

History society news

ON A cold and wet January evening our speaker was one of our members, Terry Sheppard, who entitled his talk "Acres, Academia and Acorns", and told us the fascinating story of the Babington Family of Rothley. We all know the name – but what do we know of the family's history?

The Babingtons came, via the settlement of Dethick, to Rothley from Northumberland and the Saxon village of Babington from which they took their surname.

How did the Babingtons first acquire Rothley Temple and its manorial lordship? We all know that Rothley Temple was administered by the Knights Templar until they were disbanded in the 14th century when it passed to the Knight Hospitallars. Those of you who accompanied us to London and St. John's Gate and its Hospitallars will remember all that. The Hospitallars in Leicestershire were based at Old Dalby, leaving the Rothley estate in the hands of bailiffs.

The Hospitallars leased out the Rothley estate to various tenants through the years. These tenants were responsible for the general upkeep of the church and chapels of the parish until the 16th century. At this time the temple chapel and its estate were a different parish to that of the village and its church.

Several Babingtons were Hospitallars and one of them, Sir John, Commander of Old Dalby with Rothley, was stationed in Rhodes and later Malta, and with filial love, in 1529 arranged for his brother Humphrey to have a lease of Rothley Temple. After the confiscation of the monastic estate by the crown, Humphrey's son Thomas, the sitting tenant, was able to buy outright the Temple and its 14 villages, manor and soke. So we got 300 years and eight generations of Babingtons.

The last Babington to live at Rothley, was Thomas, born in 1758. A philanthropist, an MP., and a member of the Clapham Sect of earnest Christians. To ease the side effects of the Enclosure Act of 1782, Thomas let out small allotments in Rothley to worthy townspeople. These are the allotments now owned by Rothley Temple Estates, which, at present, is seeking planning permission for a new and controversial housing development, and just at a time when there is greater demand for

allotments! Thomas also founded a Friendly Society, which made corn available at affordable prices. His collaboration with people like William Wilberforce and Zachary Macaulay would produce the fruit of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807.

This Thomas had six sons and four daughters. The eldest son, Thomas Gisborne Babington, would normally have been the inheritor but he was a great disappointment to his father – failing as a steward of the merchant business of his father's brother-in-law Zachary Macaulay.

So after 1837 the Rothley estate was held by family executors who in 1845 sold to Sir James Parker,

Vice Chancellor of England and married to Thomas' daughter, Mary. His son Henry was Lord of the Manor from 1852 to 1893 when it, with its 700 + acres, was offered for sale in lots, the major parts being purchased by Frederick Mertens, who held Rothley until the 1930's.

The Acres part of the title relates to the family's care and maintenance of their land, modernised in the Enclosure Act of 1782, and further improved after the retirement of Thomas from Parliament in 1818.

The Academia part of the story reflects the fact that throughout their history the Babington

family had many sons and daughters and a tendency for one of the sons in each generation to go into the Church. Many of them became Professors - of Botany, Archaeology and the Sciences, generally at the University of Cambridge.

And lastly the Acorns – Thomas collected acorns during a stay at Hillerston House, Cullompton, Devon, many being from Hillersden's Turkey Oaks. At Rothley they grew into oak trees with a bigger girth, thus providing better timber. Just one of his legacies for the future.

It is he, Thomas, who is our speaker's "HERO". Terry is working on a book about the Babingtons, wading through the collections of family papers in various libraries throughout the country. I am very much looking forward to reading the book and will let you know of its development.

Our February meeting, another wet evening, was a WOW! With our speaker, John Alexander, gave a talk "Enigma in Context" telling us and demonstrating various cipher and coding machines, including, possibly the most well known – Enigma! Of course the well known British decoding machine – Colossus - was much too big to bring along and anyway is not part of our speaker's collection.

John began his talk by explaining that he had left Leicestershire Police in 1993 after being with them for 16 years, but nothing to do with the secret service. He had been

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