

# Mere Historical Society



## UNLOCKING HISTORY

**NEWSLETTER**

**SUMMER EDITION**

**July 2017**

[www.merehistoricalsociety.org.uk](http://www.merehistoricalsociety.org.uk)

## **CONTENTS**

- 1. Editor's Note**
- 2. Jenny Wilding – an Appreciation** by Peter Lewis
- 3. Annual General Meeting Draft Minutes**
- 4. The Yetties – Bonny Sartin**
- 5. Royal Naval Hovercraft in the Falkland Islands  
Fifty years ago - Vernon Phillips**
- 6. How the 1940 invasion of Belgium changed my  
life - Monique Turnbull**
- 7. Shackleton's Endurance Expedition 1914-16 –  
Frank Marshall**
- 8. Shakespeare's London – Gerry Cook**
- 9. The Iconic Vulcan Bomber – Wing Commander  
Tony Davies**
- 10. Jade, Amber & Gold – Hilary Griffiths**
- 11. The SS Great Britain (Summer Visit)**
- 12. Steam: Swindon's Railway Museum (Summer  
Visit)**

## **EDITOR'S NOTE**

On taking over this responsibility from Tony Grinyer, I was initially told that it was not the practice of the Society to print reviews of the Morning Talks, as these were informal talks by members, distinct from the more professional Evening Talks by outsiders. Consequently, no Reviewer was asked to cover two interesting talks in the early part of the year.

It has transpired that in fact for some time past this distinction has not been observed; partly because Members' morning talks have proved just as interesting as some Evening Talks, if not more so. In future we will seek to cover all talks to the Society in this newsletter. Meanwhile apologies are due from me to both Vernon Phillips and Monique Turnbull, neither of whose interesting talks, while featured in the Contents Page, was properly covered by a duly appointed and authorised Critic.

To make amends, I have drafted a short account, from memory, of these two talks, with due apology for any faults, omissions and inaccuracies which will inevitably result from the lack of (as historians like to say) contemporaneous records.

The practice of including the future programmes for morning and evening talks in the summer newsletter has been discontinued, in favour of a more practical and handy separate leaflet. This can also be seen on the website.

**Peter Landymore**

## **Jenny Wilding – an Appreciation**

At the Annual General Meeting, Jenny Wilding, the Archivist of the Society formally retired from that post. Although she was thanked for her hard work on behalf of the MHS over many years, several members thought that not enough recognition had been given to her for her immense contribution to the life and success of our Society.

Although Jenny would not want us to make a fuss, for she is a person who quietly got on with the job, she did it with great efficiency, a considerable understanding of Mere history, and a ready willingness to share her knowledge of the Archive with those who sought answers to their questions – enquirers from near and far. So it is right that her role should be given more recognition than was given at the AGM, which I gladly do. I believe that the Society owes a great debt to Jenny for her professionalism, her vision and perseverance in setting up the Archive, and for her hard work in many other aspects of the Society's activities.

It is important that the resource Jenny has given Mere is not allowed to stagnate. Who then will step into Jenny's shoes? As she herself has said the hard work has been done, it just now needs to be maintained, it should not be too much of a burden, and Jenny will support any who undertake this role.

The web site generates many enquiries which come to me or Diane Ellis, our Secretary. We pass them on to Jenny, knowing that she will deal them promptly and efficiently. I very much

hope that we will be able to continue to use this “resource”:  
just one more illustration of Jenny’s support to the smooth  
running of Mere Historical Society.

**Peter Lewis**  
**Chairman**

## **Mere Historical Society**

### **Draft Minutes of the AGM held on Tuesday 4th April 2017 in the Grove Building**

Present: Chairman (Peter Lewis), Committee Members: Caroline Cook, Gerry Cook, Diane Ellis, Peter Landymore, Julia Mottershaw, Peter Platt-Higgins (Treasurer), Jenny Wilding; plus approximately 55 members

1 Apologies: None

2 Minutes of the AGM of 5th April 2016 had been circulated in the Newsletter of February 2017. These were unanimously approved by those present for signature by the Chairman. Proposer: Mary Lewis; Seconder: Wendy Hiscock.

3 Matters Arising: None

4 Reports to the AGM:

4.1 Treasurer's Report:

The Treasurer's Report and Final Accounts for 2016 had been circulated in the Newsletter of February 2017. Acceptance of the Report was proposed by John Burrough, seconded by Steve Hoffman and approved by the meeting. The Treasurer thanked Peter Dethick for checking the accounts.

