



ABERGAVENNY TALES AND TRAILS

Stories from the past for children to share with adults



The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.
LP Hartley

It is easy to forget that we all have links that go back to pre-history. Every one of us has a direct link through our ancestors to people who were living long before the Romans invaded. They survived battles, invasions, plagues and floods, even if it was only for long enough to produce the next generation of our ancestors.

Many of us are ‘in-comers’ to Abergavenny and don’t have family links with the town, but our own ancestors were living similar lives in different places. People in the past were “just like us” but they were like us with different experiences, influences and education. Of course, they did things differently and thought in different ways. With these stories we hope to provide opportunities for children to discuss with adults the things that went on in and around Abergavenny in the past, then to visit the places where they happened. There are also walks for you to follow together, giving lots of opportunities to discuss the past and to make up your own stories of what might have happened in those places.

Not all these stories will be suitable for all children. If you are sharing these stories, do decide which are appropriate for the age and experience of the children you are with.

We hope that these stories and visits will lead to all sorts of interesting conversations as well as opportunities to look things up, invent games and draw pictures. Some of the stories are based on real life experiences and events. Some are based on local legend. All the rest are based on facts, so they all could be true.

The Stories

The Great Flood – <i>an adventure for some</i>	3
Suffragettes in Abergavenny	5
Cerdyn post o Ffrainc – <i>a very sad story</i>	7
The Romans in Abergavenny	9
Massacre at Abergavenny Castle – <i>a gory story!</i>	11
Evacuees – <i>a story with a happy ending</i>	14
The Squirrel Lady – <i>a sad story</i>	16
Anne Negri Returns for a Visit to Abergavenny	18
Abergavenny Library	21

The Walks

The Inclined Plane	24
Headhunting	26

The Great Abergavenny Flood

of 1931

One morning when Stanley's mother came in to wake him up, she didn't give her usual cry of, "Time to get up, Sleepyhead!"

This time she said, "Stanley, look out of the window!"

Stanley jumped out of bed and rushed to the window to see what could have made his mother sound so different from usual. She seemed concerned and excited at the same time. Outside he could see a great sea of water! There was no sign of the Gavenny River, or of Swan Meadows, just a great lake with the Monmouth Road emerging out of the water on the far side. When he looked down, he could see water lapping over the steps into the Swan Hotel, over the road, and when he went downstairs to his grandmother's tobacco shop, the water was a foot deep. His grandmother and his parents had spent a lot of time in the night moving the stock from the shop up to their parlour, so it didn't get ruined. What a disaster!

But of course, for Stanley it was an adventure. He thought he might be able miss school, but his mother said no, of course not, he could easily wade to the unflooded part of the road. At the time for going to school he had to carry his socks and shoes in his hand and wade to dry land. It was a good thing that he wore short trousers! He sat on the doorstep of Mr Round's sweet shop at No 29 and dried his feet as best he could on his handkerchief. Then he ran all the way to school.

There was a lot of excitement at the school. Some of the children who lived in Mill Street hadn't been able to get there as they were busy helping their parents sort out the mess. Someone said that the bridge in Lower Monk Street had been swept away completely and the end wall of the last house of the terrace the workers at the Asylum lived in had fallen away with it. The people living there had been lucky not to be swept all the way out to sea. Passers-by could see into their parlour and bedrooms!





Stanley and his friends went to see the house after school.

Until the flood water went down several days later, it was difficult for cars and lorries to get into town as the road to Llanfoist bridge was flooded too, as well as the bridge at Llanellen.

A lot of people went down to Mill Street to see the damage done there and they were saying that it was disgraceful that people were living in such poor conditions and that the best thing for a lot of the buildings was that they should be swept away. It took twenty years before the slum clearance started in Abergavenny and people from Mill Street got new houses to live in, with proper bathrooms.

The bridge in Lower Monk Street was replaced by a new one but what was left of the house that was washed away was knocked down and never re-built.

Why don't you –

Visit the new bridge over the Gavenny in Lower Monk Street which replaced the one that was swept away. You might be lucky and see a fish in the river too.

