

Sarratt Local History Society - September - Julian Hunt

Not an obvious site for a market town, Chesham, nestling on the valley floor, floods very easily. It lies at the head of the Chess Valley - a dead end, with no major trunk road running through it and no canal. The Metropolitan railway (completed 1889) terminates there. The major landowners in the parish (the Cavendish family living at Latimer since 1617) were interested purely for investment purposes. Despite these disadvantages, between C17th and C20th Chesham became a bustling hive of industry and by 1900 its mills and factories employed thousands of workers manufacturing a variety of products - the more usual lace and strawplait, cloth, paper, woodware and most famously boots and brushes. Chesham's population grew from 3000 in 1801 to 9000 in 1900. Where did its wealth come from? Julian Hunt believes it grew of its own accord and its growth is evidence of great local dynamism. The advantages of a Chiltern town - good agricultural hinterland in the hills, abundant water from the Chess, prolific beechwoods and the proximity of London - enabled local tradespeople and entrepreneurs to create an extraordinary success story.

In C16th, water mills producing flour for London markets were turned over to the cloth industry, the largest employer by C17th. Between 1750 and 1850, water driven paper mills flourished. The river provided plentiful water for washing skins and the beechwoods plentiful bark for tannin for two tanneries. In 1792 the town was sending 1000 pairs of boots to London weekly. By 1900 at least six manufacturers were boasting their own mills and factories and showrooms, keeping pace with Northamptonshire's level of production and turning out hundreds of thousands of boots per week. There was an abundant supply of beechwood for the manufacturing of wooden tools and household goods and off cuts were used to produce brush backs - one manufacturer, nationally renowned Beechwood's Ltd, existed well into the second half of C20th.

Julian Hunt's talk was given with great energy and passion and his collection of photographs was superb - specially those men, women and children inside and outside their mills and factories. Sadly there was no time to explore why these industries all failed and whether local dynamism operates in Chesham today.

This month: Saturday 8th: Sarratt Remembers (see p.5). 7.30 for 8pm Tuesday 25th in the Village Hall: The Portable Antiquities Scheme - What to do if you find an old coin in the garden! Julian Walters - Find Liaison Officer for Herts.