

*From Hetfelle to Hatfield - over 1000 years of history*  
**HATFIELD LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY**

NEWSLETTER NO 78 September 2010

### NIGHT FLYING AT HATFIELD AERODROME

Last year the University won a grant to record the oral history of De Havillands and many local folk, who'd had an association with the aircraft company, provided their recollections to the De Havilland Reminiscence Project through a series of tape recorded interviews.

We learnt that there is a proposal to erect new signage around the old airfield site, describing something of Hatfield's important aviation history. We also learnt that the iconic De Havilland's beacon is to be purchased, when funds allow, and erected on the roundabout by the Bishops Square Business Park entrance.

However, there was an earlier beacon as HLHS member, Ben French, recalls:

In 1930 the De Havilland School of Flying arrived in Hatfield, from Stag Lane, where it carried on training pilots for the RAF. The aircraft used at that time were DH 9J's and Gipsy Moths.

In 1935 the name changed to No.1 Elementary and Reserve Flying Training School, teaching Short service Commission and Volunteer Reserve pilots to fly. By 1938 two Hawker Hart dual control trainers, painted yellow, were used for night flying, where circuits and landings were carried out on Friday nights.

At sunset, or after a day's flying had finished, a flare path was laid out using 'Gooseneck' flares. These were similar to a short oval watering can, with a wick protruding from a large spout - the can being filled with paraffin.

An Engineer and myself would lay out the flare path. For this we used an old Humber Snipe open car. The rear seat had been removed and we loaded up the space with the cans, then placed them in two lines along the aerodrome (*as a runway*) wide enough in the middle for the aircraft to take-off and land. Each flare was lit as we placed it in position. We'd then return to the electricians store to load up with small electric lamps called 'Glim Lamps', which were used to define the aerodrome boundary. However, the flare path was illuminated by a 'Chance Light' which was positioned to one side (Chance was the company name of the maker).



CHANCE LIGHT FOR NIGHT FLYING.

On standby, in case of emergency, was an ambulance (driven by a qualified first-aider) and a fire-truck (driven by an engineer or myself). In retrospect, it was amazing that we were not actually given any formal instructions to operate the fire fighting equipment, which mainly consisted of several large extinguishers that would discharge foam. Fortunately we never used them.

The Chance Light was a high power electric lamp, and generator, mounted on a trailer. When switched on, pheasants would wander into its path to feed under its light. But when the aircraft took-off the birds would take flight and sometimes get caught in the bracing wires of the undercarriage. *Contd....*

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### *Night Flying Continued*

It was not uncommon to see an instructor searching the path for his Sunday dinner!

Flying usually finished at midnight and there was an agreement with the local Council not to fly after this time. Whatever time we finished it still took us another hour to pack away the equipment before we could go home. My engineer partner would drive the car along the flare path, with me crouched on the car's running board gripping the door. As we came to a flare can, I would grab the handle of the can and push the wick down the spout with a long rod, then place the can in the back of the car. We became so adept at this routine that we never had to stop the car. But one night I had not pushed the wick down far enough and set fire to the back of the car - which we frantically put out.

Sometimes the driver would shout "Hang on" and speed after a hare caught in the glare of the headlights. On one occasion we skidded on the wet grass, as the hare turned, and we nearly ended up in the Ellen brook. We decided that our type of hare coursing was too dangerous after that. *(the Ellenbrook stream was later piped under the airfield runway site, for about 1/4 of a mile, until opened up and channelled again in 2002 - Ed's)*

Although I was salaried, flat rate overtime was paid for night flying duties, but only between 10pm and 1 am. For my three hours worked I would receive 1s 6d (9p). But I viewed unsocial hours as being just part of the job.