Look at the brick end of the terrace of houses where the end house used to be.

While you are in Swan Meadows, have a look at the Gorsedd stones from the 1913 National Eisteddfod.

Suffragettes in Abergavenny

It is hard to imagine now but at the start of the 20th century, just over 100 years ago, women in this country were not allowed to vote. Many men and some women thought that a woman could not understand how to vote and that she should limit her activity to home-making and raising children. Women joined together in Manchester in 1867 in a group who argued for 'suffrage' or the 'right to vote'. These early campaigners were called *suffragists* and believed in a campaign of influence.



However, by the early 1900s, a new group was formed called the Women's Social and Political Union led by Emmeline Pankhurst. They were frustrated with the lack of progress made by the suffragists and determined that positive action was needed. Their motto was "Deeds, not words". The term *suffragette* was first used by a journalist in 1906 but was quickly taken up by this more extreme group. The suffragette movement adopted the colours of purple for loyalty and dignity, white for purity and green for hope. They used these colours on their banners saying, 'Votes for Women', the sashes which they wore and on items of jewellery. It became fashionable for women to wear a discrete piece of jewellery showing that they identified with the cause. Today original suffragette jewellery is quite rare and often expensive.

By 1912, the suffragettes had turned to more militant and violent tactics and began a window-smashing campaign. One of these suffragettes was a lady called Emily (or Emma) Katherine Gatty. She sometimes went under the name of Katherine. She lived in London and was first arrested for causing damage in 1911 and sentenced to 21 days in prison. In March 1912, she was sentenced to 6 months in Holloway prison for damaging a plate glass window in London. During her time in prison, like many other suffragettes, she went on hunger strike and was force fed through a tube. She was released early in June 1912 and said to be 'mentally unstable'. This was a common description for the suffragettes, as many people could not understand how strongly they felt.

So, what do you suppose she was doing two months later? In August 1912 she was arrested for smashing a window at the post office in Abergavenny. At that time, the post office was at 53 Cross Street. It now has a History point listed at www.historypoints.org. Katherine was protesting at being excluded from the Parliamentary election register. In the newspaper, she was described as 'an elderly lady' even though she was only 42. Perhaps this was because she looked so frail after

being on hunger strike. She refused to walk and had to be carried into the dock at her trial. She was sentenced to one month in prison with hard labour and sent to Usk jail. She replied 'Thank you, your Worships. I shall not do the hard labour, of course.' However, it is likely that she had no choice about it. Do you think this was a fair sentence?

In this photograph dated 1913 Katherine Gatty is wearing a prison uniform so it may have been taken in Usk prison.



The following year the National Eisteddfod was held in Bailey Park in Abergavenny. There had been suffragette attempts to disrupt the Eisteddfod in the previous year in Wrexham. Two men opposed to the suffragists were expected to attend, Reginald McKenna, the Home Secretary and David Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer. It is reported that security was increased and extra police were hired. Can you imagine the security men trying to spot a suffragette in the Eisteddfod crowd? Suffragettes, looking just like other women, did attend and distributed leaflets but there was no direct action. However, a fire at the cricket pavilion and the burning of a hayrick in the area were blamed on suffragettes, with leaflets scattered around the area. No-one was arrested, but the suffragettes did claim responsibility in their newspaper *Votes for Women*. Who knows, it may have been Katharine and her fellow suffragettes returning to Abergavenny.

The 1918 Representation of the People Act gave some women over thirty the right to vote. It would be a further ten years before the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 gave the vote to women over the age of 21 so that they had the same rights as men. How would you feel about not being allowed to vote until you were thirty?

Why don't you –

Explore Bailey Park where the Eisteddfod was held.

Find the green topped History Point sticker in the window where the Post Office used to be on Cross Street

Find the cricket pitch on Avenue Road.

