

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - May 2013

St. George's Chapel, Windsor.

Wargrave Local History Society's May meeting was an illustrated talk by Leslie Grout, a local historian and Windsor Castle 'Blue Badge' guide, on *St George's Chapel, Windsor*. He had been granted special access to take many of the pictures that were shown.

For fine colour images (including 360 degree "tours" of the building, and more current information on The Chapel, you can visit their website at <https://www.stgeorges-windsor.org/>

Building of the Chapel was begun by King Edward IV, in 1475. The south side of the building has the ornate 'show' front, as that is the one seen by visitors as they approach through the Henry VIII gate. In recent years the stone has been cleaned, and the weather vanes and similar items re-gilded. On the west end, the now familiar range of steps were only added in the 19th century, in time for the marriage of Princess Louise. Previously, there had just been a grassy mound here, but that was not considered appropriate for 'grand occasions'. The remains of a medieval almonry were found underneath when the steps were more recently refurbished.

The north is the 'working side' of the Chapel, and so it is not elaborate as the south. The area is known as Denton's Commons. James Denton, a 16th century Canon of the Chapel, had arranged for a common hall to be built as a place where the minor canons could meet, to avoid them congregating in the town's alehouses. The building was in danger of falling down, and so was demolished in the 1850s, but the name remains.

Every castle had a chapel 'somewhere' within its precincts, although it is not known where the first one was located at Windsor. In 1240, Henry III had a new chapel built, flanked by cloisters and the (then) Royal Apartments. If plans made during the reign of Charles II had been implemented, that chapel would not have survived. Charles wanted to erect a 'fitting tomb' for his father, and this was designed by Christopher Wren. This was a grand and large design - but quite unsuitable for the location, and neither it, nor the planned Grinling Gibbons memorial it was to house - progressed any further than architect's drawings. By the time of Queen Victoria, Henry III's chapel was little used, and so Victoria arranged for the architect Gilbert Scott to make it into the Prince Albert memorial chapel. Albert's memorial was designed by Triqueti, but this is overshadowed by the memorial to the Duke of Clarence, which dominates the chapel, which also contains the tomb of Leopold, Duke of Albany.

Although begun in the reign of Edward IV, the work of building St George's Chapel took about 50 years to complete. One of the Garter Knights, Sir Reginald Bray left a large sum of money to ensure the work was done, and the best craftsmen in the land would be summoned to go to Windsor. Care was taken to ensure that all the coats of arms were properly coloured. The building was substantially complete, apart from the crossing, where it had been planned to have a tower. Between the vaulting and the roof can still be seen the walls which would have formed the base of the tower, as well as massive oak beams that support the roof. In the event, it was decided not to bother with a tower, and Henry VIII persuaded his knights to provide the funds to finish St George's Chapel.

Inside, there was at one time a wooden screen across the nave, supporting the organ. George III decided to have a bigger and better organ installed - but the wooden screen could not support the weight, so the present stone screen was erected instead.

The rest of Leslie's talk took the form of a 'tour' around the Chapel, noting many of the interesting memorials and other features to be seen. The first - somewhat surprisingly - was a memorial placed in the chapel by Queen Victoria to the son of Napoleon III. He had trained at Woolwich, and went to the Zulu war, where he died 'for his adopted country'. There are, of course, many royal monuments, the first seen being Princess Charlotte of Wales. She married Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, had a still-born son after 50 hours labour, but she died soon afterwards. Subsequently, Leopold became King of the Belgians. Memorials to later monarchs include those to George V and Queen Mary, sculpted by Sir William Dick. Although visitors are not supposed to touch any of the statues, the rules are sometimes bent for blind people - who are told that they can tell their friends that they "had a good feel all over Queen Mary"! The Rutland Chantry includes a series of 5 embroidered panels, created by Beryl Dean about 40 years ago, the material being specially woven for the task. They are now housed in a glass fronted wardrobe, so that one at a time is on display, in order to protect them from dust. Although very modern, they do not shout at you' as being inappropriate.

Leslie also talked about the Knights of the Garter, whose spiritual home is St George's Chapel. The Garter Ceremony is one of two occasions each year when the Sovereign attends service in the Chapel (the other being at Easter - normally if the Queen is in residence at Windsor, she attends service at the Royal Chapel in Windsor Great Park). If possible, all the Knights of the Garter attend the annual service, although some do not join in the procession (the Duke of Wellington, for example, being 97). When a Knight dies, the garter insignia is returned by their nearest male relative to the Queen, and their heraldic flag removed from the Chapel. A copper plate displaying the coat of arms of each Knight is affixed to their stall in the Chapel as a more permanent record - normally the inscription on the plate is in French (although that for Prince William is in English).

The craftsmen who created the woodwork in the Chapel had free reign over the smaller details they included. Alongside Prince Philip's stall is a monkey praying to the devil, whilst Leslie's pictures of misericords included a monkey having a shave, and an 'elephant and castle' - clearly made by a carver who had never seen an elephant!

As the available space in Westminster Abbey was filling up, George III decided that the final resting place for himself and his successors would be at Windsor. The Chapter Surveyor, A Y Nutt, had the task of remodelling the area that became the Royal Vault - and made 'before' water colours which can be compared with the photographs taken 'after'. The vault is no longer used, even though it is only about a third full, as burials now take place at nearby Frogmore.

Leslie concluded by saying that there were many other interesting features of the Chapel, which he did not have time to talk about, but the best way to discover those would be to make a visit.

In June, as part of the Wargrave Village Festival, the Society will be staging an Historic Wargrave Exhibition, in the Woodclyffe Hall from 10am to 5pm on Saturday June 22nd, whilst on Sunday June 23rd there will be one of the ever popular Historic Village Walks at 2.30 pm. For safety reasons, the numbers for this are limited, and a few remain at the time of writing, so please contact the Society for availability of tickets. This will be followed on Wednesday, July 10th, by the Society's visit to Hughenden Manor.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, September 10th when Mildred Cookson, a leading member of the Mills Archive Trust, will recall the Life and Times of a Miller at Mapledurham - where she ran the mill for many years.