The Arts Society
East Herts

Newsletter

October 2026

Member Society of The Arts Society: Registered Charity 281752

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SUMMER LUNCH

Back in June, there was much debate in the committee about how we would cope with the high temperature at our Summer Lunch. At that time, no one could have predicted that before the summer was over we would be asked to endure a much more intense heat.



Fortunately, in the delightful grounds of Holywell Manor we were able to place the marquees in the shade and maintained a constant flow of water carriers to combat any suggestion of dehydration. As usual, it was heartening to see such a degree of friendly chatter amongst the relaxed gathering whilst we enjoyed our customary tasty lunch. As ever, the queueing for food was positively exemplary!

None of this happens by accident. Meticulous planning starts early in the year and the level of anxiety never abates until every bit of furniture and tableware has been loaded back onto the van and the marquees have been packed away again for another year. Singling out individuals for thanks is a risky business as it seems as though the army of helpers behind them is forgotten. Not so! We know who they are and





Prizewinner!

they know that we are endlessly grateful for all they do, but it has to be said that the event could not have happened without the generous hospitality of Sue Rogers, the leadership of Beverley Maunder-Taylor and Julia Fulton and the forensic advice and assistance of Alison Gordon.



We don't yet know where we will be for next year's Lunch, but we hope to see you all again next June, in your lovely frocks (Ladies!) and in the same sunny conditions. I think that one good thing about the weather was that summer dresses got a wonderful outing. I can recall other years when the circumstances weren't so friendly!

SOCIETY UPDATE

In our last Newsletter, we asked for more news from members about their interests, their visits and their thoughts. You probably won't be surprised to learn that very few of these have been forthcoming. However, we move forward with optimism…….Your Joint Chairmen are doing just that; having managed to survive the inexcusable technical glitches in the first few months of the year, the Society ran a very successful Summer Lunch and we are now looking ahead to next month's AGM.

We will be losing some of our committee members in November and need to replace them. This is your opportunity to step up to help run the Society. Without appearing ageist in any way, we would especially welcome candidates who are younger and newer to the Society. Younger volunteers are so very useful when it comes to erecting the marquees for our Summer Lunch and more recent members bring a fresh perspective and different ideas which will help the Society to maintain its cutting edge. And it has to be said that among the audience at our monthly meetings are many senior members who have performed sterling service to the Society over the years. It's now the turn of someone else to help run affairs. You won't be left on your own. Even though we are losing valuable colleagues from the committee we are still a strong team and increasingly, given the successful sharing of the Chairman's role, we believe that job-sharing is the way forward.

So please give serious consideration to volunteering yourself to a committee role by speaking to any committee member and do remember that the Newsletter is about YOU. Please support it with articles or snippets of news which you can share with fellow members. Regardless of whatever you feel able to contribute, we thank you for your continued support for the Society and for your steady friendship.

Beverley Maunder-Taylor
Rosemary Davis

THE ART OF WARFARE

Looking forward to the planned expedition to the Royal Gunpowder Mills in September made me realise just how little I actually knew about gunpowder. Most of us will know that it was a Chinese invention; although probably not everyone realises that it was discovered by accident during the Tang dynasty in the 9th century when alchemists were searching for the recipe for eternal life. It was interesting to note from my Internet searches that it's one of the four great inventions credited to the Chinese, the other three being the magnetic compass (2ndc BC), paper making (2ndc AD) and woodblock printing (9thc AD).

The alchemists' starting principle for finding eternal life was to identify substances that would change from one form into another. The early experiments, which combined sulphur, saltpetre and charcoal, made the resultant mixture "fly and dance". I expect they quickly realised that this was a concoction that would extinguish life rather than prolong it!



By the time of the Song dynasty (10th-13thc AD) it was realised that they were onto something of enormous potential. Although it was very pleasant to deploy gunpowder for leisure pursuits and to entertain the Emperor with elaborate firework displays, it had far more practical uses on the battlefield.

