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Colyton History Society Newsletter

5 June 2025

Curious how one thing leads to another. In this case church vestments to leprosy – more below. This month a colourful exhibition of church vestments will be on display in St Andrew's Church CPHS is looking for a new Treasurer and we have another request for help with tracing family history.

1. News – Leprosy in Medieval Colyton

Last week I was asked to translate a medieval document from Latin into English. It was quite an intellectual challenge but - assisted by an AI translator and schoolgirl Latin dredged up in my memory from nearly 60 years ago - I had a go!

The text was an extract from the *Register of John de Grandisson*, Bishop of Exeter about Visitations to churches around Devon including Colyton, Shute and Branscombe in the summer of 1330 AD to record the vestments, possessions and general condition of the churches there. What immediately surprised me was the references in the text to the incumbent clergyman in Colyton who was suffering from leprosy- which was of some concern to the local inhabitants at the time.

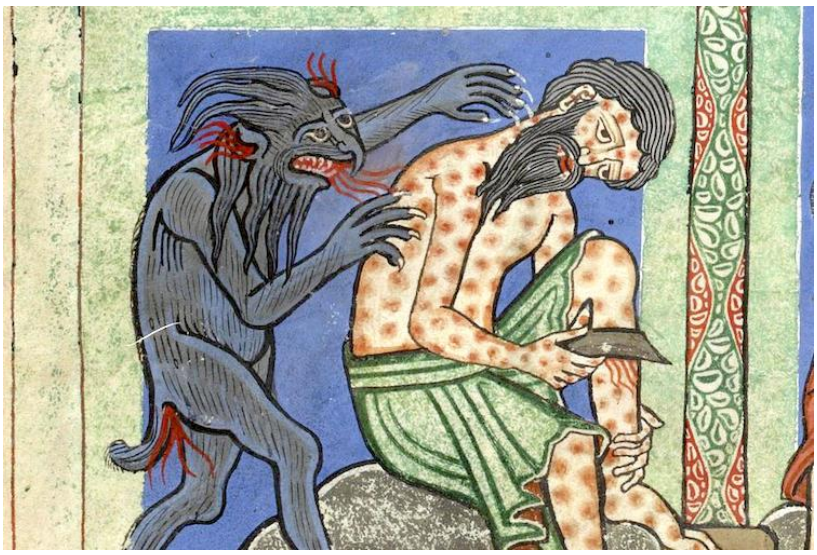

Image Credit: The Picture Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo

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"…the said church suffers many defects, especially in divine matters, due to the defect of the vicar, who is not sufficient because he is struck with leprosy."
"Lord Robert de Schirburne , parish chaplain, appearing in person, says he has no help in the church for the Divine Office, because the vicar of the place is struck with leprosy."

Credit – British Library

A further reference in the text dated February 1330/31 states

" *Lord Richard de Ketylby, Chaplain, was appointed by the Lord as Coadjutor to Master Richard Brondiche, Vicar of the Church of Colyton, who is so perpetually detained by infirmity that he can in no way manage himself and his affairs, nor the care committed to him."*

The vicar, named in other sources as Richard Byrche, is said to have contracted the disease in 1320 and died in 1332.

This prompted me to do some more research. No one knows where leprosy originated from or how exactly it is spread although it has been known in India, China and the Far East for thousands of years. Indeed, it turns out that leprosy, also known as Hansens's disease, is one of the oldest bacteriological diseases known to afflict humanity. Though

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relatively uncommon in Europe, it was first found here in England in the 4th century AD before peaking in the t3th century then gradually declining over the next three centuries. Believed to be spread through close contact over a long period of time with droplets from the nose or mouth of an infected individual. It is thought cases here and in Europe were spurred by the spate of pilgrimages and crusades undertaken at the end of the first millennium AD. The medieval images depicting lepers above show the disease was already well known here and feared by society in the Middle Ages. Leprosy was even regarded at the time as being a disease of the wealthy - who could afford to go on pilgrimages to foreign lands - rather than the poor.

While some sources say Lepers in medieval England were cared for by the Church others say they were often ostracised, segregated from their communities and left to fend for themselves. Which makes it clear why local Colytonians in the 14th century were uneasy about their Vicar - who was living among them being affected - no doubt fearing he could infect his whole flock!

The Vicar's condition was clearly seen to be noteworthy and of sufficient public significance to warrant being reported during the visitation and later recorded in Grandisson's *Register*. There was a degree of compassion felt for sufferers and medieval society even perceived them as enduring a period of purgatory in life so that their time in purgatory after death would be shortened and they were therefore closer to God than other people. Some 'leprosaria' (houses/hospitals for lepers) were established on the outskirts of communities in the 11th century, financed by donations from wealthier members of society and with alms for the inmates coming from the local community.

While the number of cases around the world today is gradually declining leprosy still exists and scientists are still trying to find a cure for it. The bacterial cause of the disease was first identified in 1873 but there were no effective treatments until the 1940s. Recent research has suggested that the genetic makeup of the disease has not changed radically over the centuries – which might explain why transmission of the disease has slowed in modern times as human populations develop some resistance. Analysis of ancient DNA from *M leprae* is now providing new evidence for identifying its origins and evolution.

