



# Watchet Conservation Matters

Promoting, Conserving & Improving  
Our Physical & Natural Environment

Issue 44 January/February 2016

## Our Chair Molly Quint

### Ellie, Judy and Dot

With the food in the kitchen for the AGM.



Restaurant. This is a really good evening with lovely food, English if you are not keen on spicy dishes, a draw, and surrounded by all your friends and new ones you will make during the evening. We hope you will come; please phone me on 01984 632592 with the time you would like your table and how many you would bring. If you are on your own come and join my table.

On a more serious note, we have room on our Committee for three more Members to join us. Jan would love a Minutes Secretary to help her, Paul Upton would like someone to take over his Casework Officer role next year and we would all love some more help with ideas for projects. Please think about it, we would love you to come in with us and support Watchet Conservation Society in this special way. Please phone me and come for a coffee if you would like to talk about it, or anything else.

Dear Friends and Members.

A Very Happy New Year to you all, may 2016 be a really wonderful year with lots of happenings, lots of fun and lots of good things being done in Watchet for Watchet.

Yours very sincerely,



**Molly Quint**

We will have good speakers for you at our five meetings which we hope you will all come along and support, the first being on the 19th January when Tony James, our local author and reporter, will talk about the Flatner, the very special little boat made in Watchet and the area, especially useful on the Levels and shallow waterways. I'm sure there will be a story or two as Tony loves to entertain!!

Then on 25th January we have our main money-raising event at The Spice Merchant



## WCS AGM 17th November 2015 – A review.



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It was a dark and stormy night; on Watchet's windswept promenade occasional figures could be seen flitting through the pools of light cast onto the pavement by lamps along the harbour front. An attentive observer would notice a general migration towards the promenade's eastern end where, one after another, group after group, they disappeared into the oasis of warmth and brightness that was the Phoenix Centre. Were they just taking refuge from the wind and darkness outside? If only the observer had read his E-mails, he would know that the reason was far more momentous; it was in fact Watchet Conservation Society's 2015 AGM!

Molly our Chairman summarised the past year's happenings and activities. Alan Jones stepped down from the committee and from producing the newsletter which is now edited by Jan our Secretary with Jason Robinson in charge of layout and printing.

This joint effort results in a really beautiful publication.

Open meetings covered the natural history of our beautiful Somerset coast, the Alfred Jewel, plans for a tidal power barrage in Swansea Bay, SS Great Britain and lime kilns. We are certainly becoming a well-educated Society!

Space on Splash Point has been given for the planting of apple trees donated by Pebbles Bar; support given to Onion Collective, improvements made to the Pound area, care of Goviers Lane crossing, tubs along the Promenade, the boat at the top of West Street slipway and St Decumans Well.

Paul Upton our case officer reported on his work monitoring and making representations of all planning applications in Watchet. He consulted on plans for the Boat Museum, the new Visitors Centre and WTC offices, all now passed. He referred to the committee's concerns over the status of Stoates Mill, Belmont Villa, and the appearance of a bright white street light in Swain Street. Paul is our representative at Onion Collective stakeholder meetings. Plans for the East Quay have made little progress recently but the Boat Museum scheme is coming to fruition and Splash Point is reawakening after a century of decline and neglect. Well done, the four Onions!

Paul stands down as case officer in November 2016. He is willing to tutor a successor over the coming year. Phil Gannon, also a WCS consultant, would assist any newcomer to the role.



## WCS AGM 17th November 2015 – A review.

As Membership Secretary I reported a recent rise in numbers following contacts with lapsed members, the committee's decision to confine circulation of the newsletter to Members and Friends and to ask non-members for a £2 donation for entry to the Society's open meetings.

John Irven, our Treasurer could not be present but our Secretary Jan Simpson-Scott read his report assuring that the Society's finances continue to be in good order, income exceeding expenditure over the year by the princely sum of £3.23! The detailed accounts, audited by Jonathan Westcott, who kindly agreed to continue, were accepted by the meeting.

