

## **Stoneleigh History Society**

### **Minutes of the meeting held on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February 2024**

1. Sheila welcomed everyone to the meeting. There were 29 members present and 6 apologies.
2. There were a number of notices: Planning permission has been granted for the erection of a blue plaque in memory of E L Fardon. It will be installed at the Forge sometime during the summer. Secondly Sheila asked members to think about 'What is the History Society for? Why do members turn up each month? What do they get out of their membership?' She suggested that one meeting in the future could be devoted to members' contributions. Finally, she thanked Derek for putting the photographs he took at Princethorpe College on to the screen for members to look at while the meeting assembled.
3. Sheila then gave her presentation 'Who's ever heard of Hamstall?'

#### **'Who's ever heard of Hamstall?'**

Sheila explained that during lockdown she had received an email from a woman living in Hamstall Ridware, called Helen Sharp. Her family name was Bostock and they had links to Stoneleigh. Her relations had farmed at Westwood Heath and Gibbett Hill and she had attended Westwood Heath School and St. Joseph's Convent before marrying and moving to Hamstall Ridware.

Sheila and Helen stayed in touch sharing information and in 2022 Sheila visited Hamstall Ridware. An interesting connection between Stoneleigh, Ashow and Hamstall gradually unfolded.

As a result of what she has uncovered she will be giving a presentation to the local history group at the 'Shoulder of Mutton Inn' in Hamstall next week.

This is a tale of two counties, Warwickshire and Staffordshire, and the Leigh family.

Prior to the dissolution of the monasteries Stoneleigh Abbey was occupied by a Cistercian order of monks. They had originally moved from Staffordshire to Stoneleigh.

In 1561 Sir Rowland Hill purchased the Abbey for his ward Sir Thomas Leigh and a mansion was built on the site of the former monastic buildings. Leigh's family and descendants remained at Stoneleigh Abbey until 1993.

Sir Thomas established a portfolio of properties across England including Adlestrop and Longborough in Gloucestershire, Stoneleigh in Warwickshire and Hamstall Ridware in Staffordshire.

Hamstall Ridware is a village and civil parish in the Lichfield district of Staffordshire. The church of St. Michael and All Angels was built in the early Norman period and a brick watch tower built next to the Hall by the Cotton family who had taken over the manor from the de Ridwares in the 1370s.

In 1601 the ownership of Hamstall Hall passed to Sir Thomas Leigh of Stoneleigh Abbey and for a while it was his principal residence.

Sir Thomas Leigh died in 1626 and his grandson Thomas inherited the estates. He was created the first Baron Leigh in 1643 after his support for the Royalist cause in the Civil War.

The link with Hamstall continued with Baron Leigh being married in St Michael and All Angel's Church in 1642 and all the male children being baptised there. The female children were baptised in Leighton Buzzard where there was a family connection through Thomas's mother Ursula Hoddesdon. Baptismal records of the children can still be found in the church at Hamstall.

When Sheila visited in 2022, she found evidence of many more links with Stoneleigh and Ashow. In the church she discovered that the Reverend Thomas Allestree, rector of Hamstall from 1695 to 1715 had previously been rector at Ashow from 1663 to 1676. Later, in Ashow church she found a list of names of people who held office there and later appeared at Hamstall. As the centuries progressed Sheila found a wealth of information showing how the Leigh family bestowed 'gifts' of rector posts at Hamstall.

Following the death of Edward Leigh, 5<sup>th</sup> Baron in 1786, the estates passed to the Gloucestershire Leighs of Adlestrop. James Henry Leigh was to inherit but as he was a minor his uncle the Reverend Thomas Leigh of Adlestrop Rectory travelled to Stoneleigh to lay claim to his nephews inheritance.

The Reverend Thomas Leigh (1734 – 1813) had married Jane Walker; they had 6 children one of whom was Cassandra. She married the Reverend George Austen in Bath in 1764. They had eight children, and Jane was the second youngest. Following the death of George Austen in 1805 the family were very poor, and the Reverend Thomas Leigh invited them to stay with him in Adlestrop.

A year later in 1806, Mary Leigh, the 5<sup>th</sup> Baron's older sister and guardian died. She was the last of the Warwickshire Leighs and so the Reverend Thomas Leigh was required to move to Stoneleigh Abbey.

The link with Stoneleigh Abbey and Jane Austen begins here, as the Reverend Leigh suggested that the women of the Austen family accompany him.

They appear to have enjoyed their time in Warwickshire and it's believed that Stoneleigh Abbey is the inspiration for 'Mansfield Park'. In that novel Jane describes a house and it's landscape as being designed by Humphrey Repton.

Jane Austen, her mother and sisters also stayed at Hamstall Ridware. The Reverend Edward Cooper, Jane's cousin was rector there from 1799 – 1833. Jane Austen's views of the rector's family at Hamstall seem to be reflected in her writing as it is thought that Mr. Collins in 'Pride and Prejudice' took many of his character traits from the Reverend Cooper!

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed the links between the Leighs and Hamstall continued. Chandos Leigh, who became Baron Leigh after the barony was revived in 1839, married Margaret Willes. Her younger brother Edward became rector of Hamstall, and later Chandos' brother-in-law Henry Pitt Cholmondeley took over from Edward as rector.

The links go on: Cordelia Leigh had a good friend called Alice Skipworth and her father was called Humberstone Skipworth. After holding a number of posts in the church he finally ended up at Hamstall Ridware as rector!

The remaining link to note is that of the Reverend Coussmaker. He was vicar of Westwood Heath Church and then rector at Hamstall Ridware!

When the Leighs no longer wished to live at the Hall in Hamstall it was rented out to tenant farmers and in the 1920s the estate was sold.

The Church of St Michael and All Angels continues as a parish church but the East wing of the Hall which they Leighs had used was pulled down and the remainder of the Hall became a working farm. The ruins of the brick-built watchtower remain.

No doubt a lot more information will emerge after Sheila's presentation to the History Society in Hamstall next week.

4. Members had refreshments provided by our kind volunteers.
5. The meeting closed at 9.15pm. Our next meeting will be on Tuesday the 26<sup>th</sup> of March. First there will be the AGM and then Richard Churchley will give a talk entitled 'From Edburga to Elvis'.

NB Sheila would like to thank members very much for allowing her to rehearse on them! She will use the experience to refine her talk for next week.

SMC/29/2/24

Sheila has very kindly pointed out a few errors and additions to the minutes I sent out yesterday.

1. The fictitious property in 'Mansfield Park' was Sotherton Court.
2. Planning permission for the blue plaque to be erected at the Forge has not yet been approved.
3. Henry Pitt Cholmondeley was Chandos Leigh's son in law not brother-in-law.
4. It was Mary Dormer Harris, not Jane Austen who likened the Reverend Thomas Allestree to Mr Collins in 'Pride and Prejudice'.
5. In Stoneleigh Abbey there is a 'scold's bridle' which was previously at Hamstall.

This was an illegal device used in medieval times to silence people, often women. Part of the device constrained the tongue, hence the saying 'Hold your tongue'!

6. Finally, there are some Thomas Leigh mix-ups which Sheila will clarify if requested.

There we have it, no' howlers', but as a history society it's important to get the facts straight, as much as one can!

