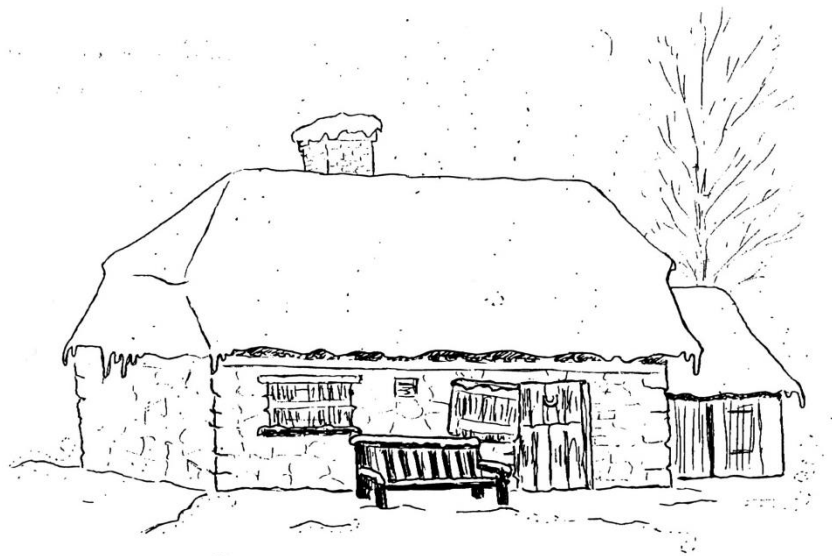


# The Thriplow Journal



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## EDITORIAL

*'To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child. For what is the worth of human life, unless it is woven into the life of our ancestors by the records of history?*

*Marcus Tullius Cicero, 103 – 43 BC*

Here is the last issue for 2024 which I hope you find enjoyable. Finding new articles for the journal is the hardest part of the job and I can assure you that articles from members are received with great joy. Having read in the last journal of Shirley's experience of being an evacuee, Society member Margaret Wright provided information included in this journal about a lesser known but catastrophic event that happened in 1944 – see page 7

We are looking for some new committee members – please see the information on page 14. Committee meetings are always enjoyable, they don't last too long and, if anyone feels so inclined, there is always time to call in at The Green Man afterwards.

Christmas is nearly upon us and the Thriplow Society's new Christmas tree is now looking good outside the village hall. The old tree, having served us well for many years, had finally come to the end of its life and a new one was bought at the beginning of this year in the January sales. Thanks to David and Geoff for their annual efforts in putting up the tree and later on taking it down. Geoff saved the lights from the old tree and they are now on the village hall. If anyone can offer help with the tree in future years David and Geoff would be extremely grateful.

The Thriplow Society programme for 2025 is included with this journal. The programme committee have done a great job in preparing an interesting selection of meetings and outings for us to enjoy but they are always looking for new speakers. If anyone has been to a meeting where the speaker has been good the committee would love to hear from you. **Please note that our village hall meetings will be starting at 7.30pm in future.**



*Pat Easthope*  
Journal editor

## MORE CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

What are your earliest memories? I can remember lying in my cot with people standing nearby and talking, just a short memory. Later when I was four, my Mother sent me to Kindergarten, I remember the boy in the desk behind me putting plasticine in my hair. As we walked up Mason's Hill, I was told not to pick up the shiny pieces of metal, called, I think, Shrapnel, that littered the pathway. They had been dropped by planes to block the radar.

My Mother also took me to Tap Dance classes. It was quite an uphill walk and we used to chant, "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can", when we reached the top we would chant, "I said I could, I said I could, I said I could". She much admired Shirley Temple, the child film star and dancer, - hence my name!



1945. My cousin Lynn aged 2 and me aged 5, in red and white hand knitted bathing costumes which stretched once they got wet.

My Aunt Celia and her husband Charles Bramley ran a Butcher's shop in Leeds, but when the war started their business, which had run on credit, went broke so they moved down to Bromley, Kent, where her sister, my mother, Mary was living. Charles travelled to Bethnal Green, London, every day where he worked as a butcher.

