



Welcome to the twenty-second 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



*Mary Siraut and Adam Chapman
at the launch event*

Tom Mayberry



West Street area of Dunster in 1750

SWHT

We were delighted that Volume 12, covering Minehead, Dunster and Carhampton, was launched in November. You should have received a discount code for purchasing the book.

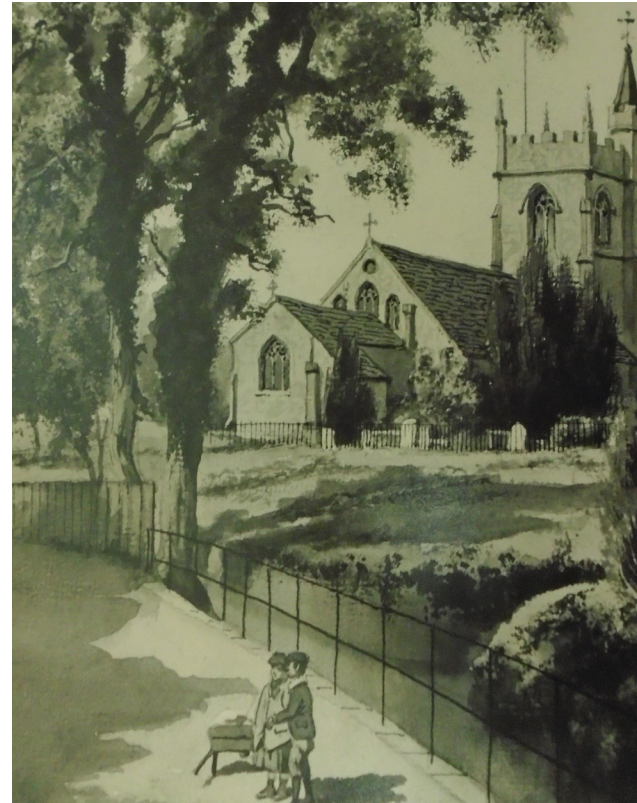
We had a special event in Castle House with our general editor Dr Adam Chapman and presented and sold several copies. After a general introduction to the work of the VCH by the general editor the county editor gave a presentation on the changing fortunes of Dunster and Minehead as reflected in the built environment. Several colleagues, west Somerset residents and newsletter readers attended and enjoyed a chance to meet up over refreshments.

Work continues on Staplegrove, much of which is in draft, and most research for Wilton is now complete. The gaol records provide a wealth of interesting stories as we saw in our last newsletter. One amusing item was a telegram to the governor who had been transferred to Shepton gaol asking him to return the Wilton prison keys! In 1824 the gaol was proud to advertise its treadmill promising customers that if they brought wheat to be ground at 4s a bushel they would receive full weight back with no tollcorn taken. They would avoid the scandalous practices whereby millers substituted inferior wheat for that received and even introduced 'pernicious ingredients'. Owing to the regulation of the gaol customers were assured that such fraud was impracticable.



Old filing board from
Wilton manorial records
SWHT

Also in 1824 readers of the Taunton Courier were warned against fraudulent petitions in a manner reminiscent of advice on avoiding phishing scams. A man who had been lodging in a Taunton dosshouse was convicted for begging using a petition claiming he was a 'decayed Excise Officer with a wife and five children (who, however, did not make their appearance)'. Appended to the petition were forged signatures in the same hand as the petition with the descriptions 'Oveseer - Aturney - Atorny - Docter -repeatedly, and a long list of similar blunders.'



St George's Wilton from Hammets Walk, late 19th century
SWHT

Many people had been persuaded to give the beggar money on the strength of this petition and the newspaper had this advice. 'We take the liberty of suggesting that too much caution cannot be exercised in examining petitions of this kind.'

We have plans to start three more parishes in 2024! With all this activity it seems appropriate to note the tentative beginnings of the VCH. The *Taunton Mail* of 27 December 1899, lauded the Somerset Record Society's discovery of Thomas Gerard's early 1630s description of Somerset and noted that a series of county histories had been initiated the previous year.

They were to be known as the Victoria History of the Counties of England and were to produce volumes on the leading families of each county. The newspaper was keen to note that modern genealogical research was to produce a 'record of our territorial houses'. The record was to be 'carefully restricted to those families which can fairly claim to come within its scope'. What would they say to our modern volumes full of quite lowly persons! The writer smugly noted that Somerset, unlike other counties, had a depository for the preservation of county records.

In this edition you will find articles on Somerset clergy ordained in Salisbury diocese in the Middle Ages, exploited shirt makers in the 1920s, the future of the Royal Ordnance Factory at Puriton and the Debenhams memories project.

Seeking ordination in the Salisbury diocese: The Bath & Wells clerks who went across the border during the 15th century

For a late medieval clerk the need to seek preferment to a living was a pressing concern. The English Church had no centralised system for the financial support of its clergy. It was therefore essential for an aspiring cleric to join and develop networks of patronage. In so doing they could either meet a patron from whom a living might be obtained, or they could at least hope to be recommended to those who had one or more livings in their gift. This need to achieve patronage helps to explain why significant numbers of clerks from the Bath & Wells diocese can be found in the ordination lists of the adjacent Salisbury diocese.

