

The Devon-Newfoundland Story: A Celebration of Historical and Cultural Connections

In the first two weeks of April 2017 the Devonshire Association (www.devonassoc.org.uk), in collaboration with the Devon Family History Society (www.devonfhs.org.uk), is planning a celebration of nearly 600 years of contact and interaction between Devon and Newfoundland.

The Association, which was founded in 1862 to promote the study, understanding and appreciation of every aspect of Devon, is an active organisation with over 1300 members. It has both historical and existing links with Newfoundland: several of its present members have collaborated with Newfoundlanders in history, archaeology and music, and in the 1970s and 1980s the Association had a Newfoundland Branch, based in St John's. Developing these connections is one of the aims of the planned celebration; another is to make ordinary Devonians and Newfoundlanders more aware of the importance of each place in the history and development of the other, and of how much culture they share.

The celebration will be county-wide, but particularly centred in Exeter, the county town, and in Bideford, a North Devon port town with strong historic Newfoundland connections. The core event will be a weekend of talks, workshops and exhibits: starting with a reception on Friday April 7th in Exeter's Royal Albert Memorial Museum, awarded UK Museum of the Year in 2013; and continuing on Saturday 8th and Sunday 9th with a symposium in Devon County Hall in Exeter, in which a series of talks by experts from both sides of the Atlantic will explore aspects of shared history and trade, dialect and folklore, music, mumming and dance. Alongside and interspersed with these will be an informal programme of exhibits, short talks and conversation in which family history interests can be shared and discussed.

Both before and after this central weekend, there will linked events in other Devon towns, and excursions to these and to other places with particular Newfoundland connections. These will include a tour on Thursday 6th to Dartmouth, Totnes, and to Compton Castle, the seat of Sir Humphrey Gilbert who first claimed Newfoundland for a British colony, and still owned by the family. Friday 7th will explore Exeter, a walled city founded by the Romans, with fine mediaeval and later buildings; and will visit the pretty adjacent port of Topsham. Monday 10th will visit Plymouth, with its citadel and old harbour. On Tuesday April 11th Bideford and Barnstaple will run a full programme of events, including talks, museum visits, displays and pottery workshops – North Devon pottery was widely used in C17th and C18th Newfoundland, and is still made. Throughout the two weeks several museums in Devon towns are mounting special exhibitions linked to the overall celebration. There will be a concert of folk music involving musicians from both Devon and Newfoundland, which will explore their shared traditions and may tour between several venues in the county.

For those interested in family history: as well as the weekend event it will be possible to visit Tree House in Exeter, the research centre of the Devon Family History Society; and the Society is also planning a family history help desk on April 11th and a talk and display on April 15th, all in Bideford.

Devon will be in early Spring, and we hope that many Newfoundlanders will take the opportunity to visit this beautiful, historic, amazingly varied county and take part in this celebration of our common heritage. For those wishing to explore on their own we will provide details of car hire companies and bus and rail timetables.

If you may be interested in coming please email devonshireassoc@btinternet.com without commitment, and we will keep you posted with developments.

You will be made very welcome.