

Report on Malvern Civic Society's talk – Friday, 14 September 2018

Shepherds' Huts – Rollin Nicholls

Rollin Nicholls's enthusiasm for his topic was immediately apparent to his audience. He was surrounded by dozens of historic items from the world of shepherding.

He explained first of all how his obsessive interest in shepherds' huts began by chance. He has always liked restoring old things and when he came across a derelict hut nine years ago he couldn't resist buying it and renovating it. In the next few years he had acquired two more and had to admit he had become a fanatical collector of everything to do with old-fashioned shepherding. He explained how the huts became popular on the South Downs, Gloucestershire, the Welsh Borders and East Anglia in the 18th and 19th centuries. They were made in local workshops or on country estates, with a framework of wood often covered with corrugated iron and with iron wheels so that they could be pulled into position by a horse. Inside, they were quite comfortably fitted-out with a stove, a shepherd's bed (with a lamb's bed underneath) and wooden panelling. Shepherds lived in them during the lambing season. There were slightly different regional styles. Some of the best quality ones were made by the brothers George and John Farris, who set up rival engineering works for agricultural machinery in the 19th century.

Rollin then began to tell us about many weird and wonderful artefacts which he passed round for inspection. We learnt about a variety of crooks, each shaped according to its use – for sheep's legs or necks, for lambs, for prodding the sheep down when they were being dipped to kill off parasites, and even for geese. He then introduced a tuneful cacophony of sheep's bells of all sorts of shapes, sizes and tones, some being surprisingly big and heavy. Then came a variety of hand shearing tools, and tools used in birthing of lambs and for other excruciating tasks. And so, the catalogue of the remarkable collection continued.

It was a fascinating evening which opened the minds of his audience to a way of life which has now almost disappeared.