Over the next two or three hundred years there are periodic reports in Chinese records of fire arrows, fire bombs and rockets being deployed in their wars. (The picture alongside is part of a 10thcentury silk banner which depicts a fire lance and a fire bomb.)

The Mongols developed an early form of grenade and the Arabs continued to refine the gunpowder recipe as knowledge of the technology moved westwards. The 1320s are regarded as the take-off point for guns in Europe. The first battle fought with cannons was the Battle of Crecy (1346) and thereafter the technology moved from the small, anti-personnel devices to larger and larger guns which could pulverise stone fortifications.

But there was a problem with gunpowder, namely the amount of smoke that it produced. During the Napoleonic Wars, it was difficult for commanders to give orders when the battle-field was obscured by smoke from the guns; and the problem grew worse over the years as the rate of firing increased.

Necessity, they say, is the Mother of Invention and by the end of the century other forms of explosive had been developed. Alfred Nobel's experiments produced dynamite – a powerful explosive that was highly unstable and was liable to shatter the gun. It did, however, earn him a vast fortune. A more promising develop-ment was guncotton – a nitrocellulose-based product. Various factories were set up, but these had an alarming tendency to blow up.

Undeterred, governments continued to seek solutions that would keep their military capability on a par with all other nations. In Britain a programme of research at Waltham Abbey Royal Gunpowder Mills eliminated the impurities in nitrocellulose, making it a more stable product that was both safer to produce and safer to handle; so when yet another factory exploded in 1871, at Stowmarket, Waltham Abbey was ideally placed to undertake the production of guncotton for torpedo and mine war heads. Their involvement in the development of machinery, weapons and other devices continued for another 130 years until the Mills were closed in 1991.

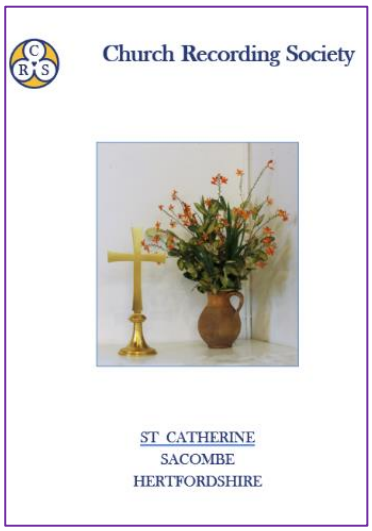
The frightening capacity of modern explosives to wreak misery and devastation is something we are forced to live with. It makes me wonder how things might have turned out if Chinese alchemists had not been diverted from their search for the elixir of life. I think it probable that they would have managed to produce something far, far worse!

Rosemary Davis
Editor

CHURCH RECORDING AND VOLUNTEERING

We're delighted to report that the records for St Catherine, Sacombe and All Saints, Little Munden have been presented. The records were started some nine months apart but for logistical reasons have taken rather longer to complete. The Team handed over the record for Sacombe at their usual 5th Sunday service and afterwards took part in a delightful picnic in the church grounds. The record for Little Munden was presented at the beginning of this month in a Morning Worship service.

Both occasions were wonderful opportunities for the Team to share with the congregations the pleasures, the problems and conundrums that beset their work. Finding out why an item found its way into the church, who gave it and who made it are questions that the Team has to resolve. We need to identify the significance of a particular flower in a window or the unusual shape of a cross.



It's all part and parcel of the absorbing research undertaken by Church Recorders as they compile the documents that make up the final record. If it's something that you would enjoy doing, please get in touch with Rosemary Davis who leads the Team. We have a new church lined up for January 2027 and would welcome new members to the Team.

Church Recording is just one of the two Volunteering activities that is provided by our Society. For many years we have provided volunteers who work at the Henry Moore Foundation. Generally, there is little scope for Heritage Volunteering in our area and so, unless we hear of opportunities to the contrary, we seek to promote the Arts through our Young Arts programme, sponsoring workshops, school projects and other activities. Our most recent grants have been awarded to Hertford Choral Society for a choral scholarship and to a pottery workshop for children during the summer holidays. If you know of any other worthwhile projects that we can support, please do get in touch. Currently, Beverley is looking after this area of work but is very much hoping that she can hand on this responsibility to a new committee member after the AGM!

