

# **Stow and District Civic Society**

## **Winter 2014 Newsletter No 187**

### **Forthcoming Events**

Please make a note in your diaries for our next couple of Open Meetings in 2015!

#### **Friday, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2015 – “How old is your House?”**

Paul Clark of the Oxfordshire Buildings Record has already spent a very full and profitable couple of days visiting Stow when a good number of our members invited him to take a look inside their homes. He has had great pleasure and fun doing this, meeting people – and certainly made some fascinating discoveries about Stow. His talk in February will include plenty of local examples to illustrate “How old is your House?” so please come and find out more!

#### **Friday, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2015 – “The original Brideshead – a history of Madresfield”**

If you have ever wanted to know more about the family and house which proved a source of inspiration for Evelyn Waugh’s story of “Brideshead Revisited” then our speaker, Brian Jauncey, is just the man to oblige! He is a current guide at Madresfield and will tell the history of its colourful characters and sumptuous interiors.

### **Visits in 2015**

Please keep an eye open for the dates for our two day-visits this year – to Worcester Cathedral and Madresfield Court in May and to Bath in July. Dates and details to be announced early next year.

### **Help for Open Meetings**

A very big thank you to all members who have already come forward and offered help with serving refreshments or setting up the Hall for our evening meetings. It’s greatly appreciated. We are still looking for help with refreshments and the Hall on Friday 5<sup>th</sup> June next year so if you can possibly offer your help on this date then please contact Rachel on 01451 833783 or email her on [rachelsurman@btopenworld.com](mailto:rachelsurman@btopenworld.com) - thank you so much!

### **Volunteer Guides**

We are also really pleased to have had nearly a dozen members indicate their interest in helping as volunteers for guided town walks or the St. Edward’s Hall paintings. Thank you all so very much and Nigel will be in touch early in the New Year to make some plans for getting the group together. We aim to make this a lot of fun and it’s also a great way of getting to know more members whilst learning more about Stow. We still have room for a few more volunteers so please let us know if you would like to add your name to the list.

## **Stow Cotswold Festival – Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> July 2015**

As you know, our Society has been invited once again to host an event in St. Edward's Hall on the day and we've already got some good ideas for this American-themed celebration day. We'd like to serve refreshments in the Hall during the day so Rachel wondered if any members might like to help by baking or preparing American cakes/cookies/muffins etc which would be perfect for the American theme? The date does seem so very far ahead at the moment – but it would be great for her to know if anyone would be willing to get involved in this way. Please contact her on 01451 833783.

### **The Methodist Hall**

Members of the committee have had the opportunity to view the Methodist Chapel on the corner of Digbeth Street and Sheep Street. As you may know this building is now for sale and Stow Town Council are interested in trying to raise funds to purchase it for community use. It is well situated close to the Square and lends itself to a number of activities as an alternative to St Edward's Hall, which is in the fortunate situation of being well booked most of the time. In addition to the main hall and a stage, there are additional rooms for smaller meetings, and the idea of having a museum to house the extensive Royce collection, currently held in storage by the Corinium Museum in Cirencester, is of particular interest. There are a whole range of other uses by the community and it would be a pity to lose the facility to a more commercial activity. It was built in 1814 so has considerable historical interest and John Wesley is recorded as having preached there in his tour of the country.

If a bid for funds to purchase the building is to be successful it will need the support of many sections of the community and we will try to secure sufficient time to enable us to secure this opportunity.

### **The Archives**

Trish Ashley and her team have done a superb job in re-organising and tidying the archives, and she has kindly submitted the following statement:-

The Archives currently housed in Stow Library have initially been sorted into two major categories, Social History [mainly people / events] and Buildings [mainly architecture / functions] resulting in the creation of 20 Box Files, each of which has its own contents sheet. These contents sheets will eventually be available on our web page.

We are now ready to expand our small friendly team of volunteers and would like some help to do more sorting and acquiring additional information in order to fill in several of the gaps.

If you are inquisitive and like answers to questions such as what, why, where, when and how etc. please telephone Trish 01451 - 832-314, leaving your name and landline tel. number, if I'm not in! Look forward to explaining personally how you could help.

