

VICTORIA
COUNTY
HISTORY



Somerset

Victoria County History of Somerset Newsletter

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Issue 10

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

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County Editor's Report

Bishop's Hull, Within and Without, is complete in first draft, apart from the maps, and work is continuing on sifting through the hundreds of thousands of documents for Taunton! Our assistant researcher is continuing to work on Norton Fitzwarren and some of her work appears in this newsletter. We are also lucky to have hard-working volunteers and hopefully another will start soon looking at the 1910 Inland Revenue survey. However, we will need to raise a large sum of money to fund research into further parishes.

This year saw the launch of the volume on Taunton Castle by Chris Webster to which the County Editor contributed.

Taunton Castle



Chris J Webster

In August a further walk around Alcombe took place and again the hidden nooks of our county aroused interest. Alcombe's hidden corner is Grove Place, often overlooked by visitors and locals alike.

In 1861 there were at least eight uninhabited houses in Alcombe, possibly uninhabitable, and some families with adult children at home. Although Alcombe was then relatively prosperous there were many local families who worked as labourers, daily servants, laundresses and dressmakers and there were several paupers. Many local casual labourers worked in the quarries when work was available and needed affordable housing.

Grove Place was built in 1861 by Edwin Palmer whose family retained ownership until the early 20th century. The houses were unusual in having an Independent chapel built in the angle of the two rows of cottages. It was not a success and was given up for Anglican use before 1874. Matins and evensong were celebrated every Sunday and in 1880 the chapel was decorated with frescoes by Kate May. There was an organ, plate was lent from Dunster church and a pocket communion set was given in 1891.

In 1899 there were two morning services, a children's service in the afternoon and an evening service and the congregation decided to raise money for a permanent church, moving to the present site of St Michael's church in 1903. The chapel was used for a while by the Plymouth Brethren but Christian Spiritualists took it before 1961 and retain it.



Thanks to Tim Edmunds for the photograph

For 50 years these nine two to four room cottages, now extended to provide modern kitchens and bathrooms, were home to never fewer than 32 people, 40 in 1901, sometimes six and more to a house. An unemployed waiter in 1871 lived here with his wife, six children aged 6 to 18 and a niece and in 1901 a family of seven lived in two rooms. By 1911 the two-roomed houses had been enlarged to three leaving six houses with three rooms and three with four rooms each.

The families came mainly from West Somerset although there were some wives from elsewhere, a Somerset labourer in 1901 had returned after some years in Ireland and a Cornishman worked as a builder's labourer in 1911. The most common occupation was labourer but there were also jobbing gardeners, laundresses, milk boys, building workers, a road mender and in 1891 a deaf and dumb thatcher. In the early 20th century there were tannery and brickyard labourers.

In 1910 the average annual rent was £4 10s.; today it can be £7,200!



Bob Croft and audience in the Great Hall *Mary Siraut*

We had our fourth Mick Aston lecture on 19 October when Bob Croft gave us a personal insight into Mick Aston's work and lasting legacy in Somerset. The only overview of Somerset archaeology had been written by Dina Dobson in 1931 before Mick started producing his publications on Somerset's archaeological landscape including the development of towns and villages. He was concerned to preserve archaeology and predict areas most likely to be of archaeological interest. The influence of Philip Rahtz and Maurice Beresford encouraged Mick to further the study of landscape archaeology and medieval settlement. He travelled the county exploring features of interest and much of his research underpins the Somerset Historic Environment Record. There were also his in depth studies notably Shapwick but also Winscombe and his passion for test pitting. He could draw well and produced several reconstructions of Somerset sites as well as a huge collection of slides. Mick was a keen promoter of Somerset's heritage and supported the VCH, the county's museum projects and church conservation. He was of course one of the first trustees of the Somerset County History Trust, noted for his disruptive but positive influence as much as for his stripy jumpers and love of home-made cake!

The day after Storm Brian a few brave souls collected on the Esplanade for a brief tour of Watchet's industrial past. After a buffeting on the harbour where we saw the remains of mineral railway tracks and the great wall of Watchet with its 2016 mural. We moved inland and were fortunate to be standing on the old mineral line path when a train passed over the bridge above us. We saw the eerily silent buildings of the Wansborough paper mills whose closure is still keenly felt in the town and observed the many former employment sites now in residential use.



