

Pitstone and Ivinghoe Museum Society Newsletter



New Year 2024

EDITOR'S NOTE

I received a request from one of the membership, following the last Newsletter, to identify the writer of "Boring Accountants?". I confess that I had simply failed to realise that not all would know that it was John Youngs, our treasurer who had written the piece. I apologise for missing out his name, but now you know!

I have not really been inundated with offerings of articles about Norman and his life at the museum. Fortunately, our manager Pete Farrar has come to the rescue and has given us a "warts and all" picture of his acquaintance with Norman. This is not meant to be critical in any way – it is simply an assessment that many of us would recognize with a resigned smile. I appreciate what Pete has done because at one stage I, too, had been on the receiving end of a perceived slight that saw me persona non grata for almost two years.

Having volunteered since 2010, I have fulfilled a number of roles – most recently as editor of the newsletter. Unfortunately, I am giving up the role as it looks as if I will be moving into deepest Bedfordshire in the near future. I have agreed to see the Easter edition to press, which will need to be accomplished at a distance. Thereafter we really do need somebody to take over before the Summer issue. I would be happy to walk any volunteer member of the society through the process before I go. Please do not be shy in coming forward.

Dennis Trebble

MANAGER'S MUSINGS

As we look to the future, at the beginning of a new year, I think that we can be optimistic for it to be as successful as the recent past. We are gradually getting recognised by an eager public, looking for reliable, affordable entertainment for the whole family. This is reflected in the number of volunteers turning up regularly to play their part in the running of the museum. It is quite remarkable how well they all bond together and work in loosely formed teams to carry out the diverse selection of jobs needed to be done. Last year was particularly difficult because we suffered from the effects of old age and ill health, meaning the loss of several long time members and my requirement to attend hospital for seven days each month, meaning I could not pull my weight properly. I must congratulate Dave Kirkwood for doing such a brilliant job standing in as manager in my absence.

The concrete workshop project is well underway with a smart new ceiling and the wiring system coming along nicely. We should end up with a modern, safe, clean environment in which to work on the various projects and maintenance tasks we have planned. We just have to win the battle with the squirrels, who do their best to make it their home, along with their other habitat, the Elliott Shop.

The extension to the model railway track, to make it into a continuous loop, is going well and should make the exhibit much more attractive and user friendly on open days. The brush shop is also being given a bit of attention with the welcome supervision from one of our long time members, Malcolm, who remembers the equipment in its original location as a thriving commercial business. It will make everything in the shop more understandable and with a volunteer at hand on open days, the manufacture of such an important household item will be brought to life.

The grain silos and the milling equipment are gradually being transformed into an interesting exhibit which I noticed, watching the factory programme on TV recently, is still the basic design for the storing and milling of grain, the hot air drying of which was pioneered worldwide at Pitstone Green Farm. The driveway is at its worst at the moment, due to a combination of things. We are intending to put

together a team of volunteers and a maintenance set of tools and equipment so that we can keep it up to scratch by giving it some attention every 6 – 8 weeks. We have a motorised wheelbarrow, a petrol-powered whacker plate and all the necessary hand tools to keep the drive in perfectly reasonable condition without spending a fortune.

Along with all the usual maintenance jobs that always need doing, there are quite a few repairs required to some of the buildings, namely the big barn that has some damaged and missing weather boards which need attention. We still need to fix the water leak above the museum shop and computer room which has managed to avoid our detection for some years. Congratulations are in order to both Ray and Leslie for the amazing progress with the creosoting job which has transformed the buildings concerned and taken them a lot of time and dedication . I will soon be ordering some new leaflets and they will not be date specific. They will concentrate on the 'Bank Holiday Monday' 'second Sunday' Open Day message. The website will always show the exact dates as well as the general ones. This should reduce the wastage caused by having to throw away so many obsolete ones.

Wishing you all a very happy new year and thank you for all your hard work and support, in whatever way you provide it.

