



Learn, Laugh,  
Live

## Pier Views September 2024

### Part 2— Speakers talks

Editorial - Page 2

May 2024 Viscounts and Chicken Stubbers  
Pages 3—7

June 2024 Bill Marchant's WW11 story  
Pages 8—16

July 2024 The Past and Present of Highdown  
Gardens

Pages 17—23

Forthcoming talks — Page 24

## Editorial :

For those members who attend the monthly meetings, you will know that I sit in the corner taking notes of the Speakers talks.

The aim is to produce an article for Pier Views, so that all members have an opportunity to find out the subject of their talks.

Following the meetings, I complete a draft version of the article. However, in order to ensure it reflects the accuracy of the talk, I always send my draft version to the relevant speaker, to ensure that I have got it factually correct and that the speaker is happy that it also reflects the essence of their talk.

To date, all speakers I have sent draft articles to, have replied with not only nice comments, but also with constructive amendments to enhance the article.

So, the final articles that appear in Pier Views are a combination of my efforts and the speaker's approval.

Paul Barry

Editor, Pier Views

At the monthly meeting of Bognor3a on the 25<sup>th</sup> May 2024, members and guests were given a talk by Dr Geoffrey Mead on the intriguing subject of “Viscounts and Chicken Stubbers”.

The concept of this subject is the contrasting lifestyles in Sussex communities.

Geoffrey began his talk by saying that his early career was a mixture of various jobs, but he eventually went on to study geography and is now a lecturer of that subject at the University of Sussex. He also works as trainer for the South Downs National Park Volunteer Ranger Service.

Firstly, he explained exactly what the term Chicken Stubbers means. These are basically people who pluck chickens.

The land in the South Weald is a mixture of areas suitable for agricultural use by animal farmers and areas for industrial use. The latter having areas of acid soil, where bricks were produced and areas of forest, from which charcoal was produced. The soil at the foot of the South Downs is some of the most fertile.

The early settlers were primarily agricultural and produced food in the coastal areas, whilst their animals were sent in land to graze, but returned to the coastal areas after harvesting.

At this time there was a hierarchy as to who owned land. There were three types of ownership of villages:

- 1) Closed villages – these were controlled.
- 2) Open villages - Random ownership
- 3) Hybrids – a combination of both 1 & 2

Eventually, industrial areas began to appear and at this point Geoffrey showed as map produced by Richard Budgen in 1724, detailing the area.

### **Firle -**

The sleepy village of Firle, with its beautiful church, which has a colourful stain glass window and a memorial to some of the previous residents of the village and a pub called the Woolpack Inn. One of its peculiarities is that there is only one way in and out of the village.

Firle Place, a splendid Georgian property is the home of the Viscounts Gage and their families and has been since 1520. The 1901 census shows that there were 19 in-house servants plus numerous village workers employed by the family. The village also has a fire beacon, which was used as a warning system during the Spanish Armada conflict. Firle Place is open to the public, but is also used for hosting events and film making. The Tudor side of the house is the family's private area.

Sir John Gage was a member of Henry 8<sup>th</sup> court and High Sheriff of Sussex.

The landscape around Firle was mainly of fields and wide-open spaces.

### Binsted -

There is a similar situation in the village of Binsted in West Sussex regarding access to and from the village. A British Geological Survey of Binsted, showed there was agricultural land and also areas of clay deposits. The soil was classed as Grade 1 and was used to produce many crops. St. Mary's church has inside a memorial to the Ellis family.

### Plumpton-

In the village of Plumpton, there was a Roman Villa, a Saxon church and Plumpton Place, an Elizabethan House, plus there is a lake with an island.

Crops were grown nearby, at the foot of the downs.

Many of the property owners living in Plumpton were rich and lived the high society life.

It was this village where Queen Camila was born.

In 1860 the railway was built and this made it easier to move products manufactured in the area.

The area was good for the manufacture of wood products and clay bricks and there was a brickyard from 1905 until WW11.

The population continued to grow and a new school was constructed.

### Plumpton Green –

This became a growing area, with new housing built, a village shop, chemist and a new church.

### Wadhurst –

The landscape around the High Weald was very wet and as a result the soil was mainly clay and sandstone, but useful industrially.

As the area grew in size, buildings were changed, with many items being recycled and much of the population did many jobs.

Wadhurst had a church and cast-iron industry.

