

## Newsletter July/August 2025

Hi All,

We had an excellent meeting for our last before our August break, with an attendance consisting of 46 members and 19 visitors, so a total of 65.

Since the beginning of 2025 we have achieved, over the six meetings from February to July, an average audience of 56, with three meetings having over 60, which is very encouraging. We will recommence in September for the remaining four meetings of 2025.

On the remaining pages of the Newsletter, which covers both July and August, we have:

**On page two** is the 'Coming Events' section.

Our next meeting is on Monday 8th September and is entitled 'Redditch 1939 to 1945: How our town supported the War Effort' and is given by, yours truly, Anthony Green

Also, we have the latest information on events/exhibitions during the summer holidays at Forge Mill Needle Museum.

**Page 3** Is a report on the 'Ten Birmingham Women' given by Henrietta Lockhart at our July meeting.

**Pages 4 to 7** relates to the current WW2 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary as it concerns our first History Society curated exhibition in 2011 at Forge Mill Needle Museum which was 'Redditch in Wartime'. This was a really extensive exhibition, and it is good to remember how much work went into it. The article relates to a specific poster display and the subsequent work carried out by the Canning family.

**On page 8** I have posted the leaflet for the Heritage Open Day at Forge Mill Needle Museum on September 21<sup>st</sup>.

### Next Meeting...

Our next Meeting is on Monday 8th September 2025 see page 2 for information. The meeting will be, as always at the Oasis Christian Centre starting at 2.00 pm.

Anthony Green, Society Secretary

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# Next Meeting

**Our next meeting is on Monday 8<sup>th</sup> September and is entitled 'Redditch 1939 to 1945: How our town supported the War Effort' by Anthony Green**

The first meeting after our August break is timed to coincide with the year of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of WW2. In the presentation I will cover: Redditch industry and the factory workers, The Home Guard and the defence of Worcestershire, the bombs that fell on Redditch, raising money for the war effort, food production, evacuees, and the celebrations at the end of the war.

Redditch is an amazing town. You can take almost any part of history and describe it using Redditch and the area as an example. It is surprising how important our little town was in WW2 and how it made a contribution to almost every aspect of the war.



**Please Note : There will be no meeting in August**



**Exhibition: Sat 19 July to Sat 30 August 2025 TITANIC: HONOUR AND GLORY**

The summer exhibition contains a collection of genuine and rare artifacts from the Titanic and her sister ships Britannic and Olympic. Discover more about the allure of Titanic through original ephemera and the personal stories of those on board.

**KIDS GO FREE** – Free entry for kids from 19 July to 31 August, when accompanied by a paying adult.  
**PLUS:** Titanic themed activities throughout the summer:

Outdoor trail in the grounds of Forge Mill (all days)  
Wednesdays – 'Games on Deck' from 10.30am to 3.00pm (free of charge)

Fridays – 'All at Sea Craft Activities' from 10.30am to 2.30pm (£1 per child)

**PLUS:** Other summer activities at the museum, including 'Tea-Tanic Experience'.



<https://www.forgemill.org.uk>



## ‘Ten Birmingham Women’ Henrietta Lockhart, University of Birmingham.



*John Byam Liston Shaw - Margaret Nettlefold before Her Dining Room at Winterbourne 1904*

It was great to have Henrietta back at the Society and her talk this year revolved around Margaret Nettlefold, a well-educated and confident Victorian woman, born into a prominent Birmingham industrial dynasty and destined to marry into another. It drew upon objects from the collection held at Winterbourne House and Garden - exploring her life and those of other women associated with her. During her presentation we met suffragettes, academics, artists, a ladies' maid - and a baby.

Margaret was born into the Birmingham Chamberlain family, her uncle was Joseph Chamberlain, and she married into another famous Birmingham family, the Nettlefolds, so she had a very privileged background. She and her sisters were well educated going to good schools, had spells on the continent and went on to University. Margaret went to Cambridge but, at this time, women were allowed to do the course but could not receive degrees.

