



# WATCHET CONSERVATION MATTERS

Promoting, conserving & improving our physical and natural environment

Issue 28 May/June 2013

## ***From our Chair, Molly Quint:***

***Dear Everyone***

I am almost too scared to mention the weather and such beautiful timing to coincide with the Bank Holiday!! Watchet is now getting ready for another great summer of activities. Do hope you have been able to see the Yacht shining in the sunshine in the children's



playground on the Memorial Ground, a beautiful thing to take the place of the redundant beacon. Many thanks go to all who were involved in the project, especially our treasurer, John Irven, (a full report later in this newsletter). Open Evening is on the 21st of May, so do hope you will come and hear John Gilman who has written many books, fact and fiction, about this area.

***Yours very sincerely  
Molly Q***

Watchet Town Council and The Conservation Society joined forces for the "Jumping the Weathervane" Ceremony.  
Peter Murphy, John Irven, Molly Quint, Sally de Renzy- Martin

## ***Forthcoming Events:***

**Open Evening: "Crossways"  
Methodist Schoolroom on Tuesday  
May 21<sup>st</sup> 2013 at 7.30 pm**

We are pleased once again to welcome John Gilman. On this occasion he will tell us about the latest book that he and Ann Gilman have written, detailing Celtic holy places of West Somerset and North Devon, they follow the steps of the Celtic Saints where their cells, oratories and hermitages were first set up during the Age of the Saints.



St Decuman's Tower Watchet

## ***Another Year – Another Bric-a-Brac Stall - June 26th 2013***

In 2012, Jan Simpson-Scott, Tina Barry, Lin Marlor and Ellie Jones garnered the stock and then braved the elements to man the Conservation Society bric-a-brac events. Over £1,000 was raised by their noble efforts. They are at it again, Jan says: We are holding our next Bric-a-brac sale at the Wednesday market on the Esplanade on June 26<sup>th</sup>. I'm sure you've all had a big Spring Clean so please donate any items you no longer need. As you know in the Conservation Society we don't throw things out, unless broken of course, we recycle. So if you're bored with your old bits and pieces then give them to us and come and buy someone else's to give yourself a dose of recycle therapy. (No electrical items please). Bring them to me or Tina Barry; or telephone Tina on 633506 or me on 639615. I will arrange for things to be picked up if necessary. Thank you in advance. We do rely on you for your splendid support and look forward to seeing you on June 26th, so please put the date in your diary.

## ***Past Events “Watchet Past and Present”***

*Report by Alan Jones on the talk by Paul Upton at the open meeting 19<sup>th</sup> March 2013*

From the advanced publicity the members of the Conservation Society plus a good few



visitors must have known they were in for a wonderful evening. What a turn out! When the available 50 chairs were filled we looked around and found 10 'Sunday school' chairs designed for little folk, but we filled those too and still people arrived and soon there were a dozen standing round the room.

Once Paul got into his subject ably assisted with quips from Nick Cotton few worried about discomfort. In his talk he asked us to imagine a time traveler bringing back someone from the past, starting with the medieval period c.1485 and moving in leaps of 200 years through 1685, 1885 and even projecting into 2085.

The question he asked was what would someone from 1485, assuming him to be a Watchet man, recognise in his town today? Only St Decuman's church it seems, up on the hill. He might remember that the tower had only recently been added to the original church. Paul felt sure that he would have known of the 'holy well' but not as we see it today.

Our visitor from 1685 around the time of the battle of Sedgemoor would still have been in awe of the tall two and three story buildings but would have recognised much of the road layout and known some of the older cottages.

During this period there were interesting comments from the audience particularly Eric Robinson about styles and methods of thatching, Eric explained that chimneys came late to Watchet and that many of the Chimneys seen on old cottages today were later additions.





By the time we got to 1885 our visitor would have perhaps felt more comfortable with the height of the buildings because the 'Georgian House' would have already been around for 160 years.

