

Newsletter

Number 4

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Autumn 2024

THE VOICE OF THE HOOTON PARK COMMUNITY • ELLESMERE PORT • CHESHIRE



The new flower-beds, and new shrubs and plants that have been planted along the main entrance-drive, have greatly enhanced initial impressions to visitors.

A full list of contacts for the Trust and for the specialist groups operating within the site can be found on the back page.

Volunteers are always welcomed to help with the many and varied tasks at the Hooton Park site.

Please email us in the first instance, or make yourself known to members of the Hooton Park community.

A busy and successful summer for all involved at Hooton Hangars

Wow, April to October has pretty much been and gone as we write this. Our first Open Day of the year exceeded expectations in numbers, and the Open Days throughout the year have been very well attended.

These public events would not work without the great band of volunteers who come in to help. A common comment made by visitors is 'how friendly and knowledgeable the volunteers are', so thank you to all who contribute.

After a long gestation the Comper Swift finally made it to Hooton Park and has pride of place in the growing collection (see p. 6). The Aeroplane Collection's Proctor arrived and has seen rapid progress and is now a recognisable airframe (see p. 5). A complete Miles Gemini is stored in the hangar and will be the next project. The Meteor and Vampire are now well advanced, and work has started on IGP, the Wright Aviation Auster (see p. 4). The mobile searchlight has been refurbished and now lights up. The Spitfire, Sopwith Baby and Hurricane projects are also active.

So all in all, a very good season, and one we can all be proud to have been part of. One focus over the closed season will be to develop the ancillary displays and signage. We now also need to look with all our partners at how we can manage to open on more than one day a month in the future.

-Graham Sparkes, Hooton Park chair

Wildlife reports



We have seen lots of wildlife in recent months, but unfortunately not all of it captured on camera. There have been several sightings of an adult fox and cub seen mainly from the site mess-room. We have several rabbits around the site and they continue to breed, as rabbits do. There has been a pair of 'grouse/partridge' on site. One can never get close enough to positively identify before they do a road-runner impression and disappear! They have, though, raised a brood of chicks as witnessed by Glyn, who also saw one of the crows steal a chick and take it to its nest on Airfield Way.

Matt also found a young kestrel injured down the back of B.18; it was taken to a shelter but is believed to have brain damage so may not be a survivor, again probably being chased by the rooks and crows and flew into the hangar wall. We can also report that we still have barn owl activity on site – the evidence has been seen both inside and outside B.16.

There are several sections of the site vegetation being left unchecked at present and we have been seeing bee and butterfly activity around the site. On the vegetation front I must say what a great job 'Bob' the bike has been doing on maintaining the public areas since joining us. Several visitors have commented on the overall appearance of the site, with well-maintained grass areas and also the revitalised border on the access road. A great success has been Jess's RAF roundel in front of B.16 entrance.

—Graham Sparkes

Wirral Amateur Radio Society G3NWR



The Society's display stand at one of Hooton Park's monthly Open Days.

This year we have seen many developments here at G3NWR, with new members joining our club since we moved to Hooton; six members have undertaken the Foundation licence and passed, two have gone on and passed their Intermediate licence, and one has passed the Full licence – a credit to those concerned. Various field events have taken place:

Hovlake Lifeboat; GB2HLS

We spent the weekend of 19th May at Hoylake Lifeboat station. Brian & Vincent arranged for us to undertake communication via OSCAR 100, linking us up with Poole & Guernsey lifeboat station. From this event the club have been assembling a 10Ghz transceiver system built around the Portsdown and Winter Hill projects. Jim G6NOI has fitted all the components into a container that can be classed as transportable; that is, before you attach any aerials to it.

GB0SCA 150th Seabird Half Rater Regatta, 15th & 16th June at **New Brighton**

Phyl G6UFI arranged for us to take part in The Seabird Half Rater celebrations; this is the oldest one design class still sailing in Britain. It is a 20ft carvel planked sailing boat, with a design dating back to 1898.

Lighthouses on the Air; Bidston Hill Lighthouse GB2BHL

The event went well, the weather was reasonably kind for us, and the use of the auto logging helped with the station.

Open Days at Hooton Park

The mobile unit has been out on display during HPT's Open Days – an attraction that draws and interacts with the visitors, enabling those who would like to talk on the air with distant stations.

