STILTON HERITAGE

Exploring the history of Stilton and the surrounding area

NEWSLETTER - SUMMER 2025

Welcome …….

….to our first Stilton Heritage Newsletter! We're aiming to provide Heritage Members with some of the latest information about our charity as well as useful background information and future plans. We shall also feature topics of local history. This Newsletter is quite a long one - much has been going on and we'd like to bring you all up to speed with what has been happening. Please, if you are able, provide us with feedback and let us know what you'd like to see in future Newsletters. We'd also welcome any comments from our Heritage Members on Stilton Heritage and its future. Contact us through the website: www.stiltonheritage.org or email the secretary: secretary@stiltonheritage.org .

What is Stilton Heritage?

Stilton Heritage was registered as a charity with the Charity Commission in August 2024. Our aim was to bring together local people interested in the history and heritage of our area; more specifically, we set out to establish a Centre for the public benefit that has local heritage collections and heritage research facilities - a village hub for all those interested in Stilton's past.

Our Constitution (which can be found on our website www.stiltonheritage.org) as approved by the Charity Commission, reflects this. Its main aim reads: "Stilton Heritage is for the public benefit to advance the education of the public in the history and heritage of the village of Stilton and the surrounding area by the establishment and maintenance of a museum for the collection and display of items, especially those which are relevant to the history of the district."

Our Trustees and Founder Members

Following a call for interest by Stilton Parish Council, several local residents met to discuss the feasibility of setting up Stilton Heritage as a charitable organisation. Seven of these residents agreed to be Trustees of the charity: Sue Ayres (Treasurer), Roy Baines (website manager), Keith Bull (Secretary), Dee Darnell, Olive Leonard, Liam McGivern and Paul Springford (Chairman). A further five "founder members", Tony Edwards, John Warner, Yvonne Warner, Vicky Dorling and Doug Maltman joined the Trustees to establish a Stilton Heritage Committee that has worked to set the ball rolling.



The Parish Room as our Heritage Centre

As written in our Constitution, a key element of Stilton Heritage is to establish a Centre in Stilton as a museum, archive and village hub for those interested in researching and learning about Stilton's past. We are fortunate that the Parish Council has been looking into using Stilton's "Parish Room" for this purpose.

The Parish Room, standing in the middle of Stilton Cemetery, was built in 1883 as a mortuary chapel and as a "boardroom" for the Burial Board of the Parish of Stilton. Such Boards were established in the mid to late 1800's to cope with the increased demands from a growing population and overcrowded church graveyards. With the industrial revolution and improving medical care England's population grew rapidly from about 9 million in 1800 to over 30 million in 1900. Stilton's chapel, therefore, catered for the increasing demands from the deceased of the village as well as providing temporarily shelter for casualties on the old Great North Road.

Parish Councils, when they were established under the Local Government Act of 1894, took over the duties of the Burial Boards, so Stilton's cemetery and its chapel building became the Parish Council's responsibility. The Council even extended the cemetery in 1926 by the purchase of additional land behind the chapel.

Over the years the chapel became little used and fell into disrepair. Lacking proper foundations, it became structurally unsound by the 1990's. Renovation was not possible, so the Parish Council decided to have the building completely rebuilt. This would not only keep one of Stilton's most attractive landmarks but also provide a useful Parish Office and a small meeting room. The rebuilding took place in 2009 and many of the original materials were reused to keep an authentic look. Thanks to the talents of a local architect, the new building is almost indistinguishable from its original form. But it's remarkably spacious inside, providing a potential valuable village facility.

The lease of the Parish Room

In recent years the Parish Room building has not been used much. Electronic communications and “working from home” have meant that a “village office” was no longer required. Furthermore, since the building was only suitable for relatively small meetings, the Parish Council has moved its meetings to more spacious facilities.

Even before the rebuilding, some had suggested using the building to house and display village archives and heritage information, but no action was taken. However, thoughts were revived when the Parish Council was faced with financial pressure from increased Council Tax payments. The Council Tax levied on the Parish Room was increased following a reassessment of its rateable value. For technical reasons, this also resulted in the loss of the Parish Council's relief on Council Tax payments for Stilton Pavilion.

Solicitor’s advice suggested leasing the little used Parish Room to decrease the Council Tax burden and make better use of the building. If such a lease were made to a charity, such as Stilton Heritage, then the charity and the Parish Council would both benefit from Council Tax relief. The charity could continue with the Council’s aim of establishing a Heritage Centre. A lease would safeguard the Council’s future interests should the charity cease to operate.

Stilton Parish Council has now engaged solicitors to draw up a lease for the Parish Room. Meanwhile, Stilton Heritage has established itself as a charity; which enables us to take on a lease. As a charity we also benefit from significant relief on Council Tax (at least 80%), whilst the Parish Council qualifies for relief from Council Tax for Stilton Pavilion. Local residents and those interested in Stilton’s past will also benefit.

