It’s no exaggeration to say that Charlie Hancox was an major influence in starting me off on a quest to discover more about Wellington’s history, and to pass on my discoveries to anyone who would listen (or read).

He was the one who jotted down the epitaph on a headstone propped up against the perimeter wall of All Saints parish church yard in the late 1950s, and gave it to my father.

The epitaph recorded the death - by explosion - of four children belonging to Richard and Sophia Frost, my great-great-grandparents. When I was older, I began my own research, first into family history and later into the never-ending pool of confusing revelations known as Wellington’s past.

I can understand what drove Mr Hancox to pursue his hobby with relentless enthusiasm. Researching is addictive and, as the answer to one puzzle is found, several others make themselves known so that, ultimately, the list becomes so long that there is more than a person can hope to solve during one lifetime.

I’ve tried to emulate Charlie’s attitude in my own limited way. History is a never ending story, being added to every day. However, we are now in a far better position than historians have ever been before, simply because more stores of archival material are open to us.

A lot of what Charlie jotted down cannot be proved and we do not know his sources. Some things we now know are incorrect, and I suspect that this will always be the case when future research exposes more or clarifies a situation.

I have added my own comments where I think they are appropriate: they are italicised within square brackets [like this].

Now, read on . . .
Golf Club was formed in the nearby Ercall Woods.

The Old Orleton, originally known as Hay Gate Farm, became an inn and, later, the Falcon. It ceased to be an inn for several years, during which it reverted to being a farm, known as Bebb’s Farm, before reopening as the Falcon Hotel. Before the coming of the railway to the town in 1849, this was a coach house [staging post] which provided a scheduled stop for passengers and a place where horses could be changed. Oddly enough, Thomas Telford, for some reason since lost, referred to the Falcon as ‘The Royal Oak’ at the time his improvements were made to the Holyhead Road. [It was, in fact, called the Royal Oak for a time in the late seventeenth century.]

The next inn on the old road towards Shrewsbury was The Plume of Feathers and appears to have been relegated for use as a farm building after stage coach use declined after 1849 [when railway passenger services commenced in Wellington]. [1962 excavations among trees on land adjacent to the site revealed the dirt surface of the old road, deeply rutted, some 50 centimetres below ground level. Travel must have been bumpy and, during wet weather, extremely difficult. Traces of cobbles from the ancient Roman road to Uriconium were visible some 50 centimetres beneath the rutted coach road.]

The Bull’s Head Hotel in New Street became the principal Posting House for the town; early in the nineteenth century, the Post Office had been run by Benjamin Smith in premises which later became Thompson’s pawnbrokers, now an amusement arcade. [Not strictly true. A ‘Posting House’ is simply where horse-drawn transport could be hired: the Charlton Arms was also one. The Bull’s Head was where Post Office personnel came to collect and deliver the town’s post collected and delivered by Royal Mail coaches.]

The western area at the junction between Haygate Road and Herbert Avenue was once a clay pit, where bricks were made for use in the town.

The Bowring Recreation Ground was given as a playground for children of the town, according to the stipulations in John Crump Bowring’s Will. It is thought that Wellington had its own racecourse during the seventeenth century. It occupied much of the present Recreation ground and crossed Holyhead Road. [In fact, the racecourse was along the mile-long straight road called Wrekin Course, which runs parallel to and north of The Wrekin Hill.]

Bradley Moor, the name of a house at this junction, may have taken its name from that given to this area. There was another Bradley Moor, now a nursing home [subsequently renamed The Priory], on Spring Hill.

Houses from the Haygate Inn [not to be confused with one of the former names of The Old Orleton hotel] (near which stood The Bull tavern during the mid-nineteenth century) to the junction with Wrekin Road was known as Newtown. There was a traffic island at the junction until it was removed to accommodate the ring road in the late 1960s. Interestingly, additional charges were levied on postal deliveries to the Newtown area.

