

BLAKE NEWS

Summer 2024



**IMPORTANT —
SUBSCRIPTIONS ARE DUE ON
THE FIRST OF SEPTEMBER,
PLEASE.**

**THE A.G.M IS ON THE 8TH
OCTOBER AT THE MUSEUM AT
7.30 PM.**

**There is no Heritage Week (6-15
September, with opened buildings)
this year. Instead a series of Her-
itage walks hosted by local histor-
ians are proposed. For details
please contact the Town Council.**

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

**by Stewart Richards
D DAY OPENING**

The Friends decided to do something a little different in June and that difference was to commemorate the 80th anniversary of D Day by hosting an event in the museum garden as well as the rose garden. The event coincided with a very special D Day exhibition in the museum. The event centred around Chrystal Bliss a local singer who sang songs from the war years and was ably assisted by Dave Englefield of Sedgemoor FM with live slots on the radio and further music when Chrystal was having a well-earned break. There were stalls in the rose garden for local organisations and the Friends hosted a tombola, museum shop and a Bric a Brac stall. Fortunately, we were lucky to experience very favourable weather during the event. Everybody who attended with many from the Royal British Legion said how much they enjoyed the event The testament to this was the very many happy faces.

You will see from the pictures, kindly donated by Jeff Searle, Chrystal dressed in military uniform, one could have been mistaken in to thinking Vera Lynn was singing and our own team of land girls who served refreshments throughout the event. The event besides being well attended was also successful in that the museum received over 250 visitors and a substantial sum of money was raised to fund museum projects. A big thank you from me as chair to all those that were involved and gave freely of their time to make the event so successful.



THE RAISED BED

by Stewart Richards

Well, after many starts and stops the memorial raised bed in the lower museum garden was completed 13th June 2024. The bed is manufactured from green oak and has been lined internally with bitumen and a damp-proof membrane to prevent moisture in the soil rotting the timbers. The central column is topped with an Armillary Sundial. The bed is expected to be around for many years to come and the picture you see with glorious bedding begonias and Peace roses was taken on the 19th of July. The bed was manufactured and constructed by 'The Somerset Levels and Moors' Men's Shed based in Old Taunton Road, Bridgwater.

The bed will allow us to recognise the extensive contributions of 'Friends,' who were volunteers and are no longer with us. A dedication of the bed will be made in due course by the vicar of St Mary's Church. I think you will agree that the bed looks magnificent and is a wonderful addition to the museum gardens and a fitting tribute to those hard-working volunteers who have gone before us

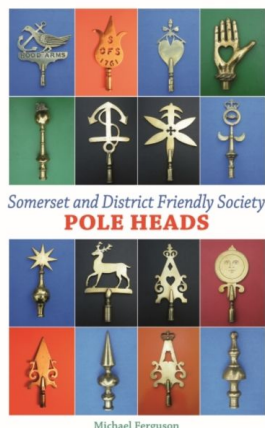


BOOK REVIEW

By Tony Woolrich

Michael Ferguson, *Somerset and District Friendly Society Pole Heads*, 192pp, Halsgrove, 2024, £29.99

This is a very well researched and profusely illustrated survey of brass pole heads, which were used by various local friendly societies when they were walking in procession.



A friendly society is a mutual association for the purposes of insurance, pensions, savings or cooperative banking. It is composed of a body of people who join together for a common financial or social purpose. Before modern insurance and the welfare state, friendly societies provided financial and social services to individuals, often according to their religious, political, or trade affiliations. They were frequently based around the local pub.

The author notes that over 600 individual pole head designs are known. Some 300 local friendly societies are nationally known, (discounting nationwide organisations like Foresters and the Oddfellows), and nearly two thirds are from Somerset and a further sixth from bordering counties.

Following some years of decline, then the National Insurance Act of 1946, the need for the local societies fell away and their membership

dropped. The regalia was often dispersed and sought-after by collectors. Numbers of local doctors had collected them, such as Dr Smith of Shepton Mallet, Dr MacVicar of Street and Dr Hopkins of Burnham. These doctors were often the societies' medical officers or surgeons. Later, these collections were acquired by local Museums, such as Taunton, Wells, the Rural Life Museum at Reading, Blaise Castle House Museum, Bristol, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

The Blake Museum's catalogue notes there are 13 named pole heads in the collection, but there is no information as to their origin. They are: Nether Stowey, Chilcompton, Ansford, Ditchat, Castle Cary, Sogursey, Meare, Wincanton, Woolavington, and Ashcott. There are two unnamed, possibly Barrington & West Pennard. There is another from Nether Stowey Men's Friendly Society (Rose & Crown), and another, possibly West Monkton or North Petherton.

