



Welcome to the first edition of our newsletter, we hope you enjoy it.

VCH Partnership Launch



Partnership members Bob Croft, Hilary Binding and Lady Gass with guests and museum staff

In February we marked the official launch of the new Somerset VCH Partnership at an event held at the Museum of Somerset.

The Partnership aims to build a community of support for the work of the Somerset VCH. This support is needed in order to fund and enable the completion of the famous big red books for the whole of the historic county.

The first Somerset volumes were published in 1906 and 1912 and covered general themes relating to the history, archaeology and natural history of the county. After a long break the first detailed parish histories were published in 1974. Publication has

continued ever since and there are now a total of 10 volumes in the Somerset series.

The launch event in the Great Hall of Taunton Castle brought together a wide range of people with a passion for Somerset's history. The evening was introduced by County Heritage Manager Tom Mayberry who set the scene, briefly telling the story of the VCH over the past century.

The current editor, Mary Siraut, provided a fascinating glimpse into how the volumes are researched. In recent years this has included investigations of the horse hair industry at Castle Cary and farming on Exmoor. This provided an opportunity for volunteers to get involved in fieldwork in order to contribute to the publication of 'Exmoor the making of an English upland'. Work is now well underway for a forthcoming volume about the area from Minehead to Dunster.

Professor Mick Aston made an eloquent case for the importance of the big red books as the starting point for any study of a locality. They have underpinned his research into Somerset's archaeology for many years.

Tom Mayberry then explained the rich possibilities for future research into the vale of Taunton Deane. The Partnership hopes to raise funding to enable this work to be carried out. A wealth of documentary and archaeological evidence is available to help tell the history of Somerset's county town and there is no shortage of stories. From the rich lands owned by the Bishops of Winchester, the unmasking of Perkin Warbeck, Judge Jeffries and the Bloody Assizes, to the development of the Portman Estates and Hestercombe.

The evening concluded with Elizabeth Williamson, Executive Editor of the VCH, speaking of her hopes for the partnership, which is an exciting new venture for Somerset.

Remembering Mick Aston

It is with great sadness that the VCH partnership heard of the death on 23 June of Mick Aston, member of the Partnership and a stalwart friend of the Somerset VCH.

With the passing of Professor Mick Aston at the age of 66, the world of archaeology has lost one of its best and liveliest advocates. Mick was born in the West Midlands in 1946 and after studying at Birmingham University reached Somerset in the early 1970s to become the County Council's first Field Archaeologist.

