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Colyton Parish History Society Newsletter

11 July 2025

This month a question – does anyone know why and how the area formerly known as Seller's Grave (Lewis Haye) acquired its name? And there are new family history enquiries and an update.

1. News –

Seller's Grave

At the intersection of the Old Sidmouth Road, Love Lane and Clay Lane

Does anyone know why this area of land above Colyton was originally known as Seller's Grave? The area has in recent times been renamed as Lewis Haye. Seller's Grave lies at the intersection of Old Sidmouth Road with Love Lane and Clay Lane. It is seen here as a scrappy little triangle of grass.

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Such crossroads have long been considered uneasy places, transitional gaps between geographically bounded areas and vulnerable to supernatural forces. Historically, crossroads have been used since Anglo Saxon times to bury executed individuals. Increasingly, they were also used for what were known as 'profane burials' of those sad and unfortunate people who had committed suicide as they were not allowed to be buried in consecrated ground.

Crossroads - with roads veering off in different directions - were considered likely to confuse a ghost. There are several such stories recorded on Dartmoor including the legend of Jay's Grave. And at nearby Lyme Regis there is a similar area known as Morgan's Grave at the intersection of Clappentail Lane with Sidmouth Road just as you descend into the town coming from the Colyford direction. A small plaque records what little is known about this site which has been known as Morgan's Grave for at least 250 years.

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Those people convicted of 'felo de se' (crime against the self) were buried at cross-roads without religious ceremony and with a stake driven through the heart to anchor the spirit to earth, an action not dissimilar to the treatment of 'vampires' in eastern European history. Sometimes the body was tortured. By the thirteenth century, suicide had come to be regarded as a crime in England (in part because the death deprived an employer of the deceased's labour!) The convicted person's property and possessions could be confiscated by the Monarch or Lord of the Manor - which often left the family of the deceased homeless and destitute. Also, in medieval Christian thought suicide was connected with the sin of despair and the loss of faith in God.

More than half a millennium would pass before society, which by the early nineteenth century was becoming increasingly enlightened and aware of mental illness, and fuelled by the suicide of Lord Castlereagh in 1822, prompted social reformers to demand action. This event, followed a year later by the crossroads burial of Abel Griffiths at the junction of Eaton Street, Grosvenor Place and the King's Road in London – a disturbed young man who had killed his father – further shocked society and fuelled demands for change. Legislation to abolish crossroad burials - the Burial of Suicide Act 1823 - was passed later that same year. However, the penalty of 'property forfeiture' was not repealed until 1870 and the criminal act of suicide was not removed from the statute book until 1961.

I visited the Seller's Grave site on Sunday afternoon. Standing on this otherwise unremarkable patch of scruffy grass deep in rural East Devon and with the sun shining down, some might perceive a slight atmosphere in the rustling branches overhead, but it is hard to imagine the dreadful violence and changes in religious, social and political beliefs and practices which this quiet spot has born witness to over the past millennium.

I met a young woman out walking her dog - another Sarah - and asked her if she knew anything about this area? She didn't know why it was called Seller's Grave but confirmed without hesitation that there were dead bodies buried underneath!

Do you know why this place was traditionally known as Seller's Grave? From research I have done, one possibility may be that it is in some way associated with the Seller's family who owned Stafford House farm in Swan Hill Road in the valley below for a period. Members of the Seller family were photographed standing outside the house in the late nineteenth century. If you do know the origins of this name and the story behind it, please let me know.

References - accessed online 7.7.25

- https://daily.jstor.org/why-suicide-was-a-sin-in-medieval-europe/
- The Legend of Jay's Grave | Dartmoor
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- Quinton's Graveyard – Legendary Dartmoor

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- Circumstances Sufficiently Appalling to the Country People': Suicide Burial in Thomas Hardy's 'The Grave by the Handpost' | Journal of Victorian Culture | Oxford Academic https://academic.oup.com/jvc/article-abstract/28/4/516/7111223?redirectedFrom=PDF
- https://cvltnation.com/rites-of-desecration-suicide-sacrilege-and-profane-burial-at-the-cross-roads/
- https://theucdlawreview.com/2023/04/01/grave-consequences-the-societal-rationale-behind-the-medicalisation-and-secularisation-of-suicide-as-reflected-in-the-burial-of-those-who-died-by-suicide-in-ireland-and-england-in-the-19th-centu/
- Staked Through the Heart and Buried at the Crossroads – The Profane Burial of Suicides | Ancient Origins
- https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/death-dying/dying-and-death/burying/
- https://www.historyextra.com/period/victorian/why-were-suicides-supposed-to-be-buried-at-crossroads/
https://oddlyhistorical.wordpress.com/2015/09/27/crossroads-suicide-burials/

2. Family History – new enquiries and updates

a. New enquiry – Roger Upright

I was working in the Heritage Centre the other morning when a man walked in and asked for help tracing his ancestors who had lived in Colyton. He introduced himself as Roger Upright from Seaton. I showed him where our family archives and parish

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registers are. Then he noticed the antique lace display panel which we have on temporary loan from the Honiton Lace Museum. That always used to hang in my Grandad's hallway he exclaimed! After his grandfather died he had inherited the lace display. Roger said he knew very little about lace and he had given it to the Lace Museum on long term loan as he felt it should be available for the public to see,.

