

Paul (Wolodimir) Magdocz and the Vauxhall Railings

Many residents will remember the Vauxhall Garage in the Causeway. Built in the late 1960s, it was for many years the premises of Cyril H Thomas and then Platinum Vauxhall. Now closed, the garage is being demolished to make way for new retirement apartments.

What is perhaps not well known, is that the railings which have been part of the frontage since it was built, were hand-made by one of Chippenham's last blacksmiths – Paul Magdocz who lived opposite the Garage at 30 The Causeway.



Paul Magdocz in the door of his forge at 30 Causeway

This remarkable man was a well-known resident of the town for over 50 years. His skills were appreciated by many, and his work still lives on.

His personal history and how he came from Poland to live in Chippenham mark him out as a man of his time and an inspiration in this Brexit era.



The Vauxhall Railings in the Causeway

Early Life

Paul was born Wolodimir Magdocz in 1920, in the town of Brody, Tarnopol, Poland (near to Kiev).



Wolodimir with his Mother, Father and sisters Emilie and Olga

His father moved the family to Lille in France where he found work on a farm. At that time all the children were of school age (about 8 to 11) and Wolodimir did most of his schooling in France.

During his school years he was sent to a monastery as a punishment for burning down a neighbour's haystack and embarked on a period of training as a Benedictine Monk. During his time in the monastery he devised a way of avoiding the rigours of a monastic life by having a hidden stash of clothing into which he would change, before climbing the walls to spend an evening in town. He was also known to help himself to the communion wine and it was soon realised that he was not suitable Monk material.

The family later returned to Poland after his father had died and by the outbreak of WWII they were living in a small village.

During the German occupation of Poland, the young men of the village were ordered by the Nazis to undertake forced labour at factories in Gelsenkirchen and Essen, Germany. The industrial sites were heavily bombed and he was living in buildings with no roofs, with little food or clothing. Once a month he was ordered to clear bombed houses searching for bodies.

At the end of the war, as the Allies sorted out the chaos left by the retreating Germans, Wolodimir was offered a life in Canada, America or England. He chose England thinking it the nearest and easiest way of getting back to Poland.

Wolodimir worked as an interpreter for the Allies as he spoke Polish, English, French, German, Ukrainian and Russian.

As a consequence of the invasion of Poland, Wolodimir had lost touch with all his family members, but after the war he eventually traced his younger sister, Emilie. She was living in Bavaria, Germany, but his older sister, Olga, had died during his internment.



A New Life in Chippenham

His first job in England was at the Glanville Engineering Company in Burlands Road.

Sometime after his arrival in England he had come to be known by the name of Paul. It is believed this was because people, if they had a job that needed doing, would say, 'Take it to the Pole' and 'Pole' soon become 'Paul'.

To make the foreigners more at home the locals put on dances. It was at a dance that he was introduced to his future wife, Ethel Muriel Morse from Wood Lane. They were married in 1954 at St Andrews Church, Chippenham.



It is not known how Wolodimir learned his trade as a blacksmith, but being a skilled metal worker, he joined the Westinghouse Foundry in Chippenham as a fitter and was with the company for 30 years. He eventually took British Naturalisation in 1957.

After they set up home in the Causeway, Paul would work in the evenings and

weekends at the forge at the back of the house. The house was a former bakery and he converted the oven into a forge.

Paul and Muriel eventually had a daughter, Jane and in 1966 they were given permission to visit Paul's mother in the land which was previously Poland, but which by then was part of Russia. Paul had not seen his mother since the war and this was the only time they ever met again as visas were rarely granted during the 60s – 70s. This same area is now part of the Ukraine.



The Forge in the Causeway

From his house in the Causeway, Paul went on to set up a business which became well known throughout Chippenham and Wiltshire. Paul's skill as a blacksmith and welder kept him in work for the rest of his life.



Among Paul's many jobs was a commission by the Marchioness of Lansdowne to produce copies of a jardinière for Bowood.

He also made a staircase in Laura Fashions at The Bridge, Chippenham (see photo below) and restored the gates at Hartham Park (see photo).

It was said that he had also been a skilled farrier in his early days, but it was his ability to weld alloys that kept him busy in later years. Much of this work was for Westinghouse and Dymag of Chippenham who manufactured magnesium racing wheels.

A Metalwork Magician

Many of his local customers would bring him all sorts of metal objects to repair. He could work his magic on anything from children's bikes, assorted metal toys through to aluminium motorcycle engines and garden equipment. He is even credited with making a golf trolley for one of the Westinghouse directors.

In 1969 he was commissioned to make the railings for the new Vauxhall Garage in the Causeway. Jane, his

daughter, remembers her father making the outer shell and all the letters. He spent the evening welding the pieces together and then filing down all the joints.



Restored gates at Hartham Park and staircase at Laura Fashions, The Bridge, Chippenham

The next morning, taking him a coffee, her mother pointed out that the railings read 'VUAXHALL'. He was not pleased and at first would not believe her. Her father reluctantly spent that evening cutting it apart, welding and filing again.

Although Paul was the blacksmith it was definitely a team effort with Muriel doing all the painting (undercoat and top coat) dealing with customers and the records.

As a couple they lived a frugal life, probably because they undercharged their customers. Paul would hardly ever eat English style food, but loved Polish Vodka. In their later years they would both spend a sociable evening at the Three Crowns pub in the Causeway or with friends. Muriel died in 2000 and Paul in 2002.

With the demolition of the Vauxhall Garage, the railings have been saved for Chippenham Museum thereby rescuing an example of Paul's work which has gone unrecognised for fifty years.

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We are indebted to their daughter Jane and good friends Rosemary and Alan Higgs for the information and pictures provided in this article.

Geoff Barrett. Chippenham. 2019

