

General Meeting 2021

January 2021: THE CENTURY OF DECEPTION

Our January Zoom General Meeting included a guest, Ian Keable, comedy magician and speaker who gave us an illustrated talk on “The Century of Deception”. This refers to the 17th century during which we have records of notorious hoaxes and deceptions. Ian gave us full and very detailed stories of three of them:-

- The story of Mary Toft from Godalming, famed for giving birth to rabbits
- George Psalmanazar who claimed to be the first native of Formosa (Taiwan) to visit Europe, maintaining the pretence for many years, and
- The Bottle Conjurer an unidentified hoaxer who claimed to be able to “creep into a quart bottle” on-stage His failure to turn up at the performance caused a riot involving several of the aristocracy and became a by-word for credulity.

Ian’s presentation was thorough and filled with comedic detail, and will form part of his book The Century of Deception – The Birth of Hoaxes in 17th Century England, due to be published in October. In the meantime if you’d like to know more about these hoaxers, Wikipedia has an entry for each

Thank you Ian for a very entertaining talk.

Nick Clark

February 2021: MAGIC IAN

Our February General Zoom meeting was well attended with nearly 70 participants. After the usual business session and announcements we were entertained by Ian Buchan, a.k.a. "Magic Ian", a retired Civil Servant who has been performing magic for children and adults for almost 35 years.

He is member and Past President of Edinburgh Magic Circle with several awards to his name and he gave us an entertaining interactive talk, “My Magic, magicians and more” He spoke about his life as a magician and some of the famous magicians, who most people will have heard of, such as Houdini, David Nixon, Tommy Cooper, Paul Daniels, with some anecdotes thrown in of those who he has met.

There were also some entertaining practical demonstrations involving participation for members of the audience - real magic before your very eyes!

A most entertaining presentation

Nick Clark



March 2021: WORKING WITH GHOSTS

Our speaker at the well-attended General Meeting in March was Sarah Slater, an official guide and lecturer at Hampton Court Palace, whose subject was “Working with Ghosts”.

Sarah was dressed in the clothes which she usually wears during her ghost tours – a Victorian mourning costume of black “widow’s weeds” which was associated with a death in the household. (She also showed us her Georgian period gown - she obviously enjoys dressing up, like her boss Lucy Worsley).

She first gave us a short history of the palace from it’s original building by Cardinal Wolsey, its appropriation as a royal palace by Henry VIII, extensive modification by William & Mary and its more recent use as grace & favour accommodation.



Many people have reported ghostly experiences at Hampton Court, some of the apparitions allegedly identifiable from portraits or tomb effigies. Reports come from staff and visitors and many from occupants of the 60-odd grace & favour residences. One such is recorded in the autobiography of Lady Olivia Baden-Powell, where a visiting psychic sees Ann Boleyn at prayer in a small room of the apartment suite. Unfortunately, that location during Anne’s time would have been a buttery or drinks store associated with the dining hall, highly inappropriate for a private chapel.

Several stories are told of the Grey Lady who allegedly haunts the SW wing, cloisters and garden on the South side. Sybil Penn was servant to four Tudor monarchs, and wet nurse to Edward VI. She nursed Elizabeth I devotedly through smallpox in 1562. The Queen recovered, but poor Sybil caught the pox and died soon afterwards. Sybil was buried in nearby Hampton church, as befitted her role as loyal family servant. Sybil's tomb was disturbed when the church was renovated in 1829, and shortly after this, stories began to spread of a ‘grey lady’ seen to walk the corridors of the State Apartments and Clock Court at the palace. Sybil is also linked to mysterious spinning wheel noises that were said to come from behind a wall in a grace and favour apartment. Legend has it that when the wall was removed, an old, much used spinning wheel was discovered.

It was later in the 1880’s that Princess Frederika of Hanover, then living in the same apartment briefly saw a woman in grey clothing leaning over her baby daughter’s cradle. Later at church she saw the memorial to Sybil Penn and identified her as the same figure.

In the 1940’s the granddaughter of the occupants, Lord & Lady Birdwood, claimed to have a face-to- face encounter with the Grey Lady on the stairs. The suite of rooms is now used as offices, and members of staff have twice heard unexplained footsteps and sightings of the Grey Lady.



