

**This is the first draft of the result of research on Watchet Council Chambers and Offices. There is clearly much more to discover. We would welcome any alterations, corrections or additions from readers. Please do not reproduce or copy any of the text or photographs as some may be subject to copyright. PU & NC**

## Watchet Council Chamber and Offices



The Watchet Council Chamber is a small single storey building attached to The Old Court House, No 5 Swain Street, comprising a chamber, an office, a small kitchen and toilet. It stands as a modest memorial to the strong and determined people of Watchet in the face of great adversity arising from the great storm of December 1900.

The property is rendered and painted white with a slate roof, with scalloped clay ridge tiles. The chamber and entrance hall form the main structure, with the offices in a lean-to structure at the rear. There are two double-casement windows to the front, with smaller-paned opening lights above. The entrance door is on the right, with similar lights above. The windows and door are surmounted by applied voussoirs

The Council Chamber and Offices are grade II listed under the same listing as No 5 Swain Street as, at the date of listing (1982), they were under the same ownership. The listing text states that the Council Chamber was added to the main house circa 1860. This is certainly wrong. A photograph of about that date shows a much earlier thatched building that adjoins a building to the right where number 6 Swain Street now stands.



A postcard with a postmark of 1906 (which may be from a photograph of an earlier date) shows a different building with two storeys and a central door. The slate roof and scalloped ridge suggest that this probably formed the basis of the present building.



The Local government Act of 1894 replaced various local government and church bodies with Rural and Urban District Councils and civil parishes. Watchet became part of Williton Rural District Council. Within that it was the Watchet Ward of St Decumens Civil Parish. Watchet Harbour continued to be administered by a board of commissioners.

Much of the town was still owned by the Wyndham Estate at that time, most of the residents and tradesmen being tenants. The property now known as the The Old Court House (No 5 Swain Street) and the building which became the council chamber was no exception. The house was called Myrtle Cottage, although this was almost certainly a nineteenth-century romantic name as it was clearly a house of some importance, not a cottage. There were, however myrtle bushes at the front (there is still a small one). In the mid nineteenth century the tenant was James date, the well-known photographer. There are photographs of him in his studio and in his garden, but it is not known where in the



Major work had taken place in the harbour at Watchet during the second half of the nineteenth century, and, although iron ore mining had ceased by the end of the century, the port was still thriving. The paper mills and Stoates flour mills were major users, and most of the employment in the town depended on it directly or indirectly. The harbour had suffered much damage over the years, but none as great as that which took place on December 27th and 28th 1900. A massive storm destroyed the western breakwater and then subsequent gales partially destroyed the eastern pier. Many vessels were lost, and the livelihood of a large proportion of Watchet's population was threatened. It was a desperate situation. £16000 was required for the repair of the harbour, and the commissioners had no means of raising that amount. However, undaunted, a group of committed townsfolk found a way. They decided to apply to form an Urban District Council which would replace the commissioners be able to borrow the money on the security of the harbour revenue and the general district rate.

The Watchet Ward of the Parish Council had held its meetings in the Castle Hall which had been the Methodist Chapel until the present one was built. The minute of their meeting on 30 April 1901 says:

*"A meeting of the ratepayers of the Watchet Ward was held here this day for the purpose of furthering the question of forming an Urban District Council for Watchet.  
Mr A V Horne - Chairman"*

After negotiations lasting a year (5 April 1902), the minutes record:

*"The Returning Officer, Mr Thomas Boyce, produced the Order of the Somerset County Council dated 31st day of December 1901 and known as "The Watchet and Williton Order 1901" constituting the Urban District of Watchet and also an Order of the Local government Board dated 1st day of March 1902 called "The County of Somerset Watchet and Williton Confirmation Order 1902" which confirmed the said Order of the county council."*

*Thus one of the smallest UDCs in the country was formed.*

The new Urban District Council held its first meetings at Castle Hall. The first councillors elected by the ratepayers of Watchet were:

Stephen Allen  
Alfred George Copp  
William Escott  
Llewelin Hole  
Alfred Organ  
Arthur B L Pearse  
George Gooding Pole  
James Stoate  
William Stoate  
Evan Thomas  
Robert John Thorne  
James Wedlake

They met for the first time on 15 April 1902 at The Castle Hall and elected James Stoate as chairman.

