

SAUNDERSFOOT AND DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

For the first lecture of the 2015-16 season the Society welcomed back David Dando whose talk had the unusual title of 'The Radical Corsetmaker' but whose subject was the writer, politician and polemicist, Thomas Paine.

Paine was born in Thetford, Norfolk in 1737, the son of a corset-maker (hence the title) to whom he was apprenticed though not too successfully. He subsequently held posts as a customs official, a teacher and ran a tobacco shop. In 1772 he published his first work 'Case of Officers of Excise' which did not improve his prospects but in moving to London an encounter with Benjamin Franklin led his career in a particular direction: armed with letters of introduction from Franklin he sailed for America to take up the position of editor with a Philadelphia newspaper. It was a critical time in relations between Britain and the American colonies; Paine's 'Common Sense,' a critique that argued strongly for self-determination is widely seen as providing the intellectual grounding for the war of independence. Paine was later to receive cash sums from both Congress and the State of Pennsylvania and a farm in New York State.

By the late 1780's a restless Paine has re-visited Britain and moved on to revolutionary France. His major work 'The Rights of Man,' published in 1791, had not only been banned in Britain but the government sought his arrest for sedition. In France he joined the Girondistes, took up French citizenship and was elected to represent Calais in the Assembly where he spoke out strongly against the death penalty. Now on the wrong side of the political divide Paine was imprisoned in the Luxembourg in 1794 where he wrote 'The Age of Reason.'

Eventually released from prison he returned to America at Jefferson's invitation in 1802, though now his attacks on the national hero, George Washington, had cost him much goodwill and many friends. Nevertheless, his influence in the affairs of state were such that he was able to advise in the purchase of the central Louisiana lands from France.

Paine died on his farm at New Rochelle in 1809 and was buried there without ceremony. Bizarrely, some years later another radical, William Cobbett, had the bones dug up and taken back to Britain where they were lost.

Paine was hugely influential during his lifetime, much of which was spent at the centre of two major revolutions. A fearless radical thinker and writer, he attacked among many targets slavery, the death penalty, the hereditary principle and organised religion; he championed the common man, freedom and democracy. And a man of so little tact that he managed to offend almost everyone he knew.

The next lecture will take place in the Regency Hall at 7.30, 21 October when Simon Hancock will speak on the History of the Port of Haverfordwest. Non-members are very welcome.