

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - April 2009

The Old Place

At the April meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society, Angela Spencer-Harper introduced us to Characters and events from her latest book, *The Old Place, Twixt Thames and Chilterns*.

The book is the story of a little old cottage and its environs in the Chiltern Hills, set almost centrally between Henley and Wallingford, Watlington and Reading. It's what Angela calls 'factional history' - each chapter being based on the discovery of an artefact in south east Oxfordshire, or the memories of local residents. Her book brings to life the times associated with these objects or memories.

The first account was from the mesolithic age, around about 6000 BC, when a group of hunter-gatherers was living on a ridge of the Chilterns. They had been on a boar hunt for several days, but when the son returned, his father was extremely cross, as the special axe the son had borrowed had been lost. Angela told how the family knew about the plants and animals, and the spirits that surrounded them, and of the craft skills that the daughter of the family had learnt. It was in recognition of her skills that the highly valued axe had been given by a 'man from the north'. In the event, the axe was eventually found - in January 1949 at Stoke Row.

The next account was from the Roman period, and related to a denarius found in 1864 when the Maharajah's Well was being dug. The coin had been lost when tossed to settle an argument between a soldier and a messenger. It was rare - as it showed the head of Pupienus, who was only emperor for 99 days in 238AD. Another carefully researched story took us to the time of the Black Death, in 1348 in Wallingford. Adam Blackthorn had travelled from Rotherfield Greys to Wallingford, taking his children as a 'treat' whilst he did his trading. He became aware of the plague when a boy from London became ill. Adam arranged to leave things for his wife and family at a 'safe distance' whilst he returned to Wallingford. Sadly, the cat kept by the hospital to catch rats had thereby become a carrier of the plague, and passed it on to Adam's son. Although some people with that form of the disease survived, Adam's son died within a few days.

The Civil War in the area around Henley in 1643 was the setting for the next tale. Based on the diaries of Sir Bulstrode Whitlock, of Fawley Court, it illustrated the stresses when two brothers - one a Parliamentarian and the other a Royalist - meet in Henley Market Place.

Moving on to the time of the Raj, John Thurlow Reade worked for the East India Company and had sailed for India in 1817. Mail from India was rare and irregular then, and John's mother had not received a letter for some time when in 1827, whilst walking down the road, saw her son's wraith coming towards her. She felt certain that he had died, but not had a Christian burial. She therefore arranged with the vicar of Ipsden to hold a burial service for John. When the next mail arrived from India it brought the news that John had died of dysentery through the jungle. 33 years later, John's younger brother, Edward, erected a memorial to John, close to the point where the wraith had appeared. Edward hoped this would calm his brother's spirit which it seemed to do so, as it has not been seen since.

The digging of the Maharajah's Well to the depth of 364 feet was done by 2 men, Jimmy Wells and Grandpa Grace within a year. Angela recounted the conditions for the men, and the method of building it. At the suggestion of Edward Reade, it was opened on Queen Victoria's birthday - May 24th 1864.

Based on interviews with evacuees, the work of the tent peg makers in world war 2 was an insight into rural crafts. Working in the woods, the trees were felled, cut by sawyers with a cross cut saw, cut to lengths, split into halves with a beetle and wedge, and then roughly prepared with a molly and flammer. There were then 24 movements to shave the shape of the tent peg - done quickly so that 600 9" long ones could be produced per day, for the use of the military. The inspectors who came from London knew little of tent peg making - they would 'pass' most of them, but other identical pegs would be given a 'black mark', and rejected. The tentpeppers would then shave the peg again, removing the mark, and the pegs would be 'passed' at the next inspection!

From the 1950s, we heard of John and Betty Searby's struggle establishing a business making a new style of trailer for selling all kinds of produce. They had to put all they could into making the first one - hoping that once it was seen, they would get back their initial costs with the orders that would follow.

The Society has recently obtained 3 photograph albums that had belonged to Harriette Cook Smith, the village benefactress who lived at Woodclyffe. The pictures, dating from the 1870-80s, are a valuable addition to our archives. See some samples [here](#)



*Harriette Cook Smith with her husband,
Willie, outside the porch of their home,
Woodclyffe (right)*

The next meeting is on Tuesday, May 12th, when Stephen Loyd will tell us about Ruscombe Wood, and the natural history and conservation work being done there. In June, the Society is providing an Historic Walk of Wargrave, on June 14th, as part of the Village Festival. On Tuesday, July 14th the Society has arranged a visit to Milton Manor House - an elegant 18th century house built by Inigo Jones for Bryant Barrett, lacemaker to King George III. The house is set in a splendid garden location with two lakes and enjoyable woodland walks.