

NEWS
in briefCity residents are
accident prone

PLYMOUTH has been named as the UK's most accident prone city in a new survey. The research, carried out by Endsleigh Insurance, says Plymouth is the most accident-prone when it comes to making claims for accidental damage. Figures show that Plymouth residents are 45 per cent more likely to claim for accidental damage in the home than the rest of the UK. When it comes to theft, Exeter residents can expect a 42 per cent less chance of suffering a break-in than the national average.

Community grants

SEVENTEEN Westcountry community groups have benefited from a cash grant of up to £500 thanks to the voluntary work of British Telecom employees. Run by BT's charity programme, BT Community Champions awards BT people with funding on behalf of local community groups, charities and organisations where they work on a voluntary basis. An explorer scout group in Exeter, Devon and Bude pilot gig club in North Cornwall are among those to benefit.

Car fire closes road

A MAJOR Westcountry road was closed for nearly two hours when a car caught fire after it was involved in a crash. Three vehicles collided at the entrance to the Halfway House pub car park, on the A383 at Bickington, at 5.50pm on Saturday. Following the crash, a Ford Fiesta went up in flames. A VW Polo and a Peugeot 406 were also involved in the collision. One man was taken to Torbay Hospital suffering from minor injuries. The road remained blocked until 7.30pm.

Question Time

QUESTION Time will be staged at a Westcountry school – one of only 12 nationally to be selected for the final of a BBC competition. For the second year running Poltair Community School, St Austell, will stage a session based on the Question Time programme. Representatives from the BBC, BT and The Institute of Citizenship will join five Panellists, including Truro and St Austell MP Matthew Taylor, and a specially invited audience, including students, staff and Governors from the school and guests from the local community, to judge the event.

St Piran unveiled

A LIMITED edition statue of St Piran, patron saint of Cornwall, is being unveiled at the Cornwall Garden Society's Spring Flower Show. The nationally renowned show will be held in the gardens at Bococonnoc, near Lostwithiel on Saturday, April 2 and Sunday, April 3 from 10am. Other sculptures by well-known artists will be dotted around the gardens. Tickets and further details about the show can be obtained from Sally-Jane Cooode, of Carwinnick, Grampond, TR2 4RJ. Tel: 01726 882488. Her e-mail address is sjcoode@aol.com.

A star turn in the heart of the moor

In the second part of our weekly Delve into Dartmoor series, Martin Hesp has been visiting Chagford – the remote and beautiful Stannary town tucked under the northern moors

WELCOME to the Beverly Hills of Devonshire. Chagford, the elite and fashionable little town nestled in its very own amphitheatre of loveliness tucked under Dartmoor's lordly northern heights. The place where Oscar winners live; where TV stars haunt the cluttered streets; where a local pub landlord likes to show you his £100,000 car, a town where even the Wellington boots are a cut above the rest.

There are plenty of other communities in the Westcountry that like to claim posh titles such as Kensington-by-Sea, but Chagford tops the exclusivity ratings by quietly and calmly getting on with the business of being that little bit superior. A hundred other humble towns may have equal good looks, but which somehow they just don't have the style.

"You can't afford it," commented a smiling passer-by as I examined the house prices in the estate agent's window in Chagford's wonderful, but car-cluttered, traffic-clogged, square. He was right. A modest three-bedroom street-side cottage was going for £385,000 – a price tag that would buy you a small farm in some other Westcountry locations.

Two minutes earlier I'd been in the town's trendy and excellent delicatessen, Black's, purchasing a most toothsome pie, when proprietor Sam Hines observed: "Chagford is amazing nowadays. You see ordinary looking people wandering about, but they are Oscar-winners or famous artists. Jennifer Saunders lives here and we often see her. And a lot of these people aren't just staying in holiday cottages. They live here."

In the very old, haunted and ridiculously historic Three Crowns Hotel, landlord John Giles was shrugging his shoulders over the value of his property. "Look at this," he said thrusting a valuer's report into my hand. "Two million pounds. That was 2002. What do you reckon it would be worth now?"

He'd just taken me out to a garage to show me his pride and joy – a gleaming new silver Mercedes which could automatically close its own doors. "Good that, isn't it?" grinned John, as we watched the portal shut by itself. "I've always liked a nice car."

And he's not the only limousine-lover in Chagford. "You can always measure the cut of a place's jib by the sort of cars parked in its car park," remarked a friend who'd joined me for the visit. We had just taken the last remaining parking spot in the one and only public car park, so were able to get quite a good idea what manner of vehicles the North Dartmoor folk drive. You will not be surprised to hear that BMW's, Merc's and Jags outnumbered the rest.

