

# CANTERBURY HISTORY GROUP



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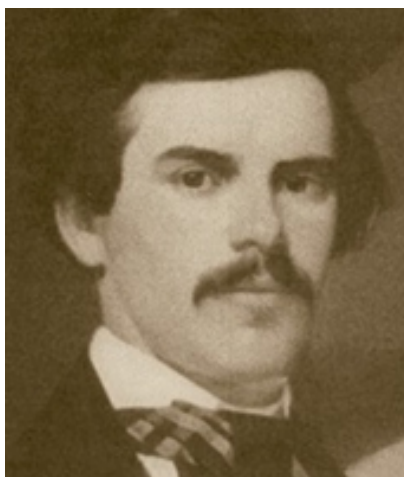
Newsletter May 2022

**Greetings to all members and friends of the Canterbury History Group**

**Our next Meeting will be on Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> May. Time 7.45 for 8.00 pm.  
in St Paul's Parish Centre, Church Street, Canterbury.**

**Our speaker will be Matthew ETTY- Leal who will tell us about Cobb and Co which aimed to provide reliable transport to and from the Victorian goldfields and ended up playing a major part in the mail delivery system in Australia.**

*Below: Freeman Cobb*



Cobb & Co was established in 1853 by American **Freeman Cobb** and his partners, **John Murray Peck, James Swanton & John B. Lamber**, financially supported by US businessman **George Train**.

In May 1856, the 4 partners sold out for £16,000. Passing through a number of owners, Cobb & Co rose to greater prominence after 1861 when bought for £23,000 by a consortium led by another American, James Rutherford. His partners included Alexander William Robertson, John Wagner, Walter (& Eliza) Hall, William Franklin Whitney and Walter Bradley. Rutherford re-organised and extended Victorian services and won a monopoly on major mail contracts. In the 1860s the company expanded to NSW and Queensland, Rutherford running the business until his passing in 1911.

Upcoming Meetings in the St Paul's Parish Centre at 7.45 for 8.00 pm - for your calendar

- Monday June 27<sup>th</sup> Philip Barton will speak about his mother Dr. Nancy Nicholson, a Maling descendant who lived in Prospect Hill Road. Her wartime research in London led to a break-through test for gas-gangrene, which saved many lives.
- Monday 26<sup>th</sup> Sept Loreen Chambers will speak on 'The Land Boom and Bust'

**NOTE** our usual Winter recess: July and August.

**Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> August at 8.00 pm** : This year we will have a combined meeting with Surrey Historical Society at The Cottage, Bedford Road. Judy Archer will tell us about the research she's done on her grandmother who was a domestic servant: a hardworking housemaid. The family and house where she worked as a live-in employee have relevance to both Surrey Hills and Canterbury.

October: History Month - We've already held our annual dinner so other events will be planned.

**Monday November 28<sup>th</sup> at 12.00 noon**: our end-of-year lunch at Ruby T's, Maling Road, Canterbury.

## Escape from Singapore to internment in Sumatra

Presented by a member of the Canterbury History Group, Jenny Norvick.

*The story of Charles Herridge, a member of Malaya's volunteer forces in World War 2, written in commemoration of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of Singapore to the Japanese on 15 February 1942*

My father, Charles Herridge, born in 1914, grew up in Fulham in southwest London. As a young man seeking adventure and career, he took a job in Malaya, running the hardware, ironmongery and manchester department of the John Little Department Store, the main shopping store for the British community in Kuala Lumpur.

He set sail from London, aged 25 in mid-1939, a few months before the British and French declared war on Germany on 6 September. He settled into life in Kuala Lumpur, getting on well with his work colleagues and making new friends through his love of sport. When the department manager for food and liquor left to join the Customs Department, this department was added to Charles' responsibilities.

Meanwhile, the Japanese, who were allies of the Germans, took advantage of the fact that the eastern colonial powers – Britain, Netherlands and France - were wholly occupied with defending themselves against the German advance in Europe. After a lull in their empire-building, the Japanese pushed south and occupied the Vichy-French-controlled colony of Indochina in September 1940, bringing the prospect of war closer to Malaya. Charles joined the Selangor division of the Federated Malay States Volunteer Force (FMSVF) in 1940-41, initially as a gunner in the Light Battery. Malaya had had a volunteer force since the days of the Crimean War, and when Charles joined, it comprised not only British but Malays, Chinese, Indian and Eurasians.

