

Stoneleigh History Society

Minutes of the meeting held on the 25th of November 2025 at Stoneleigh Village Hall 7.30 pm.

1. Sheila welcomed everyone to the meeting. There were 22 members present. Apologies were received from Quentin Compton - Bishop, Celia Baly, Liz Sykes, Pam Baker, Margaret Wallis, Sue Line, Janice Heywood, Jill Kashi, Clare Burdett and Margaret Brown.
2. Notices: a. The Stoneleigh Male Voice Choir will be performing on the 10th of December at St Francis of Assisi R C Church, Kenilworth. Tickets £15 from Phil Jones. b. Sarah is taking money tonight for the Christmas Quiz and Social. c. Sheila has Mary Dormer Harris books for sale. Hardback £10 and paperback £5. Also on sale are some copies of Nat Alcock's pamphlets on Stoneleigh, plus some drawings of Stoneleigh properties.
3. Sheila introduced the Speaker for the evening:

Chris Kirby from the Royal Fusiliers Museum in Warwick. His topic: 'The surprising life and adventures of Hannah Snell'

Hannah lived from April 1713 to February 1792. She was born in Worcester, and her father was a dyer/hosier at a time when the area was well known for glove making. Both Hannah's parents died when she was 17 and she moved in with her married sister in Wapping. She married a Dutch seaman in 1744 in the Fleet Prison. Her husband, James Summes, abandoned her when she was 7 months pregnant. Her daughter later died.

Having been so badly treated by James she decided to track him down and over the following years her life took many twists and turns.

Hannah's life is documented in a 1750's pamphlet called 'The female soldier' by Robert Walker of Little Old Bailey, London. The pamphlet is still in print today and a copy can be viewed at the Fusilier Museum.

Hannah decided to join the army disguising herself as a man. There was a bit of an army tradition in her family with her grandfather, Sam, having been a soldier and her elder brother also in the army.

Hannah joined, what became the Warwickshire Fusiliers, in Coventry and was involved in the containment of the Jacobite Rebellion in 1745 ending up at Carlisle Castle. There are drawings believed to be of Hannah performing typical army duties. While in Carlisle she got into trouble and was sentenced to be lashed. Later, the fear of being discovered as a woman caused her to desert. She decided to go to Portsmouth and try to join a ship which would take her to Holland to find her husband.

Hannah volunteered to join the navy and became a crew member of a sloop called 'The Swallow'. She was involved in the British Navy's war with France in the Madras area of India. She was badly wounded in one of the naval battles.

Having been shot in the groin she used the services of a local woman to treat her wounds. There is documentary evidence of Hannah being treated at Cuddalore Hospital. She recovered and after discovering that her husband was dead she returned to England and left the navy. Due to the threat of losing her pension if her female identity was known, she took her brother in laws' name of James Gray and was admitted as an 'out pensioner' at Chelsea Hospital.

Hannah became a celebrity and there are wood cuts believed to be of her. In June 1750 she appeared on stage in London, Bristol and Bath singing songs and performing her army manoeuvres.

Later, she bought a pub in Wapping called 'The Female Warrior', married again and had two sons. She bought another pub called the 'Three Tuns' and following the death of her second husband she married again in 1772.

Her situation took a turn for the worse when, in 1791, she was admitted to the Bedlam Hospital in London. She died a year later and is likely to have been buried in the grounds of the hospital.

What is Hannah's Legacy?

Charles Dickens recalled her story in 'British Amazons' and in some ways she is regarded as a female role model. She was a good soldier and performed her duties well.

In 2018 her achievements were publicly recognised when her great granddaughter unveiled a blue plaque in Friary Street, Worcester where she was born.

Some parts of her life and adventures can be a little difficult to accept but on the other hand there is documentary evidence to support much of her story.

4. Sheila thanked Chris for his presentation and invited questions.
The meeting adjourned for refreshments. Thanks to Mel, Kate and Phil Jones for their hard work.
5. The next meeting will be our Christmas Quiz and Social on the 16th of December.