

VICTORIA
COUNTY
HISTORY



Somerset

Victoria County History of Somerset Newsletter

Issue 5

Summer 2015

**Welcome to the fifth edition of our newsletter;
we hope you enjoy it.**

Please pass it on and email vch@swheritage.org.uk if this has been forwarded to you and you or someone you know would like to receive it.

County Editor's Report

Our really good news is that we are now a charity: The Somerset County History Trust, Registered Charity Number 1161263. We have a treasurer and new trustee, Des Atkinson, a historian currently working on a PhD on the late medieval church at Exeter University where he also teaches. We also have a CAF bank account.

Since the last newsletter went out we have seen one volume published and the text of the Dunster and Minehead volume submitted for editing. Draft texts are all on the website. More new material has gone up on the [VCH Explore website](#) so do take a look at the wealth of imagery and documents to be found there.

The big event was the launch of volume XI: Queen Camel and the Cadburys at North Cadbury Village Hall on 2 June.

Nearly 40 people came to North Cadbury village hall including Professor Richard Hoyle, Director of the VCH and other VCH staff, trustees of the Somerset County History Trust, staff from the Somerset Heritage Centre, the chairman of the South West Heritage Trust and representatives of Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society, the South Somerset Archaeological Research Group and the Somerset Vernacular Building Research Group.

After a welcome and thanks from Tom Mayberry, Chairman of the Somerset County History Trust, Richard Hoyle spoke about the VCH in its national context and the prospect of the publication of the next Somerset volume in the not-too-distant future.



Patricia Croot and Matt Bristow of the VCH



Clare Randall, speaker at the event

Dr Clare Randall gave an interesting presentation on the archaeological discoveries and the early exploitation of the landscape in the area. South Cadbury hillfort is surrounded by a wealth of sites from the Bronze Age, Iron Age and Romano-British period, which rival anything found before and have national significance. Of particular interest is the continuity of small farming estate boundaries from the Romano-British period to modern times.

Modern geophysical techniques have recently revealed new sites, including Roman villas where no visible trace exists above ground. Clare also showed the importance of badgers in finding tesserae and Roman tile and pottery fragments!



Janet Tall and Bob Croft [Trustees]

An appreciative audience then enjoyed tea and cakes and the opportunity to see and buy copies of the book.



*Betty and Robin Cloke
[Somerset Archaeological
and Natural History Society]
with Tom Mayberry [Chair
of the Somerset County
History Trust].*

Among other events were a great many talks, ranging from presentations on the work of the VCH to Taunton during the First World War via the Quantock estates, the Exmoor Forest and Somerset manorial records.



The Minehead U3A relaxing after a presentation on VCH work in West Somerset.

In April the first walk of the year took place at Dunster for the West Somerset Village History Society in memory of Hilary Binding, who was to have led them on a talk that day and is still greatly missed. Owing to popular demand two lost towns of Minehead walks were given in May and June! In the autumn there will be a Wiveliscombe walk led by Bob Croft, our county archaeologist and trustee, on 19 September and another Dunster old roads walk on 24 October.



Some of the intrepid walkers on a cool June day at Minehead quay

A big future event will be the second VCH Mick Aston memorial lecture to be given by James Bond at Taunton Castle on 8 October.

We have continued to raise money, mainly from a research project and giving talks and presentations, but much remains to be done if we are going to be able to employ an assistant to help with the Taunton area, the current area of research. Do get in touch if you can help or have any fund-raising ideas and don't forget the [website](#) for updates, information on events and news, the big red books, work in progress, volunteering opportunities and our support page, which allows you to donate easily online. Don't forget to say you want to support Somerset! If you prefer you can pay by cheque payable to the Somerset County History Trust and send it to the VCH, Somerset Heritage Centre, Brunel Way, Norton Fitzwarren, Taunton, TA2 6SF.

North Cadbury Benchends

The beautiful 15th-century church of North Cadbury is well worth a visit, if only for its set of carved benchends, mainly dating from the 1530s. They vary from finely observed faces to somewhat naïve depictions like the pair of snails. The survival of so many despite alterations to the seating is a tribute to the high quality of the work, respected by later generations.

Many have a religious theme such as the Madonna and Child or St Margaret or the flagon or grail of Joseph of Arimathea, reputed to have caught the last drops of blood of the crucified Christ. Others show people young and old, including portrait heads. The fine profile heads might have been members of the congregation; possibly they had contributed to the cost of the carvings or had occupied the benches where the faces are depicted. The kissing couple is an unusual carving for a church, but the flautist may have been in the church band. Equally familiar would have been the miller's assistant with a packhorse, probably taking a customer's corn to be ground. The windmill (*below*) would have been a familiar sight in the surrounding countryside, likewise the church with central tower, clearly not North Cadbury.



