

WIGSTON HERITAGE

GREATER WIGSTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

AND

WIGSTON HERITAGE CENTRE



Frederick Marttens and the History of Rothley Railway Station, page 10

BULLETIN 130

November 2024

FROM THE CHAIRMAN

HERITAGE CENTRE



As you are probably aware, the Greater Wigston Heritage Centre is under threat of closure due to the plan to demolish the buildings to which we are attached. The details given to us is that they are only going to build to the original footprint which did not include the Centre, this was a later addition. To find alternative accommodation for the Centre is proving very difficult, and up to writing this we have not been successful in locating new premises.

Our other problem is in the event of closing until we have new premises we need to find storage for the assets from the Centre. We have found storage for the furniture, but we need extra storage for boxes containing books, and other items. *Do you have any storage available i.e. an empty garage or do you know any friends or relatives that might be able to help.*

The plans for the new building are available online at:

pa.oadby-wigston.gov.uk/online-applications/ Reference: 24/00340/FUL

Peter Cousins, Chairman

e-mail: chairman@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk - or call 0116 2884638 or 07702 127313

HERITAGE CENTRE AFTERNOON TALKS

Due to the impending closure of the Centre, we have been able to secure new premises for the Thursday afternoon talks.

**THE NEW VENUE FROM OCTOBER 2024 WILL BE AT:
THE SHEILA MITCHELL PAVILION, PEACE MEMORIAL PARK,
LONG STREET, WIGSTON.**

The remaining talk for 2024 will be:

November 21

The 1914 Christmas Truce by Peter Cousins

December - No Talk

Talks, still at £4 per person, can be booked at:

bookings@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk

Future Monthly Meetings

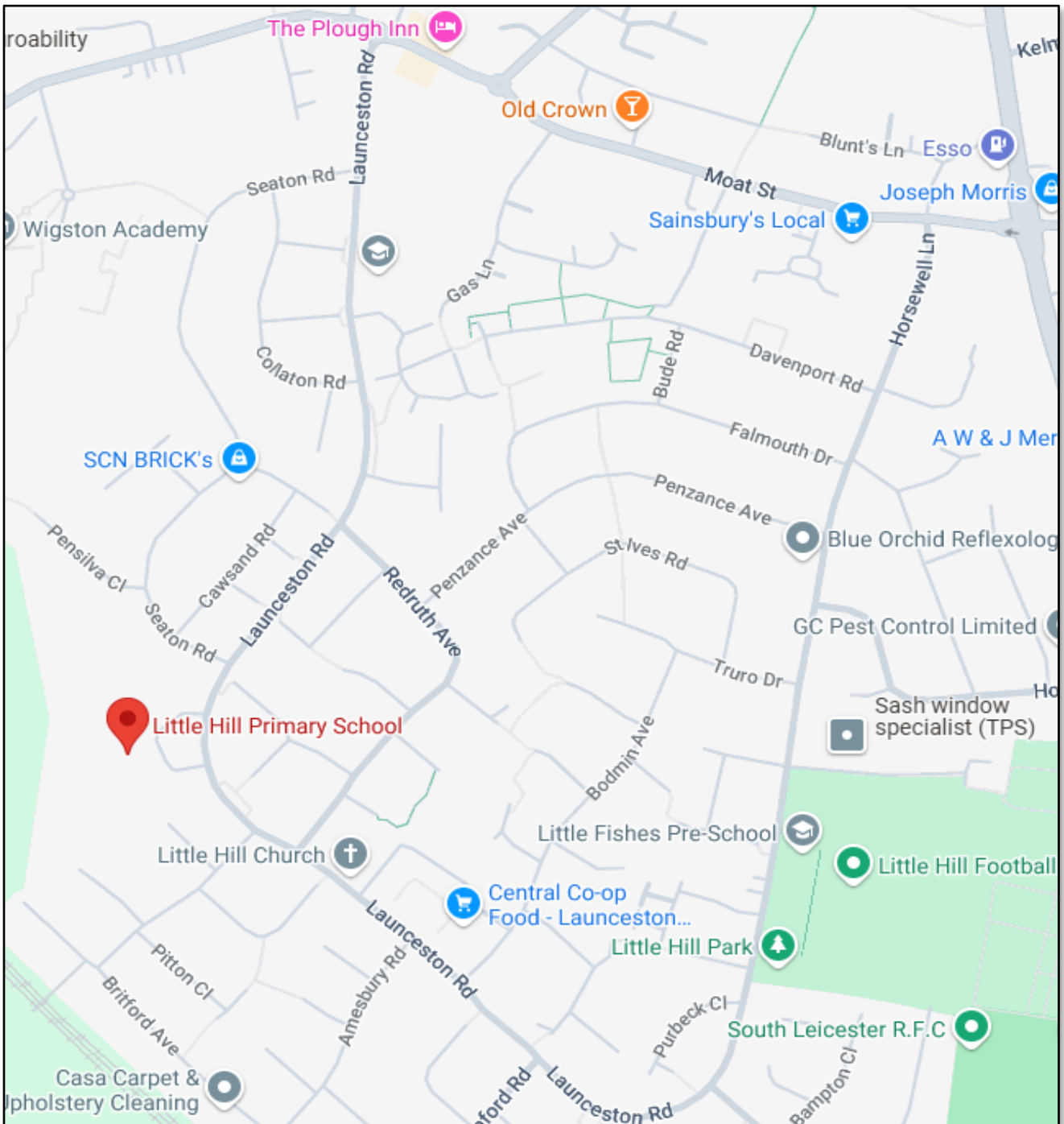
(FROM SEPTEMBER 2024)