The information that follows comes from a database of ordinations records built for the Salisbury diocese across the years 1410 to 1500 (with a gap in the 1440s to be filled in due course). The records themselves are to be found in the registers of the bishops of



Salisbury Cathedral – the west front



Ordo – part of the remarkable fifteenth-century sacrament window in the Devon parish church of Doddiscombsleigh showing a late medieval ordination ceremony

Salisbury. Several of these remain in manuscript form while others have been produced as printed editions, e.g. those for Robert Hallum (bishop from 1407 to 1417) and Thomas Langton (bishop from 1485 to 1493).

One important distinction that needs to be emphasized is that between the secular and the regular clergy. Regular clerks were those who belonged to religious orders, i.e. the monks, friars and regular canons. In numerical terms the main orders of monks were those of the Benedictine and Cistercian orders whereas the two largest orders of friars were the Franciscans (or Greyfriars) and the Dominicans (or Blackfriars). The largest order of regular canons were the Augustinians. The secular clergy were those outside the religious orders who made up the parish clergy, chantry priests and what we might call jobbing clerks (those who picked up income where they could from saying obituary masses etc). It is these secular clergy who made up the great bulk of men from Bath & Wells who sought ordination in the Salisbury diocese and elsewhere. The regular clergy were mostly ordained in their home diocese.

In this late medieval Catholic Church, a new clerk had to obtain ordination through several levels (or orders). The ordination levels comprise four main orders. The lowest of these (acolyte) was the last of the minor orders and, up to this point, the aspiring cleric had not committed himself to a celibate life. However, the three major orders, those of sub-deacon, deacon and finally priest did require celibacy. The clergy were by default expected to seek ordination in their home diocese. However permission could be obtained from their bishop to look elsewhere – this permission was given in the form of letters dimissory and it is clear that these were easily obtained and widely used.

Taking the information for Salisbury diocese across all the decades in the database, it emerges that over 6% of the secular ordinands were from Bath & Wells (see the pie chart below). In absolute terms that comprises 258 men of whom 29 were entitled *magister*, i.e. were university graduates.

Almost exclusively from the University of Oxford. Some men were only ordained at Salisbury to one of the order levels just described. They might already have achieved the status of acolyte or higher within Bath & Wells. However some clerks ranged far and wide for their ordination ceremonies.

One example among the university graduates from Bath & Wells was Robert Dale who was a fellow of Merton College, Oxford. He was ordained acolyte at Oxford (in the diocese of Lincoln) in March 1488. He became a sub-deacon back in Bath & Wells in February 1491, a deacon in Salisbury in March 1491 and then a priest in Exeter diocese in April 1491.

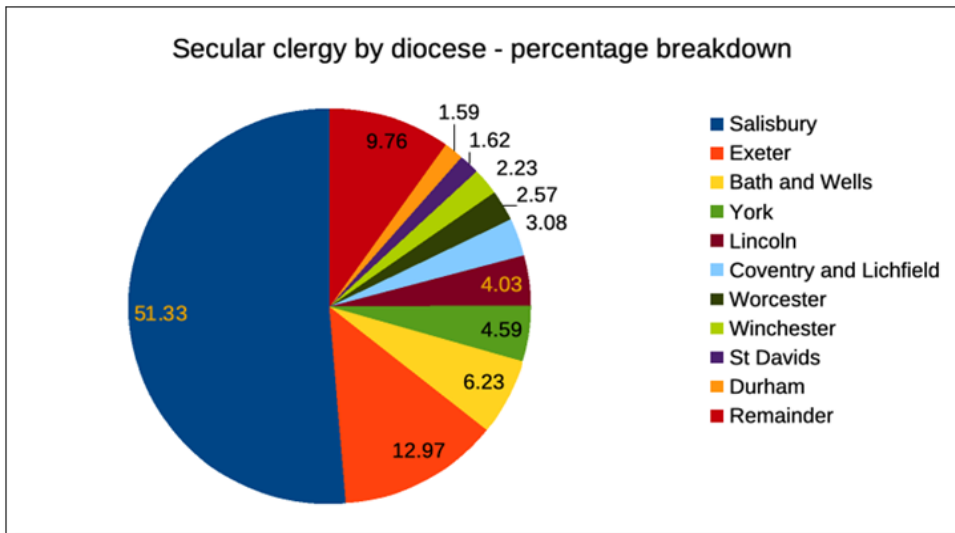
Another graduate of Merton College, Oxford was John Adams. He was ordained sub-deacon in Rochester diocese in December 1497, deacon in Salisbury in March 1498 and priest in Lincoln diocese in March 1498. His career was greatly influenced by a major who was successively bishop of Rochester, Chichester and London. Fitzjames was another Bath & Wells man whose family came from Redlynch near Bruton. As sub-deacon Adams' ordination is listed in Fitzjames's register at Rochester. Then, at the end of his life, we find that Fitzjames had appointed Adams as one of his executors. During his time as bishop of London Fitzjames had seen Adams appointed as a canon at St Paul's cathedral where he held the prebends of Holborn and then Mora. We can thus see how the possession of a valuable patron such as Fitzjames might greatly enhance a clerk's career prospects. Perhaps the ideal scenario was having an uncle who was already a bishop – such a relationship led to great preferment for several fifteenth century clerics such as Robert Nevill (see below), patron, namely Richard Fitzjames.

