



Watchet Conservation Matters

Promoting, Conserving & Improving
Our Physical & Natural Environment

Issue 46 May/June 2016



Our Chair Molly Quint

The Court Leet lock-up

The Court Leet lock-up formed part of the building known as the Market House, where local traders could set out their goods for sale under cover inside and serve customers outside through the windows.



Photography by Dave Simpson-Scott



Dear Friends and Members.

The sun is shining as I write this, wonder if it still is as you read my letter!! Our English climate!!

Lots of things have been happening and are planned to happen in Watchet Conservation Society and in Watchet Town. The talk by Paul Upton, our Case Officer, at the last open meeting was excellent, thank you Paul. We now look at 41 Swain Street with new eyes!! This coming talk is by Esther Hoyle on "Somerset Women" on the 17th May, so we shall hear, I am sure, about names we know and new names to us, all of which will make it a great and varied evening.

We have among Members and friends in Watchet many good photographers so do hope you will send your photos into our

competition for printing in a Calendar in the Autumn, organised by Nick Cotton. Nick has many new ideas for WCS and we look forward to hearing about them in time.

We have all seen the hard work going on at the Boat Museum and look forward to completion day in June when the Onion Collective will have achieved another great thing for Watchet by making the entrance of the Town interesting and appealing to the eye and improving facilities for the Town Council and Visitors' Centre, many thanks to all concerned.

Do come along to our next meeting on the 17th May, we love having a full house!

Watchet Conservation Society has received a letter from John Irven offering his resignation from the Committee, as Treasurer, and from the Society. He will be greatly missed by us as a Society and especially as a Committee Member. He was an excellent Treasurer and also helped with many other aspects of running an organisation, small details that are often the important ones, were noted and advised on. We wish him well in all his other activities and thank him for all his hard work with WCS.

Yours very sincerely,

Molly Quint



Malcolm Davey



Malcolm Davey

The Conservation Society was saddened to hear of the loss of Malcolm Davey who had been such a support especially for our Chairman Molly. He was a keen supporter of not just the society but also of Watchet, willing to give a hand and help without expecting any reward or recognition. A sensitive man and he was sometimes misunderstood. If ever the expression “still waters run deep” was appropriate, it would surely apply to Malcolm.

He was capable of showing great kindness and certainly compassion and could show an impish sense of humour in his own inimitable way. His outgoing nature and willingness to engage in conversation with

anyone, whether he knew them or not, was typical. He was, despite this, a very private man in many ways, and you needed to have known him for a while before he was prepared to speak about himself.

He had a number of interests in which he developed a great passion. Art was a subject that fascinated him and he had a feverish desire to learn as much as he could. Jan has remarked that on his regular visits to the harbour bookshop he was only ever interested in the art section. He could show an almost boyish enthusiasm for his subject which was very endearing. Perhaps his greatest love was classical music, an interest that had developed from a very early age. He could speak with authority and considerable knowledge on the subject, discussing favourite pieces and composers. He was also a lover of football and a keen supporter of Watchet FC and delighted in their success. It is always a sad occasion to lose someone like Malcolm, a genuine character and part of the fabric of our town. He will be missed and remembered with great affection by everyone who knew him. It is the society's intention to place a plaque commemorating his life at the Goviers Lane Crossing in the garden that he was so much a part of.

Nick Cotton

Watchet Court Leet lock-up

Watchet Court Leet lock-up

On our family visits in the 1980s and 1990s I often sat in the sunshine on West Pier; our daughters tried crabbing in the harbour while my husband watched trains at the Govier's Lane crossing. To get to the pier we had to pass the Market House and we would wonder about the poor chap in the little locked cell at the far end. Sometimes there was a scrap or two of food or a crust on a plate on the floor, but the man himself looked desperate and maybe starving. Who had put him there? What had he done? And what was the rest of the building used for, both now and in the past?

Now that we have lived in Watchet for 20 years there has been time to find out more!

Later, Organ's Ironmongery traded from the building, and although the lock-up was used for a time to house the local fire-fighting equipment, long before that drunken sailors and other miscreants could be imprisoned there.

The Market House is a listed building dating from 1820 and is built on the site of an earlier Market House. The chapel on the upper floor was named Holy Cross Chapel in honour of a chantry chapel of the same name which had stood by the harbour until it was suppressed in 1547. That building has long since gone.

The Market House Museum Society was formed in 1979 by local Watchet people, and a display of local interest has been built up over the years: much of Watchet's

history and pre-history can be accessed there in its extensive collections of photographs and artefacts.

What history is there of the Court Leet and its lock-up?

Not long after Domesday Book was compiled the local government of towns like Watchet became the responsibility of a “Borough Court”, known otherwise as a Court Moot (later as Court Leet). Records of their proceedings survive from 1273. Watchet's records are stored at Orchard Wyndham. In 1302 Watchet's Court Leet sent 2 representatives to Parliament and Courts Leet in general survived for formal purposes until 1977 when their legal jurisdiction was abolished. Only one Court Leet in the country, in Laxton, Nottinghamshire, keeps its power to administer and settle disputes over the local farmers' open strip field system. However, five years ago it was recorded that 42 Courts Leet were still in existence for formal purposes only.

