

NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE STONELEIGH HISTORY SOCIETY MEETING HELD ON 31 OCTOBER 2017

Present: 30 SHS members and 6 guests

Apologies: David and Jean Vaughan, Margaret Brown and Ken Wallis. Ann Langley, the speaker originally booked for this meeting, had found she had a diary clash at the last minute, so Sheila had stepped into the breach (THANK YOU!).

Welcome: Sheila welcomed members and guests and thanked Pete James for having given the talk at the last meeting. She also thanked the team of members who provide refreshments at meetings throughout the year.

There were various announcements about forthcoming meetings including one in the Market Hall Museum, Warwick at 7 pm on 7 November on 'A Neolithic henge and other finds from Warwickshire' by the Birmingham and Warwickshire Archaeological Society.

The Warwickshire Local History Society has a full list of its meetings which SHS members can attend free. Of particular interest is one on Saturday 25 November starting at 2 pm when Nat Alcock will lead a tour of Salford Hall (now a Best Western Hotel) on the Salford Priors to Evesham Road (near Bidford). The tour will be of the exterior and interior (n.b. three floors and no lift). At 3 pm there will be enactment 'Garderobe – the past in practice' related to the Catholic history of the house, and a seasonal tea will be served at 4 pm. Tickets £15 for members, £17 non-members. Anyone interested should contact Sheila by 11 November.

Roger Gilbert has now moved to Southam and is no longer a member of SHS. Members were invited to sign a card for him.

Next year's programme was now available on the Society's website.

The next meeting would be on 28 November when Pete James would talk about the Wroth Silver.

The Christmas Social would be on Tuesday 19 December. As last year, the Committee would provide drinks and raffle prizes, but members were asked to bring food to share.

After her talk, Sheila announced that Avril Newey would say a few words about poems she had written about times gone by in Warwickshire.

George Eliot and Stoneleigh

Sheila explained that although she had taught about George Eliot and had written articles about aspects of her work, this was the first talk she had given about her. She referred to the many literary connection with Warwickshire ('Shakespeare's County') e.g. Walter Scott (The King's Arms in Kenilworth – now Zizzi), John Masefield (attended Warwick School), Walter Savage Landor, Rupert Brooke (attended Rugby School), Philip Larkin (born in Coventry), Mary Dormer Harris (Stoneleigh historian who discovered the Stoneleigh Mummers Play and Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot).

George Eliot is always associated with Nuneaton but in fact she was born in South Farm on the Arbury estate where her father was the land agent. She and her brother, Isaac, were the children of his second marriage. The site is now privately occupied and only members of the

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George Eliot Fellowship can visit and take tours although a George Eliot Visitor Centre is being built ready for 2019, the centenary of her birth, she went to school in Warwick Row, Nuneaton (now Loveitt estate agents) where she was taught by two women

She was also taught Latin and Greek by the Headmaster of King Henry VIII School in Coventry, an unusual fact for a girl at that time, signifying her intellectual abilities.

For 8 years after her father retired, George Eliot lived at Bird Grove (now George Eliot Road, off the Foleshill Road). The house is now in ruins, but the George Eliot Fellowship is lobbying Coventry City Council to support its renovation, especially if they wish to become City of Culture in future. Her father was ill during this period and GE nursed him, but she questioned her Christian faith which greatly upset him. During this time, she associated with a group of radicals and free thinkers at Rose Hill in Radford. One of these was Charles Grey Bray who ran the Coventry Herald and Free Press and in 1841 she began to write anonymously for that paper. So, her literary career began.

Sheila then referred to the fact that for each year since 2007 the George Eliot Fellowship has highlighted a novel published 100 years before. 2016 was the anniversary of 'Felix Holt: the Radical' and the resultant extra attention being paid to this novel led Sheila to research it in more details. The novel looks back to the time in the 1830s when there were electoral and workers' riots in Nuneaton and Coventry and examines the changes in the social system, including contrasts between town and country. Sheila had noticed several references to places, people and incidents which were identifiable as Stoneleigh Abbey, the Leigh family and their associates. (I'm not sure this is true, Margaret, as they have the same ones at Osborne House!) Riots, lawsuits and mysterious deaths had all featured in previous talks to SHS given by Sheila.

George Eliot had probably visited Stoneleigh with her father and when visiting her half sister who lived in Baginton, and it is highly likely that she was familiar with local gossip especially as the Leigh Peerage Case featured so heavily in the newspaper for which she wrote. Whilst she had some sympathy with radical causes she did not approve of all radicals' behaviour. She tried to reflect legal issues clearly and accurately in the novel.

George Eliot had a younger brother, Isaac, with whom she fell out following her longstanding association with George Henry Lewes (her choice of George as a pseudonym was no coincidence) who was already married (to Agnes ? who had four children by Thornton Leigh Hunt, the son of James Henry Leigh Hunt who was a friend of Chandos Leigh and named after Chandos' own father James Henry Leigh. And so, the coincidences and interweaving stories continue

Avril Newey then spoke about her family's long associations with Warwickshire and her wish to record a previous way of life through her poetry. Her CD of poems was on sale at the back of the room.

Many thanks to Sheila for having stepped into the breach in such a fascinating way.

Thanks also to Shirley and Daphne for organising refreshments.