



WIGSTON HERITAGE

GREATER WIGSTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

AND

GREATER WIGSTON HERITAGE CENTRE



**One of the earliest photographs of the Magna Music Makers Choir in 1970
See page 10**

BULLETIN 134

March 2026

FROM THE CHAIRMAN



As you are probably aware, I stood down as Chairman at the 2025 AGM, but after the new Chairman resigned after a few months, I stood in as Acting Chairman, which I shall relinquish at the 2026 AGM. I will be continuing in other roles within the Society.

The Society really are now in need of new committee members to continue the successful running of the Society, which in September this year enters its 47th year of existence. The Committee only meet 3 or 4 times a year, usually for just a couple of hours. Some of the Society business can be conducted by email.

If you think you may be interested in helping, in any capacity, even for just a few hours a month, please email me (address below) and we can arrange to have a no-obligation informal chat about the various positions.

Greater Wigston Heritage Centre

By the time you read this we should be up and running in our new “home” in the United Reformed Church in Long Street, Wigston. In the last couple of years, we have had to move from the College site, and after 12 months, move again from the Fenix Pharmacy in South Wigston. My personal thanks go to those members who have helped with packing, finding storage for our archive material and equipment, and using their own vehicles for transport.

Peter Cousins, Acting Chairman

E-Mail: chairman@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk

Obituary

We sadly announce the passing, before Christmas, of an ex-member, Hilary Forryan, who was a longstanding member of the Society and attended our monthly meetings regularly.

Our thoughts and condolences go out to her family.

Society's website: www.wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk

All enquiries to: secretary@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk

The Bulletin is published three times a year on 1st March, July and November.

Articles etc., (which are always welcome) should be submitted to the Editor.

email: bulletineditor@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk

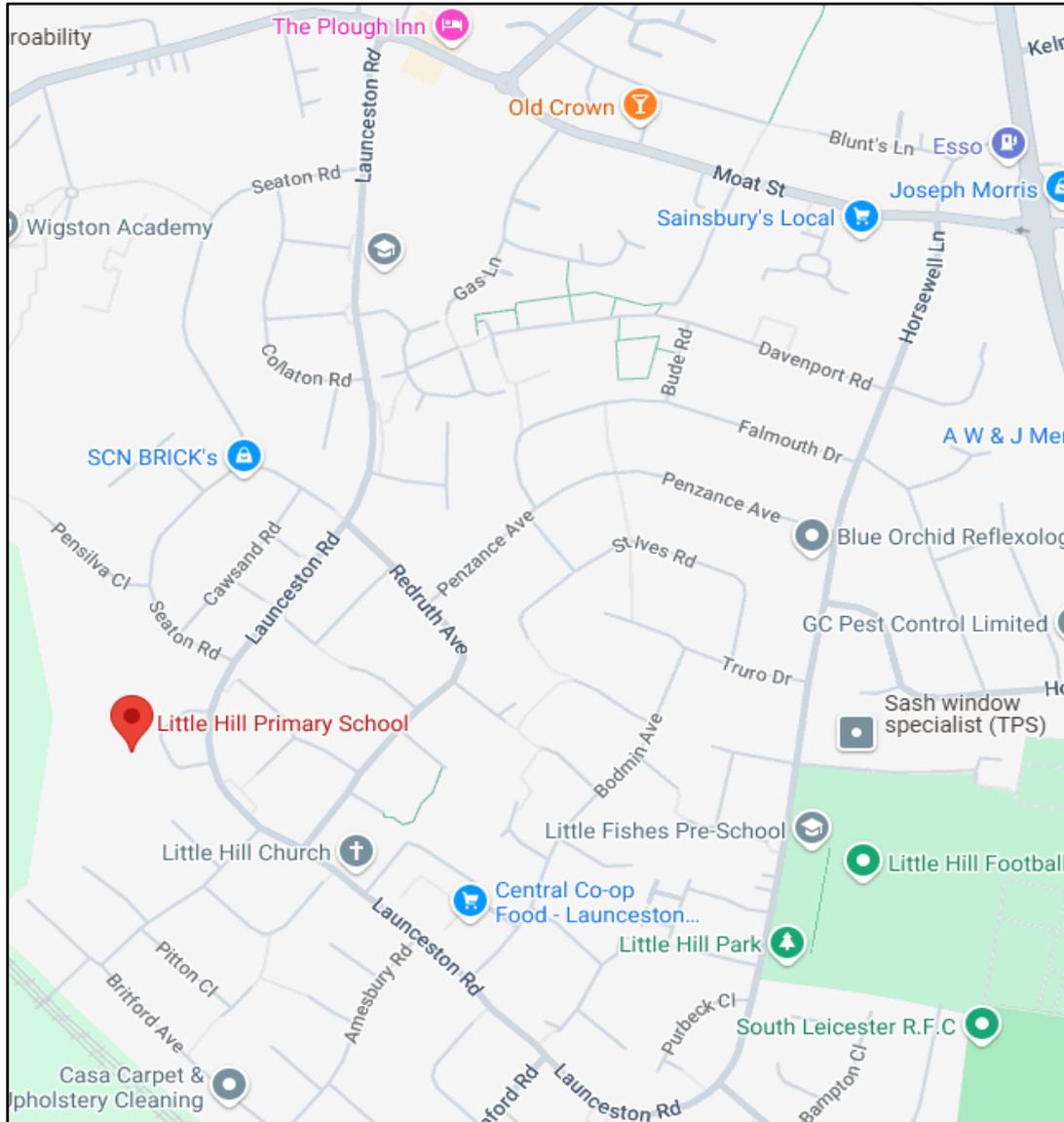
four clear weeks before publication date.

GWHS Future Meetings

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

Accessible from Launceston Road or Horsewell Lane

Parking is available on site.



