



Retrospect

Issue No 41 August 2026

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

News, views and events

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Archaeological and Local History Society can
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Articles and pictures for use in *Retrospect* are always most welcome – and needed – so please email the editor

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DIARY DATES

Tuesday August 18: NEW EVENT – visit to the English Heritage store at Temple Cloud. *See note below.*

Wednesday August 26: NEW EVENT 2pm weather permitting! - Revised date for conducted visit to Westbury-sub-Mendip Romano-British farmstead excavation, postponed earlier because of the heatwave. Meet near entrance to the Strawberry Line to walk to the site. Advise Liz if you are coming, and try to share transport as parking space is limited.

Wednesday September 9 – visit to Knighthayes National Trust property. **Fully booked.**

Wednesday September 16, Cross Memorial Hall (CMH), 2.30pm – documentary films including *Day Out In Axbridge* shot by Clive North for BBC West.

Wednesday October 21, CMH, 2.30 – Talk by Les Davies, columnist with *Mendip Times*, author and former Mendip Hills AONB manager. His subject: Follow the Plough, growing up on the Mendips.



Wednesday November 18 CMH, 7.30pm - Folk singers Issy and David Emeney, from Biddisham. Bar, light refreshments.
TICKETS £5 Friends, £10 visitors

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

HISTORY IN STORE – see diary date above

The Allerton History Society and the Friends of King John's Hunting Lodge Museum have organised a visit to the English Heritage (EH) regional store at Temple Cloud. It houses all their assets from the West of England that aren't displayed or stored at other sites. There are two large warehouses with high racks holding the material, and it is a centre for study, cataloguing and conservation. Liz will drive the Frankie Howerd minibus, but places had to be booked by now.

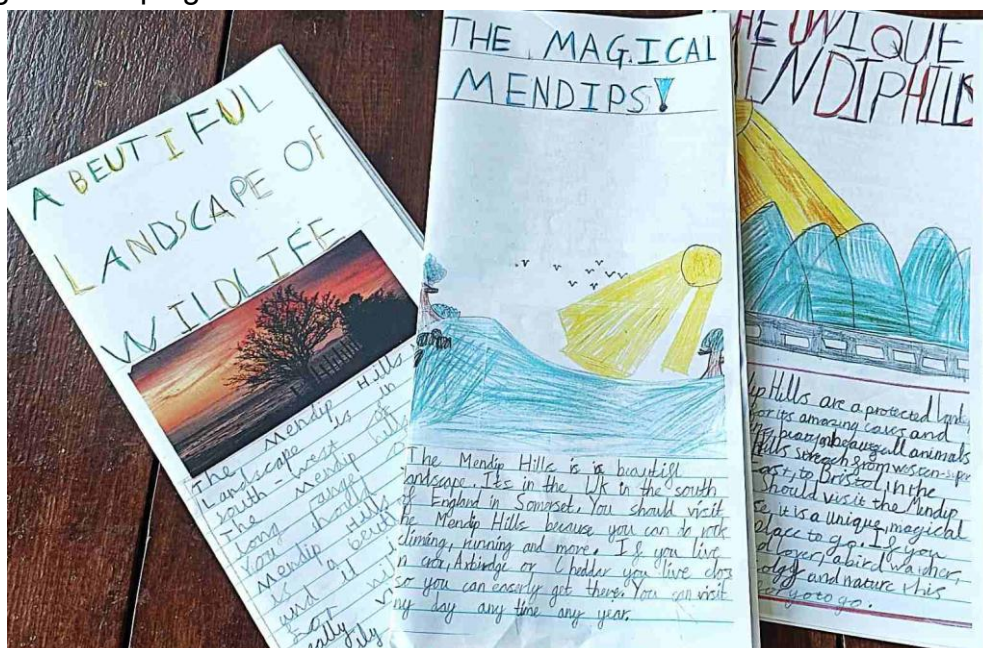
WHAT'S ON AT KING JOHN'S HUNTING LODGE MUSEUM

The museum has two special displays between now and the end of October. First, this month, is the annual production of Axbridge School. Then for September and October, Liz is showing in words and pictures how the town looked in the 1950s and '60s.

