



# Victoria County History of Somerset Newsletter

Winter 2016-2017

Issue 8

**Welcome to the eighth 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 concluding on Kilmington parish whose complex history means that its archives are to be found in a great many places in several counties! The next priorities are to write up the parish of Bishop's Hull and research will resume on Taunton, which is likely to occupy many years. Work continues to enable us to appoint a researcher and we are also lucky to have some hard-working volunteers. We hope to appoint someone during 2017 to help with the research and writing of Norton Fitzwarren and Staplegrove. However, we will need to raise a considerable additional sum of money to fund a researcher beyond the initial 12-month period.

Volume 12 (Dunster and Minehead area) is being prepared for publication, hopefully later in 2017. This should be the first Somerset VCH volume to have coloured illustrations!

The editor has also given talks and presentations, including on the Exmoor Forest and Taunton slums, and taken two more parties on the Minehead Lost Towns walk.

John Gater gave the VCH Mick Aston lecture in Taunton Castle Great Hall, part of the Museum of Somerset, in October on the dark art of geophysics. He gave us a fascinating glimpse into the possibilities of this non-invasive form of archaeology, including the ability to go back in time through the various layers which lie under many historic sites.

We remembered another trustee, Hilary Binding, by attending the unveiling of a commemorative panel in her memory in Carhampton and are planning a walk in her memory next spring.

## **New National Editor**

We have a new national VCH editor, Professor Angus Winchester from Lancaster University. Professor Winchester, has previously worked as an assistant editor with the VCH in Shropshire and since 2010 has taken the lead in reviving the VCH in Cumbria.



Professor Winchester has written and edited several books and has been president and chairman of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society. In 2014 he set up Lancaster University's Regional Heritage Centre. His post with the VCH is part-time and Professor Winchester is anxious to use his time to maximum benefit by working with the counties to further the VCH.

Somerset Archaeological Societies, publishers and neighbours reflecting the wide variety of her interests and the great respect and affection in which she was held. Hilary was a long-time supporter of the VCH in Somerset and was especially helpful with the preparation of Volume 12 (Dunster and Minehead area). She was a much-respected west Somerset historian and her books and newspaper articles will be long cherished.



## Unveiling of Memorial to Hilary Binding

On Saturday 15 October, in spite of the heavy rain, many of Hilary Binding's colleagues and friends gathered in the main street of Carhampton by the community orchard to see Lady Gass unveil the memorial board. As well as fellow trustees of the Somerset County History Trust there were representatives of the local church, local government, the South West Heritage Trust, Somerset and west



The memorial board displays a brief overview of the history of Carhampton through text and paintings. It is sited in the centre of the village by the community orchard, which is famous for its wassail ceremony as well as being the sole survivor in Carhampton of a once important feature in west Somerset villages.



*West gallery singing in St John's, Carhampton, Hilary's local church.*

After the memorial was unveiled by Lady Gass, tributes were paid to Hilary and a group of west gallery singers assembled in the orchard to sing one of Hilary's favourite west gallery hymns. We then assembled in St John's church for tea and home-made cakes and more west gallery singing and music, a tradition which Hilary loved and did so much to encourage in West Somerset.



*West gallery singers and musicians with the statue Praying by Rachel Reckitt.*

## Beckery excavations

Excavations at Beckery near Glastonbury in Somerset have produced the earliest known archaeological evidence for monasticism in the British Isles. Run as a community training dig by the South West Heritage Trust, the excavation was part of the Avalon Marshes Landscape Partnership project made possible by National Lottery players thanks to a £1.8m grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). It re-investigated the site of a medieval chapel that was first excavated in the 1880s by John Morland and again in the 1960s by Philip Rahtz.



*Volunteers excavating in the area of the medieval chapels.*

The 1960s excavation uncovered an extensive cemetery of at least 50 people. Almost all were adult males, leaving little doubt that it was a monastic graveyard. The new excavation allowed seven individuals to be dated. The earliest ones died in the 5th or early 6th centuries AD, with burials continuing in the 7th to early 9th centuries. The monastic use of the site may have ended in the later 9th century when Somerset was attacked by Viking armies.



*One of the dated skeletons. The foundations of the earliest stone chapel had been built directly on top of the head end of the grave. Some stones were removed to allow the excavation.*

The excavations also showed that the site was first occupied in the Iron Age, when the top of the site was enclosed by a bank and ditch. A new building, discovered by geophysical survey, was investigated to the north of the chapel. More information is being revealed as the post-excavation work continues.

