



Welcome to the sixth 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.

County Editor's Report

It is with great regret that we announce the death of our trustee Gerard Leighton who passed away peacefully at home on Wednesday 26 August. Gerard was a much valued member of the trust from its origins as the Somerset VCH Partnership and was a contributor to this newsletter. We are grateful to Tom Mayberry for providing a brief obituary.

Our big event was the second VCH Mick Aston memorial lecture given by James Bond at Taunton Castle on 8 October. James has kindly provided a resumé for the newsletter. Also in October the County Editor gave a presentation on the VCH at Castle Cary organised by the Bailey Hill Bookshop to celebrate the publication of volume XI on Queen Camel and the Cadburys for those who were unable to come to the launch. It was a great success and three volumes were sold. Among other events were a great many talks ranging from presentations on the work of the VCH to Taunton's slums via the Exmoor Forest.

Walks remain popular with the county editor repeating Dunster Old Roads in October for the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society. A new venture was Wiveliscombe home of our County Archaeologist Bob Croft who took us round the town on 19 September. Bob has kindly provided a note on some recent community heritage work including an event on Cothelstone Hill where trustees of the Somerset County History Trust were among the brave souls who attended a tree-planting in December.



On Cothelstone Hill

South West Heritage Trust

Work continues on the revision of volume XII for publication, which we hope will take place next year. Research on the Taunton area is now well underway, with the current focus being on Bishops Hull.

We are continuing to raise money, but much remains to be done to enable us to employ an researcher to help with the vast amount of research for the Taunton area. Do get in touch if you can help or have any fund-raising ideas. See our support page on the website

www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/counties/somerset which allows you to donate easily on-line. Don't forget to say you want to support Somerset!

If you prefer you can make a donation by cheque, made payable to the Somerset County History Trust. Please send it to the VCH, Somerset Heritage Centre, Brunel Way, Norton Fitzwarren, Taunton, TA2 6SF. We are now charity, registered number 1161263.

Our website also provides updates, information on Somerset events and news, the big red books, work in progress, and volunteering opportunities so do take a look.

Monasteries in the Somerset Landscape

Mick Aston Memorial Lecture, Taunton Castle,

8th October 2015

Mick Aston's interest in medieval monasteries began in the late 1960s while he was a student in the Department of Geography at Birmingham University. His tutor, Robin Donkin, a pioneer researcher on the economy and settlements of the Cistercian order, was an important influence. Another friend, Trevor Rowley, had begun excavations on the site of the Cistercian abbey of Bordesley, then under threat from the expansion of Redditch New Town. He invited Mick to undertake a survey of its earthworks, which covered over 100 acres. At that time this was probably the most extensive detailed record of any monastic earthwork

complex, and it made a major contribution to the interpretation of the site and to the strategies for subsequent excavation.



Bordesley Abbey Church

Reading University

Following Mick's move to Somerset in 1974 his monastic interests expanded along various avenues of investigation. His early training as a geographer meant that the study of locations and distributions was always important to him. The monastic map of Somerset was dominated by Benedictine foundations, four abbeys which had origins in much more ancient religious communities, with three smaller priories settled after the Norman Conquest. In contrast to many ancient Benedictine settlements located in well-populated fertile agricultural land elsewhere in England, the Somerset abbeys of Glastonbury, Muchelney and Athelney were all on islands in marshland, reflecting their origins in more eremitic forms of monastic life, deliberately seeking remoteness and isolation. The extent of Benedictine holdings in the central Somerset moors left little opportunity there for later-arriving orders also seeking isolation; the Cistercians achieved only one local foundation, at Cleve near the coast of west Somerset.



Cleeve Abbey refectory roof
Mary Siraut

He became particularly interested in the pre-Benedictine origins of monastic settlements and the liminal setting of early religious communities, often within the hinterland of a centre of royal power, and forming sacred landscapes with associated satellite hermitages and holy wells. Glastonbury fitted this model perfectly, but Mick was drawn to less well-known sites, publishing significant papers on the origins of Muchelney.

Whereas many people become attracted to monasteries through admiration for the architecture of soaring gothic churches or delight in picturesque ruins, Mick enjoyed the greater intellectual challenge of sites where only fragmentary buildings or earthworks survived. He always emphasized the importance of the wider monastic precinct, containing service buildings, workshops, gardens, orchards and fishponds. However, one of the most dramatic successes of the first season of his television series *Time Team* was the revelation through geophysics of the complete church and claustral plan of Athelney Abbey beneath the surface of a completely levelled field.

