

Victoria County History of Somerset Newsletter

Issue 18

Winter 2021-22

Welcome to the eighteenth 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

There is now a VCH section on the South West Heritage Trust website where we can publicise the work of the Somerset VCH, and put up rough drafts as well as more finished texts. Do have a look at <https://swheritage.org.uk/somerset-victoria-county-history/>

Our first Taunton sections have been uploaded and more will soon follow. They are not complete and will be replaced as work progresses, but hopefully you will find them interesting. We have contracted work on the archaeological and architectural sections and are hoping to employ someone to write the history of Staplegrave next year, funds permitting.

You will also find news of events and all our past newsletters on the webpages so if you are new to the mailing list you can browse our lovely early issues.



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VCH News and Events

Newsletters

We produce two newsletters each year which are full of articles and information about Somerset history and the work of the Somerset VCH.

Email us at vch@swheritage.org.uk if you would like to join our mailing list.

Previous editions:

One of the new website pages

I have recently seen that Taunton's cormorants have once again established themselves on the riverbank in their favourite trees, keeping an eye on the castle. Do they know something we do not? Taunton on Sea 2050 perhaps?

Sometimes the Covid pandemic and climate change threaten to overwhelm us and we need to look back to former times when there were also difficulties to reassure ourselves that we can come through.



Knowle Hall, Bawdrip c. 1910

On a lighter note, following up a Taunton carpenter who migrated to America has uncovered an extraordinary set of family names. He had a sister named Seline Cleopentrica and although his first child was Alfred the others included Alice Desideratum, Dorothea Decreta alias Deogratia, Amy Hutille Delsi and Eutyclus Ezra alias Ashera Ptolomy! The family settled in Nebraska.

In this issue we look at a hard winter in Somerset before the First World War as well as wassail in Somerset, early 19th-century childcare and current educational work at the Somerset Rural Life Museum. We also take a look at some records of early motoring.

Wassail in Somerset

The 17 January has a special place in the Somerset calendar, being the date of 'Old Twelfth Night'. Coming eleven days after the traditional twelfth night it dates from the changing of the calendar in 1752, with eleven days being omitted in October that year when Britain moved from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar.

Wassailing apple trees developed as an extension of Twelfth Night celebrations, often taking place on 17 January, as people insisted on keeping the later date for this custom. The word wassail originally comes from 'waes hael', or 'health be to you' in Anglo Saxon, and the custom developed as a way of encouraging healthy crops for the coming year. The ceremonies take place in an orchard where people will gather around an old tree. They vary to some extent in different places but most include some form of sharing of the wassailing cup, which is often filled with warmed cider. A piece of toast soaked in cider may be placed in the branches of the tree that is being wassailed, to encourage the good spirits. A wassailing song is sung, and a shotgun may be fired through the branches of the tree to ward off the evil spirits. In some places cider is poured at the base of the tree, or the lower branches are dipped into a pail of cider.

There are several references to Somerset wassails in the pages of the VCH. In the south-east of the county the parish of Yarlington had a wassail song, possibly dating from the 17th century, and Yarlington Mill is a variety of cider apple raised by the miller in the late 19th century.



Cider apple orchard in Somerset

Janet Tall

In Bicknoller wassailing on Old Twelfth Night continued until at least 1870. Dunster's wassail is thought to have begun in the late nineteenth century by the chemist Samuel Ell and continued until the 1930s. At nearby Minehead one was held in the 1900s. 'The Black (or 'girt') Dog of Langport' occurs in a wassail first printed in 1895 and was recorded in a variant version by Cecil Sharp in 1909.



Wassail at Carhampton later 20th century

SWHT

One of the best-known wassails is that at Carhampton, which is said to date from the 1920s. By later in the 20th century it was being organised by the landlords of the Butchers Arms in the village. There were fears that the 1974 wassail would be the last when the orchard at the centre of the village was threatened with development. However, the wassail was revived, although by 1981 only two original trees remained. The orchard has since been replanted as a community orchard.

The development of community orchards has been one way in which wassail has gained a new lease of life in the 21st century. The traditional custom now takes place in several locations across the county, including at the Somerset Rural Life Museum in Glastonbury on 15 January 2022.