The Treasurer informed the meeting that he would be resigning from his role at the next AGM in 2018 having completed 8

years' in office to date. He invited anyone interested in taking up the position to contact him.

#### 4.2 Chairman's Report:

- The Chairman thanked the Treasurer for his work on the accounts and reiterated thanks to Peter Dethick for checking them.
- He said it had been a good year and thanked all who had contributed, particularly members of the Committee. He wished to publicly express his gratitude to Tony Grinyer for all his work for the Society.
- He reported that the changed pattern of Evening Lectures, with none in January and February, seemed to be working well. He said that the standard of Morning talks has been high and these are generally well-attended. He expressed the view that, whilst it is important to maintain contributions to the programme from members, there is scope to involve outside speakers as well and that this is currently under discussion.
- The Chairman reminded the meeting that the next Evening Lecture is on 25 April with a talk on A Lost Medieval Manor by Hilary Griffiths and that Morning Talks will resume in October 2017.

5 Election of Committee: No new nominations had been received. Peter Landymore has recently joined the Committee and the Chairman introduced the current Committee Members to the meeting as listed in the Newsletter February 2017. He reported that they had all agreed to stand for re-election with the exception of Jenny Wilding, the Archivist. He asked for

them to be re-elected and this was agreed unanimously.

Proposer: Joan Sutton; Seconder: Monique Turnbull.

## 6 AOB:

6.1 The Archivist, Jenny Wilding, informed the meeting that she has resigned from her position. She said that the Archive is complete, numbered and catalogued, and now needs someone to run it. This could be two people working together and should not be too difficult. She offered to give a tour of the Archive and invited anyone interested to give her their contact details or to let her know of anyone else who might be interested. Jenny said that she would continue to catalogue the Archive.

6.2 Caroline Cook asked members to let her know if they would like to be sent email reminders of Society events and conversely to let her know if they would prefer not to receive such emails.

6.3 The Chairman thanked Steve Hoffman for his ongoing work on the Society's website which now contains more information including events, forthcoming visits and the Archive index. Peter Landymore reminded the meeting that the Newsletter is available on the website.

6.4 Judy Phillips offered a vote of thanks for the Committee and the work done by Jenny Wilding on the Archive.

There was no further business.

## WITH THE YETTIES

### The Yetties Group's tours across Europe, the Far East and Africa

By Bonny Sartin April 2017

If you thought a talk on Yetis was more for the Geographical or even the Anthropological Society, this was a look back to the Swinging Sixties and Seventies, by an original member of the famous Dorset band. These were the boys who put Yetminster on the map – it's just next door to Ryme Intrinseca (now *that* would have been a good name for a band). Although Bonny did admit (shock, horror) that none of them actually lived in Yetminster. They started off as a formation dance team (as Bonny put it, a contact sport – the girls being the attraction) doing barn dances. Do you remember the Dorset Foursome Reel, better known as the Dorset Forearm Smash? You do now, after Bonny's fine *a capella* rendering of his own song on the subject. And when an announcer couldn't get his brain round the full title of the Yetminster and Ryme Intrinseca Formation Dance Team, they were re-christened "The Yetties".

Bonny recounted how, in a 1933 Ford 8 called Desdemona, they roamed through the West, and as far as London and Oxford, before turning professional in 1967, after which they even went to the North. It was a life on the road and £8 a week. Their manager was a RADA-trained actor who promised to make them "solvent beyond their wildest dreams". Gigs followed on radio and TV, in the form of Multi-Coloured Swap Shop (with "Cheggers" – who he?). Later they had their own

show, featuring Ted Moulton (then Britain's most famous farmer), combine harvester racing (Top Gear, eat your heart out), and the sad, sad song called "The Scarecrow's Lament".

It turned out that, even in the heydays of the Beatles, the Stones and Jimi Hendrix, there was a market for their traditional (and newly-written) English Folk Songs. LP sales went so well (look them up on the Net – there are 48 of them!) that they collected a Golden Disc, which Bonny proudly displayed. This, Bonny said with all due modesty, was presented at a shindig at the Sherborne hotel that was so great that it was voted Press Bash of the Year by the appropriate trade body. Once they'd got over their hangovers.

