

Widcombe magazine

SUMMER 2024

WHAT'S ON
NEWS & VIEWS



CHANGE ^{the WORLD} ^{TOGETHER}
cultivate my creativity!
it's AMAZING to be
CURIOUS
HAVE COURAGE
BELIEVE
IN YOURSELF!
BE... Generous!!!
do what makes
you happy
MAKING A
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ROOM TO BE ME —

Widcombe magazine

SUMMER 2024



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Welcome

As we head into summer, there are plenty of reasons to be out and about in Widcombe. Our local shops are filling up with summer ware; The Ram is serving up strawberries and Pimm's while tennis fans watch Wimbledon on the big screen; the Wobblers are biking to historical sites and the Wanderers are walking the hills.

The Widcombe Art Trail is back on 22-23 June with more local artists than ever taking part. To plan your visit, see our pull-out leaflet or visit **www.widcombeartrail.com**.

And, if you are staying in, take some time to browse our features - Biddy Walcot on what the Widcombe Association actually does (with an invitation to join for just £10 a year), Helen Peter on the hidden history of West Widcombe, John Chambers on Widcombe's close links both to slavery and to the abolitionist movement, Dan Lyons on the sad story behind a memorial at St Matt's and myself taking a stroll round Prior Park Garden Centre as it celebrates its 50th birthday.

■ Colette Hill, Editor

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For booking, pricing, availability or for a stroll around the gardens please get in touch.



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Out and About

On the High Street

Happy marriage

The main news on the high street has been the Widcombe Deli's move into The Ram. Both pub manager Pete Martin and Deli owners Nicky and John Ison say the collaboration is working better than they could ever have hoped. Larkhall Butchers is also playing its part, sharing its pavement frontage to increase the café-pub's outdoor seating area. 'It's wonderful how everyone is up for sharing through difficult times,' says Nicky. 'And there's more to come. Pete is running live music every couple of weeks and a new monthly soul night. We will be serving tea and Pimm's during Wimbledon Fortnight and English fare during the Euros.'



Brighter days

At Luca and Fig, owner Luci Smolarek is enjoying the arrival of clothes in happy colours as well as seasonal treats like garden lighting, bird and butterfly boxes and picnic ware. Skirts and dresses in pretty prints from Denmark are selling particularly fast.

At Mercy in Action, manager Lesley Gillard also reports summer colours are flying off the hangers. Local support for the shop means most of its stock comes from Widcombe homes. 'People drop by with lovely things all the time. Often winter things in summer and summer things in winter, but that's fine – we just put it away until appropriate. We are so grateful to Widcombe so please say thank you to your readers.'



For Bath Spa Florists, special events like weddings and funerals mean business is brisk all year. Since Covid struck, the shop has added fresh fruit and vegetables to its offer, and sells everything loose, to avoid the use of plastic. Business owner Tash would like to see more people turn from the supermarkets to local stores like hers. 'Without local customers, businesses like ours will struggle to survive. So come on down!' ■ Colette Hill

What's on

Whether it's music, from jazz to folk, rock'n'roll to swing, disco to soul, or the arts, literature, or quizzes - there is something for everyone this summer at the Widcombe Social Club.
www.widcombesocialclub.co.uk

Music

Fridays - Widcombe Waterside Nights - live music and pizza. Free entry.

Coming up in May

Kait Vox Quartet (24th), Lauren Bradford] (31st) and in June, Cindy & Marius (7th), Cavacante (14th), Merlin Smith (21st), and Justin Towell (28th).

Friday 16 August – Bring your own vinyl! The Transmission DJs will be spinning their own collections, along with whatever you bring.

Saturday 1 June – Sounds of Sudan – charity fundraiser presented by Lara in partnership with Sudafest. Immerse yourself in the rich cultural heritage of Sudan with musicians Nabra Duo and Emad & Nashat.

Monday 3, Wednesday 5 and 12 June – Bath Spa University: Annual Theatre, Music and Dance Festival

Saturday 29 June – Evolve Music: musical showcase and fundraiser for a Bath-based community music charity.

DJ Nights

Friday 7 June - Bath Soul Club
- all vinyl night of the best northern soul.

Saturday 8 June - Electric Dreams
- the biggest 80s night in the city.

Saturday 29 June - Transmission
- alternative sounds from the 80s, 90s and beyond.

Saturday 6 July - Frug
- dance music from across the decades.



Art, Film and Literature

Sunday 9 June – The Lost Honour of Katerina Bloom plus speaker. Off the Wall Films, in partnership with Braunschweig Twinning Association.

Last Tuesday of the month, 8pm, Widcombe Book Group - if you love reading and would like to share your thoughts on a wide and far reaching choice of books with a friendly group of fellow enthusiasts, then come and try out Widcombe Book Group. New members always welcome! Contact Jocelyn Ridley at jocridley@gmail.com.

■ Ann Ashworth



Your Widcombe events calendar

The Widcombe Association has a busy programme of events this summer. For details on how to book, head to the events page at www.widcombeassociation.org.uk

9 June, History of Widcombe walk, looking at evidence of sites and characters connected with the conflicts of the 19th century, including the Crimea War, the Boer War and the Indian Mutiny. A gentle walk of about one and a half hours.

20 June at 2.30pm, wildflower garden tour in Langridge.

17 July, 7.30pm, at the Widcombe Social Club, Gardening without plastic, with horticulturist Sally Nex.

19 July, Don Giovanni, presented by Bath Opera at Prior Park College.

8 September, Heritage Open Days guided trail of cemeteries that are usually out of bounds.

And coming up, soon:

Beckford's Tower.

A talk from the brilliant Amy Frost of the Bath Preservation Trust about the renovation of Beckford's Tower.

Gardens of the American Museum.

An out-of-hours WA walk in the gardens of the American Museum with the opportunity to ask questions of volunteers.

Textiles at The American Museum.

A private talk about the amazing collection of quilts at the American Museum.

The History of Macaulay Buildings on Widcombe Hill built by Thomas Macaulay Cruttwell in the 1820s.

Autumn Quiz.

The return of the WA/WSC joint quiz – open to all.

Widcombe Christmas Market, Saturday 16-17 November

And last but not least

The Widcombe Wayfarers local monthly walks are on the second Wednesday of the month, starting at 10am at the west end of Widcombe Parade. Walks last one or two hours and are medium paced. Details are published a few days before taking weather conditions into account. Come dressed for the weather and be prepared for a few climbs.



The Widcombe Wobblers' cycle rides take place once or twice a month from May to September with destinations ranging from pubs to gardens to historical sites usually 12-20 miles. Some of this year's highlights include Westwood Manor, the walled garden at Mells, the Long Barrow at Stoney Littleton and a longer ride to Bristol Harbour. All standards of riders are welcome in this supportive group.

For more information, please email events@widcombeassociation.org.uk.

■ Clare Furlonger



WIDCOMBE WOBBLERS CYCLE RIDES 2024

MAY

9th Thursday 6.00pm

Evening cycle around the canal circuit to the Wheelwrights Arms, Monkton Combe.

12 miles

30th Thursday 6.00pm

Evening cycle to the Bird in Hand, Saltford.

11 miles

JUNE

2nd Sunday 10.00am

Daytime cycle to Westwood Manor, NT, Westwood and picnic

16 miles

20th Thursday 6.00pm

Evening cycle to the Long Barrow, Stoney Littleton for a picnic.

13.5 miles

JULY

6th Saturday 10.00am

Cycle to the Packhorse Bridge at Tellisford and the George Inn at Norton St Philip.

19 miles

21st Sunday 10.00am

Day cycle to the Walled Garden, Mells for lunch at the Cafe.

