

A COLLECTOR'S TALE

Mike Fenton lives in Oldbury. As a collector of local history items and regular user of Sandwell Archives, in this essay he explains his motivation and passion, describing some of his favourite items.

I suspect there is an innate curiosity in all of us. To what degree this is expressed depends on the subject matter. It is one of those troublesome quirks in life, that the less information you have at your fingertips, the more inquisitiveness increases.

So it was, that in 2007, I bought my first computer, and with it the realisation that I could satisfy (or at least partly) my curiosity concerning my ancestors. Were they more known for their infamy than their fame? Were skeletons hiding in well-concealed cupboards? What were their names and where did they work? I was drowning in a sea of questions, my impatience demanding answers more quickly than was possible, despite the technology now in front of me.

I had some vague background to my immediate family ancestors, which had been relayed to me by my father, but these were sketchy and spoken of with long periods of time separating them. Add to this, an unintended and youthful disregard for my past, the information never quite found the place at which it should have remained. With the keyboard placed in front of me, a genealogical website now subscribed to, I typed away, not nervously, but with some assertiveness, a keen determination to uncover tales and tribulations of those that had gone before. To my surprise, details of my paternal grandparent's home (and the place of my father's birth) appeared with little if any issue. To see the names written by the enumerator (although not always legibly) on the page was a revelation; it was if, and only at that point, that their lives were real, and not just mentions of names passed on over the years in casual conversation. I don't recall my father telling me the names of his grandparents, so to see them listed was another of those moments when you shake your head, not in disappointment, but in both satisfaction and awe. Yes, these were just simple names, but the uncovering of them was the beginning of a whole new enterprise, one which travelled in two directions and, ironically, due to my father's diagnosis of dementia, a path across which my research and his failing memory never quite met. The more I discovered, the less he was able to impart, until all but a microscopic dot was left of his ability to recall anything of significance. As tragic as this was – his condition and prognosis was all but sadly known - I couldn't of course let this distract me from my course of action, and I am sure he would have wished me to continue. The pages began unfolding before me on my computer screen, my family tree spreading, its branches

reaching out, names, years, dates and occupations filling my head, the information up to this point not known to any existing family member.

It then became apparent, that any family tree, or any genealogical investigation, could not withstand any true interrogation, without understanding the history that surrounded all of them. This was the second of the directions that I indicated earlier, one that now occupies me constantly, and something that appears to continue its appeal, no matter how frustrating it can be. Collecting may seem like a mundane and harmless activity, a gentle pastime, largely unnoticed by those not attracted to its benign commotions, when in reality it has the potential to stir the jealousy and frustration of those eager to pursue the hunt and capture its prey. The anger and frenzy I have witnessed in some circles would leave your mouth agape and jaw descending in free fall. The collecting fraternity is not generally characterised by those engaged in youthful activities, it is moreover, a somewhat niche gathering of largely middle aged and elderly individuals (mostly men), supporting facial adornments, and a sartorial fashion of a questionable nature. The demographic nature of the latter is not however the focus of our investigations and is purely a little 'local colour' to heighten an activity some may consider to be rather humdrum and uninspiring.

Those ancestral examinations I mentioned above were the springboard from which my snowballing collection was amassed, inseparable from each other in every conceivable way. Everything I have achieved in obtaining is a thread woven from the past, winding its way through my family tree, and up to and including my place of birth, the town giving rise to my family antecedents and my place of residence. This wasn't my initial plan, the original intention to simply collect a few token items that reflected my interest in local history, and thus, West Bromwich being the only real focus of my attentions. It soon became apparent however, that the roots of one's family tree stretch out far and wide, other towns and cities being caught up in its branches, relentlessly pulling you in many directions, until you yield to the fact collecting cannot be achieved in isolation, and that you need to prepare on a bigger and all too better scale than you could at first have imagined. Having accepted my now expanded plans, I looked further afield, in order that my collection mirrored those towns and places that were an integral part of my personal, working and private life. I could I suppose have included any number of towns in the immediate and peripheral outskirts of my immediate geographical attention, but I had logically to set limits, and generally, I have kept to these, otherwise my collection could not sensibly be displayed or archived in any safe or meaningful manner. Currently, the collection is dominated by postcards and glass, the latter not all having a local designation, but those that do, contributing greatly; more about this a little later. Thankfully, the postcards are easily stored and filed away, but

even these more than innocuous items can readily raise arguments and disputes amongst even the most peaceful and agreeable of the collecting society.

Whilst my intention is to discuss the collection itself, it cannot go unremarked upon, that the actual process is imbued with pitfalls and caveats which must not be ignored, any failure to do so, resulting in every conceivable manner of argument over ownership, copyright and even legal precedents that some claim uphold their particular gripe. This becomes all too apparent when sharing your discoveries on social media, and something that I have fallen prey to on numerous occasions. Claims and counter claims regarding items posted or shared on internet platforms persist to this day; some saying, they instantly become part of the much mythologised ‘public domain’; by this, I mean the whole concept of the public domain has been so scrutinised, even those with legal expertise in the field, will happily shy away from any engagement around such an overtly contentious issue.

