

Mere Historical Society



UNLOCKING HISTORY

Spring Newsletter

May 2016

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www.merehistoricalsociety.org.uk

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EDITORIAL

This Newsletter has been introduced to spread the content more evenly over the year and in order to keep you up to date with events later in the year; the Autumn programme is given overleaf, beginning on 4th October. We introduced a mild festive feeling to the December Evening Lecture by offering ‘mulled wine and mince pies’ for you all and as it met with universal approval at the AGM, we will continue to do this at our last meeting of the year on 6th December 2016.

Our new policy of avoiding Evening Talks in the dark winter evenings in January and February has now taken place and I hope you still think this is a good idea, although again it was approved at the AGM in April and I can only hope that this means we are getting most things right, or at least nearly right.

I am aware, however, that the references at the AGM to ‘Minutes’ and others items in previous Newsletters was confusing to say the least, so we will make sure anything needing approval is published with the AGM Notice in February each year and before the AGM in April, so you will have time to digest the contents before the day. Steve Hoffman has also kindly offered to make the Newsletters available on the Society website, which we hope to achieve in the near future, so that these important records of the Societies activities are available to all at ‘www.merehistoricalsociety.org.uk’

Tony Grinyer (awyethg@me.com)

A tribute to SUE BIRCH

When Sue heard that the Society needed someone to organise the Evening Lecture Programme, she offered to take it on. I was somewhat surprised because I knew she was not very well; 'I will do it if you don't mind me missing meetings when I don't feel well enough to come'. So she took it on and with great efficiency organised the programme for the year starting next October.

It was typical of her determination and courage that she continued doing the job until the very end of her life. Sue rang me up shortly before the Annual General Meeting in early April this year, very apologetically saying that she would have to resign because her health had taken a turn for the worse and 'would I mind?'

A few weeks later the reason why Sue felt she needed to resign was sadly revealed. She will be remembered by so many with affection and admiration for her courage and tenacity, her humour and kindness and her many other remarkable qualities. We can be grateful that she was such an active member of our Society with a lively interest in all that we did. She will be missed very much by very many.

Peter Lewis, Chairman

Mere Historical Society Morning Talk

Tuesday 2nd February 2016

“THE SILK ROAD TO MERE” by Julia Mottershaw



Julia Mottershaw became interested in the 'North Row' of cottages when she moved to live there two and a half years ago. This row of cottages was called the Old Silk House and having read the late Michael Tighe's booklet "Silver Threads", she realised that there had been a thriving

silk industry in Mere in the 19th century and very little was known about the Old Silk House. Also she realised that the row of cottages was built on to top of the footprint of the original building. The production of silk in Mere was not weaving, but principally 'silk throwing'; her talk is in three categories – the processes used, the places in Mere where the work was carried out and the people who were involved

PROCESSES: the journey from rearing silk worms in the silk farms, (the Filature), packaging the silk into 'Books' and 'Bales' ready for transporting from China, France or Italy to the Port of London and the London agents. The agents then sent the huge bales of raw silk by wagon along the turnpike roads to Mere. They came off the turnpike road at Willoughby Hedge, down what is now Old Hollow (but then was called Welches Road) across the Shreen at the ford and up to the back of the Silk House.

Here the raw silk thread was prepared by hand ready for returning to the agents who then passed it on to the weavers of Spitalfields and elsewhere. Silk 'throwing' is the process by which the silk which has been reeled into skeins at the place of origin, receives a twist.



From crysallis to silk fabric!

Silk thread can only be used for weaving if the thread is strong enough to be used for the warp and the weft. The men who organised the work here in Mere were called Silk Throwsters. Mainly women and young girls actually carried out the delicate work

Julia then showed some interesting images of the Whitchurch Silk Mill and the beautiful floral designs by Anna Maria Garthwaite, a famous 18th century textile designer, whose designs are held at the V&A.

PLACES: The Old Silk House was in all probability converted from an agricultural building for use as a silk processing workshop as early as 1814. We know that Hincks Mill was also an early silk mill, naming Isaiah Maggs as a silk throwster there in 1819. The Grange wasn't established as a silk processing factory until 1843. Twenty years later in 1861 T. H. Baker the local historian tell us that "A row of eight cottages near Well Head called "the Old Silk House burnt." By the 1861 census several families occupied the cottages.

