



# Watchet Conservation Matters

Promoting, Conserving & Improving  
Our Physical & Natural Environment

Issue 69 March/April 2020

## From the Chairman

*Disused lime kiln at Daws Castle*



Dear Members,

The more observant among you might have noticed that we have a delightful picture of a new-born baby in place of yet another awful mug-shot of myself.

Welcome Nancy Florence Shaw, born 23rd February 2020 and weighing in at 7lbs 6oz and the newest and youngest recruit to the Conservation Society. Congratulations too to Lucy and Sam the proud parents. Also definitely the first WCS Committee member to give birth whilst in office, may there be many more.

This is definitely the best piece of news to come out of Watchet this year.

It has been a difficult start to the year. Storm

Ciara (9th Feb) lifted the three-ton rocks used to make temporary repairs to the Sea wall before Christmas and tossed them out to Sea as though they were tennis balls. The race was on to beat the arrival of Storm Dennis and stabilise the repairs to the wall before the East Quay could be breached. Thankfully, the team assembled by our new Taunton Deane and Somerset West District Council were able to avert this threat in the nick of time. Read Deanna Payne's poem "What the Ocean Saw."

It has come to our attention that there are also problems on the West Quay; namely the dreadful state of our 158 year old lighthouse. Hopefully, we have alerted the powers that be, and will see that it gets the love and care it deserves.

Nick Cotton, with the help of Rob Hutchings, turn their attention to the historic Minster's field, an ancient burial ground, and the site of the unloved, unwanted Cleeve Hill housing development. David Evans turns his attention to our hedgehog population. He has also been responsible for producing and editing this newsletter; a weight off my shoulders for which I am most grateful.

So, a busy, and in some cases, very productive month for the WCS. The first shoots of Spring are appearing, let us hope there is no late snow.

Be Lucky.



**Bob Cramp**



## DAWS CASTLE The Origins of Watchet

### DAWS CASTLE The Origins of Watchet

At the end of January this year on a wet and drizzly day, I struggled up the fields from the Mineral Line along a muddy track to the top of Cleeve Hill with the sole purpose of visiting Daws Castle. Daws Castle is probably more accurately termed a fort. A thousand years ago, it must have made an impressive sight, with expansive views to the valley below and onwards to the Brendons, Quantocks and Exmoor. Looking towards the Severn Sea, it is not difficult to see why one would position a fortification in this spot. Even on a rather gray day, the islands of Steepholme and Flatholme, and of course the Welsh coast are visible.

