

# TIVERTON CIVIC SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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*Collipriest House today*

# Tiverton Civic Society Newsletter

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During the Covid epidemic, our newsletter is being distributed by email. We hope to return to printed editions for those who prefer these after the epidemic is over. Some copies of the 2020 editions will be printed by Fax and Files for those requesting them at a future date.

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## Chairman's Introduction

As we enter a second lockdown, Mid Devon's Covid figures are 75.3 per 100,000 (5.11.20) and rising, amongst the lowest in the country. Unless there is a major adverse change, it is likely that this area will be returned to the lowest tier of restrictions when the lockdown finishes. Despite this, it may be the spring before we are able to hold public meetings safely. It is very pleasing that Dennis Knowles has offered to run Zoom meetings for us. I am hoping that I can arrange some of these early in the New Year, including the Annual General Meeting, planned for November 17<sup>th</sup> but sadly now postponed.

We hope that you enjoy this extra Newsletter, and, once again, I must thank our hard-working editor, Fern Clarke. We are glad to welcome two new contributors, Brigid Allen, the daughter of the society's first and very long-serving, secretary, and Geoff Clarke, the Head of Economics, and my colleague in the Geography Department at Blundell's for many years. We will endeavour to produce extra Newsletters in 2021, but we need your help in the form of contributions, which should have some local relevance. These need not necessarily be, as in this issue, historical in nature. Other possible topics could include environmental issues, including climate change; planning issues; conservation; lockdown experiences; and family genealogy, but please do not feel constrained by these ideas! Articles should, ideally, be no more than about 1500 words. We ask that your contribution should be balanced and, as far as possible, non-political. Over to you!

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Many thanks to all those who have paid their subscriptions for 2021, and we very much hope that your confidence in the society's future will be rewarded. However, we are disappointed not to have received, to date, payments from a significant number of members, and we hope you will remain with us. You are reminded that the subscriptions are £12 (single member) and £18 (two people living in the same household). Cheques payable to 'Tiverton Civic Society' should be sent to me at 43 Post Hill, EX16 4NG. Alternatively, payments can be transferred directly to the Tiverton Civic Society account at Lloyds Bank, the sort code being 30-98-61, and the account number being 00255186.

Statistics show that, on average, about nine out of every ten applications for new housing developments are granted planning permission, and that objections need to be very well-researched and effective if they are to be successful, and if any subsequent appeals are to be rejected. Local objections to the Tidcombe Hall application for 179 houses have been extremely well managed by Stephen Pugh. They have been impressively supported by many individuals and influential organisations, and there have been no known supporters for the scheme. The application will probably be decided in mid-February and we hope that it will be refused.

The scheme by Petroc to build 60 houses on former playing fields opposite the college has been withdrawn after well considered opposition, although the applicants have stated that they will bring back a revised scheme next year. It is disconcerting that, in their application, Petroc commented on the large

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amount of unused space in their campus and on the lack of need for playing fields. *'The Tiverton campus is now over-spaced. There is a high proportion of under-utilised and mothballed space, as the buildings are bigger than is required'* and *'from a sporting perspective, Petroc does not run a sports curriculum for its students'* and *'has no future intention to introduce sport'* (Planning Statement). It appears that Tiverton will remain the largest town in Mid Devon not to offer A Level courses for the foreseeable future, and that there will be no post-16 sport in maintained education in the town. Indeed, although the apprenticeship courses are successful, there must be some concern about the long-term future of the Tiverton campus.

Our society have objected to both these planning applications, as have CPRE and Tiverton Town Council. New housing in Tiverton should, of course, be located on the extensive area of already allocated land in the Eastern Urban Extension, and it is hoped that the recent granting of planning permission for the second stage of the A361 Junction will, when built, make this land more attractive to builders, progress having stalled for several years.

All of us are concerned about the potential impact of the new Planning White Paper, and, after a period of consultation, the numerous responses are now being considered by the government. The proposals have provoked a barrage of opposition from MPs and many organisations, although most recognise the need for changes to Planning Law. It is hoped that acceptable amendments will be made when the final shape of the new Planning Bill is revealed.