30 miles

AUG

1st Thursday 6.00pm

Evening cycle to the Inn at Freshford

14 miles

10th Saturday 10.00am

Daytime ride to Bristol Harbour and The Bakehouse for lunch

35 miles

22nd Thursday 6.00pm

Evening cycle to the Hope and Anchor Pub

12 miles

SEPT

8th Sunday 10.00am

Day cycle to Farleigh Hungerford Castle and picnic

22 miles

If you would like to join us for a leisurely sociable cycle please book at <https://widcombe-association.whitefuse.net/pages/3-events>



The Thursday evening rides are shorter than those at the weekend. Most of our rides have one or two sections uphill; other rides may be longer and have more demanding climbs. All our rides are relaxed and for those who like a gentle pace.

Meeting point: under the tree at the western end of Widcombe Parade. In the case of bad weather, please go to www.widcombeassociation.org.uk for last minute changes.

Discover

Is it a bird? Is it a plane? What IS the Widcombe Association?

Biddy Walcot on the evolution of the largest residents' association in Bath.

Some 43 years ago, the Widcombe Association was formed as a campaigning group. It had just one objective – to banish heavy traffic from the centre of Widcombe.

For those of you who weren't around in 1981, or who have forgotten, Rossiter Road (now the main carriageway of the A36 to and from Bristol) comprised two east-bound lanes. The one west-bound lane went straight down Claverton Street (or Widcombe Parade as it's better known). Heavy lorries and a huge volume of traffic thundered through Widcombe every day, threatening pedestrian safety, creating noise and air pollution and damaging the buildings. Going to the shops in Widcombe was unpleasant and sometimes dangerous.

In 2016, after 35 years, two major restructurings of the council, and a lot of hard work by the WA, the new traffic scheme came good and (whatever your thoughts on the double roundabout outside the White Hart) the village of Widcombe is a safer, quieter and much more attractive place to be.

Where we are now

Having achieved its aim, the Widcombe Association didn't just melt away. Over its years of campaigning for traffic change, it developed other roles: organising community events and activities; monitoring planning applications and proposals for changes to highways and transport in the area; liaising with neighbouring groups and associations, and

supporting other community campaigns. Today, it is a residents' association focused on fostering a sense of community and acting as a residents' interface to Bath and North East Somerset Council.

Social Widcombe

Widcombe is a lively place – and the WA's involvement in social activities reflects that. Annual events supported by the association include opera, a popular summer Art Trail and a very busy Christmas market. Then there's the Widcombe Choir, the Widcombe Wayfarers and the Widcombe Wobblers (singing, walking and cycling respectively), a gardening club that enjoys garden visits and talks throughout the year, a history society, the Widcombe Mumpers and Go Green Widcombe – which supports residents' efforts to make their homes energy-efficient.

A different kind of greening is noticeable along Widcombe Parade, where the WA manages the planters, hanging baskets, the telephone box by the White Hart and the wildflower verge (at the west end of the street). And in winter, trees with Christmas lights are posted above the street's shops and businesses.

In addition, the WA publishes Widcombe Magazine twice a year – with free copies delivered by WA volunteers to all households in Widcombe.

Membership of the WA is just £10 a year per household. Benefits include discounts on many WA events and regular news of what's going on in the association. The WA covers some 3,000 households of which around 400 have subscription membership, along with 59 businesses. Membership is very much encouraged and the modest membership fees allow the association to continue to publish the magazine, among other things (to join, visit <https://widcombe-association.whitefuse.net/pages/7-become-a-member-today>). Members are not expected to do anything else, but are welcome if they choose to.

Democratic Widcombe

Outside its social activities, the WA has a relationship with the council, mirroring the role of parish or town councils which exist across the rest of Bath and North East Somerset (B&NES), but not in Bath. In a practical sense, this works, but the fact remains that the WA is not a statutory body and has no legitimate right to represent Widcombe residents to the district council on matters that might affect them. In short, without the WA, there would be no representative body below B&NES.

So, how does local government work for us without that additional tier? As Widcombe is the largest ward in Bath, it is represented on B&NES council by not one, but two, elected ward councillors, currently Lib Dems Alison Born and Deborah Collins. They both recognise the pros and cons of working without a parish/town council structure.

Deborah says: 'As local councillors, we find it really valuable if there's a Widcombe Association position on something – because we know then that that's representative of a really big group of residents. We probably work with the WA in quite a similar way to how councillors outside Bath work with town and parish councils.'

Alison adds: 'The WA is well run. It's got a constitution, it's got properly conducted meetings and minutes and so on. And it's reasonably transparent. Working with the WA is all about refining things. It's working collaboratively with them to come up with a solution that we feel we can put to residents and hopefully get sufficient consensus that we can make something happen – you hear the words 'democratic deficit' quite a lot. I suppose it's filtering down one idea that has to go through many iterations to reasonably address everyone's fears and everyone's concerns.'



Mike Wrigley



Deborah Collins



Alison Born

Does size matter?

Unlike parish councils (which have paid clerks) all the WA committee members and officers are volunteers. And, as current WA chair Mike Wrigley admits, there is always room for more. Although there are usually around 10 committee members, he estimates there are upwards of 100 volunteers who help out in all sorts of ways, some regularly, some once or twice a year – delivering magazines, litter-picking, watering the planters on Widcombe Parade, putting up posters, stewarding events, running bars, and staffing stalls.

WA volunteers bring to their posts a wealth of varied experience – Mike has a background in traffic and highways and both he and committee member Jan Shepley in planning. (I myself humbly admit to being quite good with a pencil sharpener). But, as Mike says, apart from wanting to make a difference to your community, the greatest attribute for the role is enthusiasm!

■ Biddy Walcot has lived in Widcombe for 26 years, along with her family and other animals.

Not in my back yard

Jan Shepley explains the role of the Widcombe Association in the local planning process.



For the most part, planning decisions made by the Council (or by the planners appointed to make them) have little or no impact on us – unless of course they affect our immediate neighbourhood, when it can seem very personal.

One of my roles on the Widcombe Association committee is to trawl the weekly planning applications list and report to our monthly meetings on any that may need our consideration. The committee then decides whether to comment, support or object formally on those applications. For the most part, we don't seek to influence the Council, unless we believe a proposal would have a significant impact on the local environment.

One such application was the proposal to redevelop of the Great Western Wines site at the bottom of Wellsway. We were concerned particularly about the scale of the proposed residential building and the cramped accommodation for the occupants who would have little or no access to fresh air. We have also commented on applications for multiple occupancy of private houses where this might have an adverse impact on surrounding residents or significantly reduce the number of family homes.

Planning for the future

Every few years the Council must review its wide range of planning policies, including environmental and transport matters. Planners are currently at the earliest stage of preparation of a Local Plan Options Report, which, when completed, will form the background to decision making for the next 20 years.

This work will address the expected need for more housing and employment space and the capacity for this to be met within the city and the more rural parts of the district. It is also examining possibilities for redefining the Green Belt boundaries to release land for development. The conclusion appears to be that the city has very limited capacity and, as a result, the suggestion is that some land in the rural areas be released.

However, the plan does not appear to have considered the capability of the road and transport network to accommodate the increase in growth in these outer areas. So, together with our counterparts in other residents associations in Bath, through a sub-group of Federation of Bath Residents' Associations (FOBRA), we have recently submitted a response to this report, which is published on the Widcombe Association website.

Have your say

It is of course open to all Bath residents to submit their own comments on any aspect of the plans and there will be another opportunity to do so in the autumn when the next stage of the Local Plan scheme is published.

■ *After cutting her teeth in local government in Yorkshire Jan Molyneux (now Shepley) was a planning consultant in the private sector until her retirement.*

Being heard above the traffic

Mike Wrigley on how the Widcombe Association continues to campaign on local traffic issues.



It is perfectly reasonable to want a say when the Council makes decisions that affect the traffic and the roads around our homes. In Bath, there is no level of representation below the Council (ie town or parish councils), so it is the residents' associations – all groups of volunteers – who fill the democratic gap.

