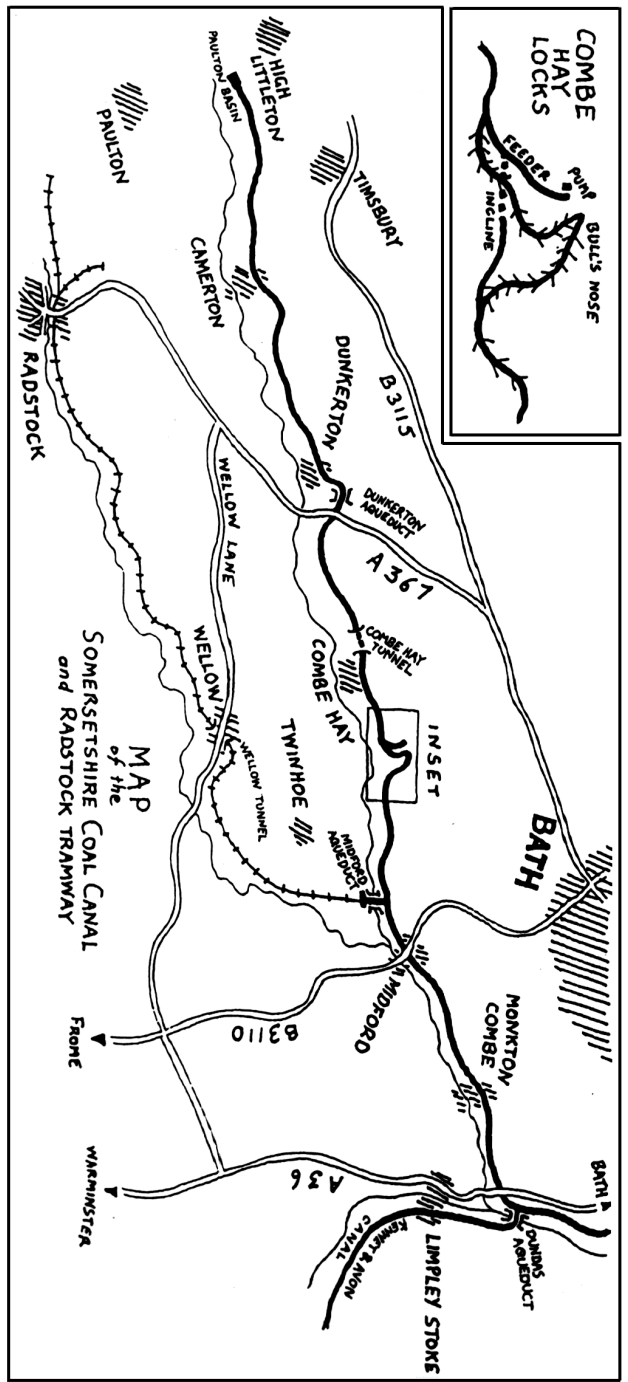


WEIGH-HOUSE

THE MAGAZINE OF THE
SOMERSETSHIRE COAL CANAL SOCIETY



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

The Somersetshire Coal Canal Society was founded in 1992 to:

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

The Society became a registered charity in 1995 and now has the
Objects:

- 1) To advance the education of the general public in the history of the Somersetshire Coal Canal
- 2) The preservation and restoration of the Somersetshire Coal Canal and its structures for the benefit of the public

Registered Charity N^o 1047303
Registered under the Data Protection Act 1984 N^o A2697068
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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>

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

Sunday 3rd June

WORK PARTY — Location to be advised

For further details please contact: *Derrick Hunt* ☎ 01225 863066

Tuesday 12th June

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Sunday 17th May

WALK — AQUEDUCT TO VIADUCT †

Meet: Brassknocker Basin

For further details please see website or contact: *Mike Chapman* ☎ 01225 426948

GARDENING PARTIES

These take place on Saturday mornings to undertake light work — tea and cakes will be provided.

Would anyone who can help at these please contact *Tony Yates* ☎ 07748 113832

FUTURE EVENTS

These events are still at the planning stage, but they have been included here to allow you to keep the dates free in case you wish to attend. Please check when you receive your next copy of Weigh-House to make sure that the details have not changed.

Thursday 6th September

OPEN EVENING at FUSSELL'S BALANCE LOCK †

Saturday 8th & Sunday 9th September

HERITAGE OPEN DAYS

Sunday 30th September

VISIT — THE CROFTON PUMPING ENGINES

Meet: Crofton Engines car park, Great Bedwyn, Nr. Hungerford.

For further details please see website or contact: *Derrick Hunt* ☎ 01225 863066

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

Work Parties

Venues are often arranged at short notice, always check with the contact person listed for that particular event.

WEIGH - HOUSE N^o 62

EDITOR'S NOTES	3
CHAIRMAN'S NOTES	4
NEW MEMBERS	4
NAVYING NOTES — W.R.G. at Combe Hay — S.C.C.S. at Paulton Dry Dock	5
SHAREHOLDERS OF THE S.C.C. — William Lambert White by Derrick Hunt	6
THE SCOTCH BOAT — A press cutting	7
EXCAVATIONS AT CAISSON HOUSE by Mike Chapman	8
SEARCHING FOR THE WILTS AND BERKS CANAL by Doug Small	14
COLLIERS WAY TRIBUTE TO WILLIAM SMITH by Andrew Mathieson	18
BOOK REVIEW: The Somersetshire Coal Canal — A Second Pictorial Journey	19
NEW BOOK: Family Matters	20
"... AND THIS IS THE DRY DOCK"	20
DATES FOR YOUR DIARY	21

EDITOR'S NOTES

Two of our regular items, *Shareholders of the Somersetshire Coal Canal* and *Navvyng Notes* return after a brief absence. In order to do justice to the events at the upper lock flight in the past few months, *Navvyng Notes* would have had to take up the whole of this edition of Weigh-House and most of the next one; I hope the brief jottings which appear on Page 5 do not mislead readers into underestimating the changes which are taking place.