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The Tiverton Conservation Area, which includes the central area of Tiverton on both sides of the River Exe, is one of the finest in England because it has many exceptional listed buildings. Yet it has, for many years, been classified by English Heritage and Historic England as 'heritage at risk'. The future of several of the town's finest buildings, including St George's Church, Exeleigh House and, possibly, Gotham House and Amory House, is uncertain, and some of these need urgent conservation work. Amory House, a fine Grade 1 Queen Anne building dating from 1708, is one of Tiverton's most attractive houses. Attempts to sell it have so far been unsuccessful, and concern has recently been expressed about its condition: Peter Maunder is researching the history of the house, and hopes to produce an article for a future Newsletter. The number of empty shops in the town centre has accelerated under Covid-19 restrictions which can lead to dereliction. The Town Centre Regeneration Plan has stalled. It is hoped that the MDDC Cabinet can propose solutions to these existing problems at their meeting in December, although considerable extra funding will be necessary to make a real impact. High streets and town centres act as focal points for communities. It is important that a viable plan is developed for our own town centre.

The slave trade has been much in the news recently, with several films and at least two major television series, as well as campaigns for the removal of statues, the re-naming of buildings and concert halls, and revelations, notably by the National Trust, about the large number of important historic buildings

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owned and funded by people who were deeply involved in the slave trade. The fascinating exhibition in the Tiverton Museum on 'Telling our Stories, Finding our Roots in Tiverton' has revealed several local links to this trade. The involvement of John Gabriel Stedman of Hensleigh House was already well known, but other local links have been discovered and it is likely that more will emerge. I, myself, have a particular interest in this topic because Archibald Dalzel, one of the most notorious slave traders, was my ancestor. He was a plantation owner in Florida and a pirate. He served two terms as Governor of Cape Coast Castle, while his influential 1792 book 'The History of Dahomey' was a moral and intellectual defence of the slave trade.

The development of an app by TrailTale, in conjunction with this society, is now available free of charge at:

<https://apps.apple.com/gb/app/trailtale/id1093099333>.

The draft entry for Tiverton can be found by clicking on 'Guided Walks'. The information has been largely taken from the Merchants' Trail panels, although I have provided many of the photographs. I have advised the author, Rafi Ilivitzky, that some of the information displayed is incorrect or outdated. I will work with him to improve this draft version, possibly providing a spoken commentary at a later stage. Please let me have your comments! Publicity produced by this type of easily accessible self-guided tour will supplement our guided walks and it can only bring more visitors to the town as well as providing increasing aware of our rich heritage.

*Jeremy Salter*

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## **The home of James Coleridge in St. Peter Street, Tiverton**

James Coleridge (1759-1836) was the elder brother of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, poet. He lived in a 'messuage with the coach house, stable, outhouses, offices and garden belonging to it, in Peter Street near the church'. As a Cambridge undergraduate, Samuel is known to have stayed with James in Tiverton in the long vacations of 1792 and 1793. James first appears in the group of Tiverton Deeds in the Devon Archives in 1791, paying £262.10s for a property 'near the church' which the widow Sarah Gorton had left in trust to the vendor, Sarah Govett. In 1793 it is described more fully as a messuage with a stable, outhouses, offices and a garden, recently rebuilt by James Coleridge, having formerly been a messuage and malthouse belonging to Sarah Gorton. Malthouses often caught fire, which could explain the need to rebuild.

James and his wife Frances were occupying the property in 1793 and 1795, when they and John Poundsford used their two houses, two gardens and an acre of land as security for a £120 loan or mortgage from Stucley Lucas, gent., of Brompton Regis. While they may have needed the money to pay a builder's bill, James and his brother George had to cope with Samuel's university debts, which by the summer of 1793 amounted to almost £150. The next spring, they had to buy Samuel out of the army, in which he had impulsively enlisted as a foot-soldier during the winter of his third Cambridge year.

