

Reports on our past lectures in 2017

27 January 2017

7th Nick Fuentes Memorial Lecture

'Discovering Roman Southwark'

Harvey Sheldon, archaeologist and Honorary Research Fellow at Birkbeck College, London

Harvey Sheldon began by paying tribute to Nick Fuentes, a leading amateur archaeologist and former WHS chairman, who died in 2010. He said Nick had made two major contributions to London archaeology by co-ordinating weekend volunteers in the Sixties and Seventies and by launching the London Archaeologist in 1968. He described Nick as a "bright beacon in a dark period" and praised his foresight, leadership, energy and commitment.

Turning to Roman Southwark, Harvey outlined the development of archaeology in the area: from the first Roman find in the 17th century to the recent excavations as a result of the Jubilee Line extension, the building of the Shard and the re-development of London Bridge Station. It was difficult to pin-point any hard evidence of an archaeological dig before the Second World War. Bomb damage in 1940/41 had revealed the rose window at the west end of the Bishop of Winchester's Palace and a post-war dig had found the remains of a Roman building in King's Head Yard. Since the 1970s, a combination of public and private funding had greatly increased the number of digs in an area of London once seen as nothing more than a suburb of the City.

Janet Smith

24 February 2017

Henry Maudslay and his circle

David Waller, author, business consultant and former Financial Times journalist

David Waller began by emphasising the importance of London in the early history of the industrial revolution. This was a period of huge economic growth and innovation which culminated in the Great Exhibition of 1851. He likened the period to the developments which have come more recently from Silicon Valley. However the huge changes would not have been possible without the development of precision machinery that allowed the mass production of standard components.

The main subject of the talk, Henry Maudslay (1771-1831), was born into a poor background in Woolwich. He started working in a smithery and later worked for Joseph Bramah, the lock maker, inventor of the hydraulic press and flushing toilet. Maudslay became an expert in making machines and via Bramah met Marc Brunel

who needed an engineer to make the machinery which Brunel designed for the automated manufacture of ships blocks. These were a vital component for the British Navy at the time of the Napoleonic wars. In all 49 machine types were built to create the first semi-automated production line in the world. Some of these are now in the Science Museum collection.

Later Maudslay opened a factory in Westminster Bridge Road, Lambeth, a stone's throw from the Thames. This factory attracted the best in engineering talent and a number of very significant figures were trained there and later set up their own businesses. These included Joseph Clement, who constructed the Difference Engine designed by Charles Babbage, the world's first computer, and Joseph Whitworth, of standardised screw-thread fame. Another was James Nasmyth, inventor of the steam hammer who was personal assistant to Maudslay.

David has written the full story in his book entitled 'Iron Men', an allusion to a textile machine named 'The Iron Man' built by Richard Roberts in 1825. (ISBN-13:9781783085446 published by Anthem Press).

Colin Jenkins

31 March 2017

The 'Transforming Orleans House Project'

Natalie Rhodes, Orleans House Gallery

Natalie introduced herself as the Heritage Hub Education Co-ordinator for the Orleans House Gallery at Twickenham; she is responsible for the many outreach programmes organised by the Gallery. The original Palladian-style villa on the site was built in 1710 for the politician and diplomat James Johnson. Over time it became increasingly opulent and a sumptuous Octagon Room, designed by James Gibbs, was later added to entertain royalty. The villa, on the banks of the Thames, became known as Orleans House in the early 19C after Louis-Philippe, Duc d'Orleans lived there during his years of exile in "dear old Twick" (1815-17).

By the early 20C, the house was in a state of disrepair and in 1926 was partially demolished before a local resident, the Hon. Nellie Ionides, stepped in and bought the Octagon Room and out-houses. In her will she bequeathed the property and the art collection it houses to Richmond Borough Council. Today, with the help of a Heritage Lottery Fund grant, the Octagon Room and Main Gallery are being refurbished and are due to re-open in September 2017. The Stables Gallery, Cafe and Education Centre remain open. To find out more see the Orleans House gallery website.

