

COMMUNITY LIFE

Theatre and Cinema

In 1680 a Trull goldsmith built a show called *The beginning of the world*, which he had permission to show in and around Taunton.¹ There were two ‘mountebank stages’ in the Cornhill and one each at the Half Moon and The Three Cups, which were condemned as obstructions in 1769.² One of those may have produced the play attended by militia officers in 1763.³ A theatre was recorded at the Three Cups, later the London Hotel, in 1773 possibly replacing the outside stage. There were two galleries and evening performances included concerts and plays provided by local performers and travelling companies.⁴ The Taunton Comedians performed in Tiverton in 1775.⁵ In 1786 a small theatre was opened by actor Mr Biggs on the south side of East Reach behind a public house, in consequence renamed the Shakespeare.⁶ Theatre manager Sidley Harper requested a licence to perform in Taunton in 1796 and the Curtis family brought *The Tempest* in 1799.⁷

In 1799 the theatre was rebuilt on the site of a former public house and cottages in Silver Street about 72 ft long and 36 ft wide. It opened in March 1800 and had a two-month season starting with assize week.⁸ Plays were usually followed by light entertainment in the form of songs and farces and there were also evenings devoted to variety performances. In 1801 seats were 3s. in boxes, 2s. in the pit and 1s. in the gallery, each section with its own entrance from the street.⁹ During assize week the programme changed nightly. The theatre

¹ *Cal. SP. Dom.* Jul.—Sep. 1683, 192.

² SHC, DD/SAS/C795/BA/9/7 (mkt plan); D/B/ta/31/1/1, p. 53.

³ SHC, DD/HC/93/3/1.

⁴ SHC, DD/SAS/C2402/52; PAM 2160, R. Bush, *The Story of the County Hotel*, 11; J. Barnard, *Retrospections of the Stage* (1830), pp. 58, 63-8, 73.

⁵ J. Bourne, *Georgian Tiverton* (Devon and Cornwall Rec. Soc. 1986), 24—5.

⁶ SHC, A/CPT 15/5.

⁷ SHC, Q/SR 364/3/22; DD/SAS/C2402/20/1.

⁸ Toulmin, *History of Taunton*, rev. J. Savage (Taunton, 1822), 596; SHC, DD/SP/178 (1800); DD/SAS/FA/185, pp. 158, 160; DD/CH/138/1; DD/SAS/C795/FA/185. pp. 97—8. 157—8, 160.

⁹ SHC, A/DIF/44, 97; A/CTP/12/3; SHC, DD/SAS/C416/8; Dr H. Alford, *Olden Taunton, a Cycle of Change* (Taunton c. 1921), 6—7.

was managed by actor and playwright Henry Lee (1763—1836) from 1801—18 when he handed over to T. A. Chaplin.¹⁰ Lee's Taunton Company toured neighbouring towns like Crewkerne but his circuit included Barnstaple in Devon, Poole in Dorset and Guernsey.¹¹ In April 1820 Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and *Hamlet* were performed with actors from London and Bristol, the latter play sponsored by local freemasons¹² although there were local actors.¹³ The theatre was enfranchised in 1826, refurbished in 1831, and was provided with gaslight in 1833.¹⁴ Edmund Kean played Shylock in 1816, Richard III and Othello in 1822 and performed there again in 1839 when the theatre reopened after a temporary closure.¹⁵ It was last recorded as a 'neat theatre' in 1842.¹⁶ Theatrical performers visited Taunton during the 19th century, accompanied by scene painters in 1851 and the London Hotel hosted plays and operas in its assembly room.¹⁷

Local theatrical groups included the Taunton Amateur Dramatic Club (fl. 1872—1901 and 1908—11)¹⁸ and the Taunton Players between 1909 and 1927.¹⁹ The Taunton Liberty Players put on original plays by West Country writers at the Corfield Hall in the 1950s and 1960s and even performed in Germany. The hall was used for theatre performances until the 1970s.²⁰ The Taunton Thespians, founded in 1928, and the Wayfarers Pantomime Society formed before 1964 were still active in the early 21st century²¹

It had been intended to build a theatre at the Wellington Road college site but the cost was too great and instead an appeal was set up for a town theatre. In 1977 the Brewhouse

¹⁰ ODNB, Henry Lee: accessed 17 Mar. 2022; SHC, DD/SAS/C2402/20/1—2, 52.

¹¹ SHC, DD/SAS/S241/1; ODNB, Henry Lee.

¹² BBC Somerset images: accessed 22 March 2016.

¹³ N. Devon RO, 1534M/T16—17, 21—2.

¹⁴ SHC, DD/CH/98, 138/1; *Taunton Courier*, 20 Apr. 1831: BNA accessed 22 March 2018.

¹⁵ SHC, DD/SAS/C416/8; DD/SAS/C2402/20/3; 23; Cambridge Univ. Lib., Add.MS 7633/68-123/100.

¹⁶ *Pigot Dir.* (1842).

¹⁷ TNA, HO 107/972, 1923; DD/TBL/75.

¹⁸ *Taunton Courier* 3 Apr. 1872, 6 Nov. 1901, 16 Dec. 1908, 22 Feb. 1911: BNA Accessed 16 Aug. 2022; *Taunton and West Somerset Annual 1897* (Taunton, 1896), 123.

¹⁹ SHC, A/BXQ.

²⁰ *Taunton Courier* 1 Sep. 1956: BNA Accessed 16 Aug. 2022; SHC, A/DIF/114/12; DD/TBL/73, 75.

²¹ *Taunton Courier* 6 March 1929: BNA Accessed 16 Aug. 2022; SHC, A/DLT; A/DMP/3.

Theatre and Arts Centre opened on the site of a brewery by the river at Coal Orchard incorporating the manager's house as restaurant and offices. It has since been extended and despite financial difficulties and a temporary closure it remains in use.²² A second theatre, the Tacchi Morris, is in West Monkton parish.

Diorama and myriorama were presented in the late 19th century and in the early 20th century at the London Hotel assembly room, which housed the Empire or County Cinema until 1934.²³ It had matinee performances and continuous film shows from 6.30 until 10.30 in the evening.²⁴ The Victoria Rooms on the Parade also had a cinematography licence and the Exchange Picture House in the corn exchange was in use until the 1930s owned by the borough but let out.²⁵ The latter was open for two hours every evening and had three matinees a week.²⁶ A planned picture theatre in Priory Avenue in 1910 was not built²⁷ but in 1913 the Lyceum Theatre opened on the site of the George inn and bowling alley on the corner of Staplegrove and Station roads. By 1920 it was a theatre and cinema with changing rooms built on the west end. Two houses to the west and adjoining land on Station Road were acquired to create parking areas. The cinema could accommodate 750 and plays and pantomimes continued to be staged until the late 1930s. In 1935 it was assigned to the Odeon company and in 1967 to Capital and Provincial Cinemas who bought the freehold from the Lyceum Company in 1970. It was renamed the Classic but in 1981 the car park was sold to an adjoining garage and the cinema closed c. 1990. In 1991 it was demolished to build a block of flats known as Laverock Court.²⁸ A second Forum cinema was planned adjoining in 1936 but was not built.²⁹

²² SHC, A/ACO 6/23.

²³ SHC, A/DIF/95/32; D/G/ta/8a/41 (11 Mar. 1908); D/G/ta/8a/42 (24 Mar. 1909); PAM 2160, Bush, *County Hotel*, 20—1.

²⁴ Hatcher and Sons, *Shopping in Taunton* (Taunton, 1928), 8.

²⁵ SHC, A/DIF/95/32; *Kelly's Dir. Som.* (1923); *Kelly's Dir. Taunton* (1929) 35.

²⁶ *Shopping in Taunton*, 8.

²⁷ SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/41/539.

²⁸ SHC, A/BMG 5/2; A/CUO 1; A/ANX/1; ADAS/2 (12388).

The Gaiety in Kingston Rd began as a temporary building among warehouses in 1920. It was a government cinema moved from Salisbury plain where it had been used to entertain the troops. Later that year it was extended into one of the warehouses and given a new front under a veranda.³⁰ The Vickery family ran it as the Gaiety Cinema Company with continuous film shows from 6.30 until 10.30 in the evening.³¹ It was replaced by a permanent building which could accommodate 500 in the 1930s but unlike the other cinemas it closed on Sundays.³² In the late 20th century it became a nightclub, a bingo hall and finally a billiard hall. It was demolished in the early 21st century and replaced by a block of flats. The Gaumont Palace opened in Corporation Street in 1932 for films and live performances but in the late 20th century it became a bingo hall, which it remained in the 2020s.³³ In the 1950s the Taunton Film Society showed foreign language films at the Wyndham Hall and a photographer in Dellars Yard showed 16mm films with sound.³⁴

Assembly and public rooms

The Assembly Room was a first-floor building over trading arcades in the market place. It was privately owned by 1708 and its date of construction is unknown, but it may have been built because the 15th-century Guildhall had become inadequate or unavailable for private functions. In 1672 the Guildhall was held by a wealthy innkeeper who had furnished it with cooking equipment.³⁵ Both were demolished in 1770 to make way for a new market house.³⁶ The new building contained a court room, accommodation for the keeper, beer cellars, a subscription coffee or club room, a billiard room, a card room and a first-floor

²⁹ SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/99/2233.

³⁰ SHC, D/B/ta/4/3/3 (1920); D/B/ta/24/1/50/794, 799.

³¹ *Shopping in Taunton*, 8; SHC, DD/AY/331.

³² *Kelly's Dir. Taunton* (1923); SHC, A/BMG 5/2; DD/TBL/73.

³³ SHC, A/BMG 4/3, 6; 5/2; D/B/ta/24/1/75/1563.

³⁴ SHC, DD/TBL/73.

³⁵ SHC, A/APT/15/5, p. 45; D/B/ta/31/5/2 (g); DD/SP/1672/66.

³⁶ SHC, D/B/ta/31/1/1, pp. 5, 73, 129.

assembly room 24 ft high with a music gallery and adorned by two chandeliers given by Colonel Coxe before 1791 and a large portrait of George III given by Benjamin Hammet in 1793.³⁷ In 1772 that room was let for the winter season at not less than ten guineas.³⁸ It was used for concerts, including a performance by Franz Liszt in 1840, and despite competition from other venues balls were held regularly until the late 19th century.³⁹

A gaslit assembly room was built behind the London later County Hotel, East Street in 1841. In 1861 it was rebuilt 100ft by 40 ft and 30 ft high and was used as a theatre, concert hall, ballroom and banqueting room.⁴⁰ Jenny Lind sang there in 1862 donating her fee with the rest of the ticket sales to the hospital, which her husband Otto Goldsmidt visited.⁴¹ From 1880 the Doyley Carte performed in the room, which could accommodate 300, 650 by 1896 when it had a gallery.⁴² A new stage was built in 1901.⁴³ In 1920 the ballroom was converted to a 555-seat cinema known as the Empire Cinema and after 1934 became the Empire Hall providing live entertainment in the 1940s and Saturday night dances in the 1950s.⁴⁴ In 1960 it was replaced by the County or Queen's ballroom, a function room used for commercial exhibitions and pop concerts. It was demolished after the hotel closed in the late 20th century.⁴⁵ The Victoria Rooms, forming the first floor of the market built in 1822 and accommodating 250 were also known as the Parade Assembly Rooms. They were demolished in 1961.⁴⁶

³⁷ SHC, A/CPT 15/5; D/B/ta/31/1/1, pp. 374, 407—9. The painting is now at the SHC.

