

STOURPORT CIVIC SOCIETY

Newsletter Number 46

January 2009

Before setting out on this Newsletter I must apologise for there being such a long time since the previous newsletter was published. There are several reasons for this, but at last the lack of communication is being put right. I hope you will enjoy the contents, which are largely historical because various members of the Society are becoming more involved with historical research.

The first item is from our chairman, Pauline Annis, who says, "Jackie Jolley and I have been researching the later years of Monica Baldwin. Now Jackie has returned to East Anglia she is hoping to track down Monica's last resting place. To whet your appetite there follows the first instalment of **The search for Monica Baldwin.**"

Searching for Monica Baldwin, 1893 - 1976

A brief obituary in *The Times* (November 22nd 1975) was the only public announcement of the death of Monica Baldwin:

Miss Monica Baldwin, who died on November 17, was the former nun who wrote *I Leap Over the Wall* (roughly the Baldwin family motto) about her experiences on leaving a convent. She also published *The Called and the Chosen* and *Goose over the Jungle*.

No details were given of her funeral arrangements. An article in the *Sunday Express* on November 23 gave a more detailed account of her last days. Headlined "Turbulent life of ex-nun Monica Baldwin" it reported that:

"At 82, a cantankerous old woman, she committed suicide in an old people's home by drinking half a bottle of whisky with a handful of barbiturate tablets. She had systemically destroyed her collection of letters and diaries which chronicled many years of a strange, troubled existence."

The *East Anglian Daily News* provided further detail in its edition of November 21. Reporting that the local Coroner in Suffolk recorded a verdict that she "took her own life while the balance of her mind was disturbed", it went on to add that Monica Baldwin had spent her final days in an old people's home, Montgomery House, near Long Melford where she had clearly had arguments both with the proprietor and also with other residents. She had been invited to stay at the home by the proprietor, Mrs. Pamela Forbes, who was a cousin of two members of the order amongst whom Monica had lived many years before but evidently there had been a "falling out" and Monica had been asked to leave.

During the 1950's and 1960's Monica Baldwin had become part of the London literary set, her books being praised by eminent writers such as John Betjeman and Maurice Cranston. In spite of leaving the convent she had retained her strong Catholic faith and wrote letters to *The Times* defending the celibacy of the clergy and criticising the abandonment of the Tridentine Mass. She undertook a world tour in the 1960's and in the late 1960's was living in Alderney. Then suddenly she disappeared from history, her death notice in *The Times* being amazingly brief.

One has to ask what had compelled such a staunch Catholic to commit the ultimate sin of suicide. A restless soul who had never stayed long in any one place had clearly had difficulty in adjusting to a society which had changed markedly during her twenty-eight years in the convent. We felt that Monica's life story could perhaps provide some explanations but, also perhaps, raise more questions....

Monica Baldwin was born in 1893 at Clarelands, near Hartlebury, Worcestershire. The Georgian house still stands today, on the outskirts of Stourport-on-Severn, surrounded by fields. She was born into a wealthy family of industrialists, her parents being Arthur and Lucilla Baldwin.

When Arthur Baldwin married his cousin, Lucilla Baldwin Livesey, in June 1889 at the parish church of Walton-on-the-Hill, Liverpool it must have seemed that all the world lay at their feet. At the time of his marriage Arthur was an extremely affluent young man, being a partner in Stourport Iron Foundry along with his uncles Enoch and Alfred. When the foundry was sold to Kenricks of West Bromwich he received a substantial share of the proceeds. Arthur and Lucilla were both grandchildren of George Pearce Baldwin whose family home in Lombard Street can still be seen today. They were also both cousins to Stanley Baldwin, later Prime Minister.

The young couple set up home at 17 York Street (Oakleigh), Stourport and it was here, probably, that tragedy first struck them. Their first child, Phyllis died in 1891 at the age of nine months. Phyllis's white marble gravestone can still be seen in Wilden churchyard today with its inscription:

“The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away.
Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Phyllis's death was also commemorated by the donation to Wilden Church of a beautifully bound prayer book which is one of the treasures of that church.

The next family home was Clarelands, Hartlebury, and although it is unclear how long they lived there, it was here that Monica was born just two years after the death of her baby sister. The third daughter, Elfrieda, was born in 1895 and would later marry William Wood Shorten (died 1933).