Because of his expertise in food and hardware, he was asked to become the Company Quarter-Master Sergeant of the Volunteer Selangor Signals Company based in Kuala Lumpur. Signals had two roles. One was to maintain, extend and repair the peninsula's network of telegraph wires and the second was to provide morse code communications between the company HQ and the frontline in any war. Wireless operators, from the Post and Telegraph Department who were expert in morse code, operated a number of signals vans which worked behind the front line monitoring the battles and relaying information back and forth. Charles' role, apart from feeding the men and equipping them with uniforms and other necessities, was to provision the vans going to and from the front.

**Japan invades Malaya and Singapore.** Just after midnight on 8 December 1941, under heavy monsoonal cloud cover and in rough seas, the Japanese landed on the white sandy beaches at Kota Bharu on the northeast coast of Malaya.

The landing was one of an audacious and co-ordinated series of attacks launched on 7 December by Japan to take possession of all British and US territories in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. It bombed Pearl Harbour (Hawaii), and commenced invasions of Hong Kong, Malaya and Burma (all British), the Philippines and Guam and Wake Islands in Micronesia (all US holdings). It also occupied Thailand. In January it would attack and later conquer the Netherlands East Indies (NEI), now Indonesia.

Japan's aim was to create its own empire encompassing all of East and Southeast Asia - the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere - remove the white colonizers and restore 'Asia for the Asians'. A geographically small island nation with a large population and an industrial economy, it sought to

do what the British had done and acquire territory which could supply raw materials for its industries and markets for its products.

By the time of its invasions in December 1941, Korea and Formosa (now Taiwan), Manchuria, the eastern part of China, and Indochina were all under Japanese rule. It now aimed to secure its supply of raw materials, particularly the NEI's oil, and the rubber, tin, nickel and other minerals of the NEI and Malaya.

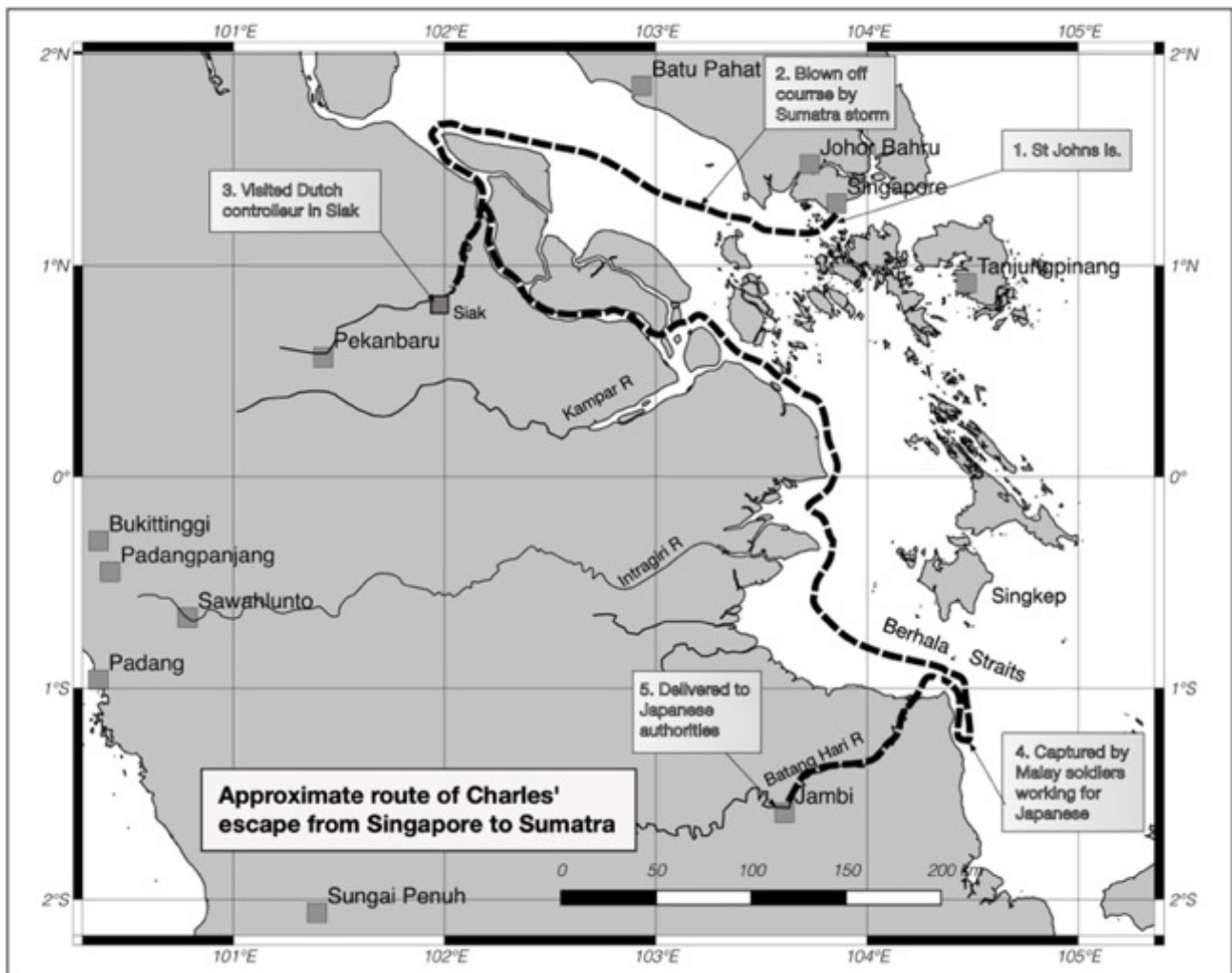
Japan needed to control all the mainland states of Southeast Asia and the Philippines to maintain its hold on China and keep open its access to the resource-rich Malaya and Netherlands East Indies. Lastly it needed to secure the Pacific territories so that it could create a hard perimeter around its empire and prevent the US from thwarting its objectives.

