Report of the Storrington April meeting held in the Storrington Village hall on

Friday 21st April 2023 by David Porter

The members were treated to a unique insight to the families who lived at this unusual location the history of the tunnel the vegetation around the location and efforts to return this to its past glory of naturally growing flowers. Probably of equal interest was the look back at the families who lived and are still living at this unusual location including the present owners

 Mr & Mrs Porter.

The tunnel original built in 1841 to take the railway line through the South Downs from London to Brighton and the South Coast has an imposing Gothic folly referred to as the Clayton North Portal part of the north entrance of the tunnel.

It took over three years to build the tunnel with 600 men digging the mile and a half long tunnel through the chalk hills

No one knows why the Folly was added to the entrance after the tunnel was completed, one is it was to reassure passengers of the new form of travel travelling through a tunnel for the first time. However the most likely that it was built to satisfy a local land owner to allow the tunnel to be dug in the first place.

The second part of the story concerns the cottage which was added to the top of the folly in 1894 and it was here that the tunnel keeper lived here with his family

The daily routine consisted of walking the length of the tunnel and lighting the oil lamps along its mile and a half length to guide the trains through. Oil lamps are a thing of the past and have been replaced with electric lamps however over 350 trains still pass through the tunnel each day.

However before we leave the Gothic folly it seems correct to mention the ghosts of Clayton Tunnel. A signaling failure in 1861 resulted in The Clayton Tunnel Rail Crash causing the death of 23 passengers and to this day visitors to the site have reported sightings of two ghostly figures walking hand in hand to the entrance of the tunnel. Charles Dickens is also thought to have based his short story The Signalman on this incident.

Up until 2003 when David Porter our speaker started living in the cottage all the previous residents have been connected to the railway mostly as a train guards based at Brighton. The story ends with the last family to live there Mr. and Mrs. Attmore before David took residence in 2003. We were shown some slides of the family taken during their tenure and some films showing the family, they had 4 girls and one that has particular relevance to the story the youngest, Julie.

We were also shown films with a sound track of a number of trains entering the tunnel including a steam train, where the folly was immersed in smoke and could not be seen. Our speaker said that it was surprisingly quiet and peaceful living there apart from the smoke from steam trains.

 The story David told ended on a very happy note as following a visit Julie made to her old home the two met and are now happily married and living in the cottage. We also had the great pleasure of meeting Julie at the meeting.

The meeting ended with a raffle and light refreshments. Our next meeting is on **19th May** in the village hall Storrington at 7.30pm when Christine Iverson will be presenting a talk entitled

‘The folklore and superstitions of the hedgerows’

M.J.Webber

Website: Storringtonhorti.org.uk