



# Watchet Conservation Matters

Promoting, Conserving & Improving  
Our Physical & Natural Environment

Issue 72 March/April 2021

## From the Chairman



*Photographed in 1908 at his parents Golden Wedding, Simon with his wife Pauline, and their young family, Cyril (7) and Edith (10) (Suzettes Nan) are seated in front.*



Dear Members,  
Well, hello again. Glad you're still here. 2020 has been an extraordinary year and has, in spite of its difficulties and challenges, seemingly passed very quickly, and it's almost unbearable that a year on, we are back where we were on March 23rd last year. I was going to use a recent portrait with my lockdown hairstyle reminiscent of Dr Emmett ("Doc") Brown from the Back to The Future films, but decided against it. How much better to show myself enjoying doing what I do best, downing a pint of Landlord in the company of my friends and fellow Old Gits in Pebbles on a Sunday evening, to show some belief, hope and optimism that some sort of normality will hopefully return to our lives later this year. The vaccine rollout

continues apace, I had mine on February 3rd and although hindsight would be a great gift, I think there is reasonable cause for optimism.

One of the few benefits or delights of Covid 19 has been the stunning, clear sunrises and sunsets that we have enjoyed off our coast this summer, doubtless the result of no aircraft pollution. My fellow photographers and I have been filling our boots, Facebook has been full of them. So, at 4.00am one morning in late September I had an idea; with these wonderful images already available, it should be very easy to produce a Calendar and raise some money for the Quantock Food Bank. Due to the generosity of the photographers in sharing their images, and a donation from the WCS to subsidise the printing costs, "Sea, Sunrise and Sunsets" was produced and printed within two weeks, and thanks to our brilliant retailers, all 300 copies were sold in under six weeks and a cheque for £1000 was presented to the Quantock Food Bank in the last week of November. A selection of some of the photographs and a list of the photographers appear in a later page.

Nick Cotton has continued to use his free time to entertain and educate us via our WCS Facebook page, more recently through posts of photographs from our/ his vast archive accompanied by a very thorough historical dissertation. Our WCS Facebook group has 970 followers including nearly 100 overseas, from as far afield as the USA, Canada, Australia, France, Burma, Switzerland, Tanzania and South Africa. It is of course due to him



## From the Chairman



**Bob Cramp presents a Cheque from WCS for £1000 to Marlene Mason, Jayne Sperring and Daphne Milton of the Quantock Food Bank**

that we enjoy a flourishing affiliated WCS Facebook Hedgehog Group—read about their progress with another article from Jane Sharp.

Nick has also been extremely active in achieving a long-term ambition to re-image Splash Point into the Pleasure Ground and make it a family-friendly and a safe environment for children. Read his piece, “The Pleasure Ground”. Our Resident Bard Deanna Payne has written her usually incisive poem entitled Resolution Baby. The lead story, however, came from a completely unexpected source. I was contacted by Suzette Jones (née Blunt) who, as she is indigenous to Watchet, might well be familiar to some of you. She has supplied a wonderful story,

starting with the Bert Hole photograph, of the Golden Wedding Anniversary of John Henry Nicholas and Jane Browning Wedlake, her great-great-grandparents along with the history of the Nicholas family which she had recently researched. I was fascinated to discover that she was brought up in the house next door to mine. She has since supplied the Society with a wealth of photographs and information and has whetted the appetite of Nicholas Cotton. More to follow later.

Finally, in December, we were able to install the WCS memorial bench for Sally de Renzi Martin and unveil it in the company of her husband John. We were fortunate that with the help of the WTC we were able to site it on the Memorial Ground in the

## From the Chairman



**A Memorial Bench funded by WCS in memory of Town Councillor ,Sally de Renzi Martin was unveiled on the memorial ground.**

pinetrees overlooking the Community Centre with which she was associated for so many years. I should like to mention that Molly has continued to look after the gardening at Goviers Lane and the flower boxes on the Esplanade single-handedly. A spot of good news, the repairs to the Sea Wall have been completed and the path up from the East Quay, up to the Pleasure Ground is again open. Enjoy this newsletter, it's been a long time coming.

