

VICTORIA
COUNTY
HISTORY



Somerset

Issue 23



Victoria County History of Somerset Newsletter

Summer 2024

Welcome to the twenty-third 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.

Please let us know if you change your email as we have been getting several undeliverable messages.

County Editor's Report

This has been a time of change for our VCH partnership as archaeologist Bob Croft takes over as chairman, although Tom Mayberry remains a member. Our secretary and administrator Janet Tall has stepped down as she has moved to work for Historic England but we have been fortunate to replace her with local studies librarian Kate Parr. Des Atkinson has just started on the history of West Monkton and later this year Tom Mayberry will take on Cheddon Fitzpaine.

It has been a busy spring for talks and events. We had our postponed VCH annual lecture by Carenza Lewis. Professor Lewis gave us a fascinating insight into the breadth of archaeological information that can be derived from test pitting, especially the expansion, shrinkage and re-location of settlement over the last two millennia and more. A far wider coverage of local archaeology is revealed by pits than would be gleaned from one conventional excavation. Also test pitting engages with residents and arouses widespread local interest in archaeology and history.



The next day we were taken to Hadsen to see *Villa Ventorum* and the museum on a very cold but interesting day! Photos by Bob Croft and Mary Siraut.



In April Taunton hosted the *Knife Angel*, the national monument against violence and aggression. It served as a powerful reminder of the violence under the surface of our communities that claims many lives, often of children.



Knife Angel on the Parade

Mary Siraut



Sheppards Barton, Frome

Mary Siraut

The county editor has given several talks including at Frome, Staplegrove, Taunton and on-line and contributed to another local history workshop in Gloucester enabling people to delve deeper into aspects of local history and explore original sources courtesy of the Gloucester Archives.



The mill house lay on the south-west bank of the river with the mill straddling the water on arches and presumably housing an undershot wheel. It survived until 1822 but had completely disappeared by 1842 except for the mill pond, which partly survives. It had a complex system for drawing water from the river and the island thus created was known as Gibraltar.

In the 1930s Longrun was considered as a possible site for Taunton airport but flooding made the scheme impractical. A plan to create an industrial estate on the land between the farm and Stepswater in 1961 was turned down by the borough council as the site was subject to flooding and the road was inadequate. Longrun farm was a dairy farm, making ice cream in the 1980s, before becoming a nursing home.

A group of newsletter readers and others explored East Reach, Taunton on 2 June. Time did not permit us to see everything so that is another walk to come next year! Sunday 2 June was also Taunton's vintage bus day, which saw the bus station re-open for one day only with crowds eager to board a historic fleet of buses.

Left The willow cathedral at Long Run

Right The New Octagon. East Reach

Below Vintage buses in Taunton



A walk along the river Tone to Long Run in early May marked the publication of *The Valley of the Tone* by the late David Rabson, reviewed in this newsletter. Fortunately the weather was kind but the ground was still very wet.

Long Run is a community-run asset west of Taunton town centre. Until the 1820s there were two homesteads in the area, Longrun Farm and a mill probably on the site of the medieval Whipples fulling mill.



Rescuing the Photographic Archive of Stanley Kenyon

In 2015, the South West Heritage Trust undertook to rescue the enormous collection of photographic negatives created by Stanley Kenyon during his career as a Somerset photographer. The negatives were suffering from vinegar syndrome and were slowly destroying themselves. The race against time to salvage the collection took 18 months and included professional digitisation, volunteer teams cleaning and cataloguing, and finally an exhibition of Kenyon's life and work at the Museum of Somerset. The project was a steep learning curve for those involved, and ultimately saved a priceless record of 20th century life in the county. Now, 9 years on, we look back at what was achieved and what was very nearly lost.

