

## NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE STONELEIGH HISTORY SOCIETY HELD ON 24 SEPTEMBER 2019

**Present:** 27 members of the SHS and 16 former pupils and relatives of former pupils, plus several guests - representatives from other local societies, friends of Sheila, Neville Beamer (Stoneleigh vicar at the time of the closure of the school) - and village neighbours.

**Apologies:** Maggie Moorhouse, Sue Crofts, Pete James, Patrick Sawdon, Terry McKee, and Margaret Brown

**Welcome:** Sheila Woolf welcomed everyone to this special meeting of the SHS. There were some Society announcements before the main business of the evening, namely the launch of her book 'A History of Stoneleigh School – Back to School 1740-1976'.

- The next meeting would be on 29 October when the Coventry Women's Research Group would give a presentation.
- It was not too late to put in a sealed bid for one of William Roseblade's watercolours. Email Sue Crofts if interested [sue2crofts@btinternet.com](mailto:sue2crofts@btinternet.com)
- Saturday 28 September is Leamington History Day, to be held at All Saints in Leamington. Many local history societies would be represented, including SHS. Margaret Rushton, the Secretary, was at this meeting and would answer any questions.
- A list of forthcoming events organised by the Warwick District History Society was available on the platform.
- The Historical Woodland and Landscape Trust is holding an event at Ryton Pools. Ben Wallace of Warwickshire County Council Historic Environmental Record is running a course on Historic Woodlands and Landscapes, on Tuesday 19 November, 9.30-15.30. The course is free but those interested are asked to register through the Dunsmore Living Landscape website [www.exploredunsmore.org/events/historic-woodlands-and-landscapes](http://www.exploredunsmore.org/events/historic-woodlands-and-landscapes). We have already asked what they are doing to lobby against the proposed route of HS2 which will destroy many acres of ancient woodland along its proposed route.
- On 9 November the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust is hosting an event for local history society members (details attached). If interested please let Sheila know in the first instance, who is required to make a block booking.
- The SHS 2020 programme has now been finalised. This will be circulated with the notes of this meeting.

### The Talk

Sheila remarked on the wonderful assortment of people who had gathered.

Everyone can remember their school days so that is something we all have in common. Obviously some of these memories are happy, others sad. Sheila's own interest in Stoneleigh School and its memories began 13 years ago when she moved to the village. When she began researching local history she discovered that some of her own ancestors had attended the school, lived and worked on the estate and were buried in the churchyard. School log books showed that not only had her grandmother won a prize for sewing but was recorded as 'a naughty girl'!

Stoneleigh School took a while to get off the ground. In 1710 Thomas, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lord Leigh, left money in his will for 'land, a school house and a school master' ~~the~~ but nothing was done by his successor. In 1732 his daughter, Anne, made a will and left £1000 'for the education of boys and girls from Stoneleigh parish' but again, nothing was done. In 1740 the 4<sup>th</sup> Lord Leigh organised that 'a convenient piece of land near the churchyard' was designated for a school and although it is not known exactly when the school became operational it certainly existed by 1750. ~~Before this time it is likely that a 'dame school' provided some education and that this was located in the old post office.~~ Sheila was interested in what sort of educational provision might have been made for Stoneleigh children before the school was built. Possibly the vicar taught some boys. Many villages had dame schools, and we know for certain that there was one in the nineteenth century, though we have no evidence of one before this.

Sheila had been able to trace many of the teachers at the school, notably ~~Tom~~ William Wells who had held the post for 40 years, and John Gardner who had been a school master for 30 years. Over the years husband and wife teams taught at the school. There were a notable number of early deaths amongst headteachers! The maintenance of school log books became compulsory in 1862 and these provide many insights into the attitudes of both teachers and pupils, and recorded many misdemeanors and some tragedies.

The school building has many interesting features. Unlike many village schools which we recognise today, and which were built in Victorian times, ~~many schools in the eighteenth century,~~ its architectural feature is Georgian. There was an inventory of every room, including the brewhouse.i.e. washhouse). The school house was in fact a home with the teaching rooms fitted in, girls upstairs, boys downstairs. It was all rather a squash, with some classes being taken in the Reading Room across the road (i.e. the current Club) and various other ad hoc arrangements being made in the ~~1980s~~ 1880s while the school was re-built and the dame school closed, incorporating the little ones into the big school. This work was finished in 1882 when half of what is now the Parsonage became the headmaster's house. During the next decades there were several changes in the school's facilities and teachers and pupils alike had to make considerable adjustments. ~~Later, space in the school became so tight that~~ In the twentieth century, for example, children had to walk up Birmingham ~~Room~~ Road to have their lunch in the former village hall (on the current site). Mel Dearing had reconstructed plans of how the school had looked.

The SHS has several items from the School .e.g. the light green Georgian teacher's desk, Sunday School prize books (Tommy's Tiny Tales', and 'What Sort of Chap' and others). Queen Victoria's Jubilee was in 1897 and every school child received a special medallion, one of which is held by SHS.

Little detail is known about the school curriculum although the 3 Rs were featured and, scarcely surprisingly, the girls were taught 'domestic arts', the earliest evidence of which is a 1788 sampler by Lucy Hall, owned by Miriam Fardon. The 3 Rs featured for all children.

During a visit to Stoneleigh in 1882 , Sir Henry Parkes returned to his old school in the village and wrote in the school log book. Reading the log books conveys a great deal of

information about children's behaviour and what was and was not acceptable over the decades. They also record epidemics and tragedies (especially drownings).

After a false start, the Leigh family was closely involved with the school. Cordelia in particular kept in close touch and offered considerable practical help. There were frequent visits by children to the Abbey. During the Great War there are records/photographs of boys helping the war effort e.g. by making crutches and bed-cradles, and girls making garments of various types. There are few log book entries during WW2 but it seems that the school staff managed to keep the atmosphere relatively calm although there was an air raid shelter in the basement and regular gas mask inspections. The population fluctuated with some children being evacuated from Coventry to Stoneleigh, and of course some men were at the front.

The 1944 Education Act led to many changes. Thus in December 1945 Stoneleigh School became a primary school rather than children remaining until they were 13 and ready for the world of work. This change meant that older children had to be taken to Kenilworth by bus for their secondary education. The ownership/administration of schools changed too and Stoneleigh, together with small rural schools throughout the country faced increasing financial problems and questions about their viability. After many meetings and much heartache the school was closed on 23 July 1976.

Key memories shared with Sheila by former pupils included - Teachers (especially Mr Grant), the iron staircase, small bottle of milk, climbing bars in the playground, gardens, school dinners, the nativity play (complete with live animals) and trips to the Abbey. Several photographs of these times were shown on the screen during the talk and Sheila was very grateful to all those former pupils who had shared their memories with her.

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Margaret Wallis (SHS Secretary) gave a vote of thanks and the audience was invited to enjoy refreshments and also to buy the book, £10.

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*Sheila would particularly like to thank everyone who supported the evening in so many practical ways, from providing food and drink (Stoneleigh Abbey for the wine), helping with chairs, fetching and carrying, taking the money and clearing up afterwards etc. etc. If you were unable to attend the meeting, the book will be on sale at October's meeting too.*