
Somerset Snippets

The Newsletter of the Friends of Somerset Archives

Issue 5 – April 2006

From the Editor

I had completed thirty years of teaching and was looking forward to my retirement, but it has not turned out to be as restful as I had imagined. As a Reader in the Anglican Church I was frequently called upon to bury members of my family and finding out what to say about them inspired me to research my family history in order to disentangle truth from myth. For me research is relatively easy as my family has been inbreeding in Somerset for many generations, and I am fortunate to have access to the wonderful collection of documents at Taunton. I chose to join the Friends as a way of saying 'Thank you' for this privilege.

It is a daunting task for me as Editor to live up to the standards set by Adrian and Bernard. However, the news letter is the property of the Friends of Somerset Archives and I am relying on contributions for future issues from you, its members. I am also indebted to staff of the Somerset Records Office for their contributions and constant support.

In this Issue, as we celebrate the two hundredth anniversary of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, we have an article from David about the talented little engineer in the tall hat who dragged the West country forward into the modern age. Esther has provided us with an update of new acquisitions at the CRO and we have notice of the events which are being organised by the Group. There is also a new feature – Know Your Archivist.

Our project to transcribe the Tithes Apportionments continues, but we still need more volunteers. This is not a difficult task as even I could manage it. Photographs of the pages showing lists of land, owners and tenants are supplied on a cd-rom and the information simply has to be filled in on an Excel database, a very straightforward process which I found fascinating as the information provided a colourful picture of a village in 1837. It was interesting to note names of families, fields and use of land and buildings. I hope that many of you will find time to take part in this project. If you are interested in helping please contact Robin Leamon.

Grace Rubery

Parish Register Digitization

Some of you may know about this worldwide project being carried out by Later Day Saints to digitize parish registers. There are a large number of benefits of this project including making them more widely available, being digitally produced they will be able to be manipulated in that the writing can be enhanced and of course you will be able to "zoom" in on various entries. Of course the most important aspect is that of conservation in that the original registers should never be needed to be consulted as the technology now exists to improve on the images to a far higher standard than microfiche or film. There is also the important fact that there will be more than one copy of these documents store in different locations, which means that if disaster did overtake the record office, such as fire, all would not be lost.

We are proud to say that the Somerset is leading the field in England for this project, thanks to the foresight of Tom Mayberry and his skills in negotiation to obtain the various permissions needed. It goes without saying that the Friends of Somerset Archives will be involved with this in particular, another part of the project, indexing the entries. At the moment we do not have the full details but as far as we are able ascertain it will be a project that people will be able to take part in at home, on their computers, using a special programme that has been developed especially for this project. As soon as we have more details we will let everyone know. In the meantime, if you are interested in volunteering to help with this project please let me know. This is going to be another large project and so we will need as many as possible to volunteer.

Bernard Welchman

Christmas Event and AGM



On Saturday 14th January members of the Group were welcomed for a post-Christmas Social and AGM at the beautiful home of Anne and Robin Leamon. I was cheered that, of our members from around the country and even further afield, one quarter had managed to make the journey to Trull to attend this event.

Anne, as Chairman, gave her report, announced that the Group now had 103 members and thanked Bernard Welchman for his work as membership secretary. Anne also thanked Malcolm Daniels for his work as Web-master and Esther and Liz from the Somerset Records Office for their contact. Carol was welcomed as Minutes Secretary and myself as editor of the news letter.

David Hawkings, our Treasurer, presented the accounts which showed a bank balance of £950.45 in the savings account and £452.77 in the current account. Although this appears to be quite healthy we need to build up this amount if we are to help return out of county archives back to Somerset when such collections come up for sale. We were also reminded that we must urge our solicitors to deposit any redundant papers with the SRO, rather than dumping them!

Tom Maybury announced that plans for a new Records Office have 'taken wing' with a site having been identified and six million pounds having been voted towards the project by the Council.

The AGM was followed by an excellent buffet which Anne had provided, and a quiz testing our knowledge of Somerset, devised by Esther and Liz provided much merriment. We had such a good time that we have requested Anne for a repeat next year.

Our membership has continued to grow since our AGM and Bernard has set us the challenge of reaching 200 in the next year. If each of us recruits one new member this will happen, so arm yourself with a spare membership form and encourage others to join.



Esther and Liz exercising our brains with a Quiz on Somerset -

and our experts struggle with the answers!



