

# A Résumé of the Remembering Roger Lea Event 26th June, 2022



Towards the end of Summer 2021, Roger Lea's son Stephen put forward the suggestion of commemorating his late father's life by holding an event in his honour. The aim was to gather together people who knew him well during his lifetime and for all the groups with which he was involved in Sutton Coldfield to be given the chance of recalling their memories of him. At that time, Holy Trinity Parish Church were kind enough to offer their facilities and speakers were suggested together with ideas for talks.

Plans finally came to fruition on Sunday, 26<sup>th</sup> June, 2022, when many of Roger's family and friends attended the event entitled *Remembering Roger Lea* in the Trinity Centre. The happy atmosphere inherent throughout the day was perfectly captured by photographs taken on the day, many of which are included in this article.

At 1.00pm exhibitors arrived to set up their displays and were made welcome with refreshments over the lunchtime period. There were several groups involved displaying items which highlighted the connection they each had with Roger.

### **EXHIBITORS**

Holy Trinity Parish Church, following the beautiful re-ordering of their church building, had several new items to sell, particularly the very readable historical appraisal of the church's history entitled *Holy Trinity Parish Church: The Story of a Parish Church and its People, 1250-2020.* Roger had been involved with this on many fronts and wrote the 'Foreward' to the book. Also on sale were two delightful jigsaws depicting the church and some rather attractive purple pens, reflecting the colour used in the furnishings of the church.

Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group (SCLHRG), of which Roger had been Chairman for over 40 years, had gathered together some of his local history research, the main item of which was his renowned *History Spot* newspaper articles, copies of which were available to study. In addition, folders containing some of the group's work-in-progress, i.e. Chester Road Railway Station and John Wyatt, the inventor, gave an insight into the variety of local history projects currently being investigated. Other material on display featured some unique local maps, recently acquired, which dated from the late 1700s and which Pete Try, the current Chairman, was endeavouring to decipher. There were also copies of the group's publications on sale.

Roger and his wife, Christine, had for many years worked tirelessly with **The Civic Society** and their display highlighted among other things a book that they had encouraged him to write called *The Blue Plaque Trail*, which guided readers to the locations of some of Sutton's well known ancestors, for example, Vesey House in High Street, being the home of the 1860s historian, Agnes Bracken. This little gem of a book has always been available to purchase either direct from them or via local booksellers. Two other items on their stand depicted *The Career of Bishop Vesey* and *Sutton's Past is an Asset for the Future*, the latter item featuring photos of some interesting local buildings.

**FOLIO** (Friends of Libraries in Our Sutton Coldfield) and **FOSPA** (Friends of Sutton Park Association), both vibrant groups within the town, provided plenty of excellent photographic records of Sutton Coldfield and its park, under the respective banners of *Telling Sutton Stories* and *AIS Archaeological Interpretation Scheme/HAT History and Archaeology Taskforce.* Both had Roger to thank for his active support over many years.

Another organisation which profited from his expertise was the **Friends of New Hall Mill**. They recalled how Roger found time to lead history walks around the Mill on their Open Days and, afterwards, donned his white coat and assisted in the Mill itself, especially when it was milling flour. He rarely missed the opportunity on their Work Days, to find time to dig his own plot of ground, very often sharing his produce with others.

At 2.00pm, the afternoon of talks began, which was introduced by Stephen Lea. It seemed that the whole of Roger's family had come to see with what esteem the people of Sutton regarded him and it was also good to notice other members of the general public sitting patiently for the speakers to begin.

#### **SPEAKERS**

The keynote speaker was **Dr Mike Hodder**, former Birmingham City Archaeologist and Roger's long term friend and collaborator in all things historical and archaeological. He began with a talk entitled *Roger Lea and Sutton's Past*. Their acquaintance went back over 40 years when they worked on matters relating to Sutton Park. Mike's abiding memory was that most of Roger's research came from Original Sources and for it to be of true value it was always written up. Today, that concept is continued to be carried on by the Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group.

**Marian Baxter**, formerly Local Studies Librarian at Sutton Coldfield Library, then recalled, in her *Personal recollections of a colleague and friend*, many delightful incidences whilst working with Roger, who was himself Head of Sutton Library for some years. He did, however, come across as being quite a complex character with a definite air of quiet authority and a quirky sense of humour. Marian

experienced all of this but remembered him with a sense of fondness and gratitude.