The High Weald is home to an ancient hunting area, Durrington Forest, with many landowners and is known for its breed of chickens, the Sussex breed. The land is not good for sheep farmers, but is so for chicken farmers, as they need less land.

After the end of WW11 changes occurred in the land, with a growing population and the need for more affordable housing. Towns, such as Crawley New Town, built in 1946, were

constructed, consisting mainly of new estates.

Subsequently, the area of Crawley got an airport, Gatwick and a connecting motorway.

The area is renowned for being the home of Isabella Tree and her husband on the Knepp estate. They returned their land to nature, known as the Wilding project. They returned pigs, deer, cattle and storks to the land and only very recently the subject of the successful increase in the breeding of storks has been mentioned in the media.

Isabella wrote a book, "The Wilding" about the project and it was subsequently made into a film.

Geoffrey concluded his talk by saying this is a century of changes and that it applies to all landscapes.

The talk was followed by a short q&a session:

The question of re routing the A27 was raised – It cannot go north through a National park and south is Binsted Woods, an ancient wood and well worth a walkthrough.

Has moving animals been a common practice for a long time – Yes, it has been so across most of the UK, including Sussex.

As an example. At Pevensey Levels, animals are taken in droves to the Saltmarshes, when the water is low and when they rise, returned to higher pastures.

Julie Cruickshank, on behalf of the audience, thanked Geoffrey for his most informative and entertaining talk.

The June monthly meeting of Bognor3a was primarily for the Annual General meeting

However, following our involvement in the recent WW11 project, we were fortunate enough to have a speaker who had contributed an excellent wartime memory to the project.

The speaker was Mike Marchant, whose father Bill, had been involved in a wartime incident during which he and members of the crew of the ship he was on captured a Nazi U-boat and found onboard an Enigma machine.

Usually, I would compile an article based on the speaker's talk, but in this case, Mike provided me with his notes and photographs. As a consequence, I have provided an extract taken from Mike's notes and photographs.

Mike's talk was based on the above wartime incident and that he had a memento of this, a pair of binoculars, found by his father on the U-boat they boarded and which had the Nazi insignia inscribed in its casing.

Here is Mike's story.....

**Signalman William 'Bill'  
Marchant  
His part in Operation Primrose  
9<sup>th</sup> May 1941**

Mike showed a photo of his father (right), age 19/20 at the start of WW2.







He was drafted to HMS Bulldog (left) in January 1941 as a Signalman.

Mike explained that, in 1940, the German Fuhrer (Adolf Hitler), having failed to win the Battle of Britain, decided instead to starve Britain into submission by destroying its imported supplies (for example food, munitions etc) which came in by sea across the Atlantic Ocean from North and South America.

The German Admiral Dornitz directed his U-boats (U-boat is German for submarine) to attack and sink the merchant ships supplying Britain.

In order to protect merchant ships, Britain used a convoy system whereby the merchant ships would cross the Atlantic in groups which were escorted by Royal Navy warships.

HMS Bulldog was part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Escort Group operating out of Iceland and led by Commander Joe Baker-Creswell (right), the skipper of the Bulldog.



On 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1941 convoy OB318, a west-bound convoy of 38 ships, sailed from Liverpool bound for ports in North and South America. OB318 was picked up by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Escort Group on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1941, 200 miles south of Iceland.



In the afternoon of that day a U-boat attacked the convoy sinking two merchant ships (Eastern Star and Ixiom) and again on 9<sup>th</sup> May sinking two more merchant ships (Esmond and Bengore Head). The culprit was the U-110 (left).

The U-110 was skippered by Kapitan-leutnant Fritz-Julius Lemp (right). Lemp was notorious for being the skipper of the U-30 which torpedoed and sank the unarmed passenger ship SS Athenia in the western approaches on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1939 (the day that war was declared). 117 civilian passengers and crew were killed during that sinking which was in contravention of the Hague Conventions and condemned as a war crime. Had Lemp survived the war, he would have been tried for that crime.



Following the attack on the convoy, HMS Aubrietia (one of the escorts) spotted U-110's periscope and located it with ASDIC (an early form of underwater radar).

Aubrietia dropped a pattern of depth charges (underwater explosives). U-110 tried to evade the attack but another pattern of depth charges forced Lemp to surface U-110.

Aubrietia was then joined by HMS Bulldog and HMS Broadway.

