

Richard Gibbs' Presentation on a Potted History of Wokingham

The presentation started with Mr Gibbs explaining that he had studied in recent years courses in local history, which had led him to conduct thorough and detailed research into the history of Wokingham. He then showed a photograph of Rose Street in the mid nineteenth century, and as a result of skilful research he was able to identify not only the trades and occupations being pursued in the photograph, but the names of the occupants of the houses and the children seen standing in the street. He focussed in particular on one shop, the occupant of which identified himself as a *Fruiterer and Fishmonger*.

He then moved on to the main point of his presentation, which was to show how he had been able to further his research by concentrating on a picture he originally saw as hazy and lacking in clarity, but which, by dint of technical expertise and the skilful overlaying of another image, would eventually give him an insight into the geography, social structure and living conditions of Wokingham in the early nineteenth century. The picture was in fact an aquatint by William Havel, which had been engraved by Thomas Dukes in 1820.

Gradually by close and studious study, Mr Gibbs was able to identify buildings of major significance in the town's history, reflecting the affluence and influence of their owners or occupiers in the early years of the nineteenth century. The first building he identified was All Saints Church, which he said had not been well looked after, and had fallen into a state of disrepair. Moving away to the east he had been able to identify Keephatch House, a farmhouse dating from the mid 16c, which had been built on sand and gravel on a slight hill. In the west he pointed out Beche's Manor, built by Roger de Beche in 1624, but destroyed in a fire in 1953, by which time it had become a hotel. He also referred to Norrey's Barn before moving to the centre of the town and the Town Hall, which like All Saints, had become unstable and in a bad state of repair. It had been bought by William Whitlock, owner of the Bush Hotel, and it was used for many different purposes, none of which delayed its destruction and a new Town Hall was opened in 1860. It remains Wokingham's most striking architectural feature to this day.

Mr Gibbs concluded by identifying the site of the silk mill, built in the 1780s by Messrs Crutwell and Brooks in order to maintain the tradition of silk making, which had thrived in the town in Tudor times, and eight of the cottages used for weaving silk still exist in Rose Street. The new venture lasted only until 1835, when the industry died, and other industries and businesses took over in a town described by Mr Gibbs as being somewhat rundown and in need of changes in attitude and business and social practices.

Richard Gibbs unusual approach to his subject provided a valuable insight into the town in his period of study. By identifying specific buildings and their use, condition and location he was able to chart the development of the town and its environment while bringing to life images of the past from close and intricate study of one fascinating picture with so many stories to tell, once its true worth had been discovered.

The audience responded with warmth and enthusiasm to Mr Gibbs' potted history, and, in thanking him Peter Must described him as a true historian, who had conducted his research with tenacity, skill and resourcefulness.