

The **R**o **e** **C**ana  
& Northern Devon  
Waterways Society

SOCIETY NEWS & VIEWS

AUTUMN ISSUE

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Adrian Wills explains how to get into the swing of things and what this picture has to do with it!

## COMMENTS FROM THE CHAIR

I have just been looking at the most recent report from the gang of volunteers working at the head of the canal at RHS Rosemoor. The progress is fantastic! All of the invasive vegetation has been cleared from the wharf wall in front of the lime kiln and a considerable section of the retaining wharf wall has been exposed. What is visible looks in surprisingly good condition and bodes well for future restoration.

A visit from IWA consultant civil engineer, Roy Sutton, had been arranged with me for this month so that Roy could make an assessment of the project and advise our society on the way forward. Unfortunately Roy has had to deal with some urgent family matters and this visit has had to be put on hold.

At Sea Lock work continues to rebuild the western wing wall and progress is being made here. One coping stone which had previously been reclaimed from the lock chamber has been replaced on top of the wall adjacent to the quoin stone. While I have a number of other reclaimed coping stone waiting for their turn to be re-sited, they are the wrong size to continue from the most recently replaced one so the time has come to start casting more replica blocks.

Once rebuilding at Rosemoor begins a large number of coping stone/ replica blocks will be required for the work at this site. Before these blocks can be acquired, further discussions with the administrators of Rosemoor as to long term plans and funding will be necessary.

As always great progress has been achieved but there is still a long way to go!

Adrian Wills

## FROM ONE EXTREME TO THE OTHER

Each autumn, as soon as the new school term starts, Hilary and I endeavour to get away for a holiday. Around this time last year we took our Wilderness Trail Boat to the Saul Junction Marina and slipped it into the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal.

Work began on the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal, also known as the Gloucester & Berkley Canal, in the early 1790's and was once the broadest and deepest canal in the world. Entering the canal through the tidal locks at Sharpness, substantial oceangoing cargo vessels could leave the dangerous waters of the River Severn and travel the 26½ miles of the inland waterway, with little hindrance, to the Gloucester docks. By 1900, the total annual weight of cargo transported along the canal exceeded 1,000,000 tons.

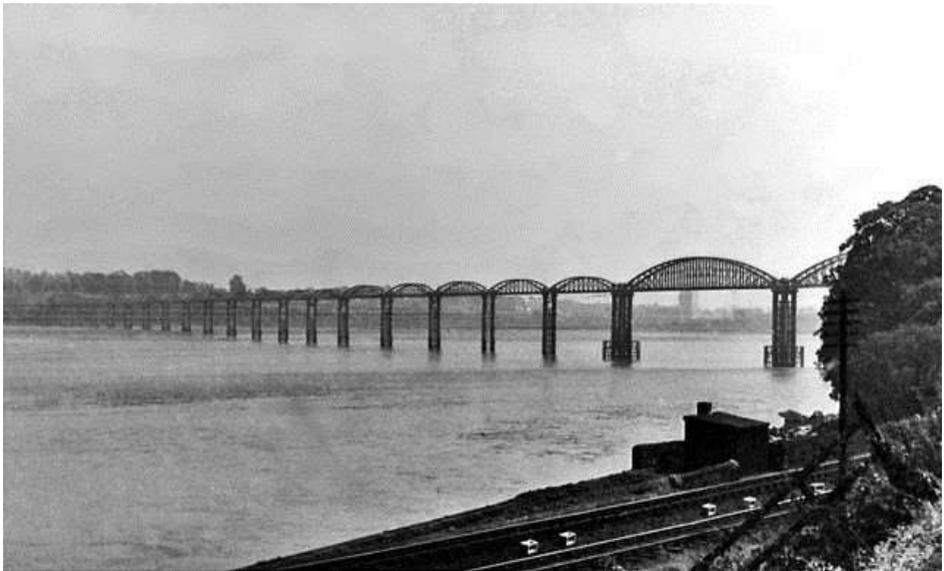
Today, little cargo is moved along this waterway but pleasure vessels of all shapes and sizes still enjoy its existence.