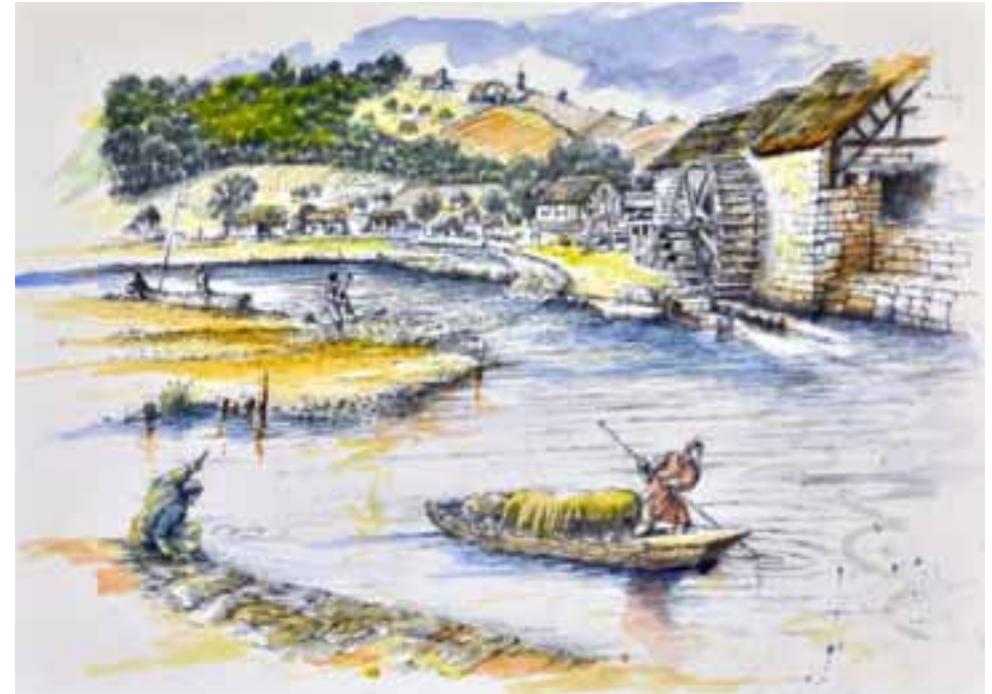
The site is not easily accessed, whichever way you choose to approach it. From West Street, it is a steep climb of about half a mile, where you will find yourself forced into the hedge by traffic negotiating the narrow road. I am going to suggest that if you are physically able, walk along West Street beach enjoying the extensive length of sandy beach and the alabaster-lined cliffs. You will reach an almost hidden cliff path that takes you up from the beach, through to the Warren Bay Holiday Park. Interestingly, you will pass two small lime kilns partially hidden in the overgrown bank. These were almost certainly constructed for agricultural purposes. Follow the sign-posted 'Coastal Path' eastwards and it will eventually take you to Daws Castle. I might mention that as you take the moderate climb following the cliff path and past the end of the caravan

and camping park, it will be quite easy to make out the outline of what was once a putting green of the long since defunct Watchet Golf Club. It is interesting how the landscape can offer these visual clues of our past if we care to look for them.

The first glimpse of Daws Castle from this route might seem a little disappointing. Although there are crumbling ruins, sometimes mistaken for the old castle walls, sadly they are not what we might think - they are nothing more than the remains of the nineteenth century lime kilns. Even so, they have acquired a certain pleasing antiquated look for those of us with a romantic bent. So what might we have seen a thousand years ago? The site occupied a substantial area of about five acres and was a complex fortification, but it must be assumed that it was principally of wooden construction with mounds and ditches and probably stockades for animals, and was home to a good number of people. Even on a wet and damp winter's day, it is a rather impressive prospect, and finding this point, there is nothing above you but sky, with the cliffs falling abruptly away and the distant beach displaying the wonderful patterns of the geological strata written in the sand and shingle. The seagulls, for no reason other than the sheer joy of it, rise and fall, gliding effortlessly on the updrafts from the cliffs. On another day, I have had the delight of seeing peregrine falcons in the distance displaying their astonishing aerobatics. There have been peregrines here for as long as I can remember. Although just a few feet from the road, there is a sense of isolation and



