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# The Otford Societ Newsletter

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**SEPTEMBER 2002**

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Photo: Gilbert Denton

*Knighon Road: Summer 1957*

## **1952-2002: A PERSONAL VIEW FROM THE CHAIRMAN**

AS A COMMEMORATION of the Queen's Golden Jubilee, the Otford Society suggested a written account of how the village has changed during the last half century, written by the former long-serving Chairman of the Parish Council, Mr Reg Lythaby. The Parish Council took up the idea, and has now published and distributed the booklet, "50 YEARS ON".

Mr Lythaby has set down a remarkably full account of events in Otford during the reign of the present Queen. It records the success story of our Parish, as it rightly should, for Otford is a success story in many ways, and Mr Lythaby pays tribute to dedicated people who have worked towards this success. Impossible, as he suggests, to name them all. He does not dwell on some of the issues that aroused high feelings in our community, perhaps out of consideration for those involved. Time has now softened the emotions felt at the time. He refers to the case of the "Little Chef", which is well documented in Anthony Stoyel's and Dennis Clarke's book, but mentions Sparrow's (Otford Builders Merchants as it now is) on its passing. Probably the Parish Council could have done little to influence the planning decision to allow O.B.M. to build its warehouse and yard adjoining the Conservation Area. Although the land had been occupied by Mr Nash, respected local builder, much of it had been used as a small-holding and for a cottage and garden for his foreman. The fact that a large firm could give employment to local people may also have swayed decisions. However, a seething public meeting crammed to the doors, with many unable to get in, seems to be an event worth recording. The Otford Society view, shared by many residents, was that such a large scale building, out of tune with its neighbours, should be placed on the industrial estate. Was not the Vestry Estate intended for such a purpose? The narrow High Street with inadequate footways, was unsuitable for heavy delivery vehicles, and dangerous because of the proximity of the Primary School – our present traffic problems might be less difficult had the planners listened.

Another long-drawn-out dispute was the case of the Billings cowsheds, a substantial brick-built building erected without planning permission right in the middle of the Darent Valley landscape. There was a successful conclusion for the Parish Council although it took seven years after many Appeals for the Enforcement Order to be carried out. The cows are now housed, more suitably from a visual point of view, in Park Lane, which is where the OPC had suggested in the first place! A further success, this for the Otford Society, was the granting of a Right of Way, to be marked on the Definite Map, of the path crossing Billings land between Footpaths SR17 and SR32. This decision came after a Petition, signed by over 100 people and a Public Inquiry. It was Cllr. Robert Sidley who had originally suggested the campaign.

Thinking back to 1952, one of the biggest differences, apart from the disappearance of the food shops and the police, must be in the approach to the village from Sevenoaks and Polstead. The re-routing of the A225 around the western side of Bubblestone Cottage has improved the appearance of The Green, and the tree planting along the road to Sevenoaks is now beginning to bring a new beauty to the landscape, enhanced by the thousands of daffodils brightening our Spring, many of them planted by volunteers. This does something to soften the brash new motor showrooms that have replaced what was once Waites, and the Wolfes. The trees planted on the new Otford Palace Park, managed by the Woodland Trust, have yet to reach maturity, so their impact on the landscape and the views of the Downs cannot be assessed, but they give a feeling of environmental improvement.

Mr Lythaby does not mention the referendum held by the Parish Council over the siting of a cemetery – the majority of votes going against the Council. He does say the Council had searched for over 25 years for suitable land, but, of course, there was no statutory

requirement to do so. Greatness Cemetery, one of the best maintained in the country, is within a mile or two, with enough land for Otford for the next 50 years. The Parish Council, however, was determined to establish a burial ground within the Parish, which it did. History must record the facts.

On the western side of Otford, the Old Polhill Road has now disappeared, and we have the new route from the M25 Bridge. Incidentally, the Otford Society played a major part in gaining the bund which hides the motorway from the village. The new approach road is not without virtues. As you turn from the bridge towards Otford, a lovely view of the Darent Valley appears. Trees planted along this stretch of the A225 which leads down towards the railway bridge are beginning to improve the scene.

Nothing could have been done in Otford in the last 50 years without the involvement of the people. Perhaps we should not be surprised that it is a relatively small nucleus of people who recur again and again. The worry is that in our community, as in many others, are there willing and younger volunteers to follow on? We have not, for instance, had an election for Parish Council for some years. We now have a Council consisting almost entirely of members who have been co-opted by other co-opted members. This is not to detract from their integrity or the value of their work as Councillors; how else would the village function?

