Dawlish Local History Group

Chronicle

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Smuggling at the Warren

It is the latter half of the 1700s. The Warren is 'a wide, wild stretch of sand, almost awash at high water, heaped up in towans, overgrown with tussocks of coarse, sour grasses, or sinking into hollows full of brackish water: pleasant in daytime, but a dangerous place at night. Here in this islanded waste there were no roads or tracks.'

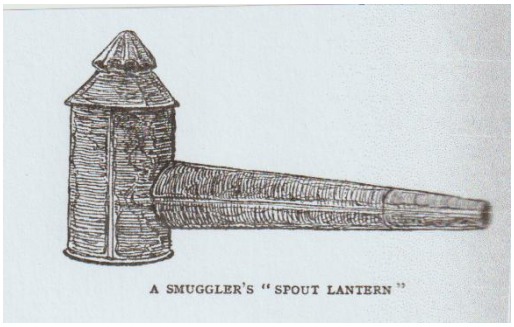
Looking down on the Warren from its elevated position stands the Mount Pleasant Inn with its cliff drop to the marshy ground below. The road or track from Shutterton that passes beside the inn goes little further than the next bend where Warren House (aka Welcome Stranger) is home to the family in charge of the salt works. There are another couple of houses nearby but to all intents and purposes it is a desolate spot and the only ostensible reason for the inn was to give succour to travellers using the ferry at the end of the spit.

Most fishermen, tradesmen or those working on the land lived a fairly hand to mouth existence at this time on top of which the government's zeal for conducting foreign wars had caused it to apply swingeing taxes on many products including spirits, tea and various fine items like silk and lace. The local

population therefore saw it as their right to redress the balance by either increasing their income or enjoying some of these expensive items through smuggling.

This sentiment extended to almost all sections of society including clergymen and Lords, after all it was the local men with money that funded the smuggling operations. Might it be that the Courtenay's of Powderham who owned the land on which the Mount Pleasant Inn was established played a part?

The inn was seen as key to smuggling in this area. 'Under the lee of Langstone Point, there is a sheltered strand [i.e. the beach below what became the Langstone Cliff Hotel] and at such times when it was considered quite safe, the sturdy free-traders quietly ran their boats ashore here, on the yellow sands, and conveyed their contents to the Mount Pleasant Inn.' 'It was a very convenient receiving house and signal station for all of this trade , for it owned caverns hollowed out of the red sandstone in places inaccessible to the authorities, and from its height, overlooking the flats, could easily communicate encouragement or warning to friends anxiously riding at anchor out at sea. The lights that flashed on dark and tempestuous nights from its high hung rustic balcony were significant'.



The spout lantern projects a forward flash whilst either side is obscured.

On safe nights the smugglers conveyed their goods up the steep path at the back of the inn to the waiting horses at the front with their hooves covered in cloth to dull the sound. Any locals not involved in smuggling were advised to turn their backs. In the words of Rudyard Kipling:

If you wake at midnight, and hear a horses's feet

Don't go drawing back the blind, or looking in the street

Them that ask no questions isn't told a lie

Watch the wall, my darling, while the gentlemen go by

5 and 20 ponies

Trotting through the dark

Brandy for the parson

Baccy for the clerk

Laces for a lady, letters for a spy

And watch the wall, my darling, while the gentlemen go by

The authorities were keen to thwart the trade and set up revenue forces to tackle smuggling at Exmouth, Exeter and Teignmouth and from around 1809 in Dawlish too. However, the smugglers looked on the wide mouth of the Exe as offering plenty of options once it was established where the revenue forces were. One story that has come down to us is that when a cargo was to be smuggled into the Warren the ferryman was invited to a drinking session at the Mount Pleasant Inn so that no passengers could be taken across from the Exmouth side.

Facts about smuggling at the Warren are difficult to establish and especially the scale is unknown. Mary Waugh tells us that the peak year was c.1782 when reports of 25 armed vessels of up to 100 tons and crews of up to 20 men carried goods into the Exeter area (6). The quoted descriptions of the Warren and the Mount Pleasant given earlier come from a book by Lord Teignmouth and Charles Harper (3). Lord Teignmouth had family connections to this area and must have known the Warren well. He also had access to Admiralty papers which have since been destroyed and so we can assume that his descriptions of smuggling here are fairly accurate.

