

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - March 2018

### AGM and A Stroll in the Park

Wargrave Local History Society's March meeting began with the AGM, when the past year was reviewed, a new committee elected, and details of the 2018-19 programme given.

Following the formal part of the evening, Society Chairman Peter Halman took members for "A stroll in the park: the story of England's royal, private and public parks" - an illustrated presentation on their history.

Ornamental gardens dated back those in Babylon in 800BC, but the making of parks in this country began with the Normans. Originally their purpose was utilitarian - as a source of food, especially meat from cattle, pigs, hares etc. There were 31 parks listed at the time of the Domesday survey in 1087, but this had grown to around 1900 by 1350. Hunting was highly rationalised, much in the way chivalry was. By the time of the Tudors, it was a time of relative peace and stability and prosperity, so more park building took place, using ideas from Italy and France. Henry VIII had an interest in gardens, and when he acquired Hampton Court, he set out to create something to rival that of Francois I. The French liked to use topiary and formal geometrical patterns, and so Henry used similar designs in order to create a feeling of grandeur around the house. When Elizabeth I came to the throne, she inherited some 200 parks. In the Jacobean era, the designs featured more terraces and cascades etc, but in the Civil War period there was no park building, and much royal property was sold off.

It was after this that country house parks were developed, and although hunting still took place, the purpose was moving more to being a place for entertainment and social gathering. In due course a less formal and rigid style developed, which became known as the English style - being simpler, it was easier and less costly to maintain. An example of this was laid out by Humphrey Repton (a contemporary of Capability Brown) for Francis Dashwood at West Wycombe in the early 18th century. Here the Palladian house was surrounded by decorative features, rather than a formal garden, so that Dashwood could entertain 'in style'. In London, Hyde Park was enjoyed by the local community, who could walk or ride in the park (or engage in illegal duelling), but in general in cities there were few open spaces for the general population to enjoy. In 1750, only 20% of the population (of about 6 million) lived in towns, but by 1850 around half of the country's 18 million people lived in towns, and this rose further, so that in 1911 about 80% of the 36 million inhabitants of the country lived in towns - often in crowded and insanitary conditions.

There were some public open spaces, such as Cremorne Gardens in Chelsea, where tournaments, fireworks, and balloon ascents could be enjoyed - as well as a lot of drinking. In Green Park, the Prince Regent had a timber Temple of Concord built - unfortunately, fireworks at the opening ceremony caused the whole place to burn down - the crown cheering, as they thought it was part of the entertainment spectacle!

The late 8th and early 19th centuries were a time of turmoil and revolution across Europe - every country except Britain being affected in some way or another. The Government was fearful that a similar situation might arise here, and one of the results was the setting up of a Select Committee on Public Walks in 1833. It is as a result of that that public parks began to develop, and Peter illustrated a number of examples from across the country. The working classes were beginning to enjoy increased recreation time, and this

helped the park movement gain momentum from the 1840s onwards. The first bank holidays (albeit without pay for the un-skilled or semi-skilled workers) came in 1871. Due to the American Civil War, the supply of raw cotton dried up, and so unemployed mill workers in the north of England were used to construct new public parks. In London, in 1851, there had been the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park, housed in Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace. After the event, the entire structure was dismantled and re-assembled at Sydenham, in South London as a winter garden and people's palace, where it reopened in 1854. A suitable 'setting' for this building, however, needed to be created, and Joseph Paxton set about designing it - complete with fountains and concrete sculptures of extinct animals. It established his reputation as the foremost garden designer of his day. Public parks provided for a wide range of activities, from riding and archery, a gymnasium, or all the excitement of a fun fair, as well as less formal activities. Within many there were buildings put up. Although some were to cater for maintenance of the park, others would be grand entrance lodges, or botanical gardens, or other ways to show 'civic pride'. Most such buildings were based on designs to be found elsewhere - maybe in the grand country estates - but one type of building was created for the parks - the bandstand. Colourful flower beds and carpet bedding became popular, along with floral clocks. At the end of the season, plants would be sold off, so the working classes could create their own miniature version.

However, the urban park began to fall into decline. During WW2, iron gates and railings were removed for the war effort - resulting in more frequent acts of vandalism. Local government reorganisation led to budget cuts, whilst the creation of country parks meant that people used the urban parks less often.

The trend has been reversed with the coming of the Heritage Lottery Fund. Successful bids have enabled town parks to be restored to their former glory. Locally, for example, the Forbury Gardens in Reading had been formed as a public park in 1856. Part was a pleasure garden, part an open space. Within it are the Maiwand Lion and the memorial to Trooper Potts, as well as a bandstand and a fountain. With the aid of an HLF grant, the restoration work has managed to recreate the original feel of the garden - even the ornamental flower beds being arranged to the same design as the originals.

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The next meeting will be on Tuesday, April 10th, when we will welcome Clive Williams - formerly Berkshire County Council's County Secretary - who will recount some of the history of Shire Hall- and the way it worked, and then on Tuesday May 8th, Dr Margaret Simons will share some of her discoveries about Reading in World War 1