



Paris Branch

Newsletter

N° 50 – September 2026



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Chairman's introduction

Welcome back from the summer break. I trust this finds you all well and enjoying the cooler weather.

We have had a number of events which many of you attended since the last edition of this Newsletter. Regretfully our incredibly hard-working secretary Janet could not be present at our 4th August ceremony or the ceremony at Bennecourt due to her suffering from severe back and leg pains. However, thankfully she was able to attend this year's Pedal to Paris event. I am sure you will join me in wishing her a full recovery.

On the 4th August we held our annual ceremony at the Arc de Triomphe where our Commonwealth guest this year was the Pakistan Ambassador Ms. Mumtaz Zahra Baloch. This was her first visit to the Arch, and she said she felt honoured to have been able to attend. After the ceremony there was a reception at our clubhouse with refreshments and free drinks. It was a most convivial occasion and much appreciated. Lots of photos were taken at the ceremony by Yvan who was our official photographer for the event. Thank you again Yvan. Yvan is the husband of Rosemary Rudland who is a very active member of our branch and represents our branch at Canadian events mostly in the Normandy area of France. Rosemary has this summer attended a number of Canadian ceremonies on our behalf.

On the 22nd August I represented our branch at the annual remembrance ceremony in Bennecourt. It was well attended. Details below.

On the 5th of this month, we celebrated the 30th year of the Pedal to Paris. 150 cyclists took part, and it was good to see our ambassador there along with the RBL National President, Sir Paul Bennett, and Didier Dumont Mayor of Bennecourt with two municipal councillors.

Janet and I along with the Ambassador, Sir Paul and Didier handed out the medals to the cyclists. This was followed by a short service at the Arc de Triomphe where we laid a wreath.

NB Pics for events below and more on our Facebook page at:
<https://www.facebook.com/royalbritishlegionparis>

On the 12th of September I shall be representing the branch for the Polish remembrance ceremony to be held at the Arc.

On the 15th September we are invited to attend the annual Battle of Britain ceremony at the Arc de Triomphe. I hope that a good number of you will attend.

We have decided not to have a lunch this month at the clubhouse. This is due to the fact that Janet and I are very busy with planning up and coming events for October. We also have the AGM this month. We will however have a lunch at the clubhouse in October.

That's it from me for this month.

Richard.

September Quiz

1. In the Great Fire of London (2nd–5th September 1666), how many people died?
2. In September of which year did the terror group Black September take hostage and subsequently kill 11 Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics?
3. Jochen Rindt died in September 1970. In what profession did he become famous?
4. The Pilgrims set sail for America from Plymouth on the Mayflower in which year?
5. Against which country did South Africa declare war in September 1939?
6. Whose funeral in 1997 was watched by an estimated 2.5 billion on television and by 1 million people lining the streets of the funeral procession?
7. In the third Crusade in 1191 which English King defeated Saladin at the battle of Arsuf?
8. The International Criminal Police Organisation was formed in 1923. What is it better known as?
9. The Who's drummer committed suicide in 1978, what was his name?
10. The sculpture 'David' was unveiled in Florence in 1504. Who was the sculptor?
11. In 1886, after 29 years of fighting, which Apache leader finally surrendered in Arizona.
12. Due to health reasons in 1948, Queen Wilhelmina abdicated the throne of which country?
13. In 1781, 44 Spaniards founded a settlement, the name of which, when translated into English, was "The Village of Our Lady the Queen of the Angels". What is it now called?
14. Scotland's Forth Road Bridge near Edinburgh officially opened in what year?
15. In 1870 the Third Republic was declared in France after which leader was deposed?
16. In 1888, George Eastman received a patent for his camera that used roll film and registered which trademark?
17. The pianist and composer Edvard Grieg died in September 1907. What nationality was he?
18. The maiden journey of the USS Shenandoah took place in 1923. What sort of vessel was it?
19. Mark Spitz became the first competitor to win seven medals at a single Olympic Games. In which year?
20. Which two students founded Google in 1998?



Answers on the last page

DEATHS

A few long- term members will recall Eddie Zommerplaag and his wife Truss. Both were members of the Paris branch until the death of Eddie some years ago. Marianne, their daughter now informs us that her mother died on 5th September.

