# Corsham Spotlight

Magazine of the Corsham Civic Society
http://www.corshamcivicsociety.co.uk

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**Contents**


| | |
|---|---|
| From the Vice Chair | 1 |
| Rudloe Manor House | 2 |
| Corsham Tapestry | 3 |
| Giverny Talk | 4 |
| Admiralty Marine Salvage | 5 |
| Corsham Station | 6 |
| Highwayman of the Past | 7 |
| Obituaries | 9 |
| Formation of the SAS | 10 |


*Contributions to* ***Spotlight*** *are very welcome. Please contact the editor at:* garchajujhar@gmail.com

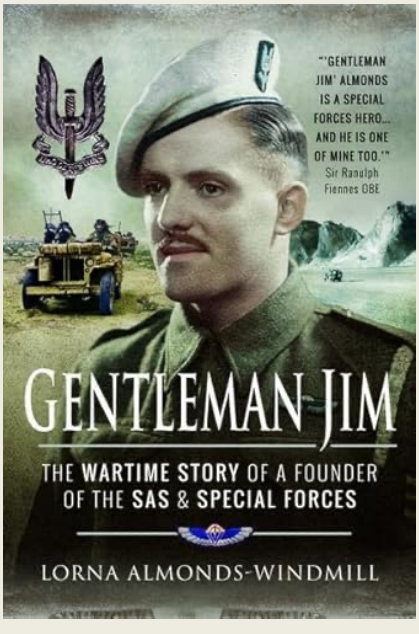


**Rudloe Manor:** Adorned with lights for the festive period (credit: Tom Cole)

Save the Dates:

26th Jul: **Visit to Rudloe Manor House** at the invitation of Mr & Mrs Sanders (Members Only)

26th Sep: Lorna Almonds-Windmill tells us of her father's involvement in the **Formation of the SAS**




**Gentleman Jim:** Cover of book published by daughter of Major Almonds (copied with permission of Lorna Almonds-Windmill)

**Officers and Committee Members:**

**President-Elect**
Thomas Brakspear

**Chair**
Michael Rumsey
Tel: 01249 715741

**Vice Chair**
Edward Barrett
Tel: 07565 612408

**Secretary**
Cath Maloney
Tel: 01249 715159

**Acting Treasurer**
Chris Johnson
07817 880287

**Membership Secretary**
Michael Rumsey
Tel: 01249 715741

**Programme Organiser**
Pat Whalley
Tel: 07570 946725

**Planning Chair**
Vacant

**Spotlight Editor**
Jujhar Garcha
Tel: 07915 534794

**Proof Editor**
Edward Barrett
Tel: 07565 612408

## From the Vice Chair

This was not in my job spec! But as most of you will know, Michael Rumsey has been unwell. He has had a small aneurism in his brain and spent a couple of weeks in the RUH. He is now restored to good health but has been told to take it easy and has decided to stand down as chairman of the Society with effect from the Annual General Meeting on 16th May. Fortunately for us, Michael has agreed to continue as membership secretary.

Thus, we will need someone to undertake this role – so come on, you leaders of mice and men or women – it's time to step up to the plate and put your name forward to our secretary!

Now a comment, a reminder, some praise and an apology:

The Society lunch was well attended and a great success (more elsewhere).

We have asked a couple of people to consider being our planning watchdogs – watch this space!

We finished last year with a super talk about Monet and his garden and got off to a cracking start this year with one from the Queen's Salvage Master (at least that's how I would describe him).

Finally, you may have noticed that I am the Spotlight proofreader. My apologies for not spotting the mix-up over the spelling of office materials in the last issue. We do understand that the shop sells stationery, but it is, as far as we know, stationery!

Edward Barrett

## Rudloe Manor House

Those new to the area may not know a great deal about the Manor House, but it is an exceptional building of which Corsham can be proud, or it was and now will be again.

Its story started at the beginning of the 13th century. After several owners in 1465, it came to Thomas Tropnell of Great Chalfield. In 1629, the estate passed to Sir Edward Hungerford.

By 1685, the building was in the hands of Thomas Goddard, who was associated with Box Village and is believed to have rebuilt the Manor House. By 1702, the Manor had become part of the Methuen Estate at Corsham.

The house continued to be passed from hand to hand – Thomas Poynder took it on as part of the Hartham Park estate in 1870. By 1931, the property was sold by auction to Countess Pappenheim, the American widow of Maximilian Albrecht, Count Von Pappenheim, a socialite often featured in the national newspapers attending many social engagements of the day. Her daughter, Countess Raben, succeeded her, ensuring the continued newspaper reporting of an aristocratic life!

