THE WEST END LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

WESTENDER

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AN EXCEPTIONAL WARTIME STORY

THE BOY WHO DID A MAN'S JOB

Written by Rose Voller



Melville and his wife

West End Museum holds so many interesting books, newspaper reports, facts, photographs and items of yester year. Our President, Bob Moody, who during his time was Scout Master of the 10th Itchen West End Troop of Scouts, was kind enough to lend us his scout and memorabilia collection which included newspaper reports about a former Wolf Cub and Scout Troop Leader who won the George Medal.

Melville Searle Thompson was a 17 year old apprentice tradesman in the Royal Engineers, whose home was in Hatley Road, Bitterne. In March 1941 he was a member of a fire fighting party detailed to tackle a fire during an air raid on Southampton. Several newspapers including the Southern Daily Echo reported that incendiary and high explosive bombs rained on buildings in the High Street, a fire bomb fell through the roof of a store setting material ablaze. After an Officer and two men broke into the burning room with a hose directing the water on the fire they where overcome by smoke and chemical fumes, and had to retire. Melville then wrapped a wet towel round his face and head and went in and hosed water onto the flames until they died down. Later he volunteered to enter another building of which the roof was ablaze and brought back a report. He acted regardless of the danger of the burning roof and collapsing ceilings. Half an hour later he was seen sitting on the ground alone, directing a hose on another building which was blazing fiercely. Suddenly a high explosive bomb fell on the burning building and there was an explosion. Melville rolled on his back to avoid the blast, and a moment later resumed his original position and carried on with his fire fighting. Afterwards he climbed on top of a wooden lean-to shed adjoining a building which was ablaze. His object was to direct a jet of water on to the fire. Owing to the low pressure of water, he realised that the jet would be more effective if operated from above ground level. He remained in his precarious and exposed position for a long time, when a helper shouted to him *"Are you all right up there?"*, Melville looked down, grinned and made the "thumbs up" gesture. Altogether he was engaged for more than six hours in strenuous fire fighting. Official Report on Boy Thompson from the London Gazette announcing his award of the George Medal was *"He showed remarkable initiative as well as great devotion to duty, and complete disregard of danger"*. Unofficial Report: Joined Wolf Cubs when he was seven, was a King's Scout when he joined Royal Engineers a month after war began; went to Itchen Secondary School. His father a Customs Officer, lives in Hatley Road, Bitterne, Southampton. What a great story! Bob said that on behalf of the Scouts, old Scouts and some friends on 2nd March 1941, Melville was presented with an inscribed watch to commemorate the G.M.award. A special entry was included in St James April 1941 Parish Magazine.

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VISIT OUR WEBSITE

EDITOR
Nigel.G.Wood

EDITORIAL AND PRODUCTION ADDRESS
40 Hatch Mead
West End
Southampton, Hants
SO30 3NE
Telephone: 023 8047 1886
E-mail: woodng@aol.com

Website: ***www.telbin.demon.co.uk/westendlhs*** **E-mail address:** ***westendlhs@aol.com***

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MEMORIES OF A LAND ARMY GIRL DURING WW2



EDNA SHOWN IN HER WARTIME LAND ARMY UNIFORM DURING HER TIME AT WEST END

Our thanks go to Rose Voller who kindly wrote this article from correspondence with Edna Voller in Canada. Ed.

Born in West End Road in November 1924, Edna Voller became one of the Land Army girls working at "Lord Swaythling's Mansion". Now a Grandmother and living in Port Elgin, Ontario, Canada she longs for the sight of West End during her time in her beloved England. Nearing the end of the war, Edna and others including local girls Connie Metcher, Joan and Betty Elfinstone worked as Land Army girls under Head Gardener Fred Rose. One night a dance was held for the locally based soldiers and only Land Army girls working on the Estate were invited. The Rev. Ivor Machin and his blonde wife Brenda were also invited, Edna particularly remembers how lovely she looked wearing a red dress and with long red nails. She mentioned the nails because the Land Army girls just didn't have good nails. She says *"To think I even got to go inside the gorgeous mansion, and during the Spring the driveway was a mass of daffodils, oh!such luxury and beauty. Not everybody has the chance to be so privileged. My Land Army years were the happiest of my life especially at Lord Swaythlings, right on our doorstep, all I had to do was walk every day down the lovely Cutbush Lane. I spent my childhood days in the woods picking primroses, bluebells and violets and looking for birds nests. Going down the lane to the stile and watching the men and horses cut the oats and seeing the red poppies waving in the wind. Watching the rabbits and other wildlife and hearing the bird songs including the cuckoos and owls at night. The lovely Harvest moon showing up all around like daylight, that was my Cutbush Lane".* Edna says when she left to come to Canada in luxury on the Queen Mary , free at that, when she thinks of home she gets a warm feeling thinking of all those memories. Edna married Mike McCaw, who served in the Canadian Army, at Locksheath in 1946 before emigrating as a war bride to Canada.

