



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

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Comments from the Chair

The Rolle Canal & Northern Devon Waterways is now in its 9th year of existence. Since its inauguration in 2003 it has achieved a great deal in fulfilling its aims of raising the profile and awareness of the Rolle Canal.

Most of this has been achieved by the quiet determination of the committee and a few stalwart volunteers.

This year, thanks to funds awarded from the Heritage Lottery Fund to Life's Journey, an ambitious scheme to highlight aspects of the Tarka Trail and to which the RC&NDWS is heavily committed, matters are about to take a massive leap forwards.

Work has already started and a viewing platform overlooking the Sea Lock is just about complete. Trees have been cleared to improve the view and others have been selected for felling along the Furzebeam section where a permissive footpath is being planned.

Our society has now to start honouring its promises to provide guided walks, offer illustrated talks and hold exhibitions for the general public as well as our members but we require considerable help with a number of activities. Not only do we need volunteers to help 'scrub-bashing' at the site of the inclined plane and the Furzebeam section but for other tasks as well. We need assistance with providing guides to help lead walks for which we can offer training. People skilled at research or record keeping in digital or written formats, are required so if you or any of your friends enjoy looking through old records and archives, or can use a digital still or video camera, we can use you. Contact details are published on the back page.

Whilst the Rolle Canal is receiving a considerable 'uplift' it is a shame, as pointed out by Chris Hassall in his enclosed article (pages 12 -14) that just across the water at Braunton another site of historic interest is under severe threat of demolition. Perhaps with more public awareness the local authority may have a change of mind and find the necessary funding from somewhere.

On Sunday 26th February (sorry for the very short notice!) it is the **Bude Canal & Harbour Society AGM** to be held at the Falcon Hotel at 2.30. This is to be followed by a talk presented by Robert Evans on Pentewan. Robert Evans has already spoken to the RC&NDWS and last year led a group around the village itself. Both events were very enjoyable and highly informative. So if you missed him before this is a second chance to hear his fascinating and very personal account of life in a Cornish village.

The **IWA (West Country branch) AGM** is being held on March 24th 2012. Meeting at 10.00am, at Nynehead, this is an opportunity to view the works undertaken by Dennis Dodd on the remains of Nynehead Boat lift on the Grand Western Canal. Dennis has been working on this project for a number of years and has recently benefitted from a Higher Level Stewardship Grant for it.

The visit to the lift will be followed by lunch at 'The Marlet' public house and then the AGM. What with the controversy created by British Waterways over hiving off many of its responsibilities this is an opportunity for more general public opinion to be voiced to try and get a better deal for the future of our waterways.

Our own AGM is to be held on Sunday, April 15th. **Please note that subscription fees for this year are coming up for renewal.**

A VIEW TO THE FUTURE?

Now that funding has been granted work on the project of Life's Journey has started with a bang. Once the New Year celebrations were put out of the way a gang of contractors started excavating a large 'wedge' out of the side of the Tarka Trail overlooking the site of the Sea Lock.



X marks the spot?

Within a very short time a deep, flat based depression had been dug and wire baskets known as gabions, were being fabricated and placed in it to form the basis of a viewing platform.

The gabions were soon filled with large stones and any gaps behind back-filled with ballast. Having secured a fence to the sides of the platform all that was left was to top the surface with tarmac and the job was finished. However at this time it was only possible *to see the Wood AND the trees!* A couple of very tall trees each with considerable canopies were obscuring the view of the Sea Lock below and had to go.



Filling gabions with stone.



A job for those tired of living?

A company specialising in felling were employed and before long the offending trees had been removed.

This was not completed without some difficulty, however. The trees could not be felled in one piece but had to be taken down in sections which meant climbing each tree and sawing using a chainsaw whilst suspended by a climbing harness.

Good fun when it's drizzling heavily, you have a running chainsaw attached to you and you are suspended many feet above the ground.

The front cover of this issue of the RC&NDWS newsletter shows Hilary Wills, Norman Richards and Trevor Fordham standing on the newly completed platform watching as one of the tree-fellers hangs, apparently by his fingernails, from the top of the remains of the last tree to go.

However the guys involved made it all look very easy and after only two days the trees



were cleared. Whilst it is a shame to lose any mature trees, these were not particularly good specimens, self-seeded and had the railway still been in operation wouldn't have been there in the first place. The wood will not go to waste since it is planned to have it sawn into planks and the timber used in the replica tub-boat construction.



Now that the trees have gone, the view down to Sea Lock is very good and that down the valley is truly stunning.

