

Newton St Cyres History Group

April Meeting

The centenary this year of the outbreak of the Great War has triggered a great deal of interest in the events of the four years 1914 – 1918. It was thus very timely to have a talk from Judi Binks of Kennerleigh & District Heritage Group on the local impact of the First World War on farming communities and women. As a retired history teacher, Judi had done a great deal of research and produced a lively and unusual talk with a great deal of local detailed information and included contemporary songs, films and first hand verbal and newspaper accounts.



Before war broke out, Devon farms were mostly small family concerns and weighted towards pastoral, with an emphasis on beef and sheep. Horsepower was essential for all activities. Of course when a recruitment campaign started in August 1914, many farming families felt a conflict between the call to duty and the need to stay on the land and get the harvest in. Recruitment agents put the pressure on and thus were very unpopular, and this continued through Lord Kitchener's campaign to recruit for his New Army after the Battle of Mons, and indeed throughout the war. As time went on a Tribunal System was set up to adjudicate on whether men could be exempted or not, and Judi showed us some of the many cases that were heard in Crediton by the local committee.

The German U Boat attacks caused a great loss of food – 2 million tons of wheat by 1917 – as well as lives, and food shortages became a real threat. Conscription had started in 1916, draining labour from the land, and so by the spring of 1917 the situation was dire. Under the new government of Lloyd George, who took over from Asquith as Prime Minister in December 1916, energetic measures were taken to get farmers to grow more food and to encourage everyone to be frugal. However, from the beginning of the war food prices rose and Judi showed us newspaper articles, for example from the Crediton Chronicle August 1914, describing the resentment felt at the rising costs of meat and profiteering. There were food riots in Devon, reported in Tiverton and Okehampton, often led by women who had to face the brunt of feeding families on scarcer and more expensive supplies. A Special Food Committee was set up by Devon County Council in September 1914 to ensure that everyone should have basic supplies.

In the rural areas there were always more resources to fall back on and Judi gave an interesting account of the Newton St Cyres Cheese Makers giving classes and also wild rabbits being plentiful in Upton Pyne. She pointed out that the Women's Institute was started in 1915 specifically to encourage women to become more involved in food production.

Another problem for farmers was that horses were taken as they were needed on the Front, and over 1 million horses were used during the war. 20% a year were lost, and of those that died, three quarters did so from debility and over work, and only a quarter were killed in battle. However, the farms were left without horsepower and as tractors were not available, nor fuel nor spare parts, this was a real problem, particular as the government was insisting on land being ploughed to grow

more corn. Sharing of horses was one way of dealing with this. Interestingly oats from Devon were fed to the horses in France.

Even by January 1915 over 100,000 farm workers had gone to fight, and so the labour shortages led to a call for women to go to work on the land. In February 1916 the Women's National Land Services Corps was set up, later developed into the Women's Land Army. Posters were made to rally women and by 1917 over 260,000 women were working as farm labourers. Locally a 6 week course was set up at Seal Hayne College to train women, but there was a considerable resistance amongst many farmers to having female labourers. In Devon, and many other rural areas, women in fact were already running the family farms and many others were supporting their families in the absence of their husbands. It was mainly urban young women who volunteered and even then Land Army was less popular than going into the VAD as nurses. Judi showed us photos of Mrs Trollope of Newton St Cyres who farmed at Langford with her two daughters, and employed women whenever she could, but she was an unusual case. She also played us a recording made by Mary Lees, who was 17 when war broke out and was the first land girl from Seal Hayne to work in Devon. The recording, made in 1974, was a fascinating insight into the attitudes of the time. It is hard to imagine now but the sight of women in breeches and smocks and with bobbed hair was shocking then and many doubted that women were capable of doing such hard work. Pay was low and there were examples of farmers taking 17 shillings of the 20 shillings weekly pay for board and lodging.

The detail and local evidence and information given during the evening was very interesting and gave us a glimpse of the reality of a war time economy and the hardships and difficulties of coping during the hostilities. Judi finished in fine style with an original recording of 'Goodbyeee' and she has our thanks for an enlightening evening.

Next meetings

Meetings are usually on Thursday evenings in the village hall club room and start at 7.30pm. We have no special membership arrangements. Everyone is welcome. There is a small charge of £2 which includes tea and biscuits.

For further information contact Jean 851337 Isobel 851351

June 14th Our outing to Iddesleigh. We shall visit the War Horse Valley Country Park at Parsonage Farm. This is the valley that inspired Michael Morpurgo who lives nearby to write War Horse. This will include a visit to their small WW1 exhibit and one to see farming as it used to be through the year. Their cream teas are to be recommended. The cost will be £5.50 including tea although some contributions towards petrol for drivers may be acceptable. We are collecting names so we can organise groups. There is also the possibility of opting to have lunch at the Duke of York Iddesleigh. If you would like to have lunch in Iddesleigh we shall meet at the hall car park by 12noon. If you wish to visit Parsonage Farm only we shall meet at the hall car park by 1.30pm aiming to all be ready to see the exhibitions by 2.30pm.. Please let Jean or Isobel know (phone nos. above)

We shall of course need some willing to drive!

Sept 18	First World War – impact on Newton St Cyres. Roger and Jean Wilkins
Oct 16	Peter Keay on Eastholme
Nov 13	Roger Mortimer Monmouth Rebellion
Dec 11	Joint Christmas Social with Gardening Club