

**Billericay Archaeological
and Historical Society**
newsletter



Spring 2026



Concorde

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Welcome to the Spring 2026 edition of the newsletter of the Billericay Archaeological and Historical Society. A month early this year because of the early date of the AGM. This will take place on March 9th 7.30pm at the Fold

There are still vacancies on the committee: Front of house to meet and greet; Catering Officer to organise rota and stock. Additional committee members would be welcome.

Please remember to renew your Society subscription for 2026 - £15 for single membership, £25 for a couple.

I would like to thank Alan Taylor and David Bremner for their contributions to this newsletter. I would also welcome new contributors for future editions.

Jacky Hathaway, editor

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Future programme

March 9 th + AGM	Ted Woodgate	The Four Marys
April 13 th	Richard Bale	Colchester's Roman temples & theatres
May 11 th	Jennie Randall	The Crooked Billet; the story of the V2 attack
June 8 th	Margaret Mills	Edward VIII and Wallis, Duchess of Windsor
July 13 th	Richard Pusey	Captain James Cook and his Three Voyages
No meeting in August		
September 14 th	Adrian Wright	Britain's Railways between the Wars

Meeting notes

September 8th Adrian Wright How railways began

To celebrate the commemoration of 200 years of railway travel, Adrian gave a fascinating and well illustrated talk about the development of the various systems – locomotive power, track systems, industry influences, passenger needs – that led up to the first fare paying passenger service between Stockton and Darlington on the 27th September 1825

October 13th Nick Dobson The Spanish Civil War

This was a talk packed with information about the politics leading up to the Spanish Civil War, events during the war and the after effects of the conflict. It was beautifully illustrated by contemporary art works and propaganda posters.

November 10th Viv Newman International Women at War

As usual Viv's talk concerned women who took part in The Great War and demonstrated a good deal of research into several women that took on unexpected roles during this conflict.

Including Flora Sandes who served alongside the male soldiers of the Serbian Army, Marina Yurlova who ran away from home to join the Cossacks and Winnipeg the Canadian Army bear mascot that became the influence for Winnie the Pooh!

December 8th Adrian Wright Hampshire Railways

A last minute change of programme. Adrian gave us a well illustrated talk explaining the origins of the railways leading to Southampton and Portsmouth and how the difficulties of terrain – hills and estuaries – were overcome. He described the subsequent development of the routes spreading across the County and the importance of the Eastleigh Railway Works.

January 12th Janet Brewer Ancient Egyptian Jewellery

Another interesting and well illustrated talk from Janet. She described the precious metals and semi-precious stones used in ancient Egypt and explained how the jewellery was made. We learnt that the jewellery was not just for decoration but for amuletic reasons bringing protection and good fortune to the wearer.

Visits in 2025

21st June The Charles Dickens Museum

12 members made their way by train to visit this excellent museum.

It is within the house that was the London home of Charles Dickens and his family. It is furnished exactly as it would have been when the family was in residence, it also contains a large, and fascinating, collection of artifacts and ephemera relevant to the family.

There is a very good café within the building which was appreciated by this group.

July 3rd and 12th Galleywood Racecourse walk

On the 3rd of July 10 members went to Galleywood to a walk round the Racecourse with Adrian Wright, our President leading us.

The Racecourse was the scene of Chelmsford races for about 176 years. It was renowned for its beauty and was popular, but it crossed main roads 4 times and this caused difficulties by the late 1930s. It was occupied by the Army and closed during WW2.

A large star-shaped fort was built on the Racecourse alongside the Margaretting Road in case the French invaded via the Essex coast. There was a watch tower at the crossroads,

The site is unique in that it has a church built within the racecourse. There are 2 graves there of WW1 soldiers, tragically killed so close to the end of the war.

Clay from here provided material for the Brickworks.

A really interesting visit. Thank you, Adrian

27th November Rainham Hall

Eight members visited Rainham Hall in the London Borough of Havering on Thursday 27 November 2025. This is an elegant Georgian House with a diverse history, large peaceful

garden and regularly changing exhibitions. Built in 1729 for Sea Captain John Harle, the house was bought by Colonel H H Mulliner to restore it between 1914 and 1924. The Sturges family owned it from 1924 to 1942, using it as a country house away from their main residence in London. It was used as a Day Nursery from 1942 to 1954, originally for children when local mothers were conscripted to work in factories or on the land as their contribution to the war effort, and was transferred to the care of the National Trust.

