

»Bridge ends

Thoughts on Terence Rattigan (Continued)

I have been fortunate enough to garner many accolades during my career. But the best award I have ever received is hanging on a nearby wall as I write this. It's a long story, so bear with me. A director called Harold French was a close friend of Ralph Richardson. When Sir Ralph died, a number of his letters and artefacts went to French. Then when French died, these same items were passed on to my friend and neighbour, Richard Briers. Richard, looking through the papers bequeathed to him, by chance came across a letter from Rattigan to Ralph Richardson. A letter in which I am mentioned. The letter, found randomly and unbeknown to me, reads: "I have been working down here on a television play with Alvin Rackoff [sic] who is to direct it and who has impressed me very much...." The letter, written from the Hotel Martinez is dated March 9, 1962, and is truly my most prized award. I may not have any Oscars but I do have those words from one of this country's greatest writers.

I feel privileged to have known Terence Rattigan.

Notes and queries

Knox Golden Wedding at Sonning Grove

Gerald Westall of Woodley has found a June 1908 piece in the *Reading Standard* about the impending golden wedding celebrations of Mr and Mrs Knox of Sonning Grove.

After living first in Hambledon, the Knox family moved to Sonning in 1861. He was a Guardian of the Poor for Sonning at the Wokingham Poor House (now Wokingham Hospital). He was also a JP for several years. They had 5 children; their daughter was living with them at Sonning Grove in 1908.

Stories the stones tell

Jean Milbourne & Diana Coulter

The nave aisle walkways in St Andrew's consist of ledger stones, marking the burial of previous parishioners and people associated with Sonning. Jean Milbourne has gallantly transcribed the stones before they become completely illegible. There are 5 ledger stones in each aisle, and over the next few months we will share Jean's transcriptions with you.

Ledger stones require particular care and attention because of the daily passage of feet, and a number of helpful guidelines exist.

In the photograph (the stones are not easy to capture on camera), you have the easternmost stone in the south aisle, which reads:



Mrs MARY CLIFFORD
died March 7th 1786
Aged 74 yrs

RICHARD CLIFFORD Esq
late of Aldermaston
died January 14th 1792
Aged 78 yrs

Sonning Exposed - heritage trail

Penny Feathers



The gate of William Holman Hunt's home in Thames Street (Courtesy: Brian O'Callaghan)

The Trail will start from the St Sarik Room and will only run on Sunday 12 September.

Come and pit your wits against the Social Committee, and have a fun time exploring both Sonning and Sonning Eye under your own steam between 1:30 and 4:00 pm. Refreshments will be available - and the answers - at the end of the Trail. Booking will not be required.

If you would prefer a more structured walk around Sonning, then Mark Green will be leading one tour only on the same day, aiming to get everyone back to the St Sarik Room in time for tea. Booking will be essential. More information will be available in the next issue of *Bridge* in early September.

The Society's entry for Heritage Open Days Weekend 2010 is entitled, *Sonning exposed: a heritage trail*. After the success of the May 2009 trail, the Social Committee is revising the questions and arranging a different trail to draw in visitors from further afield as well as Members, new and old.



Future Events

DATES FOR YOUR DIARIES

Wednesday 9 June 2010

Executive Committee St. Sarik Room 8:00 pm

Sunday 20 June 2010

Society Luncheon Sonningdene, Pearson Road 12:00 pm (See p. 2)

Wednesday 4 August 2010

Executive Committee St. Sarik Room 8:00 pm

Saturday 11 September 2010

Village Show Sonning CofE Primary School 2:00 pm

Sunday 12 September 2010

Sonning exposed; a heritage trail 1:30 pm onwards (See above)

Wednesday 6 October 2010

Executive Committee St. Sarik Room 8:00 pm

All are welcome to attend meetings of the Executive

bridge

Newsletter of the Sonning & Sonning Eye Society

Issue 23 • Summer 2010

A civic phoenix rises

Executive Committee

You may recall that last summer in Issue 19, our President, John Edmonds, reported the unexpected demise of The Civic Trust. During 2009/10 a dedicated number of individuals have worked hard to keep the flame of civic pride alive, and in April this year Civic Voice was launched.

