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Colyton Parish History Society Newsletter

16 September 2025

This month an account of my recent visit to an archaeological dig at an Iron Age settlement in Caithness, an article on the Bonville-Courtenay feud from Claire Ross and a review by Jacquie McCullough of a new book *Horriford Lives* by Gordon Elsey which has been donated to the Heritage Centre.

1. News

a. Swartigill dig in Caithness

While in Caithness recently I visited a dig at an Iron Age settlement at Swartigill in the fields around Thrumster, south of Wick. The area known as the Yarrows is remarkably rich in ancient sites and this is the eighth season the Swartigill site has been excavated.

Led by UHI (the University of the Highlands and Islands) and ORCA (Orkney Research Centre for Archaeology) it also involved some enthusiastic volunteers from the local community ranging in age from young children to pensioners.

Bead – probably recycled Roman glass

striking Viking bead

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I was personally shown round the site by Rick the dig leader. While I was there a young lad found a small specimen of partially carved reddish flint. Rick broke off to explain to him how to carefully record exactly where in the site it was found.

Rick showed me some of their finds. Most were around 2000- 2500 years old - shards of pottery some with artistic and decorative patterns on the surface. Colourful beads probably made from recycled roman glass and a later intricately cut and strikingly colourful Viking bead and part of a black bangle made of lignite. A shaped stone ball possibly used like a pestle and mortar and a quern stone for grinding grain.

Part of a bangle made of lignite

the dig site at Swartigill

The buildings which had been partially excavated looked surprisingly complex with distinct evidence of hearths and flues. A fascinating visit.

b. The Bonville Courtenay Feud – by Claire Ross

Before the War of the Roses really got going, there were a number of disputes between high-ranking families – the Bonville-Courtenay feud was just one example. Who were these two protagonists and what was their problem?

William Bonville was born in Shute in 1392, the eldest son of a wealthy merchant. Unfortunately, both his father and grandfather died while he was young so he became a ward of Edward, Duke of York, who was the cousin of King Henry IV of the House of Lancaster. By 1414 William had married well and become the "very wealthiest landowner of the West Country" through the expediency of inheritance.

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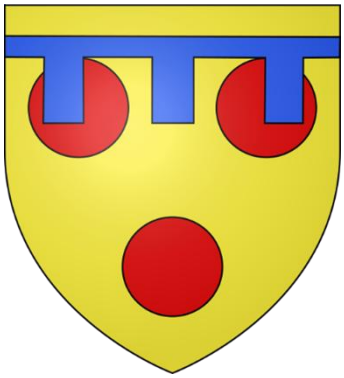
After his first wife died, he married well a second time to Elizabeth Courtenay of the Courtenays of Powderham – this was to become one of the sources of irritation between our two sworn enemies!

So what of our other protagonist? Thomas Courtenay was born in 1414 to the long-established Courtenay family, his father being the 12th Earl of Devon. Just like William Bonville, Thomas's father died before he was of 'full age' so he became a ward to Thomas Beaufort of the House of Lancaster. But when he turned 21 in 1435, he discovered that, although he had the title Earl of Devon, his mother had been given most of the estates, and hence most of the wealth, for her lifetime by his father's will. Instead of living in the family seat of Tiverton Castle, Thomas Courtenay was forced to build a new residence in the lowly estate of Colcombe!



Arms of Courtenay, earls of Devon

Arms of Bonville from wikipedia

I suspect this is how the feud started… Thomas Courtenay had the title and "pedigree" but little money: William Bonville had no title but sacks of money. And now they are living just 2 miles apart! The fact that they had been warded to, what became, different sides in the War of the Roses probably didn't help either. And of course Bonville had married a Courtenay from the other (estranged) branch of the family! The scene was set for decades of strife.

