

In Our Age

Herefordshire Lore : Living local history

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The flying saxophonist

Self taught musician Les Causer and the birth of the Hereford Big Band

Born in Leominster, but brought up in Portfield Street, Hereford musician **Les Causer** started playing the alto saxophone as a young lad. "Ray Walters, who was a great friend of mine from Clive Street, played trombone with the Salvation Army. He said: 'Why don't you try the sax?' so I bought a Selmer." Ray showed him the fingering and Les taught himself to read music.

Les' first band, the Delevene Group, practised at the house of their pianist, Lacey Evans' place on the corner of Hampton Street and Harold Street in St James. "My first song with the band was *There's a Small Hotel*."

The Hereford Barracks nearby was already hosting the Lion Club, a Saturday night jazz venue, where Les played one session as a drummer. IOA reader and pianist Doug Emery remembers the Lion: "When the main band was finished they used to say: 'Hop on stage Doug and give us a tune'." Doug and friends obliged, playing into the early hours of Sunday morning.

By the mid-1950s the Delevenes had become a nine-piece band, the Paramount Dance Orchestra. "One night, playing at a place down the Straight Mile from eight to twelve, I earned 2/6d (61.5p)." Les' engineering day job earned him just under £3 a week.

The Paramounts finished in the 1970s and it wasn't until 1990 that Les and Paramount tenor saxophonist Mansell Burgess formed the Hereford Big Band.

"With a band that size you needed big orchestrations and I managed to scrounge around a load of Glen Miller arrangements. The problem was Miller's lead instrument was the clarinet." Les took up the clarinet and taught himself to play.

The Hereford Big Band is still going strong under Pete Fletcher. Les, meanwhile, continues to follow his other hobby. "I used to work weekends with a contractor engineer at Sun Valley and the thirty shillings a week I earned was enough to pay for flying lessons at Shobdon." Les celebrated with wife Katie when he secured his pilot's licence in 1979.



A couple dance to the Hereford Big Band outside the Green Dragon in Broad Street, Hereford. And left the Paramounts in the early 1950s with, left to right, Larry Ellis on drums, Alan Owen (bass), vocals Bert Mason, Steve McGrath (keyboards) and Les Causer with his alto sax – "I bought my first, a Selmer, from J. J. Vickers in Birmingham for £16 18s and 6d in September 1954." (Photos: Les Causer)



Stop me and buy one: The ice cream man calls at a north Herefordshire hopyard. (Photo: Brian Wilder)

Hard man Ash Harris

John Bunn from Checkley, whose family ran the New Inn at Newtown, recalls a memorable hop picker's fight at the Green Dragon in Bishops Frome. "There was a lot of hops around in those days: Dean Dent at Woodmanton; Whitwick Manor, Cowarne Court and Monksbury Court; Pitt at Stretton and Godsell and Lewis at Eggleton.

"There was one picker at Bishops Frome, Ash Harris, and he was a hard man. [Some other pickers] brought a feller up from Wales who was going to give Ash hiding, but Ash got to hear about it. [When] he went into the pub and he was in 'civvy' [plain] clothes, this fellow was bragging about what he was going to do and Ash hit him. They reckon this fellow was in his tent for two or three days before he recovered!"

Free helmet with every bike

Jewish couple who fled the Nazis opened city's Lambretta shop

"My Jewish parents, Max and Ilsa Conu, escaped from Hamburg, Germany in May 1939," writes daughter Maggie. "Mother spoke some English, father did not. Max, who was a good engineer, found a job working on radar, but once he was classed as an 'alien' he couldn't continue.

"In early 1940 he found work at Fryers Garage in Widemarsh Street, Hereford. The couple sold some possessions to buy their train tickets to Hereford, Basil and Carol Butcher's grandfather loaned them a flat at their Bodenham Road house, and the Quakers, too, were a wonderful help.

"I was born in June 1940. It couldn't have been a worse time for Max and Ilsa." They had very little money; Mum's brother Tom was imprisoned at Dachau Concentration Camp (he later managed his release and escaped to America), and both their grandmothers, Margarethe and Gertrude, were killed in the camps.

"However, the family settled in Hereford and loved it – my father always said that this was the best country. He could put his hand to most things and in his spare time repaired sewing machines and anything else for pocket money.

"In the late 1940s Max started a business reconditioning engines. Foreign nationals were forbidden to open a business without a British partner and one night in a pub, probably the Imperial, he met bus driver Les Wheeler and they went into what would become a life-long partnership.

