

VICTORIA
COUNTY
HISTORY



Somerset

Issue 21

Victoria County History of Somerset Newsletter

Summer 2023

Welcome to the twenty-first 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

Our great news is that volume 12 covering Minehead, Dunster and Carhampton is in the press, having been proofread and indexed. We have been given an expected publication date of November, 2023. Further news and any pre-publication offers will be sent to members of our mailing list nearer the time. Meanwhile editing work has continued on the Taunton chapters, all but one of which are now on the South West Heritage Trust website. Work has resumed on researching Wilton, begun by Scott Pettitt. Several talks have been given and we are planning our autumn VCH lecture. Alex Craven continues his work on Staplegrove, see his update on page 2.

We have also had the biggest shake-up of local government in Somerset since 1974 with the abolition of the district councils and the older county council to create the new unitary Somerset Council.

Somerset County Council meeting in the council chamber, Shire Hall, Taunton, in the later 20th century.

SWHT



We could hardly miss the Coronation, which for many people was the first such occasion they will have witnessed. In this edition we look at how Staplegrove marked previous Coronations. Memories of great events and of ordinary everyday life underpin several oral history projects and in this edition we feature some of these. You will also find an article on Elizabeth Fry who visited Wilton Gaol in 1825 and on cemetery reform.

Update on Staplegrove from Alex Craven

Having worked previously for the VCH in Gloucestershire, Hampshire, Herefordshire, and Wiltshire, it has been fascinating to get to grips with researching a new county. I am pleased to report that work continues to progress well on the researching and writing of the history of Staplegrove. Much of the modern history has been drafted, although the deciphering of the copious medieval records of the bishop of Winchester remains a daunting task still to complete. Complicating matters is the fact that the bishops account rolls deal with the hundred of Staplegrove, a manorial unit comprising of five tithings, only two of which now make up the modern parish of Staplegrove.

Recently, I have been exploring the changing social character of the parish, which has changed dramatically with the expansion of Taunton's urban area over the boundaries of the rural parish, and which is set to expand still further in the near future. A highlight has been getting to grips with the few probate records which survive for the parish from the 16th and 17th centuries, especially the inventories of the goods of the deceased, which can reveal a great deal about the prosperity and material culture of a community.

I hope to deliver the completed draft to the Trust shortly, and I look forward to your comments once the work has been added to the project's website for consultation. The intention is to complete the research on the parish early

Colourful knitted toppers are a feature of the post box in Staplegrove



Norwood, Staplegrove, formerly The Chestnuts

Old Staplegrove village school and teacher's house. Until the mid 20th century part of a terrace of houses including the post office.



Celebrating Coronations in Staplegrove

The accession of a new monarch last year and the celebrations surrounding the first coronation in Britain this century may have caused you to wonder how such events were marked by our communities in the past. Having spent the last 18 months researching the parish of Staplegrove, on the outskirts of Taunton, it seemed fitting to consider the traces of coronations of yesteryear in the parish. Although the records relating to Staplegrove do not stretch back as far as 1558, the coronation of Elizabeth I quickly took on national significance for the identity of the newly Protestant nation, and Staplegrove was no exception in marking its anniversary every year with bell ringing. The accounts of the churchwardens record payments to the parish ringers annually from their beginning in 1585, in which year we learn that these sums were expended in providing them with bread, cheese, beef and beer.

Gaps in later records make it impossible to say how the coronations of Stuart monarchs were celebrated, but the parish showed its outward Royalism into the 18th century with annual ringing each year on Gunpowder Treason Day (5 November) and on Oak Apple Day (29 May), the anniversary of the Restoration of Charles II. The parish marked the coronation of George III in 1761 with ringing, proclamations and prayers for the new king and queen, at a total cost of 12s. The parishioners were treated to a sumptuous banquet for 300 people in 1838 to celebrate Victoria's coronation, a feast so generous that enough meat was left over to allow even the poor families of the parish to celebrate the day after everyone else. The banquet for the parishioners was to begin at 4pm, presumably early enough to allow some still to catch the balloons, fireworks and gas illuminations which were to be the culmination of the festivities at Taunton.

Being so close to the town, the celebrations of the larger community have no doubt often proved a temptation for parishioners in Staplegrove, and in 1902 it was decided to hold the parish's celebration a week after those at Taunton, to allow parishioners to attend both. In the event, the King's illness postponed the events by a month.

Beginning in the morning with a service in the parish church and the planting of a tree in the churchyard, about 350 adult parishioners enjoyed lunch in a marquee at Staplegrove manor, followed by toasts, singing and music by the Norton brass band. With the meal completed, revellers adjourned to the grounds of the manor house for sports and games, dancing around a Maypole, and the Staplegrove Glee Party, accompanied by one of the parishioners playing a harmonium whilst seated in a donkey cart. The children of the parish, numbering 200, were then treated to tea in the tent, followed by more sport, after which there was dancing until late into the evening. A desire to mark the event in some more permanent way, however, resulted in the erection in 1903 of a new porch at the west end of the church, dedicated both to the coronation and the end of hostilities in South Africa.

Staplegrove church with the 1903 west porch

Mary Siraut



The coronation of Edward's successor, George V, was also marked with a permanent addition to the parish church, this time of a more modest nature. A flag-staff and union flag, both apparently long desired by parishioners, were erected for the first time on the day of the coronation, accompanied by the singing of the choir. Again, the day was celebrated with a large banquet under canvas at Staplegrove Manor, followed by sports and games in the grounds of the house. In addition, each of the children were presented with a box of chocolates and a commemoration mug. Trees were once again planted in 1937, this time at the recreation ground in Staplegrove, and each dedicated to a member of the royal family – there was of course no mention of scandal-ridden Edward VIII. The children of the parish joined in celebrations for the district held in Taunton, before returning for afternoon sports and a tea at the village hall. The children were once again presented with commemorative cups, medals, and an official souvenir of the day – but sadly no chocolates this time! Marking the march of progress, the parishioners were able to telegram their congratulations to the new king and queen, receiving a grateful reply on their behalf. The parish's festivities concluding that evening in the village hall with music, dancing, and a performance by the Young People's Fellowship of the play 'A Crusty Bachelor'.

The coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953 was famously the first to be broadcast into people's homes on television, and one wonders how that impacted celebrations in the parish.

Alex Craven



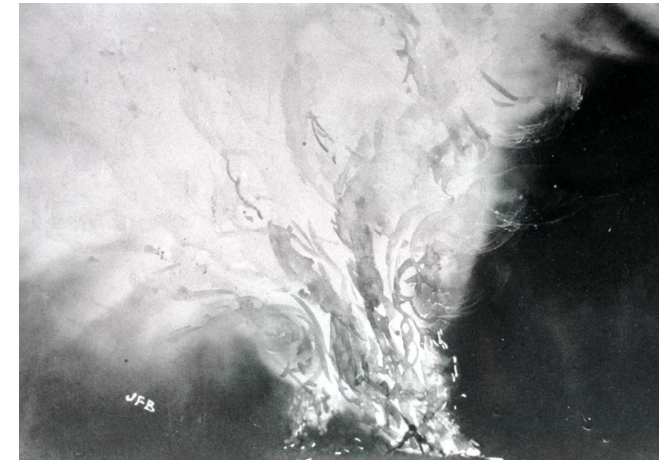
Staplegrove recreation ground

Mary Siraut

Hatch Beauchamp celebrates

The 1911 Coronation of King George V and Queen Mary was celebrated in Hatch Beauchamp, as in many villages, with sports and a bonfire despite its being a showery day. In the evening beacons were lit on the Quantocks and at the Wellington monument. One enterprising Taunton publican secured a licence to sell alcohol at the Hatch celebrations.

Village bonfire



Images:

Tom Mayberry

Women's tug of war



Elizabeth Fry visits Wilton Gaol

Elizabeth Fry needs little introduction. She was born Elizabeth Gurney into a wealthy Quaker banking family in Norwich in 1780. She married in 1800 and with her husband Joseph Fry of Bristol had 11 children, but still found time to visit prisons and campaign for reform especially for women prisoners who often endured appalling sexual violence. She visited Newgate prison in 1813 and was so horrified she returned with food and clothing.

In 1816 she started a school for children imprisoned with their mothers, in 1817 helped start an association to assist women in Newgate and in 1818 gave evidence to a select committee of the House of Commons on London's prisons. With a group of like-minded women she assisted female prisoners being transported, visiting the ships and providing them with a bible and useful tools. She travelled widely including to Ireland and France visiting places where women were confined and encouraging local women to continue her work. Despite her husband's bankruptcy in 1828 she found time to take an interest in the homeless, the abolition of slavery and the training of nurses. She commanded the respect and support of Queen Victoria and other monarchs and by the time she died at Ramsgate in 1845 her reputation had spread far and wide and inspired others.

Elizabeth Fry on a £5 note, with an image of her reading to women in Newgate Prison

