

Bridge: The first 2000 years

This ambitiously titled talk by our Treasurer Maurice Raraty took a swift tour of the history of the village from Neolithic times to the present. The area around Bridge was well populated from the earliest period, as finds from a recent dig on Star Hill show. This has also uncovered a large Roman funerary platform (more about this later in the year from the archaeologist Paul Wilkinson) as well as much material from more recent times, reflecting the strong military presence around Bridge through the years. Old maps can also give information about the development of the village: Brewery Lane for instance marks the original entrance way to Bridge Place, as well as indicating the location of the ancient malthouse, while its continuation as Mill Lane only appears on the maps after 1801, when the windmill was built after its removal from the scarp of Bridge down. Church memorials of course offer insights into the lives of past inhabitants: Frederick Colegate for instance, publican of the White Horse, carpenter and builder, or Amelius Sicard, the local doctor for 48 years. Many others come to life by these means. Pictures of the village and of the great houses appear in the 17th century for the first time, while local newspapers offer fascinating glimpses into the business of everyday life in the 18th and 19th centuries, when Bridge was alive with, especially, the more sporting and 'racy' citizenry – Canterbury races on Barham Downs brought crowds of both gentry and plebeians, at other times there were foot races for both men and girls, cricket in Bourne Park attracted crowds numbering tens of thousands, and on a lower level, The White Horse and The Horse and Groom (alias Bridge Hill House) encouraged cockfighting or (more peaceably) flower shows, forerunners of the Horticultural Society. Scrutiny of local buildings shows that many may have vanished in the rush to modernisation and the imperatives of Britain's main highway to Europe (most notoriously Bridge Farm in the 1960's), but much also remains. The Village Hall, Reading Room, military recreation room and café and even earlier, Methodist Chapel; the Post Office, formerly Chapel Yard, Mr Colegate's builder's yard. Much too can be gleaned from place-names, so many of which have vanished – names not only of houses: Hillside, Glen Falls, Lansberry Cottage, but also of locations, such as Kingsbury Lane, Pouts Hill Wood and Abbots Hoath. A whole way of life and travel is revived by a name such as Stickfast Hill, on the way up to the Gate Inn. The traffic jams that occasionally clog the village nowadays are perhaps a pale reflection of the multitudes of people who have passed through in the course of centuries. The coming of the Bypass marked an end of that era, and the start of a more tranquil one. The lecture could only hint at some of these people, places and events. There is much more to be told.