

THE 116th MEETING OF AYNHO HISTORY SOCIETY HELD AT THE VILLAGE HALL, AYNHO
ON WEDNESDAY 26th June 2019

Present:- Keith McClellan – Chairman
Peter Cole – Secretary

1) Secretary's Report

Peter said that he had had a very successful day with his History Society table at the Church Fete. He had featured "Things we had learned during the last year". The most unexpected was the knowledge that the Portway had not just been a short local road, but as long as 5,000 years ago had been an ancient British trading route all the way from the Hamble river off Southampton Water right up to York, later with many Roman remains found at different points along the way. The Fete had more visitors than the previous year, many from nearby villages, so he had an almost continuous flow of visitors who were absolutely amazed by the Portway revelations. There were also items on the Dutch Hidden Village and Simon Smith's talk on the Secull family in both Aynho and Melbourne, Australia. He also recommended the icehouse to many people.

Just after lunch on Monday he had a phone call from the Cartwright Hotel to say that there were three American visitors having lunch, one of whom said that her grandmother was Annie Cartwright from Aynho. She had asked if anyone could tell her about the family. I invited them to come on my tour of the village, and they readily agreed. I haven't yet found Annie, but I told them as much as I could about the Cartwrights and then we went round the old village.

- 2) Keith said that he had gone to the Northamptonshire Heritage Forum meeting. Afterwards there was a talk about the Roman Occupation, with details of the finds recovered.

Then there was the meeting at Bicester of the museum area there that we are hoping to join to see if we can get any speakers for next year.

3) Keith introduced David Hewitt to talk about **The Life & Times of The Culworth Gang**

David said that he was going to take us back over 240 years. It was a time that was very different. The first period to look at is 1770 to 1790. The Culworth Gang were a group of highwaymen and robbers. There are no pictures of any of them, and only one has ever been described. There are lots of stories about them, but some are just myths. They left a song that Fairport Convention have sung called "Too Close to the Wind". It was written partly by Sandy Denny, who lived for some time at Byfield. The gist of it is about the Culworth Gang. They inhabited what is called the War Country. It was at the crossroads between the old Banbury Lane (B4245) a Drove Road, and the Welsh Road. That was an important road, as about 15,000 cattle used to come from Wales and the north. They were wintered nearby, and then they would be taken down to London after they had been fattened up. David said that he had regularly walked up from Banbury Lane towards Moreton Pinkney. He mentioned the poor state of most roads in those days. People in rural areas hardly moved about at all. It was all packhorses. Roman roads had been reasonable, but little was done from then on. Culworth was virtually cut off, but this suited the Gang. The population of Northampton in 1300 was about 104 thousand, but in 1801 it had risen to 132 thousand. The poor have always been with us. They can be divided into the deserving poor, and the undeserving poor. The Church was in charge of what went on with the poor, but many were under-employed. Even so there was no great drift towards towns. The enclosure of fields caused rent prices to increase. So what were people to do? Well poaching was one recourse, but penalties were very severe. Over 200 offences merited a death penalty. The Culworth Gang began with poaching and later went on to much more criminal deeds. Watling Street was a natural barrier, and only once did the Gang cross over to the northern side of it. Gradually more and more land was turned over to

grazing sheep, and by 1800 Northampton was second only to Lincolnshire in production of long wool. Stealing lambs and sheep became a profitable part of their lives. Until 1906 the only qualification needed to become a Justice of the Peace or Magistrate was that you owned a big house. People didn't want to become Parish Constables, since this was a rough old job. If they couldn't sort out malcontents in the village, they were referred to the Magistrate. So the rich landowners always bossed the poor. The Culworth Gang had a local vicar The Revd. Michael O'Clare to contend with, who spent more time dispensing justice than he did in church. In 1772 the Gang started robbing. The size of the Gang was up to 15. They went on for about 20 years. On the road between Northampton and Oxford there were lots of coaches and carts that could be looted. They also robbed remote farms, and toll houses. The only one who had ever been described was the leader John Smith. He was a Culworth labourer, aged over 50 'of great bodily strength and daring energy of character'. There was John Smith junior, his son, William Smith another son. William Abbot was a colourful character from Sulgrave, where he was a shoemaker and parish clerk, and it was said that he always carried a pistol with him, although David has never been able to confirm this. There were William Bowers, William Turrell, Thomas Marsbury, John Hatt, William Peckover, Richard Law a carpenter, and an unnamed lad, who must have come from a respectable family, but who joined the Gang to go on their operations for the excitement and romance rather than the love of plunder. Another one was a John Lacey of Sulgrave.

30 of the 47 admitted crimes were in the Northants area, but they never killed or maimed anybody. Some victims got knocked about a bit, as did some Gang members. They operated as at least two gangs. They had distinctive outfits - the farm labourers' smock, and black masks. In 1784 Law, Turrell and Bell robbed the Banbury Amusements. In 1785 a Gang stopped John Richardson's cart and robbed it of £104. Despite the offer of a reward, no one ever replied. One recurring item stolen was food. In 1785 they robbed a fish pond at Thorpe Mandeville, taking a load of fish. Abbot stole a lamb in 1786.

In 1787 two of the Gang became careless. One evening in Towcester, Law and Peckover stopped at a public house and decided to stay the night there. Each had with them a bag. They told the landlord they contained fighting cocks. Later he looked inside and found smocks and masks. He put two and two together and called for the constable. They decided to wait and a few days after there was a robbery in Blakeston by men in smocks and masks, so the two were arrested. They protested their innocence, but were put in gaol. In fact they were telling the truth, it was the other gang who were guilty, but they realised that the game was up and confessed to thirty robberies that they had committed, and gave the names of the others. Their houses were searched and large quantities of goods were found. The Revd. O'Clare put adverts in the papers for everyone to collect their stolen goods. Abbott confessed to a further 17 robberies. They were held in Northampton gaol. Of those tried five were condemned to death – John Smith senior, Richard Law, William Peckover, William Bowers and William Abbott. Abbott was later reprieved, but the records have been lost so no one knows why. He was transported to Australia. William Smith and William Turrell were discharged for lack of evidence, which seems very strange, because there were mountains of evidence. Benjamin Smith and Elizabeth Turrell, John Smith junior and Thomas Marsbury were never brought to trial. Again why not? The young unnamed man fled to the West Indies. Although the poster shows a gun, it is believed that they never used one.

4) Forthcoming Meetings

There are no meetings in July or August

Wednesday 25th September – **Rainsborough, the Iron Age Fort by Andrea Gladden**

Wednesday 30th October – **Oxford Castle & Prison from Oxanfora to Malmaison by Alistair Duncan**

Wednesday 27th November – **A G M plus two illustrated features**