

Friends of West Norwood CEMETERY

Newsletter No. 93 – September 2018

Free to members

Chairman's Report

Bob Flanagan

At long last the HLF bid has been submitted – a decision on the merits or otherwise of the bid is expected in January next year. Encouraging news is that new HLF grants totalling £6.2 million have been awarded to Sheffield General Cemetery Park; Belfast City Cemetery; and Sir Joseph Paxton's London Road Cemetery, Coventry. Details can be found on the HLF website.

In the event, one of the most difficult things to resolve in our bid has been how to facilitate no-step access to St Stephen's Chapel. The suggested solution involves bringing a path down from near to the old Mappin Path to the south-west corner of the chapel and installing a discreet bridge from outside the Greek enclosure onto the level of the Chapel itself. A problem could be finding a path through the relatively recent graves that have been inserted at random in this area. Other news is that the 1 July Open

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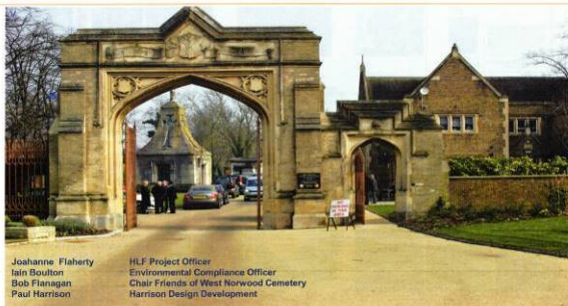
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Conservation Plan &
Maintenance & Management Plan

NORWOOD CEMETERY
A NEW BEGINNING



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Iain Boulton
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Harrison Design Development

Harrison
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landscape architecture

Lambeth
Council

**Friends of
West Norwood
CEMETERY**

LOTTERY FUNDED

Day was a success. We offered our general tour, and Roy Vickery and Dr Iain Boulton (South London Botanical Institute and Lambeth, respectively), offered wildlife tours.



New FoWNC trustee Michael Clayton

We are very pleased to welcome Michael as a trustee. Upon gaining professional accounting qualification in 2009, Michael emigrated to the UK from Australia. Specialising in Charity Accounting with a focus on membership organisations, he has since worked at notable charities such as the Royal Society and the Royal Institution of Great Britain. He currently holds the position of Head of Finance at the Reform Club. As a FOWNC trustee, Michael aims to bring his knowledge of finance and membership organisations to help improve our membership and accounting management. Michael's accession as a Trustee means that we have attained the maximum number of Trustees (9) allowed under our constitution.

Other FoWNC Matters

Our constitution decrees that one third of our Trustees shall retire in rotation on an annual basis. Hence this year Jill Dudman, Anna Long, and I will retire at the AGM on 20 October (see p. 16), we being the 3 longest serving trustees. However, we all offer ourselves for re-election.

On another matter, given that the Newsletter is available in colour on-line on our website (www.fownc.org) there have been requests to dispense with sending printed copies in the post. If members do not want to receive printed Newsletters please email membership secretary Michael Clayton (membership@fownc.org) to register your decision.

Finally, I recorded in the May Newsletter that Steve Wong, Cemetery Project Officer, amongst other tasks, had sadly left Lambeth to take up a new challenge in London. Steve has been very active on behalf of the cemetery and I personally was very sorry to see him go. We had many pleasant walks in the cemetery together. We all wish him well in his new position.



Steve Wong

European Cemeteries Route

As part of a triennial evaluation, ASCE president Lidija Pliberšek attended a European Institute of Cultural Routes Evaluation Board meeting in Luxembourg on 18 April. The evaluation was performed in order to check the quality of the route and its compliance with the criteria for the use of the label 'cultural route'. I am pleased to report that the

Route has been confirmed in the right to use the label Cultural Route of the Council of Europe for a further 3 years.

The goals and objectives of the network, namely the promotion of funerary heritage, raising of public awareness of the Cemeteries of Europe as part of our cultural heritage, promotion of research on cemeteries and education through cultural exchanges, encouraging cultural tourism, and promoting collaboration among different European countries were welcomed. However, it was thought that the visibility of the network on the internet could be improved.



It was suggested that all members should display the European Cemeteries Route logo prominently. Furthermore, a stronger presence on social media (Facebook, Instagram) was advised to raise awareness of the Route and improve its visibility. Additionally, the use of a sign informing visitors about the existence of the ASCE ARTour app could help raise public interest on the European Cemeteries Route. ARTour features a free Android and iPhone app that allows exploration of cemeteries (and other attractions in different European cities) via a smartphone or tablet. Each member of the Cemeteries Route is represented in ARTour and can also add its own guide (<https://cemeteriesroute.eu/about-cemeteries-route/become-a-member/cemeteries-route-in-artour.aspx>).

