

Retrospect



Issue No 37, April, 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 Liz Scott by email at
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Articles and pictures for inclusion in *Retrospect* are always most welcome – and badly needed – so please email the editor

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DIARY DATES

Saturday April 4. 10am: official opening of the King John Hunting Lodge Museum for the season during Axbridge Farmers' Market. Everyone welcome.

Wednesday April 15, CMH 2.30pm: Archive films on Axbridge and surrounding areas, introduced by John Page

Saturday April 25, Lamb Hotel, 11.30am: all welcome for coffee and chat.

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. Minibus details in due course. **but please contact Liz to book your seat**



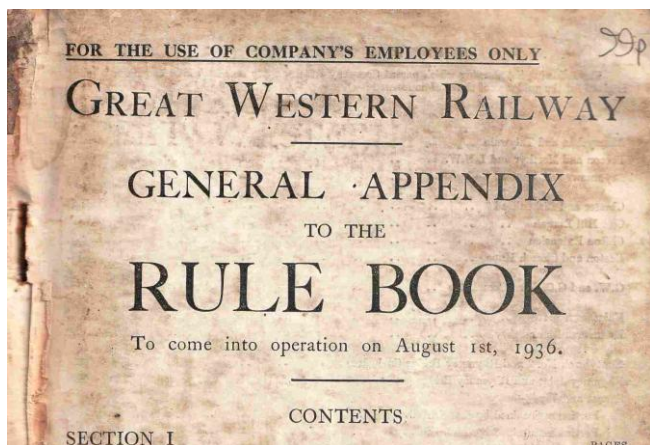
AND A DATE FROM THE BANWELL SOCIETY OF

ARCHAEOLOGY: Secretary Maggie McCarthy writes: At our meeting **on Friday April 10** we have a talk on Clifton Suspension Bridge by Mike Rowland . He is a retired police inspector and has lived and worked in and around Bristol and Bath for very many years.. He qualified as a Blue Badge guide in 1998 and is an excellent speaker. The

meeting at 7.30pm at the Banwell Youth and Community Centre, which is at the bottom of the village car park, through the gate and the building is on the right.

FROM MILKING COWS ON A TRAIN TO LOADING STEAM ROLLERS SECURELY...

In a previous edition of *Retrospect*, Roger Veale described how his passion for books has proved time and again that unlikely or unexpected titles turn up in charity shops. He routinely tours those within about a dozen miles of his home on the same day every week, scouring their book shelves for bargains, writes **Ian Tabrett**.

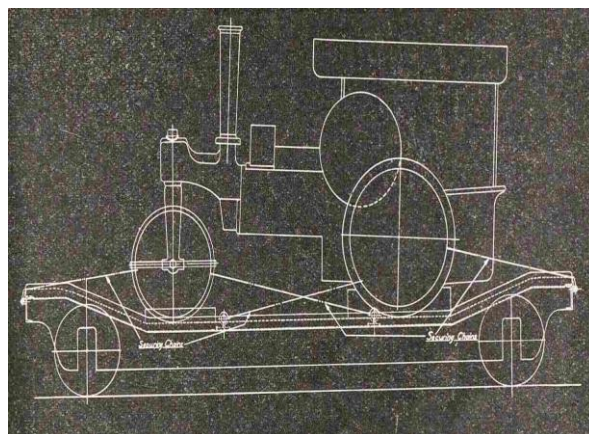
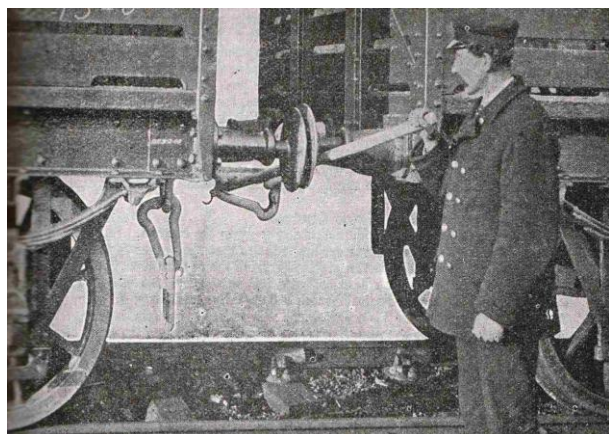


Through the years Roger has come up with some rare treasures which had been cast out as unwanted by their owners, and he's just given me the result of one of his most recent forays: for 99p, a battered and obviously extremely well-thumbed volume entitled *Great Western Railway General Appendix to the Rule Book*. The company's employees were told to use it from August 1, 1936..The

incredibly detailed instructions in its four sections and 336 pages were the work of the department overseen by GWR general manager James Milne at Paddington.

