"THE PATRON SAINT OF GWENT" JOHN OWEN 1867 - 1960

One of the most remarkable residents of Abergavenny in modern times was John Owen. Born in Dolgellau, he was the son of a compositor and reader in the office of Y Dysgedydd and Y Dydd. He served his apprenticeship in the same office before coming to Abergavenny as a twenty year old in 1887. He worked as a Welsh compositor in Henry Seargeant's press. He was to live in the town for the next 73 years. His brother Edwin joined him at Seargeants about 2 years later. They were told in the late 1890's that there was not enough work for them at Seargeants and they began to look for other work – even in Birmingham. Instead, in 1897, they were persuaded to take over a High Street printing firm run by Thomas Edmunds. Later they moved the firm, the Minerva Press, to Nevill Street. Among the Welsh books published by the Owen Brothers were their father's biography (1907) and the works of Eluned Morgan –Dringo'r Andes (1904), Gwymon y mor (1909) and Ar Dir a mor (1913). Their office became a favourite meeting-place for the local Welsh-speaking community.

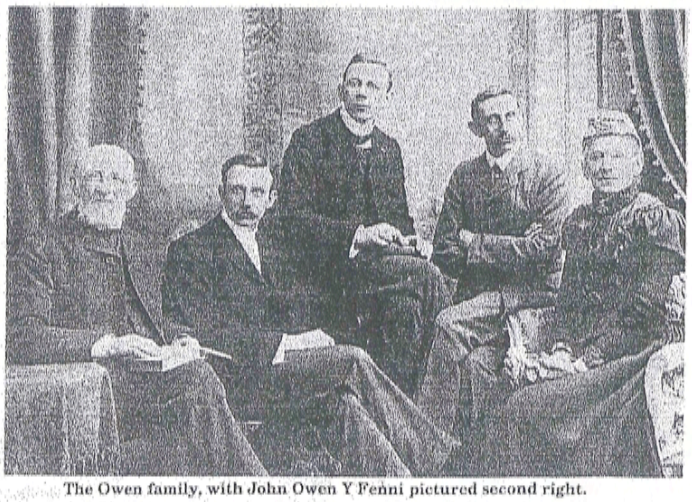
The minister at Castle Street Congregational Church felt that "what helped him more than anything else to remain in Abergavenny was the fact that, here in this church, he was welcomed in his mother tongue by one of its members." He was to be an active member, deacon and choir conductor at Castle Street. Both he and his brother were lay preachers for over 50 years. He was a travelling evangelist with a deep love of his Christian faith. In the Chronicle tribute to him on 6 January 1961 it was said that "One activity in which he excelled was addressing large Brotherhood gatherings. He started in 1909 at Malvern Link and soon his reputation spread to all parts of Wales and the border counties. He could talk, sing or recite as the occasion demanded, and he was a regular visitor at Worcester for the St David's Day celebrations. For many years at Brotherhood gatherings in the Forest of Dean, Mr Owen was a familiar figure, and people would tramp miles to hear him make a speech or recite."

His musical interests soon came to the fore. He had learned the rudiments of sol-fa in the Sunday school in Yr Hen Gapel Dolgellau where his father was the Secretary. In 1893 he conducted a choir of 70 at Abergavenny Town Hall for the cantata, "Esther, Beautiful Queen" and shortly afterwards he became an enthusiastic member of Abergavenny and District Choral Society. He sang with them for 60 years and became a life member. Naturally he took an interest in the annual Easter Monday eisteddfod at Abergavenny becoming its joint conductor with Rev. W Sylvanus Jones and Thomas Allen. He was a keen follower of the National Eisteddfod and he could have conducted the 1913 National Eisteddfod at Abergavenny. Instead he chose to act as platform superintendent so that another Dolgellau man Llew Meirion could act as conductor. In 1920 he conducted the national at Barry going on to conduct eisteddfodau in all parts of Wales. From 1920 to 1937 he regularly compered from the national platform and in the early 1930's he became a member of the Gorsedd of Bards taking the title of 'John Owen Y Fenni'. John Owen would go anywhere to conduct at an eisteddfod and many locals remember his presence in hall or marquee until the early hours of the morning.

