

MINUTES OF THE 22nd MEETING OF AYNHO HISTORY SOCIETY HELD AT AYNHO VILLAGE HALL ON WEDNESDAY 30TH SEPTEMBER 2009

Present: – Brian Reynolds - Chairman
Peter Cole – Secretary.

At least 30 other members and guests attended.

1 Correspondence

The Secretary reported on a meeting of the Cartwright of Aynho Archive Trust. Sufficient money had been raised not just to save the Archive, but also to employ an archivist to list it all before putting the most interesting items it on the internet. He has now finished examining it, and has prepared a list of the contents.

The Secretary read out correspondence that had been received about the exact name of our Church. Some believed this to be just “Saint Michael’s”, others believed it to be “Saint Michael and All Angels”. A 1913 book about churches suggested that it had been given a dedication as “St. Michael the Archangel” in 1512. The Lincolnshire Church Archives Office had been unable to provide any information about the name.

Peter said that he had been to a meeting of the Cartwright Archive Trust three weeks ago at the Northampton Records office, and he had seen a drawing there by the architect, Edward Wing, which superimposed the new Church building on the old one, which merely referred to it as “Saint Michael’s”.

2 Chairman’s and Finance Reports

Brian said that there was £1534.55 in the Accounts. This includes £400 donated by John Fulcher to provide a seat to commemorate the work carried out by the British Army in Aynhoe Park during the Second World War. It was suggested that if possible this should be sited on the green outside the Cartwright Hotel. Brian said that alternatively a memento could be set up in the Village Hall. An invoice was approved for £91.42 for miscellaneous purchases, mostly Aynho-related artefacts. The former Cartwright Arms sign will be repainted in the appropriate colours’

Next month is the AGM, and Brian proposed that rather than a presentation, we should have a general chitchat, with wine and nibbles, and all the various artefacts we have amassed should be on display. This was agreed. Keith McClellan said that we should set up a fund to reimburse expenses that anyone incurred in researching a topic for presentation. Brian said that anyone could claim this out of petty cash.

We have had a donation of £25 from David Spencer Percival, who wanted to buy a book on Aynhoe Park. Brian had managed to supply one.

Regarding programmes from other History Societies, Brian will arrange for any received to go onto the website.

3. Iford Manor & Peto Garden Visit

Brian reminded everyone of the arrangements for this visit.

4. Aynho Tunnels Project Update

Brian Reynolds

A company called Zetica Ltd carried out a geophysical study of part of the area without charge. If we wished them to proceed, they would plot where all known tunnels are, but this would incur a large fee.

Brian has written to Time Team, to ask them if they have included us in the 2010 programme, but so far there has been no reply. *

5. England’s Canals – Past & Present

Peter Cole

Peter explained that he had been a canal boater for the last 15 years, having taken early retirement and bought a narrowboat, which he and his wife Rosa had called "Petrosa". After three years on the River Wey near Guildford, they decided to move here in 1997, to be nearer the centre of the country.

He started off detailing the early history of canals, from the first small one created by the Duke of Bridgewater in 1769 to transport his coal into the centre of Manchester, and Brindley's Grand Cross to link the River Trent in the east with the Mersey in the west, with branches to the River Severn at Stourport, and to the Thames at Oxford, via Coventry. This 93-mile canal with over 70 locks, and a 1¾-mile tunnel under Harecastle Hill set nationally agreed standards, where all the locks were 72 feet long and 7 feet wide. Boats therefore had to be a maximum of 70 feet long by 6 foot 10 inches wide, and thus we have the narrowboats whose dimensions have remained unchanged to this day. The main consideration for this was the difficulty in cutting the tunnel any wider than this, and the saving of water, which narrow locks would provide.

Each canal had to be authorised by an Act of Parliament, to set out the route, to enable land to be compulsorily purchased if necessary, and to lay down the tolls that could be charged for the carriage of coal, timber, etc. By 1790 this whole scheme and all those canals had been completed, so that at last goods had a through route from Liverpool to London. Vast quantities of coal, timber, iron, stone, grain, wool, etc. were transported to factories, and finished goods were sent to major towns and ports. These canals paved the way for the Industrial Revolution to take place.

The Oxford is a canal of two (or to be more precise three) separate and completely different parts. The North Oxford Canal had only 4 locks, and was considerably straightened and shortened from 36 to 22 miles, to stave off competition from a new canal, which threatened to cut down the distance between London and Birmingham significantly. The southern part retained all its foibles and its rural character, and has become one of the most popular touring routes in the country.

Probably the most noteworthy section however is the 5½-mile quite wide and almost straight stretch in the middle. When the new canal with double-width locks, the Grand Union Canal, was finally proposed to run from near Birmingham to Brentford on the Thames around 1805, (a sort of motorway of the canals) the proposers wanted to use this short stretch as part of their scheme. The South Oxford Canal realised that it was bound to lose a great deal of trade to the new one, so their directors managed to get a clause written into the new Act, which guaranteed compensation for its own loss of trade, in the form of outrageously high tolls for all Grand Union boats using this short stretch. By this means it was able to pay high dividends to its shareholders for many years. In the year 1793 canal mania hit Britain, with no fewer than 21 new canals agreed. The reason for this was that entrepreneurs realised the full potential of canals as a licence for shareholders to print money, as a single horse could easily pull a fully loaded boat on water carrying 50 tons, which was 25 times as much as a horse and cart. So the frenzy of share dealing was similar to the dotcom frenzy of the 1990s. The original shares could only be bought at the initial meeting to propose a canal, and the meeting to build the Grand Union as a more direct route from Birmingham to London had to be transferred from an inn to a church as so many attended. The promoters were asking for £250,000 (an enormous sum in those days) but a million pounds was promised there and then. Newspaper reports of that time mentioned shares that had cost £140 each were soon selling for over £1100.

