



WATCHET CONSERVATION MATTERS

For conserving our built and natural environment

Issue 27 March/April 2013

From our Chair, Molly Quint:

Dear Friends and Members, at last it feels a little more like spring and even the daffodils are appearing to cheer us all up. Do hope you all like the planting of the gardens at the Goviers Lane Crossing, which is now so much more user friendly. Very many thanks to all who helped make this area of Watchet so lovely.

A lot of small things have been happening over the past two months, a new plaque has been made for us by our great friend Richard Stanton, stating that the Fitzroy Barometer was renovated by WCS two leaflets have been written by Nick Cotton for the Tourist Office on "Seascape" and the Fitzroy Barometer at their request to give to Visitors in the coming Season, and we are also having further plaques made in slate, to identify the improvements the Conservation Society has made around the town.



Molly inspiring planting volunteers

The item of news which caught all our attention had a wonderful ending but a terrible beginning when the little baby was swept into the harbour by the wind. I have spoken to the father and he says the little boy is fine and well now with all the energy of a toddler. Without the wonderful and quick thinking of George Reader and Tanya Allen the outcome might have been so very different, we add our very grateful thanks to them and also to the quick response of the coastguards and the air ambulance.

Do hope to see you all at the next talk on Tuesday 19th March on "Watchet Then & Now" by Paul and Nick.

Yours very sincerely, Molly Q

Forthcoming Events: "Watchet Then and Now"



**Methodist Schoolroom on Tuesday
19th March 2013 at 7.30 pm**

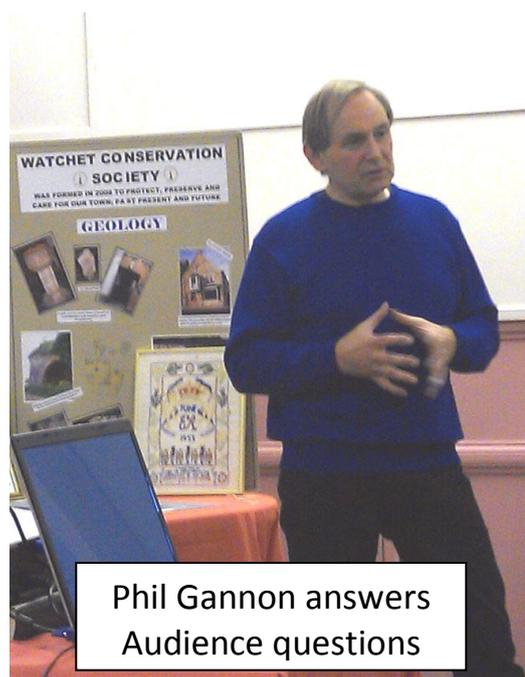
**How buildings have
changed over time – and
how they haven't.**

With help from Nick Cotton, Paul Upton will describe how much and how little some Watchet buildings have changed over time. Nick and Paul hope that there will be interesting observations from the audience too.

Past Events: The Mineral Railway – Phil Gannon’s presentation.

Peter Murphy writes: I was happy to agree to give the vote of thanks to Phil Gannon for the talk he was to give to the Society in January because I had already heard him speak on this topic so I knew he would be an entertaining and informative speaker. During my long involvement with the Old Mineral Line Project, I have heard several speakers address different audiences about the line. I helped the Market House Museum renew its displays of the history of the line and served with Phil on the Project Executive Committee.

Phil and I got to know each other quite well when he was part of a group that delivered the Project schemes in Watchet. This included on the west pier, the museum and the Watchet to Washford Trail. Phil and Jim Nicholas were responsible for getting the Watchet to Washford trail off the ground and it is true to say that without Phil acting as project



manager for the works drawing on his extensive background in Building Control for the District Council, the trail resurfacing which is enjoyed by many just would not have happened.