## SCHOOL

Most of my early memories are of school. After Kindergarten I was sent to Baston School, a small boarding school in Hayes, not far from Bromley. The school was opposite Bromley Common and we were taken for nature walks there where, to me aged five, the bracken was taller than me. In 1947 there was a very bad winter and the snow came over the top of my boots. On one of the walks, I was telling my teacher the presents Father Christmas had brought me when she interrupted, "Don't be silly child, there is no Father Christmas". I remember my first taste of peaches from a tree growing in the school grounds.

When I was ten there was an outbreak of Jaundice. I was sent home but my aunt sent me back, I was sent home again. My skin and the whites of my eyes turned yellow; I was given Glucose to drink which was horrible. Then my aunt caught it too and told the Ministry of Pensions (who were my official guardians) that she could not keep me any longer. So, I went to live with a family in Ferring near Worthing. They were very religious and I recall going to Sunday School where we sang from a book of Choruses. 'I am H-A-P-P-Y, - I am H-A-P-P-Y, I know I am, I'm sure I am, I am H-A-P-P-Y'. From there I went to a Convent school in Worthing. I cycled the five miles to school and recall falling over in the snow one winter.

From there I went to live with a family in Bromley and went to Bromley High School. They changed my name from Williams to Bell. I was given a kitten but remember very little of the school.

At the age of fifteen I was transferred to King Edward's School, Witley, Godalming and stayed there until I left school at the age of 18. King Edward's, founded in 1553 by Edward the sixth, was sister school to the Blue Coat School, The Bridewell Royal Hospital. During the holidays I went back to my aunt in Bromley.

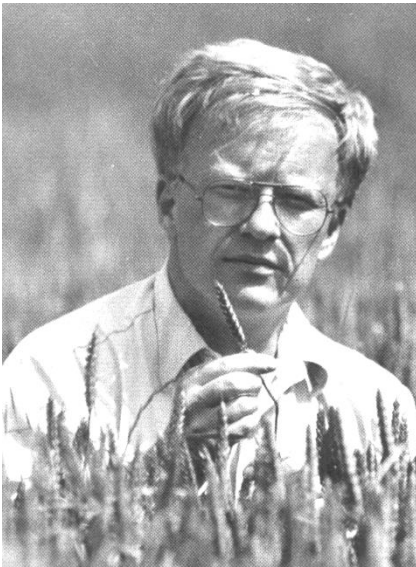


Me, as school photographer, greeting the Queen Mother in 1958 on her visiting King Edward's. The Head Master, Mr Humphries, is next to her.

*Shirley Wittering*

## Oliver Walston

*Reproduced by kind permission of David Walston*



Two days after my Dad died, I was taking a mental break, and went climbing at a gym in Cambridge. Whilst I was there, an email popped up on my phone, from the editor at Farmer's Weekly. He wanted to know whether I would consider writing a short tribute. My initial thought was no, not really interested. I continued climbing. The thought had now been planted however, and I couldn't stop thinking about it. Within about 20 minutes, I decided to go home, else I risked bursting into tears half way up a boulder. On the journey back, of about 25 minutes, I mostly decided what I wanted to say, and just had to type it out when I got to my office. This is what I wrote – a slightly abridged [worse] version was published in Farmer's Weekly soon afterwards.

*Sitting in the corner of the tiny pub was an old farmer, half a pint of warm beer in front of him. He was a friend of our host, who asked "Have you been watching that farming program on the telly?". "Oh yes" he replied, "What a disgrace! It's disgusting.". It was the late '90s, and I was with my Dad, visiting a friend of his in the Highlands. His TV program Against the Grain had just finished airing, and it would be fair to say that the reaction amongst farmers was not universally positive. Our host continued, "And what would you do to that Oliver Walston if he walked into this pub right now?". "Oh, I'd punch his lights out!" the old man replied. Our host - and I - found this hilarious. My Dad, very unusually for him, was the absolute definition of squirming embarrassment.*

