



NEWSLETTER 58

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GROUP NEWS

CONTENTS

Editorial.....	1
Meeting Reports.....	2
Eagle House- Batheaston.	2
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING	3
The Diary of Mr Parsons, Stone Sculptor of Bath	3
A Walk through Twerton Wood and the Grounds of Wood House.....	4
A Walk Through Woolley.....	5
BOOK REVIEW	5
Peter Little, A History of a few chapels around Bath	5
NOTES AND QUERIES.....	5
Proposed change to the Constitution (To be voted on at the next AGM).....	5
EXHIBITIONS	5
NEW MEMBERS.....	5
Annex AGM Minutes	6

EDITORIAL

A note from the new editor. I accepted this job with some trepidation and 'letters to the editor' may be expected.

My thanks to Philippa Bishop, retiring editor, for her helpful advice and guidance. I will welcome short contributions including book reviews. Where ever possible we will encourage speakers to provide a resume of their talk so that members who were unable to attend may be able to read it through the newsletter.

Chris Noble

Note Program Error

Your program shows that the AGM will take place at the Building of Bath Museum.

In fact it will as usual be held at the Museum of Bath at Work

MEETING REPORTS

EAGLE HOUSE- BATHEASTON.

Home of John Wood, Suffragettes Refuge or Terrorists Training Camp'?

Tuesday 13th March 2007

St Stephen's Centre, Lansdown

Speaker and Reporter

Daniel Brown

When asked to prepare a talk for the History of Bath Research Group on the suffragettes in Batheaston, it created a fabulous opportunity to bring a little told story to a wider audience, as well as creating a dilemma, as the house had a long a varied earlier history that should also be included.

Eagle House was first reported by John Collinson in 1791 in *History and Antiquities of Somerset* as being the residence of "the late ingenious architect John Wood". This was repeated by Peach in 1876, Mowbray Green (who was responsible for alterations to the building) in 1904, and more recently by Batheaston authority Mrs. B. Wilmot Dobbie in 1967. Perhaps a good illustration of how research fails if it doesn't go back to primary sources, Collinson was most probably referring to the recently departed John Wood the younger (d. 1781). Unfortunately there are still many sources stating his father as the builder and occupier of this impressive house, something that so far has not a shed of evidence to support.

So on to the suffragettes. Eagle House was occupied by the Blathwayt family, Col. Linley and his wife Emily retiring there in 1882 from India with their two children William and Mary. The house magnificently situated at the end of Northend and at the beginning of St Catherine's valley, with large landscaped gardens rising behind it to the west.

The family were committed diarists, recording every detail of life at that time. Mercifully, most of these diaries survive, they now form an important part of the Blathwayt collection from Durham Park, housed in Gloucester County Records Office.

Col. Blathwayt was a keen naturalist, a fellow of the Linnean Society and luckily for us, a keen photographer. Emily first noted in March 1907 that her husband was in favour of women having the vote, something that was to play a large part in their lives for the next 6 or so years.

Daughter Mary was kind and gentle, a member of the BRSLI, sympathetic towards animals and described as "quiet as a mouse". After chatting with some ladies over tea in Bath, she notes her joining the WSPU (Women's Social & Political Union) in 1906. Their regional movement gave her something to occupy herself with, diligently carrying out administration duties and posting of thousands of leaflets. She first met Annie Kenney in November 1907 and fell completely under her spell.

Annie Kenney was a mill worker from Yorkshire, who was a key ally of Christabel Pankhurst, firstly basing herself in the East End of London, before coming to the West Country. With the slogan "Deeds no Words" the activities of the suffragettes had no limits, their activities bordering on what could today be called terrorism.

The struggle, escapades, arrests, imprisonments and graphic descriptions of horrific force-feeding of these courageous women is recorded in the newspapers of the day, as well as the Blathwayt diaries. Eagle House became a place of refuge for Annie Kenney, as well as an important convalescent home for those recovering from imprisonment.

