



WATCHET CONSERVATION MATTERS

For conserving our built and natural environment

Issue 22 May/June 2012

From our Chair, Molly Quint:

Another busy month: the unveiling of the restored Fitzroy Barometer was a great evening, the weather was balmy, the attendance was many more than we anticipated and everything went off well. Mary was lovely, the Sea Scouts piped the unveiling and Ruth accepted the log book and pen from John, agreeing to keep records daily. We then all travelled along the esplanade to the Phoenix Centre for a toast in Rum, proposed by Pete the Poet. (A full report follows later in this newsletter- ed.).

On the 21st March we entered two teams for the annual twinning quiz, our prime team won and our 2nd team: runner up, so a great night was had by all.

Then on Saturday 30th March we finished the month with a great time celebrating The West Somerset Railway 150th anniversary. Very many thanks go to Jan & her ladies, (all beautifully costumed); their bric-a-brac stall raised a really grand sum,

Yours very sincerely, Molly Q



Molly and Ruth watch on as Mary performs the unveiling in the shadow of the arc light

Forthcoming Events: Tues May 15th. 7.30pm Methodist Schoolroom

We are delighted to welcome back: Revd. David Ireson who will give this illustrated talk, **“Becoming Human” Living with Deer and other Animals since the Ice Age**

Between 45,000 and 35,000 years ago, near extinct Neanderthals and Homo Sapiens lived side by side. These early humans had a very close relationship with the animals they hunted. Our evolutionary progress in becoming human was shaped by our relationship with other animals. Now paleoanthropologists have traced the origins of human spiritual awareness to this relationship. This picture-talk will draw upon the work of David Lewis-Williams



(author of “the Mind in the Cave” and “The Neolithic Mind”) and Professor Chris Stringer of the Natural History Museum (author of “The Origin of Our Species” 2011). **David Ireson**

Past Events: Unveiling the restored Fitzroy Barometer

Molly mentioned earlier, what a successful evening it was. When we arrived at the Phoenix Centre we were treated to a tot of Rum, Pete the Poet composed a poem especially for the occasion; he has kindly allowed us to reproduce it here:

The Fitzroy Barometer

The Fitzroy Barometer
A treat for every visitor,
Engaging all inquisitors,
From far and near.

Encased in Ash behind a grill,
The plaque restored - oh such a thrill!
Give thanks for every craftsman's skill,
We say three cheers!

Martyn skilfully replaced the door,
Robin's metalwork must be adored,
And to Richard's brass we shout "*Encore!*"

Our hearts soar like an eagle,
Let's remember Admiral Fitzroy grand
With Darwin he learned to understand,
That evolution plays a mighty hand,
Upon the Good Ship Beagle.

Sadly Fitzroy, his Old Testament he waved
*"It cannot be - I'll not be saved
If from an ape I have been made!!"*

He wept at this new dawning.
But friends, on this day let's not be sad
With this meteorological device we must be glad
And one piece of news permit me to add
And take this as a warning...

Fitzroy was the first to say
"We can tell the weather of any day!"
So a host of predictors came out to play
To make their crude forecasting,
However, Watchet men and women true,
Feel no pressure to celebrate anew,
But let's raise a glass and quaff a few
For Fitzroy's Barometer - fine and everlasting!

Pete the Poet March 20th 2012



Pete Stevenson the poet (on the right) and Professor Eric Robinson (on the left) addressing a very full house on Tuesday march 20th 2012 at the Phoenix Centre following the unveiling of the restored Fitzroy Barometer. Pete's poem is reproduced above and a summary of Eric's talk about Admiral Fitzroy follows below.



Robert FitzRoy: Father of the Meteorological Service

FitzRoy was actually Captain Robert FitzRoy, captain of the **Beagle** which took Charles Darwin into southern seas and the science which was the basis for his **Origin of Species** after years of soul-searching.

Nowadays, it is very easy to make something of a monster of FitzRoy with our 21st century political correctness, but this is probably unfair. At the age of 26 (the same age as Darwin), he was put in charge of a major voyage of charting and discovery of the coasts of South America, including Patagonia and the rounding of Cape Horn. He was trained as a naval officer expected to maintain a discipline and order on a relatively small naval vessel, thirty years after Trafalgar. His crew included two officers and three midshipmen for a sloop brig of 235 tonnes with a gun deck of 90 feet. She was one of a class which were nicknamed 'coffins' for an ability to go down in severe weather as the main deck was easily swamped. Darwin was invited to join the ship as 'naturalist' by FitzRoy, and was accompanied by his manservant Syms Covington to make up a total crew complement of 74. This was tight with a wardroom of less than the average kitchen. FitzRoy clearly appreciated Darwin as a companion with a genuine interest in discoveries biological and geological. But it was that heretical science which threatened harmony on board. As Darwin researched and collected fossils in Argentina, he became aware that the living Armadillo and the Tree Sloth of the Pampas had fossil ancestors many times their size. Extinction was no part of 19th century theology and belief in their truth of the **Genesis** account of Creation. FitzRoy was in this sense orthodox in his belief as were most educated people of the time, and while Darwin, once himself a student of Theology, never pressed his challenge, there is every good reason to think that the close confines of that cabin must have simmered in the latter part of the cruise. Again, we can be very PC about all of this but in 1832, it must have been quite different.

