



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

SOCIETY NEWS and VIEWS

WINTER ISSUE
February 2014

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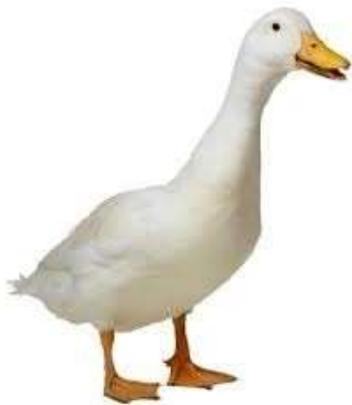
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Thoughts from the Chair

Several years ago, when I first became interested, and later, involved in the restoration of Lord Rolle's Canal, I was contacted by a local newspaper employee asking if a photographer could visit the restoration site of Sea Lock to take pictures for a forth-coming article. I was pleased to agree to this request but asked if any help was required in providing background information on the history and purpose of the canal. I was told that one of our committee members had already furnished a full explanation. This particular member is very knowledgeable about the canal's history so I was satisfied that all would be well. The article was duly published and when I read it, I was horrified by the gross inaccuracies of the supposed 'facts', which just goes to prove that you should never believe everything you read in newspapers!

According to the article, the main function of Lord Rolle's canal was to alleviate local flooding! If this was the case then it failed abysmally and no wonder it had a short-lived existence. This, of course was not the case, and the committee member was totally unaware of the article until he read himself, so where the 'facts' came from (possibly Mars), is unknown. Never mind, all was put right eventually.



It is somewhat ironic, however, when it is considered that one of the main problems for the canal, when it was operating, was a general dearth of water supply

Short of water at the moment, we are not and significant amounts of it are accumulating in depressions along the in-filled bed of the canal . Along with many other areas of our country, much of the low-lying meadows of the River Torridge are also under water.

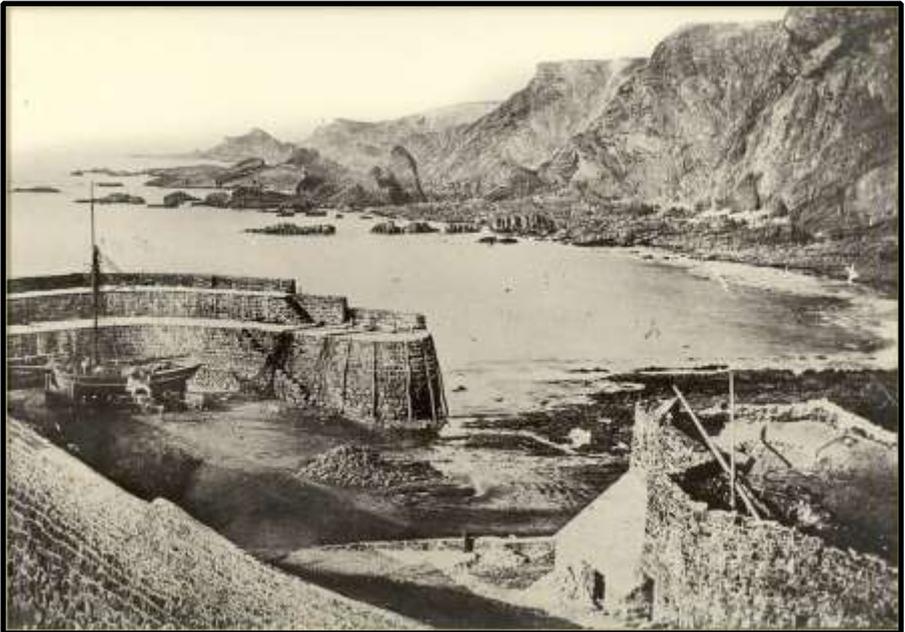
I hope readers of this newsletter find the following images, that I took of the River Torridge and lower canal in flood, this year of interest.





