

The

FHH

Newsletter



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From the Chairman

Huntingdon and Hinchingbrooke at the outbreak of the First World War

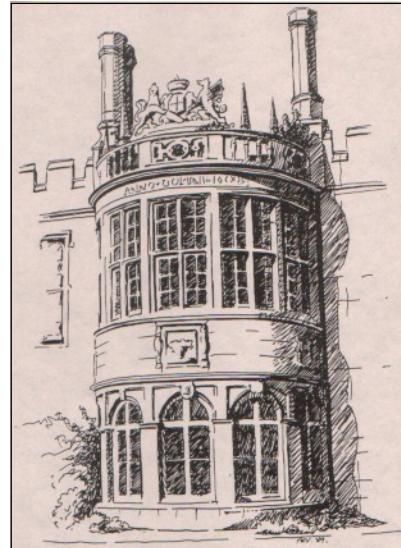
The centenary of the outbreak of the First World War is being marked in many ways and the Friends took this as the topic for their Annual Dinner in February 2014. We were fortunate to have Martyn Smith as our speaker. Martyn has made a particular study of The Huntingdonshire Cyclists Battalion of which his grandfather had been a member. He gave us a fascinating account of how the battalion was set up and operated. Of the many topics he raised, two that stand out are

- a. the patriotic enthusiasm of young men to be involved in the war, even to the point of lying about their age so that they could join up.
- b. The rather bizarre account of their posting to guard the East Coast against possible German invasion, when each soldier went on guard duty equipped with a rifle and two bullets.

Those interested in finding out more are invited to look at the detailed web-site archive collection which can be accessed by googling Huntingdonshire Cyclists Battalion.

During the Dinner which followed the talk (and everybody there agreed that the standard of the meal was much better this year) we heard readings about how Hinchingbrooke House had been used as a hospital and rest home for wounded Belgian soldiers. The Earl of Sandwich was very active in recruiting men for the war effort. In one of his letters, he laments the language problem of understanding the refugees as so few people in Huntingdon could speak Flemish. I suspect the situation would not be much different now.

Peter Downes



Michael Burrell



It is with sadness that we record the death of Michael Burrell who was a member of the Friends. Many of you will remember that, in July 2011, Michael gave a performance of 'The Winding Stair', a dramatized presentation, written by him, of correspondence and conversation between the First Earl of Sandwich, played by Michael Burrell, and Samuel Pepys, played by Mike Baker. Michael was a most talented actor and was very active in various aspects of local life. He will be greatly missed.

The skeletons in the closet: The Hinchingbrooke Bones

By T.R. Wheeley

For decades, if not centuries, it has been an accepted fact that the bones under the staircase of Hinchingbrooke House are the mortal remains of two Benedictine Nuns who once resided at Hinchingbrooke Nunnery, or the Priory of St. James as it was officially known. However, recent research, made possible by funding provided by the Friends of Hinchingbrooke House (FHH), has revealed that the bones are in fact much older than initially thought, and most certainly not the remains of nuns.

Up to the present, the accepted narrative has been that the bodies are those of two nuns who resided at Hinchingbrooke. The stone coffins, a high status commodity, even suggested that they could have been the bodies of prioresses. Their location outside what would have been the north door of the church went some way in reinforcing such a theory. It was thought that the coffins and their contents lay undisturbed until the Reformation in 1536 when Hinchingbrooke Nunnery was dissolved by Henry VIII and granted to the Cromwell family two years later. The damage to the coffins, including the loss of their lids and the disruption of bones, was thought to have occurred in the years that immediately followed, with Richard Cromwell's alterations to the fabric of the nunnery causing the disturbance. It is possible that the lids were removed in order to level the floor upon which the staircase was assumed to have been built. The staircase was again remodelled by Edward Montagu in the 1660s, helping account for the disruption.

