

Retrospect



Issue No 39 June 2026

Newsletter of the Friends of
King John's Hunting Lodge
Museum

News, views and events

Friends and members of the former Axbridge
Archaeological and Local History Society can contact
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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

Wednesday June 17 – Visit to *ss Great Britain*, Bristol, with conducted tour. Mini bus
pick-up details and cost in due course. but please contact Liz if you haven't already
booked your seat

Wednesday June 24 – visit to Westbury-sub-Mendip Romano-British farmhouse



excavations, which have been
going on for the past six years. If
you wish to attend, please contact
Liz as above. Because of the
shortage of parking spaces, try to
share transport for meeting at
2pm near the old station site for a
walk along the Strawberry Line to
the location. Some of the finds
have been included in a new
Roman gallery at Wells Museum,
which is well worth seeing.

Wednesday July 15, 2pm – meet National Trust car park, Shute Shelve, for a talk
by Madeleine Roberts on historic Cross Rifle Club and a gentle walk to see the site
of the old firing ranges on Cross Plain

NEW DATE: Saturday July 18, 11am - coffee morning with the Museum Trust, Oak
House, Axbridge.

AXBRIDGE MAYOR'S PORTRAIT SURVIVES – JUST – BUT MOST WORKS OF TALENTED SOMERSET ARTIST HAVE VANISHED

A portrait of 19th century Axbridge mayor Richard Trew can still be seen and admired by visitors to the King John Hunting Lodge in Axbridge. But many works – in fact, all but two – of the fine 19th century Somerset artist who painted him have vanished over the decades. Bridgwater Heritage Group member **Dr Miles Kerr-Peterson** looks at the life, career and tragically-early death of the much sought-after artist William Baker.

In fact, one thing Miles didn't know was how the Trew picture itself survived and only just escaped being binned: it was found by a distant relative of Trew in junk discarded after the former Axbridge Rural District Council was abolished. The canvas was torn, rolled up and in a very sorry state without its frame. Fortunately its



original name plate was also in the pile, its true value was realised and the then Axbridge Archaeological and Local History Society who raised the alarm and the Museum management committee raised the funds for and organised the restoration of the painting.. **Miles** writes: Hanging in King John's Hunting Lodge is a rather stately portrait of Richard Trew (1793-1874), sometime Mayor of Axbridge (**left**). While he is remarkable in his own right, the painting has a special interest as it is one of only two known to survive by Bridgwater artist William Baker (1817-1875), a gifted portrait painter who produced dozens of works over his lifetime.

Baptised at St Mary's Church in Bridgwater, he was the son of William Baker Senior, a currier - he dressed, finished, and coloured tanned leather to make it strong, flexible and waterproof – and was respected as a naturalist and for his knowledge of science. William grew up surrounded by his father's natural history collections, and this must have been where sketching flora and fauna nurtured his artistic skill. His promise as an artist emerged in 1838, when, aged 21, he won a silver medal from the Royal Academy for "the best drawing from the Antique," indicating formal artistic training and marking him out as a rising talent. Contemporary praise suggested expectations that he might become one of the leading historical painters of his day.

In 1840 he completed a major early commission for Holy Trinity Church in Bridgwater: an altarpiece depicting *St John in the Wilderness*, copied from a work by Guido Reni in the Dulwich Gallery. This ambitious work implied he spent time in London studying the original. The painting survived in photographs of the church interior in the 1860s, but then just disappeared. Another early commission followed in 1843, a portrait of Dr Jonathan Toogood for the Bridgwater Infirmary, also now lost.

Then in 1850 Baker married Mary Ann Axford, daughter of timber merchant Frederick Axford. The couple lived first in Bath, where Baker is recorded in the 1851 census as an "artist painter." Bath, with its affluent society, provided opportunities for portrait commissions. By about 1855 the family had moved to London, settling in Bloomsbury, and the 1861 census shows a prosperous household with five children, two servants, and the antiquary Henry Shaw lodging with them, suggesting Baker had established a degree of professional success.

