

From Hetfelle to Hatfield - over 1000 years of history

## HATFIELD LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER No. 94 September 2014

### WW1 TANK TRIALS IN HATFIELD

**The following transcript was taken from a BBC interview with Lord Salisbury. He recounts:**

‘This is a letter from Winston Churchill dated 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1919 to my great grandfather. And he was writing after the end of the war because initial trials for the first tank had taken place, in secret, in Hatfield Park at the beginning of 1916. And it reads:

*My Dear Salisbury, It would give the Army Council, and myself, very real pleasure if you would consent to accept one of the original tanks and put it in your park at Hatfield. I need not say again what my predecessors and I have felt, as to the immense help you gave the Government when the tanks were, at first, a matter of experiment by allowing us to make trials in secret at Hatfield. And I thought you would, perhaps, like to have one of the earliest types as a memento of the days when we were allowed to make free within the privacy of your grounds.*

*Yours sincerely  
Winston S. Churchill.*

Lord Salisbury continues:

‘We loved playing in it, everybody played in it. And it was a great feature of Hatfield life until the early 1970s. Even for a small boy it was very cramped indeed. There were holes in it and one of the doors had fallen off, as I remember, and they’d taken the engine out. The guns were pretty wonky on the side, everything was rusted up and there were a lot of sharp edges. And I remember one used to cut and bruise oneself quite a lot climbing

through. The noise [in use] must have been terrific and I don’t think there was anything between your head and the steel side of the tank - that, I do remember!

It was deteriorating very fast, so my grandfather sent it, in the early 70s, shortly before he died, to the tank museum at Bovington, who restored it magnificently and made it the centrepiece of one of their principal exhibits about the First World War. It’s now clearly in the right place.’

Lord Salisbury then reads some extracts taken from the tank trials of 1916 from a work called ‘Tanks 1914-1918: Logbook of a Pioneer’ by Lieutenant Colonel Sir Alfred Stone:

*February 8<sup>th</sup>, His Majesty the King visited Hatfield where a*



**Lord Salisbury**

#### **Contact the Editors:**

c/o Mill Green Museum, Hatfield, AL9 5PD

Chairman: **Mrs Chris Martindale**



*special demonstration was arranged. He took a ride in the tank and said afterwards that he thought such a weapon would be a great asset to the Army [if] possessing a large number. ‘And that’s why (laughs) they dug those trenches right across the (Parks’) golf course; can’t have done it much good, could it?’ End*



**1916: A tank undergoing trials in Hatfield Park**



**2014: The ‘Hatfield’ tank restored**

The tank, known as Mark 1 or ‘Mother’ arrived at night by train at Hatfield Station in late January 1916. King George IV witnessed the trials along with political leaders and senior military officers. There too was Lord Kitchener, ‘who was not impressed and left early’.

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### **Philip Porter’s Memories:**

An article in the September 2013 newsletter “Removal of Graves from Park Street Chapel” prompted Philip Porter to recall some of his early childhood memories living close to the graveyard and to send a photograph of his Father in the garden of the ‘Vicars House’ No. 20 Park Street which was in front of the graveyard.

Philip recalls the layout of the buildings. By the side of 20 Park Street there was a long garden and driveway. The driveway gave access to the ‘Servants House’, with coal cellar below, where the Callaghan family lived. This house also had an interconnecting door to 20 Park Street. Then there was a small washhouse with a copper. The next building was the ‘Sunday School Room’ which in Philip’s early days was the home of an elderly couple Mr & Mrs Smith. Then there were two toilets (the only toilets) and lastly the garage for the Vicars’ car. Philip used to look forward to the days when Mr Jim Smith and later his son Ralph came to cut the grass in the graveyard. They had a key, as well as Philip’s Mother, (Philip’s Father died in 1960 from what is now known as asbestosis). When the grass was cut Jim Smith often brought Philip and his brother David a Walls cornet or brickette in wafers, this had been a treat Philip’s Father had often brought home after finishing work either at the nursery on the A1000 near Welham Green or gardening for Mr Burrows at the Marshmoor Cycling Cafe.

The photograph, taken in the late 40’s or early 50s, shows Philip’s Father, Leonard Porter with Cubby their Old English Sheep Dog, in the garden of 20 Park Street. Behind Leonard are the gates and grounds of Park Street Chapel. The rear of the houses in Chapman’s Yard can be seen in the top right hand corner. This area is now part of Park Close.





## CONFESSIONS OF A TELEPHONE ENGINEER AT BAe (Pt 1)

By Jon Brindle

To many folk in 2014, the large building on Mosquito Way with a Control Tower on its roof is the David Lloyd Health and Sports club. It opened as the Next Generation fitness club ten years ago and a banner, proudly emblazoned across an outside wall, proclaimed it as Europe's largest. But its original purpose, of course, was as the Comet Flight Shed, a hangar built by De Havillands in 1952 to service the Comet, the world's first passenger jet plane. By the late 1970's I had become a resident telephone engineer covering both the Aviation and Dynamics sites. I worked within the hangar too and, as a visitor now, I can still see some of my wiring leading to the former offices, 34 years later - and 20 years after the site finally closed!

