



WATCHET CONSERVATION MATTERS

For conserving our built and natural environment

Issue 24 September/October 2012

From our Chair, Molly Quint:

Dear Everyone, So much has been happening in Watchet since the last Newsletter. The Kids' Festival was great fun with John Irven and myself helping out by running the Aunt Sally Stall, very old fashioned but still so popular with the children. This is the third year we have done this and it is so good to lend a Conservation hand to other organisations. Then August came, our annual Pool cleaning with wonderful help from Digger & Dumper machines driven by Nick Sherring and Paul Reynolds. But not

forgetting the seaweed scrubbers etc., where certainly many hands made light work, thank you all very much. The Sea was then very kind to us for two weeks it left the stones out the pool and our Pool Fun Day went ahead with great noise and splashing on the 19th of August at the end of Watchet Summertime Week.



The Watchet Wall Project had its Public Launch in July with a great presentation by its founder Tim Prior. As Conservation we felt a wider group was necessary to take it forward and we were so delighted that over 25 people came to the meeting in the Phoenix and a good committee was formed with about 14 members, of which I will be one, to keep strong links between WWP and Conservation.



Then just to round off the month we are able to say that great work has been done with the St. Decuman's Well Garden and now I do believe there are more plants than weeds!! However if anyone has any more shrubs or ground cover plants that they can part with we would be very grateful for them and also if anyone has time on a Wednesday afternoon from 2.15pm we would love a bit of help to keep everything looking good. Finally, please do come along to our next open meeting to hear about the exciting show to be staged in the Containers on the East Quay, perhaps we will be enjoying an Indian Summer then !!!



The Special Prize was won this year by Louis Foster. This prize is given each year in memory of Jim Barry, a great supporter of all things Watchet.



Yours very sincerely, Molly Q

Forthcoming Events: Sep. 18th. 7.30pm Methodist Schoolroom

A taster for: “Watchet - Portrait of a Harbour Town”



For our Open Meeting in September we welcome the organisers of ECHO-WATCHET, a Theatre Mélange production. They will present a preview of the many treats they have in store for us in their production: “Watchet - Portrait of a Harbour Town”. These Shipping Containers that we currently see on the East Quay will miraculously transform into a small theatre from Friday September 21st. until Sunday September 30th. for film, sound and live

performances: A colourful portrait of our town as seen through the eyes of the people who live here.

Past Events: “A Postcard From Watchet”

Jan Simpson-Scott reviews a most delightful evening

At our Open Meeting on Tuesday 17th. July, Lin Hart, local councillor, businesswoman and inveterate collector of old postcards, entertained and educated us with her talk about her collection. With Paul Upton at the controls of the power-point presentation we were given a magical evening.

It morphed into an audience-participation production with Watchet Elders like Jack Binding providing background detail when there was a gap in establishing names of shop-owners and locations from views of a town very different from Watchet today.

Lin began collecting postcards 22 years ago when she made her first purchase in Barnstaple. Dated 1906 it was a postcard of her first house in Watchet. How inspiring that must have been. She now has a carefully bound collection which is a very important social and industrial history of the town which she would like archived to preserve this documentation of Watchet’s heritage.

Included in Lin’s presentation were postcards showing Thornes Leather Merchants, Jones the Printers, Flappers in Watchet 1925 and a donkey and cart at work in 1938. There were numerous pubs and butchers and nostalgic views of gas lamps in Market Street.

These vintage postcards have provided Lin, not only with an absorbing and fascinating hobby, but also with knowledge about dating, conditions and social comment from the reverse of the postcards. She explained what she learned from the writing and postage. The Postal Service was obviously swift in the Thirties when a resident of Watchet sent a postcard to a friend in Williton to advise that he would meet her “tomorrow”, quite clearly a very reliable form of communication.

