

Back Then...

The Rodbourne
Arms, Cheney
Manor Road -
April 2011



The Swindon Society Newsletter - February 2025



...And More
Recently

Farmfoods -
January 2025



Welcome to the February Newsletter

Second month of the year already. Great.. spring is on its way!

Tonight, we are delighted to welcome the well respected Swindon Town FC historian, Dick Mattick. For this talk, Dick will be focusing on a man who was one of Town's greatest players, Harold Fleming. Not just a footballer by all accounts.

We're looking forward to this one so sit back, soak up the information and enjoy your evening.

As usual, if you have a story or memory you want to share, send it to me and I will fit it into the newsletter. More people are now sending me their thoughts which makes for an interesting and more diverse newsletter - and who doesn't like a lovely bit of nostalgia! Send anything to one of the email addresses below.

Finally, don't forget we still have vacancies for a couple of committee members. Please give your consideration to joining the committee. The more committee members there are, the more we can share the tasks of running the society - making the whole process much easier. It's not a difficult or demanding job, your opinion is what we need and what matters. So, if you can help us out, please let one of the committee know you are interested. Thank you!

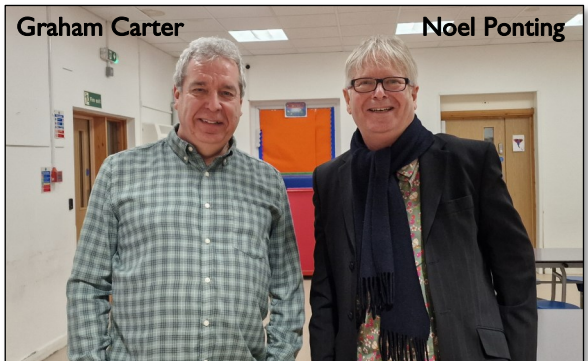
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Swindon Connections

Presented by

Graham Carter

8th January 2025



Graham Carter

Noel Ponting

We were enticed out of our homes on a snowy evening for a talk by Graham Carter last month, and we weren't disappointed. Graham took us down a Swindon-

shaped rabbit hole which began with Diana Dors and circled back round to her several times via many connections. Firstly, there was her connection to another 60s celebrity Desmond Morris. Long before they were both famous, Morris and Dors had a teenage fling and spoke about it on Parkinson in the 1970s. Desmond Morris is a grandson of William Morris – but there are three William Morrises with connections to our town! We have William the artist, the most famous of the three who lived in nearby Kelmescott; William who became Viscount Nuffield, founder of Morris Motors for whom Pressed Steel made car bodies; and finally, there is William the grandfather of Desmond and founder of the Evening Advertiser for whom there is a blue plaque on their old premises in Victoria Road. He was a champion of ordinary people and got

himself on the Board of Guardians for the Stratton Workhouse in order that he could protect the inmates.

Graham then spoke about his and Noel Ponting's latest book *Moonies, Movers & Shakers*, which is all about the Association of Wiltshiremen (or Moonies) in London and the remarkable people connected with this organisation. One such Moonie was Edwin James, who played bassoon at the first Proms concert and was a founder member and principal bassoonist of the London Symphony Orchestra, and later became its chairman. James was friends with the composer Edward Elgar, who composed the piece *Romance for Bassoon* for him. Edwin was one of a trio of musical brothers and they all variously played at royal events such as the funeral of Queen Victoria and the coronation of King George V. Graham then told us about another Royal player, Richard Horsington, who played football for Royal Arsenal having been poached from Swindon Town. Another formerly Swindon-based footballer Henry Offer also played for Royal Arsenal, but neither man played professionally. They did, however, both play in the 10-1 win against Tottenham Hotspur in 1889 – a record score that has never been beaten.

We next heard about James Bomford, who bought a farm in Aldbourne and was known for throwing parties for the rich and famous, such as Diana Dors and Dylan Thomas. He didn't know how to run a farm though so employed another Morris - Johnny (no relation to Desmond) – as estate manager. Bomford was also an art collector – his generous gift became the foundation of the collection now housed in Museum & Art Swindon in Euclid Street. At this point Graham showed us the beautiful painting *Girl Selling Flowers* by Desmond Morris, which features Diana Dors. William Morris (the Adver one) and James 'Raggy' Powell were also both early donators to what became the museum collection.



