

## Maiden Erlegh Residents' Association

On the following pages are the cover-page and a few columns from our Spring 2010 newsletter. My apologies for the slightly fuzzy cover, which I have had to scan in for this assembly.

Just to explain, Maiden Erlegh lies at the centre of Earley, an oddly-shaped town on the edge of Reading (but belonging to Wokingham Borough for council purposes). And in the centre of Maiden Erlegh is a nature reserve including a lake, opposite which I am fortunate to live. The two names, Erlegh and Earley, had the same origin historically (and they are not the only spelling variants that you see around).

MERA's newsletter is published three times a year as an A5-sized booklet. It circulates to nearly a thousand households out of 1250 in our area, plus local organizations. I have been its Editor for five years. Although other individuals do contribute, inevitably I find myself having to write the majority of the material, either signing it or not, according to how 'personal' it is. Fortunately I have colleagues who see to setting up the pages (including the display advertisements when they first arrive) for sending to the printer.

For this latest issue, we increased the size from 24 to 28 pages to accommodate several new local advertisers. There are 26 of these now, and their payments just about cover the cost of printing each issue (which enables us to keep the MERA subscription down to £1 a year, per member household!).

Our layout has the adverts appearing only on the left-hand pages, occupying either half- or quarter-pages (apart from a full-page display on the back page). This produces what we think is a good balance against the editorial pages which we place on the right — though we also have a double-spread of text at the centre of the newsletter.

Read on!

Peter Soul (peter[at]petersoul.co.uk)

# MERA

## NEWSLETTER



Maiden Erlegh Lake under ice & snow in January  
'Can you Spot the Swan' – see page 3

Come to MERA's Annual General Meeting  
on Thursday 13 May at Kenton Road Day Centre  
Refreshments from 7.30, meeting at 8.00  
Guest speaker: Adam Hewitt of the *Reading Chronicle*

Issue 150: Spring 2010

MAIDEN ERLEGH RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION

## Welcome . . .

...to the MERA Spring Newsletter! And am I glad to be typing these words, even though it's still February: they help me believe the cold weather may soon be gone, and they remind me that I'm over a particular personal hurdle – of which, more anon.

What are my memories of the ice and snow? The winter wonderland they created around the Reserve ... whole families out enjoying the snow (as in a Bruegel painting, someone said) ... almost no litter being dropped upon it at all ... two-metre-high snowballs parked in Andrews Road and Radstock Lane ... residents out on some roads in full force, clearing them ... and the pleasure of being greeted by everyone you passed (sometimes, though, my problem was recognizing friends, beneath the hats and scarves).

And then our resident swan flew off and returned with a third husband! What a catch for him, too: a wife with her own private lake and island, and staff to watch over them. He was even seen demonstrating to her his prowess at gathering material for a nest.

I can assure you that the female is in our cover picture, though being white she's well camouflaged. So I invite entries to our first *Spot the Swan* competition, by post, phone or email (see opposite): measure to where you think she is, in millimetres from the left edge and then the bottom edge of the photo. The first (or nearest) correct entry out of my hat on 10 April wins a

£10 token from the Country Gardens centre at Loddon Bridge.

### **Getting together again**

Do come to MERA's Annual General Meeting, on Thursday 13 May at Kenton Road Day Centre. Light refreshments will be served from 7.30, before the meeting starts at 8 pm. The guest speaker will be Adam Hewitt, our local man on the Chronicle. He will surely entertain us with inside stories...

Area Reps, if the newsletters felt heavy on delivery, it's the extra pages: advertisers were queuing up to take space! So readers: please notice what is offered on the left-hand pages, as well as what's written on the right.

I am always grateful to Patricia and Jonathan Brown for seeing to the production of our newsletter, as well as for helping me decide on its content. This time we agreed on including my reflections (see page 25) on a recent short stay in the Royal Berks. Really, my message to men is to look after your health – and to everyone: support your local hospital. (I'm glad to say that I am now well on the mend.)

### **Missed by everyone**

The sudden and so early death of Chris Edmunds, a tireless local councillor and a past chairman of MERA, reminds us that we are all mortal. A summing-up of his life and his achievements can be found overleaf.

*Peter Soul*

## I'm just a bloke from Earley . . .

...trying to improve our community. So Chris Edmunds used to say on people's doorsteps, as he listened to their concerns and asked for their votes. But the reactions to his sudden death at 46 from a heart attack, at the end of January, underlined the fact that he was no ordinary community member.

Chris was Chairman of MERA for 14 years. Whenever our association suffered lean times, his encouragement rallied the troops and made it flourish again. Finally in 2004 he decided that his local-council commitments were too great for him to continue with MERA.