The stretch of road from the Queen’s Hotel to the former Darby & Joan hut at Foundry Road was called Water Lane. The town’s fire station was in Foundry Road until the mid-1950s (when it moved to Haybridge Road). It had earlier been run on a volunteer basis from Walker Street.

Walker Street was once the site of the cattle and horse market; steel rings were set into the road and walls of buildings for tethering the animals to stop them wandering or fighting. The sheep market gathered at the bottom of Tan Bank; pigs were sold next to them in the area now occupied by Bell and Crown Streets; in fact, the original name for Bell Street was Swine Market. The potato market was held in Vineyard Lane (now Road) before moving into the outside (western) side of the present market Hall during the late nineteenth century.

Part of the former premises of Gwynne’s, solicitors in Walker Street, was The Sun Inn which was used as a manorial court for some time after the medieval Market Hall (which stood in and dominated Market Square) was demolished c.1800. [This group of properties was renamed Edgbaston House in the 1890s when they were acquired by the Guardians of the Poor Law Union.]

Vineyard House was built as Dower House for the Charltons of Apley Castle. Fox hounds for the local Hunt were kennelled in the fields to the north of the House.

A junction north of the town, where one road ran to Dothill House and another to Apley Castle, was said to have been the site of a gibbet. This may have been true. The road beyond appears to have been straightened in the Shawbirch area. There used to be a single door set in the wall of Park Walls, suggesting that it preserved a right of way which cut off a corner, thus shortening the route for anyone going to Longdon-on-Tern, High Ercall, Wem, etc. The road to Crudgington may originally have veered off towards Eyton before veering back towards Long Lane. Another road from Wrockwardine and Admaston may have passed Dothill House, but fell into disuse after the estate had been walled with the result that a subsequent road followed the estate wall perimeter.

Similarly, the road to Leegomery developed from a short cut incidental to the present road from Admaston to Shawbirch. Another road ran from opposite Dothill drive past Apley Castle (which fronted the road) and led off towards Wappenshall and Preston on the Weald Moors. Other roads have been laid over the years but there are still a few footpaths of ancient origin.

Apley Castle once had a large pool in its grounds; it was filled in after an heir of the Charlton family tried [in 1909] (unsuccessfully) to swim a horse across while riding it. He drowned. [Actually, the pool still exists and is thought to have been created when clay was dug out to build the final Apley Castle (there have been three castles here).] The road from Apley Castle to Crescent Road was named Crescent Road in the mid nineteenth century.

King Street was originally called Back Lane and was used as an early by-pass for folk travelling from the Portway [an ancient road which ran from Newport to Shrewsbury at Shawbirch to the Cock Inn and Holyhead Road, thus avoiding the busy centre of the town.

The railway bridge in King Street was built by a Mr Winstanley (someone of the same name designed one of the Eddystone lighthouses). Constitution Hill was sometimes referred to as Windmill Bank, not to be confused with an area off Regent Street known by the same name. [The length of King Street from Constitution Hill (western junction) to Albert Road was sometimes referred to as Belle View.]
The Baptist chapel in King Street, where Norah Wellings had her toy factory from the 1920s until 1960, was built in 1828 on the site of one erected some 50 years earlier.

Parville House was the town’s Artillery Barracks. Proposals to extend the railway network to Wellington were first projected c.1836. Various companies were involved in complex developments. It actually opened 1 June 1849 with the station jointly-owned by LNWR and GWR. The fields (now occupied by Morrison’s supermarket) surrounding the Smithfield and the Smithfield itself were bought by a local company of speculators because the original plan for the railway indicated that a station would be built here for the London & North West Railway (not by the Great Western). These speculators developed a covered market in the site and surroundings of the old Western). These speculators developed a covered market on the site and surroundings of the old Market Hall (or Town Hall) and did not proceed with the Smithfield until they had sold all they could at a high price to the railway companies.

