



Retrospect

Issue No 43 October 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 Liz Scott by email at

moorlandfm@btinternet.com or editor Ian Tabrett
at tabrett.cross@btinternet.com

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

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

DIARY DATES

Wednesday October 21, Cross Memorial Hall, 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, now on sale. Contact Liz.

Friday December 11, 7pm - *Christmas dinner and quiz*. The
Lamb, Weare. Please confirm attendance to Liz. Menu to follow.

FILM TIME!

Local archive films, including the 1979 BBC West *Day Out In Axbridge*, all made by Clive
North (**right**), were shown at our September meeting. Clive's work on
the extensive *Day Out* series ranged around the region from
Gloucester to Lundy. The second film shown, *Lost Mines of Mendip*,
was written and presented by Dr (later Professor) Peter Fowler, while
the third was one commissioned by the Axbridge Caving Group:
Discovering Mendip, seen both from the air and deep underground, and
narrated by a young John Craven. Clive, who lives on the Mendips,
later worked with chef Keith Floyd on several series of his cookery programmes.



See also FINISHED - AT LAST Page 11.

MUSEUM PROJECT UP FOR NATIONAL AWARD

Work for the King John Hunting Lodge Museum which started earlier this year involving a team of volunteers under the direction of curator Lucy Newman has been short-listed for a prestigious national award. Lucy writes: *"Over the summer I submitted*



our re-packing project for the annual Collections Trust (CT) Awards, on the advice of Rachel Bellamy, our brilliant Museum Development Officer. These are national awards open to all museums. Amazingly, we have been shortlisted through to the final round. We are up against some much bigger museums and Lottery-funded projects, so fingers crossed for our little museum!"

The CT website says: "Each year, the CT Award showcases some of the often-unsung collections management projects happening in museums across the UK. This year's award called for case studies on the theme of accountability for collections, a subject that will be explored in depth at the annual CT conference. Being accountable for collections is key to maintaining public trust in museums, but it is also a necessity for managing and using objects effectively. At Collections Trust we recognise that collections information is a bedrock for accountable museums.

"Four museums selected by the judging panel for this year's shortlist are: Axbridge and District Museum (King John's Hunting Lodge); Royal Albert Memorial Museum and Art Gallery; The Royal Welch Fusiliers Museum; the Tank Museum.

"Axbridge and District Museum (King John's Hunting Lodge) – Winthill and Star Roman villas and Hay Wood; the repackaging and better understanding of three significant archaeological collections. The aim of this project was to re-pack three significant archaeological collections to current museum standards and create a full list of objects in those collections, to help improve the catalogue and knowledge and interpretation of the collections."

Work on the collections from Hay Wood and Winthill has been completed, and finds from the 1960s excavations at the Star villa site have almost all been sorted, catalogued and re-packaged at weekly sessions at Axbridge Town Hall. Altogether, the project involves many thousands of finds of pottery fragments, metalwork, flints, painted wall plaster, roof tiles, human remains – including several infants – and from what was thought to be a cooking and working area at Star, animal bones and organic matter such as burnt corn. The award results will be announced on October 8.



NEW HOPE FOR HISTORIC ST MICHAEL'S

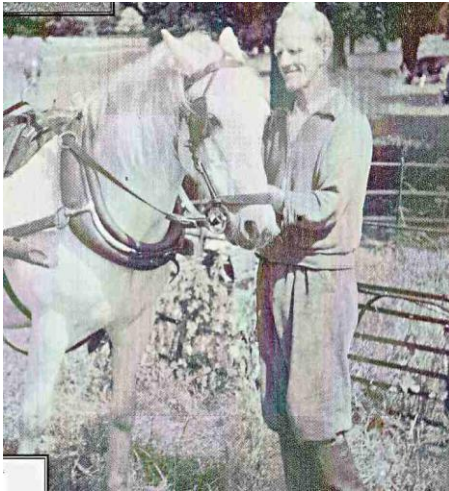


Time has been anything but kind to the huge complex between Axbridge and Cheddar which started life in Victorian times as St Michael's Free Home for Consumptives and in the 20th century became the St Michael Cheshire Care Home.

The original buildings are listed by Historic England as Grade 2* because of their architectural and historic interest...but decline rapidly set in when the home for the incurably sick and disabled, taken over by the Group Captain Leonard Cheshire Foundation, ran into difficulties and closed in October, 2023. However there is hope for a brighter future as the family trust which now owns the site work to reverse the situation and carry out badly-needed restoration projects.



One of the first is on a stone-built structure opposite the gatehouse at the bottom of the tree-lined entrance drive, which probably went more or less un-noticed until scaffolding



went up around it as its restoration began. The question asked by many was: why was it there and what was it used for? The answer is probably that before the days refrigerators were common or affordable, and ice would not have been readily available, it was a large 19th century version of a cool box in which local traders, fearful of going to the main house and facing the possibility of contracting tuberculosis, could deliver food and other perishables to be collected by staff. One local farmer who ignored the threat of infection was Edmond Durston (**left**), who drove his pony and cart up the drive to the main house to deliver fresh milk daily. He also rented the nearby field, where he made hay. However, I am told that even

this apparently simple repair task is slow and complicated: traditional lime mortar is being used, which needs specific weather conditions. In fact, its new purpose in life is to house a gas metre – but who would know that!