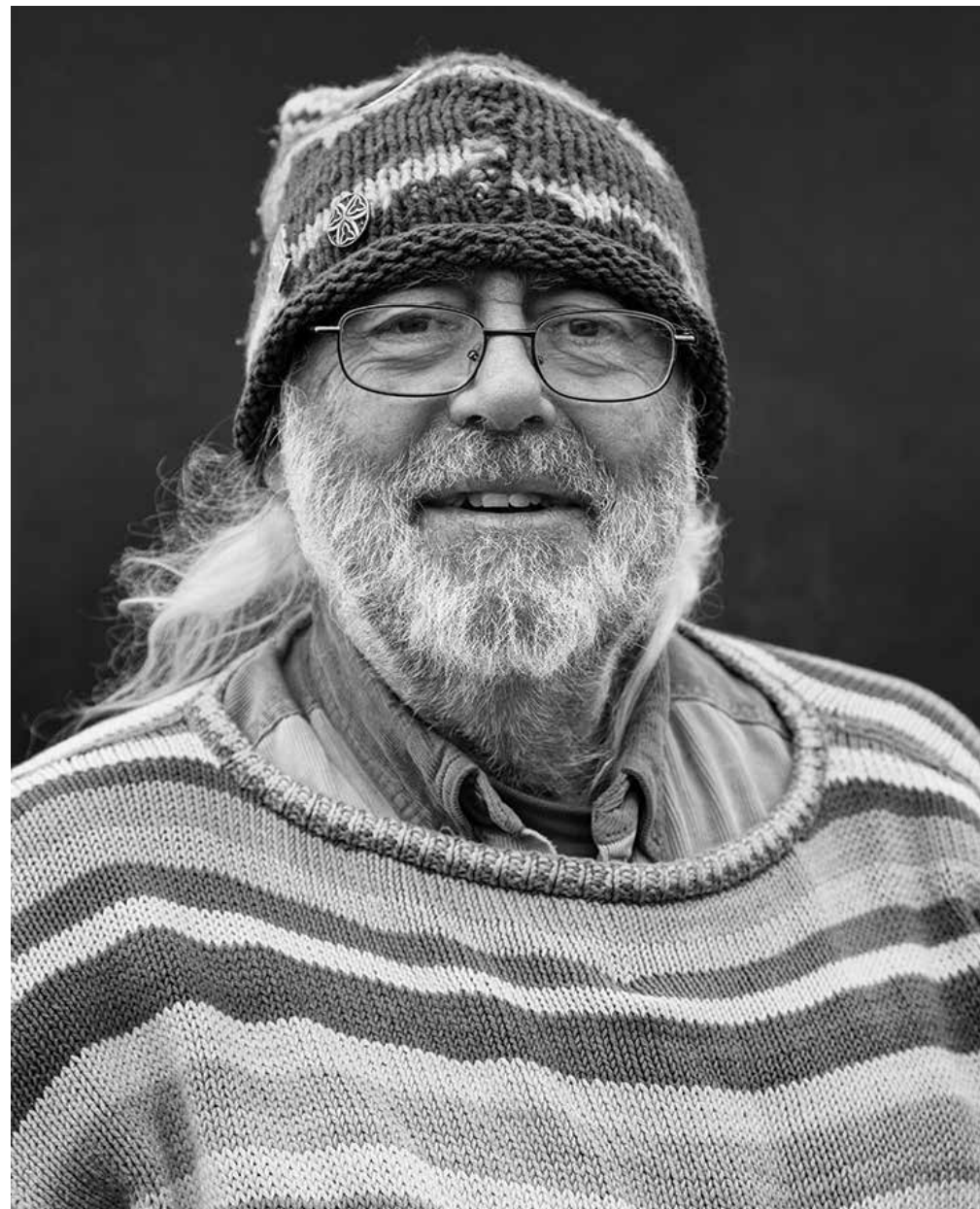
Mick arrived just as the construction of the M5 Motorway was cutting a swathe through the county, revealing archaeology on an unprecedented scale and allowing him to sharpen archaeological skills which were soon among the finest. The challenges he faced in Somerset exactly fitted Mick's hands-on approach and his enthusiasm for working with experts and volunteers to unravel the mysteries of the historic landscape. In the process he became one of the most distinguished of a new breed of landscape archaeologists.

Mick taught at Bristol University from 1979 until 2004. Throughout that period he stayed closely connected with Somerset through his research and writing, including his very influential work at Shapwick. These were also the years when he achieved national fame as part of the Channel 4 series *Time Team*. The idea for the series was Mick's, and he was the person who recruited some of its key personalities, including Robin Bush. Mick's love of his adopted home meant that *Time Team* was often to be found digging in Somerset, including at Athelney and Dinnington. Revealing the outline of Athelney Abbey was one of the most memorable moments in the programme's 17-year run.

Mick was a champion of Somerset heritage to the end. He was the voice of the fundraising campaign for the Museum of Somerset and also led the publicity campaign for the Somerset Rural Life Museum project. In recent months he helped ensure the future of his work by giving his large research archive to the Somerset Heritage Centre. It rightly included some of the stripey jumpers which became his trademark.

Mick was a true original as well as a great achiever and inspirer. He introduced a whole generation to archaeology and helped us all to value and understand the past in new ways. He will be greatly missed and his legacy will long survive him.

Tom Mayberry



Mick Aston 2011 © Pauline Rook

County Editor's Report

Current work includes preparing a volume on Queen Camel and the Cadburys for the press, and completing the Dunster and Minehead volume. Writing up has recently begun on the parish of Timberscombe. This parish has an interesting complete list of all the men who served in the First World War, not just those who were killed. It also, for such a small parish, has a very complicated history of landownership!



Cannon on Minehead harbour

Headstone of the Lark's master

Recent fieldwork in Minehead centred on the harbour area. The old quay wall is an interesting mixture of stonework, some probably dating back to the early 17th century. The early 18th century cannons which were previously used to reinforce the harbour are now proudly displayed on replica carriages.

It is easy to forget that this was once a very busy commercial port, however graves in the churchyard offer a glimpse into Minehead's seafaring past including the headstone of 53-year old Richard Jones of Aberystwyth, master of the schooner Lark, who was accidentally struck overboard and drowned on 27 March 1845 and buried in Minehead. He was probably the Richard Jones of Cyfoeth-y-Brenin, a township in Llanfihangel-Geneur-Glynn parish, Cardiganshire, on the coast, 5 miles north of Aberystwyth. His son John was also a mariner.