The end of the formal proceedings was in sight, although one more important task had to be done, that of electing a committee and officers. Tellers Myra Barratt and Judy Prior kindly counted votes. All members of the committee still standing were elected with Molly as Chair, Jan as Secretary, John as Treasurer and Andrew as Membership Secretary.

No questions were raised by the floor but an appeal made by Steve Yeandle for volunteers to attach lights to the Christmas trees to be mounted along Swain Street was met with a very good response from members.

Appetising scents of sausage rolls, vol-au-vents and other delicacies now began wafting through the kitchen door; clanking of bottles was also detectable in the background and a guess could be made that at least some of them contained wine!

Soon tables were bedecked with plates of food, glasses filled, and musical entertainment by Jeannette Owen and Paul Dawson began. With Dave Simpson-Scott as a very attentive wine waiter and too many helpers to mention offering loaded plates to one and all, a very convivial atmosphere soon developed. Thanks go to Fiona Darrell and all others who produced the magnificent spread.

The raffle was a great success thanks to the generosity of the prize-donors, including Paul Upton who contributed a magnificent yew bowl turned by his own fair hand, and to the efforts of Rosalind Pick and Jane Sharp for so ruthlessly arm-twisting their victims into buying tickets!

Meanwhile, having manned the door, Edward Frewin and I, were trying to get the receipts and attendance records into some kind of shape and, once sufficiently lubricated with intoxicating substances, we concluded that 42 members were in attendance, 38 had paid subscriptions, 6 were new members. With two very welcome visitors, this swelled the number present to a total of 44.

At the time of going to press we have 53 members in total. That is a wonderful start to the new year and your new committee will do their best to ensure that these members' trust in them is not misplaced and that the Society has a memorable, informative, effective, and above all, enjoyable 2016!

**Andrew Harrison**  
**Membership Secretary**



### Sammy Hake and his famous cottage

Down on the West Quay just through the archway, is a small cottage with a name painted on the old door: "Sammy Hake's cottage".

So who was Sammy Hake and what do we know of him and his home?

The cottage is hardly larger than a brick built mobile home; it is approached through the archway that leads to the west pier and can be found on the left side.

It seems to have been constructed on part of a medieval quay, and in a recent excavation inside evidence has been found to support this claim. Stone steps and a mooring post set into the lower floor are thought to date from the 1400s. The present building can only date back to the early 1600s as in 1607 there was a terrible Tsunami that destroyed most of

the low lying town. However it would have been rebuilt on the same site using earlier foundations. The famous low door also led through to the rear yards of the row of cottages to the west of the pier. Each yard was divided with a wall and stone archway. No doubt this route was very useful to smugglers in the event of the revenue men making an unwelcome appearance.

The building was extended in 1866 with the addition of the narrow room below the lookout. This was built specifically for the "Hobblers" to use to wait for incoming shipping. The Watchet "Hobblers" were the teams of sailors and labourers who assisted sailing ships into the harbour and helped tie them up to the bollards on the quay. In the days before tugs this was performed with small rowing boats. There are some photos in the museum showing the Hobblers' boats in action. The Hobblers association was formed in the mid 1800s by Henry Chidgey landlord of the London Inn. Its formation



was to form a regulated system of hobbling which put an end to the near open warfare between competing groups.

In 1938 a first floor look-out was constructed and combined into the cottage in 1970 to extend the living accommodation and is now the bedroom and hallway. Close inspection from the western side will show that the majority of the cottage is perched on top of the old quay wall which extends right round to Yankee Jack's cottage. The ground beneath the modern car park was probably a beach similar to that at Minehead's old harbour. The property has been a home for countless families since Sammy Hake as its size makes it a popular "Starter Home".

Ben Norman in his "Tales of Watchet Harbour" recounts several stories that occurred in the area round the harbour. He claims that in the 1890s an old lady lived there with her son Sammy and their black

cat. She was believed to have "certain uncanny powers"; she was also a pipe smoker and enjoyed a tot of brandy, so the sea captains usually kept her well supplied as insurance against her reputed ability to cast a spell. Examples of her activities can be read in the aforementioned book.

