Victoria County History of Somerset Newsletter

Issue 15

Summer 2020

Welcome to the fifteenth 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

Like many of you we have spent much of this year so far in lockdown, but we have been getting on with our work as best we can and hope that you are well. We have had to cancel many meetings and outings, but hope that these can be resumed next year. As this newsletter was produced in lockdown the images may not be up to our usual standard but we hope you enjoy the content.

We have celebrated several events at home including the 75th anniversary of VE Day and the 200th anniversary of the birth of Florence Nightingale, both of which are noted in this edition of our newsletter. There are several anniversaries in 2020 and this summer marks the 80th anniversary of the evacuation from Dunkirk (26 May - 4 June) and of the Battle of Britain.

Locally 1940 was the year of a serious railway accident at Norton Fitzwarren in the early hours of the morning of 4 November. A passenger train from Paddington to Penzance passed two stop signals at danger on the relief line and was derailed at the catch points protecting the main line west of the station, where the two lines converged. The driver had believed he was on the main line. The first five coaches were wrecked and 26 of the *c*. 900 passengers and crew died, including the fireman. Most of the passengers were servicemen including naval personnel from *HMS Raleigh*. Of the 74 injured, 56 with serious injuries were taken to the Taunton and Somerset Hospital in East Reach.

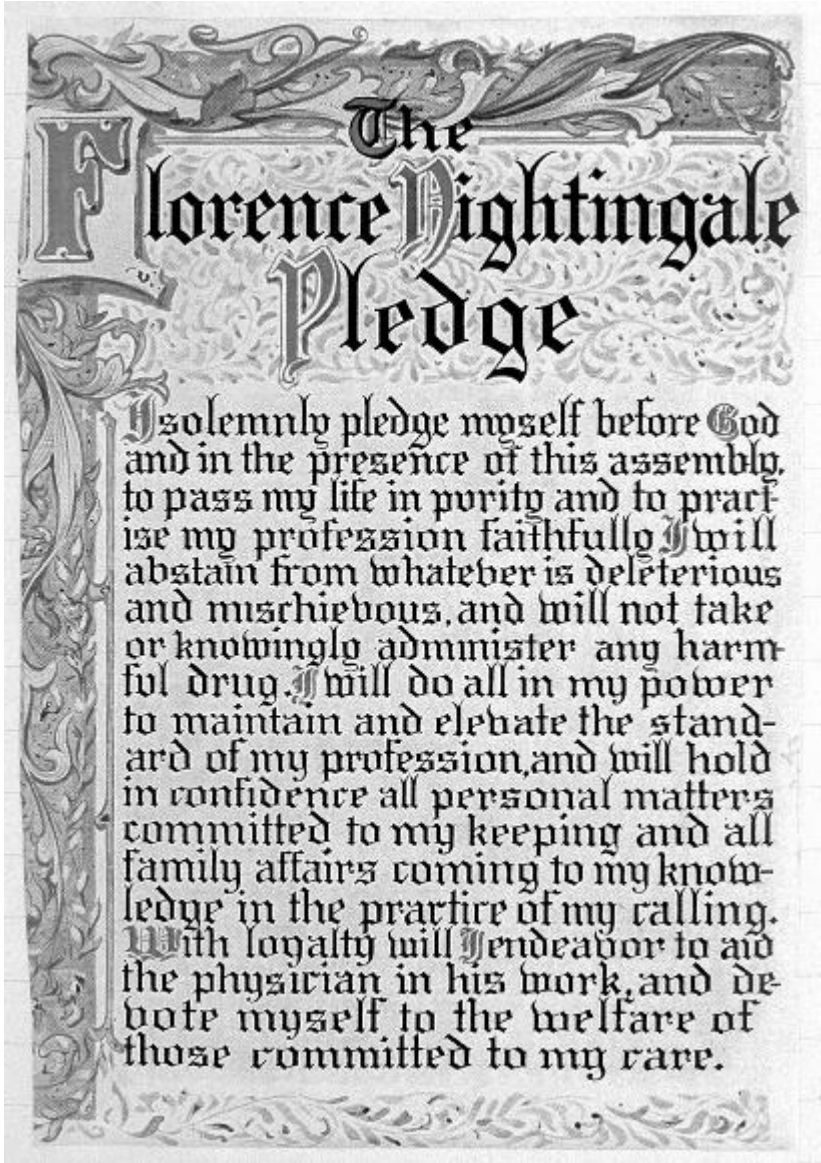
We have also been remembering the terrible Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918 - 19 which killed up to 150,000 people in Britain. Other countries, such as India, lost millions. The outbreak affected several schools in Taunton, especially boarding schools, and there were long periods of school closure as the disease came in several waves. Far worse for infants were severe outbreaks of mumps, whooping cough, pneumonia and measles in 1919 and most schools in the borough closed again for several weeks in the autumn. Influenza remained a problem before the advent of vaccines and the outbreak of 1969 - 70 was described as the worst in living memory. When 55 hospital nurses went down with influenza in 1969 local nuns helped out.

Shetland ponies on former common land at Haydon *Mary Siraut*

During the pandemic many people have been taking daily exercise in their neighbourhood and perhaps finding new corners to explore. Historic maps, some of which are available on the *Know your Place* website, provide a wealth of information on both urban and rural neighbourhoods. The British History Online and VCH Explore websites have thousands of published histories and articles produced by the Victoria County History nationwide. Fieldwork on lockdown daily outings can provide interesting discoveries like this fragment of a former common.

In this edition you will find articles on Sampford Arundel, Florence Nightingale, General Gordon and the Puriton Royal Ordnance Factory.

Pledge made by the original Nightingale nurses



Sampford Arundel – a Somerset village during the later medieval period

For a small settlement such as Sampford Arundel on the Somerset / Devon border, the evidence for life there during the medieval period may not appear extensive. For example, the brief Domesday Book entry tells us that the items subject to tax were its mill and eleven cattle. That compares to the two mills and twenty-two pigs at Holcombe Rogus, or the two mills and seventeen cattle at Wellington. However, the fact that the manor and church of Sampford Arundel were in the possession of the nearby nunnery of Canonsleigh Abbey before the dissolution of the monasteries, means that there is significantly more we can say about its medieval history.

