

MALDENS AND COOMBE HERITAGE SOCIETY

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD 26th JULY 2017

AT NEW MALDEN BAPTIST CHURCH

Mary, greeted all members (41) for the meeting.

Mary thanked the church for the use of their meeting place, and for their catering facilities.

Our speaker was Barbara Webb who we had been trying to get to come to talk to us for a long time. She informed that she had not given any talks for the last six years, so we were very pleased she could join us with her slides which Julian had put on a computer stick for us.

The talk was entitled The Lady in The Stream, and related to John Millais's famous picture of the drowning of Ophelia from Shakespeare's play Hamlet.

The painting is known for its depiction of the detailed flora of the river and the riverbank, stressing the patterns of growth and decay in a natural ecosystem. Despite its nominal Danish setting, the landscape has come to be seen as quintessentially English. Ophelia was painted along the banks of the Hogsmill River. Barbara a resident of nearby Old Malden, devoted much time to finding the exact placement of the picture, and according to her research, the scene is located at Six Acre Meadow, alongside Church Road, Old Malden, close to the Manor House Garden. Millais Road is now nearby. Millais' close colleague William Holman Hunt was at the time working on his The Hireling Shepherd nearby.

The flowers shown floating on the river were chosen to correspond with Shakespeare's description of Ophelia's garland. They also reflect the Victorian interest in the "language of flowers", according to which each flower carries a symbolic meaning. The prominent red poppy-not mentioned by Shakespeare's description of the scene-represents sleep and death.

At an early stage in the painting's creation, Millais painted a water vole-which an assistant had fished out of the Hogsmill-paddling next to Ophelia. In December 1851, he showed the unfinished painting to Holman Hunt's relatives. He recorded in his diary, "Hunt's uncle and aunt came, both of whom understood most gratifyingly every object except my water rat. The male relation, when invited to guess at it, eagerly pronounced it to be a hare. Millais painted the water vole out of the final picture, although a rough sketch of it still exists in an upper corner of the canvas hidden by its frame.

The painting was completed 160 years ago and thanks to 18 months of fine detective work from Barbara we now know that the watery grave in the painting is a stretch of the Hogsmill River in Old Malden, Surrey. Though the image shouts Summer, the background was actually painted over 5 **months from** July to December 1851 with Millais spending 11 hours a day, 6 days a week at his easel. He painted through wind, rain and persistent attacks from the biting Surrey flies and even built a small den to make things more comfortable for himself. Barbara found the location after piecing together information within the painting, accounts which Millais and Holman Hunt had written of their time in the Old Malden area and letters/notes from William Stapylton, the vicar of Malden in 1851. Barbara has written a short book about her efforts and was happy to sign copies for the members.

The talk overran slightly, so we were unable to show the pictures relating to Frith's Malden which had to be held over for another time.

Julian shared with us with another of his "Pot Luck" items; this time it was a computer-generated film showing of the passage of the bombs which fell on Malden on 16th August 1940. This brought home the utter wanton destruction of our town centre, and the fear that must have gripped the local population at the time. This was the first bombing of the London area in the Second World War, and happened completely unexpectedly.

Robin reported that the two Heritage Walks held as part of Malden Fortnight had raised a total of £91.36p from the 23 persons who took part. This together with the £116.50 taken at the Heritage stall at the Craft Fair had realised a grand total of £207.86. Thanks were given to everybody involved.

In AOB Mary announced she would not be standing in the forthcoming elections for the post of chairman due to recent circumstances.

The meeting closed with the next one planned for Wednesday 6th September 2017. This would be our AGM.