Caddhist Meeting 22 May 2025

The Making of Harpenden Museum

Our speaker David Keen, curator of Harpenden Museum, was born and brought up in Harpenden. Before becoming curator of Harpenden Local History Society, he worked with the Royal Air Force Museum at Hendon – as he said "a dream job – being paid to talk about Spitfires".

From 1900, people had started to collect material relating to local history which was at first stored in the Strong Room at Harpenden Hall, then moved several times. First to Arden Grove, to a cottage at the back of Harpenden Hall. Next to a Portakabin in a car park, then, after being scattered to various sites around Harpenden, it was reassembled in a small room at Park Hall provided by Harpenden Town Council.

In 1973, Harpenden Local History Society was formed, meeting weekly to sort through the stored items with the object of opening a future museum for Harpenden. One member, Les Casey, mounted quarterly exhibitions from the collections and such was his interest and commitment to the project that on his death, his estate was bequeathed to the Society, enabling them to negotiate for space in the new Eric Morecombe Centre.

The Centre opened in October 2021 and the History Society's move was completed in 2023. Some of the display cases were designed and made by Querk, a Leagrave company who have done similar work for the National Gallery and for the Smithsonian Institute.

The museum frontage looks like a shop and its many and varied displays include a painting of Harpenden by Frank Salisbury (Salisbury's painting of Roosevelt hangs in the Oval Office of the White House). A White Ensign from HMS Harpenden (one of a class of ships named after race courses. Harpenden held an annual horse race on the common from 1848 to 1914). A Samurai sword and Oliver Cromwell's boots (since disproved) and of course many, many items of local interest.

All of which may be viewed with great pleasure and interest, on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays from 11am – 3pm.
Terri Aubrey