

# HISTORY IN BEDFORDSHIRE

VOLUME 5, NO 10

WINTER 2011–2012

[www.bedfordshire-lha.org.uk](http://www.bedfordshire-lha.org.uk)

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## Notes and news

### 2012 BLHA Local History Conference and AGM.

The 2012 Conference and AGM will be hosted by the Amphill and District Archaeological and Local History Society at the local studies room at Poplars Nursery, Toddington – a new facility fully equipped for talks and field work. There is a dedicated car park. There will be talks from local historians ranging from ‘Lost houses in Bedfordshire’, ‘Art Deco Buildings in Luton’ to ‘Fires in Stately Homes and their Outcomes’. An illustrated talk on the medieval wall paintings in Chalgrave Church will preview a visit to the church before lunch. These heraldic paintings are one of the hidden gems of Bedfordshire.

The event is on Saturday, 9 June. Registration is at 9.15 for the AGM at 9.30, followed by coffee, before the Conference at 10.30. The Chairman will sum up at 4pm. The cost for the day is £17 including lunch and refreshments. The closing date is 4 May 2012. No charge for the AGM alone. The full programme will be in the next issue of HIB and booking details will be sent out in due course.

**Centenary of Bedfordshire and Luton Archives Service.** 2013 is the centenary of Bedfordshire and Luton Archives Service. To celebrate and increase awareness of the importance of archives Colmworth and Neighbours History Society is sponsoring a TV documentary to be made by the Media Department of the University of Bedfordshire working with BLARS. We are now applying for funding.

The programme will show how to use archives and the exciting stories they contain. The work will be done in 2012. We are now looking for stories which must have human interest – people using the archives and talking to the archivists, then following up leads. Do you know of any stories which you would like us to investigate? Dramatic stories of village, personal, or institutional life not yet explored? We would give you a TV crew to follow the search with the archivists as

they get to the bottom of your particular mystery. If you have an idea, contact me on:

[smithstephen30@gmail.com](mailto:smithstephen30@gmail.com).

**Village Shop Records.** Lucy Bailey, a PhD student at the University of Nottingham, is researching her doctoral thesis: ‘The Village Shop and Rural Life in 18th and 19th Century England: Image and Reality’. She needs village shop account books for 1750 to 1900 – not many survive and she asks if anyone has or knows of any material which might be of use. It is possible some may be within village or family records and not yet available at local record offices. If you can help contact: [lucy.bailey@northampton.ac.uk](mailto:lucy.bailey@northampton.ac.uk), tel 01234 353404, mobile 07921 386341.

**Calendar of Events 2012.** We are still waiting for many societies’ 2012 programmes for inclusion in our calendar of *all* affiliated societies’ meetings and other local history events on our website. Programmes by e-mail to: [ed.martin39@btinternet.com](mailto:ed.martin39@btinternet.com) or by post to the editor (see p. 4).

## World War II and the LBC at Stewartby, Part 2

### Management problems

Management had much better conditions but the war placed them under considerable mental strain. There was a lack of co-operation between the Government and the building industry and there was no master plan as to how to progress. With the Government becoming virtually their sole customer, unsold stocks of building materials rapidly mounted and this brought manufacturers to a standstill. Fortunately, at Stewartby, because of its size and the range of engineering, foundry, welding and other specialist workshops, and trained workmen, it was able to take on work other than just brick production but the contribution to the firm’s income was modest. Severe winter weather conditions during the first two winters of the war added to difficulties of both production and distribution and the demand from the building industry.

For a business which was used to being very efficient and very profitable, the wartime restrictions – though, arguably, needed – were extremely frustrating. One of the burdens placed on them by Government restrictions related to a mileage limitation placed on deliveries imposed, so the LBC management maintained, ‘without prior consultation

with Industry and with insufficient regard to its effect on efficiency of production or on prices to the consumer'. The Government imposed a zoning system for transport which restricted the distances to which a firm could send its goods. LBC was limited to an area within a circle with a radius of 20 miles from the works, unless it was given a special licence. For a company which had for decades developed a nationwide distribution network, this was a crippling restriction. In addition, prices were officially controlled, by fixing not only maximum but also minimum figures, which prevented efficient firms such as LBC from competing with smaller less-efficient firms.