So, having topped the league in Britain, the next step was of course Europe. At the Bucharest Folk Festival, they won the prize for Being Happy; and were pipped to the festival's main prize only by mighty Outer Mongolia. So taken were the Romanians that the Yetties were invited to give a special concert for President Ceausescu – an offer they felt unable to refuse. And after Europe...the World! For the canny British Council had spotted the Yetties as the perfect Invisible Export, to promote British Culture and mutual understanding among far-flung peoples everywhere.

Bonny told us how they made sparks fly in Pakistan, mainly by ill-advisedly touching the locally-rigged microphones and speakers; and of the luxury accommodation arranged by the British Council, which included showers but no actual water. He took us over Singapore by helicopter, through ferocious food

poisoning in Sarawak, and to eastern Sri Lanka before the Tamil Tigers made their name there. British Council representatives ranged from the useless (Sudan) to the brilliant (Ethiopia); and there was always the thrill of air flights with some of the less well-known airlines (notably Pakistan International Airways, PIA – also known as Perhaps It’ll Arrive.) Extraordinary numbers of non-English speakers would turn up in the remotest spots. Wasn’t there a hardship allowance or even danger money? Bonny couldn’t remember. You got the impression that their dedication to their art would have made it unnecessary.

The Yetties didn’t stop performing until 2010. Bonny finished with a fine baritone rendition of his own song, “That’s my Home”, a paean to Dorset. If there was a moral to his story, it seemed to be: if you want to see the world, join a traditional English folk dancing group. And the rest, as we heard, was history.

Bonny gave his talk fluently and without notes, interspersing it with a few selected songs to give us a flavour of the music he spent his life producing. If this was a departure from the usual stuff of our Society’s many and varied interests (I mean, history by definition doesn’t start until before we were born), it was entertaining and thoroughly rooted in West Country tradition. One thing that Bonny failed to mention: their rendition of Barnet Green has introduced the Sunday omnibus edition of the Archers for over 40 years. What better evidence of their contribution to British Culture could there be?

Peter Landymore

## **Royal Naval Hovercraft in the Falklands, 50 Years Ago**

**Vernon Phillips**

**January 2017**

Illustrating his talk with his own slides – of excellent quality – Vernon took us back to a time, long, long ago, when most people in this country had little or no awareness of the existence of the Falkland Islands, or their exact location. As a young naval officer, Vernon found himself unexpectedly in charge of an expedition designed to test the capabilities of hovercraft in a naval role.

We saw the preparations, involving meticulous provision of essential stores, familiarisation with the hovercraft itself, a specially designed type (i.e. quite different from the ones we used to travel on across the channel or to the Isle of Wight), and selection of personnel. Then came the long voyage to the South Atlantic by supply vessel, with a quick look at Montevideo on the River Plate estuary, and arrival at Port Stanley.

As there was, of course, no hotel accommodation, the party had to make its own home in an ancient Victorian barracks building. We learned how the hovercraft were taken around the islands, charting routes where their special qualities allowed them to take short cuts where other vessels could not pass. We also learned something of the hospitality of the islanders: with B&B arrangements including gin and tonics before breakfast. Vernon showed us also the wildlife – seals, penguins of various kinds – as well as the ubiquitous sheep, and

gave us an idea of the precarious economy of the Islanders, as well as the simplicity of their lives, so far away from Harold Wilson's government and the era of the Swinging Sixties.

Another notable photograph showed the rotting hulk of the famous SS Great Britain, designed and built by Isambard Kingdom Brunel, once the finest passenger liner on the North Atlantic, lately a huge floating wool store, and now noted mainly for the size and flavour of the mussels that could be harvested from its flanks (see also the Summer Visit Report below).



Disappointingly, the hovercraft never offered a convincing case either as a landing craft for beach assault, nor for mine-sweeping, as Vernon's work helped to demonstrate. But it

certainly gave him, and his crew, a fascinating experience at the far side of the world, which we were allowed to share. The knowledge that we have now of the extraordinary history of the Islands' invasion and re-conquest in the 1980s, unimaginable at the time of Vernon's expedition, made it all the more fascinating to be guided through this more innocent and peaceful time.

