

Fairford Flyer

No 62

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FAIRFORD HISTORY



SOCIETY

FHS Meetings 2024

All meetings are at 7.30 pm in the Farmor Room, Fairford Community Centre on the third Thursday of the month, (except for January and February 2024)

Membership fees were due in September and remain at £5. Visitors are always welcome at £3. FHS now has 153 members. We welcome the 3 new members and 2 who renewed their membership at the last meeting.

2023/2024 Programme

April 18: 7.30pm Chris Hobson on the Retreat Asylum: the patients' stories – a look at the role and work of The Retreat, the patients' lives and their treatment, and why The Retreat should be remembered.

May 16: 7.30pm Chris Peachey on Fairford walls, house, garden, and field (same talk change of title)

June 20: 7.30pm - AGM Social FHS 20th anniversary

Dates for your Diary

April 20 – Fairford Cubs 'Recollections Cafe' event at the Palmer Hall from 2-4 pm, free entry and refreshments. FHS will be supplying a display. All are welcome.

May – A display in Fairford Library as part of 'Local and Community History Month'.

June 6-7 Fairford Festival - Edwin Cuss's photographs and FHS Display in the Heritage Room at Fairford Community Centre

... and for your information

July 19-21 Royal International Air Tattoo

August 9-11 FairFest

August 17-18 Fairford Steam Classic and Retro Show

September 28 Town Crier Competition



FHS March meeting – Hailes Abbey

David Aldred gave a very interesting talk on the history of Hailes Abbey and the Mystery of the Holy Blood. The Abbey was founded by Richard, Earl of Cornwall as the result of his vow to establish a religious house after being saved from a great storm at sea in 1242. His brother King Henry III granted Richard the manor of Hailes so that he could keep his pledge. The Cistercian Abbey was dedicated in 1251 but did not prosper until 1270 when Richard's son Edmund presented the Abbey with a phial said to contain the blood of Jesus Christ. The holy relic drew pilgrims to the Abbey which benefited from the donations that the pilgrims were willing to pay to be in the presence of such an important relic. Despite the presence of the Holy Blood the Abbey's fortunes fluctuated over the next 300 years until it was closed by Henry VIII's Commissioners in 1538 who took the Holy Blood to London where it was publicly destroyed. The Bishop saying 'This is duck's blood renewed regularly – I know this from the miller's wife who slept with the Abbot!' It was also said to have been honey coloured with saffron. The Abbey was partly dismantled and later became the home of the Tracy family of Toddington and Fairford. The surviving ruins and museum as well as the nearby parish church are well worth a visit.

Sad news – This year FHS has lost several members and former members. Don Cobbett was on the Committee for a time and used to create most imaginative meeting posters. Frank Richmond died age 102 was a member from the start and paid his membership regularly until the last few years and, most recently, Richard Thompson a long-time member who was an usher at the Lizzie Farmor production in 2007. Syd has written a tribute to Professor Eric Jones who has been a regular contributor to FHS over the years and will be greatly missed. Our sympathies to all their families.

A Tribute to Professor Eric Jones

by Syd Flatman

In early March we heard the sad news that one of our valued members, Professor Eric Jones had passed away, aged 87.

Eric contributed to our Monthly Newsletters on many an occasion. Also giving talks on his pet subjects like the Grand Drain, Droving roads etc. He was not seen at many monthly meetings, that was left to his wife Sylvia to give him a full report on her return home. He would attend when talks were close to his heart, where at the end of the session, the Speaker would be subjected to Eric's Gestapo style of interrogation to glean any last droplet of information.

Eric had an insatiable appetite for knowledge right up until the end of his life. On moving to Fairford he straight away immersed himself in local history. I first met Eric in 2009 when I retired. My neighbour and I would frequent The Bull Hotel for morning coffee. Sitting at a small table, happy in his own company, studying the share prices in the Financial Times, coffee cup in hand, was Eric. As I passed his table I would cheekily comment "How's the shares going then mate?" Back would come some witty remark. That led to Eric joining us from then on. Eric constantly questioned me about local history, and it soon became apparent that we were on the same wavelength. We decided to team up, going on field trips every two to three weeks. Soon, he had me tracing the source of some ditch or other, ducking under low branches following the Thames and Severn Canal, poking around old farmyards, visiting old churches, dovecots, and lost villages. Everything was meticulously photographed on his trusty Lumex pocket camera and notes taken on his notepad.

