

# Spring 2026



**Royal Tunbridge Wells Civic Society**

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## Annual Garden Party

Sat. 1st August, 6-8 pm

23, Warwick Park



By kind permission of Jenny Chambers. Please note that the event is only open to members of the Civic Society and their guests; and that places - £23 each (to include canapés and wine) - must be booked in advance. See below for booking arrangements.

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### Booking Arrangements

Places on any of our events can be booked in the following ways:

- on the 'Events' page of the Civic Society website. Simply click on the appropriate link and submit your payment details (card, Klarna, etc)
- directly to our bank account: 40-52-40 00017200, putting your name and the event in the Reference box (abbreviate as necessary)
- by cheque, payable to RTWCS, sent to John de Lucy, 28 Warwick Park, TN2 5TB (please include your telephone no. in case we need to contact you).

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Front Cover: The Friendly Societies Hall in Camden Road - threatened at present in development plans for the RVP. The Society has applied to have it listed. For a history of the building see pp.18-20

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## Personally Speaking

by Chris Jones

**The Common...** That meeting on the Common at the end of March, in support of its purchase by the Friends, took me back. Well, not so much the meeting, as the march through the town afterwards. Back to November 1969 and those ‘Stop the (Springboks) Tour’ protests, across the country, against apartheid in South Africa. Our campaigns then were ultimately successful - let’s hope for a similar outcome this time. Anne Carwadine has looked at other occasions when people met on the Common - see pp. 10-13.

**Adult Education...** With all the other things that are affecting the town at present, little attention seems to have been paid to the withdrawal of ‘leisure learning’ from the Adult Education Centre (ie Amelia). Yet I am sure that many of our members will be disappointed (and I believe that there will be redundancies). This seems to be the result of KCC applying policy changes made at national level, leaving us little opportunity for local discussion. I wonder whether the proposed changes in local government will provide for improved local input in areas like this.

**Subscription Reminder...** The reminder is a little early this year (subscriptions are due on September 1st), but subscriptions for 2026/7 are a little higher - £20 for individuals, and £30 for couples, so if you pay by standing order, or a regular bank transfer, you may need to think about changing the values.

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*Contd. from opposite ...*

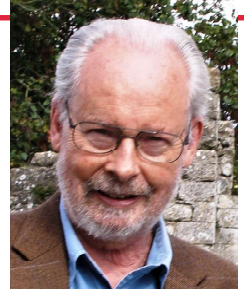
... The present **Christ Church** in the High Street dates from the eighties and is largely the inspiration of a previous vicar. The church now proposes extensive remodelling and the return of a tower as a feature of the High Street. They will also build accommodation for staff in Grove Avenue to the rear. We approved the rebuild but questioned the design and practicality of the staff accommodation.

We sometimes find that a development we object to, perhaps strongly, reappears after a year or two as a candidate for an award, and may even receive one. Such was the case with the **Premier Inn** in London Road – which is too big but otherwise harmonises better than expected with its surroundings. Such is definitely not the case with the flats on the cinema site, now **Paramount Place**, which we thought a weak design, cramped and overbearing. The full effect is now visible.

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# From the Planning Scrutineers

by **Alastair Tod**



The proposal for 184 houses on land east of Frant Road now largely occupied by **the Rugby Club** has come back as an application to Tunbridge Wells Council (the site is largely in Wealden). Implications for the town include landscape effect, the loss of the Rugby Club, and additional pressure on Tunbridge Wells infrastructure. When the scheme was exhibited last year, it was shown as part of development on both sides of Frant Road, with community facilities on the site to the west which is wholly in Wealden. There are now separate applications for the two sites, without community facilities in the western one. After consideration we decided not to object to the principle of major housing development, but we have objected to the lack of facilities, the monotonous layout and the inadequate access. The application has not yet been decided.

The owners of the Belvedere estate off Mt Pleasant have applied to dismantle, clean and repair the unlisted stone **entrance pillars**, with granite setts in the roadway and an arch structure linking them. The entrance will become the main road entrance to the Paramount Place flats when these are occupied. The pillars would originally have carried lamps, presumably gas. We welcome the restoration, have some doubts about the paving, and have objected to the metal ‘gateway’ structure as inappropriate.

We strongly opposed the development of high-cost housing on **Phillips House**, the former Axa site opposite the Assembly Hall, and it was rejected eight to one by the Council, but approved on appeal. The developer has now applied to remove a well-grown birch on the Crescent Road frontage on the grounds that it conflicts with his proposed foundations. One of our objections to the scheme was the prevalence of hard surfaces and lack of landscaping and we have objected again.

Consent has been given to demolish the remarkable circular **Hermes House** in St Johns Road, a pioneering modernist structure from 1931. Originally a church it had passed into commercial use and been so much altered that its future viability was in doubt. It will be replaced with a surgical recuperation facility in a gabled three-storey building designed to harmonise with the surrounding housing. We reluctantly accepted the demolition while questioning the design and lack of parking.

