



Abergavenny Local History Society



THE GUNTER HOUSE

NEWSLETTER No 32

AUGUST 2016

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www.abergavennylocalhistorysociety.org.uk

Charity registration number 1098582

PROGRAMME

2016

Thurs. 29th. Sept.	Miranda Aldhouse-Green BOG BODIES UNCOVERED
Thurs. 13th. Oct.	Christopher Parry THE STORY OF CYFARTHA
Thurs. 24th. Nov.	Peter Strong SUDBROOK AND THE SEVERN TUNNEL
December.	NO LECTURE.

If you have not renewed your membership, please send your subscription (£10 per person payable from 1st May) to the Membership Secretary as soon as you can so that your new card can be sent to you.

2017

Thurs. 19th. Jan.	Rob Thomas THE STORY OF MIDDLETON HALL
Thurs. 9th. Feb.	Elin Jones FAMOUS AND FORGOTTEN WOMEN
Thurs 16th. March.	Rhianydd Biebrach PRIESTS, POETRY & PURGATORY IN LATE MEDIAEVAL WALES
Thurs. 6th April.	Kirsti Bohata AMY DILLWYN: SUFFRAGIST & PIONEERING INDUSTRIALISY.
Thurs. 18th. May.	Frank Olding ARCHAEOLOGY OF UPLAND GWENT Follows the AGM.

THE SOCIETY MEETS AT THE BOROUGH THEATRE AT 7.30 pm.

Please bring your card to all meetings.

Social events and visits will be publicised separately.

CONTACTS

Chair

**Lecture
Secretary**

Secretary

Visits Team

Treasurer

Membership Secretary

**Floodlighting
Secretary**

**Newsletter
Editor and
President**

(Subject to confirmation at the AGM)

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The society website is www.abergavennylocalhistorysociety.org.uk

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RECUSANCY IN MONMOUTHSHIRE

The Abergavenny Chronicle of May 5th 2016 headlined a campaign to save the town's Gunter Mansion. One of the main features of its historic importance lies in the fact that it was home to a secret Catholic chapel in which the Mass was celebrated, at a time when to do so was a crime. The Welsh Georgian Trust aims to raise enough money to buy the house, carry out repairs and ultimately to allow the chapel to be opened alongside a small centre celebrating the history of Catholicism in Wales.



ADORATION OF THE MAGI
 REREDOS FROM THE GUNTER CHAPEL FOUND IN 1960,5 ON A CHAIR IN THE SHOP
 AND MOVED TO THE MUSEUM BY THE LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Picture MDC Museums Service

The chapel was an active centre of Catholic worship during what are often referred to as "penal times", when Catholics, clergy and laity, faced penalties of varying severity for daring to pursue "yr Hen Fydd"- the "Old Faith". This period stretched from Henry VIII's Reformation well into the 18th Century, persecution being at its peak during the reign of Elizabeth and surging again at times in the 17th century, notably at the time of the Popish Plot of the 1670s. Those who refused to forsake Catholicism and observe the practices of the Church Of England were known as 'recusants' deriving from the Latin *recusare* to refuse.

Henry had declared himself Supreme Head of the Church in England and Wales, replacing the Pope. In Wales, as in England, one of the main aspects of the change was the dissolution of the monasteries. Tintern Abbey was probably Monmouthshire's main casualty. In Abergavenny the Benedictine priory was dissolved, although it was not until 1543, somewhat later than most. St Mary's became the parish church, replacing St John's which in turn became the first site of King Henry VIII Grammar School.

Sweeping religious change came in the reign of Henry's successor Edward VI, including the imposition of the English Book of Common Prayer in 1549. This was incomprehensible to most Welsh people. At least the old Latin had been familiar! Edward died in 1553 and the next 5 years were a case of 'into reverse' as Mary tried to restore England and Wales to allegiance to Rome. This period saw the replacing of Anglican clergy with Catholic and the persecution of those regarded as heretics, with the ultimate penalty of burning at the stake.