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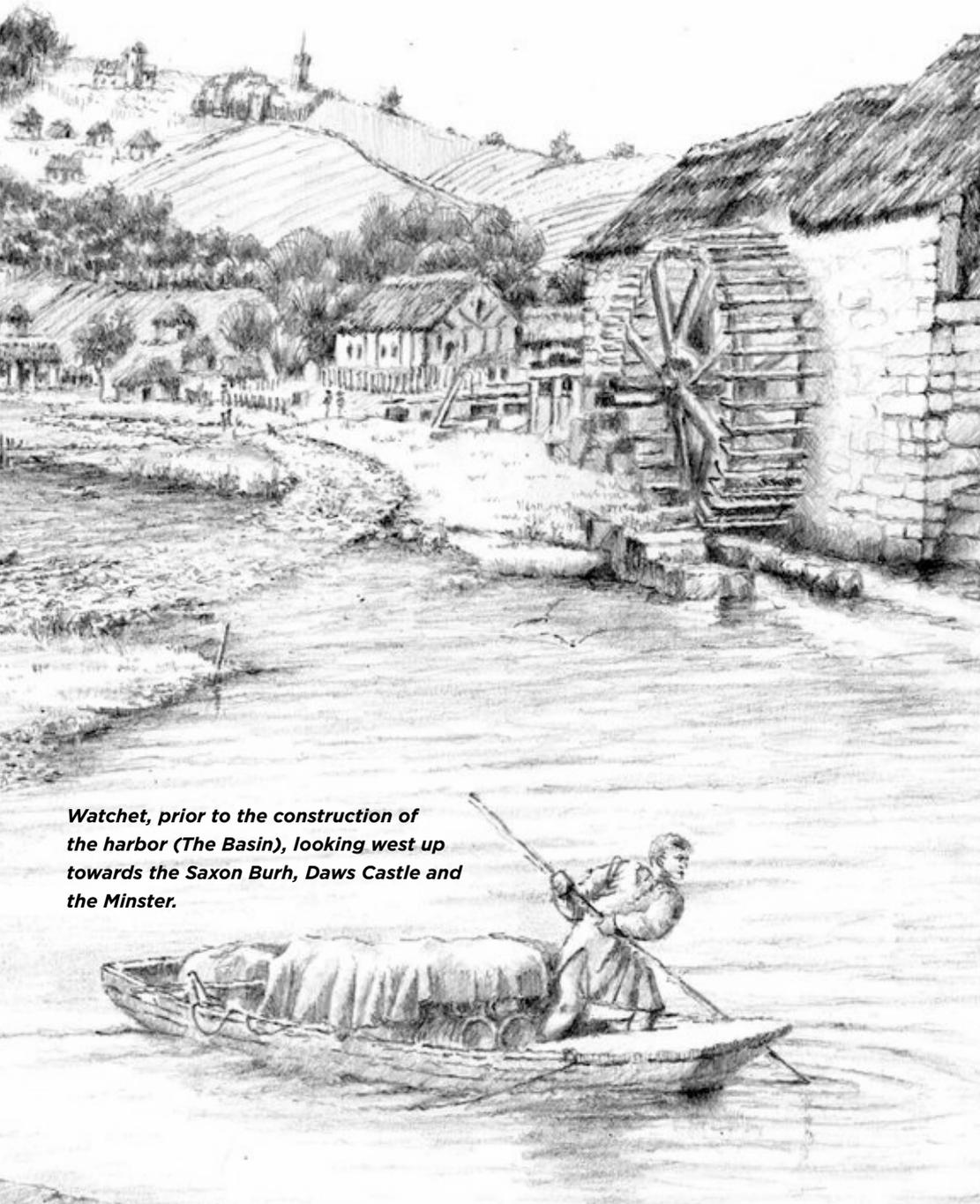


the scrubby grass feeding a few sheep adds to the atmosphere. These sensations are best experienced in the winter with its long shadows and crisp outlines, for in the season when the sun is warmer on your back and the summer in full flow, the ghosts that inhabit this ancient part of Watchet are concealed from view.

How is it that this very ancient and important probable origin of Watchet comes to be here and why? For some time there had been plundering and pillaging along the coastline of the Severn Sea and the Anglo Saxon Chronicle of 914 records how ships from the south of Brittany, carrying two earls, Obter and

Hreoaldan, attempted to land at Watchet and were repelled; being forced back to their ships to seek shelter on the Holmes (holme is Danish for Island). A later and more significant account after the Royal Mint had been established appears in 997 *"In this year the Danish army went round Devon into the mouth of the Severn and ravaged there, both in Cornwall, Wales, and in Devon. And they landed at Watchet and did much damage there, burning and slaying; and after that they turned back round lands End to the southern side... and went inland until they reached Lydford burning and slaying everything they came across"*. Clearly, the Danes were a serious problem.

