



# Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme



## 3.4: Unlocking The Archives - Project Report

15th May 2024

### 1. Aims of the Project

The primary aim of QLPS project *3.4 Unlocking the Archives* was to catalogue and conserve collections of archive material relating to the history of the Quantock Hills which were held in store at the Somerset Heritage Centre, and to make them available to the public for research.

#### 1.1 Background

In common with most County Records Centres, the South West Heritage Trust (SWHT) has a backlog of archival material, awaiting cataloguing and conservation at the Somerset Heritage Centre. These collections are usually acquired when estates are sold off or gifted as legacies and take a huge amount of skilled staff and volunteer time to process. Records collections can vary between a single box to upwards of 15 boxes. Until they have been examined and catalogued it is impossible to know what these collections consist of, but typically they might contain documents such as maps and deeds, accounts, personal and business correspondence, survey maps, and other images which can reveal a wealth of information about an estate's or businesses' landholding, management, role in the local economy, and owning family.

Amongst this material were several Quantock estate, family, and business records from the 18th and 19th centuries. This information is clearly of immense value to a variety of researchers, from someone researching the history of a particular property through to academic social historians. *3.4 Unlocking the Archives* aimed to box, conserve, and catalogue at least 10 historical collections. In addition, the project aimed to catalogue and conserve the archives of the Friends of Quantock and the Kingston Historical Society, both of which approached the QLPS during the development.

Once catalogued and appropriately conserved, details of these collections would be made available to the public, via the Somerset Archives on-line catalogue, and the original

documents made available for study in the search room at the Somerset Heritage Centre, Taunton.

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1 Project Design*

The project was intended to run for 24 months, based at the SWHT Somerset Heritage Centre at Norton Fitzwarren, on the western outskirts of Taunton. The intention was for eight volunteers to be recruited and trained in cataloguing and conservation techniques and to work alongside the professional archivists at the South West Heritage Centre to undertake this work.

### *2.2 Impact of Covid-19 and change of approach.*

*3.4 Unlocking the Archives* was one of the QLPS Historic Heritage projects most impacted by the national lockdowns around Covid-19. Primarily, this was due to the inevitable closure of the Somerset Heritage Centre. Even when the building began to re-open to the public, requirements for social distancing meant numbers were strictly limited, thereby restricting access for our volunteers who would have to share the space with other researchers and members of the public.

#### *2.2.2 South West Heritage Trust Land Tax Project*

For this reason, a change of approach was adopted, which involved recruiting volunteers to assist with The South West Heritage Trust Land Tax Project, a long-term project to digitise and transcribe Somerset Archives' collection of Land Tax Returns. These are annual returns for each Somerset parish, beginning c.1766 and ending c.1832. Photographs of these records would be sent to volunteers for transcribing and editing, before being returned to the SHC to be preserved and made available to visitors. The project was planned in such a way that volunteers will be able to work from home, anywhere in the world. Working with Kate Parr, Local Studies Librarian at SHC, we were able to recruit volunteers to work on Land Tax Records for the Quantock Parishes, thereby providing an opportunity for volunteers to begin work remotely on relevant and much needed digitisation of documents, while we awaited the launch of the project proper.

#### *2.2.3 Cataloguing and Conservation*

Uncertainty around Covid-19 and the removal or otherwise, of restrictions to access to the Heritage Centre, also led to a change of approach regarding the core work of cataloguing and conserving the various Quantock-related archive collections. To avoid the need for volunteers to work in close proximity to staff whilst being trained in the meticulous work of cataloguing this material, it was decided to remove the volunteer element of the cataloguing process, enabling the archivists to begin the time-consuming process of cataloguing and conserving the archive collections.

#### *2.2.4 Research*

In order to provide alternative volunteering opportunities, a new element was introduced to the project. Once Covid-19 restrictions were lifted and public access to the archives resumed, a small team of volunteers were recruited to undertake research of both the newly catalogued collections and existing Quantock-related material. Trained and supported by SWHT staff archivists, the volunteers were tasked with pulling out stories for a series of blog posts to be hosted on SWHTs website. Working closely with the SHC archivists, led by Esther Hoyle, the volunteers researched and produced short pieces of up to 500 words on various broad social history themes such as, work; education, religion, celebrations.

#### *2.3 Accessibility*

Covid-19 may also have been a factor in the limited success of *3.4 Unlocking the Archives* as a means of creating opportunities for volunteers with physical disability or mobility issues.

