Devon in the 1920s: Building a New Understanding of our Past

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First published as the Introduction to *The Devon Historian* 1920s' themed edition, February 2025

Introduction: The Devon in the 1920s Project

The Devon in the 1920s project was a research collaboration between Devon History Society, Devon Family History Society, South West Heritage Trust and The Box (Plymouth). The intention in establishing such a collaboration was to study a period which, locally and nationally, had been under-researched by comparison with the period of the First World War (WW1) before it and the era of recession, depression and appeasement after it. Between 2020 and 2024 researchers either individually or in groups worked on different aspects of the 1920s both at a local level and county-wide. Memories and family histories were contributed by people who had lived, or had relatives living in Devon in the 1920s. The aim was to create a picture of the county 100 years ago and to begin to identify ways in which it resembled or differed from the national picture.

There are currently 66 completed essays in the research collection; 73 family histories or memoirs; and more than 50 additional research notes. Some essays are still in hand and it is planned to add those to the collection as they arrive. The research essays and other paper will be archived with at Devon Heritage Centre and at The Box and is also be available in a research collection on the Devon History Society website, www.devonshistorysociety.org.uk. A full list of the essays and their authors is included as an Appendix to this edition, but the host organizations also extend their thanks to everyone who contributed to this project even with the smallest of snippets.

What happened to Devon in the 1920s?

A framework was created for the collection of the research contributions, using the headings Legacy of the First World War, Growing Up, Rural Life, Progress and Technology and Tourism and Leisure. This framework was revised as research progressed and 'Rural Life' was replaced with the more generic 'Everyday Life', in particular to accommodate the large body of material that dealt with housing problems and housing initiatives, both in rural and in urban areas.

The picture that emerged was one of communities and families picking up the pieces after the war and rebuilding their lives. For many, particularly in small rural communities, life did remain much the same as it had been before the war: the crops the farmers grew, the chore of fetching water from the well, the old school buildings. For others life did change, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. The school leaving age went up from 12 to 14. Motor vans and lorries began to replace the horse and cart or the river boat, improving business for some but making others redundant. There were women magistrates, women councillors and even, in Plymouth, a woman MP. The numbers of those affected by tuberculosis had risen during the war, and sanatoria, hospitals and after-care for their treatment increased. New 'council housing' was built, but councils could not keep pace with demand for housing, and many people struggled to find a decent home. Clubs and societies, suspended during the war, were revived and new ones founded: in particular the Women's Institute, which set up a network of branches in rural communities. As a result of war-time concessions to the labour force some people worked shorter hours, and there was more leisure time: time to go to the pictures, to play sport, to go dancing, and particularly to pick up the newest dance crazes from the United States, the Charleston and the Shimmy.

Devon in the 1920s was thus a place of contrasts: of mourning and remembrance, but also of going out and having fun; of opportunities taken by people who prospered but also of their unintended consequences for others; and of an increasingly comfortable domestic life led by some contrasted with the hardship and disability that others experienced without the safety net offered by the later 'welfare state'.

A time of change

There were two principal forces driving change in the 1920s that pervaded everyday life. The first of these was the continuing pace of scientific and technical innovation that had been part of life since the Industrial Revolution. Many of the pre-war innovations, such as electricity, petrol-driven engines, the wireless, or orthopaedic surgery, had been developed apace to support the war effort, and now came into their own in civilian and domestic settings. Peter Mason's article in this collection, *By Wagonette and Charabanc*, demonstrates the way in which the opportunities offered by charabancs, motor cars and motor buses took more visitors to the beauty of the moor and thus intensified the importance of the developing hospitality industry. The subsequent article based on contributions about transport in the research collection, *Ever Increasing Circles?*, emphasises the fact that it was the change to the transport of goods and supplies that came most swiftly to rural areas rather than the private motor car or the motorized farm tractor. The impact of the introduction

of petrol-driven engines also hastened the decline of some traditional industries, as demonstrated in John Bradbeer's article, *Ship-Building in North Devon.*

The second driver for change was the national plan for 'reconstruction' after the war. A Ministry of Reconstruction had been set up by the war-time coalition government in 1917 with the brief to plan how at the end of the war the country should be returned to its previous state. Under the leadership of Dr Christopher Addison as Minister for Reconstruction, however, the Ministry took on the more challenging task of creating a 'better world after the war'. They intended:

> to give shape and satisfaction to the strong feeling which has arisen in all sections of the community, among men and women of the most widely differing opinions and outlook, that there is very much to be ashamed of when we look back to the conditions of July 1914, and that out of justice to the living and out of reverence to the dead, we are called to rebuild the national life on a better and more enduring foundation.[1]

Their recommendations, many published in detail in Ministry of Reconstruction Reports, aimed to tackle (a) the waste of life, particularly through premature deaths of children and young adults; (b) the waste of talent, with so many children leaving school at the age of 12, and with women unable to participate to the full in the social and economic life of the country. They also intended to secure better conditions for people to live in, through better housing and enhanced amenities, particularly in villages; and to improve food and material security by supporting farming and fishing.

In 1918 and 1919 a number of Acts were passed to give effect to these recommendations for change (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Legislation for Reform, 1918-1919

1918

- Maternity and Child Welfare Act
- Representation of the People Act
- Education Act

1919

- Land Settlement (Facilities) Act
- Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries Act
- Public Libraries Act
- Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act
- Ministry of Transport Act
- Housing, Town Planning etc. Act
- Ministry of Health Act

[1] Ministry of Reconstruction, *The Aims of Reconstruction,* 1918, London, HMSO, p.4.

Two of the articles in this collection, Clare Greener's *Return of Servicemen and the Growth of Smallholdings*, and Tim Lomas's *How Effective were School Medical Services in Devon in the 1920s?* deal specifically with the implementation of acts in this list and identify the progress that was made, as well as the problems that were encountered.

It was a time of optimism and opportunity. However, much of the action to implement the legislation required substantial funding and in 1920 the UK began to slide into recession. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fell by 23% between 1920 and 1921, and did not recover until 1924. The Government instituted an austerity programme, and public sector expenditure plans were cut back savagely under what became known (after the chairman of the committee that made the recommendations) as 'The Geddes Axe'. This affected many of the areas where developments had been planned. A further rise in the school leaving age from 14 (implemented in 1919) to 15 was deferred; the financial support farmers were intended to receive to enable them to compete with imports was removed. Above all the plans to build new houses to provide for a growing population and to enable the clearance of the slums were stopped before even the first wave of council housing programmes had been completed.

Keeping Opportunities Alive

Central and local government plans were cut back in every sector, yet the 1920s was not entirely a time of stagnation. What has been particularly striking in exploring Devon's 1920s' history is the way in which, in spite of all the obstacles to progress, individuals in different fields took a lead in creating change in a number of different fields. The daunting economic situation set against the aspirations for a 'better world after the war' called forth a creative entrepreneurial spirit amongst those convinced of the need for change.

To illustrate this, four such individuals have been identified, working in different areas of the service provision. Two of them worked in the local government sector: county councillor Sir Francis Acland; and secretary to Plymouth Education Committee, Ernest Chandler Cook. The other two, once it became evident that neither central nor local government had the answers to the problems with which they were concerned, turned to the voluntary sector for their support: they were GP Dr Charles Lovely, and midwife Rachel Allen.

(a) Implementing the 1926 (Rural Housing) Act in Devon

Francis Acland's particular contribution to service improvement was in the field of housing, and is discussed in the article in this volume by Philippe Planel, *Restoring Devon's Cottages: the 1926 (Rural Housing) Act.* At the time the Act was passed, Acland was an appointed member of the Devon Agriculture Committee and a member of the Council of Agriculture for England and Wales. One of his roles there was as a member of its Standing Committee on Rural Housing. In 1925 he had presented the report of the Committee to the Council. As the newspapers reported, he told the Minister that:

> the state of housing in rural areas was 'the very devil' and they did not see any chance of getting it right, and that it must be put right 'at once if not sooner'… existing legislation offered little chance of an early remedy and urged immediate action by the Government.[2]

After Acland lost his seat as an MP in the General Election at the end of 1924 he stood for Tiverton Rural District Council, intending, as he said, to 'strengthen the hands of public spirited men willing to improve the dwellings of rural workers' as he felt that 'it was time local authorities got a move on in rural housing'.[3] But in fact it was his county council seat, secured at a by-election in January 1926, that was to give him the opportunity to tackle rural housing problems. When the 1926 Act, which provided for grants to be made direct to landlords who improved their cottages, was introduced a Devon conference agreed that its implementation should be managed by the County Council in conjunction with the local sanitary inspectors. Acland was appointed chair of the sub-committee of the Public Health and Housing Committee charged with implementing the Act. As Planel points out, Acland ensured that Devon 'was the only county council to enthusiastically and comprehensively take advantage of the government subsidy in the 1920s'.[4]

