

**Pearson's more suitable pulpit of 1852**



The Jacobean pulpit in St Andrew's (see page 1) was initially replaced with the one above. This was transferred to All Saints in Dunsden in 1876 and replaced by the current, grand timber pulpit still used in St Andrew's.

**Berkshire Family History Society**

For budding family historians, the Reading branch of the BFHS arranges a series of monthly meetings and an annual summer outing to a place relevant to family, social and local history. The branch meets at the Church of Latterday Saints, 280 Meadway, Tilehurst RG30 4PE. All are welcome – free entry, but donations gratefully received. Visit [www.berksfhs.org.uk](http://www.berksfhs.org.uk) or pop into the Research Centre near the Berkshire Record Office.

**YouCaxton Publications**

The editor at YouCaxton has approached the Society in case members have local history projects that they may wish to publish. The editor, Bob Fowke, would be pleased to hear from you on [editor@youcaxton.co.uk](mailto:editor@youcaxton.co.uk).



**Future Events**

**Distinguished prisoner**

John Edmonds

*Our late President occasionally contributed to our Newsletter with topical or historical articles. His pieces demonstrate the range of his interests and the depth of his love for our villages. Reprinted here, particularly for the benefit of newer members of the Society, is his article from Issue 5 on Admiral Villeneuve, who after his defeat by Nelson in 1805 was paroled in Sonning.*

The bicentenary of Nelson's victory at Trafalgar has a particular significance for Sonning. The defeated French Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Pierre de Villeneuve, was billeted here for four months, "on parole", having given his word that he would not try to escape. He resided at The Grove in Pearson Road (formerly Sonning Street), opposite the High Street.

Throughout Trafalgar Villeneuve had stood on the quarter-deck of his flagship the *Bucentaure*. The only remaining officer, uninjured, he surrendered to prevent further bloodshed, complaining that Fate had not reserved one musket ball for him. Brought to England in the British frigate *Euryalus*, Villeneuve was transferred to Reading on 30 December 1805.

Villeneuve was 42, five years younger than Nelson. The Royal Navy described him as follows: "5ft 8ins. Hair very dark. Eyes light grey. Body well made. Marks & Wounds none." His servant, Jean Baptiste Bacqu e, was recorded thus: "Age 20. 5ft 5ins. Mulatto. Hair woolly. Body slender. Marks & Wounds none."

The Grove belonged to the Rich family, owners of large parts of Sonning in the

18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1806 two unmarried ladies, Miss Matilda and Miss Frances Rich, lived there. Being the cousin and daughter of Sir Thomas Rich, retired Admiral, may explain the suitability of The Grove. The arrangement appears to have been approved by Henry Addington, Prime Minister 1801-04, later Viscount Sidmouth, who lived briefly at Woodley Park.

The naval tradition of treating defeated opponents with respect was warmly upheld for Villeneuve, who never concealed his low opinion of Napoleon. Apparently at his own request Villeneuve was permitted

to attend Nelson's funeral in London. One of Nelson's admirals found him "a very pleasant and gentlemanlike man", and he was a great social success in Sonning, being "much in demand for dinner parties".



In April 1806 an exchange of prisoners was arranged. Villeneuve returned to France under a flag of truce. He

landed in Brittany, lodging in Rennes. From there he wrote a long, highly critical letter to Napoleon, telling him that, "England is too wise and too powerful to sign a fresh treaty with a man who she knows is more dangerous to her in peace than in war."

Soon afterwards, Bacqu e found Villeneuve dead in bed. The official verdict was suicide, but there were six stab wounds in his chest; many believe he was murdered on Napoleon's orders.

**DATES FOR YOUR DIARIES**

Members are welcome to attend Executive meetings.