Big cars, small streets. As I've already alluded, Chagford has a traffic problem even out of season (particularly when the timber lorries come through on their way down from the Dartmoor forests) – but in summer the place can be grid-locked.

"A 'grockle-trap' – that's what Chagford is," said a woman we met in the street. Mrs Christine Hurdle had come down from her farm in the hills, just like she does every Friday of the year. "If it's a wet day, this is where the grockles



RICHARD AUSTIN

● HISTORIC: Colin Smith with the relics at the back of Bowden's store

come. Busy today? No – this is nothing to the summer.

"It can be mayhem. But I can understand it. Chagford's got everything.

People like to retire here because you don't have to go out to anywhere else. "We've got chemists, banks, a proper greengrocer, a really good butcher and – of course – we've got Bowdens."

We were standing outside the latter named establishment and, having been on a conducted tour of its extraordinary, Tardis-like interior, I knew just what Mrs Hurdle meant. Apart from food-stuffs, Bowden's stocks everything. And I mean everything. It's got more lines than Harrods. It must be the best-stocked store in the Westcountry – with the one possible exception of Webber & Sons which, oddly, is situated directly next door.

How two shops that sell everything coexist as neighbours in one small town I shall leave to some future article named The Great Mysteries of Retailing – but for this piece I'd delved into Bowden's because I'd heard they have a museum that is a shrine to the human ephemera of Dartmoor.

To reach the museum you have to walk the entire length of Bowden's Aladdin's Cave where you can purchase everything from the very latest high-tech domestic devices, to the type of billhook they've been using in Devon for centuries. If it's hardware, they've got it. If it's to do with gardening, you'll find it on a shelf. If it's to do with country clothing, they'll have it somewhere in the long thin myriad of this miniature department store.

There's even an entire room given over to Wellington boots. Hundreds of them, in different sizes, shapes, hues – and prices.

A tag on one shimmeringly glorious pair told potential purchasers they would have to part with no less than

one-hundred-and-five-quit to become the best wellied walker in town.

"They're very good quality," said Colin Smith, who is a co-owner of the store that has been in his family since 1862. "No, I don't know how many different items we have in this store. I suppose it must be tens of thousands. We know the value, of course, but we've never got around to counting the actual lines we sell."

The same applied to the items in the Bowden Museum. Some time ago Colin and his family realised there was something extra special about their emporium and they enshrined its long and illustrious past in a display situated at the very rear of the store. Peering through the windows at the clutter of historic objects within, Mr Smith said: "No, we've never counted how many things are in there – but it must be thousands, wouldn't you say?"

It's a place where Oscar winners live and where TV stars haunt the streets

I would. And what a collection it is. Tools, gadgets and necessities sold by Bowden's for more than a century.

"Look at that old screwdriver," said Colin, pointing to an object as long and thick as your arm. "You wouldn't need anything like that nowadays would you? I expect they used it on a steam engine or something. And there's the old 'candstick' phone we used to have here.

And look at that: 'Puritan – rich mild lather soap'. A penny. You're too young to remember that."

"Bygones" is the word used in the blurb Colin gave me. The little museum is a haven for bygones. "Household

wares of all types are in abundance," the blurb goes on. They can say that again. Gazing in at the lamps, old record players, chairs, tools, cigarette packets, bullets and the general pantheon and plethora of stuff, the thought struck me that this was the memorabilia of a bygone Dartmoor.

But then, Chagford is rich in bygones. The place drips with history and legend. People have lived here since Saxon times. Apparently the name means "the ford where the gorse grows".

But Chagford's big moment occurred in 1305, when it became one of Devon's four Stannary towns. That meant it was bestowed with great powers thanks to the tin trading which went on within its streets. The stanneries ran a sort of government which had enjoyed more power than anyone and anything save for the king in London.

A Stannary town was where miners bought their tin down from the heights of Dartmoor for weighing and valuing. It must have been quite a scene in and around the market square back in those "wild-west" days. Chagford's best known building – the eight-sided Market House – is on the site of the old Stannary Court. It was also a rather bloody place if legend is to be believed, and the aforementioned Three Crowns was a central witness to some of the blood-letting.

Back in the 1600s it was the family seat of the Whyddon's who held much sway in the district. The murder of Mary Whyddon was probably Chagford's darkest hour – and it was one that went down in history, albeit with Dartmoor being swapped for Exmoor and Mary being renamed Lorna Doone.

