

# Retrospect

Issue No 30, September 2025

Newsletter of the Friends of  
King John's Hunting Lodge

News, views and events

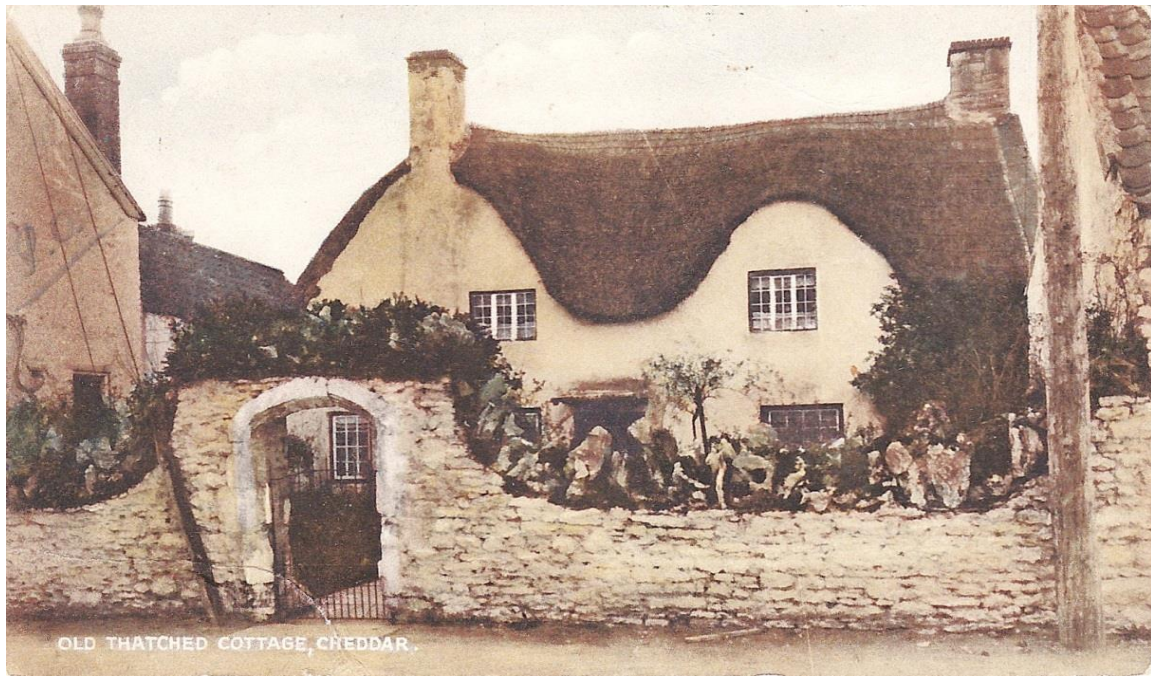


Friends of the museum and members of the former Axbridge Archaeological and Local History Society can contact Liz Scott by email at [moorlandfm@btinternet.com](mailto:moorlandfm@btinternet.com) or editor Ian Tabrett at [tabrett.cross@btinternet.com](mailto:tabrett.cross@btinternet.com)

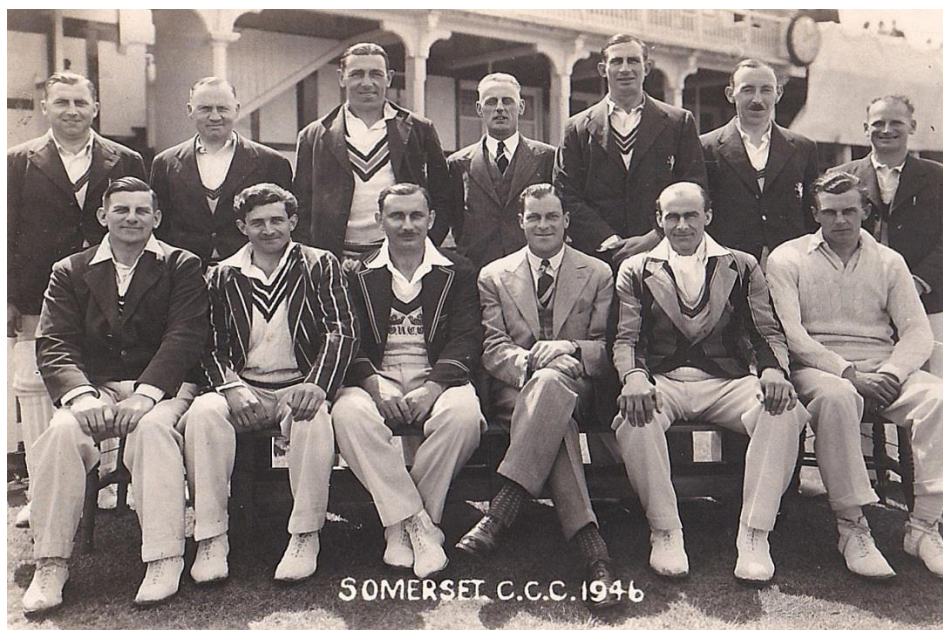
**ARTICLES AND PICTURES FOR INCLUSION IN *RETROSPECT* WILL BE MOST WELCOME. PLEASE CONTACT THE EDITOR BY EMAIL**