Work done by many volunteers over the last 50 years has enriched our community in many and various ways. Some names spring to mind. Like Mr Lythaby's it is an incomplete list. He mentions Roy Alexander, founder member of the Otford Society and his photographic record of 1977 – since updated by the Society. Leaders can be named, but there were many helpers. Who can forget Charles Blackbourne? He revived and kept going the traditional village fete. Many good and enthusiastic people have followed in his footsteps, raising thousands of pounds for local organisations and charities. The extension to the village hall might never have been built but for the work of the fund raising group. Remember OOMP! Our thanks to Sally Maycock, landlady of The Bull, and others. The coffee morning Saturdays and bric-a-brac sales for hall funds involving people like Joan Blackburn and Daphne Devonshire. The management of the Memorial Hall, its efficient maintenance and booking system largely due to John Bolton, helped by successive managers such as Ted Finley, Peter Hine, Peter Jeremiah. The early work of Bill Hope is not forgotten as the old library room is named after him. The landscaping at the approach to the railway station – sorry! Train Station – is the brainchild of Wally Kirsch, long serving and much respected Chairman of the Horticultural Society, now the Gardeners' Society. Also at the station the disabled ramp and gate on the down side were built after long negotiations by Cllrs. Robert Sidley and Ray Gulliver. Ted Hewitt, who tended the cricket square and was Parish Agent for the allotments for over 30 years, received his well deserved presentations at his recent retirement. Secretary of the Sports Association, Treasurer of the Allotments Association, Gordon Darby, who also works in many other unsung capacities, not least helping his wife Barbara – designer of our new village sign – in her expert video making. Was ever a village blessed with such recordings of social history?

The list goes on. The Darby & Joan Club, founded by Connie Horner and continued until recently by Hilary Johnson, provides an afternoon's relaxation every fortnight for the elderly as well as summer outings. The W.I. teams that run the weekly luncheon club for senior citizens. The late and much-loved Beryl Cook was a founder of this, and five teams of ladies carry on her work led by Diane Arnaud, Maureen Bolton and Pat Goddard.

The Otford Society together with its predecessor the Otford Preservation Society has been in existence for a good part of the last 50 years; the O.P.C. for over twice that time. Mr Lythaby mentions that the Parish Centenary passed almost unnoticed in our village. Is that right? T

Otford Society Newsletter carried a front page article on the event, which may well have been read by some of our hundreds of readers, although the Parish Council made no comment. Nostalgia is a very pleasant feeling, but we can't return to the age when cows plodded twice a day round the village pond, and cricket was played in the road in front of Fry's garage on Sundays. The old iron bridge across the Darent has been swept away for ever. Many people in the past have been inspired to work for the good of our village, often under the guidance of the Parish Council, sometimes individually, sometimes with village organisations. We hope this will continue, but indifference to local and national affairs is widespread. We, as a village society, strive to involve the community in decisions that affect our village, visually and socially. We want to continue to play our part in shaping an Otford that has many splendid years ahead.

*Ken Gunder.*

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### **LIFE IN THE WAR YEARS** ***Betty Jenkins continues her reminiscences***

Ration books had been ready since 1938, and when food rationing began on 8th January 1940, retailers had to cut the coupons from their registered customers' ration books and send them to their Food Office in order for their entitlements to be calculated and permits sent to them and to their wholesalers. Very soon Food Offices were knee-deep in coupons, staff cross-eyed with trying to count them, and the retailers at their wits end. Shopkeepers were already having to cope not only with demanding customers but with all the intricacies of a new system. Happily the Ministry of Food had wise advisers and, as they were to do throughout these early days, modified procedures to keep everyone sane. So no more cut out of coupons; they were only to be cancelled by the shopkeepers. One instance of the Ministry's pragmatic approach was to decide early in 1940 that restaurants, cafés and pubs serving meals would not be rationed by customers' coupons, but would receive permits for rationed foods on the basis of number of meals served. This would keep the wheels of business turning, satisfy people, and modify some of the effects of wartime shortages. The amounts of rationed foodstuffs permitted were very small; meat, for example, was only calculated on main meals, though game and fish was also available for some restaurants. It is easy to understand that their returns to the Food Office of meals served were closely scrutinised and often investigated by F.O. staff. One small café in Sevenoaks gave details of a very flourishing trade. With a colleague I went there for a meal. To spy! The food was excellent and very imaginative, demonstrating what could be done with vegetables and fruit and using all the advice provided by leaflets from the Ministry of Food. I like to think most people played fair and understood the sacrifices of the Merchant and Royal Navies in keeping food supplies coming to Britain to meet the "Basal Diet" worked out by the powers that be, and keep the nation fed and health maintained.

The inspired establishments of British Restaurants in 1941 gave everyone a chance to eat out at a reasonable cost. There was an excellent one in Sevenoaks at the Cornwall Hall. Meals were prepared, I think, mostly by voluntary workers and subsidised by local government at a cost of 10d or a shilling each.

