

Retrospect



Issue No 38, May, 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
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**Articles and pictures for inclusion in *Retrospect*
are always most welcome – and needed – so please email the editor**

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DIARY DATES

Wednesday May 20 CMH, 2.30pm – *History of the Somerset Light Infantry*. Talk
by Phil Thorne

Wednesday June 17 – Visit to ss *Great Britain*, Bristol, with conducted tour. Mini bus
details in due course. **but please contact Liz to book your seat**

SNAPSHOTS IN TIME



For two consecutive meetings,
John Page has entertained
Friends – and in April, he
enthralled with some historic
and unusual photos from the
museum's collection, taken all
over the area. Among them, on
the **left**, part of the line-up for
the 1967 Axbridge Pageant,

and an ancient pew in Holy Cross Church, Mark.



THE AMAZING CAREER OF THE MAN WHO TRANSFORMED WESTON

Last year, Retrospect featured one of the major projects carried out by engineer Harold Brown – the creation of Weston-super-Mare's Marine Lake. We used a bundle of papers now owned by a relative of his, a Friends member who lives in Compton Bishop. **Barrie Underwood**, our speaker a couple of months ago, has made a detailed research of Harold's career, and he reports on the man of many talents who, over four decades, helped transform Weston into Somerset's most fashionable seaside resort:



"Harold Brown moved to Weston-super-Mare in 1908 to take up the position of Engineer and Surveyor, and Water Engineer, to the then Urban District Council after the death of the previous Engineer & Surveyor, and at 31, he was very young for such a position. [He is pictured **left** when he was 60].

"In 1908 the roads and streets of Weston, like most towns, were constructed of crushed and rolled, stone without a surface or provision for drainage. In summer they were very dusty and in winter wet and muddy, and as most traffic was still horse-drawn were very insanitary from animal droppings. So one of the first projects Harold Brown became involved with was the gradual reconstruction of the roads, their surfacing and the main routes were widened.

"Then in 1913 he designed a new public abattoir for the town in Bridge Road and said to be a model that many others followed. The next year the council began preparing to obtain a new water supply from the river Banwell and spring in the village, a decade-long project in which Brown was heavily involved [as we shall see in the next edition of *Retrospect*].

"Also in 1914, the eastern end of Weston's Milton Road was diverted onto its present alignment and extended to join the road through Worle, which was the main road into the town via Locking Road.

"After the First World War there was a serious housing shortage and so a Government subsidy was paid for building new council housing. Weston UDC was one of the first councils to take advantage of this with its development at Milton Green designed by Harold Brown, with two more similar developments nearby.

"For six years until 1922 Harold Brown was involved in a long-running legal case between the UDC and one of its leading members, Henry Butt (**right**), a local businessman, entrepreneur and developer. This was over damage being done to the town's roads by the many steam lorries used by Cllr Butt. The case



eventually reached the House of Lords which found in the council's favour but ordered Cllr Butt to pay only minimal damages, although he had to meet the council's full legal costs and repair all the damage caused.

"Two years later Cllr Butt bought and gifted to the town the land for the Winter Gardens development, so he wasn't a bad loser!.

"In 1927 Harold Brown oversaw the construction of a major extension to the Town Hall to provide a new council chamber, assembly room and extra office accommodation. He also undertook the development of the Winter



Gardens and designed the pavilion – an elegant building with a central oval ballroom, tall round-arched windows and roof with a distinctive flattened dome [pictured above in 1937], standing in stark contrast to some of the brutalist architecture of the time in other seaside towns.

"In 1929 he was responsible for the design and construction of the 760ft causeway enclosing the Marine Lake [as described in Retrospect No. 24]. He realised there would be an accumulation of silt and devised a winch-operated dredging system to allow this to be removed when the lake was drained during the winter months.

"Two years later he was responsible for the design and construction of a UDC infectious diseases hospital in the grounds of what is now Drove Road Hospital, which is still in use today.

