

Stoneleigh History Society AGM Tuesday March 28th 2017

Chairman's Report

If 2015 was the year of the Australian then 2016 was the year of the church. The building, of course, was closed from the beginning of August for extensive restoration, and so our displays had only a short time to be seen. Nevertheless, as we began our major "Churchyard Project" under Lisa Reay's expert guidance at the end of 2015, we were able to reveal our initial researches in April. A small but dedicated band of researchers, writers, photographers and data inputters (is that a word?) have begun the massive task of researching and recording the lives of all those who are commemorated in the churchyard. Findings are then uploaded to the Burials Database section of the Society's website. Already, following the method of dividing up the churchyard which the W.I. devised more than 30 years ago, we have completed Sections A and B, totalling over 400 memorialised people. And already, the information is helping family members from around the world who are now able to see the precise burial plot of their ancestors and view details about their lives.

In February 2015 Shirley Ball's talk about Stoneleigh memories had raised £1000 for the church's restoration fund. The Society continued to help fundraise by, in May, helping to organise a wonderful concert given by Immanuel's Ground, a "Georgian" choir. Not only did this swell the church coffers by £770 but the choir's researches turned up a long-lost musical piece once played at the abbey for Edward, the 5th Lord Leigh. It was spine-tingling to listen to music that had last been played in Stoneleigh in the mid-eighteenth century. Then, in October, Sheila Woolf gave a talk on Jane Austen's Warwickshire family, in anticipation of the novelist's bicentenary in 2017. This also raised £1000.

As we approach the church's reopening we are pleased to have helped raise funds but also to help work towards interpreting the church's rich history for future visitors. Committee members have been working for some months on our 2017 display which will be a comprehensive history of the church; this will be launched with a presentation in the church in May.

We have been grateful to the church for allowing us display space in the Leigh Chapel since the formation of the Society in 2011. With the church's reopening we are delighted that a reorganisation of the space in the chapel will allow us to make our display and research materials more easily visible to visitors.

Meetings

In **March**, following our 2016 AGM, we had an excellent talk by a member of staff from Warwick County Record Office, Michelle Williams. She talked about Crime and Punishment within Warwickshire, illustrating her talk with some interesting documents. Our **April** meeting was held in the church as it was the launch of the above-mentioned Churchyard Project, when some of the more unusual or unexpected burials' stories were revealed. The display, with beautiful graphic design as ever by Pam Baker, then spent the next few months in the Leigh Chapel and elicited several complimentary comments in the visitors' book. A real treat in **May** was a visit from David Fry, a local man with a particular interest in old photographs. We had expected

him to speak about Warwickshire in general but it was a delightful bonus that he had put together a collection of specifically Stoneleigh pictures. Although many of the scenes were familiar there were also some wonderful new ones.

Our **June** meeting took the form of our annual outing, and on a horribly rainy evening in Kenilworth several members took the trail around Kenilworth's Abbey Fields, to hear a detailed and knowledgeable explanation of the ruins by Jan Cooper, the Chair of the Kenilworth History and Archaeology Society. The Abbey Barn was specially opened for us and we all enjoyed seeing the fascinating objects retrieved from the original Augustinian abbey as well as more recent history displays about "old Kenilworth." We had no meeting in **July** or **August** but had a stall at the village Duck Race/Fete.

The autumn "season" began in **September** with a welcome return talk by our own Peter James speaking about the history of silk-weaving in Coventry and Warwickshire. Having spoken to us previously about comb-making and fulling, Peter is gaining a reputation as our "industrial history man"! Another rewarding and most unusual talk was given in **October**. Vic Nock, a local expert in arms and militaria, brought his amazing collection of bows, arrows and crossbows to demonstrate their use in medieval warfare. It was appropriate that we welcomed him on St Crispin's Day! In **November** Sheila Woolf spoke about some of the wealthy American heiresses who came to Warwickshire in the nineteenth century to "marry an English Lord" in her talk "Here Come the Girls."

We rounded the year off in **December** with a most successful Christmas Social at the village hall which gave a chance to chat as well as sample some of the delicious food which members had brought to share! There was no meeting in **January** 2017 but in **February** we welcomed back Peter Walters, local writer, who spoke entertainingly and in detail about "The Story of Coventry", which was the subject of a book he wrote in 2013.

Events

2016 was, of course, the centenary of the Battle of the Somme. Avril Newey initiated a commemoration of the event with an afternoon event in Earlsdon, when we joined members of the Earlsdon Research Group in an afternoon of poetry, prose and music on 1 July. With a slightly more "Stoneleigh bias" we repeated the event in the chapel at Stoneleigh Abbey on 18 November, exactly matching the length – 141 days – of the terrible battle itself. We were very grateful to members of staff at the abbey for allowing us to hold the event free of charge. Together with the earlier event, we raised over £500 for *War Child*.

In 2015 we had been approached by the Oxford Film and TV Company, researching a series to be screened on BBC4 and called *Home from Home*. A whole programme about Stoneleigh was finally screened in May 2016, featuring the village as an example of half-timbered houses in the context of an Estate. Several members of the Society gave a lot of time to help with the company's research, and Shirley Ball was resplendent on screen!

In November the society was represented by Lisa Reay and Rob Orland at a WLHS conference, “Getting Online for Research and Publicity”, discussing the internet’s potential for local history research and its use by societies such as ours.

Publications

The new edition of Pevsner’s *Warwickshire* was published in July 2016 and the editor kindly invited the Chairman to attend the launch. There is now considerably more about Stoneleigh in the book than in the previous edition.

David Brooks’ History of Stoneleigh Agriculture has been revised and his early copies quickly sold out.

Sheila Woolf’s “Here Come the Girls” talk has been tuned into a booklet.

A dissertation for an MA in Cultural Heritage and Resource Management was written by a young woman, Louise Clare, studying at the University of Winchester; her subject was the ways in which stately homes and museums have marked the centenary of the Great War. A chapter was devoted to publications about Cordelia Leigh and the work of the Leigh family for the war effort, together with the displays at the abbey.

April 2017 will see the publication of an article by Sheila Woolf in the George Eliot Annual Review on the novelist’s knowledge of the Leigh Peerage Case in preparing her book *Felix Holt the Radical*.

Resources

Our collection of materials continues to grow and we are grateful that the village hall committee has allowed us to use storage space at the hall for our display boards and boxes, when not in use.

Conclusion

The Chairman would like to thank everyone who has given of their time, energy and expertise in helping the society to thrive, in particular those members of the committee who are always on hand with practical help and advice, and those who have spent so much time in the past twelve months on the first stage of the churchyard project – undoubtedly a long-term and valuable enterprise.

Membership of the society now stands over 50; thank you for your continued interest and support.