Clearly, we need to not only add our own guide to this facility, but also raise our profile within ASCE. However, I have failed to even get agreement on displaying the ASCE insignia at Norwood, let alone do anything else. I am pleased to report that FoWNC Trustee Andrew Cleminson has agreed to take on the task of developing the full potential of our long-standing ASCE membership. Perhaps now that the HLF bid has been submitted we may make more progress.

John Whelan

I am very sorry to report the death on 30 July of our Honorary Member John Whelan. His funeral mass was held at Corpus Christi Church, Brixton on Tuesday 14 August and was followed by cremation at Norwood. Councillor for Thurlow Park Ward from May 1990, he was re-elected 5 times until standing down in 2014. He was Conservative Group Leader at Lambeth 1998–2014 and deputy Leader of the Council under the Liberal Democrat-Conservative joint administration, 2002–6. A constant supporter of FoWNC, one of his first actions as councillor was to write in protest at the decision to recommence monument clearance work in the cemetery, an action taken by officers in response to the formation of our group. John was a much-respected figure and our sincere condolences go to his wife and family. His wife Clare Whelan OBE DL also served as councillor for Thurlow Park Ward 1990–2014 and likewise had a distinguished career in Local Government. Clare too has always been a strong supporter of our work and we are proud that she remains an Honorary FoWNC Member.



Adelaide Eliza Ironside (1831–1867)

Bob Flanagan



Adelaide Ironside

Adelaide Eliza Ironside (1831–1867) was born in Sydney, Australia, on 17 November 1831, daughter of James Ironside (1803–1866), an accountant, and Martha Rebecca, née Redman. In April 1855 she and her mother sailed for London, where they stayed at Park Hill, Streatham, home of William Leaf (1791–1874; grave 4,215, square 33). In 1856 Adelaide travelled to Rome, the first Australian-born artist to study abroad, armed with introductions from her physician Sir James Clark.¹ In time she became a respected artist. The Prince of Wales and William Wentworth, amongst others, visited her in Rome and each paid £500 for a painting.² Her paintings *The Marriage in Cana of Galilee*, *St Catherine*, and *The Pilgrim of Art* were shown at the 1862 Great Exhibition in London.

Sadly, Adelaide died of tuberculosis in Rome on 15 April 1867. According to research by Jill Poulton in the 1980s, William Leaf arranged for her body to be brought to London and for storage in the Catacombs at Norwood prior to shipping to Australia. However, Adelaide's mother died in London in 1869 whilst staying with William Leaf. He purchased a grave at Norwood on 15 March 1869 and, again according to Jill, had both mother and daughter interred therein at the same time. There is a note to



Jill Poulton and the replacement Ironside gravestone in 1985 (grave 11,836, square 77)

this effect in one of the registers in the cemetery office, but no record of Adelaide's coffin being received in the catacombs, and only Martha is recorded in the grave register itself. All a bit of a mystery. As to the grave itself, the original gravestone having been demolished by the Council in the 1970s, a new grave marker was commissioned in 1984. Some 8 oil paintings and many of her sketches survive in public galleries in Australia.

¹ Sir James Clark Bart. (1788–1870), Physician-in-Ordinary to Queen Victoria, 1837–1860

² William Charles Wentworth (1790–1872), Australian explorer, journalist, politician and author, and one of the leading figures of early colonial New South Wales

Isabella Banks: A High Victorian Drama

Diana Burns

The coffin of Isabella Kain (1783–1853) lies in Catacomb 89 on the site of the Episcopal Chapel at Norwood. She shares the prestigious vault with members of the Barron, Burbidge, and Friend families with whom she socialised in life. In a brick vault in the grounds almost opposite the entrance to the Chapel lie the remains of her niece Isabella Banks (1816–1859). The manner of her death only 5 months after a (bigamous) marriage led to suspicion of poisoning, and in turn the conviction of her ‘husband’, Dr Thomas Smethurst (1805–1873), known to history as the *Richmond Poisoner*, for murder.

The Banks Family

Isabella Kain, 2nd daughter of John Banks (d. 1809) of Clapham, was the widow of ship owner James Friend (1781–1819). She married Joseph Kain (c. 1770–1830) at Christ Church, Surrey on 21 September 1822. Joseph Kain’s grandson, John Joseph Kain (1824–1895) is also buried at Norwood (grave 11,064, square 110). Isabella is interred with her infant grandson, John Percy Friend (1854–1858), her son John Banks Friend (1808–1881), and her daughter-in-law Ellen Friend née Pigeon (1816–1883).

Isabella Banks was a daughter of Isabella Kain’s brother, George Banks (c. 1787–1843) and Hannah Vernon (c. 1796–1826). Like his father John before him, George was a sugar refiner, and the family lived in Streatham, home to many of London’s sugar merchants. These included the Kains, the family into which her aunt Isabella had married.