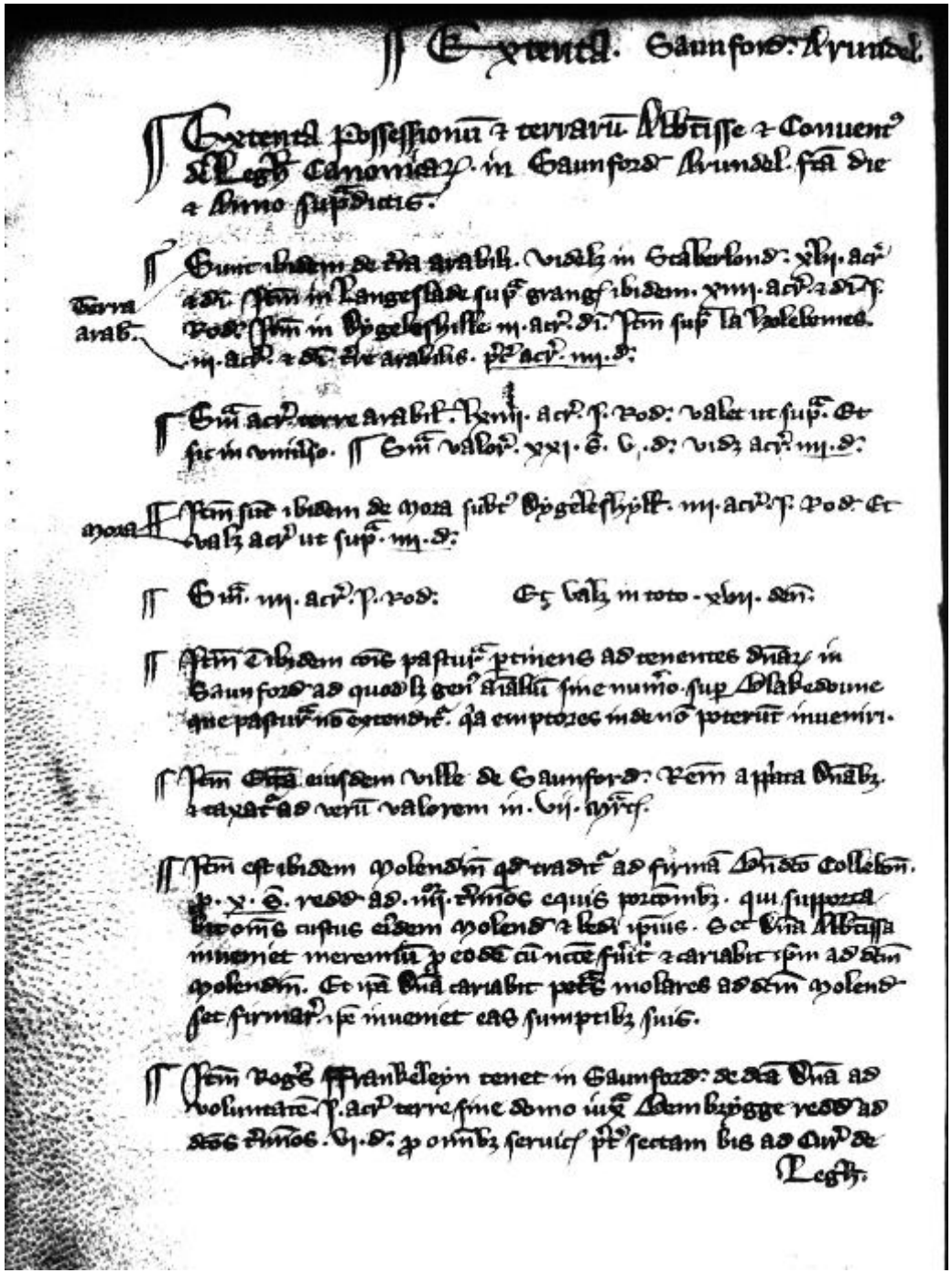
When the priory at Canonsleigh was first established in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a series of land charters were created. They are recorded in the Cartulary of Canonsleigh Abbey and these valuable records were translated and published by the Devon & Cornwall Record Society in the 1960s. In the Cartulary we first see the names of local fields and other features in Sampford Arundel. For example, in the year 1204 there was a grant of ten acres of land in 'Gaberslade' (the term 'slade' here probably refers to a damp, low-lying area). Another name found there is the wood of 'Holbiame' which, in a later document (the set of manorial extents collated in 1323), is called 'Holebemes'. In this context, 'bemes' probably means trees, so 'hol' or 'hole' may mean 'holly', or possibly 'holy' (the small settlement of Holywell Lake is nearby). As regards local people, one charter from 1251 refers to 'Roger the Frankelayn', a name that recurs in 1323. A franklin was a fortunate individual who held their land free of any military service to their lord. They were below the rank of a gentleman, but above that of a free peasant.

In 1291, a taxation survey of the churches in England was held (known as the *Taxatio* of Pope Nicholas). The church at Sampford appears there with an annual value of £4 13*s* 4*d*. By comparison the nearby Devon parish of Holcombe Rogus was valued at £6 6*s* and 8*d*, while back in Somerset the church at Wellington was valued at £13 6*s* 8*d*. Sampford was therefore a relatively modest parish. Of its annual value, the bulk would have come from the tithe imposed on its parishioners, plus any other fees and offerings.