But then we reached World War II, and in 1941, the estate was sold to the Air Ministry—it became RAF Rudloe Manor, part of the garrison town that was Corsham. So it remained until it was decommissioned in 1999 and placed on Historic England's Heritage at Risk Register. Despite many attempts to undertake suitable maintenance, the site continued to deteriorate. During that time, the Civic Society played a part in trying to encourage the 'powers that be' to hasten restoration.

The Manor and associated historic buildings finally returned to private residential use in 2021. After 20+ years of disrepair, this charming building is under restoration, and it will be an absolute pleasure to visit the site and see how work is progressing. We thank Jeremy and Sam Sanders for sharing a view of their property with us.

**Please see the enclosed application form for members to visit the restoration of Rudloe Manor House. This opportunity is limited to members only.**

Pat Whalley

# Update on the Corsham Tapestry Project

## General matters

Noting the launch of Stitch Story, the Tewkesbury tapestry, Jane Cox proposed to the Civic Society Committee in February 2023 that Corsham might have one. Your committee agreed.

After a coach trip to Tewkesbury, Jane started canvassing for support. In August 2023, the inaugural meeting of the Corsham Tapestry Group was held. It was well attended, and several useful ideas emerged. A month later, a small committee was formed.

Stitch Story was revisited in May 2024, as were exquisite embroideries of the Upper Kennet Valley and at Bradford on Avon. In August 2024, a presentation was given to a full meeting of Corsham Town Council.

## Venue

Several venues were considered. We needed wall space and a seven-day-a-week viewing. The obvious site was the Springfield Community Campus, but they were uninterested. The rebuff made the committee consider a segmented tapestry in transportable frames.

The venue issue was revisited, and in October 2024, Wiltshire Council agreed to let the Corsham Tapestry be hung in the long corridor beyond the climbing wall.

## Design

Julian Carosi produced a list of historical events for the Corsham Civic Parish. However, the list was very long, so it was whittled down to about 160 items for inclusion in the main panel. A border of smaller panels will also be provided by the many clubs and groups in Corsham. We will contact these groups in due course.

The initial plan was to create a single 10-metre panel. This morphed into 10 separately framed one-metre square panels, enabling it to be easily stored and transported to various venues. We first thought a single artist and a band of embroiderers would fit the bill, but we realised several different artists would be more inclusive.

It later became clear that seven one-metre squares would be challenging for the embroiderers to sew. We decided the main panel would be 22-feet long and divided into 11 two-feet panels depicting the town and the outlying villages.

## Artists

Sites all over Corsham were visited and photographs taken. The Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre in Chippenham was visited, and the Civic Society's archived collection of photographs trawled through. Artists were then recruited.

The final list of items for inclusion was produced and issued, together with the relevant images, to the individual artists who had agreed to design a single panel. The artists were each invited to create a panel of 13-15 images of people, buildings, views and bits of information in their areas.

They were asked to produce a set of black-and-white images, which would be forwarded to the printers to be copied onto the linen backing for the embroiderers to sew over, and a set of colour pictures of the same images to guide the embroiderers. They were also given a two-feet square of white card to be covered with copies of the colour images in their planned positions. Five meetings of the artists were held, and progress was reviewed.

Throughout this period, the requirements were reviewed, and revisions were agreed upon. By the end of March, seven of the 11 panels were complete. The black-and-white images of the first three panels have been sent to the printers, and the linen outlines were returned by the last week of April.

**Embroiderers**

Two meetings of embroiderers have been held. Some of the artists' work has been viewed, and the difficulties of converting to embroidery have been discussed.

The business of colour-matching the threads to the images has been completed and, in early May, the sewing phase will begin. This may take some two years to complete. Wish us luck!

Edward Barrett

## Reviews

In **November**, we ended our 2024 programme with a delightful look at 'Giverny, a garden through the eyes of Claude Monet' provided by John Tucker, Chairman of the Box Garden Club.

John has visited this garden many times to see it at different seasons throughout the year and understand how Monet designed his garden with varying colours and heights. This allowed the famous impressionist to paint the same scene many times, giving the viewer a different aspect to consider on each occasion.

This relatively small plot of land is visited by many thousands of people every year and is certainly a joy to see, whatever the season.

Thank you, John, for giving us a special viewing!

**January** 2025 began with a most interesting look into the world of Admiralty Marine Salvage given by Capt. (Retd) Morgyn Davies OBE, who had worked as a Chief Salvage Officer.

