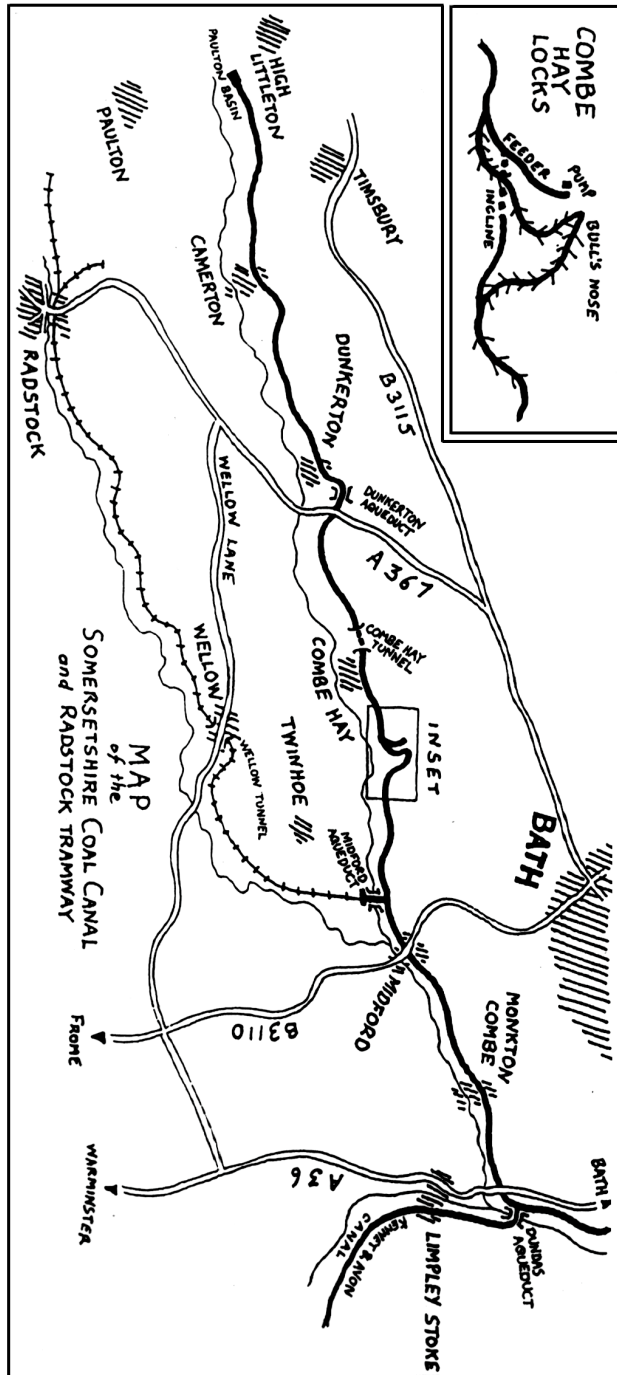


# WEIGH-HOUSE

THE MAGAZINE OF THE  
SOMERSETSHIRE COAL CANAL SOCIETY



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**EVENTS ORGANISER**

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Website: <http://www.coalcanal.org>

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The Somersetshire Coal Canal Society was founded in January 1992 with the aim:

'TO FOCUS AN INTEREST ON THE PAST, PRESENT AND  
FUTURE OF THE OLD SOMERSETSHIRE COAL CANAL'

The Society is aimed at those people who are interested in finding out more about the history of the canal, preserving what is still there and walking the parts that are still accessible to the public.

The Society aims to preserve the remaining structures of the canal (Midford Aqueduct, Combe Hay Locks *etc.*) and to protect the line of the canal from decay, dereliction and vegetation.

\*\*\*\*\*

Registered Charity N<sup>o</sup> 1047303

Registered under the Data Protection Act 1984 N<sup>o</sup> A2697068

Affiliated to the Inland Waterways Association N<sup>o</sup> 0005276

Inland Revenue reference code for tax purposes: CAD72QG

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### MEMBERSHIP FEES

(as at 1st June 2003)

£7.50 (Family / Individual) £5.00 (Senior Citizen / Student)  
£150.00 (Life) payable by lump sum or four annual instalments

Membership Application Forms are available from

the Membership Secretary, **John Bishop**

73, Holcombe Green, Upper Weston, Bath BA14HY

☎ 01225 428738 E-mail: cesjtb@bath.ac.uk

Society Website: <http://www.coalcanal.org>

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THE VIEWS AND OPINIONS EXPRESSED IN THIS MAGAZINE DO NOT  
NECESSARILY REPRESENT OR CONVEY THOSE OF THE SOCIETY

\*\*\*\*\*

The Editor welcomes any letters, articles, photographs *etc* for inclusion in **WEIGH-HOUSE** and will try to include them in full, but reserves the right to shorten them if space is limited.

Please send articles and correspondence for the next edition of **WEIGH-HOUSE** to:

Adrian Tuddenham 88, Mount Road, Southdown, Bath BA2 1LH

☎ 01225 335974 E-mail (not HTML): [adrian@poppyrecords.co.uk](mailto:adrian@poppyrecords.co.uk)

Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> July — 19:30

**TALK — The Somersetshire Coal Canal**

by **Roger Halse**

at Bradford upon Avon Public Library

For further details please contact:

Roger Halse ☎ 01249 652846

Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> July — 10:00

**WALK — The S.C.C. Around Monkton Combe**

Meet: Brassknocker Basin

For further details please contact:

Mike Chapman ☎ 01225 426948

Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> August — 10:00

**WORK PARTY — Location to be advised**

For further details please contact:

Bob Parnell ☎ 01225 428055

Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> August — 10:00

**WALK — Shoscombe and Foxcote**

Meet: Shoscombe Community Centre

For further details please contact:

Mike Chapman ☎ 01225 426948

Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> September — 10:00

**WORK PARTY — Location to be advised**

For further details please contact:

Bob Parnell ☎ 01225 428055

Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> September — 10:00

**WALK — Carlingcott and Carlingcott Mill**

Meet: Camerton, bottom of Red Hill.

