

Friends of

# THE TWICKENHAM MUSEUM

December 2010



## LOOKING BACKWARD LOOKING FORWARD

We could do worse than to ponder the former Borough of Twickenham motto as we look forward to celebrating the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the museum next year. And it is reflecting on a letter from Tannia Xing Xia, who joined us from Shanghai in 2005, that provides a constructive platform from which to take stock.

Tannia came originally from Shanghai and approached us via the internet to ask if she could come and work for us as part of her Phd studies on the role of 'a small local museum in the life of a community'. She had seen our website and was impressed by what we had achieved. She worked with us for about 6 months, from 2005-06, and what she laid down in her eventual thesis gave full credit to all those who had worked so hard over the years to establish the museum. But she thought that there was a danger of failing to recognise that this was only the beginning of a long process, and that continuing efforts need to be made to reach out to the wider community, to generate interest in the rich and varied history of our area.

Much had been achieved since Tannia made these observations; carrying forward the work of the museum in a major seminar held for local teachers to alert them to the resources available through the museum. An information pack was prepared as a teaching aid for teachers and we have welcomed a large number of local youth groups to the museum. The older visitor has likewise been welcomed, with groups visiting from the University of the Third Age, the Women's Institute and the Townswomen's Guild. Obviously much more can be done, and must be done if we are to stimulate interest across all age groups in our local heritage, and not just with our visitors in mind, but among ourselves, as the lifeblood of this wonderful resource.



The Old Borough shield in the museum collection

A number of steps have been taken this year to address long-standing concerns, or to institute changes whereby we can regularly refresh the museum. The computer and associated hardware is now moved to the attic space where a proper office environment has been established. The record of all items loaned or gifted to us is now complete and ready for a roll-out programme in the New Year that will see the 'Squires' cabinet used to greater effect and our picture collection regularly recycled.

The interest roused by the screening of the Professor Cockles Pathe Newsreel on BBC television earlier this year has led to a plan to purchase a DVD player to screen this and other local vintage footage on special open days when more volunteers are on duty. And a box of animal bones dating from the Paleolithic period has come to light that will make for a new, exciting and stimulating attraction for our younger visitors.

## SOME INTERESTING PEOPLE

*Some Interesting People in Twickenham, Whitton, Teddington and the Hamptons from 1550 AD* is the theme of the 2011 exhibition, which comprises a selection of personalities who, over the past 550 years, have enjoyed a connection with our area. Many of them lived and worked here, others are known to have owned property, or visited the area for one reason or another.

Of the impressive collection of 220 residents and visitors already featured on the museum website, a figure that rises annually as more people are identified and recorded, 160 are grouped into nine categories for the exhibition, each reflecting their various occupations. Many could be recorded in more than one category, some are better known than others and a number have been included simply because they are interesting people. *Writers, Poets & Historians*, for example, comprises the classic to the contemporary; from the celebrated novelist Henry Fielding to local historian Bernard Garside, and the *Music, Stage & Dance* category embraces a diverse range of talent across the old borough from 18<sup>th</sup> century actor-manager, David Garrick to dramatist, actor and cabaret artist, Noel Coward. The Mayor, Councillor David Marlow, will open the exhibition on Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> December at 12.00 noon.

## INTERESTING BUT FLAWED

Thanks in part to the internet, an historical account published today is likely itself to become history tomorrow. Take Walter George ‘Broomstick’ Broomhall, the sporting and aero ace late of this parish, who features in the new exhibition under *Military & Merchants*. His breathtaking exploits recently caught the attention and the imagination of virtual visitor Ian James, who decided to delve deeper, discovering that Broomstick never actually flew as a captain with Imperial Airways. The tale of his aircraft suffering a massive electrical failure in dense fog (which he managed to save as well as his five passengers, a new housing estate and Croydon airport by landing on a nearby disused golf course) is at variance with the account of court proceedings published in *Flight* magazine.

It was a hired aeroplane he flew with only one passenger that came down ‘in a most unsuitable place in no more than a haze’. The machine was removed and promptly impounded until the fee was paid, causing much loss of revenue to the owners. Broomstick eventually ‘sent along a tenner’, having told the police when they called that he could not have been the pilot, since he was wearing carpet slippers!



And worse, it was as ‘Leader of Flight No.1 Fighter Squadron’ that Broomstick claimed air ace status during the Battle of Britain. According to the Operational Record Books he did carry out basic training, but was forced to land and had to be escorted back to base. When the Squadron was transferred to Northolt, Broomstick did no more flying and resigned from the R.A.F. ‘Do you want me to delve further or are we getting into the realms of sensitivity?’ enquired Mr James thoughtfully. ‘Yes’ and ‘yes’, was the reply.

Ian was invited to the Museum to study the scrapbook containing the lives and times of this extraordinary man, and was as moved by it as he was impressed with Museum staff who made him welcome and his visit ‘a thoroughly enjoyable one’; his generous donation on leaving, a sure sign of customer satisfaction.

Opening times: Tuesdays and Saturdays 11.am to 3.00pm; Sundays 2.00pm to 4.00pm

## VISITORS AND VOLUNTEERS

The freezing weather in January saw the museum having to close on a number of occasions due to the dangerous conditions underfoot. But there is, however, a greater menace threatening our operation in the form of rapidly reducing volunteer numbers. Last year we reported 60 active volunteers from which to draw the 44 required each month to fill the rota. That number is now reduced to 50, leaving a very fine margin. The chairman of the Borough of Twickenham Local History Society, Ron Knight, has joined us together with Beryl Ahmad, and Kate Churchill. But we need more volunteers to help support our excellent and committed corps. Anyone reading this Newsletter, who isn't a volunteer and has two hours a month to spare please talk to Alex Skinner on 0208 8941 0669. Your local museum needs you!

