

VICTORIA
COUNTY
HISTORY



Somerset

Victoria County History of Somerset Newsletter

Summer 2017

Issue 9

**Welcome to the ninth 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

Work is concluding on writing the history of Bishops' Hull parish and researching the Within parish. The next task is to start making inroads into the mountain of Taunton sources. We are fortunate to have secured the assistance of Rosalind Johnson who is working on the parishes of Norton Fitzwarren and Staplegrove. Rosalind has worked on the Wiltshire VCH so is used to our ways! We also enjoyed a meeting with Angus Winchester new director of the VCH.

Our first Hilary Binding Memorial Walk on 1 April explored Alcombe. After torrential rain the skies cleared for the start of our walk. We visited St Michael's church, which Hilary knew well and of which she wrote a short history. The church dates from the early 20th-century but includes a re-used medieval door from Dunster church and some fine modern artwork. We explored the interesting streets of Alcombe village, discovering a conduit for pure filtered water, unfortunately no longer used, and some quirky modern plasterwork.



Plasterwork in Alcombe

Mary Siraute



We then moved north in search of industrial relics like the former electricity works. Here we found a sewer ventilator, hitherto unrecorded, but following our walk it now has an entry on the Somerset HER! We concluded our walk looking at some of the houses built from the bricks and tiles of the former Victoria Brick and Tile Works and finished on the site of the works on Hopcott Road.

Left -admiring our discovery!

Right— ending our walk on the Victoria site with products of the works in the background.

Mary Siraut



Due to popular demand the walk will be repeated on 1 July and 6 August and next year Pat Wolseley, President of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society, will be joining us for a coastal walk looking at the rich natural history of the area.

Sadly since our last newsletter the statue *Praying* by Rachel Reckitt in Carhampton church has suffered serious criminal damage.

Our next event on 3 June was the county editor's presentation at Timberscombe to raise funds for the church. The day was a great success including some very amateur bell-ringing!

The following Saturday our archaeologist trustees Bob Croft and James Bond took a party around Muchelney exploring its abbey and church.



Muchelney Abbey and Church

Bob Croft

Another big event this summer has been the re-opening of the Somerset Rural Life Museum at Glastonbury by HRH The Duke of Gloucester on Tuesday 13 June after a major refurbishment.

The Duke was greeted by The Lord Lieutenant of Somerset, Annie Maw, the Chair of the South West Heritage Trust, David Gwyther, and children from St Benedict's Junior School in Glastonbury. The Royal Party toured the Museum with SWHT Chief Executive, Tom Mayberry, and Estelle Gilbert, the project manager. His Royal Highness also met members of the Trust staff, Friends of the museum, volunteers, supporters, contractors and others who worked on the project.



The opening ceremony at the Abbey Barn

Janet Tall

The magnificent 14th-century Abbey Barn remains the centrepiece of the site but outside spaces such as the farmyard and orchard contain new sculptures and family trails that interpret the history of the site and its buildings.

The Museum tells the rich story of Somerset's rural and social history.



Visitors will be able to explore rural life from the 1800s onwards and discover more about the county's heritage including its landscape, food and farming, working life and rural crafts.



The new café offers local produce with a view of Glastonbury Tor from its outside seating area. There will also be a better range of activities and events.



Some of the new galleries at the Rural Life Museum.

Janet Tall

Refurbished galleries in the farmhouse and cowsheds ensure museum collections are better cared for, displayed and interpreted. Most of objects in the galleries have never been displayed before.

We could not finish this news roundup without congratulating the Chairman of the Somerset County History Trust, Tom Mayberry, on his richly deserved MBE for services to Somerset's heritage.





Muchelney surrounded by floodwater *Historic England NMR*

The Monastery on the Big Island: Muchelney Abbey

On a chilly, overcast Saturday morning in June, when heavy rain had been forecast but mercifully did not materialise, a group of supporters of the Somerset VCH Trust met at Muchelney for a tour of the remains of the abbey led by James Bond and Bob Croft.

Muchelney's name means 'the big island'. Like other early religious foundations at Glastonbury and Athelney, it is surrounded by lands liable to flood, the sort of location frequently selected by early hermit communities. Its remoteness and difficulty of access was praised by William of Malmesbury in the 1120s, because it permitted the monks to 'keep vigil for the mysteries of heaven', rarely disturbed by visitors from outside.