During last winter some major changes were made to the exhibitions, including an expanded display area featuring the Axbridge Workhouse, a new Romano-British room, and the relocation of the temporary exhibition space. Thanks to a team of volunteers, the museum is open every day 1pm to 4pm and from 10am to 4pm on the first Saturday of each month to coincide with the monthly Farmers' Market.

On this month's display, *Magnificent Mendip Hills*, by pupils of Axbridge School, museum trustee Pauline Trapp writes: "Year 3 Class (Redwood Class) are showing the work they did about the Mendips and local area. Their fabulous display includes visitor guides to the area covering history, wildlife, visitor attractions and Axbridge (of course!). Their work shows a deep understanding of conservation and the need to protect the beautiful landscape.

"There are also some very appealing paintings of the natural landscape inspired by the painting of local artist Tilly Mortimer, who worked with the children, showing her paintings and helping them create their own works of art."



IT'S A CLASS ACT AS SCHOOL MARKS 100 YEARS

One of our local schools, Banwell Primary, has been celebrating the centenary of a new building opened in 1926 to accommodate a growing number of local children who until then had been taught in an old, inadequate and insanitary building in High Street which was bursting at the seams, or at several small private establishments. :



The year is 1926 and the first set of senior pupils at the new Banwell Primary School with head teacher Mr Shepherd pose for the camera...girls at the front, boys at the back.

Ian Tabrett writes: Watched over by head teach Mr Shepherd, my mother, Betty Daw as she was then, and her best friend are seated demurely with arms crossed at their desk towards the right of the second row. They were the first and second pupils into the building when it was completed and equipped in 1926 and were allocated coat peg Numbers 1 and 2. She also later recalled being one of the "cocoa girls," which meant having to light a coal-fired boiler when they arrived in the morning, then heating water to make cocoa for pupils during the lunch break.

She and her younger brother Raymond – my uncle – returned to the school when it marked its 70th anniversary in 1996. They were able to look round, meet the contemporary and past generations of pupils, and share their memories



This summer, I made that same journey back with scores of other ex-pupils to see just how much has changed since I was there from 1946 until 1952. That's the main classroom block **above** – and yes, that's me on the **left** as a boy aged 11! Since



then I've altered a great deal, but there's still much of the school that hasn't: the classrooms, now with solid walls rather than the folding screens which used to divide them; the head's office in the corridor leading from the main door; the staffroom; and of course the playground, no longer divided by a metal fence for boys one side, girls on the other, but now with a great deal of modern equipment. There are double-glazed windows with large sun blinds, more classrooms and a new block containing a splendid

sports and assembly hall, plus kitchen and other facilities...all ready, we can but hope in these fast-changing times, to serve the village children for another 100 years.

Paul Davis, deputy head of Banwell Primary School between 2021 and 2024 and now a school leader in Weston-super-Mare, is hoping later this year to publish a book detailing the school's history. He has contributed this special article for *Retrospect*: "Residents and former staff joined with the current team to celebrate the school's centenary. But is the school really only 100 years old? The current building was opened in April 1926, with a move from the High Street – known at the time as Harding's Lane – into at least the fourth premises that the parish's school has

occupied. So why celebrate this year? Because the age of the first school is shrouded in mystery, with a likely start date of around 1767 but followed by subsequent breaks in operation.

"The move was long overdue. Criticism of the facilities of the High Street building began as early as 1894 and by 1911 an architect's report, written on behalf of the county, described the High Street site as being *'inconveniently constructed for teaching purposes, fabric old and generally worn out. Built on a cramped site on the side of a hill. No play-ground for boys; only a small one for girls and infants; Offices [the toilets] are insanitary and offensive, and too close to the School. Infants' gallery awkwardly constructed; infants reach their room by steep and dangerous steps. Lighting not good. Small classroom generally unsuitable for teaching. Heating and ventilation unsatisfactory. No lavatory accommodation (boys). No drinking water. Cloakroom accommodation inadequate and very unsatisfactory.'*

"This extract was published in the *Banwell Parish Magazine* for June 1911. In fact, without running water, the toilets would only flush if there was enough run-off water from the hillside, and often there wasn't, sometimes for weeks at a time!

