



HARPENDEN & DISTRICT
LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER 146
APRIL 2022



Front cover illustration:

Roller racking in the Les Casey Archive Room of the Harpenden Museum

See page 6 of this issue for further details

Photo: David Keen

NEWSLETTER 146

APRIL 2022

Programme for 2022	4
Harpenden Carnival	4
Exhibitions	5
Publications Received	5
New Members	5
What's Happening with the Museum	6
On and Off the Footplate	9
Heartwood Forest – A Transformed Landscape	13
Made in St Albans	19
John Seabrook – an obituary	23
Collection for Ukraine	25



follow the Society on Facebook

DEADLINE

**Please note that the deadline for publication in Newsletter 147 is
30 June 2022**

All material in the Newsletter is copyright of the Harpenden and District Local History Society unless noted otherwise.

PROGRAMME FOR 2022

Although it is hoped that this programme of talks will go ahead, they will of course be subject to any future COVID-19 restrictions.

Visitors are welcome; please encourage any non-members that you know to come along; all we ask from them is a donation of £5 towards the cost of the evening

April 26th	Discover, Protect, Innovate, Inform - 175 years of the 'Arc & Arc' John Morewood
May 24th	Redbourn, 70 years ago, through the lens of Harpenden's John Heather John & Pauline Ridgwell
June 28th	St. Albans Town Hall: the Making of a Museum and Gallery Sarah Keeling
September 27th	Elstree: Britain's Hollywood Bob Redman
October 25th	The Met Office at Dunstable and forecasting D-Day Jean Yates
November 22nd	AGM followed by Members' Evening: Short contributions by members and refreshments

HARPENDEN SUMMER CARNIVAL

The Society will be represented at this year's carnival, which will be held on the Common from 12 noon to 6:00 pm on 18 June 2022.

EXHIBITIONS

When the Museum opens displays will be changed from time to time and we will hold occasional special exhibitions.

Meanwhile do look out for our displays in Harpenden Library alongside the Local History section towards the rear of the building.

PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED

Pinner Historical Society	Newsletter 146	Autumn 2021
Pinner Local History Society	Newsletter 147	Spring 2022
Hitchin Historical Society	Newsletter 58	January 2022
SAHAAS <i>(St Albans & Hertfordshire Architectural & Archaeological Society)</i>	Newsletter 223	February 2022
The Local Historian <i>(journal of the British Association for Local History)</i>	Vol 52.1	January 2022
Local History News <i>(magazine of the British Association for Local History)</i>	No. 142	Winter 2022

NEW MEMBERS

Who have joined since the December 2021 Newsletter was issued.

The Society extends its condolences to members who have lost loved ones during the current pandemic.

High Beeches Primary School
Suzanne Brooks
Mrs J Evers
Mr & Mrs Hannagan
Lorraine Harding
Beryl Jeffs
Roy Latham
Martin Malcolm-Brown
Edward Moore
Mr & Mrs Robinson
Steve Thomas

WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH THE MUSEUM?

All the legal formalities to do with our lease of the Museum space have now been completed; we have the keys and can access the Museum whenever the Eric Morecambe Centre is open.

This process has not been entirely straightforward and made more complicated by the different agencies with which we have had to negotiate. The Eric Morecambe Centre is owned by St Albans District Council, so they are our landlords, but it is operated by 1Life who also control the Leisure Centre / Swimming Pool. For day-to-day matters the 1life staff are the people we deal with. Although the building belongs to St Albans, Rothamsted Park, in which it stands was transferred to

Harpenden Town Council while our negotiations were happening. None of this speeded up the process!

During the last week of January roller racking was installed in the Les Casey Archive Room. This has given us a storage facility for archives, photographs and small artefacts and makes the best use of limited space. All of our paintings, prints and large photographs have now been moved from the store at Sandridge Gate to the archive room. Framed items are protected by bubble wrap and have been sorted thematically.