PEOPLE: the person who held the key to the Old Silk House was one Thomas Willmott, the son of John Willmott who took over the business from his uncle John Sharrer, who set up a silk throwing business in Sherborne in 1755. Willmott had smaller outlying silk processing workshops in Stalbridge and Cerne Abbas.

Thomas Willmott also had a processing workshop in Mere at the Old Silk House. 1821 Land

Tax Records clearly show Thomas Willmott as the tenant of the Old Silk House with Thomas Moors and Charles Glover as owners of the property.

It would seem that the Old Silk House was probably the first building in Mere to process silk. Thomas Willmott must have been operating for a few years at least prior to 1814, possibly in 1793 when he set up in Stalbridge, a period of 21 years. If another 20 years is added on to take it to 1841 when it was sold – this is a total of 27 years operating as a Silk House.

She hoped that she had gone some way to put the Old Silk House back on the map of the silk industry in our town and build on the valuable earlier work done by Michael Tighe.



Julia Mottershaw
28th February 2016

Mere Historical Society Morning Talk

Tuesday 16th February 2016

“Memoir: Escape from Brussels 1914”

By Rev Margaret Laurie

The Memoir in question is a highly personal one, that of Margaret’s own aunt, Kathleen Sloan (1886 – 1978, nee Laurie). It came into her hands from her cousin and is a story that bears witness to an extraordinarily dangerous time in the early stages of World War One. In 1914 the Germans had occupied neutral Belgium in order to gain access west through to France. At this time Kathleen found herself living in Belgium and was eventually forced, along with so many others, to flee to safer havens in the Netherlands and the UK. Margaret’s talk, with readings from her aunt’s Memoir, gave us a flavour of Kathleen’s undoubted courage as she made her remarkable escape as well as a fascinating insight into her family life.

Kathleen was second of 7 children. Her older sister was academically brighter and, perhaps unusually, went to study in Paris and then pursued a career in teaching. Wanting to compete with her sister, Kathleen resolved to travel to Brussels to learn to speak French. Initially she lived with a family where her French improved. Later she began to teach. She took on a pupil, one Suzanne Fraiteur, whose mother was wealthy and whose grandparents had a villa at Heyst where Kathleen frequently stayed. In 1913 she came back to the UK for the wedding of her younger sister, Jenny, but then returned to Belgium

By the summer of 1914, the clouds of war were descending. Germans on holiday were being recalled home. The Fraiteur family returned to Brussels which was by then German occupied. Life had changed; the family had to burn their Home Guard uniform and hide guns. Kathleen was determined to carry on as usual and to help the Belgians. She recounts going to see a nurse in a nearby clinic to offer her services, little knowing that this was Edith Cavell. She was refused work as a nurse but sewed and mended shirt collars, unaware of the secret work

being done for the allies or the price Cavell would eventually pay.
Refugees fleeing Antwerp in 1914



It was later that Kathleen heard that the Belgian family's son was in hospital in Ingatestone, Essex, having been evacuated from Ghent with pneumonia. He had travelled to Ostend in his pyjamas and then on to the UK where he was met by

Kathleen's parents. Alarmed, Kathleen's parents requested that she should return home. But Kathleen had no valid passport under German military law. Taking advantage of the Belgian family's influence and connections, she managed to get her name added to a friend's passport. This had to be collected from the authorities in Brussels but, now equipped with passport, Kathleen could begin her escape.

The journey was far from easy. Initially she travelled by horse-drawn bus with 10 passengers. Leaving much behind, she set off to Antwerp, with her flask of coffee for the journey. The countryside she passed through was utterly devastated and bristling with German soldiers. She tells of stopping to rest the horse at a place where high-ranking officers were being entertained and of being threatened with imprisonment by a young soldier. Fortunately they were allowed to continue toward Antwerp and the Dutch border. Stopping again to rest they found themselves in a house that was close to the border. In the middle of the night they were able to escape by the back door, walk to a railway halt and clamber on to a train. At the end of this journey, they had to proceed on foot to another station where they caught a train to reach their destination of Antwerp. From there she was able to take a small boat along the coast before transferring to a larger boat to get to Folkestone. She must have been very relieved to find that she was on her way back to the UK and even had a cabin where she could at last get some sleep. The final stage of her escape was from Folkestone to London on a coach filled with Belgian refugees.

