



## WATCHET CONSERVATION SOCIETY



## **The Fitzroy Barometer The Esplanade Watchet**

Situated on the wall of a cottage immediately leaving Swain Street on the Esplanade is a significant part of Watchet's maritime heritage.

The Admiral Fitzroy barometer was restored by Watchet Conservation Society in 2012 utilising the specialist skills of local residents and craftsmen Martyn Ketchen, Robin Trigg and Richard Stanton.

The exact date when the barometer was erected is not known but was probably in the late 1870s. It was gifted to the town by Sir Anthony Acland Hood, a local benefactor, and this is acknowledged with an engraved plaque on the door.

Admiral Robert Fitzroy, after whom the barometer is named, gained fame as the captain of the "Beagle" which took Charles Darwin on one of the most significant and epic sea voyages of all time. As constant cramped companions Fitzroy and Darwin made an interesting coupling. Fitzroy, a devout Christian, and Darwin, the father of evolutionary understanding, were eventually to find themselves in direct opposition, a situation which may well have contributed to Fitzroy's tragic suicide in 1865. He has justifiably been called the Father of the Meteorological Society and had a life-long passion for science. On his retirement from the sea he devoted his remaining years to its pursuit.

In 1859 during a horrific storm the "Royal Charter", returning from the Australian goldfields, floundered and was dashed onto the rocks off Anglesey with the accompanying loss of lives, both passengers and crew. This event affected Fitzroy deeply and it became his inspiration for charts to be produced allowing weather predictions to be calculated. Fitzroy called this "predicting the weather" thus coining the term with which we are all familiar today, the "weather forecast", almost a national obsession. In 1860 at his instigation The Times published the first weather forecast. At this time the Crown was encouraged to distribute "storm glasses" known as Fitzroy

Storm Barometers throughout the British Isles in coastal towns and villages. It is at this point that we make the Watchet connection. It seems likely that Watchet's barometer was installed around 1870 sometime after Fitzroy's death.

This very specific type of barometer spawned many domestic examples which continued to be made long after his death and some are not as accurate as they should be. These are often accompanied by Fitzroy's remarks in a very attractive script making them aesthetically very pleasing.

The brass plaque on the door of the barometer states "The Gift of Sir A.A. Hood, Bart." which refers to Sir Alexander Acland Hood whose county seat was at St. Audries. He was a generous local benefactor donating funds to various causes in West Somerset. A second brass plaque was introduced some thirty years ago inscribed "9am Daily" which is self-explanatory. This later addition was a donation of Mary Rawle who holds personal affectionate memories of this very tangible link with the port's past.

Emrico Negretti & Joseph Zambra - Makers of the barometer.

Negretti and Zambra first established their business in Regent Street, London in 1850. These highly skilled and innovative instrument makers gained immediate recognition, winning a medal at The Great Exhibition in 1851. The Astronomer Royal, The Royal Observatory and Prince Albert were among their first clients - and Fitzroy of course.

Watchet Conservation Society is pleased to have ensured that this piece of Watchet's history and heritage has been preserved and, with so few examples remaining, trust that future generations will continue to be aware of its significance.

PS: Appropriately in 2002 recognition of Fitzroy's foresight was rewarded when the shipping forecast replaced Finisterre with Fitzroy.

**Nick Cotton 2013**