



The Community Newsletter of TOTSOC - the Totnes and District Society

Chairman's Chat

Judy Westacott



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Birdwood House, No. 44 High Street, is an imposing, blue, listed building on the corner of the Market Square. Hundreds of people walk by it every day without a second glance.

But what of its history? Research has revealed that it has had a variety of uses. A deed dated 1622 refers to it as Burdwood House and also mentions Burdwood Lane running eastwards. Benjamin Babbage inherited it in 1814 and his son Charles in 1827. Charles sold it only two years later.

In 1875 it was owned by Thomas Roberts who ran it as 'The Commercial Inn' until 1902 when Elizabeth Roberts ran it as 'The Commercial Hotel', and from 1922 when it reverted to 'The Commercial Inn'.

In 1957 it was run by an S.H. Davies as 'The Commercial Hotel' again. Then, in 1958 – in September – it was registered as Birdwood House Trust with the Charity Commission and has been run, and maintained, by the Trust since then.

Thanks to the Trust it has been modernised and hosts an Art Gallery, a rest room providing light refreshments, hireable meeting rooms, the Totnes Credit Union, flats and businesses.

The building was named after Field Marshall William Riddell Birdwood who, on 29th December 1919, was made Baron of Anzac and of Totnes. He was born in India on 13th September 1865 and had a long and distinguished military career, seeing action on the North West Frontier in 1891, in the Second Boer War and other campaigns in the First World War, including commanding the ANZAC Corps at Gallipoli. He died on 17th May 1951.

Birdwood House – an impressive building with an impressive history named after an impressive person. Next time you are passing, pop into the Art Gallery, have a cup of tea or coffee and contemplate its history yet to be created

[“The Future of Totnes” in 1971](#)

Dave Mitchell

In the Autumn 2015 edition of CONTACT, John Keleher wrote an article about a report produced by TOTSOC in 1971 entitled “The Future of Totnes” which he found in the Study Centre attached to the Totnes Museum. Devon County Council was proposing to prepare a Town Centre Plan for Totnes (later published in 1972) and the report was TOTSOC’s response. As John’s article made clear, the TOTSOC report makes interesting reading given the current concerns over the large-scale housing development now going on. The report was insistent that the setting of Totnes was a vital part of its character and should remain rural. It also felt that:

*“Any changes should be consciously controlled and designed to enhance rather than diminish the setting and the views outward from it. As a corollary, **the town must not grow outwards**”*

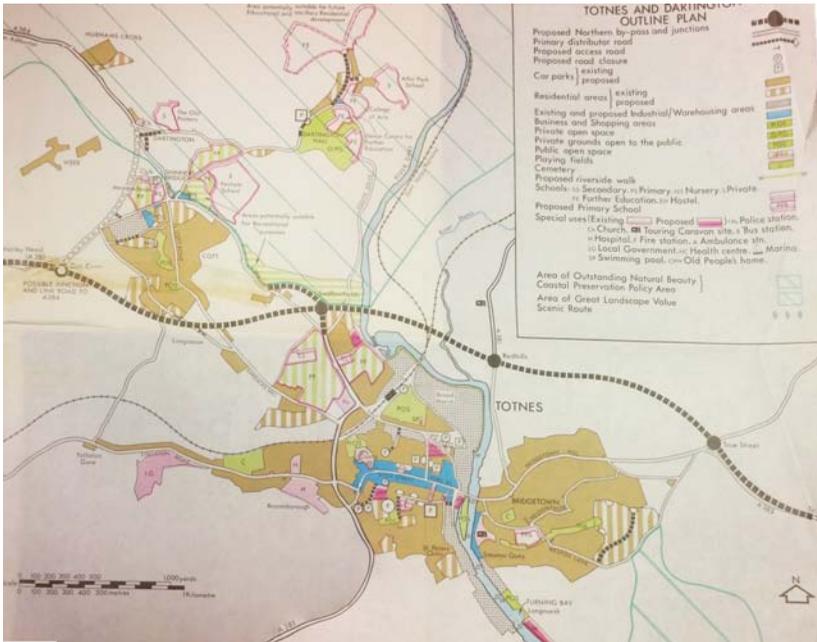
Another related issue the report covers in some detail is the traffic congestion that Totnes then suffered from. At the time Devon County Council proposed a “Northerly By-pass” which would have run between True Street and Dun Cross (on the A385 to the west of Dartington). This road would have been elevated some 30’ above the flood plain, crossing the Hems, the Dart and the two railways (the Dart Valley Railway had recently reopened). Access to the Ashburton Road was to be via a junction near Puddavine, with through traffic encouraged to go via Marley Head and the A385 rather than via Shinnars Bridge.

