

Mere Historical Society



UNLOCKING HISTORY

**Autumn Newsletter
September 2016**

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www.merehistoricalsociety.org.uk

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Editorial

This will be my final Newsletter as we have been persuaded to move back to Hampshire to be near our family and in particular our new Great Grandson. I trust that I have managed to introduce a more modern image to the newsletters that meets with majority approval and I wish you all well in the future.

Chairman's Remarks September 2016

It is sad for me and it will be a great loss for our Society that Tony Grinyer, for personal reasons, will be resigning from the committee of the MHS. Tony has been the Vice Chairman, organised very successfully the Morning Talks, edited, compiled, and produced the Newsletter, and prepared the Hall for our meetings. He has also been a great support and friend to me; I am very grateful for all that he has done for us. I should add thanks to Hazel, Tony's wife who has quietly assisted him in so many ways and served coffee and biscuits with a smile for the Morning Talks over the past several years.

This means that the Society now urgently needs to find a member to organise the Morning Talks, such a popular and successful feature of our programme. We will also need someone to edit and produce the News Letter/Magazine; no mean task in the light of the efficient and enthusiastic way this has been done by Tony in recent years, although this is now well organised. And of course new members on Committee!

As always the Summer Outings have been a great success, culminating in the splendid visit to Bletchley Park. From the comments I have received they have been enjoyed by so many of you. Thank you Caroline for your usual efficient and imaginative organisation; your hard work is much appreciated.

So we look forward, eagerly to a full and varied programme for the next six months, with the informal morning talks and our more formal evening lectures. Please don't hesitate if you have any suggestions for possible speakers or subjects on which you like us to try to find a speaker for our future programme. Let me or another committee member know and we will try to act upon your suggestions. I look forward to your company during our 2016-17 programme which I am sure will be as enjoyable and interesting as ever.

Peter Lewis

Mere Historical Society

Visit to Castle Cary and John Boyd Textiles

Tuesday 17 May 2016

Castle Cary is a delightful small Somerset town with an abundance of golden coloured stone buildings – the stone is the local “Cary” stone. The main street has a good selection on small shops – an increasingly unusual sight in towns now where the large supermarkets dominate the High Street scene.



We started by being shown around the factory of John Boyd Textiles. First established in 1837, the company weaves horsehair fabric using the original looms of 1870. We witnessed the clack-clack of the

looms and the boom-boom of the machinery on the factory floor and saw the wonderful horsehair fabric being produced. One loom will produce only three metres in a day. Horsehair must be used from live horses to ensure strength and vitality for weaving. It is imported from Mongolia and other parts of the Far East. White hair is especially valued but black and brown hair is also used. White hair can, of course, be dyed in a wide variety of colours. Horsehair fabric was used by

many great furniture makers such as Chippendale and was especially popular in Victorian times for its durability and being easy to clean.

Today, it is exported worldwide and has been used in royal palaces and some of the best hotels.

After a lunch break, we were taken on a conducted tour of the town, by Adrian Pearse of the Living History Group, starting at the parish church situated on rising ground. It is a Victorian reconstruction of a 15th century church with an impressively tall spire. We were then taken to Park Pond which, fed from springs just above it, is the source of the River Cary, a tributary of the Brue. Above the pond are earthworks which are the site of a castle which probably dates back to Norman times.



We were later taken to the summit of this hill from which there are good views of the surrounding country, including Glastonbury Tor and the Mendips.

Down at street level, we saw the famous Horse Pond (possibly part of a moat round the castle) and were shown a tiny old building with red doors (the old fire station), the former Congregational chapel, now a private residence, and an impressive Methodist chapel and schoolroom.



Finally, we went to see the famous Round House, a rare 18th lock-up which was opened for us by an enormous key. Some of the more intrepid members climbed inside to experience the gloom that a prisoner must have felt when confined there.

Our last port of call was the local History Museum housed in the upper rooms of the Market House (a handsome 1855 building with an arcade at ground level). The museum exhibits were varied, well displayed and interesting. This was a pleasant end to a very enjoyable day.

Thank you, Caroline, for organising this outing so well.

David Longbourne.

Mere Historical Society

Visit to Dunster Castle : 9th June 2016

Arriving at Dunster at 11am, we had five and a half hours to explore the castle, grounds and village. Members of our group dispersed as we left the coach, and our sub-group of four first made for the castle, which we explored with the help of excellent information in each room.



The castle has 1000 years of history, the Luttrell family having occupied it from 1376 until it was handed over to the National Trust in 1976. During their tenure, the Luttrells remodelled the medieval stronghold to create a splendid Victorian country home.

One of the many glories of the collection, the Leather Gallery is dedicated to leather hangings of European importance. There has been a library at Dunster Castle since the seventeenth century, but in 1870-1 Anthony Salvin created the room we see today. The colourful wallpaper is embossed to simulate leather.

