



Watchet Conservation Matters

Promoting, Conserving & Improving
Our Physical & Natural Environment

Issue 63 March/April 2019

From the Chairman



**John Short - Yankee Jack
(1839-1933)**



Dear Members,
I am writing this on March 1st, meteorologically speaking, the 1st day of spring, this same day last year 2018 we were all covered in snow. We have just enjoyed the warmest February on record, is the winter really over?

Some of my New Year wishes for Watchet expressed in the January newsletter seem to be coming to fruition. There is room for cautious optimism that the future of the premises of the Harbour Community bookshop seems secure. Thus is due in part to our Town Council and the hard work of the Watchet Coastal Community Team who have secured a £240,000 grant to be spent over three years on a social action plan,

part of which will enable the book shop building to be refurbished.

The other exciting news is that the District Council has agreed to a bridging loan of £1.5 million, to top up money already raised by the Onion Collective, so they are able to match fund a bid to secure a further £5 million funding, for the £7 million East Quay development. This will kick start the project and subject to tests on the harbour wall being satisfactory, work could start as early as this Autumn, Watchet is on the move.

We in the Conservation Society are trying to move several projects forward as well as trying to prevent the use of UPVC doors and windows in the conservation area.

Our next open meeting is on the 19th March at 7.30pm at the Methodist Schoolrooms, Harbour Road. The talk is "Getting to know spiders, especially in Somerset" by Francis Farr Cox.

If you are afraid of our arachnid friends, Francis will hopefully reassure you, so in future, you will be amazed.

What's not to like. See you there.



Bob Cramp



Recollections of Community Education Worker



Watchet Youth Club presentation to John Batt—with Sally Chave, Mark Webber, Bob Cole & Roy Chave.

Recollections of a Watchet and Williton Community Education Worker

Monday 6th September, 1982. I was sitting in a café on the corner of Swain Street, looking down the esplanade and reflecting on my few days in a new job. After a lifetime of school, college, and teaching in a school, here I was: at three o'clock on a Monday afternoon feeling guilty for being outside. No bells, no timetable, and yes; I discovered that communities were alive and vibrant between 9am and 4pm.

The previous Wednesday, I had started a new career as the Community Education Worker for Watchet, Williton and

surrounding villages in West Somerset. In 1979 County Council budget cuts had led to a 'shotgun marriage' of Youth Services and Adult Education; the outcome was the birth of Community Education. My predecessor, Taff Morgan, had been a Youth Worker with an office in a hut at the back of Danesfield school. My job was to manage the Adult Education and Youth Clubs from a glass cubicle in the Adult Education Centre in Williton.

My induction had comprised a tour of the area, the handing over of some keys and some instruction in administration. It was now up to me to find out about the communities, the current provision and

Recollections of Community Education Worker

their educational needs. For the next eight years these communities were at the heart of my work, and remained an important influence, until my retirement from youth work in 2009.

Although I have started chronologically, it will be easier if I keep Adult Education and Youth Services as separate stories.

Adult Education

Williton had a purpose-built centre but there were outreach classes in Watchet County Primary School (St Decuman's across the road, two schools opposite each other I found this very weird) and surrounding villages. My first role was to manage the three key Adult Tutors; Margaret Norman (dressmaking), Ron Peppin (woodwork) and Briar Norman (pottery). Each had a personal fiefdom over their rooms in the Adult Education Centre, yet other tutors also had to use them. Many of these groups had been running for years. As a new boy with new-fangled ideas I tried to be sensitive to their experience and senior years, but I wanted to see a wider range of courses. At this time there was also a move, within education, towards measuring progression, something I was asked to implement.

The diverse programme I inherited for the three rooms during my first week, in September 1982, ranged from; Dressmaking, Typewriting, Upholstery, Plant Portraiture, Furniture Restoration, Pottery, Enamelling and Lip Reading!

Over the next couple of years I opened the centre on a Saturday morning for young people to do Model Making, Arts and Crafts and Pottery. I encouraged Margaret and Ron to have beginners and advanced courses and listened for new ideas. In 1984 I was asked if we could have a Machine Knitting Course. I dutifully found a tutor and advertised in the brochure. On the Tuesday evening I was sitting in my glass cubicle doubting we would get the eight people needed to run this class when these strange wobbly things started going past the window. To my horror over 20 people turned up with their machines, far too many for the room. Parking and unloading chaos, ensued; a total nightmare. Two years later the class closed, but it had fulfilled a need. It turned out that Machine Knitting had been a fad and people had bought machines but not known how to use them. When they saw the class they dug out the machines and turned up in droves.

