

# THE GATEACRE SOCIETY

Founded 1974. Registered Charity No.508024.  
A member of the British Association for Local History  
and the Merseyside Civic Society

Website: [www.gatsoc.org.uk](http://www.gatsoc.org.uk) Email: [info@gatsoc.org.uk](mailto:info@gatsoc.org.uk)

## Executive Committee 2016/17

Brian Doman, 6 Hayles Grove, L25 4SL (0151 722 6368) *Chairman*  
Beryl Plent, 27 Grange Lane, L25 4RZ (428 5379)  
*Vice Chairman & Local History Sec.*

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Eryl Chitty *Joint Hon. Secretary*

David Phythian, 26 Primrose Road, L18 2HE *Membership Sec.*

Pam Ball, Flat 1 St Stephens Court, Halewood Road, L25 3PG (428 0500)  
*Sales Officer*

Sandra Sandland *Assistant Sales Officer*

Rosemary Doman

Margaret Gofton

## WE NEED NEW COMMITTEE MEMBERS

If you would like to know more about what is involved,  
please have a word with any existing member

## Annual Membership Subscriptions

**Household £4 Single pensioner £3 Company, etc. £6**

If you wish to join the Society, please send the appropriate subscription to the  
Membership Secretary, David Phythian, 26 Primrose Road, Liverpool L18 2HE:  
cheques payable to 'The Gateacre Society'.

*The Society's membership year ends on 31st October. If you are already a member,  
your address label indicates the date when your next subscription payment is due.*

**Our Book - Gateacre & Belle Vale: in old photographs -**  
is on sale at our meetings and events, price **£10** (bookshop price £12.99).

**Our Tea-towel** is also available, price **£4**.

Visit our website - or contact Beryl Plent or Pam Ball for further details.

## DO YOU HAVE AN EMAIL ADDRESS?

If so, and if you would like to receive your Newsletters by email  
instead of by post, please let us know by sending a message to  
**membership@gatsoc.org.uk** quoting your name and postcode

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# The Gateacre Society

*Guarding the Past - Safeguarding the Future*

## NEWSLETTER - September 2017

*Our next meeting:*

## LIVERPOOL HEROES

An illustrated talk  
by Bill Sergeant  
in Gateacre Chapel,  
Gateacre Brow L25 3PB  
on Monday 18th September at 7.30 p.m.



Bill Sergeant is Liverpool born and bred, and served for 30 years with the Police before retiring in January 1992 as a Detective Chief Superintendent. He has always been interested in local history, but developed a keen interest in the men who served during the Great War. He has visited the battlefields and cemeteries on the Somme and the Ypres Salient many times. He chaired a small committee which in 2008 provided a memorial in Abercromby Square to 'Liverpool Heroes', including Captain Noel Chavasse VC & Bar MC, the most highly decorated soldier of the Great War.

Bill wrote several books to raise the required £120,000. Since then he has been closely involved with the commissioning and unveiling of various WW1 centenary memorials. His talk deals mainly with Noel Chavasse but, Bill tells us, "The reason for the title - Liverpool Heroes - will hopefully become apparent during the talk".

**ALL WELCOME - Admission free - Donations invited**

## HERITAGE OPEN DAY REMINDER

On Saturday 9th September,  
Gateacre Chapel is open  
10.30-4.00, and St Stephen's  
Church 10 till 3. Our two-  
hour circular history walks  
depart from the Chapel at 1  
pm and from St Stephen's at  
2.30. *For more information  
see our website - or go to  
[heritageopendays.org.uk](http://heritageopendays.org.uk)*

## COME TO OUR A.G.M.

The 43rd Annual General Meeting of the Gateacre  
Society will be held on **SUNDAY 29th OCTOBER** at  
**2.30pm**, in Gateacre Unitarian Chapel, Gateacre  
Brow L25 3PB. We have invited Councillor Alice  
Bennett to attend, and to contribute to our discussion  
of local heritage and environmental issues. Alice is  
Mayoral Lead for Heritage & Design, and we look  
forward to hearing what she has to say. As usual,  
complimentary refreshments will be served, and we  
hope for a good turnout of Society members old and  
new. *Prospective members are also very welcome.*

# THE DAY ROBB BROKE OUT

Our June 2017 talk – reviewed by Mike Chitty

Robb Wilton, Tommy Handley and Arthur Askey were the three most famous Liverpool-born comedians of the 1940s. Robb's catchphrase was "The day war broke out ...". In the words of Dr Tom Preston, who spoke to us on 5th June, he was "a master of studied inaction". John Lennon, Ken Dodd and Les Dawson were all fans.

In fact Robb Wilton was already almost 60 years old when WW2 broke out. He had been working as an actor since the 1890s, often accompanied by his wife Florence Palmer. Born in Tillotson Street, Liverpool in 1881, his real name was Robert Smith. His father, a print compositor, was a Protestant from Dublin, and his mother was a Catholic from Everton. By 1891 the family had moved to Woolton. Robb's father had taken over the pub at 67 Quarry Street from his son-in-law, who had moved to the Black Horse a few doors away.

