



Watchet Conservation Matters

Promoting, Conserving & Improving
Our Physical & Natural Environment

Issue 65 May/June 2019

From the Chairman

East Quay Development



Dear Members,
As I write this the sun is shining, the sky is blue, storm Hannah has passed and Easter is hopefully a happy memory.

There are two months between each edition of the newsletter, time passes with increasing alacrity, I no sooner have seen the back of one and the next publication deadline is upon me. In fact a great deal can happen between newsletters.

In March we were celebrating a grant of £240,000 won by Watchet Coastal Communities Team to tackle some of the town's social diversity issues but also including money to refurbish our Harbour Community Book Shop. We now know

that the bookshop has secured temporary accommodation and will shortly open for the season in what was the West Coast Angling premises, 53 Swain Street.

Following on from the news in the middle of February that the West Somerset District Council had arranged for a £1.5 million bridging loan to The Onion Collective, we now discover that they have won the jackpot, they have secured the critical £5 million from The Coastal Community Fund to regenerate the town's East Quay. Our ever popular, local MP hailed the grant "as the best news the town has had in decades".

Whilst we as a society have always supported the "Onions". We are aware that this is not a universally held view, and we are nothing if not a broad church in the WCS and the main article is given to Nick Cotton for his personal critique of the Onions and the Project.

Another piece of welcome news was that the WSR has started running trains again after a three-month shutdown, initially terminating in Watchet but after 23rd April from Minehead with the opening service being pulled by a newly acquired tank engine. Not only is it nice to hear the whistles, smell the smoke but the railway brings visitors to our town.

More challenging news arrived with the news of a consultation, for plans of a massive redevelopment of the Wansbrough Paper Mill site involving 400 new homes in what is described as



From the Chairman



a residential, business and leisure centre. I am not yet sure as The Conservation Society how we react to this, obviously there are buildings of a historic nature, trees, wildlife habitats to be preserved. As I said it is going to be a challenge.

One of my pet projects is the wildflower garden on the West Street car park, and I am pleased to say that after a difficult start last year it is flourishing, full marks for lone and Liz for their perseverance (see picture).

We now have a new membership secretary, Lucy Corelly-Shaw who has taken over from Andrew Harrison, who I would like to thank for stoically carrying on for two years after resigning.

During the handover, some interesting facts came to light, that nearly 50% of you had not renewed your membership for this year. I hope this is an oversight and not a reflection on my first year as Chairman. Assuming that is not the case I would urge you to attend the next open meeting on the 21st May at 7:30pm, at The Methodist School Room and pay up. The talk is Watchet's Newest Museum by Neil Wilson. It is a Radio and Television Museum, and that is more good news for Watchet.

Bob Cramp

East Quay



East Quay

At last, a development is to take place on the East Quay, a modern, contemporary build which will hopefully reflect in the future a piece of architecture that is unmistakably from the 21st century. How will this fit in with our present architectural heritage? Watchet does not boast many fine buildings but we do have an eclectic mix of styles and periods and properties containing, behind the exterior walls, obvious and delightful clues to its history over decades and in many cases, centuries. Our shop fronts, in the main, have been sympathetically treated and give the town a genuine feel of antiquity and sense of the past that people enjoy, thus lacking the uniform, bland and repetitive qualities so often seen blighting the high streets of many other towns. We have a couple of

fine Georgian houses in and around Swain Street, some quirky buildings from the early years of the nineteenth century along with a sprinkling of Victorian and Edwardian shop fronts, interesting pubs and delightful surprises. There are examples from four centuries of individual and sometimes imaginative building and it must be said, of haphazard composition and all the better for that. Mrs A.C.Osborn, when she visited in the 1920's, described our town thus: *"that little, higgledy-piggledy town which is more like a foreign quay than any place I know of. Here the houses seem to have dropped willy-nilly from the skies, falling north, south, east or west with careless concern."* I think this sums it up pretty well. Most of our buildings were erected well before the imposition of



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building regulations and planning consent—if you were granted lease of a bit of land, you built whatever, to your own specifications. That is how the buildings of Watchet have evolved and, when Watchet is described as unique, it certainly deserves the description.

There are numerous quirky buildings including the chemist's shop, a very interesting design from the early 19th century. Others are The Art Deco Cinema, originally named the Conquest, now the Chandlery and Roger's Furniture and perhaps the quirkiest of all, the wonderful Shanghai Bungalow at the top of Goviers Lane. There is certainly no structure to the building of houses in Watchet until the industrial prosperity of the second half of the nineteenth century when various terraces were built with a shop at the end of each one, certain that an income could be gleaned sufficient to support a family modestly. This is particularly interesting as this arrangement is unique to Watchet and reflects its intensive industrial activity and is reminiscent and much more typical of towns in the industrial north than rural West Somerset.

