



Watchet Conservation Matters

Promoting, Conserving & Improving
Our Physical & Natural Environment

Issue 60 September/October 2018



From the Chairman



Dear Members

Whilst writing this little gold nugget, I seriously wonder how many of you actually take the trouble to read it. I hope you do, because for me it takes an inordinate amount of time to produce, it gives my grey cells a thorough work out. None of this comes easy to me.

I have just re-read my last chairman's message. I was at pains to detail all the many good things the WCS does for Watchet but also accompanying with a Health warning that we badly need some more help to enable us to continue. Tony James wrote a very supportive piece in the WSFP and we have been running a campaign on Facebook.

Sadly, I have to report that we have not even received one expression of interest, let alone a positive response. This leaves us in a very difficult place. We cannot run the Society without a committee, and we cannot run a committee without officers. This is particularly disappointing because we have some exciting news and the next talk on the 25th September, "Memories of Watchet" with Jenny Hill, Paul Upton and Nick Cotton will be a very popular and enjoyable evening.

The book "A Year-Long look at wildlife and plants along the Mineral Line" by Dave Simpson Scott has been published. Sixty eight pages of information and wonderful photographs and only £5.00. This will be available of course at the open evening. Empty your money-boxes.

On Saturday 22nd we are (at last) unveiling the Interpretation board at Splash Point, paying homage to the fact that JMW Turner sketched Watchet harbour and in fact it is rumoured that the Great Man himself will be attending.

Looking forward, we are planning a gala evening for our AGM on the 20th November, looking back over my year as chairman. Mervyn Brown our talks organiser has nearly completed next year's line up, and we have a number of projects in the pipeline.

However, unless by some minor miracle and some of you have a change of heart and decide to come onto the committee, none of that will happen and the evening



From the Chairman

of the 25th September will be the very last WCS talk. Ever.

Watchet is an amazing place and enjoys lots of wonderful organisations and groups; it will be a lot poorer without a Conservation Society.

We are in the last chance saloon, but it is not too late. Contact myself or Molly Quint if you would like to help.

Let's Hope for an Indian Summer.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Bob Cramp'.

Bob Cramp

Countess Gytha, Watchet & the End of Anglo-Saxon England



Countess Gytha, Watchet and the End of Anglo-Saxon England

Watchet was an important place in Anglo-Saxon times. It was one of only 30 fortified settlements (or "burhs") in Wessex, it had its own mint, and it was home to an early Christian Minster church, all of which are thought to have been located at, or in the vicinity of, Daw's Castle.

Intriguingly, Watchet was also the setting for one of the most symbolic events marking the end of Anglo-Saxon England - the fleeing of Countess Gytha, the mother of King Harold and mother-in-law of Edward the Confessor, from the English mainland, following the Norman Conquest. Her journey, which occurred in 1068, after the Siege of Exeter, has been described as the original women's march (#NotMyConqueror).

Charles Kingsley, in his 1866 historical novel "Hereward the Wake", described it thus:

She told them how she had fled from the storm of Exeter, with a troop of women, who dreaded the brutalities of the Normans. How they had wandered up through Devon, found fishers' boats at Watchet in Somersetshire, and gone off to the little desert island of the Flat- Holm, in hopes of there meeting with the Irish fleet, which her sons, Edmund and Godwin, were bringing against the West of England.



Countess Gytha, as depicted in Stained Glass at St Nectan's Church, Hartland, North Devon

Gytha was an important and powerful figure in eleventh century England, being both the mother-in-law of Edward the



Edward the Confessor (Gytha's son-in-law), as depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry

Confessor, and the mother of King Harold. But, as she boarded the boat for Flat Holm, her power and influence had drained away, and her heart was almost certainly broken. These were probably her last footsteps on the English mainland.

Born around 1000, Gytha Thorkelsdóttir was the daughter of Thorkel Sprakling, a Danish Chieftain, who was said to have been the grandson of a bear. Her brother was Earl Ulf, who was married to King Cnut's sister, making Gytha part of the royal family on both sides of the North Sea. King Cnut took the English throne in 1016, followed by those of Denmark (in 1018), and Norway (in 1028).

