



STAFFORDSHIRE ARCHAEOLOGICAL & HISTORICAL SOCIETY



NEWSLETTER May 2024

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News has reached us recently that the church of the Sacred Heart in Abbots Bromley has closed and the building is for sale for conversion for other uses.



Photograph Staffordshire Historic Churches

This was a small Roman Catholic Chapel built around 1841 to a very simple design and furnished very simply (we visited it some years ago). It was not a prominent presence in Abbots Bromley being rather hidden down a side street and it is said that it was built in a parishioner's garden. Its closure is a further manifestation of the decline in the number of places of worship in the county.

Visits

In March a group from the Society visited the churches of St Mary and All Saints Bradley, St Editha Church Eaton and St Lawrence Gnosall guided by our President Dr John Hunt. We are grateful to the vicars and churchwardens of the churches for their agreement to this visit, to the ladies who provided tea and coffee at St Editha and the Red Lion Bradley for an excellent lunch.



At St Mary and All Saints Bradley



A chilly morning in March outside St Editha Church Eaton

These are three fascinating churches and John described the architecture of each and the features in the stone fonts that link the three – a very enjoyable day.

Lectures in our Spring 2024 programme

10th May 2024

Dr. Roger White

LIVE AT GUILDHALL

The Wem in Shropshire Hoard

Dr Roger White has presented lectures to the Society on several occasions, the most recent one however was in 2017 and was "A Clash of Arms: The Romans in the West Midlands".

This evening's lecture is centred on the Wem Hoard that was discovered in 2018 by metal detectorists with the site-find being excavated by Dr Roger White in 2019. The find is of key importance to Shropshire's history where there is limited evidence of people living within the County during the 5th century.

24th May 2024

To be confirmed

BY ZOOM

To be confirmed

(The talk on Coleshill Manor previously advertised will not now take place. We are arranging a replacement and members will be notified asap.)

7th June 2024

Dr. Katherine Farr

LIVE AT GUILDHALL

You Are What You Eat: How Isotopes Dish the Dirt on Historical Puzzles

Dr Kate Farr was until recently a Senior Lecturer in the School of Sciences, University of Wolverhampton having taught there for 32 years. Her interests are in the impacts of humans on their environment over the last 10 000 years since the last Ice Age.

Analysis can reveal so much more about our ancestors by analysing what we eat after any other remains have decayed away completely. Hence the title "You Are What You Eat".

Archaeologists are now having to be much more careful about throwing anything away as science has shown that in future there may be a wealth of further information in there.

Additional Lecture

We have arranged an additional talk on Friday 14 June 2024 by ZOOM entitled 'The lost palace of Collyweston' This small village in Northamptonshire was long known to be the site of a large Tudor palace frequented by Henry VIII but the exact site was lost. Recent explorations have though finally located the remains of this once grand house. The speaker will be Chris Close, chairman of Colleyweston Historical and Preservation Society.

2024/2025 LECTURE SEASON (AUTUMN 2024)

Friday 13th September - LIVE - Christopher John - Castle Bromwich Airfield

Friday 20th September - LIVE - Dr Simon Davies - Two Medieval Settlements in the Tamworth Hinterland

Friday 4th October - ZOOM – Ian Parker Heath – Tudor Farming Interpretation Group at Under Whitle Farm North Staffordshire

Friday 18th October - LIVE - Fiona Keith-Lucas - Bell Foundry Pits at Worcester Cathedral

Friday 1st November - ZOOM – Zoe Toft – Sutton Coldfield Crystal Palace

Friday 15th November – LIVE – Shaun Farrelly – A Trip to the Seaside with Seaside Piers; Annual General Meeting

29th November – ZOOM – Invitation out there awaiting response

Live Lectures at the Guildhall start at 8.00pm with refreshments normally available from 7.30pm. All are welcome; £3 on the door.

Zoom lectures are for members only who will be notified of the Zoom link a few days beforehand.