The offer to excavate some areas near Caisson House caught us 'on the hop' and we did not have time to notify members or arrange a visit to the site before it had to be reinstated. The article by Mike Chapman, which begins on Page 8, gives an account of the many exciting and sometimes-puzzling features which came to light. In the next edition, Mike will attempt to place these discoveries in context and explain their significance.

It is editorial policy not to include articles on other canals unless they relate to the S.C.C., so readers might question the relevance of including an article on the Wilts & Berks Canal. It is not, however, the name of the canal which is relevant in this particular case, but the way Doug Small describes how canal photographs and other information may turn up in unexpected places. We have had our share of surprise discoveries in the past; with our 250 members, with 250 pairs of keen eyes alerted to the possibilities of finding information about the S.C.C. in the most unexpected places, I hope we can look forward to some more surprises in the future.

Adrian Tuddenham

CHAIRMAN'S NOTES

As I sit writing these notes we are on the eve of the fourth Waterway Recovery Group work party to visit our canal and I have just collected the keys to Dunkerton Parish Hall, where the group will stay. It is fair to say that Dunkerton is pleased to be hosting the group, but had hoped that we might be working on the canal in Dunkerton itself, such is the enthusiasm among local communities. We must attempt to keep up with the expectations that are arising from our increased activities — and that is no easy task.

As part of that task we have started a second wave of work parties, with a group nicknamed the 'gardening party' whose primary task is to keep in order the areas we have already cleared. These parties are run by Tony Yates and Veronica Bucknell; all are welcome to join. Tony has also been co-opted to the committee with a view to reporting on these activities.

John Ditcham has also become more involved: John became Secretary to the Committee last year and is now taking an active rôle representing us at national events such as the recent conference for the Canal and River Trust, the new waterways charity. He and Derrick Hunt have also been actively representing the society within the Southern Canals Association.

In all of this, we do not forget that as well as being a society campaigning for the preservation and restoration of the S.C.C., we are also interested in the history of the canal and the industry, especially the mines that gave life to the canal. Our most recent talk covered the history of the mining that fed the canal and was followed by a discussion on the issues raised. We have also heard about the House of Lords Archive which Derrick Hunt has researched so well with the aid of a generous donation from Ailsa Hutchings. In addition, our search for the archaeology of the canal has been given an unexpected boost at Combe Hay, as described on Page 7 of this issue.

So, overall, as Chairman, I have what could be described as 'a nice problem to have'. The committee is now the biggest that the society has ever seen (it is now at its constitutional limit) and we have more volunteers on all fronts than ever before, but we also have more work than ever to do and are making more progress in both historical research and work on the ground — yet there is so much more we could do if we had more resources. It seems the more we achieve, the more there is to achieve. Long may this continue.

Patrick Moss

NEW MEMBERS

The Society welcomes the following new members:

Mr. D.E.Ramsbottom	Lichfield
Mr. C.M.Blake	Bradford-on-Avon
Mr. A. Dyer	Croydon
Mr. A.Mogg	Amesbury
Mr. G.Charlton	Devizes
Mr. S. Potton	Bathampton

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Sunday 4th March — 10:00

WORK PARTY — Location to be advised

For further details please contact: *Adrian Tuddenham* ☎ 01225 335974

Saturday 10th March — 10:00 - 13:00

GARDENING PARTY — Location to be advised

For further details please contact: Tony Yates ☎ 07748 113832

Thursday 15th March — 19:30

SOCIAL EVENING — “THE KENNET AND AVON CANAL ARCHIVES”

by Elaine Kirby.

Meet: The Radstock Working Mens' Club.

For further details please see website or contact: *Patrick Moss* ☎ 07736 859882

Sunday 18th March — 10:00

WALK — SAPPERTON TUNNEL

Meet: Tunnel House Inn, near Coates (Do not use pub car park unless you are a patron)

For further details please see website or contact: *Richard Hignett* ☎ 01793 855631

Sunday 1st April — 10:00

WORK PARTY — Location to be advised

For further details please contact: *Derrick Hunt* ☎ 01225 863066

Saturday 14th April — 10:00 - 13:00

GARDENING PARTY — Location to be advised

For further details please contact: Tony Yates ☎ 07748 113832

Sunday 15th April — 10:00

WALK — COMBE HAY TOP LOCK & TUNNEL

Meet: The Avenue, Combe Hay.

For further details please see website or contact: *Mike Chapman* ☎ 01225 426948

Thursday 19th April — 19:30

SOCIAL EVENING — “THE SOMERSET COALFIELD”

by Shane Gould.

Meet: The Radstock Working Mens' Club.

For further details please see website or contact: *Patrick Moss* ☎ 07736 859882

Sunday 6th May

WORK PARTY — Location to be advised

For further details please contact: *Derrick Hunt* ☎ 01225 863066

Sunday 20th May

WALK — PAULTON BASIN and the DRY DOCK †

Meet: Paulton Sewage Works

For further details please see website or contact: *Derrick Hunt* ☎ 0225 863066

FAMILY MATTERS



John Jolliffe

NEW BOOK

FAMILY MATTERS by John Jolliffe

This book is a history of the Horner and Asquith families of Mells; the Jolliffe family at Ammerdown and Herveys from Suffolk. Some of the characters are notably eccentric which makes this a fascinating and sometimes colourful contribution to local history. In particular, S.C.C.S. members may be interested in the information on Thomas Samuel Jolliffe, who was a shareholder in the S.C.C. [See: *W.H.* 57]

It may be obtained from the Frome Society for Local Study

http://www.fs.sls.org.uk/book_sales.htm

NAVYING NOTES

It would be an understatement to say that good progress had been made on the lock flight at Combe Hay. Until 2010, our main activities had been mainly confined to Locks 12 to 15, with the occasional foray to tidy up Locks 1 and 5. Two factors have wrought a wondrous change: a new landowner who has positive plans to make something worthwhile of the lock flight and the 'discovery' of the S.C.C. as an interesting place to work by the Waterway Recovery Group.