From all of this, I want to establish that Robert FitzRoy, a man of wealth and good family, was a determined man with strong views on many subjects. This is where we come to barometers. As a navigator of a rather small vessel, intent on charting for the first time, unknown waters and coastlines, he benefited from a good chronometer thanks to the Harrison instrument of a few decades earlier. But he also appreciated the best available knowledge of weather as far as it was recorded and used in forecasts in foreign lands. So, long after the return of the **Beagle**, we find FitzRoy pressing with the determination only he possessed, for the recording of barometric pressures which in turn allowed the beginnings of the weather forecasting with which we are all familiar.

One of his successes was to persuade **The Times** to publish records daily, on the count that this was information vital for sea-going vessels, be they fisher boats or steam packets. How he financed it, I'm not certain, but in fact he donated standard barometers of the kind we have on the Esplanade, to seaports in Britain. Our pride must be that one was to end up in a thriving Watchet. The involvement of Hood is not clear to me; it is possible that he may have funded the installation of the barometers in the ports. Whatever, as Senior Flag Officer of Her Majesty's Navy, his name speaks of approval at a high level for a project which was a benefit for sailors. *Eric Robinson*

How the barometer was restored: Martyn Ketchen, undertook the task of copying and replacing the door in painted ash. The metal grilles protecting the instrument had suffered distortion and were caked with numerous coats of paint. Robin Trigg was able to restore them expertly to their former glory. The third and vital part of the project was the brass dedication plaque to the local benefactor, Sir Alexander Acland Hood, who gifted the instrument to Watchet. It had become so obscured through overenthusiastic polishing that it was almost illegible, but Richard Stanton was able to solve this particular problem by re-etching the script into the original brass plaque. Nick Cotton coordinated the whole effort. All gave freely of their time and expertise, we are very grateful to them – thank you.

Bric-a-brac stall on Watchet Station 150 year Celebration Day March 31st.



Along with my trusty band of helpers, Tina Barry, Lin and Alan Marlor and Barbara Farmer I would like to thank all those members who donated items for our bric-a-brac stall on Saturday March 31st. We joined in of course with the Railway's 150 year celebrations and what a wonderful time was had by one and all. After leaving the station The West Somerset Band came down to play on the Esplanade and they seemed to set the scene for the whole happy day. At the end of the day the tired and cold team counted

out £321.66p taken to bolster the WCS coffers.

On June 4 (The Queen's Diamond Jubilee) we plan to run another bric-a-brac fund-raising stall to support WCS projects so do I dare ask once again for your help? This is your BIG opportunity for a good spring clean! Turn out those cupboards and send things our way. Ring me: Jan Simpson-Scott on 01984 639615 or Tina on 01984 633506 and someone will collect if you wish. Please no electric gadgets, by law we are unable to sell electrical items.

My thanks again for your help with the stall on 31st March and thank you in anticipation of your help with the June 4th stall.

A sampler for Queen Elizabeth's Coronation

Nick Cotton gave us some boxes of things for our bric-a-brac stall. At the bottom of one of the boxes we found a sampler which was folded, creased and rather dirty. But it was fascinating to examine the work and detail which had gone into its making. It was obviously done in 1952 and there seems to be the name PAT at the bottom.

Lin Marlor has carefully cleaned it, tidied it up, pressed it and framed it and it now looks like this. Lin will put it on the WCS stand at the Open Meeting on May 15th for you all to see. We propose to put it on sale on our next bric-a-brac stall on Bank Holiday Monday June 4th. Of course if there are any offers beforehand we shall be very interested! We may even solve the mystery of Pat which would be lovely. *Jan Simpson-Scott*



The Annual Twinning Quiz



The teams I/r Philip Cook, Barbara Cook, John Irven, Izzy Silvester, Jo Watson, Rachel Irven, Molly Quint, & Tim Prior. With their prizes.

Watchet Conservation Society swept the board at the recent Town twinning quiz held at Knights Templar School on 21st March. Not only did our first team comprising John Irven, Molly Quint, Tim Prior and Izzy Silvester, come out as overall winners, but our second string of Rachel Irven, Jo Watson, Philip & Barbara Cook, came romping in as runners-up after answering a tie-break question. The

quiz was over 8 rounds of differing topics including history, geography, science, music and general knowledge, and raised money for the twinning society. Volunteers provided refreshments at the half way stage, and the event provided a great evening's entertainment for the more than 20 teams taking part.

Watchet Town Council Annual Meeting 18th April 2012.

At the Watchet Town Council annual meeting, where electors of Watchet have the chance to hear from their councillors about the activities of council, there was a session where some local voluntary groups were invited to talk about their activities within the community. Alongside Watchet Market House Museum, Watchet Carnival/Watchet Live and Friends of Watchet Station, Watchet Conservation Society was represented for the first time by our chair Molly Quint. Molly talked about the projects run by the Society in the last year, including gardening, pool clearing & fun day, Watchet Seascape Sculpture, and Fitzroy barometer renewal. She also mentioned upcoming projects such as the beacon in the children's playground, and the Watchet Wall project in the mineral yard. There was also an opportunity to mention each of the committee and their areas of expertise, and the good collaboration we are developing with other groups like Museum and Railway. Molly is pictured with Chair of Watchet Council, Sally De Renzy-Martin.



Watchet's Historical Past Nick Cotton writes; (and draws):

Many of our members will be aware of the opening of Gallery 41 in Swain Street. This distinctive building is being restored by Conservation Society member Paul Upton. A large portion of the fabric of this building is Seventeenth Century, although during restoration there has been found clear evidence that it is constructed on earlier medieval foundations.

Since Paul and I have been members of the Society we have continued an ongoing analysis of many of the older buildings of Watchet. The generosity of many residents has given us access to a variety of homes in the old town. It has been a considerable delight to have found numerous early features that are lurking behind the later facades – added as new materials became available, building techniques improved, tastes changed and a little prosperity came to Watchet as its trade and commerce developed.

In distant times the majority of properties were cottage built with thatched roofs. The availability of local stone is evident in some exposed walls visible to us all are of a surprisingly early date often containing 'foreign' stone imported to the port as discarded ballast.

The focal point of any cottage domestic interior in the 17th Century was the fireplace. It was the fire that provided warmth and amongst other activities the facility to cook the household food. On the ground floor of Number 41 Paul remarkably uncovered not one but two fireplaces dating from the 17th Century. In excellent condition both retain their original bressemer (beam support) and as you would expect of elm, the favoured timber for our part of the world. It may surprise you to know that Paul and I have recorded similar examples in the old town running in to double figures! Elm is a most attractive wood with a distinctive grain and mellow colour which was available in abundance at this time. In cottages and houses it was used for floorboards and other timber construction and often for furniture. I have seen settles, bureau's, tables, chairs and smaller items that would have been commonplace in the 17th and 18th Century in West Somerset.

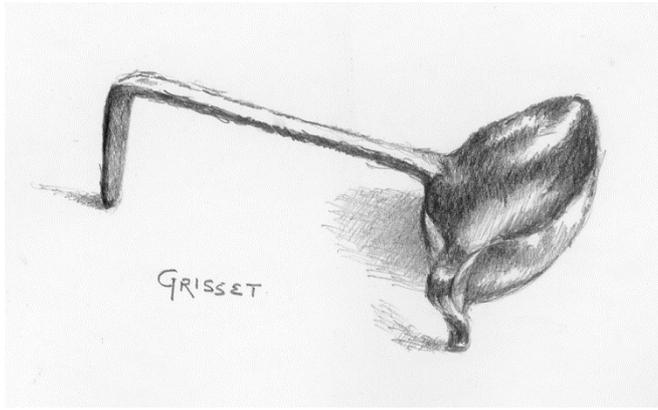
The two fireplaces at Number 41 are now available for all to see, the largest and earliest reveals a number of interesting curiosities. Etched into the bressemer are some curious circular marks which are difficult to identify their meaning. The closest I have seen similar to these are merchants marks often found at this date to identify ownership. In addition to these are carefully carved two initials 'E.S.'. This again is unusual and it is easy to speculate on their possible meaning, it seems very likely that they are contemporary with the installation of the bressemer.

A little more explainable are a series of scorched burn marks that are easily visible. It would seem likely that these are the result of rush lights. Identical examples appear on a bressemer in Waterloo Cottages (our only remaining thatched cottages in Watchet).

