

Newton St Cyres History Group



Thirty people met in the Village Hall on Thursday 18th September to hear a presentation prepared by Jean and Roger Wilkins on Newton St Cyres in the First World War. This was a focussed and well-researched talk which had the virtue of being produced 'in-house' by two people who know the village and concentrated on the detail of what happened here 100 years ago.

The scene was set by images of the village and villagers at the beginning of the twentieth century, and Jean took us back to the way that life was then, without plumbing for fresh water, sewage for sanitation or electricity for light, although the village boasted two street lights, one by the ford and one on the corner by Shaplands. The cottages usually had long gardens with an earth closet, and often a pig kept for fattening.

Vegetables were grown, coal fires fuelled cooking ranges and provided heat. There were three pubs, a

General Store (run by Mrs Knowles), a baker and a butcher. Transport was largely horse drawn carts. Social events revolved around the Church, the school and the big house, but the church had not been much touched since the renovation of 1831, and was covered in ivy and propped up with long poles on the side facing the road. Canon Boles, who arrived as vicar from Cornwall, in 1911, was to provide strong leadership during the war, but lost his only son in 1916. There was a Reading Room (where is unknown) but no Village Hall, and the school was used in winter for village events, much to the annoyance of the head, Mr Bellman, because of the inadequacy of the clearing up afterwards! The school had separate playgrounds for boys and girls, earth closets and no water, with a large stove for heating in each of the two classrooms. Sometimes the school would close for 2 or 3 weeks, until the danger of an epidemic had passed.

A picture of the fire which destroyed Newton House in 1906 shows men and boys posed, all in their working clothes, the very people whose lives would be changed by the war ten years later. Similarly poignant were two pictures of children standing by the ford, who by the time they were in their twenties would have gone through four years of war. Some of the people in the photographs of social events and outings were identified, and referred to later as the events of their lives unfolded through the war. A photograph on the occasion of the marriage of Edward Quicke's sister Gwladys in 1909, shows him and his brother Noel. This branch of the Quicke family inherited and had returned from New Zealand. Edward was to be killed delivering a message under fire, and Noel, his younger brother, was to be the father of Sir John Quicke. After the fire and during the rebuilding, the Quicke family lived at Tiverton, and later Sidmouth. However, it seems that the insurance money did not cover the costs and so the new Newton House was let out during the war to Lady Buller and her daughter, Georgiana, and the Quicke's remained in Sidmouth until the 1920s.

Taking over from Jean, Roger took us through some interesting comparisons between the village then and now, and also talked about the effects of war as it progressed. In 1901 44% of the

population of 700 (now 900) were under 20, whereas in 2011 it was 20%. Conversely, only 11% then were over 60, compared to 33% now. Of course people then did not have pensions and worked on into their 70s and more, and the census records only 7 people as retired or pensioners in the village at that time. Unsurprisingly, farmworkers, farmers and agricultural trades, together with domestic service, were by far the largest employments.

The records studied by Roger show that action followed rapidly once war was declared, with committees set up to help "alleviate distress" and to help farmers, as men began to leave the land and sign up. A Women's Working Party in Newton St Cyres made 88 shirts and 39 sheets for the soldiers and this was just the beginning of an increasingly hard effort made over the following 4 years to raise money and supplies to support the war. School, church and social life at first carried on much as usual, with meetings and events such as a visit to the church by the Exeter Archaeological and Architectural Society in 1915. However, it is telling that by 1918 the top class at the school was entirely female, because the shortage of labour meant the boys were working on the farms and elsewhere. Over time, belts were tightened but the villages and country always had more food resources than the towns (where there were food riots). For instance, 40 tons of swedes were collected locally and sent up to Scotland for the Fleet based in Scapa Flow, as reported in the paper in February 1918. From 1914 through to 1919 there was a Central Depot for foodstuffs, and collectors nominated for different parts of the village. Lady Buller organised transport to move supplies into Exeter for the hospitals and the soldiers. Schoolchildren contributed throughout the war period, with collection and donation of eggs, primroses and cash. The Choir and the Sunday School did without outings and prizes, with the money saved being given to the war effort.

