

The Wokingham Society

South Hill Park

A Presentation by David Tinker after the Annual General Meeting on Wednesday November 16th 2016

David Tinker delighted a large audience in Wokingham Town Hall after the Wokingham' Society's Annual General Meeting by presenting them with an informative, thoroughly-researched and well-illustrated presentation on the history of South Hill Park Arts Centre, Bracknell, a facility used regularly by large numbers of Wokingham residents.

Although the Arts Centre has a well-deserved reputation for the variety and range of its activities, its origins are far less well- known, but by the end of the evening the audience had gained an insight into the history of a building constructed in the eighteenth century on land that was once part of the Crown Estate with limited timber rights and deer pasturing. However, the land had been enclosed, probably illegally in the 1600s.

Over four centuries, we were informed, the site and its famous building had undergone many changes internally and externally, the current house being very different from the original 'South Hill' mansion leased to William Samroth by Ann Bagley in 1683. By 1750 the mansion was owned by Brice Fisher who worked for the East India Company. Fisher renamed the mansion *Fisher's Lodge* and he added two wings to the original mansion. Ten years later in 1760 a new owner, William Watts, a civil servant in Bengal, made further changes to the estate by changing the house into a Palladian villa and adding 30 acres of land to be provided under the Enclosure Act for the poor of the parish of Easthampstead.

As David Tinker pointed out the house was purchased in 1801 by indisputably its most famous owner, George Canning. celebrated as the shortest -serving British Prime Minister, whose career David Tinker outlined wittily and succinctly. Canning commissioned Sir William Soane, a renowned but somewhat eccentric architect, to remodel the house, and two new wings were added, the east wing for private use and the west wing for the servants. Internal modifications were also made. However, it was not long before the estate came into the possession of the Earl of Limerick, in whose hands it

remained until 1853, when it was bought by Sir William Hayter, a liberal politician and barrister.

Hayter remodelled the house almost immediately, possibly after a fire in which two children lost their lives; in 1878. he became depressed and on December 26th he was found drowned in one of the lakes in the grounds, possibly because of the deaths of the children all those years earlier. He was succeeded by his son Arthur, who remodelled the house into what is largely seen today.

In 1981 the renowned church architect Temple Moore was commissioned to remodel the house, which he redesigned in the Gothic revival style with some Baroque features, some of them influenced by the work of Sir Christopher Wren. In 1893 he also designed landscaping near the house, introducing Italian gardens and a parterre. Sir Arthur died in 1917 and his widow lived in the house until her death in 1929. A year later his nephew, Major Rickman, became the last private owner of the house, but unfortunately, as David Tinker somewhat wryly remarked, in 1940 he shot himself in the gun cupboard. Thereafter the house was put to a variety of uses.

As David remarked one of the most striking and somewhat unusual events was the evacuation of the Royal Sea Bathing Hospital from Margate in 1940. They remained there until 1945 when the mansion and 400 acres were sold to Joseph Horn, a New Zealander who converted the house into high-class luxury flats with large communal spaces, a library and a restaurant. However, the venture was not entirely successful and in 1951 the house and all its contents were put up for auction and the whole estate was purchased by the BBC to operate as its European section providing services in the event of an emergency.

The BBC left in 1958 and Bracknell Development Corporation purchased the estate in 1962 and leased it to Ferranti as the Headquarters for Ferranti Helicopters Ltd, providing a shuttle service ferrying its employees between its bases in the country. It also contained a facility for developing micro processing, which was, as David asserted, the first development of its kind in Europe.

At last in 1970 BDC selected it as the site of its new Arts Centre for Bracknell. Over the years the rooms were sensitively adapted to provide a variety of courses and art projects with a cinema, bar and other facilities enhancing the experiences of visitors. In November 1982 work began on the building of the

Wilde Theatre, the first sod of earth having been moved by John Amis and Sir Henry Lushington, a descendant of a former owner of the estate. On April 23rd 1983 the foundation stone was laid by Sir Michael Tippett and it was opened in 1984 by Princess Anne. Designed by the architect Axel Burrough on the principle of a Shakespearean courtyard theatre, the theatre successfully added a new and exciting dimension to the performing arts and in 1988-89 a dance studio and art gallery were amongst further additions. In 2002 a National Lottery Heritage Fund Grant of £3 million combined with £1 million from Bracknell Forest Council helped to transform the Centre and make it one of the leading and most popular Arts venues in South East England and further afield.

The presentation was illustrated by maps and photographs depicting the various changes undergone by South Hill Park over the centuries, not least in the development of the parkland with its two lakes, landscaped gardens and woodland. He provided us with many memorable anecdotes, particularly those relating to the supposed presence of ghosts in the house, notably on the main staircase and on the raised floor in the studio theatre. He also identified the original use of most of the rooms and facilities and he noted that, as a sign of the growing reputation of the Centre, the opening of the Sir Michael Tippett Room was attended by Kenneth Branagh, Kate Winslett and John Amis, each of whom had connections with the area.

Finally David produced statistics proving the success of South Hill Park Arts Centre, by recording the fact that as many as 3,000 events are held in a year, supported by the participation of an average of a quarter of a million visitors. However, he feels it is very likely there will be severe cuts to its budget in the future, and he wondered if its running might be outsourced to a commercial company, a development which might have a deleterious impact on a cherished local institution. As he shown in a previous presentation to the Society on the history of California Country Park, David Tinker brought history to life and made us aware of the true value of all South Hill Park has to offer.

The audience showed their appreciation through the warmth of their applause and, after answering questions, David was thanked by the Society's Chairman, Peter Must, for sharing with us his obvious love of and commitment to his subject.