

Caversham Heights Society 21st November 2018

“Swan Upping on the Thames”

Mr David Barber, the Queen’s Swan Marker, gave an informative, colourful and humorous talk about the history of Swan Upping and how and why the recording of the number of swans and cygnets on the Thames was, and is, so important.

David began by describing the importance of swans to the royal household’s menu from at least 1186 and how the medieval kings laid claim to all mute swans swimming in open water. Any study of the feasts of the Tudor monarchs would see the number of swans eaten. Gradually the two powerful and wealthy Livery companies, the Dyers and the Vintners, were also given rights to own certain swans, as were many abbots of monasteries and important barons and landowners. Today, apart from the Ilchester family who own the swans at Abbotsbury in Dorset, only the Queen and the Livery companies can lay claim to ownership. Fortunately swans are no longer eaten.

Every year, in the third week in July, a colourful ceremonial procession of six wooden skiffs, two representing the Crown and two for each of the Livery companies, each member dressed in their red uniforms, spend five days rowing the 79 miles up the Thames from Sunbury to Abingdon. The purpose of the ‘Swan Upping’ (so called because the boats go ‘up’ the Thames and the swans are taken ‘up’ from the water to be checked, counted and ringed) is to check on their health and condition and to help with conservation. Sadly in recent years there has been a decline in numbers because of foxes, birds of prey and swans getting snagged in nylon fishing gear or tackle. Also there has been a move to prevent people feeding swans and geese with bread - our speaker said that this had been detrimental and should be stopped.