

# Retrospect

Issue No 23, February 2025

Newsletter of the Friends of  
King John's Hunting Lodge

News, views and events



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Friends and members of the former Axbridge Archaeological and Local History Society, we always want 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](mailto:moorlandfm@btinternet.com) and contributions to editor Ian Tabrett at [tabrett.cross@btinternet.com](mailto:tabrett.cross@btinternet.com)

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## DIARY DATES

Our monthly meetings, usually at the Cross Memorial Hall (CMH), are free to members of Friends of King John's Hunting Lodge Museum; visitors and non-members £5; refreshments £2 for tea/coffee and cake.



**19 February: CMH, 2.30pm:** The SS Great Britain – Ian Caskie, who has been a volunteer with the SS GB Trust for 18 years. His talk will range from the design and building of the vessel to its sailing career, rescue and return to Bristol, and its spectacular restoration.

**19 March: CMH 2.30pm:** Ashton (right) and Stone Allerton Windmills - Fiona Torrens-Spence



2025  
*Westbury*  
Society  
‘The Priddy  
Environs Project:  
unlocking a  
multi-period  
landscape’



The Barry Lane  
Memorial talk  
by  
Dr Jodie Lewis

**20 March:** Current excavations on Mendip – Dr Jodie Lewis. **See poster left.**

This is the annual Barry Lane memorial lecture to which we are invited at Westbury-sub-Mendip. A mini bus will pick up in Cross and Axbridge, with details to follow.

Enquiries via  
[westburysociety@gmail.com](mailto:westburysociety@gmail.com)

**7.30pm**

**Thursday**

Westbury  
Village Hall

**20th March**

*All welcome*  
Entry £2.50

## A FASCINATING MISCELLANY

The January meeting brought a fascinating and wide range of subjects for the near-capacity audience at Cross Memorial Hall. In a break from the tradition of having one speaker and one topic, there were six speakers who kept Friends and visitors enthralled with their chosen topics. Phil Thorne spoke on and showed slides of Malta, its ancient temples and its traditions of using a battery of 19<sup>th</sup> century canons to mark mid-day every day; Lester Durston used his lifetime experience to illustrate the importance of the River Axe and the Cheddar Yeo in draining a huge area of land



from Wookey Hole and Wedmore to Cross (**above**) and on to Uphill, and controlling the flow of Mendip water on its way to the sea. Fiona Torrens-Spence described the trials and tribulations of a labourer, his wife and their children in their efforts to emigrate from the Allertons to Australia early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and their new life Down Under when they eventually made it.

John Page, with his vast knowledge, described how Axbridge rivals Wells and Bridgwater in its amazing collection of Royal charters, the earliest dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, Madeleine Roberts entertained the audience with her research on rifle shooting in the area from 1860, with the development of various clubs into the Territorial and regular Army, leading to the tragic loss of local lives in the First World War.

## DID YOU KNOW THAT...



...the daffodils planted many years ago at the main entrances to Axbridge were in full flower well before Christmas 2024?

...King John's Hunting Lodge Museum opens its doors to the public for the first time this year on April 1?

## TIME TO COUNT THE AXBRIDGE PENNIES...

THE TIMES | Tuesday January 7 2025

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News

### Hoard of coins found on nuclear site hints at turbulent times

Jack Blackburn History Correspondent

A lot can change in a millennium. A thousand years ago it appears that someone in Suffolk took the precaution of burying their savings during the turmoil before the Norman Conquest. Those savings have now been dug up on the site of a new nuclear power station.

The hoard of more than 300 coins, discovered on the site of Sizewell C, has been declared "historically significant" as it provides a rare insight into one of England's most tumultuous periods.

The hoard was found wrapped in cloth and lead and was christened the "pasty" by archaeologists because it reminded them of the Cornish dish.

"I was shaking when I first unearthed it, seeing a single coin edge peeking at me," said Andrew Pegg, the archaeologist from Oxford and Cotswold Archaeology (OCA) who found the hoard. "A perfect archaeological time capsule. The information we are learning from it is stunning."

The 321 coins, which could have bought a small herd of cows, are not

thought to have belonged to someone of great wealth. Instead they are thought to have been squirrelled away in the first half of the 11th century by a person of middling means who may have been important in the local area.

The archaeologists think the hoard could be evidence of uncertainty in turbulent times. Danish rule

Edward the Confessor on one of the coins found in Suffolk

had been ended by Edward the Confessor, who succeeded Canute's sons Harold and Harthacnut to restore the House of Wessex to the throne. Edward's death was followed, however, by a power struggle that led to the Battle of Hastings and the Norman Conquest of 1066.

This new coin hoard provides us with valuable insight into the rich historical backdrop of this period, adding

to the evidence that Edward the Confessor's accession to the English throne was marked by a degree of uncertainty and concern within wider society," Alexander Bliss, of OCA, said.

The find will be shown on *Digging for Britain*, which begins on BBC2 tonight. The whole series will be on iPlayer.

The hoard includes coins minted in a number of locations, mainly London but also Thetford, Ipswich, Norwich, Stamford and Lincoln, as well as rare examples from small mints in Langport and Axbridge.



Ian Tabrett writes: Even eagle-eyed readers of *The Times* could be excused for missing the huge local interest in the item above, early in January. After all, "Axbridge" is the very last word of the article, which describes the discovery of a hoard of 321 Anglo-Saxon coins during work to construct the Sizewell C nuclear power station in East Suffolk.

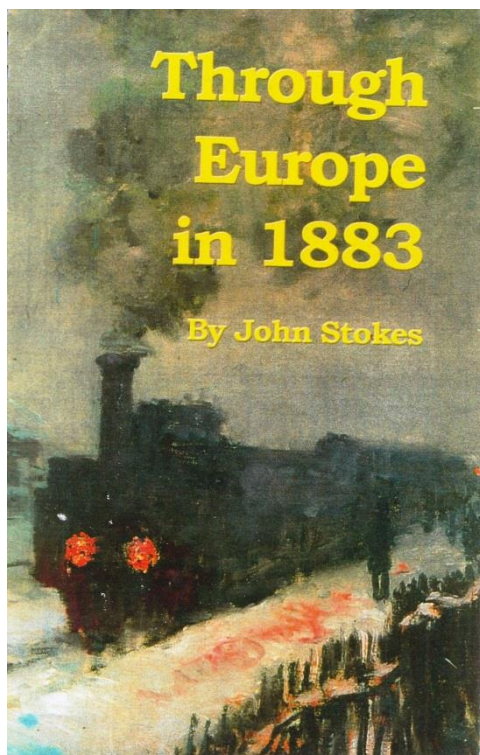
Archaeologists believe the hoard was hidden away in the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century by someone who wasn't all that wealthy but was probably quite important in the area, and who must have been anxious about his savings in the turbulent times in which they lived before the Norman Conquest.

The coins were found to have been minted in a number of places including London, but the rarest ones came from the small mints in Langport and Axbridge. Our town's mint is thought to have operated spasmodically from 997 until 1003, then again from 1017 to 1038, and fewer than two dozen examples of its coins are known. Most are held by museums in London, Stockholm and Copenhagen – and four of the five Axbridge coins in the British Museum came from a hoard dug up in Wedmore in 1853. Very few examples of Axbridge Mint coins are known to be in private hands, but the one pictured below – an extremely rare silver penny from the reign of King Cnut (Canute) – was sold in recent years for well over £2,000 by the firm MA-Shops.



## HOLIDAY ADVENTURES, 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY STYLE

Planning your next holiday or, if you've already got a booking, a trip later in the year?



Whichever, we can certainly recommend taking a tip or two from a fascinating privately-published book about a remarkable tour made in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the grandfather of Cheddar Valley resident **Mrs Noellvie Watson**. She explains:

My grandfather, John Stokes, was born at Newry in Co. Down in 1855, the eldest of three children. He left school at the age of 12 and began work at Newry's Albert Basin docks, used by ships bringing supplies to Ireland.

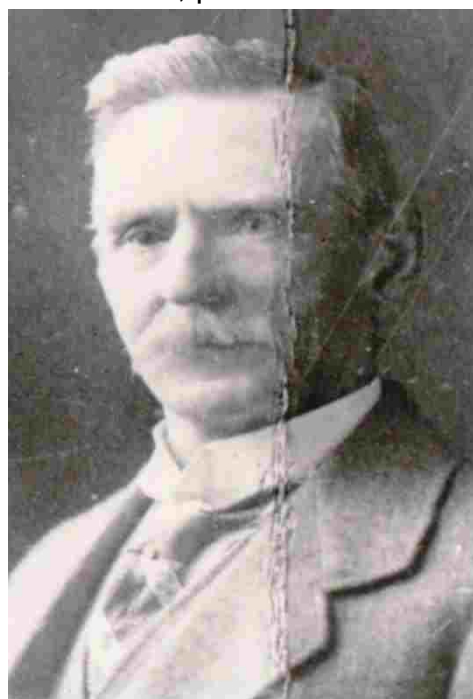
Meeting people from many countries inspired his interest in languages and travel – he paid an Italian seaman to teach him Italian and the violin. Later he added French and German to his linguistic repertoire, and this proved an advantage when he became consul for all three countries as he spoke all three languages fluently, and even a little Spanish. For his numerous visits to Europe he would go through

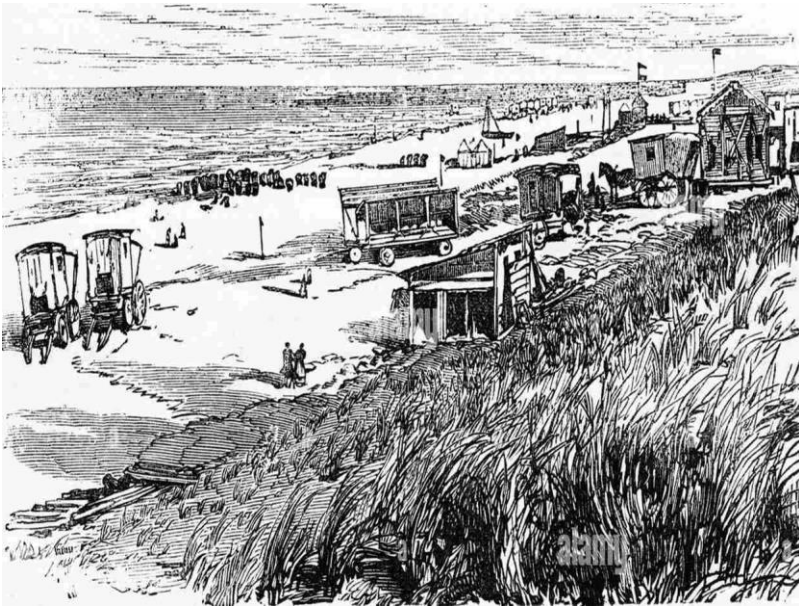
London, where the Berlitz language school helped him refresh his vocabulary.

In 1883, at the age of 28, he and a banker friend, Bob Graham, planned a two-week trip to the Rhine. Money for them was tight and Bob was given charge of the purse. In London they chose Thomas Cook to buy vouchers for travel, which suited them well.

Both men were eager to try out their language skills and they chatted with all their travelling companions in the train carriages, boats and on the streets, often singing with foreigners sitting with them. Arriving in Rotterdam, my grandfather **(pictured right)** described seeing a very flat land, lots of windmills, and a large American steamer discharging Indian corn in the port. This was the basis for the Dutchman's schnapps, Irish whiskey and German beer.

The river was very busy with shipping, in contrast to the streets which were quiet. Dogs were harnessed to little trailers which carried butcher's or baker's produce for delivery. The dogs were well looked-after and happy, he said.





Taking a train “doing fully 20 miles an hour” to Scheveningen, the famous Dutch watering place, they were in for a learning curve: a beach of fine white sand stretched for miles, pounded by gigantic waves. They paid for their tickets and were allocated a bathing machine complete with horse and minder. But swimming was out of the question because they were engulfed by thunderous waves which carried them up the beach!

Seeing calmer water further

out and planning a proper swim, they thought they’d go out. However, they were emphatically told: “Nein nein, because at a certain distance the bank goes straight down many fathoms!” Hence the enormous waves. **Above left: an 1880 engraving of Scheveningen beach as John Stokes and Bob Graham would have experienced it.**

A visit to Amsterdam was much enjoyed, and they then crossed into Germany at Herbestal, which was festooned with flags, flowers and banners. This was in celebration of the Battle of Sedan, fought 12 years earlier during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. It seemed the whole of Germany was celebrating!