In 1437 the highly profitable stewardship of the Duchy of Cornwall was taken away from "poor" Courtenay and given to Bonville. Whilst Courtenay was given £100 pa in compensation, it would not have been the full value of the role. And now we come to the first documented activity in what became the long-running feud – in 1439 Courtenay attacked Bonville's estates and the King had to extract a promise of good

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behaviour from Courtenay. But things did not improve, so in December 1441 Bonville and Courtenay were summoned to the King to be publicly reconciled. The King's solution seems to have been to try and geographically separate them with Bonville serving in France 1443-1445 and Courtenay in 1446. Unfortunately for Courtenay, Bonville's service gained him a peerage - but only a lower ranked baronetcy. At least this separation seems to have produced an uneasy peace and for a while the two men focussed on jockeying for position in an increasing volatile political situation.

But in 1450 Courtenay attempted to capture the Earl of Wilts, a friend of Bonville, near Bath, failed but then besieged Bonville in Taunton Castle with a force of 5000 men. The siege was only stopped when the Duke of York arrived and imprisoned both Bonville and Courtenay for a month. This event underlines the lawlessness between nobles in England at the time.

After that there seem to have been a number of skirmishes and petty but irritating activities on both sides for several years with the disintegration of monarchic control as a constant backdrop. Then in October 1455 the feud got seriously out of control!

Courtenay's son attacked the manor of Nicholas Radford, an eminent lawyer and councillor to Bonville. On pretence of negotiation, Radford allowed Courtenay's men to enter his house but instead they ransacked it. Then Radford was "persuaded" to accompany the men to Courtenay's father but Radford "died" on the road. A hastily-held mock inquest gave a verdict of suicide, which meant the body could be given an unceremonious funeral with the body being crushed with stones, destroying all evidence of any offence. This outrageous act seems to have emboldened Courtenay Senior as on 3 November 1455 he and his sons occupied Exeter. They ransacked houses of Bonville and his supporters and arrested members of the Cathedral forcing them to buy their freedom. In retaliation Bonville set out from Shute and looted Colcombe Castle. On the 15 November, Courtenay beseiged Powderham Castle, the seat of his estranged cousin. Although Bonville attempted to relieve the siege, he failed. Ultimately, on 15 December 1455, the two sides met at the Battle of Clyst Heath. It was a decisive defeat for the older man, Bonville: 2 days later Courtenay's supporters pillaged Bonville's seat at Shute. And where was the King and the rule of law in all this? Well, the Duke of York had set out from London on receiving news of the Battle at Clyst and he summoned Courtenay to Shaftesbury, at which point Courtenay was imprisoned in the Tower of London awaiting trial for treason. One can only imagine the joy of Bonville at this point! But then the political tide turned again and Courtenay was released without further penalty a few months later! Bonville must have feared what would happen next.

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But now the Bonville-Courtenay feud really becomes just part of the War of the Roses. Who won? Well, the Bonville family certainly didn't. Bonville's son was killed at the Battle of Wakefield in Dec 1460, and Bonville himself was beheaded early in 1461 aged 69. With no living legitimate son, his estate was split 3 ways and his family's power dissolved. The Courtenay family fared a bit better. Surprisingly Thomas Courtenay seems to have died of natural causes in 1458 but his eldest son was beheaded only a few months after William Bonville and the earldom forfeited. Thomas's son John was restored to the earldom in 1470 but then died at the Battle of Tewkesbury. Nevertheless, the Courtenay family did retain the Colcombe estate albeit through a distant cousin of the Cornwall branch who coincidently married a cousin of the Powderham branch. The Courtenay family only lost Colcombe when their grandson, Henry Courtenay, was executed in 1538 – but that is the start of a completely different story.

Refs

- *The story of Shute . the Bonvilles and Poles* by M.F. Bridie with a foreword by Sir John Carew Pole, ... 3041344 | National Trust Collections
https://share.google/1Y8sWTYgZXJzGqvXC

- **Bonville Courtenay feud – Wikipedia - https://share.google/Q20MEtZ5LrzuoGej4**
- Image from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_de_Courtenay,_5th/13th_Earl_of_Devon
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Bonville,_1st_Baron_Bonville

c. Do you recognise any of these people from 1963?