As the work was predominantly desk-based project, and the Somerset Heritage Centre is a fully accessible building, it was hoped there would be no barriers to participation for less active people, or people with mobility disabilities. The resulting opportunities were to be promoted through Compass Disability as well as general volunteer recruitment media, with a volunteer expenses budget ear-marked to cover travel costs.

Despite several phone calls and virtual meetings with Compass Disability, no volunteers were recruited through this route. We subsequently worked with Somerset Disability Network who had expressed interest in our attempts to engage disability groups. Through them we set up an introductory event at the Somerset Heritage Centre, aimed specifically at these groups. However, rather than working with their own clients, Somerset Disability Network is effectively a referral service. Therefore, the success of the event was reliant on them engaging individuals and offering the specific opportunity. Frustratingly, this did not produce any results, and the only person with restricted mobility who attended was an interested volunteer who came independently through a networking event hosted by PLUS Positive People.

In contrast, the wider QLPS had other successful engagement attempts with Somerset Sight and Deafinate. These avenues are still open and could yield more volunteer engagement across any future historic heritage legacy projects.

### **3. Results**

#### *3.1 Cataloguing and Conservation*

In total, QLPS funded 96 days of archivists' time, spent on cataloguing the various Quantock related archive collections. As a result of this work, 12 collections were physically sorted and appropriately packaged to aid their conservation, and internal finding aids and location systems updated. The archive catalogue was edited and finalised with all relevant authority files added. These collections can now be viewed both in the searchroom at the Somerset Heritage Centre and via the Somerset Archives' online catalogue. These twelve collections are:

- The Esdaile family archive
- Papers of Edwin Hellard, solicitor of Stogumber
- Brooke-Popham family archive
- Papers concerning Thomas Poole of Nether Stowey
- Records relating to Grove Farm, Pickney, Kingston St Mary
- Papers of Charles Rowcliffe, solicitor of Stogumber
- Deeds for Higher Vexford Farm, Stogumber and Hartrow Manor and Estate
- Deeds for Higher and Lower Blindwell (later Blindwell Farm), Nether Stowey
- Family settlements of the Warre family of Fyne Court, Broomfield
- Deeds for properties at Nether Stowey (archival reference DD/X/DAVS)
- The archive of the Kingston St Mary Local History Society
- The archive of the Friends of Quantocks

### *3.2 Volunteer Research*

The research volunteers created a number of blog posts which are gradually being released via the South West Heritage Trust/Somerset Archives website, where they will form a long-term digital archive: <https://swheritage.org.uk/projects/quantocks-lps/> See appendix for some examples of the volunteers' work.

### *3.3 The South West Heritage Trust Land Tax Project*

The transcription of the land tax returns for all the identified Quantocks parishes was completed, this equates to 45 individual tithings which is a huge achievement by the volunteers. All of the Quantocks tithings are now available for the public to access via the searchroom computers at the Somerset Heritage Centre.

### *3.3 Volunteer Engagement and Research*

A total of 15 volunteers took part in the project, 6 researching and writing blogs, and 9 transcribing Land Tax Records. These volunteers devoted a total of 338.4 days of volunteer time to the project, providing £46,372 of in-kind contributions.

A total of 31 days of professional archivists' time was devoted to supporting and engaging with the volunteer team, in the form of initial induction and training sessions, ongoing support and regular 'catch-up' sessions.

### *3.4 Public Engagement*

In addition to the volunteers, 77 beneficiaries were directly engaged with the project, through participation in either online talks or in-person 'Introducing the Archives' sessions at the Somerset Heritage Centre.

Four 'Introducing the Archives' sessions were held. These gave participants a chance to learn about the kinds of material held in the Somerset Archives, and how they can be accessed to aid with their own research. These sessions were variously made available to members of

the Friends of the Quantocks, Quantock U3A, Quantock Hills National Landscape volunteers, and clients of Somerset Disability Network, along with members of the general public.

Two online talks were held relating to *3.4 Unlocking the Archives* as part of Somerset Archives' programme of 'Coffee Time Talks'. These talks allowed an opportunity for the volunteers to share the results of their own research as well as sharing their experiences of taking part in the project.

Further remote public engagement was supported by a Document of the Month feature, shared across the QLPS and SWHT social media platforms, featuring individual documents relating to the history of the Quantocks.

### *3.5 Equipment purchases*

The project funded the purchase of a new laptop computer for use by archive volunteers at the Somerset Heritage Centre. In addition, preservation and conservation equipment was purchased to facilitate the packaging and safe storage of the archival collections. This included archival card and paper for packaging and labels, materials to make bags to protect pendant seals, unbleached cotton archive tape and specialist pens and pencils for the labelling of documents.

