

# Retrospect

Issue No 25A, April 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 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) or contributions to editor Ian Tabrett at [tabrett.cross@btinternet.com](mailto:tabrett.cross@btinternet.com)

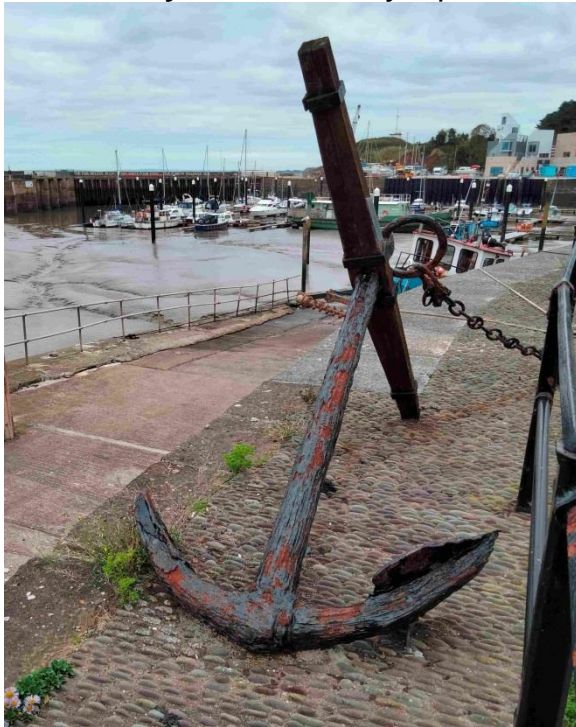
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## DIARY DATES

**Wednesday 16 April: Cross Memorial Hall 2.30pm** - *The delights of Edwardian Gardens* – Yvonne Bell, whose illustrated talk will include two examples within a mile of Cross!

**Wednesday 21 May: Cross Memorial Hall 7.30pm** *The origins of nursery rhymes* – Sue and Phil Thorne.

**Wednesday 18 June: Day trip to Watchet** with a guided tour of the Radio Museum and chance to take in the other attractions around the harbour (left). The minibus will pick up in Cross and Axbridge. Details to follow.



### 'BON VOYAGE' TO A VALUED FRIEND

**Madeleine Roberts** writes: We are very sorry to say farewell to Joan Goddard, who is moving away to be nearer her family. Although her background was in geology, Joan has always had a keen interest in both archaeology and local history. She was a member of Axbridge Archaeological and Local History Society for many years, and since the Society became part of the Friends of King John's Hunting Lodge has been responsible for

designing the posters for our talks. We are now looking urgently for someone to replace her. If you would enjoy designing posters or feel you could help in any way please contact Liz Scott.

## CELEBRATING VE-DAY, 80 YEARS ON

Next month sees the celebration of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victory In Europe Day, declared on May 8 1945 to crowds in Whitehall by Prime Minister Winston Churchill, seen in this historic Imperial War Museum photograph. *Retrospect* will be recalling the war's effects on the Cheddar Valley, and its aftermath, next month and in June. We already have many contributions, but please let us have any memories or photographs you would like to share about local events all those years ago. Send them to *Retrospect* editor Ian Tabrett by email [tabrett.cross@btinternet.com](mailto:tabrett.cross@btinternet.com) .



## HISTORY IN STITCHES



A wall-hanging depicting the Axbridge Heritage Trail has been completed and framed by a group of women who like to sew either by hand with needle and thread or using a sewing machine needle as a paintbrush. It is around two metres wide by a metre deep, took two years to complete, and illustrates the location of every building on the trail. The aim now is to display it in St John the Baptist Church.

## “COME AND JOIN US”



Paul Hughes (left) and Jon Spencer staff a stall at the March Axbridge Farmers' Market to recruit new stewards for the King John Hunting Lodge Museum, and anyone interested in becoming a Friend of the museum. It opens on **Friday 28 March** then the official civic ceremony conducted by the Mayor, Graham Page, will take place during the April Farmers' Market on **Saturday 5 April** at 10a.m.

Coincidentally, Graham's father, trustee and Friend John Page, will act as MC. Tea, coffee and soft drinks will be provided for guests.

During **April and May** the museum will be staging a temporary exhibition commemorating the 75th anniversary of the foundation of the Axbridge Caving Group, which later added Archaeological Society to its name, and more recently merged into the Friends. Following that in **June and July**, an exhibition is planned on Axbridge Methodist Church which – as we reported in *Retrospect* – recently closed. In **August**, Axbridge Primary School will put on a display and, in **September and October** there will be a commemoration of the end of World War Two in 1945.

