

## **Colyton Parish History Society Newsletter 30 November 2020**

You will all be aware by now that last month I inadvertently distributed the Newsletter by 'cc' list rather than 'bcc' distribution. I would like to apologise sincerely to each of you for any inconvenience and distress this 'gdpr' breach - and the subsequent problems which arose – caused you. I am very sorry.

In this Newsletter: announcement of the outcome of the vote on the Society's new Constitution; details of the new bronze foundation plaque which has replaced the worn foundation stone on Colyton Feoffees' Town Hall and thanks to Jan Hedderly for unearthing this touching account of local poet Theo Marzials by John Betjeman.

Sarah Charman Editor

### **1. News**

#### **Outcome of Vote on a new constitution for Colyton Parish History Society**

The result of the postal ballot on the Society's new Constitution was counted this morning and is as follows: there was a massive response with 60 votes in favour out of a total of 84 Members and no one voting against the new Constitution. The Chairman of CPHS, Marian Sydenham, will be writing to everyone early next month to confirm what the next steps are.

#### **Colyton Chamber of Feoffees replaces worn Foundation Stone on Town Hall facade**



Colyton Chamber of Feoffees has replaced the Foundation Stone on the front of Colyton Town Hall with a new bronze plaque which was recently installed by Feoffee Jonathan Sweetland. The Chamber of Feoffees commissioned the building of the Town Hall for the benefit of the community of Colyton Parish nearly a century ago in January 1927.

Feoffee Colin Pady who commissioned the new bronze plaque from Bridport Foundry said:

“The Foundation Stone mounted on the front of the Hall had become badly eroded over the years, with the writing on the lower half having worn away so much it had become impossible to read. We felt it was important to replace it with a new plaque containing all the original details”

Feoffees Chairman, Colin Chesterton, said that when the original stone had been laid by his predecessor the then Chairman, Mr E. H Cuming on 5 January 1927, a formal ceremony had been organised which was attended by the 1<sup>st</sup> Colyton Boy Scouts and Girl Guides and with a great number of townspeople in attendance to witness the ceremony. He said the Chamber would have been delighted to organise a formal relaying ceremony and to invite members of the community to attend but with the covid pandemic this was not possible at the moment. He hoped:

“the new plaque and the Town Hall will continue to be a source of pride and pleasure for the local community for the next hundred years.”

## 2. Theo Marzials



Theophilus Marzials, British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings,  
210\*.b.11, f.8.

©The Trustees of the British Museum

Thanks to Jan Hedderly for unearthing this little gem about the eccentric local poet and musician Theophilus Marzials. It comes from a talk given by John Betjeman on the Third Programme on BBC Radio in December 1950.

A copy of the full article will be available in the Heritage Centre once it reopens – hopefully next year. This year marks a century since Marzials' death in Colyton, at the age of 70, on 2 February 1920.

Below are a number of extracts from Betjeman's talk in which he quoted from local peoples' memories of Marzials from the time when he lived in Colyton. Initially he had lived here with his sister but she predeceased him by many years and he then lived as a paying guest at Mrs Power's farm at Elm Grove in Colyton until he died.

Betjeman first quoted a passage from a letter from Mr Zealley who had been a boy at Colyton when Theo Marzials was already an old man:

“He lived quite alone, and it is certainly true that he was a most eccentric and striking figure in the rural community in which he lived. His interest in music was the outstanding feature which made him known to the villagers. He

attended all concerts that were held, and almost invariably caused consternation by standing up in the audience and declaring, in his very strong accent, most outspoken, not to say rude, criticisms of the efforts of the performers. This was particularly the case if he thought he detected any form of affectation or musical insincerity. I remember on one occasion a lady, who really sang quite well, and who had a great affection for Italy, in which she travelled a great deal, singing a song to a village audience in Italian and in the operatic style of that country. Brushing aside (not without physical violence) all efforts to dissuade him, Marzials got himself on the platform and sang "Madam will you walk?" in the Italian manner, with every sort of trill and musical exaggeration."

Betjeman then went on to quote from another letter from Mr F.G. Skinner who knew Marzials well and who also stayed at Elm Grove Farm:

"Theo had one fair-sized room on the ground floor with a single bed in one corner, occupying it day and night. By his bedside was a small table on which there always seemed to be a saucer containing sliced beetroot in vinegar so that the room continually smelt of this, together with the odour of chlorodyne (which he took to induce sleep), with at night, the fumes of an enormous oil lamp. During conversation, he would often fish out a slice of beetroot on the end of a fork and drop it into his mouth most elegantly – it was almost a joy to watch him. In another corner of the room, he kept a huge stockpot on a stove, into which he threw all sorts of odds and ends so that he had a kind of perpetual stew. What he did with this I do not know, but we thought he gave it some of the poorer farmhands elsewhere.

