



WATCHET CONSERVATION MATTERS

For conserving our built and natural environment

Issue 21 March/April 2012

From our Chair, Molly Quint:

Dear everyone, spring is nearly here and all the wonderful activities that Watchet is preparing for the forthcoming year, but we can look back on the winter with satisfaction. We had the wonderful celebration of the unveiling of 'Seascape', followed then by the revisiting of the day with the great video footage by Mike Dan on the large screen in the Methodist Schoolroom, which was another work of art, we thank you Mike so much. This was followed by an exciting helicopter ride with Paul Reynolds in the pilot's seat to say farewell to the Mill chimney. Hair raising at times but great fun, thanks Paul. Then lots of ideas talked about for the future. Please enjoy the News Letter and I look forward to seeing you all on the Esplanade on Tuesday 20th March at 7.30pm for another unveiling.

Yours very sincerely, Molly Q.

Forthcoming Events:

Fitzroy Barometer Opening Ceremony: Tues March 20th. 7.30pm

The restored barometer will be unveiled on The Esplanade followed by a get-together at The Phoenix Centre when Nick Cotton will talk on its history. To whet your appetite, Nick has written the following article:

A familiar sight for residents and visitors alike to Watchet and the Esplanade is the Fitzroy Barometer set into the wall of the cottage adjacent to the 'Corner Collection'. This curiosity has occupied its current position for well over a hundred years and is a very tangible link with the town's maritime past. These barometers were once a common sight in the ports and harbours throughout the British Isles during the Victorian period and of course, with the passage of time, many have disappeared forever. The Conservation Society is very much aware of the importance of safeguarding our town's heritage, not just for the present generations but for those to come.

Sadly, the barometer had suffered at the hands of vandals and the society felt that it should undertake its restoration. After due consideration, we agreed that the frame protecting the barometer was beyond repair and Martyn Ketchen, a skilled Watchet joiner, undertook the task of copying and replacing the door in hardwood; interestingly it was Ash that he chose, which is a traditional timber used historically in the West Country. The grills set into the door had understandably suffered distortion through the ravages of time and were caked with numerous coats of paint. Robin Trigg, an artisan metalworker, felt that he could save them as indeed he has, and re-instated them expertly to their former glory. The third and vital part of the project was the dedication plaque which had become so obscured through decades of enthusiastic polishing as to be almost unreadable; Richard Stanton was able to



Barometer in 2010

bring a lifetime's experience to this particular problem and due to the depth of the brass, he was able to copy and re-etch the original script to the highest standard. Watchet is indeed very fortunate, being able to call on numerous supporters of the Society, who willingly use their exceptional talents for the benefit of our town. They are also happy to give their time freely at no cost to The Society. We owe a great debt of gratitude to Martyn, Robin and Richard. Thank you all very much.

How and why this barometer is here in Watchet is an interesting story. Admiral Robert Fitzroy figures large in our Nation's maritime history, in some ways now we might view him as a tragic figure. After a lifetime dedicated to the sea and those involved with it, he died penniless and his wife and children ultimately on his death became dependant on others for their future wellbeing.

Admiral Fitzroy, after whom the barometer is named, gained fame as the captain of the "Beagle" which took Charles Darwin on one of the most significant and epic sea voyages of all time. As constant, cramped companions, Fitzroy and Darwin made an interesting coupling; Fitzroy a devout Christian and Darwin the father of evolutionary understanding were eventually to find themselves in direct opposition; a situation that affected the Captain deeply and probably contributed to his tragic suicide in 1865. Fitzroy has been justifiably called the Father of the Meteorological Society. He had a lifelong passion for this science and on his retirement from the sea, devoted his remaining years in its pursuit.