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### **The House in the Woods**

*Ben French recalls the old cottage that Bob Padgett mentioned in the June newsletter:*

At Christmas 1940, the Flying Training School closed for a week's holiday. As the School was run along the lines of an RAF Station, Don Lawrence and myself volunteered to work during the shut-down to service any RAF aircraft that may visit. Don had a good knowledge of the area as his father had been responsible for turning the former Sinclair's farmland into an aerodrome. Don told me about the house in the woods, which he believed had been a Gamekeeper's cottage. One day, to relieve the boredom, we decided to investigate and found the house. Chickens were running around loose amongst the trees and an elderly lady appeared at the door. It was obvious that we were intruding and so we left. It was rumoured that this lady was a recluse who wrote books - Who knows?

*(people from nearby Smallford referred to it as The Poets House - Ed)*

During the 1950s or 60s a fire started while the elderly lady was in hospital and the house was virtually destroyed *(as a home)*. Sometime after the fire I decided to pay the house a visit. The remains were a sorry sight. There were dozens of books scattered about the undergrowth but, naturally, unreadable. A sad end to a person's home.

*(Ken Brandon recalls 100s of books scattered around!)*

### **Kybes Green (near Essendon)**

Brian Lawrence's article in the June newsletter revealed that he had family once living in the small settlement named Kybes (or Kibes) Green, near Essendon. The Census of 1861 appears to reveal five families living there. The family heads were all male and listed as Agricultural Labourers. They were:

1. William Marten (aged 60) with nine others.
2. Thomas Warren (48) with five others.
3. John Venables (58) with five others.
4. Frederic Valentine (39) with nine others.
5. William Valentine (48) with five others. (Frederic Valentine was Brian Lawrence's Great Grandfather)

### **Dates for the diary:**

**Monday 13th September** 7:15 for a 7:30 start: Paul Chamberlain: Bone, straw and paper; how French prisoners of war occupied their time

**Thursday 14th October** 2:15 for a 2:30 start: Ken Cain The Quaint & Quirky of Hertfordshire Part 1

**Monday 8th November** 7:15 for a 7:30 start: Tom Doig Hatfield in the Domesday Book

**Thursday 9th December** 2.15 for a 2.30 start

This will be an open meeting. Daphne Knott from Hertfordshire Archive and Local Studies library will be showing us our we can look at and add items to the Our Hatfield part of the Herts Memories website. This will be a chance to talk and share memories of Hatfield. No computer knowledge needed.

All meetings are held at Friendship House, Wellfield Road, Hatfield.

All welcome. Members £1 non-members £2

## THE WHITE LION PUB

The current White Lion Square, in the town centre, was named after the pub that stood roughly where the Pound Shop (formerly Rumbelows) now stands.

The WEA book, *Pubs and Publicans*, states only that the White Lion was sited in the St.Albans Road (that ran through the town centre during the 1950s - and before the town centre was developed). It was first mentioned in 1850, when owned by the Bradshaw family whose brewery was sited immediately behind the pub. It later came under the ownership of the Hatfield Brewery and Benskins.

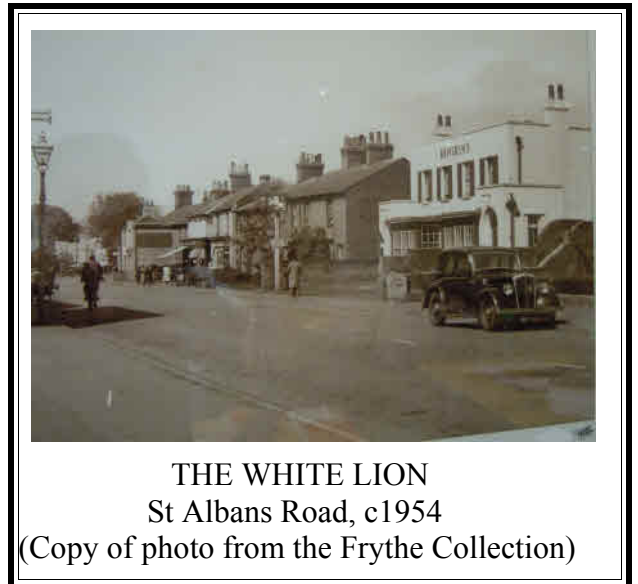
Ken Brandon frequented the White Lion as a young man returning from Army service in the late 1940s. He recalls it as the most modern pub in the area at the time, giving an indication that it must have been rebuilt since the original pub opened a century earlier. It was detached, probably rendered, and painted in a cream colour.