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James himself had made the army his early career, but had retired on half pay as a captain, perhaps on marrying Frances Taylor of Otterton in 1788. When war broke out against revolutionary France early in 1793 he wrote from Tiverton to Earl Fortescue at Castle Hill offering to serve in the Devon militia, in which he rose to the rank of lieutenant-colonel. John Gabriel Stedman, another ex-military man, remarked in July 1794 that “Mr Coldridge was on full pay at Tiverton”. In 1796 James moved back to Ottery St Mary, buying the Chanter’s House near the vicarage in which he, Samuel and their siblings had grown up.

In 1801 he negotiated to sell his Tiverton property to Richard Lardner for £550 ('not yet paid'). Lardner seems to have borrowed heavily from an Exeter bank, and in 1806 he was rescued by a Tiverton investor, Claus Pell, who paid £619.19s.6d to the bank and £90.0s.6d to Lardner for the balance of the purchase price of £710. Pell must then have divided the property into two, transferring part of it to an ex-army officer, William Ferguson, and installing tenants in the other part.

A map of 1796 in the Devon Archives shows a house with a 48-foot frontage at the north end of St Peter Street belonging to ‘Mr Colridge’. A map of 1809 shows two smaller properties in the same position: one with a 20-foot frontage occupied by Miss Ferguson, and its neighbour with a 28-foot frontage belonging to C. Pell Esq. Those houses can be identified as the

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present numbers 52 and 54, with white-painted brickwork and adjacent front doors.

## **Tiverton in the 1790s**

Much can be learnt about Tiverton in the 1790s from the acerbic journal of John Gabriel Stedman, who had spent many years as a soldier in Surinam. He was one of a number of ex-military men who had retired to Tiverton, a town which provoked his deeply quarrelsome nature. He lived at Hensleigh House from 1785 to 1787, then in 'the damn'd inhospitable spot, Broad Lane' until 1795, when he settled his family 'happily in an elegant house below Exe bridge', less than two years before his death at the age of 52. His beloved mulatto eldest son Johnny attended Blundells School, then at fourteen joined the Navy as a midshipman. Stedman, foul-mouthed and aggressive towards people he considered his inferiors, kept up friendly relations with the local gentry: Cruwys of Cruwys Morchard, Nagle of Calverleigh Court, and Nibbs, Antigua planters, at Beauchamp, Washfield. Among his Tiverton associates were the Rev. John Follett of the dissenting Steps Meeting House; a Dr John Govett; 'Mr Pell', who, like James Coleridge, was 'on full pay' in the volunteers in 1794; and Captain William Ferguson, the later occupant of part of the former Coleridge house, who was also in the volunteers. Yet another ex-officer, referred to by Stedman as 'Major Nesbit, who is sold out of the army', was either the uncle or the father of Fanny Nesbitt, the 'Beauty of Tiverton' of Coleridge's erotic poems. Two retired Major Nesbitts lived in Tiverton until

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their deaths in 1806: Alexander (31<sup>st</sup> Regiment of Foot) and his elder brother Richard, Fanny's father, (63<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of Foot).

In November 1789 Stedman attended a dinner of thirteen people, one of whom was a 'Miss Nisbet'. The beautiful Fanny would then have been just sixteen. Not only was there an unlucky number at table, but a hearse happened to stop near the door, prompting someone to mention 'the vulgar idea that one of them would soon be a corpse'. The following day 'young Miss Cowley, one of the company, dropp'd down dead'.

## **The Later Life of James Coleridge's House**

Claus Pell 'of Exmouth' made his will in 1840, leaving all his properties to his nephew Albert. In 1849 Albert Pell, of Guilsborough, Northants, sold the present 54 St Peter Street to Henry Baker of Bath for £600. It is described in the Tiverton Deeds as 'one messuage with the coach house, stable, outhouses, offices and garden belonging to it, in Peter Street near the church, bounded with Peter Street on the east, the River Exe on the west, the house and land formerly of James Coleridge and afterwards of William Ferguson esquire on the south, and the house and land of John Heathcoat esquire on the north'.

