

MINUTES OF THE 74th MEETING OF AYNHO HISTORY SOCIETY HELD AT THE VILLAGE HALL, AYNHO ON WEDNESDAY 28th JANUARY 2015

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

1. Chairman's Report

Rupert paid tribute to Jimmy Guthrie, who had passed away on 5th January. A founder member of the Society, he was particularly knowledgeable on the pre Cartwright occupants of Aynhoe Park and a driving force when investigating the village tunnels.

A talk will be given at Stowe School on 24th February by Richard Buckley, a leading archaeologist on the Richard III excavations.

2. Secretary's Report

At the last meeting he had mentioned various items that were recorded as being in the Church before it was rebuilt in 1725. Thanks to Graham Gibbs for confirming that two of these items remain; the stone and brass plate in memory of Lady Arundel and a marble in memory of Henry Watkins are in the Cartwright chapel.

The full 1911 census for Aynho has been added to our census folder.

3. William Gill - Victorian Explorer and Spy by Tony Hadland

William Gill was the great-great-uncle of Tony; this is a classic case of the "famous ancestor" being truly just that.

He was born in Bangalore in India in 1843. His father was an artist and photographer, who copied and later took stereo photographs of the cave murals in a ravine near Ajunta. This is a small town in central India, about 200 miles east of Nagpur, where the family lived. When William was 12 his Father in took a mistress, the results was that his wife left him in India and brought young William and his two younger sisters to England, and settled in Brighton. This also allowed to boys to have a formal British education as befitted their class.

William distinguished himself at Brighton College, where he specialised in Mathematics, Geography and History. In 1861 he left with a glowing testimonial from his headmaster, and went to the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich. From there he joined the Royal Engineers. He spent the next nine years with them as a Sapper Officer, including a spell of 18 months in India.

At this point a distant relative died childless and left William a small fortune. Exactly how much is not known, but on his death he left over seven million pounds in today's money, nearly all of which went to his brother, who was a solicitor. With all this money behind him, he left the Army to become a self-financing explorer and intelligence officer.

He decided that the best way to start exploring was to go first with an experienced person, so he befriended well-travelled Colonel Valentine Baker. Together, during an eight month period in 1873 they covered about 2,000 miles through Persia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan. They often travelled at a height of 12,000 feet, all the time surveying and gathering military intelligence. One particular incident occurred when they were descending a rocky outcrop. Gill was carrying a loaded gun, rather unwisely on half-cock. He rested it on a projecting ledge, when it slipped and went off, shooting him in the foot. Luckily it didn't do any serious damage so they were able to

continue. Their survey work was of great importance in settling a boundary dispute between Persia and Russia, as their detailed information enabled Britain to support the Shah's position on a factual basis. The expedition was judged to have made a substantial addition to towards a correct knowledge of the geography of Persia.

On his return to England Captain Gill decided to stand for Parliament as a candidate in a by-election in Hackney. He eventually increased the Conservative vote from 10% to 47%, but just failed to beat the Liberal Candidate.

Turning his mind back to exploring. A friend suggested visiting China, so to prepare for this he went to see the most experienced expert on that country, Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen in Berlin. He had coined the expression "Silk Road", and Gill learned a great deal from him. He carried on from Berlin by public transport, train and boat to Hong Kong, Shanghai and thence to Tianjin and Peking (now Beijing).

His first expedition in China was a five-week march inland with a staff member of the legation to the Great Wall and then down to the sea and back along the coast. Next he had intended to go through north-west China to Kyrgyzstan, a very mountainous region, and then back to Europe, but diplomatic problems between Britain and Russia put paid to this.

Instead he went to Shanghai, and travelled up the Yangtze to Chongqing. He then went on a circular route with a servant, a dog, a pony, a pony boy and 20 coolies to carry his luggage, into an area never before visited by a European. They went north to Chengdu, and then through the mountains of northern Sichuan, then to Sungpan and back to Chengdu. One place on this trip involved a haul bridge between two high sheer rock towers. Two main ropes linked the two towers, and beneath each of these were slung a short rope ending in a seat. A person would sit on the seat and slide down as far as he could. He would then pull himself up along the main rope on a thinner one until he reached the other tower. Back at Chengdu as planned, he met William Mesny, a Jersey-born Briton, who had long worked for the Chinese. They agreed to travel through Batang (Tibet) just inside the border with China) to northern Burma. They set off with 60 coolies, and entered Tibet from Tachienlou. From there they went on to Batang, in the valley of the Jinsha River. This is really the Upper Yangtze River, but the word "Jinsha" means "Golden Sand" (not the colour of the sand, but a reference to the panning for gold that has always taken place there). On his return, Gill wrote a book entitled "The River of Golden Sand" about his travels there.

From Batang they proceeded to Dali, the capital of Yunnan, in south-west China, soon after passing Shangri-La, and from there by steamer down the Irrawaddy to Rangoon, and then by sea to Calcutta and on to England. On his return, William Gill was awarded a gold medal by the Royal Geographical Society for his endeavours. This was followed by a similar medal from the Geographical Society of Paris. Baron von Richthofen was very fulsome in his praise of William's accuracy and determination.

Having been appointed to the War Office's Intelligence Branch he made a brief foray with a friend into Russian-occupied Bulgaria, and a similarly fleeting visit to Constantinople.

Gill once again tried to become an M.P., this time in Nottingham, but again without success.

The British Army asked him to prepare a paper on the Chinese Army. His conclusions were that they would not make good officers as they lacked originality, and there was no national feeling of self-sacrifice.

In 1880 a vastly outnumbered British force had been defeated in Maiwand, Afghanistan, and Gill was sent to accompany a relief force to assist the survivors, who had retreated to Kandahar. By the time they arrived another relief force marching from Kabul had recovered the survivors. The

battle in which the Royal Berkshires had fought so gallantly against such formidable numbers is celebrated in the Abbey Gardens in Reading by the largest statue of a lion in the world.

William Gill's final mission was in 1882. The British government was concerned about the situation in Egypt, and Gill was asked to go to find out about the Bedouin tribes in the Sinai desert. Britain wanted to secure the Suez Canal by enlisting support from the local Arab sheikhs. He joined Professor Edward Palmer, who had knowledge of many tribes there, and Lieutenant Harold Charrington, representing the British Government. Cairo was linked to Constantinople by a telegraph line, which ran across the Suez Canal. It was important to cut this line, as it could not be used by the opposition to monitor British troop movements. Gill was ordered to cut the line, although it couldn't be done near the Canal, as this would break the neutrality of the Canal. It went against the grain for him to do this, but he agreed, and the three of them and two servants proceeded inland to meet some sheikhs. However before they could meet, and Gill could cut the line, they were betrayed and ambushed by 25 Bedouins. Robbed of all their possessions, and stripped almost naked, they were forced to walk over a mile in the heat of the sun to the edge of a gully. Here they were all murdered and their bodies fell or were tossed down to the bottom and left. By the time word had reached the Government of this, wild animals had consumed most of the bodies, so all the remains were collected into one coffin, this was later buried in the crypt of St. Paul's Cathedral. A large memorial plaque to the three was placed there. As Gill had attended Brighton College, a public memorial to him was set up in the form of a Scholarship, and at a memorial service at the College a General of the Royal Engineers unveiled a white and black marble tablet to him. William Gill was truly a great but in this day and age unknown Victorian explorer.

4. Forthcoming meetings

Wednesday 25th February "Women at War" by Bob Harris

Wednesday 25th March "Votes for Women – The Suffrage Movement" by Muriel Pilkington