TOTSOC supported this proposal and also the construction of a second bridge to take traffic away from the Plains and Fore Street. Though the bypass was never built, the second bridge – the Brutus Bridge - **was** built in 1982. It’s fascinating to speculate how Totnes would have developed if the bypass had also been built.

The typescript has been converted into an electronic document that is available in the Archives section of the TOTSOC website at:

totsoc.org.uk/TOTSOC1971Report.pdf

The 1972 DCC map, shown on the following page, is attached to the report.



Map from the 1972 DCC "Totnes and Dartington Outline Plan"



Detail showing central Totnes

History on the Pavements

Kate Wilson

Early in 2015 Christine Fraser from the Exeter St David's Neighbourhood Partnership contacted me with an intriguing idea she had to paint plant portraits on lamp posts; not just any lamp posts, but historically interesting, cast-iron lamp posts; and not just any plant portrait, but illustrations of plants discovered by the famous Veitch family. I was intrigued - this kind of opportunity doesn't come along very often, especially not for a botanical illustrator. It turned out that the impetus for the project came partly from Britain in Bloom judges saying that Exeter could make more of the Veitch horticultural dynasty's strong Exeter connections and partly because there were some locally made, cast-iron lamp posts in danger of being removed and possibly destroyed. The idea of the Veitch Lamp Post Trail was born.

The 19th century lamp posts were fettled up and painted in their original livery - dark green on the base and light green above - during the summer of 2015. Meanwhile, I was deciding which plants would be painted on these lamp posts. I did some research about the Veitch family and found that there seemed to be very few plants the Veitch Nurseries employed plant hunters did *not* bring to the UK - the choice was vast. Fortunately, Veitch family researchers and experts locally were able to give me ideas for plants with an Exeter connection - and even better, they were able to tell me where I could find living specimens. The plants were drawn, discussed and eventually agreed upon and I set about doing a line drawing of each in permanent pen on the lamp posts in preparation for painting.

Even though I had a notice tied to the lamp post to say what I was doing, and there had been publicity in the Express and Echo about the project, and many people from the community were involved, the sight of someone with a pen, drawing on a lamp post so alarmed some residents that they called the police - who came out to check what I was doing. Luckily they didn't think I looked like the average graffiti artist and, after asking some questions and wishing me luck, they went on their way. I was able to add "police aware" to my explanatory notice. Now, all the lamp posts have been painted with their individual plants in sign writers' enamel, which should be reasonably durable; and to protect them from unwanted additional painting they are being coated with anti-graffiti paint.

There are 17 lamp posts on the Lamp Post Trail which takes you through the St David's and St James' areas of the city where the Veitch family lived, had their celebrated plant nurseries and orchards and, in some cases, are buried. It starts outside Robert Tosswill Veitch's house in Elm Grove Road (Exeter Civic society has recently erected a blue plaque to commemorate him) and ends in St David's churchyard where his son, Peter Christian Massyn Veitch, is buried.

One of the lamp posts is a garlanded, embossed, probably Garton and King lamp post in Bystock Terrace and has been painted by a local sign writer. Apparently, these garlanded posts were often outside the homes of important people and only a few remain in the city. Along the route are several things to note including the Lucombe



Lamp Post 3

Clematis montana var. rubens

Oaks in Bury Meadow Park, the Exeter artist Frederick John Wldgery's house (another blue plaque) and many drain covers and drainage channels made by local foundries - as well as the lamp posts of course. Some lamp posts bear a foundry mark of local family firms such as Garton and King (which still exists though it doesn't make lamp posts any more) and Willey and Co. This foundry was the largest employer in Exeter in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but closed in the 1980s.

The founders of both these foundries, "Iron Sam" Kingdon, of Garton & King and Frederick Willey, are also buried in St David's churchyard. The foundry marks of Parkin and Sons, whose foundry closed in the 1990s, and unusually Shepherd & son (better known, a passer-by told me, for pioneering early motoring in Exeter) are also to be found on lamp posts on the Trail.

Some lamp posts have "Revo" on them - not a local firm, but I was told by another passer-by (I learned a lot from passers-by) that as Revo specialised in electrical equipment it is probable that these were electric lamps from their installation, and not later conversions as the others were. Much of this additional information is included in Exeter's Royal Albert Museum's digital Lamp Post Trail which trail goers can follow.