From 1910, Col. Blathwayt decided that each suffragette that had been arrested, imprisoned or endured a hunger strike, should be commemorated by a garden plaque and a tree planting. The gardens to the rear of Eagle House becoming known as 'Annie's Arboretum'. He also recorded the event with a photograph of the planting ceremony. Prints of these extraordinary photographs were sold to raise campaign funds.

The talk detailed the escapades of many of these ladies, with their accompanying photographs vividly bringing them back to life. Whilst not actively participating in direct actions, the Blathwayts played a very important supporting role in the movement, however the extreme militancy of some of them became too much to bear, and their involvement declined as the war approached.

After the death of Linley and Emily, William and Mary continued to occupy the house, William continuing his poetry until his death in 1952. Mary became increasingly reclusive, withdrawing to occupy a single room of the house, dying alone in 1962. The contents of the house were cleared and auctioned in March 1962 (sale catalogue in Bath Central Library) and the house in a dilapidated state was approved for demolition, the Bath Preservation Trust no less, unconcerned with such an important house outside of the city. Thankfully, the house was saved by the current owners, restored, and converted to apartments.

During the conversion a remarkable discovery was made. In an overlooked cupboard were the diaries and photographic plates, carefully stored and thankfully remarkably preserved. As the developers bulldozers started to clear the overgrown gardens, the commemorative plaques were also revealed, now buried beside substantial trees. Several were destroyed, however a number were saved, and it was a very exciting moment when I was able to produce two of the original plaques on the evening, kindly lent by their owner.

In 1979, the Batheaston Society published a booklet called *A Nest of Suffragettes in Somerset* by Mrs. B. Wilmott Dobbie, containing many extracts from the diaries, which was a great resource for this talk.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Wednesday 18th April Museum of Bath at Work

For the minutes of the meeting please see the annex at the end of the newsletter.

Following the AGM Susan Sloman gave a talk entitled *The Diary of Mr Parsons, Stone Sculptor of Bath*

THE DIARY OF MR PARSONS, STONE SCULPTOR OF BATH

Wednesday 18th April Museum of Bath at Work

Speaker and Reporter Susan Sloman

In 2004 during a visit to the Huntington Library, at San Marino, California, I trawled 'the catalogue of manuscripts for material that might provide background information for my continuing study of the life and work of the painter Thomas Gainsborough. The catalogue entry for an anonymous diary, purchased by the Library in 1991, caught my eye, as the manuscript was said to date from 1769, and to be written in Bath. (I learnt subsequently that our Bath Archivist Colin Johnston had spotted the same diary in a dealer's catalogue, but did not have sufficient funds to acquire it.) As it turned out, this diary was not especially relevant to my Gainsborough research, but proved to be of considerable interest in other respects, and I have written an article identifying its author and placing it in the context of Bath's cultural life at this critical period in the City's history. The article is in the Winter 06-07 edition of *The British Art Journal*, still not in print in mid-April 07, but promised at any moment. Copies of the *Journal* will be available in the Bath Central Library and in Archives, in the Guildhall.

