

Mere Historical Society



UNLOCKING HISTORY

AGM Notice & Newsletter

March 2019

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www.merehistoricalsociety.org.uk

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Committee Members

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Mere Historical Society

Notice of Annual General Meeting Tuesday 2nd April 2019

The next Annual General Meeting of the Mere Historical Society will be held on Tuesday 2nd April 2019 in the Grove Building at 7.30pm.

Members are invited to partake of a glass of wine from 7.10pm. Membership Subscriptions of £10 will be collected before the AGM.

Notices and/or nominations for the AGM must be submitted in writing to the Secretary or a member of the Committee at least two weeks before this date.

Agenda for the Annual General Meeting

1. Apologies for Absence
2. Minutes of the last AGM on 3rd April 2018
(available on the Mere Historical Society website at
www.merehistoricalsociety.org.uk)
3. Matters Arising
4. Reports to the AGM
5. Election of Committee
6. AOB

Diane Ellis

MHS Committee Minutes Secretary

20th February 2019

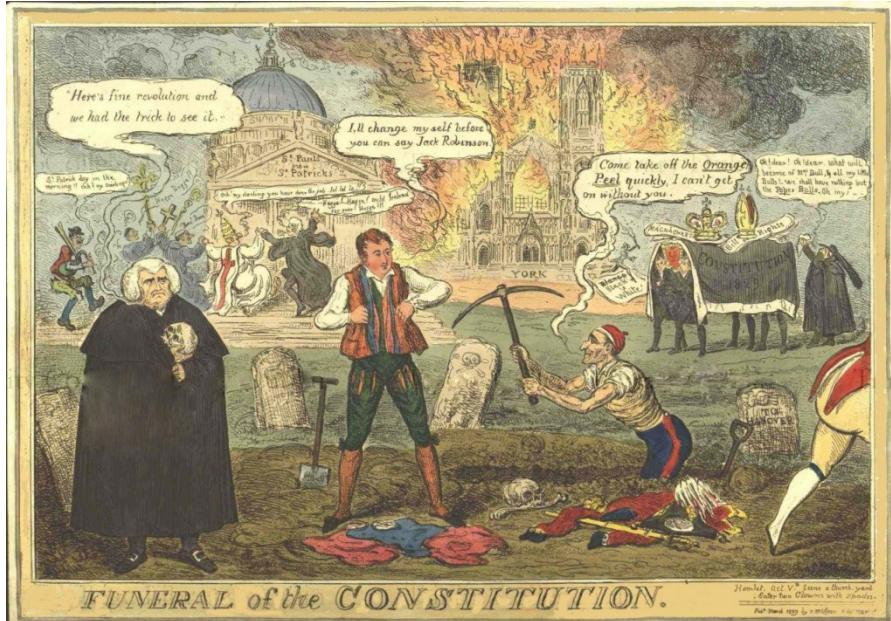
Stephen Hyde Cassan, Curate of Mere and Bruton

by Justin Bailey

5 October 2018

This talk was subtitled: “A West Country cleric in the Age of Revolution”, and so we began with some reminders of the historical context into which Stephen Cassan arrived. With the Age of Enlightenment, earlier in the ‘long 18th century’ came Voltaire, Diderot and the Philosophes, the cult of Reason, and a growing anti-clericalism – illustrated by some striking cartoons portraying the Georgian clergy as lazy, ignorant, violent or rapacious (or all of the above). Political radicals who favoured the Rights of Man, and were hostile to the aristocracy’s monopoly of power, were no more friendly to the Church of England. With its endowments, its dominance of both university and school education, and its Lords Spiritual sitting in Parliament with the Peers, the Church was seen by some as being as much a part of the Old Regime as the Whig and Tory parties and the Monarchy. Moreover, the many Britons –especially in the expanding middle class of manufacturers and merchants – who dissented from Anglican orthodoxy had equal reason to resent its power and its financial privilege. For instance, in 1818 Parliament voted £1 million to build new Anglican churches in the expanding new towns and cities: the equivalent, perhaps, of £4 *billion* today.

Stephen Cassan was born in 1789, the year of the French Revolution, and so came to manhood in the times of Jane Austen, the later Napoleonic wars, and Vanity Fair. With most of the country he would have rejoiced at the defeat of Napoleon and of France. Yet the times that he lived in saw new assaults on the Anglican position, but now from Britain’s own Parliament.



In 1828 the Test Acts, which denied positions in universities and in government to Catholics and Dissenters, were repealed; followed by the Catholic Relief Act in 1829, both measures carried against the wishes of the King. In 1836 the Tithe Act commuted tithes into money rather than produce, and the Marriages Act broke the Established Church monopoly on the celebration of marriage. With it came civil registration of births, marriages and deaths. Assaults on the Church were not always of the legislative kind: in the 1831 Parliamentary Reform crisis, when 20 of the 26 Bishops in the Lords voted down the Reform Bill, the Bishop's Palace in Bristol was burned down by rioters.