From that point on, the bodies and the remains lay undisturbed until after the 'great fire' of 1830 which ripped through the north-eastern interior of the House, destroying the staircase. At this point the staircase was rebuilt in rather plain fashion compared to the ornate 1660s Kennard staircase that had preceded it. It was during this work in 1834 that builders found the coffins and sketched what they found. The pen and ink sketch still exists and hangs on the wall outside the Library. It is interesting that the bodies seem more complete in that sketch than they do now. During the 1940s the staircase was again replaced, this time with a close match to the 1660s staircase by Kennard, moved from Rolls Park in Essex. It is quite possible that more disturbance was caused at this point, though Mary Stuart's memoir, '*A Houseful at Hinchingbrooke*', suggests that this was the point



This sketch of the bones was completed in 1834 during the remodelling of the House following the Great Fire

at which the coffins were made visible via a hatch in the floorboards; she recalls them being shown to visitors. And so it is that the 'Nun's Bones', as they affectionately became known, entered the folklore of the House. Since at least the end of the 19th century the bones have been associated with the reputed haunting of the staircase. George, the 9th Earl of Sandwich recorded in his memoir that his wife, Alberta, witnessed the ghosts of two nuns on the staircase during one of her first visits, and more recently tales of cold-spots and ghostly apparitions abounded amongst staff, caretakers and students.

It was against this generally accepted narrative that the Friends undertook to support an initiative to find out a little more about the bones. When a member of school staff, Mrs Jackie Sheehan, approached a contact at the Police Pathology unit, she was put in touch with Kerry-Ann Milic, a Forensic Biologist at Anglia Ruskin University. Kerry-Ann was previously Senior Forensic Anthropologist/Deputy Mortuary Manager with the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) in Bosnia-Herzegovina where she spent five years assisting in the identification of victims from mass graves following the Srebrenica genocide (1995). As such, the Friends and school were delighted that she was willing to give up some of her time to visit the school and carry out a closer inspection of the bones at her laboratory in Cambridge where a small group of students were able to visit her in the summer of 2013. The Friends were able to support this endeavour by providing the funds for the radio-carbon-dating carried out at Oxford University in order to determine their age.

Thanks to Kerry-Ann's work, it was revealed that the bones were indeed the remains of two individuals, one male and one female. The male, who died aged between 43-55 years of age, was particularly tall. Using the length of his right ulna as a guide, it is estimated that he stood at somewhere between 176.86cm and 186.3cm (just over 6 feet). One notable feature was that he had suffered a broken arm as an adult but the wound had healed leaving scar tissue. The definition on his brow bone was also very distinctive, leaving no doubt as to his sex. The female, by contrast, was very slight in build, and Kerry-Ann remarked on the small size of her pelvis as well as some possible parturition scars, indicating the possibility of childbirth. The polishing of bone due to the absence of synovial joint fluid indicates that she may well have suffered from Degenerative Joint Disease (DJD). The teeth were in good condition, which taken with the fact that they were in stone coffins, indicates that the individuals were high status individuals. Further ground was broken by the rather surprising results of the carbon-dating that reveal that they died 992 years ago (+/- 28 years) and therefore date from anywhere between 994 and 1050 AD – two hundred years earlier than previously thought.



The bones of the male; Note the prominent brow bone

So what conclusions can we draw from this fascinating new information? Assuming that the remains are original to the site, perhaps the most important conclusion that we can draw is that there must have

been a church on this site prior to the Norman church established shortly after the Conquest in 1066. Until now, the archaeological evidence and the remains of stonework still standing have indicated that the earliest structures date from ca.1100, however, the presence of the burials now suggests that there was a Saxon church standing on this site as early as the 10th Century. This extends the known chronology of Hinchingbrooke considerably beyond the 12th century origins previously accepted. There is no evidence to suggest that the remains have been moved from another site and it is perfectly logical to assume that the Norman church could be a modification of an earlier structure, possibly made of wood, hence the lack of archaeological evidence.

