

Henley Archaeological & Historical Group

NEWSLETTER No 165 April 2026

Message from the Chair

HA&HG is fifty this year. On 20 August 1976, when Jim Callaghan was Prime Minister and Tony Benn was a power in the land, the *Henley Standard* announced our foundation. At the start we had five working groups reflecting the interests of the founding members: Field Walking, Field Names, Woodland, Documents and Buildings. Reports on the first three lectures were included in our first newsletter which had appeared at the end of that year.

Celebrations for this 'significant birthday' will take a concrete form later this year. We plan to have a stall at the May Fayre on 4 May with a display of how the Group has contributed to developing understanding of local archaeology and history. On 20 June, when Oxpast, the annual meeting of the Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society, brings representatives of other heritage group from across the county to Henley, we'll be inviting them to join in. We hope to have a publication drawing on past journals. And later in the year, we'll have our own event specifically for members and other local supporters.

Meanwhile, we carry on the work our founders began. We welcome new research, as shown by reports below on RAF Henley and a visit to the underground aircraft factory at Wargrave, following up on our project last year exploring 'Life in Henley during the Second World War'.

There are regular speaker meetings as there were then, and also outings - at the end of last year to the Oxfordshire Museum Resources Centre at Standlake; and in June this year to Abingdon Abbey which is undergoing a restoration with National Lottery funding.

In this newsletter you will also find a report on our visit to the laboratory of Dan Miles, expert, one of Britain's experts in dendro-dating, whose work on Henley's medieval buildings had been quietly progressing under the management of Ruth Gibson, a member with a deep knowledge of Henley's rich heritage of medieval buildings. This newsletter also includes an update on current work in our archives. The quality of

Henley's historical records has always been one of the sources of pride in the past of our town since Victorian times.

Our predecessors established a strong tradition of civic engagement, for example contributing historical expertise to town planning, and to creating the original 'Henley Gallery' in the former River and Rowing Museum. Below you will find a report on the survey we conducted on the closing weekend of the old museum, revealing the interest there is keeping the existing collection together and establishing a new museum.

So, a rich and varied diet reflecting the diversity of our current activities. We do hope you'll take part in our Fiftieth Anniversary celebrations, including **volunteering to help with the May Fayre, for example – get in touch with any member of the committee listed at the end if you'd like to**; and perhaps joining in on our new volunteer research project, working jointly on life in the town between First and Second World Wars.

We hope you'll enjoy it all. Do please offer any ideas you have yourself for what we might do I future. And thanks very much for your continuing support.

Michael

H.A. & H.G. Summer Outing
Tour of the Abingdon Abbey Buildings

Our next outing, on Wednesday 3 June, will be to medieval Abingdon, the site of one of the richest monastic foundations in the Middle Ages. The Abbey regularly welcomed royalty and the nobility, but in 1538 it became one of the first victims of Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries. The ecclesiastical buildings, including the great abbey church of St Mary, were demolished and the masonry was used as building material. All that remained were the abbey gateway and its adjacent buildings and the domestic buildings. These remaining buildings were then variously used as a corn mill, granary, grammar school, brewery and gaol.






A trust has been working recently to preserve the remaining buildings and to organise a visitor experience. It has attracted significant National Lottery funding. The chairman of the trust, Greg Bensberg, will be our guide, showing us the Museum, St Nicolas Church, East St. Helen's Street and St Helen's Church. Also, weather and time permitting, we hope to visit Abbey meadow where an outline of the Abbey Church can be seen.

A full timeline and details of the history of the Abingdon Abbey buildings can be found at https://www.abingdonabbeybuildings.co.uk/history/.

We plan to provide transport for those who'd prefer not to drive themselves. There will be a charge for those using the bus, but we will meet the entrance charge per person out of the Group's coffers. The tour will begin at 11am. We are looking at the possibility of organising coffee and lunch with the group (paid for individually).

We sent an email out on Tuesday 14 April inviting Members to sign up. It promises to be an interesting visit. Please look out for the email.

The Spitfire in WW2 Around the Henley Area

By Angus Ross and Richard Miller

This story delves into different aspects of the local involvement in World War 2 on the production of Spitfire Photo Reconnaissance aircraft and the airfield named RAF Henley-on-Thames. We have found many long-time local residents who were unaware of this airfield or the Spitfire story.

What did your grandfather do in the war? What did your grandmother do in the war? What did your great aunt do in the war? So many people never asked that question, even back during, or just after, the war. Few would have got to the truth. Many people across the country were taken on to undertake secret tasks to support the war effort and building aircraft was one of those. It was the case in this area. Often the facts only became free to be discussed and researched many years after the war.

