

# REPORT OF HISTORY DAY OCTOBER 2012

The theme for the 2012 History Day was "Women & Society in Harborough and Leicestershire" covering a period ranging from Roman times to the late 20th century. During the course of the day our speakers reminded us of some notable women in Leicestershire and of their substantial contributions and influence in politics, industry, literature and religion.

As usual, the morning began with coffee and general chat between friends and members of the Society and all were settled by 11 o'clock in readiness for the first presentation.

Keynote speaker was author and Leicestershire Record Office official Jess Jenkins who, in the space of an hour, gave us a remarkable insight into the story of women's suffrage in Leicestershire -- ranging from militancy to peaceful campaigning. By delving into the personalities and characters of those involved in addition to their actions, we gained a useful insight into the women's movement in Leicestershire during the unsettled political times of the early 20th century. Jess's presentation also covered the vital role played by women in the home trade of framework knitting and confirmed the view that this was a very much hard work, long hours and declining reward industry. A fascinating talk followed by questions and anecdotes from the audience.

A significant Leicestershire family name mentioned in the previous presentation was that of Logan -- indeed, worthy enough to have been commemorated by a Harborough street name. Zara Matthews, then Curator of Harborough Museum, devoted her talk to this family and particularly Isabel and Nora "The Suffragette Sisters". By giving us the background to the family and especially that of their Liberal father it was much easier to understand their motivation and dedication to the suffragette movement. Again, this was followed by contributions from the audience who on this occasion as so often, were able to bring to light interesting snippets of information to enhance the topic.

By 1pm it was time for lunch and as in previous years an excellent cold buffet supplied by Wistow Caterers was accompanied by a welcome glass of Duncan Murray wine. During the lunch period your author managed to round up all the speakers for a "family" photograph and even found time to peruse the Lubenham Heritage Group information stand -- coming away with their excellent book "A Village History". The Day's informal setting enabled participants to buttonhole speakers and also to establish and renew contacts -- the amount of information and help people have to offer is always a very welcome bonus to the socialising aspect of being a historian.

Post lunch, Cynthia Brown (local historian, author and tutor) presented an insight into the situation of married women working in the Leicestershire hosiery trade. The after lunch speaking slot can sometimes be a challenge when the gathered audience has been well fed and watered but on this occasion our presenter engaged us fully and brought to mind the difference in working conditions today and how in former times women knuckled down to do the work necessary for family existence. It was especially interesting to learn of the arguments regarding the continued employment of women after marriage -- something we now take granted but during former times was very much in contrast to other industries.

The mid-afternoon break was a quick chance to stretch legs and indulge in that most English of customs -- "the taking of tea" -- we were to have been taken back to Roman times by Vicki Score of Leicester University Archaeological Services (ULAS) who are now famous for discovering Richard III in a car park. Unfortunately, Vicki became indisposed at the last moment but she had been magnificently understudied by Zara who took up the reins and delivered Vicki's presentation. This talk had been prompted by the Roman helmet discovered at nearby Hallaton and now on permanent display in the Harborough Museum after a nine-year reconstruction and conservation project by the British Museum. One of the helmet's most intriguing and mysterious features is a scallop-shaped browguard depicting the bust of a woman -- a Goddess? Whoever she was it has certainly been the subject of much discussion and conjecture by experts and it was therefore extremely helpful to explore Vicki's material and learn of explanations and suggestions about its origin. This was a remarkably interesting presentation which could not fail to spark or enhance an interest in archaeology.

Our last speaker of the day was Society Chairman David Johnson who gave us a very well researched talk on local 18th-century poet and writer Jane West. It's likely that many people may have previously been unaware of this remarkable lady from Little Bowden. Originally from London she married a yeoman farmer, himself descended from a local lineage of rectors, and in the surroundings of their manor house home spent her time writing poetry, literature and some unperformed plays. She was published both under her own name and that of nom de plume Mrs Prudentia Homespun and during her long life to age 93 became a popular though now largely forgotten author. David had gone to considerable trouble to obtain illustrations for his most interesting talk and he is to be congratulated on maintaining audience interest at the end of a long but very worthwhile programme.

In summary this was a most rewarding day made possible by the expertise and enthusiasm of our presenters. Thanks are due to Len Holden and Garry Davies for organising it and also to the back-office ladies for keeping us supplied with light refreshments throughout the proceedings. Every year, this major MHHS event continues to enhance our knowledge and I can confidently recommend the 2014 occasion. It will be themed on transport with our keynote speaker being Sam Mullins, one-time curator of Harborough Museum and now Director of the London Transport Museum at Covent Garden. **Full details at [www.MarketHarboroughHistoricalSociety.org](http://www.MarketHarboroughHistoricalSociety.org)**



Dudley Brown



SPEAKERS AT THE HISTORY DAY