*Back in those days, if someone asked me "Are you Oliver Walston's son?", the answer was usually "It depends who's asking". He had always been a controversial figure in farming, having hosted ITV's Farming Diary for many years, most of them before I was born. He then switched onto radio, recording dozens of breakfast table interviews for BBC Radio 4's Farming Today. This went on for several years, before being fired for (according to him) "being too posh". Given that he sometimes described himself as having been born with a silver spoon in every orifice, I don't think he could have argued too hard with the BBC's reasoning.*

*As time went on, and particularly after he stepped out of the public eye in 2010 having suffered a severe stroke, other farmers' opinions of him mellowed gradually. For the past decade, when outed as being his son, the reaction has been exclusively positive: Ahead of his time. Innovator. Forward thinking. Correct. These were the sort of words that people have used to describe him, with the benefit of hindsight. It's a shame that he never really got to hear them in person.*

*Since I came back to the farm in 2010 - less than a year before his stroke - we had some interesting moments working together, just as happens in any family business. But I feel so lucky, and incredibly grateful, that soon he graciously stepped aside and let me take the farm in my own direction. I know not everyone has this privilege.*

*I'll be running the grainstore this harvest, as usual, waiting to hear the distinctive sound of his G Wagen pulling up outside, followed 30 seconds later by "What's the yield?". This year, I think it will be good. I wish he could have been here to see it.*

~~~~~

## Why do we wear poppies?

*This article was reproduced by kind permission of Katie Curry (Melbourn u3a)*



The poppy is the enduring symbol of remembrance of the First World War and very strongly linked to Armistice Day (11 November) but the poppy's origin as a popular symbol of remembrance lies in the landscapes of the First World War.

A common sight on the Western Front, they flourished in the soil churned up by the fighting and shelling.

*Cont....*



During the First World War, millions of soldiers saw poppies in Flanders Fields, some even sent pressed poppies home in letters. The flower provided a Canadian doctor with inspiration for his poem 'In Flanders Fields' which he wrote whilst serving in Ypres in 1915. It was first published in Punch – having been rejected by The Spectator.

In response to McCrae's poem, an American humanitarian wrote 'And now the Torch and Poppy Red, we wear in honour of our dead.....' She campaigned to make the poppy a symbol of remembrance of all those who died in the war. Artificial poppies were first sold in Britain in 1921 to raise money for the Earl Haig Fund in support of ex-servicemen and families of those who had died in the conflict. They were supplied by Anna Guerin – who had been manufacturing the flowers in France to raise money for war orphans.

Selling poppies proved so popular that in 1922 the British Legion founded a factory – staffed by disabled ex-servicemen – to produce its own. It continues to do so to this day. Other charities sell poppies in different colours, each with their own meaning, but all commemorate the losses of war. White symbolises peace without conflict, whilst purple poppies are worn to honour the animals killed in conflict, particularly horses.

Who can forget, in 2014, the major art installation 'Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red' by artist Paul Cummins and designer Tom Piper at the Tower of London which captured the imagination of the public and attracted thousands of visitors?

In conclusion, the most famous poems were written, in greater than usual depth, by the most famous poets – Owen, Sassoon, Brooke – who were all actually serving on the front line.

I always wear my poppy with great pride.

*Katie Curry*



*Many thanks to Margaret Wright for lending me a book on which the following article is based. The book, written by Margaret's cousin Valerie Hardy (nee Hellaby), is entitled "Voices from the Explosion" It contains lots of information, photographs and interviews with people recalling their memories of the event. The book is available on Amazon.*

