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HATFIELD LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

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My Grandad's New Boots, or The Day Hatfield Was Bombed: 3rd Oct. 1940

By Richard Ingrey

My mother's father (Mr Robert Marjoram) was one of the engineers to make the move from Stag Lane (Edgeware) with the de Havilland Aircraft Company to Hatfield. He was a gifted motor-engine mechanic, being a natural carpenter and metal-worker, mixed with a detailed understanding of hydraulic systems; he fitted into de Havilland like a hand in a glove. Robert was born in the East End of London in the Manor Park area of East Ham. During WW1, he worked in bomb disposal. He ran the first motor-cycle delivery service in the area, soon followed by the first taxi company. In those days, it was hard to make it pay and was not easy. He was always interested in flight and its related mechanical issues, hence the move to de Havilland.

He was housed in Cumberland Court (opposite the company's new factory) and lived there for many years with his wife and daughter (my mother). On the day in question, my mother was home from school due to tonsillitis. It was a cold damp time, but nothing stopped the factory from doing the work required to keep the aircraft being designed, built and tested. So, on the day in question, he went to work on a very cold damp day (having used all his shoe coupons the previous day) in his shiny brand-new workman's Toetector boots – which were hard to get, "cost the earth" but made to last for at least two years of hard-working daily wear; this strand of the story we will come back to.

Bomb damage to the 94 shop

He settled into his working shift (there were three eight-hour rolling shifts at that time). Not much time had elapsed and his duties had him crossing from one workshop to another to the 94 workshop [*originally the assembly shop for the DH 94 Moth Minor*] when the alarm sirens started up. Within a few minutes, an enemy plane flew over the edge of the air-field quite by chance and had spotted the factory site.

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The twin-engine Junkers Ju 88 appeared to fly quite low over the airfield and, when it returned to the factory buildings from the far side of the airfield to commence its long bomb run, some of the workshop hangar buildings were still half-opened (to facilitate airframe and aircraft movements) giving the workers no time to clear away aircraft and other equipment at all. The ongoing work in the 94 workshop was the usual orderly well-oiled machine it always was; the big doors were half open with aircraft/airframes, men and equipment flowing as usual, getting the most from the shift they were working, so it was impossible to close the doors in the few seconds remaining to them as nearly everyone was heading for the nearest air-raid shelter.

A de Havilland air raid shelter

The pilot realised he had to bounce his bombs into the buildings because he was too low to bomb them, and this he did. Of the four bombs dropped, two exploded outside the hangar and the other two inside, wreaking maximum damage in the 94 workshop. There was destruction, broken people and planes, with death and carnage everywhere.

The anti-aircraft guns mounted on top of the factory buildings had been put there in the hope that they would never have to be used. Furthermore, they had orders not to fire at all because the site would then be spotted by the enemy. Accessing the guns meant climbing very many stairs and, whilst the crews trained for all aspects of their use, but to get to them quickly, there was a problem. The man in charge of the guns and gunners was a works-foreman by day, and an ARP warden if a raid was to happen. But the gunners, who were fast in both ascending the stairs and operating the guns (as proved previously in training) were able to effect their gunnery skills to very good measure and this was the only time that they fired in anger.

By this time, the guns mounted on the main building roofs had "opened up" but they were just making the pilot's bomb-run much more harder to get right; this was because they were never supposed to be fired as they were just for show with orders not to fire as that would get the site noticed. As the situation played out, it became trouble for everyone involved, both during and afterwards.

As the guns "opened up", the bombs dropped, bounced and lost their fins/tails but carried on into the 94 hangar/workshop. My grandfather and his best mate were making for one of the two air-raid shelters within the building (both rear left and right corners). They had been built robustly but not strong enough to take a direct hit – as one of them certainly did.

The stricken Junkers 88 Bomber

There was great loss of life across the hangar as a whole, but the biggest concentration was the shelter. It was as simple as this; my grandfather went one way and his best mate ran to the other shelter. It was just as it happened; they both left the main area but split and my grandfather never knew how or why. In the next few days and weeks, some of the injured still had very bad wounds indeed.

Within minutes, the German plane had limped off in the WGC-Hertford direction but, losing height, it crashed at East End Green.