Archaeology in Africa

An article in a recent issue of 'Chemistry World' by Hayley Bennett has highlighted an area which is not much discussed in the popular Archaeological Magazines; the Archaeology of Sub-Saharan Africa. The article is about research into the origins of an African technology that is fast disappearing; the use of small furnaces to smelt iron ore into iron and steel. The technology was in widespread use from West to East Africa and provided Africans with the metal materials for use in daily life, but always seems to have been a cottage industry and did not develop on an industrial scale.

Small furnaces were constructed on the sides of termite mounds from the clay of the mound and stood up to three metres tall. Skilled workers fed fuel (charcoal) and ore into the furnaces and tapped the iron bloom from the belly of the furnace.

Questions as yet unanswered include how the technology was developed, was it introduced from elsewhere or was it discovered locally, and the date of the first use of the technology with estimates ranging from the first to second millennium BC or even earlier. Elsewhere metal working seems to have developed in stages with copper working being developed before iron working as lower temperatures were needed but in Africa iron working seems to have been developed without the copper working intermediate stage.

Researchers are looking at sites of furnaces from Nigeria to Malawi, collecting and analysing remains of iron bloom and slag from the sites but research is hampered by the lack of advanced analytical facilities on the continent. There is only one laboratory south of the Sahara which can do radio carbon dating and this is in South Africa and is not always operational because of daily power cuts. X-Ray Fluorescence facilities needed for elemental analysis are also uncommon.

This is a fascinating field to explore for archaeologists. There is a lot still to do – technologies varied across the continent depending on the quality of the local ores; in Nigeria for example the titanium

rich iron ores required special treatment which other ores did not need. There is even the thought that some of the techniques might have found their way into England to help with the development of iron smelting here through skilled ironworkers being enslaved and taken to the Caribbean.

Hayley Bennett *The Archaeologists saving Africa's Ironworking Heritage*, Chemistry World, Volume 20 December 2023 pp 44-47

New Website

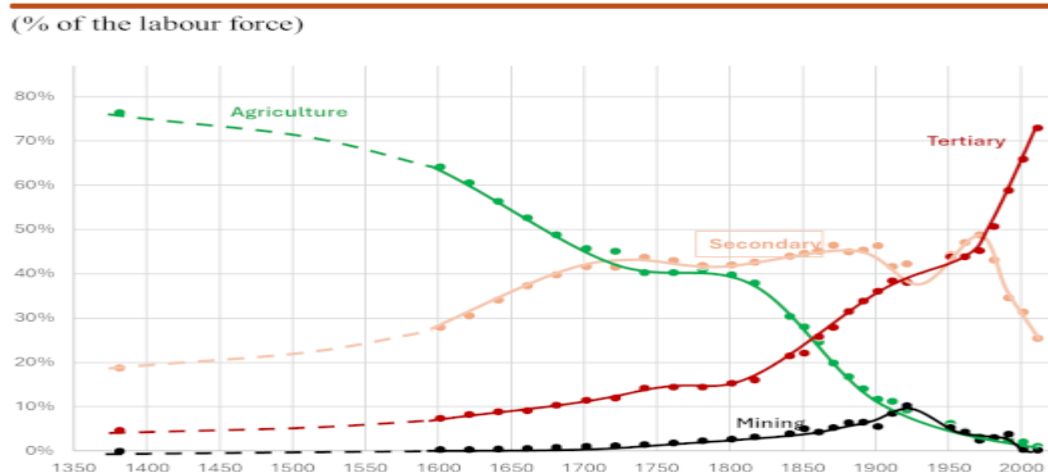
Those of you who like exploring statistical studies of history will like the new website:

[Economies Past, Cambridge](#)

Over the last 20 years, a team of historians at Cambridge have collected millions of records to build, for England and Wales, the most detailed quantitative picture of long-run economic development ever assembled anywhere in the world. The data concern **occupational structure**, which refers to the distribution of men and women through different economic activities.

 [Explore the map](#) plus our [user guide](#).

The male occupational structure of England and Wales 1381-2011



The graph shows the long-run trends in male occupational structure.

All occupations have been classified to one of three sectors:

- Primary sector: agriculture, forestry and fishing;
- Secondary sector: mining, manufacturing and construction;
- Tertiary sector: anyone in services.