Geophysics also played a significant part in another of his special interests, the hermit monasteries of the Carthusian order. The first two successful English Carthusian foundations, Witham and Hinton, were both in Somerset, and through his initiative geophysical surveys threw new light on the layout of their cloisters, cells, gardens and communal buildings. Mick had also pursued the Carthusians on the continental scale, mapping the distribution of their houses in Europe just as Robin Donkin had done for the Cistercians.



Athelney Abbey site *Severn Estuary Levels Research Committee*

Mick always recognised the need to study the economic basis of monastic life through examining the landed endowments of each abbey and priory. The juxtaposition of upland and lowland in the Somerset landscape offered monastic landholders the potential for a wide range of complementary forms of land use. Mick had undertaken studies of the early construction of the estates of the abbeys of Muchelney and Bath, but his most important contribution to this field was his long-running research project on Glastonbury Abbey's manor of Shapwick on the Polden Hills, one of the most detailed archaeological surveys of any English parish ever undertaken, which shed new light on the interaction between the abbey and its tenants in undertaking major and far-reaching modifications to the landscape in the middle ages.

James Bond



Glastonbury Abbey

Mary Siraut

Community Archaeology Projects and The South West Heritage Trust 2015

The South West Heritage Trust (SWHT) was set up in November 2014 and one of the aims of the Trust is to work with local partners and to support local archaeological research. Two projects were set up in the summer of 2015 one at Curry Mallet with the local parish council and one at Cothelstone Hill with the Quantock Hills AONB service. The Curry Mallet project was part of the national initiative funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215 and the project at Cothelstone Hill was set up to tie in with a tree planting scheme.

As part of this investigation into the archaeology of Curry Mallet a geophysical survey was undertaken by Geoflow of a series of earthworks in the Rectory Field immediately next to the Parish Church of St James. A number of anomalies were noted in the geophysical survey and two trial trenches were excavated to help to categorize and interpret these features. Liz Caldwell and Nigel Harvey from Geoflow carried out the surveys and we would like to thank them for their demonstration of geophysics to over 60 pupils from the local primary school. The children enjoyed the opportunity to see science and archaeology at work in their local fields. One of the trial trenches cut through a substantial ditch feature that was 3m wide and almost 2m deep. This was interpreted as a major water drainage feature- not a moat but a substantial ditch. It was clear from the silting up of this ditch that it was open in the medieval period, a number of medieval pottery sherds were recovered from the ditch alongside an early ox shoe. Pottery and radiocarbon dating confirmed that this ditch was backfilled in the late 13th century. In addition to the test trenches in the Rectory Field a number of test pits were excavated in the grounds of the Manor House which is over 1km north of the parish church. A number of early medieval pottery sherds of 12th – 13th century date were recovered from the Manor gardens. Special thanks to the local landowners for permission to carry out this work.



Curry Mallet excavation of medieval ditch west of the parish church.

For further details of the work of the Curry Mallet group and a video of the celebration event and open day see:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w642qCGKtF8>

Cothelstone Hill

As part of the establishment of the SWHT Somerset County Council has leased a number of heritage landscape sites to the Trust. In the summer of 2015 the SWHT worked in partnership with the Quantock AONB service to explore the archaeological landscape around the Seven Sisters tree ring on the Quantock Hills. Historic England, Natural England and the AONB service have agreed that an area of relatively recent tree planting that covers the scheduled area of the medieval pillow mound – or rabbit warren – needs to be gradually felled and a new tree clump planted. A revised tree planting plan was approved and a series of archaeological test trenches were excavated to check that no archaeological remains would be affected by the replacement planting.



Flint arrowhead found on Cothelstone Hill June 2015

Over 400 people attended an open day on the 14th June, and Jane Hill, Rachel Bellamy and Marc Cox coordinated a programme of outreach and interpretation. This project demonstrates the value of small-scale archaeological research linked to local heritage events.

This project was funded by a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) Sharing Heritage Programme. The hill is covered with a wealth of archaeological features including Bronze Age round barrows, an Iron Age dyke, Medieval pillow mounds and the remains of an 18th century folly tower. The excavation was used as a training event for archaeology students from Bridgwater College and for school children from Bishop's Lydeard School. Over 300 people visited the dig during the open weekend on the 20th and 21st June. The excavation yielded flint implements including arrowheads and blades that were made and discarded by people living in the later Neolithic and early Bronze Age period about 2500BC. No significant archaeological features were noted and the area was approved for the new tree planting scheme planned for the winter of 2015.

Further community archaeology projects are planned on the heritage sites managed by the SWHT in 2016.