George and Hannah had five children in addition to Isabella: Anne (1815–1844), Jane (1819–1888), Louisa (1820–1910), George Vernon (1821–1905), and Elizabeth Hannah (1823–1888). When George died his eldest daughter Anne was terminally ill and he made special provision for her in his will. Isabella, Louisa, and Elizabeth each inherited £1750. This was lent to lead merchant William Tarte, father of Ellen (c. 1822–1846), wife of their brother George Vernon, and gave them each a monthly income of £7-6-0.³ Only Jane received nothing, perhaps because she had married a wealthy widower, Alfred Haffenden, in 1851 and her father regarded his remaining children as being in greater need.



*Norwood: The Burbidge/Friend vault
(Catacomb 89)*

³ In 1850 this sum had the spending power of £716 today according to one estimate

George's youngest daughter Elizabeth married Friend Jennings Tomlin (1819–1896) in 1854, and the unmarried sisters Isabella and Louisa later moved in with the couple and their daughter, Mabel Ellen (1855–1907). Relations between Elizabeth and Friend became increasingly toxic, however, culminating in Elizabeth filing a divorce petition in 1861. Elizabeth claimed that her husband had bitten her nose, starved her until she was losing her sight, beaten her, and called her, in front of a visitor, a prostitute who met her lover in Kensington Gardens. Tomlin denied everything and countered by saying that Elizabeth had hit him over the head with a bottle of wine. Although Isabella moved into Mrs Smith's boarding house at Rifle Terrace, Bayswater in September 1858, she is likely to have witnessed at least some of the events building up to the petition, which are known to have started before June 1859.

Dr and Mrs Smethurst

Amongst the guests in Bayswater were a Dr and Mrs Smethurst who had lodged periodically with Mrs Smith. They must have made an odd couple – Mary Smethurst was in her early-to-mid 70s while the doctor was in his early 50s. He was later described as 'a man of short stature and insignificant appearance, with a reddish-brown moustache'.⁴ Whatever the world thought of his appearance, Isabella Banks was smitten and was indiscreet enough to make her feelings known in front of her landlady. According to Smethurst, Isabella told him that a cousin of hers had married in secret and suggested that they should enter into a similar relationship. Resulting from the bequest of a bachelor uncle James Rhodes Banks (c. 1791–1858), Isabella knew she was due to inherit a comfortable income, the interest on £5,000, during her lifetime. She urged Smethurst to visit Doctors' Commons,⁵ an institution where he could view the will and see just how much she would be worth.



Dr Thomas Smethurst

Isabella appeared to be setting out her stall to attract Smethurst with everything she had to offer, particularly money. Smethurst was not however a poor man. He had run successful hydropathic establishments and had assets in property and cash of around £3,500. He and Isabella were later described in the press as both being possessed of considerable property.⁶

Mrs Smith was seriously annoyed at her new tenant's abandoned conduct towards Dr Smethurst. Her boarding house was regarded as highly respectable, and Isabella's conduct towards another lodger was a potential threat to the landlady's living. Mrs Smith therefore asked her to leave. Isabella thus moved into lodgings at nearby Kildare Terrace, Bayswater, on 29 November.

⁴ *Sporting Times* 23 May 1891, p12

⁵ A society of lawyers practising civil law in London dissolved in 1865

⁶ *Norfolk Chronicle* 14 May 1859, p4

A Bigamous Marriage

On 9 December, Isabella ‘married’ Smethurst by licence at Battersea Church, ‘a quiet out of the way place, unlikely to be curious in the matters of the bride and bridegroom’. Afterwards, the couple slipped away on honeymoon.

Mary Smethurst probably knew that her husband was not visiting friends, as he had told her. She herself was not incapable of marital deception. When younger, she had worked as a servant for the landscape artist John Peter Laporte (1761–1839). They began an affair, staying together at weekends under the name of Mr and Mrs Johnson. A son, Charles Johnson, resulted from the relationship and later, in adulthood, it was Charles who introduced his mother to Smethurst. Thomas Smethurst and Mary Durham married in 1828 at St Mark’s, Kennington. Now, her rental paid by her husband before he left, Mary Smethurst continued to live at Mrs Smith’s and awaited the outcome of events.

When they returned from honeymoon, Smethurst and Isabella moved into lodgings at 6 Old Palace Terrace, Richmond. In late March, Isabella began to suffer from sickness and diarrhoea. As events were to reveal, she had become pregnant at some time in mid-to-late March, but the bilious attacks were the only symptom of her condition, which therefore passed unrecognised. At first, Smethurst treated her himself but, as his remedies appeared ineffective, he called in Dr Frederick Gilder Julius (1811–1886), a local practitioner.

