

## June 2021 Issue

Hi all,

Well, last month I began with 'Are we nearly there yet'. What a simpleton I am!

I am later than I planned to be with this Newsletter for several reasons...

- My wife, Margaret, and I have started visiting on a regular basis our local museum, Forge Mill Needle Museum, as it is great to have a walk over the Abbey fields and call in for coffee at the Mill View Coffee bar. In the last month we have had a museum volunteers meeting, a meeting of the Committee of the Redditch History Society and Margaret and I did some work on the garden 'beds' at the museum. In addition, there is much to do in our own garden. It is great to see and, have chat to, the staff and volunteers at the museum.
- The weather has been exceptionally warm. Not the ideal conditions for labouring over a computer. I have also fallen behind in producing printed books of Redditch history. So far I have three printed, but I had planned to have produced five.
- We based our start-up date to recommence our meetings on Monday August 9th on the previous definitive date for unlocking of the 21st of June. This has now been changed to a possible date of 19th July. This should be OK for our start date but, if we have to cancel this is not catastrophic for us but, I have every sympathy with those whose livelihoods depend on these dates. We are aware that many members/supporters are very wary of being involved in external activities.

Our meeting of the Management Committee at Forge Mill Needle Museum was on Monday 14th June 2021. We created a speaker programme and made decisions for our Annual General Meeting in October. You will find the minutes and the speaker programme for the rest of the year on page 2.

I was expecting that this would be the last 'lockdown' edition of the Newsletter. It now looks as if I need to wait until 19th July before I can say that the next issue is the 'last' lockdown issue.

Something really encouraging is that I have had a lot of support with regard to content, and I assure those of you who have sent me articles that they have not been forgotten and will be included in future editions.

I hope that you have found the expanded newsletter created during the lockdown to be worthwhile and kept you in touch with the history of the town.

On page three and four we have Reminiscences of a 'Trainspotter' by Don Vincent. It is sad that with the 'Beeching' cuts we lost our railway network. Don brings to life this epoch.

On pages five and six we have shortened version of an obituary to Paul Olsen, who was the first headmaster of St Augustine's High School, by his wife, Margaret Olsen. St Augustine's is probably the best school in Worcestershire due to the initial efforts by Paul and his staff. Margaret has supplied me with much information concerning these initial years which needs some analysis. Volunteers?

On pages seven and eight, I have included another humorous story by Tommy Thomas on growing up in the town.

So keep your stories/histories of Redditch coming in. I am happy to keep up this Newsletter as long as I have input and, perhaps, in the future we can publish a printed book of 'Stories from the Redditch History Society Newsletter'.

Take care and stay safe

Anthony Green, Society Secretary

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# Management Committee Meeting Report

We had a Management Committee Meeting on Monday 14th June 2021 at Forge Mill Needle Museum. Present: Don Vincent (Chairman), Anthony Green (Secretary), Graham Smith (Treasurer), Elizabeth Simpson, and David Spyer. Pete Harris was unable to attend due to a another appointment (however, he agreed the minutes)

The programme for the rest of the year from August 2021 was agreed and this is shown below.

The fees for the remainder of 2021 and 2022 to the Annual General Meeting in April was agreed as a membership fee of £10 for the remaining 7 meetings and the usual £3 for an individual meeting if not a member.

Graham presented the 2020 Financial Report, which obviously shows a loss due to expenses but no income, but we are still positive. It was agreed that this should be verified and approved by Gil Barlow (our Accounts Examiner) to make it available for the AGM.

The 2021 Annual General Meeting will be on October 11th. All existing officers and members of the committee are prepared to continue in their posts.

Graham supplied a list of physical resources most of which were purchased on RBC grant funding for the lost Redditch project. As the project now comes under the remit of the Redditch Local History Museum, which is quite separate from the Redditch History Society, it was agreed that these should be transferred to the RLHM.

## Redditch History Society meetings for 2021

At the Management Committee Meeting of the 14th of June, a programme of meetings for the rest of the year was agreed and we are very aware that members will be very cautious in being involved in activities of this type and we fully understand.