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## DIARY DATES



**Wednesday 17 September, Cross Memorial Hall (CMH) 2.30:** *Historic postcards given to our museum.* Talk by John Page, who explains: "In 2019 I gave a talk at Pill, near Portishead, and as I was leaving, someone told me about Mac Tozer, a collector of postcards who had just died, and wondered if I was interested in acquiring those relevant to our collection area. When I received them I was amazed at what I had been offered, and my talk will look at the collection which is now owned by the Axbridge District Museum Trust. " There are more than 800 and they cover a wide range from the picture (above) from the 19<sup>th</sup> century of a long-lost thatched cottage in Cheddar, to the gentlemen of Somerset County Cricket Club from 1946



### SOMERSET C.C.C.

BACK ROW (L.to R.):—

H. GIMBLETT.

F.S. LEE.

A. WELLARD.

R. TRUMP (Scorer).

W. ANDREWS.

H. BUSE.

J. LAWRENCE.

FRONT ROW (L.to R.):—

W. LUCKES.

A. T. JONES.

N. S. MITCHELL-INNES.

E. F. LONGRIGG (Capt.).

C. J. P. BARNWELL.

G. R. LANGDALE.



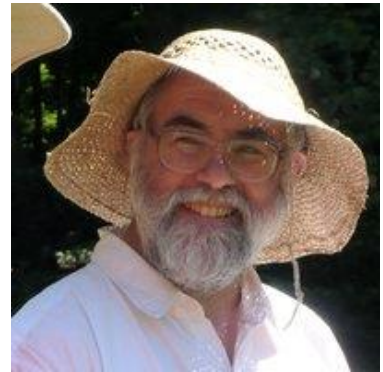
F.S. LEE  
BENEFIT SEASON 1947.

## **MORE DIARY DATES**

**Wednesday 15 October CMH 2.30:** *A Small Step To Unravelling The Past.* What the King John Hunting Lodge Museum's nationally-important pottery collections can 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.

**Friday 12 December:** *Christmas dinner and quiz.*  
Details to be confirmed;



**Saturday 20 December.** Lamb Inn, Axbridge, 11.30am, Coffee with museum stewards

## **IN THIS EDITION...**

\***The hillside** Cheddar Valley hospital that for decades helped fight epidemics and save lives with fresh air and loving care, then vanished with hardly a trace it had ever existed.

\***Digging** into the secrets of Romano-British farming on and around the Mendips.

## **MUSEUM'S WAR-TIME EXHIBITION**

Don't forget that a special exhibition on the Second World War and its aftermath opens at the King John Hunting Lodge Museum in September and runs until the end of October. **John Page** is the organiser, and it covers the war years, VE-Day and VJ- Day, and the immediate aftermath.

## **HERITAGE AND HISTORY FOR FREE**

Somerset Heritage Centre is organising its annual Heritage Open Days festival during September, offering free access to a number of historical sites and activities in the county. There is a long list of dates and locations, including Glastonbury, Brean Down, Wells, Downside Abbey and monastery garden, Pilton's 14<sup>th</sup> century tythe barn, and Goathurst, near Bridgwater. The Heritage Centre is also hosting a family-friendly open day, with talks and tours. For full details, go to [www.heritageopendays.org.uk](http://www.heritageopendays.org.uk)



## **DIGGING INTO FARMING HISTORY, ROMAN STYLE**



**Westbury Society Archaeology Group co-ordinator Andrew Buchanan talks to a group of the Friends who visited the site where a Romano-British farmhouse has been excavated over the past five years.**

A fascinating insight into life on a farm at the foot of the Mendips near Westbury-sub-Mendip 2,000 years ago was given to a group of Friends of King John's Hunting Lodge Museum who visited a long-running archaeological excavation near the village. They were met by co-ordinator Andrew Buchanan who explained the discovery of the site when a keen-eyed farmer spotted scorched crop marks in one of his meadows during a long dry spell five years ago.