Undoubtedly the most spectacular surviving feature of the whole site is the centre-piece of the original three-story buildings, the elaborately-decorated chapel, flanked by openings from which patients, segregated in wards for men and women could watch and take part in services. But even the chapel didn't escape the ravages of wind and rain, and urgent repairs have had to be carried out on the roof because of a serious leak.

Historic England's notes say its two-leaf door has elaborate scroll hinges, while there are two sets of decorative wooden pews and an organ with painted pipes. At the east end is a painted timber-and-stone altar with a carved timber canopy, and on either side, doors leading to a sacristy and a small chapel with painted floor and ceiling.

In the grounds a cemetery was opened with beautifully decorated wrought iron gates, and more than 170 patients – including



one of the last nuns to serve at St Michael's – are buried there. Their headstones were cleared to one side some years ago and the area is now an unkempt bramble-filled jungle, with trees 30ft high.

The trust which is now the custodian of the site tells me: "It's a lovely place which sadly has been neglected for the past decade, and it's going to be a long process restoring the building and grounds. We still have to decide a viable long-term future to help fund the restoration...but it is very exciting and we look forward to many years here. We currently have people in the main house to help with security and to bring in some much-needed income which is being re-invested into the property and grounds."

That, no doubt, would have pleased the family who planned and financed the original development of the site. The project was the brainchild of Mrs Matilda Blanche Gibbs (1817-1887), wife of William Gibbs (1790-1875), described by Historic England as "the notable merchant, philanthropist and owner of the estate of Tyntesfield since 1834." The report goes on: "The Gibbs had seven children, three of whom died of pulmonary tuberculosis...Mrs Gibbs sought to help those with the condition by establishing a facility where sufferers could receive long-term care and treatment.

"Her initial plan was to build a home in Surrey, however due to concerns over the suitability of the climate, she turned her attention to the isolated spot on the Mendip slopes to the north-west of Axbridge. The sanatorium was dedicated to the patron saint of the sick and suffering, St Michael's was run by nuns from the Associate Community of St Peter, an Anglican-Catholic Sisterhood who had looked after the Gibbs's youngest daughter before her death in 1874."



Mrs Gibbs engaged the renowned Victorian architect William Butterfield to design the original Gothic Revival building, opened on 28 September 1878, and an extension four years later. They are pictured together **left** at St Michael's with Miss Patterson, believed to have been the first matron.

At first there were 24 beds, half each for men and women, the extension added 26 beds. A lodge and stables were built at the main entrance, and a grace-and-favour parsonage with its own stables and coach house a little further away for

the resident chaplain. The accounts for the year 1890 show that income from investments, donations, cattle grazing rights, sale of hay and vegetables, tax refunds and funeral fees came to £2,676 5s 1d, while expenses left just £154 19s 2d in the bank, a drop of around £20 on the previous year.

The Historic England entry for the property records that the main building has three storeys to the south and two to the north, having been built into the hillside. "The ground

floor contained a men's hall and kitchen area, the first floor the men's ward and the second the women's ward. To encourage full use of the grounds all of the floors had level access to the gardens...there was a farm in the grounds to provide fresh food, and patients were encouraged to help with its running." The water supply came from an underground reservoir in the slope to the north.

There were two mortuary buildings, one next to the rear entrance to the chapel, and a cemetery opened in 1886, with male patients being buried on the south side and women on the north, but all the 170-plus headstones were moved to the edges earlier this century. Later building work included a three-storey extension with two glazed balconies, a laundry and what was thought to be a larder later converted to take further beds.

The discovery of antibiotics and the decline in the rates of TB led to the admission of far fewer patients, so the nuns left in 1968. The Cheshire Foundation took over, adding further facilities and accommodation, eventually with 100 beds. The home provided valuable employment for local people, and over the years dozens of volunteers helped



with entertainment, hospitality and trips out to make residents' lives happier and easier. Their stories and memories are told in a very moving history, *This Special Place*, compiled by resident David Hassell and Zera Wilson, and published in 2005. I am grateful that among the many black-and-white photos they publish are those I have been able to include here, including that of David Hassell himself (**left**), sitting in his wheelchair just inside the gates of the cemetery. The anecdotes and reminiscences to which the authors give valuable space are touching and add enormously to the story of St Michael's.

For instance, it reveals that the only known birth there was that of Christopher Hollis on Good Friday, March 19 1902. His father was at the time the curate, and Christopher later became an MP. In his memoir he wrote: *"I was only one year old when we left there, and although from time to time I passed*

through Axbridge I have never re-visited St Michael's. My older brother took his name from it.

"I cannot imagine that my father's duties there were very onerous nor the remuneration very munificent. He was then a young and energetic man full of evangelical

zeal...they had a chapel there and doubtless had services twice on a Sunday. There were some form of prayers conducted on other days and I am sure he was generous in the offer of spiritual aid to any who needed it, although how far any of them called for such assistance except from time to time to be buried..."