We are therefore starting our presentations at minimum cost by having presentations given by members at no cost to the Society.

For the first meeting we have decided not to have refreshments in the small room due to the small area. However, we believe that the large room where we give presentations is very generous concerning space will not be a problem.

It is always difficult to restart after such a difficult situation, but if we keep delaying, we will never start.

We hope that we can rely on your support.

### **Monday 9th August *History of Needles - Anthony Green.***

Five years ago I gave a talk on the Fishhook industry. I am now working on a book on Redditch Industry and the first Chapter is, obviously, the Needle Industry. In this talk I look at the beginning of needles and how they found their way to Redditch and the success of the industry in our town. The talk includes original videos of the Forge Mill Needle Museum.

### **Monday 13th September *The Windsors - Don Vincent***

Our Chairman, Don Vincent, is in the top tier of experts on Bordesley Abbey and its related history. In this presentation he looks at the family who were forced by Henry VIII into giving up their lands and property in London and accepting a swap with the Bordesley Abbey possessions. Thus, the Windsors became our local aristocracy and had a big influence on the town.

### **Monday 11th October *AGM (Annual General Meeting) plus films.***

The annual general meeting, which is probably the most boring of our meeting for most members, is actually extremely important. It is here where we elect our Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer, and members of the executive committee and we decide our programme of events for the next year. Without the AGM we cannot continue. There will be local history films to follow.

### **Monday 8th November *Researching my Family History - Pete Harris***

Pete has spent some time researching his family history, and he produced an article in an earlier newsletter presenting some of his research. In this talk Pete will, in his inimitable style, give an extended view of this article and, I am sure that it will be entertaining and go on longer than planned. Be warned!

### **Monday 13th December *Christmas Social***

At this stage we have not yet decided on our Christmas Social. We will have, of course, some form of presentation related to winter in Redditch and a social meeting with mince pies and tea/coffee. We will have more information as we approach the date.

# Reminiscences of a 'Trainspotter'

by Don Vincent

I suppose I was a Trainspotter (It should, of course, be Locomotive spotter) from the end of WWII until I started at High Duty Alloys (HDA) roughly 1945 –1952.

Even then as the chemical laboratory at HDA was built at the east end of the site it had a clear view of the embanked railway line. I spent some time, when the gaffer was not about, educating my workmates in the different wheel arrangements. In 1945 one still had the three main railway companies. London Midland and Scottish (LMS); London North Eastern Railways (LNER); Great Western Railways (GWR); and Southern Railways (SR). These would be nationalised into first British Railways (BR) and in 1965 British Rail. I was concerned with LMS and GWR for obvious reasons, with BR later.

If I remember correctly a few of the lads from Ipsley St Peter's club decided to start a trainspotter club. I think 'Bunty' Stewardson was the main instigator, we used to meet at his parent's house.

My trainspotting started as might be expected at a local level.