Eddie was a committee member and Assistant Treasurer under David Blanchard. Truss was a staunch Poppy collector and could be found out in all weathers collecting for the Poppy Appeal. She was a recipient of the 25-Year Poppy Brooch which she always wore with pride. The funeral is to be on Monday 14th September.

EVENTS

Rekindling the Flame

As always, it was the turn of the Paris RBL branch to rekindle the flame at the Arc de Triomphe on 4 August. The Pakistan ambassador Mumtaz Zahra Baloch, here seen with a senior officer from the embassy, rekindled the flame.

The ceremony featured French military honours including a guard contingent and a ceremonial



military band which played the national anthems of Pakistan and France.



Bennecourt 22 August

Didier Dumont, our committee member and mayor of Bennecourt sends these photos of the commemoration of 600 British soldiers killed in the liberation of Vernon, Giverney, Limetz and Bennecourt. The Sous Préfet et la Commandante de la Gendarmerie de Mantes were present.



Sunday 6 September Pedal to Paris



Richard and Janet were present, handing out prizes to the first arrivals.



Sunday 6 September - Annual Merchant Navy Remembrance Ceremony at Trinity House.

Committee Member Caroline Clopet attended. The Ceremony was led by Second Sea Lord . Present were Vice Admiral Paul Beattie CBE, the National Patron of The Merchant Navy Association, President of the Merchant Navy Association Malcolm Mathison, Admiral the Rt Hon the Lord West of Spithead, Commodore Sam Shattock, Lt Callum Sylvester RNR, HMS President. The Band of His Majesty's Royal Marines Portsmouth played.

MP's and Mayors attended. As did RBL Parade Marshals and Chairmen from different RBL branches, notably the RBL Falklands Branch. A minute's silence was held to remember the enormous losses of British Merchant seamen during WW1, WWII and the Falklands War.

His Majesty King Charles sent a letter which was read out, and the UK Prime Minister sent a message.



COMING EVENTS

Monday 28th September 18H30.

Paris branch AGM. **Do try to attend.**

Thursday 29th October, 2026 10h30 - 12h00

POPPY APPEAL COFFEE MORNING 2026

by kind permission of HM Ambassador at the ambassador's residence.

39 rue du Faubourg St. Honoré, Paris 75008

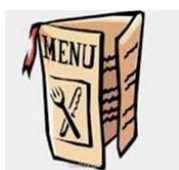
Places are limited so please reserve by phone or e-mail at:

janetwarby@yahoo.com or [01 39 28 90 28](tel:0139289028)

Wednesday 11th November 14h30 for 15h00

Service of Remembrance at Cathedral St. Louis des Invalides. 15H00 start. Please let Janet know if you wish to attend so that names can be put on the Security list.

janetwarby@yahoo.com or by telephone 01 39 28 90 28 or send to Mrs J. Warby, 5 allée des Pins, 78480 Verneuil sur Seine.



No lunch in September – Next will be in October. Details later.

Our member Bob Lewis writes, well ahead, to ask you to keep free the 25th October for a concert at the American Cathedral, 25 Avenue George V in Paris. The composer Matthew Coleridge will be conducting his own Requiem sung by Lux Perpetua, a Franco – British choir and a hundred other singers from several countries. More on this nearer the date.

The Escape of SS Southport – *Caroline Clopet*

The outbreak of World War 1 in July 1914 came as a big shock to Governments and the general public. The Summer had begun as an idyllic peaceful period of European globalization and prosperity, until the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on the 28th June. This created a chain reaction of political failures and rigid military alliances which triggered the outbreak of WW1 in early August. It sent a Tsunami of violence around the world, which was only gradually revealed through the limited means of communications at the time.

In the front line were Merchant Navy ships which had no means of knowing that WW1 had broken out. Sailing the world's oceans with vital cargo and goods, ships of the Merchant Navy had little or no means of contact with the outside world.

News of the daring escape of the first ship to be captured by the Germans in 1914 reached Britain's shores from Australia in January 1915 and caused a furore of excitement in Britain. It is perhaps one of the best stories of bravery and daring to come out of World War 1.

The tramp steamer SS Southport, from Cardiff, belonged to the raggle-taggle fleet of tramp steamers that sailed the oceans of the world, picking up contracts and cargoes where they could. It was sometimes years before such a ship returned to its home port and, sometimes the wife of the captain would accompany her husband on the voyage.

