

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Peter Driver, Follies and Oddities of Suffolk

Peter Driver gave a very entertaining presentation to the March meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall. He explored a number of follies and oddities in Suffolk. He interspersed interesting images of places around the county with funny stories about Suffolk people. He began the talk with East Bergholt Church. It is very unusual as the tower was never finished. As there was nowhere to house the church bells, a 'temporary' barn was built for them. It is still in use. Nearby there is another oddity, the Tattlingstone Wonder. In 1790 Edward White, the local squire, did not like the view of two cottages from his house and so he added a third cottage with a square tower which gave them the appearance of a church. This is even stranger when viewed from the rear as the 'tower' is hollow!

Another series of oddities mentioned by Peter were linked to the famous Red Barn Murder in Polstead in 1827 when Maria Martin was shot dead by her lover. William Corder was convicted and a crowd of 10,000 was present when he was hanged at Bury St Edmunds. His body was then given to a surgeon for dissection and public display. Some of the skin was taken and it was to cover a book which is held by the Moyse Hall Museum. Corder's death mask has been placed in Norwich Castle. The story does not end there. The remains of Maria Martin were interred at Polstead Church. However, there was so much interest in the case that her grave had many visitors who often chipped away a piece of her tombstone as a memento. Over time the tombstone disappeared and so she was just commemorated by a wooden plaque.

Churches often have interesting features. There is a redundant church at Wattisham which has a plaque outlining the sad fate of a very poor family in 1792. It states that six members of one family lost their feet in unexplained circumstances. Research now suggests that the family had eaten bread made from rye gleaned from a field. It is likely that the rye was rotting and the fungus, ergot, had formed on it. This caused gangrene when eaten. A baby in the family died and other members lost limbs or fingers. The plight of the family aroused pity and money contributed gave them a small annuity to live on.

Walpole Old Chapel is very distinctive as it has been made from the conversion of a 16th Century farmhouse. It is a very early Independent Chapel where worship began in 1649. Like many other dissenting chapels it has quite an isolated location. Peter also showed a picture of the path through Theberton churchyard. It is markedly below the level of the rest of the churchyard. This is probably because of the number of people who have been buried there over time.

There was a chance discovery made at Wenhaston Church in 1892. Some boards were taken out of the church during renovation work and left to the elements. After it rained, the boards were seen to have been painted. The Wenhaston Doom is a remarkable picture dating from around 1500. It was a rood screen which originally had a carving of Christ on the cross and around it there were a series of images warning of the Day of Judgement. It is likely that the screen was white washed during the Reformation. Peter briefly mentioned several other oddities, including Covehithe Church where a small church is built within the ruins of a former larger structure, Thomas Mills being buried in the front garden of his house in Framlingham, an almost unique post box in Bawdsey that bears the initials of Edward VIII, and the disfiguring of an angel's image on the carved corner post of the Guildhall in Eye. Sights like these are only seen when we look around us.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 27 April 2016 at The Village Hall, Rickinghall IP221HD. There is a change to the programme as Janette Robinson will be speaking about Flora Sandes, the only woman to fight in the trenches in World War I. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy