

MINUTES OF THE AGM & 92nd MEETING OF AYNHO HISTORY SOCIETY HELD AT THE VILLAGE HALL, AYNHO ON WEDNESDAY 30th NOVEMBER 2016

Present: - Rupert Clark – Chairman
Peter Cole – Secretary

1) Chairman's Report

Rupert recalled the year's highlights.

2) Secretary's Report

The society has received some of Jimmie Guthrie's papers covering the Aynho tunnels, the Arundel and Marmion families, flora in the Park and a collection of information sheets about archaeological discoveries in Aynho. From the latter the exact location of the Bell Inn has been identified on the Banbury Road, the centre of the Inn would have been under the second of the row of garages to the west of the first house in College Fields.

3) Annual General Meeting

The Committee was re-elected en bloc. Rupert Clark - Chair, Peter Cole - Secretary, Keith McClellan - Committee member and Ted Sutton – village hall rep. proposed by June Alsford, seconded by Keith Morgan.

Subscriptions will remain, £20 annual membership, Student £1 pa, Guest £3 per event payable from 1st January 2017.

It was unanimously agreed that the Constitution should be amended so that the November (final) meeting of the year is the AGM.

3) An update on the largest archaeological investigations in this area – Mr Stephen Wass

Having taught professionally, Stephen took a Master's degree in archaeology. He is now part time commercial archaeologist specialising in historic gardens and part researcher with Oxford University undertaking research into "Voyages to the House of Diversions - 17th century water gardens and the birth of modern science".

This project is at Hanwell, just three miles north of Banbury. Having been fascinated by the Farnborough Hall Gardens where there are lots of lakes, ponds, sluices and cascades, he read Robert Plot's – "Natural History of Oxfordshire". Within the text is mention of Hanwell's water works, almost like a modern theme park. Constructed by Sir Anthony Cope and described as a "House of Diversions". One of the features was a fountain, on a small island in a lake. A ball was tossed in the air by the jet of water from the fountain. Hanwell Castle is now a private house, when he knocked on the door the owner said that he had been waiting 20 years for someone to ask about the garden.

Across the garden there were ruins, and of course there was the island. Before any dig could commence background research is undertaken. This led to producing a Cope family tree; which ran from 1498 onwards when the first one held the coffers of the King Henry VII. He built Hanwell Castle in the latest style; it was one of the first brick-built structures in Oxfordshire.

One of the later Copes was responsible for tearing down the Banbury crosses. In the 17th century, brothers Anthony and Walter Cope were great friends of Francis Bacon, the philosopher and scientist who developed new ideas about the natural world. In the early 1600s they copied his ideas of water features in their gardens at Hanwell.

In the second half of the century the 4th Baronet Sir Anthony Cope had a watermill there that could simultaneously grind corn, polish stones and drill out cannons. He was showing off his mastery of technology. Plot wrote that he had fountains and collected fossils, but the particularly interesting thing is that at Hanwell there was the new Atlantis. Cope was really getting into some serious scientific investigations. He was one of many intellectuals gathering in Oxford, such as Hooke, Harvey, Boyle, and Christopher Wren. Those really were the inventors of modern science. They formed their own club, the Royal Society. So one of the oldest and most significant Societies in the world has close links to Hanwell, it became a laboratory of sorts.

Another 1650's occupant of Hanwell Castle was cleric and mathematician Richard Allestree. He had saved the Christ Church College valuables from the Roundheads when Oxford fell. He was also acting as a spy and probably using Hanwell Castle as a safe house while he was going round the aristocracy collecting money to fund the future King Charles II's return from France.

Also at the Castle was a German musician Thomas Baltzar, a virtuoso on the violin. This was a new instrument at the time. He had been brought to London in 1666 to play in a series of concerts, and it is said that after one of the concerts half of the violinists attending said that they would go home and smash their instruments, as they would never be able to play as well as he could. In 1668 he moved to Hanwell, gave concerts at Wadham College to among others the Oxford scientists. Music was seen then as a branch of sciences, a part of natural philosophy. We also know that there had been royal visits to Hanwell Castle.

When Sir Anthony died, his children having predeceased him and having fallen out with his brother John his widow tried to take over the estate. John had her declared insane, appointed two guardians, and kept her locked up in the castle tower. She lived for a further 40 years, so if she wasn't mad at the beginning of her internment, she may have been in the end.

The rest of the Cope family moved to Bramshill House in Hampshire so no one looked after the park. It just became overgrown and decayed. The family had no interest in Hanwell, so late in the 18th century much of the Castle was pulled down and turned into a farm. From an archaeological point of view this is excellent because in so many English gardens the design use and planting changes periodically, not so at Hanwell. There has been enormous adulation of Capability Brown recently, but from an archaeological point of view he was a vandal of the worst order for destroying so many Tudor and Stuart landscapes.

The "theme park" at Hanwell covers almost 18 acres, so from end to end it's almost ½ a mile long, in the form of a valley. There are acres of water held in place by a series of dams and many hundreds of yards of channels. All of which allowed for a multiplicity of interesting uses.

The first point of excavation was the island in the lake. This can only be done with consideration of the wild inhabitants and the restrictions of boating across the lake to the site. Although there is an engraving of a "floating ball fountain" it is not the Hanwell one. What has been uncovered

is “Sir Anthony’s bath”; it is a significant structure like a small cellar, with nicely paved floor, fairly well made stone walls and “fairy” steps (really tiny) down one end. It is a complete mystery as to how this could raise a head of water to power the fountain. It is not believed that that they would be able to construct any kind of pressurised spray in those days. It is just not practicable.

The current lake is closed by a massive dam, a terrific feat of engineering. There were various channels drawn off from this lake, but particularly interesting is a series of earthworks that were covered over by the dam and these were almost certainly the remains of medieval inter-connected fish ponds which were used for fish breeding. There was a big channel from the end of the lake; could this be the site of the multi-function mill? A feature we call the cascade consisting of a stone wall was discovered, built across the channel. It looked like the sort of construction where you had a couple of stone piers which had the space between them blocked. If the blockage was removed you can imagine a water wheel there. Unfortunately having completed the excavation several things became clear. First of all this is a single construction not two piers. In addition it was not very well built and used recycled stones. Some of these stones are massive. These are basically window stones but they can’t be from Hanwell Castle as that was brick rather than stone, so they are probably from the ruins of Banbury Castle. Certainly an old structure but may be not old enough. No other period items connected to milling have been found on site so back to square one.

Moving on further down the valley. Just down from the dam we found more earthworks.

There was a rectangular platform with channels coming in from each end, which then make a little moat around this circular island. Could that be the House of Diversions and the little island?

In 2014 two excavations were started, one on the edge of the island to try to determine what was happening. We are pretty sure that this structure was called a water parterre. It is a combination of ornamental water planting with an island all round. A sluice in the top corner was found to be of 17th century construction. Near the parterre is a terrace and above that is the castle and from this is a good view of the garden. Investigating the terrace a walkway, a summer house and some significant walling and drains have been found. Finds of wine bottles and seals can be dated to the 1670’s. The work carries on and involves much volunteer involvement across a range of tasks.

Forthcoming meetings

26th January 2017 Brackley - from the Iron Age to the Wars of the Roses, presented by Rosemary Leeper. We all know modern Brackley but what of its past?

REMINDER, annual membership fees are due in January.