

Retrospect



Issue No 35, February 2026

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 can contact
Liz Scott by email at moorlandfm@btinternet.com or
editor Ian Tabrett at tabrett.cross@btinternet.com

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

Retrospect is copyright Axbridge and District Museum Trust, charity No. 1091161

DIARY DATES

Wednesday 18 February, 2.30pm CMH: *Old roads of Somerset.* Talk by Barrie Underwood

Wednesday March 18, 7.30pm – *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, to include wine and nibbles – available January meeting or from Liz, Ian (both as above), Madeleine Roberts (robertsmadeleinetessa@gmail.com) Margaret Jordan (margaretjordan@comptonbishopfamilies.co.uk)



and John Page (myrtle.bk@gmail.com) Although Issy and David's music is rooted in English traditional folk song, they are best known for Issy's compositions which often draw on local history and folklore for their inspiration. They accompany themselves mainly on melodeon and guitar to perform beautiful melodies, great stories, and moving songs.

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.

DECADES OF WORK – AND THOUSANDS OF YEARS OF FINDS

Seventy-five years ago, the Axbridge Caving Group and Archaeological Society was formed, an event we celebrated at our January meeting, a report of which will appear next month.. Within five years came the discovery and exploration by a group of the members of a remarkable cave shelter on the steep hillside above the village of Hutton. Significantly, under the leadership of curator Lucy Newman, a group of volunteers from this, the successor group Friends of King John's Hunting Lodge Museum, have just finished examining, sorting, cataloguing and re-packaging thousands of finds from the cave, ready for archaeologists and students to learn from in the future: bones, pottery fragments, flint, samples of soil, charcoal and ochre, even ancient snail shells..

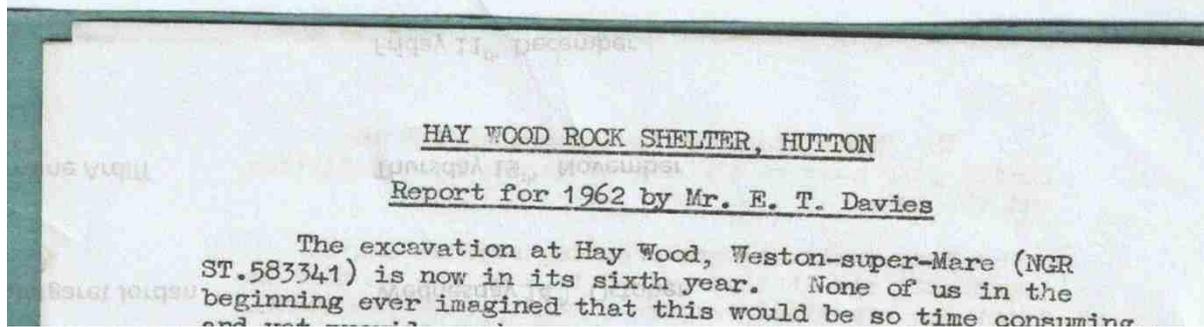


Working well: the team of volunteers who checked and re-packaged finds from the Hay Wood cave excavations

Most date from around 5,500 years ago, including the remains of 28 humans. Everything was meticulously excavated from the jumble of rock and soil which had subsequently filled the cavern, although some of the rodent bones were almost as fine as a human hair. The finds were all recorded, many were drawn then carefully stored away in the Axbridge collection for further study.

Coincidentally, a group of Friends who have been working to gather together for posterity a complete set of decades of ACGAAS newsletters, *Journals* and monthly *Retrospects* have recently come across some of the regular updates on the excavations in the Hay Wood cave. That for 1962, written by Mr E. T. Davies,