It is great that the first part of our collection is now in its permanent home and the extra space at Sandridge Gate means we have room to transfer the rest of the artefacts into proper archive boxes, replacing the temporary boxes in which most of them are currently stored.



A roller racking unit

Several volunteers have kindly offered to help with packing and moving items, but as far as the Sandridge Gate store is concerned, we don't have enough working space to accommodate any more people. Dealing with the document and photographic collections at Park Hall may be a different story. Rest assured we will call on your help when we need to and I hope that before long there will be chain of people walking between the Park Hall History Room and the Museum transferring the contents of one to the other. We have already moved one of the large steel cabinets from Park Hall to our storage cage just off the auditorium in the Eric Morecambe Centre.

We contacted five different companies about fitting out the Museum and have asked Qwerk, a design-manufacture-installation company based in Luton to take on the project. Qwerk fitted out the foyer area of St Albans Museum and at the moment are working on the Raphael exhibition for the National Gallery. They have already provided a possible design for Harpenden Museum and this is marked out in tape on the floor, looking like an unconventional badminton court. There's a lot to discuss before the Museum actually takes shape, but at least we have made a start.

We have visited the Eric Morecambe Centre on an almost daily basis recently and are getting a feel as to how the building works. One thing we have learned is that opening the Museum in the evening, when shows are taking place, is not a good idea. The bar area alongside the Museum gets very crowded during the Interval and if the doors to the Museum are open it will simply become an overspill (literally!) bar space. We were

tempted to put a Scout-themed display in the Museum during the Gang Show Week in January, but instead displayed posters highlighting our evening meeting on 22 March on the History of Harpenden Gang Show. One of our display cases in Harpenden Library has a Gang Show theme.

There's still a long way to go before we'll be able to open the Museum, but if you're passing by the Eric Morecambe Centre and see the lights on in our ground floor room, feel free to pop in and have a look. There's not a great deal to see, but you can at least admire our roller racking in the Les Casey Archive Room.

David Keen, Curator

ON AND OFF THE FOOTPLATE

A report by Joyce Bunting on the talk to the Society by Bill Davies on 26 October 2021.

Trains through Harpenden

The rail network is vital to the population of Harpenden: the daily commute to London, access to theatres, music, museums, shopping, royal parks, fun school holiday trips and more. We now have connections to airports, main line trains in all directions and *Eurostar* trains for the continent. Bill Davies was a train driver during a period of huge changes to the railway system via modernisation, expansion and privatisation. He gave us the drivers' view, peppered with anecdotes.

A train driver's story

Bill wanted to be an engine driver since the day his mother took him to see locomotives at a tender age. His railway career began in September 1964 aged 16, when he started as a Steam Engine Cleaner at Toton Engine Shed in the Nottingham area. One day, a loco driver with a cargo of coal destined for Wellingborough was short of a fireman, so he invited Bill onto the footplate. The enthusiastic lad jumped at the opportunity. "Just shovel the coal in there," he said. Bill stopped after about 6 shovel loads. "No lad, you shovel until I tell you to stop." He didn't stop until they reached Melton Mowbray. As well as shovelling, the fireman was supposed to break down big lump coal into smaller pieces the size of oranges. Bill became a fireman - but 'The Age of Steam' finished in 1968.



Bill Davies

When Bill was promoted to Driver he worked diesel locos first from Kings Cross (from 1970) and then from Charing Cross (from 1974). In 1978 he married and settled in Bedford, "To make commuting to work easier," he said, "and to be sure of a seat." He drove both goods as well as passenger trains. The



Harpenden Station : undated photograph, early C20
The goods yard in right background is now a car park
HDLHS ref 1-773

heavy loads included, at various times; coal (to the cement works in Kent), cement from the Kent works and aggregates (both to Leicester and Derby), bricks (to Leicester) aviation fuel, oil (to the terminal at Dunstable) and cars sporadically (from Vauxhall works at Luton). Eventually he went over to passenger trains completely. During nearly 30 years of driving through Harpenden the rail network was changing around him, and he was part of this history.

