THE BUTTERCROSS BULLETIN



Storm Bert and Chippenham Town Flooding (Page 12)

Issue 189

CHIPPENHAM CIVIC SOCIETY

Winter 2024

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In this Issue

Page 3
From the Chair
Mike Stone
Page 4
Social Programme 2025
Page 5
Membership Matters - Mary Norton
Page 6
Letters to the Editor
Page 12
Storm Bert and Chippenham Town Flooding
By Elaine Davis
Page 15
A New Future for Emery Gate?
By Jack Konynenburg
Page 17
Chippenham Buildings Then and Now - No 10
By Mike Stone
Page 18
People of the Workhouse Part 4
By Elaine Davis
Page 24
The Story behind Twenty Years of Sequins and Shimmy
By Elaine Davis

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The Bulletin can be sent via email as an electronic PDF version - please let us know via the website.

From the Chair

I am currently out of the UK but picked up on the media channels the severe flooding in Chippenham town centre. This will I'm sure highlight all the discussions that are now taking place on the replacement of the radial gate and major changes to how the river is managed as it flows through Chippenham. (See page 12.)

We are again approaching the end of another year. The Civic Society continues to attract good numbers to our presentations in the Rotary Hall. Thank you to members who are now sending me regular ideas for the programme for next year.

Our full colour bi-annual Buttercross continues to receive very favourable comments from our membership. Can I on your behalf again thank our editor Elaine Davis for all her artwork and all the authors of articles that we have published.

Highlighting future events for 2025 I will begin with a further blue plaque regarding King Alfred, which is referred to later in this issue. We have not held Conservation and Environmental Awards evening due to few potential projects that met our criteria, but I am pleased to announce that we are now beginning to form a healthy list, and we plan to hold this event in the Autumn of next year at St Andrew's Church. If you are aware of any building projects which may fit our criteria, please advise the Chair as soon as possible.

Next March it will be 25 years since the new Chippenham Museum opened its doors to the public and I think we would all agree that it has gone from strength to strength (see 2025 programme below for details of a special lecture).

Thank you to all members for your continued support of the Civic Society and its aims and objectives. We are still declining in membership and can I again appeal to you to recommend membership to anyone who has a love of Chippenham.

Please note that with this issue is a separate membership renewal form for renewal of your membership from 1 December. The information to renew is clearly laid out in the form, please make every effort to renew your membership by the end of the year and also to complete and return the Gift Aid form, especially those members who pay directly into the Society's bank account. Our Treasurer, Philip, claims the gift aid annually and this helps to keep the annual membership fee to the minimum

The committee would like to send season’s greetings to all our members, and we will all look forward to a prosperous year ahead.

Mike Stone
Chair



Social Programme - 2025

21 January

We start our programme with a presentation by Tim Bryan, who is Director of the Brunel Institute at the SS Great Britain Trust. He has just published a new book 'Iron, Stone and Steam: Brunel's Railway Empire'. He will give a presentation based on his new book covering the, almost, 30 tumultuous years to create the rail network covering much of the southwest. Tim has visited us before, and he will give an interesting presentation as he is one of the world's leading experts on Brunel and his railway.

18 February

Our speaker is James Holden, who has published a series of Wiltshire Buildings Records books covering religious and civic building of Wiltshire. He will concentrate his talk on both religious and civic buildings of Chippenham and the surrounding area. It was a pleasure to work with James when he was researching and compiling the information on the buildings of Chippenham, this will be a great chance for our members to hear an updated view of buildings that we often see every day but may not know their interesting background.

18 March

Our Vice Chair, John Scragg, will be returning to give a Part 2 of his journey from Chippenham to Penzance. Using his extensive photographic archive, he will take us on a journey on GWR through Devon and ending up in Penzance in Cornwall.

15 April

AGM of the Civic Society. After the AGM Melissa Barnett will give a presentation celebrating 25 years of Chippenham Museum, highlighting the many events and milestones during this first quarter century. This will be a fascinating journey not to be missed. There may also be other celebrations, which we will advise to our members when known.

All meetings are currently held at the Rotary Hall, Station Hill. Doors open at 7.00 pm for a 7.30 pm start.

Civic Society events from May to September will be sent out in our short newsletter towards the end of April, after the AGM.



Membership Matters - Mary Norton

We were very saddened to hear of the death of our friend and former committee member Mary Norton. Mary died peacefully at home on 3 October 2024 aged ninety-two.



Mary was born in May 1932 to Ben and Francis Mould. She had two brothers Ben and Laurence and three sisters Wyn, Kathleen and May. Mary was brought up in Frome and after primary school went to the Frome Grammar School. On leaving school she was employed by the Inland Revenue in their Frome Office in whose service she remained until her retirement in 1992.

In 1956 Mary married Cedric and shortly after taking up the role of Roving Tax Inspector, which saw her travel to tax offices throughout the Southwest, they searched for a home of their own. They settled on Queens Crescent Chippenham as this provided easy access for her travelling and for Cedric to commute to Westbury.

In retirement Mary embraced public life and helped on numerous committees including the Civic Society and Friends of the museum. She was editor of the Buttercross Bulletin and a valued volunteer at the museum where she helped with cataloguing.



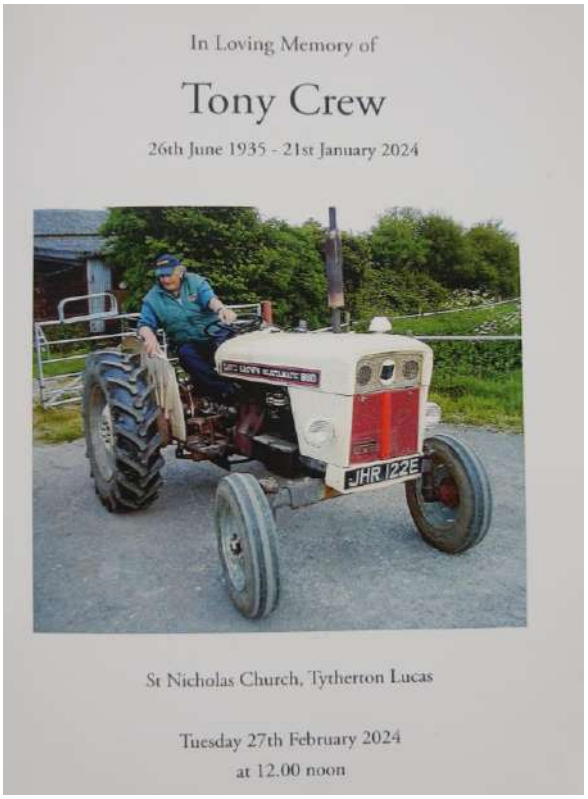
Mary's most treasured memory was her time as the mayor of Chippenham. A Conservative Councillor she was unanimously elected as the town's mayor at the full town council meeting held at the Town Hall in May 2017.This Followed a year as Councillor Terry Gibson's deputy. She very much enjoyed the numerous engagements carried out throughout the mayoral year.