Storm over Watchet marina

Mary Siraut

Norton Fitzwarren Hillfort

Norton Fitzwarren hillfort, north of the church, is a scheduled ancient monument. An overgrown gateway on the edge of the modern housing estate leads to the Iron Age univallate ramparts which enclose the top of the hill, an area of 5.2 hectares (c.13 a.), which is now a field used for arable farming. The ramparts around the hill are largely overgrown with very substantial trees and it is very difficult to see the scale and depth of the bank and the ditch. At the higher end of the central area was a Bronze Age hilltop enclosure of c. 2 hectares (c.5 a.), which is under the Iron Age banks or ploughed flat in the field. But in one place the Bronze Age bank can still be seen outside the Iron Age ramparts. Its date was first established by Harold St. George Grey excavating in 1908 when he also discovered part of a collared urn.



Excavations by Philip and Nancy Langmaid between 1968 and 1971 confirmed St. George Gray's dating of this bank and they also discovered a Middle Bronze Age hoard of metalwork hidden in the side of the ditch. In one place, they found a deposit of 70 pieces of clay moulds for making sword blades and hilts which was probably sacrificial in nature. They also discovered the trenches of a World War II observation post there, which took advantage of the wonderful view from this spot.

The most puzzling feature of the hillfort is the presence of three large, deep ravines which pierce the defences from different directions. Previously thought to be entrances the Langmaids it was concluded from pottery dating that they were the result of late mediaeval marl quarrying.



Above and opposite:

The southern ramparts

Mary Siraut



Looking across the centre of the hillfort to the Quantocks

Mary Siraut

This hill is all that remains for miles around of the ancient Pleistocene landscape. Early hominids of the Lower Palaeolithic visited Norton hill about 400,000 years ago and their chert hand axes have been found in the area, which was later enclosed by the hillfort. Much later, humans left their tools behind in Mesolithic and Neolithic times. The Bronze Age and Iron Age earthworks were each made in two distinct periods. Typical Roman fields show on aerial photographs and much Roman pottery has been found.

Then comes a gap. Despite the adage “Norton was a market town when Taunton was a furzy down”, no evidence of early medieval occupation of the hill top has yet been found. Nor is there any sign of the great battle the bloody slaughter of which, according to legend caused the Norton Dragon to be born.

David Baker and Bob Croft

The Dragon of Norton Fitzwarren



Road Sign

Rosalind Johnson

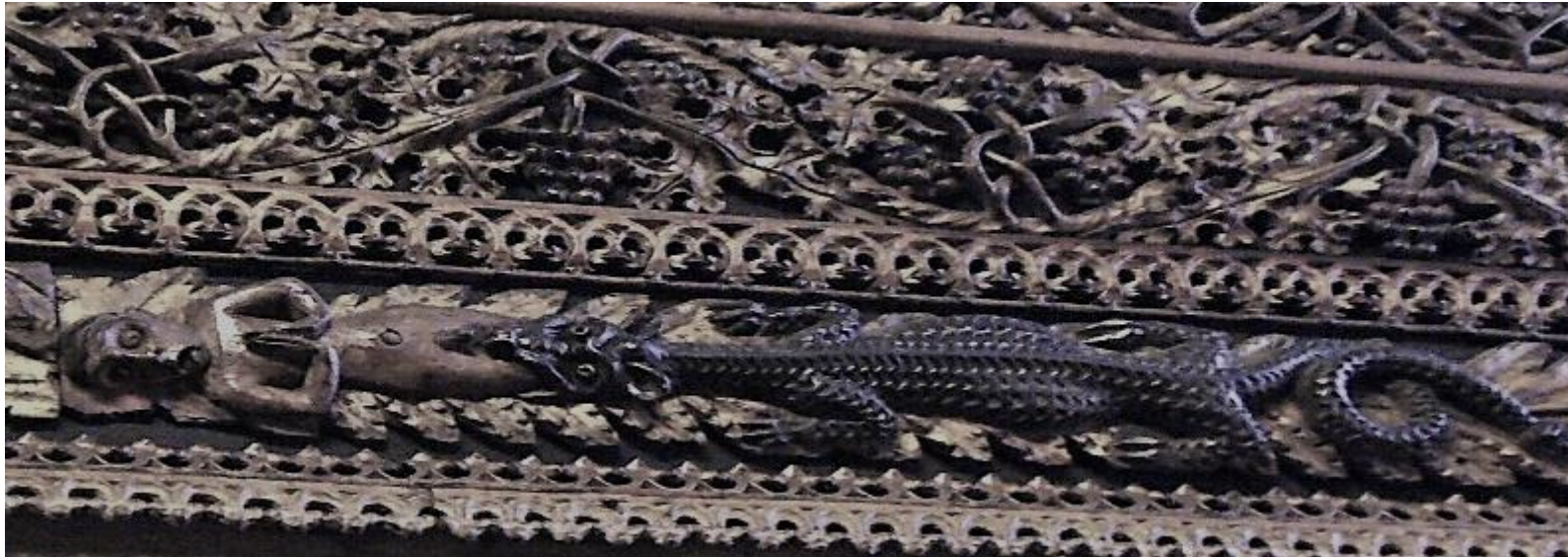
Today's careful motorist is welcomed to the village of Norton Fitzwarren by a friendly dragon, a benign creature by whom only reckless motorists exceeding the 30 mph speed limit are at risk of being devoured. But this affable monster is a 21st century creation, and the early 16th century wooden screen in the parish church of All Saints shows a far more terrifying creature. Amid scenes of hunting and agricultural life are two representations of fearsome dragons. In one a wingless dragon is shown being approached by a man, possibly with a gift of food, or maybe with some means to trap it; it may be that this is intended to show the death of the dragon. Further along the screen a second dragon appears to be in the act of devouring a praying man or woman.

