



with Oliver Farley

Horsham Society

West Sussex - a land of 70 tongues

Where would you go if you wanted to study linguistics? A place where many languages are spoken should make a promising adjunct to academic studies and London comes to mind straight away.

About 250 languages are heard in the capital's streets yet even that daunting total is well and truly surpassed by New York which boasts over 600. We're not doing badly on the polyglot front ourselves with 70 languages other than English being spoken amongst us.

Approximately 19,000 people in West Sussex speak a language other than English and nearly 19 per cent of them are Polish. That seems quite a number until we recall that the total population of the county is over 836,000 so the linguists account for only 2.27 per cent of the population, and Poles are a fifth of that small number, about 0.4 per cent.

Perhaps the fact that Polish is the most spoken language isn't much of a surprise but I for one was not expecting Portuguese to be the second one, with French as sixth and Spanish as tenth.



French is out-ranked by Urdu, Filipino and Gujarati and Spanish is pipped by Bengali, Tamil and Lithuanian. And there are 60 more languages to be heard in the land of the south Saxons.

I hear from some involved in education that the popularity of language-learning

has declined and European languages quite surprisingly so.

Some schools are now reduced to bussing their pupils to Horsham for German lessons as their own school no longer teaches it. Surprisingly, there has been some increase in the wish to learn Cantonese or Mandarin, with Japanese favoured by some.

I had some personal experience of this nationwide trend when the daughter of a good friend wanted to take up Chinese at university.

I wasn't enthused and advised her against it. Not because she wasn't capable of learning it but because all her classmates would be the sons and daughters of Anglo-Chinese parents who had been speaking Chinese since childhood and the class standard would be way above the head of less advantaged children.

Which brings us to the point of when do these distinct groups meld into the wider community and become British like the rest of us?

After all, we all came from somewhere else back in the mists of time; some colleagues claimed they could trace their

family back to the Normans.

Being a Celt myself, I claimed that my ancestors probably welcomed the Romans when they first trod on our shores!

The key timing appears to be when children go to school. There they make friends as the whim takes them and often the school crowd is more integrated than the parents waiting for them at the gates.

There is a slow blend from the first generation to the next, and communities are built up, altering with the times and more interested in the normal concerns of life than with bothering about irrelevant ethnic origins.

There is a sharing of hopes and expectations, a sharing too of cooking and food, football and sport, all yielding a richer diversity and a healthier outlook. What's the Polish for south Saxon?

The Horsham Society is concerned about the past, present and future of the town. It seeks to promote good planning and design for the built environment and open spaces. Membership of the Horsham Society is open to anyone who shares these concerns. For more information, visit the website www.horshamsociety.org or phone 01403 259038.