AUTUMN RAMBLINGS

A Round-up of forthcoming exhibitions

We are tremendously fortunate to have the Fitzwilliam Museum more or less on our doorstep. Founded in 1816 with the legacy of the library and art collection of Richard FitzWilliam, 7th Viscount FitzWilliam, the bequest included £100,000 to construct a suitable repository for his collection. Home to over half a million artworks and objects it also hosts a regular programme of exhibitions. Visitors can wander through their favourite galleries and enjoy old, familiar treasures but in addition there is the opportunity to admire special displays of items brought in from museums around the world.

This autumn the Fitzwilliam is staging three must-see events: *A Mughal Songbook: Art, Music and Empire* started last month and invites you to experience the vibrant world of song, poetry and performance of Mughal South Asia from around 1750 to 1850. It reveals the treasure of the Plowden songbook, a rare manuscript of 77 songs in Persian, Urdu, Classical Hindi and Punjabi, brought to life through detailed illustrations of musicians, dancers, singers and courtesans. Through sounds, paintings, manuscripts and more, the exhibition demonstrates how art and music crossed boundaries of language and empire – from the Mughal Empire (1526 – 1857), which ruled much of the Indian subcontinent at that time, to the ever-expanding network of the powerful British trading organisation, the East India Company (1600 – 1874).

Starting last week and running to 21 February 2027 is *An Enamel Revolution: China and the World.* Here visitors can get up close to the intricate detail of enamelled art objects. Chinese workshops were trailblazers in developing new techniques for enamelling objects and experimented with colour and material to dazzling effect, later adapting their wares for export to Europe.



18th c China, Qing Dynasty
Photo copyright Marian Gerard

Both these exhibitions are free during opening hours (Tuesday-Saturday 10am-5pm; Sunday and Bank Holidays 12-5pm) and there is no need to book. Booking, however, is crucial for the third exhibition: *A Call to Art: William Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites* which runs until 3 March 2027.



Helen of Troy
Dante Gabriel Rosetti, Oil paint on panel, 1863
Copyright Fitzwilliam Museum

The exhibition goes beyond the decorative motifs and medieval love stories that characterised a lot of their work and delves deeper into their shared belief in the power of art and beauty to bring about positive social change.



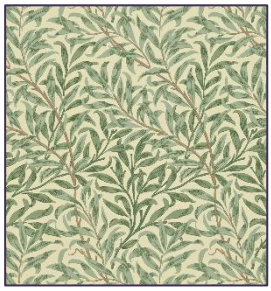
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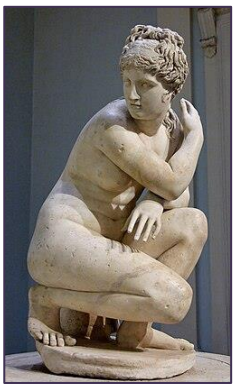


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Bringing together paintings, drawings, textiles, ceramics and more, *A Call to Art* offers a fresh perspective on one of the world's most influential thinkers on art, craft and design. Illustrated are four of Morris' enduring designs: 1) Pomegranate, 2) Strawberry Thief, 3) Golden Lily and 4) Willow Boughs***.

Further afield there are other events to tempt you outdoors over the winter months. At Tate Modern *Frida, The making of an Icon* and *Ana Mandieta* continue until 3rd and 17th January respectively. Tate Britain is always worth a visit simply to view the huge collection of Turner paintings but currently on display are also three of Constable's "six footers" – paintings of urban settings (Salisbury, London and Brighton).

And from 21 November to next April, the National Gallery is uniquely exhibiting, together, van Eycks' eight extant portraits.



For something entirely different, why not pop over to Oxford for the day to view the Ashmolean's new exhibition, *Venus: the making of a Goddess*? This event opened on 8 October and will run until June 2027.