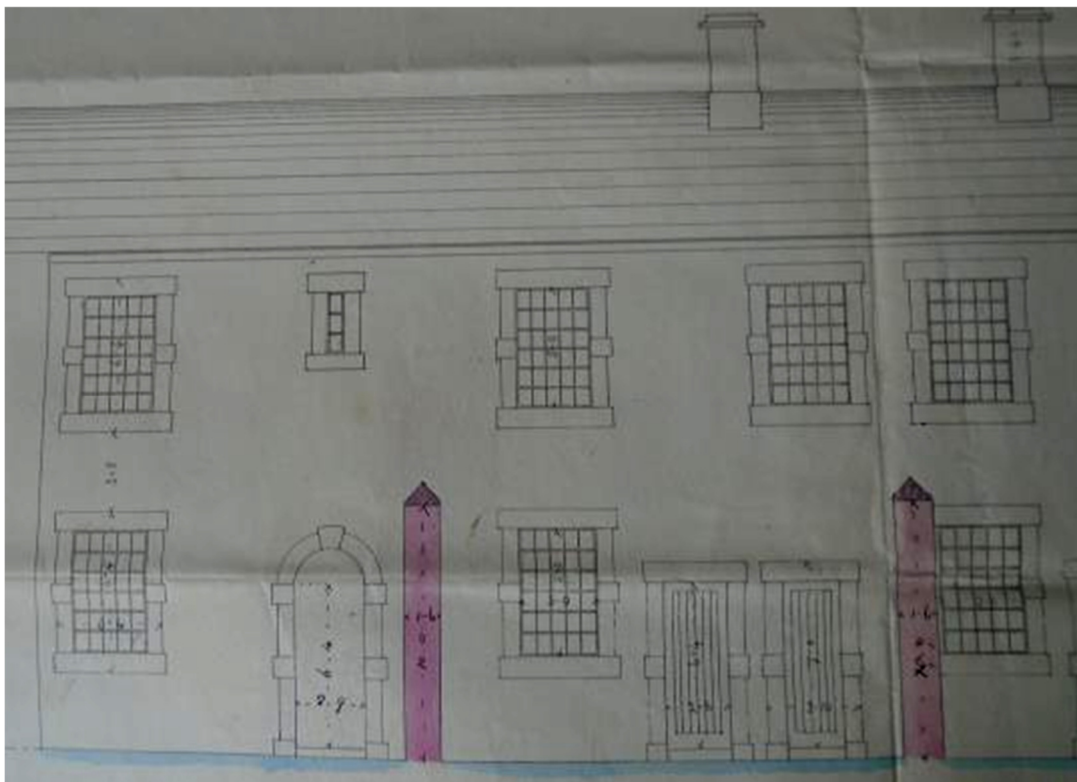


Elizabeth Fry in her later years

Among the many prisons she visited was Wilton Gaol in 1825. She was not the first prison reformer to do so. John Howard visited in 1779 and 1782 and found the prisoners mostly in irons, including the women, with no employment, beds only if they paid for them and the two bath tubs never used. A magistrate visiting in 1813 found a similar situation with solitary cells on the ground floor cold and unfit for human occupation in winter, no separation of convicts and prisoners awaiting trial, no labour or instruction and no clergyman to officiate for the inmates.

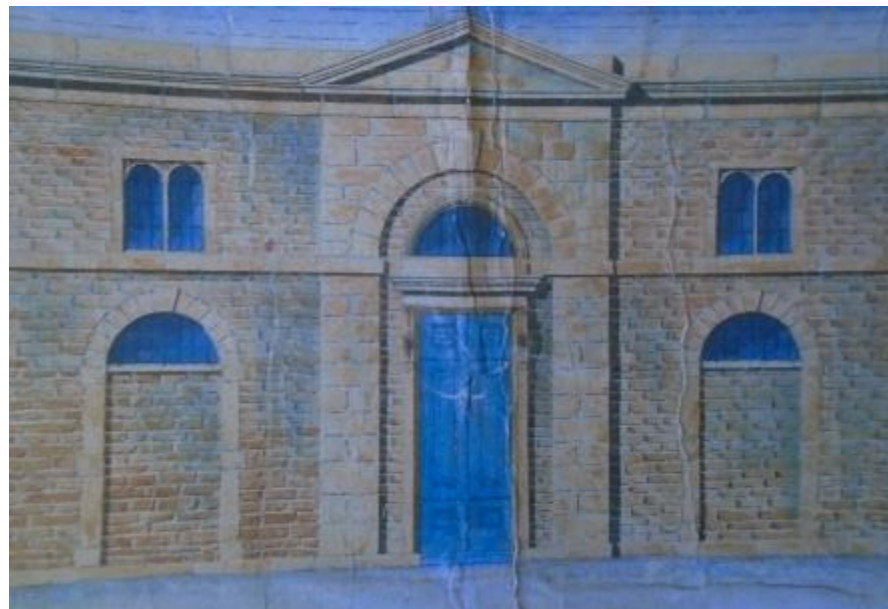
By 1819 things had improved, the prison had been enlarged and prisoners were given work. Unfortunately that gave them access to tools that helped them to escape. Men got 4d a day but women only 2d. Visitors were allowed although a turnkey and his wife were reprimanded for giving tours of the gaol. Prisoners were given money, shoes or clothing on discharge. However, much of the reporting relates to male prisoners, women are seldom mentioned except for stealing coal from the laundry, and the prison daybooks have not survived. It is known that several women had young children with them or gave birth in prison and infants sometimes died there. Mary Fry and Mary Bird each lost a child in 1824. We have no details of Elizabeth Fry's visit but presumably she toured the women's ward and spoke to the prisoners.

Part of the women's section in Wilton gaol in 1841, before alterations SWHT



Wilton gaol as it would have been in 1825 SWHT

The entrance to the gaol at the same period SWHT

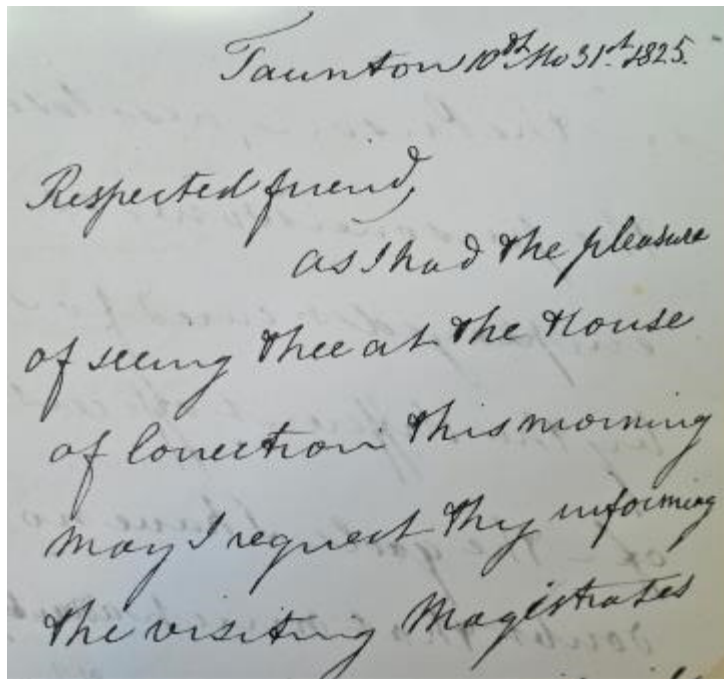


She was accompanied by Edward Coles, the Clerk of the Peace, to whom she afterwards wrote:

Respected Friend

As I had the pleasure of seeing thee at the House of Correction this morning may I request thy informing the visiting magistrates how much gratified I was with the general cleanliness & appearance of order & comfort in the Prison, also to see the prisoners so well employed and cared for by the different officers of the gaol. I have no doubt that much advantage would result from the system of mutual instruction being adopted amongst the men, it would usefully occupy their leisure hours & prove very useful upon their dismissal from the prison. As it respects the women I believe much advantage would result from two or three serious ladies visiting them superintending their instruction in reading & paying them that kind of attention that in so many persons in our own & other countries has proved the means of restoring them to society very much improved characters & consequently prevented their return to evil practices. I believe I know two ladies who would be willing to do their best to make at least a trial how far the plan would answer as they could easily withdraw if it did not.