³⁸ SHC, D/B/ta/31/1/1, p.

³⁹ SHC, D/B/ta/31/1/1, pp. 5, 73, 129; *Taunton Courier*, 20 Aug. 1840, 21 Dec. 1870; BNA accessed 24 July 2019.

⁴⁰ Alford, *Olden Taunton*, 32; SHC, PAM 2160, Bush, *County Hotel*, 20.

⁴¹ SHC, DD/SAS/C909/169; PAM 239, J. Guy, *Malachi's Monument*, 54.

⁴² SHC, PAM 2160, Bush, *County Hotel*, 23; *Taunton and West Somerset Annual 1897* (Taunton, 1896), 132.

⁴³ SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/29/2.

⁴⁴ SHC, A/EFC/1; PAM 2160, Bush, *County Hotel*, 20—1; D/B/ta/24/1/50/819; DD/TBL/73.

⁴⁵ SHC, A/ACO 6/6; A/CTP 12/4; A/DOL 1; A/DIF/95/32, 114/2.

⁴⁶ SHC, A/EHA/8.1; *Taunton and West Somerset Annual 1897* (Taunton, 1896), 132.

Several public halls were connected either with hotels or churches although the Mechanics Institute in Hunts Court was said to have been first built as a public hall in 1839.⁴⁷ The Taunton Teetotal Society was formed c. 1838⁴⁸ and a Temperance Hall was built in 1841 behind a temperance hotel at 10 St James Street.⁴⁹ A new public room off St James Street was proposed in 1874 and a porticoed hall in Canon Street was designed in 1882 but not built.⁵⁰ In 1885 William Rawlinson, owner of Pearsall's silk mills, built a large iron-roofed brick and timber Temperance Hall seating 350 approached by a broad flight of steps on the south-east side of High Street behind the British Workman coffee tavern.⁵¹ In 1888 the hall provided a soup kitchen and was used by the Taunton Town Mission from 1892 to 1910.⁵² It was also used as a concert hall.⁵³ It became a depository in the 1920s and was later demolished to build a multi-storey car park.⁵⁴ In 1885 a large lecture hall was built by John Spiller in Haydon Road but it was replaced by houses c. 1900.⁵⁵

Smaller events were held in those inns that had large dining or club rooms including the Crown in High Street, the Boot in Paul Street and the Royal Marine in Silver Street. Suburban public houses with more space often had a clubroom by the early 20th century.⁵⁶

Music

The portreeves were accused in 1693 of allowing ballad singers to perform on the Cornhill, presumably the ballads were political.⁵⁷ Instruments like virginals and citterns were found in

⁴⁷ *Pigot Dir. Som.* (1842).

⁴⁸ *Taunton Courier*, 24 March 1877: BNA accessed 24 July 2019.

⁴⁹ *Taunton Courier*, 13 Jan. 1841: BNA accessed 24 July 2019; SHC, DD/SAS/C212/13/1, p. 51.

⁵⁰ SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/9/287, D/B/ta/24/1/16/643.

⁵¹ SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/19/796.

⁵² *The Church of England Temperance Society in the Diocese of Bath and Wells* (1878), 113; E. Jebout, *A Popular History of West Somerset* (1893), addenda 1885; *Som. Co. Gazette*, 14 Jan. 1888: BNA accessed 24 July 2019.

⁵³ SHC, DD/TBL/42/9/7 (*Taunton Mail* 20 Feb. 1901, p. 4).

⁵⁴ *Taunton and West Somerset Annual 1897* (1896), 132; TNA, IR 58/823637 (606); below, rel. hist. nonconf.; SHC, D/B/ta/13/3/1, p.41; D/DC/tau,d/25/15 (1685).

⁵⁵ SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/20/825.

⁵⁶ Wilts and Swindon HC, 1075/001/396; D/DC/tau.d/25/13 (1391); D/R/ta/34/9/3.

inns and homes in the 17th century.⁵⁸ There were several families of musicians and composers in Taunton. Richard Mico (c. 1590—1661) embarked on a musical career and became resident musician to the Petres at Thornden Hall, Essex.⁵⁹ The prolific and musical Turle family included cellist James Turle (1766—1844) and his sons James Turle (1802—1882), organist at Westminster Abbey, and Robert organist of Armagh Cathedral for nearly 50 years.⁶⁰ Others were violinists Joseph (d. 1805) and Joseph (d. 1830) and William (1795—1833), a music teacher, composer and organist of St James' and later of St Mary's.⁶¹ Most churches had salaried organists in the 19th century; five organists were recorded in 1864.⁶² St Mary's church especially spent a great deal on its organ and organists and by the 20th century hosted concerts.⁶³

The Comer family of the Crescent taught, wrote and played music and organised subscription concerts in their home in the 1840s.⁶⁴ The later 19th-century Summerhayes family were all musical, teaching music and selling music and pianos. Samuel Summerhayes was a yeomanry bandmaster from the age of 17 until his death. He was also organist at three Taunton churches for nearly 40 years and composed a great deal of music.⁶⁵ Frederick Baker (1857—1933) was a composer of dance music and a musician with his own band who kept a music shop and piano warehouse.⁶⁶

⁵⁷ SHC, DD/MT/15/1 (1693); DD/SP/18/75.

⁵⁸ SHC, DD/SP/166/4, 1676/10; 1684/64..

⁵⁹ Richard Mico, oxfordmusiconline/grove: accessed 19 Feb 2019.

⁶⁰ James Turle, oxfordmusiconline/grove: accessed 19 Feb 2019; A. Humphries, *Som Parishes*, 681.

⁶¹ SHC, D/P/tau.ja 4/1/4, 9/1/1; D/P/tau.m 4/1/6; TNA, PROB 11/1835/412; *Taunton Courier*, 11 June 1834: BNA accessed 24 July 2019.

⁶² *Goodman's Dir. Taunton* (1864), 95.

⁶³ Below, rel. hist.

⁶⁴ SHC, A/ADD/2/4—5.

⁶⁵ SHC, A/ADD/1; TNA, PROB 11/2259/51.

⁶⁶ *Taunton Courier*, 29 Nov. 1933: BNA accessed 22 Aug. 2022; SHC, A/CUH/6/1.

As well as local musicians German and Italian musicians and singers were regular visitors in the 19th century.⁶⁷ Distinguished visiting performers have included Franz Liszt, Jenny Lind, Ida Haendel, Moura Lympany, the Carl Rosa Opera and the Royal Ballet.⁶⁸ In the early 21st century a wide range of professional musical events with internationally known artists were promoted by organisations such as Taunton Festival of the Arts, Taunton Live and Music on the Quantocks despite the lack of a dedicated concert venue. Concerts of popular music by the Beatles, Rolling Stones and other groups were held in indoor venues like the former Gaumont and the ballroom of the County Hotel in the late 20th century but are now usually staged outdoors at the cricket ground.⁶⁹

Taunton Glee Club was established in 1826 but appears to have ceased to exist after the 1830s. The Taunton Madrigal Society was formed in 1855 and held concerts in the Assembly rooms. Having been revived in 1891 it remained in existence until the 1900s alongside the Taunton Orchestral Society, which was still playing in the 1950s.⁷⁰ At least one music shop supplied musicians for balls and other functions in 1887.⁷¹ Amateur musicians and popular music groups played informally in clubs and public houses. The King and Queen in Paul Street had a harmonic society in the 1890s and the Somerset inn in Alfred Street had a concert room in 1901.⁷² The Taunton Male Voice Choir was active in the early 20th century, was revived at the Avimo factory in the 1940s and was still singing in the 2020s.⁷³ Amateur musicians and popular music groups played informally in clubs and public houses. The King and Queen in Paul Street had a harmonic society in the 1890s and the Somerset inn in Alfred

⁶⁷ SHC, Q/SR/163/14; TNA, HO 107/972; RG 10/2370—2, 2374—5; RG 11/2366—8.

⁶⁸ SHC, A/BKN/5/1; A/BMG/4/2, 6.

⁶⁹ *Taunton Courier*, 27 July, 2 Nov. 1963: BNA, accessed 16 Aug. 2022.

⁷⁰ Harrison, Harrad and Co., *Dir. Som.* (1859); *Taunton and West Somerset Annual 1897* (Taunton, 1896), 124; SHC, DD/TBL/42/9/7 (*Taunton Mail*, 20 Feb. 1901, p. 5); *Taunton Official Handbook and Guide* (1931), 103; SHC, A/CTP 12/4; A/AEA 1; DD/SAS/S1410/1—2; DD/TBL/73.

⁷¹ *Goodman's Dir. Taunton* (1887), ii.

⁷² SHC, DD/TBL/42/9/1 (*Taunton Mail*, 5 Sep. 1894, p. 4); D/B/ta/24/1/29/2.

⁷³ *Taunton Courier*, 2 July 1919, 9 Aug. 1922, 7 Aug. 1943, 28 Dec. 1946: BNA, accessed 16 Aug. 2022.

Street had a concert room in 1901.⁷⁴ The Taunton Choral Society was founded in 1892 and the Taunton Operatic Society in 1900 and both were still active in the early 21st century.⁷⁵ In 1980 the operatic society opened its new rehearsal room, known as the Callebout Hall in the former Congregational Sunday School in Kingston Road. It commemorated Eva Callebout who had directed and produced the society's productions for over 40 years.⁷⁶ Somerset Opera was founded in 1974 as an evening class, and although based in Taunton where most performances are given, the group also tours other venues in the county.⁷⁷ The Somerset County Orchestra of professional and amateur musicians was based in Taunton by the 1950s and still playing in early 21st century.⁷⁸

Taunton had at least one town band in the 19th century and bands performed in Vivary Park from 1892. In the 20th century interest waned but the Taunton Silver Band, later Town or Concert Band, was re-formed in 1960 although lack of a home hampered membership. The band was revived in the 1980s and travelled abroad.⁷⁹ Several classical, folk, jazz and popular music groups were based in Taunton in the late 20th century but many were short-lived.⁸⁰ Those still in existence in the 2020s included the Amici Chamber Choir founded in 1994, The Deane Big Band and the Taunton Jazz and Swing Band.

Reading rooms and libraries

Many public houses provided newspapers for customers and sometimes the news would be read aloud for the benefit of those who could not read.⁸¹ In the later 18th century the Market House reading room provided London and local papers, Smyth's in Fore Street and Savage's

⁷⁴ SHC, DD/TBL/42/9/1 {*Taunton Mail* 5 Sep. 1894, p. 4); D/B/ta/24/1/29/2.

