

**Winter 2017-18**



# THE BYZANT

The Shaftesbury & District  
Historical Society

Gold Hill Museum, Gold Hill, Shaftesbury, Dorset SP7 8JW

## **Chairman's Chat**

Since I last wrote a Chat to the Byzant there have been a few major changes to the Society and projects within it. One is sad, others more motivating. We are all sad to learn of the demise of our President, Jo Rutter, a very short time ago. He was a member of the Society almost at its inception in 1946 and took up a managerial role at a very young age. I knew him from my time firstly as Treasurer in 2010 through to the last meeting he attended last summer in the Garden Room of the Museum. He was still making useful contributions to Trustee meetings to the very end. I extend my condolences to his wife Jan, his family and friends.

On the more motivating front we welcome Keri Jones to the volunteer force. He is in radio/journalism and, for the last few years, mainly focussed on online media and social media publishing and journalism. He currently produces and presents a travel programme and travel website for radio stations up and down the country. He is responsible for our external publicity and has had several articles published in the local press, his first expressing our joy at being presented with the 2017 TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence Award – I know, it has my photograph in it but what an award – and several podcasts, one on the Shaftesbury Remembers launch. We warmly welcome him aboard.

Talking of the Shaftesbury Remembers launch prompts me to draw your attention to Claire Ryley's article and Keri's contribution to be found in this copy of the Byzant. I salute Claire's, Ann Symons' and Chris Stupples' stalwart service to the survivors of those who perished in the Great War and Rob Frost's expertise in presenting the data in a modern, comprehensive way. If you wish to learn/contribute/discuss

the project, please contact Claire or anybody in her team for details.

The museum is now becoming a little more expensive to maintain and the Trustees are looking for ways to increase income. We are, of course, always looking for savings yet we must stay up-to-date. There is no point doing this if the building is not to specification. One way to increase income is to keep an eye out for available grants and I congratulate Janet for securing a £500 grant from the Dorset Museums Association to obtain new display boards for one of the temporary exhibition rooms. We were left a sizeable legacy a few years ago but I think we will finish using it this financial year. If anybody is considering leaving the Society a legacy and would like to discuss this with anybody they could approach me directly for a confidential chat. As you can see from the above, we are a busy bunch – and believe me, the above are just examples of what we do – and writing articles for this newsletter is very time-consuming. We have called for articles from the membership but to date these have not been forthcoming. Therefore, we feel that the newsletter is becoming more of a burden and so we shall be publishing fewer of them in future. We are all volunteers to the core and servants to you, the membership.

Sometimes I get to the end of the day and ask myself 'why do I spend all of this time in that darned Gold Hill Museum? It is only a little museum and surely there can't be that much to do?' Well, there is a lot to do inside and about the museum – enough to keep a Trustee busy, anyway – and we normally tell you about this in these newsletters. But there is also an outside job to do that maintains a further interest for us all.

The GHM is one of many museums in the area. There are associations (I use this as a general term) which are

combinations of these organisations. As Trustees – indeed as Members of the S&DHS – we are encouraged to visit/give/attend exhibitions, training courses, lectures, workshops, group meetings etc and these are usually very interesting particularly when we are an almost select group. Recently Claire, Janet, Ian and I visited Bridport Museum to see the refurbishment and Lyme Regis Museum to see the layout in a difficult (interesting?) situation. I went to a North Dorset Museums Group meeting at Blandford Museum a few weeks ago. Ian and I attended a commercial digital marketing course at Blandford. Claire has been teaching and running activities mostly for children. She also attended a Bitesize Trustee Responsibility course, which most of us, including Ken, have attended, to ensure we are up-to-date with the general purpose of being a Trustee. A few years back, Elaine undertook a Volunteer Management course which gave her a recognised qualification (Institute of Learning & Management Level 3 Award in Leadership and Management Skills).

The above is but a very few of the events in which most of us have participated. The more formal part of the events does not stop there, though. The all-important breaks for coffee, lunch etc allow the participants to network and we all mix well to exchange information with other delegates and absorb useful indicators which keep our museum up-to-date and generally well-informed. I thank all my fellow volunteers for their interest in these extramural activities. Now I know why I spend all this time on that darned Gold Hill Museum. And it is mostly very enjoyable.  
David Silverside.

