

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - February 2002

### Fires of Windsor Castle

Sheila and Patrick Rooney were the speakers for the Wargrave Local History Society's February meeting when the subject was the various *Fires of Windsor Castle*, and the subsequent restoration work.

The fire of 1992 was the latest of several over the centuries. Patrick began by explaining why Windsor Castle was built at that location - one of a ring of defences around the Tower of London, each about a day's march from the latter, erected by William I (the Conqueror). There was a commanding view from the knoll on which it is built, and the river provided transport for the materials being brought to the site. The original 11th century structure was of wood, a stone one replacing it about a hundred years later. The first recorded fire was in 1295 - the report including that "in wages of 24 men carrying water to put out fire for a night in the King's great chamber which was burnt, two shillings." Another big fire took place in 1604, in the area near the Chapel, and there have been various other smaller incidents over time.

The next large fire was in 1853, on March 19th. Smoke was seen in a room above the State Dining Room, and by 9.30 pm the Household, who were dining there, saw smoke from the wainscoting. The Clerk of Works was summoned, and the alarm raised. The whole of the Prince of Wales Tower was burning. The Castle's own fire brigade was soon at work, and the Windsor Town Brigade was called in. The 'electric telegraph' had newly been installed by the railway, and was used to summon help from the London Fire Brigade, who sent two fire engines by train. The only way that the fire crews of the time could tackle the fire was to pump water from the north side, and it was nearly out by the time the London Brigade engines arrived at 2 am. Queen Victoria (at the time 8½ months pregnant) retired to bed at 4 am.

The fire was fought quickly, with no delay in raising the alarm, and put out with the aid of an ample supply of water (a reservoir at Cranbourne had been built to supply the Castle, and was situated higher than it, which helped). And there was no large draught of air to aid the spread of the fire. The Queen wrote in her diary 'I was anxious', but added 'I was thankful to be on the spot', and remained calm throughout. After the fire, food was provided for those who had tackled the blaze - although it seems as if their appetite stretched the resources of the castle larders, so that they enjoyed food 'intended for more delicate palates'. The restoration was paid for by the Government of the day - cost not a being a 'deciding factor'.

Sheila then told us about the 1992 fire, and the restoration following. It had also taken place in the area to the east of the castle. Restoration work was in progress at the time, new fire alarms and wiring were being installed, and curtains and pictures were being cleaned. The fire seems to have begun when a replaced spotlight in the Queen's Private Chapel was in contact with a curtain, and began to smoulder, the heat rising into the voids above the ceiling. Three restorers found the fire, but were not aware of the special phone to contact the Castle fire brigade - who were already

dealing with a chemical incident in the grounds, whilst the Windsor fire crew were at Ascot - so the first appliance to arrive came from Slough. Meanwhile the curtain had fallen onto the packaging material, spreading the fire, and the hot gases spread through the voids to the Brunswick Tower and St George's Hall. 36 pumps from 9 brigades tackled the blaze - taking 500,000 litres of water per minute from 19 hydrants. A well rehearsed plan had a human chain removing the treasures at the same time.

The restoration was then tackled, taking 5 years and costing £50,000,000. Some thought had been given to a 'modern' treatment, but it was decided to restore to the period of George IV, which looks correct. One major problem was to dry out everything - especially the walls. Some cellars were said to be 6 ft deep in water. The resulting restoration used the skills of many dedicated craftsmen, so that although 'the fire was a tragedy, the restoration is a triumph'.

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