He first explained the local connection, which began with the loss of HMS Montague off Lundy Island in 1906 when the vessel hit Shutter Rock. There followed consultation with leading experts and civilians. After several unsuccessful attempts to dislodge her, she was eventually parted from the rock. It became evident that a specialised group needed to be formed capable of handling and resolving such hazardous situations, so the Admiralty Marine Salvage (AMS) organisation was born and located at Bath.

Many of you will be familiar with the many MOD establishments that have been housed in the city for many years, such as Ensleigh and Foxhill. This was to be the base of the AMS, from which it was responsible for coordinating and arranging salvage throughout the two World Wars and beyond. The description of the department has changed names over the years but has come to settle as the Defence & Equipment Support Agency (D&ES Agency) at Abbey Wood.

The objectives were to manage disasters at sea and organise the recovery of the vessels together with cargo/equipment where possible. Each situation was different and required innovation and expertise to identify and manage the event.

Morgyn showed us many examples of the salvage teams' work, such as providing the Mulberry harbours used to get the troops ashore on D-Day, recovering seaplanes and nuclear submarines, and towing warships to safe harbours.

A report had to be made to the various departments from which the vessels came, including what had happened, why, where, and how the situation was to be retrieved. During battle, explanations were unnecessary, but there were reasons to suggest poor seamanship, poor design of the craft at the outset, poor training, and extremely poor weather conditions, which were all uncomfortable observations for the powers that be as to how these accidents occurred.

But, as we often hear, ‘lessons must be learned’. Unfortunately, disasters at sea will still occur, and we can thankfully still rely on organisations and innovative people such as those in the AMS organisation to resolve these problems.

Finally, a happy group of members met to enjoy good food and good company at Amore in **February**. Thank you to the staff and the chef for their care and attention to the menu and the assembled group. Everyone had a very pleasurable afternoon.

Pat Whalley

## Corsham Station Campaign Update

Whilst we still have no formal decision from the new government regarding the re-opening of Corsham's train station, there have been one or two positive developments:

Trans Wilts Community Rail Partnership has confirmed that opening Corsham Station is one of its four priorities, along with a loop on the Melksham line between Thingley and Melksham (which would also help Corsham), improvements of Westbury station, and opening a station at Devizes.

Wiltshire Local Transport Plan 4, the new County Transport plan, supports these ideas.

Finally, the BBC News had the following headline this month:

*An hourly train service connecting Bristol to Oxford could start next year if proposals are approved by the government.*

This is the service that would stop at Corsham Station. GWR has been running a trial of the service since September, with only two return trains running on Saturdays.

The plans are being put forward by regional transport body England's Economic Heartland (EEH), whose members include Oxfordshire County Council and Swindon Borough Council. It is argued that the service would support economic growth and make it easier for travellers to reach new East West Rail services via Oxford to Bicester Village, Bletchley and Milton Keynes, which are set to begin by the end of 2025.

Encouragingly, this service is also one of the Top 10 priorities for the Western Gateway Sub National Transport Body, which covers our area.

So, it seems that things are moving in the background – it will still require a positive government decision to find the funding for the station.

Chris Johnson



## Highwayman of the Past

Did any such ruthless characters ever frequent Corsham's sleepy lanes?

It seems they did, and there is one that might pique your interest.

His name was Thomas Boulter, also known as the 'Flying Highwayman of Wiltshire'. He was born in Poulshot, near Devizes, to a family well-known to the local police force.

An uncle, Nathanial, was shot and crippled for life whilst attempting a highway robbery against Colonel Hanger near Market Lavington. Boulter's mother had been publicly flogged in Devizes Market Place for some other criminal act. His father was once sentenced to death, later reduced to fourteen years transportation, for stealing a horse from Mr Hall in Trowbridge in 1775. He had then ridden it to Andover and sold it for £6!

In his early years, Thomas worked in his father's mill until his sentence began. Then, using the money gained from the sale of the mill, he set himself up as a grocer on the Isle of White, where his sister lived.

This settled lifestyle was not exciting enough for the young man, who soon became bored. The groceries were not profitable, so he left it behind to become a highwayman.

Boulter was once described as: 'About five feet, nine inches tall, with a fresh complexion. He wore his own black, curled hair, and a round narrow brimmed hat. He dressed in a claret-coloured Bath beaver surcoat, black waistcoat, leather breeches, and light-coloured ribbed stockings, but had neither boots, nor spurs.'