## **4. Conclusions**

*3.4 Unlocking the Archives* was one of the QLPS Historic Heritage Projects most disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns. This resulted in substantial changes to project design, specifically with the removal of opportunities for volunteers to take part in the process of conservation and cataloguing of the physical archive. Covid-19 may also have been a factor in the failure of the project to successfully engage volunteers with physical disability or other restrictions on their mobility, despite working with partners at both Compass Disability and Somerset Disability Network.

Despite these difficulties, however, the project successfully exceeded targets for volunteer engagement, and volunteers were able to learn new skills in both transcription of historic documents and archive research. Similarly, the targets for conservation and cataloguing of historic collections relevant to the Quantock landscape have been met, with twelve new collections now available for researchers at the Somerset Heritage Centre, and searchable on the Somerset Archives' online catalogue.

## Appendix: Three Examples of Volunteer Blogs

### 1. Punishments in Quantock's Victorian and Edwardian Schools

by Gill Young

Whilst researching schools on the Quantocks I came across references to how children were punished for poor behaviour in a Victorian Sunday school. This led me to investigate further, and I found a village elementary school whose punishment book for 1904-1927 was in the archives. These two documents give a small window into children's' school life in Victorian and Edwardian rural Somerset.

My interest was initially sparked by a document *Williton Wesleyan Sunday School 1820 – 1920* (D/N/wsc 5/4/2). The information about punishments in this blog refers to the early years of the school, which was founded in the same year as Williton's first Methodist chapel. In the 1820's seventy to eighty children attended both morning and afternoon each Sunday. Their parents were fined if they did not attend. They were primarily taught to read the Bible and spelling. Teaching was conducted by a large group of congregants under the supervision of a superintendent.

Instructions on punishment include putting "a mark of disgrace on them and place them in a conspicuous part of the school or make them kneel on a form." However, the children were also to be awarded merit tickets for punctual attendance. The superintendent and the teachers were also fined for being absent or late and "for various omissions and commissions". Fines were abolished in 1878.

The second document I investigated was *Punishment Book – Nether Stowey 0904 – 1927* (C/E/4 166/3). I had to seek special permission to view this archival material as it is possible its entries could refer to people still living; therefore, no names are included in this article. I decided to look at what happened in one calendar year, 1910. The children were punished for a wide range of actions, for example, cheating, carelessness with work, lateness, lying, wasting time during lessons, talking in lessons, passing notes, fighting during playtime, bad language, and the girls were punished for chasing the boys during playtime and kissing them.

Punishment came mainly in two forms, depending on the perceived severity of the poor behaviour, and the child's age. Punishments appeared to be applied to both boys and girls similarly, although fewer girls were punished. Children were caned on the hand one to six times for minor misdemeanours. The flat of a ruler was used for young children. For serious misbehaviour such as fighting, spitting at other children, being rude to their teacher and robbing an orchard of apples during dinner time, children were whipped with a cane, again one to six times. In 1910 there are forty-eight punishment records, forty-three were strokes on the hand records, and five relate to whipping. These records frequently referred to groups of children being punished together for a group misdemeanour, and often involved both boys and girls.

In all in 1910, ninety-seven boys and twenty-five girls were caned on the hand, whilst six boys and one girl were whipped. The list of children being punished contains many repeat names for both boys and girls, the record showing it was predominantly a small group of children who were repeatedly punished, suggesting it had little deterrent effect. In 1911 one mother removed

her daughter from school because she had received one stroke on the hand with the cane for persistent lateness. Otherwise, there is no comment in this early twentieth century record on these physical punishments in this village school being considered too harsh or unusual. The use of the ruler across the hand was still used by some teachers in my primary school in the 1950's/early 60's and occasionally one of the boys was caned on the bottom for fighting.

Most of the children's misdemeanours recorded in both these documents are like those children commit in school today, however, this blog illustrates the change in society's attitude to children's misbehaviour and physical punishment of children in schools over the last two hundred years.

## **2. Coronation of Queen Victoria - Thursday 28th June 1838**

by Amanda Smith

Queen Victoria was coronated on 28<sup>th</sup> of June 1838 in Westminster Abbey. What made this event stand out from previous coronations was the decision to make the event more public. The reason for this development was the newly built railway system which was expected to bring hordes of people living outside the Capital into the centre to take in the atmosphere and sights. Over 400,000 people travelled to London for the event. The sheer volume of people prompted the officials to extend the period of celebrations to four days. For those unable to travel, celebrations were encouraged to take place up and down the country.

