MINUTES OF THE 67th MEETING OF AYNHO HISTORY SOCIETY HELD AT AYNHO VILLAGE HALL ON WEDNESDAY 30th APRIL 2014

Present: - Rupert Clark - Chairman & Treasurer
Peter Cole - Secretary.

1. Chairman and Treasurer's Report Rupert Clark

In recognition of Peter Smith's time and efforts to refurbish the ice house at Aynhoe Park, the Society unanimously agreed to make him an Honorary Member.

A further chapter can be added to the tales of William Peckover. Also sailing with William and Captain James Cook was a junior officer, Lieutenant Edgar. With all his experience of sailing the southern oceans he was chosen to sail a convict ship to the newly founded penal colony of Australia. This convey was unique as it was composed wholly of women, almost exclusively thieves. The commander of the Colony had sent a request to London for more agricultural equipment, seed, food and "female company". All were seen as essential as without them the colony would fail. Many of these women had little option but to "comfort" the sailors, both officers and men, on the journey south. More money was earned in the ports they visited enroute. Having arrived in Australia a majority of the women became mothers. Without Edgars expertise bringing the essential supplies, the colony would almost surely have failed. The full story is recalled in Sian Rees, "The Floating Brothel".

2. Secretary's Report Peter Cole

The History Society section of the village website now has a complete set of minutes.

3. Child labour in nineteenth-century Oxfordshire. Speaker Liz Woolley

We are used to seeing children, even young adults heading off to school each morning. This everyday experience would have been exceptional at the start of the C19th. The vast majority from the age of seven were obliged to go out to work to supplement the family's income. For most families this ensured only a basic standard of living.

The common impression of child working conditions is based on those in the factories of the North and Midlands. Young children laboured under the moving machinery in a spinning works. They were the only ones small enough to get into the tiny spaces to repair broken threads. Other youngsters dragged coal trucks out of the narrower seams. This was six day a week, long day extreme hard labour. However in rural areas such as Oxfordshire it was in agriculture and domestic service that most of them were employed. Details of much this work is unknown, as the "norm" was deemed noteworthy. Also remember that nation-wide literacy was some way away so few could have written of their experiences even if they had had the inclination.

For the rural masses, life had not changed very much since medieval days. Agricultural profits continually declined during the C19th. This further increased the need for rural children to work. Locally in 1861 out of a workforce of some 71,000 sixteen percent were children aged under fourteen years. Even when in schools, during the latter part of the century, it was expected that children would absent themselves during summer and autumn times to assist in getting in the harvest or and in the spring, planting. After the grain had been gathered in, the women would go gleaning (or "leazing" as Flora Thompson describes it in "Lark Rise to Candleford") and all the children would be expected to help with this as this free food was extremely welcome. Another local industry was the stripping of bark from osier or willow rods for adults to make baskets, again more unskilled work for children.

Sometimes, rather than working with their parents children were hired by farmers or even gang masters, and a group of 60 has been recorded. Mostly the children worked alone, since the farmers would not trust them to work so hard if they were with youngsters of their own age. The work they were given to do was usually of the most monotonous and tiring sort. Some were made to stand out in a field on their own from dawn to dusk and in all weathers just shouting to scare off birds. Hand weeding the crops was another back breaking job.

Charles Kingsley wrote that one winter he had seen two small children huddled in a sheepfold who seemed too young to be turning the handle of a turnip cutter, their hands purple with chilblains, all for the princely sum of a shilling a week for 7 days work. Agricultural work was certainly not a soft option. In his memoirs one later recalled that he was often up working by four in the morning. Many were bullied or ill-treated by their farmers, and some died from overwork. Imagine trudging up and down a field leading a team of oxen for up to eight hours a day.
It wasn't until the Agricultural Children's Act of 1873 that matters improved when it was specified that no children under 10 should work in agricultural labouring gangs, no child under 8 should be employed at all, and that there should be minimum levels of school attendance for 8 – 12 year olds. This had the effect of reducing the number of children in full-time work from 11% to 4%. It was not a complete success, as parents were still allowed to employ their own children of any age. It was very difficult to enforce the rules in rural areas, and some children didn't think that compulsory schooling was for them.

Most girls left school at the age of ten to work as domestic servants. With the rise of middle class families by the time of the 1891 census there were over 1½ million women employed in service in England and Wales, 8% of them under age 14. Particularly where only one servant was employed, life became very dreary and laborious. For some the loneliness and long hours must have been crippling, especially if they had left their community or a large family. There were no household appliances to help. The single maid of all work, as she was called, was often the worst off since she was expected to perform the duties of the cook, the kitchen maid, the housemaid and even the footman. In mid-nineteenth century Oxfordshire 75% of all female servants worked alone.

