

History Group notes from the meeting on 10th March 2025

Present: Brian, Ed, Ian, Peter, Shan

Brian opened the meeting with some matters arising from the January meeting.

Regarding the location of the Shambles, the early deeds that mention the Shambles refer to a "house at south of the Shambles", implying that the Shambles ran approximately north-south. 1653-1747 Inspection of the tithe map of 1840 shows that, apart from the main thoroughfare of Old Fore Street – Prospect Place (which we can assume was not the Shambles), there is only one road that has this orientation. The remains of this road now run to the western side of Duke's and give access to the back of the Elizabeth Hotel, but in 1840 the road extended much further north, into the back of where Fields is now. Unfortunately, this area was not manor property in 1789, so it is not clear on the 1789 map whether the road extends in the same way.

While inspecting the 1789 map, with respect to current moves regarding the listing of the Church Cottage on Church Lane, Brian also noticed that access to the cottage was marked as being down Church Lane from the High Street – not from the front of the church. The map also appears to indicate a parking or turning area between the cottage and the church. It is believed that the church may not have had a lych gate onto Church Road until the 20th Century, so it would seem that funerals approached the church from Church Lane, and the coffin was then carried round the north side of the church to the west entrance.

Shan reported on her enquiry to the Town Council regarding VE day commemoration in Sidmouth. She was disappointed at the level of ambition in what was planned. A discussion ensued on whether the History Group should attempt to organise some sort of exhibition. However, Shan felt that she would be unable to lead such an effort on the short timescale available.

Ed brought us up to date on his readings of Tindall's diary. He described the difficulty of removing Dunning's pier and shared a sequence of pictures of the sequence of collapse and rebuilding of the Esplanade, starting in 1923 and not finishing until the summer of 1926.

Peter raised a query about the origin of Sidmouth's fortifications. Referring to Sarah Jones' chapter in the SVA publication "Sidmouth: A History", it seems that in 1628 the Deputy Lieutenants of Devon asked the Earl of Bedford to petition the Privy Council for a fort. He asked if anyone knew what the reference was for this. It is not clear whether a fort was built then or later. POH, in his History of Sidmouth, records that the earliest reference to the fort in the parish records is in 1697. It was noted that the southwest coast was prone to attacks, both from the French and from Barbary pirates. Todd Gray in "Devon and the Slave Trade" quotes sources estimating that many thousands of Devonians were enslaved by the Barbary pirates during this period.

The meeting ended with a discussion, led by Brian, on whether the group should organise a public event during Local History Month (May). A possible idea was to hold the normal May meeting in the afternoon, instead of the evening and to open it up for people to come in with their questions or with stories. Also to have a selection of interesting documents to show. Those present were happy to be involved. It was noted that the showing of any old documents would require a dedicated person for security reasons. In view of the positive response, Brian said that he would follow up with Ann Tanner and Nigel Hyman.

Next meetings, all at 12, Church Street

Monday 12th May, 7pm

Monday 14th July, 7pm

[Post meeting note: Following the forthcoming SVA AGM, the current Local History Group will be dissolved and replaced by a new activity to promote local history research, led by the Museum. The July meeting will be the last of the current group. In view of this the suggested May open meeting will not take place].