CHATHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Medway Chronicle

"Keeping Medway's History Alive"

Dock Road Tragedy. Gillingham's Great Day. Wingets
CHATHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

meets at the church hall,
Maxwell Rd, Brompton, on the second Thursday of each month (excepting January & August). Hall open at 7pm, talks begin at 7.30pm.
Subscription £10 p.a. Attendance fee £2, £3 for visitors.
Plenty of parking space.
Good disabled access.
New members and visitors are most welcome.

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Editorial Office. 69 Ballens Rd, Chatham. Kmt. ME5 8NX.
O1634 865176
Editor Sheila Erwin.
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Published by Chatham Historical Society.

Programme 2011/12
Nov. 10th. Audio & Visual Show—Old Ads—Gillingham then and now, Pilgrims Way. Mr. Coe.
January—No meeting.
Feb. 9th. Traditional Kent & East Sussex Trades and Crafts.
Mar. 8th. Broomhill & the Battles of Britain.
Mrs. O. Buchanan
April 13th. AGM

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Last We Forget

OBITUARY

It is with regret that we have to record the passing of our Chairman since April 2004, Mr George Bristow, who died in May.

Even during his illness George chaired our monthly meetings when he could, and conducted them in his usual efficient way. We were all impressed with his humour and optimism, neither of which appeared to desert him during his illness.

George was a conscientious chairman. At our monthly meetings he would provide a friendly welcome to members and speakers. He is greatly missed by all.

Mr. Barry Meade, who has been standing in for the Chairman, when necessary, during the last two years, has now agreed to become our new Chairman. BJ.

The Society is pleased to announce that the NEWCOMB WAR DIARY 1939-1945, which has been on display at Chatham Riverside Library, has now been moved to Strood Library. After a suitable time it will be moved on to be displayed in each of the Medway libraries.

We shall be pleased to hear from anyone who would like to be added to the Chronicle subscription list, who wishes to comment on the contents of the Chronicle, or who has information or photographs relevant to a published article. Please ring the Editor on 01634 865176.
THE DOCK ROAD TRAGEDY

by Brian Joyce

December 2011 marks the 60th anniversary of the greatest tragedy to affect the Medway Towns outside of the world wars.

On the evening of Tuesday 4 December 1951, a file of 52 boys of the Royal Marine Cadets left Melville Barracks to march to a boxing tournament at the Royal Naval Barracks in Gillingham. They were supervised by a regular officer, Lieutenant Clarence Murrayfield Carter, who divided the boys into 3 platoons. The front two marched in groups of three boys. The rear platoon, which consisted mainly of recent recruits, was in single file. Most of the cadets wore blue battledress with white waist belts and lanyards, and blue berets, although many of the new recruits wore civilian clothes. The boys marched in the road, the outside boys being six feet from the kerb. Although it was a dark winter’s evening, no light was displayed at the rear of the column.

The approach to the Naval Barracks was downhill, through Dock Road, which, with its fairly high walls either side, was rather like a roofless tunnel.

As the boys marched into the gloom, a Chatham and District Traction Company bus, GKE 69, on the Burna Way to Pembroke Gate route, prepared to make the descent behind them. It was driven by John Samson, a driver with ten years experience. Due to the narrow and confined nature of Dock Road, Samson, like most bus drivers, only used his sidelights, to avoid dazzling oncoming traffic.

He was probably driving at between 15 and 20 miles per hour as he approached the invisible column of cadets marching down the road in front of him. A street lamp was out at about 60 yards from Pembroke Gate. It was there that Samson’s bus ploughed into the boys.

Twelve-year-old Lance Corporal Alan Brazier later stated: “I was on the pavement, marching the new recruits at the back of the column. We heard the bus and we thought the noise was a bit loud. I said, ‘Look out!’ and pulled one of the boys on to the pavement and against the wall”.

The only adult in the group, Lieutenant Carter, recalled: “I moved to the rear of the column and said, ‘Keep well in, boys, there’s a bus coming!’ Then I moved to midway between the units. I next heard a terrific noise. I turned my head and saw a bus coming straight towards us. I was on the pavement. Then I was knocked completely over and slightly dazed. I instantly got up and saw the bus going away from me down the hill... The boys were lying around screaming and crying. Some were trying to dash to the opposite side of the road. I ran as fast as I could to the Naval Barracks”.

