

13 March 2008

“Murder, Crime and Policing in Norfolk and Suffolk” – by Neil Storey

Given by a specialist bursting with knowledge of his subject this was a lively and enthusiastic presentation, at times verging on the gruesome, but very well received. Neil Storey explained that some early penalties, such as the stocks and whipping post, had come to England with the Normans. Later, some horrific punishments were applied in this country in the 16th and 17th centuries for apparently trivial offences (such as salacious speaking) including branding, tongue piercing and cutting off the unlucky miscreant's ears. Scold bridles could be fitted and public immersion in water, using ducking stools, was well documented. In those early days there were over 200 capital offences which might be committed, some of which now seem very minor, e.g. driving sheep over London Bridge earned a hanging, as did stealing goods above the value of three shillings. Executions were widely advertised in printed broadsheets and, it seems, made a good day's entertainment for the public who might travel some distance to attend. The executions of murderers and those convicted of other sensational crimes brought huge crowds and often the corpse would be passed to the anatomists for dissection later the same day. A ghoulish public were also allowed to witness the latter. If the families were swift, or could pay a bribe, the bodies might miss the surgeon and be retrieved in one piece for burial, although the body snatchers would sometimes follow up the case later.

Local magistrates generally allocated the range of punishments for minor offenders – birching (perhaps for stealing something worth less than 1/-), walking around the town tied to a cart, or a day in the stocks (for cheats and traders who short-changed their customers this could mean the pillory). The stocks and pillory were installed in most towns, often in the market place, to prevent them being downgraded to hamlets with consequent loss of commercial standing. They were much used to control the number of drunks, noisy persons, prostitutes and pickpockets. At that time the male householder was responsible for his family and all employees. Before the Reform Bills of the early 1800s there was no established policy on keeping the law. Those with large estates wielded considerable power but did not always use it wisely, and this was the cause of much suffering and bad treatment to employees of lower rank. Neil then spoke about some well-known hangmen and their craft. The longest serving individual chief executioner was William Calcraft, although the Pierpoint family served for two and a half generations. Hangmen were kept busy and a number of prisons had multiple gallows (Newgate had 19 installed). Victims were always hanged in their own clothes, which would then supplement the income of the hangman. 1869 saw the end of public hanging in our area.

Conditions in early prisons were dreadful, as was the food and some of the methods of employing their long-term inmates, ranging from pointlessly turning a handle in the cell thousands of times a day to working the treadmill. Bury was one of the cleaner, forward thinking gaols and, like Brixton, used a treadmill designed by William Cubitt from East Anglia. Neil went on to recount the histories of a number of East Anglian murderers. Some, like William Corder, who killed Maria Martin in the Red Barn at Polstead, were well known, others less so but no less dreadful, and often involved accomplices in their crimes. The final story (from 1900) was of Mrs Hood (or Bennett) who left her child at lodgings in one of the Yarmouth Rows and soon after was discovered dead on the beach, strangled with a bootlace. Early detective work involving a laundry mark, photograph and a necklace were used to convict her husband who, after a trial at the Old Bailey, was executed in Norwich for her murder. Twelve years later another female corpse was found on Yarmouth beach, strangled with a bootlace... tied in exactly the same special way!

THE TERRACOTTA WARRIORS – by Don Friston

On 2 April 2008, Don Friston joined the eager throng of visitors to the unique exhibition at the British Museum to view some of the wonderfully crafted pottery figures excavated from the tomb area of China's first Emperor, Ying Zheng. Born over 2,000 years ago, in 259 BC, he was made King of Qin at the tender age of 13. (Qin, pronounced 'chin', was one of seven main states then at war, competing for overall power in China). Under his leadership, and by using newly developed weaponry and military strategy, Qin won total control within two decades and the King declared himself Divine Emperor of a unified China. In governing his empire he introduced many reforms and enforced strict laws. He used walls from conquered states to create a great wall, and built new roads and canals. Other innovative ideas were to standardize weights, measures and currency throughout his empire to improve and simplify its trading; also to develop a universal writing script, to replace the many local ones, thus allowing him to rule more easily.