(c) Desmond Morris
Image courtesy of Museum & Art Swindon

Museum & Art Swindon began life in Regent Circus, then moved to Aspen House before re-opening in 2024 in Euclid Street. On display there is Bruce the Dog's collection box and in 1912 he collected for survivors of the Titanic. Swindon lost two of its own on the infamous ocean liner – Benjamin and Ellen Howard, who had written



letters from their Cheltenham Street home only days before sailing. Another Titanic connection is Frederick Reddick, who was born in Badbury and worked at the Harland & Wolff shipyard in Belfast whilst it was being built. The new location of Museum & Art Swindon in the Civic Offices is connected to Thomas Newman, who was Mayor of Swindon and instigated its creation. He was Mayor in 1924 during the royal visit of King George V and Queen Mary and they were given a tour

of the Works by Charles Collett. Collett designed the engine King George V, which is now on display at STEAM. There is a model of the train in the Mayor's Parlour in the Civic Offices which was donated by Collett, but one was also owned by Walt Disney, who was a railway enthusiast. There is also a statuette of Mickey Mouse in the Mayor's Parlour, which was sent to the town as part of the year-long twinning with Disney World in 2010. Swindon is also twinned with Salzgitter in Germany, Ocotal in Nicaragua and Torun in Poland. The latter was the birthplace of Renaissance polymath Nicolaus Copernicus. In another Swindon link, the Science Museum Library in Wroughton has a first edition of one of his works. Another first edition to be found in the library is *Notes on Nursing* by Florence Nightingale. Buried in Radnor Street Cemetery is Charlotte Wilsdon, who was a nurse in the Crimean War alongside Nightingale.



Portrait of Charlotte Wilsdon by Guggenheim, Regent Circus, Swindon

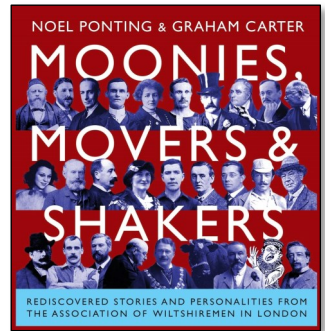
Circling back to Charles Collett, Swindon is connected to the Wizarding World as the Hogwarts Express used in the Harry Potter films is Olton Hall, designed by Collett. David Yates, who directed the final four Harry Potter films began his career in Swindon, making his first film with Create Studios. Staying on the theme of children's literature we learned that in the Thomas the Tank Engine series there are two GWR trains - Oliver and Duck (and if you've ever read these books, you'll know that Duck likes things to be "ship-shape and Swindon fashion"). City of Truro also makes an appearance in the books and was the first train to travel above 100 mph. Another speed record was held for eight days in 1953 by a Supermarine Swift (built in Swindon) that flew at 735 mph.



Graham then moved onto our spy connections; Ian Fleming lived in nearby Sevenhampton and often visited Highworth and its Post Office. That was where Churchill's secret army went to get their directions to HQ, which was Coleshill House, and Fleming's explorer brother Peter was one of those involved with these covert operations. Two of the James Bond films, based on Fleming's novels, have used locations in Swindon: Roger Moore came to the Renault Building for *A View to a Kill* and Pierce Brosnan filmed at the Motorola Building for *The World Is Not Enough*. We also then learned that Sherlock Holmes has a Swindon connection – he and Watson stopped here whilst travelling by train in *The Boscombe Valley Mystery*. Author Arthur Conan Doyle was a renowned believer in Spiritualism and said Gladys Osborne Leonard was "the greatest trance medium" he was acquainted with. Charles Collett was also a spiritualist and upon his death he bequeathed all of his money to her.

Coming back round to Diana Dors again, Graham revealed the Beatles links to the star and her home town. Dors features on the *Sgt. Pepper's* album cover (although it's

actually her Madame Tussaud's waxwork) and on the Abbey Road album cover the white VW Beetle has a Swindon registration plate. Abbey Road Studios has a blue plaque for Edwin James' friend Edward Elgar and it was also where XTC recorded their first two albums. EMI owned the studios and had a factory in Swindon on Penny Lane, just off of Drakes Way and the CDs manufactured there had EMI Swindon printed on the inner ring. The band also played at McIlroy's Ballroom on 17th July 1962, and finally George Martin lived in Coleshill.