Their landlady probably got tired of clearing up after Isabella. With no sign of a nurse being engaged by Smethurst, she announced a 40 % rent rise, and the couple moved to cheaper rooms at 10 Alma Villas. Isabella’s condition remaining poorly, Dr Julius called in his partner, Dr Samuel Bird,⁷ and the two men subsequently brought in London consultant, Dr Robert Todd.⁸ Two stool samples from Isabella were sent unbeknown to Smethurst by Dr Julius via a friend of Dr Bird’s, Dr Thomas Buzzard,⁹ to the leading toxicologist of the day, Dr Alfred Swaine Taylor, for analysis.¹⁰

Shortly afterwards, Smethurst asked a local solicitor to draw up Isabella’s will, insisting on a house call on a Sunday. He had already had a draft prepared by a friend, but was concerned to have the document formally drawn up by a solicitor. Apart from the bequest of a sentimental brooch to a friend, she left everything to her ‘sincere and beloved friend, Thomas Smethurst’, signing the document as Isabella Bankes, spinster. Smethurst also sent for Isabella’s sister Louisa.

⁷ Samuel Dougan Bird (1832–1904), physician; emigrated to Australia, 1862; president of the Medical Society of Victoria, 1869; honorary physician to the Alfred Hospital, 1871. He is buried in the Roman Catholic section of Boroondara General Cemetery, Kew, Melbourne (R/C A 0240)

⁸ Robert Bentley Todd FRS (1809–1860), Professor of Anatomy and Physiology at King’s College and a founder of King’s College Hospital (1840). He is buried at All Souls, Kensal Green (grave 15,722, square 156). An advocate of the therapeutic benefit of alcohol, the drink ‘hot Toddy’ is said to be named after him

⁹ Thomas Buzzard (1831–1919) pioneer neurologist; physician to the National Hospital, Queen Square and a founder of the National Epilepsy Society

¹⁰ Alfred Swaine Taylor FRS (1806–1880), Professor of Medical Jurisprudence at Guy’s Hospital, 1831–1877. He is buried at Highgate (grave 21,179, square 12)

When the results of the tests came back from Guy's, one of the samples was said to contain arsenic. Dr Julius contacted the head of the Surrey Magistrates, and that evening, Monday 2 May, the police called round to 10 Alma Villas with an arrest warrant for Dr Smethurst. However, he managed to convince them that his wife was dying and that it was essential he stay with her. A constable was left on the premises, the doctor's medicines were seized, and a nurse was brought in to attend to Isabella. Her condition appeared to improve, but next day, 3 May 1859, she died and Dr Smethurst was re-arrested on suspicion of murder.

Was it Poisoning?

'Arsenic' (white arsenic, arsenious oxide, arsenic trioxide) is extremely toxic and was commonly used in insect and rodent control in the 1800s. A very fine white powder resembling icing sugar, it is tasteless, hence could be administered in food. Chronic poisoning was not diagnosed easily since the time course mimicked that of common afflictions, notably dysentery and English cholera. Asiatic cholera, which first appeared in England in 1831, produced features even more like those seen in arsenic poisoning.

Widespread concern that poisoning by arsenic was being missed led to the 1851 Arsenic Act that required those selling colourless arsenic preparations to maintain a written record of those who had bought arsenic, including the quantity and its stated purpose. A record of recent purchase of arsenic was sometimes important evidence in murder trials, but no such evidence was presented at Smethurst's trial at the Old Bailey in August 1859.

Clearly the sudden, unexplained deterioration in Isabella's health so soon after her 'marriage' together with the rush to draft a will raised the suspicion of poisoning and analysis of a specimen such as faeces for arsenic might help confirm the diagnosis. An accurate, but lengthy procedure for detecting arsenic in such specimens had been available since 1836,¹¹ but Taylor used a simpler, non-specific test. Even worse, when pressed he admitted at the trial that the arsenic he had reported finding in one of Smethurst's medicine bottles was likely to have come from a reagent used in his test.¹²

The picture was further complicated when a post mortem examination revealed Isabella to have been in the very early stages (5–7 weeks) of pregnancy, although as Dr Smethurst pointed out in his defence, he could not have known of the pregnancy at the time of her death. Throughout the trial references were made to Isabella's health and although opinions varied, the consensus among her four landladies, two of whom had met her before she fell ill, was that she was very delicate.