This Autumn has seen two large W.R.G. work parties clearing the undergrowth along the flight between Locks 2 and 7. The pounds were cleared first, with only intentionally-selected trees and shrubs being left in place. Large quantities of old fencing and other debris were removed, although the railway fence posts were left in place as reminders of the convoluted history of the area. The tangled growth on the tops of the lock chambers was thinned, but the precarious position of some of the larger trees means that further clearance will have to wait until the situation has been properly assessed. The landowner has machine-cleared substantial lengths of the towpath on the lock flight and the bed of the upper reach, which leads from Lock 1 to the Workshop Basin.

Clearance of the hillside below Locks 5 and 6 has exposed the line of the inclined plane. Its profile is now clearly visible, as is the course of a later track which led alongside it from Caisson House down to the parish road, *via* a railway level crossing. Members of the S.C.C.S. work party joined in the two W.R.G. events and we returned to the site on our usual weekends to tidy up any areas which needed further clearance.

January saw our work party at a site which we have never tackled before: Paulton Basin Dry Dock. With increasing local interest in the Paulton and Timsbury Basins, we were pleased to have the opportunity to do some work on this site. After the Autumn rains, a small advance party was dispatched earlier in the week to dig some channels to the Cam Brook and lower the level of flooding on the site. By the time the main work party arrived, the majority of the site was no longer suitable for swimming; although the deeper bits could still not be approached in ordinary 'wellies'. [See picture on Page 20] Sadly the weather at the beginning of February forced us to abandon our plans for a second visit to the site. Nobody was afraid of the cold weather, we are used to it, the work and the bonfire keep us warm; the problem was the roads in the area, which had turned to sheet ice underneath a powdering of snow. We hope to return there at some future date.



"...AND THIS IS THE DRY DOCK"

John Ditcham, appropriately named and suitably attired at the Paulton work party.



THE WATERWAY RECOVERY GROUP CLEARING LOCKS 2 TO 5

SHAREHOLDERS OF THE SOMERSETSHIRE COAL CANAL

WILLIAM LAMBERT WHITE

Shareholding: £100

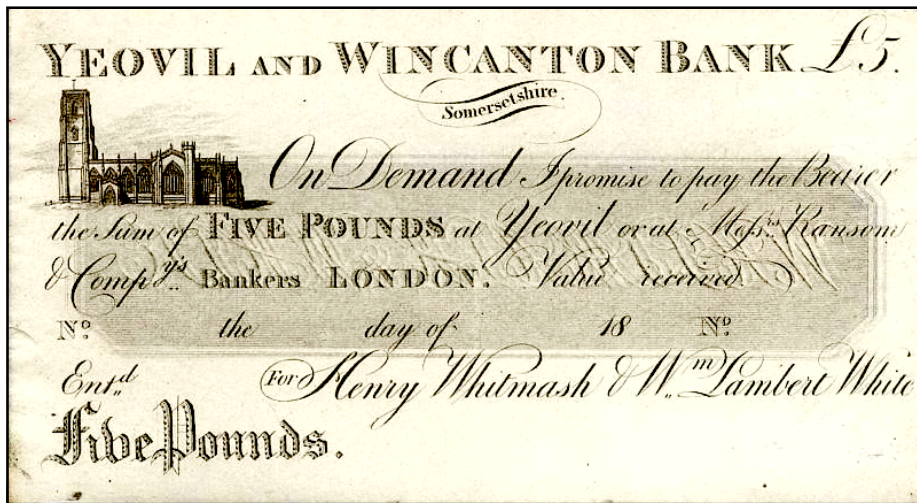
One of the S.C.C. shareholders was William Lambert White, very little is known about him except that he was a solicitor in Yeovil and a partner in the Yeovil & Wincanton Bank.

This private bank was established as "Henry Whitmarsh & Richard Brown" in Wincanton in 1796. It was styled "Whitmarsh & Co by 1805", "Whitmarsh & White" by 1811 and "Henry Whitmarsh & William Lambert White" by 1813.

In 1808 the bank opened a branch in Yeovil and from then it was also known as "Yeovil & Wincanton Bank". The Wincanton business appears to have closed in 1818.

In 1835 the bank was acquired by Stuckey's Banking Co of Langport, but the trading name was retained until 1837. In turn, Stuckey's was taken over by taken over by Parr's Bank Ltd (1909); formed into London County Westminster & Parr's Bank Ltd. (1918); became Westminster Bank Ltd. (1923); formed into National Westminster Bank Ltd. (1968); became National Westminster Bank PLC (1980), became NatWest (1990).

Notes were printed in £1, £5, and £20 denominations, but only the £1 and £5 notes were known to have been issued.



Roger Outing

A BANKNOTE ISSUED BY THE YEOVIL AND WINCANTON BANK

This proves that "Whitmarsh" is the correct spelling, but "Whitmarsh" is often used.

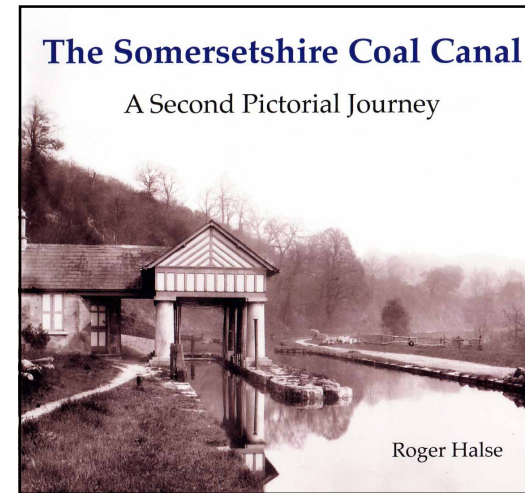
BOOK REVIEW

THE SOMERSETSHIRE COAL CANAL, A SECOND PICTORIAL JOURNEY

by Roger Halse

Published by Millstream Books, Bath. Price £7.50

It is amazing how photographs of long-closed waterways continue to emerge from unexpected and seemingly disconnected sources. The supporters of one of the K & A's other erstwhile (and to be reconnected one day) "tributaries", the Wilts & Berks Canal, are still finding previously unknown photos and, no doubt, will continue to do so. A case in point is the recently discovered photograph of boats at Uffington Wharf c1890, which was found in a book published in Philadelphia! [See Page 16]



Now, Roger Halse, a founding member of the S.C.C.S. and its Hon. Archivist, has produced a new version of his original book *The Somersetshire Coal Canal – A Pictorial Journey* published twelve years ago which was co-written with Simon Castens of The Titfield Thunderbolt bookshop in Larkhall, Bath. Some of Roger's photos this time may, at first glance, appear to be repeats from the first book but in fact none of them are. They are all different pictures - many newly published.