When we get to 1323, the set of manorial extents that were compiled in that year give us our first more detailed look at the parish and manor. These records have not yet been transcribed and published, so their contents are not widely known. They show that there was a total of sixty-four and a quarter acres of arable land, and four and a quarter acres of moorland. Of the arable land, forty-two and a half acres were in a place called 'Staberlond', suggesting an open field that would have been divided among the local tenants. Fourteen and a half acres were in 'Langeslade' which is described as above the grange. A grange was a farm-house with barn, so this could have been a monastic grange associated with Canonsleigh where the tithes collected in the form of grain or 'sheathes' would have been stored. The other arable land comprised three and a half acres in a place called 'Dygeleshille', and three and a half acres above the wood discussed earlier called 'Holebemes'. The small acreage of moorland was described as being beneath 'Dygeleshylle'.

One particularly interesting entry in the extents concerns an area of common pasture. This is described as being upon 'Blakedoune', one of the first known references to the word Blackdown. From the entry it seems that this area was being ploughed up by the tenants of the abbey, and the surveyor of the extents was not able to enumerate the acreages involved.

The one mill in Sampford was not directly under the control of the abbess; instead it had been leased out to a man called Benedict Collebon (so probably Colebourne as a modern surname). He paid an annual rent of ten shillings, as well as a small tax to the sheriff. However, the abbess was bound to provide timber for the mill building as needed, and to transport it there. She was also bound to transport the mill stones, but her lessee had to provide for them at his own cost.



In 1323 the name Roger Frankeleyn appears again (presumably a descendant of the Roger we saw in 1251). He is described as a tenant at will, holding one acre of land and a house for which he pays rent of sixpence per annum. What is very interesting about this landholding is that it is described as being next to 'Bembrygge' which is surely the same as the modern place-name 'Beambridge'.

Over two hundred years after the creation of the extents, there was another notable valuation of church lands known as the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*. This was compiled in 1535 and provides an invaluable source for the period immediately before the suppression of the religious houses. The entry for Canonsleigh Abbey gives details for both its temporal and spiritual resources. The term 'temporal' refers to the manorial and other landholdings of the abbey, while 'spiritual' refers to the church of Sampford and the income that accrued from it. The temporal valuation amounted to £2 15*s* 4*d,* all bar one shilling of which came from fixed rents. That represented a useful increase over the total of £1 13*s* 4*d* recorded in the extents of 1323.

For the spiritual valuation we get more detail. Of the total valuation of £5 16*s* 10*d*, over three pounds came from the tithes levied on the inhabitants, over a pound from wool and lambs, and a further pound or more from other tithes and profits. However the total spiritual income fell short of the expenses that were levied against it. Six pounds per annum were owed to the perpetual vicar (William Lowton in 1535), and a further 10*s* 2*d* to the archdeacon of Exeter.

What this brief survey has attempted to show is how, even for a small settlement such as Sampford Arundel, we can tease out quite a lot of information about its life during the medieval period. The fact that it was in the possession of the nearby nunnery of Canonsleigh means that it was better documented than many other places. As well as learning about the economic life of the manor and parish, we can also see the early use of place names that continue in use to the present day.

British Library, Harley MS 3660, f. 175v

Sampford Arundel church.

Roger Cornfoot, reproduced under Creative Commons Licence

In the period before the Black Death (1348 - 9), we can see that much of the area was dedicated to arable agriculture. We can also see one or two names of local inhabitants. By the time we get to 1535, we see how the manor and church of Sampford were still in the possession of the abbey, although its contribution to the monastic purse was modest. The detailed parish records for Sampford Arundel survive only from the end of the seventeenth century, while detailed census and similar records only date from the middle of the nineteenth. We are fortunate therefore to get the glimpses of Sampford's medieval life that we do.

Des Atkinson

Florence Nightingale and Taunton Hospital Nursing

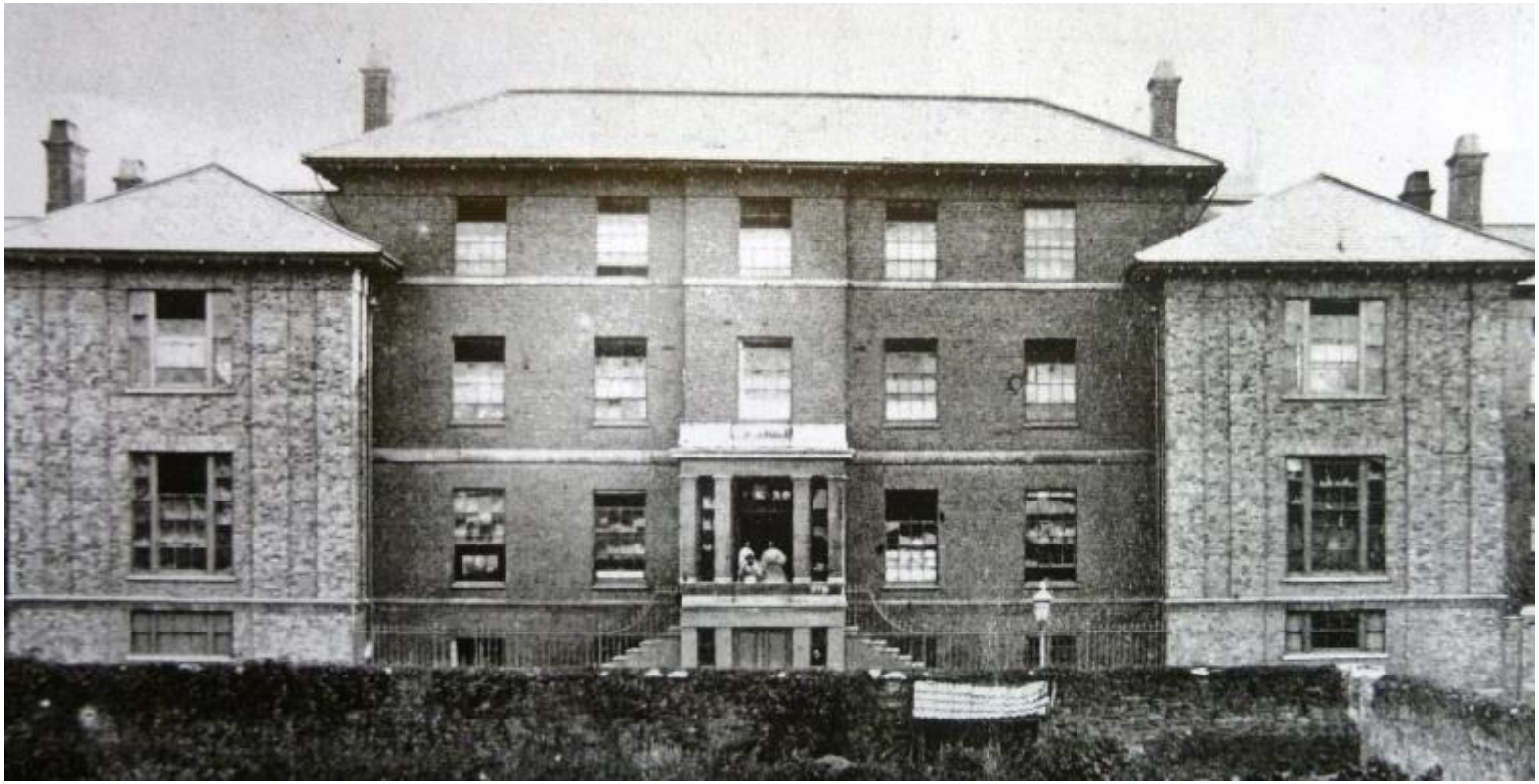
On 12 May 2020 we marked the 200th anniversary of the birth of Florence Nightingale, a woman still held in high regard despite some criticism of her manner and methods. We continue to honour this pioneer of nursing and we should do this alongside her fellow Crimean nurses Mary Secole and Betsi Cadwaladr. The names of many others are unknown. The military hospital at Scutari was run and staffed by *c*. 85 women including Florence Nightingale and Lady Alicia Blackwood. Its success led to the development of nursing as a profession notably the establishment of 'Nightingale training' at St Thomas's Hospital in London. That was the most important step in standardising nursing training and raising the status of the profession until the late 20th century move to provide university-based education. Nurses, often despised before the later 19th century, were now held in high esteem and were drawn from all sections of society, as nursing came to be regarded as both a vocation and a profession.