SSB Field Event, 7th & 8th September

This was an opportunity to practise setting up a station to communicate in the event of a natural disaster. A small team operated from the main shack during the 24 hours that the competition was running, during which we had 180 contacts.

Wirral Amateur Radio Society G3NWR

Meet at Hooton Park throughout the week at various times and on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings from 7pm to 9pm; further details from secretary.g3nwr@virginmedia.com.



We managed to complete the refurbishment of the Shell Eco car just in time for the Spring reopening, and the display board for Thornton Research Centre was in place for the June Open Day.

The mystery of the missing year-board from the Vauxhall story has been solved, it

having been misplaced among other archive material salvaged from the Luton Heritage Centre closure.

—Mike Foulkes



As always, I am certain – as all of you can relate to – that summer has gone far too quickly. I can at least report that the plan for The Griffin Trust to create a very small GM/Bedford/Vauxhall exhibition with workshop facilities to restore our exhibits in MT2 is well on the way towards completion. This will consist of a display of The Griffin Trust site Archives, acquired in the early days, before the Hooton Park Trust formation and not duplicated in any way. It will firstly involve a display of Hooton Park history, consisting of items donated to The Griffin Trust in the very early days and not duplicated with any other site history. It will be strengthened by a GM/Bedford/Vauxhall history display, some items of which were donated by the Vauxhall Motors Museum in Luton,

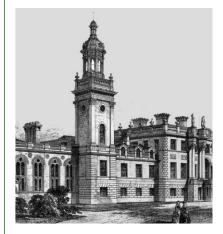


when it was closed several years ago. There will be numerous artefacts and information items that will complement other associated displays in the alcove spaces as it traverses their history almost to the present. The abovementioned display will then most importantly contribute to the HPT five-year plan, alongside the other groups established within the project, thus allowing The Griffin Trust to totally fulfil the aims of The GriffinTrust charity.

—Christine Thomas

RAF WW2 pilots items display donated some years ago by the widow of P. Mountain, from Heswall.

A glimpse of old Hooton



'From Brimstage we journey to Hooton, which, for nearly five centuries, was the most important house in the Wirral Hundred. The Old Hall, taken down in 1778, must have been a very interesting and striking building. A large portion of it was of the usual Cheshire timberand-plaster work, though one wing was of stone, and the whole was dominated by a remarkably slender tower of great height, which was built under a special licence from the king in 1488.

The hall which took the place of this in 1778 was from the designs of Wyatt, and at the time was considered "the most elegant building of the kind which the county could produce".

The present house was very much enlarged by the late Mr Naylor, who bought it in 1848. It has recently been leased to the Hooton Park Steeplechase and Racecourse Company Limited.'

From Notes on the Old Halls of Wirral by William Fergusson Irvine, 1903. Wm F. Irvine was the father of Sandy Irvine who, with his companion George Mallory, took part in the 1924 British Everest Expedition. It is not known whether the pair summited Everest, but some remains, believed to be of Mallory, have recently been discovered on the mountain.

Recent progress in The Aeroplane Collection (TAC)

Vampire

Since the last report the main work on the Vampire has involved using wet-and-dry paper to remove unwanted paint on the top side of the main wings. The starboard wing has nearly been completed and we are well on the way with the port wing. It has been a very long job!

Most of the disconnected components in the nose undercarriage leg operating mechanism have been reconnected, but there is one item which is proving very baffling. What this item does is yet to be determined! The plan is to prepare the nose undercarriage bay for painting, then clean all the operating mechanism components *in situ* before spray-painting both.



Starboard wing tip repaired.



 $Port\ wing\ nose\ repaired\ and\ wing/fuse lage\ fairing\ fitted.$

Auster G-AIGP

Our newest members have joined up to give some loving care to one of our heritage treasures, the 1946-built Auster Autocrat J/1. The aircraft has a rich history since being built in Leicester in 1946, with the first owner taking delivery of the aircraft to Hooton in November of that year.



All the tailplane fairings are now in place, another long and difficult job because of severe corrosion of the anchor nuts that hold the fairings in place. Most of the anchor nuts had to be drilled out and retapped.

The two ejection seat guns have been cleaned and repainted and are nearly ready to go back into the cockpit.

Work continues on painting the inside of the engine cowls silver.

Both the fuselage bottom doors have been fabric covered and painted with two coats of primer. They are now ready to be put back on the fuselage.



Port side, gun compartment door fitted.



Starboard wing aileron recess prepared.