## DAWS CASTLE The Origins of Watchet



**Watchet, prior to the construction of the harbor (The Basin), looking west up towards the Saxon Burh, Daws Castle and the Minster.**



King Alfred was instrumental in setting up a series of fortifications on the coastline of Wessex and Mercia to combat this continuous menace. In all, there were 35 strategically placed forts. During this period, Watchet would have had greater importance than at any other time in its history. At this time, Watchet was described as a burgh in the Burghal Hidage, essentially a list of defensive and administrative centres originally drawn up by Edward the Elder (911 – 918), in which ‘Watchet is granted the service of men from 513 hides to maintain and defend the wall’. Within the document, it states that “*each hide should provide one man and that there should be four men for every pole of the wall*”. Translating this, Watchet having

### **Overgrown walls of lime kiln**

a wall of some 700 yards, had about 500 defenders, giving us some idea of its significance at this time.

The importance of the town at this time is further emphasized by the establishment of a Mint. (The story of the Mint will be covered in a future article.) The first coins were minted in 978, during the reign of Athelred II. Apart from an interval between 1056 and 1080, the mint remained in production until c. 1158. We must assume that the fortification was at its most impressive during this period. There is clear evidence that the castle or fort was in existence during the reign of Alfred the



## DAWS CASTLE The Origins of Watchet

Great, who is credited with its foundation, although there would have been some form of fortification prior to this date. There have even been suggestions that the earliest origins may be Iron Age.

Daws Castle has also been referred to as Dart Castle and Danes Castle, but it is likely to have held this name since c. 1537, when it was in the possession of Thomas Dawe and known as 'le castell'. If you look carefully, it is still possible to make out the contours of the defences, bearing in mind that a goodly portion has been claimed by the sea. The site was excavated during 1982. The excavations demonstrated that there were two phases of construction and revealed that a good portion of the original stone foundations remained intact. Confirmation of the existence of the site was established in the Victorian period when a series of three lime kilns were built, and five skeletons were discovered in close proximity to each other, suggesting the presence of a cemetery.

It has generally been accepted that the original Minster, serving the town's religious needs was located somewhere close Daws Castle. In the 13th century, it was relocated to the present site, where the impressive St Decuman's Church overlooks the town. The strongest clue to the Minster's location perhaps lies in the reference to the field to the east of Daws Castle, described as the 'Old Minster Field'. This was recorded in 1801, over two hundred years ago. Conjecture must lead us to suppose that somewhere within in this field (and presently under consideration

for a housing development), there lies evidence of the so far undiscovered Minster. There may well be extensive burials in this location and important clues as to the earliest beginnings of the town. The potential importance of this archaeological site cannot be overestimated, not just for Watchet or West Somerset, but also for the ancient kingdom of Wessex.

### **Nick Cotton**

*Daws Castle is administered by English Heritage.*

## Hedgehogs in my Williton garden.



### **Hedgehogs in my Williton garden**

I was first alerted to the presence of hedgehogs in my garden by a friend who spotted tell-tale evidence in the path through the flower border. Since then I have done everything I can to encourage them, with a degree of success.

Fortunately, my garden is bordered by hedges, so the hogs can join the all important "Hedgehog Highway". Gardens with solid fences or walls do not help. Also at the base of part of my hedge a pile of debris has built up, affording some rudimentary shelter.

I started by putting out tasty nibbles in a simple ground feeder. I made sure that this was approved feed from a well-known maker. I added in cat food (meat based not fish) for variation. They enjoyed this but it didn't stop

them squeezing into the bird feeding station and scoffing less suitable food.

The advantage of the simple open feeder was that in the late evening I got a good view of my prickly visitors. However, I also got a good view of wood pigeons and their greedy chums having a snack on their way to roost.

My garden now boasts three "hedgehog snugs" which means the food is kept dry and out of sight of the pigeons. But as their visits are not so obvious, I am considering setting up a trail camera. So my friend's casual comment has brought me a lot of pleasure, but also had an effect on my bank balance.

### **Nick Cotton**



## A Hedgehog monitoring project for Watchet and Williton



### A Hedgehog monitoring project for Watchet and Williton

Hedgehogs were once relatively abundant, and frequent visitors to, or permanent residents in gardens and hedgerows.

