

# Stoneleigh History Society

Minutes of the meeting held on the 26<sup>th</sup> of May 2026 at 7.30 pm.

1. Apologies: Pam Baker, Bruce and Ruth Oliver, Mel Dearing, Maggie Moorhouse, Barry Nutter, Jane Taylor, Adrian and Clare Clarke, Margaret Brown, Celia Baly, Sarah Ballinger and Kate Jones. There were 16 members present and 1 visitor.
2. Notices:
  - a. There had been plenty of interest in the SHS stand at the Spring Festival. The photographs of Stoneleigh since the 2WW were very popular. And there were a number of people who came to share their memories on having lived in Stoneleigh or had relatives who had lived in the Parish. Sheila thanked those members who had turned up on the day to do a stint. Unfortunately no new members were recruited on the day.
  - b. Sheila had prepared a list of those expressing an interest in visiting Marton on Tuesday August the 11<sup>th</sup> at 2 pm. She asked those present to sign up if they haven't done so already and also to indicate if they can give a lift to anyone who needs one.
3. Sheila then began her presentation ' **The Tragic Baron – Genius or Madman. The unfortunate life of Edward Leigh**

#### **Edward's early life:**

He was born on March the 1<sup>st</sup> 1742. His mother was Maria Rebecca Craven the sister of the 5<sup>th</sup> Lord Craven of Coombe Abbey. His father was Thomas the 4<sup>th</sup> Lord Leigh. For reasons which remain unclear the couple were married in Corley, Warwickshire. The couple had 4 children, but Edward and sister Mary were the only survivors. When Edward was 4 his mother died and 7 when his father died. So at such a young age he inherited the title and the wealth of Stoneleigh Abbey and its estates.

Both children were put into the care of their uncle Lord Craven and they lived at Coombe.

Despite Edward's great inherited wealth very little money was spent on the upkeep and maintenance of Stoneleigh Abbey.

#### **Wealth of the estate:**

Rents from the estate amounted to £6,975 pa.

From an inherited estate in Bedfordshire there was £10,000

Mary inherited £15,000 when her father died.

Aunt Eleanor, who lived at Compton Verney, left the pair a considerable amount.

To get an idea of the value today the figures should be multiplied over 200 times.

#### **Edward's education:**

Edward attended Westminster School and then Oriel College, Oxford.

He gained a B.A. in 1761 and an M.A. in 1764.

He gained a DCL (legal qualification) later.

He had a wide range of interests both in the Arts and Sciences.

#### **Edward at Stoneleigh:**

Edward returned to Stoneleigh in 1763 aged 21.

After years of neglect Edward wanted to transform the Abbey and the landscape.

Between 1763 and 1774 he spent £25,000 on the best craftsmen and designers in order to achieve his ambition.

He purchased beautiful furnishings, fireplaces and the finest decorations.

He also transformed the grounds, purchasing many trees including fruit trees to create orchards.

He commissioned 2 A3 books to hold pictures and diagrams of everything he owned.

**Edward's interests:**

Music - Edward was particularly interested in music and created a Music Room at Stoneleigh which contained many instruments and musical scores. He had close links with William Hayes who was Oxford Professor of Music.

Books – He built a vast collection, some very famous.

Science – Edward had an extensive collection of scientific items , one of which was Edward Nairn's electrical stimulation machine, which was used for the treatment of nervous disorders.

**Troubled times ahead:**

Edward had planned a trip to Europe with his colleague from Oxford, the Rev. John Dodson, but Edward became unwell and the trip did not take place.

From the late 1760s to the mid 1770s Edward received treatment for poor mental health. Dr. John Munro of the Bethlehem Hospital in London, provided some care. In 1767 the records show payments made to the hospital. Eventually, in 1774 Edward was declared a "Lunatick of Unsound mind".

After that, all his work at Stoneleigh came to a halt and for the following 12 years he was treated as an invalid. He died on May the 26<sup>th</sup> 1786, aged 44 and was the last of the Warwickshire Leighs.

**His death:**

Edward's burial was very simple and very few were invited. The obituary was very short and memorials to him are sparse in their language,

All his personal papers held by John Dodson were destroyed on the instruction of Lord Craven.

**His will:**

Many of Edward's books and musical instruments were bequeathed to Oriel College. The numbers were so extensive that Oriel College later built a new building to house them.

Mark Purcell of the National Trust estimates that had Edward lived longer his library would have equalled that of the King's.

**A contemporary view - issues discussed in the follow up:**

Edward was a gifted young man. As a young child his father had observed his potential. Having lost his mother at such a young age and gaining an apparently unsympathetic stepmother he may have been isolated and lonely.

His interest in the Arts and Sciences and his pursuit of excellence in the development of Stoneleigh Abbey show a 'driven and determined' personality.

His close friendship with John Dodson may have been something which his family were unhappy about.

The lack of suitable marriage suitors organised by his family may be an indication of family concern.

The purchase of Nairn's electrical stimulation may provide a clue to his own suspicions about his mental health.

Why was Lord Craven insistent on the destruction of personal papers held by John Dodson? Did he fear that Edward was 'Gay' and wanted to destroy any potential evidence that could be used against the family?

Would Edward's condition be described as bi-polar and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century be something which could be treated to allow a person to lead a fulfilling life?

4. The audience retired for refreshments and continued their discussion of Sheila's presentation.
5. Thanks to Pam and Margaret for providing refreshments. The meeting closed at 21.00