Gloucester docks have been the focus of massive regeneration over the past couple of decades, with many of the old wharf side buildings becoming very high class residences and business offices. It is also the home of the National Inland Waterways Museum which Hilary and I have visited on a number of different occasions. In this instance we actually moored our little boat outside the museum whilst enjoying spending most of the day looking at all the museum's displays.

Following our visit to Gloucester we turned the boat around and worked our way downstream towards Sharpness. Along the way the canal runs very close to the edge of the River Severn and passes the point of the Purton Hulks.

In 1909 erosion along this section of riverbank was a source of major concern and one solution was to scuttle redundant vessels along the river edge to form a barrier. The remains of these vessels are clear to see and each is labelled with its name and a brief description of its size and history. These vessels alone are worthy of a much greater description than is given here.

Just short of Sharpness is the site of Severn Railway Bridge, where on 25<sup>th</sup> October 1960 a tragic accident took place. On this day, 2 tanker barges were negotiating the River Severn in thick fog with the intention of entering the tidal lock at Sharpness which they over-shot and inadvertently hit one of the piers of the railway bridge. The vessels were carrying cargoes of petrol and oil which exploded and a fractured mains gas pipe running across the bridge, added to the ensuing inferno. Of the 8 crewmen involved only 3 survived.



Severn Railway Bridge, Purton, July 1948

The bridge was so severely damaged that it was considered too expensive to repair.

Sharpness is still very industrial, historically interesting but not pretty! Whilst there is a small area set aside for mooring pleasure craft, there is still a large basin handling oceangoing vessels and much to my satisfaction, several very large and impressive wharf side cranes.



This year, we were unable to travel far from home for various reasons but I was keen to revisit the museum at Gloucester which had recently undergone a major refurbishment costing 2 million pounds, so having exchanged our boat for a motorhome, we once again travelled north and found a nice place to stay not far from Gloucester. Taking advantage of our bus passes, we travelled into the city centre and wandered down to the docks. Having paid for 2 concessionary tickets we eagerly entered the building looking to see what great changes had been made.

The new, streamlined exhibits including several flat screen, looped video displays, are a huge improvement on what we saw before. There is a very uncluttered feel to the inside whereas before I found everything almost overwhelming because there was so much to see and read. Given sufficient time this was not

a problem however but did, in my opinion require several visits to do the museum justice.



Now I have to say that I was very disappointed. The museum displays, originally spread over 3 floors are now reduced to 2, despite the building actually having 6 floors. Without hurrying, Hilary and I, having intended to spend the whole day inside, had looked at every exhibit, read every bit of written information and watched all of the video programmes in just over an hour and a half!

I was also disappointed to notice that the focus of the museum seems to have narrowed from that of national waterways to those canals and rivers in the immediate vicinity of Gloucester. As yet I haven't made comment to the administration of the museum itself but I certainly intend to do so.

On our journey home, we made a detour so that we travelled down the opposite bank of the River Severn on the Welsh side, skirting the Forest of Dean. This enabled us to stop and have a look at the remains of a canal at Lydney. My friend Barry Hughes had on a number of occasions recommended to us that we visited this site so it was with eager anticipation when we eventually arrived.

*‘Lydney Canal was once an important harbour for shipping timber, coal and iron from the Forest of Dean. It is now a harbour for pleasure craft. This one-mile canal in Gloucestershire runs inland from the River Severn to Lydney. It was opened in 1813 to trans-ship iron and coal from the Forest of Dean. It was once connected by a horse drawn tramroad to Pidcock’s Canal <sup>[1]</sup> which brought materials down to the canal.*

*In the 1960s imported wood was still being brought in by barge from Avonmouth.<sup>[2]</sup> It remained in commercial use until the 1980s. The entrance to the canal consists of an outer tidal gate opening into a wide basin. From there a lock opens into the one - mile canal cut. Immediately above the lock, a pair of gates point the other way as protection against a high tidal flood in the estuary. There is one swing bridge crossing the canal. The docks have recently been restored to create a marina and harbour area for seagoing yachts and motor boats.<sup>[3]</sup>*

*(Extract from Wikipedia)*

From the outer sea wall of the Lydney Tidal Lock, the entrance to the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal can be clearly seen on the opposite bank. From this point, looking out across the river it is clear to see why the Severn is considered such a dangerous waterway with its 15 metre tide rise and fall and its narrow channels meandering between treacherous sand banks.