The legalities of such tribulations are of no substantial interest to me, and I believe there is a simpler and more honest approach one should promote. I have always wanted to share my findings, irrespective of its value or rarity; after all, opening up such a collection will always find a larger – and importantly – more knowledgeable audience. Letting such photographs and artefacts rest on dusty shelves or set aside in unremarkable wooden boxes for years on end, adds little if any historical value, and denies the wider populace an opportunity to view them. What I have to say in my own defence – and without being overly proprietorial – is that if those who take an active interest in local history forums vis-à-vis social media platforms want to share images and items from my collection, I make one and only one request – just ask! I will, with very few exceptions say yes, with only one proviso, simply credit me, not from any sense of self-importance, but a recognition of the time, research and financial costs invested in acquiring such items; you can imagine therefore, that any disquiet I may display at finding such ‘unauthorised’ sharing, is justified. Some may undertake this in all innocence, maybe naivety, but when there is an all too obvious attempt to gain a degree of kudos from doing so, this is a point at which I have to make my feelings and displeasure known.

With the negative side of collecting put aside, let us take a look at some of those items thus far acquired which I particularly cosset and which resonate with some of the towns connecting those threads of my life previously alluded to. Before doing so, I need to provide a brief explanation of questions often asked and other related matters, which will provide further support to what follows.

I am often asked if I have a particular favourite item in the collection, or which is the most valuable, but these are questions not easily answered, as this

depends on context, perhaps a personal connection, indeed, a myriad of factors to take into consideration, before providing a more concrete response. There is also one significant element to assess before replying to the above: collectability versus intrinsic value. My collection is not something akin to that exhibited in provincial museums or similar establishments, nor do I pretend that it is; these are artefacts and items with an immediate and local connection, and only that, with no pretence to be anything else; the value therefore is always – without little if any exception – the collectability inherent in the item, depending on rarity, scarceness etc. In fact, I have encountered feverish bidding at auctions for items once mass produced, made from material far removed from the world of precious metals, and not always the most aesthetic of objects to cast over a critical eye; however, despite this, if the collector has a shelf space to fill, an item long yearned for, the sky can truly be the limit, all logic and sense of financial propriety disregarded, in the hunt and final capture of that one elusive item.

It is not only a financial burden that one finds oneself dealing with, but their own personal living space which becomes increasingly encroached upon. It is that burning, as yet unsatisfied feeling at the pit of your very being, that drives you forward to purchase and acquire more and more, irrespective of the impact it has. Bookcases soon lose their meaning as they continue to bear the weight of anything but the written word, with every space in between crammed and re-organised to satisfy and accommodate the latest acquisitions. I often say that my living rooms (and that becomes something more of a misnomer as the years progress) look more like an annexe of the Black Country Museum, than any normal residential property, but truth will out, and if I am absolutely sincere, such concerns are not particularly troublesome, the collection does take priority, despite logic and reasoning telling me otherwise. That awful word ‘downsizing’ is a complete anathema to me, not that I collect gratuitously, but surrendering to such a concept would deny me the very pleasure innate in the chase for the special and marvellous that has thus far not been denied to me. So, these are the hazards, obstacles and uncertainties that accompany any genuine aficionado in the collecting circle. Taking these all into account and understanding their potential implications, I feel somewhat safer to move on to the objects themselves.

The collection has a sequence, and one reflecting my town of birth, my family’s genealogical roots, my years of schooling and residence. Taking the latter into consideration, it would only be logical to begin with the town in which I made my first appearance many decades ago. The shortness of time does not allow me to provide a more detailed investigation into the objects I wish to present to you or look at more of them; I trust sufficient interest will be generated, and to some extent, the items will speak for themselves.

Beginning therefore with Smethwick, I have to admit that the only connection I have is that I was born there – and more specifically – on my late Aunt's bed, in Crockett's Lane, a house long since subject to the wrecking ball of the 1960s. With all the towns referenced throughout the collection, it hasn't been an easy decision deciding which to scrutinise and which to discuss; with regards to Smethwick, this has been a little easier. Whilst not having any pretence at having any expertise in any particular individual, scientific discovery or local company, the years of collecting have found myself more than a little obsessive, when it comes to one of the town's former industrial Goliaths – Chance Brothers. Both my paternal Grandfather and his uncle worked there, my late father often telling us that Benjamin (my grandfather) was a glassblower, but at the time such information was casual small talk, and I heeded little if any attention to it. It appears, as the years have passed, that once you start a collection the habit is so compulsive it is as near as is impossible to stop. I don't recall which was the first Chance Brothers item I bought, but for the purposes of these inquiries, I have chosen what I believe is a piece that encompasses all the attributes and factors that constitute an exceptional and remarkably good collectible. It has the name of the company (even the Lighthouse Division is given specific mention), it has a provenance, and one linked to an outstanding feat of 19th century engineering; also, in current parlance at least, it can be ascribed as an 'interior designer's piece', well, at least to some!