Pete Farrar

NORMAN GROOM : AN APPRECIATION

When Dennis told me that he was looking for someone to write something about Norman, our recently departed colleague, I understood the problem! When writing such pieces, it is conventional to mention only the good things and ignore the bad. Norman however, was a real one off and I can't think of anyone who came close to him in any aspect of his biography.

He was better at a wider variety of things than any of the people I have come across during my 75 years on this earth but at the same time he couldn't come to grips with the idea that there might have been people who could do some jobs better than he could or who knew more about a subject. Unfortunately, this aspect of his personality was combined with his refusal to try to soften the impact of his opinions on the person involved and he would always say exactly what he thought of your efforts. The really special thing about Norman was that despite the alarming, noisy, serious rows that almost all of the volunteers have experienced with him, he was always good company and would add his three-pennyworth to any coffee time debate and I don't think too many of us fell out with him for long.

His dedication to Pitstone Museum was enormous and it was rather a shock when he sold the amazing Lancaster Bomber cockpit to another museum, particularly as he had assured me that we never accept anything on loan for display! Even this act seemed to be forgiven as he spent seven years building it and was giving the money away. By then he was terminally ill but still visiting the farm whenever he was fit enough.

To sum up, we will miss the soap opera aspect of life at the museum under Norman's guidance but will enjoy the smooth running and successful existence of a wonderful asset that he spent his time trying to achieve. We all have the same aim and that is the continuing success of something he spent nearly half his adult life trying to promote.

RIP Norman.

Pete Farrar December 2023

BORING ACCOUNTANTS? (part 2)

My youthful ignorance did not appreciate how well-known Anona Winn was. An obituary published in February 1994 told she was born in Sydney in 1907 and received an OBE in 1954. She trained as a singer under Dame Nellie Melba. After success in Australia she came to London to star in many West End shows in the 1920s. She composed music for films in the 1930s, had her own band and made over 300 radio shows. She appeared in West End shows in the 1940/50s and many radio shows in her later years. She lived in DuCane Court where I worked in 1960. Quite a lady.



Annona Winn

Whilst working for Howard Ceilings Ltd I also worked part time for Darchem Ltd. Their main business was the manufacture and installation of lagging in power stations and similar. Electrical supply in mid 1900s was run by the CEGB (Central Electricity Generating Board) who were building a large oil/coaldust fired power station on the Isle of Grain, Kent. The lagging industry unions were very militant, so the CEGB asked the major insulation companies Darchem, Cape Asbestos, Turner and Newall to join together and form a company called CDN Ltd.

Initially it had three employees - a Managing Director, a Company Secretary (me) and a site manager on the Isle of Grain site. In 1978 we recruited ladders and commenced lagging at the power station. This was a large contract worth millions as this was one of the biggest conventional power stations ever built. Unfortunately, we couldn't beat

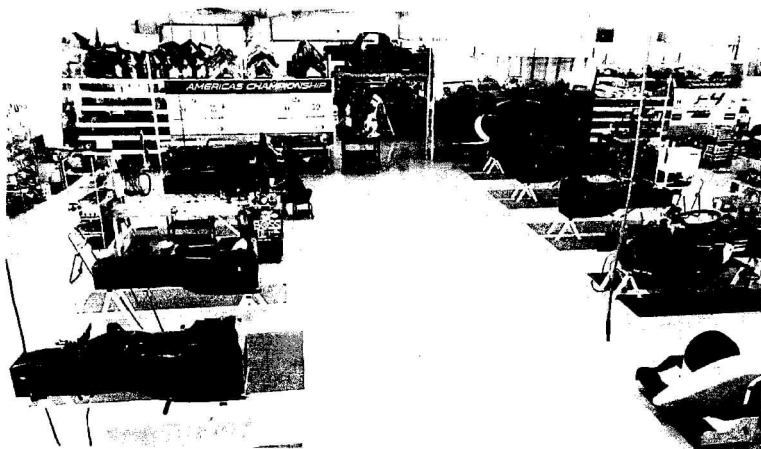
the unions who called wildcat strikes overnight with printed banners which seriously delayed the build. The CEGB decided they had made a mistake and cancelled our contract. The MD and I successfully negotiated a substantial payout for CDN Ltd and I earned a very nice bonus. One of my later best friends was the Manager for Laing Construction, the main contractor, though I didn't know him then.