Cerdyn post o Ffrainc

Saturday was Bethan Morgan's day for taking Nel the donkey to deliver butter from the little farm on the Graig to the kitchens of various inns and big houses in Abergavenny. Mam would collect their money when she came in with her eggs and some vegetables to sell in the market on Tuesday, but some of the cooks had even given Bethan coppers to spend for herself. A whole sevenpence ha'penny so far! She felt quite rich, (even if the money would really go to help out at home). It had been a long day, though, and she was just leaving the gas works, where she had collected a bag of coke to be delivered to the schoolhouse in Llanwenarth Citra on her way home.

Bethan was 10 years old, and a pupil at the school. Mrs Hopkins the teacher thought she was doing very well and ought to go to the girls' school in Abergavenny and study to be a teacher. But Bethan didn't know if Mam and Dad would ever be able to afford to let her go. They weren't exactly poor – not like old Mrs Gruffudd from the Graig, who had to go into the workhouse last year. But money was still tight. Dad had hurt his back a couple of years ago, and couldn't do any more heavy work. Her older sister Catrin was working away as a scullery maid in a big house near Llangatwg, but that didn't pay very much.

And now her brother Ieuan had been called up into the army from his job as a woodman on Lord Abergavenny's estate. He had been in the Third Battalion of the Monmouthshire Regiment for four years, training in the Drill Hall in Abergavenny every week and going on summer camps. They had all been called up Last August. They had been in Cambridge for a while, but had finally gone to France a short time ago. The terrible war had been going on for six months now, and there were soldiers everywhere. Castle Meadows was full of tents and the old militia rifle ranges were busy every day. As Bethan and Nel plodded along the lane, she could hear the guns firing. She thought about Ieuan and said a little prayer for him (Ein Tad, cadwch Ieuan yn ddiogel, os gwelwch yn dda, amen) in the Welsh which was her own everyday language.

Bethan stopped at the schoolhouse to let Mr Williams the caretaker unload the coke from Nel's back. Whilst he was putting the bag away, she sneaked a carrot from the garden and gave it to Nel. She felt quite guilty when Mr Williams gave her a penny for herself. As Bethan and Nel walked past the church, she looked across the field and could see a few people walking away from the ferry crossing. She waved cheerfully, although there was nobody she knew among them. Nearly home now. They plodded slowly up the steep lane to the whitewashed cottage on the hillside where they lived. She could see their two cows, Efa and Gwen in their little field, and beyond them the cwt moch, where Alys the black sow lived with her eight new piglets. There seemed to be chickens everywhere!

Bethan carefully took off Nel's bridle and saddle and hung them in the shed, and turned Nel into her own field. While Nel rolled happily in the muddy grass, Bethan went to the little cottage and rushed inside. She hugged mam and dad, who were standing just inside the door and seemed to be waiting for her. Mam kissed her and

said “There is a letter for us from Ieuan, but it is in English. I have some tea made and some bara planc. We can sit down by the fire and we can hear his news.”

Mam gave Bethan a thick letter. Inside was one page of writing, done in pencil, and a brightly coloured postcard. It had a dragon with two crossed flags, and the words “Monmouthshire Regiment”. On the back was written “A special present for my beautiful little sister, with love from Ieuan”



Bethan carefully put the card on the family dresser and sat down to read the letter aloud. It was in English because none of Ieuan’s officers spoke Welsh, and they had to be able to read the letters to make sure that nothing secret was being accidentally given away. Mam and Dad had both learned to read and write Welsh at Sunday School in the chapel over the river, but their English was not so good.

“Dearest Mam, Dad and little Bethan. This must be a short letter, but I shall write again as soon as I can to you and also to Catrin. My big news is that I have been made Lance Corporal and have one stripe

After a horrible long journey by train and by hard marching we have arrived in a place called [REDACTED] in [REDACTED] “

“It’s crossed out, Mam”, said Bethan, “because it’s a secret” She carried on reading.

“We are here to be trained for the trenches before we can go to the front line. There has been some shelling last night. It was not so bad as we expected, and nobody was hurt. Then our own guns gave the Germans something to think about. The men of the [REDACTED] we are with don't seem to mind much. They just told us to keep our heads down. So that is what we shall do.

I must end here, as I am on duty in five minutes.

My dearest love to you all and God be with you”

That was the last they ever heard from Ieuan.