Avon engine

Dave Calveley has recently repainted the Avon engine and stand.



Percival Proctor

Over the past few months, Rob has been working on the flying controls of the Proctor (photo 1). The rudder and joystick controls are part of two separate units that sit alongside each other. The simpler right-hand side unit has been stripped down, the old red paint removed and repainted in interior green with satin black detailing. The leather boot that covers the hole that the joystick passes through is in poor condition and he is working on how to best preserve this item.

As the photograph shows, the left-hand side controls unit is more complex. It will be stripped down, old paint removed and brought to the same finish as the right-hand side.

The Proctor wing box (photo 2) is making steady progress. Most of the glued joints have failed and virtually all plywood has delaminated and gone crispy.

Steve decided to start at the worst part, the starboard rear quarter, that was both broken and not supporting its own weight, hanging 15cm lower at the corner than the port side. He made a support that was the correct height as a reference point and built the first rib to sit on that support. This is now self-supporting, though the support will only be removed when the section is done, so as not to overload it while working

Steve has now finished rebuilding the Proctor tailplane (photos 3 & 4) and this has been mounted onto the rear fuselage to aid alignment. He has now moved on to the damaged wing which has significant damage. Using the 'good wing' as a template he is rebuilding the ribs, and at the time of writing is about to add the aileron trailing edge.

Ian has continued working on the rear fuselage and it has now been rebuilt with repaired fuselage stringers (photo 5). As in a lot of our restorations, we have found that all the glued joints had separated.

Ply skinning has commenced, and the fuselage is again self-supporting. The sliding windows have proved to be causing a bit of head scratching, but that was figured out with some close inspection of other Proctor aircraft.

It is hoped that the fuselage will be mounted on the centre section/undercarriage mid-2025.

Miles Messenger

The Messenger is now finished and on display.

Parker

The Parker is now finished and on display.

Trolleyacc

We have been lucky enough to acquire a 'trolleyacc'. This is a two-wheeled, covered trolley, which contains four accumulators. It is connected to the aircraft by means of a heavy-duty electrical cable and is used to start the engine. The trolleyacc will be cleaned and repainted in the colour used at the aircraft's last RAF service duty when it was based at Shawbury.

—Stewart Turner & Ian Maddock













Comper coming home!

The Trust were delighted on 16th September to see Comper Swift G-ACGL arrive on loan from the RAF Museum at Cosford. The negotiations and paperwork to secure the loan have taken a very long time – I first became involved in June 2022 but others had set the ball rolling prior to that, so it is

a momentous group achievement and a reflection of the growing reputation Hooton Park has as a serious museum.

So why is this a homecoming?

The Comper Swift was the brainchild of Nicholas Comper who set up The Comper Aircraft Company Ltd at Hooton Park in 1929. He was born in London in 1897 and joined what was to become the de Havilland Aircraft Company as an apprentice in 1912. He served first in the army and then in the RFC during the First World War. His aviation career continued post-war in the newly formed RAF, who, realising his talent, sent him to Cambridge to study aeronautics where, with other students and staff, he formed the Cranwell Light Aeroplane Club, developing several light aircraft, one of which won the *Daily Mail* Lympne Prize of £300. In 1927 the RAF transferred Comper to Felixstowe where he resigned to start the Comper Aircraft Company at Hooton Park.

He brought with him from Cranwell the design for a revolutionary high-performance single-seat aircraft, the CLA7, which developed into the Swift. The prototype G-AARX successfully flew in 1929 and the Swift was put into full production with both the ABC Scorpion engine and the Salmson Radial engine, but Comper wanted better performance and persuaded Douglas Pobjoy to join him at Hooton and set up a manufacturing facility. The result of combining the Swift design with Pobjoy's seven-cylinder engine resulted in an aircraft much sought after for racing and record breaking.

In all, 41 Swifts were built at Hooton, with the last one being assembled at Heston following Comper's move there in 1934 – a move which saw the company being acrimoniously wound up the same year.



Comper Swift G-ACGL safely in the hangar at Hooton Park after an absence of 90 years

What's special about this Swift G-ACGL?

Built in 1933, this aircraft was registered to Alex Henshaw of Mablethorpe on 30th May 1933. Henshaw won several trophies in this aircraft. The most notable success was the Siddeley Trophy at the 1933 King's Cup, only a year after he had gained his pilot's licence. Henshaw went on to be a test pilot for Armstrong Vickers, testing Wellingtons, Lancasters and Spitfires. It is estimated that Alex tested up to ten percent of all the Spitfires produced, which ensured that faults were detected before the aircraft reached the front line.