From the conservatory window, we admired the fabulous views that reach across to Exmoor and the Quantock Hills.

The 1950s kitchen, the beautiful dining room with stunning place settings for the visit of the Maharaja of Jaipur, the bathroom, the wonderful furniture, silver and paintings throughout – there is so much to admire here. But for me the highlight of the house was the very impressive Grand Staircase, built in 1680, with each panel carved from a single piece of elm. The intricate carvings depict a fox and stag hunt, some Charles II shillings, and a trophy of arms, which commemorate Col. Francis Luttrells' military career.



After a delicious lunch in a local pub, we set about exploring the grounds. Dunster Castle was once the centre of a great estate, which included forests, farms and land. However in the 1950s much of the estate was sold to cover death duties. We explored the wooded pathways which lead to the gently flowing river Avill in the River Gardens, thoroughly enjoying the collection of palms, sub-tropical plants, and the enormous handkerchief tree. The river running down from the watermill and under the stone bridges is really

picturesque and tranquil.

Arriving at the fully restored 18th century working watermill one of our party was compelled to buy some recently milled flour.

Climbing back up the hill, we found ourselves in the Keep Garden above the castle, affording a completely different view.

With time running out, we walked through the medieval village, with its amazing Yarn Market, built in the early 17th century. The village has a wealth of listed buildings, interesting small shops, and is delightful.

I have been to the village before but have never visited the castle and grounds. Even having spent more than five hours there, I realise there is much more to see, and I am already planning a return trip. I sense that most members on the coach were equally enthusiastic.

Jean Nimmo

Mere historical Society

Report of outing to Seaton Tramway and Seaton Jurassic Centre : 6th July 2016



Thirty one members set off for Devon on a fine dry July day, arriving at a beautifully kept flower decked Colyton Station in time for refreshments before we boarded our No. 2 Tram driven by Graham Avory, our own personal driver for the day. Graham, by the way travelled to school by tram.

As the Seaton to Seaton Junction branch line was due to close in March 1966, Claude Lane, who had an interest in operating Tram Lines going back to the 1940's bought from British Rail the Seaton to Colyton section. The sale was completed in 1980. Now, over 100.000 visitors a year use the lines, and trams from Manchester, Sheffield, Croydon and Birmingham are being used. There are 14 cars in use dating from 1904 to 2007 with restoration ongoing.



We all climbed aboard, with just one seat to spare. The ride was definitely a highlight of the day, with the Axe estuary soon coming alongside with far reaching views. Quite a few different wading birds along the shore line, shelducks, egrets, oyster catchers and a curlew were spotted. The wild flowers were at their best as we pulled in to the terminus at Seaton, passing the newly opened Jurassic Centre which we would soon be exploring, with its bird and bat boxes on view.

Now we were free to wander at leisure along by the sea or through the town enjoying a picnic or a spot of lunch. The sun was now at its best, definitely ice cream time.

At 1.30 we regrouped at the Jurassic Centre ; now over to 12 year old Harry for his report.

Upon entering the building we were greeted with a talk by Mike Ruiter. He explained what Seaton Jurassic is. Once you have entered the three dome shaped rooms you will be greeted again, this time by a Victorian Time Traveller (a hologram). She told us that this was her home, and that her father had built a time machine and now she lives in the future with us. Her hobby is actually rocks and fossils, as you can tell from the decorations in the rooms.

Continuing you will see the magnificent time machine. Each room has yet more information with interactive books and chests. Then into the garden where we found some interesting games, including a magnetic fishing game which some of us enjoyed. Seaton Jurassic is a lovely day out for all ages 5-95 and has some highly recommended cakes!! Harry.

Back on the Tram again a very interesting ride. At one point a very lucky squirrel was spotted by Harry crossing the tracks just in front of us. At Colyton we thanked Graham for a great ride, our bus was waiting, we all agreed it was a fine day out, interesting and educational with sunshine and the sea included.

P.S. Jean remembers travelling on the trams in Birmingham

Many thanks to Caroline and Gerry.

Jean (Young), Ann (Newbery) and Harry

Mere Historical Society

Trip to Bletchley Park – September 6th 2016

“Bletchley Park was occupied by the HQ of Britain’s cryptanalytic and signals intelligence organisation, the Government Code and Cypher School, between August 1939 and March 1946. Here some of the best brains of Britain were pitted against the enemy’s enciphered communications during the Second World War. Their success forged for Britain a decisively powerful intelligence weapon which saved countless lives and helped significantly to shorten the war.”

So reads a plaque in the entrance hall of Bletchley Park Mansion, which concludes with a timeless quote from Shakespeare’s *Henry V*: “The King hath note of all that they intend, by interception which they dream not of”.

Everything took place at Bletchley Park (BP), in the mansion, rudimentary huts and later in brick-built blocks, in utmost secrecy. Even long after WW2, everyone involved (well in excess of 10,000 people, the majority young females) was constrained by the Official Secrets Act to say nothing about their involvement.