View upstream from the main road junction at Landcross . Jan 2014.

Whether or not one believes in global warming, it is indisputable that Britain has, and in the not-so distant past, been ravaged by many monster storms.



A favourite photograph of mine (above), and one I often refer to when presenting illustrated talks on the Rolle Canal and the Limestone Trade, is of Hartland Quay. This massive stone sea-wall was swept away in the great storm of 1887 and today, there is little remaining evidence of it ever existing.



Continuing with the theme of wet and stormy weather, it is quite coincidental that Norman Richards has sent in an article on the ill-fated pier of Woody Bay. Pier today, gone tomorrow, one might say! *(Sorry, but it does get worse!)*

Most of the articles in this newsletter seem to have got, quite unintentionally, a topical theme running through them *(like water!)* - flooding, storm damage, family connections and dredging!

But then I suppose for a canal society it is only proper that matters flow through. *(See what I mean?)*

I know I frequently 'bang on' about volunteering, but please be aware that our AGM looms (April 27th) and that this is an opportunity for our committee to acquire new blood. Should you wish to join the committee, or want to propose someone else, then please complete the inserted nomination form and return it to the secretary, no later than Monday, April 14th, to the address printed on the back page.

I would also like to remind RC&NDWS members of the **IWA Trail Boat Festival, 24th — 26th May** at Tiverton. This is a grand opportunity to showcase our society and its activities but assistance is needed to man displays, distribute our free guides to our canal, and for chatting to 'foreigners' about us. The committee desperately needs your help for this occasion. Don't be backward in coming forward. Any volunteered time is gratefully accepted.

Contact details are on the back page.

Adrian Wills

Ps. It's alright for ducks, they're waterproof!

Notice of AGM.

The **Annual General Meeting** of the

ROLLE CANAL

& the

NORTHERN DEVON WATERWAYS SOCIETY

Is to be held on

Sunday, 27th April 2014

In the

**Lecture Room of RHS Rosemoor Gardens
Torrington.**

Starting at **2.00pm.**

The meeting will be followed by an Illustrated talk
on

***‘Pinkery Pond & the Pinkery Canal
an Exmoor Enigma’***

by **Dr. Graham Wills**

Entrance is free of charge and those attending are welcome to visit
the **Gardens** and **National Rhododendron Show** afterwards.



WOODY BAY PIER

yet more storm damage

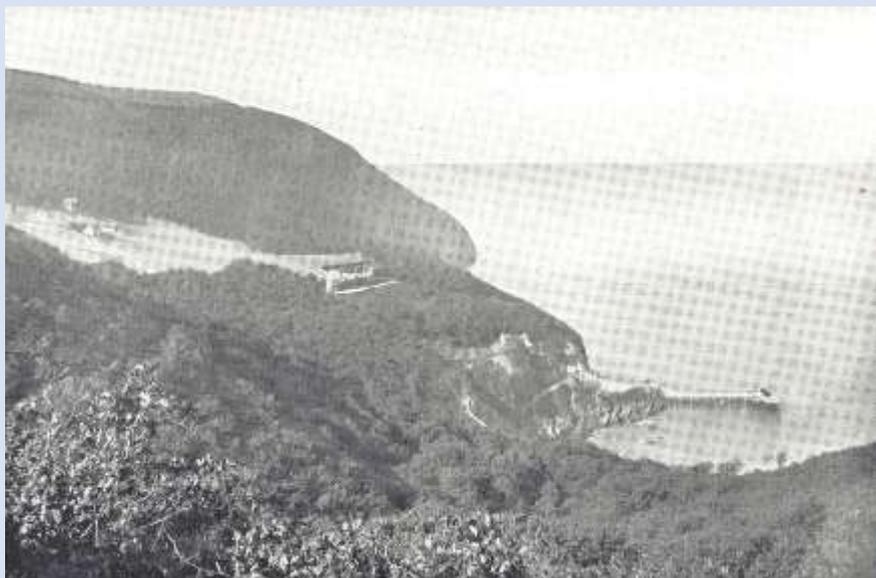
This pier once proudly stood, feet in water, about 2 miles west of Lynton, on the North Devon coast. Although there is no connection with any canal, it did, never-the-less, serve the coastal sea traffic. The land was bought in 1895 and construction started. By 1897 the pier was completed and operational.

