**The Life and Work of Alison Uttley**

A talk given by Professor Denis Judd

On 1 July 2017 at the Fitzwilliams Centre, the Beaconsfield Society’s celebration of famous writer and one-time resident, Alison Uttley, reached its conclusion with a thoroughly engaging talk on her life and work by her biographer, Professor Denis Judd. As President of the Alison Uttley Society and editor of Alison’s letters, he did not disappoint.

Alison Uttley, ‘spinner of tales’ and creator of the *Little Grey Rabbit* books for children, lived in Beaconsfield from 1938 until her death in 1976. She wrote over 100 books and became a millionaire in the post-war years from the sales of her *Little Grey Rabbit* and *Sam Pig* stories.

It emerged at the start of Professor Judd’s talk that Alison arrived in Beaconsfield at exactly the same time as Enid Blyton, another world-famous children’s writer. Unfortunately, he confirmed, Alison took a great dislike to her fellow author, whom she called a ‘vulgar curled woman’. Relationships remained frosty!

In an hour-long talk that easily held the interest of the 65-strong audience, Professor Judd sympathetically conveyed the very human story of Alison’s public success as a children’s writer, contrasting with some dark and lonely aspects of her private life. She had been widowed early when her husband committed suicide, and turned to writing to support herself and her young son, John. He, too, suffered from mental health problems and committed suicide after his mother died.

Professor Judd brought Alison’s complex character to life. He described how she could be charming and kind to her friends and then abruptly change mood and cut them off, ending her life as a rather lonely woman despite her fame. He also discussed her over-weaning love for her son, to whom she became almost unhealthily attached.

It was clear to all that, despite her character flaws, he remained a dedicated fan of Alison’s, treating his subject with respect and generosity. He highly recommended that we read her letters and her writing for adults, which he held in high regard. His talk stimulated many questions from the audience, and discussions continued over tea.

This event was the grand finale to more than a week of children’s activities to celebrate and raise awareness of this rather neglected author. There were treasure hunts at the Library and Bekonscot Model Village, art and craft competitions in collaboration with High March School, special story times and a prize-giving and a party for all the town’s children. The delicious party food was kindly supplied *gratis* by Jungs, our local baker, who baked some special *Little Grey Rabbit* biscuits for the occasion. Our grateful thanks also go to Alison Uttley¹s publisher, Templar Publishing, for donating all the *Little Grey Rabbit* book prizes for the children¹s competitions as well as a full set of the stories for Beaconsfield Library. Altogether, it was a very successful and enjoyable celebration of Alison Uttley.

The Society has created a colourful graphic display on Alison’s life, which will remain on show over the summer, at the corner of Maxwell Road and Station Road.

**Kari Dorme, Celebration organiser**