Footnote: Edna said that the town of Port Elgin is filled with British people working at the Nuclear Plant and one of her home care ladies is from Cheshire who has told her that England is not the same place anymore.

MEMORIES OF THE UNION CASTLE SHIPS BY "BADGER"

The Union Castle Line had a long association with the port of Southampton. Later taken over by British and Commonwealth, the ships shared a weekly departure with Safmarine, the South African state owned shipping company. In the 1960's two of the liners were re-painted from the traditional colour of a pale lavender hull to the whole white hull of Safmarine.

The former offices in Platform Road opposite South Western House remained unoccupied for many years and recently a developer has tastefully converted the interior into luxury apartments. As you enter the building, the names of all the Castle ships are listed on the boards adjoining the lifts giving a memory of all the history of the once great liners.

Before ceasing their trade from Southampton (and the demise of the company), they entered the lower end of the cruise market with the *Reina del Mar* that had been converted from a cargo ship. The passengers paying the lowest fares were in accommodation where previously the cargo holds had been situated and did not benefit from the comfort of lifts, the climb up to the dining room or open decks was via very steep stairs. The air conditioning was very poor and those in the know always tried to avoid that section of the accommodation.

The ships in service in the 1960's included *Windsor Castle, Capetown Castle, Edinburgh Castle, Stirling Castle* and *Trans Vaal* (Safmarine) formerly known as *Oranje* when in B & C colours. The *Capetown Castle* was somewhat dated but still remained popular with her passengers; she was scrapped in the late 60's.

On all the liners not only Union Castle a pyramid of tips, bribes and handouts existed. Barmen paid money over to the Chief Barman to get the best bars; barmen paid the butcher 5/- (25p.) for each paper sack of ice, waiters vied to get the best tipping passengers so paid handsomely to get the best tables, junior engineers expected a tip if called upon to replace cooking units, the bedroom stewards of course paid for the better cabins. The chefs of course got payments from the waiters to ensure that orders were processed quickly and so on. When the *Windsor Castle* came into service the company took on young female bedroom stewards and waitresses, many of who had little experience of life at sea. They decided that they were not going to be party to the perks system.

Curiously, sheets went missing from lockers, central heating radiators got turned off in the cabins of passengers, ice became unavailable as all the ice making machines broke down, soup arrived cold at the table and the waiting between each course got longer. The Purser was inundated with complaints.

Continued on page five... ... ...

COUNTRY MATTERS with Peter Andrews

A few random thoughts – well, one must try and fill the pages of the Newsletter with something....on country matters. I was showing a visitor around the Museum one day when he took an interest in the scythe. I told him that I read an article years ago about how a farm hand would be measured to have one made, taking into account his height, length of arm, whether left or right handed etc.. Neville later pointed out that the one on show in the Museum had adjustable grips. I tried it, but found it very cumbersome. Neville said that years ago when in Cornwall he had used one often on the small fields there. Perhaps if he's asked nicely he'll give a demonstration outside on the lawn one day, or even do your lawn for a small fee!

This led my mind to other country matters, such as Constable's painting "The Haywain". Some authorities think it's a different type of cart. The reason it's in the water is to counteract the wheels drying out in hot weather, thus making the spokes loose in the felloes (the rims, for the uninitiated). Drawing a book on farm carts out of the library, I attempted to find out more on the subject, but was unable to locate a single illustration anywhere near Constable's picture! There was no mention of haywains but there was one of haygins. I think the problem lies in that each county had its own design, to suit not only the type of use but also the soil, whether sandy, loam or clay. It also had to be of a particular width between the wheels, as years of use on unmetalled country roads caused deep ruts to form, so a wagon that didn't fit was in danger of tipping sideways. Even the width of the tyres could be a lot different, according to the type of ground and size of wagon.

In old Roman towns there can be seen ruts in the street which made the Romans restrict the size of wagons and likewise chariots to fit them. I believe the gauge of British railway lines was based on these Roman measurements. Bill White, the expert on all things of a mechanical nature, may be able to confirm this or not, as the case may be. However, I digress.

Although cart horses, and the Shires in particular, were used to draw the wagons and for ploughing, there were a considerable number of oxen used, and not just to make Oxo and Bovril! Some farmers preferred them to horses as they were stronger on heavy ground. Whereas a horse had to be rested at least once a day during ploughing, oxen could carry on all day and could live on the grass, so were cheaper to feed compared with the horse requiring oats etc...