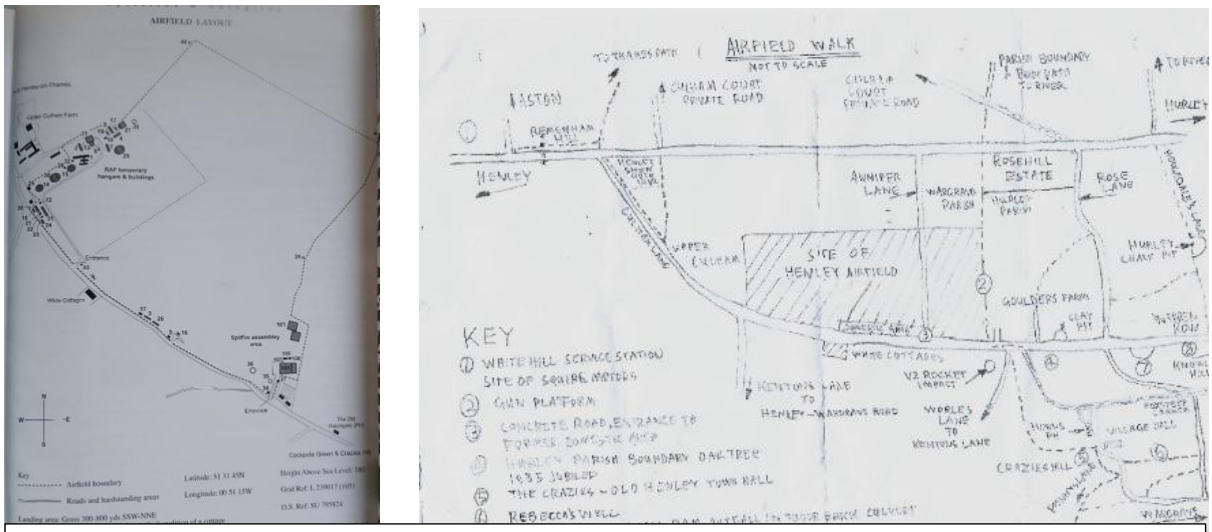


A Spitfire Mk IX

We understand that HA&HG members, some years ago, found and passed around some information on the manufacture, assembly and first flight of over 500 reconnaissance Spitfires during WW2. Also, you may have seen the Henley Standard article that we put together last October to remember RAF Henley on Thames, an airfield near Cockpole Green/Crazies Hill which closed in that month 80 years before in 1945. In 1941 and 1942 it had been the airfield where those locally built Spitfires were finally assembled and from there made their maiden flights.

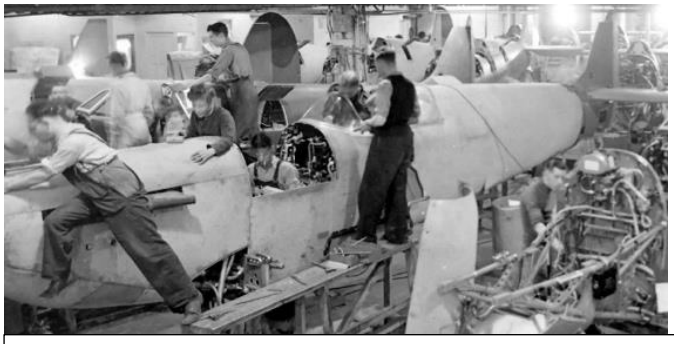
We have continued to research the various activities that took place during WW2 in our area and met some local people whose family were involved locally.

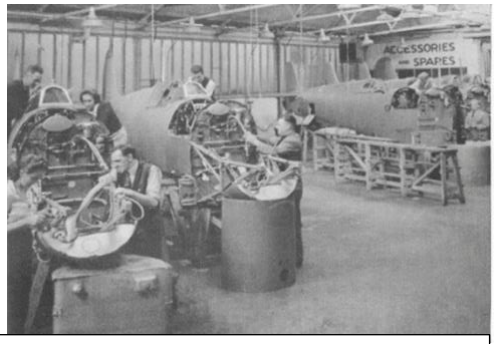
There is more than can be included in this article, so we will concentrate on the Spitfire story. But just for background, the Air Ministry appropriated land at Cockpole Green and cleared a large field for a grass strip which initially served as a relief landing ground for Tiger Moth trainers from White Waltham and Miles Magister trainers from Woodley. Later, the airfield was shared with other activities including Spitfire assembly and flights. The No 529 Squadron, a radar calibration squadron, was also based there operating the DH 87 Hornet Moth, the Avro Rota Mk1 Cierva Autogiro and the first RAF operational helicopter, the Sikorsky R4 Hoverfly.



Plans showing the location off the road from the Henley to Hurley Road and Crazies Hill. Where the Spitfires were finally assembled is now a small commercial complex. Drawing on the right side by Peter Anderson.

Lord Beaverbrook, as Minister for Aircraft Production, acted after the Supermarine factory near Southampton was bombed early in 1940. Production needed to be dispersed so he set up remote production sites using non aeronautical engineering skills and buildings but also recruiting civilian people for whom engineering was something totally new. Beaverbrook did this for many aircraft types, but for the Spitfire he set up production in Salisbury, Trowbridge and Reading. Three main sites were established in the Reading/Caversham area at Vincent's Garage near the station, Great Western Garage in Vastern Road behind the station and a site in Star Road Caversham where fuselages and other parts were constructed. Other sites, especially Newbury, were used for manufacturing and storage of other parts. Locally some work and storage took place in underground tunnels on the Wargrave Road out of Henley and at a similar site in Warren Row south of Cockpole Green. Engines were manufactured elsewhere.





