

Colyton Parish History Society Newsletter

25 August 2026

1. News

a. Armada Maps – by Sarah Charman

I recently visited Buckland Abbey, home of Sir Francis Drake, to see a short term exhibition of historic maps illustrating the Spanish Armada battle in 1588. The maps have been held in private hands for hundreds of years, most recently owned by Lord Astor at Hever Castle since 1900 and were last sold in 2020, when they were acquired for the nation by the Royal Navy Museum with support from the National Memorial Heritage Fund and the Art Fund.

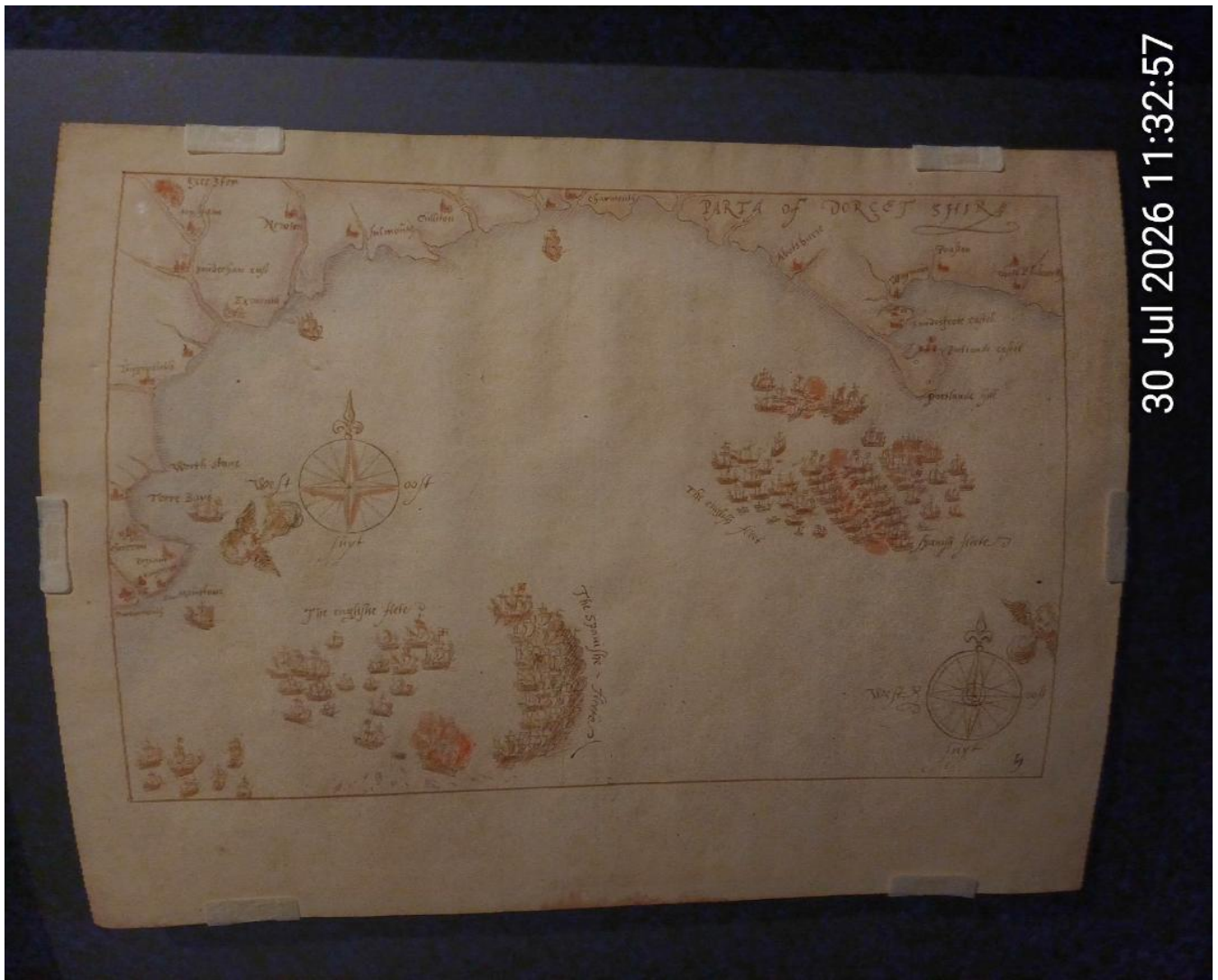


Map 3 of 10 depicting the progress of the Spanish Armada along the southern English coast in 1588, pursued by the English fleet

Pigments were apparently added to the maps at some point allegedly to increase their value and also to make them easier to read.