What was particularly remarkable about Margaret was she recorded everything that happened. She kept a very detailed diary, recorded the activities of everyone in her employ, kept records of all the household accounts, plus letters etc. These covered 40 years and were donated to Winterbourne by her grandchildren and provide a remarkable archive.

From this archive it is possible to trace the stories of her sisters and

other women who were part of her wide range of contacts.

Margaret had her tragedies, her mother, Louisa, died while Margaret was pregnant with her first child. So, she named the baby after her mother. Sadly, within months the baby had died.

Although the family were liberal and were non-conformists, Henrietta pointed out the large disparity between the classes. While Margaret went into great detail with regard to her circle of friends and colleagues,

when it came to servants it was quite different. When the family went on holiday, they took their servants with them. One holiday one of the staff drowned and the entry in Margarets diary said 'Agnes Power Drowned', that's all!

You may have noticed by now that I have made no attempt to cover the 'Ten Birmingham Women' in any detail and this is simply because Henrietta gave such a wide ranging and meticulous analysis of the subject that, frankly, you just had to be there to appreciate it.

I will just finish by saying that it was an excellent talk and it was given to a very attentive and appreciative audience. I am pleased to say that Henrietta has agreed to come back to the Society next year with another of her talks.



*Three Generations of the Nettlefold Family, 1920s'*

## Gertrude Canning – A Wren for 99 Days

It seems an extraordinarily long time ago, but in 2011 the History Society produced its first major exhibition at Forge Mill Needle Museum.

The subject was 'Redditch in Wartime' and we were 'young' and very keen at that time, and we did significant advance publicity trying to get as many people involved and we had quite a bit of support from the local press, particularly the Redditch Standard. I had telephone calls from local people giving their stories when one day, unexpectedly, I had a telephone call from Ireland. This was from Liam Canning who was researching the story of his aunt Gertrude's short life and tragic death.



*Liam Canning at Gertrude's Memorial Stone at Inveraray.*

She lived and worked in Redditch for two years before joining the Wrens and being sent to Scotland. Liam supplied us with information he had found to date and, with some information we had managed to find locally, we were able to produce the posters which I have reproduced on pages 5 and 6. Just an aside. The remarkable thing about computers and computer storage is that even though I created the posters 14 years ago with a now obsolete desk top publishing software, it is still possible to find and reproduce them!

So, again, a few weeks ago I had, again out of the blue, another telephone call from Liam to let me know that he has found out all he can about the story and has published a book which is called "GERTRUDE CANNING: A WREN FOR 99 DAYS - Unravelling the Mystery of the Murder of the Donegal Wren in Inveraray, Scotland in 1942".

He thought it might be of interest to our members as Redditch features in Chapter Two – "Gertrude's New Life." This chapter looks at her time in Redditch, Redditch in WW2, The Luftwaffe bombings of the Redditch and Alcester area in 1940 and her joining the WRNS. It also critically re-examines the original investigation into her death drawing on extensive research official records accessed through F.O.I. requests and direct conversations with Police Scotland and challenges the conclusions reached at that time, raising the unsettling question: Did the authorities allow Gertrude's killer escape justice?

I am, of course, delighted to share this story as, although Gertrude only spent 2 years in Redditch, it does form a part of our local history and illustrates, yet again, the wide-ranging impact of our small town.

Liam sent me a copy of his pre-prepared press statement and some background info about his journey that led to the book being written. He also included some images from which I have used a selection.

So, I will leave it to Liam in his press release to explain the story behind the book. {Page 7}



# Mystery of Wrens Death

It was July 1942. A warm, sunny day in Inveraray. A pretty, young Irish girl casually strolled along the back-path of Loch Fyne to the centre of the Royal Burgh.

Dressed smartly in her uniform, Gertrude Canning made her way into the 'hustle and bustle' of Inveraray to post a letter to her family back in Ireland.