Oxen were also shod; being cloven-hoofed they were fitted with TWO plates called cues, one smaller than the other. The larger had five nails and the smaller four. Shoeing was carried out in a different way to horses as they were put on their backs. Apparently they were much more easily trained than horses for this operation as well as for ploughing. Long distance carriers used as many as eight oxen.

Though people are, generally speaking, inclined to refer to blacksmiths shoeing horses, it was the farrier who did the job. Which brings me to point out that when I joined the RAF in 1940 as a fitter-armourer we were also taught backsmithing. Whenever I've mentioned this to anyone they've thought I was joking and mentioned the RAF's lack of horses, or oxen come to that.

Our first job was to make a pair of tongs, then a one-inch cold chisel, which had to be hardened and tempered using whale oil, not water, for quenching. The next job was to make a half-inch countersink bit, by eye. The one I made I used here for years before giving it to the Manor Farm Museum near Botley. The final piece was to make a revolver spring which was filed to shape from a piece of spring steel, folded into two slightly curved arms. This was tempered in a salt bath heated to the correct temperature.

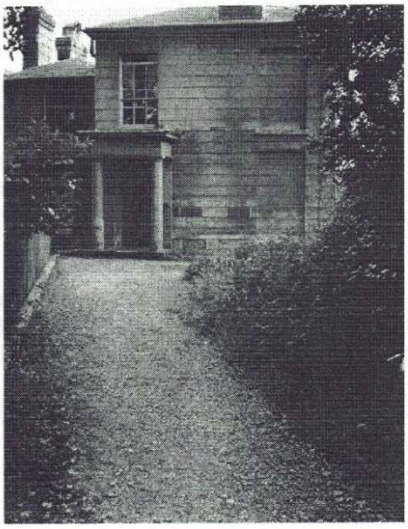
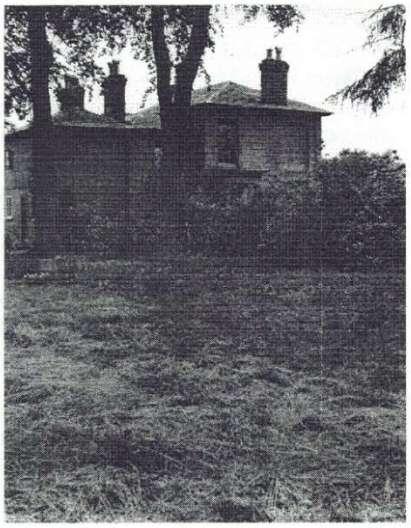
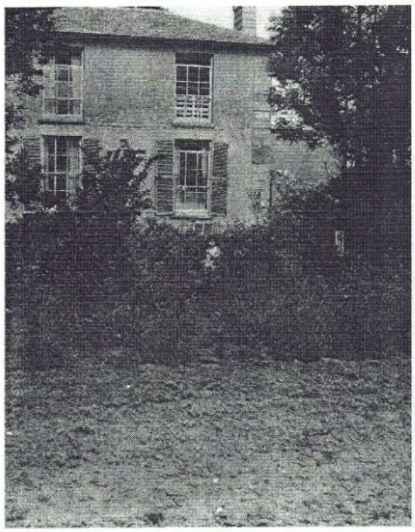
The spring was tested by placing the finished item in the jaws of a vice and tightening it up. On unwinding the vice, if the spring stayed flat or snapped it was a failure and you had to make it again, but if it sprang open, all well and good. Mine was OK!



Illustration at the right comes from our Museum and shows an elderly country gentleman using a scythe.

MOORGREEN HOUSE PHOTOGRAPHS Nigel Wood

After our recent requests for any photographs or material about Moorgreen House, it is really gratifying to report that thanks to the efforts of two of our members, Pat Cain and Marie Newton and the kindness of Mrs Ruth Thorne a local resident we have been given access to original 1950's negatives which show not only Moorgreen House, but also the old Parish Hall, Moorgreen Inn, Moorgreen Hospital and much more besides, some 15 images in all. We have had these negatives printed and they show excellent detail. I have reproduced some of the images of Moorgreen House below. Thank you to all those involved! Can anyone identify the little girl shown in the picture below in the grounds of Moorgreen House in the 1950's?



Continued from front page...

Melville became a Company Sergeant Major R.E. at a very young age training recruits in North Wales where he met and married Mair his first wife (see photo on front page), who died in March 1949. After 18 months or so he left the R.E.'s and returned to Kenya, where he had served earlier. He met and married his second wife Alice (who is still alive), and they had two children Mary Lou and David. He died in Hammersmith Hospital on 17th December 1971 after developing pneumonia while waiting for an operation to enlarge a valve to his heart. Until the family were contacted, the whereabouts of Melville's George Medal was unknown. However, his sister was able to confirm that she is looking after it for their mother (Alice), so perhaps later on it might be passed on to David's son.

(A special thank you goes to his younger brother Graham now living in Dorchester, his sister Mary Lou and his brother in law Peter Miles living in Alresford and of course our very own President Bob Moody who helped to bring this story to our readers.)

AN APPEAL

PAULINE, OUR SECRETARY AND KEEPER OF THE MUSEUM DUTY ROSTER IS ALWAYS ON THE LOOKOUT FOR PEOPLE WILLING TO GIVE UP A COUPLE OF HOURS FOR MUSEUM DUTY – WITHOUT YOU WE HAVE NO MUSEUM, SO PLEASE SEE PAULINE AT OUR MONTHLY MEETINGS OR PHONE 023 8046 2490 AND VOLUNTEER YOUR SERVICES. Thank you Ed.

Continued from page 2.....

The company was aware of the complaints but having designed the ship mainly for female staff a mix of male/female crew accommodation was difficult to introduce. After a couple of trips whereby the waitresses and bedroom stewards found their tips diminishing, there was a re-think. Yes, they decided to join the 'system', soup was piping hot, ice was always available and even the crews own bedrooms were spick and span.

The ships carried citrus fruit, grapes, apples, bulk sherry and wine, tobacco, balsa wood and on the outward journey cars, Land Rovers, tractors and even railway carriages. The most precious of cargoes of course were the diamonds and gold imported for the UK market.

In 1966 there was great interest from the Press when it was discovered that bars of bullion had disappeared from the secure cage. Allegedly this was discovered when the ship docked but several crew informed me that 'ciggies and booze' had been thrown overboard as they passed Motherbank as word had got around that the Customs and Police would be combing the ship on arrival. Sure enough the Customs rummage crews joined with police and insurance company officials in a wide-ranging search but did not find the gold.

The BT Docks Police and Southampton City Force brought a long list of suspects to the rummage unit at 101 Annexe in the New Docks and we sifted through these lists. It was suggested that we should get the names of crew re-signing for the next voyage and two names coincided with the 'hit list'. They were picked up for questioning and a further search was made, this time it was noticed that three of the concrete ballast blocks in the engine room looked too new. After breaking up the concrete the gold was recovered. It goes without saying that so much activity on a ship is unlikely to have gone unnoticed by other crew but only the two by now held in custody were charged.

In 1965 the tiny island of Tristan da Cunha had experienced an earthquake and the British Government arranged that Union Castle would divert off the normal route to pick up the families. Temporarily they were re-housed in former RAF accommodation at Calshot and Sopley. They stayed for about 9 months but the families longed for the solitude of the island and were finding it increasingly difficult to adapt to 60's Britain pop and swinging era. A RN destroyer was sent to see if a return was now safe and took some seismic boffins on the trip. It was declared safe and they were allowed to return with the British Government chartering a Castle ship.

At that time there was a restriction in force on the export of currency of £25 per person. Wealthy passengers flouted the restriction daily as each could produce a doctor's note that a cruise in the sunshine was essential for the patients well being and that £2000 was needed to buy essential medicines or from a bank manager saying that Mrs Bloggs must have brought the £1000 with her from her last holiday abroad. It was only the less aware who got caught by the rules and sadly these poor families from a volcanic rock were caught. They had no bank account and not even a bank on the island, everyone dealt in cash and you had to see the state of the cash to believe it! They were very old notes probably issued just after the present Queen came to the throne, sellotaped or stapled together and very stained and dirty. The notes were no longer legal tender in the UK and shops etc.. would not be able to accept them.

I was one of the Customs staff on duty and faced with this unique situation we telephoned our HQ for advice. We explained that these were not currency speculators trying to damage sterling but it was money they had brought with them 9 months ago as they fled from subsiding houses in a quake. There was no case that others would follow suit because who quite frankly would want to live on a volcano with a culture from our 1930's. If we seized the money their whole economy would collapse, as they were too poor to produce new currency. It was hardly likely that a few hundred pounds of tatty notes would damage the UK economy in any way. We were told to seize the money as "rules were rules".

I am pleased to tell you that the ship sailed on time and the grateful inhabitants of Tristan da Cunha later arrived back on the tiny island in the South Atlantic with their sheep and goats and a shiny new Ferguson grey tractor courtesy of Union Castle. You may also be pleased to learn that a small group of Southampton Customs staff realised after all that these notes might have come from a Monopoly game. When our HQ later phoned to see if we had seized the money, strangely they found it quite hard to believe that it was only Monopoly money – but by then unfortunately the ship was heading down the Solent so we were unable to re-check.

Then came the seamen's strike that brought a major economic struggle both for the port and the families of Southampton. It was a sad day to see all the great liners berthed alongside, the two *Queens, Caronia, Reina del Mar, Canberra* and the *Union Castle* ships. Many of the lines did not recover and when the strike ended many of the ships were sold or laid up. Container ships, bulk carriers and ferries often under foreign crews were to be the thing and it was not for another 20 years or so that cruise liners came back into fashion and Southampton came alive again. But the days of the passenger/cargo ships gently wandering down to the Cape were over, passengers by now preferred a flight to join a liner already in its crusie location rather than long days of open sea on the outgoing trip. Union Castle was soon to be no more.

BRITISH TITANIC SOCIETY ANNUAL CONVENTION

As some of you will already know it is time for the BTS Annual Convention, held at the Hilton National Hotel in Southampton, an annual event which attracts those interested in the Titanic saga from all over the world. The event will be held on 12th, 13th. and 14th. April this year, with open day for the general public being on Saturday 13th – with lots to see in the way of exhibits and memorabilia to buy for your collection. We in West End have of course, Captain Rostron's grave and house, the only memorial to James Jukes, a seaman on the Titanic (in the Museum) as well as the home of the Titanic Relief Fund secretary, Fred Woolley. Visit our museum at the Old Fire Station in the High Street on Saturdays to find out more. Ed.

On this day (April 3rd) in.....

1367 Henry IV, the first Lancastrian King of England, born at Bolingbroke Castle in Lincolnshire, the son of John of Gaunt.

1783 Washington Irving, American writer, born in New York City.

1860 The Pony Express, founded by William Russell, was first run – 1,980 miles between St.Joseph in Missouri and Sacramento in California. It ended on 24th October 1861 when the first transcontinental telegraph line was completed.

1882 Jesse James, American outlaw and robber, was shot in the back at close range by one of his own gang, Robert Ford, in St.Joseph, Missouri.

1897 Johannes Brahms, German composer and pianist, died in Vienna.

1925 Anthony Wedgewood Benn, British Labour politician born.

1930 Haile Selassie was proclaimed Emperor of Ethiopia, a country he ruled for 44 years.

1954 Oxford won the 100th. University Boat Race.

THE NEXT MEETINGS ARE ....

May 1
PEOPLE OF 16th & 17th CENTURY SOUTHAMPTON
Elizabeth Rothery

June 5
MARY BEALE & ALLBROOK FARM
Cheryl Butler

July 3
DISCOVERING TIMBER FRAMED HOUSES
Stan Waight

NO MEETING IN AUGUST

September 4
SOUTH COAST SMUGGLING
Derek Amey

October 2
AGRICULTURE & THE SWING RIOTS IN HAMPSHIRE
Hampshire Record Office

MUSEUM SHOP

The Society publications now available for sale in the Museum – these are an ongoing series of Occasional Papers on things of local interest written by members and friends of the Society. We also have photo enlargements of local scenes.

Paper # 1
My Memories Of The Harefield Estate
(Oral History Project)
By Chris Boulton **£1.50**

Paper # 2
A New Church For The Parish
Written by Peter Baker **£1.00**

Paper # 3
West End National School 1863-1904
Written by John Collins **£2.50**

Paper # 5
The Swaythling Road Methodist Church
Written by Marjorie Bodman **£2.50**

Plus the following books:

Tales of Old West End
C Sillence **£3.50**

I Remember,I Remember
Bob Moody **£4.00**

Hatch Grange..a stroll back in time *Pauline Berry (reduced price)* **£5.99**

Townhill Park House
Ralph Coney & Jim Brown **£3.00**

"Half a Loaf - The Care of the Sick and Poor of South Stoneham 1664-1948" *by Eric Raffo* **£9.50**

"Sister Kate Oram 1879-1918
A Personal Portrait. *By Pauline Berry* **£4.99**

Various photo enlargements suitable for framing of village scenes taken from our archives.
£2.50 per print

****** NEW BOOKS AVAILABLE ******

"The Mackay-Bennett...the Funeral Ship at the Titanic Disaster". *By John G.Avery* **£1.50**

"The Cholera Years...an Account of the Cholera Outbreaks in our ports,towns and villages".
By John G.Avery **£6.00**

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