Everybody wins!

Even so, the agreement and signing of the Parish Room lease is a serious undertaking for us. Whilst the Parish Council’s solicitor is acting on behalf of the Council, Stilton Heritage was strongly advised by Hunts Forum, a local charity that supports charities in our area, and the Ethical Property Foundation, another charity providing property advice to other charities, to seek legal advice prior to agreeing any lease document. As a result we approached Lawyers Volunteering for the Arts (LVFA); they have directed us to Clyde & Co who have agreed to act for us in negotiating a lease. This is being done pro bono (without charge) as we are a registered charity.

So far, the Parish Council’s solicitor has prepared a draft lease and this has been forwarded to our solicitor together with a list of requirements that we've identified. We're now awaiting the results of discussions between the two solicitors.

Grant awards

Early in the life of Stilton Heritage, Stilton Parish Council awarded us a “start-up grant” of £400 and this was followed by an award of £250 from the Big Stilton Cheese CIC. These awards, together with our small membership fees and the meeting fees charged to non-

members, have supported our meetings in the Church and Church Meeting Room as well providing sufficient funds to pay for visiting speakers.

To set up the Heritage Centre and provide equipment for talks we successfully applied to Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC) for Community Reach Funds of about £900; this provided funds for a projector and display boards. CCC also provided us with furniture for our Centre from their store in Cambridge. For additional display equipment, and for initially fitting out of the Heritage Centre, we were awarded over £2000 by the Huntingdonshire Futures Grant award scheme. Once the Parish Room lease is secured, we can plan and move on to make the Parish Room a working Heritage Centre.

Stilton Heritage displays

Some of you may have seen our display, prepared by Roy Baines, on cheese rolling that we set up for Stilton's Cheese Rolling Festival this year. This was complimented by a talk on "Stilton then and now" given by Paul Springford at the Festival. With Parish Council permission we also put a display together in the Parish Room for Open Gardens Day 2025. This featured: Roy's cheese rolling display; Sue Ayres VE Day exhibits, drawing attention to those who fell in the war; some interesting information on some of the occupants of Stilton cemetery, prepared by Vicky Dorling; and Yvonne Warner's Archives on recent village history. We opened the doors of the Parish Room later in June to enable others to see the displays.

Future talks

As soon as Stilton Heritage became a charity, the Committee agreed it should begin its work providing interest in our area's past. To this end we have planned monthly meetings inviting speakers to give talks on topics of local interest. A sub-committee, consisting on Paul Springford, Roy Baines and Tony Edwards, have put their heads together and planned the following talks for the rest of 2025:

10 July - Holmewood Hall & the Holmewood Estate by Sue Knight



Future talks (continued)

August – Summer break - No meeting

11 September - AGM + The Art of Thatching by Chris Dodson

9 October - Fen Ague by Dr Martyn Thomas

13 November - Lost Watermills of Huntingdonshire by Keith Grimwadde/ Bridget Flanagan

11 December - Social event for Members

If you have ideas for talks or visits to local sites of interest, please contact Paul at chairman@stiltonheritage.org

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Other Local History Talks

If you have enjoyed our monthly heritage events, you might like to know about other organisations putting on talks. And if you know of other local history events which would appeal to our members, please let us know!

Sawtry History Society (https://www.sawtryhistory.co.uk) organises talks at the Methodist Church on the third Thursday of each month (which is why our events are on the second Thursday…)

Peterborough Civic Society (https://peterboroughcivicsociety.org.uk) has a monthly programme of talks and visits, many with a historical theme.

Huntingdonshire Local History Society (https://huntslhs.org.uk) organises monthly meetings through the winter months

Ramsey Rural Museum (https://ramseyruralmuseum.co.uk) organises a wide range of activities, including local history talks, mainly on Wednesday evenings.

Peterborough Archaeology (https://peterborougharchaeology.org) has a programme of expert speakers on the first Monday of the month.

The Annual General Meeting

Finally, as Stilton Heritage has been running for almost a year, we need to take stock of progress and make plans for the coming year. Therefore, together with the talk planned at the church on 11th September, we shall be holding a short Annual General Meeting. For this, we shall start our meeting 30 minutes earlier (at 7pm) and plan to complete the AGM in that additional half hour before the talk.

Our AGM will include:

- A financial report from the Treasurer (Sue Ayres);

- A report from the Chairman (Paul Springford) and audience feedback on talks, etc. so far;

The Annual General Meeting (continued)

- Volunteering - Heritage Members (called Associate Members in the Constitution) offering to join the Committee and/or work in the Heritage Centre;

- Fees for Heritage Membership and non-members fees for meetings in the coming year;

- Plans for the future – what would you like from Stilton Heritage?

Stilton Heritage is a registered charity (charity number 1209657). For more information please visit our website at www.stiltonheritage.org or contact the secretary at secretary@stiltonheritage.org .