

## Stoneleigh History Society AGM Tuesday March 22<sup>nd</sup> 2016

### Chairman's Report

Above all, 2015 proved to be the “year of the Australian” as we commemorated the bicentenary of the birth of Sir Henry Parkes. This necessitated a number of complex arrangements which were masterminded by our secretary, Margaret Wallis, who ensured that no stone was left unturned and as a result our festivities went without a hitch. A special year requires special recording, and so I make no apology for doing so in detail.

As noted in the 2015 Report, although we had no official **January** meeting we met in the Club to share family history discoveries and tips, and on that occasion we were joined by Jane Reynolds and her partner Dennis who were here from Australia to research Parkes themselves. They were given a tour of the abbey and the village and attended church on Sunday. It was in **May** however that our commemorations began: at our meeting that month Sheila Woolf and Ken Wallis gave a presentation on Parkes' family history, early life and achievements in Australia, and immediately afterwards our display was assembled in the Leigh Chapel for the summer season. Material for this had been researched and written by Sheila Woolf, Margaret and Ken Wallis and Pam Baker, and was as usual beautifully designed for display by Pam Baker.

On **May 27<sup>th</sup>**, Parkes' birthday, many members of the Society welcomed the Australian High Commissioner, the Hon. Alexander Downer, to Stoneleigh, accompanied by the Lord Mayor of Coventry, Michael Hammon. The Chairman gave them a tour of Stoneleigh Abbey and they then came to Stoneleigh Church to view the display, to take a peep behind the curtain at the newly-installed memorial to Parkes, followed by a drive to the university, passing along the way Tocil House where the Parkes family farmed. After tea at Moat House Cottage, Parkes' birthplace, the finale of the day was a Civic dinner at Coventry's St Mary's Hall. The Lord Mayor had kindly invited the Society's committee, and representatives from Stoneleigh Church, to what was a splendid evening.

We were, then, all set for Stoneleigh's own celebrations in **July**, marking the bicentenary of Parkes' baptism at Stoneleigh Church. We welcomed, from Sydney, Ian Thom, Parkes' great-great-grandson, and his wife Valerie, to unveil the memorial and to read from Parkes' own Bible as part of the service. The church was full, and included members of the Melbourne Reds cricket team who were on tour in the UK. The service itself was a moving one and was conducted brilliantly by the Rev Sharon Goble, with readings and tributes given by Anthony Bianco, Ken Wallis, Sheila Woolf and Ciara Hancox. Afterwards, in glorious sunshine, we were treated to a marvellous array of canapés served by members of the church. On this occasion, as in May, it was good to see the Australian flag flying from Robin Bussell's flagpole, and to marvel at the fantastic flower displays provided by the church flower team. We should like to record our gratitude, too, to Stoneleigh residents Rory O'Connor, who arranged and affixed the memorial plaque, and Keith Walker, who provided and installed the curtains; both gentlemen gave their services freely.

After lunch the celebrations continued with our own “Ashes” cricket match at the Abbey, between Stoneleigh Cricket Club and the Melbourne Reds, an occasion masterminded by Paul Smith. Although the weather deteriorated into a thunderstorm, the match was enjoyed by all, breaking for a super tea in the Orangery before culminating in an honourable draw. The day was capped off with a barbecue at the Club, kindly provided by the social committee there.

These events were marked by two double-page spreads in the local Coventry newspaper, but also, thanks to visiting Australian journalist, Gideon Haigh, a large article in *The Times* and *The Australian*, spreading the word globally about Stoneleigh History Society!

Since July, a booklet written by Sheila Woolf and Margaret and Ken Wallis about Parkes' life has sold out. Our display has since been spiral bound into a commemorative book. Pam Baker made an excellent short film of our Parkes events. Both during and subsequent to their

visit, the Thoms were generous with gifts to the Society. In January this year Margaret and Ken Wallis travelled to the town of Parkes, Australia, taking a copy of our display for the Historical Society there, meeting up again with the Thoms in Sydney and touring some of the landmarks associated with Parkes.

