

Present: Brian, Peter, Ian, Ed, Nigel, Ann, Phil and Jane

Having welcomed members to the meeting, Brian started by asking if anyone had been able to follow up on the request for information on a talk given by Chris Dawson to the Sidmouth Historical Society in 1930. No-one had done so, but it was suggested that the index of newspaper entries made by the Butlers might be an easy way to check. Those with access to the index were encouraged to try this.

Ann then took the chair to feed back on the critical review of the Group undertaken as part of the re-accreditation of the museum. Although the History Group is not part of the museum, the two are connected in the aims of the SVA, and this is reflected in there being a joint trustee in the SVA Council. The feedback focused on a lack of engagement with the wider SVA membership and specifically that it failed to advance education of the public. This reflects the foundation of the History Group as a forum to facilitate the research of its active members, not to provide a service to the community. In requiring that the Group serve these wider aims, the accreditors are asking for a significant change of direction which requires that account is taken of the desire for the wider SVA membership for a Local History Group and their aspirations for what it should be and do. It was noted that the Group did not have a Terms of Reference and that these needed to reflect the SVA membership. Brian undertook to prepare a draft of a survey of SVA members to put to the SVA Council to action. Given the proximity to Christmas, Brian indicated that the next Group meeting would likely take place before the survey was agreed. It was noted that the alternative is for the Group to become independent and cease to be part of the SVA. Brian pointed out that a significant change of direction would require that a new leadership was found for the new group.

Ann went on to talk about some aspects of the museum photograph collection that had led to errors in publications. Many of the original photographs were pasted to display boards, while early attempts at digital copies were at low resolution, meaning that important features were sometimes not visible. As part of the move of the archive, a major effort was underway to recover the originals and to copy them at high resolution.

Ian reported on a valuable resource that is available on the BBC IPlayer. As a supplement to the BBC Great War series, broadcast in the 1960s, there were 13 interviews recorded with World War 1 servicemen. These interviews are now available on IPlayer under the title: "I was there". Nigel commented that there was also a valuable interview with an observer of the Battle of Coronel in the Imperial War Museum.

Ian also reported on the foundation of a new group "Cherishing Sidmouth Cemeteries" by the Vision Group for Sidmouth, with the aim of addressing some of the perceived current shortfalls and inconsistencies. With his experience of cemetery friends groups elsewhere, Ian was critical of the lack of clear objectives and of the lack of heritage input. It was also pointed out that cemeteries did not include all burial grounds (although subsequent research suggests that the Church of England, at least, treats the two words as synonyms). Given the number and heterogeneity of the burial grounds in the Sid Valley, it was not obvious what input the History Group should have. Ed commented on the change of direction of the gravestones in the Parish Church graveyard and noted that this coincided with the boundaries of the churchyard extensions. Brian confirmed that this seemed to be the case, but that he had not seen a reason for the change of direction. As several members noted, the normal alignment is East-West in churchyards.

Ed reported that he was working on a new book on the history of significant trees in the Sid Valley – where they came from and how they got there. He was drawing on maps and documents in the Bicton archive which showed that planting of the Bicton Araucaria avenue was supervised by Veitch

but using trees supplied by another nursery, Loddiges' from seeds brought back in 1828 by McCrae for the Horticultural Society (they became Royal in 1861). Veitch did a slapdash job and incurred Lady Rolle's displeasure when the trees did not grow uniformly.

Nigel introduced us to Berkley Levett (1863-1941), equerry to the Duke of Connaught who visited Sidmouth in four consecutive winters, 1931-4. Berkley Levett came from a wealthy Staffordshire family. When he inherited, he sold up and moved to Lancaster Gate in London. He was a bit of a dandy, mixing with royal friends and became a gentleman usher. He served for a time in India and bought Cottington House in 1920 (the house was pulled down in the 1950s to make way for Cottington Mead) and may have been instrumental in persuading the Duke to visit. Brian commented that he had always thought that the Duke of Connaught's connection with Sidmouth came from Howard Elphinstone, whose father lived in Sidmouth, and who was governor to the Duke in his younger years, but that this sounded rather more likely. Nigel recently learned that Berkeley Levett lived at Hylton on Seafeld Lane, probably before Cottington. The present owners say there was a secret drinks cupboard in the hallway. Levett's main claim to fame is that he took part in the 'Royal Baccarat Scandal' of 1890 when a fellow soldier was caught cheating which led to a court case enlivened by the presence of the Prince of Wales who was also a witness. Roy Hattersley, in his book about the Edwardians, writes that although baccarat was illegal, "worse still in the eyes of many Englishmen, it was popular in France."

Peter reported that he had been working on listing the archives of Sidmouth Bowling Club (SBC). The club was formed in 1908, became moribund in WW1 until 1922 when it moved to its current location from its original location opposite the Bedford Hotel. The archive includes minute books, photographs and playing records. Other club members have also been involved in the work of listing. When complete the Management Committee of SBC will have to make a decision as to an appropriate place of deposit to ensure the safe preservation of the Archive for the future and access for researchers. In answer to a question Peter said that a history of the club was written in 2008 but not published.

The next meetings will be held as follows at 7pm at 12 Church Street:

8th January

11th March

13th May