

# The Rother Canal

& Northern Devon  
Waterways Society



Society News and Views Autumn Issue 2010

# STAPLE VALE

250 YEARS OF LOCAL HISTORY



**An illustrated talk by Dr Hugh Reed, on the fascinating story of this Torridge - side settlement.**

**Involving four acts of Parliament,  
a transport hub, two railways, a canal and new roads.**

*This talk, from the head of a family which has lived in the area for over 200 years, will appeal to all interested in local history, railways, and canals.*

**At the Torrington Arms, New Street, Torrington**

**7.30 pm on Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> November.**

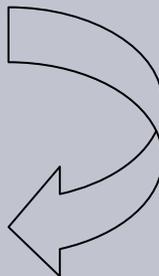
***The meeting is open to all - admission***

*Welcome to the new*

**Rolle Canal & Northern Devon**

**Waterways Society**

## **Autumn Bulletin 2010**



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### Comments from the Chair.

Following my election to the position of chair at the last RC&NDWS AGM I take this opportunity to thank Anthony Barnes for all his efforts as chair since the inauguration of the society in 2003. He is going to be a hard act to follow.

Fortunately for me 'Tony has not left altogether and continues to sit on the committee.

I thought that it would be useful to members to know not only who is on the committee but what roles of responsibility they hold:-

Adrian Wills	Chair / Editor
Anthony Barnes	Treasurer
Hilary Wills	Membership Secretary
Chris' Jewell	IWA Representative
Chris' Hassall	Publicity / publications
Mike Harper	Publications
Norman Richards	Archives
David Lovell	Restoration Projects Manager
Ray Patt	Restorations Advisor
Pat Ferguson	Community Liaison
Denise Drummond	Minutes secretary

All those on the committee members work hard to provide members with an informative, 'value-formoney' society but should you feel that there are matters that are not being addressed or ways in which the society could be improved then please do not hesitate to contact me and let me know.

Adrian Wills Tel. **01237 477705**

Email [www.info@theRolleCanal.co.uk](mailto:www.info@theRolleCanal.co.uk)



## **The RC&NDWS visits Bude.**

The fine weather that greeted the start of Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> August boded well for a good turn out of locals and visitors to the Castle Green for the Bude Stratton Heritage Day. My wife and I, accompanied by a society member drove to Bude from Bideford taking with us a gazebo and an exhibition of pictures and maps of the Rolle Canal to show to the public.

We set up ‘camp’ before the official start of the event next to representatives of the Stover Canal and not far from the Bude Canal & Harbour Society stand. Soon all was ready for the ‘onslaught’. It wasn’t long before we were joined by Tony Barnes and Chris Hassall.

An MC was on hand, with wireless microphone, interviewing numerous exhibitors and those come to view.

He gave out information about the various organisations present and did a good job of encouraging visitors to see all there was on show.

Including the three canal societies there were people representing the Trevithick Society and a group of ancient steam-engine , agricultural machinery and classic cars enthusiasts so there was plenty of local history to be investigated. There were other stalls of interest as well.

Our own exhibition attracted considerable attention and it wasn’t very long before all the representatives of the Rolle Canal Society were involved in discussion with members of the public. Between us we handed out all of the RC&NDWS ‘freebie’ leaflets and a whole load of application forms to join the society as well.

By the close of the event at 5.0.o’clock we were all feeling a little weary and grateful to be able to take down the display and wend our way home having spoken to a lot of people and, hopefully, spread the word about our little jewel – Lord Rolle’s Canal sometimes called the Torrington Canal.



**Report by Adrian Wills**

## **R.C.S Exhibition at South Molton Museum**

Opening on the first of July and running for the whole month, this exhibition entailed the displaying of pictures on wall-mounted boards and some artefacts.

The five boards showed various scenes of the canal, these being from the early beginnings, the route and various depots along the way. There were scenes depicting present-day restoration programmes conducted by dedicated volunteers.



**Hilary Wills and Norman Richards mounting the display.**

On Saturday July 10<sup>th</sup> Hilary and Adrian Wills presented an illustrated talk in the old Assembly Rooms. This was not as well supported as we would have liked but those who attended were very interested, we gained a new member, and so it was worth putting on.