Chairman

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**Claire Ryley writes about the 'Shaftesbury Remembers the Great War' Community Project:**

On Saturday November 11<sup>th</sup> 2017, Gold Hill Museum hosted the launch of its HLF funded website. Ninety guests, all contributors to the project, watched a demonstration of the website in action, and afterwards visited the museum's Great War exhibition, and enjoyed afternoon tea.



*Contributors and guests at the website launch ... standing room only!*

The launch was the culmination of over two years' work, involving hundreds of contributors, both individuals and organisations, a team of researchers, and an IT specialist, Rob Frost, who fortunately combines his expertise with a great interest in Shaftesbury's history.

We received £6700 from the HLF's First World War Then and Now programme and we asked people to share their family and other stories, building a unique archive to be made available to all, either on-line or on a dedicated computer terminal in the museum. A new permanent display in the museum shows objects donated during the

project, and copies of the stories we have collected.

We wanted to capture stories and memories about early 20<sup>th</sup> century Shaftesbury and its inhabitants, both those who served in the armed forces and those left at home, before it was too late, and we were delighted with the amount and quality of the material which we received.

We were keen to involve local schools, retirement homes and the British Legion, but everyone was very welcome to take part in the project, as we needed volunteers for a range of interesting and diverse roles.

There were opportunities to learn new computer, research and interviewing skills, as well as cataloguing and organising materials for the archive. We employed professional trainers so that volunteers could learn new skills, and produce the best results.

We held Open Day events to recruit volunteers and contributors, and shared the results of our research by giving talks to a wide range of groups. We also started holding reminiscence sessions in the town library which have proved very popular, and are continuing after the project's completion.

We have been recording oral histories for the archive and, where we have been given permission, these will be available on the dedicated museum computer and shared with Dorset History Centre.

The website and new permanent exhibition will give a much fuller understanding of the part that local people played in the Great War, and help us all appreciate the significance of names on war memorials, and the sacrifices of the individuals they represent.



*New recruits gathering in Shaftesbury High Street 1914*

The website is in two main parts:

- Stories which tells the individual stories of each person mentioned on 26 local Great War memorials
- Background which gives information about Shaftesbury and the surrounding area from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-1920s.

You can view the website by going onto [goldhillmuseum.org.uk](http://goldhillmuseum.org.uk) and clicking on the 'Shaftesbury Remembers' link.

A podcast is also available at <https://soundcloud.com/user-177849604/shaftesbury-remembers-report>

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**S&DHS member Keri Jones writes about the launch of the 'Shaftesbury Remembers The Great War' Website:**

A two-year, Lottery-funded project that explains how the First World War affected Shaftesbury and its residents has 'gone live' online.

Around 90 people who have contributed family stories attended the launch of the 'Shaftesbury Remembers The Great War' website at Gold Hill Museum on Remembrance Day.

Website designer Rob Frost of Orion IT has divided the presentation into two sections. One part reveals what life was like in Shaftesbury at the start of the 20th century. The second segment contains biographies of the 330 people named on the 25 local war memorials.

"Every single name has a story," volunteer Claire Ryley said. "We know who they were, who their parents were and where they were born. We've read some of their letters, too," she added.

Chris Stupples spent up to 7 hours each day immersed in research and he was touched by the story of the four Bennett brothers from Tollard Royal, all of whom died during the conflict. Mrs Bennett sent a letter to a commanding officer in France. "She wrote that having no news is worse than having the worst news," said project volunteer Ann Symons. "When Chris found that letter he telephoned me, because he was so moved by it," Ann added.

Many WW1 records were lost during Second World War bombing but Chris' research revealed that some North Dorset men relocated to Canada, seeking work, in the early 1900s. Those migrants were sent back to Europe to fight and Chris was able to access Canadian records to find out what happened to the soldiers.

Chris has been able to 'fill in the blanks' for local families.



Diana King couldn't understand why her uncle was pictured wearing a kilt. Chris' research revealed that he had been a member of the Enniskillen Regiment. "Some people have been surprised to learn that their relatives fought in Mesopotamia, the modern-day Iraq and not France," said Ann.

Articles and photographs also reveal how Shaftesbury's women and children supported the war effort. "Explosives were manufactured using an extract from conkers and youngsters were offered prizes for collecting them," said Claire.

Farm girls were recruited to produce around 3 million hand grenades from a factory in Bourton, near Gillingham. "It would have been dangerous work but the photographs we have indicate that there was a sense of camaraderie there," said Claire.