Cassan's forebears were Huguenots, his grandfather having won land in Ireland for his service to William of Orange; and Cassan was inordinately proud of his lineage, both paternal and maternal (the Sheffields). In fact, his obituary writer (*Gentleman's Magazine*, Nov.1841) suggested, '*Mr. Cassan's forte was genealogy, that is, the genealogy of his own family and connexions.*' Like half the Oxbridge graduates of his time, Cassan was, after obtaining his B.A., ordained into the Church in 1815; and he embarked on the pursuit of advancement, i.e. a decent income. His first

curacy, in Devon, was worth only £60 a year, plus the ‘small tithes’ and a free house: a modest beginning. Within 3 years he had moved to Norfolk, and £80; and just over a year later, to Suffolk, with £120 and the ‘surplice fees’ – payments for conducting marriages and funerals.

The clergy needed patrons, since patrons controlled the benefices of England and Wales. Bishops and cathedral chapters possessed about 20% of benefices, and the gentry and aristocracy something like 60%. The income of a benefice was a mixture of land rents, tithes and fees. Over half of the clergy were never to enjoy a living – the entire income of a benefice. They remained curates to their dying day. A third of benefices were worth less than £150 p.a.; the aim therefore was to secure the favour of the patron of some well-endowed benefice, or at least to hold more than one benefice. With an income of £300 to £400, one moved into the ranks of the lower gentry. To live on £60 with house and fees (as with Cassan’s first appointment) must have been (relatively) penury. Thus, Cassan needed to gain the attention of a bishop or an aristocrat. His concern to assert his genealogy, his publication of sermons, his literary efforts, his straining after chaplaincies, may all be understood in this light.

Cassan’s life in the West Country began in March 1819 – just 3 months after he had taken the Suffolk post – when he became the Curate of Frome for £110: a salary cut, but Frome was close to Bath, then at the height of its fame as the haunt of the wealthy and great. Frome’s Vicar preferred to live in Dawlish, on the Devon coast: a bit too far for Regency commuting times. Frome was a cloth town: like other such towns, it had been a fertile ground not only for Dissent of the Calvinist sort, but also of Evangelicalism and Methodism. Frome was, Cassan decided “a hive of Schism”; and he decided to go on the offensive, preaching fierce sermons that were ultra-conservative in politics as well as religion. Cassan was a man of, in modern terms, the Hard Right. He became the Marmite Curate: some loved him, others couldn’t stand him, and told the Vicar so. The Vicar told Cassan to stick to plain, simple matters, and gave him 6 months’ notice if he did not comply.

But Cassan then, just after Christmas 1820, married: and his choice of wife led to trouble. Her brother accused Cassan of forging letters showing a conspiracy between himself and his sister’s ex-suitor, Charles Dundas, an

MP, to get Cassan shifted to another parish. Cassan sought to clear his name by bringing a libel case; but a Taunton jury found against him. The Vicar of Frome took the opportunity to terminate Cassan's curacy. It was Sir Richard Colt Hoare, of Stourhead, who came to his rescue, making him Curate of Mere and West Knoyle; although he was never Vicar. He also allowed Cassan the use of the Stourhead library, which allowed him to write in 6 years 7 volumes of the lives of the bishops of Bath & Wells, Sherborne, Winchester and Salisbury. Then in 1831 the deaths, in quick succession, of Burton's Permanent Curate and his son opened a vacancy into which Colt Hoare inserted Cassan, with an income of £285 a year and a Parsonage that Colt Hoare had built for him. Neither at Mere nor at Bruton does Cassan seem to have pursued the controversies of his time at Frome. Nor were there, in Bruton, any more books written.

Cassan became mentally ill in 1839, and died, of 'apoplexy', in 1841, aged 52. He had acquired enough notoriety to feature in the London press, and to merit an entry in the DNB. But, in pursuing advancement, he had displeased his own Bishop by being too militant a defender of Anglican orthodoxy.



The lively presentation, and excellent illustrations, gave us an insight into the problems of making a career in the Regency and early Victorian Church: problems that in Cassan's case would have seemed, perhaps, a bit too sensational for an 'Archers' script.

Peter Landymore

NEWS FROM THE FRONTIER: RECENT WORK ON HADRIAN'S WALL

By Mark Corney

Tuesday 16th October 2018

Mark Corney set the tone for his talk by reminding us that Hadrian's Wall is not only a World Heritage Site in its own right but also part of an International World Heritage Site, forming as it does the north-west frontier of the Roman empire. By the second century AD the empire stretched from the Atlantic coast east to the Black Sea, encompassing Scotland, Germany and Eastern Europe and North Africa. Hadrian's Wall is one of the border lines running between Solway Firth and Newcastle on Tyne for about 74 miles. Mark specialises in landscape, late prehistoric and Roman archaeology and is at the forefront of new research into Hadrian's Wall and the Roman frontier borders or 'limes' which consisted of walls, ditches, fortresses and watchtowers.