Phil explained the development of iron mining on the Brendon Hills from 1839 - 1883 with a brief reopening in 1907. Sir Thomas Lethbridge opened an adit - a horizontal tunnel - into the hillside at Chargot Wood which was one of the first mines of the industrial era. Later, the Bearland flue was built at Chargot and became the only surviving such structure in the south west. It has been preserved as part of the Old Mineral Line Project.

Another Thomas, Thomas Brown was sent by the Ebbw Vale Iron Company to investigate the prospect of raising iron production on the Brendons to supply the

furnaces in south Wales which were running out of locally mined ore. It was following this that Rice Hopkins was engaged to engineer a line to carry the ore from the hills to the port in Watchet.

The line was fully completed in 1864 at a cost of £110K which was far in excess of Hopkins' original estimate which was nearer £40K. The construction of the incline accounted for £42K. The incline, which ended at Coomberow, was a steep 1 in 4 slope and at 1,185 metres long, was the longest non powered incline in the UK. Much Watchet beach stone was used in the construction.

At Watchet, horses dragged the ore wagons onto the west pier to load iron ore onto boats bound for the Ebbw Vale furnaces. Initially, men shoveled the ore into the boats. Then a mineral jetty which projected out into the harbour was constructed to permit two boats to tie up and be loaded at once.

The mines and the line closed in 1898 as the ore became uneconomic to mine because new ore deposits in Spain could be used due to technology changes in the iron industry. The line briefly reopened in 1907 but this was not long lived. Phil passed round samples of iron ore and we were all surprised at the weight of the hematite which contrasted with his other sample which was not so high in its iron content.

Passengers were carried from Watchet to the base of the incline where they transferred to wagons to ascend the slope. Phil showed us pictures of the tickets issued.

The line was never a commercial success and the rails were lifted although the Project found a surviving length on Watchet's west pier. Phil referred to a book on the line produced by Mike Jones who has spent much of his life researching the history of the mines and the line. This is available from the Station Shop in Minehead and from the Market House Museum which reopens at Easter.

This was a thoroughly enjoyable evening on a subject which illuminated an important part of Watchet's transport history - its first railway.

The New Goviers Lane Crossing – *bringing it into the 21st century*

There has been a crossing at Goviers Lane since the railway came to Watchet in 1862. Pedestrians and wagons used the route to link to the harbour and especially the East Quay. In the early days there was no restriction to crossing, but in more modern times a number of controls were introduced better to segregate people and trains. At one point wooden gates were fitted, but until recently the crossing was essentially an 'open design' protected at the Goviers Lane side by some railings, with miniature red lights to indicate that a train was approaching and warning users not to cross, replacing an earlier warning bell. In July 2010 for what were considered sound safety reasons, self closing, normally closed metal gates were fitted each side of the crossing, and the redundant warning devices were removed.

Although improving safety for the railway and pedestrians, this caused immediate problems for elderly, disabled wheelchair and motorised buggy users, as well as parents with children and pushchairs. Some users found it difficult if not impossible to open the gates. A number of representations and protests were made to the West Somerset Railway (WSR) but there initially seemed little response to the demands for a solution. Campaigners explored the possibility of using disability and equalities law to challenge the fitting of the gates and ask for a 'reasonable adjustment' as required in the provisions of the legislation. The situation was saddened by the death of Jim Kelly, a local resident and motorised buggy user, who fell at the crossing approach and subsequently died in hospital.

At this point the Board of WSR were approached and asked if they would like to help find a solution. The Chairman took up the challenge and together with campaigners met with the local community to explore the problems and try to find a solution. The Office of Rail Regulation was also involved over alternative designs that would meet safety requirements, whilst easing the problems for disadvantaged users.

A modern version of a properly engineered chicane was identified, and by March 2011 a system was simulated and trialed in Harbour Road car park to show that wheelchair and other users could successfully negotiate it.