The dragon of Norton Fitzwarren was formed from the corpses left around the hill fort after a fierce battle long ago. It terrorised the countryside, devouring children, livestock and ploughmen in the field, but, as is the way in these stories, finally met its fate. The brave knight, Fulk Fitzwarren, fought and killed the dragon, and gave the village part of its name. It is this courageous feat which is said to be commemorated in the screen.

The problem is that, if the screen illustrates this legend, it does so somewhat obscurely. The legend makes no reference to the man on the screen who appears to be feeding the dragon, and the screen has no images of battle. The earliest reference to the legend uncovered so far is that found in an anonymous paper on the Roman conquest of Somerset, printed as an appendix to Thomas Hearne's 1725 edition of Peter Langtoft's *Chronicle*. This describes the birth of the serpent as taken place after a battle between the native Britons and the invading Roman army, and links the legend with the screen in the church.

Thereafter the dragon legend appears to go silent for over a century. Edmund Rack, in his survey of Somerset in the 1780s, describes an 'alligator' tearing out the bowels of a man on the screen in the church, but makes no mention of any legend associated with it. John Collinson, in *The history and antiquities of the County of Somerset* (1791), makes no mention of the legend either. However, Collinson states that there were nine Fulk Fitzwarrens in succession, the last of that name dying a minor in 1420-1, after which the Fitzwarren estates passed to his sister Elizabeth, who married into the Hankford family, then owners of the manor of Norton. Not until an article in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1829 was the screen linked once more with the legend.

The screen in 1829 was painted and gilded, and although in 1872 the rector, Revd J. P. Hewett, told SANHS members that the screen had been covered with a coat of oak paint in 1825, it seems that this was not done until the 1840s. Sir Stephen Glynne's church notes of c. 1845 describe the screen as still being coloured, and an article in the *Church Times* of 1886 suggests that the coloured painting and gilding had been painted over some forty years earlier. In 1898 the rector, Revd W. Prowse Hewett, told SANHS members visiting the church that the screen had been taken down during the mid-century restoration of the church, and put back by him. The part showing the death of the dragon had been stolen from the church but rescued by Hewett from a shop in Taunton.



Detail of Norton Fitzwarren screen

Mary Siraut

From the latter half of the 19th century references to Norton Fitzwarren's dragon legend became more numerous. Edward Jeboult repeated the legend in 1873. In 1877 Charles Henry Poole speculated that the legend of Norton Fitzwarren, and other dragon legends, might be traced back 'to the primeval time when great lizard monsters occupied the earth with men'. In 1898 William Bigood suggested that the dragon legend arose from the dragon images on the battle standards of invading West Saxons, which would have inspired terror in the native population.

Ten years later Frederick Bligh Bond put forward the theory that the screen showed the legend of the Dragon of Rhodes. It seems unlikely that the screen shows this particular legend, though, like the Norton Fitzwarren legend, an historical figure is credited with killing the dragon. The Rhodes dragon terrorised the countryside, yet the Grand Master of the Knights of Rhodes gave orders that no-one was to kill the monster. Dieudonné de Gozon, one of his knights, disregarded the order, and, having used a dummy dragon to train his dogs and horse, slew the beast and displayed the head on the town gates. The historic de Gozon was himself Grand Master of the Knights of Rhodes from 1346 to 1353, but the earliest known account of a dragon at Rhodes cannot be dated before 1521.