This was built in 'Queen Anne' style, with bricks possibly from Bristol rather than stone, was known then as Bank House and Paul speculated that because wealth was needed for such a home that the owner was a banker. (They must have got sizeable bonuses even then!).

Paul was able to produce many photographs from this period and there was much comment from the

audience with memories from grandparents reinforcing our knowledge of Victorian Watchet.

Nick made reference to the importance and value of the photographs of James Date whose premises were located adjacent to the current Town Council Offices. This raised another question does anyone know for sure the date the council offices were built? Paul believed 1901, can anyone confirm this? There were comments about lime kilns and lime markets of the value of Watchet lime and memories of orchards at the back of Swain Street. There is still a lot of local knowledge in the community which we would love to have documented, so if you have memories jot them down and give them to a member of the committee.

Paul finished with "What if we travelled forward to 2085?" what twentieth or twenty-first century buildings would Watchet residents be proud of and want to conserve in 2085?

Would our conservation efforts have kept the flavour of this ancient sea port? And would our grandchildren be pleased with our efforts or critical that we didn't do more whilst we had the chance?

## ***Watchet's Community Hall***

Seeing such a crowd in the Methodist Schoolroom, highlighted the fact that Watchet needs and deserves a building with space for meetings of the above nature. Time was when we had such a building. On the reverse of this one shilling postcard it says: "This fine hall was built during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War for use as a 'British Restaurant' later used as Watchet Community Centre, then as a garage and workshops owned by G Nethercott. Building demolished and now the site of houses known as The Ropewalk". On a second copy of the photograph: "To



many townsfolk a matter of deep regret was the failure of the Community Centre. Here was a central building suitable for public meetings, dramatics, concerts, dances and other events which today it is often difficult to arrange for lack of suitable accommodation. Despite the enthusiasm of the committee, who made great efforts to keep it in being, it proved uneconomic, was taken over by the Urban District Council and eventually sold and converted into a garage”.

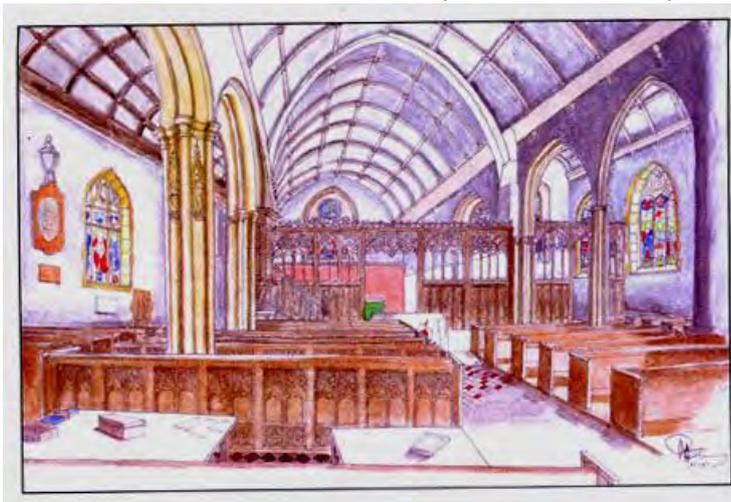
*Thanks are due to Eric Robinson for the above photograph and text. If **you** have any memories of ‘Watchet’s past’, if you have anything to add to the historical items that we print in this newsletter, please will you contact one of us. It really is important that we record the social history of Watchet as well as the architecture. Molly Quint, Nick Cotton, Paul Upton or any of our committee members would be thrilled to document your memories for the benefit of future generations. There are indeed plans afoot to tape record the memories of townsfolk to build an oral archive.*

## **Obituary: Neville Gosling**



With sadness we report the death on April 12th of Conservation Society member Neville Gosling. Members will recall the talk that Neville organised a year or two back: “The Real Ancient Mariner” by Robert Fowke. Neville met the author in New Zealand and persuaded Robert to tell his story to The Society.

Neville had great artistic ability, with his own very characteristic style he used fine line and



wash to illustrate local scenes as can be seen in this water-colour.

Our thoughts are with his widow Jenny and sons Mark and Justin.

## **A Fun Way to Raise Funds**

### **Another successful “night out” at The Spice Merchant**

The photograph shows Molly Quint and John Irven receiving a cheque for £240 from the restaurant manager: Afsar Uddin. Around 40 members and guests enjoyed delicious Indian food in the comfortable surroundings of The Spice Merchant, Watchet, on the evening of February 11<sup>th</sup>. We are indeed grateful to the management for their very generous donation to Conservation Society funds. The customary raffle raised a further £55. What a great way to make money and enjoy the company of good friends.



## The Beacon Project Reaches Completion

In April The Conservation Society in Partnership with Watchet Town Council installed a new weathervane in the children's playground at the Memorial Ground Watchet.

Before the installation of a new gilded weathervane on the old beacon post in the children's playground, Memorial Ground Watchet a 'jumping over the weathervane' ceremony was held for children from Knights Templar School. The idea of jumping over the weathervane ceremony arose from the tradition that when gilded weathervanes are installed or renovated on church and cathedral spires, beforehand they are often blessed and local children allowed to jump over them while on the ground.

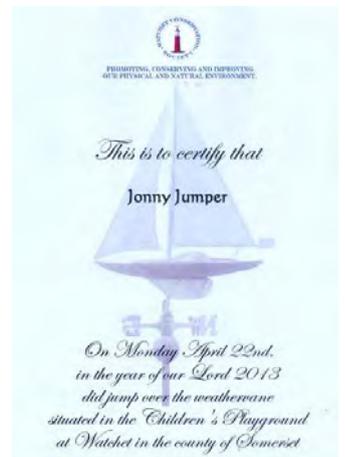


When adults, they can then point at the vane high in the sky and say to their own children and grandchildren 'I jumped over that when I was your age'.....

The children were accompanied by staff and governors of the school, and told about the tradition before being allowed to 'jump' the vane. The weathervane was erected temporarily underneath the climbing tower walkway in the playground to

allow the children to 'jump' in safety, and they were presented with personal certificates and photographs to commemorate their day. The vane was then subsequently erected onto the beacon mounting post.

This project was a partnership with Watchet Town Council who own the land and playground, but who had been struggling with the issue of what to do with the redundant beacon. This had been erected many years ago and used as a brazier at times of national celebration such as jubilees & special events, but recently has fallen into disuse because of concerns from health and safety aspects of using a brazier located in an area that had become primarily a children's playground. They were faced with a potentially large bill for removing the old structure and making it safe. Then came conversations between



Conservation Society and Town Council, about whether we could come up with some attractive alternatives to demolition. Various suggestions were considered but eventually these settled on a weathervane, as approved by WTC Tourism and Leisure and WCS committees. Having considered bespoke designs by local and regional artisans, it was decided that the cost was beyond our budget to deliver. Therefore a



Ian Wedlake prepares the beacon for the installation of the weathervane

sailboat was selected as the final design to represent Watchet in the children's playground environment, overlooking our marina where many such boats now reside. John Irven, Treasurer of WCS sourced a weathervane from a supplier who was able to manufacture and gild it, both to enhance its beauty and improve its weather protection, and then project managed its safe installation by a local contractor, Ian Wedlake. Another committee member, Paul Reynolds, was able to use his mechanical engineering expertise and 'Keepers' workshop business to ensure the components necessary for securely fixing to the post were manufactured locally. The Conservation Society covered all the costs of the weathervane and installation from membership fees and fundraising activities, with the Town Council covering ongoing insurance of the site.

Molly Quint Chair of WCS said 'this was a wonderful way to partner with Town Council to enhance Watchet, and it was delightful to see the children enjoying this unique ceremony'. Sally De Renzy Martin Chair of Watchet Town Council added that 'WTC are extremely pleased with the partnership approach adopted for this project, which we hope will be kept safe and secure by succeeding Watchet generations for our children'.



