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Colyton Parish History Society Newsletter

12 October 2025

This month, on the centenary of her birth, I recall my time working for Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

News

a. Margaret Thatcher

100 years ago tomorrow on 13 October 1925 Margaret Hilda Roberts was born in Grantham, Lincolnshire. Some 60 years later in April 1986 Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher came to Colyton, visiting the farm of Ken and Jean Underdown at Road Green. If you have any memories or pictures of that visit to Colyton please do let me know. (sarah.charman@yahoo.co.uk)

Photo from Colyton Heritage Centre archives

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I worked for Mrs Thatcher as a pr adviser and government spokeswoman in the press office at No 10 for the last three years of her premiership. Irrespective of the conflicting views people may have of her politics today, I can only say it was a privilege to work in Downing Street for our first female Prime Minister, a woman at the top of her game, an internationally respected leader known on the world stage as the 'Iron Lady' who had a clear vision of the direction in which she wished to lead this country and a strategy for how to deliver the policies she believed in, who led from the front in handling events as they arose and worked pragmatically and tirelessly to deliver her objectives.

I was standing beside her in Downing Street when she spoke proudly and excitedly to the assembled media of the joy of becoming a grandmother for the first time. Mrs Thatcher was subsequently criticised for allegedly using the Royal 'We' as in 'We are a grandmother' but it was simply a misspeak – she meant to say 'We have become grandparents.'

I accompanied the Prime Minister to Bruges in September 1988 when she made her now famous speech to the College of Europe about the future direction of European cooperation and also attended numerous European Council meetings with her as part of the press office team when the atmosphere was frequently torrid and where my role was to engage with the media pack and parry their endless probing questions until Bernard Ingham could come and brief them about the current state of often tense negotiations.

Sometimes I carried the handbag on visits to housing estates where she handed over the keys to their new home to an excited house buyer, to paint factories and science laboratories where her own scientific knowledge was often put to good use, to the 'topping out' ceremony at a Canary Wharf building, on inspection trips to nuclear submarines and on occasion to visit the families of those who had died or were injured in the aftermath of terrorist events such as the bombing of the Royal Marines School of Music centre in Deal in September 1989.

Mrs Thatcher was a good boss to work for and looked after her staff, occasionally inviting them to a private lunch with her and husband Denis at Chequers. She enjoyed real conversations about everything from fashion and jewellery to scientific developments and the environment.

I prepped the Prime Minister for media interviews and briefed her about the itinerary for every visit I accompanied her on, having previously undertaken a recce to meet the people she would be visiting, identifying what she would be seeing and agreeing where the media photo-opportunities would be. She listened attentively while you briefed her – but you'd better be sure you could back up your advice with facts!

It was a whirlwind existence of long days and very hard work – we were in the press office by 7.30 am in the morning to prepare the press digest with which Bernard would go up and brief the PM at 8.15 am. The daily routine of liaising with

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government departments all round Whitehall and regular lobby briefings for the media was interspersed with responding to inevitable crises as they arose. At the same time there were enjoyable social events such as receptions for visiting dignatories which we were expected to attend but No 10 at that time was a well-oiled machine - indeed a 'family' of some 100 people in many different roles - loyally working long hours to support the Prime Minister of the day.

And I was there at the end, in those final days in November 1990 when life in Downing Street took on the surreal air of a greek tragedy unravelling in a goldfish bowl, surrounded by the world's media. I remember the entrance hall behind the imposing black front door perfumed to suffocation point by the fragrance of lillies in hundreds of bouquets, several deep, lining the walls of the long corridor down to the Cabinet Room – sent by bewildered and admiring fans of Mrs Thatcher from around the world.

Mrs Thatcher tendered her resignation to HM the Queen on the morning of 22 November 1990. Later that afternoon, looking down from the press gallery above the packed Chamber of the House of Commons, while watching Mrs Thatcher's bravura performance at PMs Question followed by the confidence debate how could one not admire her stridently defiant declaration that 'I'm enjoying this, I'm enjoying this!' as tension releasing raucous laughter resounded around the Chamber on all sides. She had them in the palm of her hand!

