

## FRAGMENTS OF LOCAL HISTORY : 1

Anyone who is pursuing the history of a local family is likely sooner or later to be looking at the inscriptions on headstones. They are useful because apart from the expected basic information they often contain, also, a scrap of family information which doesn't appear on the more formal records. ".... killed by enemy action at Beesands." " .... died in S. Africa of enteritis." ".... drowned in Start Bay." ". .... WAAF killed in action." but it may get over-demanding working through a large cemetery in pursuit of the family name.

Happily, those who are working on a family history around Stokenham are luckier! For there exists a two-volume listing of every legible inscription in any of the half-dozen burial-grounds of the area. Every one is numbered and has its location indicated on an associated sketch of the site. The books are on the local-history shelves of Kingsbridge Library or are available from local booksellers: they have the title "Stokenham: Records of Family Names."

There are 3000 references spanning 250 years (which tends to be the usual churchyard limit) and the index lists some 500 family names.

I ought to add that there are various other types of family records available around Stokenham which can extend family histories back to 1380 but not usually with the detail and exactitude which can be offered by memorial inscriptions.

W. A. Roberts

## FRAGMENTS OF LOCAL HISTORY ; 2

For 800 years, the history of the parish and the parish church have been interwoven. The story begins with the Saxons. In historically-recorded times the Saxons were the first to settle this area. Between 700 and 800 they established and named nearly all of the present-day villages.

These Saxons were pagans. They worshipped many gods but their leaders had recently been converted to Christianity by St. Augustine and others. The general population remained, for the time being, pagan, but the spreading of the Christian faith by missionary-priests was encouraged and protected.

The English church responded by setting up, in the southwest and elsewhere, religious centres from which missionaries constantly toured the centres of population, preaching the Christian gospel. One may envisage the visiting missionary-priest setting up his portable wooden cross at Stokenham on the rise where the church now stands, and preaching to whoever would come from Chillington and elsewhere to hear him. When the mission began to have some success, a shelter was constructed for the visiting priest and his audience.

Then came the Normans. Around 1185 Mathew fitz Herbert was made the first lord of the manor of Stokenham. He immediately built a fine new manor house and, by the side of it, a fine new manor church, replacing that earlier, slighter structure. He then set about appointing a priest to his new church – and a difficulty arose. A distant abbot asserted that he, alone, had the right to appoint priests to Stokenham. A long-running dispute between the lord and the abbot eventually reached the king's court, at Westminster' where several hearings of the case are recorded. It seems that the abbot eventually yielded. The manorial church which had been built soon after 1185 was thereafter recognised as Stokenham' own parish church. A church on that site has since served this parish for 800 years.

W. A. Roberts

### FRAGMENTS OF LOCAL HISTORY : 3

For a thousand years and more, working fishermen have put to sea from the beaches of Start Bay.

Early documents have many references to their activities on the coast, where they had their stores, fish cellars, drying grounds and workshops. But in the earlier centuries their homes were always a little inland, at places such as Beeson, for there was constant danger of raiders from the sea.

A pirate raider, Henry Muge, was hanged at Start Point as late as 1581, but by that time the great Elizabethan and Devonian mariners such as Drake, Frobisher and Hawkins were asserting English sea power and it was becoming safer to live on the coast. The first recorded reference to a house at Beesands seems to be that on 6 July 1588 John Player of Beeson broke into a fisherman's home at Beesands and stole handlines and nets, for which he was put in the stocks, and whipped.

By 1803, when the first Ordnance Survey map was made, there were half-a-dozen houses shown at the southern end of Beesands. By the time of the 1841 census Beesands and Beesands Cellars had 104 men, women and children living in 17 houses.

From this time onwards the fishing industry in Beesands increasingly flourished. Towards the end of the century there were dozens of boats operating off Beesands beach. Six to eight tons of crabs went to Billingsgate market each week during the summer: mackerel was sent to London and Bristol : other fish, including conger eels and cod caught on long lines during the autumn had a local sale. The community was prospering.

The 1885 Ordnance Survey map shows about 30 houses, with an inn, a public house, and a letter box. There is also shown, for the very first time, a "Church Mission Room". The story of St. Andrew's Church had begun.

W. A. Roberts

## **FRAGMENTS OF LOCAL HISTORY : 4**

**One way of estimating the pace of settlement and agricultural development in a rural area, over the centuries, is to date the origin of hedges by species count.**

**For an account by the originator of the proposition, Dr. M.D. Hooper, with associated papers by W. C. Hoskins and others, see the booklet 'Hedges and Local History' published by the Standing Conference for Local History in 1901.**

**Broadly, the principle is that a hedgerow, once established, is an environment within which there begins to occur a steady reversion towards the wildwood, involving the slow accretion of additional tree and shrub species by the accidents and incidents of nature.**

