

NEWTON ST CYRES HISTORY GROUP TALKS

Wednesday May 11th 7.30pm in the village hall.

Ed Williams Hawkes will speak on 'Dellers of Bedford Street'. Dellers was a famous tea shop that operated in Exeter from 1914 until WW2. Dellers of Bedford Street was the most opulent of all the Dellers Branches and was 'The Place' to meet with friends for refreshments in Exeter between the two wars. Ed has a family connection. It was a victim of the May 1942 bombing of Exeter.



Wednesday June 8th 7.30pm in the village hall.

Adam Falconer, who is helping organise a survey of ancient woodland in Devon, will speak on 'The Devon Ancient Woodland Inventory Review'.

The entry fee is £2 and includes tea and biscuits. The Group has no special formal membership. All are welcome.



Copplestone: The Story and the Stone

The first CAHZoom talk of 2022, hosted by Crediton Library, was on Friday 14th January and was given by Tony Gale. Tony has an M.A. in History from Exeter University and has done a great deal of research on the Crediton area. He is prominent in the Crediton U3A, Crediton Area History and Museum Society and is a Trustee of the Devon and Cornwall Record Society. He has given several talks on local history, always carefully researched, well-presented and very interesting.

People who live in this area will have seen the large carved stone pillar on the A377 in the centre of Copplestone. It forms a traffic island in the middle of the one-way system and is a familiar sight from the road. Tony has looked carefully into the available records to try to ascertain the facts of the history of the stone. He thinks it is probably the oldest decorated monument in Mid Devon and the earliest mention of it is over a thousand years ago in a grant of 974CE, written in Old English. It is referred to as the '*copelan stan*' and was recognised as a distinctive feature of the landscape. '*Copelan*' can mean '*crested*', '*chief*' or '*rocking*'.

The stone may have had a crest originally, as the top is scooped out, and this was the opinion of the historian W.G. Hoskins. Certainly, the stone has been altered over time, and it has also been moved. In the 1840s it had been placed on top of a large plinth made of stones, but it was moved again in the 1960s to enable traffic to pass more freely, lowered in height on to a much smaller base. At the time, the newspapers delighted in reporting that there was reputedly a curse on anyone who moved the stone. Tony was equally delighted to say that this is true. The 974 charter does indeed contain an '*anathema*', in its meaning of an ecclesiastical curse, condemning anyone who moves the stone to perish with the devil. Such curses were not uncommon in land grants concerning boundary markers.

The first part of Tony's presentation was to look at the stone itself. It is situated at what is traditionally regarded as the centre of Devon, on the north-east/south-west watershed between the Taw and the Creedy, and on the boundary between the Anglo-Saxon hundreds of North Tawton and Crediton and also the boundaries of the medieval parishes of Down St Mary, Colebrooke and Crediton. This points to the likelihood of the stone being a boundary marker, but it could possibly be a commemorative stone. It is made of granite from Dartmoor, and Richard Scrivener, of the British Geological Survey, considered that it came from the Merrivale Quarry. To move such a large piece of heavy stone for over 30 miles and well over a thousand years ago would have been a huge undertaking.

The carved decoration on the four faces of the pillar is very impressive, though the south-west side has largely eroded because it faces the prevailing weather. The complex patterns are Celtic or Scandinavian in style. Carved stones have been classified and catalogued over the years, and Tony referred us to the two main reference sources; The Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture, started in 1977 and organised from Durham University, and the work of J. Romilly Allen in the late 19th century. The Corpus lists and describes county by county every early English sculpture from the 7th century to the 11th, and Romilly Allen drew and numbered every type of carving pattern.

The Copplestone panels can thus be checked in these books and similar or identical patterns found. More difficult to analyse are the two picture panels on the north-east face of the stone. The top one shows a horseman in profile, and the middle panel shows two standing figures. Unfortunately they are now quite eroded but they were drawn, at a time when the erosion was less severe, by Sir Henry Dryden, a 19th-century antiquary who produced thousands of architectural and archaeological drawings. Even so, it is not known what the sculptures mean or who they represent, although there is a parallel for the horseman at Chester-le-Street and for the standing figures in York. The niche in the top panel of the south-east face is a later addition which cuts into the decoration. Probably it held a figure at one time, possibly a saint.

Having described the stone, Tony moved on to examine the story of its origin. The earliest known drawing of the stone was made by Samuel Prout in 1811, and he considered in his notes that it was probably a boundary marker, or possibly a family memorial stone. In 1876, R.A. King, an antiquarian, wrote a paper published in the Transactions of the Devonshire Association. It included Dryden's drawing, in which he suggested that it could have been a boundary stone, used to mark a religious gathering place for what was then a rural area of the large parish of Crediton. However, two years later, in 1878, came a turning point in the story of the stone's origin. R.E. Way wrote an article published in the Journal for British Archaeological Association, in which he declared the stone to be a memorial to Bishop Putta, second Bishop of Devon, whose see was at Bishop's Tawton. He was murdered on that spot by followers of the king's earl, Uffa, in 910 as he travelled to Crediton to visit him.

It is this story that is accepted by English Heritage (it is also on Wikipedia) and Tony traced the origin of this to John Hooker, who compiled the first history of Exeter in the late 16th century. Hooker tells the story of Putta's murder but does not associate it with, or even mention, the stone. Hooker's source is unknown and there are several problems with Hooker's, and therefore Way's, accounts.

There was a palace at Bishop's Tawton in North Devon (and another at Chudleigh and also Clyst St George) but the see was at Crediton and the first bishop was Eadulph. There is no record of a Bishop Putta in Devon, only one in Rochester and he died in 688CE. Neither is there any record of a king's earl called Uffa. Furthermore, the main route then from North Devon to Crediton did not follow the present A377 but followed an old ridgeway on the higher land to the north-east.

R.E. Way's story makes quite a few big and unproven assumptions, and in fairness he did include the words 'if', 'assume', 'probably', 'believe' in his account, and did not say it was certain. Nevertheless it rapidly became the accepted version of the stone's origin, getting increasingly garbled as time went on. The English Heritage plaque of 2003 is full of inconsistencies and mistakes.

Tony's alternative theory is that the stone marks the Taw/Creedy watershed, and this is strengthened by the place names of Brownstone, Knightstone and Rolstone, also on the watershed, though no stones survive. Was this watershed an ancient boundary? Could the Copplestone be the 'chief' stone on the watershed which marked the old boundary? Whatever the truth of the stone's origin, the quarrying, transportation and skilled carving must have been difficult and expensive, so it must have been important.

A good comparison for anyone who is interested, is Toisa's Cross, which is in the Royal Albert Museum in Exeter. The carving is not as skilled and the stone not as large, nor is it certain where it originally stood. This emphasises what an unusual and impressive survival the Copplestone is. Look at it more carefully next time you drive past.



The Copplestone

.Isobel Hepworth