



# Moretonhampstead History Society

## Newsletter

May 2009

### May Meeting:

Our May meeting will take place on Wednesday 20th May at 7.30pm, as usual in the Community Club. The subject will be:

**'The Romans in Devon'  
Speaker - Derek Gore**

Derek Gore is a Teaching fellow in the Archaeology Department of Exeter University, and has published short works on the Romans and Vikings in Devon.

*Non members of the Society are very welcome to join us for a donation of £2 payable at the door.*

### April Meeting:

At our April meeting, a packed room welcomed Jane Marchand, one of the National Park's Archaeology Team. Jane gave an illustrated talk about the use of Leats on Dartmoor. The earliest were cut by tin miners in the thirteenth century, one of the largest being at the Golden Dagger Mine. Leats were also cut for domestic purposes, to serve water mills for grinding grain and fulling cloth, for example. There is evidence of these manorial leats at Chagford and Clifford Bridge. Probably the best known early leat is Drake's Leat, constructed in 1591, which ran eighteen miles from the river Meavy to Sutton, Plymouth. Sir Francis Drake, who owned mills at Mill Bay, is believed to have initiated and supervised the work this leat continued in use until Burrator Reservoir was built at the end of the nineteenth century. The longest leat is the Devonport Leat, running forty miles from the West Dart to Devonport. This leat was built to provide clean water to the rapidly expanding Devonport dockyard. It, too, continued in use until the construction of Burrator. Today, leats bring water to small hydro-electric schemes which provide environmentally sustainable power. Mary Tavy Hydropower supplies the whole of Tavistock and Old Walls Hydropower supplies Widecombe and Ponsworthy. There is potential for a much greater use of Dartmoor's ample water supply to generate electricity.

### **Wendy Coombes.**

### Butter & Eggs!:

*Peter Wills, a History Society member who lives in Suffolk, but whose family connections here go way back, writes:*

A most interesting note on the French prisoners of war in Moretonhampstead. (*March Edition of The History Society Newsletter*) I can also offer the following, from the family notes:

There is a family legend that Elizabeth Wills, laden with butter and eggs, would ride her pony to Dartmoor Prison, at Princeton, and would sell them to the American prisoners of war captured in the War of American Independence and incarcerated there.[1] In fact, the prison was built after 1806, long after the War of Independence, to house French prisoners captured in the wars against Napoleon, but well in time to house American prisoners captured in the War of 1813. Moretonhampstead at that time was full of captured French officers on parole who had been billeted in the village - though the number who used to run away, in spite of having promised not to, confirms one's worst suspicions of the French. At the prison, where the rank and file were detained, there was a daily market at which the prisoners would, for food and other necessaries, exchange "exquisite artefacts made out of bone and odd bits of wood, including beautiful models of buildings and ships in complete detail". Today these are prized collectors' items and sell for large sums. Elizabeth would have made the journey across the Moor on the turnpike road which had been constructed in

1772, making it passable for wheeled vehicles as well as pack horses. The old track used to be marked with a line of very tall poles, which acted as a guide to travellers who were caught in the vicious Dartmoor snowstorms which could leave snowdrifts ten or twenty feet deep. Nevertheless, even with a new road, carrying a load of eggs on horseback nine miles across the moor cannot have been an easy, or a quick, journey, and must have required a good deal of concentration. Thomas and Elizabeth Wills were at the time farming at Venn Farm (now Lincombe) in Chagford - between Hurston and Jurston.

[1] "Wild Irishman" by Peggy Hamilton

### **Peter Wills.**

**Editors note:** Some further information from Peter, sent to me some time ago.

'Peggy' Hamilton was Marjorie Lambkin Wills and she inherited Pepperdon Manor, just before the Second World War. She married Bill Hamilton (latterly Sir William Hamilton) and emigrated to New Zealand. Bill Hamilton is the inventor of the Jet Boat. Last year New Zealand honoured the inventor by issuing a stamp featuring his invention— see below.

These boats are used extensively in New Zealand along rivers whose shallow waters preclude the use of propeller driven craft.



### **From the Exeter Flying post:**

10th March 1814- 'An inquest was taken on Saturday last at Moretonhampstead, before Joseph Gribble Esq. Coroner, on the body of James Brimblecombe, a boy who met his death by a kick from a horse, while standing by his father's door near that town. The Jury returned a verdict of ACCIDENTAL DEATH, and imposed a fine of one shilling as a **deodand**. The rider of the horse was admonished by the Coroner and cautioned to be more circumspect in future.'

**Editors note:** From Websters-'**a deodand**' (*Old Eng. Law*) 'A personal chattel which had caused the death of a person, and for that reason was given to God, that is, forfeited to the crown, to be applied to pious uses, and distributed in alms by the high almoner. Thus, if a cart ran over a man and killed him, it was forfeited as a deodand'.

Clearly the rider could have forfeited his horse under this law rather than just a shilling!

### **June Meeting:**

On Wednesday 17th June, there will be an early evening tour of the restorations at Poltimore house, north of Exeter, followed by a barbecue in the grounds. Poltimore Manor was first mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086, and the house has been successively rebuilt and refurbished through generations of the Bampfylde family. The building is now partially derelict and the Poltimore House Trust is working to restore it.

We are grateful to Alan Payne and the friends of Poltimore House for facilitating this visit.

We will travel there in groups by private car, full details are shown on the [seperate proforma](#). If you would like to go on this trip, please complete this form and forward it to Wendy Coombes ASAP.