Some confusion arises from the fact that John Heathcoat, after bringing his workforce from Leicestershire to the former Tiverton woollen factory to manufacture lace, had occupied the present 48 and 50 St Peter Street, adjoining the former Coleridge property to the south. Like Coleridge's, those

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two houses were originally one (although 48 was later extended sideways), and in 2014 the Tiverton Civic Society attached a blue plaque to their street front, stating: 'This was one house when occupied between 1817-1832 by John Heathcoat, Inventor of the first bobbin-net machine, Founder of Tiverton's lace-making industry, Benefactor of the Borough and its Member of Parliament 1832-1859'.

As one of two MPs for the borough, Heathcoat retired to a country house at Bolham. He had previously commissioned the building of Exeleigh House, on the west side of the river near the factory, and may have lived there for a few years before vacating it for a young married couple, his daughter Caroline (1810-1877) and her husband, the lace-manufacturer Ambrose Brewin (1808-1855), who in later life moved to Hensleigh House. He may also have owned the steep descent below the churchyard, from which a footbridge crossed the river to a path through the Exeleigh House grounds.

Did Heathcoat's 'house and land' refer to Exeleigh, or to another property he may have owned, perhaps on the site of the present 56 St Peter Street? The Tiverton Deeds (4302B/T/6) show that in 1826 Heathcoat granted a seven-year lease of a messuage in St Peter Street to Lucy White, a widow. This requires further research to establish whether it was the present 48/50 St. Peter Street. If it was, the Heathcoat family had moved out by then to live at Exeleigh, or a different property in the same street.

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The Pells' tenants in the former Coleridge house were a family named Barne. John Barne, a clergyman's son and banker, married Lucy Dunsford in 1837. He must have purchased the freehold of the house from Henry Baker, the next owner after Albert Pell, since he left equal shares in the property to each of his five sons. Two of them died young, leaving their shares to a surviving brother; one emigrated to Australia, mortgaging his share to his mother; and one fell into debt, also mortgaging his share. The property, still with its 'coach house, stable, outhouses, offices and garden', was ripe for acquisition by another townsman, the retired ironmonger Henry Septimus Gill, who bought out each of the Barne family's shares in 1876 (Tiverton Deeds, 3740M/T/21).

John Barne had died by 1865, when the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, an Oxford undergraduate on vacation, made a tour of the West Country. Like Coleridge he visited Tiverton relations: distant cousins through his paternal grandmother Ann Manley, who had lived in London since her marriage but kept the Devonshire accent he had imitated as a boy. Like Coleridge, although more chastely, he admired the young girl cousins who entertained him at their home on the western outskirts of the town. Then he called on friends or relations of theirs: two respectable, middle-aged Miss Barnes 'in St Peter's Street near the church'. Probably for closeness to the rest of the family, they lived next-door to the property in which Coleridge had stayed during his love-crazed, impecunious long vacation of 1793. This link between the two poets, so dissimilar in temperament yet so responsive to romantic

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stimuli, and both killing time by visiting family members during a university long vacation, is a strikingly coincidence in the context of everyday life in St Peter Street, Tiverton.

*Brigid Allen*

Sources for this article were three editions of the newsletter, numbers 83 (article by Hugh Allen on Gerard Manley Hopkins), 92 and 93; Richard Holmes, 1989, *Coleridge, Early Visions*; Stanley Thompson, 1962, *The Journal of John Gabriel Stedman 1744-1797*; Tiverton Deeds held by the Devon Heritage Centre; William Harding, 1847, *History of Tiverton, in the County of Devon*.

## **Editor's Note**

Both Brigid Allen and Peter Maunder in our last newsletter edition kindly supplied footnotes with their articles. Unfortunately, the page set up of the Newsletter does not allow for footnotes. Converted to endnotes, these would automatically come at the end of the newsletter where we have a picture page, rather than at the end of the article. In the last newsletter, the editor manually transferred Peter's footnotes to the end of his article, but these have taken almost a page of the newsletter which is not desirable. Where appropriate, the editor has inserted the content of Brigid's footnotes into her article. The remaining content of her footnotes are listed as sources. The editor requests that future contributors do not use either footnotes or endnotes, but bracket any references within the text. These should be as short as possible to avoid breaking the flow of the article itself.