Sarah then told of her own experience of hearing workmen in conversation when no staff could have been present. Unexplained burials had been found near the site, and she believes these could have been the victims of a construction accident during Queen Mary’s rushed remodelling of the palace.

One other famous historical figure said to haunt the palace is Catherine Howard, fifth wife of Henry VIII. On being arrested and accused of adultery, she escaped from her guards and ran screaming out to the king for mercy. He had already left the palace in secret, and no mercy was forthcoming. Since then there have been regular reports of residents in that area of the palace being woken by screams, and reports of visitors feeling faint and dogs being nervous in that part of the gallery. In 2000 a scientific examination of the area did report some geomagnetic anomalies at the site! The area is now decorated with wall hangings and the occurrence of women feeling faint has dramatically reduced

The first ghost walk at the palace was held on Halloween 2002, and this has evolved into the very popular regular ghost tours.

Sarah then opened the meeting to questions and encouraged the audience to relate any unexplained encounters.

We thanked her for a very interesting and unusual talk.

Nick Clark

April 2021: AGATHA CHRISTIE

Our April Zoom General Meeting was well attended and our guest speaker was Steve Dimmer.

He introduced his subject, Agatha Christie, by pointing out that her books are the third most read books in the English language (after the Bible and Shakespeare), her works have been translated into 123 languages and she has sold over 4½ Billion copies!

He then went on to give a detailed account of her colourful life, her books, her characters and the many actors that have successfully played them on stage, screen and television.

A very interesting and entertaining talk.

Nick Clark

June 2021: A Little of What You Fancy

June's speaker was Milly, who invited us into her parlour to hear about Victorian Nottingham's music halls and entertainment. In the 1800s there was a big demand for entertainment, the theatre was only for the upper-class but the working class wanted entertaining too and in 1887 there were 11 music hall in Nottingham. They could easily be described as vulgar, bawdy, stuffy, smelly and always full! It was in this year that the Malt Cross was built by Charles Wheldon and it opened on 2 October to coincide with the Goose Fair. Downstairs was a roller skating rink and a restaurant, to go upstairs you had to pay extra.

Milly then went on to tell us the story of Mr Sam Torr (1849-1923) who left school as the age of 14 intent on going to work in the music halls. He became known for his act 'On the Back of Daddy O' where he wore a costume of a small child on his back. One night in Leicester he forgot his costume and paid a small boy to ride on his back. Unfortunately, Sam had been drinking for over 10 hours before going on stage where he fell off the stage and broke his leg! The young boy was unharmed. Joe Merrick wrote to Sam Torr asking if he could be on the show as a 'freak'. He told Sam that it was said his mother, whilst pregnant, had gone to the zoo and been frightened by an elephant. Sam took him on and after touring Leicester took him to Nottingham to the Malt Cross. They were invited to London where Joe Merrick came to the attention of doctors.

Meanwhile the Malt Cross in Nottingham had fallen into disrepute, and prostitutes were a common sight there. Sam Torr was asked to take over as manager and clean the place up, but it was making a lot of money so Sam didn't change much and after 10 months he was sacked and returned to the stage.

During this time there were 50 brothels in Nottingham. Hurts Yard had a reputation for having a very infamous brothel and Angel Row was known for having the prettiest prostitutes. A well known Justice Watkins Williams a Judge had a passion for a brothel girl called Nelly. Unfortunately, one night at the height of his passion he had a heart attack and died. His body was dumped out on the street, his friends found him and took him home in a wheelbarrow and put him to bed to be discovered the next morning by his house keeper.

Milly had many more stories to tell, including one night at the empire they had six lions on stage, but they had not been fed, the following act included a donkey that was waiting in the wings, it was dragged onto the stage by the hungry lions who saw it as their next meal! There was the showgirl who was refused entry to the Flying Horse because 'she wasn't the kind of woman they wanted in their establishment' The manger was prosecuted because there was a bye law that stated they must provide refreshment to travellers and the showgirl was touring with her act and therefore a traveller!

Milly sang a few songs of the time and was indeed very entertaining. For those who missed her talk we can book her again in person when proper meeting resume.

Pat Downing



July 2021: Penny Wheat

The guest speaker was Penny Wheat, who introduced herself by saying that she had had an extraordinary journey, (similar to that of the hobbit Bilbo Baggins), away from the comfort of home and hearth.