Bob Croft

For the SWHT October 2015



Excavation underway on Cothelstone Hill June 2015

A Devon Abbess Suffers a Somerset Burglary

The religious house at Canonsleigh near Burlescombe in east Devon was a convent of Augustinian Canonesses that had the status of an abbey. This privilege was achieved through the very high status of its founder, Matilda de Clare, countess of Gloucester and Hertford. A similar privilege was granted to the house of nuns at Lacock founded by Ela, Countess of Salisbury. Unlike the widowed Ela who ended her life as a nun at Lacock Abbey, Matilda did not decide to enter the religious life. However it may be that the second abbess of Canonsleigh, Petronilla de Clare, was her younger sister. If so then Petronilla was one of the few nuns at Canonsleigh whom we could describe as coming from an aristocratic background.

One other abbess who may have come from an aristocratic family was Mary or Margaret Beauchamp who led Canonsleigh from 1410 until 1449. Her surname was also that of the earls of Warwick, although no evidence has yet come to light to prove from what branch of the family she might have come. One thing we do know for certain, however, is that she must have had considerable personal wealth. An intriguing entry in the register of the bishop of Exeter, Edmund Lacy, dates from March 1447. It describes how one John Meducroft alias Gyls had been convicted of an armed robbery from the house (“*domum*”) of Abbess Margaret Beauchamp. He is said to have stolen 100 marks in cash, a precious jewel of Jasper encircled with silver valued at forty pounds, and two silver bowls worth 10 marks from among her goods and chattels (a mark was worth two-thirds of a pound, i.e. thirteen shillings and fourpence). As well as showing her great wealth, this register entry is also of interest for describing her as residing in a house.

From an earlier entry in Bishop Stapledon's register we can see that the quarters of the abbess had been above the cloister. In a letter dated 12 January 1320, the bishop makes mention of the quarters of the abbess in relation to the cloister: “La Sale la Abbesse” and “la novele chambre la Abbesse” and it is clear that they are on the upper floor. It also appears from the phraseology that there had recently been work to provide a new bedroom for the abbess,

although whether this was part of some new extension to the cloister complex, or simply a refurbishment of existing accommodation is not obvious. It therefore seems probable that some time between 1320 and 1447 the abbess decided to move out of the abbey precinct to a separate dwelling. Further confirmation of this may come from the time of the Dissolution. In March 1540 Roger Bluett of nearby Holcombe Rogus was granted appurtenances in Thorne and Sampford Arundel that had belonged to Canonsleigh, "except a close of land and pasture that was in the personal occupation of the late abbess of Canonlegh." It is therefore possible that the house of the later abbesses was not in Devon at all, but in Somerset. Such a move would not have been unusual. Other monastic superiors had also withdrawn from their communities in the later medieval period to live in separate dwellings. We can only speculate whether Margaret Beauchamp came to regret that she no longer had her chambers within the walled precinct of Canonsleigh itself. It would surely have taken a thief of the greatest audacity and skill to have stolen her valuable goods from there.

Des Atkinson



Gerard Leighton MA, FSA, 1932–2015

As reported on our website, we received with much sadness the news that Gerard Leighton, one of our trustees, died peacefully at his beloved Hassage Manor, near Bath, on 26 August 2015. He was 83 years old. With his passing we lost a very wise and knowledgeable guide as well as a staunch supporter of the Victoria County History in Somerset.

Henry Gerard Mather Leighton was born in Bristol on 15 August 1932, and was educated at Winchester College and Corpus Christi College, Oxford, where he studied history. His father, Wilfred Leighton, was born in the North East but spent his working life in Bristol where he was secretary of the Bristol Municipal Charities. He was a devoted scholar of the city's history and heritage, providing a powerful example to his son both of wide-ranging antiquarian interests and of public service. Wilfred Leighton was, among his many other appointments, High Sheriff of Somerset in 1953 and President of Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society in 1958. Gerard, like his father, became a chartered accountant, and by 1985 was chairman of the Jordan Group Ltd. His deep interest in historical themes developed from an early age and embraced subjects including heraldry, country houses and monumental brasses. But perhaps his major and most lasting contribution to the heritage of the South West was made through the tireless energy he brought to advising or leading a whole series of heritage organisations, committees and projects.

Gerard's incisive mind and financial acumen were often of the greatest benefit, and informed his many public roles including as chairman of the Bristol Diocesan Advisory Committee for the Care of Churches and of the Wells Cathedral Fabric Committee. He was for forty years the Honorary Treasurer of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society, and in 2008, fifty years after his father, became President of Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society.

