

## **MINUTES OF THE STONELEIGH HISTORY SOCIETY AGM HELD ON 28 MARCH 2017**

**Welcome:** **Sheila Woolf** welcomed everyone to the 6<sup>th</sup> AGM of the SHS. 30 members of the SHS, 2 new members, 1 returning member and one1 guest attended.

**Apologies:** Celia Baly, June Burr, David and Janet Gibson, Avril Newey and Patrick Sawdon

**Minutes of the AGM held on 22 March 2016:** these were accepted as a correct record

**Matters arising from the Minutes:** Although the Committee had proposed that a calendar be prepared for 2017 only two people had submitted photographs so the idea has been shelved for the time being.

**Chairman's Report:** This had been circulated previously but Sheila drew particular attention to the Churchyard Project on which Lisa Reay had spent untold hours but thanks were due to her and others involved in the project, notably Pete James, Rob Orland, Derek Robinson and Pam Baker. Sheila was also much involved!

Various fundraising events had been held, including the Jane Austen talk in October. The SHS was pleased to have been able to assist the church in this way.

Other highlights of the year had been the event commemorating the Battle of the Somme and the involvement with the BBC4 film about cottages in England.

Membership was now over 50.

Thanks to the Committee who had planned and executed events throughout the year and to those who had served on the Refreshments Rota.

Acceptance of the Chairman's report was proposed by Jane Taylor, seconded by Shirley Ball. No one was against and there were no abstentions.

### **Treasurer's Report and Accounts:**

A detailed report and accounts had been circulated to all members before the meeting. The end of year balance was £892.19 which included a profit of £161.54. The booklet on agriculture in Stoneleigh, written by David Brooks, had raised £62 and £28 had been raised from the Christmas raffle. Thanks to Patrick Sawdon for having audited the accounts.

Acceptance of the Treasurer's report was proposed by Marianne Puxley and seconded by Liz Sykes. No one was against and there were no abstentions.

### **Special Business:**

As a new society, SHS had required a constitution specific to its early years. In the light of experience and changing needs, some revisions were now required. Thanks to David Vaughan, these changes could be achieved by the passing of a resolution that Rules 6 and 7 of the Society's Constitution be amended with immediate effect, as set out in the Annex of the notice of the AGM. These amendments had been circulated to all members within 21 days of the AGM.

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Everyone voted in favour of the proposed changes; there were no abstentions.

### **Election of Committee:**

Following the constitutional changes elections could take place. Although there were 9 nominations for 9 slots, it was still necessary to conduct a formal election. The nominations received were as follows:

Chairman – Sheila Woolf

Secretary – Margaret Wallis

Treasurer – Sue Crofts

‘Ordinary’ Members – Pam Baker, Shirley Ball, Anthony Bianco, Pete James, Lisa Reay, David Vaughan

Sheila then asked Margaret to take the chair for her own election

In accordance with the constitutions, by a show of hands, Sheila was elected as Chairman, with no one objecting or abstaining.

Similarly, Margaret Wallis and Sue Crofts were elected Secretary and Treasurer respectively.

‘Ordinary Members (as listed above) were also elected unanimously.

Sheila then congratulated all those elected, referring to the specific roles held by some Committee members e.g. Pam Baker – hosting speakers, David Vaughan – constitutional matters, Shirley Ball – refreshments rota, and Lisa Reay – membership issues.

Special thanks were given to Lisa for her 6 years as SHS Treasurer.

### **Any Other Business**

- i) For the benefit of new and newish members and guests, a selection of SHS publications was on display
- ii) Sharon Goble had extended a special invitation to SHS members to the Church Homecoming on 31 May, celebrating the completion of the restoration work. The event was open to all but in order to assist with catering arrangements anyone planning to attend was asked to contact Jane Taylor (an SHS member) [jane0891@yahoo.com](mailto:jane0891@yahoo.com)
- iii) Sheila closed the meeting, thanking everyone for attending.

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**Sheila then welcomed the speaker for the evening, Rebecca Probert, Professor of Law at the University of Warwick, to speak on ‘Illicit and Clandestine Marriages’.**

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Although the title of the talk implied much 'goings on', Rebecca emphasised that in fact most people were quite conformist most of the time, or at least did their best to appear conformist. The term '**clandestine**' referred to any marriage that was not conducted under the requirements of canon law e.g. if no banns were called, if a licence had not been obtained, if the marriage was not held in the 'correct' church or had been held at the wrong time (not between 8 am and noon) or lacked the consent of the parent (father) or guardian (male).

