Bicester Local History Society
Established 1968

BLHS Newsletter

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The monthly newsletter for Bicester Local History Society

Bicester Brains Trust Talk

From 1944 to 1946 Wesley Hall played host to monthly meetings of the Bicester Brains Trust, where members of the public posed questions to a panel of Bicester's well-respected residents. These meetings were documented in regular articles in the Bicester Advertiser. In this talk, Matthew Hathaway will use these articles to explore the attitudes and opinions of Bicester's war-weary population.

This meeting will be held in the Clifton Centre on Monday 17th June at 7:30pm.

Modern Bicester Brains Trust

Following on from the talk in June, our July meeting will be a humorous recreation of the Bicester Brains Trust. A present day panel of BLHS members will answer questions originally posed to the 1940s Brains Trust, allowing us to see how things have changed, or not, in the last 80 years.

This meeting will be held in the Clifton Centre on Monday 15th July at 7:30pm.

Oxfordshire Past 2024

The Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society will be holding their annual Oxfordshire Past day in Bicester this year, on Saturday 15th June.

They advertise the event as being for anyone interested in history, buildings and archaeology. The programme of talks runs from 10am until 4pm and includes the archaeology of Bicester Priory, the history of Bicester's railways, and excavations at Graven Hill, amongst others. There will also be a number of stalls and exhibitors to visit throughout the day.

It is being held at the John Paul II Centre next to the Catholic Church and tickets cost £10 each. Attendance can be booked and paid for in advance on their website, where you will also find more details about the event itself:

https://oahs.org.uk/oxpast.php

Dates For Your Diary

Oxfordshire Past 2024
15th June

Bicester Brains Trust talk
17th June @ 7:30pm

July newsletter submission deadline
28th June

Bicester Advertiser local history article
4th July

Bicester Brains Trust recreation
15th July @ 7:30pm

Bicester's Gothic Architecture Talk

The Gothic architectural style has flourished twice in England: firstly, from about 1200 – 1550 and then, 350 years later, in the Victorian Gothic revival movement. Pat Snelson's talk aimed to explain the social, economic and religious forces that underpinned this architectural style in both periods and what we can read in Bicester's own architecture that reveals these national trends.

St Edburg's church follows the pattern of architectural development of many of our parish churches after the Norman Conquest: an original Anglo-Saxon worship space was converted in around 1088 into a Norman cruciform church. Around 1200, the Gothic architectural style arrived in England, brought over by French masons who had been working on major French cathedrals. Its defining motif is the pointed arch, whose constructional properties allow for the creation of open light-filled spaces and give rise to many more decorative opportunities especially in windows and arcading. Three stylistic phases of Medieval Gothic followed: Early English (c 13th century); Decorated (c 14th century) and Perpendicular (c 15th century).

St Edburg's was expanded in each of these three phases. About 1250, the south aisle was added which incorporates typical Early English design motifs of Plate tracery in the windows (although these are Victorian replacements), clustered columns and mouldings and stiff leafed carving. Around a hundred years later (1340), the north aisle was added and the octagonal columns in the arcade and the ogee arch window patterns are period designs. The final architectural elements to be added to the church were the west tower (1420) and the two-storey porch (1460) in the Perpendicular period. The porch has original windows (characterised by sill to head mullions) and the tower follows a common Perpendicular schema (including clasping buttresses, battlements and crocketed finials).

This pattern of adding aisles to naves and the addition of other major architectural features often occurred through the Medieval Gothic period, and was probably driven by changes in population or liturgy, or the wealthy sponsoring chantry altars or chapels over which prayers could be said to speed their souls through purgatory.

St Edburg's remains Bicester's only intact medieval structure and the town's only Grade 1 listed building. It is an important monument to generations of townspeople from the Anglo-Saxon period to the present day.