The base of the pier was of concrete and stone (probably limestone) with a high wooden structure for the main pier platform. The transverse section, on the end, was beyond the concrete base and was so designed to give it strength and to keep the pleasure steamers from drifting onto the rocks when docking.

The whole idea was the brainchild of a London solicitor called Colonel Lake, who wanted to improve the tourist trade. His plans included new roads, with a link to Woody Bay station on the narrow gauge railway running between Barnstaple to Lynton (opened in 1898), new houses and a golf links. Martinhoe Manor House was converted into a hotel and its name changed to Wooda Bay for a short time, in an attempt to make it sound more attractive. The pier served the steamers (paddle and screw, I suspect) that plied the Bristol Channel and for a while, much to the consternation of the local business owners, took some trade away from Lynmouth.

In 1899, a bad storm damaged the pier and, in 1902, another storm finished it off. In it's short life it was a grand scheme but only catered for the passenger trade and did not last very long. Mr Lake had, in fact, been using his clients savings to fund this project. The money ran out and, in 1900, he was declared bankrupt and sent to prison for 12 years, owing £170,000. The roads and houses are still there. All that is left of the pier is a walled enclosure and the concrete base that can be seen at low tide. There is also an old lime kiln and a paddling pool, but the rough tides soon demolished the connecting footpath and access to the site can be difficult.

Norman Richards



Photographs showing **Woody Bay pier, Martinhoe** and the
Bristol Channel, looking north. Circa 1898



The Lower Basin of the Ridd Incline Investigation and reconstruction winter 2012-13.

The work carried out in the winter 2011, by the SW Highways Agency as described in the last edition, left us with much earth moving work to do if we were to make anything of the lower basin, but it gave us an incentive in the form of one short length of original iron rail from the incline itself. Where one rail had been found in the spoil heap left by the Highways, there might be more to be unearthed, so the immediate task was to sort through 20 tons or so of mud and rocks dumped on the site of the canal basin in Environment Agency property.

With the Life's Journey project (reported earlier) just starting up and including interpretative work on the Incline and Canal basins, there was some limited funding available and I was itching to get down to work with my 3ton tracked swing-shovel on something different from my usual farm work. As always, when mixing volunteers with public bodies, there were many hoops to jump through before permissions were eventually granted by the E.A. and NFU insurance for the machine to be used on the site, although, even then IWA insurance precluded any official involvement of RCNDWS volunteers because they wouldn't accept that after 10 years use on the farm I was competent to drive my own machine. I still have nightmares of preparing method statements, risk assessments and insurance proposals necessary when dealing with so many agencies.

Eventually, in November 2012, Tony Barnes, Greg Smith and myself were able to start work, in rapidly deepening mud, on the job of sorting the spoil heap, separating out reusable building stone for

rebuilding part of the west wall destroyed by SW Highways, and searching for more rails from the incline. The mud, now of the consistency of thick porridge, was used to build an earth bank to define the east side of the basin and provide the neighbour with extra privacy. By January, the basin was virtually scraped level, taking care not to dig down into any clay lining, and the end of the earth bank protected with dry stone facing (mostly Tony's work). Meanwhile Greg, as a North Devon Archaeological Society (NDAS) member, had exposed most of the buried west wall footings. A useful heap of building stones was stacked ready for the E.A. contractors to rebuild the missing section of the west wall. One thing notable for its absence was any more iron rails from the incline tracks. We can only assume they were either salvaged or buried under the railway, or possibly are still waiting to be discovered in parts where we have not had permission to do any excavation.

