



Paris
Branch

Newsletter

January 2023



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Chairman's message

Greetings and a Happy New Year to you all.

I trust you have all had a pleasant and peaceful Christmas and celebration of the NewYear.

As you may have heard Noreen Riols one of our long-time members has been awarded an MBE in the New Years honours list and we extend to her our heartiest congratulations. You will find further details in Mark's contribution below.

In my introduction to the December issue I mentioned the expected results for our 2022 Poppy Appeal. There was an error in the text and the figure we expected to raise was not 1000 euros but 10,000 euros. In fact, I am happy to be able to tell you now that the precise figure which we raised was 16721.09 euros, a most satisfactory result. My sincere thanks go out to all of you who took an active part in helping this happen.

We were due to have our January lunch on the 19th of this month, however I have been informed that there are expected to be strikes on that day which could hamper those of you who would attend by using public transport. Thus we have decided to hold the lunch a week later on Thursday 26th January. Those of you who have already booked for the 19th, please confirm (or cancel) with me for the 26th .

This year we look forward to seeing the coronation of our new Monarch. King Charles III. The event will certainly provide much of interest and am sure I am not alone in looking forward to the celebration.

May I remind our committee members that we have our first meeting of this year on the 17th of this month. Please let Janet know asap if you will not be attending in person.

All best wishes,

Richard Neave.

Janet's New Year Quiz

- 1. In March 2022, which oldest recorded town became the UK's newest city?*
- 2. How many Prime Ministers were there in 2022?*
- 3. Who did Will Smith slap at the Oscars?*
- 4. The UK was given an additional bank holiday in June 2022. What was the reason?*
- 5. How many gold medals did Great Britain win at the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing?*
- 6. What was the most-watched Netflix series of 2022?*
- 7. Who was named sports personality in UK of 2022?*
- 8. When is King Charles III's coronation?*
- 9. Which royal will celebrate their birthday on 17th July?*
- 10. How do the royal family spend New Year's Eve?*
- 11. Which member of the royal family took part in I'm A Celebrity 2022?*
- 12. Who was the world's longest reigning monarch?*
- 13. What are the names of Prince Charles' five grandchildren?*
- 14. What breed of dog was commonly associated with Queen Elizabeth II?*
- 15. What country drinks the most coffee per capita?*

Answers on last page

NOREEN RIOLS awarded MBE

A longtime member of the Paris Branch, Noreen Riols, has been awarded an MBE in the 2023 honours for her services to UK/France relations and Second World War education. As many of you will know she was an administrative member of the Special Operations Executive and is one of the oldest surviving members of the French section. She participated in the training and preparation of agents about to be infiltrated into France.



When Noreen joined the RBL Paris Branch in 2001 she was invited to give a talk about her experiences in the war and this, as I knew very little of the subject, I found most interesting. Especially the bit about how agents, about to be parachuted into enemy occupied Europe were

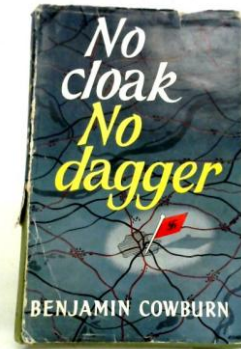
given « a last night's leave in London » to enjoy. It seems a flock of attractive female members of the SOE were released on the town at the same time. Their job was to befriend the about-to-be operatives at a susceptible moment and try to get them to give away information about their upcoming missions. Any who ceded to the temptation to do so were immediately denounced, dismissed and, presumably, sent back to the ranks.

It was whilst listening to Noreen's narrative that I suddenly made a connection. A few years previously my wife and I had purchased a rather primitive country cottage. A local estate agent had cunningly decided I might be impressed by the fact that it was already called « Rose Cottage », not a common name in the wilds of the Bray countryside. The owner was a rather surly Englishman called Cowburn. He had a Lancashire accent which, when we met, he immediately applied to the task of inflating the value of his modest property. Calling up the remains of my Yorkshire accent I set about deflating it.

Eventually we came to some sort of agreement and we became owners of this cottage in a small village. We also set about learning something of our neighbours amongst whom were a couple of sisters who, for some reason, cordially dislike each other but with both of whom I managed, and still manage, to get on. Both were interesting sources of information about the history of our little cottage and both had known the Cowburns quite well.