*... contd. opposite.*

## — Chairman's Letter —



April 2026

*There are a couple of issues affecting us at the moment that could have a significant and long-lasting impact on the town. In an attempt to explain these fully - what the issues are, and what we have done/are proposing to do, I've prepared a couple of separate summaries below. My actual letter is therefore much shorter.*

**Burrswood...** *Following a suggestion by Justine Rutland, the Decimus Burton Society and the Civic Society have been approached by the developers for our input into their proposed renovation of Burrswood. A small part of the original Decimus Burton building remains and the developers want to restore this to best effect. They are looking to build extra houses in the grounds and are seeking support from residents and from us, as without the income from the extra buildings, renovation of the main building won't be economically viable.*

**Social Media...** *Thanks to Caroline Auckland, our presence on social media has been steadily increasing. We have begun a series of posts supporting the retention of the Friendly Societies Hall. It's early days, but I'm pleasantly surprised at the support we are generating.*

**Social Events...** *John de Lucy has put together a cracking set of events for us in 2026. These include two outings by coach. He has done his best to minimise costs but you must realise that hiring a coach is now an expensive business. I therefore hope you will give every consideration to signing up for these outings.*

Brian

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### A Possible Town Council

The current Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, TWBC, will be pushing for the town to have its own council under a Unitary Authority (UA) and that it be called the Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Council (RTWTC).

A crucial consideration will be what this council would be responsible for and hence what decision-making powers and budget it would have. Legislation indicates that the one asset a town council (TC) must have responsibility for is Allotments. Anything else has to be in agreement with the UA. The main income by far for a

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TC, at least at its outset, will be the precept it gets on top of the main part of the council tax which goes to the UA. This is the current way parishes in the borough are funded. Town Councillors will be elected and will be unpaid.

Sometime in the future, the decision to apportion existing assets between the UA and the TC will have to be made. What isn't clear is how the work leading up to this decision will be done and what factors will guide this decision. For instance:

- To what extent will the UA only want the assets that make a profit?
- To what extent will the apportionment of each asset be based on whether a TC would have useful local knowledge that a distant UC doesn't? An example to consider is Parks and Green Spaces. If the TC became responsible, how would it organise maintenance? If the decision was made to contract it out, would any of the councillors have the expertise to run effective negotiations? Will the various Friends organisations be involved in the decision making? If so, how early in the process? No doubt similar questions will arise about other assets.
- Specific to Calverley Grounds, assuming it went to the TC, would the annual ice rink event go with it as well as it has been making a profit? There's also the question of who would organise it.

For comparison, Southborough Town Council has responsibility for Allotments, Parks & Green spaces, Play areas & recreation, Cemeteries, Community buildings, Events & markets, Grants to local groups, War memorials and Environmental projects.

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## **Plans for RVP - Saving the Friendly Societies Hall**

We are keen to see the Friendly Societies Hall (FSH) retained and have applied to Historic England to have it Grade II listed. Our reasons are its historical association with the organisations which helped the working class of the Camden Road area, as well as items of architectural importance within the building. The developers are indicating they must demolish all but the façade of the FSH if they are to achieve the three cinemas and associated bar area specified by the potential cinema operating company. (Other restaurants in the Ely Court area would be rented out by the council – probably the Unitary Authority.)

We have submitted a slightly modified version of their plan to the developers where the cinemas and associated bar area have exactly the same footprint but are moved slightly closer to Calverley precinct thus allowing the FSH to be retained. We await to hear if this is acceptable and, if not, why not?

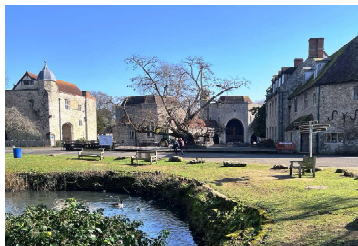
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## Summer Events - May

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Our first two visits are self-managed (no transport is provided) and are to places of local historical interest. No payment is required to the Society, though donations might be appropriate on the day. If you are interested please contact John de Lucy for detailed itineraries.

### Aylesford Priory / St Michael's Church Tues, 5th May



The Friars

There are three elements to the day:

- a self-guided tour (11-1pm) of the 'Friars' at Aylesford, with a midday-service for those who wish to attend. The priory was founded in 1242: the Carmelites returned in 1949.
- lunch at the Chequers Inn in Aylesford.
- a visit to St Michael's (old East Peckham).



Chequers Inn



St Michael's



Union Mill

### Cranbrook Village ('Capital of the Weald')

Sat, 23rd May

And four elements to this visit:

- 11am. A visit to St Dunstan's Church
- a walk along the medieval High St (plenty of places for lunch)
- 2-3 pm a tour of the local museum (incl pictures by the 'Cranbrook Colony')
- 3-5pm walk to the Grade 1 listed Union Mill. Built in 1814, still working.



St Dunstan's



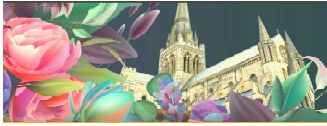
Cranbrook Museum

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## Summer Events - June/July

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The next two outings involve a coach, and entrance fees, so there is a charge, Please see the notes on page 2, for payment arrangements.