By April 2013, with the excavator wanted back on the farm, the ground was dry enough to complete the final profiling to show the outline of a shallow basin (drained) with the two docking bays pointing south and the central pier between them on which the lower pulley wheel of the endless chain would have been mounted. The inclined plane rising at a gradient of about 1 in 6 from the south end of the docking bays no longer exists since a driveway and field entrance now take its place, but the upper end of the incline is still visible, adjacent to the Tarka Trail, where an interpretive signboard has been installed. Parts of the east and west walls of the incline survive and a further interpretive signboard is sited in the line of the canal bed with a view of the renovated basin site. This is accessible to the public via a new pathway leading down from the Tarka Trail.

A total of four guided walks last summer took parties of visitors on a round trip from Annery Kiln, following the canal route beside the marsh meadow to the lower basin and then up the new path to join the Tarka Trail and view the upper basin and wheelpit. This route beside the meadow can only be followed with permission from the Environment Agency.

In the autumn, the long awaited contractors arrived to replace the missing ten foot length of the west wall. They brought a brand new excavator and dumper truck, and surrounded the whole site in 8ft high security fencing, which is still there. Meanwhile it started raining again and they brought in by truck a load of road stone to stop their machines sinking into the mud that they had produced. I fear by next spring there will be a lot of volunteer work needed to make good the damage done by their machinery to the carefully profiled canal basin we prepared last winter.



This photo shows, from the earth bank on the left, the position of the tow path, the canal basin with two docking bays and central pier shown in shallow profile. Before its demolition, the incline rose at a gradient of 1 in 6 from in front of the metal gate, up into the wooded hillside behind.

The picture below shows the docking bays on the Bude Canal, looking down the Hobbacott Inclined Plane, exactly as the base of the Rolle Canal incline would have been.



The following picture shows the pier and docking bays as seen from the incline. The roped-off area is where future excavation is planned to look for the base of the pulley wheel shaft.



The remaining two photos show the section of west wall rebuilt by contractors, and the site after their completion.



The Lower basin of the Ridd Incline.

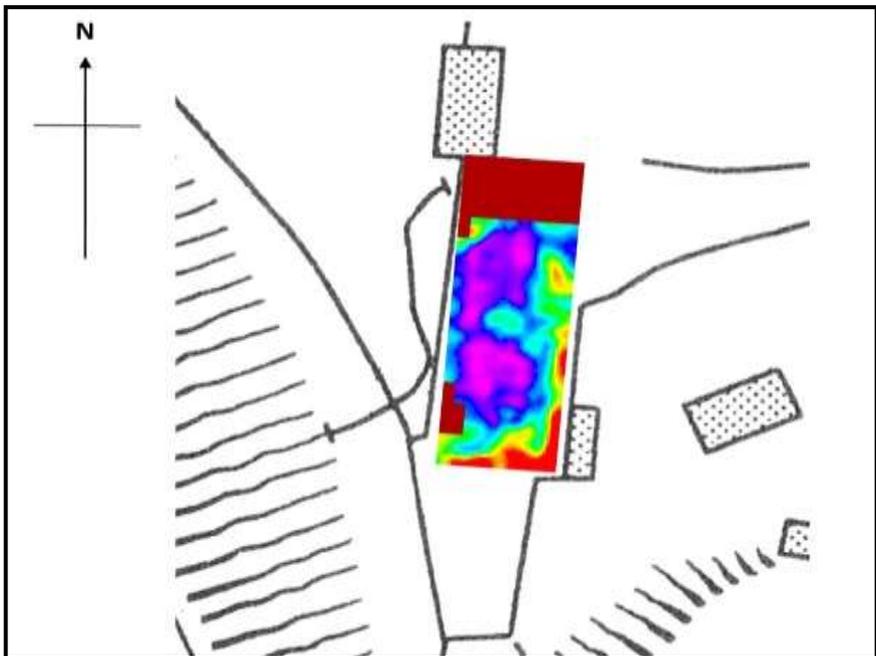
The Archaeologists' work.

