

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - June 2023

Wycombe Unmasked - William Reid

The June meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society was William Reid's presentation on *Wycombe Unmasked*. William is a trustee of The High Wycombe Society, and he enlightened us about many aspects of the town's past.

250 years ago, it was the most prosperous and well-built town in the county, but by 1900 the development of industrial towns elsewhere meant this was no longer the case, and now it is not even rated as one of the top 10 towns in Buckinghamshire. Of the 6 public clocks in Wycombe, only one was until recently telling the correct time – symbolic maybe of the way 'time had stood still' in the town (although the High Wycombe Society has now restored another to working order).

The mid-19th century changes were a consequence of the railway, and so William began his virtual walk at the station. The Great Western Railway had begun to serve Oxford in 1846 by a branch from its London to Bristol line at Didcot, and Wycombe was left off the railway network. The town petitioned the railway to provide a line to the town, and that was opened on August 1st 1854. However, rather than a direct line to either London or Oxford, Brunel arranged for broad gauge single line branch from the main line at Maidenhead, with other stations at Cookham, Bourne End, Wooburn Green and Loudwater, with High Wycombe a terminus for the next 8 years. Just 2 engines were provided to operate The Wycombe Railway. The line was extended westwards, to Thame in 1862, Aylesbury the following year, and the Thame line extended on to Oxford in 1864, with the GWR formally taking over the Wycombe Railway in 1867. A branch from Bourne End to Marlow opened in 1872 – but all of these lines remained as single track which limited the kind of service it could provide.

A notable occasion concerning the railway occurred in 1877, when Queen Victoria travelled from Windsor to Slough, then to Maidenhead, and thence to High Wycombe. She then transferred to a coach to meet Benjamin Disraeli. With only 48 hours notice of the visit, the townspeople built a welcome arch of stacks of wooden chairs up and over the road - chair making being an important industry based around Wycombe at the time. The Queen wrote in her diary that the people were most loyal and orderly, and on her return journey made a point of looking at the chair arch.

Early in the 20th century the railway connections to High Wycombe were improved, with a double track direct line to London's Marylebone station in 1902, and an extension north to Bicester in 1906. The retaining wall for the railway through High Wycombe is said to be the largest such in Europe, being made of 1¼ million blue Staffordshire bricks. Of the 75 railway stations built by Brunel, that at High Wycombe is one of only 5 that remain, with part to now be a gallery and café. By the time the town had good railway connections, though, more furniture manufacture was taking place elsewhere, and there is relatively little in Wycombe now.



Extract of the GWR map, after the opening of the direct lines in 1902.

Our 'walk' then took us along Crendon Street, where William explained the custom of 'beating the bounds' (although many of the boundary stones are now hard to find). The origin of such ceremonies was to bless the crops – in Wycombe the ceremony involves holding a boy upside down and gently banging his head to a box at each boundary point!

On into the High Street, there remain some half-timbered houses, and then to Queen Victoria Road, where a new town hall was completed in 1904, which included an organ for concerts and an auditorium able to seat 1100 people. Its 5 large stained-glass windows depict people associated with the town – Edmund Burke, the philosopher; Benjamin Disraeli, former Prime Minister; John Hampden, a Parliamentarian from the Civil war; William Penn, who founded the state of Pennsylvania, and the middle window recalls various others – the 17 men including local business people, whilst the only woman is Hannah Ball, who is said to have founded the first Sunday School in Britain, in 1769. Until 1932, it was the only building in the road, but council offices, a police station and a public library were built close by, making it an area of civic activity. The town's crest, adopted in the 14th century, is a swan, with a chain linked only to a crown, illustrating the town's allegiance is only to the monarchy – unlike the Buckinghamshire crest where the swan has its wings open, that for the town has the wings closed. The town motto translates as "Work Enriches"

William then recalled Henry Petty, who had been created Earl of Shelburne in 1751, and owned estates around Wycombe. In due course, the title passed through his nephew, John Fitzmaurice, (who took the surname Petty in order to inherit the title) to William Petty, who became a colonel in the army, and had won a seat in the Parliament – but was raised to the House of Lords before he could take his seat in the House of Commons. Britain had suffered defeat in battles against the Americans, but William Petty was an advocate of the ideas of Adam Smith, believing that sending more men and arms to fight wars was wasteful, and that it was better to open our ports to the United States and to trade together. In 1784, he was made Marquis of Lansdowne, and then became a General in the army (one of only 2 such to also be Prime Minister, the other being the Duke of Wellington). His home at High Wycombe, Loakes House, was sold in 1798, when the family moved to their other estate at Bowood, in Wiltshire. The purchaser was Robert Smith, who had the house rebuilt – and renamed as Wycombe Abbey the name did not have any religious significance).

