



# WATCHET CONSERVATION MATTERS

For conserving our built and natural environment

Issue 19 November/December 2011

## ***From our Chair, Molly Quint:***

Dear friends and members, how quickly the summer has gone and all the outside events with it but we have much to look forward to this winter. The first thing in the WCS diary is the AGM on 22<sup>nd</sup> November in the Phoenix Centre. Do please come along, and if you feel you would like to put your name forward for committee we always love to have new people bringing new ideas and fresh energy to our organisation. After the business of the evening there will be plenty of time for a glass of wine, refreshments and fun. The next date in our calendar is the completion of the Seascapes, (Pebble Garden) which we hope will be around the New Year, this will be so exciting and such an achievement for the WCS, we will send out further details nearer the date. Looking forward to seeing you all at the AGM.



Molly and John in the "Lime tree bower" at Coleridge Cottage, see "Poet's Corner" for the full story

Yours very sincerely - Molly Q.

## ***Forthcoming Events:***

### ***Annual General Meeting: November 22<sup>nd</sup> at the Phoenix Centre 7.30pm***

Molly or Jan would love to hear from any of our members wishing to take a more active part in our Society, you might even wish to stand for committee; elections and re-elections are an important part of the evening's events, a nomination form accompanies this newsletter, please return the form to Jan before November 18<sup>th</sup>.

### ***Past Events:*** Thanks go to **Tim Prior** for this review of our latest meeting.

#### **Brunel's Broad Gauge Railway at Watchet 1859 to 1900 - an illustrated talk by Chris Saunders**

Despite the wind and rain there was a full house at the Watchet Methodist Schoolroom on Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> September for Chris Saunders' presentation. Those who came were fortunate to hear the fascinating story of the railway and get a glimpse of life in Watchet during the Victorian period from a speaker with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the subject.

Over the past 15 years Chris has painstakingly researched the railway and has discovered almost 80 previously unknown photos of the Watchet line. Using his extensive photo library and maps from the period he charted the history of the railway, starting with the development of the Great Western Railway (GWR). The architect of the GWR and

engineering genius Isambard Kingdom Brunel visited Watchet in the early 1850's and twice again in 1856 to survey the proposed new harbour and to develop the railway.

Chris took the audience through the construction of the railway at Watchet and its various stages of development in the 1850's and 1860's. It was under Brunel's guidance that the line from Norton Fitzwarren to Watchet was constructed. In tandem with the railway the East Wharf was constructed using spoil from the railway cuttings to backfill a new harbour wall constructed from local stone. Unfortunately everything did not run smoothly and a dispute between the harbour owners and the railway over ownership of the new wharf delayed



development for five years. Once the dispute was settled (in favour of the harbour owners) the new railway line was able to achieve its potential as a railhead serving Watchet Harbour, bringing goods and produce to and from the West Somerset hinterland.

Coincidentally the photographs showing the early development of the railway and Watchet Station also chronicled the construction of the Methodist Chapel starting with a forest of scaffolding around the site in an early photo and subsequent stages of construction shown in the background during the opening of the new station.

The story then moved on to the construction of the line into Minehead and proposed links with the Mineral Line that never materialised. Chris explained many of the workings of the railway and construction equipment including the various trucks used; the disk and crossbar railway signal and a revolving signal man's hut that could be turned to face away from the wind and rain. It's interesting to see that Watchet's weather hasn't changed over the last 150 years!

Using enlargements from historic photos Chris showed many glimpses of Victorian life. This, included ladies in crinoline dresses waiting to board a paddle steamer for a holiday excursion, a wood storage depot on the East Wharf complete with saw pit and a long metal tube used either for steaming wood so that it could be bent into differing shapes or a creosote tank for preserving wood. He was also able to name several of the railway officials and others shown in the photos and gave a brief outline of their history.

The talk came to its conclusion with the conversion of the Watchet line to standard gauge in 1882 and the change across the whole of the UK 10 years later. The change took place on Saturday 21 May 1892, when over 4,200 platelayers and gangers started work to change 177 miles of broad gauge to standard gauge. The process was so efficient that instead of 3 days it was completed in less than two.