The work on the Ridd Lower Basin was carried out in cooperation with the North Devon Archaeological Society, (NDAS). Bob Shrigley and Greg Smith worked with me to ensure that the archaeological integrity of the site was maintained and, in addition to revealing much of what remains of the west wall of the basin and incline, managed to carry out a Ground Resistivity Survey under very difficult (wet) conditions to give an indication of what features might remain under the ground (mud).

Once the spoil heap had been cleared and the site of the basin had been levelled as previously described. The rain had held off for a few days and it was possible to use the NDAS Ground Resistivity Meter on the site. This bit of electronic wizardry records readings of electrical resistance under the ground throughout a grid marked out on the surface, from which the computer wizard, Bob, using software appropriately called “Snuffler” is able to produce a coloured image indicating where there is stonework, deep mud, or other features hidden under the ground.

In this case the image, reproduced below, shows areas of mauve, dark blue, green and yellow to red, indicating deep mud, shallower mud, and stonework under mud, which is pretty much what one would expect when paddling around in mud to take the readings. The pleasing result is that the deep mud is generally where we expected the basin and docking arms to be while shallower mud is indicated where the tow path or boundary wall should be. Best of all is the patch of green indicating possible hidden stonework in the middle of the survey area, which should be the footings of the shaft supporting the chain

wheel. This has enabled us to mark out fairly precisely where we should at some future date do some hand digging to look for this feature. The general paucity of stone remains may be explained by the nearby presence of a stone-built field barn which first appeared on the maps shortly after the canal was abandoned. We suspect that may be where much of the original stonework ended up. The lack of any solid footings for the rest of the central pier may have resulted from the demolition and removal of the incline itself when the railway was built. In general, these geophysical findings enabled us to be confident we were reproducing the features of the basin and docking bays at the foot of the incline in the correct locations.



The rectangular brown blocks on the image indicate areas where it was not possible to take readings due to obstructions or recently excavated ground.

The green and red on the right may indicate the east wall and tow path, part collapsed into basin

The green and red at the south end indicate the end of the basin and start of the incline.

The green patch in the middle could indicate the site of the chain pulley base, but there is no indication of the rest of the central pier so we assume any stonework was robbed, since the blue and mauve indicate deep mud.



Bob and Greg preparing the Geophys survey site in January mud. 2013.

INTEREST IN LORD ROLLE'S CANAL

Not such a new thing!

My wife and I have now, on several occasions, had the pleasure of enjoying delicious food, served by highly efficient, friendly and attentive staff, whilst gazing out over the waters of the River Torridge, from the comfort of the Commodore Hotel in Instow.

This impressive building has been in the ownership of the Woolaway family since 1969 and today, Gary Woolaway continues to maintain standards of excellence within the hotel and its restaurant.

It should come as no surprise that the site of this building, now considerably extended, with its splendid views across the River Torridge and right out to the infamous Bideford Bar, was originally a summer retreat for John, Lord Rolle.

The Woolaway family has very strong connections with the River Torridge and maritime trade, other than ownership of the riverside hotel, since it once operated a number of merchant vessels which transported sand and other heavy goods between the North Devon and South Wales ports. (See page 25)

On clearing bits and pieces, collected by his father over his lifetime, Gary came across a small paper-back booklet on sailing vessels. Tucked inside was a newspaper article relating to Lord Rolle's Canal which Gary kindly passed to me.

Unfortunately there is no reference to the newspaper's name or date as to when this article was published and I have been unable to find out any more about it. I suspect it was written in the 1950's but that is purely guesswork. I unashamedly reproduce the whole of the article here since it is a very nicely précised account of the history of Lord Rolle's Canal.

(The references to failing banks and consequential repercussion seem awfully familiar!)

