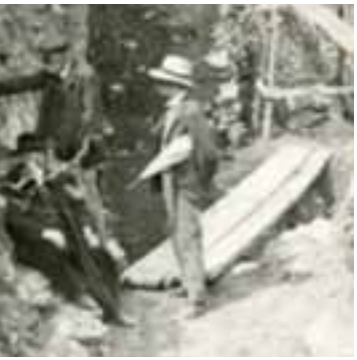
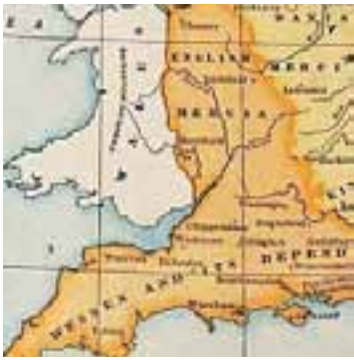
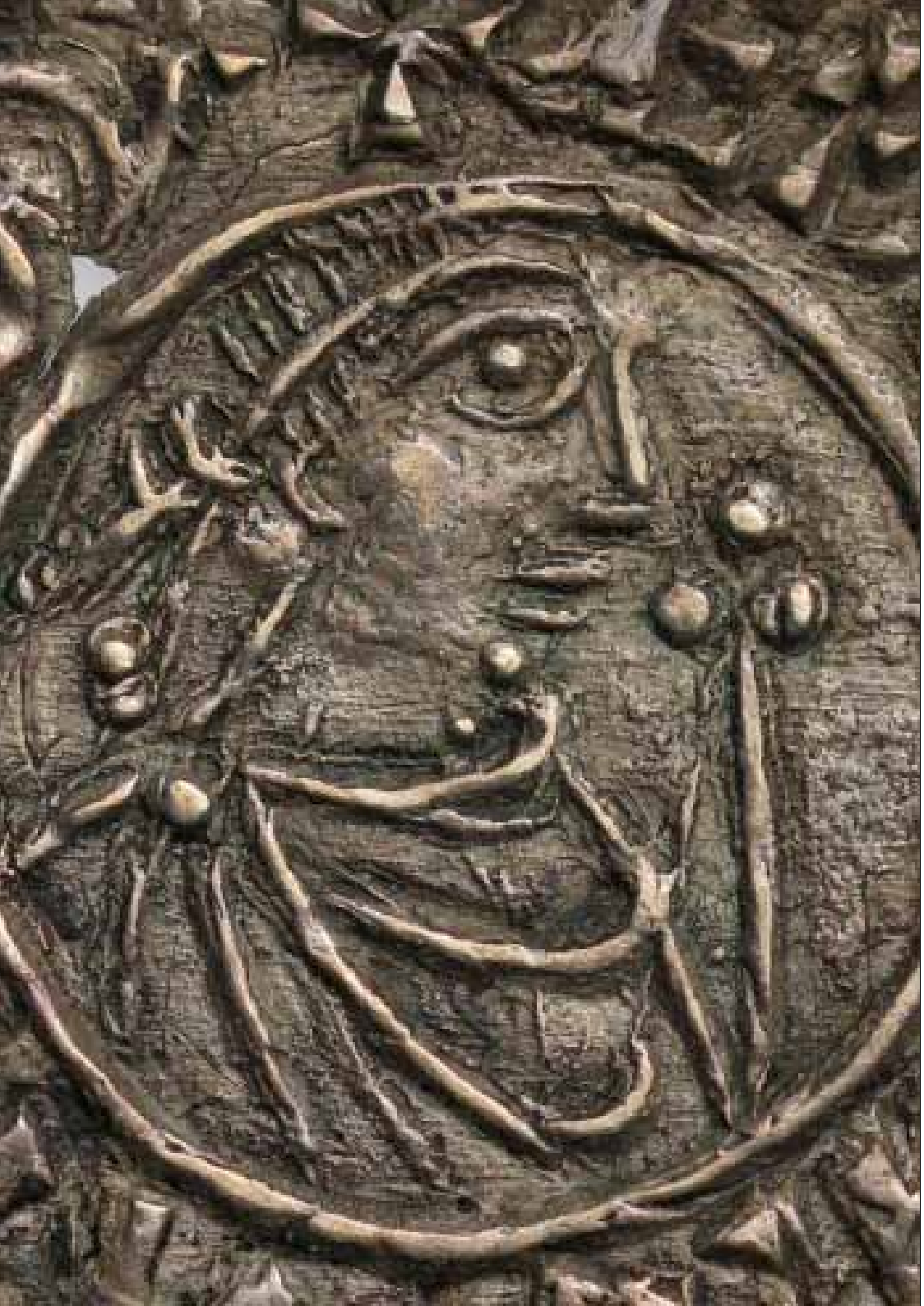