In its own words, Civic Voice works "to make the places where everyone lives more attractive, enjoyable and distinctive. We promote civic pride Civic Voice speaks up for civic societies



One of the strap lines for the new organisation, taken from its web site, <http://www.civicvoice.org.uk/>

and local communities across England. We believe everyone has the right to live somewhere they can be proud of."

The new organisation aims to be "small" and "light-footed", making "a difference where it matters". We can expect to find it "lobbying Whitehall and Westminster, campaigning with local volunteers, speaking out in the media, undertaking research," and supporting local groups as well as helping them to work.

At a special meeting of the Executive Committee in March 2010, we agreed that the Society should join Civic Voice. For this reason Brian O'Callaghan, our Vice-Chair, attended the packed launch event on 17 April. Griff Rhys Jones as the President of the former Civic Trust gave the keynote speech, having actively encouraged the emergence of the

new organisation. Eminent architect Sir Terry Farrell spoke in the afternoon about some of the London-focused planning initiatives he is currently working on. Other speakers included the new Chair, Paula Ridley, who has been involved in the Merseyside Civic movement for a number of years, and

the Director, Tony Burton. His is one of only two paid posts in the new organisation. The Executive Committee is keen to see that Civic Voice can deliver the goods that rural and

semi-rural organisations like ours need. It has to be remembered that the appeal is to civic societies covering large urban areas like Manchester as well as others like us. As we go to press it has achieved a membership of over 200, which is pretty good within two months of starting off. Civic Voice itself has joined The Heritage Alliance, a well-established campaigning organisation for heritage issues, with some interesting successes to its credit.

An early Civic Voice campaign is 'Living Streets', which focuses on creating safe, attractive streets where people want to walk. Another initiative is 'Love Local', which many will recognise as chiming with a key theme of the Coalition Government. Good bye regional planning, hello local planning, so to speak. So watch this space!

»Eye on Sonning a view from the Bridge

Bob Hine, Chairman

Welcome to this edition of *Bridge*, which follows hot on the heels of the Annual Parish Meeting of the Sonning Parish Council. Mark Green was warmly congratulated as successor to Steve Chapman, who stood down having given sterling service for some six years as Chairman of the Council. Mark joined the Society's Executive Committee in April 2006 as Press Officer and we have benefited from his objectivity and experience since then. I'm sure Mark will continue to build on the firm foundation set by Steve with the strong team of Parish Councillors and we too congratulate him.

One of the highlights of the Annual Parish Meeting in May, was a presentation on the work of the joint panel of the Parish Council and the Society set up to review 'Traffic in our Villages'. Five initiatives all involving changes to traffic flow will be explored with the involvement of a questionnaire for all residents.

The talk on Sonning's Bells scheduled in April did not have sufficient support and so will be deferred to a time when it is hoped that more can attend. The Education Panel endeavour to provide a balanced programme to interest Society members, which deserves your support.

I hope we will see many of you at the Summer Lunch at Sonningdene on 20th June.

Bridge: Newsletter of the Sonning and Sonning Eye Society

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»Executive Committee & Panels: breaking news

Gary Robinson and Diana Coulter

A new noticeboard!

The Society is grateful to Bob Hulley for the really excellent new noticeboard that has replaced the previous one, which sadly was beginning to rot away. Bob is captured here installing the board on 22 March, aided by the Hon Secretary, Andy Bell.



Notice that bike tied to the noticeboard? You'll hear soon of an idea the Vice-Chair has for installing bike racks at suitable points around the village.

Traffic in our Villages

You may be aware that the Society has been working with Sonning Parish Council to develop a long-term strategy for managing the traffic that passes through Sonning and Sonning Eye, especially at peak times, in order to

'return the village to the villagers'. Although desirable, for legal reasons it is not possible to reduce the current high volume of traffic, which of course is attracted by Sonning Bridge, by diverting it onto neighbouring bridges. The main aim, therefore, has been to improve the flow rate by removing some of the 'bottlenecks' caused by merging streams of vehicles, especially at the High Street/Thames Street junction, thereby reducing the time vehicles remain stationary.

