

THE BALCH TAPES

Based on an Article from the Axbridge Caving Group Newsletter, Spring 1993

INTRODUCTION BY ALAN GRAY OF THE ACG

As far as I am involved, this story started in 1984 when I became Secretary of the Axbridge Caving Group. I was given a stack of past history/correspondence and I dutifully read through it. One of the interesting facts that I picked up was that in 1952 and 1955 the Axbridge Caving Group & Archaeological Society (ACG&AS), which then encompassed both cavers and archaeologists, had invited Mr Herbert Balch to open the museums. These events were reported in the press and also due to the far sighted view of the members, this event was also recorded on audio tape. I contacted the ACG&AS, in fact Mr John Chapman, (who is now an Honorary member of the ACG) and was loaned the master reel to reel recording. This I transferred to cassette, and returned the master.

Listening to the tapes I realised that they were an important historical record, and thus set about transcribing them. This task was very difficult and time consuming since :

- a) The microphone that was used to make the original recording was very direction sensitive, so if M.r Balch's head was turned words/sentences were omitted.
- b) Mr. Balch was an "old" man and he tended to skip portions of the speech and talk in terms that I am not familiar with.

Still I persevered and was able to transcribe most of the tape. Those words/sentences that I have not been able to understand are marked ** and any words or explanatory comments that I have inserted for clarity, and explanatory comments for clarity, are enclosed with [*my words*].

EDITORIAL NOTE

Since Sid Perou's tidying up of the tapes, it has been possible to discern additional short sections, and these have been incorporated into the transcript. The recording has been divided into three parts, and the transcript has been similarly divided.

These recordings are of enormous historical importance, and we are immensely grateful to Alan Gray for his generosity in making both them and the transcripts available to the BCA Audio Archives.

REV. W. F. BRIMSON (Recording 1)

Very great pleasure to welcome you all here this evening, because today is a milestone in our career. We are sorry our President Mr. Orr Ewing is unable to be with us, and he has sent an apology, but we do welcome all of you including our Vice President, whom I can see here. About two years ago, this Society began as a small group of eight men who undertook the study of the caves in the near vicinity of Axbridge. They began to meet together to tabulate their findings and to record their experiences under the Chairmanship of that very keen Axbridge Historian and Archaeologist Mr. A G Tyler. A chance report in the press that we had been given the opportunity by the owner, of exploring the caves at Banwell brought our activities to the notice of a much wider public, and we were delighted to receive applications for membership from people all over the Mendip area, and from Bridgwater, and Burnham and Bristol as well. And so it must be said that the beginning of our Society in its present form comprising as it does of about 44 members was due to this press report, and I would like to express the appreciation of us all, of the help given by our journalist friends ever since that day, and especially for their help when we found ourselves excluded from that gem of all the Mendip caves the cave at Charterhouse [*G.B.*].

Well we soon became possessed of other friends too; I can't mention all of them to you this evening, but I must acknowledge the help given by Mr. H E Balch of whom I shall say something more a moment, and of Mrs. Dobson-Hinton who is here on the platform with him, and also of her husband Dr Hinton [*Mr. MAC Hinton was not a Doctor, his wife Mrs. Dina Dobson-Hinton was!*] for his help in connection with the finds we make at Ba well. Dr Hinton was a keeper of the Bone Department of no less a place than the British Museum, in London and we are very glad of his help, and also of Mr. Max Unwin of London University who is at present in the Antarctic on an exploration there. He is in constant touch with us and he is going to give us a report of his experiences there. And a particular word of thanks is due to the Clevedon Archaeological Society and its Chairman Mr. Sykes, who is also here with us this evening, who has been a generous friend to us in Axbridge sharing with us his finds made at the Wraxall Roman Villa. Well time will not allow me to mention others, but Mr. Humphrey of Bridgwater Studios with his expert knowledge of photography has also been a most valuable friend.

Well now as our Society grew, we found we lacked two very important things. The firstly a Journal, and secondly a Museum. Well thanks to the untiring energy of our Secretary Mr. Donald McKean we now have a very good Journal, and that Journal has just appeared in its second issue. The Journal is a medium of recording our activities and also a means of circulating expert knowledge of caving from other sources. There are some Journals I see on the table, they are being very rapidly snapped up, so if you want one then I should make sure of one this evening. Well now a Museum seemed almost impossible, but after trying in very many quarters we were, at last, able to obtain the help of the Axbridge Town Trust and they have granted us a room, here at the front of this hall and they have very kindly let us have it for the nominal rent of a shilling a year, and we are most grateful for the help of the Town Trust in this matter.

The room is very small but we hope that one day the interest that the collection of finds in it will arouse will mean that the people of Axbridge

will help us to acquire a bigger place. Well now this evening we are assembled here to have this Museum opened and we couldn't have a better man for this than our very dear friend Mr. Balch. He has given us of his time, and his valuable energy so freely, and Mr. Balch, his name is already an immortal one in the realms of caving, and he is a man who has enriched our knowledge in this branch of life immensely. He is the pioneer of caving and his name is known the world over through his books and through his contributions to our knowledge of our forefathers who lived in these cave dwellings. Well it is a proud evening for us to have him here with us, and to ask him to say a few words to us and to open our Museum.

Mr Balch, its [*the ACG&AS Museum*] very small in size and importance compared with yours in Wells, but nevertheless its a sincere contribution to that Science of which you M.r Balch may be called, I hope not disrespectfully, that Science of which you may be called the grand old man, and I have very great pleasure in calling upon Mr. Balch.