

Teign Valley Tales



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Christow Show

Published by the Teign Valley History Group

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FOREWORD

The Teign Valley History Group celebrates its 5th birthday this year and it is perhaps time to recap some of its activities over that time.

There is evidence of life in the valley over the past 4000 years so our existence is just a blink of the eye. We know comparatively little of how that life was lived because nothing was written down and even the Second World War destroyed some of that. Over the last 50 years Devon accents have been overtaken by a universal often television influenced accent so fewer and fewer people still show evidence of their origins when they speak. The state of dialects is even worse so now apart from a few single words they are rarely heard. Oral recording therefore becomes increasingly important before it is too late. To that end in 2010 I started visiting people who had lived in the locality for many years to ask them of their experience of growing up here. Progress is slow but I have accumulated several of which the transcriptions appear here. Geologically Christow is on the Metamorphic Aureole that surrounds Dartmoor so has a mixture of farming, quarrying & mining & this is brought out very well in these conversations.

Casual conversation doesn't progress in orderly form as you might expect in a book so you will come across repetition but I have not interfered with that other than to censor those rare parts which might be considered libellous or hurtful to other people. Memory can be a problem as one's age progresses so some of the speaker's assertions can be inaccurate but I have kept these unaltered. The actual conversations remain on record but will have to wait till we have an area in which we can display our archive. I have to thank everyone who so generously took part and allowed these conversations to be published. They provide a good insight into life in the area in a time which for many of us is just beyond living memory.

Other topics of research are gradually accumulating and it is gratifying that we have a number of members who have spent time collecting subjects of interest and some of these are to be aired at a forthcoming meeting.

Anyone who would like to carry out research of the Valley is welcome to join us or to ask us for advice from us. We are mostly beginners but are learning.

Special recognition should be given to Stafford Clark, our late president, who was known County-wide and who has had a head start in looking at local history. He has shown us the way & we hope to keep up the tradition.

Thanks also go to our production team who pulled together so well and made this publication possible, especially Judith Harvey of RHE Media, Exeter for all her help and advice, but the greatest thanks must go to the residents who are recorded here for their invaluable contributions to our history.

Graham Thompson

March 2015



Alfred (Alf) Stonelake

1929-2013

29th October 2010



The photograph on the mantelpiece is of my 2 sons. I had 3 sons. I lost one son killed in an accident right outside here, knocked down by the bus. They're in a shop in Plymouth.

You know the church here, Stafford Clark may have mentioned it to you but did he ever mention to you that there was a Methodist Chapel. It was just over from where you live. There was a Baptist's one up the top of Dry Lane. I've always belonged to the church. This was very small. I was born 11th March 1929. That was the first year,

funnily enough, that there was an agricultural show down here in the field. The people who built the Community Hall are gone now, bankrupt and finished. They were £300m in debt, recently, a little while back.

My mother was a sister in the mental hospital at Exminster. She was one of a lot of people who lived in the hospital and worked in the hospital. I've still got relations who work in mental hospitals now. She was married before me. Her name was Rodway, my name is Stonelake, so you can see the name of the cottage, Rodstone.

I joined the church choir when I was 6 or 7. You know what it's like with a young voice. You sing and sing.

It all burnt down here, 1st January 1946. 4 thatched houses were burnt down. This house and the next one were rebuilt. There was a bungalow built, a little bungalow. We don't talk to these either side of us. We don't speak to those either side of us. We just keep to ourselves. My sons, now, have been where they are now since 1989. They'd been butchers all their lives. They didn't want anything to do with what I was doing.

I worked on the railway on the Teign Valley line from Heathfield to Exeter. I was chiefly a patrol man, went along seeing everything was all right. It was closed down in 1968. It's a thing now they wish they'd never done. Lord Beeching, he took it and killed a lot off. Then I went into Exeter. I used to do the patrolling all in around Exeter St David's all around the Exeter fitting work. I was on my own, no one with me. I used to walk down this end, the west end and then all the way down to Powderham. Down one day, back the following day. That was the kind of things I done. I had a lot of friends as you can imagine.

One day this man came over to me and asked me "Are you Alfred Stoneman? I wonder if you'd like to sign this for me. You've been put forward to be a representative for British Rail. You'll be allocated the area from Bridgewater in Somerset to Penzance and also from Yeovil to Exeter and all the branch lines as well. You are the Sectional Council Representative and you must deal with all they."