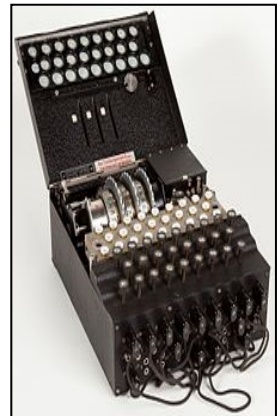
Cdr Joe Baker-Cresswell gave the order for Bulldog to ram U-110. Lemp saw this so gave the hurried order to abandon ship, including himself. Spotting this abandonment, Baker-Cresswell changed his mind and decided to try to capture the U-110 instead. Lemp, realising that Bulldog was not now going to ram, decided to swim back to his U-boat to destroy equipment and code books but he failed and died in the attempt.

Bulldog pulled alongside and Sub-Lieutenant David Balme (left) led a boarding party, including Signalman Bill Marchant and Telegraphist Alan Long, and began stripping her of what they could find.



Balme's boarding party took off many valuable items including code-books, charts, ciphers and most significantly, a complete and undamaged Kriegsmarine

(German naval) enigma machine (right) discovered by Telegraphist Alan Long.



.....and 10 pairs of Carl Zeiss binoculars! So now we know why Mike's father owned a pair of German binoculars!

With Cdr Baker-Cresswell now in communication with the Admiralty, this action was given the codename 'Operation Primrose' its purpose being to bring the captured U-boat and its equipment back to Britain.

Baker-Cresswell took U-110 in tow intending to take it to Reykjavik (in Iceland), but it sank within hours on 10<sup>th</sup> May due to the damage it had sustained.

Bulldog returned to Scapa Flow, the Royal Naval base in Scotland, with the captured equipment and the captured crew of the U-110 (Lemp had been lost along with 14 members of his crew, but a war correspondent, 4 officers and 28 men had been rescued from U-110). As prisoners of war they were later imprisoned in PoW camps in Canada.

Experts from Bletchley Park were waiting at Scapa Flow and were exceptionally surprised with what they collected and took back with them.



Realising the significance of what had been captured, the First Sea Lord (Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound) (left) signalled Baker-Cresswell with the following message – **“Hearty congratulations, the petals of your flower are of rare beauty”**.

The capture of the enigma machine was highly secret at the time and the significance was enormous. The enigma machine did not send messages; it was used to transform normal German into gibberish which was then transmitted over the airwaves using Morse code. British intercept stations could listen in to these signals, but because they were encoded, they could not understand what was being said.

This find was the first fully functioning naval enigma machine and now, thanks to this, code breakers at Bletchley Park in were able to inform the Royal Navy and thus steer convoys away from U-boat packs.

The impact was substantial; in June 1941 allied shipping losses were 432,000 tons, by August 1941 it was less than 80,000 tons!

Another important find was the *Reservehandverfahren* cipher which was solved by means of the documents captured from U-110 (this cipher was a German naval hand-cipher system used as a backup method when no working enigma machine was available).

King George VI (right) told Cdr Baker-Cresswell that the capture of the U-110 cipher material had been - **"The most important single event in the whole war at sea"**.



An unknown naval historian allegedly told Cdr Baker-Cresswell that the find had shortened the war by 2 years.

Due to the success of Operation Primrose.....

Cdr Baker-Cresswell was awarded the DSO (Distinguished Service Order) and promoted to Captain.

Sub Lt David Balme was awarded the DSC (Distinguished Service Cross).

Tel. Alan Long was awarded the DSM (Distinguished Service Medal).

Mike's father got a pair of binoculars!

A matter of importance following the capture of the enigma machine was one of secrecy; it was vital that the Germans didn't find out that we had captured an enigma machine and were now able to decipher their signals.

The surviving crew members of U-110 had all of their letters to home scanned for encoded messages (a common practice) and the Bulldog's crew were sworn to secrecy.

Mike's father kept his secret from his family until 1991 when a letter published in the Times newspaper from

Charles Baker-Cresswell (son of Capt. Joe Baker-Cresswell) prompted him to make contact. Through Charles Baker-Cresswell, Mike's father spoke to David Balme over the

phone (Balme remembered him) and he also exchanged letters with Capt. Baker-Cresswell.

In 2000, Hollywood film makers asked David Balme to be the historical adviser for the making of a film about Operation Primrose.