**Richard Brunning**

## **Four (?) Funerals and a Coronation: Early Kings in Somerset**

Somerset was one of the original shires into which the kings of Wessex divided their kingdom for administrative efficiency, putting each under the control of a shire reeve (sheriff). The inhabitants were expected to act collectively on the king's behalf, as we see from the earliest references to the county. Thus in 845 the 'people' of Somerset and Dorset fought against an invading Danish or 'Viking' army, while in 878 King Alfred, who had been hiding in the Levels to escape the Danes, emerged to lead the 'people' of Somerset, Wiltshire and Hampshire to victory at the battle of Edington. That battle, of course, was a decisive one, a turning point in the process by which Alfred and his successors created a united kingdom of England; it was fought on or about 11 May, and it is that day which has been commemorated since 2015 as Somerset Day. The West Saxon kings had many estates in the county, including a major royal residence or palace at Cheddar, and they also founded or endowed many churches there, including monasteries at Athelney, Bath, Glastonbury and Muchelney.

Somerset continued to be central to royal power even after Alfred's grandson King Athelstan seized York from the Danes and made himself the first king of all England. This was the time when Glastonbury – a minor church but with claims to a very early if shadowy origin – really came to the front rank of English monasteries. Athelstan's half-brother King Edmund I gave Glastonbury to a priest called Dunstan, whom he made abbot. Later, he fell out with Dunstan and cancelled the grant, but changed his mind after an apparently miraculous escape from death while he was hunting near Cheddar Gorge. Certainly, when Edmund died in 946, it was Dunstan who had the king buried at Glastonbury – the first known royal burial there.

Even more important for the royal presence in Somerset was the reign of Edmund's younger son Edgar (959-75). On Whit Sunday 973 – which that year also fell on 11 May – Edgar chose for whatever reason to undergo a second coronation, and fixed on Bath Abbey for the ceremony. He was crowned by Dunstan, who was by now Archbishop of Canterbury, and it is

notable as the earliest English coronation for which we have a detailed record. When, unexpectedly and still young, Edgar died suddenly two years later, he chose like his father to be buried at Glastonbury. Then followed a forty-year gap in the use of Glastonbury as a royal mausoleum, until in 1016 Edgar's grandson Edmund II 'Ironside' was buried there; he had been king for only a few months as a rival to the Danish invader Cnut [Canute]. Nevertheless, every king from Edgar to Edward the Confessor made grants to the abbey, as did many of their followers and subjects, and by 1066 it was the wealthiest abbey in England. Although the Norman Conquest marked a turning point – no later king chose burial at Glastonbury or indeed anywhere else in Somerset – the abbey continued to flourish right through to its dissolution in 1539, by which date it was still the second richest English monastery.

A major part in Glastonbury's growing reputation was played by myths and legends about its distant past, not least a late medieval identification of it with the Isle of Avalon in stories about 'Arthur'. Already in the tenth century an anonymous writer claimed that St Patrick had been buried there, but greater claims were to follow. In 1184 much of the abbey was burned down, and the monks were desperate to attract funds for rebuilding. Their need was answered seven years later when they excavated a deep pit between 'two stone pyramids' (probably late Saxon cross-shafts) and unearthed a coffin containing what they said were the bones of King Arthur and his queen Guinevere. The remains were relocated to an impressive new tomb chest in their church, and later were removed again to the prime place of honour before the high altar. At the same time the tombs of two of the Saxon kings were relocated to either side of it, Edmund I to the north and Edmund II to the south.

Most scholars of the early middle ages no longer believe that Arthur (if indeed he ever existed) had ever been buried at Glastonbury, or indeed that he was a king. Any historical Arthur must have lived in the fifth or sixth century, but there are no contemporary datable records of him before the ninth century, and no surviving links him with Glastonbury until after 1100. A good case can be made that,

in the words of Antonia Gransden, the leading expert on medieval English historical writings, the monks in 1191 'deliberately buried two skeletons, complete with inscribed cross, and then staged the "discovery"'. If so, the number of known kingly burials at Glastonbury can safely be left at three.

