



# Watchet Conservation Matters

Promoting, Conserving & Improving  
Our Physical & Natural Environment

Issue 49 November/December 2016

*Mugwort*





## Our Chair Molly Quint

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Dear Friends and Members.

It suddenly feels like Winter and the days are so short now but in Watchet there is always plenty to fill the time during both the daytime and evenings.

Dave Milton has finished the stone for the Goviers Lane Garden and roses have been planted around the base. This is a fitting tribute to Malcolm Davey for all his quiet work taken on willingly around the town. He was a man with many interests in music, art, football and people; not a person for attracting notice but always busy doing things.

As an organisation we are very involved with the new ideas being put forward by the Onion Collective for the East Quay development and hope you will come to the Public Meeting on the 10th November in the new Boat Museum.

As the Watchet Arts Group was first started within the WCS do please come to the celebration of the finished Wall in the Old Mineral Yard on Friday 16th December at 2pm. We are really thrilled with the work achieved by Pat Dennis on such a huge expanse of concrete and it has certainly enhanced that area so much. Our next project is the Ground area with Wessex Water.

Our WCS has its AGM on 15th November in the Phoenix Centre so all members are very welcome and subscriptions will be due to enable you to vote at the meeting. I have really enjoyed being Chair of WCS and have learnt so much during that time but feel it is now time for someone to step up with new ideas to take my place. I have agreed to stay for a further three months after the AGM so do hope someone will contact me during that time to offer their help. We have a good, strong committee who will give great support, as they have always done with me, so please think about either for yourself or a friend.

Yours very sincerely,

**Molly Quint**



*Hops*

This is the introductory report of our latest project The Flora and Fauna of The Mineral Line.

The project aims to identify, catalogue and photograph species found throughout the year, surveying on a fortnightly basis. Eventually a brochure will be produced for the Visitor Centre for local residents and tourists.

Leading the project is Rosalind Pick with Robert Blois, Jane Sharp and Ann Hill.

Photography by Jane Sharp.

This project has been kindly sponsored by Harbour Community Bookshop.

### **A walk along The Mineral Line 24/09/16**

There is a distinct feel of autumn today and the hedgerows are full of colourful berries; yellow-green and white bryony, bright red of black bryony, hawthorn and wild rose hips, dark purple of ripe blackberries, blue-black bloom of sloes of the blackthorn and black dogwood berries. The berries on the spindle-trees with their curious four-lobed fruits are turning the palest pink.

There are fewer red-admiral butterflies on the buddleia bushes and only one or two small white butterflies looking for nectar. The path is strewn with hazel-nuts popular with both mice and squirrels. A buzzard flies overhead, and in the trees and hedges robins and wrens can be heard as well as the continuous murmuring of pigeons.

Heralds of "the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness".

**Rosalind Pick**

## A walk along The Mineral Line

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*Painted Lady Butterfly*



*Self Heal*



*Tansy*



*Gateway Butterfly*



*Creeping Thistle*



## Watchet Harbour and Smuggling in the South West

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### Watchet Harbour and Smuggling in the South West

A harbour is essentially a shelter for ships. Watchet's natural harbour had primitive breakwaters known as "weres", boulders heaped together and later reinforced with wooden stakes driven into the ground to make what was then called a "cobb". It seems that through the centuries these constructions were time and again destroyed by wind and water. Collections for repairs were made as early as 1458, with money coming from as far as London. Watchet was evidently very important to the shipping trade. There was some type of pier in Henry VIII's time, and a Royal Commission of 1564

mentions "small boats using the "were" when bringing in salt and wine"...

It seems that in Watchet the bringing ashore of untaxed goods had begun in the 1500s, and other convenient nearby shores such as at Kilve, Lilstock and Blue Anchor also saw the early illicit landing of untaxed goods.