Behind the pub was a Salvation Army Hall (*possibly converted from an old brewery building?*). Mr. Dick Price was the landlord at the time, "a gentleman publican" as Ken recalls. There was a central entrance which led to a small lobby and 6ft counter. It was here that off-sales were served. People would bring in their own jugs and bottles for take-away beer from the pump. Despite its small size, the lobby acted as a third bar. It was quite common to see half a dozen people stood drinking within it - sometimes due to the busyness of the other bars.

Under age drinking was not tolerated in those days and, as everyone seemed to know each other, the chances of getting away with it were slim! There was a Public bar and Saloon. The only entertainment was the dart-board in the Public bar. The White Lion had a darts team and plenty of rivals on account of the many local pubs existing at the time. The furnishings in both bars were pretty basic, just wooden tables and chairs.

Ken's 'usual' was a pint of Benskins Mild, his wife, Olive, favoured a gin & lime.

Ken also has a photo showing he and 26 other White Lion regulars setting off for a seaside 'jolly' coach trip to Southend in 1953. A fairly common event for pubs of the day.



THE WHITE LION

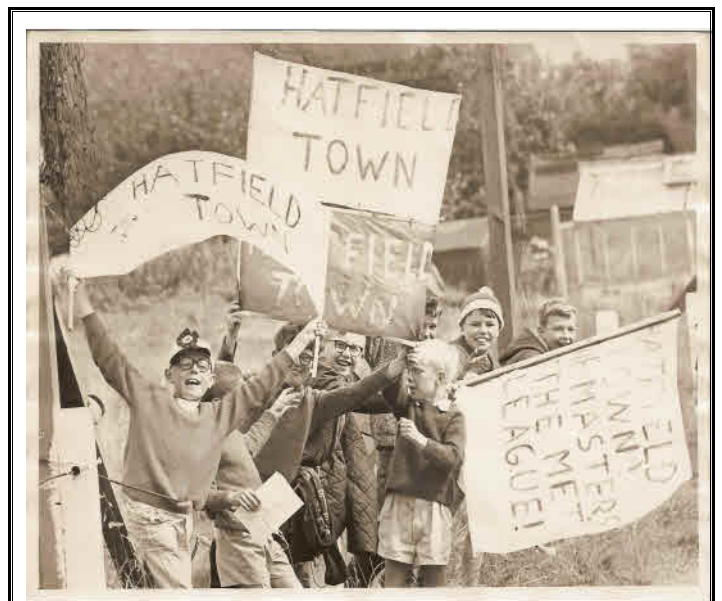
St Albans Road, c1954

(Copy of photo from the Frythe Collection)

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MIGHTY HATFIELD HUMBLE SPURS ran the Hatfield Herald headline as goals from Tennant, Burns and Butterfield saw Hatfield Town beat the famous Tottenham Hotspur 3-2 at Stonecross Road. This was during the 1966-67 season when the Town were in the Metropolitan League playing against the 'A' sides of Spurs, Arsenal, West Ham, Wimbledon and Stevenage - to name a few! The Club were a semi-pro team then and played in front of some mighty crowds too. Just two years later the Club unveiled plans to completely redevelop their ground. Sadly the £100,000 they needed did not materialise, and less than ten years later they were preparing to vacate Stonecross Road to make way for housing. In 1980 the Club moved to Angerland Common but, sadly, after only 5 seasons they folded, citing financial problems. They reformed in 1989 and tried vainly

