



Moretonhampstead History Society

Newsletter

October 2007

September Meeting:

On Wednesday 19th September our meeting was attended by some 40 members and guests. We had another visit from Paul Rendell. This time he spoke about **the Tracks, Roads and Railways of Dartmoor**. He started his talk many centuries back when the only means of transport was 'shank's pony'. Monks followed tracks across the Moor to get to other religious establishments. These were marked with guide posts, crosses hewn from granite, many are still in situ today. Mariners also walked across the moor to get from Barnstaple to Dartmouth in order to get another ship. The Mariners Way is still signposted on parts of the moor. Pack horses were used extensively for the carriage of goods. The increased industrialisation of Dartmoor led to the creation of various types of Tramway, but in the mid 19th Century, the railways took over. Paul told us that there were; at one time some 32 Stations and halts on Dartmoor, now there are only 3!

October Meeting:

This will be the AGM. We will then play, '**Historical Bingo**', a unique game that Ian Mortimer has devised!! This should be interesting!! We shall also enjoy a glass of wine or soft drink and a few nibbles. I predict an enjoyable evening!

The downside is that this is also the date that your subscriptions become due for the following year, so don't forget either your wallet or purse. Our Treasurer, Jeanette, will be happy to take your money!

Fire in Moretonhampstead:

As everyone will be aware, in the early hours of the morning of 11 September, 2, 4 and 6 Ford Street were consumed by fire. Fortunately no one was hurt. Nevertheless, it was a tragic loss on several accounts. Will Langworthy's home was destroyed, and the town lost an important and eye-catching building. Collectively, all three houses were listed Grade II*. They constituted one of only five structures in the town centre to be given a higher than normal (Grade II) listing.

This was originally a hall house, built in the early 16th century. It was supposed that the walls were composed mostly of granite rubble. However, as the demolition progressed, substantial amounts of brick were revealed. So, what historical material have we lost? How much of it really was Tudor?

The two main reasons for dating the building to the early 16th century were as follows. First, the ground plan is a classic late-medieval one, comparable with those of similar date underlying 1 Court Street, Cross Tree House, Pitt House and probably the original Mardon House (now destroyed). Second, it contained three smoke-blackened timber trusses of a type similar to the roof of no. 38 North Street, Exeter (now demolished) and several other Devon houses built in the early 16th century. A third, more precarious reason, was the existence of a wooden arch set back in the passageway, which looked to be of an early date.

The problem comes with the walls. The listing officer assumed that the walls were granite rubble, and original. Clearly they were not. The original front wall was entirely rebuilt, probably around 1700. Part of that wall (the front of no. 6) was rebuilt again in brick in the late 19th century. The other load-bearing wall at the rear had been heavily altered in the 17th century (the EH officer suggested it had been rebuilt then). The gable ends were not load-bearing. One was entirely modern, built of brick, the other 17th century. Thus we appear to have a paradox. If the roof trusses were early 16th century, what had been holding them up for the last five hundred years?

Looking at the exposed large range stack at the rear of no. 2, one can see that it was built up against (and thus later than), the stone wall behind it. This range stack would have been built in the 17th century, when the

hall of the house was remodelled as a two-storey construction and cooking could no longer take place in the hall. Thus the wall behind this stack dates from before the remodelling (i.e. before the insertion of a floor).

This reading of the evidence is supported by the fact that the truss which joined this early wing to the main hall was smoke blackened on one side only. Hence it is significant that this old wall stops abruptly when it reaches the gable end of the hall house. There is no sign of bonding. Instead we see an abrupt change of material, to modern brick. The two-storey self-supporting stack in the gable end also is not bonded with the gable wall.

This suggests that the original gable end was originally timber-framed, not stone.

This fact, which was unknown when the house was listed in 1987, explains how a Tudor roof can rest on modern walls. It appears likely that most (if not all) of the walls have been rebuilt, piecemeal, over the centuries. Three rear wings were added to the house between 1600 (east end) and 1700 (west end). Probably at some time corresponding with these developments, the house was divided into three two-storey cottages, the cellars were dug out and the front wall rebuilt in stone, nearer the street. Thus it seems that what we lost in the fire was the *roof* to a Tudor hall house, the walls of which had long-since vanished under the rebuilding in the 17th and 18th centuries. Sadly, those roof trusses were what made this building historically so important.



This dramatic Picture of the aforementioned fire in Ford St. was taken by Ian Mortimer from his bedroom window.

Picture Puzzle:

I had many responses to last month's picture puzzle. All respondents correctly identified that the buildings were part of the remains of the Powder Mills, just off the B3212 some 11/2 miles beyond Postbridge.

The quarries and mines in and around Dartmoor needed gunpowder for blasting. Farmers also used it to clear rocks from the land. In 1844, George Freen from Plymouth set up the **Plymouth & Dartmoor Gunpowder Co.** He was given permission to build the Mills on farmland at Cherrybrook Farm. The location was ideal having a source of power from the Cherrybrook, and was remote from habitation! Production began in 1846. Gunpowder is made by mixing Saltpetre, Charcoal & Sulphur. Most of the Saltpetre came from India and the Sulphur from Italy, mainly Vesuvius & Stromboli! Using water driven mills each component was crushed separately and then mixed. It was transported in wooden barrels, made on site by the Mill's own Coopers. Safety Regulations were stringent, and only copper and wooden tools were used. In some areas the floors were covered in leather. Everything possible was done to avoid making sparks. The significant feature of the buildings in my photo is the thickness of the walls. Massive dressed granite blocks were used in their construction. This was done so that in the event of an explosion they would not be destroyed. Conversely the roofs were made of light wood and tar so could easily blow off! At one time some 100 men were employed there. The Mills closed in 1897 after gradual decline, hastened by the invention of Dynamite in 1867.

This site is well worth a visit, it is **not** accessible from the pottery, but a public footpath does pass through it. As you drive out of Postbridge, look for a gate on your right in approx 3/4 mile. There is a pull-in on the left close to the gate. The footpath leads directly to the Powder Mills. Apart from the two buildings in the photo, there are many other features worth seeing. These include a complex series of watercourses, many other buildings, and a magnificent chimney, now used by sheep as a shelter!

I do hope that you have enjoyed this latest edition of the Newsletter.
Anyone can contribute; please send articles to: christopher.pilkington@tesco.net