The British had been aware that an attack was likely but discounted an attack from the north, regarding the jungle as impenetrable. They believed that any attack would come from the sea and the south. They fortified the southern approaches to Singapore, built big guns facing out to sea and secured two warships, the Repulse and the Prince of Wales, to repel any sea-mounted attack on the Malay peninsula. However, the Japanese confounded them, coming down the peninsula from Kota Bahru and Thailand, moving down jungle paths during the day and attacking the British forces by night. They also sank the two warships on the fourth day of the war allowing them to land additional men and equipment up and down the Malay Peninsula. The ill-prepared British forces folded quickly and in just over a month, the Japanese had taken Kuala Lumpur and in just over two months, on 15 February 1942, the British surrendered in Singapore.

Through all this, Charles had been busy, locating supply depots and restocking his supplies, feeding the men and resupplying the signals vans that went to and fro from the front line. Signals HQ, of which Charles was a part, retreated directly from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore and set up base in a school. Charles continued to resupply the vans which travelled back to Malaya to support the front line. Finding the local supply depot was always a problem as it kept being moved to stay ahead of the Japanese bombing raids. Charles' van was often a target for the bombers and twice he had to take evasive action to avoid being hit. 'It's an awful feeling', he said. 'You can hear the swish of the bombs as they fall, and you don't know where they're going to hit.'

Charles was still supplying the vans until just before the surrender when he was approached by two officers from his company who handed him the keys to a small van. They had seized a tongkang, or coastal goods transport junk, down at the harbour and asked Charles to supply it for a possible escape. They instructed him to wait there once it was loaded. Charles did as he was asked.

**Escape from Singapore.** A Lance-Corporal from Signals was already on the boat, a New Zealand mining engineer, Henry Lyng, whom Charles always called Jim. In the next day or so, all went quiet and the pair realized that the British had surrendered. They waited in vain for the officers for a couple of days and finally decided that they should leave. Jim went to fetch his Thai wife and two primary-age children, and they set sail. On their way out of Singapore harbour, they picked up four members of the British army, three of whom had taken refuge on a stranded goods tanker and one young man whom they later found out was a deserter. He was rowing a small sampan and, like many others, had the completely unrealistic aim of getting to Australia. Indeed, this was the intention of Charles and Jim, and of the officers whose supplies to the boat included maps to find their way to Java and then island-hop through the Indonesian archipelago.