Meanwhile, John Samson had stopped his bus and turned it round so that he could use his headlights to illuminate the ghastly scene.
Dorothy Dunster, Samson’s conductress had been standing on the rear platform when the bus struck the cadets, so saw nothing of the impact itself. She later recalled:

“At 5.53pm on Tuesday, we left the Town Hall with 8 or 10 passengers aboard. We reached the top of the hill and stopped at the stop. There was nobody there. I rang him off, and on we went. He carried on down the hill the same as we have always done.

The next thing I knew was a series of bumps. I was not afraid but just began to wonder what had happened. ‘Sammy’ did not know at first what he had gone over until afterwards. I felt his brakes go on and the bus stopped. I got out. I called out to ‘Sammy’, ‘What’s happened?’ He replied, ‘I don’t know’. He did not sound alarmed. He did not realise that anything had happened. He got out of his cabin and said, ‘What have we hit?’ We walked up the road and I saw the youngsters lying on the floor.

Poor ‘Sammy’ said, ‘What have I done?’ That was all he said. Then he just stared. He was stunned and dazed. He could not believe it. I went to try and help the kids, but I couldn’t do anything. I have no nursing experience’.

The dead and injured were rushed to the three local hospitals. Parents were hastily contacted, with SOS messages being flashed on to cinema screens. Hospital chaplains and the Dean of Rochester comforted the injured. The mayors of the three towns visited grieving parents the next day, and messages of sympathy arrived from the King, the two local MPs and the Mayor of Rochdale, who Gillingham FC were due to play on the following Saturday.

A total of 24 boys died, with at least a further 18 injured.

John Samson appeared in the Magistrate’s Court in early January charged with dangerous driving and driving without due care and attention. He was committed for trial, but because Kent Assizes were not due until March, the Central Criminal Court in London agreed to hear the case against the bus driver. The court accepted that Samson had not been speeding, that a broken street light contributed to the accident, and that the cadets were not displaying a light at the rear of their column.

However, the verdict was that John Samson should have adapted his driving to the situation that evening, implying that he should have used his headlights. He was fined £20 and banned from driving for three years.

The following month, GKE 69 was involved in another accident, smashing into a lamp standard in Luton Road, Chatham.

In 2001, the Duke of Edinburgh unveiled a memorial plaque on the wall in Dock Road to commemorate the tragic events of fifty years earlier.

THE CHURCH ON THE BLUFF
By Jack Lacey

(Medway folk were sad to hear on August 15th 2011 that St. Mary’s Church, once The Parish Church of Chatham, had been damaged by fire during the night. Fortunately the vandals were unable to get into the body of the church. Jack’s article reminds us of how much we might have lost.) ED.

St. Mary’s Church was saved from demolition in 1974 by the popular protest of the people of Chatham and Rochester. It was converted into the Medway Heritage Centre by the work of dedicated enthusiasts and opened in 1984. Dedication would have been unavailing but for cash donated by The Carnegie Trust, Rochester City Council, Lloyd’s of London, the Medway Ports Authority and others.

Amid a wealth of historical attractions: Rochester Castle and Cathedral, Fort Amherst, The R.E Museum and The Dockyard, the Heritage Centre’s seeming lesser importance was dwarfed. It tended to be overlooked by both local people and tourists, partly because of the parking problem. Yet in it’s detailed portraiture of the history of the River Medway it showed the river as the
vital link between all others. For the young it was a gateway to local history. Memorials were respectfully surrounded, and in some case were obscured, by displays illustrating barges, bridges and boats. The layout and design of the exhibits tended to catch the visitor’s eye so that gazing at one thing the eye is carried on to another. That was how I came across Lt. Hamilton Wolfrige, R.M who at the age of 22 years was killed during the 3rd Opium War. The Chinese forces contained Tartar crossbow men and it may be supposed that Wolfrige and fifteen of his men were the last to have died by the mediaeval crossbow in 1858.

Among others are Master Ropemaker brothers Guy. These two were special ropemakers as they made the miles of ropes needed for HMS Victory, and their plaque has been given a crest.

The Royal Marines considered St. Mary’s ‘their church’ and the vicars, who lived in the wild area of old Brompton and were prone to the attention of footpads on their way to an fro, were given an escort of two Royal Marine Corporals and a drummer.

The church tower was erected to celebrate Queen Victoria’s Jubilee and it is hoped that the bells might be rung next year to celebrate Queen Elizabeth’s Jubilee.

In 1667, when the Dutch came up the river, church windows were shattered by gun fire and it was that worthy Clerk of the Acts, Samuel Pepys, who paid for their repair.