After leaving Howards I was fortunate to rejoin Darchem as a financial/commercial director of their southeast based companies, I loved the variety. I was based in St Albans, initially working on projects and acquisitions. One such was a large aircraft parts manufacturer based in Dudley, I loved the black country as it was called. Whilst I was there, we had a visit from our new group CEO who insisted that stocks of metals be reduced. Shortly afterwards they acquired a Rolls Royce job which needed a rare alloy which had just been sold as scrap for £3k; it cost £21k (2023 eq. £110k) to buy it back from the scrap metal dealer. A few days later the new CEO was called back from an Australian business trip and sacked.

Shortly after, I joined Darchem Ltd, based in south London, they made white metal (Babbett metal) that was used to line bearings in huge shafting for ships, power stations, steel mills etc. On the same site were Expert Heat Treatments who heat treated steel for many businesses such as Westland Helicopters, Martin Baker aircraft ejector seats and Avdel fasteners. I acted as General Manager when the existing manager left to setup in competition against us. As commercial director of both companies I visited all the companies mentioned and the major steel mills in South Wales. This was much more interesting than accountancy. Competition for the supply of white metal was growing in South Korea as was competition for heat treatment and profitability suffered to such an extent that we had to consolidate, which meant redundancies. In the 1980s I moved to a new acquisition in Huntingdon called Darchem Composite Structures Ltd, previously Specialised Mouldings Ltd.

DCS Ltd were GRP, Carbon fibre and Kevlar specialists. They fabricated racing car bodies and back in the 1960/70s every car on the formula one grid had a body built by Specialised Mouldings. Competition in racing car fabrication was strong with all the in-house production teams stealing staff from competitors. At the time I joined we

were making body parts for Ligier Racing in France, Jordan Racing and March Racing in UK. Ligier recruited several of our fabricators paying hourly rates 50% more plus amazing working conditions. I visited Ligier's factory in Lyon to discuss settlement of an unpaid bill. The lead negotiator for Ligier was an English barrister. With his help our bill was settled amicably and they gave us a tour of their facilities where we met our previous workers. Production was 24 hours with a 24hr canteen led by a superb chef serving any food they requested. The work benches and floor were so clean you could have eaten off them.



Ligier's production area

I also visited Jordan Racing in the UK where conditions were similar. I regret to say DCS's working conditions were not to that standard. We also fabricated body parts for BAE aircraft (Shorts of Belfast), having a 9m autoclave produced helicopter blades. We built many of the gate guardians you see outside RAF airfields as it's far too expensive to site a real aircraft compared with a facsimile in grp. One less successful product were dashboards for Aston Martin. They didn't fit, much to our embarrassment and loss, it being difficult to work to millimetre tolerances in grp. The in-house production in the racing car industry and cutbacks in small volume aero components seriously affected our profitability and we had to close. A very upsetting time for me as I had to tell one hundred staff, they were redundant. The business was eventually bought by Paxford Composites who were still trading in 2022.

Wm Baird Plc were the owners of the Darchem group. Their main business was supplying clothing to Marks & Spencer, almost exclusively for trews (trousers) and similar. They had substantial modern state of the art factories in The Midlands and had supplied M&S since the early 1900s, but their weakness was it was all based on trust, there were no contracts. One day M&S said no more orders, we are buying overseas in future, hard luck. Legal action failed and other clothing companies were also buying overseas so Wm Baird had to consolidate which meant selling most of the Darchem group engineering companies. Darchem Ltd still exists and is now US owned.

