Welcome to the first issue of Wellingtonia, the newsletter of Wellington History Group. We should like to thank the Heritage Lottery Fund for enabling us to produce four free issues of this magazine over the next year or so.

The Group was formed in November 2007 and comprises several well known local historians and others wishing to explore different aspects of Wellington’s rich past.

Whereas our President George Evans and Chairman Allan Frost have written or compiled well over thirty books about the town, there is still so much more to discover or, more accurately, rediscover.

Our ancestors knew about their lives and events in Wellington, just as we do today. And, like us, they seldom bothered to write things down because their lives were ‘normal’. Who on earth would be interested in knowing what they did on a day-to-day basis, or what they got up to when going to work or church or popping into a pub?

The short answer is ... we would. Finding out what happened in the town, even in relatively recent years, is fascinating to so many of us today, especially those who are tracing their family trees and want to have more to show for their efforts than a skeletal list of names, dates of birth, marriage and death.

Events don’t just happen: people make history. Our job is to help you find out more.

Wellington has been in existence for well over a thousand years. We cannot know for certain when the first settlers moved in, nor when our town was given its name. And there are some periods where our knowledge is sparse, to say the least. That’s where our (and your!) skills come into play.

The interests of our Group, like those of any member of the public, vary enormously. Some want to know more about Wellington and its surrounding area’s social, economic and political history, and how The Wrekin Hill and The Weald Moors fit into that story.

Others are fascinated by the town’s railways, schools, industries and shops as well as the long list of notable people who have influenced development throughout the centuries.

As with many other townships, facts have sometimes been clouded by rumour, myth and wishful thinking. Another of our tasks is to find out the truth as best we can.

We need your help ... and hope we can help you at the same time.

Discovering history is all about sharing knowledge. With that in mind, we’re issuing a challenge to anyone and everyone who may have information, however small, to get involved. Please take a look at the back page for details.

If you’d like to find out more, we suggest you pay a visit to Wellington Library and delve into the books and documents held in the Local Studies section.

Other libraries in the Telford conurbation have similar sections and, because the history of the whole area is intertwined, additional information is waiting to be discovered. And don’t forget Shropshire Archives, based at Shrewsbury, which houses an enormous collection of original documents and where the staff are most helpful.

Further information, including lists of books currently available to buy, can be found by following the ‘Wellington History Group’ link on the Wellington Town Council web site:

www.wellington-shropshire.gov.uk

Strange as it may seem, Wellington did not have an official town crest until 1951. An increase in the number of visitors to the town in late Victorian times led directly to the appearance of a souvenir trade: folk coming to Wellington by train stayed in one of the town’s hotels and hired a horse and trap to take them to The Wrekin Hill and cultural venues like Lilleshall, Buildwas and Haughmond Abbeys and the Roman ruins at Wroxeter.

What better way to remember your visit than to buy a small souvenir? But, whereas images of The Wrekin and its Halfway House soon appeared on china and pottery, there was little in the way of outstanding beauty in Wellington itself which warranted its image being placed on a cup and saucer.

One business in particular saw a looming gap in the market and seized the opportunity to make money from tourists: A.E. Bourne’s Gift Emporium in New Street. Porcelain and china ware of an astonishing variety became highly popular. Many were produced by William Henry Goss at his Falcon Pottery, founded in 1858, in Stoke on Trent.

During the 1880s, the firm produced a range of ‘crested china’ ornaments featuring the Coats of Arms of towns throughout the British Isles; it appears that a Wellington Crest was devised shortly afterwards, as seen in this miniature watering can which is about 5cm high.

Wellington Urban District Council (WUDC) adopted a variation on the design during the late 1920s when producing its own Official Guides to the town.

However, the crest we use today was one designed and authorised by the College of Arms, from information and ideas submitted by WUDC Clerk John Broad (after whom John Broad Avenue is named) and WUDC Chairman Cecil Lowe, in March 1951.

The design of the Coat of Arms includes a castle (a reference to Apley Castle which was sadly demolished during the 1950s), two fleurs-de-lys (from the Arms of France which were quartered and appeared in the Royal Arms of King Charles I, who made his famous Declaration to his troops near Wellington, thus marking the beginning of the English Civil War in 1642), a lion rampant (from the Arms of the Charlton family who owned Apley Castle), a fret (the hashing behind the lion rampant, taken from the Arms of the Eyton family at Eyton-on-the-Wealdmoors and the Cluddes of Orleton), and a bugle horn (from the Arms of the Lord Forester, whose family were custodians of part of the Wrekin Forest from the Middle Ages onwards). The portcullis at the top of the crest is an emblem denoting the town’s relationship with Apley Castle.

The motto Deo Adjuvante means ‘With God’s Help’.

For those who are interested, a large copy of this crest may be seen on a wall in the Town Council chamber inside the Civic Offices in Larkin Way, Tan Bank.

Please contact the clerk to the Town Council to check when the room is not in use and access is available.
As the day of the 11 Plus examination approached, a mixture of emotions was evident among those around me. The junior school I attended – Wrekin Road, which became an annexe to Park Junior after my second year – had a successful reputation to sustain, and doubtless there was also apprehension among the staff. We had been well drilled in those techniques that tended to be examined, and the effectiveness of that preparation was soon to be tested.

On the day before we took our papers, candidates were issued with a new nib for our dip pens. On reflection, I’m not sure this was a good idea: pens seemed to work more smoothly if the nib had first been ‘run in’ for a few days. Fifty years ago, 11 Plus tests were held at a Grammar school – girls went to Wellington High School in King Street, the boys to Wellington Grammar School in Golf Links Lane. A few years later, in an attempt to make the experience less intimidating, they were held in children’s own primary schools.