The Heritage Centre sadly was closed in the late 1980s when the artefacts were disbursed and the memorials left with little protection.

Royal Marines in Chatham. Pt 2
By Jack Lacey.

In 1846 it was observed ‘... an innovation of dress by officer’s servants... future no servant will be permitted to pass the gate wearing a shooting jacket’. In 1854 a Garrison Order ran that ‘while officers were permitted to wear plain clothes for walks in the countryside and for field amusements, if they wished to pass through Rochester in plain clothes they were to abide by the specified routes; i.e. Military Road, along New Road, Gravel Walk, down into Troy Town (the path, now metalled, still exists) through the Vines and so to Rochester Bridge.’

Riding or driving they were not to stop, loiter or dismount, but ‘to go directly into the countryside or the barracks.’

The red-brick barracks was well punctured with windows (no window tax here). These were supposed to be opened to six inches top and bottom but discipline was not always total. In spring each barrackroom placed red geraniums upon the window sills, for which there was a prize winnable of five shillings.

The tenor of the afternoons, after the tensions of the morning parades, was quiet. Few officers or N.C.O.s would be about, other than those under or engaged in training. Indeed there was a sensible attitude about work and play and while I do not suppose that Tolstoy’s words applied, in his mind other than to the commissioned officers, when he said that ‘The soldier has it with Adam, unlimited leisure...’ his observation was accurate. Except for war, in all its forms and
necessary training, I calculated that soldiers worked an average of twenty-two and a half hours per week. Idyllic? Well yes and no!

Three things regulated the day: the bugle, the instructor's voice and the Barrack Clock.

'Did I see you looking at a watch Smith? There is no Time but Service Time. The BBC, the International Date Line, GREENWICH MEAN TIME, have no meaning here. All time is measured by the Barrack Clock. It is ALWAYS RIGHT."

And so it was, until 1950, when the barracks closed.

The New Stairs Lane still exists. The barracks was demolished and Lloyd's of London occupied the site for some years and then Medway Council took it over. Perhaps the poet might have the last word.

'Saplings have grown into trees to give shade, not to men, but to Lloyd's car park, once the parade'.

The Barrackroom, their home. Note the china cabinet, flags and pictures on the walls. Neatly rolled up bedding and decorated shelves.

Gillingham's Greatest Day

Part 1

For years there had been a great desire among the more go-ahead folk of Gillingham to achieve Incorporation, the highest form of self-government. Among the notable advocates for change was Mr. T.S. Smith "Uncle Charley" and the local press. "Will Adams", writing in the "Chatham, Rochester, and Gillingham News" in 1897 speaks of "being in the second grade of the local government scale" and the handicap this was. Back in June 1888 a special meeting of the Chatham Board of Health had been presided over by Mr. Adam Stigant to consider Mr. Ritchie's Local Government Bill, which contained a clause providing for all boroughs with a population of 50,000 to be counties in themselves. Mr. Stigant championed incorporation with the inclusion of Gillingham. He hoped that Gillingham people would not take a narrow view.

The result was a conference held with the local authorities of Gillingham the next day. The Gillingham representatives present: W. Tozer, (Chairman), T. Hill, W. J. Mackay, R. Sheepwash, W. E. Stokes, W. Savage, H. Gibbs, and others agreed that a Charter of Incorporation for the joint parishes would be for their mutual advantage; but they made a proviso that each town should have an equal number of representatives, that the debts of each should be adjusted and existing rights and privileges should be provided for. Another meeting took
place in Gillingham of members of both Chatham and Gillingham Boards, together with Sir John Gorst and the Under Secretary of the Privy Council, under the Chairmanship of W. Tozer. After a lengthy sitting when legal details were discussed, Mr. Geo Winch speaking for Chatham and Mr. Basset for Gillingham, the matter was passed to a full meeting of the Gillingham Board. Mr Basset reported the outcome and that a draft petition for a Charter had been received from Chatham. It is reported that ‘there was a lively discussion’, and the Minutes record that Messrs. B.H. and G Sheepwash, G. Featherby, and C.J. Beveridge and J. Old were opposed to the scheme, but the whole of the members present agreed that a public meeting be held in order that the ratepayers could express their views on the subject. After a lengthy wrangle when the Clerk and the Chairman of the Board were said to “display considerable lukeness” in the matter, the Board proceeded with other business. Because the advances made by Chatham had, in the first place, been entertained it was felt by some more liberal-minded members that the position taken by the Board was unfortunate, given that it had been agreed that representation would be equal and that meetings would alternate between the towns. Chatham was left to continue the effort alone but... in February 1889 the High Constable of Gillingham Dr. E.C. Warren, summoned a meeting of the parishioners of _Gillingham to consider if, even at this late date, further steps could be taken in the matter. Fifty persons were present, including eight members of the Gillingham Local Board and several influential residents. An amendment declaring “that they do not join with Chatham” was carried by 19 votes to 17._