"The building was condemned in 1912 and the Church-maintained school ordered to move out. Almost immediately, the vicar the Rev Charles Taylor, announced that the parish did not have the money for a new building, and so the school converted to council ownership.

"Land for the new school was purchased in 1912, and then nothing...for years. Presumably as a consequence of the First World War and other priorities, Banwell Primary School was not rebuilt until 1926. Recalling the move to the new school building in an interview with Friends member Roy Rice in 1996, Percy Baker, a pupil at the school at the time [pictured in an article later in this edition], recalled: "



'We collected up the old school and I remember we all came down together. We all stopped outside the entrance. Then they opened it up and away we went in. I can't remember there being any kind of celebration.'

"The new school (left in 1926) had 152 children aged from four to 15, arranged into five classes; only

seven months later the headteacher reported that the number attending had increased to 181 as a consequence of the move."

LOOKING BACK

The Axbridge Caving Group and Archaeological Society's first museum was officially opened in August 1952 in a room at Axbridge Town Hall, so this is an appropriate time to look back at the event. Curator Jack Weare reported in the *Journal* Vol.1 No. 3, dated February 1953: "Since the official opening the specimens have been added to considerably, with specimens ranging from the Carboniferous period to the present."

There were fine fossils from the Mendips including cattle, bear, bison, wolf, fox, horse, reindeer – one being a specimen from Fry's Hill, above Axbridge. Flints included a probable Palaeolithic hand axe from Wavering Down as well as Neolithic and Bronze Age scrapers, saws, knives, borers, lance points, arrowheads and part-worked flints from across the Mendips.

Mr Weare went on to say there was a fine collection of mainly third century potsherds from Cheddar Gorge plus a worked antler point and polishing stones. Coins ranged from the third century to those of Edward III, Charles II, William III, Georges II, III and IV, Victoria, and George VII, and a collection of 17th century tokens including one from Axbridge, and Bristol and Bath farthings. On display, too,



brasses from Axbridge, Banwell, Cheddar and Weare, the work of treasurer Mr Frank Jarman. The Town Trust



had loaned the Axbridge Nail (left and right), stocks, and a bull anchor, while recent excavations near King John's Hunting Lodge had produced relics of domestic animals, probably of medieval date, and in West Street, a human skeleton was discovered, and all were temporarily on show.

In his notes, secretary Major D. C. McKeand said the group could feel justifiably proud of the achievements in the past year. *The Journal* had been launched, the museum opened and a colour film of Ochre Cavern, sited above the town, had been completed and acclaimed as a work of photographic art.

Fresh and lovely chambers had been opened up by members at Banwell Bone Cave, the team being led by Percy Baker, one of the members who lived in Banwell and who later took part in activities including the excavations at Winthill of Romano-British and Dark Ages remains. Members are pictured **below** resting in what became known as Baker's Extension in the Ruby Chamber at the Bone Caves.



Meanwhile, **John Page** has researched the very early minutes of the group's committee meetings – it was at that time still the Axbridge Caving Group – to reveal what he calls the “rather tortuous lead-up to the foundation of the museum.” It seems that discussions were boosted by plans for Axbridge to celebrate the 1951 Festival of Britain: for those too young to remember, this was a Government-inspired exhibition in London designed to lift post-war national morale. It ran from the beginning of May until the end of September that year, with its entire focus being British achievements in science, technology, industrial design, architecture, and the arts.