### **VISITORS SEE IMPORTANT POTTERY COLLECTION**

Members of the Westbury-sub-Mendip Society archaeological group visited Axbridge to visit the museum and be shown the Pottery Type Series in the Old Court Room by Friends of King John's Hunting Lodge, David and Madeleine Roberts. They described how the collection came into existence, 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 put together by archaeologist Richard Coleman Smith with the assistance of Brian Rowland, of the Axbridge Archaeological and Local History Society (AALHS) and later by Brian Rowland, David and Madeleine Roberts, and Robin Goodfellow, with the assistance of pottery expert David Dawson. It is one of the lesser-known treasures among the many assets of AALHS that are now owned by the Axbridge and District Museum Trust (ADMT), and 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 while others are of regional and local importance and need to be available for academic study and research.

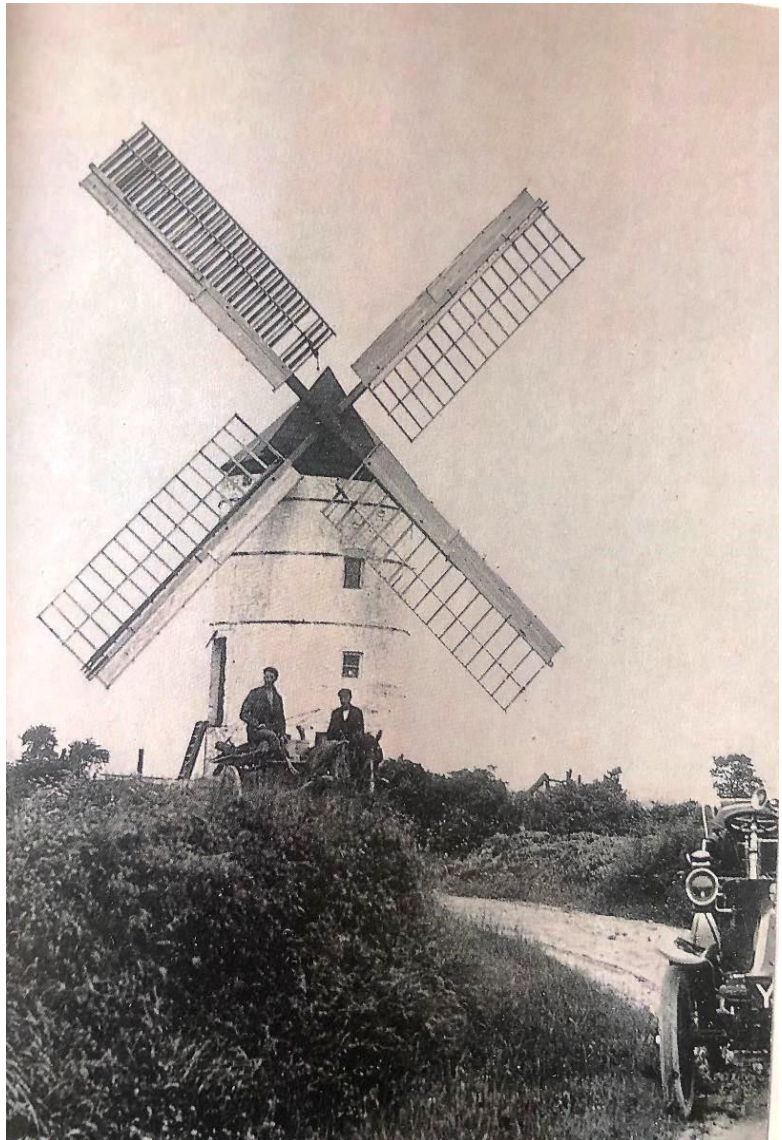
After lunch at the Lamb Inn the visitors went to the museum, and they hope to return with family and friends when it is re-opened to the public. Thanks to manager Dean Packham for enabling the visit to take place.

## WIND POWER, 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY STYLE

The Ashton windmill may have a long, colourful and highly chequered history, but its future is very much in doubt. That was the stark message of the March speaker, Fiona Torrens-Spence, who described how milling operations at the site – on the highest point of the Isle of Wedmore – began more than 800 years ago, and ended in the 1920s.



The first on the mound beside the road was a timber postmill, which could be rotated 360 degrees to catch the wind from any direction. It was owned by the Dean and Chapter of Wells and sub-let to a series of operators. By Tudor times it had fallen into disrepair and was replaced by a mill much like today's but topped by a thatched roof. Fiona told how occasionally the wind was so strong that it was impossible to stop the sails with the result that the whole building shook and sparks flew from the machinery. Once again it fell into a poor state but in 1954 was restored and eventually handed to the local authority and opened to the public by volunteers. However, it was damaged by Storm Bert last year and closed by Somerset Council although it had become a major tourist attraction.