Early accounts plausibly name King Ine of Wessex (688-726) as founder of the first communal religious house on the island. Although the charters attributed to him are forgeries, his re-establishment of a

community at Glastonbury endorses his piety. A genuine charter from King Cynewulf records the presence of monks at Muchelney by 762, but by the later ninth century that early community had lapsed. Though the Danes are often blamed for its destruction, a less dramatic drift into apathy is equally possible.

Later sources record its re-foundation in 939 by King Athelstan as a small minster for secular clerks rather than regular monks. Following King Edgar's monastic reforms spearheaded by Dunstan of Glastonbury, Benedictine monks were settled at Muchelney around 950. Thereafter, though locally overshadowed by Glastonbury's much greater wealth, it remained an independent Benedictine abbey up to its suppression in 1538.

During the Middle Ages the Benedictines were by far the most successful religious order in Britain, establishing over 350 abbeys and priories of monks and over 90 houses of nuns. The Rule drawn up by St Benedict for his own foundation at Monte Cassino in the sixth century became more widely imposed across the Carolingian Empire by Charlemagne's son Louis the Pious in the early ninth century, and ultimately became the dominant form of monastic regulation throughout western and central Europe. Its ideals of poverty, chastity, obedience and stability were associated with a routine devoted in part to the cycle of seven communal offices in church through the daylight hours with another in the middle of the night, in part to study and private prayer, and in part to manual labour to make the community as self-sufficient as possible.

Like most monasteries Muchelney found recruitment more difficult after the Black Death, and available figures show that it never contained more than 20 monks after 1381. Its internal history was relatively uneventful, though bishop's visitations in 1334 and 1437 record lax observance of monastic discipline and a few minor scandals. The abbey's final years were marred by corruption. Following the induced resignation of Abbot John Shirborne in 1532, Thomas Cromwell's agent Henry Thornton took a bribe of £100 to arrange for him to be replaced by a young monk named Thomas Ynde, despite complaints that he was no more than 23 years old, well below the minimum age permitted for an abbot. Soon after Thornton's death it became evident that he had double-crossed Ynde, pocketing the whole amount, of which £40 should have gone to Cromwell. When Cromwell demanded payment of the outstanding sum, the cash could only be raised by pawning some of the abbey's plate. When the abbey was

surrendered on 4th April 1538, the King's Visitor, Thomas Leigh, reported the abbot to be 'negligent and of doubtful character' and the ten remaining brethren as 'ignorant and unlearned'.

After the Suppression the abbey premises were granted to Edward Seymour, brother of Henry VIII's late wife Jane Seymour and later regent for Edward VI. Demolition of the church and communal buildings began almost immediately. All salvageable building materials were sold. By 1547 the only portion of the main abbey buildings still standing was the former abbot's residence. Following Seymour's fall from power and execution in 1552 the abbey initially reverted to the Crown; old in 1614, it continued in use as a tenanted farm for the next three centuries.

Following accidental discovery in 1872 of a coffin lid and tile pavement to the north-east of the farmhouse, excavations were undertaken to reveal the long-forgotten plan of the church and claustral buildings. Further excavations between 1948 and 1952 identified the tenth-century church, consisting of a small rectangular nave, a short apsidal chancel with a curved internal face and half-octagonal outer face, and probably two porticus or side-chapels, now visible as a sunken area within the outline of its much larger successor. To the Normans the Anglo-Saxon church would have seemed utterly inadequate, so in the twelfth century it was dismantled, its lower portions overlain by a raft of clay to accommodate a much grander Romanesque church of cruciform plan with apsidal chapels to the east of the transepts and to north, east and south of the apsidal presbytery. This was itself modified on several subsequent occasions, in particular by the removal of all the apses and their replacement by rectangular chapels, including the thirteenth-century Lady Chapel which increased the church's overall length to about 260 feet.

Communal domestic buildings were also laid out in the twelfth century, surrounding a square cloister south of the church, the favoured position to catch the light and warmth of the sun. Now represented only by exposed footings, they followed the usual Benedictine plan, designed to meet the requirements of the routine imposed by the Rule. The cloister garth itself was a square of grass surrounded by a perimeter walk, initially sheltered by a lean-to roof backed on to the surrounding buildings. Towards 1500 the cloister walk was expensively rebuilt

with an vaulting and large glazed traceried windows, resembling the arrangement at Gloucester Cathedral. Portions of the vault springers and windows survive in the south walk, beneath a narrow range of slightly later chambers belonging to the abbot's lodging. This walk also contains a deep recess formerly containing a tank fed by lead pipes and equipped with taps where the monks washed their hands before entering the refectory; a smaller recess probably for storage of napkins and cutlery; and a short length of twelfth-century string-course indicating a much earlier structure behind the fifteenth-century facing masonry. This walk now contains sculptural details from the tenth-century church.