This paraffin fuelled lamp was made between 1889 and 1890 and was used during the construction of the Forth Rail Bridge across the Firth of Forth in the east of Scotland. It is understood that these lamps were suspended from the criss-cross like upper parts of the bridge in order to illuminate the way for the brave 4,600 workers employed in the bridge's hazardous construction, during which over 70 were killed. Some 240 miles away at Spon Lane, perhaps little

was it known, what contribution was being made that would undoubtedly lead to the saving of many lives, this rare survivor is – a cliché maybe – a testament and legacy of the Chance Brothers Glassworks. At this point, although there is always a margin around which I may change my mind, it is this item that I would choose as the most favoured of my collection. It remains in a very good condition, it relates to my grandfather's place of work, the company name is clearly legible, the lamp was used during an incredible feat of engineering on a structure world-renowned; it even works, although the bulb is a 20th century addition, and its rarity complements all the other factors. Such an item is scarce indeed to include all such attributions, and I wouldn't sell it under any circumstances.

As with the Chance lamp, the following item also contains all those elements that constitute a particularly good representation of what a perfect collectible is, or at least, should be.



A postcard view of Smethwick High Street from 1930 (dates and years always provide an unwelcome diversion from the view on offer, and a regular contributor to unwelcome squabbles and social media altercations), shows a scene bursting with animation, advertising, buildings of historical significance and so much more. In the bottom left-hand corner, a gentleman cycles out of view - perhaps to avoid the attentions of the photographer – and in doing so, takes our eye immediately to the side of the town's singularly most important construction – the Toll House. Another gentleman a little further away appears to be taking a sideways glance in the direction of the photographer, perhaps

though with some disdain, his arms folded in an apparent gesture of defiance (such images always allow the collector a licence to speculate!). Teetering on the edge of the pavement, a rather dapper gent stands with arms on hips, wearing a black hat, blazer and white shirt splaying outwards; this sets him apart from the more obvious working-class men that surround him, his facial grimace directed to something or someone on the opposite side of the street. Heading towards the viewer are women in typical rounded hats of the early 1930s period, a young child dominated by everyone and everything around him/her; some other women are standing with their backs against the wall that fronts the former coaching house. Behind the man with trilby hat, and neatly parked near the ornate street lamps, is the only car on view, the only other motorised vehicle, a small van on the other side of the road, some little distance away at the point at which the street bends, one of its rear doors open, indicating an imminent, or ongoing delivery. On the right-hand side, some of the buildings are replete with huge advertising posters, and despite the lettering and message being obscured, the effect is complete, and adds further to the overall dynamism of the scene. On the far right, another flat capped young man, right leg partly raised, is taking a backwards glance at something evidently occupying his attention; is this unknown 'incident' the same occurrence attracting the disapproving gaze of those on the opposite side? Almost out of view, hangs the sign of the Blue Gates Public House, the original premises at this time, but fast approaching its demise, as an order for its demolition and rebuild was already in place by 1929, the new premises opening in late 1932. If time permitted, I could enthuse more about this view, and everything it means to qualify as a superb example of a true collectible and all it represents as a social commentary of its era; however, I am compelled to move on to the next thread and another town.

The overwhelming majority of my collection is dominated by those objects having an inextricable link to West Bromwich; this was, after all, the place that gave rise to my family tree, having now grown to over 2,000 individuals, some settling many thousands of miles away from their Black Country roots, predominantly the United States, where I discovered a huge family of Mormon disciples, whose origins began in Rolfe Street, some insignificant number of yards away from where I was born. The number of images and artefacts I could have chosen is quite staggering, and I will, I have little doubt, regret at some later point, those I have failed to include. Nonetheless, what I have decided to present here will have to suffice, until at least, I may be allowed to return to discuss this subject once more.