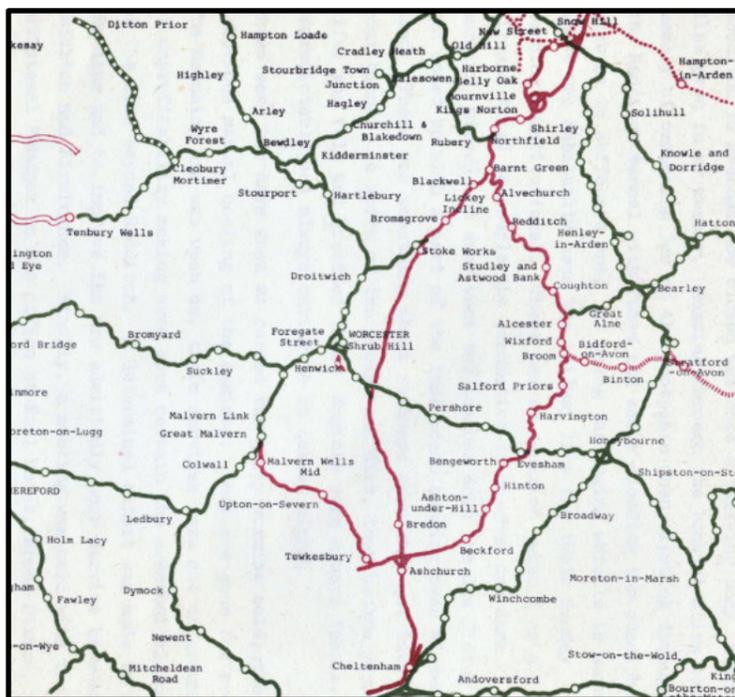
**Right:**

***A plan of railway lines around Redditch before cuts by Beeching and earlier.***

***It was possible to go south from Redditch and continue to the Ashchurch junction and take the train down to the South West.***

***It was also possible to change at Evesham for the line to London.***

***Happy Days!***



In those days Redditch was on the Gloucester loop which left the Bristol- Bradford line at Barnt Green before rejoining that line at Ashchurch junction. The object, apart from serving local communities, was to cut out the notorious Lickey Incline for goods traffic. The line served the following stations Barnt Green, Alvechurch, Redditch, Studley, and Ashwood Bank, Coughton, Alcester, Wixford, Broom Junction, Salford Priors, Harvington, Evesham, Bengewoth, Hinton, Ashton under Hill, Beckford, and Ashchurch Junction. Saturdays, and particularly Sundays, the trains were packed with Brummies going fishing. Two different lines would run into Alcester station, while Evesham had an LMS station and a GWR station next to each other. Now only Redditch to Barnt Green via Alvechurch is open.

The mention of goods traffic is interesting because the railways, then, were the main carrier of all sorts of goods not as is today the roads.

Redditch had its own marshalling yard. All sort of industrial material such as timber, coal, cement would end up there for distribution to the local destinations.

One could witness virgin aluminium ingots being transported down Studley Road to Reynolds Tube / British Aluminium. They used to come down on a trailer pulled by a Scammell Mechanical Horse later by a Scammell Scarab. Loads would be 3 or 6 tons.

When I finished at HDA our virgin came in twenty-ton lorry loads from the smelters, Anglesey Aluminium. Redditch had its own gasworks.

It was no accident that HDA and Redditch Gas Works were cheek by jowl 'the Alloys' used gas like it was going out of fashion.

The gas works had its own sidings for use by the coal trucks of the railways. The coal truck would be shunted onto a frame and then turned 180 degrees sending the coal down a shoot to a hopper ready to be hoisted to the top of the retort house.

## Reminiscences of a 'Trainspotter'... continued

However, as interesting as the local railways were the wide world beckoned., well the local wide world.

One of the favourite places, to bike to, was halfway up (or down) the Lickey Incline.

Follow the road past Hewell Grange over the crossroads and just where the road dips under the railway there is a little pull off to the left. Here one could get close to the lines. It was always interesting to see what the banker was that day. The incline is so steep that trains needed great assistance to get up it and sometimes additional braking to come down. This assistance was provided by bankers kept just the other side of Bromsgrove station. Favourite was 'Big Bertha' a 0-10-0-wheel arrangement loco purposely built for the job, if this was not available it would take some three smaller locos to replace her.

Another beauty of this spot is that one passed Dixon's orchards. I once stole a pear that I was still eating when we got back to Redditch.

If it was a nice afternoon/evening John Kettle and myself might decided to ride over to Wood End to see what was on the front of the Cornish Express. Riding over to Wood End just to see a locomotive? Happy days. In school holidays we might spend the day at Lapworth station.

Lapworth is on the GWR Birmingham to London mainline, used to get some serious machinery coming through there and at speed.

**Right: Redditch Railway Station in 1967. Photograph by Vincent Green**

***This was shortly before the station was demolished to allow the construction of the transport interchange (bus station).***

***Our Victorian station (opened 1868) was replaced by a shed on the other side of the Unicorn Hill railway bridge.***



However, it was not just local.