The diary covers the period January to August 1769 and is closely written in small but generally clear handwriting. The author is a stonemason, like his father who is also a preacher. He says he is 25 years old, and he has an 'uncle Giles'. He owns some land adjoining the grounds of Widcombe Manor. From all this we know he is Thomas Parsons (1744- 1813), the only son of the well-known Bath stonemason Robert Parsons (1718-1790). His uncle Giles is Robert Parsons' brother-in-law James Giles, who is mentioned in Robert's will. Robert Parsons worked on several of John Wood's major building projects, including the Bristol Exchange. While in Bristol, Robert joined the Baptist church; he subsequently became leader of Bath's Baptist community. Thomas Parsons' diary describes day-to-day activity in the Parsons yard in Claverton Street, Widcombe. It documents the making of urns, eagles and other decorative stonework of the kind the Parsons yard sent out via the River Avon to building sites all over Britain. It also opens a window on the personal life of a thoughtful and questioning young man living in the shadow of a somewhat domineering and dogmatic father. On my first reading of the diary I was struck by the thought that it would make a fascinating article, not least because it could be linked with a collection of Thomas Parsons' drawings that belongs to the Bath Central Library. These drawings, of which there are over 150, are bound into a small volume and illustrate designs for vases, sundials, chimneys and other stone features for buildings and gardens. They are later in date than the diary, but, like the diary, they show how wide-ranging Parsons' interests and influences were. In particular, they illustrate the cross-fertilisation that took place between the fine and applied arts in a city that was home to almost as many fine artists as craftsmen. In the diary Parsons sits up at night copying etchings by Thomas Worlidge (a London artist with Widcombe connections); in his book of designs he includes vases by the painters Gainsborough and William Hoare. Parsons in his diary also describes a family excursion to Bowood, where he and his father supplied decorative stonework, and several visits to the 1769 sale of the remaining contents of Prior Park. His account of the latter event can usefully be studied in tandem with the sale catalogue, of which the only known copy is in the Bath Central Library. There is certainly room for a publication printing the whole of Thomas Parsons' diary, and there is more to be discovered about his life and work. At the HBRG meeting Trevor Fawcett was able to add information about his scientific interests, which are hinted at in the diary. Kerry Birch has made a study of Robert Parsons from the point of view of the history of the Baptist church, and it was his talk to the HBRG at least a decade ago that first made me aware of the Parsons family. Elizabeth Holland's and Mike Chapman's painstaking mapping of eighteenth-century Widcombe has allowed me to locate Parsons' various properties and land in the parish.

A WALK THROUGH TWERTON WOOD AND THE GROUNDS OF WOOD HOUSE

Wednesday 16th May

Led by Mike Chapman

The history of Twerton Wood (sometimes also known as Carr's Wood, Wilkin's Wood, or Heneage's Wood, according to ownership) which lies at the north-western side of Twerton, overlooking the River Avon, has attracted much interest recently following its designation as a Local Nature Reserve. A public route through the wood, formerly a bridle path, has been opened up (with interpretation boards) which begins at the eastern end of the wood in Walwyn Close - just across the road from the parish church of St. Michael. However, on this occasion a visit was first made to the site of Wood House which once stood nearby on the edge of the wood.

Although a wood has stood on this site since at least the early middle ages, its original extent and outlines are unclear, nor are there any indications of ancient woodland surviving today. Its present form was established in the late 1830s by Charles Wilkins who acquired all the riverside mills in Twerton in the early 1800s and developed them into modern woollen factories. Wilkins also acquired much of the old manorial estate of West Twerton, including the wood, which was adapted to serve as a pleasure ground adjoining his new mansion house. Wood House, as it came to be known, was built in 1837 by Bath architect Edward Davis (designer of Victoria Park) as a replacement for Wilkins' original house and pleasure gardens by the Lower Mill following their demolition for the construction of Brunel's Great Western Railway viaduct into Bath. The railway, which passes through a tunnel under the wood, has itself now become a feature of historical interest.

Unfortunately the house (which once included stables, coachman's lodge and farm) was demolished in 1965 and replaced by flats, but part of its lawn, garden mound and screen of beech trees still remain. Also remaining, it later transpired, were the kitchen cellars of the house which had not been properly filled in, and were only discovered when some of the gardens at the back of the flats disappeared into a large hole. All that now survives above ground is a flight of ornamental stone steps leading up into the wood, visible in the undergrowth behind the flats. This formed part of a terrace along the back of the house, providing a fine view (now obscured by trees) across the river to Lansdown. Below this, the bridle path through the wood also provided communication with the mills by means of a flight of steps which can still be traced through an arch under the railway viaduct.

