



Issue 88

Newsletter

November 2021

FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Since our last newsletter, we have been able to resume our monthly meetings and “drop-in” mornings. On 16th September, we held our much-delayed AGM, and it was good to be back in St. Mary’s Centre for the Community again. There were approximately 30 attendees, and after the business part of the evening, during which all the existing officers and committee members were re-elected, Mike Webber presented his review of some of the items that the Society had acquired since 2019.

On 21st October, Mike Forbes gave us a presentation on Parry Thomas, Byfleet’s world land-speed record breaker. A report will be found elsewhere in this newsletter.

We hope that we can continue our programme of monthly talks, but this will be dependent on any further restrictions that may be imposed during the current Covid-19 pandemic. Our next talk is a Members’ Evening, reminiscing about Vickers-Armstrong’s, later British Aerospace, factories at Brooklands, to which members are invited to bring along their memories and any memorabilia they may have related to local aircraft production. The date is **Thursday 18th November**.

Our December speaker will be **Tony Price**, talking about “**The Bishops of Winchester—Their Place in Our History**” (December 16th).

Pre-booking is essential for these talks, either by emailing info@ByfleetHeritage.org.uk or leaving a message on 01932 342659. If you receive no reply, this means that you are booked in; only those who cannot be accommodated will be contacted. So far, we have been able to accommodate everyone who has pre-booked, but it is slightly disconcerting that some who pre-book do not turn up. Up till now, this has not been a problem, but if we reach the situation whereby the maximum limit is reached, the no-shows may prevent others from attending. If you pre-book and then find you are unable to attend, please use one of the contacts to advise accordingly.

Don’t forget our monthly “drop-on” mornings between 10.30am and 12.30pm on **Saturdays 6th November and 4th December**. An opportunity to look at some items not normally on display, and to buy our 2022 calendars and The Byfleet Fire Station Trust mugs, all at £5 each. NB: There is no “drop-in” in January 2022.

Finally, we are planning a special 25th anniversary event to be held at St Mary’s Centre for the Community on Monday afternoon, **31st January 2022**. Please make a note of this in your diary, as we hope to have a very special guest with us. More details will be announced in due course.

Keep safe and well
Jim Allen, Chairman.

REMAINING TALKS 2021



Thursday November 18: Members' evening, reminiscing about Vickers-Armstrong's/British Aerospace aircraft factories at Brooklands

Thursday December 16: 'The Bishops of Winchester - their place in our history' by Tony Paice

All talks are held at St Mary’s Centre for the Community, Stream Close, Byfleet and will begin at 8.15pm.

Members free, Guests £2

Everyone very welcome, but please pre-book your place to avoid disappointment



2022 MEETING DATES

**All meetings are on Thursdays at 8.15pm at St Mary's Centre for the Community, apart from May 26th.
(speakers to be confirmed)**

January 20th

February 17th

March 17th

April 21st

May 19th AGM

May 26th Boat trip along the Wey Navigation canal towards Weybridge [Date & time tbc – afternoon trip]

June 16th

July 21st

No meeting in August

September 15th

October 20th

November 17th

December 15th

25TH ANNIVERSARY PRIZE DRAW

On 12th October, Helen Gristwood, Chairman of Woking History Society, drew out the following tickets. Congratulations to the winners!

Prizes

2 tickets on a 2022 coach trip (not including the National Memorial Arboretum)	Theresa Mills
2 tickets on 2022 boat trip	Martin Keys
Copy of the reprinted book, 'Byfleet: A Village of England'	Jenny Murray
Copy of 'Byfleet and the Great War'	Margaret Pomfret
Copy of 2022 calendar	Chris Roberts
Copy of 2022 calendar	Peter Randall
Byfleet Fire Station Trust mug	Andy Grimshaw
Byfleet Fire Station Trust mug	Terry Maynard
Byfleet shopping bag	Pat Harris
Byfleet tea towel	Ken Green

Prizes can be claimed at our next meeting, or get in touch and we can arrange delivery.