Returning probably in November 1914 (the account is at times vague), she married William (Billy) Sloan on 5 December 1914 with just time the next day to catch the early train to Brighton where her new husband had to be on parade at 9.00am. During the next few years Kathleen's husband served in the Artists Rifles, eventually training men to use machine guns at St Omer in France. Kathleen went to a Voluntary Aid Detachment unit in Bethnal Green where she carried out general duties as assistant to the night nurse. When Billy volunteered to work at the machine gun school at Grantham, Kathleen resigned to go with him.



Kathleen's story illustrates the dreadful plight of the Belgians during the German occupation and the courage shown by those who sought to escape. There must be many more such stories to be told given the scale of the refugee exodus from Belgium at

this time, many of whom arrived in the UK to scatter and even settle in places as far flung as Mere.

Some 250,000 Belgians fled to Britain at this time towards the end of 1914. Historians say that few communities in the UK were unaffected by their arrival. Most were housed with families across the country and in all four nations.

Diane Ellis

Mere Historical Society Evening Lecture Tuesday 1st March 2016

"SS Great Britain – from launch to re-launch"

By Ian Caskie

Designed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel for the Great Western Steamship Company's transatlantic service from Bristol to New York and launched in 1843, the SS Great Britain was the largest vessel afloat at 322ft long 50ft beam and 3674 tons.



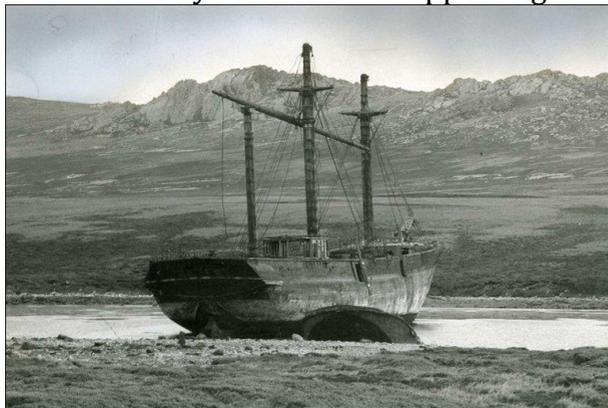
The S.S. Great Britain, Great Western Dock, Bristol, Avon.

Photo: D. Noble, John Hyde Studios.

With a single screw

propeller and schooner and square-rigged masts, she carried 360 passengers across the Atlantic in 14 days in 1845. However, she was run aground in Dundrum Bay in Northern Ireland in 1846 and the Company forced out of business. Sold for salvage and then repaired, she carried over 15 thousands of immigrants to Australia for 30 years from 1852 to 1881.

Her most famous Captain, Capt. Grey, became captain in 1854 and served for 18 years before disappearing at sea on 26th November



1872.

Forced into the Falkland Islands by a typhoon in 1884, she was retired and used as a warehouse then a quarantine ship and finally a coal hulk until scuttled in 1937.

In 1970 following a donation by Sir Jack Haywood and others, she was towed back to the UK on a pontoon barge and returned to the Bristol dry-dock where she was built.

The salvage operation was chaired by Richard Goold-Adams with Naval Architect Ewan Corlett. A submersible pontoon barge was chartered in 1970 with a German tug 'Varius 11' and on 14th April the tug and pontoon with the SS Great Britain on board sailed round to Port Stanley. The voyage home began on 24th April via Montevideo, then across the Atlantic to arrive at Barry Docks on 22nd June. Bristol based tugs then towed her on the pontoon across to Avonmouth Docks.