Immediately below the path, a mock 'bridge' or 'gallery' spans the deep railway cutting at the approach to the tunnel, ornamented, like the tunnel portal, with castellated turrets in 'Gothic' style. It is evident that 'Mr. Wilkins' Bridge', as Brunel called it, was designed to disguise the railway from the view from the house. Although later alterations to the wood were probably carried out by Wilkins' successors, the Carr family who had some interest in horticultural improvements (flower shows were held on the lawn in front of the house), it would seem that much of his original layout remains more or less intact. Continuing westward along the bridle path, it is still evident that the wood was divided into two partitions. The eastern end, around the mansion site, is marked by varieties of ornamental species of trees and shrubs (e.g. holm oak, yew, holly, and even bamboo!) which served as a garden below the house, whilst the western end, situated over the tunnel, appears as true woodland, consisting almost entirely of standard trees (mainly beech). In this part also, one can see remains of old limestone quarries in the upper slopes, one of which was acquired by Ralph Allen for the Avon Navigation Company in 1727 to build the lock in the new canal which bypassed the mill-weirs across the river below.

A few hundred yards further on, the trackway enters the field known as the Great Berry, following a line of old hawthorns towards the Gothic western portal of the railway tunnel. Even in poor weather conditions (as on this occasion) there is a magnificent view to be had from the crenellated parapet of the tunnel entrance, looking over the Avon Valley towards New Bridge and Kelston Manor. The bridle path then continues through an avenue of beech plantations which follows the valley overlooking Newton Brook, towards Pennyquick View. From here an old footpath continues through an iron 'kissing gate' down to an iron footbridge over the brook and Newton Mill, the latter now converted to a restaurant belonging to the Newton Mill Camping Site. Pennyquick View, now landscaped to form a playing field, was formerly the site of a limestone quarry and colliery. The coal pit was sunk by Wilkins in about 1840, but the seams below ground were very disturbed, and the colliery was eventually closed in the mid 1870s. The quarry, started at about the same time, was more successful. It was used for lime burning and eventually reached a depth of 20 feet with at least three limekilns. After it finished production in the 1930s it was back-filled with demolition material removed from Bath following the blitz on the city in 1942. All that now remains of coal mine the black shale of the spoil heap that forms the western edge of the playing field and a capped shaft in the valley below. Here the walk concluded before returning to the church along Newton Road.

A WALK THROUGH WOOLLEY

Wednesday 14th February

Led by David Crellin and Brenda Buchanan

The group assembled at Woolley Church on a rather damp and wet evening. David outlined the history of the village and the origins of the very beautiful church which was designed by John Wood the younger. The old church was in ruins by the mid 1700's and Elizabeth Parkin who had inherited Woolley Manor decided to commission Wood to rebuild it.

Fortunately after this the rain cleared and we were able to look round the churchyard which contains a number of interesting graves including that of Peter Puget C.B. after whom Puget Sound, Seattle, Washington was named.

The Bath Chronicle memorialized him:

"Died on Thursday 31st October at his home in Grosvenor Place, after a long and painful illness, Rear Admiral Peter Puget C.B. This lamented officer had sailed round the world with the late Captain Vancouver, had commanded various men-of-war and was many years Commissioner at Madras, the climate of which place greatly contributed to the destruction of his health."

We moved on to walk through the village towards the Lam brook and the site of Woolley Powder mills. At this point Brenda took the lead for the walk giving a fascinating insight into the layout history and development of the Powder mills which had been developed by the Parkin family. For more details of the history of the Woolley Powder mills Brenda has written a comprehensive article in Bath History Volume X Page 72.

BOOK REVIEW

PETER LITTLE, A HISTORY OF A FEW CHAPELS AROUND BATH

Published by Peter Little

Peter Little who accompanied us on the Twerton walk, has published an illustrated booklet describing 16 chapels or former chapels mostly in Bath, but including examples as far afield as Grittleton, Box, Corsham, Brokerswood and Dunkerton. Most but not all were built as non-conformist chapels. I was intrigued to learn that Harrods, anticipating IKEA, sold flat-pack tin chapels to be erected in the colonies as well as at home. Two tin chapels are included in Peter Little's book. It is an interesting piece of work full of items of local history about ministers, builders and church communities and tempts the reader to start walking and exploring.

