

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - November 2001

Wokingham

The speaker for the Wargrave Local History Society's November meeting was Tina Marinos, who told us about the history of *Wokingham*.

Tina explained that in the Middle Ages, Wokingham was situated partly in Berkshire and partly in Wiltshire, as the Bishop of Salisbury owned it, who gained income from the town, from the right to hold a regular market there. There is still a milestone near All Saints church with both county names on it, and the church unusually has three churchwardens - one representing the Bishop of Salisbury. Wokingham became all within Berkshire in 1845. Although some old maps have shown the town name as Oakingham - and it had been part of a forested area, Tina assured us that Wokingham was the correct spelling.

The old part of Wokingham is based on the medieval road layout that is now Peach Street, Denmark Street and Broad Street. This has created modern traffic problems, and the character of the town has changed as fewer people live in the central area now. There are, however, many old buildings surviving - notably Rose Street, which is an example of a medieval closed street. The surrounding area was good hunting grounds, and royalty would often visit therefore - Queen Elizabeth gave it a charter, and All Saint's church has a rare Elizabethan standard.

The market dates from the charter of 1219. Although nowadays the 'farmer's market' is held on the first Thursday each month, traditionally the market day was Tuesday (as allowed by the charter). This included poultry and livestock market, as well as fruit, vegetables and other farm produce. The ancient charter also gave the town the right to impose a penalty on anyone else holding a market within a distance of 8 miles - a right which still exists.

In the market until 1821 bull baiting took place. When this was outlawed, a bull was roasted at Christmas time, to provide food for the poor. A number of other charities and almshouses were also established - such as the Westende charity and the Lucas Almshouse charity - founded by Henry Lucas and administered until it closed a few years ago by the Draper's Company - the beautiful buildings still exist.

The people of Wokingham used to make their living largely from farming - the silk industry being particularly important. Other 'industries' included bell making, brick making - and many public houses, whilst in the nineteenth century many people worked in domestic service for the surrounding large houses. A number of well known people were associated with the town - John Walter, Archbishop Laud, and Thomas Seaward (the main character in *The Water Babies* being examples.

All Saints church, which originated in the 12th century, stands on the site of an older chapel. The Town Hall is the next most dominant public building, and stands in the centre of the town on the

old Guildhall site. It was built for a cost of £1000 in Victorian times, and once also housed a court, a police station, with cells, and a fire engine station.

Even in the 1960s, Wokingham was still a market town, but with the development of the Woosehill estate, (and later other areas) much farming land was lost. Additional traffic, and further pressure for yet more housing mean that it is difficult to retain the traditional market town character in the 21st century. Many older buildings still survive, however, although it is not always easy to persuade their owners to renovate them in an appropriate style. The town needs to be re-vitalised, but in sympathy and character with its historic heart. Tina encouraged us to all visit, walk and discover its delights for ourselves.