⁷⁵ SHC, A/BEM 2/2; A/ACO 8/5; A/DIF/114/12.

⁷⁶ SHC, A/ACO, box 8.

⁷⁷ SHC, A/CYY.

⁷⁸ *Taunton Courier*, 6 Apr. 1957; BNA, accessed 16 Aug. 2022.

⁷⁹ SHC, A/EHA/8/1.

⁸⁰ *Taunton Courier*, 23 Feb. 1921, 14 Nov. 1923, 19 Jul. 1958, 26 Jan. 1963; BNA, accessed 16 Aug. 2022.

⁸¹ P Mansfield, 'John William Marriott and the *Taunton Courier*', *SDNQ*, XXXVI, 418.

in High Street provided reading rooms and libraries with the papers and the latter also kept the votes and proceedings of Parliament.⁸² In 1791 there were said to be four book societies in the town, the earliest founded in 1766 and the most recent for ladies, but they only had c. 20 members each.⁸³ A Mr Miles had a circulating library c. 1800 and a few years later John Poole charged 12s. a year or up to 3d. a volume and his 1,849 books included a great many plays.⁸⁴ In 1849 Barnicott's in Fore Street and Sutton's in North Street had circulating libraries.⁸⁵ By 1864 Goodman's ran a library in North Street for a 10s. 6d. annual subscription.⁸⁶ Private circulating libraries in Kingston and Station roads were still open in 1957.⁸⁷

The Taunton Mechanics Institute was established in 1830 in Paul Street but later moved into a public hall built in 1839 in Hunts Court, later Bath Place, by Edward Bainbridge, providing a library and reading room, models and apparatus, and holding classes, lectures and discussions of scientific and other subjects for 8s. a year or 15s. for access to the news room. In 1850 new rules allowed a book to be borrowed for up to four days.⁸⁸ The institute was in financial difficulties by 1855 for lack of support from tradesmen and although recorded in 1859 may already have closed and the hall became an art college.⁸⁹ The Paul Street reading room was taken by the Taunton Working Men's Association who were fundraising through literary recitals in 1867. It was possibly the institute said to have closed

⁸² Toulmin, *Hist. Taunton*, rev. Savage, 592; *Kelly's Dir. Som.* (1883).

⁸³ SHC, A/CPT/15/5.

⁸⁴ SHC, DD/SF/17/2/26.

⁸⁵ SHC, D/B/ta/31/7/2.

⁸⁶ *Goodman's Dir. Taunton* (1864), 86.

⁸⁷ SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/115/4434; *Kelly's Dir. Taunton* (1957), 76, 129.

⁸⁸ SHC, Q/RSI/1; DD/SAS/C909a/4; A/BUN/1; *Robson's Dir. Som.* (1839); *Pigot & Co. Dir.* (1842); *Harrison, Harrad and Co. Dir. Som.* (1859).

⁸⁹ *Taunton Courier*, 2 May 1855: BNA accessed 24 July 2019; *Harrison, Harrad and Co. Dir. Som.* (1859); *educ.*

before 1876 after an existence of ten years.⁹⁰ In the 1900s there was a working men's club at Cheapside.⁹¹

The Taunton Literary Institution, later Taunton and Somerset Institution, was established in 1823 above the new indoor market west of Fore Street with a museum, lending library and reading room.⁹² It had shareholders and later shared the premises and a curator or librarian with the Somerset Archaeological Society, founded in 1849 before the latter moved to the castle.⁹³ It was open 13 hours a day and from 1876 hired the card room in the Market House for meetings but closed in 1883 when its library and furniture were sold.⁹⁴ The Taunton Conversazione and West Somerset Literary Association was established in 1832 for a small group of men to read and discuss papers on literary and philosophical subjects but it was dissolved in 1834. The Taunton Literary and Philosophical Society was in existence in by 1893 and survived until 1931 or later.⁹⁵ The Taunton Reading Society replaced an Oxford extension student association in 1893 and was still in being in 1907.⁹⁶ The Taunton Conversazione and Field Club met from 1899 to 1910 and as the Taunton Field Club continued with lectures and excursions until 1950.⁹⁷

The Taunton and Somerset Institution offered its large library to the council in 1882 to establish a free public library for a modest sum to pay the institution's debts but the council refused. Only in 1902 did the borough adopt the Public Libraries Act and the site of a smithy and stableyard was bought in 1905 for a public library. Designed by Ingleson Charles

⁹⁰ SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/156.

⁹¹ *Taunton and West Somerset Annual 1901* (Taunton, 1900), 113.

⁹² Robson's *Dir. Som.* (1839); *Pigot Dir.* (1842); Harrison, Harrad and Co. *Dir. Som.* (1859); *PO Dir. Som.* (1861, 1866).

⁹³ SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/153; *PO Dir. Som.* (1861); *Goodman's Dir. Taunton* (1864), 23; Bishops Hill, soc. hist.

⁹⁴ *Kelly's Dir. Som.* (1883); E. Jeboult, *A Popular History of West Somerset* (1893), appendix 1882; SHC, DD/SAS/2016/50.

⁹⁵ SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/144, 146; *Taunton and West Somerset Annual 1897* (Taunton, 1896), 123; *Taunton Official Handbook and Guide* (1931), 105.

⁹⁶ SHC, DD/S/AM/10.

⁹⁷ SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/7; DD/SAS/2016, 43, 45.

Goodison and built by Thomas Moggridge, it opened in Corporation Street in January 1906, supported by the Andrew Carnegie United Kingdom Trust. It was extended in 1911 in matching Tudor style in red sandstone with mullioned windows over the site of several houses in Bath Place. By 1913 it had c. 10,500 volumes, nearly 14,000 borrowers and lent books to schools. There was a juvenile reading room and a girl's reading room, which was set aside for Belgian refugees during the war with French newspapers and 200 French books given by Bishop Fox's school.⁹⁸ By the later 20th century the library had outgrown its premises and had a gramophone library, a reference library with information bureau and operated a mobile service. A branch library opened at Priorswood on Eastwick Road in 1968 and remained open in the 2020s sharing the building with a children's centre. Children formed half the library's c. 3,000 members in 1968—9 and a study room for homework was provided.⁹⁹ The central library had over 31,000 members by 1988 and issued 535,550 books. It moved into a former supermarket under a multi-storey car park in Paul Street in 1996 run by the county council and with facilities for study and exhibitions, and for several years a tourist information centre. The first floor housed the local studies and archaeological society's libraries until 2010 when they were removed to the Somerset Heritage Centre.¹⁰⁰

County Record Office

The county records, formerly held in Wells, were kept at Wilton Gaol from 1817 until 1858 when they were moved to Shire Hall. A purpose-built record office was built in 1958 in Obridge Road. In 2010 the service moved with other heritage departments of the County Council to the Somerset Heritage Centre, in Norton Fitzwarren parish, run in the 2020s by the

⁹⁸ SHC, A/DIF/95/32; C/SEC/29; PAM 3130 *Taunton New Library* (1996).

⁹⁹ SHC, DD/TBL/62 (1965—70).

¹⁰⁰ SHC, A/AUS; C/OP/3/151; PAM 3130 *Taunton New Library* (1996).

South West Heritage Trust.¹⁰¹ The county museum has been located in the castle since 1958.¹⁰²

Art

Taunton had many gifted amateur artists and some professionals, which led to the establishment of the art school. Several male and female residents gave artist as their occupation in the late 19th century.¹⁰³ The most well-known Taunton artist is probably Harry Frier (1849—1921), noted for his topographical water colours and sketches including many, romanticised views of the Taunton back courts and portraits of local characters.¹⁰⁴ Edward Jeboult's Lowry-like sketches from the 1860s illustrate lost corners of Taunton. More conventional artists included landscape painter Charles Haseler, portrait artist Frederick Lake and Mabel Trood. and her brother William. Alfred Alexander Clarke became a noted architectural artist who produced detailed ecclesiastical drawings.¹⁰⁵ Charles Daniel Ward, son of a Taunton decorator, took up landscape painting, moved to Chelsea and married the royal portrait artist Charlotte Blakeney, who painted Taunton Mayor Josiah Lewis.¹⁰⁶

Plans were made for an art gallery during the 20th century and the borough received paintings for display but a gallery was not opened and most paintings remainrf in storage. Regular art exhibitions were mounted in the Museum of Somerset.¹⁰⁷

Popular Entertainment

¹⁰¹ *Somerset in Manuscript* (Taunton, 1959), vii—ix.

¹⁰² Bishops Hull.

¹⁰³ TNA, RG 10/2370—2, 2374—5; RG 11/2366—8; this section, educ.

¹⁰⁴ M.H. Jones, *Harry Frier, Somerset's Unknown Painter*, passim.

¹⁰⁵ TNA, HO 107/1922; *Slater's Dir Som.* (1852) SHC, T/PH/rea/2/90; 3/23, 117, 126; SHC, SWHT and SANHS art collns.

¹⁰⁶ *Robson's Dir. Som.*(1839); *Pigot Dir.* (1842); TNA , HO107/1922—3; SHC, A/DSG/1.

¹⁰⁷ e.g. SHC, D/B/ta/4/6/3(Sep, Nov. 1938).

The traditional fairs had already dwindled in importance by the end of the Middle Ages but North Town fair continued to lead children to play truant in the late 19th century.¹⁰⁸ A pleasure fair known as the Assize fair or Powell's show was held near the Castle in the 19th century during the assizes and frequent military parades also gave rise to truancy or forced schools to grant half day holidays.¹⁰⁹

Before Alma Street was laid out the area was used by visiting menageries and Billetfield was used for circuses in the mid 19th century.¹¹⁰ Circuses were usually equestrian events with clowning and acrobatics such as tight rope walking. In 1827 box seating was offered.¹¹¹ Edmonds, later Wombwell's wild animal show came to Taunton in 1858 and 1863 and also in 1863 the Female Blondin, Sarah Young, performed on Castle Green.¹¹² In 1867 Wombwell's was invited to bring animals to the convent in South Road.¹¹³ A Russian circus with Japanese wild men came in 1865 and circuses continued to decimate school attendance in the later 19th and early 20th century.¹¹⁴ In 1894 up to 9,000 people are said to have attended an evening performance by Sanger's Circus at Jarvis field by the river but an escaped elephant raised concerns about the welfare of show animals.¹¹⁵ Probably the biggest show ever staged in Taunton was Barnum and Bailey's circus in 1899, which arrived in four trains with over 840 people, large numbers of horses, big cats and 22 elephants. They camped and performed on the poor's grounds behind the hospital and processed around the main streets lined with thousands of onlookers.¹¹⁶ In 1920 a fire at Sanger's Circus on Jarvis field

¹⁰⁸ Econ. hist.; SHC, D/P/tau.m/18/11/1 (1873); C/E/4/367/1, p. 377.