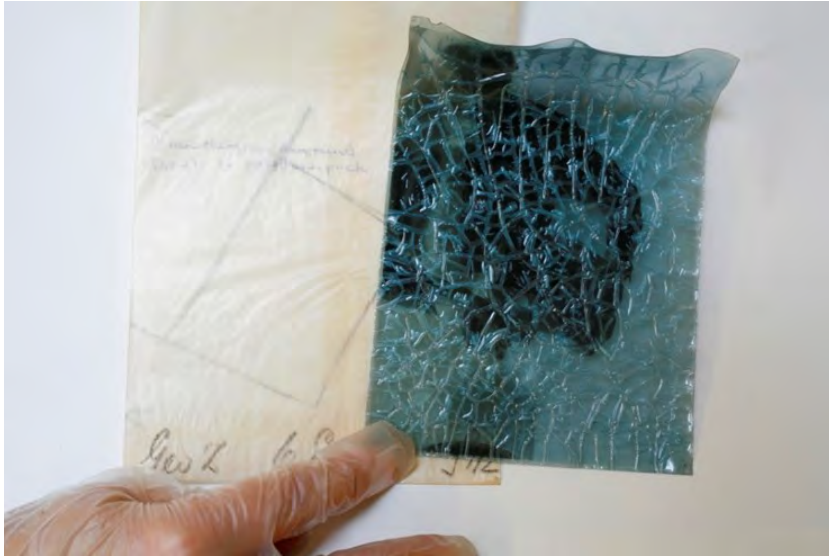


Stanley Kenyon at work in his studio



Stanley Walter Kenyon

Stanley Walter Kenyon spent most of his life and career in the Wellington area of Somerset. His early work focused on local people, schools and businesses. Later he became interested in industrial architecture, which led him to win contracts to photograph industrial sites throughout Britain. In 1944 he was awarded the Fellowship of the Institute of British Photographers and was made an Associate of the Royal Photographic Society. Kenyon was a photographer of excellent technical skills, and his images, mostly taken as large- and medium-format negatives are of correspondingly excellent quality.



One of the negatives suffering from vinegar syndrome



The poor condition of the negatives before digitisation

Kenyon won contracts with a wide range of industries and businesses throughout Britain and Ireland including dairies, millers, power stations, engineering works, collieries, iron works, waterworks, and factories making everything from biscuits and paper to sewing machines and cloth. He captured aspects of the reconstruction and industrial development following the Second World War, and photographed many working practices and industrial machines that no longer exist.

The collection comprised c. 60,000 negatives. Of these 50,000 acetate images were suffering from vinegar syndrome, causing emission of a noxious, acetic gas; the negatives become brittle; layers of the film begin to shrink and the acetate begins to bubble and pit. They couldn't be housed with other photographic archival material without risking cross-contamination, and working with the collection for any length of time would cause headaches and irritation to the eyes, nose and mouth. We were fortunate that Somerset Libraries were able to allow us to store them off-site at one of their branch libraries, and Local Studies Librarian Kate Parr would visit periodically to change the micro-chamber paper which was packed around the negatives to absorb the acetic gas.

After securing funding through generous grants from Somerset County Council, the Somerset Archaeological & Natural History Society (SANHS) and the Somerset Industrial Archaeology Society (SIAS), we could finally think about digitisation. The negatives had to be shipped to our contractors who would scan each image and re-name them according to what Kenyon had written on its envelope. Sadly the original negatives had to be carefully disposed of, as keeping them would have been impossible, both in terms of cost and health and safety.

Our crack team of volunteers worked on a variety of projects getting the collection into a fit state to be used. Using Kenyon's business registers they catalogued the entire collection, including details of the person who commissioned the work and the subject of the photograph. Members of SIAS also reviewed some of the entries to make them more accessible to users: for example, in his work with industrial firms, Kenyon might only have described his photograph as 'valve', so it would help to have a bit more information to go on! They cleaned and repackaged the nearly 11,000 glass plate negatives ready for them to be digitised in-house.

As we began to near the end of the practical part of the project, Kate and our volunteer team very gamely took part in a video recording, capturing both the story of the photographer and their personal reminiscences of working on the collection. The film was part of a 6-month long exhibition held in the Hammett Room at the Museum of Somerset, show-casing the best of the collection. We were able to draw on the different themes of his work over his astonishing career, highlighting both the local significance of his work, and the contrasting national and international breadth of his experience.

