

# Retrospect



*Issue No 34, January 2026*

Newsletter of the Friends of  
King John's Hunting Lodge

**News, views and events**

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Articles and pictures for inclusion in *Retrospect* are always most welcome – and needed – so please email the Editor

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## DIARY DATES – THE YEAR AHEAD

**Wednesday 21 January, 2.30 pm Cross Memorial Hall (CMH):** *Looking back at 75 years of archaeology, caving and the museum in Axbridge...and to the future.* Short talks by Alan Gray, David Roberts, Ian Tabrett and John Page.

**Wednesday 18 February, 2.30pm CMH:** *The end of the Turnpike roads, and what happened next.* Talk by Barrie Underwood on a little-known organisation and some of the local people who were closely involved.

**Wednesday March 18, 7.30pm CMH** – *Songs of people and places.* An evening's entertainment with professional musicians Issy and David Emeney, from Biddisham. Attendance by ticket only – Friends £5, visitors £10, available January meeting onward or please contact Liz. Wine and nibbles available.

**Thursday March 19, 7.30pm** – The annual Barry Lane memorial lecture at Westbury-sub-Mendip: *Archaeological secrets of the National Trust in the West Country*, by Cat Lodge. Mini bus to pick up in Cross and Axbridge, with details to follow.

**Wednesday April 15, CMH 2.30pm** – Archive films on Axbridge and surrounding areas introduced by John Page

**Wednesday May 20 CMH, 2.30pm** – *History of the Somerset Light Infantry*. Talk by Phil Thorne

**Wednesday June 17** – Visit to ss *Great Britain*, Bristol, with conducted tour. Mini bus details in due course.

**Wednesday July 15** – Meet Shute Shelve car park: Introduction by Madeleine Roberts and walk to Cross Plain to visit the historic Cross Rifle Club's sites. Timings to follow.

**August** – visit to local archaeological excavation. Date and venue to be finalised

**Wednesday September 9** – visit to *Knighthayes National Trust property* as guests of King John's Hunting Lodge stewards. Details to follow

**Wednesday September 16 CMH 2.30pm** – *Day Out in Axbridge and Lost Mines of Mendips*. Films by local cameraman Clive North in the 1970s for BBC West:

**Wednesday October 21 CMH 2.30pm** – *Follow the Plough*. Growing up on the Mendips, talk by Les Davies, *Mendip Times* columnist and former Mendip Hills AONB manager and ranger.

**Wednesday November 18 CMH 2.30pm** - *Banwell Bone Caves*. Talk by John Page

**Friday December 11** - *Christmas dinner and quiz*. The Lamb, Weare.

## **OUT OF THE MISTS OF TIME...A MARVEL!**



Anyone who has ever used a computer to improve or crop a photograph will know you can do some pretty amazing things. But when the old and very faded photo (left) came to light in a Victorian album in Banwell, there didn't seem much hope of bringing it back to life...until Friends member Roy Rice put

his skills to work. The result (below) shows a peaceful scene on a track – now a public footpath – at Yarborough, between Christon and Winthill. Sadly the identities of the two womenfolk may never be known, but the setting is little changed today, although the track has been concreted over.

**THEN...**



**...AND NOW**



## **HOW BERTHA BEAT THE BRIDGWATER MUD**

Last month, *Roger Veale* described a long-forgotten plan for a canal from Pill, near Portishead, to Bridgwater and Taunton, with a branch to Cheddar. He concludes by looking at what actually was achieved