The branch line to Stafford passed through Windmill Bank. The line to Wolverhampton ended at Oakengates until the tunnel there was completed; the line opened 12 June 1849 with the London & North West Railway (now called Station Road). One day on the opening was the dedication of a statue of the Duke of Wellington, erected in Station Approach.

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The branch line to Stafford passed through Windmill Bank. The line to Wolverhampton ended at Oakengates until the tunnel there was completed; the line opened 12 November 1849 and was extended to Birmingham in 1854, first by [LNWR’s] Wolverhampton High Level station and subsequently via [GWR’s] Wolverhampton Low Level.

In the reign of Edward I, Hugh Burnell obtained a grant for a market (to be held on Thursdays) and two fairs a year, the first to be held on the day after the Feast of St. Barnabas, the second on the days before, on and after the Decollation of St John the Baptist. Fairs were later held on 29 March, 22 June, 29 September and 17 November; Monday of the week before Christmas Day and the last Monday of each of the other months.

These were for farm and dairy produce, horses, cattle, sheep and poultry, and changes had to be brought about as a result of the restrictions arising from the two world wars.

Local magistrates met in the Market Hall [also referred to as Market House], and the County Court was close by. The Debtors Prison was in the attic of the building in Walker Street new used as an opticins. This may have been approachable from the rear, which led to the [present] Market Hall and the Militia Drill Hall.

Market Street was once called Butcher Lane (or Road). [In fact, Butchers’ Row comprised a number of butchers booths which stood in The Shambles, the short lane off Market Square, now called Market Approach.]

A more recent Posting House, called the Wrekin Hotel, stood in Market Square and may have been built at about the same time as the present Market Hall, formed in 1842 by its own company who established itself with capital of £5000; £2000 was raised by shareholders and the rest by a mortgage. The company purchased the rights to the town’s property from anyone else without the king’s approval.

Some of the first council houses in the country were built in Mill Bank. A new church was built on the corner of Plough Road and King Street in 1906. The roof of the old church had collapsed; after it had been repaired. The premises became a school for Catholic children. It was also used as the Picture Pavilion cinema until c.1928. Films had previously been shown at the Town Hall by travelling boothmen.

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In the fifteenth year of Henry IV, the Guild of Holy Trinity and of the Virgin Mary at the church received a pardon from the king for having ‘acquired’ twenty messuages (dwellings), ten acres of heath and six acres of meadow in Wellington. No one was supposed to obtain property from anyone else without the king’s approval.

The original Catholic church was on Mill Bank. A new church was built on the corner of Plough Road and King Street in 1906. The roof of the old church had collapsed; after it had been repaired. The premises became a school for Catholic children. It was also used as the Picture Pavilion cinema until c.1928. Films had previously been shown at the Town Hall by travelling boothmen.

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Victoria Street, once referred to in its early days as Jubilee Street and thus giving some indication that it was created towards the end of Queen Victoria's reign, is now called Victoria Road. Before the railway was built, the area around the railway bridge, The Parade and that end of Victoria Avenue was known as The Buryards (or variations like Berryyards and Bearyards). The reason for this name is not known and several possible explanations have been postulated over the years, ranging from this being a site where bear baiting took place in Medieval and later times to simply an association with the nearby graveyard of All Saints parish church which, extensive though it once was, would not have reached to this extent. [More detail on this topic is covered in issue 13 of Wellington History Group's Wellingtonia magazine.]

Running parallel to Victoria Street lies Chapel Lane, along which stands the present Health Centre. During the late eighteenth century [1797], Methodists built a small chapel at the foot of the lane on what is now the lower section of the car park. This chapel was replaced by a new Wesleyan Methodist chapel a short distance away in New Street. [For a brief history of that building and how it was acquired by the Chad Valley company, see The Chad Valley Wrekin Toy Works and Noah Frost’s Bakery Row. During the nineteenth century, Chapel Lane was lined on both sides with small cottages where several of the town’s renowned nail makers (nailors) and boot makers lived.]

