

# Desford and District Local History Society

## Newsletter

Winter 2018



### A Christmas message from our Chairman Bernard

At Christmas time, a Chairman's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of the AGM in January. Next year, as ever, we need your help as members.

Firstly. After several years of successfully arranging our main summer visit, Colin and Margaret James want to pass the baton on. The 2019 trip is sorted and they will see that through, but the work for 2020 needs to start next year. Colin and Margaret and your committee will give every help and support, but we need someone with enthusiasm and the time to prepare our 2020 trip. Please step forward: if doing so at the meeting is too daunting, give me a ring (07963221831) or e-mail me on [grimshawmfc@gmail.com](mailto:grimshawmfc@gmail.com) for a chat.



Similarly, if committee meetings are not your thing, we are looking for helpers with projects like preparing exhibition stands, the Society Christmas Tree and scanning stuff for the Archives. So, if you would like to help, please let me or Angela or any committee member know.

But, pleas for help aside, it is the festive season: I and all the committee hope we have provided a year of talks, visits and newsletters that has met, with your approval and we all wish you and your families Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

The History Christmas Tree in all its glory. Thanks to the people who made it possible.

### **Visit to; the Edwardian Houses at Leicester University Botanic Gardens on 7<sup>th</sup> September 2018**

12 members of the society took part in this visit. Several of the group had visited the gardens before, but after the tour we all agreed that focussing on the Edwardian Houses gave us an enhanced appreciation of the 'Leicestershire Gem'.

Our tour was led by Peter, a member of the friends of the Botanic gardens. Peter was an excellent guide and greatly contributed to our enjoyment of the visit.

Three of the houses were built during the reign of Edward VIII. They were built in a style that was 'a signifier of wealth and place in society'. Their origins lie in the English Domestic

Revival of the late Victorian period. One of the main architects of this fashion was Sir Edwin Lutyens.

At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Leicester was a wealthy city. These houses were commissioned by successful businessmen.

1902 - Nether close (renamed Hastings House)

William H. Stevens - shoe manufacturer. Architects were Stockdale Harrison Snr and his son James. They based their design on Old Ragdale Hall, an Elizabethan hunting lodge.

1904 - Middlemeade (renamed Beaumont Hall)

Francis S. Brice - hosiery manufacturer. Architect was Shirley Harrison, younger son of Stockdale Harrison. The house is an example of an Arts and Craft variation on a medieval house.



1907 - the Knoll.

William H. Winterton - brick manufacturer.

Architect was William H. Bidlake. The exterior design is Elizabethan with tall chimneys. The interior is a fine example of the Arts and Craft style.

1927 - Southmeade

Francis S. Brice - shoe manufacturer. This was built as his retirement home. The Architects were James and Shirley Harrison. The style of building has changed.

This is a neo-Georgian building reflecting the proportions and simplicity of classicism.



The University bought these properties after WWII. The upkeep of the houses and gardens became too expensive for the owners.

We completed our visit with tea/coffee and cakes in the ground floor of The Knoll. We were able to view some of the indoor features of the house such as the wood panelling. The inglenook fireplace had blue and white Delft tiles and a hand-beaten copper fire hood

*Dennis Casson*

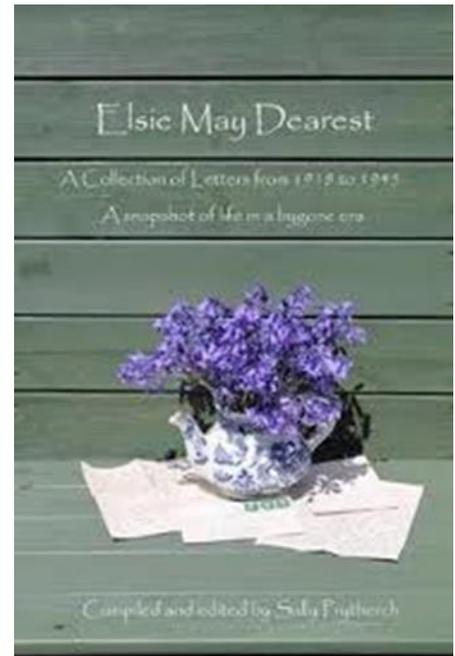
## **Elsie May Dearest: A Snapshot of Life in a Bygone Era**

