

# S.A.L.H.S

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*Stanstead Abbotts Local History Society*

**Issue 26**

## Fall and Rise of the English Country House

Editor—Terry Collins

**April 2018**

Our March meeting saw the welcome return of Tim Turner from Sworders with yet another enthralling evening talk.

He began by briefly looking at the development of the large English Country house from 17th century onwards, but concentrating on the Victorian era. The spread of the British Empire saw many landed families and the aristocracy earning money which enabled them to run the grand houses and estates spread across the country. Houses such as Holkham Hall, Audley End, etc.

Many of these estates and houses employed large numbers of staff, both inside and in the grounds, they contained workers cottages, farms and were the largest employers in many areas. This continued through the Victorian era until the late 1880's and 90's. With the coming of the Edwardian age things began to change for the worse. In 1910/1912 Lloyd George brought in inheritance tax for the first time, and this proved very difficult for many of the large estates. Things got even worse with the outbreak of the First World War as many of the

land owners or their sons went off to war and many of them never returned. Servants and estate staff also left to fight and again lots of them did not come back. This, of course led to a shortage of staff at the end of the war. During the 1920's many of the large houses were sold by local estate agents. Hallingbury House was put up for



Holkham Hall, Norfolk

sale but would not sell until the owners began to sell individual items from the house. It was even known for the estate owner to burn the house down if he could not keep it or sell it.

Following World War Two the situation worsened and 1955 was the worst year when almost 100 houses were destroyed. During this period organisations like the National Trust and English Heritage began to grow more powerful with increasing numbers of members.

Some of the large estates began to look for alternative uses for themselves. Some became schools, like Stowe, hospitals, luxury hotels, etc. But in total during the 20th Century over 1000 houses were destroyed.

A lot were however saved by the burgeoning growth of the National Trust etc.

Tim then gave the example of the sale of Dumfries House (below) in Ayrshire, owned by the Marquis of Bute, which was put up for sale by Christies but found no takers. This house was full of original Chippendale furniture so it was decided to sell this first and a loaded lorry was on route to London when news came that money had been found to save the house, so the vehicle turned round and went back home with its valuable contents. The saviour was in the shape of Prince Charles who intervened to save the house complete with all the lovely furniture. He created a fund, the Prince of Wales Charitable Foundation which pledged £20 million, to save the house

It is fact that most visitors to the National Trust sites do not actually go into the buildings but use the café, shop, children's play areas, etc. This does not include places like Longleat and Woburn Safari Parks.

The pinnacle of achievement for the rich in this country was the English grand country house. *Terry Collins*



## Apology

Sorry for the cancellation of the February meeting, this was due unfortunately, to a mix up with the bookings. Thankfully we were able to contact most of the membership in advance. This was the first time we have had to cancel a meeting and hopefully it will be the last time too.



According to local historians a Danish Fort existed at Easneye and a Saxon settlement near Cappell Lane. However we are warned that to go looking for these sites could be a fruitless task as little or nothing remains. Could it be that one day Stanstead Abbots will also be just a mark on a map showing a place of historical interest?

There are plans to turn Little Briggens, a part of Easneye, into a huge quarry that will supply building material for years to come. The quarry will stretch from Stanstead Abbots to Gilston Park. I'm not sure what Alwine would have to say about that but most of his existence has virtually disappeared already.

When I moved to the village it was almost self supporting. There were two bakers, (maybe three but I'm not sure), a couple of butchers and one had its own slaughter house. You could buy shoes, clothes, electrical goods and there was a hardware shop that catered for every need. There was the chemist and the doctors plus the hairdressers and a couple of mini supermarkets. You could buy carpets, hire plant machinery, get a cup of tea at the cafe and there were more pubs than you could comfortably drink at in one evening. We even had a bank and a post office. There were two newsagents one of which, Burtons, was a fundamental part of the village. Well Burtons has now gone so what hope is there for the rest of the village? There used to be a petrol station and another in Saint Margaret's,

both long gone. You could even get your car serviced and repaired at the local garage but no more.

The doctors was great when the new surgery was constructed from Andersons hardware store and saved a trip to Ware. But alas the surgery is now open only two or three days a week which means a longer wait for an appointment. Blood tests were available at the doctors but that has now been cancelled and means a trip to Hertford or Ware.