Unfortunately the film (U-571) (left) was cast as the capture and boarding of U-110 as an US naval victory (note - the USA weren't in the war in May 1941)!

So although the film was financially successful, reasonably well received by critics and won the academy award (Oscar) for best sound editing, the plot attracted substantial criticism from the surviving crew of the Bulldog; Prime Minister at the time, Tony Blair, called this “...an **affront to British sailors**”. Mike's father refused to go and see the film in the cinema.

David Balme pointed out that it would not have been financially viable without the film being americanised and that the credits acknowledged the Royal Navy's role in capturing enigma machines and code documents, and that the story had been told in tribute to all the men involved.

Of interest, two days before the U-110 was boarded by the Bulldog, on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1941, HMS Somali captured the German weather ship München near Iceland. Prior to being boarded, the crew of the München threw their ship's enigma machine overboard in a weighted bag. However, documents on the operation of the enigma machine were left on board, as were vital codebooks. This added essential intelligence to the Bulldog's capture. Another dubious American claim.....on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1944, USS Guadalcanal and 4 US navy destroyers captured and boarded U-505 off the west coast of Africa seizing an enigma machine. In his book '*We captured a U-boat*', published in 1957, Admiral Daniel Gallery USN, implied that this had been a first!

So well had the capture of U-110's enigma machine in 1941 been kept secret that Britain had even omitted to tell its closest ally until many years after WW2 had ended!

A final footnote.....in February 1942 the Germans, suspecting that their code might have been compromised, inserted a fourth rotor into their enigma machines (right); previously they had only used three. This compromised our code breaking.

However, HMS Petard captured U-boat, U-559, with her codebooks on 30<sup>th</sup> October 1942, enabling Bletchley Park to break the code once again. Sadly two British sailors died during that capture.





Bognor3a members and guests were fortunate to be given a talk at the July monthly meeting by Alex New, Head Gardener and Curator at Highdown Gardens. The subject of his talk was “Past and Present of Highdown Gardens”.

The history of the gardens started when the property, known as Highdown Tower – now a Hotel/Pub, was at first rented and then purchased by Frederick and Sybil Stern in 1909 and they got married in 1919 This was initially to be a holiday home away from their West London property.

Frederick Stern was very much of the time and enjoyed breeding and racing horses, which he did on the Sussex Downs. He lived the Aristocratic life, partying and hunting and collecting trophies. However, he also enjoyed plants and plant collecting, although he employed specialist collectors to hunt and find plants, from all around the world, often specifying which type of plants he desired. He also had a military career, during which he was awarded the Military Cross and the OBE. In 1920 Sybil was presented at Court.

The location is that the land sits on a unique chalk ridge, close to the sea front and not too much topsoil. As a result, the soil is free draining, due to the chalk, but contains less nitrogen and iron. In some ways it was a blessing and curse in deciding what plants will thrive in such an environment.

Within the property, there was Chalk quarry, which part of the garden, a tennis court, which was by a pond, a rubbish tip and a pigsty, the latter creating a somewhat odious aroma. In order to try and overcome this problem, he planted up the adjacent area, but was told that this was not a good idea.

Sir Arthur Hill, Director of Kew Gardens, advised Stern to review worldwide geological surveys in order to only fund plant collection trips that would target plants from areas with basic soils like those at Highdown.

By the 1920's Frederick had become obsessed with plants and employed several famous plant hunters to go on expensive and often dangerous trips to source specific plants, which are suitable for chalk-based soil. Such areas were the Himalayas, the Mediterranean Basin, North Africa, Near East, Iran, California, Chile, Bolivia and Peru. Plant hunters, such as Ernest Wilson, Frank Kingdon-Ward and Reginald Farrar, were among those sent on these risky trips.

Records found included detailed financial records of each trip, which also included details of the trip preparation instructions.

Numerous letters that have also been found, about 20 boxes, are archived at Kew Gardens. Some are handwritten, others typed, plus photos. These are read by volunteers and then digitised. This information helps to establish the history and facts of the plants. It also allows visitors to understand the plants and an ability to identify the best plants. This will involve decades of work, the creation of a database to catalogue each plant with links to the original details, by means of a unique . QR code that will eventually be placed on each plant label.

As a result, the garden began to grow. How do we know this? During the research, now ongoing at Highdown, various books were found, along with thousands of Index cards, which were found in a box, each containing detailed information. There was a card for each plant and given a unique number and showed the history and ongoing development of the plant.

