

NOTES OF THE SHS MEETING HELD ON 27 SEPTEMBER 2016

Present: 24 members of SHS and 6 guests.

Apologies: David Brooks, David Gibson, Daphne James,

Welcome: Sheila Woolf welcomed everyone to the meeting. Although there had not been a formal meeting of SHS over the summer, quite a lot had happened.

The May visit to Kenilworth Abbey and Barn took place on a very wet evening. The fact that 9 of the people who had signed up for the visit dropped out meant that there was a financial shortfall which the Society had had to bear. In view of this experience, in future, whenever members were asked to sign up for a visit they would also be asked to pay immediately.

On 1 July, SHS joined with the Earlsdon Research Group (Avril Newey, Peter Thomson and John Purcell are members of both groups) to commemorate the first day of the Battle of the Somme with a moving programme of readings, poetry and songs (by Three Spires Choir).

Unfortunately, very few SHS members attended (Sheila, Lisa Reay, Pete James, Liz Sykes and Margaret Wallis) but there would be another opportunity on Friday 18 November, at 7.30 in Stoneleigh Abbey Chapel when the last day of the Battle would be commemorated. This event was free and there would be no tickets, but members were asked to let Sheila or Avril know if they were interested so that appropriate catering arrangements could be made. The chapel could hold 100 but 50 would be more comfortable.

On 13 August the SHS had a stall at the village Duck Race. Thanks to Avril, Peter, Pam Baker, Pam Long, Barbara Gee and Margaret Wallis who had helped Sheila on the day. Special thanks to Peter who had managed to deal with the erection and striking of the gazebo. It was felt that an SHS presence at this event was not appropriate in the future.

Our next meetings would be on 25 October (St Crispin's Day) when Vic Nock would speak on medieval armoury, on 29 November when Sheila would speak on Here Come the Girls - Warwickshire's American Wives (NB this is a change, owing to David Brooks' health, but it is hoped that next year he will be able to speak on Agriculture in Stoneleigh), and the Christmas Social would be held in the Hall on 13 December.

Sheila was scheduled to give a talk on Jane Austen and Stoneleigh on 15 October at 7.30, in the Hall, in aid of the church fabric fund. Tickets were available from her.

The SHS Committee was due to meet on 29 September and members were asked to put forward any ideas for next year's programme. There was also an appeal for dry storage space for the increasing number of SHS materials – ring binders, display board, the gazebo etc. – which were currently kept in Sheila and Lisa's houses.

Sheila then introduced Pete James who spoke on **The Silk Weavers of Coventry**.

This was a fascinating talk. The centre of the UK silk weaving was Spitalfields, but it also took place in Dublin, Derby, Manchester, Macclesfield – and Coventry*. Few members had realised just how many Coventry residents were involved in the industry. Pete's mother was the fifth generation of the Haddon family to be a silk weaver. In the mid 19th century there were some 25,000 weavers in the city. Originally there were hand looms in people's houses (large

NOTES OF THE SHS MEETING HELD ON 27 SEPTEMBER 2016

windows were essential in these 'top shops') but by 1818 there were 5483 single looms and 3008 engine looms.

By 1782 there were 12 manufacturers in Coventry. They gave raw silk from India/Bengal to an 'undertaker' who spun and dyed it. The material was then given to weavers to produce ribbon. During C18th several young boys and girls from Stoneleigh went to Coventry as silk-weaving apprentices. Some of these apprentices were as young as 13.

Foleshill was the centre of the industry and was outside the city at the time. Roads linked it to Nuneaton and Bedworth which were also silk trade centres. Cromwell Street, Berkeley Road South, Lower Holyhead Road, Hillfields and the workhouse at Whitefriars Monastery were also weaving centres.

A number of factories set up to make elastic webbing, one of the first being The Elastic Weaving Co. in 1857 in Cox Street.

In 1843 an art school for ribbon design was opened and a 'Coventry Ribbon' was designed for the Great Exhibition of 1851. Ribbons on dresses were very fashionable for a while but by 1859 the industry had collapsed following the Cobden Treaty (affecting tariffs) and thousands of Coventry weavers starved. This dire situation led Lord Leigh and others to establish Leigh Mills and eventually some industry in woven goods returned. Meanwhile some 9000 former weavers moved from Coventry, either elsewhere in England or overseas.

Before the collapse Cash's set up in 1846 to produce bookmarks and pictures and Thomas Stevens started manufacture in 1854, producing his first bookmarks by 1862.

Pete showed pictures of various types of looms and the punch cards used to devise patterns.

There is a 660-page thesis on 'The Coventry Weaving industry' by P, Searby of the University of Warwick.

More information about the industry is available at the Bedworth Heritage Centre.

.....

Many thanks to Pete. The level of interest was underlined by the number of questions posed by members and the informal discussions afterwards. Thanks also to all those who brought their own examples of woven pictures to the meeting.

.....

*After the meeting, Anthony Bianco added that Manchester and Macclesfield were in a sense 'at war' between 1890 and the 1930s. Macclesfield 'won' by modernising and also developed the Edwardian fashion of silk neckties. Anthony's family were Manchester silk merchants, and an uncle developed parachute and artificial silk in the 30s. The latter, plus the development of Bri Nylon, polycotton etc. meant that there were alternatives to pure silk. Spitalfields is currently regenerating as a fashion area with several small niche design teams working in silk.