**9 December 2015**  
Executive Committee St. Sarik Room 7:30 pm

**February 2016 [Date tbc]**  
Executive Committee St. Sarik Room 8:00 pm

**Spring 2016 [Date tbc]**  
Talk on bees

**April 2016 [Date tbc]**  
Executive Committee St. Sarik Room 8:00 pm

**June 2016 [Date tbc]**  
Executive Committee St. Sarik Room 8:00 pm

**August 2016 [Date tbc]**  
Executive Committee St. Sarik Room 8:00 pm

**8-11 September 2016**  
Heritage Open Days Weekend - S&SES contribution, if any, to be agreed

bridge

Newsletter of the Sonning & Sonning Eye Society

**Hocus-pocus in the pulpit**

Diana Coulter

Probably the most reviled Archbishop of Canterbury in English history was a tailor's son born in Broad Street, Reading in 1573. William Laud was a major influence on King Charles I. They shared a passion for order in religion as well as politics. Laud favoured the primacy of the sacraments in worship. The small step of moving the communion table from the nave to the east end, protected by rails, smacked too much of popery for fervent Puritans. Relaxation of rules about pastimes on a Sabbath was equally unpopular. Charles' support for these changes contributed in part to the Civil War and subsequent events.



Laud was well educated. From Reading School he went to the newly founded St John's College in Oxford, first as a student and then as a Fellow. His rise through the ranks of the Church was meteoric. He became Royal Chaplain to James I in 1611. Within five years he was Bishop of St David's and in 1626 became both Dean of the Chapel Royal and Bishop of Bath and Wells. In 1628 he was appointed Bishop of London, and when he was 60, Archbishop of Canterbury.

A man of small stature with a quick temper, apparently he was inclined to irritability and impatient of contradiction. These characteristics and high churchmanship led to various unflatter-

ing nicknames, such as "The shrimp", "The little urchin" and "The little meddling hocus-pocus". He was imprisoned and impeached in 1640, and eventually lost his head in 1645.

Laud's interest to us in "Sunning" is that he preached a sermon here on Sunday 31 August 1623. He was friends with Robert Wright, one-time vicar of Sonning and also a Royal Chaplain, who became Bishop of Bristol in 1623. When Canon Pearson came to Sonning in 1844, the pulpit from which Laud had preached was still in place: "it was of oak, of the reign of James I, and of not very bad design. We

thought, at first, of retaining it, but when it was cleaned from the yellow paint, and brought back, it contrasted so unfavourably with the new work, that we found it necessary to replace it with one more suitable to the restored church." (*Memorials*) See the replacement pulpit on page 4 of this issue.

"Stowed away in a stable loft", the Venerable George Pott, Pearson's successor, found the pulpit and presented it to St George's Church in Tilehurst, built in 1885-86 by S Gambier Parry, the son of Henry Woodyer's great friend, Thomas. The pulpit can be seen there, and it is indeed a fine piece of Jacobean timberwork still in use today.

**»Eye on Sonning a view from the Bridge**

Mike Hart, Chairman

The Remembrance Service has just taken place at St. Andrew's in which we remember with gratitude so many who fought and died in conflicts. It is especially a sad time as we also recall not only the death of our President, John Edmonds, in August but also of Christine Clarke, wife of our Vice President Canon Chris Clarke. Our sympathies go to Chris and his family.

By the time this edition is distributed we will have had our 12th AGM. Our thanks go to our after-dinner speaker Peter van Went for giving us an insight into the history of Holme Park. We are justifiably proud of the history of our villages and we are very lucky to have Peter to tell us the Holme Park story - an expanded version can be read on page 3. You can also read about the old St. Andrew's pulpit now in Tilehurst!

Many of you will have already purchased the recently published first volume of Gordon Nutbrown's *A Thames Parish Magazine*, which presents the Sonning (and sometime Woodley, Charvil, Dunsden and Earley) Parish Magazine over the period 1869 – 1945 in an abridged format. It is a fascinating read, covering historical and often truly parochial matters over the past century and a half. If you haven't yet bought a copy it is available from various outlets including St Andrew's and Brighton's newsagents.

Bridge: Newsletter of the Sonning and Sonning Eye Society

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# »Executive Committee & Panels: breaking news

Andy Bell, Pauline Simmonds, Patrick Hamblin

## New Executive 2015/16

At the AGM held on 21 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. Lesley Heaney and Pauline Simmonds were elected to the Executive.