Organising appropriate events became a national past time, involving at a local level the clergy and landowner. The people of the Quantocks eagerly awaited the national holiday. Behind the scenes letters were to and fro-ing between relevant parties, concerning the arrangements.

Mr. B. Pope the vicar of Nether Stowey corresponded with local landowner Sir Peregrine Acland concerning the celebratory arrangements for the village. With only a few weeks to go before the 28th of June, Mr. Pope, on 2nd May, confirmed in writing that the Parish desired a Coronation dinner for the poor of the village, followed by amusements. Mr. Pope was happy for the dinner to take place on the lawn of the vicarage and the 'rural amusements' on nearby Coutte Hill. The overall cost was likely to be £30, the village had £20 and therefore a shortfall. A few weeks later 23 June the Vicar wrote again to Mr. Acland with much relief to say that further monies had been raised. Those of the village who were deemed to have the means but unwilling to contribute were named and shamed in the letter.

In addition, Mr. Pope detailed the plan of the day's events. There would be 8 long tables each seating 50 people. To ensure exemplary behavior throughout, a respectable person would be sat at each end of the table. All poor above 6 years were invited with expected numbers of 400. The dinner was beef and plum pudding; the beef would be served cold, the pudding and potatoes hot. The men could have 2 drinks, the women 1 and the children half.

After the meal, festivities would move to Coutte Hill where sports would take place, to include a donkey race; jumping in sacks and climbing a greasy pole, all topped off by a bonfire. For other members of the village a dance would be held for the young men and maidens at the Club Room. For the tradesmen, a supper was laid on at a local restaurant called Blakes. The Vicar declared he would attend all above festivities. What a busy day and evening!

The final activity mentioned in Mr. Pope's letter involved the infants. The children would be given high tea in the school room and would be given bonnets. The cost for this was placed at £10. Interestingly the vicar didn't seem to think his presence was required at the children's tea party! Leaving the details to the school master.

Celebrations in nearby Holford were done with less aplomb. Only five days before the 28th did the Vicar write to Sir Peregrine Acland to confirm that a dinner would be held for the poor at a cost of £7 2s. He goes on to say that in order to prevent the participants from drinking, an amusement will be put on at a cost of £1 - kindly donated by Lady St. Albyn from Alfoxton Hall. His letter was primarily concerned with ensuring sobriety amongst his flock and unfortunately, we have no further details on the day.

### **3. Stogumber and Baptists**

by Jacqueline Spearing

An Anglican Churchman, John Smith, became convinced that the baptism of infants was unnecessary and should only be for believers who could make up their own minds. Whilst in Amsterdam, he baptised himself and in 1612 brought a small group of followers to London where he set up the first General Baptist Church. Different versions of Baptists emerged in the 1600's, but they all agreed that Baptising should be done by full immersion in water.

Many separatist churches came to Somerset during the civil war.

The Baptists were originally endowed in the village of Stogumber in 1690, a year after the Act of Toleration granted by William and Mary. Jane Prowse of Old Cleeve was a supporter of the teachers and preachers of the Baptist faith and on 8<sup>th</sup> April 1690, she endowed the sum of £250 for 5000 years "for the benefit and behoof for such godly and pious persons of sermons and exemplary conversations of said teachers of God's holy word in and about the towns of Dunster, Stogumber and Taunton". (T/PH/VCH50). The money was to be invested in land and the interest on this was to be distributed, £50 to Taunton and the £200.00 to the preachers of Stogumber and Dunster. The trustees invested in the purchase of Ganders farm and Mill near Bampton in Devon, the rents providing the endowment. There was not a congregation in Stogumber until 1718, and the original chapel was erected in 1729. (T/PH/VCH/50) The present building was built on the same site in 1868. Stogumber was the senior church of all Exmoor Baptists.

Robert Fuller was the minister of Stogumber Baptist Church in the 1790's. His brother Andrew was first secretary of the Baptist Missionary society that supported William Carey to take the gospel to India. In support of this Robert Fuller sailed for India in 1792.

Also in the 1790's, Eleanor Hurford was converted to the Baptist faith. She was engaged to Robert Moore, who was not a Christian. Eleanor persuaded Robert to attend Chapel with her, but he would only go once. She informed him that she was going to be baptised, which would take place in the river just outside of the village. Eleanor asked him to come to the ceremony, to which he agreed, but in order to show his contempt, he set up a table of beer pots, and when Eleanor stepped out of the river, he intended to throw his dog in the water with her. However, as she testified her faith, he had a conversion. They were married in 1805 and sailed for India to join the missionary work of William Carey at Serampore. (Ref DNsr.b7/2/1).