MONTHLY MEETINGS

**AT THE LITTLE HILL PRIMARY SCHOOL, LAUNCESTON
ROAD, WIGSTON LE18 2GZ**

DOORS OPEN 6.45 PM, TALKS START AT 7.15 PM

FREE FOR MEMBERS, £4.00 FOR NON-MEMBERS

FREE PARKING ON SITE

Most talks are illustrated with PowerPoint and pictures

Tuesday 17 March 2026 AGM STARTS AT 7.00PM

followed by: Arming A Knight by Jedd Jaggard

Tuesday 21 April 2026

Husbands Bosworth Settlement Camp by Bozena Kuncewicz

Tuesday 19 May 2026

The Domestic – from Servant to Goddess by Jo Golby

Tuesday 16 June 2026

The History of The Lord Lieutenancy of Leicestershire by Mike Kapur

July and August: No Evening Meetings

Tuesday 11 August Outing 2026

Thomas Cook Temperance Walk

Tuesday 15 September 2026

A Walk Along Hadrian's Wall illustrated with slides by Adrian Walker

Tuesday 20 October 2026

Queen Eleanor Cycle Rides by Judith Rout

Tuesday 17 November 2026

More History of Wigston – a follow-up from the Long Street talk

by Peter Cousins

Tuesday 8 December 2026

Christmas Party and “Our Christmas Story” by Mike Burton

AFTERNOON TALKS
IN THE PAVILION, THE PEACE MEMORIAL PARK,
LONG STREET, WIGSTON.

OPEN AT 9.30 AM – TALK STARTS AT 10.00 AM

Thursday 12 March

LADY JANE GREY By Sally Henshaw

Lady Jane Grey, from Bradgate in Leicestershire, known as the ‘Nine Days Queen’ was executed in 1554. Jane was the great granddaughter of Henry VII, the first Tudor King. Did her royal blood and ambitious relatives make her death inevitable, or could it have been different?

Thursday 9 April

MADE IN LEICESTER by Brian Johnson

For many years, Leicester was a leading manufacturing and exporting city, but many of those companies are sadly no longer with us and will be remembered by most people as their brands became household names. Few people realise that those companies were founded in Leicester. Therefore, this talk will be of interest to everyone, even if they didn't grow up in Leicester and know little of its industrial or retail past.

Thursday, 14 May

HAUNTED WIGSTON by Stacey Chamberlain

Thursday, 11 JUNE

DESPERATE TIMES - LEICESTER FRAMEWORK KNITTERS FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL 1815-1850

By Steve Marquis

Thursday, 9 July

"LEICESTER'S MULTILINGUAL COBBLER" William Carey

By Bob Norman

Thursday, 13 August

THE STORY BEHIND THE NAME by Mike Forryan

Thursday, 10 September

CHASING KINGS ACROSS LEICESTERSHIRE
by Iain Jones

Thursday, 8 October

THE “DEVASTATOR” by Sue Lobb

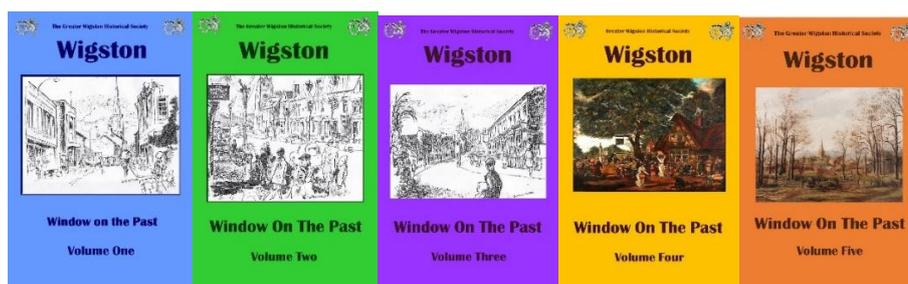
Thursday, 12 November

LEICESTERSHIRE & RUTLAND HOME GUARD by Mark Startin

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

bookings@wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk

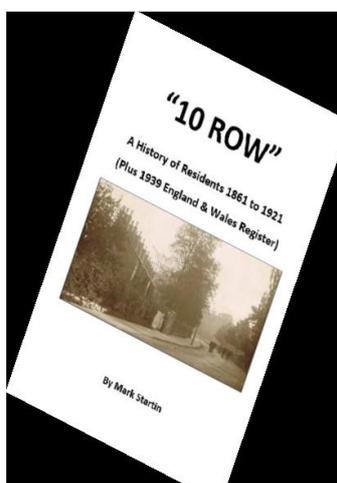
G.W.H.S. Books: *Wigston – Window on the Past* Series
Available Now



Details at:

www.wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk/GWHS-ONLINE-STORE.html

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

www.wigstonhistoricalsociety.co.uk/GWHS-ONLINE-STORE.html

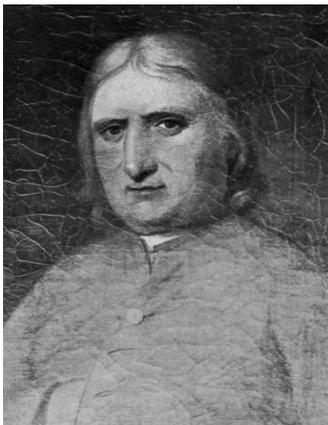
Recent Meetings

Tuesday 17th February – Hinckley in the Civil War

Philip Yorke, ex-journalist

Philip Yorke gave a very interesting talk on the impact of the Civil War on Hinckley, which seems to have made a remarkable contribution given the town's size at the time. Hinckley was visited by troops from both sides on a number of occasions during the conflict, which likely meant soldiers being billeted on locals, never a pleasant experience. On the 4th of November 1644, a significant skirmish occurred in Hinckley when a large force of Parliamentarians led by Lord Henry Grey occupied the town after defeating Royalist troops under the command of Lord Henry Hastings.

It is estimated that approximately 5% of the population died as a result of the Civil War, mainly from disease. Being involved in several clashes, the people of Hinckley are unlikely to have escaped serious harm, with possible deaths, and certainly major economic disruption.