The Gothic architectural style virtually disappears in new building from the time of the Reformation (1534), when Bicester's own priory was disbanded, sold and demolished. Succeeding generations of religious unrest, including the Civil War, and the desecration of parish church iconography and art by the Puritans meant that, by the end of the 17th century, the Gothic style was wholly associated with Catholicism and fell out of use. In the 18th century, architectural ideas from the Italian Renaissance (especially Andrea Palladio's investigations into Classical Roman architecture) flooded into England as the cultural elite came back from their Grand Tours. The Classical architectural style thus held sway in the building of both churches and stately homes for the best part of 150 years until the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

Once more it was profound social and economic change that was to propel the Gothic architectural style back onto the high street. The industrial revolution was creating great poverty alongside great wealth and social unrest was in the air in the early 1800s. New scientific discoveries and Darwin's work were generating great excitement but also great uncertainty and some religious groups were calling for the return to 'high' church ritual to restore social stability. The Victorian intelligentsia, both political and cultural, seized on the idealised medieval world as the

model of a stable and just society and, in architectural circles, this meant the revival of the kind of pointed arch architecture that had so flourished in the medieval period.

In this cultural environment, the government held a competition to rebuild the Houses of Parliament after the Palace of Westminster fire in 1834. It specified that the style had to be Gothic and the competition was won by Sir Charles Barry. He employed the gifted draftsman, Augustus W.N. Pugin to design the towers and all the interior fixtures. Pugin, a convert to Catholicism, became the cheer leader for Gothic revival and wrote several very influential treatises which sought to re-establish the Gothic architectural style as the only way to reignite Christian social values.

Pugin's architectural movement found a ready outlet for their cause in the major programme of church refurbishment and new church building that the Victorians instituted in the 1850s. Although much criticised today for its high-handed approach to conservation and the destruction of some medieval artefacts, this programme saved the fabric of many medieval churches that had been in poor repair for 250 years, and saw the building of nearly 3800 churches in new urban areas.

St Edburg's was refurbished as part of this effort in 1862/3. All the windows were replaced (most of the medieval glass and tracery had been destroyed in an 18th century storm), the chancel re-roofed, Georgian box pews and galleries removed and pews installed to more efficiently seat 1000 people and heating and lighting installed.

The revival in Gothic architecture may well have remained confined to church building and restoration but a mass of government legislation in education, law and order and local government was creating a need for government sponsored buildings in every town. Ecclesiastical Gothic mixed with an array of medieval chivalric and heraldic symbols became the go-to new Gothic Revival style for secular buildings.

Bicester has three major Victorian Gothic revival buildings. St Edburg's school (above) was built in 1858 as part of a nationwide campaign by the Church of England to have a school in each parish to 'educate the poor in the principles of the established church'. Its windows are full of 13th, 14th and 15th century ecclesiastical gothic motifs, and the quality of carving in hood-stops and gargoyles is second to none in the town.

Bicester's old County Court (1864; 5 Sheep Street, Bicester) has a similar jumble of ecclesiastical Gothic symbols, but they are highly stylised and

pared back to accommodate the many medieval chivalric motifs integrated in the building's design. These include lions in the eaves; Caernarfon arch heads in the doorway and windows (derived from Caernarfon Castle) and fleur-de-lys. A highly stylised Rose window in the East façade completes the ensemble.

Twenty years after the County Court, St Edburg's Hall (1882) was built to provide a large public assembly room and smaller meeting rooms for the townspeople. By this time, Gothic Revival was beginning to lose favour and the building's style is best described as 'Free' Gothic. The Priory Road elevation also incorporates two towers which are suggestive of the Scottish Baronial movement, a very particular rendition of Gothic revival which found expression in Scotland.

As the 19th century ended, the costs and eccentricities of the Gothic Revival movement caused it to fall out of favour. That, along with the arrival of new ways of producing iron, steel and glass led to buildings of very different forms and meant that the 'old-fashioned' Gothic style fizzled out in new buildings. Almost every town still has important Victorian Gothic revival buildings which remain full of architectural interest and in which we can read the political, religious and social mindset of the 'high' Victorian' period.

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