

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - March 2017

Annual General Meeting; The Wargrave & Shiplake



Wargrave Local History Society's March meeting began with the AGM, when the past year was reviewed, a new committee elected, and details of the 2017-18 programme given.

Following the formal part of the evening, Peter Symons gave an illustrated presentation outlining the history of the Wargrave and Shiplake Regatta – the 3rd largest on the Thames (after Henley Royal Regatta and the Henley Women's Regatta. The earliest recorded regatta, organised by the Wargrave Yacht Club, took place 150 years ago, in August 1867. (Although no records exist prior to that, a Wargrave Regatta 'Silver Rudder Trophy' was found fairly recently dated 1856, and a similar one dated 1853 is listed on the ebay site).

The 1867 event consisted of 7 races in all, with 'amateurs' competing for silver trophies and 'professionals' (ie in trade) for money. The races were, apparently, rowed upstream from Bolney Island to Wargrave Ferry. In 1888, the Regatta took on the form more familiar today, with a course from the railway viaduct to Wargrave Lawn, and many of the features of current events, such as the greasy pole or the fireworks display, would be recognised by Victorian participants. 1888 was also the year when dongola racing was introduced. Dongolas take their name from the craft used by the troops under Gordon of Khartoum to get down the River Nile through the Dongola region. Three teams, all from Wargrave houses, competed on the first occasion, but by 1891 the teams in the final came from Wargrave, Shiplake and Pangbourne. A contemporary report said that "In the first race, Shiplake were first past the post. On account of fouling, the Umpire ordered a fresh start. This caused considerable disagreement, the winning crew refusing to start again"!

Shiplake residents became more involved in the early 20th century, with the title becoming the Wargrave and Shiplake Regatta in 1907. The challenge cups from that time are still awarded now.

Calls for there to be a local event for specifically Wargravians led to the revival of a Wargrave Regatta in 1912. After WW1, the Wargrave and Shiplake competition did not restart, but a Wargrave Peace Regatta (more of a fun event) was held in 1919. The following year, the first 2 day programme was run, and in 1921 Shiplake was asked to join in – the start of the modern Wargrave and Shiplake Regatta. In the post WW1 period the social divisions of earlier times largely disappeared.

By 1939, there were 75 races in the programme, and many well-known families became involved in its organisation. The regatta did not take place during WW2, but activity grew after it, partly stimulated by the 1948 Olympics. There were 83 races that year – by 1970 that had grown to 190, and reached a maximum of 420 in 2004. That meant there was a race every 3 – 4 minutes without breaks over 14 hours each day. Rare summer floods in 2007 meant that the regatta had to be cancelled, and subsequently the number of races has been closer to 360. The Regatta itself owns all the boats used, and this is a major cost in the running of the



Wargrave and Shiplake Regatta, circa 1931

the event – one writer in the Times saying “I doubt if there’s a better family weekend anywhere else in the world”, it also being called “Two days of fun in a field by the river”.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, April 11th, when we will welcome *George Rawlinson* to share some of his memories of growing up in the village - and then on Tuesday May 9th, *Peter Trout* will tell us about the early history of airships.

Our meetings start at 8 pm in the meeting room at the Old Pavilion on the Recreation Ground See the Society’s website www.wargravehistory.org.uk/ for more information about the Society.