We will all miss her fierce intelligence, hard work, and good humour.



Letters to the editor

In a letter to the editor, we were also saddened to hear of the death, at the beginning of this year, of Tony Crewe, local farmer and lifelong Chippenham resident. Editor



Tony Crewe was a farmer who lived at the farm and tollhouse at the end of Stanley Lane where it joins the London Road nearly opposite Abbeyfield school.

Tony died earlier this year, and it might be nice to remember him as the man who achieved fame when he told everybody, at the time they were building Abbeyfield school, there was an unexploded WW2 bomb on the site. He was not really believed until they found the bomb and the bomb squad evacuated the area and blew it up.

David Wood

Chippenham hit the news in February 1998, when a large German bomb, affectionately nicknamed Fat Boy, was uncovered by builders digging the foundations for what is now Abbeyfield School. However, this should not have been a surprise.

As David points out, when plans for the new school were proposed local farmer Tony Crew had raised his fears that the field, due to be built on, contained unexploded bombs dropped in 1941. Something that he had been saying for many years without really being believed.

As excitement mounted after the bombs were located local TV and radio crews descended on the town. Tony became centre stage and was interviewed numerous times as the dram unfolded.

Tony told how at the age of 6 (pictured here) he remembered hearing the plane come over and hearing the bombs going into the ground "Thud, thud, thud" and the next day seeing the craters in the field.



The consequences of that night however quickly became apparent after the discovery of a 500lb bomb and then a much bigger one just a few metres away.



After the bombs became unstable a full-scale evacuation of the area began. And as hundreds watch on, from outside a swifty installed safety cordon, the army bomb disposal unit prepared and then detonated the devices in a controlled explosion.

The blast from the biggest bomb threw rocks weighing several tonnes high into the air but the operation was an overall success. No one was hurt and minimal damage of just a few broken windows was recorded.

For Tony the events did prove a little overwhelming and he told film crews after.

"I feel rather shaken to be honest, I don't think we would have lived here for 56 years and flet at ease if we knew what was in the ground"

Editor

We have been really pleased to receive several letters in response to articles featured in the summer edition of the Buttercross. We are so glad that articles on past shops in the town have brought back so many memories and we are grateful to those who have shared these with us.

Editor

Thank you for taking me down memory lane in your summer edition of the Buttercross Bulletin with informative and interesting articles on shops that used to be in Chippenham.

I remember Quetzal very well and bought a couple of life-sized ceramic parrots from the shop. They were absolutely beautiful, glorious colours and I had them for many years. Dentons too was a favourite, the creaky wooden floorboards and the wonderful smell of this traditional ironmongers is something that I will always remember. The Co-op too has special memories for me as it's the place where my parents met, dad was a baker and confectioner there and mum worked in the bakehouse as well, one of her jobs was to put the jam in the jam doughnuts. I think it was mum's sweet tooth that made her fall for him as he used to give her the trimmings from the vanilla slices he made, to take home with her for the family. I worked in the Co-op too, my very first job aged fourteen working after school on Friday, late shopping night, and all-day Saturday in the grocery department, my wage was £1-3s-6d.

I sometimes long for the variety of shops there were back in the sixties and seventies, we had just about everything a family could want from a high street, a toy shop, furniture

stores, electrical goods shops, record stores, butchers, bakers and a fishmongers, numerous grocery stores, clothes and shoe shops and even a saddlers. A few of my favourite shops were, Stafford James, a fabric and haberdashers, which was located just down from where Iceland is today. They had a pneumatic cash carrying system which used to fascinate me as a child, mum would hand her money to the sales assistant it would be put in a cylinder and popped into a tube where it would be carried up and across the ceiling of the store into an office upstairs where the change and receipt would be put back into the cylinder and returned to the assistant. It was remarkably fast and made a whooshing sound.

Wheeler's was another favourite they were a grocers/delicatessen and were located roughly where the British Red Cross Shop is now in the Market Place. They used to roast and grind coffee beans for customers and the smell would drift through the town centre, wonderful. Boots chemist was another favourite. Back then the store was very different, it was on two floors and the top floor was accessed by a very grand staircase. To the right on the ground floor was where the pharmacy was located and medicines dispensed from what seemed like a wall of hundreds of small wooden drawers with brass handles and label holders that went from floor to ceiling. The shop was filled with a floral scent, perhaps soaps and perfumes I don't know, but it was lovely, and I remember it even now.

Ann Shaw



A 1930s image from the collection of Chippenham Museum showing the original position of Boots on the left when this national chain first came to the town.

It was in 1964 that we came to live in Chippenham. We (my dad, my sister and myself) lived over one of the shops in the Market Place. Chippenham back then was very different to how it is now. It has changed hugely, whilst retaining its individuality.

One of the things I distinctly remember was the weekly market, then held behind the Neeld Hall with lots of stalls selling all sorts of home-made products. During the school holidays Dad used to send us to the market to buy eggs, apple pies and occasionally a cake. They were very tasty.

The shops in the Market Place and High Street seemed to be very lively in those days. There was a Youngsters toy shop, Milsom's Ladies Hairdressers, Dewhurst butchers, another shoe shop which I think was called Norvic Shoes. Where Iceland is there was a flower shop called Ye Olde Wilts Flower Shoppe. On The Shambles was Wilts Bacon Shop, and next door to that looking down the High Street was Banks Greengrocer. Next to Banks there was a small shop which was Milsom's Gents Hairdressers. Just along from there was a store called Melias, a grocery store. There was a gents outfitters called Hetheringtons. On the corner of Chapel Lane where the pet charity shop is now, was a shop called Newman's Saddlery which sold all sorts of leather goods, purses, wallets, watch straps. There was also Curry & Paxton Opticians in the Market Place. Facing the War Memorial was Cavacuiti's Café, which I believe was called The Waverley. They used to make their own delicious ice cream. They also had a café further down in New Road.



The town library used to be housed in the Jubilee Buildings, and we used to visit the library quite regularly. Just around the corner outside St Andrew's church gates there were two shops called The Chocolate Box which was a sweet shop, and The China Bowl, selling all sorts of pretty china items. (image showing Market Place c1970s with China Bowl behind West Country Cleaners image curtesy of Chippenham Museum)

There was a shop called Stafford James which was situated at 23/34 Market Place selling fabric, knitting wools, haberdashery. Sadly, we've lost that sort of shop now. I believe at some point they had a shop at number 45.

Quite close to where we lived in town there was a ladies hairdressers called Milsoms, and that is where I started my first job, which was part-time. I was there for about a year until I started a full-time job at The Angel Hotel as Receptionist where I stayed for about eight years. At the time The Angel had 41 motel units at the back, either double or twin-bedded units and all of which had their own bathrooms, TV, radio, plenty of car parking spaces. I believe Chippenham Museum has an aerial photograph showing the motel units. The

motel units, which were quite innovative at the time, have long since gone and the hotel now has its own swimming pool and leisure facilities.