Sandwell Archives; a report from the Birmingham Mail

Sandwell Council is pushing ahead with plans to build a new £20 million archives building to house its 'at-risk' records. Sandwell Council wants to build the new purpose-built facility behind Smethwick Council House to replace its displaced archive – with many of the irreplaceable documents at risk of mould and flood damage.

The current estimated cost would be at least £20 million – if designed to meet important accreditation standards – and the building would have a life of around 40 years. Sandwell Council has already spent more than £36,000 cleaning and restoring flood and mould-damaged records in recent years because of the shoddy state of its archives.

The council also spends £13,000 every year to store part of its archive in Dudley. There is also a fear that Sandwell could lose the responsibility of storing its own archive because of its negligent storage facilities.

The borough's archives are riskily stored in the cellars of West Bromwich Town Hall and Smethwick Library – where documents have already been damaged by flooding and mould. The council has shelled out £120,000 in the last eight years papering, in some cases literally, over the cracks of its crumbling archives with an ever-growing list of issues threatening to destroy the important and irreplaceable files.

This includes £86,000 given to Dudley to store Sandwell's files at its archives. The bill also includes nearly £26,000 professionally cleaning, drying and restoring many flood-damaged documents.

The archive, which boasts documents dating back 650 years, contains the "political, personal, domestic, industrial, religious, educational and social histories" of the borough. The council said its current archives are full and divided across three sites which makes it difficult to search through and organise.

Sandwell's third-rate archives have also led to an outbreak of mould on collections stored at West Bromwich Town Hall – which will already cost the taxpayer £10,000 to clean and restore. Sandwell is one of only a handful of local councils not accredited by the National Archives and the authority failed in its bid to obtain accreditation in 2018 – mainly due to the poor state of its archives and for not even meeting minimum standards.

The council said the "unsuitable environment" for storing its archive was 'jeopardising the ability to effectively care for and conserve the collections.' If the council fails again to be accredited, then Sandwell could lose its local archive service altogether.

The poor storage standards would mean the council could not be trusted to collect important and historical public records. Sandwell Council said it would have to refuse the offer of any major collections in the future because of its substandard facilities.

Without accreditation, the council could also lose its prestigious 'place of deposit' status and the borough's records would have to be stored elsewhere – most likely outside of Sandwell and at a cost to the public purse. Studies were carried out in 2020 and 2021 to find a new home for the borough's archives but were abruptly put on the back burner following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

But after the plans were dusted off, the council's first and second choice for possible sites were no longer available or deemed inappropriate. The old Gas Showroom in West Bromwich High Street was eyed up as the prime location for Sandwell's new archives building in a report from early 2021. The council later sold the site for £270,000 in April 2022 to be used for affordable housing. The Albion Foundation in Brasshouse Lane, Smethwick, was also earmarked as a potential site in the report.

The council's cabinet backed a move to look at designs for a new purpose-built archive behind Smethwick Council House – plans that include moving Smethwick Library from its current High Street location into the grade II listed building and selling off the old library site. Sandwell Council is also

paying neighbours in Dudley around £13,000 a year to store some of Sandwell's records at the town's own archives in Tipton Road.

The cost of storing part of the archive in Dudley is ten per cent of Sandwell's overall archive budget. A £30,000 report – nearly four times what is spent by the council on the conservation and digitisation of its archives – has been produced by Ellis Williams Architects at the request of Sandwell Council detailing a new archive at Smethwick Council House.

The cabinet report said attempts to find a suitable location for the borough's archive had never got off the ground in 20 years because of funding issues and a suitable site could not be found. The council said building a new archive building would also provide an opportunity to build a heritage centre to store more records and provide a community facility for Sandwell's diverse population with exhibits, arts events and music and theatre performances.

Book Review

F. E. Robson, *Secrets of the Shepherd's Monument* (Malvern, 2024)

£19.99 ISBN 978-1-916919-07-5 Available from Aspect Design:www.aspect-design.net

This comprehensive book represents a research project, lasting 15 years, into one of the monuments in the garden at Shugborough in which the conclusions promulgated by many authors over the last 40 years are considered, challenged, and a surprising new theory explained in detail.