Bath has no fewer than 34 residents associations, which are affiliated to the Federation of Bath Residents' Associations (FOBRA). Neither FOBRA nor the individual associations have statutory status yet they do campaign, FOBRA on city-wide issues and the individual associations on issues affecting their own communities.

As Biddy Walcot writes, the WA was formed in 1981 to campaign on one specific issue – to reduce the through-traffic in Claverton Street (Widcombe Parade). It took the association over 30 years of campaigning through two major changes in local government structure to achieve that goal. In 2011, the WA and the Council formed a special working group to develop and agree the detailed design of the scheme that was finally implemented in 2016.

Not just roads, but rail too!

When the electrification of the GWR line was being promoted, the Widcombe Association formed a rail group to examine the proposals and to campaign for improvements in design of the overhead gear to be installed by Network Rail through most of Bath. This led to the group carrying out work for Network Rail to comment on the positioning of the pylons for the overhead lines in the stretch between Sydney Gardens and Twerton. We still await the completion of these works.

Keeping up with plans

A number of initiatives have been introduced by the Council recently, including Residents' Parking Zones, the Clean Air Zone, and the Liveable Neighbourhoods Policy with the associated proposals on Active Travel and Low Traffic Neighbourhoods, all of which affect Widcombe. The Council has carried out public consultations and the role of the WA has been to respond, as well as to alert residents and encourage them to make individual responses.

In 2018, the Widcombe Association carried out a household survey on behalf of the Council, to determine support to extend Residents' Parking Zone coverage to Greenway Lane, Rosemount Lane, Lyncombe Vale, Lyncombe Vale Road and Perrymead. The resulting report showed a clear majority of residents in favour and a new zone was subsequently introduced.

The interventions by the Widcombe Association on transport issues have been positive and supportive as well as, on occasions, critical. The WA aims to speak on behalf of its members and we don't pretend to represent the whole community. However, we do hope that our involvement is to the benefit of everyone in Widcombe.

■ *Mike Wrigley is chair of the Widcombe Association. He is a specialist in urban and transport planning and has worked at home and overseas.*

Greening your home

Steve Cross outlines some of the ways you can make your home more energy-efficient.

If you are looking to reduce energy usage in your home, Go Green Widcombe is here to help. The Widcombe Association affiliated group offers guidance to retrofitting homes. We're planning talks to include advice on installing heat pumps, loft and roof insulation, double glazing, wall insulation, and solar panels.

Finding the cold spots

Go Green's thermal imaging camera is available for loan if you want to check your home for drafts and cold spots. One local householder used the camera to check the effectiveness of newly installed cavity wall insulation. When this exposed a cold spot, the installer was asked to return and fix the problem.



Solar schemes

Go Green also had a solar panel bulk buy scheme with IDDEA. IDDEA have now been taken over by Oakray Renewables, who are currently offering 20 per cent discounts for their first 200 new solar panel installations (<https://oakrayrenewables.co.uk/>). It goes without saying that Go Green doesn't benefit in any way from these transactions or specifically recommend Oakray, so do consider other options.

What if I live in a listed building?

Go Green Widcombe is in regular touch with the Council. Its team persuaded the planning department to amend the local requirements for the listed building consent checklist to include a short summary of the types of retrofit proposed. Keywords like Solar PV, heat pumps and double glazing should now be included in applicants' proposal description. This enables owners of listed buildings to check previous listed building applications for similar types of retrofit and see what was approved or rejected. This information can be accessed via <https://www.bathnes.gov.uk/webforms/planning/#advancedSearch> by entering the type of Retrofit (eg solar) in the keyword option, and Listed Building Consent (Alts/ exts) as the application type.

To join our mailing list for dates of talks and other insights, email www.ggwidcombe@gmail.com.

■ Steve Cross, a retired industrial chemist, spent much of his working life on projects to help the planet get greener. In the 1980s he helped Aylesford Paper Mill become the first UK newspaper producer to use 100% recycled paper, and in the early 1990s he helped Marlow Foods on their Quorn project.



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For further information call Paddy on 07769733580

WIDCOMBE

Pictures and Cards of Widcombe and Bath by local artist Sue Porter. Buy from Luca and Fig and Prior Park Garden Centre in Widcombe and from www.vanillawhite.com



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Meet the neighbours



Go West

Helen Peter on a tiny – but much loved – area of Widcombe

Widcombe extends beyond Lyncombe Hill into St Marks Road and Alexandra Road, all the way to the Lower Wells Road. Taken together, the streets in this area are known as Widcombe West. Holloway – the Roman Fosse Way – once carried wool to market in Wells. The leper hospital (rebuilt in 1761) and the Magdalen Chapel (built in 1550) still survive. The area has an eclectic mix of housing from the Georgian to the east to the 1970s Calton Estate. And above all that are Beechen Cliff woods, through which winding paths lead up to Alexandra Park and the countryside beyond.

In the war, the area was badly hit by the Luftwaffe and much of the area remained in ruins until the mid-1960s when aggressive redevelopment, known as the ‘sack of Bath’, began. By then, even housing unaffected by war had fallen into disrepair and the workers’ cottages had been categorised as slum dwellings. They were torn down wholesale to make way for road improvements as well as new houses and flats.

To many outside the area, these new homes are out of keeping with the World Heritage status of the city, but the people who live here see things otherwise.

Residents say: ‘I love living in Calton Gardens. It’s a de facto low traffic neighbourhood, which means it’s a safe place for my son to play and for neighbours to stop and chat. We have a great sense of community here. And, of course, we are close to Beechen Cliff – I’m not sure which view I like best, towards town or towards the woods.’

‘When I moved to the Calton Estate, I was drawn by the brilliant location between the city centre and the countryside, but I quickly discovered the best thing is how friendly and welcoming people are.’

‘I am a stone’s throw from town and just a minute’s walk away from the beautiful Beechen Cliff woods, Alexandra Park and all the countryside beyond.’

The area has its own community group, widcombest.uk which provides a platform for airing and tackling local issues, such as the management of the woods, play areas, parking, and planning. At the moment the old Widcombe School is designated for housing, which continues to be a matter of interest and discussion.

The group holds neighbourhood activities such as litter picks, gardening, and painting, all chances to make the area a great place to live and well as to meet each other and socialise. The Summer Community BBQ is on 13 July and all are welcome.

■ Helen Peter was a teacher and educational consultant, and has lived in Widcombe for 30 years.



Profile



John Chambers, who died in April, lived in Widcombe for just six years, but probably knew more about this

part of Bath than many who have lived here all their lives. Following his retirement, he published three remarkably detailed history books, *Widcombe Terrace*, *Church Street*, and now *The Parsons of Widcombe*, about an 18th century family of stone-carvers and Baptist preachers (reviewed by Rory Shaw, overleaf).

Yet for all his passion and assiduousness as an historian, John was first and foremost a medical man. After reading medical sciences at Pembroke College, Cambridge, he trained in medicine at King’s College, London. He specialised in cardiology and thence in heart valve disease, helping to open an under-developed new area of specialist research and practice. He was founding president of the British Heart Valve Society whose purpose is to improve the care of patients with heart valve disease by training and education, and by improving ways of delivering care.

John believed that, while good science is essential, an affinity with the arts completes a rounded doctor. He read widely all his life and particularly admired writers like Xavier Marias and Elena Ferrante for their evocation of human interactions and their understanding of that subterranean river that has always carried life along. ‘Reading about other people’s lives is one route to empathy,’ John said, ‘an essential quality for anyone working in medicine. You have to understand people and their needs if you are to treat them appropriately.’