Janet Smith

28 April 2017

'The First World War memorial in Summerstown and its 182 stories'

Geoff Simmons, researcher

Geoff Simmons set up the Summerstown182 project four years ago after a passer-by left a photo of an unknown WWI soldier outside St Mary's church in Summerstown. The vicar later unearthed a war memorial bearing three names from his garden. Geoff started researching them and then, with the help of local residents, all 182 names on the war memorial inside the church. To date, the stories of 179 have been uncovered and the descendants of one soldier were among the audience to hear Geoff's talk. For more details see the Summerstown182 website.

Colin Jenkins

26 May 2017

Enderby Wharf and the Trans-Atlantic Telegraph

Richard Buchanan of Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society

Richard Buchanan who is former employee at Enderby Wharf talked about the history of the site and the technical history of undersea cable communications.

The site on the river was home to the naval gunpowder store from 1695 to the 1760s, all transport of powder in and out taking place by water. In the 19th century the area was acquired by the Enderby family who made their fortune from whale oil used for lighting before gas. In 1830 they built Enderby Mill which manufactured rope and sailcloth, but that burnt down in 1845. The current Enderby House with the Octagon room was built in 1846.

Meanwhile nearby Morden Wharf had been developed by Glass, Elliott and Company, wire rope makers and they began to manufacture submarine cables and took over Enderby Wharf in 1857. An undersea cable had been laid between Britain and France in 1850 and by 1857 there were plans to cross the Atlantic. The first cables were manufactured in Greenwich and laid using British and American navy ships. The first attempt to lay a cable failed, the second was successful but only worked for a few weeks.

The cable laid in 1865/66 using the Great Eastern fared much better. The cables of this period consisted of a central copper conductor, surrounded by layers of Gutta Percha; a natural rubber product; the whole enclosed by steel armouring. They carried telegraph messages at very low data rates but as time went on bandwidth increased, amplifiers were inserted in cables and technology moved from telegraphs to telephones and then to digital data. Today's fibre optic cables handle multi-gigabit data rates.

The site is currently being redeveloped but the Enderby Group are campaigning to ensure that Enderby House is preserved and is used for a museum of telecommunications history.

Colin Jenkins

30 June 2017

AGM followed by a talk on 'The Putney Debates'

By Dorian Gerhold, just re-elected as the WHS Chairman

The Putney Debates took place between 28 October-11 November 1647 during a pause in the Civil War between king and parliament. Dorian began his talk by highlighting a key feature of the discussions: who should have the vote? It was a constitutional matter, he said, that would not be debated again for some 100 years. The meeting was convened by the General Council of the New Model Army and, in the absence of Thomas Fairfax due to illness, was chaired by his deputy, Oliver Cromwell. Round the table in the old St Mary's Church sat officers and other ranks, as well as two Levellers: Dorian stressed the wide social range of those present. A record of only the first three days of the meeting survives, thanks to William Clarke, Secretary to the Council, who later transcribed his contemporaneous notes.

Dorian focused on the second day of the debates, 29 October 1647, when serious consideration was given to extending the vote to all men (but not yet women). Colonel Thomas Rainborowe argued in favour with the famous words, "the poorest he hath a life to live as the greatest he ... every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government ...". A record of the final decision has not survived but from other sources it seems a wide franchise was agreed, with the exclusion only of beggars and servants. By 1648, the Civil War had resumed; it would end with the Purge of Parliament and the execution of Charles I. For a fuller account of this turbulent period in English history, see *The Putney Debates* by Dorian Gerhold, available from the cafe at St Mary's church, Putney.

Janet Smith

28 July 2017

'Merton Priory'

Dave Saxby of Museum of London Archaeology

This year Merton Priory celebrates 900 years since its foundation. Dave Saxby has excavated and researched the site and is very much involved with the projects for the future of the Chapter House site and with the Merton Priory Trust.

