

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - December 2020



Christmas Party



Wargrave Local History Society's December meeting normally takes the form of a Christmas Party. Of course, we could not hold this in the traditional way this year, but a similar occasion was arranged over the internet. Those who joined in were asked to 'enter the spirit' of the party atmosphere - maybe by wearing a Christmas hat or jumper, or having seasonal decorations around. Of course, we could not share Wendy Smith's mulled wine and mince pies, so each participant was asked to bring their own for the evening.

The evening included a presentation by Peter Halman on 'The History of Christmas' - from the time of the Druids who celebrated the Winter Solstice at Stonehenge, to the Romans, with their feast of Saturnalia, which was then adopted and adapted by the Christians and developed into the kind of festivals that we have now. Some of the customs we still enjoy go back to the earliest times - mistletoe, for example, being thought by the Druids to have magical powers, whilst the Norse people had it as a sign of friendship and love - leading to the tradition of kissing under it - although maybe that will have to be somewhat restrained this year! The singing of carols was originally a folk tradition, rather than one associated with churches, and was banned by the Puritans - like many other Christmas traditions (such as the eating and drinking) - as introducing too much 'pleasure'! Pantomimes have also been a long-standing feature of the Christmas season, being derived from the Italian Commedia dell 'arte, and having its audience participation sections. It is 'peculiarly British', and probably incomprehensible to those of other cultures, with the leading 'male' part taken by a pretty girl, and the leading 'female' portrayed by an (often portly) man!! Other now common aspects of the season are more recent - such as the Christmas tree - a German tradition made popular in Britain when Prince Albert had one set up for the Royal household in 1840, whilst the very first 'Christmas card' - although not in the form we now know - came in 1843. Other celebrations, though, such as the Frost Fairs held on the River Thames have now passed into history. "Retail therapy" however seems to have become a vital part of many people's Christmas. One ancient tradition is that of Santa Claus. There are several suggestions as to his origins - the most likely being that it derives from St Nicholas, who was a 4th century monk from Turkey who was renowned for his piety and kindness. As Peter explained, in order to deliver to all the children in the world, he needs many "helpers"!

The evening also included a 'slightly crackers Christmas quiz' - in a not too serious manner, with the questions all 'Wargrave parish related'. Finding the answers to some of them, however, were more like solving the riddles on those little pieces of paper inside a Christmas cracker!!



The Society's planned programme is at www.wargravehistory.org.uk/ - where the latest information can be found