

Present: Brian, Ian, Nigel

Several apologies were received, largely due to the inclement weather.

Brian gave the main presentation, outlining his progress with transcribing Peter Orlando Hutchinson's History of Sidmouth. Brian reported that he had completed a first draft of volumes 1-4 and that the resulting pdf file had been sent for loading on the SVA web site, linked from the History page*. The process had been helped by using optical character recognition on the printed version of the History, published in the 1930s. This covered most of Volumes 2 & 3 and parts of Volumes 1 and 4. While making the text searchable, he had retained POH's sketches and transcriptions as images so as to be sure they were faithful to the originals. Unfortunately he had been working from a black and white photocopy of the History and so the pictures were not of top quality. Volume 1 has already been made available by the East Devon AONB. This is in image format, so has the full colour of the original images but is not searchable.

Brian said that POH's main sources were the National Record Office (initially in the Tower of London, then at Carlton Ride and finally in Chancery Lane), the library at Avranches in Normandy, the archive of Mont St Michel at St Lo in Normandy, the national archives in Paris, the Otterton Cartulary and the records of Exeter Cathedral. It was commented that he did a lot of travelling. Brian emphasised the importance of his transcriptions especially of the Otterton Cartulary, which is believed to be still in private hands, and the St Lo archives, which were destroyed during the D-Day invasion in 1944. Brian noted, however, that POH did not appear to have accessed the Exeter City records, as he did not refer to the port records (which reference Sidmouth ships operating into Exeter in the 14th Century) nor the 1434 inventory of the church, which is on the back of a guildhall record. An interesting point about the St Lo records is that several of them also appear as copies in the Otterton Cartulary, but with small errors. POH cross-referenced his transcripts, so they are probably more accurate.

Transcripts of the Otterton Cartulary also appear in Oliver's Monasticon, but he makes some more serious errors, which POH did not spot until drawn to his attention later, including the suggestion that the church was re-consecrated in 1259, which was actually a reference to another church. There is no known record of the church's consecration, but we know that the original church dated from the mid-12th Century. These errors remained in the History and have been propagated by subsequent writers.

A more curious slip relates to POH's reading of the Exon Domesday. He comments that the numbers of tenants etc must be wrong because they are too small and specifically because there is a salt house but no salt workers. On the contrary, Domesday specifically refers to 33 salt workers in the Otterton return, which includes Sidmouth.

A great feature of the History is the inclusion of both eyewitness memories and hearsay in the more recent period from the late 18th century to the middle of the 19th century. Some of these are of doubtful relevance where they appear, but with the more recent shift towards historical studies of people as well as events, they are of great value. He is very careful to include appropriate caveats, but the hearsay, in particular, needs to be treated with caution.

POH takes the opportunity at various places to indulge in polemical arguments about people's behaviour – often relating bad behaviour in past centuries to the enlightened attitudes of the late 19th century. Some of these are now quite anachronistic.

Along the way he tells some gripping stories. For instance the material he collected on the 1824 storm is exemplary. He finds an intriguing mystery associated with a murder in Gloucester in the 13th

century which may have involved parties from Budleigh. And there is the fascinating story of the Salcombe Regis body snatchers.

All can now be found by using the search facility in the Acrobat reader.

Nigel commented that it was a shame that POH did not adopt photography. He noted that his friend Heineken took some and that he also kept a diary which it would be of great value to locate.

Nigel also commented on POH's engagement in musical evenings at the homes of his acquaintances in Sidmouth, particularly those held at Lime Park by Gen. Walker, which were also frequented by Gen Rumley of Arcot House and Gen Elphinstone of Livonia House. Much of the music was of composers who are completely unknown today and was often arranged for whatever instruments were present – POH generally taking his flute and French horn. As an aside, we trawled through the maps to find when Lime Park was developed around the old house. The 1946 OS map showed just the house whereas a 1952 street map showed the road serving the new development, so it seems that the development took place between those years.

Ian introduced a different topic relating to an enquiry received about a Jewish lady called Freunde who escaped the Nazi persecution and came to Sidmouth for a time before or during the second world war. The 1939 census places her elsewhere. Brian looked up the 1935 and 1939 Kelly's directories without success.

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

15th July

16th September

11th November

*Post meeting note: The complete transcript of volumes 1 – 5 is now complete and is (or very shortly will be) linked from the bottom of the History of Sidmouth Page on the SVA website. Beware, the pdf file is 109Mb so will take a while to download.