



Cirencester Archaeological
and Historical
Society

NEWSLETTER

Number 49: April 2009

WELCOME to the Society's latest Newsletter, an occasional update and archive of our various activities. The Newsletter (and Annual Report) first appeared for the year 1958/59. Since then 48 Newsletters have appeared plus our four editions of Cirencester Miscellany, containing longer articles on local history.

An archive set of all these publications is held in Gloucestershire Archives under the reference number *D10989* (Acc. Nos 10989, 11184, 11266 and 11374). These are 'open immediately for research' and members and other enquirers are welcome to consult them.

The Society is a registered charity (No. 287289) and its new website as from 2009 is www.cirenhistory.org.uk

<p>'Old & new': place names and public art in Cirencester</p>

❖ Place names

The Society's Newsletter No 47 a year ago focused on then-current opportunities to incorporate some historical reference in the selection of new place names around the town. It is good to be able to report some success, in what is inevitably a rather drawn-out consultation procedure, where the Society must be proactive to make its views count.

The only really significant housing development currently going on in Cirencester is between the London and Burford roads, with access from the London Road side. Despite the recession, a first phase is under construction and with it the infrastructure including a new roundabout for the whole development, which will eventually fill much of the open land towards Cherry Tree Lane.

There is the usual developers' marketing name (often confused, as we saw last year, with the selection of a permanent site name), in this case *Centuria*. This should be only temporary, which may or may not be welcome.

One glance at a map of 1774 in Gloucestershire Archives (ref no D674b P44) revealed the most historically relevant name, taken from the old field names. Five of the six old fields which will disappear under this development were named *Forstall*. Closest to the town was Near, then Hill and Far Forstall and one other alongside Burford Road, with Quarry Forstall the large field in the corner of London Road and Cherry Tree Lane. The name also continued beyond Cherry Tree Lane where Hunters Care Centre is now (East and West Forstall).

So it is good to know that one of the first of the new road names in this development is to be *Forstall Way*. We might hope that the name could also be used again as the development unfolds, as in Close, Drive or even Leaze, which is the other historical name appearing on the 1774 map. Previous developments in the triangle of the two main roads did not pick up on the old names of London Leaze and Near London Leaze, so it is available.

The Society's other strand of promotion in place naming is the use of individual's personal or business names where these reflect some substantial contribution to Cirencester's corporate, commercial or social life. This may not be to everyone's taste, particularly in our egalitarian age, and due time needs to pass before any such community contribution can find its place in the overall scheme of things.

To push this forward, we took as our measure the splendid presentation of the town's business community presented as a series of portrait roundels in a framed 'group photograph' of the Cirencester Tradesmen's Society in 1897, produced to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria in that year. It is a period piece in every sense (all 95 roundels are of men; there are no women) but it does feature most of the long-standing, well-established family businesses which provided the core of town commerce through much of the nineteenth century and indeed the twentieth, down to the years following the Second World War when changes really began to take effect.

Here are business names which can still be remembered, and only in recent years have the last of them finally disappeared, as the larger scale chain stores have taken over. Gillmans recently and Clappens and Trinders a few years ago come to mind. Thanks to research by various individuals over the years, each portrait has been identified. Almost without exception, they were names well known to local people, and so they represent an important – and 'lost' – bit of Cirencester's commercial and social history, worth recording in some suitable way.

Twenty or so names were picked out which would not conflict with existing street or place names (always a key criteria in the consultation process) and Beecham, Trotman, Matthews, Orpet, Ovens, Gegg, Legg and others were offered up, as well as Trinder and Clappen – enough to provide a resource of names for future years. It is good to report that Winstone was selected, and so alongside *Forstall Way* will be *Winstone Gardens*, a remembrance of a local family with a long-established shoe shop at the top of Cricklade Street (now a pasty shop and cafe). A third selected name, *Blackberry Walk*, was the suggestion of one of the district councillors for this ward, remembering the wanderings of his youth when this area 'was all green fields'.

Society members are encouraged to suggest other names for developments as they occur in and around the town.

❖ Public Art: *The Prophet*

Cirencester cannot be described as over-endowed with examples of public art. Excluding buildings themselves as artistic statements, most people would be hard-pressed to name an example anywhere in the town, which is one of many good reasons to welcome the recent unveiling of *A Celebration of Hands*, a sculpture in stone by Rory Young and commissioned by Cirencester Civic Society, which now adorns an external wall at Brewery Arts. It deserves a write-up all of its own.