### ***An Information Leaflet:***

***Following numerous requests from visitors, for background information to the Seascape Sculpture in Esplanade Lane, Nick Cotton was asked to produce a leaflet for the Tourist Information Centre. This is the text:***

The 'Standing Stones' on the corner of Esplanade Lane were conceived and implemented by the Watchet Conservation Society in association with Watchet sculptor David Milton.

This impressive and enigmatic piece stands on the site of a blacksmith's forge which was located here until the first half of the twentieth century. Mervyn Parsons, a local resident, has memories of both his father and grandfather working here as blacksmiths.

It could be argued that the earliest forms of sculpture found in Great Britain are the numerous standing stones found throughout the country and dating back to the Bronze Age. These landmarks are shrouded in mystery and have fascinated us through the centuries, their exact purpose lost in the mists of time. Dame Barbara Hepworth, one of the greatest sculptors of the 20<sup>th</sup>. century, certainly took inspiration from the stones on Dartmoor for some of her work, produced at her studio in St. Ives, Cornwall.

David's work also relates to these tangible reminders of our early ancestors.

Much of his work is open to interpretation, although it does contain some aspects of symbolism - the 'Seascape' piece is overtly inspired by our immediate coastline.



He has long had a deep fascination for our beaches, 'where the land meets the sea', and regularly visits the beach. He has a considerable understanding of the geological strata and their history - the distinctive alabaster seams that for centuries have been utilised for carving and sculpture. The font at St. Peter's church in Williton is made of Watchet alabaster and is dated 1666. The cliffs are a rich source of fossils which pre-date the age of the dinosaurs and those with a keen eye may well find an ammonite or 'devil's toenail' as they stroll across the beach (which is an S.S.S.I.)

David is aware of the changing weather patterns, the wind, the sun and moon, the ebbing and flowing of the tides and the many other aspects of what is a constantly varying landscape ..... a landscape that is always inhabited by the many birds which rely on this part of the coast for their continued existence. These elements and more are recurring themes in much of his work.

The stone used in making this work was taken from inland Dulverton. Each individual stone relates to the others, creating a sense of the perpetual changing of the seasons, a little different perhaps from a woodland, where the variations are much more obviously visual - although for David, the cliffs, beach and the sea, along with the inhabitants, indicate a changing pattern as markedly as an oak tree!

It is worth taking the time to stand in front of the sculpture and attempt to create this connection. Certainly it is the sculptor's intention that the viewer should find what he can, there being no specifics of interpretation. As with more ancient stones many feel a desire to reach out and touch them, this is an important element in his work and is encouraged. It is David's intention that this sculpture is tactile and if visitors feel a need to make a physical contact they will leave their own personal mark for centuries to come.

David Milton has that rare talent who is able to create work of a high degree of sophistication, yet has received no formal art training and is unaware of any artistic influence. His work has been acclaimed by critics and is held in numerous private collections throughout Great Britain and abroad. He has also accepted public commissions including 'Seascape' which will remain a constant testimony to his gifts and continue to give Watchet great pride that he has made our town his home. David continues on his sculptural voyage of discovery and could well be on the beach among the rocks as you read this.

## ***A Watchet Development is Nominated for a Prestigious Award***

Malt House Court, built in Watchet town centre by independent Somerset house builder, Acorn Developments Ltd, was completed in March 2012. It has already been awarded an accolade of Best Small Housing Development and Winner of Winners at the 2012 LABC Somerset West Building Excellence Awards and has now been put forward to the South West Region Awards, to be held in Torquay in June. The Local Authority Building Control (LABC) Building Excellence Awards are all about the essence of good buildings.

This compact mews of ten houses and flats, built on a long term derelict site was commended by West Somerset Council's Building Control Manager, Jayne Hall, who said that the final design, high standard of workmanship and successful working partnership with the council's building control surveyors lead to the development being worthwhile of recognition. The sympathetic design incorporated the retention of the existing stone barn, lean-to store buildings and the curved stone perimeter walls – important features that maintained the character of the site.

