

## »Owen exhibition

Joyce Reed

Designed by David Woodward and held 8-9 November in Dunsden Village Hall (the former school) we saw Owen's inscribed Communion Book, local ledgers and documents, embroidered WW1 postcards, drawings and sketches by Eric Kennington and a WW1 domestic kitchen complete with hearth, mantelpiece and cookery book.



Photographs showed 'with-ies' being woven for transporting shell cases to The Front, as Sonning Eye's industry revived. The women's war effort focused on taking on some of the agricultural tasks, previously the preserve of men; the Mission Hall was where they met to make bandages and requisites for the soldiers.

Many of the men from the local area took their horses to war; the Society's 2014 scarecrow, *Warhorse*, aptly embodied this. A drawing by a village lad, Lorrie Ambrose, featured a Dunsden cottage, still extant. His son gave fascinating insights into life in 1914, gleaned from his father – 'Village Voices' par excellence. Owen witnessed the effects of shocking rural poverty; tea - taken in the schoolroom - took on a new taste. An extract from Sonning Parish Magazine recorded Dunsden's first loss, William Monger of Tagg Lane – make this your short walk past the village green and well, referred to in Owen's poems. Names on the War Memorial, recalling John McCrae's 'In Flanders Fields', now, fittingly, have as their sentry the Dunsden Community Orchard. It is our 'Journey's End', symbolic of growth and rebirth.

Both concert and exhibition were a moving demonstration of Dunsden's vibrant community spirit, creating events combining (paradoxically) celebration and commemoration. Notices in the exhibition, exhorted, ambivalently, 'Please touch'. They certainly did.

## Heritage & wellbeing

Diana Coulter

English Heritage recently published its 13th annual survey of England's historic environment, *Heritage Counts 2014*. Its focus is the value of heritage. It includes a detailed analysis about the impact of the historic environment on wellbeing. Although it primarily considers visitor attractions and historic environment projects that have stimulated a feel-good factor in communities, it makes sense to ask whether we, who live in Sonning and Sonning Eye, are made more happy because of the heritage surrounding us?

There are 62 listed buildings within the two areas, many of high quality. Few are built of stone apart from St Andrew's, but the survival of large timber-framed houses, sometimes re-faced with brick, is evidence of the importance of the place, enriching the character of Sonning and Sonning Eye. All are listed Grade II except for Deanery Garden (Grade I) and The Eyot House, The Bull and St Andrew's which are Grade II\*.

Listing protection aims to ensure that changes to buildings are managed and sensitive to their setting and their fabric. It is this protection which helps to make our villages desirable places to live. One of the reasons the Society came into being ten years ago was to provide an independent voice when evaluating whether planning applications respected this heritage. It is not intended to ossify

the communities but to encourage sensible designs and decisions about new development that fit into the scale of the historic heart of the villages.

Another feature of *Heritage Counts 2014* is the acknowledgment that across England local authority expertise to advise on changes to the historic environment has diminished by 13%. We see the impact of this in the fact that Wokingham's conservation advice is only available for three days a week. Given the rich texture of the town's own buildings and those of the Thames-side villages, it will be important to safeguard this already slight resource into the future. Fortunately for Sonning Eye, South Oxfordshire currently runs a bigger team.

We have seen the effects of being unlisted on various buildings in the village. No one would deny that it is important to make buildings fit for the 21st century, but it may be even more necessary to restrict use of certain inappropriate materials (by Article 4 agreements) and



An extension widely acknowledged as a good example. (Courtesy: Jeremy Gilmore)

to be more discerning about modifications such as extensions. Even what seem like small incremental changes can lead to the degradation of our precious historic environment. This is where the completed Conservation Area Appraisal should prove invaluable – let us hope that the various councils will support us in our desire to both maintain the happiness factor and increase our sense of wellbeing.

