

VICTORIA  
COUNTY  
HISTORY



Somerset

# Victoria County History of Somerset Newsletter

Summer 2016

Issue 7

**Welcome to the seventh edition of our newsletter - we hope you enjoy it.**

Please pass this newsletter on to others. If you are not on our mailing list and would like to receive future copies of the newsletter please let us know by contacting us at [vch@swheritage.org.uk](mailto:vch@swheritage.org.uk).

## County Editor's Report

Work is proceeding well with Bishop's Hull, but has been interrupted by the need to work on Kilmington! That parish, which was transferred to Wiltshire in 1896, and the tithings of Bonham, Gasper, Brook and Yarnfield, also formerly in Somerset are to have their histories published in a forthcoming Wiltshire volume on the Mere area. The Somerset research for this parish has been completed, but there is a great deal of material in Wiltshire to be studied.

Thanks to Kate Parr (Somerset Archives and Local Studies Supervisor) who is enabling three volunteers to work at the Somerset Heritage Centre on some of the records for the Taunton area. They have been unearthing some interesting stories that we will be able to include in future newsletters.

We have also welcomed James Bond as our new trustee.



Among events since the last newsletter we had a rewarding walk around Nynehead with David Rabson, including a visit to the bridge over the former great river. This was an artificial enlargement of the River Tone created by the Sanfords in imitation of similar experiments on other country estates at the time. We then visited the church and Nynehead Court for tea.

*Window in Nynehead Court*

*Mary Siraut*





There was a VCH Somerset display on Somerset Day (11th May) at St James's Church in Taunton. This was part of an exhibition of Somerset archives that are held at the Devon Heritage Centre .

The editor has also given talks and presentations, including attending the Gloucestershire VCH Academy on St Patrick's Day.

*Exhibition inside St James's Church,  
Taunton*

*South West Heritage Trust*



## Commemorating the Somme

This summer we commemorate the terrible events on the Somme in 1916 and I have discovered some personal connections. In a previous edition we had the late Gerard Leighton's article on Arthur Batten-Pooll VC. He earned the award in a raid at Lens, France on the 25 June, having been transferred at his own request from the Somerset Light Infantry to the Munster Fusiliers and was then serving with the 2nd Munsters many of whom volunteered for the raid using bludgeons and small bombs.

My maternal grandfather was in the 2nd Munsters and had joined the battalion in France only two weeks earlier. I don't know if he was among the volunteers, one group of whom encountered bloody hand to hand fighting in the German trenches. In July he was about 30 miles further south at Contalmaison, where one trench was named 'Munster Alley', consolidating the tiny gains made including a German trench on the 16th. On 18th July the Germans counter-attacked and although they were repulsed my grandfather was among the 127 wounded; 27 of his comrades were killed. He was patched up and with shrapnel still in his body returned to the Munsters in time for the bloody days of September. I don't suppose my grandfather was known to Batten-Pooll but the two fought together again at Passchendaele. No wonder my grandfather like most of his generation was so reluctant to speak about the war.



Here in Somerset many local men were caught up in the battle of the Somme and never returned. The war impacted on families from all walks of life, as indicated by the lives of two of the first Somerset men to be killed at the Somme both serving in the Somerset Light Infantry.

Private William George Nelson Hancock, known to his family as Nelson, was a coal miner from a mining family in Peasedown St John. His family were labourers and quarrymen from Wiltshire who moved to Somerset in the late 19th century. Nelson was born in Bath the eldest of the three children of George Hancock and his wife Rosina Greenman. Formerly a quarry worker, George became a coal miner and both Nelson and his younger brother Victor began work in the coal mines on leaving school but just before the war Nelson moved to Newport. He joined the SLI and was killed on the Somme 1 July 1916. He is commemorated on the Thiepval memorial. He left his possessions to his sister Dorothy.

Lieutenant John Alexander Hellard, a solicitor from Stogumber, confirmed dead on the 2 July 1916 but certainly killed on the 1 July, was the son of Edwin Hellard, solicitor, and his wife Alice of Stogumber. Edwin was from Portsmouth where his family had a large legal practice and where his father Charles was Mayor in 1861. However, Edwin moved to Stogumber to practice as a solicitor succeeding to the Rowcliffe business and serving amongst others the Trevelyans of Nettlecombe. The family was a large one and employed four servants as well as a gardener.