Electrification of the *Bedpan Line* (the route between Bedford and St Pancras) started soon after he moved to Bedford. In May

1978, the hole for the first overhead gantry was dug. Electrification brought advantages but new problems for drivers as well as commuters. Many were caused by bad weather; ice on cables, storms bringing them down, collapse of gantries, and 'the wrong kind of snow' - when fine dry snow blew into the motors of the new electric trains. Just getting to work for the drivers was difficult.

Harpenden Station had a bad reputation for leaves on the line. At times, a High Speed Train (HST) would whoosh through on the fast line stirring up fallen leaves and blowing them onto the track. One night, Bill's commuter train slid right through the station and had to back up. This eventually resulted in modifications to the disc brakes to prevent recurrence. Much of the leaf problem was due to trees growing too close to the line, especially north of Harpenden.

In May 1988 the Snow Hill tunnel between Farringdon and Blackfriars was re-opened. It cost £45million (largely funded by the GLC), which included 60 dual-voltage new trains. This enabled the opening of Kings Cross Thameslink station and a direct service from Bedford to Brighton. Changes to the second route via Sutton were made around 1994.

Kings Cross Thameslink Station was closed on 8th December 2007. Longer platforms under St Pancras International Station had been constructed to accommodate new 12-carriage trains: St Pancras Thameslink was born. By then, Bill had completed 43 years of service. He had been a Driver Trainer and a Driver Manager during his last few working years, until retiring in 2007.

Huge improvements to the railway have taken place since his retirement, especially to the big stations in the capital: London Bridge and Farringdon in particular. London Cross Rail is still in progress, with hopes for opening '*The Elizabeth Line*' by June 2022. Plans for a new rail link from Luton Parkway station to inside Luton Airport have not been realised. Its future is uncertain now, like many other projects.

Bill recommends a visit the York Railway Museum where the first **DOO** loco is stored. In March 1983, he had been the driver of that first *Driver Only Opens* train to go into operation. He was met by the paparazzi and interviewed by Peter Parker (journalist) - a great memory, amongst many others!