Linking back to buildings along Drakes Way, the most important one was demolished in 1991 – the Reliance Controls building. Designed by architects Team 4 which included Norman Foster (he also designed the Renault Building), it was a ground-breaking hi-tech industrial design. Foster also designed the Great Court of the British Museum; and in their collections you can find items related to the Mondex card, which was trialled in Swindon in the 1990s. The final fact (I think) that Graham revealed to us linked back to pop music - the official Abba Fan Club was based in Highworth. The address for it was printed on the single sleeve for Super Trouper.

Phew - that is a whirlwind re-cap of everything we learned from Graham but I'm sure I've missed some really interesting stuff out. It was well worth the trip out in the snow for all who were able to make it, and if you are further interested in Swindon's connections *Moonies, Movers and Shakers* is out now.

Kelly Blake - January 2025

A Morris Minor - Built in Swindon



As a Morris Minor owner, I recently served several years as Chair of the North Wiltshire Branch of the Owners' Club. During that time I researched the local story of a Minor saloon registered GHR 800N. That story turned into an illustrated talk, of which the following is a summary. If any member of the Swindon Society has any memories or information about these events I would be very interested to hear from them.

No. 21 Victoria Road, Swindon, currently the premises of Machine Mart, was occupied in the 1970s by Victoria Garage, a British Leyland dealer in the Dutton Forshaw Group. The Managing Director was Mr Percy Gerrish.

In 1974 Mr Gerrish was approached by a businessman called Edwin Law. Mr Law had owned nine Minors and now required a new car. Production of the Minor saloon had in fact ceased in 1970, when it was replaced by the Marina. But, Mr Law didn't want a Marina; he insisted on a Minor, and

asked Mr Gerrish if one could be built to order. Cost, apparently, was not an issue. Mr Gerrish agreed; a bodyshell was bought in and parts were acquired from Unipart and the dealer network. The car was then built in the window of the Victoria Garage showroom where passers-by could watch from the street. Much of the build was carried out by the Chief Mechanic at Victoria Garage, Mr Patrick Harrin. His nephew Robert Harrin told me *“My uncle worked for Dutton Forshaw all his life, starting as an apprentice. He could be taciturn at times, but was very honest and decent. He took his work very seriously and was definitely the right man for the job.”* Harrin was aided by a couple of apprentices.

Not all the work was done at Victoria Garage however. Body elements (basic shell, doors, bonnet, boot, wings etc.) were collected together at Dutton Forshaw, and then despatched to Bamptons, a highly-regarded coachbuilder and upholsterer in Swindon, where a team of specialists put the body together and painted it - in the colour that had been specified by Mr Law. The mechanical and electrical components were then added in the Victoria Road showroom.



The build in progress at Victoria Garage (British Leyland photograph, with thanks to John Carroll)

The work at Bamptons was supervised by Works Manager Bernard Pedley, who had joined the company in 1948 as an apprentice coachbuilder. Others involved were Pete Brown in the paintshop, along with his colleague Dave Hyland who had been with the company for 15 years; bodyshop foreman Raymond Card, who had joined in 1942 straight from school, as an apprentice coachbuilder; and Mick Jones in trimming. John Fitzpatrick, who worked in the body shop, told me *“The basic shell, and all the bolt-on bits, the wings, the doors, the glass were all delivered to us. We literally put it together. Brown boxes everywhere. That’s the challenge we had. It would have gone to Pete, he would paint the whole shell first, and back to my shop to put it back together. Then we sent it back to Dutton Forshaw to do the mechanicals and electrics.”*

The bill of sale shows that Mr Law paid £3,625 - about the price of a Jaguar at the time. But sadly, although he saw the car completed, he died of cancer before he could drive it. It went to Leeds where his widow, Gwendoline, lived.