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Sir George Turner 1848-1915 *Sir George's left arm – Wellcome Collection*

Colyton was visited by leprosy again almost six hundred years later when Sir George Turner, a renowned 19th century English bacteriologist and expert on rinderpest, who worked for many years in South Africa and made a study of leprosy, came to live here. He had contracted the disease himself, eventually losing the use of his left arm: image from the Wellcome Collection contains a photograph of his arm. Turner, who returned to England and continued his researches, retired here to Colyton where he died in March 1915.

Leprosy is still present in the community in Britain and is thought to be often misdiagnosed. As recently as February this year, the Telegraph reported that a Somerset couple - the Izzards - had both contracted the disease while living and working in Zimbabwe. Mr Izzard's condition went undiagnosed for many years and he eventually lost his right leg, some toes and a finger. The couple now support the Leprosy Mission charity

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working and campaigning for the thousands around the world who are still contracting and living with the disease.

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2. Exhibition

'Threads of Gold' & 'Secrets Behind the Stitches'

A glorious exhibition of church vestments and textiles is to be held in St Andrew's Church, Market Place, Colyton, **18th – 20th June 2025**. A stunning display of the beautiful textiles from the six parish churches of Holyford Mission Community, as well as a Bishop's cope, mitre and crosier on loan from Exeter Cathedral.

The highlight will be an illustrated talk on **Wednesday evening, 18th June from 7.00pm** given by **Diana Symes, of the Company of Tapisers, Exeter Cathedral**. Tickets for the evening event will be **£12 pp** and include prosecco, petits-fours, and

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live music, and a chance to meet and talk with Diana about the Tapisers work as custodians of the rich heritage of church needlework.

The exhibition is free during the day on Wednesday (11 am – 5.00 pm), Thursday (10 am – 7.00 pm) and Friday (10 am – 6.00 pm). Refreshments available. All welcome. More information: info@colyton.co.uk

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3. Another Family History Request – Sylvia Jopson re the Copp family

Sylvia Jopson researching our Parish Records for information about the Copp family

Sylvia Jopson visited the Heritage Centre recently seeking information about her Copp family ancestors who lived in Colyton and Axminster. If anyone is associated with the Copp family today (or extended family) Sylvia who now lives in Essex would be delighted to hear from you. Let me know (sarah.charman@yahoo.co.uk) and I will put you in touch with her. Sylvia has also kindly provided the Heritage Centre with copies of her own family history research which is now available in our files.

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4. Other History Society News

a. **Can you help? Colyton History Society requires a new Treasurer**
CPHS is looking for a new Treasurer as our current Treasurer has indicated that he will not be standing for re-election at our AGM in the Autumn. Interested in this opportunity and would like to know more? Do contact me (sarah.charman@yahoo.co.uk) and we will be happy to talk you through the role. The Committee are a friendly bunch and this is not an onerous task. Brian has kindly produced a job description for what is involved which I will be happy to email you.

b. **History Society talks 2025** - The autumn session of History Society talks will begin on Tuesday **September 23rd at 2.30 pm with Jane Austen in Devon** by Hazel Jones from the Jane Austen Society.

c. **Colyton Town walks -** There are guided Town History walks on **Thursdays** throughout the summer, meeting in Dolphin Street carpark at 2.0pm, regardless of the weather. No booking required. £5.00 per person. .

5. Other organisations news and events

a. **Devon History Society**

A 1920s Dartmoor Day
Date: 14 June 2025
Time: 10:30 - 15:00
Location: Parke, Bovey Tracey, TQ13 9JQ
Find out more

6. Items you may have missed

a. *Festival of Archaeology to celebrate ancient history across Dorset*

b. *Amazing photos of thriving Devon high street through time - Devon Live*

c. *Dorset History Centre launches new series of lunchtime talks*

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d. *The quiet Devon villages where thousands died in bloody massacres | Devon Live*

e. *Iconic Devon viaduct opens to visitors for second time ever*

f. *'They erupt from the moor like castles, monsters and giants': exploring Dartmoor's tors*

g. *'Secret nuclear bunker' at Nothe fort to be opened up for new tours*

h. *National Trust acquires stretch of dorset coastline https://www.msn.com/en-gb/lifestyle/lifestylegeneral/national-trust-acquires-major-stretch-of-dorset-coastline/ar-AA1FJ11j?ocid=msedgntp&pc=HCTS&cvid=576c77f0443d472dbb487fe3e642d1cb&ei=8*

i. *Treasures in St Mary's church Ottery https://www.sidmouthherald.co.uk/news/25171059.opinion-different-view-treasures-within-church/?ref=eb&nid=2405&block=article_block_a&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=230525*

j. *Devon's weirdest event - https://www.devonlive.com/news/devon-news/gallery/devons-weirdest-event-back-photos-10218488?utm_source=devon_live_newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=auto_westernmorning_newsletter&utm_content=&utm_term=&ruid=0f3b0370-2d82-4801-be9a-21ee0af0fd15&hx=c2c794ed89df6602f4e82633c343d96d68a5399027490d09d0ed370ddee48065*

k. *VE and VJ Day - Teaching Resources*

l. *Museum of Somerset set to mark 150th birthday with events | Somerset County Gazette*

m. *Unflappable, Fashioning the 1920s exhibition at Killerton | Sidmouth Herald*

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