My morning began with a kind of business assembly, which ended with boys being taken to their examination rooms by masters who invigilated their efforts. The assembly was led by two unfamiliar men – dressed in academic gowns, probably the first ones I ever saw – whom I later identified as headmaster J.L. Morgan-Jones, and Second Master W.B. Tomlinson. They seemed to be joined at the hip, and I couldn’t decide which one of them was the more important. Tomlinson probably spoke more, but somehow that wasn’t conclusive. Had I been more sophisticated, I would have followed the hints given to me by their clothing. The Second Master wore grey flannels and tweed jacket with elbow patches; the headmaster a three-piece suit.

Our papers began with an arithmetic test, lasting an hour or so. Interestingly, I did nothing at primary school that could remotely be described as algebra, and virtually no geometry. I suppose it did me no great harm in the long-term, but my mathematical education at primary school now seems a rather narrow one. Some of the exercises had become tedious by too frequent repetition. Later in the morning, there was an ‘Intelligence’ test. These were designed by educational psychologists to be ‘culture free’ and, ideally, no benefit would be gained from any practice papers taken beforehand. However, I doubt whether this was quite true. We did so many I vividly remember one schoolmate telling a visiting inspector that his favourite subject was ‘Intelligence’ – presumably thereby causing the Park Junior authorities some embarrassment. Certainly, the questions asked in my paper had a reassuringly familiar feel.

This was followed by lunch. No one was permitted to eat at home, as I would certainly have done had I been given the opportunity. I guess the complications caused by boys returning late (or not at all) were too much for the authorities to countenance. The noise levels rose in the dining hall, until we were ticked off and returned to a state of appropriate seriousness.

In the afternoon, there remained only the English paper. There would certainly have been a ‘composition’: as a matter of principle, to protect my privacy, I probably lied about my last holiday or some other experience I was invited to describe. There would also have been some routine grammatical exercises and – the only thing that I now remember about the papers with any clarity – there was a comprehension exercise about the Victorian heroine Grace Darling helping her father to rescue some shipwrecked sailors.

I assume girls would have taken the same papers as the boys. Even in those days, girls performed better than boys at 11 so it was well known by educationalists that each year a few girls directed to Wellington Modern School would have scored higher marks than some of the boys selected for Wellington Grammar School.

I have always had a hopeless sense of direction. Knowing this, I had persuaded my father not only to show me – on three or four occasions – where Wellington Grammar School was, but I also prevailed upon him at the eleventh hour to drive me there on the day of the examination. So I arrived safely, in good time and relatively calmly. Not unnaturally, it was felt I could make my own way back without great difficulty. Had I appreciated my proximity to Wrekin Road, I would probably not have set off along the Holyhead Road in the direction of the Cock Hotel in order to reach Haygate Road! When nearing Ketley, it was clear that I had probably taken a wrong turning. Picking my way back and eventually spotting some familiar landmarks, I managed to navigate a course back to my house. Since she didn’t know quite when to expect me, my mother was unconcerned by my late arrival. Of course, this didn’t matter greatly – but just imagine if I had allowed my father to persuade me to find my own way in the morning!

On the following day, careful attempts were made to get pupils to recall, as exactly as possible, the contents of their papers. Park Junior school was anxious to maintain its ‘success’: it was rumoured that a school in Albrighton was the only other one that came anywhere near PJS’s ‘strike rate’.

In my year, which was not untypical, more than 40 children from Park Junior were selected for grammar school. This was about a quarter of the total entry to the two Wellington schools, which then took pupils from a wide area in East Shropshire. Could it be that too many were chosen from just one school? Few of the boys were later to be found in the A stream at Wellington Grammar School.
They came in their hundreds of thousands, from all over Europe. There were Italians, Germans, Poles, Lithuanians, Czechs and Slovaks, Yugoslavs and many others. They flooded into England in a continuous stream. No, this was not in the year 2007 but much earlier, in the period 1942 to 1950.

In 1946 there were 402,000 Germans here. In the years before, over 200,000 Italians came. One of them described himself years latter: ‘I came as a guest of His Majesty the King’... as a Prisoner of War! As conditions in Europe improved, most went home but a sizeable minority stayed to slowly merge with the local populations with nothing to single them or their families out except perhaps an unusual surname.

This cosmopolitan environment was increased, of course, by the thousands of Americans, Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders, Indians and Free French and many other nationalities thrown together by the war.

This article is about some of those who came from Europe as prisoners of war (PoWs), European Voluntary Workers (EVWs) or Displaced Persons (DPs).

There were over 1000 Prisoner of War camps scattered across the UK. It used to be a common site to see men working on the land with coloured patches sewn onto their jackets and trousers to show who they were.

In north Shropshire there were some very large camps, with about 2000 prisoners in each, at Sherrifhales, Mile End (Oswestry) and Adderley near Market Drayton.

Smaller camps existed at Cluddley near Wellington’s cricket ground, at Bank Top near St. Martins at Atcham and a cluster of five camps round the military base at Donnington.

The Bank Top camp still exists as a small Industrial Estate. The inmates worked mostly in agriculture for 15 shillings a week (75p in modern money). Nearly half of this was paid in camp tokens exchangeable at the camp shop for cigarettes or toiletries. The rest of the money was kept by the Government, to be claimed from a bank in Germany on their return. Some had jobs in local industry, others did road work. Prisoner Heinz Elfner (right) was told he was coming to help with the harvest and ended up on a bomb disposal unit!

Most of the prisoners were sent home in 1948/9 leaving a severe labour shortage. The government decided to replace the prisoners with refugees from other parts of Europe. Advertisements were put in European labour exchanges asking for stateless people to come to the UK. They were called ‘European Voluntary Workers’.

One lady, Margareta Reiss (below), came from the Sudetenland (Czechoslovakia) and was sent to a EVW camp near Preston. It had been a camp for German PoWs and many of the girls recognised the names carved into the wooden walls as former school friends. She was sent to work at Courtaulds in Wolverhampton. A man from Lithuania was sent to work in the local coal mines. His daughter still lives in Shifnal. The remains of Wellington’s EVW camp can still be seen behind the new sports hall of BRJ School.