Bethan did become a teacher when she grew up. She trained in Caerleon and then worked in a school in Pontypwl until she was married. To the day she died, she kept a framed picture hanging on her bedroom wall: a postcard of the Monmouthshire Regiment, sent to her from France.

Why don't you –

Visit the Regimental Monument in Frogmore Street and the old Drill Hall in Lewis' Lane (now the cinema)

Walk from Llanwenarth Church across the fields to where the ferry crossed the Usk

Visit the abandoned village on The Graig

The Romans in Abergavenny

It was nearly two thousand years ago that the Romans came to this part of Wales. They built a network of smaller forts in places like Abergavenny and near Brecon at Y Gaer and a large fortress further south at Caerleon. This was part of the Roman military campaign to conquer Britain and bring the people under the control of the Roman Empire. They planned to use the natural resources and mineral wealth of the island for the benefit of Rome – records say that Britain exported all sorts of things from gold, silver and tin to hunting dogs and woollen cloaks. However, it took more than twenty years of fighting before this part of Wales finally accepted Roman rule.

The Romans were fighting the fierce local tribe called the Silures in this part of Wales. The Silures were described by the Roman historian, Tacitus, as having dark complexions and curly hair. The fort at Abergavenny was located on the high bluff of land overlooking where the River Gavenny joined the River Usk. It lay on what became the main road from the legionary fortress at Caerleon. This road went via the small Roman town of Magnis (now Kenchester) just north of Hereford, and on to the fortress (and later town) at Wroxeter. Another road ran from Caerleon through Abergavenny to Y Gaer at what is now Brecon, and on towards Llandovery and the Roman gold mines at Dolaucothi in Carmarthenshire. The roads made it much easier for the soldiers to move quickly from one place to another, to attack the native tribes.

Abergavenny's location on these main Roman roads means that we know the name that the Romans used for the place: Gobannium. A Roman source dated to the third century C.E., the Antonine Itinerary, lists this as a stopping point on Route 12 which went to Wroxeter. Gobannium is probably a Latin version of the original Celtic name used by the local Silurian people. The Celtic word may have had the meaning of 'blacksmith' or 'ironworkers'.



Although nothing survives above ground today, we have some idea what the Roman fort at Abergavenny would have looked like because the Roman army tended to follow a standard design. Several archaeological excavations in and around the town have uncovered the location of ditches, roads and buildings. If you visit Castle Street car park you will see a ceramic commemorative plaque by the front wall of the car park and a blue plaque on the back wall near one of the pay and display machines. Nearby were found the remains of barracks (accommodation blocks) for the soldiers. There is a steep drop down from the back of the car park which overlooks Castle Meadows. It is thought that the river once flowed much closer to the bottom of this higher ground, where the Meadows

are now. Archaeologists found that lots of broken pottery, etc. had been thrown over the fort ramparts here – they seem to have been using this as their rubbish dump!

We do not know which troops were stationed here for certain. Often the smaller forts were manned by auxiliary troops rather than the heavy infantry legionary forces. These auxiliary soldiers were typically recruited from other parts of the Roman Empire and could be infantry, cavalry units or a mix of both. Interestingly, fragments of horse harness and the sort of armour (*lorica segmentata*) typically worn by legionaries have been found in Abergavenny.

A civilian settlement of local people grew up outside the fort, to start with along the roads. This lasted beyond the main military phases of the fort. Houses and workshops have been found as well as the remains of a Roman cemetery. In recent years, a bronze cup 11.5cm tall dating from the first century has been found just north of the town on the line of the road to Hereford. The handle is in the shape of a leopard with silver spots and amber eyes. This is now on display in St Fagans National History Museum.



Why don't you –

Visit the site of the Roman fort in the Castle Street car park and look at the ceramic plaque opposite the School Room.

Visit Abergavenny Museum, dress up as a Roman soldier and look at the displays of Roman objects.

Visit Caerleon to see the National Roman Legion Museum, the Roman Baths and the Amphitheatre.

Visit Caerwent, the walled town established by the Romans for the Silures people.

