

MINUTES OF THE 91st MEETING OF AYNHO HISTORY SOCIETY HELD AT THE VILLAGE HALL, AYNHO ON WEDNESDAY 26th OCTOBER 2016

Present: - Rupert Clark – Chairman
Peter Cole – Secretary

1) Chairman's Report

The Chairman, Secretary and Committee member Keith McClellan have all indicated that they are prepared to stand next year, but if anyone would like to put themselves up for election they are asked to let Peter know at least a week before the AGM next month.

2) Secretary's Report

Peter conducted four tours of the village and two of Aynhoe Park House in addition to the Society's tour of the House last month. He had also taken the Cartwright Archive Exhibition to the South Northants Council offices in Towcester.

A half-sister of Charlotte Govier has donated a significant number of her documents to the society archive. Earlier this year we had a speaker who suggested that Stanislav Czeppe (later to be her husband) might be was one of the Polish airmen picked up in Gibraltar by the ship he was travelling on from Singapore to England in 1940. Stan's diary shows him in France when the ship in question left Gibraltar. More information will follow as the documents are examined.

“The epic search for the North West Passage”

Speaker Mr Keith Ramsay

The North West Passage is in northern Canada. Martin Frobisher, a seaman and a bit of a scoundrel, was the first person to believe that there may have been a northern sea route across the newly discovered land of America through to the new world of India and China. He found what is now Baffin Island, and noticed what he thought was a quite a lot of gold. It was actually iron pyrites, but he brought as much as he could back home, and persuaded an assayer to confirm that it was gold. With the money he got he went back with six ships and collected much more. The problem was that iron pyrites when exposed to air begins to crumble away, so his first load was starting to deteriorate. However Frobisher managed to convince the same assayer that it was gold he had collected, and he made even more money. He set off for a third time with 16 ships, returning with a reputed 1,350 tons of ore. When he got back this time he realised that he had been rumbled, so he quickly disappeared. He went off round the world, and joined his old friend Francis Drake and spent several years raiding Spanish forts and shipping. He was later redeemed by helping Drake repel the Spanish Armada in 1588.

Around 1600 Dutch explorers and Henry Hudson (who named the Bay) were trying to get to the Spice Islands to bring back cargos of spices such as nutmeg which were many times more valuable than gold. They searched for both a North West and a North East Passage but failed to beat the ice.

In 1778 Captain Cook on his third and final voyage went round South Africa and between Australia and New Zealand, then went north and mapped the northwest coast of America. His intention was to find the Passage from the other side, but beyond Alaska he was frustrated by very thick ice, and had to turn back. Aynho's William Peckover would have been one of a few hundred men who had tried to find the Passage at that time.

In the 1840s there were no wars going on, so the Navy officers were reduced to half pay. The Secretary of the Navy, Sir John Barrow, decided that they should spend time exploring the Arctic Area, including the North West Passage, and set aside a large sum of money to finance this. The idea was that they would take enough food with them to last three or four years, and lay up their strengthened ships when faced with ice. The first of these expeditions was led by William Parry. With two ships, Hecla and Griper, and later on Fury, he mapped most of the area close to the Passage, and won a prize for his efforts.

Another explorer, John Ross, visited that area, but lost his ship in the ice. The crew managed to build a house, which they called Somerset House, and they lived there for three years until they were rescued by a passing ship.

In 1839 James Clark Ross (a nephew of John) took two converted navy bomb ships, HMS Erebus and HMS Terror to Antarctica to prove that they could survive in icy conditions. These had hulls made of very strong wood, which had wide and low bottoms, so that in the icy days of winter the ships would ride up over the ice, rather than being crushed by it. They carried enough food for three or four years, although in those days the need for vegetables to avoid scurvy had not been fully understood, so many men perished.

Sir John Franklin set out to find the Passage in 1845. A former Governor of Tasmania, he set sail with both Erebus and Terror. Having got to Beechey Island, very close to where the Passage was later found, both ships got trapped in the ice. Franklin's wife became desperate when she had received no news of him that she begged the Navy to search for him. Three graves of men from his ships were found at Beechey Island, and information from local Inuits indicated that Franklin had later died in June 1847 trying to walk to a place of safety. No one survived from the expedition, probably due mainly to either lead poisoning from the ship's heating system or botulism from badly tinned food. His name is synonymous with the North West Passage, although he failed to sail the Passage as he actually traversed part of it on foot in his attempt to survive.

The ship that found out this information was HMS Resolute captained by Edward Belcher. Some years later she was caught in ice and abandoned. Found drifting by an American ship, she was recovered and restored, and eventually presented by America to Queen Victoria. After many years' service she was finally broken up, and three beautiful desks were made and presented by Britain to America. One of these is still used today in the President's Office. Robert McClure, who had been on James Clark Ross's first expedition, was the first man to go through the North West Passage with his ship HMS Investigator. He was also the first to circumnavigate the Americas, but the Investigator was then abandoned in pack ice, and after a journey by sledge he was rescued by Belcher in Resolute.

In the 1850s Lady Jane Franklin was still trying to get definite information about her husband's fate. She bought a steam yacht, Fox, and asked Francis Leopold McClintock, who was a known expert in travelling by human-hauled sleds, to lead another expedition to find out the facts. He went to Victory Point, where he found a cairn with a letter in it, which is the

only written record of the expedition. He learned eventually that the ship had been crushed by ice off King William Land, and that several men had starved to death. On his return to England he was knighted, and became an Admiral.

John Rae born in Orkney went off to be an explorer in the Canadian arctic. He learned how to live like a native of the area and use dog sleds. He should be held in similar esteem as Scott and Shackleton. He completed the map of the area, concluding that King William Land was in fact an island. With the help of Inuit guides he found proof that Franklin had died on 11th June 1847. He also found evidence of cannibalism by the crew; this was so abhorrent to the Victorians that Rae's name was blackened for even suggesting such deeds, hence his low public profile today.

Roald Amundsen the Norwegian explorer, was the first person to visit both the South Pole and the North Pole. In his ship, Gjoa, he led the first expedition to successfully transverse Canada's North West Passage from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean.

During the Second World War Henry Larsen a Canadian explorer was the first person to take his ship, St. Roch, both from west to east and from east to west through the Passage. His main job was to take supplies to isolated Canadian outposts. It was also noted that the Germans were interested in a cryolite mine in Greenland, but the St. Roch was the only boat that was suitable to ply those waters at the time.

It wasn't until the 9th September 2014 that a Canadian Victoria Strait Expedition found the remains of the Erebus, and as recently as six weeks ago on the 11th September this year a remotely operated submersible vehicle spotted the Terror 80 feet down just south of King William Island. It is in remarkably good condition.

So many tried to find the route, particularly in the Victorian era it became almost the "must do". These are all brave men who knew that there was little chance of success but guaranteed hardship. Nature did not give up its secret easily.

Forthcoming meetings

Wednesday 30th November

An update on the latest archaeological investigations in this area

Speaker Mr Stephen Wass

and **Annual General Meeting.**

Do bring any finds if you may have picked up in the area.

REMINDER, membership fees are due in January.