Fortunately for me I was able to move for a few years from DCS ltd to Wm. Baird Plc as a trouble shooter. One assignment was Expert Industrial Controls Ltd based in Ashby de la Zouche, Leicestershire. They manufactured control gear. They were ahead of their time in that they designed and manufactured a joystick controller for tractors, JCBs and similar but the drivers/operators were reluctant to accept this. It is now, though, a standard fitting.



A JCB cab controller for the hydraulic systems

The parts were expensive e.g. using such items as tiny 12v state of the art motors made in Switzerland. The investment in parts was about £1m. I found a market for parts in the model making industry and the new MD and I, who were staying in local hotels, spent two hours every day after

the works closed packing the bits in plastic bags. At least it reduced the time we spent in the hotel bar. The business was sold, unfortunately, to an asset stripper who sold the buildings, plant and patents, making all staff redundant.

I carried out a few more small assignments for Baird's before it was my time to be made redundant. I do remember driving home in my company car feeling quite upset that it was my turn to go. Such is life - I now knew how all the staff I had made redundant felt. After 3 months of visiting the Job Centre, "Executives Centre" in St. Albans, I was fortunate, in 1993, to join Davall Gears Ltd at Welham Green as Financial Director. They were then owned by TI (Tube Investments) later bought by ITW (Illinois Tool Works) in USA. Davall manufactured gearboxes for Challenger Tank turrets (MOD), back axles for Reliant Robins plus gears for many national names. We had a small retail gear shop and a regular visitor was actor David Jason who bought gears, shafts and bearings for the model roundabouts he built.

I went with our MD to Singapore to negotiate a contract to supply tank turret gearboxes to the Singapore MOD. Embarrassingly, I was so engrossed in ensuring favourable contract terms (no time of the essence) I forgot the financial basics of payment terms; it was six months before we got paid. My job was only as financial director of Davalls and another small factory in Reading producing universal joints for aircraft. In those days electronics were not trusted to work the flaps and rudders of aircraft, it was all rods and universal joints. In my latter years when we were owned by ITW, every year the MD and I would fly to Chicago for a review of our results and budgets, so I saw something of America.

I retired from Davalls in 2002 and had more time for my hobby of woodworking. I joined the museum in 2004 working on restoring carts and other joinery work. In a weak moment in 2008 I agreed to take on the role of treasurer which I continue to do. I would prefer to do woodwork, but arthritis has stopped that. It has been a pleasure to work with our busy hard-working volunteers to make the museum the success it is today.

John Youngs

MUSEUM TALKS

Thursday 22nd February, 2.30pm

Will Dickinson

Cross Farm, Harpenden

‘I would intend to talk a bit about the history of our time here and to also link that history with what we do now, how it has changed and how it has not and to talk a bit about where we might be heading in the future, including food, farming, leisure and the environment. I hope that we will have a good and challenging discussion about all things agricultural, genetic, mechanical and chemical. I have an appearance on Clarkson's Farm but if you blink you will miss it! It would be good to speak to your members and share the history of the farm here, we have been here since 1815 and I am the sixth generation to farm here my son is the seventh.’

Thursday 28th March, 2.30pm

Roger Mason

The Duke of Wellington.

‘The Duke of Wellington is said to be Britain's greatest soldier, and his victories include defeating Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo. He was twice Prime Minister and fought a duel whilst holding this office. His love life was extensive, and he shared two mistresses with Napoleon, though not at the same time.’

OPEN DAYS 2024

All Open Days are from 10.30am to 4.30pm.

1 April	Easter Monday
6 May	Early May Bank Holiday Monday
27 May	Spring Bank Holiday Monday
9 June	Sunday
14 July	Sunday
11 August	Sunday
26 August	Bank Holiday Monday
13 October	Sunday

FRONT COVER : Easter open day 2010 (*by DennisTrebble*)

BACK COVER : Land Army, Home Guard and Fire Warden in the 1940s room (*by Dennis Trebble*)

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