Then he and a leading councillor were charged with investigating how the town might develop an aerodrome. They visited similar sites across Britain, Europe and North America, and their proposals were accepted so that 78 acres were purchased for a grassed airfield with a large hanger, passenger terminal, control tower and other buildings [below in 1937].



“When the West Mendip Internal Drainage Board came into existence in April 1934, the UDC agreed to provide legal, technical, financial and administrative services of its staff, with Harold Brown becoming engineer to the board on top of his work with the council. They were responsible for land drainage and water management across an area of the levels and moors from the foot of the Mendip Hills to the coastline at Wick St Lawrence, with some 53 miles of watercourses to be maintained plus 50 water control structures.”

At the same time, the council began vital improvements to the basic infrastructure and services in Weston, needed because of the rapid expansion of the resort between the wars. Not least was to improve the water supply and increase the water treatment and distribution capacity. We shall be featuring this project and the endless legal battle surrounding it in a future edition.

It was eventually agreed in Parliament, and Barrie Underwood writes: “The Act enabled the council to increase the quantity of water it abstracted from Banwell spring, to enlarge the water treatment plant and construct a large underground storage reservoir at its Milton Road site. As water engineer, Harold Brown was responsible for the design and construction of these works.

“The council was also given powers in 1934 to widen and improve the High Street, Regent Street, Union Street, Oxford Street and Alexandra Parade. This was mainly undertaken between 1935 and 1938. Development of the aerodrome began in early 1936 and was completed in the August. While this work was going on Harold Brown was also engaged on plans for an open-air swimming pool on the seafront., and ‘The Pool’ as it became known was, the largest in Europe, featuring a dramatic 30 ft high four-stage reinforced concrete-arched diving platform of Olympic standard [**below in 1937**].



“Harold Brown was responsible for a number of other municipal engineering projects in Weston too numerous to detail here, and before his retirement in 1942 he also oversaw the initial clearance of many buildings destroyed or seriously damaged by bombing in the early years of the Second World War, together with emergency repairs to the town’s roads, sewers and water mains.

“He can truly be called the unsung hero of Weston during the inter-war years, designing and delivering the ideas and aspirations of the entrepreneurial and far-sighted councillors of the time.”

In a future issue of *Retrospect* we will look at the efforts led by Harold Brown over more than a decade to improve Weston’s poor water supply at a time of devastating epidemics, resulting in the resort taking over Banwell’s copious spring and the emptying of the pond in the centre of the village to become a bowling green.