The main reason for this is Roger's access to the wonderful archive of the prolific photographer and local postcard producer of the early twentieth century, George Love Dafnis. This entire collection

has been acquired by Daniel Brown of *Bath in Time* and which is a most valuable addition to the social history of the Bath area. Whether or not Dafnis was aware of the future historical value of the scenes he chose to capture can only be speculated but without doubt many of them add an enormous amount to our appreciation of long lost aspects of life a hundred or more years ago.

Roger's book, although a "photos-with-captions" volume, contains a great deal of information for anyone interested in this small, but perfectly formed canal and will be worthwhile consulting before or during walks along the S.C.C. routes.

Twelve years ago the previous volume cost £6.50. Tim Graham, the publisher has produced this one for only a pound more — and it's got eight more pages! A real bargain which can be obtained at the aforementioned Titfield Thunderbolt bookshop in Bath, the Bath & Dundas Canal Co. shop at Brassknocker Basin, Monkton Combe (on the S.C.C. itself) as well as from some mainline bookshops.

Do treat yourself!

T.W.

[This review was originally published in 'Butty' magazine]

COLLIERS WAY TRIBUTE TO WILLIAM SMITH

In the last edition of *Weigh-House* there was a photograph of a new information board which has been installed beside the 'Colliers Way' near Wellow. The Colliers Way extends from Dundas to Frome and provides new footpath and cycleway access to what was left of the Radstock branch of the S.C.C. after the construction of the Somerset and Dorset Railway.

The notice board is set alongside an art installation, consisting of seven massive blocks of local rock arranged into a vertical structure, which was created to celebrate the work of William Smith, the Father of English Geology. The board concentrates on the local geology, but it also covers the Coal Canal, since Smith worked on its survey and construction, and since the Colliers Way is partly based on the original route of the Radstock branch. The board includes a little-known engraving of Smith in 1807, when he was aged 38, rather than the familiar portrait of him in his later years.



WILLIAM SMITH
aged 38



ART INSTALLATION
beside 'The Colliers Way' near Wellow

There is a companion information panel beside the Colliers Way just south of the Midford viaduct; this mainly deals with the various forms of transport which existed nearby. On that panel I included an extract from a map of Smith's which, again, is rarely seen. It was published in 1820, several years after his famous geological map of England and Wales, and it includes all the existing canals and railways of the time. A reproduction of this map is available from the British Geological Survey.

Hopefully the art installation and information panels will help visitors better appreciate both William Smith and the Coal Canal. Details of the route are available from Sustrans and online (www.sustrans.org.uk).

ANDREW MATHIESON

It is believed that William Lambert White was connected by marriage to the Messitter family of bankers who were also canal investors. Other than the above information, little is known about him — can anyone with a leaning towards genealogy offer some help with unravelling the family history.?

Derrick Hunt

We are grateful to Roger Outing, of www.banknotes4u.co.uk for permission to quote from his book "The Standard Catalogue of the Provincial Banknotes of England and Wales".

THE SCOTCH BOAT

David Pollard has recently discovered an interesting newspaper cutting which sheds some light on the 'Scotch Boat' which operated a high speed passenger-carrying service from Bath to Bradford on Avon. All the more interesting is the information that the boat was 73 feet long, which is longer than a standard K&A or S.C.C. lock. Even placed diagonally, the boat would not have been able to pass through the normal locks of either the K&A or the S.C.C. Does this mean that the weighing lock at Midford was longer than a standard S.C.C. lock or was it temporarily adapted to take longer boats by using the stop planks instead of the gates?

fell, when the wheels of the waggon passed over his body and he was killed on the spot. The deceased bore a good character for sobriety. He has left a wife and family.

The elegant Scottish Iron Boat which plies daily between Bath and Bradford, took a trip to Midford on Wednesday last, for the purpose of being weighed by the machine constructed there for the weighing of all the loaded boats which navigate the Somerset Coal Canal. Her length is 73 feet, and her weight proved to be, including her tackle, 2 tons 4 cwt.

THE WHALE!—The Balæna Physalis is certainly a magnificent creature; and if we contemplate the structure of its