Swift stories

In 1931 Cecil Arthur Butler was riding his pushbike through the fields of the Wirral. He had just been told in a letter that if he didn't come home to Australia soon, he might lose the chance to marry his girlfriend.

Butler was in England studying aeronautical design, so when he spotted a small plane landing in the distance, he chased it down.

The pilot, Nicholas Comper, was trialling a new style of aircraft, a Comper Swift. Striking up a friendship, the pair devised a plan to get Mr Butler home and to make the Comper Swift famous. Butler flew the Comper Swift from England to Australia in nine days, one hour and 42 minutes, setting the England–Australia solo flight record.

Perhaps the full story will appear in a future Newsletter!

—Neil Hutchinson



A line of Swifts at Hooton in the early 1930's behind the museum hangar. This area of the site is now occupied by Stellantis Group's Parts Distribution Warehouse.

Canberra cockpit restoration

When I was offered the Canberra cockpit as a 'project' I was not given a specific brief other than that it was going to be an exhibit for the 'Kids Corner'. My own interpretation of this was that the cockpit should be presented as a safe, entertaining and interactive experience for our young (and older) visitors. So, for the purists who are about to tell me I did it all wrong – yes, I am well aware that I have taken a great deal of licence, but this is a repurposing project and not a restoration.

As is so often the case, a lot of the work done on a job like this will never be seen, so I won't bother to go into detail; but suffice it to say that there was a great deal of preliminary work that will go unnoticed.

The cockpit as received

My immediate aim was to get the cockpit to a condition that would enable our young visitors to climb in and start flicking switches, pressing buttons and pulling levers. First requirement was a temporary seat which will serve until the original ejector seat can be fitted.

The most visible work in the cockpit completed so far has been the three instrument panels. We still had a few of the instruments for some of the panels, and after diligent research and a great deal of help from Terry Parker, these were identified and relocated to their approximate correct positions.

As some instruments were missing, I have created facsimiles to take their place. In the case of the miscellaneous panel I reproduced three; on the fuel management panel we had all that were needed, but the main pilot's 'blind flying' panel and the associated instruments were entirely missing. This meant creating a complete new panel to accommodate the five instruments we had and reproducing another seven facsimiles to replicate the original layout.

Whilst the result may not be a 100 percent reproduction of the original, it is worth noting that having studied more than a dozen photos of Canberra panels, every single one is different – so there would not seem to be a definitive 'correct' layout.

To illuminate the instrument panels I have installed a 12v LED strip-light behind a pelmet, and this is wired together with some red warning lights on two panels, purely for dramatic effect.

Panel illumination by LEDs

I have freed off the flying instructor's jump seat and fabricated a fitting to hold the backrest, so this now forms a neat

division between the pilots' area and the navigator/bomb-aimer's section behind it. This latter section will be tackled in due course, as will the forward bomb-aimer's prone position in the nose and also the pilots' ejector seat.

I have bolted a cleat beneath the fuselage so that the boarding ladder is firmly secured, and have bolted a selection of grab handles in the cockpit to assist entry and exit. This should satisfy any health-and-safety requirements.

So – lots done, but lots yet to do. Watch this space and please feel free to pay a visit.

—Paul Gilling



The cockpit before and after restoration.



200-year-old press moves into Museum of Printing

The 23rd of May this year was an exciting day at Hooton Park, for on that day the Columbian hand-press which had been in storage in Hangar 17 for almost two years was moved into its new home in the printing museum and re-erected to form a fitting centrepiece to the museum space.

The press, which is almost 200 years old and weighs well in excess of a ton, was moved by machinery removal experts Giles Hovendon and Patrick Roe of Logan Press, who tackled the job with consummate professional skill – so much so that we had the press printing beautifully within a day or so of its re-erection (see photo of Dylan Waldron pulling the press's first print).

The timing of the press's relocation was perfect, for it has proved to be a huge attraction for visitors to the Park's monthly Open Days, with visitors to the printing museum having to obtain timed entry tickets to watch the press being used in demonstrations to print keepsakes and the like. The press's large bed-size enables us to print posters using the museum's collection of wood-type for events at the hangars.

The next big operation is to move the late-Victorian Arab treadlepress into the Museum from its current storage in Hangar 17 . . .





