



The **R**oile **C**ana
& Northern Devon
Waterways Society

SOCIETY NEWS and VIEWS

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Cover picture: Flushing water through the paddle gates at Sea Lock, following a spring tide.

A. Wills November 2012

Comments from the chair

Whilst the unstable weather conditions we have been experiencing for some time now have created havoc in many areas and in different ways, progress continues to be made with work undertaken on the Rolle Canal by members of the RC&NDWS.

Volunteers working towards opening a permissive footpath along the bottom of Furzebeam Hill have achieved great results and it is anticipated that it will not be long before the path can be 'officially' opened to the public. However much still needs to be done to remove invasive vegetation from the top of the towpath to prevent further deterioration of the walls. Much of this work needs to be done during the winter when most plant life is dormant. Plans to rebuild sections of crumbling stone revetments are being considered for future projects.

Plans are being drawn up between the ND Biosphere, the Environment Agency and the North Devon Archaeology Society for archaeological investigations to take place at the foot of the inclined plane. Whilst this is not a project incorporating the RC&NDWS two of our members (but wearing different 'hats') are actively involved and hopefully will share the results of their efforts with us.

The Open Day at Sea Lock was well attended by around 85 people and as well as participation from members of the RC&NDWS and the general public, friends representing the Bude Canal & Harbour Society displayed an exhibition of pictures and text which was well received.

Also in attendance during Open Day was Peter Kelly, who is secretary to the Inland Waterways Society (West Country Branch. He took advantage of this opportunity to present a cheque to the RC&NDWS to be used for the acquisition of stone to help with the rebuilding of Sea Lock wharf wall.



This donation is very gratefully received and will be used in addition to the five tons of facing stone already kindly donated by Mr's B. & P. Setchell of Torrington Stone (Beam Quarry) which is awaiting collection. The shortage of suitable stone has been slowing the rebuild of the wharf walls considerably so these donations will be of tremendous benefit. Also benefitting from interest generated by the Open Day at Sea Lock and the developments brought about by the Life's Journey project is the membership of the RC&NDWS which is now approaching ninety!. All new members are welcomed with opened arms and it is hoped that the society will continue to keep them, as well as long-standing members, fully informed and involved with society activities and accomplishments.

Adrian Wills

The RISE and FALL of Stevenstone House

There has been a house of considerable importance at Stevenstone for over 700 years. Records dating from 1309 describe Stevenstone as having a manor house with a chapel.

In the Tudor times the Rolle family began their long association with Stevenstone following the purchase of the estate by George Rolle. However it wasn't until Mark Rolle inherited the estate that the house at Stevenstone became the largest and most magnificent in the whole of North Devon.

In 1868 Mark Rolle began building the new mansion at Stevenstone. This project was to take over four years and probably cost in the region of twenty- eight thousand pounds.

The house was remarkable being built in a 'Franco/Italian' style with the latest technologies of the age. The house had central heating, a service lift and a telephone. A gas plant provided power for all of the workshops which supported the house.

Six new drives were constructed to Stevenstone, each with its own lodge. *(described in previous articles.)*

Inside the house there was a maze of rooms including a library, a billiards room, a drawing room and twenty-seven bedrooms. There were three towers and a servants wing attaching the house to the stable block. There was even a secret tunnel!

The gardens were beautiful with rose arches, fuchsias and palms trees. There was a pinetum, a walled vegetable garden and a three hundred and seventy acre deer park.

The 1891 Census tells us that the mansion was home to the Rolle family and twenty-three servants including grooms, footmen and maids.

So what happened to Stevenstone House?

Sadly Stevenstone went the way of so many fine houses around this time in history. In the late 1800's they flourished but by the start of the next century they were found to be uneconomic and unmanageable. The First World War changed society in so many ways and servants were taken from service to either fight or take on new roles elsewhere.

Mark Rolle died in 1907. He had two married daughters but neither of them had children and they both lived elsewhere. Stevenstone passed to Mark's nephew. However he was already busy with the Bicton and Clinton estates so he put Stevenstone up for sale.

Captain and Mrs Clemson bought Stevenstone in 1912. The house was far too large for their needs so the main tower, one of the corner towers and the whole of the east front were removed. Captain Clemson was killed in World War One and Mrs Clemson married Colonel B C James. When he died the estate was put up for auction in 1931.