Mark began by taking us through some of the key sources of knowledge about the Wall going as far back as the Venerable Bede, and mentioning early antiquarians John Leland, William Stukeley and John Clayton, the latter credited with systematic conservation work that saved part of the Wall. A collection of his finds can be seen in Chester's Museum in Northumberland. Around the time of World War I academic interest was focused more on the written records, and in particular F Gerald Simpson, Ian Richmond and Eric Burley identified three periods of occupation: Hadrian's reign from 122 AD, Septimus Severus' reign from 193 AD and Constantius from 290 AD.

Mark went on to explain some of the pre-Hadrian history that led up to the construction of the Wall by Hadrian in 122 AD. Primarily it was to be a defence against the 'Barbarians' at a time when the Roman army in Britain was somewhat depleted. However, he also claimed that Hadrian saw himself as an innovative architect and that the project could be viewed as a huge monument to massage his ego. It received massive investment of resources with some 15,000 legionaries deployed to construct it over about 6 years. Mark showed us images of various sources of evidence to support this, including special commemorative coins, inscriptions in the Wall and the Vallum Aelium or Hadrian's Cup. He also covered some of

the history of the Wall after Hadrian, including the construction of the Antonine Wall further north, later to be abandoned with the restoration of Hadrian's Wall as the main defence line.

We were shown many images of the Wall and its features. In appearance it was an impressive construction. Evidence suggests that it was some 10 feet thick and 15 feet high including the parapet. It had coping stones and internal staircases and possibly had a running patrol walk. The turrets would have contained 8-10 men but some could contain more. Forts would have held 500 men but some were larger: for example the one at Carlisle hosted 1000 cavalrymen. Although the Wall was the subject of much study up to the 19th century, it is only in the last 25 years that a new component has come to light. Rows of pits, called cippi, were discovered at the Newcastle end of the Wall. These are believed to have been filled with entangled briars and thorns created as a defensive barrier.

Of particular interest is the more recent research which Mark explored. More evidence is constantly being discovered, particularly with new archaeological technology. Pollen analysis has revealed where some of the Northumbrian settlements were probably destroyed to create a no-man's land north of the Wall. It has also provided evidence of a dramatic increase in cereal cultivation in Northern Britain at this time, probably to provide fodder for the horses and to feed the garrisons. Geophysics using aerial photography and magnetic surveys shows the impressive extent of settlements around the garrisons and has uncovered the site of an amphitheatre possibly used to break in horses for the cavalry. Air photography and hinterland research show the location of new sites and reveal more about the post-Roman life in and around the forts, ditches and settlements. At Vindolanda, debris from forts demolished by the Romans to make way for improvements has been found in water-logged hollows, and artefacts including letters, leather shoes, amphora and even a lavatory seat have been discovered. The later Roman phase is proving of particular interest, as evidence suggests that the Romans did not after all leave Britain in 410 AD but many stayed and were integrated into communities that became a mixture of civil and monastic, perhaps led by descendants of the earlier Roman commanders.

It would seem that there is still much exciting research to be done both here in the UK and on the European continent. At Hadrian's Wall there are statues yet to be uncovered and new sites to be explored. Indeed the

drought experienced in the summer of 2018 has exposed a number of these. We were privileged to have the benefit of Mark's expertise and enthusiasm and we shall await future developments with interest.

Diane Ellis



STONEHENGE: THE STORY SO FAR

Julian Richards

6 November 2018

Once in a while, we are privileged to hear a real expert, one who knows everything about his subject, deliver a comprehensive, yet accessible, summary of his field of knowledge. This was such an occasion.

Julian set out to tell us what we know, but also what we still don't know, about Stonehenge, after 38 years of digging.

Since 2009 the A344 that used almost to pass through the site has gone, and the modern visitor centre has been created – to the chagrin of some purists. Also gone is the theory of the first 18th century antiquarians that the structure was built by the Romans. The ditch and bank surrounding the structure is dated to 2,500 BC, but the stones are thought to have been erected some 500 years later. The big ‘sarsens’ were brought from Marlborough – a 20 mile journey – but the smaller pillars travelled 125 miles from Wales. The lintels are actually joined to the pillars by joints, and were not simply rested on them; and these joints were made, remarkably accurately, with stone tools. No other structure in Europe has lintels of this age.

The first properly conducted ‘dig’, by Sir William Gowland in 1901, was primarily made in order to straighten one of the sarsens, which was in danger of falling. Other stones had fallen before; one trilithon fell in 1797 and was not re-raised until the 1960s, and stone 22 had fallen in a fierce storm on the last day of 1900. The most recent excavation was in 2008: it produced mainly evidence of previous digging in the Roman period! All the stones have now been re-raised (and some re-positioned): and the reconstruction is faithful to the original design.

