

Retrospect

Issue No 26, May 2025

Newsletter of the Friends of
King John's Hunting Lodge

News, views and events



This edition of *Retrospect* sees the first of several articles looking at how the Second World War and its aftermath affected the Cheddar Valley and surrounding areas. Inevitably this can be only a snapshot of those years, and for further reading there are two books which can be highly recommended: *Somerset v Hitler – Secret Operations in the Mendips* by Donald Brown, published by Countryside Books in 1999; *Somerset at War 1939 – 1945*, by Mac Hawkins, Hawk Editions, 1996.

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DIARY DATES

Wednesday 21 May CMH 7.30pm: *The origins of nursery rhymes.* Talk by Sue and Phil Thorne.

Saturday 31 May, 11.30am :: Axbridge and District Museum Trust invite Friends to a coffee morning at the Almshouse, Axbridge

Wednesday 18 June: *Day trip to Watchet* with guided tour of the Radio Museum 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 bookings..

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

OPEN – AND READY FOR A BUSY YEAR!



John Page introduces his son Graham, Mayor of Axbridge, at the official opening of King John's Hunting Lodge Museum. In bright sunshine, John told the large audience the museum has a busy year ahead, including a special exhibition marking the anniversary of the formation of the former Axbridge Caving Group and Archaeological Society.

75 YEARS DOWN UNDER...THE MENDIPS, THAT IS

John Page reports: An exhibition in King John's Hunting Lodge until the end of the month celebrates the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Axbridge Caving Group (ACG). It includes pictures provided by members of the still-existing ACG, showing



some of the local caves, like that left, which were explored by the newly-formed group. Another aspect to the story is that as some of the members became interested in the range of archaeological finds when cavers were excavating various sites, the group's name was changed to the Axbridge Caving Group and Archaeological Society

(ACGAS) to reflect this expanded activity. As more finds were made, it was felt a museum highlighting their discoveries would be a good idea.

Later still, those more interested in archaeology decided the insurance required for caving was costing too much, so a new organisation called the Axbridge Archaeological and Local History Society was created, and major aspects of their finds are on display. With help from the then Axbridge Rural District Council, they were able to set up a museum in King John's Hunting Lodge, where it remains to this day. Now though it is managed by the charity, the Axbridge and District Museum Trust.

ASHTON WINDMILL AND ITS FUTURE

Following our meeting in March when Fiona Torrens-Spence outlined the history of the Ashton windmill, and her fears for its future after recent storm damage, several Friends contacted the Somerset councillors most involved. Cllr Ben Ferguson replied: "Somerset Council is working really hard to re-open the site. Please be assured that steps are being taken to resolve all the issues, with the aim of re-opening the site.

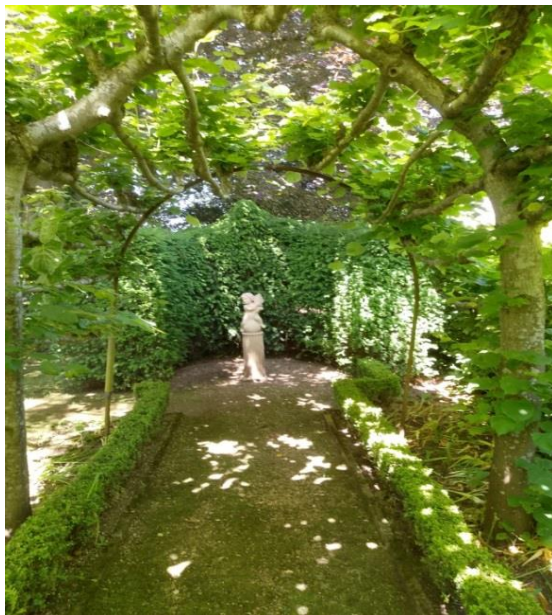


"These steps include my personal attendance to several of the Windmills Volunteer Committee meetings, along with on-going communication between the group, myself and Somerset Council. We are working

closely with volunteers and their committees to find both a way to meet the demands of the regulation around the site, and for volunteers, guests and wider community to access the site itself. I will happily keep you updated on progress we make.”