Before I started painting lampposts I was unaware of Exeter's long history of engineering or that it used to be widely reflected across the city in lamp posts, manhole covers, coalhole covers and drainage channels. This decorative cast ironwork seems to be disappearing at an alarming rate; the ease of recycling belies its durability.

A quick internet trawl reveals many places where you can buy cast iron or period lamp posts to put in your garden, yet our streets are lit by utilitarian concrete with little distinctiveness or human scale design. Well-made and designed street furniture contributes to the character of a place and tells a story of civic pride. People often feel strongly about it as the St David's Neighbourhood Partnership has proved. We need to press for more imaginative design in our new streetscapes and we could do worse than to look at the past. There's history on these pavements.

Download a leaflet, including a trail map, here:

veitchlampposts.wordpress.com

St Barnabas, Brooking

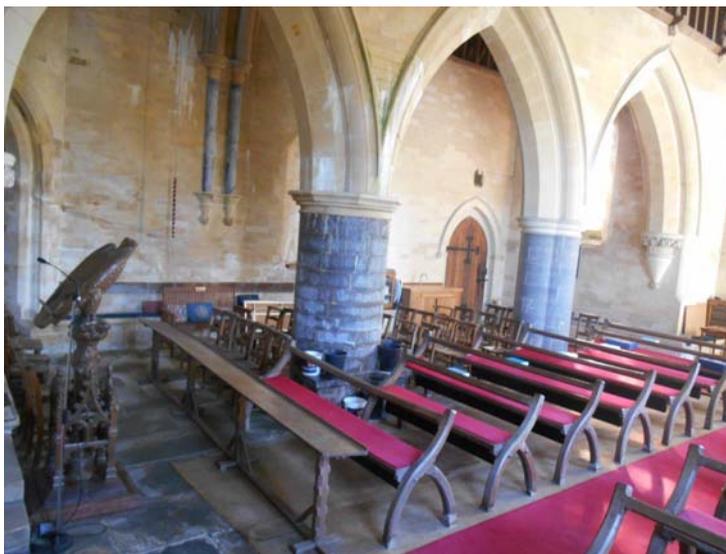
Lawrence Green

It is seldom that we see a church built completely at the same time and subsequently unaltered. Brooking church is a very good example of high Victorian style, being 'high', or Tractarian in tradition as well as architecture. It was built as a chapel of ease by the Champernowne family of Dartington for one of their sons who would inhabit the nearby contemporary parsonage house. Never a parish church, it serves a scattered rural area of houses and farms. It bears a passing resemblance to another contemporary church built by the Champernownes at Landscope.



The church comes as a surprise, hidden away from the Shinnars Bridge to Marley Head road behind its wooded banks. With its tall spire and steep gables it sits on a flat mound only a field away from the main Paddington to Penzance railway line. From the train, cresting the long gradient out of Totnes, one just glimpses the spire rising from its square of tall trees.

Approached by a short track from the road the church looms above the gravel car park giving a feeling of otherworldly remoteness. The nave and sanctuary are tall and are of two different heights joined at the chancel arch like a Norman church. The south porch is matched by a similar construction on the north side which has been converted into a spacious modern toilet. What appear to be smaller porches spring from the south and north sides of the sanctuary. The chimney in yellow Kingsteignton Hexter Humpherson bricks shows that the south sanctuary porch contains a boiler. The exterior of the church is in grey limestone ashlar with doors and windows bordered in yellow Caen stone. The spire, one hundred and twenty feet high, surmounts a square tower and is in proportion to the high roofed nave and sanctuary.



The feeling of remoteness is even more intense inside the church. One enters through an unusually long and narrow porch with a stone bench seat down each side. The first thing to be noticed inside the church are the two massive arcade pillars made of local Madrepore marble from the Dartington estate. One is a round drum pillar, the other a series of four intersecting round shafts. These pillars were shown at the Great Exhibition in 1851 and admired by Queen Victoria before being installed in the Early English style arcade soon afterwards. The pointed arches of the arcade and the understated capitals give the arcade a transitional feel that matches the predominant Early English style of the church.

