

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - January 2002

Dipping Into the Wells

The Wargrave Local History Society's January speaker was Angela Spencer-Harper, whose talk *Dipping into the Wells* was about the Chiltern villages of Stoke Row and Highmoor. She began by outlining how she came to write a history of the villages, starting with the memories of long time residents, interviewing over 60 in a 15 year period.

Stoke Row is particularly known for its Maharajah's Well, sunk in 1864. At that time, the 5th son of the squire of Ipsden was governor of the N W Provinces in India, where there was no proper water supply. He paid for the sinking of a well, and in a subsequent talk with the Maharajah explained he should have done such for his own village in the Chilterns. As a result - and maybe to 'find favour' with Queen Victoria, the Maharajah in turn paid for the sinking of a well at Stoke Row. Nearby a cottage was provided for the well keeper, and there was a list of rules outside the well, ending with "Thou shalt thank the Lord thy God for this water". Highmoor also has a well, and Well Cottages nearby. - sadly the building alterations here have incorporated the original well head with the house.

Angela continued by showing us some of the over 1600 pictures that she has collected of the people and buildings in the villages. The major occupations were the growing of cherries - with large cherry orchards that would attract coach loads of people from Reading to view them; a sawmill, which provided the wooden backs for all sorts of brushes (sent to Wembley for making up by the Star Brush Co); brickmaking, with the local clay; and turning chair legs and tent-peg making. During WW I, several orders for a million tent pegs were received from the army.

The 'gentrification of cottages' was another of Angela's themes, for which we were able to see pictures of them as working class cottages, with earth floors and provided with earth closets, and later as large extended residences for the 'executive' class - in some cases it was difficult to recognise them as based on the same structure!

The local public houses are the Crooked Billet and the Cherry Tree at Stoke Row and the Dog and Duck at Highmoor. The former is now more a restaurant than a country pub. The latter featured in an account of the infamous murderer Dr Crippen, who had stayed there in 1910.

The illustrations of 'true country people', their weddings, their relaxation, their work, and so on were a delight, and we hope to see more of this collection on a future occasion. For those who are interested, many appear in Angela's book, also called *Dipping into the Wells*.