Alan Turing’s office

For many years there was no public acknowledgement of BP’s incredible and vital work. It was not until 2011 that HM the Queen unveiled a memorial in the grounds of BP to those ‘who also served’.

Alan Turing's crucial contribution to the Allied victory and post-war Britain did not, of course, protect him from prosecution under inhumane anti-homosexuality legislation, following which he committed suicide in 1954. His posthumous pardon came only in 2013, four years after an official apology to his family from Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

Gordon Welchman has been described as the 'architect of ultra intelligence'. His pioneering work was fundamental to the success of BP and helped pave the way for the birth of the information age, which has had such a radical effect on our daily lives. In the months prior to the start of WW2, Welchman, Turing and others had been recruited from British universities by Commander Alexander (Alastair) Dennison, Head of GC&CS from 1919 to 1942.

Turing's work in Hut 8 led to the breaking of the Germans' *Enigma* and *Lorenz* ciphers; together with Gordon Welchman, he developed the *Bombe* machines, devised to speed up the code-breaking process. A replica featured prominently in the publicity for the 2015 feature film *Imitation Game* and is now on display at BP alongside some of the props (including Sherborne School



uniforms of the 1920s) and sets used in the film. At the end WW2 the *Bombes* were either destroyed or, according to legend, stored in great secrecy and under high security by GCHQ. In another building at BP, a team of enthusiastic and talented volunteer engineers have recreated the *Bombe* utilising drawings eventually released by the government.

A working replica at Bletchley Park of Turing and Welchman's "*Bombe*".

BP's now vanished Block F once housed several examples of the world's first electronic computer *Colossus*, invented by GPO telephone engineer Tommy Flowers, based on ideas developed by BP mathematicians Max Newman (Alan Turing's former maths tutor) and Bill Tutte. The National Museum of Computing has been established on a site nearby.

It is impossible to over-estimate the importance and enduring relevance of the work carried out at BP. There is a huge amount to see and to take in and we needed the five hours that our trip, masterminded as ever with great efficiency by Caroline Cook, gave us. The Trust that has been restoring BP for a number of years has achieved a great deal. The recreated offices, cold in winter and too hot in summer, in which the mathematicians, engineers, members of the three services and their civilian support workers beavered away are evocative. Display boards, video presentations, guided tours and the audio-visual multi-media handsets all contribute to a fascinating and thought-provoking experience that is much to be recommended.

A great idea Caroline – and thank you very much!

John Burrough

Mere Historical Society

PROGRAMME of ACTIVITIES for Autumn 2016

All to be held in the Grove Building at 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 Jointly with the Mere Literary Festival

**“Mid 19th Century Charity Organisations in Mere”
by Michael Plaxton**

Tuesday 1st November 2016: Evening Lecture 7.30pm

**“Mysterious life of Walter Henry; from workhouse to transatlantic troopships in WW1”
by Howard Nichols**

Tuesday 15th Nov’ 2016: *Morning Talk* at 10.15am

**“Shackleton’s 1914 Expedition to the South Pole”
by Frank Marshall**

Tuesday 6th December 2016: Evening Lecture at 7.10 pm for ‘Mulled Wine and Mince Pies’,

**followed by “Inner sanctums”
by Rob Curtis**

PROGRAMME of Morning Talks, Winter 2017

All to be held in the Grove Building at Mere

**Tuesday 17th January 2017: *Morning Talk* at
10.15am**

**“Royal Naval Hovercraft in the Falkland Islands 50
years ago” by Vernon Phillips**

Tuesday 7th February 2017: *Morning Talk* 10.15am

**“How the 1938 Invasion of Belgium changed my
Life” by Monique Turnball**

**Tuesday 21st February 2017: *Morning Talk* at
10.15am**

**“In search of Francis Faugoin, Steward for Henry
the Magnificent at Stourhead” by Julia Mottershaw**

Tuesday 21st March 2017: *Morning Talk* at 10.15am

**“Will Shakespeare’s London – danger, vanity
and vice” By Gerry Cook**

**PROGRAMME of Evening Lectures, Spring
2017**

All to be held in the Grove Building at Mere

Tuesday 7th March 2017: Evening Lecture at 7.30pm

“Life and Times of the Iconic Vulcan Bomber”

By Tony Davies

Tuesday 4th April 2017: 7pm for ‘Subs & Wine’ ;

AGM at 7.30pm, followed by Evening Lecture

**“The Yetties Group’s tours across Europe, Far
East and Africa”**

By Bonnie Sartin

Tuesday 25th April 2017: Evening Lecture at 7.30pm

“A Lost Medieval Manor” By Hilary Griffiths

Committee Members 2016

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Nominations for committee etc and notices for AOB for the AGM must be submitted to a member of committee by 28th February 2017.