Mary's death in 1558 ushered in the reign of Elizabeth. Her concern was to achieve some form of religious stability after the upheavals of the previous 20 years. In 1559 an Act of Supremacy once more rejected Papal authority restoring the Tudor monarch as Supreme Governor of the Church in England and Wales. A modified Book of Common Prayer was restored and Marian clergy who refused to take the prescribed oath were ousted. Only one of the four Welsh bishops- Kitchen of Llandaff conformed.

The degree to which penal laws against those refusing to conform were enforced depended essentially on the will and inclination of local magistrates and the Queen herself was anxious not to "seek a window into men's souls". It was hoped that as the old priesthood died out those more compliant with the new order would prevail. However a number of factors led to a hardening of attitude. The Catholic Church condemned any support for Anglican services and the formal excommunication of Elizabeth by Pope Pius V meant that in theory any of her Catholic subjects was free to be disloyal. Added to this in the 1570s and 80s there was an increasing flow of fervent newly ordained missionary priests from abroad, particularly those of the newly formed Jesuit order.

The aim of these was to restore England and Wales to Catholicism and to provide spiritual support for recusants. In Elizabeth's reign some 54 men of Welsh origin were ordained to the Catholic priesthood although most were to serve outside Wales.

The missionary priests relied on the willingness of Catholic families, particularly gentry and nobility to give them support and shelter. In Monmouthshire the Morgans of Llantarnam and the Gunter and Pritchards of Abergavenny were prominent. Amongst the nobility, Edward Somerset of Raglan befriended recusants and Catholic priests and writers. There were some however who favoured more direct action such as Thomas Morgan of Monmouthshire who was actively involved in a series of plots to replace Elizabeth with Mary Queen of Scots. He actually set up the fateful meeting between Mary and Anthony Babington, whose eponymous plot eventually led to Mary's execution in 1587. The unsuccessful attempt of the Spanish Armada to restore Catholicism by force in the following year meant even stricter enforcement of penal laws against recusants.

The Somerset family of Raglan, in the persons of the third and fourth Earls of Worcester had bent to the prevailing Protestant wind in the 16th century but had retained Catholic sympathies. By the time of the succession of the fifth Earl in 1628 however there had been family reconversion to Catholicism thanks to the efforts of Father Robert Jones, a Welsh Jesuit and Raglan castle was in Catholic hands. The fifth Earl and his sister Frances Morgan of Llantarnam helped establish a Jesuit College at the Cwm in Llanrothal, on the Monmouthshire/Herefordshire border, which survived until 1678, housing 20 priests at its peak, and being very successful in reversing the decline in Catholic fortunes. It is thought that in



THIS BACK VIEW OF THE GUNTER HOUSE WAS ORIGINALLY THE FRONT.

the middle of the 17th century that Catholics accounted for up to 20% of the population of Monmouthshire. At Abergavenny it was reckoned that more people attended the Mass celebrated in the aforementioned Gunter house than those attending the parish church! Pilgrimages continued to the ruined chapel of St Michael on Skirrid Fawr, much to the chagrin of local Protestant gentry such as John Arnold of Llanvihangel Court.

We thus have a flavour of the survival of Catholicism in Monmouthshire. Recusancy, however, came at a price in the form of fines, often ruinous. Amongst the gentry for example the staunchly Catholic Edward Morgan of Llantarnam paid £7,760 between 1580 and 1633, an enormous sum in those days.

So until the mid- 17th century Catholicism persisted strongly in what was generally a tolerant atmosphere. Priests went about fairly openly and the Jesuits of the Cwm were regularly seen obtaining their provisions at Monmouth market. In the 1670s the tide turned against Catholics in Monmouthshire. Raglan was lost as a Catholic centre when the Worcesters returned to Anglicanism. A growing number of Protestant gentry professed alarm at the growing strength of 'popery' and presented the House of Commons with a detailed account of Catholic activity in Monmouthshire and Herefordshire. Prominent amongst these gentry were John Scudamore of Kentchurch and the aforementioned John Arnold.