They depict in fascinating detail the progress of the Spanish Armada invasion fleet along the coast of southern England pursued by the smaller English fleet and show the tactics used by Lord Howard of Effingham, Lord High Admiral and Sir Francis Drake to defeat the Spanish.

But even more dramatically the maps show the impact the weather had on the course and ultimately the outcome of the conflict! I had not really appreciated the significance of this point before. (NB See the cute little cherub faces on the compass blowing winds from the given direction. So much information/propaganda depicted in a map!) Never was England more grateful to the winds blowing around our island home!



30 Jul 2026 11:32:57

Map 5 of 10 depicting the progress of the Spanish Armada along the southern English coast in 1588, pursued by the English fleet



a. Merchant's House
Market Place
Colyton
Devon
EX24 6JR
e. info@colytonheritagecentre.org
w. www.colytonheritagecentre.org

Helpful guidance notes in the exhibition explain what each map reveals. Map 3 above shows the skirmish off Plymouth. On the left the English fleet engages the Spanish. To the right the Spanish breakaway and reform, pursued westwards by the English. A small number of English ships turn south, possibly to capture the damaged vessel of Don Pedro de Valdes. At the lower left of the Spanish formation, one ship is severely damaged by a gunpowder explosion.

Map 5 entitled: the engagement near Portland Bill shows, on the left, that the Spanish ship struck by a gunpowder explosion, is captured. The rest of the fleet sails east in formation, driven by a south westerly wind. To the right, the wind shifts to the north east, allowing the Spanish fleet to turn and move to attack the English.

To my surprise I was intrigued to discover that one of the few towns noted along the Jurassic coast on map 5 was Colyton (spelt Culliton) (see top of map just left of centre). Question – why was Colyton deemed sufficiently significant in the telling of this Armada story that it was included on this map by the map maker? Was it just because of its trade connections overseas? Or was there some other reason? If anyone knows the answer please do let me know.

Equally interesting on map 5 is the portrayal of the Axe river – top just to the right of Colyton/Culliton - which arguably seems to indicate that it was still navigable above Colyford and indeed beyond Colyton in this period?

