

CHALLACOMBE SHEEPDOG TRIALS

On the 19th of August 2006, Challacombe held the 26th of its annual sheepdog trials. They have been held every year, with the exception of foot and mouth year 2001, since the first one in 1980. The idea for the trials originally came from David Ridd and the late Dick Huxtable. David then lived at Glebelands Farm, and Dick at Barton Town. David was one of the churchwardens at Challacombe church which then was in need of funds. The very first trial was held at Barton Town farm, but then for many years it was moved to Glebelands, except for 1983 when it was at Withycombe. Memories have faded a little about those original venue dates, even with people who were involved, and opinions differ as to what the exact locations were. Later the venue was changed to Whitefield Barton where it has been since, thanks to the hospitality of the Kingdon family. They also provide the sheep for the event. The purpose of the trials has been to raise money in support of the church. Over the years this has been very successful and has enabled the church to pay its Diocesan quota and contribute to major internal and external renovations.

These works have included the drying out and traditional rendering of the tower which was previously one of the wettest in the country. Internally all the weak plaster was removed and old wall coverings sand-blasted off prior to redecoration with proper lime-wash. At the same time the event is a major item in the village social calendar, and it brings together a large proportion of the villagers, church-goers and non church-goers alike, both in terms of helping and attending the trials. It is also a useful tourist attraction for holiday visitors to the area, and catches a lot of passing trade on the day thanks to the saturation roadside advertising organised by Ronald and Matthew Webber.

The trials are organised by a sub-committee of the parochial church council with responsibilities being meted out to the village at large for all the various things that have to be done in advance, as well as on the day of the trials. The setting up of the course and tents etc. is done by a willing band of people a day or so before the event. Mr. Brian Duke kindly liaises with the Sheepdog Trials Association to make sure that dates do not clash with other trials, and organises the entry of competitors. He is also normally the commentator on trials day, and sometimes is one of the judges.

Competitors come from a wide area of the South West, and many come regularly each year. Hopefully they find the lovely setting and friendly atmosphere attractive. Over the years numerous 'characters' have emerged among the competitors. The one that sticks most firmly in mind as the most amusing was the late Alfie Little. His 'run' would start off quietly, but as things started to go wrong his voice would begin to rise in volume and his language would deteriorate. By the end his shouting could be heard at Shoulsbarrow, and the air would be so blue that ladies would have to clap their hands over their ears, as his sheep disappeared over the horizon in the direction of Barton Town!

The layout of the course is for the usual lift, drive, Maltese Cross, shedding and penning, depending on the class. There are normally two classes for the 'professionals', with ten minutes allowed for each run. The last event of the day is a local farmers' class which is always very popular with spectators as it is always very entertaining. Farmers, who are good sports and do not mind a bit of embarrassment, "have a go". However, they have the decided disadvantage that their dogs are used to working with whole flocks, not a mere half dozen sheep.

Over the years the event has developed into much more than just sheep dog trials in order to attract as many people as possible. There are, of course, the very necessary tea and cake stalls, but in addition there are now produce stalls, skittles, coconut shies, and entertainments for children plus side shows run by children. A major attraction is the dog show run by Gordon Roode. This is extremely popular, with serious and fun classes to enable everyone to enter their dog in something or other, regardless of size, shape, pedigree or mongrelisation. Locals and visitors do this in large numbers for the privilege of winning a rosette and a packet of dog biscuits (no expense spared). In recent years another item of interest has been the addition of a flower and vegetable show, which gives rise to local competition and literally adds colour to the event. Classes for children including such things as the largest weed, vegetable animals, and gardens on a plate have produced amusing results showing lots of initiative. Last year, 2005, was the 25th anniversary of the trials. To mark this it was decided to make a contribution to charity, so £500.00 was given to the North Devon Hospice from the proceeds.

What lies in the future for sheep dog trialling? Fortunately at the moment there are enough competitors entering to make up a show, but there is evidence that numbers are dropping. It would appear that young people are not coming forward fast enough to replace the older ones, and possibly the advent and wide use of quad - bikes is having an adverse effect. However most bikes have a collie riding on it or running beside it, to take over the serious handling bit at close quarters, so may be the future is secure. Challacombe thinks so at least,

The next Challacombe Sheepdog Trials will take place on Saturday August ? 2007 at Whitefield Barton, Challacombe

4 photos:

- 1) Penning scene
- 2) Competitor Ken Watson with ?
- 3) Old chaps with Sticks
- 4) Pups "Our turn next?" caption