Gytha married Godwin, the Anglo-Saxon Earl of Wessex, in 1019. She had at least nine children with him, including:

- Edith, Queen of England (1025-1075) - married to Edward the Confessor (King of England)
- Harold Godwinson (1022-1066) - the last Saxon King of England
- Sweyn Godwinson (1020-1052) - Earl of Herefordshire, Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Somerset
- Tostig Godwinson (1026- 1066) - Earl of Northumbria
- Leofwine Godwinson (1035-1066) - Earl of Kent, Essex, Middlesex, Hertford, Surrey and probably Buckinghamshire



The Battle of Stamford Bridge (Peter Nicolai Arbo, 1870), at which Gytha's son Harold was victorious over another of her sons Tostig, who was killed.

- Gyrth Godwinson (1030 -1066) - Earl of East Anglia, Cambridgeshire and Oxfordshire
- Gunhilda of Wessex (1035-1080) - a nun
- Ælfgifu of Wessex (1035-?)
- Wulfnoth Godwinson (1040-1094)

But, while she was arguably England's most powerful woman at that time, the events of 1066 would have made her amongst the most broken-hearted. She lost three of her sons in one day at the Battle of Hastings (Harold, Gyrth and Leofwine) and just two weeks previously, Harold had defeated his brother Tostig at the Battle of Stamford Bridge, resulting

in the latter's death. Her family and its kingdom lay in ruins.

Following Harold's death, Gytha petitioned William the Conqueror to let her take his body - even offering to pay the King its weight in gold. But William refused, fearing the Saxons would turn Harold's burial site into a shrine. Gytha then fled to Exeter with Harold's sons - her grandsons - Godwin, Edmund and Magnus.

The presence of Gytha and Harold's sons in Exeter is thought to have made it a focal point of local rebellion. As a consequence, and Exeter's refusal to swear allegiance (or "fealty") to the new King, William laid siege



The Death of King Harold (Gytha's son), as depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry

to the city during the winter of 1067/68. Exeter capitulated after 18 days, but not before someone had apparently stood on the city walls, bared their buttocks, and broken wind in the King's direction!

Following the siege of Exeter, Godwin, Edmund and Magnus went to Dublin to seek help from King Diarmaid of Leinster (an echo of Harold's 1051 visit to Ireland - from where he returned in 1052 and raided Porlock). Meanwhile, Gytha, her daughter Gunhilda, and Harold's daughter, Gytha, fled to Watchet, and then Flat Holm (referred to in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles as Brandanrelisce). Their journey from Exeter to Watchet should have been

relatively trouble-free, as it would have crossed mainly Godwin family land and estates (including Nettlecombe, which stretches several miles southwards, from outside Williton). Watchet was presumably, at that time, still a Saxon stronghold.

Gytha apparently remained on Flat Holm for many months, waiting for her grandsons to return and reclaim the throne. Their first attempt came in the summer of 1068 when, aided by Dublin Norse mercenaries, they attacked Bristol and its environs, but were driven back near Weston-Super-Mare by Eadnoth the Staller. Eadnoth died in the battle, along with Magnus. Their second attempt occurred in

1069 when, with a fleet of 60 ships, they attempted to retake Exeter. They were foiled again, however, this time at the mouth of the River Taw, in North Devon.

Realising the hopelessness of their plight, beaten militarily and unable to re-establish a base in England, Gytha and her family conceded defeat. They sought refuge in Flanders and Scandinavia, with Gytha, it is believed, dying shortly afterwards at the convent in St Omer, Flanders (in present-day France).

Mike Quint



Watchet's Retail Architecture



The small town of Watchet can boast more original Victorian and Edwardian shop fronts than the county town of Taunton. Although inevitably there have been some alterations and adaptations, in many cases the essence has remained intact. In the vast majority of high streets throughout Britain, the individuality of shops which were once family-owned businesses created its own distinctive architectural style and unique presentation. Today, the high street chain stores present a bland and literally plastic sameness and effectively create unimaginative and, in some cases, aesthetically offensive and insensitive exteriors and interiors... One could be in any town in the country!