As my collecting fervour originated from my original endeavours to reveal the stories and tribulations of my ancestors, I felt it only pertinent to choose an object that had some relevance to this, no matter how small or tenuous that may be. Generations of the Fenton family lived in or worked near to Overend Street,

a place to some degree, off the beaten track, huddled between the High Street and Bull Street, and a place now not particularly remarkable, the original housing (with the exception of two properties) long since demolished, and with it the industries that once thrived there. It was a street very much a place in which you would not want to be found alone after dark in Victorian Britain. It was infamously populated by cock fighting gangs, prostitutes, petty thieves and witnessed more than the average murder. In the later Victorian period, one of the companies established there was the Dart Spring and Safe Company, a mere 100 yards or more from where the Fenton family lived, and where my late father and aunt were the last to be born. It was founded in 1895 by G. Arthur Griffin and William J. Wilson and busied itself with the manufacture of springs and safes. Naturally, any item West Bromwich related always attracts both my interest and perhaps ‘unhealthy’ curiosity; however, to acquire an item with a direct link to my forebear’s place of residence is quite something else and a ‘must have’. So it was, that I was contacted by a fellow historian who explained she had an item which I would assuredly like to see. I arrived at her place of work in something of a frenzied state, wondering what this could possibly be. When the object was revealed, I could barely contain my astonishment. Before me stood a sizeable, gilt *framed picture showing the company logo of the Dart Spring and Safe Company* from Overend Street.



It was donated and no financial transaction took place, a truly altruistic act from one guardian of local history to another. The picture had once hung in the boardroom at Overend Street but since when and at what point it was made, I have not yet been able to determine. It has not travelled far since those closing years of the 19th century and now comfortably and appropriately hangs on the hallway wall in the Fenton household.

The number of photographic studios that peppered the High Street in West Bromwich from Victorian to Edwardian times and beyond was fortunate, in that it provided the following generations and collectors an endless supply of views and vistas of the town as it developed over the decades and from one century to another. It did however have an unintentional downside, in so much that it has been quite impossible to decide which image to choose to supplement the second item with which I would like to share with you. Ideally, it had to be one that encompassed a view that all is too familiar, maybe nostalgic, and of something long since removed from the landscape where it once stood. Experience has told me, especially from conversations on social media, that if there is one building in West Bromwich that engenders conversation and memories, it is that of the patisserie and cake business of Broadhead's at Dartmouth Square. Its provenance as a business serving the hunger and sweet tooth of local inhabitants actually began with another cake and bread maker – Sidney George Perry, who took up residence in the building towards the end of the 19th, start of the 20th century; it has been one of those ongoing frustrations, that I have to date been unable to glean any precise year for the commencement of the business; however, postcard views with helpfully dated frank marks indicate Perry's was certainly active as early as 1903 and still very much trading in 1908, the family having moved at some point in the following three years; the reason for this seemingly unexpected uprooting remaining a mystery. We know that by 1911, Cheshire born baker and confectioner Joseph Bernard Broadhead took up residence at his five-roomed business, from where he plied his sweet items and savouries for generations to come. Anecdotes relaying the huge variety of cakes, bread and similar items for sale are boundless, the mere mention of Broadhead's suffice to fill a copious number of pages. The archives upon which any meaningful research relies have disappointingly led to a void of information regarding Joseph Broadhead himself. How long exactly did his bakery empire last, did he pass on the business to his son Douglas or future heirs? His wife Catherine certainly stayed in the town until 1965 passing away at the grand old age of 88; whether she continued in some capacity as she neared her twilight years is simple speculation.



The photograph here is of *Dartmouth Square dates from c. 1968*, and although it only partly captures a view of this once much-loved institution, it does bring together once more all those elements that come together to make not just a superb photograph, but one of a truly collectible nature. Buses on either side of the road, smaller vehicles heading towards the viewer and a small congregation of shoppers assembled outside Broadhead's which itself is adjacent to the Kenrick Clock, a landmark only renovated in the past few months of 2023. What I find particularly redolent of the decade is the view of the two sharply dressed young men ambling across the road, throwing a casual glance and wave towards the photographer. Black suits, white shirts and ties, shoes shimmering in the daylight. Looking carefully, you can see that the person nearest the camera is holding what appears to be a small paper package, maybe containing a freshly prepared sandwich or other tasty morsel from Broadheads, although this is I suppose idle speculation, something very much in the nature of the collector to do, and perhaps if not undermining historical or other similar contexts, then little harm is caused. The photograph has other merits when considering collectability. The small corner of the High Street seen here – Dartmouth Square – shows buildings in a relative state of good repair, a snapshot of the very varied number of shops and other retail premises that existed across the whole stretch of the fabled 'Golden Mile', that wide, sweep of premises that stretched out from Carters Green at one end, to the terminus of the High Street at the other. The relatively small number of shoppers shown are attired in those fashions now so admired by connoisseurs of vintage and mid-century items, a lady seemingly and patiently peering into the premises of

‘Meeson’s’, an advertisement for Benson and Hedges cigarettes hanging over the store entrance, another for ‘Player’s’, suspended from an ornate, cast iron metal fixture, both of which of course, now very much absent – and sensibly so – from the landscape as witnessed today. In the near distance, the Bulls Head Public House can be seen, an institution about which local inhabitants of a certain age will speak fondly, and the history of which remains an integral part of the town. These are the vital characteristics that imbue an image so beloved of the collector and what propels them forward in the search for more; a compulsion maybe, but undoubtedly a healthy, and certainly innocent one.

