

NOTES FROM THE MEETING OF THE STONELEIGH HISTORY SOCIETY HELD ON 25 JUNE 2019

Present: 23 SHS members and 4 guests.

Apologies: Celia Baly, Anthony Bianco, Pam Baker, Sue Crofts, Mel Dearing, Avril Newey, Peter Thompson, Liz Sykes David and Jean Vaughan and Susie Thompson

Welcome and Announcements: Sheila Woolf welcomed everyone to the meeting.

- The SHS was about to celebrate its first wedding. Best wishes for future happiness were conveyed to Clare Harvey-Smith and Adrian Clarke.
- Thanks to Clive Watson for refreshments.
- Help was needed for three forthcoming events in which the SHS was to be involved.
- Saturday 10 August: Duck Race. Saturday 14/Sunday 15 September: Heritage Weekend. Saturday 28 September: Leamington History Day. A detailed note about these events would be circulated to members later (Also attached to these notes)
- Sheila's book on the history of Stoneleigh School was at the printers and would be launched at the next meeting, on 24 September.

The Birmingham Back-to-Backs Project, by Derek Clarke, a retired conservation architect

'The Back-to-Backs' (or Court 15) are the last example of a type of housing which had been popular until the Public Health Act of 1875 was passed, after which terrace housing became popular. The style of housing typically included 2 or 3 storey houses around a courtyard which included communal privies, clothes washing and playing facilities.....and a single tap!

Although the buildings had received listed building status in 1988, they were in a serious state of disrepair. The idea of restoration began in 1992 when Elizabeth Perkins, Secretary of the Birmingham Conservation Trust, walked down Hurst Street past a row of shops which were part of a housing development which had been occupied by numerous families (and their lodgers) from the 1840s to 1970s. She felt that her Trust could co-operate with the restoration of the site and in a report was commissioned from the City of Hereford Archaeology Unit to impress the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Derek Clarke's illustrated talk provided a fascinating story and showed the huge amount of patience, curiosity, determination as well as technical skill involved in the research. The contents of every room, cupboard etc. was recorded and sketches were made of items such as fire surrounds, door catches, balustrades etc. Architectural information was gathered. The report was presented in April 1995. The grant application was successful, and the National Trust joined the Birmingham Conservation Trust in the next stage.

The National Trust wanted a reconstruction of the site as it was in 1901 and set a very tight deadline for Derek and his colleagues. Most of the buildings had disintegrated. Many walls were nine inches thick with few cavities. Old bricks were tracked down. Originally there were eight spiked chimney pots and after an appeal on Central News 336 were offered by members of the public! Authentic replacements rather than copies were used throughout,

including a Thomas Crapper pedestal unit. Staircases were restored but strengthened to take account of the future traffic flow once the houses were open to the public.

Every nook and cranny had debris – quarry tile in the fish hop (should this be shop?), a sackful of 1942 papers in a cellar, and behind the plaster in one of the shops, 50-year-old bottles of whiskey, salad dressing, damson jam, Lea & Perrins sauce, and medicines.

The ground floor of the houses on Hurst Street had been shops, notably ‘Candies’ sweet shop, the City Fish Bar (closed due to poor hygiene and occupied by feral cats) and George Saunders’ tailor, the latter being of particular interest. Saunders had emigrated from St. Kitts in 1959. He established his business in 1960 and not only had the ground floor shop but knocked down walls on the first floor above it so he could have a long show room and workroom. There were nails all over the walls holding paper patterns for named individuals (some famous performers at the Hippodrome). One third of the floor was covered with bowls to catch rainwater. Despite such difficult working conditions and order for 400 pairs of white trousers for the Household Cavalry was successfully met. The business continued until 2001.

The Back-to-Backs were open to the public for the 2004-5 season. £1.25 million was paid to the contractors. 15,000 visitors were predicted but there were 50,000 in the first year.

4 show houses were decorated and furnished in different styles, 1850s until 1970s. Two houses are available as holiday lets through National Trust Holidays (a kitchenette and tiny bathrooms have been installed in these 1930s-style houses. Two houses are used as offices.

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Sheila thanked Derek for a fascinating talk which complemented the tour of the Back-to-Backs which some SHS members had made in May.

The next SHS meeting would be on Tuesday 24 September when the book on Stoneleigh School will be launched.

Note about help needed: 8 people had volunteered to help at the Duck Race, for which much thanks! Sheila will be in touch with those volunteers nearer the date to confirm time + location where their help is required. If anyone else can help on Heritage Weekend and/or at the Leamington History Fair, it would be very much appreciated. (Three people have come forward for each, so far...) Please let Sheila know if you haven’t done so already. The more helpers, the less onerous the task!

Margaret Wallis, July 2019