

“The Revolting People of Bishop’s Waltham”

Talk by Tony Kippenberger, February 2026



Artist's Impression of Bishop's Waltham Palace in the 16th Century

Our penultimate talk of the 2025/26 season was by Tony Kippenberger titled, “The Revolting People of Bishop’s Waltham”.

Bishop’s Waltham is roughly equidistant between Winchester, Portsmouth/Portchester and Southampton so its selection as a site for a bishop’s palace isn’t surprising. Seventeen English kings and queens have been known to stay there and the palace was a place of employment for many local people.

The first group of rebels we heard about were the “club-men”, formed during the English Civil War (1642-51). At the time both sides (Parliamentarians and Royalists) took crops and animals to feed their troops as well as press-ganging local men and commandeering horses. The club-men were initially set up to resist the excesses of both sides and protect their locality. Bishop’s Waltham was directly affected in 1644 when, following a Parliamentary victory at the nearby Battle of Cheriton, Bishop’s Waltham Palace was held by 2,000 Royalist cavalry and was placed under siege by the Parliamentarians; after the Royalists surrendered the palace was looted and destroyed.

The destruction of the palace caused a great deal of anger in the town and two groups of club-men met at Beacon Hill in September 1645 to protest. Cromwell’s men arrived to disperse the crowd and a violent scene developed. Ultimately the club-men failed in their aims and the Bishop’s Palace was never rebuilt.

We then heard about the “Waltham Blacks”, a group that came into being after the “South Sea Bubble” had burst in 1720, causing great economic hardship. The “Blacks” would disguise

themselves by blackening their faces and engaged in wide scale poaching of deer, including at Bishop's Waltham; although roaming free, the deer belonged to the Bishop of Winchester. The group became more emboldened and even nominated their own "king". The government offered £100 for information leading to the arrest of the leaders but the group remained at large.

The "Black Act" was passed by the government in 1723 to clamp down on the group. This was extremely draconian and introduced the death penalty for 50 criminal acts; it was not repealed until 1893. Perhaps understandably, the local group "retired" although other later groups were severely punished. For example, an attempt to poach deer at Farnham the following year led to all seven poachers being hung at Newgate.

The next act of rebellion we heard about was a series of Jacobite Plots between 1715 and 1721. Sir Harry Goring and Philip Caryll, were both Roman Catholics based in Sussex and the former was in contact with the Old Pretender (James Francis Edward Stuart) in exile in Rome. Goring told the Old Pretender that Caryll would command the Waltham Blacks in support of his cause; both men were uncovered and forced into exile and the plot came to nothing.

James Brown Alexander, although an Anglican, was also a Jacobite and he held a series of meetings with sympathisers in Bishop's Waltham in the 1740s. When the Young Pretender ("Bonnie Prince Charlie") failed in his attempt to regain the throne for the Stuarts, the meetings ceased.

The Swing Riots took place in 1830, a time of enormous hardship. Corn Laws had pushed up the price of bread and the enclosure acts meant that common land was no longer available for ordinary folk to use and farmers began to pay labourers daily rather than on an annual contract. As a result of the hardship, rural crime rose by 30% between 1824 and 1830.

A lot of labourers' income was from threshing, so the introduction of threshing machines meant that many faced even more hardship. The riots started near Canterbury and spread. In Hampshire they only lasted 11 days but in that time there was arson, extortion and threats along with gatherings demanding action to improve the farm workers' lot. Many areas in Hampshire were affected including Bishop's Waltham.

Ultimately the rebellions failed:

- The club-men couldn't bring the Bishop's Palace back
- The Waltham Blacks had their moment but then retired and the last group were hung
- Jacobite plotting came to nothing
- The leaders of the "Swing Riots" were severely punished (although there were reductions in tithes and better pay afterwards)

This was a very interesting talk that shed new light on what appears to be a peaceful town where not a lot happens!