Fiona writes: Cllr Ferguson visited the windmill on Friday April 4 for the first time and will meet a team from South West Heritage, and representatives of the Parish Council and the volunteers with a view to transferring the overall control and management of the windmill to South West Heritage. They will need to underwrite the cost of future windmill maintenance and public insurance.

YES, EVERYTHING IN THE (EDWARDIAN) GARDEN IS LOVELY!

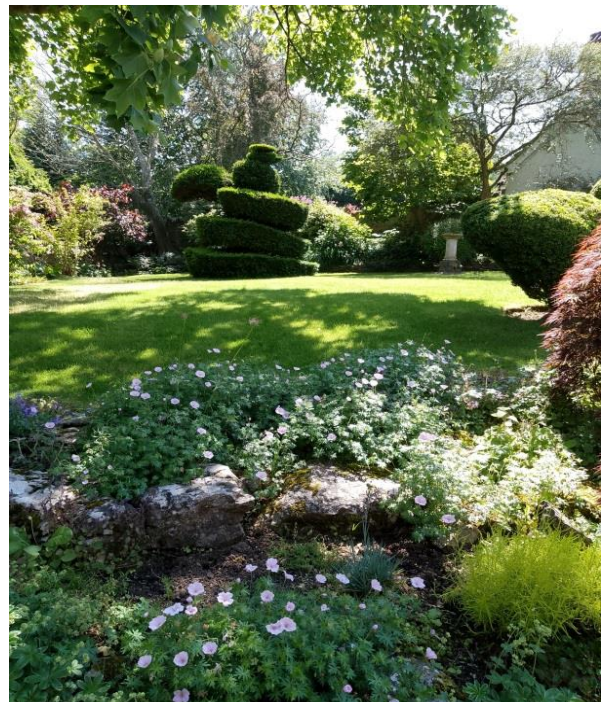


During her talk at our April meeting on the development and delights of Edwardian gardens, Yvonne Bell included pictures of several lovely examples (**left** and **below**) that she has discovered within a mile or so of her home in Cross. These include Watcombe, home of Peter and Ann Owen in Church Road, Winscombe, which will be open to the public for charity on May 18 and June 12 as part of the National Garden Scheme.

Yvonne described with huge knowledge and humour how rich Edwardians, freed from the austerity of the Victorian era, lavished their wealth on grand homes and ambitious and colourful gardens. This was the time that the cult of fresh air came to

the fore. Outdoor furniture was developed together with manual lawnmowers, and dovecots. Substantial and elegant revolving shelters became fashionable, as did garden bedrooms open to the elements which it was said could be used all year...with suitably warm bedding, clothes and hot-water bottles, of course!

As well as describing the many flowering plants and shrubs which were popular and thrived at the time in spectacular herbaceous borders, Yvonne illustrated the work carried out on estates in Somerset and other parts of the West Country by the great garden designer and horticulturist Gertrude Jekyll. She was also a formidable craftswoman, photographer, writer and artist, and frequently worked in partnership with architect Sir Edwin Lutyens. One of their best-known collaborations was at Hestercombe, near Taunton.



TRIBUTE TO HISTORIAN, FRIEND OF AXBRIDGE...AND ENTHUSIASTIC ENEMY OF WEEDS!

FRANCES NEALE (1938-2025)

Sadly Frances Neale, one of the driving forces behind the establishment of the museum at King John's Hunting Lodge, died in March and her funeral was held at St Matthew's Church, Wookey. **Madeleine Roberts**, who was museum registrar from 1979 until 1998 and is still a steward, worked closely with her and pays this tribute:

Francis was a historian and archivist with a keen interest in archaeology and local history, and was instrumental in establishing the administration of Axbridge Museum as it moved into King John's Hunting Lodge. With the help of John Ellis, she took on the mammoth task of cataloguing the entire collection of items held by the then Axbridge Archaeological and Local History Society (AALHS), and set up the procedures for receiving further items, whether they were for addition to the collection or for identification and subsequent return to the owner.

