

Retrospect



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Newsletter of the Friends of
King John's Hunting Lodge

News, views and events

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Articles and pictures for inclusion in *Retrospect* are always most welcome, so please email the Editor

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DIARY DATES

Wednesday 19 November CMH 2.30pm: *The life, times and tragedy of a Somerset country lad.* Talk by Ian Tabrett.

Friday 12 December: Lamb Inn, Weare, 7pm for 7.30pm: *Christmas dinner and quiz.* – menu available in next month's *Retrospect*

Saturday 20 December. Lamb Inn, Axbridge, 11.30am, Coffee with museum stewards

SAD NEWS FOR LOCAL HISTORY AND RESEARCH

The death has been announced of Vince Russett, eminent archaeologist and great friend of Axbridge and its history. He was for some years County Archaeologist for North Somerset; he also wrote or co-authored a number of books and research papers. Vince was keenly involved in the Axbridge Archaeological and Local History Society, of which he was chairman for some time, and then a vice-president. A full tribute will appear in *Retrospect* in due course.

A SMASHING TALK, ALL ABOUT BROKEN POTS!

The title might not have given many clues: “A small step to unravelling the past.” From it, I suspect that few if any attending our October meeting could have guessed the quite amazing stories and the facts behind them that can be gleaned from just small fragments of pottery...by the experts, that is. And the speaker, David Dawson, is certainly one of the most eminent of those experts, while to help them is a collection of hundreds of sherds, one of the most important in the country, held and treasured by the King John Hunting Lodge Museum..

As an archaeologist and researcher, he has specialised in medieval and later pottery and its production. David (pictured right) was introduced by Madeleine Roberts, who explained how during his long and distinguished career, including in Bristol and Taunton, he has been associated as a key helper and adviser to the Axbridge museum for close to 60 years. He was also president of the Axbridge Archaeological and Local History Society (AALHS) for more than a decade.



It was thanks to his expertise that the sherds in the Pottery Type Series were identified and then presented in a way that allowed their use as a research tool. They range from Roman to relatively modern times and not only reveal where, when and how they were made, where the materials in them came from, what they were used for, and sometimes even who owned them. Crucially, he said, this is the four Fs – fabric, form, finish and function.

The specimens, some of which were on display, came from archaeological digs in Axbridge and across the Mendips by the AALHS. David also illustrated his talk by showing finds from a massive aristocratic rubbish tip excavated over a number of years in the garden of the property that now houses the Wells Museum. Perhaps surprisingly, while some of the 20,000 pieces came from overseas, most were made in the West Country, particularly Somerset and Bristol. They range from humble storage jars and jugs to the finely decorated crockery used by the leading lights of the day in society, and to delicate tea services served to their womenfolk. Even bird feeders and flowerpots in the 17th and 18th centuries!

David also described the production techniques used over the millennia, from hand-thrown in local villages to the introduction of the pottery wheel which allowed for much finer products. He also illustrated how they were fired from very long ago on bonfires, to today in some parts of the world that he mused would certainly not be approved in these times of “health and safety!”

Ian Tabrett

From Stone Allerton to a new life Down Under

By Fiona Torrens-Spence

William and Elizabeth Whitting left Somerset for New South Wales in Spring 1844, leaving William's brother, James, in Stone Allerton. They were poor family, living at Dunkerry House which was then a small cottage with no outbuildings. The front garden was half the size it is today as another long-vanished cottage occupied most of what is there now. Their father, William Snr., owned three acres of land described as a garden and close, and arable.



Dunkerry House today – and, below, its kitchen photographed early in the 20th century but probably little changed from the Whittings' days there





William Snr. worked as a farm labourer and stone mason, and he married a farmer's daughter from Babcary, near Ilminster. Their eldest son was born in 1805 and at Babcary Church (above) he was christened William like the previous five generations of first sons. He travelled throughout Somerset and Dorset, and at some point was employed on his maternal aunt's 86-acre farm in Babcary. He married Elizabeth Baker, described as "a twine maker" from Bridport, the bustling Dorset coastal town which had specialised in rope-making for the Navy since the Middle Ages.

William Jnr's wedding was in 1839 when he was 33 and she 32. Elizabeth was illiterate and came from a Dissenter family. They stayed in Bridport for the next four years and had their first child in 1840. Two more children followed in short order and by 1844 Elizabeth was pregnant with a fourth. It wasn't a good time as it was remembered as "the hungry 40s" because of harvest failures and rural distress caused by the repeal of the Corn Laws and increasing enclosure of common land.

