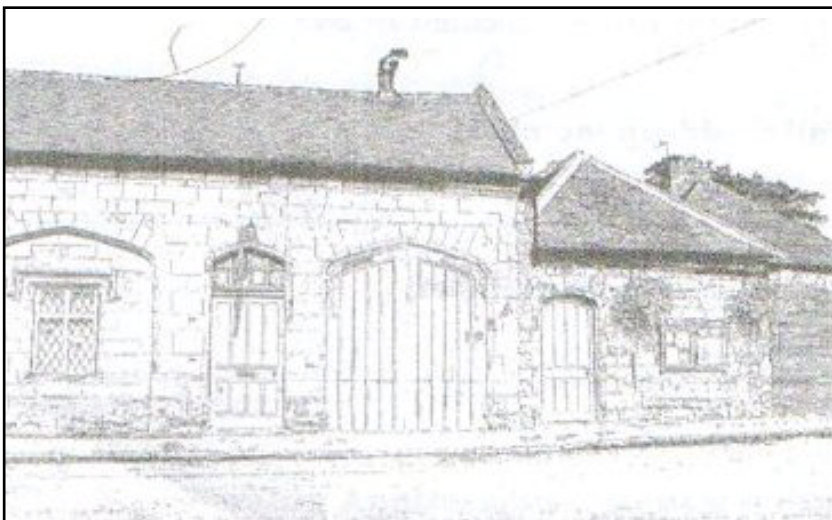


The History of Stoneleigh Village Club



The Stoneleigh Village Club has a long history, even preceding its current premises, which were probably erected circa 1840 along with the four cottages attached to it. Today it is, along with the cottages, a Grade II Listed Building. On the site of the present building there was for several centuries an important coaching inn, The Swan, which provided substantial accommodation both for travellers and their live-stock, and for the Leigh family when attending St Mary the Virgin Church in Stoneleigh. A coach house was specifically built there for this purpose, to accommodate the family's coach and horses whilst they were at church. The first inn-keeper of whom we know is recorded as early as 1595.

A document prepared in August 2011 by the Stoneleigh History Society states:

Although Stoneleigh has boasted various “ale-houses” or “beer-houses”, there has been only one inn – a substantial building occupying a prominent corner site by the village green. Usually known as The Swan, although some records call it The Three Swans, it has now completely vanished, but along with its stables and outbuildings it would have been a significant landmark within the village. It would have been used by travellers as well as local people, specifically those wishing to travel from Birmingham to Southam and Banbury; some of these would undoubtedly have been travelling with livestock. There is also evidence that the inn was used as a manor court, and the term Courthouse Green, possibly referring to the present village green, may derive from this.

A document of 1783 provides important information about the status of The Swan: that it is the only public house in Stoneleigh, and is large: it provides stabling for both farm horses and, separately, for Lord Leigh's and his household's horses when the former are attending church. It is likely, therefore, that these parts of the building would be the forerunner of the coach house in what is now the Village Club. The fact that travellers would stable their horses there means that The Swan was still, as two centuries before, a useful stopping place, with Stoneleigh being at the nexus of roads leading to Coventry, Warwick, Leamington, Birmingham and London.

Some time after 1825 the Swan ceased to trade as an inn, the Leigh family having decided not to renew the victualler's licence. It is perhaps after the death of Chandos Leigh in 1850 that his son, William Henry, formed the idea of opening a Reading Room for the village: he was a known benefactor and paternalistic landowner who expended considerable energy in helping to improve the lot of the working man. The present Village Club occupies a portion of the site, possibly the former stables (see 1810 map) and thus continues a tradition dating back to the late sixteenth century.

Stoneleigh Village Club was opened on November 5th 1856 by William Henry, Lord Leigh as Stoneleigh Village Club and Reading Room. A commemorative plaque can still be seen inside the Club, and an 86-page document records the lecture given by his Lordship on that occasion; he furnished the premises with 750 books and newspapers for use by the villagers. His youngest brother, the Reverend James Wentworth Leigh, Vicar of Stoneleigh 1863-1872 and later Dean of Hereford, records in his autobiography that *"interesting lectures were given during the winter months by well-known lecturers"*, and that *"the Reading-room was well attended every night by men anxious to read the newspapers and books provided, and that the lectures on historical, scientific, and other subjects, which were delivered once a month during five months in the year, were well attended and eagerly listened to."* [Other Days, published 1923]