For further details please contact:

Mike Chapman ☎ 01225 426948

**Walks**

These are all circular walks unless otherwise noted. You only need to arrange your transport to and from the meeting point. Any walks marked † tend to be in the form of detailed explanations of short sections of the canal and its relationship with the locality; and, as such, are less suitable for young children.

Dogs are normally welcome (except where indicated) and must be kept on leads at all times.

Check the website for any last minute changes: [www.coalcanal.org](http://www.coalcanal.org)

**Work Parties**

Venues are often arranged at short notice, always check with *Bob Parnell* ☎ 01225 428055

**WEIGH - HOUSE N<sup>o</sup> 56**

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**EDITOR'S NOTES**

Variety is the theme of this edition of Weigh-House. The work parties have moved from the area of Locks 11 - 15 to some other historical sites; Mike Chapman has recorded our first visit to the site of Withy Mills Colliery and we even have an account of how a musical play came to be written about the beginnings of the S.C.C.

Much publicity surrounded the launch of “The Map That Changed the World” a few years ago, which tended to detract from another book about William Smith, “Strata”, which was published at the same time. We now have gone some way towards redressing this imbalance by reviewing “Strata”, which deserves to find a place on the bookshelf of anyone interested in the life of this remarkable man.

Paulton Ironworks gets a mention for the first time in this issue of Weigh-House; so little is known about it that many members, even those who turn up on our walks, aren't sure where it is. Recent changes and discoveries relating to this interesting historical site have opened up several new lines of enquiry and generated a flurry of interest about this lost local industry and its connections to the canal, so I hope to include more articles about it in future editions as further information comes to light.

**Adrian Tuddenham**

**CHAIRMAN'S NOTES**

*"Life is what happens while you are making other plans" (John Lennon, possibly quoting Oscar Wilde). This is a good metaphor for the experience of myself and the committee as we approach our 2010 AGM.*

At the last AGM we were given a task of making a plan for restoring the canal, but have found our attentions taken with one offer to sell us part of the canal near Radstock, a second to lease another section of the main line to Paulton, and having to take decisive action to prevent destruction of a third section. None of these were foreseen last year, but all have increased the society's standing and credibility. Sadly we were unable to afford a section which was for sale on the Radstock Branch, although one of our members attended the auction and was willing to commit his own funds, but was outbid; the negotiations on the lease of a section of the Northern Branch are ongoing. In the enforcement case, we were contacted by concerned residents at Radford, and in turn we immediately alerted the council of these concerns, the result was a visit by enforcement officers within 48 hours. We have also been approached by Paulton Parish Council with a view to us enhancing the section of canal on the Paulton/Timsbury parish boundary

This demonstrates that we have moved from a society making hypothetical plans to a society that actually punches with real weight. It also raises another issue: money. We could not afford to buy the land near Radstock. The land subject to planning enforcement at Radford recently changed hands for £20,000; we couldn't have bought that either. Looking at canals such as the Wey and Arun, which now is navigable though five miles and five locks, by far and away the most effective way of ensuring the preservation and restoration of the canal in the long term is to own as much of it as we can; but in the short term we must work with landowners and parish councils to ensure that the canal is treated sympathetically, while working behind the scenes to generate the funds needed.

**Patrick Moss**

**NEW MEMBERS**

The Society welcomes the following new members:

Mr. & Mrs. J. & S. Hetreed	Bath
Mr. R. J. Lewis	Bath
Mr. G. Simpson	Radstock
Mr. T. Jones	Warminster
Mr. & Mrs. G. Moffet	Melksham
Mr. & Mrs. G. & J. Milward	Portishead

**DONATIONS**

The Society wishes to thank the following members who have generously made donations:

- Colin Axon
- G. S. Woodward
- Mr. & Mrs. W. Durrant
- Mr. & Mrs. M. Jefferies
- Mr. R. Chacksfield

Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> May — 10:00  
**WALK — Radford Pit**  
*Meet:* Bottom of Radford Hill  
 For further details please contact:  
*Mike Chapman* ☎ 01225 426948

Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> June — 10:00  
**WORK PARTY — Location to be advised**  
 For further details please contact:  
*Bob Parnell* ☎ 01225 428055

Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> June — 19:30  
**ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**  
 Radstock Museum, Waterloo Road.  
*Followed by a programme of previously unknown views of the S.C.C. from the 'bathintime' collection, presented by Daniel Brown and Roger Halse*

Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> June — 10:00  
**WALK — Paulton Foundry [see article on P7]**  
*Meet:* Paulton Sewage Works  
 For further details please contact:  
*Mike Chapman* ☎ 01225 426948

Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> June — 19:00  
**EVENING WALK — Combe Hay and the Locks**  
**by Patrick Moss**  
*Meet:* The Avenue, Combe Hay.  
 For further details please see website or contact: Patrick Moss ☎ 07736 859882

Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> July — 10:00  
**WORK PARTY — Location to be advised**  
 For further details please contact:  
*Bob Parnell* ☎ 01225 428055

Monday 5<sup>th</sup> to Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> July  
**S.C.C. EXHIBITION — Bradford upon Avon Public Library**  
 For further details please contact:  
*Derrick Hunt* ☎ 01225 863066

## WAVERLEY EXCURSION

*From Clevedon, 8th June 2010*

Members of the Society will have an opportunity to get together, along with other industrial archaeology groups, and enjoy a cruise on the Waverley, the World's last ocean going paddle steamer, on Tuesday 8th June. The cruise is entitled "Commemorating D-Day". We leave Clevedon at 13.15 and sail to Penarth and then up the River Usk to Newport. There we will see and may pass under the famous transporter bridge which still works on special occasions. From Newport we sail back to Clevedon arriving at 17.30.

The cost of this cruise is £21 or £17.95 concession. If you would like to book a place, please phone David Chalmers: 0117 972 0423. Cheques should be made out to David Chalmers and sent to him at 40, Greenlease, Knowle Park, Bristol BS4 2TL (please enclose a stamped self-addressed envelope). In the evening the Society has its AGM but as the cruise is scheduled to return to Clevedon at 5.30 you should have 2 hours to spare before the AGM starts in Radstock, so you can do both if you want.

Last date for making a booking: Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> May.

...and finally...



...does his wife realise he is that old?

## ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The next Annual General Meeting of the Somersetshire Coal Canal Society

will be held on

**Tuesday 8th June 2010**

at the Radstock Museum, Waterloo Road, Radstock, commencing 7.30 pm.

*To be followed by a programme of previously unknown views of the S.C.C. from the 'bathitime' collection, presented by Daniel Brown and Roger Halse*

## OBITUARY

### FRED WEDLOCK

It was with great regret that we learned of the death of Fred Wedlock. Although he was well known to the public at large as a folk singer and television personality, there was another, quieter, side to his life which we in the S.C.C.S. have much to be grateful for. In his spare time, Fred was keenly interested in the history of the Somerset Coalfield and, in particular, the area north of Paulton Basin. His house was built on the heapstead of Allen's Pit at Amesbury, and in the garden stood a coal waggon on lengths of rail which Fred had found, still in place, when extending the property. He was a keen collector of historical artefacts and was regularly seen picking over the bargains at Camerton Car Boot Sale.

When S.C.C.S. walks led us past his house, Fred was always pleased to stop whatever he was doing and spend some time chatting to us and showing us items from his collection. When ploughing activity in a nearby field brought evidence of the local coal tramways to the surface, Fred immediately telephoned us so that we could come and see for ourselves — he then gave us a copy of an aerial photograph of the scene, which he had taken from the rooftop whilst repairing his chimney pot.

Although he led a busy life with many professional engagements, he could always find the time to support good causes and local events, where his larger-than-life presence was guaranteed to turn any event into a rip-roaring success.

The world will miss his exuberant personality in show business, but we shall also miss his friendship and his staunch guardianship of the remains of the canal and mining history in the Timsbury area.



**Fred Wedlock showing Mike Chapman around the site of Amesbury Pit  
May 2008**

## NAVYING NOTES

Spring is usually a time when a verdant explosion threatens to engulf the lock flight and makes us wonder if we have been wasting our time trying to keep the canal clear. This year, however, Spring was delayed by cold weather and the anticipated malevolent growth of nettles and other weeds has not yet taken place. This gave us a breathing space in which we could devote some of our work party time to other parts of the canal.

Lock 9 has not received any serious attention since the Avon Industrial Buildings Trust worked on it about 20 years ago. The mysterious blind-ended tunnel near the canal workshops had never been properly investigated and the pumping engine site at Engine Wood was becoming overgrown. Work parties were dispatched to all of these sites and, with the permission of the landowner, clearance work was undertaken.

Engine Wood was relatively easy to tidy up, with mostly young nettles and a few fallen tree branches to remove, but the work at Lock 9 was somewhat heavier. Before we arrived, the landowner had cleared the area around the lock; the trees themselves had not been around long enough to become particularly large, but there were dozens of them, all mixed up with clumps of scrub, and we were kept hard at work cutting and burning. Never was a bonfire more welcome, as the site is much more exposed than the our usual work sites and the cold March weather, which had inhibited nettle growth, was chilling us to the marrow with a steady wind from the North-East.

We were full of anticipation about what we might find when we dug out the tunnel, but the result was initially a bit of a disappointment. Most of what we uncovered was already known and made no sense at all to our untutored eyes. The next step is to call in the experts — but their explanation will have to wait until another edition of Weigh-House.



A WELCOME BONFIRE AT LOCK 9 — March 2010

The book is indexed, has a table of references, and some useful appendices. These include; Smith's list of fossil species first named in his *Strata Identified by Organised Fossils*; a list of his principal publications and manuscripts; 'The William Smith Trail' (mentioned above, with a map of the Somerset Coal Canal); and a handy reference to the different geological periods.

In summary, this is a well-produced and reasonably priced book, with plenty of illustrations which make the geological details relatively easy to follow. The author states that this is a biography, and is not intended to be a scientific reference book 'down to the finest detail'. It should therefore provide an interesting read for those who are not familiar with William Smith's life and fame, as well as a handy reference for those who already are.

M.C.

## WHERE IS THIS?



Copyright Bath in Time - Private Collection

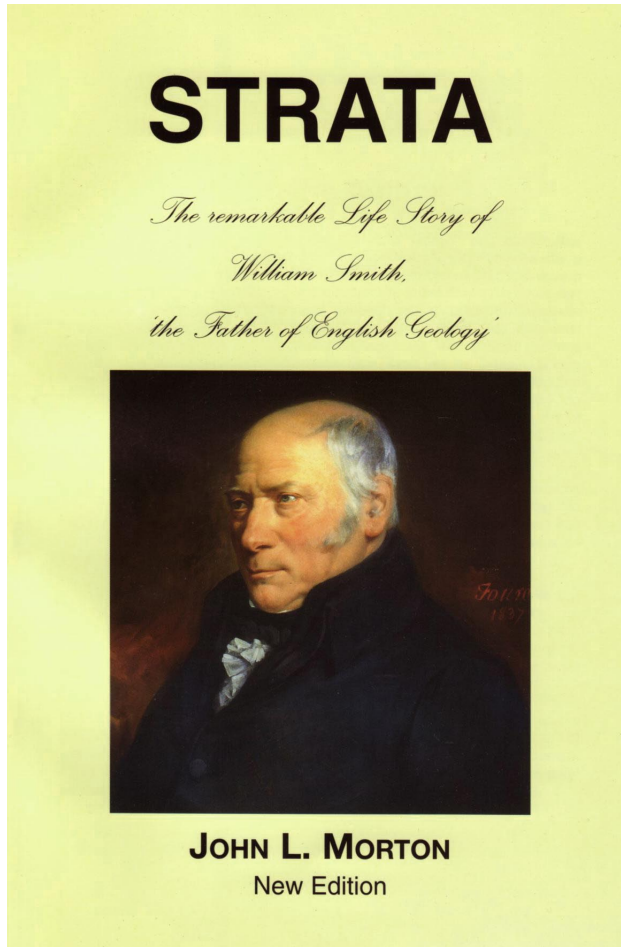
*Want to know more?*

The answer will be given at the Society's Annual General Meeting at 7.30 pm on Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> June, at The Radstock Museum. [ see *Diary Dates P. 21* ]

Following the meeting, Roger Halse and Daniel Brown will be presenting a series of previously unknown views of the SCC from the George Love Dafnis / *bathintime* collection.