### **Civic Societies meeting**

On Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> November Rachel, Nigel and myself attended a meeting of Civic Societies in Gloucestershire, kindly hosted by Cheltenham Civic Society in their "home" in 13 Lyppiatt Terrace. They are in the fortunate position of having been donated the building – Parmoor House – by Lord

Parmoor in 1964. Each representative present presented their particular situation and a number of common themes emerged – planning matters, with inappropriate development being one that most of them were trying to resist. Other themes such as ageing populations and coping with new technology and the problems of liaising with District and Local Councils were also raised. Some excellent suggestions were put forward such as live streaming of Council Meetings, awards for good developments, allied with “carbuncle cups” for the worst ones! One topic that received several mentions was guided Town Walks. As you may know these have been taking place in Stow sporadically but there is scope for developing them to a wider audience to promote a better appreciation of the history of the Town and as a good fund raiser for the Society. Please see the earlier item requesting volunteers to come forward so that we can promote these tours to more visitors.

### **The Doctor’s Surgery**

The provision of a much needed new Doctor’s surgery is becoming ever more complex. As you will have seen in Stow Times, there are now four proposals on the table and we residents are being offered a chance to vote for a preferred solution. This is an excellent chance to put local democracy to work and we are all urged to vote in representative numbers in the hope that the planners will select the most suitable solution based on the vote which it is hoped will be decisive and not a “coalition” compromise. For further details please see Stow Times December edition.

### **Bovis Homes Planning Application Inquiry**

The recent additional inquiry was held at Cirencester and was completed within one day. A more detailed account is contained in Stow Times. A decision has been deferred until June 2015. It is anticipated that our Neighbourhood Plan will be available by then, and of course the result of the General Election may affect the eventual outcome.

### **Christmas Tree Festival**

The festival of trees once again turned the Church into a winter wonderland with over 40 trees. The Civic Society Tree was prepared by Val Simmons who did an excellent job despite the very short time she had to prepare for it. Even among the high standard of trees this one really stood out with a magnificent angel on top!

### **The Cricket Museum and the VIC**

The Cricket Museum has announced that they no longer wish to host the VIC after December, in order to concentrate on retaining their splendid collection of cricketing artefacts within the Town and reclaiming the space in their tea rooms. As with Go-Stow, the grant from CDC is proving inadequate to compensate the owners for all the additional work involved in handing out free advice to visitors. Other options for hosting the VIC are being investigated.

### **Results of Members Survey**

Very many thanks to all members who responded to our questionnaire over the summer break. A total of 50 replies have been received and the information collated. To briefly summarise: -

Approx 50% of our members have only been with the Society 2-5 years, with 34% 6 years or more. This is a reflection of an increase in overall membership during this 5 year period and I hope shows that we are a friendly and welcoming group.

Well over 60% of our members keep informed about events and news via email and the newsletter but only 10% via our website. Our website has a very large and expanding amount of information useful to members and in attempt to promote it further most articles sent via email in future will start to have a link to the relevant article on our site.

Over 60% of members attend 3 or 4 evening meetings and the diversity of topics is much appreciated whilst more local subjects would be welcome.

Over 70% of members had never brought a guest to an Open evening. We actively encourage members to invite friends and family to raise awareness and keep a mind to promoting membership.

40% of members would be interested in one-off high-profile talks separate to our calendar with tickets up to £15 and 30% up to £20. This gives us a good idea on who we may consider approaching if an opportunity arises. Thank you to many who offered ideas for future talks and also for future trips. 60% indicated they would travel up to 1.5 hrs with 30% up to 3 hrs. 50% showed an interest in guided walks and gardens with another 50% keen to support theatre and cinema trips. Both these ideas are being investigated.

Suggestions were made for projects and activities too numerous to mention here. However a common theme is that members wish to enrich visitor's experience of Stow and encourage more Civic Pride. This is reflected in a number of comments regarding litter and numerous eye-sores around the Town. We hope to address these issues on your behalf.