¹¹ Michael Faraday (1791–1867) had been called in a murder trial in Woolwich, wherein a certain John Bodle was accused of poisoning his grandfather with arsenic. His assistant at the Royal Military Academy, James Marsh (1794–1846), detected arsenic as yellow arsenic trisulfide in a sample from the deceased, but the colour had faded by the time of the trial and the suspect was acquitted (he later confessed to the murder). Marsh subsequently developed a much more reliable and sensitive test, but never used it himself in case work. Taylor, unfortunately, either was too idle to use it, or was not a sufficiently experienced analyst to be able to use it reliably

¹² William Thomas Brande (1788–1866; grave 1,177, square 98), Professor of Chemistry at the Royal Institution, was involved in the investigation of Taylor's methodology

Even Louisa, who gave a more positive picture of her sister's well-being, conceded that she suffered from gynaecological problems, travel sickness, and bilious attacks. Although death made a regular appearance in Victorian families, Isabella's relations were particularly afflicted with ill health. Her mother died very young from causes that are unclear. Her sister, Anne, developed tuberculosis in her 20s and her uncle, James Rhodes Bankes, died of bladder cancer. Her father's chronic diarrhoea and Isabella's own physical problems were all commented on during the trial. She and her family may have had a congenital disposition to ill health, which may have been a contributory factor in her death. Subsequent research suggests that she may have had Crohn's Disease, a lifelong condition in which parts of the digestive system become inflamed, exacerbated by severe morning sickness.



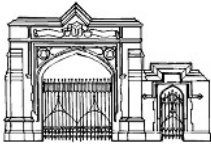
*Norwood: The Bankes vault
(grave 6,137, square 62)*

An Unsafe Verdict

Despite the lack of motive (Isabella was worth more alive than dead because the legacy from her uncle terminated on her death) and the complete absence of evidence that she had been poisoned, Smethurst was found guilty of murder and sentenced to death. He was due to be hanged in public at Horsemonger Lane Gaol on Tuesday 6 September 1859. However, the Home Secretary Sir George Cornewall Lewis (1806–1863) responded to disquiet as to the verdict expressed in the lay and medical press and stayed the execution, finally granting Smethurst a free pardon on 14 November. However, a further charge, that of bigamy was preferred, and this time the public mood meant that there could be no doubt about the verdict: he was sentenced to one year's imprisonment with hard labour.

On his release Smethurst brought an action against Isabella Bankes' family for probate of her will. He eventually inherited, via his brother, what was left of her estate after the resolution of an unconnected Chancery case; this amounted to some £800.¹³ In 1864 Mary died, and the next year Thomas Smethurst married a 28-year-old dressmaker, Annie Thomas, in Oswestry. They returned to London, living in Onslow Square, where Smethurst died in 1873. He was buried with Mary in the churchyard of St Mary's, Hampton. There is now no gravestone. Isabella Bankes was buried at Norwood from Alma Villas on 12 May 1859 in the vault of her uncle James Rhodes Bankes. The 9 ft x 4 ft brick vault was purchased on 21 October 1858 for £15.15s. Sadly the ledger stone has been lost, but the vault itself is intact and restoration of this historic grave should in time be possible although it may not be possible to source a single large piece of stone.

¹³ Until 1870 the 'goods and chattels' of any convicted felon could be confiscated by the state. In order to avoid this happening, Thomas Smethurst had transferred all of his money and property, including the anticipated legacy from Isabella Bankes, to his brother



Book Review: Smethurst's Luck

Bob Flanagan

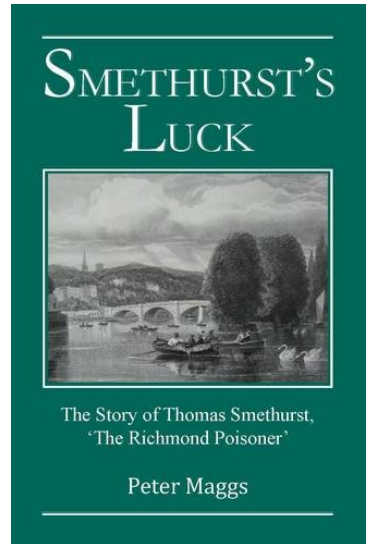
Maggs, Peter. *Smethurst's Luck: The Story of Thomas Smethurst, 'The Richmond Poisoner'*. Chelmsford: Mirli Books, 2013. 352 pp, 10 monochrome plates. Paperback. £9.99. ISBN 978-0-9562870-1-4 (see: www.mirlibooks.com/the-richmond-poisoner.html)

Much has been written about the Smethurst case having as it does all the ingredients of a true-life detective drama: an older married man - a medical doctor, a younger unmarried woman of independent means, a bigamous marriage, a rush to make a will that left almost everything to her 'sincere and beloved friend', an apparently sudden decline in health that defied diagnosis and treatment, a misleading report of arsenic poisoning by the leading toxicologist of the day, a hitherto unsuspected pregnancy, a guilty verdict, and a last-gasp reprieve from the hangman's noose. Add to this the revelation that Smethurst's wife had had an adulterous relationship in her youth and had had a child by the liaison. No wonder the case continues to fascinate.