AT OUR NEW VENUE:

Little Hill Primary School, Launceston Road, Wigston LE18 2GZ

Accessible from Launceston Road or Horsewell Lane

(Plentiful free parking is available on site)



TUESDAY 21 NOVEMBER

‘Some Mother’s Son’ (in costume) by Sandra Moore

TUESDAY 10 DECEMBER

CHRISTMAS PARTY

plus ‘That’s Magic’ by John Constantine

Our Christmas Party on Tuesday 10 December will be held at the Little Hill School, Launceston Road, Wigston, Leicester, LE18 2GZ. Doors open from 6.45pm until 9.00pm. There will be a small charge for this event, which is £4.00 for members and £5.00 for non-members.

There will be food and drink as well as the usual Christmas Raffle, and we will be having a talk and magic by John Constantine.

If you haven’t already booked, please contact us on
bookings@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk

We look forward to seeing you!

From the Committee
Thank you
Ann Cousins

Most talks are illustrated with PowerPoint and pictures.

**PLEASE NOTE TIMES FOR ALL EVENING MEETINGS:
DOORS OPEN AT 6.45PM, MEETINGS START AT 7.15PM**

Admission to meetings free to members - **Non-Members £4 per person**

Any enquiries please contact – enquiries@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk

Society’s website: www.wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk
All enquiries to: enquiries@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk
The Bulletin is published three times a year in March, July and November.
Articles etc., (which are always welcome) should be submitted to the Editor.
email: bulletineditor@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk
four clear weeks before publication date

Recent Greater Wigston History Society Meetings

TUESDAY, 17 SEPTEMBER

GWHS Meeting at Little Hill Primary School

SIDNEY'S WAR

Based on an unpublished memoir compiled in the 1990's, by DAVID HUMBERSTON, following a series of in-depth discussions with his ageing grandfather, "Sidney's War" is the vivid recollections of a schoolboy living in Leicester during the Great War years. David includes explanatory details of some of the personalities and events that Sidney mentioned so that this unique verbatim record provides a fascinating insight into life for a child on the Home Front during the 1914-1918 period.

One in five of the country's schools were damaged by bombing and many others were requisitioned by the government. Children were crammed into large classes and often stationery and books were in short supply. Young male teachers were called up to the forces and older teachers brought out of retirement to replace them.

Sidney remembered being a member of a group of youngsters who would regularly play ball games in the street as they were so quiet. They would meet up with other (rival) gangs and try to retain what they regarded as "their territory" by throwing small stones and chasing these intruders from the area. Cricket and cycling were also popular, as was making go-carts from old pram wheels (re-cycling even then) and wooden planks. The more enterprising used these to deliver coal from the local coal merchant to various households, thus earning themselves "a bob or two."

Children would often get involved in weeding and watering the family's vegetable plot at the allotments where many families grew their own food to survive.

David includes so much more information about his family, and we were delighted he was able to share his personal family history with us.

Judith Proctor

GWHS Vice-Chairman

OBITUARY

We sadly announce the recent passing of one of our members, Mr Richard Carter, who had been a member for many years. Richard passed away on 5th August 2024 at the age of 90. Richard was known through his work at Bentley Engineering, Corah's, and the Land Registry, and for his love of cricket, and his passion for church bell ringing over 80 years.

Our thoughts and sincere condolences go out to his family.

THURSDAY 19 SEPTEMBER

Afternoon Talk at the Heritage Centre

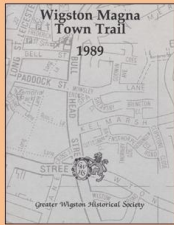
EXPLORING WIGSTON AND FOLLOWING THE TOWN TRAIL, JUDITH PROCTOR

Some of our members might remember that on 1st June each year people join together for **St Wistan's Pilgrimage Walk**. Meeting at St Wistan's Church, Kibworth Road, Wistow, LE8 0QF they learn about the local legend over a leisurely, family-friendly four-mile walk to Wigston.

In 2024, following the walk, Oadby & Wigston Borough Council organised the **St Wistan's Day Medieval Fair**, on Bell Street, Wigston from 11am - 4pm including Re-enactments; Punch & Judy displays; A Saxon forge with a Saxon fletcher as well as crafts and demonstrations and even Border Morris Dancing too. GWHS volunteers also participated and had a very successful book sale.



WIGSTON TOWN TRAIL 2023
This booklet is an update on the original version compiled and published by the Greater Wigston Historical Society in 1989.



The original sketches included were drawn by Ralph Wignall in May 1989.
New photographs by Mark Startin & Peter Cousins.
A numbered walk map is included in the centre pages.

