

Retrospect

Issue No 27, June 2025

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, we really would like to hear your views, comments, and suggestions for the future, and we need articles for *Retrospect*. So send your ideas to Liz by email at moorlandfm@btinternet.com or contributions to editor Ian Tabrett at tabrett.cross@btinternet.com

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DIARY DATES

Wednesday 18 June: *Day trip to Watchet* with guided tour of the Radio Museum (**right**) and chance visit other attractions around the harbour. Minibus will pick up in Cross and Axbridge. To book a seat, contact Liz Scott by email at moorlandfm@btinternet.com. Details of timings to follow.



Wednesday 16 July: *Blackmoor Farm and Chapel, Cannington.* The Dyer family's 15th century Grade 1 listed manor house and chapel, retaining many of the period features including oak beams, stone archways and huge open fireplaces. Minibus will pick up in Cross and Axbridge. Contact Liz as above for seat booking

August: No meeting but **Saturday 16 August 11.30am**, Axbridge and District Museum Trust invite Friends to a coffee morning at the Almshouse, Axbridge.

Wednesday 10 September, visit to Lacock, **Wednesday 17 September, CMH 2.30:** *Historic postcards given to our museum.* Talk by John Page

AS THEY SAY, IT'S LIKE THE TIP OF AN ICEBURG...



That old and well worn expression about how much of an iceberg floats above water is very appropriate for what you see at King John's Hunting Lodge Museum. The

exhibits and displays laid out over three floors in the former wool-merchant's house built in about 1460 - long after the death of King John in 1216 - is but a fraction of



the huge amount of material, some of national importance, now in the care of the Axbridge District Museum Trust (ADMT). This year an ambitious project is under way, as Friends' administrator Liz Scott explains:

"Former members of the Axbridge Archaeological and Local History Society (AALHS) will know that the society's library and artefacts were gifted to the

Trust. To allow this collection to be preserved and made readily available to others, museum curator Lucy Newman is seeking volunteers to help re-pack and collate items into a user-friendly format.

"Special days will be offered for this task until December. Help on occasional days for a few hours will be very welcome, with full training, and all will be under supervision. If you are interested in volunteering to help undertake this important task, email Lucy as soon as possible on lucy.newman@mac.com or me on moorlandfm@btinternet.com The ADMT is very grateful for all the support Friends give the group and museum, and in doing so you are putting the museum on the map."

The collections range from Pleistocene animal bones through Neolithic flints found across the Mendips, to Iron Age pottery, Romano-British burials and spectacular finds at a number of excavations, Cheddar's Saxon palace, and Axbridge's medieval documents. Madeleine Roberts, who has had many years' association with the collections, writes that there are many thousands of pottery sherds in the store room which were collected by members of AALHS during the course of excavations. "What is known as the Axbridge Pottery Type Series is made up of samples of each fabric type found within Axbridge, which means it can be used to identify and date any potsherd found in future excavations."

Earlier this year, members of the Westbury-sub-Mendip Society archaeological group visited to see this pottery collection in the Old Court Room (pictured right). Madeleine and her husband David described its significance in the interpretation of the history of the town, and its potential use as a reference for any further excavations. The series was started by the late archaeologist Richard Coleman Smith with the assistance of the late Brian Rowland, of the AALHS, and much work has been carried out in later years by a number of experts. In fact, it is one of the



lesser-known treasures among the many assets of the former society. Madeleine adds: “Since pottery does not degrade, it is a vital dating tool for archaeologists. The visit highlighted the importance of the assets held in store, some are of national significance and others of regional and local importance. They certainly need to be available for academic study and research.” Pottery expert David Dawson, who has worked on the collection, has agreed to talk to us about pottery at our October meeting, and hopefully some of the material can be put on display then.