## BOOK REVIEW

John L. Morton, *Strata. The Remarkable Life Story of William Smith, the Father of English Geology*, Brocken Spectre Publishing (New edition, 2004), 170 pp, illustrated. £11.99. ISBN 0-9546829-1-2.



study of geology, it is no surprise that no new revelations are provided about Smith's involvement with the Coal Canal and the Caisson Lock, which is adequately dealt with in the first chapter. The remaining five chapters go on to describe the production of his first geological maps and the rivalry which ensued, his financial difficulties, and the eventual reception of his work. This provides a good outline of his subsequent practical career, which not only took him over the whole country, but included his employment as a surveyor, civil and hydraulic engineer, land drainage and sea defence constructor, as well as mineralogist and geologist. The author includes many quotations from Smith's original private notes and correspondence as well as his published writings, all of which bring the subject alive.

When this book was first published, by Tempus Publishing Ltd. in 2001, it did not receive a great deal of attention, due in part to the coincidental publication of another book dealing with the same subject entitled *The Map that Changed the World*. However, the author, himself a qualified Geologist, was nevertheless elected a Fellow of the Geology Society of London largely on the strength of this work.

As a result, this new edition is not merely a reprint of the earlier work, but features a number of improvements, including eight illustrations in colour and a detailed itinerary taking in William Smith's house at Tucking Mill and the remains accessible to the public of the Somersetshire Coal Canal. In this context, it is gratifying to note that attention is drawn here to the activities of the Somersetshire Coal Canal Society, including contact details (though a little out of date - Laurie Gibney is no longer membership secretary).

Since the author's object is to 'paint a comprehensive picture of the life and works of a great man of science' and his impact on the

## PAULTON FOUNDRY

*Earlier this year, the property which includes the site of Paulton Foundry was sold to new owners who are keen to research its history. They have asked the S.C.C.S. and other local history societies for any help they can give in this matter and have lost no time in becoming members of our society.*

By pure coincidence, another resident in the Paulton area has recently discovered a ledger detailing the transactions of Paulton Foundry; this has been loaned to Radstock Museum. That interesting artefact has the potential to give valuable insight into the daily workings of the foundry and may also yield hitherto unsuspected information on the S.C.C and the coalfields of the area.

Another coincidence has brought to light a previously-unknown photograph showing Paulton Foundry in its working state. At present we have only seen a photograph of a photocopy of the original, but even that has yielded a great deal of information. We will be seeking the owner's permission to make a better copy and include it in some future edition of Weigh-House.

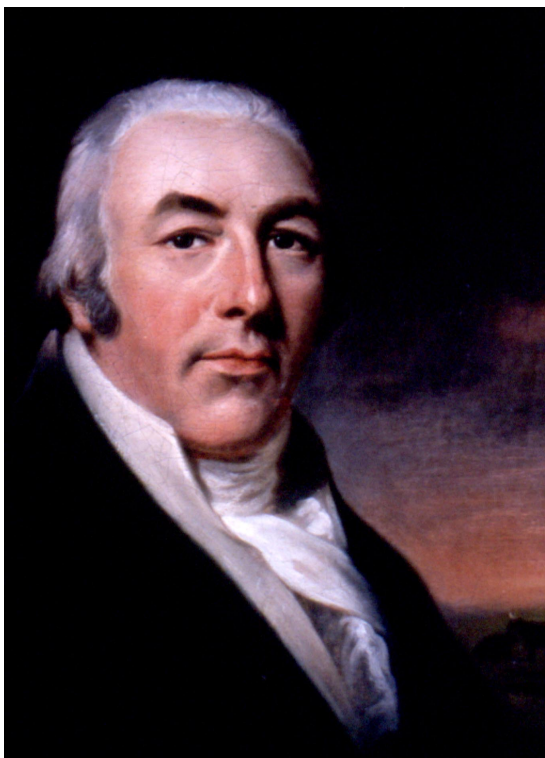
The Paulton Foundry is obviously strongly connected with the development of the S.C.C., but we have never had the opportunity to investigate it closely — our knowledge of the site being limited to peering over a hedge from a public footpath during walks in the area. Now, however, the new owners have invited us to come in and look around the property, which includes the spectacular ruins of the main foundry buildings and a surviving cottage. We have planned a visit to this fascinating and hitherto unexplored site for June and have listed it in our programme of walks on Page 21.



**BUILDINGS ON THE PAULTON FOUNDRY SITE — April 2010**

## SHAREHOLDERS OF THE SOMERSETSHIRE COAL CANAL

### John Billingsley *Esquire*



**JOHN BILLINGSLEY**

*Oil on canvas by Joseph Hutchisson 1747 – 1830*

By permission of the Moger family and Victoria Art Gallery, B&NES.

Biographical Details	
Born:	Ashwick Grove, Oakhill, near Shepton Mallet, Somerset 1747
Married:	Mary Wells, daughter of Nathaniel Wells, Rector of East Allington, Devon.
Died:	26 <sup>th</sup> September 1811, aged 64 at Ashwick Grove, Oakhill, Somerset.
Buried:	St James Churchyard, Ashwick, Oakhill, Somerset. Monument inside church.
Family:	One daughter Marianne Seymour

John Billingsley was a man of knowledge, wealth and status who pioneered progress, improvement and innovation in agriculture, industry and transport in the 18<sup>th</sup> & 19<sup>th</sup> centuries; born into a wealthy family, he was the grandson of Nicholas Billingsley, a Presbyterian dissenter who was minister at Ashwick from 1699 to 1729. He was described as a leading member of the Presbyterian church although at some stage he was reconciled with the Church of England.

He was an important promoter and shareholder of the Somersetshire Coal Canal, the Kennet & Avon Canal and the Dorset & Somerset Canal. He also promoted the proposed Bristol & Western Canal project for linking Bristol with Taunton and was actively involved in the turnpiking of roads.

His shareholding in the Dorset & Somerset Canal amounted to £3,500, but the value of his shareholdings in the S.C.C. and the K&A Canal is not known.