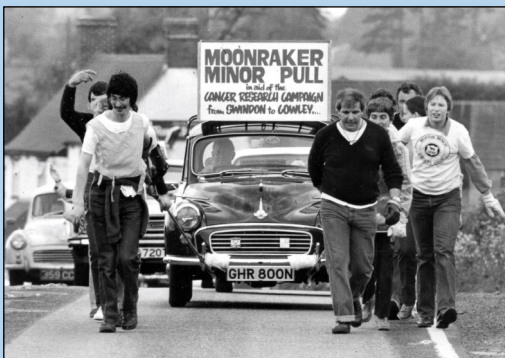
But that's not the end of the story...

In 1982, Edwin and Gwendoline's son Rod, who lived in Swindon and worked at the Dominion Insurance Company, devised an ambitious plan to raise money for the Cancer Research Campaign. He had the car driven down from Leeds, removed the rotor arm to immobilise the engine, and enlisted teams of members from the West Yorkshire and North Wiltshire ("Moonraker") branches of the Owners' Club to tow it - on foot - from Swindon to Unipart House in Cowley, 33 miles away. They were photographed with Miss Great Britain and Miss Thamesdown before leaving, and stopped at the *Lamb and Flag* in Longworth for lunch. Rod Law reported: "*The sight of the full team coming down the drive to Unipart House had to be seen to be believed.*" Over £900 was raised for Cancer Research - equivalent to about £3500 now. A video was made of the event by Hickmans of Swindon - I would love to find a copy of it!

This unique car then passed through the hands of a couple of owners before being sold at auction to Andy Smith in Derbyshire. By making enquiries through the club I was able to track him down in 2021 and found that he still owned the car. 2022 would mark 40 years since the "Car Pull" event and Andy very kindly agreed to bring it down to our local branch rally in September 2022, at REME in Lyneham. We were then able to set up a "mock car pull" photograph which included two people involved in the original event, Pete Cosslett and Robin Phillips (respectively front left and extreme right in both photographs). Robert Harrin is in blue, with cap, on the right of the 2022 photograph. On this occasion we made a new collection for Cancer Research.

In addition to the people mentioned above, I am grateful to Ray Newell and John Carroll of the MMOC, and to Martin Howard and Steve Chater of the NWMMOC, all of whom helped me with research.

Bill Read - February 2025



Charity Car Pull (Swindon Advertiser photograph) and the car at the 2022 rally (Photo by Bill Reed)

Foreword: *Christine Senior's mother, Muriel Baker (nee Proffitt), sadly passed away in June 2024. Fortunately, she left behind a wonderful legacy of documented childhood memories, and Christine has kindly allowed us to use these in our newsletter. As Muriel wrote such detailed memories of her life, I have decided to publish it in instalments over the next few newsletters. I found her stories fascinating, and I hope that you do too.*

My Childhood Memories (Part Two)

My sister Evelyn (Eve) was born in February 1925 and I came along in November 1926, the year the depression started. Mum had twins in June 1931 – Stanley and Sylvia. Stan was fair like me and Mum, Sylvia was like Dad and Eve. I remember dad pushing the twins' pram and taking us on long walks. He would walk down Gypsy Lane and back around Shrevenham Road and when I was tired I was given a ride on the pram. It was a lovely coach built pram with every comfort.

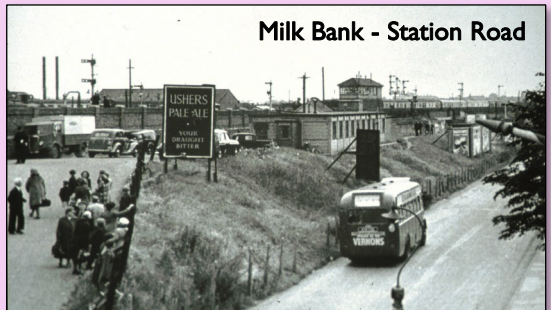
On Saturdays we used to go to the Milk Bank with a pencil and notebook and write down train names. We also did that when we went on holiday – trip week to Devon.

On Saturdays in the football season, Eve and I use to take the twins in the pushchair to the County Ground. We would go to the play area and play on the swings, slide and see-saw. Dad would be in the County Ground watching Swindon Town.