Joyce Bunting

HEARTWOOD FOREST: A TRANSFORMED LANDSCAPE

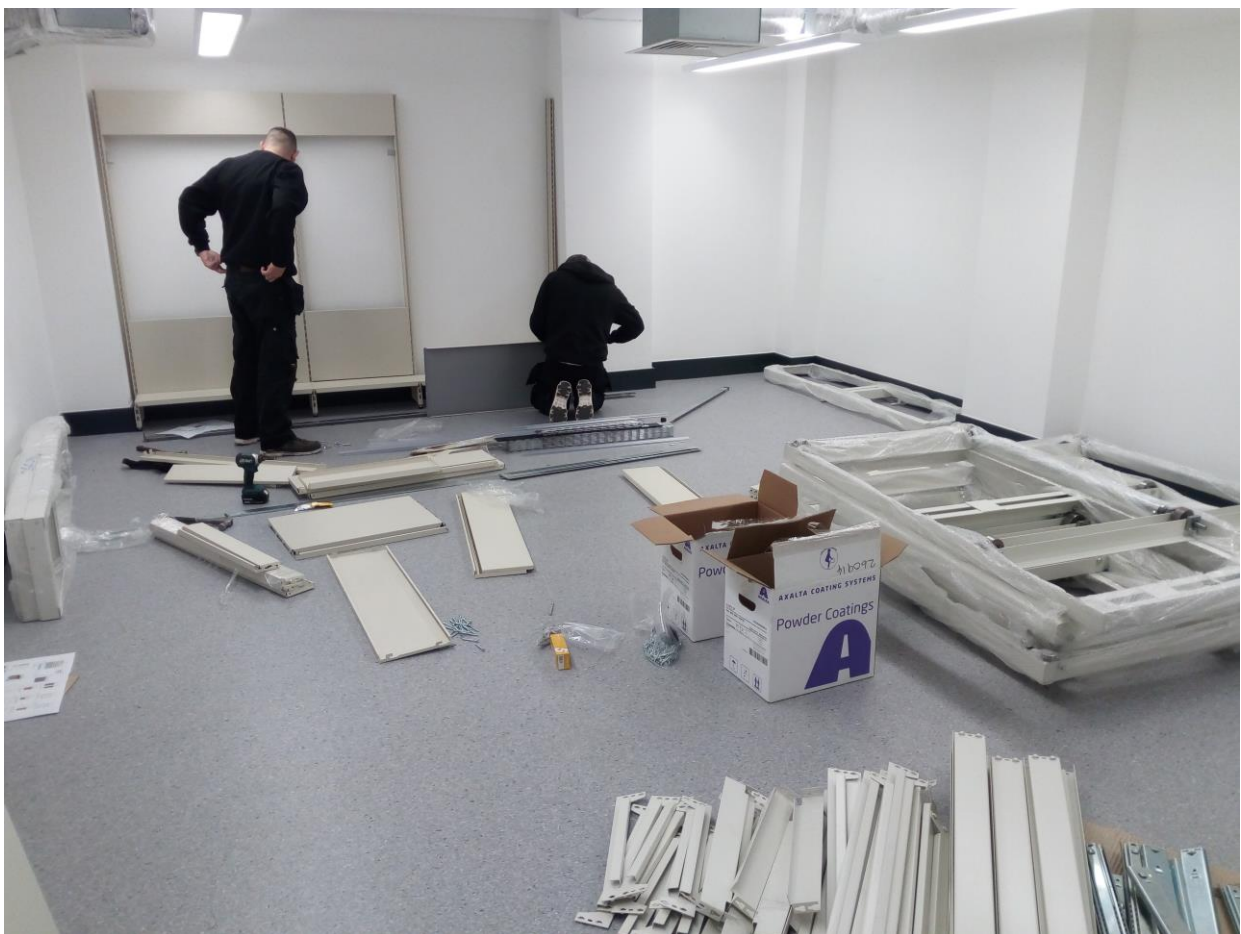
A report by Joyce Bunting on the talk to the Society by Brian Legg on 25 January 2022.

The original landscape

Heartwood Forest was created in 2010 by the Woodland Trust. A tract of agricultural land measuring 347 Hectares at Sandridge was purchased in 2008. It encompassed old established woodlands including *Pismire Spring* and *Langley Wood*. To count as 'ancient', a wood should have existed for 400 years. Maps dating from 1843, 1822 and 1766 have been inspected for evidence of old woodlands. The 1766 map shows no traces.



Thick-legged flower beetle: see page 17 © Jacques Vanni



Assembly of the Roller Racking under way in the Les Casey Archive



John Seabrook



The Pemberton Almshouses – see page 21
Photo : John Wassell

However, old names hold clues to former usage. *Pismire Spring* was named after a wood ant - a *Pismire* - which sprays urine if disturbed. *Spring* is the old name given to coppiced woods – usually hazel or hornbeam - which spring back into growth after being cut down.

Well Wood was believed to indicate the site of an old well, but it was not found until a deep round sink hole appeared in recent years. The Trust had it filled in for safety.

What the Woodland Trust achieved in the first 11 years

Paths in the old woods were defined in an attempt to protect bluebells and other plants from trampling feet. 600,000 native trees were planted by volunteers – many of them school children. Most were tiny saplings, with mature specimen trees to give immediate structure to the landscape. They now provide berries, nuts and nesting places. The common lizard has appeared – it probably wandered up from Nomansland Common. British woodland bird populations generally are still decreasing, in spite of new woods being established, but at Heartwood twice as many willow warblers have been recorded as there used to be. 60 Barn Owls were spotted between 2012 and 2021. Greater spotted woodpeckers and skylarks are among the nesting birds

Traditional species-rich hedges have been planted to form a link between woodlands other landscape features. They provide flowers in spring and fruit in autumn as well as cover. Wide wildflower meadows are left uncut in places to produce flowers, seeds and nesting materials.