Hanging on the wall of the Mount Pleasant Inn is a preserved letter dated 1774:

Onboard the Revenue Cutter Elizabeth

September 23 1774

Dear Lordships

With regard to the late epidemic of unlawful contraband running from Roskoff. Reliable informants have brought it to our ears that certain cargoes – namely 50 half anker tubs of Choice Brandy have been covertly landed after nightfall upon ye sands of Dawlish Spit and thence delivered to the Mount Pleasant hostelry close upon ye shore. It is further disclosed that the casks are then secreted away within the fabric of the aforesaid house.

Herefore – with your lordships consent it is my intention to place a discreet watch upon the said premises in order that we might apprehend these Evil Doers.

I trust that my actions may meet with your lordships full approbation.

Your humble servant

Henry Lucas

Capt. Light Dragoons

We also have verbal evidence of smuggling on the Warren from two sources. Grace Griffiths reports 'a Dawlish man was told by his grandfather, how, in his youth the old man had been given 1d to hold open a gate on the Warren for the smugglers' (2). In 1908 a Warren boatman called Bruton told an Exeter & Plymouth Gazette reporter that 'there was a certain farmer called Tuckett, who lived under Haldon, and who was the greatest smuggler about that part of the coast. He kept the farm as a cover to his smuggling, he did as he liked, and, using his 'farm' carts and 'farm' hands, smuggled thousands of pounds worth of brandy kegs, whisky, Hollands gin and so on, and hid it in the swamp on his farm. He used to take it from the top of the Warren' (5).

Lieutenant Palk – fact or fiction?

Many books have been written which record smuggling activities in this area but they all seem to recycle variants of the same information and almost none give any sources for their information so how far can they be trusted? The Lt. Palk story is a case in point.

There are almost no surviving accounts of coastguards and others taking on the smugglers in our area except for the story of Lt Palk. It is a story which has been told many times but its origin is unclear. The Local History Group's own publication describes it thus '*Lt Palk was murdered while laying in wait for a 'run' one night on the Warren. His body was found the next morning face down in Greenland Lake' (4).* The details of this event are very slippery. All accounts seem to have him dying face down but some say it was 'in a pool of water', not a great lake (2&3). Only one account describes him as 'young' Lt Palk (1) and only Griffiths tells us that he was a Lieutenant in the Royal Navy and that he died in the nineteenth century. It is notable that not a single account can tell us exactly when and how he died and only one account spells out exactly what he was doing (4). However, Griffiths muddies the water further by later stating 'In 1803 a member of a naval press gang was murdered there' [i.e. at the Warren] but was she referring to Lt Palk or someone else? Unfortunately, the Exeter papers make no reference to the incident.

+++++++Prize+++++++Prize+++++++Prize+++++++Prize+++++++Prize

The editor is keen to establish whether this story is fact or fiction. A box of wine is therefore offered to anyone who can come up with some concrete information about Lt Palk: what was his first name, when did he die, how did he die, what mission was he on, how old was he, possibly even where was he buried?

Sources on smuggling

(1) FARQUHARSON-COE, A Devon's smugglers
(2) GRIFFITHS, Grace The book of Dawlish
(3) TEIGNMOUTH, Lord & HARPER, Charles The Smugglers
(4) THOMPSON, A.R. ed. More Aspects of Dawlish history
(5) Exeter & Plymouth Gazette 21 Aug 1908
(6) WAUGH, Mary Smuggling in Devon & Cornwall 1700-1850
(7) RATTENBURY, Jack memoirs of a smuggler

Smuggling: elsewhere in Dawlish

The other major smuggling centre in our area was at Holcombe memorialised in the name Smugglers Lane leading down to Holcombe beach. Just around the headland to the east is a small enclosed cove with a cave. The cave extended for some way inland but was further extended by human hand until it connected to the cellars of an inn, now the respectable residence called Sunnylands. Although now blocked off the tunnel has been followed for much of its route by explorers who produced a video.