Next, a visit to Cologne to see the famous cathedral in the Domplatz, where *eau de Cologne* was manufactured. They noted that there were dozens of people selling “Jean Marie Farria” – the principal manufacturer – and all swearing to the authenticity of their produce...

They had many other adventures on their holiday, and returning home to Ireland, John decided to write a diary of their experiences. This was treasured by my mother and later published by some of his grandchildren. John Stokes married at the age of 40 and he and his wife Catherine (**right**) had seven children – three boys and four girls including my mother. He was very much loved by all of them for his lust for life, his enjoyment of his family, and his encouragement to them all. At mealtimes there were discussions on many and varied subjects: everyone participated, and the children were encouraged to speak in French, which was a godsend for my mother later.



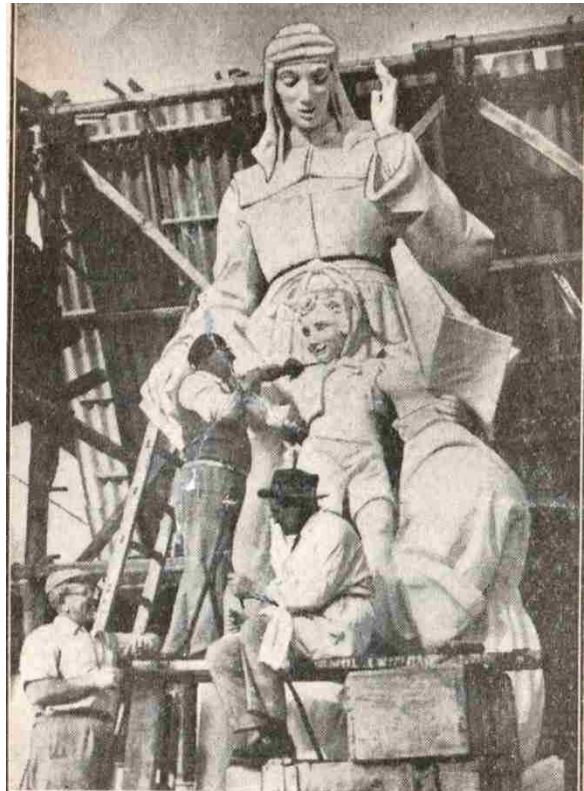
The children decided they would like to build a tennis court, which their father helped with, while their mother was asked to crochet the tennis net, which she did. The project was to prove a great success for the family and their friends.

John was very involved in his community: he became a Justice of the Peace in 1912, was a leading member of the local orchestral society, and he played an important part in the commercial and public life of the town. He worked for 25 years for the Newry Steam Packet Company, where his services were much appreciated. In fact, after an illness he was given £100 by the company to take a holiday – a very large sum then.

As consul for Italy he was contacted by the Italian sculptor Leone Tommasi, who had been commissioned to make an altar for a new church being built in Newry. Tommasi and his daughter Diana lived with the Stokes family while he was working on the altar, and they became firm friends. My sister was named after Diana, and 50 years later, having corresponded all that time in French, my mother and Diana Tommasi were reunited in Rome.

**Right: Italian sculptor Leone Tommasi (standing, left) supervises work on a 25-ton statue which was to be placed in St Peter's, Rome (Associated Press)**

In 1923, John took my mother, Kathleen, and her sister Elizabeth (Cissy) on a holiday to Belgium. At Ostend young local businessman, Leone Langic met them. He took a fancy to my mother and offered to take them all to visit to the area where First World War battles had been fought.



They drove in an open-top Mercedes-Benz for some miles until a fast-approaching car caused the chauffeur to swerve, hitting a tree, ending up in a ditch and causing the passengers to be thrown out.

John received a fatal blow to his head, Cissy had concussion and the others shock; my mother was the only one to escape uninjured, and she then had to negotiate getting them all to hospital and subsequently to arrange the return home of John's body. This was where her knowledge of the French language proved invaluable.

During the journey back to Newry, on each train an entire carriage was reserved to carry the coffin and the blinds on the windows were drawn at the stations.

The funeral was attended by men only and my grandmother and all the girls stayed at home with the curtains closed. In his tribute, the priest said: "John Stokes was a gentleman of many and varied parts and one who did not bury the many talents that God gave him, but used them." My one regret is that I never had the chance to meet my remarkable grandfather, John Stokes.

**Noellvie Watson, January 2025**