

Wargrave Local History Society

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The Nineteenth Century Church

Sue Branfoot spoke to the Society about *The Nineteenth Century Church*. She began by explaining that she was an architectural historian, an interest that arose through tracing her family history which includes George Gilbert Scott. An architectural historian is interested in looking at buildings and townscapes, and finding out why a particular building is put where it is, why it is as it is, why may it have been altered, and what human activities are associated with it.

For a church, the answer to this may seem obvious - for worship, but there is more to it than that, and what we now see has changed over time. The area where a church is in a community is usually one of the earliest places to be settled, and rebuilding generally takes place on the same site (unless, for example, the site is liable to flood or the landowner thought it was 'in the way'). Church records are also invaluable, and form the basis of much family and local research. The Church registers start to become efficient from 1837 onwards, and this was symbolic of the state of the Church. Although many people think of it as being a strong part of the community, in the eighteenth century the Church was in a lamentable state - clergy held several parishes to gain sufficient income, which meant that some of the parishes were rarely visited by them. The physical state of the buildings was also poor - one Archdeacon making a visitation found a church had the porch bricked up, and the people only able to enter through broken windows.

It was against this background that the Victorians set out to rebuild the Church, influenced by architects such as Pugin and clergymen such as Samuel Wilberforce, then Bishop of Oxford. As a young man, Pugin was concerned about the lack of spirituality, and what he thought of as paganism in the design of existing churches. He likened them to a theatre, in which the centre of attention was the clergyman, not the altar, and going to church was more of a social occasion. St Catherine's, Chiselhampton is a surviving example - with pews that faced the pulpit, and a rail added around the altar simply to keep the dogs out. Wilberforce, who had been appointed in 1847, was also keen to change the liturgy; the people would face east, and he wrote that the Lord's Supper should be celebrated at least once per month, which was far more than it had been happening. His views were not universally popular, and on a visit to Reading he expected to be 'blown up' - he wasn't, but was pelted with fruit and vegetables for his ideas.

Sue then illustrated with many local examples the kind of rebuilding - often taking down the old to ground level - that the Victorians carried out, with a return to the Gothic style, worshippers faced east, all the pews were equal, and often the building was enlarged to accommodate a larger congregation. Pugin tried to model churches on medieval designs, and he (and other architects favouring the Gothic style) believed in 'structural honesty' - if a building was made of brick, then they should not be covered up, but be seen. In some cases, such as St Bartholomew's in Reading (designed by Waterhouse), the brickwork was made decorative, and showed great skill by the craftsmen. Such skill also went into the decoration, in stone, metal or glass, which tried to develop natural themes, or use natural materials - like coloured marble, and was not 'stuck on' afterwards.

Many new churches were also built at this time, following these same principles. Not all the Victorian work was in Gothic style, however, as for example at Mattingley, south of Reading. Here the old Tudor chancel was renovated in 1864-6 and a new Victorian nave added in a matching style.