Shell Cove is sometimes mentioned as a place where cargo was landed but from here to Langstone there are almost no accounts of smuggling because it was regarded as too open. However, two instances are quoted in More Aspects of Dawlish History although the source has not been identified. In October 1790 there was a large seizure of spirits at Dawlish, the smugglers vessel and several horses were captured. The captured crew were sent to serve in

the navy, a common sentence during the war with the French as the smugglers were highly regarded as seamen.

In 1822 apparently 30 kegs were captured on Dawlish beach, but were they kegs which had drifted ashore after a gale?

The best-known South Devonshire smuggler was Jack Rattenbury of Beer, mostly because of his colourful autobiography (7). He comes to our attention because as he explains 'On 18th December 1825 as I was returning from a smuggling expedition, I was captured off Dawlish, by the crew of a boat belonging to the coastguard and carried to Budleigh Salterton watch house'….and thence to Exeter Gaol for 15 months.

One other location mentioned in our area is Shutterton Brook, particularly the entrance at Eales Dock which it is claimed was used to smuggle goods to Mamhead amongst other places.

Tales of smuggling are still heard occasionally. One concerns Moses Paul, born in 1823, who in the 1870s was landlord of the New Inn in Old Town Street and claimed that as a child he acted as a lookout for the last of the smuggling runs.

Mount Pleasant Inn

From a painting by Rev John Swete in 1798. Note the prominent, well protected position. Below the long sloping roof is the balcony for signalling to smugglers. The smaller building alongside is possibly the stables. Note that the built-up walling supporting the garden is already in place. To the right is Warren House. Picture drawn near the (later) footbridge over the railway. ***Reproduced by kind permission of Devon Archives & Local Studies, DHC:564M/F/15***

The smuggler's balcony c.1900

So far it has been impossible to establish exactly when the inn was first established. The internet says that it was operating before 1756 without giving any sources. A map in Devon Heritage Centre drawn up in the period 1747-59 shows the salt works, Warren House and a house opposite but not the inn. Given the letter about smuggling at the inn dated 1774 it is likely that the hostelry was established around the 1750/60s. Clearly it is one of the oldest pubs with an unbroken history in our area.

Even in the height of the smuggling era the inn was much more than a haunt for smugglers. From Rev. John Swete's diary in 1798 we learn that as early as this the inn was 'much resorted to during the months of summer by parties from Exeter and the circumjacent country'.

It had also offered accommodation to travellers using the ferry to Exmouth at the end of the sandbar. Some of the travellers would have made use of the stabling facilities, making the journey with a stable lad who could return the horses. Swete gives us a flavour 'the ride from Mount Pleasant to the ferry at Exmouth being for the most part over deep sands, is in this respect extremely unpleasant, but at neap tides, when the sea has withdrawn itself from the level shore, from the Western cliff to the pebbly beach opposite Exmouth, the strand is firm and smooth, insomuch that a fleet horse may traverse it from one end to the other exciting little sound and leaving scarce any impression.'

The sandbar and the rocks surrounding Langstone Rock provided many hazards to the sailing vessels of the time and there were a number of fatalities which demanded the need for an inquest which would be held at the inn. The earliest discovered was in 1798 and the latest in 1874.

From early times the landlord at Mount Pleasant was granted rights over the Warren including sporting and fishing rights such as rabbiting and pigeon shooting. These would often include large events organised from the inn and catered there. With this right came responsibilities as in the 1858 lease the landlord was required to stock no less than 100 pairs of rabbits and that 'two couples of rabbits' should be delivered to Powderham Castle weekly.