Their efforts were compounded by the lurid allegations of the Popish Plot of 1678 in which one, Titus Oates claimed to have uncovered a plot to murder Charles II and replace him with his brother the Catholic Duke of York, James. This fabrication was sufficient to create a tide of anti-Catholic feeling and persecution, which affected Monmouthshire considerably. Attention had been drawn to the Cwm and its Superior, Fr. David Lewis evacuated it and the community scattered. In December 1678 the college was suppressed by the Bishop of Hereford and its premises raided and ransacked. David Lewis had already been arrested and incarcerated in Monmouth gaol.

David Lewis was an Abergavenny man and had lived for many years at Llantarnam Abbey with the Morgan family. He ministered at Usk and said Mass regularly at the Gunter house, as did another priest, Fr Philip Evans who had been born at Llangattock Vibon Abel. Both preached eloquently in Welsh and English. David Lewis was the son of Morgan Lewis, sometime principal of the Grammar School. Although not baptised a Catholic he had converted on a visit to the continent and was ordained a Jesuit priest in the 1640s, returning to the English/Welsh mission in 1648. Until the 1670s, as indicated, the Jesuit missions seems to have led a fairly untroubled existence and he was on friendly terms with gentry families -even possibly with Arnold at one stage! He had a reputation as a committed and compassionate pastor, being known locally as 'the father of the poor'. Now he was swept up in the fury of the Popish Plot. Tried and condemned to death at the Monmouth Assizes in June 1679, he was then taken to London for questioning, where he refused offers of life and wealth in return for 'revelations'.

His execution took place at Usk in August 1679. Such was his local reputation that he was spared the official penalty of hanging drawing and quartering and allowed to die by hanging alone. Philip Evans suffered the full penalty at Cardiff Castle.

The plot left its scars on the Catholic community of Monmouthshire. The Jesuit mission was finished and Catholics deprived of their priests. Many, frightened of the severity of the persecution conformed to the established Church and the Catholic population declined sufficiently. Nevertheless the Catholic tradition of the county did not die. In 1687 a Franciscan mission was established at Abergavenny in Frogmore St., in the area between Nevill Street and Lewis Lane. The house had been bought by Thomas Gunter and when he died his wife gave it to the Franciscans for a chapel. By 1740, possibly the lowest ebb of Welsh Catholicism in post-Reformation Wales, half the Catholics in Monmouthshire were located in Abergavenny and the Franciscans found it necessary to build a new



church and add a gallery to accommodate numbers attending Mass. This remained the centre of Catholic worship and the Franciscans continued until 1858 when the present Catholic church at Pen-y- Pound was founded and the Benedictines took over. The building of the old church -and



its gallery -survive as the home of the Dover printing works

In the 18th century the Papacy divided England and Wales into four districts, each under the jurisdiction of a Vicar General. Monmouthshire lay in the Western District and its Vicar General, one Bishop Matthew Pritchard, a Franciscan, resided at Perthir, home of the recusant Lorymer and Powell families, near Monmouth. He died in 1750 and is buried in Rockfield church.

The end of the 18th century saw the beginning of the relaxation of the penal laws against recusancy and in 1793 the first public place of Catholic worship, post-reformation was permitted in Monmouth and the first part of St Mary's Catholic church built. The Industrial Revolution, and in particular its attendant influx of Irish immigrants heralded anew age for Catholicism. In Monmouthshire, however, Catholic worship had never died out and the recusant story is an important part of its history and heritage. The ambition to preserve the Gunter house and its association in this respect is therefore of considerable importance.

DAVID POWELL

SUMMER WEEKEND IN CONWY

We set off from the bus station at 9.30 in a super executive yellow coach.



At about 11 o'clock on the Ludlow bypass we broke down. The police attended us and we trundled our luggage 500 yards to the previous roundabout where we had an excellent lunch at the Squirrel. We resumed our journey in the repaired coach but broke down again at 2.30 at a roundabout the other side of Shrewsbury.

Neither the driver nor the Monmouthshire Transport company had any plans for dealing with this sort of situation. The police kept us on the coach and after a great deal of dithering and telephoning, a strong minded and decisive lady, Caroline, put her foot down and demanded some immediate and sensible action.

Eventually, another bus arrived and took us back in the rush hour to Shrewsbury. After a very large and expensive coffee in Starbucks a third coach took us to Conwy. We arrived at 8.15 late for supper and having done nothing!