**The examination of large numbers of hedgerows whose different dates of initial construction were firmly known from documentary evidence showed that the growth in the number of species was linear with time and fortuitously occurs at the convenient rate of one species per century. The unit of measurement is a 30 yard stretch of uniform hedgerow uninterrupted by gates, walls or other distorting elements.**

**The writer has found, in the South Hams, that the technique is a satisfying one to use, principally because of its self-consistency and positiveness. The same count is usually obtained in successive thirty-yard stretches of the same uniform hedgerow, and different observers get the same results. The correlation with other sources of information is good.**

**For this activity it is not necessary to have highly developed botanical knowledge. It is sufficient to collect leaves or twigs from every different tree or shrub encountered in the 30-yard stretch and then count them. In practice, the species very quickly become familiar and recognisable, even if they cannot always be named : they are such as oak, alder, willow, holly and honeysuckle.**

**Such hedge-counts can be recommended as an agreeable pastime for a summer or autumn day. They are capable of giving a new and stimulating interest to a stretch of hedgerow which had previously become ordinary and familiar.**

**W. A. Roberts**

## FRAGMENTS OF LOCAL HISTORY : 5

Happily, south Devon's long local history is well served by books and documents, though one must sometimes work hard at them.

Among the older Devon histories, occasional treasure may be dug out from Westcote and from Risdon, both 1630; from Chapple's review of Risdon, 1785; from Polwhele, around 1800; and from Lyson, 1822. All are readily available in the Devon libraries. So is the Victoria County History for Devon.

Those who are bold enough to tackle palaeography and the Latin which was commonly used in official documents until 1733 are likely to find that the difficulties melt away as they resolutely and repeatedly approach them. The following books will help:

'Enjoying Archives' : David Iredale : David and Charles  
Contains a long engaging and helpful piece on Palaeography

'Court Hand Restored' : Andrew Wright : 1778, but readily available. Multiple examples of the commonest stylised hands.

'Latin for Local History' : Eileen a Gooder : Longman.  
Teachers translation from commonly-occurring local documents.

'Shorter Latin Primer' : B. H. Kennedy : Longman.  
Is the primer used with Eileen Gooder's book immediately above.

## FRAGMENTS OF LOCAL HISTORY : 6

### Magna Carta

King John was a most unpopular aggressive king, given to asserting his legal rights too unreasonably. He progressively alienated his nobility and eventually the barons of the north and of the east threatened revolt against him.

To avoid the outbreak of revolt the king had to capitulate and he did so by the signing of Magna Carta which gave to the aggrieved barons, and nominally to the population at large, the improved rights and freedoms which they had been demanding. Through the following centuries those rights, as they extended to the population at large, became the cornerstone of the personal freedom which we all enjoy under the law.

In the drafting of Magna Carta there was an attempt to save the king's face. In a preamble to the Great Charter the king is caused to say that he has been considering the condition of the country and has taken the advice of some twenty leading men of the state, whom he names. He goes on to say that certain changes are necessary, which he has decided to institute forthwith. They are, he says, as follows ... and then he goes on to list all the changes which the troublesome barons had been demanding.

In the list of twenty leading men of the state whom the king states he has consulted appears the name of Mathew fitz Herbert, the first lord of the manor of Stokenham. So Stokenham is importantly present in Magna Carta.

Mathew fitz Herbert's family had long been close to the Norman and successor kings, and there is evidence that Mathew did various pieces of negotiation for John. There is also evidence that King John gave rewards to Mathew apart from that immortality in Magna Carta. He made it possible for Mathew to marry Joan de Mandeville, one of the leading heiresses of the nation, who brought to Mathew a great increase in his possession of lands.

W. A. Roberts

## FRAGMENTS OF LOCAL HISTORY ; 7

One of the most colourful lords of Stokenham was John de Montacute, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Salisbury. He had a vivid and turbulent career.

He was a poet, a musician, a composer and a writer of many 'beautiful songs, roundels and lays'. His music must often have echoed around Stokenham church, especially at those favourite feast-days of Whitsun and Christmas.

John de Montacute also had a vigorous public career. He was a favourite at the court of King Richard II and at one time was his king's ambassador to France. He was also of strong religious feeling, being a Lollard, one of those people who looked for a simple uncluttered practice of religion, almost anticipating the Reformation.

Unfortunately, when there was a dispute over the succession to the throne, he backed the wrong man. A mob at Cirencester, seeking to curry favour with the new King Henry VI, beheaded him and sent the head to the king, who staked it on London Bridge as an example of what would happen to the king;' enemies.

This turbulent life-story came to the attention of Shakespeare, and John de Montacute, lord of Stokenham, is immortalised as the Salisbury who is a prominent character in Shakespeare's "Tragedy of King Richard II".

## FRAGMENTS OF LOCAL HISTORY : 8

Stokenham is a large parish and former manor of some 7000 acres and twenty settlements at the extreme southern tip of Devon on the shores of the English Channel. It has been, and remains, a deeply rural farming and fishing parish, slow to change.