The original requirements of a Court Leet were to meet twice a year to appoint officials, known as reeves. Their duties may be guessed from their job titles: Bailiff who manages proceedings: currently this position is held at Watchet by Nigel Swinburne, to whom I am most grateful for his help with information about present-day proceedings. Other job titles include Bellman aka Town Crier, Constable, Ale Taster, Bread Weigher, Scavenger, Stock Driver, Portreeve, (collector of fines and dues, aka Treasurer), and Pig Driver. These





Watchet Court Leet lock-up

exercised power over fishing rights, weights and measures, petty crime and the state of the roads and bridges. Nuisances such as emptying chamber pots in the street, sifting ashes or creating a dung heap were also dealt with.

In Watchet The Court Leet used to meet every three weeks to hear cases of debt and trespass brought by Watchet people against each other. This was reduced by 1659 to twice a year, and now the tradition of meeting continues in an annual ceremonial formal lunch held at The Bell Inn on the last Thursday in October. All members of the Court are summoned to the Court Leet "at 12 o'clock in the forenoon and fail at your peril". Any jurors failing to attend without a valid reason could be fined a theoretical 7s and 6d, and in the past could be dragged in handcuffs to prison. The very hand cuffs can still be seen in the Museum.

The need for Constables ceased when policing began, and nowadays concerns such as derelict fences and neglected public areas may be brought to the Court Leet for action by the Town Council. The Summonses to the annual Court Leet are delivered by hand to each juror's home 2 weeks before the appointed date and the Bellman (currently David Milton) would also cry the summons outside many of their homes.

At the Court Leet the minutes of the previous year's proceedings are read and the jurors are sworn in before the various tasks for the next year are allocated. It is

interesting to note that all jurors, with only ever one exception, are required to have been born in Watchet and they are held in high esteem in the town. Following these business items a summary of the past year in Watchet is usually given, and after this the customary Goose Dinner is served. This is followed by the Loyal Toast, using the secret Punch recipe, whose ingredients are only ever known to the Bailiff and the landlord of The Bell Inn.

After dinner a guest speaker is invited to give a talk to the invited company, and usually a report is published in the local newspaper.

What do we know of the crimes committed by lock-up prisoners in the past? How were they dealt with by the Court? In 1629 it is recorded that an individual was accused by a neighbour of "persistently hearkening at the door" and the case was brought before the court. The complaint was upheld and the wrongdoer put in the lock-up. Nagging wives and witches received a ducking in the harbour, and there is a photograph in the Museum of a ducking stool in action during a re-enactment staged in the harbour some years ago. As a notice on the west outside wall of the Museum says, the Court Leet still exists, and so does its lock-up.

Valerie Ward

A House in Swine Street - Speaker Review



A House in Swine Street - A talk by Paul Upton - Speaker Review

Our case officer Paul Upton spoke to a crowded hall about '**A House in Swine Street**'. He was of course referring to his redevelopment of 41 Swain Street which started in 2011 and opened as Gallery 41 in 2012.

Paul started with an interesting 'picture' of medieval Watchet (when the first stone building was constructed) with cobblestone road, rutted and ankle deep in animal waste from the horses, cows, pigs and as was reported by the Court Leet 'the contents of chamber pots'. This was however par for the course in any English town and did not detract from the town's substantial economy based on its harbour. It is possible that the name was Swine Street because of the pigs, and with our local broad vowel dialect became written as Swain - who knows, however it is a nice story.

From the 1920s Jackie Binding's grannie lived in the house whose grounds stretched up to what is now Harbour road and it seems for some of that time she worked as a carrier for the Great Western Railway working from a small lockable wooden office that Paul uncovered in his restoration.

We didn't hear if 'grannie' worked the two shire horses herself or if she had staff but it conjures up a lovely picture.

And this was the joy of Paul's talk in that he created these wonderful pictures for us to imagine, including the place where the fish and chips were made, when Nick Cotton's family owned the house. A mixture of old maps and modern photos, medieval conjecture and modern anecdotes. It sure beats watching television! Thank you Paul for a wonderful talk.

Alan Jones





The Council Chambers



The Council Chambers

Historically one of the most significant buildings in Watchet will shortly cease its connection with over a century of decision-making by the town's elected representatives. The Council Chambers, a distinctive building and known to generations, has existed in its current form since 1907. Important enough to be Grade II listed, it was pivotal in safeguarding the town's future at one of the most difficult times in Watchet's long history. Following the destruction of the harbour in the great gale of 1901, things looked bleak with the sea-walls breached and ships destroyed; it could well have been the end of this little port. Watchet people had proved to be redoubtable in the past and with grit and determination they set about what must have seemed a hopeless task.