Peter Landymore

## **How the 1940 invasion of Belgium changed my life - Monique Turnbull February 2017**

As, once again, Britain engages in one of her periodic revisions of her relations with her European neighbours, Monique gave us a first-person narrative of the experience of one of those caught up, at a tender age, in the most cataclysmic of those upheavals.

Beginning with her paternal grandparents, she showed us a young man growing up in the London outskirts, in a working class home, and making his way in a textiles and clothing firm that happened to be owned by a Belgian person; and who takes the opportunity to move to Belgium when, of necessity or ambition, his boss offers him a post there. He marries, and Monique is born. Then, mysteriously, he disappears.

Monique grows up as a girl in a provincial town in the French-speaking part of Belgium, speaking only French and thinking of herself as a Belgian girl. Then, suddenly, they must leave. Only afterwards does she understand why: war has come. Her mother, seeking a place of safety, heads desperately for England. For Monique, the main memory is of an exciting journey across the sea, fussed over by attentive sailors. But life in England is strange. For a while they stay with her father's parents; then, in tiny lodgings in a suburban house. Mysteriously, her father reappears: an intimate stranger, to whom she must learn to relate. The family is reunited only briefly; her father disappears again, called up, eventually to

serve in 8<sup>th</sup> army signals. She will see him again only in short intervals of home leave. Meanwhile, she finds herself in English schools, grappling with the language – although more successfully than her mother can. They struggle on through the war years, in straitened circumstances, as a refugee family, not much supported by their English relations.

After the war they return to Belgium. Over the years, Monique learns gradually of the experiences of her extended family in coping with the long German occupation. One relative, a railwayman, was threatened with immediate execution, with his whole family, if there were one more sabotage incident on his line. It is uncertain whether the Resistance forebore for his sake, or for other reasons. Another was arrested by the Gestapo the day before British forces arrived; his body was discovered in a ditch some days later, and none of his family ever knew how he died, or even whether the Gestapo had any real reason to kill him.

All these personal stories, told to Monique by people rather like herself, brought home the tensions, the fear and the dangers of life under German occupation, an experience that she and her mother had been spared. This was a tale of modest people undergoing an ordeal that the British escaped, told from direct sources, with clarity and dry wit. (Especially engaging was the story of how her home town later became rich by importing Britain's potatoes, extracting the water, and selling them back as Instant Mash.)

Peter Landymore

## **Shackleton's 'Endurance' Expedition to the Antarctic 1914 – 16**

**Frank Marshall**

**February 2017**

The story of Sir Ernest Shackleton's heroic expedition to explore the Antarctic in 1914 is a truly inspiring one. We were therefore particularly privileged to hear Frank Marshall's talk as it was taken from a personal first-hand account that by chance had come into his possession. Frank's account of the Shackleton Endurance Expedition is as told by one of the crew, Dr Leonard Hussey, who was Meteorologist on board. It tells of the journey south in the Endurance and its destruction in the ice. It follows the remarkable story of the struggle to survive during the many months the crew were stranded on the Antarctic ice and their ultimate rescue from Elephant Island after Shackleton and five of his men made the arduous journey in an open boat to South Georgia to summon assistance. The talk was accompanied by the photographs taken by the expedition Photographer, Frank Hurley.

Disappointed at not being able to complete an earlier expedition to the South Pole with Robert F Scott, Shackleton had set off in 1914 with 27 others to cross the South Pole from the island of South Georgia in the South Atlantic. In January 1915 his ship, Endurance, became ice-bound and the team had to abandon her before she broke up and sank. The men spent months surviving at great peril on floating ice before making their way on three small boats to Elephant Island off the southern tip of Cape Horn. With little hope of their rescue or,



indeed, survival, Shackleton decided to leave most of his weakened crew on the island and set off with 5 others in one boat to seek help. Against all odds, he successfully navigated the boat to South Georgia in just 16 days. In August 1916, he was able to organise a return to Elephant Island. Amazingly, all remaining 22 men were rescued alive.

The narrative and slides used for Frank's talk were those actually used by Dr Hussey as a basis for a round Britain lecture tour to raise funds for Shackleton's 1922 return expedition to the Antarctic. Unfortunately the great man died of a heart attack on the way south. The resolve and leadership shown by Sir Ernest Shackleton throughout the expedition remains one of the great feats in the true tradition of great British Explorers of the 19th and 20th centuries. We were very fortunate to have been given such a singularly insightful and gripping first person narrative. It gave us all a great sense of 'being there'.