Florence Nightingale at Scutari

The Life and Times of Queen Victoria *(1887)*

When the Taunton and Somerset Hospital opened in 1812 nurses were unqualified and badly paid and had to be ordered not to receive gratuities from tradesmen or patients. Before specific accommodation was found nurses would sleep on wards and as late as 1851 there were five nurses of whom only one was on duty at night caring for 56 patients. Lady Palmerston's opinion of nurses: 'Perhaps they do drink a little but…it must be very tiresome sitting up all night' was typical of an acceptance of the standard of contemporary nursing and resistance to paying for improvements. Most hospital nurses were drawn from the poor classes like their patients and did the laundry and cleaning. They were treated like domestic servants with a half day off each month and until the 1860s were given £2 2*s*. beer money, replaced by a pint of ale each day, and £12 a year whereas the porter got £15. The hospital spent £271 on alcohol in 1868 compared with £80 in 1886. Middle-class women were occasionally accepted as volunteer nurses in the 1850s without pay or accommodation.

By 1867 the Taunton Hospital Committee wanted nurses trained on the Nightingale model and sought recommendations from the Nightingale Fund. There was some resentment from existing nurses, who had to be reminded that the new Superintendent Nurse was there to instruct them and they were to obey her orders and instructions in every respect. She was to supervise and train the nurses leaving matron to run the hospital. The first pupil nurses were admitted in 1869 after a probationary period of three months to serve for a three-year training period, extended to four years from 1896. They were under the care of Superintendent Emma Clarke, trained at the Nightingale School at St Thomas's. She preferred women over 25 and they had to be unmarried. A cottage was provided for the pupils. The hospital committee decided to accept the Nightingale Institute regulations and in 1870 the matron was asked to procure a register and clothing for pupil nurses after the Nightingale pattern. Despite the improvement in their position the 1881 census still classed hospital nurses as servants.



Taunton and Somerset Hospital in 1866 from the hospital garden opposite

SWHT

The Jubilee Nursing Institute was added in 1887, designed by J. Houghton Spencer, with accommodation for the head nurses over the two upper floors, and was planned to be self-funding through hiring out private nurses. It opened on 25 October 1888, pupil nurses got £10 a year and ward nurses £25 with board and indoor and outdoor uniform, a blue cloak and a bonnet. The most senior nurses could expect £36 with board, lodging and washing. Two ward sisters were to continue to sleep in the hospital but the others were to live in the Institute. In 1889 five pupil nurses were accepted after their initial training. Many more had applied but were turned down on health grounds or for being too young or failing the probationary period. They were not paid during their first year but presumably got their accommodation and food.

Above: former Taunton and Somerset Hospital, East Reach *Mary Siraut*

Left: Nightingale nurses at East Reach in the early 20th century *SWHT*

By 1893 each ward was staffed during the day by a ward nurse, an assistant and a pupil and at night by a sister and an assistant. Sisters were known by the name of their ward in the 19th century. The quality of training at Taunton led to requests to provide training for other institutions but there was insufficient capacity. Nurses were still poorly paid and the hospital spent more on meat than on wages. Untrained nurses continued to be used in the hospital and turnover was quite high, but at least two thirds of the hospital nurses had been fully trained by the late 1890s and untrained and pupil nurses were not allowed to work on wards without trained staff alongside. However, in 1903 there were more probationers than fully trained nurses, who often preferred to leave for private practice. Attempts to discourage this included medals for five years' service and improving pay. VADs were allowed to train in the casualty department and by 1914 a trained nurse could earn a guinea a week.

By the 1930s the Institute had to be extended and nurses were entering training while still in their teens, despite attempts to raise the age. Male nurses were still a rarity. Various attempts were made to acquire extra accommodation for nurses and eventually Lyngford House was acquired for the purpose. The creation of the National Health Service helped to provide a national standard for nursing training. Nurses were required to work only 44 hours a week and had four weeks of paid leave. They were provided with single rooms, periods of study for their exams and recreational opportunities.