Preparing for war: advertisement for a simple brick-built air-raid shelter. (*Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 14 August 1939) (BLARS Z41/LB10/7, Cuttings album, p. 91)

The company knew that, if it was to get back to its pre-eminent position after the war, it had to survive as best it could, build up stocks ready for an inevitable post-war building boom, and in the meantime try to keep itself in the minds of its former customers. Its marketing and public relations department worked hard both to lobby for improved trading conditions, advertise the benefits of brick as opposed to other materials, and emphasise the role it was playing in helping the country win the war. It campaigned for rural housing and farm buildings to be built or rebuilt. It promoted its own Fletton bricks as being outstandingly efficient, containing its own natural fuel – shale oil – for firing more cheaply than other clay. It advertised continuously in the building architecture press showing the extensive range of uses for brick.

**Alternative work**

The company was playing its part in the war effort in a number of ways other than continuing production of bricks. Some of the now redundant kilns were used for the storage of emergency supplies of tinned food. Parts for Sten guns were manufactured in LBC's workshops. Another way was in the vital work of re-assembling and testing American 'lend-lease' tanks, which were shipped over in parts and put back together in the pits at Stewartby. One of the more unusual, secret activities, which also made use of one of LBC's extensive worked-out mid-Bedfordshire clay pits, was experimentation by the Ministry of Home Security's Research and Experiments Department on the construction of air raid shelters and the way in which bomb blast acts on the body. This was

undertaken by Oxford University scientists. It involved experimentation with animals placed in cages, or in the case of goats by staking them to the ground, in a layout of increasing distance, around a controlled charge of explosives. The scientists would then assess the intensity of the blast at various points away from the explosions, and, by using pressure gauges and post-mortems on the dead animals, would assess the damage it had caused. The aim was to be able to predict what damage would be caused by bomb blast and to attempt to devise shelters which would minimise human harm and suffering.



LBC promotional advertisement, 'On active service', showing the delivery of vital bricks for the war effort. (*Journal of the Institute of Civil Engineers*, November 1940 (BLARS Z41/LB10/7, Cuttings album, p. 123)

**Enemy action**

In terms of direct enemy action affecting the LBC works at Stewartby, there were fears that the brickworks would become a target for bombs but it was London Brick's main competitor, the neighbouring Marston Valley Brick Company, which suffered a major hit by high explosive bomb on 24 September 1940. The day before, however, on 23 August 1940, the first casualty of enemy action in Bedfordshire was a workman in a shed where a number of men were at work in part of LBC's extensive site at Stewartby. A solitary German bomber came out of the clouds that Friday morning and fired two bursts of machine gun bullets. John Rowe, a 41-year-old worker, was hit in the back and had to be rushed to hospital in a works ambulance for an immediate operation. Fortunately, he recovered later.

**Looking forward**

By March 1944, the Chairman was reporting that 'The fifth year of the war brings in its train with cumulative effect the adverse results accruing from drastic control and diminished demand experienced generally by Brickmakers. These dire disabilities arising from the War we bear philosophically [however]. We are already seriously at work on schemes of expansions to provide for the anticipated increased demand and hope to proceed with this work during the first two post-war years, which is the period the Minister of Works has stated the Building Industry will require to get into its full stride . . . we must patiently await the better days that will dawn with Victory.'

Lord Portal, the Minister of Works, however, had accepted that, in this transitional post-war period, prefabricated houses would have to be built to

provide temporary shelter for those thousands of people who had been bombed out of their previous homes. That was a threat to LBC and the other brick manufacturers and they went on the offensive in terms of marketing and public relations to emphasise the superiority of brick houses for the comfort and permanent security which they afforded, as opposed to the less solid temporary structures envisaged by Government.

Following the end of the war in Europe, with VE day on 8 May 1945, LBC management felt free to speak its mind, at last, having been previously been fettered in its comments by the need to be seen to be patriotic and working for the national effort. 'If we are to regain our position as national distributors transport restrictions must be eased, freedom from minimum selling prices must be restored and all restrictive quotas abolished . . . If the building programme goes smoothly the day will come when all the bricks that can be made will be required . . . Let us hope that . . . there will be no delay in removing those unsound controls which today are still completely frustrating our efforts to regain lost efficiency.'

