



The Community Newsletter of TOTSOC - the Totnes and District Society

Welcome to the Autumn 2024 Edition of Contact.

In this edition we remember TOTSOC's Honorary President, Judy Westacott, and all she did for Totnes over many years.

We also have interesting articles on one of Totnes historic buildings, Bogan House, and on bats, not in the belfry but in Totnes Museum.

Last August we emailed all members regarding the issue of traffic in Fore Street and High Street. It's almost 10 years since the scheme implemented by Devon County Council was withdrawn following High Court action. Since then, the number of pedestrians in the town has increased significantly and more cafes have put tables outside, so the issue of traffic nuisance and air pollution has become even more acute. We have had a number of responses from our members, mostly in favour of looking at the issue again, but would very much welcome more. At this stage we are NOT after views on how the traffic should be managed but to find out if you think TOTSOC should take up this issue again and consult more widely in a search for a better solution than the current one. **Please reply to me at rod@thehewetts.co.uk**

We always welcome new members and would encourage you to join if you are not already a member - or if you are, to encourage others to join. The membership fee is modest by comparison with most other organisations and details on how to join can be found on the back page of this newsletter.

Rod Hewett – Editor

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Judy Westacott MBE



Our President sadly passed away in May, age 84. Judy was TOTSOC Chair for many years since before 2000. Latterly she was our Hon President. She was totally committed to our cause and passionate to preserve the uniqueness of the town. Her wise counsel on many issues helped steer our business over many years.

Judy was a towering force in Totnes. She adored everything about the town and its heritage. She was a Town Councillor for two decades, including being Town Mayor no less than five times between 1992 and 2011! In 2019 she was made an Honorary Freeman of the town.

Her tireless commitment and dedication to Totnes and its residents made her one of the town's most beloved citizens. She supported all manner of causes if they were important to the town.

Judy sat on many, many committees over the years. Only recently, she was still closely involved with at least 10 local organisations! One was the Tuesday Elizabethan market where she still had a stall earlier this summer, wearing her Elizabethan dress and hat! She was always "on the go" in the town, pulling her shopping trolley behind her and catching the eye of anyone she was passing.

She was not in the least bit "stuffy" and she always enjoyed a "laugh". Her view about the TOTSOC AGM was that it should be an enjoyable as well as an informative meeting. She and her successor Paul Bennett had a "competition" between them as to who could get the formal part of the meeting over the fastest in order to reach the interesting bits before the audience got bored! This might not be regarded as "the way to behave" but she always had a twinkle in her eye about formalities. There will be many of us who will miss her a great deal.

Bogan House, High Street, Totnes

Bogan House is one of the finest merchant houses in Totnes. Located opposite the Market Square, during 2022-23 it underwent major repairs and restoration. In July last year an article by Zoe Clough was published in Totnes Pulse giving the history of the building and the work that has now been completed. Totnes Pulse has kindly agreed to allow the article to be reproduced here.



Shrouded in heavy duty plastic, Bogan House in the centre of Totnes is revealing its secrets as it undergoes a painstaking renovation. I was fortunate to go behind the scenes to meet some of the people working on the building.

Thanks to the foresight and passion of two families, Bogan House today stands as one of the best preserved late Medieval houses in the town. It was Grade One listed in 1978. It could have had a very different future, had the planners of the 1970s had their way.

Bogan House is named after a wealthy wool merchant, William Bogan, mayor of Totnes in 1580, who bought the original house and, it's thought, extended it, building out over the street – which we now call The Butterwalk.

The grand room above the street has an ornate plaster ceiling with his initials embossed in it. Ceilings like this were often given as wedding presents so perhaps this was a present for his wife Elizabeth, because her initials are also in the ceiling. Back in the 1970's Bogan House and many of the buildings we now look at with fondness were under threat.



Neglected, squatted in, unloved and unregarded, the area behind – down to what is now the North Street car park – was earmarked for radical demolition to build a new road. The main street could then be pedestrianised. This would have destroyed the Medieval burgage plots, the narrow strips of land which run down from the main street. Bogan House, which occupies one of the bigger burgage plots, was considered a prime site for a supermarket. But fate – in the form of John Tuckey – intervened.

His daughter Anthea, who has lived in the rear portion of the house since 1972, told me more.



Anthea Tuckey

“Back in the Seventies nobody cared a damn. We bought it with the threat of compulsory purchase hanging over it.” The road plan came and went, and the ancient heart of Totnes was saved. Arguments about pedestrianisation simmer on!

John, a farmer and landscape gardener who'd restored other historic

homes, began to strip back the layers of alterations performed variously by the Georgian, Victorians and the later tenants, who lived in the flats shoe-horned into the venerable frame. The very back of the house, now a privately owned home, was derelict. *“My father very nearly brought one of the chimneys down. As he pulled a loose timber from the fireplace the whole chimney front collapsed”* Anthea said. *“It takes courage to do this. You live in dust and filth. It’s in our blood to live in dust.”*



Under the winding 16th century staircase at the front of the house the previous owners kept their coal heap. The carved plaster ceiling, installed in the 1680s, was obscured by layers of paint. The massive granite fireplace had been bashed about. But gradually the abuse was rectified. The Aga John installed in the kitchen, still warms the ancient stone walls. John Tuckey opened an antique shop in the front of Bogan House. There’s still an antique shop there, run by Chris Mitchell, the son of the man who forms the other half of the house’s restoration story.