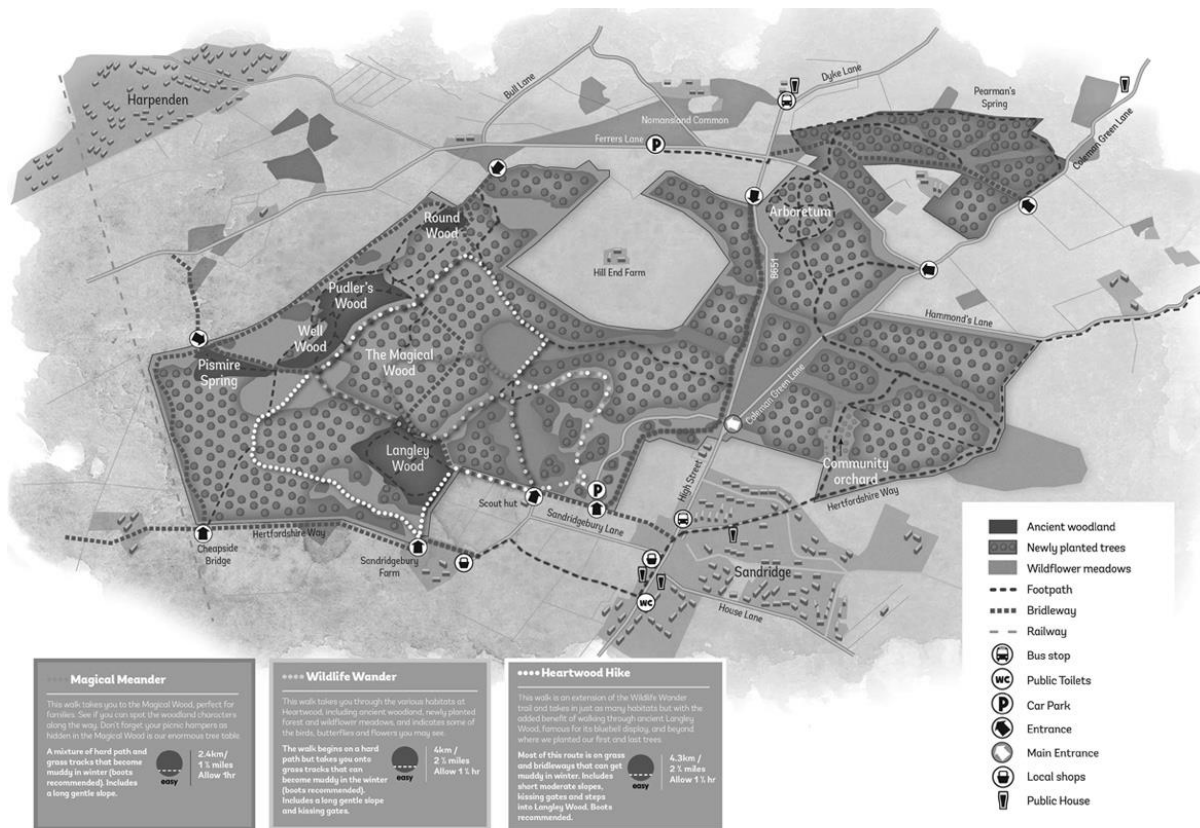
The Woodland Trust monitors populations of plants and wildlife at Heartwood Forest: 87 species of bird and 27 of butterflies, 75 species of fungi, 51 lichens, 41 mosses and liverworts, various beetles, and rich annual weed crops. Amongst those ‘weeds’ are Lady’s bedstraw, orchids, (after 6 years of non-interference) and a rare insect – the thick-legged flower beetle which is a bright metallic green and about 10mm in length.