Tribute to Devon Canal Pioneers

By Patricia O'Neill

(A plagiarized newspaper article of unknown date.)

A century ago Torrington saw the coming of the railway and with it the closure of the canal which ran from above Bideford. This had been the brainchild of that colourful personality and wealthy landowner Denys Rolle of Stevenstone House, St Giles in-the-Wood, near Torrington, who had earlier tried to colonise Florida.

The Rolle Family had lived in Stevenstone since the early part of the reign of Henry VIII, and Denys, born in 1720, had inherited an estate with an estimated annual rent of £40,000.

His riches may have tempted him to make very little of life, but possessed of boundless energy, he was far from content to idle away his time.

At home he found an outlet for his energies in doing the work of a field labourer, but at the same time he did not neglect his responsibilities as a country gentleman.

ADVANTAGES

He was M.P. for Barnstaple, the Mayor of Torrington on two occasions and also the town's Recorder. His many good works included provision for schools and garden allotments for the poor but the overriding enthusiasm of his old age was improving transport.

In common with a great many others, he seized upon the construction of a canal as the answer. At that time coal and limestone were brought up the River Torridge to Weare Giffard, the farthest navigable point, where the stone was burnt in kilns before being taken by farmers as fertilisers, carrying it either by pack horse or in waggons.

Rolle saw the advantage of building a canal, not through the fertile river valley, but along the hills, where land was cheaper and in need of fertilisers.

The craft of his canal were to be small tub-boats and possibly fitted with wheels to negotiate the water-powered incline linking the lower section of the canal with its summit level.

At the start he built a canal some half-mile in length to bring water to a sawmill and with typical energy, himself dug sections helped by his bailiff and coachman, to gauge a fair day's work. So he had some practical experience when he took the chair at a meeting at Torrington in 1793, "to take into consideration the property of carrying a canal from some navigable part of the Torridge above Bideford Bridge to Torrington and to communicate with someone of the intended canal in this county".

It was not long before there were plans to link it with the never-to-beconstructed Public Devonshire Canal (Credon to Topsham) and the Bude Canal which opened in 1823

The plan came to nothing and the Torridge Canal was an unfulfilled ambition when Denys Rolle, indefatigable to the last, in 1797 died under a tree while walking. His heir was John, Lord, Rolle, the peerage held, by his uncle who died without an issue in 1750, having been revived.

ANXIOUS

He was M.P. for Devon three times and the last Recorder of Torrington. He too was anxious to see the canal become a reality, and in 1823, without Parliamentary sanction, and at his own expense – estimated at between £40,00-£45.000 – began on what was to be known as the Rolle Canal.

It started at a river lock and basin joining the Torridge below Weare Giffard and one and three quarter miles above Bideford Bridge. After running for nearly a mile along the western side of the river the canal rose by a double-track inclined plane to its top level,

A handsome stone aqueduct built on classical lines carried the canal across the river at Beam and the first stone was laid by Lord Rolle.

NEW MILL

The canal continued to the lime kilns at Taddiport and finally, to the new Manor Mill, built to resemble a castle, at Torrington, a total distance of some six miles.

The mill was erected to benefit and derive benefit from his undertaking, for the tub-boats on the return trip to Bideford, took down agricultural produce among other things. They brought up coal and limestone, mainly Welsh, which was burnt at 20 or so lime kilns along the way including those owned by Lord Rolle.

Before the opening of the canal a shipyard was built at the entrance lock. It was owned by the Rolle Canal Company and vessels constructed there were for the use of the firm. These brought cargoes from Wales and elsewhere to Bideford and Appledore. Ships were also built in the yard for the Newfoundland and Mediterranean trade.

The *Sedwell Jane*, a three-masted schooner, 200 hundred tons burden, was the largest ship built there, in 1868, two years before the closure of the yard.