The Quay Hotel was excellent. There was a very misty view of Conwy Castle across the water with all manner of sailing craft. The food and service were excellent. The rooms gathered round a long pool with palms and fountains reminiscent of Granada. There was also a 20m swimming pool and a sauna.



It is some years since I stayed in a really first class hotel and things have changed. A card now replaces the room key. There are four different ways of putting the card into the slot and 'Sod's Law' states that it is always the last way that works. Moreover, the lock takes several seconds to decide if you are right so if you are impatient it might take some time to gain entry! You feel for a light switch and there isn't one and you discover yet another slot in which to try your card. If you are lucky, all the lights and the television spring into action. You remove your card and proceed to unpack. After about three minutes you are plunged into darkness and have to feel your way to the door. It is then you learn that you must leave your card in the slot! You remove several redundant black cushions and a black bolster from the bed and lie exhausted!

Unfortunately the bathroom was of poor design. The floor in a soft water area was smooth and slippery; the margin between hot and cold on the shower was so small that there was a danger of scalding. The shower head had a way of its own, there was nowhere to put the soap and the waste was blocked so the tray overflowed to the floor. The wash basin had a flat bottom, which made rinsing difficult especially under the swan neck faucet which got in the way. The basin was so high that some of our smaller members would have been grateful for a chair to reach it. What a shame to spoil such a nice hotel!



Our tour of Conwy castle was very long drawn out and it would have been nice to have had the time and opportunity to explore the higher parts.

After a cup of tea we found our way to Plas Mawr. The audio-guided tour was most interesting and once one had mastered the technology - very well presented. One of the rooms had about 20 naked caryatids, which might have embarrassed some of our ladies



Breakfast was so good that many of us found little room for lunch.

We departed for St Grist's church at Llanwrwst. Here was Gwydir Uchaf chapel added on to the church with tombs, empty stone coffins and small hatchments made of brass.



Dinner at the Quay Hotel was excellent and on Sunday we departed for Gwydir Castle. Here the owner Judy Corbett gave us a textbook example of how a tour should be conducted. I wish all our tours could be like this. Judy's clear and audible voice was ample match for about a dozen squawking peacocks. We



were impressed that Judy and her husband had converted what was a ruin into a very interesting home. The work involved was mind blowing and this elegant and attractive lady had managed to write three books while she was doing it!



We missed an intended stop at Beddgelert and went instead to Betws-y-Coed. There were two interesting churches and three railway tracks of different gauge and a great many tourist novelty shops selling things you couldn't possibly want to buy.

It was a good weekend and the hotel was excellent despite its shortcomings and in spite of Friday's travel difficulties. Thanks are due to Dai, Helen and Caroline for the organisation and for coping so firmly with our troubles.

KEN KEY

VISIT TO LLANELLI HOUSE



For some reason I have lost my notes but our visit to Llanelli House was quite memorable. On the way we passed a blue plaque commemorating Emmeline Pankhurst the suffragette who addressed the people of Llanelli in 1912.

Our guide was the impersonation of the aged owner Thomas Stepney who gave us a good account of the history of his Georgian house.



It was built in the 18th century but the lower front was converted into shops in the late 19th century. Llanelli felt it had something special and in 2011 found money to put it back into something like its Georgian state. The costly renovations revealed that its origins were in the 14th century and it had gone through many stages before it became a town house.

We then took our bus to Swansea docks where we boarded the 'Copper Jack' which took us through the docks and up the river Tawe. We heard an interesting commentary on the 'Copperopolis' industry which brought back memories of our Town Hall lecture.



KEN KEY

ABERGAVENNY LOCAL HISTORY STREET SURVEY- the long view

Some time around 1982/1983, I rashly agreed to help with the original Abergavenny Local History Society street survey, by typing the collected information into a readable form. Of course, I do mean "typing". On an Olivetti portable typewriter. One page at a time. Or possibly two pages at a time, using carbon paper. Cutting and pasting, deleting and editing - this meant aiming for the waste paper basket and starting again

So I regularly packed typewriter and toddler son into whatever vehicle I had at the time (I recall something with the equivalent power of a lawnmower engine) and headed across town to Beryl Pullen's lovely country house near Mardy. There we would try to make sense of the handwriting of the information gatherers, while I attempted to line up the data without making too many typos. Meanwhile Paul crawled around on the floor, sometimes distracted by toys, drinks and biscuits, sometimes not.