The guns were shut down and the foreman later complained that standing orders meant they were not to fire – but what could they have done? The factory had been found and they could not let the Ju 88 radio home or fly away to escape.
As soon as all the dead, injured, dying and the shocked workers were taken away from the bloody mess that used to be the 94 workshop, all the available on-site workers streamed in, cleared up and cleared out any broken or damaged equipment from it and its neighbouring buildings and, after some days, the work went on. As soon as word had gone round (within a few minutes), all off-shift/duty people just rocked up, signed on and did what they could to turn the factory round so it could carry on fulfilling its work-orders.

All in all, most other lines were soon working as normal (except for the reinstalling of 94's machinery, equipment and ancillary fittings, but all of that was working again a month later). The 94's complete refit was done swiftly with the hangar doors being repaired/replaced to keep the cold wind and rain out. All the roof, with any windows, were dealt with to make the building workable and most of it was done 24 hours-a-day – no days off still with the rolling three 8-hour shift pattern as before, with all the ancillary services reinstated and the production barely halted.

It was a while before the pre-bombing damage was completely reversed but everyone just got on with their work. Meanwhile, upstairs there were some interesting meetings going on regarding how to proceed with any future air raids (and the operation of the guns) as the event had highlighted the way they would have to make improvements to defend the factory. In the local area were a few anti-aircraft batteries sited quite close to the airfield and factory. One was in a field at Ellenbrook Lane with a second at the top of the hill off Briars Lane; how long they were there, how large, or how many guns they had I do not know. Perhaps someone from your society could find out. As a child I walked over the Briars Lane site which is now a playing field.

Later when the dust had settled, the loss of life came to 21 dead on the day and a few more later. With approaching 80 workers injured with a wide range of injuries (including many life-changing), a lot of highly skilled people had to be replaced in a hurry whilst others had to be trained up to fill the gaps; so some people were brought in from the other five de Havilland factories from around the country.

A memorial plaque recording the event was mounted within the factory site (close to the 94 building) within a short time. No-one was ever going to forget that day for a very long time. When the airfield and factory were later demolished to become housing, offices and other modern buildings, the memorial was moved a short distance away and re-erected.

Back in 1936, when on a visit to London, Hitler's Ju 52 had had the chance to drift around the Home Counties and, whilst doing so, flew over various sites of interest including the airfield at Hatfield. This was not the only one but any within 40 miles from London seemed to get a "fly-by". Odd that! And both the government and the RAF let them; you try doing that now!

The Ju 88 that buzzed and bombed the factory was of the type that usually carried a 2,000 kg bomb load, comprising eight 250 kg bombs (or a mixture of larger or smaller varieties) but in

what order (or if singles or multiple releases) I do not know myself.
And by the time of the next few weeks of working continuous shifts like everyone else from the MD down to the lowest cleaner operative (including ALL of the departments), the job was done with no thought to their own time/effort or any cost to their own energies, and that included my grandad's brand-new pair of working boots that were ruined in all the post-bombing mess which he then had to use (along with his old boots) until late 1941 when he was able to get new ones.
Once WW2 was done, de Havilland knew that they would need a proper concrete runway (and extra hard standing-areas laid).
My grandad's best mate's first name was Richard; hence, when I came along (being the first boy), I became his namesake to replace the 'lost' Richard.
Both Robert and Richard worked together from their workstation/bench [in the '94' hanger]; hence, I became the replacement for my grandad's lost chum as both families lived and worked together.


The Junkers 88

Photographs by permisssion of BAE Systems

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FURTHER RECOLLECTIONS ON THE 94 SHOP De Hav BOMBING

By Harry Punter

Before WW2 my father was in the Hertfordshire Fire Service, stationed at Welwyn Garden City. Before the start of the war this became part of The National Fire Service. Together with crews from Hatfield, they attended the aftermath of the Bombing of the 94 shop. He talked of the horrors of nearly standing on a dead body in the confusion. When the fires and rescue was under control they were sent in small groups to the Canteen to get a mug of tea. He was a little surprised that payment was demanded. Nobody had instructed the Canteen staff, that the Firemen did not have money with them.
Throughout the war he was promoted to Leading Fireman and then Section Leader.
At the end of The Battle of Britain there must have been a surplus of Fireman and he took specialist training in Anti Gas precautions and Anti Personnel Weapons dropped by the Germans. One of the duties undertaken then was on the dummy Panshanger Airfield which was used to draw raiding bombers away from Hatfield.
There were lights set up so it looked from the air as if a door had been opened and shut. When bombs dropped, stacks of straw were set alight to attract more bombers.
Some nights many incendiary bombs would be dropped and because of the soft ground many did not ignite. These were collected, and the Magnesium powder emptied out, and the percussion cap exploded. Then were then made into table Lamps. They were not kept for long as the Magnesium body corroded so much.


