

Tim Lee – Chairman of the Reigate Society

I'd like to invite Nicholas Owen who is President of the Reigate Society and of course a local resident to just give us a brief introduction and to kick us off. Over to you Nicholas

Tim, thank you very much for a very good evening. I'm absolutely delighted to say a few words as we get underway with this first Reigate Society virtual meeting. Absolutely terrific to see so many people and to see how much interest has been generated. Quite a lot of the faces belong to folk I know very well and welcome you all. As Tim just mentioned the Society is not just about Reigate but neighbouring areas as well. I've lived around here in the borough since I was 17 as many as you will know. I joined the Surrey Mirror in 1964 as a reporter; I've loved the place and the people ever since. In those days reporters like me used to cover meetings like the Reigate Society but not any more unfortunately. I remember very clearly one crusty old fellow back in the mid-1960's got up at a meeting and said "look here, I strongly object to the building of a TV Mast on the top of Reigate Hill" and I can remember that so well. From my house I can look out of the window just there and see that mast and every time I do I think of that fellow.

The point is the Society's been taking a close and informed interest in developments, good and indifferent in our area for almost as long as I've been alive. I think it's so important that people take an interest in the history of the area and in what happens now and what is likely to happen, especially when it comes to things like Housing Development, encouraging local business, traffic issues, public transport and so on. Our Society's a forum where we can all learn more about the place where we live and think about the future, but listen, I'll be honest. I'm very afraid and I've said it and written it down that I might be the last President of the Reigate Society. I've been worried recently that unless more people come forward to help run the organization we're going to be in trouble but I'm very optimistic people will come forward. The work involved is not too arduous I promise you and I just wanted to slip that in case anybody might want to come forward and help or know people who might.

At the same time I want to pay tribute to the two people who've really carried this organisation in the last few years – the Chairman and the Secretary Michael and Bridget Doughty. They have done a first class job - I don't know whether you can do this on Zoom but I think you can - give them a clap. Well done, oh and if you know of anybody who might become a member - a new member, don't hesitate to suggest it and bring them forward. We'd love to see them now.

It gives me enormous pleasure to introduce our main speaker for this evening. I knew him first when he ran the Ancient House Bookshop in Bell Street in Reigate that so many of us remember - I spent an awful lot of time

in that place and I spent an awful lot of money too. He's a renowned local historian who tonight is speaking about a fantastic building that is so familiar to us all surely. The Reigate Priory. Sean over to you

Thank you Nicholas. I have a big apology to make to people who joined tonight thinking I'm going to talk about the whole course of the Priory's history. I'm not – I haven't got enough time to talk about its history from the late 13th century. What I am going to talk about are events that have concerned The Priory in the last 100 years. Things that are still reflected in a way today. My excuse is that the study of history not only helps explain how we've got to where we are now but also, if we're lucky, provide some direction for the future.

Worries about The Priory are not new whether concerning the use of the house or the park. In 1920 it began with the threat of a housing development of 90 Acres on the Priory Park straddling the hilly shoulder to the south of the mansion. Happily Randall Vogan, a very wealthy merchant who lived locally, nipped this threat in the bud by acquiring the land for £15,000 and most generously presented it to the people of Reigate for their "quiet enjoyment".

A year later, following the death of Lady Henry Somerset in March 1921, the Priory mansion with the remaining 68 and a half acres of attached land owned by the Somers family since 1810 was sold by her son Henry Somers Somerset to the charismatic first world war naval hero Admiral David Beatty, Earl Beatty, for £35,000. The sale of the house was quickly followed by an auction of the other considerable land holdings and property that had belonged to the Somerset family in a sale described by the auctioneers in their catalogue as "the Sale of the Town of Reigate". The Beattys owned a splendid London townhouse and some four other properties around Britain, mostly paid for by Lady Beatty, the only daughter of Marshall Field, an American multi-millionaire. Earl Beatty and his family spent only a small part of their year at The Priory and were never heavily engaged in Reigate's community life and affairs. Lady Beatty died in 1932 leaving The Priory and its Park to her younger son Peter whose interest in the place lay largely in the stables and the horses that he kept there rather than the property itself. When in July 1936 the Borough Council approved plans to build a relief road, which would cut right across the park in front of the house, spoiling the views to the South, the degree of protest made on behalf of Peter Beatty seems, reading it now, rather understated. Apart from the need for adequate compensation his representative introduced very little into the debate apart from saying that the siting of the potential road should be close to the southern boundary of the park. Even when there was a comment that recommended there should be room left for development on either side of the road there was no protest.. More

discussion followed in 1937, but with a worsening European situation the project was fortunately mothballed.

In October 1939 The Priory was let by Peter Beatty to the large flour milling concern Joseph Rank Ltd - later Rank Hovis Macdougall. They used the building as offices and sleeping accommodation for about 70-80 of their staff evacuated from their London office. More were hived out amongst the community. In 1942 the estate was sold by Peter Beatty to the Mutual Property Life and General Insurance company, better known later as the Crusader Insurance Company, who were already leasing Woodhatch Lodge as their wartime premises which would of course become their main office after the war, later Canon's HQ, and now owned by Surrey County Council. By a curious fate, on part of that site will now be built the replacement for Reigate Priory Middle School. Initially the Mutual did for a while consider using The Priory as their permanent headquarters when the Rank lease expired though it would appear its main value to them was as a land investment.