Community Education was about responding to local needs. The docks were in operation and there were a couple of attempts to offer a course in basic Polish, as this was the predominant language of the seamen visiting the town. This 'need' had been brought to my attention through a chance conversation with a woman in town who said she would like to learn Polish as it would help her business. I, the enthusiastic new boy, thought this was an excellent idea. I was later informed that Watchet had a red light district, which was where her business was.





Recollections of Community Education Worker



Watchet Youth Club London Trip—with Laura Ketchin, Victoria Chave, Michael Jackson & Sally Chave.

The 1980s were also a period of high unemployment. Somerset County Council (SCC) provided funds to run drop-in centres for those combating isolation and loss of self-esteem while they sought work. Called C Link, it opened in the basement of the Baptist Church three mornings a week. Later this money was diverted to fund courses called Fresh Start or Make Your Experience Count and the centre closed.

As a Community Education worker, good relationships with local councillors are paramount. During my years working in Watchet I was very fortunate to be able to call on the advice and support from Eileen Woods. She was always interested in Adult Education but a great champion of the young people of Watchet.

Youth Work

Watchet Youth Club came about following the Albemarle Report published by National Government in 1959. Among its wide-ranging recommendations it offered communities financial support to build youth centres. Overseen by Lord Bourneville this funding became known as the 'Cadbury Shilling'. The Government would match every shilling raised by the community. I don't have the exact date for Watchet but the first youth center in Somerset was created in Burnham in 1961. There were lots of youth clubs on my patch but Watchet had the only purpose-built building. The land had been given by the district council and there were three trustees and a management

Recollections of Community Education Worker



committee. The only Youth Worker in 1982 was Liz White, employed directly by the management committee. A direct grant from SCC was provided for salary and building maintenance. To lessen management committee responsibilities as employers, by May 1983 part time Youth Workers had been brought into the employment of SCC. Liz had a three-session contract to run the club. I indirectly became her manager, although she reported to the management committee. The Hon Treasurer at the time was Ron Johnson and I still have Ron's letter written in June 1983 asking for the full £500 maintenance grant. Liz carried on for a couple of years, followed by a number of different helpers before Roy Chave took over (circa 1988).

The building was of 1960s build quality and design and was always a bit of a nightmare. Opposite the club new houses had been built and in 1983/4 the residents of these houses petitioned to have the centre closed due to noise, etc. At a lively public meeting we were in danger of losing the debate with councillors, as the young people "did not have a vote". I recalled reading that there was a Law Lords ruling that property owners did not have the right to object to buildings that were there before them. In the heat of the moment I stood up and referred everyone to this ruling, but not knowing the complexities or how to refer to it, called it the Hailsham Amendment.

No idea why I called it that, it was total rubbish, but he was the Lord Chancellor

at the time. It ended the meeting but over the years it gained mythical status and I later heard people in District and County meetings reference the Hailsham Amendment.

In the mid 1980s Youth Clubs UK started a girl's football programme; it was so unusual, at that time, for girls to play. We put together a five-a-side team centred around the two best players, Wendy Elle and Wendy Quint. Off they went to the county finals and won, representing Somerset in Bristol. Although unable to progress to the national finals it was a great achievement for five girls from sleepy West Somerset; and look where women's football is today.

Although I moved to Sedgemoor in 1990, I kept in close contact with Watchet and when I received a request to send six people to a climate conference organised by and centred around Michael Jackson it was Roy that I contacted. No cameras were allowed but this photograph was taken by his staff.

I spent 8 happy and informative years working with the Watchet community and it has been very enjoyable writing this article for the magazine.

John Batt



John Short - Yankee Jack



John Short - Yankee Jack

How many strollers along Watchet's Esplanade have paused by the seated figure of John Short, captured in bronze by Allen Herriot, and wondered what sort of man he was, this thoroughgoing seaman, who criss-crossed the globe, working on more than twenty sailing ships 'going foreign' before returning to Watchet? Oh, and do school children still learn the lovely tune 'Shenandoah'? We have it because of John Short, though he always called it 'Shanadore'-to be clear, though Short did not compose it, he memorised it and brought it to Cecil Sharp's attention decades later.

