

Stoneleigh History Society AGM Tuesday March 31st 2015

Chairman's Report

Activities

2014 proved to be an exceptionally busy year for the Society, when research, meetings, visits and displays all combined successfully. At our **March** meeting, following the AGM, Nat Alcock gave a most informative talk about the Weaver's House in Coventry, revealing the architectural and social background of the property and its inhabitants. We were pleased to be able to follow up the talk with a visit to the house in **May**. The centenary of the Great War was initially marked in **April** by a talk from Sheila Woolf called "When Stoneleigh Went to War", describing the village in 1914 and examining the experiences of the villagers during the war years. This was the first occasion of many during the year which marked the centenary. A few weeks after the talk, the Society was involved in the church's commemorations, when a moving tribute was given via the Stoneleigh Male Voice Choir's singing as well as through readings, poetry and pictures. These events were a prelude to our biggest event of the year, our **June** meeting's grand display of the research carried out into the lives of all the men named on the village hall roll of honour as having served in the Great War. We were grateful for a significant grant from the Warwick East Community Forum which enabled us to buy several additional display boards. Once again the Choir participated and we welcomed relatives of those named as well as seeing a magnificent short film assembled by Pam Baker of the documents and photographs found by our researchers. This body of research is perhaps the largest to date carried out by members of the Society and resulted not only in a large vertical display but also an extensive compendium of ring-bind folders containing appropriate documentation. This latter was compiled by Lisa Reay and was a true labour of love.

Thanks to the church, our exhibition continued until late autumn in the Leigh Chapel, after which a large bound book containing the vertical display pages was constructed. During village events such as the Duck Race in **July** as well as through our participation in "Leamington Looks Back" and a Christmas Fair in **November** at Stoneleigh Abbey, our researches reached a wide audience and it was pleasing to hear favourable comments from other historical societies; indeed one experienced local historian commented that ours was the best Centenary display he had seen in Warwickshire.

The Centenary was also marked by three local radio interviews given by Sheila Woolf, two of which were about the contribution of Cordelia Leigh. It seems fitting that Stoneleigh Abbey, keen to forge stronger links with Stoneleigh village, has from the beginning of the 2015 season set up a room dedicated to Cordelia for visitors to see, as well as having reconstructed a bridge in the grounds on which she was photographed in her youth.

As usual we had no meetings in July or August but our autumn programme began in **September** with a most unusual and interesting meeting, held in the church and organised by Margaret Wallis, recalling the work of the Stoneleigh Stitches who created the magnificent pew cushions. Some of the original Stitches were able to tell us, either in person or in writing, of their experiences in contributing to the project, and it is hoped that the Society can help in the production of a commemorative booklet on their work, as the result of a generous legacy from founder Stitches and former Society member Eileen

Burman. In **October** we were visited by Hazel Fryer whose talk on Repton's designs at Stoneleigh Abbey gave us a privileged insight into her expert knowledge of the subject. In **November** Sheila Woolf shared her research into the history of Sheila Rensch's family, which could trace its ancestry in an unbroken line through her mother to the very earliest of Stoneleigh's parish registers in 1633. These researches had been shared with Sheila Rensch who had given her permission for the Society to see them and it was sad that Sheila herself was unable to join us. At **Christmas**, as usual, we had no official meeting, but an informal gathering at the Club. In **January** some members met at the Club to learn from each other about resources and methods in family history research. This was a most successful event and will be repeated. On this occasion we also welcomed Australian researchers who were following the Stoneleigh origins of Sir Henry Parkes. After this winter break we resumed our formal meetings in **February** with two interesting presentations: one from Pete James on the Kenilworth Comb-making industry, and one from Lisa Reay on the history of the Worrall family, several of whose members joined us for the evening.

It was with great sadness that we learnt in **March** of the death of member Beverley Mills.

Visits

In addition to the **April** visit to the Weaver's House, on several occasions members have taken the opportunity to attend meetings of the WLHS to which we are affiliated, and in particular enjoyed the **December** outing to Baddesley Clinton – with another talk from Nat Alcock! The house was beautifully dressed for Christmas and the event ended with a sumptuous tea. Several members also visited Stoneleigh Abbey in **July** to see the launch of the exhibition about the Leigh family's contribution to the Great War. As usual many independent visits have been made to local record offices and archives.

Resources:

We now hold a significant number of photographs, CDs and documents. A perennial problem is how to house these securely, in addition to those which are on display. A database has now been constructed which will enable members to see at a glance what we hold, and which will facilitate the borrowing of items.

We have now purchased our own data projector for use at meetings.

We were grateful to Sheila Skinner for the donation of her late grandmother's desk, which had belonged to Stoneleigh School. After the desk was restored it is now housed, together with Sunday School Prize books which were a previous gift to the Society, at Stoneleigh Abbey in the "Cordelia Leigh area", showing the links between abbey and village and giving visitors information about the village and the Society. We are grateful to the management of Stoneleigh Abbey for helping in this way.

Research

Individual members continue research in many areas. Assistance has frequently been given to family historians who have contacted us with queries regarding Stoneleigh ancestors. In the second half of the year much research has focussed on Sir Henry Parkes in anticipation of the celebration of his bi-centenary in the summer. We also look forward

to further, informal meetings in which Society members can help others with family history research.

Outreach/Publications:

Members are pleased to be helping the church in its continued outreach work and in submitting appropriate paperwork for grant funding. It is hoped that the Society can help in future in giving guided tours of the church.

In addition to the physical display of material we now have our own website www.stoneleighhistorysociety.org.uk where several of our publications can be read online and details of meetings are given. We also have a Facebook page and we are linked to the website *Britain Remembers: the First World War Project Map* – a resource created by *Who Do You Think You Are?* Magazine. Our own website is linked to *Our Warwickshire*, a new umbrella site created by the WCRO onto which anyone can upload their researches. Information about men from Ashow who served in the Great War was requested for the new Ashow website following a Remembrance Day presentation at the church.

In July the Society Petitioned, in writing, against HS2 Ltd's plans adjacent to the medieval Stare Bridge and in person to the Select Committee in January. We have also registered concerns about potential construction traffic causing damage to the village's Listed Buildings and in particular to Stoneleigh Bridge.

Nat Alcock added to his many publications in July 2014 with the paperback edition of *Medieval Peasant Houses in Midland England* and later this year sees his paper in *West Country Households 1500-1700*.

The Chairman has continued to give talks on aspects of our history to many local groups, and contributed a chapter on the war effort of the Leigh family to *Aspects of the Great War in Coventry and Warwickshire* as well as an article in the Newsletter of the Northern Ceramic Society concerning porcelain painting done by young women of the Leigh family.

Using photographs from submissions by villagers, the Society published the first-ever "Stoneleigh calendar" for 2015, which sold extremely well and swelled our coffers considerably, enabling the purchase of a commemorative plaque to Sir Henry Parkes to be unveiled in July.

Conclusion

We have a strong current membership of 41 and frequently welcome guests to our meetings. There is much enthusiasm for future projects as we enter the fifth year of our existence. The Chairman would like to thank all members for their continued support, and in particular all those who have helped in whatever way in 2014. Committee members have worked tirelessly on behalf of the Society and the Chairman would like to extend special thanks to them for their good-humoured support!

***Sheila Woolf,
March 2015***