



Perran-ar-worthal

Local History Group

Dr Garry Tregidga gave a talk on Methods of Researching Local History on 29th March

Dr Tregidga is the Director of The Cornish Audio Visual Archive (CAVA) created in 2000 for the study and documentation of the oral and visual culture of Cornwall. It is located at the Institute of Cornish Studies, part of the University of Exeter in Cornwall (Tremough).

Agan Kernow (Our Cornwall) is an organisation Dr Tregidga has established to encourage and support the development of a network of groups such as ours whose aim is to investigate their local history and culture. This has particular significance in Cornwall, a land with its own language, landscape and distinctive traditions; it can be approached from a variety of angles, for example, religion, music, sport, people, places, landscapes and, naturally enough, food - in the 1860s there were 300 different varieties of pasty!

Researching local history can involve a range of different techniques and source materials – principally documents, images, publications, newspapers and oral histories. Dr Tregidga selected a number of case studies for his talk, to illustrate the richness and diversity of the subject.

The Cornish language is itself a valuable source of information for the local historian; until relatively recently there were a number of quite distinctive local accents across the county, and it was possible to distinguish between people from say Redruth, St Austell, or Launceston. Dialect words for common objects can be used to identify social boundaries otherwise difficult to detect - the Cornish word for the meal break, for example, is 'croust' in the west and 'crib' in the east of the county. Many dialect words for tools and agricultural practices are more tightly restricted and seem to reflect the 'territories' of the various Cornish market towns.

Placenames are also a valuable source of information, and as language mutates through time, the different forms of the same placename elements can provide a timeframe for the evolution of the language and the landscape.

Family names recorded in census returns demonstrate the mobility, or otherwise, of families and of individuals and their changing occupations; fluctuations in numbers can indicate population movements resulting from economic and social factors.

Finally, newspapers can be incredibly informative, often providing the sort of detail otherwise unrecorded, the personal stories, local events, strange happenings and sad tales of days gone by. This area of study is all the more useful now as many nineteenth century newspapers have been digitised and can be searched online. Particularly valuable for us are the archives of the Cornishman, the Royal Cornwall Gazette, the Cornish Guardian and the Sherbourne Mercury. These papers reported on all sorts of local activities - associated with church and chapel, schools, local societies, weather events, and catalogues and details of markets, sales of livestock, houses, farms and businesses, and much more. A web search for '*Perranwell in C19th newspapers*' produced 3,779 hits!

One example will amply demonstrate the unique value of newspapers as a source of information. The Royal Cornwall Gazette, on 23rd of September 1853, published the following article under the headline, "***The Perran Cottage Gardening and Poultry exhibition***" :

"We were surprised a fortnight since to observe an announcement of such an exhibition, in such a locality. Perranarworthal is one of our smallest parishes, only 1229 acres, and its land, in general, is of a very coarse description; indeed very much of it is in waste, but it is chiefly composed of miners, and persons employed in the foundry of Messrs Williams. We could only anticipate that the project (ie the exhibition) would be a failure unless a show was made up from the gardens and poultry walks of gentlemen in the neighbourhood. Seldom have we been more agreeably surprised. The exhibition was exceedingly well got up and made a very creditable show.

In a very few words, this piece introduces a perhaps unexpected local organisation, but also tells us about the nature of the landscape and the state of agriculture at a very precise date; it informs us about the main sources of employment of the people and their recreational activities and, unintentionally perhaps, speaks volumes on the social relations and attitudes of the day.

Dr Tregidga's talk was both entertaining and inspiring. It is encouraging to know that, as the PLHG embarks on our second year of researching our own local history (and archaeology!) we can benefit from the support and assistance of Agan Kernow and the Institute of Cornish Studies.

Steve Hartgroves