

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - November 2018

### The History of Old Windsor.

Dr David Lewis revealed some of the history of Old Windsor at the November meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society. He considered why it was of interest, and what was known of its history - and equally, what of its 'popular history' was fiction. The modern road signs approaching Old Windsor, for example, declare it to be 'the home of Saxon Kings' - except that Saxon kings travelled around the country, and did not have a fixed 'home', whilst there is only evidence on one king having been to Old Windsor - Edward the Confessor.

The modern area of Old Windsor dates from the 1930s, but the original Saxon settlement was further east, on the area known as Ham Common and lies on the south side of a loop in the River Thames. Almost all the other local settlements in the Saxon era, such as Dorney, Boveney and Eton were on the north side, the possible exception being 'Orton', (meaning 'town on the river bank'), which may have been on the high ground where Windsor Castle now stands. Old Windsor had faded by the 13th century, so that virtually nothing existed apart from the church, which by then stood surrounded by fields. Little direct documentary evidence exists, and so unravelling the history has depended on 'piecing together fragments of information from other sources'.

David noted that it might have been of importance as being where the boundaries of 4 dioceses met. It was also close to the tidal limit of the River Thames (although the exact point where that was is difficult to identify since the building of the lock at Teddington), and lay just beyond the jurisdiction of the Lord Mayor of London, at Staines. It was on the boundary of hunting grounds, and near the ancient assembly site of Runnymede (meaning 'place where councils are held'), which was "overlooked by the ancestors", having Coopers Hill to the south. Being at a boundary point, it became a place in medieval times to discuss problems - most notably the Magna Carta in 1215. This indirect evidence suggests that the area of Old Windsor was an important one.

David then considered the derivation of the name 'Old Windsor'. Until 1974, the area around the castle was known as 'New Windsor'. That derives from "Windlesora", Old Windsor's early name. The word is of Saxon origin, 'ora' meaning 'on a river bank'. "Windles" is thought to come from the old Norse word meaning 'to wind' or 'a winch'. A winch by the river would suggest a place where goods were brought from the river to the land, and there was a network of roads in the area. However, a winch would only be of use if there was already a community of people there to work it. It does not, however, seem to have been associated with the large abbeys in the region, such as Chertsey or Abingdon. The manor was divided into New Windsor and Windlesora in the 12th century, and the word 'Old' added to the latter in the 13th century, although by then the area was ploughed over and virtually nothing existed of the settlement.

So why was there a settlement there in the first place? The geology is possibly a clue. The area to the south west is very dense London clay, became Windsor Great Park. It is not suitable for growing crops, attempts to do so in war-time being unsuccessful. There is a small chalk outcrop, in effect a continuation of the Chilterns, on which Windsor Castle was later built. The lower land is alluvium, which is exceptionally fertile, well-watered, and so valuable agricultural land. A recent survey of Thames-side and liable to flood revealed that the site of the Saxon buildings, such as the church, is on an area of higher ground (as happens at Dorney and Boveney), so maybe the site was picked as being 'dry' in good farming land. Archaeology carried out in the 1950s (but not fully reported) suggests that there had been a short-

lived vertical mill there, and also buildings made with stone, tiles, and glass, all exceptionally rare at the time, as well as 'high status' pottery. No evidence of a royal hall was found, nor coinage, which would have been expected if it was a trading place.

The site was obscure, watery, had no defensive capability, and was generally inhospitable. It must have been 'of some importance', however, as 3 documents exist recording its use by Edward the Confessor. It was a base for hunting, (which was a favourite occupation for him) and convenient to reach from Westminster. Although it had minimal use in the pre-conquest era, several important events were held there. After the Normans arrived, the Manor was reacquired at considerable expense by William I from Westminster Abbey (to whom Edward had given it). In the year 1070, the Synod of the English Church was held there. This was a very important gathering of bishops etc, the Pope sending his nuncio for the occasion. Clearly it was seen as 'somewhere important' for so many notable people to turn up to. Windlesora was also regularly used for the Whitsun "Crown Wearings" until 1107. This tradition was one where the populace would come and 'sing the praises' of their sovereign. Gloucester had been used for such for a while, but otherwise they were held in Winchester or Westminster - but Windlesora had neither a cathedral nor a royal palace for such events, so - presumably - there was another reason for it to be chosen.

The Domesday survey of 1086 also gives few clues. Windlesora was the second place recorded (after Wallingford) in Berkshire, but is estimated to have had a population of only 300-500, was valued at £15, and had no mill, whilst the church is also not mentioned (although a priest is). It had 95 hage - larger plots of land - which was very unusual. It was, however, a small settlement, with no royal complex.

The name 'Windsor' is of 11th century origin, yet the settlement is somewhat older. Whatever the actual 'reason' why a village developed there, and became a 'place of importance', remains a mystery still to be discovered.

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The next meeting will be the Society's Christmas Party, on Tuesday, December 11th, whilst on Tuesday, January 8th, local historian and author Audrey Curtis will recount the history of Twyford and Ruscombe.