# bridge

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Newsletter of the Sonning & Sonning Eye Society

## Remembering Owen

Joyce Reed

Turning our backs on the 'haunting flares' created by lights flickering beside the muddied track through the graveyard, and under a dark November sky intermittently illuminated by distant flashes and the 'wail' of rockets, we did, indeed, 'Remember them'.

On 8 November All Saints in Dunsden was the eerily evocative backdrop for an evening commemorating Owen's life & work as well as Dunsden's WW1 story, entitled "Letters to my Mother". Packed in tight ranks, we listened to his words echoing uncannily from the walls and witnessed dramatic re-enactments of the 1914 'Christmas truce' and football match.

Apollinaire's poems, and letters written by a German soldier to his wife, were read both in the original and in translation. Musical performances included WW1 songs, some with audience participation, as well as saxophone and bugle solos.

Organised by The Dunsden Owen Association, directed by John Bodman, the contributors were an eclectic cast of nationalities, ages and backgrounds. The banners (designed by David Woodward), emblazoned with Owen's photograph, dwarfed us, his eyes directly challenging us to refute 'the old lie'. Peter Pearson, of 'Poetry Please' fame, was an excellent principal narrator, movingly reading Owen's poems. Students from Shiplake College dramatically recreated the man

himself: the young Lay Assistant at All Saints, the young officer in training, in the trenches, and in Craiglockhart Hospital, giving a poetic intensity to the chilling statement that young men like this, if junior officers, had a life expectancy of 6 weeks at the front.

The reading of some of the 554 'Letters to my mother' derived a marked poignancy from the proximity of the grave of Susan, Owen's mother, in the churchyard. The presence of the Mayor of Ors, France, where Owen was shot and killed, and the participation of the president of the French Wilfred Owen Society were a testament to Owen's courage, displayed both on the battlefield and in his poetry. Lord & Lady Phillimore,



Jean Eastwood, the Royal British Legion, the granddaughter of the German soldier, the Shiplake students, all wove their contributions into a complex tapestry of experiences and emotions.

Leaving behind the sanctuary afforded by the church and the especially erected marquee, the plaintive notes of The Last Post, Reveille and the reading of the names of the Dunsden fallen were still ringing in our ears. Owen's statement, in his Preface, rang true. This was 'not about heroes' but about 'War and the pity of war. The poetry is in the pity'.

For a review of the accompanying exhibition see page 4

## »Eye on Sonning a view from the Bridge

Mike Hart, Chairman

As reported within this edition of Bridge, the Society held its Annual General Meeting in Pearson Hall on 22 November. We were delighted that Lynette Padfield agreed to play the violin for us after dinner on our tenth anniversary. We were also pleased to welcome Theresa and Philip May as our guests and grateful to Theresa's toast to the Society's continued good health for the next 10 years!

The *Village Voices* project turned out to be a huge success, thanks to its authors and many contributors who shared their memories. We are now looking at ways to build upon the legacy created by the book. One initiative is to provide a scholarship to a youngster from one of our villages to help him or her to develop sustainable building conservation skills that will be of benefit to our communities. Annabella Marks will be meeting head teachers from our local schools to explain the idea and try to find candidates. If you know of someone who could be suitable please let her know.

We have an interesting programme of events lined up for next year, as described by Pauline Simmonds in the pages within. Please take part if you are available, and let us know if there is something in particular that you would like us to arrange.

Bridge: Newsletter of the Sonning and Sonning Eye Society

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## Future Events

### DATES FOR YOUR DIARIES

Members are welcome to attend Executive meetings

#### 10 December 2014

Executive Committee St. Sarik Room 8:00 pm

#### February 2015 [Date tbc]

Executive Committee St. Sarik Room 8:00 pm

#### 13 March 2015

Conservation of wildlife habitats along the Thames and its tributaries: a talk Pearson Hall 7:30 pm

