

# **Friends of the Windsor & Royal Borough Museum Newsletter 109 Autumn 2024**



# Chairs' Report

Gerald Hyder

Hello Everyone,

I hope this finds you well, having enjoyed the summer, unpredictable as it was!

14 members attended our AGM in June. The existing committee was re-elected. We were delighted to honour Len Nash with Honorary Membership. Len has served 11 years as a volunteer and 10 on the committee. His contribution has been immense. Thank You Len! The meeting concluded with a Q and A session with Stephanie Lewis (Museum Manager) and her manager. See Stephanie's Museum Update page 6 for an up-to-date summary.

**The Museum is only funded until March 2025 and remains 'At Risk'.**

Since I last reported, the Museum team have been developing options to be agreed by the lead Councillor and senior RBWM staff. RBWM has now obtained £50k government grant funding. This - with perhaps a small 'top-up' - ensures the Museum's survival until March 2025. Sadly, the Visitor Information Centre closed on 30th June 2024 due to severe budget constraints. I think their presence had been beneficial - driving up visitor numbers, many of whom might not have normally visited a museum. The loss of 2 keyholders has impacted significantly on the museum's opening hours.

In July, the Friends committee and volunteers attended a Guildhall meeting where staff and senior RBWM officers were also present. Cllr Jack Douglas (the new Cabinet Member for Communities & Leisure) also attended, as did 2 Windsor Councillors. Useful suggestions were made which will hopefully lead to longer opening hours, and the volunteers taking on more of the admin tasks. We asked that the Museum team - who created their website without professional help - be given assistance from the RBWM website team. We also suggested that if the Museum became a Museum Trust (independent of RBWM) the process could take 2 years or so. Even with increased income, sponsorship, crowdfunding etc, it might initially need some financial support. The consensus was that the meeting had been constructive.

**Front Cover** - It's back! The Queen's Walkway panel - See page 9.

Recently Stephanie Lewis had a meeting with the CEO of the Hampshire Cultural Trust (HCT). They have an excellent reputation in managing and supporting museums, art galleries etc - many of whom have been 'at risk'. The team are looking at whether they can obtain funding to pay for further short-term work with HCT. As a result of the July Guildhall meeting an 'Action Plan' has now been created. It highlights the issues raised, actions to be taken and persons within RBWM responsible.

**As a committee we want to keep the momentum going.** We are keen to increase our membership, and to remain a key player in ensuring that the Museum thrives. A larger Friends of the Museum allows us a bigger voice and to engage more effectively with RBWM and others. It allows us to better support the Museum financially. We hope to have a focus on recruiting new Friends during October/November.

**We have also developed a new website - [friendsofwindsormuseum.org](http://friendsofwindsormuseum.org) - which will launch on 23rd September** (see page 10 for more details). It's a busy time!

I hope you enjoy reading the newsletter.

Gerald Hyder





# Was There or Wasn't There ?

Len Nash .

Some of you may recall that way back in newsletter 86 I wrote a piece concerning the history of Smith's Lawn as an airfield during World War 2. Recently an old story has re-appeared as a kind of addendum to that history. It is unsubstantiated but nevertheless needs to be investigated.

The story has it that an aircraft was hidden under false foliage near the Cambridge Gate of the Castle to provide the Royal Family with swift transport to Smith's Lawn where they would transfer to another aircraft and escape to safety should there be an invasion. The assumption was that an aircraft would get to the airfield faster than a car with the Long Walk acting as an emergency runway.

However, if one examines the story from both practical and common sense points of view there arises a number of questions regarding the validity of the legend.

The first question is what sort of aircraft would be required? Presumably it would need to carry at least four passengers, (King, Queen and two Princesses), and quite possibly others plus a pilot. Therefore a fairly large type was needed and very likely twin engined as there were no single engined aircraft capable of carrying that load at that stage of the war. Something along the lines of a DeHavilland Dragon Rapide, Avro Anson or Airspeed Consul for example. Hiding such an aeroplane from complete public view could be something of a challenge.



**Smith's Lawn**

Unlike cars, aircraft require time to get their engines to an operating temperature before they can fly. Types such as those I've suggested could take from 5 to 10 minutes to achieve this. Surely one or two fast cars down the Long Walk would reach Smith's Lawn well before the aircraft was ready.

The Long Walk itself is certainly viable for use as a runway even for the type of aircraft needed. But that assumes a cooperative wind. Any aircraft using the Long Walk is restricted to one direction. A strong tail wind or cross wind could make taking off dangerous if not impossible.

Why land at Smith's Lawn? All the aircraft considered have a range to fly directly to a port such as Liverpool to allow the Royal Family to fly directly to a port such as Liverpool to allow the Royal Family to take a ship or flying boat to Canada.