In early 1914, Mrs Charlotte Clopet (the Great Grandmother of Caroline, one of our committee members), had crossed the Atlantic with her husband and Captain of the SS Southport, Aristide Clopet., and spent two pleasant weeks in New York while the Southport unloaded and took on a



cargo of American machinery. She had endured the gales of the south Atlantic, rounded the Cape of Good Hope to Durban in South Africa, and supervised the loading of provisions, fresh fruit and other supplies for the ship's crew on the long onward haul to Australia. It was May before they arrived in Australia, and early June before the Southport sailed on to New Zealand with a cargo of coal.

The SS Southport made her leisurely way from Auckland to Wellington, then to Dunedin where she turned north for Ocean Island in the Pacific to load phosphates bound for Rotterdam. However, at Ocean Island, orders were changed and the Southport was now to sail on to Nauru to take on a cargo of more phosphates for Stettin. Bad weather and a congested harbour made the task impossible, and Captain Clopet was forced to return to Ocean Island and then sail on an inter-island hop to the Gilberts, picking up small workaday cargoes as he went, in order to fill the time.

The Southport was only 14 years old and was more than three thousand tons, with a crew of 23. Her single deck was lit by electricity, which was a welcome improvement on the lanterns and candles of Captain Clopet's youth, but she had no modern refinement such as radio. All she knew of the outside world as she hopped between the atolls of the Pacific Ocean was the everyday banter of the ship's crew and the weather. She might have been on the moon as far as the world's events were concerned and no news of the outbreak of World War 1 had reached them.



Captain Clopet decided to make for Kusaie (now renamed Kosrae) in the Caroline Islands, where the fast mail-ship Germania called every two months. She should arrive in Kusaie any day now and may well be bringing Captain Clopet new orders, as she had done in the past. At least the SS Southport would be able to replenish its scanty supplies to tide them over until new orders arrived.

On the 4th August, The Southport anchored in the bay at Kusaie. That day, 12 thousand miles away, Britain declared war on Germany.

Captain Clopet, his wife and the crew were relieved to find fresh water, but there was no food on the island, for a cyclone had destroyed the crops, and killed cattle and pigs earlier in the year. The local people were subsisting on roots and coconuts. There was nothing to be done but to cut the ship's rations and wait, day after day, for the arrival of the overdue Germania. But the Germania never arrived.

On the 4th September, the Geier arrived. She was a German warship and had every right to be there, as the Caroline Islands were German, and King Sigrah was held to produce an annual tax of six marks for each of his subjects. The German flag flew in the tiny township outside the mission church.

These events were of no concern to the crew of the SS Southport, who still had no news of the international tensions that had bubbled to the surface in Europe during their absence. In particular they hadn't the faintest idea that Britain was at war with Germany. The crew crowded on deck, cheering the Geier as she sailed in. Captain Clopet and his wife Charlotte were ashore at the time, and it was Chief Officer Dodd who ordered the ship's ensign to be dipped and who waited on deck, beaming in welcome as a cutter from the battleship approached. He attached no significance to the fact that the Geier's guns were trained on the SS Southport, and he was only slightly surprised to see that the boarding party was armed to the teeth and looking far from friendly. The German officer saluted, then speaking in English, but without wishing him good day, dropped the bombshell.



SMS Geier, 1894

An armed guard was posted around the ship, and everything was inspected with a fine toothcomb, including the engine room, which displeased the chief engineer.

Captain Clopet returned to the ship. According to his ship's log:

"The upshot was that our flag was hauled down and the German flag hoisted for half an hour while the Germans read me the proclamation that my ship had been seized in the name of the Kaiser. They left a guard on board and stayed in the bay for two days. Next day, another ship sailed in. It was the German merchant steamer Tsintau of Bremen, and they sent the steamer alongside the Southport and took a great deal of our coal. Soon afterwards, an officer in command of marines on the Geier came on board with another party whose job it was to put the engines out of commission to prevent us from putting to sea. They removed nearly all of the machinery and took away the main stop valve.

The officer of the Geier told me that he would not sink us but that we would have to remain at Kusaie until after the war was over. I pointed out to him that we were short of provisions and that the natives, on account of the cyclone, were also short of food. The officer replied that there were coconuts on the island, and he said very sneeringly, 'The people of Paris once lived on rats.

