

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - June 2019

Wargrave Village Festival Events.

Wargrave Local History Society's activities during June were all as part of the Village Festival.

The first was a Historic Village Walk - as usual, fully sold out! After the showery weather of the previous week, the weather was kind as the two groups made their way around Mill Green, Church Street and the High Street, hearing about the people, buildings and events from 900 years of Wargrave's history.



On the following Tuesday, the Woodclyffe Hall was the venue for *The Magic of the Auction*, when the Society welcomed back Thomas Forrester, the popular television antiques expert and local auctioneer.

Thomas explained that he grew up on a Somerset farm, where his father had a mixed farm, keeping Hereford cattle, and offering 'pick your own' for various crops. People came from all over the country to pick sweetcorn— Europeans, Sri Lankans and Indians wanting it fresh, West Indians when drier, and Africans when even drier still, so his father would contact each group in turn as the crop changed. One of Thomas's early tasks was at the roadside stall, selling bags of potatoes – where he got to enjoy chatting to people.

He found his first auction, when he was aged about 10 or 11, a magical experience as he watched the auctioneer selling cattle. If two or more farmers wanted an animal, proceedings might be enlivened with a coin fight – bidders throwing coins at each other! When Thomas discovered that from the commission on every sale the auctioneer was probably the richest man in the room, that was what he wanted to do – but auctioning antiques not cattle.

His grandmother was an architect, who had a 13th century house in Bristol, but furnished in a 1950s style. Her father was Sidney J Churchill, a diplomat who had spent time in Tehran. He was a prolific collector of art, and so as Thomas grew up he became aware of many tremendous objects.

After school, Thomas went on to study antiques at university, and went to work at Phillips auction house in Bath, starting as a porter. The firm had branches nationwide, so he might himself in various salerooms. From the first, (and he still has his first gavel) he found auctioneering a magical experience, creating a buzz, which he still finds, seeing the items that are brought in and hearing the stories behind them.

Thomas then told several items that he had been asked to auction in recent times. The first related to a series of letters from a seller who was "in possession of Adolf Hitler's favourite teddy bear". Teddy bear sales are something Thomas's firm often holds. Some collectors like to make sure that a new purchase will fit with their favourite one - so might take the latter to the saleroom to introduce it to a potential purchase! There was a problem with the teddy bear offered in the letter. Hitler was born in 1889, but the teddy bear was not invented until 1904, so he would have been 25 before he could have owned one. The owner was asked to supply pictures, to help date the item on offer - maybe it would interest military history collectors. The seller then claimed it had been a gift from Goering, and that he and Hitler had played together with their bears during the war. The tale became even more elaborate - and the seller suggested a DNA test to verify the story - but the owner did not suggest how a sample of Hitler's DNA might be obtained. Needless to say, the offer to sell was declined.

A different outcome came when Thomas was approached by a firm specialising in film props. Although they had held on-line sales, they wanted to host a big auction. Thomas is a big fan of films - especially science fiction etc. He discovered that establishing the authenticity of an item was vital. The process included studying the film sequence frame by frame, to verify that the item for sale had actually been used in the film - checking things such as the number of stitches on an item to show it was the actual one worn in the film, etc. The firm wanted to know if Thomas was any good - having watched him conduct a sale of dolls, he got the job.

The firm suggested that everyone attending be offered a beer - but enticing or intoxicating bidders at an auction would be improper, and all contracts would be considered null and void.

Thomas then took a sale at the IMAX cinema in London which included the fedora worn - and signed by - Harrison Ford in Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark. It was a film that especially appealed to Thomas, so selling the hat was 'pure magic' for Thomas. He reckoned that at almost £400,000 including commission it would be the most expensive fedora ever sold! Other items he has auctioned came from the Star Wars films, including engineering drawings for the millennium falcon (which made "crazy money" said Thomas).

Earlier this year, Thomas's firm became aware of a rare camera needing to be sold. It weighed about 1 kg - but was in Sweden. Only a handful of these 1930s Leica gun-stock cameras had been made, and this example was built for an Italian hunter who no longer wanted to shoot game, but photograph it. Thomas related the story of how he drove across Europe to collect it, and getting a gun-like object through customs. A rare item, the last one sold realising 200,000 Euros, it will be auctioned at Newbury later in the summer.

During the evening, the audience had a sheet of quiz questions to think about, and in explaining the answers Thomas highlighted other aspects of auctioneering. A forthcoming change in the law means that items made of materials such as ivory will no longer be able to be sold. Selling Danish rosewood will need a licence to be sold, although ironically rhino horn can be self-certified to be sold. Another question concerned mourning jewellery. Thomas explained the meaning and customs surrounding such items, and recalled one in particular. Geoffrey Munn, the jewellery specialist, had asked for further details, and bought it in auction. About 6 months later, on the Antiques Roadshow, he told Fiona Bruce that it was the item he would most want to save from his home in the event of a disaster seemingly worth rather more than the £1800 he paid for it!

The most enjoyable evening ended with Thomas answering a range of questions from the audience. He

commented that he did have antique furniture in his home - there are people who complain about climate change, but have flat-pack furniture, whereas antiques last and are 'green'.



At the end of the Village Festival, the Society stall at the Festival Fete, on Mill Green, saw the launch of *A Brief History of Wargrave*, which outlines many aspects of village history, illustrated with many photographs from the Society archive. The stall also included a display of photographs about the village schools – it being 220 years since the first meeting of the Piggott Trustees, and 80 years since the laying of the foundation stone of the Piggott (Senior) School.

The next event will be the Society visit in July to the Gilbert White House and Oates Museum in Selborne, Hampshire. The Society resumes its programme of talks on Tuesday September 10th, when local GP Dr Mark Puddy will look back at 70 years of the National Health Service. The meeting will start at 8 pm in the Old Pavilion at Wargrave Recreation Ground.

