

HERITAGE CIRCLE

A 'place of magic and mystery' was how Frances Hart aptly described Venice at the start of her talk to the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall on 22 January. It is a city which has enchanted visitors over the centuries. Charles Dickens saw Venice as a 'dream' as he was overwhelmed by the water, ships, boats of all sizes, and beautiful churches and palaces in this sunlit city. It is built on 118 islands linked by 177 canals.

Tradition suggests that the origins of Venice date back to about 452AD when an invasion of the crumbling Roman Empire by Germanic tribes led by Attila the Hun forced wealthy citizens to flee to the marsh land where the modern city is located. The refugees noticed that the local fishermen built their houses on stilts. This led to extensive tree felling to provide wood to be driven into the mud. This could then be built on.

The speaker explained that legend linked St Mark closely to Venice. It is claimed that he was marooned near Venice where it was prophesied that his bones would lie in this place. In 828 some Venetian traders 'translated', or rather stole, his bones from Alexandria. The first Basilica of St Mark was built to house the relics. This encouraged pilgrims to come to Venice. Frances Hart described these visitors as the earliest 'tourists' to the city. Tourism has been a source of income for Venice since then.

Venice became one of the foremost trading ports in the world and a major centre for shipbuilding from the 13th Century. By the 16th Century the Arsenal was building up to 100 ships at any one time and employed 16,000 people. It is claimed that a ship was built in a day in 1574.

The Venetians were also known as intrepid travellers. One of the most famous was Marco Polo who ventured to China with his father and uncle in 1271. He returned to Venice 24 years later as a rich man bringing gold, jewels and spices. His writings about his journeys through China encouraged trade with Asia which enriched Venice and made it the wealthiest city state in Europe. The speaker noted the influence of China on Italian cuisine with noodles being the basis of pasta and the introduction of rice, now used in risotto.

The Venetians had one major fear, fire, as their city was built on wood. Frances Hart showed how this influenced house design as chimneys were built to avoid the risk of stray sparks. However, there was a major fire in 1514 which destroyed the Rialto. Subsequently, the famed glass making was banished to the island of Murano because of safety concerns. This is just one of the islands of the Venetian lagoon noted for a specialism, another is Burano renowned for lace making.

Frances Hart explained the gradual development of the noted sites within Venice. Not all had a pleasant function as the Bridge of Sighs led to a prison that few people emerged from.

Venice went into gradual decline from the 16th Century and lost its independence when captured by Napoleon in 1797. After 1814 the city became part of the Austrian Empire, before being incorporated into the new state of Italy in 1866. It is now a city noted for its beauty and is a major tourist attraction. However, it faces a number of challenges, not least from nature as this city which is built on wooden piles has sunk by 9 inches in the last 100 years. There were extremely serious floods in 1966. Considerable global efforts have been put into protecting a city which still offers 'magic and mystery' to visitors.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 26 February when Derek Palgrave will be speaking about *The Origin and Development of Surnames*. New and non-members are welcome.

Gerry Gurhy