

NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE STONELEIGH HISTORY SOCIETY HELD ON 28 FEBRUARY 2017

Present: 31 members of SHS and 4 new members.

Apologies: Shirley Ball, Sarah Ballinger, David and Jean Vaughan

Welcome: Sheila Woolf welcomed members. She reported that cards had been sent on behalf of the Society to several members who were ill currently. Sheila reminded members that the AGM would be held on 28 March, followed by a talk by Professor Rebecca Probert on 'Illicit and Clandestine Marriage'.

Nomination forms for the Committee were available from the registration desk and should be returned to Margaret Wallis. It was hoped the members would consider helping the Society in this way.

Sheila then welcomed **Peter Walters** who spoke on '**The Story of Coventry**'.

Peter gave a wide-ranging talk in which he described the background to his recent book in which he relates some of the stories he found during his research. E.g.

Coventry was a powerful city as early as the mid-700s. Although beyond the city boundary, evidence of a Bronze Age settlement was discovered on the site of the University of Warwick.

Lady Godiva died in 1067, but it was her husband, Leofric, who was the more interesting character – a Saxon who owed his rise to a Danish king, Canute. The myth ('fake news'!) of Godiva's naked ride was spread years later by Benedictine monks who specialised in forging charters, were very powerful – and unpopular.

Benedictines were followed by Cistercian monks in 1150, and they established a flourishing wool trade which benefitted Coventry's economy. The dissolution of the monasteries therefore had a disastrous effect on the economy, culture and building heritage of the city (and of the country as a whole) from which it took decades to recover.

Over the centuries there is considerable evidence of the independent-minded and inward-looking characteristics of Coventrians which, for instance, meant that Birmingham expanded at its expense, hence the longstanding resentment towards our neighbour.

Coventry had a close relationship with many monarchs. E.g. Edward III borrowed money from its merchants. Queen Isabella had some land in the city and endowed a church – St John the Baptist in Spon Street; she also appointed a representative to establish a centre for drapers. Richard II laid the foundation for Charterhouse on London Road. Elizabeth I was thought to be fond of Coventry merchants to whom she gave a gold cup and money. She licensed Coventry for a new way of making cloth and, somewhat surprisingly, asked the city to look after Mary Queen of Scots in St Mary's Hall for a few weeks. During the Civil War Coventry became a centre for the defence of puritans.

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Silk weaving was established in the 1700s and became very successful, as did watch-making later in the century. However, by the mid-1800s Coventry fell on hard times (as described by George Eliot in 'Middlemarch') and tariffs introduced by William Gladstone in 1860 left weavers destitute.

The late 1800s saw Coventry's industrial revival thanks to inventors such as James Starley (sewing machines then an early bicycle – followed by a two-wheeled version which led to 'Rover' and Coventry becoming the world's largest bicycle producer). Henry Lawson was an excellent bicycle designer who later took over Leigh Mills and became a car manufacturer, soon followed by Hillman, Singer, Rudge and a German, Bettman, who founded Triumph and was Mayor of Coventry in 1913.

By 1914 Coventry Council had decided that most of the city's medieval streets would have to be destroyed in favour of the motor car. So successful was the development of 'car city' that in 1937 Coventry was top amongst the UK's cities in the Government's index of the nation's wealth. Small wonder that it was a prime target for bombs in World War II.

Post-War, Coventry hit its zenith in 1966. The Council built two new tower blocks and a pioneering ring road. The Leofric Hotel, an Olympic-sized swimming pool and the Belgrade Theatre were opened, a Country Park established, and a ninth comprehensive school created. However, in the 70s there was a massive decline in car manufacture, the machine tool industry etc. Now it is the city's two universities that have saved its reputation.

Sheila thanked Peter, referred to his book, ***The Story of Coventry***, copies of which were on sale

Thanks also to Jane Taylor and Janet Gibson who organised the refreshments.