

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - October 2014

Windsor Castle - The 1992 Fire and Reconstruction

At the October meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society, Barbara Askew gave a most interesting illustrated talk about the Windsor Fire Restoration, following the 1992 disaster. She reminded us that Windsor Castle is known all over the world. It is the oldest continuously inhabited castle, having been used by our monarchs for 900 years. It is Her Majesty the Queen's 'weekend home', where she spends her private weekends, and has tended in recent years to spend even more time there. Some Investitures have also been held there since 2009.

The most dramatic event during her reign was the Great Fire of Windsor. It started on November 20th 1992, being discovered at 11.30am. To help explain what happened, Barbara used a plan of the building showing that there are three main areas to the Castle. The Lower Ward includes St George's Chapel, and the familiar Round Tower is by the Middle Ward. Beyond this to the east is the Upper Ward, including an area known as the Quadrangle, and it was within that section that the fire occurred. In the middle of the quadrangle is a large grassed area, below which is a big water tank. Around this were a number of fire hydrants - but as they looked unsightly, they had been covered with gravel, and so difficult for the firefighters to locate.

The Private Chapel was situated in the north east corner of the quadrangle, and by the layout of the building - in particular the Grand Corridor (containing many of the Queen's finest possessions) that links the Private Apartments to the State Apartments - the fire would be able to travel in all directions from there. It was in the Private Chapel that the fire began. At the time, work was in progress to rewire the building and install new fire detection and fire prevention equipment (as a precaution following the 1986 fire at Hampton Court). All the furniture and roof space had been cleared for the work to be done - and the new fire detectors were due to be brought into use in 10 days time.

There were two spot lights mounted above the curtains in the Private Chapel. It was the habit that anyone going in to the room would turn on all the light switches at once. It was suggested that the painting conservators had rested some of the large paintings against the wall and so pushed the curtains towards the spot lights, although they said that they would never do such a thing. What-ever the initial cause, when the chief picture restorer, Viola Pemberton-Pigott, returned after her coffee break she asked "Can you smell burning?" and could see a flame above the curtains. In fact there was much more than could be seen, as the fire had been burning in the roof space for some time. The bubble wrap on the paintings was beginning to catch fire, so Viola told those around her to "get the paintings out" and get the fire brigade. The Windsor Castle brigade were there, by 11.40. Meanwhile the Berkshire brigade were summoned - although it took the Windsor appliance until 11.55 to get there, as it had been out at Ascot. The Slough engine was first to arrive at 11.44. In the event, fire engines were sent not only from Berkshire but all the surrounding counties.

By mid-day, news of the fire had gone around the world. Major Eastwood telephoned every removal company in the area for their help in getting the treasures removed to safely, using a previously prepared plan, and a police cordon set up to prevent looting. Troops from the local barracks were brought in to help - all the books in the Royal Library being passed out by a human chain. They were all got away, and nothing was missing - except a bust of Louis XIV and Marie Antoinette (which the removal man had forgotten was in the corner of his van). Prince Andrew was at the Castle, and helped with the salvage operation and spoke to the press about the disaster. The Chief Fire Officer decided that some rooms would have to be sacrificed in order to protect the rest of the building, notably the Grand Corridor which George

IV had furnished, and firebreaks were also put in place. The Queen arrived at 3pm - it was her 45th wedding anniversary and she had been at Buckingham Palace. She was briefed by Major Eastwood. The fire was channelled into the Brunswick Tower, where the temperature rose to over 800°C. The fire burned for 15 hours. It had taken 200 firefighters and 1½ million gallons of water to put the fire out. Nine principal rooms and 100 other rooms had been damaged the damage being at the rate of £38,000 per minute (it being said that the water caused more damage than the fire) - but nobody had died as a result. One large picture had burned - Prince Andrew had offered to go into the building to cut it out of its frame, but was not allowed to, a Pugin sideboard was destroyed, and the Willis organ in the Private Chapel totally gone. The first task then was to put a roof over the building to protect it. Once the firemen had gone, senior Castle staff were concerned about the glass pantry - much to the horror of the structural engineers when they later found out - staff went to recover the glasses - not one was broken (but the shelves had a layer of soot all round where the glasses had been). An archaeological sift of all the material in St Georges Hall was done, some 7,000 dustbins of salvage being taken to the mushroom farm for checking. The Agra carpet - the largest seamless carpet anywhere - had been carried out by 50 soldiers and taken to the Riding School, along with many paintings, to dry out. The advice of a specialist was to leave the building for 10 years to dry out. The Royal family were horrified - they wanted it back in use much sooner.

