



# Watchet Conservation Matters

Promoting, Conserving & Improving  
Our Physical & Natural Environment

Issue 66 September/October 2019

## From the Chairman

*Fig. 3 17th century memorial in Somerset alabaster, S transept, Michaelston-yfedw church.*



On the 10th August was St Decuman's Tower open day. Much against expectations, I made it to the top of the tower without getting stuck and was rewarded with some magnificent views especially as the sun burst through the clouds. It was also the day of the Gay Pride Festival to be held on West Beach, unfortunately this had to relocate to the West Somerset Hotel because of imminent high winds, nevertheless it was attended by many people some of whom had travelled considerable distances. In the evening a concert "Songs from the Sea" was held in the boat museum by David Milton and friends in aid of the Watchet based Quantock food bank. It was standing room only.

On Sunday 11th August the official opening of Caturns/Watchet Summertime started with a sustained cloudburst of torrential rain and hail whilst Queen Catherine, King Charles II and the mayor took shelter. Watchet Summertime was the usual heady mix of live music and events, Lego building competition, duck race, craft, charity and Town Council fun days, belly dancing, a pop up outside cinema showing Mamma Mia with the spectacular finale of the firework display. The launch of the Candle Floats had to be postponed due to the weather. Nearly all the events were free. Summertime is financed by sponsors, donations and sale of raffle tickets, (lots of them) and is superbly organised and run by a small committee and a dedicated team of volunteers.

The Watchet Music Festival over the bank holiday weekend was graced by glorious weather and entertained over 8,000 locals and visitors over 3 days, just enjoying

Dear Members,  
Watchet's Brilliant Summer. I always get writer's block roughly every two months whenever I am called upon to deliver my message, there really is no excuse. There is so much to write about, so much has happened since the last July newsletter.

Our last open meeting on the 16th July was a brilliant evening, nearly 100 people turned up to hear Dr Andy King talk about Watchet's Geological Future, what a turnout.

On 27th July saw Watchet Carnival, now a two day festival, the parade was followed by numerous events and stalls on the Memorial Ground, and as one might expect it was a great success.



themselves listening to 60 different live acts of varying genres, on 3 separate stages, an incredible feat of organisation ably assisted by a local labour force of willing volunteers.

There were two very different events this last week, both hosted in the Community Centre, both well attended by the public. The first, on Wednesday 28th August a meeting of Extinction Rebellion and more importantly on Thursday 29th August, a Town Council planning committee meeting considering the application for the building of 400 homes on the paper-mill site.

Finally on the evening of Saturday 31st August, was the delayed launching of the candle floats, it was a fine, windy evening with a very high tide. The sun had gone

down, my final stunning image of this event, seen from the Esplanade, (whilst eating fish and chips) is of a very long line of illuminated floats bobbing up and down, moving out to the lighthouse as the moon was coming up, completing a busy, stimulating month in the life of Watchet.

How fortunate we are.



**Bob Cramp**



**An Alabaster Tournament—Watchet versus Penarth**

In January 2017, after several years of research, I published a little book entitled *Penarth Alabaster*. In the light of this extensive study of the use of Welsh alabaster, which also contains a short section on Somerset alabaster including a brief summary of the work of Ron Firman, I would like to follow up Nick Cotton's article "*The Riddle of the Alabaster Font*", which appeared in Issue 24 of the Watchet Conservation Society Newsletter (Sept/Oct 2012).

Nick's article states "*the alabaster here in Watchet appears to be unique in its specific and very obvious pink hue*". Now, from my researches I can positively state that some of the alabaster which outcrops in the cliffs

*Fig. 1. Entrance hall, 54 Mount St, London*

at Penarth Head in Glamorgan also exhibits very similar pink colouration. Firman was aware of this but states that he knew of no record of the use of Penarth alabaster other than the early twentieth century tiles lining the main stairway at University College, Cardiff. However, after he had visited the tombs and wall monuments in Margam Abbey church, he did begin to question whether some of the material he had found in South West England might actually have come from Penarth rather than Somerset (he did also mention Somerton as another possible source, though I personally think this rather less likely). Sadly, Firman never got around to researching the alabaster on the Welsh



