



Tragedy of War Hero turned writer who lived in Epsom

In June 1960, Douglas Baber, 42, was found comatose through drink in the garden of his former home in Woodcote Green, a well-to-do housing estate in Epsom. A court appearance followed, during which the magistrate noted that Baber had been before the Epsom bench seven times on drink-related charges. Baber, for his part, expressed appreciation for the care the Epsom constabulary had shown him while in custody. The Sutton and Epsom Advertiser described him as a “local author”, but there was far more to Douglas Gordon Baber than that.

Born in Belfast in 1918, he was living in middle-class comfort in South Croydon by 1921 in a household that included his mother Isabella, siblings and two servants. His father, Charles Johnstone Baber, was absent, later remarrying in 1929 and fathering a daughter, Hazel. Charles was an entrepreneur in the high-end footwear trade, at one time operating a shop on London’s Regent Street.

The family later moved to Bexhill on the south coast. At 11, Douglas came to public attention when newspapers reported his dramatic rescue after being swept out to sea by Channel currents — perhaps an early sign of the adventurous spirit that would define him. He developed a passion for flight and, in 1935 at just 17 years old, obtained a flying licence in a Gipsy Moth plane. On his certificate, he described himself as a student in boot and shoe manufacturing, likely intending to follow his father’s trade.

In 1937 Douglas travelled to Canada, finding work in factory administration. But the outbreak of the Second World War brought those plans to an end. He returned to England, enlisted in the RAF and, at 21, was flying bomber planes over occupied Europe as a Flight Lieutenant in 77 Squadron.

On 17 August 1941 he bailed out over Belgium and survived. He fled the crash site and was given refuge by the Rigaux family, farmers in Zingem, who risked their lives by sheltering him under German occupation. After nearly three weeks, German soldiers raided the farm following a suspected tip-off. Douglas was captured and the Rigaux family taken away to an uncertain fate. At Gestapo HQ in Brussels, he later said he was first subjected to rough treatment, then friendliness, then threats to shoot him — a deliberate psychological tactic.

Douglas passed through several POW camps: Dulag Luft in Germany, then Oflag XC in Lübeck, followed by Oflag VI-B Warburg, where he was imprisoned at the same time as the celebrated pilot Douglas Bader. The similarity in their names likely caused administrative confusion, and it is improbable the two men were not at least aware of each other.

In 1942 Baber was transferred to Oflag XXI-B Schubin in Poland, where fellow prisoners included future Chancellor Anthony Barber and Eric Williams, author of *The Wooden Horse*. He was later sent to Stalag Luft III at Sagan — now Zagan, Poland — famous for *The Great Escape*. Fellow prisoners included Paul Brickhill, who would later write *Reach for the Sky*, and actors Peter Butterworth and Rupert Davies. In February 1945 Douglas was moved again, to Marlag Nord, where he was soon liberated by Allied forces.

After returning home, Douglas collaborated with two former POWs to write *Oflag 3*, a play about prison camp life. Directed by Charles Hawtrey and featuring a young Pete Murray, it was staged at the X Theatre in Richmond and well received. Misleading online claims that Hawtrey collaborated with Douglas Bader rather than Douglas Baber have unfortunately muddled the historical record.

Douglas married Phyllis Fox in 1947. Their daughter Vivienne was born in 1950, and the family settled first in Christchurch Mount and later on the Woodcote Estate. His writing career flourished. He first signed with avant-garde publisher Werner Laurie, then with Heinemann, who released his debut crime novel *My Death is a Mockery* in 1952. The book, involving the murder of a policeman, was an immediate success and was quickly adapted into a film starring Donald Houston, Kathleen Byron and Bill Kerr.

The film became embroiled in the notorious Craig and Bentley case after Christopher Craig, the 16-year-old who shot PC Sidney Miles, revealed he had seen it earlier that day. Tabloid speculation unfairly pointed towards Baber, and he began receiving hate mail. This publicity placed immense strain on him and his family. Douglas had already shown vulnerability: in 1950 he was convicted of assaulting a ticket collector after a POW reunion. He expressed deep remorse in court, admitting to having drunk too much.