The ground floor of the west range consisted of five rooms. This area was normally used for storage by the cellarer, the senior official responsible for organising supplies of food and drink. Its upper floor may originally have provided guest accommodation, but it was later converted to a great hall, a public outer room attached to the abbot's private quarters.

The east range accommodated the dormitory on the upper floor, originally linked to the church by a flight of steps providing access for the night-time services. The ground floor included the sacristy, where vestments and liturgical equipment were stored; the apsidal-ended chapter-house, where the community gathered every morning for a meeting opened by a reading of one chapter of St Benedict's Rule; and other undercroft chambers used a parlour, day-room or novices' quarters. By the later thirteenth century the eastern apse of the chapter house had been replaced by an independently-roofed square-ended extension, where the stone seats for the monks still survive.

One of the few upstanding communal buildings is the reredorter or latrine. A dendrochronological date from an original timber indicated that this was built some time after 1268. Although much-altered since the end of the monastic period, its purpose is unmistakable. It was equipped with a row of seats along the west wall of the upper floor, which were accessible only from the dormitory. The sewer channel is segregated from the ground-floor room by an internal wall, but the flatness of the site probably made it difficult to achieve an effective flow of water for flushing, and five arches in the outer wall suggest that regular access was needed to cleanse the channel.

The monastic refectory occupied the south range of the cloister. Here the monks ate in silence while listening to a reading given from a pulpit. The monastic diet was originally based on cereals, vegetables, fruit and fish, Benedict's Rule forbidding the consumption of the flesh of four-footed beasts except by sick monks in the infirmary. However, although the fasting days and seasons continued to be observed, meat-eating on other days insidiously became customary, and in 1336 this was legitimised on four days a week by Pope Benedict XII, though no more than half the community was allowed this indulgence on any given day. This relaxation in observance had several consequences.

Considerable unease about consuming meat within the refectory remained, so a second dining-room known as a *misericord* might be built, along with a new meat-kitchen. The lesser numbers regularly consuming meatless meals reduced pressure on space in the refectory, permitting its partial conversion for other purposes. At Muchelney the refectory was entirely rebuilt towards the end of the fifteenth century, and although the blind-traceried panels along its surviving north wall show that this was a very grand and elaborate building, it was significantly shorter than its twelfth-century predecessor. Only the footings of the south wall survive, not quite in alignment with the north wall, so that the east end of the refectory was a little narrower than the west end. The reason for this is not clear.

The principal upstanding buildings occupy the south-west corner of the claustral complex. These mostly belong to the late medieval abbot's residence, but two communal buildings are embedded within them. The English Heritage ticket office and shop occupy a grand antechamber to the monastic refectory. This was not a standard arrangement, and the antechamber may have served as a *misericord* where meat could be eaten. Dendrochronology has dated its ceiling to the late fifteenth century.

Also within the ground floor is the square monastic kitchen, rebuilt on a grand scale with a high-pitched roof. Dendrochronological examination of original timbers has shown that the trees used in its construction were felled around 1312-33. Subsequently this huge space was divided into two separate kitchens by an inserted wall containing back-to-back fireplaces about 16 feet wide, with massive relieving arches.

His alteration necessitated modifications to the roof, dated by dendrochronology to 1401. The smaller eastern kitchen, where the fireplace retains its original joggled lintels, continued to serve the monastic refectory. Serving-hatches in its east wall were partly blocked soon after 1500 by insertion of the great stone stairway giving access to the upper floor of the abbot's residence. The larger western kitchen probably served the abbot's hall in the lost west range, providing more lavish meals for important visitors. Several alterations took place after the Suppression when the building was occupied as a farmhouse, notably the opening of a short passageway through both fireplaces at the southern end, which gives a view straight up the chimney.

A two-storey addition north-west of the kitchen is dated by dendrochronology to between 1513 and 1533. Its upper floor has a fine panelled ceiling with indications that the walls were also originally panelled, fittings for shutters to its windows, a fireplace with a recess for storage of salt or spices, and a small squint looking down into the kitchen. A blocked door in its east wall would have given access to further chambers in the demolished west range. In later years the lower floor of this extension was used as a dairy and the upper floor as a room where cheeses were left to mature.

