

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - February 2003

Dipping into the Wells

The February meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society was a talk *Dipping into the Wells* by Angela Spencer-Harper, about the villages of Stoke Row and Highmoor. She has been collecting and recording the memories of long-time residents and amassing almost 1700 old photographs since 1979. This archive formed the basis of the talk.

The working life was hard - affected by the supply of water. All the water had to be fetched daily in buckets, from a well maybe 25 minutes walk away, as running water did not become available until the 1950s. The pictures of local people included a midwife - who as late as the 1920s would make her own creams and potions from plants, 'Brusher' Slade (so named for his moustache) who worked in the cherry orchards - at that time a great sight.

The local shops included R Pages' "The Stores" - called the 'London House Shop' to imply that quality was available there. He was a grocer, baker, draper and the local telegraph office, and owned the first motor car in the area. The local publican's wife, Agnes Brown, was post - lady (unusual for the 1920s), whilst there was a further bakery - Lambourne's, famous for its lardy cakes, which remained in business until the 1960s.

One of the most important industries of the area was the sawmills and associated timber growing. The trees - which were remarkably straight - were brought in by steam traction engines, or earlier by teams of horses. Later, Foden lorries took over the task, but the horse power came back into use in war-time, when fuel supplies became restricted. Other lorries used at the sawmill belonged to the Star Brush company, as the Stoke Row sawmills supplied the factory with brush backs, cut on the bandsaw at the mill. Life in the mill was hard - the days were long, starting at 6am (and some workers would leave home at 4.30am) and the work arduous, though it paid relatively well. The men would relieve the boredom of machine minding with practical jokes - though not all of them appreciated these pranks! Mothers would warn their sons that it was a dangerous place, as "you'll lose your fingers" - some did, probably as a result of carelessness. The machine guards would be removed so that the men could work faster on piece-work, and only be replaced when the (pre-arranged) Inspector's visit was to take place.

Life on the farms was also hard, - especially for tenant farmers in the '20s. The workforce tended to work more in groups than now-a-days, however, and so enjoyed the companionship. Even a 'modern machine' such as a threshing machine used in the 1930s might need 10 men to tend it.

War-time in the Stoke Row area took many men away in the services - some ending up as prisoners-of war. Those working on Polish farms found life much easier than those in the camps. Others were taken prisoner in Burma, where life was much harsher. At the same time, the villages took in evacuees, whilst 'hidden factories' were set up in low huts amongst the trees, where women made parts for aircraft. Other huts were used as camps to house German prisoners of war, and later Lithuanians and Italians.

Angela showed us a number of illustrations of both the church, built in 1846, when also the school was built, and the chapel, which dates from 1815, also showing the interiors of each.

The last topic Angela spoke about was the 'gentrification of cottages'. Dogmore Cottages, for example, had been two dwellings occupied by Percy and Ivy Collis, and her parents, Mr and Mrs Johnson. By 1964, the rent was 1/6d per week. The house was subsequently extended, with a conservatory and a double garage etc, and is the home for a senior executive of a local 'utility' company. Other large - and now expensive - homes have been converted from small thatched cottages or old barns. These 'conversions' have all removed cottages from the housing stock for 'local' people - many of the newcomers working away from the village, and taking less part in local activities than their predecessors would have done. The village character was thus changed for ever.
