

THE GODALMING TRUST

Winter Newsletter 2024



The Pepperpot and surrounding area from a drone © Alan Barnes

*Working
to maintain
our heritage
and quality
of life*

The Godalming Trust is an independent body, not funded by the Councils, and all activities are organised and staffed by volunteers. Its campaigning role needs the financial support and interest of all those who care for the Godalming of today and tomorrow.

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Officers and Committees 2023/2024

President Christopher Robinson

Vice Presidents Alan Brown
Ron Musk
Angus Palmer

Executive Committee

Pam Talbot – Chairman

Graham Kimber – Vice Chairman

David Else – Honorary Secretary

Richard Gidlow – Honorary Treasurer

Colin Swait

Stefan Reynolds (co-opted)

Chairman's Introduction

I will work through the year to date in more or less chronological order starting with the AGM. Although numbers were a little lower than 2023 we were able to pass the resolutions proposed to make some changes to the Constitution. We then enjoyed a very interesting and informative talk by Matthew Slocombe, Director of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB). Anyone who occupies an old building should be aware of the services and resources available from SPAB.

We plan to hold the 2025 AGM in early July and the papers will be sent out in June.

Throughout the summer, the guided town history walks continued to be popular and the guides continue to learn new facts from the people who take part. This year one man knew a lot about this history of two pubs in particular, but also about brewing in the town.

Heritage Open Days were blessed with sunny weather and the feedback from both the properties and participants was extremely positive and the number of visitors had increased from last year. It should be borne in mind that all events are run by volunteers, people giving up their own time, to run tours of buildings and give talks and that this limits the number of tickets for the events as does space and access. We do acknowledge that there were problems with the ticketing arrangements and we shall be looking at a different system for 2025.

The Executive Committee is pleased that Stefan Reynolds has agreed to join us and he has been co-opted onto the Committee. He will bring new contacts, skills and ideas to the group.

Do look at our Facebook page and join. Alan Barnes has taken some stunning aerial photos of the town, for those not on Facebook we have included some in this newsletter including the cover photo.



[photo: Skillway] The Mayor and Consort (Paul and Penny Rivers) visiting Skillway during Heritage Open Day

For more news see our Treasurer's, the Planning and Membership Reports.

We have a fascinating article on an artist called Charles Robertson who lived in Godalming, by John Whitbourn, a local amateur historian, novelist and a former archaeologist whose family have lived in the Godalming area since at least the 1650s and his father was the last Custodian of Godalming Museum before it moved to its present site.

Pam Talbot

Godalming Trust 60th Anniversary

2025 is the 60th Anniversary of the start of The Godalming Trust and we would like to hear from you, the members, how we might celebrate this. A social event, a special lecture – please do let us have your ideas.

Godalming Trust Planning Report

Local Planning Applications

Godalming Trust continue to monitor all Planning Applications in the Godalming area and comment to Waverley Borough Council if we feel there is need. The majority of applications are for minor 'household' extensions and alterations and we rarely get involved in these unless they affect a Listed Building or are in a Conservation Area. We always welcome your input, especially if you think an application may have slipped 'under our radar' and would be worthy of our interest.

Proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework and other changes to the planning system

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government have been seeking the public's views on how the Government might revise national planning policy to support their wider objectives. Full details on the scope of this consultation can be found at www.gov.uk/government/consultations . It is a very lengthy document with 15 Chapters and the consultation had 106 separate questions!

The consultation was focused on Housing needs, 'brown field' sites, Green belt sites and the newly defined 'grey belt' sites (poor quality or previously developed land in the Green Belt), infrastructure to support new housing, community and the environment. The consultation closed in September and Godalming Trust await details of the conclusions and how they may affect our town and its surroundings.

Use Classes Update in 2024

You may wonder why so many offices and commercial buildings are currently being converted to residential use and the simple answer is that, in most cases, it is considered Permitted Development and there is little that Godalming Trust can do to prevent it apart from trying to ensure that good design is observed.

Land and buildings are divided into various categories called 'Planning Use Classes' which determine the purpose for which they can be used. Currently, the government wishes to encourage the change of use from commercial to residential, to help address the housing shortage.

Offices (B1) are able to be changed to dwelling houses (C3) under permitted development rights, to create new homes in existing buildings. Certain areas are exempt, these are mostly in central London.