During the Second World War uniformed nurses joined members of the armed forces to march though the town to raise money in war savings week and to celebrate victory. Florence Nightingale's birthday, now International Nurses Day, was honoured, by Taunton nurses in the mid 20th century at an annual May service at Holy Trinity church. Today we remember Florence Nightingale in naming after her the hospitals created to care for Covid-19 patients.

Mary Siraut

Above: Princess Alice with matron, mayor and nurses opening a hospital extension in 1938 SWHT

Left: The former Victoria Jubilee Nursing Institute , East Reach Mary Siraut

Gordon of Wilton

Major-General Charles Gordon was one of the most charismatic, enigmatic and controversial heroes of the Victorian age. His death at Khartoum in the Sudan in 1885 attracted worldwide attention, severely embarrassed Gladstone's second government and indelibly impressed itself on the popular imagination for decades. In an age less susceptible to the imperialist values he came to embody, his star has fallen precipitously and it's unlikely that many children today have heard of this strange man whose portrait could still be found adorning the walls of many English classrooms in the last half century. Ironically, this icon to generations of schoolboys who dreamed of foreign adventure and glory had largely unhappy memories of his own schooldays, which were spent at Fullands school in Wilton, just outside Taunton.

Gordon entered the school at the age of 10 in 1843. Fullands' Evangelical reputation had endeared it to his parents and the headmaster, George Rogers, was a relative of a family governess. In spite of this, Gordon struggled to adapt to life at the school. Lord George Gordon (of 'Gordon Riots' fame) had recently been fictionalised in Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge* and the other boys teased him mercilessly about the connection. Gordon refused to read Dickens for the remainder of his life. In a cryptic but emotional letter written in 1883 he alluded to a painful experience at the school which changed his life 'humanly speaking, so it was never the same since'. It's impossible to say with any certainty what traumatised the boy, though in a near-contemporaneous letter to the same correspondent he confessed, 'I wished I was a eunuch at fourteen'. (Competing urges to reveal and conceal were an unresolved tension throughout Gordon's life.) On leaving Fullands in 1846, to enter the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, he vowed, 'I will never come this way again'. It was a promise that he kept.

Gordon was commissioned second lieutenant, Royal Engineers in 1852. On his promotion to lieutenant two years later, he took up his first appointment as assistant garrison engineer at Pembroke Dock. Although he was there for just a few months, it proved to be a formative experience. Under the religious influence of Captain Francis Drew, an Irish protestant officer, and his wife, Anne, Gordon began studying biblical commentaries which fortified an already pronounced Christian faith. His religiosity became the central tenet of his life. However, he eschewed mainstream Christianity and devised his own theology, derived from his daily studies of biblical texts, and came to see himself as the instrument of God's ends. His devotion also imbued him with an unshakeable sense of fatalism. For Gordon, death was not a cause for fear but the gateway to yearned for eternal life. Recalling his first active service, in the Crimean War, he remarked, 'I went to the Crimea hoping, without having a hand in it, to be killed'.

Perhaps inevitably, this peculiarly intense man rejected polite society. 'I dwell on the joy of never seeing Great Britain again, with its horrid, wearisome dinner parties and miseries', he wrote in Khartoum in the final weeks of his life. 'At those dinner parties we are all in masks, saying what we do not believe, eating and drinking things we do not want, and then abusing one another'. When in England Gordon was at his happiest engaging in philanthropic work among the poor. At Gravesend, in Kent, where he lived between 1865 and 1871, he devoted his spare time to ministering to the sick in the workhouse infirmary, and sharing his home with local street urchins, who were fed, clothed and educated by their benefactor. Several biographers have argued that there was a sexual motive for Gordon's attentiveness, but there is no evidence to support the feverish speculation. Like those two other heroes of Victorian imperialism, Kitchener and Cecil Rhodes, Gordon appears to have led an entirely celibate existence.

Between 1860 and 1865 Gordon served in China as commander of the British brigade of the Royal Engineers. In 1862 he was summoned to join the British, French, and imperial Chinese troops protecting the international settlement at Shanghai from the Taiping rebels. Here he took command of a volatile and ill-disciplined Chinese force of 4,000 mercenaries, raised by Shanghai's British and American merchants and optimistically Christened the 'Ever-Victorious Army'.

In the face of overwhelming odds, Gordon turned his men into a highly effective, rapid and flexible fighting force. He deployed the tactics of guerrilla warfare, even manoeuvring armed steamboats along the extensive medieval canal system in the Suchow (Suzhou) region. His unorthodox approach was vindicated, successfully defending Shanghai against the rebel forces, who vastly unnumbered his own, and finally crushing the rebel army at Changchow (Zhangzhou) in May 1864. This hitherto largely unknown soldier was instantly transformed into a national hero; the soubriquet ‘Chinese Gordon’ was attached to him for the remainder of his life.

In 1873, bored at home and by a series of uninspiring posts abroad, Gordon was relieved to be offered service under the khedive of Egypt as governor-general of the province of Equatoria, in the south of Egyptian-occupied Sudan. Self-abnegation (jarringly juxtaposed with a monstrous ego) had by now become a key component of Gordon’s psychological makeup and his sole demand on assuming the post was that his salary be reduced from £10,000 to £2,000. Reaching Khartoum in March 1874, Gordon's mission was to launch steamers flying the Egyptian flag upon the Great Lakes, and to suppress the flourishing Equatorian slave trade. At enormous physical cost, Gordon expended Herculean energy establishing a chain of stations stretching into northern Uganda and mapping the upper reaches of the ‘White Nile’ and lakes. As his British staff succumbed to disease, Gordon found himself combining the role governor with those of storekeeper, porter and carpenter. Nevertheless, his mission was judged a resounding success and by the end of 1876 he had suppressed slave trading in Equatoria.