I remain with respect thy friend Elizth Fry



Taunton 10th Nov 31st 1825.

Respected friend,
as I had the pleasure
of seeing thee at the House
of Correction this morning
may I request thy informing
the visiting Magistrates

Opening of Elizabeth
Fry's letter to
Edward Coles

SWHT



Statue of Elizabeth Fry
at the Old Bailey, London

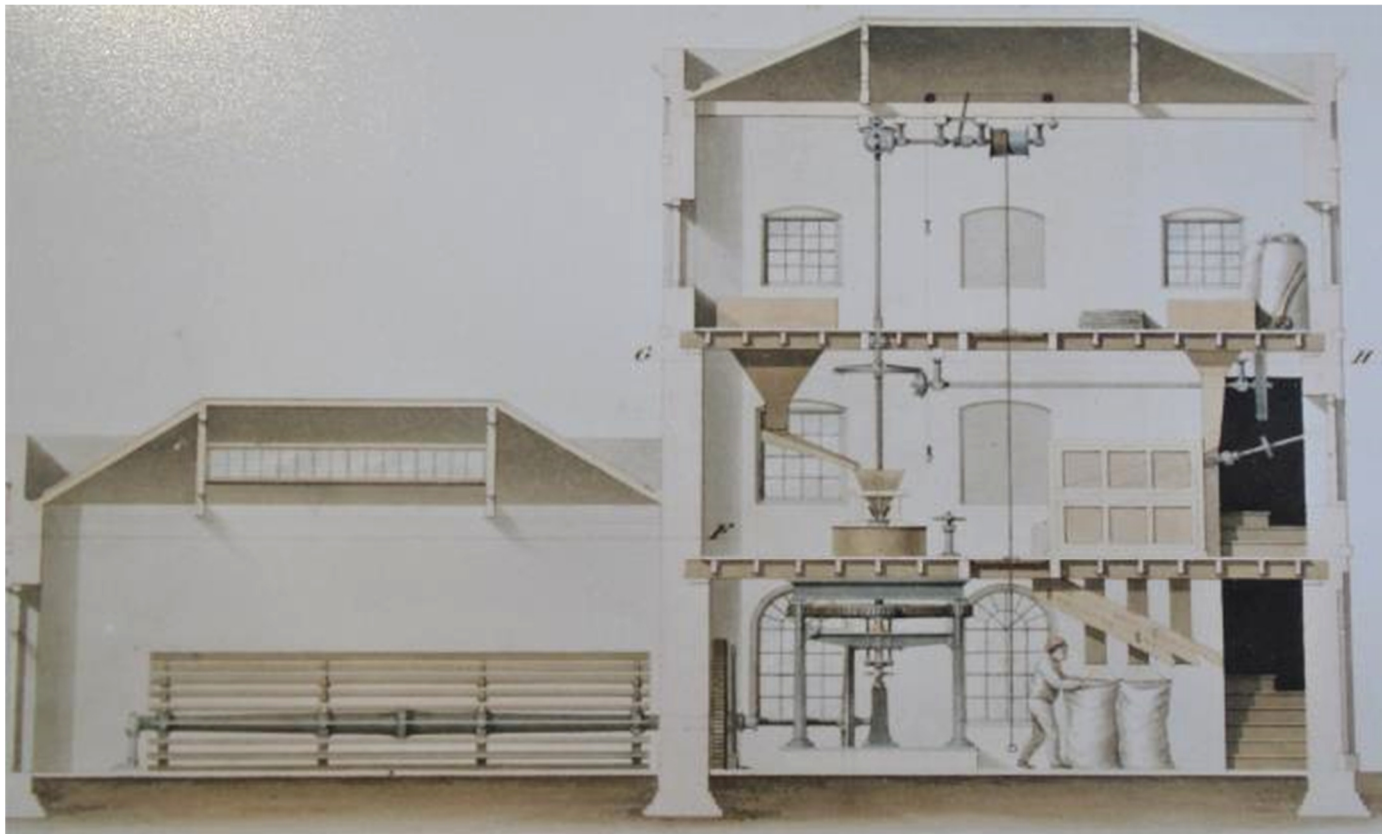
Priscilla Scales, Sarah Dymond and Ann J. Young offered to visit the gaol to promote the teaching of the female prisoners but they were initially rebuffed. Priscilla later left money to Original Infant School for educating the poor and to the anti-slavery society for the education of West Indian slaves. Sarah was instrumental in revealing problems at Paul's Meeting, which led to the establishment of North Street Congregational Church.

Magistrates Dr Malachi Blake and Edward Ayshford Sanford took the visit as a triumph. They had been unable to meet with 'the celebrated Mrs Fry' but found her letter 'complimentary to the good order, cleanliness and management of the prison'. At the time there were 96 men and 18 women in the gaol mostly convicted felons but many for offences against the game laws. The men worked the treadmill, clove wood, broke stones, pumped water or made shoes and clothing but the women did the washing and cleaning. Women were provided with dresses, caps, handkerchiefs

and shoes. Smallpox broke out a few months after Elizabeth's visit and unprotected prisoners were vaccinated. One change from 1825 was that turnkeys' wives were appointed as matrons of the prison.