Pictures showing local Spitfire construction at the Reading manufacturing sites

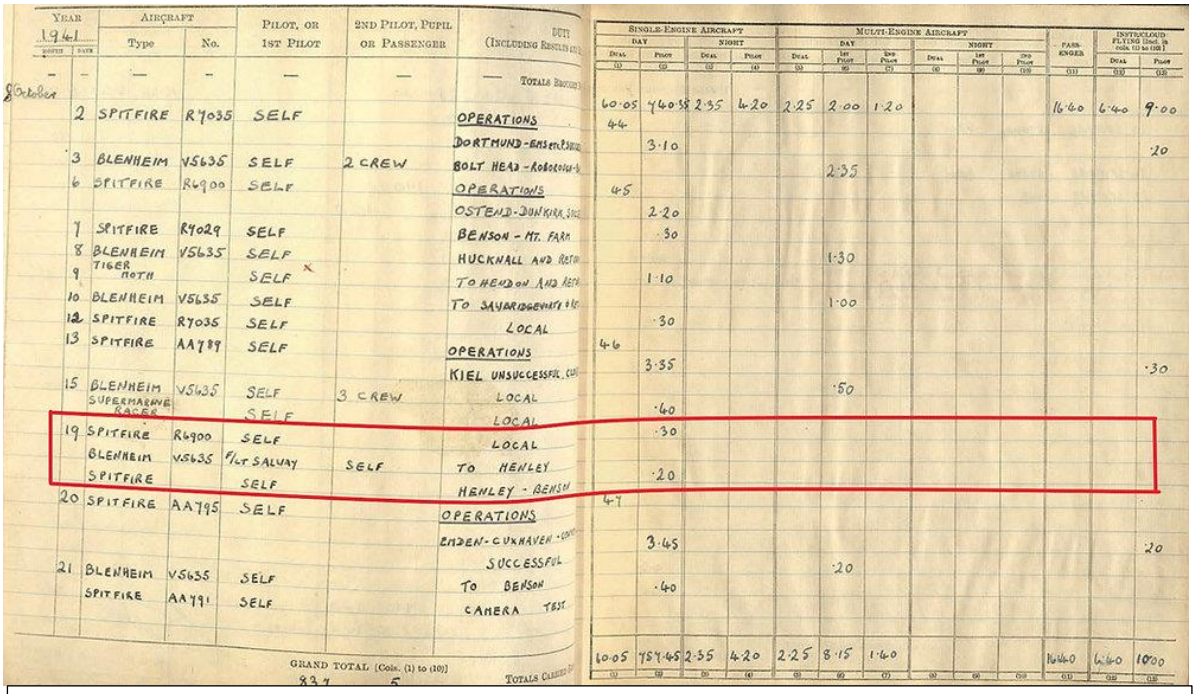


Queen Mary transporter

The hangar at RAF Henley on Thames showing a Spitfire finally assembled and ready for flight



These Spitfires were delivered to RAF Benson where on arrival they would immediately be placed on operational readiness.



Year 1941	Aircraft Type	Aircraft No.	Pilot, or 1st Pilot	2nd Pilot, Pupil or Passenger	Duty (Including Results and Remarks)
— —	—	—	—	—	— Totals Brought Forward
8 October					
2	SPITFIRE	R7035	SELF		OPERATIONS
					DORTMUND - EMS CANAL
3	BLENHEIM	V5635	SELF	2 CREW	BOLT HEAD - ROBOGUM
6	SPITFIRE	R6900	SELF		OPERATIONS
					OSTEND - DUNKIRK
7	SPITFIRE	R7029	SELF		BENSON - MT. FARM
8	BLENHEIM	V5635	SELF		HUCKNALL AND RETN
9	TIGER MOTH		SELF		TO HENDON AND RETN
10	BLENHEIM	V5635	SELF		TO SALISBURY AND RETN
12	SPITFIRE	R7035	SELF		LOCAL
13	SPITFIRE	AA789	SELF		OPERATIONS
					KIEL UNSUCCESSFUL
15	BLENHEIM SUPERMARINE RACER	V5635	SELF	3 CREW	LOCAL
			SELF		LOCAL
19	SPITFIRE	R6900	SELF		LOCAL
	BLENHEIM	V5635	F/LT SALWAY	SELF	TO HENLEY
	SPITFIRE		SELF		HENLEY - BENSON
20	SPITFIRE	AA795	SELF		OPERATIONS
					EMDEN - CUXHAVEN
					SUCCESSFUL
21	BLENHEIM	V5635	SELF		TO BENSON
	SPITFIRE	AA791	SELF		CAMERA TEST
					GRAND TOTAL [Cols. (1) to (10)] 837 5 Totals Carried Forward

Single-Engine Aircraft Day Dual	Single-Engine Aircraft Day Pilot	Single-Engine Aircraft Night Dual	Single-Engine Aircraft Night Pilot	Multi-Engine Aircraft Day Dual	Multi-Engine Aircraft Day 1st Pilot	Multi-Engine Aircraft Day 2nd Pilot	Multi-Engine Aircraft Night Dual	Multi-Engine Aircraft Night 1st Pilot	Multi-Engine Aircraft Night 2nd Pilot	Pass-enger	Instrument Flying Dual	Instrument Flying Pilot
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)
60·05	740·35	2·35	4·20	2·25	2·00	1·20				16·40	6·40	9·00
44												
	3·10											·20
					2·35							
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	·40											
60·05	759·45	2·35	4·20	2·25	8·15	1·20				16·40	6·40	10·00

Delivery Pilot logbook

This dispersed production required a high degree of planning, communication and co-ordination. There was an enormous call on the various components designed by specialist companies and often these were manufactured in many dispersed locations. The engines, radios, instruments, wheels, undercarriages, etc needed to be brought together at the right moment. All this needed to be achieved without arousing public attention. It was only just over 6 months after the Southampton raids that the first 'dispersed' Spitfire was completed and in the end half of all production was away from Southampton.

Part of the challenge was to train local men, boys and many women – ex shop assistants, domestic workers and from many other employments to become skilled fitters and engineers working long hours in often difficult and demanding conditions – and unable to tell those at home what they were doing!

From our research we believe that at least 500 Spitfires were made in the Reading Area during WW2. As the Spitfire was developed with larger engines and other features it was found that the Henley airfield did not provide a long enough run for a safe take-off. As a result, the final assembly and first flight was transferred to Aldermaston where the airfield benefitted from three concreate runways. It was by then used by the USAAF. Recently, in conversation with a local resident whose uncle had worked on Spitfires locally, we found that she still had his USAAF security pass.

This is a fascinating story which we feel must not be lost to future generations. The name itself is fascinating – of course who would call a wartime airfield RAF Wargrave or RAF Crazies Hill?! Do let us know if you come across new revelations of this local involvement in WW2.

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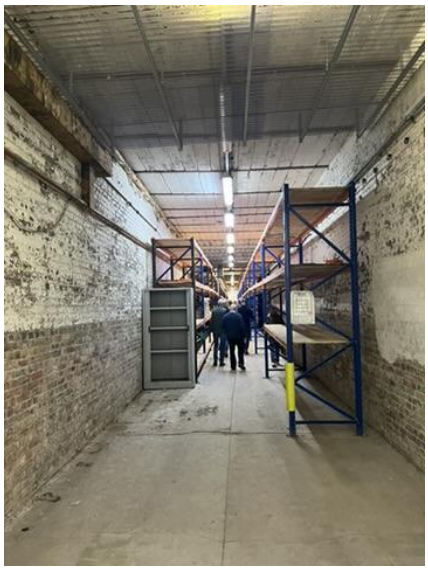
Visit to Henley's wartime aircraft factory

By Michael Redley

A visit by a party of us to the underground tunnels on the Wargrave Road, the site of Henley's Second World War aircraft factory, produced real surprises. It took place on 9 October and was kindly arranged for us, by a member of the group, Matthew Jackson, and organised by David Feary. Thanks to Matthew and David.