The latest version of the rumour claims that after changing aircraft at Smith's Lawn the Party would be flown to Goodwood. Why? At the time Goodwood was known as Westhampnet - a fighter airfield that later played an important role in the Battle of Britain. Surely the Royal party would not be flown south towards an advancing force and no doubt that the Luftwaffe, by then, had attacked all the southern fighter bases to gain air superiority.

I find the whole concept very questionable and doubt that it ever existed. However, stranger things happen in wartime so perhaps there is some fact behind what appears to be fiction!



The Memorial at Smith's Lawn  
Commemorates its use as an airfield  
from the 1920's until 1945.

During much of WW2, Armstrong  
Vickers had a final assembly factory  
here where Wellington bombers were  
assembled.

More info at

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-berkshire-36012601>

## Museum Update August 2024

Following staff consultation, the front facing service of the Royal Windsor Information Centre closed at the end of June 2024. Visitors to the borough will still be able to access information via the Visit Windsor website and promotional material will still be available at various locations across the borough including in Windsor town centre.

As a result of this change, the museum is operating under revised opening hours with the support of volunteers, whilst the team focuses on work with heritage and tourism partners to transition to a viable model for delivering a museum service. This is in light of the council's financial challenges, which are well documented. The opening hours are now 10am-2pm every Tuesday with tours available of the Guildhall during this time.

Tuesday opening is proving successful so far. Windsor Castle is closed, and the guard change attracts many visitors to the town who are often looking for something cultural to do. Volunteers are being very proactive by encouraging visitors to take a guided tour which is fantastic to see. We conducted 15 tours to 55 people during the 20 hours of opening in July which is more than an average month whilst opening 5 days a week. We are looking to open the museum on more days with support from volunteers but need to put a few things in place before this can be facilitated.

During the hours we are not open to the public, the team is working hard to secure external funds to support the museum through this transition period, networking with partners to help with future planning, continuing to move objects salvaged from the flood back into the museum store, answering the many enquiries we receive each week.

We are grateful for the time and support our volunteers are continuing to give us. We will be working hard over the coming months to raise additional income and provide an improved visitor experience, so watch this space!

Stephanie Lewis  
Museum Manager



# Markle and Sparkle

Gerald Hyder

Friday 18th May 2018. 6 years ago. A glorious day. I was in Peascod St on my way to the Museum. The town was buzzing, tomorrow was the wedding of Prince Harry and Megan Markle. The world's media were in town, and 100,000 or more visitors were expected to line the route.

Something was not quite right. There were lots of people outside Marks and Spencer. Is that Chris Brown, the Town Crier in the midst of them (well, you can hardly miss him, can you!)

'Markle and Sparkle.....' What on earth have they done to 'Marks and Sparks' The shopfitters had been in overnight and changed the wording on the shop frontage. As I got closer, I realised that many of those outside the shop were clutching 'Markle and Sparkle' carrier bags. Brilliant marketing - I don't think I've ever seen it bettered - perfectly capturing the excitement of those few days. Would we ever have guessed that this event would eventually rock the Royal Family to the core?





prime viewing spots. I'd seen this gentleman earlier near the Museum wearing this very restrained outfit! I asked him if he minded me taking a photograph. I hardly needed to really!

We live in Sunninghill. My wife had announced some days previously that she and a friend were going to Windsor to see the wedding. 'Madness' I thought and left it at that! I've been married long enough to know when not to question things like this!

On Saturday morning the radio was full of traffic updates....'Roads in the Windsor area are expected to be extremely busy, and many will be closed. Motorists are advised to avoid the area unless they have pre-booked parking'. 'Can you take us' asked my wife. 'Would you like to come?'

We agreed that we'd drive in a big loop around the edge of Windsor Great Park, and I'd drop them off at Bishopsgate. I'd tried to dissuade them, saying it was 2 miles or more to the first bit of the Long Walk that was on the carriage route. Their minds were made up. I felt just a little bit guilty waving them off with their lightweight camping chairs and their heavyweight picnic bags (how many people were they intending to feed?)

It was very comfortable watching the event from the comfort of my arm-chair.....

Around 5pm I got the call I was expecting. The carriage procession had finished an hour or more ago. They decided to walk back to Bishopsgate - the chairs and picnic bags were now marginally lighter. I offered to get them from Windsor but they declined, bless them! My radio was playing in the background....' Motorists are advised to avoid the area unless.....'