There is no doubt that John Owen loved life and showed remarkable energy in his many interests. In addition to his lay preaching and eisteddfodic work he loved astronomy, climbing mountains, painting, local history and playing the harp. He enjoyed cycling and motoring until his 80's. He would cycle around the streets of Abergavenny but for longer journeys he squeezed his six foot frame into a maroon coloured Austin 7. Those given a lift by him tended not to forget the experience!

Both he and Edwin were acknowledged astronomers. In Rev J. Silas Evans' book on astronomy and astronomers the brothers are mentioned in a chapter on the history of the science in Wales. Much of John's work as an observer of comets, the planets and the moon appeared in the 'English Mechanic'.

His brother Edwin seated in the centre of this family picture was a well-known poet and was the scholar of the family. Apart from translating Welsh into English,



The Owen family, with John Owen Y Fenni pictured second right.

he translated Latin into Welsh. He worked with

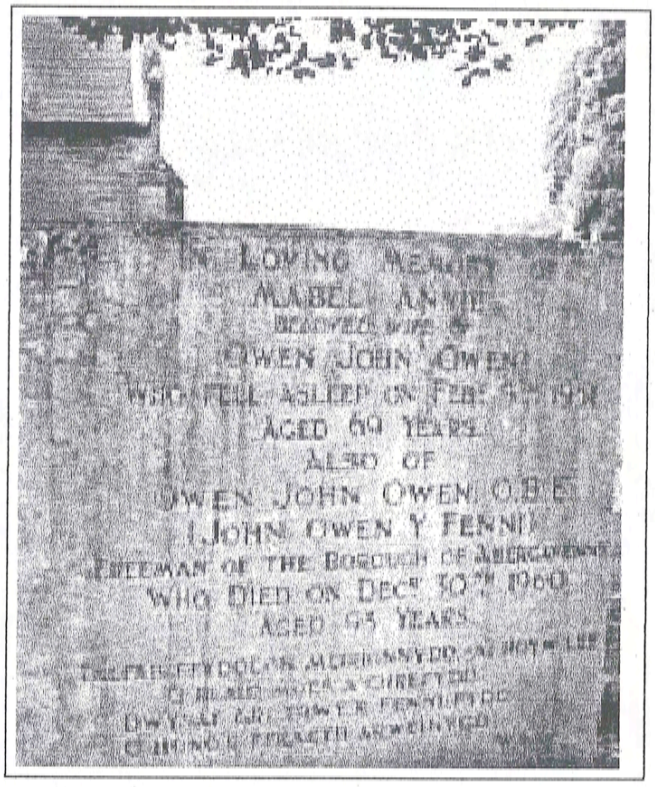
Cardinal Vaughan to translate the Roman Catholic Prayer Book into Welsh.

Much of John's public success was said to be due to Edwin 'who made the bullets for John to shoot'. John could take the printed word and inform it with joy and humour. Hardly a concert or social evening was held without 'our John' who was the life and soul of the party. His humour was 'different'. The Chronicle claimed that he had 'enlivened many boring over-pompous dinners' in the town with his whimsical jokes which often featured Irish and Welsh characters. In his youth he was also a clever contortionist. A Western Mail photograph of the Caernarvon national had the caption,: "John Owen Y Fenni, aged 68, practising for the Olympic Games," and showed him tanding on one leg with his other foot touching the top of his head! He would sometimes perform this trick to amuse the children when conducting local eisteddfodau.

As early as 1929 his many friends from North and South Wales presented him with a radio and cheque at the Town Hall in recognition of his many public activities. In the Second World War he was one of the first to organize a concert group to entertain and raise money and was instrumental in holding open air services in Bailey Park. In 1949 he was made a Freeman of the borough of Abergavenny and the following year became an O.B.E. In his tribute to John Owen in the Chronicle of January 6th 1961, Archdruid Wil Ifan described him as 'Gwent's patron saint'.

As he told boys at a speech day "Make sure you always live lively. Too many people keep alive these days only to save funeral expenses."

There is no doubt that John Owen lived very lively indeed.



Visitors to his grave near the chapel in the Llanfoist cemetery above Llanfoist bridge will see that Wil Ifan had even added some verse to his tribute. Freely translated it reads:

Faithful leading son of Meirionydd,-with his active call
For morals and religion
There will be the most solemn lament
throughout the Fenni
On the passing of the witty leader.