A German incendiary bomb


How it may have looked as a table lamp

RAIL ACCIDENT AT HATFIELD STATION By Terry Cull

Hatfield Station was opened on 7th August 1850 and as it predated Welwyn Garden City by some 77 years it became an important junction station for the branch lines to Luton and Hertford and later to St Albans. The section of track north of the station comprised the two main lines the western "down" line to the north and a further six-foot east was the "up" line to London. Straddled either side of the main lines were the local branch lines to Luton to the west and Hertford to the east.

The station platform layouts in 1860 were the same as now, the down western platform being further north than the east up platform and linked by a foot bridge. The Station area itself however was considerably different. On both sides of the main tracks there was numerous shed and siding facilities, mainly to serve the local trains for St Albans, Luton and Hertford.

Railway accidents today are rare, we all remember the tragic derailing of the GNRE inter city 125 train in October 2000 with 70 injured and 4 fatalities but in post war modern times this stands out as the only incident of its type at Hatfield.

In the early days of the Victorian railway system things were different however, in the first 40 years of rail travel on the Great Northern Railway there were no less than 8 incidents of train collision or crashes in the vicinity of Hatfield Station alone.

The first occurred on Saturday 8th April 1856 when an "express" train from Hitchin ran into the back of a coal train waiting to be shunted into the sidings at Hatfield, shattering the rear trucks and destroying the express engine and at least one of the first-class carriages. All the passengers escaped with minor cuts and bruises and were able to continue on their journeys. All that is except one lady who was described as being "much cut about the face and preferring to stay in the Red Lion."

It wasn't long however before the railway was to claim its first victims at Hatfield.

The first fatal incident took place on 23rd April 1860 when an express train from Kings Cross travelling at 50 mph part derailed at the footbridge approaching Hatfield Station and killed a trackside plate layer named George Venables from Stevenage and an eminent passenger named Francis Leslie Pym, a magistrate from Bedford.

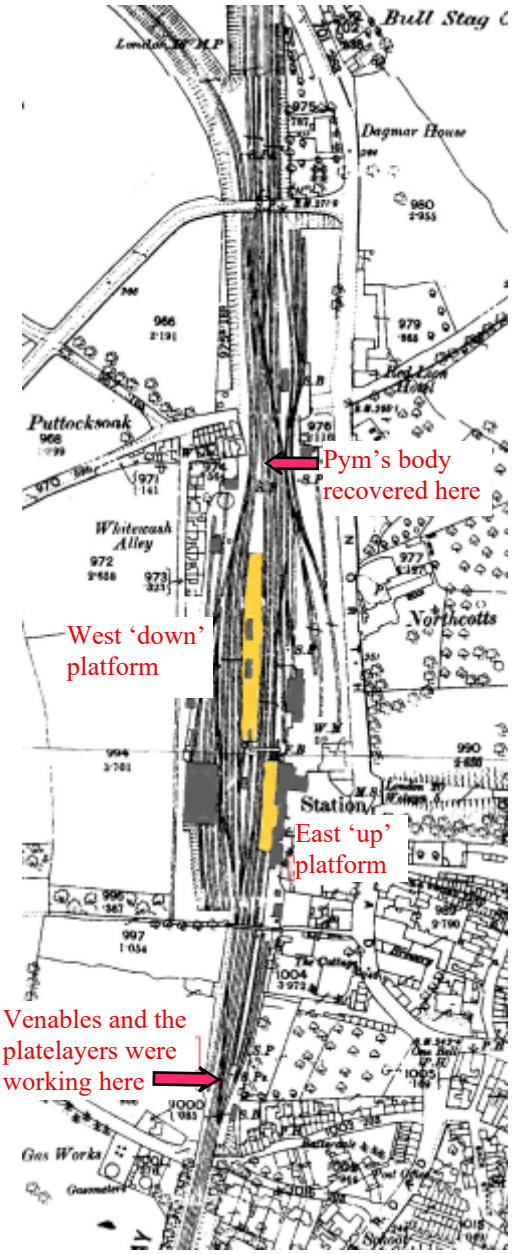
It appears Venables and two other plate layers had been working to repair the points which allowed trains to cross the main line from east to west and enter the west sidings opposite the station. They had removed a section of the points rail and lowered the track supporting ballast to the sleeper level. They insisted the work they had carried out did not compromise the structural stability of the track and both the 9.00 and 9.30 express train had passed safely (albeit before further ballast was removed). Charles Barfoot the driver of the 10.00 express described his engine oscillating badly when it reached the works snapping the main line rail and derailing part of the train. It had been hauling 9 passenger coaches, a brake and guards van.