One of Lin’s own favourites was a postcard of a small girl walking along the Esplanade holding hands with an adult. Lin has identified this young girl as Blanche Leicester who lived in Watchet and is remembered by some of our older townsfolk. Perhaps the most poignant of all was the postcard of the storm of December 1908 showing the extent of the damage. Or was it of the lone man walking down Market Street, slumped and dejected in the 1930s, mirroring the iconic national images of unemployment in the Devil’s Decade?

My own favourite was one of several of Regatta Day with everyone spruced up in best dress – so much to learn from this one about social unity and community. Much discussion was generated by the 1952 postcard of The Motor Car in Swain Street and a gentleman in a grey

suit about to cross the road. Was it James Date going home to what we now know as The Clock House? No-one was able to confirm this.

A wonderful evening: I feel sure that Lin improved the local knowledge of those of us who have come to reside in this charming town in recent years and she certainly took those long established residents on an evocative trip down Memory Lane. The buzz of conversation afterwards was palpable.

I had been privileged to see part of Lin's collection some time ago but had no idea it was so extensive and witnessing her enthusiasm was infectious. It was truly inspirational and in addition to our educational intake our coffers were swelled by Lin's kind donation of prints which were sold at the end of the evening.

I thank you on behalf of everyone Lin. You gave us an evening to remember and to talk about for a long time to come. I'm sure everyone would welcome a further instalment of A Postcard from Watchet, as I know that you have many we didn't see!

Then and Now: Spot the differences

As an interesting follow-on from the postcard evening we thought it would be enlightening to take one of Lin's postcards and display it alongside a contemporary photograph of the same area: here's Norton's Corner (between South Road and Liddymore Road).



There's an obvious lack of houses in Doniford Road, not even Shanghai bungalow, sad about the spider's web of cables spoiling the skyline. The lady from Cheshire who posted this card in 1922 tells her friend that, *"I am staying in one of these houses, having a fortnight off and I can assure you I need it"*. Nice to know Watchet has always been a relaxing place to visit.

WCS Summertime bric-a-brac Our third and final bric-a-brac stall of the year raised £56.60p which takes our total fund-raising to date to over £1000. Thank you to all of our members who donated once more and turned up in extremely inclement weather to buy back again. Without your generosity none of this would be possible. Once again I am indebted to Lin Marlor for helping to run the stall and to Ellie Jones who joined us, unknowing that once behind the stall means a life-time's commitment! Alan Marlor helped us set up the stall and stayed the course all day, providing encouragement in the rain with his funny one-liners. He was a gem clearing away the debris at the end of the day which is one of the hardest parts of the job.

Our next fund-raising event will be at Watchet Station on Friday, 14th December when we will be holding a coffee and cakes morning by kind permission of the Station-Master, David Simpson-Scott, and the Committee of FOWs (Friends of Watchet Station)

Details will follow and we look forward again to your support.

Jan Simpson-Scott

A Royal Visit:

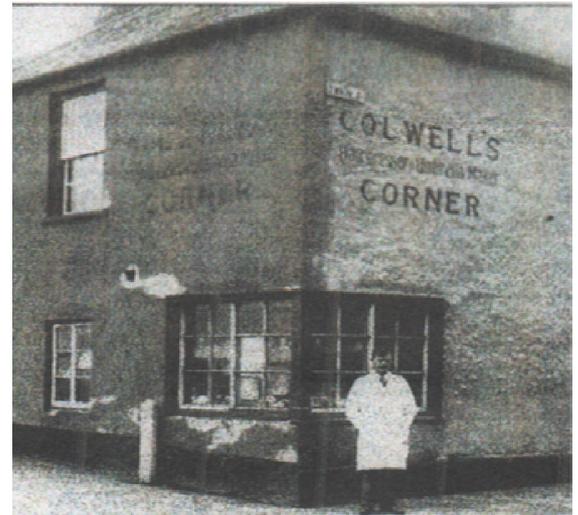
HRH The Princess Royal is to visit Watchet on September 20th. for the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of Watchet Lighthouse. Final details are being planned but it is expected that the visit will be from 10-30 am until 12-30 pm