"He was certainly the most striking figure I have met – fairly tall and of huge girth. When he sat down at the piano he dominated it by his size as well as his genius. His hair was snow white, his complexion pink and clear as a healthy child's and, although his clothes were odd and often the worse for wear, his person was always very well groomed. When I used to call and ask him out for a drink, he would slide out of bed, put on a tie, boots with no laces, no socks (he seldom wore socks) and join me with gusto. He seemed to love it. If we went to one of the lesser pubs, he would go in with me to the bar-parlour and drink a pint or two of old-and-mild; but once I suggested going into the Colcombe Castle Hotel and he said 'All right' but made me go into the Lounge while he went into the Public Bar with the locals, I passing his beer through a kind of hatchway. He said he wasn't dressed for the Saloon Lounge – and he was the most important man in my mind for miles around!

"He often seemed to have no money and would occasionally beg me, as I was a Christian, to give him sixpence or a shilling. I knew that he went later to the confectioner's and bought lollipops for the village children. I believe

that his income was sent directly to his landlady and that most of it went for board and lodging so that very little was left for pocket-money.

“We used to go mostly to Ye Old Bear Inn, where I often stayed, and where in an upper room he would play and sing, even when he was nearly seventy, in a fine, rich deep baritone – oh! Splendid, splendid. His rich speaking voice too was a delight to hear – magnificently rich and when he was roused in any way it was like thunder.

“While speaking of his voice, I must mention another habit. He was sometimes seen and heard walking bare-footed in the garden of Elm Grove in the small hours – one or two o’clock in the morning. He would sing in a very soft, low voice and now and then take a flower between his fingers, bend down and kiss it, and murmur, ‘O my pretty!’ Theo Marzials – poet and eccentric!

“He was ravenous for reading matter and whenever I left Colyton for London he would beg me to send him anything ‘from Hansard to the Family Herald Supplement - or somebody’s catalogue.’ I did what I could and he was grateful to excess.

“In the books I have mentioned which he annotated are many interesting scribblings. Here is a sample – written under a picture of George Meredith:

He was audience to my first singing of ‘Summer Shower’. Mrs H (No 2) a tall, dignified, comely sympathetic French woman, loving and by G.M. most beloved, used to be most kind about my speciality of French very old songs. I first met her at Mendelssohn’s cousin’s (Box Hill). I was the hired singer – 25gns. for 3 songs – a lot in the 70s.

“I remember that sometimes after a long evening at Ye Olde Bear Inn I would walk back to Elm Grove with Theo. He insisted on taking my arm – no easy thing for me as I weighed only eight stone while he must have turned fifteen stone – and although I could have walked the distance in three minutes, it generally took us twenty minutes or half an hour. He would keep on stopping and talking – books, music, art, local gossip, anything.

“Our conversation has always lingered with me. I started it by asking him whether he had seen that Mr Alfred Noyes had written that he (Noyes) considered the finest single line in English poetry was Shakespeare’s ‘Following darkness like a dream’. That was enough to keep us up to about two in the morning, with Theo quoting, quoting from Chaucer to Newbolt. He had a marvellous memory and could roll off passage after passage with ease and splendour. But what I most remember is that when I rose to go to bed, he put his hand on my shoulder and said, ‘Well, Fred my boy, you can take it or

leave it, but as far as my judgement is worth anything, I say that the finest single verse in English poetry, Shakespeare, Milton and all the rest of 'em included, is Mrs Alexander's

There is a green hill far away,  
Without a city wall,  
Where the dear Lord was crucified,  
Who died to save us all."

Finally Betjeman quoted from a letter sent by Marzials himself from Colyton in 1918, when he had been paralysed down one side by a stroke, to a Mrs Belt, daughter of Cyril Davenport, who was his great friend from his youth.

"I kept my voice almost intact until this last 'breaking up'. But who cares to hear an old man sing? This is a rambling dairy-farm. Folk come in summer and take rooms and some used to pay-guest or board, but since the war and ration &c. they don't. It is all very clean. The head is a wonderful old woman and she and I live here. She in her part, and I in mine. I sup with them. The niece housekeeps. Her husband does for me – and in his way is very like Cyril and me – in fact it is very like the situation of when your mama and papa and me were all just married, as it were. Of the folk who come and go in the house I don't often mix with them. Cyril knows my fits of retirement and since all this dying and the war I make no new friends – oh, I couldn't. Cyril is a bit of me – of course, and always was and ever will be. We just meet and are side by side, arm in arm, heart to heart, as if he had gone into a shop and I was writing outside. Dear old Squirrel. This is a most beautiful place, of endless and immediate variety. I have never known a place like it, in this respect. Seaton is the ugliest seaside I have ever seen, too commonplace to be odious – but the seventeen odd miles of wild landslip, just off Seaton is quite perfection – and quite indescribable. And your wonderful letter. And oh what a gentlewoman you must be....."

Betjeman commented during the talk that he had visited Colyton in the spring of 1950 and sought out Marzials' grave in the cemetery above the town. He described Colyton as unspoiled and beautiful:

"It is a huddle of cream - and pink - washed thatched cottages collected round a silver – grey church tower and it lies in a little lush Devonshire village with small hills around it. The cemetery is high above the town and looks down towards the farm where Marzials lived, over a landscape as he describes it: 'of endless and immediate variety.'