But two days later when that letter finally arrived in her home county of Donegal, Gertrude Canning, aged just 20, was the subject of a missing person's investigation. Five days after Gertrude posted her letter she was found dead; she had been shot four times.

The last confirmed sighting of Gertrude came from two road men who saw her walk along the wooded track beside a bank of wild flowers. They watched her go and minutes later they saw a soldier walking down the track in the same direction.

Gertrude's body was found just metres away from The Marriage Tree; a tree which was believed to possess a sense of magic. The grim discovery was made by two young boys and their mother.

68-years later, Gertrude's family travelled to Inveraray from Ireland to pay their respects to 'Gerty', as they fondly refer to her. Brothers Liam, Tommy and Joe Canning, along with Liam's wife Helen, visited Inveraray in September 2010.



## WRENS DEATH

Formerly a barmaid at Foxlydiat

Gertrude Canning's relationship with Redditch is that prior to joining the Forces, she was employed as a barmaid at the Foxlydiat Hotel, Foxlydiat, for two years.

She came there from a hotel in Wellington, Salop, which was her first job in England.

She was a popular member of the hotel staff, as is shown by the fact that before she left to join the W.R.N.S. other members of the staff and customers made a presentation to her of the sum of £17 19s., which had been collected.

The manageress of the hotel, spoke very highly of the deceased girl and said she was smart and attractive, and was extremely popular with everybody who came into the hotel.

The full text of the report in the Redditch Indicator follows on the following page.



The building of the Foxlydiat Hotel nears completion, c. 1938.



The Foxlydiat Hotel in 1938 (when built) and as it is now, From the front, very little has changed



## Transcript of Indicator Article - July 18th 1942

Further details are to hand as to the death of Miss Gertrude Canning, a 20- year-old member of the W.R.N.S., Whose shot-riddled body was found hidden in a ditch near a military camp in a West of Scotland town, as briefly reported in our last issue.

Prior to joining the Forces Miss Canning was employed as a barmaid at the Foxlydiat Hotel, Foxlydiat, for two years. She came there from a hotel in Wellington, Salop, which was her first job in England. She was a popular member of the hotel staff, as is shown by the fact that before she left to join the W.R.N.S. other members of the staff and customers made a presentation to her of the sum of £17 19s., which had been collected.

Mrs. Nora Kennedy, the licensee and manageress of the hotel, speaks highly of the deceased girl. "She was not the man-crazy type, though she was smart and attractive, but a good, clean- living girl. Though she was extremely popular with everybody who came into the American bar, it was because she was just natural with them. There was nothing sophisticated about her and she did not go about with any man who asked her. Most of her off-time she spent by herself, and, if he went to the pictures, she was nearly always back again by 9.30 p.m. She neither drank or smoked."

In a statement to the Press, Mrs. Edward Cullen, of Craigahu Road, Milgavie, an aunt of Miss Canning, says:-"The letter which Gertie posted to her father just before her death was full of happy references to the fact that she had been granted leave and would accordingly be able to travel to her home in Ireland and holiday with her father. That journey had since been made under tragic circumstances, my brother having had the sad task of escorting his daughter's body to the family burial ground at Ballindrait, Co. Donegal. Gertie lived with me from the age of two, when her mother died in Ireland, until she was old enough to go to work. She was a quiet, un-assuming girl, always merry and smiling. I never knew her to associate with men, and I am convinced that through all her life she was devout and clean-living. I never heard of her having made a single enemy. After attending St. Joseph's School, Milgavie, Gertie returned to Ireland for a short time to keep house for her father, but afterwards took up hotel work in England. She was employed for a time at an hotel in Shropshire, and latterly at an hotel at Redditch, as barmaid. Her happy, willing temperament made her a favourite with everybody. This I know from the fact that when she left Redditch three months ago to join the W.R.N.S. the customers and staff of the hotel clubbed together to give her a present of over £17. She was posted to the West of Scotland just two months ago, and although she had not found time to visit me since her return, I had received a number of letters from her, in which she told of her happiness in her work, and how her companions had nicknamed her " Paddy" on account of her accent."