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I heard last month from a couple who had purchased the WIGSTON TOWN TRAIL 2023 booklet whilst visiting the Medieval Fair. They had followed the map and directions spending around 2 hours starting and ending their walk at All Saints Church, Wigston Magna. They told me how much they enjoyed their time finding out more about somewhere they have lived and worked in for the last 35 years and asked me to thank GWHS for updating the walk and making it so interesting.

Why not let the editor know if YOU have completed some (or all) of the walk? We would love to hear from you about your own experiences.

Judith Proctor
GWHS Vice-Chairman



Heritage Centre News

With recent events surrounding the future of the Heritage Centre, there is no report for this Bulletin. However, I've reincluded this statement by Mike Forryan outlining the range of documents available at the Centre.

Documents on Wigston History held at the Heritage Centre

For many years we at the Greater Wigston Historical Society have been collecting documents which have been either donated or lent to us so we can turn them into text files for indexing, allowing us to search for specific pieces of data relating to the local area. We now have over three hundred such documents covering the period from 1700 to 1990. These include: -

property deeds; wills; abstracts; mortgages; land transfers; business letters; business documents/invoices; assignments; personal certificates; church attendance certificates; school play leaflets; scrap books. Plus many other documents relating to Wigston and the local area.

Each document contains many details of people, places and transactions which help us to build a clearer picture of the history of life in the Greater Wigston area.

Many of the above are just thrown away after relatives pass away, which is a great shame as they are lost forever. The Heritage Centre is happy to receive these and add them to our collection of local heritage documents that can then be researched by others in the future.

If you have any such documents please, Please, PLEASE, don't throw them away! We would love to have them. Send me a PM message and I will contact you to collect them, or you can drop them into us at the Heritage Centre in Station Road Wigston.

REMEMBER! These documents are the history of Wigston and the local area.

Thank You

Mike Forryan

All information provided by the Centre, by the volunteers and on our website is Free of Charge and funded through donations. If you would like to donate to support the archive you can do so at: -

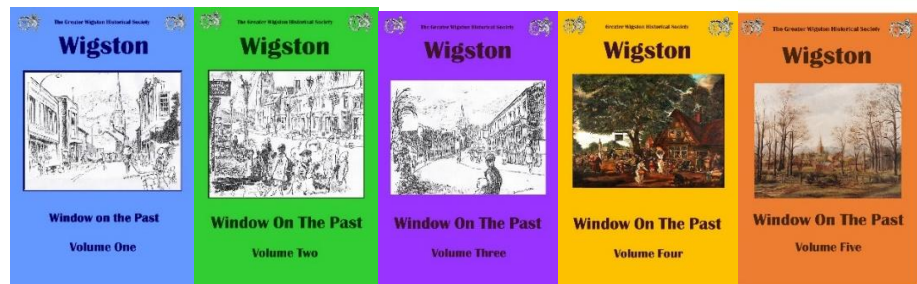
www.wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk/Heritage_Centre.html



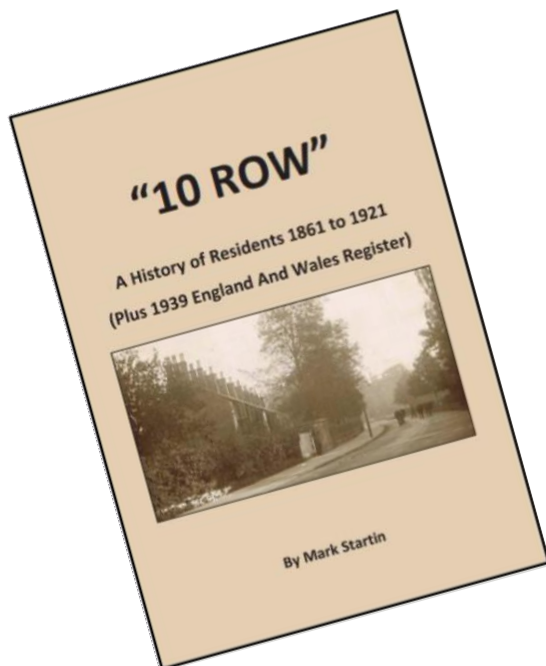
The GWHS Shop and On-line Store
Christmas is fast approaching - stuck for gift ideas? Then look no further than the fantastic range of books and DVDs available at the Heritage Centre and at meetings. And how about Annual Membership as a gift for that someone who has everything.

Books: Wigston – Window on the Past Series

Available Now



10 Row – A History of Residents 1861-1921



A unique and fascinating insight into a part of Wigston history revealing the lives of people who lived at 10 Row between 1861 and 1939.

Researched and written by
Mark Startin.

Price £10

Available from the Heritage Centre
And at meetings

Rothley Great Central Railway Station and Frederick Merttens (who made it all happen)

The Great Central Railway was created in the late 19th Century as a London extension of the Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire Railway. As a pre-1924 British railways company, the “Great Central Railway” was good, but it was never “Great” in the same way that the Great Western Railway was great. The GCR never achieved its own London terminus but ran over Metropolitan Railway lines via Aylesbury to terminate at London Marylebone Station. From Nottingham via Loughborough to Leicester, the GCR served the same towns as the almost parallel Midland Railway which originally terminated in Leicester and whose own London extension to its new southern terminus at London St Pancras station was opened in 1868. In the dying years of the 19th Century the GCR was driven through Leicestershire and through the ancient heart of Leicester destroying many historical sites dating back to Roman times; confining those Roman mosaics that were left undisturbed beneath the railway arches of the lengthy blue brick viaduct between Abbey Gate to Braunstone Gate.

