

Notes from History Group meeting on 18th September 2023 held at 12, Church Street

Present: Andrew, Lynn, Roger, Mary, Nigel, Ian, Anna, Ed & Brian

Brian opened the meeting by outlining the forthcoming meetings of the Devon History Society

Ed passed on a query about Elm Cottage, believed to have been in Seafield Road, that may have been the home of a blacksmith.

Ed then went on to say that he had hoped to join an AONB group on Sidbury Castle to see if he could locate six of Cullen's plants found only on that hill. Unfortunately, the outing was postponed to October due to bad weather.

Anna asked about the origin of the building we were meeting in. Nigel replied that parts of its history were obscure, but that the old part of the building is believed to be the Villa Verde referred to in Mogridge's guide in 1836 and was probably built between 1810 and 1820. Later it appears in censuses as two dwellings, one called Villa Verde and the other The Retreat. At this time we believe it was sometimes let to curates at the parish church, opposite. [post meeting note: George Wilson Macpherson, organist and choirmaster at the parish church, was living there in 1892. In addition to his church duties, he offered music lessons and conducted the Sidmouth Choral and Orchestral Society]. The extension was initially built as one storey in 1922 to a design by Sampson (though not to his original, very expensive, design). The upper storey was added in 1967.

Nigel introduced a very attractive book about the artist Richard Bevis, 1824-96. Although born in Exmouth, his father moved to Sidmouth as a cobbler when he was 4 years old, living in High Street, New Street and Fore Street. His eldest brother and youngest sister died young, and his mother died of consumption. From the age of six, he drew on the walls of their home. His father disapproved, but he was encouraged by Rev'd Heineken who was unitarian minister at this time, and who provided him with drawing materials. When aged 20 he left for London and became a successful artist, traveling extensively. He painted very little of Sidmouth, but Sheffield art gallery holds some early paintings. He married in 1859 Laura Rafarel in Barnstaple. Coincidentally, Laura's grandfather, Claude Rafarel, born c1771, had fled France during the Revolution and settled in Sidmouth. He was a well-known figure and an expert pastry chef much sought after for social occasions.

Lynn brought a copy of "Stopping the Rot" which she shared. She summarised the early history of Manor Road, originally called Redlands Road after the Hotel, which was owned by Mr Pickard. His descendant still lives in the town and can trace his forbears to a Town Clerk of Sidmouth. The original occupant of Lynne's house was a Denys, retired from the Indian Army. A discussion followed on whether Sidmouth was particularly attractive to retirees from Indian service. While there are several in the history of the town, it seems that there were not unusually high numbers here.

Andrew reported that he had taken on the role of publications officer for the SVA. He has particular interests in the two world wars of the 20th century and lives at Pauntley.

Mary reported that the Sidmouth Observer was now available from British Newspapers Online.

Due to heating works at 12, Church Street, the next meeting will be a week later than normal on November 20th at 7pm at the same location. Thereafter, we plan to revert to second Mondays of alternate months, i.e. January 8th, March 11th, May 13th 2024