Gradually the play and the songs - including the one based on Derrick's original suggestion of a 'Somerset Coal Canal Song' - took shape. I incorporated another of Derrick's ideas for a song built around the inscription on the tombstone of a young worker, Charles Sage, who'd been killed at the age of sixteen in a pit tramway accident. The first lines of the song '*Dear Father and Mother*' are taken verbatim from the inscription, and I've then added two further verses in similar style. The dramatic scenes began to fall into place, once I'd worked out a way of creating a Narrator figure who could act as a link between the audience and the historical figures I was portraying. In particular, I was pleased with the way the story of the Caisson Lock came alive, using a mixture of historical sources such as newspapers, diaries and letters, and invented dialogue. But throughout the piece I was mindful that my inventions and 'creative liberties' stayed within the spirit of the historical record. In that sense nothing in the play is untrue.

By the spring of 1996 I had completed the half-hour 'entertainment' and somewhat nervously showed it to Derrick. He gave it the thumbs-up (did the Committee see it?) [*No! Ed.*] and I turned my energies to the task of staging it. At this point it quickly became clear that *writing* the piece had been the easy bit! Although the play has a dozen speaking roles I'd designed it to be performed by just two actor/singers. This, I thought, would make it easier to cast and rehearse, and to put on any future performances without the 'availability' problems you can get with larger casts. What I hadn't bargained for was the fact that for most local amateur actors the idea of putting on several different hats - and accents - in the course of a single performance was a much more daunting challenge than playing 'Mr Field' in an am-dram whodunnit. Peggy Rowe, a founder of Radstock Museum, came up trumps with one local thespian, Martin Horler, who was highly talented, happy to put on any number of hats (and a full eighteenth-century costume - it helped that one of Martin's many interests was driving a liveried coach and horses!) and throw himself about the stage as required. The problem was finding a second actor to join him. Several were approached and all turned down the idea. With time running out before the AGM premiere there was only one answer: I'd have to be the second actor as well as the director.

Martin and I plunged into a busy rehearsal schedule and just before the AGM we managed to put on a 'sneak preview' performance at a Midsomer Norton Arts Day in front of the proverbial three men and a dog. One of the three men later told me that he'd very much enjoyed the show. This encouraged us greatly. Martin's wife told me I was wearing the wrong trousers for the role (I changed them). We were ready for the 'big one'. At a packed AGM at the very same Old Down Inn where Derrick and I had first met a year earlier, and where 'interested parties' among the North Somerset colliery owners had held a vital meeting two hundred years earlier, we performed the play to a warm reception (Derrick has a video to prove it!). Over the next three years Martin and I gave further performances around the area, including ones at the Bath Fringe Festival, the Radstock Gala Day and open-air at the Devizes Canal Fun Day.

Now, a decade later, I've finally managed to get around to publishing the script and songs in a volume of short plays I've written over the years. And it would be nice to think there could still be an after-life to the show. I've now reached the point where I can't cope with the strains and stresses of performing and directing, but I'd be delighted if someone else would like to stage it. As mentioned earlier it could be done by a company of anything from two to a dozen actors. I've still got many of the props and bits of the (simple) set. All you need is enthusiasm and a copy of the script!\*

**Jeremy Gibson**

\* '*A Somerset Navigation and Other Plays*' by Jeremy Gibson (published by Thumbnail Media at £6.95) is available at the following outlets:

Waterstone's — Bath	Hunting Raven bookshop — Frome
Topping's Bookshop — Bath	Mes Amis café — Beckington
Oldfield Park Bookshop — Bath	Radstock Museum bookshop — Radstock
Ex Libris bookshop — Bradford-on-Avon	

It can also be ordered from any bookshop or from Jeremy at [jeremy\\_gibson@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:jeremy_gibson@tiscali.co.uk)



## A SOMERSET NAVIGATION — OR NO CAISSON TO ANSWER

Between 1996 and 1999, a short entertainment based on the story of the Somersetshire Coal Canal called 'A Somerset Navigation or No Caisson to Answer' was performed locally in various venues by Jeremy Gibson and Martin Horler. The script and songs were written by Jeremy Gibson, who has now published them in the form of a book. For the benefit of those who might have wondered how such a thing could come about, he has been persuaded to give an account of the events which led up to the creation of this work.

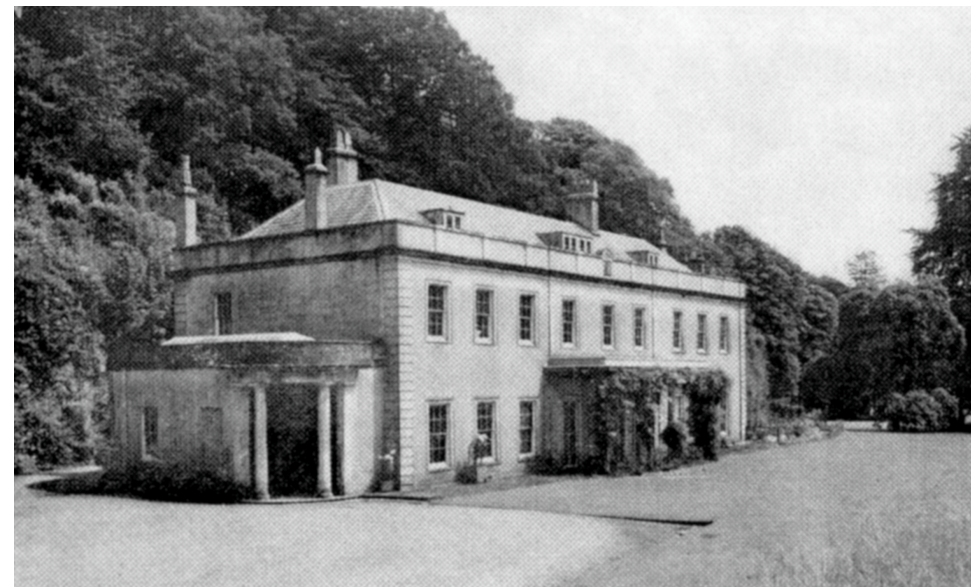
### The Somerset Coal Canal Song

♩=72  
Freely

In sev-en-teen hund-dred and nine-ty three, In Em-b'rough's fin-est house do we A—  
gree forth with to make a— plan, For a nav-i-ga-tion— by the Cam For  
we're re-solved and so— we shall Build the Som-er-set coal— can-al! vs 2: John

It isn't every day that a strange man approaches you and suggests you might like to write a song about a Coal Canal - but it happened to me! The venue, appropriately enough as it turned out, was the Old Down Inn in Emborough, Somerset, and the man in question was Derrick Hunt, then a member of the SCCS committee with responsibility as 'events organiser'. He'd heard me sing at the Folk Club which in the mid-90's met at the Old Down Inn and wondered if I also wrote songs. When I said I did, he explained that he'd been searching in vain for any existing songs about the Coal Canal that might have been written during the century of its operation - would I like to fill the gap? When I'd recovered from the surprise of it all I said I'd certainly think about it.

