

18th April - "History of Salters Steamers"

Speaker: Dr Simon Wenham

Dr Simon Wenham enthralled us with the "History of Salters Steamers" dating back to 1836.

Simon had taken a summer vacation job working for Salters when he discovered a mass of documents of all sorts hidden away in boxes. As he began to look into these he became so intrigued that he went on to write his doctoral thesis on the salter family, which is still involved with providing passenger boat trips on the river Thames today, though less so than in earlier years.

Salters is one of the oldest family firms in Oxford. The firm made its name by providing the boats used in the Oxford-Cambridge Boat Race from its inception in the mid-1800s. Between 1857 and 1976 Salters had the most successful wooden boats on the Thames and in 1893 they owned over 900 boats! Many of these were used by Londoners going up the river for a weekend's leisure of camping. Such activities were made famous by Lewis Carroll and Jerome K Jerome. At one stage over 300 boats were being built each year. These ranged from skiffs to passenger barges, paddle steamers to boat houses, some of which can still be seen. Some vessels were used as ambulance ships in both world wars. Such was the firm's reputation that they began exporting globally to Europe and the Empire, especially India. One large paddle steamer was even used by the Baptist Mission Society in the Congo.

The firm also developed hydroplanes in the 1920's, a regular timetable and a "Guide to the Thames".

Simon's enthusiasm and range of knowledge left the audience much wiser and also eager to learn more!