¹⁰⁹ Goldsworthy, *Recollections of Old Taunton*, 45—6; M.H. Jones, *Harry Frier, Somerset's Unknown Painter*, 99; SHC, C/E/4/367/1, p. 1; C/E/4/220/1, pp. 37—8; A/ARQ/4/1 (1875, 1877); D/P/tau.m/18/11/1 (1877).

¹¹⁰ Dr H. Alford, *Olden Taunton, a Cycle of Change* (Taunton c. 1921), 9.

¹¹¹ SHC, DD/SAS/2402/23.

¹¹² SHC, C/E/4/220/1, pp. 29, 36.

¹¹³ SHC, DD/TBL/49.

¹¹⁴ SHC, C/E/4/420/1, pp.177, A/ARQ/4/1 (1877, 1894); A/BEZ/1/1 (1919).

¹¹⁵ SHC, DD/TBL/42/9/1 (*Taunton Mail* 4 July 1894, p. 4); SHC, DD/TBL/42/9/3 (*Taunton Mail*, 25 March 1896, p. 4).

¹¹⁶ SHC, DD/TBL/42/9/6 (*Taunton Mail* 5 July 1899, p. 4).

resulted in five deaths and many serious injuries to women and children.¹¹⁷ A flying circus by the Cornwall Aviation Company was held at Holway in June 1931.¹¹⁸ Traditional circuses like Chipperfields continued to visit throughout the 20th century, although by the end of the century without animals.¹¹⁹

Radio

A low-power radio transmitter was installed during the Second World War probably at Lambrook where the BBC rented a site in the 1950s.¹²⁰ In 1981 the BBC acquired premises at 14—15 Paul Street as a local radio studio and first broadcast on 19 November 1981 as an offshoot of Radio Bristol, with three staff and using a transmitter at the borough's Priory depot.¹²¹ In 1998 it became Somerset Sound and in 2002 moved to Paul's Cottage in Park Street but in 2017 transferred to new studios at Deane Gate.¹²² A commercial popular music station known as Orchard FM started in 1989 based at Haygrove House, Shoreditch.¹²³ After several takeovers it closed in 2010 but the transmitter was used by a Bristol company in the 2020s. An attempt to start a local television news channel in the late 20th century failed.

Sport

Hunting and other animal sports Bear and bull baiting with dogs were common recreations and although there were penalties for keeping mastiffs in the town butchers were

¹¹⁷ *Taunton Courier*, 21 and 28 July 1920: BNA accessed 18 Feb. 1920.

¹¹⁸ SHC, DD/X/CPN/1.

¹¹⁹ SHC, A/AOW/22, 25; A/DIF/101/2/32.

¹²⁰ D. Dawson, D. Hunt and C. Webster, *Somerset and the defence of the Bristol Channel in the Second World War* (Taunton, 2011), 73; SHC, D/B/ta/4/2/4 (1960).

¹²¹ SHC, D/DC/tau.d (M/3252), box 1 (1981); PAM 664.

¹²² www.bbc.co.uk/news/43592239: accessed 2018; *What's On Somerset*, summer 2018, 55—6.

¹²³ *Bridgwater Journal*, 25 Nov. 1989: BNA accessed 22 Aug. 1922.

penalised in the 17th century if their bull meat was not baited.¹²⁴ The Cornhill bullring was last recorded in 1769.¹²⁵

A cockpit belonged to wine merchant Thomas Pope in 1597.¹²⁶ A cock fight was held at the White Hart in 1771.¹²⁷ A beerhouse known as the Fighting Cocks from the 1760s to 1790s, was part of the Flook House estate.¹²⁸ The Game Cock was an inn in Canon Street in 1833.¹²⁹ The area in the angle of the later Station and Canal Roads was known as Cockpit until the 1930s and the Sun inn down Canal Road was said to have had cock fighting in the early 19th century.¹³⁰

The Taunton Vale Harriers were in existence by 1842 and in 1846 were accused of keeping a captive deer in town to be hunted. They had kennels at Blackbrook in West Monkton parish but were based in Huish Champflower in the early 21st century. The Taunton Vale Foxhounds had kennels at Henlade in Ruishton.¹³¹

There were possibly horse races in the area in the 18th century when the Horse and Jockey public house was named.¹³² Two attempts at establishing horse-racing in the early 19th century were short-lived although in 1812 £50 prizes were offered and up to 9,000 people are said to have attended the South Road racecourse in 1826. It had a grandstand and temporary booths. Entertainments and racing was held over two days in September 1838. However, the race track was only a mile long the course was given up before 1853. It is now occupied by King's College and the Mountlands villas.¹³³ Horse-racing resumed under the

¹²⁴ SHC, DD/SP/49—51 passim, 53 (Apr. 1642), 54 (1662).

¹²⁵ SHC, DD/SAS/C795/BA/9/7 (mkt plan).

¹²⁶ TNA, PROB 11/90/115.

¹²⁷ *Taunton Courier*, 29 May 1935, citing advert 1771: BNA accessed 23 Nov. 2021.

¹²⁸ SHC, Q/REI/35/25a. Q/R1a/19/10.

¹²⁹ *Taunton Courier*, 23 Jan. 1833: BNA accessed 23 Nov. 2021.

¹³⁰ Above, intro, settlement; *Taunton Courier*, 27 Jan. 1926: BNA accessed 23 Nov. 2021.

¹³¹ VCH Som. II, 590—1; *Taunton Courier*, 16 Oct. 1842, 15 Apr. 1846: BNA accessed 4 May 2022.

¹³² Bishops Hull, econ. hist.

¹³³ Goldsworthy, *Recollections of Old Taunton*, 45; L & E Cowie, *That One Idea: Nathaniel Woodard and his schools* (Ellesmere, 1991), p. 98; SHC, DD/SAS/S1042/4 (1812); DD/SAS/C2402/52; D/B/ta/32/1/1 (1853).

Portmans in the 20th century and the present Taunton Racecourse is at Shoreditch in Orchard Portman.¹³⁴ In 1942 there was a polo and hunting stable on 10 a. at Lower Holway.¹³⁵

A greyhound racing stadium in Priory Bridge Road closed c. 1951. It was replaced by a short-lived track at the cricket ground in the 1960s when kennels were built on the eastern boundary.¹³⁶

Recreation grounds and sports centres Some schools had sports grounds but there were few public facilities before the 20th century. A single-storey gymnasium with an elaborate portico on four Corinthian columns and an exercise yard behind, opened west of Bridge Street in 1861 and was run by a Frenchman in 1864. It had closed by 1871 when the yard was used as a smithy, and the gymnasium was demolished later for a wine merchant's shop.¹³⁷ The YMCA gymnasium in Middle Street was built in 1895 on donated land with a large stained glass window over the entrance and rooflights behind a tall pedimented gable. The frontage is elaborately decorated in stone and brick.¹³⁸ In the 1911 there was a small gymnasium behind the Bird in Hand, Mary Street.¹³⁹ From the late 20th century several gymnasia opened in Taunton including at the local authority sports centre at Blackbrook, later extended and provided with a swimming pool. Sports centres and gymnasia at the Taunton Academy and some other schools are open to the public outside school hours.

Taunton had no public gardens until the end of the 19th century but several nurseries opened their gardens to the public especially the very large Elms or Youngs nursery laid out in early 19th century between Staplegrove Road and the railway. It was a popular promenade

¹³⁴ J. Tyrell, *Chasing Around Britain* (1994), 201; Orchard Portman.

¹³⁵ TNA, MAF 32/155/281.

¹³⁶ SHC, D/PS/tau.b/3/8; D/B/ta/24/1/18/8323.

¹³⁷ *Goodman's Dir. Taunton* (1864), 87; SHC, D/B/ta/3/1/1 (1871); DD/DP/3/8; DD/SAS/C795/SX/7; above, econ. hist.

¹³⁸ SWHT, HER 16759; SHC, PAM 3088 *The Red Triangle in Taunton*, 10—13.

¹³⁹ SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/43/610.

until destroyed for housing development in the 1870s.¹⁴⁰ North Town Gardens may have been restricted to local residents. They were converted to a nursery in 1905 and destroyed in the later 20th century.¹⁴¹ From the late 19th century several public parks and playing fields were established and most remain in use. The importance of open space, including allotments, was recognised by 1929 when the council published details of areas that were not to be built on.¹⁴² Recreation areas and allotments were provided on most local authority housing estates. Their value for sport was recognised in the 1930s when grounds that did not already have them were provided with pavilions for changing and storage.¹⁴³

Victoria Park (6 a.) is a 1929 amalgamation of the late 19th-century recreation ground and the Priory playing fields associated with the former Priory schools.¹⁴⁴ Victoria Recreation Ground was laid out in in 1892 as Taunton's first public park on land bought for the purpose the year before. It had entrances known as the Eastbourne and Victoria Gates but only the former survives. It provided soccer, rugby and cricket pitches.¹⁴⁵ It was enlarged to Priory Avenue by the gift of Lieut Col A. Hamilton Gault in 1931.¹⁴⁶ The Victoria Gate section of the park with its children's playground was cleared after 1947 for car parking and housing but the site of houses and a nursery north of Somerset Place were thrown into the park in exchange.¹⁴⁷ The east end was cut off by a major new road in 1972.¹⁴⁸ In the early 21st century the gardens were partly maintained by a local community group and were home to the large toad sculpture originally created for the town centre in 1982.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁰ SHC, DD/CHA/22; DD/CH/21; Dr H. Alford, *Olden Taunton*, 9.

¹⁴¹ SHC, D/B/ta/241/35/295.

¹⁴² SHC, D/B/ta/4/3/4 (1929).

¹⁴³ SHC, D/B/ta/4/6/3 (Feb. 1932).

¹⁴⁴ SHC, A/BMG/5/2.

¹⁴⁵ SHC, D/PC/stapg/7/3, p. 83; A/BMG/5/2.

¹⁴⁶ SHC, D/B/ta/4/5/1 (Jan. 1932).

¹⁴⁷ SHC, D/DC/tau.d/25/19, no 581.

¹⁴⁸ SHC, D/DC/tau.d (M/3252), box 1.

¹⁴⁹ Inf. panels in park.