In 1859, during an horrific storm, the "Royal Charter", returning from the Australian goldfields, floundered and was dashed upon the rocks off Anglesey with the accompanying loss of many lives, both passengers and crew. This event affected Fitzroy deeply and became his inspiration for charts to be produced allowing weather predictions to be calculated. Fitzroy called this "forecasting the weather", thus coining the term we are all familiar with, the 'weather forecast', almost a national obsession. (This led to the first "weather forecasts" appearing in The Times from 1860.)

At the same time, The Crown was encouraged to distribute "storm glasses", known as Fitzroy storm barometers, throughout the British Isles and it is at this point that we make the Watchet connection. When our particular barometer was installed, is as yet not known, but it would seem likely to be after 1865, the year of Fitzroy's death, as records state that they did not appear until after this date. This type of barometer spawned many domestic examples that continued to made long after his death and some unfortunately not as accurate as they should be. These are often accompanied by Fitzroy's 'remarks' in beautiful script which makes them aesthetically very pleasing.

The brass plaque on the door of the barometer states "The gift of Sir A.A. Hood, Bart.", which refers to Sir Alexander Acland Hood whose county seat was at St. Audries. Evidence shows that he was a generous local benefactor, donating funds to various causes in West Somerset. A second brass plaque was introduced some thirty years ago, inscribed 'Set at 9am Daily'; this of course is self explanatory and this task, until the barometer became vandalised, was carried out by Watchet worthy, Vernon Stone. This later addition was a donation from Mary Rawle who holds affectionate personal memories of this very tangible link with the port's past.

(Eric Robinson has written an interesting article, elaborating on the above; we will include this in the next issue of our newsletter, we've run out of space on this occasion – Ed.)

***“What Makes Us Human”*: Tues May 15th. 7.30pm Methodist Schoolroom**

We are delighted to welcome back: Revd. David Ireson who'll be giving an illustrated talk on the Upper Palaeolithic and the transition between Neanderthals and Homo Sapiens. We all have fond memories of David's last talk; can you believe that was 3 years ago.

Watchet Station 150 Year Anniversary Weekend: Sat March 31st. 2012

Jan Simpson-Scott and Tina Barry will be running a fund-raising stall for The WCS to tie in with the 150 year anniversary celebrations of the arrival of the railway and opening of Watchet Station. Any contributions – bric-a-brac, unwanted Christmas gifts, toiletries, groceries, etc – would be very much appreciated. If you would like to bring a contribution to the Open Meeting on Tuesday March 20th we will gladly take it from you. Cakes, pastries etc on the day would be very welcome. We shall be at Watchet Station to join in the celebrations and at our stall on the Esplanade by approx 11am. Contact Jan on: 01984 639615 or Tina on: 01984 633506 for more information. We look forward to receiving contributions and seeing you on the day. Thank you in advance.

41 Swain Street: Friday 16 March 11.00 am to 2.00 pm

This newsletter has followed the fascinating story of Paul Upton's restoration of this important Watchet property. As we have mentioned in the past, a blow by blow account is available on our website at:

<http://watchetconservationsociety.blogspot.com/> We understand that “Gallery 41” is to open for business as a fine art gallery on April 6th. In the meantime, Paul has kindly invited interested people to view the inside of the empty building from 11am to 2pm on Friday 16 March (just turn up!)



s the first coat of paint

For The Future: Mineral Yard and Sea Wall Arts Projects

Tim Prior describes our plans for this very major undertaking:

As those who attended the recent AGM and open meeting will know, the Conservation Society's next and most ambitious undertaking is the Mineral Yard scheme. In fact it is two separate but connected projects both aimed at rejuvenating an area of town that desperately needs improving.

Part of the Mineral Yard has become overgrown and is a magnet for fly tipping. Unfortunately it needs to be kept relatively clear to allow Wessex Water to access their underground filters and other equipment. Similarly the sea wall that protects the Yard is an important part of Watchet's sea defences, but its 20 foot high grey concrete frontage does not improve the appearance of the area.



This scheme aims to turn the negative aspects of the Mineral Yard and sea wall into a positive benefit for the local community, create a new tourist attraction and enhance Watchet's growing reputation as a centre for the arts in Somerset.