"They started in Blue School Street, moved to the Cattle Market and then to Barrs Court Road (where they also sold BOC gas bottles). My mother, after studying bookkeeping at night school, gave up her day job at Copes in High Town, to work with Dad full time.

"Then came the Commercial Road shop initially selling Villiers motorcycles and then scooters. In its heyday they sold hundreds of Lambrettas. Dad, worried about riders falling off, gave a free helmet with every Lambretta while I taught riders the basics of starting, changing gear and braking, in the lane that ran near the bus station.

Max, proud to have served as national president of the Federation of Engine Reconditioners, was also interested in radio. While Ilsa, an ardent bridge player and bowler, might be bowling at The Greyhound or raising money for her cancer charities, Max would be on his radio (call sign G3 ESY – see page 5) or helping to lay cables for the Hospital Radio. "The couple died in 2003 and never talked about their past in Germany."



Max and Ilsa; below, Ilsa supervises a delivery of Lambrettas to the shop in Commercial Road. (Photos: Maggie Connu)



Proud ploughboy

Donald Mash reports that, as a 15-year-old in 1946, he was on field work near Baynton Wood [on the outskirts of Tupsley] where farm worker Roy Able was ploughing with a brace of cart horses. "I asked him if I could have a go to which he readily agreed. He said that the plough was a single share called a Bowter?

"Off I went. To get the horses to go left he said: 'Come eer a bit' and to go right 'See a bit.' To keep the plough in the ground was hard work. I led the horses back to their stables where they had their harnesses removed, all the time Roy whistling in the hope they urinated before going into the stable."



Waggoner Arty Mills works a pair of shire horses during Wormbridge Ploughing Match at Vallets Farm in the 1950s. (Photo: Sheila Winnie)

From My Album *Gerald and Ros*



Then and then: Boatmaster Gerald Gardiner piloting the Kingfisher with wife Ros on the mooring rope and below, Gerald's grandfather Tom with his pleasure rowing boat. (Photos: Gerald and Ros Gardiner)



Earlier troubles: Bon Marche prepare to relocate after the building was acquired by Lloyds Bank. On the left stands Lil Purchase who later married Wilf Mason, pictured left in the Home Guard. (Photos: Chris Mason)



Radio hams at an undated Hobby's Exhibition in Hereford's Shirehall: left to right D. Coates, Max Conu, D. Jones, T. Atkins, P. Bucken, P. Chambers and D. Knight. (Photo: Maggie Conu)

C Company Home Guard in May 1942. Back row F. Matthews, A. Herbert, D.J. Smith, E. Norton, E. Cox, L.H. Morgan, D. Adams, W.E. Morris, J.B. Davies, B.F. Newman, G. Cartwright, R. Joyce, W. Griffin, H. Rudge, G. Feltham, W.E. Smith, D.R. Davies, G. Wright; 4th row: K. Frost, G.J. Lawrence, J.J. Hiles, T.A. Sharpe, W. West, D. Harvey, H. Griffiths, H. Talbot, P. Hayton, J. Thiselton, F. Parry, M. Rogers, R. Ingram, D. Hawkins, R. Elton, E.H. Lewis, S.A. Mailes; 3rd: D.G. Williams, A. Glennie, F. Vaughan, H. Goodman, A. Rivers, C. Brown, W. Britt, J. Thorpe, F. Pulham, J. Ankers, T. Harrison, H. Blackwell, G. Hyde, H. Godwin, A. Acton, R. Wynn; 2nd: Wilkins, H. Powell, W. Gittings, W. Cratchley, C. Wood, H.J. Smith, P. Denchfield, G. Preece, Wilf Mason, G. Lewis, K. Worthington, F. Butler, F. Leach, W. Leek, P. Curtis, J. Amies, C. Probert; front: W.C. Morris, F. Sowter, Sgt L. Barlow, Cpt W.L. Allen, P.S.I. Niblett, C.S.M. W.E. Smith, 2/Lt J.W. Ashton, Cpt C.F. Newman, 2/Lt A. Denby, C.Q.M. S. Armitage, Sgt P.G. James, Sgt L. Davies, G. Pearson, M. Nicholson, A. Searle.



Building Herefordshire's history

Reader Peter Houston recalls the construction of RAF Madley

Evelyn Jones, like many a county girl in the 1930s, left her Dinedor home to work as a housemaid in London. However she was liberated from domestic drudgery by Ulsterman John Houston. "They were devout Methodists," recalls their son Peter who, along with brother John, were born after the couple married.