Elected to Earley Town Council in 2001, he was Leader of the Council from 2004. He joined Wokingham Borough Council meanwhile (in 2002), becoming a deputy leader and Exec Member for Children's Services and then Social Care. He succeeded in implementing significant improvements to the workings of both councils, with much benefit to their communities. A council colleague says he was a team player who was able to lead the team.

Chris grew up in Cheshire, on the Wirral. Early in life, we are told, he decided it was a waste of his time to arrive a minute early for any occasion – a rule he stuck to ever after! His father was an architect who died young also, though not before passing on to him an appreciation and love of buildings, not least cathedrals.

His first job was in London with Prudential Insurance, and it was there he met Jane. They married, moving to Moor Copse Close in 1989. Chris was branch manager of Scottish Provident in Reading for 10 years. He joined AXA in London in 2006: as Investments Strategy Manager for corporate clients



Jane says he had 'found his niche'.

His heavy professional and council work left little time for recreation, but he was for five years a member – and for most of them organizer – of Earley St Peter's cricket team. In earlier years he loved to make music, instrumental and vocal. He was certainly able to relax on holiday, Jane tells us, whether touring Europe or resting on a beach.

The secrets of Chris's success in life included an ability to talk to anyone and an inability to discard anything! He could lay hold of any council or other document that might be required, from hoarded collections about the house. Jane describes him also as a caring person, always able to empathize with others' situations and points of view.

She says with pride that he left the stage 'on a high', in achievements and in the respect of others. This was more than evident at Chris's funeral service in Earley St Peter's Church, which was attended by more than 200 people.

It is a tragedy, though, that such a dedicated family man and community worker should have died so young. We offer our condolences to Jane and their family: Christopher, Oliver and Jessica.

## What goes down must come up

Where do you stand on litter? I don't mean where is it so piled-up you can't avoid treading on it, but ... well, do you ignore it totally? Do you shudder at picking up even the occasional item in the street, and binning it? Have you abandoned your front garden to litter?

Or do you try to keep the garden and pavement in front clear? Do you (like one Earley councillor) defy anyone to find litter in your street, after you've worked round it? Do you say to yourself: what's been dropped must be picked up sometime, so why not now?

Across the country, hundreds of groups of volunteers are fighting the plague of litter: see [www.litteraction.org.uk](http://www.litteraction.org.uk). In some places, individuals take on responsibility for litter-picking one length of road, usually along where they live. Often local councils organize this, accepting that it's impossible for them to deal with litter alone. When helpers are found, the problem becomes manageable.

MERA has been sounding out our councils and the Earley Environmental Group on starting such an 'adopt-a-street' scheme in Earley. WBC simply pleaded lack of resources. ETC gave us a warmer reception: Brian Hackett and I met the Planning Committee, which expressed strong initial support. We are hoping that the council will pay for some or all of the equipment needed – in which case the project has a good chance of success.

As for the EEG, they were as enthusiastic as us! We agreed to form a joint scheme to be called (probably) 'Adopt-an-Earley-street'. Some of you will have seen it announced in the EEG newsletter. Now it's our turn to say that even a small team of you could make a huge difference to our town, each volunteering to look after your bit of road, or maybe a local footpath etc.

### Over to you...

Would you be willing to join in and keep a little part of Earley litter-free? If so, please contact Brian (see page 3) before mid-April, with your details. Tell him too that you'd like to be kitted with a litter-picking tool, black bags, gloves, also a yellow jacket: apart from adding to your safety near roads, this will draw attention to what you are doing, hence giving you the chance to speak to people and spread the message.

You see, the really successful anti-litter groups are those that expanded by personal contact: 'If you appreciate the good I'm doing to the environment, why don't you start doing it too?'

The people to avoid are the litter-droppers. If we can just present them (and everyone) with clean streets, this should make them less likely to drop the next item there – if you recall what I wrote in the last issue.

When and how often you go out litter-picking is entirely up to you. You will be given a safety leaflet covering things such as not touching sharp and other dangerous items. You may find that a smaller plastic bag is sufficient for what you do collect. To get rid of the proceeds, you simply put them out with your refuse (with the recyclable items separated, if you feel the urge).

Many of you will have reasons not to take on an activity like this: too busy already, stiff joints, I know the feeling! But for the rest ... it would only take up a little of your time, and we could transform our town. Phone Brian now?

*Peter Soul*

[Already, within a month, more than 30 residents have signed up to what we now call Earley Adopt-a-Street Initiative (EASI)]

## A hard winter on the Reserve

*The Senior Park Ranger looks back at a chillier-than-average season:*

We all grumble about winter: the cold, the wet, the dark evenings, the higher fuel bills and so on, but really we have it easy compared to the other animal species that share Earley with us.

Millions of years of evolution have equipped them to survive the winter, even a cold one such as we have just had, so each species will certainly have survived. However, many individual animals will have perished (particularly if they were near the northern edge of their range).