**Bob Cramp**

**Chairman**





## Nicholas family Golden Wedding



***The Golden Wedding of Mr and Mrs Nicholas, May 30th 1908.  
Picture by Bert Hole.***

My name is Suzette Jones (nee Blunt) and I was bought up with my sister in a multi-generational household at Number 4 Doniford Road, Watchet.

My Nan was Edith Florence Nicolas, who married Edmund Drury Binding (two well known Watchet family names). I have always loved history, especially local history and Watchet's history. It was whilst sorting through old photographs for an album for my son's 30th birthday that I embarked on an amazing family journey.

Starting with the Golden Wedding photograph: John Henry Nicholas, youngest son of James and Ann Nicholas (who ran the Bell Inn in Watchet), married Jane Browning Wedlake (daughter of Capt. Robert and Maria Wedlake) at St.

Decuman's Church on 31st May 1858. Both were members of old Watchet families. They set up home at 4 Market Street, Watchet, one of a collection of rambling old buildings demolished to make way for the Market Street car park in about 1972.

They had nineteen children of whom only eight sons and four daughters survived into adulthood. Despite being scattered over various parts of the country, every member of the family assembled in Watchet on Saturday May 30th 1908 to offer congratulations to the old couple. Bunting was put up at the Lifeboat Station (now the Library) and on craft in the harbour. The party then drove (presumably in charabancs) to Cleeve Bay Villa at Blue Anchor where their son Simon and Pauline Rachel Nicholas hosted

## Nicholas family Golden Wedding



***Mill farm—Nicholas family farm destroyed by fire 1951.***

a meal for fifty! Simon and Pauline were my great grandparents. (We know Cleeve Bay Villa as The Smugglers.) In the 1911 census, Simon is recorded as a Dairy Farmer (Home Farm being behind the Smugglers at Blue Anchor) although before that, as with many of the Nicholas men, he spent many years at sea as captain of a coastal vessel. I remember my Nan telling me how rich people used to come and stay at the Smugglers to take the sea air.

Shortly after this, Simon took on Mill Farm in Watchet, together with an associated coal business with his brother Charlie (until Charlie went to Cardiff in 1915). Stoaes Flour Mill occupied the old Watchet Mill until it was destroyed by fire on 16th July 1911. Stoaes and Sons Ltd rebuilt the flour mill, but at Bristol instead, resulting in a

loss of local jobs. Some of the old flour mill buildings were re-built and converted as extra accommodation for dairy farm use for two farms: Mill Farm run by Simon, and the adjoining Riverside Farm, run by his brother William and nephew Edwin. These were two of the four old farms in the town.

Simon died in 1948 and his son Cyril took over Mill Farm assisted by his brother Jack. In 1951, a devastating fire destroyed Mill Farm. The thatched roof had made it vulnerable. The building was replaced by Mill Farm Cottage, a bungalow with a tiled roof. Jack Nicholas was a familiar sight in Watchet; twice a day driving the Jersey cows up Anchor Street to graze in the fields at Churchfields. Cyril Nicholas ran the Milk Bar on the corner of Swain Street and Anchor Street, he made wonderful clotted cream and ice-cream in the farm dairy, which he sold there, as I'm sure a lot of Watchet residents will remember!

Riverside Farmhouse (now the home of Dr. Eric Robinson) escaped the 1951 fire. Edwin had taken over the farm from his father William after his death in 1940. He married Christobel Oaten in 1935. There is a lovely picture of Christobel and son Gerald delivering the milk by horse and cart in the early 1950s in South Road, Watchet, the milk being ladled into customers' cans - there were morning and afternoon deliveries!

Edwin died at the early age of 53, suffering from TB, possibly caught from some of his cows. A few years passed and Christobel Nicholas married for a second time, to Harry Julian. I have very happy memories of being



## Nicholas family Golden Wedding



***Twelve out of Nineteen surviving Children. Born between 1859 and 1887 (28 years): Clara, William, Henry, Charlie, Simon, Samuel, Amelia John Henry. Seated: Alfred, Juliana, John & Jane (the parents) Robert, Emma.***



***Cyril Nicholas's Milk Bar and Jack Nicholas at the back driving the Cows up to Church Fields.***



taken down the farm as a child by my Nan, Cyril and Jack's sister Edith, to see Christobel, and watching Cyril in the dairy, and also looking for Jersey calves in the barns.