The grandest surviving room of the abbot's residence is the great chamber over the refectory antechamber, entered from the stairway inserted into the servery space between the east kitchen and refectory. This room has two large two-light south windows with mullions and transoms, a fine timber ceiling, and a magnificent fireplace in the west wall, with an elaborate overmantel carved with four large quatrefoils and stone mouldings terminating in figures of lions framing a panel which probably originally contained a painting. The chamber was built soon after 1500, and one of the windows contains a small fragment of medieval glass displaying a crozier and the initials T.B. for Thomas Broke, abbot from 1502 to 1522. A short flight of stairs from the north-east corner gives access to three narrow domestic rooms built over the south cloister walk at about the same time. The westernmost retains a late medieval fireplace, the central chamber has a slightly irregular barrel roof with considerable remains of an early sixteenth-century painting scheme, and the east room has traces of another contemporary mural painting imitating damask hangings with a vine-scroll frieze, and an open timber roof.

Although the architectural details of the external south face of the refectory antechamber and abbot's great chamber are of purely medieval character, the arrangement of windows, buttresses and battlemented parapet interestingly anticipates the Renaissance preference for symmetry.

Beyond the claustral buildings the bounds of the extensive precinct can be traced with reasonable certainty. On the western side was the outer court, entered through a great gatehouse with a porter's lodge attached. This provided the abbey's link with the outside world, containing buildings serving public needs, such as the guesthouse and the almonry. The partly-medieval building now called Almonry Barn, on the precinct boundary directly west of the abbey church, was probably the monastic guesthouse. The medieval almonry itself, which distributed food to the poor, was demolished in 1902. The more secluded eastern side of the precinct normally contained the monastic infirmary and cemetery. In times of drought the foundations of the infirmary are revealed by parch marks, and recent geophysical survey has shown an extensive complex of buildings to the east of the dormitory range. The southern part of Muchelney's precinct was probably occupied mainly by orchards and gardens, but slight earthworks indicate further former buildings here, probably workshops or service buildings, and a moat-like feature probably used as a fishpond.

The parish church is separated from the north transept of the monastic church by a gap of less than 3 feet. It contains medieval tiles from the early excavations. It is notable for its elaborate Somerset-style west tower, the large external stoup alongside the west door, the unusual style of its font, and the rustic seventeenth-century paintings of angels on its wagon roof. Further north is the medieval priest's house, built after the abbey's appropriation of the parish church under an agreement made with the bishop in 1308, whereby the abbot was to provide the parish priest with a new dwelling and a daily allowance of food and drink. The house originally consisted of a two-bay open-roofed hall with a parlour and principal chamber to the east and small service rooms with an upper-floor chamber beyond the cross-passage at the west end. Despite many subsequent alterations, its medieval character is still very evident.



Muchelney abbey

Historic England NMR

No naked bathing in Bath!

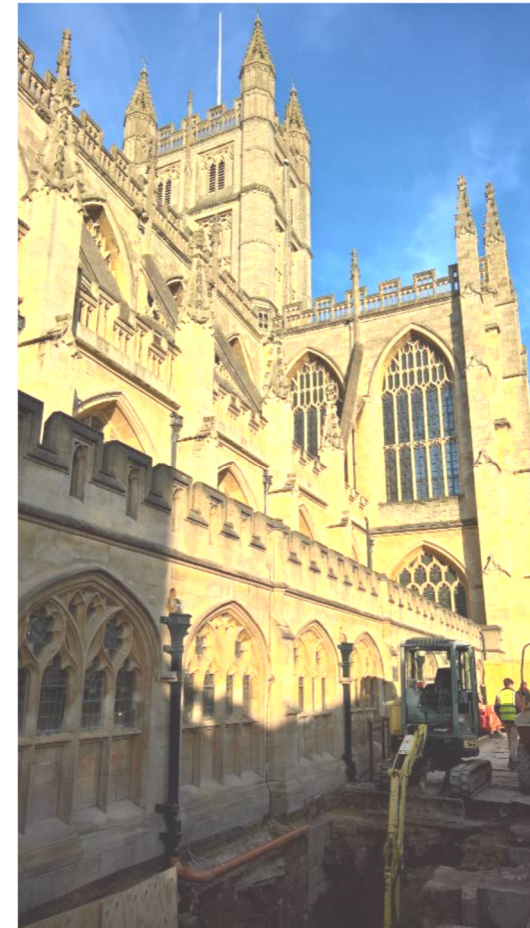
That renowned fifteenth century bishop of Bath and Wells, Thomas Bekynton, was greatly concerned with the propriety of bathers in the warm waters of Bath. Writing from Banwell (one of the bishop's manors) in August 1449, Bekynton issued an injunction to the clergy of Bath instructing them to act. The entry in his register is rather amusing and describes a report that has reached the ears of the bishop 'that the heavenly gift of warm and healing waters with which the city of Bath has been endowed from of old is turned into an abuse by the shamelessness and uncleanness of the people of that city, insomuch that, when any persons, whether male or female, go to the said waters to bathe and recover their health, and through modesty and shame try to cover their privy parts, the men with drawers (*femoralibus*) and the women with smocks (*subunculis*), they, the said people, by what they say is an established custom of the city, barbarously and shamelessly strip them of their said garments and reveal them to the gaze of bystanders, and inflict on them not only the loss of their garments but a heavy monetary fine'.