The whole interior of this lofty church is in golden coloured Caen stone, the effect spoiled in places by the efflorescence caused by leaks in the roof or joints with the tower. The church gives the impression of being a funerary chapel in a huge urban cemetery rather than a country church. There is a carved oak eagle lectern of unknown age, the eagle perched on a rough vertical tree trunk. The other bird



associated with the church is the rounded copper weathercock on top of the spire

The eye is drawn to the choir and the sanctuary which lie slightly higher than the nave. A narrow pointed arch separates the small choir. It is decorated by short shafts of local marble. On the north side of the choir is a magnificent organ with painted pipes reminiscent of Pugin. An unusual feature is a tall Saxon style window with twin lights filled by the decorated organ pipes. Opposite the organ in the choir are two deeply recessed lancet windows.

One step up from the choir is the sanctuary, also separated by an even more ornate pointed arch with side doors north and south pierced at its base. Two crowned kings' heads look out from the sanctuary arch capitals.



Behind the west facing altar is the simple shelf of the original altar and a plain marble cross. The east window is a series of five lancet lights, a rare early English feature in a Devon church. More marble is used for the piscina on the north side of the altar. The sanctuary and choir are floored with red tiles and bands of Ashburton marble.

The nave windows are all deeply recessed pairs of lancets with pleasant mediaeval style stained glass in the north aisle and later Victorian stained glass in the northernmost lancet of the west wall. Above the west lancets is a circular window with a stained glass image of Christ in Glory. The other west lancet is in plain glass as are the windows in the south aisle. Unfortunately pebbled opaque glass much favoured in early twentieth century bathrooms was used instead of plain transparent glass. The closed in feeling in the nave is accentuated by this dreadful glass as well as by the deeply recessed doorway to the spire which is found in the north east (and dampest) corner of the north aisle.

The pews are skeletal; having open legs and sides, and are more like benches. There are two heavy metal monuments on the wall of the south aisle which do not invite the visitor to read them. There is an atmosphere in this church that attracts and repel at the same time. The remoteness of the building is compounded by the high open timbered roof and the high paired lancet windows. For a fleeting second one wonders how to get out into the open air.

Once outside, graves can be seen on the north and west sides of the church and a good granite war memorial near the porch. On it are the names and regiments of twelve Dartington men who were killed in 1917 and 1918. The granite cross is wheel-headed Celtic. Walking round the outside of the church on the damp, mossy grass some curious architectural features can be seen. On the outside of the west wall a buttress rises between the twin lancet windows. Another buttress rises above the north door to the sanctuary. There is a strange and seemingly unnecessary square staircase turret on the north east corner of the tower leading to the broach spire. Perhaps the unknown architect of the church was showing off, saying: 'I can do this if I please'.

Creepy bit: the late Revd. John Scott told me a very spooky story a few years ago. He was diocesan adviser on bells and clocks and knew almost all the towers and spires in Devon.

He sent a specialist in bells to look at the ring in Brooking church in order to see how safe the frames were. Having arrived and parked outside the church this man unlocked the church and went in. He soon found the door to the tower and, to make sure that nobody came into the church and locked the tower door with him aloft he turned the key in the door to the porch to lock it. Then he climbed the spiral stairs to the bell chamber with his torch and notebook. Nearing the top of the stairs and slightly out of breath he heard the faint notes of the organ being played in the choir of the church below him.

Without being unduly alarmed he set off down the stairs to find out how he had managed to lock someone into the apparently empty church. His legs were definitely tired when he reached the floor of the vast, empty church. Nobody could be hiding behind the openwork pews. To satisfy his curiosity he looked everywhere, behind the pillars, up in the sanctuary. He checked the outside door which was locked, just as he had left it.

Not to be put off by what could have been the wind hooting in the spire he climbed the long spiral staircase again. At almost the same point near the top he heard the organ playing, this time much louder. He could even make out part of a well-known hymn tune.

Someone really was trying to make a monkey out of him. Anger lent him the strength to clatter down the staircase once more. When he reached the floor his anger turned to fear and incredulity as the church was, once more, as empty of living people as a crypt. His energy drained by a cold, unreasoning fear the bell frame inspector fumbled the door open and fled, leaving his torch and notebook to be picked up a few days later by Revd. Scott.

The Benefactors of the Totnes Weir in 1703

Jill Drysdale

There has been a weir at the bend in the River Dart about a mile upstream from Totnes since the 16th century. Geoffery Babb in 1581 built seven new mills along the Dart and obtained the water to drive these by enlarging and lengthening the leat and replacing an ineffective barrier of furze and wood with a stone built weir.