Acland understood his own worth as a man who could rise to the challenge when there were problems to work through. 'I am a fairly good man to go tiger-hunting with as long as there are tigers to be hunted', he said at the end of his next chairmanship, that of the County Education Committee, implying that it was only when the work was challenging that he really enjoyed it.[5]

(b) 'Freeing' the Secondary Schools in Plymouth

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[2] *The Scotsman*, 20 March 1925.
[3] *Western Times*, 17 April 1925.
[4] Philippe Planel, *Restoring Devon's Cottages: the 1926 Housing Act,* page xx
[5] *Express and Echo*, 6 Jan 1937.

Arrangements for the provision of secondary education across the county council education area were to be Acland's next 'tiger'. In Plymouth, however, by 1927 they had already achieved what few other local authorities had attempted, the 'freeing of the secondary schools', meaning that no parents were required to pay fees for the secondary education of their children. Before the change there had only been a limited number of scholarships available, and these were awarded to the highest placed pupils in the qualifying examination, not to all those who met the standard for admission.

Ernest Chandler Cook, the secretary to the Plymouth Education Committee and before that to the Plymouth School Board, who was the driving force for this change, described this policy as 'putting all the good things on the bottom shelf for all to take, and not only on the top shelf for just those who were tall enough to reach them.'[6] Cook was a remarkable man who spent his whole career working to improve education in Plymouth. By the 1920s he had already spent more than a quarter of a century doing so, and he was to continue in post until 1934. Like John Ruskin, after whom he named his house, he believed that '[e]ducation is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world'. As well as having a vision for how to improve educational opportunities he had a deep understanding of the powers within which the Council could operate.

Once a reorganization of Plymouth's elementary school accommodation had taken place and space existed to expand secondary education Cook set to work to 'free' secondary education. He was supported in this goal by the Education Committee chair, Alderman James Godding. Godding was a leading Conservative councillor and had himself been educated at Eton on a scholarship. His aim in entering public service had been, he said, 'to secure for those less fortunate than myself some little portion of the inestimable advantage which I have received myself.' He saw improving access to secondary education as one way of achieving this.[7]

Cook and Godding tried first of all to introduce a sliding scale of fees based on parental income, but the Board of Education would not permit this.[8] Within two months of this refusal, in July 1924, they had come up with a policy for 'the freeing of the secondary schools.' They calculated that by using the Board of Education grants to the full they could do this at less than the cost of a penny rate to the ratepayer. Of course they encountered opposition from ratepayers and the Ratepayers' Association and from some of their fellow councillors, including the vice-chair of the Education

[6] Ernest Chandler Cook, addressing a school prizegiving, *Western Morning News,* 20 December 1928.
[7] Alderman James Godding, *Western Morning News,* 13 January 1925.
[8] Godding's report on the visit to the Ministry, *Western Morning News,* 22 July 1924.

Committee, who ran a private school himself.[9] They had to survive a change of national government from Labour to Conservative which many felt would result in a veto the proposal. But the vote in the council was 47 in favour and only 29 against and from midsummer1925 no parent in Plymouth was required to pay fees for their children to receive a secondary education.

After this major improvement, Cook and Godding took the Council even further forward. In 1928, using the technical device of creating a local bye-law, they raised the school leaving age from 14 to 15, a development which had been envisaged in the 1918 Education Act but continually deferred at a national level.[10]

(c) Tackling Slum Housing in Exeter

Acland and Cook had both worked within the established framework of central and local government and succeeded in achieving progress in their areas of interest. The next two examples relate to people who were unable to bend the national or local government system to achieve priorities they considered important. The examples above related to Devon County and Plymouth City; these two relate to the City of Exeter.

The first problem in search of an entrepreneur was the question of urban slum housing, one of the most intractable of the 1920s. Local authorities had been instructed to schedule their slums and plan for their clearance in 1919, but the reality was that none of the new housing that they were planning to build was going to provide slum dwellers with alternative accommodation. The rents, which were set by local authorities at levels that enabled them to clear their loans, were unaffordable. This problem was well understood in Exeter but discussions about building in greater density or the possibility for a 'trickle down' as occupants of new houses vacated poorer quality accommodation failed to solve the problem.

