



watchet maritime heritage project stories of seafarers, smugglers and shantymen

Here are listed twenty stories, related to Watchet Harbour and local coastline, the people who have lived here and those living here right now. Purposefully avoiding overly familiar tales, this is not a definitive list but instead forms a starting point for research.

Can you, or someone you know, add any meat to the bones?

1. Watchet's own fishing fleet.

Contained in a report to the Admiralty in 1847 from the Harbour and Railway authorities there were in fact 10 x Flat boats and 20 x fishermen working out of Watchet Harbour stake fishing.

Link directly to the Boat Museum. No mention of Watchet fleet in the Museum.

What is stake fishing?

Are there any stake fishermen left?

Anybody still living in Watchet whose ancestors were fleet fishermen in Watchet?

End of the fishing fleet 1925 when the Council agreed to the Army Base at Doniford, restricting the access to the fore shore and the fishing nets.

2. Raising of the Bethel flag. 1823

Friendly Societies were being opened in major seaports. In 1823 a Watchet ship hoisted a Bethel flag in Watchet Harbour. This was for "Divine Service" encouraged by the response they raised the flag in Minehead. The Customs officers were not impressed and the ship's captain was told that if he did it again they could be liable for a £500 fine! The ship was called the Industry.

What is a friendly society? Specifically, the Brotherhood of the Sea?

What was a Bethel Flag? What was "divine service" was it a call to prayer?

Why were Customs so anti raising the flag in Minehead?

£500 is a massive fine, how much is that today?

Was the Industry a Watchet ship?

3. Textile trade in Watchet.

On investigating there are many accounts of textiles being traded in Watchet, Watchet Blue cloth, Wool trade, Linen trade. Ships bringing High ranking persons for the purchase of Watchet Blue. Ships taking wool to Wales and ships arriving from Ireland with Linen.

Watchet blue stories linked to Charles I and Charles II, Queen Catherine and Uniforms of Watchet Blue supplied for Sir Hugh Willoughbys expedition to China. 1553

Many locations in Watchet seem to have a link to textile trade ie Rack Close (where East Key now stands), Stoates Mill, Old Manor Mill (at end of market street?) Rack meadow, Blanket factory at Doniford and Swillbridge Mill, all have links to cloth production and export.

Almyr Terrace and Portland Terrace two of the oldest street in Watchet. Built of Irish Stone brought here as ships ballast?

Lots of information about Welsh rock and bricks but explore the link between Ireland and Watchet and the textile trade. If the ballast which built Almyr terrace is Irish, what was the cargo exchange?

Was the wool/linen being imported or exported?

4. Christmas storm and the formation of the smallest District Council in England. 1900-1902

Prior to 1900 the harbour trading was going through a decline. Ships registered in Watchet were spending more and more time at sea because there was little or no business in the Port. The ships used to come back once a year at Christmas time. Traditionally with a Christmas tree atop of the Mast. At Christmas 1900 there were 13 ships harboured in Watchet. On the evening of the 27th December there was an horrendous storm and the ships in the harbour were smashed or lost.

What happened to all the sailors and Watchet's economy?

What happened to all the timber from the boats?

There was no money to repair the harbour and after many attempts at fundraising Watchet created the smallest district council in England to access government funds.

5. William Dashwood 1682

Collector of Customs and his relationship with the Smugglers!

In the 'History of part West Somerset' by Chadwick Healy, he says of Watchet that it was a hive of smuggling activity. So much so that Charles II sent his man Culliforde to investigate. Culliforde reported that one William Dashwood the local customs collector spent most of the time in the Pub!

Dashwood's assistant turned whistleblower and eventually got Dashwood's job!

Where was the Blue Anchor Pub in Watchet? Where was the Ship Inn in Watchet?

One Captain Hooper and his crew on ship called the Industry sailed away when challenged by the Kings officers over non payment of duties on Brandy and Rum.

6. The Besley Family rope makers.

Owners of a Watchet Flatner (Nick Cotton has information to pass to me) and part of the Watchet fishing fleet. Were they part of the below?

7. Yard Beach boat makers. Thriving boat making industry on Yard Beach which was where East Quay now stands. Were moved from the site to make way for the Quay to be built. Started a new business in Doniford not actually making boats by extending boats by cutting them in half and inserting a new middle!!

8. Best lime in the country for building in water.

The harbour only staying in one piece because of the mortar!

9. Civil War Battle 1640's soldiers on horseback took royalist ship at sea!!

In 1643 during the English Civil War, a Royalist ship was sent to Watchet to reinforce for the siege of Dunster Castle. Parliamentarian (Roundhead) Captain Popham ordered his troops into the sea with the tide on the ebb, and with the ship unable to move, attacked the ship with fire from their carbines. Taken by surprise and under heavy attack, the Royalist commander surrendered the ship, resulting in a ship technically at sea being captured by troops on horseback.

10. The sailing of the hand operated maintenance trolley

11. HMS Fox the largest ship ever to entre Watchet Harbour.

After the First World War HMS Fox was declared surplus to requirements by the Admiralty. It was brought to Watchet to be broken by a Cardiff company. It took three years to break up and was considered a financial failure for the company but was a godsend for those returning from the war as she provided employment for many local Watchet men.