Although the dragon legend is recorded by 1725, it may be that, rather than the screen depicting an existing legend, the legend arose to explain the screen, possibly in the post-Reformation period when the original meaning became lost. What that meaning might have been is obscure. Two SANHS members who visited the church on an excursion in 1872 thought that the representations were allegorical, showing the results of sloth and industry, or virtue and vice. In 1898 William Bidgood suggested that in the Middle Ages the dragon may have typified an evil spirit, seeking out whom he might devour. Dragons were associated with evil, perhaps deriving from the temptations of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. The archangel Michael did battle with Satan in the form of a dragon, and several saints were linked with dragons. St George being the most famous, but a legend of St Martha has her taming a dragon by sprinkling it with holy water. The Norton screen would not appear to depict these legends, but the beast devouring the praying man or woman could be a representation of the legend of St Margaret of Antioch, who was attacked and swallowed by the devil in the form of a dragon, but delivered out of the beast by the miraculous power of a crucifix. This would suggest that the Norton screen may show the dragon giving up St Margaret, rather than devouring her.

Rosalind Johnson

The Sad Story of Mary Sweet and her Hotel

The present Castle Hotel was made from two hotels back to back: the Castle Hotel in North Street, Taunton to the east and the Castle Hotel usually known as Sweet's, later Clarke's, Hotel on Castle Green in Bishops Hull to the west and the former stableyard between the two, through which ran the parish boundary. The latter hotel was built for and kept in the 1830s by Mary Sweet. Many hotels in the mid 19th century were run by women including the White Hart and Abbey Hotel in Glastonbury by Maria Say and the Talbot Inn and London Tavern in Bristol by Nancy Clifden, and several of Mary's successors were women including Charlotte Clarke and Elizabeth Giles.



Mary Siraut

Mary was one of the five children of William Sweet and his wife Martha and was privately baptised in April 1787 and brought to church in July. One of her brothers Thomas was apprenticed to a Wiveliscombe surgeon in 1805. The family ran the Castle Hotel and after William died Martha kept it but went bankrupt in 1815 and Mary took over the business. She added billiard rooms and stables and coach houses in Castle Green. Mary also horsed the stagecoach from Bristol to Exeter and hired out horses and carriages.

As an unmarried woman she was probably at a considerable disadvantage when it came to buying horses and carriages and usually had a male partner to run that side of the business while she ran the hotel and kept the books. This arrangement was not always satisfactory and the two often fell out. One partner John Foy insisted that horsing the stage was part of his side of the business. Mary denied it and claimed that Foy that had not kept up the value of the horses and carriages. The dispute went to Chancery, a fatal mistake.

Meanwhile Mary had found the Castle Hotel in North Street inadequate and planned a large new hotel behind it on Castle Green on a site then occupied by three houses, formerly one, held of the manor of Taunton Deane. In 1833 she took a lease for 14 years of all the houses from Robert Mattock, lord of the manor, together with the stableyard and coach houses to the north and the posthorse stable, coach houses and offices on the south already in her occupation, for the then large rent of £230 a year. The lease also included a garden already marked out adjoining the southern stables. Mattock was to pay for the necessary alterations and additions including a north parlour and two WCs while Mary was to paint and paper. By December the hotel was open for business. In 1835 it was agreed that Mary would repay the £200 cost by an additional £20 rent. That year the old Castle Hotel was rebuilt for a new tenant apparently to designs by Richard Carver.

Mary's hotel was created with a new bay-fronted parlour with dining room below and double-height kitchen behind added to the north. There were also a brewhouse and other outbuildings north of the new wing. The staircase in the middle house was rebuilt as the main staircase for the hotel, the kitchen of the third house was converted into a bar with parlour and passages were driven through the back rooms of the three houses. As created the hotel had two water closets, 19 bedrooms and several parlours and dining rooms. A portico was added to the entrance, all the windows were converted to a simple arched design containing shaped sashes and the Castle Bow was

incorporated with two floors of bedrooms built over it. The Bow was buttressed and crenellated as was the new north parlour wing to create an almost symmetrical façade.

The new Sweet's Hotel with its imposing two-storey front was magnificently furnished, had water and gas laid on and altogether represented a considerable investment by Mary.

Unfortunately her reign was short-lived. Following the long dispute in Chancery with Foy, which she lost, Mary found herself in financial difficulties. She was popular and many people tried to help her out but a London company of wine merchants forced her into bankruptcy and she was ruined.

