

MINUTES OF THE 58th MEETING OF AYNHO HISTORY SOCIETY HELD AT THE VILLAGE HALL, AYNHO ON WEDNESDAY 29th MAY 2013

Present: - Rupert Clark - Chairman & Treasurer
Peter Cole - Secretary.

1. Chairman and Treasurer's Report

Rupert Clark

Rupert outlined the Society's programme for the next few months. He then asked Keith to say a few words.

Keith said that he wanted to express his thanks to Peter for all his efforts in not only getting and setting up the formal part of the Cartwright Archive Exhibition from the Northampton Records Office, but also for the amount of time he had spent in searching through the archive to find interesting items to bring back to show in addition. This was agreed.

2. Secretary's Report

Peter Cole

Peter said that he had been very pleased with the response to the Exhibition. He had thought that if we could get 100 people from our small village it would have been well worthwhile, but in fact we had over 120 adult visitors, plus quite a few children. He had been particularly happy to see an unexpected guest, William Cartwright-Hignett, Elizabeth's son, who had had lunch at the Cartwright Hotel, had spotted the sign outside, and came in and introduced himself.

All the items he had photographed from the Archive had been laminated, so that they could be used again and again, and this would now form part of our own permanent archive. He hoped to show them again one evening soon in the Village Hall for the benefit of anyone who had been unable to see them.

3. "Sex, Drink and Death in the 17th Century"

Mr Tim Healey

In the 17th century everybody drank ale because the quality of drinking water was so poor, especially in towns due to pollution. Milk wasn't drunk much, as it tended to go off quickly, so it was mostly used for butter or cheese. So the classic drink was old English ale, made from malt, yeast and water. Beer came in during the Tudor period, being ale with the addition of hops; it was thought to be a "filthy" Dutch innovation. Hops were more of a preservative, so it kept better. English tankards were mostly made of pewter for the rich; others used leather or wood, lined with pitch. Serious drinkers used Black Jacks or Bombards, in effect a leather jug, which were so large or lumpy that French visitors referred to them drinking out of their boots.

The classic English Inn was where most went to drink. It became a leisure centre, with games like cards, skittles, prize-fights, exhibitions of deformed people, and menageries of exotic animals.

Today many pubs are called the Bear or the Cock, a legacy of the days when bear-baiting or cock-fighting were commonplace.

Ale houses were often run by women. Anglo-Saxon wives traditionally brewed the ale for domestic use, and often placed a holly branch outside the door to indicate that her ale was fresh and she had a surplus to sell. Ale went off quite quickly, in this way an income could be made. They only died out when beer made from hops, which kept much longer, was produced in large quantities in barrels by inns, which could then undercut the wives due to bulk purchasing.

A tavern in the 17th century was a bit more upmarket, since they sold wine and sherry, which had to be imported.

An Inn offered a bed for the night, and was used in particular by long-distance coachmen. Coaching inns sprang up on popular routes between large towns, and not long after them came highwaymen. Captain Hind was well-known in Oxfordshire as one. They usually stationed themselves at the top of a hill, where the horses were at their slowest and therefore easier to stop. There were even some lady highwaymen, Katherine Fanshaw being one example.

This leads nicely on to the subject of sex. This was something that was endlessly explored in the broadsheet ballads. These were quite long, and covered all human life such as would be found in the News of the World recently. It was a great way of disseminating sensational news. One of the main themes was love. There was a whole industry of bawdy ballads, most very saucy, but as they had to pass a censor, they used a lot of double entendres.

Alehouses were quite common places for people to get married. You may be surprised to know that in these religious times, a high proportion of couples preferred to have a civil ceremony.

Samuel Pepys's diaries show that he was a serial predator on women.

Edicts of the day were that what a husband owned was his own, but what a wife owned belonged to her husband. However popular songs of the time suggest that in many households, it was the wife who wore the britches, and she was often more lustful and sex-obsessed than her husband.

Maytime was when all sorts of frolics went on. The Puritans of course detested this sort of thing.

About the worst thing that could happen to a young lady was that she would conceive a child, and then be deserted by the father. This was an enormous social stigma.

