

Retrospect

Issue No 29, August 2025

Newsletter of the Friends of
King John's Hunting Lodge

News, views and events



Friends and members of the former Axbridge Archaeological and Local History Society, please give us your views, comments, and suggestions for the future, and we need articles for *Retrospect*. So send your ideas to Liz by email at moorlandfm@btinternet.com or contributions to editor Ian Tabrett at tabrett.cross@btinternet.com

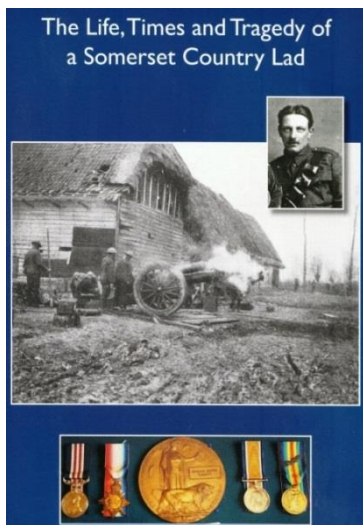
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DIARY DATES

Wednesday 10 September: Visit to National Trust Looe as guests of Museum Trust. FULLY BOOKED

Wednesday 17 September Cross Memorial Hall (CMH) 2.30: *Historic postcards given to our museum.* Talk by John Page

Wednesday 15 October CMH 2.30: *A Small Step To Unravelling The Past.* Pottery is perhaps the least spectacular of archaeological finds yet in most circumstances it is the most abundant – so how do we make sense of it and what can it tell us about the past? Talk by David Dawson (**right**)



Wednesday 19 November CMH 2.30: *The life, times and tragedy of a Somerset country lad.* Talk by Ian Tabrett.

IN THIS EDITION

***Thousands** of years of history in a Mendip cave and the finds that are being made safe for archaeologists to study in the future

***The secret** of an amazing wartime radio station in Somerset almost given away by a dropped Army cap.

And King John Hunting Lodge Museum prepares to show how the Cheddar Valley coped with the war, celebrated its ending, then coped with its aftermath

WATCHET WANDERINGS

The Friends' June visit took a group to the West Somerset coastal harbour town of Watchet, with Liz Scott at the wheel of the Frankie Howerd Trust minibus. Members first headed to the Radio Museum to meet curator Neil Wilson and view the amazing collection illustrating the story of broadcasting in Britain since the 1920s. Next stop, the Boat Museum for a fascinating demonstration of rope-making by volunteer Chris Bradshaw, helped by several Friends. While visiting the superb Market House Museum, the group was entertained by a passing shanty singer. The East Quay arts centre (**right**) also proved most rewarding, as did watching steam trains at the nearby West Somerset Railway station.



Finally, very many thanks to Liz for her driving skills and providing picnic lunch, and to John Page for his entertaining historical commentary.

THE SECRET WAR-TIME RADIO STATION **TRANSMITTING FROM A TREE!**

By John Page

Back in 2013 I received an email from a group Coleshill Auxiliary Research Team (CART) asking whether I knew of a Special Duties base known as Chirnside 3B, located on the south side of the Knoll in Brent Knoll, during WWII. Although the venue had been kept secret for a long time after the war, the existence of all the bases had recently been revealed. Two properties were involved in Brent Knoll, both in Battleborough Lane – The Laurels and Tumbledown Cottage. Neither of those names was evident in Battleborough Lane at the time but I knew what they were looking: The Laurels had recently changed its name to Hill House, and Tumbledown Cottage had been knocked down after the war and replaced by a new property called The Cottage. That is next to my house, and The Laurels is two doors away!



In this picture my house is on the right (changed quite a lot now), Tumbledown Cottage is arrowed and The Laurels is on the left arrowed “aerial fixed to tree.”

The Special Duties Section was a highly secret part of the British Resistance, designed to act against the Germans should the possibility of them invading become a reality. In addition to a mobile reserve for the British Army there were coastal defenses, various Stop Lines and, of course, the Home Guard – otherwise known as Dad’s Army. However, there were also Auxiliary Units, which were secret resistance groups aimed at operating behind advancing German lines. Some had hidden operational bases to facilitate guerilla activities, the others were intelligence gatherers whose operations were divided into three sections: the intelligence gatherers who fed into a letter drop; runners who collected from the drop and fed it to a transmission site collection point; and transmitters who used hidden radio transmitters to forward the intelligence to an operational headquarters. This fragmentation ensured that none of the operators knew each other and, consequently, could not betray their colleagues even under torture.