'He Left What?' Talk by Jenny Potter

Somerset Record Office Wednesday 1st March



Despite the snowy cold weather on Wednesday night members enjoyed a very interesting talk given by Jenny on the items people left in their Wills. Jenny, who is a member of the English Civil War Society, illustrated her talk by dressing in a 1640's costume that she had made.

Jenny has spent 10 years researching costume and found the inventories in Wills invaluable in this research. Whilst reading out the items of clothing left in an inventory she was able to point to the various parts of her dress and explain how they were made. The particular inventory she was reading mentioned cotton aprons which we were interested to learn were actually linen aprons. Cotton did not come into this country until the 18th century and clothing was made originally in wool or linen. In the particular inventory she was referring to the lady had left, amongst other things, 2 sleeves to one person and 1 pearl covered sleeve to another. Jenny explained that sleeves were not attached to a coat or dress as nowadays; they



were a separate item attached by ribbons and were considered quite valuable.

A Partlet could be worn as a jacket or cardigan or alternatively used as a bodice. Jenny had a particularly nice brocade partlet for people to see and handle. Jenny then, with the assistance of her partner Steve, demonstrated the difficulties of wearing 1640s costume by taking off the partlet she was wearing to demonstrate her bodice. The partlet was attached to the skirt by some 9 or 10 ribbons, all of which had to be undone and threaded through eyelets before the partlet could be removed. This revealed a bodice, laced up at the back which fitted over the chest and waist, pushing the bust up giving shape to a woman's figure. As Jenny explained, it was impossible for a lady to dress herself on her own, she had to have a maid to assist with tying up the laces and lacing the bodice from behind.

Jenny also found that if you are able to match a particular inventory to a house, you can work out what rooms were present at the time of the inventory, and how many fire places the house had, thus indicating the status of the house.



Her partner, Steve, brought along a selection of kitchen implements which he makes to original designs and sells at medieval fairs. Members had an interesting time trying to identify the uses of these implements.

Jenny also brought along a Corslet, originally a piece of armour for covering the trunk of the body. This was modelled very ably by Esther at the end of the evening.



Report by Anne Leamon

KNOW YOUR ARCHIVIST:

Focus on: Sue Berry



Sue Giving Advice To A Student

Sue is an only child and lived firstly in Battersea and later Sussex. When she located to Taunton her parents moved with her. Sue's hobbies are spending time with her partner, James, reading, listening to opera and classical music, and working behind the scenes with the Somerset Opera Company. Sue is also helping to produce an edition of Rack's notes, who helped John Collinson write the first County History of Somerset. Sue has not yet moved into the twenty-first century as she has no car, no TV and no computer. Sue also raises money for the new Children's Hospice.

What led you to become an archivist?

I was unsure about what I was going to do when I finished reading history at Southampton and so did a day a week work experience at the City Archives and knew it was for me.

Training – what and where?

Having completed my degree I studied a one year Diploma in Archive Administration at Bangor.

Who has most inspired you during your career?

Derek Shorricks, who was Deputy then County Archivist at Somerset. He had great knowledge and cataloguing skills.

Why Somerset?

It was the first place with a job opening up. I worked in Hampshire for a while and then returned to Somerset.

What task do you most enjoy during your working day?

My work varies so much from one day to another. Amongst other tasks I enjoy putting together materials for educational purposes.

What piece of archival history would you most like to find?

A 17th Century Index for Staplegrove Hundred – every Taunton hundred has one except Staplegrove.

What has been your most satisfying work with documents so far?

Cataloguing a collection of letters concerning Thomas Carew, builder of Crowcombe Court.

If you were not an archivist what else would you be?

An Egyptologist or an opera singer – but I can't sing!

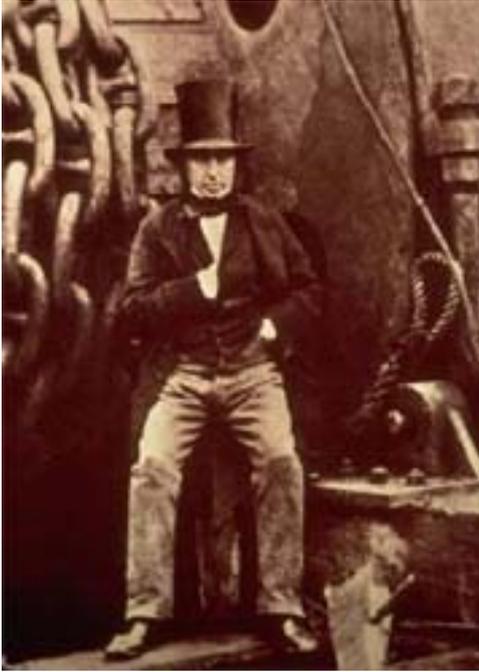
For what – or how would you most like to be remembered?