I had been walking, walking and walking. I hurt my leg; I had 6 or 7 operations in 2002 and 2003. They did one operation in Exeter and they found that the bone that they put in wasn't long enough so I had to have another operation and another and another and it went on and on. The doctors who are here now are looking after me, they really are. I have connections with them, a certain amount of connections with the doctors from Christow. We had a lady coming in here and doing a lot of work for my wife. She did live into the 21st Century but my wife died at Moretonhampstead in May 2001. In 2001 and 2003 there was lots of MRSA in the hospitals. They asked me if I would move. I said I would if they wanted me to but my sons are down in Plymouth and they have their own business down there. We've got a nice garden at the back here of the cottage. I was born here and I wanted to stay here. I didn't want to move into the town. I love it in the country. We had a lot of alterations done, out the back here. We have a large garden.

My father is buried just inside the gate there. He used to work on the farms, wherever he was wanted. He worked digging potatoes and catching rabbits; that's what he used to do. They used to drink a lot of cider, in this part of the world. We had cider places all around here. You can't go outside and make a phone call very well because you're surrounded by hills in Christow. There's Bennah Hill, Commons Hill, then Foxhole and you come around down the valley and you are surrounded by hills in Ashton.

I was born when this was a thatched cottage. I had 2 sisters older than me. One is still alive and lives in Exmouth now. She must be 88, something like that. I had a sister who died who went to live in Kent. As I was working on the railways here in the last 6 years before it closed, the railway between Heathfield and Exeter. My job was going along seeing if everything was all right, on my own. When I went to Exeter I had to cycle to work. Can you imagine what that was like? Up Culver Hill and places like that. It used to take me an hour to cycle. There was no such thing as the bicycles they got now. The lady who does the ironing for me and my son is cycling from here to Coplestone to have dinner with her brother

in law! You can't believe it. Half past four she was going to cycle to Coplestone.

[Stafford Clark] has been involved in a lot of the building around here. His father, Wilf Clark, built the 2 bungalows across from the butcher's shop, 2 small bungalows. They were built for £483 in 1938 and they were Methodists same as my next door neighbour was. He was a Methodist. They used to go to Sunday School at the Wesleyan Chapel. We would never do that; we were in the church. I was in the choir for 30 odd years. I know Mr Archer's 2 sons very well, I done several things for them.

Just below here it was very very narrow, very narrow. These cottages that were here were built right on the road years ago and there was a farm just around the corner. You used to go farming before you left school at 14. The farmer would tell us he wanted us. You didn't have to go to school because it was the war. We used to go to Tottiford cutting down trees, not the fir trees but the ones in between for firewood. Nowadays Tottiford there a lot of policemen out there! We spent a lot of time at Tottiford. We used to have 2 or 3 days a week off school. You didn't learn a lot, only a lot of nonsense really. There were no school meals, you had to come home for dinner and you had an hour and a quarter and then go back again. My brother was living here with my mother. He worked in New House, just up the road. He fell out with an old farmer who threatened to stick a 4 pronged fork through and he said he'd had enough of him and he left. In the Royal Devon there's a great big granite building, a mental hospital. He was in charge of that place. The old RD&E was up the slope a bit.

When I was in the railway a little short chap used to play skittles with me. He told me when he was playing skittles one night and talking to a man who told him they were going to knock the hospital down. They'd brought the sea sand from Exmouth and not washed all the salt away and it crumbled away the doorways and they spent £12m and my brother was taken up to the top of the hospital and they had to take it all down because the salt was crumbling the sand away. The RD&E was knocked down before 2000. They've enlarged

it now and made a hideous place of it now. That's neither here nor there. It's gone.

