



**Welcome to the twenty-sixth edition of our newsletter. We hope you enjoy it.**

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## County Editor's Report

Work has continued on the areas around Taunton mainly Trull and West Monkton and there has been steady progress on the next Wiltshire volume.

We ended 2025 with a very successful and entertaining annual lecture with Ian Mortimer illustrating just how much national history can be bound up with a medieval house, although it helps if you have the deeds! His home in Moretonhampstead contains much evidence of its long history and many boundaries in the area follow the Bronze-Age reaves of Dartmoor.



*Farmhouse back kitchen furnished from Laycock collection, Torquay museum*

*Mary Siraut*



*Farmhouse front kitchen, Torquay museum with items from Laycock collection*

*Mary Siraut*

Ian speculated on the layout of towns and villages in the area. He showed us how his house had grown from a simple two room house to a large medieval house with alterations and additions including rebuilding as cottages in the 1740s with some botched repairs! It was a freehold but was rarely owner-occupied by the end of the Middle Ages. Being let and sublet probably accounted for its poor condition until restored and given a large rear extension in the early 20th century.

Ian looked at people connected with the house from a medieval widow Alice of the Moor to Charles Laycock an Edwardian collector. Laycock was one of the first people to collect everyday household items and kept his collection in the house.

We were shown photographs of the rooms crammed with furniture and household equipment of a pre-railway age alongside the same rooms as they are today including fixtures like panelling inserted by Laycock. Charles Laycock's collection can be seen at Torquay museum including many of the items shown in the early photographs.

Ian suggested how changes in the area's population and prosperity might be due to changes in livestock farming and marketing and early tin mining. The coming of the railway, now sadly destroyed, meant further changes, tourism and commuting.

Articles in this newsletter include the Brickdale family and the fall of the old Taunton Bank, the fascinating history of a 19th-century organ, a cloth trading enterprise in Bohemia, some Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany, creative and cultural events under Arts Council England's National Portfolio Organization and Exmoor artist Hope Bourne.

## A Bohemian adventure

Sarah Waters daughter of a Salisbury gentlemen and wife for less than three years of Salisbury draper James Thring assigned the lease of her home and sold all her household goods in 1741. She was about to undertake a second marriage to Henry Franklin from a Taunton and Devon clothing family.

Shortly after his marriage Henry became embroiled in a long drawn out Chancery case to secure money from the estate of Sarah's wealthy great aunt Dorothy Toll, widow of Andrew Card of Gray's Inn, who had died in 1744 leaving nearly £20,000 shared amongst numerous legatees and their descendants. Henry, possibly having obtained or in hope of money, embarked upon a trading venture in Bohemia.



*Poultry Cross, Salisbury*

*Mary Siraut*

In 1753 Empress Maria Theresa, at the petition of Henry Franklin, granted consent for the establishment of a Bohemian woollen and linen cloth business and that he might take up residence in Rumberg in Bohemia to carry on the business of purchasing linen and woollen goods for wholesale trade but the woollens must be sold within the country. Believing that national goods would be held in greater esteem thereby, she permitted Henry and his partner John Nurse to carry on their woollen and linen business for 10 years, residing in Rumberg and buying up cloth in Bohemia and exporting the linen.

*Left:  
Great seal of  
Empress Maria  
Theresa*

*Right:  
Her signature*

*SWHT*

*Maria Theresia*

As non-Catholics they were to abstain from open exercise of their faith, to give no cause for complaint in the matter of religion and to employ only Catholic servants and work people.

They were not the first to set up business in Rumberg, now Rumburk in the Czech Republic close to the German border. Between 1713 and 1764 several English merchants settled there and foreign capital contributed to the long-term development of the town. Other British traders at Rumberg included Robert Allason, possibly from the Glasgow mercantile family, who set up business in 1713 when Rumberg had only 30 looms and encouraged an expansion of the weaving trade. Dutch textile dealers also traded with the town.

However, Henry Franklin was soon complaining of his hardships and regretted taking Nurse as a partner. Nurse owed him money before the partnership and Henry claimed Nurse was taking money for goods and failing to account for them.



*Lužické square, Rumburk*

*Wiki commons*



*Empress*

*Maria Theresa*

*Wiki Commons*

Nurse often caused him the embarrassment of asking for payment from customers when it had already been made. One such customer was Prince 'Linkinsein', probably one of the extensive Liechtenstein family who owned property in Bohemia.

Before Nurse ran away to England he robbed the iron chest of what money was in it and left Henry to meet private debts of *c.*2,000 thalers for which his goods were threatened to be sold in the public market place so he was obliged to pay. Then the landlord asked for rent of their house which Nurse had entered in the cash book as paid but the man proved Nurse had not paid so Henry had to pay it. In a bale of woolens Henry's brother sent were 3 pieces of scarlet broad cloths that Nurse pretended he had sold. His brother, probably either Matthew a Taunton draper or Robert a Honiton weaver, wanted payment. Nurse tampered with the accounts and kept the cloth to his own use. A burgher Hans Christophe Roche desired money to go to Leipzig fair and he would repay. After Nurse went to Birkstein, possibly Pirkstein, in 1756 Henry sent for this money but it had been paid to Nurse long before. Henry found the traders' cash-deficient by 154 thalers.



*Svojanov Castle*

*Wiki commons*

Nurse was said to have courted a girl at Stokenow, possibly modern Svojanov, upon whom he made several presents in plate to the amount of a thousand thalers. He was also a gamester and lost money to tricksters. To pay a surgeon for curing him of the French distemper, presumably syphilis, he took English goods placed to the account of the steward of Stokenow. When Franklin asked for the money the truth came out.

Henry took Nurse back to oblige a Mr Banwell and because of the tears of his mother, but Nurse went off again to Birkstein, and if his brother had not stood by him Henry would have 'fallen'. In the end unable to make the business pay Henry fled back to England in 1761. He does not mention his wife so it is unclear if Sarah was with him in Bohemia. She died in 1765.

In 1761 Henry was in debt and was declared bankrupt. Nineteen creditors including many traders and firms agreed to accept 3s in the pound, which was duly paid alerting other creditors. The largest debt was £1,240. One of his creditors was Matthias van Hoff of Rotterdam, a linen dealer, and another was a firm of Irish traders, presumably also dealing in linen.

Henry appears to have recovered and was living in Devon in 1772 when he leased coal-mining rights at East Anstey to his brother Robert and the Revd Richard Lewis, both of Honiton, for a tenth of the profits, which presumably failed to materialise. He appears to have finally settled in the Taunton area and was buried at Kingston St Mary in 1787.