At some point the farms were sold and the rented land returned to the Wyndham Estate. The dairy was demolished, the packhorse bridge leading from the farms to Christobel's, Cyril's and Jack's homes over the Washford River were replaced by a modern structure. The milking parlours have been converted into homes, part of the site is now Croft Holiday Cottages and 'new' bungalows were built in Whitehall on the site of the orchard and time, as it does, has moved on...

I would like to thank Jim Nicholas, June Sullivan, Richard Burnell and Pam Bosley, who told me she was the person who named "The Smugglers" in Blue Anchor, at the time when it was bought by Mr & Mrs Aldridge in the 1970s for their wonderful restaurant. (I had my wedding reception there as did my Mum and sister - the old family home!) It was referred to then as The Old House, which Mr Aldridge told Pam he didn't like and she suggested that smugglers used to come into the bay, and that's how the Smugglers name came about! She also put me in touch with Gerald Nicholas and his daughter Alison. Edwin and Christobel's son and granddaughter, who very kindly sent me a wonderful book written by John Samuel Nicholas, "The Nicholas Family from Watchet" - five generations from the 1750s to the present day—priceless.

***Suzette Jones***



## Watchet Hedgehogs



'Watchet Hedgehogs' group was set up in the middle of August 2020 and despite the lockdowns and restrictions due to Covid, I must say how positive the last five months have been for the hedgehogs in Watchet! Our Facebook page now has 315 followers and we have several local people who do not do Facebook but are part of the group.

Members of the group have asked for advice, given advice, and offered to help out in different ways. They have taken poorly hedgehogs to Secret World Wildlife Rescue (a 50 mile round trip!) or to Hoglets Hedgehog Rescue at Sampford Brett. They have been using their craft skills to make hedgehog gifts, offered excess cat food, collected small shallow dishes for rescued hedgehogs, donated heat pads, or helped each other with various hedgehog related problems.

A fundraising campaign for Hoglets Hedgehog Rescue (run by Louise and Simon Dunn at Sampford Brett), raised over £600, part of which has already gone towards vital equipment and food (not human!), which has helped Louise to care for and release hedgehogs back into the wild. We purchased a microscope for Louise from the monies donated from members of the group. She will now be able to check hedgehog faeces samples on a regular basis.

To date, there are at least twelve new hedgehog nest boxes put in gardens since the group began, and it is hoped that more people will put out new hedgehog boxes, or make suitable areas for hedgehogs in their gardens in the months to come.

## Watchet Hedgehogs

Over 70 sightings of hedgehogs have been recorded on the Watchet Hedgehog map. These have also been recorded with the Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC). I will soon be giving you instructions on how you can report your own sightings with SERC.

So, in just five months you can see how much has been achieved. I hope that 2021 will enable us to involve young people in the locality with projects and so ensure that the next generation learns all about our iconic little creature, the hedgehog, and help spread the word so that it does not become extinct.

We will shortly be coming up to the time when hedgehogs come out of hibernation. They will be very hungry and thirsty, so please make sure you put out food (cat biscuits or wet food – meaty flavour only) and plenty of water.

If you have any questions about the group, or hedgehogs in general please phone me.

**Jane Sharp**  
**01984 639428, 07918 603059**







**Auxiliary Coastguards original lookout. Left to Right—Bert Binding, Graham Coggins, Howard Jordon, Ray Eveleigh, Bill Peppin, Bernard Bull (CG Officer), Colin Bull, Walt Donaghy, Nigel Swimburne, Jack Parsons.**

The Pleasure Ground occupies an impressive position high above the harbour and town and played a significant part in Victorian Watchet from its establishment in 1862. A.C. Osborne Hann, in her book of 1927 simply entitled 'Somerset', writes: "Watchet, that quaint higgledy-piggledy town which is more like a foreign quay than any other place I know of. Here the houses seem to have been dropped willy-nilly from the skies, falling north, south, east or west with careless unconcern." It is hard to think of a more apt description of our town and harbour, and she must surely have been standing on the Pleasure Ground in order to make these very acute observations.