Some of the landlords were very entrepreneurial for example in 1840 horse racing at the Warren was advertised. Rather less savoury was the event described in the Western Times of 18 April 1835:

Lord Lisle and – Newman Esquire of Exmouth…gave an unusual treat to the fancy, by getting up a grand cockfight at Mount Pleasant Inn. Many of the cocks suffered a great deal of

punishment, having their eyes picked out, and bleeding tenderly, but owing to judicious treatment, we understand only 3 or 4 were found dead in their coups the next morning. Altogether the whole party had much enjoyment of the sport; and the only feeling was that in these degenerate days the neighbourhood might furnish a few more gentlemen of the tastes and sympathies that animated the gallant principals.'

In 1861 James Welland, the landlord, erected a large target on the Warren for the Rifle Volunteers with copious refreshments laid on. This was the start of a tradition of shooting contests at the Warren which continued for many years. They became so popular that special trains were run to the Warren despite there being no platform there and in 1863 a wooden shed was erected to help with the catering.

A new tradition began of large parties of children visiting the Warren for a day and being catered for by the inn. This was the venue for Sunday Schools and more poignantly for an annual visit by workhouse children from Exeter. The papers record such a day in 1872 but when the idea was first implemented is not known. Some of these day trips could involve large numbers of children for example in 1874 St Sidwells Church Schools brought 600 young people.

Less than a year after serving the workhouse children the landlord was called upon to provide refreshments for royalty:

'The Marquis of Lorne, HRH Princess Louise [Queen Victoria's daughter], the Earl of Devon and two others visited the Warren in the course of the afternoon, the vehicles being put up at the Mount Pleasant Inn. After rambling on the seashore for a little while, the party took tea, and stayed on the Warren for some time. The proprietor of the little inn…intends to add the word 'Royal' to its title in consequence of the visit'. Alas, there is no record of this happening.

Looking up the hill from the Warren c.1900

In 1898 the Ferris Brewery took the lease from the Earl of Devon and when the brewery closed in 1926 the inn passed to the Heavitree Brewery.

The more entrepreneurial landlords adapted to the fashions of the times so that in 1905 there was a 'smoking concert' and later that year 80 Conservatives were served in a 'coal outbuilding adjoining the inn'. By 1910 a 'tea garden' was being promoted. This was on the land which had been built up at an early date to the side of the building beside the road down to the Warren. Three years later a 'tea pavilion' was erected.

In the early twentieth century the slopes below the inn were turned into an allotment. There had been a previous dispute of the ownership of this land where the outcome was unclear but it may have been from here that the landlord was growing and selling his raspberries and strawberries.

Around this time an advert appeared for the Mount Pleasant Inn:

'Luncheons and teas , al fresco, choir outings, school treats, clubs and other outings arranged for in charming gardens, grounds or enclosed pavilion, any number. Stabling, motor and cycle accommodation. The most romantic spot in the West. Apartments'.

The inn was enlarged and modernised by the Heavitree Brewery in 1937. In fact, over the years the inn and its outbuildings had changed their configuration several times. In earlier times there was a brewery in the grounds and the cellar mechanisms are, unusually, still in place to take loaded barrels out of the cellar.

After this the inn didn't seem to generate any newsworthy items until it suddenly sprang into prominence in August 1955 with reports of a fire destroying the oldest and most picturesque part of the building. This was the wing nearest the road. Water supply was a problem 'unfortunately the nearest hydrant was able to supply a mere trickle of water and only slightly better pressure was available from the hydrant opposite Oakcliff hotel' and so water tanks from Teignmouth and Newton Abbot were called for. Meanwhile residents from


FRIDAY, AUGUST 19th, 1955.

DISASTROUS FIRE AT MOUNT PLEASANT

Photo by Mr. R. C. Davies.

over a wide area rushed to the scene with fire extinguishers as did scores of holidaymakers who helped rescue furniture and stock from the bar. The damage included the thatched roof, six bedrooms, three attics, the kitchen, wine and beer store, the lounge and bar. Despite the fire, the pub re-opened for business at 5pm that day with a temporary bar in the dining room.