Bekynton's injunction to his clergy was that they should admonish all the citizens of Bath to 'abstain from such excesses under penalty of greater excommunication'. Finally he enjoined 'that henceforth no males or females who have reached puberty go to the baths without wearing such drawers and smocks or other linen garments'.

That naked swimming was not uncommon in the Middle Ages is clear from illustrations in various manuscripts such as the *Très Riches Heures* produced for the Duc de Berry in 1413-16. However it seems likely that many of the bathers who visited Bath did not or could not swim. They came instead for the healing properties of the water and would not have had any experience of appearing naked in a public place. While the inhabitants of Bath appear to have given hygiene the highest priority at their famous baths, their bishop clearly saw decency and propriety as much more important. This entry in Bekynton's register is the only one referring to the issue, so it is not clear whether his injunction achieved its objectives, or

whether the citizens of Bath ignored him with impunity and continued to collect some useful income.

Des Atkinson



The Bath Abbey Footprint project

Anyone who has visited Bath Abbey in recent months will have seen various information panels and leaflets describing the Bath Abbey Footprint project. This is a £19.3 million programme of capital works and interpretation which will provide innovative and sustainable solutions to the reordering of Bath Abbey for the next generation. As part of the development proposals permission is needed from Bath and North East Somerset Council for planning and listed building works; Historic England for works within the scheduled monument area and Bath and Wells Diocese for works that require a faculty.

Some of the proposed works will have an impact upon the archaeological deposits within the Abbey and Bob Croft has advised the Bath and Wells Diocesan Advisory Committee on what is required to ensure that the appropriate monitoring and recording is in place as the work progresses. A detailed Written Scheme of Archaeological Investigation has been agreed by all parties and the first phase of archaeological work is now underway.

The programme of redevelopment will include:

- Stabilising the ground beneath the Abbey floor – this will have some impact upon the archaeological layers but the scheme has been carefully designed to have a limited impact upon the buried remains.
- Tapping into Bath's greatest natural resource and heating the Abbey using energy from the hot springs
- Adapting the interior of the Abbey so that it better expresses the faith and practice of the Abbey community and is more inviting for worship
- Installing energy efficient lighting and providing storage for staging
- Opening a new Song School for our Choirs and expanding the singing programme for local primary and secondary schools
- Providing a modern, welcoming space volunteers and visiting choirs
- Creating 200 square metres of new space to provide a contemporary interpretation centre which will act as the hub for projects and activities displayed throughout the Abbey.



The archaeological work is being carried out by Cotswold Archaeology and Dr Kevin Blockley of Cambrian Archaeology is responsible for the overall archaeological direction of the site works. So far work has concentrated upon the excavation of 18th and 19th century deposits but the remains of an early grave and compacted layers indicate that there is good survival of medieval and earlier deposits in parts of the site. For further information check out the website: <http://www.bathabbey.org/footprint> or contact the Project Director Charles Curnock at Bath Abbey.

Bob Croft



An artist's impression of a cross section below the Abbey showing the new spaces and how they relate to the footprint of the Abbey Church.



Detailed archaeological recording by Cotswold Archaeology of foundations on the south side of Bath Abbey Feb 2017.

Bath as a Major Urban Centre

Bath has been, justly, designated a UNESCO World Heritage site, the *only* UK city to be so designated as a whole. Its fame does, however, carry with it the danger of accepting its history and heritage as (in the wise words of Peter Borsary) confined to 'the well-established twin centred classical vision of the spa's history, with the emphasis on the Romans and the Georgians'. There is, however, much more to its part in the national urban story than that. One reminder of that fact is the celebration of Somerset Day on 11 May: it may be King Alfred's decisive victory over the Danes which comes first to mind (a battle which, though master-minded from Somerset, took place in Wiltshire), but it also commemorates the coronation of Alfred's great-grandson Edgar as king of the newly-created kingdom of England, which took place in Bath Abbey on 11 May 973. That was a sure sign of Bath's tenth-century importance, as well as its frontier location between the newly-united kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia. Altogether, as Andrew Foyle puts it in his excellent revised Pevsner guide to north Somerset. 'it is often forgotten how flourishing Bath was in the Middle Ages and that its prosperity, rooted in the cloth trade, continued to the very moment when the third Bath leapt to fame... the Bath of Ralph Allen and Beau Nash, of Bath stone and polite manners, of Smollett and Jane Austen, the spa *par excellence* of Britain'.