My work with the Record Office's Education Service.

What document would you like archivists of the future to find when researching your life?

A newspaper account of how I donated vast sums of money to the local Hospice.

“Disgraceful Exposure of Mismanagement”: Brunel and the Bristol & Exeter Railway in Somerset



April 9th 2006 marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of Isambard Kingdom Brunel. This has generated a plethora of events and exhibitions celebrating the achievements of the great engineer, particularly in Bristol, his adopted city where he carried out his best-known works. Devon and Cornwall also have cause to celebrate, due in most part to Brunel's associations with the Bristol & Exeter Railway (B&ER) and the South Devon and Cornwall Railways. But Somerset seems to have found little reason to remember the great man, despite the fact that the B&ER runs through the historic county from end to end, and that it featured some noteworthy technical innovations.

There appear to be two main causes for this. Firstly, it is an unfortunate fact that SRO holds very few original records relating either to Brunel himself or to the construction of the B&ER. The principal collections are in the University of Bristol Library (mostly personal and private items such as Brunel's diaries and letter books) and the Public Record Office at Kew (official records of the B&ER Company).

Secondly, the story of the construction of the B&ER through Somerset is full of structural failures, personality clashes and, ultimately, spin-doctoring; not an episode that Brunel's supporters were keen to publicise, and, somewhat surprisingly, not one that his critics capitalized

on.

In October 1835 Brunel, as chief engineer of the promoters of the B&ER, had employed a long-time colleague, William Gravatt (1806-1866), to establish and survey a line for the proposed railway. The two had first worked together, under Brunel's father Marc, on construction of the Thames Tunnel during 1826-1828, and in view of the dangers and hardships they shared during this project it is inevitable that they should become close acquaintances, if not close friends. However, there were occasions when both Brunels felt they had to warn Gravatt about the effects of his pride and self-righteousness. Later, in 1834-1835 Brunel had employed Gravatt to design the “standard” masonry arch bridges carrying roads over the Great Western Railway, while he himself got on with designing the major structures such as Maidenhead Bridge and the Wharncliffe Viaduct. There seems little doubt that he felt able to leave the B&ER survey in the safe hands of his old colleague. Writing in his private diary on Boxing Day 1835, Brunel noted that Gravatt had chosen and surveyed the line for the railway “in grand style”, adding “Gravatt served me well in this B&E survey”.

When it came to building the line in 1836, Brunel demonstrated his complete trust in Gravatt by making him his resident engineer, to oversee the design and construction of the B&ER. Brunel was already at full stretch, what with the Great Western Railway (and several others), Clifton Bridge (and several others), and the SS Great Western all demanding his constant attention, and he felt confident he could leave Gravatt to cope unattended.

Gravatt adapted his GWR standard road bridge designs for use on the B&ER across the Somerset Levels between Yatton and Bridgwater. However, over the deep cuttings at Long Ashton, Flax Bourton, Uphill, Puriton and Durston, he “contrived” (as he termed it) what became known as “flying bridges”, probably the first use of these very flat, long-span arched bridges which spring directly out of the sides of the cutting. And for the major river crossings of the Avon near Temple Meads, and the Parrett near Bridgwater, he designed exceedingly flat arched bridges, flatter even than Brunel's Maidenhead Bridge.

Pretty early in the construction period however, in Brunel's absence Gravatt's behaviour either intentionally or otherwise led many people to think that he, rather than Brunel, was, or thought he was, the B&ER Company's chief engineer. Then in December 1839 Gravatt complained vociferously to the B&ER Directors about some as-yet unidentified insult, probably a critical or sarcastic remark one of them made about his attitude and behaviour. He asked to be dismissed, and Brunel was forced to come in to calm everyone down, but the damage had been done - from then on, the relationship between Brunel and Gravatt deteriorated.

By July 1840 Brunel was hearing reports of Gravatt's publicly stated doubts about Brunel's abilities and views on “important engineering questions”. He wrote to Gravatt:

Connected as we have been as intimate friends of long standing ... can this be true? Is it the conduct of a friend, of a gentleman, of a subaltern trusted and confided in by the man above him?

He called a special B&ER Board meeting to clear his name. His confidence in Gravatt was destroyed, he told them, but rather than dismiss him he would limit his duties to completing the line as far as Bridgwater. By this means, nobody outside the Board need know, and if Gravatt's attitude improved he would consider reinstating him.