Massacre at Abergavenny Castle



Let me introduce myself – my name is John William and I am the son of Harold William. I live and work as a servant with my father at the Castle in Abergavenny. William de Broase is the Lord of the castle at the moment and he lives there with his family. Life is very dangerous along the borders here between Wales and England and there are lots of fights between them. It was not so long ago that Lord William's uncle Henry fitz Milo was murdered by Seisyll ap Dyfnwal at his castle and since he had no heirs Lord William de Broase had become the occupant of Abergavenny Castle.

I feel quite secure though, inside the castle. I work very hard, the hours are long, we work from dawn to dusk every day. Our role is to clean around the castle including the grounds and the animal pens. We draw the water for everyone to use and we also take water to the animals which are kept inside the castle walls. Another job which we have is to keep the floor of the Great Hall clean. The floor is earth but we spread rushes over



it and also we collect herbs from around the castle gardens like chamomile, lavender, mint, roses and violets. These herbs make the Hall smell better and I believe they deter vermin.

We all eat together in the Great hall and then we sleep there too. One thing that is good about working in a castle is I can be sure of shelter and food.

We always have to work much harder when there are visitors coming to the Castle. Making sure everything is clean and smelling good. Sometimes we have to help the kitchen staff when they are preparing a banquet. Christmas time is special and we have extra work to do. In December 1175 we were getting the Hall ready. We celebrate the whole 12 days of Christmas. It is a time of the year when most work in the fields stops, people renew friendships and make agreements with others. I was sent outside the castle to the woods below to collect Evergreens, Holly and Ivy branches to make garlands to decorate the hall. I love the smell of the evergreens, they always mean Christmas to me. We had extra fires in the Hall to keep us warm and to brighten it up. The larders and stores were well stocked with vegetables, meat and fish - salmon, herring and trout and seafood- oysters and crab. The meats were roasted on a spit over an open fire - all kinds of meat including beef pork, lamb and a variety of birds. We enjoyed this time of the year as we always enjoyed better food too. Well I was excited and happy. We heard a rumour that there was to be a big banquet for the Welsh Lords at the castle, it meant extra work for us, but it was exciting to have visitors. So our main visitors were to be Seisyll ap Dyfnwal and his son Geoffrey and other Welsh Lords. We took barrels of ale into the Hall, set up the tables and benches and put tankards on the tables ready.

On Christmas day we were all ready, wonderful smells were coming from the kitchens. We heard the sound of horses coming towards the castle and as we looked across the fields we could see this great group of people. They arrived at the castle entrance. Lord William and other nobles were there to greet them. They looked a fierce lot to me. They were shown towards the Great Hall



which was warm, smelled sweet and was well stocked with beer. They were all armed with great swords and daggers. Lord William suggested to them that it wasn't really fitting to take all those arms in to the Hall which was a place of joy and merriment and they were to be celebrating peace between them (Anyway it was the custom to leave your arms at the host's door) The Welsh Lords agreed and left all their weapons at the entrance to the Hall. We were told to put the weapons carefully in a pile. We were to go back and fore with barrels of beer to replenish those in the Hall. I went to the kitchen to help bring some of the food to the Hall. When I returned the great door was slammed shut! There were guards outside the door and I wasn't allowed in.

I wondered what was happening and then I heard the screams! I heard the shouts of anguish I heard the sounds of bodies thumping to the floor the banging on the door in an effort to escape. It seemed to go on forever, but suddenly the door burst open and Lord William and some of his noblemen burst out of the door they were covered in blood and had their swords in their hands. They rushed to their horses which were saddled and ready to go and rode off out of the castle.

I looked inside the Hall. I couldn't believe my eyes! The floor was covered with bodies, and the blood was spattered everywhere. No-one was alive. The ale barrels had been knocked over and the ale was flowing and mixed with the blood. There was silence and nothing and no-one moved for quite a while as we took in the scene. Our job was to clean the castle and it was us who had to clean the Great Hall after this tragedy.