Concentrating on Swain Street, from the Lime Cross and opposite the Council

Chambers is the distinctive Bank House, sensitively restored and much the same as it was when updated in the early nineteenth century. Originally a farmhouse, it then received a facelift and became a bank, originally a branch of Stuckey's and later, the NatWest. At one time, it accommodated a small school of which, notably, there were several independent ones in Watchet.

The Oriental Pearl is seventeenth century and has many original interior features including the distinctive local elm beams and an open fireplace with a bread oven and elm bressumer (sadly and ridiculously disguised by imitation brickwork). Inspection of the exterior reveals that it was originally thatched, although the basic fabric has changed little since its origins in the late 17th century.

Watchet's Retail Architecture

Directly opposite, ignoring the Kebab shop for obvious reasons (once the site of the original Post office), is a very pleasant and interesting row of four shops built in the latter part of the Victorian period and with little alteration. The first, now Clara Mann's the hairdresser, has been carefully restored by the owner with meticulous attention to detail to a very high standard, at the same time providing a contemporary interior befitting a 21st. century business. The antique shop next door has also received the same sympathetic treatment and interestingly, the owner commissioned the Conservation Society to restore the small cobbled yard at the rear. The two remaining shops, recently vacated but almost certain to be quickly reoccupied, fortunately have to date, also received the

same sympathetic treatment thus ensuring a continuity of these delightful shops.

Following this comes the Chemist shop, something of an architectural anomaly as it doesn't conform to normal building structures in this area. It is fairly easy to date it to the first half of the nineteenth century as it is visible in the early photographs of Swain Street by James Date. The shop front is however more conventional and would have been changed later. A pharmacy in the nineteenth century, it was owned by Parsons and Hann who also had an outlet in nearby Williton. There remains a mosaic floor at the entrance which is a tangible reminder of its past, incorporating the business name.



Directly opposite is Swain House, a Boutique Bed & Breakfast, beautifully and sympathetically restored and paying suitable homage to its past. The cobbled entrance has been renovated and





important and vital role in the town's commerce and has been reasonably cared for and looked after, retaining a good deal of its integrity. It was possible to hire horses from this establishment until just before the Second World War. On the opposite side of the street is St. Margaret's Hospice. This important 17th

recently, a stunning hand-forged gate has been installed, an excellent example of how contemporary design with a nod to the past can be so effective.

Next door is a gallery which is an exemplary specimen of an Edwardian shop front. It remains virtually intact with unusual, individual capitals and spandrels supporting the window frames. Until recently, the fielded panels to the base had been painted but now reveal the original Bath stone. The brass and amber glass door handle is original and is in the aesthetic style. Directly opposite is what was once the Central Hotel which has suffered many unsympathetic changes in the distant past. Worth noting however, are the original Watchet alabaster keystones (a very unusual and unsuitable exterior building material) above the doors and windows. Now the West Somerset Hotel, it has been a distinctive part of the street for well over a century and played an

century building has been restored to the highest possible standard, the interior having exposed elm beams and two fine 17th century fireplaces retaining their original elm bressumers. This building has been well-documented with extensive information available on the WCS website.

Next door is The Sanctuary, a recent build and although not an exciting design, fits in nicely with other buildings in the street. Opposite is a dwelling converted from two shops and has some reference to its previous use as a bakery. Next to the Sanctuary is a newly opened gift shop which was until recently Watchet's last remaining bank, now bright and airy. This formed part of Watchet's impressive Victorian Department Store well known in the locality as WL Copp's. With its many departments providing everything that anyone might need, it also brought employment to a number of the town's residents. Much of the original ground

floor is now occupied by Albert's 'Ardware'. Flanking Esplanade Lane and Albert's and also originally part of Copp's is a second gift shop. On the other side of the lane is a corner shop, again a good example of sympathetic restoration and easily recognisable from early sepia photographs in its various incarnations.