Talfab ffyddlon Meirionydd,-a'i hoyw lef
O blaid moes a chrefydd:
Dwysaf gri trwy'r Fenni fydd
O huno'r ffraeth arweinydd

W.I

I am grateful to Jeff Davies for letting me have a copy of Sian Rhiannon Williams' entry on John Owen in the Dictionary of Welsh Biography 1941 - 1970 and for details of his astronomical work. Those who wish to know more about astronomy in Wales may wish to visit the following website

http:/brynjones.members.beeb.net/wastronhist/ss24f.html

Richard Davies

The Society has commissioned two **VIDEOS**. One will last about 10 minutes and give a rapid overview of the town and the other will go into much greater detail in the course of about an hour.

The Society has conducted two well attended **TOWN WALKS** during the Abergavenny Festival.

The Societyhas been awarded **CHARITY STATUS**. This will mean that through the Gift Aid Scheme it will be able to claim back tax on all subscriptions and donations.

There has been a reprint of the book "**A TOWN REMEMBERS : MEMORIES OF WARTIME ABERGAVENNY 1939-1945**" edited by our chairman Richard Davies, Society members enjoyed the project which involved searching wartime editions of Abergavenny Chronicle, school logbooks at Gwent Record Office and archives at Abergavenny Museum. The team taped the recollections of about 40 residents revealing what life was like on the home front. The book is available to Society members for £3.50 from Richard Davies (01873 890266), Mollie Johnson (01873 830730), or Irena Morgan (01873 853957) or for £4 from bookshops, stalls, the Museum, the TIC and some post offices. Monmouthshire County Council Community Pride Scheme gave £300 to buy tapes and recorders. The tapes and transcripts are in the Museum

---

The Society congratulates **GWYN JONES** who founded the Society on his award from the Gwent Local History Council.

Our secretary Irena Morgan has contributed several articles to the Abergavenny Chronicle and her book **"ABERGAVENNY PAST AND PRESENT"** should be out in September. It is part of the series *'Britain in Old Photographs'* commissioned by Suttons of Stroud after they discovered our website designed by Irena. It features street scenes and group photographs from days gone by ranging from schools to societies and carnivals to shows.

Stephen Morgan hopes to transfer the **ST MARY'S RESEARCH GROUP RECORDS** to the Society's website. It would help if he could borrow a Commodore 80 column business machine with Wordcraft. The machine on which the records were created blew up (Spectacularly!) some years ago The disc and disc drive still work but only an old dot matrix printed record remains..

Anne Morgan (01873 856275) is pleased to accept £5 for a week's **FLOODLIGHTING** of the castle.

Ken Key (01873 852512) is desperately requiring **STEWARDS** for St Mary's church on Wednesday afternoons from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. and is already anticipating copy for **NEWSLETTER NO 20 2004**!

Visit to SUTTON HOO. October 10-13 cost £169.50. 3 nights B&B half board. Ipswich
Contact Clive Morgan. European Heritage. 01873 831633

Ann Waller is offering copies of the booklet **'THOUGHTS ON TINTERN'** by Bryan Little free of charge to members, but if members feel inclined, a donation of 50p each would be appreciated and will be passed on to St Mary's Priory Church repair funds. Ann and Ted will have a supply with them at the Summer Party at Tintern.

The society's **WEBSITE** www.abergavennyhistory.co.uk is continuing to generate interest and receive e-mails from all over the world.

Neils de Voogd, from Holland, has asked if anyone has information about a doctor, **GUY WILLIAM PARRY**, who was awarded the Military Cross in 1918 towards the end of World War I and was later promoted to the rank of major.

The RAMC historical society has a reference to him as a Deputy Commissioner of medical services at the Ministry of Pensions in Abergavenny and a reference in 1947 that he was in a joint general practice in the town. He was also a corps surgeon for the St. John Ambulance Brigade and a police surgeon.

"I am interested in finding his relatives and a picture so the story becomes more personal," he said. "The start of this search is a war medal I found in a shop a few years back and ever since then I have wanted to find out more about this man."

Guy William Parry arrived in France as a Lieutenant on the 1st December 1915 and was awarded the Military Cross (he was a T/Captain then) on the 1st January 1918 whilst serving with the 131st Field Ambulance RAMC.

Neils de Voogd recently visited the monument to the 38th Welsh division near Mametz wood on the battlefields of the Somme. He has discovered that the 131st Field Ambulance was part of that Welsh division.
The curator of the Museum of The Royal Regiment of Wales (24th/41st Foot), formerly The South Wales Borderers, said the Military Cross awarded to Dr Parry was more than likely a New Year's Honour Award given for good service over a long period.