Another description, perhaps later in his career, said his appearance was terrifying. A tall, swarthy man with a thick scar on his cheek, the result of a bullet wound which tore the skin off his forehead and burned his left eye during an unsuccessful robbery in Gloucester.

He held up coaches in broad daylight, taking money, jewellery, clothes – anything of value. Some said that if asked very prettily by a handsome lady, he might return an item of sentimental value.

His first crime was on the road from Stockbridge to Sutton. It seems he was a little nervous and rode past the coach three times before building up his courage to shout 'Stand'. After relieving the two passengers of their watches and money, he thanked them profusely, stating that he was in great want, and wishing them a pleasant journey!

Having found this first attempt quite easy, he robbed everyone else he could on the way home to Poulshot. He had bagged seven watches and £40 (about £2,500 in today's money). Not bad for a day's work.

Later, as he travelled through Somerset, Dorset, and Wiltshire, he is known to have collected a further £500 (£30,000 today).

His criminal activities continued but with several narrow escapes. By 1777, he was on his way home to Wiltshire. But two ladies in a post-chaise proved too much for him. After drawing his pistol and a haul of several guineas and dainty gold watches, something made him pause and decide to make a run for it. He fled north and was later caught and committed to York Castle, awaiting trial.

He was sentenced to death but was offered the option of death or 'taking the king's shilling'. Naturally, he enlisted and worked for four days, trying to be a good soldier. However, the regular hours and required discipline proved too much for him. On the seventh night, he deserted and made his way to Nottingham.

He soon persuaded a coachman to take him to Bristol, and it was there that he met the infamous 25-year-old James Caldwell, a notorious and cold-blooded killer. The pair agreed to work together and plied their trade over Salisbury Plain and the surrounding countryside with much success during 1777 and 1778.

But this precarious life meant one should keep moving, so the pair returned to Bristol. The London to Bath Turnpike Road, which ran past Chapel Plaister and up over Kingsdown, was the main route into Bath long before the A4 came into being.

Boulter and Caldwell continued their trade here for some time. The top of Kingsdown was the ideal place to hold a coach. There were plenty of hiding places, which were completely dark, and a coach had to slow down going up the hill toward Kingsdown.

But time was running out. On December 24th 1777, Thomas Fowle of Devizes issued a poster offering a reward of £40 for capturing one or both men. The two men on Salisbury Plain had robbed Fowle, and he was determined to retrieve his belongings.

The criminals escaped to Birmingham, but Boulter was caught and sent for trial in Bridport. He was eventually incarcerated at Winchester Castle, where he met up with his partner in crime, Caldwell. On August 19th 1778, they were tried at Winchester Assize Court, found guilty, and sentenced to hang.

Justice was quickly served, and at noon the same day, they were taken out to the gallows, a noose was placed around their necks, and their life of crime came to an end.

Source: With thanks to *Corsham Revealed* by Julian Carosi

And who are our highwaymen of today? Do we still suffer from highway robbery? Handbags, purses, and mobile phones snatched on the street? How far have we come?

Pat Whalley

# Obituaries

## John Bright

We were very saddened to hear of the death of John Bright, who was an early supporter and member of the Society. John was well known in the town as a local solicitor, associated with Goughs in Pickwick Rd.

He was also a Town Councillor from 1964, serving as Chairman for many years and in other capacities on various committees. John was a great advocate for Corsham and was a well-respected member of our community.

## Ernest Hird

In March, we were also made aware of the death of Ernest Hird, who was 93. Another great loss to the community. Ernest spent his childhood on the County Durham/Northumberland border. He developed a love for the outdoors and natural history here, and as a choirboy, he enhanced his love of music. After spending time in the army in Malaya teaching Ghurkas, his love of education became his career path. He taught in many establishments in the north of England before moving on marriage to Bath and later to Corsham to the Primary School.

He was a keen member of the Society. He had given us talks on the results of his considerable research into Lady Margaret Hungerford and her creation of the Almshouses. I am sure he felt strongly about the need for the town to recognise the importance of our local heritage, and his work reflected that. He was also a regular participant at the Church of St John's Gastard, another area of community life from which he will be sorely missed.

As an author, he wrote and published a History of the Almshouses, a History of St John's Church Gastard, a History of the Corsham Choral Society and a book about his life and work. In addition, he produced a book based on the diaries of Herbert Spackman.

He enjoyed 65 years of happy marriage with Margaret, raising two daughters and later six grandchildren. Ernest led a full life and made a significant contribution to his community. Our condolences go to Margaret his wife, his daughters, and grandchildren.