C.S. Leeds in his book ‘Chats about Gillingham’ comments, ‘It is true that there were many advantages to be obtained by the securing of a local County Council but it is probable that nine-tenths of Gillingham ratepayers of today (1906) will rejoice that the “boys of the old brigade” made what, at the time, appeared to be an error of judgement, as they have secured the identity of the place, with _all Gillingham’s ancient and honoured history.”_ (Chatham secured Incorporation on the 22nd November 1890).

For some years after Chatham’s Incorporation the folk of Gillingham carried on in the even tenor of their ways, while watching the progress of their neighbours ‘over the hill’. The High Constable was elected annually to fill the role of the social head of the town. The Local Board’s name was changed to Gillingham District Council. Important Government establishments were being built in the town and streets of houses were springing up in every direction. The population was nearing 50,000 and many felt that it was time for Gillingham to take her place among the leading Kentish towns. In 1897 the question of
Incorporation came under serious consideration by the townspeople. It was at the High Constables Banquet of Mr. R.D. Batchelor that Mr G. Leavey made a stirring speech in favour of the forward step, and Mr. C. Smith supported him at the Chatham Mayoral Banquet the next week. Feb. 1898. The matter was brought before the District Council when the High Constable asked the Council to move the matter by convening a meeting. A vote was taken and five voted each way and the Chairman Mr. R. H. Cock gave his casting vote in favour of dismissing the matter.

But the matter could not easily be dismissed. The next important move was in October 1899 when a public meeting was convened.

However the meeting was badly advertised and organised. Only about 30 were present. The High Constable Mr. J. Plewis announced that the meeting would be held on another date. The postponed meeting took place on 7th November when the High Constable quoted facts and figures, collected and published by ‘Will Adams’, of the “News,” concerning recently incorporated towns. Of the 33 towns 16 had an increase in their rates, but in nearly every case the increase was due to big improvements. 17 towns had a decrease or remained as they were. A resolution requesting the Council to take necessary steps to secure a Charter was proposed by Councillor Trimble, seconded by Mr. W. Lewington and carried by a substantial majority.

When the matter came before the Council in November it was discussed in a business like way and on the information presented it was decided by six votes to five that a meeting of ratepayers be convened. On January 10, 1900 a large and thoroughly representative gathering took place in the Public Hall.

The meeting, however, had been badly organised, even the Chairman Mr. Featherby was without an agenda. The audience waited for speeches which did not come, and then, believing that they had been hoaxed - for it was little better - they determined that as they could not get information they would have fun and frolic - and this they had. Mr. C. S. Leeds was present and wrote “It was a meeting that would remain in the minds of those present.”

Mr. Lewington moved a resolution “that in the opinion of the ratepayers and residents of Gillingham and New Brompton, a Charter of Incorporation would secure unity of government and efficiency of administration.” He made a thoughtful and logical speech but was met with uproar and had difficulty in making himself heard. Councillor Herring seconded the resolution and, on a vote being taken, it was defeated by a large majority, about 120 voting for it. The promoters were not daunted by the rebuff and renewed their efforts but no real progress was made until November 1900, when Mr. C. T. Smith was elected to the ancient office of High Constable.

To be continued in the next edition.

Sheila Erwin.
The Royal Engineers and The Dockyard Extension.

In 1861-2 Parliament approved the building of an extension to Chatham Dockyard which would “provide facilities for the repair of naval vessels damaged in action. The country that can first repair its ships will double its force” The plan was in effect to cut off St. Mary’s Island from the mainland creating three basins for fitting out and repairing. Working plans were not approved until 1864. It was a massive undertaking involving the use of convict and contract workers.

A large brickfield was laid out at the north end of the Island to separate convicts and hired men.

The majority of bricks were made by convicts using local clay, blue clay from Burham and yellow sand from Aylesford, making excellent bricks. 110 Million were made to March 1875!

The construction of the basins was made possible by the discovery of Portland Cement by Col. C. Pasley, RE, during his experiments on limes and cements.

