

NOTES OF THE MEETING OF STONELEIGH HISTORY SOCIETY HELD ON 28 NOVEMBER 2017

Present: 27 members of the SHS and one guest.

Apologies: Nora Blagburn, Avril Newey and Jean Vaughan

Welcome: Sheila Woolf welcomed everyone. She announced that the 2018 programme was now on the website (www.stoneleighhistorysociety.org.uk) and confirmed that the visit to Merevale Hall on 24 April would go ahead. A flyer was available and would be re-circulated in the next mailing. A minimum of 20 people were needed to make the trip viable; non-members were welcome to attend. Tickets, £15 would go on sale at the February meeting. She reported that the visit to Salford Priors had been a success, with Nat Alcock giving a talk and leading the tour. The Christmas Social would be held at 7.30 in the Hall on Tuesday 19 December. Drinks would be provided and there would be a raffle, but members were requested to bring food to share. Membership renewals would be taken at that event.

Pete James then gave an illustrated talk on the Wroth silver

The ancient ceremony of the Wroth silver is in the same category as maypole dancing, cheese-rolling and so on, being an ancient English custom dating back at least to 1170 AD, held on 11 November (Martinmas Eve). It takes place at the 'Wrothstone' which is the base of a cross (long since disappeared) on a burial ground (possibly a Bronze Age barrow) on Knightlow Hill, between Rugby and Stretton-on-Dunsmore. No one knows when the cross was erected but the 'wrothstone' is designated a national monument.

The Feast of St Martin notes the end of the farming year, when wheat seeding was completed, fattened beef slaughtered, and hiring fairs were held (when both farm workers and domestic servants could find new employers, and vice versa). Pete showed several prints and paintings of fairs in various parts of the country, including Pocklington in Yorkshire, and Barford.

'St. Martin of Tours' was a Roman soldier, born in Hungary but brought up in Italy. He did not want to be a soldier, and legend has it that he once cut his cloak in half and gave half to a beggar during a snowstorm. He later became a monk and eventually a bishop in Tours, at the insistence of the townspeople from whom he had hid in a barn with geese who cackled and divulged his hiding place. The Feast is celebrated throughout Europe and goose is often cooked, processions are frequently held, children make lanterns etc.

Martinmas was seen as 'a settling day' i.e. the day when, at sunrise, tithes were paid to the church and landowners. Wroth silver is the ceremony which covers the 'Knightlow Hundred' which was the largest Hundred in Warwickshire, covering Stoneleigh, Marton, Kineton, Brandon etc. The title has changed over the centuries e.g. in 1236 it was the 'wrothpenny', in 1628 the 'wrothmonies' and today 'wroth silver'. Different values were – and indeed are – paid by different parts of the Hundred (for some reason Harbury pays far more than elsewhere).

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The ceremony (never held on a Sunday) involved the representatives of parishes being called out and they then threw their dues into the dip in the wrothstone. The penalty for non-payment was a fine and producing 'a white bull with a red nose and ears (n.b. only 2% of British white have red/pink points – the wild Chillingham cattle – so quite how this part of the fine was ever paid remains a mystery). The dues were paid to the landowner, the Duke of Buccleuch. The surprising reason for him being the landowner was due to the fact Whites have red points (hooves, ears and eyes). The wild Chillingham cattle meet these criteria but they are found far from Warwickshire, so it is a mystery how this part of the fine was paid due to the fact that in the sixteenth century the landowner was Stoneleigh's own Sir Thomas Leigh. He then left the land to his son William Leigh, and then the descent ran through the female line until six generations later a daughter, Elizabeth, married Henry Scott, 3rd Duke of Buccleuch.

The ceremony of the Wroth silver has continued for many years, retiring to the Dun Cow in Dunchurch afterwards. In more recent years the venue has been the Queens Head at Bretford.

Some of the background to Wroth silver appears in 'Antiquities of Warwickshire' by William Dugdale. There is also a website www.wrothsilver.co.uk

Sheila then spoke about her experience at a recent Wroth silver ceremony, having discovered its existence through the Rugby history group and bought a ticket for the event and subsequent breakfast at the Queen's Head in Bretford. Attendance required a walk in the dark (torch required!) along the A45 into a field where many old farmers bowed over the wrothstone and threw various amounts into the stone. The Duke of Buccleuch's agent attends. Payment was made at the last possible minute i.e. before sunrise on 11 November. Stoneleigh is no longer one of the parishes involved in the ceremony. After the ceremony the group moved to the pub where a full English breakfast was served, 'churchwarden clay pipes' – newly made each year - were smoked, rum and hot milk served, and the money counted. Speeches were made and people were invited to write poems about the ceremony. There used to be celebrations, involving a pageant, about the death of the dun cow, (the area being "Dunsmore", where legend has it that Guy of Warwick slew the Dun Cow). Keeping the link to the Buccleuch family locally, there is still a statue of Lord John Scott of Buccleuch in the centre of Dunchurch, which is often decorated by pranksters.

Thanks to Pete and Sheila and to Jenny and Margaret who provided the refreshments.