Watchet's Historical Past: *Once again our thanks go to Jack Binding for more recollections from Watchet's fascinating past.*

Fearless Joe and the Lion Tamer

On the evening of 20th March 2012 my wife and I gathered with a large number of local folk at the Swain Street end of the Esplanade to witness the unveiling of the Admiral Fitzroy barometer which had been housed on the outside wall of Cosy Cottage for nearly 150 years. The Society had invited the owner of the cottage, Mrs Mary Rowlands, to carry out the honour of unveiling the barometer and this was done with much cheering and applause. Whilst these preliminaries were taking place, my mind went back to the early 1920s when Mary's grandfather, Mr Joseph Colwell who had married Lydia Date the daughter of a well-



'Colwell's Corner' - Joe in his barber's coat.

known and respected family, ran a very successful Ladies and Gents Hairdressing business at the corner shop (now The Corner Collection). Now in those days it was not unusual for a travelling circus with all its entourage to suddenly appear and pitch their marquee on the Recreation Ground. On this particular occasion the Circus Manager, for a publicity stunt, called on Joe and offered him £5 if he would go in the lion's cage and shave the lion tamer. Joe, who was somewhat short in stature and of a quiet and inoffensive manner, much to everyone's surprise took up the challenge. Excitement in the town grew and on the appointed evening the marquee was filled to capacity. In due course the event of the evening arrived and as the lions' cage was being erected there was a buzz of expectation all around. Would Joe appear? Suddenly a fanfare announced the arrival of the lion tamer who walked into the cage with a cracking of whips, then came the lions, snarling and pawing the ground. Slowly, one by one, each was persuaded to mount and sit on stools in a circle around the cage. Suddenly, Joe, this diminutive hairdresser from Watchet, attired in his white jacket, calmly entered the lions' cage armed with just a cut-throat razor. He approached the lion tamer who was seated in the centre of the arena and placing his napkin around the lion tamer's neck proceeded with steady hand and eye to give him a first class

shave much to the wild acclaim of the audience.

However, there was a sting in the tail as it were. When Joe went to collect his winnings the Circus Manager could not be found. The following day Joe was told that the Circus was packing up and preparing to leave, so he promptly enlisted the help of a number of his seafaring friends to come with him and root out the Circus Manager. There was no shortage of volunteers and in due course the Manager was found and advised quite clearly to “pay up or else”. Joe duly received his rightful winnings and the toast that night in all the taverns was to “Fearless Joe, Watchet's hero” – an enduring title that has passed down through the ages. Happy days!

The Riddle of the Alabaster Font *Our newsletter would not be complete without a contribution from Nick Cotton, here's his latest article and drawing.*



Most of our members will have seen the rich veins of pink and white alabaster in the cliffs along West Street beach. Alabaster is a translucent type of gypsum, in some forms, so soft a material that it can be carved with a thumbnail. For this reason it does not make an ideal exterior building material, although it was used by the ancient Egyptians as decorative facing on the pyramids near Cairo. A little closer to home in Swain Street, the newly opened ‘Little Gallery’ has alabaster keystones above the door and window; an unusual feature that I have not encountered before.



Alabaster has been taken from the cliffs at Watchet for centuries, but information is scant. Certainly, it was transported to Bristol for use in the glass works, along with seaweed. (Alabaster is a flexing agent and ideal in the glass-making process, the seaweed being utilised as a colouring agent.)

In Victorian times, with the arrival of the railway, the town became a tourist destination. The Victorians were great accumulators of seaside souvenirs and a small cottage industry was established, supplying alabaster carvings of lighthouses, bowls, etc.