### Chichester Cathedral, Festival of Flowers Fri, 5th June



The amazing flower festival only happens in Chichester Cathedral every two years - here is your opportunity to experience it in June. Our coach leaves from outside the Assembly Hall at 9am (so please be there by 8:45) and returns at 5. We are booked on the 12:30 - 2pm visitor slot. There are cafe facilities on-site for lunch, and a market in the cathedral cloisters. Price, £55 per person.

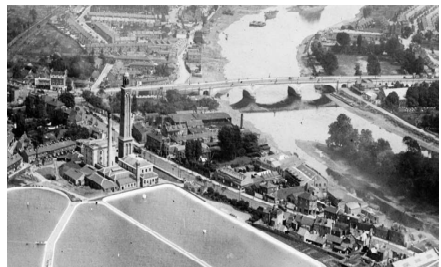
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### Brentford Musical Museum and Museum of Water & Steam Thurs, 23rd July

The coach again leaves at 9am for Brentford and the Musical Museum - an amazing array of musical instruments and inventions (such as self-playing pianos and violins) (see right).

Then the Museum of Water & Steam - based at the former Kew Bridge Pumping Station (right), or, if you prefer, a nice riverside walk to Kew Bridge.

Price, £60, incl. ploughmans lunch at the Musical Museum.



For details of two further events later in the year, please see page 21.

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## Tunbridge Wells Common - a second Hyde Park?

**Anne Carwardine was inspired by the recent meeting on the Common to research similar events in its past.**

One Saturday, a few weeks ago, a large crowd gathered on the Common in support of the local community's bid to buy the Tunbridge Wells and Rusthall Commons. Marchers and banners are an unusual sight these days, but back in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, meetings and demonstrations were a frequent occurrence. In 1896 a local journalist observed:

*The vexed subject of how to reach the masses appears to be partially solved in Tunbridge Wells where, on Sundays, our Common is becoming a second Hyde Park for open air meetings, and various communities of religious, temperance and socialistic views can be found promulgating their doctrines to large audiences. (Kent & Sussex Courier, 26<sup>th</sup> June 1896).*

The following stories of three of the larger events to take place represent the most frequent reasons people used to gather: religion, politics and war.

### 1884 - Religion

Hymns and sermons often rang out on the Common, whether it was the Salvation Army, Anglicans, or even for a short period, the Mormons, who were singing and preaching. In July 1884, the Vicar of Holy Trinity, Canon Hoare, was instrumental in organising an open air event which featured the celebrated American evangelist, Dwight L Moody, who was touring England.

On a hot, sunny day, a crowd of around 15,000 assembled on the Lower Cricket Ground, with 50 members of the Working Men's Sunday Morning Bible Club acting as stewards and a special force of ten police constables in

attendance. A large table was positioned at the centre of the field, with chairs around it for local clerics and councillors. (The original plan was for a wagon, but they weren't permitted on the Common on Sundays).



Dwight L. Moody (1837-1899). American evangelist, who made a number of trips to Britain. One of his best-known quotes was: 'Faith makes all things possible ... Love makes all things easy'.

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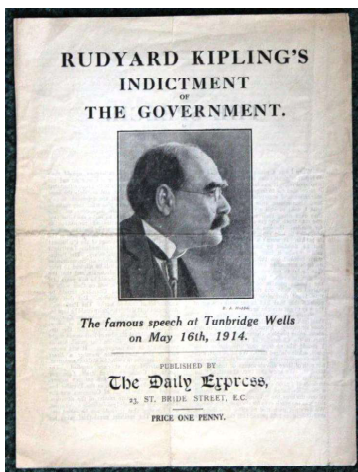
After hymns had been sung, Rev Moody climbed onto the table. Despite the hot weather the crowd, who were mostly, or all, men, listened attentively as he spoke eloquently and passionately for around an hour. He expanded on the good news of the gospel, with illustrations from his personal life and home country, and proclaimed that death, sin and judgement had all been conquered. Moody concluded with a prayer and offered to meet that evening in the Trinity Church Schoolroom with anyone who wanted him to pray for them. It seems a considerable number took him up on the offer.

## 1914 - Politics

There were also large numbers of political meetings on the Common over the years. They included, for example, a demonstration against the Education Bill in 1903, a Women's Freedom League event in favour of women's suffrage in 1908 and a meeting in support of the local cricket ball makers' strike in early May 1914. But the largest and most high profile meeting, which took place on 16<sup>th</sup> May 1914, was a protest against Home Rule for Ireland.

According to the newspaper, the weather was glorious and the town agog with excitement. Unionists poured into town from surrounding villages and further away. The two local train companies issued cheap tickets and ran special services. The event began with a procession from Monson Road to the Common. Around 4,000 people took part, including a large group of women in their own section, carrying flags and wearing sashes and hats in the national colours. The marchers were accompanied by bugles and had an escort of Kentish Yeomen. There was a festive atmosphere; spectators lined the route and houses and shops were decorated with flags and bunting.