Interestingly in 1849 following the cholera outbreak conditions in Taunton workhouse were compared unfavourably with those at the gaol where the cells were up to 9ft high and ventilated, there were water closets, wash-handbasins and unlimited water, a good diet, cleanliness was enforced throughout the building and there had been no cases of cholera. In 1848 there had been 1,199 prisoners, of whom 33 were in the infirmary, but only two deaths. By the mid 1850s when the prison was rebuilt every cell had a toilet, washbasin and gas lamp, which would have pleased Elizabeth Fry but aroused the envy of most slum dwellers.

Mary Siraut



*Design for treadmill operated flour mill
for a prison* SWHT

The cemetery as a public park

Urban churchyards were often the only public open space in city neighbourhoods, but by the 19th century were neither healthy nor pleasant places to visit. The London burying grounds, such as Dickens describes in *Bleak House* as ‘heaps of dishonoured graves and stones, hemmed in by filthy houses, with a few dull lights in their windows, and on whose walls a thick humidity broke out like a disease’, were replicated in towns and cities throughout Britain. Taunton was no exception. In November 1849 Dr John Sutherland, Superintending Medical Inspector to the General Board of Health, reported on the state of churchyards in the Taunton area and especially St Mary’s churchyard following the cholera outbreak. He interviewed the sexton and neighbours and their descriptions of the treatment of corpses makes painful, not to say revolting reading. Neighbouring churchyards were also full and only St James still had space thanks to an 1846 extension, but that would not last long.

John Sutherland (1808-91) was a native of Edinburgh, and is perhaps best known as the friend and supporter of Florence Nightingale and for his studies of cholera. His wife Sarah was an advocate of public health reform and a member of the Ladies Sanitary Association. However, from an early stage in his career John became interested in interment, studying foreign practices and trying to prevent burial within churches.

For the Taunton area Sutherland recommended new burial grounds as a matter of urgency and had even located some possible sites. Interestingly one of the sites he had chosen because ‘the whole neighbourhood is beautiful and well planted with timber’.



Dr John Sutherland by Fenton (1885)

Sutherland considered that public cemeteries were about more than burying the dead. ‘Cemeteries must be made sufficiently attractive to induce the population to frequent them. Instead of being what burial grounds are at present, places which people would always willingly escape from, or which they pass by with a shudder, they must be made the means of exercising directly humanising influences on the public’. A large space ought to be set apart for ornamental purposes so that cemeteries might exhibit ‘the most refined landscape gardening’.



St James' cemetery

Mary Straut

He was not the first to recommend this, being one of a number of cemetery reformers influenced by visiting cemeteries abroad. This included Pere Lachaise in Paris, reputedly the first parkland cemetery opened in 1804, but crowded by the 1830s due to its lack of a proper site plan. Britain was slow to take up the idea of park cemeteries, although in Scotland in the 1820s John Strang advocated the garden cemetery as a ‘token of a nation’s progress in civilization’. His book *Necropolis Glasguensis* was published in 1831 and deplored the burial grounds of his native city, recommending the approach of Pere Lachaise. He advocated a pleasant spot planted not only with evergreens but cherries, lilacs, laburnum, roses and honeysuckle.

New cemeteries were laid out in the 1830s notably the privately-owned York cemetery in 1837 and Highgate in 1839. John Claudius Loudon was a keen advocate of cemetery improvement and his book *On the Laying Out, Planting and Managing of Cemeteries* was published in 1843. He was criticised as impractical: he favoured an undisturbed appearance with graves never re-opened for additional burials and surrounded only by evergreen trees and shrubs; but he would accept flowers if in coffin-shaped plots! However, many of his ideas were taken up from the late 1840s resulting in several attractive public cemeteries.



Barnoon cemetery with mortuary chapels

Mary Siraut

Highgate or Arnos Vale might be best known, but there are many small local cemeteries that provide an oasis in deserts of urban sprawl. A few like Barnoon in St Ives in Cornwall, Bath Abbey Cemetery on Ralph Allen Drive or the New Carlton Hill cemetery in Edinburgh have dramatic views. Some were established on a commercial basis like the London Necropolis with its own railway but most were created by local authorities and parishes and run by burial boards. Their often ambitious layouts, with chapels and gates, lodges and paths, trees and flowerbeds have now matured. Some are sadly neglected although even those are being rescued by local people who appreciate them as both historic records and neighbourhood amenities.

Many are rich in mature trees and wildlife and bring peace not only to those visiting the grave of loved ones but local residents generally. Although many fine buildings such as mortuary chapels have been lost a number survive together with a wealth of monuments.

Taunton St Mary's and Bishops Hull cemetery was created between 1854 and 1856 on 2 a. of land on the corner of Mountway and Wellington roads with a lodge and two mortuary chapels. It was designed by Edward Ashworth of Devon and built by Samuel Shewbrooks. Sadly it suffered the loss of its railings in 1943, its chapels in the late 1960s and its perimeter planting, leaving it exposed to the main road and surrounding buildings. However, St James' cemetery is still a fine example. The parish wanted a burial ground close enough for the poor to have a 'walking funeral' with room for several thousand burials.

St James' cemetery

Mary Siraut



Five acres near Fairwater on Staplegrove Road was acquired and laid out with intersecting circular paths converging on a sinuous drive and extensive tree planting. Two mortuary chapels, Anglican on the east and nonconformist on the west, were combined in a single building. These had banded brickwork in many colours, a patterned tiled roof, two south transepts of different design but with circular upper windows and a turret with spire on the north east. The chapels have been demolished but the attractive keeper's lodge survives with its pretty roadside garden and a thick hedge of many shrub species reduces the noise of traffic. Other hedges and trees screen surrounding buildings creating a sense of being in a large park with flowers and birdsong.