CUTTING FROM THE BRISTOL MERCURY — 28th September 1833



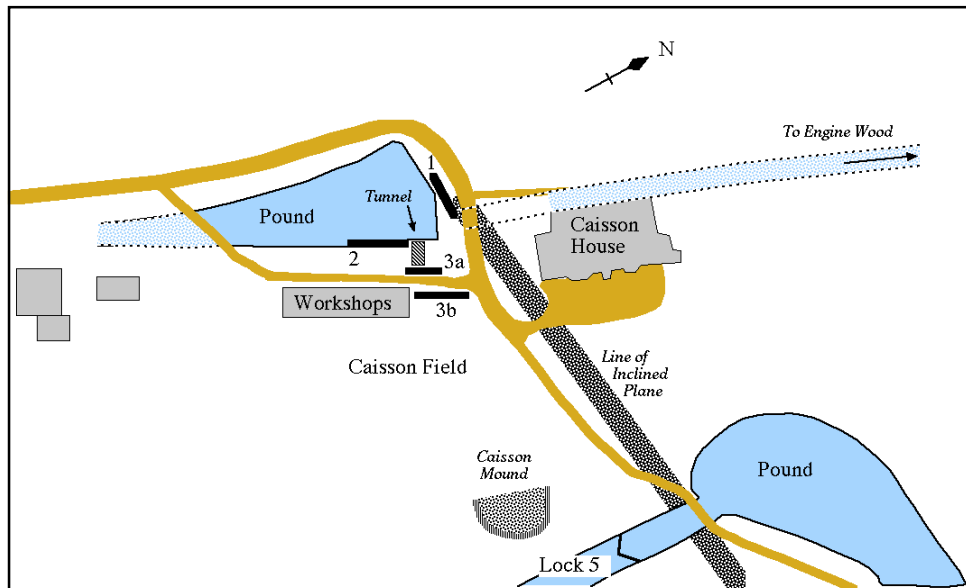
THE SCOTCH BOAT AT DARLINGTON WHARF ON THE K&A CANAL

EXCAVATIONS AT CAISSON HOUSE

22nd — 30th November 2011

It came as something of a shock, albeit a pleasant one, when the new owner of Caisson House offered us the use of a small excavator with a driver for a few days to explore the area around the site of the workshops and basin which form part of his property. For many years we have speculated upon what might lie below the surface and, from time to time, we have been offered tantalising glimpses of hidden structures in the course of other work in the area¹. This was the first time we had been given an opportunity to excavate the site in a methodical manner.

The plan was to explore three sites: 1) the northern basin wall which may have formed the top of the inclined plane, 2) the eastern basin wall parallel with the workshop, 3) two sites at the northern end of the workshop which contained many unexplained features.



**A SKETCH OF THE AREA AROUND CAISSON HOUSE
SHOWING THE THREE EXCAVATION SITES**

1. The Northern Basin Wall

The digger began work at the point where the northern basin wall kinks; to the east of this point the older basin wall is covered by a newer section of wall. Behind the new wall, we were able to follow the line of the old wall, which appeared to align with the course of the inclined plane. In the early days of the canal, until about 1842, there had been a branch leading to Engine Wood to supply the pumping engine with coal and return the pumped water to the upper level above Lock 1. At one point we came across a vertical joint, which suggested that this was where an extra piece of wall had been built to

¹ "New Findings Near Caisson House"; Mike Chapman. *Weigh-House 51* P.14

This was the picture of the canal boats at Uffington Wharf. For us this was an amazing discovery coming out of the blue. For many years we have been looking for a picture of real working boats on the Canal, and now we had one. Two loaded boats with horses attached, and the bonus of all the extra detail of the wharf as well. Graham loaned us the book and we have made good copies of this picture and all the others relating to Uffington. The Wharf buildings in the picture are still there and the canal line is still easily traceable. Amazingly in the pictured, moored alongside the wharf, is a box-like container. This triggered a memory. In the late 1880s the canal company briefly experimented with container boats. Containers being picked up and dropped off at various locations along the route as required. The experiment failed. I remembered another picture that we have of a boy at Forest Lock, Melksham. He is sitting on an almost identical container; so perhaps we now have proof of how these "early Tom Puddings" were constructed.

We used these pictures at the Uffington White Horse show where they attracted a lot of attention, allowing us to explain Uffington's connection with the canal and our plans for restoration. Whilst at the show I spoke to the curator of the Tom Brown Museum who was running a slide show on her laptop. And 'Joy of Joys'



UFFINGTON LIFT BRIDGE — c1907

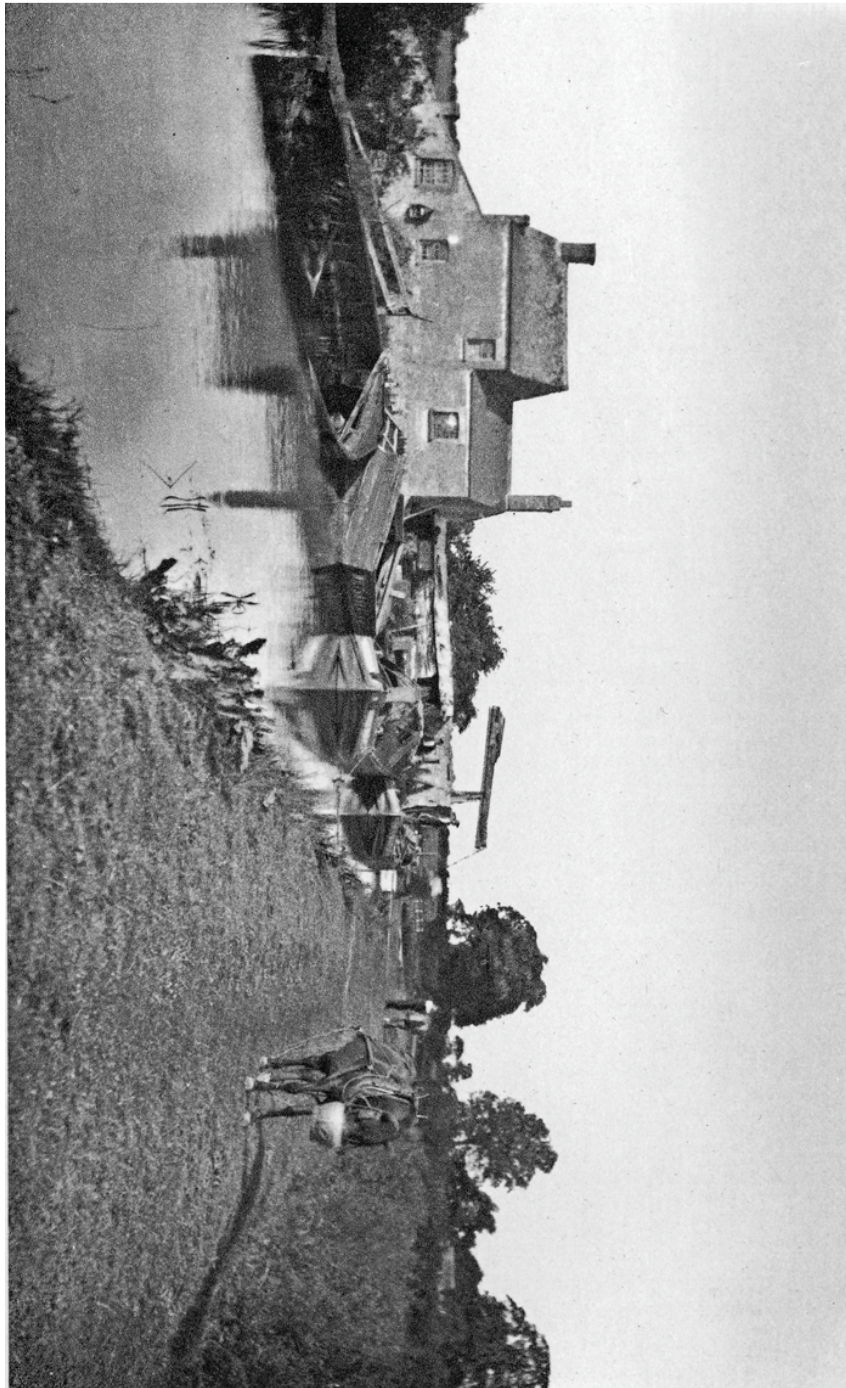
there was a picture of a draw bridge which we had never seen before. It showed a man sitting on the bridge and was also annotated "Mr. Bingham, Headmaster of Uffington School 1907". We even know the exact location of the bridge and some of it still remains in situ today.