***(Much of the above text has been borrowed from The Fitzwilliam Museum website in order to properly promote these events)

THE CATHEDRALS OF COVENTRY

Feed the wife and feel the happiness! I knew we were in for a good trip to Coventry when our hotel served Taittinger on tap. What more could a wife ask for! We had decided on a bar meal in the hotel and while the boss had something light and healthy I was drawn to a Godiva Sandwich which I will describe in due course after I've refreshed your memory about Lady Godiva.

Nearly a thousand years ago Count Leofric, Earl of Mercia, married a comely, blond beauty called Godifu who, a rich landowner in her own right, was also the owner of Coventry. (She would become Godiva after the arrival of the Normans who decided Godifu was a silly name but Godiva wasn't!) Now Leofric had levied a swingeing tax called Heregelt (which in Old English meant army monies) on all in Coventry who owned more than half a hide – which was virtually everyone. Godiva said the tax was totally unfair and begged her husband to rescind it. Leofric sneeringly replied "When you ride naked through the streets of Coventry I will stop this tax." After she did, he, utterly shocked, kept his word and abolished the Heregelt and Godiva lived happily until her death in 1067.

We know all this is true because the story was written down 250 years later by two literate monks from Hertfordshire – what could be more reliable!

Cleverly, my sandwich arrived naked and every-one could see exposed my beef, creamed horseradish and puréed spinach. Two roundels of radish symbolised the eyes of Peeping Tom who lost his sight while ogling the naked lady. Having waited for years to visit Coventry's cathedrals, I went to bed happy and replete.

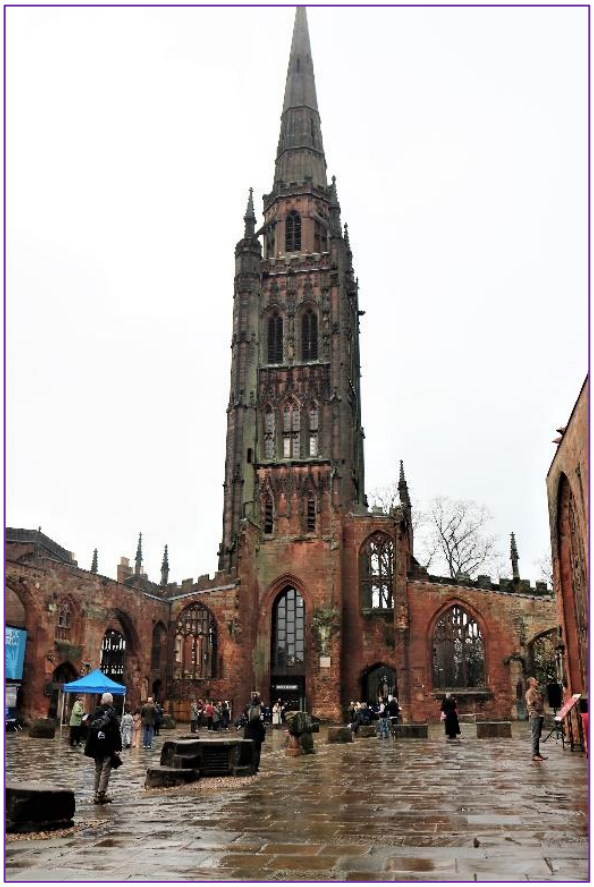
The Parish Church of St Michael's became a cathedral in June 1918. Twenty-two years later it lay in ruins after the heaviest and most intense bombing raid of any experienced on mainland Britain during WWII. Our visit started on 14th November last year, which was the 85th anniversary of the firestorm that destroyed the huge medieval church, pictured below in a 19th century oil painting by Edward Rudge.



Some of you may know the history of the church but we didn't, so please indulge me while we get to grips with St Michael's past. Built on the defensive enclosure of what had been a motte and bailey castle, the church most likely started out as the castle chapel in about 1300. Now, well before St Michael's became the enormous parish church of 1918, Coventry already had a cathedral dedicated to St Mary and tiny traces of this building are to be found to the north-west of St Michael's.