Working last year on our project on the impact of the war on life in Henley, I had found references to the tunnels in papers on wartime billeting. Welsh miners had been employed to dig them out, under the Park Place estate in 1941. They hadn't liked the work much, seeing sweeping up chalk dust as a far cry from mining deep seams of coal which they were used to. The pay wasn't much good either. And it was clear that Henley had not been entirely hospitable, not much liking the 'rough' strangers suddenly in its midst.

So it was a real treat to see the results of their handiwork, now in private ownership and normally not accessible to the public. A small party of us assembled outside the remains of a concrete guard house at the former entrance. We went through a small door into an entrance space with a tunnel large enough to drive a lorry down stretching off into the distance under the hill. The remains of a turntable showed where the lorries delivering supplies and machine tools were rotated for the return journey. The network of tunnels supplied with power from a local generator was the heart of the factory. It worked day and night, and the noise and fumes must have been considerable. A tunnel sloping back up the surface from deep under the hill provided an exit for workers in case the front door could not be used. We traced the original footpath over the hill to the exit, which still has some of its marker lights hanging from trees.



The purpose of the factory was the assembly of fighter aircraft under orders from Lord Beaverbrook, Minister of Aircraft Production. After centralised production was successfully destroyed by the German air force early in the war, production of components and assembly was secretly dispersed. Salisbury and Reading became unlikely centres of this engineering work, turning out hundreds of aircraft. Henley's factory was a satellite of the Reading centre. Aircraft produced locally were flown off from an airstrip, belonging originally to Park Place at the top of Remenham Hill, which for a short time became 'RAF Henley'.

Henley people – mostly women - had jobs as machinists on lathes in the factory. A lot of them didn't last long because the work was hard and the conditions difficult. Visiting the place, it was easy to see why. The physical underground work was not for everyone.

The Wargrave Road walked by the night shift was spooky. From an oral history project done some years back, we found the story of woman who brought metallic shavings back from her lathe at the factory as decorations to hang on the Christmas tree for her children.

It has never been quite clear – at least to me – quite what part the Henley factory played. I have seen references there to the production of instrumentation and landing gear for the aircraft. It had been suggested that the Wargrave Road factory was linked in some way to the wartime production of Stuart Turner's engineering works in the town, which we looked at in detail in our project of Life in Henley during the war. (See Adrian Mettem's article in our booklet, *Life in Wartime Henley,* which is still available from the Bell Bookshop.) But in any case, it was brilliant to get closer to another of Henley's contributions to the war effort at its factory under the hill.

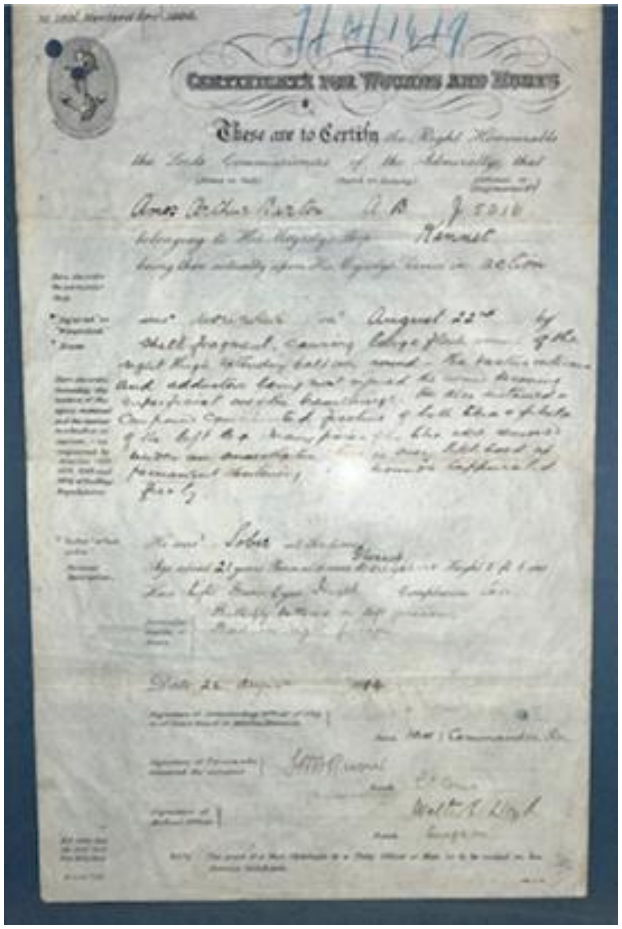
My Grandad
By Chris Whitehead

On 22 August, 1914, the River-class destroyer HMS Kennet was deployed with the China Squadron to Tsingtao (now called Qingdao), to blockade the German base there.



While chasing the German destroyer S 90, she approached too close to the shore battery and came under fire. Although not materially damaged, she sustained three men killed and six wounded, two of whom subsequently died. One of the wounded was a 21-year-old able seaman called Amos Arthur Barton (always known as Arthur). He was my grandfather. As war had been declared only eighteen days earlier, Arthur was among the first naval casualties to be suffered by Britain in the Great War.

His injuries were extensive – as you may see from his 'Certificate of Wounds or Hurts' signed by the Captain. It states graphically…



CERTIFICATE FOR WOUNDS AND HURTS

These are to Certify

'*Shell fragment causing large flesh wound of the right thigh extending halfway round – the vastus internus and adductors being most injured the wound becoming superficial over the hamstrings. He also sustained compound comminuted*[1] *fracture of both tibia and fibula of the left leg : many pieces of the tibia were removed under an anaesthetic. There is every likelihood of permanent shortening. Both wounds suppurated freely.*'

He was lucky to survive.

Interestingly, the certificate also states that he was '*sober at the time!*', the implication being that often men were not!