The group's committee began discussing hopes for a permanent museum in September 1950, and for the Festival display in the Town Hall, two cases of finds were being prepared. In the May – after the new name Axbridge Caving Group and Archaeological Society was adopted – other premises were suggested. The first was a cottage on the Church Steps, which was under threat of demolition. However, the cost of repairs and renovations, estimate at £200, was described as “prohibitive” and it was acquired by the Church. By May 1952 an approach to Axbridge Town Trust to use a room in the Town Hall brought a rapid response that the society could use the

old Weighbridge Room just inside the main entrance at a nominal rent of 1s (5p) a year plus the cost of lighting. A museum committee of six was set up, the members being the Rector the Rev W.F. Brimson, society secretary Major McKeand, Jim Hunt, Percy Baker, Mr R.J. Cousins (Banwell School head), Mr D. Neads and curator Jack Weare. By the July, the date for the official opening was decided as Friday August 8,



AXBRIDGE MUSEUM.—Mr. H. E. Balch, the noted Mendip cave Explorer is the first to sign the visitors' book after he had opened the Museum of the Axbridge Caving Group and Archaeological Society at Axbridge Town-hall. With him (left to right) are Mr. A. J. Hawkins, Dr. Dobson Hinton, Major D. C. McKeand and the Rev. W. F. Brimson.

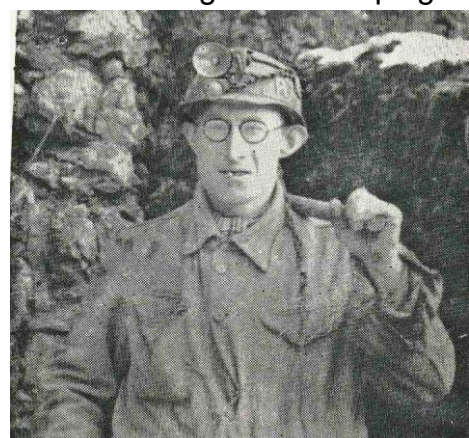
1952, with attendance by invitation only. The caver, archaeologist and Wells Museum curator Mr H.E. Balch conducted the opening ceremony, seen **left** as reported in the *Weston Mercury*.

The museum committee revealed that Bristol Museum and Bristol University had offered geological collections, either on loan or as gifts. After much discussion they unanimously passed a resolution that “all specimens taken in the field on a group site become the property of the

group. This right of ownership to be waived in the case of individual specimens if the group so determines.”

In a later *Looking Back* article we will report on the next stage of developing a permanent museum.

Right is Percy Baker, who helped lead the exploration of Banwell Bone Caves and played a big part in other caving and excavation activities of the Axbridge Caving Group, which later became the Axbridge Caving Group and Archaeological Society, which much more recently morphed into the Friends of King John's Hunting Lodge Museum. Mr Baker was also a member of the committee set up to develop the museum.



HOT, HOT, HOT

The hot weather meant two events planned for this summer had to be postponed: a conducted visit to the Westbury-sub-Mendip Romano-British farmstead excavations – since given a new date, as above – and an open-air talk by Madeleine Roberts on historic Cross Rifle Club followed by a walk from Shute Shelve to the sites of the old firing ranges on Cross Plain. It is hoped to arrange a new date...on a cooler day!

However two fixtures did go ahead: a well-attended coffee morning at the Oak House as guests of the museum trustees, and a visit to Wells Museum to meet



curator David Walker and learn about Professor Lionel (Leo) Palmer, who died in 1962.

He was an expert caver, particularly on the Mendips; Professor of Physics at Hull University; second curator of Wells Museum following Herbert Balch; pioneer of geophysics; and first professional director of the Hay Wood excavation and other digs carried out by the Axbridge Caving Group and Archaeological Society. He also had a long and distinguished air force career, having joined the Royal Flying Corps in the First World War (**left**) then was with the RAF in operational and training duties

during and after the Second World War.



Axbridge in the 1950s and 60s: one of the pictures to be included in the forthcoming exhibition at King John's Hunting Lodge Museum (see note above). The aerial view shows the town still had a railway line and no bypass!

