



# Watchet Conservation Matters

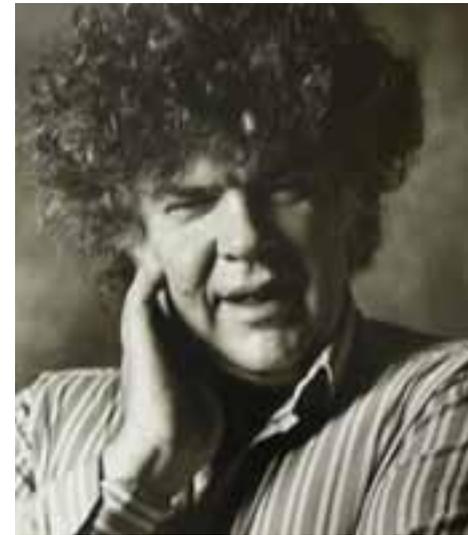
Promoting, Conserving & Improving  
Our Physical & Natural Environment

Issue 57 March/April 2018



## From the Chairman

*A young Maurice Chidgey at the keyboard of a Monotype typesetting machine at Williton in the 1950s.*



Jan Simpson-Scott has been Secretary for the past eight years, Newsletter Editor for over two years and during the last year when we had no chairman, fielded most of the problems that arose. Little wonder that she has decided enough is enough and wants to move on to pastures new.

On behalf of the society, I would like to thank her for all her past efforts, particularly as she has agreed to produce this and the next newsletter.

For the moment, until we fill these vacancies I will attempt to fulfil these roles, as well as continue as Chairman. Obviously far from ideal and definitely not sustainable in the long term. Please Note. Please come and join the committee as active members or we shall have to have a difficult conversation about our way forward.

On a lighter note, the planting of the Wild Flower project in the West Street Car Park has started. The booklet on the Mineral Line project is going to be printed. The two interpretation boards, Turner and Stoates Mill, will shortly be completed and work will soon start on the human sundial. We have produced a leaflet detailing the talks programme and the Society's Aims and details hopefully to attract new members. As I write this I have a three foot snowdrift out side, Spring must be round the corner.

**Bob Cramp**

Hello Members

This is my second report since taking over as your chairman since the AGM last November, during which time I have had a baptism of fire.

At the start of the year most of the committee were seriously ill, and our January meeting had to be postponed. I have yet to have a meeting attended by the whole committee and now our secretary and newsletter editor has resigned.

In the year since I joined Conservation (ostensibly to take pictures for the society) the following have resigned: Casework Officer, Chairman, a committee member without portfolio, Membership Secretary and now the Secretary. These were all long serving committee members, no-one has stepped forward to replace them in spite of appeals to you the membership.



## REFLECTIONS! 50 years at the West Somerset Free Press

### REFLECTIONS! 50 years at the West Somerset Free Press - Maurice Chidgey

In August 1948 I was engaged as a compositor apprentice by Mr. F. N. Cox, then managing director and editor of the West Somerset Free Press. I then became a "printer's devil", being the youngest apprentice in the printing office at Williton.

The West Somerset Free Press was established in 1860 by Mr. Samuel Cox, who was born at Watchet and later became a part-owner of the largest ship ever to be built in the town, the schooner Star of the West (82 tons). Mr. Cox eventually moved over the hill to Williton, where he established a printing, bookbinding, stationery and book-selling business, progressing to establishing a weekly newspaper. It was so-named Free Press because of the then recent abolition of both the paper duty and newspaper advertising duty, which created a far greater degree of freedom for the Press. Not surprisingly, the name Free Press was not only given to West Somerset's local paper, but to a number of others across the country.

Many influential people looked with distaste on the growing opportunities for enlightenment of ordinary folk, and the announcement that a purely local newspaper was to be published was received with a certain amount of anger - in some instances even accompanied by threats of a boycott of the proposed publication. Despite this, Mr. Cox went ahead and the first edition, consisting of only four pages, was published at Williton

on 28th July 1860. Since that first edition it has been proud to boast that it has never once missed an edition, though there have been a few near misses!

In my early days at the Free Press the type, as for many years, was mechanically set in the "hot metal" letterpress process on Linotype and Monotype typesetting machines using molten lead. The type was then composed together and made up into pages by hand, totally different from today's computerised process and make-up. Early on Friday mornings the made-up pages of type were locked securely in steel frames and put, one at a time, into a wooden box and then lowered by hand with pulley and rope to the press room below. On very rare occasions I recall the person lowering the box letting the rope slip and the enclosed page of type would end up as "printer's pie" (a mass of jumbled type) on the floor below. The language that followed certainly broadened my education!

Mishaps like this would cause long delays in the starting of the print run, as all the type would have to be re-set and the page made up again.