Meanwhile a reference by Martin Portus, during his most enjoyable recent lecture to the Society on the Jefferies family business in the town, reminded his audience of another piece of public art, given to the town during the late John Jefferies' period as Chairman of the then Urban District Council back in the 1960s. It is a statue called *The Prophet* which stands outside the Leaholme Flats in The Avenue, itself a development of that time. So apart from anything else there is an association between a then new housing scheme and a piece of public art to 'embellish' it, making it truly a period piece.

The story of its acquisition is revealed in a letter (which years later came into my care) from John Jefferies to near-neighbour the late Mavis Marshall, another stalwart of Cirencester and one of his successors as Mayor of the town (the UDC had chairmen; the successor Town Council has mayors). It was written on 24 March 1995, only a few weeks after the death of the artist who had created the sculpture, Willi Soukop, at the age 88 on 08 February of that year in Glasgow.

John Jefferies recalled that he had first met the artist when he (Soukop) was on the staff at Dartington College of Arts, describing him as 'a most likeable man, very modest and with all the traditional Viennese charm and great kindness for all he met'. With Jefferies in the chair at the Council, it was typical of him that he accepted the gift (made to him personally) of *The Prophet* from Willi Soukop on behalf of Cirencester, installing it (actual date not known – does anybody know?) in its present position in The Avenue, where it has been now for well over forty years.

Jefferies' letter contains further interesting gems, such as the fact that he was 'somewhat surprised that it [the offer of the statue] was accepted without any positive objection as far as I can recall', adding, no doubt tongue in cheek, that 'perhaps the fact that shortly after *The Prophet* had been installed in The Avenue, Cheltenham Borough [Council] spent what in those days was a considerable sum for another of his works, had something to do with it!'.

Again, also no doubt through John Jefferies' good offices, Willi Soukop had adjudicated at a competition held at Cirencester Grammar School in the days when John Barnett was headmaster [1954-61] for a piece of sculpture by pupils of the school.

Soukop was a sculptor in stone, wood, metal and clay, working in the European modernist tradition of the 1930s. For thirty years from 1969 he was Master of Sculpture at the Royal Academy Schools. He had arrived in Dartington from his native Vienna in 1934 and stayed for six years, an enjoyable and rewarding time before his internment as an enemy alien at the start of wartime hostilities.

His work as a sculptor, 'rendered in flowing lines and economy of form' according to one appreciation, brought him considerable success as a public sculptor, with commissions for schools, churches and housing estates in Britain and abroad. So the Leaholme project had its context. Perhaps it did in another way too, for Soukop once wryly remarked 'few people usually take the trouble to find out' who made these works. Occasionally there is a letter to the Standard asking for just such information!

There is also an interesting parting comment to Mavis Marshall, which resonates down the years as a reminder of ways and means of long term care. 'You did say something,' Jefferies writes, 'about giving *The Prophet* a wash and brush up; perhaps it might be prudent to consider carefully whether the patina which the concrete has acquired over the years has added something which might be of value. It is one of the things I would have asked him about had he lived.' Therein lies an equally relevant contemporary comment for our own times.

Willi Soukop: obituary in *The Independent* 09 February 1995; see also website www.saundersfineart.co.uk/pages/artist/17.html

❖ Public Art: *The Bingham Gallery 2009 exhibition*

The Bingham Gallery in Dyer Street is housed in the former Reading Room of Cirencester's first Bingham Library which opened in this building, then brand new, in 1905. Refurbished in 2005 as a celebration of its centenary, the Bingham Gallery is now a multi-functional space used for meetings, seminars, presentations and receptions as well as concerts and – of course – as a gallery proper, displaying some of the local topographical art and local history which is owned by the Trustees of the Bingham Library, the building's owners.

Annual themed exhibitions, freely open to visitors on specific dates, are held throughout the summer months, and the 2009 theme is *Cirencester Parish Church*, a most appropriate choice as the extensive programme of refurbishment in the church itself continues to be one of the town's major current conservation stories.

The Trustees' collection includes many detailed and fascinating portrayals of both church and Market Place as well as the streets around, and provides a stimulating range of historical detail, of particular interest to Society members and other local historians. The exhibition also always includes the Cirencester Millennium Embroidery, twelve exquisite panels celebrating two thousand years of history in the town, created in the year 2000.

Exhibition dates are Saturdays from 10 to 2 on each of 09 and 23 May, 13 and 27 June, 11 and 25 July, 08 and 22 August and 12 and 26 September. Admission is free and a booklet is available as both a guide and a souvenir. Further information is available from the Trustee office on 01285 655646 and www.binghamlibrarytrust.org.uk. Volunteers are also sought to join the Friends group and assist as stewards during exhibition openings etc.

David Viner

April 2009. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Society