**Mary Siraut**



*Kingston St Mary church*

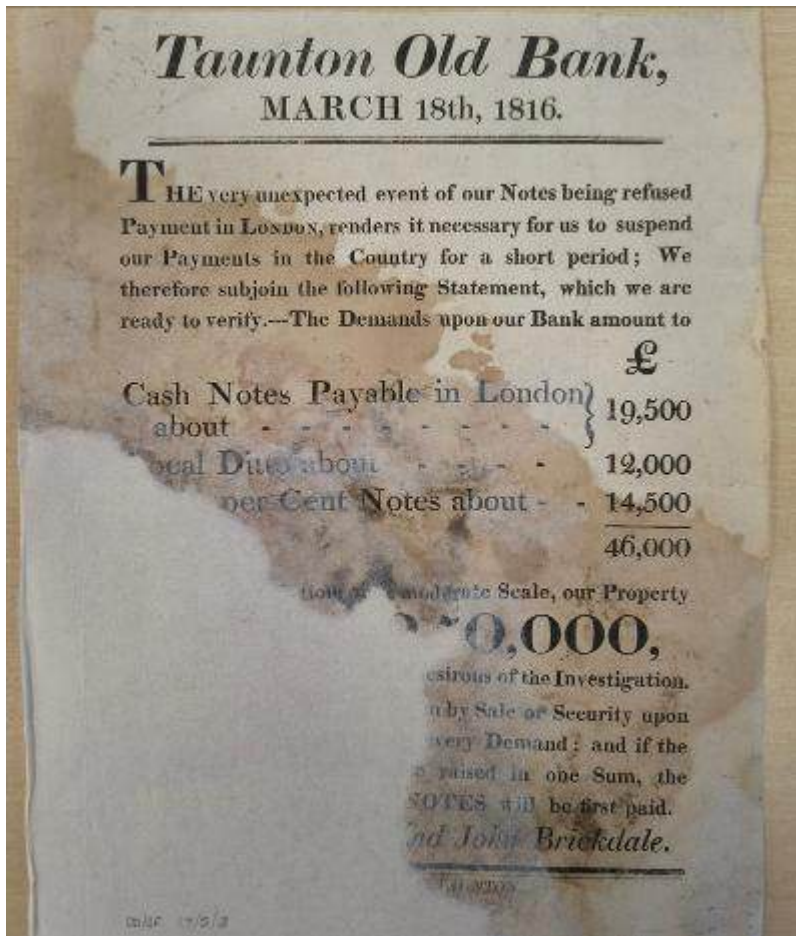
## The Bankruptcy of the Brickdales

Matthew Brickdale and his son John were two Somerset men at the centre of a banking crisis in the period immediately after the Napoleonic Wars. As partners and proprietors of the Taunton Bank they had much of their capital invested in that company. When their bank notes were refused payment in London in 1816 they were forced to issue a notice that no customer of a bank would ever wish to see. Even though the surviving copy of that public notice is now damaged, it still makes for a sobering statement of the crisis.



The Taunton Bank, located in the centre of the town, had been founded in 1777 by Matthew Brickdale and his associates. Like other local banks in the period it had the right to issue its own bank notes. By 1813 those notes were guaranteed by Matthew and John Brickdale as can be seen in an example from July 1813. By that date their partners in the company, Edmund Halliday and Thomas Darch, had withdrawn. As well as individual customers, the bank included the Taunton and Somerset Hospital among its clients.

The failure of their bank was certainly not exceptional in the nineteenth century, even if the specific events leading to their demise might differ. According to Leslie Pressnell, the Taunton Bank held over £14,000 in Navy bills and £7,750 in Transport bills in the period before 1800. He characterised that as money flowing 'along rockier channels between lender and borrower'. Things were brought to a financial crisis by the depressed economy of Taunton and its hinterland in the period after 1815. The local industries were not in good health, placing reliance on the agricultural economy which itself was struggling. The Brickdales could not have been unaware of the difficulties their bank was in. They were receiving a weekly account from the holders of their London deposit, the bank of Messrs Bosanquet, Beachcroft, Pitt & Anderson. These frequent reminders of their plight led John Brickdale to complain that 'you see how they catch at every [...] minutest turn of our account'.





*Portrait of Matthew Brickdale painted by Henry Singleton in 1812*

Born the son of a Bristol draper, he had married Elizabeth Smith, the daughter of Thomas Smith of Clifton. When his father died in 1765, Matthew was reputedly left a large fortune of £100,000. Retiring from his Bristol trades as a clothier etc., Brickdale entered politics. He was a Common Councillor for Bristol from 1767 to 1784. He was elected mayor of Bristol in 1791 but refused to serve. In 1768 he was elected unopposed as MP for Bristol, standing as candidate for the Tory Steadfast Society. The cost of his electoral contests may have been very high, leaving him financially unable to cope with the circumstances of 1816–19.

One of Brickdale's very pleasant assets was that of Court House at West Monkton, lying some three and a half miles from the centre of Taunton. He purchased the property in 1775, paying £8,000 for the estate comprising 104 acres. It appears he spent much money on the gardens and grounds of his new acquisition.



The failure of the Taunton Bank plunged the Brickdales into a crisis of their own as they did not have the resources to hold off their creditors. Despite an extended struggle to avoid the inevitable, they finally had to declare bankruptcy in late 1819. The commission of bankruptcy took place at the George Inn in Taunton's High Street. This would have been under the direction of a commissioner appointed by the Lord Chancellor. The duty of this official was to administer the estate of a bankrupt, disposing of all his lands and holdings, distributing the proceeds to the creditors in proportion to their debts.

One remarkable fact of this case was the age of the elder Brickdale. Born in 1735, Matthew Brickdale was already 84 years old in 1819; he then went on to live for another twelve years. The bankruptcy must have seemed an ignominious end to a long career that included many years in politics.

In 1791 he was listed among the provincial bankers who would receive subscriptions on behalf of the Veterinary College, London. In Taunton it was Brickdale's bank that acted as receiver while in Exeter it was Baring's. In 1801, writing in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, the Rev. J. Boak described Brickdale as 'the most respectable gentleman of the Eastern Division of Somerset'. 1811 was the year when the enclosure of all the common lands in the parish of West Monkton took place. Brickdale purchased several of the lots. His other properties in the parish included the 244 acres of Quantock Farm and also Overton Farm. In total his holdings at West Monkton were valued at a little under £32,000 in 1817.

