

Llandrindod Wells & District U3A Lecture Meeting January 2019

Octavia Hill - Richard Walker

Report by Clive Barrett

Chairman Berwyn Woolnough welcomed everyone to the January meeting, and commented on the large attendance. He made announcements about the Film group now meeting in Tremont Road, the Abbeycwmhir Study group, the new members Coffee Morning on the following Monday at the Herb Garden, the May 1st Lecture Day, with TV presenter Yolo Williams, Steve Hughson Chief Executive of the Royal Welsh Show, the Willow Globe Theatre, and a band from Swansea. He also referred to the AGM in March, and requested nominations from members because four of the committee were standing down having served their allotted three years.

The Chairman then introduced the speaker for the morning Richard Walker, Secretary of Brecon U3A, whose subject was “Octavia Hill (1838-1912) Social Reformer and Co-Founder of the National Trust”. The speaker began by stating he would be following the life story of Octavia Hill, so named because she was her father's eighth daughter, by focusing on the people such as parents and grandparents who had influenced her so much. One of her main influences being her grandfather Dr. Thomas Southwood Smith, who had a very varied career, which included a concern for the poor in their poverty disease ridden conditions, and together with important men of the time he improved sanitary health. During his excellently delivered talk the speaker also displayed some appropriate humour. Richard Walker also mentioned Octavia's parents, mother Caroline, who had a social conscience, and was involved in education as a teacher. Together with father James, her mother favoured the development of the child, and their right to enjoy their childhood. Her father also had radical views, was a member of the Chartist Movement, and was influenced by the desire of the people to establish ideal communities.

Octavia knew as associates or friends a number of famous Victorian people including Beatrice and Sidney Webb, William Morris, Princess Alice of Hesse, Thomas Carlyle, and John Stuart Mill. At the tender age of 14 she had developed an incredible social conscience, and later was known to visit poor people and social housing. She also met the famous Christian socialist John Ruskin. Octavia went to work for him as a copyist, and in the meantime wrote an article on the “Benefit of Education in 1860”. She was also greatly involved with sanitary organisation, and the importance of social housing, the latter in 1875, was a time of landowners in power. Ruskin bought houses on Octavia's behalf, which were then improved and let out as social housing. Later she managed tenancies on 17 different sites, she built playgrounds for the children e.g. Soltaire, near Keighley. She laid the foundation of modern social work, and regarding post Second World War social housing the speaker quoted his home town Chesterfield. Octavia's strong social views influenced the Government's thinking, amongst these were Green Belts(open spaces), the Burials Bill, and the poor in London. In 1878 she lived through a difficult time, including having a nervous breakdown, and falling out with her mother and other people. Her views were ahead of her time, and in 1905 she was invited to join a Commission on the Poor Law.

Octavia's other claim to fame was that in 1895 with Sir Robert Hunter, she co-founded the National Trust. The first properties purchased were Alfriston in Sussex, and Barrington Court in Somerset. The speaker thought that Octavia would not like how the Trust was run nowadays.

Richard Walker then answered questions from members, and was thanked by Chairman Berwyn, who added it was good to see and hear a speaker who was so on top of his subject. At the next Llandrindod & District U3A lecture meeting at the Metropole Hotel on Monday February 11th the speaker will be Dr. Martin Bates, whose talk is entitled “Lost Landscapes Around Our Shores”.