



S.A.L.H.S

website: www.salhs.org.uk

Stanstead Abbotts Local History Society

Issue 31

Editor—Terry Collins

SALHS AGM 2019

July 2019

Our May meeting saw the eighth AGM for the society and this was accompanied by a presentation given by our Committee members Dick Dixon and Gerald Coppen, who have lived in Stanstead Abbotts for over 70 years, a talk entitled 'A walk along the High Street.'

The actual AGM was dealt with quite quickly, as all the committee were prepared to stand again and there were no other nominees. The Chairman's report was read to the audience and then the following elections took place, Bob Hunt Chairman, Lynne Heraud Secretary and Glenis Collins Treasurer. It was agreed that the remainder of

the Committee be re-elected en bloc and this duly took place.

This was followed by a break during which the members attending were able to enjoy a glass of wine and some nibbles before settling down to the evening's presentation.

After telling the audience a very brief history of the village in the time of Domesday, when it had just 30 households but was still the fifth most important village in the county Dick and Gerald began their walk along the High Street at St Margaret's Station and headed towards Roydon Road and the Red Lion.

All along the way they had photographs of most of the buildings

showing what the buildings and the street were like during the late 19th Century and compared with up to date photographs. There were also numerous anecdotes about some of the people who lived in the village at the time. Many of the audience had lived in the area for many years and they were able to add short stories of their own, some of them very humorous. Dick and Gerald had so much to talk about that time soon ran out and we were only just over half way along the High Street. They will be back another time to finish off their story.

Terry Collins

1889 LADIES OF THE VILLAGE BUYING GUNPOWDER

In mid-October 1889 Mr William Miller of Stanstead Abbotts found himself in court for not having a gunpowder licence. This had come to light when he sold a police constable half a pound of gunpowder but was unable to produce a licence. The reader may be surprised to learn that one could purchase gunpowder from a villager's home in this way but there were people who loaded their own cartridges for shooting pests and the odd rabbit now again for the table. It was in fact not illegal at all to sell gunpowder in this way however the law did insist you had a license, after police approval, to store gunpowder in your own home. Not surprisingly Mr Miller admitted not having purchased a license and explained that he had only recently discovered he needed one and had not intentionally avoided acquiring the required permission.

The magistrate was clearly intrigued as to whom he was selling this gunpowder to. Mr Miller explained that he only ever kept a maximum of a pound in weight each of two types of gunpowder at his home. His main customers were the ladies of the village who purchased just a "pennyworth" at any one time. One can imagine the interest among the officials being peaked by this revelation and the obvious question was then put to Mr Miller. His response explained that the ladies used the gunpowder to clean out the chimneys to their coal fired brick built coppers. These hot water boilers were a very common features in the sculleries and outhouses in the village at the time. Due to the design of most of these "coppers" it was not possible to use flue brushes pushed up the chimney as one would do with an open fire. However a short sharp small explosion would effectively clear the chimney of the accumulated soot. How this was actually achieved he did not disclose.

Mr Miller was fined 2/- [10p], which was the value of the licence he had never purchased and a small sum towards court costs. He was reminded that he must have a current licence to continue storing gunpowder in his home. It would appear that he was treated very fairly in this matter and at least some of the officials in court that day had learnt something new about the uses gunpowder could be put to.

Stuart Moye

History of the Lee Valley Regional Park

June's meeting saw a visit from Amy Lewis from the Lee Valley Park Authority, unfortunately I did not attend this evening so what follows is purely my take on the subject and not what the speaker actually said, I do hope you enjoy it.

The Lee Valley Regional Park was Britain's first regional park and runs for 26 miles along the river Lee from the river Thames to Ware in Hertfordshire. The area was once home to a diverse range of industries, gravel pits, waterworks sites and munitions factories amongst other things but over the years the land became neglected and overgrown. Rescuing the land to regenerate it into a 'playground for Londoners' was rather questionable prior to the Second World War but in 1944 as part of Sir Patrick Abercrombie's Plan for Greater London it was suggested that the Lee Valley was the ideal site for an excellent site for regenerative planning. In the early post war period nothing was done until the challenge was taken up by Alderman Lou Sherman, then Mayor of Hackney

He inspired and managed to persuade 17 other local authorities to support him and in 1963 the Civic Trust was asked to investigate and report on the resources the Valley held. As their report was very positive a bill was put before Parliament with the aim of establishing The Lee Valley Regional Park Authority and when it had received Royal Assent the Authority came into being formerly on 1st January 1967.