An inventory taken in 1837 included 16 horses, several sets of harness, two phaetons and a coach. The hotel then had a bar with bar parlour, four parlours, five dining rooms and 16 bedrooms. The linen included 40 pairs of sheets, 50 pillowcases, 50 tablecloths, and ten dozen towels. Much of the plate bore her family's initials.

In the midst of all her woes her mother Martha, who lived with her, died in 1838 aged 88. However, she bravely carried on even holding her annual ball and supper on the 11 January 1839.

In July 1839 an auction was held to sell all Mary's remaining possessions including 12 post horses, 9 sets of harness, 3 saddles and a fly. The furniture included 17 prime goose feather beds, 16 carved four poster beds, dressing glasses and tables, some painted, mahogany furniture, glassware, china including 100 pieces of valuable old china, tea and coffee pots and a beer engine with four taps.

Fortunately the sale seems to have covered her debts and she was able to take on a lodging house in High Street, Taunton with a servant. She had given that up by 1861 when she was an almswoman in Magdalene Lane where she remained until her death in 1874 aged 87. She was not forgotten and the hotel then called Clarke's was still popularly known as Miss Sweet's and the licence was issued under the name of Sweet's until 1874. Her name still appears at the side entrance under Castle Bow. Her lasting legacy, however, is the hotel, now known as the Castle Hotel having swallowed up its eastern rival. Despite different windows and two extra storeys she would still recognise the hotel she had built in 1833.

Mary Siraut



The Castle Hotel

Mary Siraut

Taunton's first female dentist

Long before any woman formally qualified in dentistry Taunton had a female dentist. In the early 19th century modern dentistry was still in its infancy and there was little formal training. Most dentists learnt on the job assisting a dentist or serving an apprenticeship. The first woman to be licensed to practice dentistry in England was Lilian Lindsey in 1895, over half a century after Julia Blackmore began work.

Julia Anna Harriet Blackmore was born at Awliscombe near Honiton, Devon in c. 1804 although she regularly underestimated or overestimated her age. She was the daughter of Richard Blackmore and his wife Catherine. Richard was said to be one of 22 children of John Blackmore of Moorhayes in Cullompton and moved to Taunton to find work. Described as a 'mechanical genius', he took up dentistry and was said to have been the first dental surgeon in Taunton although by 1839 there were three dentists in practice. The family lived in Harmony Row, Tancred Street. Julia presumably was trained by her father. Between 1836 and 1846 she lost her mother, father and sister. After her father died in 1840 aged 71, Julia continued the practice in Harmony Row and also took in lodgers, a comedian and his wife in 1841, dentistry not being a very lucrative profession at that date although she could afford a servant. After her sister's death she took care of her two little nieces Frances 'Fanny' Julia Ann and Emma Ellen Farthing.



Early 20th-century English and American false teeth samples from the SWHT collection

Mary Siraut



Early 20th-century dentist's chair from the SWHT collection Mary Siraut

By 1851 she had moved to premises in Fore Street to accommodate her nieces and two female cousin milliners from Devon. In the 1860s she was in Bridge Street and in the 1870s in Station Road practicing as a surgical and mechanical dentist; drawing and filling teeth and fitting artificial ones. By that date the foot-operated drill had been introduced as well as porcelain teeth, crown and bridge work and removable dentures, all developed during Julia's working life. Although local anaesthetics were only developed in the 1880s, ether was used for extractions from the late 1840s and nitrous oxide from the late 1860s.

Growing concern at the lack of professional qualifications and training among dentists led to an Act of Parliament in 1878 requiring all dentists to be registered and dental surgeons to be qualified. Dentists already in practice before the passing of the Act were allowed to register.

Out of some 3,500 dentists who took up registration probably only a couple of dozen were women. Many of those were widows keeping a chemist's shop, who presumably did a little tooth pulling for poor customers, only a few like Julia were full-time dental practitioners. One of the last 'unqualified' female dentists on the dental register was Annie Whitchurch who worked with other dentists in a practice in central Nottingham until the 1900s but that was unusual for a woman.

Declining health and eyesight led Julia to retire in *c.* 1880 and she moved into the Magdalene almshouse. In 1881 she stayed with fellow dentist Allen Stringfellow who had moved from Chard to Taunton where he appears to have developed a lucrative practice and who had married her niece Fanny. Julia died in 1884 but she had not been forgotten and obituaries appeared in the *Western Gazette* and in the *British Journal of Dental Science*.