Many thanks to Mike Searle for help in writing this.

OBITUARY

Bernice Lashbrook 1942-2024

By Dr Miles Kerr-Peterson

Bernice Lashbrook died on Monday 11 March 2024 at Musgrove Park Hospital, aged 82. She had been admitted at the end of January, but had improved sufficiently to be on the verge of going home, but took a sudden turn. She will be deeply missed, being very active for the good of the town's heritage for many years.

Bernice Axe was born in Hayes, Middlesex in 1942. Growing up she wanted to be a doctor, but on leaving school she worked as a junior and then as a secretary in various offices around London.

Bernice had impeccable skill as an administrator. She then joined an advertising agency and was allocated a small client base and also dabbled in small time modelling when clients could not afford professionals.



Bernice married Geoffrey James Lashbrook in the early 1970s. Bernice and her husband ran a reproduction furniture and import/export business. He sadly died of heart problems, aged 59 in October 1980. Now widowed, Bernice took up secretarial work again and was employed by the German company Siemens in 1982 and spent twenty happy years there before retiring to Bridgwater in 2002.

She was always public spirited, She wrote: *When I moved to Bridgwater just over 20 years ago, apart from a friend with whom I had been working for many years in Sunbury and then Chertsey and who had moved with her husband to Bridgwater a year or so before me, I didn't know anyone else.*

With a love of history and having discovered there was a small Museum in the town, I visited and before long I found myself acting as Secretary to the Friends of the Museum. It was at an interesting time as the local Council who had custody of the 16th century house in which the Museum was situated decided to close the building and develop the land for other use. No need to go into the finer details but they failed and we survived!

I also joined the Bridgwater & District Civic Society which did, and still does, a sterling job in keeping an eye on protecting precious buildings within and on the borders of the designated 'Conservation area' of the town. I again found myself acting as Secretary – funny how quickly a new person can find themselves doing this sort of thing isn't it!

Engaging with various local organisations and by offering a skill I thought might be helpful, not only did these activities enrich my life but I made an awful lot of friends so many of whom remain to this day and that has given and continues to give me much pleasure.

For the museum Bernice also conducted research and transcription. She was heavily involved in transcribing the John Chubb letters, which are now available to the public on the Bridgwater Heritage Group website. She also compiled a 26-page history of the museum, which was a working document composed to provide detailed administrative notes during efforts to save the museum from closure, following the withdrawal of Sedgemoor District Council. This sort of essential but seldom acknowledged work that Bernice was so active in.

The Civic Society then was headed by a powerhouse of talented retired grandees, particularly Dr Cattermole, Philip Smeed and Derek Gibson. Bernice was able to keep these gentlemen coordinated and provided the administrative professionalism that enabled various ambitious projects to be fulfilled, notably the heritage lottery grant that enabled the first two waves of Blue Plaques. She was unafraid to keep these gentlemen in check and rebuke any lapses into pomposity! Rightly, she was held in very high regard by them.

She left the Civic Society in about 2012, and about the time she also stepped down at the museum. This was when she was most involved with the Unitarian Congregation, becoming a lay preacher.

The only other voluntary position she retained alongside chapel was her role in the Friends of the Wembdon Road Cemetery. She was instrumental in the formation of the Friends, serving diligently as secretary from 2010 to 2019, but still attending meetings thereafter, as recently as the AGM in September 2022. At that meeting, although somewhat frail, she was characteristically joyful, thoughtful and energetic, peppered with her occa-

sional wicked sense of humour, which she reserved for close friends.

Bernice was an accomplished writer of history, poems and stories, although she was too modest to consider herself a writer or historian. Sadly, her history of the Unitarian church was lost when one of her laptops died, something which is a great loss to the town. Her transcription of the Unitarian burial register was saved at least, and is published on the Friends of the Wembdon Road Cemetery website. The Friends published a collection of her short stories about the *Critters of the Cemetery*, (2022) which raised a hearty amount of money for the restoration of memorials in the burial ground.