The trial for murder was one of the first to be largely decided solely on the basis of expert evidence, albeit some of it flawed. Moreover, its outcome was a factor in the debate that led eventually to the formation of the Court of Criminal Appeal of England and Wales in 1907.

Peter Maggs has done a very thorough job in documenting the six separate court actions that Smethurst endured (inquest, magistrate's court, murder x 2 - the first Old Bailey trial was abandoned because a juror became ill, bigamy, and probate) using archive material and contemporary press reports. Moreover, he gives background information on the principal players including the family trees of the Bankes and Smethurst families to 'flesh out' the narrative.

Interestingly one Charles Dickens was scandalized by Smethurst's reprieve. He wrote to his friend John Forster: 'I cannot tell you how much interested I am in what you tell me of our brave and excellent friend the Chief Baron [the trial judge, the Lord Chief Baron Sir Frederick Pollock (1783–1870)], in connection with that ruffian [Smethurst]'. He commented on the 'miserable knaves and asses' who were calling for a reprieve and declared that he would 'hang any Home Secretary...who should step in between that black scoundrel and the gallows'.¹⁴



¹⁴ *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Volume 9, 1859–1861. The British Academy, Pilgrim Edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. Letter dated 25 August 1859

Stanley Watkins: The Sound of Silents ~ Part 2¹⁵

Barbara Witemeyer

With the success of *The Audion* behind them, my father Stan Watkins' department decided to try making 'a real talking picture'.¹⁶ For this they needed sound and picture to be synchronized 'to within about 1/25th of a second'. Once this had been worked out, and a small room allocated to the production team, they went ahead. Dad's diary entry for 23 February 1922 reads: 'Conference... on talking movie which J.P.M. [Joseph Maxfield, his supervisor] has assigned to me'. Proudly, dad recalled 'having the distinction of being the first director and one of the first actors on our system. I said a few words about what we were doing, struck a gong, and played a tune on a tin whistle'.

A Modest Beginning

The tune played was very simple; the words to it went: '*How dry I am, how dry I am, nobody knows how dry I am*'. As this was during Prohibition, my father felt 'that the success of talking pictures was due in some small measure to the sincerity I was able to put into that little tune'. A modest beginning perhaps, but this was the start of great things ahead.

Not unnaturally, the main focus of the Western Electric engineers had been research and development towards better telephone communications. Some of the 'high-ups' felt that electrical recording and talking pictures were 'unsuitable for a company whose business it was to make telephones'. Despite these objections my father and Joe Maxfield went on with their experiments and soon became fast friends. They made a good team, because Maxfield, as dad recalled, was 'ruthlessly intense in his work and I acted as a sort of safety brake on him. He was interested in everything, but tackled all in the manner of a specialist while I let my mind range over things'.



Stan Watkins in full voice

The electrical recording developments that Bell Labs were undertaking during the 1920s, in collaboration with Victor and Columbia, involved transmitting and recording over telephone lines. My father's diary for this period show almost daily trips to Columbia where they recorded 'music from the Capitol Theatre for our friend Roxy [and] a concert by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra transmitted from Carnegie Hall. We also recorded important speeches such as President Coolidge's Inaugural Address'.

¹⁵ For Part 1 see Newsletter 92 (May 2018)

¹⁶ Unless otherwise noted, the quotes in this article are from my father's unpublished manuscript *The First Sixty: a Sortabiography* (1946)

Sometimes these transmissions also included visuals; as early as 1924 Bell Labs gave the first public demonstration of a fax machine. But they were still a long way from sound-on-film, or even sound-on-disc, which had to be synchronized with moving pictures.

Although the Vitaphone system which finally convinced the world that talking pictures were here to stay used this latter, rather cumbersome technique, moving pictures with sound had been seen before. In fact, Western Electric had been experimenting with recording onto the film itself from 1913 onwards. These early trials required huge areas of the film to be used for the soundtrack, and splicing broken or damaged film caused untold difficulties. To give the early attempts their due, my father noted: 'This was no discredit to the inventors; it wasn't possible with the facilities they then had at their disposal'. Indeed, when the successful talkie did appear it wasn't the outcome of any of the earlier attempts, but was an offshoot of the phonograph and the telephone.