By 1898 they had moved to The Mount after the retirement of Uncle Enoch Baldwin to Malvern. This was a newer and more prestigious house. It was during this period that

Monica's father, Arthur Baldwin, became a political power in the community. Among the positions he held were : Chairman of the District Council, Chairman of the Boat Club Committee, Vice-President of the Workmen's Club, County Councillor and member of the local Bench. One would suspect that he spent little time at home.

In 1902 tragedy struck the family once more when Arthur died at the age of 37 of a heart attack while cycling between Wilden House, the home of his uncle, Alfred, and The Mount. He had, apparently, been to Wilden House to visit his aunt, Eliza Bond Worth, who was staying there. When he failed to arrive at a committee meeting in Stourport that evening his acquaintances guessed that something was amiss but his body was not found until the following morning, still sitting on his bicycle, propped up by a tree. Arthur Baldwin was buried at Wilden next to the grave of his daughter, Phyllis. There is a commemorative window to him in Wilden Church depicting Fortitude and Triumph.

There is little information about the family after Arthur's death. They certainly would not have been short of money. Lucilla at 42 was a relatively young widow but she never remarried. Monica would have been 8 years old and would have been very aware of what had happened. It was rumoured within the family that Lucilla, her mother, had a drinking problem and this was why she had not initially noticed her husband's failure to return home. In these more enlightened times I think we can have some sympathy for Lucilla, grieving for her dead baby, left alone in a large house with two young daughters while her husband occupied himself with business and politics.

Monica dropped hints about her childhood in some of her books. For example in *Goose in the Jungle* she referred to "my horrible childhood" and made reference to a former governess who she had clearly not got on with. In *I Leap over the Wall* she commented, "I had, I suppose, received a more or less average education, first by governesses and then at a Continental finishing school.....But as there had been no question of my having to earn my own living, I had never bothered about trying to matriculate or provide myself with any of those useful diplomas which unlock the doors of any worthwhile post." She also refers to time spent at Albrighton Hall "the Shropshire home of my Sparrow aunt and uncle, where - in the spacious days before 1914 - some of the happiest hours of my life had been spent."

By 1912 Stanley and Lucy Baldwin had given her a coming-out party at Astley Hall. By 1914 Monica had taken a decision to enter an enclosed convent near Bruges.

AND that is where we leave the story of Monica Baldwin for the time being. I hope to include further information, researched by Pauline, in the next Newsletter.

AT THIS POINT I would like to welcome all new members who have joined us in the last year. We hope you will enjoy our meetings and will help the Society in any way you can, particularly in commenting on plans for Stourport's further development and giving us details of any knowledge you have about our town in the past.

Now we have Part Two of Audrey Cooper's article on Stourport Library's early years

Popular reading meant romantic novels for the ladies, by such as Ethel M. Dell, Bertha Ruck, or the then more modern stylist, Denise Robins; Westerns, crime and detective stories for the men, by Zane Grey, Luke Short, Edgar Wallace. An early classic Western "The Virginian" by Owen Wister had the immortal line, "When you call me that, smile!" Family sagas as a series of books were sought after, Galsworthy's Forsytes, and that particular favourite "The Whiteoaks Chronicles" by Mazo de la Roche, set in Canada. For the children the girls had school stories like those of Angela Brazil, or far-flung adventures by Bessie Marchant; the boys had John Buchan, Percy Westerman, yarns telling deeds of daring set in history or with pirates on the high seas (any occasion when the scuppers ran with blood!)

From 1933 the library continued to enjoy a calm and useful existence in the Council House until the outbreak of war in 1939. Then early in 1940 the room was requisitioned as part of the obligatory Food Office which soon started dispensing not reading books but ration books. Fred Rimell had joined the RAF and the library was asked to move out, first of all it seems, to the Wesleyan Methodist Schoolroom in Parkes Passage, but when bombs partially demolished the Bewdley Road Boys' School in November 1940, boys and classrooms had to remove to the Methodist Schoolroom, so the library was forced to move once more. At one stage it was housed in the basement of the old Market/Town Hall at the corner of Bridge Street and New Street, (and more recently the Job Centre until it was closed- MJ) and seems to have survived there in much discomfort for a time, when and for how long is not known for certain. Does anyone remember the library being there?

A better known venue, probably from 1941, was that of a large room behind Aston's Baker's Shop in High Street which became the library's home for some years. The room, formerly used for parties, wedding receptions and the like, was warm and aromatic from the proximity of the bakery itself, and on quiet nights mysterious rustling sounds could be heard with the chirping of crickets and the to-ing and fro-ing behind the walls of other life enjoying the delights of a cosy environment. Mr. Aston himself, the library's landlord, invariably cheerful despite his habitual rather ghostly floury-white appearance of face and form is still remembered today carrying into the front shop large trays of his excellent pies and pasties, sought after and queued for by devotees near and far.