She also oversaw the training of custodians and was very strict about always having two on duty, with one at the desk and one on an upper floor to answer questions and keep a watchful eye. The upstairs custodian was encouraged to have a glass-cleaning spray and duster to the ready to remove any finger marks on cases left by visiting children! Communication between the custodians was by a small brass handbell that sat on the desk at the entrance – a short ring of the bell quickly summoned assistance to the desk. On one occasion I got the call and found Frances sweeping the street outside the museum, indignant about the scruffy appearance of the street outside.

Her interest in Axbridge led her to research its history, and her work was published in a series of fascinating articles in the *Cheddar Valley Gazette* in 1968. Photocopies of these were placed in a folder to enable custodians to appreciate the rich history of the town and to further enlighten visitors.

She became one of AALHS's vice-presidents until its end in 2023. Even though the main focus of her interest moved to Wells Cathedral, where she became honorary librarian; I remember visits to the chained library while she was working there, and to the Old Deanery Garden where she was deeply involved with its restoration – gardening gloves and trowel to the ready, she assaulted the invasive ground elder. Her research continued throughout her life, and her friendship with Hazel Hudson led to interesting discoveries in and around the Isle of Wedmore. I remember a visit to Panborough and their unravelling of the Saxon Charter of that area, published in the *Proceedings of SANHS Vol 127*. Other discoveries became the subject of talks that over the years she and Hazel gave to AALHS.

At St Matthew's Church, the eulogy was given by Dr. Michael Costen, who described Frances's professional history and highlighted her academic achievements, including her work on William Worcestre, an early 15th century English topographer. Tributes were paid by those who were close to her, including her niece, Professor Sophie Ratcliffe. Frances will clearly be remembered with affection and deep respect by everyone who had the privilege of knowing her.

DAY FOR PEACE – AND WEDDING BELLS

The date May 8 1945 was one for which the whole world had long been waiting: the day peace in Europe could be declared after years of conflict, death and misery. The second war to end all wars had affected everyone: family members lost, deprivation, fighting just to survive. But that day meant fresh hope...a new beginning, a chance to celebrate.

How the Cheddar Valley had coped through the previous six hard years and how it marked that special occasion in 1945, *Retrospect* hopes to reflect through peoples' memories and experiences culled from many sources. In Banwell – where five people were killed and many buildings destroyed by German bombs – that May was a very special time for the Hicks family, and is a joyous way for this account to begin.



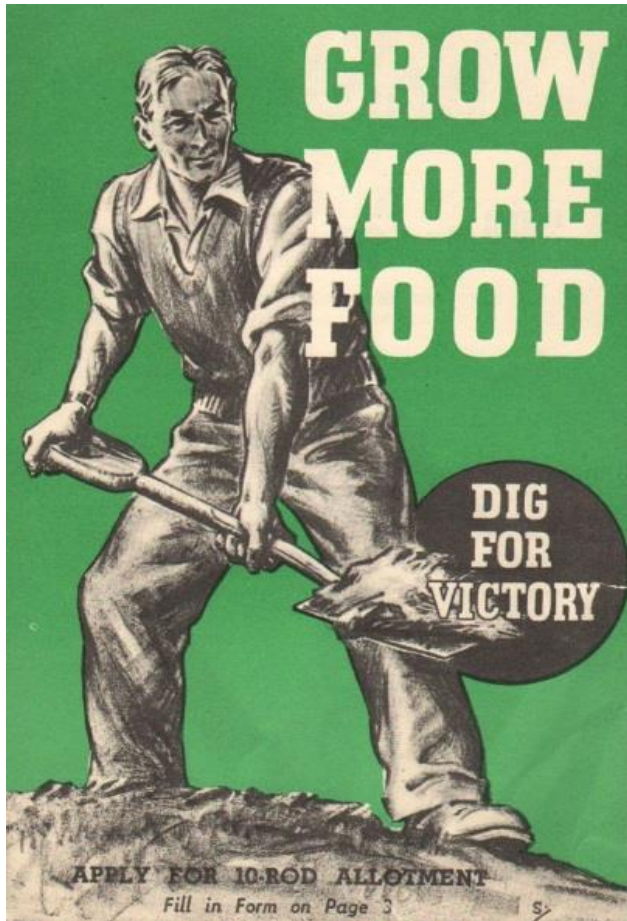
Sue Maguire writes that the 8th was her father Frank Sarkowicz's 26th birthday and her Grandpa and Grannie Hicks's 38th wedding anniversary. On the 24th Sue's mother Elizabeth (Betty) Hicks, married Frank, an American serviceman. "Dad looked very smart in his US uniform and mum wore a lovely two-piece pink suit," she says.