That Rothley station is situated where it is was due to the intervention of a certain Frederick Merttens (1849-1935), a German emigrant who was known as Fritz to his wealthy friends and associates. Frederick Merttens was born 14 August 1849 at Herrgottsau, Germany, 55 Km ESE of Cologne. He came to England in his early 20's via Rio de Janeiro, which was quite some diversion, but not without purpose or profit. Around 1867/8 Merttens had immigrated to Brazil from his homeland in Germany to avoid conscription into the increasingly aggressive Prussian Army, losing his German nationality in the process. In Brazil Merttens was employed by a cotton exporter who sent him to Manchester as their UK Agent. Before long Merttens abandoned his employers in Brazil and in 1874 set up in the same business on his own account, trading as Merttens & Co Ltd and, of course, retaining his network of trade contacts and customers who trusted his integrity. This soon transformed the German absconder and self-preservationist into a very rich man. Frederick Merttens became a naturalized British Subject in 1879.

In his personal life, Frederick Merttens had married his Poynton landlady, the widow Anne Kearney née Seel (1841-1886) in 1873 at St Paul's church Withington, Manchester. But in 1886, Anne Merttens died aged 45 when the open horse drawn carriage she and her sister were travelling in overturned throwing both women out onto the road causing Mrs Merttens to suffer heavy injuries which resulted in her death. Ten years later in 1896, the widower Fritz married the spinster Margaret Joanna Howell (1867–1954), the daughter John Job Howell, a cotton dealer, at Birkenhead, Cheshire. The vicar of Rothley officiated at the wedding showing that Merttens already had a significant presence and influence in Rothley.

In 1893, the sale of the bankrupt Manor and Soke of Rothley (Rothley Temple) and its 700-acre estate came to Merttens notice and he moved quickly to purchase it. Merttens' brainchild was to construct an exclusive model executive village within the Manor of Rothley, which he then owned and controlled as Lord of the Manor and Soke of Rothley. Merttens' grand plans also included an 18-hole golf course and a railway station for rich factory owners from Leicester, Loughborough and Nottingham who could then commute in a matter of minutes from the smoky towns or city to an idyllic rural retreat at a "Rothley Garden Suburb". Merttens sold plots of land to the wealthy incomers who were then permitted to erect large architect designed mansions, subject to the personal approval of Merttens as Lord of the Manor. Rothley Garden Suburb encompassed Swithland Lane, The Ridgeway, Brownhill Crescent, Westfield Lane and The Ridings, Rothley. All the properties had large gardens and some even their own tennis courts. Merttens also oversaw the construction and landscaping of the conveniently placed Rothley Park golf course, on former agricultural land, for the outdoor sport and recreation of his wealthy clientele and to provide a communal activity for them to hobnob with their own class on the course and in the clubhouse.



Frederick Merttens



Rothley Court/Temple

In 1898, the GCR were looking to locate a station locally to serve Swithland, Cropston and the larger village of Rothley where Merttens also wanted a station, a Rothley Station was then the linchpin of Merttens' grand designs. An alternative station site was initially partially constructed on an elevated site near Swithland Reservoir on the Rothley side of the overbridge spanning the road from Rothley to Swithland village. That location was sought by the Earl of Lanesborough, who resided at Swithland Hall, one assumes for his own personal use and purposes, but there was little else in the immediate area from the GCR's point of view. Construction of Swithland Station was well advanced but it was never brought into service due to Merttens intervention. The platforms of Swithland Station were duly removed, the stairs down to the roadway infilled and the entrance in the inner wall of the overbridge (still visible) bricked up. Nowadays the site of Swithland station is referred to as "Swithland Sidings". Merttens played his winning hand by

donating to the GCR, free of charge, the freehold of the land on which the current Rothley station has stood since 1899.



Rothley Station

Although Merttens steadfastly set business before all else, because his business and property interests funded his wider ambitions, he never seemed to have kicked his wanderlust until in the end he was finally forced to do so. By 1897, the Merttens had moved into Rothley Temple, now Rothley Court, after it had been restored by Merttens. Two years later Merttens consulted an eminent German doctor in London over bouts of recurring ill health brought about by the effects of tropical diseases he had contracted during his time in Brazil. Dr Sir Hermann Weber recommended that Merttens should move near to the snow line in Switzerland, so the Merttens family sold up at Rothley Temple and moved to Les Avants near Montreux 3 Km from Lake Geneva and at the foot of the Alps. One year later the demands of Merttens business interests in the UK caused the family to return to England, firstly to Manchester, then to Poynton in Cheshire, (15 miles from Manchester) and finally to Rugby where over the next 28 years they resided at least 3 addresses. Why Rugby? His son Fritz Roel attended Rugby School and Rugby was connected to no less than 7 railway routes including those to London, Manchester and Rothley (GCR).