Edmund Bigood Upright was Roger's Great Great Grandfather. He lived first at 38 Fore Street and then 78 Market Place, Colyton, The 1871 census showed him living next door to a Mr Scherzinger, a watch maker and Edmund was described as postmaster, lace dealer and representative of an insurance company. Clearly a busy man! Roger said he understood the lace was sold in the draper's shop next door which was run by Edmund's wife Mary Ann (nee Restorick)

If you know anything about the Upright family (and Restorick connection), or have any family photos, then Roger would be delighted to hear from you. Please email me (sarah.charman@yahoo.co.uk) and I will put you in touch.

b. Update- Sylvia Jopson re the Copp family

Sylvia Jopson seeking information about the Copp family

We have had more responses to Sylvia Jopson's request for information about the Copp family than any other family history query we have run here. Thank you to everyone who has contributed information. Sylvia has now put together a file of information about her family and has very kindly sent us a copy which has been added to our archive of family histories in the Heritage Centre for others to browse through. Sylvia still has queries to resolve so if anyone thinks they may have more information to offer about the Copp family please let me know.

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c. Cate family

Coley Cate from the United States has been in touch trying to track down details of his ancestor Robert Ezra Cate. Many Cate family trees online state that he was born here in 1667 yet I have checked our 'bmd' records in the Heritage Centre and found nothing. Interestingly however, one of my predecessors who also helped people with family history searches – the highly authoritative John Cochrane - had the same query from what must be members of the wider Cate family in Tennessee and Florida in the US twenty years ago! He drew a similar blank!

This is frustrating but not surprising and does not mean that Robert Ezra Cate never existed. Simply it means he was not baptized or married at St Andrew's Church here in Colyton. The family may have been non conformists or he may have been born/baptized elsewhere. We are continuing to search for other possible family members from the 17th century as there are a number of other Cate names listed here in the Colyton parish records. And I have just found a record from the Parish Registers of St Andrew's Church in Chardstock of two marriages of a William Cate in 1633 and 1638/9. It's not clear if they are the same man. If anyone has any details or knowledge in their family histories of a Robert Ezra Cate or his father William Abraham Cate(s) whom Coley believes died around 1667 please do let me know – Coley and I would be very grateful!

3. 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 car-park at 2.0pm, regardless of the weather. No booking required. £5.00 per person.

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4. Items you may have missed

a. Ottery St Mary's transition to electricity -

https://www.sidmouthherald.co.uk/news/25253797.history-ottery-st-marys-transition-electricity/?ref=eb&nid=2405&block=article_block_a&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=270625

b. Historic Branscombe bakery reopens as a community shop
https://www.midweekherald.co.uk/news/25250623.historic-branscombe-bakery-reopened-community-shop/?ref=eb&nid=2397&block=article_block_a&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=200625

c. Axminster Station's 165th anniversary
https://www.midweekherald.co.uk/news/25252166.axminster-stations-165th-anniversary-celebration-july/?ref=eb&nid=2397&block=article_block_a&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=200625

d. Honiton railway station new heritage display unveiled
https://www.midweekherald.co.uk/news/25252547.new-heritage-display-unveiled-honiton-railway-station/?ref=eb&nid=2397&block=article_block_a&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=200625

e. Royal Mint's 18 rarest coins featuring Queen Elizabeth
https://www.sidmouthherald.co.uk/news/25291715.royal-mints-18-rarest-coins-featuring-queen-elizabeth-ii/?ref=eb&nid=2405&block=article_block_a&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=070725

f. Church vestments textiles exhibition Colyton
https://www.midweekherald.co.uk/news/25236387.church-vestments-textiles-exhibition-colyton/?ref=ebbn&nid=2302&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=140625

g. Exeter's bloody killing field armies
https://www.devonlive.com/news/devon-news/exeters-bloody-killing-field-armies-10232676?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

h. Royal Mint's advice on cleaning old coins

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https://www.midweekherald.co.uk/news/25224527.clean-old-coins-royal-mints-advice/?ref=ebbn&nid=2302&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=090625

i. Dartmoor widdershins exhibition
https://www.greatbritishlife.co.uk/magazines/devon/25171205.widdershins-dartmoor-exhibition-moorland-mythic-art/?ref=eb&nid=2374&block=article_block_a&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=010725

j. UK discovery thought to be the oldest roadway in the world
https://www.msn.com/en-gb/travel/news/uk-discovery-that-was-thought-to-be-the-oldest-roadway-in-the-world/ar-AA1GJvc6?cmp_prftch=2&ocid=msedgntp&pc=HCTS&cvid=bde090be859544ea9cbaf75147933432&ei=9

k. Grade II listed Georgian townhouse for sale in Axminster
https://www.midweekherald.co.uk/news/25216119.grade-ii-listed-georgian-townhouse-sale-axminster/?ref=eb&nid=2397&block=article_block_a&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=090625

l. New Seaton Historical Romance
https://www.midweekherald.co.uk/news/25304417.new-seaton-historical-romance-novel-bringing-past-life/?ref=eb&nid=2397&block=article_block_a&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=110725

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