

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - July 2007

Visit to Highclere Castle

Highclere Castle was the location for this year's visit to a place of local interest for the Wargrave Local History Society.



Situated just south of Newbury, although just in Hampshire, the Castle is set in extensive grounds of about 1000 acres. The estate was established in the 8th century by the Bishop of Winchester, and in the 1370s the then bishop, William of Wykeham, rebuilt the Bishop's palace there. However, the lands were taken over by the Crown in 1551, and then passed to private ownership in 1572. The estate then passed in 1679 to Robert Sawyer, and by marriage to the 8th Earl of Pembroke. In the mid 18th century, two 'follies' were erected - 'Heaven's Gate' and 'Jackdaws Castle' (below), both of which are still to be seen from the house, whilst in 1770 the grounds were laid out by 'Capability' Brown., for its then owner Henry Herbert, later to become the 1st Earl of Carnarvon. The house was rebuilt around this time, to look like a classical mansion.



The house, however, as it now appears is the result of remodelling carried out by Sir Charles Barry in the early - mid 19th century, for the 3rd Earl of Carnarvon. (and it was at this time that the name was changed to Highclere Castle). Some features of the house show similarities to other of Barry's work of the period, such as the Palace of Westminster and the Reform Club, also in London. From the entrance hall, of gothic

style, we entered the Library - a grand room with architectural features as found in the Reform Club. The detailed work, however, was undertaken by Thomas Allom, following Barry's death in 1860. Noted furnishings include a Carlton House desk and another desk that had belonged to Napoleon Bonaparte.

From there, we moved to the Drawing Room, with its light green silk wall coverings, many 'family portraits', before moving to the 'Smoking Room', as used only by the men, of course, with pictures of Venice that were mementoes of the 'Grand Tour'. Moving on through the 'morning room', featuring a rare bureau made in 1765 by Pierre Langois, we reached the 'stone staircase, and thence to the first floor, with the spacious bedrooms. - all with fine views across the parkland. They lead out from a gallery that runs around the 50 ft high Saloon at first floor level. Returning to the ground floor by way of a majestic oak staircase, we reached the dining room- again designed by Barry. The table itself includes 12 additional leaves.

We then left the 'grand' part of the house, and in the basement were able to view two exhibitions. One relates to the work done by the 5th Earl of Carnarvon in Egypt, with Howard Carter, exploring the tombs of the pharaohs, and culminating in the discovery of the tomb the "boy king" Tutankhamun. Although (to pay Death Duties), many of the artefacts were sold, some had been stored in cupboards in the passageways between rooms, and these form the basis of the exhibition. The other exhibition shows work of the Highclere Stud, established by the 5th Earl in 1902. The 7th Earl was the Queen's Racing Manager, and she has been a regular visitor to Highclere.

As usual for a Society summer visit, we then partook of a pleasant afternoon tea, and a stroll of the grounds.

The "Bird Collection" of Postcards

The Society has recently acquired the 'Bird Collection' of postcards of the village. This collection, assembled by lifelong Wargravians, Derek Bird, the Society's first Chairman, and his mother Ruth, shows many aspects of the village over the 20th century. As part of the Society Archive, it is now secured for posterity for the village. We are always interested in adding to our collection of pictures, documents, books, maps etc relating to Wargrave, so if you have anything that you think may be of interest, please contact us.