That is in no way intended to diminish the significance of Roman (or Georgian) Bath. It was not only the largest and wealthiest urban centre in what would later be the county of Somerset – well ahead of its nearest rival, Ilchester – but also of great importance in the province of *Britannia* as a whole, and indeed further afield. It was, as Peter Leach puts it in *Roman Somerset*, 'famed both throughout Britain and the Empire. Its hot springs have been its fortune ever since the Romans first realised their potential'. Among the buildings known from excavations and surviving foundations, pride of place rightly goes to the twin religious and leisure complex, including of course the baths, the earliest and grandest Roman civil buildings known in Britain. It included a temple dedicated to the local cult of the goddess Sul or Sulis, identified by the Romans with Minerva : hence their name for the town, *Aquae Sulis*.

Despite its grandeur and wealth, Bath – like all Romano-British towns – dwindled in the fifth and sixth centuries until it was nearly depopulated, and although the West Saxons recorded a tradition that they had captured the 'city' of Bath from the Britons in 577, it may not be reliable, being written down centuries later, and it does not prove that there was anything urban at that time. Certainly an Anglo-Saxon poem describing an unnamed fortress which may have been Bath and describing hot baths suggests a ruined settlement. However, from the seventh century onwards Bath revived both as an ecclesiastical and royal centre, and it has never again ceased to be urban.

It is recorded from the seventh and eight centuries as the location of a nunnery and then of an abbey- both of them founded or sponsored by the kings of Mercia and then Wessex. Already in 796 one Mercian king could call it a celebrated town, and in 864 a later king held a royal council there. Under either Alfred, or his son and successor Edward the Elder, it became one of the network of fortified towns (burhs) installed to defend Wessex and Mercia against the Danes, and (as we have seen) it was chosen in 973 for the highly symbolic coronation of King Edgar: in other words, he or his advisers wanted to demonstrate his power and prestige not in Winchester or Kingston-upon-Thames (like many earlier West Saxon kings), but in a town close to the border of Mercia and Wessex, like the similarly-placed Oxford, which was also coming to national importance at that time.

After the Norman Conquest, the city became even more important. Already by 1066 (judging from Domesday Book and from the quantity of coins minted in Bath) it may have ranked among the twenty largest towns in England. In 1090-1 William II increased its importance further by licensing the bishop of Wells to move his cathedral to Bath, and he also granted the entire city (previously, like most larger towns, a royal possession) to the bishop. This was a recognition that Bath was more important than Wells, for the move was one of a series under the Normans by which cathedrals were to be housed in major towns rather than lesser settlements. Much of Bath's medieval importance must have come from its craftspeople and traders – for it was still the largest town in the county – and from the business generated by its monastic cathedral, but its baths remained important and attracted many visitors: in the 1130s one chronicler noted in passing that they drew visitors from

all over England, as did John Leland four centuries later; and they attracted at least one royal visitor in the person of Henry VI.

It is the medieval period of Bath's prosperity, continuing into Tudor and Stuart times, that is most difficult to recapture, for its major buildings (other than the abbey) have almost all since been swept away, together with its city walls and gates. Even that abbey had effectively lost its cathedral status back to Wells after 1218, although ever since 1245 it has continued to be bracketed with its rival as the see of Bath and Wells in an attempt by the pope to allay their mutual jealousy. The city was still the 69th largest city in England in 1377, judging from the notorious poll tax, and its cloth manufacturing and trade continued to thrive. Tudor and Stuart Bath possessed many fine houses of craftspeople and traders, but almost all were timber-framed, and almost all were replaced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Other than the abbey church, all we can see today of the long period between the Romans and the Georgians is the medieval street pattern within the former walled centre. Even that abbey church was twice nearly lost, once when it was badly underfunded and neglected, only to be saved by a total rebuilding by a generous bishop, Oliver King, at the very end of the middle ages, and the second when it was dissolved as a monastery by Henry VIII a generation later, though fortunately its abbey church was saved from demolition, and became in 1573 the town's parish church.