Then, around 1200 Holy Trinity church was built between St Michael's and St Mary's. Happily, in the bombing of 1940 it remained intact and is on our list for another Coventry visit.

Back at St Michael's, construction, alterations and enlargements continued until the middle of the 1400s when it was given an enormous octagon and spire which, at 296 feet, made it the tallest spire on any parish church in Britain. Only the cathedral spires of Salisbury and Norwich were taller.



Remarkably, the tower still stands undamaged by the Luftwaffe assaults (above). To enter the church we passed through the west door which took us through the tower. Stumps of the medieval columns mark the nave, the south and north aisle and an extra north aisle for chapels. The glassless windows mostly have their tracery intact except for five at the east end of the south aisle where the magnificent organ once stood and it was this that created a mega inferno that robbed these windows of all their glass and tracery.

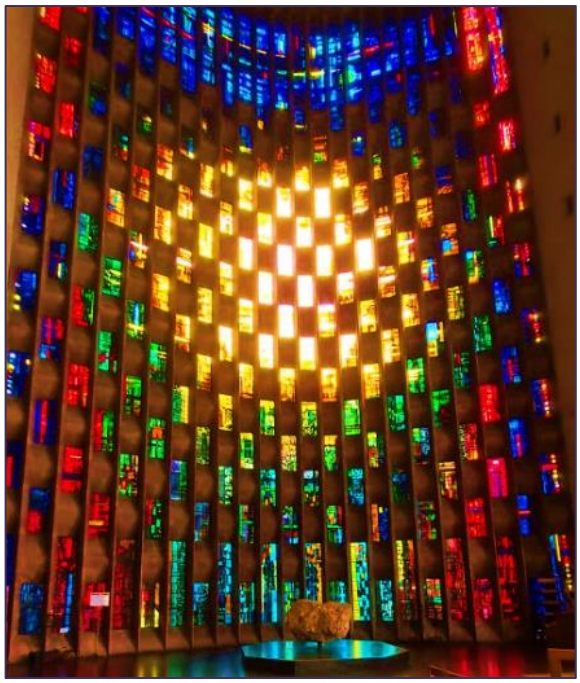
Finally we arrived at the polygonal apse at the east end. Five windows, with all their tracery intact, soar loftily above a twisted cross. This is a replica of the cross which was formed shortly after the raid from fallen roof beams which lay in the ashes and debris in the form of a cross. The original is kept inside the new cathedral. On the wall behind the altar, built of fallen masonry, are the words in gold lettering FATHER FORGIVE. The symbolism of it all is very moving. Fortunately, we can have no comprehension of the horror of that night in 1940 but today we are left with an area which breathes peace and tranquillity.



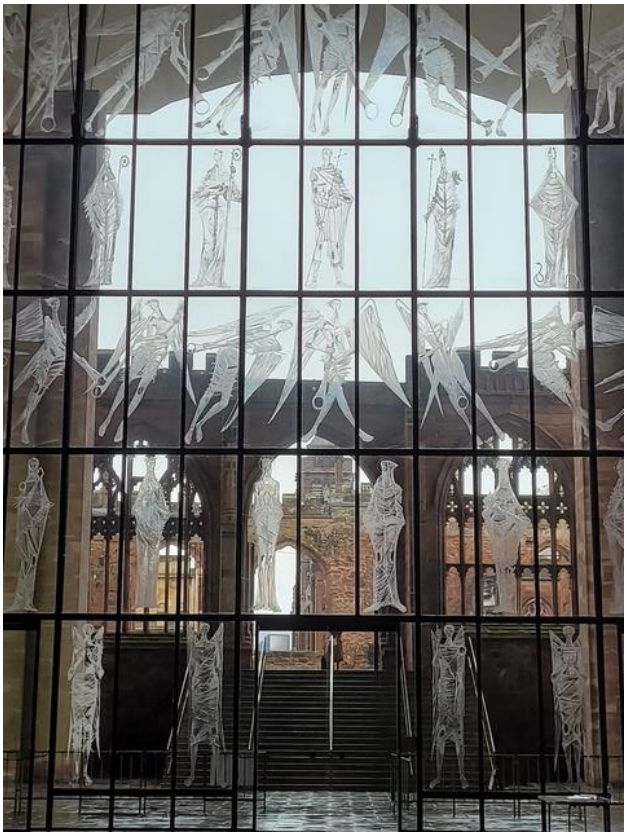
We move to our left and passing down the Queen's steps leave behind stark beauty for the brutalist architecture of the new cathedral. (The steps were named after the route taken by Elizabeth II when she came to lay the foundation stone of the new cathedral in 1952.)