Police investigations are being conducted into the murder, but at the time of writing, no arrest has been made. Miss Canning, who was employed as a wine steward in the officers' mess at her camp, left her billet at 4.30 on Tuesday afternoon, in July, to post a letter to her father in Ireland. When she did not return to open the bar that evening, and then she was again absent at roll-call, a search was instituted. Men working in the neighbourhood spoke of having heard a succession of shots, in the late afternoon. They paid no attention, since sounds of firing from the nearby rifle range are common. Before leaving her billet, Miss Canning had been laughing and joking with companions. She seemed in happy mood, and gave no indication of impending trouble.

After naval and military parties, assisted by police, had searched unsuccessfully for five days, Miss Canning's body was discovered by two young boys out for a walk with their brother after evening Church service. The body was lying in a depression some 25 yards from a quiet roadway. There were no signs of a struggle, but, handfuls of grass and bracken had been pulled, and placed over the body as means of concealment. A post-mortem examination revealed that Miss Canning met her death from five shots fired from a Service revolver. A bullet wound on the wrist had been bound up with the girl's own handkerchief. It is believed that her assailants first shot struck her on the arm, after that, after binding her wrist, the girl, pursued by the gunman, fled for her life. The theory is borne out by the fact that some of the shots hit her in the back.

WREN KILLED  
BY 5 SHOTS



Twenty - year - old Wren Gertrude Canning, whose body was discovered near a Scottish west coast town on Sunday:-  
She had been killed, it was revealed yesterday, by five shots from a Service revolver. There were no signs of struggle, so it is believed that the body of the girl was carried there.

Liam Canning told us ' When my son was handed a newspaper clipping referring to Gertrude's death, the family's interest was sparked. I have now been collating information on Gertrude's death for a number of years now. Thank you for the photo of the Foxlydiat Hotel from circa 1940's and the corresponding modern one. It was a brilliant find. Her death still remains as an unsolved murder in Scotland. The family is keen to source information and they also hope that the story of Gertrude's death may have been passed down through the generations. The family hopes to erect a permanent memorial to "their Gerty" on a bench somewhere in Inveraray,'



The brothers erect a plaque near to where they believe their aunt was killed.

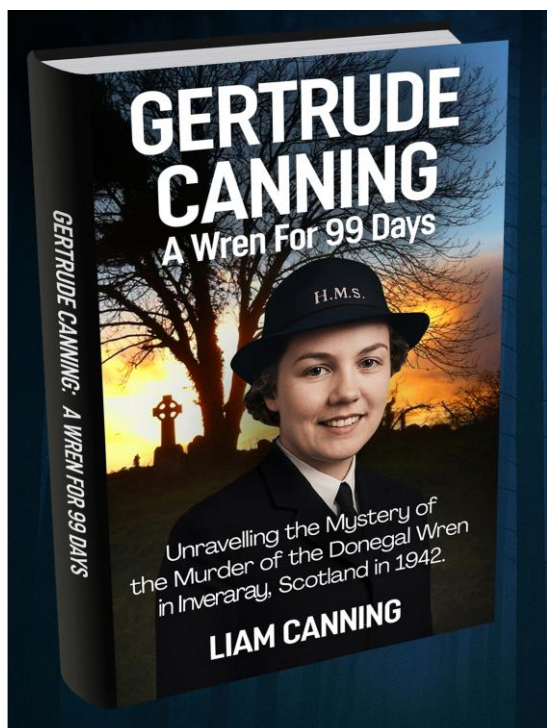
The detective investigating her death, Detective Chief Superintendent Robert Colquhoun, found that the bullets fired, which are I believed to have killed Gertrude, were from a standard British Army gun; and that several thousand men within a ten mile area would have been armed with that type of revolver.