He was hospitalised, first in Hong Kong and later at the naval hospital in Chatham. For the rest of his life he had to wear a built-up surgical boot (long before platform soles were fashionable!) This image, taken some thirty years later, shows clearly that boot.

His family did not hear of him or from him for over a year - they thought he had been killed in action. A memorial service was held for him in his home town, Glossop, in Derbyshire. You may imagine their surprise when he finally turned up on their doorstep!

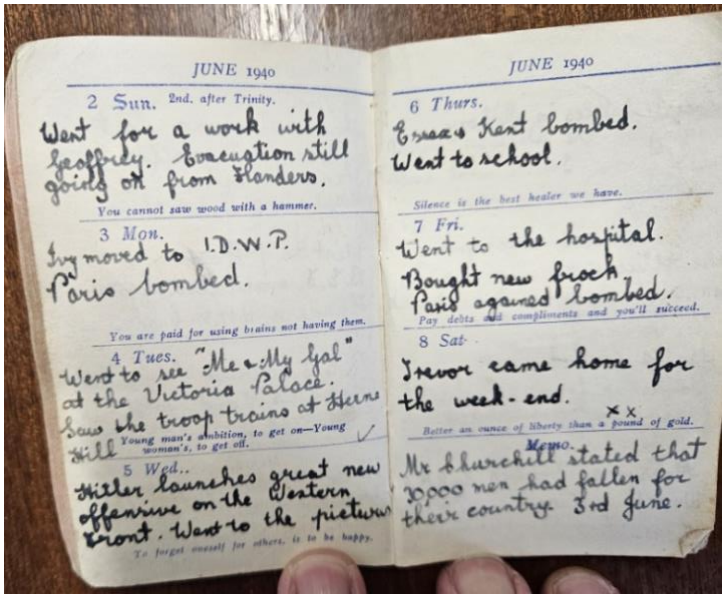
[1] A comminuted fracture is a severe injury where a bone breaks into three or more pieces, typically caused by high-impact trauma.

H.A. & H.G. Archive Update

By Simon Lunn

Lynn Brookes, Elisabeth Wood and I are making progress in cataloguing HA&HG's archive with over 1000 items now catalogued out of an estimated 3000 items.
New additions continue to be donated. The photo below shows a couple of pages from the 1940 diary of Jean Sadler as mentioned in the last newsletter. The diaries frequently

juxtapose major historical events with the more mundane as seen in the entry for 5 June 1940, “Hitler launches great new offensive on the Western Front. Went to the pictures”. Going to the pictures was a more than weekly event!


JUNE 1940

2 Sun. 2nd. after Trinity.
Went for a walk with Geoffrey. Evacuation still going on from Flanders.
You cannot saw wood with a hammer.

3 Mon.
Ivy moved to I.D.W.P.
Paris bombed.
You are paid for using brains not having them.

4 Tues.
Went to see "Me & My Gal" at the Victoria Palace.
Saw the troop trains at Herne Hill
Young man's ambition, to get on—Young woman's, to get off.

5 Wed.
Hitler launches great new offensive on the Western front. Went to the pictures
To forget oneself for others, is to be happy.

JUNE 1940

6 Thurs.
Essex & Kent bombed.
Went to school.
Silence is the best healer we have.

7 Fri.
Went to the hospital.
Bought new frock.
Paris again bombed.
Pay debts and compliments and you'll succeed.

8 Sat.
Trevor came home for the week-end.
xx
Better an ounce of liberty than a pound of gold.
Memo.
Mr Churchill stated that 30,000 men had fallen for their country. 3rd June.

A quick dip into one box file in the uncatalogued items shows there is much still to see and record: Regatta documents dating back to 1839, an analysis of burials in Henley in the early 17th century showing a fourfold increase to 220 in 1643 with only nine being soldiers around the time of the Battle of Duck Street, an epic poem to Henley (undated), and a list of the Henley token issuers during the shortage of small change in the 17th century: a fishmonger, a bodice maker, a coachman and a pewterer amongst others. A look at the Portable Antiquities Finds scheme, discussed during the Group’s recent Standlake visit (see elsewhere in the newsletter), shows that Henley tokens have been found locally and in London, with the most recent discovery being at a Detectorists festival in 2023.

Here’s a few lines from the ‘epic’ poem as a taster:

> “For, though all spotless now the silver stream,
> And smooth the fields which with rich harvests teem,
> When Revolution erst her wings unfurl’d,
> And from his thorny throne the Stuart hurl’d,
> That crystal surface of that rolling flood
> Rejected streams pollute with human blood;
> And still imbedded in those fields, remain
> The rotted bones of many a warrior slain.”

We have also approached local secondary schools with the aim of helping teach students the local history perspective on topics in the National Curriculum such as immigration and WW2. It is still early days; however, the initial engagement from teachers is positive.

All Group members are welcome to look around the archive either for your own research or just out of curiosity. Please email hahg.members@gmail.com and Simon Lunn, who looks after the archive, will arrange a convenient time for you to visit.

Rings of Time, Our Visit to a Dendrochronology Laboratory

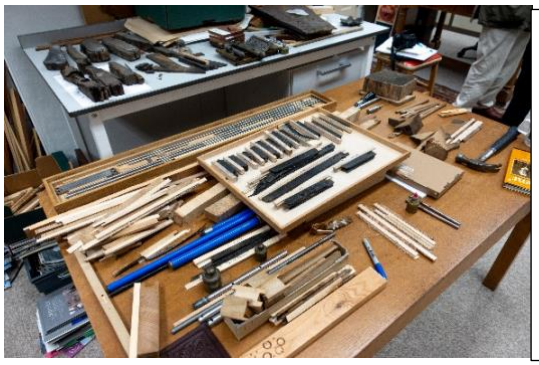
By David Feary

On a damp, cold morning, a small and fortunate group from our Group set off for Mapledurham, having been kindly invited by the eminent dendrochronologist Dr. Daniel Miles to visit the Oxford Dendrochronology Laboratory. Numbers were necessarily limited—laboratory space, as we were soon to discover, is limited when one is dealing with centuries of timber history!