At one time the inn was probably separate from the dwelling house and it is likely that the path at the back started between them. It would be nice to think that this path 'was originally trodden by the cautious feet of smugglers filing silently from the shore' (2) but it may have had a more prosaic function as the 1858 lease shows a well at the bottom of the path on the Langstone Rock side in what is now a car park and the landlord was told he must repair the well and the windlass and bucket situated at the top of the cliff. Interestingly this archaic machinery was called into use in 1955 to help fight the fire when there was insufficient water pressure for the firemen's hoses.

The inn was rebuilt after the fire but had lost a lot of its historic character. However, the internet claims something of the past remains as it reported that a 'poltergeist would throw foodstuffs and keys around'. Was this the unquiet spirits of the bodies brought to inquest or was it Lt Palk seeking justice?

Wartime History of Exeter Airport (RAF Exeter)

Report by Frances Hutchinson of the talk by Chris Wiseman

September's talk told us about the history of Exeter Airport and the part it played in WW2. Exeter airport initially opened with the landing of a leopard moth biplane on May 31st 1937. It officially opened a year later on July 30th 1938, as a civilian municipal airport. Originally it consisted of a terminal building, one field, one hanger, fuel pumps, with grass fields around it. The terminal was a single-story art deco building. The flight club were based at one end and the public airport at the other. It was a grand building that even had a ballroom!

Original terminal building

The airport was taken over by the air ministry in 1940. Initially it was called RAF Clyst Honiton, but this soon changed to RAF Exeter. Originally RAF quarters were canvas tents, later replaced by brick buildings. The first to arrive were Fighter Squadron 213 on 18th June 1940. They came from RAF Wittering in Peterborough. On 5th July 87 Squadron arrived from Tangmere, West Sussex. On July 6th 1940 Exeter officially became RAF operational. RAF squadrons typically consisted of twelve planes in operation. Most would have a couple of extra planes to use when others were under maintenance or otherwise unavailable.

In September 1940 601 London Squadron were sent to Exeter, in part to rest from the heavy air raids over London. They used this time to rebuild their strength after large losses, training new pilots. They were nicknamed “the Millionaires Squadron” as they were made up of so many wealthy aristocrats and upper-class individuals. Most had been flying since the 1930s as hobby aviators, being the ones with the means to do so.

The longest serving squadron at Exeter was 307 Polish Squadron. They were there from April 1941- April 1943. Some ended up marrying local women and settling in the area. Czechoslovakian squadron 310 were at Exeter from May 1942- June 1943, using spitfire planes. Many different squadrons passed through Exeter, both RAF and other European. Some staying just a few weeks, some staying several months and the longest staying two years.

Exeter became home to a top secret plane. The Lysander was used for flying to and from occupied France for reconnaissance artillery spotting and transferring agents. The plane was kept behind a giant curtain. The agents and pilot who flew in it were also kept secret, with a limousine directly transferring them right up to the plane.

In 1943 the Royal Navy used Exeter as a base for coastal patrols and strikes against enemy shipping in the English Channel.

The airfield at Exeter in 1941 as seen from a German aircraft.

The airfield layout consisted of three runways in 1941, but in 1942 the runways were extended. This effectively gave them six runways, with each end of the runways being used separately. In 1944 the main runway was extended and the airfield expanded by demolishing the farm next door. This was done to allow for heavy bomber planes that needed a longer run to take off and land. The expansion allowed Exeter to become an airfield for damaged aircraft to be diverted to. Exeter was a closer location for flying back from Europe than some other airfields.

Several buildings are still standing at Exeter Airport from the WW2 period. The Women's RAF packed parachutes in airman's backpacks in an unusually tall building, built so they could hang the parachutes up to make packing them easier. It is now used for storage. The ammunition store still stands. The guns were used to scare birds off the runways. There is still evidence of a pillbox built in case of invasion to protect the airport. Exeter had “disappearing Pillboxes”. A small concrete bunker that could pop-up from the ground to surprise enemy aircraft. It used a compressed air system, with a hand pump as back up. The buildings at the airport are now mostly painted white, but during the war were painted camouflage green.