Frederick Merttens was without doubt a very wealthy man, but not at the expense of his employees who he paid well, and he even had a bonus scheme created for them. Neither was he greedy as he donated vast sums from his personal wealth towards projects to benefit his fellow man. Merttens was a pacifist, hence his departure from Prussia. He eventually became a Quaker and tireless campaigner for the International Peace Movement as well as for Adult Education. He was a Rugby J.P, President of the Manchester Statistical Society (as a German he liked

order, efficiency and accountability) which furthered improved efficiencies in the cotton spinning industry, which helped to maintain competitiveness, plus he sat on the boards of hospitals and schools etc. In Rugby a 4-acre park he donated, and a road are named after him. Wikipedia doesn't mention Frederick Merttens' wider achievements at all but does mention him in relation to Swithland and Rothley GCR stations.



Swithland Sidings

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swithland_railway_station

In the final years of his long-life, Frederick Merttens was a housebound invalid at 12 Bilton Road, Rugby and died at home on 16 March 1935 at the grand old age of 85. His ashes are interred in the chapel at Rothley Temple (now Rothley Court), where there is a plaque. The ashes of 2 of his sons are likewise interred and remembered. Several other plaques refer to members of the Merttens family who are interred elsewhere.

Further details may be found in the excellent book "Frederick Merttens: The Last Lord of Rothley's English Manor and Soke" by Terry Sheppard, published by the Rothley Heritage Trust. Reference copies available at Leics. and Rutland CRO and Loughborough Library, or for loan at Rothley and Birstall Libraries.

John Ellis

The Mystery of the name 'Barrack Yard'



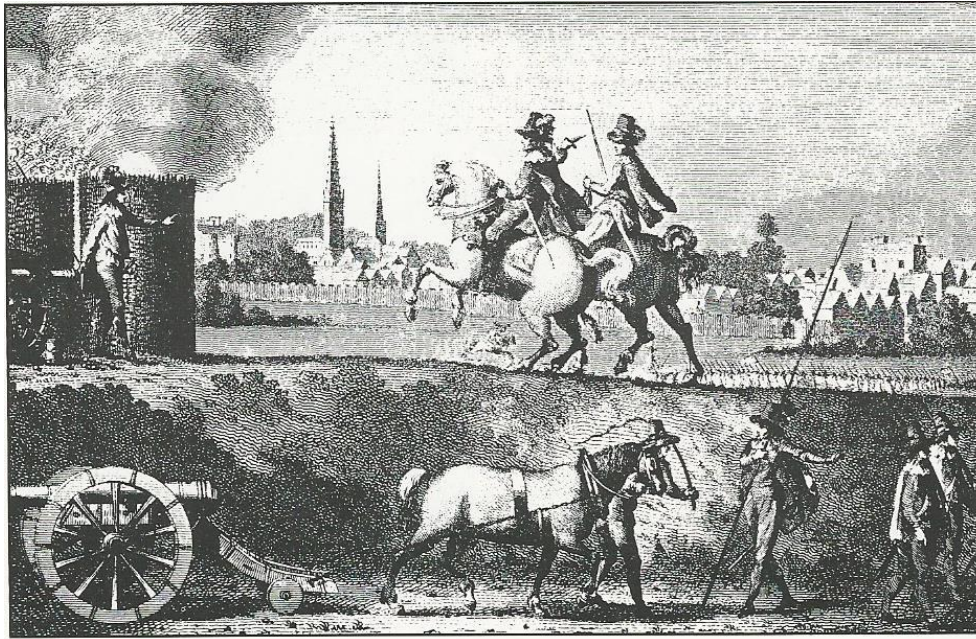
Entrance to Barrack Yard, Moat Street

There is much conjecture but no definitive evidence as to the true origins of the name 'Barrack Yard'. Here are three possibilities: -

1. Duncan Lucas goes with the idea that it comes from the location of troops from Cromwell's New Model Army who were stationed in the village on the way to retake Leicester from the Royalist forces after they had occupied the town following the brutal siege in May 1645. Oliver Cromwell, himself, spent the night of the 14 June 1645 at the old, moated Manor House (where the name 'Moat Street' comes from). On leaving, it is rumoured that Cromwell's troops made off with All Saints Church's communion silver.

(Extract from One Man's' Wigston by Duncan Lucas page 27).

Precise evidence on how Wigston fared during the Royalist and Parliamentary occupations is scant, only oral tales and legends passed down the generations remain. Apart from the possible loss of church silver, the village would likely have fared better under the Roundheads compared to the occupation by Royalist forces commanded by Prince Rupert a month earlier, who also stopped off in Wigston on their journey to capture the Parliamentary Town of Leicester.



Contemporary sketch of the Siege of Leicester, May 1645

But the nature of the then village population and its closeness to the Parliamentary stronghold of Leicester would have meant that the village was unlikely to be viewed as being particularly friendly by Royalist forces, some of whom were forcibly billeted on local people – which was rarely a pleasant experience for the hosts. There is some indication that this occupation was somewhat brutal with possible incidents of murder even executions, including the wife and two children of the local vicar, Zachary Burrough. It must be remembered that after the Rupert's soldiers had forced their way into Leicester after two days of bitter fighting, hundreds of civilians were massacred in the worst atrocity of the whole Civil War.

