

Report for the April 2016 meeting of the Malvern Civic Society

On Friday 8 April Peter Sutton gave an interesting and entertaining talk entitled “Malvern’s Medieval Poet”, which was about William Langland and his famous work, Piers Plowman. Langland explored themes just as relevant in his own time, the fourteenth century, as they are today.

Peter Sutton has had a distinguished career in history and in modern languages as well as a later career as a professional actor. He also writes plays of his own and has translated Piers Plowman into modern English.

Three versions of Piers Plowman were written, varying from 2,500 to 8,000 lines. The second version (1370) was the one that was turned into modern English. Piers Plowman was Langland’s life’s work and is an alliterative poem that deals with the poet’s moral concerns. Chaucer was born ten years after Langland and there are some parallels, although no one knows for sure whether Chaucer read Piers Plowman. Equally, there is no proof that William Shakespeare knew him although some strong imagery from Othello suggests that he must have read Piers Plowman. Centuries later, Elgar referred to Piers Plowman as “my Bible”.

The poem starts with the narrator falling asleep on the hills, where he dreams about money and falsehood. The character “Religion” steps in to moderate the battle that ensues between the two. There is a quest for truth in the poem that leads to a dead end. It is full of religious symbolism, allegory and laughter, to which Peter Sutton did full justice in the extracts he read aloud, adopting a range of entertaining accents to depict the different characters in the poem. There are three levels on which the poem can be understood: the superficial, literal meaning; a deeper, moral meaning; and, lastly, an underlying spiritual truth. Langland praised the merits of the poor and maligned his own class.

Peter Sutton brought out the many unknown or unconfirmed facts about the poet, including whether his first name was William, where exactly he came from (thought to be Cleobury Mortimer in Shropshire) and whether or not he was illegitimate. Peter believes that he was illegitimate and probably born around 1330, whilst after the 1380s nothing else is known about him. Factual events of the day to which Langland referred in his work do provide some hooks upon which we can hang elements of truth about his background. Great Malvern Priory has claimed that he was educated there although it seems certain that he was not a monk. Langland showed from his writing that he had a broad grounding in religious education and seemed familiar with legal courts. Examples of themes he explored that are valid today include his grumbling about the poor level of grammar that he witnessed in people’s writing and then his own words in the poem about money, something that can do good but which can also be a source of corruption.

Clive Hooper gave the vote of thanks for this very lucid talk, which had cast quite a bit of light on a subject shrouded in mystery.

On Civic Society business, Clive Hooper emphasised that there are still places for the outing on Tuesday 7 June to Ironbridge, which includes two of the ten award-winning museums, the Jackfield Tile Museum and the Coalport China Museum. Ironbridge preserves and interprets the remains of the Industrial Revolution in a World Heritage Site. Those on the trip will be able to see, touch and walk upon magnificent British tiles and then to see traditional china-making techniques as well as viewing exquisite collections. There are also still places on the Sunday 20 November trip to Windsor to visit the exhibition “Fashioning a Reign”.

The next talk, entitled “*Unsung Heroine of Iraq*” will be given by Jan Long. It will be held on Friday 13th May 2016 at 7.30 pm at the Eden Church Conference Centre, Grovewood Road (off Townsend Way, next to the Malvern Spa Hotel). Entry is £1 for all.