To prove his point, he could reel off the name of successful writers who first trained in medicine: Scottish novelist and playwright Tobias Smollett trained as a surgeon. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle qualified



as a doctor with practices in Plymouth and then Portsmouth. Chekhov saw medicine as his primary occupation. W Somerset Maugham drew on his experiences as an obstetrician in his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth*. Poet John Keats qualified as an apothecary, physician and surgeon. ‘Ludwig Wittgenstein was a porter at Guy’s Hospital during the second world war,’ John said. ‘In medicine, you can’t move without bumping into philosophers or poets.’

He believed local history to be another linked subject, noting the surprising number of retired physicians active in local history around Bath. ‘The processes of diagnosis in medicine and research in local history have many affinities. A finding in a deed or newspaper or some other source needs always to be checked against other records. The relative authority of the various tests in medicine or the historic records in local history need to be judged. Some are likely to prove correct, others to give no more than circumstantial corroboration. Local history, like novels and like medicine, is ultimately concerned with people. It gives us an understanding of the people in a community over time and enlarges our sense of who they were, how they judged the world, and how the world judged them.’ ■ Colette Hill

Widcombe Heroes

Widcombe has more than its fair share of lovely residents. Who's your Widcombe hero? Send your nominations to magazine@widcombeassociation.org.uk



I would like to nominate Jill and Keith McGarrigle because they are the best neighbours ever! They never fail to help anyone nearby. They look after other people's dogs when necessary, hold keys to numerous neighbours' houses, and when a very old lady nearby was ill in bed and dying, whose two adult offspring lived far away, they regularly checked in on her to make sure she had everything she needed. Because I am elderly myself and wear a personal alarm, they are the first people who would be called, if necessary.

■ Michèle Gross - Pulteney Gardens



Book review

The Parsons of Widcombe – Embodying the Enlightenment by John Chambers

The Enlightenment (1685-1815) was a time in the evolution of our society when the great thinkers and writers promoted ideas of reason, experimental evidence, individual liberty, and separation of church from state. Many famous names come down to us from this period. The question is what did people like us, the 'middling people', think and do?

John Chambers, in his detailed examination of three generations of the Parsons family of Widcombe, found not merely a family business of stone masons. At one level, these were small business people buying and selling property, marrying, having children and dealing with bereavement. But they were also dedicated non-conformists, committed to preaching, to teaching children, writing poetry, conducting scientific experiments, and actively participating in local societies discussing new philosophical ideas. The rise in literacy and the groundswell of support for our modern political structures probably came from people like the Parsons.

The Parsons of Widcombe – Embodying the Enlightenment by John Chambers (£8.99) is available at the Oldfield Park Bookshop. ■ Rory Shaw

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Nature Notes

An abundance of birds



David Goode on the extraordinary bird life in Widcombe

Since I came to live in Widcombe in 2011, I have kept a record of different species of birds seen in our garden on Lyncombe Hill. The total stands at 44 with another 14 seen flying over. It never ceases to amaze me just how varied the bird life can be so close to the city centre.

Diversity

The bird life of our local area is influenced by its setting, with a wedge of natural habitats extending into the city from the countryside beyond. So, as well as all the normal garden birds one might expect such as robin, blackbird, great tit, blue tit, song thrush, blackcap, dunnock, woodpigeon and wren, we are fortunate to have a variety of woodland birds including both species of woodpeckers (great spotted and green), nuthatch and tree creeper, together with goldcrest, chiffchaff, jay, stock dove, tawny owl and buzzard visiting the garden. We have even had pheasants dropping in occasionally. During spring and autumn migration, our garden has attracted spotted flycatcher, willow warbler, firecrest and even a corncrake!



Kestrel on the lookout for a vole.
Photo credit: Claire McCormick

Lyncombe Hill Fields

During the past four years I have been pleased to join the dedicated and enthusiastic group of volunteers who regularly check on the birdlife of Lyncombe Hill Fields. We meet on the first Saturday of every month, weather permitting, and record all the birds seen or heard. These fields are looked after by volunteers from Widcombe, Greenway Lane and Bear Flat, under a licence from the Council. The aim is to diversify the area for wildlife and make the fields accessible for people to enjoy this very special place. New paths put in by volunteers have been crucial in transforming the area. Birds benefit from more than 20 new nest boxes and several ponds have been constructed. On our bird walks we have recorded up to 25 species, and more than 100 individual birds, all within one hour. Our group of recorders has grown, and it is particularly satisfying to see people completely new to bird-watching becoming very proficient and enjoying themselves. If you would like to join the bird monitoring group, please contact us www.lyncombehillfields@gmail.com.

■ Professor David Goode has 50 years experience as a professional ecologist, working in central and local government, and an international reputation as a writer on environmental issues ranging from biodiversity conservation to urban sustainability.

Stop press: local entrance to Prior Park to return

The National Trust has won planning permission for the tea shop to be moved back to its old spot by the lower lake and plans to reopen a lower entrance from Church Lane in late 2024. Keep a watch on local media @ntbath.

National Trust update

Ruth Newell on what the National Trust has in store for visitors over the coming months.

With long summer days stretching ahead, we think of spending time outdoors to soak up the sun and perhaps enjoy a picnic or two with friends and family. Prior Park is a popular picnic spot whether you sit near the bridge or up in the pasture to enjoy the views. Further out, on the Bath Skyline the fields are filling with wildflowers and the kids' play area is a favourite spot with families.

Bath Skyline – open all year round. May to July is the best time for butterfly spotting – see how many varieties you can find.

Bathampton Meadows – an exciting programme of heritage skills days will be held in the autumn.

Head a little further out and walk-up **Little Solsbury Hill** to take in the summer solstice.

And closer to home, there is **Prior Park Landscape Garden** where there's plenty to do over the coming months:

- The park is open seven days a week until 3 November 10am till 5pm with the last entry at 4pm. (After 27 October we close at 4pm.)
- If you haven't visited Prior Park for a little while you might have missed the launch of the new Silent Space trail. It's the first in the UK and invites visitors to find a spot or two in the garden to switch off and spend time soaking up nature. Next time you visit ask reception for more details.
- May half-term (25 May to 2 June) has an 'endangered animal trail' for families. Find the hidden creatures and work out what they are.



- The Festival of Archaeology is back from 13 to 28 July when a team of volunteer archaeologists will be uncovering more of the basin of water in the pasture, plus a series of archaeology walks will be available to book in advance.
- There will be games and activities for children in the school holidays, 20 July to 3 September.
- We are open for free on 7 and 14 September for Heritage Open Days.
- During October half-term we plan a 'spooky spider trail' and will once again be taking part in Museums Week, offering free entry for cardholders.

■ Ruth Newell, National Trust,
<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/bath-bristol>



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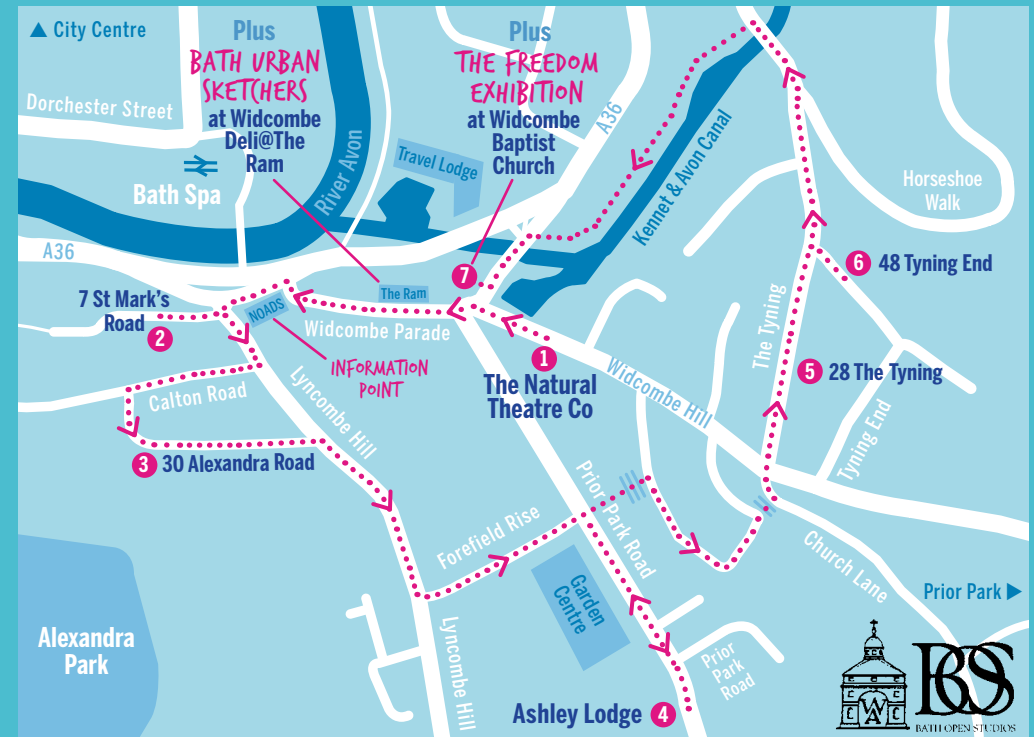


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Widcombe Art Trail 2024

The Widcombe Art Trail (22 and 23 June) is more popular than ever this year, with 28 local artists exhibiting in seven connected venues, taking you on a circular walk around the area. The wonderfully varied art includes paintings handblocked silk, jewellery and ceramics, promising something of interest to everyone at affordable prices. ■ Pippa Wrigley



Angela Frith



Maggie Martin



Iasonas Bakas



Carol Baines



Katie Rhys Jones



Usha Pearce



Sue Pryor



Sue Porter



Judy Meats



Vikki Yeates



Jessica Palmer



June Wagstaff



Biddy Walcott



Sarah Lewis



Liz Holden-White

THE WIDCOMBE ART TRAIL is a route around Widcombe linking seven venues using roads and footpaths. Come and meet our artists listed here and shown on the map overleaf.

1

THE NATURAL THEATRE COMPANY, BA2 6AA



Carol Baines
Printmaker
inspired by the
natural world



Polly Gough
Printmaking
and mixed
media



Sarah Lewis
Handblocked
scarves in silk
and wool



Linda O'Gorman Work
in mixed media



Sue Porter Art
of Widcombe
and Bath



Katie Rhys Jones
Colourful,
abstract
landscape
painting and
collage



Joanne Slade
Landscape
paintings in oils
and acrylics



Vitrific Vibrant,
creative
enamelled art
and jewellery



Biddy Walcot
Hand-thrown
ceramics

2

7 St MARK'S ROAD, BA2 4PA



Jessica Palmer
Wild landscapes
in papercut
and collage

3

**30 ALEXANDRA ROAD,
BA2 4PW**



Ruth Davies
Painting in
acrylic and oils



Maggie Martin Colour
and movement
in landscape



Sue Pryor
Abstract
and still life
paintings



Pippa Wrigley
Watercolours
and mixed
media

4

**ASHLEY LODGE, PRIOR
PARK ROAD, BA2 4NW**



Angela Frith
Semi-abstract
oil paintings



June Wagstaff
Etchings,
brooches,
table runners,
textiles

5

28 THE TYNING, BA2 6AL



Usha Pearce
Mixed media
paintings
(refreshments
available)

6

48 TYNING END, BA2 6AW



Liz Holden-White Textural
paintings
and cards



Rachel Ward
Colourful
paintings
and cards

7

**WIDCOMBE BAPTIST
CHURCH, BA2 4JR**

(Open from 12:30pm on Sunday)



Iasonas Bakas
Abstract
geometric oil
paintings



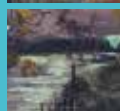
Richard Ford
Landscape
and people
photographer



Nicola Hyman
Arty upcycled
jewellery from
used materials



Judy Meats
Local
landscapes
in acrylic and
watercolour



Rosalind Minett Acrylic
paintings and
small figures



Clovis Patten
Paintings
influenced by
landscape
and music



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watercolours



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A walk on the almost wild side

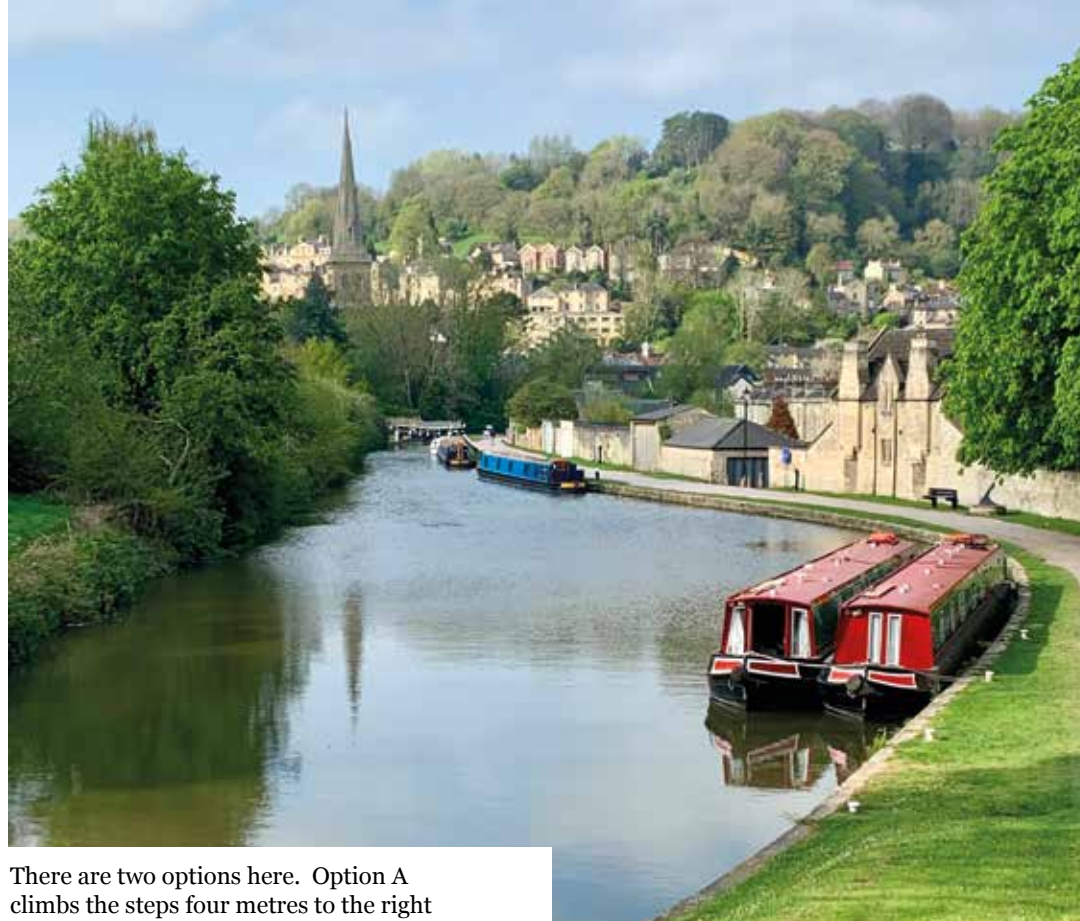
Mary Young takes us on a delightful local walk, discovering historical gems and magnificent views on the way.

If you are looking for a walk which offers some of the best views in Bath this is a must, and it is right on our doorstep in Widcombe. It is about 6km and will take about two hours at a moderate pace with no rest stops – although you are certain to want to stop several times to absorb the views, country air and just soak up the atmosphere.

This article is designed as a taster so please look at the full description (Walk 2 – Best of Widcombe Views) and general guidance before setting out - www.widcombeassociation.org.uk/walks/.

The walk starts at the railway station although you can start at any point along the route.

The first point of interest is Magdalen Chapel on Holloway. The chapel was built in about 1100 and at the end of the 12th century a small hospital for lepers was founded close by. The chapel was rebuilt in 1495 followed by further work in the 18th century and it still holds regular services. The leper hospital became an asylum in the 13th century and was rebuilt in 1761. It is now a private house. Opposite the chapel is a horse trough with an interesting inscription.



There are two options here. Option A climbs the steps four metres to the right of the horse trough and continues up to Alexandra Park; or for a step-free route to the park follow option B. Both end up on the main path along the top of Beechen Cliff below Alexandra Park, which was opened in 1902 to commemorate the coronation of Edward VII and named after his wife. This is a lovely spot for a picnic with extensive views across the city. There is a children's play area and toilets (20p coin required).

The route then goes through Lyncombe Hill Fields, another lovely place to soak up the views and see if you can spot some interesting flora and fauna.

Leaving the fields, the walk goes down Rosemount Lane, into Lyncombe Vale, to Prior Park Road before crossing over into Church Street where you will note the attractive St Thomas a Becket Church which is the Grade 2 listed parish church

of Widcombe. Then along Church Lane alongside the National Trust's Prior Park Landscape Gardens to reach the skyline walk (with amazing views back over Bath and Widcombe) before descending onto Widcombe Hill down a narrow, steep path.

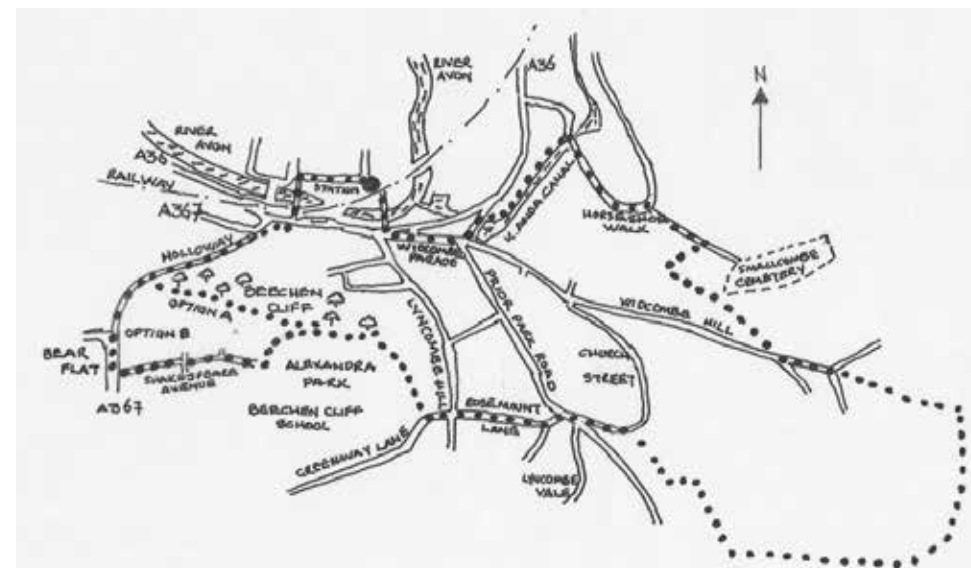
The walk then crosses more fields to reach the path leading to a lane where you turn left but it is well worth a detour to visit Smallcombe Cemetery to the right.

At the end of the lane turn left into Horseshoe Walk and follow this road down, turning left along the canal towpath. Shortly you will come to Widcombe Deep Lock, the second deepest lock in the UK at 5.92 metres deep. This is the lowest stretch of the 57-mile Kennet and Avon Canal, designed by John Rennie in 1793.

From here there are various options – you can return to the station or stroll along Widcombe Parade maybe stopping for some retail therapy or to have a drink or something to eat.

I hope this will tempt you to step out into our lovely local countryside and perhaps find other walks in the area.

■ Mary Young is secretary of the Widcombe Association and Chair of Bath Ramblers.



Summer gardening

Spring has definitely sprung – John Leach shares some of his invaluable knowledge on how to keep your garden looking good and growing well throughout the summer.

This is a magical time of the year. Mother nature is breathing life into every corner of our gardens, often leaving us racing to catch up with the abundance of growth and an ever lengthening catalogue of tasks needing our attention.



Feed your plants

Many of our plants have come through the long, wet winter and will benefit from a feed. Give trees and shrubs planted this spring or last season a general fertiliser such as Growmore to give them a good start. Roses benefit from a high potash fertiliser such as Toprose. It is particularly important to feed plants in containers and Tomorite works really well for just about everything. The exception is acid-soil loving plants such as camellias and azaleas which should have an ericaceous feed.

Watch out for greenfly

Keep an eye on your roses. Greenfly seem to appear overnight at this time and if they build up too much, should be controlled. We use Vitax Plant Guard on our roses at the garden centre. It is based on natural ingredients and is non-toxic to pets and wildlife, so suitable for bee-friendly gardens. It also gives some protection against the common rose diseases.

Easy beans



Home-grown beans are so much better than the supermarket fare. If you struggle with runner beans try the climbing French bean Cobra, which carries a good crop of pencil shaped, tender, tasty beans and is easy grow.



Moth traps

Guard against Codling moth that gives us those nasty little grubs that get into our apples. Codling moth traps are shaped like a little tent that is hung in a tree and contains a pheromone lure to trap the moths before they lay their eggs on the baby apples. It is totally safe for all other wildlife.

Take out spent flowers

It is a really good practice to walk around your garden every few days with secateurs in hand, deadheading. Removing spent flowers encourages plants to produce more flowers rather than set seed. Roses, sweet peas, dahlias and many herbaceous plants will benefit greatly as well hanging baskets and window boxes.



Watering

It is important to keep newly planted trees and shrubs watered right through their first summer. Daily watering is not necessary and is very wasteful. I recommend that young trees should have the equivalent of a bucket of water once a week and shrubs half a bucket, even if there has been some rain. This regime ensures that water gets right down to the roots rather than wetting the soil surface and evaporating with minimum benefit to the plant.

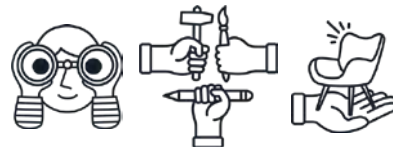
Happy gardening.

■ John Leach is managing director of Prior Park Garden Centre.

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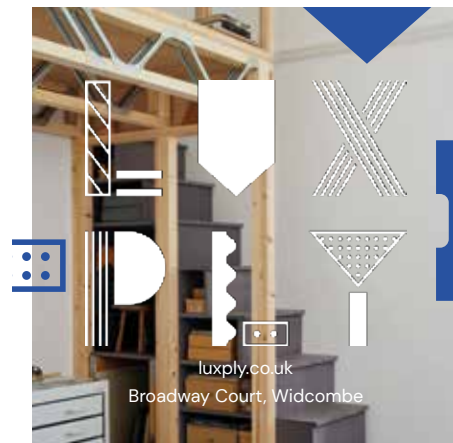
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Working Widcombe

Our Garden Centre hits 50!

Colette Hill on the business that evolved into a part of Widcombe life.

Widcombe's favourite garden centre, which is 50 years old this year, is viewed by its customers more as a venerable institution than a commercial business. It is the one-stop shop for carefully tended outdoor and indoor plants, gardening kit, pet supplies and upscale groceries as well as being one of several great gift shops in the area that enable us to shop locally for every occasion. In addition, it hosts a popular café run under licence by Roy and Ali Hayward. The garden centre is staffed by men and women who often arrived by serendipity then stayed for decades, becoming experts in their fields as well as familiar faces – friends even – to loyal customers.