In one of his last services to local history Gerard had a major part in steering the Somerset County History Trust into existence in 2015. We are very grateful to him for what he gave in so many ways and will miss him. To his wife Juliet and to his children we offer our deepest sympathy in their loss.

Tom Mayberry

See further: M.J. Crossley Evans, *A Grand City – Life, Movement and Work: Bristol in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. Essays in Honour of Gerard Leighton FSA* (Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society, 2010) pp. vii–xiv; and ‘Wilfred Leighton FSA’, *Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society*, vol. 111 (1967), pp. 73–4.

SANHS Maritime History Publishing Project



Coal Harbour house and suspension bridge from volume 1 Mary Siraut

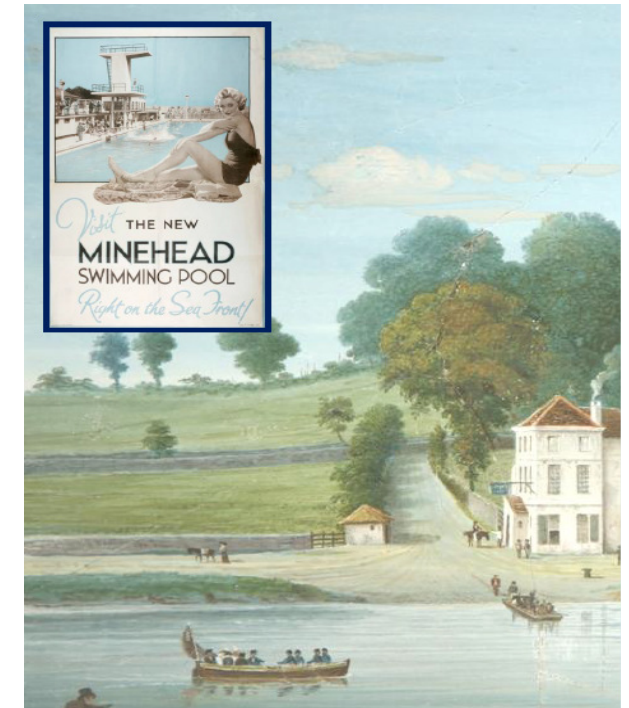
Since the maritime historian Michael Oppenheim wrote the chapter on ‘Maritime History’ for the newly launched *Victoria History of the County of Somerset* published in 1911, no single volume has appeared covering such a broad subject, although many books on individual aspects of Somerset’s maritime history have appeared since that time. Graham Farr took a huge step forward in the promotion of maritime history by writing extensively on the Bristol Channel but there was no detailed work on the county specifically from a maritime perspective.

After much fact finding, fundraising and research, volume one of a new series covering Somerset's rich and varied maritime history was published in 2010 by the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society. In 2014 volume one had to be reprinted and volume two was launched. The general subjects included in the first two volumes are trade, river engineering, port development, hydrographic surveying, social history, tourism, travel, ferries, civil engineering and fishing.

A third volume is in preparation and if you have research you wish to be considered for publication in this series please contact Dr Adrian Webb, 19 Kirke Grove, Taunton, Somerset, TA2 8SB, aj.webb@virgin.net or 07443567136.

Copies of the books are available in Somerset bookshops.

Rownham Ferry and Minehead Lido on the cover of volume two



Historic Photographs of Somerset



Bishops Hull Council School class c. 1910

SWHT

Bishops Hull acquired a new school in 1893 with four classrooms on Gypsy Lane and by 1915 it had over 100 pupils. In this photograph the children are flanked by a teacher and a pupil teacher. Bishops Hull school usually had several trainees in the form of monitresses and pupil teachers, six in 1905. It was usual at that period for teachers, especially women, to learn on the job from their mid teens. Although most staff were female Bishops Hull usually had a male head teacher.

The children came from a wide range of backgrounds as is evident in the picture despite the fact that the children have been combed and tidied for the photograph. Girls wore pinafores to keep their frocks clean but they

vary from elaborately frilled to torn and dirty. Most boys sport Eton or Vandyke collars, bow ties and waistcoats but many jackets have clearly been outgrown and no longer button up. They all appear to be wearing sensible boots, a necessity in an era of rough roads.

Most children stare fixedly at the camera although a few attempt a smile and one moved. A few seem apprehensive; one little girl appears to have turned to her sister for reassurance.

Events for 2016

Events for 2016 are being finalised, and will include more walks with an exploration of Nynhead on 1 May and hopefully a Carhampton walk later in the year. Events will be posted on the [website](#) and circulated 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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