Article by A.Wills

Further exploration of THE STEVENSTONE ESTATE

Continuing with our investigation into one of the main residences of the Rolle family, one weekend in early summer 2011, Norman and I were very kindly invited to 'Heronslake', situated on the Stevenstone Estate, by Dr Jean Tyler.

The original name of 'Heronslake' was 'The Old Saw Yard' and we were keen to find out more about it.

Stevenstone is in the parish of St. Giles-in-the-Wood. This was our first indication that in the past timber might have played an important part in this community.

Further pointers were soon discovered!

The Gardeners Magazine of 1843 stated that 'Stevenstone is a very old place, chiefly remarkable for very large trees.'

In the *White's Directory* of 1890 it stated that 'Stevenstone House stands in a park of about 370 acres which is well stocked with deer and contains fine timber.'

A report in *The Western Times*, published on 29th May 1931, described Stevenstone House as 'overlooking a magnificently timbered park.'

The Stevenstone Estate had a nursery on the edge of St Giles village and a photograph in the *Old Beaford Archive* shows estate workers planting young trees. Further research has told us that below 'Heronslake', the Leighty Water stream flowed through a beech-wooded valley.



Immediately surrounding 'Heronlake' were a great number of large conifers which prior to World War II were home to a colony of red squirrels.

In the late nineteenth century located here at 'The Old Saw Yard' was a game-keeper's cottage, a butcher's shop, a gas generating plant, a saw mill and various outhouses grouped about a central, cobbled yard enclosed within stone walls.

Many of the cottages at Leighty Water provided homes for the saw yard workers. The 1881 and 1891 censuses describe many residents of St Giles as being employed as carpenters, sawyers, foresters and woodmen.

In the last twenty-five years of the nineteenth century this little valley would have been bustling with timber being brought in from all corners of the estate to be sawn up at the mill and passed on to the workshops.

By the 1940's 'The Old Saw Yard' had become a large barn and one dwelling house stood surrounded by ruined walls barn and one dwelling house stood surrounded by ruined walls foreign trees and the plantations had gone, cleared away by timber merchants from Bideford and Torrington and replaced by wide cornfields.

Dr Tyler kindly allowed us to explore her magnificent barn to find out about its structure and use. Fortunately it was built at a time when labour and material were cheap and it remains surprisingly solid and intact.



'The Old Saw Yard'.

The barn was designed to be used as a timber-shed and saw-pit. It is thirty feet wide and one hundred and twenty feet long. It is built of stone and is slate-roofed. There are regularly spaced supporting roof beams which make an open lattice-work of the gable space. The eastern entrance, through a wide arch,

is on ground level but to the west where the land is sloped, the barn is supported on brick pillars and arches. Massive oak beams hold up the floor and under the building are large storage areas. Inside is a vast area and a large solid stone plinth which would have housed the saw.



Unfortunately we have not managed to find any photographs of 'The Old Saw Yard' in its heyday. If anyone has anything further that could help us with our research we would love to hear from them.

Article by Heather Attwood & Norman Richards.

Editor's note: Norman is the Archives Officer for the RC&NDWS. He will be delighted to receive any information or illustrations relating to his and Mrs Attwood's research of the Stevenstone Estate, or any other matter concerning the Rolle Family or the Rolle Canal.

Contact details are published on the back page of this newsletter.

HISTORIC STRUCTURE IN JEOPARDY!

Velator Quay was built in about 1855 when the River Caen, Northern Devon's other canalised waterway, was straightened and opened up to navigation, allowing large ocean-going sailing ships to reach Braunton for the first time. The engineer was Nicholas Whitley, working for the Williams Estate of Heanton, and this was some 40 years after James Green's initial works of embanking the Braunton Marshes to claim the land for agriculture.

The quay was built on two levels, the higher or "Big Quay" convenient for loading the larger trading vessels and the lower quay for smaller fishing boats and especially the sand barges that regularly brought in cargoes of sand and gravel from the outer estuary for unloading at high tide.



The last sailing barge 'Hilde' unloading gravel at Velator Quay c 1946

Picture courtesy of the North Devon Maritime Trust

Now, after over 150 years of service. the big quay has been declared unsafe since its wooden piles and facings have deteriorated allowing the tide to flow in and out washing away the earth infill behind. Seen from the top, all appears sound, but an engineering survey has revealed that the stone surface, on which cars parked until the closure in 2008, could collapse at any time.

