



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

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County Editor's Report

What a winter we have had as severe flooding saw Somerset make national headlines for all the wrong reasons. As you can see from Richard Brunning's article in this newsletter Somerset is no stranger to flooding.



Prince Charles and Lady Gass visit flooded Muchelney by boat.

Work continues on completing the draft of volume XII Dunster and Minehead by writing a volume introduction, and then work will begin on Taunton Deane. All the maps for volume XII have been submitted for editing and professional drawing later this year. The VCH is very grateful for a grant from the SANHS Gray Fund towards the cost of drawing the maps.

We had our second history walk in April looking at the lost towns of Minehead, which was well-attended despite the awful weather. We looked at Higher and Quay Towns and how they have been shaped by changes to the economy, fires and modern development. Further walks are planned, including a proposed visit to Norton Fitzwarren hillfort later this year, so look out for these. For safety reasons groups have to be small and early booking is recommended.





Nationally the VCH has seen departures and arrivals. Elizabeth Williamson our long serving architectural editor and latterly executive editor took early retirement to return to her work as an architectural historian. Professor Richard Hoyle from Reading University, a distinguished economic and social historian of early modern England, has been appointed director and general editor from 1 October 2014. Professor Miles Taylor, who as Director of the Institute of Historical Research looked after us during the interregnum, has also returned to a more scholarly role and Professor Lawrence Goldman, known to most people as the editor of the new Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, has taken his place.

Historic Images of Somerset



Timberscombe Club 1908.

Timberscombe Friendly Society was established in 1827 to provide men with the opportunity to provide for themselves and their families when they became ill or died. On the first Tuesday in June all healthy members within 15 miles of Timberscombe were to meet at 10 a.m. and process to church before enjoying a dinner at 2s 6d each. Membership declined from 130 in the 1890s to c.60 in the 1930s. For the club day there were flags, bought from Minehead Friendly Society in 1876, tents, a band and bellringing until 1939. The society survived until 1948 or later.

In this photograph the members are assembled in Sunday best with buttonholes, and sashes for the stewards, possibly at Bickham, carrying flags, poles with brass poleheads and magnificent floral decorations. Note the varied hats and facial hair! They are accompanied by a band, apparently from Watchet and made up of members of the Somerset 2nd Volunteer Battalion with their instruments. Later in 1908 the Volunteers were reorganised and the 2nd Battalion was based in North Somerset. The picture was taken by photographer Bert Hole of Watchet and bandmaster Alfred Wedlake is lying down on the left.

Flooding on the Somerset Moors – a long term view

The devastating floods of the last two winters have brought the Somerset Levels and Moors into the national limelight but the area has had a dynamic relationship with water for the last 10,000 years. The vast floodplain at the heart of Somerset can be broadly divided between the slightly higher 'levels' along the coast and the lower lying peat dominated 'moors' further inland.

This division was not always present for if we could travel back in time to 10,000 years ago we would see a more unified wetland with numerous river channels and large lakes. The coast at that time was as far away as Lundy but the ending of the Ice Age led to sea level rise that submerged the valley that is now the Severn Estuary. At their furthest extent these saltmarshes and mudflats reached as far inland as Glastonbury and Langport by around 5,000 BC.

Eventually freshwater reedbeds, carr woodland and raised bog expanded to dominate the lowlands but this wetland landscape was always changing. The sea began to push further inland again from c.1,500 BC, in the middle Bronze Age, and by the Iron Age saltmarsh had once again expanded as far as Langport with fortified settlements on the islands of Brent Knoll, Athelney and Aller all protected by salt water at high tide.

The Roman period saw the first attempts to try and tame the floodwaters with the creation of extensive coastal and river defences. These allowed the creation of fields, droeways and settlements along the coast, in the Axe valley and in the area between Langport and Ilchester. For several hundred years this new farmland yielded a productive return for the effort of drainage but in the early fourth century AD the defences appear to have failed with catastrophic results. The Axe valley and the whole coastal area were once again inundated by the sea and the settlements were abandoned.

Reclamation of the wetlands began again under the Saxon Kings of Wessex. Once more the coastal marshes were the first areas to be reclaimed for agriculture, forming most of the present pattern of fields in that area. The inland moors were harder to drain and causeways were built to allow passage across them. Diversion and canalisation of some of the rivers began before the Norman Conquest, with the diversion of the River Brue westwards into the great lake known as Meare Pool.