The resulting volumes were eventually bound in hard covers and spent the last three decades mouldering on the shelves of Abergavenny library and museum.

It was quite bizarre to see the old books again when around two years ago Sue Smith announced that the Street Survey was to be updated. The pages looked so much older than they were, like a sepia photo of an ancestor who looks almost familiar.

So I agreed to get involved again. This time, with the aid of a computer, the results will be viewed as web pages. Any updating or alterations, either during the process of inputting data or as and when information becomes available, can be organised with a few clicks. It will remain on a cloud for future generations (or may even gather virtual dust). I don't even have to leave the house to do the work. But my current car has a proper engine. And Paul has a PhD in maths and computer science, so if he is still crawling around on the floor, I don't wish to know about it!

BIANCA EMBERSON

ALHS RESEARCH GROUP - New website launch

The group's main achievement to date is the new Abergavenny Street Survey website which we have recently launched (www.abergavennystreetsurvey.co.uk). This is the updated version of the original Street Survey which was published by the Society in 1984. We are particularly indebted to George and Carol Foster without whom the website would never have happened. And to Bianca Emberson and Gill Wakley who have entered a huge quantity of data onto the website. But altogether, nine members of the group have devoted many hours to various aspects of researching and producing the website plus we have had additional information from Janet Herrod at Abergavenny Museum. This is our most ambitious project so far and we are hoping it will prove a valuable resource.

The searchable site gives the history of the building and information on occupants for almost all the properties on eight streets in the town centre. It is a 'work in progress' so we are hoping that Society members and the public will provide information and photographs to add to the site. The original survey left out a few of the properties including the those at the bottom of Frogmore Street (numbers 28 – 39) so any information and old photos showing these properties would be particularly welcome. And we would be curious to know more about this little sculpture (shown right) which stands between the Kebab shop and the dress shop (don't attempt to look if you are driving by!). Did it come from the Priory at some stage and get incorporated into the building during construction or is it a recent find from a salvage yard? Is it a headless mason with his hammer and chisel (which is my theory)? And what is the shield-shaped object on his chest? Your ideas will be welcomed.



Photograph: Ken Key

Other projects being worked on by the group include continued work on the Old Hereford Road Cemetery headstone project and a WW1 project, plus we are assisting the Georgian Society with collating information on Gunter House and recusancy in Monmouthshire. Gill Wakley has had several articles published in journals using data gathered by the group. New members are always very welcome, so do join us.

SUE SMITH

THE HUNT FOR VERDUN OAKS AND CHESTNUTS

Earlier this year, whilst doing research, I came upon an article, in a July 1917 issue of the Abergavenny Chronicle. The article mentioned the sale of oak saplings grown from acorns taken from the battlefield at Verdun.

The battle of Verdun was fought around that city which is in north eastern France. It is about 100 miles from the German border and the French were determined that the Germans should not penetrate further into their country. It was one of the longest battles of World War I and lasted about 8 months during 1916. It was in this battle that the patriotic declaration was made by the French – they shall not pass. There was great loss of life, totalling around 400,000. The French were ultimately successful in stopping the German offensive.

Around the time of finding the article in the 1917 Chronicle, another article appeared in a 2016 issue of the newspaper. This was a request from the Woodland Trust for any information people might have as to the whereabouts of the above mentioned oaks, which were for sale. I had heard that it was possible the trees had been planted in Bailey Park.

I walked in the park and found two oaks at the far end of the avenue, one each side of the path, which looked possible candidates, judging by their size in relation to the nearby King George V Oak planted in 1911 to celebrate the coronation. However I have no evidence that these are Verdun oaks. I then read the WWI tank plinth noticeboard erected by the Local History Society. This stated that in July 1919 at Peace Celebrations held in Bailey Park, the Mayoress, Mrs. Z. Wheatley, planted a number of horse chestnut trees, starting a Peace Grove.