A Hooton Park link ...

Second Lieutenant Joseph Patrick Fitzgerald English was an American citizen from Troy in New York State, the son of Lawrence and Mary English. After schooling in Troy, he went to the Catholic University of America in Washington DC to study architecture. While there, he enlisted in the American Army when the USA entered the First World War in 1917.

He received his commission as a lieutenant and volunteered for the Air Service, but, apparently unhappy that the American aviators were not being sent to France quickly enough, he went to Canada and joined the British Royal Flying Corps.

Before he left his home country, he is reported to have said, 'I am willing to give up my life for my country'.

He was posted to the 4th Training Depot Station at Hooton Park Airfield, flying a Sopwith Dolphin plane.

He lost his life on 21st July 1918, aged 25, after losing control of his plane and crashing into the mud of the Mersey at low tide.

He is buried in the churchyard of St Mary of the Angels at Hooton.

—Gerry Bateman

Martin Williams at the gravestone in St Mary's churchyard, Hooton.



Then and now at Hooton

A continuing series by Neil Hutchinson of 'Then and Now' photos of life at Hooton Hangars



Then ...

A photo from the John Hughes Collection showing members of 610 Squadron having a joke using the engine nacelle of Meteor F4VT183 some time in the early 1950s. The exact meaning of what is going on is unclear – you probably had to be there! The aircraft was Struck Off Charge at RAF Duffield, East Yorkshire, in June 1954 following an accident on take-off; the pilot was uninjured.



Now ...

Our young volunteer Elliot and resident RAF uniform and gear expert Chris Beard attempt to recreate the action using the nacelle of HPT's Meteor T7, the restoration of which is now well advanced thanks to the efforts of Phil, Don and Ray.

Did you know ...

Prior to being developed as an aerodrome in 1917, the site was a racecourse set in the grounds of Hooton Hall. This was requisitioned at the outbreak of the First World War for Army training purposes. Although racing did not resume after the war had ended, a very strange race was held in 1930 when eight riders dressed in white nightshirts contested a race starting at midnight. The event was witnessed by a crowd in excess of 20,000 and formed part of the 325th anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot.

No. 663 (AOP) Squadron at Hooton Park, 1949 to 1957



No. 663 squadron was formed on the 14th August 1944 as a Polish Air Observation squadron at San Basilio, Italy, supporting the 8th Army. It was disbanded in October 1946. Post-war it reformed as part of the Royal Auxiliary Air Force (RAuxAF) on 1st July 1949 with its headquarters at Hooton Park where it occupied No. 1 hangar.

No. 663 Squadron comprised several detached flights – No. 1951 at Ringway, No. 1952 at Llandow, No. 1954 at Wolverhampton/Castle Bromwich. The Headquarters Flight, No. 1953 and No. 1955 flight, were tasked with photographic duties, and based at Hooton Park. Being an Air Observation Post (AOP) squadron, the squadron's motto was quite apt: 'We fly for the guns'. The squadron aircraft code used between July 1949 and April 1951 was ROC. The Squadron was eventually disbanded on 10th March 1957.

No. 663 Squadron badge – a Polish eagle in deference to its origins, with a snaffle bit in its claw – was presented to the Squadron at Hooton Park on 25th November 1951 by Air Commodore W. H. Merton. 663 COs were Major J. R. Bandy until October 1952, then Major C. Surgeon followed by Major H. B. Warburton MBE DFC. The squadron won the AOP Efficiency Cup in 1951, 1952 and 1953.

(To be continued . . .)

—Colin Schroeder

Annual Bus Running Day draws in the crowds

The annual Bus Running Day was another great success, with fine weather, numerous buses out running, and many viisiting vehicles.

Over a thousand passengertrips were taken during the event, and visitors also enjoyed the site's other attractions, including the stallholders in Hangar 17.

Thanks go to all who helped organise the event, and to all bus owners, drivers, conductors and others who helped make the event what many have described as 'the best ever'.

Photos courtesy of Graham Sparkes and Andy Hamer.













A sad tale with a happy ending



The day before the North West Vehicle Restoration Trust's open day in June, Liverbus 211 (L211SBG) 'Andy' decided to be naughty and thought it would be amusing to mix oil and water in the engine and then water into the cylinders causing it to 'hydraulic'. This is when there is water between the top of the piston and top of the head. The engine then refuses to start.