George Fox

Yorke mentioned five prominent local figures having a national impact, again, a remarkable number for such a small place. Captain John Shenton, who fought for King Charles I, escaped capture by hiding in a tree, a feat repeated by Charles II after the Battle of Worcester in 1650. John Cleveland, a fairly well-known Royalist poet, and Sir Henry Firebrace, a Royalist spy. On the side of Parliament were George Fox, the founder of the Quakers, who was born in Fenny Drayton near Hinckley, and John Cook, born in Burbage, now part of Hinckley.

Cook became the first ever Solicitor General, appointed by Cromwell. He oversaw the trial and execution of King Charles I and was therefore executed after the Restoration in 1660 alongside other Regicides. There were four Regicides in Leicestershire: Lord Henry Grey, Peter Temple, Henry Smith MP, and Colonel White MP for Rutland. Another Leicestershire MP, Sir Arthur Haselrig, supported the trial and execution but wasn't directly involved in either.

Another very significant development occurred in 1640 (perhaps the most important event of the era in the county) when William Iliffe brought a framework knitting machine to Hinckley, the first in Leicestershire. Although it took a while for the industry to take off, it didn't reach Leicester until 1680. By the beginning of the 19th century, framework knitting employed up to 50% of Leicestershire's working population.

THE LANCASTER BOMBER CRASH 80TH ANNIVERSARY



As many members will know, and a few will actually recall, a major event took place over Wigston Magna on 4 February 1946 when a Lancaster bomber plane crashed in flames, narrowly missing Long Street School (now the LLRO), killing all six Polish airmen on board.

For many years, the school, now All Saints C of E Primary School, has been holding a memorial service, which is called Wings of Peace, to commemorate the event. This year, being the 80th anniversary, a special ceremony was held. About 70 members of the public witnessed an outdoor performance of a specially written hymn by the whole school choir, followed by poems spoken in their own language by Polish pupils at the school. Prayers were led by the

Rector, the Revd. David Cowie, and short speeches were given by distinguished guests: the Deputy Lord Lieutenant, Mr Lars Tharpe, who was a pupil at the school for a short time in his younger days and the Mayor of the Borough, Councillor Jasvir Chohan.

Poems were read by a member of the Bomber Squadrons Centre in Lincolnshire (the plane had taken off from Faldingworth) before children from the school laid a wreath and six lanterns with lit candles. During the service, a relative of one of the airmen, who had come over specially from Poland, gave a speech, in English, before other Polish visitors laid wreaths and a candle. Before closing prayers, the last post was beautifully sounded to signal a silence impeccably observed and concluded with reveille, again beautifully played. While the majority of guests then adjourned to the school hall for tea and cake (made in the school kitchen) and served by older pupils, a small group of students and members of the GWHS led by the Rector proceeded down to the information board about the crash just outside the school for further prayers and the laying of wreaths on behalf of the school and the Society. The Board had been designed and organised by the Society, along with the former Wigston Civic Society, a few years ago.

The memorial tree in the school's playground is backed by the two garden benches refurbished by the Society in the summer of last year.

The school had prepared an exhibition, in addition to its permanent display of artefacts, of written work and letters, photos of previous events and scrapbooks,

including the book about the crash held by the Society and loaned for the occasion. In addition, a rolling PowerPoint presentation was on view of photos from the Society's archive of local views of the area at the end of the war.

The afternoon concluded with a talk by a Polish visitor about his connections with Leicestershire.

The whole event was a fitting tribute to the six airmen who died 80 years ago in a foreign country while representing their own country, which had supported Great Britain against a common aggressor.

Members wishing to read more about the crash can do so on the Society's website.

Colin Towell

GWHS

Wigston Civic Society

THE VINES ACADEMY TRUST

All Saints Church of England Primary School

**ON 4 FEBRUARY 1946
A LANCASTER BOMBER
CRASHED IN WIGSTON KILLING
ALL SIX POLISH
MEMBERS OF THE CREW**

On 4 February 1946 an Avro Lancaster MK1, pictured, PA269, took off on a training flight from RAF Faldingworth in Lincolnshire. The crew of six were all from the Polish Airforce. The pilot had been substituted just before take off.

The plane had flown down to Leicestershire and at about 1.15pm was flying very low over Wigston where a severe thunderstorm was raging with very dark skies.

About 80 children were staying at school for dinner that day, they had just been called in from the playground because of the storm when the plane came down. There were some minor injuries to residents, but no fatalities on the ground. Over 100 houses were damaged plus a passing Midland Red bus.

The pilot avoided many houses, a nursery in Central Ave and the Board School in Long Street (now the Record Office) before crashing into a field at the rear of the present All Saints C of E Primary School

The Leicester Mercury later that day quoted the words of many local people including a Mr Rowley of Coronation Ave who said 'I heard a terrible roar. Looking up I saw a large four engine bomber, hurtling to the ground, in a mass of flames. It was an awful sight. Just before I saw the plane there was a vivid flash of lightning'.

Beech House, on Aylestone Lane, was severely damaged but many other properties suffered broken windows and dislodged roof slates.

The memorial at All Saints C of E Primary School today. A remembrance event is held by the school and pupils each year.

This information board was devised by Wigston Civic Society and Greater Wigston Historical Society from data in their archive and with their financial assistance. It has the approval of All Saints C of E Primary School and local councillors

This information board was sponsored by Jim Allen and his family. Jim was a local resident, business man and Borough Councillor

W/CB Sulinski

W/O W. Wrzesinski

W/O M. Szwardt

F/SF Mikula

F/O W. Jedrejczyk

F/O C. Sulgot

300(Masovian) Squadron RAF

The crew were all buried in the Polish section of the cemetery in Newark on Trent, Lincolnshire.

Reprographia Firenze

Interview with Ann Hemmings

For fifty years, from 1969 to 2019, Ann Hemmings was the inspiration behind the highly successful local choir, the Magna Music Makers, based at the Moat Street Methodist Chapel, founded by one of Ann's relatives, William Kirby. Ann (nee Kirby) has lived in Wigston all 87 years of her life.