The show was considered a great success by the museum staff, particularly on the Thursday and Saturday market days. A lot of people showed an interest, bought sets of our leaflets and 2 books by Barry Hughes on the canal

We gave out free leaflets to all those who were particularly interested and I had to print some more yet still ran out of the Brauton Marsh leaflets.

We gained a couple more new members to the RCS and I hope to see them at the Sea Lock Open day on 19th. September.

The Museum curator would like us to return some time next year for a similar exhibition.

## Report from Norman Richards.

### ***Trevor gets all 'Arty'***

As well as making himself available to help with the restoration of Sea Lock, society member Trevor Fordham, has been spending a considerable amount of time in creating images based on canals and waterways.

Trevor is hoping to sell his pictures, as sets of post cards or as larger wall hangings, and is prepared to make a donation from the proceeds to the society

For further information or if you wish to purchase any of his pictures then contact Trevor by email on :

**[www.trevor@judd-fordham.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:www.trevor@judd-fordham.freeserve.co.uk)**

or

Tel: **01805 623380**



Lord Rolle's Canal 1823-1871

Boam Aqueduct



SEA LOCK BUDE CANAL



# FROM DARKHAM LEAT TO ROSEMOOR

A RC&NDWS guided walk – August 15<sup>th</sup> 2010

A welcome break in the generally dismal August weather brought us a fine, bright afternoon which tempted a good turn-out of 26 members, friends and others who had by one means or another heard of the opportunity to walk through the woods and meadows of Torrington's RHS Rosemoor Gardens where the general public are not otherwise allowed.

Meeting in the woodland car park there was a brief hitch in the arrangements when we found that, for the first time in eight years, Rosemoor staff had neglected to unlock the gates ready for us. However a word at the reception desk quickly produced a man with a key and we were on our way.

Passing through the gate in the deer fence which keeps the garden safe from marauding wildlife, we followed the track down through Darkham

Woods to the weir on the River Torridge. A dry, early summer had lowered the level of the river so that we could see the construction of the weir. Keith

Hughes of the Weare Giffard History Group ventured out onto the sill to photograph the plaque set in the wall commemorating Lord Rolle's part in its rebuilding in 1835.



We know there must have been a weir on this site before the 19th Century because prior to the canal being dug this leat fed water to a Tucking Mill towards the northern end of Rows Moor, where hand woven, woollen cloth was mechanically washed and beaten to shrink it and make it thicker for blankets, felt and warm clothing.

After the canal was built, the leat was enlarged to supply water to the canal basin by the lime kilns and some boats came up as far as the weir and onto

the river Torridge to carry agricultural lime to farms upstream. There was a small wharf by the weir, named on old maps as Healand Docks and that probably dates from the building of the new weir in 1835.

Following the leat downstream along the edge of the water meadows we were treated to a magnificent display of the pinky-mauve flowers of Himalayan Balsam, an invasive plant condemned by the Environment Agency but none-the-less a wonderful sight on a sunny day. There are two small, original arched bridges over the leat, giving the farmer access to the meadow, but the heavy machinery used for cultivation these days has broken through the top of one of them and we fear it may be culverted before long.



About three years ago Rosemoor cleared a large area of conifer plantation in the valley bottom to make way for a wild-life habitat with hard wood trees interspersed with open, rough grass and ponds to encourage biodiversity. This area is now well established and provides cover for wildlife and is great for wild flowers, insects, invertebrates, foraging deer and badgers.

After the wildlife area the path crosses the little stream which is actually the tail race of the tucking mill and we were able to make out some of the remnants of the structure. A few yards on is the empty and completely overgrown canal basin, besides which stands the very imposing block of lime kilns that were the principal *raison d'être* for the canal south of Torrington.

The kiln complex at Rosemoor is suffering from the ravages of time but there is sufficient masonry surviving to show where the coal and limestone was loaded and the quick lime and ash raked out from the bottom. One pot has partially collapsed revealing its cross section.

This insight to the lime industry of the 19<sup>th</sup> century completed the guided walk over the Rosemoor end of the canal and from the kilns we pass through the gardens to arrive at the main entrance in time for a visit to the restaurant for all those in need of a cup of tea!