It is in any case a real tragedy that Henry's destruction of the monasteries was so brutal and thorough. Some aristocratic families – even supporters of the king like the Howard dukes of Norfolk – were careful to rescue their ancestral tombs from condemned monasteries and to relocate them elsewhere, but Henry seems to have had no qualms about saving even the four royal tombs at Glastonbury, just as at Reading Abbey he was indifferent to the apparent destruction of the tomb of its founder King Henry I. The splendid recent reinterpretation by Roberta Gilchrist and Cheryl Green of excavations at Glastonbury shows that so far the very sites of the royal burials are uncertain. Raleigh Radford's claim, for instance, that he had found Arthur's grave in 1962 is shown to have been mistaken: the 'grave' was a pit, and one datable to 1184 at the earliest. More plausibly, Radford tentatively identified a robbed feature within the east end of the abbey church as Edgar's tomb, but even there, conclude Gilchrist and Green 'there is no archaeological evidence to support this identification'. Their survey should be a spur to raise funds for the new excavations they recommend, and one of the aims should surely be to try to locate the elusive royal tombs.

### David Palliser

*The Lady Chapel at Glastonbury, dating from the 1180s.*

*Mary Siraut*



## The thieving cleric of Canonsleigh

The theft of cash and jewellery from the house of the abbess of Canonsleigh was described previously (see Issue 6 of this newsletter). Canonsleigh Abbey was located in east Devon near Burlescombe, but it seems that the house of the abbess may have been over the Somerset border in Sampford Arundel which was one of the abbey's possessions. The thief took over £60 in cash, a precious stone set in silver, and two silver bowls. The offender in question was brought to trial in March 1447, and it turns out that, rather than being some wandering vagabond, he was in fact a member of the clergy called John Meducroft or Gelys (Gyls). The records of the case are given in the register of the Bishop of Exeter, Edmund Lacy.

Meducroft was indicted in a lay court on the charge of armed robbery. Lacy's register says of the accused that 'he has often humbly begged to be allowed to purge himself'. Thus Meducroft, as a churchman, was seeking to have his case brought to a church trial where he might cleanse himself of his offence. While bishop Lacy did not obstruct this request, he was also in no hurry to comply with it. Indeed, it appears he only set this process in motion in July 1453. The abbess who had suffered the theft (Mary or Marion Beauchamp) had died in December 1449. Her successor, Joan Arundell, was elected on 10 March 1450. Meducroft's chances of freedom may have been enhanced by the death of Mary Beauchamp, and he may have begun or restated his petition to the bishop as a consequence.

In such circumstances the bishop was normally keen to initiate the purgation process himself, and to keep the progress closely under his direct supervision. However Lacy on this occasion handed over authority to Master Henry Webber, the precentor of his cathedral. That was certainly an unusual step. The English bishops of the period in almost all cases kept the process of purgation tightly under their control. The occasion at which criminous clerks were

purged was not, it would seem, a session of a regular church court - in the hierarchy of archidiaconal, consistory or audience courts - but was rather at a specially constituted tribunal. The purgation machinery was flexible, allowing the bishop to commission whom he wished, and to operate where he chose, within his diocese.

It is not clear what the final fate of John Meducroft was, although the process of purgation should have led to the release of the accused. However, there was a series of steps that had to be gone through, including the issue of a proclamation advertising the forthcoming process, and inviting objectors to attend. The commission for such proclamations normally included the instruction to make them 'three times on Sundays and feast days at Mass at a time when the greatest multitude of people is present.' Meducroft's crime should therefore have been widely known, and the bishop would have been keen to show that the offender had been suitably chastised and punished before his final purgation. Indeed, it seems likely that Meducroft had spent a lengthy period in the bishop's prison.

### Des Atkinson

*This contribution is based closely on the following:*

*A.K. McHardy, 'Church courts and criminous clerks' in Medieval ecclesiastical studies in honour of Dorothy M. Owen, edited by M. J. Franklin and Christopher Harper-Bill, pp. 165–83. Studies in the History of Medieval Religion 7. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1995.*

## Picturing a Rebel

At an auction on 19 July 2016 the Museum of Somerset was able to acquire a fine three-quarter-length portrait of James Scott, Duke of Monmouth and Buccleuch (1649–1685). The Duke of Monmouth will forever be remembered in Somerset as the man who led an army of Protestant rebels to crushing defeat at the Battle of Sedgemoor in July 1685. Monmouth was quickly captured and pleaded in vain for his Catholic uncle, James II, to spare his life. Instead, before a great and silent crowd on Tower Hill, Monmouth was beheaded nine days after the battle.