The wedding ceremony was at Corpus Christi Catholic Church in Weston-super-Mare, and afterwards they went to the family home at Cannaways Farm, Banwell, for their reception and this wonderful group photo, before travelling to Salisbury for their honeymoon. Being in the American army, Frank was called back across the Atlantic almost immediately, and Betty had to wait 10 months before she could sail to America and join him in Chicago. Sue adds: "Mum arrived in good time for Easter Sunday, April 21, 1946, settled in...and I was born in February 1947!" Sue is editor of the Weston-super-Mare and District Family History Society's journal, *Buckets & Spades*.

Margaret Jordan now looks at what the war meant for everyone:

¶ When Hitler announced a total blockade of the waters around Britain and the German navy launched heavy attacks on convoys, it became urgent to control stockpiles of food. Intensive farming and strict rationing saved the day, but cultivating an increased amount of land became necessary, and farmers worked towards the nation's self-sufficiency in food.

The late Michael Frost, who lived in Christon and then Cross, recalled his father's



delight when a new John Deere tractor arrived from America to help with the extra acreage the Government had ordered him to work on his farm. Cheddar Valley growers were ordered to dig up their strawberries, and a Government's War Agricultural Department ordered planting vegetables and other crops instead.

Helen Boileau, who lived at Rackley in Compton Bishop, worked for Howard Ashby on his market garden in Cross, and before she died some years ago she told me that they were ordered by the Government to dig up their strawberries and plant rhubarb instead. When I asked why rhubarb, she replied: "To keep the nation going, of course!"

Posters were put up with the "Dig For Victory" slogan, and the number of people occupying an allotment to grow their own food doubled. People

were encouraged to turn flower beds in their gardens into vegetable patches, which helped to build a spirit of involvement in the war effort. During 1941, the land under cultivation increased by 50 per cent. This extra amount of home-grown food meant there would be more space on ships for weapons and raw materials needed for the war effort.