Ann Hemmings, 2025

The Kirby family have lived in Wigston since 1812, when William Kirby, arrived in the village from Great Glen. He had moved to Wigston to establish a branch of the recently formed Primitive Methodists. He would later oversee the building of the first small chapel near where the present church stands (see below). The Moat Street Methodists later emerged from Kirby's Primitive Methodists. The Methodist Movement, founded by John Wesley in 1839, who came from a wealthy family and became an ordained minister in the Church of England after studying at Oxford. Despite Wesley's nonpolitical stance and his appeal to all classes, by the time of his death, Methodism had become firmly part of the Establishment.

The French Revolution, which occurred two years before his death, radicalised many of its working-class members, and the Methodist Connexion (national organisation) split. The Primitive Methodists, with a largely working-class membership, emerged as the radical wing of the Movement. Wigston's more conservative Methodists eventually built the Chapel at the top of Frederick Street in 1885, from which, of course, Charlie Moore's Temperance Band would emerge. The former Primitive Methodists built their new chapel at the bottom of Moat Street in 1886, the same year that the Methodist Connexion had reunited.

Ann's first role was to help clean the building in the early 1950s, aged 14, like her grandmother, Elizabeth Kirby, had done when the chapel first opened. From scrubbing floors, Ann's contribution would soon branch out. She joined the chapel choir and taught in the nursery for 11 years. With a few fellow members, she began a singing group which met in their homes. In 1969, nine members of the Moat Street Young Wives Group, led by Anthea Lunn, with the aim of providing music for chapel services. It quickly expanded to 20 members who called themselves the Magna Music Makers, with June Davis taking over from Anthea Lunn.



Wigston Primitive Chapel, built 1846, Moat Street

In the meantime, Ann married Jack Russell in 1958, with whom she had two children, Caroline and Richard. During the 1960s, Jack was a Conservative Councillor, reflecting the complete break with the Kirby's' radical past. For the next couple of years, the MMM performed at chapel events, including joint events with the Moat's male singers, conducted by her father, Arthur Kirby.



Moat Street Methodist Chapel

During the first couple of years, the Magna Music Makers continued to perform primarily at chapel events, such as harvest festivals and candlelight carol services. In 1973, they staged a series of one-act plays and music-and-song events organised by the Wigston College Players, a local drama group. A year later, they sang for a variety show at the Moat Chapel to raise funds for new curtains. Barbara Hardy became the choir's musical director in 1975. Events over the next three years included singing at a Council-organised tea for senior citizens, which became an annual occasion. A performance of 'Merrie England' with the Frederick Street Choir and Civic Orchestra. A Women's World Day of Prayer service at Moat. For the tenth anniversary celebrations, the joint choirs sang Stainer's 'Crucifixion'.



The 1980s saw the choir gain increasing recognition, and they began performing at major county events, including the Lorraine Charity at the Grand Hotel in 1980 and 1983. The Three Choirs Festival at St. Thomas' Church, South Wigston, as well as concerts at the Haymarket Theatre for Loros and Children in Need.

Ann was also involved in the Oadby and Wigston Borough's twinning relationships in France and Germany. This led to their first international performances at Maromme and Norderstedt.



The Magna Music Makers in one of their trips to Germany

The next decade would see a very busy schedule of Local, Leicestershire and international concerts. In 1991, they sang at a morning service at the Glen Parva Young Offenders' Centre. They sang at several events in Wigston, including a Gala Concert for the Framework Knitters' Museum, a joint concert at Bushloe with the Oadby and Wigston Civic Orchestra, and a performance of Merrie England at the Haymarket Theatre. In 1993, they sang at the Llangollen International Music Eisteddfod.



During the first two decades of the new century, they continued to perform around the county and, of course, regularly at the Moat Street Chapel, including a celebration of Ann's wedding to David Hemmings in 2009, and Barbara and Michael Hardy's diamond wedding anniversary in 2015. Their final concert was for the Salvation Army in 2019.

KEITH SMITH
And The
OADBY AND WIGSTON CIVIC ORCHESTRA

The orchestra, then called Wigston Civic Orchestra as it was formed prior to local government re-organisation in 1974, was established in February 1966 by Keith Smith, a young music teacher at Guthlaxton Grammar School. The orchestra's name included the word 'Civic' because the idea came from a prominent local Councillor, Mr Don Mobbs, and initially the Council supported the orchestra financially. Another well-known local man was also involved, by the name of Duncan Lucas, who, until his death in 2022, was President of the Historical Society.



Oadby and Wigston Civic Orchestra conducted by Keith Smith

Keith was born in South Wigston and, from an early age, took singing and piano lessons. He was well known for his excellent treble voice and was a member of the choir at All Saints Church, Wigston Magna, as his piano teacher, Violet Moore, was organist there at the time. Keith was educated at Kibworth Grammar School and then went on to gain degrees in music at both Leeds and Surrey Universities. In between, he attended the Royal College of Music, where he studied choral and orchestral conducting and violin. Whilst at school, he played the violin in Leicestershire County Youth Orchestra and the National Youth Orchestra.

His first teaching post was as Senior Music Master at Guthlaxton Grammar School, and he is still well remembered by former pupils. In 1969, he went on to Banbury School as Director of Music, which was then the largest comprehensive school in the country. Subsequently, in 1979, he became a Staff Conductor for Hampshire, having charge of Southampton Youth Orchestra. In 1991, he founded Hampshire County Youth Choir and, during the 1990s, also conducted Hampshire Sinfonietta, a small professional ensemble. Southampton Youth Orchestra often played at the Royal Festival Hall and Royal Albert Hall, and under his direction

undertook many foreign tours; these included visits to the USA, Canada, China and throughout Europe. He worked in Hampshire for over 25 years and retired from there in 2003.

In 1974, Keith followed in the footsteps of Sir Malcolm Sargeant and became conductor of the Leicester Symphony Orchestra. He held this post until 1995 and remains their Conductor Emeritus. He was also Chorus-Master of Leicester Philharmonic Society Choir for over 20 years.