One was opened at Penshurst – I remember cycling there for the opening – and, of course all the necessary permits for supplies had been issued. A week or two later I had a phone call from a very important voluntary worker demanding a permit for anchovies. "I cannot possibly serve cod without anchovy sauce" I was told. But she had to. Such luxury imports were a

thing of the past. She was lucky to have cod to serve.

The allowances of rationed food-stuffs were continually changing and more food put on ration. Even soap was rationed with special permits for industrial and farm workers. A "point" system was introduced to give everyone a measure of choice with certain foods, and there were allocations of eggs, dried egg powder, dried milk and corned beef as supplies were available. I seem to remember one, once, of bananas! Woe betide any "foreigner" who tried to get these items and fruit from shops they did not normally frequent. Firm tactfulness was needed by shopkeepers, but I do not remember any fights. I suppose it would be called "shortage" nowadays. There were no sticky labels or calculators then; envelopes had to be addressed by hand. It was a real and continual chore. In my department we had a long table for volunteers who came to help. Women, it was discovered, could, and did, manage responsible jobs not previously thought right and proper for them to do – despite experience of World War One. Now they were being conscripted for war work from the age of 18 years. There was a Land Army Hostel for women farm workers at the bottom of Tudor Drive, where houses have now been built. Their contribution to the labour force was very valuable as more and more men were called up.

It has to be remembered that there was no television in those days. News was heard from the radio, and there were news-reels at the cinemas, if they could be reached in those days of petrol shortage and the black-out. There were newspapers, of course, consisting of just four pages, as a rule. Black-out regulations were very strictly enforced by A.R.P. (later Civil Defence) wardens. We had special light-proof curtains or shutters, with sticky paper on the glass panes to lessen damage by flying splinters.



Anderson shelters were available for gardens, and many were decorated with vegetables and flowers. Later Morrison shelters were provided for indoor use. They had to be erected against an inside wall, were about the size of a double bed with the top a sheet of steel supported by iron legs with mesh at the sides. My husband polished the top of ours and put a Persian carpet on it. (His "anti-Hitler" gesture!) The steel top is now the base of my garden shed, and the legs support fences. The war-tire "waste not want not" is not forgotten.

The various Ministries responsible for our welfare produced many leaflets giving advice on how to survive. Booklets like "The Kitchen Front" and recipes for corned beef hash and even how to make whale meat palatable were widely distributed. DIG FOR VICTORY and the importance of using vegetables in our diet (carrot cake was delicious) was stressed continually. The Radio Doctor gave daily advice from 1941, and vitamins, cod liver oil and concentrated fruit juices were produced for children. MAKE DO AND MEND was another precept even from before the introduction of clothes rationing – also in 1941 I think. This was kept very secret, foreknowledge would have wrecked the scheme. Food stockpiling had been bad enough before rationing began.

One other important slogan was widely displayed – CARELESS TALK COSTS LIVES. How little time and information we had to gossip about! There was, however, a very great need for secrecy and discretion. Signposts as well as station names were removed to hinder an invading enemy or agents.

And, of course, we had the HOME GUARD!

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## TRAFFIC CALMING SCHEME

The flurry of letters to the Sevenoaks Chronicle suggests that some residents believe that proposed remedies are worse than the present situation, and further, would harm the visual appearance of Otford.

Andrew Barber gave the facts in our last Newsletter, and the Otford Society has said that residents themselves must decide what, if anything, is to be done. Whatever the outcome, there will not be 100% unanimity, that is certain. The BAPTIE report is not yet published, at the time of writing (9th September) but is due at any moment. Julian Cooke, who has replaced Iain China in managing the publication of the plans, is unfortunately not free to speak to our Autumn meeting on October 3rd **[now October 24th ed.]**, but we hope to arrange for a representative from the Highways Department to answer questions and explain the plans at that meeting, 8.00pm, in the Memorial Hall. (Please watch local press.)

Roger Fogden, a former member of the Executive Committee, has been corresponding with the S.D.C. and the Parish Council on the matter, and he gives his opinions below.

