moretonhampstead history society

NEWSLETTER

April 2013

Next meeting
The Courtenay family of Powderham Castle
Wednesday 17th April

Felicity Harper is the archivist at Powderham Castle and an authority on the Courtenays. The family of Courtenay "of Powderham", always known thus to distinguish it from its senior line the family of the Earls of Devon, was one of the most influential and best connected in Devon from the 15th century onwards. The family was descended from Sir Philip Courtenay (1340–1406), a younger son of Hugh Courtenay, 2nd Earl of Devon (1303–1377) and in 1556 became 'de facto' holder of the earldom inherited from its distant cousin although this was not recognised 'de jure' until 1831 They were the lords of the manor of Moretonhampstead and patrons of St Andrew's Church for over five hundred years. We will follow up this talk in September with a guided tour of Powderham Castle.

Lady Frances Finch, wife of William Courtenay, 1st Viscount Courtenay. Portrait by Thomas Hudson, brother-in-law of Moreton's Rector James Fynes. In her hand and hat are shown ostrich feathers, a panache of which form the heraldic crest of Courtenay.

February 2013 History Society talk

Andy Powell's talk entitled 'A fact stranger than fiction' considered the mysterious fate of the sixteenth century North American colony of Roanoke Island set up by Sir Walter Raleigh. As we have found in past talks, commonly accepted views of history do not always fit in with actual evidence and decent Historians find themselves having to counter popular misconceptions. Thus Andy Powell argued fluently that Sir Francis Drake's reputation has been wrongly enhanced at the expense of his Devon cousin's, Sir Richard Grenville of Bideford.

In 1575 Grenville put forward a proposal to Sir Francis Walsingham for a round-trip exploration of the Azores and the Atlantic coast of North America, with the objects of harrying Spanish ships, and setting up a colony from which to challenge Spanish domination and exploit any natural resources. Grenville's application was rejected, but in the following year Drake's similar, probably plagiarised, project was accepted, but the voyage was not a success.

In 1584 Raleigh gained a Royal charter for seven years of exploration and trade in 'the new world'. Grenville was given command of this adventure, and later in the year contact was made with the indigenous people, a temporary fort established and a truce between the English and Spanish agreed. Andy Powell quoted from a contemporary English document citing the Spanish negotiators as 'swaggering', and a contemporary Spanish report describing the English as 'swaggering'. A nice example for historians to take care over presenting and accepting 'facts'.

In 1585 Grenville returned to England, promising those he left behind that he would return with much-needed provisions. In the event, in the following year, two weeks before Grenville's arrival with the stores, Drake 'relieved' the settlement so that Grenville found it abandoned. The fort's location and the eventual landfall of the original settlers after they abandoned it, is open to some discussion, although Andy Powell is confidant that he is able to identify both locations and is helping to set up excavations this year to prove it.

Grenville died in 1591 from wounds suffered from fighting the Spanish and the speaker revealed another anomaly in his popular reputation. English attitudes have tended to revere Drake, despite his mistakes and consequently underrate Grenville's contribution to history. But quoting from contemporary Spanish sources Andy Powell illustrated how highly the enemy of the time esteemed Grenville for leadership and personal courage: a highly respected adversary.

Finally, the speaker, a former mayor of Bideford, suggested we all visit that town's St Mary's Church with its effigy of Sir Thomas Grenville and to look out for its cannons. In 1890, during work to widen it, workmen realised that a few of the quay's original mooring posts were in fact Armada cannon! They were removed and can today be seen at Victoria Park. We all recorded a sincere appreciation of an extremely entertaining and stimulating talk. Brian Spittles.

Roanoke Island annual pageant to commemorate its original foundation

March 2013 History Society talk

The March talk by Brian Spittles, a Society member, was on the 'peasant poet' John Clare (1793-1864) who was born the son of illiterate parents and died in an asylum, yet at one time was a very popular poet, his first book selling through to four editions. Despite losing a lot of schooling due to having to work in the fields, he was a keen scholar, virtually an autodidact. His first contact with poetry was reading Thompson's *Seasons* at the age of thirteen. He began writing immediately, using old blue sugar bags as manuscript paper. He was fist published in the local Stamford Mercury, which led to his work being noticed in London with subsequent national exposure in the *London Magazine*.