The priory site has a long history of archaeological excavation. Work was done in 1922 - 24, then in 1962, 1976, 1983 and most extensively in 1987 to 1990. As well as showing

photos and results from the latter digs David also showed pictures from the earlier work including when the site was still crossed by a disused railway.

The priory was first built in 1114 under Henry I, but moved to its present site in 1170 during the reign of Henry III. Most of the building took place during his reign and he often spent time at Merton. Its school was a very important centre of learning with Thomas a Beckett and Nicholas Breakspear, the only English Pope (Adrian IV) educated there. King John was at Merton before signing Magna Carta and one of the most important English legal documents 'The Statutes of Merton' was signed in the Chapter House in 1236. The remains of the Chapter House have been preserved under a road and are regularly open. Money is already committed for the construction of a new museum to improve the interpretation of the remains.

Colin Jenkins

29 September 2017

Wandsworth, whitebait and the Thames fisheries

Roger Williams, author and publisher

Roger Williams talked about the history of the Thames fishery. He became involved in this through a volunteer project to survey the current stocks of fish in the river where he was asked to research the history of fish and fishing to set modern observations in context. In particular the Smelt was once very common; with 3000 being recorded in one haul but this migratory fish now no longer comes to the Thames.

In earlier times the river supported many species of fish and up until the mid 19th century had a thriving fishery. In a painting of Putney Bridge from 1793 one can see fishermen using seine nets. Dorian Gerhold has researched 'Wandsworth's Lost Fishing Village' and Roger had made use of this research. The fisheries decline was mainly due to pollution but another contributory factor may have been 'whitebait'.

Whitebait is the small fry of various common fish such as herring and sprats and the term was first used in the 18th century. For a time it was even claimed that whitebait was a specific species but the main reason for use of the term was to get round restrictions on the catching of small fish. The height of 'Whitebait' as a specific London culinary delicacy was from 1822 to 1894 where annual parliamentary dinners were held in Greenwich. This dinner took place even in 1858 which was the year of the great stink when parliament was unable to sit at Westminster due to the state of the Thames.

Roger has produced a book for those wanting to know more.

Colin Jenkins

27 October 2017

Liquid Assets: Interpreting the Prehistoric Finds from the London Thames

Jon Cotton, a former senior archaeologist at the Museum of London

Jon Cotton focussed on three finds from the Thames: a Mesolithic flint axe; a Bronze Age spearhead; and an Iron Age dagger. He posed the question: how did they come to be in the Thames? Were they accidentally discarded or deliberately thrown into the river? A map of the many found objects in recent years pointed to an east/west divide. Before the start of major building projects to the east of London - such as Crossrail and HS1 - the overwhelming majority of prehistoric finds had come from the western reaches of the river. The Putney/Wandsworth/Barn Elms stretch appeared to be especially significant and he paid tribute to the contribution to archaeological knowledge made by local groups such as the Wandsworth Historical Society.

It was widely accepted these days, Jon said, that many of the prehistoric finds were votive offerings to pagan gods. But he went further and suggested that they were possibly a means of assuaging the river itself: prehistoric man did not have the engineering skill to counteract the rising level of the Thames, so perhaps he chose to placate the river with offerings instead. He hoped that the excavations now taking place for the Thames Tideway Tunnel might reveal more answers.

Janet Smith

25 November 2017

Our last Friday meeting of the year is given over to short talks by members. This year there was an unprecedented 6 talks:

Prince Alfred's Visit to Tristan da Cunha by Neil Robson



In 1867 Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh and second son of Queen Victoria, made an official visit to the British dependency of Tristan da Cunha in the South Atlantic. In a break with royal protocol, he was carried ashore on the back of the Chief Islander, Peter Green, who later vowed "Never again!"