Table 1:
Assisted migrants to New South Wales, 1839-99. Birthplaces

Year	England & Wales	Scotland	Ireland	Other Countries	Percentage of Irish
1839	3,614	1,925	2,876	1	34
1840	1,994	1,672	2,921	10	44
1841	4,735	1,664	13,704	-	68
1842	1,894	725	4,204	-	61
1843	11	-	-	-	-
1844	2,083	174	1,882	-	45
1845	209	8	281	-	57
1846	-	-	-	-	-
1847	-	-	-	-	-
1848	4,483	1,483	1,778	141	23
1849	0,000	-	-	-	-

Unemployed rural workers were being forced to leave their homes and to move to towns and cities in search of work. Some were thinking of going to the colonies, especially if they were Dissenters. Living in Bridport near the coast would have made William and Elizabeth aware of the

possibility of emigration and in 1844 they applied for the Government's New South Wales Bounty Scheme, which offered successful applicants free passage to New South Wales and a bounty payment of £65 on arrival there. It was open to men under 40 who had worked in agriculture or were "skilled mechanics" (men with a trade such as blacksmith or wheelwright) and they could take their families with them. A reference from an employer was required and William's aunt Sophia Bartlett, who inherited the family farm in Babcary, supplied one for William.

On 2 March 1844 the Whittings waved goodbye to England as they sailed from London to New South Wales on the *Royal Saxon*. Built in 1829 the 700-ton sailing vessel was chartered to carry around 300 Bounty emigrants to New South Wales, plus a handful of non-Bounty passengers and a Surgeon-Superintendent as ship's doctor to look after their needs.



The good ship Royal Saxon on which the Whittings sailed to a new life

We don't know what the weather was like during the voyage but seven weeks after leaving, Elizabeth went into labour and on 11 May was delivered of a still-born child. *The Royal Saxon* was in mid-ocean and didn't arrive at Botany Bay for another six weeks, having completed the voyage in 99 days, which was considered to be fast, and the emigrants arrived looking clean and well-fed.

The Whittings settled at Snails Bay, a working class ship-building area of Sydney. Their first year was one of great hardship in which two of their children died, leaving only the eldest, Robert. In fact, Elizabeth gave birth to five more children over the next seven years. William found a job as a storeman but by 1852 abandoned Elizabeth, and his children. Robert, who was now about 12, became an apprentice shipwright, but Elizabeth was forced to put daughters Elizabeth and baby Edith into the newly-opened Asylum for Destitute Children, the New South Wales equivalent of a workhouse, but she kept her daughter, Sarah Ann, who was just a year older than Edith.

Over the next three years things seem to have improved for the family as in 1855 Elizabeth Snr. took Elizabeth and Edith back out of the asylum. We don't know if William came back to the family, but four years later Robert married Charlotte Fletcher, who was from Banwell, back in Somerset. They had a number of children, and Elizabeth probably helped with childcare, cleaning and laundry.

William died of bronchitis in 1865, and there is a newspaper announcement of his death and of the wake at the *Swan with Two Heads*, a hostelry still trading today. He had been a member of the Ancient Order of Foresters, an organization which ensured that members had a decent funeral and send-off.



Snails Bay, Sydney, where the Whitting family settled, from a rare 19th century picture photographed on a now-damaged glass plate

Elizabeth lived with Robert and Charlotte until shortly before her death in 1882. She had a massive stroke which left her almost completely paralyzed. She was admitted to the Hyde Park Asylum for Infirm and Destitute Women, where she remained for four months until she died. During the 40 years she had lived at Snails Bay – pictured towards the end of the couple's lives there – its population increased enormously and became a densely-populated, bustling suburb.

There are many stories about emigrants who made it good in Australia, but fewer about people like William and Elizabeth Whitting whose dreams didn't quite come true. Conditions were as harsh in the New World as back home, and they had both lost the support that might have been provided by extended family in Somerset and Dorset. As Elizabeth was illiterate, they are unlikely to have kept in touch with relations back in Somerset, and their story would have been completely forgotten in Stone Allerton had it not been for Jeanette Murry and Cheryl Murray, two of their descendants who live in Australia but visited Stone Allerton about five years ago in search of the original Whitting family home.