There is a suggestion from recent work that the ‘avenue’ ditches – which long preceded the stones – may have accidentally aligned with the solstice; and that possibly it may have been this accidental alignment that inspired the creation of the stone circles. The first ditches and banks were dug in around 3,000 BC, and subsequently

the stones were arranged, and then later re-arranged in order that the ‘bluestones’ should mirror the ‘sarsens’ in their alignment. There is still debate over whether the bluestones were brought from Wales as a circle, or as individual stones later made into a circle. Some of the original stones are still missing: we don’t know where.

It is now established that the ‘Aubrey Holes’ – named after John Aubrey, the Restoration antiquarian who first identified them – were dug in 2 circles some 1,400 years after the stone monument was created. Their purpose is still debated.

Another significant, relatively recent, find was the Amesbury Archer: although his burial place is two and a half miles from Stonehenge. His grave illustrates a transition: the late Neolithic age was one of big, collective construction projects. Thereafter, in the period named after the Beaker People, monuments were small and centred on powerful individuals, marked often by possession of gold and copper ornaments.

How was it made? There have been a multitude of experiments, some more reasonable than others, in moving 40 ton stones. Some have used materials never found at the actual site, and so are unlikely to be historically accurate, even if feasible.

Why was it made? It appears that some 60 individuals were buried in the area in the 3 centuries that follow the creation of Stonehenge: some probably not from the local area. Yet the idea that it was a ‘domain of the dead’, separated from that of the living, does not work chronologically: there is evidence of use by the living at the same time. Another interesting, but speculative, theory is that the bluestones were thought to have healing power: that Stonehenge was a hospital, to which the sick were brought, and buried locally when these health-restoring properties proved to be mythical. As to religious uses: the association with Druids is wholly wrong, chronologically, so the modern ‘ceremonies’ at the summer solstice are nonsensical. Furthermore, the principal fact is that it is the Winter Solstice, not the summer, with which Stonehenge is aligned: it therefore celebrates not midsummer, but the turning of the year.

The most significant result of recent work is the discovery that Stonehenge was subsequently surrounded with wooden circles, made from large tree trunks: again, the reasons are not known. However, we can be sure that Stonehenge was made and re-made over 1,400 years: so it must have had many uses, changing over that time.

Julian reminded us how Stonehenge has changed from a ruinous relic to a national treasure and World Heritage Site: in 1915 the site was sold at auction, and bought by one Cecil Chubbs, who had gone to the auction to buy some chairs. He paid £6,600 – a pretty stiff price in those times. Three years later, he gave it to the nation.

It is difficult to do justice to the wealth of detail, the broad sweep covering centuries of pre-history and decades of archaeology, and the clarity of exposition and light touch of presentation by Julian Richards. For the perhaps 80 members present, it was a treat.

Peter Landymore



ALBERTO BIOLETTI, SOLDIER OF NAPOLEON AND MASTER CLOCKMAKER OF WINCANTON

John Baxter
13 November 2018

How can you start life as an Italian, become a student in Turin, then a soldier of France, survive one of history's most crushing military disasters, and end up as a clockmaker in Wincanton, dying at a very ripe old age and leaving numerous, British, descendants?

The secret, apparently, is to live in revolutionary times: specifically, the time of what Mr. Baxter called "the real First World War". This was the period, 1793 to 1815, of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars: 22 years of almost uninterrupted strife in Europe, which spread death, destruction and hunger across almost all of Europe on a scale not to be matched for a hundred years.

Alberto was born in Turin in a family of Waldensians – an obscure pre-Reformation sect of 'heretics' much disdained and persecuted by the Catholic Church. Probably – in view of his later career – his father was a clockmaker. In 1796, the French Revolution had arrived in ancien régime Italy –and the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia - in the form of a victorious French Army; and 18- year old Alberto, perhaps enthused by Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, and perhaps sympathising with the anti-clerical, anti-Catholic spirit of the Revolution, took their side and joined up. Under the young General Bonaparte – a Corsican of Italian heritage himself – he fought the Austrian armies until the 1797 Treaty of Camp Formio brought the Italian campaign to a successful (for France) conclusion.

Although Bonaparte, on his return to Paris, was given command of the Armée de l'Angleterre and put in charge of preparing to invade us, he had a better idea: the conquest of Egypt. In May 1798 he set out with an army of 35,000, mainly drawn from the veterans of his Italian command. We can therefore surmise that Bioletti was among them. For once, things did not go so well for Napoleon. In August, the French fleet was caught by Nelson in the bay of Aboukir, and

completely destroyed. Although Cairo was taken and an Egyptian army defeated, a subsequent march up the coast towards Damascus was halted at the port of Acre, where the Ottoman garrison, co-commanded by the extraordinary naval officer Sir Sydney Smith, held off a 62-day siege.

Dissociating himself from the deteriorating situation, in August 1799 Napoleon slipped off back to France, to mount his coup and become First Consul, leaving the Army of Egypt under General Kleber. For many of the French, Egypt became their grave: how did Bioletti survive? Mr. Baxter puts this down to his promotion to the rank of ‘ordonnance’: best translated as a general’s personal assistant. He is more than a valet, if less than an ADC: he sees to uniforms, horses and baggage, and acts as a personal bodyguard. He was perhaps in the service of Kleber himself.