Over the past few months a series of meetings of a joint Highways Group, attended by four members of the Society, have been held to identify the issues involved, such as traffic volume, parking and speeding, and to come up with possible solutions. The conclusions and a proposed solution that centres on reducing traffic in Pearson Road and the High Street, were presented to Parishioners at the Annual Parish Meeting in the Pearson Hall.

Clearly, any changes imposed on the flow of traffic through the village will affect some residents positively and some negatively. Therefore, villagers will have an opportunity to digest the proposals and to comment on them.

For those people unable to attend the meeting, a copy of the presentation and the plans are available on the Sonning Parish Council web site at www.sonning-pc.gov.uk/Highways.html

Once traffic management has been addressed, the Society will again work with the Parish Council to identify excess and inappropriate traffic signs in the two villages. Hopefully, in a few years time we will start to see the benefits of these initiatives in the improved appearance of the villages, and stop them resembling — and being treated as — urban outskirts of a major conurbation.

Putting on the right events

As Bob Hine notes on the front page, we deferred the talk on Sonning's bells in April. In part this arose because of the unusually lengthy Easter break, made worse by volcanic ash problems, but in part it must be because we may not be getting the programme right. It took two goes to get enough interest to run the London Wetlands Centre visit last May, and we nearly pulled the bluebell walk, which in the end was attended by only 6 people.

If we are not getting the programme right, please contact the Education Panel (Diana Coulter 969 2132, Lesley Green 969 6621, or Joyce Reed 969 0378). We are preparing a short questionnaire to discover what sort of things you would support. This will be issued later in the year. Your views do matter to us, so do watch out for it.

» New Members

Very occasionally we need to email Members. If you would prefer not to be contacted by email, please let the Membership Secretary know. If you have not heard from us, and would like to be included in our lists, please confirm your correct email address

Welcome packs for new residents are available from the Membership Secretary, Carole Barnett, on 969 6693.



Trust, the main interests of which are to research, catalogue and support the maintenance of listed historic gardens and parks within the county.

In Sonning we have one Grade 1 Listed garden at The Deanery in Thames Street (see *Bridge*, Issue 20). Two members of the Garden Trust's Committee will be attending the lunch and look forward to meeting Society members and answering any questions.

Tickets for the lunch cost £10.00 each. Numbers are limited so please use the enclosed form or telephone Penny Feathers on 0118 934 3193 to order yours. We look forward to seeing you there.

Summer lunch on 20 June

Penny Feathers

Tickets are now available for our Summer Lunch starting at 12 Noon in the wonderful gardens of Sonningdene on Sunday 20 June. Those who attended Village Voices or who bought the DVD, will recall that the gardens at Sonningdene provided the perfect backdrop for the Sonning Village Players in their prime, performing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. So as we approach Midsummer 2010, fine weather has been ordered and we look forward to being joined by many members.

The Society is a corporate member of Berkshire Gardens Trust which was officially launched last year. Berkshire was the last county to form such a

Thoughts on Terence Rattigan

Alvin Rakoff

Early in 1962 I was approached by no less a personage than A.H.D. Tel – the BBC loves acronyms, this one stands for Assistant Head of Drama, Television – with some trepidation to ask if I would, um, consider, uh, perhaps, care to think about, producing (and directing, because in those days the two jobs were combined) a new play written for television by Terence Rattigan. The reason for the trepidation was that I was considered a kitchen-sink realist.

True-to-life gritty dramas had swept into television in the '50s. In fact, when such realism finally reached the theatre with *Look Back In Anger* and reached films like *Room At The Top*, they were playing catch-up with that screen in the living room corner. The wave of life-like dramas started in America. And as a Canadian I was one of the UK's foremost interpreters of such plays.