It is a testament to Brunel's foresight that had the Broad Gauge been adopted instead of standard Gauge, speeds of over 250 mph would now be possible on the UK rail network.

The talk ended with the sad sight of hundreds of broad gauge locomotives at the Swindon dump waiting for disposal. Fortunately some examples and an exhibition about Broad Gauge can be seen at the Didcot Railway Centre.

Our Chairman, Molly Quint thanked Chris Saunders for his fascinating talk and for making it so interesting.

Chris has asked that if anyone has photos in private collections of the old railway and particularly of the 1882 conversions, if they could share them with him to help further his research.

### ***Conservation in Action: 41 Swain Street, Watchet***



There's so much news to fill our modest publication on this occasion that a proper update on Paul Upton's restoration project will have to wait for our next issue, HOWEVER, a visit to Paul's blog, will bring you well up to date with all the latest developments and discoveries, if you are reading this online then simply *control+click* the following link: <http://watchetconservationsociety.blogspot.com/> If you don't have access to the internet, I'll happily print a copy for you. Give me, Edward Frewin, a call on 01984 633422. On my visit to the blog, I found it particularly fascinating to learn that this property was originally a single story medieval "Hall House".

### ***Good Design in practice: Paul Upton comments on Malthouse Court***

So many developments and redevelopments in Watchet over recent years have been executed without much thought for the visual impact in the streetscape, or the views and vistas seen through the gaps between buildings. It is a pleasure, therefore to see a new development where thought has been given not only to the use of local building materials and styles, but the view from different vantage points. It is not yet finished, but, the view of "Malthouse Court" glimpsed behind the newly painted Post Office is a great improvement. Well done Acorn Developments!



### ***Watchet's Historical Past - 1925 – Military Camp established at Watchet***

On 25<sup>th</sup> May 1925 it was reported that preliminaries for setting up camp were well advanced under the direction of Capt F C Harley, Royal Engineers, and that the main body were due on 27<sup>th</sup> June. Units of the Royal Engineers Anti-aircraft and Artillery and Signals would make up the force under canvas and would be distinct from the arm of the Air Forces to be quartered at Westonzoyland. Further arrivals of a party of gunners and sappers brought the strength of the camp up to 13 officers and 218 NCOs. Their specific job was to erect tents in the camp field proper which lies on the southern slopes of quarry hill. On its 13 acres, approximately, 1,000 officers and men would be under canvas by the end of the month comprising anti-aircraft brigade of Royal Artillery, anti-aircraft company of the Royal Corps of Signals and detachments of the RAMC and ASC and the Ordnance Workshops, and

all regulars from the Aldershot command.

The summer camps continued until the outbreak of war in the form of fortnightly camps alternating with the Territorial and regular armies, most of who were stationed under Southern Command (London Counties). At the outbreak of war in 1939, Doniford camp was taken over by the RAF remaining in their hands until 1957. During 1957 the Doniford site was transferred to the War Office. The first infantry unit to arrive in 1957/58 was the Northamptonshire Regiment. A headline in the West Somerset Free Press dated 13<sup>th</sup> January 1960 stated "Northants Regiment returning to Watchet in 1960". During the



rundown of the camp the site was used by the battalions of the Leicestershire Regt, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Anglian Regt, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Irish Rangers, Royal Warwickshires and Royal Fusiliers.

On Tuesday, 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1968 Field Marshall Viscount Montgomery of Alamein was chief guest at the Vesting Day Parade for the new Royal Regiment of Fusiliers at Doniford Camp. The camp was finally closed by a Conveyance dated 13<sup>th</sup> October 1982 although troops had departed some time before then. The main camp site has now been transformed into a holiday complex.