The quay is the responsibility of Braunton Parish Council who have no funds to pay for repairs which could cost hundreds of thousands of pounds, so they have decided the only safe solution is to “naturalise” the quay, which means removing the big quay altogether and returning it to the profile of the rest of the mud and grass riverbank so no further maintenance will be necessary. Braunton Council and North Devon Council have apparently exhausted all possible sources of heritage funding and the quay has no legal protection as a heritage or archaeological feature so the planning authority have given consent for the demolition work to take place. Even this procedure will cost many tens of thousands so there will be some respite while the council seeks funds to finance the work.



Velator Quay 2009: Photo by Chris Hassall

The lower quay and the small slipway alongside will remain, no doubt along with the numerous modern and less modern boats that now litter the riverside in various states of decay, but it is sad that the big quay, with

its history of Braunton's important maritime past in the great days of sail, extending even after World War 2, will soon remain only in memories and photographs.

It is also, perhaps, ironic that while the Sea Lock on the Rolle Canal is undergoing ambitious restoration, Northern Devon's other nineteenth century navigation is losing its major heritage feature.

Article by Chris Hassall.



Vessels moored against Velator Quay C.1950.

The nearest is the Ketch 'Woodcock' with the Motor Barge 'Spec' between her and the Ketch 'Bessie'.

Photo by Stanley Rogers - courtesy of North Devon Museum Trust

NO WHEELS ON MY WAGON (Yet)!

The Replica Tub-boat Project continues

Work on the replica tub-boat construction project has slowed somewhat over the past few weeks partly due to the intervention of Christmas and New Year Festivities and also the weather conditions. The ground surrounding the tub-boat build has at times seemed more like a rice paddy than a firm working surface. However, this is not to say that there has been no progress.

Barry has been 'beavering' away on the wood-turning lathe in his workshop and has produced an exact wooden replica tub-boat wheel. Hilary, Trevor and I made a flying visit, taking Barry's template, to the foundry of the Blist's Hill Victorian Village Museum. I had arranged for the foundry-master to use it to make a mould into which he could later cast molten iron.



The foundry-master was initially quite concerned about whether he could do the job because of the large dimensions of the wheel despite the fact that he and I had discussed it over the 'phone. Anyway he said that he would give it a go and let me know how he was getting on. Due to other jobs he

already had time-tabled he could only produce the 8 wheels that I require over a series of weeks following Christmas.

We were able to watch as the foundry-master and his helper poured a number of castings before they eventually, and in a spectacular manner, emptied the blast furnace once all the moulds were full



New template in foreground, original wheel and bearing in background.

It was along journey there and back from Bideford in one day but it was a very interesting and productive day. It was a pity that we had insufficient time to look around the museum because it is a fascinating place.

Not all the wheels have been cast yet but I understand that he has sorted out the technical difficulties and succeeded in casting some. Fortunately for him the couple of failures that he initially had were literally thrown back into the melting pot. Only time was wasted which is still bad enough!

Trevor and I have cut more timber to finish cladding the sides and ends of the tub-boat but not all are permanently fixed yet. We have been fixing the boards with 4inch long square, wrought nails and have run short. Like the wheels these are not easily sourced from the local hardware store so I am searching for a supplier through the Internet.



Casting molten iron at the Blist's Hill Victorian Museum Foundry.

The poor, wet weather may have prevented working outside for a while but the cold is not always a problem.

Hammering the hefty nails through 2 inches of softwood
Hammering the hefty nails through 2 inches of softwood



4 inch wrought ,ship nails

If anyone knows a local source of such nails I would be delighted to hear from them. Contact details are on the back page of this newsletter.

A.Wills.

WEARE GIFFORD SHIPBUILDING

The First Phase (Part 1)

Michael Guegan, present chair of The North Devon Museum Trust, provides a fascinating and detailed account of the various vessels built at Sea Lock during the early 19th Century

First, a confession! Most of my knowledge of the history of the Rolle Canal comes from Barry Hughes' excellent book '**Rolle Canal and The North Devon Limestone Trade**'. My interest is in shipbuilding in North Devon which, of course, includes Weare Gifford. Chapter eight of Barry's book covers the ship yards at Annery (or Sea Locks as they were usually referred to) and it is my intention in this and subsequent articles to expand on the life of the vessels built at Sea Locks.

All the readers of the Rolle Canal and Northern Devon Waterways Society are, I assume, familiar with the fact that the Rolle Canal Company invested during four distinct phases, the building of fourteen vessels entirely for its own use and financed by it or its directors.

This first article examines the first six vessels covering the period 1827 to 1830. It is not my intention to repeat Barry's book, so I will concentrate on the ships and their history starting, of course, with the first - the '**Louisa**' or '**Lady Rolle**'.

