

## Minehead on the Move SLP 2017-2018

For our fourth SLP with Minehead museum, U3A members researched a number of topics involving the development of transport, in and around Minehead.

Traders and voyagers developed lengthy sea routes along the western coasts of Europe as long ago as 3000 years. The earliest known forms of simple, sea going vessels were the currachs, which consisted of a wicker frame over which hide was stretched. One of the research topics followed the reconstruction of a Celtic form of such a vessel.



Early inhabitants also contributed to numerous track ways across the countryside, linking sites of habitation. The development of paths, tracks and roads in and around the town were briefly surveyed by another member of the research team. Using published maps, from 1800 to the present day, and local historic sources, it was possible to trace the development of infrastructure around Minehead. Key events such as the rise and decline of the port, the formation of the turnpike trust and the coming of the railway were all significant events leading to the development of the town. The routes of long distance walking paths, such as the Macmillan Way and the South West coastal path through the town provide a fascinating link with the past. They both follow routes which pass close to prehistoric sites, suggesting continuous existence over several thousands of years.



With the coming of steam ships and the railway, the use of horses for transport and pleasure escalated. Until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Minehead was mainly accessible only by sea, on foot or on horseback. The creation of new toll roads not only provided locals with easier access to nearby towns, it also opened up the town to visitors at a time that coincided with the birth of tourism. These visitors were brought into the town from the early nineteenth century by horse drawn coach services. They were also taken on excursions to the surrounding countryside. When the railway arrived, horse drawn coaches were used to take people to their hotels in the town, to the pier and also to Porlock, Lynton and Lynmouth.

Horse racing took place on the beach from the mid-nineteenth century and crowds flocked to the town by rail and sea. Minehead became a fashionable resort in the 1920s. Maharajas with a retinue of turbaned grooms and scores of polo ponies travelled every summer from Rajasthan to play polo with the local aristocracy. On one memorable occasion, even two elephants accompanied the visitors.



The railway opened in Minehead in 1874 as a broad gauge extension from Watchet, which had been linked to Taunton by the Bristol and Exeter railway in 1862. George Luttrell insisted



that the railway terminated on the sea front in order to stimulate the growth of tourism. In the years immediately preceding the advent of the railway, the Bratton stream was concealed in a culvert under a new road, called the Avenue. This gave direct access from Wellington Square to the new station. The Beach Hotel and the Esplanade hotel were built around this time. The pier was opened in 1901 and this greatly increased the numbers of day trippers from South Wales. Disembarkation from the steamers was much easier and more frequent via the pier compared to the harbour which was restricted by tide levels.



In 1911 a flimsy monoplane first landed on the sands of Minehead beach. These early aviators attracted much attention from the people of Minehead and crowds flocked to admire and wonder at them.

The advent of bicycles and later the motor car changed the mode of transport in and around the town. The mid 1920s saw the development of many garages and bus companies.



The discussion of transport in and around the town could not be complete without reference to one of the Minehead's famous sons, Sir



Arthur C Clarke. He predicted many of the things that we take for granted today. He had a deep belief that humanity was destined to be a space-faring species and foresaw space shuttles, moon landings and space stations.



In 1992, he visited Minehead for the Festival of the International Space Year. He was awarded the Freedom of the town in July that year and the certificate now hangs in Minehead Museum.