There were darker sources of Brickdale's wealth, namely his association with slavery and slave plantations in the West Indies. The *Legacy of British Slavery* database shows that trustees for Matthew Brickdale registered the enslaved people on the Hope Estate on St Vincent in 1817 and 1822: by 1825 the estate had been transferred to John Inglett Fortescue (the brother-in-law of Matthew Brickdale's son John). There appear to have been between 70 and 90 enslaved people in total on that estate. In 1807 Matthew had paid £950 for seven enslaved people on St Vincent. There are also documents showing annuities from plantations on Nevis and Jamaica. Meanwhile Matthew's son, John, is listed as holding a mortgage on the Retreat Estate in Jamaica. The survival of the Brickdales' interests in these estates after 1819 show how they were successfully able to hold on to much of their slave assets.



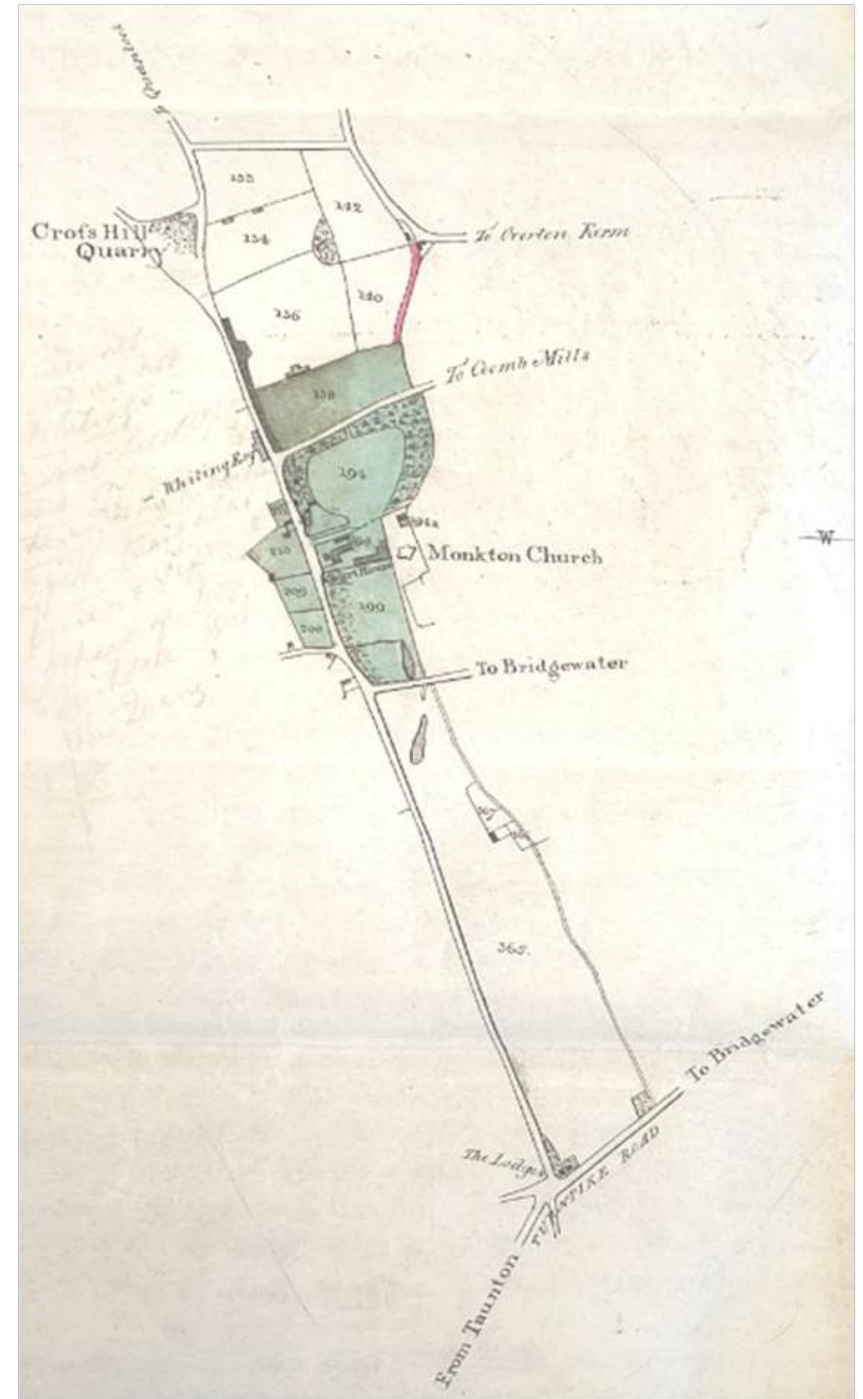
*Sugar Plantation Yard on St Vincent, pictured in 1824*

Given Matthew Brickdale's advanced years in the period 1816–19, it fell to the eldest son, John Brickdale (1760–1840), to shoulder much of the burden of the financial crisis and bankruptcy. He had studied civil law at Oxford and in 1787 married Anne, daughter of Richard Inglett Fortescue of Buckland Filleigh, Devon. He was the active partner in the final years of Taunton Old Bank. At one point he decided to go into hiding to escape his creditors and relied on communications with and through his solicitor, Robert Beadon, who proved a steadfast supporter of the Brickdales throughout the crisis. John Brickdale's wife, Anne, became an important channel of communication in her own right, and John bemoaned the necessity of absenting himself from his wife and family. At one point Brickdale had been held in custody in his own home. He attempted to flee the house by hiding in a shed in the kitchen garden but was discovered and retaken. The necessity of seeking the more general protection of bankruptcy was something Brickdale had to accept.

In the Bristol Mercury dated 4 October 1819 it was reported that 'John Brickdale, Esq., son of Matthew Brickdale, Esq. (who represented this city in two successive Parliaments), is expected to succeed to the Comptrollership of the Customs of this port.' Such a post would have provided great relief to John who, in a letter of March 1820, described himself as 'living upon open charity and unable to do anything (which I would most willingly undertake) to gain a present livelihood'. He was fortunate therefore to be employed at the Custom House in Bristol in early 1821.

In the period that followed, assets had to be disposed of over many years. What was perhaps the greatest loss to the Brickdales was the estate of Court House at West Monkton. Court House was sold for £3,820 in 1827 with receipt of the money witnessed by John Fortescue Brickdale, the grandson of Matthew Brickdale.