The Exeter blitz of 1942 was part of The Baedeker Raids. A series of mass German air raids named after the German Baedeker guidebooks, which were used to select targets of cultural value. Exeter, Bath, Norwich, York and Canterbury were the key targets. Exeter saw nineteen air raids with two-hundred and sixty-five victims killed. The biggest raid set fire to a lot of the city and it took two weeks to fully put all the fires out. Most of South Street was lost to fire.

In April 1944 the Americans arrived. Most RAF squadrons had left Exeter at this point. 440th Troop Carrier Group used Exeter as its base. The United States Army Air Force took over the airfield. The Americans used Exeter to transport troops to France for D-Day on June 6th. The airport location made it ideal for launching airborne assaults into Normandy. After the initial paratrooper drop they continued to transport supplies to Normandy beaches. Some casualties were brought back via Exeter airport.

The George and Dragon pub in Clyst St.Mary was popular with airmen. They would carve their names into the pub celling and walls. The ceiling was taken down during a refurbishment post war, but some of the boards have been rescued. They have been preserved by the RAF Exeter Archive.

The airport has a memorial to the pilots who served at Exeter during the war. A life size bronze statue of a Battle of Britain airman stands at the front of the terminal. There are plaques around the base detailing the history of the airport during WWII. The only spot in the cathedral to have been bombed has a small plaque to the Polish airmen who helped protect it from worse damage.

After the war the airport became jointly military and civilian. Some RAF used the airport for glider pilot training and as a rest stop for operational squadrons until the mid-1950s. The airport only became fully civilian in 1974 when Devon County Council took ownership. They sold the airport in 2007, but it remains as a fully operational civilian airport.

A walk around Starcross

Jon Nichol led our August visit to Starcross. He was an entertaining leader often giving interesting anecdotes but holding strong views on various subjects especially the 'lunatic asylum'.

At the far end of the village in the Exeter direction near the last bus stop we were introduced to the current owner of the old police station and his tree house. From there we moved back along the main street and admired a large yellow building called Langdale. This was owned by Miss Parker one of the village worthies who was involved in all aspects of village life from the local football team to the Primrose League.

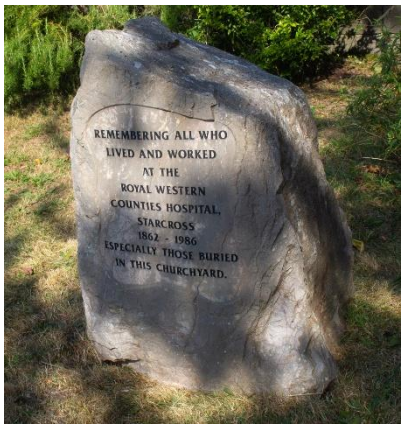
Further on we came to Boots the Chemist which was originally the pharmacy run by the local doctor, Dr Isles, whose house was set back beside it. This was Strand House which was named in recognition that the sandy shoreline originally started at the edge of the nearer pavement.

Another reminder of the old shoreline was the remains of the old sea wall behind the thatched shelter at the end of the carpark. Here we heard that in November 1824 the sea wall was breached and there was a heavily pregnant lady in a house along the Strand who had to be rescued by boat and then gave birth in the boat.

Continuing along the main road opposite the station there is a large building called Regent House which once belonged to Captain Peacock. He is probably the most famous person related to the village. He had a glittering career including being a captain with P&O, surveyor of the Panama Canal, and the inventor of barnacle paint, a water condenser and the screw propeller. When he retired to Starcross he let his inventive imagination produce a pleasure boat looking like a swan where the neck was a disguised chimney and the flippers helped the steering. There were also four small cygnets built one of which survives in Topsham Museum.

We next encountered a nondescript building at the end of Bonhay Road which we were assured was the town's toilet in previous times strategically sited over a stream for obvious reasons.

The adjoining well street was home to a number of artisans. There was Mr Wells bicycle shop now called Pennyfarthing Cottage and at the end on the left was a basket maker and on the right a blacksmith whose forge was probably in The Nook. We were told that the blacksmith never travelled beyond the village in all his life.



Turning right into New Road no. 8 was pointed out to us as the home of Reg Colley. He was a painter and decorator and latterly worked at the asylum but is now best known for the reminiscences that he wrote about village life and which can be seen on the Starcross History website.