**Report from Chris Hassall**

## More about Lime Kilns.

Most members, particularly those who have visited Annery Kiln or Rosemoor Lime Kilns on our guided walks, will be familiar with the typical kilns of the Torridge valley. Their siting was largely determined by the need to 'feed' them with large quantities of limestone and coal, most of which arrived by sea from South Wales.

Easy access from the sea or major rivers was the reason why kilns were sited in almost every bay on the coast which had a beach smooth enough to 'beach' a flat bottomed ketch or polacca brig and unload the cargo while the tide was out. The other requirement, of course, was a valley deep enough to enable carts or pack horses to carry the burnt lime inland through the cliffs to the agricultural hinterland. Prime examples of this situation are Mouth Mill, west of Clovelly, and Heddon's Mouth on the north Devon coast near Trentishoe.

To get further inland with the minimum of laborious horse and cart work, kilns were built on the river banks as far inland as Weare Giffard and Ridd on the Torridge, just accessible by boat on the spring tide.

The Rolle Canal was built primarily to enable coal and limestone to be carried much further inland to the giant kiln complex at Rowes Moor (now Rosemoor).

However there is one source of lime in North Devon, and that is a line of limestone strata which outcrops in just a few places between South Molton and Barnstaple. It so happened that some of these outcrops were conveniently sited for the Filleigh estates where the Fortesque family had the necessary capital to exploit this resource for the same purpose of improving the farmland as the Rolle family in the Torridge area.

There was, of course, no local source of coal as even the 'Bideford Black' seams, which appear to run in the right direction, don't extend east of the River Taw. However, the limeburning process uses far less coal than limestone, and indeed charcoal can be produced inland and used in place of coal, so it was still worth building lime kilns and digging quarries at these limestone outcrop sites.

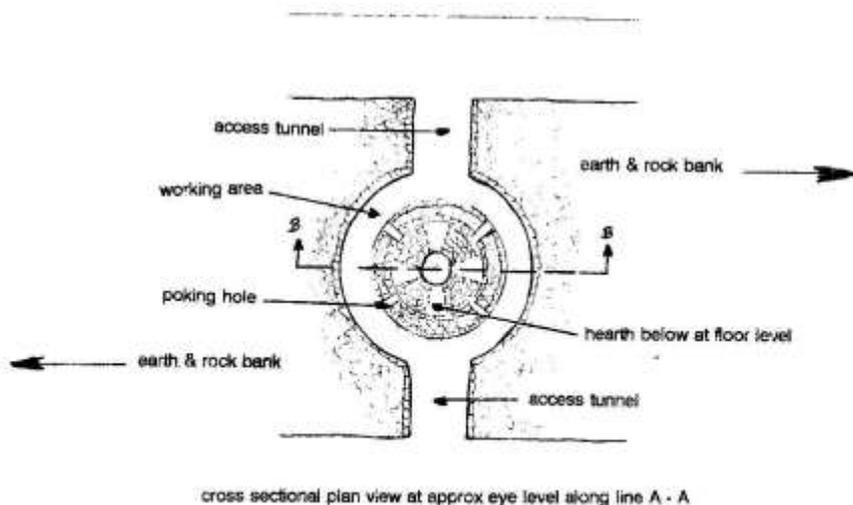
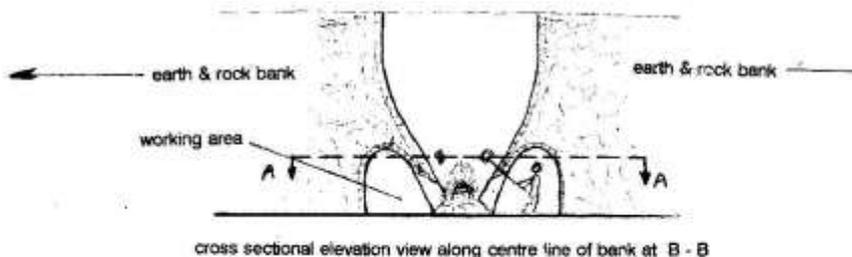
One of these quarry and kiln sites is at West Irishborough Farm, just on the boundary of Filleigh parish, where the term 'Rubble Hills' on OS maps mark the overgrown site of two large quarries and associated spoil heaps along with a remarkable lime kiln of unique design on which the present owner has carried out considerable restoration work. Described as a 'cathedral kiln', it is built within a massive

earth and rock bank with level access to the top for loading and a tunnel access from low down each side of the bank for the hearths and working space.

