

Minutes of the meeting held on the 25th April 2023 in Stoneleigh Village Hall.

1. Sheila welcomed everyone to the meeting.
2. There were 13 apologies, 18 members present and one visitor.
3. Notices: a. Sheila informed the meeting that Margaret had recently been hospitalised. She is back home resting and sends her best wishes to all. b. Sheila has received information from the Leamington History Group about their summer programme. Warwickshire Local History Society has also sent details of a visit to Sutton Park this summer. Please see attachments for details. c. The Coronation display is now available in the Leigh Chapel. Lisa informed the meeting that some visitors have already been to see it. She has produced an A5 flyer which she made available to members present. d. Sheila recently had a family history request from Florida, USA about a child called Mary May. She had had difficulty finding information but made a discovery in Philip Gill's book on the Stoneleigh Alms-house residents. Mary had lodged with Elizabeth Barnet in the New Alms-house and continued as a servant before moving to Shropshire to get married. It was fortuitous that Philip was in the audience to hear this story.
4. Sheila then welcomed the speaker from Alcester History Society and invited him to give his presentation -

'The Blind Postmaster General and the Suffragist' by Alan Godfrey.

This is the story of Henry and Millicent Fawcett

Henry Fawcett was born in 1833 and lived in Salisbury where his father was a prominent Liberal and supporter of Free Trade. From a young age Henry planned to become a member of parliament. As a student at Cambridge, he decided to read for the 'bar' as he thought this a good route into politics. Unfortunately, he began to have eye problems and was told to cease all reading for a year. However, after a shooting accident he lost his sight completely and had to give up his ambition to become a lawyer.

Throughout the early 1860s, while still an academic at Cambridge, Henry made several attempts to get into Parliament. Eventually in 1865 he won the seat of Brighton for the Liberal Party. In 1874 he lost his seat but was elected a year later for Hackney.

While in Parliament his interests were varied but one of them was public access to land and he was a contemporary of Octavia Hill, one of the group that founded the National Trust.

In 1880 Gladstone appointed him Postmaster General. He was not in the Cabinet, as Gladstone was suspicious of Fawcett's ability to limit the circulation of sensitive material. All documents had to be read to Fawcett, so it was possible for information to be 'leaked'. Instead, he was made a Privy Councillor.

As Postmaster General Fawcett was instrumental in bringing about a whole raft of innovations – Postal Orders, the Parcels Post, the Post Office Savings Bank, collection times displayed on the side of post boxes (in Braille also, known as the Fawcett tabs), he revised the Post Office Annuities and Life Insurance and introduced the 'Penny Lilac' stamp.

In 1884, aged 51 he died of pneumonia. He was buried in Trumpington churchyard in Cambridge. There are a number of memorials erected in towns where he lived and worked – London, Cambridge and Salisbury. His link with the Post Office continues today as the Fawcett Association founded in Victorian times to represent workers is now part of the Communication Workers Union.

Millicent Garrett was born in Aldeburgh, Suffolk in 1847. Her father was a prominent businessman and was responsible for building Snape Maltings. This was one of the largest maltings in existence at the time but is better known today as a music venue and is linked with Benjamin Britten who also lived in Aldeburgh.

Millicent and her sisters were well educated, and it was at a party that she was introduced to Henry Fawcett. She found that she shared his political interests and after a short engagement they were married in 1867. They had a daughter, Philippa, the following year. For a while Millicent assisted her husband in his work but eventually pursued her interests in political economy and women's rights.

As well as being active in the women's suffrage movement she wrote a number of books, novels and pamphlets. One of her textbooks on political economy was used in schools although her novel 'Janet Doncaster' did not reach such a wide audience.

Following Henry's death Millicent sold the family home in Lambeth and moved to Gower Street where she lived with her sister Agnes and daughter Philippa. (Alan told us at this point that a member of Alcester History Society had discovered that a relative of hers, Susannah Griffin, had worked for many years as a parlour maid at Gower Street while Millicent was there.)

Millicent was interested in the fight for women's rights in other countries and travelled widely. On one occasion, she and a group of other women visited South Africa where Boer prisoners were kept in very poor conditions by their British captors. The women and children suffered nutritionally as a result of the meagre army rations. She recommended that they be given seeds and gardening tools so that they could grow their own food. She saw that this proposal was adopted, and conditions did improve.

As the 20th century progressed the support amongst women for increased rights intensified and thousands took to the streets – 1911 40,000 women marched at the Coronation, 1913 70,000 women from across the country gathered for the Women's Suffrage Pilgrimage. Following the outbreak of war in 1914 there was a pause in suffrage activities and women put their energies in to the war effort.

After the war ended in 1918, the fight for women's suffrage continued and in the Reform Act of 1918 some women did get the vote, but it wasn't until 1928 that men and women had equal rights to vote. Millicent died in 1929 but her daughter Philippa continued the fight for women's skills and abilities to be recognised by society.

In 2018 a statue of Millicent Fawcett was unveiled jointly by 3 generations of women. The statue is the only statue of a woman in Parliament Square and was created by a woman, Gillian Wearing. At the unveiling the Prime Minister, Theresa May, acknowledged the great contribution made by Millicent and her fellow Suffragists.

5. Sheila thanked Alan for an interesting presentation and a short period of questioning took place.
6. The meeting closed and refreshments were provided by Maggie and Ruth.
7. The next meeting will be on the 23rd May, and the speaker will be Dr. Javad Hashemi. His topic will be 'The fascinating story of egg cups'.