Birds and animals are shown. Some, like the leaping dolphin, appear to be heraldic symbols, also the griffin and Unicorn, cleverly carved to fit the shape of the bend. The stork was regarded as a bird of good omen and the pelican, believed at that period to feed her young with her own blood, was a symbol of divine love. More familiar to the congregation would have been the cat devouring a mouse caught in a trap and the snails.



The Cadbury shield is one of only 20 or so similar shields to have been found in Britain. It is 60cm in diameter and is decorated with 25 rows of raised ribs and 25 rows of individually stamped bosses, totalling about 6030 in number. The metal of the shield is about 1mm in thickness, leading to the belief that it was an object used for display and prestige rather than something that had a practical use in battle.

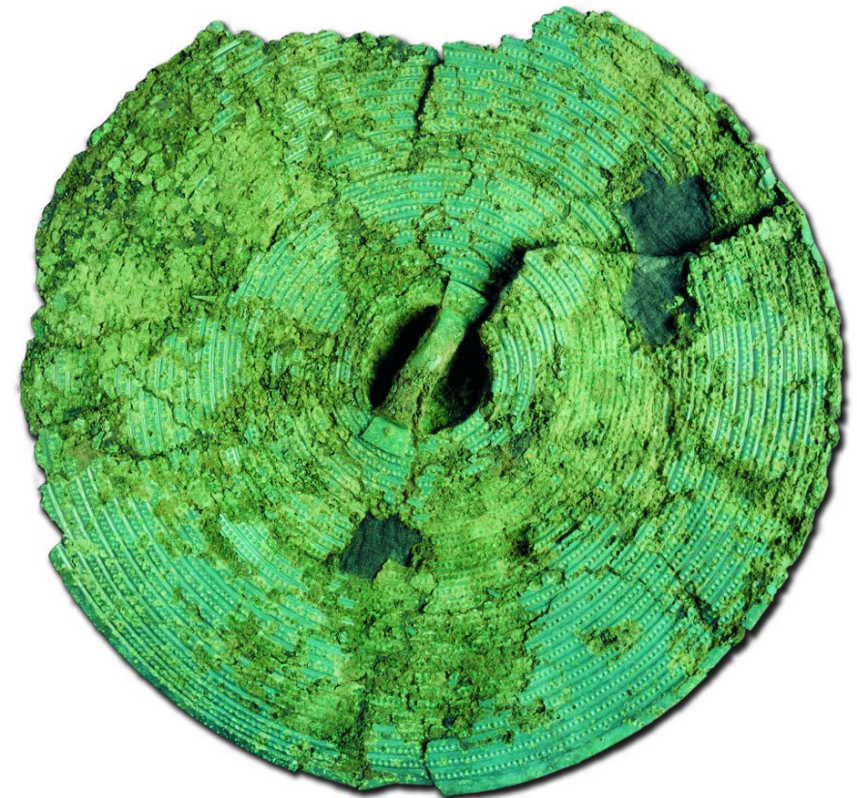
The Cadbury shield was made in the period 1350-1150BC. In about 1000BC it was placed in its final resting place in the ditch when it was stabbed three times, probably as part of a ritual act.

The shield is on display in the Museum of Somerset.

Steve Minnitt

The South Cadbury Shield

During excavations by the South Cadbury Environs Project in 1997 a remarkable discovery was made at Milsom's Corner, below the ramparts of Cadbury Castle. A sheet bronze shield was discovered in the upper fill of a Bronze Age ditch. The object was clearly in a very fragile condition. Rather than risk excavating it on site the shield was lifted in its surrounding block of earth and taken to the Wiltshire Conservation Centre at Salisbury where it could be revealed in a careful and controlled manner. The landowner, Mrs Elizabeth Montgomery, kindly donated the shield to the Somerset County Museum, which enabled funding to be raised for the excavation and conservation work from bodies including the Heritage Lottery Fund.



