



WATCHET CONSERVATION MATTERS

Issue 5

April 2009

David Ireson returns....

We've asked him back to talk to us about the history of St Decumen's Church and the development of the Celtic Church in Watchet. While he was the Vicar of St Decumen's he became exceedingly knowledgeable about the fabric of the church and we've asked him to share some of that with us. We've asked him also to tell us about the extraordinary role played by members of our parish in the greater affairs of England.

Planning Problems for Stoates Mill Care Home

The proposal for a 65 bed care home behind Stoates Mill has had a stormy ride through planning. This society was pleased to advise the developers Anchor Street Ltd, on converting the old mill buildings, sensitively retaining the important architectural features. We liked the idea of a Care Home within the town for our own people. It is very sad when an elderly person has to move from the town they live in to another place and lose touch with their friends and relatives when perhaps they need them most. Our Case Officer, David Simpson Scott attended the planning meeting at West District Council and spoke about the merit of converting the existing buildings.

The Planning Officer recommended refusal but Councillor Tony Knight guided the Council decision for a site meeting to see for themselves the flood and traffic risk and the visibility from roads to decide whether its height, mass and bulk would dominate Watchet as suggested.

The Planning Committee will decide at their next meeting whether to approve the plan and thus save the old mill buildings, or whether to confirm the Planning Department recommendation for refusal.

The buildings are of great historical importance to the town. The Old Mill which is deteriorating and rotting through neglect was built in around 1830 when the Corn Laws were passed. We know there was a corn mill on the site well before that because it was mentioned in the Domesday book. At that time Watchet was part of the Mohun Estate, there was a mill but no town mentioned and the mint had yet to be built. The site offered a perfect position for using the force of water for industrial purposes. Being by the harbour it provided an easy transport route. The present buildings were built and owned by the Stoate family some of whom, still live in the town.



Uncertain Future for the mill

The rusting turbine so much in need of care was installed in 1903. If the Council refuses planning we fear that the buildings will continue to stand as a derelict reminder of a more prosperous past instead of becoming a vital part of Watchet once more

Calendar Competition

We are looking for 12 photographs for a Watchet Calendar. We want pictures which show Watchet and the surrounding area in 2009. Pictures that show undiscovered Watchet, the town at work and play, by day and night, in different seasons and from your window.

We want your pictures, never before published and your own work. The twelve selected photographs will be printed in a calendar. You can enter as many pictures as you like either digitally or on film. We regret we cannot return any photographs. There will be prizes for the best child and adult entry. Closing date August 31st 2009. For more details contact Edward Frewin on 01984 633422



The kind of curragh Decuman used to cross the Irish Sea and find his way to Watchet.....

Tuesday 28th
April

The Methodist
School Room

Harbour Road

7.30 pm

JOHN GILMAN Hands to Make and Mend



WCS was very fortunate to have John Gilman as our guest speaker on Tuesday 23rd of June. John, a seaman himself, was born locally and although now living in the north-east, still spends much of his time around Watchet. He has written with authority on the history of the Bristol

Channel coast and sailing from the Channel ports. The open meeting was well attended. We were rewarded with a fascinating description of the many crafts produced by sailors in their leisure time aboard ship, from embroideries and scrimshaw, to ships in bottles. An art form of skill and ingenuity.

We learned that sailors, hard up for raw materials, made use of flotsam, fish bone and packing cases to create beautifully carved versions of their own ship. These models provide a true record of our sea-going heritage, from a time when cameras were rare, and have become the antiques of today. It seems that many men learned to create ornaments of meticulous detail and beauty in their long weeks away from home.

Interesting to note is how many of these models have survived the years in good condition, a tribute to the skill of the makers. John urged us to buy these treasures in junk shops and car boot sales whenever we spot them. His own collection is a way of guaranteeing that these precious items survive to the next century.

Conservation Society welcomes Town Council Representative

Since Watchet Conservation Society began in 2007 we have benefitted from Councillor Peter Murphy being Secretary. Peter provides the link between these two groups.

Following a meeting between Watchet Town Council and Watchet Conservation Society the Town Council has accepted an invitation for formal representation on our Committee in order to assist further liaison.

We now welcome Councillor Hazel Bowden as the Town Council's representative. This appointment is greeted as a milestone in the relationship between these two organisations.

A Call for new Committee Members

Anyone who might be interested in joining the Committee please contact Peter Murphy, Secretary, Jan Simpson-Scott, Newsletter Editor (01984 639615), or a Committee Member below. We would like to hear from you.

Watchet Conservation Society Committee

Chair Sam Westmacott 01984 639674

Secretary Peter Murphy 01984 639261

Treasurer and Membership Secretary Edward Frewin 01984 633422

Case-work Officer David Simpson-Scott 01984 639615

Face-lifting Watchet !