Sally Prytherch came to talk to the Society on September 18<sup>th</sup>. Her presentation centred on the life of her paternal grandmother Elsie May. She had discovered an old roll top desk that had belonged to Elsie which had contained a whole series of letters that had been written by Elsie's two husbands, which had remained untouched for many years. Sally said that the

discovery had awakened an interest in her family history and she described her research as 'going on a journey'. Sally felt that the experience had changed her life and given her fresh insights into lives lived many years ago.

Elsie May lived from 1899-1997. She was raised in Newfoundpool. She had a strict upbringing. She was very affected by the poverty around her and she wrote an article for a local magazine describing the conditions of poor people in Leicester. She was a committed socialist and this had a bearing on her general outlook on life. She was also interested in theosophy, which explores the nature of divinity on the origin and purpose of the universe. At the age of 18 she ran away to Witham in Essex to marry Harold. In that era such behaviour would have seemed very daring and foolhardy.

Harold came from a large family who had been brought up in the slums of Atherstone. Many of his brothers and sisters died from the conditions in



which they lived. Sally discovered that Harold had a brother called George. He was a 'difficult' child and ended up in Desford Industrial School located just outside Botcheston. It later became Desford Boys School, which was an Approved School and is now derelict: the forerunner to Young Offenders Centres. Apparently, George's name is on a memorial stone at the site of the old school. George fought in The Great War and eventually died of a head injury.

Harold and Elsie were often apart because of the nature of his job. He wrote a series of amusing and affectionate letters (discovered in the desk). Some of these were read out by members of the audience during the talk to great effect. Harold became ill and stayed in a convalescent home to recover. Meanwhile Elsie and Harold had a bungalow purpose built for them in Newtown Linford close to the entrance of Bradgate Park. Tragically Harold died of a stroke on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1938 in his early forties. There is a gravestone for him in Newtown Linford cemetery. Elsie was left to bring up 3 children on a pension of 21 shillings a week. She opened her bungalow as a guest house to make ends meet. Elsie met Cyril and married him in 1941. It is thought they met through their common theosophical interests. They moved to Thornton. Elsie died age 98.

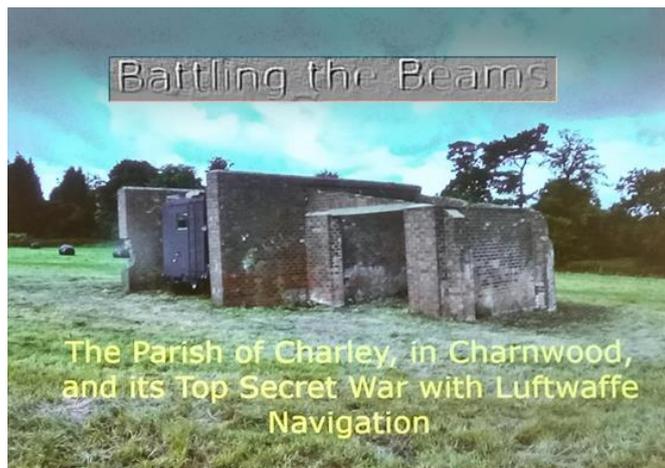
The talk was fascinating because it illustrated beautifully how the particular details of a family study can give rise to wider issues in society. Topics such as poverty, slum dwelling, wars, infant mortality, politics, religion, health and family life were all touched on.