Before Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1753, some marriages were conducted under '**The Rules of the Fleet**' (referring to Fleet Prison in London). These marriages were conducted by clergy (sometimes unfrocked ones) for a considerable fee. Couples were given a certificate of marriage and the marriage was recorded (often in several books which meant priests could cover their traces, and later researchers faced some wild goose chases). By 1740 c25% of marriages in London took place in this way and an unknown number of couples travelled some distance in order to get married there. London was a c18 Las Vegas! It is worth noting that, as most if not all couples wanted to get married by a priest, the Fleet marriages represented some conformity.

Prior to the 1753 Marriage Act there was a variable pattern of location of marriage. About 80% of couples got married in church in their own or an adjacent parish in the same county, or a parish where their own priest was also in charge. The priest was responsible for keeping accurate records and these records were also used to ensure that the parish did not become responsible for any illegitimate children born to couples who had married elsewhere. Although it is very difficult to trace all marriages that took place outside any given county, records show that a few couples travelled great distances eg. the register in Bradford-on-Avon shows the marriage of a couple from Berwick-on-Tweed.

The Marriage Act of 1753 tightened up the various requirements which any prospective couple had to meet. Mandatory requirements included – marriage by an ordained priest in a church or chapel, free consent, banns, licence, parental consent if aged under 21.

### **Broomstick Weddings**

Various historians and folklorists over the years have asserted that some marriages in c18 were 'broomstick' ones. This tied into the idea that all one had to do to be married was to exchange vows and jumping over a broomstick signified that this had been done. Rebecca's research found no evidence of this in England (but n.b. there is much in African-American history to support it during slavery and beyond) and she felt that the most telling counter-evidence is a comment in the Westminster Magazine of 1774 which quoted a man who wanted to marry his 12 year old ward but said he 'had no inclination for a broomstick marriage'. Further research, using the online database of c18, found that 'broomstick' was a synonym for 'sham'.

### **Illicit Marriages**

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Illicit marriages were classified as either 'void' or 'illegal' i.e. bigamous.

A marriage was void if it took place within 'prohibited degrees' i.e. parent/child/grandparent or grandchild/sibling/uncle or aunt/niece or nephew/the spouse of any of these relations and the relations of one's spouse. Marriage to a dead wife's sister was particularly common. If anyone challenged any of these marriages they could be declared null and void and all children immediately 'bastardised'. There were mechanisms to transform void into valid but these were complex. Some couples got married in Scandinavia but these marriages were not recognised in England. During the early c19 parliament spent much time deciding what to do and in 1848 a Royal Commission was set up to consider the problem. This Commission found that since 1835 there had been 1364 marriages within the prohibited degrees.

Over the centuries there were severe penalties for bigamy, including the death penalty in c17 when more women than men were hung for this (mainly because few were allowed to learn to read). Branding, short imprisonment or a fine were common punishments but for a period up to 1835 transportation to Australia occurred. In 1861 it was decided that a maximum of 7 years should be given for bigamy and this law stands today.

Several reasons are given for bigamy:

- The person concerned thought that their spouse had died. If they had not re-appeared after 7 years they could re-marry without penalty but if they appeared in less than 7 years the marriage was bigamous and due punishment meted out
- A minority were for financial gain
- Divorce was extremely difficult and rare. It required a private act of parliament. During the c19 there were only 4 a year, at huge cost.
- Some men claimed that they were still hoping to find 'the right one'.

Bigamy was felt to be better than co-habitation and seemed to be the only way a couple could be together. However, only a few spouses knew that they were bigamously married although most bigamous marriages took place some distance (40-50 miles) away from the couple's place of residence but even so there was always the chance that word would get back.

Even though these marriages were carried out by clergy, it was not until 1999 that a death certificate had to be shown before another marriage could take place.

In answer to a question, Rebecca agreed that there was an inevitable 'spike' in bigamous marriages during war-time.

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Sheila thanked Rebecca for a most interesting talk.

Thanks to Liz Sykes and Marianne Puxley for organising refreshments.