The North Devon Journal of March 29th 1827 announced 'The *Louisa* brig launched by Tardrew near the mouth of the Rolle canal'. This was the first of six vessels at this yard and was named after the wife of Lord Rolle. As someone once suggested perhaps *Louisa* was too familiar because when she was registered at the Bideford Customs House on April 19th of that year the builder was correctly identified as a William

Hutchings but with her name changed to the definitive '**The Lady Rolle**'.

From the next and subsequent registrations the '*The*' was dropped although it was probably a mistake by the registrar at the time.

However, on to the specifications of *Lady Rolle*.

Built by William Hutchings and registered at Bideford on April 19th 1827 number 7. She was 63 feet 2 inches long by 19 feet beam and a depth of 10 feet 4 inches

Tonnage 92 41/94 tons 1 deck square rigged (i.e. a brig)
2 masts a standing bowsprit a square stern
and no (figure) head.

Her ownership was held in its entirety by William Tardrew, esquire of Annery House, Monkleigh, owning all 64/64 shares.

A further registry of November 10th 1831 gives only three changes: her rig was specified as a brig, her name was corrected to *Lady Rolle* and that William Tardrew was an esquire of Monkleigh

The next registry was on September 4th 1838. This was a compulsory re-registry due to a change in the way of measuring the vessels to determine their tonnage from 1836 on. As soon as a change in the vessel or her owners occurred after 1836 she had to be re-registered, so in 1838 the following appeared in the Bideford ship registered:-

'Lady Rolle', Built by William Hutchings and registered on September 4th 1838, number 16

Details: 60.2 foot long, 16.9 feet beam and 10.4 feet depth of hold. Her tonnage was altered under the 1836 Rule to 80

811/3500 tons. Under this new measurement all dimensions were in feet and decimal feet. A special ruler divided twelve inches into 10 decimal fractions and the Customs Officers were given new instructions of how and where to measure a vessel. The ship itself was not altered. Many people get confused by this but it was just a change in procedure.

William Tardrew was still the sole owner until October 27th 1846 when he sold half (32 shares) of the vessel to George Braginton, merchant of Torrington.

There were no other entries except changes of masters, the last being Robert Bowden who took over as master on December 28th 1852. Her registry was cancelled with the notation 'Vessel lost with all hands' and no date was given.

From here on it becomes a mystery, I can find nothing more about her. 'Being lost with all hands' which would usually turn up something, but even the Lloyds List 'the bible of ship wrecks' has nothing nor does the North Devon Journal, usually a good source, has any mention of her.

The last reference to her was in the Royal Cornwall Gazette of August 4th 1854 when it was stated that she had arrived at Charlestown (Cornwall) from Saundersfoot (Wales) with a cargo of coal. The vessel's crew list, held at the National Archives at Kew, also stops here. As there was no official number issued it suggests she was lost sometime before June 1855. I am still searching.

The second vessel Hutchings completed for Tardrew in 1827 was the '**Stevenstone**'. She was rigged as a smack with one mast and a running bowsprit. Her dimensions were 54feet 9½inches x 17feet 2½inches x 8feet 10½inches with a tonnage

of 67 69/94 tons. Two years later a second mast was installed, she became a schooner and probably looked very similar to the '**Hudscott**'.

In November 1837 Tardrew sold 37 shares of which 27 went to George Bragington and the remainder to Davis and George Arthur of Neath. I hope that they were well insured as the registration was soon cancelled 'lost in 1838'.

The North Devon Journal of Thursday, December 6th 1838 (and Lloyds List, although they called her '**Stevenson**') gives the details:- '**The Stevenstone**', Fisher master of Bideford, with coal from Swansea for Plymouth, bought up in the Mount Road yesterday before daybreak, too late upon the tide, and soon after went ashore on the August Rocks, Marizion, and became a total wreck; the crew most miraculously saved themselves in the boat"

(Part 2 of **The First Phase** to follow in the next RC&NDWS newsletter)



Editor's Note:

While there are no illustrations of the vessel

'**Lady Rolle**', there is a portrait of the lady herself:-

Lady Louisa Barbara Rolle
(1796-1885). By Sir Thomas

Lawrence P.R.A. and probably finished on his death by Mrs. Robertson.

Great Torrington Portrait
Collection

Down the Cut!

2012 DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Sunday, February 26th

Bude Canal & Harbour Society AGM.

For further details contact Bude Canal & Harbour Society at Ebbinford Manor, Vicarage Road, Bude EX23 8LN.