The portrait reflects a far happier moment in his history. The original full-length picture was painted by Sir Peter Lely in 1675, and the recently-acquired version is one of several full- or three-quarter-length copies made by Lely's studio. One was given to Nell Gwynne. Monmouth, the favourite but illegitimate child of Charles II, is shown splendidly arrayed in his Garter robes having been made a Knight of the Garter in 1663 at the age of only thirteen. He displays all the confidence of someone high in royal favour and whose recent part in the siege of Maastricht had won him a reputation as a brave soldier and commander.

The occasion for the original portrait was the visit by Charles II to the University of Cambridge in 1675. Monmouth had been made Chancellor of the university the year before and intended the picture to hang in the Regent House where his father would be sure to see it.

The Regent House original was destined to have a short life. In 1683 it was taken down following Monmouth's alleged involvement in the Rye House Plot, the abortive plan to assassinate the king and the Duke of York on their return from the races at Newmarket. Then in August 1685, following Monmouth's execution, it was carried into the streets of Cambridge and burned.

The copies are all that remain, and the version which has now been acquired is an especially fine example. On Saturday 3 September it was displayed at a parish open day in Westonzoyland Church, a short distance from the Sedgemoor battlefield. Following cleaning it will hang permanently in the Rebellion Gallery at the Museum of Somerset, Taunton, as a splendid evocation of an ill-fated man.

**Tom Mayberry**

*See Anna Keay, [The Last Royal Rebel: The Life and Death of James, Duke of Monmouth](#) (2016)*

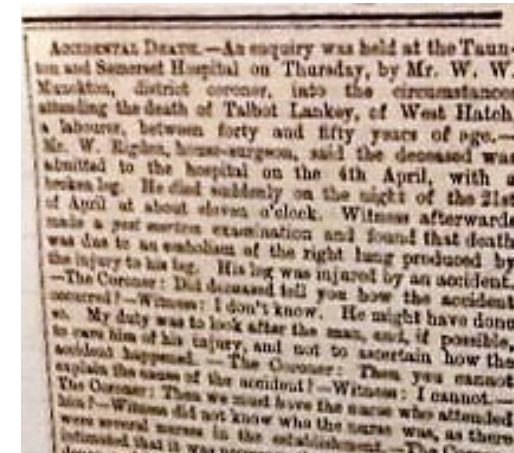
## A case of sudden death at Taunton and Somerset Hospital

I have been reading through the Minutes of the Hospital Committee monthly meetings for the mid to late 19th century. Much of the content is repetitive and lacking in depth as it is one sided – that is letters or plans referred to but not included to enable the reader to be able to capture the whole story.

It is, however, interesting to see how nurse training was evolving through the period – based on the Nightingale pattern. The names of the pupil nurse probationer applicants are given. Each commenced with a month's trial before acceptance for a year of training, after which if the probationer was successful and worthy of being retained as a 'trained' nurse they were invited to remain on the staff. Likewise, I have found the names of the Matrons and medical staff for the period also.

One particular entry inserted at the end of the monthly meeting of the 4th April 1878 is in the form of a cutting from the *Somerset County Gazette* dated 27th April 1878 detailing a Coroner's report. A patient by the name of Talbot Lankey of West Hatch had an accident on the 4th April that resulted in a broken leg. He died suddenly on the 21st April and the post mortem revealed that Mr Lankey had died due to a pulmonary embolus following the injury.

The Coroner, Mr W. W. Munckton tried to elicit from the House Surgeon, Mr W. Rigden, the cause of the accident. The House Surgeon replied that he did not know as his duty was to look after the man, and if possible cure him of his injury. Clearly the Coroner found this unacceptable and demanded that the nurse who had looked after the patient be summoned. The House Surgeon did not know which one had attended Mr Lankey 'as there are several in the establishment.' The case was stood down whilst the House Surgeon was despatched to make enquiries. On return to the enquiry Mr Rigden