Marian Sydenham would be pleased to know if you recognise anyone? She believes the second man from the left in the back row is Reg White who wrote the first *History of the Feoffees* and that the lady second from the right at the front is possibly Angela Massam.

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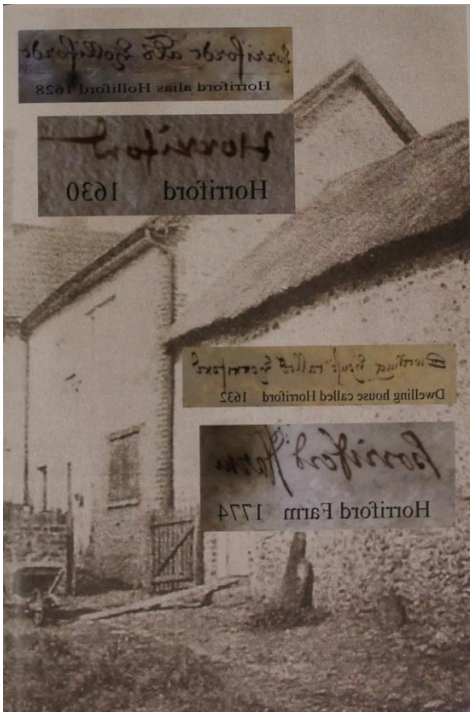
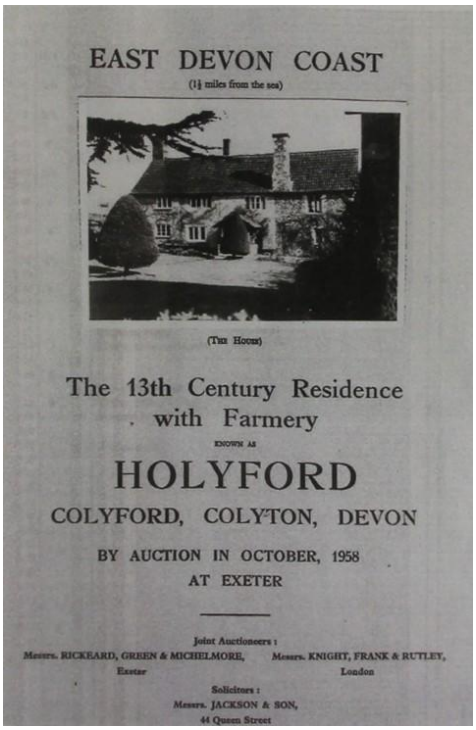
d. Review of *Horriford Lives* – by Jacqueline McCullough

'*Horriford Lives – People of Holyford Farm'* A privately published book, researched and written by Gordon Elsey has very generously been donated to the Heritage Centre archive library. It is the Elsey family version of 'A House Through Time' and tells the story of the very different people and times from the mid C16th to 1958 when it was put up for auction.

Although the site of the farm is mentioned in the Saxon Land Charter of 1005, the story begins when the Howper brothers, John and Pascal, are noted as tenants in the 1609 Survey of the Manor Whitwell. It is the start of the dwelling which goes on to support about twenty different households through the next three hundred and sixty years. The story concludes with the farm taking on a new role as a hotel from 1946 to 1958.




EAST DEVON COAST
(1½ miles from the sea)

(The House)

The 13th Century Residence
with Farmery
KNOWN AS
HOLYFORD
COLYFORD, COLYTON, DEVON
BY AUCTION IN OCTOBER, 1958
AT EXETER

Joint Auctioneers :
Messrs. RICKEARD, GREEN & MICHELMORE, Exeter
Messrs. KNIGHT, FRANK & RUTLEY, London
Solicitors :
Messrs. JACKSON & SON, 44 Queen Street

It is richly illustrated with photos, maps, newspaper articles and anecdotes of the people who had Horriford Farm as their home and workplace. Horse racing, farming, an outbreak of typhoid fever, poaching, disputed inheritances – the rich fabric of all life. The book also includes a selection of poems from Jeremy Clarke's book '*Devon Hymns'.* Memento *I want to remember this. Wading through waist-high hedgerow shadow In a dew-damp lane at midnight. Moonlight like snow in the skeleton trees, The soft shuffle-step of the cows Slow-dancing in the Devon dark*.