My schooling from the mid-1960s until the beginning of a new decade in 1980, had always took place in Rowley Regis, a place much smaller than those already referenced, but with an ancient and long history to match. When discussing this former stereotypical village, the town of neighbouring Blackheath cannot be omitted; it was of course the sale of glebe land in 1841 (that having once belonged to the church) in Blackheath that formed the basis for the establishment of Blackheath parish itself, and thus, my interest in the history of this place also, and any artefacts and items I can successfully discover linked to it.

One of the principal companies active in Blackheath, and geographically sandwiched between it and Rowley Regis, was the sprawling works of Thomas William Lench, colloquially and universally known as simply ‘Lench’s’. Founded in 1880, it was a prolific producer of nuts and bolts, but also made huge numbers of rivets and screws. It recruited generations of families over its long history, and it has been fortunate that I have been able to purchase, source and discover, a surprisingly high volume of photographs, documents, letters, and even industrial items, that have survived the century or more since the company’s birth. Lench’s was a company very much characterised by its dynastic history, its managers and directors – seemingly at least - left unhindered by mergers, takeovers or similar commercial activities. Founded by Thomas William Lench, it is very much the history and managerial manoeuvres of Thomas’s younger brother Harry, where focus and attention is with little exception placed. In the early years of the 20th century (records are indistinct regarding the precise year) Harry Lench was elevated from clerk to manager, a position from which the company name was very much promoted within the immediate community and further afield. Amongst those collectibles thus far acquired, there are letters from local dignitaries, clergy, military and even the BBC. Invoices in my collection indicate Harry’s admiration for motorcars, gardening, renovation and building work. Following in the footsteps of some of his former and Victorian predecessors, acts of philanthropy were very much part of his commercial make-up. Recreational facilities, charity donations, football teams, musical (brass) bands and scouting all part of the company’s industrial

DNA. With regard to the latter, I was more than fortunate to add to my collection – and in very recent times – an object that I believe hung somewhere (presumably the boardroom) in the factory. It shows the ***Lench Works B.P. Scout Troop in 1924.***



Framed, it is of some considerable size, measuring 33 x 22 inches, and an item I'm sure any previous employee would have failed not to notice. The photograph is taken on the Sport's and Social Club grounds opposite the main entrance to Lench's. I have never made a detailed count of the numbers featured but it is close to or exceeding 100. What proportion of those photographed – if any – were employed by the company is unknown but does show the extent to which Lench's name and activities immediately outside the factory gates had travelled. The grounds and buildings have sadly all since been lost, and in part, one of the reasons I continue to collect; not just for some gratuitous act of private hoarding, but to ensure that provenance and heritage are – to whatever extent -preserved and made secure.

En route to Rowley Regis Grammar School – and later to the college that succeeded it, I ambled passed St. Giles Church, a building at the time I must have passed a thousand times or more, but without any thought or regard to its history – and oh, what a history it has! Time doesn't allow me to provide the information I would like to impart, and I will instead refer you to those records you may find archived, and research already submitted in extant records and articles. Add to that my own research – mostly published in the annals of the Black Country Bugle – and on social media, and the pages come alive with

anecdotes and stories of this fascinating building. With more pressing scholastic matters on my mind in those years of the early 1970s, little did I know, that St. Giles was not the first church to have been built on that hill overlooking both Rowley Village and Blackheath, to which it ostensibly gave birth.

The dates and years ascribed to the first of these churches is somewhat undefined but is considered by most to have been constructed during the reign of King John, in c. 1198. Remarkably, over the following 600 years and more, there do not appear to be any stories of an infamous or similar nature; scandals or clerical misdemeanours either having been successfully hidden, or simply not having occurred. By the beginning of the 19th century, it was the physical appearance of the church that was in question, subsequent descriptions providing uncomfortable reading for both church elders and local worshippers alike. In 1801 the English cleric and historian, the Rev. Stebbing Shaw wrote that, *"This fabric has the least of anything remarkable of one I ever saw"*. In 1808, the author and preacher Joseph Nightingale added salt to an already festering wound when he commented that, *"The Church here, of Rowley Regis, is remarkable for the deformity and barbaric taste of its construction"*.

Rowley's ecclesial incumbent since 1800 had been the Bible thumping firebrand George Barrs; he had bitterly complained about the terrible disrepair of the church for many years and campaigned zealously for a new building. George Barr's pulpit protests were eventually realised – ironically though just a short 12 months after the Reverend's death. The old church's final service was witnessed on November 24th, 1839, the new church re-opening in September of 1841. George Barrs was not to be forgotten; his remains laid to rest beneath the original three-decker pulpit.