The working space is a vaulted annular chamber like a ring doughnut or a WW2 pillbox for those who remem-

ber them, or a micromini hadron collider as a 21st Century simile. The base of the kiln forms the centre of this annular tunnel with four hearths alternated with four poking holes, which must have made working this kiln even more like being in Hell than the conventional Torridge style kilns.

**'Chris' Hassall.**



Please be aware that many of the sites described in this publication are held in private ownership and are not open to the public . The RC&NDWS is granted access to these places for organised, guided walks only with the agreement with the various owners.

# The Haytor Granite Tramway

## *A railway with a difference!*

On what promised to be a pleasant, sunny day Hilary Wills, Norman Richards, Philip Molyneux and I set off from Bideford to join members of the Bude Canal & Harbour Society for a guided walk along the Haytor Granite Tramway from the Haytor Quarries to Bovey Tracey, (about 8 miles).

Built in 1820 this unique tramway was constructed to transport the particularly fine quality granite down from the heights of Dartmoor to the Stover Canal at Ventiford, Teigngrace from where it was transhipped away. The prized granite was used in the construction of some very imposing structures, notably London Bridge which was sold to the Americans

Having parked at the bottom car park in Bovey we were joined by the contingent of one from Bude being Mike Moore. Unfortunately other members of the BC&HS for various reasons had had to withdraw at the last moment. Anyway our very elite group was met by our guides Mike and Mo' Wright, experienced moor-walkers. Leaving our cars for the day in the car park we walked into the centre of Bovey where we boarded the 'Dartmoor Hoppa', a mini-bus service looping around Bovey, Haytor and Widdecombein-the-Moor.

As we travelled up towards Haytor Rock itself the weather took a turn for the worst. We left the bus at the top Haytor car park and walked ever upwards to the rock itself. From this vantage point the whole of the Teignmouth Bay spreads out below, a wonderful sight but this particular moment in time the mist had thickened to a point at which it was difficult to see beyond a few metres! As we walked around the rock we stopped for a moment and watched a small group of intrepid climbers attempting to scale one of the sheer faces of the rock. We left them to it and ventured on towards the Holwel Quarry beneath Holwell Tor adjacent to Haytor.

Due to the thickness of the mist we went slightly off course and had to backtrack to finally arrive at Haytor Quarry. It was a very sobering lesson in just how easy it is to get lost on Dartmoor even for those experienced with its tracks and tricks!

In 1850 the quarries at Haytor employed about 100 men but they closed in 1858 when more easily accessible and cheaper granite was

sourced from Cornwall. Today the remains of the huge hoist and its winding mechanism can still be seen in the main quarry . This is a very attractive spot which is visited by many people even on a moist and misty day.



What makes the Haytor Tramway unique is the form of the rails or ‘trاملates’ that wagons were guided along when transporting the stone. Unlike the usual cast iron track of most railways this was constructed from irregular blocks of granite laid directly on the ground. The gauge of the track was 4 feet 3 inches or 1.295mm, ‘in new money’, and there were junctions and sidings at places where the wagons could be redirected. The wagons were allowed to travel down hill along the mostly gently descending route by means of gravity. The empty wagons were towed back up the hill by teams of horses. The engineer who over-saw the construction of the tramway is unknown but George Templer of Stover House managed the quarries and doubtless had considerable influence in its building.

On the open moor lengths of the tramway are much in evidence but some are lost, either having been over grown or removed and carried

away for use in building projects else where. There has recently, however, been a considerable amount of work undertaken to expose that which has been buried. Whilst the newly uncovered track is very pleasing to the eye it is sad to see how much of the close cropped moorland grass has been overwhelmed by large swathes of invasive bracken.

