



Moretonhampstead History Society

Newsletter

April 2009

March Meeting:

Our last meeting on, 18th March, saw forty-five people in the Community Club to hear the writer Peter Villiers talk about Joseph Conrad. It was a brilliant display of knowledge, delivered entirely without notes, and in a charming and authoritative manner which would impress even the most experienced public speaker. Peter is the son of the late Alan Villiers, a well-respected writer on ships and the sea; so when Alan left his book on 'Conrad - the Master Mariner' unfinished, Peter completed it for him* – he, himself, having a lifelong interest in Conrad as a novelist. And what an interesting man Conrad was, writing not in his native Polish, nor in his second language, French, but in his third language, English. And despite this he was praised by the influential critic, F R Leavis, as one of the greatest writers in the English language. Perhaps growing up in exile in Eastern Russia, and orphaned at a young age, and sailing around the world for twenty years, gives you a different perspective on what really matters! And despite proposing to his future wife in the National Portrait Gallery with the words, 'Well, how about it, old girl?' and asking whether she could be ready to marry him in a week or two (and then promptly disappearing for another month), one could not help but like him. If you want to read more – contact staff at the library; they are expecting a rush on Conrad's books.

(* *Joseph Conrad – Master Mariner*, Peter Villiers, Seafarer Books 2006)

April Meeting:

Our April meeting will take place on Wednesday April 15th at 7.30pm, as usual in the Community Club.

From Pot Water to Hydro Power - An Appreciation of Dartmoor Leats.

Speaker: Jane Marchand

Jane is a member of the Dartmoor National Park's Archaeology team, and an experienced speaker on local Archaeology.

Non members of the Society are very welcome to join us for a donation of £2 payable at the door.

email:

The number of members now getting this Newsletter by this means continues to grow, I now only print 19 copies, and of those, only 2 need to be posted! We are truly a very 'green' History Society! If you are on email, and still receiving a printed Newsletter, but would be willing to have it by that means, do please let me know using the email address on the back page. Also for those already receiving this by email, don't forget to let me know if you change your address.

The Guano Story:

A personal view

Those of you who visited Tyntesfield, the National Trust's Victorian Gothic mansion outside Bristol, may remember that William Gibbs derived the fortune to build his remarkable house from the export of guano from Peru. Guano is solidified bird droppings, rich in phosphorous and nitrogen, which was widely used in Europe and the USA during the 1800s for agricultural fertilizer. More importantly, it was an essential constituent in the manufacture of gunpowder. A number of nineteenth century entrepreneurs became very rich from the

exploitation of this valuable natural resource. The name comes from the native Quechua Indian word for excrement 'wana'.

Last autumn I was able to visit the Ballestas Islands off the southern coast of Peru, the source of William Gibbs' massive wealth. These barren, rocky outcrops are home to literally millions of sea birds which use the isolated crags for roosting and nesting. Their droppings have built up over centuries and solidified to form pockets between the peaks – some reportedly more than two hundred feet deep - which can be excavated in the same way that chalk or gravel would be quarried. It is easier to understand this process when you realise that the average annual rainfall in the area ranges from one to three millimetres – roughly an eighth of an inch. The hot summer sun and continual winds dry the droppings until they harden into a solid mass. During the nineteenth century the Peruvian Government - an autocracy made up of the old 'Spanish' families, descendants of the conquistadors - allowed foreign industrialists to mine and export the guano in return for substantial 'fees'. The labour was provided by gangs of Chinese coolies who were paid at subsistence rates. For several decades this industry was the Peruvian government's most important source of revenue. The practice declined at the end of the nineteenth century once gunpowder was no longer used to make explosives and artificial agricultural fertilizer was widely available, but it was only in 1975 that a more enlightened government banned the exploitation of the guano deposits completely. Today twenty-two of the Ballestas Islands are officially designated 'Guano Islands'. They are protected by armed guards and extraction is managed by licensed dealers. This means that most of the guano is now sold at affordable prices to Peruvian peasant farmers, some of whom are indescribably poor.

Arriving at the Ballestas Islands was a breathtaking experience. The boat trip took an hour from the coast and the screeching and mewing of the circling birds became ever louder as we neared the grey, white streaked rocks. We were able to see at very close quarters dolphins, Humboldt Penguins, Blue-footed Boobies, rare Peruvian Pelicans, seals and sea lions, and many thousands of cormorants, gulls and terns. Red-legged vultures constantly fly over the islands and cleanse them of fallen birds and animals. The smell was unforgettable!

I found it difficult to reconcile the stately grandeur of Tynesfield, in its typically English pastoral setting, with the wild and screaming rocks of the Ballestas islands inhabited only by birds and seals. William Gibbs was an ardent churchman, but I can only imagine that he saw no moral disparity between the opulence of his family life and the exploitation of these natural deposits - essential for Peruvian peasant agriculture – and of the Chinese labour gangs whose dangerous work made his fortune for him.

Wendy Coombes

From Treleavens Diary:

Friday April 19th-1799. This day was to have been married Sergeant Benley of the Marines to Mrs. Soper that keeps the White Horse Inn in this town, the Licence was bought, guest invited, and every preparation made for the celebration of the nuptials, but the Sergeant in the Morning said he had an order to repair immediately to his Commanding Officer at Newton, and would return again on Saturday evening, but the Sergeant did not come according to promise and 'tis supposed has left Mrs. Soper in the lurch!

Editor– no 'supposed' about it!

May Meeting:

Our May meeting will take place on Wednesday 20th May at 7.30pm, as usual in the Community Club. The subject will be:

‘The Romans in Devon’

Speaker - Derek Gore

Derek Gore is a Teaching fellow in the Archaeology Department of Exeter University, and has published short works on the Romans and Vikings in Devon.