Coming home on a dark evening we take for granted that with the flick of a switch there will be instant light. It would have been a much different situation in 17th Century Watchet. For the vast majority the only light would be provided by a rushlight. Blacksmith made (see illustration) the rushlight held a



bundle of rushes that were soaked in animal or bird fat. The fat (tallow) in many cases



would have been a by-product of roasted meat or a stew, perhaps gathered in a grisset. Gilbert White in his iconic book 'The Natural History of Selbourne' published in 1789 wrote "The careful wife of a Hampshire labourer obtains all her fat for nothing for she saves the scummings of her bacon pot for this use". The rushlight came in a number of different styles and types and it is quite possible to identify them by regional variations. Of course the

rushlight holders that were used at number 41 are long gone. The 19th Century saw the introduction of oil lamps to cottage homes and candles were much more available and affordable.

Another interesting feature of the principal fireplace is the stones that support the bressemer. Local stone predominates but interestingly there are incorporated a number of dressed stones that indicate an earlier date. It was common for stone to be reused - an interesting theory is that stones such as this may have been 'liberated' from Cleeve Abbey. The second fireplace also revealed curious features. It had not been used for domestic use but some form of manufacture – perhaps bronze smelting. There is clear evidence of an additional doorway added in the late 17th or early 18th Century to the side of the building. This certainly indicates that it was not intended for domestic use but for some form of trade. It is always interesting to speculate!

Jasper Westcott was born in Watchet in 1754 and apprenticed as a bronze founder in Bristol in 1771. In 1780 he was 'admitted a burgess', meaning he was entitled to trade in the city and he did so at 64 Redcliff Street. Certainly he returned to Watchet at some time and probably died in the town on the 19th of March 1816 at the age of 65. He is buried at St. Decumans. Of course it can only be conjecture and perhaps a little fanciful, but could it be possible that as a young man he learnt the secrets of his trade in Watchet and at number 41!

The building has revealed many secrets and indications to the countless generations who have lived in it. Sunken wells, interior windows, strange graffiti – there are a hundred tales to tell.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Paul Upton and his sympathetic and sensitive approach to restoring this building. Giving a relevance to the 21st Century but also ensuring that the integrity of the building is retained.



Poet's Corner – Again apologies to Jan Simpson-Scott, the regulation eight pages of the newsletter filled before printing her essay on Coleridge's Kubla Khan. The next issue will definitely carry this item. There is room however, just, to print a portrait of the great man to whet our appetites for the forthcoming article.

Wildflowers around Watchet – by Botanical Artist - Sheila Mannes-Abbott

The Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*) is probably the easiest orchid to recognise and is one of our best loved. As the flowers resemble large Bumble Bees it was thought that was the method of pollination, however this rarely occurs, in fact the Bee Orchid is self-pollinating. Last year on a nature walk with U3A, we found a number of fine specimens near Kilve. The conservation of all wild orchids is under threat with the destruction of habitat. The colony of Pyramid Orchids for example on the western outskirts of Watchet is in decline partly because of too early cutting of the grass bank before the seeds have had a chance to set.

All plants growing in the wild belong to someone and in 1981 The Wildlife and Countryside Act made it illegal to pick or dig up wild plants without the landowner's permission. This act was supplemented by legislation in 2001, making it a legal duty for landowners and occupiers to safeguard biodiversity on their land. This Bee Orchid painting is now in the Kew Herbarium collection.



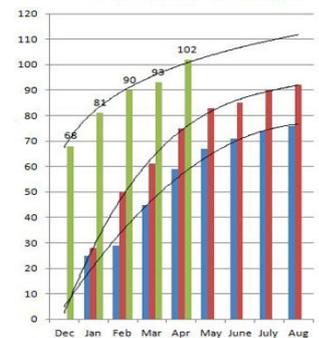
Watchet Conservation Society Committee

Molly Quint often says that the quality of any organization is down to the strength of its committee. If that's the case, then we are very fortunate in the WCS to have a very strong one. The full list is printed below but I thought it might be helpful for our members to learn



a little about individual officers and this time we feature **John Irvén**. John fills the role of Treasurer and Membership Secretary at the same time as being an active town councillor a tireless campaigner for the Watchet Library and for improvements to the Goviers Lane railway crossing, Chair of Watchet Summertime etc etc. As Treasurer, he has the unenviable duty of maintaining our solvency; with so many plans and

projects on the go, that's quite a task. The other hat John wears is that of Membership Secretary, he regularly produces a graph showing how our membership is growing; the latest one is illustrated here. We have just exceeded our target of 100 memberships for the first time (>140 members allowing for couples and family) – well done John! There is still an opportunity for those who have not yet renewed to send their remittance to John – thank you



WATCHET CONSERVATION SOCIETY
Chair
Treasurer and Membership Secretary
Secretary
Case Officer

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Committee: Tina Barry, Nick Cotton, Peter Murphy, Tim Prior, Paul Reynolds, Eric Robinson, Izzy Silvester

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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