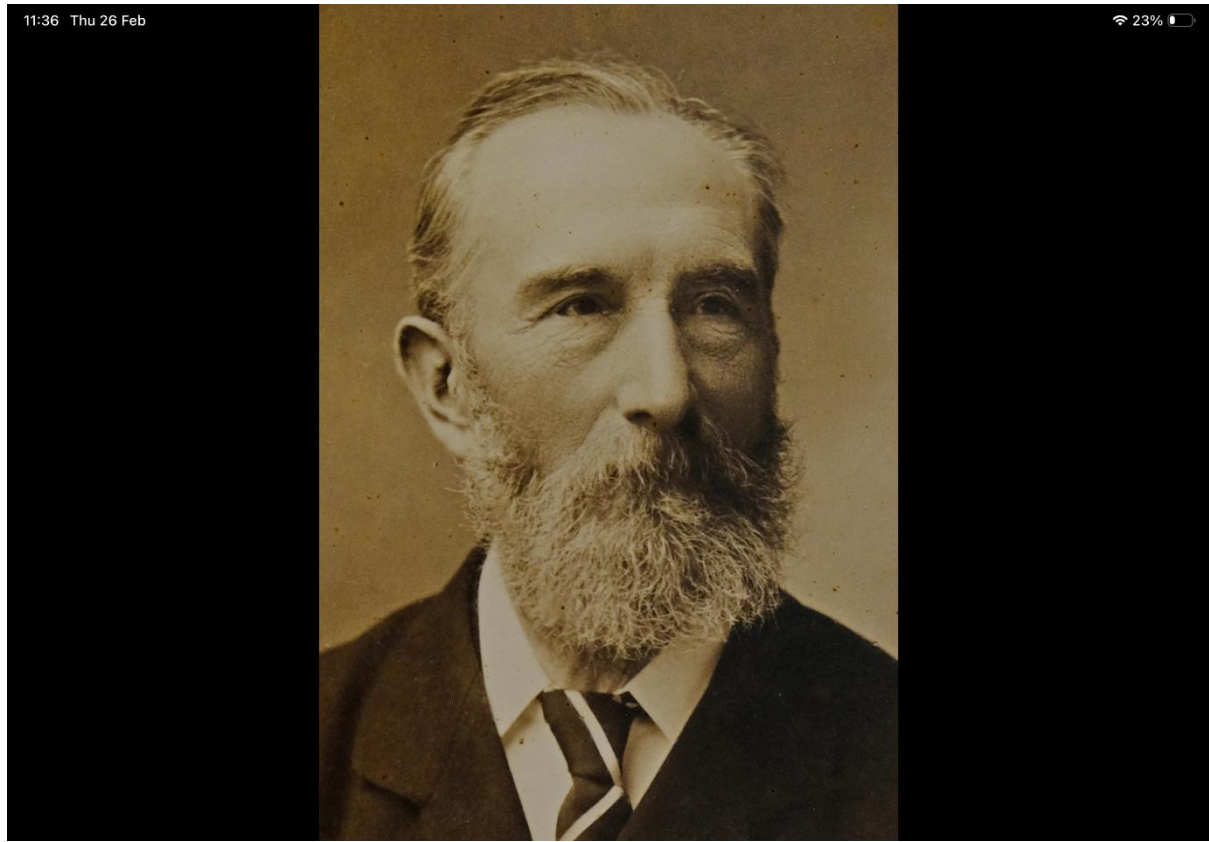
b. Walter William Wills 1839 – 1914 – by Sue Hurry

The information used to compile this history of Walter Wills is mainly taken from two articles written by Keith Clayton, in the publication 'Precious Seeds' dated 1958 cited below.

Walter William Wills was born in 1839 to Richard Wills, a wealthy farmer in Musbury, then in Devon. Richard farmed over 400 acres. He was a staunch member of the established church and right hand man to the then vicar, George Tucker (the younger), serving as Chief Warden. Walter was brought up in the faith, going on to be confirmed and become a regular communicant. By his own admission he enjoyed life and is quoted as saying that he 'had tried the world, had danced with the girls all night and returned home to have coffee with his parents in the morning.'
(<https://www.preciousseed.org>.)

At the age of around seventeen in 1856, he became concerned about the way he was living and sunk into depression. His parents became very worried about the change in him and consulted the local doctor, who advised that they send Walter

away to live with his uncle. Walter didn't think that the doctor's advice would help him as his problems were not physical or mental, but spiritual.



Walter William Wills

Two local clergymen tried to reassure him that he had nothing to worry about as he was a regular communicant. Walter was not reassured by this and became unable to sleep. He took to walking in the fields at night, praying that he would find peace.

This went on for a year until Walter felt he could take no more. One day he went up to the Eleven Acre Field to tend to the cattle. While he was there, he told God that he couldn't go on and that unless God sent him a sign, he would take his own life. In later years he was to tell people that he saw a light from heaven which reminded him of St Paul's vision on the road to Damascus. Walter found a stake and drove it into the ground where he had had the vision. Then he left the cattle in the field and ran home to tell his mother she did not need to worry about him anymore as he felt at peace. His mother sent for the doctor who thought him to be suffering from 'religious mania' and that he should be committed to a 'home'.

Walter agreed instead to attend church regularly and take communion. He also started to study the Bible. One day, after witnessing a baby being christened, he became

distressed and told the vicar that this was not what the Bible said about christening. Christening was a ceremony for adults who had confessed the faith. On his way home from church, he came across Mrs Susan James sitting outside her house on the Combpyne Road. She was reading her Bible. After lunch that day he told his parents he was going out, but would be back in time for evensong. He went back to see Mrs James and they spent the rest of the day studying the Bible together. Walter lost track of time and had tea with Mrs James. Tea, he later told people, that had consisted of 'unbuttered bread'.