St James' cemetery Mary Siraut

It is worth exploring some of the county's older cemeteries, from the Garden cemetery at Smallcombe in Bath to Milton Road in Weston super Mare, rich in wildlife, and from Minehead with its clipped yews and undulating levels to Crewkerne, which still has its mortuary chapels. Such cemeteries are a notable feature of the landscape, often attractive to wildlife, some have benches provided or donated and most are a haven for quiet contemplation. Although still places to bury and mourn, thanks to Strang, Loudon, Sutherland and others many of our cemeteries are more public park than 'place of abomination'.

Mary Siraut

Oral History in Somerset

Did you know that, alongside the more familiar written and photographic records, Somerset Archives & Local Studies cares for a large number of sound archives, too? We have nature sounds, folk music and published recordings of local groups. But this article will introduce you to the largest section of our sound archives, which is also one of the most personal and evocative: oral history interviews.

What is oral history?

Oral history is where individuals are recorded speaking about some aspect of their lives, often being prompted by an interviewer. A common type of recording is a life history interview, where interviewees talk about their whole lives, sometimes recorded with the aim of capturing information about how a place or a way of life has changed since the interviewee was born. Other interviews are more targeted, focusing on a particular aspect of life such as politics, work in a particular industry or life as a new immigrant.

We have well over 1,000 oral history interviews from Somerset, covering many different areas and subjects and people from all walks of life. Most of the recordings were made between the 1960s and the present day, and capture memories stretching back to the 1880s.

Some highlights from our collections

We have many collections, some very large and some very small, covering the whole geographical area of Somerset. The collections here are included to give you a flavour of the whole – there are too many for them to all be on this list, and we receive new collections regularly.

Somerset Voices

Collection reference: A/CMQ, Somerset Heritage Centre

Clips and information at www.somersetvoices.org.uk

The Somerset Voices Archive project started at the Somerset Rural Life Museum in the 1970s, to collect interviews about rural life in the Glastonbury area. Now, it is our largest oral history collection, with over 850 interviews, from the 1970s to 2018.



Ann Heeley was the main interviewer of the Somerset Voices project. Here she is in 1983 interviewing Walter Baber of Manor Farm, Stoney Stratton SWHT

Its scope widened over time, to the whole of Somerset and all sections of society and work, and it started to actively collect interviews relating to contemporary events, such as the prolonged flooding in 2013-2014. Interviewees range from the highest postholders in the county (including former Bishop Peter Price and local MPs) to those brought up in extreme rural poverty.

Exmoor Flood Memories

Collection reference: A/BHN/2, Somerset Heritage Centre

A small but emotionally powerful collection of short interviews recorded in 2006, recalling the Lynton and Lynmouth Flood Disaster of August 1952, in which 34 people died. The recordings also mention the severe flooding elsewhere on Exmoor, including in Dulverton.

Somerset Oral History Collection

Collection reference: DD/OH, Somerset Heritage Centre

Recorded between 1964 and 1999 (but mostly in the 1970s-1990s), this collection of over 200 recordings spans the whole historic county and people from a wide range of backgrounds. North Curry, Wiveliscombe, Staplegrove, and the history of education on the Mendips (from the 1890s to the 1960s) are particularly well represented. Several Women's Land Army workers are also included, as are Somerset County Council staff and local businessmen.



Dorothy Barrett, later Mrs Phillips, was born in 1885 at Moredon House, North Curry, the youngest of seven children. Interviewed in 1977 aged 92, she had lived through the reigns of six monarchs. Among her many memories are those of her wealthy Victorian upbringing, the day of Queen Victoria's death, and losing her husband during the First World War. SWHT



Staplegrove Stores [175 Staplegrove Road] in about 1938. Shown here are Leslie Endacott with his son Jack and niece Jean. In 1929 Leslie married Agnes, who was interviewed in 1991 by Staplegrove Local History Society.

Exmoor Oral History Archive

Collection reference: A/BJS, Somerset Heritage Centre; and collection reference B723, North Devon Record Office

Audio trails compiled from the collection at www.swheritage.org.uk/heritage-online/dulverton-sound-walk

The Exmoor Oral History Archive was recorded by Birdie Johnson between 2000 and 2002. It has 78 interviews covering many aspects of life, from agriculture and engineering to hunting and heath burning – and even mentions a Mars-bar-eating llama! The period included pivotal moments for Exmoor's history, including both World Wars, the formation of the Exmoor Park Authority and the devastating Lynton and Lynmouth flood disaster of 1952. For many, their childhood ended at fourteen when they entered the world of work. Interviewees describe jobs which are now lost, such as life in service, whortleberry picking and catching moles. The recordings also highlight the strong community ties, centred on institutions such as the church, the Young Farmers' Club and local politics.

Voices of Axbridge

Collection reference: A/EGA, Somerset Heritage Centre

About 100 oral history interviews, mostly made between 2007 (one in 2004) and 2016, giving a rich picture of life in this Somerset town. It includes memories of wartime, local events, occupations (including a professional Father Christmas), and the terrible Hockwold Air Disaster of 1973.

People on the Move (film)

Collection reference: A/DFZ, Somerset Heritage Centre

A set of 23 filmed interviews carried out by the GLADE youth group in 2010-2011, interviewing people who have moved to Somerset from another country. Interviewees' home countries include: Angola, Botswana, the Dominican Republic, Iran, Italy, the Philippines, Poland, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uganda.



