

Sutton House Society Newsletter

June 2002

For all interested in the past, present and future of Sutton House, Hackney

Hackney's most famous resident?



In April the De Vere Society held its AGM at Sutton House. It is appropriate that it should choose to meet in Hackney because the De Vere Society advocates the theory that Edward, 17th Earl of Oxford, wrote the plays attributed to William Shakespeare and the Earl lived in what was later called Brooke House, Hackney, and was buried in Hackney Church!

Nothing is left of Brooke House now, since its demolition in 1954, except a wall painting now in the Museum of London and a roomful of panelling in Harrow School. Unfortunately there is no sign of the grave either although it is clearly documented to have been in the old church before its own demolition in 1797. The following article has been written specially for this newsletter by the Chairman of the Society, Brian Hicks, and we thank him very much for his contribution.

The Sutton House Society has no collective view on the matter of course, but it is hoped that what follows will be food for thought! We should very much like to receive comments from members.

Hackney's most famous resident?

The Elizabethan courtier, poet and playwright Edward De Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, lived at Brooke House, Hackney, from 1596 till his death in 1604.

He was born on 12th April 1550 at the ancestral home of Castle Hedingham. His father died when Edward was only 12 and he was sent as a ward of the crown to live in the household of William Cecil. He was considered an outstanding scholar particularly at classics and French.

After attending both Cambridge and Oxford universities he went on to study law at Gray's Inn. While he was there he wrote, produced and acted in plays and masques.

In 1572 Oxford married Cecil's daughter, Anne. He was active in Court circles, and began publishing his first works of poetry and prose. He was at the height of favour with Queen Elizabeth. In 1575–6 he toured Europe, spending much time in France and especially Italy.

Oxford was much praised by his contemporaries for his fine lyric poetry, had his own acting company, the Lord Oxford Players, and later acquired a lease on the Blackfriars Theatre. He became an active patron of other writers, a number of whom

dedicated works to him some in terms that clearly indicate that he was directing their work. He was never a patron of a man called “Shakespeare”.

In 1598 Oxford’s name appears as a playwright in an article written by Francis Meres, in which he is named as “the best for comedy among us”. At the same time he was referred to by George Puttenham as “first amongst noblemen poets if their doings could be made public”.

Poems under his own name ceased to appear after 1593, the year of the publication of *Venus and Adonis*, the first work to be published under the name of William Shakespeare and dedicated to Henry Wriothesley, 2nd Earl of Southampton, a man well known to De Vere.

Was Edward De Vere this “Shakespeare”? A growing number would agree with what the historian Professor Rubenstein wrote in 2001 that “had the plays and poems been written anonymously it seems likely that today Oxford would be the leading candidate for their authorship and no one would argue that Shakespeare of Stratford wrote them.”

There has to be some connexion between the life and personal experiences of an author and their imaginative writings. Oxford’s background and experiences do seem to make him a far more likely candidate. He was a major figure in the court of Elizabeth, studied classics and the law, and spoke and wrote Latin and French. The detailed knowledge in the plays of Italian cities, customs and culture suggest a first-hand knowledge, which Oxford had.

Oxford saw military action in at least three armed conflicts including the Armada. The plays show that whoever wrote them was knowledgeable about war, soldiers and military command, and the sea.

There are extensive references and allusions to aristocratic pastimes such as falconry, jousting, hunting, fencing, music and dancing, all of which the court records show Oxford excelled in.

His literary sources and connexions are also impressive. One uncle, Henry Howard Earl of Surrey, introduced the sonnet form and blank verse into England. Another, Lord Sheffield, wrote a book of sonnets according to the Italian fashion. A third uncle and sometime tutor, Arthur Golding, made an English translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, which is acknowledged by scholars as having a major influence on Shakespeare’s plays and poetry.

In Cecil’s house, where Oxford lived, the library contained over 1700 books and some 249 manuscripts. These would have provided excellent reading for Oxford in many subjects including science, medicine, astronomy, history, geography and witchcraft. It also held a book on the sonnets of Petrarch and many other authors which 20th century scholars have identified as direct sources for stories and illusions in Shakespeare’s plays, including Caesar, Cicero, Seneca, Tacitus, Terence and Virgil, and also sources of plays from French, Italian and Spanish writers.

William Shakespeare on the other hand has very little to commend him. A careful reading of orthodox biographies shows just how difficult it is to prove any literary pursuits or abilities: there is no record that he ever had any education at Stratford or anywhere else; his daughters and parents were illiterate; there are no records or correspondence to or from him which identify him as a writer; nor records of his ever owning books or receiving payment for writing. His death went unnoticed in literary London (and in Stratford apart from as a business man).

No one can say with certainty that De Vere is Shakespeare but equally it has not been proved that he is not. Whether this is still the case with the Stratford Man is being increasingly questioned and many lovers of the works of Shakespeare are beginning to take an interest in Edward De Vere. If they are proved right just imagine what this would do for and to Hackney!