WHO IS WHO AT THE MUSEUM

By Stewart Richards

Cecil Luscombe

It gives me the utmost pleasure to introduce you to one of our longest serving custodians Cecil Luscombe and to thank him for his dedicated service over many years. Cecil who has just celebrated his 90th birthday, has been in the role of custodian since around 2002. On a visit to the transport room, you will see on display, several Corgi commercial vehicles in the livery of local Bridgwater businesses. These were not the original liveries and were created by Cecil after being asked to do so by Dr Peter Cattermole, former curator. He first stripped the original paint and then repainted the vehicles in those familiar local liveries. Cecil decided to volunteer at the museum because he had time on his hands and wanted something fulfilling, to occupy some of that time. Cecil states that he gains immensely from the friendships he has established with other volunteers at the museum. In addition, he adds that the many visitors he meets from across the globe are a pleasure to meet and he has learnt many interesting facts from them in his role as a custodian.



CURATOR'S CORNER

by Mike Searle

As I reported in the Spring Newsletter, I uncovered a former exhibition space on the Gallery. The conversion to put it back into use was completed in time for reopening in April. The space is now occupied by some Victorian costumes from the museum's textile collection.

The Douglas Allen negatives have now been destroyed as I reported in the last newsletter. The destruction was carried out by a specialist company.

The brick and tile collection currently held at the Brick and Tile Museum will be transferred to the South West Heritage Trust at Taunton. SWHT owns the Brick and Tile Museum.

We have been gifted a superb model of St Mary's Church, North Petherton. The model is made completely out of matchsticks. This was constructed by the late Norman (The Matchstick Man) Hutchings, and took six months to complete. The model is on permanent display in the Bygones Room.

Currently running until Sat 7th Sept is an exhibition called 'The Change in Fashion from 1066 – 1980s'. There are over 100 figures on display

which takes you on a journey through the ages. The costumes have been painstakingly researched and highly accurate fashions created. Do pay a visit to view these marvelous creations

The bell from the chapel of the 'Abode of Love' is now on permanent display in the Bygones Room.

The weathervane from the old Co-operative Store in Chapel Street/King Street has been restored and is on permanent display in the Bridgewater room..

Due to popular demand, the last exhibition for the year will see the return of the photo exhibition 'Around St John Street in the 1970s' This will run from Weds 11th Sept – 26th Oct.

The museum will close for the season on Sat 2nd November and will revert to Saturday only opening.



*Top Left: Costume display
Above "Change of Fashion
1066 – 1980s" exhibition
Top Right: North Petherton
Church Model
Left; The bell from the Abode
of Love
Right: Restored Co-op
Weather-vane*



BRIDGWATER HERITAGE GROUP

Dr Miles Kerr-Peterson & Tony Woolrich

Since the last edition of *Blake News*, an article on the history of the Cottage Inn in Wembdon has been added to the website, featuring pictures of the old thatched cottage that have been kindly supplied by Keith Roman. The original cottage jutted some way

into the modern road, and was demolished in 1937 as it was in the way.

Notes on the life of William Briwere, the founder of Bridgwater have also been added. Briwere became one of the most important men in England in the time of King Richard and King John, being one of the central men in government. He seems to have been a close personal friend of King John, and was exceptionally loyal to him. To give a flavour of him though, the fact that Briwere served as Sheriff of

Nottingham for a time in John's reign. He's probably not the Sheriff of Nottingham of legend, but this perhaps sheds a dim light on the sort of person Briwere was. He was not liked in Somerset: twenty-five years after his death it was remembered that 'did his will with many folk'. He emerged in the historical record in 1175 and died in 1226. Bridgwater was his major dynastic project. His wealth, military expertise and ambition probably meant the town's castle would have been one of the best in the country for its time.

Moving to industrial Bridgwater, Clare Spicer and Jill Trethewey have contributed an article locating all the known Rope Walks in Bridgwater. There were

walks in Hamp, Eastover and Chilton, and they are all long demolished. Six have been located. Some trace of them survive in places – the long perfectly straight path alongside Morrison's car park on the Taunton Road side being one.

