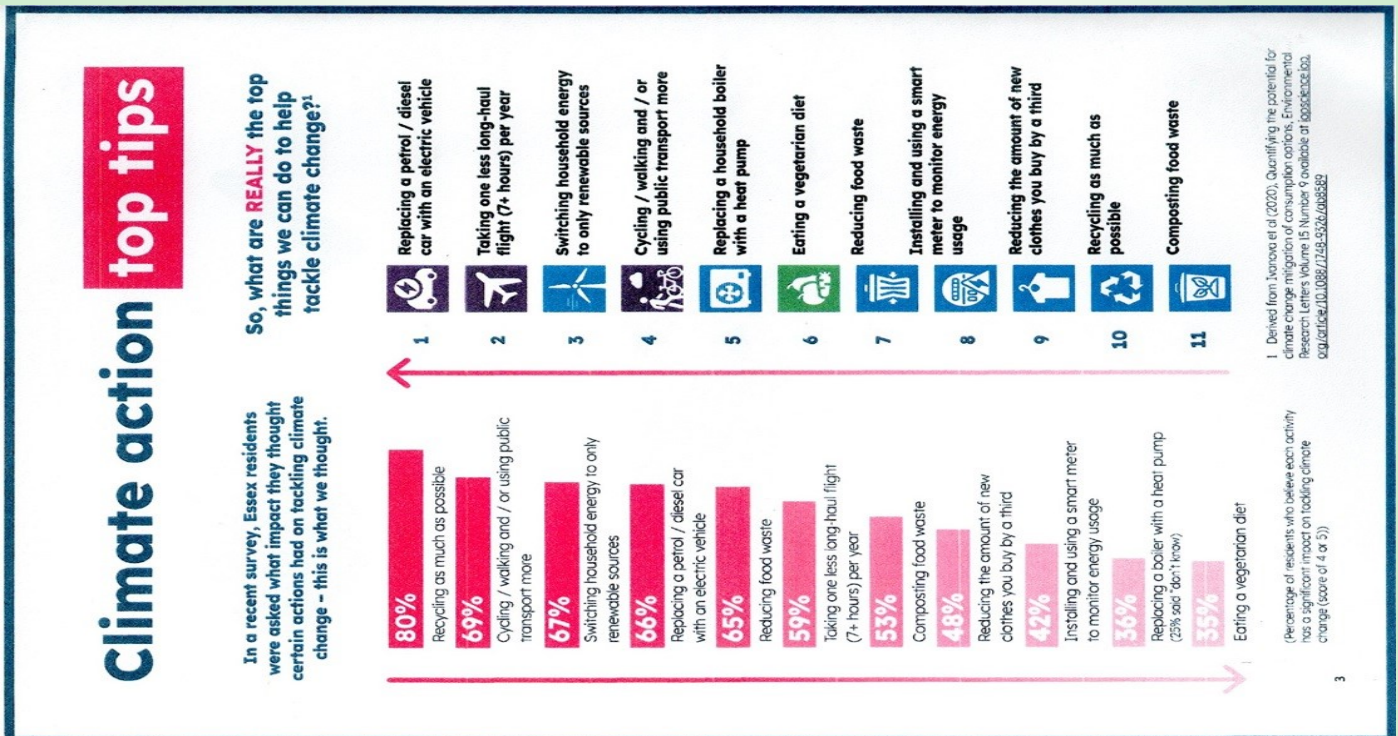
L to R George & Wyn Goldsworthy, Ellen & Dorothy Theobald, Nell Landon, Charlie Goldsworthy, Bett Lawson

A memorable day in more ways than one and what a relief that must have been.



CLIMATE ACTION—TOP TIPS

Sorry to turn you topsy turvy but I wanted to get this in and could only do so by turning it round



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LEIGH LIVES

For all who love the history of Leigh and its people

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