*Edwin Hellard's office near the Knoll in Stogumber*

*South West Heritage Trust*

John attended King's School Canterbury where he joined the Officer Training Corps. He was a keen cricketer and played for Somerset. Although his older brother went to Oxford University John joined his father as a solicitor's clerk, qualifying in 1906 and entering into partnership with his father.

In 1913 he moved to Colombo, Sri Lanka to practice, but in 1915 he applied for a commission in the Somerset Light Infantry and was admitted 2nd Lieutenant. He went to France with the 1st battalion and at the start of the Battle of the Somme was shot in the head on the morning of the 1st July, although his father was told he was missing presumed killed on the 2nd. His memorial is in Serre Cemetery no 2.

Mary Siraut



*Edwin Hellard, right, at Stogumber Station*      *South West Heritage Trust*

More about the Somerset Light Infantry and the Battle of the Somme can be found on the [Somerset Remembers](#) website.

## Harry Salter

*Staff at the South West Heritage Trust have recently uncovered the moving story of Harry Salter, the only Somerset-born soldier to be shot at dawn during the First World War.*



Harry Salter was born in Bridgwater in 1891, the son of an innkeeper who ran the Caledonia Inn on Polden Street, Eastover. By the time he was fourteen both of Harry's parents had died. He briefly worked as a 'chain boy' with the Great Western Railway in Bridgwater, but after losing his job became destitute. In 1908 Harry was convicted of stealing food and clothing from a ship moored in Bridgwater docks and was sentenced to a month's hard labour in Shepton Mallet Prison. After being released he moved to Liverpool where he was soon convicted of a number of petty crimes. In 1911 he was sentenced to three years in a Borstal Institution.

Perhaps in an effort to escape his troubles, Harry enlisted in the army soon after the First World War broke out. At first he volunteered for the King's Liverpool Regiment but was discharged during basic training. He then enlisted in the 6th Battalion East Lancashire Regiment and after a brief period of preparation set sail with his battalion. They arrived in Gallipoli in July 1915 and were immediately put in the front line. Conditions on the peninsula were appalling. Dysentery was rife and the battalion suffered heavy casualties.

Harry Salter deserted from the front line in the summer of 1915 and again on 1 November. After being captured he was court martialled and sentenced to execution by firing squad. On 11 December 1915 Private Edward Row was one of the unwilling party responsible for carrying out the sentence. His extraordinary first-hand account of the execution records that Harry's last words were 'Don't blindfold me'.



*The unveiling of Bridgwater War Memorial,  
25 September, 1924  
South West Heritage Trust*

Harry Salter is buried at Green Hill Cemetery, Gallipoli. His name is not included on Bridgwater War Memorial or the County War Memorial in Wells Cathedral. In 2006 he was among 306 soldiers pardoned by the state, the pardon recording that 'he was one of many victims of the First World War and that execution was not a fate he deserved'.

The South West Heritage Trust would be interested to hear from anyone with further information about Harry Salter's life in Somerset.

Sam Astill

## Beckery Chapel, Glastonbury



*Aerial view of the chapels*

*South West Heritage Trust*

New research is being carried out at Beckery, an island of hard geology in the Brue floodplain west of Glastonbury. A medieval chapel complex, with legendary links to King Arthur and Saint Brigit, had previously been investigated by John Morland in the 1880's and Philip Rahtz in the 1960's. The South West Heritage Trust re-examined the site as part of a community archaeology project funded by the Avalon Marshes Landscape Partnership project.



*Grave of an individual from the Saxon monastic cemetery. The skull was crushed by the weight of the early Norman chapel walls above it (removed by time of photo)*

*South West Heritage Trust*

The main trench was on the chapel site, where evidence for a third phase of rebuilding was noted. Five graves from the Saxon monastic cemetery were excavated, three under the walls of the early Norman stone chapel and two that had been largely destroyed by the final phase of rebuilding in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. Dating and analysis of those individuals will provide evidence of when the monastery was operating and possibly where the monks came from.

