



**SOMERSET BUILDING**  
*Preservation Trust*

**NEWSLETTER**

April 2023

Dear Members

You will be aware from previous Newsletters that it has been our long-held ambition to secure the future of the Old Courthouse in the main street of Chard and bring this remarkable historic building back into public use.

I am delighted to report that we are now involved in detailed discussions which hopefully will see that aim achieved – more than 20 years after we first looked at this property.

As always with projects of this type, there are a number of legal complexities which have to be resolved but we remain optimistic these will be overcome and we are extremely grateful to the Architectural Heritage Fund and Chard Town Council for their support.

I would like to add my personal thanks to Patrick Stow who has agreed to be our vice-chairman temporarily, filling the vacancy left by the death of Mike Foden, and who has represented the Trust in the on-going discussions over the future of the Old Courthouse.

This promises to be a very busy year for the Trust. In addition to everything else, we are starting to receive entries for the biennial Stansell Awards which will be presented in the autumn.

If members know of any building projects that might qualify for one of these prestigious awards please contact our secretary but time is tight as judges will start looking at the various schemes in May.

Russell Lillford  
Chairman

## **Trustee Retirement**

We offer our thanks and best wishes to Angela Yeoman who has decided to step down as a trustee. Angela has served on the board for many years and contributed an enormous amount to our various projects. We wish her all the very best for the future.

## The Old Courthouse, Chard

The Trust is negotiating to take a lease on this remarkable building in Fore Street, Chard, so it can draw up a programme of work to protect its important historic features and bring the whole of the property back into public use.

The Grade 1 late medieval town house has been vacant and neglected for many years, leading to it being placed on the At Risk Register. Now a change of ownership has given the opportunity to secure its future.

The Architectural Heritage Fund has awarded us £9,000 to undertake a Viability Appraisal that is necessary to help raise funding to cover the cost of the project and we have also received a £3,000 contribution from Chard Town Council.

Known locally as The Old Courthouse, the building dates back to around 1630. It escaped the “modernisers” of later centuries and retains most of its original features including a first-floor courtroom with a barrel-vaulted ceiling and excellent original plaster work with figures depicting Justice and Wisdom and scenes from the Judgement of Solomon.

The shop premises on the road frontage are currently being used by the Chard Community Hub which provides space for local groups and a range of activities.

*The interior of the Old Courtroom with its barrel ceiling and rare decorative plasterwork.*



## Tone Works

Members who went along to the open days at Tone Works last November could not fail to be impressed by the ingenuity and skill of the engineers and workers during the initial phases of the repairs to the former woollen works on the outskirts of Wellington.

It is excellent news that the restoration of this nationally important complex has been given further grant funding of £185,596 from Historic England.



*Inside the Tone Works with machinery still in place*

The Trust has taken an active interest in the efforts to restore this historic works that once washed, dried and finished cloth produced by the nearby mill.

Tone Works, which date to the early 19th century and were originally powered by a waterwheel, closed in 2000 leaving much of the historic machinery in place. The sprawling site was purchased by a series of property development companies each with plans for residential development but nothing was done and the historic buildings continued to become more derelict. Somerset West and Taunton Council stepped in to buy the site in 2020 to protect this registered heritage asset and ensure the various buildings can be repurposed.

## Former Trustee Honoured

Congratulations to former trustee John Bishton who was made an MBE in the New Year's Honours for services to the preservation of the historic buildings in his home town of Bruton. John was a SBPT Trustee from 1991 until 2002 and has been a prominent member of the Bruton Civic Society.

## Minterne House



Those who made the long drive down to Dorset for the annual general meeting were rewarded with a private tour of an architecturally and historically fascinating building - and a sparkling late autumn day.

Although it has the appearance of a much older house, the present Minterne House only dates to 1905, being built on the same footprint as the original early 17<sup>th</sup> century building which was demolished because of extensive dry rot. As a result, many innovative techniques were employed, including iron girders rather than timber in the framework, and the finished house incorporated many modern conveniences. Our tour guide, the present Lord Digby (fourth from the left in the photo above) referred to his home as a “new build”.

Members also enjoyed a talk on one of the most colourful members of the family, the adventuress Jane Digby 1807-1881 who after three marriages and a string of aristocratic lovers across Europe, became the wife of a Sheik and lived a Bedouin life style in a tent in the Syrian desert.



## **And finally .....**

The biennial William Stansell Awards will be presented in the autumn. These acclaimed awards recognise outstanding examples of building, design and conservation, whether new buildings or the alteration, conversion or repair of old buildings. The only stipulation is that the work must have been completed in 2021 or 2022.

So, if you know of any projects you feel might be worthy of an award in any of these categories, please encourage the owner/architect/builder to get in touch with our secretary Jane. The closing date for entries is 12 May 2023.

The awards are sponsored by builders and developers Stansell who are marking their 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year.

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