Opposite the War Memorial there was Heath's stationers. In that same rank of shops there was the Jolly Miller Café and Hollands Newsagents.

Barretts Fish & Chip shop was in Timber Street, along with The Old Bakehouse. The Old Bakehouse also had a shop at number 4 Market Place. The bread, cakes and buns were delicious. Also in Timber Street was the Odeon Cinema, which my sister and I used to go to on a Saturday morning. It was 6 old pence for Saturday morning pictures.

In number 15 St Mary Street there was the Driving Test Centre. I can also remember a GP Surgery in St Mary Street. Chippenham Register Office used to be where the Museum now is, before moving to New Road. It is now at Timber Street behind the Museum.

In The Causeway on the right-hand side with a canopy overhanging the street was a Chinese restaurant called Lok Seng Chinese Restaurant. A friend and I used to enjoy lunches in there together from time to time. It is now a chiropractors practice.

Woolworths is another store I recall, sadly now gone (image below showing Woolworths c1970s curtesy of Chippenham Museum) Timothy White's was somewhere on the other side of the road and opposite Woolworths. The dentist in the High Street is still there. Above the shops near Woolworths was a café called The Salamander. I used to enjoy a lunch in there from time to time.



Further along by the Western Arches there used to be a shop called Swales, which I believe used to stock ladies' clothes. In the summertime my sister and I used to enjoy going to the outdoor swimming pool in Monkton Park. Since it has been filled in that space is used now as a children's play area.

The senior school I went to was Chippenham County Secondary Modern School for Girls and is now Hardenhuish School. This is now a mixed school. At the time I was at the school there were about 600 pupils, I think small by today's standards. The school that is now Sheldon School was Chippenham County Secondary Modern School for Boys. Chippenham also had at that time a Grammar School. I believe that has now been incorporated into Hardenhuish School.

There used to be four hospitals in Chippenham, one on the London Road, now flats, Frogwell Hospital which I understand was originally an isolation hospital, and Greenways

Maternity Hospital in Malmesbury Road which closed in about 1988/89. We still have St Andrews Hospital which serves Chippenham – one hospital for a now much larger town.

On a site in Wood Lane the Police Station and Westmead Infant School used to stand, but both have now been demolished. In The Causeway there used to be Spinkes Printing Works.

I left Chippenham in 1977 and returned in 2012 to a much-changed town with an interesting history.

Sally Lynes



A 1970s image from the collection of Chippenham Museum showing the high street at the point Sally left Chippenham

We are very grateful to all society members who contact us with letters or comments to go into the Bulletin. If you would like to have your say on anything Chippenham related, please contact: Elaine Davis, edavis@chippenham.gov.uk.

Storm Bert and Chippenham Town Flooding Elaine Davis

The end of November saw the arrival of storm Bert. Very strong winds and heavy rain led to significant flooding across the country, after river levels rose to record- breaking levels.

This included the river Avon which burst its banks in the early hours of Monday 25 November. This resulted in the town centre experiencing the worst flooding in nearly 60s years. The impact of which will be felt by individuals and business affected for many weeks and months to come.



Images of flooding in Monkton Park taken Monday 25 November.

In his article in the summer edition of the Buttercross (issue 188, page 8) John Scragg outlined plans for the towns radial gate.

In the article he discussed the issue of flooding which could arise should the present gate, which is due to be replaced, fail to open in specific weather.

These issues are well known, and therefore much debate has surrounded the question of whether the recent devastating flood was caused by the failure of the radial gate.

A statement has been issued by the Environment Agency regarding the levels of water and the functioning of the radial gate during and after the storm.

> During the high flows along the river Avon, the radial gate opened and worked as expected, allowing the water to pass through the gate and downstream. Based on initial estimates, there were between 150 and 200 tonnes of water passing through Chippenham every second at the peak of the flood. Rain gauges recorded up to 80mm over 48 hours, falling on saturated ground, and upstream gauge at Great Somerford got to its highest levels since 1968.

They go on to say

> Storm Bert swept lots of Debris along the River Avon, some of which has become stuck at the radial gate along with several boats. We are closely monitoring the operation of the gate, and we plan to start clearing the debris from the gate, to ensure the gate can close properly. This will be done when our filed teams can safely do so. Until we can clear this debris it is likely that the upstream level will continue to drop, exposing more of the banks. We will be monitoring this, but there is nothing that can be done until the gate is able to close. *Environment Agency Nov 2024*

This fall in the upstream water level was certainly the case and anyone traveling across the town bridge just days after the flooding would have been forgiven for thinking it had not really been that bad.



Image of the river from the town bridge taken Tuesday 3 December



The recent flooding and subsequent drop in water level has highlighted the issue of rubbish, which can be found in our river, and the problems this can cause.

This image was taken from the wooden foot bridge in Monkton Park, and clearly shows the amount of accumulated rubbish, with at least 4 metal shopping trolleys clearly visible.

While flooding in the town is not unknown, as these images below, from the 1920s, 30s and 60s show, it did seem that such events had been left in the past. Current issues around climate change does raise the question of what this means for weather patterns in the feature, and if we are prepared for more storms like Bert!







Chippenham 1926, 1932 and c1960s reproduced curtesy of Chippenham Museum

A New Future for Emery Gate? Jack Konynenburg



At an exhibition on 14th September the public was finally able to see the emerging proposals for Emery Gate, by the Acorn Property Group. It was described as 'An ambitious transformation of the shopping centre, breathing new life to the centre of the town'. Whilst a previous exhibition had been principally about aims and objectives for the project without any detail, this time the form and content of the proposed scheme have become much more apparent.

Emery Gate was opened in 1986 and was the earliest insertion of a Shopping Mal into Chippenham town centre, similar to the numerous others built elsewhere from the 1950s onwards. Reflecting the ever-increasing passion for shopping as a leisure as well as practical necessity, the development was simple in concept - two rows of shops facing each other across an enclosed walkway for people to satisfy their desires and aspirations, terminating at a large 'anchor store' for their more prosaic requirements.

Architecturally it was not without merit- including a fine 'Post Modern' entrance from the High Street, and a 'railway age' roof structure with roof lights along the mal with interesting turns in direction. It was marred by the building's very poor relationship to the riverside, criticized by many at the design stage. The view into the development from Emery Lane/ St Mary Street was also unattractive- being dominated by the loading area and car parking.



During the intervening 38 years the centre has fared reasonably well. It's had three anchor stores- Safeway, Somerfields and latterly Tesco, and contained a reasonable smattering of useful smaller shops. However, as the town centre suffered alongside others, from a reduced footfall due to internet shopping, there have been more vacancies. It is understood that discussions with Acorn have been underway for some time to redevelop the centre.

