

Article from Laindon & District Community Archive

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Date Range: 1945-1968

John Bathurst's Memories of James Hill

The First Warden of Laindon High Road School Youth Centre

I note that James Hill's book on Tee Line shorthand was not published until 1968 which fact would account for my knowing nothing about it. It was certainly the case that Jim, with whom I was acquainted from the end of WWII until the end of 1949, was always interested in what later has come to be known as 'Office Practice', otherwise typing and shorthand. I recall him telling me that he had mastered both his facility as a typist and in utilising Pitman's shorthand by attending evening classes while in the employ of Bradford Corporation Transport department as a bus and tram conductor. As I cannot recall him ever telling me about his military service, whether his particular skills were mastered before or during the war I do not know but he certainly gave me the impression that he regarded that becoming adept in these commercial subjects was a step towards 'improving' his employable abilities. As I cannot recall Jim ever specifically talking about the development of innovations with regard to the use of Pitman's shorthand I cannot comment further on the matter of Tee Line but I do remember his expressions of disgust with regard to an innovation he had gone to considerable trouble over in respect of the use of the typewriter.

This innovation related to a small device he had invented and had had patented that, when attached to the typewriter, greatly facilitated the ruling of straight lines. When he had approached one of the typewriter manufacturers with his device with the object of having it placed into production for the benefit of all typists worldwide, despite being met with what appeared to be enthusiasm, Jim discovered that all that his approach achieved was that the manufacturer purchased the relevant patent and then proceeded to shelve the device in favour of their own far more costly system.

How far Jim's expertise in the commercial field related to his presence in Laindon, apart from its use in any administrative duties he had to perform, is not immediately apparent. He came to Laindon as the direct consequence of the Essex Education Committee (EEC) deciding to appoint full time 'wardens', as they were then called, to oversee the youth centres they had devised throughout the county. In the absence of any purpose-built accommodation Laindon's youth centre was based on Laindon High Road School, a situation that led eventually to quite a considerable degree of friction with George Radford, the incumbent head teacher, in residence since the school was first opened. Jim's appointment as Youth Warden at Laindon must have been made in consequence of his experience as a leader of youth rather than as an expert in shorthand and

typing, that experience having been gained by virtue of him having been in charge at either Redcar or Marske-by-the-Sea Boy's Club, then in Yorkshire North Riding, now in Cleveland. (Memory is confused over the club's location; Jim either lived at Redcar and was youth leader at Marske or vice-versa.)

As I recall, on his first appointment at Laindon, although already married, Jim was in digs until such time as family sized accommodation could be found for him in order that his wife, Constance, could join him from Yorkshire. As work on the **King Edward Road council estate** was just started at the time of his appointment, he was eventually accommodated in 2 King Edward Road, one of the first houses to be completed on the estate, and this was still the Hills' address in 1949 when I last had any contact with him due to my enlistment in the army from that date.

As the youth centre warden, it fell to Jim to organise, supervise, cajole, encourage and generally persuade the members into 'worthwhile' activities none of which were compulsory. The facility to do this seemed to come naturally to Jim, greatly assisted by his down to earth manner, no doubt the consequence of his Yorkshire breeding. Use of the youth centre's facilities was based on the club membership principle, the cost of which was covered by the EEC and the majority who joined did so to avail themselves of the recreational activities that were not generally freely available elsewhere. The fact that the youth centre only had the use of the High Road school in the periods of time when the building was not being used for its primary purposed rather restricted any general club use. Table tennis was a popular activity of the time and its demountable tables made full use of the space afforded by the school's hall when this was not in use for other activities like gymnastic displays and it was this pressure on the employment of very limited resources that best realised the warden's organisational abilities. Assisted by some volunteer adult help he was able to recruit, Jim pressed some of the classrooms into use for suitable activities such as forming a choral society or a drama group. Unfortunately, because of the poor facilities generally for social activity in the Laindon area, the facilities conveniently afforded by the central position of the school meant that the same classrooms were often in use by other organisations for meetings, evening classes, etc, and conflict could ensue as a consequence.