The Shepherd's Monument is a relief sculpture in marble by Peter Scheemakers (1691–1781), representing a modified version of the painting entitled 'Et in Arcadia Ego' by Nicholas Poussin and beneath it an inscription comprising ten capital letters over two rows. This sculpture was commissioned by Thomas Anson (1695–1773), the owner of Shugborough, at the beginning of the period from 1747 when he was ornamenting his garden and park with a variety of remarkable structures. These represented the classical monuments which he had seen on his Grand Tour and along with other buildings observed by his brother George in China. Scheemakers' sculpture was first documented in 1756 as being placed in a garden wall near the mansion and by 1759 it had become a freestanding structure enclosed within a rusticated stone arch standing in a shrubbery. In 1769 it was moved once more and given a classical surround.

From the outset, visitors have puzzled over the ten letters carved beneath the sculpture and many suggestions have been made in travel diaries, garden history papers, books, journals and, more recently, newspapers. Thomas Pennant (1726–1798), who was a close friend of Anson, described the monument in the 1782 book of his travels from Chester to London, stating that it was a memorial of 'some loss of a tender nature for he was wont to hang over it in affection and firm meditation'.

The methods the author has used to explain the meaning of the inscribed initial letters, the sculpture, and the painting which inspired its creation include archaeology, geophysics, geometry, ancient history and mythology, religious myths and legends, and classical symbolism, as well as both primary and secondary literary sources and his own graphics drawn over a contemporary estate plan. He claims to have explained the meaning of all the monuments and in particular the way in which they were aligned with each other, concluding that Anson used a code which he had placed within Scheemakers' sculpture and which was known only to himself.

I was fascinated but left wondering why someone like Thomas Anson, who belonged to several gentlemen's societies of the type in which members met to discuss their ideas and projects, would not want to boast of his ingenuity and wish it to be known particularly to his descendants if, as suggested, buried treasure was involved.

Sue Gregory



The Shepherd's Monument Shugborough Photo; British Listed Buildings

Staffordshire Historic Churches Trust

The first tour in 2024 is on June 29th starting at Weston upon Trent (near Stafford) at 2pm. Then the tour proceeds to Stowe by Chartley and ends in Gayton with a tea provided.

The cost, which includes tea (not to be missed) is £17 for members and £20 for non-members.

The second tour is on July 27th starting at 2pm at Blore St Bartholomew. Then we go onto Ilam Holy Cross at 3pm and finish at Waterfall St Bartholomew and St James around 4 to 4.30 and end there with the usual tea.

Please show early interest by emailing Katie Brown at admastonfarm@outlook.com

NEW PROJECT

Transforming The Trent Valley medieval buildings graffiti survey project.

A community project aimed at recording graffiti in our churches and other medieval buildings. Transforming the Trent Valley will coordinate a pilot project in the TTTV project area on both sides of the county boundary (Staffordshire and Derbyshire, along the River Trent), surveying and recording graffiti in medieval buildings. By and large this means churches, as they are in the majority when it comes to surviving medieval buildings.



Staffordshire Archaeological and Historical Society and Derbyshire Archaeological Society are involved, as are some individual churches and history groups. Training and equipment will be provided, plus a handbook and identification guide. Please contact me directly if you're interested in taking part. I look forward to hearing from you.

For more information, contact Dr Mark Knight m.knight@staffs-wildlife.org.uk

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News from the Archives

Stoke on Trent Archives will reopen on 24 May 2024 in the new facility in the Potteries Museum, just next door to the old Central Library building where the archives were previously held.

Meanwhile work on the New History Centre in Stafford continues; it is expected that it will open in the autumn of this year.

Staffordshire County Council have withdrawn the free facility for access to the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography through the Library Service. Users had been able to access the Dictionary on line using their Staffordshire Library card but now cannot. We understand the underlying reason for this concerns the security of the underlying platform used for the digital version and this has caused several County Library Services to cancel their subscriptions. This will cause real problems for researchers and there appears to be no obvious replacement.