William Spekynton, who was to become a doctor of civil law, was a native of Montacute. He was a Wykehamist, i.e. a man educated at Winchester College who then went on to its associated Oxford college of New College. Spekynton was one of a growing number of students of civil or Roman law at Oxford whose numbers had swelled significantly over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. He was ordained acolyte and later as deacon in Bath & Wells. However he was ordained sub-deacon in the diocese of Winchester and priest in the diocese of Salisbury. As an academic doctor, Spekynton was something of a rarity – only eight other men (across all dioceses) are recorded as such in the Salisbury ordinations database. According to canon law at the time, no ordained priest should have been studying civil law – it is not clear whether Spekynton chose to ignore that stricture or whether he had received explicit dispensation to do so.

John Withers, also of Somerset, was a fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford who became a doctor of canon law significantly later in life (by a papal bull). He was ordained as an acolyte at Oxford (and thus in the diocese of Lincoln); the next known ordination ceremony we know for him was in the diocese of Winchester where he was ordained deacon. It was in the Salisbury diocese that he was ordained priest in June 1489. Withers' earlier education is of interest as he attended Eton College and was one of its very first fellows. His connection with Eton continued where he was recorded as an executor of the will of Robert Galon, chaplain of that college. One final example from Bath & Wells diocese is Thomas Smyth. He was not a fellow of one of the newer colleges at Oxford but instead is recorded as being from one of the older halls, in his case St Mary Hall. That more ancient system of halls and inns was being steadily superseded by new collegiate foundations during the fifteenth century (Lincoln College, 1427; All Souls College, 1438; Magdalen College, 1458). Smyth was ordained acolyte and sub-deacon in Winchester diocese. His diaconate was in his home diocese and his priesthood in Salisbury in June 1454. Later in his career he was appointed chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral in London. Smyth had preached before the king on Passion Sunday 1466. Making the king familiar with your face and talents was never a bad move, and Smyth had the distinction by that time of being a doctor of theology. His benefices in Somerset were at Radnor (near Bath) and, towards the end of his life, the rectorship of Portishead.



The beautiful abbey church at Sherborne

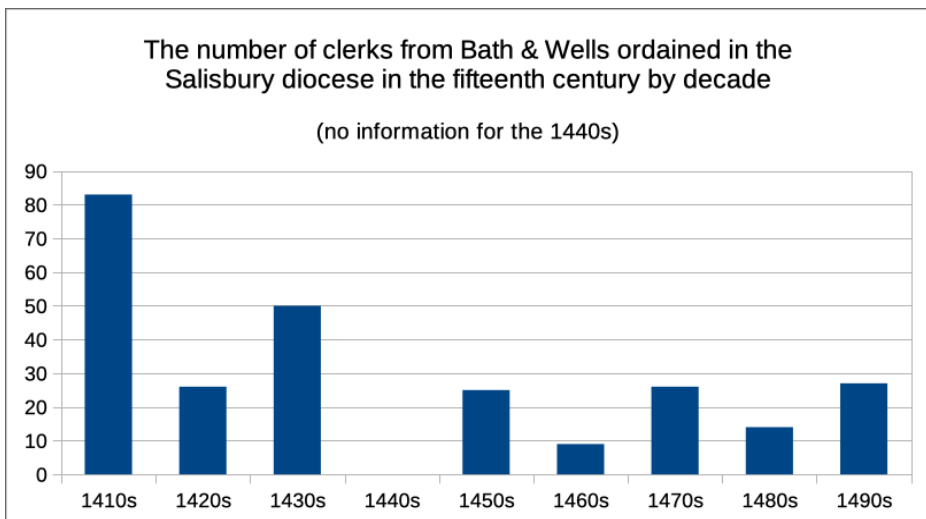


The pie chart (left) also indicates how men from some very distant dioceses are to be found among the Salisbury ordinands. Many of those can be explained by the proximity of the Salisbury diocese to the university of Oxford where clerics from across England (and beyond) were studying. The ancient county of Berkshire used to extend to within just a few miles of the city of Oxford. Thus, when Salisbury ordination ceremonies were held in places such as Abingdon or the bishop's manor at Ramsbury, they were within easy reach for the Oxford clerks.

Three instances in the Salisbury registers are shown in September 1410, December 1413 and June 1498. In total nine men from Montacute Priory attended ordination ceremonies in the Salisbury diocese across the century. Eight Augustinian canons, mostly from Bruton Priory and Keynsham Abbey did likewise. There were also a very few Carthusians and Benedictines who did the same, and one Dominican friar. None of the Cistercians of Cleeve Abbey or Franciscan Friars from Bridgwater did so.