Located within the town's conservation area, this residential scheme offered three affordable housing units. Malt House Court is tucked away behind the Post Office, between Swain Street and the Market Street car park, it is well worth a look, to see how modern construction can work in an historic environment.

## ***A Note from the Society's Case Officer: Paul Upton***

One of my responsibilities as case officer is to examine all planning applications and decisions in the town and make representation to the District Council when appropriate. Most applications are uncontentious, but when I have a concern, I bring it to the attention of the Society's committee, and if they agree, I write a letter of objection. We are particularly concerned to conserve and protect our heritage of buildings, our landscapes and streetscapes, and to ensure that any new developments are appropriate in their siting, their scale and their design. We cannot, of course, align ourselves with any individual or group of residents who may be affected by a development, but take an objective view which we consider best for the whole town, present and future.

We recently objected to an application to build a two-storey house on land between Beverley Drive and Goviers Lane. This application was refused permission by the District Council and the applicant has appealed against this decision. A copy of my letter of objection will appear on the District Council's website (It takes a little time for items to be posted on the site so please re-visit the website if it has not yet been posted). Go to [www.westsomersetonline.gov.uk](http://www.westsomersetonline.gov.uk) then click on *Planning and Building*, then click on *Planning*, then *View a Planning Application On Line*. Enter the application number which in this case is 3/37/12/036. You can then choose from *comments* or *documents* to find all the details. Some members may not be aware that this service is available for all planning applications, and even if you do not know the application number, the address or post-code will usually find it for you.

***Finally, if you have a concern, or are considering a planning application, and would like some input from the Conservation Society, please contact me or one of the other members of the committee. Paul Upton – Case Officer Watchet Conservation Society.***

**Poet's Corner:** we're pleased to once again include one of Jan Simpson-Scott's fascinating essays on our "local poets".

## **Coleridge: two passions we share – walking and poetry.**

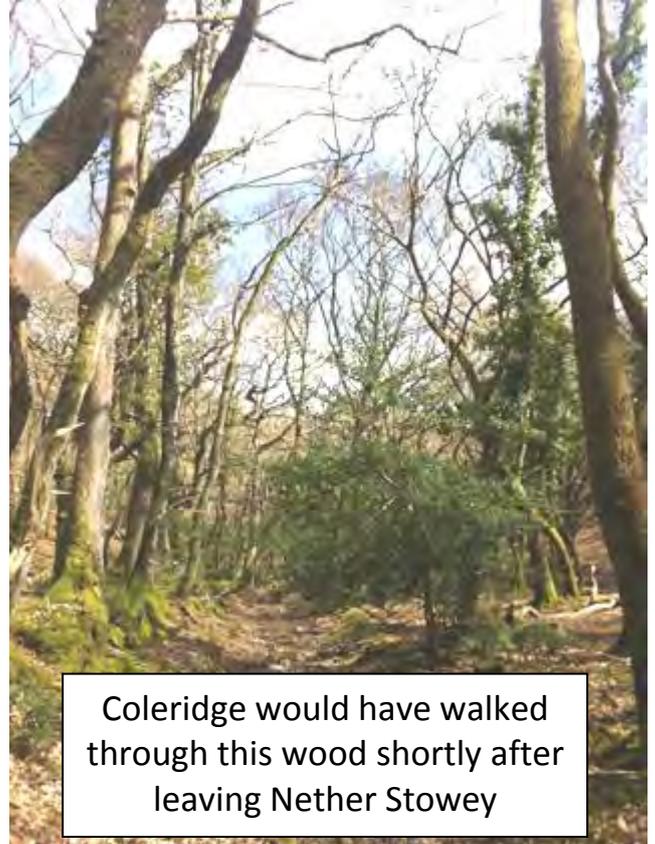
Coleridge was a man of great passion. Writers often are passionate creatures.

We know that he walked endlessly. There are many references to his walking in his poems.

