

History of Devon



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What is Devon

- Devon is a large shire county in the South Western peninsula of the United Kingdom.
- famous for clotted cream, picture postcard thatched cottages and cider.
- The largest city in Devon is Plymouth with the famous Hoe where Sir Francis Drake played bowls before sailing to defeat the Spanish Armada, and the Pilgrim Fathers started their journey to the 'New World'.
- Devon is perhaps best known today for its beautiful, unspoilt beaches
- Inland is Dartmoor, a National Park, made famous in the Sherlock Holmes mystery, "The Hound of the Baskervilles".

Topography

- Devon is 670,343 hectares in area, (2,700 square miles)
- has a population of just over 1 million people.
- It borders Cornwall to the west and Somerset and Dorset to the east
- it has two areas of high moorland (highest point 621m) with characteristic granite "tors" of Dartmoor. These areas are rich in Bronze and Iron Age archaeological features
- 500 km (300 miles) of coastline
- areas of hilly pastoral farming land.
- The major towns are
 - Plymouth (population 256,000)
 - Exeter (population 108,000)
 - Torbay (population 123,000)
 - Exmouth (population 32,000)
 - Newton Abbot (population 23,000)
 - Barnstaple (population 21,000).

So let us find out about Devon's past

Early Times

Dartmoor in particular has many remains of pre-historic man. The Romans left their mark on Exeter, and major portions of the Roman city walls can still be seen. The Normans followed with Exeter Cathedral. But Devon was never in the mainstream of English politics. Perhaps there was not enough wealth to be exploited. The history of Devon is therefore more the history of the average man

The Middle Ages

The Weather and changes in climate resulted in many changes in farming practices in Devon. It is recorded that a cold wet climate started around 1300 AD in England in general. But by the 15th century it is believed that wine was made in Devon.

Unlike many parts of England, Devon had very few noblemen as landowners, the land was owned more by the country gentry. Between 1485 and 1914, the gentry were the people who ran Devon

- **Plague and** disease were common everywhere in Europe. in 1546 a plague swept the county
- By 1606 it appears to have got **cold** again, rivers became frozen and storms swept the county
- In the first half of the 17th century, Devon was noted by contemporaries as **spacious and populous**, and that its inhabitants, though hard working were distrustful of strangers and travellers
- Cold winter were recorded again through the century. The winter of 1676 was again extremely hard
- **Smallpox** epidemics in the 1640's, 1710's and 1760's resulted in many deaths
- 1690, October 7th, the 'London Gazette' reported an earthquake in Barnstaple, followed by another hard winter

- Daniel Defoe published his account of a tour of Great Britain between 1724 and 1727. The tour took him through Chard and Honiton, and much of what he saw in South Devon impressed him. Going north, his first impression was that the country was wild, barren and poor.
- Records exist showing that Europe was **snow bound for months** on end in 1739, 1776, 1814 and 1895.
- But there were droughts and **long hot summers through the 1880's**
- **In 1842 Devon was mainly agricultural**
- But all was not rural bliss. Conditions could be harsh, open sewers and poor housing were the norm.
- Many emigrated at this time to avoid the economic misery of living in Devon
- The population having declined during the 19th century, it is starting to gently increase due to the attractive climate
- **Today tourism is the mainstay of Devon's economy**

During the 20th century however, changes in society and the wider economy have accelerated the transformation of the County into an area popular with tourists. Agriculture is still important, as is fishing and primary industry, but the modern economy in Devon focuses on services and manufacturing industries. (Devon County Council's view on Devon today)

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