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## **The Life and Death of a Midshipman in Nelson's Navy**

On the east wall of St Peter's Church beside the vestry door is a small, almost illegible, stone tablet commemorating an infant, Benjamin Frederick Coleridge, who died aged four weeks on the 25<sup>th</sup> October 1791. The third son of Colonel James and Frances Duke Coleridge, he had been born close by, at 54 St Peter Street, and his loss was obviously a sad event. However, at a time when infant mortality was still stubbornly high, the next child born of the same sex was frequently given the same Christian names, so when another boy was born on October 5<sup>th</sup> 1792, he was also named Bernard Frederick, always known as Frederick. His life was also destined to be tragically short, and his death caused enormous grief to his immediate family.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge first recorded meeting his nephew Frederick on September 5<sup>th</sup>, 1793, writing in a letter to his brother George 'my brother James is at Sidmouth. I was there yesterday. He, his wife, and children are well. Frederick is a charming child', and he must have encountered him on several other occasions during his visits to Tiverton.

The Coleridge's sold their Tiverton house in 1796, moving to Ottery St Mary, and Frederick was sent to King's School. At the age of 11 he joined the Royal Navy in Plymouth as a Volunteer of the First Class and he was gazetted on board HMS Impeteux, a 74 gun ship of the line which had been captured from the French in 1794, where he became an especial favourite of Captain, later Admiral of the Fleet, Sir Thomas Byam Martin, who allowed him to read and

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write whatever he chose for two hours in his cabin every day, while there were also amateur theatrical performances every weekend. His education was not ignored, he received regular lessons, especially in Latin, from the ship's chaplain, and he was also instructed in seamanship.

Young 'volunteer midshipmen', or 'captain's boys' were a common feature of the early navy. They were usually the sons of gentlemen or serving officers, and in 1794 they were officially designated as 'young gentlemen intended for the sea service', being limited to four per one hundred of a ship's crew, although these rules were inconsistently applied. Bringing many of their own provisions, they were normally sent to sea at the age of eleven years, or even younger, as an alternative to boarding school. They tended to eat the same food as the Petty Officers and crew and were sometimes invited to the wardroom or captain's table. They took part in a range of duties, including watchkeeping and the supervision of the reefing and furling of sails, and they normally became full midshipmen after several years' service, being eligible to apply to become lieutenants at the age of twenty.

During his time in the navy Frederick sent home a series of detailed letters which gave a vivid picture of his experiences, many of which can be read in Lord Coleridge's 1905 book, 'The Story of a Devonshire House'. He was present for long periods at the blockade of Brest and during extensive patrols of the French and Spanish coasts as far south as Cadiz, being initially paid 3d per day. Despite expressing some indications of homesickness, he was

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generally extremely positive about life on board, writing on one occasion, 'I live very well, having roast beef every day almost. After dinner I had strawberries and wine, but wine is no luxury to me, for I have two glasses at dinner every day and two at supper which is my half-allowance'.

Life was not always enjoyable. He wrote in one letter that he had to witness a flogging, 'and the man roared so terribly that he could not bear to hear it', and on July 3 1804 he sat upon the masthead for the first time, writing later 'the sea looked most terrible to me, it being so far below me, but I was not the least afraid of falling'. Provisions aboard were at the time becoming sparse: 'We have had nothing now for the last month but salt beef, biscuit, stinking water and brandy, and 'the maggots which are very cold when you eat them like calves-foot jelly or blancmange being very fat indeed', even 'the wine being exactly like bullock's blood and sawdust mixed together'. On 24<sup>th</sup> November, he witnessed the total loss of HMS Venerable, which had struck a rock off at Roundham Head, Torbay, and on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1805 he saw a tragic accident when Captain William Jervis of HMS Tonnant was drowned when his gig overturned during a transfer between ships. Later that year he wrote that 'a dreadful accident happened the other day here. The hands were hurried up reef topsails and my station is in the fore-top. When the men began to lay in one of them laid hold of a slack rope which gave way, and he fell out of the top on deck and was dashed to pieces, and very near carried me out of the top along with him as I was attempting to lay hold of him to stop him from

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falling. Poor fellow, he was called Wallace, one of the best men on the ship, and has got a wife and three children, whom he supported entirely by his pay'. This experience presaged Frederick's own fate and brings to mind Charles Dibdin's popular 1795 song Tom Bowling.