I have never been a great admirer of brutalism and it would appear that mostly we fall into two camps when it comes to Basil Spence's new cathedral which was consecrated in 1962. There are no in-betweeners*: use of concrete at its best; an unusually ugly factory; a masterpiece of brutalist architecture; a gasholder on one side and a dustbin on the other; a concrete disgrace … an utter monstrosity; resembling a cockroach; surely it will grow on its detractor".* So far as we were concerned, it was just nice to get out of the rain!

Through the west door and on our right is the Baptistery of the new cathedral. There is something awesome about this space. John Piper's vast window, 198 panels of vibrant, multicoloured glass is stunning and the font created from a boulder from Jerusalem is wonderfully simple.

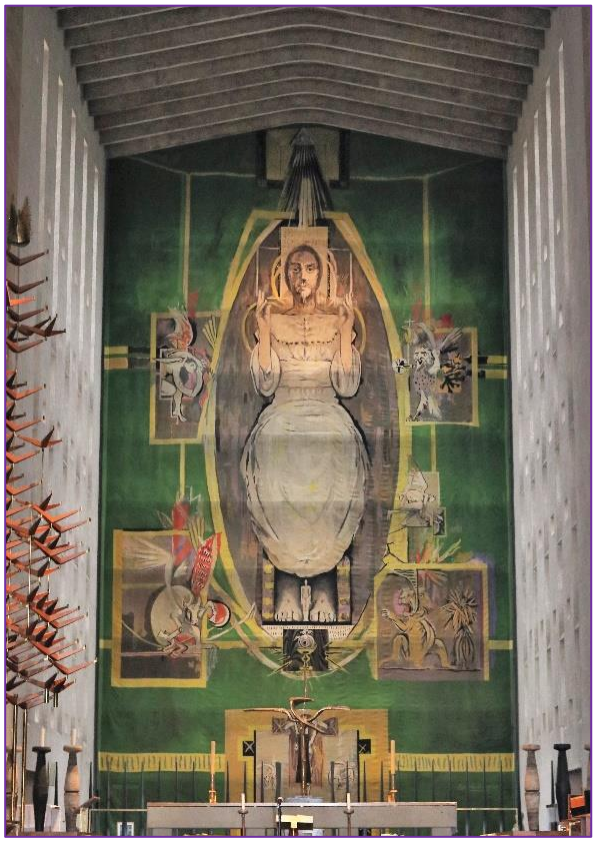


We turn around to look at the *west* window which is actually at the south end of the building. The window, *The Screen of Saints and Angels*, is enormous (45 ft wide and 70 ft tall) and covers the whole of the *west* end of the church.



It contains 66 larger-than-life figures which were etched into the glass by John Hutton over ten years. The ruins of the old cathedral can be seen clearly through the glass, linking the old with the new.

