

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - November 2019

Sonning through the history of ten buildings

Diana Coulter explored Sonning Through the History of 10 of its Buildings. Diana is an architectural historian, who lives in Sonning, and led the Sonning and Sonning Eye Society's contribution to the Sonning Conservation Area Appraisal. Her local and specialist knowledge therefore gave a most interesting account of aspects of the village's history.

Diana began by using an aerial photograph to explain the layout of the village centre. Apart from the church, and some dating from the 19th century, most buildings were constructed of brick, flint and timber, with little use of stone.

The first site that Diana described was that of **The Bishop's Palace**, to the south west of the church. Sonning village was part of a large estate which belonged to the Bishops of Salisbury throughout the medieval period, and the palace was the principal building there, dominating the hill overlooking the River Thames. It is thought that there had, at some stage, been Bishops of Sonning, but that when the Anglo-Saxon dioceses were reorganised following the Norman Conquest, Sonning became part of the Diocese of Old Sarum (later Salisbury). In medieval times, the bishops were powerful men, and being close to Windsor, and the Court, Sonning was a convenient place for a bishop's residence. Sadly, the site has never been made a scheduled monument, but archaeological excavations were carried out in 1912 by Charles Keyser and interpreted by Harold Brakspear. The work was not done in the way archaeologists work now. As they were looking for the medieval structure, they ignored anything above the medieval layer, and so the evidence of later developments was lost. Harold Brakspear did, however, produce a plan - based largely on what they wanted to find. The earliest hall was later converted to have rooms for the bishop, and a larger hall built on its south side - possibly around the time that the bishop was granted a licence to crenellate his buildings in 1337. The layout and dimensions would appear to be very similar to the surviving Bishop's palace in Salisbury. One notable event in its history was when Richard II's child bride, Isabella of Valois (sometimes known as the 'grey lady') was held here after Richard's downfall.

The bishops were able to retain the palace at Sonning until 1574, when the estate was exchanged with Crown lands in Wiltshire, and the land was then sold by Charles I to some London merchants in 1628. The Rich family owned it for the most of the 17th and 18th centuries, and it then belonged to the Palmers into the early 20th, when the estate began to be broken up, and parts sold off.

Alongside the large gates at the entrance to the Bishop's Palace site is **Turpins**, a substantial late medieval house. Behind its brick facing it is a timber framed property. Its position close to the Palace showed that it was occupied by someone of importance within the community. Towards the east end would have been the servery and pantry, with the western 2/3 as a typical medieval hall, with the chimney appearing above - the Bell at Waltham St Lawrence is a similar type of structure. Inside the house, changes were made around the start of the 17th century, to make it more comfortable to live in, principally by adding extra floors.

Diana suggested that when the bishops gave up their Sonning lands, the use of prestige buildings in the village would probably have changed. Instead of those who worked the land being taxed, the land would have been rented to farmers who could develop it as they wished. Turpins had a large area of land behind the house, including part of the present churchyard, where pigs and cows would be kept, fruit grown, and

grain stored.

Further east, on the corner of the High Street, stands **The Green House**. Sometimes known as a lobby entrance house, it was built with a first floor, either side of a central chimney, and had two rooms to the left of the entrance and two to the right, with a staircase behind the chimney. (Ivy Cottage and Forge Cottage in Sonning are of similar construction). An extension was added in the 20th century by the local builder, Sidney Paddick. The windows are typical of the 1690s, being double hung, where the top part does not move. The brick parapet around the edge of the roof is a design feature introduced to create a fire break, following the Great Fire of London.

The next structure Diana described was not a building, but **The Rich Memorial** in Sonning church. Thomas Rich had bought the Sonning estate in 1654, and it remained in the family until 1795. Thomas was a Turkey merchant - meaning he traded in goods, such as wines and carpets from that area. A member of the Vintners Company in the City, and of the East India Company, he was also a City Alderman, and became MP for Reading in 1660, and knighted in 1661. The monument is one of the top baroque memorials in this country, of Italian style, and was described as "dangerously catholic".. However, the Victorian vicar of Sonning, Canon Hugh Pearson, thought there was nothing more deplorable than this, and had it removed from its purpose built chapel.