The home dioceses of the secular clerks ordained in the Salisbury diocese across the fifteenth century

One final observation concerns variation over time. The bar chart (bottom left) shows how many Bath & Wells men attended ordination ceremonies in the Salisbury diocese listed by decade. Two periods across the fifteenth century stand out, namely the 1410s and the 1430s. In the first of those the bishop of Salisbury (from 1407 until 1417) was Robert Hallum. He achieved great prominence as envoy to the councils of Pisa and Constance, the latter being the forum where the papal schism that had rocked the Western Church was finally resolved with the election of Pope Martin V. Hallum was also very active in the royal council of English king, Henry IV. For any aspiring clerk it would be highly advantageous to become known to such an outstanding bishop with all his connections to both the English king and the papal court. Similarly in the 1430s the presence of Robert Nevill as bishop of Salisbury would have acted as a strong attraction. Nevill's uncle was none other than Henry Beaufort, the wealthy bishop of Winchester, who was able to persuade Pope Martin V to provide Nevill to the vacant see of Salisbury even though he was but twenty-three years of age. Nevill had been nominated to that bishopric by the royal council (Henry VI was still a small child at this point). In 1427 Nevill was translated to the bishopric of Durham, again by the influence of Henry Beaufort. Nevill's biographer, A.J. Pollard, is less than complimentary about him, describing him as 'not the greatest ornament of the late medieval English church' and as a man 'not blessed with outstanding intelligence'. Those were not charges that could be levelled against Robert Hallum. The prominence of both Hallum and Nevill in their time at Salisbury may help to explain why the 'incomers' from Bath & Wells were especially attracted to the Salisbury diocese during their episcopates.



The Song of the Shirt revisited

*Work—work—work,
Till the brain begins to swim;
Work—work—work,
Till the eyes are heavy and dim!
Seam, and gusset, and band,
Band, and gusset, and seam,
Till over the buttons I fall asleep,
And sew them on in a dream!*

From the *Song of the Shirt* by Thomas Hood

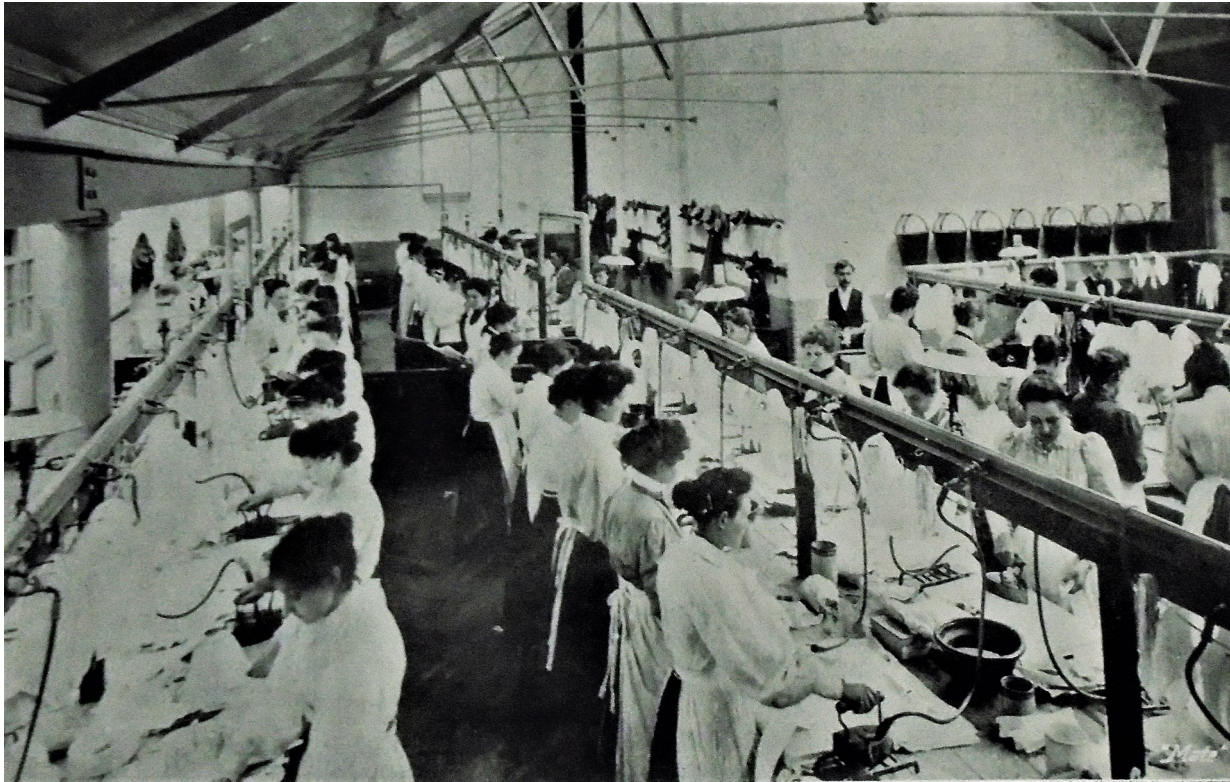
Taunton played a prominent role in the manufacture of shirts and collars from the later 19th to the later 20th centuries and for many women in the 1920s it would seem that not much had changed since Thomas Hood wrote his famous poem in 1843. By the early 20th century the shirt-making trade board laid down minimum wages, but investigations for the Ministry of Labour revealed that these were not paid and rural women and those with learning difficulties were exploited.