Following the Lynmouth flood disaster in August 1952 the Free Press produced a whole page of photographs relevant to the story and this page was among those printed on a Thursday evening. In those days, any paper over the size of eight pages had to be printed in two stages - the second stage being on Friday mornings. This page of photographs caused great problems as the lead spaces between the

## REFLECTIONS! 50 years at the West Somerset Free Press



*The last print run of the West Somerset Free Press on the old Cossar press at Williton, 23rd November 1989.*

half-tone photographic blocks kept rising due to friction with the ink rollers of the printing press. This caused large black blobs to appear between the images on the newsprint; everything was tried to avert this, but to no avail. The only thing we could do was to print 30-40 copies, then stop the press and knock down the spaces! Throughout the night this was repeated until the print run of approximately 12,000 was completed. We were all rather bleary-eyed by the morning. Then we had to prepare for the second stage printing of the remaining pages to complete the edition. Unfortunately, we experienced the

same problem again the following year when a whole page of local celebratory pictures relating to the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II appeared. It was never attempted again in letterpress days.

Another incident, not funny at the time, concerned a serviceman stationed at Doniford Camp who came before the local magistrates' court. In a report of the case in the Free Press it was stated that "The defendant had previous convictions against him". Unfortunately, both the typesetter and proof-reader missed out a very important little word - no! The



## REFLECTIONS! 50 years at the West Somerset Free Press

sentence should have read: "The defendant had NO previous convictions against him". This omission caused quite a lot of tricky repercussions. Apparently, the young serviceman was engaged to a local girl and when her parents read the report, no way were they going to allow their daughter to marry a convicted criminal! Anyway, things were sorted out. A full and prominent apology was printed in the following week's issue... and romance prevailed!

The above example just shows what a huge difference a little word makes, but the following reveals how even one wrong letter can totally alter a sentence. In an obituary notice a sentence should have read: "In loving memory of our dear dad". Unfortunately what appeared was "In loving memory of our dead dad". Very upsetting for all involved but, however careful one tries to be, mistakes happen.

Other gaffes have been made by the public advertising items for sale – one in particular where the advertisement read: "For sale, grand piano by lady with bowed legs"! Also appearing in the classified advertisement columns one week was the following, which had been inadvertently placed under the heading of "Poultry": "Duck egg blue coat for sale, brown overcheck, medium size, nearly new, telephone..." I wonder how many replies were received?

Another amusing incident occurred when the compositor making up a page mixed up two reports. Halfway through an account of a wedding intruded part of a livestock sale. The result: "The bride was

attired in a white gown of 86 breeding ewes, 6 rams, 30 fat hoggets, etc." The bride's family was not too happy over this!

Friday mornings saw a six o'clock start after a long day on Thursdays, and if anyone happened to be late the whole office would be informed by the banging of spanners on the cast-iron radiators! It made a terrific noise and I should think the whole of North Street was woken up.

In the days of Williton Magistrates' Court, when the monthly sittings were held on a Thursday at the local police station, Free Press journalist Jack Hurley would cover the proceedings. Following the sitting, Jack would return to his North Street home and type out all his court stories. He would then place his 'copy' under a stone on a ledge in his front porch, from where I would collect it just before six o'clock the following morning and proceed, with others, to typeset all his court stories for them to appear in that week's issue of the Free Press.

Following the untimely death of Mr. Norman Cox in 1970, Jack Hurley was appointed editor. On 12th May 1972 he introduced the most radical change in the appearance of the Free Press since its launch in 1860 by replacing advertisements on the front page with news and photographs. Jack was a prolific writer and was also the author of several books in the Exmoor Press Microstudy series, where his vast knowledge of West Somerset and its folk was shown to full effect. For many years he contributed the weekly Notes

## REFLECTIONS! 50 years at the West Somerset Free Press

by the Way column in the Free Press, where he created the character of Will Widden, a veritable sage of Exmoor, who always had the last say in a West Country dialect tailpiece to his Notes. This was always much looked forward to by many readers. Jack had the unique ability to make even the duller subject interesting, and was deservedly awarded the MBE for outstanding service to local journalism.

The last print run of the West Somerset Free Press at Williton was on 23rd November 1989. After this it was at first printed at Plymouth, then at other places. The cessation of the printing of the Free Press at Williton virtually brought to a close the method of letterpress printing there after about 130 years and saw the venture of re-training into computer setting and page make-up. The largest number of pages printed in an edition of the Free Press at Williton was 32.

Besides the newspaper, a considerable number of books, magazines, posters and a large amount of commercial printing were also undertaken at Williton. After Frank Cox, I served under four other editors – Norman Cox, Jack Hurley, Bob Alwyn and present editor Gareth Purcell. The Free Press is now owned by the Tindle Newspaper Group based in Farnham, Surrey.

### **POSTSCRIPT**

From West Somerset in the News, a book on the first 150 years of the Free Press by Jeff Cox, son of Norman Cox and great-great-grandson of Samuel Cox:

"In the last week of July 1860, Samuel Cox and his three staff gathered in their cramped premises in Long Street, Williton, to launch their new venture. They worked in relays around a hand press; one inked the flat-beds of handset type, another cranked the handle to impress the paper onto the inked type, and the other two removed and stacked the printed pages.