Art was another of Eric's passions. We visited art exhibitions: Stubbs, Turner, Rembrandt, Rubens, and Whistler were among his favourites. He was a very talented artist himself. Another pastime was bird watching. His grey Nissan car would often be spotted in some gateway or other. Hat on his head and wearing his favourite olive-green tweed overcoat he would be scanning the horizon with his field glasses. Eric was also an accomplished author of many books. I do not know how he managed to fit it in with all his other interests, but somehow, he did.

Never one to talk of his past, Sylvia has helped me fill in the gaps. He had a very interesting career indeed. He was born on 21st September 1936 in Andover, an only child. He attended Andover Grammar School and then on to Nottingham University. After this he won a Scholarship to Exeter College which is part of Oxford University.

Sylvia and Eric married in 1958. They had two children, Deborah and Christopher while he was a Fellow of Nuffield College. In 1969 Eric took up a teaching post in Illinois, USA. The wages were lucrative but the weather conditions were extreme. Shovelling snow became a bore. So, in 1976 he took up a teaching post in Melbourne, Australia. Reaching retirement age in 2001 he and Sylvia decided to relocate to England and came to Fairford to be near their daughter who was living in Cirencester at that time. Their son Christopher was already established in his career and decided to stay on in Australia.

Eric may have come across as quiet and unassuming but as you can see, he certainly crammed a lot into one life time. We miss him greatly.

Tragedy at Honeycombe Leaze

By the end of the Second World War 23 airfields had been built in Gloucestershire for the Royal Air Force, most of them for the training of aircrew or other supporting roles. Some of these airfields remained active after the end of the war but today Fairford is the last surviving airfield in Gloucestershire still in military use. It was inevitable that some of the many hundreds of aircraft that were stationed on these airfields would be lost in accidents and it is not surprising that there were a number of aircraft crashes in the Fairford area. One such crash happened on 13 December 1948 and took place between Fairford and Honeycombe Leaze.

On that day two pilots from the Central Flying School at Little Rissington took off in a Harvard two-seat training aircraft for an instrument practice flight. For some reason the pilots were flying a Harvard that had been borrowed from No. 2 Flying Training School based at South Cerney. The Central Flying School's task was to train fully qualified pilots to become instructors who, after completing their course, would be posted to one of the RAF's many flying training schools to teach new pilots.

The weather was barely good enough for flying on 13 December with low cloud and heavy rain which developed into a storm. The Gloucestershire Echo of 16 December reported on the inquest in which three eyewitnesses gave evidence. Mr. William Nicholls of Coronation Street, Fairford said that he heard the aircraft approach from the direction of Cricklade and then saw it turn towards Cirencester. Mr. Nicholls said he then heard the engine of the aircraft "rev up and then go dead" and that he "looked round in time to see it crash into a field and blow up. He dashed to the field, but found he was unable to do anything". Both pilots had been killed instantly in the crash. Two other witnesses also gave evidence at the inquest: Mr. Joseph Larner of Cable Cottage, Fairford saw the aircraft passing through the low cloud then dive into the ground and Mr. Frederick Pottinger of The Cottage, Honeycombe Leaze said he heard an explosion and saw debris flung into the air. The aircraft had crashed in a ploughed field near Honeycombe Leaze about a mile from Fairford and the wreckage was scattered over about 250 yards. The verdict of the inquest was accidental death.

The crew of Harvard FT224 were Pilot 1 Stephen Hughes age 25 and Pilot 2 John Edward Burns age 30. Pilot 1 and 2 were non-commissioned officer ranks equivalent to sergeant and corporal. Stephen Hughes was the son of the Reverend Arthur Price Hughes, a Wesleyan Methodist minister from Bristol. Stephen's brother David had been shot down and killed near Tunbridge Wells, Kent during the Battle of Britain on 11 September 1940. John Burns was from Derriaghy, a small town between Belfast and Lisburn. He had joined the RAF in 1935 and was one of the two survivors of a 38 Squadron Wellington bomber that was shot down near the island of Melos in the Aegean Sea on 1 March 1944 during a mine-laying operation. He was captured and imprisoned first in Athens then in four prisoner of war camps in Germany before being released on 7 May 1945. John Burns was buried in the Roman Catholic cemetery in Derriaghy and Stephen Hughes was cremated at Putney Vale Crematorium, London. These men were some of the last of the 211 RAF men who had died in aircraft accidents during 1948. Aircraft accidents were so frequent in the immediate post-war years that they rarely warranted more than a brief column in the newspapers of the day.