The new scheme is very ambitious. It is proposed to demolish all the existing buildings except for the underground car park and construct a new shopping street similar to Borough Parade, with flats over a mixture of shops and hospitality units. Also included is the old Woolworths store (now Poundland, Costa Coffee and Sports Direct). Meaning the oft described 'ugliest building in the High Street' will be gone at last! In its place will be three shop units with flats above, and two on the other side of the Centre's new entrance.

The new street continues approximately as far as where the sitting area in front of ex Tesco is today. Here there will be a generous and attractive entrance into the Island Park and exit into Emery Lane. On the site of Tesco, the car park and loading bay will be four blocks of flats, with views both over the riverside and the town centre. 225 flats and 19 retail/ hospitality units are proposed in the development, with extensive landscaping throughout.

There are 300 car parking spaces proposed, which are largely underground with some disabled spaces at street level. The entrance to the underground car park will be adjacent to where the existing cycle/ footpath is from Emery Lane to the riverside.

All told, I think the development would be a huge asset to Chippenham Town Centre. The improved frontage to this part of the High Street is welcomed, as is the replacement of the dated covered over mal with an open street. The opening up of the centre to the riverside, combined with views from the residences, is a huge improvement on the existing building. The provision of many residences satisfies the increasing desire for people to live in town centres, to the benefit of our town.

The worry is that this huge scheme might not be viable and may need to be watered down. A compromise would be to leave the existing centre as is and develop only the residential part at the rear, which would be a missed opportunity. Another worry is the disruption resulting from construction - the decanting of all the existing shops and businesses in the centre and the closure of the car park, probably for about 18 months.

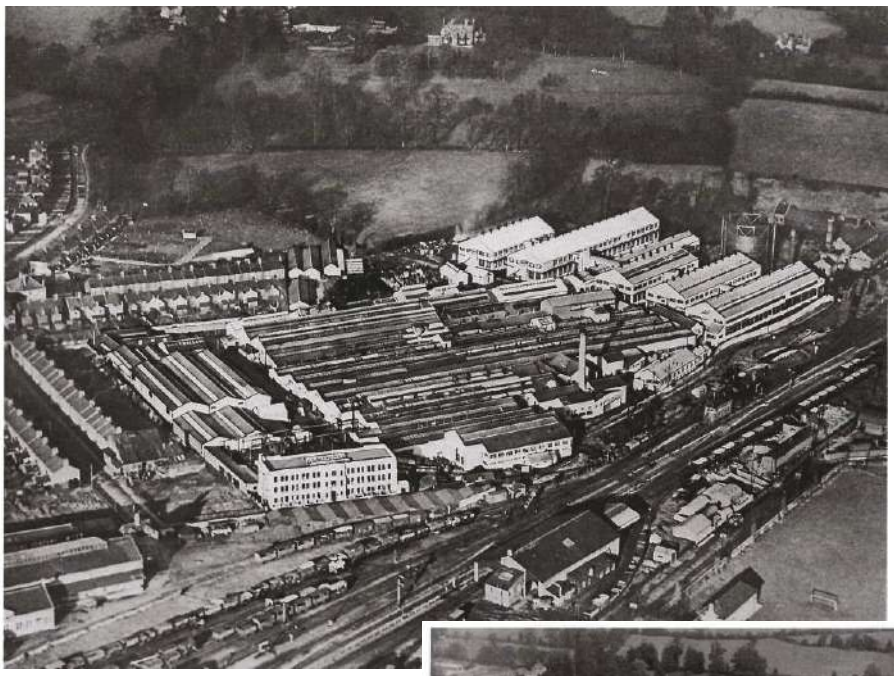
Perhaps the construction can be phased to reduce the impact.

Chippenham Buildings Then & Now - No 10 Mike Stone

Westinghouse between 1935 and 1953

For my next Then and Now I have chosen two photographs of the Westinghouse Brake and Signal Company taken at two important times for the developing company.

This first picture, taken in 1935, shows the works to the side of the main Great Western Railway. Note the large, cleared area to the northwest.



This was planned as an extension to the works due to the securing of a major contract in Poland to improve their railway infrastructure and lines.



The additional works were all constructed, as clearly shows in this 1953 photograph, but of course with the outbreak of the Second World War, the contract was cancelled.

This was a major headache for Westinghouse but with the declaration of war in September 1939 the works quickly adapted to produce so much military equipment that it was called the 'Universal Provider'.

In the next issue I will look at what is left of Westinghouse on the site and will concentrate on the new building that has taken place on this former works.

People of the Workhouse – Part 4 Elaine Davis

The concluding story of Rose, Grace, Alice and Mary Davis, inmates of Chippenham Union Work House in the 1881 census.

At 11pm on Tuesday 4 August 1914, Britain declared war on Germany. Whether this was expected by the general population is greatly debated. Tensions had been growing in Europe for a while, with fluctuations in the balance of power between Germany, Russia and France. This had caused concern for Britain and had strained relations with Germany but agreements with Russia and France, aiming to secure its empire by settling colonial disputes, meant that Britain felt secure in its dealings with central Europe.

Even the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and his wife by a Serbian-backed terrorist, recognised today as the main catalyst for WW1, did not initially raise fear in Britain of an imminent widespread war in Europe. The assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne was greeted with shook and widespread condemnation but relations between Austria-Hungary and neighbouring Serbia were historically tense so the mounting aggression between the two would not necessarily have suggested what was to follow. These rising tensions across the channel could be followed through the reports in the daily papers but for the most part, they were overshadowed by events closer to home.

In April 1912 Prime Minister Herbert Asquith had introduced the Third Home Rule Bill which was to grant Ireland self-government. This was met with fierce opposition by Unionists in Ulster who formed a paramilitary force, the Ulster Volunteers, and threatened to resist by force the implementation of the Act.



AUSTRIA DECLARES WAR ON SERVIA.

The Daily Mirror

LATEST CERTIFIED CIRCULATION MORE THAN 1,000,000 COPIES PER DAY

No. 3,558. WEDNESDAY, JULY 29, 1914 One Halfpenny.