### **Battlefield Survey**

It was reported in the last newsletter that funding is available for a limited survey of the battlefield area. The survey has had to be postponed until next year as the main area to be surveyed is under cultivation and will not be available until after harvest

### **Lichfield and the National Arboretum**

Lichfield Cathedral's three spires are known as the "Ladies of the Vale" and are unique amongst mediaeval cathedrals with these features. Truro and St Mary's in Edinburgh are Gothic Revival and Lincoln lost its 3<sup>rd</sup> spire in a storm 1000 years ago. Lichfield also lost its 3<sup>rd</sup> spire in the Civil War but Charles II funded its rebuild after the restoration.



Dating from 1249, various changes and additions have been made. More recently the entire West front was remodelled by Sir Gilbert Scott and is probably the most ornate frontage of any Cathedral in Britain, and more recent cleaning and restoration work has revealed it in all its glory. The impressive additions continue in the interior with the magnificent Flemish stained glass added in 1803

There are further revelations inside with a permanent exhibition of items from the Staffordshire Hoard. The intricacy of the craftsmanship that went into these items is amazing yet much of it was defaced before it was discarded.

Following a lunch break we proceeded to the National Memorial Arboretum (*right*) where we were treated to an



introduction telling the story behind the creation of this amazingly successful venture from conception to realisation in just four years from 1996 to the Millennium. Based on the site of redundant gravel works it was levelled and planted with the help of generous grants from the Lottery fund and others. It is a unique site in that it provides an opportunity for any organisation whose members were killed during their contribution to the war effort, whether military or civilian, to be remembered.

A short tour covered just a few of the memorials after which we were free to seek out those in more distant locations. For me the magnificent Airborne memorial was the most impressive, but the most memorable was probably the “Shot at Dawn” site, dedicated to



those who had been killed by our own troops for “desertion”, and situated at the point on the site where the first rays of the sun alighted at dawn. All these victims have since been pardoned; we can never fully appreciate the mental torment so many young men were subjected to in that dreadful conflict.



The whole experience was most thought provoking and memorable.

### “Meet at Dawn - unarmed”

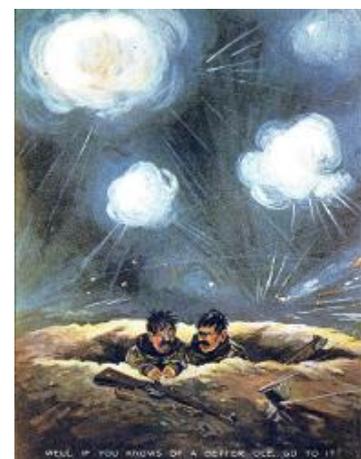
Our speaker, Andrew Hamilton, was able to recount the story of the iconic Christmas truce of 1914 from the account in his grandfather’s diary. It was a fascinating description of trench life in the early days of WWI, written as it happened, then transcribed in neat handwriting and later he had it typed.

Robert Hamilton was born in Tiddington near Stratford and enlisted as a regular soldier in the Warwickshire regiment. He married Renie Mordaunt and they lived at Walton Hall while enjoying the life of an Army officer – he had retained the menu of one of their regimental dinners.

At the start of the conflict they set off to France from Folkestone, all wearing their caps – metal helmets were not introduced until 1916 – where the job of the Warwickshires was to push the Germans back and stop them getting to Paris. It was a mobile war at this stage and the men slept in barns with billets for the officers. In September they found some caves which accommodated over 500 troops.



Eventually they settled in for the winter near Ypres without pumps to remove flooding from the trenches. Casualties were not repatriated but eventually removed to cemeteries. Robert was a friend of Bruce Bairnsfather, a well known cartoonist depicting the ironies of trench life and Andrew showed some of his cartoons including the famous one of two soldiers in a foxhole with one saying “Well If you knows of a better ‘ole then go to it!”. He also created the character of “Old Bill”.



Christmas Day 1914 started at 6.30 without any shots being fired. The Germans wanted to talk and to “meet at dawn – unarmed” which they did half way between the trenches where they exchanged cigars and cigarettes. It was an extraordinary day with tales of candles on Christmas trees, singing exchanges and even an account of a German soldier receiving a haircut from the a British soldier!

There was no football match where Robert was located but the newspapers later recounted the event elsewhere – Germany won 3-2! The Germans spoke very good English and the troops all enjoyed a good feed of duck and plum pudding.

The officers were furious at this fraternisation but could do nothing at the time, except to ensure that it did not happen again, though there was a tale that on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1915 a dog jumped into their trench carrying a message from the Germans.