*Valeries parents were farmers but had retired and moved away from Fauld before the explosion. Margaret is extremely grateful that none of her relatives died in this catastrophe.*

*Pat Easthope*

**THE WORLD'S GREATEST ACCIDENTAL EXPLOSION** took place at Fauld in Staffordshire at 11:11 am on Monday, 27 November 1944. The explosion was a military accident which occurred at the RAF Fauld underground munitions storage depot..

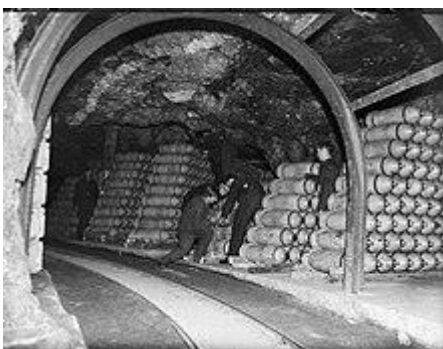
Between 3,900 and 4,400 tons of ordnance exploded, mostly high explosives. The crater, estimated at nearly three-quarters of a mile long, half a mile wide and around 100 feet deep covered an area of 12 acres. It is still visible just south of Fauld, to the east of Hanbury and is now known as the Hanbury Crater.

A nearby reservoir containing some 6 million gallons of water was obliterated in the incident, along with several buildings, including a complete farm. Flooding caused by the destruction of the reservoir added to the damage caused by the explosion. The exact death toll is uncertain; it is believed that about 70 people died in the explosion and resulting flood.



*Aerial view of the crater and damage to the surrounding area caused by the explosion, taken by the RAF on 4 December 1944*

The cause of the explosion was not made clear at the time, as the British government did not want enemy governments and military to know the extent of the disaster. Staff shortages had resulted in a management position remaining empty for a year and 189 inexperienced Italian prisoners of war were working in the mines at the time of the accident. There were also equipment shortages, a lack of worker training, multiple agencies in the mine resulting in a lack of an organised chain of command, and pressure from British government and military to increase work rate for the war effort which resulted in safety regulations being overlooked. In 1974, it was announced that the cause of the explosion was probably a site worker removing a detonator from a live bomb using a brass chisel, rather than a wooden batten, resulting in sparks. An eyewitness testified that he had seen a worker using brass chisels, in direct contravention of the regulations in force.



*Bombs being stacked in one of the tunnels at RAF Fauld*

Maintenance Unit 21, RAF Fauld Bomb Storage was locally known as “the Dump” It consisted of old gypsum mine workings which had been made into storage for a variety of ordnance; in addition to shells and bombs, the specifications included several types of weapons and up to 500 million rounds of small arms ammunition. Eye witnesses reported seeing two distinct columns of black smoke in the form of mushroom cloud ascending several thousand feet, and a blaze at the foot of the column.

The explosion registered on seismographs in Casablanca, it was also recorded as an earthquake in Geneva and Rome. It was heard 100 miles away in Weston-Super-Mare as well as in London Birmingham, Sheffield, Leicester and Northampton and various location throughout the country noted “inexplicable rumbles of sound”.

Debris and damage occurred to all property within a circle extending for 1,300 m. Upper Castle Hayes Farm completely disappeared and Messrs. Peter Ford's lime and gypsum works to the north of the village and Purse cottages were demolished. The lime works was destroyed by the flooding that occurred

after the destruction of the reservoir. Hanbury Fields Farm, Hare Holes Farm and also Croft Farm with adjacent cottages were all extensively damaged. Debris also damaged Hanbury village.

At the time, no precise records were kept monitoring the exact number of workers at the facility. While the exact death toll is uncertain as a result of this, it appears that about 70 people died in the explosion. The official report stated that 90 were killed, missing or injured, including:

- 26 killed or missing at the RAF dump—divided between RAF personnel, civilian workers and some Italian prisoners of war who were working there—5 of whom were gassed by toxic fumes; 10 were also severely injured. Six are buried in military graves.
