Meeting Reviews 2009/2010

The Vokes Family in Kings Worthy, 10th October 2009

At our AGM held at St Mary's Hall Springvale, Michael Vokes was our guest speaker. He talked to us about the Vokes Family in Kings Worthy from the 18th Century.On October 10th 1759, Richard Vokes (Volks) married Margaret Harris, as a tombstone in the churchyard, and the marriage register, records. On October 10th 2009, two hundred and fifty years later to the day, a direct descendant of this marriage, Michael Edward Vokes plus thirty of his relatives, gathered at Kings Worthy to celebrate. This celebration coincided with the opening session and AGM of the Worthys Local History Group. There was a record turnout of members to hear Michael give a detailed account of his ancestry, based on years of careful research that has taken him all over the world. He identified the main occupations of his ancestors as farming and building. His side of the family lived at Wistaria, London Road from the time it was built in 1800 until 1975. The grandson of the bridal couple from 1759, Michael Harris Vokes, was the builder and first occupant of Wistaria. The business he set up at Wistaria, on a plot much larger than the present property, stretching right down to the river, conducted multifarious other aspects to his business such as wheelwright, coffin maker and glazier. In 1864, a later Michael Vokes was responsible for a major extension of the church, including the present chancel and the hexagonal vestry. He also held important roles in the village, for example churchwarden, guardian of the poor and surveyor of the highways. The house itself has played a part in village life, various rooms being used at various times as doctor's surgery, Sunday School and electoral committee rooms for the Liberal Democrat party.The Local History Group itself came into being when its present owners began to research the Vokes family and the history of the house. The illustration shows Edward James Vokes and Sarah Vokes pictured (date uncertain). After the talk, a large 'wedding' cake was cut by Michael's granddaughter. This had been made by Maureen Vokes and decorated by her friend with a beautiful picture of St Mary's Church.

Hinton House,12th November 2009

Group member and local historian, Alix Hickman, gave us an illustrated talk on the history of Hinton House, Kings Worthy, the subject of her current research project. There was a good turnout of both members and some visitors to the meeting. For many people in the Worthys Hinton House has seemed a bit off the beaten track, especially if one's children didn't go to Kings Worthy Primary School. 'Out of sight, out of mind' may have been an apt expression. However, Alix Hickman certainly fired our imaginations by filling the house with fascinating people and their varied activities. Alix started by giving us an idea of the construction and lay-out of the house. The house is unusually constructed of chalk blocks with external render and plastered walls inside, with several notable features including a large domed ceiling above the staircase. It was built in the late 1860s and was probably for the Revd John Lake Barton who lived there with his wife Alethea, four servants and five scholars. On the death of the Barton's the leasehold was sold in 1877. In 1880, following the death of Capt. Walter Williams of Worthy Park, his widow Grace and their four children moved to Hinton House. Two of those children, Arthur and Herbert, founded the Vulcan Iron Works at Kings Worthy Foundry. Some members of the family continued to live at Hinton House until 1908 when Grace died, and it was sold. Another interesting owner was Colonel Bryce Stewart (an American) and his wife Georgie Gholson Stewart who occupied it from 1911, with 4 servants. Their son, also Bryce, attended Cheltenham College (Military) at the same time as a grandson of Grace, James Hunt. Bryce was wounded in France and came home to convalesce but was killed in Mesopotamia in 1916. His name appears on the war memorial in Kings Worthy churchyard. James Hunt was also killed in 1916, in France. Col Bryce Stewart died in 1936 and his wife Georgie died in 1940. In 1945 Bunny Thornton, a WREN working at Martyr Worthy, has told how she was billeted at Hinton House with 40-50 other WRENS. The house reverted to family use after the war when in 1946 the Leasehold of the house was sold to Col Ernest Arthur Hunter Fell and he, his wife and two daughters, lived there until 1959 having bought the freehold in 1958. In 1959 the freehold was sold by the Fell family to George and Nancy Wansborough. George became involved with Gordon Keeble Cars in 1960 (an example of which can be seen in the Milestones Museum, Basingstoke) but the venture failed in 1965. Nancy worked in mental health and wrote a book on cricket entitled "Maiden Over". Interested in local village life the Wansborough's often allowed village fêtes to be held on the lawn. During the question and comments session after the talk several members remembered the Wansborough's. In the 1971 HCC leased part of the house to the archaeology dig MARC3. In the 1980s it was used by the Hampshire Wardrobe for theatrical costume storage and was occupied by Kings Worthy Primary School as additional classroom space until very recently. In 2000 a request for the house to be listed was rejected and the property was sold by Hampshire County Council. The present owners (2009) have renovated Hinton House and, as well as a home, it has become a retreat for their company, Health Etcetera.