Not long after this Derrick recommended Kenneth Clew's excellent *'The Somersetshire Coal Canal & Railways'* to me as useful background reading, and very soon I became fascinated not only by the story of the Coal Canal but by the wonderful larger-than-life characters who peopled it, including William 'Strata' Smith, Robert Weldon, the designer of the ill-fated Caisson Lock, and the dyspeptic Rector of Camerton, John Skinner. Here, I thought, was not merely material for a song, but also a drama (and as at one point in my life I'd spent a decade working in the theatre as a writer and director I was very comfortable with the idea of making a theatre piece with music and songs). I got back in touch with Derrick and suggested this way forward. He was encouraging and thought it could be 'premiered' at the SCCS's AGM later that year. (I was later to discover that the SCCS committee were highly sceptical about whether any drama on the history of the Coal Canal could be in the least entertaining! Fortunately, being unaware of these feelings, I set to work on the basis of Derrick's enthusiasm).



**BILLINGSLEY'S HOME, ASHWICK GROVE**

As illustrated in the Auction catalogue shortly before it was sold for demolition in October 1955. Now a ruin, which can be seen from the public footpath at ST643477.

Billingsley had many business interests in addition to canals, including coal mines, Oakhill Brewery and its public houses and farming of 4,000 acres. Possibly he had involvement in the cloth trade and a logwood mill (making dyes for the cloth industry). One of his activities was controversial. The enclosure of Mendip in order to improve farming productivity was hated by the ordinary people who were dispossessed of land by the enclosures. By contrast, his activities in the draining of Sedgemoor were beneficial without controversy.

He was a renowned agricultural expert and founder member of the Bath & West Society, now known as the Royal Bath & West of England Society, based near Shepton Mallet, Somerset. The silver cups which he won in the Society's competitions are still in the possession of his descendants, some of whom live and work in the Bath area.

Billingsley is best known as the author of "General View of the Agriculture of the County of Somerset with Observations on the Means of its Improvements" 1795. In his book and activities he advocated the modernisation of farming practices. He promoted mechanisation, ploughing with oxen, hedge and wall building, crop rotation, treatment of sick animals with medicine and the improvement of cucumber production with horse dung. His major innovation was the introduction and adoption of the double-furrow plough. The competition to demonstrate its effectiveness was held at Barrack Farm, Bath.

The chapter on political economy shows how forward thinking he was. It relates to the narrow margin of British food supplies in view of the outbreak of war with France. Today the concept is known as "Food Security".



A DESCRIPTION OF

ROBERT WELDON'S

HYDROSTATICK or CAISSON-LOCK,

Which is now building and nearly completed

On the SOMERSET COAL-CANAL near COOMB-HAY,

ABOUT THREE MILES FROM BATH.

AS many impediments arise in the progress of Canals; First, From a want of water to supply locks in dry seasons and elevated situations; 2dly. In crossing valleys by expensive aqueducts; 3dly. Tunneling through hills and high grounds; And 4thly, The great delay occasioned by passing many locks where the unevenness of the country renders it unfavourable for canals;

R. WELDON, after having devoted many years study and indefatigable labour to avoid these difficulties, and to accomplish this great object, now offers to the publick a description of his Hydrostatick or Caisson Lock.

The drawing annexed presents a perspective view of the machine or contrivance by which the conveyance is to be effected, and of the inside of a lock, or pound, in which it is immersed,

A. consists of a trunk or caisson made of wood, and of dimensions equal to the reception of a commercial vessel of twenty

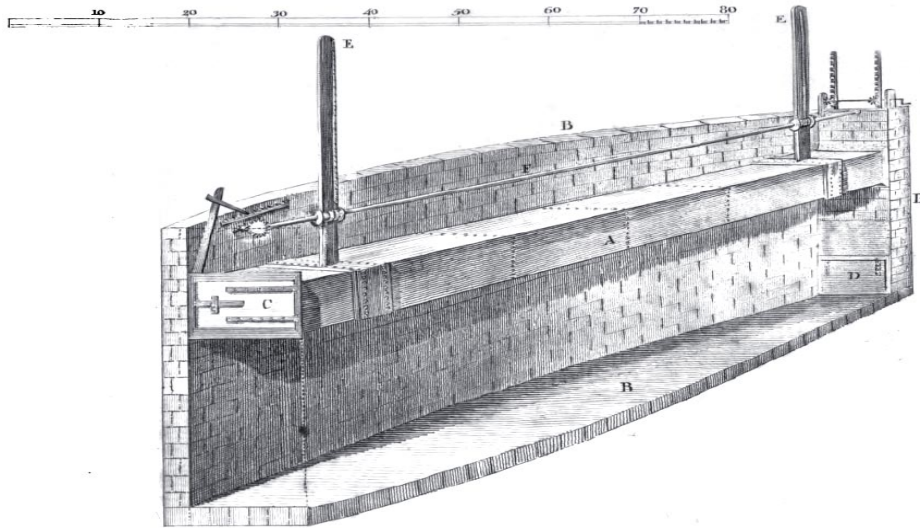
twenty-five or thirty tons burthen, at each end thereof is a door way, which the boat, &c. is to be floated through into or out of the caisson, and being received therein, and the door then shut, with a given quantity of water to float the boat, and counterpoise the caisson, so as to make it the same specific gravity with the water in which it is immersed; it may then be easily raised or lowered at pleasure, either by destroying the equilibrium, by admitting a small quantity of water into the caisson through a valve constructed for that purpose, or by discharging a similar quantity through another valve, or by chains and rollers, as in the drawing annexed, from one level to another, and the boat be floated from the caisson into the canal; the water in the caisson and that in the canal having both the same level whilst the conveyance is effected.