BRIAN HICKS

Apologies

Unfortunately, Joseph Sickert, our speaker for the Sutton House Society Summer Soiree, was taken ill just the day before the event which, given the circumstances, was cancelled at short notice. We may try to re-schedule this some time in the future depending on Joseph's health.

Picnic in the Park

NOTE, NOTE, NOTE!

There are still some places available for the excursion to Knole House (National Trust) in Kent on **Saturday 6th July**, when members are invited to partake of a picnic in the famous deer park. The outing will also include a visit to the nearby Roman Villa at Lullingstone (English Heritage).

For the picnic in Knole Deer Park members are asked to bring something to eat and drink for themselves and to share around. A folding stool might also be useful, particularly if the ground is wet. Afterwards there will be plenty of time to explore the park, gardens and magnificent house.

Two minibuses will leave Sutton House at 9.30 am on **Saturday 6th July**. Tickets which must be bought in advance are limited to 30 but members using their own transport will be welcome to join the party. The cost will be £12.50 with £4.00 discount for N.T. members and/or £2.00 for English Heritage members.

Please phone or email Mike Gray (020 8525 9672) mikeg@hollyvillas.fslife.co.uk by Friday 28th June.

News from the House

Siân Harrington, Property Manager, reports as follows:

Despite recent attempts it has not been possible to contact the owner of the adjacent vacant yard, 16a Sutton Place, in order to take the National Trust's wish to acquire the site a stage further. However, Carole Reeves, the Area Manager, has asked Hackney Council if they can enforce a clearing up of the site which is littered with cars and rubbish.

A first draft of the new management plan for Sutton House has been produced by the consultants, Renaisi, and this has been circulated to the Steering Group. A second draft of the plan will be available by mid-June and will be circulated to all interested parties, including Sutton House Society committee members and the Sutton House Local Committee. Once the management plan has been agreed, there will be a review of the way the house is interpreted and presented to visitors. All ideas are welcome.

Volunteer Co-ordinator Helen Volhard emigrated to Canada with her family this month and will be missed by all. A replacement is being sought and in the meantime Shelley Garland, the House Manager, is covering volunteer coordination. James Needham will occasionally act as locum Duty Manager on Saturdays and Sundays.

Kathleen Patterson, who takes over from Nicola Richardson as Property Assistant, has sent the following biographical notes:

I have spent the last two years organising public policy conferences for between 40 and 750 people in London and around the U.K.. Prior to that I was a freelance stage manager for 16 years, working on a variety of productions including seasons for the

Royal Shakespeare Company, a musical based on Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* with 20 tap-dancing rhinos (you may have seen the costumes as Save the Rhino Campaign use them in the London Marathon) and 10 years with the Peter Hall Company. I first visited Sutton House about 8 years ago and started as a volunteer helping out with Discovery Days and in the shop last August before joining full-time as Property Assistant in May.

The Society warmly welcomes her to house.

Discovery Days continue to be very popular with between 300 and 500 visitors per event. Ruth Clarke, the Education Officer, is also running a number of collaborative projects including Black History Month events, and the schools programme is being run by Mary Colson assisted by volunteers.

From our Man in Standon

S.H.S. Member Rob Street has a letter in the newspaper of the Puckeridge and Standon area of Hertfordshire. It reads as follows:

A 16TH CENTURY WEBSITE. Sir Ralph Sadleir, who lived in the Lordship Standon from 1546, has gone global. The website (www.sirralphsadleir.com) was set up by Tom Charney from Wisconsin U.S.A.. He discovered Sir Ralph 10 years ago and has since portrayed him annually in a recreation of an Elizabethan Renaissance Faire. Mike Gray, historian to Sutton House, Hackney, Sir Ralph's first home, and I have added information on the Lordship. Also on the website is a long-lost play from 1602 in which Sir Ralph has a walk-on part. Margaret Drabble in the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* says 'the play has little merit'. Have a look and see what you think. Standon and Puckeridge remember the Sadleirs: there is a magnificent tomb in Standon Church, a Sadleir road, Sadleir School and the Sadleir Dramatic Society. With our television obsessed with the period, you never know: we could be seeing David Starkey and a film crew in the near future.

Check out the website for yourself!

Discovering Hackney

A programme of guided walks led by Mike Gray and Sean Gubbins has started, looking at the history and architecture of the area at the 'Heart of Hackney' which includes St. Augustine's Tower, the new Hackney Museum and Sutton House. The walks start on the steps of the Town Hall at 11.00 am, cost £4.00 and £3.00 (concessions) and last about 1½ hours. No booking is needed — just turn up. *Wednesdays 26th June and 10th July; Saturdays 29th June, 13th and 27th July*. Further information from Sean Gubbins on 020 7923 0753 or Mike Gray on 020 8525 9672.

Obituary

It is with great sadness that we have to report the recent death of Bill Hurdman, the former Rector of St. John-at-Hackney. Bill died after a short illness and we have sent a letter of condolence on behalf of the Society to his wife Rosemary and their three sons. Bill was a great friend and supporter of the Society from the earliest days and a member of the Local Committee from the outset. He was a most warm and positive man, full of encouragement and empathy and generous with his friendship. His deep sonorous voice and laughter were a joy to listen to. Long-time members will remember Bill telling the story of Sutton House when the audio-visual presentation in the chapel was still operating, and I remember the day I

made the recording in Bill's marvellously untidy study in the Rectory while a huge rabbit snored loudly under his chair.