Watchet was something of an anomaly in West Somerset as, with the exception of Minehead which was tourist based rather than industrial, the majority of the population were employed in agriculture and, to a lesser extent, fishing and coastal trading.

Watchet has over recent years lost all of its industrial employment. Older residents will remember the shirt factory, the bakery, the paper bag factory, the harbour trade and, importantly, the paper mill. The loss of

the paper mill in effect brought a closure to Watchet's industrial status, with little likelihood of a return, and thus Watchet's unique identity has been lost—but will not be forgotten. With two active museums and a conservation society and members of these groups passionate about the town's past, with both 'born and bred' and new members of the community actively involved in safeguarding the town's heritage, it seems unlikely that the identity of our past triumphs and disasters will be forgotten and in fact, more probably, celebrated.

The Onion Collective, which includes members who have decided to make Watchet their home and to educate their children here and clearly see the town as their future, has managed to secure the funding to develop part of the East Quay with no threat to marina activity. I have witnessed the wasting of several hundred thousand pounds in feasibility studies, consultations and other nonsense with the most ludicrous scheme to develop the East Quay for housing, including the pinnacle of absurdity in a plan to construct a six storey block of flats! I could be cynical and think that the council had their eye on the considerable revenue that the many occupants of this inner-city tribute might bring. Of course, it might be assumed that the money may have been better spent on developing a method of keeping the mud out of the marina than employing companies from various parts of the country with no knowledge of Watchet and only prepared to offer the basic minimum consultation with its residents. In one instance, a remarkable outcome of several months of consultation

An aerial photograph of the East Quay in Watchet, Somerset, taken during sunset. The foreground is filled with numerous small boats and yachts moored in the water. A large area of the quay is covered with red plastic sheeting, indicating a development or construction site. In the background, the town of Watchet is visible, nestled against a hillside. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow over the scene.

East Quay Development Area (Red)



East Quay

and research, it was revealed that, if the town lost its industrial base, it should concentrate on tourism as the principal commerce. This nonsense cost several tens of thousands... I would happily have come to this very same conclusion in five minutes, as would the majority of the town, and I would have been quite happy with a tenner and a bag of chips for my trouble.

It's not easy to accept change in such a close community and having lost so much of our identity, it is difficult, especially, to accept that so much we have known and cherished is now forever lost. We must try to be realistic and face the future with true Watchet grit, accepting what has happened and attempting to reinvent ourselves as we did after the great storm of 1900, when all seemed lost. The people of Watchet and the newly formed Urban

District Council who then occupied the recently sold iconic Council Chambers, brought the town back from the brink. History shows us that it has always been in Watchet's character not to give in and to maintain resilience and of course, a sense of humour and friendliness and to indulge in passionate debate... All qualities that make Watchet so attractive, which is why so many people are attracted to the town. The Onion Collective have, after the best part of twenty years, managed to succeed in raising money to develop at least part of the East Quay and hopefully bring, most importantly, jobs and a boost to tourism... our principal industry now, whether we like it or not.

The Onions have not gained universal popularity and the indigenous population, to some extent, have resented the fact that

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they seem to be taking over and changing things and are outsiders spoiling our traditional town beyond recognition. There was bound to be a problem when Helwell Bay, familiar as such for generations, was changed to Fossil Beach as part of a re-branding of the town. From Victorian times until the second world war West Street beach was called Cridlands Beach. I have often wondered why this was changed. Perhaps it can be argued that it makes us, the people who live here, resentful that we may have become a brand to be sold and packaged to the increasing number of visitors who are invading the town. Is there some justification when people voice their unease that the new signage seems to have been borrowed from an episode of Noddy in Toyland? The Pavilion on the old Pleasure Grounds has, I think, created the most dissent and inevitably, some people

have said that the money could have been spent on a more traditional building. An interesting comment I have heard and might repeat is that "a more traditional building, because of its location, would quickly have suffered vandalism, but the advantage of this structure is that it appears to have already been severely vandalized and would not warrant the vandals' attention." Importantly, this piece of ground, given to the town with the coming of the railway and designated as the 'Pleasure Grounds', somehow fell into private ownership and was lost to the town. The Onions, together with the generosity of the present owner, have now successfully managed to get it reinstated and once again, it is available for the use of residents and visitors alike. It is to be lauded that they were instrumental in bringing this lost asset back to the town.