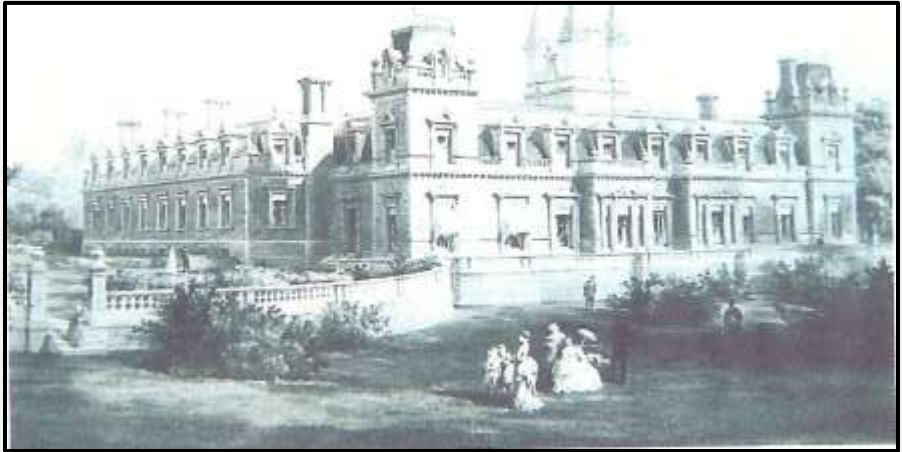
Stevenstone as a whole could not be sold, so it was put up for auction in over six hundred lots of all of its fixtures and fittings. The remaining structure was put up for sale and once again it could not be sold. The servants quarters were destroyed in order to make it more attractive. Still no buyer came forward.

During the Second World War British and later American soldiers stayed in the remaining building. Unfortunately soon

afterwards the house slowly faded away as stone, timber and brick were taken away to be used for buildings nearby.

Today very little remains of this once remarkable building. Today very little remains of this once remarkable building. Any stonework that remains is covered in ivy and is now home not to a titled family but to jackdaws and bats.

Norman Richards & Heather Attwood



Stevenstone House'. St. Giles in the Wood, circa 1872

Once famously described as the *'ugliest house in the country, built by the wealthiest man in the country'*.



Left: Rolle Walter dimidiated arms on the keystone of Stevenstone library.

Right: corridor in Stevenstone House circa 1907-12



Pictures stolen from Wikipedia.

PROGRESS AT FURZEBEAM

Wednesday, 5th September 2012

Another day of good weather gave the volunteers another opportunity to make headway on providing a permissive footpath along the section of the canal skirting Furzebeam Hill.

The towpath was trimmed with an Allen scythe and several sections were graded to provide a reasonable walking surface. It is now relatively easy for most people to walk this section of canal as long as reasonable care is taken.

It is apparent that the number of people already walking this section is increasing, and in doing so, are creating muddy sections, especially where the path has been recently carved out. To counter this, since we cannot surface it conventionally, Adrian Pope spent much of the afternoon taking smaller branches to the accommodation bridge so that next time we can use a chipper to provide a wood chip surface on these muddy patches.

One section of the stone embankment has collapsed, and although it is possible to bypass it, if it is not repaired the collapse may spread along to the next section. It is possible for volunteers to help rebuild it but consensus is that a skilled drystone wall builder is required to supervise the work.

If any one reading this knows such an artisan please give me his name and contact details.

A recent visit from the County archaeologist has led to the proposal that an exploratory dig across the canal to the north of the bridge would be useful in determining the profile, which could then be defined accurately by digging alongside the banks, hopefully exposing the stone walls.

Given a reasonable winter, it should be possible to open the towpath to the public by the summer of 2013.

Two pictures show the change brought about by the volunteers and the Life's Journey project. The provision of a

path across the sluice has completed most of the path work, which now only requires maintenance on a regular basis.

Tony Barnes



Towpath in winter 2009 A.Barnes



Drainage sluice covered Sept 2012 A.Barnes

Open Day, Annery Sea Lock / Basin

On Sunday 9th September 2012, the owners of the Annery Site opened their historic site to the public. The Bude Canal & Harbour Society and Inland Waterways Association – West Country Branch attended with a display and sales stall.

The BCHS have an affinity with the Rolle Canal, as it was the next canal that James Green, engineer and builder of the Bude Canal built, after the Bude Canal. It has a similar aspect; a tidal lock to give access to trading vessels, an inclined plane and wheel pit and used tub boats on wheels, as used on the Bude Canal.



For BCHS & IWA WC Branch it was a useful and worthwhile event to share common elements with the Rolle Canal supporters and we would look to come to the next Open Day.

Chris Jewell
Trustee
Bude Canal & Harbour Society
Registered Charity No.1086646

WEARE GIFFORD SHIPBUILDING — THE THIRD PHASE By Michael Guegan.

Between 1840 and 1842 the next three vessels to be built at Weare Gifford were all registered as having been built by George Braginton who was by this time, along with William Tardrew, the leaseholders of the Rolle Canal (see page 69 of Barry Hughes book '*Rolle Canal and the North Devon limestone trade*').