Twenty three years later, I attended Baroness Thatcher's ceremonial (state) funeral at St Paul's Cathedral in London in April 2013. To this day there are still really bitter differences of opinion about the impact of her beliefs and policies on this country but this event, perhaps more than any other, showed the admiration and respect with which Baroness Thatcher as an individual was - and still is - held in politics and by ordinary people around the country and among Statesmen and leaders across the world. She had a vision for where she wished to take this country and the courage and conviction to deliver it. What more can be asked of any leader?

References

i. Photo of Mrs Thatcher with Ken and Jean Underdown at Road Green Farm, Colyton, April 1986 – from the archives at Colyton Heritage Centre
ii. We are a grandmother ***https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=mrs%20thatcher%20we%20are%20a%20g%20randmother&mid=4C5C7DEDFCB788CD4D544C5C7DEDFCB788CD4D54&ajaxhist=0***
iii. Archive: PM Margaret Thatcher's 1988 Bruges speech - BBC News
iv. ***http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/september/22/newsid_2528000/2528223.stm***

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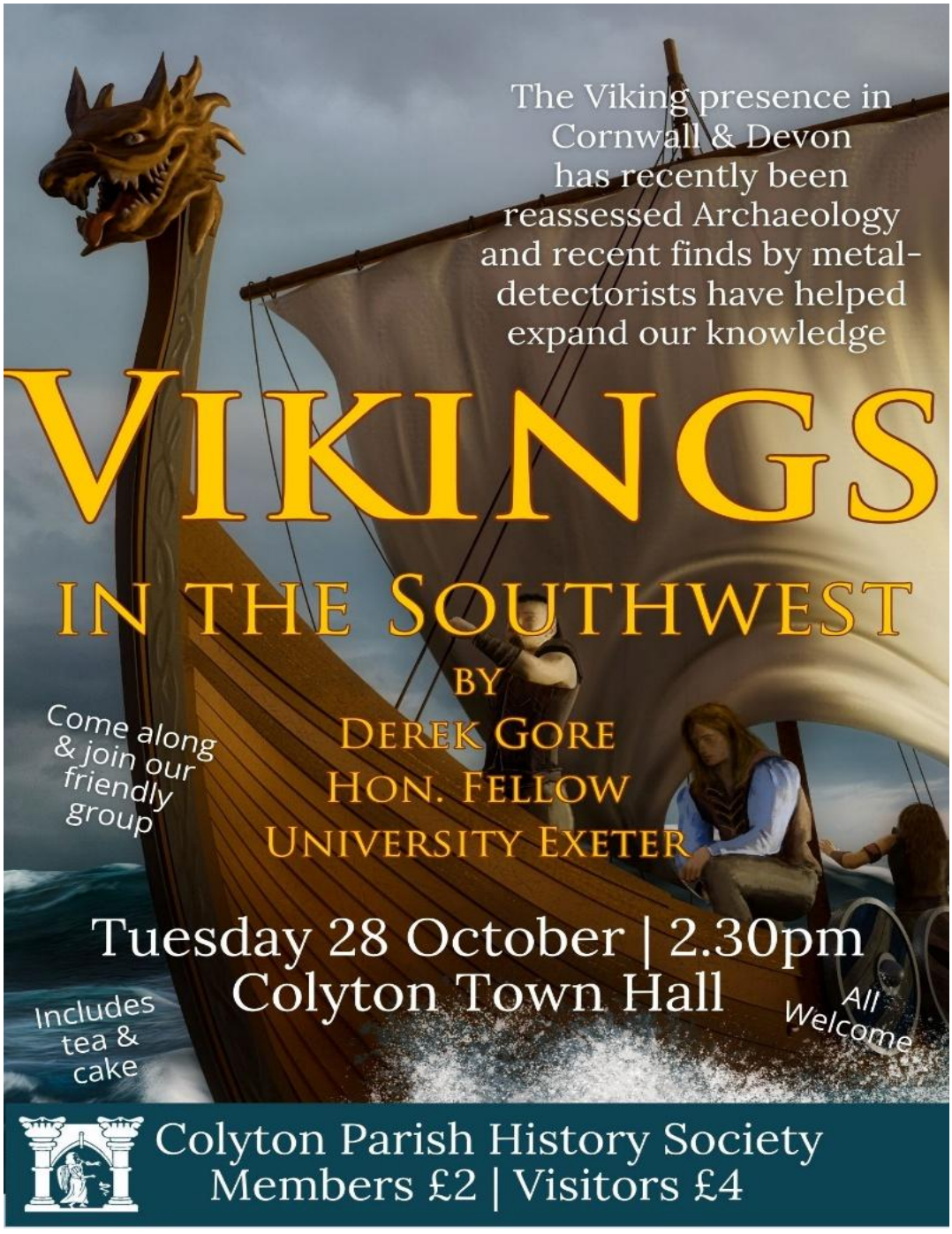
b. Colyton History Society - October talk