NOTES AND QUERIES

PROPOSED CHANGE TO THE CONSTITUTION (TO BE VOTED ON AT THE NEXT AGM)

It is proposed that Paragraph 4 changes from:

"General Meetings. An annual general meeting is held in April each year when an annual report and accounts for the preceding year are presented, a new Committee is elected and a level of subscription is decided for the ensuing year."

To:

"General Meetings. An annual general meeting is held in April each year when an annual report and accounts for the preceding year are presented, a new Committee is elected and a level of subscription is decided for the ensuing year. The subscription is due on 1st October and a reminder will be sent to members with the annual programme."

EXHIBITIONS

As well as the exhibition on the Slave trade at the Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol we have had five exhibitions in Bath museums to mark the two hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the Slave Trade by Parliament, held at Beckford's Tower, Number One Royal Crescent, The Herschel, the Building of Bath Museum, and the Holburne.

NEW MEMBERS

Daniel Brown

ANNEX AGM MINUTES

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

1. Apologies were received from Godfrey Laurence, Julia Moss. We had a good turnout with 22 members present representing about one quarter of the membership.
2. A motion to confirm the minutes of the meeting of 12th April 2006 was proposed by Trevor Fawcett and seconded by Mac Hopkins Clarke. The motion was carried unanimously.
3. A motion to elect the co-opted members as full members of the committee, John, Chris Noble and Nigel Pollard, was proposed by Mary Ede and seconded by Philippa Bishop. The motion was carried unanimously.
4. David Crellin took the chair for a proposal to re-elect Michael Rowe as chairman. The motion was proposed by Bill Hanna and seconded by Pauline Hanna. The motion was carried unanimously.
5. David Crellin was proposed for re-election as Secretary. The motion was proposed by Michael Rowe and seconded by John Ennor. The motion was carried unanimously.
6. John Ennor was proposed for election as Treasurer and Barbara Humble as the independent overseer of the accounts. This motion was proposed by Michael Rowe and seconded by Trevor Fawcett. The motion was carried unanimously.
7. The Chairman thanked Philippa Bishop warmly for her excellent work as a Newsletter editor. A job very well done. He also welcomed Chris Noble who has offered to take on this important role.
8. Treasures report: John Ennor confirmed that the financial position of the group remains strong with a substantial balance in the account. He proposed that the subscription should remain unchanged. The motion was proposed by Philippa Bishop and seconded by Mac Hopkins Clarke. The motion was carried unanimously. He provided a statement of accounts and a motion to accept these were proposed by Pauline Hanna and seconded by Roger Rolls. The motion was carried unanimously.
9. Report for the year by Michael Rowe:
 - a. Michael thanked everyone for supporting the group now over 20 years old. He asked for suggestions for speakers for next year noting that we could get in speakers from outside but nowadays that can be costly and the committee view was to continue to use local speakers meantime..
 - b. He called for members to notify the Secretary of email addresses as we move into the electronic age. In addition, he noted that soon members would be asked if they preferred to receive the newsletter and other group information by email alone so that postage and printing costs can be reduced. It is important to state that members who want to receive the group news by post will continue to be able to get it for the foreseeable future.
 - c. He noted that the Website still represents an issue that needs to be resolved. Meetings are planned for the committee to discuss the subject and bring a proposal to the next AGM.
 - d. He drew the attention of members to the new website of Daniel Brown, www.bathintime.co.uk . It is a growing resource of images of Bath. Pictures from private collections, some unpublished, are being added all the time.
 - e. The chairman highlighted the nationwide fall in museum attendances and urged members to promote the Bath facilities as actively as possible.
 - f. The opening of the Bath Spa was described as history in the making and that its socioeconomic effects would be the substance of future research.
 - g. Members' achievements were applauded including Dr John Wroughton's book on medieval Bath and the establishment of a business by David McLoughlin and Kay Ross providing historical research services for property owners.
 - h. The chairman thanked the committee most sincerely for its work over the year.