Butterfly populations vary according to weather. In 2019 their numbers increased, then dropped sharply. The species seen at Heartwood include painted lady - a migrant on its relay flight from Africa - which takes 6 generations to get here, and can reach the Arctic Circle. The small blue butterfly isn’t really blue, but is tiny. Large purple emperor butterflies fly around the tops of tall trees and come to land during the first week of July to feed on horse dung and dog excrement.

A new Arboretum covering 11 ha was planned for Heartwood. In 2015-2016, more than 10,000 young saplings of 60 varieties were planted by volunteers, to form Britain’s largest and most comprehensive arboretum of native trees and shrubs. This seems a lot, but not all these little trees will survive in the varied soils on site. So what is a native tree? ‘Native’ includes only species that arrived after the last ice age and before humans had a major influence. When the English Channel opened up – around 7,000 years ago - trees could no longer spread from Europe by normal means (i.e. wind or animal dispersal of seeds.)

What further changes will we see?

Heartwood is a ‘work in progress’. Trees will need to be thinned after 15 years. Coppicing the old woods will take place in stages,



Forest walking map showing the extent of the forest <https://heartwood.woodlandtrust.org.uk>

allowing plants beneath to flourish again. Round Wood was last coppiced in 1990, and a small area has recently been cut down; the results will be monitored. In 20 years or so it will become clear whether the cloned elm trees - supposed to be resistant to Dutch elm disease - are fully disease resistant.

The first wonderful flowering fields at Heartwood will not re-appear. They were the result of disturbing the soil – which is why poppies pop up only the year after soil has been ploughed. But new annual grasslands will become established, with walks

and rides for visitors. Skylarks prefer open meadows so their numbers will decline where the forest grows denser. Grass around the trees will gradually die as they grow, but we can hope to see more bats. Wild animals will appear to add to sightings of foxes, squirrels, voles, mice etc. A new field has recently been acquired, via a legacy, to complete the circular walk. Heartwood Forest has only 55 car parking spaces - insufficient at times for the many visitors who would like to come. This will be increased.

This corner of Hertfordshire is gradually being transformed into a rich varied landscape for the protection of wildlife and a place for recreation and appreciation of nature for generations to come.

Joyce Bunting

(Brian Legg has 13 years' involvement as a volunteer with the Woodland Trust at Heartwood Forest)

MADE IN ST ALBANS

A report by Jean Gardner on the talk given to the Society by Steve Potter on 22 February 2022

Stephen Potter gave us a fascinating talk about the inhabitants of St. Albans and how they made a living explaining that the industries were originally based on agriculture. The huge medieval barns at Kingsbury were used to store wheat and barley which was ground in mills on the river Ver. They were also used for fulling cloth and lastly for animal feed until the 1970's.

In the 17th century four breweries turned the barley into beer. Each brewmaster had a grand house one of which remains as Hotel Chocolat in the Maltings the site of one brewery. Another attached to the Holywell Brewery down the hill is now Wesley Barrell furniture shop. The brewery horses when not pulling drays were pressed into service to pull the fire engines. The only brewery now is a micro brewery but there is an annual beer festival. This is organised by CAMRA, the real ale society. which was founded in the Farriers Arms in Lower Dagnall Street.

Amazingly there were once forty hat makers in the town. All the family helped with the business. Children as young as five would start by splitting the straws. It was made into plait which was sewn into hats. Hats for Eton and Harrow were made here but the trade peaked in the 1870s' and died away as people stopped wearing hats in the early 20th century.

Tanning was another industry. It operated behind St. Michaels Manor and gave rise to an appalling smell. The leather was used for shoes. French Row was formerly called Cordwainers Row where the bootmakers plied their trade. *'When the Abbey Gatehouse was a prison inmates lowered shoes from their cell windows for people to put food in'* said Stephen. It gave rise to the expression *living on a shoe string*.

