



WATCHET CONSERVATION MATTERS

For conserving our built and natural environment

Issue 18 September/October 2011

From our Chair, Molly Quint:

Dear Friends and members

This has been a busy Summer for Watchet, weather very English, but when the good days arrive they are very, very good. At the end of July we had Watchet Summertime, a new weeklong event, commencing with the

10th anniversary of the opening of the Marina, fireworks and all, then many events on the Esplanade & around the town, Our Pool Fun Evening included, which was great fun but rather windy and chilly, many children taking part and many boats sailing across the pool, many thanks to everyone helping and taking part. Do please come to our Open evening on the 20th September we would love to see you.



Pool Fun Day Craft Work

Yours very sincerely, Molly Q.

Forthcoming Events:

Tuesday September 20th 2011, 7.30 pm Watchet Methodist Schoolroom, Harbour Road

'Brunel's Broad Gauge Railway at Watchet 1859 to 1900'

An illustrated talk by Chris Saunders

The famous I.K.Brunel visited Watchet on a number of occasions in the 1850s to survey the proposed new harbour and several railway projects.

His legacy is the West Somerset Railway from Norton Fitzwarren to Watchet harbour. We will cover some of his major achievements and in particular the Broad Gauge Railway using historic photographs.

All are welcome and admission is free



Annual General Meeting: November 22nd at the Phoenix Centre 7.30pm

As well as carrying out the usual business of winding up this year's formalities, there will be some fun as well. We do hope as many members as possible will attend, refreshments are planned and there might even be a glass of wine! Molly or Jan would love to hear from any of our members wishing to take a more active part in our Society, you might even wish to stand for committee; elections and re-elections are an important part of the evening's events, nomination forms are available from Jan Simpson-Scott (Tel: 01984 639615).

Past Events:

"Lichens and their use as environmental indicators" a talk by Pat Wolseley.

Thanks go to Jo Watson for this summary of Pat's presentation:



On Tuesday 19th we were treated to a talk on an unusual subject – lichens. Pat Wolseley, Natural History Scientific Associate and ex-President of the British Lichen Society gave us a beautifully illustrated talk on these often unnoticed botanic organisms.

Pat, of Nettlecombe Court, has been interested in lichens since 1979 after following a career as a botanist. Her place of abode gives her plenty of opportunity to observe lichens as an environmental indicator as some of the trees in Nettlecombe Court are 400 years old and lichen on the trees can tell the expert much about the ages which have passed as they themselves can be extremely long-lived. She emphasised the two main types which scientists

now use as environmental indicators – nitrogen tolerant (nitrogenophile) and nitrogen haters (nitrogenphobe).

Pat showed us many slides of different lichen and it was amazing just how varied are the places they can be found – from arctic tundra, hot deserts, rocky coasts as well as the more common sightings on trees or gravestones in the UK. The Barle River on Exmoor is extremely good for nitrogenphobe lichen as the air is clean and the river water fresh. *Lobaria pulmonaria* is particularly present there as it is sensitive to air pollution. Another lichen; once so common in our area and very sensitive to air pollution, *Usnea florida*, is getting extremely rare. However, as these are disappearing, the nitrogen tolerant lichens are on the increase. Pat explained how the bright coloured lichen are nitrogen tolerant whereas the grey/green lichen such as the bearded lichen one sees on trees do not like nitrogen. Nitrogen has increased in the 21st Century, as a result of intensive stock keeping and nitrogen dioxide from vehicles.

She explained a scientific project she is involved with – Project Opal - across England air quality is being monitored by observing certain common lichen. Evidence of climate change can be seen as species that thrive in cold mountain climes disappear and lichens from warmer areas take over.

Paul Upton thanked Pat for her interesting talk and for persuading us to "likin' the lichen".

Progress Report: Esplanade Lane Pebble Garden

Jan Simpson-Scott's Bric-a-brac stall on the Esplanade during Watchet Summertime was a huge success; thanks go to her and her helpers, Tina Barry and Margaret Adams. The wonderful sum of £341 was raised towards the costs of materials which will be required for the Pebble garden's foundations. There was even some stock left over which has been donated to other local "Good Causes".

Plans are in train for a formal unveiling ceremony at the turn of the year, probably between Christmas and New Year's Day.