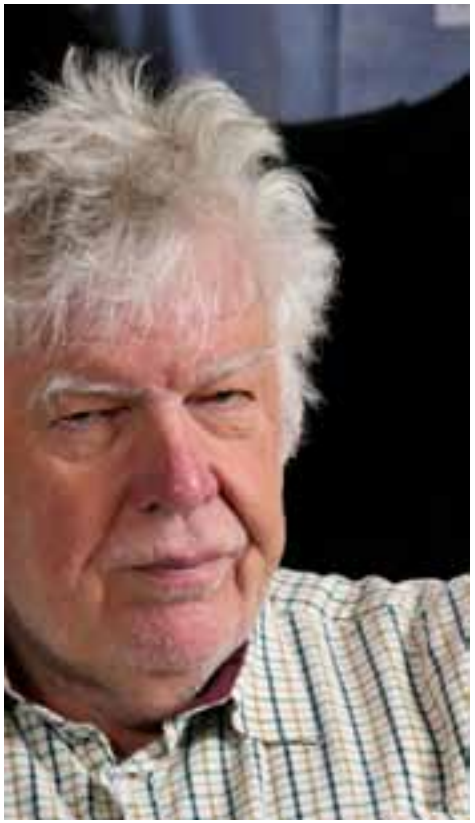
Watchet Conservation Matters

Promoting, Conserving & Improving Our Physical & Natural Environment

Issue 65 July/August 2019



From the Chairman



Dear Members,
Well hello, this handsome new portrait was taken during a photography course given by Terry Walker as part of Watchet Learns, a recent initiative to help locals learn new skills. I was asked if I could play the part of a farmer or a fisherman. It's amazing what a few days, growth can do for a chap.

As usual, 2019 proceeds at a pace, we have already passed the summer solstice and are bracing ourselves for the tourist season but also have the Carnival, Summertime and the Music Festival to come. How lucky we are to live in Watchet.

Last month we had the sad news that Jan Simpson-Scott had died, she had as most of you know been ill for some time. She had for many years been the Society's secretary and Newsletter editor, posts she filled with enormous skill and dedication, as well being a passionate and enthusiastic supporter.

Our thoughts and condolences go out to Jan's family but particularly to Dave, her husband. I am grateful to Nick Cotton who worked with Jan on the WCS committee for many years for writing such a moving and affectionate obituary.

Since Jan resigned in February 2018, we have yet to find suitable replacements and urgently need a secretary and newsletter editor if we are to continue as a society. Any volunteers would be welcome.

Our next Open Meeting should be of interest to anyone living in Watchet, particularly those in West Street.

"Watchet's Eroding Coastline. Whats at Fault?"

A talk by Andy King on Tuesday 16th July, Methodist Schoolrooms at 7.30pm.

See you there.

Bob Cramp

It was with considerable regret that the Conservation Society learnt of the death of one of the society's most loyal and active members since its inception—Jan Simpson-Scott.

I remember an early meeting many years ago when there was a discussion at Sam Westmacott's house overlooking West Street beach about the possibility of forming a conservation society to safeguard the town's history and heritage which at the time seemed under threat. Jan and her husband Dave showed considerable enthusiasm and Jan asked numerous questions before committing herself to the cause. At this period, they were fairly new to our town but it was obvious from the outset that Jan was not going to take her retirement lying down and so the case was proved in the ensuing years.