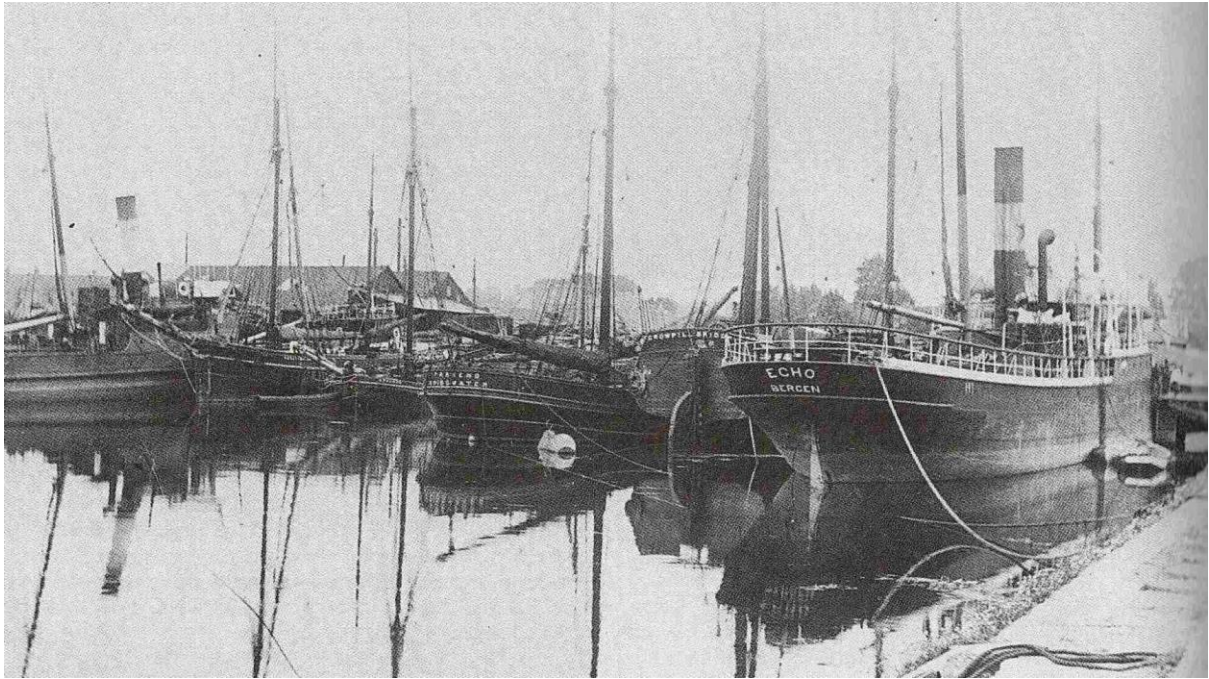
**T**he main cargo for the canal was coal from South Wales delivered by coasters which navigated the Severn estuary to the River Parrett on the high tide, and moored alongside wharves in Bridgwater where they settled on the mud when the tide turned. However with impending competition when the Bristol & Exeter Railway Act was passed in 1836, a scheme was put in hand to construct a floating harbour just west of the town to accommodate ships up to 600 tons, with the canal being extended to join it. This involved a deep cutting, a tunnel and two basins



connected by a lock, and the cost soared from an estimated £25,000 to £100,000. A unique feature of the new Bridgwater Dock was the steam-powered draw boat dredger *Bertha*, (left) which scraped up the silt brought in by the river. She was reputed to be based on a design by Isambard Kingdom Brunel, and operated from 1844 right up to 1969, making her the oldest working steamboat in the country. When the dock closed, she

went to the Exeter Maritime Museum, then to Eyemouth in Scotland, before being rescued and brought back to the West Country where she is now in store in the care of the ss Great Britain Trust, awaiting restoration.

Because of the arrival of the railway, the canal company suffered badly, with its trade halved, and despite an abortive idea of turning it into a railway, was eventually put into receivership in the early 1850s. The Bristol & Exeter Railway (B&ER) bought the assets of the canal company in 1866 for £64,000, mainly to have control of the Bridgwater Dock.



**Bridgwater Dock in the early 1900s, from Tony Haskell's *By Waterway To Taunton***

The canal to Taunton, though, was kept open and in good condition to complement the railway's operations, but when the Great Western Railway amalgamated with the B&ER, the canal was neglected and after 1907 saw very little use.