Charlotte Early and Reece Bigwood

A slow start

The beginnings of the centre were not propitious. In 1973, two local builders clubbed together to buy a steep plot (once a market garden) on the west side of Prior Park Road, with a view to filling it with new houses. When the planning department at Bath City Council declined permission to do any such thing, they were left with a narrow, sloping site with no obvious use. The builders brought in Fred Daw, who had just retired as director of parks for Bath and the idea of a shop selling garden plants was born. By 1974, the business consisted of a small wooden building with a glasshouse, plus room to park 15 cars. Fred appointed John Leach as his general manager and John is still managing director today.

The new shelter suggested by Gavin Cooper



Senior plantsman Simon Knight advises a customer

By the end of the 1980s, Fred Daw's (as the shop was then known) was running out of space and the shop was extended. The site was landscaped and planted with trees, including the magnificent weeping beech tree beside the main entrance.

In 2006, when the old structure was becoming tired, John invited local architect Philip Hillier to design the centre we know today, with its sedum roof and low-ceilinged café (the latter a stipulation of the Council's planning department). Building took four long years with trade continuing in the midst of the chaos and the portaloo.

No further development took place until this year with the construction of the second shelter for bedding and tender plants, at the suggestion of manager Gavin Cooper. Gavin died abruptly of a heart attack in December 2022 and the new shelter will carry a plaque in his memory.

In other ways, the centre's expansion has been gentle and organic. John explains: 'We always sold eggs supplied by a local farmer. Because we needed milk for our teas and coffees, someone suggested we buy a fridge and sell milk. From these small beginnings, we eventually found ourselves with our richly stocked farm shop. It's been the same with the pet and gift departments.'

It's all about the people

Perhaps the most important factor in making the centre something of an institution is the people who work there. Young people who arrived as weekend or general staff went on to make a significant contribution to the development of the centre – senior plantsman Simon Knight, Charlotte Early who runs the farm shop, Kirsty Depledge in the pet department, Amanda Sweet in gifts, and – behind the scenes – office manager Polly Thomas. Andy Cridge, who does all the deliveries has been with the company for over 40 years.

Of course, the main purpose of the centre is still to sell plants and here again, expansion has been organic. 'We are very particular about the plants but we aren't expensive. I think that is what sets us apart. We employ four plantsmen who buy almost exclusively from UK nurseries. All four are serious professionals who nurture the plants while they are with us as well as provide reliable advice to customers.'

John is particularly proud of the many years people choose to stay with the business. 'The running joke is that our probationary period is 10 years.' He also enjoys the long term contact with customers. 'Many are the children of our first customers, and indeed the grandchildren, which is so rewarding.'

Looking ahead, the obvious challenges are the move to peat-free compost and the impact of climate change on the plants we will be choosing for our gardens. John remains optimistic, noting the growing interest in gardening across the generations and the wonderful ranges of plants being developed by specialist nurseries.

■ Colette Hill



Polly Thomas

Widcombe Foodies

Divya Atkins has lived in Widcombe with her family for 18 years. She is a computer scientist but aside from work is passionate about sharing her love of cooking. This recipe hails from Bangalore – it's a delightful summer dish and is how south Indians often make a spicy rice pulao (although they might add more chillies than in this recipe). Feel free to include tomatoes, a handful of peas or broad beans or other seasonal veggies to the mixture – before adding the rice.



Mint rice with spice

Serves 4

Ingredients:

- 2 cups of rice
- Large bunch of fresh mint (4 cups of leaves)
- 1 inch piece of ginger, peeled
- 4 garlic cloves, peeled
- 2 bay leaves
- 2 star anise
- 4 cloves
- 2 cinnamon sticks (2cm long)
- 2 cardamom pods
- 1 green chilli, slit
- 8 cashew nuts
- 8 sultanas or raisins
- 4 tbsp ghee
- 4 tsp lemon juice
- 1tsp salt

Method:

Rinse the rice, and leave it to soak in double its volume (4 cups) of water.

Roughly chop half the mint leaves, ginger and garlic, and then pound into a coarse paste with a pinch of salt, using a pestle and mortar (enjoy the aromas!).

Melt the ghee in a deep pan on medium heat, add the dried spices (bay leaves, star anise, cloves, cinnamon and cardamom) and the slit green chili, and fry for 30 seconds.

Add the pounded ginger-garlic-mint paste, the remaining fresh mint leaves, the cashews and sultanas, and fry on medium heat for one minute.

Add the rice, along with its soaking water, stir well, and add the remaining salt.

Stir occasionally on full heat (make sure the rice doesn't stick to the base of the pan), until the water comes to a boil, then reduce to a simmer.

Cover with a lid and cook until the rice is semi soft (about five minutes).

Turn off the heat, stir in the lemon juice, and replace the lid, to allow the rice to finish cooking in its own steam for 10 minutes.

Serve hot with yoghurt or raita.

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Looking Back

Slavery and abolition in Widcombe



James Stephen

John Chambers on some surprising historical coincidences

One Spring morning in 1817, a soberly dressed figure was seen passing along Widcombe Terrace, and nodding acknowledgement to the extravagantly attired owner of number 3. The first man was James Stephen, the prominent abolitionist, brother-in-law of William Wilberforce. The second was John Cumberland Hughes, tenant of the Grand Bras plantation in Grenada.

The coincidence is less surprising when you know that Bath was strongly associated with slavery and its abolition. On the UCL slavery database, Bath has 77 addresses associated with claims at emancipation and Bristol has 118. Allowing for population size these numbers are similar and far in excess of those for Liverpool and London. Bath Abbey is said to have more memorials to plantation owners than any other religious building in England.

John Cumberland Hughes and the enslaved Alexandrine had two sons, John and William, at his plantation in Grenada. He manumitted (or freed) them in 1793, after which they lived as a family and had four further children. In 1805, he left them to return to England where he married Elizabeth Stanley in Ponsonby, Cumberland. The couple came to Widcombe Terrace in 1807, the year the transatlantic slave trade was banned.

Other plantation owners lived in Widcombe Crescent - William Wadden Martyn at

number 1, Thomas Prince and Martha Freeman at number 5, and John and Olive Mackeson at number 7. The Pickering family of 13 Prior Park Buildings are also said to have derived their wealth from plantations. There are still streets named Widcombe Crescent and Widcombe Road in Kingston, Jamaica.

James Stephen was the legal mastermind of the abolitionist movement and particularly of the 1807 bill. William Wilberforce, who often stayed in Bath, in Great Pulteney Street or Perrymead, believed that emancipation would now happen inexorably but gradually. James Stephen and many others pushed for immediate emancipation. The campaign became far more activist, for example boycotting grocers selling sugar from the West Indies rather than relying on individual abstention from sugar. Elizabeth Heyrick and others linked emancipation with domestic social reforms pointing out that the rich treated the poor 'with the spirit of the slave trade'.

The Emancipation Act was passed in 1833 and implemented from 1834 to 1838, bought by the distribution of £20 million to the 46,000 plantation owners. The enslaved people received no compensation and had to continue indentured work at low wages for a further eight years. Alexandrine received £533 compensation but John Cumberland Hughes appears not to have owned the freehold to Grand Bras and his executors received nothing. Edward Welch Eversley of 6 Macaulay Buildings was also a successful claimant.

At the end there was another coincidence. Despite an age gap of 10 years, James Stephen died on 10 Oct 1832 and John Cumberland Hughes within 4 months on 5 Feb 1833. Since they had first met in 1817, James Stephen had helped bring about emancipation and had been MP for Tralee and later East Grinstead. Meanwhile John Cumberland Hughes appears to have lived a domestic life producing five children and earning a memorial in St Thomas a Becket Church. ■ *John Chambers*

Slaughter remembered

Dan Lyons uncovers the horrific tale behind a memorial in St Matthew's Church.