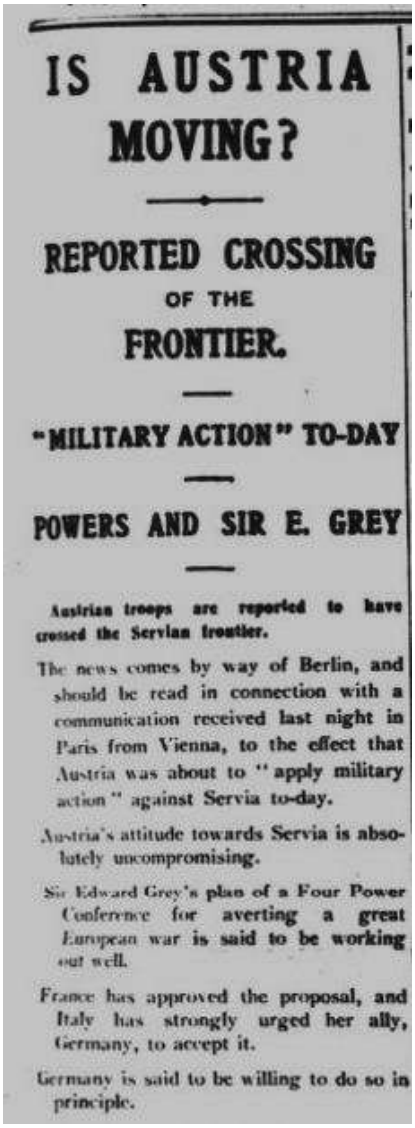
BOYS INJURED IN THE BATTLE OF BACHELORS' WALK: CHALK CROSSES TO DENOTE WHERE THE NATIONALISTS FELL DEAD.

VOUCHER

The unionists refused to accept any authority of a Dublin Parliament and demanded that Ulster be excluded from the bill. In response the Nationalists raised the Irish Volunteers with the intention of helping Britain enforce the Act whenever it was passed. Both sides began to arm resulting in violent struggles.

Therefore, on 29 July 1914 as war clouds began to gather with the Austrian declaration of war on Servia. The front pages of the national papers were mainly reporting on what was seen to be the more worrying escalation of aggression in Ireland.

Ironically at a point when the government were struggling to address violence within its own country within the crisis in Europe, Britain's involvement was seen as one of peacemaker.



IS AUSTRIA MOVING?

REPORTED CROSSING OF THE FRONTIER.

"MILITARY ACTION" TO-DAY

POWERS AND SIR E. GREY

Austrian troops are reported to have crossed the Servian frontier.

The news comes by way of Berlin, and should be read in connection with a communication received last night in Paris from Vienna, to the effect that Austria was about to "apply military action" against Servia to-day.

Austria's attitude towards Servia is absolutely uncompromising.

Sir Edward Grey's plan of a Four Power Conference for averting a great European war is said to be working out well.

France has approved the proposal, and Italy has strongly urged her ally, Germany, to accept it.

Germany is said to be willing to do so in principle.

From 24 July 1914, British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey had been working to organise an international peace conference to prevent further escalation. As late as July 29 papers, such as this report in the Pall Mall Gazette, were stating that…

'Sir Edward Grey's plan of a Four Power Conference for averting a great European war is said to be working well'.

However, despite this positive rhetoric, Germany refused the proposal. Within days Russia, who had declared its support for Serbia, began to mobilise its troops. While it is believed that for the Russians this was a precaution against a wider war, the Germans saw it as an act of aggression. They called for Russia to demobilise, but when this was ignored, Germany declared war on Russia.

Rising fear of a German victory in Western Europe and subsequent control along the Channel coast, led Britain to mobilise its navy. It promised to protect the French coast from German aggression through the Channel, and on 2 August the Cabinet agreed to support Belgium if there was a substantial violation of its neutrality.

In accordance with its war plan, Germany ignored Russia and moved first against France. They declared war on August 3 sending its main armies through Belgium to capture Paris from the north. Britain issued an ultimatum, demanding Germany withdraw its troops from Belgium and provide assurances that Belgian neutrality would be upheld. As the 11pm deadline for a response approached huge crowds gathered and newspaper reports the following day describe the scene.

> *"Extraordinary scenes of enthusiasm were witnessed. Not for years have such crowds been seen in London. Whitehall, The Mall, and Trafalgar-square were all packed with excited throngs. The enthusiasm culminated outside Buckingham Palace …. A lady came out of the Palace and announced that war had been declared.*
>
> *This was received with tremendous cheering which grew into a deafening roar when King George, Queen Mary and the Prince of Wales appeared on the balcony. As if by general accord, the cheers gave way to the signing of the National Anthem, which was taken up lustily by the whole throng. For a full five minutes the Royal Party remained on the balcony. They retired amidst a perfect storm of cheering, and although the crowd subsequently began to melt away, thousands remained. They grew gradually less demonstrative, and it was noticeable that the news of the*

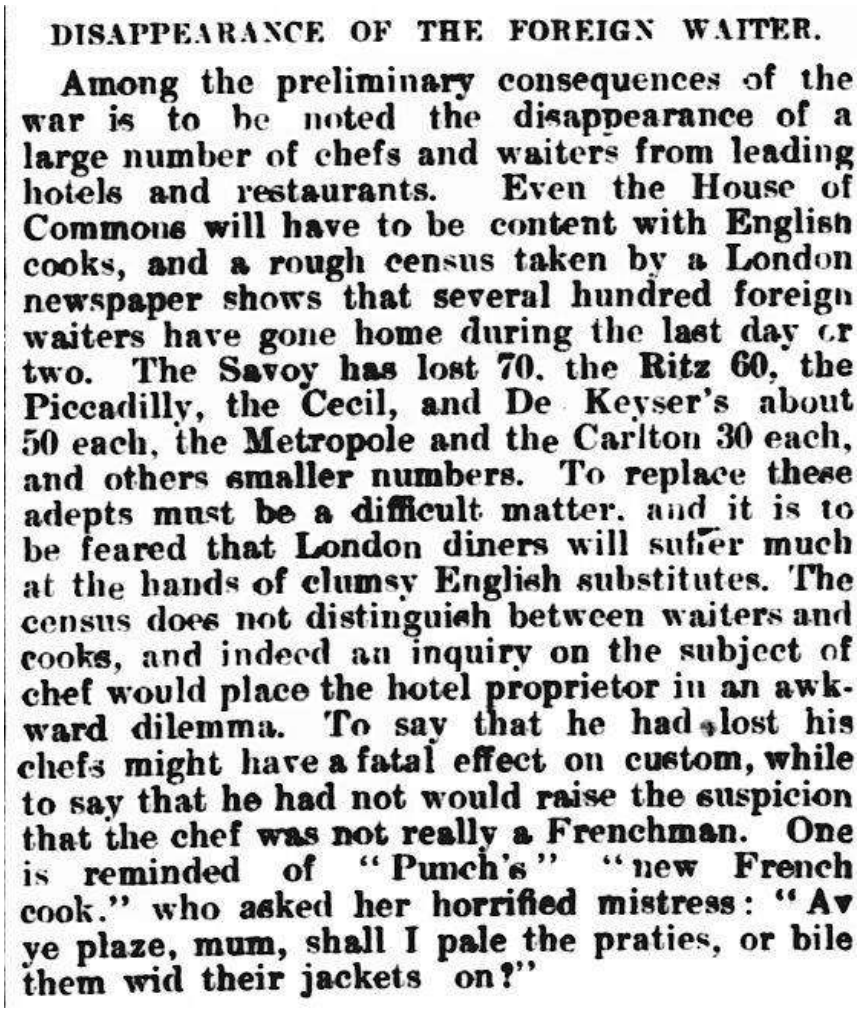
actual state of war had a sobering effect on many. Mafficking gave way to distinct seriousness". (The Daily News and Leader, August 5, 1914).