### 1966 and all that. Young fans at Stonecross Road



to secure a permanent home ground but, instead, have lead a nomadic life, and this will be the 5th season that the Club haven't even played in Hatfield! In 2006 planning permission was granted to build an impressive football stadium at Angerland Common, but the University closed the site down to build their massive Park & Ride in 2004 and have not re-opened the playing fields, as expected - with planning permission to build the Stadium expiring last year. Hatfield does not now have one senior club playing within the town, but the campaign goes on. If you wish to help, contact Jon via [hatfieldhistory@ntlworld.com](mailto:hatfieldhistory@ntlworld.com)

## THE GUN BUTTS at De HAVILLAND's by Ben French

*In June's newsletter we produced a photo of the 'gun butts' wall which was sited on the edge of Round Wood - being well away from the aircraft factory buildings and runway. The large wall was demolished a couple of years ago and now only large concrete foundation slabs remain. Further to our enquiries, it seemed very few people had a recollection of this aspect of Hatfield's aviation history - until now:*

The gun butts at Round Wood were built in the early days of WW2 and were to be ready for testing the .303 Browning machine guns and the 20mm cannons of the prototype Mosquito fighter plane (W4052) which first flew on the 15<sup>th</sup> May 1941. Five days later the Mosquito was jacked up at the butts to simulate its flying position. Firing started with single shots, building up to longer and longer bursts. After each firing, stringent inspection was carried out - not only for target alignment, but to see if the recoil of the cannons caused damage to the wooden airframe - an issue the attending Air Ministry Gun Specialist had concerns about. However the tests soon dispelled these fears.

Later the gun butts would have been used for the Vampire and Hornet fighters.

There was also a row of three flat roofed, solidly constructed brick buildings in the woods nearby. These had heavy steel doors and were used to store ammunition. *(Demolished in 2009-Ed)*.

Only the prototype aircraft were tested this way. It must be remembered that security was very tight at the time and, unless one was involved with this project, not a lot of people would know what actually went on. Post War the butts were possibly used to see how much damage would be caused by bird strikes to the Comet and Trident jet airliners.

Previous to the above, between 1935-1939, another brick wall gun butts were used for target practice by the trainee pilots of No.1 Elementary and Reserve Flying Training School (on what was to become the Dynamics site). These butts were adjacent to the former Sinclairs farmhouse (Harpfield Hall) and were later to become the De Havilland Engine Company Test Beds. I was a trainee Ground Engineer at the time and I would be detailed to drive Len Gaskin, the Flying School Armourer, over to the butts where he would level the piled up sand and strip and clean the .303 Lee Enfield rifles of World War One vintage!

The old farmhouse was derelict but part of an orchard was still there. During the apple season I would fill a box and take them back to the lads in the hangar. The high wall of these butts remained for many years after the war.

In about 1960 other testing was carried out at the Halford Laboratory *(Dynamics, Manor Road site)* for damage caused to jet engines through bird strikes. Live chickens were delivered to the site. One would be killed and, while still warm, placed in a special gun. The jet engine would be run at maximum revolutions and the chicken was then fired into the front of the engine. The engine would be shut down and then investigations would be carried out to see what damage was done to the compressor blades and engine.

*(A story abounds where the Americans bought into this emerging technology and somebody mistakenly used a frozen chicken - with catastrophic consequences! -Ed)*



*The Antiques Roadshow comes to town*

Many hopeful people withstood the rain in the hope that their 'antiques' may prove valuable at Hatfield Park in July. One local winner was a Mr. L, whose Victorian Hunter fob watch was valued at £8,000. He thought it was worth £400. A pristine 1926 boxed set of Hardy's fly-fishing rods, reels & flies was valued at £1,800 - the box was designed to fit on the running board of its wealthy owner's Rolls Royce! Mrs Double's 1890 majolica ware jug, festooned with colourful lizards & beetles was valued at c£800. However, Mr. Wilson's Fry's chocolate 'five boys' c1910 enamelled advertising sign would've been worth £1000, but proved to be a 1980 reproduction. Wooden spoon goes to Lorraine Horne who queued for 6 hours in the rain with her 1950s brass carriage clock only to discover it was worthless without its original packaging. She now intends to sell it at the Birchwood car-boot sale!