His other freelance work gave Keith the opportunity to conduct many professional orchestras, both at home and abroad. He particularly enjoyed working with the Quingdao Orchestra in China and gave many concerts in Hungary and Romania. He has also enjoyed adjudicating at many music festivals and, in addition, has arranged and conducted many fund-raising concerts in his home village of Ratley, on the Warwickshire/ Oxfordshire border. For many years, he conducted biennial performances of Handel's 'Messiah' in the mediaeval church.

Throughout his life, Keith has always returned to his home ground to arrange and conduct the 'Civic Orchestra', which this year will celebrate its 60th and final season, for Keith is now 86 years of age. During the six decades of its existence, the orchestra usually performed five concerts each season, though latterly four, adding up to between 250 and 300 events. All but three of them have been conducted by Keith Smith.

Behind the scenes, there have been a number of truly valued and indispensable helpers. For over thirty years, David England was particularly active, firstly as treasurer, but also by organising venues, advertising, printing and running 'front of house'. Keith's wife, Andrea, a percussionist in the orchestra, has now taken over much of the organising.

The orchestra's first concert was given at Bushloe school, but over the years other venues have included Abington School, Oadby and Moat Street Methodist Churches and latterly St Thomas the Apostle Church in South Wigston. The vast majority have been at Guthlaxton, now Wigston College.

Originally, all the instrumentalists were local musicians, based in Leicestershire, but gradually players have also come from many parts of the country, a number of these being Keith's ex-students. We should express great appreciation for all the players who, over the years, have contributed their skill, time and enthusiasm to the orchestra.

It has been a deliberate policy to engage promising young soloists from the country's leading Conservatoires and many who have sung or played with the orchestra have progressed to have international careers. These have included Dame Sally Matthews (soprano), John Mills (violinist) and David Cohen (cellist). At first, the Orchestra consisted of a small string ensemble, but a larger orchestra, often with over 50 players, soon evolved, and this became usual thereafter. The programme content always included a wide range of well-known and lesser-known pieces. Occasionally, new works have featured, notably by local composers such as Keith's colleague Geoffrey Tomlinson and Terence Dwyer,

who was Keith's music teacher at Kibworth Grammar School. Both composed new works for the ensemble. The annual New Year Viennese and Summer Proms have always been popular!

The final concert - to honour Keith's amazing commitment to music and culture in the Borough - took place on 28th February 2026 at Beauchamp College, Oadby, in the presence of the Lord Lieutenant of Leicestershire and the Mayor of the Borough.

Greater Wigston Historical Society adds its own appreciation of the contribution to classical music in the Borough by the Oadby and Wigston Civic Orchestra under the direction and baton of Keith Smith for 60 amazing years. Congratulations.

Colin Towell


**Oadby & Wigston
Civic Orchestra**
Conductor: *Keith Smith*

60TH

**Anniversary
Festival Concert**

Programme includes:
*Overture: 'Meistersingers', Wagner;
Symphony No. 2 'Little Russian', Tchaikovsky;
Finlandia, Sibelius; Violin Concerto in A Minor, Glazunov*

Soloist: John Mills

Beauchamp College, Oadby
Saturday 28th February 2026 7.30pm

Tickets at the door: £12, OAP & student concessions £10, School students free

Poster for the latest Concert by the OWCO

The History of the Wigston Historical Society Archive

Back in 1988, I came to live in Wigston, where I was quickly recruited to the Historical Society by my cousin Duncan Lucas. I remember watching a presentation of local pictures by Bill Ward, a local man with a passion for photography and local history. These images of old Wigston and places where my relations lived sparked an interest in collecting memories of Wigston in the form of photographs.

One of my hobbies was family history, and I was in the process of completing a One Name Study on the FORRYAN name. Part of this project was to collate images of where they lived and travelled. These two interests started me collecting images from all sorts of places and storing them in digital format. My objective was to be able to search the photographs and to be able, at some future date, to show them on a website.

A lot of thought went into the methodology of storage, indexing and use of metadata. Talking with members of the DMU faculty, it became clear which path I should take. I set up a computer, scanner and printer and set about creating a framework that the images could be stored in to facilitate easy access. Having done this, I started looking for images. Each image had to have a unique reference number and a clearly defined description, which would allow me to deposit the files into directories. The structure I chose was by village such as Wigston Magna, South Wigston, Kilby Bridge and Glen Parva. Each village was subdivided into Streets, Events, People, Transport, Farming, Maps, and many more. This structure still remains some 30 years later.

Once the Photo Archive was set up, I set about obtaining images and populating the directories. I soon reached a few thousand, at which point I started to expand the use of the metadata, which required me to revisit each image and copy/enhance the date. A worthwhile exercise which enabled me to set up a website for the society and make the images available to all.

Some years later, when I had become Chairman of the Society, Peter Cousins joined us, and with his technical skills, he took over my old website and created an improved version with more capabilities. It was at that time that I transferred the Archive from my private collection to the Historical Society.

Over the years, local people have donated images to the Archive, and it has now grown to some 20,000 images.

During the period of building the digital photograph archive, the Society was given documents and books which were originally kept in my garage. There were two problems with this arrangement. One was the space required, and my garage was starting to bulge. The second was information retrieval and keeping track of everything. It was at this point that Peter and I started to look for storage space, and from this was born the Heritage Centre. However, this did not solve the issue of indexing, viewing and retrieval of the hard copy material. It was decided that all of the material we had should be digitised and put into a searchable format to allow us to search the Archive as though it were on the web.

Again, we needed to define our processes. How to digitise material. How to store the files, and finally, how to search the data and use it.

A great deal of time was taken to structure the Archive and how to digitise the material. Scanning was one solution, but this would only work with typed documents, and even then, there were many failures. It was decided that we needed a team of volunteers who could work at home to transcribe documents, ledgers, maps, etc., into a format that we could use. We now have a number of superb people who do this work.

So, how does this all work in practice?

All new material is routed via me. Photographs I scan, number, index and put directly into the Archive. Documents are routed through me, and I pass these out to our volunteers to type up, and they are returned to me and added to the Archive. The master Archive is kept by me, with regular backup copies being held by committee members. The big job is moving the material to our website. Peter Cousins manages this every six months or so, as it is a huge undertaking. It is worth remembering that the website can be up to six months behind in adding new files and images.

