



# Watchet Conservation Matters

Promoting, Conserving & Improving  
Our Physical & Natural Environment

Issue 54 September/October 2017

*Illustration from Gustave Dore's Edition  
of The Ancient Mariner (1877)*

## From the Chairman



Despite the holiday season the committee has been very busy driving on with our many projects. Soon you should see The Turner Interpretation Board installed at Splash Point. Our work archiving Wansbrough Paper Mill records came to fruition within Contains Art's launch of Watchet Paper Mill Heritage Exhibition and hopefully you all took the opportunity to celebrate the influence of the paper mill in Watchet. Walking down Anchor Street into Mill Street you will see the development preserving the site of Stoates Mill. We are working on an Interpretation Board to explain and preserve Stoates Mill's Gilbert Gilkes Turbine. Bob Cramp's photographic archive of the paper mill has been massively popular on Facebook with numerous "likes" and requests for copies which it is hoped can be fulfilled. Thanks go to Bob for his unstinting work on this.

Our projects are progressing well. We've decided the best way of managing an increasing but fascinating workload is by small sub-committees overseeing these projects, then reporting to the monthly full committee meetings. We feel we are in a very happy place with such a determined and mutually supportive team giving up so much of their time.

As you know we have been without a chairman since Molly Quint's official retirement at last year's AGM. I am very pleased to tell you that we shall have a full committee and Chairman standing for election at our AGM on Tuesday 21st November at The Phoenix Centre at 7.30pm. Please support us if you can. We have also formalised Valerie Ward's stalwart role within the society and she is now our Press Officer. She is also an invaluable help to me as proofreader for our newsletter. Watchet Community Choir will be singing for us after the business part of the meeting which has been stream-lined after one or two complaints that it is too long. The Officers and committee will be voted en bloc; voting will be by a show of hands removing the need for voting papers.

Very many thanks to Hilda Cornish for her contribution to this edition giving us a delightful glimpse into her garden. Always happy to welcome new contributors.

**Jan Simpson-Scott**



## Watchet and The Ancient Mariner



### Watchet and The Ancient Mariner

Visitors and residents alike will not have escaped one of Watchet's main claims to fame – its association with Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous, yet mysterious, poem "The Ancient Mariner". First published in 1798, the poem is thought to have been conceived during a coastal walk which Coleridge and Wordsworth took in November 1797, and it is widely believed that Watchet, where they stayed overnight on November 13th, is referenced in the poem, as follows:

*"The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared,  
Merrily did we drop  
Below the kirk, below the hill,  
Below the lighthouse top."*

But was Watchet's contribution more than just geographical? Did Watchet's nautical connections help to inspire The Ancient Mariner since, as Ben Norman records in his "Tales of Watchet Harbour", Coleridge is widely believed to have talked to some old sailors during his visit?

Watchet was not a large port in the 1790s and, at the time of the poets' visit, its ships were involved in coastal trade only – plying mainly between the smaller Bristol Channel ports of Somerset, Devon and South Wales. But the Channel itself, which would have stretched out before them as they made their way down from the Quantocks that evening, was hosting a golden age of shipping, with both merchant and naval vessels sailing from Bristol's flourishing maritime centre.

## Watchet and The Ancient Mariner

Bristol had spent the early to mid-1700s as the premier port involved in the slave trade, with a number of its ships undertaking the notorious "triangular route", trading goods such as glass beads and guns, for slaves in western Africa, who were then sold or traded for sugar, rum and spices in the West Indies and America, prior to the ship's return home. There was even an attempt to start a Greenland whaling fleet there, in the latter part of the 18th century. St Mary Redcliffe church, where Coleridge got married in 1795, overlooked Bristol's harbour, which would have thronged with nautical activity at that time. And while there was no actual slave market in Bristol, former slaves captured while fighting for France in the West Indies were taken to Stapleton prison in the city in December 1796, following the wreck of the transport ship *The London* at Ilfracombe in October that year.

Watchet sailors would, in all likelihood, have been amongst those aboard these deep-sea ships, as there was a high demand for both skilled and unskilled crew, with seamen tending to follow the money. Watchet's itinerant sailors include the well-known Yankee Jack, a Watchet shanty-man who ran the blockade during the American Civil War in the 1860s, after the British slave trade had ended.

