

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - April 2011

### The Old Bath Road

Tony King gave us one of his presentations, this time taking us on a journey along the historic Old Bath Road from London as far as Reading.

Cecil Roberts was a journalist, and also a poet, playwright, publisher and author. He had lived at Pilgrim Cottage, near the Golden Ball at Assendon, just north of Henley - and a chance comment by the innkeeper that "200 years ago you could have seen the Oxford Defiance, the Birmingham Tantivy or the Reading Telegraph coaches pass by" prompted Cecil Roberts, who travelled from Henley to London via the A4, to find out more. He then wrote *And So to Bath* - published in 1940, and running to at 17 editions. Tony had carried out further research, adding suitable illustrations.

Until the mid 19th century, the only means of travel on the roads was by horse. It was not a comfortable journey - Queen Elizabeth complaining that after a coach journey she 'could not sit for a week'. Frequent breaks were needed - giving rise to many roadside inns - and of course there was always the risk of attack by highwaymen. The route westwards would either be along the old Roman road, via Chiswick, Staines and Silchester, or the 'Old Bath Road' via Colnbrook, Maidenhead, Reading and Newbury. There was a choice of the 'high road' or the 'low road' - the latter although quicker, was susceptible to flooding. Even with the faster coaches that would 'fly' from London to Bath, the journey took 3 days - many of the coaches keeping going through the night - in all kinds of weather. Inside passengers would suffer from an awful stench, whilst those outside had to endure the rain and snow - in 1812, passengers on the Bath coach actually froze to death.

Progress came in 1784, when a Bath businessman, John Palmer had been granted a Royal Patent for theatres outside London. This included the Theatre Royal in Bristol, and he needed speedy transport for the cast, props and scenery - and realised that his improved system could also work to speed up the post. The trial run on August 2nd 1784 left Bath at 4am, reaching London at 8pm the same day. Palmer travelled over 5000 miles in just 4 months in 1785, establishing the new mail routes, and by the 1820s there were some 700 long distance coaches on the roads.

The Old Bath Road route began at the Bell Savage inn in London's Fleet Street, and the first stop by Piccadilly Circus. From there, the coach would head out of London, and pass Hyde Park, where there was a toll house. A licence was granted enabling the collection of tolls - the licensee paying £7000 for the lease at Hyde Park. The toll house was moved in 1721, to the present site of the Ritz hotel. Even in those days, Hyde Park Corner was a congested place - as there was no regulation of traffic until the Highways Act of 1835. Horse drawn carriages were to be driven on the left hand side of the road - so that the driver's whip would not be entangled in overgrown hedges, and he would be better placed in the event of an attack on his coach.

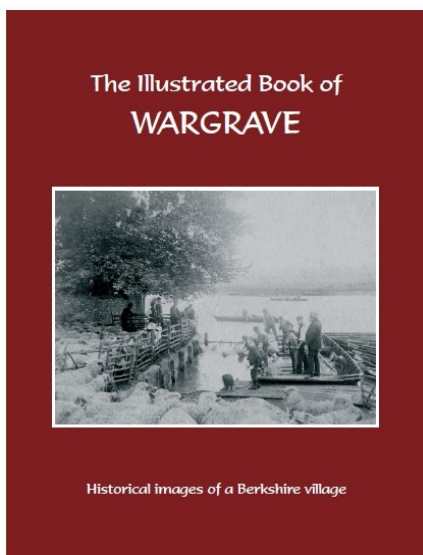
London was described as a 'city of 100 gates', and the next one was at Kensington, where the toll house was erected in 1717. Further out was Chiswick House - where Lord Burlington started a trend for 'smaller' houses - by which was meant those with less than 40 bedrooms, and so known as 'Toy Houses'. Beyond lay Brentford - a Georgian village that lies across the Thames from Kew - described as 'on one side is the Garden of Eden, and on the other side, HELL' - for Brentford had a lurid reputation as a place full of prostitutes. It has, however, a long history, being where in 54BC Julius Caesar crossed the Thames into London, or in 780 AD King Offa had the Council of Brentford to negotiate with the Church.

Onwards through Isleworth (where the painter Van Gogh had been an assistant preacher) and Osterley, Hounslow would be reached. Here there was stabling for over 2000 horses, as it was the first stage for changing horses - 300 coaches a day passing through. Many travellers would not then cross Hounslow Heath at night, as they hoped to avoid the activities of highwaymen - smartly dressed men who would know where and when the coaches would call, and which ships they would meet ( and hence what cargo they might be carrying). Cranford, on the Heath, was where in 1784 - two canons were placed five miles apart - to be the base line from which all Ordnance Survey mapping is derived.

Through Colnbrook, where the Ostrich inn, on the site of an old hospice, was where dignitaries would meet to prepare themselves before attending at Windsor Castle, travellers would then pass Sir William Herschel's telescope at Slough - used to discover Saturn and Uranus, before entering Maidenhead, and then across Maidenhead Thicket. This was another favoured spot for highwaymen - to the extent that the vicar of Hurley was paid danger money to preach in Maidenhead. The route through Hare Hatch and Twyford would bring the coaches to Reading - in via London Road to The George, and out up Castle Hill, "And So to Bath".

Tony recounted tales of many of the houses that had stood along side the Old Bath Road - and their interesting occupants. He also explained how the building of Brunel's Great Western Railway - opened through to Bath in 1841 - brought about the rapid decline of the mail coaches on our roads

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Our next meeting is on Tuesday, May 10th, when Gerry Westall, who was a long term employee of Suttons Seeds, will be talking about the work that went on there. In June the Society will be taking part in the Wargrave Village Festival, with Historic Village Walks (now sold out).

The Society's new book, The Illustrated Book of Wargrave, will also be published during the Village Festival.

Then on Tuesday, July 5th, the Society will visit Stonor House, the home of the Camoys family for 850 years, which is a fascinating collection of medieval buildings behind a Georgian facade.