One or two of us might decide to go to Tamworth. The reason being is that Tamworth station has two levels. The afore mentioned Bristol-Bradford line runs over the top and at right angles to the West Coast Main Line, both in the early days being LMS. A side benefit of the train ride was that the train went through Saltley marshalling yards and train shed.

One could not write the numbers down quick enough. We even embarked on a trip to Crewe. Can you imagine catching a train in Redditch changing at Birmingham to go to Crewe? Whatever were we thinking? It did not end there. Once one returned home the Ian Allen Trainspotter's book was got out and the relevant numbers collected that day underlined in the book.

One had to be dedicated, adult, well off and preferably mad to travel the country to collect all locos in any one class as some did.

It all faded away perhaps because of nationalisation, perhaps because of work, perhaps because steam was phased out.

However, it never really leaves the blood. How many of us enjoyed heritage steam trains, most, I guess? It does not have to be steam why else am I member of Friends of the Far North Line, an organisation interested in the welfare of the Scotrail line from Inverness to Thurso/Wick?

# Paul Olsen (14th May 1923 - 8th October 2019)

## Headmaster St Augustine's High School 1974 - 1982

### by Margaret Olsen

Paul Olsen was one of the first non-clergy in the country to be appointed head teacher of a Catholic grammar school. He followed this by becoming one of the first leaders of a new generation of purpose-built Comprehensives.

He was an intelligent, articulate man of clear educational vision, with a strong sense of mission, underpinned by his personal journey of faith and commitment to Catholic social teaching.

Born in Walworth in the East End of London to a Danish father and an English mother, Paul was always proud of his early upbringing.

Showing considerable aptitude Paul won a scholarship to the prestigious Queen Elizabeth Grammar School, Barnet, at a time when eyebrows were raised locally that such an accolade had gone to the son of an immigrant.

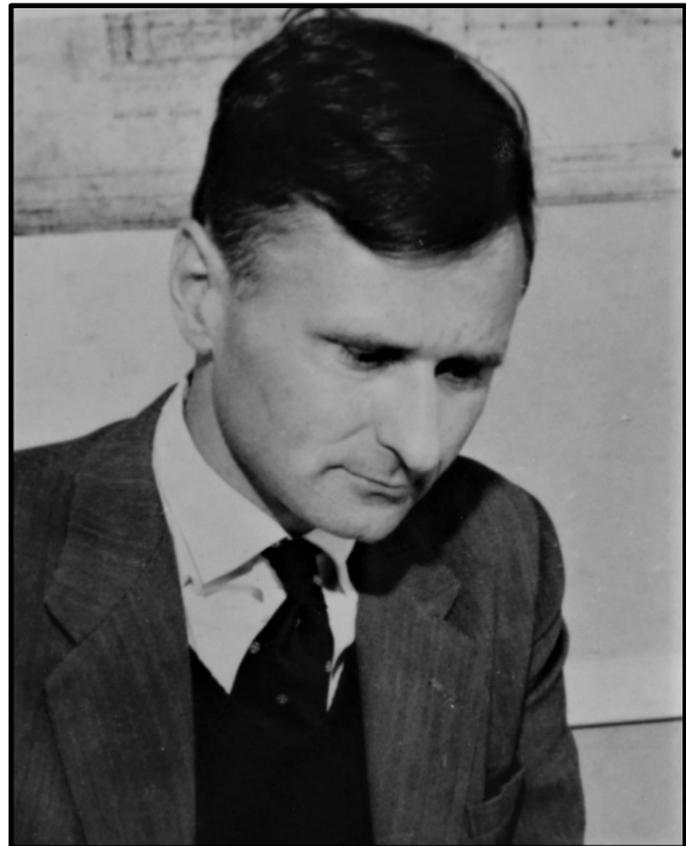
At the school he worked hard at his academic studies and he was the first in his family to go to university and might have had to turn down his place at Balliol College, Oxford, but for the offer of a small annual grant gifted by one of the London Guilds and another from his Local Authority; the fruits of many handwritten requests and applications for support.