Some of the servants were sent outside the castle wall to dig a pit to bury all the bodies. We had to drag and carry the bodies to the pit. Stepping into the hall the ground was sticky from the blood that had been spilled. My clothes were all stained too as I helped to move the dead. I knew that I would have to spend a long time cleaning the clothes I was wearing. When the bodies had been disposed of, we had to clean the floor. That was a very difficult task. We took all the rushes out and burned them, they had soaked up a lot of the blood and then we scraped the top layer of the soil and threw that on the rubbish heap. I looked at the Hall and the lovely garlands we had made for Christmas and I knew no celebrations would be able to take my mind off what had happened here.

Later as we were finishing the cleaning Lord William and his men came back. They were out of breath and shouted for us to bring them ale. Their squires helped them to remove their clothes and took their blood stained swords away to clean. As I was taking a barrel of ale to the Hall, I heard Lord William saying that luckily they had reached Seisyll ap Dyfnwal's home before they had heard of the massacre and they were able to kill Seisyll's seven year old son Cadwallader and capture his wife. The whole family wiped out.

For me, I will never be able to enter the Great hall again without all these memories flooding back the sounds the smells and the sight will always be with me.

This massacre was bloody and brutal and even in a time when killing and slaughter were common it stood out as the worst atrocity. Because of his actions, Abergavenny Castle was doomed. In 1182 Seisyll's relatives attacked it and burned the Great Hall to the ground, Lord William wasn't there so escaped their revenge.

Why don't you -

Visit Abergavenny Castle. You can see the remains of the Great Hall - just one stone wall is left.

Evacuees!

Miss Hollins called out to the children to get their things together as they would be getting out of the train soon. It has been a long time since they left Birmingham and all the children were tired and fed up with being crowded together. A whole school of children was packed into the train. Billy helped his little brother Paul make sure he had his bag and his gas mask ready. Their grandmother had found a couple of old canvas bags for them to use, and they had packed their pyjamas and toothbrushes and a few clothes in them. Paul had his little teddy bear too, and Tommy had his pencils and pad of drawing paper.

When the train stopped, they all piled out and Miss Hollins sorted them into crocodiles. A rather bossy lady with glasses and a clip board was talking to Miss Hollins and she led them out of the station and marched the crocodiles of children into town. As they went, they could see hills in the distance and hoped they'd be able to go and explore them soon. They marched into a big building that someone said was the Town Hall but it turned out that the part they were in was the market hall. There were lots of grown-ups waiting there. The bossy lady was called Mrs Hiley. She called for attention then called out loudly, "Welcome to Abergavenny, children, this is going to be your home until it is safe for you to go back to Birmingham. You will be allocated your billets shortly."



The grown-ups started walking through the rows of children and then taking one or two by the hand and leading them to the bossy lady who would make a note of their names from the labels they had pinned to their coats. Then the children went off with the grown-ups. Miss Hollins smiled and looked encouragingly at the children as they left and said, "I'll see you at school on Monday."

Billy and Paul seemed to have waited a long time when a rather severe looking woman came up to them and, taking each of them by the shoulder, marched them up to Mrs Hiley. She said, "I'll have these two." Mrs Hiley said, "Oh are you sure, Mrs Ruth, wouldn't you prefer to have two of the older children?" But Mrs Ruth said no, she'd have these two as they'd eat less than the bigger children.

Mrs Ruth led them through several streets of terraced houses and into one that was not unlike their own home, but this one was made of stone, not bricks. She took their ration books and showed them where the outside lavvy was then gave them some bread and margarine. She took them up to their room and pushed them in. Billy and Paul heard her lock the door and go downstairs. They couldn't see much out of their window because of the paper tape glued across the glass and anyway there were only other houses outside and none of the hills were visible. They both felt very sad and scared. Mrs Ruth had not been at all smiling or friendly. They waited for ages, trying very

hard not to think about their mother and grandmother at home, but nothing happened and it started to get dark. Paul said, “Do you think she’ll let us out to go to the lavvy again?” Billy peered under the bed and said, “It’s all right, there is a gazunder we can use.” They turned on the light switch but there was no bulb in the holder so in the end they put themselves to bed in the dark and huddled together with Paul’s teddy bear and cried themselves to sleep.