We will never know how the Davis sisters felt at the point Britain went to war with Germany. Could they have been part of the throngs outside of Buckingham Palace? While we can't answer that for Rose, Grace and Mary we can be fairly certain that Alice would not have been there. As the wife of a German national, war with Germany was unthinkable.

In his article Germanophobia and World War I (https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk) Professor Panikos Panayi states: "Nothing could have prepared the Germans for the level of hostility that they would face in Britain during the First World War. A combination of government measures and public opinion destroyed the communities that had emerged by 1914."

Within a day of Britain declaring war on Germany the Aliens Restriction Act was passed by parliament. This required foreign nationals (aliens) to register with the police,

"The introduction of Aliens Restrictions Act of 1914 was initially focussed upon identifying potential spies however all "enemy aliens", even if they had lived and worked in England for many years, had to register as an "enemy alien" or face a significant £100 fine or six months imprisonment. Amongst other things, the Act restricted their travel to within a 5-mile radius". (https://www.knockaloe.im/)



DISAPPEARANCE OF THE FOREIGN WAITER.

Among the preliminary consequences of the war is to be noted the disappearance of a large number of chefs and waiters from leading hotels and restaurants. Even the House of Commons will have to be content with English cooks, and a rough census taken by a London newspaper shows that several hundred foreign waiters have gone home during the last day or two. The Savoy has lost 70, the Ritz 60, the Piccadilly, the Cecil, and De Keyser's about 50 each, the Metropole and the Carlton 30 each, and others smaller numbers. To replace these adepts must be a difficult matter, and it is to be feared that London diners will suffer much at the hands of clumsy English substitutes. The census does not distinguish between waiters and cooks, and indeed an inquiry on the subject of chef would place the hotel proprietor in an awkward dilemma. To say that he had lost his chefs might have a fatal effect on custom, while to say that he had not would raise the suspicion that the chef was not really a Frenchman. One is reminded of "Punch's" "new French cook." who asked her horrified mistress: "Av ye plaze, mum, shall I pale the praties, or bile them wid their jackets on?"

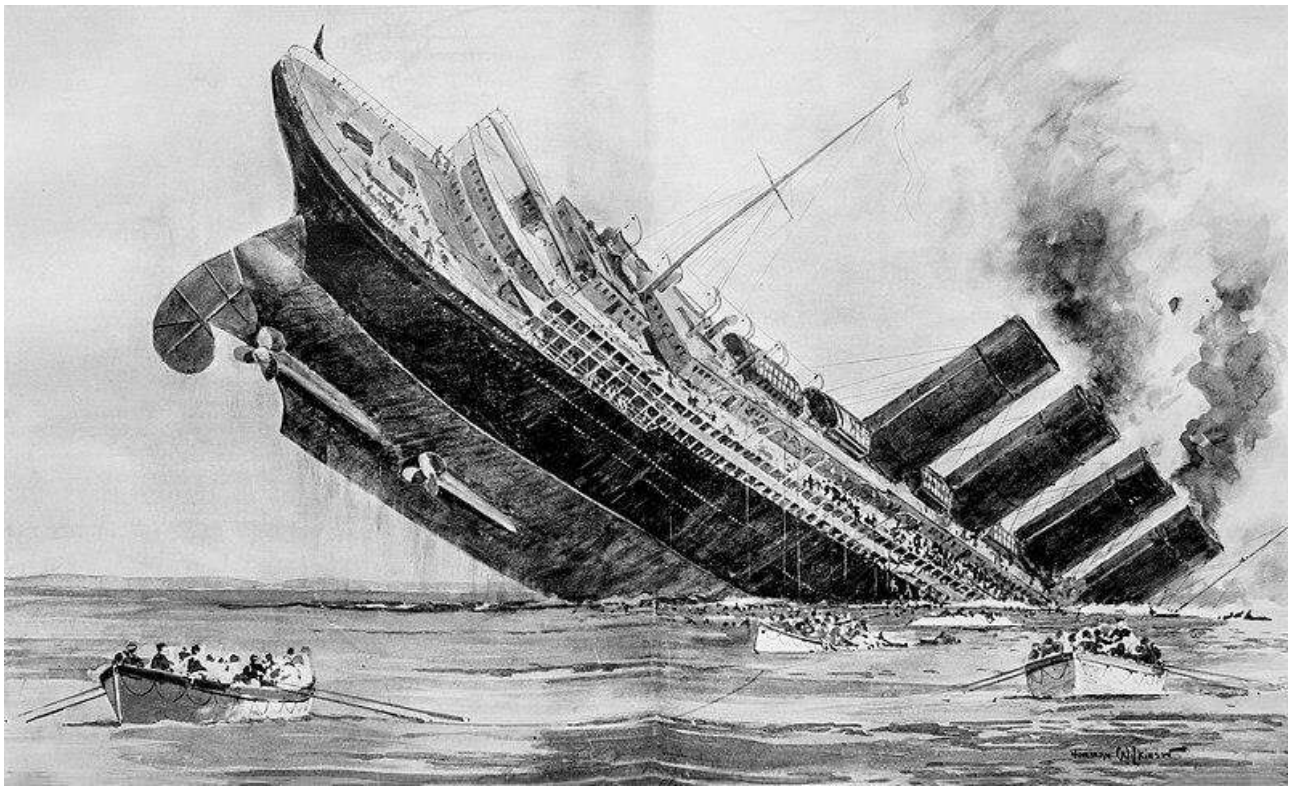
Furthermore, men of military age (17–55) who were categorised as enemy aliens could be arrested and interned. This was initially aimed at those thought to be a potential danger to the public,

Ironically this interment was one of the reasons behind issues highlighted here by the Huddersfield Daily Examiner dated August 6.

The report makes mention of the loss of French chefs who had gone home. However, the loss of waiters, causing such a problem for the top London hotels, was most likely the result of the Governments Aliens Restriction Act and the internment of some of the men who made up the main workforce of waiters in the capital.

Alice's 43-year-old German husband, Frederick William Sonntag (known as William) would have been required to register with the police. A family man who had called Britain home for over 20 years had become an 'enemy' to his neighbours and those he worked for, overnight.

It is unlikely that William would have initially faced interment. However as public anti-German feeling grew, after reports of German atrocities in Belgium the Government policy began to change. Then on the 7 May 1915 the ocean liner RMS Lusitania was torpedoed and sunk by a German U-boat. The British Ocean liner owned by the Cunard Line, was on route from New York to Liverpool, England carrying more than 1,900 passengers and crew.



