

NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE STONELEIGH HISTORY SOCIETY HELD ON 28 May 2013 at Stoneleigh Village Hall

Present: 19 members, one new member and two visitors.

Apologies: Liz Sykes

Chairman's welcome: Sheila welcomed everyone to the meeting. She thanked all those who had contributed such good ideas and useful comments during the April meeting. The Committee would be meeting during the summer and would consider these. She also thanked everyone who had helped in any way with the display, including those who had provided tea and cakes or had been on hand in the Leigh Chapel when the display was available during the May Bank Holiday weekend and who had volunteered to help during the final weekend. SHS members would similarly be available at the display during Duck Race day on 20 July and during Heritage Weekend on 14 September.

The visit to Bagot Castle was on Tuesday 25 June, entrance £4 per head, payment to Lisa as soon as possible. Members were asked to meet at 6.50 ready for a tour of the Castle at 7 pm after which the group would visit the church.

Sheila then welcomed David Vaughan to talk about

The Stoneleigh Workhouse (aka Wentworth House)

David and Jean moved to Wentworth House in 1968. Wentworth House had been divided into two in 1958 after it had finished being the Stoneleigh Vicarage.

At the beginning of the 17th century workhouses were established to deal with the 'homeless, blind and infirm elderly'. Until the dissolution of the monasteries these groups had been looked after by religious orders. Under the 1601 Poor Relief Act ('The Poor Law') parishes became responsible for the poor via cash handouts and accommodation for the groups listed plus 'the incompetent poor'.

In 1630 workhouses were established and the 'competent poor' were made to work. By 1771 some 2000 workhouses had been established and within 40 years there was a five-fold increase in poor relief.

The records all show that workhouses were cold and forbidding places, literally places of last resort for the truly desperate. They caused huge damage to family units as families were split up between sexes, adult and children, on arrival. Children were undoubtedly badly treated, with many records of caning and near starvation (e.g. Oliver Twist, observations by Charles Chaplin, and 'Voices from the Workhouse' which spoke of 'tyranny and starvation').

The idea for Stoneleigh workhouse was mooted on 13 February 1783 during a meeting at the Swan Inn. At that time Stoneleigh parish covered a huge area so there were many poor to be considered. Villagers decided to petition the then Lord Leigh to establish a

NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE STONELEIGH HISTORY SOCIETY HELD ON 28 May 2013 at Stoneleigh Village Hall

workhouse; the petition had 20 signatures. It was many years before a workhouse was built, thanks to Mary Leigh, the sister of Lord Edward Leigh who had inherited the baronetcy in 1749. As he was mentally ill Mary managed his affairs and suggested that a Stoneleigh workhouse be built modelled on one in Kensington where she lived at the time. This proposal was rejected but the design by a Mr Johnston who lived at Pear Tree Cottage was accepted and Wentworth House was built - with two gables, as still exist, and 3000 square feet of bedroom space.

The 1790 document of the poor levy on the parish listed all those parishioners who were liable to contribute. £88.12.3 was raised. The workhouse was probably opened in 1788, the total cost of the project being £633. However, the income was insufficient to cover running costs and presumably Mary made up the shortfall during her lifetime (she died in 1806)

The Rules/Orders/Regulations of Wentworth House were very strict. Some 200-220 people were accommodated so clearly there was considerable bed sharing. Due to financial difficulties, the workhouse did not remain operational for long e.g. in 1817 a letter from a Richard Derby to the wife of Thomas Leigh refers to 20 people being left. The exact date of the closure is not known. Inhabitants were presumably placed elsewhere. There is a record of a valuation of £82 being made by a local expert. It is unclear for how long Wentworth House remained unoccupied until it became the Vicarage (see below).

Research is ongoing to try to fill in some of the gaps in knowledge.

Sheila then spoke about **James Wentworth Leigh, one time Vicar of Stoneleigh**

James was born in Paris in 1838 during one of the family's international forays. He was ordained and became quite a social reformer. He was vicar of Stoneleigh 1864-1873 and lived at Wentworth House where he entertained many well-known contemporaries e.g. Arthur Sullivan. In 1867 he founded a village co-operative store, possibly the first such rural store in the country.

In 1869 he went to America and whilst in New York met Frances Butler whose mother Fanny Kemble, was a famous actress and a niece of Sarah Siddons. Frances' father was a slave owner with a large plantation in Darien, near Savannah.

In 1870 he returned to Stoneleigh and in 1871 married Frances (Arthur Sullivan played the organ at the wedding). There are records showing that he attempted, in a meeting in the Reading Room, to arbitrate between farmworkers and their employers during the Agricultural Labourers' Strike, and that he was concerned the children should be removed from the Warwick workhouse and placed in proper homes.

**NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE STONELEIGH HISTORY SOCIETY HELD ON 28 May
2013 at Stoneleigh Village Hall**

Returning to Darien with his wife to work the rice plantations with emancipated workers, he founded Saint Cyprian's Episcopal Church for the Coloured People of McIntosh County and seemed to have made quite an impact on the local community for his liberal views. During his many visits to the States he made friends with Henry James.

On his return to the UK he became vicar of Alveston and lived at Alveston Manor, Stratford, and in 1877 became vicar of Leamington Spa then, in 1883, vicar of St Mary's, Bryanston Square (offered to him by William Gladstone who had a high regard for Dr Jephson of Leamington). Between 1894 and 1919 he was Dean of Hereford Cathedral.

James Wentworth Leigh died in 1923 and asked to be buried near his wife (who had died in 1911) in Stoneleigh.