

Retrospect



Issue No 31, October 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 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, so please email the Editor

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DIARY DATES

NEW: Thursday 2 October: 7.00 pm Ad Astra Cider Co., Allerton Lane, Stone Allerton, BS26 2NG Cost £5 per person : Team quiz in aid of Museum funds, all Friends invited – please contact Liz by September 30 with names

NEW: Tuesday 21st October: Church Rooms, Axbridge, 8pm: Axbridge District Museum Trust agm. With refreshments, all welcome

Wednesday 15 October CMH 2.30pm: *A Small Step To Unravelling The Past.* What the King John Hunting Lodge Museum's nationally-important pottery collections can tell about the past. Talk by David Dawson, with samples on display

Wednesday 19 November CMH 2.30pm: *The life, times and tragedy of a Somerset country lad.* Talk by Ian Tabrett.

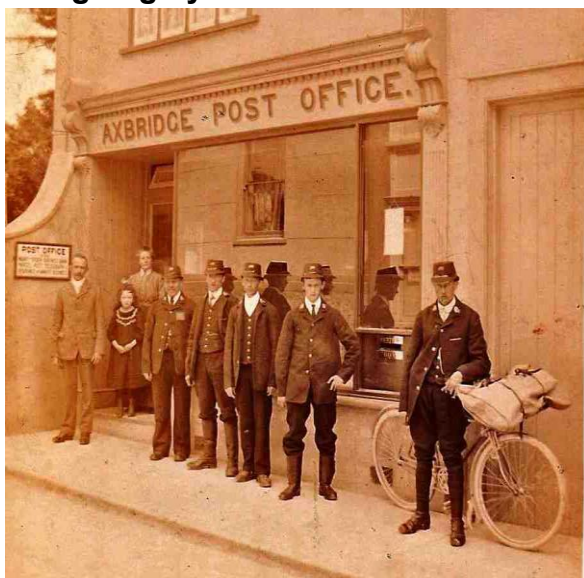
Friday 12 December: Lamb Inn, Weare: *Christmas dinner and quiz.* Details to be confirmed.

Saturday 20 December. Lamb Inn, Axbridge, 11.30am, Coffee with museum stewards

WISH YOU WERE HERE...POSTCARDS FROM THE PAST



Above: Rowberrow Bottom, barely recognisable today, trees and undergrowth having taken over. Below: a first-class line-up of postal staff in Axbridge at a time when there were five collections and deliveries a day, with mail coming and going by train on the Cheddar Valley branch line.



The Friends' September meeting attracted a big turn-out for a fascinating talk by John Page on two boxfuls of more than 860 local postcards recently given to the Museum from the collection of the late Michael (Mac) Tozer. Most are from around the turn of the 20th century, and while some scenes and locations they depict have totally vanished, others are fairly easily recognisable today.

John explained he had to enhance many of the postcards by computer because they had faded with time, and he said often they could only be dated by the postmark

or by clues in the messages written by the senders all those years ago. His own vast research helped considerably, as did scrutiny of the dress of the individuals shown, the horse-drawn vehicles, the occasional car, or the surrounding buildings, shops and businesses recorded for posterity by the photographers.



Above: a big occasion in about 1906 for guests and staff at the Penscot Hotel, now the Shipham Inn. Below, a car-free and carefree main road through Berrow, taken by renowned Somerset photographer Charlie Pearce, who was responsible for many of postcards in the collection and always signed them C.P.



THE COST OF CARE: 8s 6d A DAY PER PATIENT...

The Shute Shelf Isolation Hospital was built in the 1920s to help fight epidemics of diseases from typhoid to measles. Very few records survive showing its vital work, or even that it ever existed, but those at the Somerset Heritage Centre reveal a high level of care by the staff. By today's values, the cost was tiny.

By Roger Veale and Ian Tabrett

In 1938 the purchase of items needed to deal with extra patients due to a typhoid epidemic included 60 each of sheets and blankets, 20 quilts, 40 pillows and 20 mattresses, at a total cost of £61. At the same time they had to cope with a severe gale that caused "extensive damage to chimney pots, tiles, windows etc" which cost £19 19s 3d to repair. In the August, it was noted that total spending on each patient with scarlet fever, diphtheria or measles was set at 8s 6d a day, while those with any other disease cost 11s 6d a day. Tenders were agreed to pay Axbridge butcher Mr W Chapman 6d a pound for stewing steak and 11d/lb for joints of beef, mutton and pork.



Shute Shelf Hospital as it was in the 1960s (Weston Mercury) – and now



Figures for the UK until well into the 20th century show that in a bad year, perhaps 25,000 people died of measles, most of them children. It was a notifiable disease so that all cases had to be reported to the Medical Officer of Health. Failure

to do so resulted in a fine of £100, a colossal sum by today's values. People suffering from the disease were also fined if they travelled on public transport, and parents could be fined for sending infected children to school.