This infuriated me. I was born of French parents, although I am a British subject, naturalised by Winston Churchill, and my parents were in Paris during the siege by the Germans in 1870, and they told me enough of that terrible time to make me fully appreciate the reference to rats! I told him in no uncertain terms that my men would be starved, and I could not be responsible for what starving men might do on the island. That gave him second thoughts: he wrote out there and then an order to King Sigrah to secure supplies of meat and so on. It said that whatever he gave me would be paid for after the war.

Not content with taking our coal, the Germans on the steamer Tsintau took some of our Kerosene oil and everything else they thought would be useful, although the officer of the Geier told them not to touch our provisions as we had none to spare. The Geier also took off our boatswain and two of our firemen, who were all German, and one of our Norwegian sailors.

This of course left us shorthanded, but as the German officer pointed out, since we were not going anywhere, it hardly mattered. "The fate of your ship will be decided by a prize court", he said, and then they sailed off in a great hurry it seemed. His last words to me were that they would be back in a fortnight and expected to find us there when they returned."

Meanwhile, Mrs Charlotte Clopet, who had been confined to her cabin on her husband's orders for the last two days and which she was not too pleased about, was released and accompanied Captain Clopet when he went ashore to visit King Sigrah to negotiate food supplies. While the Captain was gone, the engine room crew got down to some serious business.

Chief engineer Harold Cox was highly experienced when it came to engines. Having served on ships far older than the SS Southport, he could repair anything with a hammer, a hacksaw, a soldering iron, a length of tow, and a ball of string. He could make a faltering engine sing sweetly enough to bring a ship to port. While the Captain was ashore, he went to work with two engineers.

Captain Clopet was very unhappy. The negotiations with King Sigrah had been long and tiresome and the outcome was only partly satisfactory. All that could be spared was coconuts and the roots of trees, which, is what his own people were eating. Captain Clopet and his wife returned gloomily to their ship having negotiated the loading of native long-boats to ferry the coconuts to his ship.

Once aboard, the gloom was quickly dispelled when his chief engineer met him with the good news that the damage to the engines was not so great as they had feared. With a little time and patience, some of the missing parts could be manufactured and they could get the Southport on the move again – helped by the burning of coconut shells!

Everyone went to work and were hard at it, round the clock, for ten days, including Mrs Clopet. It was a monumental effort of ingenuity, elbow grease, hammering and sawing, whilst anxious lookouts fearfully scanned the horizon for signs of the Geier's return.

On the afternoon of the tenth day, they managed to get up steam. The fact that it was a poor head of steam was a good deal less important than the fact that the engines would take the ship ahead, but not astern. Captain Clopet thought he could manage. It could have been worse after all, he remarked, if it had been the other way round.



It was a feat even to get her to face outwards from her anchorage, but that night, in the darkness, with all her own lights extinguished, the SS Southport limped out to sea. It took them 12 days to reach Brisbane, sailing via the Solomon Islands – partly in German hands, but they had to take the risk. They sailed at quarter power, with the crew

on quarter rations. It was better than subsisting on roots.

Upon their arrival in Brisbane, there were celebrations and they were showered with gifts. It took a long time to repair the engines properly and longer for the story to reach Great Britain (see headline from the Berwick Journal here). By the time news got through, in early January 1915, the Southport was already on her way again, taking up the voyage that had been so rudely interrupted four months earlier, sailing towards the Pacific to Ocean Island to pick up her cargo of phosphates and head for Rotterdam. Mrs Charlotte Clopet, who had refused the offer of a fast passage home from Australia, was still on board.

The Southport continued her leisurely progress and survived to do her bit for the war effort. She was requisitioned by the government in May 1917 and ran the gauntlet of German U-boats to bring wheat and foodstuffs from the USA and Canada to a beleaguered Britain. She continued in government service until 1919, was sold to Greece, where she was renamed Tithis in 1923, and broken up in Italy in 1932.

When the German gunboat SMS Geier, returned to port in Kusaie, they were shocked to find the SS Southport absent. The Geier subsequently evaded Allied warships until, needing major repairs, she entered neutral Honolulu in Hawaii in October 1914 and was interned by the United States. When the US entered the war in 1917, she was seized, renamed USS Schurz, and sunk in a 1918 night collision.

