Stratford sub Castle Guild October 2021

**“Look Into My Eyes - The history & mystery of hypnosis”**

**Speaker - Alan Jones**

Alan Jones is a practicing hypnotherapist and gave a socially distanced audience a fascinating talk starting off by assuring even the most sceptical of us that we have all been hypnotised. Have you ever been driving along a well-known route and suddenly realised you can’t remember much about the past few minutes. You were in a state akin to hypnosis, your sub-conscious was “driving”. And what does it take to be hypnotised? Well, just imagination and willingness. I’m sure most of us would own up to the first and many to the second as well.

Explaining that even the ancient Greeks had experience of what might be considered hypnosis Alan then took us on a journey through time, stopping briefly with Dr Franz Mesmer who latched on to the idea of animal magnetism and set up a studio to cure patients using magnetism.

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The good doctor wore a special cloak and the photo shows our chairman, wearing a replica of the cloak, “treating” Richard Death - who was kind enough to say that “he felt a small tingle in his thumb”!

Some years later a showman, La Fontaine came to London and a surgeon called James Braid attended his show in which he claimed to place a young woman in a trance. Bray jumped up on the stage shouting “Fake” but then found that the girl’s pupils were dilated - something she couldn’t fake. Being of a scientific bent Braid then took a large hatpin and inserted it underneath the girl’s fingernail. This should have really hurt but there was no reaction. Realising that there was something in this, Braid went back to his hospital and told his peers that it could be really important to surgery in the days before anaesthetics. They remained sceptical however and, stung by the Mesmer experience, refused to support him. Braid resigned and spent the rest of his life investigating and refining the technique that he called “hypnosis”. He had a few followers however and one of these was a missionary, James Esdaile, who was also a surgeon. He was sent out to India where he practised surgery using hypnosis but, wisely,ensured that his operations were witnessed and documented by people in authority. On his return many years later he presented his results to the forerunner of the BMA. They were quite impressed but replied that while he had been away they had discovered ether. So an opportunity was missed and that was the end of hypnosis as a pain blocker for a long time.

Instead it was explored by psychiatrists such as Sigmund Freud as a means of treating mental problems. At this point our speaker gave us a demonstration of the limited capacity of the conscious brain compared to that of the unconscious by asking our chairman to say the alphabet as fast as he could. No problem, just a few seconds. But then, when he was asked to do the same but leave out every other letter he very quickly couldn’t do it. These days hypnosis is primarily used for treating conditions such as depression, anxiety, phobias and the like but is also used successfully in the operating theatre.

During the discussion at the end it was interesting to learn that Alan has an unusual approach in his treatment. Not for him a sequence of sessions. Just one session of 90 minutes and a recorded video for the patient to view at their leisure. If that doesn’t work he recommends the patient goes elsewhere.

Our next meeting is on November 10th when, in one of our popular nature talks, John Hughes will tell us about the ‘The Seabirds of Ascension’. For 25 years John has monitored the vast seabird colonies that breed on the military island of Ascension in the South Atlantic collecting field data to identify the causes of the population decline.

David Balston