Opposite is the Post Office and Smuggler's Cave and in between sits a handsome and perfectly proportioned early Georgian town house, again restored with meticulous attention to detail and retaining evidence of a much earlier building to the rear. It boasts a magnificent Georgian interior with highly decorative plaster work and inset 'barrel' cupboards, contemporary with the facade. This has not been altered and is an unexpected gem for modest Watchet. A little further down and on the opposite side is, sadly, a very recent abomination, a perfect example of how to introduce a new retail premises and successfully destroy the harmony and continuity of the street to the greatest effect. It may well sit easily and anonymously in a modern shopping complex and cause no comment and be more aptly situated there perhaps.

However, in a street that, on the whole, has managed, with the careful consideration of various retailers, to maintain its integrity, it beggars belief that an estate agent could be so insensitive and inept. It contrasts pointedly with the recently opened Sam's Deli where great care has been taken by the new owners to maintain a sympathetic attitude to the other buildings in this ancient and historic street. The same may

be said of Chives, next to Sam's. Opposite is the distinctive and important piece of Watchet's industrial past, 'The Foundry'. Although converted to flats, the integrity of the facade has been admirably retained.

Finally, at the end of the street are the Corner House Cafe with a long and interesting history and the Corner Collection. Both of these buildings sit well with the complementary edifices on either side.

Watchet is indeed fortunate to have preserved so much of our architectural retail heritage in an age when these features have been lost forever in so many towns throughout Great Britain. It must surely be important that every effort is made to preserve and conserve the buildings for future generations and Watchet's unique and special character.

Nick Cotton



Pooh, Poppins and the Provincial Lady by Helen Walaseck



Open Meeting - Pooh, Poppins and the Provincial Lady - Tuesday 17th July by Helen Walaseck

A good turnout of 40 members and friends sat down to listen to a fascinating illustrated talk by Helen Walaseck about Punch Magazine, in particular the period from 1910 to 1950.

Punch magazine's political cartoons were world famous due to the size of the British Empire and many artist and cartoonist vied for the privilege of drawing for Punch.

'The Pooh' connection came from A A Milne (creator of Pooh Bear in 1926) who was deputy editor of Punch and his eponymous bear was based on a bear called 'Growler' who appeared in a Punch cartoon in 1916.

'Poppins': The connection with Mary Poppins comes from the Shepherd family. E H Shepherd drew for Punch for over 50 years whilst also a deputy editor. Mary Shepherd illustrated the Mary Poppins book and it was said that her husband E V Knox (editor of Punch) was the inspiration behind the character 'Mr Banks'.

'The Provincial Lady' turned out to be 'The Diary of a Provincial Lady' written by Elizabeth Monica Dashwood under the pen name of E M Delafield. Published in 1930 it was largely an autobiographical diary of a middle class lady in Devon, it proved immensely popular and further books were written covering her time in London and travels abroad. Since that time it has never been out of print, quite some record. Its connection with Punch is that it was first published as a diary in Punch magazine before being made into a book.

Punch was published, we were told, all through the war and its Bouverie Street premises (just off Fleet Street), narrowly missed being bombed in the 1941 Blitz when the News of the World offices across the road were destroyed.

The talk was mainly about the people behind the cartoons, it would have been better perhaps to have seen more of the cartoons and less 'historical detail.' Nevertheless it was an interesting talk about a famous magazine during a dramatic era.

Alan Jones

Watchet Conservation Matters is published six times a year. If you would like to contribute news or an article, please contact our acting secretary Bob Cramp on: bob2cramp@gmail.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.

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**A year-long look at wildlife and plants
along the Mineral Line - by Dave
Simpson-Scott**

This is the product of one man's dedication to a project that he was brought into initially as a photographer working in collaboration with a writer and naturalist, to document a whole year of wildlife on the Mineral Line. A considerable undertaking.

The result is this truly wonderful little book. It contains a remarkable amount of data, and all is presented in an easy to understand format, packed with wonderful photographs.

Whether you're a tourist visiting the Mineral Line for the first time, or a local walking your dog daily, this book is for you. I know you will find it enhances your knowledge and enjoyment.

Priced at only **£5.00** per copy for a limited edition of only 130 copies, contact myself or Molly for further details.

Bob Cramp