Here I'm attempting to link the two which I believe resulted in a fusion of the physical landscape with the imagery of his words. We know that nature impacted on his thought processes and Coleridge's walks across the Somerset hills inspired his magical poems.

A keen walker myself though far from the class of Coleridge or his walking companions, Dorothy and William Wordsworth, it is not difficult for me to understand how his awe of the local environment translated itself in the lyrical words on the page.

I have touched on one of his masterpieces, *Kubla Khan*, in a previous newsletter. Coleridge wrote the introduction to this poem some years after he composed the poem itself and in it he recounts how he wrote many lines of this poem in an opium-induced sleep at Ash Farm whilst taking a break during a long walk. From his



Coleridge would have walked through this wood shortly after leaving Nether Stowey

home in Lime Street, Nether Stowey, Coleridge would have passed through Porlock, three miles from Ash Farm. Now a bed and breakfast guest-house, Ash Farm overlooks the sea and lies snug in a dip between surrounding fields where country meets sea and Exmoor begins a steep drop down to lapping waves. The landscape here is often windswept but still as remote and starkly beautiful as it would have been when Coleridge walked across its isolated plain.

*Kubla Khan* is a poem which has fascinated generations of readers. Its imagery is exotic, brilliant, vivid and haunting, the vocabulary rich in symbolism and rhythms. Coleridge borrowed the landscape around him and transmuted this physical vision into an emotional and written translation. Xanadu in this poem is remarkably similar to West Somerset, romantically expressed it is true but recognisable nonetheless. The path above Ash Farm leads down to a narrow valley, locally called a combe. It zigzags along, passing woodlands of stunted oaks, old paths under stone tunnels. Strolling up and down gentle slopes Coleridge would have caught occasional views over the Bristol Channel. Did he sit on the flat stones set into the old walls and dream the lines of *Kubla Khan*?

"Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea."

Walking on one comes to the tiny Culbone church used in the TV version of R D Blackmore's "*Lorna Doone*" as the scene for John Ridd's wedding. R D Blackmore was another local Romantic literary figure who derived his imagery from this locality. Culbone

Church, reputedly is the smallest complete church in England, seating just thirty people. It is a sacred site dating back to pagan times and the exotic atmosphere here fuelled Coleridge's images of both Xanadu and "Christabel", his long narrative poem which has had considerable effect on other poets like Edgar Allan Poe and even twentieth century song-writers. Both Christabel and Kubla Khan are dream poems, revealing Coleridge exploring his own inner landscape whilst feeding on the physical environment.

"So twice five miles of fertile ground  
With walls and towers were girdled round  
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills  
Where blossom'd many an incense-bearing tree,  
And here were forests ancient as the hills,  
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery"

Coleridge saw a romantic chasm corresponding to some chasm within himself which he filled with timeless imagery. The contradictions in the verse nourish the contradictions in his own soul. He constantly needed to invent an alternative world. His vision with Robert Southey of a utopian world embodied in his conception of Pantisocracy had never been realistic. Coleridge was not

realistic nor was he practical so he sought his alter ego in dream poems. Poets are often dreamers and his recourse to opium exacerbated these innate tendencies. That the landscape of Somerset strengthened his emotions has been to the benefit of England's literature. A road which he records in his diary as a frequent walk was from Lime Street to Alfoxden House in Holford, a trek of about one and a half hours across the rolling



landscape at the foot of the Quantock Hills which have their own natural beauty. It is breathtakingly pretty in spring and summer with wild flowers, cow parsley, buttercups, poppies, speedwell and grape hyacinths. The fields of sheep and cows lend it a Hardy-esque simplicity of unspoiltness. Somerset meets Dorset in a plethora of landscape and literature, country meeting sea. Alfoxden Park, the home of Dorothy and William Wordsworth from July 1797 to June 1798, is now once again a private house. But Dorothy's Glen is still there, a ravine with a waterfall and rushing stream described by Coleridge in The Lime Street Bower My Prison:

"To that still roaring dell, of which I told:  
The roaring dell, o'erwooded, narrow, deep  
And only speckled by the mid-day sun"

Coleridge and the Wordsworths often walked from Alfoxden to Kilve, following Holford stream. It is extremely tough terrain and their walking gear, especially footwear, would not have been as sturdy as our own. Their stamina and agility matched their poetic symmetry. Perhaps they rested in the dense white drift of aromatic wild garlic, prolific in the summer months, and paid homage to the profound and transient beauty, which Coleridge and Wordsworth planned to celebrate in a poem called *The Brook* which would be an allegory for the course of human life. The inspiration was the stream. The poem, like so much of Coleridge's work never reached fruition. Opinion is divided on the reasons for this. Did his restless nature compel him to move to more ambitious works? Did his supply of opium run out? Answers to this we shall probably never know but it is testimony to his greatness that even his unfinished works grace the collections of important British poetry. We do know that suspicions of his fermenting revolutionary ideas whilst in Somerset caused him to disappear at times. The authorities were very careful to squash the spread of seditious ideas as revolution was brewing, if not happening, across Europe, especially in France and Germany where Coleridge and the Wordsworths went after their stay in Somerset. Their flamboyant style of dress added to the suspicions which surrounded them, quite apart from their revolutionary ideas about poetry and literature which we know changed and advanced the traditional Enlightenment culture of reason to Romanticism based on mysticism and emotion. It is easy to imagine that if *The Brook* had been written its style would have been meandering, symbolic and sublime, perhaps the running water representing the flow of human thought. Who knows?



From Kilve a walk along the cliffs brought them to Watchet and it is here that our hero's walk resulted in his consummate inspiration which we celebrate with our very own statue of *The Ancient Mariner*.

Coleridge was a prodigious walker. Records show that he once walked from Nether Stowey to Lynton across Exmoor and back in two days, a distance of ninety miles. Walking, and especially hill-walking, was a passion with him, inspiring his spirit to soar, his creative genius to expand as his quill pen flew across the page, producing lines we still thrive upon today. Coleridge's stay in Somerset was brief. Yet in that short time, inspired by landscape we can walk and enjoy today he wrote some of the most visionary poetry the English language possesses, changing the poetic landscape forever.

Soak up this landscape as did Coleridge, then enjoy the poetry it has inspired. Walk in Coleridge's footsteps by day; savour his lines during a quiet evening. What immeasurable delights there are in this quiet corner of England – and it is ours!

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

### **The Bluebell** (formerly *Endymion non-scriptus*, now *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*).



The bluebell as we commonly know it can be recognised by anyone walking through a woodland in the spring and sees a blue haze of these beautiful and fragrant flowers carpeting the woodland floor. Very early in spring the leaves break through the soil and lie in rosette fashion, with the pale unopened buds pushing up through the middle. Before the flowers open the buds are erect, gradually assuming their drooping attitude. The inflorescence is one-sided with five to twelve sweet scented flowers with strong recurved petals. As the weight of the opening flower increases, the head bends over giving this plant its graceful attitude. After flowering when the seeds are ripening, the capsule once again becomes erect. Bluebells can be seen in many woodlands in our area, the one I painted was growing in my garden, a gift from a friend who is fortunate enough to own a

wood in which bluebells grow prolifically.

*Hyacinthoides hispanica*, the Spanish Bluebell is easily distinguished from the English Bluebell that we know and love, by its lack of fragrance. Flowers grow all around an upright stem. To my mind the Spanish Bluebell is an unwanted import as it hybridises with “our” indigenous bluebell (*H. non-scripta*), producing a cross known as *H. x massartiana*, with no scent. I would personally dig them up from my garden and pop them on the bonfire. We should remember the fate of the native red squirrel once the grey variety was introduced into the British Isles, let us beware.



**WATCHET CONSERVATION SOCIETY**

*Chair*

*Treasurer and Membership Secretary*

*Secretary*

*Case Officer*

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