



Watchet Conservation Matters

**Promoting, Conserving & Improving
Our Physical & Natural Environment**

Issue 51 March/April 2017

From the Chairman

Easentown



Dear Friends and Members

It was with much regret that the committee accepted Molly Quint's resignation as Chairman after many years of hard work during which time our Society has grown and flourished. As a result your committee has decided to run for a year without appointing a formal chairman but having each monthly meeting chaired by a different committee member on a rota. And this is how I, by chairing our March meeting, am writing today in the capacity of WCS Chairman.

Those of you who were lucky enough to purchase our 2017 WCS calendar (and those that weren't so lucky) will be looking forward to our March meeting on the 21st at 7.30pm in the Methodist Church schoolroom when our topic is 'Otters in NW Scotland'. Definitely an evening not to be missed!

Your committee remains active with involvement in many exciting projects including participation in the Wansbrough Paper Mill Archiving initiative, the Mineral Line Flora and Fauna project, Recording and possible Reconstruction of a Medieval Fish Weir at West Beach, the 'Book of Watchet' by A.L. Wedlake revision and reprint project and the proposed Turner interpretation Board at Splash Point.

On social media Nick Cotton's 'mystery objects' are proving to be popular and I understand that he is unlikely to be running out of these for quite some time.

At our March committee meeting we again discussed the fate of the old Council Chamber Building and what now seems to be the inevitability of this iconic place being lost to our community. As individuals and as WCS members we have tried, over many months, to explain the history and future potential value of the building to Watchet residents but the Town Council insisted on selling it on the open market. A sad day for our town.

Of course we are very happy to welcome new members to our society and indeed new members on our committee so please 'spread the word' so we can continue to grow and ensure we achieve our core objectives of 'Promoting, Conserving & Improving Our Physical & Natural Environment.'

Best Regards,

Mervyn Brown

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Mervyn Brown". The signature is fluid and cursive, written on a light-colored background.



Easentown: The Lost Village of Watchet & the Severn Tsunami



Easentown: The Lost Village of Watchet and the Severn Tsunami

Walking on a still night from the Pleasure Grounds to Doniford beach when the sea mist descends and nothing other than vague outlines confront us, the gulls are mute and an eerie silence pervades. In the distance, seawards, the sound of a single bell echoes across the water forcing an involuntary shudder. This is not my experience but has been recounted several times by others. Is there an explanation? Can we get to the bottom of this spectral experience? I think we can.

James Date is the most important figure in Watchet from the nineteenth century. A pioneer photographer, he did much to record the numerous changes that Watchet underwent as it became the industrial hub of West Somerset. His first photographs appear in the late 1850s, an opportune time as the West Somerset Mineral Railway was fully operational and plans to bring

the Great Western Railway to Watchet were already in place, the line reaching completion in 1862.

We are all familiar with his photography but he also turned his hand to writing and producing a small booklet entitled 'A Handbook of Watchet and its Neighbourhood' which was published in 1867 in collaboration with the geologist D Mackintosh. It is a charming insight into the very specific Victorian style of writing.

For the purposes of this article I quote a specific passage: "A fisherman informed the present writer that there are remains of a forest nearly a mile off the coast at Watchet. The intervening bottom of the sea generally consists of bare rock. If so the waves must have removed an immense mass of rock between the submerged ground on which the forest grew and the present line of the cliff, since the land last went down. The father of the same fisherman informed me that not more than 150 years ago a brewery belonging to one Mr. Davies stood a distance of at least 200 yards off the cliffs to the east of Watchet Harbour. Rocks are now to be seen in its place. About E.N.E. of these cliffs there was once a village called Easentown."

James Date was aware of the remains of a submerged forest both at Porlock and nearby Blue Anchor and would have found the fisherman's observations perfectly feasible. He may well not have been aware that at one time much of the Severn Sea was densely forested or that it was possible to walk to Wales passing the high point

Easentown: The Lost Village of Watchet & the Severn Tsunami



of Steepholme on the way. It might be interesting to note that these remnants of the forest were known as 'Noah's trees' an obvious biblical reference before there was a proper understanding of the earth's geological development.

