

MINUTES OF THE 104th MEETING OF AYNHO HISTORY SOCIETY HELD AT THE VILLAGE HALL, AYNHO ON WEDNESDAY 28th MARCH 2018

Present: - Keith McClellan – Chairman
Peter Cole – Secretary

1. Secretary's Report

Peter said that he had spent quite a lot of time preparing for an impending visit of Catherine Laden from Dayton, Ohio, U S A, who will be visiting Aynho on Tuesday 17th April. She is a direct descendant of Thomas Mercer, an Aynho resident who emigrated to America during the 2nd half of the 1690s. Thomas was born in Adderbury, and was a prominent Quaker. She and her husband want to go on his tour of the Village, and he has visited the Quaker House in Adderbury and is planning to take them there, as he has arranged for the House to be open for them to see inside.

Keith introduced Imogen Matthews to talk on **The Hidden Village** – about a place hidden in Dutch woods sheltering persecuted Jewish people from occupying Germans during World War Two.

Imogen said that her mother was Dutch, and had been a teenager living near Rotterdam during the German occupation of the Netherlands. She explained that the invasion started on the 10th of May 1940. A few days later most of Rotterdam was flattened by bombs, there were hundreds of casualties, and the Netherlands capitulated. Gradually life returned to a sort of normality, except that there was always a German presence. Imogen's mother returned to school and one day the Germans removed all the history books. About a month later they were returned, but with huge chunks of pages ripped out, concerning items the Germans didn't want the Dutch children to know about. However her mother refused to use these doctored books and taught her class verbally. These little acts of defiance became commonplace. Everybody had to carry identity papers, and Jews were forced to wear a yellow star all the time. Several Jewish families disappeared, and others came to known friends bringing their valuables to be looked after until the war was over, although of course most did not survive. A lot of shops had very little to offer. Coal was rationed, followed by food, and new clothes in the shops, but Imogen's mother became good at dressmaking and patching clothes up. The life of shoes was extended by attaching bits of old bike tyres under them. The Nazis confiscated wireless sets, but Imogen's grandfather concealed his under the floorboards and neighbours would call in every night at 9 pm so that they could listen to the BBC news which was their only source of propaganda-free news. Fuel ran scarce so the community chopped down the lime trees in the road at night and the wood was shared out.

On the 5th September 1944 Dolle Dinstag (Mad Tuesday) the Allies liberated Antwerp, and it seemed that the Netherlands would soon be freed. Some of the Germans panicked and actually fled towards home, but in fact the Allies had over-extended themselves and withdrew, so it wasn't until nine months had passed that Holland was finally freed. Before that the Dutch suffered a great deal due to the Hunger Winter which lasted from November 1944 almost until the end of the war. Food supplies completely ran out largely due to the Germans taking them for themselves and back to Germany. It was extremely bad in the west of Holland and along the coast. There was a particularly hard winter, so that rivers and canals froze, and no boats could bring in food. There were 22,000 deaths, mostly of elderly and sick people, attributed to starvation. Living near a rural area Imogen's mother cycled to frozen fields and dug up as many tulip bulbs as she could carry. These were their main source of sustenance as they were nutritious (they tasted a bit like chestnuts) and could be dried and used as flour. It turned out that hyacinth bulbs were highly toxic, and crocuses were too small to be viable. She also managed to find carrots, swedes, beetroot and best of all was sugar beet, because that gave them energy.

It took ten days after the war had ended before good supplies of food were delivered. Of course they had to be careful not to gorge on food, as it took a while for their stomachs to relearn how to cope with proper food, so the first supplies were just vitamin-enriched biscuits as these were best initially.

After the war her mother married an English man and came to live in England where Imogen was brought up. Imogen has had many holidays in Holland with her own family, and they frequently cycled in the Veluwe woods area, a bit like a dense but attractive country park. Just a few miles to

the west is the town of Harderwijk, about the size of Banbury, which is some 40 miles due east of Amsterdam. On one occasion she noticed a memorial stone commemorating the place deep in the woods where the Jews had been hidden during the war from April 1943 to September 1944. This was the site of the Hidden Village.



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This indicates the relative position of the town of Harderwijk to this map.

The roughly circular line shows the wartime extent of the Veluwe woods

The local people had built huts out of wood, leaves and moss to house up to a hundred people, Jews, fallen English and American pilots and anyone else who wanted to escape detection by the Germans. It was a constantly changing group as some were passed on to safe houses elsewhere. There were different types of hut, some were all above ground, some were partially below ground level and others were completely submerged. Due to the length of time that has passed the original houses have all long since disappeared, but with the help of some of the original builders at least examples of the underground huts have now been reconstructed as a mark of respect to the brave people of 1943. Naturally there was no electricity in the huts, and the inhabitants including children had to keep quiet during daytime to avoid detection. The woods were very dense and despite searches the Germans never discovered the hidden village during this time. They were reluctant to venture into the woods at night for fear of being ambushed. The trusted locals risked their lives to keep the fugitives supplied with food, medicine and books, and they had to have convincing stories and lies to explain what they were doing in the woods. All the bunks were made of very solid wood. In the end a camp boy had gone out to get water, and he was spotted by Germans. They forced him to confess and got reinforcements to find the houses. Luckily there was time for most of the inhabitants of the camp to escape, but 8 were killed.

So Imogen has written a novel, mainly about two fictional young people, one who lived in the village and the other helping from the outside, but at the same time illustrating the problems encountered and overcome as well as the heroism of those helping the Jews and others at that time.

Keith thanked Imogen for an interesting and unusual talk.

3. Forthcoming Meetings:—

Wednesday 25th April – **The Portway Path** – Running through Aynho since before Roman times – by Bob Hunter.

Wednesday 30th May – **Rothschild and Waddesdon Manor** by Maureen Paterson, Room Guide.

Wednesday 27th June – **James Secull – A story of a family from Aynho to Melbourne, Australia** – Doctor Simon Smith, a Professor from Victoria University, who is a direct descendant of James Secull has written a book about him. He is coming over to England to launch his book and speak at our meeting. He will be inviting any member of the Secull family living in England to come to the meeting.