Through a chance conversation with Matt Rose of Halsway Manor near Crowcombe, I was fortunate to get access to Tom Brown's

biography 'A Sailor's Life: The Life and Times of John Short of Watchet 1839-1933'. As Librarian of the English Folk Song and Dance Society, Matt is well placed to answer any queries about John and together with Tom Brown's excellent book, 'Yankee Jack' comes to life. John's meetings with Cecil Sharp from 1914 onwards, which were instrumental in the English folksong revival in the early 20th Century, secured his place in history. His exceptional memory for tunes and verses impressed Sharp, who estimated 80% of the material in his 1921 book 'English Folk Chanteys' came via John. Reverend Brockington of Carhampton who had helped Sharp said in John Short's obituary:

"He was a very natural musician. His voice was deep and of great power, and yet so flexible that 'runs' and delicate

John Short - Yankee Jack

sequences were always clearly sung. He had a rare sense of pitch, and of course, an extraordinary memory."

Perhaps we can answer our opening question with another: is it worth remembering John Short, whose statue was unveiled in March 2008? After reading this biography and listening to the accompanying CDs, the answer must be a resounding yes. He was much more than the 'common seaman', the first to be commemorated with a Times obituary. The lyrics of his chanteys or shanties chronicle the hard life of seamen through whose blood and sweat Britain rose to maritime pre eminence in the 19th Century. Often disregarded and abused by 'bullyboy' deck officers, this group of working men undertook trips of a year or more, frequently in unsafe vessels, so called 'coffin ships'. We can only suppose that John's sense of adventure overcame his misgivings. Or perhaps it was simply a confidence in his own abilities, chiefly as the 'chanteyman'. Late in life he told Sharp, who had asked about other singers in the town, 'not to bother with they chaps... They've still got the smell of the farmyard in 'em.' In the job of lead singer, making the crewmen work efficiently in unison, he was spared a lot of the hard physical effort of working sails, pumps and anchors, up and down time after time. John together with two other young men of Watchet, William Smith and Edwin Chidgey, decided to go deep-sea as teenagers. While most seamen could only place their mark on ship's papers, we see John's confident copperplate signature as he signed aboard

the barque '**Promise**' of London around 1859. This is the first ship in which we shall follow John as he led the worksongs. These often starkly recall conditions on board, as we shall see in some extracts taken from Tom Brown's book.

'**Promise**' took part in the profitable triangular trade between, firstly, West Country ports, then southern European destinations in Spain and Portugal, and finally the Canadian seaboard. General wares from English factories supplied the growing immigrant population of Canada; huge quantities of salt were loaded in Spain for preserving cod from the Grand Banks off Newfoundland, some of which found its way back to Europe. The additional cargo was timber for the home voyage, immortalised in 'Donkey Riding':

***Was you ever in Quebec?
Stowing timber on the deck
Where you break your bloody neck
Riding on a Donkey
Way hay and away we go
Donkey riding donkey riding
Way hay and away we go
(RIDING ON A DONKEY)***

The 'donkey' in this and many other shanties was a donkey engine, often steam powered, used in mining and timber industries to hoist cargo into the ship.

Although he received the nickname Yankee Jack, and told Cecil Sharp he preferred American ships, as the food was better, John Short kept clear of so-called packet ships, especially the Liverpool based





John Short - Yankee Jack

Blackball Line which sailed twice a month across the Atlantic whatever the weather. The line developed a reputation among crewmen for fast and tidy ships but also for harsh discipline and vicious officers:

***In the Blackball Line I served me time
To me way, ay, ay, hoorah roll
In the Blackball Line I wasted me prime
Hoorah for the Blackball Line
A bully mate and Captain too
To me way, ay, hurrah roll
They're the bastards for to push her through
Hoorah for the Blackball Line!
(THE BLACKBALL LINE)***

One suspects the powers that be on a ship did not mind a sarcastic song about another sailing company, provided the work was done efficiently. John told Cecil Sharp the right song could halve the effort involved in a task. Clearly John Short was not averse to seeing the world beyond the Bristol Channel, to which he returned in old age to sail 'home waters'. But this is to jump too far forward. Let us look at the second of John's 'going foreign' ships.

1867 found him on board 'Conference' on the guano run to South America. This involved rounding the Horn and joining perhaps 200 other ships waiting to load from offshore islands in Chile or Peru some accumulated bird droppings from 100s of years of, er, deposit. This was so valuable as fertiliser or an ingredient in explosives that these countries fought a war over ownership of the guano deposits. Somerset's Tyntesfield House near Clevedon reminds us of the fantastic



wealth a family could acquire by controlling this noxious and dangerous trade. John's share was considerably smaller and his shanty more basic:

***Was you ever in I-kee-kee*
Round and round the bloody bay
Loading bird-shit all the day
Riding on a donkey!
(RIDING ON A DONKEY)
*Iquique, a port in Chile***

This voyage was notable for a quarter of the crew refusing to work with the guano. The logbook gives a wealth of detail but fails to provide explanation. Did they have concern about the ship, or its

John Short - Yankee Jack

potentially explosive cargo? Were there troublemakers, or did they want to spend more time in Callao and its notorious brothels and grog dens? Whatever the case, John Short completed the voyage with a 'V.G.' for both 'Conduct' and 'Seamanship'. He was discharged in Plymouth after a voyage of almost exactly a year.