Minehead, just along the coast, provided both a slave ship owner, Isaac Hobhouse, who operated out of Bristol in the mid-1700s, and two members of the notorious Welsh pirate Bartholomew Roberts' crew (William Magnes and Thomas Giles), who were both hanged at Cape Coast Castle in 1722.



*Bristol Harbour Looking Towards St Mary Redcliffe (Nicholas Pocock, 1784)*



*Slave Ship JMW Turner 1840*



*Cooke's engraving of Ilfracombe, based on a sketch by JMW Turner (published in 1818)*



## Watchet and The Ancient Mariner

As well as providing sailors to the deep-sea fleet, Watchet was probably a destination in its own right during the mid- to late 1700s, for at least some of the ships' crews. With the ongoing conflict against France (which included, in February 1797, an attempt to invade Ilfracombe), "impressment" by the Royal Navy was a particular hazard for sailors returning to Bristol, and crews are known to have jumped ship further down the Channel, to avoid falling victim to the press gang. Indeed, naval ships were reportedly stationed at Lundy, at the Channel's western end, to prevent just this.

Watchet was also a useful place to smuggle goods ashore, as described in a previous issue of this newsletter (Number 49 – November/December 2016). The contraband (brandy, tobacco, linen etc) would have been received, via coaster or tender, and either distributed quickly or squirrelled away in various hide-outs.

One such hide-out, discovered in the 1990s in Watchet, was found to contain various artefacts from the late 1700s, including brandy bottles, Bristol-made pottery, clay pipes and an anti-scurvy pill bottle (John Norton's Maredants Drops).

So while a Watchet ship could not have embarked upon the sort of voyage endured by the Ancient Mariner, there is every likelihood that individual sailors living in, or passing through the town, had direct experience of some of the things that Coleridge describes in his poem. The extremes of weather, unfamiliar sea life



*Captain Bartholomew Roberts*



*In the Bristol Channel (Nicholas Pocock, 1787)*



*Late 18th century bottles from a recently discovered smugglers' hide-out near Watchet harbour*

## Watchet and The Ancient Mariner

(sea snakes, phytoplankton and, of course, the albatross), whirlpools, icebergs, the Doldrums, nautical folklore (particularly the legends of the spectral ship, the "Flying Dutchman" and, more locally, Mother Leakey) and, perhaps, the effects of yellow fever, could all have been discussed that November night.

And could Coleridge have heard first-hand about the hellishness, and resulting guilt, of being a crew-member aboard a slave ship, which some commentators believe The Ancient Mariner implicitly refers to? A contemporaneous poem by his brother-in-law, and former great friend, Robert Southey, entitled "The Sailor, Who had Served in the Slave Trade", has similarities to the Ancient Mariner, and is explicit in linking the protagonist's guilt with an incident aboard a slave ship – the flogging to death of a female slave, on the orders of the captain. Was the Mariner's shooting of the albatross his equivalent deed, which he is condemned to describe, forever more, to anyone he can make listen?

Coleridge had strong anti-slavery views in his early life, winning a student prize at Cambridge in 1792 for his poem "Ode on the Slave Trade" and speaking out against it, through the 1790s, in lectures, sermons (he was a Unitarian preacher) and in his short-lived periodical "The Watchman". He was sympathetic to ordinary sea-farers involved in the slave trade, as well as enslaved Africans, realising that they too suffered in a job they may well have been forced into. It is perhaps no coincidence that he left Bristol and ended up near

Bridgwater, which was the first borough in England to raise a petition against slavery. It is also, however, somewhat ironic that he first met Wordsworth through John Pinney, whose family, in common with others in Bristol and the West Country, had grown rich from plantation ownership. While the deeper meaning of the Ancient Mariner remains a source of rich debate, it's not inconceivable that, during that November evening, huddled in one of Watchet's inns, Coleridge and Wordsworth heard first-hand about the human cost of England's ever-expanding maritime reach. Accounts of the experiences of deep-sea sailing, including the slave trade, could have been provided, with assembled sailors able to speak freely, to sympathetic ears. And perhaps in this way, Watchet's maritime connections helped put flesh on the bones of Coleridge's greatest literary masterpiece, and inspire some of its famously tortuous themes.