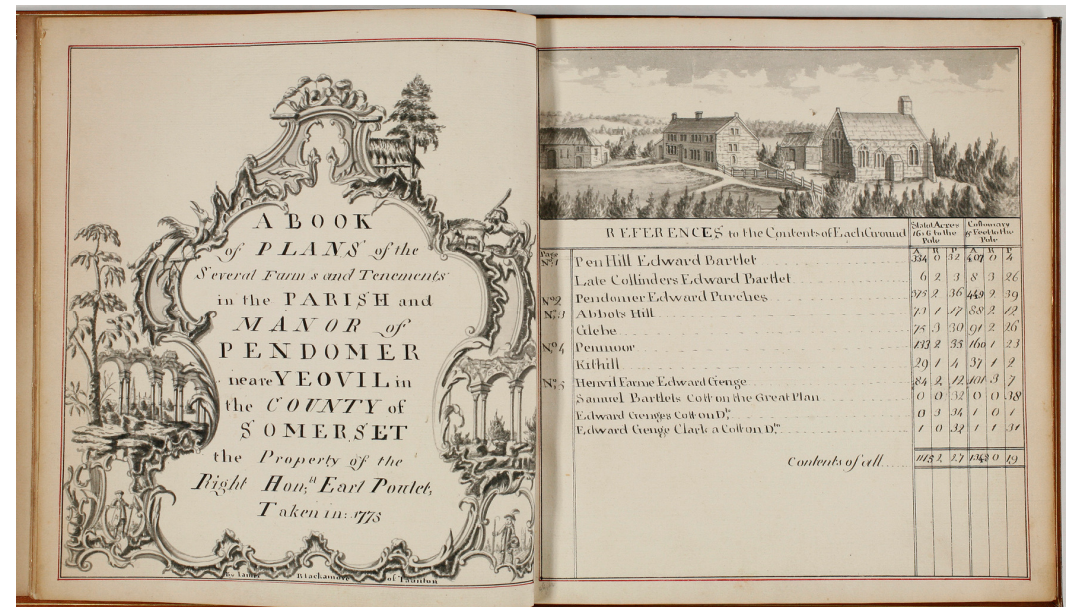
Coker Court Manuscripts saved for Somerset



The Coker Court manuscripts form the family archives of the Helyar, Button and Walker-Heneage families. In 1616 Dr William Helyar, Archdeacon of Barnstaple and Canon of Exeter, purchased Coker Court from Sir Robert Phelips of Montacute. Dr Helyar's descendants remained resident at Coker Court until the 20th century. The Button family of Wiltshire acquired lands in north-east Somerset from the 16th century onwards. During the 17th century the Button male line died out, and with the marriage of a Button daughter into the Walker family of Somerset the two families were joined. However, again the direct male line died out, and a marriage between the Walker and Heneage families saw the estate pass to the Walker-Heneage family of Compton Bassett, Wiltshire. In 1902 Dorothy Helyar married Major Godfrey Clement Walker-Heneage and the family archives were relocated to Coker Court to join those of the Helyar family.

Earlier this year the South West Heritage Trust received the good news that the Coker Court manuscripts (archival refs. DD\WHh and DD\WHb) have been accepted in lieu of Inheritance Tax by H M Government and allocated to the Somerset Heritage Centre. The offer required additional local fundraising, with generous grants and donations from a variety of organisations and individuals.

Grants were received from The V&A Purchase Grant Fund, The Friends of the National Libraries, The Friends of Somerset Archives, Wiltshire Family History Society, East Coker Parish Council and the East Coker Society, along with personal bequests, including one from the estate of Thelma Munckton.



Frontispiece of a survey of the manor of Pendomer

The allocation through the Acceptance in Lieu process marks this collection as one of significant importance. The initial report on the collection describes it as a “Pre-eminent archive”. The collection is mainly medieval and early modern in nature; it contains around 1,000 pre-17th century deeds, along with important documents for the study of the English Civil War. The Helyar and Button families were staunch Royalists and their archives reflect this. Also included in the archive are deeds for lands in Somerset, Wiltshire, Dorset, Devon, Cornwall and Hampshire; wills and inventories; and family settlements and estate papers, such as rentals, survey and maps.

Highlights of the collections include:

The commonplace book of John Walker, containing a description of Colchester after the Civil War Siege of 1648.

Pardon by Charles I to William Helyar for all treasons committed since May 1642. (William Helyar had been captured as a Royalist Colonel in 1642. The Helyar Jewel, now in the Victoria & Albert Museum, was reputedly given to Helyar by Charles II for his loyal service.)

Order of Protection granted to Archdeacon Helyar, signed by ‘Stanforde’ (Henry Grey, Earl of Stamford, Parliamentary General), 10 April 1643.

Papers relating to William Helyar’s compositions for delinquency, 1646, including a petition concerning his taking arms against Parliament.

Letter book of Laurence Steele, mainly corresponding with merchants at Virginia and Barbados, 1646.

Letters Patent of Charles II, 1650, granting to Dr Steward permission to change his paternal arms. (This document bears the pre-Restoration seal of Charles II in exile (*shown below*). Only four copies of this Great Seal are known, of which this is the only undamaged impression. It is the only Great Seal from William the Conqueror onwards not represented in the national collection.)

Licence to William Helyar of East Coker, that he may, with his wife and four persons invited to his table, eat meat during Lent, signed by William Juxon, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1663.



