

Stoneleigh History Society AGM Tuesday March 24th, 2026

Chairman's Report

Meetings

The core activity of most societies is its meetings programme, and almost all our meetings in 2025 were given by members themselves – an interesting experiment which proved to be a great success – so much so that we are repeating it in 2026. The brief was to speak either about a story of local interest or about a place or family story important to the individual speaker. We had begun this in February 2025, and in **March** we were scheduled to hear from Mel Bianco; her talk was postponed however, and so Sheila Woolf spoke on "*An Arabian Odyssey - from Flintshire to the Land of the Pharaohs*", the story of her ancestor's adventures in Egypt and the Sudan in the 1800s. Sheila spoke in **April**, too, reflecting upon our celebrations of the bicentenary of the birth of Sir Henry Parkes. It hardly seemed like ten years, and it was good to revisit Parkes' story and the photographs of our commemorations.

Mel Bianco gave us her postponed talk at the **May** meeting: *A personal interpretation of the Cistercian Abbey at Stoneleigh*. Mel had spent many years investigating the architecture of the abbey and the lives of its inhabitants, and it was an impressive and lively evening.

Quentin Compton-Bishop spoke to us in **June**, on: *From Smyrna to Stoneleigh - my Levantine Heritage*. Quentin described the history of the Levantines and traced his family origins back to the Ottoman Empire. A fascinating and unusual story.

After our summer break we returned in **September** with Lisa Reay and Sheila Woolf presenting *Tales from the Churchyard*. This was a look back at the society's churchyard project which began in 2015, investigating the stories of "those who came before us" - this time focussing on some surprisingly eminent people, Abbey servants, "notorious" 19th century burials and our oldest tombs.

In **October** Sue Crofts gave us *North Lodge - The House and its inhabitants from 1841-2025*. Sue's research into the house's beginnings and continued use were both thorough and beautifully illustrated, finishing with descriptions of the work which she and her husband have done to make the house a lovely home fit for the 21st century.

Finally in 2025 we invited an outside speaker, and his talk in **November** did not disappoint. Chris Kirby of the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers Museum (Royal Warwickshires) spoke on *Hannah Snell, an 18th century Female Icon* Her extraordinary story included how, disguised as a man, she signed up to the Warwickshire Sixth of Foot and fought in the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745. Chris gave us a story which combined fact and myth, resulting in a most entertaining evening.

Our Christmas Social was another success, organised efficiently and imaginatively by Sue Crofts and Sarah Ballinger. The evening was enjoyed by all, but an embargo was put on the chairman's participation in next year's quiz!

Feeling refreshed after the Christmas break, we reassembled in 2026. Such had been the popularity of members' talks in 2025 that several more had volunteered their services for the coming year, and so in **January** we began with a double bill. First Adrian Clarke asked the question "*Who put the "Lanch" into the "Lanchester Polytechnic?"*" - looking at the life and achievements of Dr Fred Lanchester 1868-1946. Secondly we watched a DVD of the local "*Campaign to Stop Expansion of the Airport*" in the first decade of the 21st century, preceded by a short commentary from Nora Blagburn. Both presentations gave us food for thought in different ways: few of us knew much about the man whose name was given to the polytechnic, and the DVD gave a salutary reminder of "people power" in our recent history.

The year finished in **February** with "*The brass band conductor and his defiant daughter*", a tale of working-class life in West Yorkshire at the beginning of the 20th century, was told to us by Sue Crofts – a great illustration of family history secrets. Lastly, "*Coventry Whitefriars, from religious foundation to workhouse*", was a tour de force of research given by Margaret Moorhouse.

Several more talks will be given during the course of 2026 by members, and it is really good to see the depth of knowledge, enthusiasm and interest emanating from a small local history group such as ours. Long may it continue!

Events and Exhibitions

Perhaps the 2025 occasion most of us will remember was our celebration of VE Day80, on May 10th in Stoneleigh Church. This required a huge amount of research into the lives of those from the two villages of Stoneleigh and Ashow who sadly lost their lives, but also into the experience of life in general here at home during the war. The resulting show, in collaboration with Stoneleigh Male Voice Choir, was both informative and moving. To the many who rehearsed, read, or helped in a variety of ways, a big thank you. We also had a stall at the village Blossom Festival, which drew much interest from visitors, and it would be good to encourage more local people to engage with our work.

In tandem with the show, a VE/VJ Day exhibition in the Leigh Chapel of Stoneleigh Church was available from May till November 2025, accompanied by a commemorative album. For much of the research for our exhibition, as ever, we owe a great debt of gratitude to Lisa Reay, and to Pam Baker for her expertise in creating the final display's appearance.

All our previous displays are kept in the Chapel, along with parish registers, research projects, books and booklets. Although our website is naturally the "go to" place for our

work, it's good to have actual paperwork and objects in the Chapel for the casual visitor to see, and it's been pleasing to read many complimentary entries in our visitors' book.

Website

We continue to receive enquiries and compliments via the website from researchers around the world, and following our WW2 investigations it was particularly good to help some who were interested in their forebears who had been here during the war. Several booklets have recently been added to our website, which demonstrates the breadth of our research. Another addition to the website has been the *Stoneleigh and Ashow News* – as far back as 2010. One can now read online our current village magazine but also check back on what was happening in previous years – a useful document of recent history. Similarly, we now have all our meetings' minutes added to the annual programmes so that anyone can see what our various talks have been about. We owe Rob Orland a huge debt of gratitude for all his time and expertise in helping to make our website one of the best in Warwickshire (in my opinion!) If you are not one of the hitherto **3 million visitors** to the site, do have a look: www.stoneleighhistorysociety.org.uk

Outings/outside talks

Our affiliation to the Warwickshire Local History Society enables us to attend their talks free of charge, and several of us have taken advantage of this. Similarly, under their aegis some have enjoyed trips in 2025/6 to Winterbourne House, Arbury Hall, The Lady Katherine Leveson Foundation and Ragley Hall.

As we celebrate fifteen years of existence as a society, we have much to be proud of, and many members to thank along the way. My fellow Officer, Sue Crofts, and the rest of the committee are always on hand with support and advice. Meetings would be much less enjoyable without Sarah Ballinger's efficient organisation of refreshments! It is very gratifying that, while many local history societies are losing members, our numbers, in the mid-thirties, remain pretty constant. We are nevertheless considering ways to reach out to the local community to increase our membership. Thank you all for your loyalty...and spread the word!

Sheila Woolf March 2026.