Do you put food out for the birds? The frozen ground, lack of insects reduced cover and shorter daylight all conspire to give them a hard time. And their small size means heat escapes fast, in spite of their brilliantly designed feathers. They can lose 10% of body weight overnight, trying to keep warm.

Some people argue it's unnatural to feed birds – but then so is placing houses, roads, conifer forests etc over their ancestral habitats. In the end, perhaps, a few scraps put out in the garden may not have a big impact on survival of a species, but at least it raises our spirits on winter days!

### **Icy charm, charming behaviour**

Although the freezing-over of the lake

in winter brings a whole new beauty to the scenery, it has the drawbacks of inconveniencing the waterfowl and bringing out some odd behaviour in humans. This year saw branches, recycle boxes and (most idiotic of all) lifebelts thrown on to the ice. And as well as being hazardous to wildlife, they all had to be laboriously retrieved.

Then as winter started to fade away, we worked on digging gullies along the lakeside paths and others, in an attempt to drain the puddles and keep the shoes of walkers drier in wet weather. Don't forget, though, that this is a nature reserve and not central Reading. The paths will continue to have a certain rustic charm, and when it's wet we still recommend visiting in stouter shoes or boots.

Something else we did was to erect a kingfisher nest-box. Probably no kingfisher has nested in Maiden Erlegh in the past hundred years – but we are forever optimists!

Finally, it's worth mentioning that the recent chilly weather (the coldest for 30 years) does not mean that we can all forget about global warming and trying to live more 'sustainably'. Weather is not at all the same thing as climate, and global temperatures have been the highest on record. Beware, or at least be aware...

*Grahame Hawker*

## School notes

*We asked the Head of Modern Languages at Maiden Erlegh School to tell us about the benefits of studying foreign languages:*

Languages are an essential part of the cultural richness of society. The ability to understand and speak a foreign language is a great skill to have – and it sets you apart from the majority of British people. It opens up a world of opportunity and of deeper cultural understanding. Learning a foreign language, whether it's for pleasure or for a future job, is both fun and useful.

All Maiden Erlegh students study French from Year 7 (age 11+) for at least two years. Year 8 is when pupils now make their GCSE choices for Y11., 'Proven linguists' start German in Y8 too. These are the lucky ones, taken on a visit to the French and German regions of Switzerland for a week in February. The itinerary includes Lausanne, Bern, Geneva (taking in the UN building and the International Red Cross Museum), Gruyère for its cheese and other places to suit all tastes.

Years 9 to 11 enjoy trips to France and a German exchange to Lippstadt. And last December we had a visit from the German TV channel ZDF, making a film on language-learning in England. Year 10 performed well for the camera!

Another thing about foreign languages is that they give you an insight into both the English language and English culture (via comparisons with that of other countries). You develop all sorts of communication and research skills, and gain techniques for learning further languages when the opportunity comes. All this is regarded as valuable by universities and by employers, especially in the international

job market.

So our sixth-form language pupils have real incentives to study hard. All are offered an exchange week of work experience in France or Germany, with huge benefits to them. Our French return visitors worked here for a week in March in local primary schools.

Alas, the opportunities for learning other languages are limited. We were visited by Swedish teachers last year, and we regularly host Chinese visitors and involve them in teaching. So our pupils need to be ready for anything!

*Jonathan Newton*

### **What's it going to do tomorrow?**

Maiden Erlegh School now possesses a weather station. It was installed last November, and is solar-powered with battery back-up. Measurements are fed into a computer which sends them, together with a local weather forecast, to the internet. Already, we are told, its forecasts for the Earley micro-climate seem to be more accurate than those from other sources. The simplest way to access them is to google the words Maiden Erlegh Weather Station.

Our congratulations to the school, pupils and parents for raising £3900 for Haiti in return for having a non-uniform day. But surely the smart school uniform can't be disliked that much...

We must draw your attention to the continuing excellent series of art exhibitions in the Peacock Gallery at Maiden Erlegh – see the listing on page 15. But the highlights of the whole year have to be the GCSE and A-Level Art & Design shows, which will spill out of the gallery to fill the whole of the Visual Arts Department. Go and see their splendour if you possibly can.

## From *Cats* to . . .

I must admit that when I heard the news last October that Andrew Lloyd Webber was about to be operated on for prostate cancer, my reaction was: lucky so-and-so, first he will get the best treatment, and then when he's recovered he will sit down and write a musical on the subject – calling it *Cuts*, no doubt – and make more millions! Still, good luck to him, I thought.

I then forgot about ALW, until January when I found an article he had written, telling the whole story up to his final all-clear, received that month.