All requests for searching the archive are routed through me, and I search the master Archive and reply to every contact.

So, how do we search the Archive?

We have a sophisticated piece of software that enables us to create a file showing where a specific piece of information is found, either in the Archive or the physical copy at the Heritage Centre. We can email this file to people who can then follow up with a visit to the Heritage Centre or ask for further information.

Included within our Archive are collections from local people. These include the archives from Duncan Lucas, Gerry Broughton, Tony Danvers, Tricia Berry, and James Freckingham.

The GWHS Archive is now the place to go when you want information about the area. Come and see for yourself at the Wigston Heritage Centre in South Wigston, where you can browse the Archive free of charge.

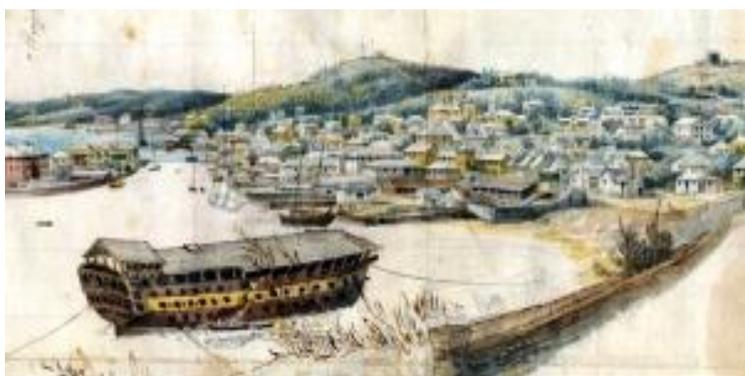
Mike Forryan - President GWHS

August 2025

Since this article was published the Heritage Centre has now moved to the United Reformed On Long Street, Wigston. Open on Fridays from 10.00am until 2.00pm.

The fate of convict William Chamberlain, 1818 – 1841

In our article in Bulletin 133 titled 'Update on The Ice Skates Story and William Chamberlain', we made reference to Hulk Register HO 8/67, which included the surgeon's report for Chamberlain stating 'Dead', 'Died 8 Feb '41 at ???'. Unfortunately, we were not able to decipher the next few words at the time. We have subsequently established from the Quarterly Returns of Prisoners in Hulks for March 1841 that William Chamberlain was received onto HMS Warrior, which was based in Chatham on 28 April 1840. Later, he was on board the prison hulk HMS Dromedary in Bermuda, where he died in February 1841.



Convict Hulk, Royal Navy Dockyard, Bermuda



Convict Uniform in Bermuda

Illustrated London News, 17 June 1848

The entry we could not resolve we now realise reads 'RnHosp L' and refers to the Royal Naval Hospital of the Royal Naval Dockyard in Bermuda. From the Medical Journals of Bermuda Royal Naval Hospital (convict patients) reference ADM 101/9/1 for 1837 – 1842 held in the National Archives, we then found the surgeon's report for the death of William Chamberlain.

This poses the question of where William Chamberlain was buried. The answer is almost certainly in the convict cemetery of the Royal Naval Dockyard. The Bermuda National Trust Historic Cemeteries website provides details of the 'Convict Cemetery' https://www.bnt.bm/heritage/historic_cemeteries/

This small cemetery was hidden behind a row of former Dockyard employee houses. A tranquil spot on the northern shore, it has nine visible graves of which only five have inscriptions. The graves all date from 1843 to 1846, and two of the men whose names are still visible are known to have been convicts at the time of their death. The first convicts were brought to Bermuda from England in 1824 on HMS Antelope, and the cemetery dates from about this time, but there is no evidence that it was ever consecrated.

We know that by 1898, the cemetery was no longer used because cartographer Lieutenant A. J. Savage marked it ‘disused’ on his survey map of that year. Of the 9,000 convicts sent here, 2,000 died. There are only 13 marked graves in total; four are named, and nine are unnamed.’

The Royal Naval Dockyard in Bermuda was established in the late 18th century and remained a naval base until 1995. It has since been transformed into a major tourist attraction, <https://dockyard.bm/>.

Wikipedia has entries for the ships involved in William Chamberlain’s time as a convict. HMS Warrior was laid up in September 1815 at Chatham. She became a receiving ship in August 1819 and was a temporary quarantine ship in 1831. She was fitted as a prison ship after 1840 and was eventually broken up in December 1857 at Woolwich. HMS Dromedary was a 24-gun storeship, formerly the merchant Kaikusroo. She was purchased in 1805 as a 40-gun and named HMS Howe and then HMS Dromedary in 1806. In 1809, she carried Lachlan Macquarie to the colony of NSW as the replacement governor for William Bligh. In 1819, she was re-commissioned as a convict ship and ferried convicts to Tasmania. She was then refitted as a timber transport and collected timber spars before returning to England. In the 1830s, she sailed for Bermuda, where she was converted to a prison hulk and subsequently broken up in 1864.

Earlier this month, we established that William Chamberlain was the son of Robert Shuttlewood and Mary Chamberlain, born 13 October 1818 in Sileby. It is interesting to note that he took his mother’s surname.

A more detailed account of this story will be presented as a Society transaction later this year.

Sharon Hall, Neil Hancock and Stuart Mucklejohn

Bermuda became a penal colony in 1824 because of the need for labour to construct a new naval dockyard. Lacking sufficient facilities on the island, prisoners were forced to live on the ships that brought them. As with prison hulks, cramped and insanitary living quarters only added to an already high death rate caused by brutal working conditions in a tropical climate. Labouring in tropical temperatures led to sunburn and sunstroke. The glare from working with bright white limestone all day led to cases of blindness. Years spent in such miserable and depraved circumstances led to drunkenness and violence.

During the years of the Great Famine in Ireland (1845-1852), thousands of Irish convicts arrived on the island, many of whom suffered from malnutrition. Another person from Leicestershire who died as a result of these unhealthy conditions was John Cox Baum from Countesthorpe, whose death was recorded in 1840, aged 56, one of 2,000 out of 9,000 convicts sent there between 1824 and 1863 when the penal colony was closed.