The hall is a fine example of Queen Anne style architecture. Nearly 50 different families and inhabitants have resided at the hall, including merchants, artists, vicars and architectural historians. It now hosts exhibitions showcasing the varying lives of former residents over the centuries. Due to the many changes in ownership, the hall does not have a collection of furniture or objects relating to any specific era in its history. The changing interpretive exhibitions essentially fill the gaps.

After refreshments in the small, but quaint cafe, we were expertly guided by volunteers before having plenty of time to explore the house and garden for ourselves.

Plantagenet to Tudor

The War of the Roses lasted between 1455 and 1485. The ending of this war brought considerable relief and freedom to the Lollards. This also affected the majority of the population of Billericay, they tended to be followers of the teachings of Wycliffe. Whilst the civil war had raged, Henry VI had rewarded Robert Tyrell, who lived at Heron Hall, with the gift of the Billericay Chantry Chapel and the lands that it owned. He accepted the lands, but presented the Chapel back to the local people.

Billericay had the right, confirmed by a Charter in 1478, to hold a market. The months in which the market, or fair, was held, were August and October.

During the 16th Century, Henry VIII broke off all relations with the Pope. He declared himself "Head of the Church". Then, he "suppressed" many of the monasteries. These included Thoby Priory. Their estates included one at Blunt's Wall, which was given to Cardinal Wolsey. This remained in his possession from 1525 until his death, in 1530. Richard Page then became owner of this estate, before Lord Petre of Ingatestone Hall added this land to his estate.

At this time, there were a number of merchants who resided in Billericay. The production and sale of Essex cloth was a major activity. There was a flourishing wool trade and cloth trade and, also, skimmers made a worthwhile living.

During the reigns of both Mary and Elizabeth, there was bigotry and religious persecution in in this area of Essex. Catholics and Puritans alike, suffered harassment, injustice and execution. Six locals of Puritan faith were burnt at the stake. One of these was a tailor, who lived in Billericay High Street. His name was Thomas Watts and he perished at Chelmsford. A Margaret Ellis died in Newgate and others, including Joan Horns, Elizabeth Thackvel, James Harris and Joan Porter died in either Smithfield or Stratford.

During Elizabeth's reign, Catholics and Puritans were required to attend the Parish Church on Sundays. However, if they did not attend, then this could lead to heavy fines or the forfeiture of land or imprisonment. If someone harboured a Catholic priest, to give Mass, it was an offence which was punishable by death. And yet, Lord Petre continued with this practice, without ever falling foul of the law. Apparently, there were three hiding places for the priest at Ingatestone Hall. These were known as "Priest Holes". Once, a priest known as John Payne, was chased and caught in the vicinity of Ingatestone Hall. He was subsequently martyred at Chelmsford.

Unfortunately, there is, currently, no evidence that Queen Elizabeth ever stayed in Billericay. However, she did stay at Ingatestone Hall. During her reign, there were performances of "Mystery Plays" by local players. The Churchwardens accounts at Chelmsford, at this time, contain the following entry: "Received, two sums of money from Belyreca men for hire of our garments".

Also, at this time, education was provided locally by good grammar schools at Brentwood and Chelmsford. This meant that a brilliant scholar, who, of course, had to be a boy, may then have had the opportunity to obtain a scholarship tenable at Caius College, Cambridge.

Alan Taylor

Source "Billericay Through the Ages" W.G.Harper

Concorde

I would like to continue the TRANSPORT theme of recent papers in the BAHS magazine, with the story of the lady who saved the Spitfire, and the development of CONCORDE, another British engineering achievement, that we sadly miss. But I do not think that there will be Heritage Concorde aircraft rides!

How did Britain, meet the engineering challenge to get the engineering skills and experience needed to develop a machine capable of supersonic flight? A reminder: ENGINEERING is the profession of applying scientific principles to the design and construction of equipment, machinery and structures. A MACHINE: is an assembly of components arranged so as to perform a particular task.

Received wisdom, from the Greek thinkers of the past, is that experimental flight started with Daedalus making feather wings for his son Icarus to be able to fly. But they reasoned that if he went too high in the sky, the wax holding his wings together would melt. We know today that it gets colder as you rise in the atmosphere, not hotter. Any thought philosophy requires scientific observation to back it up, and they did not know about solar radiation.

In 1782 the first experimental attempts at building an engine suitable for flight were the hot-air balloons of the Montgolfier brothers. But theirs was a lighter-than-air experiment. Similarly, the German Zeppelins. An ENGINE is any machine designed to convert energy into mechanical work. In this case hot air to lift people into the air.

