

THE 113th MEETING OF AYNHO HISTORY SOCIETY HELD AT THE VILLAGE HALL, AYNHO  
ON WEDNESDAY 27th MARCH 2019

Present:- Keith McClellan – Chairman  
Peter Cole – Secretary

1) Secretary's Report

Peter said he had finished sorting out the accounts for 2017 and 2018, but not yet printed them. As soon as the clocks have gone forward an hour he will be starting his free tours of Aynho Village. He already has one tour booked in April when a group will be coming, and it is hoped to take them over the ground floor of Aynhoe Park House as well.

2) Keith introduced **Ruth Peters** to talk about **The Romantic Decline – Preserving Chastleton House.**

Ruth said that she is the Senior House Steward at Chastleton, and other National Trust properties in West Oxfordshire. She has been in the job, which is based at Chastleton, for two years. Some people who help visitors in the various rooms there have been doing the job for 20 years, and they still say that they are learning things about the House. The Trust's way of maintaining Chastleton is quite different to most other properties.

Chastleton is a square house built in 1607 by Walter Jones, an up and coming lawyer in the early 1600s. The land had originally been held by Robert Catesby of the Gunpowder Plot fame, but the house there had been demolished to prevent it becoming a shrine to the Plotters, and Walter used his family's money from a former wool merchant business to buy the land and build the House.

He married well and his wife came with a good dowry, but later generations of the family didn't match his ability to make money, so the house remained virtually unchanged since Jacobean times (during the reign of James I). The last inhabitant of Chastleton was Barbara Clutton-Brock. She was the last owner of the line, and she moved in with her husband Alan. He was an art critic for the Times, an artist and wrote many books, and became a trustee for the National Gallery in London. Alan died after 15 years, so she was alone in Chastleton. The family had become more and more impoverished, and there just wasn't any money to alter the House. Barbara managed to re-roof part of it herself where necessary, and she completely rewired it as best she could.

She was sitting by a window one day, when she saw that neighbours were starting to build something awful nearby. She was horrified that this part of Oxfordshire might be ruined, so she wrote to a newspaper, saying "What would the National Trust think, as I am hoping to leave it to them?". The Trust heard of this and immediately became interested. Martin Drury contacted her, but learned that she had no intention of giving it to them, but she would be prepared to sell it. After much discussion the Trust eventually agreed a figure to buy it, but in the meantime Barbara sent a lot of antiques off to a local auction house. Martin was so sure that the Trust was determined to buy the House that he went to the auction & bid on almost every item and bought most of them. So virtually everything was eventually displayed in its place, and if you come to visit you will see all the original furniture. We call that an indigenous collection. Martin says "What is unique in Chastleton? It plays no part in English history, so why was so much spent on it?". Ruth said that although the House has lived through many periods of English history, it has never been the main place, but it has always been in the background of most historical events. It has not been grand or palatial but it has always been a liveable house, where you can imagine people going through historical changes. The rules of the game of croquet were made here for example where the game first started. It perfectly captures the scene of benign neglect, a bit like a secret garden. Usually when you go round this type of house it is all spick and span, but here it is completely different.

Today thanks to Downton Abbey we have this idea of upstairs and downstairs, but here it is all downstairs, as the family never had any money to employ servants. So you really get a sense of how people worked and lived.

We have some very interesting rooms, we have a fascinating collection of domestic textiles. Some National Trust properties have grand tapestries and ornate rooms. We have tapestries, some dating back to the 1500s and they are really beautiful, but we also have some lower-level domestic tapestries, a pre-cursor to wallpaper, we have wall hangings, and we have something called a doornick, which is French linen woven to make a green wall covering. We have bone stitch – Irish zigzag style wall coverings.

In most Trust houses old tapestries were regularly replaced, but here we still have the originals.

When we talk about preserving Chastleton and the look of the building, it is very consciously kept as Barbara left it. So as you walk round it has a rather dusty look, with cobwebs draped from the ceiling, and this has been a very conscious decision by the Trust. This is known as the “Spirit of the Place”. Each National Trust property has its own Spirit.

