

VILLAGE PROBUS CLUB OF HARPENDEN



BULLETIN



AN OCCASIONAL REPORT ON CLUB ACTIVITIES

Issue: July 2026

1 June

Discussion Group

Fourteen members met at The Engineer on Monday 1 June to discuss the subject of money.

We looked at definitions of money, reviewed its history, and spent some time on the implications of its digitisation. We also considered the dramatic changes in the banking industry over the last 30 years, the disappearance of bank branches and the difficulty of finding someone to provide advice if you have a problem. The discussion also touched on crypto currencies; are they really money, the future, if any, of cash and the prevalence of financial fraud.

There was a general sense of unease about the direction and pace of change but some comfort was taken from the fact that money has been around for much longer than central banks!

At the end, we all used money to pay for our food and drink.

Report by Discussion Leader - Scott Prentice

9 June

June Walk

Well, we were threatened with torrents of spring rain and dreadful conditions underfoot beforehand, which probably accounts for the reduced number of willing walkers that day: only five of us. Colin Robinson was unable to continue as lead for the walk, given his risk of falling and so knowing the area from some years ago I took it over.

The start was tied to the John Bunyan pub outside Wheathampstead, because of the lunch booking. For those that know the area, there is a walk that starts at the ruined house where John Bunyan is reputed to have preached, on one or more occasions. Beside it there is an old sunken lane. After that the public paths stretch across the fields almost to the Crooked Chimney pub. The walk turns at that point across more fields to Symondshyde Farm, on through Symondshyde Great Wood next to it and then back to the starting point. That was the plan.

Well, the day started with sunny weather, but with showers forecast. The sunken lane was in unusually good condition, thankfully, and the fields after gave a delightful panoramic view of the countryside beyond the road to Lemsford. Then a heavy shower began. Fortunately we were within 100 metres of cover under a Damson tree and other shrubbery, which gave good protection from the rain. It only lasted 5 or so minutes, and that was the only rain we had that morning.

We turned near the Crooked Chimney pub at a point where there was a good view of Bocket Hall in the distance. Yes, that dot in the distance in the photo below is Bocket Hall!



Photo taken by Richard Upton

The open fields towards Symondshyde Farm had been under threat of housing development about 5 years ago, but this has since receded, (probably only temporarily). Symondshyde Farm had some new additions below.



Lambs at Symondshyde Farm



Symondshyde Farm still houses a brewery and riding stables

Report by Competition Organiser - David Butler

18 June

Hatfield House Visit

With the late addition of Mike Ryland's grandson Charlie, 23 of us shared cars over to Hatfield House for a private guided tour on a warm June day, with a white climbing rose in full flower covering the north wall of the house, and the air full of scent from the lime tree avenue.

The benefit of a guided tour was that we learnt about both the history of the house and the Cecil family who built it in 1611 and even now continue to live here as the Marquesses of Salisbury. The house is used extensively by film and TV companies.

William Cecil established the prominence of the family as the chief adviser to Elizabeth I for 40 years, and his son Robert managed and oversaw the peaceful transition of power to James I in 1603. A later political Cecil was made the first marquess under George III in 1789, and then yet another Lord Salisbury was Prime Minister no less than three times in the late 19th century. The current marquess is himself a prominent (Conservative) politician.

As the family has retained its influence, land and wealth over 450 years, Hatfield House has benefitted from continual improvement and updating. Although the entrance hall is largely as originally built (with an original vast refectory table), other rooms such as the winter dining room and the library have been expanded, vast fireplaces and tapestries acquired or moved, and an entire collection of armour bought to create a suitable impression on Victorian visitors.



The ceiling of the long gallery was painted gold ahead of a short visit by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. Sadly the gloves and hat on display in the Long Gallery have been proved not to have belonged to Elizabeth I as had been previously thought. Two famous portraits of her are authentic however - and very impressive.



It was interesting to hear that the current marquess and his family continue to commission furniture and works of art and have redecorated and re hung the principal reception room with tapestries and works of art as might have been the practice at the time of James I's visit. A large statue of James I, Robert Cecil's patron, dominates the fireplace.



The chapel is a fortunate survivor of a serious fire, and is in constant use; the family has a resident chaplain and services are held daily for the family and estate staff. The original 17th century glass in the east window is very fine.