Janet Tall

Child care in Taunton in the 1820s and 1830s

The single mother or widow with young children needs to work to support them but struggles to afford childcare, which sometimes costs more than she earns. Sounds familiar? Many poor women in the early 19th century found themselves unable to work or to send their daughters to school or work because of the need to look after infants. Some could turn to their own mothers or to neighbours but for many the solution was help from the parish in the form of poor relief.

Those who provided child care also often claimed relief and so we learn that child care cost *1s 6d* to *3s 6d* a week, the higher charges being more common although some married women earned as little as *2s 6d* silk weaving and few more than *5s* and they had rent and food to find. An abandoned wife earned *4s* a week and paid *9d* for lodging and *1s 6d* for looking after one of her two children, for whom her husband had paid only *2s 6d* a month. Dinah Kirk a silk winder earned *5s* at Mr Norman's mill but spent *3s* on care for her daughter and was allowed *1s 6d* by the parish. Maria Lane, a silk weaver, earned *6s* a week but paid *3s 3d* for care of her infant son and also was awarded *1s 6d* relief. The child's father was in Australia. Other women, from silk weavers to labourers, had young children by different fathers who had absconded. A former prisoner who had got a place in service in Bath had left her two children in the care of two women in East Reach. A Taunton servant earned £10 10s a year, out of which she paid *2s* a week for her child's keep, half her wages. Married women with husbands experienced similar problems. Another servant had only £9 9s a year in wages and an infant daughter to provide care for as her husband had been transported. Mary Garland of Shuttern a silk weaver was struggling to get help with a sick child, as her husband William had also been transported.

For women unable or unwilling to turn to the parish and with no-one to care for the children another solution was to take or send the children to work. This was a common solution afforded by the silk mills, regarded as a safe environment for children. They were clean and warm, silk cannot be thrown properly if it is cold and most mills were centrally heated, and with powered machinery only limited to certain floors. Very young children

were employed in keeping the rooms clean and tidy and fetching and carrying. As they got older they could wind silk on the quills for the shuttles and assist the weavers, often their own mothers. Silk weaving was mainly done by married women and it was poorly paid. However, women sometimes had the option of renting a loom and working at home. Some had to share a loom with sisters or mothers reducing the amount produced but allowing shared child care. If a loom stood in rented accommodation the charge was about *1s.* a week for the space. The skilled and better paid work was throwing, usually done by young unmarried women. A mill owner noted that they brought meat to cook in the mill kitchen for the midday meal but the married women went home for kettle broth, hot water on vegetable peelings, scraps, rinds and dry crusts, or brought treacle sandwiches.



1820s housing in King Street, Taunton

SWHT

In the 1820s some mill owners advertised to parishes that they were ready to employ young pauper children. Parishes expected parents to put their children to work. Between the ages of 9 and 14 children usually earned 1s to 1s 6d a week, but a few girls earned more. However, in the late 1820s Mary Jarvis aged 7 earned just 9d a week at Heudebourck's silk factory where her older siblings earned up to 2s 9d and her mother 3s. Parents and older children appear to have negotiated pay on an individual basis with girls earning between 8d and 2s 6d a week for working the same hours as the adults except that they rarely worked overtime. For comparison general labourers in the town earned 9s to 10s a week.

In 1833 half the female employees in John Jones's mill were aged between 8 and 15, but he took some younger children for nothing to keep them out of mischief while their parents worked. John Heudebourck employed mostly girls over 9 but had a few younger ones whose parents could not afford to send them to school or have them kept at home. They worked up to 13 hours a day in summer with breakfast, dinner and tea breaks totalling two hours. Two boys were found to have worked from 5am to 11pm but it was not stated if that was the wish of their parents. William Charles Cox employed 20 children aged 8 to 14 making bobbin net for a maximum of 13 hours as their parents needed their wages and would otherwise have to pay someone to look after them. He thought it would be bad for business and the children if they were limited to 10 hours work a day. Another bobbin net manufacturer, William Rawlinson, agreed because if a young child left work so must the parent. However, he also claimed to rarely employ a child under 9 years of age.

One mother sent her young son to work, probably at a hotel, where he earned nothing but was fed for doing casual jobs. Other children similarly worked for no wages but were at least fed and were off the street while their parents worked. Some women solved the problem by employing their young children to work with them, like a roper with 4 young sons, or the several women who kept small schools and could keep their children by them while they taught. Other women took on small shops where they could look after the children between infrequent customers like the widow Warren who had five children

aged between 3 to 10 and paid 8s rent for her shop, but earned little. A woman in North Town who was left with five young children rented cows. Clearly many mothers were enterprising and did their best to provide for their children while earning.