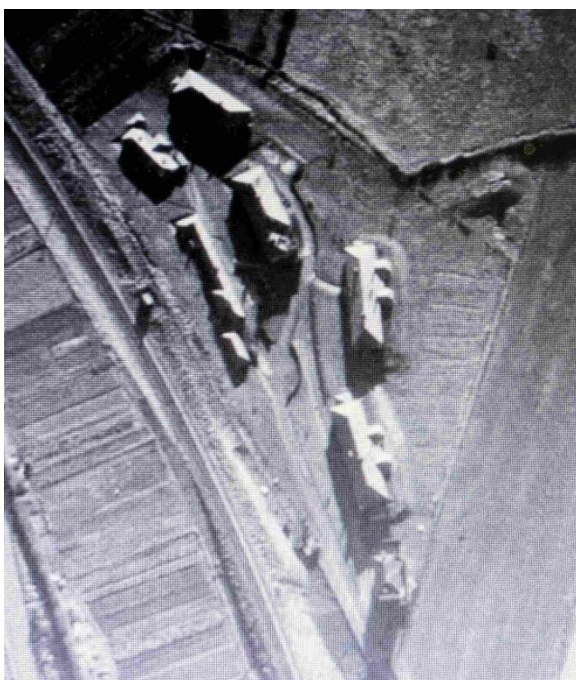
At the December 1938 meeting of the hospital board it was reported there were 45 cases of diphtheria, scarlet fever, and measles including two men from RAF Locking. But the bulletin from the medical superintendent Dr A V Leche, of Axbridge, three months later is stark: one case of typhoid was still at the hospital after a year and remained infectious; two cases of young children with measles were very grave as was a six-year-old boy suffering from diphtheria who was "almost moribund" when admitted but responded to rapid treatment which had a dramatic effect and he went home "quite well." But there was worse to come in the memorandum:

I regret that one of the Nurses has been laid up with acute Tonsillitis. She is now well and taking two weeks rest and change.

Two cases of Scarlet Fever, though well nourished, were admitted in a very verminous, neglected and untaught state. They would soil the beds or floor. They soon learned clean habits, thanks to the skill and care of our Nurses, but in addition to reprimanding the children I asked the N.S.P.C.C. Inspector to visit their home and warn the careless parents. This has been done.

However, Dr Leche ended on a high note: "The nursing and domestic arrangements are excellently conducted. The ambulance, boiler work and disinfection are well carried out and the garden well cared for and most useful." The meeting also agreed that State-registered nurses and others with professional medical qualifications were "officers" while unqualified nurses were "servants."

A few months before the end of the Second World War, staffing levels were:



Matron, Sister, two Staff Nurses, two Assistant Nurses category A, plus three of category C, and seven nurses in training. On the domestic side there were a cook, two kitchen maids, three house maids, four ward maids and two relief maids.

In 1948 the National Health Service was created and isolation hospitals began to be phased out, and Shute Shelf was given a new role as a convalescent and care home. At that time, convalescence after a serious illness or major operation was a routine part of medical care. The aerial picture *left* shows the site as it was in 1949.

The Heritage Centre's archive has two "Hospital Visitors' Books" covering 1949

to 1974 into which a team of volunteers appointed to keep an eye on the running of the site reported on their findings during monthly visits. There were two present each time and generally wrote briefly about the over-all housekeeping and well-being of patients. By 1951, they find the hospital was ready to take its first NHS patients and by 1968 the visitors record the presence of 11 convalescent and six geriatric patients.

Occasionally, though, there are more specific comments, and in June 1951, they found "Matron and one nurse working hard polishing the wards." No patients were present. Then a couple of months later: "A really exciting visit and I found matron with 11 male patients and all very cheerful. The wards looked so nice and it is wonderful that Shute Shelf is at last a going concern."

By the early 1970s, convalescence ceased to be part of the regular treatment regime and the site became a care home for the elderly until it closed altogether. The site was sold for £200,000 in November 1984, eventually to be redeveloped for the housing development which stretches along the hillside today.

AND FINALLY...



As a footnote, Roger writes: "My own memories of having scarlet fever nearly 80 years ago are somewhat hazy, but I can recall the ambulance trip to my local isolation hospital – not Shute Shelf – and of being in a small ward with other children of a similar age.

"The only treatment I can remember is of having an injection in my bottom – probably penicillin –

otherwise it was bed rest which left me having "rubber" legs when I was eventually allowed up. I have no memory otherwise of the hospital routine or the food, so it must have been quite pleasant but ordinary!

"Apart from the very little paperwork at the Heritage Centre there is virtually nothing to chronicle Shute Shelf Hospital's existence. As well as isolating patients from the community it seems itself to have been isolated, as a search through the local papers shows – it only seems to have been newsworthy when patients died from typhoid. Its presence in the landscape has been totally eradicated, and memories of it will soon be gone, too."