### **Other meetings**

We have of course continued to hold meetings each month on a variety of local topics. In **October** Pete James spoke about the history of fulling with particular reference to Stoneleigh; in **November** David Vaughan and Sheila Woolf presented their researches into the Leigh Peerage Case; in **February 2016** our guest Peter Walters spoke about the restoration of the Earlsdon Fountain, a project pursued by Avril Newey for many years; this was accompanied by pictures provided by Pete James. In addition there was a full house in **February** for Shirley Ball's talk on "Old Stoneleigh" which raised £1000 for the church.

In **September** Lisa Reay introduced members to the next big project for the Society - the Churchyard Project. This will be a long-term activity, to record all the gravestones and to research "those who lie beneath". A further presentation will be given in **April 2016** before displaying current findings. Lisa's intention is to discover as much as possible about "our neighbours passed" but in practical terms every grave is being photographed by Derek Robinson and the churchyard mapped by Rob Orland. Both Derek and Rob have been made honorary members of the Society in recognition of the enormous amount of work they have already put in. Rob has created a database for our website which will ultimately be fully searchable. Several members have already participated in this project but more would be welcomed.

### **Occasions**

In **April** our annual outing was to Arbury Hall near Nuneaton, the home of Viscount Daventry, for a private visit on a glorious Spring day. The trip was greatly enjoyed by those who came, although it was a pity that more members did not sign up. Our **Christmas** social was held very successfully at the Village Hall.

### **Outreach and publications**

In addition to those publications already mentioned, a history of Stoneleigh Agriculture has been produced by David Brooks; this is a wide-ranging review from its beginnings to the present day. David hopes to present his findings to members at a meeting later in 2016.

Partnership between the Society, Stoneleigh Church and Stoneleigh Abbey continues to grow. We are grateful for the continuing ability to hold our displays in the Leigh Chapel, and have helped in the preparation of a leaflet for the church as well as a banner screen about it for display in the Abbey's chapel. In pursuit of Heritage Lottery funding for the church we have worked together on fulfilling some of their Community remit. SHS members helped at the first Heritage Open Weekend in **September**, guiding visitors around Stoneleigh Church and have helped in writing funding applications. The Churchyard Project will further strengthen our connection.

Sheila Woolf continues to give Stoneleigh-related talks throughout Warwickshire, as does Pete James. Avril Newey's Great War project, Sing Us Your Dreams, received lottery funding in 2015 and continues to thrive.

We have had stalls at the Village Duck Race in **July** and at the Food Market in **September**; we have also participated in a WW1 day at St John's Museum, Warwick, publicising our researches. In **September**, too, as part of the Warwickshire Local History Society's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations held at Stoneleigh Abbey, Sheila Woolf gave tours for the 120+ visitors!

In **July** we were approached by the Oxford Film and TV Company, researching a programme to be screened on BBC4 and called *Home from Home*. This will feature Stoneleigh as an example of half-timbered houses in the context of an Estate. Many members of the society (and villagers in general) have given a great deal of their time over many months to assist, and we await the outcome with interest.

Also in the summer, the current editor of *Pevsner's Warwickshire* visited the village and abbey several times in order to update knowledge of both for the new edition to be published in 2016. The chairman was able to assist with local knowledge and in return the editor gave freely of his documentary researches.

Much assistance continues to be given to those researching their family history.

### **Resources**

In preparing our Parkes display we bid successfully for a grant for more boards from the Warwick Rural East Community Forum. In addition we also received, free, a refurbished laptop as a result of a bid to Warwickshire County Council; this is now available on loan to any member. Our website was, disastrously, hacked in the winter, which led to our moving to a different web host. Rob Orland has been an invaluable help in re-establishing and updating the site.

### **Conclusion**

In January 2016 we celebrated five years in existence and it is astonishing to review all that we have achieved in so short a time. At the time of writing there are 49 members. We regularly welcome guests at meetings. The Chairman would like to thank everyone who has contributed of their time, energy and expertise in helping the Society to thrive, in particular those members of the Committee who are always on hand with practical help and advice. *In accordance with our constitution, in 2017 elections will have to be held for most positions on the Committee. It's not too early for members to consider whether they are able to assist in the work of the Society by serving in this way.*

*Sheila Woolf*

*March 2016*