Already Roman-era finds had been made nearby: a hoard of silver coins and metal items, plus a 20kg lead "pig" dated 164 to 169 AD produced at Charterhouse and which can now be seen in the Wells and Mendip Museum. Further digs found evidence of metal-working in both lead and iron, probably to serve the needs of local farmers, plus a single human burial which tests showed was a man aged around 45 who had done hard manual work during the Roman occupation...and suffered agonising toothache because of a long-established abscess.

Then came the discovery of the farmstead which has revealed evidence of life here from the second century AD and which supported the theory that there was a number of farmsteads dotted along the edge of the moor from Westbury to Cheddar and beyond. They were probably family-owned by people who were almost certainly locals and who had adopted much of the Roman way of life as they lived alongside the invaders.





**Nearest the camera, the farmhouse living room, which had painted wall plaster, and beyond, the probable bedroom, food storage room and kitchen.**

Mr Buchanan explained how the team of mostly local volunteers, with the help of professionals, have revealed the likely development of the house and its slow decline in the late fourth century as the Mendip lead-mining industry declined with the economic collapse as the Roman empire fell.

It had a large living room with painted wall plaster – but wasn't posh enough to have mosaics or under-floor heating – next to a probable bedroom, then a food store where fragments of large pottery jars were found in a room leading to what was probably the kitchen.

There was a south-facing gallery, part of which was likely to have been used to house livestock – hundreds of bones from sheep or goats, cattle and horse, even four cats have been found. The owner probably made his money by selling and carting his produce to the garrison and miners at Charterhouse, not far away on top of the Mendips, and to markets elsewhere.





**Above: Some of the Westbury Society Archaeology Group volunteers, who have been digging the site near the village for five years, examine the latest finds at the Romano-British farmhouse. Below, two familiar Friends – Madeleine and David Roberts – at work in the excavation**



Finds also include a large number of Roman coins, thousands of sherds of pottery from all over the south of England, stone tiles from the roofs, and of course the stone foundations. The owner at first was clearly well-to-do, and bone hair pins showed that at least one woman in the household had adopted a Roman hair style.

However, as the farm's markets disappeared it was probably abandoned by its owners, and evidence has been found that the buildings were occupied by squatters who lit fires in its rooms and even utilised one of the rarest finds, Roman quern stones that had been used to grind corn and produce flour. These people, too, eventually left and a few

hundred years later the still-visible walls were systematically robbed of their stone, probably by a medieval Bishop of Bath and Wells to build the boundary of a deer park he created all around the abandoned farm, and evidence of which survives today.

**Ian Tabrett**





**Andrew Buchanan points out the part of the farm's south-facing gallery which was probably used to house livestock centuries before the walls were robbed of their stone and reduced to their foundations. And below, the living room, top right, with the long gallery nearest the camera.**

*(Pictures John Page and Ian Tabrett)*





# **THE LIFE-SAVING CHEDDAR VALLEY HOSPITAL** **THAT JUST VANISHED**

**By Roger Veale – who did most of the research – and Ian Tabrett**

Once upon a time is how all good fairy tales begin. This most certainly is NOT a fairy tale, but it can still open with: Once upon a time...there was a hospital on the sunny slopes of the Mendips in the Cheddar Valley, which over more than three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century almost certainly saved scores if not hundreds of lives. The picture below, taken by the *Weston Mercury* in 1967 of the Cross crossroads, shows half-way up the hill the Shute Shelf (that's how it was spelled then) Isolation Hospital on its eye-catching and extensive site just off the A38 beside the recently-closed Cheddar Valley railway branch line.