The Lee Valley Regional park covers an area of more than 10,000 acres, and is a mix of open spaces, nature reserves, lakes and riverside paths. This is more than four times the size of London's Richmond Park. There are a number of reservoirs and watercourses. (Canals and rivers) To date there have been sightings of over 200 species of birds including rarities like the Bittern, seen regularly during the winter in the park. There are also purpose built nesting rafts for the Common Terns, which despite the name are not very com-



One of the Lee Valley Park's many open spaces



Bittern and Common Tern seen in the Park

mon at all. There are over 35 species of mammals ranging from the otter to the water vole and more than 500 plant species within the park boundaries. The Park Authority has a remit and a duty to preserve and develop leisure, sport, recreation and nature throughout the park.

Since London held the world's greatest sporting gathering in 2012 the Lee Valley Park has been playing an important role in fulfilling the legacy of the event. The Park's three Olympic venues are, the Lee Valley Velo Park, the world's number one cycling hub comprising all the four Olympic disciplines, track, BMX, road and mountain biking, Lee Valley hockey and tennis centre, located in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic park and the Lee Valley White Water centre in Waltham Cross. In addition the park also owns The Lee Valley Athletics Centre, The Riding Centre and The Ice Centre.

One of the other major attractions within the park are the Lee Valley Farms located off Holy Field Road near Waltham Abbey. An ideal place for children, with all sorts of animals to see and things to do. The following statistics show just how big and how important the Lee Valley Park is, there have been over 6.6 million visitors, there are 8 Sites of Special Scientific Interest, within the park, there are 4 Internationally Important Wetland Habitats, 33 former gravel pits now converted in to fishing lakes. 1200 miles that a tufted duck flies each year to the Lee Valley Park after a journey from Scandinavia and the Baltics

There have been 17 major international sports events held in the park since the Olympics, 400 canoeists from 80 countries competed at the World Slalom Championships held at the White Water Centre in 2014. One of the aims of the Park Authority is to provide access to the countryside for children and following the 2012 Olympics 5000 children from across London were given free sports experience in its inspirational 2012 legacy venues.

When the Lee Valley Park was first planned it was hoped that it would become London's 'Green Lung' and to date it has certainly become just that and long may it continue.

Terry Collins

Royston Cave and the Knights Templar

July saw the welcome return of Keith Fitzpatrick Matthews with another fascinating topic, this time based to the north of the county.

Royston is the smallest of the four towns in North Hertfordshire along with Hitchin, Baldock and Letchworth, at the time the cave was discovered the town was half in Hertfordshire and half in Cambridgeshire and it lies at the junction of Ermine Street and Icknield Way both old Roman roads. The town grew up around an Augustinian priory

The mysterious cave in Royston, just off Melbourn Street was discovered accidentally in August 1742 by two workmen who were carrying out alterations to a house when they came upon a millstone in the ground, when they removed it they discovered a large hole below it, a local boy volunteered to go down as toe holds appeared to have been cut into the chalk, he descended on a rope and he said that it was a cavern. The local bailiff requested that the entrance be enlarged and tons of soil were removed and to avoid attracting large crowds this was done at night. It is almost certain that the first people who explored the cave were looking for any sort of treasure that was hidden there, but of course, there was nothing of the kind to be found. However the carvings on the lower wall gave rise to speculation about their origin. A local vicar George North from Codicote went down and described that he had found a human skull some charred bones (it is not clear if they were animal or human) and fragments of a drinking vessel. At this time the entrance was enlarged and the cave was opened to the public in 1790 by the owner Thomas Watson. Later the same year the antiquary William Stukeley found a piece of what appeared to be pipe clay but the illustration of it shows that it was not from a pipe, it bore a fleur de leys and this gave rise to the idea that the object was from the middle ages but later examination may date it to the seventeenth or eighteenth century. In the 19th century (1853) local antiquarians Beldam and Nunn examined the cave and described it as 'like being inside a giant wine bottle'. The cave is circular and bell shaped and carved into the solid chalk bed-



Royston Cave Entrance

rock and it lies not far from the junction of Ermine Street and Icknield way around which the town developed. It is 5.2 metres in diameter and about 7.7 metres high with a shaft 0.6 metres in diameter, which is why a boy was sent down first as a grown man could not fit into it.

It is the carvings around the bottom of the chamber that have caused the most interest and controversy. Since the cave's discovery it has been made clear that the overwhelming number of carvings represent religious themes with crucifixion scenes and recognisable saints. The style of the carvings is crude and not done with any style and it appears they were completed over many years by a number of people. Some of the figures are recognisable as saints including, St. Christopher, St Laurence, St George and St Catherine plus others that were identified by Beldam in the 19th Century, as some of the Plantagenet Kings of England (Henry II and Richard I plus Eleanor of Aquitaine) He also gives what he believes to be the approximate date that the carvings were made, he says it was sometime after 1191 but there is a date carved into the cave of 1347, which of these, if either is correct remains a mystery.