There were only about 200 transmission stations, divided into Zero stations, OUT-stations which transmitted to Zero stations, and sub-OUT-stations, which transmitted to OUT-stations. Each of these had sufficient power only enough to handle the distance needed. Chirnside 3B used a 6-volt car battery but only needed to transmit to Puriton, which then passed the information to the Golding 0 Zero station at Hestercombe Gardens, which then forwarded it to the central location at Coleshill, Warwickshire.

One of the wireless sets (**right**) was 15ins long, 9 3/8ins wide and 9 1/4ins high and used a standard 6-volt car battery. To ensure it was always available, it had to be recharged frequently. There is a handset on the top of the battery, which was a standard issue for those few who had a telephone in those days.



The transmitters had to be kept in a secret place where it was unlikely to be discovered if the Germans did invade the area. Luckily, I knew the family of the local man who had organized the wireless operation and his son, who was the operator. I was able to arrange a session where the CARD people could talk to the mother, and she revealed that the secret compartment they used was concealed in woodwork they had inserted on the underside of the flight of stairs which ran up from just inside the front door.

A panel with a secret catch was removed to access the radio. Of course it was necessary to have an aerial and the mother recalled that one day, a cap fell to the ground from a tree close to where she was talking to a friend. They saw that in the beech tree was someone in an Army uniform, on a ladder which stood in a rhyne and was partially obscured from the rest of the site by a pigsty! He was repairing the aerial which was connected to the cottage about 60 to 70 metres away by what appeared to be a standard overhead power cable. She couldn't remember, though, whether it was buried behind the bark of their tree, although that was quite common elsewhere.

It appears likely that a consultant surgeon at Burnham's War Memorial Hospital, who was also a major in the Berrow and Brean Home Guard, may have been the officer who was in charge of the operation. Luckily, of course, this station never did have to be used for real.

MUSEUM'S WARTIME EXHIBITION

A special exhibition on the Second World War and its aftermath opens at the King John Hunting Lodge Museum next month and runs until the New Year. **John Page** is the organiser and he writes: I aim not only to include the war years, VE-Day and VJ-Day, but also the immediate aftermath. The displays will include local war memorials, wartime and postwar cartoons and advertisements, and some local highlights of the war years.

PACKING UP HISTORY

A team of volunteers has started work under the watchful eyes of museum curator Lucy Newman on repackaging and safeguarding King John Hunting Lodge Museum's vast and nationally-important collections of finds from a number of archaeological excavations in the area over the last seven decades.



The huge amount of material is in the care of the Axbridge District Museum Trust (ADMT). The aim of the project is to sort through the thousands of items and re-package them so that they can be readily available for study by archaeologists, researchers, and students

The first finds being dealt with are from Hay Wood Cave, first investigated in the 1950s on the steep north-facing hillside above the village of Hutton. Excavation work was started by members of the former Axbridge Caving Group and Archaeological Society (AALHS), who then suspected little of the importance of the site and its thousands of years of history.

Under the direction of the late John Chapman, they found the cavern was almost completely filled with soil and rocks, but they very soon uncovered a human skull and other human remains, then three more human skulls.

They were hampered by the fact that generations of badgers had been there before them, causing chaos with their constant tunnelling activities. Around 560 human bones with 10 skulls were found in two main groups – some had been buried in the cave soon after death while evidence suggests others had been exposed in the open before being interred, and some were in a “cairn” of large stones. The were of eight adults, a teenager and a child of about six, but altogether the bones are thought to have been from about 28 individuals, from infants to the elderly. Evidence suggested the cave had been first used from perhaps 5,500 years ago.