Finally, a trunk of regalia and documents relating to the Loyal Quantock Lodge of Odd Fellows was donated to the Heritage Group by Steven Scarrott. This consisted of a several aprons, collars, sashes and rule books, and these have been catalogued onto the website. The best parts of the collection are now on their way to the Museum of Somerset.



Oddfellows regalia

Friends of the Wembdon Road Cemetery

By Dr Miles Kerr-Peterson

Recent additions to the website, available to Friends of the Cemetery, including:

Biographies of **Edward Harden** 1837-1924, **Mary Ann Harden née Whitting** 1850-1927, and **Lily Harden** 1869-1954. Edward Harden was a farmer at East Bower who was dedicated to improving education for farmers and farm workers, and raising standards in the dairy industry. He was one of the first to be involved in setting up the Somerset Agricultural Society. As a farmer he was additionally concerned about land drainage and water management. Edward also played a very strong role in Bridgwater civic life, becoming a Poor Law Guardian, the first chairman of the Rural District Council for Bridgwater Without, and eventually an Alderman. Mary Ann was born in Tarnock, in the parish of Badgworth, where her parents John Whitting and Mary née Harden, were running a farm of 100 acres. She was the youngest of eight siblings. She married Edward in 1868. Lily was their eldest child and only daughter. She was born at East Bower and would move with her parents to Bower Lodge on Wembdon Road after their retirement (named in honour of their old farm). In 1951 she moved to Weston super Mare.

Biographies of **William Humphrey Cox** (1856-1905) and **Emily Maude Cox** (1868-1898) née Lee, his wife. William was an aerated water manufacturer who worked at the Wembdon Brewery, near the Wembdon Road Cemetery, making the precursor of modern fizzy drinks. William was at

various times a travelling salesman for the Wembdon Brewery and also the manager of the wine vaults of Messrs Robinson & Churchill at 33 St Mary Street. By 1893 William was landlord of the Castle Inn on the Corner of Fore Street and Binford Place, then the White Hart in 1903 and then the Sailor's Return Inn in West Street in 1905. Both Emily and William met very tragic ends as a result of very poor mental health. Their shattered memorial seems to reflect their shattered states.

A triple biography of **Lewis Thompson** 1841 – 1920, his wife **Elizabeth Thompson née Deane** 1845 – 1930, and his son from his first marriage,

Lewis Francis Thompson 1871 – 1943. Lewis senior was from the Thompson Ironmongers family, prominent Quakers and would work in the other family business of Thompson and Collins Cheese Factors of St Mary Street. He married Reubenetta Elizabeth Payne in 1869, but she died in 1875, not long after the birth of Lewis Francis. In 1877, Lewis married Elizabeth Deane in Brighton. Lewis was a Temperance campaigner, a Liberal party supporter, and dabbler in composing acrostics. Elizabeth Deane was born in 1845 in Dorking, Surrey. She was the daughter of William Deane and his second wife Phebe, née Burne. As a child she lived with her parents and older brother William, over their ironmonger's shop at 11 Trafalgar Street, Brighton. She set up home with Lewis in Northfield. By 1899 she was on the committee of the Women's Liberal Association of the South and South-Western Counties. Women's Liberal Associations met to discuss Liberal party policies, including the move towards female suffrage. By 1911, Lewis had retired and they moved to a house called Roseland, 39 Wembdon Rise. Lewis died in 1920, she died in 1930. Lewis Fran-

cis Thompson served in the Great War. In 1915 Lewis joined the Army Service Corps Remounts and his regimental number was R4/140536, rank Private. A Remount Squadron had around 200 soldiers who obtained and trained horses and mules, to supply all other army units. Then Lewis seems to have transferred to the Royal Army Medical Corps within the first year. With the R.A.M.C. his regimental number was 140339. His records are lost, but he seems to have served in Malta with the 30th Company. After the war he retired. Towards the end of his life Lewis suffered a loss of mental health, and he died in the private Cotman Asylum on the 18th of March, 1943, aged 72.

Aside from the great and the good, a briefer Pauper burial ground biography of **Alice Fletcher** 1871-1877, recalls a little abandoned girl in the Bridgwater Workhouse, who died after being scalded by the fire there.