These communal efforts were made financially as well. People were encouraged to buy War Bonds and War Certificates to fund the government. This money was to "feed the guns" and it was pronounced "a solemn duty" by Canon Boles to purchase War Savings. In one fund raising effort, the village raised 1,505 pounds and 8 shillings, enough to buy an 18 pounder field gun (cost £1,200) and in 1918 alone the village contributed £5,000, which in today's values of around £220,000 represents an enormous effort and sacrifice from individuals.

The disruption to families who were left without father's and brothers to earn, was considerable. Because it was not usual then for married women to work, Miss Petherick, a teacher at the school, had to leave her job after her marriage and there was quite strong resistance to women working generally, despite the need for manpower. We were shown a picture drawn by Winnie Alford of Sweetham, at the age of 13. It was published in 1915 in *The Western Times* and showed a little girl posting a letter "*To Daddy at De Funt*" (to Daddy at The Front), and was a reminder of how many families lost their chief wage earner. Short of manpower and of money, the fabric of the village began to wear out – houses were in disrepair, wells were not cleaned, and in 1917 there was a typhoid outbreak. Cottages would have been condemned except that it was not possible to replace them.

Food supplies were as vital as cash supplies for the war effort, and farming came under great pressure. Quotas were introduced, controls and inspections began. There was a policy of increasing grain and potato production at the expense of livestock, and Roger showed us figures for the parish which demonstrated these changes, with the wheat area up by 126%, other cereals by 41%, and potatoes 135%, but grass for grazing down by 15% and the number of cows down by 14%. Remarkably, the number of horses on farms remained stable, despite the requisitioning of horses through the country. There are a great many Tribunals documented and reported in the papers; men who had been called up were able to put a case for staying in their jobs, and the tribunal would decide who would stay and who would have to go to fight. Overall, 140 men

from Newton St Cyres served in the military forces, and 21 of these died between 1914 and 1919.

Jean then showed us a photograph of the names on the memorial in the church, and went through what she has discovered so far about the lives and deaths of those 21 men. This was sometimes surprising, often sombre, always interesting, and demonstrated just how various and geographically spread the experiences of these people were. For example, two had returned from Canada and both were to fight and die on the Western Front. Their ages ranged from 19 to 51, with three being married with children. Of the three sailors, one was shore based, the other two saw service in the North Atlantic and one was to die when his boat was torpedoed in the Dardanelles. One man had transferred to the RNAS as a military observer so was flying in the early planes. Another pioneer was the soldier Walter Knowles (one of the children of the shopkeeper, Mrs Knowles) who had learnt to drive by 1902, but was also described as being '*familiar with horses*' making him a valuable and versatile man. They were not all killed in battle, and they were not all in the trenches, and they had not all been born or brought up here, but they all regarded Newton St Cyres as their home but of those who have a marked grave, only one is buried in our churchyard.

Our thanks go to Jean and Roger for their excellent presentation and the worth while work they have done to recall the men and the families of the village.
Jean will submit to the Newton Wonder short accounts of those that died, to be published on the Centennial month of their death.

2014 Autumn Meetings all Thursdays at 7.30pm in the Village Hall Club Room

Everyone is welcome. There is a small charge of £2 which includes tea and biscuits.

Nov 13 Roger Mortimer The Monmouth Rebellion (see below for background information)

James II succeeded his brother Charles II in 1683 and favoured Catholicism. James, Duke of Monmouth, was a Protestant, and an illegitimate son of Charles II. He landed at Lyme Regis and was greeted in the Western Counties as King Monmouth. However his poorly armed and untrained men were defeated by Royal troops at Sedgemoor in July 1685. He was captured and beheaded. Judge Jefferies was sent to the South West to mete out justice, which he did with great severity. Some Cridton men were hung, drawn and quartered and then displayed at the entrances to the town.

Dec 11 Joint Christmas Social with Gardening Club

If you are interested in the history of the village and would like to help on the committee we should love to hear from you. If you have been independently researching but don't wish to get involved we should still love to hear what you have been up to. For example have you researched the history of your house, or perhaps you would like to know how to go about it. Please do make contact with Jean or Isobel. We are particularly lucky in Newton St Cyres that we have a village with very good records.

From January 2015 our meetings will be held on a Wednesday evening.

For further information contact Jean 851337 Isobel 851351