East Quay

The development on the East Quay has been criticized for its design, architectural merit and relevance to our heritage by a number of people. I concede that some people might prefer to see a patchwork of Victorian cottages and a general homage to previous buildings in the town. As a committed conservationist, I believe it is important to safeguard our past, but not everything, only that which is worth saving. I'm also against pastiche building and this development gives a real opportunity to build something that future generations will be able to identify as clearly 21st century. Whether or not I like all the details of the development is rather irrelevant unless it causes serious offence, which it does not. I'm satisfied that, importantly, it does have integrity and I applaud the Onions for the many consultations they have held and especially that, in some cases, they returned to the drawing board, having taken on the criticisms of Watchet residents and changed it.

I'm also encouraged that the Onions, in the main, have their homes in Watchet and are raising children in the local schools and it is these children, when they become adults, who will be able to judge the success of their parents. Only time will tell if this project can be heralded a success, but I sincerely hope so. I think it particularly interesting that the Two Rivers company will be producing hand made paper on the site and, although only on a small scale, it relates perfectly to the very first paper produced at Snailholt over two hundred and fifty years ago.

Can I justify the relevance of this new build? Perhaps—by using Osborn Hann's description on her visit to Watchet. *"Higgledy-piggledy... willy- nilly"*. And is it quirky (a description often given to Watchet)? I think perhaps it is.

Whether we like it or not, at the very least we can be thankful that it is not being built by an outside speculator with a view to the main chance. Imagine if, by some horrendous possibility, the six storey block of flats had materialized, with its occupants visiting Watchet for perhaps only two months of the year and playing little if any part in community life.

There will be jobs created and more tourists will undoubtedly visit but I have a couple of serious concerns—what provision will be made for additional cars and coaches, and vitally how do we as community bring pressure regarding the ever encroaching mud. My feeling is the worsening situation with the silt must be properly addressed and managed otherwise this new development will be severely affected and hampered in reaching its full potential.

This is a personal view and may not necessarily represent the views of all members of the conservation society.

Nick Cotton

Who was The Man from Porlock?

Who was The Man From Porlock?

Stevie Smith (1902-1971) has always been a favourite poet of mine. She has a unique talent and originality.

The following are opening verses of her poem relating to Coleridge and Xanadu.

***"Coleridge received the Person from Porlock
And ever after called him a curse,
Then why did he hurry to let him in?
He could have hid in the house
It was not right of Coleridge in fact it was wrong
(But often we all do wrong)
As the truth is I think he was already stuck
With Kubla Khan
He was weeping and wailing:
I am finished, finished,
I shall never write another word of it,
When along comes the Person from Porlock
And takes the blame for it"***

The interaction between man and nature is a major theme for Coleridge. It's painted all over "Kubla Khan" where the unknown speaker of the poem tells of how a man named Kubla Khan travelled to the land of Xanadu, where there was a "stately pleasure-dome". Coleridge explained that he had fallen asleep after taking "an anodyne" prescribed "in consequence of a slight disposition" - the "anodyne" was opium to which Coleridge was addicted until the end of his life. On waking from his perceived psychedelic dream he composed the poem in a semi-conscious trance between 1797-1798, it being published finally in 1816. The whole poem is pervaded by an atmosphere of dream and vision. It



enchants by the vibrancy of colour, artistic beauty and sweet harmony.

***"In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round;
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery"***

This describes the palace built by Kubla Khan, the grandson of Ghengis Khan, the great ruler of central Asia.



Who was The Man from Porlock?

Coleridge had many struggles: his attempts to reconcile everyday life with his Utopian beliefs, particularly so when living in Nether Stowey where he was regarded as a spy inciting revolutionary feelings from France, as anyone would be by drawing attention to himself in flowing cape and widebrimmed hat, walking the quiet village streets; often espousing views which would have been alien to the local villagers. He was never accepted here as his wife, Sara Fricker, was. She helped teach local women to read; here there was a great divide between them. Further there was his inability to complete some of his poetry and living in a state of paralysis; his fraught relationship with Sara and the death of their infant son. Coleridge's health from childhood was poor. He had a socio-political struggle which he tried to resolve with his friend Robert Southey with whom he considered the holding of property in common ownership, as a key principle.

"Where the common ground was cultivated by common toil and its produce laid in common granaries, where none are rich because none should be poor, where every motive for vice should be annihilated and every motive for virtue strengthened". Underpinning their scheme was a melange of ideas garnered from the writings mainly of Plato, Paine and Priestley. This new Utopia would, they believed, arise from a commitment to benevolence and civil liberty, a concern for human rights and an awareness of the perfectibility of mankind. It was an ideal world they sought; perfection, yet an impossibility.