Diane Ellis

*The picture shows the ice-bound "Endurance" before she was abandoned and eventually destroyed by the increasing pressure of the sea-ice.*

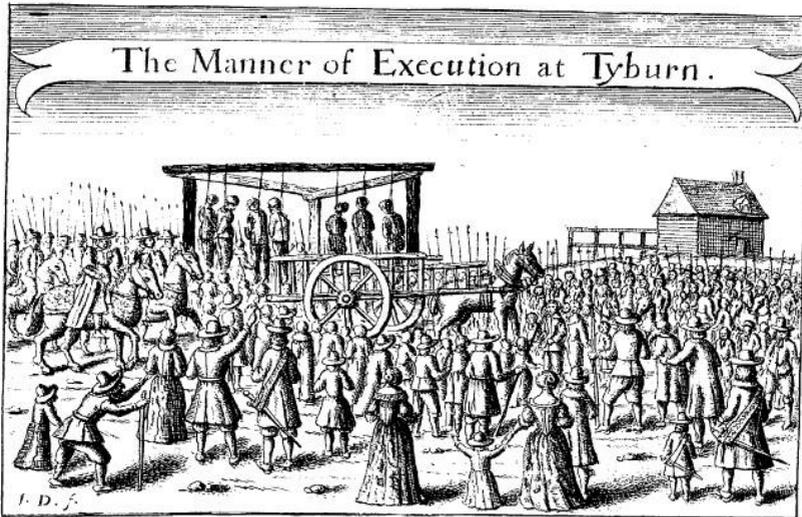
## **Will Shakespeare's London – Danger, Vanity and Vice**

**Gerry Cook**

**March 2017**

Shakespeare is central to the history of English literature, but we know few details about his life. We do know his career was spent in London, which John Donne described as “full of danger, vanity and vice”. This talk aimed to give an impression of London and to imagine Shakespeare's first visit as a young aspiring poet from Stratford around 1587. England as a whole was in danger from religious conflict, succession issues and the imminent Spanish Armada, and London reflected these fears.

London had a population crisis, the City nearing 200,000. This led to overcrowding, poor sanitation and disease. Also, houses were of wood, and cooking and heating on open fires created risk from fire. Will entered from the west, but his destination was probably the theatres north east at Shoreditch. At Tyburn (Marble Arch), he could have witnessed public executions on the “Tyburn Tree”. Then, a detour to Westminster Abbey to see Chaucer's tomb and past the remains of Old Westminster Palace to Whitehall Palace, Elizabeth I's London residence; up the Strand and its mansions with gardens giving direct access to the river; through Temple Bar and into the City. Fleet St and St Paul's were the centre of a flourishing book trade, and Will would return for source material and ultimately have his own work sold here. The noise of the wagons and crowds rushing about their business made progress difficult. Old St Paul's was



large and once had a spire much taller than Salisbury's, although that had been destroyed by fire in 1561. The inside had been largely stripped and was now just a gathering point for gossip and business deals. Cheapside was known as "Goldsmith's Row" but was now full of downmarket shops and taverns. It was also a large market, originally Westcheap. Another detour brought him to London Bridge, its twenty great arches the foundations of a magnificent engineering achievement, although the congestion discouraged crossing.

The theatres at Shoreditch were opportunities for work. The new young playwright Kit Marlowe was a huge success and may have helped, but then left to join a new, third theatre "The Rose" in Southwark. Will Shakespeare's career as a playwright

with the Burbages, owners of “The Theatre”, began and gradually flourished.

The accession of James I in 1603 brought the major changes expected of any new dynasty, with new dynamism and tastes. Will was at his peak, and the moving of the “Theatre” to create “The Globe” at Bankside and the revolutionary indoor theatre at Blackfriars brought fresh opportunities and challenges. He stayed until 1613 and then returned to Stratford. Perhaps he thought about what changes he had seen, his own career and about the future. But the Great Fire of 1666 was to destroy most of the City he had discovered on that first day.



## **The Life and Times of the Iconic Vulcan Bomber Wing Commander Tony Davies (RAF) Ret March 2017**

This was a very personal account of an iconic aeroplane given by one of the commanding officers of the Vulcan Bomber, Wing Commander Tony Davies. He began by setting the context of the plane's development following the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The US McMahon Act in 1946 determined the future development of nuclear weapons and power with the US acting alone. This led directly to Clement Attlee's decision to build better and faster aircraft than the Lancaster to compete as a world power. Three designs were selected for production, the Avro Vulcan, the Handley-Page Victor and the Vickers Valiant, and ultimately over 300 entered RAF service.