Long before then, in 1835, the Rolle Canal Act was passed, entitling Lord Rolle to buy the common rights of part of Torrington Commons through which the canal passed, on condition that he retailed nothing beyond coal, culm, lime flour and timber, which was a fair indication of the trading business he had built up around his enterprise.

At his death, in 1842, his property went to the second son of Lord Clinton, the Hon. Mark Trefusis, who changed his name to Rolle.

For a time he leased the canal to George Bragington, son of the Stevenstone steward, but in 1865 Bragington, due to the failure of his bank, was declared bankrupt and the canal reverted to Mr Rolle.

In the same year at a public meeting, at Bideford, ways were discussed of getting a direct rail link with Torrington, Holsworthy, Launceston, Plymouth and West Cornwall. A few months later, the

South Western Railway announced a forth-coming Bill to build a line to Torrington.

When it was decided, after the Bill was passed, that the cost of building the line would be too much of a risk, the railway company sought Parliamentary powers to abandon the scheme, but “thanks to the gallant opposition” of Mark Rolle “to violate the engagement of construction was refused”.

ILLOGICAL

On the face of it, his attitude was illogical, but he must have realised that his canal could not face the opposition of a quicker means of transport.

Work was begun on the line in 1870 and the opening was in 1872. In between the canal ceased to function, the new railway cutting across the centre of the inclined plane.

The upper part of the canal was unsuccessfully turned into a toll road and the rest became derelict.

Today little remains of the Rolle Canal, beyond the sea lock at Landcross, the kilns at Annery, the incline at Ridd and the still imposing Beam aqueduct, now a private drive.

Apologies to Patricia O’Neill for stealing her work.

Editor’s Comments:

I would very much like to find out more about this article so if any readers have information about Ms O’Neill and/or the newspaper she wrote for, then please do not hesitate to get in contact with me.

Email: info@the.rollecanal.co.uk or

Telephone:- 01237 477705



Further to the article by Patricia O'Neill, a photograph (below) has recently come to light, in a new publication, which clearly shows the empty canal (bottom right) at the time of building Torrington railway station. Kindly provided from the **Tilley Kimber** collection



And yet more coincidences!

This recently uncovered this newspaper clipping from the Devon Life magazine of August 1974, depicts a young and hairy Barry Hughes on the sister barge of 'Advance' lying at Sea Lock. Sadly the 'JJRP' has gone and the 'Advance' is now in a very poor state of repair.



The last gravel barge built for sail, launched in 1923, and later converted to diesel. The 'JJRP' has now been acquired by the North Devon Museum Project, which is launching an appeal for funds for her restoration. She is shown here with Barry Hughes, an industrial archaeologist, and some schoolboys who are planning to restore her for the projected Maritime Museum on Torridgeside.



(Above) The **Stan Woolaway** at Bidford and (below) the **Ron Woolaway** at Appledore, both sand dredgers. Pictures circa 1960



Down the Cut

Programme of Rolle Canal Guided Walks for 2014.

All walks start at 2:30pm on a Sunday afternoon and can be expected to take two to two and a half hours. The distances are usually around two miles. Much of the walking is on the Tarka Trail but there will be sections of rough or damp ground where strong shoes are advisable, or water-resistant boots if there has been recent rain. Walking sticks or hiking poles can be very useful in places.

A donation of £2 per person, per walk is requested.

*Dogs are allowed on most walks but must be quiet, unobtrusive and under close control.

Sunday 11th May.

Beam Aqueduct and new tow-path walk below Furzebeam Hill.

Start point: Public car park at Puffing Billy

Walk along Tarka trail to see the iconic aqueduct and then the newly exposed canal basin, roving bridge and tow-path, walking through bluebell woods high above the Torridge, back to the Tarka Trail and the Puffing Billy.

Sunday 15th June.

Annery Kiln and Ridd Inclined Plane.

Start point: Annery Kiln, by Halfpenny Bridge over the Torridge on the *Weare Giffard Road*.

