

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - October 1999

### Town Museum to Heritage Centre

Brian Boulter, a vice-president of the Berkshire Local History Association, was the guest for the Wargrave Local History Society's October meeting.

Brian came to Maidenhead about 35 years ago, and wanting to know more about the area, joined the Maidenhead Archaeological and History Society. This had - then - been going for about 10 years, and amongst its aims were to revive the Maidenhead Town Museum. It seemed, however, that nothing was known about the museum. The items it contained were said to be able to be seen in the library, but they were not there. It had been at the library, but all had been packed up in boxes and no-one knew where they went. All very strange!

The earliest collection, made by W B Farr, President of the Maidenhead Field Club and Antiquarian Society, had been offered following his death in 1890 to the town for a museum. However, nothing happened, so when Henry Arrowsmith's collection was similarly left to the town in 1904, the *Maidenhead Advertiser* commented that it would be 'unthinkable to repeat the mistakes of the Farr collection'. The benefactor Andrew Carnegie had enabled a library to be built in Maidenhead, and so there was somewhere to put the 'wonderful and varied collection'. The Carnegie Trust, however, would not permit this, so the museum rented the local Auction Rooms. Local councillors did not seem keen on the museum, declaring that there was nothing of such interest as to go and see it twice, or anyone interested in the past could go to London, whilst others thought if it was so valuable, then it should be sold. It was a mish-mash of a collection - part of a tree under which Wellington stood at Waterloo and a 'beautiful collection of seaweeds' for example. To this collection were added others, including some Roman antiquities, and a collection of Cookham Dean material with related detailed notebooks. But, the museum was still paying rent, so a second approach was made to the Carnegie trustees. This time they agreed, provided that the items could be moved out if the space was needed for books.

Gradually, the museum collection grew, and by the 1930's space was short. Then young Peter Daryl Williams Hunt became involved. Eventually, he went to London University, and when called up for the army was sent to North Africa, where he spent much of his time visiting historic sites. He was the only curator Maidenhead Museum ever had, working when he was on leave to catalogue the collection. He later was sent to the far east, and whilst in Malaya studied the local tribes, writing a text book on them for the British Army. He then married a native girl, and had a son, but after - it is said - tripping over a log in the jungle, Peter died of poisoning.

Meanwhile, in Maidenhead the library needed the space, so the collection moved to the Art School. When that was taken over by the County, the collection moved yet again. In due course, some of the objects went to other museums, some on the local tip, whilst the local items were stored in boxes under Maidenhead Town Hall stage. This is where Brian found them, and removed the items of most interest about 3 months before the storage area was flooded.

A display was then put on in Maidenhead Library in 1986, and for a while were on view at the Rectlinger Museum, near the river. When that closed, storage was made available in a barn at Shottesbrooke, until that was damaged by fire, and so a further move took place. At about this time, the Maidenhead Civic Society, which had been set up after the war, and put on exhibitions from time to time, approached the Society, to suggest a jointly run Heritage Centre to house the museum. Initially, a lease was taken on an empty office building, and displays of Maidenhead from stone age to computer age were put on. After 18 months, the building was sold, so - into boxes for storage again!!

About this time, the National Lottery started, and so an approach was made for funding. After 12 months preparing the bid, and 9 waiting, the answer came 'maybe'. Consultants were appointed to look into the plans. Eventually, the plan was turned down - but the consultants liked what they saw had been going on in the mean time. This was a series of exhibitions mounted, as part of the fund raising - in a vacant unit in the Nicholson Centre. The consultants were able to advise the Heritage Centre on how best to adapt a shop, to take the heritage to the people. The Heritage Centre changes the displays every 6 weeks, to which admission is free, and the collections are still growing - this year the Air Transport Auxiliary (who, as ferry pilots, were based at White Waltham in WW2) collection was obtained, so there is always something new to see. The Heritage Centre still do not have a permanent home, however, so there remains the possibility of it all going back into storage once more.

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