

Redlynch & District Local History Society

Extraordinary Wiltshire Women by Ruth Butler, Heritage Education Officer at Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre Zoom Presentation on Tuesday 6th April 2021

Ruth Butler, Heritage Education Officer at Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre gave us an on-line talk about Extraordinary Wiltshire Women. We learnt about several very different women starting in the 12th century and finishing in the 20th century. They all made their mark in a world often dominated by men.

Ela of Salisbury (1187-1261): When her father William FitzPatrick, 2nd Earl of Salisbury died in 1196 she became Countess of Salisbury. In her early teens she married William Longespee and he became 3rd Earl of Salisbury and Sheriff of Wiltshire. Ela and William used their wealth to wield influence and power, they were among the dignitaries to lay the foundation stones of Salisbury Cathedral in 1220 and provided financial support. In 1226 William was poisoned and died, Ela commissioned an elaborate tomb and he was the first person to be buried in the Cathedral. The title reverted to Ela and she refused to remarry (Magna Carta protected women from being forced to remarry). She was one of only two women in medieval England to hold the position of Sheriff, inheriting it from William and paying Henry III to secure it. She established Lacock Abbey in 1232 and became its first abbess.

Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke (1561 -1621): Mary had an extensive education and was taught scripture and classics, trained in rhetoric, was fluent in French, Italian and Latin and knew some Greek and Hebrew. In 1577 she married Henry Herbert, 2nd Earl of Pembroke. At Wilton she established an “academy of literature” and many poets and playwrights visited including her brother Sir Philip Sidney and Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. She is buried in the quire of Salisbury Cathedral and the epitaph reads “Underneath this marble hearse/Lies the subject of all verse/Sidney’s sister, Pembroke’s mother/Death! Ere thou has slain another/ Wise and fair and good as she/Time shall throw a dart at thee”.



Arundel Penruddock and Lady Blanche Arundell both fought to protect their families during the civil wars and Cromwell’s rule. In 1643 a 60 year old Lady Blanche defended her home(Wardour Castle) when a 1300 strong Parliamentarian army besieged it. She led her family, servants and a small force of 25 men for five days before surrendering. In 1655 royalist Colonel John Penruddock of Compton Chamberlayne led a failed rebellion against Cromwell’s Protectorate. He was imprisoned in Exeter and his wife Arundel wrote pleas for clemency to Cromwell. These failed and he was executed for treason but Arundel continued to petition Cromwell on her own behalf and her seven children.

Edith Olivier (1872 – 1948): She was a campaigner, author, Wilton Mayor and pillar of society. During the First World War Edith established the Women’s Land Army in Wiltshire and was later awarded the MBE. After the war she moved to Daye House on the Wilton Estate and hosted and attended parties with Stephen Tennant, Sigfried Sassoon, Rex Whistler, the Sitwells and Cecil Beaton. Edith found both Ashcombe House in Cranbourne Chase and Reddish House at Broadchalke

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for Cecil Beaton. Edith had a close relationship with Rex Whistler, she provided stability and a refuge at Daye House.

Matilda Talbot (1872- 1958): Matilda moved to Lacock Abbey to care for her Uncle, Charles Talbot. In In 1916 her uncle died and left the estate to her and in 1944 she gave Lacock Abbey, the village and Manor Farm to The National Trust. She donated the Lacock copy of the Magna Carta to the British Museum.

Mary Mildred Bruce (1895 – 1990): At the age of 15 Mary was banned from driving for a year after racing her brother's motorcycle on the road. She graduated to cars and in 1926 she married the Hon Victor Austin Bruce, they took part in Monte Carlo rallies and in 1927 drove to the Arctic Circle. She owned a speed boat company and then bought an aeroplane. In 1950, now divorced, she moved to Bradford on Avon and was running glove factories in Warminster and Cardiff. In Warminster in 1980 her papers were found in a derelict glove factory and deposited at Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre. When she was 79 she test- drove a Ford Capri at 110 m.p.h at Thruxton racetrack. You can read more about her colourful life here:-

<https://www.beaulieu.co.uk/news/women-in-motorsport-social-history-the-honourable-mrs-victor-bruce/>

Bob Inns, Secretary

April 6th 2021