## The Queen's Walkway

You'll probably know that The Queen's Walkway is a symbolic 6.37km long walking route marking the 63 years, 7 months and 3 days of the late Queen's reign. She opened it on her 90th birthday - 21st April 2016. It was designed and maintained by the Commonwealth Walkway Trust, who were dissolved after her death. It is now looked after by the [Walk 21 Foundation](#). The information panel disappeared a couple of years ago. I'd heard rumours



that it was to be sited on Castle Hill when the works were completed. In April I contacted Walk 21 to enquire where it was? Unfortunately it had been damaged whilst in storage but would be repaired.

Great to see it back in town! GH

## Queen Elizabeth's Range Rover which carried the Obamas in April 2016 on Windsor visit sold to billionaire



If the Obama's weren't too worried about what they saw on getting off their helicopter on their 2016 visit to lunch with the Queen at Windsor Castle, then their security team might have been! There to greet them - and to drive them the 400 yards to the Castle - was 94-year-old Prince Phillip .

A real character! GH

<https://www.altonherald.com/news/queens-range-rover-which-welcomed-president-obama-to->

# Our New Website

[friendsofwindsormuseum.org](http://friendsofwindsormuseum.org)

Our new and exciting website arrives shortly! We are doing final testing, and it will be live from Monday 23rd September at [friendsofwindsormuseum.org](http://friendsofwindsormuseum.org)

Our 'old' website was not fit for purpose. It hadn't been updated for several years. We were lucky enough to have expertise from Ken Sutherland - who had already designed websites for the [Windsor Local History Group](#), and [The Swan](#) (the community-run pub in Clewer). Together, we created content which Ken then uploaded. He has created something that reflects the past and present, and looks to the future.

**We are keen to increase membership of the Friends, and to remain a key player in ensuring that our Museum thrives.** A larger Friends of the Museum allows us a bigger voice. It allows us to engage more effectively with RBWM and others. It allows us to better support the Museum financially. A new website will hopefully increase membership (we currently have about 60 members). We are also going to start putting items about museum events on our rejuvenated Facebook page, again in the hope of increasing membership. Later in the Autumn we will have a further recruitment drive using 'flyers' that will be available in various places in Windsor and elsewhere encouraging locals (and others) to join the Friends.

Thanks as ever for your support.

Gerald

\*our new website's web address is slightly different from the old one - remember, it's [friendsofwindsormuseum.org](http://friendsofwindsormuseum.org)

**I hope that you have enjoyed the Newsletter. Would you like to contribute - an article perhaps, or an interesting old photo? An encounter in the Museum? Feedback about the new website is also helpful.**

**Please contact me at  
[wrbmfriends@gmail.com](mailto:wrbmfriends@gmail.com)**

# Fort Belvedere and the Abdication of Edward VIII

Gerald Hyder

The 4 miles of the A329 from the Heatherwood Roundabout (next to Ascot Racecourse) to the A30 at Virginia Water (junction with the A30/Wentworth entrance) is a pleasant drive. Clearly it does not have the romance of Route 66 in the USA, or the history of the Royal Mile in Edinburgh! Nevertheless you do pass within yards of The War Horse memorial on the roundabout; Ascot Racecourse; the tomb (and further on, the house of) Thomas Holloway - the purveyor of pills and potions, and founder of the Royal Holloway; the 17th century chalybeate wells at Sunninghill; the house where John Lennon and Yoko Ono lived from 1969 until 1971, and then Ringo Starr and family from 1973 until 1988; a toll house, and finally Fort Belvedere, scene of Edward VIII's trysts and his abdication declaration. We will look at some of these places in future newsletters.

Fort Belvedere is easy to miss! There's a private lane on the right-hand side about 200 yards after passing the entrance to Coworth Park, just after the Polo Centre. It is in Crown Estate land in the midst of forestry and is not visible from this entrance or from the main entrance on the A30 towards Sunningdale. It's currently leased out. Canadian billionaire retail magnate Galen Weston lived there from early 1980s until his death in 2021.

Edward VIII held several meetings here with Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin in the months before the abdication. On 10th December 1936 he signed the instrument of abdication at the fort, witnessed by his three younger brothers including Prince Albert, Duke of York (who succeeded him as George VI). The following day Parliament recognised and ratified the abdication through 'His Majesty's Declaration of Abdication Act 1936'. On the evening of 11th December he made his abdication speech from Windsor Castle and immediately left for France. The full story - including the abdication speech - is here <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20231208-a-royal-crisis-the-shocking-moment-king-edward-viii-announced-his-abdication-to-the-nation>

The Abdication speech was recorded by BBC engineers in defiance of orders (source BBC). Today it is recognised as one of the most important broadcasts of the twentieth century.

**Next Page - Picture of Fort Belvedere**





**From an old Senior Service cigarette card !**

kind permission Neil Parker

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