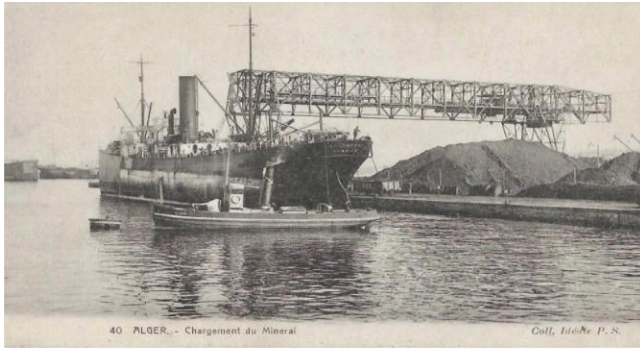


Figure 1 The SS Southport (Postcard in family possession)

The humiliation suffered by the Geier and the Germans was not to be forgotten however, and it reared its ugly head during the Second World War in Paris, when the Germans put a bounty on the head of Captain Aristide Clopet.

A Word in your Ear - "A" and "An"

The "n" in the indefinite article "an" has sometimes, over the years, got strangely confused with the word itself. Here are a few examples:

An apron was originally "a napron" (related to *napkin* – from the French "*naperon*").

Somehow the n got transferred. Similarly:

An orange should really have been a "norange" from Arabic-Persian *nāranj* – *Naranja* in *Spanish*, but the "n" shifted in the same way.

An adder was originally "a nadder";

an umpire was "a noumpere";

Unsurprisingly the opposite sometimes happened:

A nickname was originally "an eke-name" (*eke* meaning also from the German *auch*) but the "n" wandered, this time from the article to the noun.

The same happened to "*a newt*" which used to be "an ewt" .



The Last Laugh - Guy de Maupassant and the Journalist.

J: Monsier Maupassant! Excuse me for interrupting your lunch. You may remember we met once at France-Soir, my paper. It was some time ago, when you wrote for it yourself occasionally.

M: Ah yes. That takes me back a bit. Have a seat - and a glass.

J: Thank you. I've read all your stuff since "Boule de Suif". It's still my favourite and I've always wondered what gave you the idea for that particular story.

M: It was when I was staying at the hotel in Tôtes with a friend, M. Flaubert, actually. We were having lunch and a coachload of people arrived.

J: Oh yes. Tôtes is the village in the story, isn't it?

M: Right. Any way this lot were a bunch of snobs, and I didn't like the way they talked to the servant girl. Pretty enough, she was, but a bit on the stout side.

J: Ah. I've often wondered about that. You know you really are an exceptionally versatile writer: short stories, novels and even a book of poetry too.

M: Ha! I've been responsible for more poetry than you might think!

J: You have unpublished work in progress?

M: No. But that reminds me of the English poet Swinburn.

J: What on earth for?

M: Back in autumn 1868, near Etretat. He was swimming and got into difficulties. I jumped in and saved him from drowning.

J: Did you really? Good Lord!

M: Yes. So, in a sense I can claim to be responsible for all he wrote after 1868. That is my contribution to English literature.

J: That's fascinating! By the way, I'm told you're a regular here at the Eiffel Tower.

M: Yes. I come to the first-floor restaurant quite a lot.

J: Indeed? Well, one has to admit the tower is impressive. You must be one of its greatest admirers.

M: On the contrary. I detest the bloody thing. Always hanging there spoiling every view over Paris.

J: Really. But, if you hate the Eiffel Tower so much, why do you come here?

M: That's simple. It's the only place in Paris you can't see the thing from.

(NB The dialogue itself is invented. The opinion and events mentioned in it are nonetheless well documented)

MY 57

September quiz: Answers:

1. Officially only 6	11. Geronimo
2. 1972	12. Netherlands
3. Racing Driver	13. Los Angeles
4. 1620	14. 1964
5. Nazi Germany	15. Emperor Napoleon 111
6. Princess Diana	16. Kodak
7. Richard 1	17. Norwegian
8. Interpol	18. An Airship (the 1 st U.S.)
9. Keith Moon	19. 1972
10. Michelangelo	20. Larry Page and Sergey Brin



Comments & contributions to mfyates@gmail.com
Back numbers: rblfrance.org/ then "Paris Branch Newsletters"