Cindy Griffiths with Jean Kent and helping dog Nellie

The problem of finance then raised its head. As well as the problem with the gates, assessment showed that the access ramps were too steep and of adverse camber, and where other users had experienced difficulty. This area, however, was the responsibility of the West Somerset Council (WSC), not the railway, and additionally the footway approaches were the responsibility of Somerset County Council (SCC) as highways authority. The task of getting everyone working together as well as finding the total cost was starting to look unachievable.

At this point Conservation Society Treasurer John Irven, who has continued to act as the 'Community Stakeholder', facilitated a partnership between WSR, WSC, SCC, and Watchet Town Council (WTC) and ensured that sufficient financial contributions could be made by each party to deliver the solution. West Somerset Council took leadership for project coordination and design by WSC's Jayne Hall, who is also a committee member of our Conservation Society. WSC provided project management and coordination, and through Sullys the contractors, the new crossing was installed between 5th November and 15th December 2012 without once having to close the crossing to users during the building work.

Although new pavement surfacing had to comply with 2013 legislation, especially for meeting disabled health & safety requirements, the original lower steps and railings dating from 1862 when the railway was built were able to be retained. As reported in the last newsletter, Conservation Society member Eric Robinson advised on how to obtain the best match for the new granite steps required. A new gate needed to retain the public right of way was fashioned in wood, and all railings, metalwork, wood and painting were made consistent with the existing design for the conservation area.

On 18th February, the West Somerset Railway chairman, Humphrey Davies, hosted a formal opening ceremony for the local community on behalf of the partners and stakeholders. This involved welcomes from John Irven and Humphrey, together with a small ceremony unveiling plaques by representatives of Jim Kelly's family bearing his message for the future - 'Have a safe crossing'. A ribbon was cut by Linda Stacey, a local motorised buggy user and campaigner.



The speeches have been made and the ribbon is cut

WSR then ran a special train to Minehead and return for the guests attending, which incorporated 'Lorna Doone' and a second special carriage adapted to allow wheelchair users and carers to enjoy the trip. Refreshments were provided by helpers from Watchet Phoenix.



Jayne Hall planting polyanthus

As the areas adjacent to the crossing had to be cleared for the modifications, but were not part of the project, Watchet Conservation Society volunteered to finish these with appropriate plantings, using society funds, a donation from Watchet Town Council, together with cash and in kind contributions from WSC members, not forgetting N.J. Nurseries who generously donated half the polyanthus plants, a few of which are shown on the left. Conservation Society Chair Molly Quint, designers Sheila Frewin and Jayne Hall together with Malcolm Davy who did much of the physical work, were part of the event.

During the introduction, John Irven said "I think it is a great example of 'best practice partnership working' to deliver a solution to a real problem for the community. I hope it continues to bring the community, Railway and all groups involved closer together as we move forward"

Then and Now: Spot the differences



In our last issue, we featured West Street Beach from the slipway. In this edition we instead, look to the east towards the slipway. Our postcard shows the backs of houses lower down West Street, together with the footpath behind that offered access to the West Pier and lighthouse, in the far distance cranes are just visible on the East Quay. The new outfall for the Washford River can just be seen in our current photograph.

Watchet's Historical Past: WATERLOO COTTAGES

Completion of Nick Cotton's essay from our last newsletter

It might be worth spending some time in reflection, whilst on the bridge overlooking the cottages, considering how life was for the inhabitants in 17th.Century, Watchet. The population of England and Wales had risen from 4 million (in 1600) to 5 ½ million by the end of the century which in itself had an obvious impact. Throughout the 1600's, there was a rapid increase in trade and commerce and the port was well placed geographically on the Bristol Channel to take advantage of these changes.

In particular, building patterns were undergoing notable changes. Dwellings prior to this date were in the main constructed of wood; now they would be built with stone.

Watchet was well placed during this period as it had ready access to stone from our beaches. It was for this reason that there are virtually no cob buildings in the town. Just a few miles away, in surrounding villages, cob is the norm.