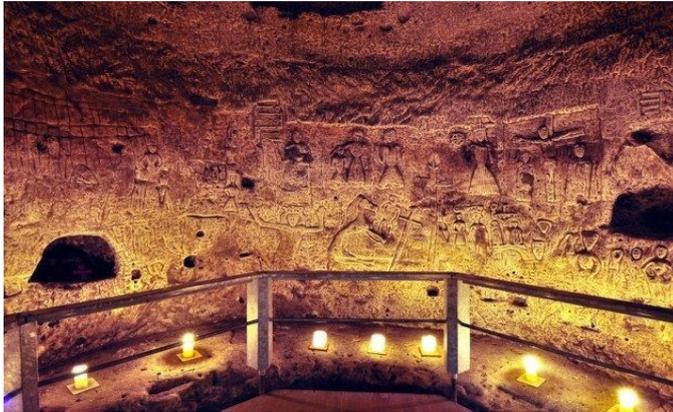
The question that has caused most controversy is, what was the cave used for. In the 18th century one suggestion was that it had been an oratory but this was not well received and it seems that this would be controversial from the beginning. Since then it has been suggested that it was a Romano-British chamber used to store cremated remains, an oratory attached to a hermitage and even a pagan site, possible of a temple. However in the 1970's a local archaeologist, Sylvia Beamon, began researching the cave and published a book on her findings entitled 'The Royston Cave used by saints or sinners'. As caves of this type are rare she had set about looking for parallels and had only discovered one in a castle in the Czech Republic also a bell shaped cave with carvings on the walls and in the 13/14th century had been used as a prison. She then looked for similar carvings and found them in a chateau in the Loire region of France. She found that Templar knights had been held prisoner there in 1308 and

Continued on Page 4



A Wall Carving in Royston Cave

Royston Cave and the Knights Templar continued



The interior of Royston Cave

claimed that there were very close similarities between them and those at Royston. Other writers and researchers have however disagreed with this theory but it has become the most generally accepted theory, that the carvings in the cave were the work of the Knights Templars.

It is often thought that there is a link between the Templars and Freemasonry a theory which began in the 18th Century in Scotland and which has grown over the years, due in part to books such as *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* which was a best seller in the 1980's one of the first books offering the alternative history theory, in the case of that book it purported to show a

direct bloodline link to Jesus who, the authors claim had married Mary Magdalene and began a family. This theory has spawned a great number of books which support the theory although there is a total lack of evidence to prove it. It even appears in Dan Brown's thriller *The Da Vinci Code* which has become the best selling novel ever.

What are the true origins of the cave however? There was a hermit living in Royston around 1506 when records show that the lord of the manor Sir Robert Chester built a prison house in the town and it is possible that the cave was in fact a hermitage. This lord of the manor was the owner of the hermitage in Barkway and it may have been at this time (1742) that the cave was partially filled in. Similar carvings have been found at Carlisle castle dating from the 1480's and it has been claimed lately that the figure stated by Beldam to be uncrowned Queen Berengaria is in fact King Edward V one of the princes in the tower as the carving is similar to one of the missing king in St George's church in Windsor. Some have seen the carvings as 15th century while others have dated them as late as the 17th Century. All in all the cave is both fascinating and mysterious.

Keith was thanked by the chairman and answered a number of questions and I am sure that some of the audience will soon be making their way to Royston.

Terry Collins

The SALHS Committee

Hon. President Ron Dale
 Chairman/Public Relations
 Bob Hunt
 Secretary Lynne Heraud
 Treasurer Glenis Collins
 Archivist/Historian Ray Dixon
 Archivist/Facebook Andrea Coppen
 Newsletter /Vice Chair
 Terry Collins
 Parish Council Rep Julia Davies

Committee Members:
 Linda Gifford
 Gerald Coppen
 Rob Gifford
 John Lloyd
 Rosemary James

Website Manager Brian Johnson
 General enquiries email
 Admin@salhs.org.uk

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

August	11th	2019	Annual BBQ (Members Only)
September	8th	2019	Conservation of the Pagoda at Kew by Dr. Lee Prosser
October	11th	2019	Saints at St Albans by Rory Young
November	8th	2019	Hoddesdon from Saxons to Supermarkets Sue Garside
December	13th	2019	Xmas Party (Members only)
January	10th	2020	History of Much Hadham by Michael Clark

Unless stated otherwise all meetings are at the Parish Hall at 7.30pm
 Members Free. Non Members £2 Tea, Coffee and biscuits included