From these early years, Jan became more and more involved and as with anything that truly interested her, she threw herself at it with an intensity of purpose that I much admired. I find that nothing is more infectious than enthusiasm and she made no attempt to disguise it, embracing any new project with a dedication and interest that, at best, could be inspiring. I have to say that, additionally, if it seemed to her a little pointless, boring or uninteresting, she could quite clearly display her displeasure with a number of facial expressions that I found particularly interesting and clearly informative. I confess to finding this at times rather amusing but was terrified in case I was caught grinning and had to suffer the resultant chastisement. She had joked several times that I would do well to remember that she had been a teacher and knew how to deal with those who might be troublesome. This was typical of Jan's specific type of humour and, come on, let's be fair, she was not above a little sniggering herself.

She had a deep understanding and considerable passion for history which had been a lifelong interest, having taught it for a good number of years. My guess is that she was a good teacher, being

Jan Simpson-Scott

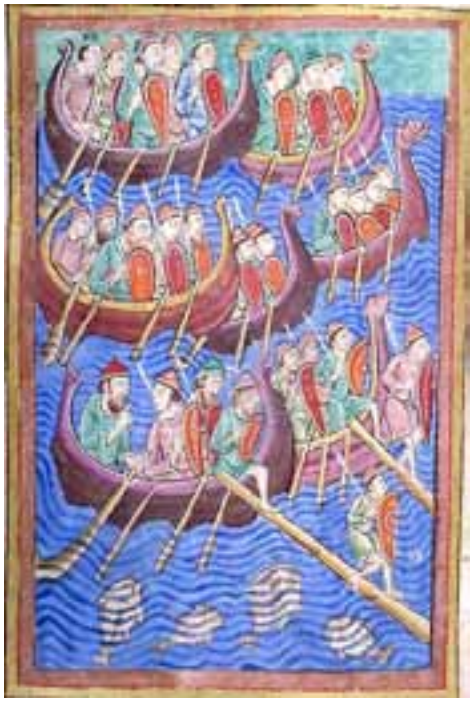
gifted at imparting information with enthusiasm to anyone who displayed an interest. She was obviously grateful that she found herself in a town that had such an extensive and fascinating history which stretched back over the centuries and could suddenly throw up new and interesting information to sustain one's curiosity. Her interest in social history was particularly rewarded as Watchet especially had, in the mid nineteenth century, a period of intense industrial expansion like no other part of West Somerset. Perhaps an even bigger passion was literature and her particular local interest was Coleridge, indeed she contributed many fascinating articles on the poet in our newsletter.

I have my own personal memories of Jan, some connected with the society but others as a friend and confidante. As far as the society is concerned, we often found ourselves working together on the same project and on occasions, in my frustration to 'get on with it', I have to admit that I could be, well, shall we say, 'difficult'? Jan had the ability to temper my enthusiasm but at the same time, in no way diminishing it which I very much appreciated. Her advice and support was very important as she quietly got on with it and doing nothing more than giving me a gentle nudge to ensure I was on top of it. These few lines are just my own memories of Jan but I know many others had reason to be grateful for her support and enthusiasm over the years and as with all organisations, there were ups and downs. There is no doubt she was a wonderful servant of the Conservation Society.

As a friend, Jan was an exceptional and patient listener, rarely giving advice but seeming to be both sympathetic, understanding and - in some ways a rather odd thing to say - always available with an eager ear. I have no desire to say anything further regarding this friendship other than I very much appreciate the time and wise counselling I received from a much missed friend.

On a sad but potentially an upbeat note, Jan and I had planned an interesting Conservation Society project this year which was to produce a publication celebrating 'Watchet's Literary and Artistic Heritage', something that she would have relished. When hearing of Jan's illness I was tempted to forget it and move on to something else. She continued however, even in the face of the inevitable, to show incredible strength of will and great fortitude which is an incredible example to everyone. I think there is little doubt she would have liked me to continue with the project and without her help, it will be difficult, but I think it would be a very worthwhile and fitting tribute to dedicate to her memory.