*The map of Court House and its estate created for the conveyance of 1827*



The role of Robert Beadon, the Brickdale's Taunton solicitor, has been alluded to above. The papers for the Brickdale family as held at the Somerset Heritage Centre, show very clearly how much time and effort Beadon put into assisting the Brickdales. For example, Beadon wrote to Matthew Brickdale in November 1819 as follows:

Dear Sir

I received a Commission of Bankrupt against Messrs Brickdale on Sunday night, but in consequence of a letter which I received from Mr John Brickdale the next morning, leading me to hope that I should see you either yesterday or to-day, I have not proceeded to open it, which I must do unless I see you soon, or some arrangement be made for settling their affairs.

If you would advance about £10,000 and pay the joint creditors, taking an assignment of the West India Estate etc. for the purpose of securing yourself, I think that the Commission need not be worked, and that that Estate may be saved for the family, unless it should be less productive than it has been for the last seven years –

I have kept myself at home yesterday and to-day hoping that I might see you, and will not go far from home any day this week. And am Dear Sir,

Your Truly  
Robert Beadon

From the nature and volume of that correspondence, Beadon appears to have gone well beyond what the Brickdales might reasonably have expected of a professional acquaintance. The final settlement of the Brickdale bankruptcy was achieved at long last in 1853 when a dividend payment on the estate of the late Matthew Brickdale was announced in the pages of the *Morning Chronicle*. However the fortunes of the Brickdales were already reviving. In 1838 and again in 1841 Matthew's grandson, John Fortescue Brickdale, was listed as owner of the 244 acres of Quantock Farm. However by 1910 the Brickdales no longer feature in the list of landowners in West Monkton. Their somewhat tumultuous history in Somerset and any memory of the rise and fall of the Taunton Old Bank seem to have faded quickly.

### **Des Atkinson**

*Grateful acknowledgment is due to Dr Robert Nantes whose 2021 doctoral thesis 'English Bankrupts 1732–1831: A Social Account' proved an invaluable source for this article.*

## Charles Harman and the Organ of St Peter's Church, Staple Fitzpaine

Charles Harman, the son of Joseph and Anstiss Harman, was born at Taunton in 1765 and baptized on 19 September in the church of St Mary Magdalene.

He grew up to be a Taunton cabinet maker, but the passion that ruled his life was music, and especially the playing of the organ. By the early 1800s, he was assistant to William Turle, the organist of St Mary's Church. In 1826 they jointly inaugurated the new organ in Ilminster parish church, when their playing, as a duet, of a Handel Coronation Anthem, probably 'Zadok the Priest', was said to have 'elicited, in a very gratifying style, the full power of the organ'. Later Harman succeeded Turle as organist of St Mary's, a post he held until a short time before his death in 1850.

Though he married twice, secondly to Harriot Augusta Pryce, he evidently had no children. He prospered sufficiently in his trade to become a property owner and developer, and was known locally as the builder of some cottages in Tancred Street that he whimsically named 'Harmony Row'. He owned a large shop on the south side of East Street called 'The Bazaar', while on the north side, opposite Gray's Almshouses, he built, and evidently designed, a grand house for himself, 39 East Street.



*Prospect Villa (now Stoke House), Stoke St Mary*



*39 East Street, Taunton*

His property ownership extended to the countryside, and at Stoke St Mary he spent his later years creating and embellishing a country residence he called Prospect Villa (now Stoke House), which looked out from Stoke Hill across the Vale of Taunton Deane.

Charles Harman's home at 39 East Street was the centre of his musical life. The house was spacious, and had at its heart a music room 28 feet long, 18 feet wide and 16 feet high. A room on such a scale was necessary because it had to receive Charles Harman's most treasured possession, his chamber organ. The house still stands, with double-height windows on the first floor to light the music room, a façade with distinctive Soane-inspired pilasters, a gadrooned cornice, and other features that may reflect tastes Charles Harman had acquired in his work as a cabinet maker.

## The Bequest

Charles Harman died at his home in East Street on 6 October 1850, aged 85, and was buried in St Mary's churchyard, where his box tomb still prominently survives. His wife had died only a few weeks before him. He wrote his will in 1848 (with a codicil in 1850) and left bequests to a wide circle of relations, friends, servants and others, including the old man who swept the crossing opposite his door. One particular concern was for the fate of his chamber organ, but, as his will explained, he hoped it would find an appropriate home:

'I should be pleased to give my organ to a neat built lofty church in the neighbourhood and in [a] rather large parish w[h]ere the parishioners can afford to pay [an] efficient performer to play the organ. The churches of Stoke and Thurlbeer are too small. If I recollect well Staple Church is lofty and handsome and the parish rather large, the Clergyman [the Revd F. B. Portman] a fine preacher and a worthy character. If the Rector or Vicar of such a parish with the approbation of his congregation should feel inclined to accept of my organ I will most readily give and bequeath the organ to the parish of Staple Fitzpaine.'

He then sets out some conditions for the bequest, as follows:

'...to have the organ carefully removed by [an] experience[d] organ builder, to get a good performer to play it and endeavour to harmonise a respectable choir that the praise of God may be heard by singing of Handel's Grand chorus in the Messiah 'For the Lord Omnipotent reigneth Hallelujah' [the 'Hallelujah Chorus']. I trust that my executors will endeavour to see my wishes realise[d] and if they should fail of getting a parish in the neighbourhood to accept of my organ on the above terms why then it must be sold with my household furniture.'

*The Revd Fitzhardinge Berkeley Portman  
(1811-1893)*

It is evident that the Revd Portman duly accepted the organ, and in Charles Harman's obituary its intended new home was already considered an established fact: 'The powerful organ constructed for his own amusement, for the reception of which in building his house in East Street, a large room was erected, is given to the Incumbent of Staple Fitzpaine for the use of that Church.' When the sale of Charles Harman's furniture and effects took place on 1-2 January 1851, the organ was not included, though a wide variety of other musical instruments were among the lots. The sale took place in the music room itself, and given the 'vast quantity of every variety of Furniture' that needed to be accommodated for the sale, it seems quite likely that the organ had previously been removed. By the end of 1850 it may well already have been installed in St Peter's Church.



## Staple Fitzpaine

St Peter's Church at Staple Fitzpaine was notorious in the early 1800s for the poor quality of its music. It was said that when the music at St Mary's in Taunton became particularly ragged, the saying went: 'They are singing what they like, as they do at Thurlbear and Staple.'