Pickfords was one of the first businesses to make use of the canal system, with depots around the country. Gangs of labourers, known as navigators or navvies, armed only with picks, shovels, and wheelbarrows toiled long hours to construct not only the canals and their locks, but also bridges, aqueducts and the first long tunnels built in Britain.

Most of these schemes succeeded, and some paid handsome dividends to the shareholders for quite a few years. In the case of the Oxford Canal, after a slow start the dividend climbed steadily in the early 1800s, and reached 34% in 1828, and 30% in 1838, mainly due to the astuteness of securing good tolls for the Grand Union stretch. With the coming of the railways it inevitably fell to 20% by 1848, but it was still paying over 8% in both 1858 and 1868.

Peter then went on to describe features of the South Oxford Canal in detail from Napton through Cropredy to Banbury.

Then came a bit more history. The canals flourished until the mid 1800s, when the coming of the railway led to a steady decline. There were improvements with the introduction of the diesel

engine to replace the horse, but despite this the decline continued until the end of the Second World War, by which time only a handful of companies were still operating. Successive governments were happy to let the canals fall into disuse, as they could then save the cost of maintaining them.

Luckily all was not lost, as in 1939 a newly married writer, Tom Rolt, and his wife resolved to buy a narrowboat and convert it to a craft they could live on and escape the rat-race by touring parts of the canal system. He found the boat he was looking for here at Banbury, and fitted most of it out himself with the assistance of Tooleys boatyard. Rolt was the first person ever to have a fixed bath installed on a narrowboat, and he had other novel features as well. He and his wife spent the best part of a year touring large parts of the canal system, meeting and befriending many of the old boatmen and their families, and recording details of the life and times of that day. In his spare time Tom Rolt wrote a book about his travels and the way in which he feared that canal life would disappear, which was eventually published in 1944. A fellow canal enthusiast, Robert Aickman, was so taken with the book that he arranged a meeting with Rolt, and as a direct result they formed the Inland Waterways Association, which fought the government tooth and nail to prevent waterways being closed.

In 1955 the Government of the day declared that the Oxford Canal was one of those that would be left to decay and finally be filled in. The I W A called a meeting at Banbury Town Hall in June 1955, which was attended by 400 people. John Betjeman was chairman, and many M.P.s and dignitaries attended. It was resolved that this intention to abandon the local canal should be opposed strenuously, and both local and national feeling was so great that the Government eventually backed down, and the canal was saved.

The very long winter freeze of 1962/63 finally brought about the end of commercial carrying, but during the 1970s and 80s pleasure cruising really took off. Due to the I W A's efforts many canals were saved, and derelict ones restored, especially with the introduction of lottery funding, and this is continuing to this day. When Peter first moved to this area in 1997, Banbury almost ignored the canal, but with the general regeneration of canals of the late 1990s, and the coming of Castle Quay, they have made a feature of both the canal and the new museum.

Peter then went on to describe the features of the canal at Aynho and southwards to Oxford. This included the distinctive lift bridges, a lock cottage at Somerton that is over ½ a mile from the nearest road, and a tithe barn right by the canal at Upper Heyford.

For 16 years from 1907 the Oxford Portland Cement Company quarried limestone and produced cement at Kirtlington Quarry. Near Thrupp is a railway bridge, and close by you can still see the stumps of an earlier one, where on Christmas Eve 1874 there was a terrible accident, when a crowded train left the track and fell into the canal. 34 people were killed, and 64 were injured. At Oxford there are two possible routes to the Thames, one via Duke's Cut, if you are going upstream towards Lechlade, and the other at Isis lock, the last one on the canal, which leads downstream.

Life for the working boatmen was very hard. They were not well paid, and living conditions were difficult. On a 70 ft boat, the front 60 feet formed the cargo hold, and the whole family had only a cabin 10 ft long by 7 ft wide in which to live, eat and sleep.

Finally Peter went on to explain that if anyone wanted to hire a narrowboat for a holiday they didn't have to go on an out and back route, since there are no fewer than eight rings or circular journeys. He listed these with maps and photographs taken from his travels.

Due to his late wife's illness he decided to sell his narrowboat in 2005, and he now has a small dinghy with an electric motor, so that he now enjoys travelling the canals in absolute silence, and doing a lot of fishing.

6. Forthcoming Meetings

October 28th only	A.G.M.	Members
November 27th	The Church at Middleton Cheney	Bob Hunter
December 2010	No meeting	

7 of 10 meetings have now been arranged; details by the end of 2009

* Item 4

The very next day after the meeting Brian had a response from Jim Mower of Time Team. It read:
“As per usual we won't start development for next year until at least December.
At that time I go through everything and we make up a short list. If your project makes
this list I'll get in touch. If you don't hear from me I'm afraid it means you didn't make it. “