Conservation in Action: 41 Swain Street, Watchet



The restoration continues in leaps and bounds. Walking down Swain Street, we've seen the scaffolding come and go, we've witnessed the old rendering chipped away and replaced, the chimney stacks restored, the nasty "Turnerised-roofing" removed and in its place, lovely natural slate can now be seen. A full history of the trials and tribulations, the exciting discoveries and a photographic diary of events can be found in Paul Upton's blog at: <http://watchetconservationsociety.blogspot.com/> well worth the click of a mouse.

Watchet's Historical Past - Watchet Harbour (Marina)

Watchet's Marina celebrated its 10th anniversary during August. Perhaps that's a good time to look back to when we were more used to a harbour than a marina. Jack Binding has written this article detailing entrepreneurial activity in the harbour during the 1920's

HMS Fox – Now or Never

In 1923 Watchet Urban District Council granted to Joseph Lee of Dover a portion of the

western part of the harbour for the purpose of operating a ship-breaking business. The first ship to enter the harbour to be broken up was the “Fox”. This ten-gun twin screw light cruiser had been built at Portsmouth and was launched on 15th June 1893. At one time a flagship of the Pacific fleet she had seen action in various theatres of war, including the Great War when she was in the East Indies, and in 1917 on Red Sea patrol.

On 15th July the great day dawned and, watched by a huge crowd, this 4,360 ton cruiser, 320 ft. long with a 49 ft beam, on a very high tide, slipped between the pierheads without “smelling them”, a feat of manoeuvre that confounded the old salts. On board the “Fox” which had reached Watchet from Chatham a day late, Watchet's Captain Organ knew it was “now or never” if he was going to get in, for the ebb had begun. The manoeuvre he ordered with the aid of the tugs resulted in the cruiser entering as gracefully as a yacht. However consternation followed as, instead of sliding into the cot of the west pier she ploughed out her own berth 100 ft away. It didn't end there because the tugs decided to call it a day and promptly put to sea leaving the cruiser without motive power – helpless! It was a month before she could be coaxed into the west pier.



This breathing space provided an opportunity to open up the cruiser to visitors and it was reported that she raised a nice sum for Charity before the breakers got at her. Over the years she was “all over the place” in utility souvenir form. Bits of her timbers went to the Church for pew repairs; others made gates and posts, and generally bits and pieces found their way to various parts of the district.

The only other vessel to be broken up was the 3-masted schooner the “Dora Rio”.

St Regis Paper Mill Chimney: “An Obituary”

Going.....
Going.....
Gone



Paper was made at Snailholt Farm from the middle of the seventeenth century for a John Saffyn of Collompton, Devon. It was probably like cider-making, a side-line for the farmer to make a little extra money. Snailholt Farm is on the mediaeval route which ran from Parsonage Farm and St Decuman's church down to Kentsford Farm and then on to Cleeve Abbey. Some of the old waterways associated with the paper-making are still visible in the gardens and fields around Snailholt. Paper making continued into the eighteenth century when William Wood and four generations of the Wood family made hand-made paper until 1824. It was then taken over by James Date, William Peach and John Wansborough who gave his name to the Mill and introduced machines for paper-making. John Wansborough was a devout Methodist and he built a chapel in the grounds of the mill, insisting that his employees attended. There was a major fire in 1889 and much of the mill was destroyed. However, within ten years, the mill was thriving, having become the largest manufacturer of paper-bags in the country. In 1903, the mill was bought by W H Reed and later became part of the Reed and Smith Group, later Reed and Smith Holdings. In 1978 the company was taken over by St Regis International of New York. David S Smith purchased the mill in 1986. Since June 1st 2011 St Regis has been known as D S Smith Paper.

Since the mid nineteenth century, the mill has been a major employer in the town. 120 were employed there in 1865, rising to over 500 in the 1960s. Since then new technologies have required much smaller numbers of employees.