Bit by bit I started to pick up information about this chap Cowburn whom I had met but once or twice. He had been in the war. He had had spent a lot of it in France. He had had connections with several Resistance networks.

He spoke little, it seems, of his wartime history but one of the rare anecdotes that I heard was that he had sometimes found it easier to fraternise with German soldiers than to avoid them. He told my neighbour Helene that once he had been constructing an explosive device when a couple of passing officers knocked on his door. It took him a minute to hide the material and, when he answered the door the officer asked him humourously « So what have you been up to then ? ». « Oh, just building a few bombs in the back room. » replied Cowburn. They all laughed and shared a drink. Her sister, Louisette, told me he had given her his book « No Cloak, No Dagger » and lent it to me.



Cowburn's wife, I learned, had died shortly before we purchased his cottage and was probably a reason for his leaving it. She too spoke little of herself and I am told that at her funeral, a modest affair, locals were surprised to see a flock of large black cars arrive with some pomp. Mme Cowburn had been secretary to Georges Bidault , an active resistance member and, in post war France, several times Prime Minister.

All this, at the time I was but vaguely conscious of, but, after listening to Noreen's account I couldn't help asking her if the name Cowburn meant anything to her. Her eyes lit up and she smiled, « Benny Cowburn ! » she exclaimed « Of course I do. He was the one who kept coming back. »



I wish I had known something of this when I met him. Our conversation might have extended beyond the price of half an acre of the Vexin.

I still have his military beret though. He left it in an old cupboard in the bedroom.

Mark Yates

History of the RBL Paris Branch

During our branch's centenary year Janet and I came across a number of old drawers in the cellar. The drawers are full of index cards dating from 1946 to the early 1980s which record members' details and yearly subscription payments. This being before the age of the computer the membership secretary had to type the cards.

Looking through them has proved to be fascinating and we have discovered that, among a number of distinguished members, some had worked for the SOE during WW2. So, who were they?

Well I shall enlighten you over the coming months. I shall also let you know about those other distinguished members. Most of them have now sadly passed away.

May I introduce you to:

Haim Victor Gerson OBE, DSO. Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur.

The information on Victor Gerson's index card just states the above and that he held the rank of Major. He was a member of our branch from 1976 until 1980. He died on the 14th April 1983 aged 87. It's possible that he may have joined before 1976. Being curious to know how he got his OBE, DSO, LdH I decided to carry out my own research and this is what I found.

Haim Victor Gerson was born in Southport, Lancashire in August 1898. He was the son of a fabric merchant.

At the declaration of WW1 Victor joined the British army and was sent to the Western Front in France and took part in the Battle of the Somme.



**Haim Victor Gerson
OBE, DSO**

After the war he came to Paris where he became a dealer in fine rugs and carpets. He married and had a son. However, in the 1930s his wife died and his son was killed in a traffic accident. He then married Giliana Balmaceda, a Chilean-born actress.

On the 18th June 1940 four days before the signing of the armistice between Germany and a defeated France, Victor and Giliana escaped to England where they both joined the SOE.

In May 1941 Balmaceda became the first female SOE agent to be sent to France. She went to Vichy France, the southern, unoccupied region, and there she collected information and administrative documents, such as ration cards, which could be reproduced in England for use by agents on clandestine missions in France.

On the night of the 6/7 September 1941 Victor was parachuted from a Whitley bomber, along with five other agents and landed near the Le Cerisier farm of Auguste Chantraine, Mayor of Tendu. He travelled to Lyon and Marseille, where he assessed the possibility of organizing subversive networks in cities. In October, he narrowly avoided arrest in Marseille being wary of the voice that gave him an appointment by phone. He did not keep the appointment and quickly left France and returned to London where he reported on his conclusions on the French willingness to resist the German occupation.