During University vacations his father insisted he work in hotel kitchens, to experience life for the labouring classes beyond Oxford academia.

Paul's time at Oxford was interrupted by world war. Aged 19, he relinquished his Danish citizenship to be eligible to join the Royal Navy to fight fascism.

Only weeks after "joining-up" he received the devastating news that his father had died suddenly while at work.

***Right: Paul Olson.***



His brief period of compassionate leave led to his training being delayed, however, his potential to become an officer was quickly spotted and he went on to survive combat in the Mediterranean, followed by MTB duties in Lagos and then taking his own command in the North Sea and Orkneys.

He was on D- Day escort duties in 1944. He rarely spoke about his war-time experiences.

After the war he returned to Balliol and studied under such eminent historians as Dick Southern and Christopher Hill.

## Paul Olsen - Headmaster St Augustine's ... continued

Despite the many directions available to him he very deliberately chose teaching as a career, cutting his teeth as history master at St Clement Danes, Hammersmith.

During the 1950s he was an active Catholic Trades Unionist Teacher - advocating Catholic Social Teaching at a time when Communism was a rising force in the Trades Union movement. In the 1960s he was the co-editor of a series of Catholic Education Pamphlets for Sixth Formers; "Where We Stand".

His first headship appointment was in 1963 to the brand new St Thomas Aquinas Grammar School, Kings Norton. The school rapidly established itself as both high-achieving and popular, opening up roles in skilled employment, and places in tertiary education to many students whose working class backgrounds were similar to that of its charismatic leader.

**Right:**

**St Augustine's Foundation Staff 1975.**

In 1974, at a time when the archdiocese was working with local authorities in rolling out a programme of Secondary re-organisation, he took the reins at the fledgling St Augustine's Comprehensive School, opened to serve North Worcestershire and the new town of Redditch.



Although a complete contrast from the boys' grammar school, he worked very hard to instil in his students, the same Christian values and educational aspirations. St Augustine's immediately took off, high-flying and oversubscribed, deeply rooted in Catholic values as well as ecumenical in outlook. In Redditch he formed strong links with local church pastors invited to participate in Christian Unity week and collective worship.

On retirement from headship in 1982, Paul moved to Burnham-on-Sea, initially returning to history teaching before supporting his wife Mary at the Kindergarten she ran for eleven years. Unfazed by the switch from teenagers he relished the opportunity to use his culinary skills - cooking for up to 50 energetic and picky infants, including seasonal fruits and veg from the school garden. He also took on light teaching duties with the older children and, at the age of 70 he still considered himself sprightly enough to showpiece a perfect forward-roll!

Paul Olsen died on Tuesday 8th October and his requiem Mass was held on 16th October at the Church of Our Lady and English Martyrs, Burnham-on-Sea, attended by family, friends, parishioners and many others from the world of education including both former pupils and teachers.

Dedicated throughout his life to his family he is survived by wife Mary, daughters Christine and Julie, sons Richard, John, Erik, Peter and Neil, five grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

# The Cadet

## By 'Tommy Thomas'

One day a parade was held by the Army Cadet Corps on the school playground and so impressed was I by the uniform and especially the drum corps; I immediately enrolled as a cadet. Some of it was fun especially camping and manoeuvres unfortunately there were no vacancies in the drum corps. The drill hall was on Easemore Lane and its proximity to the river Arrow was ideal for manoeuvres or field exercises. These took place each week and heavily camouflaged we ran through the woods and meadows trying to ambush the enemy, generally fiendish Germans. I was a member of the three-man Bren gun party, membership however was subject to a rather frustrating pecking order. I was number three on the team but had been informed by my ego that I was far more intelligent than Titchy Evans who was number one. Titchy had the glamorous task of carrying the gun, a real Bren gun albeit a 'DPO' or 'demonstration purpose only' model. Mickie Brown as number two had only a little less glamour, he carried an empty ammunition box but I as number three carried a 'Ping Pong bat'. This bat had a metal strip with a lead weight attached to its underside. When we sighted the enemy we took up firing positions and on Titchy's command of "Fire" I self consciously and half- heartedly, shook this bat producing a kind of "Takatakatakata" sound intended to simulate rapid machine gun fire. It was demeaning and I hated it. Consumed with jealousy and resorting to petulance I moaned and groused until eventually I was allowed to carry the gun. Titchy Evans seemed somehow strangely relieved to be rid of it, I soon found out why. Blissfully unaware that a Bren gun and magazines weighed about twenty-eight pounds I soon discovered that I had placed an Albatross round my neck. As I had moaned and groused so strongly to carry it I could not now appear to be unequal to the task and must reluctantly soldier on. However before long the burden of weight and responsibility was taken from my hands, literally.