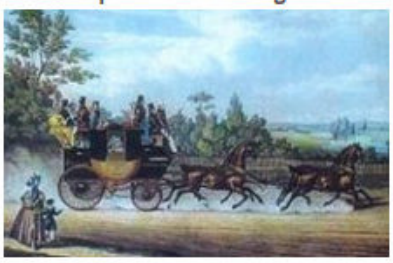
Pillbox Defences in the Worthys, 12th November 2009

"I'm wearing my wife's knickers". Michael Edwards was keen to explain it wasn't he who wrote this on a wartime concrete pillbox off Hookpit Farm Lane but such graffiti has, sadly, been found during a survey of wartime defences in and around the Worthys. Michael described this "work in progress" to a packed audience at the recent meeting of The Worthys Local History Group. This talk was the second half of an evening with Hinton House as the first presentation. We were amazed to hear that 30,000 pillboxes and similar structures were built during the period June 1940 to July 1941 in expectation of imminent German invasion. Of these 30+ strategically placed around the Worthy Down airfield appear to survive, mainly in good condition. There was no blueprint for their design and specifications varied according to local circumstances and availability of materials. In some cases brick walls were made to act as shuttering for the poured concrete as there was a severe shortage of timber at the time. In most cases a blast wall protected the entrance and there was a characteristic Y shaped internal wall to stop ricocheting bullets. Fortunately the effectiveness of these structures was never tested as there was no invasion but they were prone to flooding, quickly filled with smoke and were extremely noisy when guns were fired in them. We learned of retractable forts that protected the runways - the tops were level with the runway whilst aircraft took off and landed but could be raised using hydraulic jacks to defend the runway at other times. The plan is to survey and record all the defences that still exist before they are lost and forgotten. There will be progress reports from time to time and possibly a publication at the end of the project. The team would be interested to hear from anyone with recollections of such structures or who may have an air raid shelter in their garden! A cautionary note – please do not attempt to explore these sites on your own. Most are on private land, some filled with debris (plus the occasional hypodermic needle) and the occasional one some in danger of collapse. All things considered it seems best to let the group do a systematic survey of this part of our heritage and share the results with us. The Worthys Local History Group is keen to encourage local research which can take many forms such as recollections of older residents, genealogy, research into places or people using the Records Office or the Internet. The end product could be added to the group's archive, be it an article in Worthy History or a presentation at a meeting. If you have an idea please mention it to someone in the group and don't be shy – you don't need a PhD to discover something really useful!

Hampshire Flints, 11 February 2010

As part of our regular series of meetings at The Church Rooms Kings Worthy, Gordon Pearson gave us a most interesting talk on HAMPSHIRE FLINTS, from pre-history to the present. Gordon Pearson was for many years engaged in the conservation of old buildings in Hampshire. His talk was based on his many experiences with flint as a traditional building material in Hampshire. As as child living in the fens of East Anglia, his grandfather told him of a stone that could produce fire. Gordon was astonished when his grandfather created a spark with two flints. This experience helped awaken a life-long interest in flint. Retired from conservation work Gordon now lives in a flint cottage in Kings Somborne. Chert was formed about 70–100 million years ago and mainly down the east coast and across the south to Somerset. The deepest layer of flint, a type of chert, found in Hampshire is at Dummer near Basingstoke. The flints were embedded in the layers of chalk. There is not a lot of flint found on the continent. Flint has been used as a building material for 3000 years and commonly used in Hampshire in the 18th and 19th centuries by poor people to build their houses. Flints are often knapped to show the colour of the flint. Tabular and modular flints were used for buildings, cortex flint a pure flint, is black, very hard and indestructible but chert can be of a variety of colours. It is also a poor heat conductor. Look at the Wessex Hotel exterior for dense black flint. Garnetting flints became popular, in the 16th century women did the knapping and men laid the garnetted flints slightly turned up. There are good examples of this at Boarhunt Church, which is shown in the photo at the top. Early examples of flint work can be seen at Portchester Castle and Breamore Church and many of the walls in Winchester. At Northington Church, knapped flint was used as a chequered board effect. Gordon showed us many slides of good workmanship both in repairs and buildings and many examples of poor workmanship and repairs.

The Turnpike Road Through the Worthys 1759-1845. 11th March 2010



Local historian Peter Finn gave us a most entertaining and enlightening illustrated talk on the development of the turnpike road through the Worthys from its beginnings in 1759 through to its closure in 1845. Before the coming of the turnpikes roads were mostly rough tracks whose upkeep was the responsibility of the local parishes through which they passed. The inevitable appalling state of the roads inhibited transport, especially at a time of increasing commercial activity and improvements in agricultural production, which demanded easy communications. Private enterprise came to the rescue in the early 18th century when investors arranged to upgrade and maintain stretches of road in return for tolls or payments by the road users. The profit motive proved a very effective tool in the improvement of communications and transport. Peter told us of the Acts of Parliament necessary to sanction the new roads, the development of turnpike gates and toll houses to ensure payment of the tolls, choices of route and many other aspects of the new and vastly improved roads. Peter told us of the various tolls levied on vehicles and animals, exemptions from tolls, including coaches carrying the post and also, curiously enough, "vagrants". We heard of highway robbery, toll cheats and how they were combated and of the hazards and discomforts of travel. Peter took us along the turnpike from Popham to Winchester, tracing both the earlier route of pre turnpike roads through the Worthy villages, with its many twists and turns to avoid the bogs and other hazards and the subsequent route of the turnpike itself. For all its great advantages the turnpike toll road system met its match in the railways around the 1830s. Railways offered a cheaper and more convenient mode of transport, capable of carrying much heavier loads more rapidly and inevitably they superseded the turnpikes very quickly, the Popham to Winchester turnpike finally closing in 1845 after 85 years. The last stage coach to run on the turnpike was the Red Rover. We all came away with a heightened interest in the turnpike system and a desire to trace the old roads on the map, to follow their twists and turns and to look for the sites of the old toll booths and the milestones. A most interesting evening leaving us all with a great deal of food for thought. Those wishing to know more about the turnpike should obtain a copy of Worthy History No 13, where Peter has written an informative and often amusing article. Peter won second prize for his longer essay on the subject at the Winchester Writer's Conference in 2009.