Vivary Park was laid out on 11 a. the northern half of which was private parkland with chestnut trees created in the 1840s by the Kinglake family south of Upper High Street.¹⁵⁰ It was regularly used for public events and the houses on Mount Street had access gates, as they still do. It was offered to the Local Board of Health in 1854 for £1,500 but they considered the price too high and declined it.¹⁵¹ It continued to be used for public events with the permission of the owners and in the 1880s it was offered to the town council who were reluctant to buy. However, in 1892 the council agreed to acquire it and in 1894 bought it with adjoining land and tennis courts at a total cost of over £3,600 and spent a further £2,000 on planting, fencing and buildings.¹⁵² It opened in 1895 to provide both formal planting and open space with a bandstand and has decorative gates facing High Street designed by MacFarlanes of Glasgow.¹⁵³ The fountain was installed in 1907 and the war memorial in 1922, backed by a rose garden. The park is best known for hosting the Taunton Flower Show in most years since 1851 and run for much of its history by the Taunton Deane Horticultural and Floricultural Society established in 1866. The park was extended in the late 20th century, restored in 2001—2 and has a wildfowl lake, large children's playground installed in 1980, tennis courts, putting green and public golf course alongside the Sherford Stream; the whole covering over 40 a.¹⁵⁴

French Weir playing field (6 a.) developed alongside the former river swimming area having been bought by the corporation in 1893.¹⁵⁵ Greenway Road recreation ground in Leslie Avenue (3 ½ a.) was the gift of Rowbarton developer Thomas Penny, furnished with a

¹⁵⁰ *Taunton of Today* (1896), 77; SHC, tithe award (Taunton St Mary); DD/SAS/C/2550/12 (Map of Taunton 1849).

¹⁵¹ *Exeter Flying Post*, 29 July 1847; *Taunton Courier*, 11 Oct. 1854; BNA accessed 31 July 2019.

¹⁵² *Taunton Courier*, 24 Mar. 1886, 30 Nov. 1892; BNA accessed 31 July 2019; SHC, D/B/ta/4/6/1 (Aug. 1893, June 1894); DD/AY/8.

¹⁵³ J. Orbach, *S. & W. Som.* 622.

¹⁵⁴ SHC, A/BMG/5/2; DD/TBL/72; inf. panels in park.

¹⁵⁵ TNA, IR 58/82630 (3711)

large pavilion, since demolished, and opened in 1899.¹⁵⁶ In 1929 the corporation bought 6a. on Cheddon Road as a playing field, probably for the children's home.¹⁵⁷ The land was redeveloped after the war as Taunton Green with tennis and other courts and children's play areas. It was opened by Prince Philip in 1952.¹⁵⁸ Priorswood playing fields cover nearly 8 a. and are now known as Lyngford Park. The Hamilton Gault playing field (11 ½ a.) in Hamilton Road was given to the town in 1931 by Lieut Col A. Hamilton Gault.¹⁵⁹ Despite losing some of its land in 1961 it had three soccer and two cricket pitches in 1978. It remained an important ground for amateur sport in the early 21st century and had a children's playground and a skate park.¹⁶⁰

Many employers encouraged sport and sponsored clubs. The largest was the Somerset Constabulary Athletics Club, from 1954 the Taunton Police Club. In the 1930s the police had a rugby team and had acquired a large sports ground at Mountfields. The club had 980 members in 1943 and 2,051 by 1959.¹⁶¹ The sports ground later passed to the county council and became the Wyvern sports club, which remained open in the 2020s. The Civil Service and private employers like Avimo had c. 500 members in their sports clubs in the 1950s.¹⁶² Private recreation grounds included that at the Avenue later occupied by tennis courts.¹⁶³

Archery and shooting There were two sets of butts probably in use until the 17th century.¹⁶⁴ There was an archery club by 1859¹⁶⁵ with a ground in Bishops Hull.¹⁶⁶ A rifle

¹⁵⁶ SHC, SANHS Tite Colln, Taunton Scrap book.

¹⁵⁷ *Taunton Official Handbook and Guide* (1931), 116.

¹⁵⁸ SHC, C/E/4/311/7 (25 Oct. 1952).

¹⁵⁹ SHC, SHC, D/B/ta/4/5/1 (Jan. 1932); D/DC/tau.d/25/17 (1947).

¹⁶⁰ SHC, D/PC/stapg/7/3, p. 83.

¹⁶¹ SHC, A/BMG/5/2; D/PS/tau.b/3/7—9.

¹⁶² SHC, D/PS/tau.b/3/8—9.

¹⁶³ TNA, IR 58/82605 (1289).

¹⁶⁴ Below, military hist.

¹⁶⁵ *Slater Dir. Som.* (1859)

¹⁶⁶ *Goodman's Dir. Taunton* (1864), 33.

club was in existence by 1839,¹⁶⁷ possibly the small bore-rifle club of 1900. In the 1940s they had a range behind the Black Horse in Bridge Street.¹⁶⁸

Bowls Two bowling alleys were in use in 1598 but their owners were forbidden to use them for gain.¹⁶⁹ There was a bowling green at the Three Cups in the early 18th century but by the 1750s it was disused. It was revived three days a week by subscribers but was presumably lost when the inn was rebuilt in 1784.¹⁷⁰ Beerhouse skittle alleys were popular in the 19th and 20th centuries although only a few town pubs had space for them. At least two built them above their stables, another replaced back court buildings and in Alfred Street one was built along the backs of adjoining houses.¹⁷¹ The Conservative club built a skittle alley in 1946.¹⁷² There were two Taunton Bowling Clubs, one with a green and pavilion in Vivary Park by 1931. The other, renamed Taunton Deane by 1931, started in 1909 at the Avenue but soon moved to Richmond Road where it remained until 2000. In 1996 they acquired purpose-built premises in Blackbrook with six indoor rinks and in 2000 eight outdoor greens opened on the site.¹⁷³ A Taunton Athletic Bowls Club had a green at the Poor Grounds before they were redeveloped for housing in 1935.¹⁷⁴

Tennis A tennis court adjoining the George in High Street had been converted to a garden and dunghill by 1615.¹⁷⁵ The White Hart had an enclosed tennis court in 1653.¹⁷⁶

Lawn tennis became popular in the early 20th century when there were tennis clubs with

¹⁶⁷ SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/17 (1839).

¹⁶⁸ SHC, D/DC/tau.d unlisted box 17, 1942—3, 18—19, 69.

¹⁶⁹ SHC, DD/SP/49 (May 1598).

¹⁷⁰ SHC, PAM 2160, Bush, *County Hotel*, 9, 11.

¹⁷¹ Wilts and Swindon HC, 1075/001/396; SHC, Q/LIC/1/5; D/B/ta/24/1/84/1817; DD/SAS/C2401/69.

¹⁷² SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/108/2435.

¹⁷³ SHC, A/DIF/116, no. 27385; D/PS/tau.b/3/9; SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/55/948; tauntondeanebowlsclub.com; accessed 6 Sep 2019.

¹⁷⁴ *Taunton Official Handbook and Guide* (1931), 63.

¹⁷⁵ SHC, DD/SP/50 (Apr. 1615).

¹⁷⁶ North Devon RO, 1142B/FP71.

courts in The Avenue and Woodstock Road, both off Staplegrove Road. The Priory Tennis Club had courts adjoining the rugby ground and the School of Art had a tennis club off Wellington Road, behind the later Marshalsea's Garage. In addition there were public courts in Vivary Park and private courts around the town.¹⁷⁷ There were tennis courts in the early 21st century at the Blackbrook sports centre. Badminton was popular in the 1960s when there were Pyrland, Rowbarton Ladies and Taunton clubs and several clubs in the 21st century were based at local schools.¹⁷⁸ Squash appears to have been less popular but in the 2020s there were courts at a few schools and the Wyvern sports club had both squash and tennis courts for members.

Billiards The first recorded billiard rooms with tables were in small public houses in the 1720s.¹⁷⁹ Later there was a billiard room at the 18th-century Market House.¹⁸⁰ The game seems to have fallen out of favour until the later 19th century when larger hotels began to install billiard rooms. Clubs also had billiard rooms in the later 19th century including the Taunton Club at the London hotel, the YMCA, the Hammet Street Liberal Club, the Conservative Club and the Somerset County Club, which built a second in 1886.¹⁸¹ In 1891 six men were employed as billiard markers.¹⁸² The game was popular again after the First World War when billiard halls were added to the Priory Liberal Club, YMCA and Soldiers Home.¹⁸³ The Holy Trinity men's club added a second in 1913 and a third in 1920.¹⁸⁴ In the late 20th century interest in the game revived and the former Gaiety Cinema in Kingston

¹⁷⁷ SHC, A/BMG/5/2; *Taunton Official Handbook and Guide* (1931), 122; OS Map 1:2500, LXX. 7, 12 (1914 edn), LXX.7 (1930 edn.).

¹⁷⁸ *Taunton Official Guide* (1961), 106—7.

¹⁷⁹ SHC, DD/SP/1723/50, 1729/58.

¹⁸⁰ Toulmin, *History of Taunton*, rev. J. Savage (Taunton, 1822), 596

¹⁸¹ SHC, PAM 2160, Bush, *County Hotel*, 21; 3088, *The Red Triangle in Taunton*, 21; DD/SCY; TNA, IR 58/82631 (82); SHC, D/B/ta/21/851; D/B/ta/24/1/9/252, 24/1/201/800, 24/1/21/851.

¹⁸² TNA, RG9/1617—18; RG12/1875, 1877.

¹⁸³ SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/49/774, 24/1/51/836, 848; 24/1/91/2208; D/B/ta/4/3/4 (1926).

¹⁸⁴ SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/45/172, 24/1/50/795.

Road was a billiard hall before being demolished in the early 21st century for housing development.

Athletics The Taunton Bicycle Club was founded c. 1866 and survived until the 1905 or later and was instrumental in developing the Taunton Carnival. There was also a ladies cycling club by 1900.¹⁸⁵ The Taunton Athletic Club started c. 1876 and held running, cycling, hurdling, jumping and throwing events in Vivary Park.¹⁸⁶ In 1880 it merged with a Taunton cricket club and leased ground by the river accessed from Priory Walk. A running and cycling track was laid out and in 1882 a combined pavilion and grandstand was built. The site was also intended for the Taunton and Taunton Vale cricket, football and cycling clubs and the general public.¹⁸⁷ The cost led the club into debt and they let the grounds to the county cricket club but continued to use it for annual sports events and added tennis to their range of activities.¹⁸⁸ The Taunton Harriers, who presumably took their name from the hunt, met regularly to run from 1883 and especially the ten mile run from the Parade towards Bishops Lydeard and back. They also held annual sports including cycle races at the cricket ground.¹⁸⁹ They later merged with the athletics club, which declined but was reformed in 1926 as an athletic and cycling club and girls were allowed to run.¹⁹⁰ It was re-founded again in 1957 as the Taunton Athletics Club and remains in existence.¹⁹¹ There are also several running clubs

¹⁸⁵ *PSANHS*, LXI (1915), lii; SHC, DD/SAS/C2645/22—3; DD/TBL/80; *Taunton Courier* 18 Apr. 1894: BNA accessed 11 Aug. 2022; SHC, DD/TBL/42/9/8 (*Taunton Mail* 28 Nov. 1900, p. 4).

¹⁸⁶ *Som. Co. Gaz.* 15 June 1878: BNA accessed 11 Aug. 2022.

¹⁸⁷ *Taunton Courier*, 6 Oct. 1880, 23 Feb., 17 Aug., 14 Sep. 1881, 15 March 1882: BNA accessed 11 Aug. 2022.