*At the time of writing, there is nothing concrete to report since Andrew Barber's item in the June Newsletter. The County Council have asked outside consultants, BapTie, to provide a detailed specification, which the Parish Council has promised to make available for further public consultation, but this is not expected before the beginning of September at the earliest.*

*As Andrew mentioned, the scheme at present under consideration (advocated by the S.D.C./Iain China Report) has as its main feature ten (yes, TEN) pairs of humps (euphemistically called "cushions", although the very reverse of soft and cuddly) arranged 40-60 metre intervals between the Pond roundabout and the Darenth River bridge – on the pattern of those in Bullfinch Lane, Riverhead. This scheme will be neither effective nor fair and will be disproportionate to the problem. Although it will curb the speed of smaller cars, because the humps will be restricted in width to allow buses and ambulances to straddle them for the comfort of their passengers, they will also be straddled by lorries, vans, and many larger cars. Motorbikes will simply weave round them. Moreover, the presence of the humps will "drag" traffic towards the footways at times when vehicles might otherwise move over to give pedestrians a wider berth. To the majority of drivers, the humps will be an unwelcome distraction, an added hazard to be surmounted; and I confidently predict that to a few, they will be seen as a challenge, and they will vie with one another to see who can go over them fastest! The effects will be suffered most by those who live at the west end of the village, who will not only be faced with negotiating 20 humps (10 going, 10 coming back) every time they go by car to the Post Office or Sainsbury's, but still be terrorised by White Van Men and other drivers of the largest and most menacing vehicles when walking their children to school.*

*The only counter argument against the "straddle syndrome" I have heard is that vehicles which are unable to straddle the humps will force following traffic to go slower; but that presupposes that traffic through the village is nose-to-tail all day, whereas the China Report states that traffic flow is 4,000 vehicles a day, which translates into an average of only about four a minute (over a 16 hour "day"), a low flow. Everyone knows that at School Run times the village centre is so congested that it is hardly possible to go through at 5 m.p.h., let alone*

*20; whereas the School Run times constitute only a tiny fraction (less than 5%) of the work week, and at other times, pedestrians are few and far between, so it is perfectly safe and unthreatening to them to drive through at the present speed limit of 30 m.p.h.*

*And what of the wear and tear, waste of petrol and environmental effects of multitudinous brakings and accelerations?*

*The present proposals stem from the objective of reducing speeds to 20 m.p.h. (not achieved by the experimental "buildouts" last summer), and that is based on the statistical probability that if you are hit at that speed, you are more likely to survive than if you are hit at 30 m.p. or more; disregarding the statistical likelihood of being hit in the first place (very low according to the accident record as conceded in the China Report – the figures for 2000 place the U. at the bottom of the league in Europe for road deaths), or the chances that if you do survive you might be in unenviable shape. This 20 m.p.h. criterion is laid down under a Government inspired and funded "initiative" for reducing child mortality on the roads, which in some parts of the country is said to be too high. But I gather from the County Council that funds are available for other calming measures independently of this "initiative".*

*Clearly calming measures are desirable, especially at the west end of the High Street, between the millstream and river bridges, where the footway is narrow and drivers are tempted to put their foot down. I have put forward the suggestion that a sufficient degree of calming would be attained by a full-width platform ramp across the road just west of the river bridge, serving to check the speeds of all vehicles in both directions in that vicinity. Such a ramp might also be placed at the opposite end of the High Street (say, outside the cottage called "Boddington") to check the speed of vehicles coming off the Pond roundabout. Naturally there should be appropriate signage, sympathetic to the conservation area, warning of narrow footways, the ramps and so on. I see no need for the draconian steps now being contemplated. If there are the occasional "tearaways", they must of course be reported and dealt with by the police. But they should not be used by those in authority as a pretext for measures which will only vex the law-abiding, responsible, silent majority.*

*When the opportunities for further consultation arise, I strongly urge readers to make their views known.*

*Roger Fog*

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### **Arthur Turner's encounter with U-459 in 1943**

Ian Thomson, author of our article printed in the last Newsletter, has pointed out that a few lines were missing, which highlight the contribution made by this vessel to the war in the Atlantic, and the significance of its sinking to the Allies. These are the lines that were unfortunately omitted:

*"By July 1943 U-459 had already made five war patrols, during which time she had supplied 75 U-Boats at sea. Throughout her career she was under the command of Korvettenkapitan Georg von Wilamowitz-Mollendorff, who, at the age of 49, was the oldest surviving U-Boat commander."*

(It will be recalled that the Captain went down with his boat.)

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### **GARDEN PARTY, 6th July**

This pleasant annual event was held in the lovely grounds of Broughton Manor, one of Otford's grandest Listed Buildings. The Society was made most welcome by Mr and Mrs C Brown, and members enjoyed the warm sunshine strolling around the gardens. The Society was pleased that Michael Fallon MP and his wife were able to attend, as was the Parish Chairman, John Allen.

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### **Date for your Diary**

3rd October **[now October 24th ed.]** – Autumn meeting – 8.00pm – Memorial Hall  
Subject and Speaker to be announced.

9th November 7pm. Mill Lane Centre ( A25 Seal Road, behind Shell Garage)  
Grove Singers Folk Song Concert  
In Aid of Cystic Fibrosis Trust  
Tickets Mrs. G. (Barbara) Darby 523339

Please watch local press and notice boards