The land between Victoria Street and Chapel Lane was known as College Hill, a reference to a school which once existed here (nothing to do with Wrekin, originally Wellington, College). Several small dwellings, known as Keay’s Shut, lay at right angles to New Street. On the opposite (western) side of College Hill from Chapel Lane were more rows of simple dwellings and hovels, known collectively as Nailors Row, where more of the town’s nailing fraternity lived. Until Victoria Street was constructed to provide a road link between New and King Streets, this general area was called Smithfield Place and had a reputation for aggressive behaviour, including arson, rape and even murder. This veritable blot on the town was razed to the ground as soon as the plan to lay Victoria Street was agreed [as part of celebrations to mark Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee in 1887].

Another group of dwellings, west of Nailors Row and accessible through a single door from New Street, were in Gloucester Place. It occupied the area roughly where the shelters are at the present bus terminus [now along part of the western side of the ring road next to Nailors Row car park].

The Palais de Dance, later The Majestic Ballroom in New Street, was Wellington Grammar School until the Boys High School (now New College) in King Street was opened in 1912. Hemp Butt lane ran along where the Methodist church stands from New Street to link up with Jarratt’s lane (later Glebe Street). Heywood’s ropeworks fronted New Street next to the Methodist church until it and several adjacent seventeenth century dwellings were demolished by the council in the early 1950s. [The ring road passes through where they stood.]

The area now occupied by the New Street-Glebe Street stretch of the ring road was filled with substandard housing for the poorer classes of Wellington’s population, one group of dwellings called Parton (later called New) Square.

The boundary between New and High Streets has changed several times since the upper end of New Street was first designated as High Street towards the end of the nineteenth century, before which Mill Bank was ‘off New Street’. Fountain Place was the name given to a small area near the junction of New Street and New Church Road, possibly a reference to the location of one of the town water pumps or perhaps a natural feature near Christ Church.

Several roads in Wellington included short rows of housing, often terraced, with specific names. For example, King Street included Rose Hill, Summer Row, Gordon Terrace and Artillery Row.

Number 4 New Street was an odd-looking building on the corner with Crown Street. Bird’s provisions occupied the property for the last half of the nineteenth century. By 1903 it had been acquired by A J Poole. Eventually, Mr Grainger opened his men’s outfitters here; it was taken over by his assistant Norman Jellyman who remained here until the property was demolished in 1960.

The kerb outside the shop was made of iron because it was constantly clipped by horses and carts negotiating the turning into Market Square. Another iron kerb existed outside Agnew’s former outfitter in Church Street when the Post Office was relocated there. Again, horse-drawn mail carriages frequently clipped the kerb.

Carvers built the original Post Office premises [currently the Sorting Office] in Walker Street. There was a group of dwellings behind the garage next door to the Swan Inn; they were known as The Rookery.

Little Ireland was the name given to a close of seventeenth century hovels opposite Rollason’s scrap yard in High Street. Until Rollason’s moved from The Rookery to High Street in the early 1930s, Little Ireland cottages were owned by Mike Welch [himself a scrap metal and rags dealer].

The Lord of the Manor was a title given to the Foresters, one of whom was granted the unusual right to wear his hat in the king’s presence because of his infirmities.

A News Room was established in 1846 by Mr Edwards in Market Square. Subscriptions cost a guinea per annum. The Mechanics Institute had almost 70 members in 1851. It contained 800 volumes, mainly supplied by a local printer, probably Mr Houlston, and subscriptions cost 10s (youngsters under 18 paid 6d) per annum.

In 1851, there were 181 indoor paupers in the Union Workhouse; they cost an average 2s 11d per head to keep each week.

Dr Withering directed that, when he died, there should be no ostentatious displays of grief made at his funeral and his body should be carried to the church by six honest peasants. In the event, he was not buried at Wellington.

King Charles I mustered his troops outside Wellington. Prince’s Street school was built and run by Methodists.

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