Sinking of the Lusitania. Engraving by Norman Wilkinson, The Illustrated London News, May 15, 1915.

Within 20 minutes of being hit the Lusitania had sunk, and around 1,200 people lost their lives. It is believed that the British admiralty had warned the captain of Submarine activity in the area and that there was a significant risk to the ship. He was advised to adopt the tactic of zigzagging, where the boats course is constantly changed to confuse attempts to plot a course for a torpedo. However, it is though that the ship's captain, William Thomas Turner, chose to ignore the advice.

Immediately after the sinking of the Lusitania, Germany defended the attack. They maintained that that the ship was a legitimate target and had been carrying munitions for the Allied war effort. This remains a controversial topic even today and there is evidence to suggest that the Lusitania was indeed carrying ammunition. Germany insisted that the blame for the sinking lay with the British and Americans for not taking the threat of the war

seriously enough, but this was swept away by a tide of international condemnation for the act.
In Britain there was a surge of anti-German protests. For a week after the sinking, British towns across the country saw widespread rioting, with German-owned shops attacked. Public pressure led the government to implement a general program of internment. While it is unlikely that the government believed enemy nationals still at liberty posed a military threat, for their own safety as much as that of the British population, it became policy that all non-naturalised enemy nationals of military age were to be interned, while those over military age were to be repatriated.

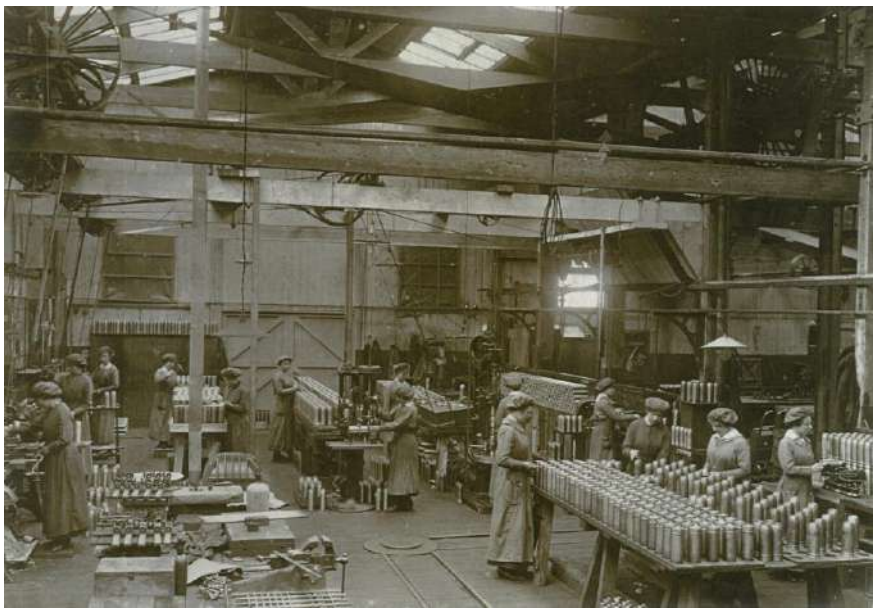
The first internees were accommodated in hastily arranged temporary (and often unsatisfactory) camps, such as disused factories, aboard ships off the south coast or former workhouses. But as the numbers increased interment camps were set up across the country.

As yet it is unclear if this was the fate of William and Alice. There were some exceptions such as age, infirmity and having a son or sons serving in the British armed forces. We do know that on the 20 April 1915 William and Alice's eldest son, 19-year-old Frederick William enlisted for the Royal Engineers. Maybe this was enough to ensure that William was not interned but regardless of this, it can be assumed that being of German descent during this time was not easy.

But what of Alice's sisters Rose, Grace, and Mary?

Regardless of how people felt when war was declared, the consensus was that it wouldn't last long. However, as time went on and the realities of the war became evident, it was soon obvious that this was not going to be the case.

The Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS) was the main trained corps of military nurses. It was founded in 1902 at the time of the Boer war and by 1914 was just under 300 strong. As the casualties on the front line mounted the QAIMNS were quickly overwhelmed. Hundreds of women came forward to work as voluntary nurses but as a qualified nurse Grace may have a moved from working with children to caring for injured soldiers.



Saxby and Farmer, Chippenham reprinted curtesy of Chippenham Museum

For women from working-class backgrounds, such as Rose and Mary war brought the opportunity to move away from domestic services and join munitions factories.

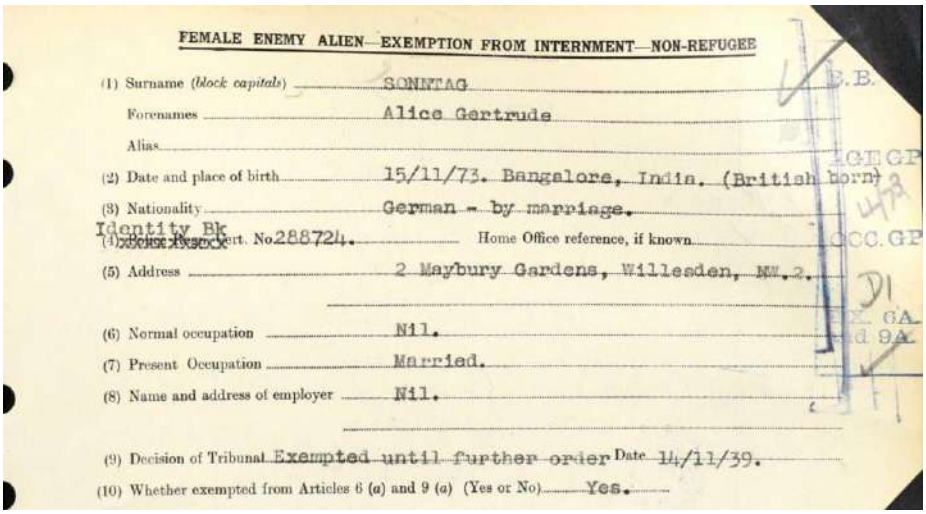
Without evidence However we can only speculate on the life of the Davis Sisters at this point.

At 11am on 11 November 1918 the guns on the Western Front fell silent. After more than four years of horrific fighting the war was coming to an end. But the country had changed. Almost one million British soldiers, sailors and airmen had been killed and nearly two million others had been permanently disabled. Against the odds Alice and William's son Frederick retuned from the war and the family were reunited. However, the experiences they had all faced must have had a lasting effect on them.

Sadly, from here on our knowledge of all the sisters becomes very limited. In January 2022 the 1921 census for England and Wales was released. It provides a unique snapshot of life after the war and for anyone researching a family history it is a wonderful resource. However, despite much searching, no record has been found to date for any of the Davis sisters. Why this is the case is a mystery.

