

Emsworth — the Local Cultural Centre in the 1830s?

Recent histories of Emsworth have said little about local entertainments in the reign of William IV (1830-37). This article, using as its source *The Hampshire Telegraph & West Sussex Chronicle*, is an attempt to shed a little more light on to the social scene in this period. By the early 1830s the general public were able to enjoy horticultural exhibitions, usually staged at “The Royal Oak”, and included the Annual Cucumber Show held in March, followed by the annual show of Pinks and Strawberries held in June. These competitions attracted entries from outside the parish and prizewinners, for example, came from Havant and Hayling.

Cricket featured in summer editions of the paper. It reported on the entertaining matches played at the Cold Harbour ground. These not only included matches between East Hampshire and West Sussex, but were often played for high stakes; in June 1831 a return match against Portsmouth for 44 sovereigns was advertised and in June 1833 a match against Hambledon, still no mean side, was played for 55 sovereigns a side. These matches were followed by dinners, at 2s. 6d. a head, provided by C. A. Louch of “The Crown” and, after a match on 24 June 1833, the public were entertained by a balloon ascent from the ground.

Musical tastes were catered for by the Emsworth Harmonic Society whose half-yearly annual dinner was held at the “Ship Inn” in the High Street. In February 1836 it was reported that Mr. Harris, the music teacher, who lived on the corner of Nile and South Streets, had given a lecture, illustrated by music and, in March of the following year, he placed an advertisement for the first meeting of *The Instrumental and Vocal Society*.

However, earlier in 1834, the leading lights of Emsworth decided that the intellect needed stimulation. On 24 November, the paper published plans to establish a Mechanics Institute in the town and that a meeting to discuss the proposal was to be held at the National School on Monday evening, 8 December. The gathering decided to establish an Emsworth Literary Society and chose as its president Rev. William Norris who was instrumental in calling the meeting that had attracted a large attendance and from which “about 40 members were enrolled”. It was decided that a library be created, that “philosophical apparatus” be obtained and that occasional lectures would be delivered. The members of the first committee were elected and a week later membership had swelled to 80. As usual it was desirable to have high profile local figures as patrons. The unanimous choice of Sir George Staunton, MP of Leigh Park raised some unwelcome comments and caused Messrs. Cooper and Smart, secretaries of the Society, to write an open letter to the newspaper stating that there was “the utmost diversity of opinion on political issues” and that his political opponents supported his election.

The first lecture, held on 19 January 1835, was given by Rev. W. Norris, whose topic “On the history and progress of Literature and Science”, which it was reported, “gave an interesting

account of the origin and use of language, letters, books, writing and typography". The next lecture was given by a surgeon, George Miller, and later by his business partner, John Hicks, who interested his audience with a lecture "On the physiology of blood", at the end of which meeting it was announced that a donation of £20 had been given by Charles Dixon of Stansted Park. The first annual meeting of the Society was held in the Crown Inn Assembly Room. This is the only detailed annual report to be published by the newspaper but gives some interesting facts. In its first year the Society had enrolled 236 members and acquired a library of 286 volumes, of which 150 had been donated. Fourteen lectures had been given by members of the society, a further eight arranged and the Rev. Morris was re-elected as president.

It was not only members who gave lectures. In April 1836 Mr. Armstrong, under-gardener to Sir George Staunton, gave a very well-received talk on "Natural History". This was followed, in January 1837, by another of his lectures on botany, which, "despite the severity of the season, the specimens used in illustrations were numerous and beautiful". Speakers came from as far away as Fareham and Chichester. Later that year it was announced that C. Short, Esq. of "Woodlands" had donated "a hansom(sic) pair of valuable globes" whose example the paper's editor hoped would be followed by the gentry of the neighbourhood.

In 1837 Victoria became queen and the author is ending his article, but ponders on several unanswered questions such as — were women invited to attend these meetings? What happened to the library and other gifts to the Literary Society and their minutes? When and why did it fold?

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