Phase one of the project will be to turn the Wessex Water area into a mini-park. By careful development of the area surrounding the underground installations, a number of raised flowerbeds, seats and hopefully a water feature could be installed. The shelter provided by the sea wall and its sunny location will make the mini-park an oasis of green in a built up area of town.

Although the new park is an exciting development in its own right, it is only part of a much more adventurous scheme to use the Sea Wall as an outdoor art gallery.

The basic concept is to use the upper section as a series of canvases to tell the story of Watchet and the Mineral Railway. Careful preparation of the wall's surface, with a neutral light colour, can then be painted with historical scenes using paints designed for Maritime use. This surface preparation and paints are able to withstand salt spray and, with regular cleaning, will keep fresh for years.



A similar project on Sheringham's sea wall

The larger lower sections would become an open air art gallery. By fixing batons to the wall in certain areas, paintings can be attached to form a constantly changing art display through the summer months. The area can also be used to host art festivals and formal exhibitions, by using canvas attached to the top of the wall to create covered area.

Whilst paint is likely to be the main medium, there will also be opportunities to include art works made from mosaics, steelwork, sculptured reliefs and a range of other materials.

It is envisaged that this will include everyone within the community who wishes to be part of the project. In addition to the Conservation Society, school pupils and older students will be closely involved in a number of ways. Local artists will be asked to run the gallery, arrange exhibitions, organise events and decide which works should be displayed and where.

As with all ambitious schemes there are a number of major hurdles to overcome before both projects can become a reality. These schemes rely on the good will and co-operation of a range of agencies, not least of which would be West Somerset District Council and Wessex Water. There may also be legal or practical issues that could limit the scope of the project or stop it altogether. In addition, there is the issue of funding, as there will be significant costs and in the present economic climate funding can be difficult to find. However, the Society has a number of ideas for raising funds including lottery bids, sponsorship arrangements and merchandising.

This will be a difficult venture with no certainty of success, but if we do succeed, it will create a new tourist attraction and more importantly act as a catalyst to bring high quality artists to the Town. One day, with the help of the skilled artists who already live in Watchet, the Town's reputation as an artistic hub could match that of St. Ives in Cornwall and Southwold in East Anglia.

If you would like to discuss any aspect of the project or have any suggestions please contact Tim Prior on priort108@googlemail.com

Can You Help?

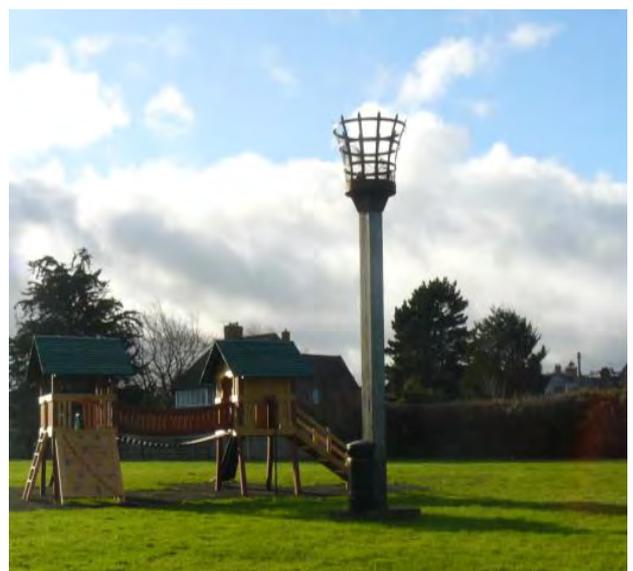
From time to time we have inquiries sent to our website from other societies or individuals requesting help or information regarding research projects they are pursuing. Can any readers or members help with the following requests?

Tracy Huggett from Essex is currently engaged in researching the various properties belonging to the John Preddy Group. This includes the Watchet Pharmacy. Should anyone have any knowledge of the building or its history she would be grateful if we could let her know.

