

Notes from History Group meeting on 8th May 2023

Present: Ian, Ed, Robin, Phil, Brian

Brian opened the meeting and introductions were made.

Brian reported progress with the proposal to use crowd sourcing to transcribe the Heineken weather record, 1836-1876.

Nigel was successful in finding a newspaper report for the reconstitution of the Choral Society, but not in its original formation. He will send an image of the report on the reconstitution concert to Brian and will check for the original formation in the Mercury.

Brian advertised the national initiative, "their finest hour" which aims to collect memoirs etc relating to life in WW2. Members are invited to visit <https://theirfinesthour.english.ox.ac.uk/> and to upload their stories or stories they have inherited.

Phil alluded to the report on the Roxburgh flats and asked if there were more photos. Brian promised to send them to him.

Robin said that he had a good collection of material relating to the Norman Lockyer Observatory. He then referred to the architecture of Sampson. A discussion followed on Sampson's connection with the Arts & Crafts movement and it was agreed that he was not a leading exponent.

Ian had visited the Sidbury non-conformist chapel prompted by Phil. It is situated just off the East Devon Way beyond Hatway Hill. Now used as a barn, the windows show clearly its earlier use. Nothing is yet known about this chapel – when it was built, why it was so far out of the village, when it ceased to be used.

Robin referred to the poor resolution of early 19th Century maps of Sidmouth. Brian agreed that the 1807 survey was rather coarse and suggested that most people work from the tithe map – or for manor property, the 1790 Day map. Brian pointed out that for east of the river, there was an excellent map from 1804. Brian promised to send a copy of the latter to Ed, and of the former to Robin.

Nigel has taken on the task of pulling together an exhibition to mark the 60th anniversary of the East Devon AONB, on the theme of the last 60 years. The exhibition will take place on August 17-21. He has material promised on the Knowle building and hopes to do something on coastal erosion. Brian offered the Roxburgh flats. He mentioned that he had copies of the minutes from the handover of the Sidmouth Urban District Council to the East Devon District Council at the Knowle. As part of a contribution on the cemeteries, Ian had identified Edward Stanford as a significant resident who seemed to have been missed. Born in 1827, he founded Stanfords in London in 1853, which remains the largest map retailers in the world. He came to live at Helens in 1887, shortly after his retirement. His son Major William Stanford continued to live here until his death in 1931.

Nigel reported on a visit to the Devon Rural Archive in Modbury to give a talk. Brian said that he often received material about the Archive but didn't circulate it because it was such a difficult place to get to. Nigel concurred from his experience in trying to find it. However, he said they have excellent facilities including a very good library.

Nigel then introduced the topic of shipbuilding, which he hoped to refer to in the display boards for the new Ham walk. Brian was sceptical that there was much to say, though it is known that there was

a yard at the eastern end of the esplanade in the 19th Century. Robin referred to an early 19thC lithograph showing a two-masted ship in the bay and suggested that it would be worth looking at directories for shipbuilders or for chandlers. [post meeting note: some directories from 1838-1878 (but not others!) list William Connatt/Conant as a boat builder]. There are no other relevant references in the 19thC directories. However, a look at the Conant family memoir reveals that in 1779 Robert Conant of Sidmouth, shipwright, married Mary Bartlett also of Sidmouth. So, it appears that the Conant family, alone, kept the trade going over a fairly long period.

Brian finished by reverting to his study of the relationship of the Domesday salt house to St Peter's Chapel. He pointed out that in the 1322 deed to redefine the boundary between Sidmouth and Salcombe Regis, the measured distance seawards from the chapel takes you almost exactly to today's mean high-water mark on the beach, and then along the beach to the end of Ham Lane. At this point it is reasonable to assume that the boundary was defined from the high-water mark confirming that the high-water mark has not moved significantly in the last 700 years, presumably because any erosion by the sea was balanced by the aggregation of material in the shingle bank. During this period, it seems likely that the cliffs on either side have retreated more than 100 metres, based on current rates of retreat and evidence recorded by Peter Orlando Hutchinson (POH), mainly relating to the Chit Rocks. If correct, this means that the Sidmouth seafront would have been at the head of a significantly indented bay in the early 14th century, as depicted in POH's sketch.