**Right:**

***Tommy's School, Bridge Street School, at the time of this memory.***

***This is now Holyokes Field First School and is currently being replaced with a new school closer to the location of the current population.***



One day whilst on a field exercise I was running along the edge of a river -bank muttering to myself about the weight of this accursed gun when suddenly it became much lighter. Looking down I was horrified to discover that I was minus half a bren gun, the front half of which had fallen into the water, this was because I had not reassembled it correctly. What should have been a relatively easy recovery job turned into a nightmare taking all afternoon. Unfortunately the barrel section had plopped into the water just opposite a swans nest and when we approached the point of entry, the angry bird, thoroughly convinced that we were trying to steal its eggs, viciously attacked us, catching up with panic stricken Titchy and Mickie Brown and beating them about the head. Terrified of returning to barracks with only half a gun, I approached the spot once again from the opposite side of the bank, the swan's blind spot. Barefooted and up to my chest in muddy water I probed with my feet until at last I located the missing gun barrel.

## The Cadet ..... continued

Holding my breath I submerged and managed to get hold of it but with my ears full of water I did not hear Mickie and Titchy shouting as they ran off, “

The Dickie Man is coming”. The ‘Dickie ‘man, so called because of an unfortunate physical deformity of short backward facing arms and whose hands always seemed to be playing with his crotch as he walked, hence the name, owned this stretch of the river.



*Image of Bren Gun from Robert DuHamel, <https://commons.wikimedia.org>*

We had always been terrified of the ‘Dickie man and with the mindless cruelty of children we teased him mercilessly, safe in the knowledge that with his deformity he would have difficulty in catching us, well! he had caught me now. With the swan approaching me from one direction and the ‘Dickie man ‘ from the other I was in between a rock and a hard place.

The ‘Dickie man got to me first and clutching the gun barrel I was hoisted out of the water by my jacket collar, my heart pounding and fully expecting a thrashing, “Are you alright son?” he enquired, “She’s got a bad temper that one“ he said, indicating the hissing swan. “Now boy you come with me”. Shaking like a leaf with cold and fear I followed him to his farmhouse where to my surprise he dried me out, gave me a cup of hot soup and even cleaned up the Bren gun.

He turned out to be a lovely old man, a life lesson learned,” judge not the book by its cover “! On return to the Barracks, I found that Graham Hall, a sworn enemy of mine who also coveted the Bren gun, had with glee reported my misfortune to the sergeant and to my great relief I was back once again “Takatakatacking’ with renewed enthusiasm on the ‘Ping Pong’ bat. After three months there was still no vacancy in the Army Cadet Drum Corps and desperate to get my hands on a drum I switched my allegiance to the Air Training corps. I immediately offered myself to the drum and Bugle corps where I was presented with a rather battered looking bugle, would I ever get my hands on a drum? No, not here but I did enjoy the flying trips.

Once a month we would head off to RAF Cosford or Wellesbourne tooting about the countryside in Avro Ansons, or a Wellington bomber and on one memorable occasion I hung suspended upside down in a Tiger Moth. We were flying over Filton aerodrome near Bristol and as I looked up I could see Britain’s eight engine white elephant, the Bristol Brabazon parked outside its hangar. This massive plane, big as a Boeing 707 and complete with cinema spent most of it’s short life ‘parked’ until it was scrapped.