The Market House Museum has the original painting included in its collection by the

celebrated artist A. Heaton Cooper who was commissioned to produce a watercolour to complement the author's observations. He captures perfectly the essence of Watchet in his distinctive style. Looking down today on the East Quay, it is hard to believe that it was once a popular sandy beach enjoyed by generations of locals. It is not difficult to imagine the wonder and excitement there must have been as Yard Beach gradually disappeared under the rubble and stone that was being removed from the cutting that would enable the arrival of Brunel's broad-gauge railway, changing Watchet's fortunes dramatically.

There can be little doubt that Watchet has developed a unique identity through many centuries of change - from the Viking

intrusions in the tenth century to the latest chapter of the 21st century. As I write, the new East Quay development is reaching for the sky and this distinctive building will dominate the Quay, and as with all new contemporary build, it will be loved by some and loathed by others. The tall ships, the Mineral Railway, the railway trucks and engines that were so much part of the town's everyday sights, sounds and smells during its industrial heyday are now sadly consigned to history.

The Marina, which opened with such high expectations despite the reservations of the majority of residents, is now in the year of the pandemic a rather depressing sight. Many were the boats and yachts that filled the marina in its first few years, but gradually they have gone, one by one, leaving not much more than a handful of forlorn-looking, mud-spattered survivors sitting on the ever-increasing old enemy, the Channel mud. The tidal gate has long since ceased to work and has been removed. And so the worst fears of those who campaigned so fiercely against it being built have come to pass; the marina has proved to be the white elephant that was predicted. It is not all doom and gloom however and perhaps there may be some hope for the future as there are possible solutions - it would not be the first time in the town's history that it had triumphed over adversity.

It is from the vantage point of the pleasure grounds that arguably our greatest English painter and first true impressionist, Joseph Mallord William Turner, stood to sketch the harbour as it was in 1811 having, with

George Cooke (the engraver of Turner's drawings), been commissioned to produce the publication, "Picturesque Views on the Southern Coast of England".

It seems more than likely a century before Turner's visit that Daniel de Foe may well have found himself in a similar position and observed and recorded the town in a rather damning way. Brushing aside his criticisms however, it is worth recording his observations just a short distance away on the beach at what must have been Hellwell Bay. There, he observed: "walking on the shores at Watchet I discovered among the large gravel great numbers of stones, fluted in imitation of shells of fishes of all kinds. Some I have seen as broad as a pewter dish, and again others no bigger than a peppercorn....they be there in great plenty".

How many writers, poets and artists who have stood in this same spot cannot be calculated. It is not difficult to imagine Coleridge and Wordsworth on the cliff edge looking towards Wales and seeing the Flatholm lighthouse illuminating the night sky.

The often-quoted opening lines of the Ancient Mariner are said to be the perfect description of Watchet. Of course, we didn't have a lighthouse until 1862, a good time after Coleridge visited. In the age of principal illumination being by candle or rushlight, the beacon of Flatholm would have been a dramatic and arresting sight in the night skies of Coleridge and Wordsworth's time.



***Coastguard Officers assigned to Watchet.***

This piece of land has afforded the most significant viewing point for centuries and was gifted to the people of Watchet by the trustees of the will of Lord Egremont (George Wyndham) following the arrival of the railway in 1862. The term 'gifted' is perhaps misleading. Paul Upton states in the updated History of Watchet "The land for the Pleasure Grounds was gifted to Watchet by the trustees of the will of Lord Egremont (George Wyndham). The term gifted is perhaps misleading as the land remained in private ownership but was made use of and maintained by the people of Watchet until it was bought from the Wyndham Estate by Commander Copp in 1984." Fairly soon after it came into the town's possession, an octagonal timber refreshment kiosk was erected and must have been a popular destination for residents and visitors alike. It was known as

the Beehive and in addition, several benches were installed on the perimeter - the artist's impression gives some idea of how it might have appeared. Kelly and other directories mention the Pleasure Grounds from the 1870s and it seems likely it would have continued in use until an act of arson during the Edwardian period burnt it down. The Pleasure Ground with the Beehive Tearoom regularly appears in maps and guides and directories until the First World War. There is no indication of a structure after this date so we must assume it was not rebuilt.