In the 60's she studied at Loughborough and Leicester, but wasn't a participant in any the political and social experimentation of the time. Thereafter she married and had three children, so far so unsurprising. It was in the library with her children that she came across the book "Who Killed Hanratty" by Paul Foot. She found the book intriguing, especially the letters written between Hanratty and his mother.

Penny was now teaching at Stafford College and also doing some home tuition. The father of one of her pupils was a prison officer, he suggested that one of the inmates was likely to benefit from someone on the outside taking an interest in him, and would she be prepared to write to him?

A very appreciative letter arrived from Stafford Prison and that encouraged her to start a correspondence. Soon after the inmate was moved to Featherstone Prison, Wolverhampton, and was asking Penny not only to keep up the letters but to visit as well. On her first visit she

discovered that his brother was also at Featherstone, and she carried on the correspondence with both of them. They liked to think of themselves as her brothers and called her “big sister”. They were later moved to York, where Penny continued to visit and they were then released. Their mother paid a surprise visit to Penny, thanking her for her interest in the boys and to tell her that they were doing well and keeping out of trouble largely thanks to her.

Penny came to be known as a willing visitor and there followed many invitations to accompany individuals during court cases or write and visit prisoners. Over the next ten years she spent time visiting or writing to around 60 people all around Britain

There was a particularly sad murder in Stafford, the victims being two small boys, and she wanted to try to understand the motives of the perpetrator Eventually she was able to find that he was in Walton Prison in Liverpool. A letter to the prison chaplain led to an eventual agreement to visit, The prisoner agreed to see her and she visited for three years. Her comments were invited on his suitability for parole, she considered him a danger to himself and said so, but parole was agreed and the man committed suicide on release, a great shock and sadness to Penny.

Inspired by some TV documentaries Penny decided to inquire about letter writing and befriending American prisoners including those facing execution. This was a far more formal process than in the UK and she was sent a lot of advice which stressed the need for commitment - it must be a stable relationship till the end. Eventually she was asked to correspond, and sent an introductory letter – and got no response. However, her letter had been passed on and finally got a response from an inmate of a maximum security prison who admitted that he was guilty of murder and a long correspondence started. Somehow her name and details had been passed around and she was soon receiving requests for pen friendship from all over the US.

She later found herself able to visit America and has now been to Nashville, Tennessee seventeen times, making friends with prison guards and inmates and visiting some of her correspondents.

She is still writing to prisoners in Nashville and is a member of the board at Stafford Prison.

In her closing remarks she stressed how sad it makes her that in America the death penalty seems to be used so inconsistently.

We thanked Penny for her unusual and thought-provoking talk.

Nick Clark

October 2021: Emma Sheardown

October's guest speaker was Emma Sheardown with a talk entitled “There's No Such Word As Can't”. She went on by explaining that complications at her birth that had led to starvation of oxygen to her brain and left her with quadriplegic cerebral palsy. Doctors believed that she would never be able to walk or talk, but with the hard work and encouragement from her parents there followed a long procession of specialist physiotherapy which helped her improve her walking and speech.

By the age of six she got strong enough to walk unaided One of her therapists had suggested pony riding as a useful therapy so a Shetland Pony was bought for her to ride around the family farm - much more acceptable physiotherapy than boring exercises!

At seven she wanted to be doing the same things as her riding friends, but she could not safely canter or jump. Her Riding for the Disabled Association instructor introduced her to dressage, and eventually to Paralympic dressage which is about displaying the communication and harmony between horse and rider while undergoing a fixed set of movements.

In 2009, five years on the program, she had her own horse Eddie and was entered in the European Championships at Kristiansand, Norway. She and Eddie were part of a team of seven as “new kids on the block”, to gain experience, but in her first major test she won a European

Individual Silver Medal. The following day it was free-style to music where She and Eddie managed to become European Champion, winning the European Free Style Gold Medal.

In 2010 she travelled to Kentucky to represent Team GBR at the Alltech World Equestrian Games and here, despite injury from a fall she won a freestyle Gold Medal along with an Individual Bronze Medal

She says that becoming European and World Champion at her sport were the proudest moments of her life. In 2011 these achievements led to her being awarded the British Equestrian's Medal of Honour.

A remarkable story from a remarkable lady which was received with enthusiastic applause.

Nick Clark