The French army remained in Egypt until its final defeat by a British-Ottoman army and surrender at Alexandria in September 1801, shortly before the Treaty of Amiens brought a pause in hostilities. Bioletti would have been repatriated to France, with the other survivors, in a British ship. (Kleber was not with them: he had been assassinated in June 1800 by a young Syrian.)

After Amiens, the freedom-loving French had a small colonial problem to settle: the slave revolt in St. Domingue (now Haiti) led by Toussaint l’Ouverture. One of the Generals in the force sent in 1802 to reassert French control, led by General Leclerc (who was accompanied by his wife, Pauline Bonaparte), was one Jacques Boye. The ‘ordonnance’ to General Boye was – Alberto Bioletti. Leclerc was at first successful; but in 1803 the revolt resumed, and fighting and yellow fever shrank the French force by 75%. The fever victims included Leclerc. His successor, Rochambeau, saw his army virtually wiped out; he attempted to sail for France but ran into the British blockade (we were again at war) and was made prisoner. With him were Boye and his faithful Italian.

We learned much of interest from the story of the French prisoners: for instance, how the world’s first prisoner of war camp was purpose-built at Norman Cross, and how prisoners earned a living

from model-making and straw-work (mainly hats). The Generals were, of course, on parole and so lived as gentlemen. (Rochambeau, however, did not behave as one and proved a difficult and unpleasant guest.) In April 1806, he and Boye came to Wincanton, recently designated as one of the main holding towns for French prisoners (it was sufficiently far from the coast). The prisoners made an impact on the small town: population 1800, of which 1100 lived from manufacturing (flax and ‘ticking’) or the coach trade, the rest from farming. In a typically British, Dad’s Army, way, the ‘commandant’ under whom the prisoners (500 altogether, officers and their soldier-servants) were placed was a local solicitor, George Messiter. They had to obey two roll-calls a day and an evening curfew, but were otherwise free agents.

So, naturally there was fraternisation. Bioletti found a young lady from Crediton, Devon, Mary Feltham, 21, and married her in July 1807. Then Rochambeau behaved badly again: he quarrelled violently with a farmer across whose land he had chosen to hunt. The outcome was that he and Boye were sent off to Crediton, and of course Alberto and Mary went too. But a prisoner exchange in 1811 allowed the general (and his ordonnance) to return to France. One wonders how Mary felt about going with him with her two young children, as she did.

Back in France, Boye and Bioletti re-joined the Grande Armée just in time for the invasion of Russia. In the winter retreat, they were caught with the French rearguard at Borisov on the Berezina river; then marched by the Russians 900 miles back East, in freezing conditions, beyond Moscow to Kazan. There, a member of the Tolstoy family took pity on Boye and took him (and faithful Bioletti) under his wing, an action which led to Boye marrying a Tolstoy relative and settling in St. Petersburg. Eventually - after Napoleon’s defeats in 1813 and 1814 – Bioletti got back to France and was reunited with Mary (how had she lived through the years of his absence?) One supposes that he fought again at Waterloo. Then in 1816, he and Mary returned, with their family, to Wincanton – one can only guess why: perhaps Mary found the French had not warmed to her much. Now approaching 40, he set up as a barber/dentist for a while, and then started making clocks. He lived out his life as the

clockmaker of Wincanton, dying there aged 91, in 1869. By then, there was a new Napoleon at the head of the French state; and Alberto's homeland, Piedmont, had enlarged itself into a new Kingdom of Italy, comprising all Italy except Rome and the Papal States.

Three of Bioletti's clocks have survived. One is owned by Susie Bioletti of Dublin (though actually from New Zealand). 700 descendants of Alberto and Mary have been identified: none now live in Wincanton, (although one of Bioletti's sons was once a Barber in – Mere). Perhaps they inherited a wanderer's genes.

This tale of the Almost Unknown Soldier and his strange odyssey, in the age before the EU's Free Movement of People, was told with verve and a novelistic vigour. Indeed, Mr. Baxter's talk was derived from his novel, *Surviving Napoleon*, published by Charonia Media, and surely available on an internet near you.

Peter Landymore

THE DEATH OF GORDON OF KHARTOUM

by

David Baker

4 December 2018

Gordon's death at Khartoum in January 1885 is one of the great 'wrong but wromantic' moments (to use the term memorably invented by Sellar and Yeatman, in "1066 and All That") of Britain's Victorian history; and the story has been told in many books and films. But how did 'Chinese' Gordon even come to be there, in a country not part of the British Empire, and barely controlled by its nominal ruler, the Ottoman Sultan of Turkey? Enter Sir Samuel Baker, and his remarkable wife, Florence, from whom our speaker is himself descended.