## John Brown

We were also saddened to hear of the death of another of our long-standing members, John Brown. John lived in the Corsham area for many years, attended Chippenham Grammar School, and frequented the Corsham Youth Club.

Although John and his family had moved away from the area, he retained a keen interest in what was happening in the town. He provided a very good piece for Spotlight on his time spent at the Mansion House (now the Digital Centre) in the 50s/60s, where a kind but indomitable lady called Miss Reynolds ran a thriving youth club. She kept the town's youth engaged and busy with all sorts of activities, from sports to serious debate and public speaking competitions, which obviously made a good impression on John and his contemporaries.

We send our condolences to John's family.

Pat Whalley

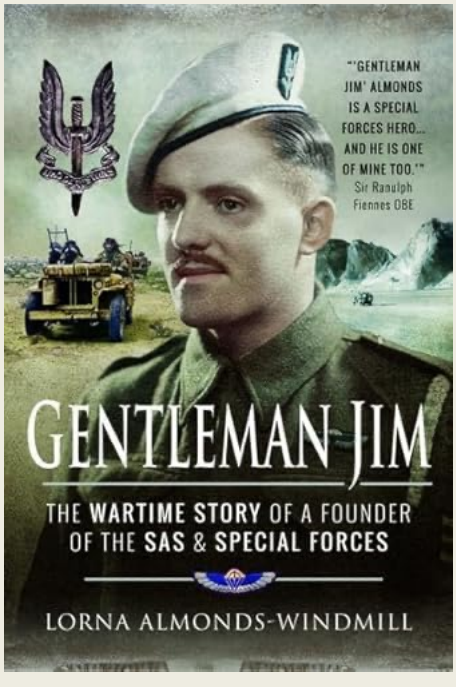
## Save the Date: Talk on The Foundation of the SAS, 26th September

Many of you will have watched the BBC TV series 'SAS Rogue Heroes' and probably marvelled at the audacity and bravery of the men concerned. Sergeant Jim Almonds in that series was played by actor Corin Silva. We were advised that the story was not based on historical facts. However, we can hear the facts from Lorna Almonds-Windmill, daughter of Jim Almonds, who later became a Major. His wartime story is the subject of our speaker's book: *Gentleman Jim: The Wartime Story of a Founder of the SAS & Special Forces*. Lorna will ensure we hear the 'real' story and the part Jim played in setting up the famous SAS.

This meeting will be held in the auditorium of the Pound Arts Centre. We hope and expect a 'full house'.

Please ensure you keep the date in your diary.

Pat Whalley




**Gentleman Jim:** Photo of book cover (copied with permission of Lorna Almonds-Windmill)

# CORSHAM CIVIC SOCIETY TALKS 2025

All meetings are at the Pound Arts Centre (T: 01249 701628) at 7.30pm unless otherwise stated. Members £2, Non-Members £5. Guests are very welcome. Please be aware that these events are subject to last minute changes beyond the control of the CCS.

| | |
|---|---|
| 16th May | **AGM** followed by drinks and nibbles at the Town Hall, 7:15pm start |
| 27th Jun | Jonathon Holt, **The Architectural Follies of Wiltshire** |
| 25th July | Claire Slack of Wiltshire Museum, **Un/Common People: Folk Culture in Wiltshire** |
| 26th Jul | 26th **Visit to Rudloe Manor House** at the invitation of Mr & Mrs Sanders (Members Only) |
| 16th Aug | **Garden Party** |
| 26th Sep | Lorna Almonds-Windmill tells us of her father's involvement in the **Formation of the SAS** |
| 24th Oct | Wendy Reynolds, **Recollections of Ascension Island & St Helena** |
| 28th Nov | David Leonard, **The History of Chapel Plaister** |

Please note that the programme may be subject to changes.

For more information email: corshamcivicsociety@gmail.com or see the website: www.corshamcivicsociety.co.uk

Corsham Civic Society was founded in 1963 to represent the people of Corsham in all aspects of conservation, preservation and the promotion of this delightful Wiltshire town. The Society is a registered charity, a member of ASHTAV (Association of Small and Historic Towns & Villages of the UK). It is our aim to promote high standards of planning and architecture, to create a wider awareness amongst the local population of environmental issues, the geography, history, natural history and architecture of the area, and to secure the preservation, protection and improvement of features of public amenity and historical interest, in Corsham and the surrounding countryside.

**Corsham Civic Society, 91 Tellcroft Drive, Corsham, SN13 9JQ, Wiltshire. Registered Charity No: 275321**