## THROUGH THE CAPTAIN'S DOOR

In the previous newsletter, Jack Binding gave us a fascinating insight into the breaking of H.M.S.Fox in Watchet harbour, which led **Nick Cotton** to write the following account:

Nothing could have prepared me for what I was to find when I entered a modest house in Watchet. Many of Watchet's houses and cottages retain relics of this significant event in our maritime history. I have been privileged over the years to see many of these at first hand, and have even climbed a staircase claimed to have been removed from the old warship. Imagine then my surprise and delight when entering this cottage, built some time after the demolition of the Fox. I was ushered into the sitting room through a substantial mahogany door. I immediately questioned its origin, as it did seem rather incongruous. The owner told me it had been removed from H.M.S.Fox, had been the captain's door and had been subsequently incorporated into the house. I can find little reason to doubt this claim.

This wonderful piece of Watchet's maritime heritage is much prized by its current owner. The door and surround is beautifully made, as you might expect, and typical of the quality and craftsmanship of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Constructed of a rich, dense mahogany, the door frame is of equally high quality and the pediment is finished with a classical dentil cornice. The finger plates remain and, more importantly, the heavy brass handles. It's an odd experience grasping the handle and conjuring the image of the captain returning to his cabin after having successfully captured two German merchant ships at the outbreak of World War I. There are many such tales to tell.

This however was not all. I entered the kitchen through a second door, another from the Fox, this less imposing, but composed of panels made from exotic bird's eye maple. This visit was a unique and moving experience, and one which I shall always remember. As I made my way to leave, the owner caught my envious eye and emphatically stated, "I would never sell them", and quite right, too.



## THE ONGOING FIGHT TO SAVE WATCHET'S LIBRARY

On 27-29th September 2011 there was a high court judicial review into the decision by Somerset County Council to close 11 libraries in Somerset, including Watchet. The verdict, which will determine its future, will be given in a few weeks once the judge has reviewed all the evidence. WCS continues to maintain an interest in the building, its architecture and history as a community asset for the people of Watchet.



### ***Poet's Corner*** – Sara Coleridge wife of the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge

*A brief account by Jan Simpson-Scott*



Sara Coleridge. Miniature by Mathilda Betham, 1809. (Hullon-Deutsch Collection)

Inspired as I was after spending the morning as a Room Guide in Sara Coleridge's kitchen at Coleridge Cottage in Nether Stowey I decided it was time to take a break from the restless Romantic and examine a little of the life that his wife endured with their first child, Hartley, after the family arrived in Lime Street on a farm wagon on New Year's Eve 1797.

On arrival they found a thatched house which was semi-derelict and when Coleridge's friend and soon-to-be neighbour, Tom Poole, had suggested that Coleridge might buy it he had not thought that the idea would even be considered. For someone such as Coleridge to whom beauty and purity were such vital elements a hovel near the poor house with an open gutter to the front would not have seemed inviting. Was it being next door to Poole to

whom he was so close or was it the breathtaking locality that drew Coleridge here? Whatever the reason Sara found herself in a house where her time would be largely spent in the kitchen, little more than a service room, without even a drudge to help with the heaviest work. It would be a primitive sort of life with a Spartan routine for Sara without the exhilarating breaks on the Quantocks so enjoyed by Coleridge.

The kitchen was large by most standards with a high ceiling and only a narrow side window letting in minimal light. Her only additional source of light was from a candle stored in a box on the wall. She would light this with a taper kept in a drawer in the kitchen table and which she would dip into bacon fat before lighting it with the tinder box.

A door at the rear of the kitchen led to the garden where the family grew herbs, vegetables and corn and kept a pig, geese and ducks to cater for Coleridge's demands for self-sufficiency. Sara came from Bristol where ships brought in cargoes of spices so she was familiar with recipes for curries. She made pork pies, meat and potato pie and as most of

the women in Nether Stowey, she lacked an oven and would cross the road to have them baked by the baker. She reckoned that the three of them could live on 16s a week. This would have meant a low-meat diet. Her stock pot hangs over the kitchen fire and she would add to this whatever produce the day brought.

It was a humdrum life constantly stoking the kitchen fire over which she had to cook and dry Hartley's nappies. It was damp. There were mice. But in the backyard was a well giving access to soft spring water, more than most had in the area. Hartley had a cradle of local willow and they ate and drank from Somerset red earthenware.