"Between them, they printed two pages of local news and adverts for that first edition of the West Somerset Free Press. Another two pages of national and international news had earlier in the week been printed in London and despatched first by train to Bristol and then on to Williton by stage coach.

"On Saturday, July 28th, 1860, about 1,000 copies of the first edition of the Free Press were distributed around the district, selling for three halfpence, the equivalent today of about £2.70. Within six months, the paper was to double in size to eight pages."

Jeff Cox, now retired, has been a journalist all his working life and specialised in the coverage of foreign news for the BBC's television and radio news bulletins.

### **Maurice Chidgey**





### Open Meeting - Clay Pipes of Somerset by David Bunney

The first Open Meeting of 2018 on January 16th was on a very daunting night. For those who braved hail, rain, mist and fog to hear David Bunney's illustrated talk on his hobby of collecting clay tobacco pipes it was a most interesting time.

From the time he first found a number of fragments of these pipes on an allotment, David has had an enthusiasm for collecting them. He has amassed 3,000 of them but all but two are broken. David called his hobby 'weird'; seven eighths of his collection are 'ordinary' and stored in his shed. Two trays full of the most interesting examples were passed round the audience.

The history, in England, of these fragile clay pipes began in 1572 with the arrival of tobacco and smoking. The oldest pipes are Elizabethan, very plain, with small bowls

and had long stems to cool the smoke: from 1850 onwards the bowls were much larger and highly decorated.

David described how the pipes were made, often as a cottage industry, by washing and drying clay before beating out any air pockets and roughly shaping to fit into a hinged two-piece mould. The stem was pierced along its length and after closing the mould excess clay was trimmed away before firing. David showed pictures of all shapes and designs of pipe, and the inside of a clay pipe workshop. Waxing of the stem and mouthpiece was always done after firing.

The shape of the clay pipes evolved from 1570 /1580 from a very small bowl, like a little ladle (because tobacco was imported from the colonies and was expensive) to a larger bowl which could be decorated. Styles and designs changed constantly with fashion between 1580 and 1840, and

local events, politics and group loyalties also played a part. There were even some with several stems, designed to be shared around a group, and known as 'cadger' pipes.

At first the stem of the pipe had a thick wall and a stumpy shape. The bowl gradually was made bigger, and by 1660 there was a spur moulded on to prevent the pipe rocking when laid down.

After 1780 the bowls were decorated, often with stripes, and also with trade- and maker's marks. The maker's mark was often impressed before firing, on the side of the bowl or underneath it: motifs such as Tudor roses, fleur-de-lys, a gauntlet and a wheat sheaf were also often found in relief on the bowl. Marks added after firing are rare, but David showed a pipe bowl which did appear to have been painted after firing.

Later, there were historic events celebrated with pipe bowls shaped into a head, and one of the pipes passed around the audience had a head of King George V on the bowl to celebrate his Silver Jubilee. Public Houses, Friendly Societies, Cricket and Football Clubs all had their fame spread along with the smoke.

The making of these pipes was a widespread second source of income, especially for farmers who had access to the all-important clay.

During a lively question-and -answer session David told two stories which

had made news in past centuries; one James Fox, pipe-maker, had not paid his taxes and a fight ensued with a police constable (who also made pipes). In another news item John Parsons fought with his son-in-law over the selling of pipes in the former's "territory".

Add to these disputes the fact that some local people loathed smoking, which they proclaimed was 'sticky', 'vile' and 'disgusting'... It made me wonder how many of those broken pipes found buried had never ever seen the tobacco they had been so carefully designed to hold? What further stories might there be to tell?

**Valerie Ward**



## It started on the first day of Spring in Watchet...



### It started on the first day of Spring in Watchet... and didn't finish until the 2nd!

Herewith a few pictures taken around, or close to, our house during and after our recent snow storm. Some talked of a Beast from the East, others talked of Emma, but the combination changed Watchet into something I've not seen here before in close to 12 years. Let's just say it was definitely a MEMORABLE event, enjoy it as much as possible as a part of life's rich pattern, and before we know where we are, life will be back to normal! Except of course, the other side of these extreme and unusual events, there are those who, in one way or another, will have lasting

unpleasant memories from this storm – and, of course, I feel for those people.

As a memento, a few pictures.

**Dave Simpson-Scott**

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)

**Chairman**  
Bob Cramp

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

**Treasurer**  
Ann Hill  
01984 632451  
[annhill46@gmail.com](mailto:annhill46@gmail.com)

**Case Work Consultant**  
Phil Gannon

**Committee**  
Nick Cotton  
Jason Robinson  
Mervyn Brown  
Robert Blois  
Valerie Ward - Press Officer