#### April 2015 [Date tbc]

Executive Committee St. Sarik Room 8:00 pm

#### June 2015 [Date tbc]

Executive Committee St. Sarik Room 8:00 pm

#### August 2015 [Date tbc]

Executive Committee St. Sarik Room 8:00 pm

#### 10-13 September 2015

Heritage Open Days Weekend - S&SES contribution, if any, to be agreed

# »Executive Committee & Panels: breaking news

Andy Bell, Pauline Simmonds and Patrick Hamblin

## New Executive for 2014/15

As of the Annual General Meeting held on 22 November, Mike Hart, Bob Hine, Andy Bell and Alan Furness were elected to the roles of Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Hon Secretary and Hon Treasurer respectively. Patrick Hamblin and Annabella Marks were re-elected to the Executive, while Janine Moore joins us for the first time.

## March talk on conservation of wildlife habitats

On Friday 13 March we look forward to welcoming Richard Mayon-White to the Pearson Hall at 7:30pm. Richard will talk about the conservation of wildlife habitats, focusing on the Thames and its tributaries nearest to us. A river warden and co-ordinator for the River Thames Society, his recent book, co-authored with Wendy Yorke, "Exploring the Thames Wilderness" is a great guide for walkers and naturalists alike.

## Planning applications

The Planning and Traffic Panel has continued to meet monthly. There have been a number of applications since the last edition and comments have been

made on those for Birchley, Old Bath Road, and South Lodge, Sonning Lane. The Panel was disappointed that WBC permitted the flags and signage at the former Fire Station site to remain.

## Sonning Parish Council Planning Committee meetings

The Society continues to observe these meetings regularly.

## Gates in Sonning Lane

Members have now cleared the ivy and other growth from one of the gates in Sonning Lane and a quotation is being obtained for their restoration. The Scarecrow Committee has agreed to consider funding the repairs.

## Conservation Area Appraisal

We understand from SPC that the draft CAA has been reviewed by WBC and will be formally submitted after relatively minor revision by SPC's consultant.

## University Farm sign in Charvil Lane

Following comments made to the University by the Society, a new sign has been provided for the farm, replacing a very old sign in poor condition on this main route into the village.

## Cycle racks

The Panel is investigating suitable locations for cycle racks in the village.

## Sonning Cutting



Network Rail has been carrying out work that has been described as 'the massacre of Sonning Cutting' - everything in the picture above was destined to go! As Ali Driver describes opposite, work was stopped and there are ongoing discussions as to the way forward.

## Traffic

The Planning and Traffic Panel has not yet completed its assessment of the practicality of improvements in a number of areas relevant to the village. A report will be available for submission to the Parish Council in due course.

# Hurst's warm welcome

Pauline Simmonds

On Sunday 12 October about 20 Society members were royally entertained by the Hurst Village Society. This enjoyable visit was organised by Annette Drake, former Heritage Champion and Wokingham councillor, local historian Henry Farrar and Derek Jackson.

Our varied programme opened with a DVD about the village, which is spread over a wide area from Stanlake Park in the north to High Chimneys and Dinton Pastures in the south, the Loddon in the



west to Haines Hill in the east. The nucleus is located on Church Hill with St Nicholas, Castle Inn and Barker's Almshouses forming an

attractive group. We explored these in some depth. The Secretary to the Trustees of the Almshouses briefly told us about its foundation in 1664. The Bowls Club President, plus about 8/10 assistants, gave us a delicious tea and explained its history and the memorabilia adorning the walls



of the second oldest bowling club in England. The tour returned to the church where there was an opportunity to admire its riches, including the recently conserved monument to Lady Saville (illustrated).

Although there were almost as many from Hurst as from Sonning in the end, the Hurst team gave us an excellent afternoon!

## »New Members & 2015 subs due

In January we would like you to renew your subscription, which is being held at the same level for the 11th consecutive year. Renewal forms are enclosed with all the details. **Please note** that if you have already set up a standing order or joined the Society at or after the 2014 Village Show, there is no need to do anything.

A warm welcome is extended to the following new members:

- Mr & Mrs P Goodacre
- Mr & Mrs M McNeill
- Mr & Mrs D Moran
- Mrs V Reeve
- Mr & Mrs B Snell

Welcome packs for new residents are available from Lesley Heaney, the Membership Secretary, on 0118 969 7231.

# Not seeing wood for the trees

Alastair Driver

Sonning residents were understandably up in arms in September when Network Rail started clear-felling the 170 year old Oak trees in Sonning Cutting near Warren Road Bridge in September, following negligible consultation with the local community. With emails flying around in all directions, I stepped our MP Theresa May and me as the Society's own environmental advisor, and the works were immediately called to a halt, pending a review of the proposals. (Well there's no point in having the Home Secretary and the Head of Conservation for Europe's largest environmental organisation in your ranks unless you call on their services from time to time!)

After eventually managing to get hold of someone at Network Rail who was prepared to discuss its actions, I was able to ascertain that indeed the plans were as draconian as they seemed: it was indeed planning to remove all of the trees on the entire length of Sonning Cutting within its ownership - from top to bottom of both banks along the whole 2 mile length of the cutting - because they were concerned about leaves blowing onto the line and trees falling on to the line.

Fortunately on the very day that I was on site having done a hastily arranged interview for BBC Berks, I bumped into the Network Rail Director and his team who were inspecting the works in the light of the furore it had caused. I explained that not only were there rare and protected species in this woodland (such as Purple Hairstreak Butterfly, Stag Beetles and Lesser-spotted Woodpecker) which Network



Rail was clearly unaware of, but actually the work it was doing was very likely to

make the "leaves on the line" situation even worse. In addition and by its own admission, it had failed to consult the local community properly in advance. We then agreed that I would submit proposals for a revised and much more pragmatic approach to tree management, prepared as a 10-point plan.



## 10-point plan

1. Trim vegetation in the 6.5m strip at the base of the slope as needed for electrification, as planned.
2. Leave as much of the scrub and low growing shrubs on the embankment as possible, in order to trap leaf litter - especially in the lower third of the slope, rather than creating bare ground which will make the leaf blow from surrounding woodland onto the line even worse until the vegetation re-establishes.
3. Reduce the crowns of all the trees in the bottom two-thirds of the embankment to reduce them to below the height at which they could fall onto the line. They do not need to be felled and removed.
4. Do not touch the trees which are further up the embankment and have no chance of falling onto the line. With a line of crown-reduced trees and then scrub below them, if they do topple over they will just fall onto this retained vegetation downslope. In addition this will retain the visual screen at the top of the slope which the adjacent properties benefit from.
5. Leave all dead timber in place on the ground, in small piles trapped

behind other tree trunks on the slope. It will soon get smothered in bramble etc and won't move, but will be great for Stag Beetles (of which there is a nationally significant population locally), fungi etc.

6. Plant a native thorn hedge up against the fence at the top of the bank to give the adjoining properties a bit more security in the longer term.
7. Send me the Network Rail environmental assessment documents and a copy/evidence of the felling licence for the work.
8. Send me (and other key consultees) a copy of the revised proposals for consideration.
9. Once the revised proposals are agreed with the key consultees, send the revised proposals to all immediate neighbours along Sonning Cutting for information.
10. Improve the communications with the local residents by nominating a single well-informed Network Rail point of contact on-site to liaise with local residents.

It has to be said that our dealings with Network Rail on this matter have been polite and civilised throughout and we are therefore hopeful it will listen to our concerns and modify the plans accordingly. Just before going to press on this article, we have had it confirmed that it has not yet come to a decision on the 10-point plan, but that it was now unlikely that the works would be carried out before the bird-breeding season starts in March and so is unlikely to be resumed until September 2015.

Like all public bodies, Network Rail has a duty under Section 40 (1) of the NERC Act (2006) "to have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of their functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity". Let's all hope that the organisation takes this legal duty seriously when it comes to balancing the needs of a safe and efficient rail network with those of local residents - human or otherwise.