But I was also an admirer of Terence Rattigan's work.

His plays were upmarket, yes. Far from the grit of sweat and toil, yes. But well-written, character-driven, and capable of capturing all kinds of audiences. So I willingly accepted the BBC offer.

Working with Rattigan on Heart to Heart

As with most lives, shared between highs and lows, my year working alongside the great playwright was a definite high. Intellectually stimulating, urbane, charming, witty and fun, are all adjectives that would describe him accurately. He often referred to Sonning. His days in the Red House, which now bears his name on a blue plaque that I pass repeatedly, he told me were happy and – more important to him – creative. I think he loved walking along the banks of the Thames while he worked out his writer's thoughts. Well, at least one can picture him doing so, which I do.

Imagine my surprise when, a few years ago, directing his play *Separate Tables* (Anthony Valentine, Glynis Barber) at The Mill, I came across this derogatory reference. "Nasty air in the Thames Valley," says a young mother,

"not good for baby. Bournemouth air much better." Did he believe that? Or was it just an author's toying with words? Who knows.

When I told Terence Rattigan my first date with my late wife was to see one of his plays, *The Sleeping Prince* at the Phoenix Theatre, London, he bloomed with pleasure. I had also seen many of his films as a boy in Toronto: *The Browning Version*, *The Winslow Boy*, *Breaking The Sound Barrier* and more. And shortly after first arriving in England I saw *The Deep Blue Sea* with Kenneth More and Googie Withers, a play Rattigan and I subsequently talked about repeatedly.

He was not an untroubled man. An open homosexual at a time when such things were illegal and immoral. Considering his success, he was sur-



Rattigan photographed in 1955, eight years after he had lived in Sonning (Courtesy: www.nickelinthemachine.com)

prisingly insecure. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather be working with Wesker or Pinter?" he asked, too often. I have had the pleasure of working with both of those authors, but had to assure Rattigan that working with him would be just as rewarding.

The BBC production was called *Heart To Heart* and starred Kenneth More, Ralph Richardson, Wendy Craig, Jean Marsh, and Peter Sallis among others. While Rattigan's expertise lay in theatre, his first love, and he had shown he was no slouch as a film writer, the thought of a multi-camera scramble over many studio sets concerned him. As always, he strove to make sure he got the technique right. So that's where I came into the picture.

We started working at his elegant Eaton Square flat in London. Then down to his sea-side home in Brighton. Then to Cannes, where surprisingly he stayed not at the lush Carlton but at the lesser Martinez Hotel because, he explained, in the days when he was unknown, "they had always been kind". And onto Rome where we met Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton on the set of *Cleopatra*. We, the BBC and I, were forlornly wooing Burton to play the leading role; so I spent several days carousing around the city with that brilliant Welsh actor – but that's another story. Our travels ended in Rattigan's villa in Ischia, where a few days/weeks later the final script emerged.

Last meetings working on Harlequinade

My last meetings with Rattigan were at the now defunct Duke of York's barracks on Kings Road, Chelsea. The vast military rooms were perfect for rehearsing television plays. I was directing *Harlequinade* with Denholm Elliot, Joyce Redman, Edith Evans et al. The steps to the rehearsal room were numerous and steep. It was 1973. Rattigan was ill and could only mount them by leaning heavily on a cane. I had escorted him. He wouldn't let me help. When we reached the top he paused, told me not to open the rehearsal room door just yet, regained his breath, paused again, straightened, deliberately hid the cane behind a clothes' rack, pulled in his tummy and straightened even more, smiled a big smile and said, "Wouldn't do to be seen with a stick". To say he entered with a flourish is to minimize that grand arrival.

In 1976 I directed *In Praise Of Love* with Kenneth More and Claire Bloom. Such meetings that we had over this play were brief. We spoke on the phone many times. But it was not the same. Discomfited, he did not want to be seen. Or talk too much. He lavished praise on the production. He could be bitchy and sour at times, so praise from him was no small matter.

A year later he died. *Continued on p 4*