An puzzling obelisk in the cemetery recalls two unrelated families. First it includes **Tuckers of Clay Hill Farm**, which is to the west of the Quantock Road as you curve round Wembdon towards Sandford, and north of the Spaxton Road. **William Tucker** 1818-1899 was probably born at the farm and would inherit the tenancy from his father. In August 1866, William married **Fanny Inman Tucker** (1838-1891) in St Mary Redcliffe, Bristol. William retired in 1868 and the stock of the farm was auctioned off. William and Fanny moved to Cannington, and later to Northfield in Bridgwater. Their son was Charles William Harvey Tucker (Harvey) 1871-1903. Sadly William had chronic ill health and by 1901 he was needing the help of a live in nurse. Here's where the second family in this plot appear. In his final days William became close friends with Gertrude Everley Russell Gregg, née Pope 1870-1906, a truly remarkable woman who worked as a professional singer and had moved to Buenos Aires, marrying a Richard Russell Gregg there. Their marriage does not seem to have been a happy one, so she returned to England, pregnant, in 1900 with her daughter. The second daughter was born on her father's farm in Hampshire. By 1901 she was in Bridgwater, living in Northfields a few doors up from Harvey Tucker. Such was their closeness that the newborn daughter was christened in St Mary's Eileen Harvey Gregg. When Harvey died in 1903, he left a good proportion of his estate to Gertrude, including the family burial plot. When her father, Charles Pope died in 1905 she laid him to rest here. She died of alcoholism in 1906. That daughter, Eileen, would go on to be a actress using the stage name 'Everley Gregg', and would appear in many films including 'Brief Encounter'.

Continuing the theme of film stars associated with Bridgwater, **Audrey Hepburn** is a relation (sort of) to **William George Fitz-Gerald** 1832-1896. Rev Fitz-Gerald was the vicar of St Mary's Bridgwater for over thirty years, long enough to officiate at the baptisms and marriages of a whole generation of parishioners. His notable achievements were a new church organ for St Mary's, the large scale renovation of the interior of the church in 1878 and the restoration of the tower and opening of the western arch in 1888. He was made

Rural Dean of the Bridgwater district in 1890. Agnes Fitz-Gerald (1837-1911) née Matson, as vicar's wife also made an important contribution to her husband's successes. She organised the women parishioners who did so much to help the poor and needy but whose work went mostly unrecorded. There is a good chance that Agnes was a Sunday School teacher as well as regularly attending services. On top of all this, Agnes had the prime responsibility for running the house, raising the children and managing the servants.

A double biography of **Anna Hutchings** (1811-1890) née Locke and her son **Henry William Batten** (1838-1884). Anna was born in 1811 at Hillfarrance, and was one of nine children of Thomas Locke and his wife Elizabeth née Stevens. Thomas was a farm labourer and husbandman. Anna's first husband was Taunton master baker Henry Rowsell Batten, but he died on 7 December 1851 at home in Bridge Street at the age of thirty-nine. After his death she married Thomas Hutchings, surveyor and builder, and lived with him in Bridgwater. Henry William Batten (1838-1884) was Anna's son from her first husband, but Thomas looked after him and provided for his step-son. Henry was a china and glass dealer in the Cornhill, Bridgwater, but surprisingly he began as a stationer and bookseller, then a master builder and an accountant. He successfully stood for elections to become a St Mary's parish churchwarden and a town councillor. In 1857 he married Mary Jane Hall, although she died suddenly in 1867. His second wife was Cordelia Grace Parsons (1840-1919). Henry fell ill in 1883 and died in 1884. Cordelia carried on the china business in Fore Street and later High Street, and even commissioned pieces of crested china.

COFFEE MORNINGS IN AID OF FOBM FUNDS

FIRST TUESDAY OF EVERY
MONTH

10.30-12 NOON

**PLEASE BRING A SMALL ITEM TO
THE COFFEE MORNING FOR THE
RAFFLE**

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Websites:

Friends: www.blakemuseumfriends.org.uk

Museum: www.bridgwatermuseum.org.uk

Bridgwater Heritage Group:

<http://bridgwaterheritage.com>