It was the revived importance of the spa from 1704, when Beau Nash became Master of Ceremonies there, and the spectacular architecture that followed from the 1720s, when Bath reacquired national fame, and the draw of 'polite' society, that the city rediscovered its glory days. By the time that the first national census was taken in 1801, it was the ninth largest town in England, with nearly 29,000 inhabitants, far ahead of its nearest rivals, Frome and Taunton. Inevitably, it fell back (in relative terms) in the nineteenth century as great ports and industrial cities outpaced it, including of course Bristol, though in 1861 it was still the 25th largest town in England. Indeed, if we take (as we should) the historic county of Somerset, Bath still remains easily its largest urban centre, with a population at the 2011 census of nearly 95,000: its closest competitor, Weston-super Mare, had 76,000. In any case, urban importance and fame are not merely a matter of size.

With its modern revival as a tourist centre, the creation of a new university, the success of conservation in the centre after a bleak period of post-war destruction, and the recent success of the new Thermae Bath Spa complex, Bath is surely enjoying a fourth great age as a major British city.

David Palliser



A decaying headstone to a remarkable family

Just beyond the east wall of Bishops Hull church is a decayed and flaking headstone commemorating John Williams, his youngest daughter Sarah and her husband John Brown buried between 1791 and 1853. Not very promising or easy subjects for research you might think, especially with such common names but the research was surprisingly rewarding.

The Williams family had been plantation owners in Antigua since the 17th century. Colonel Rowland Williams was governor in the late 17th century and there were many Williams families among the plantation owners of the island by the early 18th century including John Williams who held lands in St John's. He died c. 1750 leaving among several children by his wife Martha John born c. 1703. The younger John settled on the neighbouring island of Nevis before 1725 when his uncle Thomas Oesterman died leaving property to his nephews and niece. The bequest probably allowed John to marry.

Colonel John Williams and his wife Sarah had at least three children Elizabeth born c. 1731, Sarah born c. 1733 and John born c. 1736. They appear to have got into financial difficulties and had to sell up before leaving for England. The buyer of at least some of the land was the Honourable John Richardson Herbert, later President of the Council of Nevis for 25 years. Herbert seems to have begun an affair with Elizabeth Williams and the couple had a 'Fleet' wedding, a clandestine marriage, at St George's chapel in Mayfair in 1752. They returned to Nevis to Herbert's Montpelier plantation in St John Figtree parish but the rest of the Williams family appear to have stayed in London. Elizabeth brought her husband half her uncle Thomas's estate in Antigua and possibly property in Nevis, which may have been the foundation of his wealth. She had only one surviving child, a daughter Martha Williams Herbert, and died young being buried in Nevis in 1769 where her memorial takes a few years off her age!

John Richardson Herbert never remarried but had many illegitimate children, some of whom he later acknowledged and provided for in his will. He also had the care of his orphaned niece Frances 'Fanny' Woolward after her father's death in 1779. His wealth and property increased and he bought further plantations.



Like most plantation owners' children Martha Williams Herbert went to England to be educated. She was accompanied to England in 1761 by her parents and her aunt Sarah 'Sally' Herbert, who never married. Having seen their little girl settled in London Martha's parents returned to Nevis. Sadly Martha was not to see her mother again. She lived partly with her aunt Sally, but also spent time with her other aunt Sarah Williams and her parents and in 1770 with Mrs Webbe in Salisbury. Her education complete Martha returned with Aunt Sally to Nevis.

Martha's cousin had married a much older man Dr Josiah Nisbet in 1779 and the next year had a son Josiah. It might have been because of acquaintances Martha had made there that Fanny and Josiah went with their child to Salisbury when they visited England but Dr Nisbet, already ill, died there in 1781 and Fanny returned with her son to her uncle John Richardson Herbert and her cousin Martha at Montpelier in Nevis. There she met the young naval officer Horatio Nelson. They were married on 11 March 1787 and two months later on 18 May 1787 Martha married 50-year old widower Andrew Hamilton. Andrew was born on Nevis and his family home is now the Museum of Nevis. He became President of the Leeward Island's General Council in 1798 and died on 3 April 1808.

Although much younger than his father-in-law, John Richardson Herbert was in poor health by the late 1780s and having seen his daughter and niece married he went to London intending to spend his last years there. In 1788 he made his will while residing at Cavendish Square in London. It is a very long will but among other provisions he left three slaves to the freed woman who was the mother of at least one of his children. Probably the English climate did not suit him, however, for he returned to Nevis where he made several codicils to his will before he died in 1793. He left his daughter Martha a wealthy woman and a considerable sugar plantation and slave owner. She owned six estates including Montpelier and over 800 slaves. However, by 1808 she was a childless widow and under her father's will her estates would pass to his great nephew when she died.