We received a warm welcome. Dan greeted us at his charming, thatched cottage, in the centre of a large private estate, and immediately revived us with hot drinks. While the house itself may be several hundred years old, it conceals a striking contrast: a state-of-the-art laboratory hidden below, accessed from within the cottage and secured behind a formidable fire door.
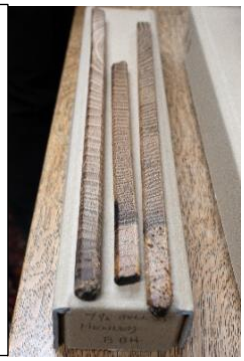


Once assembled underground, we were utterly captivated as Dan began to explain the science—and art—of dendrochronology. His work starts on location, where he carefully extracts narrow pencil like cores from oak beams in historic buildings. These samples are brought to the lab for meticulous preparation. Each core is cleaned and polished before being examined under a powerful microscope. Using computer-assisted tools, the growth rings are measured to an astonishing precision of 0.01 mm.



On the left, long silver drill bits used to extract cores are visible between various pieces of wood.

On the right, prepared wooden cores ready for examination.



The real magic lies in what comes next. No two sequences of tree growth are ever exactly the same. Each pattern forms a kind of natural fingerprint, allowing experts to match it precisely against established reference chronologies. The process is like a trained musician hearing a few bars of music and identifying exactly where they belong within a symphonic movement.

We were treated to a hands-on demonstration, taking turns to peer down the microscope and try our hand at measuring the rings. Dan also shared a selection of beautifully polished cores, including samples from iconic buildings such as Westminster Hall and the Radcliffe Camera, alongside examples from our own Henley houses. Seeing these tangible links to history laid out before us was a real highlight.



Dan explained how the presence of bark on a timber can pinpoint not just when the tree was growing, but the exact year the tree was felled. The building will have been built within the next year before the timber hardened. However, as we learned, success is not guaranteed. Missing rings, reused timbers, or absent bark can all complicate the story. Building the long reference sequences that underpin this work is itself a monumental task. In England it now goes back unbroken to the Roman era.

After the laboratory session, we were invited to explore Dan's woodyard and sheds - a treasure trove of timber awaiting study. There was far more than we had time to examine properly, but one particularly impressive sight awaited us: the eastern door of Winchester Cathedral, currently undergoing restoration. Its scale and craftsmanship were amazing.



All too soon, our visit came to an end. We left not only better informed but genuinely inspired by the skill, patience, and passion that underpin this fascinating field. It was an unforgettable experience, and we extend our warmest thanks to Dan for his generosity and hospitality.

Results of the Survey at the River & Rowing Museum

By Annabel Lyell

On the closing weekend of the River & Rowing Museum in September 2025, a small group of HA&HG Members undertook a survey of visitors to see if we could better understand

the idea of a local museum and what visitors might be interested in seeing more of in the future.

An estimated 2,000 visitors attended the weekend. The HA&HG questionnaire team was stationed at the entrance to the Henley Gallery for both days. We recognise that we probably missed several visitors focussed on other galleries elsewhere. However, as our ongoing aim is to ensure that objects from the Henley Gallery remain in Henley, this seemed the appropriate place to base ourselves as this is the future target audience. About 10% of the total visitors completed our questionnaire (202 people) and their answers have allowed us to draw several conclusions which may be useful when considering how to reshape a new local offering. (Where reference is made to "visitors" in this article, it is only to those visitors we surveyed on the closing weekend. It is a relatively small sample survey so conclusions must be treated with care. The conclusions are summarised in bold, with expanded answers beneath.)

1. **Visitors were mainly from Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire.**
    - 53% were within 5 miles of Henley
    - 86% were from Berkshire, Buckinghamshire or Oxfordshire

While the River and Rowing Museum initially had ambitions of being a national museum and a national centre for rowing history it was in fact visited mainly by those local to the area. A lack of marketing to both local and more distant tourists coming to the area was mentioned by several visitors.

2. **Visitors were mainly younger children and adults over 30 years old**
    - 24% of visitors were under 12 years old
    - 64% of visitors were over 30 years old
    - 20% of visitors were 66+ years old
    - 11% of visitors were aged 12-30

Teens and young adults were not well represented amongst the visitors.

3. **Nearly half of the visitors had not been to the River & Rowing Museum in the past three years (2023-2025)**
    - 47% said it was their first visit to the museum in the past three years
    - 33% had visited the museum at least 3 times in the last three years

We intentionally avoided the "Covid years" of 2020-2022 to try and get a realistic picture of how often people visited the River & Rowing Museum in recent times. While there is clearly a core group who visited the museum regularly, many had come to see the museum only when it was closing and it was no longer going to be available to them. The cost of entry to the museum was a barrier for several people, particularly as they had "no idea how good it was going to be".

4. **Half of the visitors had visited any museum 3+ times a year**
    - 50% of visitors went to any museum frequently (i.e. 3+ times a year)
    - 80% of visitors went to a museum at least once a year

With 80% of visitors attending a museum at least once a year, it is suggested that visits to a new museum could be increased from the 47% that had attended the River & Rowing Museum over the past three years.

5. **If the River and Rowing Museum had been located in Henley town centre, three-quarters (74.5%) of visitors said they still would have visited it about the same amount.**
    - 19.5% of visitors would have visited a museum in the town centre more often
    - 74.5% of visitors would have visited the same amount

While a town centre location may be desirable for passing trade, ease of parking was clearly a draw to the museum. The location of the museum outside of the town centre did not seem to bother the majority of visitors.