By the 1930's, 20 years have past since the Stern's moved to Highdown and they had built a pavilion at the top of the garden and had a bell, which would call the Butler to bring anything they desired. Unfortunately for the Butler, it was a very long walk. Eventually, Frederick purchased a house for the Butler in Ferring.

The gardens have also had a number of visits from Royalty in the 1930's, six were recorded in the Visitors book, including Queen Mary, the Prince of Wales, later to become King Edward VIII, who abdicated in 1936, plus royals from Sweden and Romania. Photos were also kept of these visits. Apparently, the royals liked to come here, because of its discreet location and the fact that Sybil Stern had social connections with the royal family.

Sybil also kept a diary of the details of all such visits.

Due to his increasing knowledge of numerous plants, Frederick Stern wrote several books on the subject, including "The Chalk Garden", "Snowdrops and Snowflakes" and "A Study of the Genus Paeonia".

In 1956, Frederick Stern was knighted for his services to Horticulture.

In the cellar of the house at Highdown, a laboratory was found, where Frederick had studied plants. The findings of his studies are now kept by the RHS trusteeship.

Sir Frederick Stern died in 1967 and in 1968 Lady Stern handed over the trusteeship of Highdown Gardens to Worthing Town Council, as they had no children, and is still in their trusteeship to this day. Lady Stern died in 1972.

Alex then showed a series of photographs, depicting the family and various plants, including Tulips, Magnolia, Hornbeam and Paeonia's.

A photo of the garden was shown and when this was taken the garden had deteriorated, due to various factors, lack of funding, staff, plants lost, glasshouses overgrown etc. However, in 2019, a £1 million grant was obtained from the [National Lottery](#) Heritage Fund . This allowed for a path to be created, potting sheds to be installed, a sensory garden and a visitor's centre to be built.

Alex then said he had to risk assess all the plants and identify, if possible, what had been lost, where there were too many plants, what had to be taken out and evaluate what is needed.

Large plants, eg trees, had to be cut back and plants propagated. One of the major problems was resourcing plants that had been lost, such as the Foxtail Lily, which is very difficult to grow.

Other matters requiring attention were the protection of plants from pests and visitors in addition to access across the site for staff and visitors alike.

Nowadays, all plants are labelled and it is planned that sometime in the future, plant details will be shown on a [QR](#) code, so visitors can read all about the plant.

Plants are now shared with other botanical institutions\_ and this allows knowledge and Collections to grow.

Any plants that cannot be found, details were obtained from Frederick Stern's original Index Cards, to assist with resourcing such plants.

Finally, Alex showed the audience a letter, actually from an address in Felpham, to Highdown, from 1962, where the writer had similar soil to Highdown and had grown Fushia's and included a picture of said plant.

There followed a short Q&A session:

Alex was asked what is his background before becoming Curator at Highdown – He had worked in Local Govt in London in his early 30's and enjoyed life, such as going to Ronnie Scots Club in Soho and activities.

He then applied to go to Horticultural College, got accepted and remained for 3 years. He then as a student worked at Hillier's Arboretum, with other students and they all lived in a house on site. He then studied for a science degree at Sheffield University, after which he returned to Hilliers on an RHS Bursary. After that he went to an Arboretum in Boston, USA, which was very mature. On his return made various suggestions to Hilliers.

He then saw the advert for the Highdown post, applied and here he is today, the incumbent.

Can you buy plants at Highdown – Yes, on Thursday and Friday afternoons.

Do you have enough volunteers - Not really, Covid caused a problem, so after we had a recruitment drive, but we always need more volunteers. If you are interested in volunteering with the garden, please write to [highdowngardens@adur-worthing.gov.uk](mailto:highdowngardens@adur-worthing.gov.uk)

How can you deal with Invasive plants – Rhododendrons can be a problem, as nothing grow underneath. Also, such plants a Knotweed are difficult to remove.

Where this occurs, it maybe best to search for a specialist firm who deals with these plants.

Julie Cruickshank thanked Alex for his most informative and entertaining talk.

## Forthcoming talks

September 26<sup>th</sup> – Robin Shapland

“Hot Air Ballooning”

October 24<sup>th</sup> - Sandra Simmons

“Life in Iran as a Housewife”

November 28<sup>th</sup> – James Dickinson

“The Strenuous Life of Theodore Roosevelt”