The Beehive has a strong connection with the Date family and it appears in many photographs by James Date. Mrs Elizabeth Date with her sister ran the refreshment rooms in Swain Street which were sited to the left of the entrance to Esplanade Lane. The 1901 census shows that Elizabeth Date,

aged 56, was the wife of John Date, aged 54, who was a coal and corn merchant in Swain Street. Their daughter Lydia, aged 24, was the 'refreshment room assistant' at this date but the directory of 1906 shows that Lydia had then taken over from her mother. The Pleasure Ground is rather inaccessible today and it seems inconceivable that the water needed to make all the cups of tea that no doubt would have been in much demand in high season was carried by hand. Of course, 'the dip' that needs to be negotiated from the old 'Recreation Grounds' was as flat as a pancake and would have extended some considerable distance beyond. It would have been no problem for a horse and trap to make the journey from the Swain Street tearooms. Coastal erosion has had the most dramatic effect on this particular area of land and will sadly continue to do so. On some old maps, just beyond the bridge on the seaward side, a drinking fountain is indicated perhaps suggesting that a supply of drinking water was close by. Until it fell into private hands, the Pleasure Ground was maintained by the Council and was regularly cut, as remembered by a retired council worker who was tasked with mowing it, and had no problem with access to it at that time.

The main feature that people remark on when visiting for the first time is the distinctive white building that reflects the light so strongly on a sunny day and from some considerable distance both on land and sea. It has been wonderfully adapted to serve as a telephone transmitter for our mobile phones with 'nautical' additions that are so appropriate for our maritime heritage. It might be possible to guess its

original purpose, positioned as it is, high above the town, and affording excellent views across the Severn Sea (as Wordsworth and Coleridge would have referred to what we now know as the Bristol Channel). Built originally of red brick, it served as the coastguard lookout until 1982 when the coastguard were relocated to the familiar position they occupy today on the Esplanade. Local resident Graham Coggins recalls it well as he served some thirty years with this important organization, which has been responsible for rescuing and saving people's lives as long as we can remember. He spent a good many nights no doubt peering into the rough weather that we have suffered to our cost over the centuries. I am grateful for the photograph he has allowed me to use featuring the early days of the lookout, and he has furnished me with the names of Watchet stalwarts, himself included, who are posed standing in front of the newly built lookout.

There are also visual memories of the Second World War here, in the form of two old gun emplacements although the one on the Pleasure Ground has been concreted over. To the right of the path that takes you to Splash Point, the other is clearly visible but hangs dangerously suspended over the rock armour and the beach. These were built in considerable numbers along our coast and a number were interesting enough to have attracted Grade II listing.

Until recently, this historic piece of the town's history had sadly fallen into a state of neglect. The site is now administered by the 'Pleasure Ground Group', an independent local group





## Pleasure Ground



affiliated to the Watchet Conservation Society. The present owner John Richards makes no charge to the group and has generously taken on the responsibility of insuring the site. There was an area that was a cause for concern for both members of the group and residents, an unprotected edge that had a sheer drop to the East Quay. The first priority of the group was to secure this area and thanks to the generosity of local residents, finances were raised and Victorian style railings were made and installed by Watchet artist/blacksmith Ben Horrobin. Ben gave his services and undoubted skill for free as his personal gift to Watchet. Within the railings, a cast GWR bench has been donated which seems very appropriate as it has a direct link to the arrival of Brunel's broad gauge arriving in the town in 1862. The Conservation Society a few years ago planted an orchard here and, despite its exposed position, the trees are doing well.

It is from the Pleasure Ground that you can access Splash Point on a short cliff path that

takes you past the old gun emplacement to the restored harbour wall breached in 2020 and new steps to the beach. Just beyond, there was once a small tidal pool called 'Penny Pool' that would have echoed to the delighted shrieks and squeals of happy children, but all traces are gone.