A section of rail spun loose and struck Venables, who had taken refuge clear of the track on the west side, injuring him badly. the centre derailed carriages jack knifed, some hitting an oncoming coal train passing through the station, shattering the coaches and spraying coal dust everywhere and some mounting the west platform destroying part of the corbelling and platform surface, (the rebuilt section at the north end can be seen today). One coach hit the water crane north of the platform and the centre "Bradford" coach carrying Mr Pym was dragged on its side. The separated engine and van eventually coming to rest just before the Wrestlers' bridge. Mr Pym was found lying in the six-foot gap between the main lines just north of the station.

Surprisingly, as the middle derailed coaches were considerably damaged, most passengers were not severely injured and after the track was cleared they were able to carry on with their journey. Both Pym and Venables were carried on make-shift stretchers to the Red Lion where they were attended by Mr Osbaldeston, a Hatfield Surgeon. Mr Pym died within minutes and Venables some two hours later both from severe injuries and shock.

The Inquest into the accident and the fatalities took place on Wednesday 25th April 1860 at the Red Lion, Hatfield. The jury were given a gruesome tour of the crash site which still displayed bloodstains from the unfortunate Messrs Pym and Venables. Amazingly it was found that the accident was unavoidable and the Great Northern Railway Company were exonerated. This was despite the work being carried out at the time almost certainly weakening the rail which itself had recently been "turned"; a practice carried out by the railway company to turn worn section of rails upside down to increase their life. The broken section had a lateral crack which should have been spotted at this time.

It is doubtful therefore that Sarah Venables, Georges wife, received any compensation from the Company and was forced to raise her child and look after her pauper mother in Letchmore Green on a straw plaiters income.



Mrs Pym however fared a little better when she sued the Railway Company. It appears Francis had a sizeable estate but died without leaving a will, this meant apart from a small annuity to her, all his wealth went to the eldest son of his eight children. As this left the rest of the family severely disadvantaged Mrs Pym won awards of £3000 for herself and £1500 for her remaining seven children.

This outraged the right wing press of the time; the Daily Telegraph severely criticised the decision saying that the Company and its shareholders had not been held at fault and Mrs Pym's award had been based on her husbands negligence in not leaving a will.

In the early days of the railways safety was often compromised for profit and rail travel was accepted as having its risks. Further accidents occurred in the vicinity of the station in 1870, 1878, 1882, 1885 and 1889. By the turn of the century however new technology had brought considerable improvement and there have only been two incidents since 1900; the GNRE derailing previously mentioned, and a collision between an express and stationary train in Hatfield on 26th February 1939 resulting in several injured and one fatality.

All the injured and families of the deceased of those incidents would have received considerable compensation for their injuries and loss, unlike the family of George Venables, Hatfield's first victim of the new steam era.

PRE-NATIONAL HEALTH by Jean West

Further to our article about health care in Hatfield before the NHS (June 2019, issue 113) Jean West writes:

I was 17 when the NHS came into being, and there always seemed to be a doctor's bill awaiting payment on the mantlepiece – not a large bill usually but as most mothers didn't work then, a bite out of the wages.

Hatfield was fortunate with its doctors, and each had their own adherents, ours was Dr Godfrey Young, founder of the Lister House practise as it is now. He lived in St Albans Rd. and a dentist lived next door to him. Later on, came Dr Alwyn Jones, a short, dark haired Welshman and mostly our family went to him.

In our lane were a number of small bungalows in which some District Nurses lived. For a small subscription each week or month, they were much employed and loved by the ordinary families who perhaps preferred their services rather than always going to the doctor. They were kindly caring nurses who assisted childbirth and the care of young and old patients. Nurse Prince I remember as she was sent for when I had a deep cut on my knee after falling on gravel. I still have the scar on my right knee.