It is still possible easily to find fragments of alabaster on the beach; a comfortable rock to sit on and a pen-knife for whittling can be quite rewarding. (It is important to remember that it is illegal to remove alabaster from the cliffs themselves.) During my wanderings, I have discovered a number of effigies in local churches carved from alabaster, and of particular interest was the font at St. Peter's Church in



Williton. The font is dated 1666 and has the initials R.W. and R.P. incised into it. As to the significance of these, it is open to conjecture: it had been assumed that they may be the initials of the churchwardens of the time.

Recently, I have been in discussion with Ray State, who is involved in the research of alabaster carving. He was made aware of Watchet alabaster from the writings of the late Ronald Firman, of Nottingham University, and Nicholas Stone, a London carver. (Although alabaster can be found in other parts of Britain the alabaster here in Watchet appears to be unique in its specific and very obvious pink hue). Firman reported that a traveller called Gerard wrote, in 1633: "Near Minehead, at this time, a Dutchman hath found out mines of excellent alabaster which they use much for tombs and chimney pieces." (for Minehead, read Watchet.) The Dutchman may be William de Keyser, the brother-in-law of Nicholas Stone, who came to London in 1613, having trained in the de Keyser household in Amsterdam and married into the family. Nicholas died in 1647 but his workshop continued, firstly with his son John until 1667, and then with a cousin until about 1672.

Significantly, two of the Stone workshop carvers were Richard Pooke (RP), and the foreman, Richard White (RW). It is interesting to note that these are the very initials on the font at Williton. Pooke was illiterate and made his simple mark, RP, on the orders. Much of the Stone records are held at the John Stone Museum in London, but John was not as meticulous as his father at keeping records: the last entry is in 1658 and unfortunately, because of this, the Williton font is not mentioned. Pooke and White were designated as 'travelling carvers', and if, as seems likely, Stone was quarrying alabaster in Watchet, it is almost certain that the font was carved in the town, by the London carvers, thence transported to Williton.

Ray would welcome any information regarding Watchet alabaster that would assist him in his continued research.

Poet's Corner For Jan Simpson-Scott's regular contribution to our newsletter, she discusses:

Coleridge and his relationship with Dorothy Wordsworth:

A question I am constantly asked when I am working at Coleridge Cottage is "Do you think that Coleridge had an affair with Dorothy Wordsworth?"

Usually my answer is that there is no evidence to support this. I don't believe that they had a relationship beyond a devoted friendship and a literary bond brought about initially by Coleridge's deep friendship with William Wordsworth, Dorothy's brother. So as a diversion I thought I would explore the relationship between Dorothy Wordsworth and Coleridge to see if I might take a different view.

Before coming to Nether Stowey in 1797 Coleridge had spent some time with the Wordsworth siblings in Grasmere where they lived, walking together almost every day. Here the three sought inspiration through nature on their long walks in the Lake District. This shared experience continued after 1797 when they hill-walked across the Quantocks



Dorothy Wordsworth

from Lime Street to Porlock, garnering inspiration from the spectacular scenery and effectively inventing a sort of Romantic tourism of the hills which would be translated into poetic form. From July 1797 the Wordsworths were in residence in Holford at Allfoxden House, described by Dorothy as a large mansion in a deer park with seventy head of deer, an excellent garden, well stocked with vegetables and fruit. This was rented by Wordsworth for £23 pa. On 20th January 1798 Dorothy Wordsworth began what came to be known as "The Allfoxden Journals". It was in these that she recorded their daily lives. The Allfoxden journals give numerous details of Coleridge's visits to Allfoxden and the Wordsworth's five visits to him at Nether Stowey, giving a deep and personal insight into their lives. Dorothy Wordsworth wrote many letters from here to her friends, in which she praises Coleridge's "society" and "talents". Certainly she flattered Coleridge, praising his poetry. Coleridge referred to the three of them as "three persons and one soul". Dorothy Wordsworth had no intellectual training and was not on the same academic level as Coleridge. Her diaries are simple, natural, though fascinating records of her parallel life with Wordsworth and Coleridge. In her writing there is nothing of the style of Coleridge which constantly exhibits his genius and formidable intellect.

