



STOW & DISTRICT CIVIC SOCIETY

REGISTERED CHARITY NO 264597

SPRING NEWSLETTER

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WHAT THE SOCIETY IS ALL ABOUT

The Stow and District Civic Society promotes the history and amenities of Stow-on-the-Wold in Gloucestershire, a town with a rich heritage reaching back 4,000 years. The Society currently has over 180 members. As well as organising visits to sites of historic interest, it also sets up regular talks by historians with specialist knowledge of Stow and the surrounding area.

The stated aims of the Society are:

- To stimulate awareness of the preservation, protection and development of places of historical interest.
- To encourage high standards of planning, architecture, landscaping and amenities in our town and the surrounding district.



The Market Cross in Stow Square

“Why not come along to one of our meetings and give it a try.” – Nigel Surman, Chairman

APRIL OPEN MEETING

Storm and Spear – talk by former pilot Mike Napier



The Tornado strike/attack aircraft

When Friday night's speaker, Mike Napier woke up that morning, he was in Cairo, 2,200 miles from Stow. Most of us would have been stressed at cutting it so fine. But for Mike, it was routine. He was piloting the BA flight home. And after a safe landing at Gatwick, he was soon with us in St Edward's Hall.

Mike confessed that he finds life at the controls of a passenger plane these days a mite boring. And we could soon understand why. He spent nine years flying the Tornado, for part of that time carrying out laser-guided attacks on military targets in Iraq. Even he found it frightening at times, as he sped 100 feet above ground through mountain passes at 7 miles a minute with the prospect of enemy fire just over the next hill.

He showed us a video filmed from his cockpit on one such mission. The wows and hoops from the audience told it all. Even Mike said he got airsick.

Like many small boys, he'd wanted to be a fighter pilot when he grew up. But unlike most, he fulfilled that dream.



Mike joined the RAF in 1978, and spent three years learning his trade on a Hawk Trainer, 'the best and easiest' aircraft he said, though that comment left us earth-bound mortals wide-eyed.

The complexity of navigating the Hawk – on your own, no navigator – through changing weather conditions, at shifting altitudes, all at the speed of sound, defies understanding, especially when the G-force during a turn means your head feels four times its normal weight.



The constant danger as an RAF pilot was brought home to us when Mike told of his close friend who'd been killed – not by enemy fire – but in a mid-air collision during training.

But as often with those who face daily danger, a strand of ironic humour is often needed just to stay sane. And it popped up every so often during Mike's talk. 'We dropped four bombs then home for tea and biscuits,' he told us, and 'We bravely ran away,' all in the best traditions of the Battle of Britain pilot's wartime banter. At times, he told us, it was 'sheer fun.'

The evening too was a reminder of how much we all owe to those few who are happy to risk their lives to keep the rest of us safe.

And even fewer are those with the gift of being able to make others understand a little of the danger and excitement they've been through. Mike Napier is one of that number. And Society members showed their appreciation at the end with rousing applause.

- Derek Taylor

Gloster or Gloucestershire?



The Gloster Javelin was a world class interceptor aircraft in its day, Mike explained. But it's now nearly 50 years since it was decommissioned. Why Gloster? The Cheltenham-based aircraft factory changed its spelling in the 1920s because overseas buyers couldn't handle Gloucestershire!

COLESHILL – THE SECRET BUNKER



**Beautiful countryside
But what lies beneath?**

During this period of change in our countryside with rural villages being expanded by anonymous housing estates, it was a real pleasure this Spring to re-visit the National Trust village of Coleshill, on the county border between Faringdon and Highworth.

Very little has changed to my knowledge in the last 15-20 years and the village appears to bask in the rural pace of a farming community. But this village holds a secret that was not known about for many years. It was not until the entrance to an underground bunker fell in several years ago that it was realised that the village was a wartime training ground for Churchill's secret army, members of which were known as Auxiliers.

In 1940, following the evacuation of British troops from Dunkirk, the threat of invasion while our armed forces were weakened, loomed large and Winston Churchill decided that we needed to form a resistance movement before the event. Selected members of the local Home Guard would volunteer to hide underground in secret bunkers, wait until invasion forces had passed on and the fighting had stopped, and then emerge to commit acts of sabotage against the invading forces.

This was a very hazardous undertaking and the life span of the auxiliers was reckoned in terms of a week to 10 days before they were discovered.

Local men were recruited who knew the local landscape and could live off the land, and it is estimated that up to 1000 bunkers were created around the country, mostly concentrated around the South and East coasts. The location of some of these bunkers is probably still unknown as the auxiliers often took their secret to the grave.

