

SAUNDERSFOOT AND DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

For its first meeting of the 2018-19 season the Society welcomed Helen John, project manager at the National Botanic Garden for the regency restoration project. The title of her illustrated lecture was 'Middleton: Paradise Regained – Reclaiming a Regency Rarity' and Helen brought the audience up to date on the project to restore Paxton's picturesque landscape and water features at Middleton Hall, now of course the site of the Botanic Garden.

While the estate bears the name of the Middleton family who created the original Middleton Hall it was Sir William Paxton whose money and enthusiasm saw the development of the renowned eighteenth-century landscape now being restored. Paxton had had an eventful career before his return to Britain. He entered the Royal Navy at the tender age of twelve before joining the navy of the East India Company and later developing mercantile interests ashore. He made a significant fortune after establishing a merchant bank to look after the monies of other East India men, providing a safe link between, particularly, India and London. He also farmed the Bengal mint and controlled the quality of the coinage, a highly profitable venture.

With his bank and town house established in London Paxton sought a country estate to reflect his social position. He had travelled from India in the company of Captain David Williams of Llandovery, another East India man, and it is likely that Williams alerted his friend to the availability of the Middleton estate in 1789. Paxton brought in the architect Samuel Pepys Cockerell to design a new house, the arrangement of the landscape was set to Samuel Lapidge, a collaborator of Capability Brown, assisted by the engineer James Grier. With Paxton's fortune behind them they were to create one of the finest late eighteenth-century landscapes and water parks in Britain.

After Paxton's death the family sold the estate and sadly the landscape began a long period of neglect and decline. The regency restoration project now seeks to re-establish the extended gardens and water park, a significant undertaking that has already seen the excavation of the two principal lakes, Llyn Mawr and Llyn Felin Gat, both of which are big enough to be classified as dams with all the associated inspection and safety criteria. Work will continue throughout 2019 and 2020 and wherever possible volunteer groups and students will be involved.

Our speaker was warmly thanked by Mrs. Shirley Cunningham for an informative and entertaining lecture. The next meeting will take place on Wednesday, 17 October at 7.30 when Judith Barrow will speak on the 'Suffragettes.' The venue, as usual, is the Regency Hall and non-members are welcome to attend on the night.