

THREE MOMENTS IN TIME

On Tuesday 3rd December 2013, nearly thirty people gathered in Branscombe Village Hall to do some colouring in with felt tip pens. No, it wasn't a Play School gathering, but Map Detectives in action! What was it about?

As many of you know, the Branscombe Project is involved with English Heritage and East Devon AONB in a HEAP Project (strange acronym meaning Historic Environment Action Plan). In simple terms the morning's task was to colour in maps in order to map the past onto the present-day landscape.

Heading up the morning's proceedings, Emma Rouse (who has been funded by English Heritage to manage this HEAP project), explained how maps are drawn for different reasons, usually political or economic, and how, therefore, they emphasise different things. Sometimes this limits their usefulness – for example the 1793/1810 map of Branscombe only details land owned by the Dean and Chapter of Exeter cathedral, and there are frustratingly large white spaces where land was owned by others. But there is usually enough detail to make meaningful comparisons possible.

After Emma's introduction, we split into five groups sitting round five large tables. Emma had marked out five one-kilometre squares on parish maps of different ages, copied for each table, and each group took a different square and compared and contrasted an 1810 map, the 1840 Tithe Map, and the 1889 Ordnance Survey map with today's modern Explorer map. We looked for changing field boundaries, disappeared orchards, cliff flats or woodland, and for buildings that were present in the past, but had disappeared or changed. We marked what we found on the modern map using different coloured solid or broken lines, or different coloured cross-hatching.

How did it go? Well, the work took a bit of getting used to, but gradually, as people moved between maps, they started to notice things – for example upland level fields were more often amalgamated than those on the slopes (upland better for arable, slopes harder for modern machinery?); buildings were often in the same place, but the outline or orientation had changed (knocked down and rebuilt?); footpaths sometimes followed the line of disappeared field hedges; huge expanses of orchard dwindled to almost nothing, whilst woodland has increased over the last hundred years.

We are pleased with how things went; we discovered ways in which the presentation and annotation of maps could be improved, and were delighted that many people said they wanted to continue. Eventually, perhaps, the whole parish could be covered.

Now Emma will take all our work away and using GIS (geographic information system) software will work it into layers over the modern map. Then our efforts will truly be revealed! And, once done, we hope to show you the results on this website!

With many thanks to Priscilla Trenchard for taking the following photos of the day:













(Please contact us if you do not wish a photograph of you to be shown – it will be removed)