The main reason I'd forgotten him was that just before in October, I had been given the same diagnosis ... in fact in January I ended up having the same operation as he had (prostate removal – by robot), and now I've had a virtually definite all-clear myself.

All along, though, I felt quite unworried. This I really can't explain (and I don't think it applied to those around me), unless it was due in part to the magnificent treatment and care I was getting at the Royal Berks.

### **A room with a view, of sorts**

I haven't had to stay in hospital for forty years! I found that once you're in, it's exactly as if you have a 'personal manager' who you never see, but who sends countless nurses and others to you, to carry out a vast programme of tasks. These go on through the night, of course. My two nights after the operation weren't exactly sleep-filled, and I have nothing but admiration for night-nurses who came at the word of the manager (?) or press of my buzzer.

Every eight hours there was a

change of shift, with much gossiping between the arriving and departing nurses. Then I discovered that actually they were transferring vital information on each patient: greatly reassuring...

There was plenty for my sense of the absurd to feed on: the water-jugs seem perfectly designed to spill when the bed-table they're on is moved – and then again when they are poured. The backs of the day-chairs stick to the narrow strip of skin that's exposed by your hospital gown: ouch!

Why does breakfast arrive without the means to wash your hands first? It's not a good idea to consume the whole of your lovely bowl of porridge, because if you do, the toast that came with it will end up cold and flabby.

And what is the protocol when the doctors arrive in the middle of it: wave your spoon at them and carry on? Or pretend you've had enough?

Why is paracetamol issued as big hard-to-swallow tablets, instead of the slim caplets you can buy anywhere (for probably a fraction of the cost). And if your operation has left you with a rough throat, why can't you be given pastilles? My advice: bring your own.

The washroom basins lack plugs. I was told this is to stop cross-infection. At least you can ask for a disposable bowl to put in the basin. And back in the ward, the bright main lights have no dimmers, so they may only be switched harshly on and off. In the mornings it can be a cruel awakening...

But that's all trivial, compared with the experience I seem to have had of the NHS at its best and kindest, as I faced first tests, diagnosis and



treatment choices, then what turned out to be an unexpectedly long operation (even so, I was home two days later), and then follow-up visits.

### **Leaving it to chance**

I want to focus on two things. The first is how it all started: a chance visit to a GP who had checked me out previously because of water-works problems. I said: why not check again, while I'm here. This time he didn't like what he found. The last thing I was expecting was to be visiting the RBH only days later. And I could so easily have put off asking, for another year or more...

To be blunt, early diagnosis prevents early deaths. Men over 50 are entitled to ask their GP for a 'PSA' test, which can detect prostate cancer (so may the 'GP's finger', as in my case) – though not always. Official advice isn't definite yet about whether they *should* request it, because the result can also be positive in men who will never die from the disease, or who might not even have it: they could face needless investigation and worry. GPs should explain these and other risks to you.

The fact remains that it's the most common cancer in men, causing more than 10,000 deaths annually. Certainly Andrew Lloyd Webber is now a strong advocate of regular PSA tests for all, to detect slow changes. And he says (as I do): if you've a 'problem down under', *see your GP*. To find his lively article, google the words Webber Daily Mail (be aware that some of his experiences would not happen to most patients!).

### **Leonardo would be impressed**

Let me also tell you about the Da Vinci robot that operated on me – controlled by a trained surgeon nearby, I hasten to

add. I was even allowed a glimpse of it beforehand. Because its 'hands' are much smaller and more flexible than a surgeon's, the operation is far less invasive and you recover more quickly. Within days afterwards, I was in almost no discomfort at all. Mind you, I still had to take it easy for several weeks (and here I must slip in a thank you to Mrs S for all her TLC).

There are only a dozen or so DV robots in the UK, so we in Reading are fortunate indeed. In the 18 months this one has been in the RBH it has done more than 50 ops like mine, and soon its use will be extended to other sorts.

But alas, there's no guarantee that it will stay here. A down-payment was made, but £1m must be found to pay the balance by the end of 2012, and so last year an appeal was launched.

If I tell you that many staff from the RBH Urology Dept, from nurses to consultants, have just taken part in the Reading Half-Marathon to raise money for the appeal, you will appreciate the dedication of this hospital team to their patients and to their robot.

Me, I'm dedicated to it in a different way, as you can understand. So please forgive me if I now look at you as if I'm rattling a tin, and say: will you give something, to ensure that this amazing machine remains in Reading?

You could make a card donation by phoning 322 7962, or send a cheque (payable 'RDHC Reading Robot Appeal') to RDHC, Appeal Office, Royal Berks, Reading RG1 5AN. Or else go to [www.justgiving.com/robbietherobot](http://www.justgiving.com/robbietherobot) and follow the instructions. Yes, they are so attached to it they call it Robbie!

My thanks to them, and to you.

*Peter Soul*