Walter's parents weren't happy that he had gone to the poorest house in the parish for guidance rather than the vicar. Walter told his father that as the vicar hadn't been able to help him before, he didn't think he would be able to help him now. Richard offered to pay for his son to study to become a priest, but Walter refused, preferring instead to continue to study the Bible with Mrs James.

Walter told Mrs James he wanted to 'do what Paul did'. Mrs James agreed to support him and stand with him while he preached. They chose a spot outside the Post Office in the village. After this first open air meeting, a man called Harvey, found he couldn't sleep as he had been so affected by what he had heard and so his wife said she would send for the doctor. Harvey didn't want the doctor to be called, he wanted to see Walter, so at 2 o'clock in the morning a neighbour went to New House Farm to ask Walter to come to see him. Harvey became a follower of Walter's.

On the next Sunday the three of them went to the Post Office and Walter again preached in the open air. The three of them continued to meet every Sunday evening in Mrs James' cottage to study the Bible and to conduct open air preaching sessions outside the Post Office. Before long they were joined by others.

Two and a half years after Walter started preaching his father started attending his meetings, followed by his mother. His father encouraged him to build a chapel on Whitford Road. Richard Wills funded the building materials. The stone came from Shoothill Quarry. The work was carried out by other believers. A man called Rockett, possibly related to the first Post Master in the village, undertook the carpentry work and a mason by the name of Partridge also worked on the building which was completed in 1859.

Walter continued to do the preaching, baptisms took place and a simple form of communion was introduced. The company grew to around sixty members with Sunday School at 10am, followed by The Lords Supper at 11am – this service sometimes went on until 1pm. There was another Sunday School at in the afternoon and a Prayer Meeting at 6pm. This was followed by a Gospel Service and another Prayer Meeting which often went on until 9pm.

As a result of Walter's preaching in the local area, assemblies were established in Axminster, Axmouth, Beer, Lyme Regis and Colyton.

The last service was held in the Musbury Chapel on 11th November 2011. It was converted into a house and is now a holiday cottage.

Walter Wills died in Axminster in 1914.

Sources

In his article in the Musbury Parish News, Martin Minter concludes by examining the evidence for the information given regarding persons mentioned in the Keith Clayton articles, verifying their existence and that they lived in Musbury in the period mentioned.

Keith Clayton's articles appear, because of the way they are written, to have been based on oral history. It is possible that he visited Musbury to gather evidence for his articles in 1958 or around that period. The Chapel was still in use at the time and there would have been members of the company living in the village, in their late 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s, and attending the chapel who would have known Walter Wills, listened to him preach and heard his story at first hand. As with all oral history, things alter and are embellished with repeated tellings, but are based in truth.

1. 1958. Precious Seed, Musbury, Volume 9, Issue 4, Part 6 of a series: How it Began, Musbury Devon. Keith Clayton. <https://www.preciousseed.org>.
2. 1958. Precious Seed, Volume 9, Issue 5, Part 7 of a series: How it Began, Musbury, Devon. Keith Clayton. <https://www.preciousseed.org>.
3. Summer 2020. Musbury Parish News, Musbury Chapel – Is this the true story of how it came about? Martin Minter, Musbury Heritage. martin@musburyheritage.co.uk.

c. Colyton Houses Through Time Project

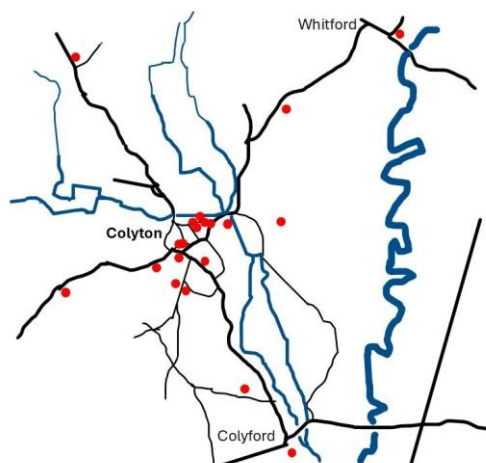
Take a look at the image below. In the mid 19th century the famous Victorian artist William Spreat sketched this lovely picture from Kingsdown Hill looking out over the newly built railway line – opened in 1860 (and completed down to Seaton by 1868) - and across the fertile green fields to the hills beyond with the town of Colyton nestled snugly at the bottom of the Coly valley. Now compare it with the photograph below – taken from the same position on August 12 2026. Observe how Colyton has developed as the town has now spread up the hillsides to the south west? Most of this expansion has taken place since the 1960s.



