

## THE SECRET HISTORY OF CHELSFIELD

*Little-known and much criticised local historian, **Dave Griffiths** reveals some obscure and, some would say, dubious facts about Chelsfield's past*

The name Chelsfield comes from the Anglo-Saxon words 'Chel' meaning *small village cleaved in two by idiotic bypass some time in the 1930s* and 'Field' meaning *thanks to some local landowners giving the Council a backhander*. Chelsfield is mentioned in the Domesday Book and recorded as 'where the goode people of Orpington keepe ye lawnmower'.

The local parish church of St Martin-of-Tours was in fact completely demolished during the recording of an episode of Noel's House Party when it was used as the backdrop for an elaborate practical joke. What stands on the site today is a remarkably faithful replica of the original building made entirely from modern materials. The oldest section of the building is the Brass Crosby room which dates back to 2007 apart its roof which has had to be replaced more recently when local travelling metallurgists removed the lead for what one can only imagine were research purposes.

At one point in history, Chelsfield had forty-seven public houses in the centre of the old village. The ratio of taverns to residents was such that each was visited in strict rotation by all the other publicans in order to keep the businesses thriving. Alcoholism was epidemic and in 1743, a Chelsfieldian could expect to live until just after his or her 9th birthday. The longevity of the population improved over the next few years and in 2009, Chelsfield expects to have not only eradicated the plague but also to have high-speed broadband and maybe even running water available to some residents.

One of the oldest businesses in Chelsfield is the Koi Barn which dates back to 1812 when its core business was as a fishmonger. The Koi Carp was invented by bored Japanese businessman in 1860 and Chelsfield's Koi Barn was quick to begin trading in this ornamental fish. The inventor of the Koi Carp, buoyed by his success proceeded to invent the horse, but was to die in penury having spent his fortune on a protracted legal battle with God, who claimed to have invented the horse years earlier, along with the badger.

Being largely a farming community, Chelsfield played its part in the Agrarian revolution and whilst not managing to lay claim to inventions such as the Seed Drill (*invented by Jethro Tull in 1701, the same year he invented the flute and progressive rock*), local farmer Josiah Sparkes did come up with the ill-fated Muck Whisk. This disgusting device, driven by hand was capable of spraying a thin film of manure over an extremely wide area but as no one could imagine why this could be anything other than a nuisance, Josiah died a poor, disillusioned and extremely unpleasant smelling man.

The Industrial Revolution and the arrival of the railways changed life in Britain beyond measure as its position as a global power grew beyond imagination. In Chelsfield, this was largely missed due to the fact that it coincided with a produce show and everyone in the village (who wasn't drunk) was feverishly growing humourously shaped vegetables. This produce show continues to this day but is sadly dogged by sectarian violence between the two feudal communities of

Chelsfield and Well Hill. Last year however, there were only two deaths in the fiercely fought 'biggest marrow' competition, signalling we hope, an end to years of needless bloodshed.

Chelsfield was at the forefront of the 20th Century's key events as one might expect. The women's suffrage movement was active in a village with a healthy female population and following Emmeline Pankhurst's attention-grabbing act of chaining herself to the railings outside No 10 Downing Street, the women of Chelsfield decided to follow suit. Unfortunately, Chelsfield at the time was almost entirely devoid of railings so an early incarnation of the Chelsfield Women's Institute laid on various fund-raising events involving jam, naked calendars and the like between 1912 and 1918 in order to pay for a programme of erecting railings all around the village. Just as the brave Chelsfield suffragettes were about to finally chain themselves to these brand new railings, the government capitulated and the December 1918 General Election made history as it was the first opportunity for women in Britain to vote. Ironically, polling booths in Chelsfield saw very few women taking advantage of their new rights; having struggled for so long to have decent railings put up in the village, almost the entire female population of Chelsfield spent polling day shackled to every section of available railing, thereby making it impossible for any of them to cast a vote.

Today only two sections of this expansive railing project remain, one section outside Chelsfield Village School and another, opposite, outside the saloon bar of the Five Bells Pub. The local cycling club, the Chelsfield Wheelers, still commemorate the bravery of the local suffragette movement by chaining their bicycles to the railings every third Thursday of the month. It is expected that bicycles will be given the vote in around 2014.

Between the wars, Chelsfield underwent massive social change. The depression saw the closure of all but four pubs in the area, the Five Bells, the Bo-Peep, the Rock and Fountain and the Kent Hounds. Despite their best efforts, Chelsfield's proud legacy of chronic alcoholism was on the slide. The Parkes family who ran the Five Bells for most of the 20th Century did their best by throwing people out of the pub for not being sufficiently drunk, but the days of premature drink-related death were sadly over.

During World War 2, Chelsfield threw itself into all the Ministry of War initiatives, including collecting all unwanted metal in order to buy a Spitfire. Pots, pans and, sadly, the 13 miles of Chelsfield railings were melted down to build an aircraft for the Royal Air Force. Annoyingly, due to an administrative error, Chelsfield's scrap metal ended up being used to build a Messerschmitt BF109E by mistake, this aircraft crashing near Well Hill in 1943 having been shot down by a Biggin Hill-based Spitfire (funded by the equally incompetent residents of Dusseldorf). Ironically, Well Hill soon put the wreckage of the downed German aircraft to good use by melting it down and converting it into some nice railings for their village.

After the War, Chelsfield became more isolated as first the shops and then the post office closed. Plans to build new houses in Chelsfield during the 1960s were vigorously opposed by local residents who used this threat to form the Chelsfield Village Society. Bromley Council's current policy of entirely ignoring Chelsfield was

active back then, which was quite fortunate, given that many of the committee members have at one time lived in the new houses they tried to prevent having built.

The annual Chelsfield Village Fair has its roots in the old tradition of Goose Fairs. These were popular events but suffered a decline due to the rather restrictive admission rules which refused entry to anyone who was not a goose or at least closely related to one. When the Chelsfield Goose Fair was revived in 2000, no such petty restrictions were in place and the Fair has gone from strength to strength every year since. The tradition of having aerial entertainment in the form of flypasts or flying displays started in 2007 and next year it is hoped to have flypasts from three Tomahawk cruise missiles as they target the new Tesco superstore at Orpington War Memorial.