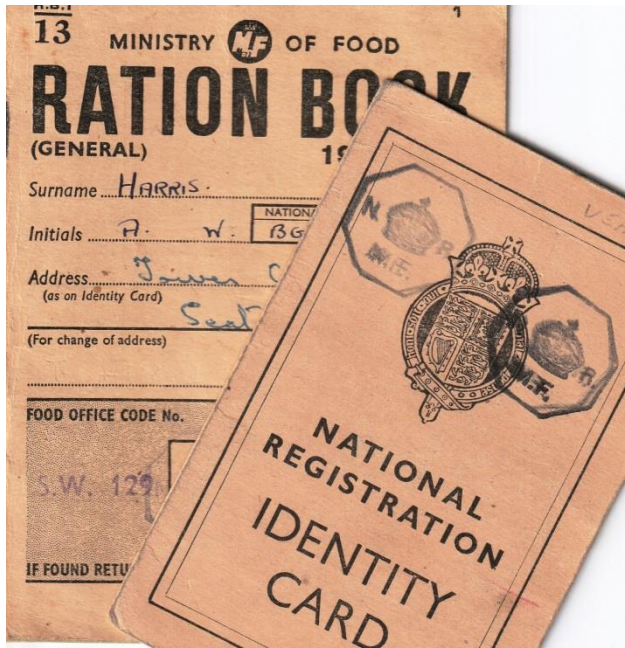


Helen Boileau and Howard Ashby rotovating a field of strawberries at Cross, which had to be replaced by rhubarb!

In 1940, the Government introduced food rationing to ensure fair shares. Everyone was given a ration book with coupons inside which were required when buying basic food. As shortages increased, long queues formed when people got to hear that what they wanted was in stock. Clothes rationing came in 1941 and 11 coupons were needed to purchase a dress leaving just 55 for the rest of the year, so there was a desperate need to plan clothes buying. A "Make Do And Mend" campaign was launched to persuade people to make things last. So recycling isn't new, as it flourished in World War 2."

Ian Tabrett adds: When the Government introduced food rationing in January 1940, everyone had to register with individual retailers. Priority allowances of milk and eggs were given to those most in need, especially children and expectant mothers. As Margaret describes, shortages increased and those long queues became commonplace. And it was common for someone to reach the front only to find the item they had been waiting for had run out!

Fruit and vegetables were never rationed but were often in short supply, especially tomatoes, onions and fruit from overseas. Some other key commodities were also



rationed – petrol in 1939, clothes in June 1941 and soap in February 1942. Bread, which wasn't rationed during wartime, was added to the list in July 1946.

This is a typical weekly food allowance for an adult: Bacon and ham, 4oz; other meat to the value of 1s 2d, equivalent to two chops; butter, 2oz; cheese, 2oz; margarine, 4oz; cooking fat, 4oz; milk 3 pints; sugar, 8oz; preserves, 1lb every two months; tea, 2oz; one fresh egg plus an allowance of dried egg; sweets, 12oz every four weeks

The Government imposed a strictly-enforced total blackout, so that every home, shop and business had to use thick black curtains or blackout paint

to stop any light showing through windows and doors. Street lights were switched off, road and railway station signs were removed as well as village and town place names to confuse the enemy in case of invasion. Petrol was rationed from September 1939 and in 1942 the allowance for private motorists was stopped altogether. Fuel supplied to approved users such as commercial firms and farmers was dyed red, and using it for non-authorized journeys was an offence. Car



headlamps had to be masked from January 1940, and the Government ordered matt white paint to be applied to the edges of wings, running boards and bumpers – although often this seems to have been ignored. Even direction indicators – most of which were of the now long-forgotten fold-out trafficator type – had to be masked so

the light was only visible through a slot an eighth-of-an-inch wide!. Inevitably road accidents and casualties soared because of the black-out. In the event of an invasion, all vehicles – and even bicycles – had to be immobilised and drained of fuel.



Censorship of newspapers, film and radio bulletins was strict, and details of the effects of bombing raids, casualties and the aftermath – or where they occurred – was forbidden. For instance, the picture **above** of bomb damage in the main street of Banwell was taken by a local Press photographer within hours of the attack and as clearing-up operations were beginning, but it wasn't allowed to be published. It was only much later that the cameraman sent his pictures to Roy Rice, of the Banwell Society of Archaeology and Local History. Similarly, censorship meant Service personnel in action in Europe or elsewhere were not allowed to send home more than very basic personal details and none at all of where they were in action. Only authorised greetings cards could be sent for special occasions, like the one



(left) my father posted to my mother and me from somewhere in northern France at

Christmas 1944 when he was a member of a tank crew. The only message he was allowed to add inside was: "With all my love."

In Retrospect next month: how local villages and towns suffered in the Blitz, and memories both tragic and happy.