Despite all the years of campaigning, and the centuries that had unfolded, it was the ravages of the industrial revolution that sealed the fate of this long awaited second church. Mining works and its associated industries had caused irreparable damage, subsidence leading to officials condemning Barr's new church as unsafe in 1900. With the foundation stone being placed in June of 1904, and the 1858 tower being incorporated as an architectural nod and wink to its predecessor, the 3rd church opened its doors; it is what follows that has always fascinated me concerning Rowley Church, and particularly this third incarnation. Half-truths, downright lies, myths, legends and speculation abound, and the fact is, that the whole picture may never be known; however, as morning broke on Wednesday, June 18th, 1913, the people of Rowley Regis looked on in astonishment, as yet another tragedy befell upon the area, and once more on the church that dominated the view from all sides.

The day was approaching its closure when around 7pm – the time has never been accurately ascertained – the repose was cruelly broken. A miner and local man by the name of Josiah Westwood who resided just some 100 yards from the church is reported to have been the first witness to the unfurling horror about to re-visit the area. An inferno of great magnitude had taken hold of St. Giles, Josiah Westwood later to afford evidence that he had first observed the fire illuminating through a window at the chancel end. Newspaper reporters commented how Josiah's hand had been severely injured, blood pouring profusely from the deep wounds inflicted by the smashing of the glass from a nearby fire alarm. At approximately 8pm the whole of Rowley Regis was starkly aroused by the fearful sound of sirens from a fire brigade who despite their bravest efforts and speed had arrived to see their third church ablaze with such ferocity it seemed their efforts were to be in vain. In the early stages of the fire – which by most accounts is believed to have begun in the organ loft - the flames had quickly spread to the pews which had been constructed from highly inflammable pitch pine and from there it set alight the beams which supported the roof, the latter collapsing within just a quarter of an hour of the blaze taking hold. The view of this Dante-like inferno was described by many, as they traversed the steep incline of Rowley Village to view the engulfing fire as it lit up the evening sky, at this point visible from at least 12 miles away. One particular report commented that, *'The top of the tower had stood out like a huge beacon against the dark sky, and the main part of the building was lined in flames. The roof had disappeared and from the interior of the church there was a deep red glare, while the walls, stoutly buttressed, seemed outlined for all the world with a string of giant fairy lamps'*.

A large crowd of spectators had assembled dangerously close, the burning ends of roof beams described as resembling 'fiery gargoyles' and falling masonry narrowly missing the attending fire fighters. Rowley Regis Firemen had been bravely and ably assisted by neighbouring brigades and with all the windows burnt out, their collective efforts were concentrated on saving the tower. The Rowley Brigade was commanded by Captain Large and Lieutenant Smith, the captain arriving at 8.30pm who reported that despite the combined assistance of both Old Hill and Oldbury Fire Engines it seemed all was already considered lost. Other descriptions of the fire's terrible progression were testament to the calamity now unfolding. The fire had quickly crept along the floor and roof, the licking flames swallowing the interior within minutes, one report describing how *'...the roof fell in with a terrible noise, blowing out all the windows'*.

The valiant struggle to now save the ancient tower did from some accounts meet with a degree of success; the tower it was reported housed *'eight of the finest bells in the district'*, an historically important octet to be saved if at all possible. The tower was rescued although it had suffered gravely, now a poor and

dishevelled husk of its former self. Why had the blaze advanced so effortlessly? Why had the tremendous and tireless actions of the assembled fire brigades not succeeded? The inquest had begun.

Captain Large said afterwards that the brigade had received the alarm at both Blackheath and Rowley Regis, and within five minutes his men were already at the scene, the ever-growing flames before them seemingly impenetrable, the church “*simply ablaze*”, to use the captain’s own words. The captain continued by saying, “*...there was no hydrant supply and we had to send a turncock to cut off the water from Warley and Quinton in order to get any pressure. The motor turbine was then got to work, but we could only run it at a little over quarter speed because the water supply was not sufficient to keep it going at full speed*”.

The factors leading to the fire appear both numerous and not entirely conclusive. Pews constructed from pitch pine, a wood containing a volatile and incendiary oil, poor water supply and even a disadvantageous wind strength could be assigned varying degrees of guilt. Further anecdotes indicate that on the day of the fire a supply of paraffin was delivered with workmen busying themselves inside the church; stories of children playing in the church yard shortly before the alarm was raised have also been mentioned. Reverend Daughlish explained the day after that he had been in the church just half an hour before the blaze was noticed; he had been officiating at a christening and curiously – if not inexplicably – neither the vicar or anyone attending the service had witnessed anything untoward. Suspicion soon fell – and unfairly so – on certain individuals and groups. The Suffragette Movement was immediately suspected but without any evidence to support such an unsubstantiated claim. Similar mistrust was placed upon striking workers from the nearby Coomb Wood steel works who had been displeased by the vicar’s lack of support for their cause.