Peninsular Barracks Winchester Visit, 8th April 2010

On April 8th 30 members met on a lovely spring evening at the Romsey Road entrance to the barracks. Our guide was Ian Bailey, curator of the museum and he provided us with a very detailed plan of the area and took us on a brief tour. The site was first developed by the Romans who fortified it in the first century as it occupied a strategic position on high ground above the flood plain of the Itchen. Lines of the Roman walls have been traced back to the Westgate erected originally by the Romans and this has been the western entrance to the city for two thousand years. Winchester was chosen by Alfred the Great to be England's capital and he was crowned here in 871. Stones from the Roman walls were used by William the Conqueror to build the castle on the western part of the site. Henry III added the Great Hall between 1222 and 1235 and this is the castle's only surviving building. The castle was held by the Royalists in the Civil War and attacked by Oliver Cromwell who breached the walls and his troops occupied the city and desecrated the cathedral. In 1682 Sir Christopher Wren was commissioned by Charles II to build a palace on the site and the court moved to Winchester. Construction started early the following year and at the time of the death of the king the palace was almost complete. In 1687 James II abandoned any further work on the palace. The castle had a deep ditch on its western side and this feature proved useful to the London and Southampton Railway Company when the line was built in 1837 – 1838. Construction involved a deep cutting and the excavation was used to fill the ditch. Peninsula Barracks has been a military establishment since the eighteenth century and was used to house many French and Spanish prisoners from the Seven Years War (1753-1763), the American War of Independence and the Napoleonic Wars. Adjoining Romsey Road just up from the Westgate is the Mons Block now converted into flats but built in 1856 as a hospital for Crimean War casualties under the influence of Florence Nightingale. The palace of Charles II was burnt down in 1894 and erected parallel to the railway was the long block barracks using stone and columns from the palace. We were shown the dates of 1901 that decorate the drainage hoppers at the tops of the down-pipes. At right angles to the long block is the short block built at the same time and bearing the same date. This now houses the Gurka Museum and the Royal Hussars Museum whilst the long block has been converted into luxury apartments. After our site visit we all adjourned to the Guard House and noted the fire damaged columns salvaged from the palace. Here Ian Bailey gave us a fascinating illustrated talk on the history of the barracks and answered our searching questions with ease. We rounded off a splendid evening with a meal and drinks in the St James's Tavern.

The Lives of Worthy Folk in Times Gone By, 13th May 2010

Michael Edwards, the Worthys Local History Group' Records manager, provided us with enlightening glimpses of the lives of ordinary people who have lived and worked in the Worthys from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The material was distilled from reminiscences recorded over the past 28 years and transcribed assiduously by the speaker. The hall was filled to capacity for this talk and, interestingly, nearly half the audience were not members of the history group. An indication of the kind of history that interests the public. We can discover a good deal of information about the local aristocracy, gentry and clergy from contemporary documents, but we seldom read or hear of the lives of working people except perhaps in a generalised way. Michael Edwards has put this right by accumulating a great deal of detailed information about the lives of local working people, who recalled not only their own experiences but also that of their parents. The long hours that people worked was a feature of all their lives, especially for those in domestic service, usually working from 5am to 10pm. One woman recalled how she wept with exhaustion before going to bed. But their hard lives did not prevent them from remembering light-hearted aspects of their childhoods even when it was not so joyous at the time. One man recalled how as a boy he fell into a school latrine pit when chasing a ball. Fortunately, it would appear he was rescued by the school inspector who was visiting the school at the time! Although curtseying and forelock tugging was the common practice until the 1920s, at least one father told his children not to do it, even though, like everybody else in Kings Worthy, his livelihood and his cottage depended on the good will of the local landowner. This same man was threateningly visited by the angry landowner and a police constable when he shot several foxes that were killing his hens, but he was well able to defend his actions during the confrontation. Other stories covered wartime experiences of local young women struggling with the day to day problems of wartime life and their roles as "clippies" on the buses during blackout, plus a host of other tales from those who lived through the times. Of particular interest was the story of the young boys living by the railway who made good use of the ration packs discarded through troop train windows by American and Canadian soldiers on their way to Normandy. The troops may not have appreciated the cigarettes, chocolate and cans of beef but the boys knew what to do with them!! The insights into the lives of the serving and labouring class were all the more convincing for being first hand accounts. What could have been a depressing set of recollections was lifted by interwoven happy episodes and the light touch of the speaker, which provided an entertaining as well as an informative evening.