

Bournemouth and Beyond Discovery Group

Annual General Meeting December 1st 2020

Secretary's Report 2020 and 2021

Good Evening everyone. This is my sixth annual report as Secretary.

This report covers two years. As a direct result of the virus, the 2020 programme was cut short and 2021 started much later than normal. I will try and refresh your memory with the following summary.

So, just sit back and relax.

Spring programme. The 2020 Spring programme began on the **21st of January** with a talk from Paul Miles entitled "The Origins of Bournemouth". Paul explained that one of his passions was as a deltiologist (a collector of old postcards). This started when he purchased an old book, "A Handbook of Bournemouth". This contained some interesting photographs to which he has now added many others and Paul presented a visual cascade of the town, taking us through the ages. He referred to the earliest settlement at Hengistbury Head, some 12,000 years ago. Paul then explained how important the Enclosure Act of 1802 was to this story, in dividing up former common land to encourage agriculture. Other important influences were Napoleon, the smuggler Gulliver and Captain Tregonwell. In 1812 Tregonwell built a mansion (now part of the Royal Exeter Hotel) and other properties for family and friends to stay and take the fresh air and sea, calling the area Bourne Tregonwell. In 1852 the Bournemouth name was first used and by 1870 the railway had arrived, bringing holiday makers and day trippers. As a result the town grew and grew and grew!!

The following week, Stephen Robson introduced us to the Honourable Charles Roll, a cyclist, balloonist, racing motorist and an aviator. In 1904 he met Royce and formed the Rolls Royce Company, manufacturing motor cars, including the Silver Ghost in 1907. He had a short life, born in 1877 and died in Bournemouth in 1910. The town of Bournemouth had grown from its start in 1810 and wanted to celebrate its centenary. By that time several pioneers in aviation, including Rolls had developed a number of strange flying crafts. That year the Bournemouth Aviation meeting was held and it was decided to mark the towns' centenary in July with flying competitions around a circuit on land at Southbourne, with prizes of some £8,000 (approaching £1 million today!). During one competition, Rolls crashed and died. A sad end for a man of many talents and a real zest for life. That land is now part of St Peter's School playing fields, where a memorial plaque is now sited.

February started with Mike Andrews, who gave us an excellent talk about some grand houses of Mudeford. He started his talk explaining how in the 19th Century it was called Muddiford and was a sea bathing resort favoured by Lords and Ladies of note, with many large houses. This all changed when the railway arrived in 1860 and day-trippers began to arrive in numbers to take the sea air. In particular he spoke about Brookside which was full of stuffed animals and was demolished in 1963. A house of intrigue was Bure Homage House where one owner, a Sophia Dawes was once won in a game of cards. Mike also showed us the magnificent Mudeford House, which became the Avonmouth Hotel, now called the Christchurch Harbour Hotel and completed his talk, showing us the drawings that Harry Selfridge had prepared for a very large property at Hengistbury Head, which thankfully was never built.

For the next talk Jackie Winter reminded us of the Boots Book Lovers Libraries. Jackie explained how John Boot opened his first shop in Nottingham in 1849. His Son and Daughter-in-law some years later, introduced books and created subscription libraries. In 1938 some 38 million books were exchanged and over 1 million new books added. They were the largest subscription library in the world, with 3 classes of membership and 5 libraries in Bournemouth. Their libraries were the place to be seen, with calm and elegant interiors and staff trained to provide for every whim. Books deemed unsuitable to display had red labels and were held under the counter. Staff, predominately women had many conditions, including a "marriage bar", strict training and dress codes and worked from 8.45am to 7pm and to 8pm on Saturdays. However due to the arrival of paperbacks and declining membership, the last library closed in 1966 after some 65 years of service to the community.

Then we were entertained by our very own David Jenkin as we explored the history of Excelsior Holidays. The company was started from the family home, by Walter Maitland in 1920, with one coach. Initially the work was very seasonal, but with WW2, they were busy transporting troops or labour required to build airfields and widening roads.

For this work, Excelsior hired-in up to 60 coaches. Vernon Maitland was born in 1926 and took over the company in 1947, due to his Father's ill health. He soon expanded the company, starting continental tours and taking an active part in an international organisation for travel operators and associated businesses. He was awarded an OBE in 1980 and became President of the international organisation the following year. Over the years the business had acquired several other coach companies and continued to expand, in spite of new legislation, inflation and competition. During the talk we heard about some amusing incidents - how a change in telephone numbers resulted in the Halifax taking Excelsior holiday enquiries, the difficulties for the company and passengers when travelling overland to Kabul and Russia and taking a coach on a 14,000 mile worldwide advertising tour. Vernon was clearly a hands-on man and even had local anaesthetic during knee surgery, to keep an eye on the surgeon! Excelsior was sold in 1997 and Vernon died some 2 years ago in Florida, where he lived.