Nick Cotton

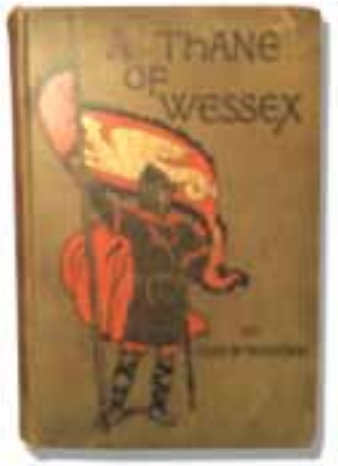


Anglo-Saxon Watchet and the Vikings

"What was that?
Very faint and far away there came up to me in the still air, for what breeze there was set from the sea to me, a chant sung by many rough voices - a chant that set my blood spinning through me, and that started me to my feet, running with all the speed I could make in the darkness to warn Watchet town that the vikings were on them! For now I knew. I had heard the "Heysaa", the war song of the Danes.

But before I could cover in the dark more than two miles I stopped, for I was too late. There shot up a tongue of flame from Watchet town, and then another and another, and the ringing of the church bell came to me for a little, and then that stopped, and up on Minehead height burnt out a war beacon that soon paled to nothing in the glare of the burning houses in the town. I could fancy I heard yells and shrieks from thence, but maybe that was fancy, though I know they were there for me to hear truly enough."

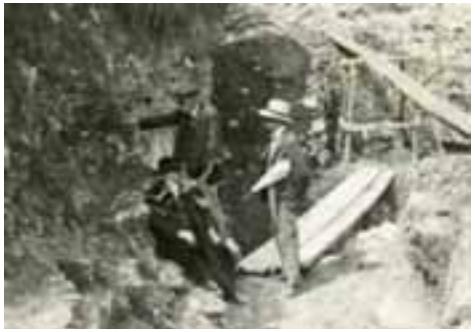
The above is an extract from A Thane of Wessex, by Reverend Charles Whistler. First published in 1896, it is a fictional account of the life of Heregar, an outlawed Anglo-Saxon thane (land-owner), who regains his prestige and land (including Watchet), via his courageous acts against the Vikings. Set in the early 800s, in Sedgemoor and West Somerset, it is the first of a series of books written by Whistler, based on the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles and the Norse Sagas.



A Thane of Wessex - Book Cover (1896)

Anglo-Saxon Watchet

Rev Whistler (1856-1913) was one of a trio of amateur historians who, at the turn of the 20th century, took a keen interest in the history of Wessex and the Viking incursions into West Somerset. Whistler was the Vicar of Stockland Bristol from 1895 to 1909, during which time he wrote the above-mentioned novels, his fellow clergyman, the Reverend William Greswell (1848-1923), was the Rector of Dodington, from 1888 to 1913, while the third of the trio, Albany Featherstonehaugh Major (1858-1925), was a retired War Office official who wrote extensively about Wessex and its conflicts. Major and Whistler were both active members of the national Viking Club (or Viking Society for Northern Research), and all three were actively involved with the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society.



Albany Major (wearing a cap) on an archaeological dig

In 1903, Rev Greswell wrote a comprehensive history of the area, entitled The Land of Quantock. He then went on to write The Story of the Battle of Edington, in 1910, and Dumnonia and the Valley of the Parret, in 1922. Dumnonia was the Roman name for the ancient British Kingdom of Cornwall, Devon, West Somerset and West Dorset – an area also referred to as Dyfnaint/Dyvnaint (from which the word Devon derives).

