

**Snake's head Fritillary *Fritillaria meleagris* By Sheila Mannes-Abbott**



The genus name *fritillaria* comes from the dice-box pattern of squares on the flowers, *meleagris* comes from the spotted petals resembling the spotted feathers of the guinea fowl, hence one of its common names is the guinea flower. Other common names include, Lazarus flower, chess bells, sulky ladies, chequered lily and leper lily due to bell like flower. Its most popular common name is Snake's head fritillary due to the unopened flowers resembling a snake's head. The Snake's head Fritillary is a plant of water meadows and the changes in farming practice and increase in treating water meadows as suitable building sites has adversely affected its former distribution.

One of the most famous meadows is Magdalen college Oxford, Ellie and I hope to see

them at Kew gardens (Princess Walk) in early May, but we might be a week too late. Ed.

***Members of the Watchet Conservation Society receive this newsletter bi-monthly either the printed copy or by e-mail. If you have enjoyed reading this publication and are not a member, please will you consider joining the Society, you would be helping to conserve our physical and natural environment. It costs just £6 a year, any of the committee members below, would be delighted to welcome you.***

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**WATCHET CONSERVATION MATTERS**

Promoting, conserving & improving our physical and natural environment

Issue 34 May/June 2014

**From Our Chair Molly Quint**

Dear Friends and Members,  
The busy season has started, the Book Shop has opened again, the Market is starting and various things are happening on the Esplanade, and the grass and weeds are growing !!!

We are very pleased that we are involved with the Onion Collective in discussions on the East Quay and hope to be able to have some influence on how the land is developed and what buildings are planned and what they will be used for. Paul Upton, as our Case Officer, has great knowledge and understanding of buildings and am sure he will take our wishes forward with the aid of Nick Cotton and myself. Please do talk about any concerns you have with the development with any one of us.

We are really looking forward to our next Open meeting with Graham Browning, talking on the Coleridge Cottage and the lives of the people who lived there, so do please come and bring with you anyone whom you think would be interested in the talk. **With Best Wishes from Molly.**



Editor's notes.

**Somerset Shore Search** events will be taking place at Watchet, Saturday May 31st 1pm – 3pm and at Porlock on June 15th 12.30 – 3pm and also at Minehead on Saturday July 12th 11am – 1pm.

These family friendly events involve looking for and recording intertidal wildlife such as crabs, topshells, starfish sea anemones and a wide range of seaweeds.

These events are organized by Somerset Wildlife Trust.

I forgot to give the answers to the quiz question concerning identifying the flowers in Sheila's beautiful picture in the last edition of the newsletter. I identified the following :- Black bryony, blackberry, convolvulus (bindweed), cow parsley, hawthorn, ivy, viburnum opulus (gelder rose). If you found more please let me know.

**Watchet Conservation Society - Notes on Open Meeting -  
Tuesday 18 March 2014**

Molly Quint opened the meeting with the news that the WCS Lollipop stand was undergoing some restoration and that it, and a new display of photographs would be on show at the next open meeting. She was also delighted to report that the fund-raising evening at The Spice Merchant had attracted a full house and raised a marvellous £225 plus a further £60 from the draw.

Prof. Eric Robinson had brought along a painting of Watchet Harbour, possibly dating back to around the 1970's, but certainly pre-dating the Marina development. Viewed from the East Wharf, the painting showed the buildings on the Esplanade and a large expanse of our famous harbour mud at low tide, but most importantly showed the course of the Washford River as it used to run through the harbour before its subsequent diversion. Eric offered the painting up to auction to the members and it raised a fabulous £70 for Red Cross Appeal for Syrian Children.

**Talk about Two Rivers Handmade paper - By Neil Hopkins; Manager,  
Roadwater Mill**

Those members and friends who attended the March Open meeting at the Methodist School Room, Harbour Road, Watchet were lucky to be fascinated and entertained by a very informative talk, delivered by Neil Hopkins, Manager of Roadwater Mill; manufacturers of the specialist handmade Two Rivers watercolour paper.

Neil explained the history of the last commercial paper mill at Roadwater - established in 1976 by Jim Patterson, a fourth generation papermaker from Newcastle, who joined Wansborough Paper Mill in Watchet in the 1970s. Two Rivers has been operating from its current location at Pitt Mill, Roadwater since 1990 and still survives as one of a handful of commercial handmills in Europe. The mill itself is 400 years old and much of the ancient wooden milling machinery still exists. It has been restored as a traditional water-powered paper mill, with an eleven foot high, two & a half ton, 100 year old metal wheel from Wales and an 1841 Hollander rag-breaker. The mill uses pure Ex-



ginning of their great journey to the Saragossa Sea. The bamboo handled net so familiar in seaside shops was totally ineffective; the mesh must be very fine. One memorable incident when I 'borrowed' my mother's large flour sieve it was a great success and the envy of my friends. I only had the use of it on this single occasion. Having secured a good catch we returned home triumphantly and the poor little creatures were fried in butter, seasoned and served on buttered toast. It wasn't just small boys who were interested in the elver they were very much part of the seasonal rural economy of both Gloucestershire and Somerset. In my home county certainly nets were made of cheesecloth but at Bridgwater they were more resourceful using in some instances a fireguard or a meat cover attached to a pole. In the latter part of the nineteenth century there must have been more sophisticated methods because as much as a ton of elvers were sent to Gloucester in a single day. I left Gloucestershire in the early 60's and aged twelve I brought with me images of a boyhood full of simple delights that I suspect were little different from my father a generation before.

**Nick Cotton**

**We conclude the final part of Pat's fascinating recollection of early Watchet :**

When we first moved to Watchet there was a community hall where you could stage concerts - plays and large social events. If you ask "What happened to the Hall?" well, you'd never believe that someone or a group of somebodies decided it should be sold. Who in their right mind could have even contemplated selling a village hall to a garage company? It is unimaginable isn't it? And we really need a LARGE COMMUNITY HALL TODAY.

Watchet had a vast array of clubs and organisations. There was The Bowling Club, the Boxing Club, Football teams, Cricket, the British Legion, Sea Scouts, Guides, Brownies, Cubs, Red Cross, etc, etc. What more could we want? Well there was always the history of Watchet to consider. St. Decuman; the Watchet Mint; the Vikings; the Iron Mines; and the Mineral Line, and of course, The Court Leet.

Does anyone recall seeing the glow worms lighting up the dark evenings down the Mineral Line or can anyone remember the nightingales singing their hearts out? Their blissful song could be heard above the steamy noise of the night-shift at the mill.

I am coming to an end at last. This was all about 50 years ago. Any wonder that when my daughter Rachel and her husband John decided to retire to Watchet in the late 2008-2009. I yearned to come back and did so on December 18<sup>th</sup> 2009.

Watchet has never lost its wonderful community spirit. It's still fun living here. I am glad I'm back. You don't just exist in Watchet. You live life to the full and enjoy it.

**Pat Wilks.**

**Don't forget  
Our OPEN MEETING on Tuesday 20th May 7.30pm  
Methodist Schoolrooms Harbour Road Watchet  
Speaker Graham Browning talking about Coleridge cottage**

## ELVERING AND THE SNAIL CATCHER

My father enjoyed nothing better than reminiscing about his childhood days in rural Gloucestershire before the outbreak of the Second World War.

Of the many characters that he both spoke of and wrote about was the snail catcher.

His description curiously mirrors an account by the Somerset writer Walter Raymond in his book 'Crafts and Characters'.

My father described this regular visitor to lanes around his cottage home as the 'snail catcher, a short man, rather scruffy with lined features and his skin the colour of faded mahogany and intense blue eyes'. Walter Raymond gives him the more romantic title of 'snail merchant'. He could almost have been one and the same but for the distance of a generation.

To become a snail merchant required very little outlay in fact all that was required was a good sack, a short iron hooked pole and of course stamina and a good knowledge of the habits of the snail. How long this peculiar trade existed is difficult to tell but it would seem certain for at least a century.

The eating of snails is naturally assumed to be a peculiar habit of the French but this was certainly not the case in at least Victorian Britain. Both my father's and Walter's snail merchants found a ready market in the port of Bristol and also on the Somerset side in Bridgwater where it was considered a great delicacy.