In the morning Mrs Ruther told them to wash themselves at the kitchen sink and gave them some bread and margarine then locked them in their room again. They peered out of the gaps in the tape over the window glass and although they could hear some children playing somewhere near they couldn’t see anyone. They played eye-spy and hangman using some of Billy’s precious drawing paper but the time went really slowly and they got very hungry.

Eventually they heard the doorbell ringing. Then they could hear what sounded like an argument coming from downstairs. They could make out the loud voice of the bossy Mrs Hiley and the complaining voice of Mrs Ruther and then footsteps coming up the stairs. Their door was unlocked and Mrs Hiley strode in. She looked round the room and sniffed then said, “Get your things together, Billy and Paul, you are coming with me.” They didn’t need to be told twice: anything was better than this horrible place. So they stuffed their pyjamas and Paul’s bear into their bags and put on their hats and coats. Mrs Hiley led them out to her motor car, with Mrs Ruther grumbling and complaining behind them.

All Mrs Hiley said was as she drove off was, “I don’t know – that woman! I’ve got a much nicer place for you two to go.” They drove to the edge of town, to a pleasant house where a lady came out and gave both Billy and Paul a big hug and took them inside where there was a fire burning in the kitchen hearth. She let them toast some bread over the fire while she talked with Mrs Hiley. She said, “Don’t you bother, Mrs Hiley, the boys will be fine with me.”



After Mrs Hiley had left and the boys had eaten the toast, the nice lady, whose name was Mrs Morris, sent them out to play in the garden, which was a good one to explore. When she called them back in to wash their hands, she gave them a sausage each for their tea and lots of lovely mashed potatoes and carrots from the garden. In the evening, when Mr Morris came home, they played beggar-my-neighbour until bedtime. When Mrs Morris put the boys to bed, she found the postcards that their mother had given them to send her to say where they were staying. She said, “We’ll write on those in the morning, and you can post them on our way to School.” When they got to the new school, they found all their friends and Miss Hollins.

They lived very happily with Mrs Morris through the whole of the war and then went back to stay with her in their school holidays for many years afterwards.

Why don’t you –

Visit the Evacuee Panels at the Abergavenny Community Centre and the Old Station Surgery.

The Squirrel Lady

Rhodri was digging a hole in his grandmother's garden to bury the squirrel that had been knocked down by a van on the road in front of the house. The ground was very hard under the tree where he'd been told to dig, but he was still surprised to find an oddly-shaped stone in the gravelly ground. After the squirrel had been buried in a nest of leaves and the ground made smooth again he took the stone and washed it under the outside tap. As it came cleaner he could see that it was carved and it looked as if it was some sort of animal.

He took the stone to his grandmother who looked at it carefully. "How curious," she said, "that you should find a carving of a squirrel in a hole being dug for a squirrel. I think I know where this might have come from."

"Where?" asked Rhodri.

"Well, in the church where the monuments are, in one of the side chapels, there is a statue of a girl called Margaret Plantagenet who was known as the Squirrel Lady. She was supposed to have had her pet squirrel in her hand when the statue was new. And it isn't there now."

"Tell me about her – please." said Rhodri.

"This was all hundreds of years ago, in the fourteenth century I think, when the powerful landed families used to make their children marry into the other powerful families to make them even more powerful. Sometimes the children were really young too."

"Yuck!" said Rhodri.

"They mostly didn't have to live with each other until the girls were old enough to have babies safely. But they probably had to be seen together at their various castles to remind the peasants how powerful they were going to be. Anyway, this girl was called Margaret Plantagenet and she married John Hastings, the future Earl of Abergavenny, when she was thirteen and he was eleven."

"Double yuck!" muttered Rhodri.

His grandmother continued, "I expect John would have been busy doing his lessons and learning to ride and how use a sword. Margaret would have had some education too and learned embroidery and how to be a 'lady'. And she had been given a young squirrel that she trained and kept on a chain – a red squirrel it would have been then, long before the grey ones came."