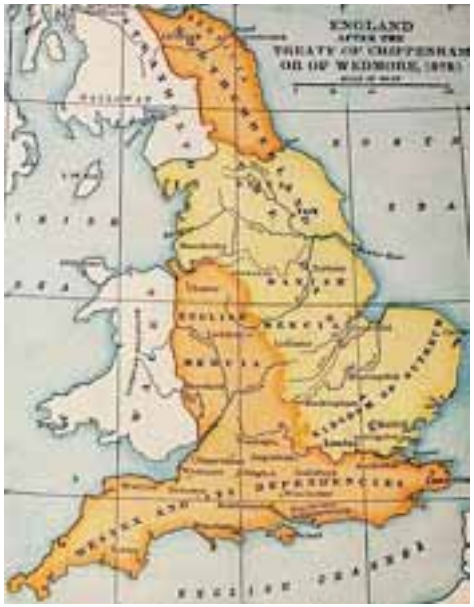
Greswell reiterated the 1875 view of Bishop Clifford of Clifton - that two significant Anglo-Saxon victories over the Vikings, in 878 (during the reign of King Alfred), the Battles of Cynwit and Edington, took place near Bridgwater. This view was not universally held, however, and Oxford University's William Henry Stevenson, writing in 1905, described Bishop Clifford's placing of the Battle of Edington on the Polden Hills, as being "of a very imaginative and unsatisfactory nature, built upon improbable assumptions, baseless identifications of sites, impossible etymologies, and shows a general lack of critical restraint." The locations of both battlefields are still disputed.

Greswell's Sketch Map of King Alfred's Campaign in 878

The Treaty Between King Alfred and King Guthrum

Anglo-Saxon Watchet

Regardless of its historic location, the Battle of Edington is viewed as one of the most important in England's history, since it resulted in King Alfred's peace treaty with Guthrum, the Viking leader, and the latter's conversion to Christianity. The treaty also created a new territory under Danish rule, known as the Danelaw, which operated separately from the rest of England, which by then had fallen under the control of Wessex. Fans of the Bernard Cornwell TV adaptation The Last Kingdom may recognise these events!



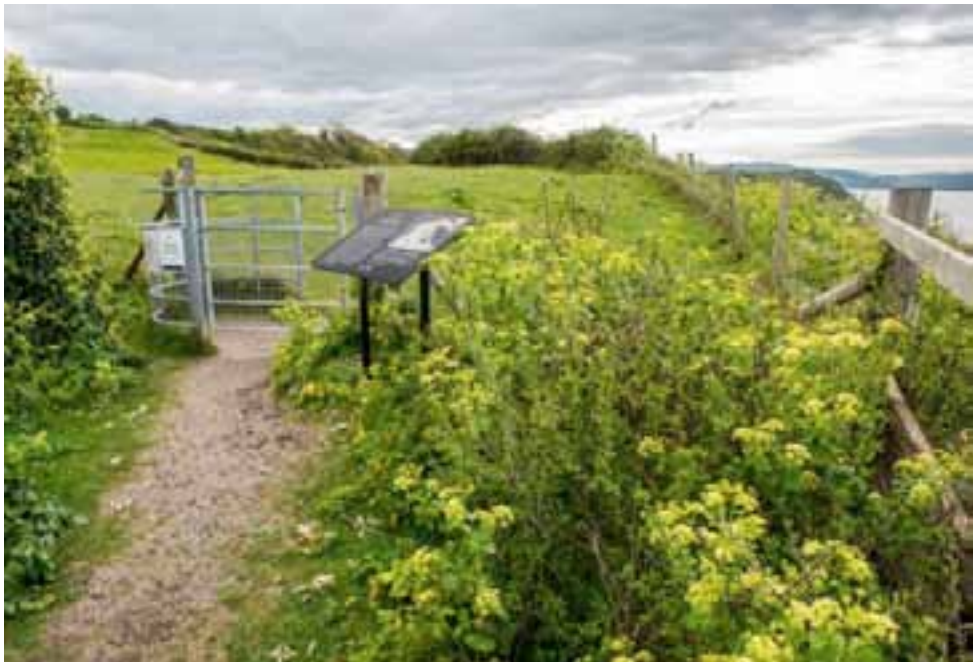
Map of England in 878 Showing the Danelaw

Albany Major's 1913 book, entitled Early Wars of Wessex, traced the development of Anglo-Saxon Wessex from its beginnings in the sixth century, to the Danish Conquest of England, in the early 1000s. It covers Wessex's westward expansion into Dumnonia / Dyvnaint, during the English Conquest of 500-700, as well as the Viking incursions which followed.

