

Stoneleigh History Society AGM Tuesday 27 March 2018

Chairman's Report

It might *seem* that the Society was less “high-profile” in 2017. Apart from the contribution to the church’s reopening in May, we had a presence at the Duck Race but held no other official events. Nevertheless, work has continued apace “behind the scenes”, with a huge amount of progress made on the churchyard project, and other publication projects as detailed below. Membership stands at 55 and we have welcomed guests to meetings on many occasions. We have certainly not been standing still.

Events and Displays

The most important event of the year was the “Homecoming” of the church, after its being closed for almost a year for renovation. At the service of rededication our display in the Leigh Chapel was shown for the first time. It remained in place throughout the year.

The display was the result of many months of research by several members of the Society, who put together a comprehensive history of the building, its fabric and contents. Our discoveries are not only exhibited as a vertical display but have also been gathered into a book which can be perused in the main body of the church by those for whom mobility difficulties prevent access to the Leigh Chapel. In addition, Mel Dearing created an architectural timeline for permanent display in the church porch, which shows visitors at a glance how the building has evolved. Various members of the Society also helped the church produce new explanatory leaflets for visitors, in particular a church trail for children.

We were extremely grateful to the church for consulting us when renovating and re-ordering the Leigh Chapel, and for purchasing new display stands for our use there. As a result “our” section of the Chapel is now very smart, and our many resources more helpfully displayed.

As 2017 was the 75th anniversary of the deaths of three of the four Stoneleigh men who lost their lives in the Second World War, a small display was put together to tell their stories.

Stoneleigh’s association with Jane Austen was the local focus of the novelist’s bicentenary commemorations. The chairman’s talk on Austen’s Warwickshire family was given twelve times to local groups as well as at the Abbey on the anniversary of Austen’s death. Many foreign visitors, notably from the USA, were given specialist tours.

Research and Publications

The churchyard project has progressed a great deal, with around 800 narratives researched and written by Lisa Reay, Sheila Woolf, Pam Baker and Pete James. Following the method devised some thirty years ago to divide up the churchyard into sections A-E, we have now progressed to, and almost finished, section D. Tremendously complex family relationships have been revealed along the way, with many fascinating stories. These continue to be uploaded to the Burial Database on our website, as well as on our Ancestry family tree. We

are grateful to Derek Robinson for photographing the graves, often revealing hitherto-illegible inscriptions, and to Rob Orland for trouble-shooting when the website's inner workings seemed confusing. Enquiries for family history research from people around the world have been made much easier to answer as our knowledge has increased.

Our booklets have proved to be popular sales items, and local libraries now hold copies. Philip Gill's book on the almshouse residents between 1841 and 1911 has been substantially revised, and prepared for publication by Pam Baker. It promises to be an excellent addition to our understanding of the stories of many villagers from the past.

Margaret Wallis and Margaret Brown have been preparing a book celebrating the creation of the church tapestry cushions. Past SHS member Eileen Burman left a legacy designed to pay for such a publication, and with photographs of all the tapestries taken, again, by Derek Robinson, it will be a fitting memorial to all those "Stoneleigh Stitchers" whose work over many years created such beautiful –and useful – items.

In preparation, too, is a calendar for 2019 which will comprise photographs by the late Will Blagburn, who died in 2017 and who would have celebrated his 90th birthday in 2019. The Society will publish and pay for the calendar, with profits going to Myton Hospice, where Will and so many other local people have received such good care.

Meetings

Our **March 2017** meeting, as well as being the AGM, saw a visit from Professor Rebecca Probert of Warwick University, a specialist in the history of marriage in England and Wales. She spoke entertainingly to us about "Illicit and Clandestine Marriages" and we were especially pleased to see her since she was shortly moving on to a new post at Exeter University.

Our focus in **April** was split among three subjects: first, the church restoration project, when Sarah Ballinger introduced a display illustrating some of the most interesting/challenging aspects of the work which had been undertaken with the grant of £210,000 from the English Lottery Fund. Second, Samplers: Sheila Woolf spoke about two sampler kits bought from America, one by "Cordelia Leigh, 1878, Stoneleigh Abbey" and the other "Ann Willcox, Stoneleigh School." She had had them made up, and had researched Ann Willcox's family history. Thirdly, Derek Robinson presented a large collection of photographs of Stare Bridge and its surroundings which he had taken through the seasons. Anthony Bianco outlined how the bridge would be impacted during and after the construction of HS2.

We continued with the theme of the church restoration in our **May** meeting, held in church where our exhibition on the church history was displayed in the Leigh Chapel. Sheila paid tribute to the small team who had researched the history, and who had prepared the documents and graphics for the display, and each of them spoke about the aspects which had most interested them.

Our 2017 trip took place in **June**, and was to Toye, Kenning and Spencer, Bedworth. The company specialises in narrow fabric weaving, manufacturing coloured ribbons, braids and laces. Everyone thoroughly enjoyed witnessing the extraordinary skills of the workforce.

As usual there was no meeting in **July** or **August**.

In **September** Shirley Ball's talk about the village school was postponed to 2018, and instead Peter James spoke about the many and varied Coventry firms, which had once thrived but have now disappeared. This illuminating talk evoked many memories of the important industrial past of the city.

Unfortunately, in **October** our speaker pulled out at the last minute, and Sheila Woolf stepped in to speak about the associations between the writer George Eliot and the county of Warwickshire – and perhaps surprisingly, her association with the Leighs of Stoneleigh.

Our **November** meeting was a topical one, Peter James speaking about the ancient custom of Wroth Silver which occurs at Dunsmore each year on 11 November. Its history is thought to be the longest in the country; Sheila added detail about attendance, which takes place before dawn!

Our traditional **December** Christmas Social provided a relaxing opportunity to chat, eat and drink in the village hall.

There was no meeting in **January**, and our year was completed in **February** looking back over some of the research completed by many members since the Society's inception, and in particular considering the connections made with people all over the world, several of whom had been generous in supporting the society as a result.

Personnel and Affiliations

We have now affiliated ourselves to the British Association for Local History, which enables us not only to receive publications and information about events of interest, but which also provides us with essential Public Liability Insurance for our meetings and trips. We continue to be affiliated to the Warwickshire Local History Society, and some of us have participated in visits organised by them in 2017.

In 2017 Lisa Reay stepped down from her role as Treasurer, although she continues as Membership Secretary. Sue Crofts has taken on the position of Treasurer with quiet efficiency. The Chairman would particularly like to thank Lisa and Sue for their work in this regard, and Margaret Wallis, our Secretary, whose support and reliability in ensuring the smooth working of the Society is without parallel. Pam Baker has taken on the role of Speaker Host at meetings – a huge help – but, additionally, her design skills in the production of exhibitions and publications are a massive asset to the Society. Thanks, indeed, to **all** members of the committee for another year of hard work for the Society, and to all our members who support meetings with their attendance each month; help with refreshments is especially appreciated!

In 2018, with a strong membership, we look forward to another year filled with interest and discovery.

Sheila Woolf March 2018