In Operation DELAY 11 on the night of 21st April 1942 Peter Churchill, an SOE agent landed four SOE agents by canoe on the French Riviera from the submarine HM P42 "Unbroken". One of those agents was Victor Gerson << René>> who with Marcel Clech, one of the others, went to Lyon where they met up with another SOE agent, the American Virginia Hall. Victor Gerson gradually built up the escape network VIC to Spain with Lazare Rachline (Lucien Racht) and Georges Levin, with Thérèse Mitrani in Lyon, René Feraggi in Marseille, and Jacques Mitterand in Paris. He also installed groups in Perpignan and Montpellier. Victor Gerson entrusted Rachline to exfiltrate the eleven SOE agents who escaped from Mauzac prison on 16th July 1942. The escaping agents made their way through Spain to England and included Michael Trotobas and Georges Bégué.

On 19/20 August 1943 Victor Gerson returned by plane to England, and on the 14th September returned to France in a Hudson bomber which landed in France and was met by Henri Déricourt.

Despite the VIC circuit being penetrated three times by the Gestapo in June and October 1943 and January 1944, in which some members were arrested, the group was able to continue its activities.

Victor Gerson was arrested once while travelling on a train between Paris and Lyons, however he made his cover story so convincing that he was released.

During the war he was infiltrated into France a total of six times.



After the war he returned to Paris and resumed his activity in fine rugs and carpets.

His contribution to the SOE efforts to support the Resistance movement in France is one to be remembered.

Richard Neave

Please note the Modified date.

The change is due to strike action forecast for public transport

 <p>Don't forget to book in for this month's lunch.</p> <p>Thursday 26 January 12h15 for 12h30 Only €23 - Pay on the day (in cash please)</p> <p>Contact Richard at 06 45 10 47 70 or richard.neave05@gmail.com</p> <p><i>Reserve early to be sure of a place. (Cancellations up to 48h before)</i></p>	 <p>LUNCH MENU 26th January</p> <p>APERITIF</p> <p>STARTER- <i>vegetable soup</i></p> <p>MAIN COURSE- <i>Risotto and chicken Koulibiac</i></p> <p>DESSERT- <i>Galette des Rois</i></p> <p>WINE SERVED WITH THE MEAL</p> <p>COFFEE OR TEA</p>
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The late Patrick Noble, whose obituary appeared in our December edition, sent me, shortly before his death, a last contribution to our columns. I have divided it into two parts. Here is the first:

THE RAILWAY NAVVIES

UNSUNG HEROES OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION - Part 1

Introduction



Great Britain during the late 18th Century and the first half of the 19th Century was the cradle of the Industrial Revolution. An integral part of this revolution was the construction of the railways. There was an early start made in 1822 with the creation of the first public railway system, some 15 miles long between Stockton and Darlington, the

carriages being horse drawn. However the first railway with steam locomotive traction was the Liverpool – Manchester line opened in 1825, an event which earned itself a double mention in the Guinness Book of Records when William Huskisson, a statesman of the day, attained immortality in every sense of the word, by getting himself run over by the train as it started - the first fatal rail accident. In spite of this inauspicious beginning, the event signaled the beginning of "Railway Mania" - an explosion in railway construction all over the country, involving massive and often speculative investment with fortunes made and lost overnight. By the 1870s the peak was passed, but railway construction continued at a slower pace until the 1890s, spreading a dense network all over Great Britain comprising some 20 000 miles of track. This was to revolutionize and transform industry and society by providing rapid and cheap transport, opening up regions until then isolated and cut off from mainstream national life.



These gigantic projects were conceived and directed by imaginative engineers, who became national, even international celebrities, of whom the best known include Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Joseph Locke and the father and son duo, George and Robert Stephenson. The railway works were executed by dynamic contractors, such as Thomas Brassey, Edward Betts, William Mackenzie and Samuel Peto.

However these high profile engineers and contractors would have achieved nothing without the toil, tears, sweat and unfortunately too often the blood of the “navvies”, the men who physically built the railways. But navy is a strange appellation, so what is its origin? To find an answer to this question we must go back to the 18th Century,



when there was an extensive programme of constructing canals. At that time a word frequently used in place of “canal” was “navigation”. So it was quite natural to refer to the men who dug the “navigations” as “navigators”. In due course in everyday parlance, this became transformed into “navvy”. Two or three generations later the same term was applied to the men who built the railways, and the expression has persisted to this day to describe a labourer engaged in heavy manual work associated with construction.

The Works

The scale of the works involved was mind boggling, involving cuttings and embankments, tunnels, bridges and viaducts, not to mention the stations, marshalling yards and locomotive depots.