The arrival in 1840 of a new resident rector, the Revd Fitzhardinge Berkeley Portman (1811-1893), changed all that. He was the youngest brother of Lord Portman (later the 1st Viscount), and brought his commanding presence, patrician self-confidence, and genial good nature to the long-neglected parish. Lord Portman built his brother a grand new rectory (now Staple Manor) next to St Peter's, and in 1841 the rector directed the repair and enlargement of the church. A south aisle was added and the musician's gallery, which evidently still existed at the west end, was removed. It is quite possible that the village musicians continued to play until Charles Harman's chamber organ finally displaced them.

Mr Portman was a musical man. He was fondly remembered for enlivening family gatherings at the Rectory by singing Spanish folksongs 'with great gusto & charm' while one of his daughters accompanied him on the piano. His eldest daughter Mary Elizabeth (1841-1928) was for long the organist at Stoke St Mary, and in 1877 another daughter was praised as the soprano soloist in a performance of Handel's 'Messiah' at Wellington: 'Miss Portman's singing of the air "I know that my Redeemer liveth" was exceedingly good.' When Charles Harman's gift arrived at St Peter's, probably late in 1850, it is not known whether the organ was inaugurated with a performance of the 'Hallelujah Chorus'. But we can hope that Staple's musical rector respected the old man's wish.

In 1873, Edward Jeboult reported that 'there is a neat organ under the tower'. Almost 175 years after it first arrived, the organ remains there still.

*The Nameplate of G. and H. Buckwell*

## The Organ

The organ case bears the ivory nameplate of the organ makers G. & H. Buckwell, 30 Hackney Road, London. There are only a handful of known organs by the Buckwells, including examples at St John's Church, Hoxton, and St Mary the Virgin, Lychett Minster, Dorset. Two of them, both single manual instruments, are in their original condition.

The organ at St Peter's, despite at least two restorations, contains many original elements, including its mahogany case, the lower frame, much of the pipework, and the hand pump. It has recently been described as 'a special example of the early English pipe organ' which remains 'remarkably close to original condition'.



The organ has thirteen stops distributed between Swell and Great. It has sometimes been suggested that there may originally have been only one manual. But it seems more likely that the 'powerful organ' created for Charles Harman always had two manuals. A pedal board was removed in recent years.

The organ was evidently built to Charles Harman's specification. His obituary says it was 'constructed for his own amusement', which might imply that his role in the process was more active than was true of most clients. Build dates ranging from 1833 to the 1840s have been suggested, but given the details of Charles Harman's biography, and the history of Buckwell's, a date between 1830 and 1835 seems most likely.

The mahogany case survives in fine completeness, and probably reflects Charles Harman's design influence as a cabinet maker, or even his constructional contribution. It appears to be unlike any other surviving Buckwell case, and is in a simple classical style. The case has three towers of gilt dummy pipes separated by two recessed areas, containing further dummy pipes. The towers stand on striking gadrooned brackets and are surmounted by classical cornices. The panelling of the case front largely consists of elongated rectangles that abut each other. Just as on the idiosyncratic façade of Henry Harman's house at 39 East Street, there seems to be a sense here of client direction or intervention, reflecting a familiarity with contemporary furniture design and the architectural innovations of John Soane.

The organ was restored at an unknown date in the 20th century by George Osmond of Taunton and again in 1980 by Eustace and Alldridge of Exeter. But beyond the removal of the pedal board, interventions have been conservative and the original character of Harman's chamber organ has survived remarkably well.

Tom Mayberry



## Jewish refugees in Somerset in the Second World War

As we mark the end of the Second World War and with refugees in the news it is interesting to note how Jewish refugees were taken in to Somerset homes in the 1930s. Bath had many Polish Jews with their British-born children from tailoring families in Bethnal Green and Mile End. Other Jews also found London too dangerous, especially the poor courts of the East End where many lived, and fled west albeit temporarily. They included Bessie Finkelstein and her children leaving her husband in London and Fanny Goldstein who at nearly 60 joined the ARP. Russian china dealer Izaak Zlotnik who settled in England before 1914 came to Taunton with his second wife Ethel Freeman, an Englishwoman he married in 1931. They soon returned to London where Izaak died in 1944. Furrier Israel Arenstein, another early settler who was naturalised in 1910, brought his wife to Taunton and settled in Hamilton Road before returning to London and retiring to Hove. Also in Hamilton Road was Maud Goldstein and two young girls, possibly her grandchildren, some of the many evacuated London Jewish women and children who held services in the GWR social hall including Passover in 1940 ministered to by a Jewish teacher. A Jewish rabbi was in Taunton in 1942 and preached at the Unitarian chapel but by then most evacuees and refugees had left mainly to return to London.

The late 1930s brought in a fresh wave of Jews from Austria and Germany, mainly women but also couples, who sometimes advertised for domestic work in England before migrating. Martin Corkery, a retired Lieutenant Colonel in the Royal Army Medical Corps, and his wife Alice employed two Jewish women at their house in Trull in 1939. Henna or Henny Hasenlauf was a 41 year-old Polish Jew living in Frankfurt am Main who arrived in Somerset with her daughter Frieda. They later moved to Leeds to join the Jewish community there and Frieda married toy dealer Solly Israel but died young. Both women were buried in the Gildersome United Hebrew Congregation cemetery.

*Polish Jewish children arriving in London on the Warsaw, February 1939*

*Wiki Commons*



Willi Friedman and Jenny Jaschkowitz were married in Flensburg, a port town in northern Germany in February 1937 and must have left soon afterwards as its tiny Jewish community had already shrunk because of persecution. They found work at Musgrove Farm in Wilton, he as a cowman and she as a domestic. After the war they settled in London. Decorator Ernst Gerstl and his wife Irma a housemaid, both born in Vienna, fled to England and settled in Gray's Road in Taunton where Ernst found work as a painter with a local firm.

Among the better-known refugees was jeweller Hans George Mautner who came to Taunton with his brother, a cotton manufacturer. He was born in 1901 in Weigelsdorf, Lower Austria of Czech parentage and went to Prague as an apprentice jeweller. He opened a workshop in Vienna, where he married, won several exhibition medals for his work, often in Art Deco style, and finally came to England in 1938 where he set up business in Hatton Garden. He and his wife Susi came to Taunton and in 1939 lived with his brother's family in St George's Avenue off Cheddon Road. They returned to London, where they were naturalised. The brothers settled in adjoining apartments in Putney where Hans died in 1972.