By May 1947 when the company accounts for 1946 were published, a positive Chairman reported that 'The bulk of the bricks put into stock from earlier production [500 million bricks] was sold with considerable benefit to the year's trading result.' For many British companies, the war was disastrous, since they were no longer allowed to produce what they had formerly produced but directed towards satisfying war production needs, with a resultant loss of market. Others never looked back, since what they were producing was just what the Government needed and their company grew rich as a result. As it turned out, London Brick Company was able to recover, post-war, and climb back to its pre-eminent pre-war position as the major national manufacturer of bricks. Later taken over by Hanson, it went on to become part of a global company although production of Fletton bricks in Bedfordshire subsequently diminished and finally ceased at Stewartby on 28 February 2008.

[This article first appeared in *Local History Magazine* under the title 'All fired up and nowhere to go', No 133, Mar/Apr 2011, pp. 24-27.]

## Sources

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\* BLARS = Bedfordshire & Luton Records & Archives Service.

STUART ANTROBUS

## Augustus Henry Orlebar and the Schneider Trophy, Part 2

The only challengers to the British team for the 1929 race were the Italians. They brought two Macchi aircraft, the M52R, a developed version of a previous winner, and the new very advanced M67. The two French aircraft were not completed in time; Germany's Dornier design never got off the drawing board and the USA's new aircraft built with private funding proved to be almost unflyable.

In the race, Atcherley and Waghorn flew Supermarine S6s, and Greig flew a surviving S5. The Italians' two Macchi M67s had engine failures and failed to complete the course but their M52R was second. All three British aircraft finished the race, but Atcherley in an S6 lost his goggles in the slipstream and, with impaired vision, misjudged a turn, flew inside a corner pylon and was disqualified. Waghorn's S6 won the race by a wide margin, averaging 328.6 mph, and Greig in the S5 took third place.

There was a strange repetition of the winner's experience in 1927 - Waghorn also miscounted the number of laps. Towards what he thought was the end of the race his engine cut out, and he was forced to land short of the finish, cursing his luck. When his engineering team came to rescue him he learned that he had completed the course and won the race *before* the engine failure!

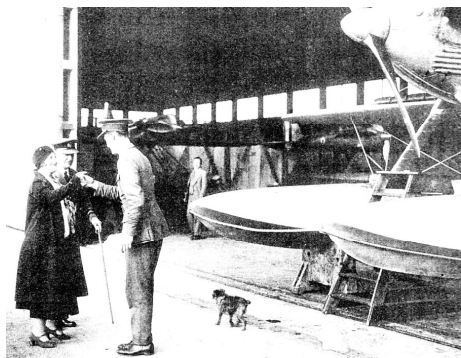
The second consecutive British win in 1929 created the chance for a country to win the Trophy outright, for the third time since the races began. The Italians had been in a similar position after the 1921 race, and the USA after the 1925 race, but both had failed to achieve a third win within the space of five races. The British Prime Minister of the time, Ramsey MacDonald, averred that 'We are going to do our level best to win again'.

The 1931 race was also to be flown at Cowes but a period of major economic depression had started in 1929, which caused the UK Government to withdraw their financial support. RAF involvement was also vetoed. These decisions angered the public, whose enthusiasm had been aroused by Ramsey MacDonald's encouraging statement in 1929.

Fortunately, a wealthy benefactress came to the aid of the Royal Aero Club. Lady Lucy Houston, who had inherited her shipping magnate husband's £6m fortune in the 1920s, offered to pay £100,000 towards the cost of ensuring British participation in the all-important 1931 race. The government relented and allowed the RAF to defend the Trophy in the light of Lady Houston's backing. The political bickering had dragged on for so long that only nine months remained to prepare. There was no time, and insufficient funding, to design and build completely new aircraft or engines, and the only possibility was refinement of the existing Supermarine S6 aircraft and its Rolls-Royce Type R engine. The Type R was uprated by 400 hp, to 2,300 hp, for the race. R J Mitchell strengthened the S6 for the higher speeds anticipated with the more powerful engine. Two modified aircraft were ordered, as 'S6Bs', and 2 existing S6 airframes were upgraded, redesignated 'S6As'.

