

Stratford Guild – March 2023

‘The Duke of Monmouth: How his head was turned and lost ‘ Speakers Brian and Jacqueline Sutton

Monmouth’s own vanity, and friends abroad, were the cause of the promotion of the King’s illegitimate son to be the ‘Pretender’ of the day. His progress from being a man of no consequence to a man with an obviously unfounded ambition to usurp King James II was elegantly presented by the Sutton couple as a duet.

This was an account of the Monmouth rebellion of 1685 which started with a small number of dissidents opposed to the Catholicism of King James II arriving on the shores of Lyme Regis. The rebellion was quashed within the year at the Battle of Sedgemoor.

The presentation was alternate so that each section of the narrative was necessarily formal and rehearsed showing that it was clearly accurate. There was no room for progressive editing because each presenter had to be dependent on the other without spontaneous correction or collusion. With them standing well apart, this added authority to the talk.

Monmouth was the illegitimate son of Charles II with a beautiful Welsh girl, Lucy Walter, with whom he had become deeply enamoured when she was visiting London. He was acknowledged by the King but never with any right to succession; he was created James, Duke of Monmouth, with a coat of arms which included the bar sinister. Despite this honour which provided him with a secure and noble future (he achieved high rank and saw active service in the army), he rebelled against the King, eventually being defeated at the Battle of Sedgemoor. This was due to incompetence, near complete lack of support and, famously, depending on pitchforks as weapons and carthorses for cavalry. Of sad interest locally was the case of Alice Lisle, who lived at Moyles Court near Ringwood, who sheltered two men, Hickes and Nelthorpe. Although denying any support for the rebellion, these two were identified as rebels, without trial. To harbour a rebel, proven or not, was to be classed as a rebel and treated the same way. They were tried at the ‘bloody assizes’ at Winchester by Judge Jeffries, famous for his sadistic enthusiasm for capital punishment. ‘Dame Alice’, as she was known, was executed as well as the two alleged rebels for her collusion despite the jury failing to agree to convict.

These were interesting times, a dangerous era. It is difficult not to wonder at there being no evidence of support from the Netherlands where William of Orange with his wife Mary must have been waiting already with some hope of the succession which they eventually achieved.

The Monmouth story was complicated and full of action, recounted with an enormous amount of fascinating detail, some of it gruesome such as the execution of Charles 1. An excellent and educational evening with a fair amount of humour ended with a well deserved appreciation from the chairman.

Charles Villiers.