

NEWTON ST CYRES HISTORY GROUP

Discovering the church and churchyard

After torrential rain in the preceding days, we had a beautiful summer evening for our first in-person meeting since February 2020. Not only was it the first time the History Group had met face to face for almost 18 months, but it was our chance to thank Brian Please for his valuable contributions to the History Group over the past six years.

Old and new faces assembled outside the church at the east side, overlooking the village, suitably distanced and equipped with folding chairs. Jean Wilkins opened the meeting with thanks to Brian, our very best wishes for his and Moira's new life in Herefordshire, and a token of our appreciation. That took the form of a card and a copy of 'Travels in Georgian Devon: The Illustrated Journal of the Reverend John Swete 1789-1800 Vol III' edited by Todd Gray. This contains accounts and illustrations of Crediton and the surrounding villages, including Newton St Cyres. Brian then talked for the first part of the evening's programme, with 'Some Observations from the Graveyard'.

He prefaced his talk by reflecting that although what has happened in the past is unalterable, our knowledge of events and our interpretation of them changes all the time. For this reason, one of his main motivations has been to capture and preserve information and make it accessible, so that it is not lost. This is why he has been so enthusiastic in publishing the various booklets, memories and maps we now have, and which are so useful and interesting.

When Brian moved to Newton, the Green Millenium Book was his starting point, and it triggered his interest in the mining history here. He then organised the publication of the memories of Alfred Abrahams and Stella Cork, which give a snapshot of the village in the 1900s and the 1940s respectively. Brian also emphasised the significance of the church building as the embodiment of the village, not just the communal effort to build it but the memorials and gravestones that record the lives of people who lived and worked here.

The second part of Brian's talk was about the church building and its surroundings, the early wayside cross and the wooden Anglo-Saxon building which would almost certainly have been on this site high above the valley, to be replaced later by a simple stone building. Over time, as the village grew and became wealthier, the church was added to and enlarged, until by the end of the 15th century it was effectively the building we now have. It was at this time that the dedication to St Cyr and St Julietta was made. The interior would have looked different, with wall paintings and a rood screen.

After the Reformation, whitewash hid the paintings and the rood screen was destroyed.

The building suffered rough treatment during the Civil War, then in the more prosperous 18th century box pews and a pulpit were added. But by the late Victorian period, the building was in poor repair and a complete restoration took place early in the 20th century.

Access to the church has changed over time. There seems always to have been a steep road up from the village, though not in the present cutting, and there were once steps up to the church near the wayside cross. Entry was by the north door, now closed off, by a path from the steps across the graveyard, and for the Squire and family, across from Newton House, over a bridge once the cutting was made. Church Lane was always a less steep route, and now the main entrance is from the south door and porch, to avoid the main road and cutting. Here can be seen the granite posts to the Vicarage, put there by Andrew Quicke in 1715. The Vicarage is now Glebe House but its grounds were once much larger and included Elmhurst and the modern Vicarage.

After Brian had given this general background, Jean divided everyone into four groups, and she, Brian, Midge Kelly and Isobel Hepworth stationed themselves around the graveyard, each describing a different aspect of the area as the groups walked around. This worked very well. Brian stood to the north of the church and explained that the north aisle was a late 15th-century extension, built when the village was prosperous, probably from the wool trade. This is shown by the ornate pinnacles, and the five buttresses, each with a niche for a statue. From the east they are St John the Evangelist, John the Baptist and a bishop, with the other two missing.

The window mullions are finished with corbelled heads and carvings of grotesque animals. In 1911, this wall was covered in ivy and in danger of collapse, being held up with props. In addition, the church tower was rendered and much of this render was falling off. Renovation was carried out between 1911 and 1915. Brian pointed out the original north door access, and the path to it, which is still discernible through the pattern of the gravestones.

Brian also drew attention to the Helmore graves. The Helmores are well known as local estate agents in Crediton, and a William Helmore is recorded as selling four properties near Exeter in 1699. The family business is thus three centuries old and had strong connections with the village, dealing with the sale of many properties, farms and land, and also renting a prominent cottage next to the ford on Pump Street, where it is likely that William Helmore (there have been at least eight William Helmores) carried out his business as a land agent and auctioneer in the mid-19th century.

Jean was positioned to the west, where she talked to the groups about two sets of gravestones in that area, the Crumps and the Quikes. Many will remember from Brian's mining leaflet how John Crump, a manganese miner, was accidentally drowned in the adit that emerges at Ford Farm, where his and two other men's bodies were washed out on 24th March 1842. He was one of a large family that remains local to the village.

Hedley Crump (1892-1918) grew up in Portsmouth, where his father was a naval quartermaster, but the family returned to Newton St Cyres, the family home, on his discharge. Hedley trained as a torpedo man and went almost right through the war, but sadly died of pneumonia as a complication of Spanish Influenza.

Three generations of the Quicke family lie in a vault near the gate across the bridge to Newton House. They date from the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th, but the family have been in Newton St Cyres since the mid-16th century, and there are many other graves and memorials to them in the churchyard and the church interior.

Midge has done a great deal of research into the Pasmore family, whose graves lie to the west of the church tower, and she talked about their lives. This account will be printed in full in September's Newton Wonder, so I will not repeat it here. But I can assure you it is very interesting.

Isobel talked about the south side of the church and two of the graves in the area. The old entrance to the rood screen platform can be seen in the wall near the vestry. It was blocked with square cut Posbury stone after the Reformation when the rood screen was removed. The central boss in the south porch, of the sow suckling her piglets, was pointed out as well as the quatrefoil window, unevenly worn, quite probably by a bell rope which would have passed through it in earlier times.

The clock on the tower dates from 1711, replacing the original one facing north towards Newton House. It failed in 1905 and fell into disrepair, but was repaired by John Durrant in the 1960s and now runs on electricity so does not need to be wound every day as it originally did. The sundial dates from 1816 and was used to set the clock before the advent of British Standard Time in 1880.

The grave of Reg and Nora Bray lies to the west of the gate, and many in the village will remember them. Reg was a gardener to the Quicke family and a bell ringer who is the oldest campanologist on record. To the east of the gate is the grave of Katherine Sannweldt 1833-1913. She was a 'beloved and devoted friend' of Lady Audrey Buller. Lady Audrey lived at Newton House when it was rebuilt after the disastrous fire of 1906. She was there from 1908, until her death 14 years later. At present we know nothing more about Katherine Sannweldt, but her surname is unusual, and the inscription says she was an aunt and had a sister. Was she German or maybe her father was, and what of her sister, and her nephews or nieces?

The truth of Brian's remarks about the way in which the church connects to national and international matters was demonstrated as the groups went round the outside of the church, and yet only a small portion of the stories and lives were considered.

The History Group aims to carry on with the momentum Brian started and now that we have a format, to keep publishing information about the village and its inhabitants. Much

information amassed over the years by Tim Sedgwick, Jean and others still has to be processed, and Midge has shown how much more there is to be researched.