At the Commons, people collected around three platform which had been set up in the area between the Victoria Grove and the rocks, and meetings were held



Rudyard Kipling (1865 - 1936) was born in India, in Bombay, where his father was a professor at the School of Art. At one point it seemed that he and his American-born wife, Carrie, might settle in Vermont. They lived there for some years but eventually settled for Batemans, in Burwash, Sussex.

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simultaneously at each of them. Speakers included local MPs and Unionist leaders, but it was author Rudyard Kipling who got the greatest crowd reaction and his fiery speech which generated the most headlines. 'Mr Kipling did not mince his words' said an article in the *Courier*, 'and every sentence was punctuated with outbursts either of applause or laughter as he drove home point after point and satirised the Cabinet and the lesser mercenaries supporting them'.

Kipling's eloquence was widely praised in the press. The *Courier* again: 'Never since the days of the poet shepherd-king has a slinger hurled smooth stones with deadlier aim against a swaggering braggart than did this poet-journalist'.

When the speeches were concluded, a bugle sounded from the main platform and the three chairmen simultaneously proposed a resolution protesting emphatically against the Home Rule Bill, 'which would deprive loyalists in Ireland of their full heritage'. The resolution was carried with great enthusiasm,

### 1915 - War

Within a few months of the Home Rule event, Britain was at war and the next large-scale meeting on the Common was a patriotic demonstration which took place on 16<sup>th</sup> May 1915, at the beginning of the town's second 'Recruiting Week'.

Once again the sun shone and a large crowd gathered. Bands from two of the battalions billeted in the town played 'patriotic and sacred selections' and everyone engaged in some hearty hymn singing.

**PATRIOTIC MEETING.**

Come and Hear how EVERYONE CAN HELP THE COUNTRY.

**DRUM HEAD MEETING,**  
TUNBRIDGE WELLS COMMON (QUEEN'S GROVE),  
**SUNDAY, MAY 16th, at 3 O'CLOCK.**

The Bands of the Liverpool Scottish and the 4th South Lancashires will be present

**SPEAKERS:-**  
**CAPT. DUNCAN CAMPBELL, D.S.O., M.P.** (Wounded in France with the Black Watch).  
**MAJOR the REV. W. BRACECAMP, and other Gentlemen.**  
Chairman - - Mr J. B. SNELL.

**COME, AND BRING YOUR FRIENDS.**  
If weather unfavourable, the Meeting will take place in the GREAT HALL.

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Women were playing a significant role in the war effort and the local Women's Volunteer Force took part, in what was their first public appearance. They attracted much attention, both for their brisk and orderly marching and for the smart appearance they presented in their khaki uniforms.

Standing on the rostrum, Alderman Snell, the main speaker, expressed gratitude to the army and navy who had 'kept the peril of invasion from these shores', and challenged everyone in the crowd to think: 'Am I doing everything I can for King and country?'. Captain Duncan Campbell of the Black Watch, who had been wounded at the front, appeared with his arm in a sling. He referred to atrocities committed by the Germans and encouraged men to sign up before they were forced to by conscription. Newspaper accounts don't indicate what the response was, but when one man climbed onto the platform and expressed his willingness to enlist, he was loudly cheered.

In contrast to this meeting, most war-related meetings and demonstrations on the Common were anti-war. For example in 1922 there was a large 'No More War' demonstration, in support of the League of Nations, addressed by local clergymen and others, and accompanied by the Salvation Army band.

Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, large-scale gatherings on the Common happen only rarely, and when they do it's generally for charity events such as the Hospice Run. But it's clear that in meeting and marching to support the community bid on March 22<sup>nd</sup> (see below), local residents were acting in line with a longstanding tradition.



Note: At the time of writing (April 2026) the final outcome of the Commons sale is still unknown.

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## The replica fingerpost rises

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**Back in Spring 2024 Philippa Pigache wrote about a campaign to save a local landmark. She now explains what happened.**

The battered old fingerpost at the junction of Birling and Bayham Roads has been resurrected. If local residents haven't noticed it is scarcely surprising because it is an exact replica of its ancient predecessor.

In my earlier article, I explained how local residents, John Spence and Jez Hall, had set up a crowd-funding site to raise the money to replace the old fingerpost with a replica, exact in every detail. The Civic Society gave £250, and many heritage-conscious local residents contributed. After some six months they were within £300 of the £1,200 that was needed: the original having been deemed beyond repair by KCC.

At this stage the Pantiles KCC councillor, Becki Bruneau suggested they might be eligible for a grant from KCC: but... they were not a properly constituted organisation qualified to apply. The ('properly constituted') Civic Society stepped in and applied on their behalf. The form was completed and submitted, but not in time to escape yet another obstacle: local elections had been called and all grant applications became void.

John and Jez were not deterred. Nearly a year had passed since they started fund-raising and they

knew that crowd funding has a limited life-span. 'We looked at our fingerpost, now missing an arm, and thought; if it falls down and is carried away as rubbish we won't have our template for coping the precise measurements for a replica.' So, they bit the bullet and made up the funding gap of £313 from their own pockets.