By contrast to the Herberts the Williams family seems to have given up plantation life altogether and they remained in England. Colonel John Williams's only son, John Williams junior, aspired to a political career in England having married an Englishwoman Charlotte Mary Thornhill in 1766 by whom he had a daughter Sarah Charlotte in 1767 at Hampstead. He may have made several attempts at getting elected but was finally successful in winning the seat at Saltash, Cornwall in 1772. Unfortunately for him a petition was brought against the election for bribery and after about two months and two speeches in the Commons John Williams lost his seat. He probably spent the rest of his life at Hampstead.

John Williams the elder and his daughter Sarah left London, possibly after the death of his wife, and moved to Somerset to Bishops Hull parish. Bishops Hull was by this date home to the Mills family,

also of Nevis, whom they probably knew because John Richardson Herbert was attorney for the Nevis estates of Thomas Mills the elder of St Kitts. Also both families had a mutual friend in John Pinney. John Williams died on 25 June 1791 and was buried in Bishops Hull churchyard on 30 June.

At Ruishton on 3 September 1805 aged c.72 Sarah Williams married John Brown of Henlade, Ruishton, 44 years her junior. They settled in St James's Place, Taunton. In 1808 having attained her 75th year Sarah consulted Wiveliscombe lawyer Philip Hancock about making a new will. She was not wealthy but comfortably off, holding a mortgage on lands in Nevis. She left most of her money to her husband, but made careful provision for the possibility of surviving him! Although John Richardson Herbert had not mentioned his wife's family in his will, Sarah had not forgotten his daughter and made bequests of money to Martha and to her other niece, John William's daughter Sarah Charlotte although her aunt transposed the Christian names. In 1789 Sarah Charlotte had married prosperous Hatton Garden lawyer Thomas Lane and amongst their several children was Charles Lane, later Deputy Lieutenant of Oxfordshire who lived in considerable style at Badgemore House in Henley on Thames in the mid 19th century.

Sarah's testamentary arrangements were rather premature and she outlived her niece Martha who died childless in August 1819. Sarah Brown died on 13 June 1830 aged 97. It was probably her husband who was responsible for the beautifully engraved but friable headstone to his wife and father-in-law. John Brown's death on 28 April 1853 was recorded in an almost exactly matching style.

John did not remarry after Sarah's death but moved to Bishop's Hull acquiring two houses: Henley House on the Wellington Road where he lived and a house opposite the Congregational chapel, since demolished, where one of his tenants was the minister Robert Winton and where the chapel Sunday school was held before 1883. When his brother William Brown died John took in his widow and children. However, by 1851 he was living alone with a housekeeper and on his death in 1853 was buried with his wife and father-in-law in Bishops Hull churchyard. If those stones could speak? Perhaps they do!

Mary Siraut

Historic Images of Somerset



South West Heritage Trust



A family were taking an early motoring holiday in Somerset and posed with their shiny American car in front of the old almshouses at Stogumber. The six almshouses were built in the early 17th century in fulfilment of the bequest by Sir George Sydenham (d. 1597) for the use of poor widows who each received a small pension. In 1939 the almshouses were sold and converted into a single house.

However, the most intriguing item in the view, except for car enthusiasts, is the attractive stone signpost built into the wall and curved round the corner. Hands with pointed fingers direct early motorists to Watchet, Williton, Crowcombe and the railway station. Sadly all one sees there now is a standard metal sign directing motorists to the station and Crowcombe and more detailed directions on a modern sign post across the road.

Stogumber is an attractive village well worth exploring and its history will be found in [VCH Somerset V](#).

Forthcoming Events



Alcombe

Mary Siraut

Sunday 6 August 2017

There will be a repeat of the VCH history walk around Alcombe in memory of Hilary Binding from 1.30 pm. There are a few places left. Booking is essential.

Thursday 19 October 2017

There will be the fourth VCH Mick Aston lecture in the Great Hall in the Museum of Somerset. Bob Croft will speak on *Mick Aston and Somerset Archaeology*. Details will be circulated to newsletter subscribers and advertised on the [website](#) nearer the date, booking will be essential.

We also hope to have an autumn walk possibly at Winscombe or a repeat of the Dunster Old Roads walk and advance notice will be sent to everyone on the mailing list.

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:

Victoria County History of Somerset

Somerset Heritage Centre,
Brunel Way, Norton Fitzwarren,
Taunton, TA2 6SF

vch@swheritage.org.uk

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.