*1818.03 Sergeant Smith,
5th Division, US Army,
1944*



*20129 Van Heusen's machine room,
Watchet, 1956*





The exhibition The World Before Yesterday at the Museum of Somerset, 2018

Today, the Kenyon Collection is one, if not the, most heavily used photographic collections in the archive: it supports the research of our users; reminiscence therapy sessions with older residents of the county; learning packs for schools and colleges and fun ‘days gone by’ views for our outreach and social media channels. Our thanks for help in rescuing this remarkable collection go to our funders, our volunteers and to the family of Stanley Walter Kenyon for their interest and support for the project, without whom this priceless record of 20th century Somerset may have been lost for ever.

You can view the images of the Kenyon Collection at the Somerset Heritage Centre by searching the Archive Catalogue for A/DQN, and you can view the exhibition film documenting the project on the South West Heritage Trust’s YouTube channel.

Kate Parr

Castle Bow, Taunton: Two Rediscovered Images

The east gate of Taunton Castle, known today as Castle Bow and in the 1790s as the Porter's Lodge, has long been a prominent feature in the landscape of the town. Extending for about 50 feet from east to west, the gateway linked the castle precinct to the busy life of Taunton itself, and particularly to the town's marketplace.

Castle Bow was built, or rebuilt, from the 13th century onwards, and its impressive double-chamfered arches, together with grooves for a vanished portcullis, have survived to the present day. Historically the first floor was probably used as a chapel, a role suggested by possible evidence of a piscina and an aumbry.

From at least the middle of the 18th century large parts of the structure were falling into ruin, and only in the early decades of the 19th century was that process reversed. Construction of adjoining buildings in about 1815 evidently included rebuilding of the gatehouse superstructure, and by 1822 Castle Bow could be described as 'lately converted into a dwelling-house'.

Further work followed in 1833. Mary Sweet, then tenant of the Castle Hotel – which faced North Street – decided to replace some houses on Castle Green with a new hotel, backing on to the old one. By the end of the year the ambitious building was complete and was flanked on the south by Castle Bow, now a full three stories high. Much later, in the 1960s, Castle Bow would reach its final modern form when it acquired yet another storey.

Castle Bow today

Mary Siraut





Castle Green and Clarke's Family Hotel, c. 1910. This is the hotel as built for Mary Sweet in 1833. The arms of Bishop Thomas Langton, recorded in the drawing of 1752, were preserved and are visible on the rebuilt west face of Castle Bow. A bishop's mitre, also from the earlier building, was reset on the east face.

SWHT

Chris Webster's *Taunton Castle* (2016) gathers key evidence for the history of Castle Bow, as well as images from 1773 onwards. Now two further images, which have recently come to light, add a little to what we know. The first is a watercolour by the artist John Inigo Richards (1731–1810), who also painted pictures of Halswell Park in 1764 and of the cascade at Hestercombe six years later. His depiction of Castle Bow dates from 1752 and shows a structure which at that date still preserved much of the west wall at first floor level together with a large four-light window. Both would be destroyed by the end of the century.

More striking is the building that Richards depicts north of Castle Bow, on the site later occupied by Mary Sweet's hotel. This is clearly the dwelling referred to by Joshua Toulmin in 1791, which, he tells us, bore the date 1498 and arms which were those of Thomas Langton, Bishop of Winchester. The original purpose of the building is not certain, but it occupied an area which in the medieval period variously contained the constable's hall, houses for a janitor and a watchman, and a clerk's chamber.



*Castle Bow, Taunton,
by John Inigo Richards,
1752. Watercolour.*

©Yale Centre for British Art.