Through Bill's good offices we were able to welcome the then Bishop of Stepney, now Bishop of London, Richard Charteris, to inaugurate the audio-visual presentation and it was a wonderful sight to see the Bishop, who is a very tall man, in full regalia in the chapel.

Another memorable occasion was the last time the Society organized a Beating of the Bounds, and Bill came to the Middlesex Filter Beds in his flowing robes to bless the post we erected there to commemorate the occasion, a post made from one of the discarded oak timbers from Sutton House.

Bill and his family moved to King's Lynn when he took up the living at St. Margaret's, but he was often in Hackney as he served as a Trustee for the Hackney Parochial Charity and was to be seen taking tea in Sutton House.

CAROLE MILLS

We send our sincere sympathies to Rosemary, his widow, and their three boys and as a reminder of Bill's great warmth and humanity we reproduce his article from the *Hackney Gazette* of November 1994.

I SAY, I SAY

A regular feature in
which guest writers
have their say



This week's
contributor is the
Rev Bill Hurdman,
Rector of Hackney

RIGHT at the heart of Hackney stands the huge church of St John-at-Hackney, a vast classical building which has just celebrated its bicentenary.

There have been plans to convert it into flats and it has even been suggested that it might become a sports hall or a warehouse!

Fortunately, all these ideas were rejected.

Standing in the vast, well-maintained churchyard, the church gives a sense of roots, solidarity and belonging in a community which is sometimes confused and uncertain and lacking in identity.

It is much more than just a place where Christians meet.

It is a sort of crossroads where all kinds of people come together. Its doors are open to those of all religions and none, to those who are searching and to those who have found. It belongs to everybody.

That is why we encourage all sorts of things to happen there. It is why we have set up the Hackney Parliament of Religions, a forum for people of all faiths to learn and understand each other better.

A lot more goes on behind the doors than people might think. It is much-used for exhibitions, concerts and recordings.

Nigel Kennedy recorded Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* there and the music for the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* was recorded on the magnificent organ. Hidden upstairs in the church is a studio for young local artists.

The churchyard is a well-known meeting place for the homeless, mentally ill and, sometimes, alcoholics.

Already there is a day centre in the church where food and clothes are given out. With the help of grants and money raised by the church and with the support of the statutory authorities,

plans are well under way to improve the kitchens, to install proper disabled access and to add shower and washing facilities.

These plans are part of the church's Community Space Project and will make it more available and accessible.

For 200 years, St John-at-Hackney has tried to serve the local community — and it will continue to do so.

It is concerned both for the powerful and well-established people in the community and also — perhaps especially — for people without power, often on the very fringes of Society.

So St John-at-Hackney is not just there for church services, weddings and funerals. It is there for everybody and it belongs to everybody, which is just what a parish church should be like.

What a good thing it didn't become a block of flats or a warehouse!

Under Hackney: The Archaeological Story

Keith Sugden

with Kieron Tyler

Preface by Brian Sedgemore M.P.

With sections on prehistoric Hackney, Roman Hackney, Saxon Hackney, Medieval Hackney and Tudor Hackney, this 64-page paperback tells the story of Hackney from the archaeological perspective. Hackney has been 'dug' by archaeologists since the 19th century, and several exciting new sites have been excavated by the Museum of London archaeology team in recent years. This book brings the story bang up to date, and explores what is known about Hackney before written history, and what the material world can tell us about early times.

Fully illustrated, it is published by the Friends of Hackney Archives with the assistance of the Museum of London Archaeology Service and a grant from the Awards for All grant scheme. Free copies are being made available to Hackney schools and libraries.

Dr Keith Sugden, a physical scientist by training, studied archaeology at Birkbeck College and is now a London-based guide. He edited *Criminal Islington*, and his other publications include *A History of Highbury* and *Walking the Pilgrim Ways* (which was shortlisted for the Thomas Cook travel book award).

Kieron Tyler is a Senior Archaeologist with the Museum of London Archaeology Service, and has published on many archaeological subjects, including Hackney's post-medieval villages.

Retail price **£4.95**

Copies are available from **Hackney Archives Department**, 43 de Beauvoir Road, N1 5SQ. Please add £1.50 for post and packing if ordering by post; and make cheque payable to London Borough of Hackney. Or to purchase in person, telephone 020 7241 2886 or fax 020 7241 6688 or e-mail archives@hackney.gov.uk to confirm opening times.

Copies are also available from Stephen Selby Pictures, 63 Broadway Market E8, and the Guildhall Library Bookshop.

ISBN: 0 9517493 1 5.

Contributions to and observations on this newsletter are welcome and should be sent to Mike Gray at 16B Clapton Passage, Hackney, E5 8HS or mikeg@hollyvillas.fslife.co.uk