

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - January 2016

Hennerton Hexagon



HENNERTON.

There was a capacity audience at this meeting to hear Phil Davis give a most interesting presentation entitled "Hennerton Hexagon", in which he related the stories of 6 people who had been associated with the house there, and how what they had done in the past had influenced the future.

He began with Zachary Allnutt, who lived from 1775 - 1856, who farmed 40 acres of the land for lavender - distillation of the lavender to produce perfume and essential oil being done on site. Zachary was the son of Henry Allnutt, a Henley solicitor who was also the clerk to the Thames Navigation Commissioners. Henry

had set about installing pound locks in place of the hazardous old flash locks on the River Thames from Sonning to Marlow. The result was that the river was brought under control, so making navigation much safer - and making it easier to transport goods - such as the products of the lavender farm. In due course, Zachary succeeded his father, both as a solicitor and as clerk to the Thames Navigation Commissioners. He also became a recognised navigation engineer, ensuring that further pound locks were installed down the Thames as far as Teddington. In that way, the River Thames was opened up to all year round navigation for the first time. As the clerk, Zachary had to be the "advocate for the river" - promoting its use, and protecting its interests. Many of the places along the river were 'inland ports', including Henley, Wargrave and Sonning - and they feared 'loss of trade', as had happened to Reading when the River Kennet had been made navigable by the canal company up to Newbury. When a proposal was made for a direct canal from Reading to Maidenhead, by-passing Wargrave, Henley and Marlow, Zachary was able to oppose the canal company's arguments and so the canal was never built - although he was less successful in arguing the case against I K Brunel for a railway over a similar route.

By 1815, Park Place belonged to the 1st Earl of Malmesbury, who decided in 1815 to separate the southern end of the estate, and then put it up for sale. The Earl had been a close friend of Napoleon, and losses on the stock market may have triggered the sale - those who had backed the 'winning side' had made large gains, and, fearing a financial crash, were looking to invest in property. One such, a stockbroker who had been one of the first members of the newly formed Stock Exchange, was Charles Frederick Johnson, who was also a master of the Mercers Company. He bought this part of the Earl of Malmesbury's land, for £21,000 on July 17th 1815 - just 29 days after the Battle of Waterloo - and engaged the architect C H Latham to "design him a house at Hennerton" - which appears to be the first mention of the name in the Wargrave area. The plans were shown at the Royal Academy exhibition in 1817 - the house having a traditional English character to the front, with a classical Italian style veranda to the rear. C F Johnson became involved with the district of Wargrave, for example being one of those who administered the Poor Law and the workhouse in the parish, until he left the area in the late 1840s.

The house was advertised for sale in 1848, and the purchaser was John William Rhodes (born in 1795), who was a big supporter of industry in West Yorkshire, and even after moving to Berkshire, remained a magistrate in Yorkshire, and on the electoral roll for Leeds. He also supported the "Society for Diffusion of Useful Knowledge" financially. This organisation provided education for workers in the Yorkshire textile industry. J W Rhodes was very forward thinking in matters of education, for in the 1851 census his youngest daughter was not living at home, but at a school in Leamington - most unusual at that time for a girl to be educated that way. Some 8 years before the passing of the 1870 Education Act (which ensured basic education for all children), J W Rhodes was also involved in providing education in Wargrave, for he was the largest contributor (25%) to the cost of building the present Robert Piggott Junior school (on land provided by Lord Braybrooke). Sadly, he did not really see the benefits of his generosity, as he died less than a year after it opened.

Two other members of the Rhodes family featured in Phil's talk - Herbert Edward was the first of J W Rhodes' children to be born at Hennerton. Educated at Eton and Cambridge, where he was a rowing blue, he also was a good cricketer, playing for Yorkshire at a time when the team was known as "ten drunks and a parson". In 1889, the Dover Express reported the 'strange death of the Yorkshire cricketer, Herbert Rhodes - he had been drinking heavily on the train from London, and had apparently fallen from a balcony, the inquest returning a verdict of 'misadventure'. William Wilfred Rhodes was one of J W Rhodes' grandsons, who became a lawyer and also a Major in the army. Unfortunately, a very traumatic experience in 1916 led to him being discharged in 1917 - he was considered unfit for "service at home or abroad, or office work, or any post necessitating mental strain".

NB The Rhodes family who lived at Hennerton were not related to Cecil Rhodes, the explorer and statesman, after whom the Rhodes Scholarships at Oxford University are named, nor to Sir Campbell Rhodes, the businessman who lived in Crazies Hill, nor to Wilfred Rhodes, the renowned Yorkshire and England cricketer.

The last of the six Hennerton people was an American serviceman who had been there during WW2. All that was known was that he was called Caruso, came from Akron, Ohio, and carved his name on the Hennerton gatepost, framed by the symbol of a heart. Phil started to check the 8.5 million US Army enlistment records! He also contacted the local paper in Ohio, and made contact with a school librarian - whose mother's maiden name was Caruso. She was able to find her grandfather's scrapbooks, which not only contained a picture taken at Hennerton, but had text in the same - unusual - style as that found on the post. In civilian life, as a metal worker, he had often made copper bracelets for friends - always with the shape of a heart on them. Phil had identified the very soldier who had been at Hennerton pre D-Day!!

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, February 9th, when Ann Griffin will tell us about The Revd James Austen Leigh of Scarletts at Kiln Green - "Large, Dark and Handsome" - and the building of St Peter's Church in Knowl Hill. That will be followed on Tuesday March 8th by the Society's Annual General Meeting, when details of the programme for the coming year will be announced.