Tony's talk was illustrated with drawings and photos that showed how the aircraft's unusual delta shape evolved over time. Modifications were made to its engine power, communications systems, bomb carrying capability, range and fuel capacity. Ultimately it was to be used as an important factor in the Falklands Islands conflict although its usefulness was challenged by its requirement for huge refuelling tanker support.

In the first instance the chief designer was Roy Chadwick at Avro. The plane had 4 engines, two pilots and three crew, was 99' 11" long and the area of a tennis court. It carried 21 bombs of 1000lbs and could fly at more than 500mph. Its primary

purpose was to act as a nuclear deterrent against the perceived threat from USSR. The so-called MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) policy of the Cold War rested on the premise that use of nuclear weapons by opposing sides would cause complete destruction of both sides and that this would deter either from using them.



The Vulcans were designed to fly at high altitude of more than 50,000 ft. They were painted white for best camouflage at this height and to reflect back the flash from its weapon should it ever be dropped. Subsequently a mottled camouflage came to be used in the early '60s following the Gary Powers incident when the American pilot was shot down on surveillance over Russia (a story that is the subject of the recent film *Bridge of Spies*). The camouflage was thought to be more effective at lower levels for example over forestland. Tony had brought models of both these colour variations for us to see.

As well as providing us with a fascinating insight into the aircraft's capability, Tony's photos introduced us to members of his crew and features of the aircraft including the interior of the cockpit. He showed us maps of the flying routes used in practice flights over the UK and in Russian surveillance as well as training sorties in Labrador, the Great Lakes, Masirah Island, Malta, Cyprus and Canada. Finally, and to the delight of the audience, he showed a short film of the Vulcan in flight escorted by 9 Red Arrows. We were then truly able to appreciate its impressive size, beauty and elegance as it rolled magnificently in the sky.

Our thanks to Tony Davies for a talk that was full of interest and genuine affection for his subject.

Diane Ellis



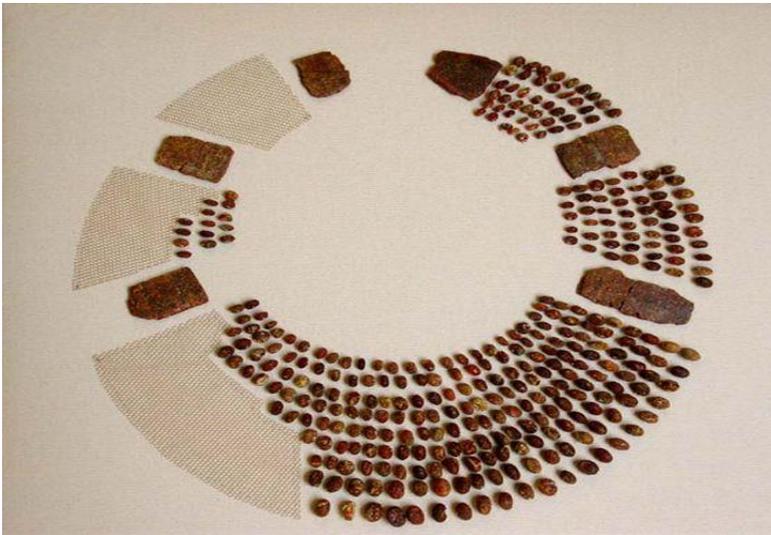
**Jade, Amber and Gold: Three Stories from Pre-history**  
**Hilary Griffiths**  
**April 2017**

Hilary Griffiths is an archaeologist from the Shaftesbury and District Archaeological Group. Despite a change from the published topic, she nonetheless treated us to a fascinating account of how three exotic items found their way to Britain, in some cases journeying over 100s of miles, in a very early period of history.

The first item was jade, which was used in one of the most important Neolithic items, the Stone Age axe. The axes discovered in Britain may have found their way here in the Neolithic period, crossing the Channel, as farmers came from the continent to settle in Britain. Hilary showed us two types of axe found in Britain: the first had very practical uses and was often hafted and smooth; the second was symbolic and often was never used. These might be highly polished and were symbols of wealth given away to confer status. A particularly fine example is the Canterbury axe which was made of jadeite from the Italian Alps and is now in the British Museum. Other such examples found their way to the south-west area, as discovered in the Neolithic Sweet Track in Somerset.