Dr Denys Wilcox is anxious to contact anyone who may recall Marjorie Mack Smith who died in Watchet in 1969. She lived in St Decumans Road.

A request from your editor: Many of the older Watchet residents talk of a footbridge that existed many years ago, over Goviers Lane from Almyr House (or Claremont as it was then known) across to Highbank. There is a photograph in existence but I cannot locate a copy. Do any of our members have a copy? Back last summer Sheila and I entertained to tea a family who were evacuated from the East End of London to spend the war years here. They verified the existence of such a structure, in fact the youngest child got its head trapped in the balustrade!

And This..... Artistic suggestions sought to resolve the following problem. On Watchet Memorial Ground Kids Playground is a beacon atop a pine post as shown in the photo. This was installed many years ago, apparently when the UK joined the EU. It was originally envisioned for use as a beacon for events such as armada, millennium and jubilee celebrations. During a visit by Watchet Town Council Tourism and Leisure committee in January 2012 to identify positioning of new play equipment, an opportunity was taken to discuss possible updates. It was noted that following health and safety inspections the beacon was deemed unsafe for operation as originally intended, and is no longer allowed to be used for its original purpose. So it cannot be used in the coming Jubilee celebrations. Watchet Town Council has been evaluating potentially removing the beacon and support structure to prevent it being misused. The pine post is set in a concrete



base foundation and it is believed that the cost of removal is affecting any decision. An Alternative solution: Discussions revealed that an appropriate alternative to removal could potentially be attractive to WTC. The Council were very impressed with the recent WCS Sculpture Garden in Esplanade Lane, and if The Conservation Society propose an alternative artwork which could be mounted on top of the existing structure, this would avoid unnecessary removal costs, whilst providing an attractive alternative feature, which due to the height of the support pole would be less likely to be vandalised. Possible ideas discussed were: a weathervane, a Watchet symbol such as an anchor, a metalwork or stone sculpture, or some combination of the former. The existing metal basket could be removed, with the current concrete foundation/base and pine post providing a sufficient mounting for the new artwork. WCS have written formally to WTC to ask for permission to consider such a project, which has to go through the proper approvals procedures. In the meantime, any ideas and suggestions for an artwork please let us know!??

Watchet's Historical Past: Queen Bee arrives at Doniford Camp

Jack Binding concludes his short history of the Queen Bee experiment.

The decision to carry out night firing exercises necessitated the positioning of searchlights on high points at St Audries, Doniford (the Mount), Daws Castle and two on the Recreation ground. Subject to weather conditions, the Army would make it known publicly the nights when these exercises would take place, commencing between 10 and 11 pm.

This created a good deal of interest and excitement and people, including myself as a boy, would gather on the Recreation ground eagerly awaiting the forthcoming display of night gunnery and subsequent actions. As soon as darkness fell, one by one the searchlights



would send their powerful beams into the sky all concentrating on an area seaward and there silhouetted in the night sky would appear what looked like a lovely silver moth, the Queen Bee, and a murmur of excitement would run through the crowd. Suddenly all the guns at Doniford Gun Park would open fire with ear shattering explosions and bursts of flame would appear around the Queen Bee. The plane would fly up and down the coast and the exercise would go on for an hour or so. A vivid memory for me



De Havilland Queen Bee

Radio-controlled target version of the Tiger Moth first flown on 5 January 1935. Total of 380 built for the R.A.F., comprised of 320 built at Hatfield (K 3597 to V 4805) from 1935 and 60 by the Scottish Aviation Co. Ltd. (LF 779 to LF 867) in 1943–44. Usually as a twin-float seaplane provided live gunnery practice, with A.A. ranges at Anglesey, Cromer, Burrow Head, Manorbier, Towyn, Weybourne, Watchet, and overseas in Malta and Gibraltar. All-wooden ply-covered fuselage by contrast with Tiger Moth's metal, fabric-covered fuselage. Declared obsolete in May 1947.