Visitor numbers remain healthy. Geoffrey Morgan and Susan Youngs reported a 'cheerful invasion of eight-to-nine year olds' from St Catherine's school, which Geoffrey engaged with the history of the Museum downstairs while Susan embarked on a trip through Anglo-Saxon Twickenham upstairs. Geoffrey later held back the tide of a second visit, this time comprising 95 children from St James' Catholic School who arrived in three groups between 10.30am and 12.30pm. The star attraction was Professor Cockles. Deemed to be 'real cool', with much focus on 'when did he die?' and 'what were his last words?'



Professor Cockles prepares

## A FAMILY REUNION

Also featured in the new exhibition *Military & Merchants* category is Rifleman Frank Edwards, whose football kicked off the first major assault by British troops at Loos in Northern France in October 1915. Frank was the grandfather of resting volunteer, Susan Harris. His entry on the museum website caught the attention of other members of the Edwards family living in Surrey and in New Zealand that Susan never knew existed. Her family tree has now grown to include a Great Uncle and Great Aunt. Both branches of the family in England and New Zealand had obtained copies of the book, *The Footballer of Loos*, written by Susan's husband, Ed, but it was via the museum website that contact was established and a reunion planned.



The Footballer of Loos

## STRAWBERRY HILL OCCULT?

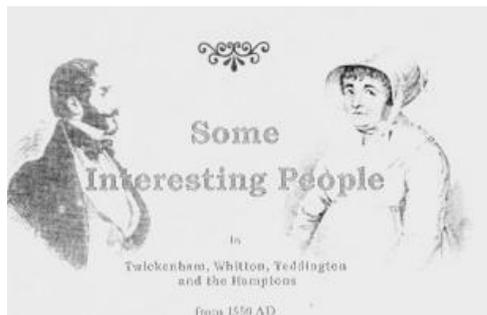
Having read online St Mary's College Parts 1 & 2, a local student emailed to ask if 'anyone would know anything about any black magic or occult practices happening there a long time ago'. As part of her A-level art project 'on similar things', this information would be 'a great help to have as a local example!' She had also heard of a tower there, once used for exorcism and wondered if there was any truth in that. Tony Beckles Willson was as intrigued as he was baffled, replying that the Catholic Vincentian Fathers came to Strawberry Hill in 1924 and daresay could have been associated by some with occultism - perhaps arising from prejudice and suspicion. He confirmed the existence of a water tower in the grounds, 'which would indeed have been convenient for practising exorcism, not necessarily in itself an un-Christian practice'. The tower was disused by 1912 and finally demolished in 1950.

## ANNUAL LECTURE

No mention was made of the black arts by Anna Chalcraft, former curator of Strawberry Hill House who gave the 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Lecture in May about the restoration project at Strawberry Hill, which has now been completed. To celebrate the 10th anniversary of the opening of the Twickenham Museum next year, Dr David Allan has been asked to repeat his hugely popular talk given to the Borough of Twickenham Local History Society this autumn. For those who know, or think they know about art and artists in Twickenham and the surrounding areas this talk is a must. Dr Allan embarks on a vividly constructed and scholarly journey through art history in *The Coloured Mass; Art and Artists in the Twickenham Area from Tudor Times to 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, featuring the lives and works of more than eighty artists. Dr Allan's copiously illustrated study is due for publication by the Borough of Twickenham Local History Society from January 2011, priced £11.99.

## BOOKS AND PUBLICATIONS

This year's exhibition has been a collaborative venture between John Sheaf and Tony Beckles Willson, and with it comes a sumptuously illustrated 80-page book. Priced at £6, it's sure to be a popular best seller for years to come.



*Dr Langdon Down's Normansfield Theatre* is an impressive updating of the paper originally published in 1997 about Dr John Langdon Down and the private 'Entertainment Hall' he created at Normansfield. The book details the conservation work which has taken place in recent years to preserve the structure, its decoration and scenery. Heavily illustrated throughout mostly in colour, it's priced at £7.50.

## FROM WEB TO WHITTON

Nevill, Nevell, Nevells and other variants, was a popular name in the Twickenham area in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. And no more so than in Whitton where Charles Nevell ran a successful dairy business, and his brother George the Admiral Nelson public house where descendant Doug and his wife, Pat, visited earlier this year. The manager and staff of 'The Nelson' were thrilled to see the return to the premises after more than a century of a wonderful earthenware spirit jug and barrel branding iron bearing the Nevell name and initials respectively. The return of these objects was fleeting, but Doug did leave an invaluable collection of family photographs living in and around Whitton from 1871 to the 1920s.



Barbara Hughes from East Fremantle, Western Australia, emailed to say that she had 'just stumbled' upon our 'terrific' website prior to a trip to the UK to visit Whitton where her ancestor retired in the 1850's. His name was John Watts, and he was a 'gold laceman' from London. His trade must have earned him a good living, as he left an estate worth £8,000 when he died in 1859. One of his daughters is shown as a shareholder of the Red Lion Pub in the 1861 Census for Whitton.

## SITUATION VACANT

Colin White is stepping down as Treasurer – but insists that his superlative act can be followed by the right person with a couple of hours to spare each month. Meanwhile, it's a huge vote of thanks to Colin for his years of service to the museum wherein his skill and dedication has done much to put us on the firm financial footing we enjoy as a fully independent local institution.

Newsletter Comments and suggestions to Ed Harris: [e.harris510@btinternet.com](mailto:e.harris510@btinternet.com)