The second newly-discovered image is an ink and wash drawing, evidently of 1796, by the topographical and portrait artist Henry Edridge (1768-1821). From a vantage point under Castle Bow itself, he looks eastwards towards an animated street scene. As was typical of topographical artists in that period, Edridge manipulates scale to make the view more monumental. He also ensures that the tower of St Mary's Church presides impressively in the distance. Buildings in the left foreground largely survived until the early 20th century and included a dovecote seen high up on the side wall midway down the street.

Edridge's drawing is a rare early depiction of Taunton as a bustling place of trade and frames the scene appropriately in the gateway of the ancient castle which had shaped so much of the town's history.

Tom Mayberry

*Taunton seen from Castle Bow, by Henry Edridge,
c. 1796.*

Ink and wash drawing.

Private collection.

Unwillingly to School?

Problems of school attendance

While many 19th-century parents longed to get an education for their children, seeing it as a way out of poverty, their children did not always appreciate the opportunity!

For many poor people the only education available was at Sunday school, free and open to adults as well as children. Before education was compulsory parents might take advantage of charity schools for clothing and other benefits but the children would not always attend school. At Timberscombe of the 66 children enrolled at the charity school in 1842—3 only five boys had maximum attendances and four girls and two boys had not completed a single week of schooling. Sunday school attendance was much better, six managed maximum attendance but three had attended fewer than seven sessions.

Truancy was a huge problem for schools. Some children were taken away by their parents to work in the factory or the field, help at home or for some local fete or other event. Children were expected to have learnt to read by the time they moved up from the infant class and education after about the age of ten was often considered a waste of time by both parents and children. Average attendance in some schools was very poor. Boys played truant most often although girls were more often absent, but usually because they were sent to work or kept at home to help out.

In rural parishes bad weather made it difficult for children who often lived some distance away to get to school but the main problem was the seasonal work required of children.

At Withycombe in the 1870s the children were described as disorderly and backward, and they were frequently absent for haymaking in June and whortleberry picking in July followed by a six week harvest holiday. Even after the school re-opened children would go gleaning instead and if the harvest was late they would take more time off. In the autumn the potato harvest meant more absence. The Christmas season brought its own problems and the school had to give a half day holiday on 21 December for 'St Thomas and custom of begging'. In April the planting season resulted in poor attendance and with haymaking the circle of absence continued. However, by 1885 names were sent to police for bad attendance and parents were notified although one girl was sent home for reading and destroying the teacher's letter to her parents. Attendance had improved by the 1890s and the attendance officer visited the school regularly.



Former Bishops Hull Sunday school

Mary Siraut

Town children tended to play truant for military parades, fairs and circuses, events which were extraordinarily frequent. Often schools were forced to give a holiday because too few children came to make it worth opening. The South Street British boys school struggled to get the boys into school in 1863. They were given a holiday for the marriage of the Prince of Wales in March although the school hosted coffee and cake after the Sunday school procession. The same month there were absences for Wombwell's wild animal show and in May a circus, the Female Blondin [Selina Young] and the Grand Field day of the 1st Somerset Militia reduced attendance at school. For the Grand Foresters fete at the end of May the school was forced to give an afternoon holiday as only eight boys turned up. The factories had a three-day Whitsun holiday so the factory children refused to come to school. That was followed by the town fair on the 17 June resulting in 'small attendance'. In November the boys were given a half holiday for the return of Captain Speke, discoverer of the source of the Nile. Silk throwster Mr Rawlinson sent about 30 boys who worked in his factory to the school. By 1864 although Mr Rawlinson paid the school pence the boys came for up to six weeks then left.

At St Andrew's in the 1870s children played truant to see the yeomanry and a pupil teacher later found absent from lessons was expelled. The following year after absenteeism when the circus was in town the school bowed to the inevitable when the yeomanry were in town and granted a half day's holiday. Similarly at the Central St Mary's boys school attendance was poor during North Town Fair, flower show week, circuses and yeomanry parades although for the grand field day in 1877 a holiday was given.

The summer was also interrupted by legitimate absences such as Sunday school treats. Sometimes parents kept their children away as at St Andrew's in 1877 when two children were withdrawn as their mother wanted them to sit alone and keep their clothes separate from other children, which the school could not agree to although many children were sent home for being dirty.