Over the years I have heard many rumours of pictures and their sources. Sometimes they are possible to track down, but usually the information is just filed away in the back of my mind. Another conversation at the White Horse Show got around to the 1944 picture of a WW II Vickers Windsor bomber which crashed in the canal at Grove. I had heard of the picture but never seen a copy. This resulted in my being sent a photocopy of a page from Don Summers book 'Grove Airfield' which had the picture. Unfortunately it was so bad as to be unrecognisable, and when I acquired a copy of the book it was nearly as bad. The author suggests that the original appeared in Flight magazine but I'm yet to track it down.

There is obviously still much more material to track down and many exciting new finds to make. We, Janet and I, are always pleased to receive any new leads; so if you come across anything about the Wilts & Berks Canal, however tenuous, please contact us.

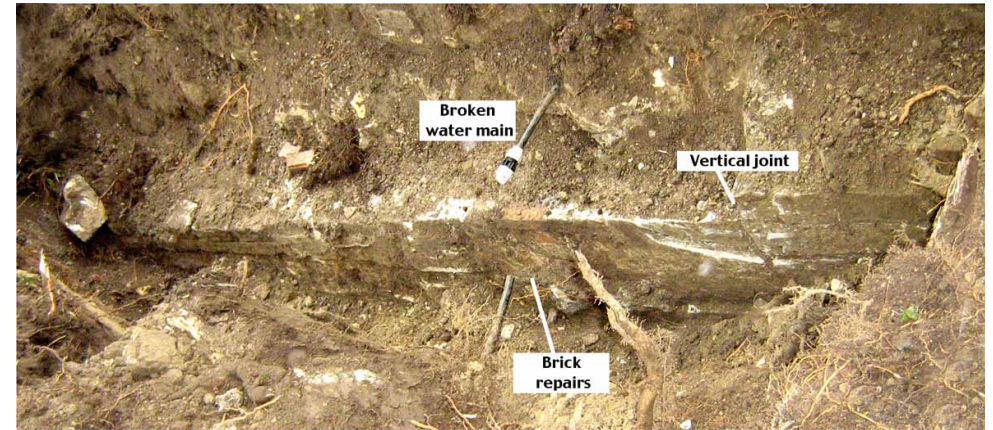
Doug Small

Email dg.small@gentle-highway.org
Website <http://www.gentle-highway.info>



Weigh-House 62

block the gap when the junction to Engine Wood was no longer needed. We could not dig as far as the eastern end of the blockage, where we might have expected a second vertical joint, because of fears over the stability of a tree whose roots we were loth to disturb. From the position of this joint, it appears that the Engine Wood branch had lain close along the back wall of Caisson House, not on the line of the present-day pathway as we had previously supposed.



LOOKING NORTHWARDS AT THE UNCOVERED SECTION OF BASIN WALL (Site 1)

In the course of digging, we discovered a modern plastic water main by the traditional method of puncturing it before we realised it was there. When the water had been temporarily turned off, we were surprised to find brickwork repairs in the wall just below the pipe, as if the wall had been damaged relating to the water supply.

2. The Workshop Basin Wall

Starting at the northern end of the eastern wall of the Workshop Basin, close to the small blind-ended tunnel which has puzzled us for many years, we worked our way southwards, following the course of the wall. A large amount of the wall was still in place, although some of it was in poor condition. One section appeared to be stepped, but this was most likely because the top courses had fallen away to varying degrees. On reaching the floor of the original basin, we discovered a length of rectangular-section metal bar with swaged holes at intervals, which may have been intended as some sort of strap to hold stones in place.



THE WORKSHOP BASIN WALL (Site 2) EXHIBITING A STEPPED APPEARANCE



Weigh-House 62

Shortly after this excavation, the landowner discovered a large iron casting buried in the southern end of the basin. This appears to be part of the base of a crane. We know that two crane sites existed in the area at different times: one was at the top of the inclined plane for transferring coal boxes from the boats to the waggons and the second was at the southern end of the workshop basin. It was near this latter site that the casting was recovered, so the crane was probably once part of the workshop equipment. As the two sites were in use at different periods, it is possible that there was only one crane, which was removed from one site and re-erected on the other when the operational requirements changed.



CAST IRON CRANE BASE SECTION

3a. The Back of the Tunnel

We were certain that the mystery of the little blind-ended tunnel at the north-eastern corner of the Workshop Basin [See picture P12] would be cleared up by digging a trench to reveal what lay behind the back wall of the structure — if only we dug deeply enough. As with so many predictions about this canal, it proved false. An exploratory trench, in exceedingly hard-packed ground, revealed that no further structures lay beyond the back wall; there was nothing to shed any light on why such a structure had been built.