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People are welcome to make an appointment to come and study *Horriford Lives* in the Heritage Centre but the book may not be removed from the Centre.

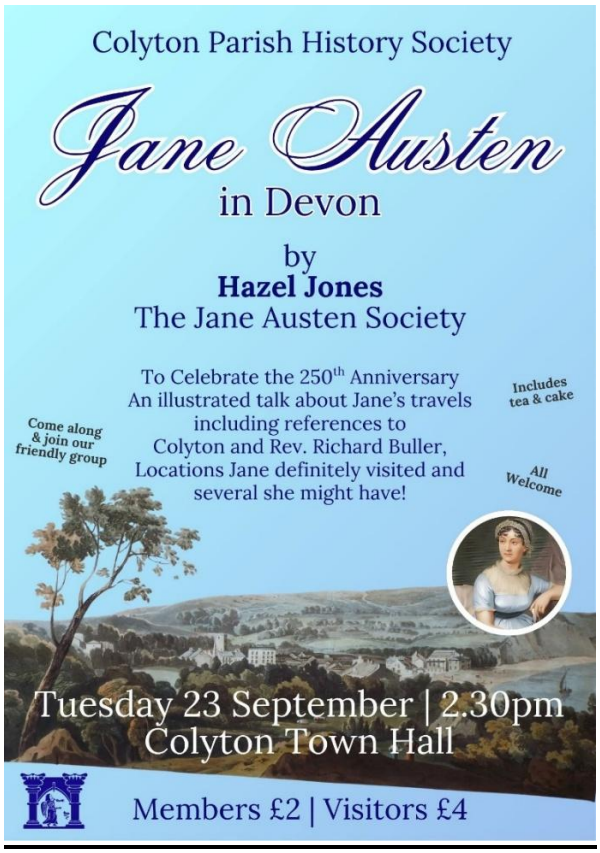
2. Questions from visitors to Colyton – can you help?

i. "***Were the 5 cottages in King Street between Soanes and the old Chapel all built at the same time?"*** (Looking at them face on, the left hand pair are grander than the 3 on the right, the 3 on the right are higher, the external finishes are different - brick/render, the windows/porches etc. are different). They are thought to be 15th century and probably built at the same time.

ii. ***Oldest building in Colyton –*** Last month we asked if anyone knew what is the oldest building in Colyton (excluding the church)? We've had no responses so far. Can you help?

3. History Society News

a. **History Society autumn talk programme -** Don't forget our first talk of the autumn is about Jane Austen's travels in Devon and is on Tuesday 23rd September 2025 at 2.30 pm in Colyton Town Hall. All welcome.