In Bristol the snails found their way to the oyster bars and eaten by the prosperous merchants but it was also favoured by the Bristol glass workers, (an important trade in the nineteenth century) as they were considered beneficial for the chest and lungs for the glass blowers, They were also considered to have medicinal properties in the treatment of tuberculosis.

The preparation of the snails was fairly straightforward. They would be soaked in brine and then the open seal of the shell would be cut off and removed, then boiled

for about twenty minutes removed from their shells and served cold with vinegar.

It seems that they were also bottled and at least in this part of Somerset were considered something of inducement to gaining the favours of a potential suitor.

'A little jar of snails may well turn a maiden's head' Yes well, maybe a hundred years ago but I am reluctant to suggest such action today

as I think this particular attempt at wooing will meet with perhaps less than limited success.

The counties of Gloucestershire and Somerset shared another interesting regional pursuit. As a small boy my friends and I would paddle about in the streams and rivers in the early spring intent on catching elvers. These miniature eels sometimes called 'glass eels' would appear each year in great abundance and were at the be-



moor water from its own well.

Neil brought with him some of the essential ingredients and equipment, which he passed around the audience, before giving a demonstration of how to make a traditional ribboned paper scroll. The Two Rivers paper is made from long cotton and linen fibres - the sample he showed was pure cotton from Uzbekistan - mixed with water and beaten to bruise the fibre ends. The fibres are scooped up onto a mould and deckle - essentially a non-ferrous sieve with a frame (named from the Flemish for 'lid') - and the water is strained off and the paper laid onto a felt, where, at the mill, a vacuum table and hydraulic press are used to squeeze out the water.

For our entertainment, Neil demonstrated this process by sandwiching his paper between blankets and using his own bodyweight to remove the excess moisture - to the amusement of those watching. He explained how a watermark can be formed in the paper, by a pattern or letters 'stitched' into the mould, and how different textures of felt can make interesting paper. Pitt Mill use unique cloth felts to give the 'knot' texture for which the paper is renowned. Two Rivers watercolour paper is much acclaimed by artists, and Neil showed us some examples of watercolour paintings, demonstrating the brightness of the colours and variety of techniques such as line and wash, oil pastel, chalk pastel, acrylic.

In Turner's day cartridge paper, used for shotgun and artillery shells, was the very best paper for painting as it had a surface where the colour was not too quickly absorbed and could be washed off. Most modern watercolour paper does not have this quality, but Two Rivers paper does. Each sheet is dipped in gelatine to seal the surface, known as sizing, then slowly air-dried high up in the mill rafters. The papermaking process takes two working days, but each piece is truly unique, with the 'deckle' edge feature of the handmade process. Coloured papers are made from processing their own rags from denim jeans and specialist papers can have other ingredients added, such as hemp, seeds and flower petals.

Two Rivers papermakers feature in the book 'Forgotten Crafts' (By Paul Felix and Tom Quinn; published by David & Charles 2011 ISBN 978 144 634 0929) and also appeared on a recent episode of Country File.

Neil's own skill and knowledge of the traditional paper-making methods and his love of the end product was clearly apparent from his talk. More information about the Two Rivers specialist paper can be found online at :-

[www.tworiverspaper.co/themill.html](http://www.tworiverspaper.co/themill.html) and the mill is usually open to visitors during working hours, but it is recommended that you telephone first on 01984 641028.

**Jayne Hall**



**A few personal experiences during another winter of extreme weather**  
**by Mike Priscott.**

The winter of 1963 was certainly a special one and I recall some of my personal memories – in the style of brief word pictures of various incidents. I had been working for seven years by that time, living in Minehead on North Hill, and working at the Westminster Bank (later to become NatWest) by the road junction in Williton, opposite the Egremont Hotel (now no longer). The bank staff of eight was a happy team, then readily recognising the customers by name as well as knowing their signatures. The age of customer numbers was still a little way off.