NB CPHS' **Annual General Meeting** will follow on immediately from this month's talk by Derek Gore on the **Vikings in the Southwest** which is taking place at **2.30 pm on Tuesday 28 October 2025** at Colyton Town Hall.

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2. History Society News

The Heritage Centre will be closing for the winter at the end of this month.

3. Other organisations events

a. Devonshire Association – Buildings Section

The History of England through the Windows of an Ordinary House - by Dr Ian Mortimer **FRIDAY 7 NOVEMBER 2025 AT 14:30 -** The Worship Area, Mint Methodist Church, Fore Street, Exeter, EX4 3AT

Dr Ian Mortimer is best known as the Sunday Times-bestselling author of the four Time Traveller's Guides – to Medieval England, Elizabethan England, Restoration Britain and Regency Britain – as well as four critically acclaimed medieval biographies, a prize-winning novel and several other titles. In total, his books have sold more than 1.4 million copies and been translated into sixteen languages. He is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and has been described by The Times as 'the most remarkable medieval historian of our time'. He lives in Moretonhampstead in a fascinating medieval, Tudor and Edwardian house, some of the more surprising aspects of which he will explore in this talk.

Cost of the event: £5 per person. No advance booking, pay on the door by cash or cheque only, no cards. For further details use link below :

The History of England through the Windows of an Ordinary House - Devon History Society

4. Items you may have missed

a. **National project launched to rediscover King Henry VIII's forgotten Tudor Domesday book**
https://westbridgfordwire.com/national-project-launched-to-rediscover-henry-viiis-long-forgotten-tudor-domesday-book/

b. **£20 million fund to be shared across 75 museums**
https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/uknews/20-million-fund-to-be-shared-across-75-museums-in-england/ar-AA1O2LKo?ocid=msedgdhp&pc=HCTS&cvid=68e6870b0b254658b400c24b340bdca9&ei=14

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c. Wartime diaries shed light on Sidford's home front life | Sidmouth Herald

d. **Fascinating story behind Seaton's newly restored clock**

https://www.midweekherald.co.uk/news/25477598.fascinating-story-behind-seatons-newly-restored-clock/?ref=eb&nid=2397&block=article_block_a&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=220925

e. **Thelma Hulbert Gallery hosts The Work of Giants! exhibition | Midweek Herald**

f. **Here's why you should visit this stunning ghost town in Dorset**

https://www.msn.com/en-gb/travel/news/here-s-why-you-should-visit-this-stunning-ghost-town-in-dorset/ar-AA1NqCAX

g. Rare 180 million-year-old fossil identified as new 'sword dragon' species - Devon Live

h. The incredible Titanic story involving a Dorset family