Late for school?

St Mary's Central Schools 1860s

SWHT

Regular day and half-day holidays were given for national events and celebrations. Children were often required to attend local events especially processions. In July 1880 up to 3,000 school children perambulated the town, attended church and took tea for the Sunday school centenary. On 4 November 1884 children from every school in the town accompanied the body of the Revd F. Jeremiah Smith, founder and benefactor of several schools, to the cemetery. Schools also had to give children a holiday for religious events like confirmation or when the building was required as a polling station.

Less pleasant reasons might require children to be absent. Schools were often closed for long periods before the 1920s to control outbreaks of measles, diphtheria, whooping cough and other disease which often proved fatal to the infant classes, although at Minehead in 1903 it was said children used scarlet fever as an excuse to play truant. In 1904 Minehead children were afraid to come to school in May when the hobby horse was about. More unusual was the closure of Bishops Hull school in September 1940 for an unexploded bomb.

There might be reasons for individual children to be absent especially a death in the family, a funeral or less commonly a murderer facing execution as in the case of the young relatives of Fred Ripley in 1863. Ripley cut the throat of his former girlfriend Anne Rowsell on 26 December 1862 outside the Crown and Tower beerhouse. He was to have been hanged on 26th February but his sentence was commuted to penal servitude at Parkhurst prison.