Huge quantities of earth, and rock blasted with explosives, had to be dug, loaded onto horse drawn wagons, displaced, tipped, compacted and shaped. The motive power for all of this was essentially the muscles of the navvies. The painter Ford Maddox Brown manages to render the navvies' work picturesque in his best-known picture entitled "Work". Click on the partial picture or [here](#) for a link to see the splendid whole.

Only quite late in the day did steam powered excavators start to replace some of their back-breaking toil. This meant that huge armies of men had to be recruited and deployed to meet the urgency of the construction timetables, for the railway companies, the banks, the government and Victoria society in general were in a great hurry to complete the railways. For example for the London – Birmingham line 20 000 navvies were required simultaneously. In 1845 nationwide 200 000 navvies were working on the construction of 3 000 miles of line. There was a minority of tradesmen such as masons, bricklayers, blacksmiths and carpenters, especially for working on the stations, bridges and viaducts, but the greatest number were unskilled labourers led and directed by the gangers.

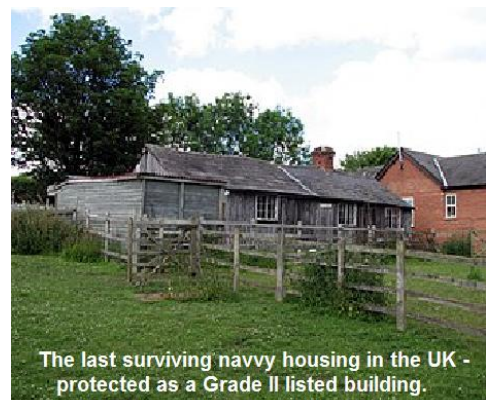


There was danger everywhere and fatal accidents as well as severe injuries were commonplace, and generally viewed by management as part of the game, for which they were not responsible. This was especially true of tunnelling. The worse example was Woodhead Tunnel on the Manchester – Sheffield line, three miles long, on which 1 000 navvies worked from 1839 to 1845. Accidents were frequent with 32 dead and 240 gravely injured. The contractor was not prepared to use safer techniques and materials “as it would

slow down the work”; profit was more important than the lives of navvies. The site was remote, situated on the moors and the men lived and worked under appalling conditions. A Parliamentary enquiry into the conditions at Woodhead did not lead to any improvement. Fortunately there were some contractors who treated their navvies decently, which developed loyalty and cohesion, so that the whole team moved from one project to the next.

The Navy Culture

The nature of the work created a special and original culture very different from that of mainstream British life. For a start, navvies were for the most part nomads moving from one site to the next, rather than individuals recruited locally. They came from all over the United Kingdom; that



The last surviving navy housing in the UK - protected as a Grade II listed building.

is to say from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, talking with a babel of accents and languages. Very often they tended to stay together and moved as a national group from project to project. They dressed in a distinctive manner wearing colourful waistcoats which, with their trouser legs encircled with string tied just below the knee, made them highly visible. The arrival of large bodies of navvies, and do not forget we are talking of thousands, into remote rural areas, living in shanty towns, inevitably created tensions between them and the locals. Large quantities of beer and spirits were freely available so on payday there was often a breakdown of law and order. The local police forces were at that time badly organized and in any case were very thin on the ground, so sometimes the army had to be called out.

Navy Morality (or Immorality?)



The heavy drinking, foul language, sexual permissiveness and absence of interest in formal religion of a large part of the navy population were a source of horror and disapprobation to puritanical Victorian society. So various churchmen, Lady Bountifuls and other do-gooders set about helping the navvies to get back on the straight and narrow.

They were appalled to note that in the navy encampments they found “plenty of women but very few wives”! However all these squeaky-clean moralists were for the most part not at all concerned about the appalling conditions under which the navvies were obliged to live and to work. They were not shocked at the numerous deaths and injuries occurring due to the lack of concern for safety on the part of the contractors and the authorities.

The navvies in fact lived and acted in accordance with their own moral code of conduct, which included loyalty to their comrades, helping those in adversity and giving generously to a collection to help a widow of a fellow worker killed in an accident.