Sir Samuel earned his fame, and his knighthood, as one of the intrepid explorers of the Upper Nile, along with Speke and Burton and other more famous names. He was the man who 'discovered' (for Europeans) the existence of Lake Albert and gave it its name, along with Murchison Falls where the Nile begins life as an identifiable river as it flows from Lake Victoria. He had previously interrupted a hunting expedition in Hungary to visit a slave market (yes, slave trading was permitted in Hungary in 1860), and fell in love with a blonde Hungarian teenager destined for the harem of a Turkish official. Unable to afford her, he bribed her attendants to let him run away with her. It was with her that he undertook his expedition to the upper Nile in the early 1860s.

On the strength of his exploration fame, Baker was appointed in 1869 by the Egyptian Khedive as Governor-General of Equatoria, an ill-defined region encompassing what are today parts of Sudan, South Sudan and Uganda, with instructions to stamp out slavery. To enforce his authority he was given 1700 Egyptian troops, many of them released convicts. The journey south (by river boat) was arduous: in the marshlands of the Sudd, it took 32 days to cover two and a half miles.

Samuel and Florence stayed four years, trying with limited success to drive out the slave traders, who resisted with force, and coming into conflict with the Kingdom of Baganda. At one point, only a mad charge by his personal bodyguard – dubbed the Forty Thieves – routed the slavers and rescued the Governor. But in 1874 he left, to be succeeded as Governor by none other than George Gordon.

The 5ft 5 Gordon was already renowned for his exploits in China, and seemed just the man to root out slavery in Equatoria. But he took his Christianity to the point of fanaticism, and was inclined to be governed by visions, which he called ‘revelations’. One of these led him to propose to appoint as governor of Khartoum a notorious slaver and one of Baker’s main opponents. Although he resigned his appointment within a year, he was then made Governor of the whole of Sudan by the Khedive. But he had had only limited success in removing corruption in his own administration, or in getting rid of slavery (a major local industry), by the time of his resignation in 1879.

He was therefore long gone by the time that the Mahdi appeared in 1881, and began to raise the tribes against the Egyptian Government in the name of an Islamic State. In November 1883, he defeated a British-led force of 8,000 Egyptians, and seemed to have succeeded in wresting control of the Sudan away from Cairo. In Britain the PM, Gladstone, deemed the problem to be containable, and not worth a British intervention. But this was not the view of Sir Garnet Wolsey, Britain’s top soldier, nor of the Times newspaper, which clamoured for Gordon to be sent back to quell the Mad Mahdi and his horde of Fuzzy-Wuzzies. Wolsey stepped in to stop Gordon from accepting appointment by King Leopold of the Belgians to govern the Belgian Congo and suppress slavery there (an interesting irony); and ordered him to Cairo in January 1884 to “advise on the security of the Egyptian garrisons and the safety of Europeans in Khartoum.” On arrival, he was once again made Governor-General of the Sudan and sent to Khartoum. His instructions were clear: to evacuate the garrisons and the Europeans, with minimum destruction and loss of life.

But when Gordon reached Khartoum in mid-February, he had no intention of evacuating. He publicly burnt the punishment whips, freed 80% of the convicts and declared debts to be forgiven (not consulting the creditors); although he left the slaves to remain slaves. Using a friendly Irish correspondent of the Times who had joined him in Khartoum, he made his despatches to the Government public and declared that there was no need to evacuate, that he would hold Khartoum indefinitely and that if only more troops were sent the Mahdi could be beaten. Back in Britain, a press campaign raged to ‘rescue Gordon’, the hero of Christianity and anti-slavery.

At the end of July, Gladstone’s hand was forced. Parliament decided in early August to send a force to prevent an Islamist overthrow of the ‘legitimate’ government of a province of Egypt, a ‘friendly’ (i.e. British-controlled) power. But this proved easier said than done. The problem was getting a force of ten thousand men 1,350 miles up the Nile.

Sir Samuel Baker – who had become Gordon’s friend, and had a shared history with him in Equatoria – offered an alternative. Ships could take the force –or a major part of it – to the Red Sea port of Suakin, and thence across the desert to Berber on the Nile, then on to Khartoum. It was a much shorter journey, and it had been done before – though with a much smaller force.

Wolsey was not impressed: to him, the scheme was impractical and likely to end in failure of the whole expedition. Taking 10,000 men across a waterless desert in the face of hostile locals was – if not madness, then militarily unsound. He methodically assembled river pilots, boats, and his force and went slowly, slowly, up the Nile. September, October, and November passed. Gordon had made the same journey in 23 days. By December, Gordon was cut off in Khartoum, with the population starving and the telegraph lines cut. By now evacuation was impossible; but help was on the way, surely? Then, in early January, the fort of Omdurman, on the opposite bank of the Nile, fell; and artillery began to breach the defences of Khartoum. The falling level of the river –which was also slowing Wolsey’s progress – favoured the crossing of the Mahdi’s men. On the 26th of January the assault took place, and succeeded within

hours. The defenders were massacred to a man. Two days later, Wolsey's scouting steamers reached the approaches to the city and learned of its fall, and Gordon's death. It was not at once avenged by the might of the Empire: Wolsey turned back.