When war broke out, John decamped to Herefordshire to help build RAF Madley: "Dad was a carpenter by trade, but he had it 'upstairs,'" explains Peter. The family moved to a bungalow, 'Bethany' at Canon Bridge, where their neighbour, Don Glead, also worked on the airfield. Some time ago Don recalled how their farm horses moved building materials to the bricklayers: "We had to use a horse and cart because the Fordson tractors, which were low, used to belly down in the mud."

Once Madley was finished John Houston moved to work on other Midland aerodromes including Coventry's, blitzed in 1940. "Mum wouldn't stay [in Herefordshire]. She wanted to be with him – if anything happened they'd all go together." The two boys trailed along, going from one school to another.

When war ended John started his own construction company, Houstons of Madley, working on farms and dairies around Herefordshire.

The firm was launched on a box of eggs. New enterprises required official authorisation and John travelled to London to secure his Ministry licence armed with a shoe box of fresh Herefordshire eggs as an incentive for the Ministry official. "You can imagine," says Peter. "Fresh eggs during rationing! Dad came out of his meeting at the Ministry all smiles."

Scudamore School

Peter left Scudamore School (still only 14) to learn the business under a Welsh bricklayer Ben Thomas. They were building a dairy near Preston on Wye when John Houston dropped by to check on his son's progress.

"He's all right John," said Ben Thomas, "if I can keep him off them bloody horses." Peter's passion for the saddle left him dropping his brickie's trowel and hitching a ride whenever he could. He even bought his own pony, an unbroken two-year-old, from a dealer in Whitecross, walking it home to Madley on a rope halter. The pony was stabled in the Houston garage. "It was right next to my bedroom and I could hear him stomping in the night. I felt like I owned the world!"

Eloped

When building work slowed, the Houstons moved to Northern Ireland, but Peter returned to Hereford when, as a 19-year-old, he could earn full pay as a bricklayer. He lodged with his grandparents, Jack and Mary Jones, now living in Butte Avenue and worked for builders Bailey Brothers, Hiles and Mussell until the severe winter of 1961/62. "With the frost and snow we never did a stroke of work for ten weeks and the jobs piled up." He and a friend, Ron Brown, decided to invest £100 each and launch their own building company, Houston and Brown.

From their yard on Burcott Road, next to builders' merchants Groomes, and with a workforce that would top 30, they laid concrete floors at British Cannery in Berrington Street, renovated houses on the Hunderton Estate, built industrial units down Edgar Street, and eventually doubled the size of the Sun Valley complex. "The amount of work was amazing: we grew and grew and grew."

By the 1960s Peter, his wife Valerie and their children Tina, Julie, Paul and Donna were settled in Southbank Road. (Peter and Valerie's marriage was not without drama: the couple eloped to Portsmouth and wed on a special licence and a best man recruited from a neighbouring building site. "Our honeymoon was four hours in a pub!") Now Peter was able to share some of his good fortune and hard work with others: as reported in IOA 53, Peter's family 'adopted' a German penfriend. The families were recently reunited after 50 years.



Peter and Valerie at Porthcawl

Peter (with his cat) and Evelyn with RAF airman Fred Hayworth. RAF servicemen and their wives often stayed with the Houstons at Canon Bridge.



Burghill



It is 25 years since the county psychiatric hospital, St Mary's at Burghill, closed. In *Boots On! Out!* (Logaston Press 1995), from which this image by Steve Richards comes, former patients remembered their days there with nostalgia. "I hate for this place to be pulled down because it's like part of me," wrote one. St Mary's was turned into a housing estate. Herefordshire MIND, which co-published the book (*Boots On! Out!* was the instruction given to patients in need of a breath of fresh air) now runs mental health support services at Heffernan House in Widemarsh Street, Hereford (01432 271643).



Florist and fruiterer Fred Illman's at Hereford's Butter Market. We'll be looking at Herefordshire's market gardeners in our next issue. Send us your memories! (Photo: Michael Young)

Commercial Road

"I wonder what happened to my grandfather, Arthur Jones', tailor's shop in Commercial Road, asks **Lita Power**. In grandfather's time it was a tailor's shop belonging to his father. Arthur, a clothier assistant, inherited the shop and it was sold when my grandmother died. It then became first a sports (Ellis?), then a lingerie shop."