Meanwhile, Frances Dove, who had been educated at Girton College, Cambridge, and taught at Cheltenham Ladies College for 3 years, had moved to teach at St Andrews Boarding School, becoming the Headmistress there from 1882 – 1896 (changing its name to St Leonards). She then told the governing body that she wanted to establish a similar school in the south of England. Her requirements were for a large house, close to a town, with a grass area sufficient for cricket, a lake where the pupils could swim, and where there was less than average rainfall. The outcome was that in July 1896 she had raised £20,000 to buy the 30 acres Wycombe Abbey property, and so Wycombe Abbey School was founded. Her idea was that girls could be educated so that they could earn their own living, and also be able to help others. An illustration of the latter was when Frances set up a Central Aid Society in Wycombe to alleviate poverty in the town – an organisation that is still going strong with premises in Desborough Road where support is offered to those in need. In 1907, women were first allowed to stand as candidates in local elections, and by the following year Frances was nominated to become the first Lady Mayoress in England (but then defeated by 2 votes). Two years later, she stood down as Head of the school, but remained a magistrate. In 1917 she took her first commercial aeroplane flight, and then 2 years later, at the age of 72, she learnt to drive – apparently her friends wished she had not! She was awarded the DBE in 1928, and died in 1942 – by which time the American army had taken occupation of the school for the rest of the war. Her important contribution to the life of High Wycombe is recognised by the re-naming the road leading to Wycombe Abbey School from Abbey Way to Frances Dove Way.

The American army erected Nissen huts in the grounds, and adapted the chapel to be used as a cinema, and set out parade grounds for the GIs. Initially, the internal communications systems in the house could not cope, as there were signs in what had been the schoolgirls' rooms that said "If in distress, please ring for a mistress". William read some extracts from the '*Instructions to American Servicemen*' – pointing out that although similar to the British in many ways, the British could not make a good cup of coffee – but the GIs

could not make a good cup of tea; - and that they should not point out that the GIs were being paid about 5 times as much as the British soldiers (amongst many other pieces of advice). High Wycombe was a busy place during the war, with the RAF's "Bomber Harris" based nearby at Knaphill – but it did not suffer from a direct hit during the war. The girls were able to return to Wycombe Abbey in 1946, and it is now one of the highest rated schools in the country – with a branch in Shanghai – whilst Knaphill is now the headquarters for the UK Space Command.

William next told us about The Rye – an area along the river valley, the name being derived from the Anglo-Saxon for an island. Until 1927, borough residents were allowed to graze 2 cows on The Rye. Wycombe is mentioned in the Domesday Survey of 1086, when it was recorded as being 1200 acres, able to support 30 ploughs, and having 6 corn mills. It is thought that the Pan Mill, which stands on The Rye, was one of those. It was demolished for a planned road widening, but as that did not happen a replacement mill building was set up, and this still grinds flour 3 times a year for sale to visitors.

During the Civil War, High Wycombe was 'in the middle' between the Parliamentarians in London and the Royalists in Oxford. The town favoured the Parliamentarians, but when the Royalists came and took the furniture of the mayor, they demanded a ransom for its return. They also wanted a ransom for the mayor's wife – although she meanwhile had fallen for one of the Royalists!

One of the oldest ruins in Wycombe are the remains of the Hospital of St John the Baptist. Like most such establishments, it was situated at the edge of the town close to a main road – in this case that from London. Its purpose was to feed the hungry, care for the poor, tend the sick, bury the dead and provide a bed for strangers. It had been associated with the abbey for several hundred years until the dissolution of the monasteries in 1540, but the town was allowed to retain the land if it opened a school there. The result was the founding of the Royal Grammar School in 1562. The site, however, was too small to cope with increasing demands, so eventually moved to the top of Amersham Hill. It has only ever had one girl pupil, who joined the school in 1961. She was allowed to do so as it was the only local education authority school in the area that could continue the classical education she had received in Scotland before she moved south. The ruins are regarded by Historic England as a rare survival of a medieval hospital in a town, but in summer they are obscured by trees. There was then put in place a plan to reduce the trees in height, and carve them to represent characters who might have been there in time past – although the council have now imposed a tree preservation order on trees there.

Amongst the other businesses that William told us of was the local firm of Harrison and Sons. The Post Office had introduced the idea of the sender, rather than the recipient, paying for the transport of letters in 1840. This needed the supply of stamps – initially the Penny Black. Harrison and Sons was able to secure the contract to print these in 1933, and so from 1934 until 1997 postage stamps were printed in High Wycombe – Harrison's taking over an old chair factory for their specialised printing operations.



For more information about the society, visit the website at www.wargravehistory.org.uk

William Reid (stood, left) answering questions at the end of his presentation to Wargrave Local History Society's June meeting.