David gave us a clear telling of this famous tale, and posed his own audience questions; could Gordon have been saved? And if so, how? For him, the errors were first, the political delay of four months between Gordon's being sent to Khartoum and the decision to send a rescue force; then, Wolsey's error in failing to open the Suakin – Berber cross-desert route. Asked whether Gordon could not, indeed should not, have simply done as instructed and evacuated Khartoum in March or April, he answered that the European civilians, women and children were indeed sent out; but the garrison troops were too weak in number, and too ill-disciplined, to fight their way out.

Not the least interesting point was the announcement that one of the audience was herself a great-great-niece of Gordon. And if the drama of Gordon's death was well-known to some, the roles played by the other ancestor, Sir Samuel Baker, and still more his remarkable wife Florence, were new and fascinating. As for Gordon – today he would not have been considered terribly suitable for a senior appointment in a developing country; and Parliament and Press would be rather less likely enthusiastically to support a direct military intervention, although then again – action to prevent the establishment of an Islamic State...? It was left to Kitchener, 13 years later, to terminate the Mahdi's career (and State) at the battle of Omdurman in 1898 – with the help of a certain young lancer called Churchill.

Peter Landymore

FIFTY-FIVE YEARS FIGHTING RUST

By Ian DEAN

11th December 2018

RUST, rust , the bane of maintenance folk the world over: invented, we were told, a year after the first iron bridge was built. Sadly, the corrosive title did not attract as big an audience as we sometimes get; however Ian treated us to a thread of occupations and challenges all related in one way or another to the oxidisation of iron.

After an initial working life in the theatre, there followed for Ian a lifetime of caring for old road and rail vehicles and machines of all sorts; and, having a long-running interest in industrial archaeology, he went on to work as founder-Director of an industrial museum.

Then there ensued a few years as CEO running a full-size steam railway, a spell in France including engine driving, and finally as a volunteer on the Gartell Light Railway near Templecombe.

Along the way Ian had cherished a bus, a fire engine, a Citroen 2CV, a Model T Ford and a 5inch gauge set at Bourton.

After many joint visits to scrap yards with his wife, Julie, she decided she needed to have her own project and acquired a traction engine.

Ian eventually retired after 6 of his associates died in quick (no pun intended) succession, and he decided he did not want to be the 7th funeral.

Vernon Phillips

THE HISTORY OF THE FROME SHOW FROM 1861

Morning Talk By Philip Cary

Tuesday 8th January 2019

As a former dairy farmer descended from generations of local dairy farmers, and a one-time Chair of the Frome Show, Philip Cary was able to give us a unique insight into the history of the Frome Cheese Show (as it is known locally). He took us from its beginnings in Frome Market Yard in 1861 through to its second location at Fromefield from 1920 - 1998 to its current site at Bunn's Lane, south of Frome on the road to Mere.

In a talk illustrated with wonderfully evocative photographs, Philip began by setting the historical context, explaining how the growth of cattle farming emerged in the eighteenth century from an earlier dependence on sheep farming in the Middle Ages. Ultimately the effects of industrialisation on farming practices, the advent of the railways in the nineteenth century and the influence of rich landlords such as Lord Bath led to the predominance of dairy farming, and the establishment of the Frome District Agricultural Society in 1861.

Philip's photos showed how the Show began life in Frome Market Yard, held traditionally on the last Wednesday of September. Crowds would then number around 2-3,000 whereas today typically they are 20-30,000. Initially the focus was on cheese and butter but by 1864 the show was exhibiting a wide range of farm animals and vegetables and included long service awards too. There were fascinating images of farmers exhibiting their produce, milking done with a stool and pail, impressive rows of truckles, judges at work testing the cheese quality, pony and trap racing and crowds who were gathered behind a barely adequate rope barrier with little regard for health and safety. Archive records of Show posters told a story of prices and prize-winners and even a poem to encourage visitors to attend.

Pictures of the Show locations revealed how it has evolved. In 1894 the Frome Show building (currently the Cheese and Grain in the market car park) was constructed. It was specially designed for the sale of cheeses, featured large entrances along the side to enable easy access for farmers and their products and had a platform to enable cheese to be loaded easily on to the Radstock – Frome railway behind. In World War I this building was taken over to make munition shells and did not return to the Show again. However, in 1921 the Show reformed, new land was bought at Fromefield, the current site of the cricket club and Frome hospital and now also a housing estate. The old wooden grandstand was moved there and so began a new phase for the Show that lasted until 1998 with exhibits in large marquees. In 1999, more land was acquired at Bunns Lane and the Show moved to a bigger site with more exhibition and car parking space.