Therefore, we will never know what life was like for the sisters in the changing years of the 1920s and 30s and only tantalising glimpses can be found. Grace and Mary are recorded in the 1939 Register

While not a census the 1939 Register is arranged along similar lines and includes similar, if less detailed, information. Taken on 29 September 1939 the information was used to produce identity cards at the start of WW2 and, once rationing was introduced in January 1940, to issue ration books. When the register was taken Grace and Mary were living together in Willesden, north West London, and Grace is listed as a retired nurse.



FEMALE ENEMY ALIEN—EXEMPTION FROM INTERNMENT—NON-REFUGEE

(1) Surname (*block capitals*) SONNTAG

Forenames Alice Gertrude

Alias

(2) Date and place of birth 15/11/73. Bangalore, India. (British born)

(3) Nationality German - by marriage.

(4) Identity Bk. Cert. No. 288724. Home Office reference, if known

(5) Address 2 Maybury Gardens, Willesden, NW.2.

(6) Normal occupation Nil.

(7) Present Occupation Married.

(8) Name and address of employer Nil.

(9) Decision of Tribunal Exempted until further order Date 14/11/39.

(10) Whether exempted from Articles 6 (*a*) and 9 (*a*) (Yes or No) Yes.

We can also find Alice in a document of the time.

As in the 1st World War, when Britain declared war on Germany in 1939, all German and Austrian citizens living in the UK were again classified as enemy aliens and required to register with the local police. This also included wives, and this document shows Alice listed as an Enemy Alien.

From the moment the four sisters came to England from India their lives were hard, they had to fend for themselves to survive and achieve. It is possible that they all felt at times like aliens in the country but despite everything they went onto live long lives.

While the year of death is yet unknown for Grace. Eldest sister Rose died in 1956 aged 86 Mary Jane died in 1962 aged 87 and Alice Gertrude Sonntag died in 1963 aged 90.

The Story behind Twenty Years of Sequins and Shimmy

Elaine Davis



On a wet dreary evening in September an area of Chippenham was filled with the shimmer and sparkle of sequins when local belly dancing group Sahara Sisters held their annual Hafla in Sheldon School.

Hafla is an Arabic word meaning party, used by belly dancers around the world for their get together events. For the Sahara Sisters this was certainly a party as this year the group have been celebrating their 20th anniversary. Therefore, on Friday 6 September the group took to the stage and shared, with a packed audience, a 20-year long love of dance and all things sparkly.



However, it was the start of the evening that held the most significance for the group as it provided a chance to say a big thank to a very special person: The group's founder and leader Rachel Terry.

Through a collection of videos put together by past and present members the importance of the group was highlighted and Rachel's commitment to running it was celebrated by all. One member referred to it as a family and Rachel as "Our Sahara Sisters mum".

Rachel's first connection with belly dancing came at a very difficult time. Ill health had meant the loss of her job as a Lab Technician in a local secondary school, and she had gone from a busy, social and active person to struggling with chronic fatigue syndrome and constant pain caused by Fibromyalgia. A chance meeting with a fellow sufferer led her to try belly

dancing which proved to be a fun and enjoyable way of finding temporary relief from the pain. After a six-month search for a local class, she joined a group in Calne.

The classes and the friends that she made played an important role in helping to deal with her illness so, when the teacher gave up after having a baby, Rachel, along with others in the group, were determined to keep going. They formed a new group and moved to Chippenham and on the 7 September 2004, Sahara Sisters began.

With previous experience of teaching and managing a class, great organisational skills and the drive to succeed, Rachel was the ideal person to take charge.

Since then, Rachel has thrown herself into developing the group, leading to many personal accomplishments along the way. When the group were struggling to find a suitable venue to hold classes, Rachel was inspired to start her own business running a function centre. She had experienced on many occasions problems with booking venues and poor-quality places so knew that she could do better.

In 2012 Rachel opened The Citadel Hall in the former Salvation Army building in Bath Road. As well as home to the Sahara Sisters, the hall, located on the top floor of the building constructed in 1903, offered affordable room hire in the centre of the town. With a capacity of between 80-100 the unique venue with its crenelated battlements reminiscent of a medieval castle, became popular for a variety of regular exercise classes, conferences, exhibitions and workshops.

Sadly after 8 years, the covid pandemic meant that the business faltered. With restrictions on public gatherings, bookings for the venue stopped and the hall's regular users moved to online activities. In addition, a subsequent rent rise led Rachel to take the difficult decision to close the venue.



But despite this huge set back Sahara Sisters remained a key focus for Rachel and the search began for a suitable venue for the group's regular Tuesday night classes. Finding the right home has not been easy but since September the group have settled in at Sheldon School.

Over the 20 years the group have built up a large repertoire of routines including all forms and styles of belly dance, along with Bollywood, Hula and Samba. To enable this, from the outset Rachel has pursued an understanding of the dance genres, undertaking training and academic study to become a qualified belly dance teacher. She has explored not just the technique but also the philosophy and unique history behind this dance form, which some believe can be traced back as far as 6,000 years! A highlight of this was a trip to Egypt where she met and danced with Nagwa Fouad, a belly dance legend of the 1970s and 80s and local village girls of Luxor.



Rachel has also formed strong friendships with other experienced belly dance instructors. These have been invited to work with the Sahara Sisters to choreograph and teach various dance styles. Alongside this, more experienced members of the group have stepped up to choreograph dances to a variety of music from chart topping rock songs to popular hits from musicals, ensuring routines remain fresh and provide something new and exciting to learn. It also ensures that the Sahara Sisters are a hit whenever they perform, be that at their own Hafla's or as guest at other groups', at community and music events or as special visitors to local care homes.

But as the group say themselves, "dancing is about more than just learning the steps". As a non-profit making organisation it has always aimed to keep costs down, making taking part as affordable as possible. The fun and social element has always been as important as the exercise and dance and many strong and supportive friendships have developed. Over 20 years the group have welcomed hundreds of women to the classes. While some stay for just a short time, others have been with the group for many years and a few have been with Sahara Sisters from the very beginning and along with Rachel were instrumental in setting up the group.

The group is open to anyone over the age of 18 but there is no upper age limit. Rachel's experience ensures that dance moves can be adapted so that everyone can join in, meaning health issues and age are no barrier to taking part. Currently the group's oldest member is 74 years young! The group has over 30 members in total but is always open to anyone who would like to have a go.

One member commented: "It can be quite intimidating I suppose to walk into this. But it's just a lovely group of people and I think it's the community of the group that I particularly love".



As the group reach the end of their 20th Anniversary year, I asked Rachel what the highlights have been.

While she replied that there had been many, for her the key moment was when her daughter Sandy decided she would like to join.

Sandy has now been dancing with the group for over 18 years!

Sahara Sisters meet every Tuesday from 7.30-9.30pm at Sheldon School.

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Wishing you all a very Merry Christmas
and a peaceful New Year