Through the 1950s Douglas published prolifically, producing *Where Eagles Gather*, *The Guarded Years*, *Love on the Verge*, *A Road to Disaster*, *The Mortal Triumph* and *The Slender Thread*, alongside short stories and journalism. He also published under the name John Ritson and worked as a publishing editor and executive. In 1956 he became advertising promotion manager at ABC TV, part of the early ITV network. On the surface, life in the stockbroker belt appeared successful.

But privately Douglas was spiralling. He increasingly found himself in Epsom Police Station for drink-related incidents, and once smashed his car into a shop in Bexhill. His marriage appears to have come under great strain. According to his daughter Vivienne,



Douglas was devastated when he learned during the 1950s that members of the courageous Rigaux family who had sheltered him had been murdered by the Gestapo or deported to camps, where some later died. She said the guilt haunted him for the rest of his life.

It is easy to imagine how the emotional burden drove him towards alcohol. In 1963 he was still producing work — he published a short story in the *Birmingham Evening Mail* and took a post as advertisement controller on the Reverend Timothy Beaumont's magazine *Aspect*. But on 21 October 1963 Douglas Gordon Baber died at 21 The Hill, Wheathampstead, near St Albans. He was only 45.

One of his later works, *God's Blind Eye* (1960), features a businessman battling alcoholism. A line from the book seems to echo Baber's own torment: *"When the effects of the alcohol wore off, the sense of impending disaster and loneliness was far worse, crouched in his mind like an enemy."*

Martin Knight



“Us and Them” visualises connections with former Epsom patients

A ground-breaking heritage project exploring the lives of disabled people detained in Surrey's former mental hospitals is turning fresh attention on Horton Cemetery in Epsom – the burial ground of some 9,000 men, women and children whose resting place remains locked, overgrown and inaccessible under the control of a property speculator who has neglected the site since the 1980s.

Freewheelers Theatre and Media, a creative company of disabled artists based in Leatherhead, is leading *Us and Them*, a National Lottery Heritage Fund-supported initiative using original medical portrait photographs and case records from Surrey's long-closed asylums. Working with photographer Emma Brown, community history group On the Record and researchers at King's College London, they are uncovering the stories of patients whose voices were seldom heard in their lifetimes. The project includes new wet-collodion portraits of Freewheelers members made using the same Victorian techniques once used in institutions such as The Manor Hospital and West Park. These contemporary portraits will be shown alongside the originals in a touring exhibition, with the first major display due to take place at The Horton, Epsom, in 2026.

For Epsom, the work resonates particularly with Horton Cemetery – the former burial ground for patients from the Epsom Cluster hospitals, including The Manor, Horton, Long Grove, West Park and St Ebba's. Despite its national historic significance as the largest asylum cemetery in the UK, the cemetery has been left to decay for decades and remains closed to relatives, historians and the wider community. The Friends of Horton Cemetery continue to campaign for its return to public or charitable ownership so that the site can be restored, documented and respected as the resting place it once was.

The Freewheelers project highlights the human stories behind those buried there. One participant, Alice Scott, chose to pair herself with Rose Harris, a woman confined to The Manor Hospital in 1910 and buried in a pauper plot at Horton Cemetery in 1917. Another member, Pete Messer, recreated the photograph of workhouse survivor Frederick Tarrant, who spent 15 years in various institutions, part of the same system that funnelled thousands of patients to unmarked graves in Epsom.

Historians involved in *Us and Them* emphasise how the original photographs were created without consent for purposes of classification and diagnosis, often contributing to stigma. Today, the Freewheelers portraits aim to prompt public reflection on how disability is perceived and represented, and how society remembers – or forgets – those who lived and died within institutional care. The project's December creative sessions coincide with a Christie's auction of similar historical images, underlining renewed public interest in the stories of institutionalised people.

The Friends of Horton Cemetery say the renewed national attention generated by projects like *Us and Them* strengthens the argument that the burial ground must be brought back into community hands. Volunteers have long argued that the cemetery is a unique and irreplaceable heritage site, containing the life histories of people from across Britain and the world, many of whom



have living descendants still searching for answers.