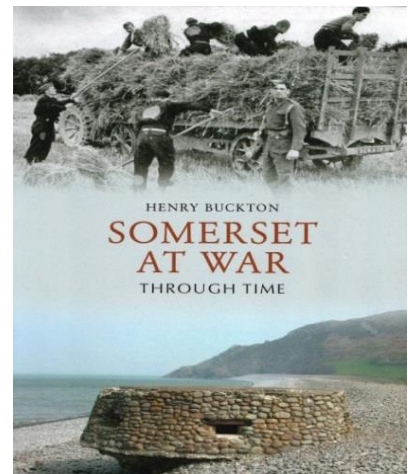


King John's Hunting Lodge Museum, with its extensive collections, looks down on a sunny and busy Square

BATTERED BUT DEFIANT

In this month's special article following the VE-Day anniversary celebrations in May, we look at how the war affected Mendip villages and towns and how people defied the German bombers to get on with their lives as best they could.

As well as the books on the conflict mentioned last month - *Somerset v Hitler: Secret Operations in the Mendips* by Donald Brown, and *Somerset at War 1939 – 1945*, by Mac Hawkins – there is another publication you may find interesting: *Somerset at War*, by Henry Buckton (**right**), released by Amberley Publishing, Stroud, in 2012.



OF BOMBS, BRAMBLE JELLY AND FISHPASTE SANDWICHES

Sadly, few of those who took an active part in World War Two are still with us to celebrate the 80th anniversary of VE-Day. Even the memories are fading for those who were youngsters so many years ago. But fortunately, stories and recollections of those grim days from 1939 to 1945 and beyond have been collected and recorded for posterity by many sources.

Villages and towns in the Cheddar Valley and surrounding areas played their part, suffered in the Blitz, and endured the hardship the conflict forced on the country. Thanks to a BBC research project some years ago plus the efforts of historians and the offerings of residents, *Retrospect* can give just a flavour of those days.

AXBRIDGE

Monday April 27 1942 had a tragic significance for the town: a Spitfire with a young Czech pilot at the controls mysteriously went into a dive from which it never recovered, smashing into the hillside above the town. The pilot, Flight Lieutenant R Rochacek, had taken off with his squadron from an RAF base in Dorset, and a theory was that he lost consciousness during manoeuvres. The late Peter Mayer, a prominent Axbridge shopkeeper and town councillor, later recalled seeing the fighter come down and with others ran up the hill to see if they could help, but sadly there was nothing they could do to save the pilot.

BANWELL

On the evening of September 4 1940, a stick of nine bombs fell on the village, killing five people and destroying four terraced cottages in lower West Street (**below**) and further up the street, the Post Office, telephone exchange and general store.



The damage to the Post Office and telephone exchange (**below left**) was so great that it was feared no one could have survived, but the owners and two telephonists



managed to crawl out of the wreckage. A police constable on special duty from Weston-super-Mare had been standing outside the building and his body was found next morning in a nearby garden. Special Constable Ronald Clark, who lived nearby, was standing in the front of his home and was also killed.

Another bomb fell in Church Street and blew out the wall of a house owned by Fred and Dot Yarde overlooking the Bowling Green. Their bedroom was undamaged and they escaped without injury – while their son aged about four didn't even wake up. Harry Mottram has written that in another raid, two German land-mines were dropped by parachute just outside the village and one exploded on farmland in Wolverhill Road,

causing a huge crater. A German bomber ran into flak from an anti-aircraft gun battery based nearby and crashed at Hewish.