The gatehouse housed the 3rd printing press in England. Printers became major employers. In the 19th century Dangerfield Printers and the Campfield Printing works were in the Fleetville area, so named after the first printers moved there from London's

Fleet Street. The Salvation Army produced their *War Cry* magazine. Eversheds printed calendars and the Art Deco posters for the London Underground. The former Thomas Smith Printers became Ballito Hosiery where the girls who had made stockings turned their hands to producing ammunition during the second world war.

Excavations at the Maltings produced evidence of ancient metal working. This was echoed by blacksmiths in Dog and Gentle's Yards and Christopher Place. Ancient pottery made from local clay was also unearthed. It's ideally suited to making clay pipes and bricks. The red bricks of older houses were made small local brick works. The Roman bricks in the cathedral tower are the oldest but those in Pemberton Almshouses are the oldest of more recent times at four hundred years.



The Samuel Ryder Hotel

Photo: John Wassell (March 2022)

Other colours came from further afield once the railways had arrived. The Abbey Station was the first to open when a branch line was laid from Watford, it was quickly followed by another from Hatfield and lastly the main line from London. The railways finished the coach trade. The White Hart had once catered for seventy a day. Roads needed constant upgrading. Some old milestones remain. In the Hatfield Road one reads Hatfield/Reading which seemed strange until Stephen explained 'It was the route taken by Lord Salisbury from his Hertfordshire home on the way the Bath to take the waters. It was nicknamed the *Gout Road*.

London Road housed Arthur Melborne Cooper the film maker in 1907 and Mercers Clocks and Chronometers until the 1980's. Most of the town's factories have gone. St. Albans Rubber Co. closed and Marconi's moved. Even the gasworks was blown up.

But St. Albans clung to its agricultural roots:

Samuel Ryder – of golfing fame - founded Ryders Seeds whose premises in Holywell Hill are now a hotel and Cafe Rouge. His brother James set up Heath and Heather the herbal health merchants in the factory south of the station. Also in Victorian times Frederick Sander known as 'The Orchid King' cultivated plants in huge glasshouses where Flora Grove is now.

Stephen ended by acknowledging the debt owed to John Bennet Lawes and Henry Gilbert of Rothamsted for their work on improving crop health and the contribution they made to agriculture across the world.

Jean Gardner

JOHN SEABROOK - An Obituary

John, who sadly passed away on 25 March, was born in Harpenden in 1932 and grew up in the Southdown area. He gave a vivid description of his early life in his autobiographical books, *Bowling Alley Boyhood* and *The Best of Times*. A later book, *The View from Church Green* gave an insight into his life as Chief Reporter on the Harpenden Free Press. He reported on the meetings of Harpenden Urban District Council and served as a Councillor himself.

John was posted to Singapore for National Service with the RAF, but returned to Harpenden and resumed his reporting for the Free Press, which he left for a career in public relations.

Throughout his life John had a keen interest in the Scout movement. He joined the 3rd Harpenden Troop and became a Patrol Leader and a King's Scout. When Eric Thair started the Harpenden Gang Show in 1949, John was in the cast and he continued to take part in the Gang Shows of the 1950s. In recent years, he returned to the stage for the 60th and 70th Gang Shows and was in the audience at the Eric Morecambe Centre for this year's show. John was deeply interested in the history of Harpenden and was able to answer many of the queries which came our way. He talked about his last book *Her Father's Name*, at our Members' Meeting in November and was looking forward to selling this fascinating mix of fact and historical fiction at events around Harpenden this year.

Perhaps recognising that his health would not allow him to do this, he contacted the Society and offered his remaining stock of



The Gang Show 'old codgers' – John Seabrook at centre

books to be sold for the Harpenden and District Local History Society's benefit, a typically generous gesture.

John married Elizabeth, née Hossack, in 1957 and their children, Timothy and Hilary, were both born in Harpenden.

We will all remember John as a good friend of the Society.

David Keen

A collection for Ukraine at the Society's meeting on 22 March 2022 raised £310 for the Disasters Emergency Committee. With the agreement of attending non-members their £3 entry fees for the evening were included in the collection.