All went well until 1629 when the Marquis of Worcester complained that the weir should be lowered by 2 feet as his land on the Littlehempston side of the Dart was continually flooded and the meadows reduced to marshland. The lessee of the land Thomas Prestwood was willing to lower the weir but the Mayor and Corporation of Totnes were not and a court case ensued. Prestwood was a royalist during the Civil War and subsequently his lands were sequestered in 1649 without a solution and the River Dart continued to flood.

It is not surprising therefore that by the end of the 1600's the rebuilding of the weir was necessary and in 1699 the Duke of Bolton, who now owned the Littlehempston side of the River commenced a court case which ended up in Chancery and all but bankrupted the Town of Totnes. This was due to the combination of the cost of the litigation over the weir and the vast sum of £3,000 which had been spent on the expenses incurred during the Civil War which the Government never repaid.

A repair to the weir was a necessity and benefactors had to be found. In the Guildhall there is a recently restored board which records the generous donations of Thomas Coulson M.P. (£300) and Richard Langdon merchant of Totnes (£50). Considerable as these sums are they did not contribute much to the final cost of almost £3,000 which cast the town into debt until 1716.

But what of our valiant benefactors? Richard Langdon and Thomas Coulson?

Richard Langdon and his wife Elizabeth lived at 39 High St Totnes. They had no children. Richard donated £50 to the rebuilding of the Weir.

Richard Langdon was a very wealthy man, a merchant who had lived for many years in Portugal. He died in Totnes on 24th March 1709 and was buried in St Marys Church with his wife who had predeceased him on June 2 1689. On his memorial stone which was on the floor of the church but which has now been removed it was stated that Richard Langdon was a "pious, charitable and worthy man a friend and benefactor to a great many people." This statement is borne out in his very long and complicated will in which he divides his fortune between many friends and relatives. He leaves his two servants an annuity of £40 per year for as long as they should live and a great many objects from his home which meant that they would never have the necessity to work again.

During the time that Richard Langdon lived in Totnes he was a generous benefactor to the church. In 1689 he gave "a crimson velvet embroidered carpet with gold and silk fringe" and a white linen cloth which was designed to be put on the Communion

Table of Totnes Church. In 1699 he gave "a new canopy for the pulpit to be fixed to the pillar cornice about the pulpit rails and banisters also one crimson velvet cushion with gold and silver fringes. The canopy was surmounted with a gilt angel blowing a trumpet."

As a merchant Richard Langdon belonged to the elite of Totnes and his fortunes were intermingled with the other elite merchant families through marriages and investments in land and buildings. The house in which he lived for example was owned and rented to him by the Wise family of Totnes who enjoyed enormous wealth and were considerable landowners in Devon. John Wise was heavily involved in the dispute about the Weir so the donation towards the repair could be judged as a gesture to support a friend.

The other contributor however was not a Totnes man but a close friend of Sir Edward Seymour of Berry Pomeroy.

Thomas Coulson M.P. for Totnes 1692 -95 1698 -1708 and 1710 -1713.

Thomas Coulson was the son of William Coulson baptised in London on 1st October 1645.

Thomas Coulson's involvement with the East India Trade made him a very wealthy man and by the 1690's he was a prominent figure in the City of London and known for his Tory politics. He was a friend of Thomas Pitt and an associate of Sir Edward Seymour.

In 1692 Coulson advanced loans to the Government of £30,000 and in the same year Sir Edward Seymour arranged for Coulson to be elected to the vacant parliamentary seat of Totnes less than 2 miles from Seymour's country seat of Berry Pomeroy. Seymour informed the Mayor of Totnes that Coulson was "a considerable merchant of this city (London) who is qualified with very good abilities and integrity." He also stated that he was certain that Coulson would prove "not only a good patriot to his country but also a munificent benefactor to the town." However Seymour did not add that he himself needed Coulson in Parliament to further his own ambitions.

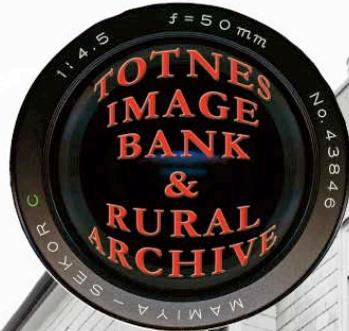
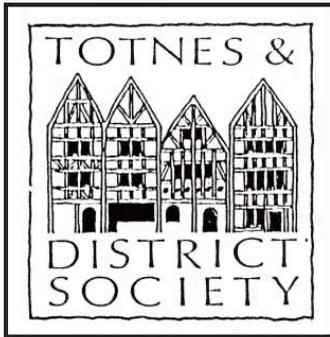
In January 1701 Thomas Coulson helped to pave the way for his election at Totnes by promising financial assistance to the Corporation to repair the Weir from which the Town Mills were powered and to provide an organ in the church.