¹⁸⁸ *Taunton Courier*, 28 Feb, 1883, 19 March 1884: BNA accessed 11 Aug. 2022; below, this section.

¹⁸⁹ *VCH Som. II*, 591; *Taunton Courier*, 10 Jan., 5 Sep., 7 Nov. 1883, 15 Apr. 1891, 16 Aug. 1922: BNA accessed 4 May 2022; *PSANHS*, LXI (1915), lii.

¹⁹⁰ *Taunton Courier*, 8 Sep. 1926, 15 Aug. 1934: BNA accessed 11 Aug. 2022.

¹⁹¹ *Taunton Courier*, 4 May 1957: BNA accessed 11 Aug. 2022; www.tauntonac.org.: accessed 11 Aug. 2022.

in the town. The Taunton marathon, using a half marathon course twice, has run since 1982 except during 2020—1.¹⁹²

Swimming Men and boys bathing in the river was regarded as a nuisance in 1849 and provision of a bathing place was suggested.¹⁹³ Two bathing places in the river Tone, a free one where the canal formerly entered the river below French Weir, and a private or enclosed one on the riverbank above the weir opened in 1862. They were originally for men only and over 14s had to wear a costume. Admission to the private area was by ticket from the attendant and there were iron changing rooms, first and second class boxes for clothing and steps into the water, which was chained off from the rest of the river to prevent swimmers being swept away although a rowing boat and hook were kept for emergencies.¹⁹⁴ Despite that swimmers drowned. The Taunton Swimming Club started in 1883 holding swimming galas in the river and with some breaks the club continued until 2000.¹⁹⁵ By 1888 the bathing station had looking glasses and foot baths.¹⁹⁶ It was rebuilt in 1894 with diving boards, removed during drought, 40 cubicles and a brick changing hut for boys. In 1896 the river bed was concreted and the old canal bed filled and turfed.¹⁹⁷ By the early 20th century there were facilities for both men and women, girls and boys from local schools used it free of charge and school swimming matches were held. The increased demand led to plans from 1907 for an indoor pool at Coal Orchard, especially when rebuilding French Weir caused a temporary closure of the bathing station in 1914.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹² SHC, A/BCZ 1.

¹⁹³ SHC, DD/SAS/C2273/3/13, p. 13.

¹⁹⁴ SHC, A/BXU/3/3, 7; A/BID 1; D/B/ta/3/4/1; Q/SR 749/103—5.

¹⁹⁵ SHC, A/BXU/3/4—5, 8; A/DIF/114/12; A/DQR/1.

¹⁹⁶ SHC, D/B/ta/3/4/1.

¹⁹⁷ SHC, A/BXU/3/7; 4/1; D/B/ta/4/2/1 (1893—4, 1896); SHC, DD/TBL/42/9/3 (*Taunton Mail*, 24 June 1896, p. 4); TNA, IR 58/82630.

¹⁹⁸ SHC, D/B/ta/4/5/1 (1907, 1912).

The site of a malthouse and several houses in St James Street was chosen for a pool with ten slipper baths and a laundry. Implementation was delayed by the war and financial stringency. Eventually in 1929 the council's Public Baths opened in St James Street including a large swimming pool.¹⁹⁹ In 1931 the building was extended to provide a smaller pool for learners and a gallery for spectators.²⁰⁰ In 1933 between April and October there were 96,000 admissions but the river bathing station also remained in use until the war.²⁰¹ By 1968 at least ten Taunton schools had a pool and some allowed other schools to use them.²⁰² A large new public swimming pool opened near Flook House in 1976 but clubs and learners continued to use the St James Street pool and it underwent a major restoration in 1986.²⁰³ However, it was uneconomic to run and was finally demolished in 2018—19. A new pool at the Blackbrook Leisure Centre opened c. 2010.

Boating Boating for pleasure was probably an old pastime on the river and some of the boathouses such as that owned by the Metfords at Firepool may have been for pleasure boats. The North Town foundry made steam pleasure boats in the mid 19th century and c. 1891 Henry Massingham had an electric launch on the river.²⁰⁴ In 1879 nine hire boats from three-person wherries to 12-seater boats were subjected to inspection for licensing. There were also single seat canoes. Boating declined in the 20th century despite many attempts to revive it but canoeing has remained popular.²⁰⁵

¹⁹⁹ SHC, A/BXU/3/4, 7; A/DIF/95/32, 114/2.

²⁰⁰ SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/81/1721; A/BXU/3/1.

²⁰¹ SHC, A/DVY 1; A/DIF/114/12.

²⁰² SHC, C/PL/3/1/6.

²⁰³ SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/226/12103; A/BXU/3/1, 8.

²⁰⁴ Above, econ. hist., industry; below, local govt., elec.

²⁰⁵ SHC, D/B/ta/3/4/1 (1872, 1874); E. Saffin, *Taunton AFC 1947—97*, 1.

Cricket The first recorded cricket match was in 1845 and a Taunton Cricket Club was begun before 1857²⁰⁶ but there was no ground and the game was played at Taunton school.²⁰⁷ In 1878 the club amalgamated with the Bishops Hull club and had a ground on Bishops Hull Road.²⁰⁸ By 1896 it shared the county ground and by 1931 it had two teams.²⁰⁹ Another Taunton Cricket Club got into debt but members subscribed to pay a professional bowler. It merged with the athletic club in 1880.²¹⁰ The Vale, later Taunton Vale Cricket Club, was formed in 1870 with 45 members and had a ground at Tangier.²¹¹ After 1872 it ceased but was re-founded in 1875 and remained in existence until 1925 or later.²¹² A North Town Cricket Club was recorded in 1874.²¹³ Taunton Deane Cricket Club started as the Wilton Cricket Club but changed its name in 1908 on moving to the county ground. It closed after 1931 but was restarted in 1954. It created a ground in the convent field adjoining Vivary Park and built a new pavilion in 1985.²¹⁴

Somerset County Cricket Club was established in 1877 probably in succession to the Gentlemen of Somerset who played from 1860. There was no ground and the club depended on subscriptions. In 1886 the club first played in the ground off St James Street, which they had leased with pavilion and track from the Taunton Athletic Club. After adding extra stands and becoming a first-class county side in 1891 they bought the freehold in 1896.²¹⁵ The ground had entrances in Priory Avenue and later from Priory Bridge Road, replaced by Coal Orchard, for members only.²¹⁶ The 1882 athletics pavilion contained changing rooms, dining

²⁰⁶ *Taunton Courier*, 13 May 1857: BNA accessed 25 Nov. 2020; SHC, DD/TBL/75 (1965).

²⁰⁷ SHC, DD/TBL 47.

²⁰⁸ Bishops Hull, soc. hist.

²⁰⁹ *Taunton of Today* (1896), 48; *Taunton Official Handbook and Guide* (1931), 73.

²¹⁰ *Som. Co. Gaz.* 10 March 1883 (letters); above, this section.

²¹¹ *Taunton Courier*, 5 Oct. 1870: BNA accessed 25 Nov. 2020; SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/9/251.

²¹² *Taunton Courier*, 24 Feb. 1875, 10 May 1876, 30 March 1878, 16 Dec. 1925: BNA accessed June 2016; *Taunton Official Handbook and Guide* (1931), 73, 75.

²¹³ SHC, D/B/ta/31/1/7, p. 224.

²¹⁴ *Taunton Official Handbook and Guide* (1931), 75; SHC, A/AAU 1.

²¹⁵ SHC, DD/TBL/75 (1965).

²¹⁶ *Taunton of Today* (1896), 77.

room, canteen and toilets for both sexes under seating but was demolished as part of a redevelopment of the ground in 2014—15.²¹⁷ Half the championship games were played at Taunton for most of the 20th century.²¹⁸ In 1925 Jack Hobbs of Surrey broke W.G. Grace's record of 126 centuries at the county ground.²¹⁹ The club depended on amateur players until the 1940s often from Oxbridge. The renowned Jack White who captained the team from 1927—31 was a working farmer.²²⁰ A large riverside grandstand, since demolished, was built in 1926 and rebuilt in 1954.²²¹ By 1928 the club had acquired residential and industrial property between the pitch and St James Street, redeveloped for car parking.²²² New entrance gates were erected in 1963—4 in memory of Jack White (d. 1961).²²³ In the early 21st century most buildings were rebuilt, the west seating backed by a large residential and retail development, and controversial giant floodlighting standards were installed.

Between 1891 and 1900 Somerset professionals G. B. Nichols and E. J. Tyler had their own team the Taunton Moonlighters.²²⁴ In the early 20th century the Somerset Stragglers Cricket Club provided for gentlemen cricketers who wished to play regularly.²²⁵ Some organisations had their own clubs including the Great Western Railway from 1894, Chapman's department store and the YMCA in the 1900s, the press in 1907 and the United Banks Club in 1931.²²⁶

²¹⁷ TNA, IR 58/82603 (1042); www.bbc.co.uk: accessed 18 Sep. 2014.

²¹⁸ SHC, A/BMG/5/2.

²¹⁹ *Taunton Courier*, 19 Aug. 1925; *The Illustrated London News*, 22 Aug. 1925: BNA, accessed 8 Apr. 2021.

²²⁰ SHC, DD/TBL/75 (1961—2, 1965).

²²¹ SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/63/1174, 24/1/123/5760.

²²² SHC, D/B/ta/31/3/1, p. 239.

²²³ SHC, DD/TBL/75 (1965).

²²⁴ *Taunton Courier* 29 Apr. 1891, 17 Jan. 1900: BNA accessed 11 Aug. 2022.

²²⁵ *Taunton Official Handbook and Guide* (1931), 73.

²²⁶ SHC, DD/TBL/42/9/1 (*Taunton Mail* 4 July 1894, p. 5); A/EDG 2/1; D/B/ta/24/1/26/1737; DD/FIV/5/415; *Taunton Official Handbook and Guide* (1931), 75.

Rugby The Taunton Rugby Football Club was said to have begun in 1876 as a short-lived joint venture between Taunton school and a local collar manufacturer.²²⁷ By the 1880s there were several teams in the town such as the Press Club and the Railway team. The Taunton club was recreated in 1884 and in 1896 in addition there were also Star, Swifts and Trinity teams and Rowbarton, later Taunton, Albion Rugby Club, which played until the First World War.²²⁸ Several clubs used Jarvis's field by the river at Grasscroft where they established a permanent ground with grandstand c. 1896, given up by 1928, but the Taunton Rugby Club leased the Poor Grounds with grandstand, rebuilt in 1906, and an entrance in Viney Street. The club played there until 1935 when the area was to be redeveloped for housing.²²⁹

The former soccer ground had been redeveloped for tennis and boating on the river but it was not a success and the owner sold the land to the rugby club, which held its 1935—6 season there.²³⁰ The ground was requisitioned in the Second World War and the club used the police sports ground at Mountfields Road. They returned to Priory Park in 1946 but the ground was devastated by fire in 1959. The clubhouse was rebuilt in 1961 and the club had 425 members in 1962.²³¹ In the 1990s they moved to a new ground with a large clubhouse at Bathpool in West Monkton parish and Priory Park was redeveloped for housing. In the early 21st century the club fielded three teams and youth teams and maintained its links with Taunton school.²³²

²²⁷ SHC, DD/TBL 47.