I subsequently found an article of 25th July 1919 in the Chronicle giving details of the Mayoress's tree planting at the Peace Celebrations. I found chestnut trees in a shady area near the children's playground and a further clump near the bandstand. These seemed to be more purposefully grouped, and there were two stumps of felled trees, and those trees may once have formed part of the Peace Grove.



Possibly the Verdun horse chestnuts in Bailey Park

So it seems, according to the newspaper, that both chestnuts and acorns were gathered from the Verdun battlefield. One article states that Lord French when visiting Verdun gathered acorns in the hope that they would grow in Britain as a memento of the gallant French stand. They were given to the Mayors of various towns throughout Britain by the General Manager of the L. & N.W. Railway. These acorns were officially tested for their germination powers, and Abergavenny's share of the acorns were cultivated by local florists in preparation for planting, as a memorial, when peace was declared. Regarding chestnuts, the Peace Celebration article states that the Mayor of Verdun took chestnuts from trees destroyed by German shell fire during the siege of Verdun.

Finally, in the village of Bryngwyn, near Raglan the villagers had subscribed generously to the Peace Celebrations, which enabled quite a grand programme to be prepared for the occasion. This included the presence of the Mayor of Abergavenny, Alderman Z. Wheatley, who planted an oak tree grown from an acorn from the Verdun battlefield. The tree was planted in a field belonging to Miss Crawley, near Croes-bychan. One very enthusiastic celebrant was Miss Betsy Arnold. She was believed to be 104 years old and delighted everyone by dancing round the freshly planted Verdun oak.

It seems therefore, according to the newspaper, that at least one oak tree was planted in a field near Raglan as well as the chestnut trees in Bailey Park. As I have no evidence of the survival or precise location of the oak tree I have not contacted Woodland Trust. However it is gratifying to know that these trees were planted in the Abergavenny area as mementos of this very significant battle.

JANET CONSTABLE

ABERGAVENNY EISTEDDFODAU IN THE EARLY 1900's

In April 1913, an announcement appeared in the Abergavenny Chronicle:

"In connection with the National Eisteddfod in August next, arrangements are being made with the assistance of the Misses Jackson of Brynderi, to organise the Pageant of Gwent as the opening attraction of the Eisteddfod with the view of demonstrating the historical and eisteddfodic associations of the neighbourhood.

Such Pageant will be held on August Bank holiday in the historic grounds of Coldbrook Park and it particularly desired that all residents in the immediate and surrounding neighbourhood should take part in the following episodes:



Major General Sir Ivor Herbert and Lady Herbert. (Daily Mail Photograph. Mr. J. A. Herbert. Mr. Patrick. Mr. Geoffrey Crawshaw.

Opening dance of the Mountain Fairies, River Sprites etc. Episode 5 AD 1177 Massacre of Syswylt ap Dyfnwl by William de Braose in Abergavenny Castle.

Episode 8. AD 1453 reception of the Earl of Warwick, the Kingmaker, at Coldbrook

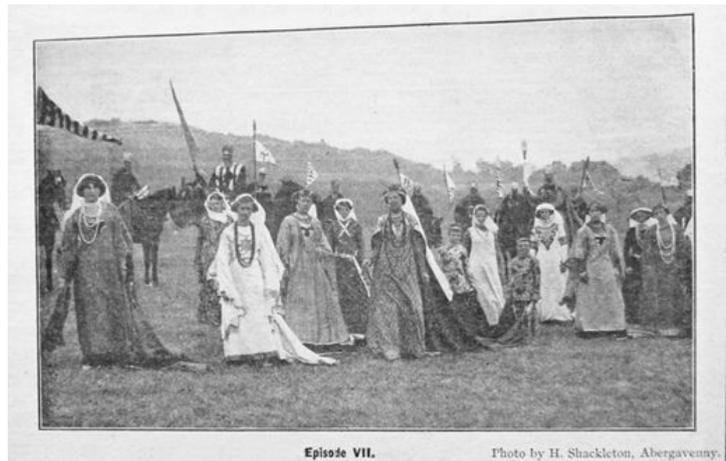
Episode 9 AD1469 The Battle of Banbury before and after."