It was, however, when Charles II raised the taxes to fund building warships that regular smuggling began in earnest. Why pay tax on imports simply to fund distant wars? This was the way import duties



## Watchet Harbour and Smuggling in the South West

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were regarded and smuggling contraband was seen as a far lesser crime than piracy which involved far more violence and often death. Piracy became common by the 17th century, especially so in East Devon; both piracy and smuggling were more prevalent than they had been earlier along the West Somerset coastline. There was also the difference between piracy and smuggling in that smuggling involved far more local people in the unloading and hiding of goods.

In both Somerset and Devon the rugged cliffs and coves offered wonderfully concealed areas where ships could secretly offload contraband into caves and other hiding places. The battering of the northern facing coastline by Atlantic gales meant that erosion and landslips were continually changing the profile of the cliffs. Finding safe shelter for ships not only gave problems for the smugglers but headaches for the Customs Officers hunting them. On an old map of the Minehead area is marked a cave called "Smugglers Doom"... possibly rhyming slang for Burgundy Combe on the cliffs above it. This cave collapsed early in the last century, maybe killing the smugglers within?

Rudyard Kipling's poem about smuggling with its line "five and twenty ponies, trotting through the dark..." gives a flavour of exciting times when luxury goods were taken at night along dark and unmade roads. Many knew what was going on and were rewarded for their silence. At Blue Anchor rumours were put about that if you looked out at night and saw a ghostly

cottage, it meant death within the year. Thus secrets were kept from anybody not directly involved.

What exactly is contraband? Basically, imported goods on which the taxes have not been paid. Kipling's poem refers to luxury items such as lace, cloth, wines, tobacco and brandy. In fact there were also other imports such as salt, and in one cargo 14 pounds of human hair was smuggled, perhaps for wig-making. High value, low volume, was the order of the day. The goods themselves were relatively harmless, unlike now in 2016 when drugs, guns and fugitives are more often hidden aboard cargo ships.

Minehead, Blue Anchor, Watchet and Lillstock were among the local ports to bring the goods ashore. Well-organised groups of locals would assist in off-loading and hiding them. Local Courts Leet were supposed to enforce the payment of taxes, but the port officials (known as "tydsmen") who went aboard the ships to check cargoes were often in on the game of avoiding customs duty. It was indeed more of a game and less of a crime when the taxes were going to pay for the king's current war plans.

In 1682 Charles II sent his Surveyor-General, William Culliford, to investigate the situation and was horrified at how prevalent smuggling was. A Minehead shoemaker was in the habit of snooping around at night and swore he had seen the Minehead tydsman allowing an untaxed cargo of cloth to be unloaded. He was silenced by five days in jail and a public whipping for being a



## Watchet Harbour and Smuggling in the South West

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“nightwalker” and “making it impossible for honest merchants to do their business”.

A similar official blind eye was turned in Watchet when the collector of customs duty went drinking in the nearby Blew Anchor\* public house while a ship was being unloaded; he was taken to court, convicted and dismissed. However, it seems that his replacement did exactly the same! Finally coastguards were appointed and the smuggling abated somewhat.

Hiding the goods safely before distribution was a problem which produced some very ingenious solutions. In East Devon cottages where goods could be stored before distribution were often marked permanently by fixing a distinctive bottle-end high up in an outside wall... a more permanent sign than the “friendly house” chalk marks used by the Romanies.

On a map of Branscombe in Devon are marked the entrances of 6 storage chambers dug 12 feet underground and accessed by well-hidden tunnels. Creative architecture made secret areas within buildings when rebuilding. For example, in Watchet after the tsunami of 1607, spaces were made within walls apparently 10 feet thick and accessed through hidden doorways. The London Inn has a concealed gap between it and the adjacent building; tunnels exist, some of which are now bricked up. One passage runs under the cellar at Helliker’s, and The West Somerset Hotel shows signs of a bricked-up passage. Such entrances through trap hatches like one at The Bell Inn were as close to the

slipway as possible. It is said that one such passage led under Swain Street as far as the old Milk Bar (now Frames and Boat Bits).

In Watchet, with the port’s closure, the last commercial cargo was unloaded in 1993, so here at least no more contraband was unloaded and here the era of organised smuggling came to an end.