The following year the khedive appointed Gordon governor-general of Sudan, including Equatoria. He now had sole responsibility for a violent and lawless territory exceeding a million square miles, in which slavery and deprivation were rife. He immediately instituted a series of extensive reforms aimed at eliminating the corruption that had become endemic in Sudanese society, but his central mission was to eradicate slavery. Much of his work was achieved through sheer force of personality. His hypnotic charisma coalesced with an otherworldliness that invited transcendental associations. A contemporary recalled that ‘His chastity which was absolutely incomprehensible to the Arab seemed to raise him to the position of a mystical and almost divine character’. In one characteristic escapade he marched with 300 men to Darfur province, where a large force of rebel slave traders had gathered. Gordon fearlessly rode into the rebel camp in full dress as governor-general accompanied only by an interpreter and small escort; the bewildered insurgents surrendered. Of such men legends are born. The slave traders’ rebellion was finally crushed in 1879; Gordon had expunged the cancer of slave hunts from a vast region stretching from Darfur to the Red Sea littoral. It was perhaps his single greatest achievement, although slave trading remained legal in Egypt.

He left Egyptian service at the end 1879, returning home restless, rudderless and contemptuous of British officialdom. In May 1880 he accepted the post of private secretary to the marquess of Ripon, who had just been appointed viceroy of India, but immediately resigned the post on reaching Bombay. He then returned to China, ignoring British officials who had instructed him not to go. Though he played a key role averting a full-scale rebellion against the central government, he was increasingly regarded as a dangerous and unstable destroyer. During a brief visit to Peking his irrational behaviour left mandarins and European diplomats equally perplexed. Sir Robert Hart, an old admirer in China, wrote, ‘Much as I like and respect him, I must say he is ‘not all there’. Whether it is religion, or vanity, or softening of the brain—I don’t know; but he seems to be alternately arrogant and slavish, vain and humble, in his senses and out of them’.

Nevertheless, a fresh opportunity came in 1881 when Gordon was offered command of the Royal Engineers in Mauritius. The post afforded him a good deal of leisure time which he devoted to a series of exhaustive investigations that led him to identify an island in the Seychelles as the site of the Garden of Eden. He was promoted major-general in March 1882, and proceeded to South Africa, where he spent most of the remainder of the year reorganising the troops in Cape Colony. The following year was spent in the Holy Land, where he studied antiquities and developed theories about the true sites of the crucifixion and burial of Christ which gained traction with British

and American scholars. In 1884 Gordon accepted an offer from the king of the Belgians to assume command of his Congo territory. He intended to resign his British army commission and leave for the Congo in February, but events, or, as Gordon would have had it, divine providence, intervened.

Egypt, which had become an unofficial British protectorate, by now faced a dangerous crisis in the Sudan. An obscure Egyptian government official and former slave trader called Mohammed Ahmed proclaimed himself the Mahdi, or 'Expected One', and raised a rebellion in the Sudanese province of Kordofan. He established himself in the province's capital, El Obeid, a city of 100,000 inhabitants. An Egyptian force of 10,000 men, commanded by General William Hicks was sent to crush the insurrection which the Mahdi, a not dissimilar character to Gordon, proclaimed a holy war. The Egyptian force was annihilated (there were just 300 survivors), with Hicks Pasha among the dead. The Mahdi now posed an existential threat to the Anglo-Egyptian garrison at Khartoum, a city with a large population of European traders and their families.

W. T. Stead, an eccentric and meddlesome but influential journalist, who met his end on the Titanic, whipped up a campaign in the pages of the *Pall Mall Gazette* for Gordon to be dispatched to the Sudan to save Khartoum. The clamour soon grew into a national frenzy; crowds shouting 'Gordon must go' became commonplace in city streets. Gladstone himself, aware of Gordon's reputation as an unpredictable and potentially unstable maverick, was reluctant to buckle to public pressure but ultimately acquiesced to lobbying from influential members of his cabinet. Gordon's hasty appointment pacified public opinion but ambiguity surrounded the precise remit of his mission. Most of the cabinet assumed he had been instructed to evacuate the Khartoum garrison and return to Egypt, but even this was not entirely clear. It was obvious to some from the outset that the mission was spectacularly ill-conceived. Lord Salisbury, on reading of Gordon's appointment, remarked, with a gesture of despair, that 'they must have gone quite mad', while Gladstone's perceptive secretary, E. W. Hamilton, confided in his diary that Gordon 'seems to be a half cracked fatalist; and what can one expect from such a man?'

On arrival in Cairo, Gordon was promptly re-appointed to his old post of governor-general of the Sudan. He made his way to Khartoum, reaching the city on 18th February when he declared, 'I come without soldiers, but with God on my side, to redress the evils of the Sudan'. Gordon now announced that he would not be evacuating Khartoum, and that his duty was to defend the city against the Mahdi. However, he did oversee the removal of about 2,500 women and children, together with the sick and wounded, to safety in Egypt before the Mahdi's forces completely encircled the city in March. Gordon thereafter resorted to writing emotive telegraphic messages and dispatches, despairing of Khartoum's plight.