For the Record...

Did you miss a meeting? Find out how it went.

After a long break, we were delighted to be able to resume our monthly meetings in September, and it was good to see everyone again. **Mike Webber** gave us a review of just a few of the many items that the Society has been very grateful to receive for its archive. Normally Mike would just cover the one year, but due to everything coming to a halt because of the pandemic, he had a bit more time to cover. There isn't space here to go over everything Mike showed, but here is a sample selection, showing the variety of items we were delighted to receive.



Above: Ebenezer Mears' yard and workmen (photo undated, from Cedric Batterson), with a more modern Ebenezer Mears lorry from the 1960s to the left.



Above: A postcard of West Byfleet, looking towards St John's church and Byfleet Corner, dated 1917

Right: Photo of a portrait of Henry Dennett. The Dennett family founded Byfleet Brewery in 1845, and some 20 years later took on George Barron Holroyd as partner. The Holroyd family owned Byfleet Mill, and their descendants kindly sent us this photo.



Left: Mr Derisley's Highland Cattle in Mill Lane, near Bluegates Hole, c.1928. Mr Derisley is to the rear, with Ken the dog. The hat at the front belongs to Mr Sechiarì.



Right: Wesleyan chapel on the corner of Rectory Lane and High Road. Now the Methodist church hall, this served as the church until the present Methodist church was built in 1939.





We were pleased to welcome **Mike Forbes** to our October meeting to speak about **John Godfrey Parry Thomas, Byfleet's World Record Breaker** (known as Tommy to his friends).

Parry Thomas was born in North Wales in 1884. He went to school in Oswestry and did well. Thomas' great love was engineering and, despite his mother's wish for him to go into the Church Army, he went to London to study electrical engineering at the City and Guilds College.

By 1908 he had developed the Thomas electrical transmission, a transmission system that was used on a London bus and a tramcar. Although now acknowledged to be many years ahead of its time, the transmission proved too heavy and expensive to be taken up on a large scale. However, this did not discourage him, and Thomas was awarded many patents for a wide variety of engineering inventions. He went on to become Chief Engineer at Leyland Motors where he designed the Leyland 8, a luxury car,

each one of which Thomas tested personally to ensure it could reach 100mph (at a time when the world land speed record was 124mph). He became very interested in motor racing and persuaded Leyland to let him take the Leyland 8 to Brooklands. Leyland agreed on the condition he keep the car in its standard form. However, Thomas soon started to make modifications and stripped the car right back. He began racing in earnest in 1922, moving to a bungalow called The Hermitage in the middle of the Brooklands circuit. He did well with the Leyland 8, and left Leyland in 1923 to concentrate on racing. By 1924 he was racing nearly every weekend in a car now called the Leyland Thomas No 1, and breaking records such as the World Record for the 10 Mile Flying Start in November 1923. Racing began to take up more and more of his time. He developed the four cylinder Thomas Special as well as developing several smaller cars at the same time. He also drove other people's cars on occasion. He was incredibly active and successful and it is thought that he probably competed in and won more races at Brooklands than any other driver.

Following the death of fellow racing driver Count Zborowski in 1924, Thomas bought his car, a Higham Special and renamed in Babs. Babs had a formidable 27 litre V12 aero-engine with a chain drive. It was in this now famous car that he made his first attempt at the world land speed record in October 1925 at Pendine Sands, but Babs did not perform well.

He returned to Pendine on 28th April 1926 and this time broke the record by a considerable margin. Malcolm Campbell had previously held the record with 150.87mph, but Thomas managed a huge leap to 169.2mph, increasing that to 171.02mph two days later. Malcolm Campbell regained the record in February 1927 with a speed of 174.883mph, so Thomas was keen to try and reclaim it. He booked himself in to the Beach Hotel at Pendine for February 14th, but came down with flu, so his attempt was postponed until 1st, 2nd and 3rd March when the tides would reveal a good stretch of sand. However, the weather was terrible for the first two days, so everything rested on his attempt on 3rd. On that morning, Betty Ebsworth of the hotel presented him with a good luck cat, and Babs was driven down to the sand for the first run. Babs roared off, but then there was silence. The car had swerved, rolled over and the right hand chain had broken, killing Thomas instantly. It was decided that there would be no attempt to repair Babs and that she would be buried in the dunes behind the track. Babs was dragged to the pit by a tractor, and nine inches of concrete poured over her resting place.