As explained in A L Wedlake's A History of Watchet (updated and republished recently, with the support of WCS), Major believed that, prior to the English Conquest, Watchet was a haven for Viking traders, who were allied with the British inhabitants of Dumnonia / Dyvnaint, against the Anglo-Saxons, at that time. According to Major's theory, the valleys of the Doniford and Washford Rivers formed important trading routes into the hinterland, with Williton "the town of the Welshmen" being the place where the Britons and Vikings traded.

Major drew evidence for his theory from various sources, including place names, the Nordic appearance of the inhabitants of the coastal communities, their customs, and even the design of their rowing boats (similar to Watchet flatners). He believed that the trading relationship, which centred around Watchet, ended as the Anglo-Saxons pushed the Britons further westwards, probably in the late 600s or early 700s.

According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, the first two Viking raids on West Somerset occurred a few miles west of Watchet, at Carhampton, in 833 (probably 836) and 840 (probably 843). Both resulted in Viking victories, and they are



Entrance to Daw's Castle (the remains of Watchet's burh)

described in Swanton's translation of the Winchester Manuscript, as follows:

"Here (833) King Egbert fought against 35 ship-loads at Carhampton; and a great slaughter was made there, and the Danish had possession of the place of slaughter. And Hereferth and Wigthegn, two bishops, passed away; and Dudda and Osmod, two ealdormen, passed away."

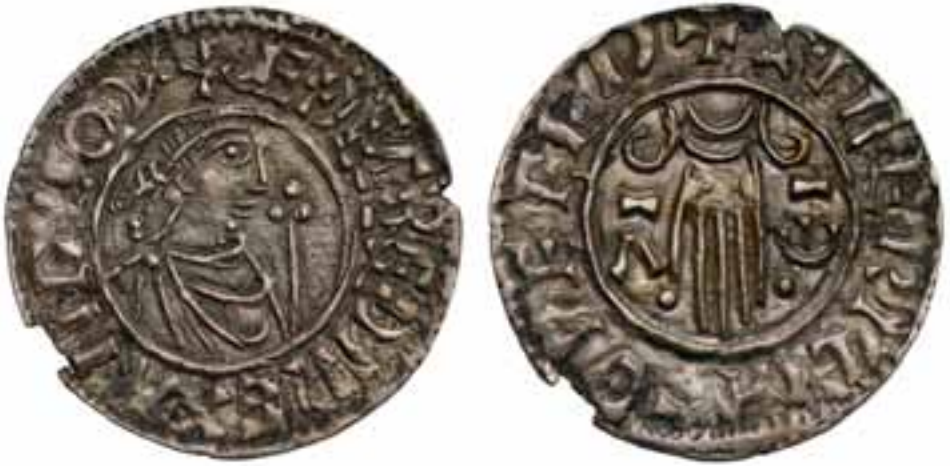
"Here (840) King Aethelwulf fought at Carhampton against 35 ship-loads, and the Danish had possession of the place of slaughter."

Another raid is said to have occurred in 845 (probably 848), at the mouth of the River Parrett - less than 15 miles to the east of Watchet:

"Here (845) Ealdorman Eanwulf with the Somerset men, and Bishop Ealhstan and Ealdorman Osric with the Dorset men, fought against a Danish raiding-army at the mouth of the Parret, and made a great slaughter there and took the victory."

A fictional account of this battle features strongly in Whistler's A Thane of Wessex, with Heregar being portrayed as a hero. Needless to say, the Vikings were defeated. Following his victory at Edington, and in

Anglo-Saxon Watchet



A Watchet coin minted between and 997 and 1003, during the reign of King Æthelred II (the Unready)

response to the ongoing Viking threat, King Alfred established a fortified settlement, or burh, at Watchet, during the 880s. It was one of 30 burhs stretching across Wessex, each of a different size, and each serving as a place of safety for locals.