Members of our Colyton Houses Through Time community project have been busy during the summer investigating and writing, firstly about the style and construction methods used in a range of houses across the town from different time periods and including some of the volunteers own homes. Secondly, we have been researching the stories of the people who have lived in these properties over the years.



The map below shows the location and spread of the properties studied.



The properties were selected at random in the sense that they were chosen by the individuals participating in the project. They range from small terraces to detached houses and apartments and from old chapels to former pubs. Some are hundreds of years old and others are quite modern. Whatever their age each house - from the details of how and when it was constructed to stories about the people who have lived in them over the years - has a story to tell. Volunteers have been busily engaged in searching through old census returns, wills and local newspaper archives, seeking pictures of properties, talking to people who have lived here in Colyton for many years to capture their memories, pouring over old maps of the town and historic tithe apportionments. It has been fun.

Our researches have raised some interesting questions for us such as why street names were changed so frequently in the past, the often frankly bizarre numbering systems for newer properties, the impact of fires on the destruction of properties in the town centre and about changing fashions in house design why, for example, there are so many properties in Colyton and Colyford with the classical 'Greek key' design on them and even the important role played by steam engines in the local community!

We are planning a small exhibition in Colyton at the end of October in the Sunday School Building to reveal our findings. The exhibition will take place on **Friday and Saturday 30 and 31 October from 10 am to 4.00 pm** and is free to enter. We do hope you will come along.

References

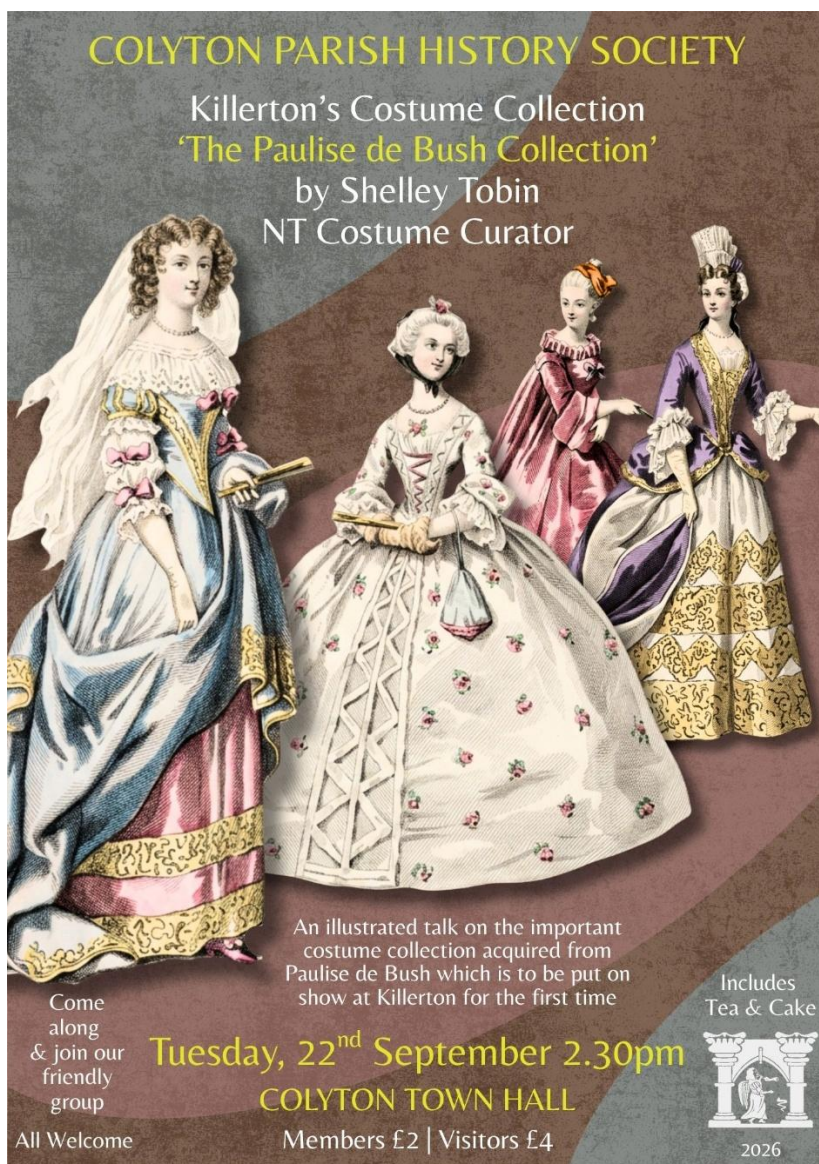
- 1 Spreat, William – *Colyton from Kingsdown*, lithograph by William Spreat, Exeter
- 2 author's photograph
- 3 map produced by Claire Ross, CPHS trustee and volunteer

