

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - June 2024

Wargrave Village Festival

The first of the Wargrave Local History Society's events for this year's Wargrave Village Festival was the ever-popular *Historic Village Walk*. Despite the weather forecasts in the days beforehand threatening heavy rain, the conditions were ideal for the two groups to have a gentle afternoon stroll from Mill Green around the church and High Street area. As is now usual, this was a sell-out occasion, with people of all ages - from under 6 months to over 80 - hearing about people and events from over 900 years of Wargrave's past, and the places associated with them.



WLHS Chairman, Peter Halman, recalling the history of past Wargrave residents commemorated in the churchyard. Photograph courtesy of Tim Hodges

A little over a week later, and the society hosted *An Evening with Simon Williams*, in the Woodclyffe Hall. Simon is probably best known for his wide range of work on television, from *Upstairs Downstairs* to *Doctor Who*, or on radio in *The Archers* - as well as acclaimed performances on the stage - and he has also written several books and a play. He delighted the audience with stories from the world of acting, and people working in it. He did observe that sometimes an event organiser might say "to be opened by a mystery guest", which might prompt the response "that'll be Simon again"! - although Simon was clearly the reason why people had come for the evening.

Simon's father, Hugh, had been an actor before him, although Simon knew little more than that his father came home late at night, smelling of Leichner grease paint, whisky and Craven A. However, visitors to the Williams' home included other performers such as John Mills, Laurence Olivier and Jack Hawkins, and so Simon got to like "actors". At this stage, Simon did little acting himself - whilst at school he had been due to play the part of Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but by the time of the production he had grown 3 inches and his voice has broken, so he was pleased "to be relieved of this duty". However, he told his father that "when I grow up, I want to be an actor" - to which the reply came "you'll have to choose, son - you can't do both". His school reports were what his father described as "pretty grim" - but his father's reviews at the time were "pretty bad too", so could not pay for Simon to go to drama school, so he began in weekly rep. Simon recalled the advice of several actors on how to explore the nature of a character, or how to feel the appropriate emotions of a part. Simon had several amusing tales to tell about actors needing a prompt - from being under a table in his first play (for which the actress concerned gave him 10/- at the end of the week) to another where the prompt was asked 'where are we?' - and the answer came "page 53", or another where the cast all stopped - they know the line, but not who said it !!.

Simon soon caught up with what he might have learnt at drama school when he was told of thee casting for a project about an Edwardian family and their servants downstairs. This was to become London Weekend Television's *Upstairs Downstairs*, in which Simon was cast as Captain James Bellamy. Simon made many

life-long friends, including Gordon Jackson, who gave him tips on how to better deliver a line. The programme was transmitted live to about 15 million viewers. It did have its negative side, though, as if he was seen in the street or the supermarket, people believed that Simon was a cad, like the character he played. In one instance his shopping trolley was rammed by another shopper who told him “that’ll teach you, Capt. Bellamy, for treating your wife like that”. If he was attending an event with other cast members, the actors who played the ‘upstairs’ characters were treated as ‘upper class’, whereas other actors playing the servants were treated as lower class people. He also recalled that in some households the programme was watched ‘upstairs’ on a colour set, but the servants watched it in black and white”! The programme was all shot in the studio, and there were no stairs from ‘downstairs’ to ‘upstairs’, as all were on the same level.

Simon also told the audience of the problems with playing love scenes - “tough work but someone has to do it” - in the days before an ‘intimacy co-ordinator’ would arrange such things. They were always very tricky things to play, Simon dispelling the legend that actors might be promiscuous people.



Simon Williams Photograph courtesy of Tim Hodges

Being a professional actor was not an easy way to earn a living, as 85% of them would be unemployed at a time, and many lived below the poverty line, taking on jobs such as house cleaning in between acting roles. They liked to have feedback about their work, and although 95% of people were decent human beings, there was a minority who were the critics who found it easier to write a bad review than a good one.

More recently, Simon has played the part of Justin Elliott in *The Archers* on radio - another unpleasant character he said. The recordings took place in a fairly small room, with one kitchen area’ for example, representing the that part of every house in the programme, and sound effects being added to create the illusion of being on a farm, or food being cooked in a frying pan.

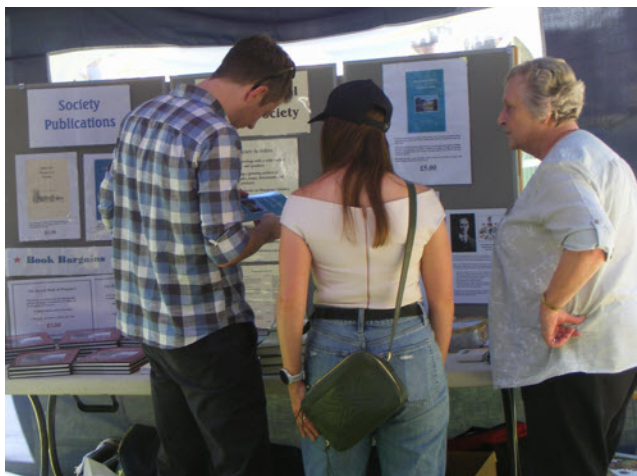
Amongst Simon’s other work is *Posting Letters to the Moon* - (theatrical readings of letters between Celia Johnson and Peter Fleming sent from the family run farm at Nettlebed), a wide range of work on the stage, and writing plays - one of which, *Playing the Ghost*, had been performed in the Woodclyffe Hall by the Wargrave Theatre.

After the interval, Simon answered a wide range of questions from the audience - from advice to young actors to the difficulties of playing a corpse, or his most challenging role (playing Joe Biden in *47th* at the Old Vic) and all illustrated with entertaining anecdotes about himself, other actors, and the profession. He engaged with the audience who had a most enjoyable evening.

A few days later, and the society was at the *Wargrave Village Festival Fete* on Mill Green. The themes for this year’s display of historic photographs of the village were the church; benefactress Harriette Cooke Smith and her Woodclyffe gifts to the village; and - as the village



festival itself has ‘a history’, having begun in 1975 - a section about that, including Wargrave Local History Society’s part in it over very many years. (*right*) .



Visitors were also able to buy books about Wargrave’s history at special Village Festival bargain prices! (*above*).

For more information about the society, visit our website at <https://www.wargravehistory.org.uk>

