Did Chudleigh Roar in the 1920s?

A Case Study

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As people picked themselves up following the First World War and the Spanish 'flu, a period of prosperity brought about a sense of optimism and a new kind of freedom, particularly for upper- and middle-class women. This new independence was reflected in new fashions and entertainment. There were huge advances in science and technology. The motor car was on the scene and 'The Bright Young Things' partied in jazz clubs and nightclubs in the cities as never before. But was modernisation witnessed in Chudleigh? Leisure pursuits appeared to take place principally on a class basis. A rigid class structure operated in Chudleigh but there was an element of social interaction between the various classes. Some activities were enjoyed solely by the upper and middle classes who took their holidays abroad, while the working classes relied on the train or the charabanc for an outing to the seaside or to Dartmoor.

There was a strong military presence in Chudleigh with a number of high-ranking retired officers residing there. Former members of the Devonshire Regiment such as Col. Ellicombe, Brigadier General Edwards and Col. Holland met regularly at the Regimental Dinner Club. Hunting and shooting were popular pastimes for the gentry locally. Shooting was a private affair and the local gentry would host regular shoots. Hon. Charles Clifford of the Ugbrooke Estate would invite members of the Powderham Estate, the Stover Estate, the Lindridge Estate, the Oxton Estate, the Whiteway Estate and the Mamhead Estate, and each would reciprocate. Those who hunted would probably hunt three times a week in the season. Hon. Chas. Clifford, Col. Browning and Sir George Hammick hunted with various packs of hounds, mostly with the Haldon Harriers and the South Devon Foxhounds. Each hunt would hold a hunt ball, a puppy show and point-to-point races and these were very grand affairs. Dinner parties would follow these events, when the wives who didn't hunt could join in the tales of the fastest point or the biggest hedges jumped.

Balls were very fashionable amongst the upper classes. Some would be connected with a sporting event; alternatively they would be held in aid of a charity. Usually these would be hosted at the home of one of the supporters such as the charity ball at Lindridge, Bishopsteignton hosted by Lady Cable. Guests from Chudleigh included Commodore and Lady Florence Boyle.[1] Guests would often arrange house parties. Friends would arrive for drinks before setting off for the ball. Other balls were held at a central venue, such as the Annual Devon County Ball held in 1928 at Poltimore Park College which attracted high-ranking aristocrats.[2]

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[1] *Western Morning News*, 30 August 1923.

[2] *Western Times*, 31 August 1928.

Private garden parties were held in the summer. Mr and Mrs Farquhar of Whiteway, Chudleigh, hosted a garden party at their home when two hundred guests attended, including Dame Georgina Buller and Lady Mary St Aubyn.[3] Tennis parties were popular too. There would be matches amongst friends played on the lawns, followed by tea. Friends called regularly on each other and played golf or archery. Sailing was also popular.

A good social mix was in evidence within political, sporting and community functions. Members of all classes enjoyed hunting and shooting but whereas the upper and middle classes were mounted to follow hounds, or as guns actually shooting the birds, the working classes enjoyed the sports by blocking up fox earths and following the hunt, often on foot. They joined the shooting parties as beaters.

There were many local associations and events in the town enjoyed mainly by the middle and working classes, although the upper classes usually held the principal roles. An example is that of the Chudleigh Sick Poor Nursing Association. All those on the committee were members of the upper class, with the exception of two middle-class ladies whose husbands were prosperous businessmen. The Chudleigh Horticulture Society was led by Miss Ellis, Hon. Charles Clifford and Major Wright (all upper class). Upper-class ladies would often act as judges at the Chudleigh Flower Show, when again there was a real social mix in attendance.

Other organisations and events enjoyed were the Cricket Club, the Lawn Tennis Club, the Folk Dance Society, the Pidgeon Flying Club, the Conservative Club, the Constitutional Club, the Unionist Club, Young Liberals League, the British Legion, Mothers' Union, Harriers Hunt and South Devon Hounds, Bovey Tracey and District Agricultural Association, Devon County Show, Chudleigh Horticultural Show, Newton Abbot Fat Stock Show, Chudleigh Ploughing Match, Newton Abbot races, Chudleigh gymkhana, Chudleigh sports and pony races, Chudleigh Band, Chudleigh Evening Institute Dance Band, Chudleigh night school plays, and the fair in the playpark.

The advent of the motor car enhanced the social life of those wealthy enough to run one, and those who could afford it enjoyed the new electric light and power supply. Another innovation popularised in the 1920s was the wireless. The cinema was another new arrival to Chudleigh. Held at the Town Hall, films were shown on Friday, Saturday and Monday evenings with a matinee on Saturday afternoons

A popular annual event in Chudleigh was the carnival. The procession around the town would culminate at The Square, where the entries would be judged. Everyone made their own outfits for the floats from crepe paper. In 1921 the prizes were presented by the president, the Hon. Chas. Clifford. Side shows could be found around the town centre and the proceedings ended with a fancy-dress dance at the Town Hall, with prizes awarded for the best male and female costumes.[4] Another annual event was the tug-o-war competition held in Chudleigh between teams from Chudleigh and the neighbouring villages.

The various churches and their leaders organised events for adults and children. Garden fetes, tea parties, sports days and trips to the seaside were organised. For the children who weren't away at boarding school, there was a youth club, the church choir, Girl Guides, Brownies and

[3] *South Devon Weekly Express*, 28 August 1929.
[4] *South Devon Weekly Express*, 4 November 1921.

Boy Scouts and activities connected with the three schools. Outings were usually by the train to either Paignton or Teignmouth.

Chudleigh Athletic Football Club was particularly popular with working-class men. It was started in 1904 by Mr James Creed, whose occupation was that of carpenter and upholsterer. The team played 'friendlies' against teams from neighbouring towns and villages. After the war, the team was reformed and became known as Chudleigh Athletic. In 1929, Chudleigh Athletic joined the South Devon League. The team had a strong following by Chudleigh people.[5]

There were seven pubs in Chudleigh and some of these contained skittle alleys. There were also whist drives and dances held regularly and concerts were well attended. Shopping trips to Exeter and Newton Abbot became easier and cheaper when a bus service arrived in 1919.

So, did Chudleigh roar in the 1920s? 'The Bright Young Things' may have danced into the night. Modernisation reached Chudleigh in a limited way, with motor car ownership, a bus service, electricity, wireless and the cinema and although the dawn was breaking, it was yet to have a significant impact on the social lives of the majority of the people of Chudleigh.

[5] *The Chudleigh Book* (Orchard Publications, 2009), p. 142.