Patrick Noble

THE ROYAL MILITARY CANAL AND MARTELLO TOWERS



Following up our preceding series on curiosities of the Napoleonic era my trusted authority on the period suggests that a short account of the contemporary Royal Military Canal might merit a mention.

In 1804, there was a very real fear of a French invasion of the south coast of Britain and the most likely site of a landing place was believed to be the

Romney Marsh area between Folkestone and Hastings.

The British government undertook excavation of the canal in order to cut off the vulnerable area. Thus the "Royal Military Canal" was completed in 1809. More of a moat than a canal in its function, it stretched from Seabrook, near Folkestone to Cliff End near Hastings, a distance of 28 miles. In addition to the canal a line of 103 "Martello towers" was constructed, one every 500 yards or so.

About ten of those along the canal have survived. Equipped with windows and a door they are used as secondary residences and are much valued as such.



A Martello tower - British version

It is worth noting that these towers were copied from those built by the Genoese to defend Corsica, the classic example being the "*Torra di Mortella*" in northern Corsica which gave rise to the generic term "Mortello tower". These had indeed given quite a lot of trouble to the units of British troops during their landing in Corsica in 1794 - an affair involving the Siege of Calvi where Horatio Nelson lost the eye with which, some seven years later, he was able to



Mortello tower Cosican version

"see no ships". These towers - small raised artillery platforms seem to have stuck in the British military mind. Versions of them were constructed all over the Empire.

The same considerations which made Romney Marsh a prime site for a French invasion meant that it was also, in years subsequent to the Napoleonic era, a coastline popular with smugglers. Thus, although the

canal never saw military action, in its subsequent somewhat inglorious history it was used to try to control smuggling. Guard houses were constructed at each bridge along its length - but the measure met with limited success - mainly because of corrupt guards.



39-45 pillbox on the banks of the canal

Today the 28 miles of the canal are followed by a readily accessible pathway and the militarily inclined visitor will want to examine some more recent additions to the landscape; second world war pillboxes erected on the banks of the canal and, notably, a couple of hundred yards north of it, the Hythe sound mirror. This

was part of a series (several more such mirrors can be seen at nearby Denge). They worked by concentrating the sound of aero engines and formed an experimental early warning system for incoming aircraft. They were, of course, rendered immediately redundant with the first applications of radar.



Hythe Accoustic Sound Mirror

And for those more inclined to the aesthetic aspects of the subject, the canal is in itself a most attractive stretch of water.



The Last Laugh:

Father/son relationships

Johnny – Dad, I have found the girl of my life and, believe it or not, she only lives next door.

Dad – You mean young Jane ?

Johnny – Yes. She’s wonderful.

Dad – Look lad. I hate to admit it but it’s not a good idea. I’m sorry but you have to know ; She’s your sister.

Johnny – Aw Dad !!

Some time later :

Johnny – Dad, I think I’ve found someone else. It’s Lucy from four doors down. She’s great.

Dad – Gee I’m sorry Johnny. She’s your sister too.

Johnny – Aw Dad !!!.....

Some time later :

Johnny – Dad, I’ve found the most fantastic girl in our street. Marvelous. Judy, from the end house.

Dad – Look Son. I’m sorry about this but well – things were really moving around here about the time you turned up. Judy is your sister too.

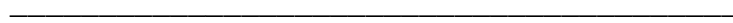
Johnny – Aw Dad !!!!.....

Some time later :

Johnny – Mum, I have to say something. Three times I’ve had a chance at finding a girlfriend – all in our street. Jane, Lucy and Judy. I told Dad and he says they’re all my sisters ! I’m sorry to ask you this but - Is it true ?

Mum - Don’t you worry Johnny. You take your pick of them. He’s not your father.

MY



Janet's New Year Quiz

Answers :

- 1. Colchester*
- 2. Three*
- 3. Chris Rock*
- 4. The Queen's Platinum Jubilee*
- 5. One medal*
- 6. Stranger Things*
- 7. Beth Mead*
- 8. King Charles' Coronation will take place on Saturday 6th May 2023*
- 9. Camilla, Queen Consort*
- 10. The royals traditionally spend New Year's Eve at Sandringham*
- 11. Mike Tindall*
- 12. French King Louis XIV*
- 13. George, Charlotte, Louis, Archie and Lilibet*
- 14. Corgies*
- 15. Finland*