It has plentiful artefacts and earthworks of the Stone Ages, the Bronze Age and the Iron Age, but negligible evidence of any Roman presence. Its recorded and documented history began with the Saxon settlers who from 700 AD began to move into the area behind the military force of their newly united nation. All of the present-day villages were settled or re-settled around that time, and many of them end their names with the late-Saxon 'ton' meaning homestead of farm.

By the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century the area was part of a major Saxon royal estate held by Countess Gytha who had received it from King Canute as part of her dowry. When Gytha's son, King Harold, was defeated and killed by the Norman invaders at the battle of Hastings in 1066 Gytha fled, and her estate became a royal Norman estate, part of the personal demesne of William the Conqueror. A hundred years later it was granted, as a manor of the Norman feudal system and was held under successive lords of the manor for the next 500 years, occasionally relapsing for a period into the hands of the reigning monarch.

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## FRAGMENTS OF LOCAL HISTORY : 9

- 1186 Mathew fitz Herbert's new Stokenham church marks the final local ascendancy of Christianity over the earlier paganism.
- 1215 Stokenham's first lord of the manor is named in Magna Carta as one of the Charter advisers to King John.
- 1218 Chillington becomes a borough and its burgesses are granted a royal licence to hold a weekly market.
- 1300 Discovered lepers were banished from the community, and some lived in the leper hospital at the western end of Chillington.
- 1349 For each of three years, the Black Death ravaged Stokenham, killing half the population and making many farms derelict.
- 1400 John de Montacute, poet, musician and lord of Stokenham, was executed, and later immortalised by Shakespeare.
- 1581 Henry Muge 'a pirate of the seas' was hanged in chains upon Start, marking the Tudor defeat of coastal piracy.
- 1588 Patrick Blare, vicar of Stokenham, was chaplain on the 'Ark Royal', flagship of the fleet which destroyed the Armada.
- 1588 Stokenham people carried away many gold and silver coins, and jewellery, from an Armada ship wrecked on Slapton Sands.

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## FRAGMENTS OF LOCAL HISTORY : 10

The Devon public libraries are powerful sources for local history. Kingsbridge, in its study area, has a generous local-history section. It contains the standard histories – Risdon, the Lysons, the Victoria County History for Devon and Hoskins – together with a full indexed set of the Devonshire Association Proceedings, collections of specialist information collated under parishes ... and much else.

Plymouth Local Studies Library has very much more, including many maps and such items as the bishop's registers of mediaeval times (on the left as you enter). The adjacent reference library has a much more diffuse collection (and a coin-operated photocopier)

Torquay has a snug and quiet separate local-history library where you will often be the only user and where the collection is wide-ranging.

The West Country Studies Library at Castle Street Exeter is the richest resource of all. It has maps, machines, census returns and much much more. Here, and at the near-by general reference library, there is a back-room store of bulky books and precious books : it is always worthwhile to enquire for 'difficult' items.

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## FRAGMENTS OF LOCAL HISTORY : 11

Effective maps covering large areas of local countryside are not available at dates much before 1800 : the art or skill of effective cartography developed late. There are, however, occasional plans of an estate or a few fields with which, perhaps, a particular document is concerned. Whenever you come across such a map lying within your boundary of interest, the safe rule is always to try to get a photocopy of it – for sooner or later you will want it.

There is a 1755 map of Devon by Benjamin Donn which is beautiful in the areas where it exists (it won a national competition) but it has many sad gaps. He was an honest cartographer who mapped only where he or his assistants had set their feet.

The threatened Napoleonic invasion brought the very first Ordnance Survey map – at one inch to the mile – and started an entirely new high quality of map making. Our local area was among the first to be mapped, the date of the survey being about 1798. David and Charles still produce a full set of these O.S. maps, folded and presented in just the same way as modern O.S. maps, and they are not expensive.

Many excellent O.S. maps have followed. Among the very best for the local-history purpose is the first edition of the 15-inch scale. It was published around 1886. It is meticulous in its detail, like modern O.S. maps and at this very large scale can give an immense amount of detailed information, down to individual trees in a hedgerow. Copies, for photocopying can be found in main Devon Libraries or, if all else fails, from the Map Library at the British Museum.

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## FRAGMENTS OF LOCAL HISTORY : 12

The Civil Registers can be a powerful help in the pursuit of local and family histories.

The civil registration of births, marriages and deaths became a legal requirement in England and Wales from July 1837. A complete index of every registration which has since been made anywhere in England or Wales is available for public inspection without formality and without charge. It is at the office of the Registrar General in St. Catherines House, 10 Kingsway, London WC2B 6JP

One enters from the street into a room full of bookshelves. Each book is of a standard kind, weighs about 20 pounds and covers one quarter of one year. There are desks at which to consult the volumes, and the place is usually quite full. Each one-line entry, in alphabetical order of name, has the date, the full names, the registration district and the reference. Certificates can be ordered on the spot if they should be needed : the index commonly makes them unnecessary.

This is a most valuable, authentic and complete source of information.

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