

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - November 2012

The Nabobs of Berkshire

It was 'full house' at the November meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society, when Clive Williams recounted the history of the Nabobs of Berkshire - merchants from the East India Company who settled in the Thames Valley when they returned to Britain.

Clive began by explaining who a nabob was. The great mogul emperors ruled India from about 1580 to 1708. Their empire covered most of north and central India, and this area was divided into several provinces. Each province was ruled by a deputy - the Hindi word for deputy being nawab. When these people returned to Britain - having made a lot of money - the word became anglicised to 'nabob'. The words snob and nob are diminutive forms of the word. They were not liked (hence being called snobs), and so tended to band together. A large number of them settled in Berkshire - which became known as the 'English Hindustan' - there being 31 large mansions in the county known to have nabob connections.

They tended to congregate in the Thames Valley as it was close to the Royal seat at Windsor - a place of power at the time. It was also near to London, and many of the nabobs became MPs. This was the period of the 'rotten boroughs', and, for example, Francis Sykes had gone to India with 'nothing' - and returned with a vast fortune (equivalent to £500 million) made in Bengal. On return to England, he moved to Basildon Park, and 'bought' Wallingford as a Parliamentary seat. His tenants voted for him - if they did not, they would be evicted. But it was a minority of those who went to India who returned as prosperous men - many more died lonely and poor out there.

The East India Company had been founded in the reign of Elizabeth I, for the spice trade - not only used for food, but for medicinal purposes - in particular nutmeg. Clever advertising had promoted nutmeg as able to ward off the plague, and so a bag of nutmeg was worth a bag of gold. At the time, it was only to be found in the Banda Islands in Indonesia, and the East India Company and its Dutch competitor had the trade. Eventually, the English gave up their rights to Run Island, in exchange for the Dutch interest in another -- Manhattan. An exchange of nutmeg for the big apple!.

The East India Company was then concentrated in India, with a trading settlement at Surat. A further settlement was added in 1640 at Madras, and as the island of Bombay was part of the marriage settlement When Charles II married Catherine de Braganza, that also became a trading station. Finally, a trading station was established at Calcutta in 1690. The settlements at Madras, Bombay and Calcutta each had their own council and defence army - the three combined defence forces totalling some 150,000 men, making it one of the largest armies.

The company, however, was struggling, when Cromwell took it over, and as rival concern had been given a charter by Charles II, in due course they were amalgamated, and followed Dutch ways of doing business introduced in the reign of William III.

One of the people who went to work for the company in Madras was Robert Clive. When the nawab in Calcutta decided to 'teach the English a lesson', the settlement in Madras decided to send a relief force. Although not a military man, Clive took command. The Battle of Plassy in 1757 resulted in victory for the English - although mainly as a result of an 'arrangement' with one of the Indian generals, who was then to become the nawab! The 100,000 strong Indian army disintegrated - but the English lost just 15 men. In thanks for his part in this, Clive had a reward - worth around £25 million. Eventually, the company

appointed Clive to rule all of Bengal, in place of the Emperor.

Men such as Francis Sykes were put in charge of the tax districts. India was one of the wealthiest countries in the world at that time, and so with the 5% that he could take 'off the top', he made a lot of money. By 1770, aged 40, he could retire, with around £500 million in today's values.

Another house that was occupied by a nabob was Maiden Erlegh. Edward Golding had been in Bengal, and on his return became a member of the Exchequer in government with Henry Addington - his friend and neighbour at Bulmershe. Swallowfield Park belonged to Thomas Pitt, whose grandson was Pitt the elder, and great-grandson Pitt the Younger - both of whom only achieved what they did as a result of the fortune Thomas Pitt had made in India. Thomas had been trading on his own account against the East India Company, but was then recruited by them as the Governor of Madras. He made a huge fortune, and also acquired a significant large diamond (later put into a French crown), which earned him the sobriquet "Diamond Pitt" Later, Henry Russell bought Swallowfield - he had been the Chief Justice in Bengal. Just north of Reading was Caversham park - owned by Charles Marsac, who had also served the East India Company in Bengal.

The estate at Englefield was - and is - owned by the Benyon family. Richard Benyon had gone to India (possibly as an orphan boy), and become a successful trader. He rose to become Governor of Madras, and on his return to England, married the widow who owned Englefield. One of the surviving letters from Richard Benyon notes that the nabob was going to call on him 'unannounced'. The nabob was not travelling 'alone' - but with his 80 wives, 300 children, 500 servants and 250 cavalry. Richard called on the leading citizens of Madras for help - 'not a problem' - they evicted the tenants from 2 complete streets to let the nabob and his entourage move in. Eventually, the nabob presented Benyon with an elephant - a sign that he was leaving - but only he left, leaving the wives, children and servants behind! It transpired that the nabob was at war with his neighbouring nabob, and had therefore put his family into the care and protection of the English.

Clive told us about several other houses and their occupants with East India Company connections, and those wanting to know more about this might be interested in [the book](#) which Clive has written, which details far more than can be included here.

The next meeting takes place on Tuesday, December 11th, when the Society will hold its Christmas Party, whilst on Tuesday, January 8th, Brian Armstrong will recount his Experiences of a Rowing Coach - his involvement with the England rowing team, including the preparations for the 2012 Olympics. This will be followed on Tuesday, February 12th with a presentation by aviation historian Aldon Ferguson on Local Airfields, when he will enlighten us about the less well known as well as the well known airfields in Berkshire.