MUSEUM ALL SET FOR THE SUMMER

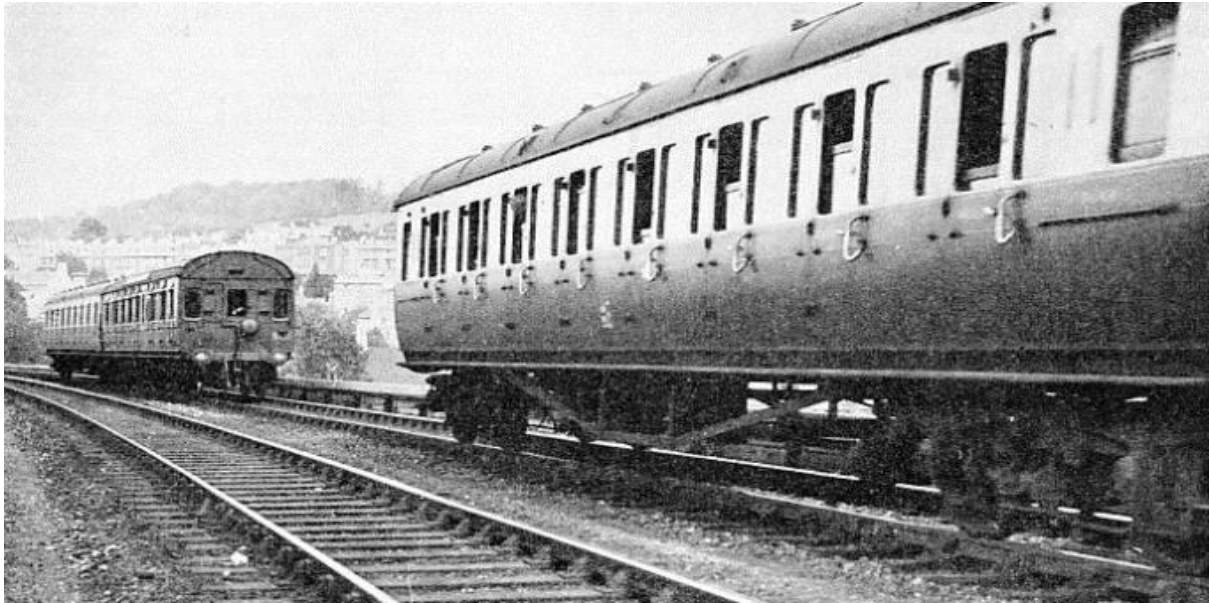
Museum trustees, staff and volunteers are all geared up for the season ahead and have made some changes to the exhibitions, including a much-expanded display featuring the Axbridge Workhouse, a Romano-British room and a new space for the forthcoming temporary exhibitions.

Opening times every day from now until October are from **1pm until 4pm** except on the first Saturday of each month, to coincide with the Farmers’ Market, it’s from **10am**

The year’s events started with a photographic display on the Allerton villages. In May the museum celebrates *100 years of the Axbridge Bellringers*, while June and July mark the *centenary of the Axbridge War Memorial*. August is given over to an *Axbridge School history project*, then until the end of the season there’s a display on *Axbridge in the 1950s and 1960s*. An exciting season ahead!