One question we do now need to address, however, is whether the stone coffins are contemporary to the remains. The previous dating of the coffins placed them from the 13th century, however, stone coffins were certainly in use in the Saxon period. C. Daniell's book, *Death and Burial in Medieval England 1066-1550*, even suggests that stone coffins from this period could well have had wooden lids, thus potentially explaining why these are not in evidence at Hinchingbrooke. Furthermore, whilst acknowledging that stone coffins were a status-symbol, Daniell also suggests that early Christian burials could determine the location of the later rebuilding of a church. At Capel Maeog, for example, a later church was positioned next to a stone-lined burial from an earlier period and the grave is called 'founder's grave'. Could a similar narrative be true of Hinchingbrooke? Further expert knowledge to date the coffins would certainly help determine if the bones are indeed those of their original occupants. The fact that the remains of only two individuals are present certainly implies that they may be the original occupants and were not simply random remains scooped up from the old burial ground and placed into empty caskets during building work in the Tudor period, or some later century. That the coffins were not removed when that part of the nunnery complex was enclosed by Richard Cromwell in the 1540s suggests that they are probably in their original location; either out of deference for their status, for ease, or because they did not realise they were there.

Assuming the burials are in their original coffins and location, it is necessary for us to determine who they may have been. The teeth and stone coffins mean that we can be sure that they were people of high status. Indeed, it is quite possible that they were patrons of the church and thus were afforded a burial



Students visit Kerry-Ann Milic in the laboratories at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge

in a prestigious position. Whether there is any familial relationship between them is uncertain. A small sample from each skeleton has been retained in order to see if a DNA match can be made and Kerry-Ann hopes that the parturition scars on the female's pelvis will shed light on whether she had previously given birth. The remains of animal bones were also found in the grave, though it is thought that these may have en-

tered the grave at a later date, either dragged there under the floor boards by rodents or gathered into the space during later alterations to the staircase. When the bones were first examined, one particular mystery immediately presented itself in the form of what appeared to be the dried remains of a chicken. Only once examined in the laboratory was it revealed that it was the back half of a rabbit with dried skin still encasing the skeletal structure. Its mummified condition suggests it has been in the foot of the coffin for years if not decades, again, presumably dragged there through the open foot of the coffins by a rodent.

These findings, only made possible through the generosity of the FHH and Kerry-Ann, have gone a long way in extending our knowledge of Hinchingbrooke's early history. They have challenged assumptions, provided answers, and in addition produced further questions. Above all, the findings reinforce what a fascinating place Hinchingbrooke House is. As its custodians, we can only hope that it continues to give up its secrets for many years to come.

Tom Wheeley, Hinchingbrooke, July 2014

The Last Day of Peace

Another event to mark the First World War will take place at Hinchingbrooke House on **Sunday, August 3rd**. This is put on by the County Council and is called 'The Last Day of Peace'. (War officially broke out on the 4th). This event is free and takes place between 1 pm – 5 pm. It will bring to life the realities of the conflict on the home and frontline and will involve activities for all ages including:

- Re-enactors - in costume – bringing alive the spirit of the Great War.
- The Music Hall Society performing music of the period.
- The Combat Veteran Players performing short extracts of Henry V and selected Rupert Brooke readings.
- Six exhibitions including photographs, documents and letters from Cambridgeshire, Belgium and France.
- Vignettes and reading of letters to and from the front .
- Displays from St Neots Museum.
- Expert advice on family history from Cambridgeshire Archives .
- Refreshments made by Hinchingbrooke House's chef and catering team.

Amanda O'Donoghue, who is leading the project at Cambridgeshire County Council, said: "For the 'Last Day of Peace' event, we have a wonderful venue at Hinchingbrooke House, that can help create an atmosphere to commemorate the Great War. There will be re-enactments, activities and exhibitions that we hope will make people aware of the contributions Cambridgeshire made to this hugely important milestone in world history. Working with partners in the UK, France and Belgium, we've been able to create a shared sense of history about the conflict too by sharing images and documents. The event is free and we want people across Cambridgeshire to join us on 3rd August to commemorate the conflict."

For more information about the 'Great War: Between the Lines' project and the Last Day of Peace event on 3rd August, contact Sally-Ann Greensmith on 01223 715613