Hilary's second exotic item was amber which was used to make beautiful necklaces such as the spacer plate necklace found at Upton Lovell and thought to date from c2000BC. Amber like this may have come from the Baltic perhaps as a gift exchange. It was known that amber was electromagnetic and held

warmth when rubbed so it was valued for its mysterious properties as well as its appearance. It took great skill and much patience to work raw amber and the beads were very rare and precious. Other amber objects that have been found include miniature accessory cups. There is a strong local connection with Richard Colt Hoare of Stourhead, who, with William Cunnington, recorded finding amber objects in the round barrow near Stonehenge which he excavated in 1803 and 1807.



The third exotic item in Hilary's talk was gold. An important archaeological find of gold is from the grave of the Amesbury Archer dating from 2100BC. It is believed he was the first metal/gold craftsman in Britain and he must have been very rich. Over 100 artefacts were found in his grave including arrowheads, a flint knife, copper knives, a bone pin, boar's

tusks, gold hair ornaments and wrist guards. Analysis has shown that this gold was not from Britain but came from central Europe. Other fine gold examples found in Britain include lunulae, the Mold Gold Cape which took over 100 years to re-assemble and is now in the British Museum, the Lockington gold hoard found in Leicestershire and the Rillaton gold cup found in Cornwall.

Hilary's detailed exploration of these three historic exotic commodities was beautifully illustrated with images of some of the artefacts. She gave us a real sense of how analysis of the discovery site, the materials and contextual information helps to pinpoint their origins and thus to understand more about the lives of people from so far in the past.

Diane Ellis



## **VISIT TO ss GREAT BRITAIN MAY 2017**

To think that this old lady had been languishing on the beach in Sparrow Cove, in the Falkland Islands for 33 years with no prospect beyond a slow decay.

Then in 1970 she was salvaged and brought 8000 miles back to the very dock where she had been built 127 years earlier. One of our members took a few minutes on the coach to give us a resume of her history up to that point, so that we could appreciate the wonderful restoration effort which is preserving her for the nation, and indeed for the world to enjoy.

The ss Great Britain was hailed as "the greatest experiment since the Creation". Perhaps a bit of Victorian hype, but she was the first ship to have both an iron hull and a propeller, and she was for over a decade the longest ship in the world. Her design was a huge step over Brunel's first wooden-hulled paddle-steamer the Great Western. She was to travel over a million miles and go round the world 32 times, besides carrying over 15,000 immigrants to Australia.

It was a time at the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign when ship-building was becoming competitive internationally, and Brunel was a man for this time, like Churchill was in WW2. He was prepared to take risks and there were setbacks during the design, many iterations of the concept, but the Great Britain was largely right.

Our guides were knowledgeable and informative pointing out features which the casual observer might not notice.

Remarkable was the headroom on the promenade deck allowing gentlemen to wear their top hats while promenading, out of the weather. So too were the very small bunks, 4 to a cabin in steerage with just room for one to be standing at a time.



On the Atlantic, going home

Conditions for the 15 guineas steerage passengers must have been almost unbearable, with the heat, vibration and smell of the engine together with sea sickness and very limited water. The passenger ticket does guarantee a comprehensive list of victuals for each week right down to salt, pepper and mustard, but life must have been pretty grim with only the prospect of arriving in Melbourne after about 60 days and then possibly making a fortune in gold, to keep one going.

Huge strides have been made since she returned to the original dock in 1970; the main challenge of course is to arrest the decay. The dry dock under the glass sea allows an idea of the gradual wasting of the iron hull over nearly 180 years. A carpet woven to an original design, which happily had been recorded,

is a notable example of the attention to detail found in so many aspects. The rats in the galley were so lifelike, one had to make sure they weren't real. Everyone will have their own special memory.



On the Avon, nearly home

The ship's story is one of mixed fortunes, going aground in Dundrum Bay was nearly fatal, John Gray lost at sea after 18 years as Captain, storm damage off Cape Horn, an ignominious half century as a storage hulk in Stanley Harbour, before becoming an abandoned wreck in Sparrow Cove, but then surviving that long tow through the Atlantic which could so easily have gone wrong, She can celebrate her million miles and 32 times round the world, and is now an unrivalled visitor attraction.



