

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 3)

Then we had of course that wonderful thing, first of all the Dean and Chapter had free, free admission and free use of a room much the length as this, but not quite so wide, over the Cloisters, that helped us very much and when it became a question of our paying for the gas used in the room they said all right its so small compared with the Cathedral, with the Cathedral gas, don't say anything at all about it and so it went in as an expense of the Cathedral and of course its gas on to the time when Mr. Brimton was paid.

Now we in ** Lane will always be a sacred memory to all of us in Somerset. He has done work, that, that will never be forgotten. His work in Yeovil, particularly at Taunton, then he came to us, he came to see, to see the things from my, from my Wookey Hole early Iron Age and Roman British occupation and I, I was surprised he was almost like a child delighted, "Oh look at that, look at that, look at...". Well when we came out and stood in the Cathedral green he said, he said well Mr. Balch what do you want. I'd like to help you. I said well that's the right, thing, yes the sort of thing I want, I knew what he had been doing, I said well sir, I want that house, this was the old ** of twenty rooms looking down upon, almost upon the West Front and he said well can it be bought and I said I expect it can be sir. Well ** a lot of money. I said I know it is, I said I've been saving up my pennies towards it, and I accumulated from my admission fees in the Museum £350; that's towards it but it's only a flea bite. Well he said, make an enquiry, so I made an enquiry, and August went on with a good ** payroyal ** with the Dean and Chapter who have been always dear fellows, and they were not the real owners; the Theological College were the real owners and so I put the thing forward and made a proposal. A very moderate proposal of £1000 to the Theological College trustees; but Oh, well, I think they would have said Yes, but they had to satisfy the Curate, and he said ** I could get £3000 for it in a minute. I said well I cannot afford ** of about £3000 so then I got the ear of a surveyor. I said look here that, that house is destined to be the Museum; and don't you stand in its way. So they had consultations, then they said well, they had to save their face somehow, well do you want it all, that's the stretch of land reaching right up to the North Liberty. I could not very well say yes; I said no; and so the next point was ** and you shall have it. So I said well I'll see' I don't think ** its only a school at present and its destined to be a Museum, so help us as much ever you can. In the end we got it £1275 ** £6000 on the market today; in fact one of the auctioneers came to me and said **. I give £3000 for that in a minute. I said you go home, they are going to have that Museum and its already ** for Mr. Linden said it you ** of a figure of £1675, I believe that was the figure, its yours. So I closed it at once and gave the man **. Take you time I don't want to turn you out of the school, take your own time, and after you have made your arrangements let me know, you shall go in your own time. So it happened **beautifully and we walked in and transferred the Museum from the Cloisters ** and my £300 fitted up all the furniture of the inside and so we started clean• And you can see how everything has transpired ** I am certain that we have started in the way it is bound to bring in all your dear people to help you to see that you we'll all go down this generation which is now faced with a problem which might be almost beyond their power. It it'll come all right and I believe that it will be a great and very, very proud tradition for Axbridge of the next generation. Now I might labour a fact for ever and ever but you can go on talking about the things that have turned up, and the people who have said

come along and we've got some things we really don't know what to ** will you take the ** back to the Abbey at Glastonbury, hand it over without reservation. They included in our safeguarding and insuring ** you must somehow or other manage to keep your insurances safe because particularly people who are running risk, they must be covered. Remember I found I have had to go on much further than I expected to have to go on to keep it safe, with many liabilities and chances and I have proved that ** in doing this I have had to make small claims through unsuspected accidents and you are liable, if a cow comes down on your visitors head ** if you have forgotten to keep something in repair and then you are dealing with an old house. You may have to deal with an old one or a new one; do keep safeguards, its a beastly worry, if you know at any moment you may be letting into costing thousands of pounds if you can afford it.

Well Ladies and Gentlemen in coming to open this Museum, it gives me very great pleasure and I'd like to express to you in the very greatest hope that you will have something that particularly your children shall remember. You let the kiddies have full use of it, you've got to watch them sometimes, but I believe a very great deal comes from your helping the kiddies, to the very best of your ability and it's a very great joy if you've got children of your own, of course you realise it. We've had seven, six surviving, but they're all very very keen but ** have taken them away all over the place. My brothers and sisters died in the far regions of the world, but I can't complain for the Balch's went from here and became one of the very important people in the United States, where the first, the first signatory to the Declaration of Independence was a Balch who went away from Mendip Again. John always John or William, John or William, John or William, I was not because of a squabble, I became Herbert much to my disgust [*Laughter from the audience*]. So I retaliated by naming my boys William and John and ** at once ** have been missing and gone far and far away they get contact and I get letters from all over the world, and I've been able to build up an extraordinary story of migrations and movements of all troublesome times of the 17th century particularly. That was a time, a terrible time that Somerset went through and survived.

Ladies and Gentlemen I wish you god speed. I believe you are doing a most important thing for your delightful Axbridge, and something of which presently be all very proud, and be all trying very hard to do something to help, and good luck to you.