

Somerset and District Friendly Society Pole Heads

Michael Ferguson

Somerset and District Friendly Society Pole Heads provides an insight into the world of voluntary mutual self-help clubs – friendly societies – in the days before National Insurance and the Welfare State. Their heyday was the nineteenth century and they existed to provide sickness benefits and burial payments. For a few pence a week they could save working families from destitution.

Processions in general used to be a widespread form of celebration by bodies sharing a common interest, and friendly societies over much of Britain processed on their anniversaries. Pole head carrying in processions by friendly societies, however, was a distinctly regional practice, and was to be seen in Somerset in particular, together with East Devon, Dorset, West Wiltshire and South Gloucestershire. These places contributed by far the majority of known designs of pole heads.

This book aims to revive interest in pole heads and to act as a reminder of the social significance of friendly societies, which were such an important means of helping to keep the wolf from the door. Through their use of pole heads they have left a legacy of vernacular artefacts that deserve to be better known. Friendly society pole heads are as iconic to Somerset as scrumpy, cheddar cheese, and hunky punks on church towers, all of which would have been familiar to society members as they took part in their annual club walks.

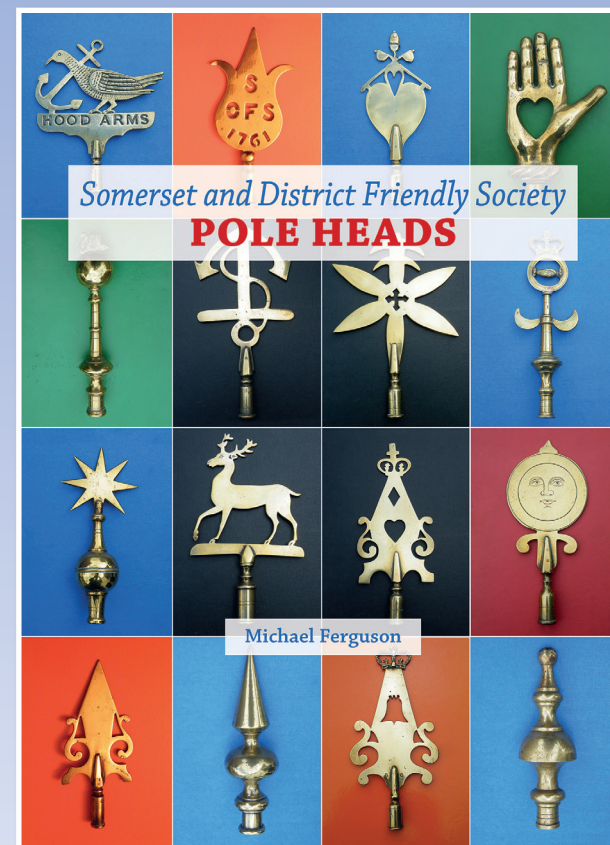
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Michael Ferguson was brought up and schooled in West Somerset and Taunton, and then studied at Edinburgh and Oxford, eventually specialising in Historical Geography. He was a research student at the Institute of Agricultural History at Reading University, and followed a career in Secondary, Further, Higher and Adult education. For several years he was secretary to the West Somerset Rural Life Museum at Allerford, and was editor of the Journal of the National Horse Brass Society. He has been involved in research into friendly societies both at the national and the local scale.

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