Between 30 and 50% of brides who went up the aisle were pregnant at the time. The reason for this is that in those days the ceremony of engagement (known as hand fasting, because they would hold hands and have a ribbon entwined round them, and then stated their intention to marry) was considered more important than marriage itself. They would then do a little "preliminary examination" to ensure that they were compatible with one another. If the bride was then pregnant when she married, this was considered no great stigma.

One of the reasons why there are so many ballads about lusty young wenches and decrepit old men with young wives is because due to the Civil War; so many young men were slain, that there were far more women than men around afterwards.

Although there were no large-scale brothels outside London, bawdy houses were alehouses where additional services were on offer in many places. Any ensuing children were brought up in the family, so bastardy rates were relatively low then.

Ballads were written to well-known tunes, so that anyone could easily sing them.

Condoms were first introduced in the 1660s and 1670s. Made usually of fish gut, they were advertised as "instruments of safety for gentlemen of intrigue".

Charles II set a standard of profligacy few of his subjects could match, having at least 12 illegitimate children. One of his mistresses was Nell Gwynn, the Barbara Windsor of her day. She was the typical rags to riches girl, but very loyal and witty with it. Once, when faced with a jeering mob, who had mistaken her for her rival, Louise de Kerouaille, she put her head out of the carriage and said: "Good people. You are mistaken. I am the protestant whore!"

John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, was one of King Charles' courtiers. He was a poet, a drunkard, and a libertine. He died age 33, from alcohol and various venereal diseases, but not before undergoing a deathbed conversion to religion.

Which brings us to the subject of death. This was everywhere in the 17th century. For the first time the King James Bible had been translated into English. One unfortunate man, Mr Baker, produced a Bible, which unfortunately had a misprint that stated "Thou shalt commit adultery", so copies were quickly withdrawn, Graveyards became more democratic in that previously the rich had been buried inside churches, with great stone memorials. From this time however anyone could have a stone memorial in the church graveyard.

One of the great themes was the omnipresence of death and the suddenness with which it might strike rich and poor alike. There was plague, fire, and war, particularly the Civil War that produced many casualties on both sides, although fire and diseases outnumbered those killed in battle.

The big death, that really shocked the nation, was the execution of Charles I. None of the official executioners wanted to do the job, but eventually a person was found, who agreed to do it for £100, wearing a mask, so that his identity would never be known. Thousands present gave a great groan as he was beheaded.

Malefactor's bodies were displayed on gibbets, as a warning. There was a lot of superstition. In England witches were never burned, they were hanged. According to historical records two thirds of cases of people reported as witches were actually dismissed in the courts as being just neighbour disputes.

The plague doctor wore a cape topped with a facemask and bird beak, which was supposed to act as a sort of gas mask to reduce infection, and large eyepieces to ward off evil spirits.

The Great Fire of London apparently only caused about 8 deaths, although there was massive damage to buildings.

Death for many was just a gateway to a better life.

In response to questions Mr Healey said that civil marriages were more likely in towns, but in small villages or parishes marrying in church was the norm.

Although in Oxford the Puritans abolished church organists, and college choirs, they didn't shut down country dancing. Cromwell himself was a music lover.

Rupert said that he understood that at the beginning of the century there was very little privacy, as all the rooms in a large house were open, and you often had to go through other rooms to get to your bed. Later on this changed so that people had their own rooms going off a long corridor. In the royal palace however as many people as possible crowded in when a child was born, to confirm that it had not been changed if it were a girl or in some way disabled.

Regarding divorce, this was very hard to get.

Young couples were almost expected to get together and experiment before marrying. This was because at any level people were looking for progeny. They therefore wanted to ensure that the man was not impotent, and that the wife was not frigid. Even in Puritan households there was such a thing as a bundling board. With the full knowledge of the parents, the prospective couple would spend a night in bed with a long thin board between them, so that they could be certain that they would be able to live in the same bed together. The main thing always was that if you got a girl pregnant, you had to marry her; the Parish did not want to feed any unnecessary mouths. There were occasions when unmarried mothers would be forced over the parish boundary to give birth. Vagrants could also be whipped so as to encourage them to move on to another parish. In a small village the parish controlled your life, affecting every aspect of it.

4. Forthcoming meetings

June 26th "What Archaeology is all about"

Mr David Jennings

July 31st History and Tour of Friars Well. Members only, or by prior arrangement.

Mr and Mrs R Sermon