So wind back to The Person From Porlock to try to identify the subject of Stevie Smith's poem. He's clearly not a person is he? He is Coleridge's self-tormenter when he awoke from his drug-fuelled haze. He was the intruder of Coleridge's beliefs in himself and of his skill in producing lines of immense imagination; his ability to penetrate the heart of things, the deepest feelings. The Person From Porlock became his curse, his interrupter, represented Coleridge's procrastination, someone to blame when he was unable to live up to his own self-image.

Ash Farm, Culbone, Porlock is allegedly where Coleridge was staying 1797 when he was interrupted by The Person From Porlock. It's on The Coleridge Way. The views are spectacular, the walking invigorating and the couple who own the farm usually happy to chat about their own Coleridge experience.

If you like this poem you may also like "Not Waving but Drowning" Stevie Smith 1957.

Jan Simpson-Scott

Getting to Know (you)



Open Meeting - Getting To Know Spiders, Especially In Somerset by Francis Farr-Cox

The subject of the March 19th Open Meeting of the Watchet Conservation Society was "Getting to know Spiders (especially in Somerset)", presented by the Spider Recorder for Somerset. Mervyn Brown introduced Francis Farr-Cox, whom he had known when working for Wessex Water.

Since the bathroom is often the first place we meet a spider (with a shudder, perhaps) it was appropriately a picture of the Long-legged House Spider which we saw first at the start of a fascinating "meet and greet" session with spiders.

Spiders in the bath are usually there with a purpose... access to water in the trap below the plug-hole! (I had always assumed they had crawled up the waste-pipe, from outside). Unable to climb up the steep and slippery inside of the bath, there the spider often stays unless somehow removed. Mr. Farr-Cox then showed the intrigued audience a hand-made 'spider ladder', which was handed round to show how the marooned arachnid could be helped out.

Having thus made us feel quite protective towards arachnids (A.K.A. spiders), the speaker went on to ask "what sort of an animal is a spider?" and to describe the various types or Orders of arachnids, such as harvestmen and false scorpions. He





Getting to Know (you)

emphasised that spiders are not classed as insects, which generally can have wings, always have six legs and usually two compound eyes and always have three sections to the main body... Head, thorax and abdomen. By contrast spiders usually do not have wings, always have eight jointed legs, only two main body parts (head and abdomen) and have either six or eight eyes.

As to the Orders of spiders, he described the harvestmen as having a body which is recognisable as a single lump, rather than the two-part arrangement of head and abdomen typical of true spiders. They also have only two eyes, on stalks, unlike the spiders with six or eight (not on stalks).

Whereas spiders come in many sizes, the false scorpions are tiny, hard to see as they hide in soil, leaf litter and compost.

Another question frequently asked is "how many species of spider are found in Britain?" About 670 was the reply... with around 400 of these found in Somerset. One very rare species, known as the Ladybird Spider, is a legally protected species and found in Dorset but not in Somerset.

Do they all live the same way?. No. Not all make webs and catch their food in it, but however they find their prey they all digest it outside the body before sucking it in as a liquid. (Sort of 'spit on it and polish it off')!

Some spiders can be identified by their web-weaving techniques: for more

accurate specific identities, comparison of the sex organs is essential as they are individual to every different specie. There are a number of different web styles, but all are spun with the very strong and elastic spider silk. The orb web which most people associate with spiders has a very sticky area and insects once caught in it cannot escape. The garden spider spins this type of web, usually in half an hour, and by the end of the day the stickiness has done its work and the spider has had its meal. The web only lasts a day, unlike the non-sticky sheet web which entangles insects in the mass of threads and has a very long life. There are over 250 species of money spider, whose tiny size makes it capable of running about on the underside of its web, and they can be wind-blown as far as 200 yards on the end of their spider silk.

Spiders are a friendly group of creatures, given their appetite for flies and other pesky insects: surely the ultimate in eco-friendliness is the way the orb-webs when day is over are eaten up by the spiders who built them? These spiders have their gut positioned close to the silk-spinning position on the spider's abdomen. A good design, well planned!

What's not to like about these fly-eating eco-hero spiders?

Valerie Ward

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.

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Landscapes

1.

Looking east to the Quantocks.
 The earthly morning sun
 oozing silver into
 thunder grey cloud.
 Coiling up across the hillscape,
 up and away to reveal
 the far reaching curve of the hills:
 Then deep down in Bosum-cleft combs:
 the far reaching strata of rock

Hilda Cornish