The launch of the first vessel the sloop *Fanny* in 1840 did not make the local paper, but both the second and third did and within the reports were a few snippets of information about the yard itself. In the May 27th 1841 issue of the North Devon Journal the launch of the brig *George Vicary* was recorded as being from the new yard of William Tardrew close to the entrance of the Rolle Canal, facing Weare Gifford near the old Manor house. Just over twelve months later the brig *Clara* went into the river, again the builder being named as George Braginton, it being stated that this was his third vessel and also that a few years previous Mr Tardrew had built seven more; amazingly the numbers given were correct and are of course all verifiable. Unfortunately the name of the master builder who actually built the three vessels has been long forgotten.

Now to the vessels themselves :-

The sloop '**FANNY**'

The first of the three vessels was the sloop *Fanny*. She was recorded in the Bideford registry book on July 1st 1840 as having been built at Annery by the aforementioned George Braginton. She was small being only 44 feet 5 inches long with

a tonnage of 35 3116/3500 and having a square stern with a running bowsprit.

Her owners were George Braginton, merchant of Saint Giles and William Tardrew, esquire of Monkleigh, each holding 32 shares. Just three years later she was re-registered having been completely rebuilt, being lengthened to 56 feet 8 inches which increased her tonnage to 52 3483/3500. She also had a second mast fitted, carried a schooner rig and now had a fixed bowsprit. These alterations would have made her completely unrecognisable from when she was new. Her owners remained as before, until in quick succession between February 1856 and February 1857 she changed hands several times.

Louisa Tardrew, the executrix of William Tardrew sold his half of the *Fanny* to George Braginton. In turn he sold the whole of the vessel to James Nancekivell-Mills, a local merchant, who then, only two months later, passed her on to a mariner named Samuel Ching and an innkeeper, Charles Snow, both of Barnstaple. On May 13th 1857 the schooner *Fanny* was transferred to her new owner's home port of Barnstaple. From now, until she was broken up in 1899, she changed hands on a regular basis, her final owners being Maria Kemp, widow, who had inherited 32 shares from her late husband; and John Warren Kemp who was probably her son.

The last mention I have of her was in the Bideford Gazette of December 8th 1891 when it was recorded that the ketch *Fanny* of Barnstaple had been blown ashore and damaged, near the cricket pitch at Instow, during the recent hurricane.

Unusually, during 1869 her second mast was removed and she was again rigged as a sloop. During 1885 and following the then current North Devon fashion, a second mast was again

added and this time she became a ketch. She was a true local coaster and during all her sixty years of existence she probably never left the Bristol Channel and could regularly be found in the arrivals and departures of the local shipping columns.

The '**GEORGE VICARY**'

The second vessel was, as noted earlier the *George Vicary* and she was a totally different vessel when compared to the *Fanny*. Her dimensions were 60.7 feet long x 17.4 beam x 10.7 feet depth of hold. She was rigged as a snow, had a square stern, a standing bowsprit and sported a boy figurehead.

Her owners were again Braginton and Tardrew with 32 shares each. Despite the fact that she was rigged as a snow and sported a figurehead she was still only a coaster, which meant that she could only work around the coast of the United Kingdom and the near Europe ports, as there is no evidence that she was ever copper bottomed for deep water work. She was re-registered again at Bideford in 1845, after her rig was cut down to that of a schooner.

Her long term master, James Tatum of Appledore purchased 8 shares (4 from each of the original owners) in November 1845, a purchase he soon had cause to regret, for barely a year later she was lost. She had departed from Appledore on November 16th 1846 and shortly after encountered a snow storm. With visibility down to zero the *George Vicary* carried on only to run ashore a few hours later near St Gowans Head near Milford. Fortunately all the crew were saved but the schooner herself soon became a total wreck. Lloyds List gives her voyage as from Newport to Dublin with coals, if this is

correct the *George Vicary* must have stopped off at Appledore on the way over to Dublin, but again I cannot verify this.

‘CLARA’

Although the *Clara*, which was registered at Bideford on August 24th 1842, was only rigged as a schooner, she was, in fact, 5 feet longer than the *George Vicary*. Her vital dimensions were 65 feet long x 17.6 beam and 10.9 depth of hold, which, except for the extra 5 feet in length would make the *Clara* and the *George Vicary* very near sisters, although the new vessel did not carry a figurehead. Her owners were much as before with George Braginton and William Tardrew holding 24 shares each and Richard Braginton, described as a ‘gentleman’ of Torrington holding the remaining 16.

The *Clara* traded for only a brief five years with her original owners before being sold to William Wearne, and George Morton, both of St Ives and owning 48 and 16 shares respectively. These men were both well known and respected in the maritime community at this time, having purchased both new and second hand vessels from north Devon owners and builders.