Inevitably the care of infants often fell on the shoulders of young girls who had to leave school in order to take care of small siblings. Many were also employed as daily or resident child nurses by working families, who earned enough to pay their meagre wages but could not afford to keep a regular nursemaid.

Mary Siraut

East side of Paradise Square 1830s. Originally the square was closed off on the south by another terrace of houses called Foundry Row.
SWHT



Bringing Somerset Rural Heritage to life for school groups

The Somerset Rural Life Museum is an excellent place for a school visit. The Museum is unique in that it is located on the site of the former Abbey Farm. Through carefully planned workshops and self-guided tours with optional trail sheets, school groups can explore rural life from the 1800s onwards and discover more about the county's heritage including its landscapes, food and farming, working life and rural crafts and traditions. The South West Heritage Trust Learning Team are committed to making each school visit memorable and bringing classroom learning to life through onsite experiences pupils will never forget.

Through engaging immersive workshops pupils explore food production, farming, and life in rural Somerset in the past and its relevance to our lives today. These take place within our dedicated learning space as well as within the galleries.

There are many ways a visit to the Somerset Rural Life Museum can support teaching and help pupils develop their skills and confidence. A visit for a workshop combined with exploring the galleries deepens understanding of the past. Pupils engage with primary sources. During workshops pupils participate in engaging activities enabling them to make connections between rural life in the past and modern day life, be surprised and have fun. Through our workshop offer we invite pupils to step into the shoes of people living in rural Somerset in the past.

The museum collections are used to explore cross curricular subjects, and the Learning Team provides a range of resources to support teachers in preparing for a visit and embedding the learning back in school after a visit. Schools can also use a visit to the Somerset Rural Life Museum to broaden pupils understanding of the arts and achieve Arts Award Discover, a nationally recognised qualification.



Discovering in the farmyard gallery

SWHT



Drawing in the courtyard

SWHT

The Victorian range cooker forms a focal point in the Farmhouse Kitchen. On school workshop days during term time, smoke can often be seen rising from the kitchen chimney as pupils discover the delights of drop scones freshly baked during the Victorian House and Home workshop. There is also the opportunity to handle household artefacts from the period comparing them with modern day equivalents as well as learning traditional skills such rag rugging.

Somerset loves to celebrate. Through exploring the Celebrating Gallery pupils discover all about the Friendly Society feast days, the harvest home and Wassail and take part in a carousel of activities designed to deepen their understanding of the uniqueness of Somerset celebratory customs. An excellent opportunity for teachers to use a museum visit to support local study curriculum work.

As well as being a busy working farm, Abbey Farm was also a family home. During the Second World War evacuees resided there with the farm owners, the Mapstones, and archive documents show that neighbours would join the Mapstones to use the cellar as an air raid shelter. Participating in our Evacuee Experience workshop, pupils take part in a range of activities covering topics such as rationing, dig for victory and experience an air raid, sheltering in the farmhouse cellar. What better location could there be for pupils to engage in an evacuee experience for a day to enhance their classroom learning?



Rag rugging

Peter Hall



Baking in the farmhouse kitchen

Peter Hall

The Abbey Barn, completed in the 1340s to store produce from the Glastonbury Abbey estates, plays a central role in the Fun on the Farm workshop. Jobs carried out during the farming year are explained through an interactive talk. There is plenty of opportunity to handle artefacts and discover how they were used alongside learning about food production in times past. Engaging in flailing wheat straw inside the Abbey Barn and grinding the grain to produce flour provides pupils with experiences to enhance their learning.

A re-created First World War allotment and potting shed opened to mark the First World War Centenary is located out in the museum orchard. Along with the rich wealth of archive material accompanying it, this area of the museum provides excellent hands on opportunities for pupils to discover more about life on the Home Front in the Echoes of War workshop and the ways in which local Somerset school children supported the war effort.

The Learning Programme on offer at the Somerset Rural Life Museum provides teachers with an excellent range of immersive workshops and gallery exploration to support students with a varied and broad curriculum that prepares them for the world.