They then advertised for and appointed the following staff:

Town Clerk (Solicitor)	Frank Risdon
Medical Officer of Health	Dr Linden
Inspector of Nuisances, Highway and Sanitary Surveyor	Gowen Hunt
Rate Collector	Willie Lee
Harbour master	Captain Watts
Harbour Signalman	Charlie Sully

Repairs to the harbour were commenced, resulting in the structure that we see today. Unfortunately before the work was completed, the sea did further damage and the final sum was towards £25000.

Later that month, Mr Oxenham, the proprietor of the Central Hotel in Swain Street (the brick building which now houses "Green Undertakings" etc) offered the council the use of his coffee room as a council chamber when required, and a sitting room upstairs as a permanent office – both for £10 per annum. The Central Hotel was a temperance house, which would have suited many of the councillors who were staunch Methodists and opposed to all consumption of alcohol.

In June 1907, the council received an offer from Mr A V Horne of the tenancy of "the premises at The Cross lately occupied by Mr James Davis". Mr Horne was presumably the agent for the Wyndham Estate. The offer included the whole of Myrtle Cottage and the present council chamber building. They agreed to a lease of 21 years, but requested that Mr Horne make several alterations including a new lavatory in the previous washroom (what is now the kitchen), a new overmantle to the fireplace and a new wainscot in the meeting room. It is not clear whether the conversion from the previous two-storey building into the present single storey structure had already taken place.

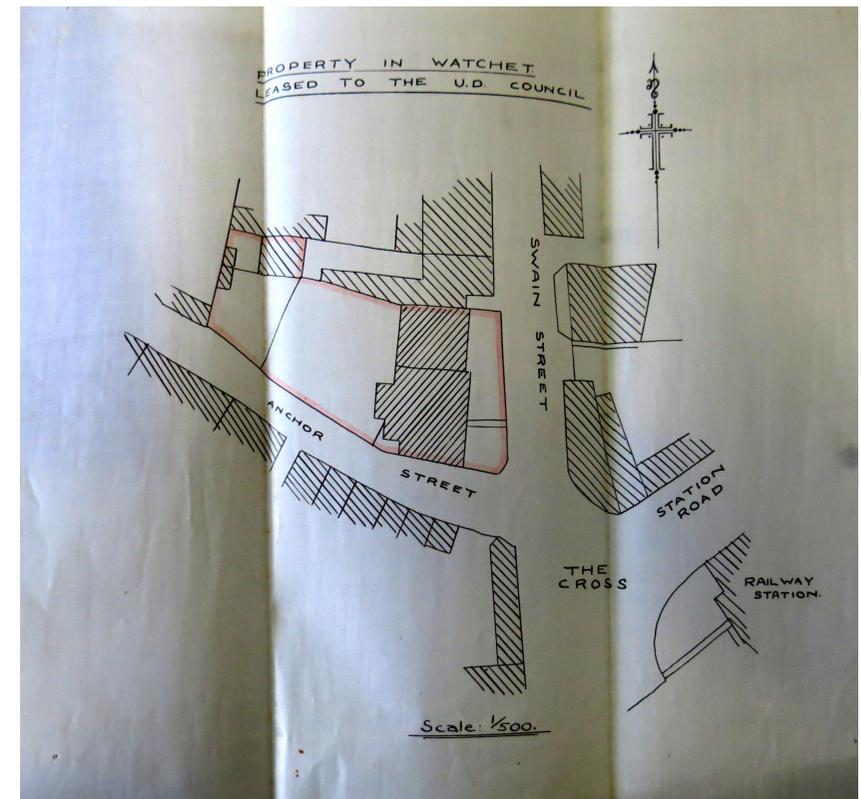
Photographs taken soon after this show a building much as it is today, but with the wall and railings as they had been in earlier days.