Still to this day conspiracies surrounding Rowley’s great fire continue, and the truth is there is no substantive evidence for any cause; the mostly likely explanation being this was nothing more than an accident, anything more malicious yet to be supported by evidence and objectivity. The First World War had abated all building efforts to realise a new and fourth building. Insurance on the church had not been completed as it should have, with funds having to be realised via the community and other sources. Construction began in 1922, the new church being completed and dedicated on September 23rd, 1923. I understand plans are already afoot to celebrate the centenary of this most intriguing and mysterious of buildings and I look forward to seeing them.



My collection includes a *press cutting showing the church ablaze*, and what is reported to be an image captured using ‘special flashlight photography’; others have since commented that these were exaggerated claims on behalf of the newspaper or its reporters on the ground, designed to sell copies of an incident that has remained in the memories of local people, irrespective of any journalistic hyperbole, and one that still fascinates this collector.



There is a further image – this time in postcard form – *that dates from 1908*, which is another of those wonderfully captured views that perfectly encapsulates all those elements a collector craves to see when flicking through those huge volumes of postcards you encounter at antique fairs, car boot sales, and those proffered by online auction sellers.

On this occasion, the photographer has enabled the eye to travel the steep gradient of Rowley Village, taking in all the animation on both sides. In doing so, we see a large crowd of mostly women and children dressed in almost identical black and white dresses, perhaps indicating an imminent church event or returning from one. It is perhaps possible that the view has been orchestrated by the photographer, or simply the appearance of one, has brought out the curious nature of those present at the sight of a camera pointing in their direction. All the buildings shown have now gone, and unfortunately I cannot identify those which are distinct from residential properties, with the exception of one, which is the former King Arms Public House on the right hand side, outside which stand a small group, and one of Rowley Regis oldest licensed premises, which lasted I believe into the 1960s (maybe later) until it too was removed from the landscape.

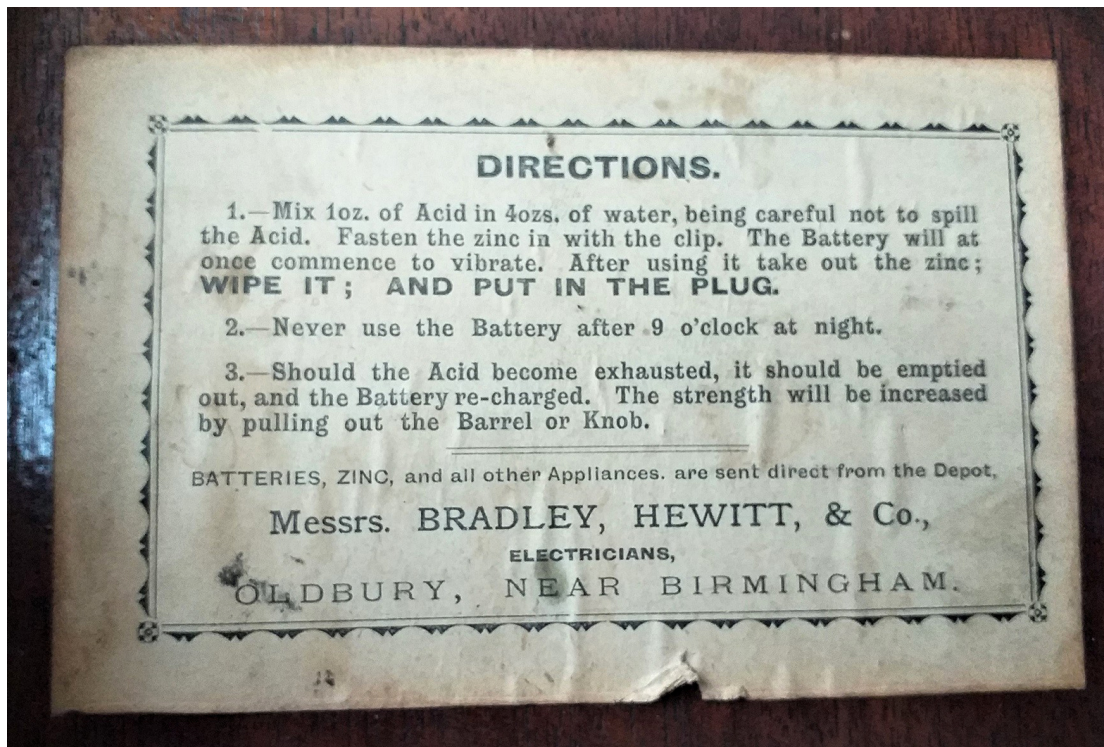
The whole image is a reflection of the social life indicative of the time; with the motor car to yet make a substantial appearance, 2 horse and carts are present, one in the middle of the road and seemingly unmanned, the other parked up, with the driver atop the contraption. Three chickens in the centre right of the view peck their collective way across the hill, reminding us of the existing rural nature of Rowley Regis in this period. The climax of the photograph is of course the church itself, nestled behind trees and the narrowing of the hill as it approaches its zenith. The tower which fireman bravely laboured to survive overlooks the whole scene, unbeknown of the tragedy to befall those in its shadow a short five years later. It really does have everything a collector wants; a street scene amply peopled, transport of the era which helps break up the view and buildings of varying styles and architecture - and so much more pleasing than the drab and uninspiring banality of contemporary housing estates! Add to that the unique history of the church, you could not want for more.