There are other references to our vanished village but all rather scant with flowery language... "lost!", "all gone to sea!"

The Severn Tsunami of January 30th 1607 documented with visible reminders of engraved brass plaques on church walls commemorating the event. The term tsunami is much disputed by those who know about such things but what is certain is that an incredible surge of water brought great devastation all along our coast and Wales, affecting every town and village and inland as far as Glastonbury.

There are a number of contemporary accounts recording this horrifying event and a vivid description of the time

records "... that no gray-hounde could have escaped by running before them." It is hard to imagine the sheer terror that this catastrophe wrought on the unfortunate victims of this disaster. It is suggested that as many as 2000 lost their lives, with livestock taken and washed away. There would have been much hardship endured by the survivors, many of whom would have lost their living and even their houses.

The effect on Watchet is hard to imagine but is it possible that the tsunami swept the village of Easentown away? Our coastline is very fragile and subject to constant erosion and an event such as this would cause unimaginable devastation even today.

My theory does present a problem. To return to James Date's fisherman who says that a brewery existed '150 years ago'; this would give a date of 1700 suggesting that it was still extant at that date, although I can find no evidence to confirm this. It seems that there is sufficient inference to suppose that the village of Easentown did in reality exist, although its fate must for the moment be left to conjecture.

As for the tolling of the bell, well, for those lucky enough to hear it, reaching out over the centuries on a misty, still and soundless night, might it be the chapel bell from our lost village?

Nick Cotton



Wansbrough Mill Archive Project



Wansbrough Mill Archive Project

The Wansbrough Mill closure in 2015 was devastating for many families in Watchet. There has been paper making here since the mid-17th century; a community grew around this business and others as new employment came along in the town. Such a longstanding influence on Watchet leaves behind a remarkable legacy. The Archive Project is part of recording and preserving that unique history for future researchers.

As communities in former times have worked together, the current archiving work at Wansbrough mill is being undertaken by a wide range of local people, alongside experts who are advising on procedures and priorities. Amongst the volunteers are past employees, members of WCS and other organisations all co-operating and supporting each other in a shared effort to preserve important and unique records from the Wansbrough Mill. It reflects the strong community desire to retain the legacy of this important industry for future reference.

There was an enormous volume of material in the form of paperwork left when DSS left the buildings. There were so many documents, files, plans, meeting minutes etcetera, etcetera... It truly seemed to be an insurmountable task. However the volunteers have stepped up to the mark!

Esther Hoyle is the County Archivist and she and a colleague have been instrumental in getting us started. She led an initial training session and with the help of Chris Northam, Wansbrough Mill site manager, and Kalina Newman, Contains Art worker, we volunteers have sifted through a huge amount and with practise have learned how to be both thoughtful and ruthless according to the worth of each item. It has been a very steep learning curve for me personally, though others have experience and have been effective more quickly than I have!

If you have a connection with Wansbrough and are willing to share photos, documents from your own or relatives' time there you may be interested in a second archive which we are collecting to go alongside this one at the Somerset Heritage Centre in Taunton. The dates for collecting these very important items or copies of them have been set: 18th March at the Phoenix Centre, 11am - 4pm and 28th March at the Wansbrough Mill, also 11am - 4pm. This collection will be called the Community archive. Please come along if you can.

Ann Hill

***WCS Treasurer and WCS Representative on
The Wansbrough Mill Archive Steering Group***

Open Meeting - Talk on Conservation on Mount Athos



Open Meeting - Talk on Conservation on Mount Athos

On a cold January evening 24 people braved the elements to hear an interesting talk by our membership secretary Andrew Harrison, who kindly stepped in at the last minute when our scheduled speaker was unable to come.