A veteran of the D-Day landings in World War II, Ernest Mold trained as a doctor after returning from the war, moving to Lynton in 1953. He ran a surgery out of his local pub, and often walked miles in adverse conditions to visit his patients. © Mark J. Rattenbury



Five of the War Stories interviewees, at the project launch at the Museum of Somerset in 2015. Back (left to right): Jack Eglinton and Paul Heim; front (left to right): Colin Criddle, Betty Carter and Renée Stone.
SWHT

War Stories (Somerset) (film)

Collection reference: A/EEB, Somerset Heritage Centre

A series of 14 filmed interviews made in 2015 focused on the Second World War. Interviewees include veterans, Prisoners of War, evacuees and those on the Home Front. A version of the film can be seen online via the South West Heritage Trust website. Select 'Heritage Online' and it can be found in the 'Watch Films' section.



Dorothy Russell was born in Rodden Down in 1913, and is shown here at the time of her interview, aged 98. She talks about her time in service at Longleat House, reminiscing about the members of aristocracy and royalty who used to visit, and describes the huge social changes her long life has seen.
SWHT

Home in Frome: Working Memories

Collection reference: A/DQP, Somerset Heritage Centre

Interviews, photographs and extra information at www.workingmemoriesfrome.co.uk

This collection of 86 oral history interviews covers life in Frome from the 1920s to the end of the 20th century. The recordings give insights into Frome's industrial past and working lives, and into housing, domestic work, childcare, social life, clubs, shops, employment, markets, schools, healthcare, Frome during the Second World War, and the many changes Frome has seen over the 20th century.

Using oral history interviews

As with any other historical source, oral history has its strengths and limitations. For example, it is fabulous for telling you about emotions, lived experience and everyday life, but is not so reliable if you are looking for precise dates. Oral history is very personal, and it is understandable that interviewees may not want to tell a stranger everything about their lives – would you? Some interviewees have been interviewed many times and view the process as a performance, telling tall tales. There may be language we wouldn't use today, and upsetting things can appear suddenly in what seems like a very benign interview – “oh yes, that was the summer my sister had that terrible accident”. It is possible to get around most of these things, sometimes with the judicious but not misleading use of redaction.

In practical terms, the sound quality of some recordings is poor; this tends to especially be the case for older recordings. Some collections include word-for-word transcriptions of the interviews, some have summaries, but some have no information about the content of their interviews at all.

There are also limits on how some recordings may be used, depending on whether or not they have archive licences and what the copyright situation is.

But don't not use oral history because of these things. They humanise official records and bring history to life in the most wonderful way. For example, Lynton and Lynmouth flood disaster official records will tell you the flow rate of the flood water and the cost of the damage, but they won't tell you what it felt like when the Barle bridge hit your house sideways, about the stink and the thousands of worms left stranded as the water receded, how everyone had to drink shandy for weeks as there was no fresh water, or the effect of hearing a bagpiper playing a lament at the mass funeral.

Sound archives at risk

The collection's I've highlighted here are all playable and in modern formats, but many of our other sound recordings are not – such as those on open reel tapes. Even with the best care we can provide, it has become clear over the past five years or so that just storing the original recordings themselves is not going to ensure their long-term survival.



The recordings are degrading over time, sometimes catastrophically; the playback equipment for many formats is becoming unavailable; and the specialist knowledge of sound engineers is being lost as they retire. The conclusion now is that all sound recordings must be digitised – and quickly. In 2017-2022 we were fortunate enough to have over 600 of Somerset and Devon's sound recordings digitised through the British Library's 'Unlocking Our Sound Heritage' project. A follow-on project to digitise and promote more South West sound archives is being planned.

Thinking of doing your own oral history project?

Oral history projects are very rewarding and are great for community history. Careful planning at the early stages makes things much easier later on, so if you are planning an oral history project, please get in touch with us so that we can help you. Our website contains [advice on how to arrange oral history collections for deposit](#). We also have a digital recorder which may be available for you to borrow for the duration of your project.

Jane de Gruchy

Snippets from VCH research: The fate of a Georgian house



The Priory, Canon St, Taunton c. 1876 with the Sears family at the garden entrance

SWHT

Priory House or The Priory, one of Taunton's lost big houses, was described in 1823 as a lately-built, 'gothic' stuccoed double mansion with six bedrooms and attics in a walled garden. It had matching three-bay street and garden fronts with porticos, later glazed in. There were a lodge and a large stableyard against Canon Street. In 1839 there was a shrubbery walk around three sides of the garden partly replaced later by a large kitchen garden.

A sale particular in 1925 described an entrance hall 29 ½ft by 11ft with enclosed porticos each end and a rear conservatory, drawing and dining rooms 20ft by 16ft, a 20ft library, a morning room, two staircases, 6 bedrooms of which three were over 20ft long, a large bath room, a box room and 3 toilets. In the basement were a kitchen with Eagle range, a servants' sitting room, scullery, pantry, larder, cellars and a large room 20ft by 16ft. Outside were a loose box, stall, garage, heated greenhouse and garden room, two fruit orchards and a large walled kitchen garden but much of the original garden had already been built on.

It belonged to the Kinglakes, owners of Priory manor, and by 1839 was occupied by William Norman, who with William Kinglake developed The Crescent. By 1861 it was home to retired grocer John Christopher Easton who in c.1832 started what became County Stores in North Street. He died in 1865 and the house was briefly occupied by the grocer Henry Turle, before he moved into 1 The Crescent. In 1871 it was let for 21 years at £75 to Robert Humphrey Sears a retired engineer from India. He had married Mary Ann Rochfort from a large Calcutta family in 1855, but she died a few days after her baby Lily in 1861. Back in England in 1868 Robert married Mary Ann Rochfort Smith, daughter of his wife's sister Delia, and after their first son was born they moved to the Priory. The couple are pictured with their four sons Robert, Alfred, Frederick, later rector of Leckhampton, and baby Arthur born 1875. Mary Ann died in February 1880 aged only 32, and her mother Delia, who had returned to England with her daughters after her husband's death, later came to live at the Priory probably until Robert died in 1898.