When Paul Upton and I have been fortunate enough to visit homes in Watchet, we have found substantial evidence to validate this conclusion. There is little doubt that as we continue our research, a clearer picture will develop, allowing a greater insight into Watchet's vernacular building evolution in the seventeenth century.

Interestingly, the large number of fireplaces we have identified from the latter decades of this era could be due to a number of reasons; it is important to remember that with the significant increase in stone building, (even for the less affluent) it was also accompanied by the purpose-built fireplace. Glass was an additional material that also became more readily available for windows, even in modest homes, replacing the linen soaked in linseed oil that previously offered protection from the elements.

The cottagers' diet at this time was fairly basic - bread, cheese, potatoes and onions, which were combined as pottage. Watchet did have the advantage, of course, of access to fish and shellfish.

Now that cooking (and watching cookery programmes on the television) has become Britain's most popular spectator sport, I'll finish with an authentic recipe of the period.

From "The True Gentlewoman's Delight", published in 1653.

An exceedingly good way to stew chickens:

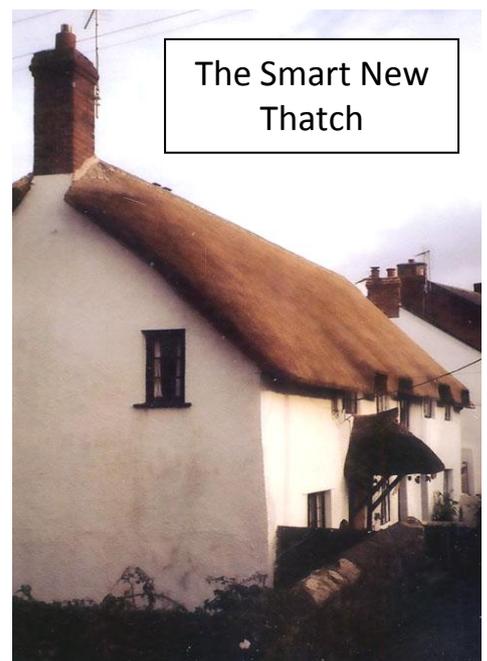
'Take chickens, fley them, and cut them in pieces crosse way, then put them in a pipkin or skillet, and cover them almost with pepper, and Mace and Water, so let it stew softly, with a whole Onion in it, till part of the liquor be consumed, then put in as much white Wine as will cover them again, take parsley, sweet Marjoram, Winter Savory, with a little Thyme, and shred them very small, and put them in, and let them boyle, till they are almost enough, then put in a good piece of butter.'mmmm.

Eric Robinson's background account of the thatching process:

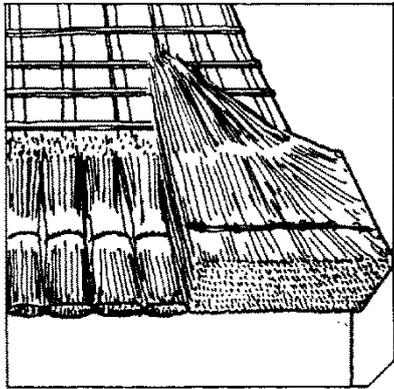
In the first week of December 2012, work was completed on the re-thatching of Waterloo Cottage, Mill Street. This involved a measure of diplomatic consultation which governed the timing of the work.

As Nick Cotton says in his account in our last newsletter, Waterloo Cottage number 7 is only one of three now-separate units taken from what was once a typical Somerset Longhouse running down to the river and the Leat of the mill complex of the town, with the one tall brick chimney stack at gable end above the river in what is now called Little Thatch. So there were three households to agree on the timing of the work. This included the temporary closing of holiday letting of number 7.