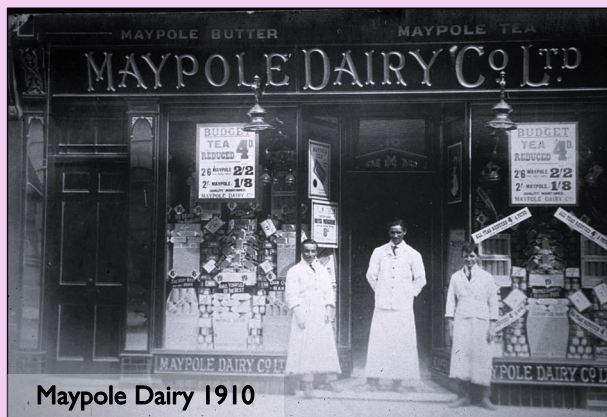
Mrs Durnford (a neighbour) took in lodgers when her sister died. One time a family of four (parents and two boys) came to lodge; their surname was Girvan. The two boys were the same age as us. After a year they moved to Ramsgate. It turned out that the father played for the Robins, and then had a transfer to Ramsgate F.C. The following year for our Trip-holiday we went to Ramsgate and on one of the days there we visited the Girvans.

When Sylvia was three years old, she developed meningitis and was taken to Victoria Hospital and sadly died a week later. I remember answering the door to a policeman who had come to tell Mum and Dad the sad news. Our lodgers were Peggy and Jack Hyde. Jack was a bus driver and I remember Peggy trying to comfort Mum. We never talked about Sylvia's death but were told later that once we children were in bed, mum and dad used to shed their tears.

As we lived near the railway station, we often had people to board and lodge, sometimes Italians. Mum and Dad worked hard as they were buying their house. Dad's mum, Grandma Proffitt had given them a deposit to start them off. Dad worked on an allotment in his spare time and produced most of our vegetables.



I was the shopper and would pick up lots of bargains. At the pork shop (Rimes) I would get three pennyworth of fat ham pieces. Mum would slice it up and render down any fat so everyday we would have egg and fried bread for breakfast – lovely flavour. Macfisheries would sell me cracked eggs if they had any. Sometimes the man would say “Haven’t got my hammer today, missy”. The pork shop would sell lovely pork dripping with dark jelly underneath. This was lovely



on toast. At the Maypole, Melia or World Stores I would look out for the best bacon pieces, it was worth shopping around. The butter was moulded into shape at the Maypole so I liked going there to watch it being done. When I had any spare money I would sometimes get a bag full of stale buns for a penny from the cake shop and when they were toasted they were very good! Mum made cakes

when I got a lot of cracked eggs. Apart from my “bargains”, I bought the weekly joint, a piece of beef called “edge bone” for about 1s 2d or 2s. I could also buy three pennyworth of lamb chops (four little chops) or four pennyworth of frying steak which would feed our family along with all the nice vegetables that Dad would bring home from the allotment.

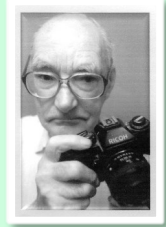
One day when out shopping in Anstey's in Regent's Street, I picked up a £1 note from the floor which was a lot of money in those days. I took it home and my dad sent me back to the shop to say that I had picked up a note but not to tell the staff how much it was. I called back into the shop to see if the money had been claimed and as it hadn't so then I took it to the police station in Old Town. Six months went by and as it had not been claimed I was given the money. Mum came with me, so we were able to pick up an accordion which she had bought in an auction and left in the shop to get mended. Mum loved going to auction sales and she picked up a lot of bargains which she then sold at a profit. The accordion wasn't for us as it was sold on. We also bought an iced cake from the cake shop as a treat for tea. I can't remember what else we used the money for but we did go on the bus to Old Town which we couldn't normally afford to do.

We had a lardy cake most weeks. One of Mum's auction buys was a gramophone which came with needles and two records – one had two music hall songs; “I'll Be Your Sweetheart” and “Two Little Girls In Blue”, and the other had two hymns “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty” and “All People That On Earth Do Dwell”. Mum never used the name Proffitt at the auctions, she used her maiden name Cook. Mr Goodenough brought home the heavy items.

To be continued...

Muriel Baker (nee Proffitt)

BEANEY CORNER

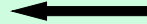


Welcome back to Beaney Corner where each month Diane Everett selects a few photographs from the vast Beaney collection to share in the newsletter.

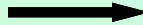
Here are some more wonderful images; they are a joy to see aren't they! Let us know if you recognise anyone. More next month!



