

## **Minutes of the Stoneleigh History Society meeting held on the 29<sup>th</sup> of October at Stoneleigh Village Hall.**

1. There were 19 members present and 4 visitors. 11 apologies were received.
2. Sheila Woolf welcomed everyone to the meeting and gave out the following notices:
  - a. Phil Jones had brought a collecting tin and Remembrance poppies for sale.
  - b. Adrian Clarke had brought the Fardon blue plaque for all to see prior to its' installation, hopefully in December.
  - c. Sheila will be presenting her talk on sugar, slavery and Stoneleigh's connection at our November meeting.
  - d. In Kenilworth, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November Sheila will be giving her talk on the men of Stoneleigh who took part WW1. SHS members are welcome to attend.
  - e. Sarah Ballinger gave early notice of the Christmas Quiz and Social which she and Sue Crofts have planned. Everything is ready to go, and you do not need to be in a team before the event. All will happen on the night of the 17<sup>th</sup> of December!
3. Sheila introduced the speakers for the evening – Gill Mills and Bob Bristow from the **Friends of the War Memorial Park, Coventry.**

**Gill** began by giving a background to the establishment of the Park in 1921.

- It was to commemorate the loss of 2,600 men and one woman from Coventry during the war of 1914 – 1918.
- The initial area of the park was funded by public subscription. Later 62 acres of Stivichall Common were added.
- The Park was opened in July 1921 and involved a procession from 'the Barracks' to the park, the invitation of 400 widows to attend and a large group of children taking part in a concert of music.
- In 1923 it was decided that the entrance to the park should be near the Grove. Stone from the medieval city wall were used as a base for the entrance pillars.
- The War Memorial itself was designed by local man John Gray. It was made of concrete, clad with Portland stone. Inside the monument he built a 'Chamber of Silence' which had a white marble floor.
- On the 8<sup>th</sup> of October 1927 Earl Haig inaugurated the monument. Amongst those present was Corporal A. Hutt who was Coventry's first recipient of the Victoria Cross.
- In the 1930s a number of Pavilions were added throughout the park. These were in the Art Deco style and were also made of concrete, clad with Portland stone.
- During WW2 anti-aircraft guns and an air raid shelter were placed in the park.
- In 1947 commemorative trees and plaques began to appear in the park.
- In the 1950s a children's play area was provided. A bandstand was briefly a feature but was later moved to Naul's Mill Park. There was a small railway which ran along the Kenilworth Road perimeter. In 1963 the German Ambassador to the UK opened a 'Garden of Peace' close to the Sports Pavilion.

- In the 1970s an aviary was built near the Leamington Road perimeter. This was not maintained very well and was repositioned in 2019.
- In 2006 **The Friends of the War Memorial Park** were established. This group has been pivotal in pushing for improvements to the Park, working with the local council to obtain funding for items such as the new Visitor Centre, the outdoor fitness course, the Japanese garden and the sensory garden.
- The Friends meet on the first Sunday of the month to do litter picking. Their general meetings are held once a month during the summer and bi-monthly in the winter. Currently their membership numbers around 50 people. New members are always welcome!
- In 2013 the work of refurbishing the Park was completed. The work had cost £2.8 million which was provided by the Heritage and BIG lottery funds.
- English Heritage gave the Park Grade 2 listed status and the entrance gates as Grade 2+
- In July 2014 Prince William visited to declare the Park a 'Centenary Field' – the first park in the country to be designated as such.

**Bob Bristow** is a member of the Western Front Association and described his work in surveying the trees and plaques in the Park. In 2019 Western Power donated £16,000 for the purchase of new plaques. Over time many trees had died, leaving just the plaques while in some areas the plaques had disappeared. His job has involved consulting records, planting replacement trees and replacing their plaques. Only one plaque commemorates the death of a woman in combat in WW2. She was a wren, Barbara J Masters who died in Egypt in 1945.

The **Friends of the War Memorial Park** have produced a book giving more details of those who have a commemorative tree and plaque. This has replaced the Remembrance Tree Trail which involved placing a laminated sheet on each of the trees whose plaques had been researched.

Though the work to maintain the War Memorial Park as a place of remembrance continues, the need for it to provide an area for recreation and enjoyment for the people of Coventry remains. Today the Park Run, held on a Saturday morning is extremely popular with up to 600 participating – one of the largest in the country.

N.B. Further research following the talk has shown that Corporal Arthur Hutt was born in Earlsdon in 1889. He was awarded the VC for his brave actions during the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battle of Ypres at Passchendaele on October the 4<sup>th</sup> 1917. In 1965 a Cornish granite memorial was erected in his memory in the Park.

4. Sheila thanked Gill and Bob for their very interesting presentation. She invited the audience to ask any questions they might have. Further discussions with Gill and Bob took place during a break for refreshment.
5. The next meeting will take place on Tuesday the 26<sup>th</sup> of November at 7.30 pm.
6. Thanks to Sarah Ballinger for providing the refreshments.
7. Meeting closed at 21.20

SMC/SHS/24.10.31