

HOLT WI

So what do these words conjure up for you? The Silk Road, Persians, Medes, Samarkand, the Aral Sea? Ancient history and Genghis Khan? Or medieval trade routes from the Orient to Europe? Well, all those things and more, I expect - at least a flavour of Arabian nights' romanticism. And thus Holt Village Hall became, albeit briefly, party to this romanticism, courtesy of an inspired speaker of considerable personal daring, who told us the story of her journeys in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, former parts of the Soviet empire in the twentieth century, but caches of history for long before that.

The indomitable Gill Suttle started with tours of the legendary Samarkand and Bukhara, both seats of ancient Islamic learning, where the majestic tower was, not so long ago, a site of execution and the market, again only 150 years or so ago, a huge slave market. Positioning us on the old Silk Road, that network of trading routes from China and India westwards through the middle east to Europe, Gill opened out for us the world of the Turkmens and specifically their horses, beautiful creatures possessed of the DNA that made them ancestors of English thoroughbreds, but under loved by our standards.



With significant self-assurance, Gill leased a six year old ex-race horse, Khan, and rode alone for over a month following the ancient route from Merv to Parthunisa. She saw where the Soviet engineers had diverted waters, that come from the snow melt of the Hindu Kush, from the River Oxus into huge irrigation schemes, banishing poverty and hunger as the desert bloomed, but leading inevitably to the death of the Aral Sea. She experienced the wonderful hospitality of the Turkmen peoples, who despite living in Soviet cinder block buildings rather than traditional mud brick houses, or even yurts, have retained much of their traditional social structures. She stayed with camel herders, willing to embrace even the eccentric stranger who rides alone into their midst after a day in the saddle. She saw the mausoleums of great past rulers and the extravagant statuary of more recent dictators. It was sobering to hear that Turkmenistan still has a concentration camp, indeed a death camp, for those who fall from political favour. She

met with disaster as she contracted dysentery and was initially believed to be a drunken Russian woman as she lay in a field too weak to get back on her horse. But she met with kindness and care as Ena and her family nursed her back to health. She encountered excitement as she watched the Turkmen national game – a kind of free for all rugby played on horseback, with no discernible boundaries and the ball being replaced by a headless goat corpse.



Surviving her adventure, this indomitable lady returned to England, determined to rescue the horse Khan, who had become a healthy and accommodating companion during her journey. The fate of horses that are past their usefulness, in Turkmenistan, is not pretty and indeed during the two years of complicated red tape and manoeuvrings it took to get Khan out of the country, he came perilously close to starvation. However, thanks to a determined former minister for horses, who had also spent time close to death in the concentration camp for political reasons and his contacts, she was finally able to bring Khan to her home in Herefordshire. Here he lived until 17 years of age, becoming involved in much charitable work, including a lengthy ride, which raised £14 thousand for ME research. Khan also sired a blood –line, a dynasty which is growing still. To date this beautiful and spirited horse has 21 descendants.

So that was our talk this month, but it was more than a talk. Gill's first hand experiences, accompanied by dozens of slides took us all to the central Asian desert and lucerne fields, clay brick ovens and tea houses, extravagantly beautiful decorative patterns of mosque walls and ruined city mounds where the desert sands had reclaimed whole cities - a little taste of the exotic in Holt.

So, we had been already invited into the lives of a paramedic on the Air Ambulance and a magazine journalist and, with this latest taste out of the ordinary, we have been richly entertained since New Year. With the Spring now upon us, other activities are starting up. The Resolutions and Campaign Day and the County quiz are both in the next few weeks and Holt hopes to make our presence felt at both. We have plans for outings locally and further afield, a coffee morning to plan and a theatre outing in the offing. We are always happy to see new faces, as indeed we have done this year, so feel free to join us, 7.30 pm for 7.45 pm start on the first Thursday of the month at Holt Village Hall.