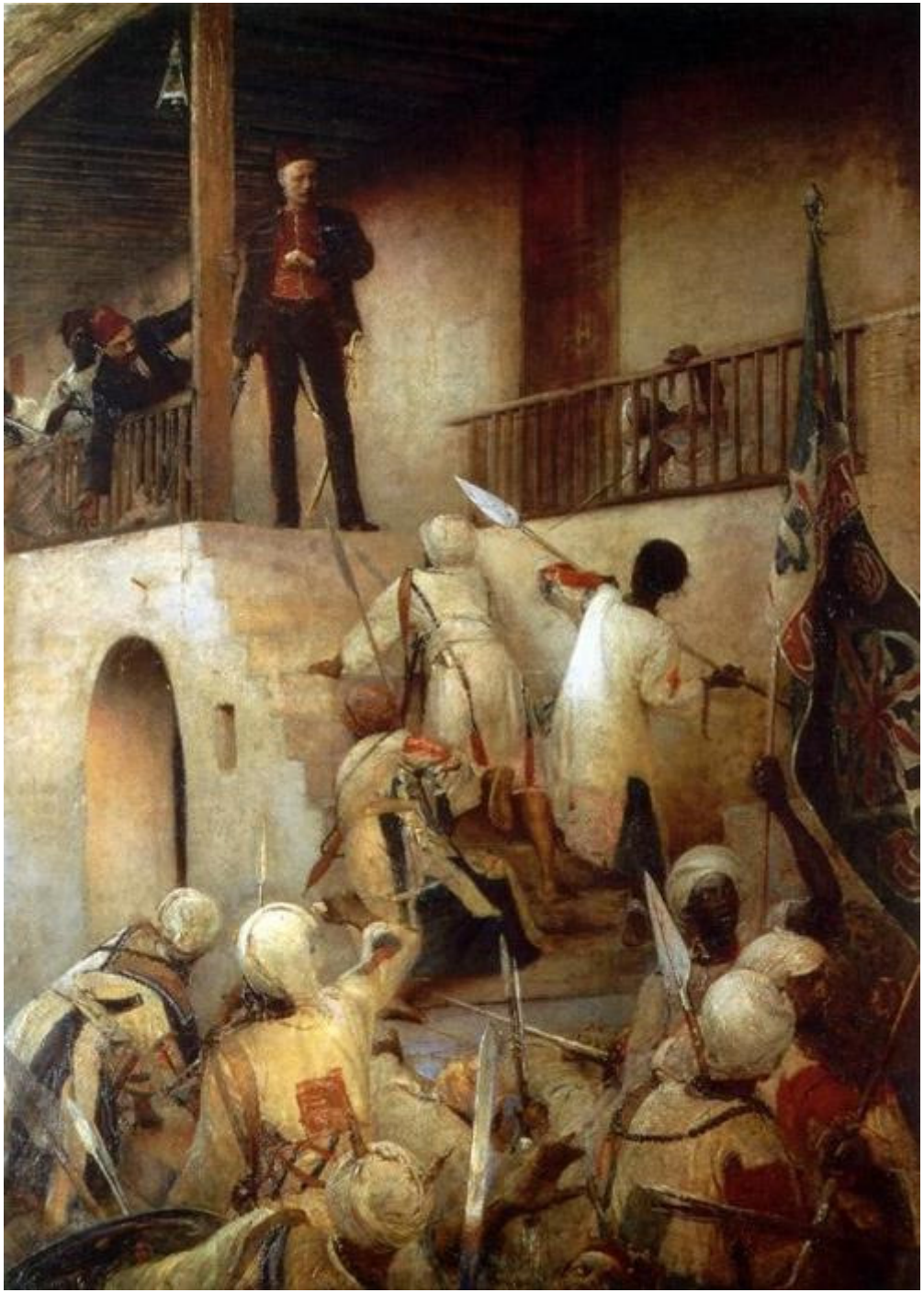
Public opinion at home was again roused. Gordon's foolhardy decision not to evacuate the garrison (some said it was little short of mutinous) was conveniently forgotten and a new narrative quickly gained widespread currency: Gordon had been callously abandoned by his country, left alone to heroically defend British honour. Public opinion capriciously shifted from a desire to see Khartoum successfully evacuated to belligerent demands for the re-conquest of the Sudan. In the face of what was little short of mass hysteria, augmented by pressure from members of his own cabinet and the queen, Gladstone again crumbled and in September 1884 an expedition under the command of Sir Garnet Wolseley was dispatched to relieve Khartoum. The diplomat Cecil Spring-Rice sardonically observed, 'It's funny that a man whom it took one journalist to send should take our only general, two thousand camels, a thousand boats, and ten thousand men to bring back', while Gordon's fellow soldier Redvers Buller scathingly remarked 'that man was not worth the camels'.

In Khartoum itself the man of the hour grew ever-more erratic. In his journal he vacillated between proclaiming that the hour had 'come to save our national honour' and dismissing the Sudan as 'a wretched country and not worth keeping' (after his death, the government ensured Gordon's volatile and resentful journal was published in full, in a futile effort to convince the public of his insanity; they badly miscalculated the popular appeal of doomed heroism).

By late January 1885 Wolseley's relief force was tantalisingly close to Khartoum, but on the 26th a fall in the level of the Nile enabled the Mahdi's men to cross into the city. The garrison fell and Gordon was killed. Of the surviving European civilians, most of the men were executed, while young women and girls were packed off to the harems of the Mahdi and his acolytes. Older women and babies were left to starve. It was an almost unimaginably horrific conclusion to a siege of 317 days.

Precisely how Gordon met his end has never been entirely clear. The most reliable testimony, which was accepted by Kitchener when he heard it in Khartoum in 1898, from one of Gordon's surviving bodyguards, was that Gordon had died trying to fight his way out of his palace. However, the imagination has never had much patience with facts, and by the time Kitchener learned the truth every British schoolboy already knew the *real* story of Gordon's apotheosis as Christian martyr. The legend, which seems to owe its origins to a surviving Khartoum notable who escaped from the Mahdist forces in 1887, has it that Gordon stood passively on the palace steps, putting up no resistance as the Mahdists advanced towards him with their spears. The image was immortalised by G. W. Joy in his 1893 painting *The Death of General Gordon, Khartoum, 26 January 1885*. Here Gordon, donned in full uniform and fez, stands defiantly and passively at the top of the palace steps, the revolver in his right hand unaimed and his sword still sheathed. He gazes down at his attackers with an awe-inspiring combination of courage and disdain.

News of Gordon's death triggered what was little short of a paroxysm of national revulsion. 'England stands before the world dripping with blood and daubed with dishonour', wrote Robert Louis Stevenson. Gladstone's affectionate nickname 'GOM' ('Grand Old Man') was inverted to 'MOG' ('Murderer of Gordon'). His beleaguered administration fell in June 1885. When Kitchener defeated the Mahdist forces at Omdurman in 1898 his battle cry was 'Remember Gordon'.