Subsequently a complaint against Coulson and Seymour was made for having used threats and bribes at the election. Despite this unpleasantness Coulson fulfilled his promise to the Corporation regarding the Weir and subscribed £300 for its repair.

Thomas Coulson died on 2 June 1713 and he was buried at the church of St Michael Royal in London.

He did not marry but had a relationship with a woman named Jane Radcliffe by whom had a daughter. He also had several other illegitimate children whom he recognised and to whom he gave "good portions" in his will.

The references for this article plus further information on the Weir dispute can be found in the Totnes Archives behind the Museum which is open on Thursdays and Fridays 10:30am to 4pm.



*Presentation by the
Totnes Image Bank
Images from the archives*

HISTORIC BUILDINGS IN WW2

Totnes & District Society AGM at 7pm
HISTORIC BUILDINGS in WW2 7.30
Royal Seven Stars
Thursday 20th OCT
TOTSOC & TOTNES IMAGE BANK members £2.00.
non members £3.00 on the door.

Changes in the Leechwell Garden

Dave Mitchell

As reported in the last edition, the existing Play Structure in the garden needs to be replaced. The Leechwell Garden Association has obtained a grant for most of the new work and TOTSOC applied for, and received, a £4335 Community Plus grant from Santander which will pay for a “dish roundabout” specifically for children with ‘limited mobility’. After extensive consultation in the spring, the LGA committee awarded the contract to Earthwrights, a local firm, who will be installing the new structure during November.



Though water flows through the garden, there is no mains supply, which has made watering the herb garden a very labour-intensive task.

The LGA have now installed a solar-powered dual pump system – one pumps water from the immersion pool to a large water butt, the other powers a hose connected to the butt for watering.

The system is contained in a small shed beside the herb garden (which will in time blend into the garden).

The picture on the left shows the interior of the shed.

Application to join the Totnes and District Society (TotSoc)

Individual annual membership fee: £5.00; family membership: £8.00

Please complete the form below. Payment by standing order is much preferred, but if you wish to pay by cheque or cash this is also quite acceptable. The membership year is from 1st October.

Name..... Tel.....

Address..... Post Code.....

Email address.....

STANDING ORDER FORM

To: (name of your bank).....bank

Please set up the following Standing Order and debit my/our account accordingly

1. Your Bank Account details

Account name.....

Account Number:

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Your bank branch.....

Sort Code:

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Postal address of your branch (please print)

.....Post code.....

2. Payee details

Name of organisation you are paying:

Totnes & District Society

Sort code of TOTSOC:

40-52-40

Account number of TOTSOC:

00027393

3. About the payment

How often are the payments to be made: **YEARLY**

Amount details: **£5.00 / £8.00 (delete one)**

Date of first payment: **on or after 1st October 2016**

until further notice (payments will be made until you cancel this instruction)

4. Confirmation

Customer signature(s)

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Date.....

Please return this completed form to **Jeremy Logie, TOTSOC Treasurer,**
15 Heath Way, Totnes, TQ9 5GP

He will then send the lower section it to your bank.

TOTSOC 2016 AGM

Following last year's very successful illustrated talk by Barrington Weekes we are delighted to welcome him back again. There's a poster about this year's presentation on page 12.

The AGM will be held at the Royal Seven Stars on Thursday 20th October, starting at 7pm. The talk will start promptly at 7.30pm.

TOTSOC and TOTNES IMAGE BANK members £2.00, non-members £3.00 on the door.

TOTSOC on Facebook

TOTSOC now has a Facebook page at:

www.facebook.com/Totnes-and-District-Society-1189123487810635/

The TOTSOC Committee

The current TOTSOC Committee Members are:

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Paul Bennett Secretary	paulandsuebennett@btinternet.com
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Jeremy Logie Treasurer and Membership Secretary	jeremy.logie@talk21.com
Kate Wilson Planning Officer	katewilsondeane@gmail.com
Jim Carfrae	jim@carfrae.com
John Keleher	john.keleher@virgin.net
Dave Mitchell Webmaster and Contact Editor	dave@zenoshrdlu.com
Anne Ward Public Art & Design Subcommittee	mail@anneward49.plus.com

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