Though details of his activities in the 1850s remain scarce, the 1860s saw a series of notable commissions, particularly in Bridgwater when in 1862 he was commissioned by Henry Westropp MP to copy a portrait believed to represent Admiral Robert Blake (it isn't, but is the only other surviving portrait by Baker). In 1864 Bridgwater Town Council selected him to paint a portrait of Mayor William Browne, a prestigious civic commission (**right** as it was photographed in Bridgwater Town Hall in about 1950). The portrait has since vanished. Browne then engaged Baker to copy portraits of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, after the



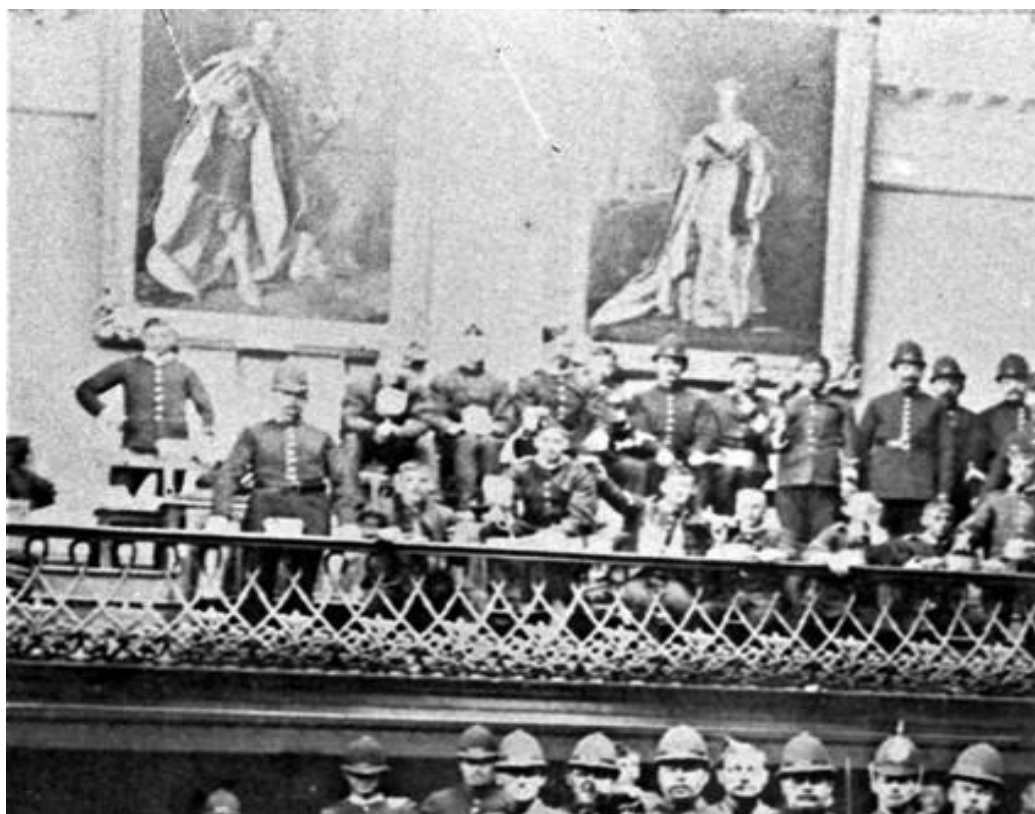
style of Winterhalter, for the new Town Hall. This was the time William also painted Trew of Axbridge.

By the 1871 census he was living in Clevedon, describing himself as a "Historical Portrait Painter," suggesting much of his work involved copying Old Masters and historical portraits for wealthy clients. Evidence suggests that a substantial part of his practice lay not only in original portraiture but in producing faithful, high-quality copies of celebrated works. His artistic legacy therefore may have been much broader than surviving evidence suggests.

The problem is that he doesn't seem to have signed his paintings! In the 1871 census, his son Frederick William was also listed as a watercolour painter, indicating an artistic family tradition.