The post office has now gone as well. Yes I know we have a facility in the Coop to post a letter or parcel but it's a shadow of the old post office. The bank has long gone and now means a trip to Ware or Hoddesdon. The pubs have disappeared too. If you want a pub crawl in the village you start in the Red Lion and that's as far as you go. The old Lord Louis is now the Oak again and more of a restaurant so I don't class that as a pub. The Jolly Fisherman is not in Stanstead Abbots so we can't include that and I know the Rye House Tavern is in the village but beyond my idea of walking to the pub. The village club is members only but you could include that if you are a member. A small remainder of the drinking houses that used to populate the area. A sad day when the Queens Head closed but that is a personal opinion. There is a balloon shop now and I'm not knocking it, my granddaughter makes good use of it and appreciates its existence but I don't suppose it's much use to the elderly who can't get around much.

There is very little left in the village now and you will have to travel to get you daily needs. Travel never used to be a problem with plenty of buses to Hoddesdon or Hertford, Bishops Stortford and even a bus to Heathrow Airport. But things have changed. The Heathrow Airport bus does not come through the village anymore so we are obviously looked upon as not being the travelling type. You can no longer catch a bus to Hertford from Stanstead Abbots,

you have to walk to Saint Margaret's and get one there. The Stortford bus still runs but only every two hours.

The village High Street has been resurfaced with block paving and narrowed. This was to slow down the traffic passing through. Well it worked. The High Street is now so undulated with a wonky surface that only a maniac could speed along it. Parking is a bit hit and miss. Not that there is much to park for anymore with all the old shops gone except for the Coop. There are three lay bys restricted to thirty minutes parking and a main car park. The main car park is divided into two with one area for free parking all day and the other red area for free parking for three hours and chargeable after that. Sounds good but, and there is always a but: the red area is the first three hours free from 9am till 3pm. All you do is get a free ticket from the machine that will show your time of arrival, put it in your windscreen and away you go. Only don't arrive before 9am. The machine will not issue a ticket before 9am. So if you have a doctors appointment at 9am and park at 8.50am you can't get a ticket. If the warden comes around before your return he will slap a fine on your car. Sounds daft but I enquired of a warden what the procedure was and he said he was duty bound to issue a fine and you had to complain to the council to get it revoked. What happened to common sense?

So the shops have gone, the pubs and banks have gone, the buses have gone, the High Street has seen better days and the streets lights are going the same way. Burtons has gone, never thought that would happen, and now they are going to turn us into a quarry.

Stanstead Abbots? Yes it used to be a settlement on the banks of the River Lea. I'm sure there is a mark on the map to show where it once stood. Don't go trying to find any remains though; it could be a fruitless search.

*Brian Johnson*



## Remarkable Women from Hertfordshire

Julie Gregson from HALHS paid us a return visit as our April speaker, talking to us about some of the women, some famous and others not, who either lived or were connected to Hertfordshire

Edith was the Queen consort of England and the wife of Edward the Confessor. Born around 1025 the daughter of Earl Godwin a Saxon Lord, she married Edward on 23rd January 1045. She was an educated woman who spoke several languages and studied mathematics and astronomy, a rarity among medieval women. She lived with Edward until his death but they had no children, on his death she commissioned a book about his life, *Vita Edwardi Regis*. In the latter years of their marriage she became one of Edward's inner group of advisors. She was known to be a very determined hard and sometimes bad tempered woman. On the publication of the *Domesday Book* in 1068 she was shown to be the richest woman in England and possibly the fourth richest person.

Another Medieval woman of note was Dame Juliana Berners, born 1388, said to be the prioress of St Mary at Sopwell near St Albans. She was brought up at court and became very interested in hawking, hunting and fishing. She is the supposed author of the *Book of St Albans*. She also wrote a *Treatyse on Fyshynng with an Angyle*, the first book in English about fly fishing which predates Izaak Walton's *Compleat Angler* by 150 years. Her book on fishing was one of the most popular books of the time and was reprinted many times. It is not known when she died and there are considerable numbers of historians and researchers who believe that she did not write either of the books for which she is known.

Moving on to the Tudor era, of course there is Queen Elizabeth 1st who, although a disappointment to her father Henry VIII for not being a boy, reigned England for over 40 years. She was living at Hatfield Palace, the house her father had provided for her, when the news was brought to her, at the age of 25 that she was now Queen. She took to the task enthusiastically holding her first council of state within two months of her accession to the throne.