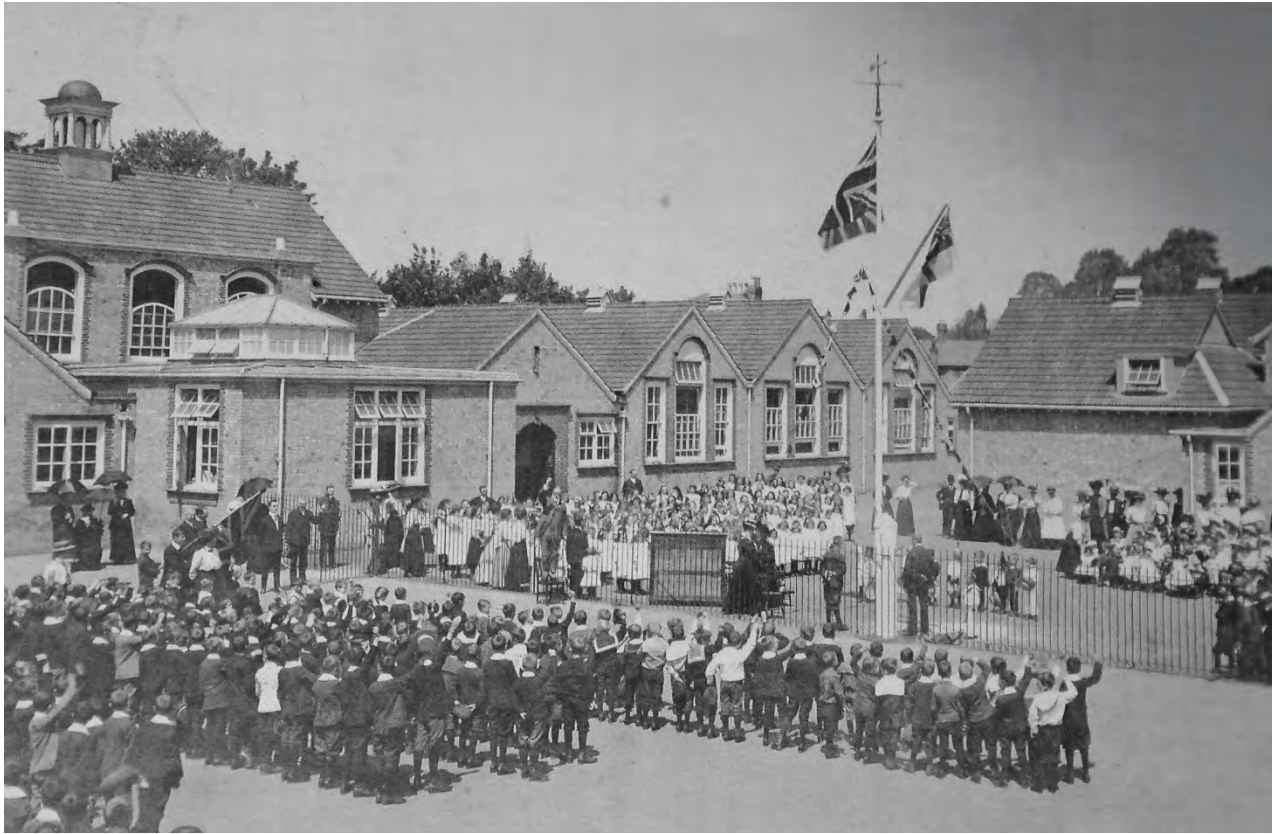


Girls at The British School celebrate Empire Day 1906

SWHT

In Bishops Hull up to 34 children in 1891 habitually took a half day a week off and two girls and a boy were usually absent three days a week. In May 1892 the circus was in town and many children played truant. At the Sunday school regular attendance was rewarded with gifts of umbrellas by the vicar in 1893 but among day pupils attendance was poor, one girl aged 10 only attended for 13 days a year and three Galmington boys were regular truants.

At St John's Tangier in 1895 one girl had a certificate for four years' perfect attendance but another girl attended only 51 out of 299 schooldays. There were still rural pursuits to keep Bishops Hull children away. In 1913 children were kept off school picking flowers and selling from door to door and in September picking blackberries or kept home to run errands. In 1927 over 100 children, said to be from the council houses, were absent for Taunton Charter day celebrations.



North Town schools celebrate Empire Day in 1909

SWHT

Several schools attempted to improve attendance. Some like St Mary's Central school used the carrot and stick approach. In 1888 children who attended school punctually got a halfpenny refund on their school pence at the end of the week but lists of absentees were sent regularly to the school attendance officer. However, in 1895 when attendance was only 98 out of 153 children on the register the school complained that the attendance committee did nothing to help. In 1894 good attenders at Holy Trinity, mainly girls, received 2s each to add to their savings accounts. In 1914 Original Infants school tried to improve attendance and punctuality by offering an afternoon walk in Vivary park for children who came punctually.

Circuses were still causing children to play truant as late as 1919 but children were also taken on outings especially in the summer months. In 1932 the Memorial schools organised a school trip to Cleeve Abbey. Gradually attendances improved through the 20th century but truancy remains a problem especially in those areas where children are still unwilling to go to school.

Mary Siraut

Snippets from VCH research: Alexandra College and the development of Wilton Grove

Wilton Lodge was the home of retired silk manufacturer Samuel Norman (d. 1845). It then had four reception rooms, seven best bedrooms, two staircases and a coachhouse. It was sold in 1872 to Eliza Griffith, daughter of an Independent minister whose family had occupied it.

In c.1864 assisted by her sisters she opened a senior girls' school in the house, later known as Alexandra College or Taunton County School for Girls providing a modern high school education.

She altered and greatly enlarged the building along Wilton Grove, adding a schoolroom in 1869, a gymnasium and additional schoolroom in 1878 and a large block, presumably for boarders of whom 23 were resident in 1881. By the 1880s the school had an infirmary and girls were taken from kindergarten to student governesses.

In 1874 Eliza married French teacher Victor Meynier and by 1881 she employed five resident teachers and three pupil teachers. Only senior girls were boarding in 1891 and sadly after Eliza died in 1893 aged 50 the school closed and Victor returned to London.

The school was divided and Wilton Lodge became the home of Taunton china and glass dealer John Giles Vile and The Lodge, later Grove Lodge and now 12 Wilton Grove, was taken by Joshua Lambert, former master at Taunton School, and his wife as a boys' school. The south-east block was divided before 1897 into three houses each of two storeys with attic dormers and new openings with brick pillars made in the old boundary wall. They were numbered 1—3 Wilton Grove, now 6, 8, 10. Among the early occupants were implement dealer Thomas Hawkes and stationer Edward Goodman.



