

THE 118th MEETING OF AYNHO HISTORY SOCIETY HELD AT THE VILLAGE HALL, AYNHO ON WEDNESDAY 30th October 2019

Present:- Keith McClellan – Chairman
Peter Cole – Secretary & Treasurer

1) Chairman's Report

Keith said that the Parish Council Clerk had told him that from now on there will be a weekly Tuesday bus for Christmas shopping. It will be leaving at 10.35am from Aynho bus shelter.

2) Secretary's Report.

Peter said that he hoped that people didn't think the title of next month's meeting was too presumptuous, but he had to say that he has lived here for 21 years, and most Aynho residents know that he had been a dedicated canal user with a narrowboat for 11 years until his wife died of cancer, and then a Barrow Boat, a tiny dinghy, with an electric motor and used that for day trips on the canal for 14 years. He has lived a long and interesting life, but no one knows anything about his first 57 years. He hopes everyone will have a few laughs and quite a few surprises.

3) Treasurer's Report

Peter said that Rupert Clark had resigned as the Chairman & Treasurer very shortly before our 2018 AGM. He persuaded Peter to become Treasurer, and it looked as though the Society would fold up very quickly, because he said that he hadn't booked any speakers at all for 2019. He told Peter that he had paid in all the money to the Bank, so we didn't have to worry about cash. We only had a few days before we had to put something in the December Newsletter, so Peter arranged an urgent Committee meeting. We were all agreed that we must make every effort to continue. It was always difficult to get speakers for the cold month of January. Peter had always been a great fan of Chris Barber and his Jazz Bands, and he had bought a biography of his long career as a bandleader, so he offered to make a talk for our January meeting.

Peter stressed that his fellow Committee members helped out a lot, especially Keith, who did a marvellous job in getting speakers for the first six months very quickly.

From the outset Peter had always been quite worried about our financial situation. He had the chequebook, Paying In book, and an old Bank statement, which showed that we had £106 .61 in the Bank, and as there was no cash he lent the Society £100 of his own cash as a float.

We carried on, but by April 2018 he had not received a single Bank statement. The Bank said that a statement had been sent out on 4th December. They were very helpful and sent a copy.

He had a shock and a surprise. Not only had Rupert deposited cash of £44.50 on 23rd November, but also on the same day he had paid in a large cheque from his own personal account. So we had more money than had been expected.

4) Keith introduced Alastair Duncan to speak about "**Oxford Castle & Prison from Oxanfora to Malmaison**"

Alastair said that his part of Oxford Castle and Prison starts with a cartoon drawn by a prisoner called David Gadsley in 1785. The Prison Governor at the time was a very disreputable man called Solomon Wisdom. He used to charge the prisoners excessive amounts for cleaning out their cells, or for supplying straw or pillows, etc. Daniel Harris, clerk of the works, had a massive argument with him. He wanted a huge pile of animal dung removed, but Solomon didn't want to spend any money,

so he altered the cartoon to depict Harris standing on the dung heap, saying "I am the cock of this dung hill" a derogatory insult in those days, and the Devil standing by him urging him on. The Magistrates were so incensed to learn of Solomon's activities that they sacked him & made Daniel the Governor.

His main problem was overcrowding. He solved this by using the prisoners to build a new better prison. The prisoners gained new skills that they could later use to get work, and Daniel became a great reformer. When digging down he found evidence of Saxon remains and a former Norman crypt, and he measured and drew details of the findings. A lot of what we know about the Castle today is down to him. All the tour guides base themselves on actual characters, so Alistair had no hesitation in dressing up as Daniel Harris.

