

BBC History Magazine Weekender – Winchester 5th to 7th October 2018



This event took place over three days, with talks by leading historical authors, presenters and lecturers, many of whom are well known faces on TV. This is the third year this event has been staged in Winchester within the imposing surroundings of the Great Hall or in nearby Ashburton Hall. I chose nine talks including Q&A sessions which lasted about an hour, followed by book signings – needless to say, some of them have books for sale!

Winchester Great Hall with 'King Athur's' Round Table.

Helen Castor presented **Elizabeth I: A Study in Security** which outlined Elizabeth's difficult upbringing and the lack of security from danger or trauma throughout her life, living with the constant knowledge that nothing could be relied upon. Elizabeth avoided change if possible and when pressed to marry, remained indecisive. On her death in 1603, she had not named an heir.

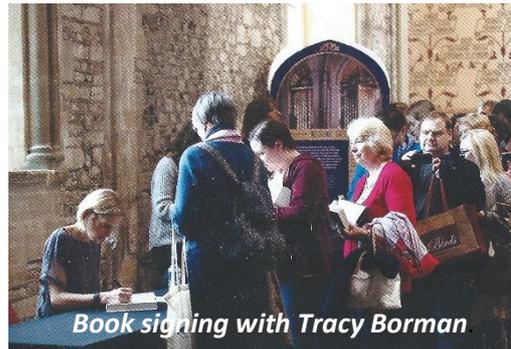
Neil MacGregor then gave a talk on **Living with the Gods**. This showed the religious insecurities worldwide today and the ways in which different countries try to curtail immigrants bringing their religions with them. However, he pointed out that folk beliefs are still going strong and gave several examples, including Christmas which is a secular celebration at heart, being a mixture of Roman Saturnalia, Turkish and Dutch stories, with Santa Claus introduced from the USA.

On Saturday, my first talk was **Suzannah Lipscombe** on **Witchcraft**. From about 1450 to 1750 witches were considered especially dangerous. The church was not instrumental in witch trials as witchcraft was a crime and therefore under secular jurisdiction. The last executions for witchcraft took place in 1685, but witch hunts occur even in modern times.

My second talk of the day was **Ryan Lavelle** on **The Death of Cnut the Great and the End of the Viking Empire**. After Ethelred the Unready died, Cnut became King of England, as well as ruling Denmark, Norway and some of Sweden. Cnut had married Aelfgifu who went to live in Norway acting as Regent with their son Svein. He then married Emma of Normandy, Ethelred's widow. Cnut died in Shaftesbury in 1035 and his body was taken to Winchester for burial.

Guy de la Bedoyere then presented **Domina; The Women who made Imperial Rome**, giving details of the reigns of two families in Rome – the Julio-Claudians and the Severans – whose first Emperors were not the sons of the previous ruler. The family lines were carried through very dominant females. After the death of Augustus his wife Livia's son Tiberius became Emperor, he did not marry so Caligula became Emperor through his link with Germanicus. He was followed by his uncle Claudius who married his niece, and her son Nero then followed, unfortunately committing suicide and leaving no heirs, thus ending the line.

Tracy Borman gave us details on **James I and the Gunpowder Plot**. James I married Anne of Denmark when she was just 14. Because of his unpopularity as King of England, the Gunpowder Plot was devised and, through an anonymous letter sent to the King enquiries led to the plotters being found in the cellars. There was known to be a person high in government involved, it could have been Robert Cecil or Anne of Denmark, the Queen.



Book signing with Tracy Borman

Bernard Cornwell then had a conversation with Ryan Lavelle. Bernard is a prolific author of fiction based on historical fact, having written over 50 novels. Ryan is the historical consultant on the TV series “The Last Kingdom”, Cornwell’s fictional books based on the history of the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings. Bernard Cornwell spoke about both his Sharpe and Last Kingdom series, as well as some of his stand-alone novels.

On Sunday, when I was starting to get history overload, I had only two talks. The first was **Ruth Goodman** on **How to Behave Badly in Renaissance Britain**. Ruth gave us an insight into the use of gesture and words during the period and had us all on our feet learning how to bow. Small gestures to insult people were demonstrated, as were different ways to bow without showing the inside of your hat – apparently very insulting during Renaissance times.

The final talk for me and the highlight of the three days was **Michael Wood** presenting a talk on **Troy**, about which he made a TV documentary series (available on YouTube if anyone’s interested) and wrote a book in 1982 (*In search of the Trojan War*). These were instrumental in setting up a fourth dig which produced a great deal of new information and proved Wood right in most of his suggestions. It was thought that the story of Troy was a legend, but it was written down c. 550 BC by Homer. The first excavation was undertaken by Heinrich Schliemann in 1871-1873. He found a cache of Bronze Age gold treasure including jewellery, pottery and weapons, and went on to find a palace with wall paintings.



Michael Wood speaking at the Winchester History weekend.

Mandy Kesby