At this stage, **Andy Foster** was invited to introduce his new book, *Pevsner Guide to Birmingham and the Black County*, in which, he said, there were references to Sutton Coldfield. There was a chance to purchase a copy at a reduced price that afternoon and copies were also available from booksellers.

There followed a short break between speakers which then gave everyone a chance to enjoy another look around the displays and even to walk around the nearby Holy Trinity Parish Church to see the re-ordering of the interior, which had been finished in 2016.

Fortified by more refreshments, the audience were then treated to another three speakers, the first being **Stella Thebridge**, the editor and mastermind of *Holy Trinity Parish Church: The Story of a Parish Church and its People, 1250-2020*. Her acquaintance with Roger had been short lived, but as a fellow librarian they had much in common. However, she had recognised his quiet contribution to keeping the church history alive, to which end he had become a steward, guiding the public around on open days.

Railway enthusiasts were then delighted to hear from **Stephen Lea**, whose connection with Sutton harkened back to 1984 when, as a young man, he drew the plan of Sutton Coldfield Station for his father's first publication *Steaming up to Sutton*. Stephen's interest had never waned and his talk hinged on aspects of Sutton Coldfield's railway history. Many of his resources originated from the Midland Railway Study Centre, Derby and the L&NWR Society Study Centre, Kenilworth amongst other places.

Roger's other son, **Ben Lea**, then introduced the final speaker of the afternoon, which was yours truly, **Janet Jordan**, as Secretary of the Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group. I was pleased to give an account, under the title of *A Remarkable Legacy*,\* of Roger's numerous achievements as Chairman of the Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group. These included his many Publications, Written Articles, Lectures, Courses, Newsletters, Field Walks, Surveys and, of course, his *History Spot* in the Sutton Coldfield Observer newspaper. Without his generous leadership and sheer hard work to keep everything running smoothly over 40 years, with its many ups and downs, today's members would not be able to enjoy their weekly meetings in the Local Studies Library or produce such well researched material for the benefit of the town of Sutton Coldfield, which has such a rich and fascinating history!

The speakers having finished, all who had attended were thanked by Stephen and there was then one last opportunity to look at the exhibits before the event closed.

Many of the guests were then invited to an afternoon tea which had been arranged at New Hall Hotel. Sandwiches, scones and cakes, with lashings of hot tea or coffee, in the wonderful surroundings of Sutton's oldest moated manor house, was a very fitting place to remember Roger, I believe, for the following reason! King Henry I could also have had his afternoon tea here!

This is not such a wild idea as it at first seems as Roger himself left the following extracts from his books, giving interesting food for thought:-

## Scenes from Sutton's Past (page 22)

King Henry I exchanged Sutton in 1126 for a manor of the Earl of Warwick by a charter which states 'Earl Roger... may have one park and one hay fenced... an outwood common to the freeholders... in demesne two carucates of land and one water mill... and eighteen fallow deer'.

## The Story of Sutton Coldfield (page 30):

In the twelfth century an important status symbol was the impressive moat encircling a hall or manor house. However, the old Sutton Manor House on the hill did not have a moat. This difficulty was overcome by building a new hall with a moat to serve as a hunting lodge, and this was named simply 'New Hall'. The site must have been part of the demesne property in Sutton, probably within the enclosed woodland referred to in the 1126 Exchange Charter.

Roger seems to suggest that King Henry I owned New Hall, so he could well have visited it prior to 1126, at which date it was exchanged for a manor of the Earl of Warwick.

This was one of Roger's legacies, conjecture that can probably never be proved but is very intriguing nevertheless!

Janet Jordan Secretary Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group July, 2022

\*The above mentioned talk, *A Remarkable Legacy*, with its accompanying chart listing all of Roger's achievements as Chairman of the Sutton Coldfield Local History Group, is to be found on this website under Serendipity/Remembering Roger Lea/A Remarkable Legacy and Chart. The chart gives full details of the whereabouts of his publications, etc, and a list of his *History Spot* articles.