Toiling in this kitchen could not have been easy for Sara especially in the first cold months after their arrival. One imagines Coleridge's absorption in the beauty of his surroundings, his quill pen moving quickly across the pages as he sat at his desk in the front parlour, Sara working endlessly in this kitchen. Yet Tom Poole was not just a devoted friend to Coleridge. He was aware of the paucity of Sara's existence, felt it reflected on both himself and Coleridge's wild reputation and so he persuaded Coleridge to enlist help for Sara in the form of a servant-girl, who came to be known as Nanny. Poole made a gate in their connecting wall through which he arrived with milk for Sara.

Eventually Coleridge took himself and Sara into village life, joining the Stowey Musical Society and Poole's Reading Club. He wrote to a friend in 1798 that "we are very happy".

That Coleridge was ever really happy is debateable, such was the turmoil of his inner self. Sara's life was hard and she was to lose her second child, Berkeley, born at the cottage and who died in a convulsive fit following smallpox and whilst Coleridge was travelling in Germany. She bore this loss alone as Poole advised against interrupting Coleridge with the news.

Eventually in 1808 and after two more children, Derwent and Sara, Coleridge would leave her but I believe she deserves her place in our local history.

As I stood in her kitchen looking at the wild flower posy collected from the garden to add her brand of prettiness as a contrast to Coleridge's need for beauty in a bolder form, I could not help but muse about what she could have told us about our legend, her husband; what secrets her kitchen held.

## **Coleridge Cottage opening event 9<sup>th</sup> September 2011**

Last year we had an excellent WCS talk by the National Trust's Stephen Hayes, who spoke about Dunster Castle, its solar panels, bats and conservation. As area manager and project coordinator for the refurbishment of Coleridge Cottage at Nether Stowey, he also told us about the major re-presentation project underway there. As a Friend of WCS, he invited John Irven and Molly Quint to represent the Society at the celebration event to mark the re-opening, organised by the *Coleridge Partnership*, an informal group comprising the National Trust and representatives of Nether Stowey Parish Council, the Friends of Coleridge Cottage and the volunteer supporters such as our own Jan Simpson-Scott. The event included a few words from the National Trust's Chairman Sir Simon Jenkins, and readings of Coleridge's works by Tom Mayberry, Chair of the Friends Group. The photograph on page 1, shows Molly and John enjoying the garden and sitting in the new 'Lime tree bower', as featured in Coleridge's poem of that name. Members are encouraged to visit to see for themselves the revamped Cottage and garden.

# Wildflowers Around Watchet

**Botanical artist – Sheila Mannes-Abbott says:**

Very few wild plants are in bloom at this time of the year, which gives me an opportunity to paint Toadstools.

Autumn has arrived with its fruits, berries and mushrooms. I have been fascinated with fungi since a child after finding a group of Fly Agaric (*Amanita muscaria*): the red-capped toadstools so often illustrated in children's books. Apparently the name Fly Agaric comes from medieval times following the practice of breaking the cap into a bowl of milk to stupefy flies. Despite its attractive appearance, the Fly Agaric is poisonous as are the others in the *Amanita* group, some deadly.



The rather chewed toadstool illustrated left is, I believe, *Boletus edulus*, with its convex pale brown sticky cap resembling the buns that used to be displayed in the baker's shop which led to its common name Penny Bun. The *Boletus* shown has been so disfigured by either a slug or snail making identification difficult. Dr Watling in his book "The British Fungus Flora" lists 36 species of *Boletus*. Although some are edible it is wise to consult an expert as a few are poisonous. The very rare Devil's *Boletus* is probably deadly.

The Brown-Roll-rim (*Paxillus involutus*), is found in late autumn and is very common, also very poisonous. This one I found last year on Staple Plain, pushing up through the Brambles just asking to be painted. This particular Toadstool is very common in many of our local woodland areas.



**WATCHET CONSERVATION SOCIETY**

*Chair*

*Treasurer and Membership Secretary*

*Secretary*

*Case Officer*

*Committee: Theresa Harper, Tim Prior, Paul Reynolds, Eric Robinson, Nick Cotton.*

**Watchet Conservation Matters** is published six times a year. If you would like to contribute news or an article, please contact the newsletter editor:

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