Hedgehog populations in rural areas are in decline as consequence of the fragmentation and loss of habitat, combined with a decline in food availability. Both are largely caused by intensive agriculture. Road-kill, as well as predation by other larger mammals has also contributed to their decline. Climate change may affect the ability of hedgehogs to prepare for hibernation, as well as cause them to come out of hibernation at times when there is insufficient food available. Climate change will also increase flood risk and may constitute a hazard to hedgehogs that are

hibernating or nesting on the ground.

In urban areas (particularly small towns and suburbs), hedgehog populations appear to be doing better. Populations are more stable, or have even increased slightly. Such areas can act as reserves and refuges for hedgehog populations. As such, they can maintain healthy populations that will survive until the time comes when the wider countryside can be repopulated with hedgehogs and other animals.

As hedgehogs feed on invertebrates that live in the soil, their relative abundance can be a reflection of the health of the local environment. A decline in hedgehog numbers may indicate the disappearance of sources of food (mostly invertebrates), and therefore can signal degradation in the quality of the local environment. Although

## A Hedgehog monitoring project for Watchet and Williton



hedgehogs very occasionally take carrion, frogs and mice, their core diet consists of earthworms, beetle larvae, beetles, earwigs, caterpillars, millipedes and SLUGS. They are therefore allies of gardeners.

Other than garden birds, squirrels, mice and other rodents, foxes and occasionally badgers, hedgehogs may be the only relatively large animals found residing in urban and suburban gardens. Although they are largely nocturnal in their activities, if present, they are relatively easy to observe, either through patience and observation, by putting down food, or using camera traps (see Nick Cotton's article). Indicators of the presence of hedgehogs include tracks and droppings.

Assessing the size and distribution of the local hedgehog population can be seen as a way of measuring the health of the local environment through comparison with populations elsewhere. Such a survey can also be seen as a way of engaging people in 'citizen science' and connecting them more closely with the natural environment.

We are proposing to run a project aimed at assessing the size and distribution of hedgehogs across Watchet and Williton.

This will involve:

- Raising awareness of the ecological importance and plight of hedgehogs
- Providing local information/data about hedgehog populations to inform a national overview of their status, facilitating review and revision best practice in their conservation

- Help increase the size and health of local hedgehog populations through provision of appropriate habitat and nesting sites in gardens and other available land
- Increase connectivity through the urban/suburban environment through reducing barriers to hedgehog movement; allowing them to achieve the foraging ranges that they require for a healthy, balanced diet and breed successfully.

We are developing a scheme for recording hedgehogs locally that anyone can get involved with. We will also be promoting methods and techniques for increasing the sizes and health of local hedgehog populations. Once up and running, we hope to run the project for two years, by which time, it is hoped that it will be self-sustaining.

If you are interested in participating in this project, please contact:

**Dave Evans**

07565 765957

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or

**Kate Jeffreys**

Kate.jeffreys@gmail.com

**Dave Evans**

## Open Meeting - The Parrett Navigation Company



### Open Meeting - The Parrett Navigation Company Tuesday 21st January by Francis Farr-Cox

On a cold and frosty night, all chill thoughts were left at the door of the Methodist schoolrooms as we were warmly welcomed by the committee for another season of talks organised by the Watchet Conservation Society. These talks are open to everyone for a small charge of £2, free of course if you are a paid up member.

Our first speaker of the year was Francis Farr-Cox who gave a very detailed history of the Parrett Navigation Company. Francis likes to keep his audience on their toes by asking questions and setting puzzles.

No doubt the River Parrett had been used for transporting goods long before the Romans. During the industrial revolution, however, the increased demands for raw materials and finished goods meant that the river boats traditionally used for carriage could handle the increased volume of trade. Furthermore, the journey to Langport was only possible on the high Spring tides. An Act of Parliament was granted in 1836 for the Parrett Navigation Company to deepen parts of the river and build locks to manage water levels, allowing barges of up to 25 tons to reach Langport and beyond on every high tide throughout the year.