But what of "Sammy" was he real, or just part of another Watchet tale? I wondered what might be the truth so started investigating.

A good place to start was the library on the esplanade and its internet computer terminals. Within minutes I found references to the Hake family in the West Somerset area.

It seems that John Hake was a farmer in Minehead in the mid 1800s. His wife is recorded as Elizabeth in the census records. The couple are reported to live with a son, James. Their first son, John was born in 1800, their daughter also Elizabeth, in 1807. Elizabeth's children: (there is no mention of the father!) James was born in 1845, a daughter Anne born in 1846. Sammy was born in 1851.

In 1881 the family of five was resident in Quay Street in Minehead. The family then disappears from the Minehead record in the late 1880s and only Elizabeth turns up in Watchet in a cottage in Market Street in 1891. With her is their youngest son, Sammy.

There is little known yet of Sammy's life other than he appears to have been a working man all his life and a fisherman in

his later years. I suspect that rather than being a boat owner he would have had the use of the tidal nets and stakes that extend from the West Street beaches down to the low tide mark, a long way with Watchet's huge tidal reach!

During the First World War the old mineral railway, which had been closed for some years, was to be torn up for scrap metal to feed the munitions industry. A group of local men who were not required for active service had the job of lifting the rails and sending them back down the track for onward transport to the steel works in Wales. The normal means of transport to work was by the use of a hand operated platelayer's "pump" trolley. On one occasion recounted by Ben in one of his books, the team decided it would be easier if they added a sail to the trolley and let the wind do the work. Needless to say it all ended in disaster at Washford with a crash into the closed level crossing gates. Sammy was amongst the number who all received cuts and bruises for their trouble.

In his later years Sammy did not enjoy the best of health or good hearing. A bachelor he was living on his own in his cottage. In typical Watchet manner, his friends and neighbours rallied round to support him in his final years.

Ben records in "Watchet Chuckles" an occasion in the 1930s when the neighbours mistakenly thought Sammy had passed on. They called the local amateur undertaker "Jimmy the Chippy" to measure him up for a



cheap coffin. During the disturbance Sammy woke up and was confronted by Jimmy shouting at him to just lie down and die like any normal man!

To conclude this tale with fact, Sammy is recorded in the 1911 census working at the gas works in South Road as a labourer. (In 1867 a brand new gas works to supply the cookers and street lights of the town had been built in Watchet.)

Something of an anticlimax I do believe! Still, the stories tell a different tale. Anyone familiar with old Watchet (and not so old) will recognise that some local characters, like Sammy Hake, still exist and carry on in the old ways, and long may they do so!

**Chris Saunders**



### **Watchet's Paper Mill ceased production on December 23rd 2015**

In 2011 the chimney which had stood impressively on Watchet's skyline since it was built circa 1865 was demolished. WCS commemorated this iconic building with the unveiling of an Interpretation Board in July 2013. We shall be putting forward suggestions for the future use of the site in due course. In the meantime a timely reminder of the history of this industry seems relevant.

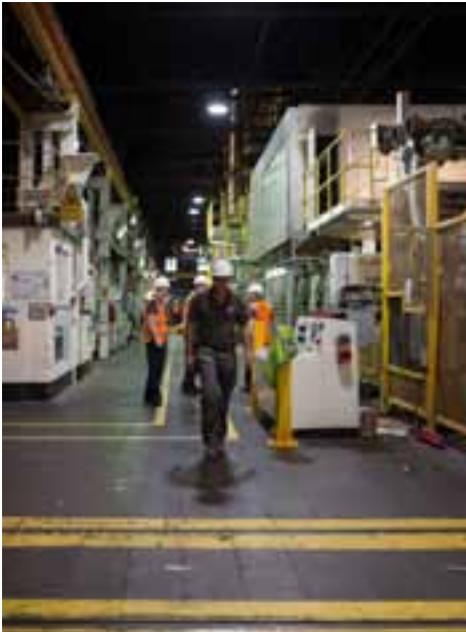
The paper mill was founded in 1750 by William Wood. Paper was hand-made in the mill using the vat method and was known as St. Decuman's paper. Production was limited, probably one cart per week. By 1810 Wood's business was expanding and apprentices were being brought in from Cheddar.

