

Newton's Unsung Heroes

The history of Newton St Cyres dates back to at least the 11th century, providing researchers and the plain curious with a fascinating window into the past. Among their number are the ceaselessly inquisitive members of the Newton St Cyres History Group, unpaid enthusiasts who carry out research, organise walks and talks and turn out engrossing publications about the village they are proud to call home. They talked to Ann Quon Cordingley, who also took the photos.

Young Sarah Wilkins came home excitedly with a school project. "It was something that you sometimes dread with 10-year-olds," recalls Jean Wilkins. "It was to write about the history of our own house."

Jean knew that their home on Sand Down Lane was 400 years old, but that's about all, so she and Sarah set about learning more. "We found some old people to talk to, went to the West Country Studies Library in Exeter and the Record Office, and Sarah wrote a nice little essay for school," says Jean.



Jean and Roger Wilkins

Today, 40 years later, Jean Wilkins is widely regarded as the oracle of local historical knowledge. So it is not surprising that she is chairperson of the Newton St Cyres History Group committee, a small and enthusiastic team of local residents, all retired, with a clear passion for history and storytelling.

Besides Jean, there's her husband Roger, a former agricultural scientist, Lynda Pearce, a former civil servant, and Isobel Hepworth, a former history teacher. All have been involved since the group was started in 2010, each contributing their efforts to various aspects of its work.

Some might think that history is a dry subject. But not when this group is talking about their work. They organise talks and exhibits, conduct research, produce publications and organise activities such as walks and outings – all around issues of local historical interest.

As chairperson, Jean fixes up speakers through her personal contacts and extensive network of history groups, including Cridton U3A, the Devon History Society and, more

recently, the Crediton Area History Zoom. A former information scientist and librarian for Devon County Council, Jean studied botany at Reading University, where she and Roger met as students. They married and moved to Newton St Cyres 40 years ago.

As a history teacher, Isobel Hepworth was a natural for the group. She moved from Otterton Village in East Devon in 1984 and wanted to do something for the village as she was about to retire, so she got involved in the history group. "I was working in the library service and before that I was a history teacher. I did a degree in history. So it was right up my alley, although I had never done local history."

Isobel has the task of taking notes at all the talks and doing the write-ups for the Newton Wonder. Amazingly, she is on write-up number 102. "Isobel is very talented in the write-up of the talks and they are a fantastic record," says Roger. "Quite often people come and say I got more out of reading Isabel's report than I got listening to the talk at the meeting. It's a real skill."



Isobel Hepworth



Lynda Pearce

Lynda Pearce grew up in Exeter and used to pass through Newton on the school bus to and from Crediton, where she went to school. She never dreamed that she would ever live in NSC, but has been here now for 30 years. Her husband was a friend of Devon author Peter Thomas, from whom she developed an interest in collecting old postcards and photographs. Lynda offers the group what she describes as a different perspective as a keen collector of visual history. "I was surprised when Jean asked me to join," says Lynda. "I knew she wanted to get other people to help, but I kept saying that my views on history are very different to the other members of the committee because I am more interested in recent history such as the people-oriented history and pictures."

It is because of her unique interests that Lynda has been invaluable when it comes to organising the group's photo exhibitions in the Parish Hall, among others.

If it takes a village to raise a child, as the African proverb goes, then in 1999 it took a village to put together a book of historical photographs of NSC life. “A group of about eight or nine of us produced a book for the millennium which entailed collecting old photographs, mainly from villagers who lived here a long time. They wanted their photographs to be in this book and we had amazing cooperation from them,” recalls Jean, who says looking through photographs brought the village together.

Roger thinks the millennium book exercise may have also whetted locals’ interest in history because a few years later the Parish Council held a public consultation, followed by a comprehensive questionnaire seeking residents’ views on all aspects of village life and how it should develop in future. The result was the Newton St Cyres Parish Plan, published in 2008, which contained the findings of the questionnaire. Among them was the suggestion that respondents would be interested in a history society, if one were set up.

“I was heavily involved in the parish plan exercise, so I had an interest in contributing to the follow-up recommendations that were made in that plan,” says Roger. “That encouraged me to get involved in the formation of the history group. Since we started, my main contribution has been looking after the money, and we are still solvent,” he chuckles.

The group does not charge a membership fee. “We don’t have a membership where you need a little card and you pay £10 a year or whatever. Anybody can come to any of our meetings if they want to,” says Jean.

The group’s core activity is monthly talks by guest speakers held during the winter months in the Parish Hall, where £2 covers the hiring of the hall and speakers’ expenses, as well as a cup of tea for visitors. “These meetings normally attract around 30 people, depending on weather and topic,” says Roger.