The Mill at Sonning was recorded in the Domesday Survey in 1086, and milling continued there for 9 centuries, until the work was moved to larger mill at Tilbury. The present structure was built following a fire in 1797, and was unusual in using roller mills, rather than flat grindstones, being powered by 2 undershot mill wheels. It closed as a working mill in 1969, and in due course was converted to a dinner theatre, opening in 1982 - the theatre auditorium being housed in the former granary. Water power is still important there, as an Archimedes Screw generates electricity, contributing to the National Grid at night, the Mill only taking power from the grid during performances.

Nothing is known of Thomas Rich's house - possibly built on the site of the Bishop's Palace, and evidence lost in the 1912 excavations. His successor, **Richard Palmer**, had a house built in a neo-classical style a short distance away. The Palmers dominated Sonning through most of the 19th century - Robert becoming a Berkshire MP in 1859. The property passed down through the family, until in the 1880s Henry Golding Palmer had the house transformed in a broadly Jacobean style by the architect Henry Woodyer. It became the home of the Reading Blue Coat School from 1947.

Nikolaus Pevsner, in his guide to the buildings of Berkshire, described **Sonning Church** as visually Victorian, and the 19th century work did have a deep effect on the medieval church (apart from its tower). The craftsmen at that time, however, could not knap the flints, so (apart from on the south aisle wall), they are roughly cut rather than close-fitting. Much of the work was described by Canon Pearson (who had known Henry Woodyer at Oxford in the 1830s) in the parish magazine in 1869. Woodyer had galleries removed, but there were insufficient funds to do all that he would have liked to do. Following a fire, the interior was repainted white in the 1960s, which covered some features of Woodyer's work, but very typically Victorian light fittings, by Hardman of Birmingham, still hang in the nave.

The Palmers (who were not the biscuit making firm) were considered good landlords. They provided a boy's school in Thames Street, a water pump, and the **Robert Palmer Cottages** for retired estate workers. These were built in 1850, and later had kitchens and bathrooms added. Behind each was a large garden, sloping down to a stream that runs through the village, where each tenant could grow fruit and vegetables, and was allowed to sell any surplus produce. As not all the present tenants wish to use this area, some are now used as allotments by other villagers.

The Deanery, which occupies land where once the Deans of Salisbury had houses, is the most secretive of Sonning's properties. Surrounded by high brick walls, it feels 'fortress-like' when seen from Thames Street, and the best views of it are from the church tower. Now Grade I listed, it was built in 1901 for Edward Hudson, then editor of Country Life magazine, and comprises a house around an inner courtyard, designed by Edwin Lutyens, the gardens being laid out by Gertrude Jekyll. Inside, there is a double height

hall, reminiscent of the halls of medieval houses. Currently, it belongs to Jimmy Page, the Led Zeppelin guitarist.

The last house Diana described was **Pool Court**, which dates from the 1970s. Lying within the conservation area, its roof, is in the style used by Lutyens - not so surprising, as its architect, Francis Pollen, had begun his working life working on the Lutyens archive. The building is not formally 'Listed', but is recorded by Pevsner as of merit. In 2017 an application to demolish it was turned down, in part as its removal would affect the character of the conservation area.

The Society's latest publication - [A Brief History of Wargrave](#), outlining aspects of village history, illustrated with over 40 photographs from the Society archive, is now available at Society meetings, or at Newberry's in Twyford.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday December 10th, when the Society will hold its Christmas Party, and then on Tuesday January 14th Aldon Ferguson will recall The Role of Women at Danesfield and Phyllis Court in Photographic Interpretation in World War 2.