Baker died suddenly in London in June 1875 aged 58 while still professionally active. Notices revealed he had recently received further portrait commissions in Somerset and was preparing to return there to carry them out. His death therefore cut short an ongoing career. Probate records show he left an estate valued at under £800, a modest rather than great wealth despite his reputation.

William emerges as a skilled and respected Victorian artist whose work ranged from portraiture to religious and historical painting. Though much of it is now lost, his career demonstrates significant achievement, from Royal Academy recognition to civic and aristocratic commissions. His life also reflects the precariousness of artistic legacy: despite considerable contemporary esteem, many of his works have since



disappeared, leaving only fragments of a once substantial career. The losses from Bridgwater Town Hall are particularly upsetting. Mayor Browne, Victoria and Albert **above** as photographed in the main concert hall in 1896 when the town was filled with police and soldiers about to confront striking brick workers when the Riot Act was read and troops fixed bayonets to disperse the crowd in the High Street. Browne was still hanging there in the 1960s, but as with so many others of Baker's works, they just disappeared. Axbridge is certainly doing well to retain its Richard Trew painting, which can be appreciated both for its subject and for its painter.

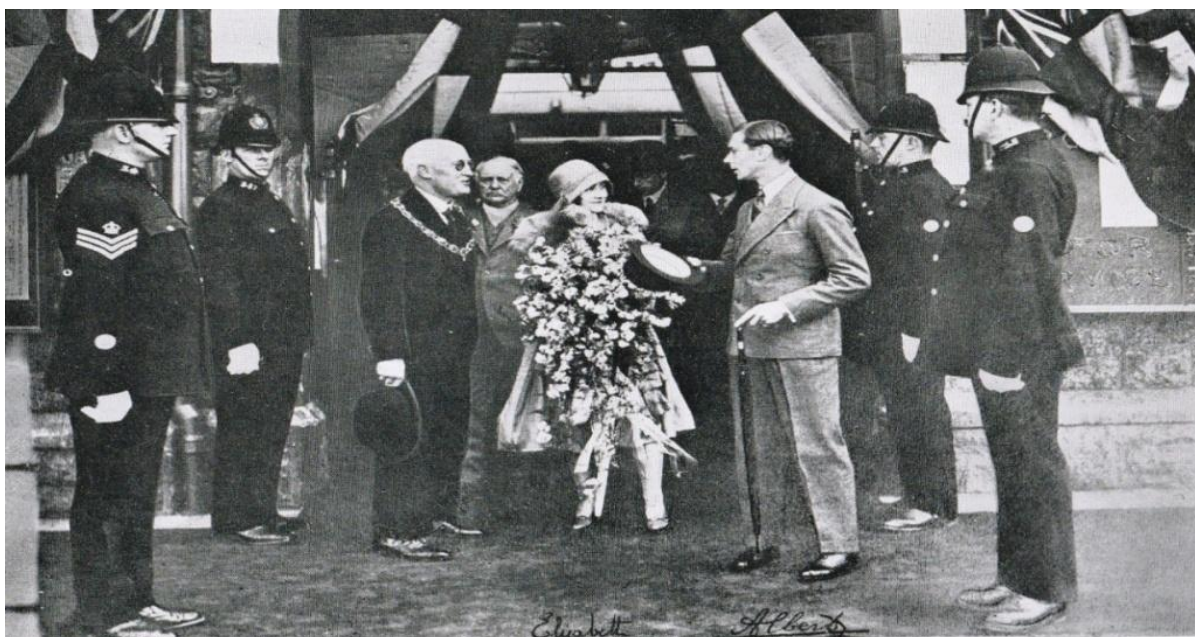
Pictures: Bridgwater Heritage Group and KJHL Museum

We'll describe the remarkable life and career of Richard Trew next time

A ROYAL APPOINTMENT



Our article last month about engineer Harold Brown and his amazing achievements created a good deal of interest and brought more information about the regard with which he was held for his work with Weston Urban District Council. This can be judged by the fact that he and his wife were among the few civic leaders to be chosen to welcome the Duke and Duchess of York – later to become King George VI and Queen Elizabeth – to the resort on July 6 1928. The Yorks were making the first-ever Royal visit to Weston, arriving by train then being conducted on a motorcade along the seafront and through the town to the Boulevard and officially open and tour the news Queen Alexandra Memorial Hospital.