The navy at this period has been greatly romanticized, not least in the fictional adventures of Jack Aubrey and Horatio Hornblower, but the truth is much more prosaic, and this is reflected in Frederick's letters. The navy was dominant in the wars against France, significant naval actions were few and far between, especially after Trafalgar, and ships spent much of the time in port or engaging in tedious blockading duties. However, 'living and working at sea was dangerous; it is estimated that 90% of the 92,000 British fatalities during the French revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars with France were caused by disease, accident and shipwreck' (HMS Victory website).

In October 1804 Captain Thomas Byam Martin wrote to Frederick's father, shortly before he was transferred to another ship, stating 'I have now, from a longer acquaintance with your truly good boy, the satisfaction to say that he is everything a parent could wish, or the service desire, and I hazard nothing in predicting that his progress in life will be creditable to his family and the profession he has chosen'.

In October 1805, after visiting his parents in Ottery St. Mary, where he celebrated his thirteenth birthday, Frederick sailed on the 9<sup>th</sup> October from Torbay to Plymouth on H.M.S. Foudroyant, an 80-gun two decker, which had

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formerly been Nelson's flagship. In December of that year he became a full midshipman, and shortly afterwards he sadly fell from the topmast of H.M.S. *Phoenix* in Plymouth Sound, and lost his life. The Monthly Magazine of February 1806 carried a report on page 98. 'On board the Phoenix, of 44 guns, in the Sound, Master Coleridge, who had just made his naval debut on board that ship. He was trying to go aloft, and, taking hold of a rope that was not fastened, he unfortunately came down by the run on the deck, and was killed'.

Frederick's body was taken ashore and interred in the tomb of his maternal grandfather, Bernard Frederick Taylor, at Antony, near Torpoint, an inscription being added 'He fell, to rise again'. Lord Coleridge records that 'on hearing the sad news of his son's death his father gave a cry and fell senseless to the floor. He was carried to bed in a sort of fit and for some weeks his reason, if not his life, was in danger', and it was not until March 1811 that he could bring himself to visit his son's grave. His mother 'for many years afterwards always spent the anniversary of Frederick's death in her own room with many tears', and his brother, John Taylor Coleridge, also born in Tiverton, wrote an unfinished poem, the first line of which reads:



'Cease thou, lorn mother, cease those bitter tears'.

*Jeremy Salter*

*The silhouette of Frederick dates from his time in the navy*

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## Collipriest Part III: The Blundell Family



*Peter Blundell, courtesy of Blundell's School*

After the death of Peter Blundell, founder of Blundell's School, the Blundell family continued to build up its wealth, not directly from cloth manufacture in Devon but as merchants trading internationally from London. John, a nephew of Peter Blundell, became one of the early mayors of Tiverton, and his grandson, another John (c.1619-1686), became a Justice of the Peace (JP) during the second half of the seventeenth century.

The younger John Blundell was recorded living at Little Tiverton 'paying Hearth Tax on six chimneys'. Land to the south and east of the Lowman from [Old] Blundell's School to the confluence with the river Exe was held by the feoffees of Peter Blundell, and may have been part of Little Tiverton.

By 1681, much of the Collipriest estate had passed from Mary Deyman to John Blundell JP, who was then recorded as a tenant of Collipriest paying rent for 120 acres. The Blundell family reached its zenith by the late 1600s and would have been a position financially to build a family residence. Although it is widely believed that there is now no trace of the first Blundell residence, its existence is inferred from the record that Thomas Winslow 'rebuilt and enlarged' a residence in Collipriest in 1770.

