

# Newton St Cyres History Group



Most people in the village have been into the church and seen the four large black lozenges hanging on the north wall, painted with heraldic symbols. Our talk on Thursday evening, 21<sup>st</sup> March, explained in fascinating detail the reason for and meaning of these 'hatchments'. They are called hatchments because the word is a corruption of 'achievements', which in heraldry means the armorial shield or escutcheon granted to someone by the king. There are over 86 of these surviving in Devon, the majority in churches, and we are lucky to have 4, all relating to members of the Quicke family. A hatchment was made when someone of social standing died, and it was carried at the front of their funeral procession and then hung above the door of their house for a period of mourning, after which it would be taken to the local church. Over time, many hatchments have disappeared or been destroyed, but a good many survive. They are made of canvas stretched over a frame, which was often covered in black crepe, with skull and crossbones painted on. They are really oil paintings and need a similar level of care in their restoration.

Our speaker, David Oates, has done a great deal of

work on the Devon hatchments, and the results are published in 'Hatchments in Britain Vol 7' (ed. Peter Summers and John Titterton). Using an example from the entrance in the stables at Killerton House, Mr Oates explained the elements which make up the design of a hatchment, and how much it can tell you about the people for whom they were made. A black background signifies death, but a white background means the arms bearer is still alive, so frequently a hatchment will be half black, half white, if a husband survives his wife or vice versa. The central shield will bear the family arms, and an eldest son has a 'label' or stripe with three tags. If the marriage produced no children, a skull will be at the base of the lozenge, but in the case of our hatchments this is not correct, as both of the Quicke marriages depicted on the hatchments did produce children, and Mr Oates could not explain this anomaly. He gave us a great deal of detail, though, on the many different degrees of nobility and the position within a family signified by the designs.

The heraldic designs on some hatchments can be very intricate, for instance on two in Poltimore Church. If a man married two or three times, then his wife's arms would be quartered on her side of the hatchment. This could go back for generations, recording many ancient families and their intermarriage, and providing a complex detective puzzle for the investigator. Mr Oates enjoys finding, if possible, portraits and other memorabilia of the people recorded and in the case of the Quicke family, portraits exist and could be paired up, and this brings to life the armorial designs.

The special language used to describe a heraldic design can be poetic. The crest on the Quicke arms is '*a demi antelope argent armed, attired, tufted and maned gules, collared sable lined or*'. 'Argent' means 'silver', 'gules' means 'red' and 'or' means 'gold'. You will appreciate that colour photography has made understanding these designs a great deal easier!

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Hatchments seem first to have developed in the Low Countries and to be related to the end of Catholicism and the beginning of the Reformation. They became particularly fashionable in the C19th and then went out of use in the twentieth century, quite rapidly. Two of the four in Poltimore church are among the oldest in Devon, dated 1691 and before. We all learned a good deal from this enjoyable evening, and can now look at the hatchments in the church and understand what we are seeing.