**AW**



Looking into the Tidal Lock of the Lydney Canal, above. Looking across the River Sever to Sharpness (behind the telegraph pole) from the entrance to Lydney Canal, below.



## LOOKING BACK IN TIME

In the last edition of the RC&NDWS Newsletter I commented on the gratefully received donation of an historic North Devon Pottery edging tile that Sue Scrutton made to me. As well as this artefact, Sue has been kind enough to supply me with a wealth of information on the history of Lord Rolle's Canal as well as allowing me to copy some of the pictures in her collection.

Barry Hughes has also been a wonderful source of photographic and written information which I have extensively used in the past and will continue to do so for a long time, I suspect.



The picture on the front cover of this issue is a cropped copy of

the photograph as seen on the previous, belonging to Tilly Kimber. The photograph was taken from the New Road Bridge, built by James Green, adjacent to New Town Mills (today Orford Lodge) and is looking north. The river is to the left hand side and is flowing away from the photographer. The canal, still in water, is clearly visible in the centre of the picture and the main road from Torrington, heading south, is on the right hand side and its Common is in the background.

Quite some time ago Tilly graciously allowed me to borrow and subsequently scan, a number of original photographs depicting some aspects of the canal. Copies of photographs showing the lime kin complex at R.H.S. Rosemoor (circa 1880s) have been used quite recently with reference to the sterling efforts of Ian Harrison and his group of volunteers who are regularly working



The previous photograph was taken from a position slightly up the main road from New Town Mills and shows the River Torridge and canal, later to become Rolle Road, following the hillside of Torrington Commons, heading towards Taddipport. In the top right hand corner there is the Waterloo Monument, a stone obelisk erected in 1818 by “the ladies of Great Torrington .....”dedicated to the fallen of that conflict”.

I thought it might prove interesting to those reading our newsletters if I included more photos from this collection since many are not commonly seen.

I try hard to acknowledge the hard, physical efforts of our volunteers who give up time to restore the fabric of the canal where ever possible but a huge measure of thanks has also to be given to those people such as Sue, Tilly and Barry who have contributed to the graphic and textual knowledge of the Rolle Canal.

Referring again to the last edition of this newsletter, I replicated some information about curious happenings on and about the canal which were published at the time by various newspapers. Credit for this information goes to Peter Blackaby and Michael Morgan.

More of these articles follow now.

10th February 1827 Oxford University and City Herald

Lord Rolle’s canal at Torrington will be finished in the course of another month, and will be opened for the conveyance of goods from London, Bristol, &c. to that town. There are twelve barges now

employed on it carrying stones, lime, and sand. The advantages that will be derived to the town and neighbourhood of Torrington by the canal are incalculable, Sherborne Journal.

23rd February 1827 North Devon Journal

Torrington.—Between two and three hundred Navigators who have been for a long time working on Lord Rolle's Canal, were last week discharged, to the no small loss of the Publicans and Shopkeepers; the Canal is nearly finished, we understand that his Lordship inspecting expressed but great disapprobation at its being so contracted, the greatest part of it being so narrow, that only one Boat can pass at a time ; this would have been excusable had money been wanting, but surely after his Lordship had paid upwards of twenty thousand pounds, he certainly had a right to expect a Canal only three miles in length, more than six feet wide, which this is not in many places.

10th May 1828 Western Times

Launch, attended by a fatal accident.— On Thursday last a very handsome brig, of 130 tons burthen, was launched near the sea lock of Lord Rolle's Canal, and on her gliding into the water, she received the appellation "Bicton" the well name of his lordship's seat near Exeter. The day was fine, and the pleasantness of the walk, the delightful scenery of Annery, and the lovely Torridge, attracted a large assemblage to witness the imposing spectacle. We regret to add that the pleasure of the afternoon was greatly beclouded, if not altogether totally destroyed, by an accident which proved fatal to a child of the name of Corbet. To prevent the ship from going across to the opposite bank, the shipwrights attached cable to a post, near which many spectators were standing, and on the rapid descent of the ship into the water, the sudden action of the rope on the post drew it up, and the child thereby received a violent blow on the head, by which its skull was fractured; it lingered till the following morning, and then expired.