An investigation was conducted into the outworkers for A K Cook and Company immediately after the First World War. The Excelsior Shirt and Collar Works had been established before 1885 by collar maker Alfred Kirk Cook (d. 1926) and piano dealer Clement Smith on the site of The Mount abutting the back of the Original Infant School. They also had premises in Canon Street in 1894, probably for collar dressing. In 1910 the Mount factory had a vertical boiler and 12 h.p. engine, machine shop, offices and box cutting room downstairs and a room with 40 shirt machines, box store and stockrooms upstairs, but it was in poor repair. Iron buildings behind the factory housed laundry and drying rooms, collar machine room, cutting room and a cloth store.

Conditions and wages were poor especially for the outworkers in the villages. The firm employed outworkers at Westport. These shirtmakers were responsible for assembling and seaming shirts from the ready-cut sections and made-up collars and cuffs supplied from the factory. They earned 10d for seaming a dozen cotton shirts and up to 2s for woollen ones. They had to pay 8d to 1s for the cop of cotton which their employer claimed would make 1,200 shirts, omitting to take account of the fact that lockstitch required both needle and shuttle threads. They had 1d an hour deducted for the cost of their insurance stamp until the full cost was paid, which was illegal and for which Cook was prosecuted by the Home Office. There was a receiving room under a manageress at Westport but by 1922 there were fewer than 40 outworkers employed putting in sleeves, cuffs and buttons.

Women at the small out factory at Seavington were charged 1d a week for oil, even though the manageress said the whole works used no more than 2d worth a week. It was difficult to calculate arrears of pay due to the women for underpayment as wage records were not properly kept or were destroyed and the women were afraid of losing their jobs. Two Taunton factories had threatened to stop providing outwork if 'there was any trouble'. Outwork appears to have declined in the mid 1920s so that by 1927 it was confined to former factory workers who were tied to the home. The owners of Pool Wall mill ran a factory in Ireland where workers were paid on piece rates but all workers also got a bonus of 2d in the shilling.

Things were not much better in the Excelsior factory at The Mount, possibly because the company's large export business had been damaged by the war. By 1919 enough evidence had been uncovered on the wages of 21 women to prosecute Cook for underpaying a total of £45. This was less than was owed but the records did not go back far enough to claim more. Although convicted the firm did not pay for several months, until two unions had written to the ministry and then only part of what was owed. This aroused widespread anger among workers locally and scandalised factories who paid the minimum rates and risked being undercut on sales. As a result the Ministry of Labour ordered an investigation into shirt-making in the Taunton area 'with a view to prosecution in all cases where this is possible'.



Women ironing collars in a Taunton factory c. 1908 SWHT

OUTLASTS MANY STARCHED COLLARS.

VAN HEUSEN

TRADE MARK.

The World's most economical

COLLAR

ENTIRELY MADE IN TAUNTON, SOMERSET

SUPREME FOR

Economy, Comfort & Style

WHITE In 5 Styles Quarter Sizes.	1/6 each.	COLOURED In Style 11 only. Half sizes, 5 designs.
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A 1920s advert for Taunton-made collars SWHT

The minimum rate for female shirt and collar workers was *5d* an hour and *6d* for forewomen. Investigations showed at the Excelsior factory no one was paid this much, and some as little as *3d*. Piece work and bad record-keeping made it difficult to prove how much women were due in arrears. In an out-factory of Cook's at Ilminster stitchers were paid up to 25 per cent less than the minimum. The Taunton Manufacturing Company's out-factory there gave workers bonuses that brought them above the minimum, but in their factory in Taunton eight buttonholers had only three quarters of the minimum wage. Analysis of earnings of some of the women who worked at the Excelsior factory showed that many started aged 12 or 13. Some moved from one factory to another and had many decades of experience but most earned only *4¼d* an hour. Girls from the back courts were only paid *3d* an hour and worked a 47-hour week. Some women were said to average only *2.3d*. Even experienced shirt fitters in their 50s were earning as little as *3d*.

There were instances of women and girls with learning difficulties, classed as 'sub-ordinary', being exploited. One such woman, a buttonhole machinist aged about 50, got only *2½d* an hour, half the minimum, and like other buttonholers had to buy oil and needles for her machine. A girl from Union Gate aged 16 described as 'slow in the brain' ran errands in the factory, which was said to be an 'asylum for workers who are rejected by all the other firms.' On a later inspection in 1927 the workers were described as a poor lot 'castaways from the other Factories in the Town'.