B. is one side the bottom, and one end of the lock or cistern in which the caisson is immersed, which is built of free-stone, and of the following dimensions, viz. from the foundation to the top of the wall sixty-six feet, length from out to out eighty-eight feet, width in the middle twenty feet, ditto at each end eleven feet and half, and the perpendicular height from the surface of the lower canal to that of the upper canal forty-six feet.

C. The door at each end of the caisson, which shuts into a rabbet, the frame projecting about three inches beyond the door when shut.

D. An aperture at each end of the cistern or lock, communicating with the upper and lower canal, with a sliding door or gate, which are counterpoised like a common fall, and wound up by wheel and pinion, to receive the end of the caisson, to which it is closely fitted at the time the boat is received or delivered.

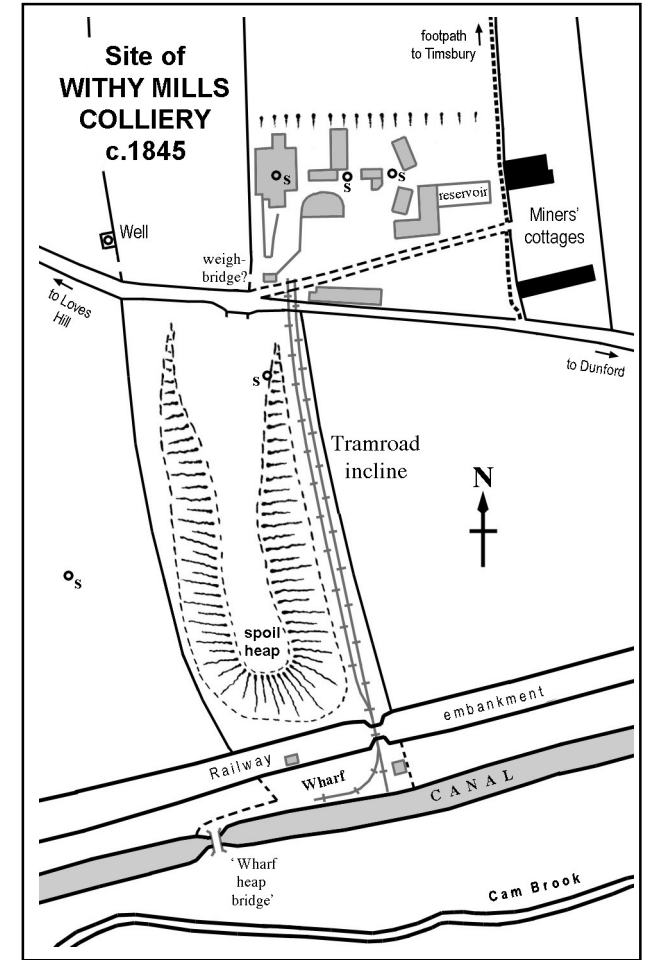
R. WELDON,



ROBERT WELDON'S CONTRIBUTION TO BILLINGSLEY'S BOOK

During discussions with the owner, we were also conducted to a well-shaft hidden behind a hedge in the neighbouring field on the west side, a feature which was later found to be marked on the 1880s OS map. It was a surprise to see that it was very finely made of pennant sandstone, and provided with a square well-head mounted on a plinth. The mouth of the shaft was particularly unusual, consisting of a large single slab with a large hole carved or drilled through the middle, protected with another single slab as a cover. Although this feature stood in an isolated position some 50 yards away from the colliery site, the two must have been connected in some way. Large quantities of pennant stone would have been raised during the sinking of the pit, and a similar large slab with a drilled hole could once be seen near Paulton Lower Engine Pit, among the ruined foundations around Paulton Basin before they were cleared.

Before leaving the site, we were able to meet the neighbour in the new property on the opposite side of the lane, and were gratified to learn that he would be willing for members of the Society to inspect the course of the inclined plane at some future date to be arranged. To return to Radford, it was decided to continue up the footpath to the plateau at the top of the field which affords some spectacular views to the south and contains Lynch House, a rather unusual 19th century farm building with an undercroft perched on the edge of the hill. The entrance track to the house joins the main High Littleton road through Timsbury village, where one can return to the canal via Mill Lane, an ancient narrow track which leads back down to Timsbury Mill.



THE LAYOUT OF WITHY MILLS COLLIERY — from an old plan of c.1845.

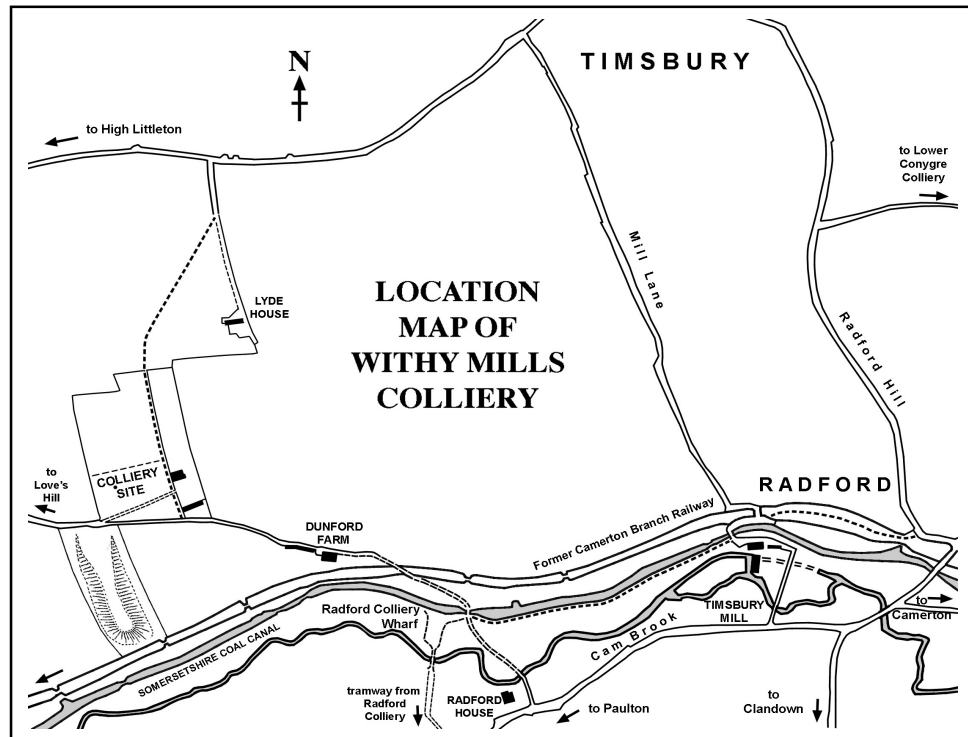
The original buildings (shown in grey) superimposed on present day outlines, together with various shafts (marked 's') and the well in the neighbouring field to the west. A bridge, marked 'wharf heap bridge' is shown crossing the canal to the towing path side, which may have been temporary. Remains of the narrows can still be seen here, but no other evidence for a bridge has been found.

