

Samuel Pepys – a talk by Robert McQuistan 26th February 2021

A good number of members joined us on Zoom on 26 Feb to listen to Robert McQuistan giving another of his most interesting talks.

This time Robert's topic was Samuel Pepys (1633-1703). Pepys was a teenager when he was present at the execution of Charles I and also was on board the ship to witness Charles II being returned to England to accede to the throne.

Incidentally, Pepys' diaries only cover his life from his late 20's to 30's. He was most concerned about what affect such close work would have on his eyesight - in fact he still had good eyesight until his death.

Pepys married a 15 year old French girl and besides his reputed unkindness to her he was also known for his infidelities. Infidelity, along with his predilection for drink and love of theatre were high on his list of matters which he covered in his diaries. He even recounts the price he paid for wandering hands during a church sermon – having needles stuck in his legs!

Of course, from Pepys we get first-hand accounts of the Plague, such as the shock of seeing red crosses painted on doors of houses with plague, and the subsequent Great Fire of London. As the fire approached he and a friend dug pits in the garden to bury his important papers and gold, his wine was stored in the cellar - although we don't know what if anything survived.

Pepys used his considerable administrative skills as a civil servant in the Naval Office. Whilst he was in charge he recorded 97,506 burials of which 68,000 were because of the plague. He was in the naval office during the reign of James II and the subsequent period of William and Mary.

After his death his diaries were lodged in Magdalene College, Cambridge where they languished for many years before being transcribed from his own form of shorthand. Had he continued writing diaries until old age who knows what further insights we would have had of his lifetime?

Reported by Moyra Breckenridge