Turn to the ***east,*** which you will have gathered is actually ***north***, and three things immediately demand one's attention. At the far end, and behind the altar, is Graham Sutherland's monumental tapestry, *Christ in Glory*. Hand-woven in France by twelve master craftsmen utilising over 900 shades of wool, it's 75 ft tall by 39 ft wide. The tapestry depicts the Risen Christ in a mandorla which is flanked by the four symbols of the evangelists: a winged man, a lion, a calf and an eagle. There is also a smaller depiction of St Michael slaying a dragon and at the time of hanging it was the largest tapestry in the world. I'm sure there must be those who like it, but I moved on, unmoved.



One oddity: looking toward the altar one can see no windows. The towering, narrow windows of stained glass by Lawrence Lee, Geoffrey Clarke and Keith New are canted in the exterior walls at an angle "to cast lights onto the altar end of the church". I'm not sure that this objective was entirely successful. The colours were stunning but seemed to cast only shadow on the nave floor.

Lastly there are eight huge Tablets of the Word set into angled surfaces along the body of the church. Each tablet in pink and white Hollington sandstone is 15 ft wide and 6 ft tall and bears a biblical passage written in free-form capital lettering. These plaques are the work of a German émigré, Ralph Beyer, who served in the British Army in WWII. The workmanship is exquisite and the texts are inspiring. However, it's not easy to read the crammed upper case lettering and I'm afraid that these slabs do little for me.

The old cathedral was famous for its medieval glass, an enormous amount of which was lost over the years through religious wranglings but most of the remaining fragments were taken from St Michael's in 1939 and stored in the cellars of a rural vicarage. Within the new cathedral are exhibitions of this 500-year-old stained glass and wonderful they are. John Thornton is known for his superb work at York Minster in the early 15th c but few people are aware that Thornton was a Coventry man who contributed to the windows at St Michael's.





Commemorations over the weekend of the bombing raid included various events in the ruins of the old cathedral: a vigil, a drama and a service of peace and thanksgiving – but in the Market Square they staged a frenetic 65 feet tall "rebuild" of the cathedral using cardboard boxes and positively miles of parcel tape. It was all a great deal of fun but in no way did it resemble the old cathedral. Weighing over a ton, it was then intentionally pulled down at the end of the day, supposedly to simulate the sudden, cataclysmic destruction of the cathedral.



Time had caught up with us and it was time to find food. We walked back to the walls of old St Michael's. Here in Bayley Lane, just five or six yards from the burnt-out cathedral, is the complete medieval St Mary's Guildhall built in the 1340s. Sadly, it was hosting a wedding reception so we were unable to see the magnificent interior but, by way of compensation, we were able to eat at leisure in the undercroft restaurant which fortuitously served Taittinger on tap!

A magnificent ending to a wonderful break. I just hope that the weather was kinder to Lady Godiva when she rode along the same route.

Peter Davis

WHERE AM I PLEASE?

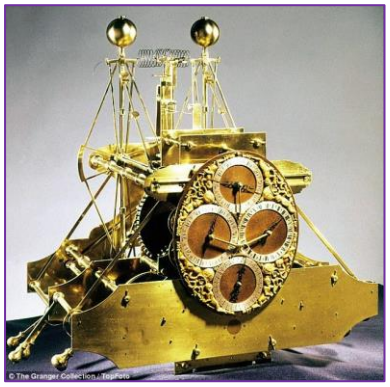
THE year is 1702 and you are afloat somewhere on the ocean, but where on the ocean? Using a sextant, the sun and the stars will establish your latitude but the only way to establish how far east or west you are is by Dead Reckoning (how far you **think** you have travelled in a period of time). Obviously, relying on guesswork means that calculations frequently were wrong. Hence, on Sunday 23rd October 1707 a catastrophe of gigantic proportions occurred when Admiral Sir Cloudesley Shovell led the vanguard of his fleet onto the Scilly Island rocks resulting in the sinking of four of Her Majesty's Ships; *Association, Eagle, Romney* & *Firebrand* with the loss of nigh on 2,000 sailors including the Admiral and his two stepsons. The authorities determined that something had to be done to fix Longitude accurately and in 1714 Queen Anne approved the Act of Longitude which provided the colossal prize of £20,000 (nearly £4 million today) for the person or body who discovered a method to fix longitude. A Board of Longitude under the Astronomer Royal was established to oversee the competition.