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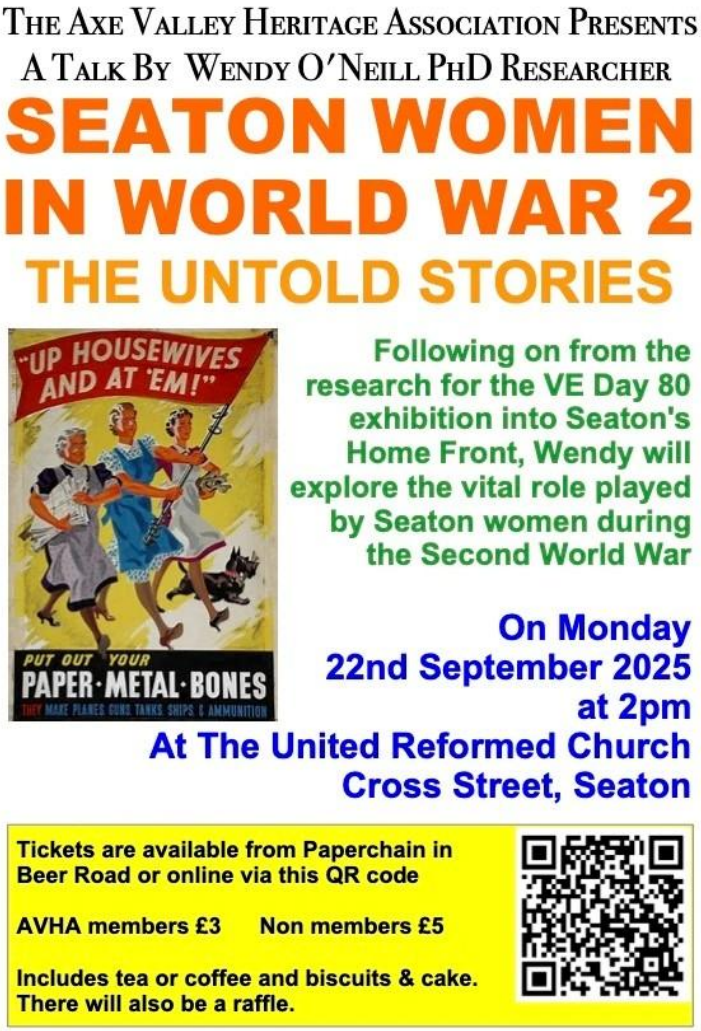
c **Can you help? Colyton History Society requires a new Treasurer**

CPHS is still looking for a new Treasurer as Brian, our current Treasurer, has indicated that he will not be standing for re-election at our AGM in the Autumn. This is not an onerous task and the Committee are a friendly bunch. Interested in this opportunity and would like to know more? Brian has kindly produced a job description for what is involved which I can email you (sarah.charman@yahoo.co.uk) or he would be happy to talk you through the role. .

4. Other organisations events

a. Axe Valley Heritage Association



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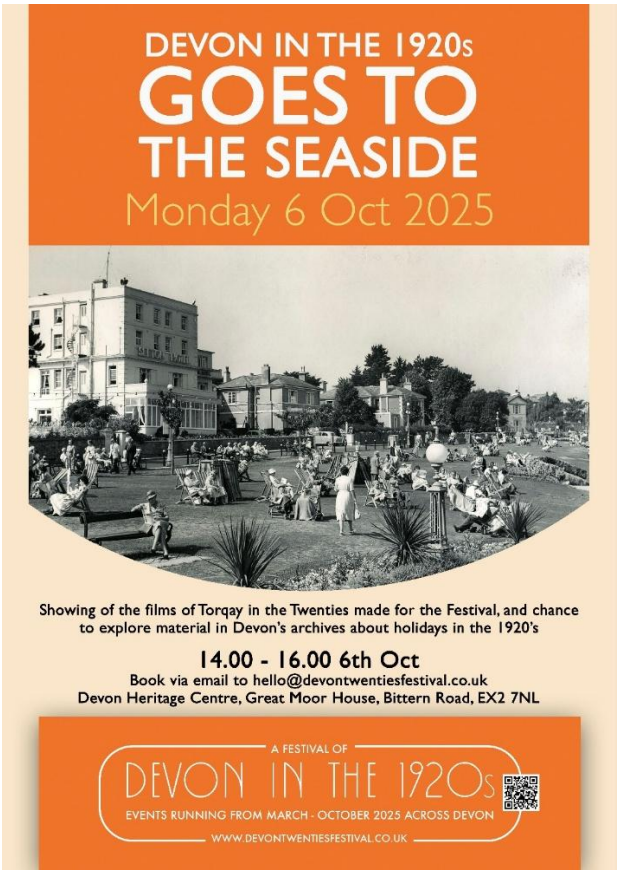
b. **Devon History Society - Heritage Open Days Specials**

- **Ivybridge** – exhibition about Ivybridge and Dartmoor in the 1920s at the Watermark
- **Teignmouth** – exhibition about Teignmouth and Shaldon in the 1920s at Teign Heritage Centre
- **Killerton** – exhibition about the public service of Eleanor and Francis Acland in the 1920s in the Engine House, complementing the fantastic presentation of 'Unflappable!', the 1920s costume exhibition, and the house.
- **Hemyock** – Calves, Churns and Communities, family friendly afternoon exploring local history
- **Poltimore** – talk about Poltimore House in the 1920s in the project centre at Poltimore House