What did they make of us? One German, from a tough infantry regiment, could not get over the fact that men pushed prams! This never happened in Germany. One fell in love with the food. In his camp, the prisoners were given big tins of sausage meat, bread and mustard. ‘It was the best thing I ever tasted,’ he said. On the whole, most felt they were fairly treated here, an opinion reinforced when they returned home and met those who came from the PoW camps in Russia. One Italian PoW said he was much better off working here for 15 shillings a week than he had been working on the land in Sicily before the war.

Hermann Ganter was a prisoner at Donnington. He fell for his ATS sergeant, Monica Cann, who was teaching English in the camp. They married in February 1947 at the Registry Office in Wellington (now Gwynnes Solicitors near the Library) and honeymooned at the Charlton Hotel. She was the first Englishwoman to marry a German PoW. It was against the law to fraternise with the enemy at this time, so they were both taken to court and fined. The Army split them up but the marriage still stood. Public opinion was so strongly in the couple’s favour that the law was changed in the summer of 1947.
Not all had good experiences. An older prisoner, Alwin Gross, from Cluddley Camp hanged himself in 1947 in the woods near Wrockwardine, and Wilhelm Kunz threw himself onto the railway near Shifnal. Two others, Friedrich Wolter and Erich Wullenkord, were shot at a camp in Wem just a few days before the war ended. There were mass breakouts from the camp at Mile End Oswestry.

What did we make of them? As the first batches of Italians were marched down from Shifnal to Sheriffhales camp, the locals booed them through the town. Opinions slowly changed as social barriers broke down. ‘I was treated like a son,’ said Italian Angelo Toffanin of the farmer who employed him. Local women bought hungry-looking PoW packets of fish and chips, much to the displeasure of the English soldiers guarding them. However, those who had lost family members in the war were a lot slower to forget and forgive. Joan Titley did forgive. She met Wolfgang whilst he was still a prisoner at Cluddley. ‘He was so different from local boys,’ she said. ‘Polite, helpful and considerate.’ They married and he established a haulage business in Wellington.

There was a major centre for Polish army families at Penley. The Poles were in a different position. They had been our allies in the war which had started in an attempt to stop the German invasion of their country. Many millions had been incarcerated in Russian Labour Camps in Siberia until released to form a Polish Army to fight on the side of the Allies. After the war, many did not wish to return to Russian-controlled Poland, not surprising after their experiences in the Labour Camps. They formed their own community here which still exists today.

Most of those who stayed are now retired. Their families have grown up and play a full part in our society; one even became our MP. Others also did well. Margareta, the young factory hand from the Sudetenland, had two children, one a successful businessman and the second an educational expert on the needs of deaf children. Her grandson is a well known nuclear scientist. Others opened their own building businesses or became skilled engineers and managers. From these inauspicious origins, many of those who stayed managed to build successful lives here, often reaching senior positions in their chosen fields. Once our enemies, they became valued citizens making an important contribution to our national life.

Our government feared that the conditions in Germany could re-ignite belief in the promises of the Nazi party or, more likely, cause a drift to communism. It was felt to be just recompense that hundreds of tons of food, badly needed in England, were sent over to Germany. After all, although this food had been grown here, it was through the labour of PoWs.

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Aggravated by our military commitments all over the world, especially with British Army of the Rhine (BAOR), Greece, Palestine and India.

The prisoners were desperate to go home. It was over 18 months since the war ended and the PoW camps were still full. The deciding factor in keeping them could have been the conditions in Germany in 1946/47. The situation was dire, there were food riots in the British Zone of North Germany, high unemployment and a housing shortage even more critical than in England.

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The range of rock types within The Wrekin Forest is one of the most varied in the world so it is not surprising that they have diverse uses. The geology here has been exploited throughout human habitation. This is an attempt to explain the most common uses that have been found for some of our local rocks.

The most easily worked metal is probably gold and we have some here. It’s in Buckatree quarry, but don’t jump to conclusions; the tiny amount in Wrekin quartzite would be so expensive to extract that it would be much cheaper to buy it from a jeweller. However, there may well have been useful deposits thousands of years ago. There may also have been copper and tin to account for a fairly large population of Bronze Age people.

The longest used mineral is iron ore which was used by the Iron Age Celts, builders of The Wrekin Hillfort. They found fist-sized lumps of good iron ore on the surface in Little Wenlock, Black Hayes and the Short Woods. There was also plenty of charcoal for the furnaces. Flux and, of course, the forest was also plenty of limestone for iron smelting. There may have been useful deposits of copper and tin to account for a fairly large population of Bronze Age people.

Celts also used sandstone from the northern side of The Wrekin to build their hillfort on the top. Imagine the amount of work needed to get a cartload of sandstone from the bottom of the hill, even with a team of strong oxen. How many tonnes would be needed to encircle the hilltop – twice?

Romans and Romanised Britons are known to have used coal to fire their central heating system at Viroconium as well as charcoal and the seams were fairly close to the surface anywhere between Little Wenlock and Short Wood. They too, would have used iron and most of the city is built of sandstone, though much of that came from further north and was floated down the river.

For their Watling Street’s surface dressing, they seem to have quarried Ercallite (or granophyre), the hard pink fine-grained granite from The Ercall. It appears also to have been used by Thomas Telford when he resurfaced the road and extended it to Holyhead. This rather pretty rock breaks into small hard pieces and was sold as Ercall gravel in Victorian times, popular for garden paths in large houses like Apley Castle and Dothill and also smaller places like Sunnycroft. The National Trust, appealing for matching stone for their paths, found it in Ercall quarries.

Coal, clay, ironstone and limestone have been extracted from Short Wood, Black Hayes, Spring Coppice, Limekiln Wood and many other parts, especially from medieval times and during the industrial revolution. Even now there is an application to take more by ‘surface mining’ (aka opencast) about which many of us are objecting strongly. At first shallow mines were dug by primitive means like bell pits with a ladder, branching out until just before (?) the hole collapsed, when another hole was dug. Later, timber pit props were used and mining was more extensive. Sometimes, as in Short Wood, a diagonal tunnel was dug; making an adit or drift mine, into which miners could walk and coal could be brought out by a tramway.