In addition to maintaining navigability by managing the river levels, there was a need need for a tow-path. Francis painted a colourful picture of boatmen having to jump their horses over styles and field boundaries, illustrating his story with a Constable painting of just such an event on the River Stour. The high sill on the original nine-arched bridge at Langport also impeded navigation. This was replaced with the current three-arched bridge. Much the documentation relating to the 'Navigation' has been preserved. Francis was able to give us much detail regarding the financing of the project and the engineers responsible for its construction.

Many local traders and businessmen bought shares in the venture, but the biggest shareholder was Stuckeys Bank, which was a large concern in Somerset terms, and whose branches were eventually bought by National Westminster Bank.



## Open Meeting - The Parrett Navigation Company

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The two principal shareholders owned a sizeable fleet of barges, which each employed two men and a boy.

One engineer involved in the design and construction of the Parrett Navigation was William Gavatte, known for his design of the broad, low arches of the bridge at Langport. Isambard Kingdom Brunel also assisted with the project, providing advice on the use of locks. Unfortunately, his advice on this occasion was in error, as he only surveyed the Parrett in winter and assumed the flow of water was constant throughout the year. The error was corrected without incurring too great a cost by replacing some of the half locks (also called flash locks) with double locks.

The Navigation was a financial success partly due to the rapid build (just four years). This, combined with a trade of 70,000 tons of cargo annually, allowed the original loans to be paid off in just 10 years.

In addition to the information regarding finance and engineering, we were told more personal stories of boat crews, lock keepers and their families, many of whom were involved in glove making, very popular employment in Somerset at that time.

Sadly competition from roads and railways brought the varied but hard life to a close. Serious flooding during 1875 required the removal of locks, and in 1877 the assets of the company were transferred to the Somerset Drainage Company.

A most interesting talk ended with Francis happily answering questions both formally and later over a cup of coffee

**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.

**Membership (per annum):**

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### **What the Ocean Saw**

Statuesquely, it lay, plotting its escape from  
behind the old sea wall,  
Calculating its imminent hatch between  
rhythmic tides and seagull's call,  
Sustaining solely on saltwater and a few  
errant sea creatures,  
Discreetly tucked amongst the breakwater-  
defence's still features.  
For about a hundred years it sat, its  
patience growing incredibly small,  
Until one dark night, in utter despair, it  
broke through the harbour wall,  
The wall shook and roared and the tide  
paused a minute,  
Curiously teasing at the harbour wall and  
what it had hid in it.  
And then without a warning and with a  
triumphant shout,  
The beast behind the harbour wall shot,  
canonically, out,  
In the pale moonlight, it remained, blinking,  
startlingly blue-eyed,  
Drinking in the salty-spray, under the stars,  
It's deep-longing; satisfied.  
It ducked under the swell and stretched out  
a hundred years of wrinkles,

Breathing in its ocean home, toothily smiling  
at rock-bound wrinkles.  
Returning to the height it once had, its  
skin glowing with the dew of the tide and  
contented bliss,  
It stared, disdainfully back at the stone cage,  
that it knew, it would not miss.  
Its Clam-shell heart soaring to its luna love,  
it caught a wild wave in haste,  
And rode it fast and far away, jaw dripping  
with freedoms fresh taste.  
The ocean caressed the empty pit, her  
hands soft with morning  
With a sigh, she wished the beast, 'bon  
voyage' and felt a new day dawning,  
As the sun tickled the ocean's curves, She  
recounted the night to her frothing history,  
A harsh whistling wind, a grand escape and  
a Conan Doyle-esk, unraveled mystery.  
The people came the next day and postured  
the consequences of a crumbling sea wall,  
Many of us had theories, but only she knows  
of that night's events, for the ocean saw it all.

**Deanna Payne 'Twitch'**