- 37 killed (drowned) or missing at Peter Ford & Sons gypsum mine and plaster mill, and surrounding countryside; 12 also injured.
- Approximately 7 farm workers at the nearby Upper Castle Hayes Farm.
- One diver was killed during search and rescue operations.

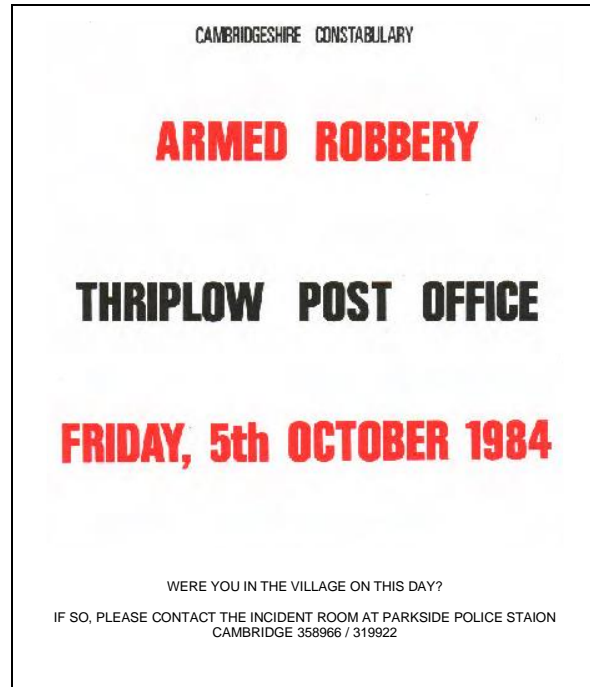
The inscription on the memorial stone that was erected at the crater in November 1990, lists a total of 70 names of people who died as a result of the explosion, 18 of these names are people who are still missing and presumed dead. Two hundred cattle were also killed by the explosion. Some live cattle were removed from the vicinity, but were found dead the following morning.

The area is now covered with over 150 species of trees and wildlife. Access is restricted as a significant amount of explosives are still buried deep in the site; the UK government has deemed their removal too expensive to be feasible.



*A memorial to the victims at the National Memorial Arboretum, near Litchfield, Staffordshire*

## THE THRIPLow MURDER



Forty years ago 53 year old widow Mrs Doreen Smith, the owner of Thriplow shop and post office was shot in the head whilst counting the days takings. She was found by neighbour Colin Tibbs who called an ambulance which rushed her to Addenbrookes Hospital where she was declared to be in a critical condition.

The first thing we knew about this was later that evening when a policeman knocked at the door to find out where we were between 5.30 & 6 that evening. The police very quickly set up an incident room in the village hall. The shop was re-opened on 9<sup>th</sup> October for the sale of basic items such as bread and milk by Mrs Smiths' assistant and good friend Carol Smith (no relation) who lived in Sheralds Croft Lane. The Post Office said it hopes to open a temporary service in the village as soon as possible.

On 10<sup>th</sup> October a newspaper headline stated "Thriplow is sealed off as police hunt for vital clue". The article said that Mrs Smith was still fighting for her life and that the gunman got away with £400.

On 12<sup>th</sup> police stopped more than 100 motorists driving through the village in a bid to find any vital clue and on 16<sup>th</sup> the Cambridge Evening News stated that the Post Office had offered a £5000 reward for any information leading to the arrest and conviction of the gunman.

On 19<sup>th</sup> October the police staged a reconstruction of the events and villagers were asked to relive 2 hours in the afternoon of 5<sup>th</sup>

On October 23<sup>rd</sup> the Cambridge Evening News headline was "Now it's Murder" as Mrs Smith had lost her fight for life that morning.

Over the next few weeks various theories appeared in the local papers with the police offering anonymity to anyone with information including the gunman's accomplice(s). A village collection was held which raised £107 for Addenbrookes Intensive Care Unit where Mrs Smith had been cared for. The police moved out of the village on 24<sup>th</sup> November promising that the murder hunt would continue at full strength.

On 13<sup>th</sup> December the police named George Farmakopoulos as a man they wanted to interview. He had vanished after giving away his VW Caravanette on October 6<sup>th</sup>. The vehicle had been spotted in Thriplow at the time of the shooting when Farmakopoulos was with a young woman and a boy aged about two. The vehicle would be on display on the village green on Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> and villagers were asked to look at it to see whether it jogged any memories. The following day it was announced that the police had some new leads to follow.

On 7<sup>th</sup> January 1985 it was announced that a person (believed to be a woman) had been arrested at Heathrow Airport and had been questioned by police but they were still looking for a second person. The following day 37 year old Maureen Cottage from Stapleford was accused of the killing and remanded in custody.