Recent BBC reporting has highlighted the scale of the neglect, the site's condition and the growing calls for public ownership. For many families, the cemetery is the last physical link to relatives whose lives were shaped by the former Epsom institutions. Campaigners say that without intervention, the stories now being rediscovered risk remaining disconnected from the very place where so many of those patients were laid to rest.

More information about the Friends' campaign and the history of the site and some 500 personal stories of the patients buried in the Epsom Hospital Cluster cemetery in Hook Road/Horton Lane, Epsom can be found at www.hortoncemetery.org

Sam Jones – Reporter



See BBC coverage here:

Disability group recreates Victorian hospital images

'Grandad is one of 9,000 buried in derelict site'

Call for public ownership of asylum cemetery

Related reports in Epsom and Ewell Times:

Portraits of pauper patients in Epsom's Horton Cemetery, inspires artist

Petition to reclaim Horton Cemetery from property speculator

Local community gathered at Horton Cemetery

Another Horton Cemetery Life Story

Image: Background Horton Cemetery: *photographed on 28 February 1971 by L R James. Epsom & Ewell Local & Family History Centre.* Foreground: Courtesy Friends of Horton Cemetery

British Railways' 200 year celebration train coming to Epsom

Free exhibition train to steam into Tattenham Corner

A free exhibition train celebrating 200 years of the modern railway will arrive at Tattenham Corner station next March as part of a 60-stop national tour.

More than 40,000 people have already visited the touring train, named *Inspiration*, which forms a centrepiece of **Railway 200**, the nationwide programme marking two centuries since the opening of the Stockton and Darlington Railway in 1825. Nine in ten visitors say they would recommend it to a friend.

What visitors can expect

Co-curated with the National Railway Museum, *Inspiration* explores how rail reshaped Britain and the wider world. Displays chart key "railway firsts", interactive engineering challenges and a rapid tour of lesser-known railway careers. The exhibition has been praised as "brilliant", "fascinating" and suitable for all ages.

One visitor reported: "I loved that it was interactive. I visited with people from age 18 to 85 and there was something for



everyone.” Another said even their five-year-old “absolutely loved it”.

The train will be hosted by Southern at **Tattenham Corner station from 9 to 11 March 2026**. Tickets are free but limited.

Tattenham Corner’s royal railway history

Tattenham Corner station itself has a long connection with major public events. Opened in 1901, the station was built to provide easier rail access to the Epsom Downs racecourse, particularly for the Derby. According to local historical accounts, the new station offered an alternative to the original Epsom Downs station, which at the time had nine platforms and could be overwhelmed by Derby-day crowds.

It is widely understood that the creation of Tattenham Corner station was encouraged so that **Queen Victoria**, in the final months of her reign, could travel to the racecourse with greater ease and avoid the congestion associated with the older, much busier station. The new alignment brought passengers directly to the famous turn on the Downs from which the station takes its name.

In the decades that followed, Tattenham Corner became a focal arrival point for racegoers, and extra services still run on major racing days.

A milestone for Britain’s railways

Railway 200 marks two centuries since Stephenson’s *Locomotion No. 1* steamed along the Stockton and Darlington line, an innovation that changed global travel, encouraged mass tourism, shaped timekeeping and sped up industrial development.

The anniversary year has already included a re-run of the original 1825 journey watched by around 100,000 people, commemorative stamps and coins, a global “whistle-up” of more than 200 locomotives, and what organisers describe as the world’s largest rail festival.

Angie Doll, Chief Executive of Govia Thameslink Railway, said: “Two hundred years ago the modern railway came into existence and utterly transformed our society. Working together, we hope to educate and inspire young people in rail’s past and future. The railway is great for the climate, and helps our local communities thrive.”

Emma Roberts, Programme Manager for Railway 200, added: “Inspiration is a fun, free and fascinating way to learn about the past, present and future of rail. There’s something for everyone.”

Rail Minister Lord Peter Hendy called Britain “the birthplace of the modern railway” and said the touring train aims to inspire a new generation of engineers, drivers, conductors and technicians.

The exhibition has been supported by a £250,000 National Lottery Heritage Fund grant, with Porterbrook providing the livery for the train.

