



WATCHET CONSERVATION MATTERS

For conserving our built and natural environment

Issue 16 April/May 2011

From our Chair, Molly Quint:

Welcome to our April & May Newsletter. This is such a lovely time of year and so many exciting things have been happening. Do hope you all enjoyed the Royal Wedding, it was such an amazing spectacle, England can do this sort of thing so wonderfully, and it was so lovely to see the bride & groom so very much in love and enjoying every minute. Here in Watchet, St. George's Day on the Esplanade was great fun, with our Stand doing a great PR job, with people very interested in the work we have been doing. The Pebble Garden is now at the drawing board stage, the garden is to be planted for the Summer. St. Decuman's Well has begun its 'Make-Over', and a very sturdy off –shoot from the original Fuschia from the Pebble Garden has taken root and is flourishing in its new tranquil surroundings of the Well. We are asking for help now from our members for two occasions; one being the clearing of the Pool on the 21st of May; great fun, but not for best clothes! The second being gifts from the back of your cupboard for Jan's Bric-a-Brac Stall on 26th July on the Esplanade as part of "Watchet Summertime", raising money for the Pebble Garden Project. Do please come along to our meeting on the 24th May (*please note change of date from originally May 17th*) when the talk will be on our wonderful Quantocks, how lucky we are to have them so close and so well managed by Tim Russell and his team of wardens.

Yours very sincerely. - Molly.



Jan, John & Molly –St George's Day

Forthcoming Events

Tuesday May 24th 2011, 7.30 pm Watchet Methodist Schoolroom, Harbour Road
(Please note the change of date – originally planned for May 17th)

'Life in the Quantocks'

Talk by Tim Russell, Senior Ranger, Quantocks ANOB

All are welcome and admission is free



Saturday May 21st plus Sunday May 22nd

Pool Clearing

Please make a date for your diary for pool clearing from approx noon onwards. PLEASE contact John Irven john.irven@btinternet.com (01984 631083) if you are able to help, as we need volunteers again, and we have to plan in advance who will be there and arrange cover for tasks and timings within a safe working plan.



Saturday June 18th

Fun Day on West Street Beach

Around the freshly cleared pool from 1.00pm

Full details to follow in the next newsletter.



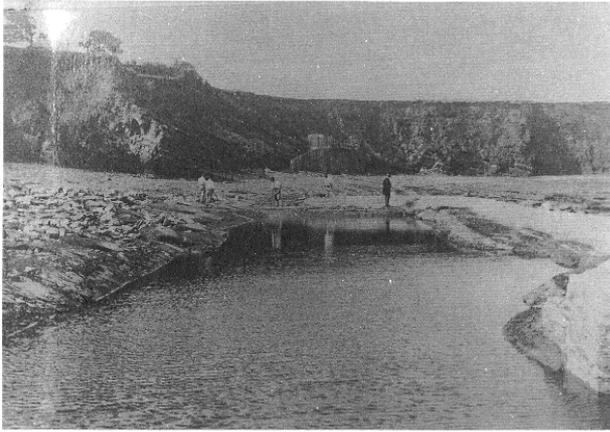
Tuesday 26th July during Watchet Summertime “WANTED”!!

Watchet Conservation Society will be holding a Bric-a-Brac stall on the Esplanade. Please turn out your cupboards for us and donate to our society if you can. Miscellaneous items you no longer want or need are just what someone else is looking for! Call me on 01984 639615 and I'll be happy to arrange collection from you - Jan Simpson-Scott.

Watchet's Sea Bathing Pools. By Chris Saunders.

Some years ago I was researching in the Somerset Photographic Archive at Allerford School, when I came across several photos that seemed to be of a familiar place. The recent activity at West Street Beach has prompted me to look at these again to shed some further light on this subject.

Sea bathing became popular from around 1760 and in Watchet the main beach was one extending from Goviers Lane to Splash Point (all now covered by the east quay), known as “Yard Beach” it features in Turner’s image of the town of about 1811. This was a pleasant sandy beach, popular for bathing and for fishermen to repair their nets. Following the construction of the new harbour in the 1860s and the Victorian trend for modesty, bathing was segregated; Gentlemen to West Street, or Cridland’s Beach, and by 1867, the Ladies to Helwell Bay. Some time, between the 1860s and the turn of the century (probably in the mid 1870s) two bathing pools were constructed. The West Street Beach one has been featured here recently, however the Helwell one is relatively unknown.



The first photo shows the pool under construction in the soft rocks of Helwell, looking west just after the tide has cleared. The big rocks have been moved to the beach for use in the walls. The old gentleman watching the proceedings appears in many of James Date's photos of the 1860s and 70s. The second shows the site from the same position, only a couple of years ago. The pool has silted up and the walls have long ago been eroded from the soft shale below. However the outline still remains.