In June 1942 they discussed their plans to develop the property with the Borough Council who raised no significant opposition, but it was stipulated that if the Mansion was not required for occupation by the owners of the corporation, the owners of the corporation should be given first refusal on the house. A small but voluble group of local men, members of the radical Reigate and Redhill Discussion Group, quickly made their opinions known of what they considered as the council's missed opportunity in not purchasing the whole property for the Borough. They saw the Mansion as an ideal centre for the community, and the estate as a public open space with playing fields for schools and clubs. Three of the most valiant local objectors were Frank Potter, an art master at Whitgift School, and Ernest Lancashire, an actuary, both honoured founding members of the Reigate Society – hurray! By February 1944, sufficient concern had been expressed for a lengthy debate to be held on the subject by the Town Council in which views were heard from a wide range of interested parties in a future use for the mansion.

Strongest support was given to the idea of it serving severally as a Borough Library, as a base for adult education, and a small theatre. Later discussion in May 1944 expanded this list of uses to a health centre, a youth centre, a gymnasium, a municipal café, an indoor Nursery, a dance hall, a picture gallery, an exhibition room, and workshops for arts and crafts. Sadly the delegated Council committee had to admit that it could find no sanction, even if it were offered to them, for a loan for The Priory through any of the ministries it approached, due to the war. At this juncture Mutual proposed that now their only interest in the development of the site was for a row of

shops with a service road on The Priory land to the west side of Bell Street. By this time the planned county road through The Priory had been abandoned. Had this not been the case it seems likely that their building proposals might have been extended further. Discussion about the mansion and park rolled on throughout 1944 and in December of that year, the town clerk was charged with asking the Crusader (the Mutual having just changed its name) what they would be prepared to accept for the whole estate. The Borough were offered it for £67,000 but such a sum inflated by the developmental value couldn't be entertained by the Corporation. However, the Town Council was left with a trick still up its sleeve; barely two months later it recommended to the mid Surrey planning committee the zoning of the whole estate as a public open space. An appeal by the Crusader against this zoning was silently dismissed at a hearing held in Reigate in 1946.

Later in 1946, in the expectation of bargaining a lower price the Mayor of Reigate launched a public appeal to raise £25,000 towards the acquisition of the estate and the house though with little success, only £3,500 was raised. At the Borough Council meeting on the 3rd of March 1947 the possible use of The Priory was yet again considered, this time under three main headings: with an allocation of funding the Borough would bear the cost of a community centre and Surrey County Council the cost of a library and a youth centre. The District Valuer was asked at the same meeting to renew negotiations with Crusader for The Priory estate and it was now revealed that the Corporation was looking for financial support from the Ministry of Education. It was not perhaps surprising that just four weeks later at the Council's meeting on the 31st of March, it was announced that the community centre would also be used jointly for educational purposes for a period not exceeding ten years. The Southern Divisional Executive of the Surrey Educational Committee when it next met a few days later disclosed that subject to an agreement with the Borough up to 450 children would likely be placed there in a mixed Secondary School. This sudden move was due to the recent sharp direction from Whitehall that conditions contained in Rab Butler's Education Act of 1944, delayed because of the war, must be implemented by April 1947. Under the act all children at the age of eleven were to enter senior schools and the minimum school leaving age was raised from 14 to 15. Surrey County Council education committee with almost no preparations made found themselves forced to look for space to contain a very significant increase in the number of pupils in secondary education and The Priory was their local stop-gap salvation. It took another seven months, until November 1947, before Reigate Corporation could finally announce that the contract between themselves and The Crusader had been finally signed, and that the Corporation and the Surrey County Council could take immediate possession of the

property. The total agreed purchase price was £47,500, the Corporation paying for just under 50 acres of the park for leisure activities and 1/3 of the mansion, and Surrey County Council paying for 16 Acres of the park for playing fields and 2/3 of the Mansion - the Ministry of Education however, agreeing to pay towards part of that portion. A great deal of work had to be undertaken before The Priory could open as a school as it had become somewhat derelict. A new heating system and separate lavatories for boys and girls were needed and much else besides and all was still far from complete when the school opened on the 31st of August 1948. The school grew quickly in numbers and in the mid-1950's a gymnasium which doubled as an assembly hall, changing rooms and two workshops were built in which woodworking and metalwork could be taught. The school ran as a secondary modern comprehensive school until 1963 when, with the development of large new secondary modern schools in Redhill and Woodhatch, it was determined to limit the intake to girls. In 1971 a further change was made to turn The Priory into a mixed middle school for pupils between the eight and twelve years of age, and so it remains today though now with the knowledge that the present school will move to new premises in Woodhatch in September 2023, or perhaps one should say thereabouts, and a new role will need to be found for The Priory some 75 years after it opened as a school.

Whatever the future holds for the building, I hope that it will not be one in which over 600 young pairs of feet continue to pound the floor of this grade 1 listed building every single day. Many feel as I do that The Priory should be used to serve the whole Community as originally envisaged. It's numerous rooms to be used by organisations, clubs, learning groups for seniors, like the U3A, for music practice and performance, for arts and crafts and a gymnasium doubling as a sports hall and a large meeting place. Even moving the library and registry office here. It has a great deal of potential - one special priority is the Priory Museum, which must survive in whatever the future holds for the mansion. I must disclose an interest here as I am one of its trustees but I will maintain as others do, if the Priory is the jewel in the borough's crown, the Museum is certainly a jewel in The Priory's crown. It was the brainchild of the late Mrs Audrey Ward, a teacher at the school, and it was declared open in the neo-gothic library of the mansion in 1973 and flourished here until November 2010 when it was forced to evacuate its space following a snowstorm that caused serious damage to the roof and its remarkable collection put into an off-site store. Ten long gruelling years on the work of restoration is nearly complete and we look forward to the Museum's return. The museum is a necessary complement to the remarkable history of The Priory and is as vital to it as the fantastic fireplace and the grand staircase with painted walls and

ceiling. I end with the hope that as The Priory building belongs to the people of the Borough, just as much as the open space that surrounds it, they will see that they have a share in its future as well. Let's now hear your views and thank you for listening to me.