A geophysical survey (by Geoflo) identified new features, a rectangular building and a curving ditch that may once have enclosed the site. Both were provisionally dated to the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century. Analysis of the pottery and bone will provide insights into the diet and economy of the site.

Richard Brunning

## Remembering Thomas Becket

Through the kindness of the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Becket Casket was displayed at the Museum of Somerset, Taunton, during the months of February and March 2016. Over 15,000 people came to see this outstanding example of medieval art as well as to learn about Thomas Becket's infamous murder in his cathedral church at Canterbury in 1170.

The casket was made in Limoges, France, in about 1180 and is of copper alloy, champlevé enamel and rock crystals. It was intended to hold a relic of the saint, such as a fragment of bone or a piece of cloth and is the most magnificent, and probably the earliest, of many reliquaries made to honour him. The scene on the front panel shows Becket's murder. Other scenes depict his funeral and the raising of his soul to heaven.

Of the four knights who murdered Becket three had West Country connections. Reginald Fitzurse held the manor of Williton, where he lived, and Richard Brito had land nearby at Sampford Brett (both in VCH volume 5). William de Tracy was the lord of Bradninch, near Exeter, as well as of Moretonhampstead, Devon.

Fitzurse was the ringleader and Brito the knight who struck the final blow. When Becket lay dead or dying, Hugh the clerk, evidently from Horsey near Bridgwater (VCH volume 6), stamped on the archbishop's neck, scattered his brains on the floor, and shouted 'Let's get out of here. This one won't get up again.'

To accompany the exhibition a series of related events was held. They included a lecture by Professor Nicholas Vincent entitled 'Becket's Murder: The Somerset Connection' on 3 February, and another by the art historian Dr Claire Donovan on 10 March. A special Becket Day was held at the Devon Heritage Centre on 15 February, organised in cooperation with the Devon History Society.

Tom Mayberry



*The Becket Casket, Limoges, France, c. 1180 (Victoria and Albert Museum, London)*

## Forthcoming Events

### Thursday 20 October 2016

The next Mick Aston Memorial lecture will be on 20 October in the Great Hall of Taunton Castle with John Gater the Time Team geophysics expert.

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

### Saturday 15 October 2016

The memorial to historian Hilary Binding, our former trustee, will be unveiled by Lady Gass at Carhampton on Saturday 15 October at 3pm.

We also hope to do more of our history walks and advance notice will be sent to everyone on the mailing list.

## Please 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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## Historic Photographs of Somerset



*Remains of the Grand Western Canal near Langaller in 1951*

*South West Heritage Trust*

Sadly there is no photograph of this canal at work in Bishops Hull. It fell victim to the success of rail traffic. In 1831 the Grand Western Canal Co. purchased plots of land in Bishops Hull and neighbouring parishes. For example John Easton agent of the Grand Western Canal agreed with William Walter of Barr to buy land for the canal and the right to cut trees there; in return a swingbridge was to be built for the use of William Walter. Part of the land was to be used for a canal lift with a towing path. The site of the lift was behind the trees in the photograph.

The bridge ironically was to become Bishops Hull's link with the railway network as it enabled people to walk to Norton Fitzwarren station. In 1864 an Act arranged for the canal to be bought by the Bristol and Exeter Railway Company. That was followed by sales of the canal bed to the owners of adjoining lands. By the late 1880s the only stretch of canal to remain intact in the parish was that shown in the photograph and the section crossed by Mr Walter's bridge was dry except in very wet weather.

In 1901 local people were worried about the state of the path from Langaller to the station at Norton Fitzwarren and crossing the canal on Mr Walter's bridge. In the 1930s both the county council and the Great Western Railway laid claim to this path, the only practical route from Bishops Hull to the station; that raised questions as to liability for the canal bridge.

By the 1980s the remaining stretch of canal was regarded as a hazard and the owners of Langaller Farm felled the trees and filled in the canal to the distress of many local people who enjoyed walking there. Sadly the good stretch near the former Victory public house at Allerford Crossing has also been filled.

Mary Siraut