Jakks, the specialist supplier of approved fingerposts to several local councils, agreed to honour their original quote. Permission from the newly-elected KCC to remove the collapsing post was accomplished, and on August 18 the replica finally went up. Go and view it if you live near the site. We challenge you to remark any difference with the original.

John and Jez meanwhile are wondering whether anything could be done about the elegant Victorian lamp-post that stands beside the fingerpost.



Jez (left) and John (right).

## — 1945 - A Plan for Revitalising the Pantiles —

**A relative newcomer to the town, John Townsend considers proposals for the redevelopment of the Pantiles in 1945.**

In 1942 Tunbridge Wells Town Council invited the Civic Association (a non-statutory organisation similar to our Civic Society) to prepare a scheme for the 'Post War Development of Royal Tunbridge Wells.' In 1945 their report was published for the community and Town Council to consider. Chapter Six deals with The Pantiles and had the recommendations been acted on, The Pantiles would be a very different place today. The chapter is rather long and rather pompous in style, but I hope this summary keeps the sense of why the scheme was thought necessary and the background to its vision.

The Chapter begins with a long outline of the 'Tradition of The Pantiles' which goes over its early history and will be common knowledge to most readers. It then deals with the decline of the area which it attributes to the death of Beau Nash in 1762 and the changing tides of fashion. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, critics were lamenting the loss of its rural charm and the encroachment of commercial interests.

Worse still, the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw The Pantiles subjected to 'the shameful treatment of disinterest, neglect, and haphazard patching', unlike a 'cherished heirloom, cared for and preserved', The Pantiles suffered from being everyone's responsibility and thus no one's priority. Its unique character had been eroded by unsympathetic

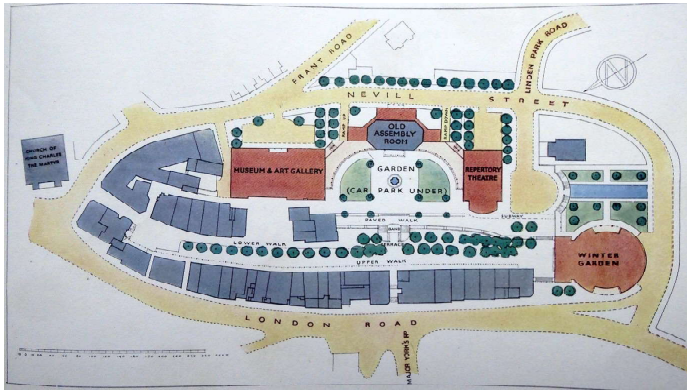
development and a lack of coordinated stewardship.

However, in 1945 it was considered that the lively atmosphere of The Pantiles could be restored. While the days of promenading in elaborate dress and exchanging witty repartee may have gone, the tradition of The Pantiles could be adapted to serve contemporary needs. The challenge was to restore The Pantiles as a centre of leisure and culture - a place where music, drama, and the arts could once again flourish.

In the wake of war and social upheaval, there was a renewed appetite for literature, music, painting, and drama. The success of organisations like the wartime Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (*later the Arts Council of Great Britain*) attested to the public's hunger for cultural enrichment.

Decentralisation also played a role. Where once London monopolised the arts, provincial centres had begun to assert themselves, showing that vibrant cultural life need not be confined to the metropolis. Tunbridge Wells, with its unique traditions, was well positioned to lead this movement.

Restoring The Pantiles required more than sentiment; it demanded thoughtful planning and coordinated action. The vision put forward was thought to be ambitious yet grounded in the area's history and character.



The proposed Island Precinct

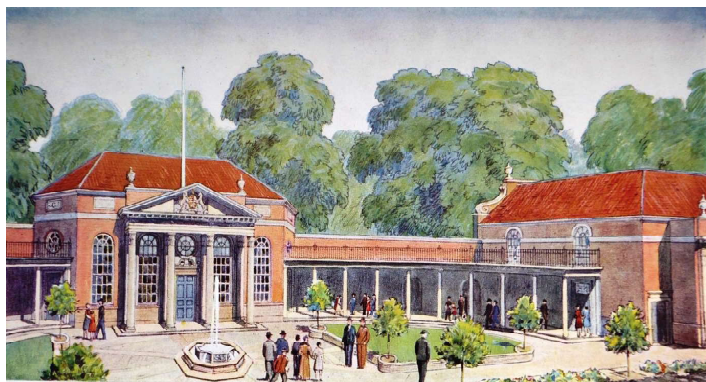
Crucial to this vision was creating an ‘Island Precinct’ which had at its heart a cluster of cultural institutions. By acquiring key properties and reconfiguring the surrounding roads, The Pantiles would be transformed into a pedestrian-friendly area, free from vehicular traffic, where visitors could stroll, shop, and enjoy cultural amenities without interruption. Included in this part of the plan were:

- a Repertory Theatre, designed to seat 600 to 700 people and equipped with all the necessary facilities for modern productions. It could also offer children’s matinees, school performances, lectures, support for amateur societies, and ‘even film screenings.’
- a combined Museum and Art Gallery. It was felt strongly that the rooms allotted to the Museum in the new Civic Centre (completed in 1939) would be required for the Public Library, so a new Museum would be needed allowing the library to expand. The Art Gallery would be comparatively small with two rooms for the display of a permanent collection

and one room for loan exhibits.