²²⁸ SHC, PAM 262 *100 years of Taunton rugby*, 17, 21, 23; A/BMG/5/2; SHC, DD/TBL/42/9/3 (*Taunton Mail*, 29 Jan. 1896, p. 6).

²²⁹ SHC, PAM 262 *100 years of Taunton rugby*, 25; D/B/ta/4/3/2 (1896); D/B/ta/13/3/1, p. 396; D/B/ta/24/1/36/379; A/BMG/5/2; D/DC/tau.d/25/17 (abstr. of title); OS Map 1:2500, Som. LXX.12 (rev. 1929).

²³⁰ E. Saffin, *Taunton AFC 1947—97*, 1; SHC,.

²³¹ SHC, PAM 262 *100 years of Taunton rugby*, 37, 41, 43, 47; D/PS/tau.b/3/8.

²³² tauntonrfc.co.uk: accessed 10 Jan. 2020.

Football Rugby was more popular than soccer until the mid 20th century but football was played under electric light in Vivary Park for the first time in 1879.²³³ A Taunton United football team was in existence by 1900 and by 1924 they had moved to a new sports ground between the river and Priory Bridge Road called Priory Park.²³⁴ The Taunton United Football and Athletic Company Ltd sold shares to local people.²³⁵ The team was disbanded and the ground was taken over by the Taunton Town club founded in 1927. It failed and was forced to sell the ground in the 1930s.²³⁶

There were many amateur teams in the 1930s based on workplaces such as Avimo and the railway, which had had a team from 1909 or earlier.²³⁷ The war saw the arrival of military personnel who formed their own teams reviving interest in the game. In 1947 the Taunton Amateur, later Town, Football Club was formed and by 1953 created a ground in Wordsworth Drive adjoining the Hamilton Gault recreation ground. They bought it in the 1970s. The club, popularly known as the Peacocks, played in the Southern League Premier Division and won the FA Vase in 2001. By the early 21st century there were several other football clubs based in Taunton including the Hamilton Ladies.²³⁸

Golf The Taunton and Pickering golf club was formed in 1891 but was several miles south of the town in Corfe. A municipal golf course and putting green were established at Vivary Park in 1928 and extended in the 1960s. The Vivary Park golf club was formed in 1932 and by 1967 had 200 members when there were complaints the nine-hole course was overcrowded and the club house was inadequate. It remained in use in the 2020s.²³⁹

²³³ *Taunton Courier*, 1 May 1878: BNA accessed 24 July 2019; E. Jeboult, *A Popular History of West Somerset* (1893), appendix 1879.

²³⁴ SHC, D/B/ta/4/3/4; D/B/ta/24/1/58/1042; OS Map 1:2500, Som. LXX.12 (rev. 1929).

²³⁵ SHC, DD/KIT/1/16.

²³⁶ SHC, D/B/ta/4/3/4; *Taunton Official Handbook and Guide* (1931), 75.

²³⁷ SHC, DD/FIV/5/375.

²³⁸ E. Saffin, *Taunton AFC 1947—97*, 1—2; tauntontown.com; accessed 10 Jan. 2020; SHC, A/ECJ/1—15.

²³⁹ SHC, A/BMG/5/2; C/PL/3/1/5.

Other ball sports Taunton Women's Hockey Club was founded before 1912 as the Priorswood Club, the Taunton Ladies Club by 1927. The Taunton Vale Club hosted men's and mixed hockey clubs by the 1930s. Hockey was played at various school and college grounds and at a site at Wrantage until the Taunton Vale Hockey Club and pitch were opened off Greenway Road in 2001.²⁴⁰ Taunton had a basketball team by 1909 and the YMCA formed a team in the 1960s.²⁴¹ The Tigers Basketball team was established in the 1990.²⁴²

Flying and Gliding Harold Birchall, teacher at Taunton School, was a keen amateur pilot and was a founder member of and advisor to the Taunton and West Somerset Gliding Club inaugurated in 1931 in a field south of Wellington Road. Mr Birchall set up engineering workshops at Taunton School and obtained an aircraft for school use. The gliding club continued until c.1989.²⁴³ Sir Alan Cobham brought his flying display to Taunton in 1932.²⁴⁴

Skating Roller skating was a fashionable pastime from the later 19th century and in 1876 a short-lived skating rink was established at the London Inn assembly room with three sessions each day accompanied by the Summerhayes band.²⁴⁵ Later an outdoor rink was made in Bishops Hull parish but by 1930 there was a large rink off Upper Wood Street on the sawmill site, probably the new rink which received a music licence in 1929 and possibly used by the Taunton Roller Skating Hockey Club.²⁴⁶ A new rink opened in 1939 next to the

²⁴⁰ *Taunton Courier*, 19 Sep. 1959: BNA accessed 22 Aug. 2022. SHC, A/DKT 1/3, 4/4/16, 21.

²⁴¹ SHC, DD/FIV/5/387; *Taunton Courier*, 15 Oct. 1960, 22 Apr. 1961: BNA accessed 22 Aug. 2022..

²⁴² SHC, A/ECJ 1—15.

²⁴³ SHC, DD/X/BIC. The 1930s Taunton Flying Club was a pigeon homing society; *Taunton Courier*, 22 July 1931, 19 June 1935: BNA accessed 22 Aug. 2022.

²⁴⁴ *Taunton Courier*, 10 Aug. 1932: BNA accessed 22 Aug. 2022.

²⁴⁵ *Taunton Courier*, 8 March 1876: BNA accessed 22 Aug. 2022.

²⁴⁶ Bishops Hull, soc. hist.; OS Map 1/2500 Som. LXX.12 (1930 edn.); *Taunton Courier*, 9 Jan. 1929, 31 Dec. 1938. BNA accessed 22 Aug. 2022.

cinema in Station Road but was probably short-lived and demolished for car parking.²⁴⁷ In late 20th and early 21st century skateboarding was popular with children especially boys and facilities were provided at the Hamilton Gault playing field.

Societies and Clubs

Freemasonry The St George's Lodge met at the Fountain Inn in East Street from 1764 but ceased in 1783.²⁴⁸ The Lodge of Unanimity, now Unanimity and was constituted in 1788 its origins in Ilminster before transferring to Taunton and was probably meeting c. 1800 in North Street and later in Clarkes Hotel.²⁴⁹ Popular with Taunton tradesmen and professional men, its membership increased from 45 in 1866 to 112 in 1891.²⁵⁰ In 1878 they bought the old Catholic Church in the Crescent and dedicated it in January 1879. After being sublet to Huish's school for girls, it was gradually improved and furnished, had a dining room added in 1884 and remained the Freemason's Hall in the 21st century. Its furnishings include an organ installed in 1932, antique globes and a collection of books begun in 1842.²⁵¹ By 1938 there were six other lodges meeting in Taunton, the oldest being a new lodge of St George founded in 1906, and by 2010 there were nine lodges, four connected with schools.²⁵²

Political clubs In 1789 a Revolution Society was founded to celebrate 1689 and in 1790 celebrated the French Revolution but was not recorded again.²⁵³ A sheriff's club for former sheriffs and others met at the London inn and raised money to pay the shrievalty javelin men in the later 18th century.²⁵⁴ In 1815 the Somerset and Taunton Pitt Club was

²⁴⁷ *Taunton Courier*, 31 Dec. 1938, 14 Jan. 1939: BNA accessed 22 Aug. 2022; SHC, D/B/ta/48/18 (c. 1945).

²⁴⁸ SHC, A/CTW; M. Yates, *Freemasonry in the Province of Somerset from 1733* (Wedmore, 2010), 282.

²⁴⁹ SHC, 368/1/84; Q/RSm/2; Yates, *Freemasonry in Som.*, 174.

²⁵⁰ SHC, Q/RSm/2.

²⁵¹ SHC, D/P/tau.m/4/4/1; 24/1/19/751; Yates, *Freemasonry in Som.*, 116—18.

²⁵² SHC, A/BMG/5/2; Yates, *Freemasonry in Som.*, 115.

²⁵³ SHC, A/CPT/15/5, p 384.

²⁵⁴ SHC, DD/SK/4/5/23.

founded with c. 100 members.²⁵⁵ The Somerset County Club was established in 1882 and had handsome premises at 40—1 Fore Street with billiard, cards, reading, smoking and dining rooms. That property was sold in 1929, to become Marks and Spencer, and the club moved to Shrapnells in the Crescent, which it partly rebuilt and extended in 1930.²⁵⁶ Membership fell from c. 300 in the 1940s to 72 in 1957, mainly gentlemen and former members of the armed services. In the 1970s the club had vacated the building, which has since been offices, and moved to Melville House, Middle Street but was wound up in 1986—7.²⁵⁷

The West Somerset Liberal Club in Hammet Street in 1885 closed in 1908. The Taunton and West Somerset Liberal Club had premises west of the Temple Methodist church until 1902 or later.²⁵⁸ It was probably the Taunton Liberal Club based by 1922 at the Priory, Canon Street and extended for billiards in 1926.²⁵⁹ The Conservative Club was in Station Road c. 1900 but moved to Bath Place where it had a reading room, bar and two billiard rooms in 1910. It later moved to Church Square and had up to 600 members in the 1940s.²⁶⁰ The Taunton and Somerset Constitutional Club had 571 members in 1942.²⁶¹ The Taunton Labour Club and Institute was built in Priory Bridge Road in 1928 and extended in 1934 to provide billiard and meeting rooms. It had 800 members in 1946 but closed later in the century like many political clubs.²⁶²

Youth organizations The Taunton branch of the Young Men's Christian Association [YMCA] began in 1855 in Hammet Street and by 1883 had 190 members and a library, reading room. In 1890 they acquired St James House in St James Street, which was converted

²⁵⁵ Toulmin, *History of Taunton*, rev. J. Savage (Taunton, 1822), 595.

²⁵⁶ SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/14/548, 24/1/44/617, D/B/ta/24/1/74/1520; Devon HC, 547B/P/80/2813.

²⁵⁷ SHC, DD/ATK 3/1, 6—7, 14; DD/SCY; D/B/ta/24/1/2229/14770; D/PS/tau.b/3/6.

²⁵⁸ SHC, DD/TBL/42/9/8 {*Taunton Mail* 11 July 1900, p. 4}; *Goodman's Dir. Taunton* (1902—3), 208.

²⁵⁹ SHC, D/B/ta/4/3/4 (1926).

²⁶⁰ TNA, IR 58/82631 (82); SHC, DD/SAS/C2402/51; D/PS/tau.b/3/7; D/B/ta/13/3/1, p. 392.

²⁶¹ SHC, D/PS/tau.b/3/6.