Fiona described this decision as “a disaster” and appealed for the councillors responsible, Ben Ferguson and Harry Munt, to be lobbied to provide funds and expertise for the future.

**Top: Ashton windmill with a damaged sail after Storm Bert earlier this year; and main picture, as it was in around 1900**

## **PREPARING THE WAY FOR A PIPE DREAM**

*With investigations going ahead rapidly for a proposed second Cheddar reservoir right on our doorstep, this is an appropriate time to look at the way the first project was tackled in the 1930s, using steam power and an army of 400 men. Axbridge's own freelance journalist and editor Harry Mottram – mastermind behind the website Axbridge News and a number of other publications – has contributed this fascinating article. The photos were sent to him some years ago by a relative of one of the original workmen on condition they are only used to illustrate the history of Cheddar Reservoir. Harry writes:*

It was the year the National Grid was completed and the classic London Underground map designed by Harry Beck was first published – and the year Hitler came to power. This was 1933, when work began to build Cheddar Reservoir.

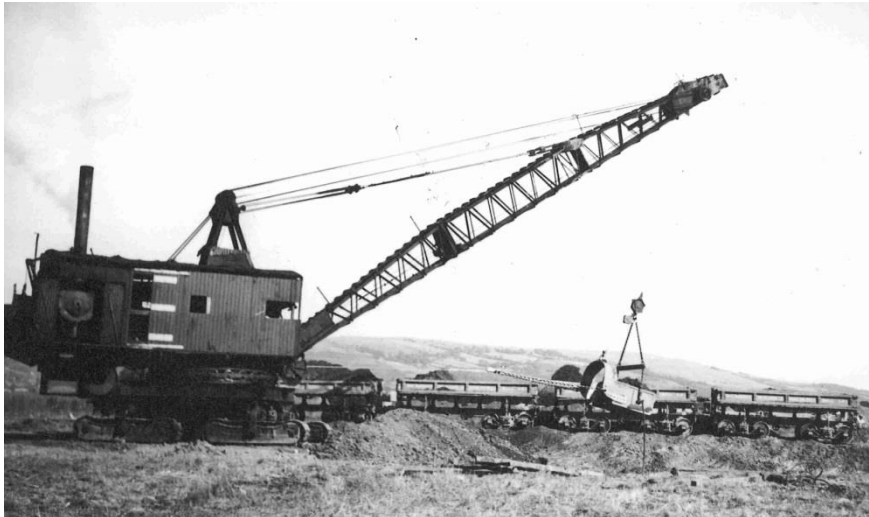


**The ground is prepared for the first Cheddar Reservoir**

The country was still recovering from the economic slump triggered by the Wall Street Crash of 1928, and the lasting effects of the First World War. Britain was entering the modern age of new council houses, BBC radio, jazz music, fast cars, air travel, and modern domestic appliances which needed gas, electricity and most of all, clean running water for washing and to flush lavatories for the expanding population. Hence the need for Cheddar Reservoir.

If the present plans by South West Water, owned by the Devon-based Pennon Group who bought Bristol Water in 2023, are approved as expected this year, it will become the largest infrastructure project in Somerset after Hinkley Point C, with a completion date of 2030 at a cost of at least £2.8 billion.

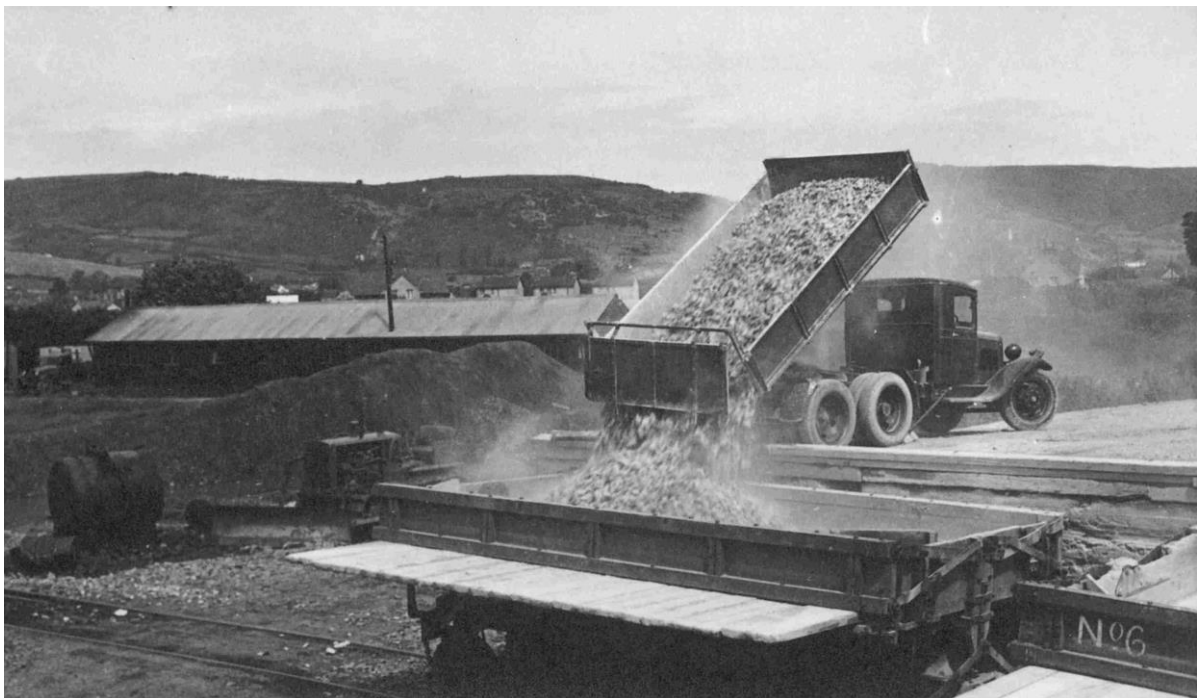
When the first reservoir was constructed, heavy plant and equipment was in its infancy, so manpower was vital. A railway link was built as a spur off the Cheddar Valley line to take material to the site, near where the yacht club is today. A steam-