Phone: 01288 352808

Sunday March 24th

A visit to the Nynhead Boat lift on the Grand Western Canal followed by the **IWA (West country Branch) AGM**

For further details, including booking lunch, contact Jane Pilgrim at jane@tabra99.eclipse.co.uk

Sunday April 15th

Rolle Canal & Northern Devon Waterways Society

AGM Starting at 2.30 in the Woodland Classroom of RHS

Rosemoor Gardens, followed by an Illustrated talk by local and well-respected potter **Harry Juniper** on 'North Devon pottery from 17th Century until present day.'

Wednesday May 23rd

An afternoon guided-walk around Braunton Burrows looking at the flora and fauna of the area as well as the marsh drainage system built by engineer James Green is planned. An illustrated talk on the same topic is planned for that evening but as yet has to be confirmed.

Details of both events will be advertised as soon as possible.

Sunday June 17th

An afternoon guided-walk from Annery Kiln to the site of the inclined plane and wheel pit. It is hoped that work on clearing this site of invasive plants undertaken by volunteers will have been started by this time and there will be much to see of the remains of this once impressive mechanism. Details to follow.

On a **Sunday in July** it is proposed that a 'Tarka Trail Day' is held. Volunteers from the society will be asked to 'man' vantage points along the Tarka Trail where they can distribute information sheets about Lord Rolle's Canal to users of the trail, talk about its history and highlight what can be seen.

The date of this event has not been set and is likely to be held with fairly short notice since it will be very dependant on the weather forecast.

The date of this event has not been set and is likely to be held with fairly short notice since it will be very dependant on the weather forecast.

Volunteers for this event will be greatly welcomed.

Sunday August 19th

Meeting in the woodland car park for a 2 o'clock start there will be a guided walk from RHS Rosemoor Gdns to the head of the leat at Healand Weir, returning through the wildlife wood to the remains of the tucking mill and the lime kiln complex. There is then chance to visit the formal gardens and have a cup of tea in the Rosemoor tearooms.

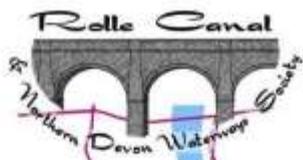
Sunday September 9th Heritage Day at Sea Lock

This site will be open to the general public from 11.00 pm until 5.00pm. This is a great opportunity to see at close quarters the progress of this restoration project and view one or two rather unusual historic artefacts in storage there.

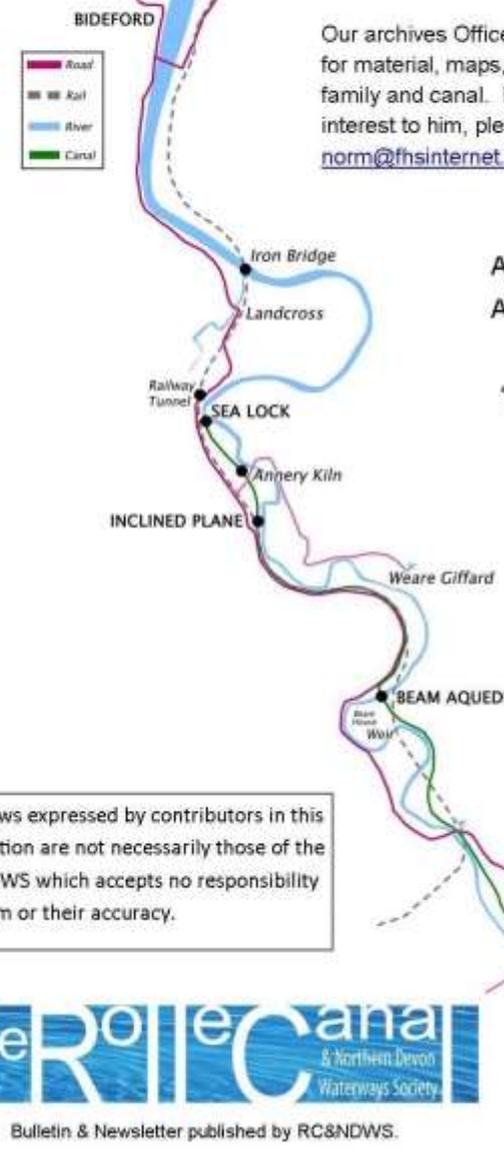
Entrance is free but refreshments will be on sale.

Sunday September 29th

A guided walk along the Bude Canal and an opportunity to see inside the vast Hobbacott wheel pit . Details to follow.



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 him by email at norm@fhsinternet.com or at the address given below:

All other enquiries to the Chair --
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