Bicester Local History Society
Established 1968

BLHS Newsletter

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Poverty, Pestilence & Public Health in Victorian Britain talk - by Dr Simon Wenham

Britain may have been the 'workshop of the world' in the Victorian period, but the sceptre of poverty and pestilence loomed large over the lives of many of its citizens. A large proportion of people were not only close to the bread line, but repeated epidemics decimated whole swathes of the population. This talk explores the wealth and health of the British during the Victorian period and the State's struggle to improve conditions.

This meeting will be held in the Clifton Centre on Monday 16th June at 7:30pm.

Rousham House Visit

A group visit to Rousham House and Gardens has been arranged for Wednesday 23rd July. If you wish to come along and haven't already sent in your payment then please complete the form provided and return it, together with the payment, to Sally, by the end of our meeting on 16th June.

Membership Questionnaire

A big thank you to everyone who returned their completed questionnaires back in March. We had a 63% response rate, which was excellent and helps us feel confident that the results represent the opinions of the group as a whole.

Pat Snelson will be going through the results in more detail at the AGM in September, but in the meantime it is nice to know that you all think we are doing such a good job. The main cause for concern being the seat comfort at the monthly meetings!

All the information is already proving very helpful, particularly the suggestions for subjects you'd like to cover and places you'd like to visit.

We'd like to give another big thank you to everyone who also responded to the call for help. The new proofreading team has already proved invaluable with their help on the new edition of the Bicester Historian (out on the 16th). Everyone else who volunteered has been contacted regarding the roles they've signed up for and will hear more in due course.

Dates For Your Diary

Public Health in Victorian Britain talk
16th June @ 7:30pm

July newsletter submission deadline
4th July

Rousham House visit
23rd July @ 1:45pm

AGM & Questionnaire results
15th September @ 7:30pm

Garden Archaeology talk - by Dr Stephen Wass

Stephen Wass gave us an insight into his work as an archaeologist, which includes research for his DPhil and commercial work. His DPhil is complete, but research continues, largely based around Hanwell Castle, near Banbury. His commercial work is often undertaken for the National Trust and involves working with other contractors and adhering to deadlines.

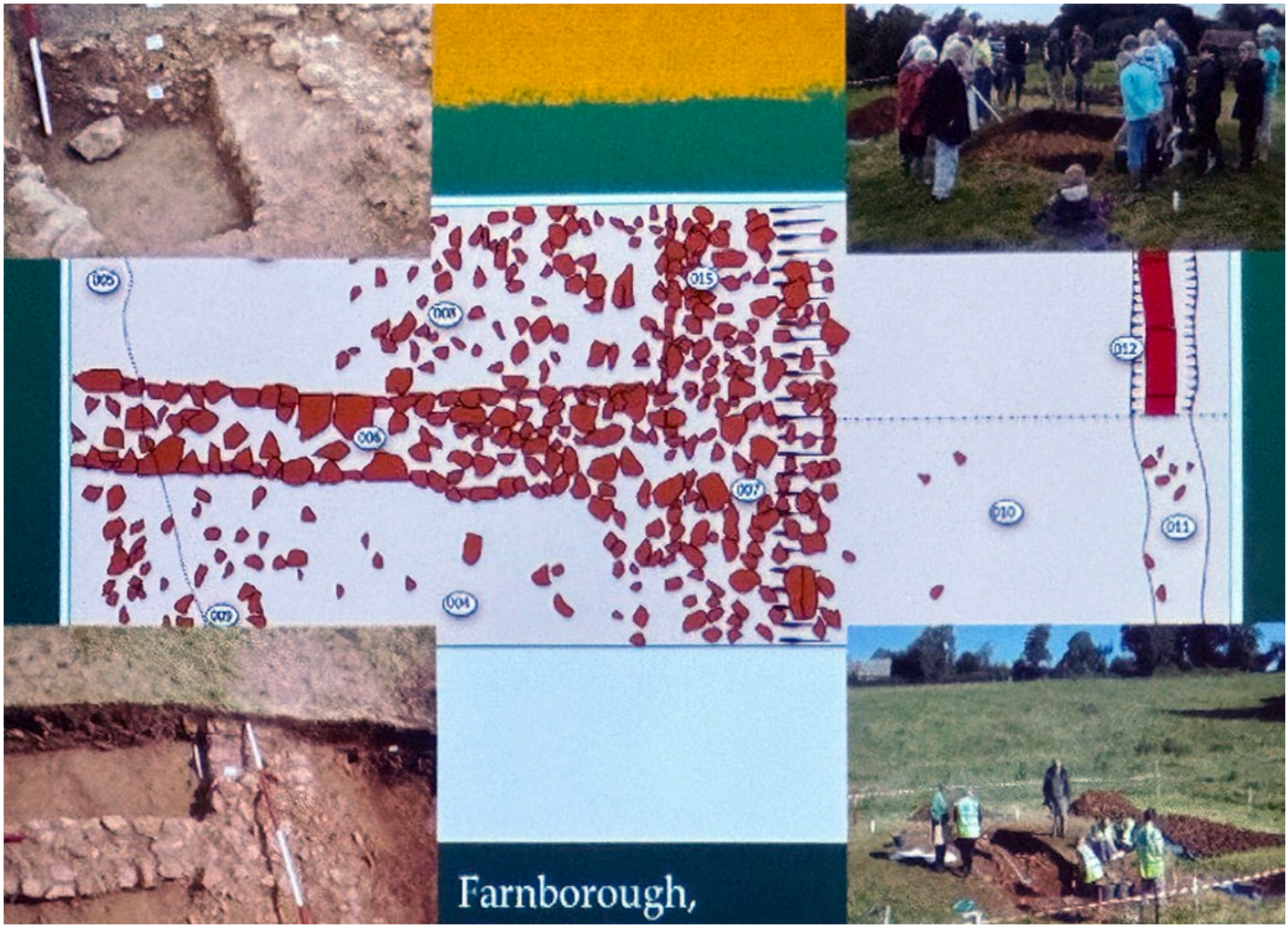
The British are very keen on visiting historic gardens, but this is not replicated among Europeans.