Tickets

Tickets for the Tattenham Corner visit are free but must be booked in advance.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Bit of Epsom history for sale

A distinctive slice of Epsom’s high street history has surfaced for sale — the original “**Ladies at Lester Bowden**” shop sign, once proudly displayed beneath the old walkway of the famous **Lester Bowden** outfitters in the heart of town. The sign, around seven



feet long and built to last, has survived in remarkably good condition thanks to its sheltered position and evokes the golden age of a business synonymous with Epsom's racing tradition.

For generations, **Lester Bowden** was the name every jockey, trainer and racegoer in Surrey knew. Established in the early 20th century, the gentleman's outfitters was famed for its bespoke tailoring and equestrian style — a cornerstone of Epsom's identity as the home of The Derby. In later decades, as fashions evolved, the store expanded to include a dedicated ladies' section: "Ladies at Lester Bowden," which served as both a stylish boutique and a symbol of the business's adaptability.

The building itself has a pedigree even older than the brand. Before Lester Bowden moved in, the site at the corner of the High Street and Spread Eagle Walk was home to one of Epsom's most historic hostelries — **The Spread Eagle Inn**. For over two centuries, weary travellers, jockeys, and race patrons found food, drink, and lodging there. The Spread Eagle's name became woven into Epsom's folklore — a meeting place during Derby week and a landmark at the heart of town life. It even was home to the Epsom Magistrates during a Court refurbishment.

When **Lester Bowden** took over the premises in the mid-20th century, they carried forward the building's long association with Epsom's equestrian and social history. Its large, distinctive frontage, tailor's fittings and wooden signage became part of the visual fabric of the High Street for decades — until the shop's closure brought the end of an era.

Now, with this **original shop sign** up for sale, a tangible piece of that story is back in circulation. The seller describes it as "about seven feet long," heavy, and needing two people to lift — a proper relic of a bygone retail age. Protected from the weather under the old walkway, it remains in fine condition and could easily be restored or displayed as an artefact of Epsom's retail past.

For heritage enthusiasts, collectors, or anyone with affection for Epsom's racing roots, this is a rare opportunity to own a genuine link to the town's layered past — one that spans from coaching inns to couture.

Those interested in the sign can find details through this Gumtree ad, but the real story is larger: it's a reminder that every piece of Epsom's architecture tells a tale — and that sometimes, those tales are still for sale.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Tracing the history of poor relief in Epsom and Ewell

Residents and researchers in the borough now have enhanced access to a fascinating trove of historic records that shed light on how our local community dealt with poverty, welfare and social care from the early nineteenth century onward.

The system of poor relief in England underwent major changes in the 1800s. Under the "Old Poor Law" (before the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act) each parish vestry was responsible for caring for its poor, sick and destitute residents. After 1834, the "New Poor Law" created groupings of parishes into Poor Law Unions, each with a Board of Guardians and a central workhouse.

In Surrey, the Surrey History Centre holds an extensive guide to Poor Law records, including minute books of the county's Poor Law Unions. For Epsom, the records of the Epsom Poor Law Union from 1836 to 1930 are now indexed and available for consultation.

The minute books of the Epsom Poor Law Union record meetings of the Board of Guardians, who decided whether applicants should receive relief, be admitted to the workhouse, or be "removed" to another parish. They note weekly expenditure, supply orders, the appointment of staff, and the conditions of inmates.

Poor Law records can also include examination papers, bastardy bonds, settlement certificates, removal orders, and workhouse admission and discharge registers. Together they provide a detailed picture of the social realities of life in Victorian and Edwardian Epsom.

Although today a relatively prosperous borough, Epsom's history includes many households living on the edge of poverty. The



Union's records allow us to trace how local governance responded to hardship, how relief was funded, and how the population's needs changed across a century.

Behind the official entries lie the human stories: the widowed mother seeking parish relief, the injured labourer, the orphan placed in a workhouse, or the itinerant worker removed from one parish to another. These records reveal the rhythms of ordinary lives and the community's efforts to care for its own.