Meanwhile, Gravatt's flying bridge concept was a great success, and many later railways featured them. However, on the Somerset Levels the use of heavy masonry arch bridges, with high approach embankments to carry the roads over the railway, was a disaster. Soon after construction of these bridges was started, the masonry showed signs of subsidence, and the approach embankments began slipping once they got above a critical height. Several bridges near Weston-super-Mare collapsed or had to be taken down, but despite this Gravatt continued to build bridges further down the line to the same design. The problem was caused by a layer of peat about 16ft below the ground surface of the silts and clays of the Levels on which the railway was constructed. Once the weight of the bridge masonry and the associated earth embankments reached a critical level, the "slippery" layer of peat failed, causing everything above it to subside and slump outwards.

Gravatt's large bridges over the Avon at Bristol ("Exeter Bridge"), the Parrett at Huntworth ("Somerset Bridge"), and the Tone at Bathpool ("New Cut Bridge") were also settling alarmingly, but Brunel was only alerted to the fact a fortnight before the B&ER was opened from Bristol to Bridgwater on 14 June 1841. By that time eleven of the masonry arch road bridges had been replaced by timber beam bridges. A blistering exchange of letters took place; Brunel told Gravatt:

You knew this, and must either have wilfully concealed it or shut your eyes to it ... your infatuation is so great as to render you unfit for the business of this busy life ...

I cannot confide in you in the least degree ... had you told me, this disgraceful exposure of mismanagement could have been avoided ... I have gradually and reluctantly come to the conclusion that we must part.

He offered Gravatt one last chance to resign, which Gravatt refused. He dismissed Gravatt on 18 June 1841; the two never worked together professionally again. Gravatt had completed the designs of all the bridges as far as Taunton Station. Now that he had sacked Gravatt, Brunel himself was forced to quickly design all the bridges on the next stretch of the B&ER, from Taunton to a temporary terminus at Beam Bridge, beyond Wellington. His sketch-books at Bristol University show how his ideas developed.

During the following few years nine more of the road bridges were replaced, Bathpool New Cut Bridge was rebuilt, and Somerset Bridge was taken down and replaced by a timber arch to Brunel's design. The demise of Somerset Bridge was covered by papers circulating in the Bridgwater area; otherwise very little about the fiasco was made public at the time. It seems the B&ER directors were able to focus attention elsewhere - and anyway, investigative journalism was still in its infancy. The Taunton Courier for 5 October 1842 carried a small item, which only just managed to be mildly critical:

It is regretful to see removed most of those beautiful stone arched bridges on the line of railway between Bristol and Bridgwater, and replaced by those of wood, which are flat and have an unsightly appearance.



David Greenfield

Crosse Connections

Thursday 4th May 2006 at Fyne Court 7.30 pm

Most people will know of Andrew Crosse “The Wizard of the Quantocks” and the important contributions that he made to science. However, what most do not know is that he was only one member of a somewhat colourful family. We are lucky in that we have John Porter, a descendant of the Cross family, to give this talk and that we are able to hold this event in Fyne Court, the home of the Crosse family. (Please see instructions on how to get there). As we are having to pay for the use of this venue, we would like as many members as possible to attend and also if you have any friends, who would be interested, please bring them along as they will be made very welcome. The charge for Non-members is £2.00 but if they feel that they would like to join when they arrive, all the better and we will refund the money that they have paid as soon as they become members.

Instructions to Fyne Court, Broomfield Taunton

If travelling along M5 leave at Junction 25 follow directions to Taunton through 2 roundabouts and 1 set of T traffic lights

At the 3rd roundabout take the 2nd exit and continue along this road over the River Tone to 2nd set of traffic lights. Turn right, drive past the train station and take left hand lane at traffic lights and then right hand lane at next set of traffic lights heading for Kingston.

Drive through Kingston following the road around the sharp right hand bend at the pub. Continue until at the top of the hill at the junction turn sharp left and follow the signs for Fyne Court. 6m N of Taunton

If approaching from Weston or Bridgwater you can leave the M5 at junction 24 turn onto the A28 towards North Petherton. There is a turning on the right which may well be sign posted Fyne Court. 6m SW of Bridgwater.



Somerset Light Infantry Database

This is now up and running although all of the entries have not yet been entered. In order to consult this database on line (which is only available to members) you will need a username and password. For 2006 these are as follows;

Username: friends

Password: principium

Please keep visiting the website and the database as now information is being added constantly.