Portland Cement proved to give ‘greater stability and solidity’.

The whole of the design of the work and the responsibility for its execution devolved on the officers of the Corps of Royal Engineers.

To Sir Andrew Clarke, RE fell the credit for the original design; and to Col. C. Pasley, RE for the successful carrying of it into execution.

As James Presnail put it in his book ‘The Story of Chatham’. “It was a great engineering feat to convert this large tract of amphibious ground, half land, half water, gradually from a site of chaotic desolation, into a vast regulated establishment, which after twenty years of labour and £3 million was completed”.

The line of the wharfage of Chatham Dockyard was increased to 10,000ft and an embankment created of 4,500ft in length, enclosing a total area of 500 acres.

The Bull Nose.

(see Back page) When Chatham Dockyard and the River Medway was alive with ships and river craft of all descriptions the words ‘Bull Nose’ were in common use. Now Medway folk of a certain age would not be expected to know their origin.

As can be seen from the map, the Bull Nose was an essential part of the arrangements to get ships into one of three basins for repair or for visiting ships to find a safe haven. The two entrances, side by side, gave it the appearance of a bull’s nose. Massive machinery inside the engine house opened and closed the locks. Were it not for the ‘Bull Nose’ the Medway Towns would not have had the pleasure of seeing so many of our naval ships and being able to go on board them. So the Nation benefited in two ways: the original requirement for rapid repair of ships in war had been met and the Medway Towns had the pleasure of hosting ships during the very successful Navy Days.

Sheila Erwin
Chatham Navy Days

The first Navy Day was held at Portsmouth in 1927 and Chatham followed in 1928 when 41,818 visitors attended. The Battleship MARLBOROUGH (1912) was open to the public, as were 6 cruisers, including Vindictive, and no less than eleven Destroyers, plus 4 submarines, and (from the Nore Reserve) Ark Royal a seaplane carrier, and Marshall Soult - a Monitor (gun drill ship). Proceeds donated to Charity amounted to £2,4235s 1d.

In 1936 there were fewer ships on view but visitor numbers had increased to 116,688. 1938 saw the last Navy Days until 1948 when the annual event was reinstated but with fewer visitors during the 1950s. In 1960 49,000 people attended. Navy Days were then suspended until 1965 and it was not generally known the reason for this. However, looking through contemporary papers I see that during this period it was being decided whether the Dockyard should close, or house the new Nuclear facility. Thankfully for Medway 'the yard went Nuclear', and survived twenty more years.

The very last official Navy Days was held in May of 1981. Achilles, London and Coventry were among those ships in the basins.

The planned 1982 event was cancelled due to the Falklands conflict in which HMS COVENTRY, sadly, was sunk.

And so ended what was a great Medway event.

(Navy Days research by C.J. Erwin.)
Winget Life.
Among the prominent manufacturing firms situated in Strood from the 1930s to 1982 was Wingets Ltd. This Society has recently been very pleased to receive two donations of various copies of the Winget 'in house' magazine 'Winget Life', covering the very significant period from 1940 to 1951. It is a delightful publication which gives one a marvellous 'snapshot' view of the attitude of Management and workers during the traumatic war years and the difficult period immediately after. All aspects of life are reported. Births, deaths, promotions, fund raising for a Hurricane, knitting comforts for men in the services, news of men serving in the armed forces, the firm's Home Guard groups as well as social activities.

An article in the December 1940 edition by the MD Mr George Dickson reaffirms his Christian belief. He writes of a "new paganism spreading over the world, challenging all established beliefs with all the brutal efficiency of modern mechanised warfare."

A special feature of all the Winget editions are the wry, affectionate caricatures of staff and management by, the then personnel manager, the artist Emelio Coir.

In our opinion Winget Life is a unique document of Social History and we will be including drawings, photographs and articles from it in future Chronicles.

We shall be pleased to hear from anyone with news of a 'Wingetite'.
Sheila Erwin.

Dec. 1940
The Winget Fireman is rightly proud of his Brigade which now boasts a car of its own. Recently Mrs George Dickson generously presented her car (lock stock and barrel) to the Winget Fire Brigade who quickly converted it into a serviceable fire engine. Fitted as a trailer is a Winget 2in. Speed Prime Pump which has already proved its worth in the near neighbourhood.

Audrey Frances Holt. (Secretary to M.D)
Drawings by Emelio Coir

Nora Pilkinton. (Clearing Centre Shorthand Typist)