Leaving behind the open moor the tramway descends into Yarner Woods, the site of a significant fire not so long ago although Mother Nature has reclaimed her own and there is now little to suggest how much destruction there was. Through Yarner the route of the tramway becomes a public footpath known as the 'Templer Way' and travels through a truly beautiful stand of Beech trees. The tramway is very well preserved in this section and a nicely carved '5' mile marker stone stands proudly to one side indicating the distance from it to the start of the Stover Canal.



Exiting Yarner Woods the tramway gets hidden as it runs through private property and eventually becomes evident again on the side of the old road down to Bovey where at one point it crosses a stream by means of a small clapper bridge. We followed this road into the outskirts of Bovey Tracey but now the tramway has all but disappeared in amongst all the urban development. The last indicator of this incredible means of transport is the '3' mile marker sadly propped up along the line of some old garages. A very short distance from this

marker is 'Pottery Pond' which we stopped to view.

Pottery Pond was a highly significant feature of the Bovey Tracey pottery industry which operated from 1775 until 1965.



The pond was the result of ball clay extraction, the clay itself resulting from the slow degradation of Dartmoor granite. This clay was highly prized and was even used by Joshua Wedgewood. The pond at one time was used to power 5 watermills but today it is a protected nature reserve and home to a rich variety of native plants and animals. Returning to the centre of Bovey, by now the weather had brightened considerably turning into a fine afternoon; we paid a visit to a small workshop behind a woollen goods retail outlet where the

owner was working demonstrating his skill as a weaver on some very ancient man-powered looms and spinning machines.

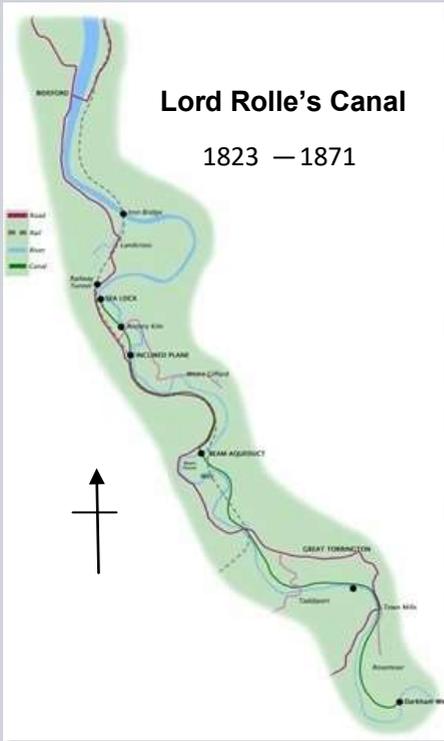
After listening to the weaver explain the function of his machines he then gave us a quick demonstration of how he worked them. At this point we thanked Mike and Mo' Wright for leading us on such an interesting walk, parted company with them and Mike Moore, returning home to Bideford wearier but much wiser people.

**Report from Adrian Wills**

## DOWN THE CUT What's **planned for 2011?**

- **For those who missed the guided walk along the Haytor Tramway it will be repeated.**
- **A guided walk to Pentewyn and Pons Mills in Cornwall.**
- **A guided walk around Bideford with special reference to its maritime history by Barry Hughes.**
- **An illustrated talk by local author, 'Liz Shakespeare on the social history of the late 19thC and researching family histories.**
- **An illustrated talk by Harry Juniper on the Pottery industry of Bideford.**
- **A joint exhibition with the Bude Canal & Harbour Society and the Bude Canal Trust on some of the works of James Green.**

Dates for these events yet to be decided. Watch this space!



The views expressed by contributors in this publication are not necessarily those of the RC&NDWS which accepts no responsibility for them.

The editor is pleased to receive contribution of articles, letters and comments from any members of the society for publication.

In order to include them in the next **RC&NDWS Bulletin** please send them, preferably as email attachments, to

[www.info@theRolleCanal.co.uk](mailto:www.info@theRolleCanal.co.uk)

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**If you feel you can be of service to the RC&NDWS in any way then please do not hesitate to make contact as above. Voluntary help in restoration, research or many simple, light administrative tasks is always in demand and welcomed.**