Above: Axbridge Caving Group and Archaeological Society members begin their exploration of Hay Wood Cave. They are (left to right) Jack Lane, Bill West, Tom Davies, whose face is just visible behind Jack Weare. Below, two of the human skulls they later found



As well as the human bones and teeth, the excavators found several hundred fragments of animal bones including sheep and goats, ox, domestic pigs, dog, wolf, badger, rodents including tundra vole, and even beaver. There was some pottery – 58 fragments dating from the Iron Age, and 98 Romano-British from the 3rd and 4th

centuries. The soil contained evidence of hazel and alder, so that the hillside is thought to have been lightly wooded when the first humans used the cave.

David Roberts writes: Hay Wood is a limestone cave in the western Mendip Hills. Excavation over some years yielded a large amount of human remains as well as Mesolithic microliths (flint tools used by hunter-gatherers) and Iron Age and Romano-British pottery.

Dating the human remains was problematic because of the rock falls, disturbance by animals and repeated human activity. A 1972 report in the *Proceedings of Bristol Speleological Society* (written by Dr Bob Everton, a long-serving chairman of the AALHS, and his wife Anne, who served as the society's secretary for some years and was an accomplished field archaeologist). They ascribed the burials to the Iron Age. However, advances in carbon dating technology led to a 2013 paper published by University of Bristol Speleological Society (Schulting and others) which ascribed the use of the cave as a burial site to the Neolithic period from 3930-3500 cal BCE.

Carbon and nitrogen isotope data indicate a diet mostly from the land, despite the nearness of the coast. This is consistent with results from Britain as a whole, and provides evidence to support the theory of a rapid and relatively complete dietary change from Mesolithic hunter-gatherer culture to a more settled agricultural Neolithic culture.



The entrance of Hay Wood Cave as it looked after the archaeologists had left. It is important to know that it is on private land and is not open to the public.

As for the current re-packing project, David writes: The storeroom in the Old Courtroom at Axbridge Town Hall contains a large number of artefacts and remains from the 75 years of caving, archaeology and museum collection. Many of these were stored, conserved and labelled in ways considered appropriate at the time but which are now viewed as unsatisfactory and likely to compromise the long-term preservation of the material.

An increasing number of researchers has sought access to our collections for academic purposes, and our important collections are likely to be examined more frequently in the future so they must be stored, properly wrapped, in museum-grade boxes. Our enterprising museum curator, Lucy Newman, has obtained a large number of modern storage boxes and appropriate wrapping material, and her initiative in successfully applying for a grant to purchase these items is to be applauded. Now she and a team of volunteers are undertaking the re-packaging and storage of this large quantity of material over the coming months.

At the first talk of 2026 (on January 21, 2pm in Cross Memorial Hall), speakers will describe the significance of the material in our collections and will include the themes covered in the exhibition mounted in the museum earlier this year to mark the 75th anniversary of the museum collection. We plan to bring at least some of the display panels to Cross for the afternoon, and it promises to be a fascinating presentation covering caving, archaeology and museum assets. So don't miss it!



Let work begin! Museum curator Lucy Newman (right) gives guidance to volunteers who are about to tackle the checking and re-packaging of the animal bones found and put into store decades ago after the excavations at Hay Wood Cave, Hutton

A JOYFUL JOURNEY BACK IN TIME – IF YOU BEHAVE!



Ancient Blackmoor Farm and its historic chapel near Cannington were the venue for the Friends' July visit – and what a fascinating one it proved to be. The Grade 1 listed building, which dates from the 15th century, is only open for tours by prior arrangement and owner Ian Dyer led members through the high oak-beamed rooms which his family has spent more than 60 years restoring to their early

glory. He said that in fact, the estate was mentioned in the Domesday Book, but an even earlier house on the site is thought to have dated back to Edward the Confessor. As well as antique furniture and household items he has amassed a huge number of antique weapons, from pikes and firearms – including one of the best collections of rare cannon and mortar shells in the country – to a specially made replica Tudor-era suit of jousting armour. Mr Dyer also showed off a long-outlawed mantrap, and while he kept everyone highly amused with his anecdotes, he threatened to do away with anyone who mis-behaved, although he did agree to allow the unfortunate victim the choice of weapon to be used!



Blackmoor Farm owner Ian Dyer (second from right, in the window) keeps visiting Friends amused during their tour of the 550-year-old Grade 1 listed house and chapel

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