The History of Shrewsbury School.

The establishment, changing fortunes and ultimate success of Shrewsbury School was the subject of an intriguing session on January 28th 2014 by Dr David Gee, History Master at the school. He outlined its foundation in 1552 when the tithes collected by St Mary’s Church from the relatively prosperous Clive parish played a significant role in helping to fund the Free Royal Grammar School. An inauspicious start was overcome with the appointment of Thomas Ashton in 1652 as the first Headmaster to build up the reputation of this establishment, helped in part by the attendance of influential young noblemen such as Philip Sidney until by 1580 Shrewsbury had become the biggest Public School in the country. Renowned also as a brilliant producer of plays, a talent even recognised by Elizabeth I herself, Thomas Ashton is appropriately commemorated today in the name of the school’s Ashton Theatre.
further local link was established in Grinshill when Stone Grange was built in 1616 for between £500 to £600 to construct a sanatorium providing a retreat for the pupils to escape the highly infectious ‘sweating sickness’ that had earlier claimed 667 lives in Shrewsbury in 1606. Records of the building’s regular use exist from 1630 onwards, and this facility is recognised as saving both the lives of many pupils and the secure reputation of the school. Following the creation of the Commonwealth in 1649, the school managed to avoid the critical attentions of the puritans by temporarily decamping to Grinshill to ensure its continuing survival. This local connection was further consolidated by the appointment of Shrewsbury masters to the living at Clive Church, including John Rowland [1783 – 1811] and William Jeudwine [1846 – 1855].

The Eighteenth century however witnessed a dramatic decline in popularity, until it is claimed that the school roll dropped to as low as only two pupils in attendance thus threatening imminent closure. Another renowned Headmaster, Dr Butler, re-established the academic rigour and strict discipline that saw numbers dramatically rise, but he clearly failed to impress the young Charles Darwin who recorded his frustration at the limited classical education on offer. By the 1860s Shrewsbury School had been acknowledged as one of the top public schools in the country, and had identified its principal role as preparing an educated elite ready to govern the British Empire – an aim not always in accord with the more business-orientated burgesses of the town.
Its growing success soon created the need for larger premises, and despite the promotion of Coton Hill as the favoured site, the school took over the initially less-promising Kingsland buildings that had previously served as the Foundling hospital and the Parish Workhouse. Despite this compromise, the 1882 relocation proved a remarkable success and led to the dramatic expansion in numbers and educational provision to create the establishment that we know today.

David Gee skilfully combined a mixture of fascinating historical detail with personal anecdote to produce a memorable talk that both informed and entertained the audience of 79 members in attendance. A striking lesson in history.