

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - June 2015

Wargrave Village Festival



The first of the Wargrave Local History Society's events during June, as part of the Wargrave Village Festival, was a conducted local history walk. This was so popular that tickets sold out within 3 hours on Festival Ticket Sales day!

Participants gathered on a pleasant Sunday afternoon – the weather being dry but not over hot. In two groups, they then had a gentle stroll around Mill Green, Church Street and the High Street, hearing about people, buildings and episodes from over 900 years of Wargrave's history as they went.

Pictures of the walk can be found at

<http://photosbypennie.pixieset.com/wargravehistoricwalk>



The second event was "*All About Antiques*", which took place in a packed Woodclyffe Hall on a Wednesday evening. The well-known antiques expert Thomas Plant – familiar to many from several television series – delighted the audience with recollections of his work as an antiques and collectables valuer and auctioneer.

He began by explaining that his father was a farmer, and Thomas enjoyed seeing the auctioneer at work selling cattle. It seemed not to be such hard work as farming – but what else did auctioneers sell? His great-grand-father was a keen collector, and so Thomas had become interested in 'old things' from an early age., and went on to study History of Art and History, before taking a degree in 'Antiques'. During this time, students would be allowed to go to the local museum when it was closed to the public and closely examine the exhibits, even those normally in locked cabinets. However, the degree course taught him nothing about the business of antiques, and he would still have to start as a porter and work his way up. He was able to gain some work experience at Phillips in Bath – who, as he seemed to quite like the work, asked if he would like to work there. During his 7 years there, he progressed to be an auctioneer.

The actual auctioneering part is a relatively small part of the business. The real skill is to get goods in to be auctioned – maybe visiting the seller's house – "if they like you, they are with you" he commented. The task then is to catalogue each item before the sale. Now-a-days, many bidders will not view the items on the viewing days, but will rely on the catalogue to place a telephone or internet bid – there may be only a

handful of bidders in the room, but 100 or so on-line. One 'trick' in the auction itself is to get a rhythm going – rather like passing lamp-posts whilst driving – 40, 50, 60 On leaving Phillips, he went to work for Gorrings in Sussex for 3 years, and then bought Special Auction Services as his own business (with a business partner). With a link to Christie's, they took on some of the secondary toys, and when Christie's closed that department, the work and some of the staff moved to work for Special Auction Services – a similar pattern followed with the camera and music departments.

Some 15 years ago, by a 'stroke of luck', his life changed. A junior television researcher contacted Phillips about a new television series, "Bargain Hunt" to be fronted by David Dickinson, to ask if their auction house could be used for one of the shows. "When would it be?" – "*August*" – "That's Thomas's sale". And so Thomas began his television career. After a while, Thomas got a telephone call from the instigator of Bargain Hunt – "*We like you on the tv – you work well*" – *Would you like to be one of our experts at the Shepton Mallet programme?*" Thomas said "Why wouldn't you?" And so 'Bargain Hunt' has become one of the constants in his television career – a 'warm feeling' and a fun show to do – for several years with David Dickinson, and rather more with Tim Wonnacott.

A while later, whilst on a road trip in France with family members, Thomas had another phone call – the BBC were thinking of a new show to be called 'Flog It!' – "*Would you like to be one of our experts?*" "Of course" ('Why would you say no?', he said to the audience). Although the first suggested presenter was David Dickinson, he went to work for ITV, and a Scotsman took on the role initially, until Thomas and Philip Serrell were doing a piece to camera with a young man in Marlborough - and so by another 'stroke of luck', Paul Martin became the regular presenter.

Until recently, both series were made by BBC Bristol. They make 4 or 5 shows in a weekend, and thousands of people apply to be contestants on Bargain Hunt. BBC's rules now mean that they are not allowed to change or influence anything they are not allowed to walk into the shop before filming begins, for example. The camera now follows the teams around the fair – if the experts look frustrated, they are! Attending a fair, experts and contestants are assaulted on all their senses, from the noise, the sea of colour, or the smell of antiques – and the inevitable bacon van. The 'Bonus Buy' is his biggest headache – to find 5 over a couple of days. Flog It!, on the other hand, is one of the few shows where the public can "see the BBC at work". One of the fascinations from Thomas's point of view is the way people wrap their items. "How many tea towels do you have at home?". Some use copious amounts of bubble wrap – and then tape it. He has nothing against bubble wrap, but when the tape won't tear, the precious vase may end on the floor in pieces!! In many ways, Flog It! is like his normal job – finding objects of interest to sell. Every item is seen by a team of off-screen experts, and then some are selected to be filmed – the on-screen expert having at most 5 minutes to see it before they begin. What makes it interesting are the stories of those who bring in the items.

By contrast, the Antiques Road Trip, which also features Thomas as one of the experts, is made by Scottish TV – unlike the BBC programmes with a cameraman, soundman, director, researcher, junior researcher, runner ... etc, most of these tasks are undertaken by a single cameraman / soundman / director. Although a 'competitive' programme, all the experts are great friends. A total of 15 days filming, spread over 3 months, goes into each 'trip', and the minimal crew gives the programme a dynamism so they can just 'do things'.

With stories ranging from the psychology of teddy bear collectors, the difficulties of telephoning successful bidders, and maybe not always quite recognising an item's true potential, Thomas entertained the audience in a lovely warm style. Questions ranged across the problem of getting a discount in the antiques shops they visit (for whom it is good publicity), the changes in desirability of different types of antiques, (he can only sell what the fashion or market desires), the problems of criminal activity, or the delights of working with some of the celebrities on that variant of the 'Road Trip' series. All of which he answered with a gentle humour. Pictures from this event can be found at http://www.timhodes.co.uk/WVF2015_antiques/



Then at the end of June, the Society presented a display during the Village Festival Fete of photographs and documents relating to the war-time American bomber crash in 1943, and many questions from visitors about the village's history discussed.



The Society will resume its programme of meetings after the summer break on September 8th, with a talk on the Geology of Bowsey Hill, in the meeting room at the Old Pavilion on the Recreation Ground, Wargrave, starting at 8pm.