She was then refloated and on Sunday 5th July towed up the River

Avon to Bristol, passing under the Clifton Suspension Bridge, also designed by Brunel. She waited for 2 weeks for a sufficiently high tide to get back through the locks to the dry dock in the Great Western Dockyard where she had been built in the early 18th Century.





The ship is sealed below the waterline to prevent further corrosion by a glass plate fitted around the hull to keep it water and air tight. Dehumidifiers keep the air at a relative humidity of 20%, while a layer of water on top of the plate gives the impression that the ship is afloat.

The new **“Being Brunel : The National Brunel Project”** will consist of the redevelopment of derelict 20th Century buildings beside Bristol’s Floating Harbour to complement and enhance the setting of the SS Great Britain in her historic dockyard, where she has become Bristol’s no 1 visitor attraction. Demolition of the vacant 1940’s buildings alongside the ship began in January this year. Brunel’s Grade 2 listed Drawing Office where he designed and built the SS Great Britain is being restored to how it was in the 1840’s. ‘Being Brunel’ is due to open in early 2018. Many thanks to Ian Caskie for such an informative and excellent illustrated lecture.

Mere Historical Society : Morning Talk

Tuesday 15th March 2016

“Conservation – The Agents of Decay”

By Hannah Severn

Hannah works for the National Trust at Stourhead House and admitted that it was her first foray into public speaking outside of Stourhead. So she was practicing her public speaking skills on us all!

Hopefully we were all familiar with Stourhead, and had chance to visit the house, built between 1721-25 in the Palladian style for the Hoare family, who had made their money in banking.



Stourhead is a fairly modest house, as far as country houses go, but in their day, the Hoare family would have had a small army of staff running and looking after the house. Today the National Trust employs a much smaller team of 9

staff who look after the house, and everything in it; they are Stourhead’s conservation team.

AGENTS OF DETERIORATION

Hannah then talked about what sort of problems they had to keep an eye out for in the house, and what measures they had in place to prevent these things happening. Conservation in historic environments is a huge and complex topic.

The idea of the agents of deterioration was originally developed in Canada in 1960s. Until mid-twentieth C., conservation concentrated on repair, and then went in direction of monitoring and preventing damage

(‘prevention is better than cure’), delaying the need for remedial conservation work (stabilisation). NT conservation is laid out in the ‘Manual of Housekeeping’ – aka the Bible!

There are an accepted 9 agents: Fire, Flood, Loss (theft), Physical, Chemical (gases, pollutants), Biological (moulds, pests), Light, Relative Humidity (fluctuations) and Temperature (fluctuations). A tenth agent may be added to this list: mis-management/lack of documentation/poor curatorship

Fire/Flood

Both of these ‘disaster scenarios’ are very unlikely, but not completely unheard of – you may remember the tragic fire at Clendon Park last year, and prior to that, the devastating fire at Uppark in 1989. All NT places now have a salvage plan to deal with the aftermath of a fire or flood.

Floods of different varieties can be a very common problem for historic houses, Stourhead suffered its own flood in November last year due to historic pipework. Water can also get into buildings through poor building management (leaks, ingress, etc).

Loss

Loss is rarer than you might think. Loss can refer to theft, but more often refers to parts of an historic collection or building that are lost and not recovered.

Physical

Most common form of physical damage is cumulative damage or wear and tear – this most obviously includes people touching or using, but can also include actions such as regular dusting (as dust can be abrasive) and even the ongoing use of objects such as clocks.

We as NT staff have also been guilty of over cleaning in the past.

Chemical

Chemical agents of deterioration are mostly environmental, such as gases and pollutants coming through open doors and windows – although dust can also contain particles that are chemically active, we regularly clean and check our historic collection.

Historic objects themselves can also give off damaging pollutants, historic varnishes and glues, for instance, could break down.

We use proper conservation-grade storage materials, when we put historic objects into storage, simply wrapping something in newspaper or a plastic bag is not a good idea!

Biological

Many different factors fall under the biological agents of deterioration category. One very common problem is mould, which is caused or exacerbated by other agents such as humidity, temperature and water ingress. Also insect pests which are monitored in historic environments – though only a small amount of UK insects actually damage heritage material. But when insects damage our collection, they damage it permanently.

