

Lecture Reports

Brian Little

Thursday 13th September 2007

Houses and History: Reading Buildings for clues to the past – David Clark

This was essentially an illustrated talk, comparing architectural styles throughout the county. Interesting and enjoyable, but unsuitable for report here. **J.G.**

Thursday 14th October 2007

High Society at Astrop: The History of Astrop Spa – Deborah Hayter

This was a lecture full of interest and not only because Astrop Spa had a period of renown but also because it is surrounded by elements of mystery.

Our speaker took her audience back to the glorious heyday of spas and spa towns – the eighteenth century. As much as anything this was to reveal the earlier prominence of Astrop, which flourished in the second half of the seventeenth century but only for the first half of the eighteenth century.

It was during this time that this phenomenal location was regarded locally as a good place with the added value of the link with St Rumbold. In a pamphlet of 1668, over 70 ailments were said to respond in some way to the water from the well. Eyes, head and teeth were also mentioned as specific body areas expected to benefit. Given this measure of popularity linked to a society whose upper classes were seeking a resourceful use of leisure time, it is especially sad that the only known picture by the artist Rowlandson depicts the spa in operation way past its glory days (see *C&CH.5.7* (Autumn 1973), p.134).

Within the appropriate Northamptonshire circles and possibly encouraged by reminders of the so-called season in county newspapers, a trip to Astrop in the right company was a must. Lesser mortals may well have based themselves in Kings Sutton lodging houses. Even Celia Fiennes (1694) included the spa on one of her journeys. We may never know whether or not she had access to descriptive poems about Astrop. One of these suggested that you not only took the waters but also consumed buttered rolls and tea. For those well placed in society the level of participation was higher and was linked to a subscription ball, the grandly named Astrop Assembly.

By the late Victorian and Edwardian times, spa-related activities in Britain began to be subsumed by the flight to the seaside. Hardly surprising was the observation by an amateur archaeologist Peter Thompson, writing in 1913, that he could only see foundations of the buildings that comprised the Assembly Rooms.

One of the many unanswered questions is how the spa related to the House and Park. Was there a money link? One thing is certain, as the Spa shrank so the Park gained in size. It was at this point that Deborah's audience realised just how much remained to be discovered about this fascinating corner of Northamptonshire.