Stan Watkins (left) helps fit a synchronous motor (1924)

Thus, my father and his group concentrated on improvements to the synchronized, recorded disc system. Enconced in the little studio on West Street, they were now busy making short films that combined visuals with sound. The room they had to work in was so small that the noisy camera had to be set up on a flat roof outside the closed window. Often it was my father who was the 'star' of these experimental pictures, singing English ballads and folk

songs he had learned from New York friends. He had inherited musical talent from his mother and sang unaccompanied in a clear tenor voice. Sometimes 'a young lady from the Labs who could play the piano' helped out. Sadly, most of those early recordings have been lost, although it is fair to say that their quality was probably far below today's standards. The early discs were, however, a vast improvement on cylinder recordings, and by the mid-1920s phonographs too had greatly improved. My father had himself pioneered some of the improvements. Now, recordings of dad and of professional artists were being cut and programmed to synchronize with moving pictures.

Warner Brothers

Once enough samples of these mini-talkies had been prepared successfully, the 'movie people' were invited to come, see, and hear. It was now Spring 1925. Dad remembered: 'Most of the big fellows came, the heads of Paramount, MGM, Universal, etc... The movie tycoons said that we had a very clever and amusing toy, but it really wasn't of much interest... it wasn't "box office" and the public didn't want talking pictures'.

One studio not represented at the demonstrations was Warner Bros. By chance, Western Electric had an engineer in Hollywood who was a friend of Sam Warner. Nathan Levinson¹⁷ had seen the Bell Labs ‘talkies’ and recognized their potential; Sam Warner was brought in for a demonstration and was immediately won over. In turn, Sam brought in his brothers who were also convinced by the sound-film demos, but not entirely. Harry concurred that the Industry needed sound, but only sound, not talking. What he saw was the opportunity to offer equal value to all the Warner theatres. ‘We’ll record music to go with all our pictures,’ Harry said, ‘so that even in the smallest theatres they’ll have the music of a great orchestra...But no talk in the pictures’. Well, it was a foot in the door, and Western Electric had a firm grip on the doorknob.

In June 1925 Western Electric and Warners formed the Vitaphone Corporation to develop ‘talkies’. My father was given a year’s leave of absence from Bell Labs at Harry Warner’s request to act as Vitaphone’s chief engineer and ‘get them going’. With 10 young Bell engineers as the nucleus of his new ‘sound department’, he set up their recording equipment in Warners’ Brooklyn studios.

Sam Warner was in charge of production on the East Coast, and he and dad soon became friends. Despite extraneous noises from pigeons roosting inside Warners’ old Vitagraph building, and the elevated subways that ran outside, the work of making ‘shorts’ began. At first these were mostly ‘musical one-reelers’, but because of Sam Warner’s confidence that talkies were the movies of the future, some included speech.

The First Vitaphone Feature

Although he did not share his brother’s optimism, Harry Warner did make a concession to his ‘no talking’ rule. In one of the shorts that preceded the first Warner Bros. Vitaphone feature, *Don Juan*, Will H. Hays,¹⁸ gave a short speech ‘praising the joint efforts of Western Electric, the Bell Telephone Company, and Warner Bros. for making possible the magic that the assembled audience was about to witness’.¹⁹ Michael Pupin, a famous physicist and inventor, considered this the closest ‘approach to resurrection [that] ever made by science!’²⁰



The New York Premiere of Don Juan

¹⁷ Major Nathan ‘Benny’ Levinson (1888–1952), American sound engineer. He won an Academy Award in the category Sound Recording for the film *Yankee Doodle Dandy*

¹⁸ William Harrison Hays, Sr. (1879–1954) President of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, so-called *Czar of the Movies*

¹⁹ Clive Hirschhorn. *The Warner Bros. Story*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1979: 32

²⁰ Frederic Milton Thrasher. *Okay for Sound: How the Screen Found its Voice*. New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1946: 255

However, even miracles can go wrong. Hays' introductory speech was followed by several short musical features. One evening the wrong record was put on and 'Will Hays appeared on screen, hands and ears outstretched, and opened his mouth to the strains of Roy Speck's banjo'. Dad was deputed to stay on and see that this did not happen again - as a result he saw *Don Juan* over 90 times. In so doing he noticed things such as the dagger carried in the cleavage of one of Don Juan's spurned lovers, which popped in and out of view in different shots!

Dad also learned to sleep silently during the film. Although he may have wearied of it eventually, in his opinion 'Warners showed good judgment in going all out for a real humdinger of an opening show'. *Don Juan* was, he said, 'the most spectacular picture they had made to date'. A romantic swashbuckler, starring John Barrymore,²¹ it had a musical score by William Axt²² played by the New York Philharmonic and atmospheric sound effects, but, of course, no talking.

As each reel of the film was completed in Hollywood, it was sent to Brooklyn and the images were matched to the score as it was recorded onto 17-inch discs. Because of the need for both film and score to be recorded in one long, uninterrupted take, this was time-consuming work, with extraneous noises making many reruns necessary. The work went on non-stop, helped by a friendly osteopath who came in to give the tired crew massage. There was no time to lose. Dad's diary for this period contains no entries apart from notes of 'overtime meals' and taxi fares home in the early hours.