Cottage industries used female labour. One such was lace-making. In 1861 there were almost two thousand lace-makers in Oxfordshire, about 70% of them under 14. There were 53 in the small village of Souldern, equal to a fifth of the female population. Some learned from their mothers at a very early age, but most were sent to lace schools as young as 5, as this was considered the best age for them to learn the manual dexterity required. Souldern had three lace schools. The children had to sit hunched over their work, with no exercise, which resulted in many developing consumption, or becoming deformed in later years.

An alternative was glove making. Locally gloving was concentrated in the Woodstock area. In the 1851 census 150 girls under 14 were listed as gloveresses in Oxfordshire. Due to very long hours and the need for close work they were prone to develop poor eyesight. Most children learned gloving from their mothers, which meant that they didn't get any proper education. Even after the Education Act of 1870 made full-time education compulsory for children under 10, as in many other industries this was easily evaded in rural areas. The Agricultural Employment Commission reported that gloveresses were found to be grossly ignorant, their morality was very low and they were generally found to be of rather easy virtue. Hope House in Woodstock was used as a glove making factory until the 1930s.

In Abingdon there was a good deal of clothing sewing or finishing work done. This was particularly badly paid, the children only earning three pence per pair of trousers, out of which they had to pay for their own thread and collect and return the garments. There were blanket makers in Whitney and Samuelson's Britannia Works in Banbury. Others worked in brickfields, filling moulds, carrying bricks or running barefoot up and down in the clay until it was ready for brick making.

These boys were called “puggers” and it was said that their feet were so sensitive that they could find the smallest submerged lumps. Standing in wet clay for hours ensured that the inevitable cuts on their feet turned gangrenous.

Boy chimney sweeps, or climbing boys as they were known, had attracted the attention of national reformers as early as 1788. Despite this early Act they still often worked in the most appalling conditions, with brutal masters and they often suffered long-term health problems as a result. They had to work in very tight places, and it was quite usual for masters to prick their feet with pins or broken glass, or even light fires under them if they got stuck. Many old chimneys had spikes in them, designed to aid climbing, but in practice their clothing often used to get caught on these, so many went up chimneys naked except for a coating of lubricating grease.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century a sort of alternative child job market had developed nationally. The work was exclusive to children, marginal to the economy, and offered little chance of advancement. In Oxfordshire these included errand boys and newspaper sellers. Oxford Universities became one of the biggest employers of children, as they needed many servants. The University Clarendon Press employed several hundred people, many of whom were boys under 14 doing unskilled work. When they were released at age 15, they hadn’t learned any useful skills. They were by then too old to start an apprenticeship, so were doomed to a life of drudgery.

A few orphans or abandoned children might if they were lucky end up supported by Parish Poor Laws, by which the Guardians found them apprenticeships. The less fortunate ones could be sent to work in the textile factories or coal mines of the Midlands. Some mill owners advertised for active girls about 14 years of age and under four feet six inches to work in their cotton mills, provided that they brought with them two dresses and £5. This was a common arrangement whereby Guardians rid themselves of pauper girls by paying the premium to get them off their hands. Despite an Act of 1816 forbidding Parish apprentices from being sent more than 40 miles from their home, a number of children were apprenticed to coal miners in Dudley, and twelve from Headington were even sent to Great Yarmouth to work on fishing boats. This was a dangerous occupation and seven of these ended up by drowning, a mortality rate well above the average for the fishing industry as a whole. At least until the 1870s most children worked so they didn’t go to school, and this lack of education had a profound effect on the country.

Changes in the market for products, advances in new technology and new employment legislation combined to bring about a slow decline in the demand for and the supply of child labour during the latter years of the 1900s. in the 1901 census there was a surprising number of children still working in Oxfordshire. It shows 8,400 boys under the age of fourteen, 907 of whom were still working in dead-end jobs. Out of 8,300 girls 343 were still engaged in domestic service. Northamptonshire and Bedfordshire still used young women in the hatting industry i.e. making straw boaters, the classic summer headwear for the Victorian town dweller.

Sunday schools had a vital role as for some it was their only chance of any education.

It wasn’t until the eve of the First World War that the lives of children became less dominated by work and school became the norm.

4. Forthcoming meetings and events

Wednesday 28th May	The EU - Past, Present & Future	Chris Hodges
Wednesday 25th June	Royal Mistresses	Roger Powell