After the fighting in Leicester ended, it is believed that hundreds of prisoners were moved to Wigston and corralled into an area then called 'Gaul Close', today's Peace Memorial Park. Apparently, according to William Pochin's 'History of Wigston' written in 1911, the village had been used before to accommodate prisoners sent from Leicester just before the siege began, when the Borough's leaders had decided to transfer all those imprisoned within the town (in order to save on provisions) to Wigston.



Memorial Park, 1959

(A fuller account of the 1645 Siege of Leicester can be found in Volume Two of *Wigston – Window on the Past*.)

2. Tricia Berry puts forward another possibility: -

“One thought I did have is that the word, (usually spelt Barack or Barak same as US President), crops up in the locality as a Christian name in the 1700s & early 1800s. Someone of that name worked as a baker at Ross's which was a little further down Moat Street, where Sandra's hairdressers now is. Ross's owned the land from their bakery up toward All Saints & I wonder if Barak used that path/jetty to enter the bakehouse which was & still is (now the hair salon) at the rear of the house. But I must stress this is only a thought, I have no evidence it is true.”

3. Bill Boulter offers an alternative reason for the name: “Life in the ‘Yards’” was so cramped and congested that someone, possibly ex-army, suggested that life there was just like living in an army Barracks.”

(AR33 Barrack Yard, article in the GWHS archive).

Does anyone have any other suggestions?

Steve Marquis.

Understanding Well Known Sayings

Bring Home The Bacon



Meaning

To earn money, particularly for one's family; to be successful, especially financially successful.

Origin

The origin of the phrase 'bring home the bacon' is sometimes suggested to be the story of the Dunmow Flich. This tradition, which still continues every four years in

Great Dunmow, Essex, is based on the story of a local couple who, in 1104, impressed the Prior of Little Dunmow with their marital devotion to the point that he awarded them a flich [a side] of bacon. The continuing ritual of couples showing their devotion and winning the prize, to considerable acclamation by the local populace, is certainly old and well authenticated. Geoffrey Chaucer mentions it in *The Wife of Bath's Tale and Prologue*, circa 1395: -

*“But never for us the flich of bacon though,
That some may win in Essex at Dunmow.”*

Till The Cows Come Home



Meaning

For a long but indefinite time.

Origin

Cows are notoriously languid creatures and make their way home at their own unhurried pace. That's certainly the imagery behind 'till the cows come home' or 'until the cows come home', but the precise time and place of the coining of this colloquial phrase isn't known.

It is a long-standing expression and the earliest example of it in print comes from the late 16th century. John Eliot used it in *Ortho-epia Gallica*, 1593, which was a French teaching textbook in which he attempted to "teacheth to speake truely, speedily and volubly the French-tongue": I am tied by the foote till the Cow come home.

It's worth mentioning that this and other early citations refer to one cow coming home, why the phrase later migrated into the plural isn't clear.

Mike Forryan



From the Past

Wigston One Hundred and Two Hundred Years Ago

1924



Edwin Hubble, American astronomer, announces that Andromeda, previously believed to be a nebula, is actually another galaxy, and that the Milky Way is only one of many such galaxies in the universe.

In fact, it is now estimated that there are between 100 and 200 billion galaxies in the cosmos.




The last Apache raid into the United States occurred as late as 1924 when a band of natives from Mexico stole some horses from Arizonan settlers. The Apache raiders were caught and arrested.

The Mexican Indian Wars that involved Apache bands in Northern Mexico continued for another nine years, until the final holdouts were defeated in 1933.

WEDDED FOR FIFTY YEARS.

Wigston Couple Happy in the Evening of Their Days.

Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Lewin, of "Leicester View," Central-avenue, Wigston Magna, yesterday celebrated the 50th anniversary of their wedding. Both started work at an early age, and have worked hard all their lives.



Mr. Lewin's earliest recollections are of tending cows at the age of eight in the fields where South Wigston now stands. After working in various clay pits in the Highfields district and elsewhere, he went with his father to London, where he helped to construct the Underground. Returning to Wigston, he was employed by the Midland Railway Co., in whose service he remained for 53 years. He has vivid recollections of the Franco-Prussian War and of the political activities of Gladstone, Peel, and Bright. He was present at Hyde when over two miles of railways were torn down by an indignant crowd. Mrs. Lewin has ever been a diligent worker in deserving charitable causes.

Wigston in 1924 – Leicester Mercury

WIGSTON PENSIONS AT 60.

Council Employees to Join Contributory Scheme.

Wigston Urban District Council decided last night to subscribe to the local authorities' superannuation scheme.

Mr. J. B. Main, who moved the resolution, said the scheme meant the Council and its employees making contributions, for which the officers and workmen of the Council would be entitled to a pension at 60. It might cost a 2d. rate.

Mr. T. Beeston urged that, apart from the moral aspect, this step would be better for the Council financially in the long run.

