

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - February 2000

Madame Tussaud is Buried in Wargrave, Question Mark

In a change to the programme, the Wargrave Local History Society had a talk entitled *Madame Tussaud is buried in Wargrave, Question Mark*, for their February meeting, given by Peter Delaney.

Peter began by noting that not everything seen in print can be relied upon to be historically accurate - one local paper had even printed the title of this particular meeting incorrectly!

Using examples from research into various local history topics, he then explored some of the coincidences and traps that unwary local historians may encounter. The Tussaud grave in Wargrave was just one such. This stone had been reported in books at least as early as 1923 as being that marking the grave of the founder of the famous waxworks. Once having appeared in print, it was often repeated in later books. In fact, Madame Tussaud's remains lie in Chelsea, and the Wargrave tomb marks that of the wife of one of her grandsons, Victor Tussaud.

Wargrave is emphatically one of the prettiest places on the Thames, and also one of the most enjoyable, for, in addition to rare beauty of trees and water, it is essentially secluded and a haunt of peace, relatively, that is to say, to some riverside towns. It is a favourite resort of artists, and two notable ones among them, G. D. Leslie, R.A., and J. E. Hodgson, R.A., conspired to make the sign of the *George and Dragon* a work of real art and humour; for on one side St. George, having slain the dragon on the other, is represented in the act of drinking a homely tankard of English ale. The **Church** was destroyed by a fire caused by militant suffragettes in 1914. It is of interest as the burial-place of Thomas Day, author of that classic of our youth, *The True History of Sandford and Merton*, and of another whose name inspires perhaps even more agreeable recollections, Madame Tussaud, the originator of the famous waxworks.

Another printed history had stated the origins of the Piggott School in Wargrave. Although it had the correct name for the founder, his death was put over 60 years too late, the wrong number of pupils was stated, and almost all the rest of the school history were also incorrect. Again, having been in print, others had copied this.

The story then moved to that of one Thomas Elliott, who had lived in Bournemouth and founded a company in the 1880s. Although a printed history of the latter gave a date for its establishment as 1880, this proved not to be the case, even though quite early company papers claimed it to be so. Exploring the family background showed that not even official documentary evidence, such as the census, is always accurate. In order to get as close to the truth as possible, many sources have to be examined, and all the evidence considered.

In one case, for example, the Ordnance Survey map of 1898 showed that a particular set of buildings then existed, but that it was not shown on the earlier 1891 edition. This appeared to

show that the site was built upon between those dates, but a newspaper account of 1884 mentioning them (and an advert printed in 1874) showed this to be wrong. By coincidence, the same newspaper noted the holiday visitors to Bournemouth at the time, - including the Rev'd A H Austen-Leigh, who 6 years later became Vicar of Wargrave.

Thomas had been born in Stepney, but had been sent to live with an uncle when only 5 years old. This it turned out was due to the death of his father William Elliott in the 1860s. Thomas's brother, also William, had gone to live with another uncle, in Margate, and had then trained to be a Baptist Minister. His first pastorate brought him to Berkshire - to the chapel at East Ilsley, before moving to Scotland.

One coincidence seemed to be that Thomas's house name and a middle name of his eldest son was Girvan, whilst the youngest son had another unusual middle name - Hayward. These, it turned out, were the maiden names of Thomas's wife and mother respectively. His wife, by coincidence, came from Scotland - even though a local newspaper in announcing the marriage put her home town of Newton Stewart in London.

Returning to Wargrave, another item of village history that had appeared in print was a rather fanciful account of the 1914 fire that destroyed St Mary's Church. The narrator made many factual errors, such as the village having neither a policeman or fire engine at the time (it had both), and also mentions the Tussaud grave. But, having been in print, it was again referred to by later historians.

The talk then returned to the Tussaud grave. Elizabeth Tussaud's memorial is engraved on the back of that to her mother, Amelia, and the stone is next to that of her (Elizabeth's) father. By complete coincidence, his name was William Elliott.