The third photo gives a close up of the workmen, the foreman in his frock coat!

Close inspection of the photo shows wooden wheel barrow and buckets. The workmen have their trousers tied just below the knee in true "Navy" style.

My final photo shows the same site at the present day. The beach has eroded some 20M (60ft) south and west in the intervening years and the small Elm trees in photo 1 had grown to some 6 ft in diameter by the 1960s when Dutch Elm disease killed them off.



Anyone interested to see the remains can still find some evidence of the sluice in the north east corner and the rectangular flat area full of sand.

The question of why West Street has survived while Helwell has not is plain to see in the photos. Helwell was made of beach rocks loosely held together with cement mortar, whereas West Street is solidly made of poured concrete. It is my guess that originally they were the same, but West Street was re-built around the time of the harbour re-construction in the 1905 era.

Further reading and information;

- 1 James Date's Exmoor and West Somerset, Halsgrove 2002.
- 2 The hand-book of Watchet by James Date 1867, SCC library service.
- 3 The West Somerset photograph archive, Allerford school.

Chris will be our speaker at the September meeting, so do watch for news in our next newsletter.

Past Events

Not in my Backyard – talk by Paul Upton WCS Case Officer

On Tuesday 15th March our Case Officer, Paul Upton, entertained and informed us with his illustrated talk “Not in my Backyard” which may well have changed the views of those of us stuck in a time-warp so far as architecture is concerned.

After giving us an easy to understand roam through building regulations and explaining the finer points of planning permission Paul showed us photographs of Watchet’s skyline and encouraged us to identify with the whole as opposed to simply seeing individual buildings. The Masonic Hall, Bank House - now The Georgian House - a very important building in Watchet’s history, dating from c.1750, and the flat-roofed cinema on the corner of Harbour Road and Swain Street, now Watchet Surgery, served as case studies. From these Paul developed his argument about being brave, pushing the boundaries in design. He praised some of the lines of Woollams Place. Leading on to Listed Buildings and their grading he referred to the fact that a listed building need not be beautiful. Battersea Power Station was his proof.

Phil Gannon joined Paul for a Question and Answer session and used Dunster as an example of seeing the whole in order to capture the identity, rather than taking buildings in isolation. He reminded us that buildings of high design have stood the test of time and that King Hammurabi of Babylon made the first planning regulations around 1750 BC.

Paul and Phil convinced us of the need to plan any building or extension carefully so that it is in sympathy with the surroundings and complements the historic town of Watchet. WCS is extremely fortunate to have this formidable team to guide and advise us. Paul and Phil have a wealth of local knowledge as well as expertise in planning coupled with their focus on conservation and their willingness to help and advise. It was such an enjoyable talk followed by a lively discussion.

Jan Simpson-Scott



41 Swain Street Watchet

Paul Upton has recently purchased 41 Swain Street which he has started to renovate. The plan is to build an art gallery with flat over. The Conservation Society is both delighted and indebted to Paul who has agreed to post an online blog where we can all follow the progress of the renovation and restoration (with all its ups and downs). This is one of the most important and fascinating old buildings in Watchet. 41 Swain Street, remembered by many as 'The Old Coffee House' was the home of Nick Cotton’s parents for nearly fifty years. Nick says: “The excitement I have experienced in seeing the old building reveal its many secrets has set my tail wagging. It is proving to be a rare insight into the past and a wonderful opportunity to speculate about the numerous generations who have lived in the house. As each layer is peeled away so it reveals evidence of the individual occupants and how the passage of time changed their lives”. The blog can be found at: <http://watchetconservationsociety.blogspot.com/> Do follow the link, you’ll find Paul’s account absolutely fascinating and of course well-informed.

St Decuman's Well



Ian and Myra getting to grips with the weeds

Fuschia replanted

We are supporting a request from the Church warden to help keep tidy the St Decuman's Well area, and some initial work has been done to assess what needs to be planned. Jo Watson (01984 631668) and Myra Barrett (01984 631396) are co-ordinating the programme, and if you are able to help, please contact them. We have already replanted an offshoot from the fuschia in Esplanade Lane at the entrance to the well, as a means of conserving the plant for when we refurbish the area to make up the new pebble and sculpture garden

Watchet's Historical Past

HISTORY BENEATH OUR FEET. Nick Cotton writes:

It is interesting how familiar we become with our immediate environment, our houses, streets, rooftops, etc. However, careful observation can reveal so much of the character of our town. We are lucky in Watchet that there are so many clues and indications to the past, visible or hidden away in the fabric of the many old buildings that survive. This photograph, taken outside the recently and sympathetically restored Bank House in Swain Street is a perfect example of how the street surface would have appeared in the 19th. Century; the cobbles, as with many building materials, would have been sourced locally. The beach over the centuries has been a rich fund in many ways. The cobbles illustrated would differ considerably from those found in the cottage yards where 'shallow' stones would be all that was necessary, because an area that was subject regularly to the traffic of horses pulling carts and wagons need to be much more robust. The cobbles in this instance would need to be set much deeper and be vertically elongated, to a depth of at least eight inches. In an excellent state of preservation, the cobbles at Bank House are set next to the 'kerb and flag', a portion of which gives a clear indication of how the street would have looked. Along with Watchet Alabaster and Lias (specifically used for flagstones), pebbles had been taken from our beaches and riverbeds since at least the seventeenth century. This little cameo of Watchet's heritage is just one of the numerous such examples found throughout the town.