Mr. W. Gamble said the majority of workpeople were given no opportunity of obtaining these benefits, and therefore it was not fair that one section should thus be given undue advantage.

Rev. Canon T. W. Wright held that it was no argument that because some were denied this opportunity all should be robbed of it.

WIGSTON COUNCILLOR'S DEATH.

Continuous Service Since Inauguration of Authority.

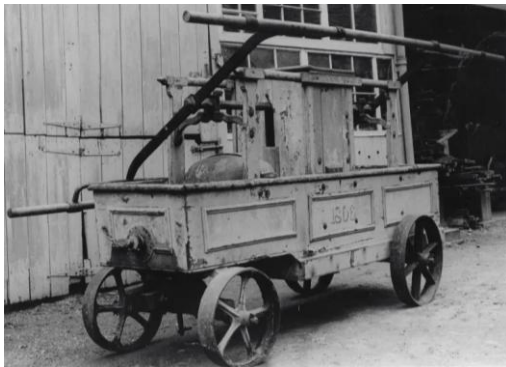
At Wigston Urban Council last night tributes were paid to the memory of the late Mr. W. G. Forryan, "father" of the Council, who died on Sunday at the age of 67 years.

Mr. J. H. Holmes (chairman) said Mr. Forryan was the only member who had a record of continuous service on the Council since its inception 30 years ago. He was elected member for St. Wolstan's Ward in December, 1894, on the formation of the Council, and only once since then had had to contest his seat. Sympathetic references were made by other members, and a resolution of sympathy with the relatives was passed. Representatives of the Council and the Council employees are to attend the funeral at Wigston Magna to-morrow.

1824



The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. In 1824, a small group of people met in a London coffee shop, determined to change animals' lives. They created the society that became the RSPCA, sparking a movement that spread around the world.



The first Municipal Fire Brigade was created by the Edinburgh Town Council in 1824, the first fire brigade in Britain.

Picture shows what is believed to be the first ever firefighting appliance, dated 1806. Now in Edinburgh Museum.

Wigston 1824 – Leicester Chronicle

Early on Thursday morning, Robert Coleman, who was convicted at the last Borough Sessions, for uttering base coin, escaped from the County Bridewell, Horsepool-street by getting over the gaol wall. Notwithstanding he broke his leg by the fall, he contrived to get as far as Wigston before he was apprehended. He is supposed to have secreted himself underneath some scaffolding on the previous evening, and thus eluded the vigilance of the Gaoler at the time of locking up the prisoners.

Henry Heartheat, John Wood, and Samuel Brace, of Great Wigston, for trespass and damaging the property of Matthias Horton, at Great Wigston; damage and costs, each 8s. 2d.

On SUNDAY, Sept. 19, 1824,
THE ANNUAL SERMON
Will be preached in the
DISSENTERS' MEETING,
GREAT WIGSTON,
For the BENEFIT of the SUNDAY SCHOOL belonging
to that Congregation, by the
REV. T. MITCHELL, OF LEICESTER.
Public worship to commence at Half past Two o'clock.
Three Hymns will be sung by the children and congregation.

Steve Marquis

Medieval Bread Recipes

I thought this new series of medieval recipes might appeal to members



Medieval bread recipe

There was quite a wide range of bread eaten in medieval times. It was the main staple food in the diet of people both rich and poor. However, it is hard to find a 100% definitive recipe that has been passed down directly from that period. History sources such as Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales" act as some of our best guides and references on medieval food. Chaucer's miller, for example, referred to a variety of bread names and how they were eaten. If we could go back in time and witness some of the popular medieval bread recipes, we would notice some key things: -

1. Ale-barm was used for raising the dough; its equivalent today would be brown ale + fresh yeast.
2. Wheat flour was used to bake bread for the rich as they preferred the finest, whitest bread
3. Honey was often used when making bread with wheat flour
4. Rye bread was the common bread baked by medieval peasants



Medieval Baker at the Oven

The Medieval Baker

The most popular way of baking bread was done by the poor. Peasants would take their usually meagre amount of grain and grind it by hand in a wooden mortar or a stone trough. They would then mix it with water and bake what was known

as unleavened bread (or oatcakes). The baking was done by placing the dough under an upturned pot placed on the ‘down-hearth’ – this was the flat stone in the centre of the floor of their one room hut on which the fire was built. The embers would keep the stone hot for some time, so it was ideal for baking in this way.

In some towns and village, the bakers would bake bread to supply the local people as well as baking for their own families. A medieval baker’s oven was usually housed in a dedicated building and often outside a town or city’s walls because of the risk of fire. The rich and powerful who had their own lands and often a medieval castle, had ovens housed in buildings within the castle walls.

If a baker had a good reputation, they might find themselves baking in a medieval castle kitchen exclusively for a rich noble, his family, guests, and servants. The image (above) gives an idea of how a baker might have been seen working in a castle kitchen. Notice the method being used to remove the baked bread from the hot oven – a long stick with a flat round end. Made of clay or wood this was called a peel. Peels are still used today, although they tend to be made of metal. The most common place to see them is in pizza parlours for removing freshly cooked pizzas from the oven.