The main house comprised living accommodation and offices. The room to the right as the house is entered was the UDC office, with a door through to the meeting room emerging beside the fireplace. This fireplace shared a chimney stack with the house's. It was to this office that Watchet residents remember going for their ration books during the war.

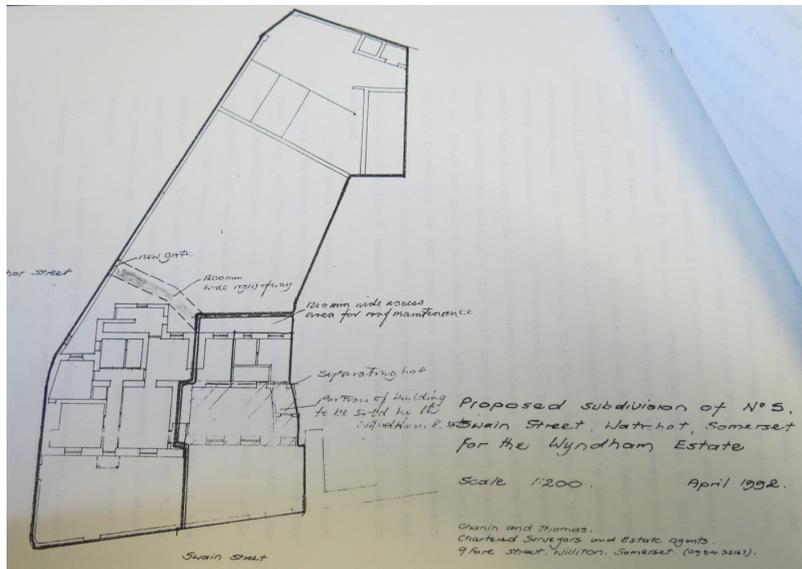
In 1911 Watchet suffered yet another disaster. Stoates flour mill was destroyed by fire and the company decided not to rebuild but to move to Bristol. At a stroke, the harbour trade was reduced and the UDC had to cut its costs. The harbour master, who by this time was Alfred Norman, and other staff left. Gowen Hunt took on the role of harbour Master in addition to his other duties. He continued his many duties until 1940.

Gowen Hunt (whose grand-daughter, Jennifer Hill still lives in Watchet) was an effective and talented man who was responsible for many improvement schemes in the town. He had been a ship's purser before working for the UDC. When appointed, he lived with his family at Myrtle Cottage



The Urban District Council continued the tenancy of the whole property until its dissolution in 1974 when, with the Local Government Act, the West Somerset District Council was formed with Watchet Town Council as the minor authority. The District Council had offices in Williton, but continued to share the Watchet property with the Town Council and some District Council employees worked there. In 1979, the Town Council renewed the lease with the Wyndham Estate for another 21 years at a rent of £750 per annum.

In December 1992 the property was divided and sold. For £8,500, the Town Council purchased the meeting room, the paved area in front of it, the rooms to the rear, and a small amount of garden. The doors from the main house were blocked up. The remainder was sold to Mr Peter Douglas Capper, who renamed it The Old Court House (he may have had some historical evidence for that name—further research required). The Town Council retained ownership of and responsibility for the clock which had been installed to celebrate the Coronation Of Queen Elizabeth II.



Building works took place the following year to improve the office facilities and further refurbishments were made in 2001 when disabled access was improved.

## Outside the Chamber



Photographs from the early days of the urban District Council show the cast plaster sign which still adorns the front elevation (sadly damaged in the bottom right corner). The words "URBAN DISTRICT" have been overpainted with the word "TOWN". The above 1940s photograph shows a telephone kiosk beside a myrtle bush. The Victorian iron railings are still in situ. In the 1960s, the kiosk and the railings were still there, and the clock sits proud on the roof.