Fast forward to 1796. British engineer Sir George Cayley approached the engineering challenge of achieving sustained controlled flight in a heavier-than-air machine by developing the

mathematics of Aerodynamics. That is the movement of objects through the air, by developing the mathematical relationships of lift, thrust, power and drag that was needed to enable sustained, controlled flight to be achieved. In 1903, the Wright Brothers acknowledged that Cayley's aerodynamic information had enabled them to achieve their first controlled flights with their heavier-than-air machine, at Kitty Hawk, America. Their first flight was on 17th December 1903. One would find it hard to imagine that their wooden frame and wire flying structure, with bed sheets covering the wings and driven by a simple four-cylinder piston engine of 37 horsepower, would lead to the supersonic aircraft of today. But it was the first important and practical step towards controlled flight. Any reference to the contribution of Cayley and Britain is often missed out in American reports about the Wright Bros.

The next step in the public gaining confidence in the technology of controlled and sustained powered flight was the crossing of the English Channel in a monoplane, a single wing aircraft, by Louis Bleriot on 25th July 1909. This was only six years after that first flight in 1903. This flight, from Cap Gris Nez to crashing by Dover Castle, captured the imagination of people and took only 37 minutes. The landing site at Dover is well marked. Was Britain still able to consider itself an "Island Fortress?"

In 1912 the Royal Flying Club, RFC and the Royal Navy Air Service, RNAS were formed. They were amalgamated in 1913 to form the Royal Air Force, RAF. In 1913, a competition called the Schnieder Trophy for sea-planes was organised as an International Air Race. This was to search for better flying machines, faster aircraft speeds and greater reliability in aircraft design. Italy, France, America and Britain competed. The Germans were keeping their ideas under wraps.

The First World War, 1914 – 1918, established the usefulness of aircraft for artillery spotting and bombing. After the First World War, and with the experience of the use of aeroplanes, Europe started to develop more efficient aeroplanes. To encourage this development, a number of aircraft races were carried out in America, France, Italy and Britain. These races encouraged the public's interest in flying. British aircraft engineering won the trophy in 1914, 1922, 1927 and 1929 when a Supermarine S.6. won at a speed of 328 m.p.h. The S.6. was powered by a precision crafted engine by Henry Royce, [Rolls did the marketing] developing 2,000 horsepower. The last Schnieder race was on 13 September 1931, which Britain won with S.6B and a world record speed of 408 m.p.h. The S6B was flown by Flight Lieutenant J N Boothman, later to become Air Chief Marshal Sir John Boothman, KCB KBE DFC AFC.

This last win by Britain may never have been achieved because the Labour government, at that time, refused to help fund the support for the development of the British Vickers-Supermarine S.6B aircraft. This was despite the rumblings of unrest from Germany's Nazi rearmament. To the rescue came Lady Lucy Houston who called on the daily newspapers for "Britain to Wake up, there is a war coming". Lady Houston saved the day by contributing £100,000 to the project.

The Chief Engineer of the S. 6B project was Reginald J Mitchell. Mitchell who, based on this experience of winning the Schnieder Trophy outright, went on to design the iconic SPITFIRE. The first flight of the prototype Spitfire was on 5th March 1936. Mitchell died in 1937 aged 42. He had based his design for the unique wing structure after watching the manoeuvrings of the seagulls on the south coast. All of engineering can learn from nature. Nature has thousands of years of developing "Good design practice".

Other Chief Engineers, who made significant engineering contributions and advances to fighter and bomber aerodynamics at the beginning of the Second World War, were the designers of the

following popular planes: HURRICANE - Sydney Camm; MOSQUITO and later COMET – Ronald Bashop; LANCASTER bomber – Roy Chadwick; WELLINGTON Bomber – Barnes Wallis also known for the bouncing bomb [Dam Busters]. Powered by the thunderous roar [I remember it well] of Henry Royce's Merlin engine that powered these aircraft to eventual victory against the significant German fighter and bomber aircraft.

This victory was helped by another British engineering wonder, that of Radio Detection Finding, RDF, later renamed Radar by the Americans, who again forget its origin when talking about it.

A year after World War I, during 1919, the first non-stop flight by British RAF engineers Allcock and Brown crossed the Atlantic. They flew a Vickers Vimy bomber from St John's, Newfoundland to Clifden, Ireland. A crossing of 1,900 miles in 16 hours. The next innovation that changed everything was the JET ENGINE developed by British engineer Frank Whittle, circa May 1941. The reciprocating piston engine had reached its limit. Jet engines derive thrust by ejecting energy through a combustion chamber at high speed. Basically, a jet engine ingests air, heats it and ejects it at high speed.