Iron ore and water eventually make rust or ochre, which comes out occasionally in springs. The ochre was used for ‘raddling tups’, that is to say daubing the front of rams so that the shepherd could tell which ewes had been ‘served’ by the ram and so estimate lambing time.

Limestone has three main uses – building, farming and iron working. Our limestone is mostly Carboniferous in age, not easily worked or cut in straight lines like sandstone, so not much used for building, especially for corners. To dress fields it was much used after being roasted in a kiln, slaked with water and powdered. For iron smelting limestone is used as a flux, absorbing impurities from the iron and turning into slag, which is used in road building. In Limekiln Wood are extensive (and dangerous) quarries and mines. When it was discovered that small boys were used in the mines they were closed.

Clay is used mainly for brick making and we have several different kinds. Blockleys are still making bricks in Hadley and an old clay pit will soon be built on. Many pools – Apley and Dothill for example – are from clay extraction. Some deposits are of valuable fire clay used for furnaces and there are red, blue and yellow brick clays. In the Gorge are odd mineral deposits such as talc, tar and fine sands used for blasting.

The biggest quarries in the Ercall, Lawrence and Maddocks Hills have been for hard-core, forming the bases of roads and buildings. These were gouged out of the hills, destroying vegetation and wildlife in what was supposed to be a protected area. Millions of tonnes of Wrekin Quartzite and a large grained granite called Camptonite were exploited.

You may say it’s the price The Wrekin Forest paid for Telford New Town.
Historians owe it to their readers to discover the truth. Sometimes it can be very difficult, especially when rumour or wishful thinking becomes regarded as accepted fact.

I have been trying to find proof to support various claims of Wellington’s past for several years, without success.

The first is whether or not a pagan temple existed in or near the present All Saints parish churchyard.

The Pagan Temple
It strikes me as rather odd that no mention seems to have been made of a pagan temple in any books or guides relating to the town’s history until the 1960s. It could have been the result of a chance remark by someone when asked whether it was possible that the town’s original Saxon church may have been erected on the site of sacred ground used by pre-Christian worshippers.

He replied, ‘Yes, it may.’

Since then, his comment has been converted in fact and, sad to say, is often cited by students of history as the reason for the origin of our town. The myth is given further credence by the brown plaque on the side of the NatWest Bank on The Green. Is it a case of wishful thinking?

‘Proof’ of pagan presence is quoted by reference to an academic interpretation of Wellington as ‘grove of the shrine people’, using forms of Old English: weoh (shrine) and leah (grove), with the addition of ingas (people of).

This ‘origin’ is extremely doubtful for several reasons. One is that ingas is a word extremely rare in Shropshire; another is that it would not be used in the context of a Saxon settlement but perhaps in a more general way of defining a group of people living in an area or under the leadership of an individual, in much the same way as we may be classed as British or subjects of a monarch.

The Saxon Farmstead
Something caused a Saxon to set up home somewhere in the centre of our present town. Angle and Saxon mercenaries had been invited into Britain during the sixth and seventh centuries ... and many decided to stay.

They were seasoned fighters who eventually gained the upper hand. But they were also farming folk who tended to create small farmsteads in hitherto quiet and remote parts of the country. Furthermore, after Christianity had been embraced by the general population, many small settlements had the benefit of a local priest, often with his own little church, to serve their spiritual needs.

Since we can be fairly certain that Saxons set up a farmstead in our locality, and there are numerous examples of nearby villages which take their name from early Saxon settlers (Uckington, Uffington, Uppington, Donnington, etc.), should we also accept the fact that Wellington was named after an Anglo-Saxon farmer (Weola) who happened to choose our area to erect a farm (tun) which had at least one meadow (ing)?

I think so. Can I prove it beyond all doubt? No. But why didn’t our ancestors bother to mention a pagan shrine? Is it because there never was one?

Other Options
Other reasons for Wellington’s origins have been suggested, including that it took its name from Watling Street (which was once a settlement in its own right) or that early forms of the name indicate an association with Wales or Welsh-speaking people. None of these conjectures seems to fit the facts.

If anyone has definite proof that there was indeed a pagan shrine in Wellington, please let me know. Until that happens, it would save a lot of confusion if Wellington’s origins could be credited to Weola, whoever he was. That’s what our ancestors thought.

They may well have been right.

Was there once a pagan sacred grove somewhere in front of All Saints parish church? Can you prove it?
Very few people impress me but none, in my opinion, holds a candle to the remarkable achievements of John Barber. He, probably more than any other individual before or since, was responsible for many changes that lifted Wellington from being an overgrown village into a prosperous Victorian township. Yet the town seems to have forgotten him.

He was still serving an apprenticeship as a land surveyor (among other things) on the Duke of Cleveland’s Uppington estate when his widowed mother moved into Eversleigh (below) on Mill Bank in 1840. John joined her a few years later and set up business here as an auctioneer and valuer in 1848 at the age of 23. He opened an office (right, as it was in 1975) at 1 Church Street in 1851, where the firm still trades.

He soon gained a reputation for honest dealing, a vital trait among Victorian businessmen if they hoped to succeed. He also had the gift of conversing comfortably with both aristocrats and common working folk. But he was not content to restrict business activities to arranging sales of property and household goods, or drawing plans for building houses.

He became disgusted at the underhand antics of livestock dealers from Wolverhampton and Birmingham and tried to hold his own cattle sale on The Green in 1852. It was an unmitigated disaster. But he was not a man to give up easily, and was determined to stop corruption.

He realised the only way forward was to obtain his own premises where he could control the whole affair. His chance came in 1855 when he set up a booth on land by the Bury Yards (where one of the town’s rubbish dumps was situated) near the railway bridge in today’s Victoria Road.