More recently a plaque marking the contribution of members of the Royal Air Force who died for their country was affixed to the building. A stone commemorating the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II was erected—the work of local sculptor, David Milton. The paved area provides a popular seating area for residents and visitors alike.

To the rear of the offices there is a very small piece of ground giving access for maintenance and escape from fire (through the window).



## Inside the Chamber

### Synchronome Electric Clock

Experimentation with electric clocks were first surprisingly in the 18<sup>th</sup> century but were not that successful and is not until a clock-maker, a Scot, Alexander Bain applied for a patent in 1841 when they were considered as a serious option to the mechanical clock. In the latter years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the coming of mains electricity electric clocks became a considered alternative and in 1895 Frank Hope Jones established a company for the production of Synchronome Electric Clocks. This new innovation allowed a 'master' and 'slave' system which meant that the master clock could service a number of slaves, in effect a large number of subsidiary clocks, which would be highly beneficial in factories, municipal buildings, offices and other similar enterprises maintaining a constant and reliable method of exact time keeping. There can be few examples remaining that still serve the local community and we are fortunate that our 'Synchronome' clock is still effectively in service. The master clock still effectively overseeing our local council proceedings and its slave housed in the distinctive and possibly unique town clock almost certainly celebrating the Coronation of our present monarch.



## Porch Tiles

The high fired floor tiles in the entrance porch are typical of numerous and varied examples still remaining in Watchet today. Consisting of various colours and shapes they make up an interesting geometric pattern and are found in hallways, fireplaces and occasionally the pathway to a front door. This type of tile dates from 1885 until about 1920 and it is safe to assume these were laid post 1902. It would normally be assumed that they would have been manufactured in Staffordshire although I have a theory seeing similarities to bricks used in Watchet at this date that they may have their origins in the Ebbw Vale Brickworks although further research to verify this is required.



## The Fireplace

Dating from the first decade of the twentieth century the fire place and surround would have been made and fitted when the Urban District Council first met in this re-furbished building. To one side is a portion of the dado rail which is contemporary with the fireplace. The cast iron grate is inset with green glazed tiles in the art nouveau style popular at this date. The wooden surround and mantle is of 'American' walnut and the carved and inset motif consists of a shield with original hand painted coat of arms of the town supported by stylised well carved dolphins and anchors befitting our maritime heritage.



## The Chairpersons Chair

This curious and slightly bizarre chair was the gift of V.E.Danby to the council in 1942 when he was a serving councillor and has a plaque to the effect. The chair is considerably older than the date on the plaque and would date from c. 1890. It can be termed loosely as being colonial and probably has its origins in India. I am reliably informed that Mr Danby had an antique and second hand business in the property Swain House now a boutique bed and breakfast.

## The Councillors Table

Made of good quality mahogany has in recent times been restored essentially removing both its history and integrity which is a shame as it was almost certainly where the councillors attended their first meeting in this building.



The 'Woolie', Ship Portrait, E Binding



Although of no relevance to the chambers it was donated by E. Peppin in 1963.

Often called 'Woolies' this is a lovely example of a particular type of folk art associated with the ports and harbours of our shores. These ship portraits usually embroidered in wool but sometimes in silk as this example is. Dated 1914 it is rather late and near the end of their popularity as sail was rapidly giving way to steam.

These were made by sailors often on sea voyages with a little spare time on their hands. Exuding charm in their naivety the sailor produced many such items in various materials most notably scrimshaw and not surprisingly usually depicting ships. Sailors of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth would of necessity be well versed in the skill of needlework and having the necessary items for creating such objects to hand from their ditty box. Often the result of their labour would find a good home with a wife or sweetheart on their return to port. Wool and silk pictures of this type were produced from mid nineteenth century and it has been suggested the inspiration came from Chinese silk pictures purchased by sailors in Hong Kong when following the first opium war the Treaty Ports were opened to the West in 1842.