David Marcus

## The Battle of the Beams

November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018

What a fascinating talk from Terry Sheppard of the Charley Heritage Trust this was. He was so enthusiastic and certainly knew his subject and although quite a bit was, for me, too technical, it still was quite riveting, and I learnt so much not just about the beam deflector in Charnwood but also elsewhere.



The building, hidden deep in Charnwood was one of the secret weapons invented during the war by R.V. Jones that interfered with a German invention that used radio beams whereby bombers hit very specific targets in all weathers, by navigating along these beams with extreme accuracy. These hidden installations were able to confuse the navigation system of

the bombers, so devastation was avoided.

*Molly Marcus*

*Short extract from 'WW2 People's War' (An archive of world War Two memories-written by the public gathered by the BBC).*

*'In the early part of the second World War the Germans began to use a radio beam system which they had been developing since the mid-thirties. It was a guidance system, which used intersecting radio beams to direct aircraft to any particular target in Britain.*

*A brilliant scientist, Professor R.V. Jones, working for British intelligence was responsible for investigating the German application of this system, and to discover a means of countering it.'*

*It became known as 'The Battle of the Beams'*

### From Caroline Wessel

Five members of our Society recently attended a WW1 Conference organised by the Academic Panel of *Centuries of Stories*, a four-year lottery-funded project to discover stories about Leicestershire people during WW1. The event, held at De Montfort University, The Venue, was free of charge and attracted a full audience of over 220 people, who also enjoyed a superb buffet lunch. Hosted by the Record Office's Senior Archivist, Robin Jenkins, seven academic papers of original research were presented on such diverse subjects as Hallaton village in WW1; Leicestershire's part in saving the nation from starvation; changing attitudes to WW1 war memorials; overseas soldiers buried in Welford Road

cemetery; the medical records of Leicestershire regiment soldiers regarding shellshock; what motivated Leicestershire men to enlist; and the world's only university founded as a war memorial - the University of Leicester.

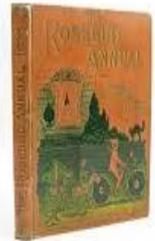
### **Just a little more about Caroline**

Caroline has served on the *Century of Stories* Academic Panel for the past four years and said that one of the greatest pleasures of her involvement was reading the number of fascinating papers submitted to the Academic Panel - though it was very hard to make the final choice as they were all of such high quality. Particularly exciting was the recent discovery of the Leicestershire Regiment' WW1 highly detailed medical record in the Public Record Office at Kew, that highlighted the tragedy of those suffering from shell-shock before it was acknowledged as a medical condition.

Caroline has also said she has Betty's Dickson's alphabetical card index listing details of many, many Desford history items. They should make for fascinating reading our future newsletters. Here is a taster - thanks Caroline in advance of more to come, (*Molly Marcus*)

#### **ARTISTS-**

Frederick Rust lived in Main Street and his studio was the big tin-roofed shed by the footpath. He painted watercolours of many local views, including one of Church Lane in 1897. He shared his studio with Mr T.C. Lawrence, who lived at Bufton lodge, Botcheston and illustrated children's books. In 1898 Desford school teacher, Mrs Orton, was a model for one of Lawrence's pictures that appeared in a children's annual entitled *The Rosebud*.



### **2019 AGM Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> January 2019 at 7.30pm in the Free Church**

Attached are AGM minutes for 2018, 2019 Agenda and nomination papers for the committee, which will be elected at the AGM. We welcome new committee members.

**PLEASE RETURN COMPLETED NOMINATION PAPERS TO ANGELA THOMAS BY FRIDAY JANUARY 11<sup>TH</sup> AT 8 OXFORD ROAD.**

It would be helpful if you can print out the minutes and agenda to bring to the meeting. Yearly subscriptions (£12) will be collected. Please encourage your friends and neighbours to join the society.

The AGM will be followed by a refreshment buffet. Please bring some finger food to share. The meeting will continue with mini talks and video clips from our archives.

*Angela Thomas, Secretary*