In honour of the Prince's visit, the island's capital was re-named Edinburgh of the Seven Seas. 2017 marks the 150th anniversary of this far-flung royal visit and, at Neil Robson's instigation, the island has produced a handsome set of commemorative stamps. One of which is shown on the right.

Four Mystery MCs by Margaret Bell

Inspired by a reference to four un-named WWI Military Cross holders in the parish magazine of St Mary Magdelene, Wandsworth Common, Margaret set about finding out who the men were. With the help of online databases and local archives, she had managed to identify them as:

- 2nd Lt Geoffrey Cholerton Smith
- Lt Montague Roger Dell
- 2nd Lt Normal Dolby
- Capt Cyril Nelson Lowe

By an extraordinary co-incidence Smith and Dolby, who had both been pupils at Emmanuel School, Battersea, were awarded the MC on the same day (along with a third former pupil). Cyril Lowe, also known as Kit, later achieved fame playing rugby for England, setting a record for scoring tries that stood until 1989.

2 Temple Place and the Astors by Nigel Black



This extraordinary castellated building in the heart of London was built as offices for William Waldorf Astor (1848-1919), an American multi-millionaire, in 1895. He used leading designers and craftsmen to reflect his love of literature and history. His aim was to gain acceptance as an English gentleman. His efforts paid off: a few years later he became a British citizen and, in 1916, he was raised to the peerage.

The Astor family's enormous wealth derived initially from fur and then from prime real estate in Manhattan. Over here, William Waldorf acquired property (Cliveden House in Buckinghamshire and Hever Castle in Kent) and leading newspapers (the Pall Mall Gazette and later the Observer). Shortly after his death in 1919, his daughter-in-law, Nancy Astor, became the first woman to take her seat in the House of Commons. 2 Temple Place is open to the public during special exhibitions.

Putney Old Burial Ground by Phil Evison

An attractive public open space on Upper Richmond Road was originally a burial ground from 1763-1854. The site, opened to accommodate the 'overspill' from St Mary's Church, was paid for by public subscription amounting to £240 17s. Of the 213 burial plots, 4 listed tombs remain, as well as some 60 headstones and slabs and a small mortuary house. Among the distinguished 'residents' are Harriet Thomson, an 18th century novelist, and Stratford Canning (1786-1880), diplomat and politician.

Phil said his talk was largely based on the work of a 20th century history of the burial ground written by Arthur Crotch (1867-1952), who took up local history after retiring from the General Post Office. His research was originally published in 11 instalments in the Wandsworth Borough News in 1933 and later as a booklet. Crotch described himself as a "confirmed London lover" and went on to publish articles on a number of Putney's churches, including St Mary's. He himself is buried in Putney Vale Cemetery.

Lt Col Sir John Norton-Griffiths, KCB, DSO by David Kirk



Popularly known as 'Empire Jack', John Norton-Griffiths (1871-1930), pictured here, was elected MP for Central Wandsworth in 1918. The handsome army officer, standing as a Coalition candidate, was, according to the Wandsworth Borough News, a "warm favourite with the ladies". Before taking up politics (he had previously been MP for a different constituency), he'd had a varied and colourful career in the army, mining and engineering; his exploits took him to eastern Europe, the Middle East, South America and Africa.

He remained Wandsworth's MP for six years until 1924 when he took off on his travels again. His life ended in tragedy in Egypt when he shot himself on 27 September 1930 in the face of financial ruin. His political legacy has reached into our own times: his grandson was the late Liberal Party leader, Jeremy Thorpe.

Auction Ephemera by Keith Whitehouse

By tradition, the evening ended with Keith showing us some of the artefacts with local connections that he's recently bought at auction. These included two Wandsworth Bridge share certificates; an 1840 Mulready envelope sent to an address in Battersea; a series of Edwardian post-cards of the Oxford/Cambridge boat-race; three medals awarded to a Wandsworth police officer (V Division) and a spirit flask presented by the West London Rowing Club in 1861. All the items were left on display for members to examine more closely.

Janet Smith