**A North American Harvard T2B trainer
seen here with its undercarriage and flaps down.
Many of these aircraft are still flying today**



Newspaper Cuttings

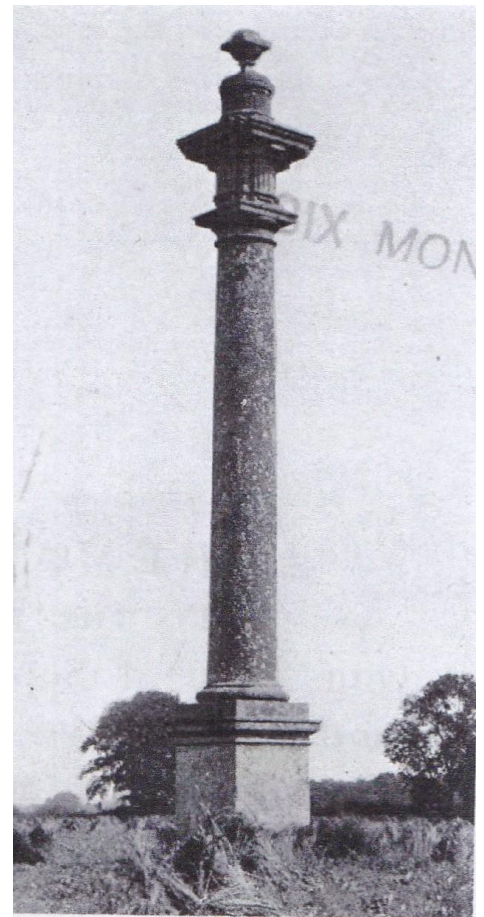
Recently a new source of information became available online. 'Find my Past' has scanned and uploaded issues of the Country Life magazine dating from 1897 (then priced six pence per issue) to 2009 (a lot more than six pence per issue!). Fairford information in Country Life is often about house sales which in themselves are helpful and interesting but there are occasional articles including one in 1902 on the Fairford Church windows with this misleading final paragraph:

"It is interesting to recall an incident during the time of the Great Rebellion when these windows were taken from the church and buried for a short period in the neighbourhood. In the replacing, the original order was slightly altered. Some people hold the opinion that we owe to the temporary burial the advent of that strange growth of lichen on the outer surface of the glass, which has added so conspicuously to the beauty of the colour. It is also curious to note that when 'those devastating ruffians of Cromwell' did attack the church, they singled out for particular destruction the scenes from the sufferings of Christ and the history of the Virgin. We can, at least, be only too thankful that they passed by the wonderful picture of the 'The last Judgement', as well as so many excellent windows, which still remain intact and in the order in which they were originally placed."

There was also a letter in 1917 to the editor enquiring the origin in Fairford of 'A remarkable monument'. This is the reply:

"Sir - In your issue of September 1st [1917] is published a letter from Mr D. Sheppard under the above heading. The 'monument' to which he refers and of which you publish an excellent photograph is well known to me, and Mr Sheppard's description is a very accurate one. I remember some forty years ago putting the same question to the resident owner of the estate upon which the structure stands, viz. Mr John Raymond Barker who was, I believe, the grandfather of the present owner. The 'old squire,' as he was familiarly known all round the neighbourhood, was a typical country gentleman, beloved and respected by everyone and by his courteous answer he showed himself well acquainted with the popular local legend that the column marked the spot where the unique stained-glass windows were supposed to have been stored during the Civil War. Mr Barker said, however, he knew nothing whatever to confirm that legend and his view was that the column had been erected by one of his ancestors to give an effective artistic termination to a wide avenue across the deer park of Fairford Park. I think this is the real explanation, but many thousands of persons passing along the neighbouring roads have asked the same question. Henry Weaver".

[In fact the Obelisk was built between 1751 and 1761 which proves it can have had nothing to do with the Civil War of 1642 to 1651. The 'old squire' who Mr. Weaver spoke to was actually John Raymond Raymond Barker (1801-1888) who succeeded his father John Raymond Barker in 1827. The monument is completely devoid of an inscription.]



WHAT DOES IT COMMEMORATE?