After the war, certainly by 1949, the library had moved to a large wooden hut, formerly the Labour Exchange, on the present site of St. Wulstan RC Church in Vale Road. The general impression here was more of a real library with serious intent, a greater range of books and subject matter, more taxing to organise and keep in good order. It was still open only on a part-time basis, but long enough hours to merit two librarians, Mr. Cooper and Miss Dora Large who shared the responsibility. Unfortunately an attempt to vandalise the library with an arson attack causing some damage was a most unwelcome incident. It was therefore, with considerable relief and a sense of achievement, that in 1954 the first fulltime

professionally staffed library was provided in a small but purpose-built single storey building on the opposite side of Vale Road. (N.B. My sister, Miss Pat Bradley, worked here at one time in the 1960s - MJ.) Later the building was used by the Spina Bifida Association. The population was then over 10,000 and by 1971 it had increased to nearly 18,000 so that the new library, opened in 1972 as part of the complex erected on the old Foundry site and much more suited to the needs and expectations of a growing Stourport and district in the new computer/technological age has now developed into the large, well-equipped and pleasant user-friendly library we have today.

The Newsletter continues with part of another historical item, which has appeared in a previous newsletter. (Newsletter no. 4, June 1991). It was written by Miss Amy Baylis who was Honorary Secretary of the Society for fourteen years.

Stourport in the Twenties

At first glance Stourport High Street appears to have altered very little since I was young - architecturally no doubt it is more or less the same, BUT, the tram lines have gone and most of our good class shops have dwindled and shop fronts altered or been replaced.

Stourport people, especially the men, must have been rather smart - no jeans, T-shirts, etc. - as we had three good class Gents' Tailors and Outfitters, these being Barten's, whose shop was extended and took in three small shops, Beazer's (later Peter Donminic's) and Turner's (next to Woolworth's). As regards ladies' wear, Jack Vicars and his two charming sisters ran a high class Drapers and Millinery (where now stand the National Westminster Bank and Boots). Across the High Street (in what later became Abigail's) was a good drapers and haberdashery shop, known as "Daddy Radford's" and next door was a furniture store, run by Mallards, who were relatives of Radfords.

We must also have eaten well, as we had at least three very good butchers in High Street alone, one owned by Miss Purser - a very smart Victorian lady - and this was part of the shop which is now Bentleys. Miss Purser's manager was one Frank Tunkiss, to whom she left her business. Fred and his widow, Olive, who at 97 years old still lives in Stourport (that was in 1991 - M.J.), were very well liked. Fred's slaughterhouse was behind the shop, with the entrance up Lashford's Entry (more of this later). It has been known for the cattle to escape through or over the two gates which were there.

Practically opposite Miss Purser's was Brown's the butcher's double-fronted shop. Albert was a family man and a great character. His slaughterhouse was somewhere along Manor Road. Then, further along towards the "top of the town" was Pheasey's, Pork Butcher. This shop was somewhere within the present Grinnall's complex. The Pheaseys were good Congregationalists, whose church had a very good following in Stourport for many years.

We had three very good grocers - Taylor's (now Phipps and Pritchard's), a high class grocer's (by today's jargon would be called a delicatessen), owned and run by the two

Butler brothers, who were always so smart in their persil white coats (Persil was unknown in those days!) WH Smith is where Butler's used to be and Turner's (later Don Everall, Travel Agent). Speaking of butchers and cattle, it was not an unusual sight to see cattle being driven to market in Kidderminster by one "Bodger Evans", a rather rough diamond who liked his "tipple".

There were two good class shoe shops - Blunts, who have extended their shop somewhat, and Glovers, who moved from their shop taken over in Barten's extension to a site now covered by Lloyd's Bank. When Mr. Glover died, his manageress, Miss Millichip, took over. One of the shops taken in by Blunts' extension was "Stones" the Sadlers. Then came Bateman's (fishing tackle supplier), then a greengrocer's and, on the corner of High Street/York Street(now a hairdresser's) was Mrs. Green's pharmacy.