Institutions could provide a refuge. Two Austrian Jews were employed at King's College and exempted from internment in December 1939. Cook Selma Robitschek was born in Prague in 1883 and was a German citizen. After the war she settled in London although she took a trip to South Africa at the age of 75. One of her fellow servants was parlourmaid Ernestine Leiser, nee Serebrenik, a divorcee from Vienna who was more adventurous. Her family split up, probably following the Anschluss, and her parents and one brother went to Israel and another brother to New York. In 1940, aged 39 and assisted by Dr Unmack, head of King's, Ernestine travelled to Liverpool and boarded the *Lancastria* with many other Jewish emigrants and arrived in America on the 21 March 1940 with just 36 dollars. However, on the ship she met another Viennese Jew, a divorced technician called Amand Aron Rossi who had been in London earning a living as a musician. The pair married the same day they arrived and settled in the Bronx, New York.

The *Lancastria*, a requisitioned Cunard liner, was not so lucky. On 17 June 1940 she was sunk off St Nazaire while evacuating thousands of people from France. The loss of c.4,000 lives including soldiers, civilian families and refugees was Britain's worst maritime disaster.

Mary Siraut



*Sinking of the Lancastria 17 June 1940*

*Wiki commons*

## A Life Outside: Hope Bourne on Exmoor

Hope Bourne (1918-2010) was a writer and artist who spent almost sixty years chronicling the landscape, wildlife and rural traditions of Exmoor. She was fiercely creative and resolutely independent, leading a self-reliant life that gave her the freedom to write, draw and paint. *A Life Outside: Hope Bourne on Exmoor* was the first museum exhibition dedicated to her life and work. By reintroducing this often-overlooked figure, it offered insight into a singular voice whose reflections on nature, rural life and environmental sustainability remain profoundly relevant today.

For nearly forty years, Bourne occupied a series of dilapidated cottages and caravans on the Somerset side of Exmoor, living off the land as much as possible. She grew vegetables, kept bantam chickens, caught fish, and shot rabbits and the occasional deer. She lent a hand to the local farmers, assisting in lambing, shearing and feeding livestock. Writing provided a small and precarious income, and she exchanged drawings and watercolours for meals with friends.

*Hope Bourne  
sketching, 1976*

© The Exmoor  
Society



*Hope Bourne,  
pen and ink  
drawing of beech  
hedge on used  
envelope, c.1972*

© The Exmoor  
Society

Her working materials were limited: she used the cheapest paper she could find and reused every scrap, including envelopes, the inside of cereal boxes and the backs of greetings cards. She never owned a typewriter and wrote entirely by hand. Nevertheless, Bourne was a prolific creator. Largely self-taught, she made thousands of drawings and paintings of her surrounding landscape, wrote and illustrated seven books, a journal, and numerous articles and letters, and contributed a weekly column to *The West Somerset Free Press*.

The exhibition presented a selection of this broad creative output. It included some of her intricate animal studies, and depictions of the ever-changing weather and landscape, as well as personal items that offered a glimpse into a life led totally self-sufficiently – including her paraffin lamp, Roberts radio, compass, binoculars and Swiss Army knife.

It drew on collections within the Exmoor Society archives as well as new research by writer and Guardian Country Diarist Sara Hudston, whose book *A Life Outside: Hope Bourne on Exmoor* will be published in September 2026 by the Exmoor Society. It was co-curated by Kate Best and Sara Hudston, for the South West Heritage Trust.

**Francesca Ramsay**

## Cultural Communities: The Stories That Make Us

In April 2023, South West Heritage Trust embarked on a three-year programme of creative and cultural activity following the award of National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) status by Arts Council England. This funding has enabled us to significantly expand access to heritage across Somerset, particularly for underserved communities, through innovative partnerships, community-led engagement and creative practice. The programme focuses on five key strands: **Early Years, Apprenticeships, Social Prescribing, Collections into Communities, and Digital Engagement**. Together, these activity areas demonstrate the Trust's commitment to inclusion, skills development, and meaningful engagement with heritage beyond our museum sites.

The Early Years programme has prioritised heritage experiences for children aged two to four, with a focus on areas of highest need. Central to this work is **The Fascinating and Curious Museum**, a portable, sensory, museum using objects from Somerset Heritage Centre collections. Taking a child-led curiosity approach and working with Early Years practitioners in settings has deepened our understanding of how young children engage with heritage objects and directly informed programme development across each year. Practitioners reported positive impacts on children's language and communication skills. Creative sessions have taken place in Somerset libraries for families and young children in Chard, Yeovil, Langport, Ilminster, Bridgwater, Minehead and Taunton and included heritage objects and artist-led activity included shadow play, storytelling, and printing. There have been events at our museum sites and reflective outputs including a project poem capturing a child's-eye view of the Fascinating and Curious Museum experience.

SWHT has partnered with **Bridgwater and Taunton College** to deliver apprenticeship opportunities and skills development, supporting young people into heritage and creative careers. Apprentices in Content Creation and Multi-Channel Marketing have gained experience to support their apprentice standard, as well as project planning and evaluation.



*'Fascinating and Curious Museum' engagement with Early Years children*

**Social prescribing and wellbeing** programmes have been embedded across NPO activity to reach families, individuals and communities experiencing barriers to cultural participation. Partnerships and a ticket distribution scheme with organisations such as Taunton Food Bank and Priorswood Community Centre have strengthened the Trust's ability to reach underserved groups and build sustainable referral pathways. Reminiscence sessions and workshops with adult education centres have also brought heritage activities to diverse audiences. Funded programmes linked to the Trust's exhibition programmes at museum sites have also provided opportunities for new audiences to access events. One example was a **Sci-Fi Saturday** at the Museum of Somerset, linked to the *Adventures in Time and Space* exhibition.

**Collections into Communities** has taken heritage directly into public spaces and community events. This has enabled us to reach large audiences, sharing creative activities and promoting the wider work of the Trust. This has included participation in 'Together' events in Yeovil, Chard, Bridgwater, Taunton, and Wellington, attending Somerset Day at Burrow Hill, and Cobblestones Takeover Day in Bridgwater. Community-based collections work has also included retirement home visits, sound recording projects, and outreach events linked to collection objects such as the Cheddar Brooch, displayed at the Museum of Somerset.

In April 2025 the Trust worked in partnership with SEED Sedgemoor, Somerset Film and local artists to create a **Pop-up Museum in Bridgwater**, a four-day temporary museum showcasing local invention, innovation, and heritage objects linking to the brick and tile industry. Around 500 people attended, engaging with stories, interactive exhibits and inclusive workshops.



*Visitors to the pop-up museum in Bridgwater*



*The solar-powered photographic studio and display at Glastonbury Festival*

In June 2025 we attended **Glastonbury Festival**, running a solar-powered photographic studio. Festivalgoers were invited to see an exhibition showcasing portraits from the Trust's collections, including a portrait of festival founder Michael Eavis, on display at the Rural Life Museum. The portraits created connected Somerset heritage with contemporary cultural identity.

