

Nevil Shute - The man who never forgot Hamble

2nd February 2023 - Memorial Hall

Nevil Shute was one of the world's best-selling authors of his time, writing classic novels such as "A Town like Alice" and "On the Beach", which were both made into films. He ended up making the Solent area his home, as it was an ideal location for him to indulge in the two great loves of his life, aviation and sailing. Well-known local writer and speaker on maritime matters, David Henshall, known as Dougal, gave a fascinating illustrated talk highlighting the local influences that helped Nevil Shute craft his books.

David started by telling of his introduction to Nevil Shute books in the library of Hamble Secondary School that he attended as a pupil. Nevil Shute was brought up in London and as a school boy he had an interest in aeroplanes. In 1919 while at Oxford University he was asked to be a crewmember on a sailing holiday. The yacht was based at Lukes Boatyard at Hamble and this how he became familiar with the village Hooker's bakery and the Bugle public house.

Sailing out of the river without an engine they had to tack and fouled 3 boats on the way and eventually anchored up for the night at Calshot. The anchor dragged overnight and they ended up back at Hamble Point. Despite these incidents, he enjoyed his sailing experience and went on to have his own boats. An even bigger attraction for him to Hamble was the aircraft factories, particularly Fairey Aviation at Hamble Point.

Although his first two books were not very good, Nevil Shute incorporated his aviation and Solent sailing experiences, as well as local places in his subsequent novels. Prior to the Second World War he wrote a book 'What happened to the Corbetts' about what it would be like for a family living in Southampton during a war. The family decided to move to Hamble and live on a boat. It was amazing how he knew about places such as a hidden access to the airfield and Butlocks Reservoir which most visitors would not have been aware existed.

During the war Nevil Shute worked for the admiralty on various projects such as improving attack methods on U-Boats, targets for anti-aircraft guns and smoke laying glider trials on the Beaulieu River. Later he used the north coast of the Isle of Wight by the Needles to test rocket powered grapnels and other projects in preparation to D-Day. He put many of these together in his book 'Chequer Board'.

At the end of the war, he was back in Hamble, including taking a course at Air Service Training that featured in a later book. He wrote 'The Seafarers' that was set in Hamble about buying and doing up boats with the Bugle being a familiar meeting place. He continued to enjoy sailing in the Solent using his Hillyard yacht but in this 'he blotted his copybook' and was forced to move to Australia in 1950.

He wrote further books such as 'Round the Bend' about flying and a love story 'Requiem for a Wren'. After a disagreement about a film of one of his books his writing was not the same. He died in 1960 while at his typewriter writing another book. In total he wrote 24 books. He asked for his ashes to be returned to England and they were scattered at sea by West Pole off Hayling Island.

As always, a very well researched and presented talk by David.