Moving away from the 'great and the good' to ordinary folk, we were next told about Jane Wenham, the Witch of Walkern. She was a widow who in 1712 was charged with witchcraft after supposedly bewitching Ann Thorne a servant at Walkern rectory. Jane was arrested and searched for witch marks on her body, she also agreed to take a swimming test, but when asked to recite the Lords Prayer she stumbled over the words and subsequently was sent for trial at Hertford Assizes. When she was brought before the judge it was apparent that he was sympathetic towards her, when she was accused by witnesses of flying he told the court that there was no law against it. She was found guilty but the judge set aside the conviction, suspended the death penalty and sought a pardon from Queen Anne. Jane was set free with the help of the Cowper family and given a cottage to live in away from her village for her own safety. She lived peacefully for the rest of her life and is buried in an unmarked grave at Hertingfordbury. Jane was one of the last people to be tried for witchcraft in England due to the introduction of the Witchcraft Act in 1735.

In the early 19th Century there were a number of women in the county involved in the anti slavery

movement, in some instances by boycotting imported expensive items like sugar. They also produced a number of pamphlets which were distributed around county towns and by 1831 there were over 70 female campaigners in Hertfordshire. A number of wealthy women went out of their way to try to prove they were anti slavery campaigners and not feminists, for instance Sarah Mills in 1812 left a note in her will. Leaving the sum of £20 to 'her negro Girico Jeanette' (worth £800 today).



Lady Caroline Lamb

One of the most famous Hertfordshire figures in these time was Lady Caroline Lamb (1785-1828) who lived at Brocket Hall, near Welwyn. Most famous for her scandalous affair with Lord Byron in 1812. She was a very highly strung and sickly child who received little formal education, she became a writer and novelist, but in 1805 she married William Lamb at the age of 19. They had one son and a daughter who died within 24 hours of her birth. Their son George Augustus was born with severe mental difficulties, and was cared for at home until Caroline's death. She met Byron after reading his book *Childe Harold* and asked to meet the author. Their affair only lasted about 6 months and on his death her health deteriorated rapidly She died at her Brocket Hall home aged just 43.

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## Remarkable Women of Hertfordshire cont.

Another literary woman with Hertfordshire connections was Lady Rosina Lytton, nee Wheeler, (1802-1882) a supporter of women's suffrage and a novelist. She married Edward Bulwer Lytton in 1827 but the time she spent writing put a strain upon their marriage and they separated in 1836. He won custody of their children and she never got over this, and later when he was standing for parliament she went to one of his public meetings and denounced him, She spent a long time in a mental institution and still outlived her husband by nine years.

In the early years of the 20th Century Lady Constance Lytton aka. Jane Wharton, a suffragette, became well known. After being refused permission to marry by her mother she joined the Women's Political and Social Union, the most militant of the suffrage movements. She was imprisoned four times but when it was discovered she was a member of the Lytton family she was released

on each occasion, and so she changed her name to Jane Wharton to avoid being given special privileges. She suffered a stroke but continued campaigning until the outbreak of WW1 when the WPSU stopped their suffrage work, at which time Constance began to campaign on behalf of Marie Stopes for birth control clinics. She died in 1923 aged 54. She was buried with the green, white and purple suffragette colours on her coffin.

Apart from these women there are others just as famous, Aethelfled Queen of Mercia, actresses Flora Robson and Dame Ellen Terry, authors Barbara Cartland, Beatrix Potter and George Eliot (Mary Anne Eliot), Dolly Shepherd an Edwardian Lady parachutist, Ruth Osborne the 'accused witch' from Tring, Emily Davies Founder of the country's first college for women. Not forgetting the late Queen Mother born in 1900 she lived much of her childhood in Hertford-



Land Army Girls - Cornwall WW1

shire. She married in 1923 and became Queen Consort in 1936.

Women of Hertfordshire served their country in two wars, in munitions factories (the canary girls so called due to the colour of their skin after working for too long with sulphuric acid), as members of the Women's Land Army working in fields and on farms, in factories, as bus drivers, and police officers, while their menfolk were away fighting.

*Terry Collins*

### The SALHS Committee June 2017

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### Data Protection Act

In accordance with the above act we have to advise that the Society holds information on computer in respect of each member. This information is used for routine membership purposes only and remains confidential.

### Forthcoming events

May	11th 2018	AGM - The Baesh Charity by Jonathon Trower
June	8th 2018	The Maltings by Guy Horlock
July	13th 2018	Good Morning Lords and Ladies by Jill and Barry Goodman
August	12th 2018	Summer Barbecue—Details to follow –Members Only
Sept	14th 2018	Hunsdon House by Lee Prosser - Curator at Historic Royal Palaces
October	12th 2018	Salisbury Hall and The De Havilland Aircraft Museum by Alistair Hodgson

Unless stated otherwise all meetings are at the Parish Hall at 7.30pm

Members Free. Non Members £2 Tea, Coffee and biscuits included