Karl Hardman, who knows Volvo engines like no one else, agreed that he could get the engine running as good as ever, and so the bus came for a little 'holiday' to Hooton Park and for use of the lifts. Andy The Bus (ATB) was towed from the NWVRT premises in Kirkby to Hooton by Andy Camp behind his ex-Merseybus Seddon Atkinson jack-wagon and ATB was ably piloted by James Rowlands. Backup was provided by Alastair Andrew and James Morgan in the van.

ATB was then moved through the gate and then into the corner of the hangar to settle down in the corner for its stay. Karl set to work on stripping the engine and said it was in poor condition and was a mixture between a Volvo THD101 and THD102. ATB doesn't do anything easy!

Parts went and came and the source of the water ingress was discovered to be two holes in cylinder liners which is down to age and the wrong type of antifreeze being used. Six new liners and bottom of the pistons, head skimmed, gaskets, a few valves, new oil filters and oil were all part of the job.

It was complete on the day of the Open Day in August and sounded far better than it had done but ATB wasn't on display as it seems not to like being seen in public.. I was very pleased with it and the excellent job Karl had done. He found one or two other things that needed doing but nothing too urgent.

A water leak appeared and this was sorted by Tims Hinds and Barrington and the rear seat and some electrical work sorted by Glyn.

A quick run down by the oil refinery on 18th August proved successful and then it was back to Kirkby on 21st August after a fuel pipe needed a quick nip up on the day by Andy Camp. Kirkby was reached in about 50 minutes with no problems.

However, ATB decided it wanted to be able to change its own oil and a rather awkward pipe has corroded which made the bus unavailable for the Merseyside Transport Trust's September Running Day and the Transport Show at Woodside in October.

The oil pipe should be sorted in the next few weeks and hopefully ATB will be 'all lit up' at the NWVRT's Nocturnal Event on Saturday 9th November. Two services will be running between 2pm and 6.30pm from Headbolt Lane Station (96) and Prescot Station (90) to Charley Wood Road for the event.

Unless, of course, ATB has other plans!

—Terry Morris (with grateful thanks to all at Hooton Park who helped make this happen)

Micro cars come to Hooton





During the summer, Hooton Park was delighted to host visiting 'micro cars' and their owners who brought their fascinating vehicles to put on display for the day.

Chester No. 4 tram news



Work progresses on the handrailing on the stairs – it's really tricky to get it looking right! The aluminium beading on the stair stringers has been a little devil to fit, for aluminium doesn't bend like we would want it to sometimes! But we're nearly there now, and it looks great.

The controllers that arrived from Walton on Naze are being cleaned up and made to look good. They are very heavy. Does anyone know what chemical to use to get rid of the chrome tops, as they are a bit 1930s and really should be brass, more in keeping with the 1900s?

We have acquired a set of wheels on axles to the correct gauge of 3' 6" (see photo above) – details in the next newsletter on how we did it. We're currently cleaning the fossilised grease and brake-dust off them so they can be painted in 'red oxide' (sort of dull red).

Working party is usually on Tuesdays, 10am to 2.45pm.

-Rob Jones

Ellesmere Port Model Boat Club

The boat club have enjoyed taking part in a few Open Days this year, with a various boats sailing on our now completed lake, and hopefully more to come next summer. Sailing is available all year round, and anyone wishing to join, yearly membership is £30 with a one-off fee of £10 in the first year. The club holds a meeting every second Tuesday of the month – please contact Mark Price on 07751034897 for more details.





HOOTON PARK CONTACTS

Hooton Park Trust

info@hootonparktrust.co.uk Tel: 0151-327 3565

Newsletter

Editorial, design & typesetting:

Ken Burnley

kburnley@btinternet.com Tel: 0151-648 2789

Associate editor:

Neil Hutchinson

nhutchinson@owenellis.co.uk

The Aeroplane Collection (TAC)

Stewart Turner

stewartc24turner@gmail.com

The Griffin Trust

Christine Thomas

griffintrustcouk@gmail.com

Bus Owners

Andy Hamer

c207gtu@gmail.com

Chester No.4 Tram Team

Rob Jones

rsjtrams@aol.com

Wirral Amateur Radio Society

Jim Whelan

jimmy.whelan@hotmail.com

Ellesmere Port Model Boat Club

Mark Price (Secretary)

moprice1024@gmail.com

Museum of Printing

Ken Burnley

kburnley@btinternet.com

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