Civic Design Awards

As you will know, The Godalming Trust Civic Design Awards are awarded biennially to outstanding design of new buildings, sympathetic restoration of old buildings, enhancements to the environment and general ambience of the area. These awards are made in the hope that they encourage good design in our town.

Since 'lockdown' we have not made any presentations, mainly because we are not aware of any projects in the last few years which reach our high expectations.

We are pleased to say that, this year, we have spotted several possible contenders but, if you know of a building project which may be of interest, please do hesitate to contact us.

David Else

Treasurer's Report

I can summarise the transactions for the first 6 months of the current year as follows:-

We have received by way of Subscriptions, Donations, Gift Aid and Interest some £1,850

We have spent by way of Printing and Stationery, Meeting costs, Subscriptions, Website and advertising costs some £888. Over and above this we have also made two donations. Firstly, and as mentioned in the previous Newsletter and AGM papers, a Blue Plaque in memory of George Mallory. Those costs were £470. The second donation was in response to the recent appeal by The Rural Life Centre based near Farnham of £1,000. This donation, we thought as a committee, was in line with the ethos of The Godalming Trust. The Rural Life Centre, as I am sure many of you will know, look after our Heritage in maintaining historic buildings. We thought our donation was appropriate as The Rural Life Centre have a couple of buildings that came from the Godalming area. The main building, which you cannot help but notice as you walk into the centre, being the 'Old' Pavilion that was situated on the recreation ground on Holloway Hill and used by The Godalming Cricket Club for some 100 years. It was replaced just at the turn of the century when a new pavilion was erected by The Godalming Cricket Club with the assistance of Lottery Funds from Sport England and Godalming Town Council amongst others.

The picture opposite shows Pam Talbot and Richard Gidlow together with two representatives of The Rural Life Centre with our donation, standing in front of the 'Old' Pavilion. ('OLD' Pavilion being the name by which the members of Godalming Cricket Club affectionately referred to it)

Richard Gidlow



Membership

Our preferred method of communication with our members is by email, although it is appreciated that this is not convenient for some members. However, if you continue to receive information by post (including this Newsletter!), but do have an email address that you are happy for us to use, then please let me know.

Similarly, we would appreciate hearing about change of address, email address, etc., or any other change of circumstances. In this way, we can keep our membership records as accurate as possible.

Graham Kimber

gkimber@btinternet.com

Unveiling of The George Mallory Plaque

Further to the AGM here are some photos of the plaque being unveiled on 30 June 2024 by Deputy Lieutenant Brigadier Roger Hood.



Charles Robertson, Orientalist Artist & Godhelmian.

By John Whitbourn

In the nineteenth century 'exotic climes' such as the Middle East became sufficiently safe and practicable for well-do-do Europeans to visit in significant numbers for the first time since the fall of the Roman Empire (discounting a Crusade or two...). Despite the continuing risks posed by disease and bandits and capricious regimes, the driven and/or intrepid duly did so in ever increasing numbers. For instance, in *'The Innocents Abroad, or The New Pilgrim's Progress'* (1869)¹ Mark Twain published a witty account of probably the very first advertised 'package tour' for Americans to tour the Holy Land. Although even they were advised to bring a revolver along on the trip! I can't help thinking most modern day tourists might be deterred by such 'small print'...

To those numbers Victorian Britain contributed a school of artists subsequently termed as 'Orientalists', who found both inspiration and an avid home market for their works depicting the thrilling (innocent and otherwise) strangeness of foreign scenes, hitherto only visualised in the mind's eye via Scripture or medieval travelogues.

One such artist was Charles Robertson (1844-1891), a painter and engraver, and a Godalming resident in his latter years. From at least 1881 until his death he lived at *'Meadrow House'* in Meadrow. Or rather that 'disputed zone' which according to taste can be called Godalming or Farncombe or Catteshall or maybe even Shalford as per original parish boundaries.² Call it what you will, it was there Robertson chose to enjoy the fruits of his modest fame and its evidently more than merely modest rewards.