The question was as to how it should be restored. The 'Ruinists' (including the vice president of the Royal Institute of British Architects) wanted a break with the past; the 'Replicationists' wanted to restore everything to exactly how it was pre-fire; others wanted to have a "Modern Design". A competition for plans to rebuild St George's Hall included one from Fisher & Hopps to leave a space in the roof aligned with the main runway at Heathrow to see the planes flying above, whilst another by Tom McPhillips suggested installing a 120' long moving water tank alongside the window wall, with a crown on the top of the water - "The Royal Wave". The Duke of Edinburgh wrote "Some Thoughts on the Restoration of Windsor Castle", and English Heritage gave advice. To make an 'authentic restoration' would cost £41m; to make an 'equivalent restoration' (ie using modern materials) about £32m; and a 'contemporary redevelopment' around £29m. The Royal Household was very much against the latter, whilst the first option was too expensive. Previous rebuildings, for George III, Charles II and George IV all went seriously over budget (George IV was allowed £150,000 and spent £1,000,000) - an over spend was not to be allowed this time. None of the contractors made any money out of it - the work being done for its prestige value. The work was paid for by the Royal family - not a penny coming from the taxpayer - partly funded by opening Buckingham Palace to visitors.

The work revealed some previously unknown aspects of the Castle's history. Panels removed, for example, in the kitchen showed that it was medieval, not 19th century - with roof timbers dated to 1337, probably the oldest surviving kitchen anywhere, although the lantern roof put in by Sir Jeffry Wyattville for George IV was destroyed. The undercroft area of St George's Hall had been partitioned into offices, but was given a new floor and made into a large usable space. The Grand Reception Room was restored to its original 1820s condition, rather than the dingy pre-fire state. It - like much else - was a complex restoration French boiserie panels were made of clay over the wood, then covered in gold leaf and burnished - an expensive process. The principle of 'equivalent restoration' was summed up by Ian Constantinides, (who restored the plasterwork) - "As long as it looks like what it looked like it don't matter if it ain't what it was like". Although not to the standards of George IV, half a million pieces of gold leaf were used, with a magnificent result. The Queen Mother was particularly concerned about 'the trophies' - panels on doors carved in limewood, covered in clay, then gold leaf and burnished. Having been pinned to the doors, they had not been removed, and painstaking work was needed to restore to their former glory.

St George's Hall before the fire was said to be featureless. It had been redesigned by Sir Jeffry Wyattville, who Prince Charles called 'the greatest ever vandal at Windsor' - it being known as 'the railway carriage'. The new roof would have corbels further down the wall, so it had a steeper pitch. Although the architect's preference was a modern glued timber technique, the decision was made to make the first green oak hammer beam roof since the middle ages. Specialist Roger Capps personally chose the timber from Herefordshire for its straight grain, and the beams were made using traditional tools such as a scratch



stock. Many of the joints did not work as designed, and the changes had not been estimated for. Eventually the beams were lifted into place – but what ‘worked on paper’ did not work on site – the survey of the hall was 4” out, so the beams did not fit. All this added expense meant Roger was likely to go out of business, but to pay him on a different basis to other contractors could not be done. Eventually the architects managed to persuade the authorities that the changes in design had to be paid for, and the roof – Prince Charles describing it as ‘absolutely stunning’ - was completed in just under a year.

The Private Chapel had been destroyed, and Giles Downes was the architect who designed a replacement. He had never done a gothic design before. Laminated oak frames on tulip wood bases were to be made by Henry Venables of Stafford. They were almost complete, when a spark caused a fire that destroyed the lot. Eventually, the building was completed, creating a lantern inspired by that of Ely Cathedral, with a small private chapel next to it. A stained glass window was designed by the Duke of Edinburgh, and includes panels showing the fire, the firemen tackling the blaze, and a salvage worker removing a portrait of Wyattville, with a panoramic view of the Castle above.

The originally planned completion date was brought forwards, so that it could be marked the Queen’s 50th wedding anniversary – just 5 years since the fire had happened.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, November 11th, when Christina Hill-Williams, a former High Sheriff of Berkshire, will give us a personal insight into the history and duties of this ancient office. Then on Tuesday, December 9th the Society will hold its Christmas Party. The following meeting will be on Tuesday, January 13th, when Trevor Otlewski will return to tell us about some of the Purpose Built Villages that were specially created by wealthy philanthropists in the last 200 years. Our meetings start at 8 pm in the meeting room at the Old Pavilion on the Recreation Ground. Visit our website www.wargravehistory.org.uk/ for more information about the Society.