February concluded with a social evening. Margaret Bird once again delivered an entertaining quiz, in which we had to identify photographs taken on previous Group visits. This certainly exercised the brain and after fairy cakes and drinks, we watched a very interesting video of old Bournemouth, which John Jones had obtained from the library. Many thanks to Margaret, John and Tina for the refreshments.

March started with Stuart Bacon, who spoke to us about the Landmark Trust. It was founded by Sir John Smith and Lady Christian Smith to restore smaller heritage buildings and create holiday lets. They had three main criteria, the building had to be historically important, needed saving and was a property in which people would want to stay. Income for restoration came from three sources, national funds such as the Heritage Lottery Fund, holiday lets and bequests. Stuart concentrated his talk on the restoration of two Dorset properties, Dunshay Manor, between Swanage and Corfe which had many owners, including the Spencer-Watson family. The other property was Clavell Tower which was built by John Richards on the Smedmore Estate. This structure was in a very poor state and also close to a crumbling cliff edge. The Trust demolished the structure, brick by brick and rebuilt it 25 metres inland. There are waiting lists to stay in the properties, but as Stuart reminded us many are in isolated spots, with no TV, WiFi or indeed double glazing, so you do experience life, somewhat as it used to be!!

One of our founder members, Jean Sutton then told us all about the Russians in Tuckton. How Leo Tolstoy (of War & Peace fame) and Vladimir Chirkoff (whom he met in the army) became great friends. Both were anti-establishment, began publishing their thoughts in Russia and then moved to England, establishing a community at Tuckton House, off Saxonbury Road. In 1900 twelve residents moved into the house, but as Tolstoy was a vegetarian, there was no butcher, fish or pub. Within the house they build a bomb proof strongroom to house the Tolstoy diaries. They bought a disused water building and established the Free Age Press, sending numerous publications throughout Russia. In 1905 there was an uprising in Russia, workers strikes and over 1,000 people killed. However as a result a People's Assemble was formed and the exiles then returned to their homeland and their Tuckton properties sold.

Unfortunately the outbreak of the coronavirus meant the cancellation of the remaining meetings of the Spring Term and all the planned trips. We missed entirely the Autumn programme and even the Spring programme 2021. A total closure of some 16 months!!

July 21. After some meetings of the Management Committee and this very long break, we finally met again in July this year. Our first coach trip was to Buscot Park, which is a NT property north of Swindon. This was our first use of Heathside Coaches and over 20 members enjoyed the journey. We lunched at a pub by the river in Letchlade and then visited a 13th century church, St John's the Baptist, at Inglesham. The building was most interesting and from a guide we learnt that William Morris saved the building, raising funds for a new roof and essential building works. At Buscot Park the weather was fine and we were able to tour the lovely house and extensive gardens. There was even electric scooters to use for those having difficulty walking and of course we found the cafe for afternoon tea.

Then in August we had another coach outing, this time to the Kennet & Avon Canal. Our lunch stop was at Newbury and after a short journey, we embarked the house drawn barge at Kintbury for a three hour trip on the canal. It was so peaceful being pulled by a horse, even through a lock. Whilst on the canal we sheltered from a rain shower by pulling up the side windows. Later we were served tea or coffee and some lovely home-made cake, which was appreciated by all. Then back on the coach for our journey home, arriving about 7.30 pm.

A visit to Adam Henson's rare breed farm was the coach trip for September. The farm is near Cheltenham and after a stop for lunch at Chievely, members were able to explore the farm. The farm is high up, so a chilly breeze was felt all day, but in the barns they found sows with young and newborn piglets and also many chicks. I understand they found some very greedy goats!

In October we had a self-drive trip to Exbury Gardens, which was attended by approximately 20 members. We had a glorious sunny day and no wind, so ideal to take a ride on the train and stroll around some of the 200 acres of gardens. There was even a bonus of an exhibition of “nerines”, indoor flower variety, which had been developed by the de Rothchild family. There were blooms in every colour around the room. Some members were even tempted to purchase this indoor plant.

The final coach trip was in late October, to Westonbirt Arboretum, which is near Tetbury in Gloucestershire. Once again the weather was generally kind to us with sunshine most of the afternoon. However a few of us had a soaking from the heavy downpour just after arriving, as we tried to find the restaurant, which was some distance away from the entrance. Whilst we saw some autumn colour in the trees, the weather was still mild and hence winter was delayed. However we enjoyed the walks and particularly the Treetop Walkway, which is some 300 metres long and such a natural progression from the pathway, that you have no idea how high you are, until you look down over the edge.