## Heritage Walks 2015

The heritage walks in September again proved to be very popular, with 68 visitors over the three days. Village history and its characters were brought to life with the help of Tudor woodwork, Georgian windows, church monuments and bricks. An architectural walk through time from the Saxons to today!

## Knowing our ancestors

Our Autumn Talk on 2 October continued the historical theme and looked closely at more recent residents. Gillian Stevens, Berkshire Family History Society, explained how to create a family tree using as an example one of Sonning's well-known families, the Russells. She traced their ancestors back to early Victorian days via burial records, online databases, newspapers and census forms, revealing a murder, an old turn-pike and some traditional occupations. It was fascinating and for

many, full of very useful information!

## Planning applications

Written comments were submitted on applications from Sonning Golf Club to build 17 dwellings (10 private and seven affordable) on the Pound Lane boundary of the course (subsequently refused); 51 West Drive; The Great House; and Unit 1 at Sonning Farm.

Wokingham Borough's decision on the proposed development at Birchley, Old Bath Road, was upheld by the Inspector but the appeal by Millgate Homes was denied due to the lack of a suitable affordable housing contribution and not on the grounds of visual appearance. Millgate Homes has submitted a further application.

## Sonning Parish Council planning meetings

Panel members continue to observe the monthly meetings of SPC.

## Sonning Conservation Area Appraisal

The draft document is being finalised by WBC ready for public comment.

## Cycle racks

Pearson Hall Management Committee has approved installation of a rack outside the hall. The type is now being considered and the Society thanks the Scarecrow Committee for agreeing to

fund it. The Panel continues to investigate other suitable locations.

## Impact of gravel extraction in Sonning Eye

We continue to support the Sonning Eye Action Group (SEAG) over the lack of consideration to the major issue of flooding after the proposed infilling of pits with inert materials. Further letters about potential groundwater issues have been sent to Oxfordshire County Council.

## Spoon sculpture

The Society received a number of adverse comments regarding Uri Geller's 'gift' but the sculpture was removed before any formal submission was made to WBC.

## Traffic

An informal meeting was held with the Assistant Bursar of Reading Blue Coat School regarding traffic and parking in Sonning Lane. The Society is to join a further discussion involving SPC and WBC. There is great concern regarding speeding traffic in Sonning Lane and the danger to pupils.

The panel is re-assessing the practicality of road and footpath improvements in a number of locations in Sonning and will consult with SPC in due course.

## »New Members & 2016 subs due

In January we would like you to renew your subscription, which is being held at the same level as 2015. 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 2015 Village Show, there is no need to do anything.

A warm welcome is extended to the following new members: Mr & Mrs Avann, Mr & Mrs Hutchinson, Mrs Johnstone, Mr & Mrs Parker, Mr Sanderson and Ms Bushby.

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

# Holme Park in historical perspective

Peter van Went

Two centuries after St. Birinus brought Christianity to the Thames Valley, Crown lands from Windsor Forest were granted to the Saxon bishops of Ramsbury. By the 13th century, they had built an enlarged manor house on a steep meadow ("holms") overlooking the Thames.

The 1086 Domesday Survey revealed a thriving community, ample pasture, extensive woodland and a fishery.



Unknown artist's impression of the palace from the river (Courtesy: RBCS)

With easy access to Windsor and Westminster by river, Sonning soon became a regular meeting place for such medieval figures as King John and the Black Prince. Following Richard II's deposition in 1399, his child queen, Isabella of Valois, was condemned to a lonely but brief imprisonment in the palace.

## Royal ownership

Left relatively unscathed by the Reformation, Sonning's ecclesiastical links endured until 1574 when Queen Elizabeth exchanged properties in Wiltshire for Sonning's manor. Neglected, the Bishop's "palace" fell into ruin, abandoned to villagers quarrying its building materials for their own homes; foundations grassed over lay hidden until archaeological excavations in 1913.