The Surrey History Centre's page *Poor Law records - minute books* offers guidance and shows that indexes to the Epsom minutes (1836-1930) are now online.

Visit:
<https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/culture-and-leisure/history-centre/researchers/guides/poor-law-records/minute-books>

Researchers should first consult the online indexes and then contact the Surrey History Centre to view the original volumes, which may require a visit or advance booking.

Tips for local researchers

- Search by parish as well as by name - many cases are listed under the parish of settlement.
- Note that "removal orders" might show a person being transferred between parishes.
- Combine minute books with census or parish registers for a fuller picture of a family's circumstances.
- Compare relief volumes across decades to identify periods of local economic stress.

With the indexes now online, there is a fresh opportunity for local historians, schools and community groups to explore Epsom's welfare legacy. Projects could include exhibitions of anonymised case studies, research into patterns of employment and hardship, or school activities exploring the social history of our borough.

The minute books of the Epsom Poor Law Union open a compelling window onto over a century of social welfare practice. By engaging with these records, we can better understand the changing nature of poverty, relief and governance in Epsom and Ewell - and recover the lives of those who, often in quiet dignity, sought help when times were hard.

If you make a discovery of local interest from these records, *Epsom and Ewell Times* would be pleased to hear from you.

For many more events and projects from the Surrey History Centre [CLICK HERE](#)

Sam Jones - Reporter



A former Epsom Long Grove Hospital patient remembered for his pacifism

Barney Cohen (1897-1970)

By his nephew, Andy Strowman

There is a very quiet cemetery in London — East Ham Jewish Cemetery. You may be the only visitor there apart from the grave workers. Among the rows of stones lies one marked *Barnett Cohen* — the only one there by that name.

Barney, as the family called him, was born in 1897 in Whitechapel. His parents were Milka (Millie) and Hershel (Harris) Cohen, and the family lived at 17 Milward Street, behind the London Hospital. His brothers were Jack and David, his sisters Rachel and



Rose. The same house later became my home too, long before I was born.

Barney grew up in hard times. Like so many of his generation, he left school at fourteen and joined the garment trade. He was gentle by nature, a man who never said a bad word about anyone. I think he lacked confidence — something I have inherited too.

When the Second World War broke out, he enlisted. But when faced with the prospect of killing, he refused. He simply could not harm another human being. For that courage — for it was courage — he was punished. He was placed in the guardhouse and later imprisoned in Wormwood Scrubs as a conscientious objector.

In prison he suffered terribly. His weight fell to five and a half stone. My grandmother Millie, desperate to save him, sought help from her sisters in North London. Together, they visited a government office, and — as the old East End saying goes — *the brown envelope changed hands*. Only then was he released.

A retired officer once told me what those conditions were like: “You wouldn’t have liked it in there. Tiny cells, no space, noise all night — shouting, banging, threats. We only stepped in if someone started hitting you.”

Barney came out of prison changed. He was nervous, forever scratching, anxious about his work. If he worked beside his brother Jack, he was always asking, “*Is this all right?*”

When I was sixteen, my mother told me that Uncle Barney had endured six sessions of electro-convulsive therapy at **Long Grove Hospital in Epsom** — the same hospital that later held Ronnie Kray. Long Grove closed in 1992, but its shadow remains.

Yet Barney was no shadow. Despite his suffering, he radiated kindness. He loved to make people laugh, performing little magic tricks that delighted us as children. Once, when I was about eight, he came to visit us during his lunch break from the Ellis and Goldstein factory. While he talked to my mother, I quietly bolted the front door so he couldn’t leave. My mother struggled with the latch and he burst out laughing — a moment of warmth I have never forgotten.

He married Dolly, and my mother, then fourteen, was his bridesmaid. Life was not easy for them. Poverty, mental illness, and misunderstanding strain any family, and in those days help was scarce and sympathy rarer still.

Barney once told a story about visiting London Zoo on a Sunday in his best suit. A commotion broke out near the monkey cage; he joined the crowd, only for one of the monkeys to run off and return — to spit a mouthful of water all over his suit. The crowd roared with laughter, and so did Barney. That was his nature — to laugh even when the joke was on him.