There can be no better place to sit and watch the sun go down over the town and harbour than the Pleasure Grounds, imagining all those who have done the very same thing over the centuries. Although there have been changes and there will be more in the future, the Watchet sunsets are constant and timeless and as the day gives way to night and the bats are flying, the stars on a clear night are the very stars that our ancestors marveled at as they turned their gaze to the heavens - countless generations to come will see the very same as we see today.

**Nick Cotton**

## Report on Sea, Sunrise & Sunsets Calendar



The WCS agreed to pay for 50% of the production costs to enable the Calendar to be made available for a £5 Donation.

The production of this Calendar was achieved in just over two weeks. This was due to the generous and rapid response from my fellow Watchet photographers in supplying their images.

The Photographers: Johnny Abbot Garner, Bob Cramp, Liz Elmont, Peter Mather, Paul Scullion, Terry Walker, Gillian Wells, Paul Wells.

Jason Robinson, (Best Before End) in designing and getting 300 rapidly printed.

The support of our wonderful local retailers in selling all copies in under six weeks: Alcombe, Watchet and Willerton Post Offices, the Spa in Liddymore Rd, The Veggie Patch and Alberts Hardware.

Most importantly, a big thank you to you, the people of Watchet, who supported the project and purchased the calendars.

I was able to present a cheque for a Thousand Pounds to the Quantock Food Bank at the end of November.

**Bob Cramp**



*Covid-sunset*

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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**Watchet Conservation Society**

[www.watchetconservationsociety.co.uk](http://www.watchetconservationsociety.co.uk)

**Chairman, Acting Secretary**

Bob Cramp

07989 723183

[bob2cramp@gmail.com](mailto:bob2cramp@gmail.com)

**Vice-Chairman**

Nick Cotton

[lyndacotton@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:lyndacotton@yahoo.co.uk)

**Treasurer & Membership Secretary**

Lucy Corellett-Shaw

07967 100706

[lucycorlett@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:lucycorlett@yahoo.co.uk)

**Newsletter Editor**

Dave Evans

07565 765957

[devanscephs@gmail.com](mailto:devanscephs@gmail.com)

**Minutes Secretary, Press Officer**

Valerie Ward

**Case Work Consultant**

Phil Gannon

**Committee**

Molly Quint

Nick Cotton

Jason Robinson

Mervyn Brown

Loretta Whetlor

Rob Hutchings

Dave Evans



### **Resolutions baby!**

They seem to have resolved to put on a few pounds,  
That guy's resolved to get buff and thin,  
And this lady resolved to be more confident  
In whichever outfit she puts her self in.

Your Dad has decided to give up smoking,  
The shop staff have all gone out for a run.  
My neighbour's resolved to get better at chess  
And he can't, so he's resolved to tell no one!

The church have resolved to raise more funds,  
The kids have resolved to achieve better grades.  
The players have resolved to make more shots  
And the goalie has resolved better saves!

The baker has resolved to go vegan  
The butcher's resolved to make cakes  
Together they're determined to make nut loaf  
taste beefy  
Resolved to do whatever it takes

The spy has resolved to go sailing  
They says that the sea makes them calm  
And the sailors now involved with  
neighborhood watch -  
They've got their hands on a motion-sensor alarm!

Bus drivers are taking up cycling,  
Over 40s yoga is looking intense  
The teenager next door must have taken up  
hurdling  
You should see how he hops over a fence

Everyone has resolved to be better  
At their own arbitrary, ordinary passion  
And those who can't resolve without a little help  
Tend to follow general resolution fashion

They resolve to do this and resolve to have that  
And resolve to do it all before tea  
And as much as I admire a well meaning resolution  
It just doesn't sit right with me.

I've tried many times to have a resolution  
"This year is the year" I will say  
But I make myself mad when it goes down hill  
And it's all gone pear shaped by the May

So I have resolved not to have a resolution  
I have resolved to just go with the flow  
I'm resolving to be peaceful in times of strife  
And if I manage it, I'll resolve to let you know!

### **Deanna 'Twitch' Payne**