Next it was the matter of finding reputable thatchers able to undertake the work on a listed building with the necessary skills of master thatchers; not quite so easy nowadays as it was



pre-war. There was good fortune in finding a space in the diary of Matthew Roberts of Lydeard St Lawrence, who with his partner; was able to start the work in late October. However diligently they worked, they faced very fitful weather which sometimes brought everything to a standstill with strong winds and heavy rains making work impossible for days on end. The other discomfort had to be the fact that the cottage is orientated west to east, which means that in the low angle winter sun, the pitch of the roof facing Mill Street could bask in whatever warmth there was, but the north facing pitch was both sunless and often freezing cold - thatcher's luck.



There are quite definite regional variations in thatching and certainly bias in the choice of materials. In East Anglia and the Ouse Washes of Cambridgeshire, it is fenland reeds which are used. For Somerset it might have been the similar phragmites beds of the Levels which would have been a natural choice, but no, wheat straw is the firm choice throughout Somerset and into Devon, a by product of grain harvesting. In Riverside Farm, long since slated, surviving thatch was of a long straw, including the wheat ears. For Waterloo Cottage, the straw was 'combed' to remove the ears; the straw shaken into bundles with the stems facing the same way, then pressed into the older thatch at the base of the roof. Work progressed upwards, the final bundles at the ridge being laced together by split branches of hazel to secure the thatching.

Often there is extra decoration in the form of a pheasant fashioned in willow withies. I asked if we were going to have pheasants as a final touch in Mill Street. Being good professionals, fully aware of planning rules, I was told that as there were no pheasants in the previous listing for Waterloo Cottage, no, there would be no pheasants to add to the final bill.

Knowing the consequences of protection of species (dormouse for instance) and knowing that thatch contains on average 32 mosses, some of them considered to be 'endangered species' and several forms of liverwort, I am relieved that Natural England have been too busy with badgers, bats, and those dormice to have got round to producing rules governing mosses. In a different assessment however, the cottages in their new splendour may now win a place for Watchet in the revised edition of Pevsner's Buildings of England, Somerset South and West (coming soon).

A happy conclusion to our campaign for repairs to the little bridge by Waterloo Cottages :

This twin arch packhorse bridge, across the Washford River released from the four watercourses of the Stoa's Mill complex and the system of leats and discharge pipes, is now restored.

Contractors with the necessary skills, using sand and lime mortar did the repairs during a brief break in the wet weather during the early part of February. Looking rather starkly white at present, we either wait for natural weathering or take Eric Robinson up on his offer to paint the coping with yoghurt past its sell by date or if available a cocktail of cow manure – thanks Eric. Bacteria and lichen will do the rest, given time. A great Watchet landmark will then be ready for the 2013 visitor season



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

PRIMROSE (*Primula vulgaris*)

With the start of spring, primroses open their pale yellow petals (I always think, to catch the sun's rays). They grow countrywide but especially in the south west. Primroses can be found in woodlands, on roadside verges and almost any grassy places. We are lucky to see them on our own Watchet railway station bank. At this time of the year they start appearing along our lanes, peeking out between rocks and roots; giving us the assurance that spring is on the way.

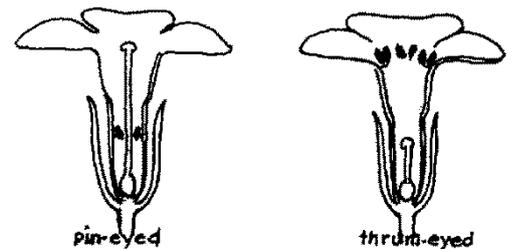


Primroses, oxslips and cowslips have two kinds of flowers: pin eyed, (as the

ones painted here) and thrum eyed.

The lines of darker yellow pointing to the centre of the flower are called honey lines, supposedly to guide the bees to the tube at the base where the nectar is produced. In the pin eyed flower, the pistil has a long stalk with the stigma noticeable at the mouth of the tube, whilst in the thrum eyed variety the pistil is short stemmed and is near the bottom of the tube hidden by the stamens which are attached around the top.

The primrose is less common than it was, due to plants being dug up and over-picked near larger towns. Sadly they are then, unable to seed and spread.



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