

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - July 2006

Visit to Eton College

The Wargrave Local History Society had a conducted tour of Eton College for their meeting in July.

Our guide began by explaining that there is a special language used at Eton - masters are known as 'beaks', lessons are called a 'div', cricketers are 'dry bobs', whereas rowers are 'wet bobs' and so on.



The College was founded by Henry VI in the 1440s, and in some ways resembles Kings College, Cambridge, which he founded at a similar time. Henry had seen the education provided by the Bishop at Winchester College, and decided he could provide something similar within sight of his castle at Windsor. The clock tower at the east of the quadrangle resembles that at Hampton Court, both having the same architect. On the north side of the quadrangle is the largest classroom, built in the 1690s, and the oldest classroom in the world still in use. Inside originally there were wooden partitions, dividing the room for different lessons to take place - hence 'div (or division) for the lessons. Above was a dormitory where 70 boys slept. The boys were taught by 10 priests, who lived in the cloisters of the College.

Both the dining room - dating from 1440, and the Chapel are built at a higher level, in order to protect them when the Thames floods. The Dining Room includes a panel signed in 1591 by Queen Elizabeth - who-ever sits at that place is entitled to two rations! The Chapel was intended to be the largest in the country when it was built, and the present chapel was intended to be just for the choir. If completed as intended, it would have stretched across the road outside and beyond, but the War of the Roses resulted in the death of Henry VI in 1471, and the Chapel was never finished.

Some aspects of life at the College have changed over time. In the early days, it was compulsory for the boys to smoke - as a means (it was thought) to keep disease away. Similarly, it was compulsory for a boy to carry a knife, to sharpen his quills - (and enable them to carve their names into the furniture!). If a boy did either of these things now, it would be a punishable offence!

Today, there are 1260 boys at the College (and no girls). The College owns all of Eton, and there are 50 boys in each of 24 houses in the town - pupils called 'oppidans', the other boys who live in the College being Kings Scholars. Boys start at the age of 13, and leave when 18, at a cost of £24,000 per year. Their lessons are structured more like a university, as they go to a science school, a music school etc.

We were privileged to also see the Headmasters corridor, with portraits of many well known Etonians, and then the Election Hall, dating from 1520. Here the Kings Scholars are presented with a gown by the Provost at the end of their first week at Eton. We were then able to visit the 'Museum of Eton Life', where many smaller items of historic interest are on display.

After the visit, we moved to the garden centre adjacent to Dorney Court, for an afternoon tea, and then made a 'detour' on the return home to view the Eton Rowing Lake nearby.

