

Wadhurst History Society: 11 April 2012

Kent and Sussex Scandals

Chris McCooley, on his third visit to the History Society, regaled us with a delightful selection of tales, titbits and trivia from the past, delivered at breathless pace with the authority of a university professor and the humour of a stand-up comic.

He effortlessly told of smugglers and highwaymen, of early photography and table football, of EH Nesbit and Napoleon, of Bill Clinton and Donald McGill – the sheer variety of his sensational, salacious and sad stories was breathtaking.

It was both sad and scandalous that young children were sent up narrow chimneys in the 18th and 19th centuries; sad that 80% suffered from breathing problems and cancers from their inhalation of soot and scandalous that it took over 100 years for Parliament to ban the practice.

Smuggling to circumvent the high duties imposed on luxury goods (mostly imported from France) to finance wars (mostly against the French) in the 18th century was big business, with the odds stacked heavily in favour of the smuggler gangs. How else could seven tons of tea be transported by 500 horses away from the coast by the Hawkhurst gang with impunity?

Along the way, Chris told us about the village hall in Goudhurst, opened in 1904, which has three vertical windows which, from the outside appear to spell TIT, much to the amusement of the local boys at the time. And he issued a warning to those crossing the river at Dartford – the US ship Richard Montgomery sank in the Thames estuary in the war with 1,000 tons of TNT on board. It's a scandal that it was never dealt with at the time on the basis that it didn't matter; the explosive is still potent!

Chris told us about the remarkable Freda Barton of Hadlow and West Malling whose photography chronicled events for 40 years from the 1880's; her bohemian lifestyle was sensational and salacious – as indeed was that of author EH Nesbit, another Kent resident, who lived in a ménage-a-trois for many years till the death of her husband. She married again and moved to Romney marsh, where her spirit still lives on in her house.

Donald McGill's saucy postcards were regarded as salacious (and even obscene), but the scandalous and sad fact was that he never retained the copyright of his 16,000 drawings, selling them to his publisher for just 6 shillings (30p) each. Despite the fact that as many as 200 million of his cards were sold, he died poor and is buried in an unmarked grave at Blackheath.

McGill's work was described as a "harmless rebellion against virtue" by George Orwell – and there is nothing wrong with that!