At Stourhead last summer we had woodworm in both the Library, and under the stairs up to the volunteer's tearoom. We treated this a water-based insecticide developed by and for the heritage industry.

Pests love dark, undisturbed spaces, so it's really important that we check, clean and maintain all areas of the house as much as possible.

Light

Light damage is a huge issue for historic collections, Hannah showed a photo of what was once a rose pink settee as a good example. All types of light causes damage, whether natural or artificial, but light is needed so that we can open our places to visitors, so it can be a real challenge to meet the needs of both the historic collection, and those who visit historic houses.

We have two blinds at most windows at Stourhead, which really help us control light levels, but they're not the most attractive.

Relative Humidity (RH) and temperature

NT ideal humidity level in showrooms and storerooms is between 40%-60%: below 40% becomes too dry and furniture can start cracking, and above 60% is when damp becomes a real problem.

Where RH is perfect for metals (therefore preventing corrosion), it may be too dry for any wooden objects also in the room

The National Trust aims to prevent, or at least reduce the rate of, deterioration of the collections and interiors of our historic buildings by using preventive conservation. Hopefully, she had given us an insight into some of the causes of deterioration in NT places, and what is being done to slow down the damage. A lively discussion followed and many thanks given for such an interesting and well presented talk.

AWG

Mere Historical Society Evening Lecture

Tuesday 5th April 2016

“Constable – His visits to Gillingham”

By Sam Woodcock

Why did Constable, born in Suffolk, visit Gillingham? The question posed by Sam Woodcock was answered by Constable’s connection to the Fisher family and in particular, Bishop Fisher of Exeter and later Salisbury in 1807, hence his paintings of Salisbury Cathedral. John Fisher was the nephew of the Archdeacon of Berkshire and was summoned to Windsor Castle to tutor Prince Edward, later the Duke of Kent and father of Queen Victoria. In 1790 Dr John Fisher was the rector of Langham on the Essex/Suffolk border, near to Constables birth place at Flatford Mill. The 22year old Constable was introduced to Dr Fisher in 1798 and shared a love of Art and culture.

Constable later went to London with a letter of introduction from Dr



Fisher and was admitted to the Royal Academy School of Art and became a regular visitor to Fisher’s London home in Seymour Street. He also visited the Bishop’s Palace in Salisbury and there met Fisher’s nephew John Fisher and became firm friends.

In 1816 they both married, Constable to Maria Bicknell, and both honeymooned in Osmington Vicarage near Weymouth. In 1819 John Fisher was appointed by his Uncle the Bishop to be vicar of Gillingham as well as Osmington and became aware of the Mills and rivers around Gillingham. He invited Constable to stay and he



subsequently painted the famous pictures of Shreen Water and Purns Mill. The Gillingham Vicarage has now been demolished.

In September 1823, Archdeacon Fisher writes to his wife taking

the waters in Bath of a picnic with Constable and his children; later Constable painted Parnhams Mill in Gillingham on the River Shreen which now hangs in the Fitzwilliam Museum. He usually painted in his London Studio from original outdoor oil sketches, but a similar painting was done in Brighton in 1826. In these paintings there are observations in the background of local edifices such as King Alfred's Tower at Stourton and St Michaels Church at Mere. Yet another painting exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1827 is from a different angle, but shows that little has changed from that time. The original Purns Mill was destroyed by fire in 1825 and a picture dated 1883 shows a very different red brick structure. Traces of the original Mill can, however, still be seen at the base of the present mill which was built on top of the old foundations. Sacks of grain pictured in 2005, just before the mill finally closed, compare favourably with those in the 1825 painting. The mill although no longer in use, can still be visited today.

Tony Grinyer

Mere Historical Society Evening Lecture

Tuesday 3rd May 2016

The Story of Mata Hari: Eye of the Dawn

By Kathy McNally

Mata Hari (Malay for 'Eye of the Dawn') is perhaps the best-known female spy of modern times. She was a femme fatale and celebrated beauty, who apparently used her sexuality to extract secrets from men. But was she a devious double agent or more a victim of injustice? This is the question Kathy invited us to answer in her intriguing exploration of Mata Hari's life.