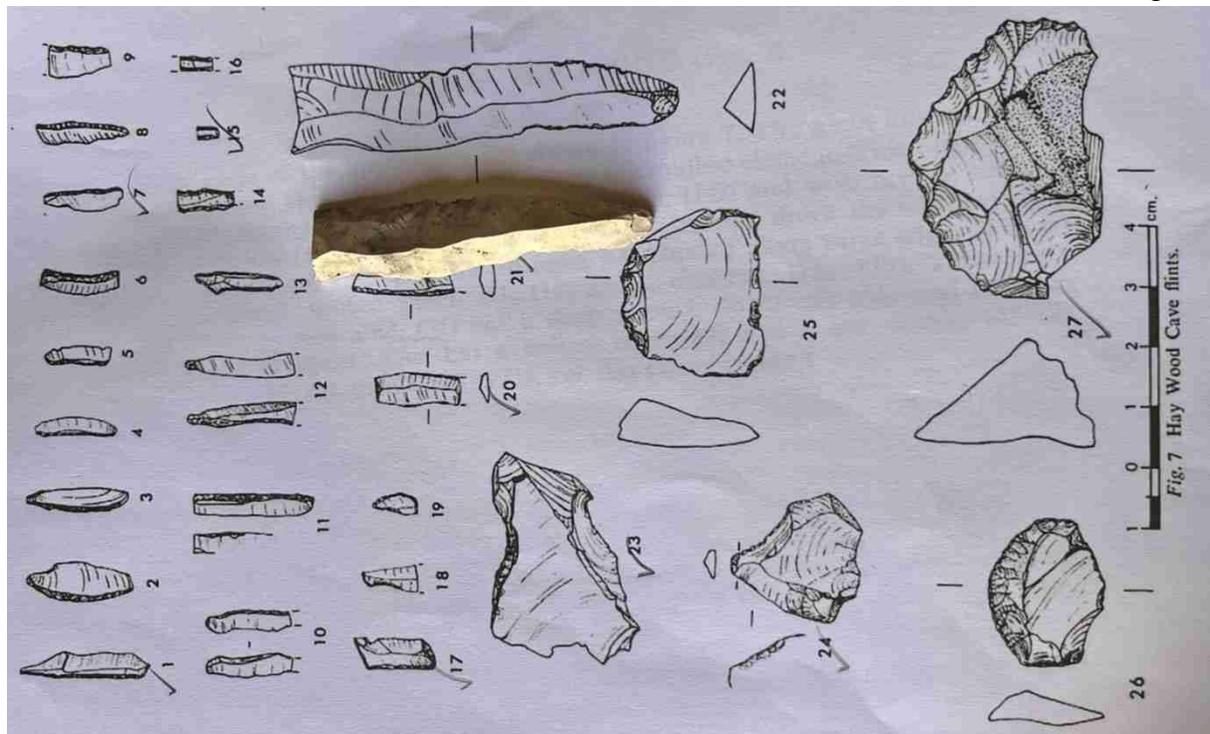
certainly gives a vivid impression of the dedication of the team involved in the dig:



“None of us in the beginning ever imagined that this would be so time-consuming and yet provide such great interest and excitement. From its commencement as a very small cave dig, it has grown into an excavation which has resulted in the accumulation of a vast number of finds from a very small area, and it is hoped a proper interpretation of these will eventually solve the mystery of the skeletons of Hay Wood.

“The site is at the entrance to a small cave on the northern slope of the western end of the Menips at about 250ft above sea level. Digging began in May 1957 with the hope of finding a cave system, and within a few days we were thrilled to discover a small passage. This was opened by Tony Kemmish at 2am on Midsummer’s Night, only to discover it ended after about 20ft in a small chamber.

“Subsequent excavation revealed first skeletal remains some way along the tunnel, and later further skeletal material in debris...it became clear that the original



One of the flints found at the Hay Wood cave shelter is compared with the diggers’ original drawing from decades ago

appearance of the site had altered considerably since the insertion of the human remains by the build-up or accumulation of a mound at the mouth of the cave...it

consists almost entirely of large boulders probably built in the form of a rough cairn over the rather haphazardly-scattered remains”

Mr Davies described unsuccessful attempts to find a date for the burials then went on to report that a few flints had been found in layers above the skeletons while microliths tended to be below the burial layers. There were pig and sheep bones and teeth, while “remains of animals now extinct in this country have been found throughout the mound. Beaver teeth were in the soil covering the cairn...Northern Vole jaws and teeth have been recovered frequently from within the mound...in the upper layers this vole is clearly associated with undoubted Roman sherds, and it is



clear that it survived locally long after the Pleistocene period.”

The team involved found their work was complicated by the fact that badgers had been there before them and had scabbled through the material to make space their home. Since the archaeological work ended, many of the finds, including pollen samples, have undergone careful laboratory and scientific tests. The aim has been to discover their

age and the environment when the cave was providing shelter and a burial space for people and animals over several thousand years from Neolithic to Roman times.

Pictured above is: one of the intriguing pieces of pottery found in the debris which filled the cave, and **right**, the early days of the dig.

David Roberts takes up the narrative:

The excavation of Hay Wood cave from 1957 to 1971 remains one of the most significant archaeological investigations undertaken by Axbridge Caving Group and Archaeological Society. The article



in *Retrospect* last August set out the story of the site and its evolving interpretation.

A 1972 article by Anne and Bob Everton, later secretary and chair of the Society, set out in *The Proceedings of the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society* the early conclusions of the excavation team. They suggested that, although the site was difficult to interpret because of the disturbed stratigraphy and the lack of clear means then of dating bone, it could be inferred that the cave served as a temporary camp for Mesolithic hunter-gatherers between 10,000 and 4,000 BCE. Later, in the early Iron Age from 800 BCE to 43 CE, it was used as a burial site for a local family or small community, they said.

By 2013, huge progress had been made in scientific dating techniques, and a paper by Rick Schulting, of Oxford University, aided by John and Margaret Chapman, appeared in

The Proceedings of the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society, and confirmed the use of the site as a temporary Mesolithic hunter-gatherer camp, but at a later date.. Scientific data indicated that the bones were of early Neolithic origin of from 4,000 BCE to 2,500 BCE – and the bodies were probably buried as complete corpses. Analysis indicated their diet was land-based despite the proximity of the coast, and this was in line with the recognised pattern of Neolithic communities in Britain.