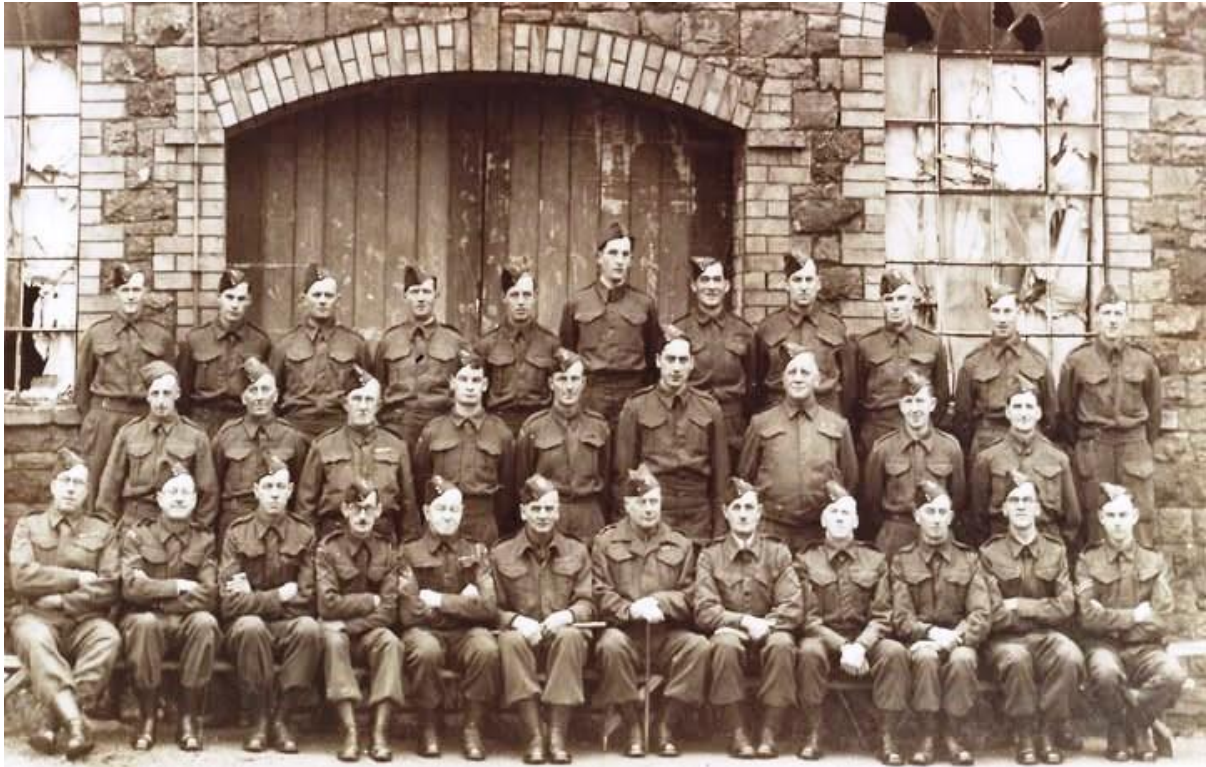
Banwell's Home Guard unit used the Bowling Club as their headquarters, and members of the RAF Regiment were billeted at Banwell Castle along with a St John's Ambulance unit who were based in the Castle entrance tower, while Banwell Abbey was the base for a searchlight unit. On the edge of the parish, the Bristol Aeroplane Company built a factory at Hillend, and the A368 and A370 were widened to allow aircraft to be towed to the Locking airfield. The factory built and repaired thousands of Beaufort and Beaufighter aircraft, plus a small number of Hawker Tempests.

CHEDDAR

As part of the BBC's *World War 2 People's War* online research project some years ago, an un-named resident of Cheddar said the village was considered a safe place so children were evacuated there from both Bristol and a junior school in Stratford, East London. "Cheddar's British School doubled in size and for a time local youngsters were taught in the mornings and the evacuees in the afternoons. Some of the evacuees had head lice, which made for very ill-feeling between the mums of

the locals and of them. Many of the children were billeted in houses where they had spare bedrooms.”

The resident told the BBC project: “Like most families in Cheddar, my parents rented a few acres of land on which they grew enough vegetables to feed the family. In summer, they grew strawberries as a cash crop. Anyone who could produce food did well during the war years...Any sort of machinery was scarce, and we considered ourselves very fortunate when a friend offered to lend us a horse to pull the plough. I



The impressive Cheddar Home Guard unit photographed at what is thought to have been the old mill in Redcliffe Street, which was their drill headquarters. (John Bennett collection)

remember helping dad sort out the tea, sugar and fats coupons, and counting them. Nobody talked about diet then; they were only too pleased to be able to get anything to eat. Great care had to be taken that food not on ration, but scarce, was allocated fairly.

“One time on our way to school, we heard a steady rumbling noise and found we couldn't cross the main road due to a seemingly endless convoy of fast-moving tanks and armoured cars. We had to wait so long, that we were late for school. Normally our headmaster, Mr. Tyson, would have been very angry but on this occasion he listened to our stammered apologies, and told us to go quietly to our classes. Later we learned they were on their way to take part in the Normandy landings.