- the Old Assembly Room would be restored as a venue for chamber music, poetry readings, and informal gatherings. In front of the Assembly Rooms would be a formal water garden, echoing the old stream that once marked the boundary between Kent and Sussex, and landscaped walks that invited relaxation and contemplation. There would be a carpark underneath.
- a Winter Garden (at the end of the Parade) would ensure year-round vitality, including a spacious, sunlit room where people could meet, read, take the waters, and enjoy music even in the colder months. With a central bureau for information, it would provide a welcoming retreat and a focal point for social life. It was thought that the site was ideally positioned to provide a clear termination to The Pantiles and preserve the sense of enclosure associated with a precinct.

So how was this all going to be done? The report said, ‘the existing buildings below the retaining wall are old, and in



Artist's 1945 impression of the Assembly Hall (L) and Repertory Theatre (R)

the past some of them have been of considerable merit. But they have been so much altered from time to time that with one exception [*the Old Assembly Room*] they have lost all architectural interest. They are also for the most part in a state of dilapidation; and so, with the one exception, it is suggested that they should be pulled down.' This would have included Sussex Mews together with 21 to 29 The Pantiles, the Corn Exchange, Royal Victoria Hotel, Sussex Arms and Glen Albion Terrace (Sussex House), paradoxically all the latter were listed Grade II in 1952. There is no mention of the Fish Market but the plans show a piazza in front of the Museum and Art Gallery so it appears that this building was also earmarked to be pulled down.

The view to the Winter Garden



Readers will form their own opinions on the merits or otherwise of the plans but ending The Pantiles with the Winter Garden and putting Linden Park Road behind it, does seem to have been a good idea. Whether the other buildings would have survived the passage of time is debatable, but in 1945 the design was seen as reflecting modern trends.

The report also made recommendations for the buildings on the north-west side of The Pantiles (the Colonnade). I will deal with these in the next issue of the Newsletter. **JT**

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## A History of the Friendly Societies Hall

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As Brian Lippard explains on p. 7, the Friendly Societies Hall, in Camden Road, is threatened by development plans for the RVP. In this article we look at a little of its history



The Friendly Societies Hall is a striking building, both inside and out (see cover picture); but it is also important because it represents a part of the town's history that is often ignored. This is not the Tunbridge Wells of the retired Indian Army officer, or of smart ladies in tea-shops. Rather it is about the laundresses and building workers who made that other life possible. Working people had a hard life - wages were low, but they were also uncertain. Losing one's job, or becoming ill, could be disastrous, and lead to the workhouse, all too often a one-way road.

One solution was the 'friendly' or 'provident' society, which provided a form of mutual insurance. A small weekly payment, perhaps 4d., provided a 'hospital letter' in case of illness, a contribution to funeral expenses, or some limited support in case of

unemployment. These developed in the early 19th century: usually national organisations, such as the Manchester Oddfellows, the Foresters, or the Druids; made up of many hundreds of local 'lodges' or 'courts' (there were many parallels with freemasonry).

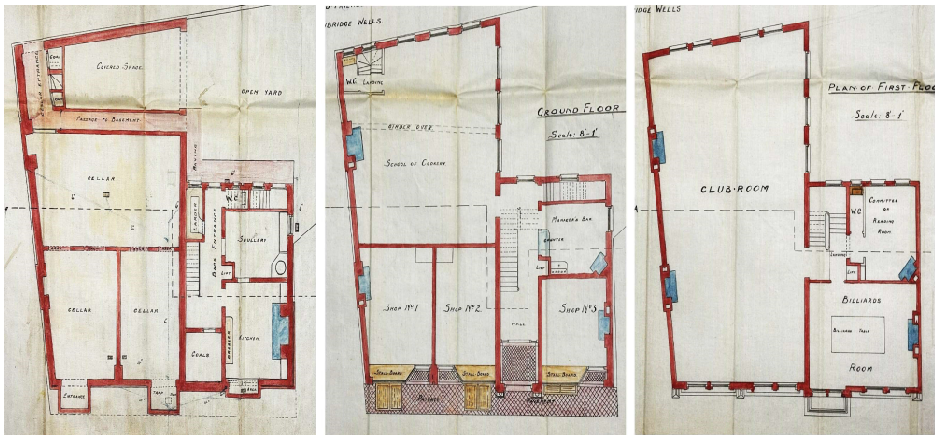
We know of two such organisations in Tunbridge Wells in the 1840s: the 'United Brothers', and the 'Mechanics & Artisans'. Charles Trustram was chairman of the latter. As a surgeon he obviously saw the benefits, but regretted that many of the better-off, the clergy and gentry, took no interest.