Ninety Feet a Minute

It took them several months, but at the end they figured out the correct ratio to produce workable discs. Unlike commercial records, the groove on these monsters ran from the centre of the disc to the outer edge and the recording had to run for exactly 10 minutes, the length of one reel of film. These fine tunings required standardizing to achieve the control necessary for accurate synchronization.

One of the things dad was proud of was his brainstorming with Sam Warner and the President of the Vitaphone Corporation, Walter J. Rich, about the speed at which talking pictures should be run. Early film was shot at 60 ft/minute; any faster and the exposure would be inadequate. When it was being shown in the theatres, however, it had to be run faster to avoid flickering. This arbitrary variation would have caused unacceptable distortions for sound



The actress Norma Shearer (1902–1983) and a Vitaphone disk

²¹ John Barrymore (John Sidney Blyth) (1882–1942), American actor

²² William Axt (1888–1959), American composer of nearly 200 film scores

films, so after consultation with Warners' chief projectionist, Jack Kekaley, they agreed on 90 ft/minute. This was about what most first-run houses ran their films at, the smaller theatres often speeding them up in order to get in more showings, and therefore, more paying customers. Today, 90 ft/minute is the standard, and amazingly it only took four experts and 'a bit of intuition' to make that decision.

The size and speed of the recording discs also had to be decided upon. Based on the size of Victor's presses, they could not be bigger than 17 inches, and the necessary 10 minutes of recording demanded a speed of between 30 and 35 revolutions/minute. Constrictions of the Labs' gearing equipment that connected the record turntable to the picture machine finally led to the 33½ speed being adopted.



Forthcoming Events

September–December 2018

Introductory tours will be held on the first Sunday of each month, starting at the cemetery main gate off Norwood Road at 14:30 (2 September, 7 October) or 11:00 (4 November, 2 December) and lasting for 1½–2 hours. There is no charge, but we welcome donations. To be notified of additional events please register an email address on our website (www.fownc.org/news/). To join the team of volunteers carrying out conservation work in the cemetery, please contact Beth Cross (BCross@lambeth.gov.uk).

Saturday 22 September: Open House London. Tours start at the cemetery main gate at 14:00, 14:30 and 15:00. Visit openhouselondon.open-city.org.uk/ or pick up a brochure in libraries for details of other venues including the Clockworks Museum in West Norwood.

Saturday 29 September: Lambeth Heritage Festival. West Norwood Cemetery's Clapham Connections. Tour starting at the cemetery main gate at 14:30. Other events will be taking place throughout September - copies of the festival brochure are available in Lambeth Libraries or visit www.lambethlocalhistoryforum.org.uk/home/.

FoWNC Lectures are held in the lounge of Chatsworth Baptist Church (access by the Family Centre entrance), Idmiston Road, SE27, as detailed below, starting at 14:30. There is no charge, but we welcome donations to cover refreshments and room hire.

Saturday 20 October – AGM and Lecture: William Wright DD – Samuel Wright

An author and biblical scholar, William Wright (grave 16,899, square 39) was missionary to the Jews at Damascus, 1865–75, and editorial superintendent of the British and Foreign Bible Society, 1876–99 (see Newsletters 88, January 2017 and 89, May 2017). Samuel Wright is the great great great nephew of William Wright.

Saturday 17 November – A Year in the Life of a Bee Keeper - Jean Azzopardi

The honeybee has an enormous fascination. Many people get carried on a tide of interest into a relationship with this marvellous insect, which is so unlike ourselves and yet lives in cities of 60,000 strong, without our need for committees and councils, or so we think. Jean Azzopardi is our resident bee keeper at Norwood.

A Bit of Mystery – Bob Flanagan

The gravestone illustrated (grave 16,950, square 32), which sadly had some lead lettering stolen a few years ago, lies on Doulton Path and commemorates John Ross of the Surrey Commercial Docks, Rotherhithe, who died 28 March 1878, aged 57; his 3rd son Archibald Hastie, who was accidentally shot at Ilwaco, USA, 25 May 1887, aged 30; his eldest daughter Marion, widow of the late Henry Sutton, who died 2 October 1889, aged 46; and his eldest son John Morgan Ross, who died 29 September 1894, aged 56. Just behind this grave lies the impressive granite tomb of the vocalist Agnes Ross (Mrs George Hicks; grave 21,121, square 32) who died 13 March 1886, aged 36. Agnes was the daughter of J. Ross JP, of Campsie, Stirlingshire, and was brought up there. She came to notice after singing at St Stephen's Church, Lewisham. I've always assumed there was a family connection?



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