Hay-on-Wye

Judy Fergusson believes the mystery photo (IOA 54) was taken by Hereford photographer Jeffrey Hammond at Wye Terrace. (He lived there before the 'new' bridge, absent in the photo, was built.) Judy, who after a brief stint at the Sanitary Laundry, started as a General Post Office telephonist at the GPO in Church Street after six week's training in Swansea. "It was difficult in Swansea coping with farmers speaking Welsh, but for a 21-year-old it was a great job. Originally we were '100 percenters' meaning we covered the 24-hour clock hours as the men did. Then the GPO worried about men and women being alone together at night so we did a shorter shift and became the '95 percenters'." Occasionally Judy relieved the regular telephonist at Hay-on-Wye's manual exchange. The Hay lady knew everyone's phone number by heart. Occasionally a call would come in and she'd tell the caller 'Oh, So-and-so's not in: I just saw him go in the butcher's.'" Then after a spell at the Army's Moreton-on-Lugg camp working on military sales catalogues – "we disposed of everything from a pin to a tank" – she became a collector of taxes at the Inland Revenue for 28 years.

Checkley

John Bunn of Checkley is a natural naturalist. On the day he was interviewed by IOA, John was raising a pair of orphaned blackbird chicks in his kitchen. He has witnessed a startling drop in wild bird populations: "There used to be three nests of redstarts here; now there might be one. There'd be nine martin nests here: none now." John also notes the disappearance of old English partridges, skylarks, nightingales, cuckoos and hedge sparrows."

Bulmers

"I read the piece about Bulmer's in IOA 54," writes **Bob Powell**. "As youngsters in the 1960s many was the time we took the footpath from Ryeland Street through the works with my great-uncle Ernie Powell [see back page] stopping to buy one of the big brown, glass, stoneware-stoppered bottles of Cidona to quench our thirst on a hot day."



Where was it?

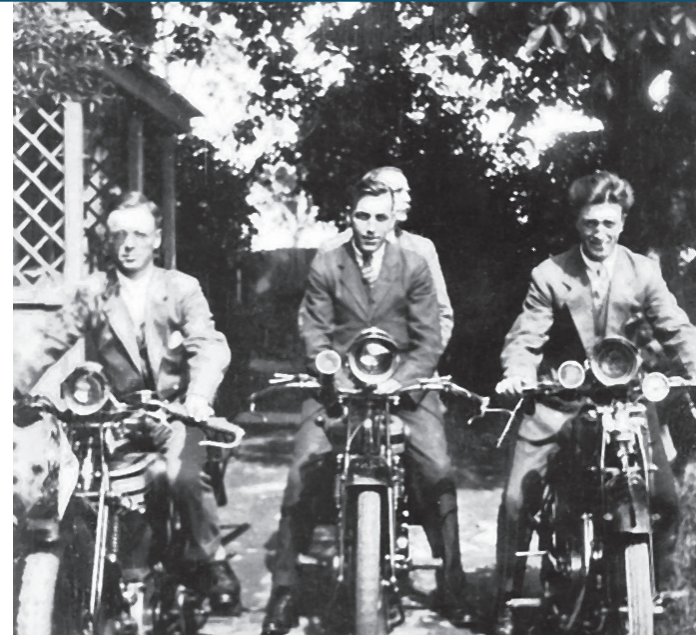
This Hereford city company, founded around 1926, sold Rootes Group cars such as Hillmans and Sunbeams along with International Harvesters and David Brown tractors. And the car? A Humber Super Snipe Mk III, top speed 81.6 mph, from about 1950/51. Cost new: £1,471.

Whitecross' bikers

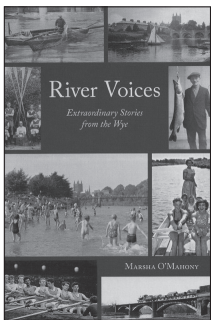
The James and Powell boys

Seated in the centre between two friends is Ernie Powell (William Ernest, 1899-1984) of 48 Chandos Street with, on pillion, Dick Powell (1859-1940). Dick's great-grandson, **Bob Powell** from Kingussie writes that Dick, a mason and 'bricklayer foreman', built his own home, Primrose Villa (22 Chandos Street) and enjoyed a reputation as a keen racing cyclist in his 30s. Their cousins, mounted on either side were, according to a family album "the James Boys. My great-grandmother Rosanna James (1863-1942) was born at Hoarwithy," adds Bob.

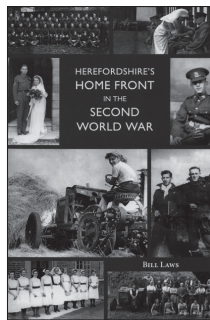
And reader Michael Griffith shares his own recollections of motor bike racing over Dinmore Hill in the recently published *Queenswood – Our Wood on the Hill* (available from Queenswood Visitor Centre). "My father took cine film of motor bike racing in the 1920s. The riders would show off their skills by climbing a steep track which turned off the main road opposite the junction for Bodenham. Crowds would turn out to watch."



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