We had two very good bakers in the High Street, De Grays, where now stands the cake shop and part of Sketchley Cleaners, and across the other side of the street, Astons Bakery (now a car spare parts shop). The aroma from the bakeries was mouth-watering. Between Aston's Bakery and Milner's - ironmongers and general builders (now Oxfam and card shop) - was Astons' Entry where there were three or four cottages and, I think, a Right of Way into York Street. Next to Milner's was Bickerton's, Jewellers and Gent's Hairdresser. After a great number of years the Jeweller's have recently closed and the shop is now run as a florist by a Bickerton grand-daughter.

Part Two of Stourport in the Twenties will be in the next Newsletter and the next item concerns a more recent event: **The Flow Festival**.

The Devil's Tale July 2008

Last summer members of Stourport Choral and Operatic Society were pleased to be invited to join in the activities set up to celebrate the newly restored canal basins. In fact it was usually only those members who were no longer of working age who were available to attend practice sessions, held in various venues (Areley Kings Village Hall, Lickhill Memorial Hall, The Hope and Anchor Pub's upstairs room and even, when the weather was suitable, the Basins!) Despite difficulties due to poor summer weather, we had a most interesting and happy time. (Well, I did and I think this applied to other singers too).

Spiral, a professional Spanish performance company, who specialise in creating outdoor dramatic events, brought together various actors, artists, musicians, schoolchildren and singers (us) to tell the tale of when the devil in the guise of Capitan Vicio (actually an Irish comedian) comes to Stourport. He arrives in a magnificent boat (the Ship of Fools), created by Spiral's excellent artistic team (see later) with a crew (consisting mainly of Spanish drama students) and soon persuades Angela, a local (SCOS)girl to fall in love with him. However, another boat, has already brought a group of young folk (many of them students from London Drama Colleges and extremely friendly to us more mature Stourport Folk) to the riverside and they are busily sunbathing and fishing. It turns out that Tranga, their

leader, and her friend the Dumb Ballerina, (both Spanish mime artists) are fearful of the captain as they know him of old and warn Angela of the dangers of associating with him. In the meantime he and his sailors have trashed her family pub. Angela won't hear a word against him though his crew as they disappear from the scene sing, "Hey ho, Here he goes, Pulling in fish, More souls to sow .

The Stourport Folk do their best to welcome and feed the visitors, but when they, and Angela, realise the captain's true intentions, to blow the town to smithereens and gather more souls from the townsfolk, they create a massive bombardment of sound that is too much for the captain, who directs his ship in a rapid retreat. He is going on to try his tactics at Bewdley!

I have included this summary to hopefully clarify the story for some audience members who were a little bemused. England is not so familiar with this form of entertainment as Spain and other European countries. In spite of the weather, I think that Chris Baldwin, the playwright, director and organiser of all that went on, created with his team a remarkable spectacle and a memorable experience. MJ

Incidentally, our choir is next performing a concert at Kidderminster Town Hall on April 18th 2008 and the theme will be music from the movies, such as **Shrek**. Please look out for posters and do your best to support us!

For the final items I am including a brief note from Arthur Page who writes:

I have just received what must be positively my final award!

I have been awarded the Richard Bird Medal for my long period (nearly 25 years) of support and activity within the Inland Waterways Association.

Congratulations, Arthur!

Also

I have a plea for more information for our Newsletter. Your memories of old Stourport, or those of other people, are most acceptable, likewise photographs and other information suitable for our archive which you may find when clearing out cupboards, etc. Please don't let it be thrown away. It may well be valuable to us.

On the last page you will find one of two songs Pauline has come across recently. The other will appear in a later Newsletter.

Mary Johnson

Lines composed by Mr William Pickard to celebrate the freeing of Stourport Bridge from tolls, April 3 1893. Sung to tune of, "The Man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo." There were five verses and a chorus. The following is a "taster".

First Verse

We've just come down to Stourport to spend a happy day
For 'The Bridge' is free today; yes, the toll is done away;
Our 'County Council' done the trick, Mr Radford led the way,
And now we all can cross just when we like;
Yes, in shouting "Hurrah !" let's all unite."

(The retiring Toll Keeper was Peter Snider who also got a mention)

"Then a good word for Peter Snider, he's a faithful servant been,
For you always had to pay if you wished to cross the stream,
No matter how impatient you was to get away,
He would always keep the gate shut till you'd pay,
And then he'd let you pass through right away."

(Even the Chairman of the County Council was mentioned:)

"We're proud of our County Council:they're all good men and true,
For they set the bridge now free and proud Englishmen are we
They are doing many useful deeds, which will last for many a day;
Yes, we are pleased to welcome Mr Willis Bund today,
For he's a right good chairman all do say."

I don't think Mr Pickard would have had much of a future as a songwriter !