**Fig. 2** Doorway arch in Somerset alabaster, Binham Grange, Old Cleeve ©Julian Orbach

side of the Bristol Channel. Had he been able to, he would have found that there are records of the exploitation of Penarth alabaster from at least the 17th century and possibly very much earlier, though it has to be said that the majority of known usage in Wales dates to the 19th and 20th centuries. Without doubt the most spectacular use of this material is in the entrance hall of 54 Mount Street in London, which was once the town house of Lord Windsor (Earl of Plymouth) but is now the residence of the Brazilian Ambassador; Fig. 1.

However, although the pink varieties of Penarth and Somerset alabasters may be visually indistinguishable from one another, the mottled grey coloured alabaster found around Watchet is unique to this location as it is not found in Glamorgan. This grey mottled material is not only seen in many church monuments in South West England but also in secular buildings, such as

Binham Grange, Old Cleeve; Fig. 2. Two 17th century examples of wall memorials which definitely contain elements of grey mottled Watchet alabaster have been found in Wales. The most accessible of these is in the south transept of St Michael's church Michaelston-y-fedw between Cardiff and Newport; Fig. 3, (note that the top element of the monument is a later repair in Penarth alabaster).

Until recently, like Nick, I had assumed that the external alabaster keystones found in Swain Street were features unique to Watchet. However, in 2017 several similar external alabaster features were discovered in Newport Road, Cardiff; see example Fig. 5.

Finally, Nick presented some tantalising evidence that Nicholas Stone and later his son may possibly have worked with



**Fig. 4** WWI War Memorial, N wall of Michaelston-y-fedw cburch.



**Fig. 5** External alabaster features, Newport Road, Cardiff.

Watchet alabaster and that two of his sculptors could have been responsible for carving the Williton font. This is of particular interest to me because Newman has stated that the alabaster memorial to



**Fig. 6** William Thomas memorial (1636) Wenvoe church.

William Thomas (1636) in Wenvoe church, Vale of Glamorgan; Fig. 6, is “*strongly influenced by Nicholas Stone*”. This leads me to question whether my original assumption that this particular memorial was constructed from Penarth alabaster may be wrong and that the material actually came from Somerset. (Note the pillars of this memorial have been painted black so it is not possible to identify if the grey mottled alabaster exclusive to Somerset lies beneath the paint. The light grey elements are not alabaster.) To conclude, whilst there was extensive use of what has been assumed to be Somerset alabaster in South West England during the 17th century, and the grey mottled variety is exclusive to Somerset, the pink (and white) varieties from Somerset cannot be distinguished visually from similar material found in Penarth. The tournament therefore cannot begin unless someone can come up with a method for distinguishing between alabaster from the two sources. Multi-isotope fingerprinting (sulphur, oxygen and strontium) has been successfully used to distinguish the sources of Medieval alabaster artworks. However, this method is highly specialist and expensive and, given that the two sources in question here are from the same geological sequence separated by no more than 25 miles, it seems very unlikely it would be successful in this case. I suggest that in this instance the relatively cheap method of using a hand-held XRF analyser to measure trace metals content might well be worth a try.

**Michael Statham**  
Field Officer Welsh Slate Forum



### Lost Horizons: St. Decuman's Cricket Club

Some trawling of the Free Press archive at the Somerset Heritage Centre Taunton reveals the existence of St Decuman's CC in 1880, when a merger with Washford CC was proposed, with *'weekly practices shared between Williton and St. Decuman's.'* This connects nicely with a report of the AGM of the club at Watchet in 1900. A vote of thanks was given to Mr G.G. Pole for *'free use of the field for many years.'* Combine this with a resolution to employ Mr Chave the contractor to lay on a water supply connecting the field with cottages at Five Bells, a distance

of 200 feet, and we can be very sure this is one and the same with our photo (kind permission of Richard Burnell of Parsonage Farm). The cricket loving Mr G.G.Pole, we assume, had the farm in 1900.