As this was a private auction supported by a few landowners and farmers willing to test his new venture, unscrupulous dealers were unable to influence bidding. It was a great success and, over the ensuing years, Barber’s auctions at his ‘Smithfield’ went from strength to strength and would ultimately result in a single venue for selling all forms of farm livestock, not just cattle.

Such was the success of the enterprise that the large run-down area of tenement buildings (which included Nailor’s Row) close to John’s booth was renamed Smithfield Place (see map dated 1882 opposite).

But what effect did the Smithfield have on the town, apart from regularising the sale of animals? Quite a lot, actually.

Until John Barber appeared on the scene, livestock was sold in different parts of the town centre streets: cattle on The Green, sheep in Walker Street, pigs at the northern end of Tan Bank and horses on fields where New College in King Street now stands. Bearing in mind that all animals had to be driven through the town along compacted dirt streets with no pavements, and the creatures had to stand for hours on end,
Wellington must have been extremely filthy.
Whereas animals still had to be driven along roads to the Smithfield, the number of creatures passing through the centre of the town was greatly reduced, as was the mess they left behind. It’s impossible to appreciate the difference it made to the town’s character.

Further improvements to Wellington’s economy came when John assisted the Markets Company to obtain an Act of Parliament to acquire land for their new market hall (which was built in 1868 and is still in use) and to transfer the right to collect tolls on all animals sold in the town to the company.

As part of the deal for helping them, they built a new Smithfield (below, as seen in 1930) on land now occupied by Morrisons supermarket. For the time being, John was allowed to be the sole auctioneer there.

Eventually, Barber’s firm bought the new Smithfield, which became the largest outside London until its closure in 1989. Many shopkeepers owed their own prosperity to the number of people who visited the Smithfield and, of course, the general market.

And visitors weren’t restricted to farming folk living in the surrounding countryside: John Barber also held annual wool sales, when fleeces were sold in marquees erected on field at the southern end of where North Road joins the bottom of Spring Hill, although there were occasions when the Market Hall was used to store fleeces from all over the country for examination before bids were made. The auctions themselves were frequently held in the Town Hall (also in the market hall building in Market Street) and attracted influential buyers from, among other places, Yorkshire.

John Barber did not confine activities to organising auctions of one sort or another; he did a great deal more to help the town expand and prosper. He introduced early forms of building and insurance benefit societies to promote land acquisition and house, office and other commercial building, and drew up numerous plans for town development, one of which led to the demolition of Smithfield Place (Wellington’s unruly red light district) to create Victoria Street.

Sadly, John died in 1881, yet the foundations he laid for his business helped to ensure its continuation; it is currently the oldest surviving firm in Wellington. His honestly and capably made contribution to the town’s development and prosperity remains unique.

As far as I can tell, John Barber was the only person to have been presented with a superb and generous Testimonial (below, signed by over 200 people) and silverware by Wellington’s townsfolk at an extravagant dinner held at the Charlton Arms Hotel in 1875.

These are just some of the reasons why I hold John Barber in such high regard and why Wellington should give him the recognition he rightly deserves.

If you’d like to learn more about the history of the remarkable firm founded by John Barber, read The Story of Barbers, established 1848, available through all good booksellers for a mere £5.00.
sk anyone familiar with Wellington’s long and illustrious history to name its most influential family and it’s likely they’ll mention the Charltons of Apley Castle. From their historic seat on the northern outskirts of the town, successive generations of the ancient dynasty had a considerable hand in local affairs over the course of many centuries.

Yet, while the Charlton’s influence can be seen all around Wellington — in its buildings, street names and coat of arms (which incorporates a depiction of their home), there is another family whose contribution to the life of the town appears to have been largely forgotten.

For at least a century, there role in its commercial development and the well-being of its citizens was, arguably, just as significant as the Charltons and so pervasive that it continues to be felt in the most insignificant aspects of everyday life… from the simple act of boiling the kettle to making a quick trip down the cash machine! So let us take a moment to consider the achievements of Wellington’s great lost benefactors — the Eytons.

Ancient Origins

With a lineage that can be traced back to the late Twelfth Century, the Eytons are among the oldest members of the landed gentry in Shropshire. Despite their ancient pedigree, they did not become directly involved in Wellington’s affairs until the mid 1700s, when Thomas Eyton moved with his family to a mansion in the Crescent Road area of town from their ancestral seat of Eyton-upon-the-Weald Moors. His reasons for doing so remain unclear but, in an era when it had become fashionable to abandon the old country pile for a more comfortable abode (the Charltons, for instance, moved to a new town house – The Vineyard — in 1721), his was not a particularly unusual course of action.

Following his arrival, Eyton added numerous residential and commercial properties to his existing Wellington estate and may have viewed relocation as a means of consolidating his interests in an era when the town was feeling the first flushes of a commercial boom from its proximity to the east Shropshire coalfield.

Whatever the motives behind the Eytons arrival, it was not long before they made their presence felt in the town. Within the family records, a series of letters written at the turn of the Nineteenth Century by Frances Sparrow (a Wrockwardine spinster for whom the Eytons acted as legal trustees) provide a florid insight into the reverential treatment afforded to a family who, in an age before the advent of democratic local government, clearly exerted a patriarchal influence over local affairs.

Head of household at the time was Thomas Eyton who, as Shropshire’s Receiver-General of Taxes and co-founder of Wellington’s first regular banking service, undoubtedly flexed a great deal of financial muscle in the town.

Yet, if Miss Sparrow’s assertions are anything to go by, he was also a compassionate supporter of its less wealthy citizens. ‘Mr Eyton has great merit for his exertions in favour of the poor’ she opined ‘for they are unremitting (sic) and he has no one to assist them’, suggesting that such generosity of spirit was by no means the norm.