Laundry hands, ironing soft collars, were expected to iron 109 collars for *1d*, so to earn the minimum wage of *5d* an hour they would have had to iron 545 collars an hour or nine a minute. As they worked an *8½* hour day considerable stamina would be required to stand and iron 4,635 collars. Clearly most women could never achieve that and received only *3¾d* an hour. Box-makers in the Excelsior factory were much better paid, with women getting *9.3d* an hour and girls *5.6d*, but in 1923 they did not work a full week.

Not all workers were prepared to put up with their conditions, several joined the United Garment Workers Union and some at the South Street factory even joined the Dockers Union, which was not approved by the employer, in order to strike. A K Cook and Company went bankrupt in 1922 and the factory closed in 1924. Mr Cook's widow Clara reopened the factory in 1927 with four workers but the business failed, probably because it was unable to compete with the other larger factories in Taunton. Despite investigations and prosecutions low wages for women continued and female beginners at the Van Heusen factory earned only 4d an hour in 1938.

In 1939 the textile and clothing industries employed c.2,000 insured workers in Taunton and as late as 1961 six factories employed c. 1,700 people, mainly women, making it Taunton's largest manufacturing industry. The industry still used outworkers in 1952 when 411 clothing outworkers were subject to inspection under the Public Health Acts, falling to 100 by 1972 as the factories closed. In 1960 council tenants were allowed one commercial sewing machine to work at home. The song of the shirt would probably still strike a chord with garment workers in the developing countries where most of our clothing is made today.

Mary Siraut



Modern garment factory in Bangladesh

From ROF 37 to GRAVITY

Despite the marshy ground Puriton was chosen for a new Royal Ordnance Factory because of good rail connections via a branch to the Great Western Railway mainline between Bristol and Taunton and the availability of local brick.

The construction of Royal Ordnance Factory 37 Bridgwater was started in late 1939 in Puriton to manufacture RDX (Research Department Explosive). Production started in August 1941 and over 20,000 tons was manufactured before the end of the Second World War. All the explosive was sent elsewhere to be filled into bombs, shells and other weapons. In 1943 2,816 people were employed. The manufacture of bulk explosives ended in 1945 and production turned to manufacturing materials, principally hexamine and formaldehyde, for the plastics industry. Concrete sections were also made for the Airey prefabricated house.

The factory was linked to the main railway network by a short branch line, now lifted. On entering the factory the line split to serve a group of magazines. Explosives were moved on an internal narrow-gauge railway system. Besides plant buildings there were the administration buildings, laboratories, a general maintenance shop and an acid plant providing the high concentrations of nitric and sulphuric acid required for explosives manufacture.

A hostel was built in 1942 but most workers were housed on a large estate begun in 1941 in Woolavington. By October 1942 1,777 pre-cast concrete bungalows had been built. There were a community centre and a youth club. In the 1960s standard local authority houses and bungalows replaced the 'temporary' dwellings.

Explosives manufacture restarted in 1951 at the onset of the Korean War. "Plastic propellants" for rockets were also made; work that was developed into the 1980s. Another explosive, HMX (High Melting Explosive) was started in 1955, with a larger production plant commissioned in 1960. A plant to make TNT was built in 1980. Royal Ordnance was transferred to the private sector as part of British Aerospace in 1987.



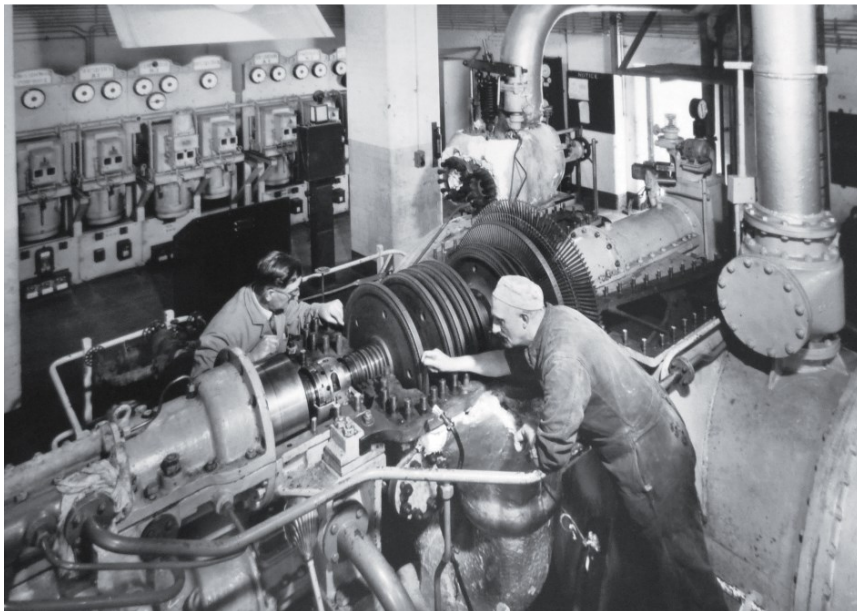
The site in the 1950s



Inside ROF 37 in the 1950s
Left: Vehicle workshop
Right: Drawing office



The factory closed in 2008. A detailed archaeological building survey was undertaken by Wessex Archaeology in 2012. In 2017 the Gravity site was designated an Enterprise Zone. Since then, Gravity has been working hard to achieve its mission to deliver decent work opportunities in conjunction with climate action through enabling a smart campus, attracting a new generation of advanced manufacturers. This enables the site to once again be an employment hub in future facing sectors that will enable communities to thrive.