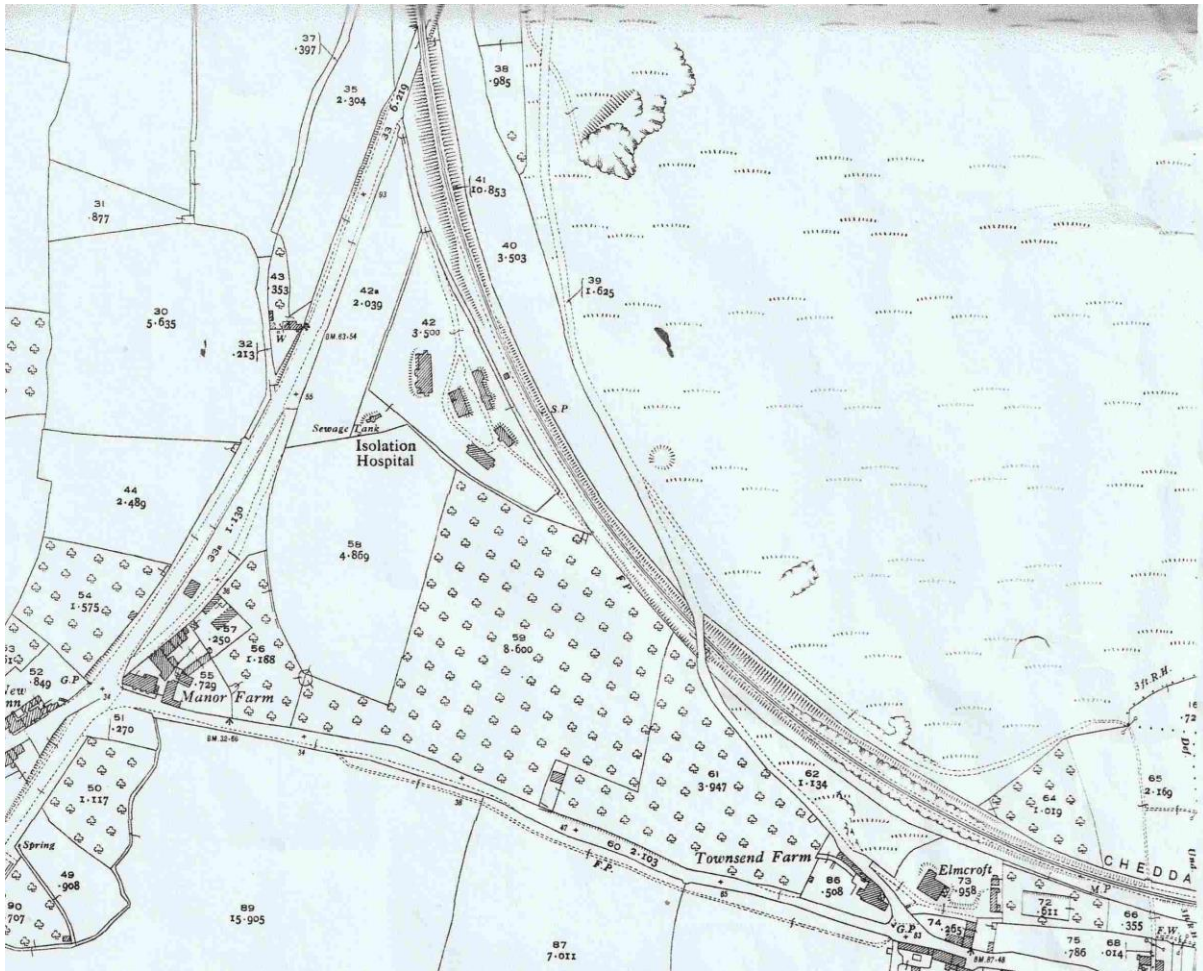
It looks impressive, yet not a trace of it survives today – not a brick or roof tile, stethoscope or bedpan. Not even the entrance gate and drive past the caretaker's lodge, garage, admin. block and wards. All swept away in the 1980s for the new Wavering Down Rise housing development.



The hospital had beds to take 40 patients at a time, or in an emergency, up to ten more. And it provided a vital service for the very ill all the way from Bridgwater to Portishead and everywhere in between when, in the 1920s and 1930s, epidemics swept through the area: epidemics of diseases which today largely have been eradicated in this country or can be treated quickly by modern medicine and inoculation: scarlet fever, diphtheria, typhoid, tuberculosis, meningitis, measles, mumps, even acute tonsillitis. They were all cared for there by the staff who were tasked with not allowing the infections to spread.

Isolation hospitals were built largely because of the Infectious Disease (Notification) Act passed by Parliament in 1889. Shute Shelf was built in 1928 with four wards and an administration block, as shown in the 1929 O.S. map below.



