

Merton Historical Society will be 50 years old on 28 February 2001. Our Chairman LIONEL GREEN, who is a founder member, looks back, with

FIFTY YEARS OF REMINISCENCES

In writing these reminiscences of Merton Historical Society I find the memory plays ingenious tricks. Some events I remember so clearly and think I know when they took place, only to find that the Society records are at variance by several years. Even the locations change. I thought that the symposium where Miss Jowett spoke about Literary Associations of Merton, and Eric Montague on the Mitcham Workhouse and I reflected on Recollections of Old Merton must have been at the old library building in Kingston Road; but the records say it was at the Central Library in Morden Road on 22 March 1967.

It all began with the Festival of Britain in 1951. The former Merton & Morden Urban District Council set up a committee to organise events to celebrate the Festival. The District Librarian, Miss Evelyn Jowett, was asked to produce a history of the district. Coincidentally the WEA planned a series of lectures for the winter of 1950/1 by Mrs J.Saynor on local history. This brought together a band of like-minded people who were made aware of the rich heritage we enjoy, and, at the conclusion of the series, wished to continue the studies.

Stimulated by support from several District Councillors, and encouraged by the Clerk of the Council, Mr Harry May, the Merton and Morden History Society was founded on Wednesday 28 February 1951. Councillor V.Talbot was elected Chairman, with Cllr.S.H.Reeves Vice-Chairman. The WEA evening class provided our first Secretary, Miss E.M.Jowett, and our Treasurer, Mr S.E.Cobbett. The Committee consisted of our tutor, Mrs J.Saynor, and a student, Mr L.E.Green. Cllr.E.W.Warren was also elected to the Committee. Our first auditors were Cllr.G.S.Whitmee and Mr E.F.Dakin.

During the first year (1 March 1951) we had a talk by Dr Sheppard Frere about the mound in Morden Park, which he had inspected. He felt that it could well be a burial mound before being made into a garden feature, but only an archaeological dig would determine its age.

The first AGM took place on 2 November 1951 before the first anniversary, which is why the 50th AGM took place before the 50th birthday of the Society. Income consisted of 58 subscriptions at 2/6d (12½p) = £7.5s.0d, and expenditure on paper and postage was £3.8s.2d, leaving cash in hand of £3.16s.10d. I remember the Treasurer remarking that he thought we could afford to buy a spade to begin a dig in Morden Park. Mr Cobbett served the Society for 15 years as Treasurer, and then as Auditor.

There were 42 members at the first AGM, and the records state that after the business meeting Lionel Green gave an illustrated lecture on the Priory site, using an epidiascope. I have to confess that I do not recall this.

I do however remember the float that the Society organised in connection with the Coronation Carnival on 6 June 1953. This was a presentation of the marriage of Queen Eleanor to Henry III, and we won the first prize of ten guineas (see Bulletin No.118 June 1996). In 1955 the Society helped with the exhibition held to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar.

We had better summer weather in the 1950s, and went on long rambles in the heart of Surrey, visiting many historic sites, making full use of party rates on the railway.

Archaeological excavations began with Stane Street in Morden Park under Dennis Turner in the autumn of 1958 and the spring of 1959. I wasn't on Eric Montague's digs in Mitcham, but was thrilled to be present with Scott McCracken in 1976-8 as the foundations of the chapter house were uncovered. There seemed to be one significant figure at all the Society's excavations - Bill Rudd!

However, no reminiscences would be complete without reference to failures and disappointments. When Colonel Bidder revealed the outline of the priory church in 1922, Gilliat Hatfeild generously purchased the site of the high altar and conveyed it to the Urban District Council, to preserve it for all time. In 1958 this Society commissioned and paid for a commemorative stone to mark the site. This was sculpted by Mr Blackwell, and showed a ground plan based on Colonel Bidder's findings. The UDC erected the stone and laid out the surrounding garden. Colonel Bidder, then our President, came and unveiled the site on 25 July 1959. I recall the efforts made by Miss Jowett and Harry May and many District Councillors, who knew what was meant by "for all time". In 1986 the Borough Councillors made other arrangements, and this important historical site is now under Savacentre's car park. A bitter disappointment.



The memorial plaque in the priory gardens, Station Road, shortly after it was unveiled.