Sandy Thomas

The hard winter of 1909 - 1910

While we are so concerned about the effects of climate change on our world and especially on Somerset, much of which is low-lying, it is interesting to note some of the weather events of the past. Bitter winters have frequently been experienced and before the First World War there was a particularly cold and snowy winter in 1909 – 1910. Familiar scenes were transformed under a blanket of white.

Thornfalcon Cottage and a little-used A358, December 1909



North Curry, December 1909

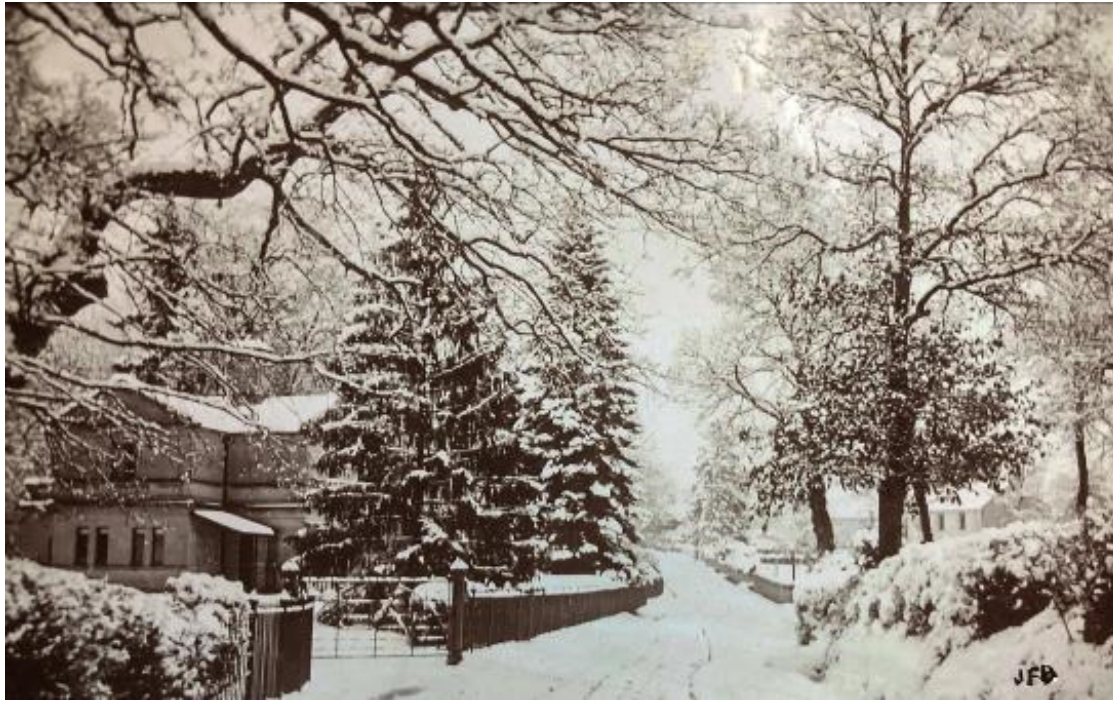
Heavy snow in the Blackdowns area in May 1909 might have been a sign of things to come. It began snowing in Somerset in November, not only on the hills, which were under deep snow by Christmas, but even on the coast. The council at Weston super Mare had to clear roads in the town. By December much of Somerset was under snow.

Increased deaths from heart failure were attributed to the bitter cold and many people in Yorkshire and Wales died of exposure in the snow. The snowfall in November over the west of England was described as the heaviest ever recorded so early in the winter. Funerals were disrupted by heavy snow in South Somerset and heavy snow and strong drifting on Exmoor disrupted hunting, especially in December and February.

February saw very heavy snowfall and bitter cold throughout Britain, in Scotland it was the heaviest snow for 25 years. Rivers were frozen, which had not been iced over since the 1850s. There were blizzards and record hard frosts. East Somerset suffered disruptive snowfalls in early February 1910. There were warnings not to let hens eat snow and to shelter young horses. In an era of increasing technology the vulnerability of power lines, telephone wires and tram services was all too evident.



Skating on the lake at Orchardleigh, c. 1910



Hatch Park lodge, Hatch Beauchamp c. 1910



Miss Winter's cottage at Selworthy, c. 1910

It was not all doom and gloom, however, as people enjoyed a spot of skating on frozen lakes and ponds. Many photographers were out and about making the most of the opportunity for attractive images especially in the countryside where much snow was still pristine on trees, hedges and thatched roofs.