Brief history of the limestone trade and the purpose of the Rolle canal. Walk across river meadow to the site of Ridd Incline where the tub boats were hauled up a ramp to the upper level of the canal, to navigate to Torrington. See the upper canal basin and site of underground water wheel. Return along Tarka Trail

Sunday 13th July

Staple Vale to Taddiport.

Suitable for most mobility scooters.

Start point: Puffing Billy, Torrington old Railway Station. *Brief history of turnpike roads, canal and railway crossings of the Torridge at Staple Vale.*

Follow canal/Rolle road to Taddiport and site of swing bridge, lime kilns and milk factory.

Return by riverside path or Rolle Road, if preferred.

Sunday 10th August

Rosemoor, Darkham Weir and Lime kilns. NO DOGS ALLOWED.

Start point: Rosemoor Gardens, Woodland car park. *Stony path down to weir, follow leat along riverside meadows, path through wildlife habitat area, to site of Tucking Mill and Lime Kilns. Return through gardens. Tea shop and toilet facilities available here.*

For further details, if required, watch the local press or email hassallc@ymail.com

Other dates to note

Saturday 8th March

IWA West Country Branch AGM

Exeter Canal Visitors Centre

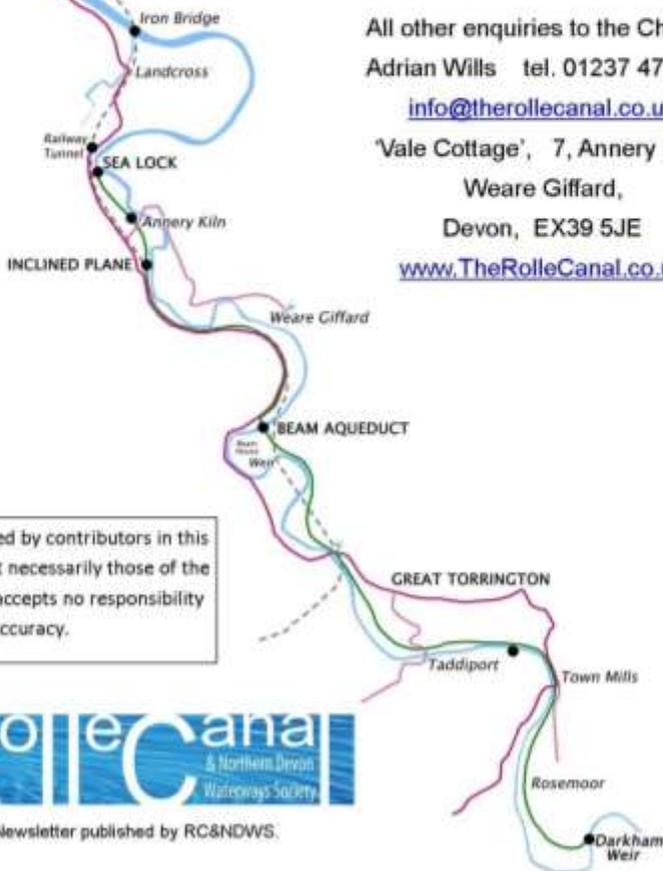
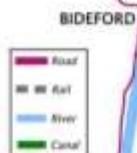
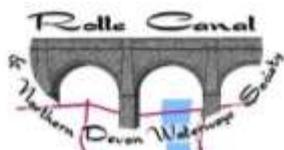
AGM followed by an Illustrated talk (to be arranged)

Saturday-Monday 24th-26th May

IWA National Trailboat Festival

Grand Western Canal, Tiverton

Exhibitions and displays, boats and walks



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



Bulletin & Newsletter published by RC&NDWS.

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 --
 Adrian Wills tel. 01237 477705
info@therollecanal.co.uk
 'Vale Cottage', 7, Annery Kiln,
 Weare Giffard,
 Devon, EX39 5JE
www.TheRolleCanal.co.uk