Inside the factory (left) and
the same building abandoned
after closure (right)



Gravity will be the UK's first commercial smart campus and a blueprint for a 'cleaner', smarter future. It aims to attract the world's most innovative companies working in the 'clean growth' sectors. Expected to create up to 7,500 jobs, the 616-acre Enterprise Zone will be designed to include diverse, flexible workspaces and resilient technologies along with enhanced transport links to, and within, the surrounding area.

A heritage project began in 2019 and employees of the Royal Ordnance Factory (ROF37) have shared their memories of the site bringing to life its heritage and the innovation and camaraderie that were at the heart of working life there.

The curating and cataloguing of the archive has not yet finished. The Trust would welcome help from any former Royal Ordnance Factory 37 employee who can contribute their knowledge to the process. If you, or someone you know, may have information or further stories to share, please contact the Trust at somersetarchives@swheritage.org.uk.

Bob Croft



Community heritage days were held at the 37 Club resulting in this film Our Lives at ROF 37: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4ym0JqQJW8>

Debenhams Memories Project

On 15 May 2021 the last Debenhams store closed, signalling the end of over 200 years of trade on Britain's high streets. In 1927 it was the largest department store group, with 84 companies, 110 stores and an international presence. Its origins lie with William Clark, who founded a draper's store in 1778 at 44 Wigmore Street, London, selling fabrics, bonnets, gloves and parasols. The

distinctive stores have been a familiar sight in our towns and cities, and the business has had a particular connection with Somerset. Its administrative offices were established at Bedford House in

Taunton in 1965, and it was from there that key functions such as finance, HR, training and stock control were managed for the whole organisation.

The South West Heritage Trust has been supporting the efforts to find a permanent home for the important Debenhams archive. Ensuring that the legacy of the business endures is particularly important to the many Somerset people who worked for the organisation. As a long-term former employee at Bedford House explained,

'We feared the story of Debenhams and its impact would be lost. Through the archive the whole history of a major retail company and the work that we did will be remembered.'

To support this the Somerset Archives and Local Studies team have been working with a group of former employees to record their memories of their time working for Debenhams at Bedford House.

It was agreed that a group oral history archive would best capture the sense of what it was like to work for the organisation from a range of perspectives. Three sessions took place to record the staff memories of working at Bedford House, and of social activities, over a period of more than 40 years. At the same time documents and photographs reflecting working life with the organisation were collected.



The entrance to Bedford House in 2019

The result is a rich set of recordings covering many aspects of working life, including career development, systems and the introduction of new technologies, as well as the ways in which staff went the extra mile to ensure deadlines were met, especially at busy times of the year. The social side of working in a large busy office environment was also captured – everything from Christmas parties, charity fundraising and team building days, to an annual cricket match. The strong camaraderie and loyalty amongst staff is evident in the recordings, alongside the growing concerns in more recent times about the future of the organisation. The result is a unique glimpse into the experiences of a group of Somerset people and their work.

The collection can now be accessed at the Somerset Heritage Centre and the catalogue can be viewed online.

Janet Tall



Chapmans, later Debenhams, in the early 20th century with removal waggons SWHT



Participants in the Debenhams Memories Project at the Somerset Heritage Centre



Snippets from VCH research: A restless life?

Documents concerning property are often rather routine, but sometimes they are accompanied by fascinating bits of paper such as the accounts of John Baldon's upbringing and later life.

He was the younger son of grocer and innkeeper Thomas Baldon and his wife Sarah from Kingston St Mary, who kept the White Hart, Taunton and later the Three Cups. Their older son Thomas became a coachmaker in High Street, a useful trade to his father who horsed the mail coaches, even keeping horses at White Ball to tackle the hill. Repairs were often required. John was much younger and Sarah died after his birth. He was 11 in 1789 when his father died. Fortunately there were trustees and income from a small estate in Galmington. His schooling cost over £5 10s a year rising to over £14, as he was sent to a series of schoolmasters between 1789 and 1792 hinting that he was a difficult pupil. There were payments for clothes, buckles and pocket money. His brother Thomas also died young so in 1793 John was apprenticed to a Bridgwater coachmaker for £42 in addition to the cost of his clothes, shoes, pocket money and debts.