At the John Gilman lecture in July it was agreed that we would start to tackle the way Watchet looks. As a consequence Myra Barrett, Phil Gannon and a willing team of helpers walked around Watchet's Conservation Area checking out the signs. This team produced a list of signs which are broken and in need of restoration, need replacing, no longer serve a purpose, are obscured from vision, or where a new sign is needed.

David Simpson-Scott took photographs of examples and a few of these are shown below.

The result - to date - is a list of twenty-three signs which are in some way either redundant or not pleasing to the eye. The Town Council has been passed a list of seven signs which can be removed easily, thereby improving the appearance of the town. The Watchet 2025 team was also given a list. In the autumn it is our intention to move onto the others, after we have established which council has responsibility for the signs and discussing with them the necessary changes.

If you know of any sign which you believe needs to be looked at or of any other ways the Conservation Society can improve the town's appearance please contact Sam Westmacott, Myra Barrett, or a member of the Committee.

Typical examples are the signs below.



Surplus, duplicated old road sign

Watchet Products no longer trade in Anchor Street



Damaged and defaced sign for building work site



For your diary:

Watchet Conservation Society AGM

Tuesday 27th October 7.30pm
Methodist Church, Harbour Road.

All welcome.

From the Editor's collection

In late November 1797 William and Dorothy Wordsworth walked through Watchet with Coleridge and the first part of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* was planned:

*"I fear thee ancient mariner!
I fear thy skinny hand!
And thou art long, and lank, and brown
As is the ribbed sea-sand"*

Members Nick Cotton, Andrew Musgrave,
Derek Fawcus, Myra Barratt,
Jan Simpson-Scott

What's happening to Watchet's Mineral Line ?

by Peter Murphy

The West Somerset Mineral Railway Company incorporated in 1855 ran the Old Mineral Line from the Brendon Hills to Watchet transporting iron ore from the mines to the port for shipping to the iron works in south Wales. The mines closed and so the track was lifted by 1920.

A Heritage Lottery funded project aims to improve the access to the key sites on the line and tell the story of this historic railway to a wider audience. The Market House Museum and the Town Council are partners in the project led by Exmoor National Park.

There are three conservation sites on the hills Langham Engine House which had a steam engine pumping water out of the mines. It also powered an aerial ropeway to transport iron ore from the nearby mine to the rail head. So far access to the Engine House has been constructed.

The Bearland Ventilation Chimney had a fire lit in its base which drew air from a ventilation shaft connected to the mine. This enabled clean air to be drawn into the mine so that the miners could breathe underground. Access has been constructed to this site.

The Incline pictured above was a remarkable piece of engineering to transport wagons filled with iron ore down a 1 in 4 slope to Comberow. The incline is being cleared and restoration of the winding house is underway. Access will be improved as at the moment it is difficult.

By the end of May, Watchet Museum will have window displays and models showing the incline working and the loading of ore on Watchet's West Pier. There will be interpretation panels at the three hillside sites.

After consultation in March, three projects are underway in Watchet. Archaeologists discovered there are still rails beneath the surface on the West Pier, these will be revealed and replica rails laid to show where the lines ran into the mineral yard. A new footpath is being built to create access from West Street through the Mineral Yard. The Watchet to Washford trail will have an improved surface in places where it is muddy and uneven. Seats will be placed along the trail with interpretation panels.

There was considerable support for the West Pier proposals but people's views were mixed about how the trail should be improved. Wheelchairs and buggies – yes, cycles possibly, horses no! Riders who presently use the trail are requesting to ride alongside the other side of the line. Three significant buildings in Watchet are associated with the end of the line - the Station House, the old goods shed, which is presently the Fish Plate restaurant and the old engine shed known as "Beaver's Garage". Will they form a future ensemble as they once did or will they be lost to the heritage industry?

Exhibition on the Esplanade – Saturday 16th May

Your Committee wants to highlight the important work being undertaken in the name of Watchet Conservation Society. Our aim is to promote the architecture, geology and history of our interesting town and raise awareness to the public. It is possible to live in a place and yet be unaware of its assets, so we are planning to 'wave the flag' in a small exhibition on 16th May and we hope the weather will be warm and DRY.

We feel there are so many unique features in and around the town worth bringing to the attention, not just of the tourists who we hope will be swarming on the Esplanade, but us the people of Watchet. This old port is lucky to have the support of so many committed local people who love it. Those who care for their own corner, who work in the station, who plant flowers, who volunteer at the Museums, help out at the Phoenix Centre and work with organisations like the Scouts and Carnival make it the charming friendly place it is today.

Watchet Conservation Society Committee

Chair Sam Westmacott 01984 639674

Secretary Peter Murphy 01984 639261 Treasurer and Membership Secretary Edward Frewin 01984 633422

Casework Officer, David Simpson – Scott 01984 639615 Members Nick Cotton, Andrew Musgrave, Chris Danby, Derek Fawcus