Part 1 covers additions to the standard rules governing train signalling and working and maintaining points and signals, while Section 2 gives instructions on the working of both passenger and freight trains.

Section 3 has "general instructions affecting the loading and conveyance of merchandise traffic, also livestock by passenger and freight trains." Finally, a section concerning station work, with pages of photographs and illustrations covering everything from setting points to loading steam rollers. There are many pages on the safe operation of what were known as "slip coaches" – carriages carrying passengers destined for the many holiday destinations in Somerset that were unhooked from moving express trains and brought to a smooth stop at stations like Taunon to be taken on as part of branch line trains. But more of that another time.



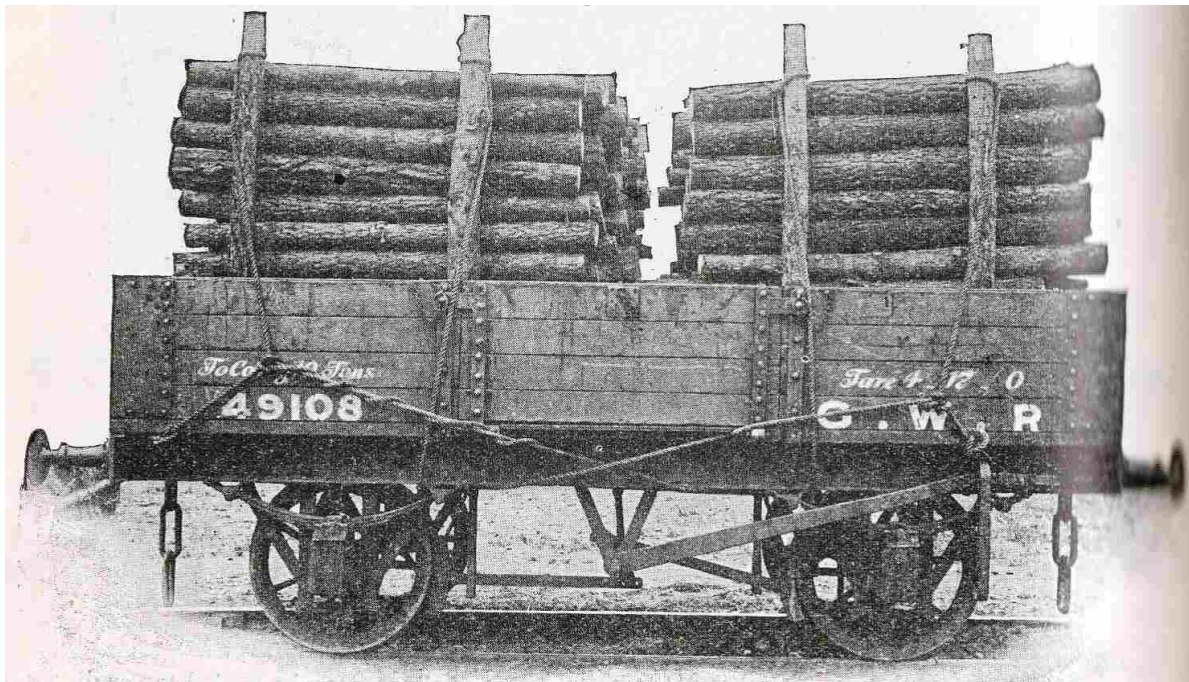
The GWR way to use a shunting pole to couple or uncouple two wagons...and to load a steam roller securely back in 1936

The index alone runs to 26 pages with around 1,200 references, starting with A, how to deal with all kinds of accidents (including “promptitude in dealing with”) through to Y, Yards. There are pages on items such as “banana vans, heating of” or “carboys, empty,” “duties not to be allotted to lads”; handling esparto grass in bales, through to what to do with unwanted forms, old books and waste paper.