*Restored to herself*

No one climbed the rigging and no one enlisted for the next voyage, but all 28 of us got back to the coach after a great day when the rain had stopped as we arrived and started again as we left.

Vernon Phillips

### **Steam: the Swindon Railway Museum**

In the early 1800s, Swindon was a vibrant pig rearing town and was known historically as Swine Town, which had morphed to Swindon by the 1840s. From 1841 and increasingly over the next 100 years it became well established as a railway town, the home of the engineering workshops of the Great Western railway, which is where the MHS third visit of 2017 travelled to on Thursday, 13th July.

The workshops were at their zenith by the mid 1930's, when three new steam locomotives were completed each week, but the end of steam was marked by Swindon producing the last steam Locomotive, 'Evening Star' for the national rail system in 1960. The works were finally closed in 1986 and sold to a developer, but one of the first workshops to have been built, the Machine Shop, became the Museum of the Great Western Railway.

The museum charts the beginnings of the GWR through to the end of steam. There are impressive exhibits of steam engines and other rail vehicles and artefacts over that 120 year period, with some exhibits changed periodically, drawn from the national collection. Currently on loan to the Swindon museum, but truly GWR in origin, are 'King George V', one of the largest and most powerful engines from the 1920's, which toured the USA before WWII and returned with a typical US ornate engine bell mounted over its front buffers, and 'City of Truro' a smaller mainline engine, which in 1904 was the first locomotive to exceed 100 miles per hour.

While walking round the museum, one of our group was delighted to be able to sit in a "Toad". This was railway parlance for the typical GWR goods train guards brakevan, of which he has a model on his model railway. Equipped with a stove to keep the occupant warm in winter, he looked longingly at transporting it to his garden to use as a quiet retreat!



**The first locomotive on the GWR**

The museum also covers the development of the township around it, which was largely built by the GWR to house its labour force. The railway ran just to the North of the old town, which was on a hilltop, and with an increasing workforce up to 12,000 staff accommodation was needed. The works were to the North of the tracks and the new village was built on the South, so for the safety of its staff GWR built a lengthy underpass walkway to connect the two.

The village was built between the early 1840s and 1865, and the houses are still lived in today, although much modernised internally. It was built with streets established on a grid pattern and, although small by modern standards, housing was

of an advanced design, quite spacious for the period and included small front gardens. The village included a school, library, church, park, and Mechanics Institute, which was provided to engender a social life and encourage self-improvement for the workers, beginning with basic reading and writing lessons.



**The Big Green Engine (Gordon is jealous)**

The village also included a hospital. With worker safety far removed from modern day standards, working in the railway factory was exceedingly dangerous and there was at least one death or disablement every week and a lot of disease in the village. All the workers contributed, through their wage packets, to the facility and enjoyed a "cradle to the grave health service", claimed to provide the blue print for our modern day NHS.

After a long but enjoyable day on our feet exploring the museum and the railway village, we were quite pleased to re-join our coach for the journey back to Mere.

Graham Avory

## Committee Members 2017

Chairman	Peter Lewis	840116	<a href="mailto:pexhill@btinternet.com">pexhill@btinternet.com</a>
Treasurer	Peter Platt-Higgins	860809	<a href="mailto:p.platthiggins@btinternet.co.uk">p.platthiggins@btinternet.co.uk</a>
Secretary	Diane Ellis	861541	<a href="mailto:dianesellis@yahoo.co.uk">dianesellis@yahoo.co.uk</a>
Membership	Gerry Cook	861797	<a href="mailto:sixpenny1946@gmail.com">sixpenny1946@gmail.com</a>
Visits	Caroline Cook	861797	<a href="mailto:sixpenny1946@gmail.com">sixpenny1946@gmail.com</a>
Archivist	Jenny Wilding	860908	<a href="mailto:jenny@flaxmill.org.uk">jenny@flaxmill.org.uk</a>
Programme	Julia Mottershaw	861912	<a href="mailto:juliamottershaw@hotmail.co.uk">juliamottershaw@hotmail.co.uk</a>
Newsletter	Peter Landymore	228819	<a href="mailto:plandymore@outlook.com">plandymore@outlook.com</a>