



The Society for Clay Pipe Research

SCPR Conference September 2016 – Wrest Park

By Susie White

Our 2016 conference took us to Bedfordshire and the very impressive Wrest Park. This was one of the most imposing SCPR conference venues that we have had for a while; a Grade I listed house set in Grade I listed formal gardens. We were based in an education room near the stables, but with access at break times to the gardens. One of the main reasons for going to Wrest Park was because it is now home to the new central archaeological store for English Heritage's collections housing more than 153,000 objects. These objects include everything from Roman copper pins excavated at Wroxeter to the nineteenth century carved bell jacks that once adorned the roof of the magnificent Colombia Market in London.

Our morning started with a very interesting introduction to Wrest Park and its occupants, the Grey family, by history volunteer for English Heritage, Debbie Radcliffe. The same family had lived at Wrest Park for over 700 years, although the house we see today, which resembles a French Chateau, was built between 1834 and 1839 by Thomas de Grey, the 2nd Earl. Chris Jarrett spoke next, and told us all about *Bedfordshire pipe makers and their pipes*. What quickly became apparent was that Bedfordshire pipemakers were a little thin on the ground. There is clearly work to be done on this front, although Chris did direct everyone towards an interesting pamphlet about the Reynolds family (members of whom worked in Bedfordshire) that is available online (http://www.researchpod.co.uk/pdf/The_Tobacco_Pipe.pdf). Peter Hammond gave the final paper of this first session with a potted history of the pipe makers from Bushy, Hertfordshire. Interestingly a number of these were members of the Reynolds family too. It all got very complicated; at one stage Peter had to navigate us around the ins and outs of the family relationships.

At our conferences there is normally a display of pipes for delegates to look at during the coffee, lunch and tea breaks. This year was no exception and there were some very interesting displays, with material from up and down the country. After we'd had coffee and a chance to look at the displays, the delegates were treated to a guided tour of the stores. Curator of Archaeology for English Heritage, Charlie Newman, led the tour. When the store first opened they were described as an *Aladdin's Cave* and that is exactly what they were. A cavernous building with rows and rows of shelving, to the ceiling, holding a whole range of archaeological and architectural treasures.

Charlie has also been working on the excavated material from the Jewel Tower in London; one of the few remaining elements of the Medieval Royal Palace at Westminster. She had got some of the material out for delegates to look at, which included some early clay pipes, including an exceptionally high proportion of West Country types. The tower had been built for Edward III as his treasury in 1365 and was used until 1512 as a store by the royal family. Then, from the end of the sixteenth century, it was used to house parliamentary records. The building was taken over by the weights and measures department in 1869 and finally placed in the care of the Ministry of Works in 1948.

The final paper of the morning was by Susie White, Curator of the National Pipe Archive in Liverpool. She reported on an exciting new project that is being funded by a grant from Historic England. The project is hoping to digitise a lot of the material held by the Archive to provide a kind of clay pipe "one-stop-shop" with the aim of providing guidelines and information to help pipe researchers date and identify their pipes. New pages and information are currently being added, but results can already be seen by accessing the website at <http://www.pipearchive.co.uk/>.

After a splendid buffet lunch, we moved on to the afternoon session which started with the Society's AGM, which reported a slight fall in the number of "real" members of the Society but an increase in the traffic through

the Society's Facebook page. It was hoped that efforts could be made during the course of the coming year to encourage some of the Face-bookers to join the Society in full. The Committee remains the same for the coming year, with the exception that it will be joined by Peter Taylor as an ordinary member.

It was Peter Taylor who kicked off the afternoon session of papers with a very interesting paper entitled *An Ancient Arte or a New Trade? Pipemaking in the Reign of James I*. The thrust of Peter's paper was a tale of caution and the fact that when reading accounts of the *new trade* of pipe making and smoking from the late sixteenth century, we should be careful to ensure that accounts are not taken out of context thereby skewing their interpretation. He gave as an example the often quoted reference from 1596 that smoking was "commonly taken up", which would imply that pipe smoking was quite widespread by this date. However, if the full quotation is looked at, and the phrase put back into the context in which it was written, it is clear that smoking was "commonly taken up" for *rheums* and therefore only for a specific medicinal use, which is not at all the same thing!

David Higgins then spoke about a small group of pipes and two pipe stoppers, that have been recovered from the 1665 wreck of the *London* in the Thames estuary. This was a second-rate warship of the commonwealth period and had been one of the vessels that escorted Charles II back to England at the Restoration. Unfortunately, on the 7th March 1665 she blew up in the Thames Estuary *en route* to collect the captain, John Lawson. Sadly more than 300 of her crew were killed and the ship sank. Were the pipes recovered from the site the cause of the explosion? We will have to wait until the final analysis and reporting has been completed to find that out. In the meantime, the pipes provide a valuable and closely dated assemblage that can be used to check and refine bowl form typologies for the 1660s.

After tea break we had a paper from Brian Boyden with the rather intriguing paper entitled *Tamara, Yelyena, Polina, Eleanora and Sasha are especially close*. These five young ladies turned out to be Russian dolls, but their names spell out the word TYPES and they were used as props by Brian who asked us to consider the advantages and disadvantages of bowl form typologies. Brian posed a number of interesting questions and conundrums including who initiated the change from one form to another, the smoker or the maker? And were the changes indicative of changing social status. By his own admission he had no immediate answers, but it was certainly a very thought provoking paper.

The final paper of the day was from conference organiser Chris Jarrett, who reported on the clay pipe makers he has been discovering as a result of the Thameslink project that he has been working on. This very interesting paper brought to a close a fascinating day with some splendid papers. The meeting came to a close at 5pm and everyone headed back to Bedford to reconvene in an Italian restaurant, *Amici*, for an enjoyable conference dinner in the evening.

Sunday morning was a beautiful sunny day and saw us all back in Bedford for a fascinating guided tour of the town. Our guide was slightly worried that he would not be able to provide us with any pipe facts during the course of this tour. We have always joked in the past that SCPR delegates can spot a pipe 100 yards away, no matter where we end up, and this tour was no exception. One of the stops was at Bunyan's chapel, where we were able to admire the bronze doors, which were donated by the Duke of Bedford in 1876 and depict scenes from Pilgrim's Progress. By the time we had been given the rest of the history about the building most of the delegates had adopted the field-walker's pose (i.e., head down and eyes scouring the ground) and were wandering around the flowerbeds outside of the chapel looking for pipes. The minister, who had just finished a service, was intrigued and he came to ask us what we were doing. When he was told that we were looking for pipes, he went back in to the church only to re-appear with a pipe bowl that had been recently discovered in the grounds. He was overjoyed to be told that the pipe dated to the time when Bunyan would have been preaching at the site!

Having made the minister happy, provided the guide with a pipe anecdote for one of his future tours and had a fascinating time in Bedford, the last of the delegates had a much needed lunch in a local pub before heading home. We are most grateful to Charlie Newman, Debbie Radcliffe and all the English Heritage staff at Wrest Park, as well as to the conference organiser Chris Jarrett, for making this a most enjoyable meeting.