

History of the River at Bursledon

6th February 2020 - Roy Underdown Pavilion

Jeff Martin, Bursledon's expert on its village history and Chairman of Bursledon Local History Society, gave an illustrated talk on the 'History of the river at Bursledon' to a well-attended meeting that included visitors from other local villages.

He started by giving evidence of local Roman activities and the later period when salt making was important to Bursledon. He illustrated this by showing pictures of how this was done near Hacketts Marsh although its production ceased about 1500. Jeff used maps to show details of the village and why shipbuilding was important.

Bursledon was nationally important for shipbuilding as it was a safe location allowing early warning of an attack, had sheltered but deep water and a good availability of timber. The first royal ship built at Bursledon was the 'St George' in 1338 and it was launched by the King, Edward III. The 'Grace Dieu', the largest ship ever built in England in the early 1400s, was laid up at Bursledon and her remains are a protected wreck in the river today.

At times of war, merchant shipbuilders were offered contracts to build naval vessels but it was a risky business with many of them going bankrupt. In the 1600s William Wyatt was successfully building 80-gun ships at Bursledon and in the 1740s Philemon Ewer was another significant Bursledon naval shipbuilder. At the end of this century George Parsons was successfully building naval ships including Nelson's 74-gun 'Elephant'. Details of supporting local industries were explained such as iron making.

In the 1700s Bursledon's population was about 200 and only topped 600 in the 19th century. Jeff then went on to describe the village's pubs. The Red Lion and the Swan were on each side of the river to provide refreshments for those waiting to cross. There were also the Ship & Launch by Lands End Hard and the riverside Jolly Sailor pub that had a shed alongside it to store dead bodies recovered from the river until an inquest was held at the pub. The Jolly Sailor's important association with the regatta was also illustrated.

The only way to cross the river in early times was by a ferry but in 1800 a wooden toll bridge was built as part of a road scheme between Portsmouth and Southampton. Initially there were structural problems that were rectified by George Parsons. A railway bridge was built in the late 1880s and this again had problems with landslips of the embankments during construction. The railway led to a boom in the strawberry-growing industry but cut off many houses from the river and completely changed the landscape. The toll bridge was freed from tolls in the 1930s and a new concrete bridge constructed. In 1975 the M27 motorway bridge was opened.

Jeff illustrated how merchant sailing vessels from the north of the country brought coal and other goods to Bursledon Pool to be distributed locally, including taking coal to Botley by barge. He told of smuggling activities in the village with some storing

contraband in the box tombs in the churchyard. After the First World War many 70ft naval motor launches were for sale and some were converted to houseboats and Deacons Boatyard started business. The story of Bursledon's riverside activities could not be told without mention of the 1980s popular television series *Howards' Way*.

His talk concluded by moving further up river to explain about Maidenstone Heath, brick making at Hoe Moor, plus Upton and its shipbuilding site. Those present were enthralled and impressed by Jeff's presentation, particularly with its detail some of which many had not heard before.