The best laid plans can go astray, and storms, sea currents and the prevailing winds pushed their boat some way up the coast of Sumatra and they found themselves sailing through a maze of coastal channels and up a wide brown river to the town of Siak where they met with the Dutch administrator who advised them to keep moving as he was waiting to hand over to the Japanese. So, they reoriented themselves and started to head south down Sumatra's coast.

The men were uncertain what to do. On the one hand, they were aiming for Australia, on the other, from time to time they had opportunities to stop for a while and then they thought it might be good to just wait out the war on the coast of Sumatra. They spent some time working a timber concession on one of the coastal islands before they were warned the Japanese were closing in. They moved on and stayed on an offshore fishing trap, helping the fishermen there with the catch and with salting the fish for sale in a local market. This time, they were betrayed and a motor launch with three armed Malay policemen on board came to collect them. It took them up the nearby Batang Hari River to the town of Jambi where they were greeted by a smiling Japanese captain who wanted to know how they had evaded capture for several months.

The group was split up. The three British servicemen were sent to Prisoner-of-War (POW) camp. Charles and Jim as members of the volunteer forces were interned with the civilians. The young deserter, Ronnie, attached himself to Jim as his son and was interned as well. Jim's wife and two children were sent to be interned with the local Dutch women, first in a school and then in Jambi Gaol.

**White coolies in Jambi Gaol.** Charles, Jim and Ronnie joined all the local Dutch civilians who had been rounded up and detained in the local high-walled Jambi Gaol. In general, colonial civilians

around the Japanese empire were warehoused in whatever local secure facilities were available, in contrast to POWs who were often used for hard labour, such as the Thai-Burma and Pekan Baru railways.

However, in Jambi, the Japanese were keen to humiliate the colonial rulers and to show the locals that Asians were now in charge. So, they sent all the healthy men out of the prison to work as 'white coolies'. The men were issued with spades and hoes, and their first job was to shore up the approaches to a bridge.

Charles and some of the others were then given the job of clearing the rat nests and other detritus out of the water channels that ran behind the houses. These channels were the repository for toilet and household waste and they also captured run-off from the streets and field drains, filling them with human excrement, rubbish and organic material. 'It was filthy and hazardous work', said Charles. 'It was a miracle none of us caught skin infections or got ill.'

Their last and longest job was to upgrade a cart track to a road. The track ran up a steep hill and through a coconut plantation, where it flattened out. The men seemed to enjoy themselves on this job, or perhaps they remembered the more pleasant moments in retrospect. They had two Malay supervisors, one friendly and one unpleasant, but supervision seems to have been fairly lax. The young men like Charles had competitions of strength, challenging each other to push the small metal cart used to carry soil up the hill without stopping.

Working outside kept them healthy in other ways. Rations inside the prison were scant and lacking nutrition. Outside the prison, the local Chinese community, no friends to the Japanese, used regularly to provide food to the men, surreptitiously dropping food parcels in the grass when the two foremen were not looking. The friendly foremen actually arranged for all the men, one at a time, to have a meal at the house of a local Chinese riverboat captain. This extra food was to hold the men in good stead when they moved to their next place of internment.

Suddenly one morning in late September 1943, the men were ordered to pack their belongings and be ready to leave immediately. They were crammed into a couple of small buses and driven to Palembang, 250 km to the south, a journey that took 10 hours. At Palembang, they were driven to the docks and herded into the stifling hold of a waiting boat where they stayed overnight before sailing to Muntok on the island of Bangka the next day. They were headed for another high-walled stone prison, Muntok Gaol.