Once initial fame had been achieved Clare made a number of visits from his home county, Northamptonshire, to the Metropolis. Although feted by leading literary men - Hazlitt, Lamb, and Coleridge amongst them - he was at ease only with common people such as prostitutes and pugilists, fellow outsiders disdained but needed by polite society. Clare happened to be in the streets when Byron's funeral cortege passed by and he was tremendously impressed by the presence of ordinary people paying their respects to the most popular poet, and scapegrace, of the day.

Tragically Clare became increasingly subject to delusions. At once time he thought himself to be Tom Spring the boxer, at another Byron, and these became compounded with the three men merging into one individual. At the age of forty-four Clare was admitted to a private asylum in Epping Forest. He was given considerable freedom, but after four years escaped in order to go home. Clare walked for four days and three nights, virtually without food, and sleeping rough, to get home. But five months later he was taken into Northampton Lunatic Asylum - now Hospital - and declared insane. He spent the rest of his life there. He was encouraged to write, and walk into town, where he sat in the portico of the main church chatting to anyone with a quid of tobacco to spare, a tragic figure. In the intervals of coherence he wrote some very fine poetry, including his most anthologised poem *I Am* - currently gracing the London Underground.

Clare and his wife Patty had nine children, seven of whom survived infancy, and poverty was always a severe problem. His employment remained poorly paid agricultural labour, for he made, despite its popularity, little income from writing. Disputes over copyright between various publishers and editors left little money for the author. But his fame did bring him wealthy patrons. The Lords Milton, Radstock, Exeter, and Spencer all contributed, though he felt insufficiently, to his welfare. His precarious status can be seen over the issue of Enclosures, which he saw as robbery of the poor by the rich. This was not an idea the powerful accepted gracefully, and caused bitter quarrels over censorship.

In the last fifty years Clare's reputation has become increasingly strong. Concerns about conservation and environmentalism have brought Clare's approach to nature into a clearer focus. He was a man out of his time. Brian Spittles

Footnote

In Brian's discussion with the audience after the talk, we discovered that Simon Cox's father was for many year s a leading light in the John Clare Society.

NEW FROM THE ARCHIVES
Russian coin found in Moreton

Sylvia Gowers dug up a metal object in her garden and brought it into the archives. We identified it as a 2 kopecks coin made of nickel silver, dated 1841 with the imperial emblems of Tsar Nicholas I and the mint mark of the town of Ekaterinburg in the Urals.

How did it end up here? Possibly from a farm labourer who had served in the Crimean War (1853-6)? Perhaps from the drunken Russian on his way from Widecombe Fair, in Bob Pigot's anecdote, whose bear scared the Vets' horses on North Bovey Road?!

100th MHS MEMBER

We have signed up our 100th member. Appropriately, it is Geoff Norrish who comes from a long line of Moreton forebears. To commemorate this landmark, we will present Geoff with some family history documents from the archive, including this photo of the Ring of Bells when his grandfather was the landlord.

Church exploration trip Saturday March 16th

We had snow, hail, sleet, rain and some sun on our first trip of 2013. At St Mary's Hennock, high up overlooking the Teign valley, we were given a very warm welcome and a talk on the history of the village and church. For such a small village this granite church has a lot to admire, especially the ceilure painted with bright golden stars on the bright blue background on the roof over the rood screen. The painted and carved screen beneath it dates from sixteenth century with delightful paintings are of medieval saints and apostles, albeit some have been defaced. Hennock church, like Moreton's, has managed to save their trumpeting angel that had been above the pulpit and is now positioned on the south wall by the screen stair door opening. The Norman font is very simply decorated with large geometric patterns The church was burnt down and rebuilt in the fifteenth century but the tower is older dating from1260 and what tiny narrow steps there are to climb up to the bell tower to get close to the ancient bells on their wooden frames and to overlook the Teign valley through the tiny windows.