ELVERY CHAMBERS left Abergavenny for Australia in 1968 and is trying to trace her family's history and that of a local farmhouse. She knows her grandfather, Robert William Nelmes, (born 1873) lived with his uncle James Nelmes in 1881 on a farm called 'Pembulla' in Llanwenarth Citra. She would like to find out more about this farm especially who lived there before 1876 when the uncle was married to Emma Jones from Llantilio Pertholey. At the time of his marriage, he was living in Victoria Street and was working as a fireman, presumably on the railways. So why he should have changed his occupation and moved to Llanwenarth Citra was puzzling especially as in 1891 he was in Tredegar and back on the railways. Mrs Chambers would also like to know the school her grandfather would have attended around 1881 when he was living at Llanwenarth Citra and whether there were any records of it from that time

---

Another inquirer, **LESLEY BEVERLEY**, wants to delve into the history of Albert Place behind Princes Street in Abergavenny. Albert Place seems to be older than the Princes Street terrace and she would like to know if anyone has local memories of it or who could supply any details.

If anyone can help with these inquiries please contact the secretary, Irena Morgan on 01873 853957 or by e-mail on abergavennyhistory@ukonline.co.uk.

PLAQUES

The latest fourteen of the twenty three blue plaques were unveiled on August 4th. A sub committee of the Society chose the plaques and Precision Cast Components of Newport made them. Abergavenny Town Council gave £500 and Monmouthshire County Council gave £1000 towards the cost.
It is an interesting exercise to walk round and find them. You will learn a lot about the town and may be led into places you have never been before

The fire plaque was not put up by the Society but by an insurance company which, failing to discover their plaque on your burning building, would refuse to put out the fire. I believe it is a copy of the original plaque.

The rectangular plaque on the Post Office is not a Society plaque and unfortunately gives the wrong information. The Abergavenny Archaeology Group certainly discovered the Roman gateway in 1963 but subsequent excavations of the Ewers Garden and Orchard sites and the trial trench on the Tudor Gate Surgery (prematurely called the Magistrates Court site) revealed that the Roman fort was on the same side as the mediaeval town and the gate was therefore the North West gate.

Apart from the blue plaques, the Society has contributed to the cost of **DISPLAY BOARDS GIVING DETAILS OF THE CASTLE** which were unveiled in the castle grounds on August 7th..

TAN HOUSE
CENTRE OF A
THRIVING TANNING
INDUSTRY
UNTIL 1884

Sheep market
on this site
until 1863

Georgian House
circa 1750

SITE OF THE
MEDIEVAL
NORTH GATE

HIGH
CROSS

Site of Roman barracks and
granary, also line of the
1241 Norman town wall

HERE STOOD
THE BULL INN
ALONGSIDE THE TOWN'S
MEDIEVAL MARKET
PLACE

SITE OF THE
MEDIEVAL
WEST GATE

Site of 18th century
Welsh
flannel mill

KING HENRY VIII
GRAMMAR SCHOOL
1542-1898

SITE OF THE
MEDIEVAL
SOUTH GATE

THE 16TH CENTURY HOUSE
OF THE VAUGHAN FAMILY,
BECOMING THE COW INN
IN THE 18TH CENTURY

One of the town's oldest inns.
See 1660 Charles II
coat of arms on wall

TITHE BARN,
mainly 14th century on a
12th century site

Site of boot and
shoe industry
until 1865

Abergavenny was known for the
manufacture of white periwigs.
On this site lived James Jones
hair bleacher circa 1741

Town's largest coaching inn
during the 19th century

In 1883 Crawshay Bailey II
leased the Priory Meadows.
In 1894 the town purchased
the park for £5000

SITE OF THE MEDIEVAL
GATE LEADING TO
ST. MARYS PRIORY

THE GUNTER MANSION
HERE IN A SECRET CATHOLIC
CHAPEL JESUIT PRIEST
ST. DAVID LEWIS CELEBRATED
MASS BEFORE HIS ARREST
AND EXECUTION IN 1679.

Author Ethel Lina White
was born here on 2nd April
1876

The Town Hall was built in
1870 to replace John Nash's
Market Hall, note the black
face of the clock on the
north side

Jettied row of shops,
16th century in origin,
remodelled circa 1800