The engineering challenge of flight at speeds exceeding the speed of sound, Mach 1 is the effect of breaking the sound barrier. The speed of sound plods along at around 741mph when compared to the electromagnetic force at 186,000 miles per second. The sound barrier causes a sudden increase in the force of air against an aircraft flying at or above the speed of sound i.e. > 700 mph = Mach 1. The friction experienced at supersonic speeds causes the Concorde to expand by some 10 inches. This also increases the problem of drag. Concorde flies at Mach 2, twice the speed of sound, at a cruising speed of 1307 mph. The prototype trials started in 1969. The first passenger service started on 21st January 1976. Concorde was withdrawn from service on 23rd October 2003, after 34 years of flying. It is officially called British Aerospace / Aerospatiale Concorde, Supersonic Transport, SST. We are all familiar with the svelte, delta wing shape of Concorde, so I will leave it there. [Sorry to use imperial rather than metric units, but it is what we older members understand, since we have no youngsters.]

David A. Bremner

There's at least one black sheep in the family!

While exploring my family history I was quite pleased to find my 3 x Great Grandmother Mary Ann Bird, listed in the 1841 Census only to discover that she was residing in Newgate Gaol along with her two year old son! Further research revealed that, although guilty of the crime – receiving stolen property – for which she was imprisoned, the real criminal in the family was her daughter, my 4 x Great Aunt Eliza Redman. I then found a report in the Morning Post 10 Dec 1840.

Ingenious Frauds

Eliza Redman, alias Bird, a young female of respectable appearance, was brought before Mr Maltby, at Union-hall, charged with obtaining gold watches and other articles, the property of different tradesmen, and Mary Ann Bird, her mother, was charged as the receiver.

The examination of the prisoners excited considerable interest, in consequence of the ingenious manner in which most instances the younger of the two succeeded in defrauding the numerous tradesmen of their property.

Eliza would call at the premises of tradesmen such as linen drapers / dressmakers or watchmakers saying that she had come from the homes of respectable men or women who lived locally, and were known to the tradesmen, and wanted to see a selection of dresses or watches in order to choose something to purchase. The tradesmen would watch Eliza go to these houses and wait for her to return with any goods not required. After some time, the tradesmen would go to the homes just to be told that no goods had been requested or delivered there.

The police were called to investigate these crimes and found some of the items pledged at pawnbrokers in Dalston near the where Eliza and Mary Ann lived. Further items were found at their home. Mary Ann said that her daughter was an actress and that she believed these goods were purchased with her earnings. Eliza said that her mother was not implicated in the transactions. Both were committed to trial at the Old Bailey.

At the Old Bailey Eliza was identified as being 16 years old, 4' 11 ¾" tall, could read and write well and had previous convictions. Mary Ann was 41 years old.

Both prisoners were found guilty. Eliza was sentenced to be "transported beyond the seas for fourteen years" and Mary Ann transportation for seven years with a recommendation of mercy, seemingly her sentenced reduced to being confined in Newgate Gaol.

Eliza was taken to Tasmania, no known trade on embarkation but listed as a nurse and needlewoman on arrival. She never came back to London but spent the rest of her time after completion of the fourteen years in Tasmania and later Sydney.

Research by Trudy Cowley and Dianne Snowden in Australia results in Eliza's biography being published as a supplement to their book *Patchwork Prisoners* available from www.researchtasmania.com.au. It lists everything that happened to Eliza, marriages, children, further crimes, further descendants etc, ultimately leading a good and honest life.

I must have many, many cousins down under, I wonder if they know about Eliza's story? And should I admit to being secretly proud of having such a notorious ancestor?

Jacky Hathaway

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Tuesday talks at the Essex Record Office

March 3 rd	Gary MacDonnell	Beaulieu Park Station: Overcoming the challenges
March 31 st	Jools McCusker Maxwell	The loss of the London 1665
April 28 th	Dr Peter Gurney	The Chartist Revolution
June 2 nd	Rachel Bailey-Gibson	Dr Adele Isabelle de Steiger: a pioneering Victorian alienist

For further information and to buy tickets please go to the Essex Record Office website

The Festival of Essex Archaeology & Heritage 2026

Thursday 24th July at Cressing Temple Barns. A second event after a very successful first Fair in 2025.