In 1899 young 'Robert Wilton' made his début in *Dishonoured* at the Theatre Royal, Garston. After that he moved around, joining a new company every few months. At the Theatre Royal Hull he played a French marshal in *A Royal Divorce*, the play that is said to have popularised the line "not tonight Josephine". It was there – in the melodrama *Greed of Gold* – that he met his future wife. They married in 1904. Three years later he was billed as Robb Wilton for the first time, in *Who Was the Woman?*. A 1909 advert in the 'Era' magazine called him a "Song and Patter Comedian". Later that year he was top of the bill at the Leeds City Varieties, and in 1914 he was "supported by Full London Company" in the revue *Enquire Within*.

After WW1, Robb joined Fred Karno's company, had a big house in Birkenhead and a flat in Kensington, London. In his Sunbeam car, he was one of the first Music Hall stars to drive himself around the country. In 1923 he and Florence embarked on their one and only 'world tour' – to Canada, the USA and Australia – performing *Sherlock Bill* which was set in a police station. His Fire Chief and Magistrate characters had also been introduced by this time. In 1926 he moved into a detached house overlooking Potters Bar golf course, and was in a Royal Performance with the Tiller Girls and Jack Hylton.

In the 1930s Robb found fame on radio, the occasional film and early TV variety shows. The Magistrates Association objected to his portrayal of the bumbling Mr Muddlecombe JP on BBC Radio's *The Court of Not-So-Common Please*, but, as Tom put it, "Lord Reith gave them short shrift". The 1940s brought mixed fortunes. The couple had moved to Rhyl when the BBC Light Entertainment department relocated to North Wales. In 1947 Robb became 'King Rat', a prestigious position in the showbiz charity world. But in 1949 their son Robert (another actor) fell from a window, aged 36. The verdict was accidental death, but Florence was never the same again. The following year, owing to 'extreme fatigue', Robb was ordered to rest.

Robb died in 1957, aged 75. He was active almost to the end. In 1955 he had starred (as a magistrate!) with Arthur Askey and Thora Hird in the film *The Love Match*. In 1956 – by which time he and Florence were living in Mayville Road, Allerton – he was on ABC TV's *Hometown Saturday Night* from the Crane Theatre in Liverpool.

In the question-and-answer session, Tom was asked where the name 'Wilton' had come from. He offered two theories. Perhaps he initially chose 'Robb Woolton' but people found this difficult to pronounce? Or perhaps it was from Marie Wilton, who was a favourite of his sister (herself an actress).

Based on his researches, Tom Preston has written the first-ever biography of Robb Wilton. We look forward to its publication later in the year.

## RIGHTS OF WAY STRATEGY

Anyone interested in protecting Merseyside's Public Rights of Way should take a look at the newly-published 'Improvement Plan' document. The deadline for comments is 29th September. Please visit our website for further information.

## 231 HOUSES?

Countryside Properties (UK) Ltd has applied for planning permission to build 31 extra houses on the former Gateacre Comp site: 3 extra on Grange Lane, 6 extra on Cuckoo Lane, and 22 extra within the interior of the estate. This will be achieved largely by building tall semi-detached pairs instead of detached houses, and by making some of the gardens even smaller than originally planned. We have objected to the changes, which we feel will downgrade the quality of the estate, and exacerbate the problems of traffic and pressure on local schools and health services. Two of our local Councillors have also objected, which means that the decision on the planning application (ref. 17F/1805) will have to be made by the Planning Committee rather than by Council officers. *Further comments from local residents will be accepted up until the date of the Committee meeting.* If you wish to object to the latest planning application, email your views to [planningandbuildingcontrol@liverpool.gov.uk](mailto:planningandbuildingcontrol@liverpool.gov.uk), making sure that you include the reference 17F/1805 along with your own name and postal address. Or write to Development Control Division, Liverpool City Council, Cunard Building, Water Street, Liverpool L3 1AH.

## 4,000 HOLES?

It would seem that someone in the City Council has been celebrating the 50th anniversary of 'A Day in the Life' (on the Beatles' Sgt Pepper album) by counting the potholes in Gateacre. On Grange Lane they are numbered up to 62. How many more will it take to fill the Philharmonic Hall?



## POSTMAN'S PLIGHT

We asked the City Council why the new houses in Grange Lane have such strange numbers. Rather than the anticipated 2, 4, 6 through to 106, the numbers only run from 2 to 10, with suffix letters added from A to N (excluding I and L to avoid confusion with the number 1). The reason, we were told, is that there are already "existing numbers 12 & 14 Grange Lane further down the road". But does anyone know that The Cottage (by Grange Mews) is officially No.12, or that the Gateacre Institute is No.14? And is it logical, given that they are opposite the shops numbered 171-185? We suggested that it would have been better to re-number these two properties, rather than risk visitors to the 53 new houses facing confusion for years to come.