After our comprehensive tour, we adjourned to the Coach House Kitchen to enjoy our (pre-ordered) lunches, and then we were free to enjoy the gardens and park for as long as we wished. Inevitably perhaps some parts of the garden had been commandeered by a film crew! The gardens and woodlands are worth a visit in their own right, so we weren't able to do full justice to them after our house tour.



It was a good day out - and only 9 miles away. As always when a famous place is on our doorstep, some of us hardly knew about the house or the family. But now we definitely do!

Report by Visit Organiser - Paul Manuel

24 June

Family History Group

A group of club members has met twice, on 28 May and 24 June, to explore whether we could usefully form an ongoing interest group within the club programme.

Mike Trenchard very kindly hosted and led these initial meetings and we shared our own experiences of researching our forebears and ancestors, some with a general interest in genealogy and social/political history and others with more immediate interest in locating near relatives.

Mike, as a professional genealogist, was able to give us a lot of potential leads to follow and the sources we could use, beginning with records of births, deaths and marriages, and leading on to censuses, wills and court cases; as he pointed out, it is easier to find relatives who held a lot of property, thus requiring publicly held wills, or criminals whose trials would have been recorded and reported on in newspapers. Otherwise most of our ancestors in England lived almost invisible lives beyond baptisms, marriages and burials, leaving only names and dates.

At our second meeting Paul Manuel shared some family stories which he had heard as a young person from elderly relatives, and which subsequently he had been able to research to establish the truth behind the anecdotes. To illustrate what Mike had said about property and crime, Paul had discovered quite recently (by a chance internet search) the will of a wealthy farmer who had set his Manuel son-in-law up in business in the 1830s, which by coincidence happened a few years after this same man's younger brother had been transported to Botany Bay for stealing a few sacks of wheat. There is a large tribe of Manuels in Australia as a result!

Paul also mentioned the value of local newspaper archives and local history groups.

Mike also gave us some general information about how to trace wills. Prior to 1858 the Church of England's ecclesiastical courts had jurisdiction over the "proving" of wills. Later on the state, now in the form of the Ministry of Justice, took on this role. Wills written in cursive formal "secretary hand" could be hard to decipher; Mike had had some partial success using an AI transcription.

Mike has also arranged visits to the National Archive (4 November) and to the British Library (15 September). Places were still available for the BL trip.

Having held these two exploratory meetings, we agreed to continue our efforts and to meet monthly. Eight members had expressed initial interest, but now that we have established a sense of direction and format, we would wish to invite any other members with a desire to track down their family and social roots to get in touch with Mike and join us. The next meeting will be held on 29 July at 10am. Please contact Mike Trenchard if you would like to come along - he will need to know whether we need an alternative location.

Report by Group Member - Paul Manuel

29 June

Discussion Group

Potholes, Sinkholes and Black Holes?

David Butler, the discussion leader, kicked off by listing a list of facts and issues surrounding the issue of potholes in our local roads, smart motorways and HS2, including a range of possible questions to come back to during the group discussion. David finished off by a short factual definition of real sink holes according to The British Geological Survey.

The Group discussion commenced a very lively discussion about road potholes including the observations that a lot of problems were related to the poor management of sub-contractors and too many committees and quangos getting involved in spending decision making. The issue of local government spending priorities was raised as a big problem and that this appears less of a problem in Switzerland where a lot of local decision-making is informed by peoples' referendums.

The issue of personal responsibility was raised surrounding the state of our local roads and highways, in particular litter and fly tipping, and encouraged very lively debate.

HS2 received a great deal of ire since we now know that trains are unlikely to run until 2036 – 2039 and HS2 and the Government have acknowledged that the cost is expected to more than double to between £86 bn and £103 bn. But it was also appreciated that a large proportion of the civil engineering works is now complete including the 10 mile Chilterns Tunnel and Colne Valley viaduct. In particular the Colne Valley Viaduct is a beautiful and impressive piece of engineering but is now destined to languish for many years before any rails are laid. The group considered why HS1, including the Channel Tunnel was completed without any one remembering significant delays although it was acknowledged that it too was subject to large cost overruns.

At the end of the discussion everyone was reminded that Harpenden is in an area of the country that is susceptible to sink holes, including one member who had recent personal experience of a sink hole in his own road!

Everyone confirmed they had thoroughly enjoyed the discussion which was followed with the serving of a very well received Engineer lunch.

Report by Discussion Leader - David Butler