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A Chancery Court case of 1704 reveals something of the family circumstances at the end of the seventeenth century. In 1684, a John Lovering borrowed £500 from John Doble of Calverleigh. John Blundell JP and his son Richard stood surety in the sum of £1000. John Blundell put all his possessions at Collipriest to cover the debt of John Lovering, but when John Blundell died in 1686, Sarah his widow and Richard his son took over his goods. When Richard also died in 1691, Sarah took on the administration herself. Presumably the Blundell family were living at Collipriest at the time although not in an identifiable house.

When John Lovering died in 1690, the £500 had not been repaid and it subsequently came to light that the Collipriest estate of well over 200 acres had been assigned to John Lovering, possibly to defraud the estate of John Blundell JP. In 1704, John Doble, executor of his father's Will, took action against the Executors of John Lovering and against Sarah Blundell for 'retaining the lease of Collipriest and adjacent lands and not handing over their assets to the creditors of John Blundell'. It may be that the first house at Collipriest was built at this time and was heavily mortgaged.

*Mary Toft*

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## **Thomas Hardy associations: A novella set in the Exe Valley**

Literary associations with places known to us can be intriguing. In a few cases, they form the foundation for tourist attractions today. Most of the literary associations in Thomas Hardy's novels lie further east in Dorset, but a lesser known one is with the Exe Valley in Devon. Thomas Hardy wrote a set of short stories / novellas which were published as *A Changed Man and other Stories* in 1883. One novella in this book is set in the Exe Valley in 'Lower Wessex' (Devon), and is entitled 'Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid' (27,000 words). The story follows the adventures of Margery Tucker, daughter of Dairyman Tucker of Silverthorn Dairy. This farm is said to be at Upexe. The nearby village is that of Silverthorn (Silverton). The woodland described in the novella is called Chillington Wood (known to us as Killerton woods).

There is a touch of fairy tale in this novella as the story involves visits to a grandmother and the transformation of a poor girl before a ball from which she is then whisked away. Her romantic encounters are with a local lime burner (Jim) and a strange foreign baron, the former less romantic and more matter of fact, the latter more romantic but unrealistic. A romantic triangle develops, but she is not 'in love' in a conventional sense. It is a tale of a young woman trying to control her own destiny in the world around her, but allowing herself a dreamlike aspiration, the possibility of living in another world.

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Some critics regard the theme as a forerunner of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* but some scenes hint at other Hardy novels. Jim parades on a militia horse at a review in Exonbury (Exeter) – a touch of *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Lesser hints come from such references as rendlewood (*The Woodlanders*). Other locations in the novella are the nearby fete at Tivworthy (Tiverton) and a scene on the beach at Idmouth (Sidmouth).

The setting of the story captures the white mist that settles in the valley, the fishing that draws people from afar, and 'the level ground of the water meadows' that makes a journey to the riverbank difficult. Hardy's close observation of nature is evident: worms that rise up onto the paths after heavy rain; beech and ash leaves shedding more drips than other leaves.

The setting of Jim's lime kilns (located on steep slopes) is less realistic though we know that there was lime burning up at Tivworthy and other places in the area. The valley of the River Burn running down to the Exe between Silverton and Bickleigh is steep (later there was a Burn Halt on the Exe Valley railway). It fits the description of a 'miniature valley' with a house down by the road and the kiln at the head of the valley, 'some miles from Mount Lodge'. Nearby should be the grandmother's house, 'Rook's Gate', and just south of the Burn Valley is Ravenshayes (shown on the old O.S. map). But this is stretching the locational link.

The residence of the baron, Mount Lodge, could, with another stretch of the imagination, be adapted from Silverton Park (just south-east of Silverthorn),

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the mansion built by the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Egremont and largely unoccupied at the time when Hardy wrote the novella, although this suggestion may be too tenuous. The Egremont family owned most of Silverton. Hardy chose to describe Mount Lodge as medium in size, with Italian elevation. By coincidence the Landmark Trust has, in recent years, renovated and adapted the Silverton Park Stables, very grand in themselves. We might question the reference to the human stock of the area – ‘Her face was of the hereditary type among families down in these parts: sweet in disposition, perfect in hue and somewhat irregular in feature’; also ‘weather wisdom was imbibed with their milk-sops by the children of the Exe Vale’.