Things changed over the next thirty years. In the 1860s the various local societies (there were 19 by 1864) were coming together in an 'amalgamation'. This manifested itself in an annual fete, under the patronage of the Hon FG Molyneux of Earl's Court on Mt Ephraim. There was a procession through the town, with bands and banners, sporting events and stalls in Molyneux's grounds, then a formal dinner and fireworks (displaying the slogan 'Unity is Strength').

In the 1870s they started thinking about premises. A company was



A banner of the Equitable Friendly Society summarising their beliefs: 'Sickness is ever present, Death comes to all. Be wise today: Provide for the future.'



The 1877 plans: basement, ground and first floors. The right-hand side was only half the depth.

formed and funds raised (by selling shares, though they also needed to take out a mortgage). A site was found in Camden Road, and in 1877 the foundation stone was laid (by Princess Louise, daughter of Queen Victoria - she had a house in Rusthall). There was, of course, a great procession through the town first. The plans were by William Barnsley Hughes - a prominent local architect who also designed Kentish Mansions (originally a hotel) and the Wellington Hotel (now Travelodge). The builder was Henry Elwig.

The original building was in two parts: 2-storey to the left, and 3-storey to the right, both with basements. There were shops at the front on the ground floor (two to the left, one to the right). On the first floor to the left was a full-length 'club room', with high ceiling and ornate mouldings (this is currently the snooker room - see Summer 2025 Newsletter).

The right-hand side was more for

services: hall and staircase, kitchen in the basement, accommodation on the second floor; but with a bar on the ground floor, and committee/reading room upstairs. And on the first floor was a billiard room - the table provided by William Tindall of Camden Park (wealthy ship-owner).

The room behind the shops on the left was marked as 'school of cookery'. Such a school had been planned in the early 1870s, but had found other premises. In 1878 the room was available for lectures and meetings.

Tenants were found for the shops: a coal merchant, tobacconist and Ceylon tea merchant; and the other rooms put in the hands of a WMC (working men's club - distinct from the FSH Co, and paying rent to it). But the finance was not working, and in 1889 it was decided to sell up (the new borough council seemed interested at one point). It went to auction in 1889

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but failed to reach its reserve, and was eventually bought by a new grouping of friendly societies.

It re-opened in 1890 in the hands of a new Friendly Societies Hall Club & Institute (WMC). The list of groups who used it was growing: not just Friendly Societies, but local Building Societies, and trade unions. Molyneux had died in 1886, but the tradition of the annual fete was continued in 'Hospital Sundays': processions through the town (see below) to raise money for local hospitals.

Many of the groups associated with the hall had rather extreme political / religious beliefs, but that didn't stop others using the facilities: the various meeting rooms and the splendid concert hall. In 1882, for example, a group of children from the Ragged School put on a performance of Pilgrim's Progress; while in 1901 a celebratory lunch was held for Herbert Beerbohm Tree, the famous actor, who had just laid the foundation stone for the Opera House.

In 1901 the trustees acquired the freehold from the Ward family, and arranged a significant extension - filling in the gap at the back on the right. The

'cookery school' room at the back of the ground floor, with part of the new extension, became the billard room with three tables (the old 1st-floor billiard room became a 'club room').

The 1911 National Insurance Act which saw the start of state benefits, was a pointer to how things would change in the 20th century, though the NHS didn't come along until 1948. The Societies continued to provide various forms of cover, and the FSH continued to host a range of activities: smoking concerts, whist drives, etc. In 1937 an extension to the back of the concert hall provided a stage and dressing rooms. That same year, striking bus-workers used the hall as a base in their fight for an extra 2d. an hour. (Yet in another example of how it was open to all, the Conservative party held their Christmas whist-drive there in 1936.)

In the 1950s the hall provided services such as a 'Rent Advice Bureau', but the financial role of the Friendly Societies was fading, and the hall was becoming basically just a social club. In 1994 the trustees for the three societies who then owned it, announced that they would need to sell.

It then became home to the Victoria Snooker Club, who, over the years have attracted world-class players, and indeed, offer the only snooker club between Bromley and the south coast.

Hospital Sunday procession c.1913. Friendly Societies raising funds for local hospitals.



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## Autumn Events - Oct / Nov

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Our last two outings require you to make your own travel arrangements, though these are not onerous. There are charges, though - see below.

### Finchcocks Event - a Schubertiade Sun, 11th October 3-5 pm

So, what is a 'schubertiade'? Here is a contemporary description:

‘Those were unforgettable evenings. We gathered in some friendly house. There was no ceremony. One arrived, greeted friends, poured wine, opened a book of poems. Then someone would say ‘Schubert play us something’. At once the room changed. Conversation ceased. It was not a concert. It was friendship set to music.’

Price, £30, incl canapés and drinks.



Franz Schubert

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### Penshurst Place & Salomons Museum

Tues, 3rd November

We start at 10am with a ‘behind-the-scenes’ tour of Penshurst Place - ‘the grandest example of a fortified manor-house in England’, ending with refreshments in the Barons Hall (centre, below).

Then lunch at the Leicester Arms.

Then a visit to the Salomons Museum (right), and, possibly, the theatre and stable block.

Price, £27, incl refreshments (but not lunch).



Above: Salomons Museum.