As John was rated AB or Able Seaman, he received either £2.00 or £2.50 per month. Whatever the experiences on this trip, John Short sailed on 'Conference' again just three months later. He had clearly done well on the previous trip, keeping his head down, if not his voice, and done his duty, because when he signed on again at Cardiff, he was taken on as Bosun, with increased wages of £3.50. Following an 1856 Act of Parliament, seamen were entitled to receive an advance on wages before a voyage, and to nominate a family member to receive this 'allotment'. Such a measure helped their people at home to survive while at the same time reducing a spendthrift matelot's ability to waste hard-earned cash in low dives around the world. John Short was never a spendthrift or whoremonger, despite the topics of some shanties, and took his month's advance, presumably in favour of family back at Watchet. He had a keen sense of what was correct behaviour. In old age Cecil Sharp noted how John feigned dislike of 'Shanadore' aka Shenandoah in order to avoid singing a salty couplet in front of Sharp's wife. At a previous meeting, with no lady present, he had declared it to be his favourite!

Let us turn to a ship which was already ancient when John sailed in her; perhaps it was this experience which turned his thoughts back home. The late 1860s saw the beginning of the end of the age of sail. The Suez Canal had opened in 1869 after ten years' construction. At a stroke 4000 miles of sailing was cut between Europe and Asia. John had sailed the old route round the Cape and across the Indian Ocean on Earl Balcarres some two years before. This ex Indiaman three master, built in 1811 and still with two rows of gunports, ferried British troops from Great Britain to colonial outposts such as Karachi, Bombay and the Far East. Deaths among crew and passengers were not uncommon. John made two trips in her: on arrival in Bombay the second time, her condition was described as 'very leaky'. She ended as a hulk off the West Coast of Africa. Oddly 1869 also saw the launch of the most famous sailing ship 'Cutty Sark'. Quite obsolete from the start, she survived as a result of the maritime world's reluctance to accept steam power wholeheartedly. John shared this mistrust, but accepted the facts of life regarding long distance 'windjammers'. His thoughts turned to home. His younger brother Sydney, with whom he had sailed, was now married and back in Watchet. All this he perhaps turned over in his mind:

***We've traded with the Yankees, Brazilians,
and Chinese,
We've laid with dusky beauties in the
shade of tall palm trees.
We've been through the Southern Ocean
and up to Callao***





John Short - Yankee Jack

***Around Cape Horn and back again, a
sailor's bound to go
I've crossed the Line and Gulf Stream,
been round by Table Bay
Around Cape Horn and home again, for
that's the sailor's way.
(THE SAILOR'S WAY)***

By 1873 John Short had come home to Watchet and married Annie Marie Wedlake at St. James Church Taunton. Her father was Captain George Wedlake, of another Watchet seafaring family. It seems John, a sober and God fearing man, followed the advice of the old sailor in this song:

***Come all you bold seafaring men and
listen to my song
When you come off those long trips, I'll
have you do no wrong
Take my advice and drink no strong drink
Don't go sleeping with no whores
Get married lads and have all night in
And go to sea no more
No more no more
And go to sea no more
(GO TO SEA NO MORE)***

In later life John Short served as Town Crier and Captain of the Parish Fire Brigade. He also worked as a hobbler; his boat competed to make contact with incoming ships and secure business with them. However it was the series of meetings with Cecil Sharp which we should finally recall: John Short's place as our only home grown celebrity was the result. John spoke fondly of Sharp after the latter's death in 1924. Their relationship flourished beyond musical

matters. On one occasion, Sharp visited John at home in Market Street and asked after his wife:

'The sailor led us into a bedroom, where lay a sweet-faced smiling old lady, crippled by rheumatism. (Mr Sharp) questioned her and she told him John did everything for her, cleaning the house, cooking the food, carrying her from bed to parlour - that he was her sole attendant. Cecil said to Mr Short out of the lady's presence and preparing to resume singing, 'Mr Short, you are a very fine singer, but your greatest achievement is in the next room'.