### **Valerie Ward**

*\*Spelling as given in A. L. Wedlake’s “History of Watchet”*



## Visiting the Somme - Speaker Review

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### A talk by Jane Sharp - Speaker Review

Jane Sharp gave a most interesting talk on her several visits to the Commonwealth War Graves around the Somme. We started with the famous Thiepval monument where 72,000 names of the fallen are recorded. Adjacent to the impressive memorial designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens are 300 French and 300 commonwealth graves, all beautifully kept on pristine lawns and planted with flowers. It is one of these graves where Ellie's grandfather was buried. He died 100 years ago come October and our family will be going out to pay our respects.

Jane then took us on a tour of some of the other notable cemeteries starting at Beaumont Hammel the Canadian Army memorial with an impressive statue of an elk standing some twenty feet high and the Welsh memorial with a less impressive red dragon. Each cemetery has a memorial stone with the inscription 'THEIR NAME LIVETH FOREVER' These words were chosen by Rudyard Kipling. He also chose the words that appear on graves of unidentified soldiers - 'Known only unto God'.

In addition to the cemeteries and memorials, Jane showed pictures of the crater at La Boiselle where Welsh and Cornish miners dug tunnels under the enemy trenches and filled them with explosives. This huge crater resembles a strike from a giant meteorite and is several hundred feet across.

Pictures of the small town of Albert taken during the war were particularly poignant with most of the town reduced to rubble; the church stands in ruins with just its steeple intact, but its famous statue at the top of the steeple, of the Madonna and child, leans precariously to one side. The town has been tastefully restored and is now very pretty and contains an interesting museum in the tunnels under the town, where most of the inhabitants sheltered during the worst of the shelling.

Of particular interest to Watchet folk were the photos Jane took when she visited the graves of those men of Watchet recorded on the new war memorial.

After the talk we were able to look at assorted memorabilia brought by Jane and Society members. These included brass shell cases, medals and Commonwealth War Graves Commission literature and one of the "pennies" sent to families who lost loved ones during WW1.

Another most enjoyable evening.

**Alan Jones**



### Daw's Castle Lime Kilns

The lime kilns at Daw's Castle and the Warren kilns calcined the lower lias limestone for the production of hydraulic lime which will set under water. This was greatly valued for harbour and marine dock work construction.

John Smeaton in 1756 specified Watchet lime for the construction of the Eddystone Lighthouse and this lime was carried in panniers by packhorse to Plymouth!

Lime kilns were periodically "rebuilt". The ones that survive today date from the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

The West Street Watchet, to Minehead via Blue Anchor road was a turnpike road created under the Minehead United Turnpike Trust 1765-1877. Duty was payable for conveying stone and coals. It

is suggested that by providing a horse-operated or donkey-operated tramway both materials could be hauled from the beach avoiding tolls. Under the Exemption Clause in the 1829 Turnpike Act no toll was charged for the finished lime if it was used for agricultural purposes.

The Warren kilns were operated by Symons Frean and Co in 1885 and milled at Washford where cement, lime and plaster were produced. In later years the kilns were operated by Worthington Sutton who lived in Bilbrook and who used donkeys both for hauling and his means of transport. John Slade took over the final operation of the combined kilns but this ceased in 1923 and was the last lime burner in the locality.

### Phil Gannon

*In response to Dave Simpson-Scott's article on The Watchet Tramway in WCS Newsletter 48.*

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.d.scott@icloud.com](mailto:jan.d.scott@icloud.com)

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)

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1st - Gillian Gibbons

### **Calendar Competition - Winners!**

We were so delighted by the many people who took part in the competition and the standard of the photography was extremely high. So very many congratulations to the winners:

#### **1st - Gillian Gibbons**

*Watchet Ablaze*

#### **2nd - Alison Grove**

*Mist over Doniford Bay heralding a new April day*

#### **3rd - Chris Dene**

*Untitled*

*The calendar is available to buy at the AGM on Tuesday 15th November at The Phoenix Centre, £5 each, and throughout the town at various outlets.*



2nd - Alison Grove



3rd - Chris Dene