The ownership of much of the floodplain by ecclesiastical lords, including the Bishop and Dean of Wells and the Abbots of Glastonbury, Muchelney and Athelney,



A woodcut of the 1607 flood

helped to encourage the creation of more flood defences and the straightening and diversion of all the main rivers where they crossed the floodplain. This medieval system of artificial water courses is still largely working today and dwarfs all the subsequent river engineering works that have taken place.

Winter flooding was an annual occurrence but coastal inundation could be more devastating. In 1607 a terrible storm caused widespread flooding, driving sea water as far inland as Glastonbury, generating as much national attention as the recent floods through the hurried distribution of numerous pamphlets.

Many of the moors resisted improvement until the combination of drainage acts and parliamentary enclosure in the late 18th and early 19th centuries formed the regular landscape of ditches and droves that characterises much of the area today. Extensive, damaging floods still occurred with alarming frequency, although the older settlements were wisely positioned on islands of hard geology that generally kept them above the floodwater.

Global warming is now ringing the changes again. The last few years have been a reminder that the Somerset lowlands are a dynamic landscape that doesn't want to stay still.

Richard Brunning

Somerset's Lost County Towns

One of the most precious objects in the Museum of Somerset is the Ilchester mace, an eloquent reminder of the past importance of what is now a modest small town. It is not only the oldest surviving municipal mace for any British town, but the earliest surviving staff of office of any kind. Its brass head, datable to c 1300 or even earlier, is decorated with three kings and an angel, coupled with an inscription in the kind of Old French used in thirteenth-century England. Interpretation of the figures and inscription is uncertain, but it deserves to be much better known, as a reminder of Ilchester's great days as a thriving borough and county town, with defensive walls, at least six parish churches, and the right to send members to parliament.

The town was, therefore, much more important than it is today. It had been (after Bath) the second largest Roman town in what became the county of Somerset, and at the time of Domesday Book (c1086) was again second only to Bath; and soon after that it housed the royal sheriff, county courts and county gaol. Yet the original shire town was not Ilchester – and certainly not Taunton – but Somerton. When the kings of Wessex divided their kingdom into shires, each under a shire reeve or sheriff, the sheriff usually administered it from a centre from which the shire took its name – Dorchester for Dorset, Hamtun (Southampton) for Hampshire, and Wilton for Wiltshire. There has been some dispute about whether Somerton was named from Somerset or the other way round, but James Campbell, our leading Anglo-Saxon historian, is quite certain that the Sumaersaete (people of Somerset) meant 'those people ruled from Somerton'. This pattern of shire towns was taken over by the Norman kings after 1066, with the shires renamed as counties but with much the same boundaries.

The obvious problems to explain are why Somerton was the original shire town, why it gave place to Ilchester, and why both were later eclipsed by Taunton. The answers



involve a mixture of geographical and political factors. Kings wanted each sheriff to rule from a strongpoint which ideally was centrally placed within its shire, and which was also on land under direct royal control. Somerset, however, could have no major town right in the centre because of the presence of the Levels, and it had no large town in royal hands after 1100. Bath, easily the largest by 1086, was too near the county boundary and was in any case granted away by William II to the bishops of Bath and Wells. Ilchester, the second largest, was still in the king's possession, and had a royal mint and 108 burgesses in Domesday Book (as against Taunton's 64 – and in any case Taunton was also an ecclesiastical town, having been granted by earlier kings to the bishops of Winchester).

So at some unrecorded date after Somerset was created (it is listed as in existence by 878, as one of the shires rallying behind King Alfred in his victory over the Vikings) Somerton was replaced by Ilchester, certainly no later than 1166, when the county gaol was established there. And when Ilchester began to decline, the obvious alternative was still Somerton, to which county government was transferred in the 1270s. Clearly neither can have been ideal, because in 1314-15 parliament considered an inquiry into the relative merits of the two. In the upshot, Somerton remained the county town until 1366, when Ilchester took over again, but for only five years before Somerton was chosen again – though Ilchester retained the county gaol until 1843.