Of course work does not just consist of researching, writing and preparing volumes for publication. The VCH maintains two websites including our 'Explore' site which

utilises thousands of images, document transcripts and short histories. New material is uploaded on a regular basis, so it is always worth taking a look whether your interest lies in Exmoor wills, Dunster's lost roads, Castle Cary's industries or general topics such as schools and nonconformist chapels.

Other events following the February launch include, a number of talks and presentations for various organisations, such as a palaeography workshop for a local family history group and a presentation on the history of the Somerset VCH for the Bridgwater Civic Society. In May we sent a copy of the Glastonbury and Street volume to Her Majesty the Queen and we did some preliminary work at Hampshire Record office on the Taunton manorial material for our proposed future volumes.

On 2 June 2013, Coronation Day, we gave a presentation on the Royal Forest of Exmoor as part of the Simonsbath festival. Afterwards we had a tour of Simonsbath House, now a hotel. It was interesting to see the remaining fragment of the mansion planned by John Knight, which after having the top floor removed and standing derelict, has been brought into use as accommodation for a children's outdoor centre linked to the hotel. The darker stone surrounds probably give an idea of how the entire frontage of the proposed three storey house would have looked.



At the back of the Simonsbath Hotel

VCH Taunton Project

When the current volumes are complete it is hoped we will begin work on the Taunton area. The great vale of Taunton Deane fills the space between west Somerset's three ranges of hills: the Brendons in the west, the Quantocks in the east and the Blackdowns in the south.

It was described in 1609 by John Norden as the great paradise of England. It is an area rich in settlement with fertile soil and ample water. It is not only geography, which defines its area, but also history. Its riches were desired by many landowners and several hundreds consequently have land in the district including Glastonbury Abbey's Whitley hundred. That resulted from a charter, reputedly of 705, giving to the abbot Beorhwald land that formed the later parish of West Monkton.

However, most parishes fall within the hundred of Taunton. The town itself was first recorded as having been destroyed in 722 but some form of settlement evidently continued. The manor and hundred of Taunton Deane, acquired by the bishops of Winchester from the 10th century, provided a princely income for its lords and funded the great castle at Taunton. The town itself prospered as shown by the few surviving buildings of the period, notably the church of St Mary Magdalene with its great tower and double aisles.



In addition to Taunton 25 suburban and rural parishes in the geographical area of Taunton Deane comprise the proposed study area. There are many subjects for study and a rich body of sources with which to work, not least the landscape and built environment.

Many of the area's villages show evidence of agricultural wealth in their churches and houses, and some may be planned settlements. Some villages have been swallowed up by Taunton over the last couple of centuries and others have experienced considerable housing development, but many have remained small and have even been absorbed into neighbouring civil parishes like tiny Angersleigh. The wider landscape contains great houses and gardens, ancient woods and the deer parks at Cothelstone and Poundisford.

Taunton has seen great changes in recent years as large housing estates, ambitious road schemes and large industrial and business parks have changed the town's environs and swallowed up villages and hamlets that were once independent agricultural settlements. Much of Taunton's ancient core has been rebuilt, even its 19th-century buildings are disappearing, and with the new 'Vision for Taunton' project to rebuild much of the town centre, it has become imperative to record the town's history.

Historic Images of Somerset

Our featured photograph was taken c.1885 by Herbert Henry Hole of Friday Street, Minehead. It shows Thomas Kent Ridler's ship Perriton being unloaded in Minehead harbour with the help of a steam crane. Behind is his warehouse, now a residential building called Tides Reach. The thatched building beside it was the Customs House, demolished to provide access to the 1901 pier. In the foreground are smaller vessels of rival Minehead merchants; Henry Pulsford's Argo on the left and beside it the John and William. Argo carries her registration on the stern in the modern manner while the other two carry traditional nameplates on their port and starboard sides. The port of Minehead lost the right to register its own shipping in 1835 and thereafter its ships were registered at Bridgwater.

The Perriton, a 90-ton topsail schooner, was the last ship to be built at Minehead (on the beach as the quay shipyard had closed) and was named after a hamlet, later suburb, of Minehead. She sailed on her maiden voyage on 17 June 1881 under Robert Lewis from Minehead to Neath. Sadly after a busy career around the British Isles and northern France she became a casualty of the First World War. She was shipping a cargo of flint from Dieppe in France on 29 June 1918 when she was fired on by a German submarine. The crew were rescued but the Perriton was lost off Berry Head in Devon.



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If you would like to support the future work of the Somerset VCH please consider making a donation to the **County History Trust**. For more information, or to donate online, [click here](#).

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