The letter K has only one entry: “klaxon horns, instructions for shunting” while L needed two-and-a-half closely-printed pages, S took up three pages, but M needed just 36 lines, including the milking of cows while in transit: “The sender or his representative must be requested to state how long the animals will go without milking...and should be asked to meet the requirements.” They also needed to give an assurance that none of their animals was likely to calve during their journey.

As for P, there were “pigeons, homing traffic” followed by “pillows, hire of” and “poultry, live, conveyance of.” R dealt with “rats and mice damaging electric cables” and robberies from luggage vans, while S concerned itself about “sagging loads, loading of.” U needed little space except for unloading and loading steam rollers, while W worried about cans of water for lavatory compartments...

Sadly there appears little demand for such detailed directions to aid the smooth running of today’s railway. ‘Elf ‘n’ safety takes care of everything.

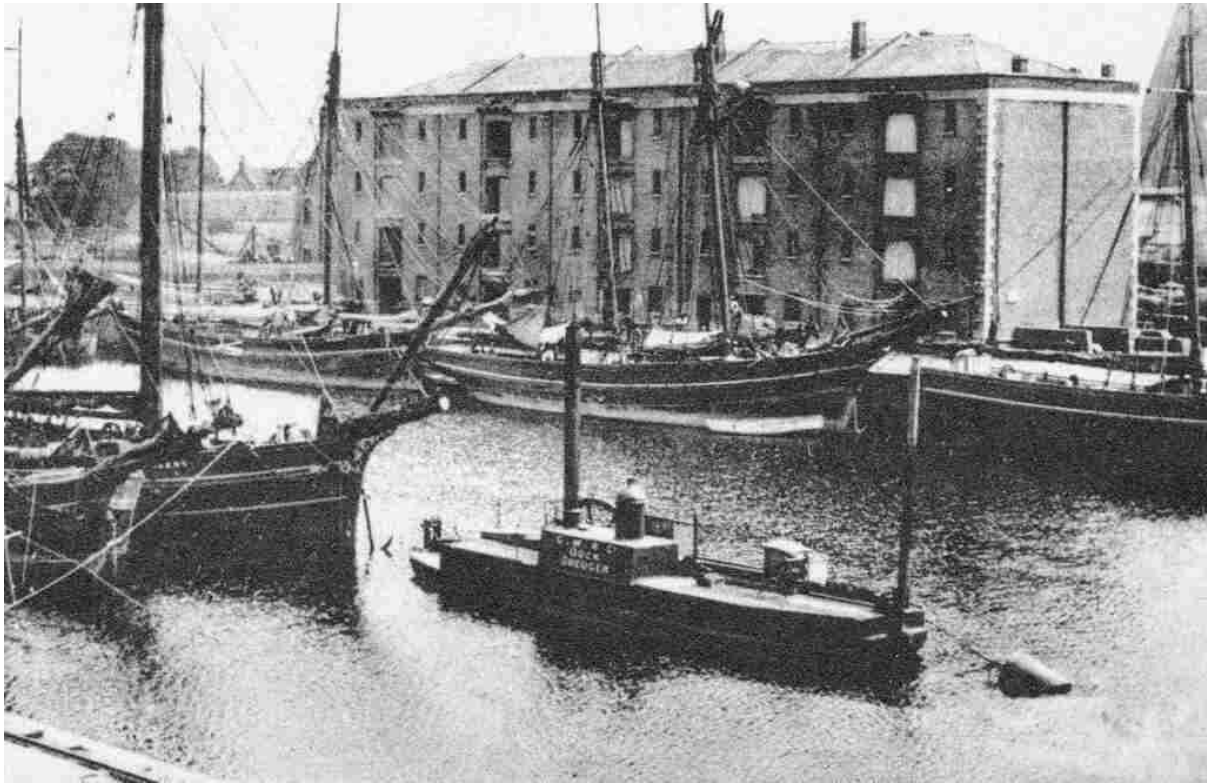


There are no pictures of cows being milked on the moo-ve but one on loading pit props 90 years ago

NEXT TIME: PAUL ARDIFF LOOKS AT A LONG-FORGOTTEN SYSTEM AND RAILWAYMEN’S SKILLS THAT ALLOWED EXPRESS TRAIN PASSENGERS HEADING FOR THE SEASIDE IN THE WEST COUNTRY TO SWITCH TO THE BRANCH LINE SERVICE WITHOUT LEAVING THEIR SEATS

HOW BRUNEL AND BERTHA SOLVED A VERY MUDDY PROBLEM

Retired civil engineer Lester Durston describes Brunel's solution to solve Bridgwater's very muddy problem, and how vandals almost sank it.



