

Nevil Shute's Solent

20th September 2012 - Roy Underdown Pavilion

David Henshall gave a fascinating and extremely well researched talk about Nevil Shute's associations with Hamble and the Solent area. Nevil Shute was one of the world's best-selling authors of his time, writing classic novels some of which were made into films.

Although not a southerner by birth, Nevil Shute ended up making the Solent area his home, as it was an ideal location for him to indulge in the two great loves of his life, sailing and aviation.

David started by showing a list of the 24 books he wrote and then highlighted the great number that had connections with Hamble and the Solent area. David said that Nevil Shute was not a great creator but a magpie who cached away snippets of information which he would use in his novels.

After the First World War he came to Hamble to sail a yacht which was based at Lukes Boatyard. The yacht had a deep keel and no engine, so he encountered difficulties tacking out of the river and one of his favourite anchorages was inside Calshot Spit. The first time he anchored there, the anchor dragged and he drifted back to Hamble Point buoy. Experiences such as these, including going aground, as well as Lukes Boatyard, the Bugle pub and Hookers bakery at Hamble were used in his books. Nevil Shute wrote his first novel in 1923.

He was to have a career as an aeronautical engineer, so sailing out of Hamble he was fascinated by the seaplanes at Hamble Point and he was involved in the setting up of the aviation company 'Airspeed', which was eventually based at Portsmouth in the 1930s. During this time he lived at Shedfield/Waltham Chase, Southsea and finally moved to Hayling Island.

In 'What happened to the Corbetts' published just before the war he writes about the Corbett family who live in Southampton enduring aerial bombing and they move to the relative safety of Hamble where their yacht was moored. He started another book, which he did not finish, that was based on his sailing experiences of using Newtown Creek.

By the Second World War he had left Airspeed and was working on military projects. These included torpedo projects and smoke laying glider trials on the Beaulieu River near Exbury. Then he used the north coast of the Isle of Wight by the Needles to test rocket powered grapnels and other projects in preparation to D-Day. He put many of these together in his book 'Chequer Board'.

After the war he continued enjoying his sailing in the Solent using his Hillyard yacht which he had built in 1939 and a favourite anchoring place was Yarmouth. One of his post war books 'Seafarers' is set in Hamble and is about buying and doing up boats, with the Bugle mentioned as a meeting place.

In 1948 he undertook an aviation radio course at Hamble's Air Service Training and a character, Tom Cutter, in "Round the Bend" does the same course.

Although he emigrated to Australia in 1950, in the 'Trustee from the Toolroom' his last book published in 1960, Hamble is still mentioned. David concluded by asking, although he did not live in Hamble or Southampton how did he know about Butlocks Reservoir which most visitors would not have been aware existed? Another well received and popular illustrated talk given by David to the Society.