

NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE STONELEIGH HISTORY SOCIETY HELD ON 29 NOVEMBER 2016

Present: The meeting was attended by fifteen members and three guests.

Apologies: Sarah Ballinger, Jane Taylor, June Burr, Eileen Creed, Ken Wallis, Janet & David Gibson, John Purcell, Anthony Bianco, Pete James, Shirley Ball and Sue Crofts.

Welcome: Sheila Woolf welcomed everyone. There were a few notices.

David Brooks' history of agriculture in Stoneleigh had been completed and he had generously donated ten copies to SHS for which members were asked to donate whatever they thought appropriate for SHS funds. Seven copies disappeared quickly. It was hoped that David would be able to give a talk about his findings next year. Thanks and congratulations were proposed.

Sheila thanked all those members who had supported the Somme evening at Stoneleigh Abbey on 18 November, especially Avril Newey, Peter Thompson and Pete James. A collection had been taken for the charity 'War Child' and had raised about £300.

The Churchyard Project had resumed. Thanks to Lisa Reay, Pam Baker, Pete James, Rob Orland and Derek Robinson for their continued assistance. Other SHS members were invited to contact Lisa if they were interested in helping with this interesting project.

Congratulations were recorded for the Parish Church Council, especially Sarah Ballinger, for the Church Restoration Workshop (plus impressive display and refreshments) which was held on 26 November. This was a huge success. It was clear that much work remains to be done. Once this is completed it had been agreed that SHS would have partial use of the Leigh Chapel and this would involve more space for our display boards.

The next SHS meeting would be the Christmas Social, at 7.30 on Tuesday 13 December in the Village Hall. More information would be circulated shortly. The 2017 programme had now been finalised and would be sent to members before renewals began on 13 December.

Many thanks to Rachel Gill and Liz Sykes for – yet again – covering for refreshments,

Sheila then gave a talk on **'Here come the Girls'**, sub-titled 'Tales of madness, mystery and mischief'.

During her researches on the Leigh Family, Sheila had been surprised to discover that several Warwickshire gentry had married American heiresses so she had investigated further. Her talk referred to several of Warwickshire's American Wives. American daughters could inherit equally from their fathers along with sons, unlike in the UK, so this was a case of Americans wanting British class and the British wanted American cash!

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Helene Forbes Beckwith was the daughter of a New York banker who was worth \$3 million. She was a friend of Caroline Astor (Mrs Orme Wilson) whose mother was 'The' Mrs Astor of Waldorf Astoria Hotel fame and to be in her 'little black book' was an ambition of most New York socialites. As a result of acquaintance with Mrs Bradley Martin, a New York socialite who owned the Balmacaan Estate in Scotland and hosted various sporting events, Helene met Francis Dudley, the Third Lord Leigh, and they were subsequently married on 29 November 1890 in St George's, Hanover Square, in London; amongst the guests was Jennie Jerome who became Lady Randolph Churchill and the mother of Winston. There is a fine portrait of Helene, holding her pet spaniel, in Stoneleigh Abbey today.

Whilst Helene was in Warwickshire her family received considerable press attention in the US as her two brothers entered asylums but not before one of them had been found guilty of misappropriation of funds, leading to difficulties over Helene's portion. Eventually she got her share – and Stoneleigh Abbey got electricity! Francis remarried in 1923, his wife – another New Yorker, Marie Campbell – being 30 years his junior. There were no children of either marriage.

Cornelia Bradley Martin was the daughter of the above-mentioned Mrs Bradley Martin and became the Countess of Craven when she was 16, living at Coombe Abbey. She was widowed at an early age, her husband having drowned under mysterious circumstances during Cowes Week. She later sold Coombe Abbey and lived at another Craven property, Hamstead Marshall in Berkshire.

Frances Butler was the daughter of Fanny Kemble, an English actress, who married Piers Butler who had become obsessed by her during a theatrical tour of the US. He was a very rich American who owned a large plantation in Savannah, Georgia. In order to reduce his considerable debts, he held the largest slave sale in Georgia's history (some 400 men, women and children). Fanny was an abolitionist and had been horrified when she found how Piers had obtained his money and the marriage broke down. She subsequently wrote 'A Residence on a Georgia Plantation'. Her daughter later met and married the Rev. James Wentworth Leigh, vicar of Stoneleigh, and for some years tried to ensure the proper education of workers on the family plantation (slavery had been abolished by that time). Eventually she wrote 'Ten Years on a Georgia Plantation Since the War' but constant criss-crossing the Atlantic became too much for them and they settled at Wentworth House in Stoneleigh where they did a great deal of entertaining e.g. Arthur Sullivan and Jenny Lind. Eventually the Rev. James Wentworth had livings in many other parishes, ultimately becoming Dean of Hereford Cathedral.

Mabel Gordon married another member of the Leigh family, Rowland, and the marriage service was conducted by his uncle, the Rev, James Wentworth Leigh. They had two children and lived in Leek Wotton and are buried in Ashow, near Cordelia Leigh.

Daisy (Juliette) Gordon was Mabel's sister. Her father had made a fortune in Savannah. She fell madly in love with Willie Low who lived at 42 Clarendon Square in

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Leamington. Willie was very spoilt and seemed to have been mainly interested in spending his family's money (on women, cars and alcohol), not helped by him becoming part of the Prince of Wales' 'Marlborough Set'. The couple married and lived at Wellesbourne House. However, Daisy suffered greatly following an accident on her wedding day when a grain of rice got stuck in her ear and caused deafness. She was excluded from Willie's social life and eventually decided to divorce him, assisted by her brother-in-law the barrister, Rowland Leigh. However, Willie died suddenly and when the will was read it transpired that he had left everything to his mistress; his sisters were scandalised and successfully challenged the will. Daisy then made a new life for herself and, after meeting Sir Robert and Lady Olive Baden-Powell through the Leigh family, she was inspired to found the Girls Scouts of America. In 2012 President Obama awarded the Medal of Freedom posthumously to Daisy. More recently, a group of Girls Scouts made a pilgrimage to Wellesbourne to honour her so the links between the US and Warwickshire continues to this day.

Sheila was thanked for giving such an interesting talk.

Msw/1.12.16