"Women also wrote cards and knitted enormous numbers of balaclavas, socks and gloves. Some were given to men waiting to head overseas from Fovant," Claire added.

Locals were very interested in this effort. Each month, The Western Gazette published long lists detailing the amount of knitwear produced and sent.

Some women wanted to become even more involved. Ann has learned that a local woman moved to France to bake bread for the troops after her brothers were called up to fight. "Her father wrote to the War Office requesting permission for her to return home for a month to help with the harvest," says Ann.

If you're interested in how Shaftesbury has changed in 100 years, the site offers a snapshot of the town before and after WW1.

Claire says Shaftesbury became, "old-fashioned" without the economic benefit of a direct railway connection. But she was surprised to learn that, despite the local hills, the town had become a centre for cyclists. Three bike shops traded in

the town, with one premises on Salisbury Street offering cyclists overnight accommodation.

All three of the project leaders say they got involved with this project because they wanted to learn more about the town. They say they've achieved that goal following this research.

Claire says that when she walks around town, she can better understand the town's history. "I now know why there are white posts topped with crowns next to the Library on Bell Street. It is because the Police Station used to be on that site," she says.

And Chris says he has forged friendships with the families of the soldiers he's researched.



Pictured with the Mayor and Mrs Lewer at the launch on 11 November are (from the left) website designer Rob Frost, Ann Symons, Claire Ryley and Chris Stupples  
The project is ongoing and its next phase will share the stories of the soldiers who returned home after the war. The

project team say they welcome additional information on the stories featured or questions about their work. And Ann says she's delighted that the museum received an email from Tasmania, just days after the website launched. To view the website and listen to a podcast discussing the project, visit [goldhillmuseum.org.uk](http://goldhillmuseum.org.uk).

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### **A year in the life of a steward: a reflection on the 2017 season by Elaine Barratt**

The role of museum steward is an interesting one providing the opportunity to meet visitors from Bangor to Bangkok, Newquay to New Jersey, Stavanger to Sydney, Canvey Island to Cape Town and all points in between. The aforementioned are just some of the places from which people have travelled to write comments in our Visitors' Book this season, comments which express appreciation for our lovely museum and its friendly stewards.

The requests for information, noted in the Day Book this year, were many and varied including: where was the Shaftesbury Temperance Club? Answered by David K, it was the hall in Bell Street sold to the Freemasons just over a century ago and now known as the Heritage Hall; what are the small metal wall plates located on building walls around the town, bearing an 'S' or 'F' and occasionally a number? Answered by Chris S after some research, they are indicators of sewers and fire hydrants; how did foundries know how to cast bells to produce the right note? Answered by Janet S, they were clipped until the correct note was achieved; and the usual requests for information about families and properties, including a general one about pubs, usually taken up by Ray, our librarian and archivist. People also offered things such as: film records of the town

produced 30-35 years ago; a periscope made by a war-blinded man; information about a family who had lived on Gold Hill; different woods for the 'In Praise of Wood' (temporary) exhibition; alternative explanations or descriptions of various artefacts; and further information, with permission to use it, from the daughter of GI bride, Violet Cock, whose photo appears in Room 8 and who settled in Missouri with her husband, Beryl Hughs, (we have the wrong spelling!) and produced five children.

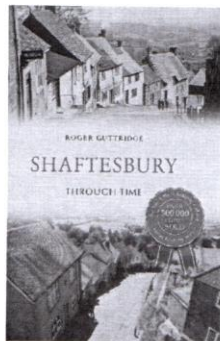
There were various incidents such as: a fainting in Room 4 (the lady was wearing a fleece on a hot summer's day); a wasp sting in the same room; a mysteriously broken chair in Room 5 to which no-one owned up; however the incident which caused and is still causing the most consternation and which is nothing to do with the Historical Society was the disappearance, in May, of the Hovis loaf, i.e. the large one for collecting cash, donated by Hovis following the filming of the famous advert directed by Ridley Scott in 1973. One local lady was particularly aggressive to the stewards on duty assuming, even when assured otherwise, that the museum is in some way responsible for it. We are told that it has been removed for refurbishment of its fibreglass structure and repainting and also that the Town Council deems it a potential danger and is unhappy about its location on the High Street. I do know its current location but if I were to divulge it I might have to shoot you!