During John Wansborough's time, steam engines were introduced to provide power. The position of the paper mill was good for the plentiful quantity of water needed for the paper-making process, and the location near the harbour meant that coal was easily imported from South Wales. However, this position was clearly poor for gaining a good updraught for the coal-fired boilers. Underground flues were constructed up the hillside, culminating in the chimney which served as a major landmark, towering near, but not competing with St Decuman's church tower. It is square in section, which is unusual as circular section chimneys are stronger. It is built of brick, bound with iron bands and tapers gently. Six stages are marked with double courses of buff brick and then topped with a corbelled-out section and two courses of dog-tooth brickwork. Presumably at this height (about 75 feet), it was not sufficiently tall to create the required updraught, and another section of about 15 feet was added to the top, again with corbels and dog-tooth brickwork. The red bricks were probably made locally at Wellington or Bridgwater, but the buff bricks were probably brought by boat from Ebbw Vale in South Wales. The harbour at Watchet was important to the mill for many years, as, not only did it provide for coal to be imported, but also the raw materials of wood pulp and esparto grass were brought in. The mill even bought its own steamboats, the SS Rushlight followed by the SS Arran Monarch to fetch coal from South Wales.

The chimney was a significant landmark in Watchet and a reminder of the town's successful industrial past. It was a rare survival – whilst there were once many, there are very few chimneys left in Somerset and none are of square section. There is a round one at the Brick and Tile Museum in Bridgwater and an octagonal one at Fox Bros Tonedale Mill in Wellington. D S Smith made a good case for its demolition, and they have followed all the correct procedures in preparation. Its repair and maintenance would certainly be costly, but it is sad to see it go.

Paul Upton, June 2011

ORIGINS of WATCHET'S LIBRARY BUILDING

As the fight continues to save Watchet's Library from closure it's interesting to recall how the building came to be, the generosity of benefactors and the bravery of Watchet men. Jack Binding has provided this fascinating account:

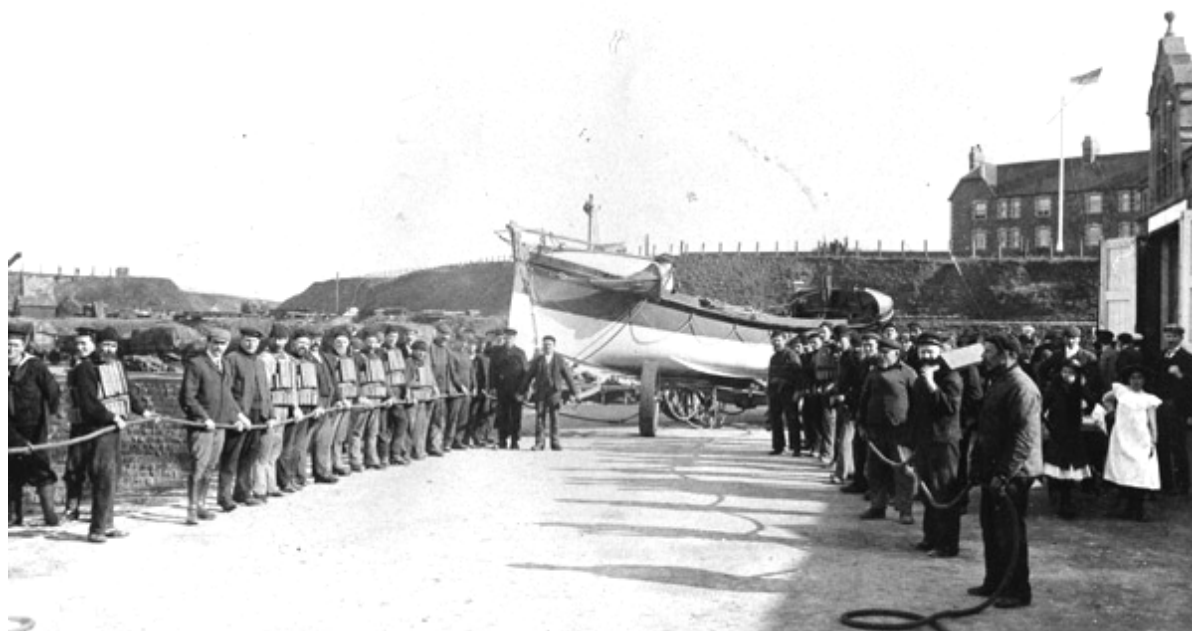
In 1874 the Committee of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution decided to station a lifeboat at Watchet. The lifeboat was to be named Joseph Soames following a gift of £1,000 from Mrs Soames. Messrs Woolfe and Sons were instructed to build the lifeboat and Messrs Robinson and Warton to construct a supporting carriage. As a site was required the Countess of Egremont offered one at the eastern end of the Esplanade. Her Solicitors advised her that under provisions of the late Lord Egremont Trustees the site could not be given whereupon the Countess wrote out a cheque for £50, the cost of the site, in favour of the RNLI and the deal was closed.