ENTER a rather remarkable carpenter and joiner from Yorkshire who repaired and built clocks in his spare time. John Harrison was an extraordinary person. As a child he would take clocks apart and rebuild them and by the age of twenty he had made a longcase clock and movement entirely out of wood!



Harrison realised, in building his prototypes for the longitude challenge, that to achieve the exacting accuracy, metals had to be protected from extremes of temperature and so he invented the bimetallic strip (two pieces of different metals joined one to the other which contracted and expanded at different rates). New escapements and pendulums were also invented by him as designs progressed. His first chronometer for the challenge was H1 but

it was with H4 that he had his greatest success though neither he, nor anyone else, would everreceive the Board of Longitude's £20,000 prize.



H1 left:
Height 63cm
Weight 34kg

H4 below:
Diam 13cm
Weight
1.3kg

TO test entrants it was decided by the Board that contestants would have to sail their entries from Portsmouth to Kingston, Jamaica. William, John's son, together with H4, arrived at the finish line aboard *HMS Deptford* just one mile out of reckoning (which represents an overall time loss of 5 seconds). It happens that the Board of Longitude was headed up by Nevil Maskelyne who, along with several Board members including Sir Isaac Newton, were firmly against any winner with a mechanical device. They argued that as latitude was determined by solar and astral readings the answer to longitude must lie in the firmament and most likely through lunar readings. The Board determined that H4's win was caused by fortune (luck)! A re-run, but this time to Barbados, again produced H4 as the winner by an even greater degree of accuracy. The Board, with the same reasoning as before, refused to award the prize! King George III was furious and demanded of Lord North, the Prime Minister, that parliament should reward Harrison and finally an award of £8,750 was made. (The Board of Longitude, perhaps through shame and their vilification in the press, later paid Harrison £10,000.) Following the success of H4, John Harrison produced H5 which was a 5" diameter "pocket" chronometer described by Captain James Cook as "the finest timepiece the world will ever see" after he carried it aboard *HMS Resolution* on his second and last great voyage.



JOHN Harrison died in 1776 and it is proper that we remember his great achievements in this the 250th anniversary of his passing

A GLIMPSE AT NEXT YEAR'S LECTURE PROGRAMME



Next year marks the 300th anniversary of the birth of Thomas Gainsborough and in January we welcome Matthew Morgan to explore the trials and triumphs of Gainsborough's life. Unquestionably he was one of the greatest British portrait painters. His ability to capture the inner lives of his sitters, his dramatic use of paint and his remarkable approach to colour set him apart from almost all of his contemporaries. Yet the paintings that Gainsborough truly loved were landscapes.

In his lecture Matthew will look at the life and work of this unique artist, his experimental technique and his fraught relationship to portraiture, the genre in which he excelled.

The wintry topic for February is Scott's journey to Antarctica. In her lecture, *Love Letter to Antarctica*, Katherine MacInnes explores the correspondence between a young bride, Oriana, and her husband, the ornithologist Ted Wilson, as he accompanied Scott on his travels, observing bird life and producing drawings which he sent home to his wife.



Discovery Winter Quarters 1904
The Wilson Gallery, Cheltenham

March brings us a sparkling lecture by Tony Faber on Fabergé's eggs. Of course, by this time you will all have received your 2027 programme card which gives you all the details of the year's lectures, trips and Special Interest Days. There is much to enjoy……. Please do share the details of our meetings with friends. Whatever the topic, there is always something of interest to enjoy with the added bonus of getting up to date with all the latest gossip and catching up with old acquaintances.

Friends can always come along to sample a lecture at the modest price of £8 and are sure to find the experience most enjoyable. We maintain our buoyant membership largely through personal recommendation so please spread the word. Contact details are on the Programme Card and also on our website:

theartssocietyeastherts.org.uk

Or you can always drop by the Welcome Table before a lecture to find out more.