One fine day in 1641 a happy young Mary crossed the street to enter St Michael's Church. Inside, she walked to the altar where a handsome fellow was awaiting her. A wedding ceremony was



● BEVERLY HILLS?: The view over Chagford with St Michael's Church in the background and (below) Cavalier Sydney Godolphin who died in the porch of the Three Crowns after taking a musket ball during a Civil War skirmish

performed and beaming Mary re-emerged into the Dartmoor sunshine wearing her ring. No sooner had she inhaled her first breath of married fresh air, she breathed her last. A jealous lover, taking aim at the bridegroom, missed his target and took out his beloved instead. Mary was carried across the road to what is now the Three Crowns where she was pronounced dead.

Two years later more blood was running across the building's ancient floors. This time it belonged to the young poet and Cavalier, Sydney Godolphin, who'd been

Chagford is rich in bygones. The place drips with history and legend

involved in a Civil War skirmish just down the road. Sydney had taken a musket ball and he lay dying in the famous old porch of the Three Crowns. "No, I don't believe in ghosts," said landlord John Giles, who has owned the inn for 29 years. "But I have seen the Cavalier. It happened one night when we first moved in – we didn't have en-suite in our room back then and I had to go down the corridor to go to the loo. And that's when I saw him – the Cavalier – silhouetted in white.

"I put the hairs up on the back of my neck. I had hair then," said John. "And when I got back into bed I was all goosy-pimpled. But I still don't believe in ghosts. The funny thing is my wife does, and she's never seen one."

Listening to John, I got all goosy-pimpled myself. And later, walking through the sunlit streets of this most attractive of Dartmoor towns, wondered why it is that some of the Oscar-winners and TV stars who live in Chagford have never got around to turning the strange and swash-buckling tales into a blockbuster movie.

Town that
is steeped
in history

ENDECOTT House, next door to the Three Crowns, is another of Chagford's historic buildings. It is named after John Endecott, one of the Pilgrim Fathers who eventually became governor of Massachusetts. For 300 years the building played host to the local school.

The parish church of St Michael's, with its magnificent rood screen, is well worth a visit. It dates back to the 15th century, although it was originally dedicated in 1261. In the graveyard you can look across the valley at Castle Drogo perched on its crag, and you can see the old market cross which is now part of the war memorial.

In his book *Village Cricket*, Cornish writer Tim Heald muses over what he describes as the "slightly unkind judgement" that is habitually made about Chagford. "If you were to erect a high wall around it, no one would notice. I heard this remark from a Chagfordian," writes Tim.

"I'm still not quite sure whether it's a barbed reference to the world's indifference to this remote, easy paced place or whether it reflects on the introspection and insularity of those who live there."

NEXT TUESDAY: MARTIN HESP VISITS LYDFORD
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Help us keep
an eye on
spring bird
visitors

CONSERVATIONISTS across the Westcountry are being urged to record the influx of summer migrant birds as part of a national project to map their arrival.

During the first week of March last year, the first of the winged migrants arrived on UK shores during a period of high pressure and southerly winds.

An influx of swallows was recorded in late February – about two weeks earlier than usual – and they were quickly followed by a sand martin which arrived in Cornwall on March 1 and house martins which were seen in Devon and Cornwall on March 7.

The recent cold snap has meant current prospects for birdwatchers are not so good. Nevertheless the organisers of BirdTrack – an online bird recording scheme set up by the British Trust for Ornithology and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds – is urging enthusiasts to be on the lookout.

Dawn Balmer, from BirdTrack, said: "Most birdwatchers look forward to the start of March and hope to see their first summer migrants during the first two weeks of the month.

"With the current weather systems it is unlikely that we will get many migrants for a few weeks, unless there is a big change in the weather.

"We are encouraging birdwatchers to enter their records to BirdTrack and which will help to contribute to local, regional and national bird recording."

Further details about the scheme can be found at www.birdtrack.net

Olympic star
in appeal for
fundraising
cycle ride

AN Olympic gold medalist is urging cycling enthusiasts in the Westcountry to take to the saddle for charity.

Track cyclist Chris Hoy, who won a gold medal for Team GB at the Athens Olympics 2004, has called on residents in Exmouth, Devon to get on their bikes and raise funds for charity Leonard Cheshire, which offers support for disabled people in the region.

The charity has organised a cycling trip to Vietnam – departing capital city Hanoi and taking in banana plantations, remote hill-top villages and bustling market towns before arriving at Sa Pa on the Chinese border.

The 250-mile journey is expected to take ten days to complete.

A deposit of £299 is required to book a place on the Cycle Vietnam trip, which is scheduled to take place from Thursday, November 24 to Monday, December 4.

Entrants must agree to raise a minimum of £2,500 in sponsorship.

For more information, give the events team a call on 0870 420 4301 or visit at www.leonard-cheshire.org/events