He died in 1970, still working, collapsing at his workplace at Ellis and Goldstein in Aldgate. His brother Jack said simply, “He always lacked confidence. If I was sewing beside him, he kept asking, ‘*Is this all right?*’”

Barney’s life was not easy. He came from poverty, fought private battles with fear and illness, and faced the cruelty of others with quiet dignity. But he also gave laughter, love, and gentleness to those around him.

His was the untold story of so many — the sensitive souls caught in the machinery of war, poverty, and misunderstanding. He suffered because he refused to harm others. That is a kind of heroism that seldom earns medals.

When I think of Uncle Barney, I see not weakness but light — the quiet strength of a man who never stopped being kind, no matter what the world did to him.

I dedicate these words to him, and to all who, like him, struggled to fit into life yet gave it more compassion than it ever gave them.

Andy Strowman

Image: Barney at son’s wedding. Barney on right.

You can read many stories of former patients of the cluster of Epsom psychiatric hospitals on the website of The Friends of Horton Cemetery

A snapshot of Romany Gypsy life in Woking

Written and visual sources for the lived experience of Romany Gypsies in the county are rare so a collection of copy photographs of the Baker family of Sunridge/Sundridge Camp, Old Woking, and a memoir written by Rose Baker (later Burch) recalling her



family's life there, make for an extraordinary testimony (reference 10066/1/9). Rose (born 1918) was a twin and one of 13 children of James and Clara Baker. Gems in the collection include a handwritten list of where she and her siblings were born, including in tents, in a meadow by Old Woking cemetery and in 'the little field by the river near the park which is now overgrown' (10066/1/6). Nellie Violet & Rose Baker Jackmans Nursery

The Bakers and other families in the camp worked for Mr Carter at his farm in Kingfield. The work was arduous, and Gypsies provided cheap labour as they were generally not well paid. From the age of 14, Rose worked at Cartbridge Laundry, then at Jackman and Son's Nursery in Egley Road, where some of her sisters were already employed. Annually in September, the family would travel to Hampshire for the hop-picking season. New building byelaws and public health concerns meant that by 1931 Woking Urban District Council compulsorily purchased the privately owned land which the encampment stood on and a year later evicted its nine resident families. The Bakers moved into settled accommodation in Westfield. Rose's son Geoff used her memoir to research his Romany roots and, in the process, collated a whole collection revealing a fascinating insight into their lifestyle. The collection will be a huge help to enquirers tracing their own Gypsy ancestry.

A game of cat and mouse?



This intriguing drawing was discovered among records of Greenfield School, Woking, recently deposited before the school's merger with Hoe Bridge School (10768/1/2/2). The pencil sketch, depicting a cat teacher with a classroom of mice pupils, is captioned, 'But when her Highness is near, Dear Cat you need have no fear'.

Who is the Cat examining the maths paper in her hand, and who is 'her Highness'? Helpfully, though, all the mice are all individually named, including K Green (creator of the artwork) and K Barbier (whose name appears on the maths paper).

The mystery is further deepened by a cryptic poem that accompanies the drawing:

Cat poem

Now look amidst the senior mice,
Serene and calm Her Royal Highness stands,
How could you Cat, suggest these mice
Would game and play in little bands.
Never, never could the Girls' School mice
Be other than polite and nice
When such a Highness took command
And ruled with love that lively band
Dear Cat, in all humility we you advise



To show our portrait (we're sure that's wise)
To that same Royal Highness who here stands
And say you're sorry – we feel she'll understand.

We think the drawing dates from the early 1940s, as some of the names have been traced on the 1939 Register as born around 1926 to 1927, and were most likely senior pupils, as the poem suggests. This was before the school was purchased by Ockenden Venture founders, Joyce Pearce and Ruth Hicks (in 1948), so we are no closer to identifying 'Cat' and 'Her Royal Highness'. If you can help us solve this enigma, we would love to hear from you!

Surrey History Centre.

Read about many other rich and varied events from Surrey History Centre [HERE](#)

Epsom & Ewell's French racing twin is a favourite

The Château de Chantilly has been selected as Monument Préféré des Français 2025 (France's Favourite Monument), surpassing 13 other iconic sites in a national vote. It succeeds the 24 Hours of Le Mans circuit, which won the honour in 2024.

