Shipley History Society – first 10 years

Welcome to Andrew Bernardi and introduction.

I’m going to give a summary of 10 years of the Shipley History Society, hopefully in about 10 minutes. I’ve divided it into two sections and Andrew will play in between – the aim is to keep it brief, so we have less talk and more music.

We embarked on our first Shipley History Society walk exactly 10 years ago in late November 2009, when Gordon Brown was still Prime Minister and the year a young Barack Obama was sworn in as US President. The world seemed full of hope. With instructions from Bob Phillips about what to look out for on the way, a group of us set off on a fine day down Boar Lane, past the Zero Station and back along Green Street. You’ll be relieved we didn’t decide to do a 10th anniversary re-run this week - it’s just a bit muddy at the moment!

And so the Shipley History Society was born, and since then we have had 38 talks, 12 walks, 16 visits to places of interest, 10 AGMs with mulled wine and assorted musical entertainment and a number of summer parties with more wine and Gina’s famous spam sandwiches!

Some of our talks have been on topics of general interest. Two talks by Dr Geoffrey Mead on Sussex Agricultural History and Sussex on the Rocks gave us a good introduction to the landscape and geology of the area, and how it has been farmed over the years. We’ve had a great talk on the Sussex coastline and its role in history and another on Dark Age Sussex – apparently not nearly as dark as you might expect – both by Mark Perry Nash, a wonderful speaker who also talked to us about his forebear John Nash and the Brighton Pavilion. John Nash was the Regency architect who designed Buckingham Palace, Marble Arch and Regent Street, and also Knepp Castle for the Burrell family.

We’ve had a talk on the Wealden Iron Industry and another on the Caryll family, the prominent Shipley family of ironmasters, who lived at Bentons, and we followed this up with a visit, thanks to the Barton Jaynes. One talk was so good we had it twice, Timber-framed buildings of the Sussex Weald, with Annabelle Hughes, well known for clambering around in the roof spaces of ancient houses looking for evidence of crown posts and purlins. Another speaker who never lets us down and is a firm favourite is Janet Pennington, who has been 3 times and given brilliant talks on Chanctonbury Ring, the history of the Adur Valley and recently Sussex pub signs.

Our most popular talks are ones which relate directly to Shipley, its people and places. Stewart Angell came to talk to us about Wartime radio networks and Shipley Zero Station. Chris Hare talked to us about Hilaire Belloc, the renowned poet and writer who lived at Kings Land in Shipley for nearly 50 years until his death in 1953, and we look forward to celebrating the 150th anniversary of his birth next year. Chris came again one Christmas with his wife, playwright Ann Feloy to sing the folk songs of the South Downs, which seemed to involve a lot of Belloc’s drinking songs with rousing choruses. John Lytton gave us a fascinating talk on his great grandfather, the poet and diplomat Wilfred Scawen Blunt, but probably our best attended talks have been the two that Gordon and Pippa Reay gave us, firstly on their home the old Shipley Workhouse and then on Dragons Green and the history of the George and Dragon – and you can’t get more local than that. Or not until this summer, when Ian talked to us about the Heinkel bomber that crashed during the war over Broomers Corner, and we were sitting in Derek and Gina’s house looking right over the field where it crashed.

We are continuing the local theme next year with our first talk on the history of the Knights Templar in Sussex with Oliver Tempest. The order was founded 900 years ago in 1119, and Shipley church is one of the earliest Templar churches in the country, dating from around 1140. We’re delighted that Peter Sanderson will be giving us a guided tour of the church in June, before our summer drinks. The other talk we have planned is on Elizabethan Sussex in April and the speaker is Helen Poole. Helen’s previous talk was about King Charles II and his escape through Sussex in 1660. Charles died in February 1685 and a month later in Germany Johann Sebastian Bach was born. And now over to Andrew.

We’re very grateful to the Burrells for our 3 visits to Knepp over the past 10 years. Our first visit involved a trailer ride around the estate and out to the Norman keep, and the second was a visit to the castle in summer 2016, when Issy Burrell talked to us about the history of the Burrell family, Knepp castle and the terrible fire of 1904 and also the rewilding project. This summer a group of us were lucky enough to visit the stork project and hear about the introduction of white storks to Knepp, a bird which once thrived in this country but has not been seen here for a few hundred years.

Where possible we’ve tried to follow up talks with visits, such as Ockley Windmill, Parham House and Shoreham Fort. We’ve had many other visits - to Saddlescombe Farm, a downland farm which has been farmed for around 1000 years and was once owned by the Templars, Sullington Barn, the Blue Idol Quaker Meeting house and St Mary’s House at Bramber, a 15th century pilgrim inn. We’ve also visited the West Grinstead Clergy House, John Prince’s collection of antique armaments at Itchingfield, Saucelands, another historic house in Shipley and this summer a memorable visit to Christs Hospital. We have done many different walks around the area and been introduced to the art of dowsing by Bob, trying to locate the leylines around Shipley Church. Bob also led 2 walks to Dragons Green and Scawen Blunt’s grave. Hidden away in woodland and flanked by an avenue of yews, the grave is inscribed with lines from Blunt’s sonnet ‘Chanclebury Ring’ -

Dear Checker-work of woods, the Sussex Weald!

If a name thrills me yet of things of earth,

That name is thine. How often I have fled

To thy deep hedgerows and embraced each field,

Each lag, each pasture – fields which gave me birth

And saw my youth, and which must hold me dead.

Over the years some of us have been involved in research too and Jean in particular has gleaned fascinating facts from the old Shipley school log books and produced several booklets about different aspects of village school life, as well as researching the Shipley men who died in both world wars and are remembered on the church war memorials. Claire has been involved with the Horsham District Heritage Forum project which has recently produced a book ‘The Heritage of Horsham District in 100 Objects’, a celebration of this beautiful part of the country and a perfect Christmas present. We’ve also been involved with the heritage lottery funded project - Belloc, Broadwood and beyond, led by historian Chris Hare. Chris has run workshops teaching traditional Sussex folksongs written by Hilaire Belloc and those compiled by folksong collector Lucy Broadwood of Rusper in the early 20th century, and he’s worked with the primary schools in Rusper and Shipley to bring these songs to the younger generation. We’ll finish with a few words from Belloc, from the last verses of his poem ‘The South Country’:

If ever I become a rich man,

Or if ever I grow to be old,

I will build a house with deep thatch

To shelter me from the cold,

And there shall the Sussex songs be sung

And the story of Sussex told.

I will hold my house in the high wood

Within a walk of the sea,

And the men that were boys when I was a boy

Shall sit and drink with me.

Please stay and drink with us afterwards. Thank you again for your support of the Shipley History Society and now back to Andrew.