

MINUTES OF THE 72nd MEETING OF AYNHO HISTORY SOCIETY HELD AT THE VILLAGE HALL, AYNHO ON WEDNESDAY 29th OCTOBER 2014

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

1. Chairman and Treasurer's Report

Sadly the Society has not been able to buy one of the WW1 remembrance ceramic poppies. However the Society will support the renovation of the village War Memorial.

2. Secretary's Report

The records of the seven Aynho old families have now almost all been sorted into generations.

3. A History of Ditchley Park Presented by Mr Michael Montagu, Bursar of Ditchley Park

This is the story of Ditchley Park then and now. Sir Henry Lee bought the estate in 1580, it remained in the family for almost 200 years. Queen Elizabeth visited the then Tudor house in 1592. Her visit was commemorated by a portrait, now hanging in the National Portrait Gallery. One of the later Lees, also Sir Henry, was awarded the hereditary title of Baronet by King James I. Edward Henry, the son of the 4th Baronet became the first Earl of Litchfield. He married Charlotte Fitzroy, the illegitimate daughter of King Charles II and his mistress Barbara Villiers. The 2nd Earl arranged for the present house to be built in 1722. The Viscounts Dillon inherited the house from 1776 to 1932. In 1932 financial problems forced the sale of the house.

Until 1949 it was owned by the American Tree family. Both born in America, they came to England and married. A wealthy couple, they were famous in the 1930s for their society balls. Ronald Tree became an M.P. in 1933, and was sympathetic to Churchill's concern about the menace of Hitler. Churchill first came to Ditchley in 1937. He fell in love with the place and became a regular visitor. During the early years of the World War 2 his advisors told him that he should not stay at Chequers or Chartwell on full moon-lit nights, as their long straight drives made them easy targets for German bombers, so he used to sleep there regularly. The Dressing Room became his personal study. He often had important visitors – Lend-Lease deal between the US and UK was substantially negotiated during visits to the house. On another occasion, the Duke of Hamilton came to Ditchley to advise Churchill that Rudolph Hess had landed on his Scottish estate. A bust of Churchill in the garden unveiled in 1994 marks his visits.

Finally the house was sold to Sir David Wills of Wills cigarettes fame. He realised the importance of Anglo-American relations, so in 1958 he set up the Ditchley Foundation to further this aim.

The grounds total about 290 acres, with a small lake and a four mile drive leading south-east towards Blenheim Palace. The name Ditchley comes from Grim's Ditch, which runs through the estate, and then to Blenheim.

The cost of building the house was £9,000 in 1722, equivalent to eight million pounds today. It was designed by James Gibbs, and most of the actual work was by Francis Smith. In the White Drawing Room the second Lord Litchfield gave pride of place to his grandparents, with pictures of both King Charles II and Barbara Villiers, Lady Castlemaine, by Lely. Henry Cheere provided four chimney-pieces for about £100 each, the best examples being in this room, the Velvet Room and the Green Silk Room.

Many attractive paintings exist depicting various stages of its history. One, in the Velvet Room, shows the first Sir Henry with his faithful dog. It is said that one evening the dog refused to leave

his master's bedroom when asked to do so, and later that night he seized an intruder bent on robbery.

The Great Hall is mostly the work of William Kent. He painted the ceiling design of mythological pictures, and planned the décor and furniture. Henry Flitcroft did quite a bit in that room as well, with lions and eagles incorporated into the designs. The Green Silk Room, once the smoking room, has a ceiling by Flitcroft. A portrait shows Barbara Villiers, this time with a child by another lover, thought to be John Churchill, who became the 1st Duke of Marlborough at Blenheim. The Saloon has murals of Diana and Minerva by three Italian plaster-workers. Originally there were two libraries, but these were combined into one.

On the first floor are nine fine bedrooms, including Winston Churchill's, another is known as the Queen's bedroom, since she used it to have her hair done on a short visit in 1959.

Today the Foundation exists to promote international learning and to bring together experts to discuss transatlantic and international issues. It provides talks, lectures and tours.

There are about ten conferences each year. Recently these have included: -

- How should governments best cope with the Digital Revolution?

- Brazil's place in Latin America

- The Shale Frenzy revolution and politics

- The Arab Awakening – three years on

- The future Global Role of the USA

- Post- NATO Afghanistan

- Future Military Capabilities

4. Forthcoming meetings

Wednesday 26th November AGM and "Twenty things you may not know about Aynho"