Two tenders for the construction of the Lifeboat Station (now the library) were accepted from Mr J H Langdon, one for £352 for the erection of the station and the second for £22 and 10 shillings for the erection of a wall on two sides of the building. A further estimate of £105 - 16 shillings and 2 pence was accepted for enclosing the spare ground, addition of water tanks and pipes, and the erection of a flagstaff.

Volunteers to man the lifeboat resulted in 26 men putting their names forward, but only 11 were required. They were chosen by lottery. The successful men were Robert Searle, Wm Norman, James Webber, Joseph Rowe, Wentworth Short, W Robt Webber, Edmund Chidgey, Alfred Binding, W Chidgey sen., Edward Harris and William Chidgey – names which are still familiar today

On 31st July the great day dawned and amidst great excitement Mrs Joseph Soames christened the lifeboat which was duly launched from the harbour slipway. A memorable day came to a close when the Countess of Egremont presented each member of the crew a new suit of clothes and a hat – a proud day for them.

Circumstances changed and the lifeboat was withdrawn from Watchet and the station closed in 1944. It languished for some years until 1951 when Leonard Laity Stoate of the milling family gave the building to Watchet. It was then converted to the town library.



Poet's Corner – Coleridge Cottage, 35 Lime Street, Nether Stowey.

Jan Simpson Scott brings us up to date with the restoration and re-presentation of the house and garden of this important West Somerset landmark:

From August 11th to 30th October the home where Coleridge lived with his wife and son for three years from 1797 will be open to the public on Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays from 11am to 5pm. This follows a conservation and preservation project by The National Trust. Some parts of the cottage, not previously seen by the public, will be opened up. Other rooms have been restored to reflect the time and fashions when the Coleridges lived there. The family's kitchen is one room restored in this manner. The courtyard and garden will be open and the well from which the Coleridges drew water can be seen. Coleridge noted that there was "a nice well of fine spring water". It was in this garden that Coleridge found the solitude so vital to him when he was writing "The Rime of The Ancient Mariner", "Frost at Midnight" and "Kubla Khan." From this garden he would go through a gateway into the garden of his friend Tom Poole where there was an arbour with a lime tree which inspired his poem "The lime-tree bower". (Look out for this in a future newsletter).



In the reading room there are displays and poetry books. Memorabilia of this great Romantic poet can be found throughout the cottage.

This is an exciting conservation and restoration project on our doorstep. It is where Coleridge found a peace and tranquility summed up in his line "The light shall stream to a far distance from the taper in my cottage window". It was from here that he came to Watchet and left us a legacy of which we are justifiably proud.

I shall be at Coleridge Cottage working as a Room Guide during this exciting opening season. Admission is free for National Trust members. Non-members' admission prices are: Adults £5.50, Children £2.75. Join us if you can."

Watchet From The Air One of Paul Reynolds vertigo inducing aerial photographs



Wildflowers Around Watchet

Botanical artist – Sheila Mannes-Abbott says:

This summer has seen spectacular displays of Rosebay willowherb on the banks along the roads and lanes of West Somerset, sometimes known as Fireweed for its habit of being the first plant to appear naturally on fire-damaged sites. Some years ago, Phil Drabble the naturalist wrote the following about a painting of mine:

“Rosebay willowherb is a survivor so it is not too choosy about its lodgings. It grows in woodland clearings and on wayside verges, along canal towpaths and disused pitbanks. It was one of the first wild flowers to colonise the bomb craters and devastated building sites after the last war’s air raids in London. But despite its apparent catholic tastes, its distribution is patchy. The fragile, downy seeds are blown by the wind but they need a bare patch of soil in which to germinate.

Rosebay willowherb has such summery associations for me, particularly as it is the favourite food plant of the Elephant hawk moth caterpillar. It was obviously the caterpillars that fired the imagination of the naturalist who originally put a name to the species because, the moth itself has a pointed body, and beautiful patches of mauve and puce on its wings (as can be seen in the painting) but the caterpillar has a lovely matt skin, precisely the dull grey of elephant hide. All the hawk moths are exciting. They are large, some of them very large, the Death’s Head hawk moth, the largest insect in the British Isles, having a wing span of about five inches and its caterpillar being up to five inches long”.



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