We moved onto the village church and were surprised to learn that it had originally stood in Exmouth and was transhipped to Starcross and then altered by raising the height of the roof. Right at the back of the churchyard is a memorial stone to all those who died at the Royal Western

Counties Hospital 1862-1986. It is sobering to reflect that almost no other sign remains of the hospital which dominated village life for so long with possibly 1500 patients and all the necessary staff drawn from the surrounding area. Apparently, the hospital had its own brass band which played on many occasions in the village and the current sports field used to belong to the hospital.

Onwards to view the Starcross pumping house built by Brunel and brief mentions of how the railway had altered village life. The building was later used as part of a coal-yard with appropriate sidings. Opposite is the old Galleon public House now called Driftwood. We were assured that originally the house was lived in by a butcher who used to hang his carcasses from an upper window in order to cure them!

We ended up looking at the red brick building opposite the Courtney Arms which used to be the Assembly Rooms which was, we were assured, the place to be and where it all happened on a Saturday night in the 1960s.

Executions in Exeter 1285-1943

Report of a talk by Mike Richards

Our chairman chose this gruesome topic which attracted a nearly house-full attendance. The first officially recorded execution involved a famous case involving a feud between the city and the cathedral. The importance of the trial can be judged by its being overseen by King Edward I. The secular conspirators, including the mayor were executed but the religious members involved were merely banished.

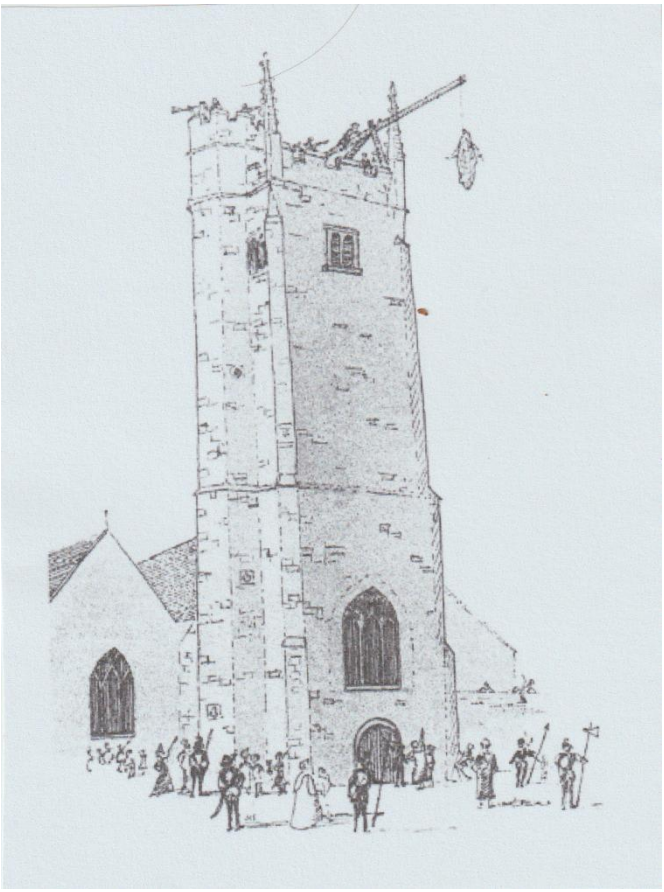
The next two cases mentioned involved Thomas Benet who nailed anti-Pope messages to the cathedral door and a woman who railed against the Catholics when 'Bloody Mary' was on the throne. Amongst other women who were executed were 4 from North Devon who were hanged at the Castle Gatehouse in 1685 as witches. The last public execution of a woman was in 1866 which was watched by 20,000 people.

Only two years later public executions were banned but they still continued inside the prison in specially constructed hanging facilities. The last woman executed in this way was Charlotte Bryant in 1936 for poisoning her husband with arsenic. The last execution of all in Exeter was in 1943, rather surprisingly it was for a murder committed by Gordon Trenweth in Falmouth.