Indeed, Mr Eyton’s benevolence is well-documented, in such instances as the festivities he laid-on for his eldest son Thomas’ coming of age; when the town ‘was entirely illuminated and an Ox and about 13 or 14 sheep given and roasted by the inhabitants’.

A few years later, at young Thomas’ wedding, food and money were again distributed to the poor at Eyton’s expense but his good reputation was set to be severely tested as events took a tragic turn for the worse.

Tragedy Strikes

Thomas Eyton died at his home in January 1816, after what was widely supposed as a short illness. In fact, he had committed suicide… after falling badly into arrears with his taxes in his roll as Receiver-General.

In a stunning reversal of
fortunes, all but Eyton’s settled estates were seized by the Crown and, following an inquisition at the Falcon Inn on Haygate Road, sold to recover his debts, leaving his eldest son Thomas with no option but to return to the ancestral seat on the Weald Moors.

Eyton Hall, however, had been ruined since at least 1763, and the family were forced to take refuge in a nearby farmhouse, around which even the crops had been seized by the Exchequer! Yet, despite their seemingly hopeless position, the Eytons had far from lost their influence in Wellington.

In 1802, Thomas Eyton exercised a traditional family right by presenting his third son John to the living of All Saints church. While his appointment may have been governed by nepotism, the new vicar proved more than capable of the task and is widely credited with inspiring a remarkable religious revival in Wellington.

Reverend Eyton’s achievements were founded on his extraordinary abilities as an eloquent and powerful preacher in the evangelist tradition, to which he had become a convert during his time at St John’s College, Cambridge, where he graduated in 1799 (receiving his Masters degree three years later).

Seemingly, his great piety had been recognised in Wellington before ordination, as Frances Swallow readily attests; ‘you would hardly believe it possible for so young a person, but 21, to have established such a character, as he bears here - but his whole study is to benefit the poor and to assist distress’.

When he gave his first sermon, Eyton became something of an overnight sensation, leading Miss Swallow to declare ‘the Parish of Wellington will have every reason to be thankful for such a Pastor’.

That they were is demonstrated by the remarks of the writer Charles Hulbert, who, after Reverend Eyton’s death in 1823 (at just 45 years of age), wrote ‘the sorrow and distress of the affectionate parishioners of Wellington at the loss of their beloved Pastor… may be conceived but cannot be described’.

Reverend Eyton had suffered from persistent ill health throughout his twenty years in office but, much like his father before him, took a close interest in the welfare of his parishioners, visiting the sick and destitute and providing poor children with education at Wellington Free School — a model of its kind long before the establishment of the National School Society.

His sermons, which were among the first items to be published by the fledgling Houlston’s Printers, continued to inspire generations of Wellingtonians, such as Hesba Stretton (who shared his deep evangelical fervour) and, by working closely with the Wesleyans, he also played a crucial role in helping establish a place for non-conformist worship in east Shropshire, which is, perhaps, his most enduring legacy.

An Enduring Influence
Just as one of the Eytons had attended to Wellington’s spiritual needs, so another began addressing its inhabitants’ physical well-being.

Although Thomas Eyton returned to the Weald Moors in 1816 and set about providing a mansion worthy of restoring his family’s reputation, his eldest son Thomas Campbell Eyton eventually came back to Wellington, taking up residence at Donnerville House and, latterly, The Vineyard, where he lived with his wife and children.

T.C. Eyton was a leading light in the provision of Wellington’s public utilities and it was his company, formed in 1851, that was responsible for building a reservoir at Ercall Pools to supply the town with drinking water.

He also helped establish a gas company that eventually took over provision for the whole town from its railside works in Bridge Road, which remained a notable local landmark for many years.

Just at the peak of his influence, Eyton ended his family’s direct involvement in local affairs when he inherited the ancestral estate in 1855.

While he had been an influential figure in Wellington public life, he enjoyed a much higher profile as a distinguished naturalist, famed throughout Europe as a recognised authority on Ornithology, publishing many books and papers on the subject.

After moving back to Eyton Hall, he turned his attention to building a museum to house what was widely regarded as one of the finest private natural history collections in Britain, although the venture did not come cheaply. Within the family records, several increasingly fraught letters written by Eyton’s father-in-law R.A. Slaney emphasise the heavy cost of improvements, which eventually amounted to nearly £10,000.

The heavy burden was not just a financial one, either. Indeed, Slaney had taken it upon himself to save the new lord of the manor from ‘ruin and sorrow’ and his insistence that Eyton promise ‘to take steadily to water and leave off intoxicating liquors’ hints at the underlying problems of a man he feared had become ‘habitually

Concluded on next page...

Thomas Campbell Eyton
disguised and weakened’ by ‘bad habits’.

All of which seems far removed from the dignified public image of a person who had not only served as a Justice of the Peace but also Lieutenant in the Wellington Corp of the Shropshire Yeomanry!

With the Crescent Road mansion succumbing to demolition soon after the Eytons moved back to the Weald Moors, few obvious traces of their time in Wellington survive.

There are no street names or public edifices to commemorate their good deeds, while subsequent modernisation has swept away many features of the utilities the family helped to establish in the town.

Given their comprehensive influence over local affairs, there are still plenty of ways to remember the Eytons, so, next time you turn on the gas central heating or go to the tap for a glass of water, spare a thought for Wellington’s lost, but not entirely forgotten, benefactors!

The Magnificent Eytons
continued from previous page ...

SOME MEMBERS OF WELLINGTON HISTORY GROUP COMMITTEE HAVE AMassed A WEALTH OF INFORMATION ON WELLINGTON AND ITS INHABITANTS, INCLUDING TRADE DIRECTORIES, MAPS, COPIES OF PROPERTY SALES, CENSUS LISTINGS AND, OF COURSE, PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE TOWN AND ITS PEOPLE.

