

The First Swimbridge Q&A

by Mark Haworth-Booth

The first of the 'Swimbridge Q&As' was held on Wednesday 19 October 2011 and went off in fine style. Around 60 people turned up to enjoy a glass of award-winning wine from the Summermoor Vineyard in the parish, or some North Devon apple juice from Westlake. They were regaled with a delightful selection of music by our organist Janet Patton (on piano), while colour slides were projected. These showed the village as it was in the years leading up to 1965, by Mervyn C. Dalling, plus photographs by John Hayes of the works on the Link Road (1988-89) which replaced the old railway line. The PCC had decided to initiate the 'Swimbridge Q&As' because of the new housing built in Liverton Drive: it was a way to welcome newcomers both to the village – and its history - and to our place of worship. However, it was also a way of sharing our lovely church with the community at large and welcoming everyone in to enjoy it. The title of our series, the 'Q&As', is intended to suggest something rather more interactive than a lecture, with lots of audience participation.

John Hayes – formerly head of history at South Molton School - opened the formal proceedings with a



short résumé of the major changes he'd seen since first coming to live in the village thirty years ago. He spoke, of course, of the Link Road, but also of the great reduction in the number of farms during the period - from 50 down to half that (although he noted three new ones). He also spoke of the silver mine, between Hannaford and Hearson, which was set up in the 1830s and operated under a variety of names. He recounted how three men died in a mining accident there when they were overcome by poisonous fumes. He also reminisced about his very first view of Swimbridge, as he drove down the hill from Kerscott, and saw the village with the church at its heart. He recalled that our much-loved

former incumbent, the Rev. Peter Bowers, had had the same rush of excitement and pleasure on first seeing the village, driving down the same road.

John then introduced our main speaker for the evening, Mervyn C. Dalling, 'who has lived in Swimbridge all his life' – to be wittily interrupted 'Not yet!' We are very lucky to have in our midst a really excellent amateur local historian who is also a most entertaining raconteur. Mervyn gave us a marvelous account of his memories of village life, beginning when he first came to our church at the age of four (he was born in 1941). He sat in a pew by the south door and was constantly poked in the back by a little girl in the row behind. Resourcefully, the young Mervyn asked a kindly lady if he could sit with her in a pew near the pulpit. He spoke of the wartime period when evening services were held in the Old School Room because the windows of the church were too large to be blacked-out – which was required when a 'black-out' was in force all over the country, so as to give enemy bombers no help in identifying either their navigational position or potential targets. Mervyn noted that the very table on which the projector was placed had been used as a temporary altar in the Old School Room in those days. He spoke fascinatingly of the days when there was a tannery in the village - he still has some pieces of leather made there – stamped Barnstaple rather than Swimbridge - and said they have a particularly pleasant smell. He recalled a time after the war when there was still a blacksmith plus three shops, six pubs and seven places of worship. He recalled that going shopping after the war was not what it is now: each family had a ration book with a number of 'points' representing the amounts of different foodstuffs they were allowed to buy at that time of severe shortages. He also recalled how families would have to go to stand pipes at various points around the village for their water. The water supply was brought to the village from Indiwell at the expense of the Duke of Bedford. As the pipes ran close to the Methodist Chapel, now a private house, no burials were allowed in its grounds. He also recalled how the milkman

would come to each door and supply milk from a measure straight into the householder's jug. Mervyn's tales showed us how much times have changed, in countless small and large ways, over the past fifty years. The lively audience, including new residents from Liverton Drive, came up with lots of good questions.

As John said in his closing remarks, there would be a retiring collection to raise funds to improve the lighting at church. John gestured to the superbly carved Gothic rood screen, which is one of the most 'glorious' in Devon according to Sir Nikolaus Pevsner. The splendors of the screen were scarcely visible under our rudimentary lights. John recalled visiting the church of St Endellion in Cornwall with Fr Peter and their sense of wonder when the lights were turned on for them. The interior was bathed in beautiful light at the flick of one switch! (We have about 20 and the light they provide is unfortunately far from beautiful). So, the aim is to improve the lighting with the aim of making it much more functional – for the priests presiding over services, for those reading the lessons, for the choir and congregation – but also more dramatic, to light up our treasures in a way that does them justice. Last but not least, we want our lighting system to be low-energy and low-cost to help reduce the church's carbon emissions. Better lighting and other improvements are part of the church's many enhancements over the years, most notably the very welcome heating system installed in 2006. Soon we shall have the superb Streamside Garden, now bedding-in, and we also have a convenient website which serves the whole benefice and makes it very easy for people to see what we are doing, when our services are, and get in touch: www.swimbridgeparishchurch.org

The PCC and churchwardens offer warmest thanks to John and Mervyn, to Julie Whitton, to Syd and his family at the post office, and Jon the postman, for publicity, David Netherway for the screen, Nick Arthur for the projector, Vera and Rosie for serving the refreshments, and Mike Clift for very kindly volunteering to wash up all the glasses next morning! The retiring collection added just over £100 to our lighting funds. Very warm thanks to everyone for their generosity and for getting the Swimbridge Q&As off to such a promising start.

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