To our final town, we arrive in Oldbury and an object surrounded in some both curiosity and mystery. *A small, maybe early Edwardian wooden box of little aesthetic appeal* poses more questions than there are answers. On either side of the box there are two puncture like holes, the use for which is not immediately obvious; on one side only, there is a small anchor shaped catch still in working order. The bottom section forms a draw and is fronted with a rounded knob of either ivory or more likely bone. Opening the box, the underside is affixed with a discoloured label informing the owner of instructions, the details of which are both curious and puzzling. The directions are as follows:

1. Mix 1oz of acid in 4 oz of water, being careful not to spill the acid. Fasten the zinc in with the clip. The battery will at once commence to vibrate. After using it take out the zinc; WIPE IT; AND PUT IN THE PLUG.
2. Never use the battery after 9 o'clock at night.
3. Should the acid become exhausted, it should be emptied out, and the battery re-charged. The strength will be increased by pulling out the barrel or knob.

Beneath these somewhat bewildering instructions we are usefully informed of the company responsible – on this occasion - MESSRS. BRADLEY, HEWITT, & CO., ELECTRICIANS, OLDBURY, NEAR BIRMINGHAM.



Infuriatingly, a thorough search of the company name has not unearthed one iota of information. It does appear however, that the box is a late example of one of those 'cure all' devices, so beloved in the Victorian era; a panacea to alleviate and vanquish a plethora of ailments, anything from nervous disorders to hiccups. The contents of the box have sadly long been lost but from other similar items we can deduce what they are likely to have been. Quickly returning to the second of the printed instructions, it is plainly mystifying why you are commanded to 'Never use the battery after 9 o'clock at night'. Did its operation really result in a nuisance so horribly and audibly loud, or was there some more simplistic and innocent reason? Perhaps it will never be known?

The next photographic contribution shows *Oldbury from the early 1930s*, and one bustling with activity and movement. A small group of men and women are either exiting the corner shop on the left-hand side or are leaving Halesowen Street at the point at which they are crossing the top of Birmingham Street. One of the signs on the left indicates the booking services of Midland Red, the other a cigarette advertising sign, probably hanging from the former premises of Alfred Bone. The group on the left look somewhat forlorn, if not suspicious of the cameraman they find in their proximity.



The backdrop is dominated by the public buildings of the time, only the clock tower and former library still standing. At the very centre is the War Memorial, yet to include those names lost from the war that will descend once more on the people of Oldbury only short few years after this image was captured. Three young men are huddled around a black and white lamp post which shows the direction of travel for West Bromwich; all have hands in pockets, and not meaning to be judgmental or critical, it does present something of a group of men idling away their time, their glares aimed directly at the photographer who has preserved for all time their inactive countenance.

If there is one image in the whole scene that brings everything together, it is the policeman directing the non-existent traffic for which he has been made responsible to oversee. He stands rigidly above those around him, the striped box providing the view he requires to safely manoeuvre the cars and buses – when they appear – to their collective destinations. His bright white sleeves mark him out and supplement his cap and uniform. This is a panorama of immense animation and activity, shining a light on the transport, fashions, architecture and daily routines of people of the period; it is a fantastic example of an object any true collector will seek out and pay accordingly, no matter the financial disadvantage that collector may succumb to.

The collector's journey is never complete, and most will explain there is always something missing; in my case, early photographs of Overend Street – evidently rare as proverbial hens' teeth – and ones which will allow me a view of those back-to-back houses where dozens of my ancestors lived for generations. There is one, appearing in a book from David Pearson, showing a Methodist preacher

talking to a small crown in ‘The Fold’, the very corner of the street where my father was born, but sadly, it is a grainy and dark image, with most detail illegible.

As my acquisitions increase, I have come to realise that I have a particular penchant for collecting industrial and commercial items. These – like the much-loved Chance Lamp – shine a light on the industrial practices of the day, and in a 21st century residential property, they may seem at first at odds with their surroundings; however, it is this, that makes them so appealing. The same applies to those which feature advertising; an enamel sign or confectionary tin, uniquely decorated, mysteriously adding an old world charm to an environment peppered with technological advancements.

I could easily enthuse and gush about many more items and photographs, write copious more words and sentences, but that is for another day. I trust you have gained some insight into the life – and yes perhaps, a somewhat askew one of the collector, noting his or her overzealous eccentricities, their annoyances and jubilations at missing out and winning, and ultimately the chase that is never complete.

Mike Fenton, August 2023.