Philip's talk showed how things have changed: for example blocks of cheese wrapped in polythene have largely replaced truckles and there is an increasingly international product range. Just last year in 2018 a new bigger modern Cheese Shed was built, albeit less elegant than the 1894 original in the Market Yard. Yet perhaps one of the most thought-provoking points is the sense of continuity and living history as represented by Philip Cary. The Show is essentially the same as it has ever been, a showcase for farmers and rural life. Philip told us that one of the original founders of the Show was probably one of his ancestors. The involvement of the Cary family has endured and Philip's nephew from the family farm at Buckland Dinham will be Chair of the next Frome Show. Philip's love of the Show was very evident and we were delighted to be able to welcome his daughter, Alison, too to assist with the presentation. Our thanks for such an engaging and fascinating glimpse into a piece of local tradition.

Diane Ellis



IT WASN'T JUST ALAN TURING!

by

Hamish Bell

5 February 2019

How many people would have known, say 20 years ago, who Alan Turing was? Yet now, his name is familiar. He is famous for inventing the machine that allowed German Enigma coded signals to be deciphered in time for their plans to be known and then countered by Allied military intelligence in Hitler's war. But, Hamish reminded us, its significance did not end there: it led on to the Age of 'Technology' –specifically of digital calculation technology – in which we now live. Today, our society is as dependent on the 'computer' as it is on water, fuel and power. But Turing's is not the only name that deserves to be remembered.

The human mind has been interested in problems of calculation, and therefore in the possibility of making calculation tools, for some time – actually, for thousands of years. We were shown the Antikythera Mechanism, the Greek cogs and wheels device from 100 BC that was made to make astronomical calculations, such as the prediction of eclipses – in an age when for most people these were caused by 'the Gods'. Then there were Quipu – knotted strings – from even earlier for some cultures, and the abacus, which was used in Greece from 500 BC, but which might have its origins some 2000 years earlier. Later (much later) Napier, the Jacobean who calculated the logarithmic tables that we all learned about at school, made a calculating device known as Napier's bones, from its dice-like components; and logs led to the slide rule calculator.

Then came Charles Babbage, the failed actuary who, thanks to a government grant, designed a Difference Machine that was never built (before inheriting the equivalent of £8 million); and Ada Lovelace, Byron's only legitimate child, who devised the first 'program', or set of instructions for the Difference Machine, and who sadly died at 36. What is a 'program', exactly? Well, said Hamish, look at a knitting pattern: it's essentially a program, which makes jumpers the original 'soft-wear'...(it's the way he tells it).

So far, so – vaguely – familiar, until up steps Herman Hollerith – heard of him? In the US, the 1880 census had taken 8 years to produce its results. Now the population was larger by a quarter, so the 1890 results would be available in...1900, right? Hollerith invented a system for punching cards to represent the numbers, and then sorting the cards electro-mechanically to make the calculations, which got the results out in just 6 years. His ‘tabulating machines’ were still in use in data processing and accounting in 1960.

And so to Bletchley Park. Besides Turing, there was Max Newman, who designed a machine to decode the extra-special Lorenz coded messages used by Hitler and the top Nazis. Unfortunately, it didn’t work. Enter Tommy Flowers, the humble telephone engineer from the GPO. He found an electronic switching method that would make the Newman machine work, using 1500 valves. Everyone knew that this was crazy, because radio valves were known to blow constantly and frequently: but Flowers knew that in telephonic use, they didn’t if you never switched them off. This led to the Colossus machine, which entered service in June 1944 – just in time for D-Day.

After the war, Britain led the world – briefly – in computers. The National Physics Laboratory made the ACE (Advanced Calculating Engine) with all of 128 bytes (no, not mega- or even kilo-, just bytes) of processing power. Geoff Toothill led the development of the first Manchester computers; later, Hamish worked under him at Farnborough. Then, developments by Maurice Wilkes, at Cambridge, enabled J Lyons Teashops to automate their stock and delivery operations.

Starting in the mid 1950s, Britain devised the first computer-driven air interception radar system, Linesman, to see off the Russian Bears (aircraft, not animals) intruding on British air space. It incorporated 150 linked computers and ran on lead-acid batteries, like a car.

Other names followed: Grace Hopper, the US (female) Admiral who pioneered programming language; and Edsger Dijkstra, the Dutchman whose work allowed programs to find the shortest pathway to the solution – an application used every day now by

delivery drivers and other SatNav users. There was Dame Stephanie Shirley, who came to Britain as a child refugee from Hitler and made a huge fortune by enabling women to do programming from home when they became mothers. There was Brit Donald Watts Davis, who devised the packet as the standard unit of sections of data for transmission; and fellow-Brit Sir Tim Berners-Lee, who conceived the Internet and the World-Wide Web. And then a long list of others Hamish could have told us about – including, but not only, Steve Jobs and Bill Gates.

Finally, the desk-top arrived in the Eighties. How ironic, Hamish told us, that the Apple logo shows an apple from which a bite has been taken: since Turing, in 1954, took a bite from an apple which he had injected with cyanide, in order to end his own life, at just 41 years of age, unrecognised, unloved, and largely – then - unknown. On the day of the talk, in a BBC poll, he has been recognised as the greatest scientific icon of the 20th century.

Peter Landymore

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