

NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE STONELEIGH HISTORY SOCIETY HELD ON 30 MAY 2017

Present: 32 attendees, including 29 SHS members, 1 new member and 2 visitors

Welcome: Sheila Woolf welcomed everyone to the meeting, held in Stoneleigh Church where the SHS's display on the church history was now in the Leigh Chapel. Sheila paid tribute to the small team who had researched the history, unusual features of which would be featured in the evening's talks, and to Pam Baker who had prepared the documents and graphics for the display.

Members were reminded that registration and payment of £5 for the visit to Tovey Kenning and Spencer on 27 June should be made that evening. Any subsequent queries should be addressed to Anthony Bianco (07721624241).

Mel Dearing and Anthony Bianco - Church Architecture

(N.B. The shape of the church through the centuries is featured in the new panel in the porch, to the right of the church entrance. This panel was prepared and designed by Mel.)

Anthony provided a chronological commentary as if reported in the Stoneleigh & Ashover News while Mel introduced some architectural mysteries.

The exact location of the Saxon church is not known but it, was in the valley rather than on the hill, probably with a mud floor and thatched roof. The Norman church seems to have been built as an extension to the Saxon one; the development of its tower remains a mystery as it was built square but became smaller over the centuries. Different roof pitches over the nave remain noticeable, especially when construction started on the south aisle roof which was removed, to be replaced by a low-pitched lead roof. Subsequent paintings and drawing, and later photographs, show the development of the church but these illustrate several illogicality's/artistic licences which compound the mystery around some of the church's features today.

Pete James - Monuments

Several monuments were highlighted e.g.

1. The Lady and Child, now in the church porch, dates from the fourteenth century. It was outside the church for many years.
2. The Unknown Priest (with a small dog at his feet), to the left before the door to the Leigh Chapel. Was found buried vertically in the 1820s when the Leigh Chapel was built
3. Tomb of Duchess Alice Dudley (nee Leigh), renowned for her charity work, to the left of the altar. Monument built in 1648 (20 years before her death!) with 8 black marble pillars, angels with trumpets holding curtains. There are medieval murals behind this monument.
4. Plaque to Humphrey How is on the outside of the south wall but it was originally inside the church. He came from a family of fullers based in Stareton and was porter 'Keeper of the Gate' to Lord Leigh. His role was to stop vagabonds entering the church but also to give alms to the poor.

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5. The Gallery. This includes the Royal Coat of Arms and the details of the Leigh Endowment, and the donations given by some parishioners.

Sheila Woolf – Burial Chambers

Thomas, the first Baron Leigh, wanted to memorialise his ancestors Sir Thomas and Dame Alice, and their memorial is now over the archway to the Leigh Chapel but had been on the opposite wall of the chancel. In 1665 he created the vestry and the vault beneath for the burials of his family. In 1786 all the Leigh family members buried under the floor of the vestry were listed, and in 1813 further listing of burials made, with details of the coffins. The vault is now blocked up, the entrance marked by a milestone. A family tree of them, 1669-1806, appears on the display.

The Leigh Chapel was designed by C.S. Smith of Leamington Spa, who also designed the Pump Rooms. Between 1843 and 1979 there were 15 memorials and 10 burials in the chapel. The earliest memorial is to the Hon. Julia Judith Leigh. Among them are memorials ~~are~~ to Gilbert Henry Chandos Leigh and Rupert Leigh. Also, the East Window was created in memory of Gilbert in 1886. During the recent refurbishment of the Leigh Chapel several other memorials had been found under the carpet.

The last Leigh to be memorialised was Robin, the 4th Lord Leigh who is buried in the churchyard.

Other notable memorials are the various war memorials and near the font, are the Dove tapestry, prepared in 1966, and the Henry Parkes memorial plaque, unveiled by his great great grandson in July 2015.

Shirley Ball - More recent memories

Shirley described (with photographs) various highlights of life in the church in the twentieth century included the blessing of the gates in 1956, a fund-raiser performance by Leamington Spa Opera, with the church choir in 1977, the dedication of the cushions prepared by 'The Stoneleigh Stitches' and associated programme by Channel 4 in 1990, the Save Our Church campaign in the 1980s, the conversion of the choir changing area into a toilet and kitchen in 2008 and the Roof Appeal in 2012+ . Shirley ended her talk with a wonderful, coloured photograph of the church in snow which helpfully illustrated Mel's points about the pitched roof and various strange architectural features.

Sheila thanked all contributors, emphasising that much more research had in fact been done to unearth additional mysteries – see the display!

Jean Vaughan and Barbara Gee were thanked for the refreshments.

NOTE: Next meeting is the visit on 27 June. No meetings in July or August. Mark 26 September in diaries when Shirley will be talking about the school.