On 12<sup>th</sup> January a report in the Cambridge Evening News stated that an international police hunt had led to Belgian police seizing a Greek in Antwerp, they were assisted by Cambridge Detectives. The man was thought to be Farmakopoulos and the matter had been referred to the Director of Public Prosecutions with a view to extradition proceedings being taken. A newspaper headline on March 8<sup>th</sup> stated "Man fights Extradition" but on 19<sup>th</sup> it was confirmed that the appeal against extradition had been lost and it was hoped that he could be brought back to Cambridge within weeks.

In June Carol Smith, who had been running the shop for the past 7 months, stepped down from managing the shop as a new post mistress, Mrs Brenda Harvey, had taken over.

Villagers presented Carol with a glass bowl engraved with a picture of the shop, some daffodils and the words 'Thank you Carol' together with a cheque for £120. Carol said that she would still be working part time in the shop.

In July Maureen Cottage was committed for trial at Norwich Crown Court for the murder of Mrs Smith.

The extradition proceedings took some time and it wasn't until 9<sup>th</sup> August that Farmakopoulos was arrested at Heathrow Airport and three days later he was charged with murder at Cambridge Magistrates Court and remanded in custody. Detectives said at the time that it was too early to say whether Cottage and Farmakopoulos would stand trial together, but on November 6<sup>th</sup> Cambridge Magistrates Court committed Farmakopoulos to Norwich Crown Court.

The result of the inquest on the death of Mrs Smith was published on 7<sup>th</sup> November. She had received three bullet wounds in her head and neck and died from brain damage and lung complications caused by the bullet wounds. The coroner agreed to release her body for cremation. Her funeral took place on 15<sup>th</sup> November in St. George's Church, Thriplow, more than a year after her death. The service was attended by family, friends, villagers and representatives from the Police as well as Postmasters from Cambridge and Royston.

Towards the end of November an advertisement appeared in a local paper saying that Farmakopoulos claimed to have spent the afternoon of the shooting in Cambridge and listed all of the shops he said he had visited. Anyone who could confirm seeing him that afternoon was asked to contact his solicitors.

The trial took place in February 1986 with Mr Don Hollis prosecuting. The court heard that Farmakopoulos had been living with Maureen Cottage in Stapleford at the time of the killing. Cottage had admitted the robbery but denied murdering Mrs Smith and a verdict of not guilty was entered after the prosecution offered no evidence on the murder charge. She gave evidence against her former lover, saying that he had wanted to rob the post office for some time and wanted her help and she eventually gave in to his constant nagging. She admitted that they both went into the post office, she to distract the post mistress, when suddenly he was behind the counter holding a gun. She said *"I just thought he was going to scare the woman, I never ever thought he would actually use it"* She went on to say that when she saw the gun she was very scared and handed over a bag for the till money before stepping back out of sight. She said she heard some scuffling noises and thinks the postmistress said 'no, don't' once or twice. She went on to say

*"George came into the shop part of the post office and said "Let's go". I didn't hear any shots. When we were driving back to Stapleford he said he had shot her six times"*

The next day they fled to Europe with her young son but she claimed that the pressure from the crime forced the couple apart and she could not live with what she had done. She said that she had wanted to return to England to face the music but that she had been kept a virtual prisoner by Farmakopoulos.

The couple lived together in Athens for four months and she was unable to leave because Farmakopoulos had hidden her passport and kept her locked in the house. But eventually she found the passport and using money sent to her by her mother she and her son flew straight to Heathrow where she was arrested.