12. Joys of being a tidal harbour.

Being a tidal harbour has itself been the reason for some interesting sailing stories. Because there was no water in the harbour for many hours, ships would queue at Blue Anchor waiting to enough draught to get into the harbour. This created races for the entrance as soon as a captain believed there was enough water and there are many tales of boats running into each other and ships grounding. To reduce the risk a black ball was raised on the harbour Wall when there was 8ft. This meant that the smaller vessels would be able to get in first.

There are many tales of storms creating havoc in the harbour because of the tides and when the building of the Esplanade created to protect the properties it increased the size of the waves!

How do you put out a fire on a boat if you don't have a fire service?

13. Harbour Mud..... a tale of how mud sticks

With the addition of quaysides, the mud became a problem. There have been so many plans to get rid of the mud that the ways devised to do so are worth investigating.

How many plans to get rid of the mud?

Shovelling it into the river.

Farm hands and wagons.

The fire engine that got stuck!

The boiler and steam winch.

Mechanical digger and dumper trucks

The Perseverance (fitted with high pressure water pumps)

Dredger

Any more?

14. Mr. W.R. Butt and the bombing targets.

In 1945 Mr Butt a contractor for the Air Ministry. Taking over the Mineral Yard and the lifeboat house for the storage and repair of rocket and bombing targets. This is linked with Doniford Camp and the Queen Bee. Targets out in the channel were also maintained by the company.

Tale of a local boatman who like all Watchet people, love a bargain, painted his canopy with the target paint which was going free. Taking his boat out to sea on a day when there was supposedly no bombing practise nearly got blasted out of the water by a bomb being dropped from a plane! Who was that boatman?

Watchmoor target practice 1935-1950

15. The Slave Trade

In 1670 Evan Ragland from Somerset –the ancestor of all the American Raglands- arrived in Virginia. He-14 years old-and his cousin John Davis had been abducted (“shanghaied”) from the dock of the port town of Watchet in Somerset- a crude but common practise at the time.

The Raglands lived in Stogumber and St Decumans Parish near Watchet. The boys had taken a stroll on the Dock when they were thrown on a ship that took them under harsh conditions to Virginia. Evan was sold as a labourer to Stephen Pettus a plantation owner in New Kent County. After seven years he was able to buy his freedom! He eventually married the Plantations daughter and inherited all the wealth!

There was also a Watchet Anti-slavery society in 1814-1823.

16. The tale of George Eskott and the capture of the Pirate King.

1608. George Eskott a Watchet Sailor was captured by the notorious Lundy Pirate Thomas Salkeld along with his crew and taken to Lundy where they were incarcerated. Once the pirates had consumed the Brandy onboard Eskott’s boat the captured sailors led by Eskott broke free and attacked the drunken pirates. Armed only with a shovel Eskott attacked Salkeld breaking his arm. The pirates were overwhelmed, tied up ad taken onboard Eskott’s vessel back to Watchet where the authorities were waiting.

James I was so impressed that he rewarded Eskott with a pension.

17. Rushlight and Arran Monarch.

The Clyde puffers used for the transportation of materials for the Paper Mill.

18. Mud sports in the Harbour

Mud sports in the harbour were a familiar sight in the late 70's and early 80's coming to an end in 1984(?). Team games and individual trials made for a fun filled afternoon of activities. David Milton was MC for the very last mud sports. Memories of lost wellies, greased poles and the 100-yard squelch are spoken about with fondness and a hankering back to a time when Health and safety was not considered to the extent that is today. Where getting into a scrap was part of the risk involved and not a means to claim a vast sum of money in damages.

Before the mud became such a regular sight there is talk of cricket being played on the sand in the Harbour!

18. Frozen harbour

In the winter of 1962-1963 the harbour at Watchet froze over. There are many people in Watchet today that can regale us with tales of the time the harbour froze, let's collect these memories before they are lost!

19. The launching of the Watchet Lifeboat.

The Watchet Lifeboat station was open in 1875.

Because of the tidal nature of the harbour low water launching of the life boat was done by horse drawn carriage. Eight horses were required to take the first lifeboat the Joseph Soames down to the water. Along through the harbour avoiding the muddiest parts and out across the fishing grounds to the launching site. Later the horses were changed for a tractor unit.

There are many stories of rescues from Minehead Fishermen to French aviators!

Investigate the stories of rescues. The Rose and the Olive Branch 1876(?) The Kelso 1883, Minehead sailors 1899, the crew of the Rosalie 1899, the crew of the Annie Christian 1904, 'Salmet' the French aviator 1920.

20. The Watchet Anchors.

Situated in Watchet are 3 large anchors. Each was recovered by local sailors and brought back to Watchet. One at the boat museum believed to be a trading ketch anchor caught by Steve Yeandle on the anchor of his own boat. Another sits on the harbour wall and the third is painted blue and on the entrance to the town.

What stories could these anchors tell and how did they get to the places they are now?