Seeing photos of the Aegean Sea soon took our minds away from January Watchet. Mount Athos, or properly known as 'The Autonomous Monastic State of the Holy Mountain' is part of the Haldiki peninsular sticking out some 60 km into the northern Aegean Sea. Designated a world heritage site, it is home to 20 monasteries of the Eastern Orthodox church, most of which lie along its dramatic coastline. Mount Athos lies at the tip of the peninsular and rises some 2000m above the sea. The summit is crowned as one might expect with a cross. The first monastery was founded in the year 963 by St Athanasios but there is evidence of monks retiring to this region as early as the 4th century. Throughout the centuries Mount Athos has been attacked by pirates which is why so many of the monasteries look like fortresses. In the 15th

century the monastic state was dominated by the Ottoman Turks. Its fortune didn't rise again until the 19th century when under the patronage of the Russian government the monastic population grew to a high point of 7000. In 1912 the Ottoman Turks were finally driven out by the Greek navy and following the First World War the peninsular came under Greek rule.

The method of getting between monasteries was by rugged paths which over the centuries have become overgrown and difficult to negotiate and Friends of Mount Athos was formed with volunteers spending time repairing and restoring them. It was with this organisation that Andrew found himself on the rocky paths of Mount Athos in 2001 armed with picks shovels and loppers. Prince Charles is the royal patron of FoMA and he has paid many visits enjoying the peace and seclusion.

Andrew explained that getting a visa to travel to Mount Athos was even more difficult than walking the damaged pathways. There were very strict rules that prohibit women, 'beardless boys' and 'eunuchs'! He also needed a form signed by his parish priest! I'm so glad he made it for it was a wonderful talk about a wonderful place.

Alan Jones



The Goal - Something different, fiction from fact

It's strange the way things turn out.

You may long for something, plan for it for years, and yet, when you finally reach the goal you may find that you don't really want it after all: or you may find there are other goals beyond. Or you may reach your goal, only to find it wrapped in bitter regret.

It was like that for me. Don't ask my name: over the years it's one of many things about me best forgotten. My goal wasn't that unusual... Just a roof over my head. Honestly that's all I wanted at the beginning.

I was born far away from here - don't ask me when - and life was good to me at first. Schooling? You had to be rich to get any

of that, and being the youngest of of six boys meant every penny a man got went on food and rent, not on learning. our Mam came from the next county and knew how to make lace. I remember her sitting in the doorway in summer with the bobbins weaving to and fro across the pillow. Come winter nights she'd sit on the settle by the fire, candle and globe set close by, making lace far into the evening. Years after, I think how she never got to wear any of it herself, and if one of us boys had been a daughter, how she might have longed to dress up in it.

But Mam's work was sent away week after week for other ladies to wear, and all she had to show for it was new boots for her lads, or breeches. Don't mistake what I'm saying: Mam was never discontented, never complained and she and Pa were happy enough for the short hours Pa was at home.

Pa had been a miner the other side of the Bristol Channel from here, and long hours he worked, and hard. Many nights he came late home, after dark. We boys would have our dinner and Mam would put the best plateful aside for Pa when he came back, dirt-black and weary.

I wanted to be a miner too, testing my strength with pick and shovel, but by the time I was ten Pa's chest was bad and his mining days were over. like other families from the Welsh valleys, Mam and pa tried there luck across the water on the farms.

Those were great times, at Longacre farm, with labouring jobs for my brothers and sometimes work for Mam when she'd finished her tally of lace. The best part of farm work, said Mam, was the cottage that went with the job, as well as the good food we had. That was the best time of my life, and the last good time. I suppose I was about eleven, and growing up fast, when an end came to our good times. The first change was when Mam got sick.

You don't notice the little changes at first do you? Especially when you're with our Mam all day, every day. mam had always worked hard, never grumbled, and as the other lads were out on the farm all hours, she'd put their platefuls of dinner by the range and not eat any of it herself. I never realised how little she was eating until the day she couldn't get out of bed for weariness. Noon came and the man came to pay her for her bundle of lace. "Don't come for a while," Mam said, "I'm that tired and my eyes aren't so good for the lace-making."

Cold fingers of fear touched my neck and shoulders, but like a child all I said was "Mam, how long are you going to be in bed?", while I grumbled to myself that things ought to stay the samosa they had been. Why do things have to change? The week after Mam took to her bed, Pa and the lads came home with bad news, "They're selling up the farm and they'll not need us anymore. Where can we go?"