The Duke and Duchess of York are greeted at Weston-super-Mare railway station in 1928 as they arrive to officially open the new Queen Alexandra Memorial Hospital in the Boulevard

A 12-page souvenir brochure gave a highly-detailed timetable of the visit and the many hundreds of dignitaries, business leaders, hospital staff, volunteers, and Scouts and Guides who were to be presented at various stages of the tour. The booklet's foreward explained why the new hospital had been built and funded mainly by public subscription. Seventy years before, what was described as "Weston village" had no hospital at all and a workman who fell from scaffolding and broke his leg bdy had to endure the 20-mile journey on poor roads by horse-drawn wagon to the Bristol Royal Infirmary. His plight raised concerns in the "village" and a fund-raising campaign allowed the building of a four-bed cottage hospital, now replaced by the new one.

On their arrival, the Duke and Duchess were greeted by a guard-of-honour from the Somerset Light Infantry, and the Duchess was presented with a ceremonial key to officially unlock the main entrance. The Royal couple were taken to the wards, operating theatre, maternity wing and even the kitchen before having afternoon tea in the Board Room. On their departure by car they were driven through many of the newer parts of the town, including the recent council house developments that Harold Brown had designed just a few years before.

In a future issue we will take a closer look at Harold Brown's interests outside work, and his sad death.

TURKEY TROT AT WEARE



It may not have been Christmas but it was certainly turkey-drive time at the former Sparrow Hill Farm in Upper Weare, when this wonderful photograph was taken back in the 1920s. It was one of those on show in a special display during the Spring at the King John Hunting Lodge Museum, staged by Fiona Torrens-Spencer and the Allerton History Society. The photo is one of the many in the Donald Ham Collection, now held at Somerset Archives in Taunton, and the exhibition told the story of three generations of the Ham farming family.

THREE CENTURIES OF SERVICE – THE HISTORY OF THE SOMERSET LIGHT INFANTRY



In June 1685, King James II needed to expand his army to face the threat of the Duke of Monmouth's rebellion. One of those commissioned to raise a new regiment was the 7th Earl of Huntingdon, with the result that what eventually became the Somerset Light Infantry was formed...and that was the starting point for the talk at our May meeting by Phil

Thorne, who himself served in the regiment. He described the unit's many early engagements – at a time when a Private's pay was 8d a day – including being sent to Scotland in 1745 to face the Jacobites at Falkirk and Culloden (**below**). It was there that all its officers were killed so that what was left of the



regiment had to be brought out of the action by its sergeants. This was the origin of the regimental tradition of sergeants wearing their sash over the left shoulder rather than the right, as was usual for non-commissioned officers.

The regiment then spent decades serving in Europe, Ireland, the Mediterranean and West Indies. In 1822 they were posted to India where they remained for 23 years during which they took part in the three-month defence of Jalalabad (1841-42) in the First Afghan War. In recognition of their actions Queen Victoria renamed the regiment after her husband, Prince Albert. The siege also gave their Taunton barracks its name. Later came action in the Crimea and the Zulu and Boer wars during which a number of the men were awarded the Victoria Cross for their gallantry.

In the First World War, one battalion spent the whole four years on the Western Front while the other was in India. The Second World War saw service on a number of fronts including Italy – where they took part in the infamous Battle of Monte Cassino. Shortly after D-Day, sections landed in Normandy and fought their way through France and the Low Countries with the 43rd (Wessex) Division. Finally In 1959 the regiment was merged with the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry to form the Somerset and Cornwall Light Infantry.



Phil also paid tribute to his long-time friend and service colleague the late John Chapman (**left**), especially for his dedicated and inspired leadership of the Cheddar Army Cadet Unit, with which he was associated for some years. John was, of course, also a leading member of the Axbridge Caving Group and Archaeological Society, taking part in excavations and research over many decades.

Ian Tabrett