Born Margarethe Zelle, Mata Hari was the daughter of a well-to-do Dutch hat-maker. She was a beautiful child with a vivid imagination but became distanced from her father following the death of her mother and her father's remarriage. She turned her imagination and talent to learning to dance when she moved to Java, following her marriage to Rudolphe MacLeod. When this marriage ended, Mata Hari returned to Holland and eventually found herself in Paris where she earned her living from sensual dancing, wearing alluring and exotic costumes from Java. In demand in the cities of Europe, she had many lovers, including

French and German aristocrats and officers, in the period leading to the outbreak of World War 1. It was this lifestyle that eventually led to her arrest by English police and MI5 on suspicion of being a German spy.

Protesting innocence on the grounds that she was in fact a French spy, she was released only to be arrested by the French military and tried for espionage as a German double agent. She was held in St Lazare prison in terrible conditions and interrogated 17 times before her trial. Exhausted, she finally admitted to being a German spy, in the face of proof that she had taken money from the German Consul. However, she claimed that she did not give away any secrets, only published information and was just behaving in accordance with her lifestyle. Despite no proof of her spying being produced at her trial, she was found guilty and executed in 1917.



In taking us through Mata Hari's life, Kathy revealed to us an independent-minded, attention-seeking young woman who had made her way by selling her charms to the higher ranks of Europe. But was she a spy? Did she

admit guilt through loneliness and desperation while in isolation facing trial from St Lazare? Was her trial fair? No evidence of actual spy material appears to have been produced, nor any evidence of having attended a spy school in Antwerp as was alleged. At a time when modesty and homeliness in women were promoted as the ideal, were the French trying her more for her courtesan lifestyle than for espionage activity?

Kathy drew a comparison with the case of a young female Russian spy, named Anna Chapman, who was arrested for espionage in America in 2010 and then was deported back to Moscow where she received a hero's welcome and began a new life and career. Had Mata Hari been convicted in present times, would she have faced a more lenient sentence? Was the military trial in France more about

the sentence than the process of proving guilt? If she had been tried in England would she have still been executed?

Kathy is a historian with a keen interest in espionage and spies. She did not offer answers to the questions she raised but she did leave us all wondering and certainly succeeded in generating a sense of mystery and intrigue about the myths surrounding the life of Mata Hari.

Diane Ellis

Mere Historical Society

PROGRAMME of ACTIVITIES for Autumn 2016

To be held in the Grove Building, Mere

Tuesday 4th October 2016: Evening Lecture at 7.30pm
“Verwood Industry and Life” by Pam Reeks

Tuesday 11th October 2016: *Morning Talk* at 10.15am
“Friendly Societies in Mere” by Michael Plaxton

Tuesday 1st November 2016: Evening Lecture at 7.30
“Mysterious life of Walter Henry; from
workhouse to transatlantic troopships in WW1”
By Howard Nichols

Tuesday 15th Nov' 2016: *Morning Talk* at 10.15am
T B A

Tuesday 6th December 2016: Evening Lecture at 7.10
pm for Mulled Wine and Mince Pies, followed by
“Inner sanctums” by Rob Curtis

COMMITTEE MEMBERS 2016/17

Chairman	Peter Lewis	840116	
	pexhill@btinternet.com		
Vice-Chairman	Tony Grinyer	861545	&
Newsletters		awyethg@me.com	
Treasurer	Peter Platt-Higgins	860809	
	p.platthiggins@btinternet.co.uk		
Archivist	Jenny Wilding	860908	
	jenny@flaxmill.org.uk		
Minute	Diane Ellis	861541	
Secretary		dianesellis@yahoo.co.uk	
Membership	Gerry Cook	861797	
Secretary		sixpenny1946@gmail.com	
Summer Visits	Caroline Cook	861797	
		sixpenny1946@gmail.com	
Member	Julia Mottershaw		
	juliamottershaw@hotmail.co.uk		

Nominations or AOB for the Annual General Meeting (AGM) must be submitted in writing or by email to the Secretary or Chairman at least two weeks before the date of the next AGM.