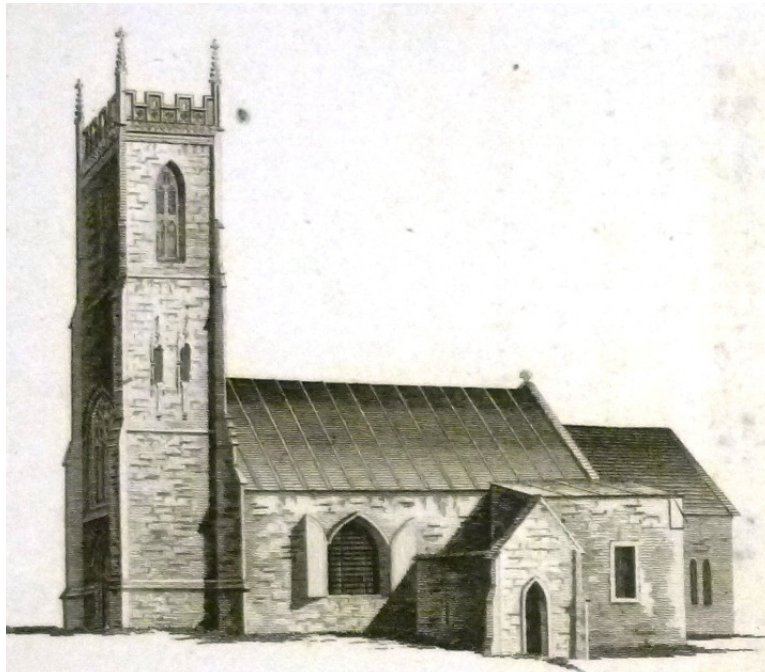


informed the Coroner that the Nurse was in bed (she had been on night duty). Regardless of this she was summoned to the enquiry and informed the Coroner of her experience in the case. The 'man nurse' William Gardner and James Oates the hospital porter also gave evidence. After some delay a verdict of accidental death was recorded.

Subsequently the Coroner wrote a letter of complaint to the Committee who considered, along with a letter of explanation from Mr Rigden (neither of which letters we have sight of), that the coroner's complaint was unfounded. However, the Committee directed that it was the duty of the House Surgeon to afford to the police all the information relating to the case to the furtherance of their enquiries. It was not in their opinion part of the House Surgeons' duty to enquire into details of the case further than may be necessary to the treatment of the patient. How times change.

Jenni Llewelyn

## Historic Images of Somerset



*Kilminster church c.1790*

*South West Heritage Trust*

In this newsletter it is a drawing rather than a photograph – a fascinating drawing of Kilminster church as it was in the 1780s.

The shuttered windows were found on many church windows beside towers used for playing ‘fives’. The box structure beside the porch is the south transept and contained a monument to the wife of one of the lords of Norton Ferris manor. A large sundial adorns the south-east corner. The bigger transept on the north was usually known as the Hartgill aisle. In this view the

chancel was fairly new, it was rebuilt several times, having a new floor of Chelmark stone from Wiltshire installed possibly by the Hon. Charles Digby, rector 1767 to 1811.

He was a pluralist and canon of Wells but usually resident at Kilminster and prepared to spend money on the church. The church was white-washed in the 1780s with roof timbers and gallery wainscoting painted blue and was said to be well kept. Revd Digby probably destroyed the earliest parish register having had a copy made as he could not read the original!

The church witnessed many un-Christian activities in previous centuries. The Hartgills and the Lords Stourton maintained gangs of retainers in their bloody mid 16th-century feuds. Many of these so-called servants indulged in highway robbery and murder and several were hanged, two even claimed to be clergy. The climax came with the murders of William Hartgill and his son John at the hands of Charles, Lord Stourton in 1557. Violence may have abated thereafter but the Hartgills remained pugnacious and litigious in the 17th century if mostly amongst themselves.

Trouble flared again in the 19th century with an unseemly and long-running battle over pews between the tenants of the Hoares and of the earls of Ilchester. After an assault during a service at the end of 1867 the rector decided to make all seats in the church free. The chancel was rebuilt at least twice in the 19th century and from 1868 the rest of church, except the tower, was rebuilt to the designs of James Piers St Aubyn.



*Combeland Road, Alcombe*

*Mary Siraut*

## **Forthcoming Events**

### **Saturday 1 April 2017**

There will be a VCH history walk around Alcombe in memory of Hilary Binding. Details will be circulated to newsletter subscribers and advertised on the [website](#) nearer the date, booking essential.

We also hope to do more talks and walks, including one at Muchelney in June and an autumn walk perhaps at Winscombe or possibly a repeat of the Dunster Old Roads walk later in the year. Advance notice will be sent to everyone on the mailing list. We are hoping to have our fourth Mick Aston lecture in mid-October

## **Please Support Us**

Plans for further work are entirely dependent on public generosity.

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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