The best way to remember Yankee Jack is through his songs. One of his disciples recalled that Sharp would 'hurry off to Watchet, a small port on the Bristol Channel, where lived John Short, the chanter singer. Short liked to be near the sea when singing, so he and Sharp would sit side by side on the quay and John Short would sing happily through the noise of wind and waves while Sharp smoked his pipe and jotted down the tunes'.

May we remember that every time we pass down the Esplanade.

Rob Hutchings

***A Sailor's Life: the Life and Times of John Short of Watchet 1839-1933*
(ISBN:978-0-9930468-0-3)**

An Introduction to Fungi by Peter Baker



Open Meeting - An Introduction to Fungi - Tuesday 15th January by Peter Baker

Peter Baker, a retired science teacher now doing conservation work on the Quantock hills was well qualified for this talk but was able to put over the scientific side of the fungus family in a way lay people could understand without dumbing down the facts for those in the audience with a botanical background.

Peter explained the two principle groups of fungi as those that 'drop' their spores and those that 'shoot' their spores into the air for the winds to take them well away from the parent plant. It came as a surprise to many to learn that the part with which we are familiar e.g. the mushroom or toadstool,

was but a small part of the main plant that lived below the soil or in rotten tree trunks.

Under the ground these mycelium (root like threads) can spread for 100's of yards and we were told that the world's largest organism is in fact a fungus covering some 3.45 square miles in Oregon USA.

Peter brought several specimens of fungus with which to demonstrate his fascinating talk including a puffball which could be seen to shoot out millions of spores into the air - so dense as to resemble smoke. My favourite was when he set light to a 'coal' fungus (also known as King Alfred's cakes) showing how the smouldering ball could be brought back to fire by blowing onto it, by this method early man could transport fire over many



An Introduction to Fungi by Peter Baker



miles by transferring the fire to a new fungus when the first was burnt out. It was easy to see how a fire could be started using dried grass and a red hot smouldering fungus. Far better than rubbing two sticks together!!

After these fascinating demonstrations Peter went on to talk about their culinary qualities as well as the poisonous and hallucinogenic characteristics of this vast family of plants. First a photograph of a field of flat head mushrooms the size of saucers then a photo of them cooked in the frying pan, that got the taste buds moving. But on hearing the devastating effects of eating the 'death cap' mushroom (*amanita phalloides*) which destroys the liver leading to a painful death I was less inclined to go foraging myself unless led by an expert like Peter.

There were lots of beautiful photos of the farm at Aisholt where Peter does most of his conservation work along with the huge variety of fungi that grow there. Having been farmed organically for many generations the farm has become internationally important for the variety of 'wax caps'. I could never have imagined that a talk on fungi would be so enjoyable.

If you missed the talk look out for the name Peter Baker as he conducts forays around the farm with his expert guidance. We have certainly put our name down for a trip to Aisholt - not an hallucinogenic trip of course.

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 bi-monthly newsletter via email for free, or a printed copy for only £1.50 each. If you are not a member and have enjoyed reading this publication, come and join us to help us conserve our physical and natural environment. All of our committee members would be delighted to welcome you.

Membership (per annum):

£6.00 (single membership)

£10.00 (couple membership)

Printed copy of Newsletter:

£1.50 each (£9.00 per annum)

£2.00 each (ad hoc single purchases)

Both (per annum):

£15.00 (single membership, 1 x newsletter)

£19.00 (couple membership, 1 x newsletter)

Watchet Conservation Society
www.watchetconservationsociety.co.uk

Chairman, Acting Secretary, Acting Newsletter Editor

Bob Cramp
07989 723183
bob2cramp@gmail.com

Ex Officio Membership Secretary

Andrew Harrison
01984 634498
ap_harrison@yahoo.com

Treasurer

Ann Hill
01984 632451
annhill46@gmail.com

Minutes Secretary, Press Officer

Valerie Ward

Case Work Consultant

Phil Gannon

Case Work Officer

Paul Upton

Committee

Molly Quint
Nick Cotton
Jason Robinson
Mervyn Brown
Loretta Whetlor
Rob Hutchings
Lucy Shaw



Waves

The tide on the turn,
loud noisy thuds
against the sea wall. A wave
tipping into another wave
falling away, twisting
into still another wave.

Further along the beach
a scree of pebbles shushing
down into the surf.
Then come carpet rolling waves
rolling pebbles up the beach
time and time again.

Hilda Cornish



Waves

The tide on the turn
loud noisy thuds
against the sea wall. A wave
tipping into another wave
falling away, twisting
into still another wave.
Further along the beach
a scree of pebbles shushing
down into the surf.
then come carpet rolling waves
rolling pebbles up the beach
time and time again.

Hilda Cornish