I was 14 years and 2 months when I left school. I was born March 11th 1929 and a certain time in May, you got to remember that war was being declared some time after and there was trouble between Germany and England. The farmer at Waterwell was told that he had to do this and do that. He had 3 sons and 3 daughters and he lived at Waterwell. His name was Edwards, Henry Edwards. He lived there a long time. They all came under the Canonteign Estate. He had 80 acres and he had to grow potatoes and everything. Beside the farm he had a very long field, the field was for the Torquay people. They were trying to grow everything in a long field by the Torquay reservoir. They grew a lot of stuff but the rabbits had quite a bit of it. We used to have to go out there and we used to pick it by hand. They used to dig them by hand and they were put in hessian bags that took 1cwt of potatoes. I was driving a horse back from Tottiford in the night coming down Bennah Hill and taking half a ton of potatoes to Waterwell so they could boil them up and give them to the pigs. We had to sort them out. If you put a green one in with the seed ones, the size of an egg, they'd give you a smack around the ears. There were some terrible things that went on at these farms. Some things on the farms were nice. We used to take people from up the country to the farm the other end of the Tottiford for a cream tea. I was 14 years and 2 months old when I left school. I never forgot, now I can laugh thinking about it. My sister's husband was in the army. Before he was in the army she worked for Simmonds in London for a long time. She had 2 girls. My mother was living then in a small cottage around here. They came and asked my sister what she was doing for a living. They asked what my mother did. He told her she had to do a job. My sister's husband was abroad and she had to go to work. My mother had to look after the girls. My sister was 5ft 4 and she had to go down to Trusham and work the shifts in the signal box during the war while the Americans were being taken down to Heathfield and they went over to Stover, didn't they. She had 10 children altogether, 8 boys

and 2 girls. She lost quite a few of them. She went up to Kent to live when this place burnt down. I went up there but I didn't like it and my mother didn't like it. My mother didn't like the country up there. My mother's first husband was called Rodway and he died. He was in the mental service in Exminster. When he died my father used to go to see who he was considering was his girlfriend, my mother. He used to walk from here, walk mind, up around Haldon and down to Kennford to see my mother in Exminster. Those youngsters that run around nowadays they don't do nothing. He would go Saturday nights and come back ready for work on Monday mornings.

I went up to Scatter Rock at the top for 3 or 4 years then there was talk about it closing. Have you heard about the ropeway behind the Teign House Inn? My other sister used to work on that, the other sister that I had. I stayed up there some time then I went underground up left by the Teign House Inn where they were getting Barytes.

This young man was up in Shropshire and they were getting the Barytes out. He was getting very thin and he decided he had relations in Teign Village. His brother was an electrician, lived until quite recently. There was a public house near where the Nobody Inn is, a little way up from there, a 2 door pub called the New Inn. This is the truth. I was working at the mines at the time. They talked about this bloke dying. He come down from Shropshire and worked in the mines. When he died, they went and got the coffin from the mortuary and thought they'd buried him. They took the coffin out, buried it and then found they'd left the body behind in Exeter. They buried the coffin without the body as he was only about 4 stone. It's called the Nobody Inn now.

I was a trammer, pushing the trucks 300 odd feet full of Barytes. You had to climb ladders to go out. I've got photos, I'll show you.

I used to go round with Chips Barber showing him the different places on the railway on the Teign Valley Line. Most of Stafford Clark's stuff about the railway is nonsense, it's not true. Here's a photo of the Parish Council, years ago. Nobody knows I've got that one.

Christow Post Office was over, you know the Artichoke, come down the road a little way and there's a 4 bedroomed house next to Aysgarth. That's where the Post Office was. Mrs Sylvia Wills, I used to be with her when I played the organ, she was Sylvia Salter and she lived in a little cottage which was part of the Artichoke. Next door to her there was a bloke called Fred Ball and he had 5 children and he lived there with his wife. It was joined to the Artichoke. It takes a bit of believing.

I used to walk up through the tunnel. The back of Christow Church and the Sunday School in 1900 and something. The names on the back are all the people who used to go to church. My wife was working in Longdown and met an old lady and told her she lived in Christow and she gave her the photo. Any amount of people would want that photo; they don't know I've got it.

My mother gave me 6d to spend at the Dunsford Show and I went up there and rode up in the cart and I lost my 6d in the 3 fields at Dunsford Show. Someone found my 1947 6d piece years later - "Lucky Find" - 55 years later he found it.

The photo in the churchyard just across the road, that was Henry Edwards, the old farmer.

There was a tree brought over from Australia in the 18th Century. It grew against the church wall and the woodpeckers used to get into that tree.

The mine picture is the Teign Valley Barytes mine. Wheal Augusta.

The gentleman was called Rendell. The houses were privately owned. Where Briony Falks lived there was a shop there that sold biscuits. There was a shop a little way up Butt Lane by the Artichoke.

Snapshots taken by my brother; there's one at the top of Butt Lane looking across Christow. There's one at the very top of the village, a picture of the well at the top of Dry Lane towards Commons Hill. There's a photo of me at my father's funeral. I was only 3 when he died.

Christow Station was never in Christow, it was in Doddiscombsleigh. There were 7 cottages where Strattons is now.

There's a photo of my wife and myself. She really used to work,