She was mourned as probably the last female dentist in the United Kingdom. As we have seen that was not correct and happily before the last of Julia's generation of 'unqualified' dentists had passed away, women were successfully qualifying as professionally trained dental surgeons.

Mary Siraut

Workhouse Disorder

In common with many other Poor Law Unions during the early 1840s, the authorities at Taunton workhouse experienced difficulties in maintaining control of the inmates. Infringements included absconding from the workhouse, refusing to work, destroying workhouse clothing, fighting and using 'improper language'. Window breaking was another common way of letting off steam and this reached a peak in November 1845 when the master reported that there were 384 small and 4 large panes of glass broken in the windows of the workhouse. The most common punishment was to be locked up with a reduced diet, usually just bread and water for periods ranging from 12 to 48 hours. Birchings and whippings were also recorded and some offenders were taken before the magistrates.



Front of main block, Taunton Workhouse

Mary Siraut

Children were not exempt from punishment: four boys were reported for being 'saucy' to the schoolmaster, one was birched and the other three were to be confined in a separate room on a reduced diet for 12 hours. The boys were particularly good at escaping and measures were taken to prevent this; iron bars were placed across their bedroom window and the wall in their yard was raised. On one occasion some of the boys from the workhouse school ran away when out for an 'airing', causing annoyance to one of the guardians when they trespassed in his orchard - the schoolmaster was admonished for his lack of control.

Judith Blaker

Henry VII: The Image of a King

Through the generosity of the National Portrait Gallery in London, a remarkable portrait of Henry VII has been loaned for display at the Museum of Somerset in Taunton. Painted in 1505, it is the earliest work in the National Portrait Gallery's collection and may have been commissioned as part of unsuccessful plans for marriage between the widowed King Henry and Margaret of Savoy. The portrait's unknown artist came from the Netherlands and memorably captured Henry's lively intelligence as well as his reticent, avaricious and mistrustful character.



Henry VII (1457–1509) by an unknown Netherlandish artist, 1505. Oil on panel.
(Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.)



Perkin Warbeck (c. 1474–1499), from a later drawing

Henry has a special place in the history of Taunton Castle, home of the Museum of Somerset. It was there in 1497 that he confronted the rebel Perkin Warbeck. Warbeck said he was Edward IV's younger son, Richard, Duke of York, and England's rightful king. For six years many powerful people, including the King of Scotland, chose to believe him. Having reached Cornwall from Ireland, he arrived at Taunton on 20 September 1497 with a force 8,000 strong. But Warbeck fled when news reached him that the king's army was approaching. He was captured at Beaulieu Abbey and brought back to Taunton Castle to face King Henry in person. He admitted at once that he was an impostor, born at Tournai in Flanders, not a royal prince. The failure of Warbeck's rebellion was a key moment in Henry's reign. It ended the dynastic conflicts which had continued for almost 40 years and meant that the new Tudor monarch was at last secure.

Tom Mayberry

Historic Image of Somerset



This evocative photograph was taken from the footbridge of the former railway station at Norton Fitzwarren showing the complex junction between the main line on the left, the former Taunton to Barnstaple line in the centre and the Taunton to Minehead line, now the West Somerset Railway, on the right. The trees on the left mark the line of the Grand Western Canal. The public house on the right marks the end of Station Road and has been demolished.

In September 1886 the *Taunton Courier* advertised a sale of furniture and effects from the refreshment rooms at Norton Fitzwarren. The extensive sale comprised items from the sitting room, bar, four bedrooms and the kitchen and cellar. Glasses from the bar were included in the sale, as well as tea and breakfast china from the kitchen, but no china for lunch or dinner, which suggests that the refreshment rooms did not serve meals other than breakfast. In 1895 it comprised a fully licensed bar, parlour, taproom, club room and four bedrooms, skittle alley and stables.

Early 20th century view of Norton Fitzwarren railway junction from SWHT collections



Forthcoming Events

Saturday 22 April 2018

There will be a walk from Dunster Marsh to Blue Anchor in memory of Hilary Binding. The walk will be co-led with ecologist Pat Wolseley, President of the Somerset Natural History and Archaeological Society. Details will be circulated to newsletter subscribers and advertised on the [website](#) nearer the date, booking essential.

There are proposed spring walks around Norton Fitzwarren and Bishops Hull and if there is sufficient demand the Watchet walk may be repeated later in the year.

We also hope to do another Mick Aston lecture in the autumn with Chris Gerrard as our speaker, so watch this space! Advance notice will be sent to everyone on the mailing list.

Dunster Hawn, the early medieval port of Dunster Mary Siraut

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