Below: Penshurst Place,



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## Programme Notes

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### Roger Joye previews our forthcoming talks

Our summer season of talks comprises a good variety of subjects and – abnormally – of venues! We ask you to note carefully that there will be a one-off return to Christ Church for the 14<sup>th</sup> May meeting, but thereafter we shall be using our new home in the Bridge Club at 40 London Road. Do, however, please keep an eye on our newsletters and – nearer each date – on our website and social media platforms as well as your email inbox, for any updates to the programme. As ever, meetings will start at 7.30pm on the second Thursday of the month.

The presentation on **14<sup>th</sup> May at Christ Church Hall in the High Street** will be ‘**An Archaeological Review of the Tunbridge Wells Landscape**’ when we shall learn what the ever-lively Nigel Stapple has been uncovering since his last report to us in May 2023. Nigel reckons that our part of West Kent has, historically, been much overlooked by mainstream archaeology, with very few ‘professional’ excavations taking place. Whilst we have a reasonable historical narrative from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, our older history (and indeed our prehistory) has been somewhat neglected. However, community-led archaeological research since 2012 has shown our local landscape to have had a far richer past



than most of us would realise. From Mesolithic rock shelters, Neolithic and Bronze Age settlements to Iron Age hill forts, Roman period finds, Saxon dens, medieval villages and 16<sup>th</sup> century industrial iron-working, we are surrounded by a fascinating and culture-rich landscape.

On **11<sup>th</sup> June** we come back (definitively?) to our new home at **the Bridge Club in London Road** for a return visit by Alastair Dick-Cleland, whom many members will remember from last summer when he introduced us to the wonderful work and properties of the Landmark Trust. The title of his talk this time is ‘**Never Look at an Ugly Thing Twice**’: the life & work of C.F.A.Voysey. Charles Francis Annesley Voysey was one of the leading Arts & Crafts architects, whose practice flourished between 1890 and 1910. He was one of the most successful and sought-after architects of his day, and was awarded the Gold Medal by RIBA in 1940. As well as designing houses in his own distinctive style, he produced



Broad Leys, Windermere, by  
CFA Voysey.

numerous designs for  
wallpapers, fabrics, rugs,  
furniture and much else besides.  
Alastair will give us a finely  
illustrated account of the life and  
work of this fascinating man.

On **10<sup>th</sup> September** we welcome to **the Bridge Club** Helen King, Collections and House Manager at Scotney Castle, whose presentation entitled **‘The Husseys of Scotney’** will focus on the significance of the Castle’s collection, the Picturesque movement, and the work of Christopher Hussey who inherited Scotney in 1952 with his wife Betty, and who left the property to the National Trust. Scotney is considered one of the best examples of a Picturesque garden, and the mansion and Old Castle sit within a designed landscape. The collection is on track to be one of the five largest within the National Trust, and, as an Accredited Museum, it tries to vary the display and tell stories of the inhabitants.



Scotney  
Castle

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## Other groups

### **The Friends at the Amelia Scott Royal College of Physicians. Thurs, 9th July**

The Friends at the Amelia Scott are arranging a visit to the Royal College of Physicians (near Regents Park) on 9th July - a tour of the Medicinal Garden at 12 noon, and a tour of the Museum at 2pm.

A visit to the museum might seem a bit specialist but the history of medicine is important to us all, and the Museum has a fascinating collection (started by William Harvey in the 17th century). There is a link to the Amelia in that Liz Douglas, who used to work here, will deliver the tour.

For further details please contact Brian Lippard.

# CIVIC SOCIETY

## Forthcoming Events

Meetings start at 7.30pm on the second Thursday in the month. Please note that we are moving our events this year to the Bridge Club, at 40, London Road, (though we will be returning to Christ Church in the High Street for one month, in May). Non-members are welcome (suggested £5 donation).

<b>May 14<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>'An Archeological Review of our Local Landscape'</b> Nigel Staple returns with more of his team's findings around the town from Mesolithic rock shelters to 16th century iron workings. <b>Note: Christ Church, High Street</b>
<b>May / June</b>	<b>Summer Outings</b> To Aylesford Priory, Cranbrook, Chichester Cathedral and museums in Brentford. <b>See pp. 8-9 for details</b>
<b>Jun 11<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>'Never look at an ugly thing twice'</b> Alastair Dick-Cleland illustrates the work of CFA Voysey, the leading Arts & Crafts architect whose talents extended to wallpaper, fabrics, rugs and furniture. <b>Bridge Club, 40, London Road.</b>
<b>Aug 1<sup>st</sup> (Sat)</b>	<b>Annual Garden Party</b> At 23 Warwick Park by kind permission of Jenny Chambers. Society members and their guests only. <b>See p. 2 for details</b>
<b>Sept 10<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>'The Husseys of Scotney'</b> Helen King, House Manager at Scotney Castle, tells us of the significant collection there; and the work of Christopher Hussey, the last owner, and his wife, Betty. <b>Bridge Club, 40, London Road</b>

The views expressed in this Newsletter are those of the named author or of the editor and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Society.

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