**Digital engagement** has supported accessibility and co-creation. A recent project using digital technology is **Stories of Home**, an audio-visual exhibition at Weston Museum. Co-created with local communities, the exhibition explores themes of home and belonging through photography and film and is on display until March. It exemplifies SWHT's inclusive, community-focused digital practice.

The NPO-funded programme has enabled SWHT to transform how heritage is shared, experienced and co-created across Somerset. Through strong partnerships, creative practice and inclusive approaches, the programme has reached thousands of people, supported skills development, and embedded heritage into everyday community life. As the programme continues into 2026, SWHT remains committed to developing innovative, accessible and meaningful ways for diverse audiences to engage with Somerset's heritage.

**Louise Donovan**

## Snippet of VCH research: A young man about town

In the Somerset Archaeological & Natural History Society's collection is the diary of Neast Greville Prideaux who was an articled clerk at Ilchester in 1802—4. The diary is important for the history of Ilchester in the 1800s but also casts light on a young man out enjoying himself.



*St Michael the Archangel,  
Bristol*

Neast was a Bristol boy baptised in 1784 in St Michael's, the church in which his children would be baptised. He was articled in 1800 to Henry Tuson of Ilchester. After qualifying as an attorney, he married Frances Fisher at St Margaret's Babington in 1808 in the presence of both sets of parents, Frances was a minor. They settled in Bristol, for a while living in Horfield Road. Possibly close to St Michael's but they soon moved down the hill into 35 St James Place, later Parade, possibly modern number 15, where Neast died in 1851.



*St Margaret, Babington*

As a carefree bachelor in 1804 he visited Taunton to attend the spring assizes on behalf of Tuson. He was full of praise for Taunton – 'one of the prettiest towns I ever beheld' and made the most of his visits. Work does not seem to have been allowed to interfere with a busy social life. He 'paraded the town till supper time by lamp light' before retiring to his room at the Castle inn in North Street.

The following day he 'walked about the charming town of Taunton' and read a play he got from 'the Taunton Library'. Then he went to meet the judges about a mile from Taunton and followed the javelin men with a white wand alongside the undersheriff. In the evening he strolled into town and went to the playhouse. He saw *The Heir at Law* and *The House to be Sold*. He was an aspiring playwright and spent some of his spare time writing plays.

A few days later he attended the Assize Ball and danced till one or two in the morning. The next evening he again went to the theatre to see a farce called *High Life below Stairs* and the next night to see *The Soldier's Daughter* and a farce *Ways and Means!*

## Historic Image of Somerset

### Milk bottling



*Milk bottling 1939, Wellington Co-operative Society*

*SWHT A.DQN/3//1237/1*

In the later 20th century the bottle of milk was familiar to most households, usually delivered by a milk roundsman. Bottles were returned, cleaned and re-used many times, unlike late 20th-century cartons or today's plastic bottles. They were hailed as a great health breakthrough after the contamination incurred in the former system of open containers dipped into to fill the customer's jug. Milk was usually supplied in pint bottles but other sizes were used notably the third of a pint bottles used to supply free milk to children in school after 1946 until replaced by cartons.

Milk was a traditional treat straight from the cow, or for very young children. Until the price of tea came down the poor drank weak ale or beer or homemade cordials and herbal teas. The rise of tea drinking increased milk consumption by all classes and urban dairies and cows became common, later blamed for the spread of tuberculosis. Milk was often dirty and adulterated and sanitary inspectors' reports made grim reading, although the situation with ice cream was even worse. Milk, neither cooled nor pasteurised, customers were said not to like cold milk, was sold from open containers and was responsible for a typhoid outbreak in the Taunton area 1919—20.

In 1920 the Taunton medical officer of health was unable to stop people infected with tuberculosis dealing in milk or the use of open milk pails. No pasteurisers were used except at two milk depots who used polluted wells. Unsold milk was scalded and sold separately next day. In 1924, when nearly 1,500 gallons a day were consumed in Taunton, over a third of samples was contaminated. One dairy made twice daily deliveries of bottled but unpasteurised milk by 1929. The Co-operative store opened the first pasteurising and bottling plant in 1930. They remained for many years almost the sole suppliers of pasteurised milk and issued tokens for bread and milk delivery services, which were very popular.

By 1946 three Taunton milk suppliers pasteurised their milk, but the rest still sold it untreated. In the 1950s hygiene improved although some suppliers were fined for dirty bottles. Urban cowkeeping had ceased, most milk was bottled and the county council controlled four milk pasteurising plants. By then very little unpasteurised milk was sold. Foil bottle tops were colour-coded as to milk type such as ultra heat treated or tuberculin tested. Milk consumption declined in the late 20th century and most free school milk was stopped. Milk was increasingly sold in supermarkets in waxed cartons and then in plastic bottles although a few dairies continue to use the traditional glass bottles.

**Des Atkinson, *The Lands of a Medieval Devon Nunnery*** (Devon and Cornwall Record Society NS 68, 2026, 196pp illus.)

The volume consists of the extents of Canonsleigh Abbey [Harleian MS 3660] with a long and comprehensive introduction, maps, photographs and tables and concludes with a useful glossary, bibliography and index.

This nunnery on the Devon and Somerset border is not among the most well-known religious houses but the gatehouse and other fragments of the abbey survive although no proper archaeological survey has ever been carried out.