There is another document: “The Statement of Significance”. This basically denotes the reason why the Trust acquired the property, i.e. it is the best example of whatever it is, and/or details of the owner if the person who had lived there was special.. Chastleton is unlike any other Trust property due to the perspective of those people who were involved in its acquisition. Martin Drury set down what he was expecting – As light a hand as possible is to be laid on Chastleton in order to arrest 150 years of decay, and repair rather than renew. All the wooden panelling should be preserved, wholesale decoration should be avoided, plaster should be preserved, and we should avoid changing the character of the House and gardens.

So the gardens are not perfectly managed. The topiary is not clipped absolutely immaculately.

When they bought the House in 1991 there wasn't wholesale redecoration, but they had to spend six years repairing the roof, making it waterproof, and rip out Barbara's rewiring and replace it with something that could cope with lots of staff and visitors. They gave structural repairs to beams, though there is still some death watch beetle and woodworm damage. There are four individual outbuildings outside the main square House. They had to take out and clean and catalogue all Barbara's furniture, etc. and all this took six years to complete.

Chastleton is closed for four months during the winter for any works, cleaning and further categorisation to be done. We are always closed on Mondays and Tuesdays, so we are open on Wednesdays to Sundays from 1pm for 5 hours. We get about 45,000 visitors a year, which is plenty. Almost unheard of in National Trust houses, there is no shop and no café at the House, but the nearby Church volunteers do run a tea and cakes stall just outside the Church, or in the entrance if wet, for visitors to buy.

The grassy car park is deliberately some way away, but cars with disabled passengers can obtain a special permit which allows a few cars to park closer.

Ruth showed photos of some of the rooms including one of the secret hidden room in which a woman had hidden Catesby immediately after the Gunpowder Plot. King's men had searched the house, but had not found the room. They had decided to stay there that night, so the woman had plied them with food and drink laced with laudanum. When they had fallen sound asleep Catesby had fled, and the men had to leave empty handed.

One of the treasures in the library is the Juxton Bible. This is the one that is said to have been used by Bishop William Juxton who accompanied King Charles I on the day he was beheaded in 1649. William Juxton lived at Little Compton, not far from Chastleton, and when the Juxton family died out the Bible was given to the Jones family.

Another treasure in the House is a special set of drinking glasses. These were a Jacobite tumbler and glasses beautifully engraved with roses and they were used to toast the King across the water. These could have been fatal for the family if discovered at a time when Catholics were hated people, so they were lucky to have survived.

Pictures were shown of the Irish bone stitch zigzag wall covering, and the linen doornick, then the Cavalier room next door to the secret room. There is a special quilted bedspread, which took a lady 15 years to make, and cost her her sight. Another picture was of the Dairy Court in the centre of the house, where you can see boarded up windows, where Walter building the house didn't have as much money as he had expected, so he didn't glaze them.

Ruth's team do a full clean of tapestries in the winter months, strip the beds and clean the sheets and blankets. Everything is cleaned from top to bottom, and put back in place. There is even an electric hot water bottle that Barbara used. The heat and humidity is carefully controlled to ensure that there is no damp which would encourage death watch beetles for example. Lights and curtains are used to ensure that there is just enough light for visitors to see things, but not too much sun to fade tapestries, etc.

Sometimes new things are bought, such as the Sheldon tapestries. These were in the House until 1919, when the lady before Barbara found that they were valuable so sold the set of four. They were tracked down and purchased. Made locally in 1590 they have wonderful colours. Another purchase just a few weeks ago was a water colour by Joseph Nash of the Great Chamber here.

There are over two thousand books in the Library and a similar number in store, so we have a team of book conservationists who clean every book.

We are a registered museum and we have to maintain museum standards.

Ruth ended by saying that she hoped everyone would come or return to Chastleton.

Keith thanked Ruth for a fascinating talk.

### 3) Forthcoming Meetings: -

Wednesday 24th April – The Sheep That Eat Men by Martin Sirot-Smith (in costume)

Wednesday 29th May – Victorian Inventors and Inventions of Northamptonshire by Jon-Paul Carr

Wednesday 26th June – The Life and Times of the Culworth Gang by David Hewitt