The next occupiers were Charles Edward Lance of the Bengal Civil Service and his wife Mary Elizabeth Portman, whom he had married in Bengal in 1866. They probably added the glass conservatory to the garden front, perhaps to enjoy the warmth and exotic plants they had been used to in India. After Charles died in 1916 Mary moved to Elm Grove and Lieutenant Russell Bowlby rented the house until c.1925 when it was sold.

The Taunton Liberal Club took the house and replaced the conservatory with a billiard room in 1926. After the Second World War the extension was removed and the house was converted into offices for St John Ambulance. It fell into disrepair and was demolished c.1973 despite objections, leaving only the lodge, gate piers and flanking walls, which contain medieval carved fragments. The stableyard was replaced by a block of flats.

Mary Siraut



The garden front c. 1970 showing signs of considerable subsidence and a buttress appears to have been built against the left-hand corner. Also visible is the vault under the former conservatory. The roof has been altered and the attic window removed but the balcony survives. The garden has been destroyed.
SWHT



The entrance front c.1970, disfigured with a waste pipe and other alterations.
SWHT

Historic Images of Somerset

An experimental light



Looking up Hammet Street from the Parade in April 1886

SWHT

This image taken on a sunny late April day shows Henry Massingham's electric lighting on the Parade in contrast to the shorter gas lamps. Thomas Penny's gift of trees are flourishing their newly opened leaves having been planted in 1880. On the right early damage to Hammet Street is evident after numbers 14-18 were knocked through to create a furniture store for Hatchers before their new furniture shop was built west of High Street in 1894. The top floor windows were shortened to accommodate Hatchers' signboard. The houses were partly rebuilt in the 1890s as separate shops.

A delivery van is drawn up in Hammet Street and a pony trap waits for its driver outside 32 Fore Street. That shop was taken over by Fox Fowler and Co. as a bank and later refronted and an extra floor added but the whole was demolished in 1959—60.

Wealthy shoe retailer Henry Massingham, pioneer of retail therapy providing one of his stores with toilets and a restaurant, was a keen exponent of electric lighting. In 1882 Walter Easton had urged the Market House trustees to install electric lighting on the Parade. In 1884 he and Massingham demonstrated arc lamps powered by one of Easton's steam engines. Massingham considered his scheme to provide street lighting using electricity brought by wires from a generating station was superior as it could be extended to light the whole town. Eventually he persuaded the trustees to allow him to light the Parade at his own expense for the festive season 1885. He installed an American Thomson-Houston generator in one of the arcades driven by an Easton steam engine. The powerful arc lights proved popular and Massingham was allowed to extend his demonstration although the trustees disliked the wires.

In May 1886 Massingham opened a power station behind his shoe shop in Fore Street and was allowed to instal permanent electric lamps on the Parade and to supply incandescent lamps for indoor lighting to business customers. Eventually the council agreed that the town centre should be lit with electricity. In 1887 Massingham formed the Taunton Electric Lighting Company. In 1891 he mounted an electrical exhibition with an electric bus and an electric launch on the river. His company sold their generating works, then in St James Street, to the corporation but in 1896 Henry was contracted to supply the city of Bath, where he lived, with electricity.

Public celebrations required decorative lights and hundreds of electric Chinese lanterns were provided for the 1897 Diamond Jubilee and 1,000 lamps for the 1902 coronation. Although the original street lamps have gone Hardy and Padmore of Worcester supplied new ornamental lamps for the Parade in the 1930s. They were restored in 1996 and are sited in the pedestrian area of Fore Street.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

VCH Lecture by Carezza Lewis

The Power of Pits – village excavations throwing new light on the past

This year's VCH lecture will be held in person and on-line on Thursday 12 October 2023 at 7.30 pm in the Museum of Somerset, Taunton Castle. Booking will be available soon via the South West Heritage Trust website.

This talk will show how archaeological 'test pit' community excavations carried out by thousands of people in today's villages and towns have made discoveries which can reconstruct the development of a single place through time, and how, by piecing together the evidence from many places, can throw new light on the impact of historical phenomena as diverse as the Roman empire, the Norman Conquest, the Black Death plague pandemic, the English Civil War, industrialisation and 20th century post-war housing programmes.

Professor Lewis is perhaps best known for her appearances on television, especially presenting Time Team, but she has also worked for the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments England as a field archaeologist and held several academic posts before being appointed to a chair at the University of Lincoln.



Beckery Heritage Walk

Saturday 14 October 2023 at 2.00pm

Visit the site of Beckery chapel and also look at the industrial heritage of the Morland's and Baily's factories at Beckery near Glastonbury with SWHT



Meet at The Red Brick Building, Morland Road, Glastonbury BA6 9FT

The walk will take 2 hours and sensible walking boots are essential.

To book email info@swheritage.org.uk

Left Beckery excavation 2017

Right Morland's 1934 factory

SWHT

J. Orbach





East Quay, Watchet

Mary Siraut

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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 Somerset VCH now forms part of the South West Heritage Trust: Charity Number 1158791. Cheques should be made payable to the 'South West Heritage Trust' with a note that the money is for the VCH account. For more information contact:

Victoria County History of Somerset, Somerset Heritage Centre, Brunel Way, Norton Fitzwarren, Taunton, TA2 6SF vch@swheritage.org.uk

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