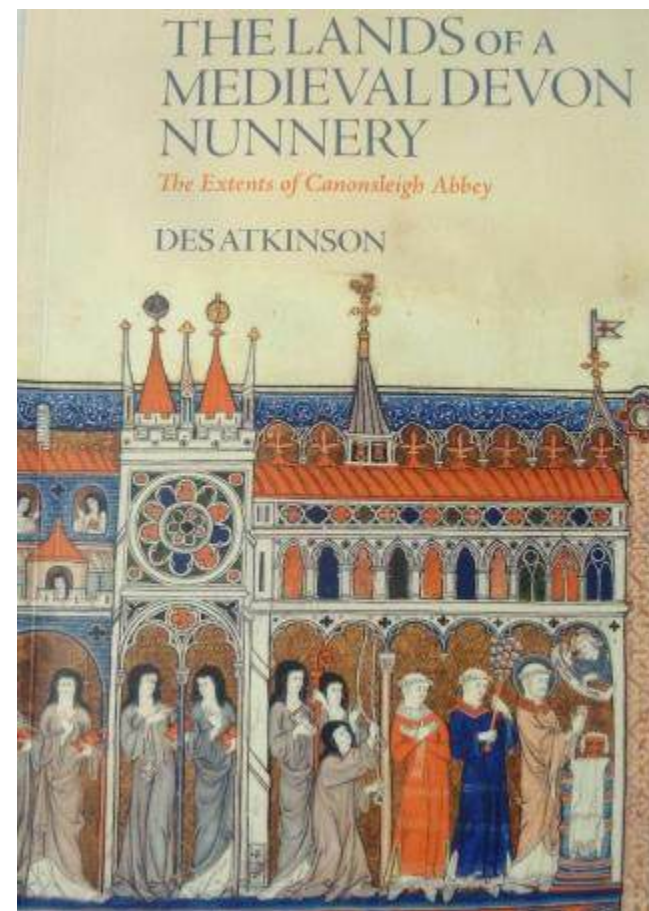
The introduction looks at the history of the abbey and its manors, mostly in Devon but also in eastern England including Manningtree in Essex. In Somerset they held Thorne St Margaret. In 1323 a cartulary and survey of the abbey's estates were undertaken and survive among the Harleian manuscripts. The cartulary was published many years ago by the record society so it is valuable to have the survey in print as well.

Canonsleigh was originally a house of canons but was refounded for women in 1284 and proved popular having up to 50 canonesses in the early 14th century. The house seems to have declined in popularity in the 15th century and there were only 18 nuns at the dissolution. There might have been some financial difficulties probably resulting from agricultural crises including poor harvests and cattle disease, although it was a relatively wealthy house.

There is a full analysis of the data provided by the extents both for the whole estate and for individual manors and a comparison with the Valor on the eve of the Dissolution. In addition to the usual arable crops and livestock the abbey had mills, dovecotes and alder and oak woods. The nature of tenancies varied between manors with Hockford Waters having only one free tenant and over 50 per cent serfs compared with Netherton with only a 4 per cent servile population. Manningtree, being a town, had only free tenants. Quantities of demesne also varied. As might be expected a third of Canonsleigh manor's income came from its demesne. The large amount of demesne on Essex manors probably produced for the market, perhaps at Manningtree.

A full translation of the extents follows and makes interesting reading. About one third of the abbey tenants were unfree and several manors have considerable detail of the works owed by villein tenants. At Manningtree we learn some of the street names such as Peysaunte Lane, Pernele Lane and Chapel Street. The chapel was hemmed in by tenements several of which owed it wax rents. There were market stalls and shops, a workhouse, bakehouse, toll house, forge and saltmarsh and tidal water came up to the town.

This is a very readable book and makes a valuable contribution to many aspects of medieval studies.



## New Purchases and Donations to the Somerset Studies Library

The following is a selection of items that have either been purchased or kindly donated to the library during 2025 and are available to consult in the searchroom at the Somerset Heritage Centre. If you would like to make a donation of a work to the library, please get in touch through the email on the final page.

- Bache, Richard (2025) *French Weir Health Centre: the history of a practice 1900-2025*. UK, French Weir Health Centre. Shelved at S/362.11/BAC/2025
- Chapple, Dave (2025) *Bridgwater, Somerset, 1983 to 2004: a working class, left-wing rebellious town?* . Bridgwater, Self-published. Shelved at S/BRI.1/CHA/2025 O/S
- Cooper, Knight, Richard (2025) *Death & Service: Commonwealth war graves of Somerset*. Taunton, Mirador Publishing. Shelved at S/940.467/COO/2025
- French, Henry (2025) *The Reclamation of Exmoor: rethinking the consequences of nineteenth-century landscape change*. Switzerland, Palgrave MacMillan. Shelved at S/EXM/FRE/2025
- Gowar, John (2025) *The Wrington Enclosure: an abridged account of the enclosure act of 1810, the awards made by the commissioner appointed in the act, and the subsequent exchange of holdings*. Self-published. Shelved at S/333.76/GOW/2025 O/S
- Jays, Anita (2025) *Sarah Ann Carter: nineteenth century pregnant asylum inmate*. Milton Keynes, Open University. Shelved in the Offprint Collection
- Linnington, Andrew (2025) *Outrage! How the struggle for women's suffrage came to Clevedon*. Clevedon, Clevedon Lit-Fest. Shelved at S/324.623/LIN/2025
- Lush, John (2005) *Medieval Church Dedications as Evidence for the Cults of Edward the Martyr and Edward the Confessor*. London, Self-Published. Shelved at B/246/LUS/2005 O/S
- Preece, Roy Alan (2023) *The World is a Bundle of Hay: memories of the Somerset Levels*. Oxford, Snowflake Books. Shelved at S/630.9/PRE/2023

- Studio Elite (2025) *Discovering East Coker*. Studio Elite. Shelved at S/EAS.3/STU/2025 O/S
- Taylor, Tim (2025) *Research on the Early History and Importance of Carhampton and Origin of its Name, With References to Carhampton Hundred and Somerset*. Self-Published. Shelved at B/CAR/TAY/2025 O/S
- Thorley, Lin (2024) *John Billingsley 1747-1811: entrepreneur turned agriculturalist*. Gloucester, Hobnob Press. Shelved at S/920/BIL/THO/2024
- Triggol, Roger (2025) *A Bit About the Triggols and the Last of the Working Horses at Fry's Farm, Chedzoy*. Shelved at S/636.1/TRI/2025
- Webb, Adrian J. (2025) *Mr Swanton's Orchard: Bruton 1651*. Taunton, Harry Galloway Publishing. Shelved at S/634.1/WEB/2025
- Wincott, Maureen (2025) *A Letter from Pitney: a story of 19th century emigration to Australia from a small Somerset village*. Castle Cary, Cockhill Press. Shelved at S/PIT.3/WIN/2025

Kate Parr



## Forthcoming Events

As usual we enjoy getting outdoors, fingers crossed for some good weather!

The postponed walk around Alcombe will hopefully take place in early summer and we are still hoping to arrange an archaeology walk.



*Jane Austen  
floral tribute,  
Bath*

*Mary Siraut*

## 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:

**Victoria County History of Somerset**, Somerset Heritage Centre, Brunel Way,  
Norton Fitzwarren, Taunton, TA2 6SF

[vch@swheritage.org.uk](mailto:vch@swheritage.org.uk)

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*Mompesson House, Salisbury, home of the widowed Anne Portman, nee Wyndham, and her daughters from 1798 to the 1840s*

*Mary Siraut*