On the Parrett, several special craft were built at various times to jet the accumulating silt off the banks, hopefully for it then to be carried out by the freshwater flow. The *Eroder*, built by the Wills company at Salmon Parade in Bridgwater, was a steam-powered jetting craft, which was followed by the *Bertha*, built in Bristol in 1844 which in the picture **above**, courtesy of Bridgwater Heritage Trust, is seen moored in Bridgwater dock with a variety of other vessels.

It hauled itself by chains attached to the dock walls, with a metal paddle attached to a vertical wooden pole mounted on its prow, which could be raised or lowered. Silt was scraped along the bed of the dock to be deposited over horizontal hatches above pipework or conduits that emptied out into the river. There was a similar but slightly larger scraper boat at the Cumberland Basin in Bristol docks.

In 1871 a rail link was established to the GWR main line, crossing the Parrett by an unusual bridge just up-stream of the dock entrance. Known as the Telescopic Bridge, a short section on the east bank moved sideways allowing a section over the river to be hauled back, allowing ships to navigate the river up towards Town Bridge. It remains today as a foot bridge and cycle way next to a modern concrete road bridge.

During the 1950s, as ships became larger and with the brick industry long past its prime, trade in the docks diminished and by the late 60s, British Railways decided on closure and sought a contractor to carry out the work involved.

The Bristol firm of Nott Brodie & Co. were the successful tenderer and I was the civil engineer in charge in 1972 – a job that lasted a few months in a town that had seen better days.

Two elements of the work were of significance: the two entrances between the outer basin and the river had to be blocked off, and a way installed to allow excess flow in the canal to discharge into the Parrett.

The lock gates between the main and outer basins were secured shut, and the outer basin drained as the tide receded. The main gates in the ship lock had to be kept closed against high tidal water, designed to maintain water in the outer basin, not the reverse!

The smaller barge lock was closed off with sheet piling. The operation involved removing two large timber baulks of Baltic pine which had been set in the masonry when the dock was built. After more than 100 years submerged, the splintering timber still smelt of resin! A new structure some metre wide was topped off and hand railings added to form part of a walkway along the river frontage, while a footbridge took pedestrians over the landward end of the barge lock. At the canal



and of the dock, a concrete barrier was constructed in the lock, and the timber gates of the ship lock remain in the open position (**left**) more than 50 years since they were last used. The canal and Parrett run very close together for a stretch at Hamp, upriver from the town, where an overspill weir was constructed, although it was a difficult spot to reach with plant and materials.

While we were on site vandalism occurred and a small stone store in which spare parts for the machinery around the dock was stored and the now redundant *Bertha* were both broken into. The vessel was slowly sinking, so we pumped her out and soon after she was lifted on to a low-loader and taken by road to the Maritime Museum at Exeter.

The dock was later redeveloped as a marina, and the locks near Bowering's Mill and out into the Parrett were reinstated, while the warehouse incorporated a pub and apartments. The National Rivers Authority has carried out various flood defence schemes along the Parrett, both upstream and downstream from the town, and I was involved in much of work.