According to Edward the Elder's Burghal Hideage, written in the early 900s, Watchet was granted the service of men from 513 hides, to maintain and defend the burh. A "hide" was an early unit of assessment for taxation, based on an area of land and its quality, with one hide being responsible for providing one man, to defend the burh. Watchet's burh appears to have been of a reasonable size compared to the other 29, and it was on a par with Christchurch (470 hides), Hastings (500 hides) and Langport (600 hides). The remains of the burh can be visited at Daw's Castle, on the cliff-top west of Watchet (now an English Heritage site).

Despite the existence of the burh (or perhaps because of it), further Viking raids on West Somerset continued to occur through the 900s. The Winchester Manuscript describes one such raid, on Watchet and Porlock, around 915, as follows:

"And the king had arranged so that there should be positions on the southern side of the Severn mouth from Cornwall in the west, eastwards as far as Avonmouth, so that they dared seek land nowhere on

that side. However, they then stole up by night on two certain occasions: on the one occasion east of Watchet, and on another occasion at Porlock; then on each occasion they were hit, so that few came away, except only those who swam out to the ships. And then they settled out on the island of Flatholme until the time came that they were very short of food, and many men perished with hunger, because they could not get any food. Then they went from there to Dyfed and then out to Ireland, and this was in harvest-time."

Watchet at this time must have been flourishing, since it was home to one of the first recorded vineyards in the UK. The vineyard was granted to Abingdon Abbey, by King Edgar, in 962.

Further Viking raids occurred in 988 and 997, with the Abingdon Manuscript stating that:

"Here (988) Watchet was raided, and Goda, the Devonshire thane, killed and a great slaughter with him."

While the Peterborough Manuscript states that:

"Here (997) in this year the raiding-army travelled round Devonshire into the mouth of the Severn, and there raided, both in Cornwall and in Wales and in Devon; then they went up at Watchet, and wrought great harm there by burning and by slaughtering of men..."

Watchet's attractiveness to the Vikings was almost certainly enhanced by its mint, which existed from approximately 980 (until around 1160). It was one of approximately 90 mints scattered across the country, all of which produced hammered silver pennies, the only currency denomination which

existed (half-pennies and farthings being created by cutting).

Watchet silver pennies are amongst the rarest of the period and, interestingly, there have probably been more

found in Scandinavia than in the UK – presumably as a consequence of the paying of protection money to the Danes ("Danegeld"), under King Æthelred II (the Unready). The payment of Danegeld ensured a temporary peace, from 991, until King Sweyn Forkbeard of Denmark's successful invasion of England, in 1013. Examples of Watchet minted coins can be seen in the Market House museum.

Although the paying of Danegeld and the Danish Conquest brought an end to the Viking raids on West Somerset, there was an echo of the them when Harold Godwinson, the last Anglo-Saxon King of England, looted and burned Porlock, as he travelled from Ireland to claim the English throne, in 1052. The event is described in the Peterborough Manuscript thus:

Anglo-Saxon Watchet

"Harold was then coming out of Ireland with nine ships, and then came up at Porlock; and there many people gathered to oppose him, but he did not hesitate to provide himself with food, went inland, and there killed a great part of the people and seized for himself whatever came his way in cattle, and in men, and in property, and then made his way eastward to his father..."

And in a final indication of Watchet's importance in Anglo-Saxon times, King Harold's mother, Countess Gytha, and her companions, are thought to have passed through the town on their way into exile, following the Siege of Exeter of 1068.

Mike Quint

No Comment!

Open Meeting - Watchet's Newest Museum - Tuesday 21st May by Neil Wilson

Our May meeting was about Watchet's Newest Museum. We were entertained by Neil Wilson about how he came to open the Radio Museum in Anchor Street.

Neil is an engaging speaker who works without notes, searching his distant memories for the facts and openly admitting that sometimes it is a bit hit and miss, but that didn't matter, we were all fully engaged as he told how his interest grew from tinkering with old radios picked up at jumble sales as a boy, to his move to Tropiquaria in 1988 which included the BBC Transmitting Station. The BBC as a whole didn't hang on to old equipment but to a young radio buff it was a treasure trove. In the early 1930's the BBC didn't make their own recordings and if a back up was needed they would get HMV or EMI to record for them. By 1934 the BBC decided to get their own disk recording machine (Remember this was all from memory). In 1993 the first museum opened in part of the old building - mainly rooms that were too dark and dingy for anyone else to want them.