Torrington 10th March 1860 Western Times

A man named Howard, servant to Mr. Henry Wadland, of Roborough, was returning from the Rolle Canal stores, with a waggon full of \*guano drawn by three horses, one of them took fright and the driver was thrown in the canal ; the waggon and horses fell in also. The driver, apprehending his danger, sprang out on the opposite side before the horses and waggon fell in, and thereby escaped certain death. He soon obtained assistance, and the horses having been liberated, the manure and waggon were got out. The manure was somewhat damaged.

APPLEDORE 23rd April 1861 North Devon Gazette Accident.— On the evening of yesterday week, a seaman named Bates, belonging to the new schooner Alice,” recently built for the Rolle Canal Company, while engaged in mooring the vessel, fell overboard, and but for the timely assistance rendered would, in all probability, have been drowned. As it was, notwithstanding the skilful treatment of Charles Pratt, Esq., surgeon, several hours elapsed before his life could be pronounced out of danger.

*\*Editor's Comments;*

*Guano is accumulated excrement, usually of sea birds, and is rich in nitrogen, phosphates and potassium. It was found to be an excellent fertilizer. In the 19th Century there was a very considerable global trade in it.*

*Since it was 'mined' in many distant places such as islands off the coasts of Peru, Namibia, Oman and Patagonia, it had to be imported and would have been quite costly.*

*It would be interesting to know from where this guano was being sourced and what quantities were being moved along the canal.*

*Perhaps someone reading this article would like to do a little research and find me the answer!*

## PUTTING MATTERS INTO PERSPECTIVE

A short while ago Chris' Hassall kindly sent me an extract from another canal society's newsletter to which he subscribes. Chris' thought it may be of interest to our members. I am not sure whether I find the article, shown below, as being inspiring or rather humbling!

Whilst I have no intention of belittling the efforts of our canal restoration team's efforts, what is being undertaken on the Grantham Canal is something else!

### **The GRANTHAM CANAL HERITAGE INITIATIVE**



A fabulous overhead photo of Woolsthorpe Middle Lock showing the lock totally reduced down to the invert with only the 4 quoins standing.

## LIME HAULAGE - Circa1830

T. Stevens Esquire. probably lived at Cross, near Taddiport, in the 1830's and was responsible for collecting the tolls on the turnpike road. I am not sure if it was for a Turnpike Trust or whether he was an agent for John, Lord Rolle.

Written on a bill I have T. Stevens Esq.. charges Robert Pristacott for cartage fees for lime dating from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> March 1830 which I assume to be from the kilns at Taddiport . The bridge crossing the River Torridge at Taddiport had its own tolls.

This bill is calculated according to the number of journeys made crossing the bridge per day, at the following rates:- This being all in 'old' money, £pounds, Shillings and dPence

A single horse, crossing the bridge cost one penny and a half.  
(1½d was pronounced 'pennyapeney').

A butt of lime crossing cost 2¼d,  
(Pronounced 'tuppence farthing')

Dated for the 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1830, the bill states; 3 horses and a butt of lime were charged at 6¾d for the day. (pronounced 'six pence, three farthings' which is about 3p in today's money)

3 horses crossing at 1½d x 3 = 4½d + 2¼d, for the butt of lime, totalling 6¾d

Most traffic was horse and butts but on two occasions were Gig and Chaise carriages, each of which were charged at 9d. (4½p).



## GETTING THE 'HANG' OF IT!

For quite some time now Trevor Fordham and I have given most of our attention to rebuilding the outer western wing wall. The services of the RB22 have been required for this to raise and lower a scaffold lift for us to work from alongside the wall when the tides have been favourable.

In between times and tides, the problem of silt deposition on the outside of this section of wall has been thought about. During a recent visit to the site, Norman Richards used the Kubota tractor to clear the overgrown track running along the hillside on the outside of the entrance to the canal. We have discussed at some length as to whether this track was originally part of the ship building 'ways' from when the shipyards were moved from Annery to Sea Lock.

