

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - October 2022

The Medieval Hospital of St Peter, Windsor - Dr David Lewis

For the Wargrave Local History Society's October meeting, Dr David Lewis gave an interesting and enlightening presentation on the Medieval Hospital of St Peter, Windsor, along with that of St Mary Magdalene in Reading, and the hermitage of St Leonard at Windsor. The latter was of sufficient importance for Lancelot to be mentioned as going there in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, which later became the first book printed by Caxton, in 1485.

David, who has made a special study of the history of the town in the medieval period, began by explaining some of the problems in researching that era. Although many records would have been created, when the present Guildhall was built in 1691, it was somewhat smaller than its predecessor. At the time, there seemed to be no need to keep them, and so, with the exception of one small account book covering 1510 – 1560, documents from before about 1650 were burnt. Fortunately, as a royal town, there are some details in national records, such as the Pipe Rolls and Close Rolls, whilst Eton College had property deeds that dating from that period. They were, however, written in shorthand medieval Latin. Letters had different shapes to those in use now, whilst a mark would indicate a missing word in the text, so reading the 3000 or so of these was not a simple task, but they did reveal names, places, occupations, members of the town council, etc, Windsor being one of very few towns for which such documents survive.



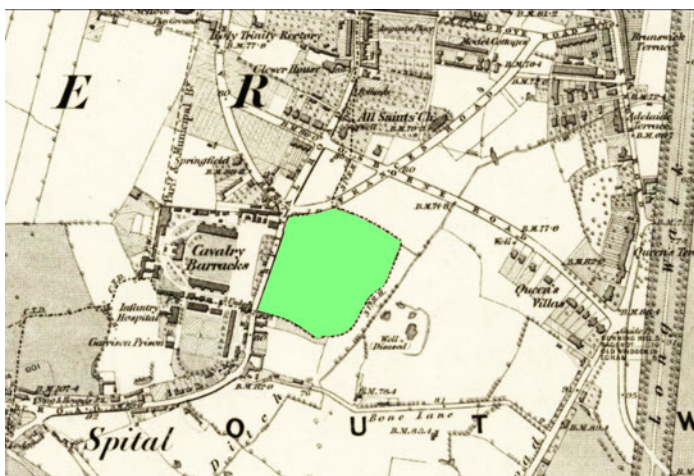
David explained that the term 'hospital' came from the Latin word *hospes* – meaning to host, from which comes the French *hospi(t)ium* (and hotel or hospitality). They might otherwise be referred to as Leper or Lazar (from the Biblical Lazarus) houses. This did not mean that the people there suffered from leprosy, but it was a generic term for skin diseases. They were a common feature of many towns – Norwich, for example, having seven of them. There was a standard form and location for them – a large hall with an adjoining chapel, situated in gardens on the town boundary, so as to surround it with prayer, alongside a main road where donors might pass. In the case of Windsor, it was by the then main road to Reading (where there was the similar hospital of St Mary Magdalene) before it passed through Windsor Forest.

The purpose of these hospitals was to care for the old, infirm or sick, and they were run on quasi monastic lines, as a ‘power-house of prayer’, where the inmates were required to pray for the founder and the donors. They catered for people without family support, but that did not necessarily mean they were poor – some wealthier people would arrange to give half of their assets to the hospital when they died. There was a limited number of places – typically 12 – and probably a long waiting list for those wishing to enter. There would be a ceremony of purification, both spiritual and physical – the latter making use of an open bath called a stew, when the person would agree to the conditions and rules of the order running the hospital – including to be chaste. As well as participating in religious matters, they would grow food, tend the cattle and other livestock, brew ale and attend the local market. Each inmate had an allocation of 4 gallons of ale per day – it being an important source, along with bread, of calories. The quality and quantity of their food was probably better than that of the general population,

They also had to maintain the buildings and beg for alms, whilst an important task was the growing of medicinal herbs and plants. At that time medical care was based on the humoral theory. It was believed that people caught illness through one of several causes – the miasmas of foul air, something they saw, or bad food. In much the same way as the elements of earth, air, dry and fire and water had to be kept in balance in the natural world, it was thought necessary to balance the blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile, corresponding to heat, wet, cold and dry. If, for example, someone had a fever, and so the skin was redder, they would be bled to reduce the effect.

Windsor had its origins in the 7th century, as Windlesora. In about 1150, Henry II set about reconstruction of Windsor Castle in stone, and then in 1160 made a parallel investment in the town. That included the endowment of the St Leonards hermitage in 1165, the foundation of the hospital in 1169, and the building in 1170 of Windsor bridge – important as one of very few along the Thames then, Windsor being at the cross-roads of major roads in the pre-Victorian era. These developments led to the prosperity of the town. The hospital was possibly the first in Berkshire – mention is made of one at Reading before that, but the building was not completed until 1175 – but did not have the dedication to St Peter at that time.

St Peter is first mentioned in the early 13th century. Edward the Confessor had given New Windsor to Westminster Abbey, but William I had paid the monks to have it back. The monks were hoping to have Edward the Confessor made into a saint, and also wanted to repossess Edward’s lands, including New Windsor. As part of their campaign, they claimed many miracles had occurred using the holy water from a stream associated with the hermitage, and it seems that the dedication of Westminster Abbey to St Peter was then linked to the site at Windsor.



Not a lot was happening otherwise there at that time, but by the middle of the century Henry III re-founded the hospital, giving it a link to Broomhall Abbey, building a new chapel and wardens lodgings, providing timber for a cloister, 100 birds and 10 cattle, ¼ of the town’s fee farm, and providing a new stew. The buildings were then laid out in a characteristic U shape. Parish boundaries normally followed the road pattern, but Henry II had given New Windsor to the abbey at Waltham Holy Cross. In order to bring control of the hospital closer, the boundary was arranged to put the hospital into Clewer parish, and the vicar of Clewer was put in charge in 1251.

However, by 1396 there is recorded as being a “sale of diverse books, vestments, chalis ornaments and other utensils, charters, writings and other muniments”. In 1412, an inquiry was held by the Lord of Clewer, the escheator and the sheriff of Berkshire into the ‘wastes, destruction and dilapidations by certain wardens’, and the hospital closed and the property reverted to the crown. It was then granted to Eton College by Henry VI in 1443 as part of the foundation endowment. The chapel remained in use in 1530 as a chapel of ease, but 8 years later the chapel was closed and the site became Spittal Chapel Farm, which remained in use into the

19th century, although Eton College sold some of the land for housing in 1829, and a mixture of housing and industrial development occurred later in the century.

It remained essentially the same until 2011, when the site was to be redeveloped. This would provide a unique opportunity to carry out an archaeological investigation, but the local authority claimed they did not know where the hospital site was, despite the location being clearly shown on old maps opposite the horse barracks, which still exist. Although some test pits were dug, they were in the wrong place – it becoming evident that the council did not want to know about the site history, and that the developer wanted to get on with their building project. The area, however, is still called Spital, and the former Spital Road linking it to the town centre is now called St Leonard's Road.