Christopher Hollis's father went on to become vice-principal of Wells Theological College and then Bishop of Taunton. He himself went to Eton and Balliol College, Oxford, and visited the USA, New Zealand and Australia as part of the Oxford Union Society's debating team. He was a friend of Evelyn Waugh and Ronald Knox and in the 1920s, like them, converted to Roman Catholicism. He taught history for 10 years at Stonyhurst College then became a visiting professor at an American university. During World War 2 he was an intelligence officer in the RAF before being elected as the somewhat rebellious Conservative MP for Devizes. He retired in 1955, wrote a political column for *Punch* then moved to Mells where he spent the rest of his days writing books and supporting Somerset County Cricket Club. His brother Roger was knighted and was sometime director of MI5.

Another whose extraordinary story is told in *This Special Place* is that of Vera Powell, who started work at St Michael's on March 1, 1941, the day after her 18th birthday.



Her first task after being welcomed by the Reverend Mother, the nuns and the rest of the staff, was to change into her domestic's uniform to be photographed (**above**) with the nurses. Later her duties included sitting in the afternoon by the front door to greet visitors, and it was her habit to allow the St Michael's cat, Fluffy, to lie around her neck like a fur collar!

Vera recalled that the home grew most of its own vegetables and fruit, which the staff helped to gather. They kept geese – given the names Charlie and Mary, who



regularly produced goslings – as well as hens, turkeys, goats and pigs. A surprise party was organised to mark her 50 years' service, then 10 years later one for her 60th anniversary, and yet another for her 80th birthday in 2003.

An inspiring tale of an amazing woman at a lovely and vital establishment. We can but hope that its future lives up to its past.

Ian Tabrett

JUST FANCY THAT...



After reading last month's article on the Old Axbridge exhibition that's still on at the King John Hunting Lodge Museum, John Page writes:

"I was interested in the picture of Stratford Johns, as he lived close to where I lived in the South London area. One day I was walking along a main road nearby when someone started waving at me (nobody

else was around).

"I waved back, of course, but was uncertain who he was until it suddenly dawned on me that it was Stratford. Why he was waving at me particularly I have never known - although maybe I look like a star!!! Someone else confirmed that they had seen him along that road that day - but he didn't wave at them!"



DOWN, AND UP

The King John's Hunting Lodge Museum has had mixed fortunes so far this year. At their last meeting, the trustees were told that while visitor numbers were down on 2025 at just under 3,800 by the end of July, donations had more than doubled, which is welcome news in view of the withdrawal of funds by both Somerset Council and the National Trust. Liz Scott is required to retire as a trustee this month, but the meeting hoped she would continue as a vital link between the Friends group and the Trust, which is also considering steps to strengthen the relationship between the two. Meanwhile all Friends will be most welcome to attend the museum trust's annual general meeting on Tuesday 20 October in the Axbridge Church Rooms, when drinks and nibbles will be available.

WHAT'S MISSING...?

The article promised for this month about the rude-looking trees at Cross that just got bigger hopefully will appear in the next issue, having been displaced this time by our exclusive feature on St Michael's.

OUT AND ABOUT (1)



Above: some of the Friends and members of the Allerton History Society who shared a visit to the English Heritage regional store at Temple Cloud hear about an iron-bound chest carved from a single log of oak and thought to date from the 14th century (picture Madeleine Roberts). Below: among the thousands of items held in two large warehouses at the site (picture John Page).



OUT AND ABOUT (2)



Above: some of the Friends who, thanks to cooler weather, were finally able to visit the excavation at Westbury-sub-Mendip of what is thought to be a Romano-British farmstead. Andrew Buchanan, on the left, one of the dig leaders, describes the work that's been done there, for the benefit of both the human and bovine audience! And below, excavation work continues on the large site, with part of the building under cover from the elements.



OUT AND ABOUT (3)



As guests of the trustees of the King John Hunting Lodge Museum, Friends and volunteer custodians visited the National Trust's Knighthayes Gothic Revival house and grounds near Tiverton. This is home to what the National Trust describes as "one of the most outstanding botanical collections in the country."

MENDIPS FILM FINISHED - AT LAST!

The film *Discovering Mendip* was a very long time in the making, and it involved a large number of people in a great deal of work. Just how much is revealed by a note that cameraman Clive North wrote for the Axbridge Caving Group newsletter in October 1972.

He revealed that in 1968, the committee had approached him and David Bromwich (who was the film's producer) with the idea of making a film on caving and archaeology "to stop the group from stagnating." Clive went on: "Around 2,000 feet of film has been shot, many many hours have been spent in cramped, wet and muddy places underground, both in pretty grottoes and harsh wet streamways, several flights over Mendip, and even more hours spent editing, producing sound effects, writing the commentary and puzzling over where the money would come from."

A team of around 20 members helped in the production, and their small budget which was decided at an early stage meant the script had to be followed to the letter because if any new scenes were added "great expense would have been incurred and the film would never have been finished." A number of appeals for financial donations or loans were issued, and it was completed at last! In fact, after its premiere there was a big demand for showings or copies from groups all over the country and several film libraries.