The first thing the new owners did was to have a figurehead (a woman figure) fitted. William Wearne died in 1848 only a year after purchasing the vessel, but his executors held onto the shares until 1853 when they were sold to George Morton, who along with his wife, were in fact two of the nine executors. This made him the sole owner until 1862 when he sold the *Clara* to John Grenfell, master mariner of St Ives. In July 1887 John Grenfell sold her to ‘The Brazilian Coal Company Limited’ of Cardiff. This was the beginning of her longest voyage ever as up to now she had always been employed coasting. Probably carrying a cargo of coal she sailed for Brazil, where she was

transferred to the Brazilian flag to an as yet unidentified Brazilian port. Her registry at St Ives was cancelled on March 24th 1888 and that is as far as I have managed to trace her. Any later information would be welcome.



Of these three vessels only one illustration has been found, but what a lovely photo it is. The picture shows the sloop *Fanny* moored against Castle Quay almost certainly in 1871 with the planked hull of the barque *Standard Bearer* on the stocks across the river.

Michael Guegan

Editors Note: Michael has been kind enough to promise an article in the future in which he will attempt to provide a brief and simple explanation of the complexities by which vessels' dimensions and tonnage was calculated, since when written down they seem somewhat mystifying to the layman.



A closer view, showing incredible detail, of the shipyards at Seven Brethren Banks, Barnstaple, looking upstream, extracted from the photograph of the sloop 'Fanny' on the previous page.

Circa 1871

Walls, wheels and paddles

By **Adrian Wills.**

There has been a great deal of activity at Sea Lock this year one way or another. Not only has the rebuilding of the wharf wall progressed considerably despite the shortage of suitable stone but work on the tub-boat building project has made massive steps forward and the 1930's reed cutting paddle boat has also undergone tremendous changes.

The butty tub-boat is very nearly finished. All the elbows and knees have been bolted into place; planking and boards trimmed and chamfered but most exciting of all is the fact that all four wheels are now firmly bolted into position, turning smoothly on their axles. The bottom of the boat has been given one coat of bitumastic paint and awaits a second. When this

has been done and the paint given time to dry the RB crane will be employed to raise and turn over the boat which is at present lying upside down so that the wheels could be installed. Most of the caulking required has been completed so all that is needed for the side planking is a final coat of preservative and the first tub-boat to be built at Sea Lock in nearly 150 years will be ready for launching!



Barry Hughes and I have spent some time in deciding the best way to launch the tub-boat. Side-launching boats into canals was quite a common method in the past since usually there is insufficient width in the canal to allow for the traditional stern first as with most sea-going boats. However, since the tub boat was not built on ways, craning the boat in is probably the most simple and efficient means in this instance.

Nothing has been planned yet but there will be some form of ceremony held to celebrate the completion and launching of the boat and to acknowledge the time and effort given to achieve this end. Details will be made available when the auspicious moment is decided.

The paddle-boat is also nearing completion having undergone major surgery. The steel cladding on the bottom of the boat was found to be rusting very badly when it was decided to

sand it down and give it a new coat of paint. The solution was to cut out the whole of the bottom and replace it with new steel. This required stripping virtually everything out of the hull so that it could be turned over.

Trevor Fordham and Steve Blazey set to work with wrenches, spanners and screwdrivers and before long the boat was looking decidedly undressed. Once it had been turned upside down (not easily done!), John Gordon began cutting out the rusting metal with a large angle-grinder. Soon he had hacked away all that had to be replaced. Next Steve cleaned all the surfaces to be re-joined ready for John to apply his welding skills. Once John had cut to shape and welded the new metal in place it was given coats of primer and bitumastic paint and once again lifted and turned over.



Now the paddle boat was the right way up Trevor and Steve rapidly re-instated all the bits of engine and paddle-drive mechanism that they had previously stripped down, cleaned, greased and done all the other necessary bits of repair and maintenance to get all working well again.

New paddle blades of marine-grade plywood have been made to replace the old and splitting wooden ones: maybe not

quite authentic but more efficient and hopefully with a longer period before they require replacing again.

The engine cooling system is having to be altered since it has not been marinized and the tidal water in the basin of Lord Rolle's Canal is salty. Water drawn straight from the canal at this location would soon rust out the inside of the engine, so Trevor and Steve are working on installing a

sealed freshwater cooling system. The inclusion of a Jacuzzi or spa-bath was also suggested as another desirable modification but considered to be slightly frivolous!

We are now seeking a volunteer to test-drive the paddle boat once it is finished. I suggested Trevor might like the job but he is not too keen on that idea. I don't know why not!

Any takers?





The RC&NDWS always welcomes volunteers who are prepared to help with a wide variety of society activities. Many of these tasks do not require long term commitment or massive physical ability but are all equally important to the successful running of the society. If you feel you can help in any way then please do not hesitate to make contact with the committee through the address below:

Our archives Officer, Norman Richards, is always looking for material, maps, pictures or text, relating to the Rolle family and canal. If you have anything which may be of interest to him, please contact hi by email at norm@fhsinternet.com or at the address given below:



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