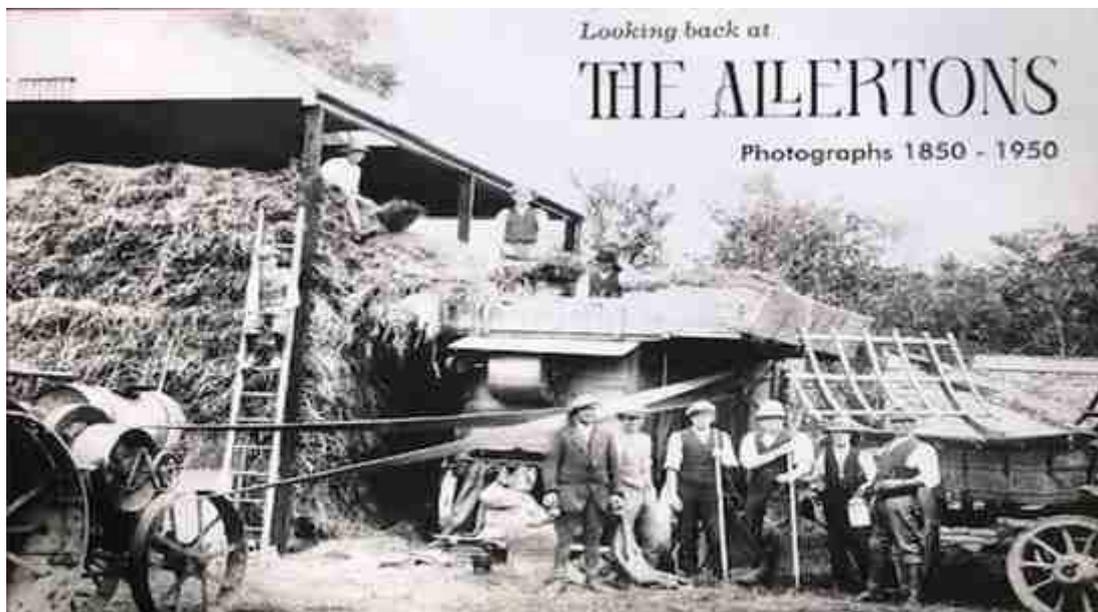
The site yielded the largest known group of Neolithic cave burials in the Mendip area. A vast amount of animal bone, some pottery and other material was also collected. The report praised the quality of the sieving that produced so much tiny material as “deeply impressive.” These two reports can be found online.

The article in last August’s *Retrospect* described the process of sorting the vast quantity of material from the site and ensuring that everything is properly conserved for future study, although some of the techniques used in the early 1970s are now thought, in some respects to compromise the preservation of such material.

There is still much to be learned about the site and its inhabitants: for instance, were the burials of people living locally or from a population with considerable mobility? Were they related? When you consider the origins of the stones used at Stonehenge, the integration of populations becomes clearer.

The important issue for the Museum Trust is to conserve the material in line with the best modern practice so that, as science and technology advance, those who follow us will inherit material in a state that will facilitate further study and analysis.

THE STORY OF ONE PARISH OVER 100 YEARS IN WORDS AND PICTURES



The parish of Chapel Allerton on the Isle of Wedmore includes the villages of Stone Allerton, Chapel Allerton and Ashton. The project to collect photographs and family memories from the people of the villages for an exhibition was initiated by the Allerton History Society. The concept came together in an exhibition in the Ad Astra Cider Barn, then in the Old School Room, Stone Allerton, in 2024.

The exhibition then moved to King John's Hunting Lodge Museum in Axbridge, where it ran for two months. In fact it proved so popular that the Allerton History Society committee decided a more permanent record should be made. This book is the result.

For rural England, 1850 – 1950 was a time of tumultuous change. In the Allertons in the 1850s, most people worked in agriculture and associated trades. Local families had deep roots in the area and their lives were dominated by the rhythms of the seasons. By 1950, the mechanisation of agriculture, the consolidation of farming, two world wars and the growth of a commuter society had changed the face of the countryside. This rapid change in the Allertons is recorded in the book with realism and sensitivity by Graham Wathen, who has used the photographs and accompanying text from the exhibition to capture the spirit of the community that clearly values its past and wishes to celebrate its roots.



Celebrating Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, Chapel Allerton School, June 1897

The organisation of the book reflects themes of change and continuity that dominated the time: church, street scenes, school, war, farming, rural trades and recreation. The final section contains the photographs and memories of several local families. This is an especially absorbing section as it shows significant moments in their lives and illustrates, with changes in society through the experiences of individuals and groups from a cohesive community.

Overall, "*Looking Back at the Allertons 1850 – 1950*" is an achievement of which the community should be proud. So many villagers contributed, the Allerton History Society initiated the project and undertook the organisational and logistical tasks, and Graham Wathen turned the images and recollections into a beautifully-crafted publication. It will surely become a welcome addition to the bookshelves of residents and former residents of the villages as well as to those of family historians, students of rural life and specialists in the development of photography.

Copies priced at £20 can be obtained from the Chair of Allerton History Society, Fiona Torrens-Spence, who can be contacted on 01934 710188 or via email at ftspence@yahoo.com.

DAVID ROBERTS