

NEWTON ST CYRES HISTORY GROUP

Devon in the 1920s

Dr Julia Neville is an honorary research fellow at the University of Exeter, Department of History. She is currently project manager for a research collaboration on 'Devon in the 1920s', and it was in this capacity that she talked to us on Friday 14th May via Zoom. The project is based on shared memories and the aim is to present the results in 2025 with an exhibition and events based on people's family histories, all rooted in the lives of people at the time.



Julia pointed out that the 1920s are often overlooked – unlike the First World War and the Thirties and the Second World War. The aim of the project she leads is to look at this decade of transition, which includes the General Strike, the 1924 Empire Exhibition at Wembley, and the marriage of Elizabeth Bowes Lyon and Prince Albert, Duke of York. Using photos that have been shared by families and individuals, and the stories that accompany them, she gave us an overview of the many changes that happened during the 1920s.

The shadow of the Great War lingered on. Many villages were erecting their war memorials to those who did not return, but many of those that did were wounded and in pain, and did not live long. Children symbolised the hope for the future and the rebuilding of lives.

Julia showed us a map of the places in the county from where she has had contributions. They tend to cluster on the South Coast, Plymouth and Exeter, but in time there will be more information from Central and North West Devon, with rural Devon a strong theme. Already, motor vehicles were arriving, bringing change from the old ways to the modern world, but daily life in the village cottages was still basic.

A contribution from West Devon described a gamekeeper's cottage, with one brass tap over a small stone sink in the pantry and a kitchen with a table and benches to the side, the grandparents' chairs at either end. There was a black range cleaned laboriously by the mother with stove black, and a large kitchen dresser with all her crockery.

Another account from High Bickington describes the stone flags in the kitchen, bare because the men came in and out in their hobnailed boots and so you had to be able to scrub it clean. The oven was in the side of the fireplace and you had to heat it and plan your cooking, with the roast first, then the pastry, and then cakes. Efforts were made to get landlords to upgrade the cottages at the local government level. As time progressed, kitchens were supplied with piped water, and an electric supply improved heating and cooking.

All this made a big difference to the lives of women especially, because housework became less arduous and time consuming. For instance, it was possible to plug an iron into the central light if the bulb was removed, which was much easier than continually heating irons on the stove.

A contribution from Plymstock is about market gardening, and a smallholding on the rich red Devon soil producing crops such as cauliflowers, potatoes, peas, beans, onions and also anemones. Flower growing was a crop as well. However, Devon is a strongly pastoral area and Calf Clubs, the forerunner of the Young Farmers Club, were initiated. Each young person had a calf to rear and there was a lot of work done by the Clean Milk Movement to get rid of tuberculosis from cows and milk, which is a different kind from the airborne one spread by coughing and sneezing. Many soldiers came home from the Great War with pulmonary tuberculosis.

Village life centred on the church or chapel and the school. After service on a Sunday, young people could socialise on walks with their families. An account from Petrockstowe says how important the annual Revel was in June, with skittles, maypole dancing and stalls, and that the annual summer outing was a highlight. These were red letter days as mostly people stayed in the villages.

Charabanc trips for a day at the seaside could be arranged for a special treat and Devon was becoming popular for holidays. The south coast resorts would have dances, town bands and other entertainments. Hotels and guest houses started up in response and the numbers of these increased rapidly. The railway network was well developed along the south coast and east up to Barnstaple. The use of a wireless set reduced the isolation of the villages, and the BBC began in 1922.

Urban life was changing as well. In Exeter there had been horse-drawn trams from the 1880s, and electric ones from 1905. Photos of the High Street from the 1920s show how shopping was becoming a leisure activity, with the added enjoyment of tea and cake at a café or tea shop. Julia said, though, that a horse and cart would still be used to go to the shops or to a dance or the cinema in rural areas. The cinema was very popular, as colour films came along and the talkies.

There was increasing travel from the villages to the nearest town and the motor bus system was developing. Not everyone approved. A Diocesan Committee Meeting for the Rescue of Girls considered that dances or the cinema and the type of dancing and emotions generated a bad effect on morals.

Motorcycles were common after the First World War, because they had been used at the Front and people were familiar with them. A side car could be added for passengers, and goods or luggage could be strapped on at the back.

Car ownership was increasing, with cheaper models from Henry Ford in America and William Morris at Cowley. You could buy a car from a garage, take a couple of turns around with the mechanic and then drive home. No other training or documentation was required. Not surprisingly, motor accidents became very concerning and put a strain on country doctors, who were not used to so many accidents. As a result, roads were widened and straightened where possible.

On the fringes of the towns, plots of land could be sold off for building without the need for planning or any other permissions, as long as there was road access and a water supply. New housing went up, and bungalows were a popular type of house on these sites. Also, many people retired from jobs all over the Empire to live in Devon. The outskirts of Exmouth and Budleigh Salterton were popular and Budleigh had an excellent golf course!

However, there was still plenty of unimproved housing in the town centres. There is a description from Paignton of a flat with steps up to the first floor, a rough passage and a door on either side leading to two flats. The resident lady had an oil lamp, with an open fire to cook and for heat. Coal was delivered once per annum and she kept it in a shed she called her 'linney'. There was one tap at the foot of the steps for water. There was a fire in June 1927, but her flat was unharmed except for some water damage. Fires were quite common in the 1920s, started by sparks from open fires and unswept chimneys.

Education was being extended, but it was a common situation for promising pupils to leave aged 12, despite getting a scholarship for secondary education. This would be because there was not enough money in the household to pay for travel, uniform and books.

In all aspects of life, social change and technical progress were shaping the course of the century.

Our thanks go to Julia for giving us her time and knowledge. The details of the contributions gave a personal slant to the history that she based on them. This project is supported by South West Heritage Trust, Devon History Society, Devon Family History

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