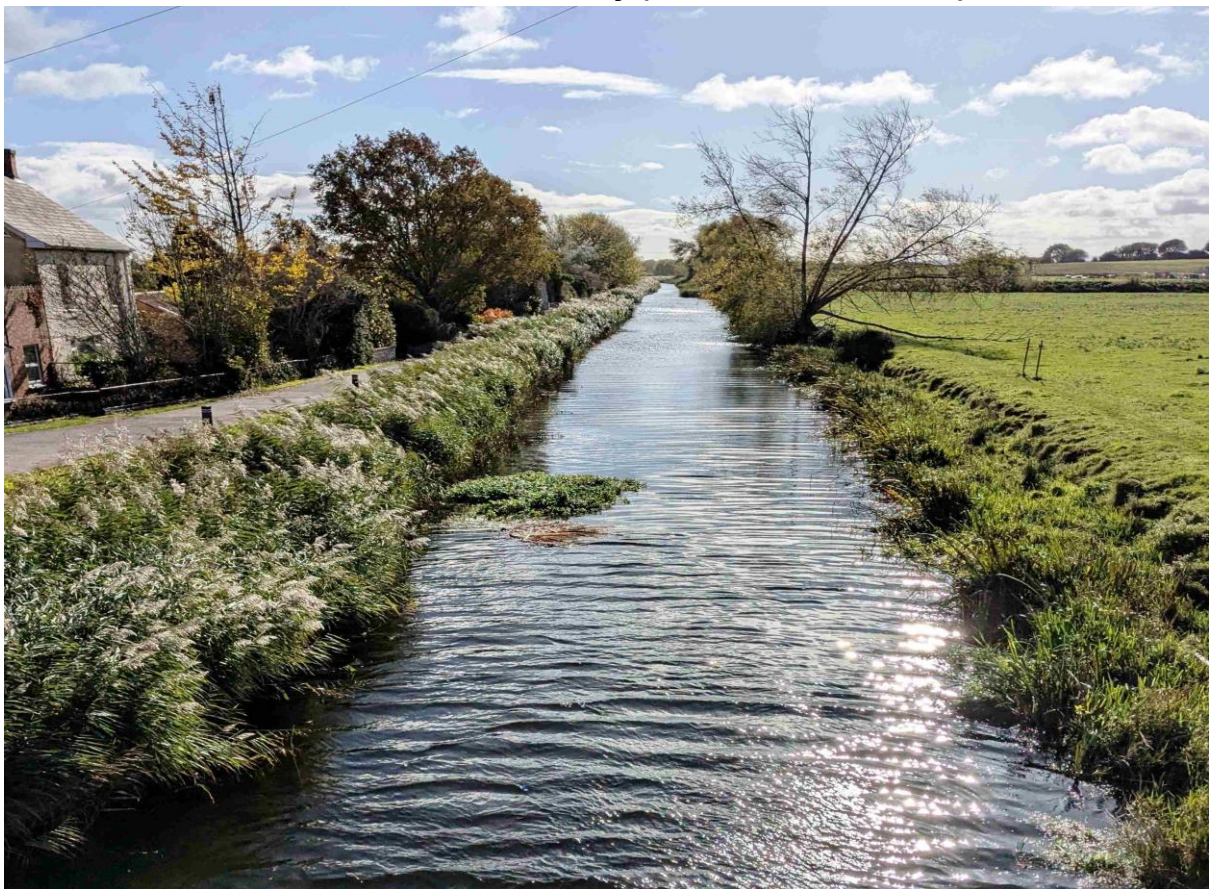
During the Second World War, as part of defensive work in case of an invasion by the Germans, the metal swing bridges were removed and melted down, and it became part of the Taunton Stop Line with pillboxes along its length. By the 1970s a start was made to restore the waterway for leisure use. Bridgwater Dock (right) was developed as a marina and for residential use, and extensive work on bridges and locks was completed in the 1990s.



So much for the big dream of linking the Bristol and English channels to save ships having to make the perilous voyage around Lands End. The first survey was carried out by James Brindley in 1768 and the last by renowned civil engineer Thomas Telford – but their efforts were in vain because of the advent of steam ships which made the sea voyage around the coast so very much safer and quicker.



**Above: If only...this could have been the scene on the approach to Cheddar. In fact, it's the Kennet and Avon Canal not far from Bath. Below: the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal near Huntworth today (*Pictures: Ian Tabrett*)**



## **HIDDEN TREASURES IN OUR ARCHIVES**

The discovery of several sets of important reports and documents belonging to King John's Hunting Lodge Museum and the former Axbridge Caving Group and Archaeological Society has caused considerable excitement at the *Retrospect* editor's desk!

They include detailed notes and records of the society's dig at Winthill – details which were forgotten and overlooked for decades – and contemporary reports on the work carried out by society members at Hay Wood Cave, near Hutton, in the late 1950s and early 60s. There is also something which wasn't known to exist: a bound set of society *Journals* from the first issue in February 1952 to that of September 1955. Together, all this material contains a treasure trove of articles, illustrations and information which we will be drawing on for articles in future issues of *Retrospect*.

## **HAPPY CHRISTMAS!**



There was a good turn-out for the Friends' excellent annual Christmas dinner at the festively-decorated Lamb Inn at Weare. During the evening, Liz made a presentation to John Page for his work and expertise through the years at the King John Hunting Lodge Museum, and for Friends. In turn, Liz was thanked for all her hard work for the museum and for members