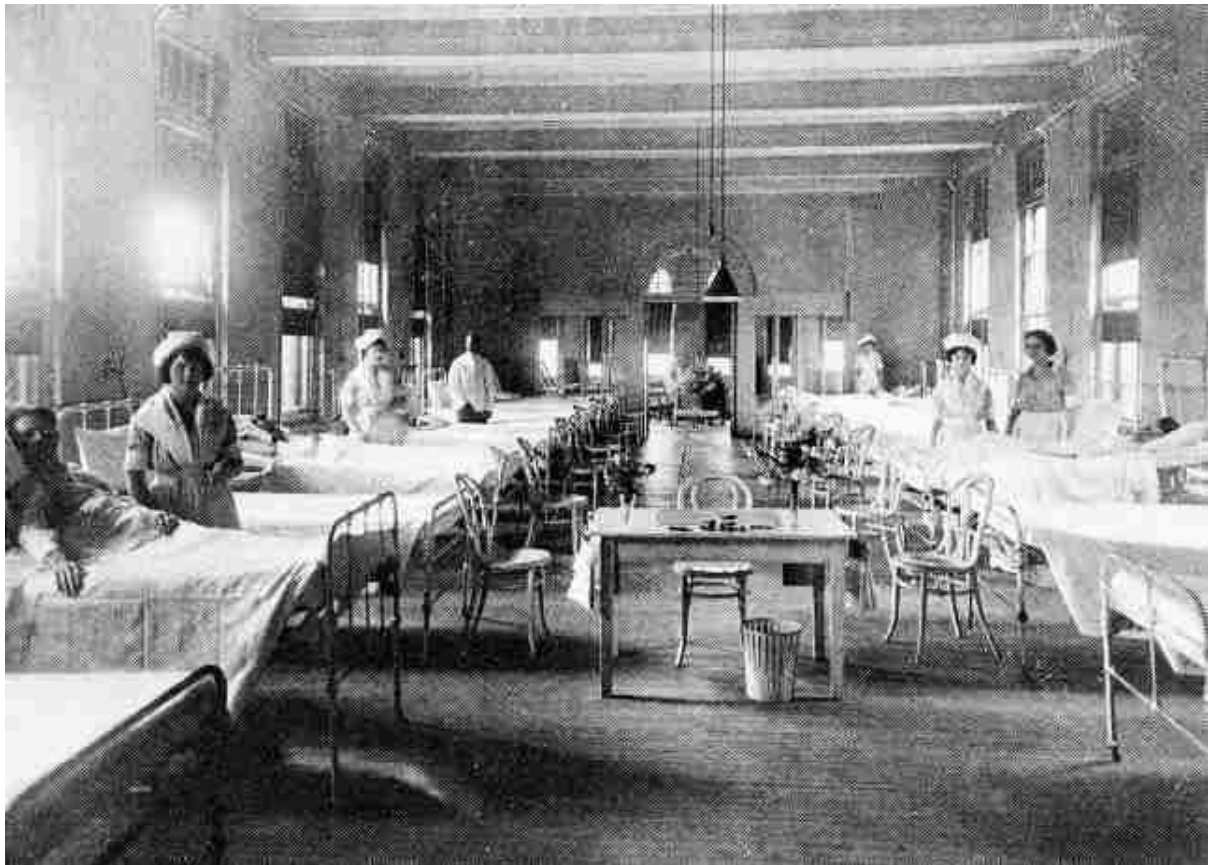


An extra ward block, porter's lodge and an extension to the admin block to provide extra accommodation for staff were proposed in 1934, but as is clearly illustrated by the paperwork now in the archives of the Somerset Heritage Centre in Taunton, the scheme was reduced after prolonged bureaucratic wrangling at Somerset County Council, who held the purse strings. Estimates gathered by the governing body, the Axbridge Joint Hospital Board, sometimes for only a few pounds, were invariably declared to be excessive. Some of the suggested improvements were rejected altogether.

At one stage, the architect even sent a memorandum typed boldly in red to show his frustration at the snail's pace of decision-making, and demanding clarification of exactly what had been decided!

Serious epidemics during and after the First World War in fact may have been the stimulus for the Shute Shelf project. The site was considered a healthy environment, and there was already a home for child tuberculosis cases at the nearby village of Compton Bishop.





**A typical 1920s isolation hospital ward, designed with features like verandas to provide patients with access to fresh air and sunlight, believed to be beneficial for recovery, but with few comforts for patients: a bed, chair, table to share, and basic electric lighting.**

For years at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Weston-super-Mare Urban District Council had been debating the need for an isolation hospital, but failed to agree a suitable site. Then in March 1929 came a devastating report of a typhoid outbreak in the resort “definitely explosive in character” starting in the previous October. No figure for the number of cases is given but there was no doubt that the infection was carried in the public water supply. Tests were carried out at all the springs which supplied the town, with the results showed the main water source at the Banwell Spring was found to be satisfactory as was the Cheddar spring, but Winscombe and Cross were declared to be “very contaminated.”

The Somerset Heritage Centre holds some documents from the Shute Shelf Hospital, including the minutes of the quarterly meetings of the Axbridge Joint Hospital Board between the late 1930s and mid-1940s. The meeting in December 1938 chaired by Colonel Yatman of Winscombe noted the “admirable way in which staff dealt with the typhoid patients [from Burnham-on-Sea and Bridgwater during the recent outbreak, and their untiring services of care to the patients.”

**TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT MONTH**