Another Orientalist artist to make a similar Surrey choice of abode was John Frederick Lewis (1805-1876), an apparent friend and mentor of Robertson. He however selected Walton-on-Thames (coincidentally Robertson's birthplace and early home) to turn into an *'Oriental tent'*

¹ Curiously enough, the best-selling of Twain's works during his lifetime, as well as one of the best-selling travel books of all time!

² In the early 18th century it might even have been termed *'Ye World's End'*! The pub recorded there in 1723 (probably now *'The Three Lions'*) was so called.

and *'life of the Arabian Nights'* as per visitors to his house there. Whether Robertson also converted Meadrow into an outlier of the Ottoman Empire we don't know—though it's nice to toy with that outside possibility.

It was a booklet published to accompany an exhibition of Lewis's work at Watts Gallery, Compton, in 2019 that prompted dim recollection of a local press clipping I'd gleaned years before regarding Robertson. Eventually relocated,³ it concerned a request by an unnamed descendant of Robertson for information about their ancestor and especially about his picture entitled *'Loot'* (also known as *'The Captives'*) which they had inherited. As the evocative title suggests, the painting shows the victors of a Bedouin battle taking their pick of the ensuing war booty: both human and material... I don't recall any follow-up in the press to indicate a response to the correspondent's request.

Study of that painting, together with reading around the subject of the Orientalists (not so easy in pre-internet days) initially led me to the notion that no small part of their appeal and success lay in skimming as close as possible to the outer limits of Victorian propriety, without crossing over into 'indecent' and associated opprobrium.

Further research leads me to find Robertson largely innocent of such pandering.⁴ Instead I found that the majority of his work (viewable on the Web see below) were of places inaccessible but familiar to Biblically-formed and educated Victorian minds. Or else scenes from *'Arabian Nights'* type tales likewise known to them. Others were of charming domestic British landscapes, such as Yarmouth in the Isle of Wight.

And so in strictly artistic terms Robertson surely earned and deserved his acclaim and material prosperity, especially since it arrived via those aforementioned intrepid and still perilous travels. Accordingly, Godalming can be freely glad to number Mr Robertson amongst those luminaries who have made it their home.

³ Source and date lackadaisically not noted by me at the time, but by internal evidence probably 1983 or 1988.

⁴ Although see his *'Loot/The Captives'*, *'The Harem/Dancing Girl'* and *'The Reluctant Captive'*...

A few biographical details about him are readily available. He studied art in London during the early 1860s and lived in Aix-en-Provence for some years before undertaking his first 'Orientalist' trip to North Africa in 1862, aged only 18. In 1863 he made a precocious professional debut at the Royal Academy and in 1865 married Alice Mary Lonsdale⁵ (1836–1916), with whom he had six children.

Further travels ensued: to Turkey, Palestine and Egypt in 1872; Morocco and Egypt again in 1876. Much later, in 1889, he made a prolonged visit to Jerusalem, Damascus, and Cairo, as well as Turkey and Spain, before his early death aged 47. A posthumous 'retrospective' of his work was staged by the 'Fine Art Society' in 1892.

Robertson seems to have painted in oils up to around 1880 but after 1884 worked almost exclusively in watercolours, swiftly becoming an associate of the Royal Watercolour Society (rival to the Royal Academy) and became a full member shortly before his death. He was also Vice-President of the Royal Society of Painter-Etchers and Engravers. A cornucopia of his work may be viewed at, for instance:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Charles_Robertson_\(1844-1891\)](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Charles_Robertson_(1844-1891)) <https://www.artnet.com/artists/charles-robertson/>

Robertson's paintings can also be seen 'in the flesh' in the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool and in the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

Existing local awareness of Robertson is the 'Blue Plaque' (presumably unofficial) affixed to the front of Meadow House by a previous owner.

It only remains to express the hope that others better suited to art history research will take up the baton to add to my 'bare bones' outline above and firmly establish Robertson as a well-known Godhelmian.

⁵ Who'd had an adventurous pioneer era Australian birth and childhood herself (her father being one of the founders of Melbourne, Australia).

Photos of Godalming taken from a drone by Alan Barnes



The Eashing Methodist Chapel at the Rural Life Centre





Should you wish to contact The Trust on any issue please write to David Else, Honorary Secretary, Winter Cottage, Milford Road, Elstead Godalming GU8 6HY info@thegodalmingtrust.org.uk
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