WE MAY BE ABLE TO HELP FOLK DOING THEIR OWN RESEARCH, INCLUDING ASPECTS OF WELLINGTON’S HISTORY AND FAMILY TREES, SO INFORMATION WHICH MAY NOT BE AVAILABLE IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND RECORD OFFICES COULD BE SUPPLIED BY US FOR A SMALL FEE TO COVER TIME AND EXPENSES. ON THE OTHER HAND, IF WE DON’T HAVE THE INFORMATION OURSELVES, WE CAN OFTEN POINT YOU IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION OR OFFER ALTERNATIVE SUGGESTIONS.

WE HAVE ALREADY PROVIDED INFORMATION TO PEOPLE INVESTIGATING ANCESTORS INVOLVED IN THE MALTING, BREWING AND PUB-KEEPING TRADES ... SOME FROM AS FAR AWAY AS AUSTRALIA!

OUR OFFERS OF HELP ALSO EXTEND TO BUSINESSES AND CHURCHES WHICH MAY WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THE BUILDINGS THEY OCCUPY, AND EVEN THE BOROUGH AND TOWN COUNCILS. SOMETIMES WE ARE ABLE TO INFLUENCE DECISIONS WHICH COULD OTHERWISE HAVE AN ADVERSE EFFECT ON THE HISTORICAL INTEGRITY AND HERITAGE OF THE TOWN OR ITS SURROUNDING ENVIRONMENT.

THE HISTORY OF WELLINGTON IS FASCINATING; THERE’S SO MUCH TO LEARN. WE RELY ON PEOPLE WILLING TO SHARE THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES AND WHATEVER FAMILY PAPERS AND PHOTOGRAPHS THEY MAY HAVE LURKING AT THE BACK A DRAWER.

ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, WE ARE ALL HISTORIANS. MANY PEOPLE WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THEIR FAMILIES, AND HOW THEY CAN RECORD THEIR FINDINGS FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS.

WE CAN OFFER ADVICE ... BUT RESEARCH IS NOT JUST A ONE-WAY PROCESS. YOUR OWN DISCOVERIES CAN HELP WELLINGTON HISTORY GROUP GAIN A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF OUR TOWN’S FASCINATING PAST, SO PLEASE SHARE YOUR FINDINGS WITH US.

THE WREKIN TOPOGRAPH

O NO ONE CAN EVER KNOW EVERYTHING OR BE SURE WHAT THEY’VE WRITTEN IS TOTALLY CORRECT. SEVERAL TIMES AFTER ONE OF MY BOOKS HAS BEEN PUBLISHED, SOMEONE HAS TURNED UP WITH A RARE PHOTOGRAPH OR SNIPPET OF INFORMATION WHICH CASTS A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT LIGHT ON THE SUBJECT.

THAT’S EXACTLY WHAT HAPPENED WITH MY BOOK THE WREKIN HILL. IN IT, THERE’S A TOPOGRAPHIC ILLUSTRATION OF THE LANDMARKS YOU CAN SEE FROM THE WREKIN SUMMIT.

UNTIL RECENTLY, WE (HISTORIANS, THAT IS) BELIEVED THESE TOPOGRAPHS CAME INTO BEING SHORTLY AFTER RAILWAY SERVICES ARRIVED IN WELLINGTON IN 1849. THEY WERE INTENDED AS USEFUL SOUVENIRS FOR TOURISTS. THE EARLIEST VERSION OF THE TOPOGRAPH SEEMED TO HAVE BEEN PUBLISHED IN AN 1870 GUIDE. HOW WRONG CAN YOU BE?

A FEW MONTHS AGO, ANNE PLUMMER CONTACTED THE WREKIN FRIENDS WEBSITE SAYING SHE HAD AN OLD WREKIN TOPOGRAPH PRINTED IN COLOUR ON GOOD QUALITY CLOTH.

SHE SENT IT TO GEORGE EVANS FOR SAFEKEEPING UNTIL WELLINGTON GETS ITS OWN MUSEUM OR AN ARCHIVES SECTION IN THE LIBRARY.

THE INTERESTING THING ABOUT THIS TOPOGRAPH, WHICH IS SLIGHTLY LARGER THAN AN A3 SHEET OF PAPER, IS THAT IT’S DATED 1824, ALMOST 50 YEARS EARLIER THAN ANY OTHER WE’D MANAGED TO FIND.

THIS DISCOVERY LEADS US TO RETHINK THE ORIGINS OF WREKIN TOURISM. AS IT’S OF SUCH QUALITY, IT MUST HAVE BEEN PRODUCED FOR ‘BETTER OFF’ VISITORS TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE INCREASE IN, AND FREQUENCY AND RELIABILITY OF, STAGECOACH TRANSPORT, PERHAPS AS A DIRECT RESULT OF GENERAL IMPROVEMENTS TO ROAD CONSTRUCTION BY ENGINEERS LIKE THOMAS TELFORD AT THAT TIME.

WHICH LEADS ME TO MENTION SOMETHING I REALISED YEARS AGO ... FOLK HAVE SOME EXCITING THINGS TUCKED AWAY IN THEIR ATTICS.

HAVE YOU? IF SO, PLEASE GET IN TOUCH.

WE’RE INTERESTED IN VIRTUALLY EVERYTHING TO DO WITH THE TOWN, ESPECIALLY IF IT’S PRINTED ON PAPER OR CLOTH. WE CAN’T, UNFORTUNATELY, ACCEPT ARTEFACTS (LIKE BOTTLES, POTTERY AND EVEN OLD FARM MACHINERY) BUT WE WOULD LIKE THE OPPORTUNITY TO PHOTOGRAPH THEM.
ALL FRIENDS ROUND THE WEEKIN.
Do an attempt to ascertain,
the limits of the horizon of that celebrated
SHROPSHIRE MOUNTAIN.
History is all around us and although it is about the past, the present can provide us with clues to our local history. Even in a relatively small market town like Wellington there are numerous clues if we take time to stop, look, and think. The aim of this article is to give you a flavour of the types of things that can still be seen that provide a glimpse into the past.