In keeping with Chinese tradition, as soon as he became King work started on the construction of Ying Zheng's tomb. This work was to continue for thirty years with the tomb forming the centre of a great palace complex, as the First Emperor pursued his aims of living and governing forever. The scale of the complex is vast, measuring 56 km square, with the central tomb mound (as yet unopened) being 350 m x 350 m. In 1974, a farmer digging a well found a terracotta head, which eventually triggered what has become one of the foremost archaeological excavations in the world. Around, 7,000 terracotta soldiers have been found buried in three pits situated close to the tomb. Many other pits are in the area and those opened to date contain a wide variety of artefacts, including pottery horses, civil officials and acrobats, plus two magnificent half-size bronze carriages each pulled by four horses. There are also 46 bronze birds – cranes, geese and swans – with 15 pottery attendants, once part of a water garden. Due to the 2,000-year time lapse, and the plundering of the tomb site in antiquity, the majority of the excavated objects are broken. The on-site specialists have, however, achieved a miracle (the two carriages alone took nine years to conserve). Who knows what treasures will be revealed in the future, as the site will not be fully explored for perhaps generations.



The London exhibition had a representative group of the priceless restored figures, horses and bronze birds, a copy of one of the carriages, and many supporting pottery items, including fragments from the palace buildings; there was a sample of the protective armoured cape (formed from small rectangular limestone plates linked by copper wire so as to be flexible when worn); also rare gold and bronze items such as pots, coins, measures, bells, engraved notices, and weaponry. Items were very well displayed and could be seen at close range. The exhibition closed on 6 April.

10 April 2008 “Church Archaeology” – by Alan Greening

Alan Greening spoke of his career as an architect involved (mainly in above-ground work) over many years in the repair and renovation of churches and wood framed buildings. Before undertaking each job it is essential that the architect and selected builder and/or mason discover as much as possible of the history behind the structure. Also no professional would risk attempting to repair a listed building without an in-depth knowledge of the materials used for the original build and, where possible, an accurate estimate of its age. Members were shown drawings of the main window styles used for churches from Norman times through the centuries, including round, the narrower lancet, decorated and perpendicular. The Victorians were very skilled craftsmen and this can cause confusion where their work seeks to replicate earlier building styles – careful study by investigators usually shows the Victorian work to be too perfect, in some cases due to their use of machine tools. Restorations require the architect to have a broad understanding of construction techniques that might have been used from medieval up to comparatively recent times. In addition, there may well be remains (sometimes human) to be examined and dealt with by specialists. Alan’s work has taken him to several counties and covered some very interesting projects, both large and small. He has studied and worked on churches and buildings in Suffolk, including Southwold and Blythburgh, and he gave some fascinating details of the restoration project at the latter, in which he is currently involved.

The first thing to do once a contract is awarded is to develop a conservation plan. A visual examination of the building to be repaired can often give a guide to its relative age, but this is not always reliable. Where very ancient or famous buildings are to be renovated a search for evidence is usually made in the owner’s deeds or in public records. Books on architectural style by past experts such as Sir Nikolaus Pevsner can frequently reveal illustrative and written clues to a building’s past – where wood is involved the dendrologist may provide help on dating and source. The conservation plan will set out the extent of the repairs and the materials to be used. For instance it is not always required or desirable to restore interior decoration or wall paintings to their original condition. The removal of poor quality earlier restoration and layers of overpainting, followed by stabilisation of the remaining original work may be sufficient. Weak structural components will probably be replaced in the long term interest and safety of the building – here the skill of the architect and mason will be tested to secure the closest match to the original wood or stone and any fixings.

Alan explained some of the ways early craftsmen could work out the ground plan for a building using the simplest of devices, sometimes as basic as a cord with a few knots tied at regular intervals. By extending this, with the help of a colleague, a plan could be marked out on the ground or transferred to building materials. The same cord might be attached to a central peg and used to draw arcs and circles, which when repeated could precisely fix the position of pillars, arches and doorways. Builders also had carefully made stone or carpenter’s squares with which to accurately mark off angles on stone or wood components.

24 April 2008 “Recent Archaeological Discoveries on the Ipswich Waterfront” – presented by Rhodri Gardner

At the society’s meeting on 24 April, Suffolk County Council archaeologist Rhodri Gardner spoke about excavations carried out between 2003 and 2007 along the Ipswich quayside on the River Orwell. Fast development here has meant the archaeologists have been very busy between Orwell Road and East Stoke Bridge with virtually the whole of the medieval settlement now examined. This area, formerly occupied by flour mills and maltings is being redeveloped as a