Parry Thomas was a quiet man who could look forbidding but was in reality very charming. He loved children but never married; he was rumoured to have many lady friends, but his private life remained private. During the General Strike of 1926 he volunteered to drive a London bus, and it was only after his death that it was revealed that he had funded beds at Great Ormond Street Hospital with money raised partly through Thomas' own fees and partly from displaying Babs to the public in London department stores.

Thomas' body was taken back to The Hermitage. A private service was held there and then the coffin was conveyed to St Mary's church, followed by six vehicles loaded with floral tributes. People such as Dame Ethel Locke King, racing driver John Cobb, the staff and management at Leyland, all at the Beach Hotel, and Malcolm Campbell and staff all sent flowers. Thomas was laid to rest in St Mary's churchyard where he still lies.



However, that wasn't the end of the story. Permission to exhume Babs was granted in April 1969. Owen Wyn Owen led the works and then spent 16 years restoring her. For many years Babs would winter at Brooklands Museum and move to Pendine Sands for the summer. She moved permanently to Pendine in 2017 and there are plans to feature her in a new museum there. We thanked Mike for sharing the story of Parry Thomas' extraordinary life, which although tragically cut short was full of achievement.

SOCIETY NEWS AND QUERIES

HERITAGE SOCIETY BOAT TRIP

Although we had to postpone our now traditional boat-trip due to You Know What, we were very pleased to be able to go ahead in August. Leaving from Parvis Wharf, members enjoyed a cruise along the canal, getting as far as Newark Priory before returning. After so long, it was good to see members “in the flesh” again, so fingers crossed we can continue. Many thanks to Claire Calder for the photographs.



Above: Members all aboard!
Top left and left: sharing the canal with some friends.

The **Byfleet Heritage Society Calendar** for 2022 is now on sale—the perfect Christmas gift!

Available from Byfleet Community Library, St Mary’s Centre for the Community, and the Queen’s Head for £5, or copies can be sent by post for an extra P&P charge. See www.byleetheritage.org.uk for more details

Byfleet through the Seasons
Byfleet Heritage Society
2022 Calendar



The photographs in this calendar were taken by the members of our 2020/2021 competition, judged by an experienced professional photographer.
Visit us at: Byfleet Heritage Room, Byfleet Community Library, High Road, Byfleet, KT14 7PQ.
The Byfleet Heritage Society is a Heritage Trust so open during the day, opening hours and entry is free.
Email: info@byleetheritage.org.uk Web: www.byleetheritage.org.uk
Find us on Facebook



On **Saturday 4th December** you can come and say hello at the Byfleet Heritage Society drop-in at Byfleet Community Library (10.30-12.30). Then carry on to **Plough Green** where you will find the **Byfleet Village Christmas Fair** from 10-4—an excellent opportunity to start your Christmas shopping and have some fun. See you then!

NEWSLETTERS VIA EMAIL

Just a reminder that if you would like to receive your newsletters and other Society news by email, do let us know. Just drop an email to info@byleetheritage.org.uk to be added to our emailing list.

If you need to **contact the Society**, we can be reached in the following ways:
Leave a note at Byfleet Library, email us at info@byleetheritage.org.uk or ring our Secretary, Tessa Westlake on 01932 351559

Byfleet Heritage Society, Byfleet Library, High Road, Byfleet, Surrey KT14 7QN
Published by: Tessa Westlake, 8 Brewery Lane, Byfleet, Surrey KT14 7PQ