Ceilure at Hennock church that marks a 'heavenly divide' between the nave and the chancel

Onwards down the hill to Saints Peter, Paul and Thomas of Canterbury at Bovey Tracey (or South Bovey as it was once known) to be welcomed with a cup of coffee by our member, Wendy Coombes, who showed us around and told us some of the history. Being a church dedicated to Saints Peter and Paul indicates that the church had been built in Saxon times and the dedication to St Thomas was added later. Bovey Church looks so typical of our local granite churches but has a wealth of unique monuments and furniture, often involved with political history. And it has some connections with Moreton. Bovey manor was very probably owned by William de Tracey, as was Moreton; he gave a section (Doccombe) of his manor to the Monks of Canterbury as repentance for his part in Archbishop Becket's murder in 1170. The Norman church here was also burnt down and only the tower remained. It was rebuilt in the fifteenth century when the wool trade was thriving and

much of the richness and furnishings were provided by Lady Margaret Beaufort, the mother of King Henry VII, including the three beautifully carved misericords in the Chancel and the richly carved and painted pulpit and rood screen that are of equally exceptional quality The brass eagle lectern may look all shiny and new but it is fifteenth century and was hidden away from Cromwell's troops in the local pond. Today it is still possible to put a coin in its mouth to be dropped out by its tail as Bovey people used to do when they put in their one penny for Peter's Pence to maintain the Papal See before Henry VIII abolished the practice. One of the large monuments in the Sanctuary is to Elizaeus Hele, the second husband of Alice Bray of Parke, who left money on his death in 1636 for setting up schools, including one at Moreton. Her first husband also has a large monument on the opposite side of the Sanctuary. He was killed with nine others at the Stannary Court at Chagford when the roof collapsed in 1618.The Loyalty Board to King Charles II has a black rose on the flank of the lion probably placed there by a royalist vicar in memory of the executed King Charles I.

Wendy Coombes addressing the group at Bovey Church

After lunch at the Claycutters Arms at Chudleigh Knighton, we were met at Teigngrace by the churchwarden, Judy and her friends, with tea and cake. This church was a complete surprise to us. Externally it looks so similar to other local medieval churches but on the inside is like no other in Devon! It was completely changed by the Templar family of Stover Park in the 1780s to be in 'Strawberry Hill Gothic' style and the plastered walls are painted all over in pale blue. It has the original cruciform shape but in the ceiling in the centre is a perfect shallow unlit dome. It is simple, harmonious and very peaceful. There are occasional little cherubic angels on the plaster covings The original pews have been replaced except for one door which remains at the entrance of the box

pew of the Templar family which takes up the whole south transept where they had a fireplace to keep themselves warm during those long sermons. The gallery holds the eighteenth century organ. There are several family monuments, mostly we noticed for sons who drowned at sea. All these three churches are well worth visiting if you were not able to join us; Teigngrace is kept locked but the churchwarden can be contacted to let you in.

NEXT HISTORIC CHURCHES TRIP SATURDAY MAY 11TH

We are travelling north this time to just beyond Winkleigh to two medieval gems (among Todd Gray's 50 best Devon churches) and then to a pilgrimage church with its own martyred saint. A bit further to go but well worth it.

St Mary's church in the small village of High Bickington (on the B3217) is famous for its wood carvings, especially for the medieval bench ends of which there are about 70! There is plenty of parking after going down a long lane in the old part of the village to the church car park. Then on to another St Mary's at Atherington, which is about one mile further north on the same road. Here is another gem containing several unique furnishings, including 'poppy head' bench ends and a sixteenth century rood screen with an enclosed rood loft, with access from its stairwell. This is the only original one left in Devon. There are also some interesting monuments and carvings on the floor, one of a knight that is one of the earliest in the country. We are not being shown around at either of these churches but there is so much to see it isn't really necessary. It will be worth bringing torches and binoculars to admire the roof bosses.