Robert returned from the Western Front in January 1915 and took up other duties in Hereford until the end of the War and of his diary. Andrew’s book ends with a chapter on his life after leaving the Army in 1919 and subsequent retirement. The book is a fitting memorial to all the soldiers killed in the war, with many of his grandfather’s acquaintances mentioned by name.

*(Note; - there is a YouTube video of the Sainsbury’s Christmas advertisement, alongside which is another video called “Sainsbury’s Christmas - the story behind our Christmas ad” which contains a short clip of Andrew Hamilton along with some shots of his grandfather’s original diary and the neatly written version. Worth a look!)*

## **Dramas in the Hall**

Last year’s one woman production was far from being the being the first play to be performed in the Hall. We now know that Stow has had a strong tradition of Amateur Dramatics over the years. The impressive scenery and productions of the St Edward’s Players in the 1940’s and 50’s have already been reported in the Autumn 2013 issue, but since then the Society has been presented with a wonderful collection of press clippings by member Mrs Margaret Robbins recounting the even more impressive range of productions from the Stow Players in the 1970’s.



A collection of press reviews from a total of 8 plays, programmes from a further 2 and a photograph from “Ladies in Retirement” (*left*) make up a valuable selection of memories to keep in our archives. The plays range from comedies to thrillers and serious drama which received some excellent reviews in the local press. Comments include “One of the best things the Stow Players have done” (Miss Letitia), “The whole cast acquitted themselves admirably” (The House on the Cliff – which also received excellent reviews for the set, decor and lighting). “The Chalk Garden” was presented at Stow on the same night that it was revived in the West End – a coincidence that could have invited critical comparisons, but the cast, it was reported, “came through with flying colours”

If there was a perception that the local press were less critical than London reviewers, this was dispelled by the insertion of the occasional adverse comment when they felt the company had not quite reached its normal high standards, which confirmed that the reviewers were genuinely appreciative and it is clear that Stow enjoyed an excellent series of entertaining productions in the Hall throughout that period.

Also included with the collection was the front page of the Journal showing this view (*right*) of filming at Chastleton in July 1972. This was for a BBC production of “The Duchess of Malfi” directed by James MacTaggart and starring Eileen



Atkins. Mrs Robbins recalls that a number of the Stow Players participated as extras, her husband was a priest and she was a lady in waiting; one of the off duty firemen from Little Rissington was the Executioner! Mrs Robbins’ husband is pictured in between the two actors in the centre of the picture wearing a cross, and Mrs Robbins is shown on the left, looking very regal and distinguished in her costume.



She also remembers the excellent catering arrangements which, to her surprise, were totally egalitarian. Apparently an enterprising elderly resident of Chastleton used to turn up for a free lunch every day!

These golden days of amateur dramatics have now passed but need to be recorded for posterity. Who knows, the tradition may yet be revived in the future!

### **Lord Nuffield and the birth of the motor industry**

Our speaker, Robert Harris, worked for Morris Motors in Cowley and his father had also worked in the motor industry so was well qualified to recount the extraordinary life of William Morris, later Lord Nuffield. William Morris never wanted his biography to be written but at least two have been published since his death 51 years ago. This talk was a wonderful opportunity to hear an authoritative and personal account of his career.

He was born on 10<sup>th</sup> October 1877 in Worcestershire. His father had worked at various jobs including a cowboy in the “wild west”, but due to poor health his parents moved back to their native Oxfordshire and William went to school there. His penchant for Engineering started with mending mechanical items in his bedroom, and then he went to work for a cycle shop repairing bicycles where he built up a name for himself among the cycling fraternity. He later borrowed £4 and set up his own cycle repair business. He was also a keen cyclist and he made a bicycle for a top cyclist of the time, Eric Pilcher, and this increased his reputation. One problem was that at the age of 16 he was unable to get credit so whenever he needed a part he used to ride to Coventry to purchase it. He belonged to Headington Cycling Club where he met his future wife.



*At this point in his life his career has barely started. There is much more to relate but space prevents the rest of his story from motor manufacturer to medical benefactor in this newsletter and the article will be continued in the Spring edition.*