A previous application for the National Eisteddfod to be held in Abergavenny had been made in 1909. At the Eisteddfod in London, it was announced that Carmarthen had been selected by 142 to 92 despite the efforts of Lord Tredegar, Sir Ivor Herbert, Robert McKenna MP and many other eminent supporters. Abergavenny had been in competition with Carmarthen, who stated that they were not afraid of 'all the titles supporting Abergavenny's bid'

but 'acknowledged the importance of the Abergavenny Eisteddfod from 1833 to 1853'.

The local Abergavenny Eisteddfodau continued, but were less successful than previously and consistently made a loss, partly because the proceedings were held in the Market Hall and were inaudible to all but those immediately next to the stage!

However, despite misgivings about finance, efforts continued and eventually succeeded in obtaining the National Eisteddfod for Abergavenny in 1913. The excellent rail links and three railway stations to accommodate the special trains that brought Eisteddfod goers to the event must have had a big influence in this time of popular rail travel.



Mr R H Jackson, the secretary of the Eisteddfod committee, was working exceptionally hard and there were many meetings reported diligently by the local press. The treasurer, Mr Howell James, had the anxiety of managing on too little money. He was complaining in June 1913 that he had paid out £700 on the new Pavilion (with excellent acoustics!) in Bailey Park, but another £350 was owed 'which they did not have'.

Also in June 1913, a dispute between the Abergavenny Amateur Athletics Association (4As) and the Eisteddfod committee was reported. The 4As had arranged very successful meetings every Bank Holiday Tuesday for some years. Competitors came from all over Britain and abroad, with many

thousand spectators arriving on special trains. The previous year, the special attraction had been aeroplane flights, but the competitions of runners, hurdlers and bicycle racing were at the height of their popularity, together with a fête in the Castle Grounds and fireworks at night.

The special attraction in 1913 was to be whippet racing! All this did not go down well with the pompous Eisteddfod committee who complained that it was inappropriate to hold such an event on the Tuesday of the Eisteddfod week (Bank Holidays in August then being on the first Monday of the August). Eventually, after an acrimonious dispute, a delegation was able to calm things down and the 4As went ahead.

The Eisteddfod was extensively reported in the Abergavenny Chronicle. An amusing account of the rehearsal of the Gwent Pageant stated that ‘the proceedings were unfortunately obscured by rain’. This large event with costumed enactments of historical episodes, both actual and imagined, was the highlight of the Eisteddfod and much praised. A spread of photographs of the actual Pageant (photographs being unusual in newspapers of the time) was interspersed with accounts of the proceedings and names of those involved.

At the Eisteddfod itself, the crowning of the bard was apparently poorly attended as were many of the concerts which made a large loss. There were ‘unpleasant scenes’ at the Friday concert when the adjudication and results of the over-running afternoon competitions were given during the concert. The concert goers prevailed over those who wished to hear the results of the Eisteddfod competitions. And the Saturday morning was wet with only a few visitors and only two of the eight promised brass bands competing. But overall, large numbers of competitors and visitors had a good celebration of Welsh literary and musical traditions with the triple harpists gaining particular praise.

Naturally the Eisteddfod organisers had been very concerned about the threat of attacks from suffragettes. There was extra expense for the guarding of the Pavilion (details of which were confidential) and they cleverly switched the attendance of the local MP and Home Secretary, Robert McKenna MP, from the afternoon to the morning and there was only a minor skirmish with his car in the High Street. However, the suffragettes obtained their publicity by setting fire to the Cricket Pavilion where the security guard was asleep inside, and a hay rick at Mr Holly’s farm.

The Eisteddfod treasurer continued to struggle to make ends meet but eventually the final deficit of £40 9s 1d was reported in January 1915. Attention was elsewhere by then, of course.

In 1917, the Abergavenny Band of Hope held an afternoon Eisteddfod and in September 1918, a local Abergavenny Eisteddfod was held in the Town Hall under the auspices of the Congregational Church. As well as the singing and recitation competitions, there were competitions for letter writing and knitting, activities well practiced during the 1914-1918 war!