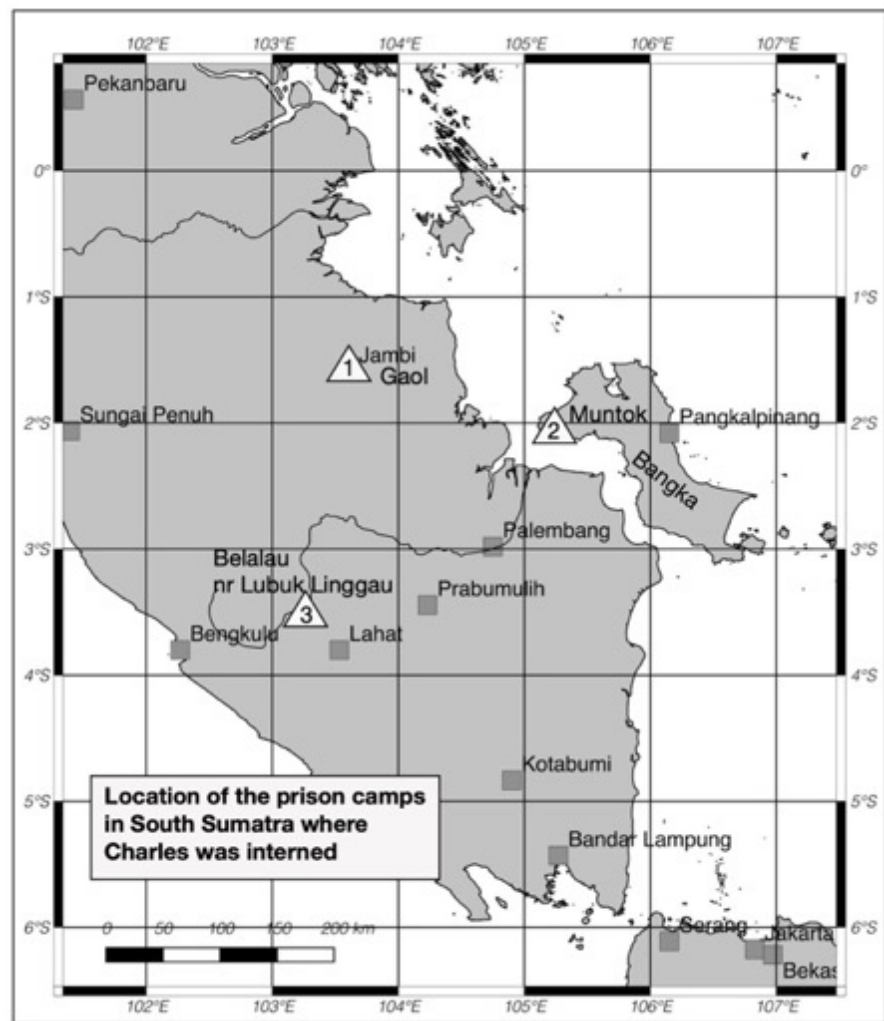
**Muntok Gaol: where men starved.** The prison already had more than twice as many as its holding capacity by the time Charles arrived. The Japanese had decided to consolidate all the internees held in detention in various cities in South Sumatra into one location. For the men, it was Muntok Gaol. In a prison designed for 150-200 men, by June 1944 it held 910 internees. Most arrived in September 1943. About 700 were Dutch with about 200 British, and a few Australians and other nationalities.

The camp had a Japanese commandant but was guarded by local Malays, and the men themselves ran the camp through an elected camp committee. Initially it was a busy thriving place. The Japanese provided the men with sleeping mats and scant supplies of food and medicine, but nothing else. So, it was up to the men to provide any other comforts they could create from what they could scavenge, for example the resourceful Dutch quickly constructed urinals and a boiler for hot water; they also ran the kitchen. The men created a social life with concerts, giving lessons to each other and running a school for the teenagers. Charles joined the kitchen roster as a kitchen hand.

The men's energy and enthusiasm quickly drained away as regular ration cuts reduced their food and nutritional intake to starvation levels, leading to a rapid decline in the men's health. Diseases

of malnutrition and starvation appeared, such as beri-beri, pellagra and other skin diseases, as well as dysentery and malaria. At the end of May 1944, the camp set up a hospital in the Tin Winning buildings, formerly the coolie lines for the local tin mine, which were located next to the prison. Hospital was a misnomer as it was another set of large cells where the sick men could be cared for away from the other internees.

At the same time, Charles joined the hospital staff as a nurse/wardsman. His first night was a baptism of fire as he cared for a man who was dying from beri-beri. The man was swollen up and leaking liquid, with ulcerated legs. Suddenly he began to wail loudly before sitting bolt upright, and then the life went out of him. It was a difficult and upsetting experience and Charles wasn't sure he could keep it up. But he got used to it and continued to work there until the internees were released from captivity after the Japanese surrender.



It was gruelling, messy and heart-breaking work, washing and dressing men, distributing and emptying bedpans, mopping up the leaking bodies of beri-beri patients, and watching many of them die. An overwhelming stench of excrement and decaying bodies permeated the hospital which repelled visitors, but those who worked there got used to it.