Black and white photography provided people with dramatic illustrations of the beauty of snow as well as its destructiveness. Perhaps best enjoyed in the spring when the problems are forgotten.

Mary Siraut, inspired by Tom Mayberry's collection of photographs

St Peter's Church, Williton c. 1910



Nuggets from VCH Research When petrol was 1s. 8d. a gallon!

The recent fuel crisis, rising prices and climate change seem a long way from the so-called golden age of motoring but early motoring had many problems of its own. Several early bills and accounts have survived for Benjamin Denning's Taunton Motor Company.

We hear of people driving away from petrol pumps without paying, but in the days of personal service and credit Denning was obliged to sue several customers in the county court, many were not even local. Hence the survival of these wonderful billheads. In one case a certificate of motor registration to prove ownership had to be procured from Exeter. Even a solicitor could be at fault although that offender had the excuse of being on the Western Front.



Billhead in use between c. 1909 and 1912

SWHT



Billhead in use 1912-13

SWHT

Jul 7th.	One 10h.p. Singer light car as seen and tried by you	204	15
	registration	1	-
	Painting number plates and fitting		2
July 9th	2 galls Shell at 1/8		3
July 10th.	One Vacuum grease gun		2
July 14th	One brass funnel		2
	One Lodge plug		4
July 14th	4 galls Shell		6
	2 galls Shell		3
July 14th	Insurance on Singer car 20 less half commission	5	11
	9/-		8
July 15th	6 galls Crown		3
July 21st	2 galls Shell at 1/8		6
July 24th	4 galls Shell at 1/8		8
July 27th	2 galls Pratts at 1/8		3
July 28th	2 galls Shell 1 at 1/8	4	18
July 9th	One Klaxon horn		4
	One brace spanner	3	10
	One Smith's oxidised speedometer	1	15
	One Smith's oxidised clock		10
	Fitting		3

Buying a car in 1914

SWHT



Modern motorists would be shocked at how much petrol and oil a 10hp Singer car used!

Benjamin Dening was an ironmonger, a farmer's son from Herefordshire. He settled in Taunton and set up his cycle and motor business at 54 East Street, the former Standfast's carriage works, where he lived over the shop with his wife Helen, a member of the Stansell family, and their children. The company he started is still in business although no longer in the centre of town.

Billhead in use 1914-15

Historic Images of Somerset



Flying Circus at Holway, Taunton, in June 1931

SWHT

The Cornwall Aviation Company of St Austell put on a performance at Holway to entertain the crowds. The circus remained in Taunton from 18-28 June 1931 with performances nightly and twice at weekends. Admission was 6d, but a flight after the show cost from 5s., although each night one lucky young woman was selected for a free flight. The show was comical as well as daring with 'The Flying Fools' wire walking, looping and rolling. At weekends 'the Flying Squad' did a bombing routine, fortunately with bags of flour, as one hit a spectator.

The company started in the early 1920s with men who had flown in the First World War. It boasted of having carried over 100,000 passengers by 1931 without accident. Sadly that record was broken the following year when a plane crashed at Harrogate killing a passenger.