*SRO notable Accessions * November 2005- February 2006*

November 2005

- Additional parish material from Ilton, East Quantoxhead, Orchardleigh, Lullington, Freshford, Stoke St Mary, Goathurst, Strington, Stoke St Michael, Dodington, Holford, Kilton
- Additional parish council material from Nynehead Parish Council, Farrington Gurney
- Additional material from the Western Unitarian Christian Union
- DD\SFR.m, M/1837 – Additional records for the Mid Somerset Monthly Meetings of the Religious Society of Friends, 1650-1996

December 2005

- Additional parish material from Hemington, Paulton, Aller
- Additional parish council material from Coleford parish Council, West Camel Parish Council, Aller Parish Council
- A\CNF, M/1871 – Records of Northmoor Green primary School, 1926-2005
- A\CNH, M/1875 – Records of St Michael’s CofE First School, 1878-1993

January 2006

- Additional parish material from Evercreech, Langport, Lullington, Bicknoller
- Additional parish council material from Street Parish Council, Hatch Beauchamp Parish Council, Combe Florey Parish Council
- Additional material from The United Reformed Church (South Western Synod)
- D\H\men, M/1890 – Additional Mendip Hospital Records, 1849-1991
- A\CNS, M/1911 – Records of British Cellophane Ltd., Bridgwater, 1935-1990
- DD\WI, M/1920 – Additional material from the Somerset Federation of Women’s Institutes, 1926-2005

February 2006

- Additional parish material from St Decuman’s, Trull, Stanton Drew, Kilve, Strington, Huish Champflower, Carhampton, Dunster
- Additional parish council material from Cheddar Parish Council
- Additional material from Ashwick Presbyterian Chapel
- DD\X\NAS, M/1933, Midwifery records for Stogumer and district, 1920s-1970s

March 2006 (to 22 March)

- Additional parish council material from Norton Fitzwarren Parish Council, Frome Town Council
- DD\FRC, M/1957 – Records of Frome School of Art and Science, 1884-1980
- A\CON, M/1966 – Photograph album for the Vellow and Stogumer area, c. 1900
- DD\X\HPS, M/1969 – Railway Station plans of Crewkerne and Yeovil, 1883-1962
- A\COR, M/1971 – Architectural correspondence and drawings relating to Ston Easton Park, 1980s-1990s

Forthcoming Events

Crosse Connections.

Venue Fyne Court.
Thursday the 4th of May, 7.30.

A talk by John Porter on Andrew Crosse the ‘Wizard of the Quantocks’, scientific experiments and his family. – *see map*

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Somerset Away

Venue Somerset Record Office, Obridge Road
Taunton
Friday the 23rd of June, 7.30.

Continuing our annual theme of a lecture on Somerset records outside of Somerset we are lucky to have a talk by County Historian, Dr Robert Dunning, who has spent the last 30 years researching through collections of records all over the world looking for Somerset material.

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Treasure Hunt.

Venue to be announced.
Sunday the 3rd of September. Details to be announced.

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Visit to Devon Record Office.

Venue Exeter.
Saturday the 7th of October, 9.30-12.00.

A behind the scenes visit to the record office at Exeter courtesy of the County Archivist. Also a talk on the UK Meteorological Archives held at Exeter.

Booking for all of these events through Bernard Welchman is essential.

If you have any ideas or suggestions on future visits or events please contact Bernard Welchman

For Sale

Norris’ Taunton Journal 1725 to 1727. Indexed and filmed by Paul Mansfield. A full facsimile of the original with an index on one cd-rom for £4.00 post free to the U.K. and £4.60 overseas. Please make cheques payable to The Friends of Somerset Archives.

Available from 19 Kirke Grove, Taunton, Somerset, TA2 8SB. All of the costs for this production were donated by Paul Mansfield

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NEWSLETTER - Please note that this newsletter has been issued with the agreement of all of the committee who have the final say on all of the material published by the Friends.

* * * Don't forget that this is not only a group supporting the Somerset County Record Office but also other record offices in the historic county and also we are interested in Somerset records that are outside the county and not so easily accessible. Contributions to the newsletter or to the website on matters about any of these will be most welcome. * * *

Somerset Record Office Open Day Saturday 20th May 10.00 am to 4.00 pm

The Friends of Somerset Archives will take a full part in this open day, with a "Friends" table, meeting visitors on the door and generally helping where needed. Again we need volunteers perhaps to give two hours of their time during the day to help introduce the wonders of the record office to those who have little or no knowledge of what goes on behind the scenes and the vast and varied types of documents available. Of course we also hope to recruit new members. Please let Bernard know if you will be able to help.