Back in 1980 I was tasked to lead a gang with replacing the whole outside cabling network over (and under) the Aviation site. This was to be in readiness for the installation of a new, modern telephone exchange that my company were hoping to install as a replacement for the outdated Strowger model - with its noisy, chattering uni-selectors - which had been in use from the mid 1930s, some 45 years earlier. In 1980 many offices would still have two telephones per desk; one GPO (BT) phone for making external calls, and one of our phones for making internal calls. And many of our handsets were still the old original 1930's bakelite models with a dial as shown in the photo, below.



**Left:** A 1930s bakelite phone from De Havillands / Bae as used there in 1980.

**Right:** Its dial showing the emergency site numbers. Kay, a former switchboard operator, informs that the extension numbers for the control tower were 668 and 669 which followed on from the Fire Dept situated below the tower.



I was told that we were in competition for the new exchange with the mighty GPO and that both our companies were in a race to prove they had a whole new cabling network in place to support the proposed new telephone system.

When it came to re-wiring the site I chose the hangar building to be cabled first, because it was the furthest run from the telephone exchange. The GPO did too, as they thought it a good idea for us rivals to work together. It wasn't!

It proved a most difficult task having to force over 500 metres of heavy 100 pair, one inch thick armoured cable throughout ancient underground pipes which were often soiled up, flooded and barely big enough to accommodate it.

Standard good practice was always to leave another draw-rope in a pipe to allow further cables to be pulled through; but I deliberately didn't do this as we were in competition with the GPO. Our company were a bit of a rag-tag outfit who didn't much support us engineers with adequate equipment like drain rods or gear to help us lift heavy (or jammed) manhole covers etc. Me and my gang of four cable pullers were very much left to our own devices and we weren't even given plans of the route to take; just an enormous reel of cable and drum jacks to raise it. However, I made sure that we always started work well before the GPO arrived to enable us to steal a march on them. Fortunately I discovered an old lead sheathed cable that wasn't in use, which I cut and used as a draw-wire to pull ours through -

and aided by squirts of washing up liquid to lubricate the cable as we tugged and heaved. Using these defunct lead cables also provided us with a good incentive as we would sell it for scrap at Smallford; loads of it. This set a profitable precedent for the rest of our work over the entire site, which got cabled with amazing speed thereafter! And we'd often have a pint or two in the Stonehouse or Barley Mow after a visit to the scrap yard. The generic term 'bluey' was given to all scrap cables, but actually referred to the blue colour given off by burning lead. Copper burnt green. - not that we needed to burn any.

We were a happy bunch and would laugh as the hapless GPO arrived for work replete with all manner of proper equipment like motorised winches, pumps and lifting gear - everything, it seemed, apart from helicopters and submarines! As we got farther ahead of them, I made sure that the difficulties we had faced were going to be far worse for them following behind. And whenever they complained I'd tell them to speak to Eddie our Phillipino 'foreman' whose broken English and strong accent only helped stall our rivals further. As it happened, our company won the contract to supply the new telephone system, whilst the GPO were still pointlessly battling to install cabling that they would never use. All's fair in love and war, I suppose!

### **ROCK AROUND THE BLOCK: FILM**

In June the 'premiere' of the above film was shown to an invited audience at Breaks Manor. The purpose for producing it was to complete a trilogy of Society projects that had chronicled Hatfield's pop music legacy through a book of the same name, and a double CD containing songs written and recorded by Hatfield musicians. The film has a uniquely entertaining concept where a spoof 'Juke Box Jury' panel of celebrities - from the black & white TV days of 1960 - pass judgement on colourful songs from the future which they can see performed through the monitor of a time machine. The film features great songs by unknown Hatfield pop acts of the 1970's & 80's who once performed at the Breaks Manor youth centre in Hatfield; a venue that also helped launch several international stars from the town. All the action was filmed at the Breaks and it is hoped that it will stimulate performing arts students to use the great facilities available there - including a recording studio. The film can now be seen on Youtube by typing in the search words:  
Rock Around The Block - Breaks Manor



Photo by Lynn Stevens

### **SPONTANEOUS WW1 SERVICE**

Monday 4th August marked the centenary of Britain's entry into the 'war to end all wars'. Amid some criticism, our local authorities had appeared to overlook such a nationally commemorated event with a service for Hatfield, from where 172 men of the Parish were lost. But a hasty appeal on the day via local Facebook groups saw around 70 people turn up and lay candles at the monument in the Memorial Garden as the names of the fallen were read out. A minute's silence followed at 10pm.