By April 1919, the Abergavenny Eisteddfod was back, organised by the Abergavenny Improvements Association with a two-day fête in the Castle grounds, a rugby match against the New Zealand All Blacks and a flying display. Frivolity and enjoyment were back!

A longer account of the Abergavenny National Eisteddfod through the eyes of the local press appears in the Gwent Local History Journal 2016. Thanks to Sue Smith for her help with photographs of the Abergavenny Chronicle and to the Chronicle Office who allow us to use their archives.

Gill Wakley

VISIT TO THE NEWPORT SHIP AND THE TRANSPORTER BRIDGE

The Newport Ship “The best preserved 15th century ship ever found” (newportship.org)

Although the above quote on their website rather begs the question as to how many 15th century ships there are lying around, our very own local piece of shipping history was found during the excavations to build the Riverfront Theatre on the Usk in Newport in 2002. The area under construction became the orchestra pit, but the ship that got in the way had been in the mud for around 532 years.



A bus load of the usual eager local history day trippers therefore turned up some 546 years after the ship sank. The project is now housed in a huge draughty shed, situated on an anonymously bland industrial area on the outskirts of Newport. We were split into smaller groups to be given a talk by the volunteers who seem to be working under many pressures - as with all such schemes, the funding is sporadic; however with the help of the Friends of Newport Ship and (probably not enough) volunteers, they have made remarkable progress and have ambitious future plans to build a tourist attraction that would be comparable with the Mary Rose

The conservation is a long, complicated and expensive process. Computer software has provided 3D images of each timber and artefact, which have been meticulously measured and recorded. From this, they have also had a 3D model built, created by laser printing each existent timber.

The actual timbers meanwhile have been undergoing a very long beauty treatment, which involves being soaked in polyethylene glycol – this soaks in to the timbers and replaces the water in the wood. This process has so far taken several years and is now coming to the end. The wood has been taken in batches to a site in York, where they are to be freeze dried and returned to Newport for storage in a separate atmosphere-controlled section of the shed

The amount of timbers retrieved is relatively small. It is now known that the oak timber originated in the Basque country of northern Spain around 1450 and would have traded along the western Atlantic. The story and interruption of its dismantling in Newport around 1470 is not entirely clear.

The website gives much more information and details of the open days. It is well worth a visit to learn about the history of medieval Newport, to be amazed at the modern technology being used to reconstruct a piece of that history and perhaps to support them in the many obstacles the Friends and volunteers face in bringing about this amazing project

On to lunch at the Waterloo Hotel – worth a local history trip on its own. Built in the 1870s, this grade 2 listed former docks pub was refurbished in 2007. The bar has its original stained glass and wood panelling.

Conveniently across the road from lunch is the Transporter Bridge, a fascinating structure that I have known since childhood and which looks reassuringly as I remembered it, even though nothing else in Newport does.

The Transporter is another contender valiantly waving its metal arms to be heard above the noise of competing funding needs from Newport Council (which owns it) and other agencies. Like The Ship, it is run by dedicated volunteers and Friends.

The Bridge opened in 1906 and was built to aid crossing the river at a point where the majority of the population living at the time on the western side needed to get to work in the expanding manufacturing area on the east bank. This type of bridge allowed the tall ships through, although it was virtually out of date by the time of its opening as river traffic declined and the railways took over. It never made any money.



BIANCA EMBERSON

There were once around 20 such bridges world-wide, now only 7 remain, there are two others in the UK. By 1985, the Newport Transporter Bridge had deteriorated to such an extent that it had to be closed on safety grounds. Gwent County Council eventually obtained funds and reopened it in 1995.

The gondola – which takes vehicles as well as pedestrians – took us across the river at the dizzy speed of 10 feet/second (many more statistics to be found on fontb.org.uk). We were given a lot of information on its structure and method of working and on the other side we climbed up to the engine room where we could watch the cables winding/unwinding as the gondola made a return trip and then came back over for us.

The website gives details of its open days (at certain times the brave can climb up and over and while the view could hardly be compared to Sydney, it looks as scary). There is a tiny visitors' centre and, like the Newport Ship, the Transporter Bridge deserves a wider audience to learn its fascinating history and help keep this engineering phenomenon for future generations.

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