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### **Ray Simpson – This and that.**

The only new additions to the library collection since the last Byzant are some expense books for Motcombe Church..... These were found by a member of the public whilst clearing out his late father's home and he wanted to

donate them to the Society. He also mentioned that he had found a map of Shaftesbury dated 1620, which is just five years later than the earliest map of Shaftesbury. He told me that it showed the centre of the town with a pannier market opposite the Town Hall. Hutchins History of Dorset alludes to a 1620 map and if this is that one then it would be of enormous value to Shaftesbury's history. Annoyingly the man cannot now locate the map but I continue to contact him in hope.



Claire Ryley and myself, representing the S&DHS, have been collaborating with Roger Guttridge, the well known Dorset author, for his new book *Shaftesbury Through Time*; providing material, research and photographs from the Museum's collection. The work began in the late Spring of 2017 and is now finished. Roger has sent the final proof to the publisher, Amberley. The book will, hopefully, be in bookshops late March/April.

My usual piece of historical trivia for this edition is as follows:-



DARING BURGLARY AND CAPTURE OF THE THIEVES – At an early hour on Saturday morning last week, a daring

burglary was committed at the dwelling-house of a widow, Mrs. Anna Combes, of Tisbury. The thieves, it appeared, resorted to an old plan of placing a treacle platter on a pane of glass, so as to deaden the sound in breaking. By this means, they removed a pane near the fastening of a window, and so effected an entrance to a sleeping apartment on the ground floor. Mrs. Combes and her servant slept together in the room, and they awoke during the search of the burglars. Little suspecting the presence of such unwelcome visitors, the servant jumped out of bed and the first thing she caught hold of was a man's arm! Her terror may be easily imagined, but she nevertheless had courage to strike a light, whereby the women were alarmed at finding two ruffians in the room. Their apprehension was by no means allayed either when the fellows demanded money and threatened that if any noise were made they would cut the throats of both mistress and servant. Having ransacked Mrs. Combe's pocket, and found a purse containing about 12s or 14s they decamped; but the light procured by the servant enabled both women to see distinctly the features and the dress of the burglars. Their dress too was somewhat remarkable, one of them wearing an old military suit, and the other a dirty brown smock frock of peculiar description. As soon as the terrified women recovered themselves they dressed and gave information to the police, whereby Superintendent Dann and several constables started in pursuit of the burglars. In a short time the fellows were traced through Barford Saint Martin and Grovely Wood to Stopford, and they were ultimately captured at the Bell Inn, Winterborne Stoke, where they were coolly drinking a quart of ale. Superintendent Dann took the prisoners to Hindon on the same evening, and on Wednesday they were brought before the magistrates there and committed for trial at the assizes. Both the prisoners are well-known characters. One of them, named James Sheen, is about 40 years of age, and belongs to Steeple



Ashton, Wilts. At the time of his capture he wore a stable jacket of the 12<sup>th</sup> Lancers, though he stated he had been in the 13<sup>th</sup> Foot, from which he volunteered into the 55<sup>th</sup> in the year 1854; and was discharged from the latter regiment for bad conduct. He had only just been released from Winchester Gaol, where he had been imprisoned for a month for begging. His companion was a man named George Robinson, of Newton Tony. This fellow had also been in the army, and is a ticket-of-leave man, having been sentenced to six years' penal servitude for deserting from the 62<sup>nd</sup> Regiment of Foot, and joining the Russian army during the Crimean war. He served four years and a half of the term, and was then released. He had not learned to be honest in the interval, and has consequently several times made the acquaintance of the police, and had only just been discharged from Fisherton Gaol Salisbury, where he had been confined for six months for felony.

In April the following year Jarvis Sheen and George Robinson pleaded guilty to breaking and entering the dwelling-house of Anna Maria Coombes, with intent to steal, at Tisbury. - Sheen was sentenced to 9 months, Robinson 12 months' hard labour.

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**Keri Jones looks back at Sir John Stuttard's 5<sup>th</sup>  
December talk on 'The Two Beckfords of Fonthill'**

A former Lord Mayor of London presented his research into two local landowners who enjoyed influence and massive wealth, before a sex scandal forced one of them into exile.

"Both of them were the wealthiest commoners in England in the 18th century," said Sir John. "One was a great politician



and the other was the greatest fine art collector of all time." As a former Lord Mayor of London, Sir John became interested in Alderman Beckford, who held that position twice. When Sir John moved to Shaftesbury six years ago, he began detailed research into the Beckford family.