powered crane and shovel were employed to help with the work although it was pick and shovel that largely ruled the day.

Around 400 men, many from the Irish Free State who even brought with them their own priest, took on the task. Many were billeted locally in

homes, pubs and boarding houses, while some lived in huts close to the site. Work began in April 1933, and it took five years of digging and lining the reservoir to complete, then around a year to fill before the outbreak of World War Two.



Cheddar had been a key part of the local supply grid for nearly 100 years thanks to the Mendip water cascading out from the bottom of the Gorge. In 1914 it was decided to take water from the River Yeo to increase supplies not only for the growing population in the Cheddar Valley but further afield. In early 1922, the dams and intake were built in the Gorge next to the now-demolished Cliff Hotel, with a pipeline laid to a pumping station in Lower New Road.

Eventually, though, a reservoir was needed to make better use of water from the springs. Geological work began, the present site was chosen and the cost was estimated at £450,000. McAlpine was the main contractor for the Bristol Waterworks Company, and work began. The company actually had wanted to build a much larger reservoir or a second one as well, but funds did not allow this.

Work was suspended from October 1935 to March 1936 because of incessant rain, and the reservoir was finally ready in 1938. A huge saucer-like depression was scooped out of the fields to the west of Holwell Lane, with the hedges and trees



taken out, along with Barrow Wood Farm. The soil and stone removed was used in a huge embankment to contain the water, reaching as high as 50ft on the Wedmore side and lower on the north, keeping the circular path around the reservoir level.

A low wall rimmed the perimeter, with survey points every 25 yards or so marked by numbers 0 to 116 – still visible today. The sides were lined with concrete slabs, with a base of clay. When the water level is low, this is exposed revealing how comparatively shallow the reservoir actually is, although on the south side it is more than 25 feet deep. It can hold 1,350 million gallons of raw river water pumped in from tower on the Cheddar side and a smaller inlet to the south, which is only rarely used to take water from the River Axe.





The reservoir is around two-and-a-quarter miles in circumference, and originally was out of bounds to all but employees of Bristol Water. Much of the clay for the lining was dug to the south of the reservoir and later became known as the Clay Pits, still used for fishing. Permission for today's activities like angling, sailing and other water sports, plus access for people to walk, jog and cycle around edge, had to wait years. During World War Two, in 1940, regular bombing raids by the Luftwaffe were taking place targeting Bristol, towns in Somerset, and Cardiff docks, and the German air crews used the reservoir to help their navigation as it was so prominent in the landscape. One night, a number of bombs were dropped across the area, with a number landing both at Compton Bishop and near where Wedmore Golf Club is now. Whether they were aimed at the reservoir we don't know, but it was common for the Luftwaffe planes to jettison their bombs if they did not reach their target. When building work finished, some small parts of machinery were left behind at the site and this took some time to be cleared away, along with the siding off the Cheddar Valley Railway. The accommodation huts came down and the workers packed up and left. The pubs and shops of Axbridge and Cheddar had seen a boost in trade, and some local women married the workers. One thing that didn't happen then, though, was that second reservoir...



**A big moment as water flows in to Cheddar Reservoir for the first time, even though the tower has not yet been completed**

### **AND FINALLY...**

Oops! This is the *real* Retrospect issue No. 25 (but has been number 25A) because due to a silly mistake by the editor, the February edition was wrongly numbered...Wrist suitably slapped.