G. W. Joy's depiction of 'The Death of General Gordon, Khartoum, 26 January 1885'

Charles Gordon, a man whose feelings about his native land were at best ambivalent, had a posthumous existence as the premier icon of British imperialism. His image became ubiquitous; statues were erected in London, Chatham, and elsewhere in Britain, and later at Khartoum. Tennyson wrote an 'Epitaph' for the Gordon Boys' National Memorial Home near Woking, while Elgar contemplated commemorating him in a symphony. The anniversary of his death was marked annually in special sermons. In 1898, the bishop of Ripon, preaching in Sandringham parish church, invoked Gordon's name as 'a summons to all live more courageously towards ill, more unselfishly towards men, and more simply towards God'. Gordon seemed to impress almost everyone who never knew him, and hardly anyone who did. One acquaintance, who appears to have spoken for many, remembered him as 'a mystic who liked the sound of his own voice'.

In the twentieth century the values he embodied became increasingly alien. He was one of the targets of the barbed pen of the Bloomsbury aesthete Lytton Strachey in the iconoclastic and scurrilous *Eminent Victorians*. Nevertheless, Gordon continued to be the subject of hagiography in some quarters and his exploits were still recounted in some schools as late as the 1960s, when he was the subject of the spectacular but ultimately forgettable Hollywood biopic *Khartoum*, starring Charlton Heston. (The film is perhaps chiefly notable today for Laurence Olivier's bizarre performance as the Mahdi.) Growing ambivalence towards Britain's imperial past in recent decades has seen him and other totemic figures from this country's age of colonial expansion largely erased from the national memory (Kitchener is another obvious example). Hard to credit now that he was once one of the most famous men in the world.

Scott Pettitt

Royal Ordnance Factory, Puriton

In August 1939 a site at Puriton was chosen for the construction of a factory dedicated to the manufacture of a recently developed explosive, RDX (Research Department Explosive). The Huntspill River was dug to provide water, but the existing drove pattern was retained to aid camouflage. The site covered 700 acres (280 hectares) and was served by a railway spur with sidings to the west. Inside the factory materials were distributed by narrow gauge railway. The administration area was at the southern end of the complex, with the acids manufacturing and formaldehyde plant behind. In the northern area were two duplicate nitrating areas. They were duplicated as a protective measure.

The process of manufacturing RDX involved the production of hexamine from ammonia and formaldehyde which was then processed with nitric acid. Production started in August 1941 and over 20,000 tons was manufactured before 1945 by over 2,800 people employed at the site. People were employed in a wide range of jobs ranging from chemical scientists and technicians, office and administration roles, and security and canteen staff.

ROF Puriton *SWHT, Kenyon collection, A/DQN*

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. 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 and the factory closed in 2008. The site is now known as Gravity. Acquired by This Is Gravity Limited in 2017, part of the Salamanca group, their aim is to develop a smart campus focused on clean growth, and to provide a home to some of the world's most innovative companies.

Looking at photographs during one of the community heritage days

In 2019 the South West Heritage Trust was commissioned by Sedgemoor District Council to coordinate and deliver a community heritage project to look at the story of the Royal Ordnance Factory 37 and to gather memories, particularly of people who worked there. The project has been completed this year with the release of a short film featuring some of the employees of the factory. The film is hosted on the South West Heritage Trust YouTube channel. Go to https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4ym0JqQJW8 to watch this fascinating account of what it was like to work at the factory.

Two very successful Community Heritage Days were held in the 37 Club in November 2019, coordinated by the South West Heritage Trust, Sedgemoor District Council, Somerset Film, Gravity and the staff of the 37 Club. Over 20 people were interviewed by Somerset Film about their memories of the factory. People were actively encouraged to bring along memorabilia from their time at ROF for deposit or photographing to form a community archive. The lasting memory of the Community Heritage Days was the camaraderie displayed by the former staff from ROF37, many of whom had not seen each other for decades.

The collection of documents and objects is currently at the Somerset Heritage Centre awaiting final additions before sorting and listing. The objects will be held in the museum stores on site and will be linked on catalogues to the archive collection. The collection, when complete, will include original and copy photographs, engine plates, and personal apprenticeship and employment papers. In addition to the material collected at the Community Heritage Day events, the Trust was able to collect a vast quantity of plans of machinery and rooms from the site. Once these are in a stable condition they will be appraised and sorted to form part of the archive.

Esther Hoyle

Historic Images of Somerset

VE Thanksgiving Parade, 13 May 1945, including Home Guard *SWHT*

Taunton celebrated the end of war in Europe with celebrations, services and parades like this one up High Street to Vivary Park. Taunton was mercifully spared bombing although incendiaries and machine gunning from aircraft saw damage to buildings including the workhouse. Both Air Raid wardens and Home Guard were active in the town. Twenty communal air raid shelters were provided and Anderson shelters were supplied to people living near main roads. The 2nd Somerset (Taunton) Battalion of Home Guard included platoons from the gasworks and Van Heusen's shirt factory. By August 1941 there were 5,564 evacuees excluding unaccompanied children and a committee was set up to feed the population especially schoolchildren and evacuees.. There were emergency feeding stations at four schools and two British restaurants, one alone serving 560 meals a day. British military personnel were stationed around the town and Americans from 1942. While VE day was a great relief it took many years for life to return to normality as Taunton faced austerity and further rationing.

Summer meadow in Stoke St Mary 2020

Forthcoming Events

Unfortunately all our events so far this year have had to be cancelled due to Covid-19.

We are still considering whether it will be possible to hold our annual autumn lecture, which is scheduled to take place at the Museum of Somerset on 5 November at 7.00 pm. Professor Mark Stoyle is due to be speaking about the impact of the English Civil War on Somerset.

Subscribers to this newsletter will be notified if we are able to go ahead.

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