Assize of Bread & Ale 1267

It may be surprising to some to discover that by the mid-13th century ingredients for baking bread and the actual size of loaves that could be baked was regulated. The Assize of Bread and Ale came into force in 1267 by order of King Henry III of England. Both medieval bakers and brewers were obliged to fees varying in scale in order to do their work and often had to face inspections of weights and measures by order of this Assize. An early instance of ‘Quality Control’ in the commercial food and beverage industry!

The profession of being a baker gained respect and recognition by virtue of this and by the mid-15th century (first charter dated 1486) the Worshipful Company of Bakers was formed. Today it is still in existence although mainly for the purpose of charitable and ceremonial purposes.

If you enjoy baking and have yet to try making anything with an old-fashioned recipe, you could consider baking a medieval style bread using today’s ingredients. These recipes should help you, your friends and family to enjoy a taste of a bygone age.

Steve Marquis

“Wiggy’s War” is the sequel to “Wiggy’s Child”

Episode Seven

Leicester Bombed

Daylight Raid, 21 August 1940

The daylight raid in August when Cavendish Road was hit was too near for comfort. The solitary plane came out of the clouds and “whurrump!” devastation. People were killed others injured. That was for the openers. The Luftwaffe came over in earnest through August and September, our fighters, the now legendary Spitfires and Hurricanes were continually in the air fighting them off. Daily the scores mounted, how many shot down, and still they came. The history books call it “The Battle of Britain.” We didn’t know it at the time of course, all we knew was the German bombers were coming daily, and our fighters hardly had time to re-fuel before they were in the skies again.

Things were looking bleak indeed, what with one thing or another. News bulletins were depressing, although for relief, we had Arthur Askey in “Bandwagon” and Tommy Handley in ITMA (It’s that man again). Later on, “Can I do yer now Sir,” intoned by “Mrs Mopp” became a catch phrase.

“Searchlight’s up again,” said father coming into the living room. There was a searchlight battery on the Oadby Lane. The searchlight: vertical, it’s broad beam unwavering, stabbed the night sky. It usually meant trouble; after a time, it would be turned off, plunging the streets into inky blackness. Soon the sirens would start wailing over Wigston.

How many times did we hear “moaning Minnie” during the following years, it became part of life, along with the blackout, ration books, identity cards, long queues for everything, and the posters that appeared everywhere. “Dig for Victory” – Lawns and flowerbeds were dug up. Father dug with manic ferocity on his allotment and up the back garden. “Careless Talk Costs Lives” warned another.



Cavendish Road after being bombed, 21 August 1940

19th November 1940

The short November day had closed in, the blackouts were up, and Aunt Clara had come round to see if mother had any grey darning wool to spare. Uncle Ted had “taters like craters,” in the heels of his socks, aunty grumbled, and she was everlasting darning them.

Mother ferreted about in her bit-bag and produced some thick grey wool. “This should do,” said mother. Uncle Ted always wore thick army type socks. I often wondered how he got his feet in his boots with those socks on. I was of the opinion that Aunt Clara must darn them with a bodkin! There was a hurried knock on our back door and a friend of mother’s came in.

“Did you know they’re dropping flares over Leicester?” she exclaimed.

We looked at her gone out!

“Flares? – Do you mean German flares?” we asked incredulous and flabbergasted all at once.

Father said he’d neither seen or heard ‘owt and he had just been up the garden for a look round, anyway the sirens hadn’t gone. Off he went to have another look outside when the sirens started up. One after another, they wailed their warning.

We were used to German planes droning overhead on their way to bomb Coventry and ‘Brum’. It was only a few nights ago they had plastered Coventry. Aunt Madge and Uncle Len lived there, and we hoped they were all right. Father came back.

“You are right, gel, they have dropped flares, that means we are for it tonight.” Leicester was indeed ‘for it’.



Freeman, Hardy and Willis warehouse was set ablaze on 19 November 1940



Tichbourne Street being bombed 19 November 1940

Outside we could see the glow in the sky from the fires, and the ground shook to the landing of bombs as they fell with increasing velocity. The Midland Red buses were lined up outside the Horse and Trumpet in Bull Head Street. They had never stopped running before. Even the little blue lights were extinguished inside the buses.

As the raid increased, our warden said we would have to go to the shelter alongside Ross's Lane. I didn't want to go and leave 'Prince'. Pets will have to take their chances, said the Warden.

"Well, they haven't dropped any bombs on us yet," I argued.

The shelter smelled of damp concrete. There were plenty of people already installed. "If anybody wants to 'go', you can use the facilities through there," said the warden indicating a curtain at the back of the shelter. It proved to be a bucket: the facilities that is.

A young chap had brought along his accordion and entertained us with selections from his repertoire. One elderly lady got to her feet and asked our accordionist to "Play a bit louder lad, I'm going to have a pee in that bucket back there".

We seemed to be in that shelter for a long time. The raid increased as time went on. Around midnight, I went outside for a quick look round, I didn't care what the warden said. We sat on in the shelter, more fed up than afraid – sleep was impossible. It was about four o'clock in the morning before All Clear sounded. We trailed wearily home with our flasks, torches, and blankets and fell into our beds.



Doreen C Boulter, 1988