We will cross the A377 on to the B3226 to reach the delightful village of Chittlehampton, for lunch at the Bell Inn and then across the square to the church. This village has its own saint, Saint Urith (or Hieritha), whom we saw on the screen at Hennock. She was beheaded by local men with scythes at the instigation of her step mother - come and you'll find out why! Her sainthood made Chittlehampton a great pilgrimage church with one of the finest towers in Devon. The church warden, who is going to give us a short talk, says this church is more typical of Somerset than Devon, so let's see what we think!

Please let me know if you can come, need a lift, can give a lift or will meet us there. Also let me know if you would like lunch at the Bell Inn. Donations are always happily accepted of course, especially at High Bickington where they are having severe water leaking problems in the tower.

Meet at St Mary's High Bickington at 10 am.

A message from Dr Todd Gray, author of 'Devon's Fifty Best Churches'

After visiting churches it is important to write in the Visitors' Book what you have appreciated seeing. It is especially important now with 'reordering' as churches are being changed to provide more flexible seating arrangements. So if you think the church furnishing is worth saving, then write a few words to help preserve it.

Brent Knoll church

This church is only half a mile off the M5, Junction 22, (Bristol Airport exit). The bench ends are beautiful and well worth seeing. Three of them are consecutive showing a fox dressed as a bishop, telling a story to the geese, his imprisonment and then being hanged by a goose. And there is also a quite remarkable large Puritan wall monument.

Let us know if you have come across any churches that are 'worth the detour'.

Judy Hardiman

Histor-Ian's corner

Last month I went to Speyer, Germany, to see the 11th century cathedral; quite by chance I went to the local museum of the Pfalz (Rhineland Palatinate). There they have a wine museum with the world's oldest intact bottle of wine: it is Roman, dates from about 325 AD, and its wax seal is still intact (see picture). They also have a bottle of Grundsteinwein in its original bottle from 1687 and re-bottled wines from 1540 Leistenwein, 1631 Steinwein, 1728 Leistenwein and 1822 Steinberger.

I was staggered by this, and wondered what other vintages are still extant. A website I consulted on my return told me that 'the oldest drinkable bottle' is a 1727 Rudesheimer Apostelwein. Elsewhere I've read that the barrel from which this is drawn is topped up with newer wine when a bottle is taken from the original cask; so I don't think this counts: the original has been diluted. However, I also noted that eighteenth century wine does come up for sale occasionally. A bottle of 1775 Massandra (Russian sherry) sold in 2001 for $43,500. A 1787 Sauternes (Chateau d'Yquem) recently cost a collector $100,000 (an 1811 bottle sold for even more). As for an *ancien grand cru*, there is still a bottle of 1787 Chateau Lafite in existence (although it is not thought to be drinkable; a 1791 bottle was found to be off a few decades ago).

There are websites that specialise in the sale of old alcohol. One, oldliquors.com, has a 1789 Armagnac for £11,000, a 1789 cognac for £46,500, and a 1795 Madeira for £12,500. An 1820 vintage port on their website costs £1,800; but as wine ages better in barrels and big bottles, a four-litre bottle of 1846 Avilla is probably better value at £5,100.

But then, I thought, what if I wanted to drink some history, literally. What could I get for, say, under £1,000? This might amaze you – it amazed me – but, looking around, I note that for £720 you can pick up a bottle of 1840 Marsala, or for £840 the 1834 vintage. Queen Victoria had not even ascended the throne when that wine was put in a barrel. Quite a number of late nineteenth century bottles of port are available for under £1,000. For £200-£500 you can taste a wide range of ports from the 1920s and 1930s.

In thinking about this tasting of history, however, another though came to mind. Most of the really old ports are available now because they were purposefully laid down – in barrels and in cellars – they are not accidental survivals. It's quite inspiring in an age when local government looks at 20 years as 'long-term planning'. Just like a the owner of a forestry estate plants trees that his great-grandchildren will harvest, some people lay down tuns of wines with the idea that they will be bottled and enjoyed in a hundred years or so. Not even all the insecurities of war, disease and social unrest dissuade them from investing in the future. There's a lesson in that for us all.

Cheers!

Ian Mortimer