In his book, Life begins at Midnight. Detective Chief Superintendent Colquhoun, said another shock in the murder of Gertrude Canning, came when they realised that 'only the previous day an entire infantry brigade made of British and Canadian units had finished commando training in the area, and had left for the south'.

All army guns, right across the country and beyond, were checked. When the soldiers returned from the Dieppe in France, their guns were also checked.

The detective's theory and it was just that, a theory is that Gertrude's mur-derer was someone she knew and that "in all probability, he died in Dieppe, and his secret died with him".





*A powerful new book, Gertrude Canning: A Wren for 99 Days – Unravelling the Mystery of the Murder of the Donegal Wren in Inveraray, Scotland in 1942, has just been released, shedding new light on one of Scotland’s most haunting unsolved murders.*

*It is a deeply personal and heart-breaking account of the life and tragic death of Gertrude, a young 20-year-old Irishwoman from Ballindrait, Lifford, Co. Donegal, murdered in Scotland during World War 2 while serving as a member of the Women’s Royal Naval Service or ‘The Wrens’ as they were more commonly known.*

*She had been attacked and shot. Her body was discovered in a ditch near a secret wartime military base in the Scottish village.*

*To this day, no one has ever been brought to justice for her murder, making it one of Scotland’s oldest unsolved cold cases.*

*More than 80 years later, Gertrude’s nephew, Liam Canning, a native of Ballindrait, Co. Donegal, now living in Strabane, Co. Tyrone in Northern Ireland, reopens the case with a deeply personal and thoroughly researched account that questions the original investigation's findings.*

*“A Wren for 99 days” challenges the outcome of, and the conclusions reached by, the investigating team at the time, raising the unsettling question: Did the authorities allow Gertrude’s killer to escape justice?*

*“This book is both an investigation and a tribute,” says Liam Canning. “Gertrude may have been forgotten by the justice system, but she is not forgotten by her family.” “It also sheds new light onto a long forgotten unsolved cold case crime.”*



*Gertrude Canning: A Wren for 99 Days not only revisits a historical injustice but also celebrates the enduring spirit of a young woman whose story still connects people across generations through memory, love, and justice. The time has come to tell her story, and this book does just that.*

*“Gertrude Canning: A Wren for 99 Days” was formally launched at the Inveraray Inn Hotel, Inveraray on Thursday, 26th of June at 8 pm and is also available at [www.gertrudecanning.com](http://www.gertrudecanning.com).*

*Contact details.*

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## **FORGE MILL NEEDLE MUSEUM HERITAGE OPEN DAY 21ST SEPTEMBER 2025**

### **Admission Free**

On Sunday 21st September 2025 from 11.00am to 4.00pm (site opens at 10.00am) we have our annual volunteer organised Heritage Open Day supported by local community groups. Amongst the wide range of local activities, we will have iconic motorbikes from the Royal Enfield owners Club, model boats from the Little Radford Model Boat Club, Arts in Redditch a charitable organisation promoting and supporting arts, Worcestershire Wildlife Trust will be promoting wildlife in Worcestershire, and much, much more.



**FORGE MILL  
NEEDLE MUSEUM**

**Free entry to the  
Museum and the  
current exhibition**

**Free guided tours of  
the Needle Museum  
and Bordesley Abbey  
Site**

**Music throughout  
the day from Indigo  
Arts our community  
charity supporting  
young people.**

**Refreshments and  
light lunches are  
available from the Mill  
View Coffee Bar.**

**Heritage Open Days 2025**

**FORGE MILL NEEDLE  
MUSEUM AND BORDESLEY  
ABBEY VISITOR CENTRE**

Needle Mill Lane  
Redditch, Worcs, B98 8HY  
Tel: 01527 62509  
<https://www.forgemill.org.uk>

Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> September  
11.00am to 4.00pm