d. BBC documentary series 'A House Through Time' with David Olusuga

A new series has just begun on BBC 2 based on the lives of people who lived in a house in Edinburgh. [BBC Two - A House Through Time](#)

2. CPHS events

A reminder that the CPHS autumn talk programme begins at **2.30 pm on Tuesday 22 September** with a fascinating talk by curator Shelley Tobin on Killerton's costume collection. Members £2 Non Members £4. All our welcome. Do come along.



COLYTON PARISH HISTORY SOCIETY

Killerton's Costume Collection
'The Paulise de Bush Collection'
by Shelley Tobin
NT Costume Curator

An illustrated talk on the important costume collection acquired from Paulise de Bush which is to be put on show at Killerton for the first time

Come along & join our friendly group
All Welcome

Tuesday, 22nd September 2.30pm
COLYTON TOWN HALL
Members £2 | Visitors £4

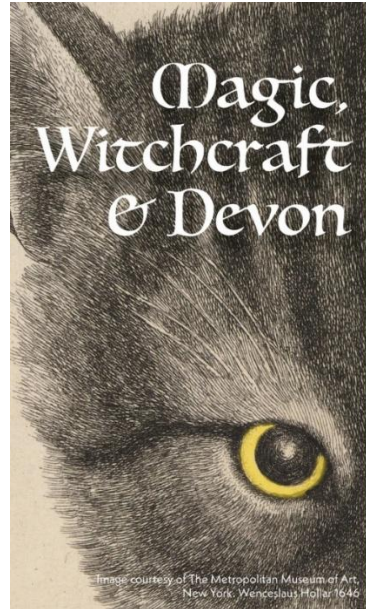
Includes Tea & Cake



2026

3. Other organisations events

a. Magic, Witchcraft Devon



**Magic,
Witchcraft
& Devon**

Image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York. Wenceslaus Hollar 1646

Saturday 24 October 2026

9.30 Registration 10.30 Welcome

10.40 *Dr Todd Gray,*
'13 Devon Witches, 1565-1633'
University of Exeter

11.40 *Prof. Mark Stoyle,*
'Spellbound: Witchcraft in Exeter, 1558-1660'
University of Southampton

12.40 – 1.45 Lunch (available in nearby cafes)

1.45 *Prof. Marion Gibson,*
'The Mystery of the Dartmouth Witches, 1601-2'
University of Exeter

2.45 *Dr Tabitha Stanmore,*
'Magic in Early Modern Rural Life'
University of Exeter

4.00 End

Mint Methodist Church Centre,
Fore Street, Exeter EX4 4AT
£14 admittance fee payable through
www.stevensbooks.co.uk or tel. 07900915469.
Refreshments will be available at a small charge.

3. Items you may have missed

[The East Devon museums that are worth a revisit this summer | Sidmouth Herald](#)

[Sidmouth Devon is a 'beautiful' town with links to royalty | Sidmouth Herald](#)

[The Screaming Skull of Bettiscombe - Dorset legends | Bridport and Lyme Regis News](#)

[Could Bridport's Chantry have guided ships into West Bay? | Dorset Echo](#)

Sarah Charman
Editor