Alex, a volunteer at the Lichfield Local History Access point, has written a short blog about Elias Ashmole ; [Elias Ashmole – Staffordshire History Centre](#)

Visit to St Mary's Abbey Colwich

In April 2024 we visited the Abbey of St Mary in Colwich. This mansion was built by Viscount Tamworth in the late 1820s on the site of a previous house known as Mount Pleasant. Viscount Tamworth's house was built in the Gothick style and was a substantial edifice which was not quite complete when he died. It was empty for ten years until it was bought by a community of English Benedictine Nuns, founded in Cambrai in 1623, who had left France during the French revolution. The community thrived and by the 1970s there were 40 sisters in residence. In the 19th century it was known as St Benedict's Priory but by 1928 it had grown sufficiently to reach the standards of an Abbey and was renamed St Mary's Abbey. After 1970 gradual decline in the number of sisters meant that the community became unviable in 2020 and was disbanded. The premises now lie almost empty and are for sale.



St Mary's Abbey Colwich, the south east front with current entrance

On arrival the nuns had set about the task of converting what was intended to be a fashionable country house into a nunnery. The grand entrance hall was converted into the chapel and other potentially splendid rooms on the ground and first floors adapted for other uses. The original architecture remains mostly in place with some attractive ornate ceilings and windows. There is stained glass in the chapel, some designed by Pugin. There were major extensions at the back of the house some of which were later demolished to allow the building of a modern accommodation block in the 1970s. For more than a century and a half this was a flourishing community and estate; the

nuns managing the extensive gardens and running small enterprises such as the printing of prayer cards, embroidery and cooking for the Meals on Wheels Service.

Our visit was guided by Gerard Wilcox and the last Abbess, Sister Davina, welcomed us: local ladies provided tea/coffee and home made biscuits and cake. It was an interesting visit allowing us a glimpse of what once had been a vibrant nunnery and something that Staffordshire will not house again.



St Mary's Abbey Colwich. Ornate plaster ceiling in one of the ground floor reception rooms

SA&HS Needs You!

As someone interested in the history and archaeology of Staffordshire and beyond, have you ever considered the possibility of closer involvement through the activities of our Society?

The Staffordshire Archaeological and Historical Society exists to promote the history and archaeology of both our region and further afield, by acting as advocates for its study and an appreciation of its value, underpinned by a mission to disseminate our knowledge and understanding of it, and enjoyment of the riches that it brings to us as individuals and communities. At the same time our Society is also driven by the interests and support of our membership, without whom, of course, it would not exist.

The critical link between meeting the interests of the membership and fulfilling the aims and objectives of the Society is your committee, which oversees all of our activities. It is the committee that arranges the programme of lectures and

excursions, manages our website and engagement with the public, promotes occasional projects, publishes our Newsletters and much respected *Transactions*, and liaises with other regional groups and societies. To do all of this we call upon the wide and diverse range of skills, experience, knowledge, and interests that your committee members bring to their role, but there is also an ongoing need to complement these via new committee members who refresh the committee with new thinking, perspectives, and ideas.

So, this is an appeal to our members - to give some thought as to whether this might be an opportunity that you would like to explore. The committee has opportunities to invite co-opted members to join us for up to twelve months in the first instance, giving co-optees the chance to see the committee, our Society and its work from a different perspective and decide if it is something that they would like to continue with and contribute to. Our committee meetings, normally five a year, are now held by zoom, members having found this a convenient and accessible response to the demands of busy daily lives. If you decide that it's not for you, that's fine. You can opt out as easily as you might opt in.

If you think that you might like to give this a try, or would like to ask any questions about how this all works, please feel free to contact John Hunt, Steve Lewitt or Keith Billington for a chat. Ours is a friendly, accessible, and inclusive committee that works well together and is one that we are sure you will find welcoming and supportive! Please do think about joining us and influencing how SA&HS might go from strength to strength.

John Hunt.

This newsletter is edited for the Society by Richard Totty richard.totty4@gmail.com

Comments and articles are welcome.

Any views expressed herein are not necessarily those of the Society.

Follow us on Facebook, X (Twitter) and Instagram.

Coming in 2025 a Field Trip to the churches of St John the Baptist Berkswell and St Lawrence Ansley, Warwickshire, guided by Dr John Hunt. Detail in our January 2025 Newsletter.