While not among the top-rated works of Hardy, the themes of the novella are worthy of consideration in themselves and point to more developed forms of these themes in the full novels that were to follow. A young woman and the nature of marriage is one theme; in this tale Margery Tucker has to settle for reality – ‘marriage is a life-long contract in which general compatibility of temper and worldly position is of more importance than fleeting passion which never survives’. The temptation of ‘a left-handed marriage’ to a titled rich man rather than a legal ‘right-handed marriage’ to a working man, is overcome.

The tale is free to download from ‘gutenberg’ and free on Kindle.

*Geoff Clarke*

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## Tiverton Museum in 2020

[gc1]At the very start of this year, staff and volunteers at Tiverton Museum of Mid Devon Life were planning to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the museum opening. The museum first opened its doors at 9 Angel Terrace (in a building that had previously been the Old Bell Inn) in 1960. As the museum's collections grew, the museum moved around the town. It spent a few years in the 1960s at the old Chilcott School on St Peter Street. It moved into its current home in the old National School building in the late 1960s, with the galleries opening in 1969. The museum has expanded the site since then, firstly by building the waggon gallery in the 1970s, and then the transport gallery after the Tivvy Bumper moved to the museum in 1979.

We have grand plans about the future of the museum and ways in which we can provide exciting, vibrant displays which inspire visitors as they explore the history and heritage of the Mid Devon area. We had been hoping to progress with these ideas throughout 2020, however, we found ourselves suddenly responding to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has seriously impacted Tiverton Museum, alongside many other museums, visitor attractions and cultural organisations across the country. The museum is an independent charity and we are dependent upon generating income through admission, events and learning activities. The museum was closed for 6 months due to the pandemic which meant that we

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were unable to earn any of the income that we depend upon through the busiest period of the year.

Just before lockdown we launched an emergency appeal and we were very touched that so many local supporters donated to it, raising over £6,600. The museum used the government's Job Retention Scheme during lockdown and into the summer. Thanks to funding from The National Lottery Heritage Fund's Heritage Emergency Fund, the museum was able to safely re-open to visitors. This grant enabled us to purchase equipment such as screens, signage, sanitiser and cleaning materials. It is also enabling us to update our IT system so that staff and volunteers can work from home on days that the museum is not open. That grant also covered some of our running costs until November.

We were delighted to reopen in September and welcome our first visitors back in. We have reopened with reduced opening hours, and limiting the number of visitors within 30-minute time slots with priority to pre-booked tickets. This helps to keep our visitors safe and regulate the flow of people through our one-way system.

In October we were very relieved to hear that we had been awarded a grant from the Government's Culture Recovery Fund. This will cover some core costs to the end of the financial year giving us some time for us to review our new situation, revise our plans and consider how we can successfully deliver our services, whilst earning crucial income to keep afloat.

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Although we have re-opened, we aren't able to generate any income through some of our usual income streams (events and school activities). Income through admissions and the museum shop is reduced, meaning that we are unable to earn the same level of income as we did pre-Covid. This, and the fact that we have limited cash reserves, has created an extreme challenge which we must meet.

The museum's Trustees and staff are working very hard on strategic and financial planning to keep the museum open next year and beyond. We do need the local community to continue to support the museum, either through visiting, joining our membership scheme or by donating to our emergency appeal which is still ongoing and can be done online at:

<https://cafdonate.cafonline.org/12418>

We very much hope that we will be able to return to our redevelopment plans, and to continue to share and celebrate the history, stories and heritage of Mid Devon and our community.

*Pippa Griffith*



*Museum displays in the National School building in the 1970s*

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*The Transport Gallery being built around the Tivvy Bumper steam engine, c. 1979*

*Tiverton Museum  
The workshops for schools were very popular before the pandemic*



*The museum displays today include oral histories of local people*