

SAUNDERSFOOT AND DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

At its April meeting the Society welcomed back Mrs. Sandra Storch to give an illustrated lecture on 'The Celts, their Art and Religion.'

Who were the Celts? We know them today largely through their enduring art and design, much of which continues to have an influence, but they themselves left no written record. Rather it is through the contemporary descriptions of Greek and particularly Roman authors that we have some knowledge of them. In appearance they are portrayed as pale skinned and blond haired yet when we consider the Celtic nations, in an arc from Scotland, Ireland and the Isle of Man through Wales, Cornwall and Brittany to Galicia, these are not characteristics we can now recognise. It is perhaps likely that more recent migrating peoples bred out these features. From analyses of Indo-European languages the Celts appear probably to have originated in India and gradually migrated west and northwards, arriving in Britain around 600 BC.

Their early art was geometric in form but increasingly swirls, knots and circular motifs came to dominate. They used decoration extensively: on household goods, jewellery, weapons, statuary, standing stones and monuments, even on their own bodies. Their influential styles and patterns can be seen in the margins and illustrations of the Book of Kells, for example, and many other early Christian writings. Even today their patterns are readily used and recognised. The slides accompanying the lecture revealed a particularly rich artistic legacy: the gold patterned Schwarzenbach cup, ornate torques often with tiny end features, the jewelled boss of the Battersea shield, the golden Mold cape from north Wales, now in the British Museum, the Ardagh chalice thought to have been buried to save it from Viking raiders.

The religious beliefs of the Celts were eclectic, no doubt reflecting their extensive migrations. Nature was especially important to them, seeing a deity in trees, mountains, wells and rivers. They believed the soul resided in the head, often making an offering to the gods of the heads of decapitated enemies. To the Celts, life and death were separated only by a thin membrane and they held a strong belief in the afterlife, preferring suicide to capture and a life of slavery. Their funerary practices were varied, sometimes favouring cremation and the interment of ashes in urns, other times the burial of the deceased. Celtic tradition appears therefore to have adapted easily to the coming of Christianity.

Sandra Storch was warmly thanked for her informative talk. The next lecture, and the last in the 2014-15 programme, will be held at the Regency Hall at 7.30 on 20 May when Richard Davies will speak on 'Interpreting World War 1 through Commemorative China. Non-members are welcome to attend.