St Regis Chimney

St Regis have announced that they are intending to demolish the landmark chimney at the paper mill because of cost associated with keeping it in a safe ongoing state. Having been approached by residents and members, we consulted with English Heritage and Somerset Industrial Archaeological Society about the structure. West Somerset Council applied for listing status, we supported that application. Sadly, we have just heard that the application has been unsuccessful. But we will explore with St Regis, the possibility of a suitable board at the site detailing the chimney's history.



Watchet Paper Mill Chimney

Poet's Corner

Coleridge's Finances

Coleridge received two scholarships to enable him to attend Jesus College, Cambridge, between 1791 and 1794. These scholarships amounted to £100 p.a. This only provided Coleridge with a meagre living. At the same time he began to accrue debts which he avoided paying. There are no records of how Coleridge used his income but it seems a strong possibility that his indulgence in wine and opium was a major cause of his debts.

By 1797 he had married Sara Fricker and his debts were mounting. His income was small, basically 1 guinea for his weekly article in *The Morning Post* which always took him two days to write. By Christmas of that year the Coleridges were in debt to the shopkeepers of Nether Stowey.

Their debts would have looked something like this:

A quarter's rent for their cottage in Lime Street	£2.2s
A quarter's allowance owed to Mrs Fricker senior	£5.5s
Owed to printer of Coleridge's poems	£5
Nanny's overdue wages	£1.1s.
Shoemaker	£1.13s
Chandler and general supplier	12s
Coal	£2.6s
Sundries	12s
TOTAL	£18.11s

Was it such debts which inspired Coleridge to put his quill pen to paper, opening up the full flowering of his genius? The Rime of *The Ancient Mariner* was published within "Lyrical Ballads" in 1798. Coleridge had hoped to receive £5 for the poem but there is no record that he was paid as much as this. What is known is that he was granted an annuity of £150 by Josiah and Thomas Wedgwood, wealthy sons of the great Staffordshire potter, whom he had met on a visit to Bristol. There were no conditions attached to this annuity.

Presumably the Wedgwood brothers recognised genius. [Jan Simpson-Scott](#)



Wildflowers Around Watchet

Botanical artist – Sheila Mannes-Abbott says:

Although one of the most widespread Orchids: the Early Purple, *Orchis mascula*, has largely disappeared from farmland habitats, we are lucky in West Somerset to have local areas where it flourishes on grass covered dry- stone walls in broadleaved woodlands, preferring to grow along the edges where it is better lit, adding splashes of purple amongst the bluebells. As its name suggests, it is the first Orchid to appear in the year, it gladdens the heart in early spring to spot patches of purple that appear on roadside verges and woodland walks. The identification is fairly easy with the Orchid's distinctive combination of early-flowering habit, purple flowers and shiny spotted leaves. Infrequently the leaves are unspotted; the example shown, I painted in Cornwall but they're identical to the ones you will find in Somerset.



Footnotes

East Wharf

Watchet Conservation Society has shared a report, prepared by its members, on the ground conditions of Watchet's East Wharf, with West Somerset Council. The council has in turn expressed appreciation for our contribution, and have offered to talk further with us on implications for development on East Wharf.

Railway Bridge and Crossing

We continue to support the programmes underway to replace the footbridge, and create an alternative disabled friendly crossing at Goviers Lane. We understand that sufficient funds have now been raised to provide reproduction Victorian gas lamps to enhance the structure.

Esplanade Lane Pebble Garden

Our Society is pleased to report that we have now had formal approval from West Somerset Council that we are to be allowed to develop the proposed "Pebble Garden" behind the tourist office at the corner of Esplanade Lane. A WCS sub-committee is busily discussing plans and alternative designs.

Watchet Library

Several members of our committee have been active in the challenge to Somerset County Council's plans to close libraries, including that of Watchet's. As we go to press we are delighted to report that Watchet is now at the centre of this campaign and a visit to the following website will give further details: www.publicinterestlawyers.co.uk For a small town, we can claim to pack a big punch!

WATCHET CONSERVATION SOCIETY

www.watchetconservationsociety.co.uk

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Watchet Conservation Matters is published six times a year. If you would like to contribute news or an article, please contact the newsletter editor:

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