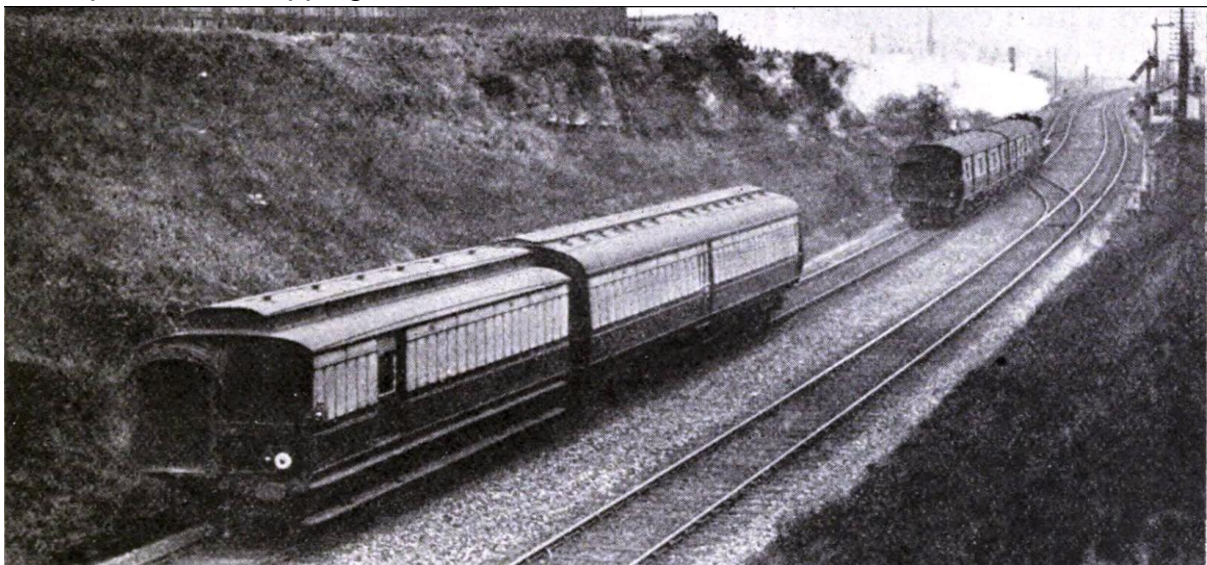
SLIPPING OFF TO THE SEASIDE

The article in the last edition of *Retrospect* about a 1936 GWR rule book found in a local charity shop aroused the interest of lifelong railway enthusiast **Paul Ardiff**. What specially caught his eye was the section dealing with the practice of carriages – called slip coaches – and their passengers being released from speeding express trains at places like Taunton so they could continue their journey attached to waiting branch line services without ever having to leave their seats. Destinations in the West Country ranged from seaside resorts to towns not served by the main line.



A good view of the slip guard's accommodation at the front of two coaches slipped at Bath, probably in the 1930s

Paul writes: I have always been fascinated by the railway and in particular its quirky ideas and workings... like fly shunting, hump shunting and slip coaches, and it is the practice of “slipping” coaches that I want to concentrate on.



Two coaches are slipped at Bedminster, Bristol, from a fast through train

While I had no first-hand experience of slip coaches back in the day, my father did. He worked as a booking clerk at Paddington during the late 50s and early 60s, lodging there during the week and coming home to Bristol at weekends. Later in life he told me about travelling on slip coaches and in particular his journey on "the very last slip coach."



A coach is slipped at Didcot, probably in the 1940s

I tried to research this and initially drew a blank because the records say the last coach slipped on the GWR was at Bicester on Friday 9 September 1960. However after digging deeper into the mysteries of slip coaches I discovered there was a "last" slip recorded at Didcot, the last *double* coach slip, on June 7 1960. I had obviously not been listening hard enough and missed this important distinction.

The pre-nationalisation rail industry was very competitive, and companies were constantly striving to be faster and more efficient than the others. So to save express trains from having to stop at less important stations the ingenious idea of detaching one or more coaches without stopping was devised.

The use of slip coaches really began on the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway; the 4pm from London Bridge to Brighton slipped coaches at Haywards Heath,, where they were collected from the platform by a locomotive waiting in the siding for onward journey to Lewes and Hastings.

The Great Western Railway began the practice on the Paddington to Birmingham services, slipping at Slough and Banbury, with most slips being at Slough, with slipped portions going on to Windsor and Eton Central. Because of the relative shortness of the trips to Windsor and Eton it was possible to get the coaches back to Paddington to use again the same day, with up to three trips possible. In fact, the GWR used slip coaches on both broad and standard gauge.

The other railway companies took up the practice with varying enthusiasm,, and the use of slip coaches reached its peak in 1914 when 189 slips a day were taking place across 12 companies.

Slip coaches were usually modified versions of standard non corridor coaches, and two types of slip mechanism were employed, but I will concentrate on the version used by the GWR.

A hinged hook on the leading end of the slip coach was released by the slip guard moving a lever to retract a locking pin. This same lever was then used to control the braking of the now slipped coach, with full instructions given in section IIa of the General Appendix to the GWR Rule Book August 1936, There would be only enough vacuum in the system for about three brake applications, so the guard had to be pretty good at controlling where he stopped the coach. There were a couple of incidents involving slip coaches which made the headlines.

In 1880 a coach intended for Windsor and Eton was slipped Slough off the 5pm express to Plymouth and collided with the rear of the main train which had stopped unexpectedly. There were no injuries, and the cause was put down as one of the tail lamps on the slipped coach being out, which misled the signalman. Among those on board were Princess Christian and Princess Victoria of Holstein-Augustenberg.

Some 14 years earlier,, in 1866 at Tunbridge, four coaches were slipped from a Dover-bound service and they ran through the station before colliding with empty coaches, injuring 11 people. The investigation concluded that the incident was the result of “a hazardous system of working.”



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