The success of these day and night exercises by the Army and RAF must have reached the ears of the powers-that-be at Whitehall because on a Thursday in 1938 the Secretary of State for War, the Rt Hon Leslie Hore-Belisha (Belisha beacons) together with 16 London Mayors, several Members of Parliament with the Chief of A A Command, General Sir Edward Pyle, and Lieutenant General W D S Browning, Director General of the Territorial Army, assembled at Doniford Camp to observe demonstrations by the various gunnery crews firing at the radio controlled Queen Bee flying at alternating heights. On one occasion a Queen Bee flying at over 100 miles per hour received a direct hit and landed in the sea off the harbour and the remains were picked up by the salvage tug and brought back to the East quay. The day's activities received national coverage and were filmed by Pathé News.

During the period from August 1937 to April 1942 a total of 17 Queen Bee aircraft crashed or were shot down whilst engaged in anti-aircraft gunnery exercises. Two such engagements sadly resulted in fatalities. On 16th August 1940 a Defiant L7010 from 50th TU whilst target towing spun into the sea one mile off Watchet and the two crewmen were killed, and on 20th June 1941 a Hawker Hanley L3423 from IAACU Weston Zoyland whilst target towing crashed into the sea off Watchet – again the crew of 2 were killed.

Poet's Corner – Oh dear! Although Jan Simpson-Scott produced her regular copy for this spot (in good time!) before flying off to New Zealand, we've run out of space, so Jan – please forgive us; we must postpone until April, your essay on Coleridge's Kubla Khan.

Wildflowers around Watchet

Sorry too to Sheila, because of space constraints, we have no room for a description of this tiny and charming, harbinger of spring: the Violet, (*Viola odorata*) to go alongside your painting, but perhaps we can simply say “A picture is worth a thousand words”. We’ll make sure that whatever you choose to illustrate for the next edition of our newsletter, we’ll ensure that there’ll be space for you to tell us all about it – thank you for your contribution.



Obituary: Sadly, we have to report the death of Reg Boulton. We asked Nick Cotton to say a little about this true gentleman.

I knew Reg for only a short time, but this modest, quietly spoken man was exceptional in so many ways.

Moving to Watchet to live with his daughter Emma from Hereford, he immediately embraced the town and its people. He was fascinated by the harbour, its buildings and its sense of history; he loved the surrounding countryside. Reg was a painter, engraver, print maker, stone letter-cutter and musician - he took up the 'cello in his seventies. (Emma's house sign, "Bank House", is a lasting testimony to his skill.)

I first met him in the gallery where we sat and talked about studio pottery. Oh, I forgot to mention that he was also a potter. It's always a pleasure to meet someone who instantly becomes a friend. Reg had this effect on people.

As soon as Reg arrived in Watchet, he began painting on a daily basis, making his way to the harbourside, then home again to the easel and a cup of coffee.

I was privileged to see examples of his work in a room set aside in Bank House. It is really quite staggering to realise how many facets there were to his artistic output. Perhaps for me the most fascinating discovery was a book, beautifully bound and hand-finished, a serious collector's item on the carvings of Kilpeck Church.

Reg soon became a member of the Conservation Society and was determined to be an active participant. Sadly, this was not to be and, had he survived, his attributes would have been realised.

I was lucky to have met Reg and it is a deep regret that our budding friendship was so unfairly cut short.

WATCHET CONSERVATION SOCIETY

Chair

Treasurer and Membership Secretary

Secretary

Case Officer

Committee: Tina Barry, Nick Cotton, Peter Murphy, Tim Prior, Paul Reynolds, Izzy Silvester

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

Edward Frewin – 01984 633422 E-mail: edward@frewin.co.uk

www.watchetconservationsociety.co.uk

Molly Quint - 01984 632592

John Irven - 01984 631083

Jan Simpson-Scott - 01984 639615

Paul Upton – 01278 734630