6. **Nearly half of the visitors came mainly to see either Henley's History or the Wind in the Willows exhibition**

7. **When visitors were asked what displays they would like to see in a new Henley museum, visitors wanted to see more local history and more about the River Thames (including its boats and rowing history).**

8. **When visitors were asked what features enhance their visit to a museum the two most important offerings were a café and interactive displays.**

9. **100% of visitors considered it important to have a local museum in Henley.**
    - 83% considered it "very important "

Perhaps this is not surprising. Visitors who came were keen on museum's generally, and those who completed the survey would have wanted to help keep some sort of museum. But the volume of visitors and wider expressions of regret at the closure showed significant support for a local museum. Several detailed freeform answers that cannot be individually incorporated into this short article showed a high level of engagement. We all heard visitors comment on the high quality of some past exhibitions at the museum, and general sadness that it was closing. However, there was also criticism around the lack of advertising and lack of knowledge about what the Henley Gallery contained. If a new local heritage museum is created, the key message we heard is that it will require significant investment in marketing in our local counties and a regular turnover of exhibitions to encourage people to both visit and visit repeatedly.

So what next?

As a group we continue to advocate for a new space for our local Henley history collection and in March a petition was sent to both the Town Council and the River & Rowing Museum Foundation from HA&HG Members.

The River and Rowing Museum have given us a copy of the database of 15,000 objects belonging to the Henley Collection. This will form the basis of any future Henley museum and/or future displays. Our next step as a group is to review the collection database, learn about what is there and contribute to the stories we can tell about our important local history. **If you would like to help with this, or have any questions, please contact: annabel_lyell@yahoo.co.uk**

Autumn Outing to the Museum Resources Centre, Standlake

A group of HA&HG Members went to the Oxfordshire Museums Resources Centre in November for a fascinating tour of their facility. It is a large repository of over 110,000 objects representing the heritage of Oxfordshire, including its history, archaeology, agriculture, crafts and arts. Many of the objects on display in Oxfordshire's museums actually belong to the County Museums Service at Standlake. The Centre also provides advice, storage and collections management services to several museums in the county.







On arrival, we were taken on a tour of the Centre's storage facility. A vast warehouse with items carefully stacked from floor to ceiling. While many of the smaller objects were boxed away, large pieces could be viewed up close including oil paintings of Oxfordshire landscapes, washing mangles, dairy carts, large wooden wagons, metal signs advertising companies from Oxfordshire's commercial past, rows of large farm tools, furniture and even an old green Ransomes lawnmower. This is just to name a few object types from a very extensive collection. While the collection is only available to view by appointment, along the edge of the storage aisles there were small exhibitions and explanations for visitors on some of the more extraordinary pieces they hold.



Waterperry Coach, 1820's. Owned by Joseph Warner Henley, MP for Oxford.



An enormous blanket loom, possibly made in 1702 and adjusted during the 1800s. It was used in Witney right up until the 1960's to make blankets and horse colour check fabric.

We were then taken through to the Centre's laboratory, where a number of finds local to Henley had been placed on the table for us to view. The rare gold brooch (see far-right picture below) from the 13th or 14th century was found at the Rectory Garden Site in Henley. I later discovered that the brooch was actually described in the 3rd HA&HG Journal (April 1985) by Anne Cottingham. If interested, the journal is still available to view on the HA&HG website or in hard copy at the HA&HG Archive.






Following the tour, we were given a very enthusiastic talk by Dr Edward Caswell, the Finds Liaison Officer for Oxfordshire who is responsible for identifying and recording archaeological objects found by members of the public. He introduced us to the Portable Antiquity Scheme (PAS) Database, explaining that over 1.8 million items have been recorded on it. Most of these objects have been found by metal detecting. Each artefact in the database has a short description and their position is recorded on a map of the UK. It is possible to look online at the objects found in and around Henley on Thames and view maps of objects distributed by county e.g. Oxfordshire or Berkshire. Dr Caswell was very keen to stress what a huge amount of potential the PAS Database has for advancing our historical knowledge and how many opportunities there are to use this data for new and original projects. The data is available online and can be accessed by anybody at this link: https://finds.org.uk.

It was a fascinating morning and if you didn't get to come with us, the Centre is well worth a visit. The museum does tours about once a month, but you must book a ticket in advance. Details can be found here: https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/events/workshops-oxfordshire-museum/tour-museum-resource-centre-4.

Good Reads from Our Members

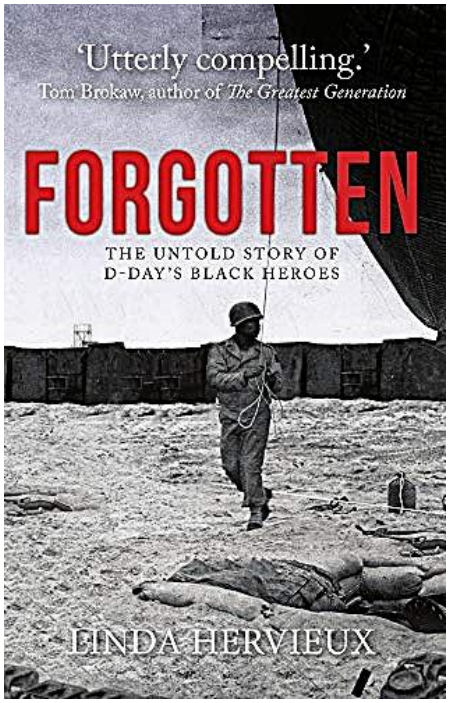
This is a relatively new section in our newsletter. Please contribute! We would love to hear about any history or archaeology books that you, our Members, have read recently. The books do not need to be newly published. The review need not be long or fully comprehensive – a short description of why you liked the book is sufficient. There will be October (think Christmas!) and Summer reading lists for our newsletters so that you all have some additional ideas to add to your own lists. Please send your book reviews to annabel_lyell@yahoo.co.uk. Happy to receive reviews at any time – they will be placed

in my newsletter file for the next publication. Here are some of the books that Members have enjoyed recently.

Piers Brandon, *Edward VIII: the Uncrowned King*, Penguin 2016
From: Michael Redley

I really enjoyed this little book, only 120 pages, in the 'Penguin Monarchs' series. It tells the sad but well known story of the King who abdicated in December 1936 rather than be parted from the woman he loved, although 'kinging', as he called it, was emphatically not his forte in any case. But it tells you so much more about modern Britain – the damaging influence of a powerful press, the corrupting power of wealth, and how it will end badly when you claim immunity from criticism but forget the price to be paid in duty. I particularly love the moment when a dazed Edward VIII, then still Prince of Wales, emerged from train wreck clutching a cocktail shaker.