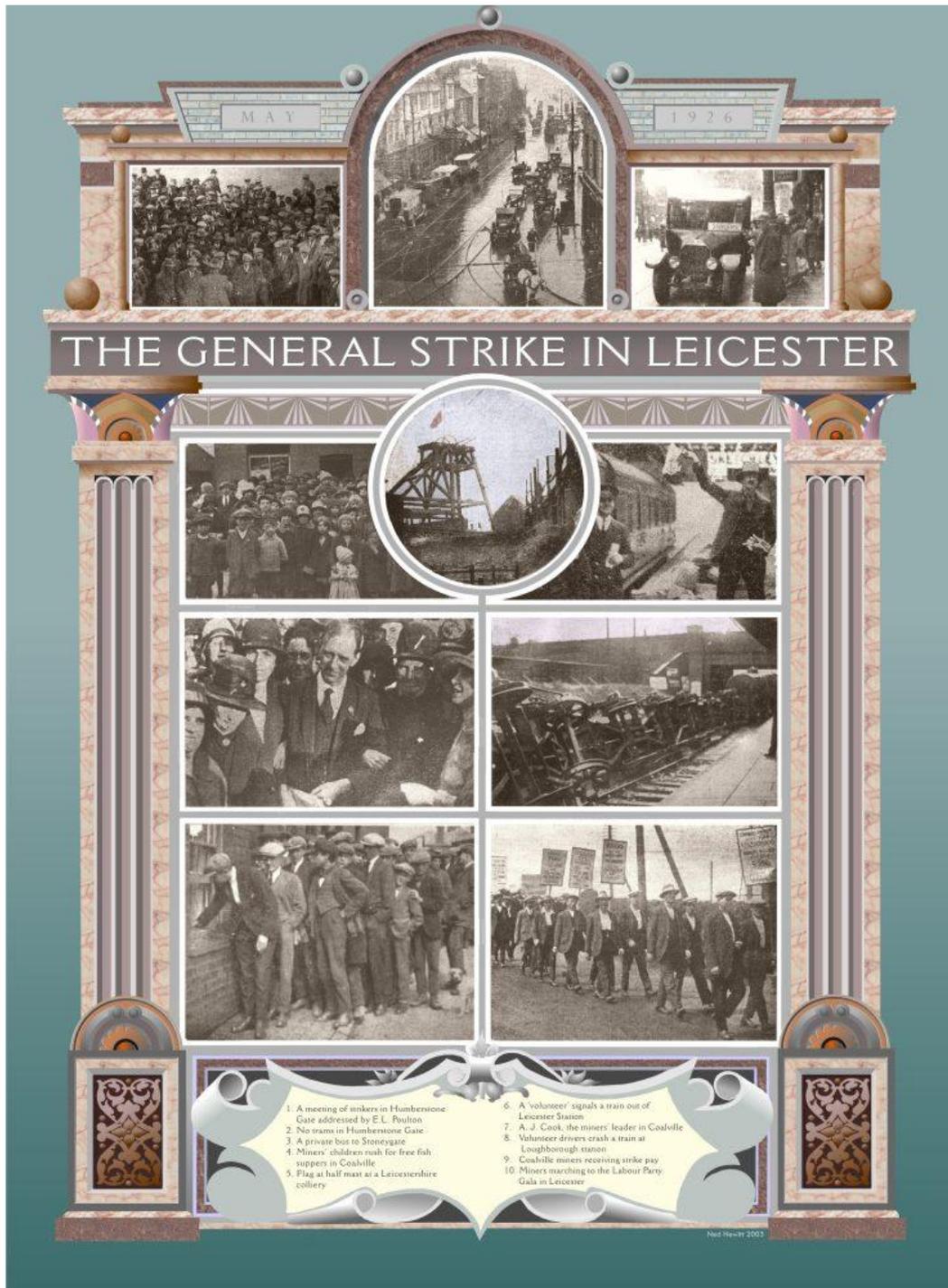
Steve Marquis



From the Past

Wigston One Hundred and Two Hundred Years Ago

Centenary of the 1926 General Strike

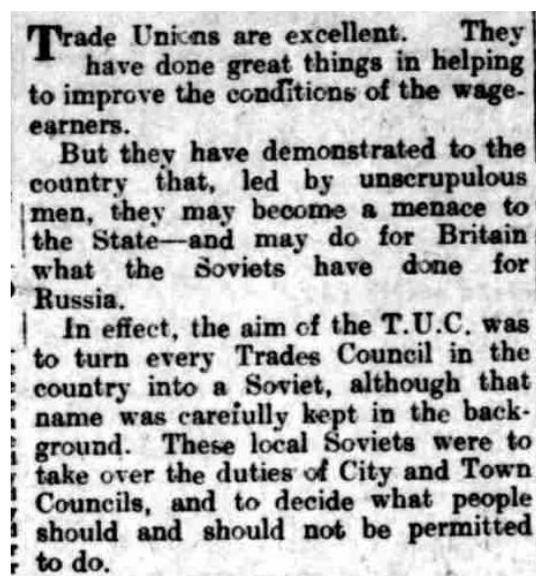


A recent Digitalised Version of the Original Cover of Ned Newitt's 1976 Pamphlet on the General Strike in Leicestershire

The General Strike began on May 4th, 1926, when the TUC called on its member unions to stop work in support of the miners who had just rejected a 13% wage cut. The conflict between the miners on one side and the mine owners and the government on the other had been brewing for over a year. During WW1, soldiers were promised a “Land fit for Heroes,” but what they actually experienced was a country in economic turmoil, resulting in mass unemployment and declining living standards. In the background was the Russian Revolution, which terrified the British Ruling Class, as the French Revolution had done over a century before. The government's response was the same, with increasing political oppression. Communists were imprisoned as part of what became known as the ‘Red Scare’. The first Labour Government was brought down in 1924 by the Zinoviev Letter Scandal, a forged letter allegedly sent by one of the leaders of the new Russian Revolutionary Government, purportedly giving instructions to the new Labour Government.