Alderman Beckford, the father, was elected Shaftesbury's MP in 1747 but, unlike today's politicians, he would have had little contact with townspeople. Shaftesbury's parliamentary seat was termed 'a rotten borough', where the wealthy or the aristocracy effectively decided who was elected and how they voted in parliament. "Who became MP was in the gift of the Earl of Shaftesbury," said John. "He wouldn't have related to the people of the town. He lived on the Fonthill Estate and he kept a house in London. He would have spent most of his time in London and came down here from time to time," John said.

Beckford was politically savvy though, and he saw an opportunity with the growing movement for political reform. He took his campaign for better electoral representation directly to the King.

"The Alderman's three addresses to George III were all about the King abolishing parliament, reforming it and preventing these rotten boroughs. Yet, earlier, Beckford had been elected as an MP to a rotten borough. He is an enigma," mused John.

Alderman Beckford's liberal stance and his free trade ideals made him very popular in the City of London, and that's why he's the only Lord Mayor with his own statue. But Beckford's liberal views might seem at odds with the source of his vast wealth - Jamaican sugar plantations.

"It was normal for wealthy people to have servants," John explained. "Landowners in Virginia, Maryland and the West Indies would have had slaves. Nobody thought anything of it until the movement to abolish slavery started at the end of the 18th century and continued with Wilberforce, in the early 19th century. Beckford was asked if he had any problem with slavery and he didn't answer the question. It was almost irrelevant at that time," John said.



If tabloid newspapers had existed in the 18th century, the lifestyle of the Alderman's son William would probably have filled the front pages.

"He was bisexual," John explained. "He had a relationship with a boy who was eight years younger than he was. It was never proven whether that relationship was consummated and it was never brought to court. But there was a scandal associated with letters that he wrote to the boy."

William Beckford was quickly disowned by certain sectors of society.

"He was shunned by the aristocracy," said John. "There were people who would not have wished to have known him. He was about to be offered a Barony but he didn't get a peerage. There were people who did visit him, though. Nelson came to stay and he was a colourful character as well," said John, before adding, "There were other visitors who were fascinated by his art collection."

Beckford went into voluntary exile and spent seven years in Portugal.

When he returned to Fonthill he began constructing a stately home that would reflect his immense wealth.

"He started knocking down his father's lovely neoclassical house, Fonthill Splendens, and he built a Gothic cathedral to house his art collection," said John.

Fonthill Abbey was built in the style of a mediaeval abbey and sported a 90 metre-high tower, briefly. The structure collapsed on multiple occasions due to construction problems. Very little of Beckford's grand country home has survived.

Young Beckford's rather lonely and isolated upbringing may have played a part in his problems. Sir John says that William didn't mix with children his own age and he wasn't sent to school.

"He was educated at home on the Fonthill estate," John explained. "He didn't have anybody of his own age to play with. He didn't go to university either but when he was 18 he was sent off to Geneva with his private tutor. He was quite childish in some ways. He was a dreamer and he fantasised."

Eventually, Beckford had to sell his entire art collection and the Fonthill Estate.

"I don't feel too sorry for anyone who blows a huge fortune," said John. "It was his money and he spent it."

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### **Forthcoming Lectures at Gold Hill Museum**

**Tuesday 06 February at 2.30p.m.** 'Shakespeare's Guildhall and the provincial public buildings of pre-modern England' by Dr. Kate Giles



Kate, a former student of Shaftesbury School and now Senior Lecturer at the University of York, has dedicated her academic career to researching Guildhalls. As in Shaftesbury, these buildings were once at the heart of civic and public life in medieval England but today they have often been converted or demolished, and their histories largely forgotten. Most recently Kate has been working on 'Shakespeare's Guildhall' in Stratford upon Avon. Her talk will introduce us to the Guildhall as a type of building and then share her findings which have informed a £1.4 million project to open this building to the public.