I would like to focus on some examples of physical features that are in and around the centre of the town. Old advertisements and signs represent good examples of how vestiges of the past are still present today even if the reasons for their origins have long since ceased.

The railway bridge in Church Street still shows the remnants of a ‘McCLURE’S’ white-painted advertisement on one of its brick walls. McClure’s had shops in both Crown and Duke Streets since the Great War. It is sad to see that the McClure’s shop in Shrewsbury has also closed.

Rather than just state where other different examples are located, it might be interesting to see if you can recognise the descriptions of old signs and whether you can identify their locations.

One prominent old sign depicts a black painted ‘TEA ROOMS’ moniker positioned on the side of a building with a hand and finger pointing towards the entrance. The business there today is very different.

Black lettering on a faded white background indicates the setting for a former ‘BRUSH & BASKET MAKER’ in another area of the town. Fortunately, it also includes the name of former owner.

Further along the same road, the emblem of a former manufacturing company can clearly be seen. The circular sign is blue and white and it is positioned at the top of the front of the building. It gives the initials of the company in question although there is no indication of the products that were made on the premises. Those ‘in the know’ would immediately realise what the initials in the ‘The C.V. Co Ltd’ sign stood for. Today the building has a very different use.

A short distance away from here two stained glass pink inscriptions stating ‘COMPLETE’ and ‘FURNISHERS’ are still in evidence on the first floor windows. No prizes for guessing the name of this business. In recent years the premises below have been used for a variety of retail outlets. This establishment has a personal connection as many years ago my mother was employed there. Next time you are at the top of New Street why not see if you can spot them.

White letters on a grey background spelling out the word ‘BILLIARDS’ are clearlyvisible above the doorway of the rear entrance to what is still an entertainment venue in the centre of the town. Keep a look out for it next time you park your car and walk down the steps into town. While billiards may no longer be the order of the day at those premises, another building that for many years was known as ‘The Wellington Billiard Hall’ on Tan Bank, was more recently used for the more popular past time of snooker. That of course was the former ‘Rechabite Hall’ as can still be seen today.

Whilst the Rechabites would not have approved of the previous venue selling alcohol, it should be remembered that Wellington had an enormous amount of public houses around the town.

The grey ‘FOX & HOUNDS’ and ‘1908’ signs against a red brick background indicate the location of that former public house.

Elsewhere in the town there is a date stone for just two years later, but where? Read on ...

On the side of a building near to the public house mentioned above there is a yellow ‘Public Conveniences’ sign still displayed although anybody attempting to follow its advice would surely find themselves inconvenienced as the facilities that the sign relates to are no longer in use.
A modern blue public house style sign still hangs outside a regretfully closed establishment. See if you can spot it with its historic coat of arms before it is consigned to history. As a clue to its location there is adjacent to it another sign which is predominantly white in colour advertising ‘The Boot Room’ restaurant. There is also a painted-over plaque on the wall which tells of the link to one of the most important family names in the history of Wellington.

On occasions, older signs can still accurately depict the current business that uses the premises indicating the longevity of the particular establishment. An example of this is the white painted sign above the first floor windows showing the name of a particular estate agents located in Church Street.

The Square in the centre of town has a number of historic buildings. I wonder how many people could name the current occupants of the building that was the site of a former renowned printing and publishing firm? Two damaged brown tiles with scenes from a working printing firm are still visible below windows at the front of the building.

Sometimes, when older buildings are removed or redeveloped, all trace is lost. However, there is still a small piece of evidence adjacent to the site of the former swimming baths in the town which has the date inscription of ‘1910’. I managed to learn to swim there just before it was demolished.

These are just a few examples of how the past lives on in Wellington.

Next time you go into town why not look more closely at the streetscape that we all take for granted and see what you can spot for the first time? There is bound to be something you have passed on numerous occasions but simply not noticed before.

If anyone has any interesting stories about any of the sites included in this article, please write in with your recollections.

Do you have any old photographs or postcards showing scenes of Wellington, The Wrekin or Weald Moors? If so, please get in touch.

Photographs not only show what things were like at a particular point in time, they can also be compared to other pictures so that we can see the changes which have taken place over the years. Comparing successive photos can sometimes help us to pin down roughly when each one was taken.

This photo of The Green looking towards All Saints parish churchyard was taken sometime before the 1920s when the buildings were demolished to make way for what was then the National Provincial Bank.

The Green, the oldest identifiable location in Wellington.
Wellington History Group, affiliated to Wellington Civic Society, is a group of individuals interested in various aspects of the history of our town and has been created to fulfil the following objectives:

1. To research and publicise the history of the town of Wellington and its neighbourhood, including The Wrekin Hill.

2. To work with other organisations and individuals having similar aspirations.

3. To organise or take part in events, exhibitions, displays and pageants of local history.

4. To advise and help each other with local history work.

5. To support any worthy efforts with positive implications for local history.

6. To publish books, leaflets and other work.

We are not restricted to things that happened decades or centuries ago ... even yesterday is history!

To help us make a success of this exciting venture, we need your help. If you have anything on paper connected with the history of Wellington and its surrounding area (including The Wrekin Hill), please get in touch.

We’re interested in anything and everything: personal photographs taken at work or during events, postcards, programmes, posters, maps, directories, guide books ... in fact, you name it!

We are keen to acquire as much information as we can. And don’t worry about the safety of your treasured belongings. Unless you say you don’t want items back (in which case we’ll take them off your hands with a view to donating them to the Wellington museum if or when it is created, otherwise to Wellington Library), we’ll copy and return them, unharmed, in a short space of time.

So, please take time to explore those boxes tucked away gathering dust at the back of the attic ... and, if you’re in any doubt about how useful something might be, we’ll help you decide. The only effort we’d normally ask you to make is to provide us with a little background information on the subjects of personal photographs.

Please help us rediscover Wellington’s Past!

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and how you can help us to help you

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