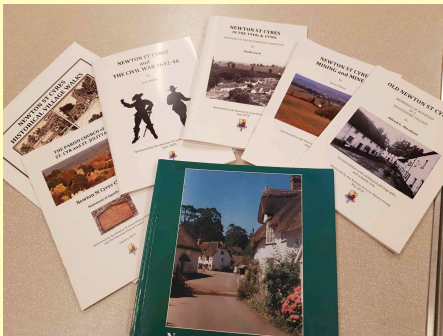
However, due to Covid, face-to-face gathering have been suspended and talks are held via Zoom. To facilitate the Zoom talks, the group has joined with other organisations, including the Crediton Library, which uploads the talks onto their YouTube site. While Zoom has helped reach wider audiences, the group is conscious that some people don’t have access to Zoom.

To overcome this, they have organised other types of events, including walks and photo exhibitions. Last month, a walk in Sand Down Lane proved to be so popular, it was held twice. “Fortunately, I know quite a lot about the history of Sand Down Lane because I live there,” says Jean. “It was lovely because we had three other people come and say ‘Oh, I hear you’re doing this walk about Sand Down Lane, can I help? One of them had only lived there for two and a half years. But she went around asking neighbours what they knew about their houses, and she spoke as well.”

The group has found that topics with the highest local content are the most popular, rather than academic subjects. “The more local the topic, the more you get real involvement with people talking about their own experiences, their memories of the village, people they knew and what used to happen, and that’s really lovely. That’s one of the most rewarding things,” says Jean.

The group learned early on that people don’t like to be talked at, they want to be involved. “We had people bringing stuff they’d dug up in their gardens, people with metal detectors who had found stuff and could talk about it. And we have had photography sessions with interesting things about people’s houses, deeds and things. So from the beginning, we’ve tried to be more than just educational; we try to involve people.”

Lynda recalled making a presentation using pictures of Newton St Cyres that she and Jean had compiled. Lynda was very conscious she was speaking to a group of long-time villagers. “I’d only been here about 20 years compared to people in my audience who had been born and lived here for many decades, so I was thinking, ‘Gosh, what am I going to say since I don’t know much about the depth of my pictures. But when I was showing pictures of pre-war maypole dancing in the village a lady said ‘That’s me, that’s me! I was eight years old at the time.’ It was just amazing. I didn’t need to worry because people joined in very happily and I learned far more than I actually gave out to people.



History Group Publications

Another facet of the group’s work is research and publications. The decision to publish is decided at committee meetings based on interest or research that someone in the group has been doing and whether it would attract wider interest. Jean’s research led to the publication of “Newton St Cyres and the Civil War 1642-46” about the hardship endured by those in the village during this period 400 years ago.

The group speaks fondly of the late Brian Please, who lived in the village for six years and quickly became involved in the history group because of his interest in mining as his house overlooked the fields where manganese mining took place in the old days. Brian had a knack for seeing potential in material and turning it into finished written products.

Regrettably, Brian passed away suddenly in August. “We lost a lot of skill in Brian and desperately need some more help. We need someone younger who is good at doing things on computers,” says Jean.

Jean gets a lot of requests for information either directly or from someone in the village who passes the query on. And if she’s not available, they might contact Peter Hawksley, another knowledgeable long-time resident and – full disclosure – editor of this magazine.

A recent request came from a man whose parents had grown up in the village. He asked whether Jean had pictures of the house his grandparents had lived in. Jean knew fellow group member Midge Kelly was doing research in the Sweetham area, where the grandparents had lived. Midge was able to give the man a beautiful picture of an oak tree that his great grandfather had planted in 1932. “He was very, very pleased,” says Jean.

It’s the unexpected connections that intrigue and delight the group the most. Jean tells the story of an American from Iowa who contacted the group, asking if they could trace the house where his family had lived in the 18th century. “We were able to send him maps of the property when they had lived here,” says Jean. “When he visited, we were able to pinpoint the house because the records here are very good. He was so pleased.”

Why do these amateur historians spend so much time doing what they do? “I’ve just been wondering that,” says Jean. “It’s hard work, but you do get rewards. For instance, it’s people coming up to me with little bits of information, because you know they’ve listened to you when you spoke. That is a rewarding thing.”

Says Roger: “It’s partly the personal satisfaction, learning things about where you live, the community that you love and lived in for 40 years.”

CRIB SERVICE



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December 24th
3.00pm



COME AND SING CAROLS BY CANDLELIGHT



CANDLELIT CAROL SERVICE

NEWTON ST CYRES CHURCH
DECEMBER 19TH
6.30 P.M.

MULLED WINE AND MINCE PIES AFTERWARDS
collection in aid of Children's Hospice