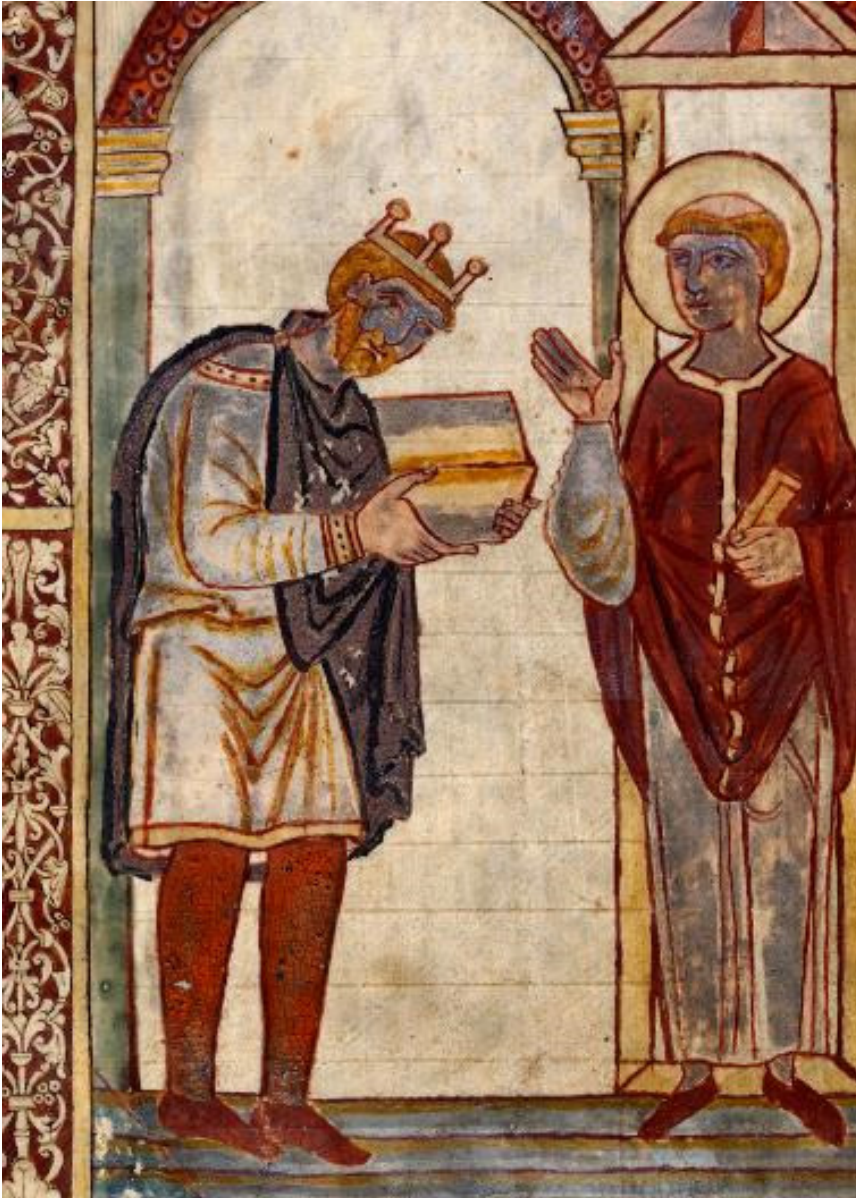
There was a serious purpose with many of these airshows, which was to encourage an interest in flying. M. Salmet brought the Daily Mail aeroplane to Taunton in 1912 encouraged by Prew's motor company who supplied fuel and the Van Trump family of collar manufacturers, one of whom went up for a ride and nearly drowned when the plane ended up in the sea.

Sir Alan Cobham also promoted flying with a display of 14 aircraft in August 1932 on a field south of Wellington Road, which had been used by the Prince of Wales on his visit earlier that year. Cobham returned in May 1933 to give an air display at Haydon Farm as part of his campaign for aviation. The 1930s also saw visits from a zeppelin and great interest in films about flying.

Sir Alan had encouraged Taunton council to create an aerodrome, reporting in 1930 on suitable sites round the town including Haydon and Holway. The site chosen was between Haydon and the main A358 road, south of the present Gateway Park and Ride. Nothing was built, however, Haydon had a 69-ft grass runway but it was little used.

Forthcoming Events

We are delighted to announce our Somerset VCH lecture, which will take place online.



On 24 February 2022 at 7.30pm

Historian and broadcaster Michael Wood will give a lecture on

ATHELSTAN: FIRST KING OF THE ENGLISH

During a distinguished broadcasting career spanning more than 40 years Michael Wood has achieved a reputation as the people's historian. He has presented outstanding television series and written on subjects ranging from the Dark Ages and the Anglo-Saxons to the world of William Shakespeare.

In this illustrated lecture he retells the remarkable story of Athelstan (c. 894-939), the first Anglo-Saxon king to rule over the whole of England.

Michael Wood was made an OBE in 2021 for services to public history and broadcasting.

Tickets: £8.50

Available from Eventbrite or via [the South West Heritage Trust website](#)



Our postponed tour of Cleeve Abbey with James Bond will take place later in 2022. Details will be circulated nearer the time. Notices of all events will be sent to subscribers to this newsletter.



Tangier Way bridge, Taunton

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 to the **Somerset County History Trust** [Registered Charity Number 1161263]. For more information contact:

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