

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Martyn Taylor, The A-Z of Streets in Bury St Edmunds

Martyn Taylor used material from a recent book to give an entertaining talk to the August meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall about changes to the streets of Bury St Edmunds. He used the idea of an A-Z gazetteer to explore aspects of the history of the town through short anecdotes about places and the people who lived there.

Martyn started his review with the letter A and Angel Hill. This lies at the heart of the historic town. One of its most prominent features is the Angel Hotel which was built on the site of three medieval inns. It used to have attractive creepers across its frontage but they had to be removed as mice climbed them and got into the bedrooms, upsetting guests. Nearby is another notable building, the Athenaeum. It has a green dome which contained an observatory opened in 1859. Unfortunately it is now in disrepair. However, at the time, it encouraged a flourishing astronomical society.

Like most medieval towns and cities, guilds played a prominent role in the community. In Bury St Edmunds, the most influential was the Candlemas Guild whose members were the wealthiest citizens in the town. They supported the poor and the needy. Two examples of their work are still to be found. The Guildhall Feoffment School in Bridewell Lane and the almshouses in College Square were financed by the guild.

The talk offered quirky details about Bury St Edmunds. Hatter Street, where the Abbeygate Theatre now stands, is little changed from when it was built but it was the Jewish Quarter and was originally called Heathenmen Street. The Fox in Eastgate Street is probably the oldest pub in the town. Drovers who brought animals to the market drank there. Around the corner was the ducking stool which was last used in 1833 to punish scolding wives or cheats. Similarly, in Home Farm Lane, near the hospital, there is the only thatched building in Bury St Edmunds because a serious fire in the town in 1608 led to thatched roofs being banned.

Martyn told one distressing story. Chalk mining was undertaken in parts of Bury St Edmunds. The chalk was used to make lime cement for building work or to reduce the acidity of fields. In 1964 33 houses were built in Jacqueline Close to the west of the town centre. In 1967 some of the houses began to collapse and fall into the old mine workings. The problem was so bad that most residents had to be moved out for their safety. Their problems did not end there as most were not insured for subsidence and so were still liable for their mortgage repayments. Questions about why permission was granted to permit building on the site were never adequately answered.

At the end of his A-Z review, Martyn mentioned Zulu Lane. He has found a link between the town and the Zulus. In the middle of the 19th century, Thomas Wilkinson, the son of a JP in Walsham-le-Willows was a pupil at a grammar school in Bury St Edmunds. He went on to become the Bishop of Zululand. This story concluded an enjoyable evening provided by a man with an extensive knowledge of Bury St Edmunds through research of the town where he was born and obviously loves.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 24 October at The Village Hall, Rickinghall. Mike Wabe will give a talk about life and death in a Victorian gaol. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy