

NEWTON ST CYRES HISTORY GROUP



Our meeting on April 14th was about the formation of the characteristic Devon landscape of hedges and boundaries. A huge amount of research and mapping work has been done by the DCC Historic Environment Service. Cressida Whitton, of the DCCHEs, explained how an accessible digital archive has been created which is available for public use. The record enables a breakdown of the land use from any time in history in Devon to be shown, and the changes in our own village are clear.

The talk used slides which demonstrated the different types of hedges and land boundaries – stone faced banks, and earth banks topped with stones or, more commonly planted with hedges which were laid and/or coppiced to prevent stock getting through or damaging the bank. Some of the most ancient ones which survive are Anglo-Saxon parish boundaries and probably three-quarters of Devon's hedges are medieval: because Devon and Cornwall were, unusually, enclosed early, many of the early strip farming systems were hedged about five hundred years ago. Even older are the Dartmoor 'reaves', dating from the Bronze Age, which were field and settlement boundaries, earth and stone banks which are still in place today in some areas. The barton fields of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reflected the convertible husbandry of alternating sheep and corn in fields to maintain fertility levels. By the eighteenth century, maps were being made with illustrated hedges and hedge trees beautifully drawn, and then came tithe maps which give detailed information about field names and enclosures. By the nineteenth century, field sizes had increased and were more regular. Cressida showed slides of this process in Newton St Cyres, which used to have many orchards and small enclosures, now largely disappeared. Indeed, it is estimated that Devon had 50 – 60,000 miles of hedges in the 1850s, which has now shrunk to 33,000 miles. In the last hundred years, field sizes have grown much larger and the mechanisation of farming has affected the hedgerows as well. Annual cutting by contractors results in a loss of hedge trees and of berries to feed the birds.

There is an argument that hedges are a luxury, and that fences are tidier and easier to maintain and interesting issues were raised during the evening, but it is hoped by the DCCHEs that in the future there will be an increased emphasis on restoring hedgerows, and using traditional management techniques. There is a Devon Hedge Group which works towards this and also grant aid is available. Clearly, a very great deal of information on land use in the past is reflected in the landscape all around us.

Next Meeting

Our meeting on Saturday, June 11th is an outing to North Wyke and South Zeal. Numbers are limited, so please contact Jean Wilkins on 851337 to book and for information on times and arrangements.

There are no meetings in July or August.

Our first Autumn meeting is on Thursday 15th September and details will be announced nearer the time.