Wilton Lodge. Trull Road

Mary Siraut



Wilton Lodge was divided in two in the later 20th century and the larger southern half has been successively valuation and women's institute offices. The circular carriage sweep survives, It is possible that features from Wilton Lodge were re-used in the section now called Grove Lodge including the Georgian doorcase and elaborate 18th-century gates, although they may not be local. The single-storey schoolroom survived plans for a new house and was partly converted for garaging.



Gates of 12 Wilton Grove

Mary Siraut

Historic Images of Somerset

Taunton's GPO



Former General Post Office, North Street, Taunton in the 1950s when it was a vital part of everyday life

SWHT

Recent post office scandals remind us that the post is still important even if it has declined since the 19th and 20th centuries. Letters have always been a major part of the lives of those fortunate enough to be literate and able to pay postage. By the late 17th-century there was a frequent and reliable service for letters from London and intermediate towns. Post for rural areas was reputedly left at a public house in Silver Street. The coming of the railway speeded up transmission and the Taunton postmistress established a night mail service to London. After occupying several buildings the post office settled in 9 Hammet Street with a large extension along Church Square providing savings bank and telegraph services. Wall pillar boxes were installed in the 1870s and by 1895 post was collected from offices and most boxes seven times a day and once on Sundays.

After over 60 years the Church Square post office was inadequate and John Rutherford designed a large new general post office in North Street, which involved the destruction of many historic buildings including the Spread Eagle inn. The new building opened in 1911. Letters were dispatched 14 times on weekdays and even twice on Christmas Day and parcels 11 times a day. There were five town deliveries daily and one on Sundays. In 1935 a large telephone exchange, now flats, was built behind the post office on the old Half Moon yard. In the late 1940s 24,000 letters a day were posted in Taunton. In 2007 only a few years short of its centenary the head post office closed. The large stone and brick three-storey building with its prominent clock was converted into a shop and later a restaurant but the façade remains unchanged. I am not sure what happened to the picture, I expect some of you remember it too!