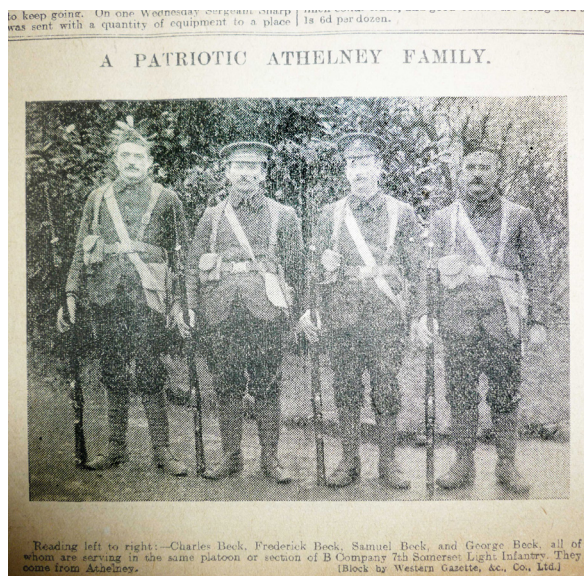
The eventual choice of Taunton as county town came surprisingly late, and could not happen until the bishops of Winchester gave up their hold on the town and its castle. Much still needs explaining, and the forthcoming VCH volume on the town will no doubt clarify it. The county court moved there from Ilchester in 1843, and the Shire Hall was built in the 1850s, but the County Council, established in 1889, did not move its offices to Taunton until 1935. By then, both Somerton and Ilchester were only shadows of their former selves, though the evidence for the past glories of both is excellently set out by Robert Dunning in the third volume of VCH Somerset. Yet more could still be done to remind everyone of how much they once mattered. There is, for instance, currently a display in Oxford's Ashmolean Museum of Ilchester's medieval coins struck for successive kings, and it would be splendid if it could be loaned for display within the county. As for the town's mace, though it is prominently displayed in the county museum, the crucial mace-head is too high to view closely because of the length of the 19th-century staff. Mirrors or close-up photographs might help in making more accessible to visitors this astonishing survival, which Sir Nikolaus Pevsner called a rare treasure of national, and even European, importance.

David Palliser

Somerset Newspapers and The First World War

Somerset newspapers from 1914-1918 contain a vast amount of information about the First World War's impact on the county. As part of the Somerset Remembers project a team of volunteers are indexing stories relating to the war. This index will be made available to researchers who might be looking for information about a particular person or place. Interesting stories may also be used in the Somerset Remembers temporary exhibition.

Newspapers contain photographs of Somerset soldiers. This image shows four brothers from Athelney who all served in the same company of the 7th Battalion The Somerset Light Infantry. Private George Beck was killed in September 1915. He was a willow worker before the war.



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WIVELISCOMBE.

Half muffled peals were rung on the church bells on Sunday last as a tribute to the memory of the late Lieutenant R. E. Hancock. At the evening service held at the parish church the lessons were read and the sermon preached by the Rev. L. R. Hancock, uncle of the deceased officer.

Largely through the efforts of Mrs. Mainwaring the house and business premises in The Square, formerly occupied by Messrs. Alpass and Baker, have been secured and furnished for the reception of Belgian refugees, and on Thursday evening last the first occupants arrived by the eight o'clock train. They consist of a mother, her daughter aged 16, and a son aged 8, another adult woman, a young man aged 18, and a little girl of 6. We understand that

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Articles from the period often contain surprisingly detailed descriptions of events. This example from 1914 describes the arrival of Belgian refugees in Wiveliscombe and a memorial service for a local soldier.

Newspapers chart the changes that took place in agriculture during the First World War. This image from 1915 highlights the important role Somerset women played in farming during the conflict. The Somerset Heritage Centre has a large collection of local newspapers and both local and national papers can be found at the British Newspapers on line website. Among local newspapers that cover the period of the First World War are: Bath Chronicle, Bridgwater Independent, Bridgwater Mercury, Burnham Gazette, Central Somerset Gazette, Chard & Ilminster News, Cheddar Valley Times, Clevedon Mercury, Langport Herald, Pulman's Weekly News, Shepton Mallet Journal, Somerset & Wiltshire Journal, Somerset County Gazette, Somerset County Herald, Somerset Express, Somerset Guardian, Somerset Standard, Taunton Mail, Taunton Courier, Wellington Weekly News, Wells Journal, Western Gazette, Western News, West Somerset Free Press. Many of these are available on microfilm at the Somerset Heritage Centre.



Somerset Remembers Team Blog

www.somersetremembers.wordpress.com



If you enjoyed this newsletter and would like to join our emailing list let us know.

The Somerset VCH is very grateful to its supporters and to those individuals and organizations who have given donations. If you would like to support the future work of the Somerset VCH by a donation or legacy and would like more information or wish to donate on line go to <http://www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/support/donate/county-history-trust> and let them know you would like to support Somerset's history.

By our next edition we hope to have a local Somerset trust and charity account in place.

Watch this space!

The causeway and bridge between Street and Glastonbury around 700 AD (Peter Lorimer)

Victoria County History of Somerset

Somerset Heritage Centre
Brunel Way
Taunton
TA2 6SF

vch@somerset.gov.uk

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