A few days after giving her evidence she was accused by Bruce Laughland, QC of lying to save her own skin and to protect her real accomplices. He said that she had lived in the drugs underworld of Amsterdam for several years and suggested that she had carried out the robbery with criminal associates from Holland. She told the court that she was completely dominated by her lover and couldn't think for herself any more after what she had been involved in. She said that she had been told that the murder charge against her would be dropped if she admitted to the robbery charge and that part of the arrangement included giving evidence against Farmakopoulos but she denied lying. She told the court that Farmakopoulos lived in a fantasy dreamworld of private planes, expensive yachts and property in Greece but it was all boasting about property he did not have. She reiterated that it was Farmakopoulos who was with her at the Thriplow robbery.

Farmakopoulos claimed that he knew nothing of the killing until his arrest three months later, saying that he had been shopping in Cambridge that day. Don Hollis, Q.C. accused him of being a lying, deceitful man, who had admitted having previous convictions for theft and forgery.

On 4<sup>th</sup> March, moments before the jury was sent out to consider its verdict the lights went out in the court when workmen accidentally cut off the electricity supplies to the building and the jury had to reach its decision by gaslight. The jury took 6 ½ hours to convict him by a majority of 11 to 1 on both counts. On the following day Farmakopoulos was given a life sentence and was ordered to serve a minimum of 20 years for the murder. He was also given a concurrent 12 year sentence for robbery.

Farmakopoulos accused the police of lying and tried to climb out of the dock. It took four dock officers to subdue him and take him down to the cells.



Detective Superintendent George Sutherland who led the police hunt told the court that there had been no deal between the police and Cottage over dropping the murder charge. The judge told Det. Supt. Sutherland that the skill with which the inquiry had been conducted reflected greatly on him and his colleagues.

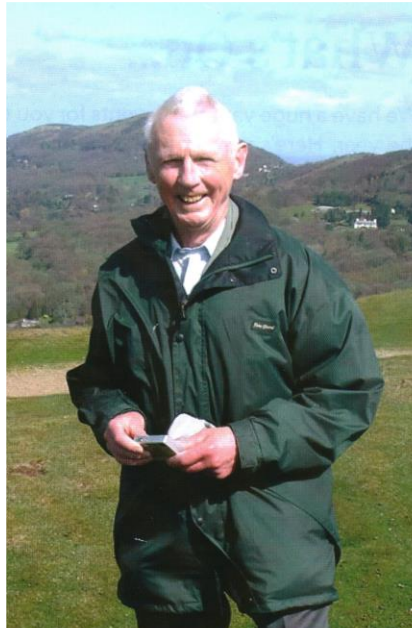
The commendations read that “by exacting, painstaking and thorough investigation two suspects who had fled the United Kingdom on the day after the shooting were identified. They were traced through Europe to Greece with careful planning, astuteness and patience” After the presentation Mr Kane said “The fact that the officers were dragged through Europe and back again, playing a game of chess with the murderer, who did not know his girlfriend was under arrest, was a masterly feat of not only professional policing but the psychology of it all was most interesting to watch. It was a unique and highly professional job. No-one was more pleased than the policemen of Cambridgeshire that the case had been cleared up”

*Our Society rules state that there can be up to ten committee members and there are currently only seven. Anyone who has been a member of the Society for six months is eligible to join the committee. If you think you may be interested and would like to know more about what is involved please contact any committee member who would be pleased to speak to you.*



## GLEANINGS

It is with much sadness that, on reading an article in the autumn edition of the "Cambridgeshire Past, Present & Future" magazine, we learned that former long term Society member Dr. Anthony Cooper died in April of this year at the age of 92. Anthony moved from Thriplow to Great Shelford several years ago but remained a member of the Thriplow Society until some 18 months ago when he resigned because he could no longer get to our meetings as his band practice nights were the same as our meeting nights. The CPP&F charity bought Wandlebury 70 years ago and, until earlier this year, Anthony had served as an active member of their planning committee for 30 years. We offer sincere condolences to Anthony's family.



*Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to all*



*Every day that passes, passes into history*