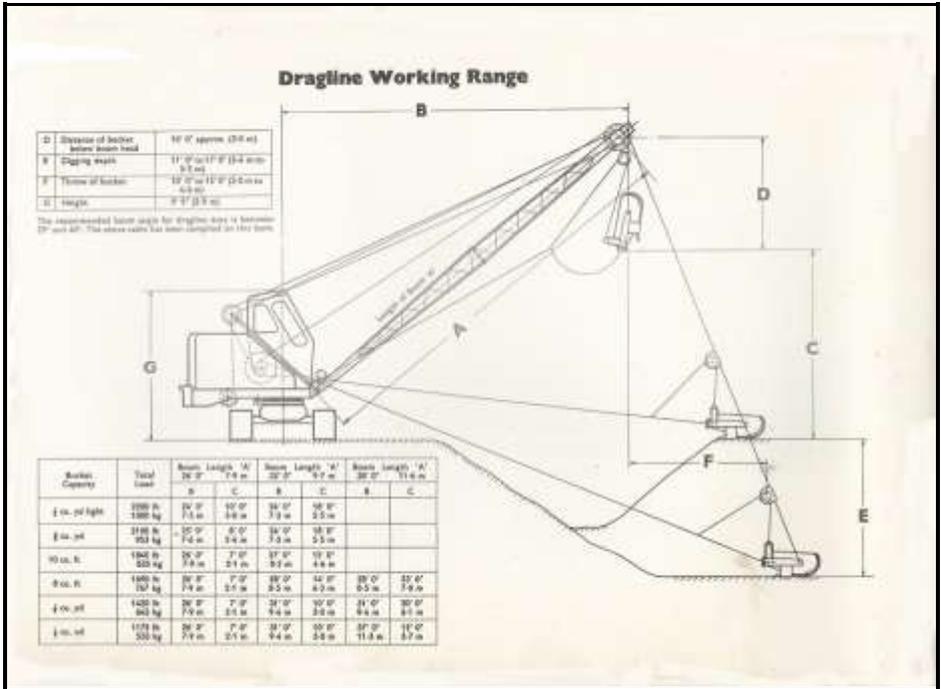


I am convinced that without this huge deposit of silt, which can be seen in the picture opposite, which semi blocks the entrance to the canal, there would have been a natural deep and quiet bay in the river below

which would have been ideal for launching newly built vessels into or to hold vessels waiting to enter the canal.

Trevor, Mike Chambers and I had been spending time in getting the Priestman Cub properly set up to work draglining. Operating a dragline crane is similar to attempting to rub your tummy in a

circular movement with one hand whilst trying to pat the top of your head with the other and simultaneously dancing a jig!



A technical 'how to do it' page from the

**THE PRIESTMAN "CUB" MARK V1 EXCAVATOR  
OPERATIONS AND MAINTENANCE INSTRUCTIONS**

EDITION 2                      1965

PUBLICATION TPD89 PRICE TWO GUINEAS

PRIESTMAN BROTHERS LIMITED

HEDON ROAD,

HULL, ENGLAND,

Taking life in hands I decided to 'have a go' at dredging some silt from this obstruction. I had previously tried working the dragline, with a measure of success. Unlike when operating a

lifting crane which is a simple up or down action, draglining requires 'throwing' the bucket out. This is achieved by raising and releasing the bucket in such a way as to make the bucket swing out and away from the crane as it falls. It is then drawn back towards the crane, effectively scrapping the ground before finally being lifted and emptied to the side.

As the bucket is being swung out, the dragline brake and the lifting brake have to be released to allow their ropes to freely spool off their drums. However a degree of restraint has to be maintained to prevent the drums from over-spooling after the bucket has landed otherwise the ropes slacken off the drums and then tend to overlap, tangle and kink themselves as they are being rewound.

In my early attempts to master this operating technique, I did inadvertently kink the dragline rope. Clutches and brakes were adjusted to reduce the chance of this happening again and I continued to practise.

I spent several hours one afternoon working the dragline but couldn't get the bucket as far out as I wanted. On my next attempt, having lowered the boom to give me a little more length from the end of the boom to the crane I managed to swing the bucket out by approximately 15 feet further from the vertical. While Trevor watched the proceedings, I began to drag out a very satisfying amount of silt from alongside the wing wall. It was about this time we both became aware that the dragline rope had broken one of its multi-strands which was happily unwinding itself and creating a 'birds nest'. (Ref. picture on CONTENTS page).