The General Strike itself was deliberately provoked by the Tory Government, which took a whole year to prepare for it. Stanley Baldwin, the Prime Minister, was determined to destroy any meaningful labour capacity to resist wage reductions. Unfortunately, the Government was more committed to achieving its aims than either the leaders of the TUC or the Labour Party. Even though support for the strike remained strong, more workers came out on the day the action was called off than had begun the strike on May 4th. After only nine days, the TUC ended the strike without securing any meaningful concessions from the mine owners or the government. The miners were left to fight on their own and were eventually driven back to work because of hunger by November.

In Leicester, support for the strike was mixed. On the first day, around 12,000 Leicester workers, mainly in transport and construction, joined the strike. The city’s largest groups of workers in the hosiery and footwear industries continued working. So, despite the hysterical reaction of the Leicester Mail (Thursday, 13th May 1926), the strike had only a limited impact locally: -

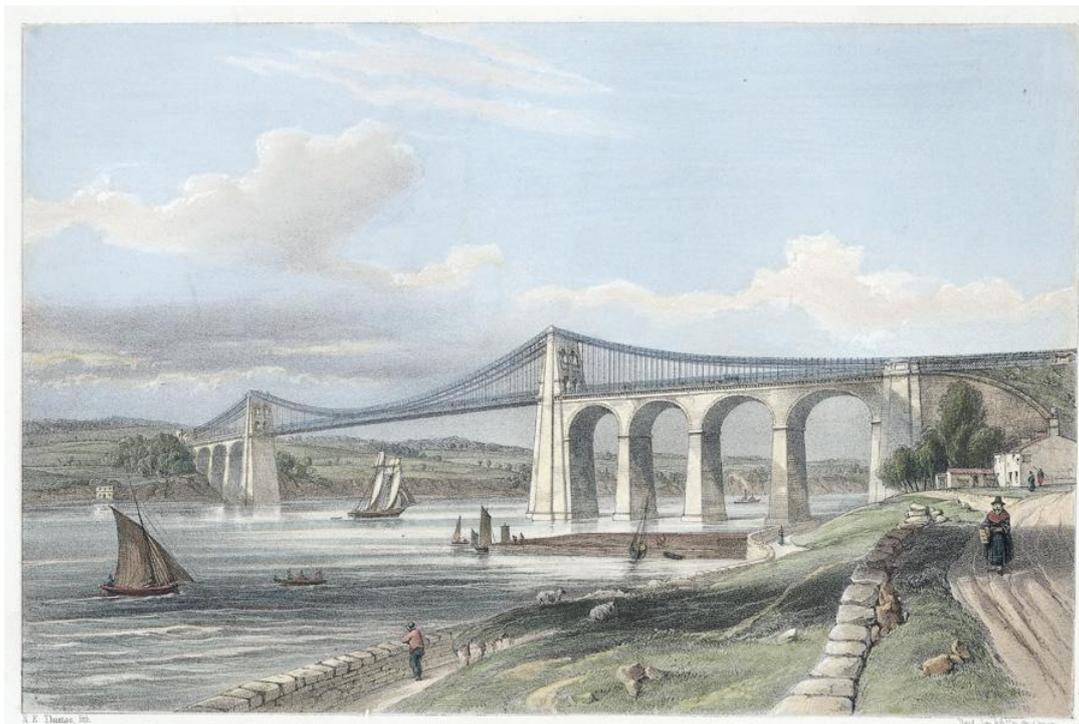


Trade Unions are excellent. They have done great things in helping to improve the conditions of the wage-earners.

But they have demonstrated to the country that, led by unscrupulous men, they may become a menace to the State—and may do for Britain what the Soviets have done for Russia.

In effect, the aim of the T.U.C. was to turn every Trades Council in the country into a Soviet, although that name was carefully kept in the background. These local Soviets were to take over the duties of City and Town Councils, and to decide what people should and should not be permitted to do.

1826



30 January – Thomas Telford's Menai Suspension Bridge joins Wales to Anglesey, the first suspension bridge in the world, as it looked in 1840

HIGHWAY ROBBERY.—On Saturday night, the 25th ult, a lad about 15 years of age, in the employ of a baker at Mousley, in this county, was stopped in Knighton Lane, leading from Oadby to Wigston, about half past eight o'clock, by a fellow named Gale, who demanded his money; using threats if he did not comply. The boy refused, when the villain knocked him off his donkey, and succeeded in rifling his pockets of about four shillings in copper, and a watch, with which he made off. A description having been accurately given of the offender, he was traced to this town a few days afterwards, where he had been offering the watch for sale, and ultimately was found to have enlisted in the corps of artillery; but he, with several other recruits, had taken the route to London. Unwita, the officer, together with the boy, lost no time in following the party, and finally succeeded in overtaking them near Northampton, when Gale was positively identified as the robber. He was immediately handcuffed and reconveyed hither:—On Saturday last, he underwent an examination at the County Police Office, and the above facts having been sworn to by the lad; he was fully committed to take his trial for the offence at the next assizes. The prisoner appears to be not more than 19 years of age.—Thos. Plowman was also committed, on the 25th instant, by Rev. C. J. Hewicke, charged with felony; for trial at Sessions.

Leicester Chronicle, 31 March 1826

Obituary

On Saturday last, Sarah, relict of the late J. Clarke, Esq. of Wigston, aged 77. The poor have lost a kind and beneficent friend—her family a most affectionate parent—and the memory of this excellent lady will always be cherished with the greatest regard by her surviving friends.

Leicester Chronicle, 29 April 1826

The Clarke family was among the wealthiest in Wigston during the 18th century. In 1782, six almshouses were built to house six destitute villagers, consisting of three old men and three old women, paid for by a bequest of £3,000 (a huge sum, over 30% higher than the average annual poor-rates for that period) from Elizabeth Clarke in her will dated 7th December 1774.



The Six Alms Houses on Long Street