Linda Hervieux, *Forgotten: The Untold Story of D-Day's Black Heroes*, Amberley Publishing, 2019
From: Paul Butler

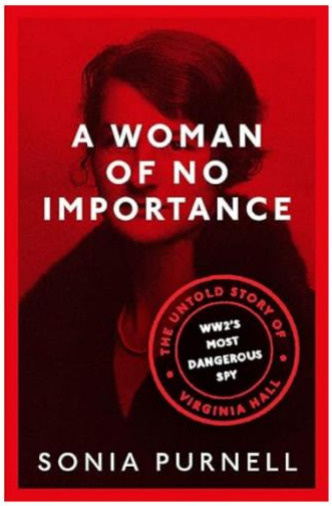


This excellent, well-researched, and professionally written book tells the story of the WW2 American D-Day landings on Omaha Beach from the viewpoint of the 320th Barrage Balloon Battalion, an all-black combat unit tasked with maintaining a curtain of aerial balloons around the landing crafts to protect infantry from enemy aircraft fire.

Before D-Day the black conscripts were billeted for a short time in England at the camp at Checkendon, and the book describes them socialising at the local Black Horse and Four Horseshoes pubs and dancing at the village hall, where they were welcomed with open arms and treated just the same as the white GIs. After the war, these powerful experiences of equality were carried back to America, and helped fuel the budding civil rights movement.

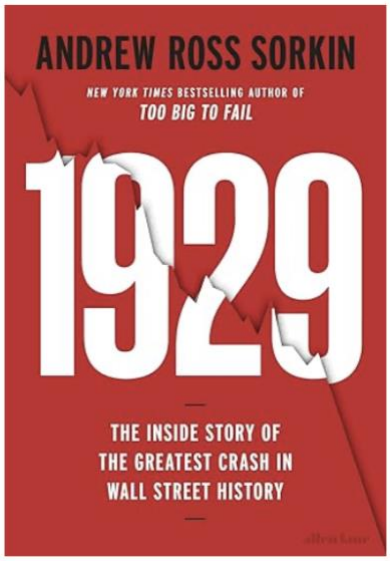
Until I read this book, I was unaware of the shameful effects of racial segregation in the US armed forces during WW2, with the stereotyping of US black soldiers by many senior officers in the military as being "too dumb to fight". The author points out that Steven Spielberg's 1998 film "Saving Private Ryan", touted as an historically accurate portrayal of the American landings, failed to show a single black face nor any of the many barrage balloons hoisted by the 320th, serving as an example of how Jim Crow politics has worked to airbrush black soldiers out of history and into the "forgotten" category. As such, the book was a sobering read of bravery and perseverance in the face of institutionally racial prejudice.

Sonia Purnell, *A Woman of No Importance*, Penguin Publishing Group 2019.
From: Annabel Lyell



This is the extraordinary biography of Virginia Hall, an American born lady who ended up working for the British Special Operations Executive during the Second World War. The story is all the more unusual as she had one leg amputated below the knee due to a shooting accident in 1933. While most would have returned home after this for a quiet life, Virgina and "Cuthbert" (her wooden leg) drove ambulances in France at the beginning of the war, then spied for the British and planned the jailbreak of 12 agents from a German prison. Her courage is very inspiring especially against a background of such deep prejudices against women and disability at that time. The book details both her successes and failures which in itself makes it an interesting read. I won't spoil it by telling you which plots work out well for her - it's well worth a read.

Andrew Sorkin, *1929: the inside story of the greatest crash in Wall Street History*, Allen Lane 2025
From: Michael Redley



Economists have analysed it endlessly. Sorkin, a journalist, author of *Too big to fail*, about the crash of 2008, and no relation of Aaron who wrote *The West Wing*, now tells the human and personal side. The movers and shakers were driven by *amour proper*, tunnel vision and greed. It is a world where the idea of 'insider trading' had scarcely caught on, stock speculation was a new fashion based, like car ownership, on cheap credit, and no one took a grip when everyone knew it was wrong. His story is a car crash waiting to happen, and there is an annoying knowingness in the style of storytelling. But it's still a page turner and a dire warning.



Steam Heritage Guide 2026, Steam Heritage Publishing
From: Peter Anderson

This guide has just been published. It lists museums and attractions for the whole of the UK including the Isle of Man, the Channel Isles, Northern Ireland and also Ireland. There is also an Events Diary listing the majority of events from March to January 2027. Available from high street newsagents and also online at: www.steamheritage.co.uk.

Historical Novels

A couple of historical novels have also been suggested as good reads by Darius Halpern. "*Testament*" (1938), a fiction work set against the backdrop of the Russian Revolution and "*Johanna at Daybreak*" (1969), a psychological novel set in post-World War II Europe, both by R.C. Hutchinson.

Our forthcoming lectures

All lectures will be held at Chantry House, doors open 7pm for 7:30pm start
Details available on the website: https://hahg.org.uk/lectures-coming/

2026

5 May	The Vikings and Baghdad: How scientific approaches to silver are transforming perspectives on Viking origins, Jane Kershaw
2 June	Oxfordshire Place Names, Andrew Long
6 October	Preservation of Abingdon Abbey (preliminary title), Godfrey Cole
3 November	Recent Archaeological Discoveries in Buckinghamshire, Lucy Lawrence
1 December	History of Marlow, Geoff Wood

Special events for H.A. & H.G. Members

3 June	**Summer Outing: Tour of the Abingdon Abbey Buildings** see details on pages 2-3
20 June	**Oxfordshire Past 2026**, **Annual Conference, Henley** details and booking here: https://www.oahs.org.uk/oxpast.php
9 September	**Lecture by Dr Jonathan Healey** on his new history of the English civil War, *The Blood in Winter*.

H.A. & H.G.
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Our Website

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