Information about all these is available at www.devontwentiesfestival.co.uk

c. Friends of Devon archives (FODA) event

- **Devon in the 1920s Goes to the Seaside -** 2pm Monday **6 October** at Devon Heritage Centre



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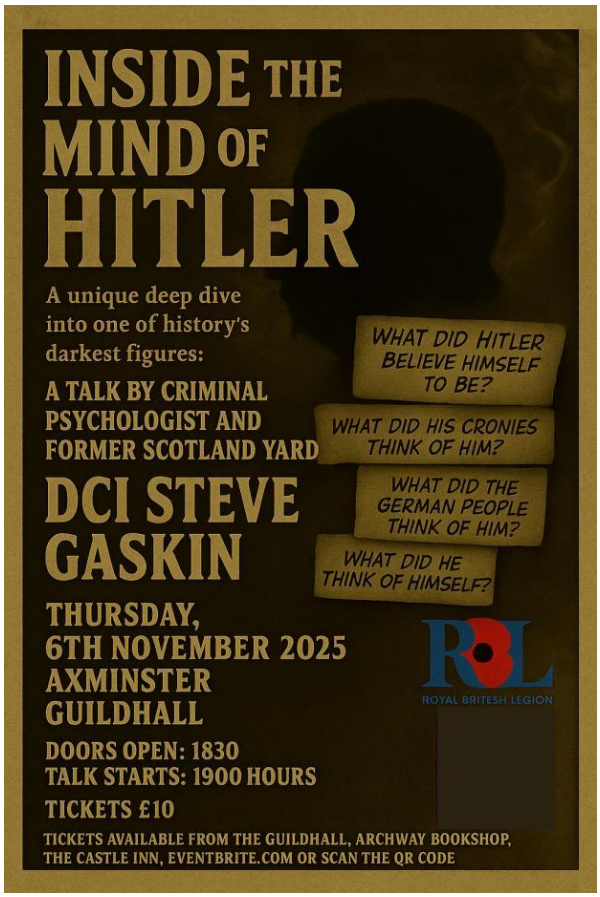
e. **Axminster Guildhall**



Talk on Hitler's psychology coming to Axminster | Sidmouth Herald

5. Items you may have missed

a. Heritage Open Days September 2025 - Heritage Open Days events to look forward to in East Devon | Midweek Herald

b. Theft from RAMM - Historic weapon and pocket watches stolen from Exeter museum - in pictures - Devon Live

c. Remembering the Napoli Disaster
https://www.sidmouthherald.co.uk/news/25410472.remembering-napoli-maritime-disaster-east-devon/?ref=eb&nid=2405&block=article_block_a&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=250825

d. Royal Clarence, Exeter to rise again - First look at how Exeter's Royal Clarence Hotel will rise again | Devon Live

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e. Torquay's Agatha Christie statue
https://www.devonlive.com/news/devon-news/torquays-agatha-christie-getting-wax-10479023?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

f. GWR New Devon Cornwall stamp trail launched
https://www.midweekherald.co.uk/news/25411808.new-devon-cornwall-stamp-trail-launched-gwr/?ref=eb&nid=2397&block=article_block_a&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=250825

g. Snapshots of Devon life in days gone by
https://www.sidmouthherald.co.uk/news/25406103.snapshots-devon-village-life-days-gone/?ref=eb&nid=2405&block=article_block_a&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=250825

h. Vase sells at Axminster auction for nearly £16000
https://www.midweekherald.co.uk/news/25419832.vase-sells-axminster-auction-near-record-16-000/?ref=eb&nid=2397&block=article_block_a&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=280825

i. Lostwithiel home with 3000 year lease
Home with bizarre lease that won't expire until 4652 - Devon Live

j. Guided tours of Colyton
Colyton: Guided tours offered to explore town's history | Midweek Herald