

The Story of Mr RRC Gregory

A talk to The Eltham Society by Margaret Taylor
3 December 2009

We were rewarded for our December lecture with a former Chairman, Margaret Taylor presenting a talk on the incredible life of Mr RRC Gregory, the author of a book that has inspired us all to have a greater understanding of Eltham's history *The Story of Royal Eltham*, published in 1909. In fact this was Margaret's second occasion to present the story of Mr Gregory to the Society, the last being on 3 November 1977, which marked the publication of *Some Eltham Local History Records* published by The Eltham Society and included an excellent account of Mr Gregory's life. Margaret had updated her presentation with some fine photographs highlighting the key moments and places associated with the life of RRC Gregory.

Richard Robert Castell Gregory was born on 12 May 1855 in Brightwell, near Wallingford, Berkshire and from his beginnings it was clear that his chosen profession would be teaching. His first job was at the British School in Highgate and after marrying Nancy Ford Reely in 1879 he returned to his Berkshire roots to take up teaching at the small Aston Rowant Village School, close to his birthplace before being appointed Headmaster at the school in North Cadbury, Somerset, a stones throw from the ancient hill fort of Cadbury Castle, with mystical connections to King Arthur. In 1890 he became Headmaster of the larger nearby school at Castle Cary, which traces its origins back to the Norman Conquest. An interesting point that Margaret expanded on was that Gregory lived and worked at places with a strong historical association. Perhaps this influenced him when contemplating the idea to write a book about a town that he would soon teach at. This of course was Eltham.

Richard Gregory came to Eltham in 1901 after seeing an advertisement for the vacancy of Headmaster of Eltham National School in Roper Street. He was concerned at the poor knowledge the school children had of history and was inspired to change this when discovering the Admission Register for the school of 1814. Local history became his passion, even school inspectors reporting Gregory's determination to ensure that all children take an interest in their past.

His book became a reality in 1909 after being serialised in the local paper. A thousand copies were published with many being subscribed to before publication. The book was a masterpiece with 348 pages, 162 photographs and 484 illustrations. There was no doubt that the book captured so well the essence of Eltham's rural past, strong royal connections and the key personalities who had influenced Eltham. He was a prominent Eltham citizen being invited to the Royal Garden Party of 1913, a church warden of St John's Church and a member of the influential Woolwich and District Antiquarian Society. Mr Gregory continued to teach at Eltham until his retirement in 1921, receiving a silver ink stand as a retirement present.

Richard Gregory died in 1927 while holidaying in Hexham, near his son's home, and Eltham was to be his final resting place in a simple grave with his wife in St John's Churchyard. Margaret's talk had once again reminded us all, of the important legacy that Richard Gregory has left us in this centenary year of his inspirational book, *The Story of Royal Eltham*.

David Sleep