Jamaica papers, including correspondence and accounts, relating to the Helyar plantations in Jamaica, 1675–1714, including a map of the island, 1671.

Assignment in trust to Sir Michael Heneage and others, of Essex House in the Strand, London, the former residence of Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, 1681.

Map of Charlestown, USA, showing the disposition of His Majesty’s forces, 3 March, 1730.

Correspondence from :
 Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, 1832–50;
 Sir Robert Peel, c. 1842;
 Thomas Moore, poet, c. 1838;
 George, Duke of Cambridge, nd;
 Adolphus Frederick, Duke of Cambridge, 1848;
 Louis Philippe, former King of France, 1848, mainly to Thomas Assheton Smith, Tory Politician.

The personal correspondence of Colonel Walker-Heneage, Deputy Assistant Director of Railway Traffic (*shown right*), to his wife Dorothy, during the First World War.

Papers of Major Clement Walker Heneage, VC, of the 8th Hussars.

Letter of Virginia Woolf concerning the possibility of publishing a diary, 4 November, 1931.

We are very grateful for all the support we have received to enable this collection to remain publicly available at the Somerset Heritage Centre.

Liz Grant

Historic Photographs of Taunton

The late 19th century was a time of prosperity and improvement for many people in Taunton. There was much new building and investment in infrastructure. Taunton had electric lighting from 1886 then in 1901 electric trams replaced horse buses, although hotels retained theirs for some years. A dedicated supply produced electricity for the trams, which ran from Rowbarton to the bottom of East Reach.



The first tram ran on 21 August 1901 with people riding in decorated cars. At first double-deckers were used but they were difficult to handle on the curves, especially the steep curve into the depot at the bottom of East Reach, so in 1905 they were sold to the Warwick and Leamington Tramway Company and single-deckers were used exclusively, like the one here. They were built by Brush of Loughborough and were painted crimson and gold. By 1913, over 660,000 passengers a year were carried each year but that fell away with the war and by 1914 they competed with motor buses from outlying areas. The rising cost of electricity, combined with the declining number of passengers, led to the closure of the service in 1921.

Mary Siraut



Tramcar no. 2 passing Flook House, Station Road, Taunton, c. 1903

Book review: Jane Penoyre, *Traditional Houses of Somerset*

(Somerset Books, Taunton, first published 2005, reprinted 2014) 176 pp, illus., hard covers, £19.99 [ISBN 978 0 86183 407 5]

The reprint of Jane Penoyre's *Traditional Houses of Somerset* is timely, for it keeps in print an excellent survey of the different types of secular buildings in the county from 1300 to 1700, after which date pattern books and easier transport of building materials placed less reliance on local Availability, while the uniformity of classical architecture eroded the diversity of local styles. Much, in fact, was very local, as evidenced by buildings in Somerset compared with adjacent counties, let alone those at a distance such as East Anglia.

The selection of examples is careful and representative of the work of the Somerset Vernacular Building Research Group with which the author was closely involved. It stretches from major country houses to barns and outbuildings. Persons interested in the subject will recognise many other buildings similar to those described or illustrated. It is not intended as a gazetteer of all traditional buildings in the county but a review of the most typical types. This needs to be appreciated.

Many of the buildings described are now farmhouses. This was not always the case as, for instance, the summer palace of the Abbots of Glastonbury at Meare. To quote Christopher Hussey writing in *Country Life* about houses in Somerset. 'There are a number of architectural interest from the late 16th and 17th century which were inhabited by minor gentry farming their demesne land, prosperous clothiers and the like, which maintained the position of a small squire until the Napoleonic Wars, taxation and the rising cost of living made genteel pretensions more difficult and the houses tended to become just farmhouses'.

Most evidence of medieval houses is dependent on the roof and plan of the building both of which remain in amazing quantity but evidence of

the background to their construction and ownership tend to be scarce. One can only hope more will come to light - for example, an archive of papers of a family that owned one such house for over 100 years from 1665 and altered in at that time was found amongst those of a local turnpike trust.

The book deals will detail as well as generalities. The plans and drawings of mouldings, cornices and beam ends and photographs of interior details are an interesting and useful guide to dating a building and again the examples are well chosen. All in all this is a worthwhile book that enhances our understanding of the vernacular architecture in Somerset.

Gerard Leighton

Forthcoming Events

Details on the [website](#) nearer the date, booking essential.

Saturday 19 September 2016

Walk round Wiveliscombe with Bob Croft, County Archaeologist

Thursday 8 October 2016

James Bond gives the Mick Aston Memorial Lecture at the Museum of Somerset

Support Us

If you would like to support the future work of the Somerset VCH please consider making a donation or legacy to the **Somerset County History Trust** [Registered Charity Number 1161263]. For more information contact:

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