Mike Chapman

The colliery itself stood in the field on the opposite side of the lane, but this too is closed off for a private drive to two former miners' cottages in a separate plot of ground on the east side of the field. Fortunately an old public footpath to Timsbury which once served the pit still runs past the cottages (through their gardens) which provides a better view of the site. It was also fortunate that one of the cottage owners who happened to be working in the garden at that moment kindly offered to take us into the field for a closer inspection. The ground here is very uneven, and it was immediately obvious that, though the pit buildings had been entirely demolished, their foundations were still much in evidence. Early plans of the colliery show three shafts within the pit area, together with a reservoir which stored water for the engine boilers. Two of the capped shafts were easily identified (one is shown as a 'well' on current maps), and the masonry of the buildings protrudes everywhere through the turf over the whole site. Even the outlines of the reservoir can be clearly made out. In short, this field has a high archaeological potential, and appears to conceal the completely undisturbed layout of an early 19th century colliery.



**AN UNUSUAL WELL — Uncovered by the colliery site owner as Mike Chapman looks on.**



For SCCS members the illustration of Robert Weldon's Hydrostatick Caisson Lock, which appears in Billingsley's book, is of great interest. The accompanying description is signed by Robert Weldon himself.

### Memorials

In the church of St. James, Ashwick there are two memorial tablets. One for John Billingsley and the other for his wife Mary and their family.

### Mystery

Soon after his death the Bath and West Society commissioned Samuel Woodforde (the nephew of James Woodforde author of *Diary of a Country Parson*) to copy in oils a crayon portrait of Billingsley. This has now been lost.

### Further research

There must be a lot of information about Billingsley still waiting to be found, which would make an ideal research project for someone with an interest in the subject. Could the lost Woodforde portrait be tracked down? Was Billingsley connected with the experiments to trace the source of the water in Wookey Hole caves by placing dye in the Mendip swallets? How much was Billingsley's shareholding in the SCC? Did he play any part in the passage of the Acts through the committee stages in Parliament? What were his friendships and business connections?

**Derrick Hunt**

Some further suggestions for anyone who wants to know more about Billingsley

- Visit St James Church, Ashwick. Memorials in the church. Family tomb in the graveyard.
- View the remains of Ashwick Grove.
- View the original of the Billingsley portrait in the Guildhall, Bath (not the Victoria Art Gallery).
- Research & write a book on Billingsley - any offers?

### Further Reading

- 1 **Old Mendip by Robin Atthill published by David & Charles. ISBN 0715351710**
- 2 **General View of the Agriculture of the County of Somerset with Observations on the Means of its Improvements 1795 by John Billingsley.**  
This book is available from libraries or is downloadable from Google Books.  
If you are not sure how to download the book, please contact Derrick Hunt.

## A VISIT TO THE SITE OF WITHY MILLS COLLIERY

15 November 2009

*The site of Withy Mills Colliery in Timsbury parish is located on the hillside overlooking the Cam Valley, not far from the canal terminus. Opened in about 1815, it was presumably sunk in this region to take advantage of the newly completed canal, to which it was immediately connected by a double-track self-acting inclined plane. Although little seems to be known about this pit, it was probably fairly successful; it had both winding and pumping engines, with 120 men working there later in its career. Its main claim to fame was for an accident with fatalities which was caused by a drunken engineman who overwound a load of men hanging on the rope ('man-riding', the usual practice before the introduction of cages) who came to grief in the winding wheel. Withy Mills appears to have belonged to the group of Timsbury collieries connected to the canal Basin further west, and like them was closed in the 1870s, after which the site completely cleared before being handed back to the landowner in 1878. Although the site of the colliery wharf on the canal, overlooked by the prominent colliery 'batch'*

*or spoil heap, had often been noted on previous walks, the opportunity was taken on this occasion to visit the upper part of the tramway where it joined the pit.*

To reach the Withy Mills site, there is a useful footpath at Radford, at the bottom of Radford Hill, which follows the trackbed of the old Camerton Branch railway line as far as Timsbury Mill. From here it continues along the towing path of one of the best preserved sections of the canal towards Dunford. Next to the platform of Radford Colliery wharf the towing path is crossed by the lane from Upper Radford to Love's Hill which can be followed a few hundred yards past Dunford Farm to the site of Withy Mills Pit. Formerly it was possible to gain access to the colliery spoil heap on the south side of the lane, but this has now been closed off for a new property built next to the entrance, and it is therefore no longer possible to examine the route of the inclined plane which ran down the east side of the spoil heap. Down and Warrington, writing in 1970, reported that stone sleeper blocks could still be seen there *in situ* and that excavations had revealed a turnout with wood and stone sleepers with three 'L' tramplates still in position. Viewed from a distance, it was evident that the course of the incline, now somewhat overgrown, had seen no alteration since then, and was therefore still of archaeological interest.

→



WITHY MILLS BATCH — November 2009

The Somersetshire Coal Canal is behind the trees on the left.