Richard confirms that this field, the last on the left approaching Five Bells from Watchet, has always been known as *'Cricket Field'*. In area 11 acres, it equals the size of the old Watchet Harbour! As well as local clubs, St. Dec's had fixtures with the Quantock Lodge Team from Nether Stowey, the subject of a new book by Barry Phillips, *'Too Fond of Winning'*. This title was the comment made to young

Master Stanley by Somerset CCC legend S.M.J Woods. The normal practice of Quantock Lodge was to bat first, declare on 200 runs ahead and proceed to bowl the village opponents for a low score. The thought of Sammy Woods (who had opened the bowling for both England and his native Australia) steaming in on village pitches causes one to feel sympathy for Tom and Bill and Ernie all those years ago.

Two figures present at that AGM in 1900 were to play an important part in the history of the game in Somerset, namely W.G. Penny and Arthur Pearse. 'W.G' was the Watchet stalwart who put

Harold Gimblett on to the county scene with great success. The latter provided Watchet with a son, Alan, who served the town in many capacities: employer, sportsman, epic organiser of flower shows and county councillor.

Perhaps someone can find out when St. Decuman's CC pulled stumps for the last time?

### 'Long off'



## Watchet's Eroding Coastline-What's at Fault?



### Open Meeting - Watchet's Eroding Coastline-What's at Fault? Tuesday 16th July by Andy King

Andy King is well known to the Conservation Society and received a warm welcome. He apologised at the start that the subject was technical, but he would, as far as was possible, avoid too much technical jargon.

The talk started with a general explanation about our coastal geology showing our red mudstone at Hellwell, the blue lias at Watchet from the Jurassic period etc. Then going on to explain the Blue Anchor fault line and the Watchet/Cothelstone fault line and how they were largely responsible for our interesting coastline, which is world famous in geological terms. Andy showed us some interesting postcards from as far back as 1900 up to 1950's. The oldest from 1900 showed West Beach with considerably more cliff than we see today, then the beach

at Warren Bay c.1920 This he compared to a more recent photograph again showing the extent of the erosion. The pictures of Blue Anchor c.1928 were compared with recent photos and news stories regarding the Blue Anchor public house which closed recently (We had many a pleasant meal sitting round the fire there only this last winter, blissfully unaware of the present danger).

Andy explained at some length how the actions to prevent erosion in the past have in some instances aggravated the problems rather than solve them, for instance the rock armour can cause the cliff behind the defence to be undermined, other defences merely move and exaggerate the erosion either side of the defence. The old post card of the sea defence at Blue Anchor was a good example, Andy explained, as to how the energy of the waves get redirected, the picture showed quite clearly the cliff beyond the defence was so eroded as to be encroaching behind the sea wall.

Andy showed us the current plan for our coast where, with the exception of Watchet, the coast from Blue Anchor to Hinkley would be left to the elements. Before we all became too depressed Andy reassured us that whilst some of the erosions seemed dramatic the average yearly loss of land was very small, around 40cms per year and he foresaw Watchet still being around for a further 1000 years. I'm not sure that those living to the east or west of Watchet were much reassured. He finished by answering the many questions raised by his talk and was very reassuring—I think!

**Alan Jones**

Watchet Conservation Matters is published six times a year. If you would like to contribute news or an article, please contact our acting secretary Bob Cramp on: bob2cramp@gmail.com

Members of the Watchet Conservation Society receive this bi-monthly newsletter via email for free, or a printed copy for only £1.50 each. If you are not a member and have enjoyed reading this publication, come and join us to help us conserve our physical and natural environment. All of our committee members would be delighted to welcome you.

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#### **Editors Note:**

*This is the last call we need a Newsletter Editor. I have been the "acting" newsletter editor since March 2018, (this will be my 10th). I gave a year's notice that I will be standing down at the AGM in November. As things stand this will be the pen-ultimate edition. I have enjoyed doing it, but I need time for other commitments. A refund will be issued for those paid in advance for 2020.*

*As I said "This is the Last Call".*

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### **In a Watchet Garden**

Falling raindrops  
make leaves shudder:  
a meadow brown flies for cover.

But bumble bees seem  
unconcerned  
When filching pollen—  
from runner beans.

**Hilda Cornish**