Through 1944, the number of sick and dying increased weekly and by October, only about 10 percent of the men in camp were fit enough to do the necessary chores in the camp. By the end of 1944, 229 out of the 910 men had died and the still-living were scrounging to eat whatever they could find, anything green that was vaguely edible, and protein in the form of rats and mice, bats, grubs, ants and maggots.

**A prison camp among the trees.** Things took a turn for the better in March 1945 when the camp was moved to an abandoned Dutch rubber plantation at Belalau in the foothills of the Bukit Barisan mountain range in South Sumatra, near the town of Lubuk Linggau. The men were housed in the former rubber workers' quarters, 14 long wooden huts with metal roofs. The huts faced out onto a communal green and the whole was fenced with a new barbed wire fence. A small river ran just inside the fence and this was the men's water supply. The huts had not been cleaned and were rife with vermin. Charles observed that he could see the bedbugs marching to the four corners of his mosquito net when he woke up in the morning and everyone was infested with lice. The men preferred to spend their time outside on the green, where they built small fires to cook food they had gathered.

Despite the appalling conditions inside the camp, Charles found the area rather beautiful. To be able to look out and see jungle, fields and rubber trees and breathe cool air was a tonic after Muntok. Despite being an area of relative plenty, the Japanese rations were still scant and often rotten. The majority of men still experienced malnutrition and many still became ill. However, men could get out of the camp unnoticed if they were careful, through stormwater drains that ran under the fence, although if they got caught, they faced often severe penalties. Charles ventured out a few times to cut a hand of bananas which he smuggled back inside bundles of the long alang-alang grass which was used to cover the tin roof of the hospital to keep it cooler.

Charles continued to work in the hospital, including in the special dysentery ward, a rudimentary hut placed away from everyone else and shunned by most. Remarkably, neither he nor his work companion contracted dysentery.

**The surrender and home.** In the second half of August 1945, there was a sense that things were changing. Flights of bombers flew over although they couldn't tell whether they were friend or foe. On 23 August, the local Malay guards were replaced by armed Japanese. Charles feared they might be about to be killed although this impression was contradicted when that evening their rations were increased three-fold and they were flooded with foodstuffs from the Red Cross parcels which the Japanese had hoarded instead of distributing them.

The following day, the camp commandant, Captain Seki announced that the war was over and hoped that they could now be friends. The men were free to come and go and to visit the women's camp which had been moved to a site a kilometre or two away not long after the men were moved. Charles and some of the other men were invited to lunch there.

The Japanese had surrendered on 15 August but it took nine days to tell the men they were free. The men's response was quite muted. Where was the liberating army? They had no idea what was to happen next. It took another two weeks until the Allied soldiers found them, on 6 September. Finally, the RAAF were put in charge of evacuating the two camps to Singapore. The seriously ill were given priority and, as a nurse, Charles accompanied the first group to be evacuated, on 16 September.

Eleven days later Charles sailed back to the UK on the Polish hospital ship the Sobieski. His older brother, Tom, was there to meet him. 'He searched the crowds. He was looking for perhaps a skinny chap. Charles recalled, 'I looked yellow and had now reached 82 kg, a far cry from the 56 kilos I was when the war ended.'

When the men were released, of the 910 who had been interned in Muntok Gaol, only 555 had survived, and 355 had died.

*Jenny Norvick presented this material to us at our April 26<sup>th</sup> meeting. Her husband Martin prepared the maps. We are very grateful to them both. Leila Griffiths presented her father's story about his POW experience in Sumatra at that meeting too. We will include that in our June newsletter.*

### **Auto-Classico returns to Maling Road on Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> May.**

Maling Road was closed off and a huge crowd gathered to see many beautifully presented classic cars as well as motor bikes at this annual event. It had been cancelled during lockdowns. Neil Curry set up a stand and our banner so that we could sell Visions of a Village and hand out pamphlets. There was quite a lot of interest in CHG, and we sold 9 books. The traders did a roaring trade.

Top Left: Neil Curry view towards Post Office



Top R: Bentley with IGA behind



Below L: Looking towards Theatre Place



Below R: View across Maling Road from corner of Bryson Street. Can you identify the cars?