Art historians look at the symbolism and aesthetics, and consider the reasons for neglect. In the 1980s, the idea arose that historians needed to work to establish the basic facts about a garden's origins. Extensive reconstruction took place at Hampton Court, where the layout of the late-17th century/early-18th century garden was recreated. Similarly, at Kenilworth Castle an Elizabethan garden was reconstructed and a vast excavation and reconstruction took place at Kirby Hall in Northamptonshire. These projects were not universally popular and by the 2000s funding was lacking.

More recent research tells a broader story and this is the focus at Hanwell Castle and Farnborough Hall (Warwickshire).

Before excavation can commence, wide-ranging planning and research is undertaken. Permissions, methodology statements and risk assessments are prepared. The geology and topography of the target area is investigated. A Landscape Survey & Appraisal is undertaken which may include the use of LiDAR to map archaeological features which are not immediately visible from the ground or through traditional satellite images. The Historic Environment Record and field names maps are consulted for the wealth of information that they contain.

At Farnborough Hall, these investigations revealed a square moated area; debris from the 18th century when buildings which interrupted the view were demolished and the site of the original house.



Geophysics is employed to further identify remains beneath the soil. At Packwood House (Lapworth, Warwickshire) a 17th century sundial garden was revealed to have been built on an Elizabethan moated garden.

The historic significance of any surviving plants and standing buildings is examined.

There can often be a need to know the dynamics of the family associated with historic houses and to be aware of their social and financial position over time.

Generally speaking, archaeologists are reluctant to excavate a site because of the damage to historical evidence in the ground. They, therefore, have a responsibility to make meticulous records.

At Hanwell Castle, a summer house, the so-called 'House of Diversion', from the 17th century was discovered. Of particular importance was the unearthing of a unique assemblage of terracotta garden urns from the period. It was considered that the gardens were laid out to encourage conversations that promoted contemporary scientific thinking in the Oxford area.

Dr Wass expressed the opinion that archaeology is little more than vandalism unless findings are published. To this end, he brought out his book, Seventeenth-century Water Gardens and the Birth of Modern Scientific Thought in Oxford: The Case of Hanwell Castle, in 2022.

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