## The Rich family

In 1654, as more English estates fell into the hands of the City "nouveaux riches", Holme Park was purchased by Sir Thomas Rich, a Mediterranean trader to which his ornate monument in the men's vestry in St Andrew's bears witness. By 1795, Admiral Sir Thomas Rich, the fifth and last baronet, had removed to a smaller property in the village. Holme Park was then sold

to Hurst landowner, Richard Palmer, whose rapid ascent of the social ladder coincides with his employment as the Duke of Bedford's land agent in London.

## The Palmers in the 19th century

Demolition of the Rich family mansion ensued in 1796 making way for an elegant Regency house complete with gardens landscaped by Humphrey Repton. Robert, Richard's eldest son, served as Tory MP for Berkshire for nearly thirty years. Acclaimed as the "Great Squire", Robert's benign governance successfully defused the rural violence which afflicted so many English estates during the "hungry" 1830s. Sonning, Woodley and parts of Earley, all formed part of his miniature "kingdom". When its peace was rudely disturbed by the arrival of Brunel's railway in 1838, Palmer famously complained his game birds would be "scared away". A much respected and generous benefactor, he died still a bachelor in 1872 aged eighty.

Between 1880-1882, Holme Park's mansion assumed its now familiar flint-faced appearance with dressings in stone, brick and terracotta. After Suffolk clergyman Henry Golding Palmer reluctantly claimed his inheritance, he redesigned his aunt's old country



Woodyer's sketch for the Library (Courtesy: The late Mrs Armine Edmonds)

house, consulting architect Henry Woodyer who recommended its transformation into a Gothic-style residence.

## Varying fortunes in the 20th century

Amongst the building's most striking

features are its marble floored entrance hall and fireplace and an impressive panelled staircase. Vestiges of the former Regency house remain within the old library overlooking the terrace. By 1910, the costs of running such a large estate were prohibitive with death duties and inflation taking their toll of many smaller properties. These considerations amongst others persuaded Ruth Wade Palmer to sell up.

Amongst several owners following in quick succession was Captain Fryer who kept a string of race horses which regularly made an appearance at local point-to-points. When Fryer died in 1933 and the house finally ceased to be a family home, it was bought by Farnborough House preparatory school.

After war broke out in 1939, the estate was let to the Royal Veterinary College following its evacuation from London. Teaching and lecturing took place inside the house, upstairs rooms were turned into dormitories and rations were supplemented with produce from the estate. This ordered routine was loudly interrupted in August 1940 when a low flying German bomber released its cargo into the woods near Sonning Lock shattering many windows. Luckily, the house itself was undamaged.

In 1946, Holme Park came on the market again and by coincidence the "Rich connection" was destined to be revived after Reading Blue Coat School, once endowed by Sir Thomas, left Reading for Sonning.

Selling its old buildings in Bath Road and backed with an appeal launched by the Bishop of Reading, the town's second oldest school took up residence at Holme Park. With a mere 150 pupils and ten staff, the School reopened on 21st January 1947, Headmaster Bernard Inge's birthday, just before the onset of one of the coldest winters in memory.

More information on the architecture of the Bishop's Palace can be found in "Bridge" Issue 4, on Thomas Rich's memorial in Issue 14, and on Reading Blue Coat School in Issue 22. All issues can be viewed on the Society's website.

# Can you help please?

Annabella Marks and Diana Coulter



Following his approach to SPC, we had the pleasure of taking a spry, former WWII evacuee around Sonning on 12 November. Ron Darvell came to Sonning from Becontree twice with his mother and baby sister: in 1940 following The Blitz and towards the end of the war when doodlebugs rendered London and other cities unsafe.

Ron's story will appear in the next issue of our newsletter, but before we present it, we just wondered whether anyone who reads this remembers either a shy boy starting school in 1940 or 1941, or, perhaps more importantly, Mrs Brooks with whom the family stayed in Pound Lane, albeit briefly, in 1944 or 1945. Please contact us on either 0118 969 2132 or 0118 969 2264 - we'd love to hear from you.