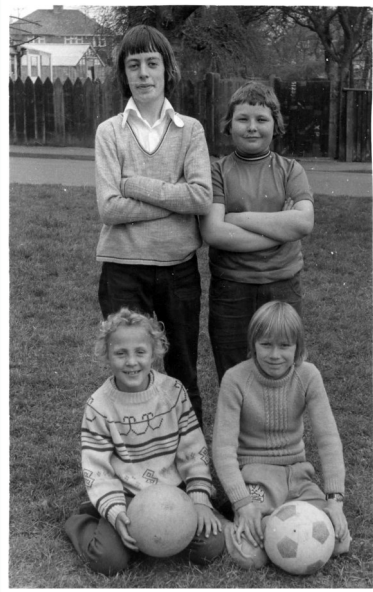
Coronation 1953 Bessemer Road
by the North Swindon Club
(Cheney Manor Road)



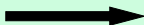
Pinehurst
Road



Cheney Manor
Road



Carnival
Unsure of Location
(Maybe Penhill Drive?)



Where Was This Taken? - Answers And Interesting Facts

Wow! What can I say? We have been inundated with answers from last month's mystery picture - How lovely! Thank you to each and every one of you that took the time to contact us. The picture was taken at the corner of Cheney Manor Road and Whitby Grove. The Post Office is sadly no more, it is currently a Costcutter shop.



My thanks go to:

- Kevin Bizley
- Ade Rowe
- Debra Melsom (sent in an image too)
- Teresa Martin (sent in an image too)
- Bryn Mayell
- Paul Cole
- Jennie Bridges
- John Stooke
- Mandy Ball
- Dave & Stella Sheppard
- Jean Johnson

Apologies if I have missed anyone.

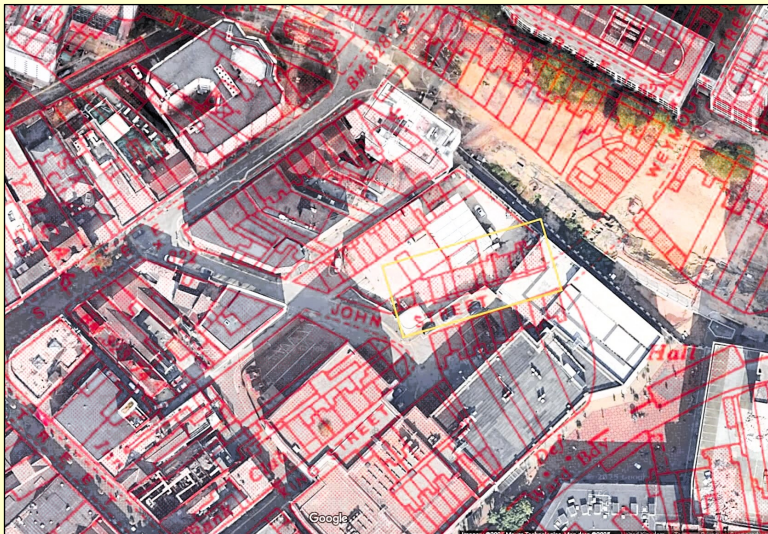
In addition - this month I received answers to November's mystery picture (we didn't have one in December). In November's newsletter, I asked if anyone knew the location this photo and now that we have some answers, we know the definitive location. This picture is of John Street in 1957. Confirmed as follows:

• **Jennie Bridges** linked a flicker photo: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/swindonlocal/3900134011/>

• **John Stooke** said: This is John Street looking down from the Stone Canal Bridge which joined to Cheltenham Street. In the distance is the Coop stables where horses that pulled the bread vans were kept; later a furniture shop, then a night club, now flats.



• **Dave & Stella Sheppard** said: The photograph from November's newsletter could be John Street, where my husband's uncle had a shoe repair shop.



• **Kevin Leakey** said: It's John Street looking down from the canal bridge. Attached is an aerial picture with a 1942 map overlay showing where the houses would be now. (The yellow square is the row of houses in the photo).

Many thanks Kevin!

Labelled as “To Rodbourne Arms”
Presumably Cheney Manor Road - 1930s



Labelled as “View to Wiltshire Hotel” - From Which Street?