Home visits by doctors were fairly common; some homes were not the most satisfactory places for treating ailments – I recall my mother was very particular about the bathroom bowl being spotless plus a small linen hand towel was put out for the doctor to wash his hands after examining the patient.

When I was 7 I tumbled all the way down a flight of concrete steps above the shops on the corner of our lane, it's next to the florist nowadays, which followed a chasing game played with a friend who lived in one of the flats. I don't recall what damage I did, but I ended up in Barnet General Hospital but in the adult 'Nightingale Ward' because there was no bed available in the children's ward. The visiting hours were just Sunday and Thursday afternoons and it seemed a very long time between visits. If you wanted any food other than the standard hospital fare, you had to bring it in. I liked certain breakfast food and blackcurrant jam and eggs all of which had to accompany me. I don't recall how the hospital scheme worked – maybe you were charged according to your circumstances and ability to pay something towards the fees, perhaps my parents belonged to some scheme which covered the cost. My class at school wrote me a composite letter but I really wasn't 'ill' as such. Some of the nurses were rather abrupt and made no allowance for me being the only child in the ward. One even made one grown-up cry which upset me rather. To aid my recovery I was urged to walk and not stay in bed and I gave out red and green salt and pepper pots at dinnertime to all the other bedridden patients.

The next time I was in hospital was a year later (same ward, same venue) and that was a very painful time both physically and emotionally. I had a suspected mastoid in an ear and felt very unwell indeed. This time I wasn't allowed to roam about and got a letter telling me that 'something had happened to Grandad' and they couldn't visit me for a week but could send a kind neighbour instead. Poor woman, she gave up her time to catching probably 2 buses, and brought me reading matter plus my favourite sweets. I was so unhappy I could barely speak to her. My Grandad had of course died – why wasn't I told right out? I don't know but then death was rarely mentioned to children.

Dr Jones was a highly popular doctor and the only one I know of who had a party and presentation in the Memorial Hall when he eventually retired years later – all arranged by his patients. We were served well by all who administered to our medical needs prior to the NHS.

Arcadian Hatfield

In the early 1990s, writer Margot Strickland* was living in Wheathampstead, making regular contributions to *Hertfordshire Countryside* under the heading "Fanny's county diary". In one instalment she wrote about Old Hatfield, beginning with the arcade of shops running from the foot of Church Street to Fore Street. She gave her article the splendid title, "Arcadian Hatfield".

Her descriptions are purely poetic. She introduces the area:

"The late afternoon sun slices the columns marching majestically along the arcade, into shadows on the pavement; the select shops are reticently ranged, displaying their wares with an almost discouraging discretion."

Then, shop by shop, she follows trails of fancy – "Cruise-wear drapes the dress-shop window, bringing to mind travel agents' prose in which ...

"No castles, country-houses or cottages on the market in the estate-agent's window; they may be a dream of the past.

"Muted music conjures a vision ...

"Framed in the perspective of smooth white classical shapes stands the classic corner shop, homely and inviting, ... a hugger-mugger of objects, almost all of them as delightfully useless as music on a piano ... a gift-shop. Wooden toys, pretty aprons, pots, a little bird carved from a rare stone found only in Russia, blue and white china from Scandinavia ... used to be a barber shop in the 17th century ... Before that there was a lock-up for vagrants".

Margot paints a vivid picture of both past scenes, with "Ragged travellers trudging up the Great North Road ...".

Then she comes to "Fragrant honeysuckle, and honesty in an alleyway. A proudly-hooting train silhouetted crossing the bridge above the sprouting-summer roundabout" – and Jacob's Ladder. "The mysterious place is overhung with green branches ... The steps rise steeply ... An old stone generated the dream for which these steps are named. A ladder on which white-robed angels winged their harmonious way up and down the rungs...." *Genesis* is quoted. "To the top. Not the blue and white of the heavens but blue window shutters on a white cottage ..."

I know of no poetry about Hatfield, but this article comes close to it.

Hazel Bell

Society News

For latest information about Society events and the on-going impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, please refer to Bulletin No. 2 (1st August 2020) for details.

*Author of: *The Byron Women* (Peter Owen, 1974); *Angela Thirkell: Portrait of a Lady Novelist* (Duckworth, 1977); *Moura Lympany: Her Autobiography* (Peter Owen, 1991) as well as stories for magazines, essays, poems and plays.