There is no mention of Oxford in Roman times. Legend has it that about 700 A.D. there was a young Saxon girl called Frideswide, who was very virtuous and wanted only to remain a virgin and worship God. Her father was a Mercian king, and Algar a local prince who wanted her hand in marriage approached her. She was horrified by this, and implored God's help. God immediately sent a lightning bolt that blinded the prince. This appalled her and she pleaded with the Lord again and said "Look I'll do a deal. If you restore his sight, I will stop him loving me and I will serve you". So he created a healing well, and the man's sight was restored, and he went back home. She immediately opened an Abbey, and St. Frideswide Abbey was the first recorded building in Oxford. It is now where Christchurch Cathedral is. St. Frideswide became a Patron Saint of Oxford.

Ethelred the Unready was the King of England from 978 to 1013, and again from 1014 to 1016. For most of his reign he had to fight off Danish invaders, and he tried to buy them off with Danegeld. This was not successful, so in 1002 he ordered a massacre of all Danish settlers. Some Danes were killed, but in Oxford all of them were massacred. A few fled to seek sanctuary in St. Frideswide Abbey, including a princess, Gunhilda, sister of Sweyn Forkbeard, Lord of Denmark, but this didn't stop them being killed. Forkbeard was infuriated by this and burned Oxford to the ground. In 1009 Oxford was rebuilt, this time in stone, with a wall all around the city and four gates, north, south, east and west. Forkbeard later invaded England in 1013, and Ethelred fled to Normandy. Sweyn, who was the father of King Canute, died in 1014 and Ethelred returned for a couple of years until he too died. King Canute ruled England from 1016 until 1035, and another of Ethelred's children, Edward the Confessor ruled until his death in 1066.

William the Conqueror came to the throne, and he ordered all his lords and barons to build high castles or defendable stone houses with a wall all round throughout England in order to establish fortifications against the Scots and Welsh, who were both threatening invasions. A motte-and-bailey castle here was the start of Oxford becoming a viable city of great strategic importance. He also brought a reign of terror on all the Saxons in England, in particular at Oxford. The local lord, Robert D'Oyly hated the Saxons so much that he was absolutely cruel to them, and apparently the Virgin Mary came to him in a dream and begged him to desist, so that he eventually built a Church from the base of the Tower.

It is from this building where monks taught children that the inspiration for Oxford to be a great centre of learning with later colleges began. Here boys would receive the highest quality of education in the land, which would set them up for life. One of the monks was Geoffrey of Monmouth who came to Oxford with stories of King Arthur and Merlin. He wrote a famous book in Latin: A History of the Kings of England. Henry II banned students from going to Paris to be educated, so they turned to Oxford.

This is where problems started. Some students fall out with the locals, who disapprove of them drinking, fighting, etc. This is where the issue of Town and Gown first started. The way that this was solved was for the Universities to set up halls of residence, where they could monitor the students to ensure that they did not do damage, etc. but they were free to drink and argue within reason, without disturbing local residents. Balliol College and then Merton College were set up in around 1263 and 1264 respectively and the Castle once again became a prison.

During the Civil War King Charles made Oxford his capital. The city was besieged by Cromwell's men who decided not to attack, but to starve the population out. Eventually King Charles sent a large body of troops to Abingdon as a diversion, while he and his entourage managed to slip away.

The conditions in Oxford prison had deteriorated so badly that Oxford Castle was almost completely destroyed in 1650. Later two new prison wings were built.

Many people were hanged there including Mary Blandy in 1752, who had poisoned her father with arsenic.

Donald Neilson was a terrible man who had murdered three postmasters, and had left a 17 year old girl hanging in an underground drainage system where she died. He was told by a judge that he must stay in a prison until he died, so he was kept in Oxford Prison until his death in 2011. He had been put in Oxford Prison because it had a passageway from the prison to a court room so he could be moved without anyone seeing him or rescuing him.

The Prison finally closed in 1996, and the site where it and most of the Castle area was is now the garden of the Malmaison Hotel.

Keith thanked Alistair for a very interesting and informative talk.

5) Forthcoming Meetings

Wednesday 27th November – A G M & Twenty things you don't know about Peter Cole

December – no meeting

Wednesday 29th January 2020 – Silk Weaving, Temperance & Co-Ops by Keith McClellan