[Its in our blood to live in dust](#)

Back in the early 1960s Douglas Mitchell was Mayor of Totnes – like William Bogan centuries before. He bought the building now housing the town museum, and Birdwood House as well. Chris takes up the story. *“There was a wet fish shop next door. Priscilla my step mum went in to get some fish and my father came in to see John. She came out and he said to her ‘I’ve just bought Bogan House!’”* It

needed a lot of work, and today's comprehensive project, funded entirely by the family Mitchell Trust, continues the job.

Hard Graft

It's incredible what's been done. Behind the scenes, which few people will see or appreciate, are layers of top-quality craftsmanship. Anthea shows me what she fondly calls Gary's Cupboard. *"Gary is a 21st century carpenter. He stood for a long time looking at a large stone in the wall above. Just sitting there waiting to drop on your head. He looked at it and it looked at him. "There are two storeys of this depth of wall sitting on that (old beams). He calmly took a deep breath and put in this wonderful oak frame. That's taking the weight of the whole of the building."* It's a broom cupboard, essentially. But also, a work of engineering – and a work of art.

Architect Annie Brick has been involved with the renovation project for several years. She showed me around, from the attic's new roof beams to the ground floor, and even onto the scaffolding to see the front of the building, now minus its familiar white painted slates. It's a skeleton of ancient wood and Victorian additions, chunks of which will need cutting out and replacing.

It turns out painting the slates was a big mistake. *"It was refronted in Victorian times and the slates were dropping off. They'd been painted with gloss paint and so the building's front couldn't breathe,"* she explained.



Joe Bosence, site manager, said the Victorians neglected to fit proper lead around the windows so water has got in and rotted some of the timbers. Part of the massive project is replacing the slates with reclaimed slates, bedded in lime mortar. One of the oak pillars underneath the overhanging storeys also

needs repair. I was surprised when Annie told me the red painted pillars are actually hollow – for good structural reasons – but one is feeling its age. *“It’s vital we use the right materials, like lime render and plaster, oak, Douglas fir and breathable paints,”* she said.

Even the scaffolding is unusual – it couldn’t be attached to the building, so instead the lattice of metal poles and the wooden platform I stood on is held in place with 18 tons of ballast. Historian Michael Laithwaite also recognised the building’s qualities, and his survey details the reasons it qualified for listing. Annie says she invited Michael, then in his 80s, to come back and have another look and write another report. *“It was the last report he did before he died,”* she says.

Craftwork

Local craftspeople like Joe, Jason Edwards, Mike Vickery, Jon Bayes, Richard Wallis and Peter Beard – and Gary the carpenter – are using their specialist skills to bring Bogan House back to life. I met window maker Tim Sloan, who has spent the best part of a decade working here on and off. He showed me a piece of



the Victorian window frame he’s replacing. He’ll reuse the old glass. *“You can see how bent it is if you look along it, bent under the weight of the glass.”* These are from the 1880s. *“The house has got its own unique little personality. Some of it’s Medieval, some of it’s Georgian, some Victorian, so it’s got a variety of different personalities. It’s probably had families grown up in here, had children themselves you know.”*



Annie and Tim with marble

He showed Annie and me one of the finds, a clay marble from the Georgian period.

“Some poor child’s probably been in tears losing that down a hole.” He also found a gentleman’s stick pin, for a cravat or tie, which was lodged between floors at the front of the house. It must have fallen through a gap in the floorboards, undisturbed for years until now.

And in the roof there was an old bowl – dating from 1689, which Anthea is keeping safe. Once the work is done – the final job will be rehangng the slate frontage – there’s the question of how the building will earn its keep. Birdwood is a separate entity, also run by Anthea. It’s financially self-sufficient.

The Future

Bogan’s 17th century hall is rented out to local groups, and the Devonshire Collection of Costumes has occupied the first floor since 1986. But the renovations have cost around half a million pounds.

John Severn is secretary to the Mitchell Trust. *“We started the work in 2017. It’s been a tortuous journey, and we are now more than halfway round the building. For the past two years people have been walking past saying that’s a wreck, but the slate frontage is the last part of the project.”* He said the trust was concentrating on getting to the finishing line before thinking about the future. *“It’s true that the whole running of the building is heavily supported by the Mitchell Trust.”*

Julia Fox is the head of the costume collection, currently packed away in myriad boxes. *“It’s a difficult place to store clothes but the building is a draw for the public and the Trust has always been very kind to us,”* she said. She’s already planning

the first exhibition back in Bogan House, which will feature a pair of gauntlet gloves, embroidered in silver bullion, which were made in around 1650.

This landmark building is also still a home. Anthea clearly loves it. *“I’m attached to it; I feel very comfortable in it. I understand it.”* Not everyone would want to live here. *“Whatever happens this building has to be ready to face the next century.”*

Fifty years ago, the odds were not in its favour. But it survived the mania for modernisation which wrecked so many historic towns. Bogan House – which by the way is pronounced BOWgan, not BOGan – is today a testament to the two families – and the skilled craftsmen – who have put it back together for the benefit of all of us.