The bond between these three was certainly spiritual. Coleridge wrote of them "Though we were three persons it was but one God". William Wordsworth wrote of Dorothy:

"She gave me eyes, she gave me ears;
And humble cares, and delicate fears;
A heart, the fountain of sweet tears;
And love, thought and joy."

She was the catalyst which enabled them to achieve greatness, enhancing their vision, increasing their awareness. It was they who penned the lines which sprang from the view they took of their surroundings. She was the stimulus for the words which came from their pens revealing their metaphysical response.

Coleridge was a complex character. He was also very flawed, prone to moods and excesses. He would change the course of England's poetic history for ever and it surely must be no coincidence that his greatest works were written in his years at Nether Stowey where he was so often in the company of Dorothy Wordsworth. Coleridge's poetry emerged from the deep and powerful emotions which increasingly he believed could only be experienced from a deep relationship with nature. Dorothy did not write poetry but kept detailed journals from which Coleridge could draw for his later verse. It could be argued that she was used by Coleridge. She documented reminiscences which he would later borrow. She logged his moods and passions. There is little record of her own feelings. She was the guardian of Coleridge's creative genius and seemed happy to be so.

It is beyond doubt that William and Dorothy Wordsworth and Coleridge recognised that they shared something which could be defined as love and achievement. Dorothy never married. William Wordsworth married Mary Hutchinson and Dorothy lived with them. Coleridge married Sara Fricker and after leaving her, had an affair with Sarah Hutchinson, Wordsworth's sister-in-law, to whom he dedicated his famous poem "Christabel".

It is clear that there was an immensely strong bond between Coleridge and Dorothy Wordsworth but William Wordsworth was always evident as the third side of the triangle. Dorothy had the gift of sympathy and empathy. In a world where women were subordinate she may well have cherished her position as confidante to a man of great genius. She knew Coleridge through the spectrum of his moods. He kept close to her. Genius that he was, he was dependent upon her for spiritual comfort. There must have been love between them. She was an extremely important, if not vital woman in his life for quite some time. She must have loved him and that love must have been reciprocated. But I remain convinced that it was only ever a platonic relationship. Intense yes, but it was

nonetheless pure and platonic. As a woman of the time Dorothy Wordsworth was in a unique position – the keeper and supporter of genius. At times it must have felt like a burden, a heavy load to carry but she believed she was creating poets. She would never be one herself. Coleridge told her that her presence induced his moods of happiness and creativity in which he wrote his poems. It was symbiotic. She was an immensely strong woman, yet gentle – an indispensable “sister” to Coleridge. Behind his genius, his great works, Dorothy Wordsworth occupies the shadows.

As for more.....? I still believe there was no more. A platonic love which was sufficient for both, satisfied each. It was one of the most fruitful, creative relationships in English Literature but it fulfilled Coleridge only on one level, strong but chaste.

In 1802 Coleridge wrote:

“Why was I made for LOVE
And LOVE denied to me?”

I shall return to these lines in the next newsletter which will feature Coleridge’s marriage to Sara Fricker.

Jan Simpson-Scott

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

Common Mallow - *Malva sylvestris*



Found frequently on roadsides and waste spaces from June till September, most particularly in the South of England and less so in Scotland and Ireland. This particular sample was 50 yards from my front door outside the Memorial Ground.

This pretty plant, ignored by many of us because it is always there, does deserve closer inspection as I discovered. The seed ‘pods’ are like a tiny pie in a fluted dish, the buds and stems are covered in fine hairs. The leaves are attractively folded and flatten out as they grow older and bigger.

This plant has been used as a soothing agent in the treatment for inflammation of the skin, respiratory, gastric systems and more.

My Grandfather used to chew the fresh flowers as he said it helped with toothache. I certainly have not tried that myself!



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