This accolade was conferred through the popular France 3 television programme Le Monument Préféré des Français, presented by Stéphane Bern, which each year invites the public to vote for their favourite heritage site. Stéphane Bern is a well-known French journalist, television and radio presenter, writer and historian. He specialises in European history, royalty and cultural heritage, and is often described in France as the country's "Mr Heritage."

A heightened spotlight on Chantilly

Epsom and Ewell with Chantilly enjoy a twinning charter and both share a proud equestrian heritage. Chantilly is renowned for its racecourse and celebrated training grounds, Epsom is world-famous for the Derby, a race that has shaped the international thoroughbred calendar for over two centuries. This shared identity as centres of horseracing tradition provides a natural bond between the two towns and further enriches their twinning relationship.

The chateau victory not only amplifies the national and international profile of Chantilly but reinforces its status as an exceptional cultural treasure. The château, owned by the Institut de France, houses the Musée Condé, with the Duke of Aumale's art collection and library as its heart. It is also celebrated for its formal gardens, its expansive park and the remarkable Museum of the Horse, housed in the former great stables.

Since the château was designated "Monument préféré des Français," Stéphane Bern presented a commemorative plaque to Anne Miller, the château's administratrice générale. The French Ministry of Culture highlighted that this distinction honours not just architectural splendour, but the unique legacy bequeathed by the Duke of Aumale, reaffirming the château's role as a living site of art, memory and natural heritage.

The Duc d'Aumale: A link across the Channel

A key figure tying Chantilly to our locality is Henri, Duc d'Aumale (1822-1897), a French prince, military officer, scholar, bibliophile and art collector.

After the Revolution of 1848 forced the Orléans family into exile, the Duke of Aumale settled in Twickenham, just across the Thames from Epsom, in a notable residence known as Orleans House.

Although the main house was largely demolished in 1926, the Octagon Room and service wing survive as part of the Orleans House Gallery, now a Grade I listed building. During his stay, the Duke built an imposing library and picture gallery adjacent to Orleans House, housing many of his collections. These collections — including masterpieces by Raphael, Rubens and others — were later transferred back to Chantilly upon his death, forming a substantial part of the Musée Condé's holdings under his no-loans rule.

The Duke also had local ties through the birth of his son, François d'Orléans, duc de Guise, born in Twickenham in 1854. Upon his death in 1897, the Duke bequeathed Chantilly, together with its art, library and collections, to the Institut de France, under the condition that it be preserved as a museum of French art and history.



Twinning, cultural bridges, and local opportunity

The success of Chantilly in this national competition is a proud moment for Epsom & Ewell, reinforcing the value and impact of town-twinning. Twinning is not merely ceremonial — it offers opportunities for cultural exchange, reciprocal visits, shared projects in art, education and heritage, and deeper understanding between communities.

Nigel Collin, Chairman of the Epsom & Ewell Town-Twinning Association, commented:

“We warmly congratulate our colleagues in Chantilly for this well-deserved achievement. Anyone who has visited the Château cannot fail to be amazed, not just by its external splendour, but by the staggering depth of works from the 15th to the 19th century — works you can only see in situ here, thanks to the Duke of Aumale’s strict no-loans condition. It really is well worth a visit, and if any residents are interested in visiting via a Twinning Association group, we will be pleased to advise and assist.”

This announcement may inspire renewed interest in twinning visits, themed excursions focusing on heritage, art or gardens, school exchanges, and collaborative cultural programmes. Epsom & Ewell welcomes ideas for reciprocal exchanges with Chantilly, whether joint exhibitions, lectures, or youth projects.

For further information or to register your interest in a Chantilly visit, please contact the Epsom & Ewell Twinning Association via contact@epsomtwinning.com.

Sam Jones – Reporter



King Athelstan returns to Kingston

Podcaster and historian Tom Holland was in Kingston on Thursday 4th September to mark the 1,100th anniversary of the coronation of King Athelstan, regarded as England’s first monarch.