The bunkers were constructed by burying a Nissen type hut in woodland, and constructing a brick access chute with a ladder and blast walls to minimise damage from a hand grenade dropped into it. The entrance was covered with a metal tray filled with earth and leaves to match the woodland floor, and an escape tunnel provided at the other end for emergency evacuation. Conditions would have been hard indeed with some 6 or 7 men in such a confined and damp place with no washing facilities and a chemical toilet. Fortunately they were not needed but this does not detract from the bravery of the volunteers who were prepared to sacrifice their lives in such basic conditions.

Coleshill village decided that this aspect of their history should be commemorated, and undertook the creation of a replica bunker in the village itself, to protect the original bunker from deterioration by large numbers of visitors. This was one of their Open Days, when the bunker is open to enable the

public to experience the conditions which the men would have faced. When the men were sent for training they were told to report to the Post Office in Highworth, where Mabel the postmistress would ring the secret number to arrange for their transportation to Coleshill, a very remote village in those days.

On arrival they would report to the guardhouse, which still stands at the entrance to the Coleshill House Estate (the house having been sadly destroyed by fire in the 1950's). It has been carefully but simply renovated to replicate to some extent the rather rudimentary wartime conditions, but with interesting information boards and photos of the volunteers. Unknown to many people is the fact that during the Cold War, the Home Guard was re-established, having been stood down in the latter part of WWII when the threat of invasion had reduced.

Having had the opportunity to visit the original bunker soon after it was first discovered, I think the village has done a wonderful job in recreating it, and to sit in it by the light of a few candles was very atmospheric. As the guide said, the only thing they haven't reproduced is the smell from unwashed bodies etc., for which we were grateful!

To add further interest to the Open Day, the restored watermill was in operation powered by the original wheel, though the buckets have had to be replaced. This was again a wonderful glimpse of the days before engines or electricity, and the warm and sunny day was rounded off by a visit to the village shop for an ice cream.

- Tim Norris

Note: - Further Open Days are scheduled throughout the summer and details can be obtained from the NT website for Coleshill, Oxfordshire. It's well worth the extra few miles.

STOW COTSWOLD FESTIVAL

‘Watch out, watch out, there’ll be plenty of sheep about!’



The Stow Civic Society’s involvement this year in the Stow Cotswold Festival has now started with the launch at Stow Primary School yesterday of our model “sheep decorating” competition. Over 150 models of ceramic money-box sheep, kindly sponsored by Newlands of Stow, were delivered to the school and details of the competition explained to the pupils at their Assembly by Head Teacher, Mrs. Rebecca Scutt; this was received with great excitement and enthusiasm by pupils and teachers alike! Pupils were encouraged to decorate their own individual model sheep using all types of materials and to give their sheep a suitable name. The models will be completed prior to the Stow Cotswold Festival on Saturday 15th July and displayed at Newlands for judging the week before. Prizes will be awarded and the models then re-located and displayed in St. Edward’s Hall on Festival day for all to see and admire.

Make sure “ewe” don’t miss them!



FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Open meetings are held in St Edward's Hall and start at 7.00pm with tea, coffee and a chance to chat.

Friday, 2nd June 2017 – Open Talk & AGM, St. Edward's Hall please note this starts at 7.30 p.m. followed at 8.00 p.m. by:-

"The Lion of the Cotswolds." Stow resident and President of the Moreton Show, Steve Parkes talks to us about the iconic breed of Cotswold sheep, the Cotswold Lion.

(This is a change from the advertised programme. Derek Taylor's talk, "Who do the English think they are?" a history of English national identity, will now be on Friday 24th November)

Wednesday 9th August 2017 – Organised Visit – Chavenage House, near Tetbury

We're arranging a private visit to this beautifully-preserved Elizabethan Manor House which includes a personal tour given by one of the family. Records of Chavenage estate exist from before the Norman Conquest; the present house was purchased by Edward Stevens in 1564 and the main buildings remain virtually unchanged to this day. Chavenage House is famed for its many relics and tales from the English Civil War when Nathaniel Stevens, MP for Gloucestershire, supported the Parliamentary cause. Today the house is a favourite location for filmmakers and has featured in many films and TV programmes, most recently as Trenwith House in "Poldark" for the BBC.

Organised Visit - Outing to Old Campden House and Chipping Campden

This trip is being scheduled for later in the year. More details to follow shortly.

This visit follows up on our talk in February on Old Campden House by Mary Gray and we are delighted that Mary has agreed to take us on a guided tour of the House. We will also include a visit to the famous Hart Silversmiths where silver is still hand-crafted in the very same workshop used by C.R. Ashbee's silversmiths from 1902 to 1908.

Please keep an eye open early next year for confirmation of dates and booking forms for the above visits.



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Registered charity no 264597

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