

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.

MR. HERBERT ERNEST BALCH (Recording 2)

Mr. Chairman, Ladies, and Gentlemen it is a very great pleasure indeed to be asked to come and open this Museum. It recalls to my mind very vividly the opening or, it were hardly an opening, the beginning of our museum at Wells, which was established by myself really unassisted in the cottage of my Mother in the small Priest's Row at Wells. And to that little upstairs room, now the bathroom of my son and daughter-in-law came a very, a very such a crowded body of geologists from London that they packed it like herrings in a box. And it gave me, at once, a very great encouragement exactly as I gave to the first men of Axbridge who came to say we should like to have [*a Museum*] and when that I said that I knew that it would come about. They were determined to do something quite as good, in fact very much better, than we have been able to do at Wells, but I can assure you I don't want Wells to be more exacting in its demands upon one than it is today. When you get 7,000 people crowding into the museum in Wells in one month as we have had more than once in the month of August and I think we are already well over 2,500 for August already. It looks as if we are going to have a record this year.

And when you know that people come again and again [*to the Museum*] and send people again and again and are always coming to speak to you as if you the only ones that had ever been there — so you have to rack your brains to remember. They make some remark that tells me exactly how I remember and I can take up the thread that I dropped perhaps 10 years ago, and so it happens and so it keeps a very close association with the people who have come and gone and they get to be, as we are all, absolute lovers of Somerset. Somerset is in our bones, there is no doubt at all about it, we feel that strong about it, and must always remain so. There is a great devotion developed among the people of Somerset and Axbridge is an expression of that devotion that I have always felt that Axbridge has had a thin time and I have said to them [*the founder members of the ACG&AS*] in the earliest days "Oh for goodness sake, put Axbridge on the map again if you can, because Axbridge lost one time, through neglect what they never should have lost" and now they are a name over a large area of Somerset and of which they have no various corporation to have their annual feast get something of the kind to take the place of it because that's what happens and I suppose all the delightful silver things that belong to Axbridge were brought out at the great feasts of Axbridge, they have disappeared. I would be delighted to get wind of one day it didn't succeed in getting it. If I had lived in Axbridge I think I should have had it, some how, but its disappeared once I think that the old silver of Axbridge Corporation were offered to me, but I couldn't buy it, beyond [*my*] price, however another opportunity may come.

However that is by the way you would like me to give you such encouragement as of my own experience of it. Its now sixty years ago come next March that talking to the Dean and the Chapter, at that time, they said "Well that room it was much the shape of it, but not quite so wide you can borrow that thing if you like, nobody is wanting it, if you like to borrow it, yes, you take it" and I took the ** And so was born the Museum of Wells then at once the naturalists in our club or society ** they formed a committee which was largely a committee of the Naturalists and Archaeologists Society

which had been in existence for five years in 1888. I am the only living individual of that large effort that was made by the Archaeological Society, all are dead but myself, but from several years after that there are three or four more still alive. Of that effort in 1893 I am the only one still alive and lots of these people were very deserving people, but they are gone, I hope to a better place **, a newer one but in actual fact it's been a great joy to get people come back again and again and to say we remember, our children remember, and our children love your little books, they read them over and over again until they are torn to ribbons and it's a satisfaction that these young people, and don't forget that these young people that come to us now and sit open mouthed and are very quickly able to absorb the essentials that will certainly bring them right in to the fore in work that you are doing here in Axbridge today. And that are at a most delightful age where little kiddies who come in and say something that shows that they are absorbing things that they have learned in the Museum.

I could tell you some wonderful stories of people that have come from that simple beginning. Little books taken to the poorest and to the hillsides above Wells who have gone on to be important professors in the universities and name their first interest in these little ** taken by me at the time of the formation of the Museum 60 years ago. I celebrate my sixty years in March next year, I hope—if I am fit. Well shortly, to give you some idea of what is possible, you haven't got, I can't do this for you, I can't offer you a Cathedral, I can't offer you a Cathedral, but you have Mendip as your right, I'll tell you ** Mendip is more than its people, it is a marvelous place, the Mendip. Nobody knows, I know something of it, many of you know something of it, the fact that the children can ** on the ** show you that you have a good deal that we never had to help you forward with it. Let me tell you my experience, it began with ** we never had such a meeting as yours unless it was the annual meeting of the Archaeological Society when they, when they asked me to what you had done this year, and that's the full thing that happened at the committee that we formed. They are the centre, they are the controller of the whole thing. They can say if they, if they ** very very nasty they may vote me out and say you'll sell this blessed place tomorrow, they can do it. They are absolutely free without ** if any of you get a place of that sort you can ask for your consideration to be a Scientific Society and you get freedom from income tax and freedom of rates except the simple water rate, which is not a rate at all anyway. It's a marvelous piece of work given, help which is given by the public and enables you to steer clear ** all fear of being ** out of your way and it will not be for many years before they ** to banish it, largely that is why it is in effect that from the way start, about sixty years it has been done in an Honorary capacity. That is I have never had a penny for my work in the Museum at all in sixty years. Everything ** after paying reasonable expenses often times, often times they are not properly paid for because and I'll tell the Ladies this ** I get, I get help from the Ladies who come and offer themselves, they come unpaid to help, to back me up with the labour of love which I have been doing for so long, and it's a, It's a remarkable thing that ** where I had to say no, this will not do at all, you, you must agree to accept so and so, and so and so at least. Will you do it, Yes ! they will do anything and we get, we get Ladies who you almost had to ** home were ready to back us up to such an extent that they, they take an ** Honorary ** and they learn and teach a tremendous lot.

Well ** that is the way at which ** succeeded and I hope the Ladies apart

from ** round the Botany table you've certainly jolly good Botany students haven't you **. So you get a section **Botany table and you be prepared to ** you've a jolly good thing quite near Axbridge you know, you come down and pick them sometime. We have a wonderful table at the present moment, well let's go on, we began quite a small, quite a small opening on a day or half a day a week, a Wednesday, a Wednesday and a Saturday presently a very short time, a very short time on, in the holiday, in the Bank holidays bring people as they do, they bring people in Somerset in ** and in that way it began to go up to our Bank holiday attendances showed a tremendous uprising and with that uprising comes an income and my income today, a ** purely and simply payment for services rendered, that is the people not only are they glad, glad to pay the simple fee of sixpence, which is merely three pence up to ten years ago, but they nearly always are ready to contribute something in a box, which is, which is kept for the purpose. If only the fact that, nearly the whole of the work is carried out as a labour of love by the people who do the work. The same thing applies, Axbridge has began the right thing you are doing much the same thing for Banwell and for Woodspring no doubt ** not half enough is known as, as we have done and are still doing at Wookey Hole. At Wookey Hole the whole of the work that has now gone on, for one case fifteen years, longer than Banwell isn't it, for fifteen years, and looks like going on for a further ten has been entirely done by voluntary labour. We never took on a man to handle a pick and a shovel ** ourselves. It's been pick and shovel work, and I've used a pick and shovel for years and years it was second nature.

Well it was a long time before we began to soar ahead into, into a considerable ** visitors ** list, I'll tell you by 18, by 1948 we had 300,000 visitors. It seems, it seems an enormous figure, we had passed that, but since that time we have gone on by leaps and bounds. In 1947 we had, we had passed 18,000 people through the door. By 1949, by 1950 we had come to a peak of 20,500 people in twelve months. The last year didn't quite reach that, but today it looks as if it's going to surpass even the big one of 1950 and there, there is no advertising involved, they come recommended by the people who have been before and you can see that, that if you make it worthwhile, then people come.