Old White Hart, Taunton

SWHT



St Martin, Cornmarket, Worcester

Wikipedia

He was no easy charge for his master or guardians. He ran off and enlisted twice, incurring much trouble and expense in tracing him and getting him released from the units he had joined. On the first occasion in 1795 he was found with Colonel Hall's Devon and Cornwall Fencibles at Exeter. It cost his guardians £10 14s to get him back. In 1797 he joined Fencibles at Worcester and was traced to Bristol. His guardians continued to pay for his clothes, stockings and hats and an allowance of a guinea a month. It may have been at Worcester that John met Maria Turner and in 1799 they were married in St Martin's, Worcester, presumably the 1767 Old St Martin's in Cornmarket.

Back in Taunton John received up to £40 year for himself and smaller sums for his wife from his trustees but, already heavily in debt, he mortgaged the estate. He seems to have done little work, although Maria kept a huckster's shop. Their only child, Thomas, was baptised in 1800. Like his brother John died young and in 1802 was buried with his parents at Kingston. The trustees sold the Galmington estate holding the proceeds for Thomas.

Maria ran the Old Blue Boy beerhouse in High Street probably until her death in 1813. In 1804 she married Edward Anderson of the 13th or Somerset Regiment. Sergeant Anderson enlisted young Thomas in the regiment, so possibly he had inherited John's fascination with the military. When he came of age the trustees were worried that Thomas was not legitimate. A fruitless and expensive search of the London registers ensued because of a rumour John had married there. Thomas returned from Edinburgh where his regiment was stationed for George IV's visit and left soldiering. He married dressmaker Elizabeth Bussell in 1823 and worked as a confectioner. Like his father he died young, at barely 30, leaving a widow and two infant sons living with her parents. Elizabeth tried to claim the proceeds of her father-in-law's estate and agreed in 1840 to accept £300. They sustained a fire in their High Street lodgings the following year and appear to have moved to Bristol.

Historic Images of Somerset

Christmas shopping nearly 70 years ago



Looking up North Street, Taunton towards the Parade around Christmas in the late 1950s

SWHT

This seasonal image was probably taken from the first floor window of 1 St James Street, a camera shop until the early 21st century. North Street, Taunton is in festive mood before the many 1960s developments. Chapmans, later Debenhams, still had its large Victorian shopfront just off the right hand edge of the photograph and had not extended further south, where the windows of Maynard's the confectioners would have been a magnet for shoppers.

Across the road is the edge of the sign for Moor's Corner House café, still an eatery, and Harrison's seed shop. The next block of three shops was a rebuild of North Street House, a tall three-storey late Georgian house accessed by a flight of steps over an area basement, but given a new front and converted into three shops in the early 20th century. It has been sold and will later be demolished for Lipton's supermarket, now Poundland. It includes Halfords cycle shop and Maypole, one of the earliest grocery chains, with its own fleet of delivery vans one of which stands outside. Beyond are the District bank, which survives as a coffee shop, and the Cheltenham and Gloucester Building Society, a relatively recent loss. On the opposite side of the street were Hepworth's, Jones shoe shop, another fairly recent closure, and the opticians Eubulus Williams and Son.

There were still no parking restrictions and traffic was light for almost 12.30. There were nearly as many bicycles as cars, with a zebra crossing and a few traffic signals at the Parade, adequate for the throngs of pedestrians out Christmas shopping. Decorated trees adorn the Chapmans canopy and most other shopfronts, with a large tree just visible on the Parade.

The general post office, now a restaurant, with its prominent clock would have been exceptionally busy dealing with a large share of Taunton's 100,000 letters a day at Christmas. Over 100 extra staff were employed for the season.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

VCH Lecture by Carenza Lewis

The Power of Pits – village excavations throwing new light on the past

The postponed VCH lecture will be held in person and online on Thursday 29 February 2024 at 7.30 pm in the Museum of Somerset, Taunton Castle.

Booking will be available via the South West Heritage Trust website and bookings made for last October will of course be honoured.

This talk will show how archaeological ‘test pit’ community excavations carried out by thousands of people in today’s villages and towns have made discoveries which can reconstruct the development of a single place through time, and how, by piecing together the evidence from many places, can throw new light on the impact of historical phenomena as diverse as the Roman empire, the Norman Conquest, the Black Death plague pandemic, the English Civil War, industrialisation and 20th century post-war housing programmes.

Professor Lewis is perhaps best known for her appearances on television, especially presenting Time Team, but she has also worked for the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments England as a field archaeologist and held several academic posts before being appointed to a chair at the University of Lincoln.

We are planning more events for 2024 and will let our newsletter readers know as soon as details are available. It is hoped to do another Taunton walk in the spring and guided walks further afield in the autumn.



Please Support Us

Further work is 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.

Please note that the Somerset County History Trust has been dissolved and the VCH now forms part of the South West Heritage Trust itself a charity: Charity Number 1158791. Cheques should be made payable to the 'South West Heritage Trust' with a note that the money is for the VCH account. For more information contact:

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Argyle Street, Bath

Mary Siraut



Bedford House, Taunton. In the 1950s before the parapet was removed and the house in front demolished