At a ceremony on Platform 1 of Kingston station, Holland unveiled the name “King Athelstan” on one of South Western Railway’s Class 450 trains. The event was staged with Saxon re-enactors, children from King Athelstan Primary School wearing crowns, and a choir from Tiffin School.

The Bishop of Kingston, Martin Gainsborough, offered a blessing for the train. Dignitaries included local MP Sir Ed Davey, the Mayor of Kingston, Cllr Noel Hadjimichael, and representatives from Malmesbury, where Athelstan is buried, and Oldenburg in Germany, twinned with Kingston.

Remembering England’s first king

Athelstan, the grandson of Alfred the Great, was crowned in Kingston in 925 before becoming known as the first ruler of a united England. While less famous than later monarchs such as William the Conqueror or Elizabeth I, a poll run by *The Rest is History* in 2021 saw him voted England’s “greatest king”.

Kingston played host to the coronation of Athelstan and six other Saxon kings. South Western Railway remains the only operator serving the town, making it a partner in the Kingston 2025 celebrations marking this heritage.

Voices from the ceremony

Tom Holland said: “Who better to have a train named after him than Athelstan, the great Anglo-Saxon king who first set England on track to becoming a united kingdom?”

Peter Williams, Customer and Commercial Director at South Western Railway, added: “As it travels around the network, we hope our train will inspire customers to discover more about Athelstan’s reign, and his coronation in Kingston 1,100 years ago.”



Sir Ed Davey, MP for Kingston and Surbiton and Leader of the Liberal Democrats, described the event as “a little unusual but absolutely in the spirit of the occasion”.

Mayor Noel Hadjimichael called it “a wonderful part of our six-month festival of past, present and future across the royal borough”.

Part of Kingston 2025

The naming ceremony formed part of wider Kingston 2025 cultural celebrations. Later in the day, commemorations continued at All Saints Church, the site of Athelstan’s coronation.

Surrey to mark 50 years since the death of playwright R.C. Sherriff

This November marks the 50th anniversary of the death of **Robert Cedric Sherriff (1896-1975)**, the Surrey-born playwright and screenwriter best remembered for his First World War play *Journey’s End*.

Sherriff, who attended Kingston Grammar School, originally worked as an insurance clerk before serving with distinction on the Western Front. His experiences in the trenches shaped *Journey’s End* (1928), the searing drama set in a British officers’ dugout during the last year of the war.

The play, which launched the career of a young Laurence Olivier – barely 21 at the time – was first staged at the Apollo Theatre in London. It became one of the defining anti-war works of its age and continues to be revived on stage and screen nearly a century later.

But Sherriff’s talents extended far beyond the theatre. He went on to become the **highest-paid English scriptwriter in Hollywood**, penning screenplays for classics such as *The Invisible Man* (1933), *Goodbye Mr Chips* (1939), *The Four Feathers* (1939), and *The Dam Busters* (1955). His work combined dramatic structure with cinematic flair, leaving an enduring legacy on both sides of the Atlantic.

To mark the anniversary, **Surrey History Centre** is hosting a special event in Woking on **Saturday 8 November (10.30am-12.15pm)**. The programme includes:

- **Dr David Cottis - “RC Sherriff and the Well-Made Screenplay”**
A look at how Sherriff brought stagecraft into cinema, illustrated with material from the Centre’s archives.
- **Roland Wales - “Shirkers or Spies? RC Sherriff in Wartime Hollywood”**
Exploring Sherriff’s move to America during the Second World War, where British expatriates were accused in some quarters of being shirkers at home and even suspected spies abroad. Despite this, their patriotic films resonated strongly with American audiences, helping shape wartime morale.

The event will be held both **in person at the Surrey History Centre, Woking (130 Goldsworth Road, GU21 6ND)**, and online via Zoom. Tickets cost **£6** and must be booked in advance. Book [HERE](#)

For those interested in Surrey’s literary heritage, the occasion provides a rare chance to revisit the remarkable career of a local man who made a global impact – from Kingston schoolboy to West End dramatist, Hollywood insider, and chronicler of the war generation.

For more news and events from Surrey History Centre [CLICK HERE](#)