“When the war in Europe ended, in school this was celebrated by a special tea which included meat and fish-paste sandwiches, finishing with strawberries served with a sprinkling of sugar. Then one evening my father took me up the Gorge to watch fireworks. Wires had been criss-crossed across for the fireworks to travel along and as a grand finale, a cascade of yellow and white fireworks fell like a waterfall down the sides of the gorge.”

COMPTON BISHOP

As part of the BBC archive project, a Compton Bishop resident remembered walking with his parents to Axbridge Moor to see a bomb crater: "It was a great big deep hole with lots of people looking at it." One night another bomb wrecked the village school. The pupils then had to go to the old Vicarage for their lessons, later the garage of a house called at Glastonbury Thorn, and finally to the old schoolroom in Cross which is now the Memorial Hall.

The resident said many bombs dropped around Compton Bishop because it was thought the Germans were aiming for an Army depot at Sparrows Hill, Weare. "When you went for walks we often saw warning signs for unexploded bombs and lots of incendiary bombs in the fields and by the river." He also remembered the evacuees and that many of them didn't like the country and longed to go home. "But some pretty evacuee girls used to kiss in the playground!" During the conflict "a Mr. Wilson from Axbridge came round buying wild blackberries to make bramble jelly."



Mr Henry Tiarks, his dachshund dog and some of the 25 evacuee girls he took in at his home, Webbington House. Clearly they were enjoying life there under the supervision (left) of District Nurse Slim, from Lower Weare. (Margaret Jordan collection)



In last month's *Retrospect*, Margaret Jordan introduced us to the late Helen Boileau, whose family lived at Rackley. Helen's wartime role is amply recorded in Donald Brown's excellent 1999 book, *Somerset v Hitler – Secret Operations in the Mendips 1939-45*. A Military Information Committee,

based at Axbridge police station, co-ordinated most aspects of local civil defence and emergency services, and out of the blue the then 18-year-old Helen received a call to go for an interview. When she arrived, she was escorted past offices and a

cell to a room in which were a group of men sitting round a table, one in Army uniform. Helen recalled that they seemed to know about her and her family, and asked if she would agree to be their secretary. In charge was Colonel Yatman, from Winscombe.

She was given a variety of duties, although she also had a job working for a local small-holder, and when cycling back home she often saw the Cross Home Guard section, who paraded at a former brewery in Old Coach Road, which although disused for some years – it had brewed a special Victory Brew in 1918 – still had a strong smell of beer!

The men trained on the hill, in Bourton Combe and Cross quarry, and on their return Helen saw they had a habit of resting on the oak benches in the lovely old porch, still in place, at Cleeve Head House. Fire guards also used the porch when watching for incendiaries. Meanwhile Helen joined the Home Guard as a Woman Auxiliary and trained as a radio signaller using the Morse Code.

On her 17th birthday, she had taken and passed the last driving test held in Weston-super-Mare until after the war. Living off the beaten track in the country her family had an allowance of six gallons of petrol a month, for use only on journeys to Axbridge, Winscombe or Weston...just about enough for their needs since the car only did 20 miles to the gallon. However, Helen was given extra for specific WVS tasks such as transporting evacuees or delivering yearly issues of ration books for the district.

CHRISTON



A striking memorial stained glass window (**left**) was placed in Christon Church by leading villager Charles Wainwright. He dedicated it to his grandson, Sergeant Michael Durrant, of 582 Squadron Bomber Command, who was shot down and killed in a raid on Kiel in September 1944, and to the airman's mother Catherine – Mr Wainwright's daughter – who served in London as a nurse during the Blitz. The Wainwright family had moved out of their home at Barleycombe earlier in the war to release it as accommodation for refugee children who had arrived without parents.

NEXT TIME

A final look at how local towns and villages fared during the war and celebrated its ending in Europe in May 1945. Plus *Retrospect* reveals a highly-confidential report which has remained forgotten since it was drawn up in 1941 for Somerset County Council, and detailed the true horror of the effects of German bombing raids.