In 1824 the mill was taken over by James Date, William Peach and John Wansbrough who gave his name to the mill. Wansbrough

introduced the first machines for paper-making and had 120 employees with a wage bill of £100 per week. Mainly widows were employed – their wages were lower, they didn't argue or join early unions, and by working they were not a cost to the poor relief and so reduced the parish rates. Wansbrough, a devout Methodist, built a chapel in the mill grounds, insisting his employees worshipped there. The local area was important to Wansbrough's success giving him all the basic requirements: an adequate labour force, a plentiful water supply and accessibility to raw materials – paper waste in the form of beer labels, pawn tickets and old posters, rags of every description and colour emitting an indescribable stench and dust. Communications with marketing areas were good, initially by sea and horse-drawn wagons, rail later. There was considerable inward traffic by ships to Watchet Harbour with coal from South Wales, wood fibre and esparto grass for pulp.



## Closure of Wansbrough Paper Mill



Most of the mill was destroyed by fire in 1889. Ten years later five paper machines were operating and Wansbrough mill was the largest manufacturer of paper bags in the county. David S Smith purchased the mill in 1986. It has been the UK's leading paper maker with a large transport fleet.

WCS will be joining the debate on the future use of this site and its artefacts, believing in the need to preserve areas of importance relating to Watchet's industries and heritage. If you have ideas about the conservation of this site please contact a member of the committee who will be pleased to receive them and pass them on to our consultants for discussion.

**Jan Simpson-Scott**



*Mill photography by Glyn Jarrett*

Watchet Conservation Matters is published six times a year. If you would like to contribute news or an article, please contact our secretary Jan Simpson-Scott on: [jan@topcreative.co.uk](mailto:jan@topcreative.co.uk)

Members of the Watchet Conservation Society receive this newsletter bi-monthly either via email for free or a printed copy for £1.00 per copy. If you are not a member and have enjoyed reading this publication, please consider joining us and help us to conserve our physical and natural environment. Membership is just £6.00 per year. All of our committee members would be delighted to welcome you.

**Watchet Conservation Society**  
[www.watchetconservationsociety.co.uk](http://www.watchetconservationsociety.co.uk)

**Chair**  
Molly Quint  
01984 632592  
[quint407@btinternet.com](mailto:quint407@btinternet.com)

**Treasurer**  
John Irven  
01984 631083  
[john.irven@btinternet.com](mailto:john.irven@btinternet.com)

**Membership Secretary**  
Andrew Harrison  
01984 634498  
[ap\\_harrison@yahoo.com](mailto:ap_harrison@yahoo.com)

**Secretary**  
Jan Simpson-Scott  
01984 639615  
[jan@topcreative.co.uk](mailto:jan@topcreative.co.uk)

**Case Work Consultants**  
Paul Upton  
Nick Cotton  
Phil Gannon

**Committee**  
Rosalind Pick  
Paul Reynolds  
Jason Robinson



**Sheila Mannes-Abbott 1939-2014**

**“She loved and painted flowers”**

Standing above primroses and cyclamen is the crocus. A pretty little flower, so small, yet strong, symbolic of winter’s survival. Without light, through the darkness of winter it grows.

Sheila talked to me about secret and hidden gardens, a theme she returned to again and again. There is a story by Margaret Wise Brown which includes these lines:

“If you become a mountain climber I will be a crocus in a hidden garden” said the little bunny

“If you become a crocus in a hidden garden I will be a gardener. And I will find you” said his mother.

Simple words, running true, with a depth of meaning. The allegory is ideal. Crocus; Sheila; hidden garden; art; interpretation.

Search for your own interpretation in Sheila’s garden border. I have found mine.

**Jan Simpson-Scott**