**Tuesday 06 March at 2.30p.m.** 'The Background to Mabel Giffard Abbess of Shaftesbury by Sir Sidney Giffard.

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### **Letters To The Editor 14 October, 1852**

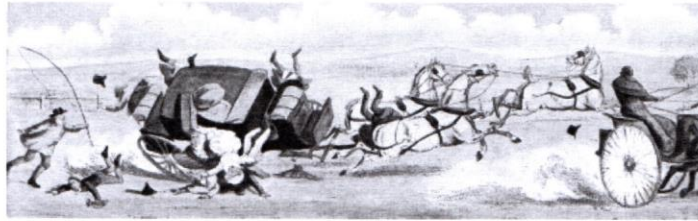
SIR – As contradictory reports have been circulated about what might have been a serious accident with Foyle's Salisbury and Shaftesbury coach, I beg to send you the



following particulars of the matter. On Tuesday last, the coach was heavily laden with passengers and luggage, and had proceeded steadily and comfortably twelve miles on the road, when on descending a short hill, the "off" fore-wheel struck a large stone in the middle of the road, which gave the coach such a sudden jerk that the pole snapped off close to the socket. The coach was thus precipitated on the hind legs of the "wheelers," when the driver with great presence of mind pulled the horses all round on a soft embankment, where the wheels became embedded and fortunately brought the coach to anchor. The horses meanwhile dashed away like lightning with the pole dangling amongst them, The passengers and luggage were soon transferred to a wagon, which was kindly placed at our service by a lady passing at the time, and all, I am grateful to add, reached their destination in safety.

In conclusion I have to state, that not the slightest blame can be attached to the coachman (Foyle, jun.), who thoroughly displayed the utmost caution and prudence, as all my fellow passengers will testify.

I am, Sir, your obedient, Servant,  
THE PASSENGER ON THE "BOX"



P.S. - It is right to mention that a Carrier between Salisbury and Yeovil passed us at the time with an empty van, and refused to render the passengers any assistance.

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### **News Round-up**

It is brought to our notice that the Shaftesbury Byzant re-enactment ceremony is to be staged again after a break of some years. We understand that it will be held sometime in June of this year. If anybody is interested in helping in any way please contact Zoe Moxham at the Town Hall.



The Museum will be open from 10 – 18 February for the Snowdrop Festival.

Further to the report about the *Shaftesbury Then And Now* book on page 15 of this publication we now learn that the book will (subject to change) be unveiled at the Gold Hill Museum on Weds. 28 March at 4.30p.m. Members of the Society are invited to attend and signed copies of the book will be available to purchase.

### **A plea to the membership**

It is hoped that the Byzant publication can, in future, include more items of historical material and produce a larger and more interesting magazine. It would therefore be helpful, and much appreciated if The S&DHS members were

to submit items of a historical nature, not necessarily of local content, which they feel would be of interest to the readership. If you feel that you can contribute would you kindly send material to the museum library, either by post or email – [library@goldhillmuseum.org.uk](mailto:library@goldhillmuseum.org.uk)  
Your views on the format and reporting are also welcomed in this way we can present a better publication.



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## **Jo Rutter**



It is with sadness that I write these words on the passing of Joseph (Jo) Rutter, our president and lifelong member. I have not known Jo for very long, but in the few years that I have, I came to admire him as a very knowledgeable person on the history of Shaftesbury, as was his wife Jan. During these years, I was privileged to collaborate with him, and others, on a project which he had begun and was passionate about - the translation of the Roxburghe copy of the Shaftesbury section of the Pembroke Rolls. Felicity MacSwinney and myself became the remaining collaborators of a small team which met to undertake the project. We had many sessions, mostly at Jo and Jan's home in Stour Row where he would always have coffee and biscuits awaiting us, and it was through these meetings that we got to know him very well. One never knew what he might produce from his home, which appeared to be stuffed with books, literature and documents which would almost do credit to the National Archives. We found him a very well informed and dedicated man and very thorough with his research. At these meetings, we observed his considerable knowledge of Shaftesbury's past together with his own theories on its development and there appeared to be nothing he did not know about. He calmly accepted being teased from time to time and was always open to alternative views. We did eventually complete the

Pembroke project, but sadly, it is still awaiting publication.

Jo had been associated with the Shaftesbury & District Historical Society almost from its beginning. He became a member in the early 1950's and was its secretary for some of the time and as such, was instrumental in the purchase of the present museum buildings.

Sadly Jo was to have given a talk to the Society in the Spring on his latest research into some of Shaftesbury's streets.

It cannot be over emphasised of the loss to the history of Shaftesbury upon Jo's passing.

The Society offers its sincere condolences to Jan and family.

*Ray Simpson*

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