Calm, even when she was ill Mam said, "Go to the hiring fair. Surely they'll be needing hired hands come harvest-time." That was what they did, Pa and my brothers, proud though they were, and out of our home we all had to go. I helped Mam with getting our pots and pans and bits of furniture together, and we found shelter in a barn after pa and my brothers went away. It was then I promised myself that if I ever could, I'd get us a roof over our heads, when I was big enough to do a man's work. That was my goal. I didn't think as far as a wife and children of my own. Just a roof, that was my goal.

As you can see I got it in the end. But as I said I didn't really find it was what I wanted after all.

Id heard from folk in the village that the way to get rich, or at least earn a crust, was to join the fishing boats and pull a silver fortune out of the sea. I didn't tell Mam where I was going and Mam was too weary to stop me. Two years I spent away. It must have been two years for I recall two Christmases with moon and stars for my roof and the stinking fish-hold to sleep in.



The Goal - Something different, fiction from fact

One kind man I remember from that time was Caleb Norton, the shipowner. He was good to me. He saw fair play with the older men and showed me how to fight for myself and how to keep my few belongings safe. Did I save my pay from the share-out when we came ashore? Not the first time, though I came to remember those that did save theirs. I also came to know where they kept their money hidden. I may have had no book-learning but I was no half-wit like some of them, leaving their coins in a bit of sacking for anyone to find.

My hiding-place was where not even Caleb Norton could have thought of. I got a knife and cut a small hole in one of the decking planks. There was my money-store and little of it did I spend. Whatever I had from the share-out went in there, saving as I was towards the day I could leave the sea forever, rent a cottage of my own and farm the land for myself.

It was in the second autumn I started adding to my hoard extra coins whenever I could. Another winter, another spring.... then I would have enough to reach my goal. Come Christmas, when the rest of the crew got blind drunk to celebrate, I was sharp enough to collect up leftovers and hide them. Money, that's what I'm talking about. I was safe enough with only Caleb Norton and me having our eyes open and that night I doubled my store of money. Come Spring, I'd pack up fishing for a living along with my bag of coins, go ashore and rent that cottage close to the barn I'd last slept in two years ago. Good times would be back again.

I didn't get the cottage as you can see. But when we came ashore after Christmas I did get a roof over my head. "Stealing your mates' money! Shame on you!" were the last words I heard from Caleb Norton, and the clang of the lock-up door still grinds through my head.

It's dark in here and cold. I've some bread and water, and a slop bucket in the corner, but nothing else to show for my years at sea. People come and look at me through the grille sometimes, but never a kind word from any of them. I'd rather have the moon and the stars for my roof than this.

Strange, the way things turn out.

Valerie Ward

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.d.scott@icloud.com

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.

Photography of Mineral Line flora and fauna by Dave Simpson-Scott.

Photography of Easontown & Court Leet Lock-up by Bob Cramp.

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A walk along the Mineral Line on 8th February 2017

It is a very cold but sunny morning, and the path underfoot is wet and muddy following several days of heavy rain. A young blackbird is splashing around in one of the puddles.

Trees have been felled by the side of the railway line and the hedgerows on either side of the Mineral Line have been cut back letting in more light. There is now no sign of the bright red seeds and berries of a few weeks ago, although ivy berries are still providing food for birds.

Two long-tailed tits are displaying to one another one swinging upside down on a delicate twig. The sun is shining through the yellow catkins of the willows and there is a glimpse of a blue-tit camouflaged amongst the branches.

By the side of the hedges are clumps of wild chives and new growth is pushing up through the ground in a myriad of shapes and hues of green.

*“Young leaves clothe early hedgerow trees;
Seeds and roots and stones of fruits,
Swollen with sap put forth their shoots;
Curled-headed ferns sprout in the lane;
Birds sing and pair again.”*

Spring by Christina Rossetti

Rosalind Pick



Catkins



Goldfinch



Juvenile Blackbird



Snowdrops