**Mike Quint**







## In a Watchet Garden

### In a Watchet Garden

The excitement of seeing one's first butterfly in the spring even if it is only a faded small Tortoiseshell. Later on, the Holly Blue around the holly bush or where the ivy grows in the hedge. Not forgetting the Speckled Wood Butterfly. The Orange tip butterfly flying around the garlic mustard, also known as Jack by the Hedge.



*Holly Blue Butterfly*

Now, the end of July, twelve species of butterfly have been recorded in the garden. Watching a female Common Blue on the Bird's-foot-trefoil, then immediately onto white clover.

Recently on a sunny day four Gatekeepers interacting with one another. They will see off a Peacock Butterfly if they have a mind to!



*Speckled wood butterfly*

Field grasses, drifts of marjoram, field scabious, knapweed, dwarf scabious, all popular plants with butterflies.

In the garden the marjoram and field grasses are where butterflies can tuck deep down when the weather is cold and wet; or in the honeysuckle, hebes, sedums...

Or as someone said to me years ago, gardens are important "Nectar Pubs" for butterflies!



*White clover*

**Hilda Cornish**

## In a Watchet Garden



*Garlic mustard*



*Honeysuckle*



*Marjoram*



## Open Meeting - Birds of the Somerset coast by Brian Gibbs



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Once again we had a last minute speaker when Dr Tony Sarjeant was indisposed and we were fortunate to have Brian Gibbs talk to us about the birds of the Somerset coast.

Brian is co-author of 'Birds of Exmoor and The Quantocks'; he is also the county recorder for rare birds. An expert indeed.

For his talk to the Conservation Society he confined his brief to the Somerset coast from Glenthorne, on the borders with Devon, to Burnham. Brian surprised most of the 37 members and visitors present when he said that the Fulmar (a member of the albatross family) was the only breeding sea bird to be found on our coast.

He explained that to qualify a bird had to actually breed on the cliffs or foreshore and that in quieter days terns and plovers had nested on the stony beaches along our coast but sadly no longer. Of course a lot of sea birds and waders nest in the

estuary of the Parrett, particularly now that the Steart reserves are well managed; not to mention the hundreds of herring gulls nesting on the closed paper mill building... Brian explained how the little egret first came to the area in 1990 and has successfully spread throughout the county. I remember seeing one land on the West Quay and the herring gulls making it quite clear he wasn't welcome (I doubt it wanted to share their fish and chips)!

Brian had some amazing photographs of birds filmed along our coast including some very rare birds. His knowledge made the whole talk of interest to everyone present and to the bird lovers an absolute feast.

We have been so fortunate in our last minute speakers. We keep our fingers crossed that nothing befalls Paul Upton or Jenny Hill when they talk about 'Memories of Old Watchet' at our September meeting, which will be held on Tuesday 5th, not our usual date.

**Alan Jones**

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](mailto: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.*

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**The Mineral Line on Monday 28th August.  
Bank Holiday Monday**

Well as the first picture shows there is now just a hint of Autumn, even on the open fields around the Mineral Line, and as you look closer the changing season is becoming ever more apparent, with many of the fruits starting to decorate the plants. Bountiful berries to be seen and what a feast that will soon represent. There is as yet of course still food a-plenty for the wildlife, but as I'm sure they're aware, harder times are coming.

Blackberries too are now ripening quickly, and there's many a human to be seen doing some picking. (I can smell the pies cooking!) The well-known wild clematis too is "doing its Autumn thing" and turning into "Old Man's Beard", whilst also setting off the picture of blackberries rather nicely. Rosehips too, all showing the same signs that leaves will be on the ground before long.

Finally two pictures showing, firstly, something that probably shouldn't be along the Mineral Line – but it is, and if it could speak, would perhaps have a story to tell! A bunch of cyclamen, now in full bloom, well spread in a small area, so almost certainly been there for a long time and flourishing. Wonder if it was a discarded plant, perhaps even thrown from a train window many, many years ago. I doubt we will ever know. Also, what a beautiful gatekeeper butterfly that came out into the sunshine to show itself off.

Intriguing place the Mineral Line. Enjoy.

**Dave Simpson-Scott**



*Blackberries and Old Man's Beard*



*Rosehips*



*Cyclamen*



*Gatekeeper butterfly*