In Italy, Macchi were developing the M67, to become the M72, but its Fiat-built engine was troublesome, the aircraft was not ready in time, and the Italian team had to withdraw. France failed to have a suitable aircraft ready in time and a planned design from Germany failed to materialise, and since no other nations had shown interest, the British team was unopposed in the 1931 race. Nevertheless, the British public turned out in their thousands to see the RAF's hoped-for victory, which required just one of the four S6 variants to finish the course.

The only remaining members of the original RAF High Speed Flight at the time of this race were its Flight Commander, Squadron Leader Orlebar, and Flight Lieutenant Stainforth. They had been joined by Flight Lieutenants J Boothman and F Long and Flying Officer L Snaith, and it was these new members who were to fly the three competing aircraft. In the event, only one of them flew the course; Boothman, the first to make the attempt, achieved an average speed of 340.8 mph in an S6B, more than 12 mph faster than the winning speed in 1929, and so won the Schneider Trophy permanently for Great Britain. After this success over a closed course, an attempt was made a few days later on the World Speed Record in straight and level flight. On this occasion, George Stainforth flew one of the S6Bs, with its engine uprated to 2,600 hp, and set a new speed record of 407.5 mph. Thus, in spite of the sorry economic state of the country at the time, and thanks to the beneficence of Lady Houston, 1931 was a major high-point in the history of British aviation.



Lady Houston visiting the Schneider Trophy team on the day before the 1931 race

Having won three successive competitions, the Schneider Trophy came permanently to this country; it has been on show in the Science Museum in London since 1977, alongside the winning Supermarine S6B aircraft.

The significance of the Schneider Trophy races for Britain can hardly be overestimated. The improvements in aerodynamics resulting from refinement of successive Supermarine designs led to one of the most significant fighter aircraft of the Second World War, the Supermarine Spitfire. Like the S6B, it was designed by R J Mitchell. Furthermore, its Rolls-Royce Merlin aero engine was a direct descendant of the Type R engine used in the later Schneider Trophy winners. This engine was used to power not only the Spitfire and the Hawker Hurricane, but also the Avro Lancaster, Britain's most potent bomber, the De Havilland Mosquito, the British bomber that was

for a time faster than any enemy fighter, and the North American P51 Mustang fighter built in the USA.

Although Flight Lieutenant Stainforth, achieved the World Speed Record after the 1931 Schneider Trophy race, that record had previously been gained by Harry Orlebar, flying the unmodified Supermarine S6, after the 1929 race. The speed attained on that occasion, over Southampton water, was 357.7 mph. This feat won him the Thompson Speed Trophy, awarded by the American National Aeronautical Association. He was also awarded a bar to his AFC for his successful leadership of the Schneider Trophy team and for capturing the World Speed Record.



A Supermarine S6B racing seaplane

In 1931 Harry Orlebar's daughter Bridget ('Bumble') was born, and his book *The Schneider Trophy* was published. At this time he and his family were living at Tetworth Hall in Sandy, Beds. He was promoted again, to Wing Commander, the following year. In September 1933 he was appointed Senior Air Staff Officer in Aden, where he served for three years; he then returned to the Air Ministry for a training course before becoming Station Commander at RAF Northolt.

In the ensuing years A H Orlebar filled several staff and command appointments, including Deputy Senior Air Staff Officer at Fighter Command and Director of Flying Training. In 1937 he was promoted yet again, to Group Captain. In the early years of the Second World War he was deeply involved in developing the organisation and technique of night fighter defence, for which he was awarded the CBE in 1942. In March 1943 he was appointed Deputy Chief, Combined Operations, with the rank of Air Vice-Marshal, under Vice-Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten. Sadly, he died of cancer only a few months later, on 4 August 1943, aged only 46. He is buried in Podington churchyard. His wife outlived him by more than 53 years, and was buried in 1996 in a neighbouring grave.

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*History in Bedfordshire* is published by the BEDFORDSHIRE LOCAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION. Editor: Ted Martin, 2A The Leys, Langford, Beds SG18 9RS. Telephone: 01462 701096. Copyright © 2012, Bedfordshire Local History Association and contributors. ISSN 0968-9761. Printed in Great Britain by Streets Printers, Baldock, Herts.