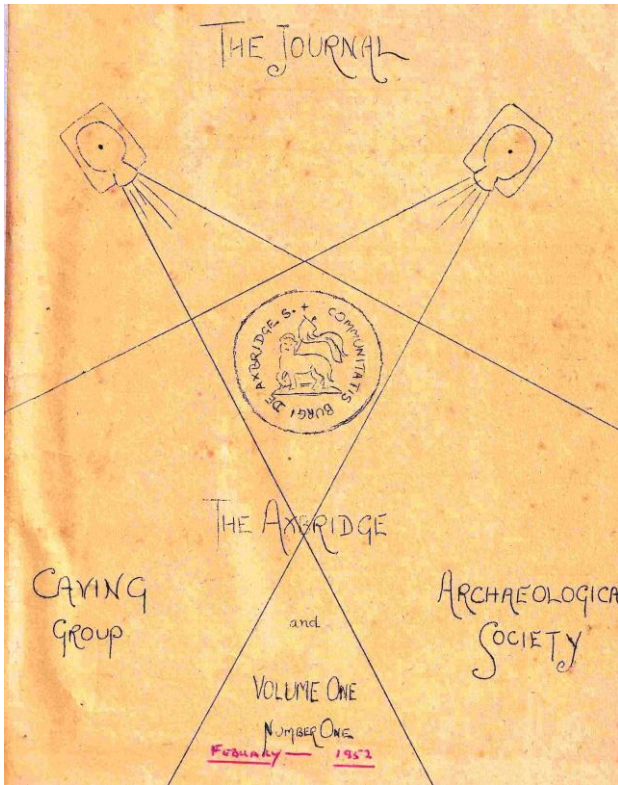
OUR UNSUNG – OR, RATHER, UNSINGING – HERO

Our March meeting could so easily have been a disaster...folk singers Issy and David Emeney contacted us at breakfast time on the day to say Issy had had a slight cold which she thought had cleared but suddenly returned so that she couldn't speak, let alone sing.

Result: we decided to go ahead with our meeting, with John Page gallantly stepping into the breach, promising not to sing but to deliver a fascinating talk about his home village of Brent Knoll (or South Brent as it was known until the GWR decided that the Somerset place name would confuse passengers heading to South Brent in Devon...). The evening went extremely well, with everyone enjoying a glass of wine and nibbles provided by Liz, and a chance to chat.

LOOKING BACK

When I started work as an apprentice reporter on the *Weston Mercury* almost seven decades ago, one of the first tasks I was given by the editor was to dust off the paper's ancient bound copies of the weekly editions to look out interesting items for a column called "Looking Back." I rather enjoyed that experience...and I still enjoy delving in the archives to gather information about the past. Hence a new and hopefully regular item in *Retrospect* to look out snippets from



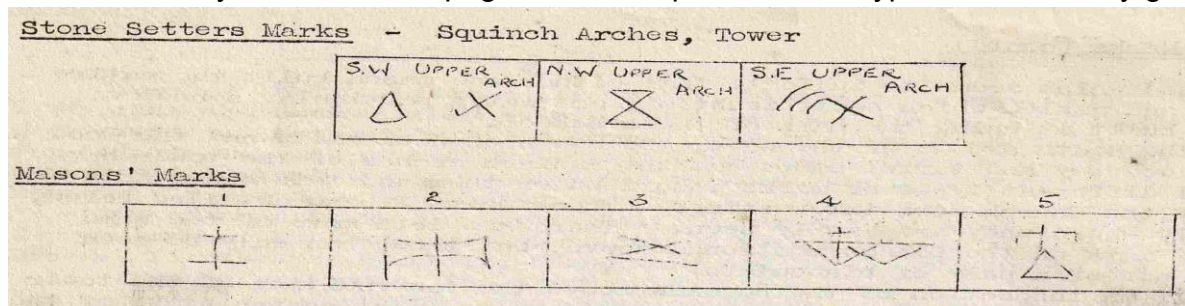
the Axbridge Caving Group and Archaeological Society's newsletters and *Journals* since the group was founded 75 years ago, starting with *The Journal Volume One Number One* from February 1952 (left).

Secretary Major D. C. McKeand began his editorial by saying that it was the first of what he hoped would be very many. Then he set out the policy for contributors to keep readers abreast of current local archaeological and caving topics which would make the *Journal* "a permanent and valuable work of reference for all...and that we will expand our knowledge with our roots going deep."

However, he added a cautionary note: "Unfortunately in these days magazines

can't be produced cheaply therefore, much as we would like to make a free distribution to members I am afraid it can't be done." The cost to members would be 2s (10p) and to others 3s 6d (17.5p) per issue.

For their money in that first 26-page edition, duplicated from typed stencils, they got



a detailed look at masons' marks to be found in Axbridge Church (**above**); advice on equipment and clothing essential for cave exploration; notes on Roman sites near Axbridge; the area's geology; and detailed articles on progress by members who were busy investigating Banwell Bone Cave. **Ian Tabrett**