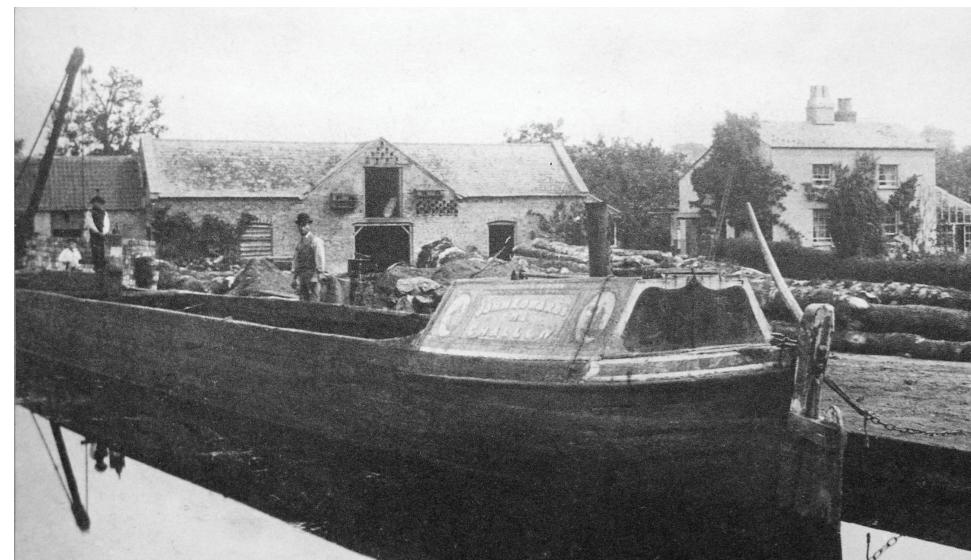
A 10ft. DEEP EXCAVATION TO REVEAL THE BACK OF THE TUNNEL (Site 3a)
The rough face is the back wall of the tunnel.
The hole is the top of a stone chute.

It was a chance remark by the landowner which gave us the most likely explanation — it looks as though it might have been built in the early 20th century as a boat house. At that time the basin and top reach would still have held some water, so the owner might easily have enjoyed a little leisure boating

The stone chute which led into the chamber from above may indicate that it also served a dual purpose as the outlet for a privvy; maps show that a very small building existed on that site until at least 1907.

Our number one find for 2011 came about thus. Brian Stovold, the Chairman of the Wantage Branch of the Wilts & Berks Canal Trust, conducts regular walks along the canal route during the summer. During one such walk he was talking to Graham Edwards of Oxford who mentioned seeing a canal picture in an American edition of Tom Browns Schooldays. He later emailed Brian and, after thanking him for an interesting walk, he went on to say:

It has always intrigued me that so few photographs were taken of the Wilts and Berks as a working canal. Admittedly the waterway was in decline in the second half of the nineteenth century, but trade was still being carried out and briefly continued in isolated areas into the twentieth century. Photography had become well established by this time and it was common for the equipment, although very cumbersome, to be taken out to rural locations. In his account of a holiday on the canal, published in 1894, Reginald Blunt states “I had a half plate camera, a red lamp, and a good stock of plates with me, and brought back about a hundred negatives, most of which developed into very pleasant reminiscences of our voyage”. Unfortunately it appears that none of these images have survived and the only pictorial record of that voyage is the few sketches in the article. Even the famous Swindon photographer William Hooper appears to have ignored the canal until around 1912 when he captured it in its unused and foul condition for Swindon Council. No doubt this was to assist them in their application for the Act of Abandonment which was granted in 1914.



WANTAGE WHARF — c1890

Although the scarcity of pictures is exasperating every so often a little gem does come to light. Some examples: A rowing boat in the top lock at South Marston came to us through Janet’s research into family history, a boat being loaded at Wantage wharf from a collection of old material purchased on ebay by an enthusiast, another picture of the wharf loaned to us after a talk to a local group, a really good copy of a Semington Junction photo from the photographer’s daughter, and a photograph of the old Anchor Inn at Abingdon as well as a drawing of the Abingdon Lock tail bridge from the daughter of the inn’s landlady c.1920.

“Here is a scan of the photogravure of the canal at Uffington from “Tom Brown’s Schooldays” published by Porter and Coates of Philadelphia in 1893 together with a list of the other photogravures that were commissioned for the book. I read somewhere (I could probably rediscover where) that a photographer was sent over especially from Boston, Mass., for this, so the date must be early 1890s. There is a handwritten dedication inside my copy dated Christmas 1893.” →

SEARCHING FOR THE WILTS AND BERKS CANAL

Finding historic photographs of the S.C.C. has sometimes been a matter of painstaking research in the obvious places. On other occasions, researchers have been led by pure chance or an educated guess into a quest which finds new material in the most unexpected places. The S.C.C.S. is not the only society in which serendipity has played a large part in uncovering its history, Doug Small has been doing similar photographic research on the Wilts & Berks Canal.

I first became interested in collecting archive material back in 1997 when I was approached by Tempus Books asking if I knew of anybody in the Wilts & Berks Canal Amenity Group (as we were then) who could put together a collection of about 200 pictures relating to the canal. I thought “that’s easy, I can do that”. Well I did, but it wasn’t easy. The starting point was our own archives which were at that time in the custody of Gerry Townsend. These were mainly copies (and copies of copies) of various old pictures gathered by members over the years from mostly unknown sources. Other members had their own individual collections usually in the form of slides used for presentations. Finally one or two “new” images were found in public archives. These old pictures used in conjunction with more recent ones of the current state of the canal and the restoration produced a book with which I was reasonably pleased and that is still in print 12 years on. The second book, published last year (2010), was a bit easier thanks to the digital revolution and the more open access to the public archives this has provided. But the bottom line is that the Wilts and Berks Canal was not, pictorially at least, a well documented navigation.



MELKSHAM FOREST LOCK — c1900

I’m not an academic or in any way a qualified researcher so it is a continuous learning experience for me trying to track down information. Pictures are my main interest; therefore I am fortunate that my colleague Janet Flanagan, who is a dedicated researcher, shares her information with me. Together we have visited many individuals and organisations. As we know that many people are understandably reluctant to part with their treasured pictures and documents I always take along a laptop and scanner, as well as a digital camera, so that we can copy material in situ.