²⁶² SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/68/11329, 24/1/69/1360, 24/1/91/2019; D/PS/tau.b/3/6.

by architect Frederick Roberts. Later the grounds were occupied by a gymnasium completed in 1895, cricket pitch and billiard hall. By 1901 there were 612 members who fielded two football teams, cricket, swimming and tennis clubs. In 1905 to mark their jubilee the house was extended over the adjoining house site bought in 1900.²⁶³ During the Second World War a canteen provided two and half million meals for service personnel.²⁶⁴ In 1969 they planned a new building at Lisieux Way completed c. 1974 where they remained until 2018 when they secured funding to re-open the Great Western Hotel at the railway station.²⁶⁵ The Young Women's Christian Association [YWCA] began in East Street in 1882 before moving to the Crescent and in 1898 to a large house in Mary Street adjoining the Original Infants school. The west end was rebuilt for road widening in the 1950s. They moved out in 1996 and the building was bought by a housing association.²⁶⁶

In the 1910s and 1920s scout and guide troops were established at several schools and churches, sometimes formed from 19th-century lads' brigades and girls' clubs. Some had no more than 20 members and one of the largest was for boarders at Taunton School which had 64 boys in 1923.²⁶⁷ By the mid 20th century there was a guide and brownie hall near St Andrew's church hall north of the station and a scout and guide headquarters was opened at Tangier.²⁶⁸ A local authority youth centre opened in a former postal training centre off Belvedere road in 1966.²⁶⁹ Other youth clubs, many connected with local churches, flourished in the 20th century but later most closed.²⁷⁰

²⁶³ SHC, DD/TBL/68.

²⁶⁴ SHC PAM 3088 *The Red Triangle in Taunton*, 5—13, 29.

²⁶⁵ SHC, A/DSG/1; DD/YMt; D/B/ta/24/1/230/14882; bbc.co.uk, accessed 23 March 2018.

²⁶⁶ SHC, A/DSG/1; A/DBC/4/6; 8; DD/CH/82/1; DD/FIV/1/45; TNA, RG13/2278.

²⁶⁷ SHC, A/CVB 6/4/1, 7/3/1; SHC, D/P/tau.a/23/2.

²⁶⁸ SHC, D/P/tau.a/9/4/4; Bishops Hull, soc. hist.

²⁶⁹ SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/179/10691.

²⁷⁰ e.g. SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/156/9507.

Other organizations By the 20th century Taunton had hundreds of societies representing many interests from leisure to charity. Some were branches of national organisations including the British Legion, Civic Society, Soroptimists or the Rotary Club.²⁷¹ The British Legion had 800 members in 1939 when based in Bath Place. In the late 20th century it moved into the Lawns in Mary Street where it remained in the 2020s. It built flats in Leslie Avenue named Clifford Ashman Court after a former county president and now run by a housing association.²⁷² The RAF Club, later the Wings, in Cheddon Road still had 570 members in 1962.²⁷³ In the first half of the 20th century c. 35 Taunton clubs, mainly working men's, military and sports associations, applied for alcohol licences but although some experienced a large increase in membership during the Second World War many closed from the early 1950s. One of the largest was the Great Western Railway Staff Club and Institute opened at the station in 1940 and with 750 members in 1946.²⁷⁴ It succeeded the Great Western Railway Social and Educational Union hall and skittle alley, on the same site, off Plais Street in the 1920s.²⁷⁵ The St Andrews and Holy Trinity working men's clubs both of which had their own premises remained active in the 2020s.²⁷⁶ Some employers provided social facilities for their workers including Thomas Penny who built reading, smoking and dining rooms at his sawmills and yard in Wood Street in 1934.²⁷⁷ Other clubs included members only beerhouses and night clubs.

Some organisations like the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society, founded in 1849, and the Taunton and District Gardener's Association, started in 1928 continued to flourish in the 21st century. Frederick Baker composed 'the Chrysanthemum

²⁷¹ SHC, A/CUD; A/ASF/1; PAM 261 R. Dunning, *The Rotary Club of Taunton, 1922—72*.

²⁷² SHC, D/PS/tau.b/3/6; *Som. Standard*, 3 March 1972; BNA accessed 21 Sep. 2021..

²⁷³ SHC, D/PS/tau.b/3/8.

²⁷⁴ SHC, D/PS/tau.b/3/6—9.

²⁷⁵ SHC, D/B/ta/13/3/1, p. 357; D/B/ta/24/1/66/1269; 24/1/106,3118 (map).

²⁷⁶ SHC, D/PS/tau.b/3/6.

²⁷⁷ SHC, D/B/ta/24/1/24/1634.

Valse' dedicated to the latter *c.* 1930 as they held chrysanthemum shows.²⁷⁸ Many others failed to survive including the Taunton Business and Professional Women's club started in 1947, townswomen's guild founded in 1948 or the Taunton Deane Archaeology and Excavation Committee 1973—2015.²⁷⁹

Events and Celebrations

In the early 18th century the anniversary of George I's coronation was celebrated annually and in 1727 the leads of the high cross and the post office ran with wine and there were bonfires and illuminations.²⁸⁰ The Taunton Festival of 22 June 1814 celebrated peace with France with a pageant of tradesmen, workers and musicians led by yeomanry cavalry, figures representing Britannia, the Duke of Wellington and John Bull, recruiting parties and charity schoolchildren. After the procession had wound its way through the principal streets 60 tables were laid out from the Parade to Church Square for a dinner for *c.* 3,000 people. Festivities continued for 2 more days including open air dinners for workers' groups, dances and games on the Parade and a ball.²⁸¹ The 1815 victory at Waterloo was celebrated by a ball at the Castle.²⁸² The Taunton Carnival has its roots in the 1814 festival and subsequent events to raise money for the hospital. Girls and nurses paraded with garlands of flowers and collecting boxes alongside the floats, originally decorated mill and factory wagons. Carnivals were held in most years between 1891 and 1914 usually in late summer and were known as the Taunton Cyclists Carnival and Trades Procession as a Taunton Bicycle club organised them and created a carnival committee. Processions were held during the day and a carnival concert was held in the evening. During the war the committee was disbanded and its equipment was sold. In 1922 an autumn carnival was proposed and a few were held in the 1920s and 1930s.

²⁷⁸ SHC, A/CUH/6/1.

²⁷⁹ SHC, DD/TCM/18; C/ENAH/7.

²⁸⁰ SHC, DD/SAS/C2548/2 [Norris's *Taunton Jnl*, 21 Oct. 1726, 13 Oct. 1727].

²⁸¹ SHC, DD/SAS/C795/BA/9/7 (printed insert, 1814); DD/SAS/C795/TN/150.

²⁸² SHC, A/APS 8/5.

In 1966 a new Taunton Carnival was inaugurated with carnival clubs and workplaces creating elaborate floats with extravagant lighting effects. It has been held annually on a Saturday night in October ever since as part of the Somerset carnival circuit.²⁸³

George IV's coronation was celebrated by a modest dinner under the archway off Hammett Street but bellringing, choral services, processions, teas, concerts and fireworks became increasingly common especially for the marriage of the prince of Wales in 1863 when 6,000 Taunton families received food gifts.²⁸⁴ The 1887 jubilee was marked by processions of military and trade groups and tea in Vivary Park with medals for schoolchildren.²⁸⁵ Particularly elaborate decorations were erected in the town centre for the 1897 jubilee including large quantities of electric lights.²⁸⁶ Royal accessions were proclaimed from the Market House and in the 20th century from the front of the municipal buildings in Corporation Street.²⁸⁷ Local composer Harold Jeboult wrote a *Te Deum* for the 1902 coronation although in Taunton it was celebrated prematurely in June with two days of processions, services, military parades, tea and dinner, sports and fireworks.²⁸⁸ The 1911 coronation was celebrated with bellringing from 6 a.m., processions, tree planting, church services, music, a dinner for the over 60s, a tea and sports for children and a firework display with dancing.²⁸⁹ The 1935 jubilee was marked by a cinema showing of a film of the king's reign for older children, followed by a service and tea in the park. The infants received chocolates and all schoolchildren had books. There were arches and other decorations on the Bridge.²⁹⁰ For the 1951 Festival of Britain the Mayor of Lisieux brought a folk dance group

²⁸³ N. Chipchase, *Taunton Remembered*, 92; SHC, DD/TBL/80—2; DD/S/PCK/3; DD/FIV/5/3, 15, 17—18.

²⁸⁴ Goldsworthy, *Recollections of Old Taunton*, 15; SHC, C/E/4/220/1, pp. 26—7.

²⁸⁵ SHC, tau.m/2/6/16 (1887), 18/11/1 (1887); SANHS Tite Colln, Taunton Scrap book (plan of procession).

²⁸⁶ SHC, A/DIF/101/6/118.

²⁸⁷ SHC, DD/ASC/9/3/1.

²⁸⁸ SHC, A/DIF/95/35.

²⁸⁹ SHC, A/DIF 79/1.

²⁹⁰ SHC, C/E/4/359/5 (1935); DD/FIV/1/91.

to entertain the townspeople.²⁹¹ The 1953 coronation was marked by over a week of events including a live television broadcast of the ceremony in Vivary Park and a 21 gun salute with three-pounders for which local residents were warned that all windows should be left open! All babies born on coronation day were given a silver spoon.²⁹²

In 1928 an ambitious historical pageant written by Major Maurice Cely-Trevillian entitled *Defendamus*, the Taunton town motto, was performed with more emphasis on Taunton's perceived independent character than historical accuracy.²⁹³ The pageant, in the tradition of the pageants devised by Louis Napoleon Parker in 1905, was originally planned to be performed in 1927 to celebrate charter anniversaries. The performances were held on five evenings in the Crescent field, site of the later County hall, using c. 1,500 actors. It covered periods of history and legend from King Arthur to the Monmouth Rebellion. Large grandstands were erected and each night c. 3,000 people came to view and 7,500 copies of the pageant book were sold.²⁹⁴

Queen Elizabeth II's coronation in 1953 was celebrated with a carnival, fair and military tattoo.²⁹⁵ Prince Philip, the Queen Mother and other members of the Royal family visited the town between 1952 and 1962, the Queen visited in 1987 and 2002 and Diana, Princess of Wales in 1993.²⁹⁶ In May 2004 the 1100th anniversary of the granting of Taunton Deane to the bishop of Winchester was celebrated with a month of events including re-enactments, fairs, services and exhibitions.²⁹⁷

²⁹¹ SHC, M. J. Brasselet and G. E. Winn, *Taunton—Lisieux Twinning*, 4.

²⁹² SHC, DD/ASC/9/3/1.

²⁹³ SHC, A/BDK/1.

²⁹⁴ SHC, A/BCJ/2; below, local govt., politics.

²⁹⁵ SHC, A/BWM/1.

²⁹⁶ SHC, DD/ASC/9/3/5, 9, 24—5, 29—32, 34.

²⁹⁷ VCH Office, festival leaflets.

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