Next to the sanitary inspectors the members of the middle class who saw the most of slum housing were the GPs. Their visits to patients' homes made them aware of all the problems. Dr Charles Lovely was one of these. He once gave an example of the conditions that he found:

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[9] *Western Morning News*, 3-10 October; 26 November 1924 to 13 January 1925, report in detail the range of views about the proposal and the final decision.

[10] Regrettably this was overturned during the 1930s as one of the consequences of the recession after the Wall Street crash.

> *... a few days ago he visited a place where the rain was coming through the roof onto the bed, the ceiling was falling down, a rat ran across the floor and a candle had to be used to go up and down the stairs owing to the darkness. For such accommodation a rent of 4s 6d was being charged.*[11]

Lovely had attended a meeting of concerned people in Exeter aiming to establish a public utility society (a term superseded by Housing Association in 1936) whose purpose was to provide housing to let to large families at rents they could afford.[12] It resulted in the creation of the Exeter Church Army Housing Society which, between 1926 and 1930 built 18 houses. Lovely, however, felt that this pace was too slow to remedy what he saw as urgent and pressing problems. He determined to work through another public utility society, the Exeter Workmen's Dwellings Company, and on the death of its founder he was elected chair.

Lovely was a man in a hurry, and operated on more entrepreneurial lines than the CAHS. He negotiated with builders to block purchase properties already under construction; he persuaded Great Western railway to buy some houses to rehouse their own employees in the slums; he developed a scheme under which 200 people paid a small amount each week.[13] So within three years, to the CAHS's 18 houses the Exeter Workmen's Dwellings Company built 79. Dr Lovely also took steps to avoid landlords in the WQ reletting the slums. He insisted that a house was closed for every house into which he took a WQ family.[14] By the end of the 1920s Exeter was publicly recognized for the progress it had made in public utility society housing.[15]

(d) Promoting Better Reproductive Health

The final example in this essay of a Devon social entrepreneur is Rachel Allen, the founder of the first reproductive health service in the county, which happened in Exeter. Rachel was a qualified midwife who had retired from the profession on marriage and came to Exeter when her husband was appointed to a job there. As a trained midwife she was soon co-opted onto the City Council's Maternity and Child Welfare Committee. She was later elected as a Labour councillor and sat on the committee as a councillor.

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[11] *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 12 October 1929.
[12] *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 14 October 1925. The records of the Society were apparently destroyed in the Exeter Blitz in 1942.
[13] *Devon and Exeter Gazette,* 8 December 1926; 28 September 1927..
[14] *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 28 September 1927.
[15] T. Speake, 'Housing of the Poor and Slum Clearance, Sanitary Institute Journal, 1929, pp. 571-5.

Much progress had been made in tackling high levels of infant mortality by the mid-1920s and campaigners began to change their focus to the stubbornly high rate of maternal mortality, deaths of women within two months of giving birth. Allen had already established through the Medical Officer of Health that every woman who died in or soon after childbirth in Exeter was a working-class woman. She had then caused consternation in the committee by demanding that there should be an inquest on every woman who died in childbirth to determine the cause of death. 'Mothers … were aware of the danger', was one doctor's comment, and he suggested that the 'distressing' experience of an inquest should be avoided.[16] Allen turned her attention to promoting better reproductive health. 'Family planning' services were at that time only available in Exeter if a woman could afford to pay a guinea (£1 and 1 shilling) for a private consultation. Alternative provision for those who could not afford a private consultation was, in Allen's view, an important service. To ensure that such a service was available she persuaded fellow members of the Exeter and District Citizens' Association to set up a Women's Welfare Association and employ a women doctor and a nurse to offer advice on reproductive health free of charge. The clinic opened at the beginning of January 1930.[17]

The examples above demonstrate how some men and women, inspired by a vision of ways in which lives could be improved, could take on an entrepreneurial role and secure change both within and outside the statutory framework of public sector services even during a period of government restriction and austerity. They were people of some standing in their communities, whether by birth or by office, able to claim a hearing and persuade others of the justness of their cause. When they encountered obstacles, and the financial climate of the 1920s presented many of these, they worked to remove or circumnavigate them. When national or local government failed to act they created alternative pathways. They made a real difference to the fortunes of many in the county in the 1920s.