Finance was needed to rebuild the harbour and Watchet, then part of the Parish of St.

Decumans, from necessity decided to form an Urban District Council to enable the local people to secure the funds necessary to rebuild. The then Parish Council had met at the Kings Hall, now the home of the Watchet Sea Scouts and following urgent meetings, they moved to the Central Hotel, referred to as the Temperance Hotel, in Swain Street. The proprietor, a Mr. Oxenham, gave access to the members of the newly formed council in the 'coffee room' for their meetings and rented them a room upstairs as an office. It was clear that with their new importance the council members would require more permanent and suitable premises and ultimately they acquired the present building on behalf of the residents of Watchet.

The minutes survive from the first meeting which was chaired by James Stoate with many familiar Watchet names in attendance.

The Council Chambers

Interestingly on the agenda of refurbishment was the decision to commission a mantelpiece. This remains to this day, carved to a high quality, of American walnut, it has the Watchet coat of arms in the original paint in the carved cartouche, a lasting testimony to the men who saved Watchet from a disastrous fate. It seems fitting that a photographic montage flanks this impressive fireplace depicting those who made it possible for Watchet to regain its harbour and its long seafaring traditions.

A rare surviving Synchronome clock has recorded time in the chamber for at least sixty years and serves as a master to the slave clock that was installed above Court House to celebrate the Queen's Coronation in 1953, in itself an iconic landmark. This is a very special building not just as it is in such a visible part of the town but perhaps more importantly because of its historical significance. It must be hoped that its new use will reflect this and the people of Watchet can feel justifiably proud of their building as it enters a new and exciting period of its history.

Nick Cotton





The Ice House at Orchard Wyndham



(Typical Ice House)

The Ice House at Orchard Wyndham

I have long had an interest in ice houses and have visited many throughout the UK. My interest began when a WEA group of which I was part was researching the garden of the Commissioner's House in Chatham Dockyard.

Before refrigeration became generally available the preservation of food in time of plenty to provide for times when it would be in short supply could be tackled in a number of ways. It could be dried, pickled, salted, smoked or potted. The first recorded ice house in London was built in Greenwich in 1619 and was like a brick built well with a thatched timber structure over the top. Purpose built ice houses did not come into general use until the 17th century and were mainly used to provide cold desserts to be enjoyed in hot weather. Often they were sheltered by a belt of trees and the top covered with ivy or shrubs to protect against

the sun's heat. Good drainage was essential so they were often built on a slope as any moisture would encourage the ice to melt. A drain of some sort was needed at the bottom of the chamber and a grid, or sometimes a cart wheel, provided a base for the ice and allowed any water to drain away, either into a purpose built drain or into the ground if it was in a chalky area.

At Orchard Wyndham, near Williton, the ice house was built by Sir William Wyndham in the mid-to- late 18th century when changes were being made to the gardens. Here it is a tall stone tower, entirely above ground, built against the face of a cliff. It has several false window openings with dressed stone headings to make it an attractive element in the garden landscape as well as being a useful addition to the running of the household. A new drive was constructed along the top of the cliff so that carts full of ice collected from a local source could unload the ice into the top of the tower to drop through a charging hole into the brick lined chamber below. A door on one side at lower ground level, sheltered from the sun by trees, allowed access to the chamber via a tunnel which could be packed with straw to provide extra insulation. A window alongside could be opened to provide dry air to keep away moisture.

Barbara Marchant

Watchet Conservation Matters is published six times a year. If you would like to contribute news or an article, please contact our secretary Jan Simpson-Scott on: jan@topcreative.co.uk

Members of the Watchet Conservation Society receive this newsletter bi-monthly either via email for free or a printed copy for £1.00 per copy. If you are not a member and have enjoyed reading this publication, please consider joining us and help us to conserve our physical and natural environment. Membership is just £6.00 per year. All of our committee members would be delighted to welcome you.

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Sheila Mannes-Abbott 1939-2014

“She loved and painted flowers”

Forget-Me-Nots

In Sheila's April Border three flowers dominate: the violet, pansy and auricula, a species of primula; hiding behind, delicately in sight, is the pale, dainty star-shaped Forget-Me-Not.

This fragile little flower has immense symbolism. In Medieval times blue became synonymous with fidelity, blue love; and in the 15th century German love poets wrote of the Forget-Me-Not as a token of its steadfastness. In parts of Canada it is still used as a symbol of remembrance of the nation's war dead as we use the poppy, and

in Newfoundland is worn on July 1st for this purpose. Freemasons use the Forget-Me-Not to urge their members not to forget the poor and the desperate. It is the State Flower of Alaska.

On May 21st this year Watchet Dementia Action Alliance (WDAA) will celebrate its first anniversary at The Forget-Me-Not Cafe in The Sanctuary. WDAA works to support those who can no longer remember, who are living with Dementia. This simple but beautiful flower is longreaching in its symbolism.

Forget-Me-Not. Always remembering Sheila...

Jan Simpson-Scott