Neil explained the complexities of making discs in the early days before the war. Amazingly Neil had some of these early discs including a 1934 recording of George Bernard Shaw, sadly this was recorded at 60rpm and couldn't be played on the equipment he had brought. The next recording dated 30/4/1947 was of the Minehead Hobby Horse going round the town sounding remarkably similar to the sound we heard just a few weeks ago. Then a 1968 recording of a Watchet Hobbler for BBC West Country, finally a surprisingly clear recording of the King's abdication speech which was recorded from 'the inside to outside' (I had never heard of that before).

Now the museum has moved to the old Anchor pub premises in Anchor Street where in addition to a wide range of 'machines' Neil has a collection of Wireless World Magazine dating back to 1917 to the present.

The museum is currently open on three days a week, Thursday Friday and Saturday. Even as a non radio buff I was absolutely fascinated by the history.

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)

The open meeting on **17th September** "Jenny Hill in discussion with Paul Upton". This re-instates the talk cancelled last year.

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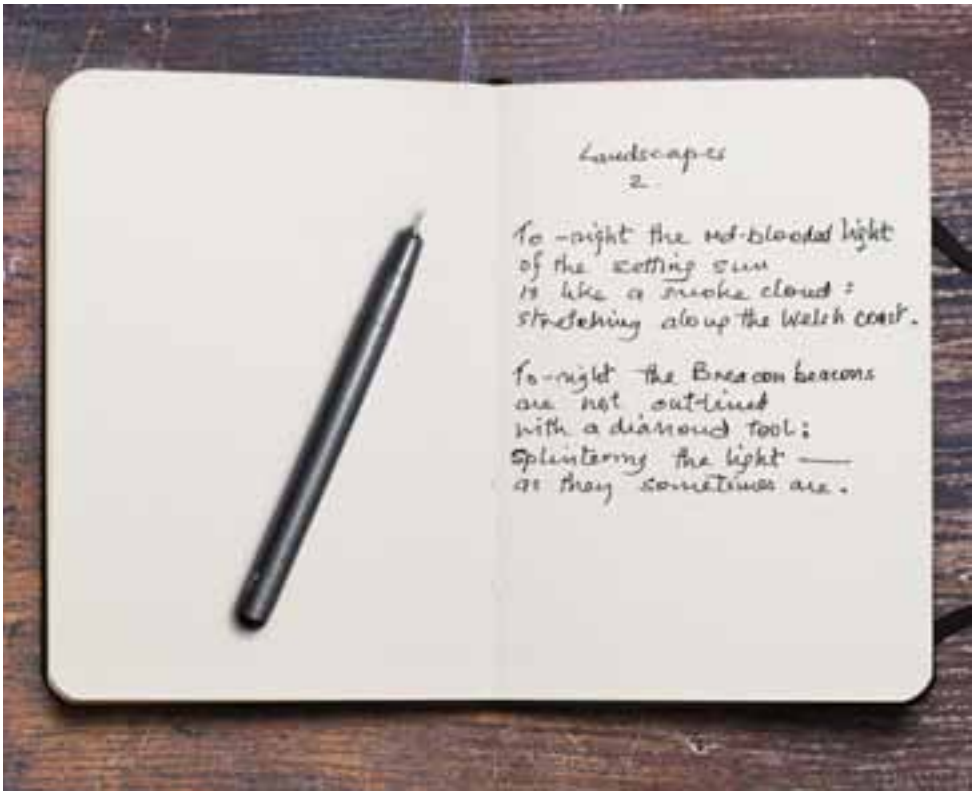

Landscapes
2.

To-night the red-blooded light
of the setting sun
is like a smoke cloud:
streching along the Welsh coast

To-night the Breacon Beacons
are not out-lined
with a diamond tool:
splintering the light—
as they sometimes are.

Hilda Cornish