Devon in the 1920s and the national context

One of the reasons for undertaking the Devon in the 1920s project was because the 1920s is an under-researched area of local history. This does not mean there is no relevant material on which to draw. Our contributors are indebted to the giants on whose shoulders they stand whether in national history like David Cannadine or in local history, like W.G. Hoskins. Present-day historians who

[16] *Devon and Exeter Gazette,* 7 March 1928*,* 20 March 1929.
[17] *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 22 October 1929.

have not themselves written for the project have nonetheless been generous in their help in making their researches available and discussing them with people in the project. These include Professor Henry French, Professor Colin Diwall, Dr Paul Brassley, Dr John Broughton, Dr David Pindar and a number of contributors from specialist historical societies such as those related to transport or to electricity.

Our researches pose the question – and this goes to the root of what local history is – whether there can be a history of 'Devon' at all. Devon is a huge county. with more road miles than Belgium. It has two coasts, two moors, eight estuaries, two large urban centres, 20 smaller towns, and 535 or more parishes. Generally it was, to use J.B. Priestley's description, a part of 'Old England' rather than 'Nineteenth-Century England', or 'New England'.[18] It was a county of the squire and the parson, rather than one of the industrial revolution or the modern age, and the continuation of that way of life is well illustrated by Helen Turnbull's study in this volume on the Cliffords in the context of *Landed Gentry, Land Sales and Social Change*. There were other aspects to Devon life, however; essays in the research collection include one on HM Dockyard in Plymouth, which dominated the economy of the borough and its hinterland and one on the significant pottery industry in Torquay. Yet in the 1920s, an era which was the heyday of local government, the unifying feature of Devon was as it had been since the middle ages the framework of county government based on the shire of Devon. Even the autonomous entities of the county boroughs of Exeter and Plymouth acknowledged a connection to the county, both formally through collaborative arrangements such as the Devon Vagrancy Committee and less formally through the many institutions with 'Devon' in their name.

Whilst this provides a case for writing about 'Devon' there are other questions about how to compare Devon with other counties or entities within England. The mix of factors that produces a 'Devon' statistic suggest that comparisons may be more meaningful at sub-county level, and this is well illustrated in the discussion in the essay in the research collection on *Devon Farming in the 1920s* where, as an example, the high volumes of soft fruit produced in a particular area is suppressed in the county statistics, but the area itself can be compared with fruit production in districts of Cambridgeshire.[19] It is interesting that the appeal for societies or individuals producing similar research published by the British Association of Local History in 2021 produced almost no response. The framework for comparative studies needs to be carefully chosen. Using our

[18] J.B. Priestley, *English Journey* (1934) London, Heinemann/Gollancz, pages 397-401.
[19] Jonathan Spain, *Fruit Farming in the Cam Valley,* 2021, Shepreth, RiverRhee Publishing.

framework of exploring how local authorities elsewhere in the country took forward the legislative opportunities offered by Acts of Parliament passed between 1918 and 1920 may be a more fruitful approach.

Conclusion

The research collection offers a firm foundation for further development, and indeed work is already under way to add to it, particularly by developing some of the research materials already contributed, particularly for example, on education and on public health. As indicated in the previous section comparative work could usefully focus on the response in other counties to the post First World War legislative programme. Did other places build more houses, have a greater proportion of students staying on in full-time education after 14, tackle rough sleeping more successfully, or expand their network of Women's Institutes to a greater proportion of their communities?

David Killingray has recently challenged local historians to stretch out beyond the production of descriptive narratives of the past, and to give consideration to the particular characteristics of the age about which they are writing. In the study he and Iain Taylor undertook of Sevenoaks in the long nineteenth century they chose the framework of risk and mitigation, choice and its development.[20] From our present state of knowledge, the overall picture of Devon in the 1920s that we have collaboratively created was one of a time of opportunity: both of opportunities taken, opportunities foregone, and of those who sought to shape those opportunities not only for themselves, but for those less fortunate than themselves.

[20] Iain Taylor and David Killingray, *Sevenoaks, 1790-1914: Risk and Choice in West Kent*, 2022, University of Hertfordshire Press.