Church memorials can harbour extraordinary stories. One such is the Cawnpore memorial in the small hall as you enter St Matthew's Church on Widcombe Hill.

General Kennedy of the East India Company Army commissioned the memorial to remember his daughter, Susan Blair, and her children. They had lived in Macaulay Buildings and worshipped at St Matthew's and were killed in the Siege of Cawnpore, part of the Indian Mutiny of 1857.

At the time, the British forces in India were mainly composed of regiments of Indian soldiers with British officers, and most (but not all) the soldiers mutinied and turned against their officers. At Cawnpore, a major garrison town on the river Ganges, they were led by a disaffected local prince, Nana Sahib.

The British commander, General Wheeler, was forced to take anyone British or Eurasian into a poorly fortified and supplied entrenchment surrounded by mud walls a metre high. Of the 1,000 people packed into this small area, 700 were civilians, women and children. Vastly outnumbered and outgunned, and suffering horrendous casualties, the brave defenders of Cawnpore fought for their lives.



On 25 June, Gilbert Augustus Master wrote to his father:

We have now held out for 21 days under tremendous fire. [Nana Sahib] has offered to forward us in safety to Allahabad and the General has accepted his terms...Charlotte Newenham and Bella Blair are dead. I'll write from Allahabad. God bless you.

On the day of the surrender, all those still alive, including many wounded, were taken down to the Ganges where boats had been moored to take them to Allahabad. However, as soon as they boarded, the mutineers revealed hidden batteries of artillery and masses of infantry which opened fire from both sides of the river. By the time the firing ceased, only 146 people, almost all women and children, were still alive. Only one of the boats managed to float off down the Ganges and, ultimately, just four men made it to safety.

The women and children were imprisoned by Nana Sahib in the Bibighar (the House of the Women) where they were kept in appalling conditions. Two weeks later, they were all murdered, Mrs Blair and her daughter Susan among them.

There is another memorial to the family in St Michael's Church in Broad Street.

If you can bear the horror of it, The Indian Mutiny by Saul David is (highly) recommended further reading.

■ *Dan Lyons is a retired tax adviser and amateur historian, with a particular interest in military history.*

The Back Pages

Committee profiles

Sisters Clare and Hilary Furlonger volunteer respectively as chair of the events committee and treasurer of the Widcombe Association. They have shared a home in Bath for some 25 years, first on Widcombe Hill, then Perrymead, then Lyncombe Hill. Their elder and younger sisters are not far away, Ruth in Bear Flat and Janet in Cheltenham.

Their father, a vicar, loved to roam so, as children, Clare and Hilary lived in many houses in many parts of the UK, most especially in Cornwall where they still have a bolthole near Redruth. Both went to university – Clare to read History at the London School of Economics and Hilary to read English at Liverpool – before long careers in education for Clare and the civil service for Hilary.

It was visiting her elder sister, Ruth, in 1999 that first drew Clare to Bath. She had remembered the city as black-stoned and grim and was dazzled by its transformation into the pale stone World Heritage Site we



Hilary (left) and Clare

know today. The serendipity of the perfect role in the education department of Bath Spa University convinced her to make her move. Hilary followed soon afterwards to take up a senior role in the MOD.

Hilary joined the WA committee over 10 years ago and in 2017 took on the role of treasurer. Clare joined the events committee five years ago and runs the WA's events.

Both are strongly committed to supporting their local community. As Clare says: 'I love the fact that when we go out, it takes us forever to get from A to B because we bump into so many people we know through our volunteering. It gives a wonderful sense of belonging.' ■ Colette Hill

Your committee

- **Mike Wrigley**, chairman, chairman@widcombeassociation.org.uk, 07793816669
- **Ann Ashworth**, membership, membership@widcombeassociation.org.uk
- **Steve Cross**, Go Green Widcombe, ggwidcombe@gmail.com
- **Clare Furlonger**, events, events@widcombeassociation.org.uk
- **Hilary Furlonger**, treasurer, treasurer@widcombeassociation.org.uk
- **Colette Hill**, Widcombe Magazine, magazine@widcombeassociation.org.uk, 07971 557690
- **Rachel Meyrick**, Dolemeads matters, rachelmeyrick@mac.com
- **Jan Shepley**, planning matters, planning@widcombeassociation.org.uk
- **Luci Smolarek**, Widcombe traders, Luca & Fig, 01225 571 827
- **Biddy Walcot**, Widcombe Magazine, magazine@widcombeassociation.org.uk
- **Mary Young**, secretary, secretary@widcombeassociation.org.uk

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Last Word

Gallons into half pint pots

Ralph Oswick was artistic director of the Natural Theatre Company for 45 years and is now an active patron of the Bath Comedy Festival.



The Natural Theatre Company once rented the basement at Widcombe Institute. This was after years camping out in premises as varied as Dead Mill in Larkhall, where low ceilings decreed we could only fully erect our sets outside, and the upper room of the Little Theatre Cinema, now a screening venue but then only accessible for our equipment via a pulley up the front of the building.

Consequently, we thought the damp basement on Widcombe Hill was the bee's knees. Especially as a little worm-eaten staircase at the back led up to the warehouse of Harvest Wholefoods, our landlords. Why? Because we could pop up said secret stair and nick illicit cartons of chocolate soya drink!

When Harvest moved out, they let us borrow the warehouse to produce one of our touring shows which was set on The Titanic. The scenery included a gleaming white stage cloth. Harvest had used the place for bottling molasses and other treacly vegetarian substances, so the wooden floor was very sticky. We had to surround the set with acres of newspaper and take our shoes off whenever we stepped on stage. A bit like entering the holy temple!

We soon found other premises, this time in a former condom-packing laboratory sited where the Odeon now stands. This

was obviously spotlessly clean but being surrounded by council flats there was a problem with noise, especially at night. Once, when practicing the Hallelujah Chorus for our classical music spoof Scarlatti's Birthday Party, which was about to depart for a season in Berlin, there was a furious rattling at the big roller shutter that opened onto the rehearsal space. Then a voice rang out. A round of expletives followed by 'Anyway, we don't appreciate that kind of music round here!' So much for taking culture to the masses.

We must have got the song right in the end as the show toured for years in various versions and was seen by a million people.

Anyway, we ended up buying Widcombe Institute. The National Lottery grant rules at the time required the applicant to compare two similar projects, so we produced schemes for the Institute and for the former bakery in Oldfield Park. Widcombe Institute was deemed to have greater potential, especially if tied in with the regeneration of the area. Who knows, if things had gone the other way, we might have found ourselves organising Oldfield Rising.

The company became a huge international success, with up to four performance teams on the road at any one time, so we started to look for even bigger premises. The nearest we got to purchasing a new place is now the Tesco on Wellsway. I can't imagine a Wellsway Rising. In the end, we compromised and installed the beautiful mezzanine studio that is now the main focus of the Institute.

We did the equivalent of Stacey Solomon's television programme, *Sort Your Life Out*. The Council lent us a vast industrial unit in Peasedown and we laid out every single item we possessed. Every stained glove and every manky (odd) shoe and got rid of around half of it.

Thus, on return home, we found the newly restored and improved Widcombe Institute fitted us like...well...like a glove!

■ *Ralph Oswick*



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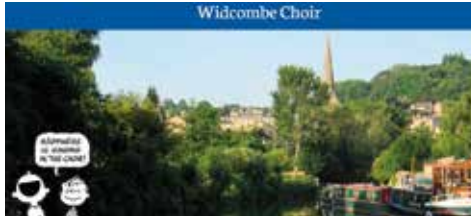
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If you have any comments about this issue, we welcome your feedback.
Please email: magazine@widcombeassociation.org.uk



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