“Article written by Zoe Clough and reproduced with permission from The Totnes Pulse community online magazine (www.totnespulse.co.uk). ”

Totnes Museum

Upside down in the Nursery

We knew there was something in the Nursery storeroom because of a little pile of poo which appeared one day on top of a recently cleared shelf underneath the space where the storeroom loft hatch cover ought to have been. Then we looked round and noticed that there were also some droppings on the floor nearby. The storeroom had been full of clutter – boxes, plastic bags full of rubbish, display cases in various conditions and items which should have been put somewhere else. We’d been cleaning it which is probably why the poo had become apparent and we feared rodents. A longstanding and knowledgeable volunteer bravely crushed a piece of the poo between his fingers. “Crumbly - mostly insects,” he said. “We have bats,” and added he thought they were probably pipistrelle bats. We didn’t do anything about it because we had so much else to do.

Following the resignation of the Museum Manager, who unfortunately left the Museum in an undocumented mess, the Museum has been in disaster recovery mode. Volunteers have rallied to the cause: new ones have been recruited and previously discouraged ones have returned. We are making the difficult transition from being a Museum with an almost full-time, paid manager to being a volunteer run Museum where no one is paid. We rely on donations to keep us going and

everything – from cleaning to cataloguing - is carried out by volunteers and trustees. We've discovered that the previous manager moved things around and kept no records of what he'd done, so we aren't even sure where things are unless they're obvious. It's a challenge, but we're learning all the time and we're getting the museum organised and making it a fascinating place to visit. But, back to the bats.

Over the next few weeks, as we added boxes to the Nursery storeroom, we watched little areas of bat poo grow until they became too difficult to ignore. We thought maybe if we replaced the loft hatch cover, the bats would restrict themselves to the attic. Totnes Town Council owns the Museum building, so we thought we ought to let them know about our visitors. The Town Maintenance Officer came and had a look, but he was cautious about replacing the loft hatch



cover in case the bats were in the storeroom. We contacted various bat experts, and they advised not doing anything that would disturb any bats. I stuck a note on the door saying, "do not enter" and left it at that.

A few days later I opened the storeroom to check on the situation. To my surprise there was a bat hanging from a crack in the ceiling just inside the door. It was incredible. The room was quite light – there's a south facing window – so a bat hanging there was unexpected. I took a quick photo and retreated. There was discussion about what kind of bat it was, why it was there in full view, was it OK, and how had it got in - and out - of the storeroom.

Another knowledgeable volunteer said only horseshoe bats hang upside down. We were quite excited.

That evening, a couple of us went to the Museum at dusk to see if we could see from where the bats flew out of the building. We weren't successful: one minute there were no bats and the next there were several wheeling around and darting to and fro in the outside passageway and to the garden at the back of the museum. It was quite magical. Lesser horseshoe bats have an almost constant frequency call, about 110kHz, and can be "heard" on a bat detector as a series of continuous warbles. Obviously, we had a bat detector with us and were able to identify the bats wheeling around as lesser horseshoe bats. The next day I checked on the bat. It was there but had moved along the crack in the ceiling a bit to a slightly different position. We therefore assumed it had been out and come back again. The next time we checked there was no bat hanging from the ceiling, but there was a large pile of poo in a different part of the storeroom. We shut the door and left well alone. We assume that by now the bats have left for a winter hibernation roost, but we probably won't be putting the loft hatch cover back until we're sure they've gone.

There's never a dull moment in Totnes Museum – if you'd like to volunteer with us, please get in touch! <https://www.totnesmuseum.org/>

Kate Wilson

The TOTSOC Committee

The current TOTSOC Committee Members are:

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Rod Hewett	rod@thehewetts.co.uk
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TOTNES & DISTRICT SOCIETY

Notice of AGM

The Annual General Meeting of the Society will take place on
Monday 18 November 2024 at 5:30pm
at
REconomy Centre. 13 Leechwell Street, Totnes, TQ9 5SX

Agenda

1. Apologies
2. Minutes of AGM 2023 and matters arising
3. Election of Chair
4. Election of President, Officers, and Members to the Committee
5. Annual Report of the Chair
6. Hon. Treasurer's Report
8. Any Other Business

This will be a 'business only meeting. There will not be a speaker.

Please encourage your friends and neighbours to join TOTSOC

Thank you, our loyal members for your continued support for TOTSOC: it is much appreciated by the Committee. Sadly, several loyal members have passed away in the last few years and we have done little to encourage others to join. Whilst our running costs are very low, we rely on costs, such as printing this publication.

The Committee would be grateful if you could do something to [encourage your friends and neighbours to join](#). As you know, the annual fee paid by standing order is just £5 or £8 for a couple. The application form is on the website at totsoc.org.uk. We have printed some extra copies of this edition, so just let me know if you would like one or more additional copies for you to hand round to potential members. We do have some expenses, such as producing this publication.

Jeremy Logie