Autumn programme. The Autumn talks started on the 19th October this year. A lovely colourful start, as Rosemary Lagrand took us on a photographic tour of the North Island of New Zealand. She had spent a month in the country and during the two weeks in North Island travelled many miles by car. We saw New Zealand's oldest church, which is in Russell, built in 1836, the largest tree, some 51 metres high and a girth of 14 metres as well as many beaches, flowers and shrubs. She explained that it was hotter in North Island and the beaches consist of silica sand. However, whilst idyllic, they also suffer from an invasive plant, the Californian Thistle, which must be reported to the authorities when spotted.

To continue with the uplifting theme, we then had a talk from Chris Walker, as we were introduced to the Great American Songbook. He told us about George and his brother Ira Gershwin and others including Cole Porter, Hoagy Carmichael, Benny Goodman, all great names during the 1920 to 1960 period. The talk was interspersed with archive recordings of songs performed by Nat King Cole, Sinatra, Peggy Lee and even Rod Stewart! The talk concluded with a spoof of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, apparently both singing the song, “Baby it is cold outside”.

November started with our Annual Lunch at the Mayfair Hotel, which was enjoyed by 19 members. It was good to be able to chat to members in an informal atmosphere. Those present including Phyllis Rogers, a former chairman of this Group. We also had Eileen Barker there, who recently lost her Husband John, both being members of this Group for some 50 years.

“Eve'ning All” was the cry, as Richard Hutley told us all about policing past and present. The display table was full of helmets, truncheons and cap badges, some old and some modern. It was interesting to see how the police force had developed from humble beginnings in the 1600's, as Parish Constables (often called petty constables). These men were unpaid, without a uniform and enlisted for just one year, to today's policemen and women with a whole array of clothing and aids. During the talk we learnt about the Bow Street runners, the London docks police that started in 1798 to deal with the many trading ships. As for Dorset police, they were formed in 1855, with Bournemouth police force created in 1948 and the two forces merging in 1967.

The following week Neil Meldrum took us back through time to the Ancient Maya people. Many facts have now emerged as their carvings and buildings have been studied. They were very religious people who worshipped three main gods, Death, Maize and Sun, mainly through blood letting offerings. In their world there were 50 year cycles with 13 heavens and 9 underworlds. They were jungle people, but massive builders of pyramids and temples with each city a separate entity. It is thought that whilst they numbered between 5 and 10 million people, the poor jungle ground and clearance to plant maize for food led to their demise, as this could not be sustained. Neil told us that Maya people still exist, with some structures being restored and efforts made to maintain the Maya language.

The final talk started with a kiss (so the title said!) as Jacqueline and Brian Sutton explored the life and times of Dylan Thomas. Indeed we learnt that Jacqueline once dated Dylan's son Colm, (hence the kiss), then researched Dylan's life. Dylan was born in 1914 in Swansea. His Father was Head of English at a grammar school and whilst Dylan was no academic, he was good at English. At the age of 11 he decided that he wanted to be a writer and poet and had his poem first published at age 13. However it was later established that the poem had been published before, written by somebody else!! That event summed up his life as he developed a bohemian lifestyle, drinking and begging money from friends and supporters. Dylan and his wife Caitlin, whom he married in 1937, both had very open lives with many lovers and “Patrons”, (well to do ladies who supported them). He is best known for his work, Under Milk Wood, which was made into a film. This led to tours of America and of course Hollywood. However he continued to drink and also take drugs, and he died in America in October 1953, at the young age of 39.

In conclusion, I must thank a number of people. To Ros for arranging the Autumn programme of talks and co-chairing the evenings. For John, Val and Ann for arranging the Spring programme of talks and for John co-chairing the evenings, for arranging the hall, liaising with the Caretaker and for kindly hosting committee meetings at his home.

Also to Yvonne for dealing with the membership, watching the finances and completing the attendance records each week. Also to Tina and her helpers for ensuring that every week we have tea and coffee and biscuits on demand.

To Ann, Val and John for organising the coach and self-drive trips

Also a thank you to all the members of the Management Committee for their regular attendance, their input at the meetings and general assistance.

Last but by no means least, a big thankyou to you, the members, for joining and attending the talks, as without you the Group could not continue.

Now lets look forward to a full year of interesting talks, visits and, yes, even more discoveries!

Thank you.

Dave Gibb, Secretary.