The only feared upheaval in those days of banking was the surprise arrival of a bank inspector, although it wasn't always a real surprise. The Egremont Hotel friendly landlord and his wife, Dennis and Winifred Smith, followed the tradition of their predecessors, in tipping off the Branch Manager (then John Deacon) when an advance week's booking was made by some gentleman who seemed he might just possibly be a bank inspector. However, in the winter of 1963 we knew we were quite safe from any visiting inspector, as travelling around in the atrocious winter conditions was hazardous and officially discouraged.

Travel was certainly tricky, and the loss of a Royal Mail van under snow for six weeks was a well known tale at the time. Postman Jock Stronach (later to be my father in law) was driving his van, delivering mail on the Brendon Hill round, accompanied by Sid Wensley. It was deemed safer to be working in pairs in such conditions. During the morning round, the blizzard conditions were such that driving became impossible and the van had to be abandoned, - not seen for six weeks. Dutifully, Jock and Sid carried the undelivered mail down from the hills back to Postmaster Arthur Pye in Swain Street.

My travelling from North Hill Minehead was uncomfortable in the cold and difficult to avoid falling on the ice. The roads were full of huge snow drifts. The railway kept going so instead of my usual bus trip, I had to use the train to Williton, and was daily reminded that Long Street is well named, as I again tried to avoid falling on ice.

During that winter, I was studying accountancy as part of my bank diploma examinations, and after work travelling by bus to night school lessons at Taunton. The train wasn't really an option for the timing of the return trip to Minehead. The winter stopped my studies for six weeks, as the buses couldn't run as the Taunton – Minehead road was completely blocked with snow; huge drifts in many places. The fact that the train was the only way to reach Minehead from the outside world, was sadly completely lost on the railway authorities and Dr. Beeching who deemed only a little while afterwards, that this railway line was superfluous. When eventually buses could get through, I travelled on the top deck (virtually all buses then were double deckers) and marvelled at the scenery. When approaching the Stag's

Head pub (no longer there) the snow was at my eye level. The route had been carved through the snow.

For a short while the sea in the Watchet harbour actually froze; a rare sight indeed. Had videos and digital cameras been invented then, there would surely have been a film of a truly spectacular arrival of a large cargo ship entering the harbour in a severe blizzard. The high wind and snow made this a hazardous manoeuvre, and something that will always remain in my mind. The pilot and ship's captain pulled off an amazing feat with no mishap bearing in mind the tight measurements all round.

Yet another experience remains with me when the Westminster Bank at Watchet ran out of money. This bank was a sub branch to Williton, and to remedy the problem I was despatched with some £5,000 intended to keep them going for a few days. I set off in a taxi from Somerset Motors – now long since gone and in its place is the Co-op shop. With careful driving from Ernie Williams we were doing quite well going via Doniford, knowing that going down from Five Bells was impassable. The problem arose where the road slightly rises crossing over the railway near where the West Somerset Railway's Doniford Halt is now located. The taxi just couldn't be coaxed up that modest incline, even with a local farmer and me pushing. We just had to give up, so there was me stuck in the snow with what was then a considerable amount of money. I was then rather concerned that we would be able to retrace our route safely, as I wasn't keen to be seen to hanging on to the money and seemingly disappeared. Luckily, the farmer and I were able to turn the taxi completely around by sliding it on the ice, - no engine, no steering wheel! We reached home base safely in the end.

I am reminded of another incident around that year with both similarity and contrast. The similarity was the Williton Westminster Bank running out of notes; none left in the building, apart from those notes in staff wallets and purses and that didn't amount to very much! The reason was the weather, - the contrast. We had a brilliantly sunny day which had been preceded by some dull weather. This prompted the film company Woodfall Studio Productions to shoot crowd scenes for the film "Tom Jones" and called on the Bank without the usual warning, so that we could be prepared with ample cash. This company took all our notes, including "dirty" notes going back to the Bank of England. I often thought that some of the casual extras in that star studded cast must have wondered if their paper money was genuine! Our Lloyds Bank friends in Williton helped me out, as I went down the road and brought back some of their "stock" to keep us going. These days cash no longer moves around so casually.

When thinking of that extraordinary winter of 1963 we all thought then that the world weather had gone crazy. We didn't think then of global warming, rather the opposite.

**Mike Priscott** March 2014.