3b. The Northern End of the Workshops

Just below the thin layer of Tarmac we discovered a large area of very hard-packed mortared-rubble stonework which the digger was unable to penetrate. On following this eastwards, we found that it terminated in a definite straight edge which ran approximately in the direction of the centre line of the present-day stable block which replaced the original workshops. Further excavation revealed that this was the top of an ashlar-faced wall, backed by mortared rubble on the side facing the basin. Traces of ivy showed that the face away from the basin had once been exposed and the general impression was that we had discovered a substantial retaining wall. In the opinion of a skilled stonemason, the face had been dressed by means of axes, rather than hammers and chisels, which signified that it was the work of French workmen.

At the workshop end, the base of the wall rested upon a series of terrace-like steps and, whilst excavating these, a large iron bolt was found. The end of the bolt with a nut rested adjacent to a square recess cut in the rising face of one of the steps and the rust formations along the length suggested that it had held together four pieces of timber, each about 8in. thick.



(Composite photograph — each end of the trench floor was uncovered separately)

THE ASHLAR-FACED WALL ADJACENT TO THE WORKSHOPS / STABLES (Site 3b)

Showing the stepped terrace below the digger bucket, the massive stone feature across the trench and the damaged ashlar facing on the right

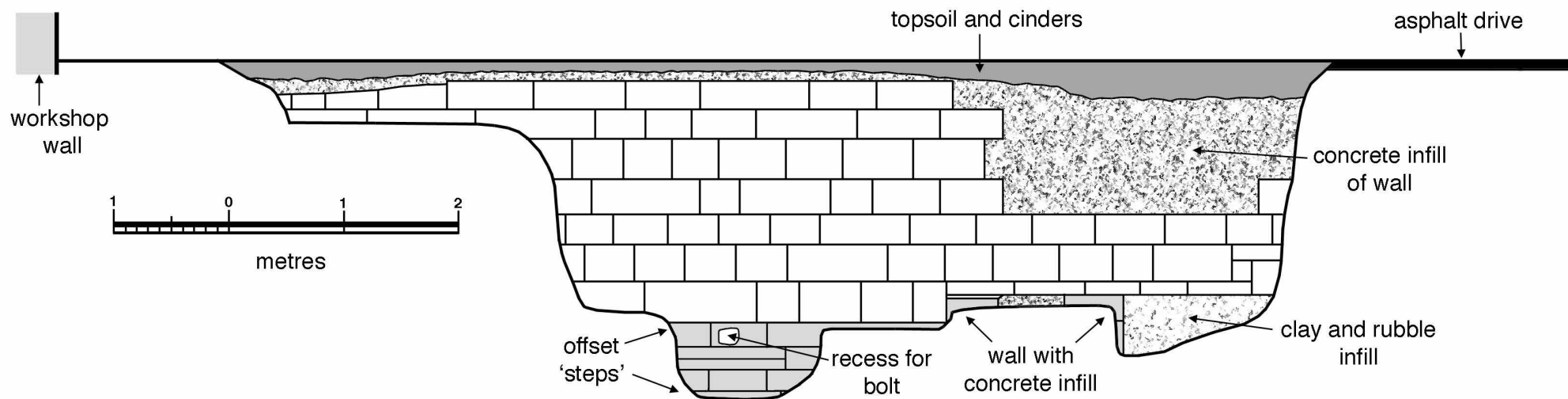
As the ashlar wall progressed northwards, in the direction of Caisson House, several of the upper courses were missing and the lowest course terminated against a massive stone feature at right-angles to it. This appeared to be another thick wall, having two stone faces and a concreted rubble infill; unlike the ashlar wall, this one was roughly dressed on its outer faces. The ashlar wall rested on top of this feature, which lacked any coping stones and may once have comprised more courses.

→

AN IRON BOLT

Showing the position where it was found

The recess in the face of the steps is just visible



ELEVATION OF THE ASHLAR-FACED WALL LOOKING WESTWARDS



THE 'BOAT HOUSE' TUNNEL

Spoil from the ashlar wall excavation piled in the background

As the ashlar wall reached the limit of our excavated area (the R.H. end of the above drawing) it rested on a hard-packed infill of clay and rubble. Further excavation was prevented, as it would have undermined the driveway to Caisson House, although the landowner has plans to allow us to continue excavating in that area at some future date when the driveway has been decommissioned.

During the course of uncovering the ashlar wall, several indications of earlier digging were discovered. Near the terraced steps there were signs that a deep vertical-sided trench, almost parallel with the wall, had been backfilled. This could not have been hand-dug and it appears to have been made by an excavator similar to the one we used. If the driver had been exploring for artifacts, he must have been singularly unfortunate as he had just missed discovering anything interesting by a matter of inches. Another machine-dug trench came to light at the northern end of our excavation, this one had been backfilled with rubble, which contained a high proportion of broken ashlar. It appeared as though the digger had approached the ashlar wall at an angle and tried to dig through it to a depth of over 6ft. After removing the ashlar facing, the machine encountered the hard mortared backfill, which was at least 5ft. thick, and was defeated — so the trench was abandoned and refilled with the demolished facing stone.

Evidence of two other walls was encountered, but these were insubstantial affairs and had probably been agricultural or garden features at various times in the past. One, only a few inches below the surface, ran from the workshop end of the ashlar wall towards the tunnel; the other was built on the top of the massive stone feature running in an easterly direction at about 45 degrees to the face of the ashlar wall. In both cases, only one or two courses remained.

Although our investigation has produced many new questions, at least it has provided us with a few answers to some of the longer-standing ones. We are now, at last, beginning to get a clearer picture of the changes which have taken place on this site since the inception of the S.C.C. and much better understanding of the various historic maps of the area. In the next edition of *Weigh-House* we hope to give details of some of the more definite conclusions to be drawn from our discoveries, although many of the more intriguing questions will have to wait for the results of further investigations.

Mike Chapman

[These sites are on private property and have now been backfilled. Please respect the privacy of the landowner and do not be tempted to trespass. We hope to arrange a visit to the sites at some future date]