Before these specific cases were discussed Mike had gone through a long list of crimes which could result in an execution which tended to change with time. In earlier times it reflected acts against authority such as rebelling against Richard III or Cromwell's Commonwealth and heresy. There was also a long history of executions for theft although in the 1700s it was often about theft of horses, sheep or cattle. In 1612 there was an execution for piracy but by the 1700s highway robbery was a greater problem. Examples of executions for sexual acts grew from the 1700s and the first execution for rape was in 1743, others followed for sodomy, homosexual acts and child molestation.

We tend to think of executions as just being about hanging but in earlier times there were alternatives. The condemned could be hung and burnt for poisoning (in what order wasn't mentioned), burning was normally reserved for heretics, particularly serious offenders could be hung, drawn and quartered (further details available on google), alternatively they might be pressed to death or shot for treason but the nobility were often awarded a beheading.

Mike showed photos of various locations where public executions took place including the Guildhall and Haldon where a gibbet was located for hanging highwaymen. On one occasion the tower of St Thomas church in Cowick Street was used to raise a clergyman who supported the Prayer Book Rebellion (1549) in an iron cage where he was left in full view to die.



The talk ended with a couple of prisoners who escaped execution. There was Charlotte Winsor in 1866 who ran a 'baby farm' for unwanted babies and was accused of allowing several to die. One hour before her execution was due the Home Secretary commuted her sentence saying that she was ill. This did not please the gathered crowd who had come to watch the execution and there was a riot.

There was also the famous case of John 'Babbacombe' Lee where three attempts were made to execute him but on each occasion the trap doors would not open. Many explanations have been put forward as to why this might have happened including the weight of the officiating minister but it remains a mystery. His sentence was commuted to life imprisonment.

Finally, Mike noted that three of the executions were carried out by the Pierrepoint family whose professionalism (95% instant death) was compared to an earlier sadistic hangman called William Calcraft who played to the crowd and used only a short drop to prolong the agony.

Dickens & Dawlish

GRIFFITHS, Grace The book of Dawlish: 'Charles Dickens placed the birthplace of Nicholas Nickleby in the town, having visited and liked Dawlish while he was settling his parents into their cottage at Alphington'.

Miss Cecil Rotton's memories of holidays in Dawlish 1900-1910

The family stayed at a lodging house near the beach every August. Almost everyday they were on the beach building sandcastles or paddling but 'when you bathed you went up the beach to a line of bathing machines. They were little huts on wheels and you paid your money and went in and changed. I think you knocked on the door when you were ready and the man fastened the horse on and he pulled the thing down so you stepped into two or three feet of water for modesty's sake. You put on the most voluminous stuff- an enormous overall with plus fours underneath and they immediately filled up with water so it was practically impossible to swim'.

Meals consisted of porridge, bacon and eggs for breakfast. For lunch there was generally a joint and an 'awful suet pudding'. At 4.30 there was a 'whacking big tea' and just before bed 'gruel or soup or biscuits'.

'There were dances at night and I remember hearing Strauss waltzes coming from the hotel nearby'. 'We sometimes hired little two wheeled pony carts called jingles. You got in it but then you came to the first hill and you had to get out because the weight was too much for the pony. And when you started to go down hill you had to get out because the pony might slip…. Dawlish is hilly…. so it was just one long walk'.

'Generally there was very little to do for a month…..so it was awfully dull'.

VACANCY

The History Group will need a new editor of the Chronicle from April 2026. Editors over the years have been academics, amateur enthusiasts, just-interested, quiet, not-so-quiet, pedantic, free-wheeling, budding writers, happy-not-to-write themselves, and from all walks of life. There is scope for almost anyone to make the society's magazine their own and have the support of the Committee. More information from the Chairman 079 8801 6098

More vacancies

The current committee will be down to 4 members in April. There used to be 8 members on the committee and we seriously need some new blood if the group is going to continue to thrive. Please think about what you can offer to support your society and secure its future. The committee meets 3 or 4 times a year at a mutually agreed date and time. It is not hard work but can be rewarding.