

English Mediaeval Castles & Great Houses.

At our March meeting, James Wright FSA gave a very interesting insight into the inner workings of mediaeval castles. James is an archaeologist and historian based at the University of Nottingham who has studied buildings archaeology for over twenty years.

In direct contrast with most talks on castles (which tend to focus on high status patrons and their architecture), the talk offered an alternative viewpoint of life in English mediaeval castles: that of the ordinary folk. Using archaeological evidence gleaned from historic building survey of many different castles and great houses, contemporary literature, artistic representations, graffiti and architectural history, James presented the story of the masons, carpenters, cooks, clerks, servants, stable-hands and lower status visitors to great castles. He delved into the kitchens, stables, staircases, cellars and garderobes to uncover evidence of how these castles were organised which he illustrated with lots of interesting photographs.

He explained that the basic layout consisted of three areas – the Hall, the Solar (private rooms) and the service area (kitchens etc). There would also be barns, lesser halls (for the use of servants), offices for stewards, wells, a brewhouse, a slaughter house etc.

During the building phase, the Master Mason was the architect who had constant discussions with the owner. The design was passed to the stonemasons, fixer masons, carpenters to create the building and finally to plasterers and painters.

The household could consist of up to 200 people. Staff and horses lived in an outer courtyard. Most of the staff would be in shared accommodation, often shared beds! Although there were not many women in the household, laundry was always done by women.

The talk concluded with mention of the effect on adjacent settlements such as markets, employment, religion and environment.

Jesse Boot and Highfields Park

At our April meeting, Professor John Beckett from Nottingham University talked to us about the history of Jesse Boot and Highfields Park. Jesse bought the Highfield Estate in 1919 for £32,676, about £1,620,000 in today's money. The park consisted of 151 acres, increased in 1921 to 220 acres and was split between Lenton and Beeston. The Tottle Brook is the parish boundary.

Jesse bought the estate for his wife Florence, who came from Jersey, but they never lived there as Florence preferred their house in the Park.

By 1920, Jesse was not well and sold the Boots company. He gave the City Council £350,000 (about £16m today) to be used for Parks, Recreation, Music etc. He funded the Binns organ in the Albert Hall and bought Woodthorpe Grange and the Embankment. He gave the Highfields estate to the Council and in 1921 two parks were created – Highfields Park and University Park. He largely funded the University and created a lot of sports facilities. He took great interest in all these projects but died in 1931 and is buried in Jersey.

There were many other projects that he funded and was involved in, so Nottingham owes a great deal to Jesse Boot.

Visit to Costume and Textile Collection at Newstead Abbey

In May we enjoyed a fascinating trip to see the Nottingham Museums and Galleries Lace, Costume and Textile Collection housed at Newstead Abbey. The 'Behind the Scenes' tour of the collection took us to several rooms not normally open to the public. Judith Edgar, the curator, gave us an insight into some of the interesting items kept there including a collection of children's shoes, beautiful embroidered items of clothing and some fabulous Nottingham lace dresses. This was just a tiny selection of a vast collection of articles, all stored, catalogued and kept immaculately. Following this, we enjoyed a leisurely stroll around the gardens and lunch in the cafe.