While conflicts over the use of limited facilities were inevitable in the circumstances, the Laindon youth centre did become a viable institution under James Hill's leadership. Despite the continuing restrictions imposed by food rationing that persisted long after the end of the war, a canteen facility was opened for the benefit of club members. This was initially staffed by adult volunteers but such was the spirit of the times with its determination to maximise the welfare aspects of many publicly funded institutions, means were provided to financially reward such volunteers who were recruited for this and other undertakings on an 'appearance' basis in order to encourage their continued support. As has been previously reported elsewhere among such recruited 'volunteer' staff was the late **John White** of Worthing Road, Laindon. John, after his wartime military service with, I

believe, the Royal Engineers' Regiment, returned to his previous trade of plasterer. Like many an ex-serviceman, military service had engendered in him a restlessness that was not assuaged by the return to a mundane domestic life and, in volunteering his services for 'youth work' he was able to indulge in a passion for organising various activities that his wartime experience had encouraged in him. As well as his interest in developing interest in sports activity such as the youth clubs soccer team, swimming and so on, John chose to expand his interest towards becoming a general dogsbody within the youth movement as a result of which, as a consequence of recognising the importance of education, in the 1950s he secured a position training apprentice plasterers at a London college (I think it was Goldsmiths), such was his expertise in the craft. It was when returning home to Laindon on the evening of 30th January 1958 by the ill-fated 18.20 train from Fenchurch Street that John unfortunately became one of the ten fatal casualties resulting from the collision with the following 18.35 from Fenchurch Street.

With the assistance of people like John whose names are now lost to me in the mists of time (although I do recall that one such other male assistant leader was an ex-army man who had spent a lot of the war period in a German stalag or prisoner of war camp, who was happy to regale the youth members of the club with his experiences.) Jim Hill was able to run what to me, at least, appeared to be a successful organisation which I was, for some short time in the middle 1950s, able to emulate in the Wallsend area of the north east of England. As was explained at the beginning of this article, the establishment of the Laindon youth club was part of a deliberate policy adopted county wide by the Essex Education Committee. This was part of a nation-wide endeavour encouraged by the Labour Party controlled Government established post their 1945 general election landslide and the introduction of what has become known as the 'Welfare State'. Thus the establishment of the Laindon youth club was being reflected with various degrees of success all over the place with a growing pool of both expertise and inter-club cooperation resulting. Thus, from time to time, joint efforts were made with other youth clubs within the system, which left a lasting impression.

Apart from those matters with which I became personally involved, it is impossible to recall all the activities that were indulged in at Laindon High Road School youth centre. Since Jim Hill attempted democratically always to involve the membership with the running of the centre there were constant forums taking place both formal and ad hoc, on the best way forward, some of which bore fruit. I recall that as a consequence of a forthcoming youth centred enterprise or convention that was being organised as part of the inter-club cooperation to be held at the **Craylands School**, I took up archery in order that we could put in a Landon team to compete. By comparison with the sort of sophisticated equipment that is available now for archers, ours was a pretty primitive or amateurish effort using only simple long bows as my photograph (taken at a training session) indicates. The event at Craylands involving demonstrations of much that was taking place

throughout Essex on behalf of youth was the subject of colour film which, again as I remember it, was given a showing at Laindon later. Perhaps this is still available in somebody's archive. Incidentally, in this connection, a brief check on the index of the Essex Records Office holdings (SEAX) reveals that under the index number A7004 there are records (two volumes) of the Laindon Youth Centre House Committee covering the period 1948 to 1967 available at Chelmsford that might be of interest.

In the period in which I was making use of the Laindon Youth Centre, a close bond seems to have grown up, as I recall, with the Rayleigh Youth Centre which used the secondary school at Rayleigh in much the same way as we did Laindon High Road. I think the name of the Rayleigh School has subsequently changed and, as I remember it, it was a far better equipped school than ours at Laindon. Certainly, a particular joint effort by the centres at Rayleigh and Laindon led to a party, from each centre that included me, spending a weekend in a joint camp under canvas at Snettisham on the Norfolk Wash. Certainly, Jim Hill was present with us as part of this particular outing. Also, when it came to setting up Laindon Youth Centre's drama group to gain entry with our interpretation of 'Lonesome Like' to, initially, the Essex regional, then the county-wide one act play contest, Rayleigh were considered our main contender for the title of county champion. I have detailed elsewhere the sequence of events and the importance that this was to prove in the career of the late Joan Sims. To continue to try to keep the record straight regarding Joan and the Laindon Centre, it was certainly the case that Jim Hill used all his powers of persuasion to get Joan to join his nascent youth drama group. Joan's acting ability was well known in the district as the results of her links with the Langdon Players Drama Group which was open to all ages. Getting her on board the youth group as well was clearly a good idea since it proved to be a boost to both Joan's ambitions as well as to Jim's determination to make the Laindon Youth Centre a worthwhile undertaking. It must be clearly understood that Jim's involvement with the youth drama group was never ever, to my knowledge, ever more than instigator, organiser, encourager or producer and certainly never as an actor. As far as Joan was concerned, her acting career was nurtured as much by being a member of the more mature Langdon Players as it was to receiving a considerable boost when being engaged with 'Lonesome Like'.

18 November 2012