Perhaps one of the most socially significant events held there was a meeting convened by the Reverend James, *"of farmers and labourers at the Stoneleigh Reading Room, with the view of bringing about an amicable settlement as far as this parish was concerned,"* [ibid] at the time of the Agricultural Labourers' Strike led by Joseph Arch (with whom the Reverend James sympathised) in 1872. Many members of the Leigh family performed extracts from various dramas, including Shakespeare, at the Reading Room, to great acclaim according to the Parish Magazines of the late nineteenth century. For example it is recorded that in January 1868 the Hon.G.H.C.Leigh and his brother the Hon. Rupert gave a reading from "King John" which was "vociferously applauded" by the "enthusiastic audience," whilst other members of the extended

family assisted in the performance and entertained with songs and a travel lecture. Later in the same month lectures were given on such diverse subjects as Garibaldi, Darius and Napoleon – all of this for a penny! Indeed the famous actress Fanny Kemble, the mother-in-law of James Wentworth Leigh, herself performed Shakespearean monologues there, to a packed audience. Stoneleigh's most famous son, Sir Henry Parkes, returned from Australia to the village where he was schooled as a "grand old man" in 1882, and he, too, gave a lecture in the Reading Room.

At the time of the First World War the Reading Room/Club became the focus for village activity to help the war effort. Lord Leigh and his sister, Cordelia, held meetings there to encourage the young men of the village to enlist and to sign up for shooting practice organised by Lord Leigh's game-keeper. Appeals for help accommodating Belgian refugees, and for sending Christmas presents to the troops, were pinned to the door. Women, again recruited by Cordelia Leigh and her sister Agnes, met there to organise sewing projects such as the construction of sand-bags.

Although the Leigh family, led initially by Lord Leigh and the Reverend James, held Temperance Meetings at the Club, coffee and cocoa being sold, some time after 1900 it became a licensed premises – continuing the tradition of The Swan Inn. The following details about alcohol consumption and the organisation of the Club in the early twentieth century are given by Harry Edmunds, a Stoneleigh villager, in his *Reminiscences*:

"...later on the members used to be allowed to purchase two pints of beer or two bottles of stout but it was not allowed to sell any spirits or wine...it was not till after the first world war, about 1928, that the Club was allowed to open after church at eight o'clock – no midday opening till 1930 and then from twelve till two o'clock. Anyone wishing to join the Club had to fill in a form by the proposer and the seconder but you could not purchase anything until you had been accepted by a full committee of which three of them were nominated by Lord Leigh himself and they were only allowed to have 10 members outside the village and

the subscription was two shillings per annum. This was due the first week in November each year. The first steward to be appointed was one of Lord Leigh's firemen as a part-time job after damaging his arm in a farm fire. When Lord Leigh's sons were born they were presented with a silver bowl given by the members of the Stoneleigh Working Men's Club. In my early days the club was run by Mr W Wells (headmaster of the school) who acted as secretary and treasurer. He used to be informing Lord Leigh of all that went on and often sent a balance sheet to him. Of course as times changed an agreement was made. There was a large girder brought into the club and built to carry the roof of the club, and on one side of the girder it was painted Friendship Love and Truth and on the other side it was Faith Hope and Charity. The girder was hauled up from the old mill by the weir at the flood gates in the late eighteen hundreds."

Throughout the twentieth century the Village Club remained the hub of village life. Women were admitted as members some 50 years ago, and family events are now regularly held there, such as christenings and wakes. Each Christmas the Coventry Mummers perform the ancient Stoneleigh Mummers Play to a large audience, to raise money for local charities. Other regular events include an Easter Bonnet Parade, the annual Duck Race/Village Fete, as well as Bonfire Night and a variety of Christmas and New Year "special events." These are valued occasions when villagers get together as a community. The Club also hosts a number of weekly gatherings for older villagers, such as bingo sessions, and there are the usual "darts and dominoes" and pool tournaments. Quizzes are regularly held, often to raise money for charity, and each month there is a community coffee morning hosted by the Women's Institute. In June 2012 the Club was once again a focus for the village's Diamond Jubilee Celebrations, just as it has been in previous years for Silver and Golden Jubilees.

Stoneleigh History Society

Places- Booklet 2

SLW 2012

Map of 1810, showing the position of The Swan Inn, later the site of the Village Club and Reading Room.

