

SAUNDERSFOOT AND DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

For its last meeting of the 2018-19 programme the Society welcomed back David James to speak on Pembrokeshire's connection with Japan and to provide an update on some of the subjects he had spoken of previously.

The scene was set by a brief summary of the final days of the First World War. In retaliation for the blockade of its ports the German Navy began a systematic attack by U-boats on food supplies coming to Britain through the Western Approaches and past the Pembrokeshire coast. U-boat 91 was both busy and deadly effective: in September 1918 it sank the American coastguard cutter Tampa with the loss of all the crew. Many of the bodies were interred in local churchyards, including that at Lamphey. In 2018 a memorial service was held to commemorate the loss of lives attended by representatives of the American Coastguard Service.

A similar fate was suffered by the Japanese passenger liner, the Hirano Maru, with the loss of some 300 hundred people. Again a number of local burials took place, particularly at Angle. The event was recorded in the parish records and in the churchyard by a wooden post which had become decayed over time. Our speaker was instrumental in contacting the present-day shipping company, NYK, who agreed to fund a stone replacement memorial inscribed in Welsh, English and Japanese and decorated by the national flower, the chrysanthemum. The story created a lot of interest in Japan, in the media as well as with family descendants. The new memorial stone was unveiled by the Duke of Gloucester who laid a wreath, and the service was attended by family members and by representatives of the Japanese embassy.

The final link with Japan was through the person of Togo Heihachiro. As a young naval lieutenant he lodged at the master shipwright's house in the royal dockyard in Pembroke Dock while learning about the construction and deployment of modern warships. During his later career he was to rise to the supreme post of Marshall Admiral of the Japanese Fleet which he commanded to victory over the Chinese and Russian fleets. He seemed to have thoroughly enjoyed his time in Pembroke Dock and from Japan he sent a Gingko tree seed to be planted in the garden of his former lodgings. Today cuttings have been taken from the mature tree, care of the National Botanic Gardens, to be sent back to Japan and because of his much-celebrated career there is a great demand for them throughout the country.

Our speaker was warmly thanked by Sarah Whiddett for an imaginative and unusual talk. Members are reminded that the Society's trip to Llangwm will take place on 15 May, arriving at Geoff James's historical exhibition at 1.00 and at the church hall at 2.45 for a talk and light refreshments. Members unsure of the directions are advised to contact Ms Penny Brace for details.