This would only get worse if I continued, with a high probability that the rope would eventually snap. Dredging was halted for

the day. I drove the crane back and parked it alongside the workshop in preparation for repair the following day.



Swinging the dragline bucket out alongside the western wing wall just before the unravelling rope was noticed and work had to be stopped for the day. Picture by T Fordham

When Trevor and I had a good look at the damaged rope, it was indeed in a mess. I was hoping that where it had been kinked, it could be cut off, leaving sufficient length of rope to reattach the bucket and continue as before. It was soon obvious that the rope was damaged so far along its length that the whole thing would need removing and replacing.

Fortunately I had a spare length from a scrapped machine. It is shorter than the one it has replaced so I am keeping my fingers

crossed that it will be long enough to perform the duties for which it will be employed otherwise, of course, it means purchasing a new rope.

After a small measure of struggling and cursing, Trevor and I managed to cut off and swop the damaged rope with the spare



Having dragged out some of the silt which had accumulated against the wing wall, access to the wall for rebuilding purposes is now much easier. However, it has highlighted quite how much needs to be rebuilt, as can be seen above, and how much facing stone and other construction materials are going to be needed to complete this task. Still, it keeps me out of mischief!

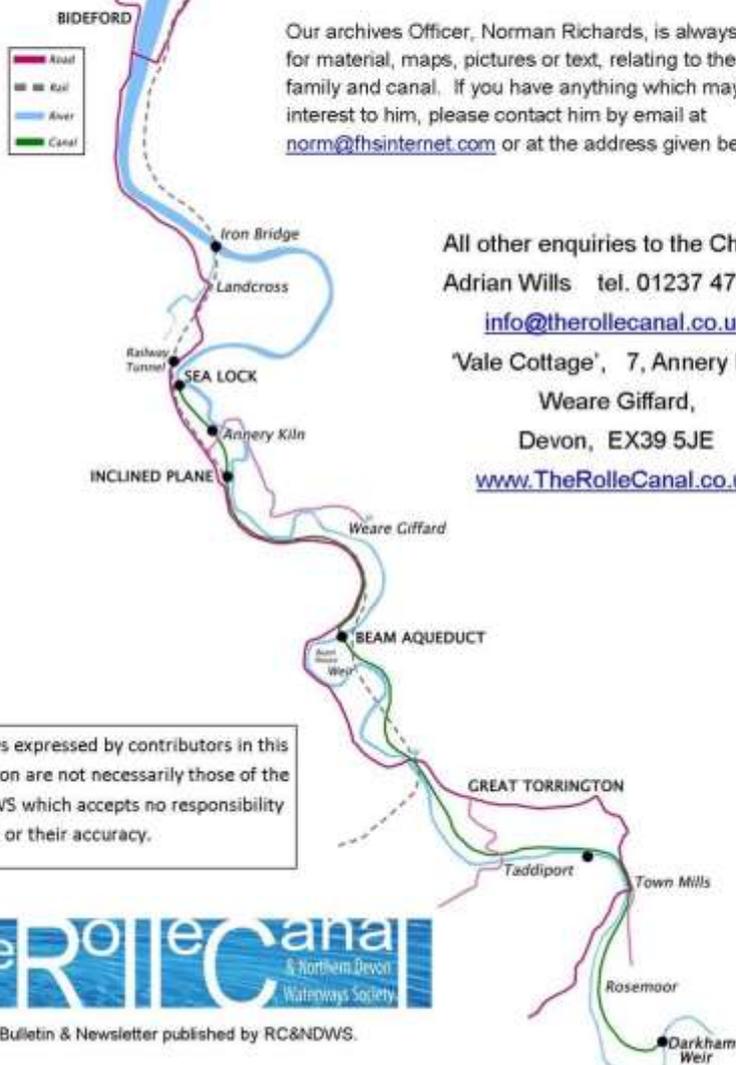
**Adrian Wills**



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](mailto:norm@fhsinternet.com) or at the address given below:

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