D. Rabson, *The Valley of the Tone: exploring a Somerset river*

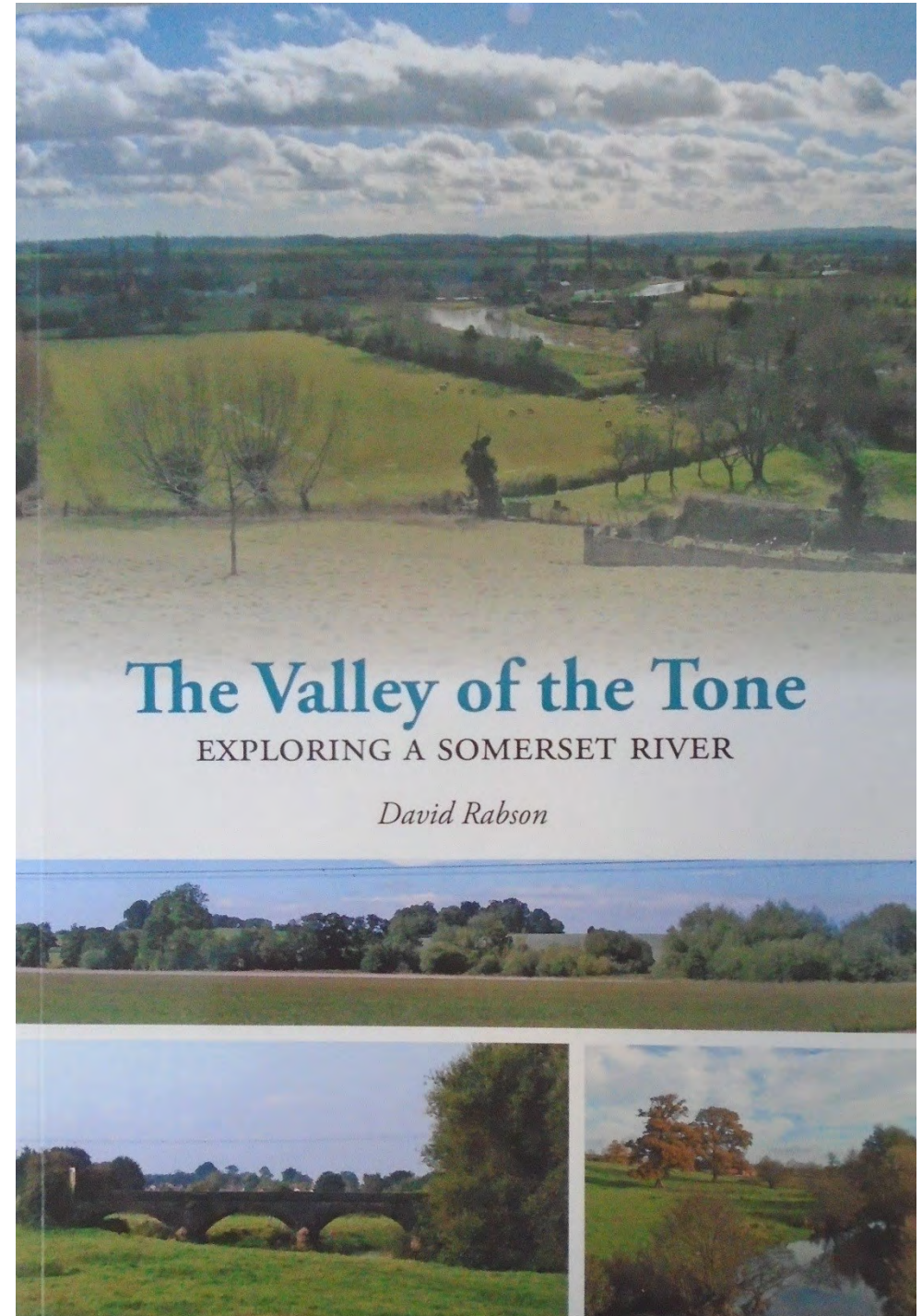
(Taunton, 2023) ISBN 078 0 902152 32 8 pb 144 pp. illus. £18.95

This book, virtually completed by David Rabson before his death in 2021, has been published by the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society. The book opens with a poem on the river by Lorna Grinter and a forward by Tom Mayberry. Most of the volume takes us on a journey from the source of the Tone until it merges with the Parrett. David was a primarily a geographer although he also became a historian and his work is generously illustrated with maps as well as many photographs old and new and documentary sources.

The early chapters set the scene including information on the river, its geology and wildlife, farming and living in the valley, from prehistory to the present. There is information on flooding, bridges and water management. We are then taken on a journey from the source through Clatworthy reservoir, Wellington, Nynhead Park and Taunton out onto and across the levels. The area's history has been thoroughly researched and there is not a stretch of the river that could be described as uneventful. Agriculture, industry and leisure uses of the river are explored in detail, concluding with a look into the future and the need to care for one of Somerset's most important rivers. At the end of the book eight river walks are temptingly presented with pictures and maps although be warned the maps are historic ones!

In this book David has left us a legacy that we can all enjoy and should encourage us to get out and explore our often underappreciated river.

Mary Siraut



Forthcoming Events

We are planning more events for 2024-2025 and will let our newsletter readers know as soon as details are available.

We hope to have our usual VCH fundraising lecture this November but have yet to confirm the speaker.

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

There will be an afternoon walk exploring Minehead's historic Higher Town on Sunday 29 September and a ramble around Taunton's Trinity area probably on Sunday afternoon 13 April 2025.

We are also planning an archaeology walk in 2025.

Historic Somerset farm machinery from the age of steam

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:

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Cheap Street, Frome

Mary Siraut