"Wasn't that rather cruel?" said Rhodri.





“Yes, but people thought differently about animals then, particularly rich people. Anyway, they were staying at Abergavenny Castle when Margaret was fifteen and John thirteen. This squirrel didn’t think much of being chained and when Margaret took it for some exercise on the castle ramparts it managed to tangle up its chain so badly that she had to unlock it so the squirrel could move. When it was free of the tangle of chain the squirrel scampered off. Margaret chased after it and clambered over the ramparts to try to reach it. But she stretched too far and overbalanced and fell right down to the ground a long way below. They had to bury her in our church and the family got her an expensive tomb made with a statue of her holding her squirrel.”

“What happened to the squirrel?” said Rhodri.

“I expect it ran off into the woods. But the statue squirrel stayed on Margaret’s tomb, probably until the Civil War, when Cromwell’s soldiers came into the town and did a lot of damage in the church. They used to take things as souvenirs. A soldier might have knocked the alabaster nose off Lady Gwladus’ monument and popped it into his pocket to take home. And then knocked the squirrel off Margaret’s tomb and put it in his pack. He might have decided the pack was too heavy to carry bits of stone around as well as all his stuff and chucked the squirrel out into the ditch.”

“What a strange story - and sad.” said Rhodri.

“Yes,” said his grandmother, “but there is something about it that makes me think it could be true.”

Why don’t you –

Visit Abergavenny Castle and try to imagine what it was like when Lady Margaret was there.

Then visit her tomb in St Mary’s Church and see where the squirrel isn’t! Look for the carved dragon on the choir stalls while you are there too.

Anne Negri Returns for a Visit to Abergavenny

Cissie sat with wide open eyes in the corner on a stool, hoping everyone would forget that she was there. She was hidden by two of the others in this room crowded with people come to see their visitor. She loved just being in this room with pictures on the walls and the cherubs, fruit and roses on the ceiling.



Her aunt Anne had arrived back at their house where she had grown up (just like Cissie). Now she looked like a grand lady in elegant clothes. She ran a tea shop in far-off exciting London. Anne's husband was running the business while she returned to visit her family in Cross Street, Abergavenny. Anne's husband was foreign, Italian, they said, but Cissie wasn't quite sure what that meant. He was called Domenico - a name Cissie had never heard before. Cissie wasn't quite sure what a teashop was either, although she had heard people talk about tea and coffee. She had learnt that tea was made from leaves with hot water and coffee from ground up coffee beans. Both came from foreign countries far away across the sea. They were drunk from fancy decorated cups, and some better-off houses had them on the dresser in the hall-kitchen like their own pewter mugs that were used for serving ale.

Cissie had hoped to hear about London and sights and gossip about what Anne did there. She knew that Anne and Domenico lived in a row of houses around what was called a square with space for carriages outside. They worked very hard cooking to serve cakes and ice-cream there and to supply great houses at 'entertainments', whatever they were. But Anne was talking to Mama and her father, Walter, about apprenticeships, and she strained to hear, hoping she might be mentioned, but knowing she could not be. Although Anne and two of Anne's sisters had gone to London, they had the right connections to be placed in good jobs.



Anne seemed to be trying to be patient with Walter, using the same tone of voice that Mama used. Cissie could understand that it wasn't a good idea to shout at Walter like she shouted at *her* brothers when they were being stupid. Walter didn't like being told things by Mama and was always talking about how much better things were before, in the olden days. He didn't listen to what most people said so he always took a long time to understand what people were trying to tell him, longer than it did for her and she was only twelve. She was nearly grown-up and had learnt all the tasks in the kitchen now. She could fetch the water and the small wood for the fire, pick over peas and other dried beans, chop vegetables,

and grind up spices in the pestle and mortar. She had recently learnt how to check the temperature and make bread in their oven at the side of the big fire in the kitchen. She was trusted enough to make some of the meals cooked in the kitchen without needing to be supervised. Soon she would be able to make fancy dishes – perhaps even the ice-cream that her aunt talked about – as well as the small, sweetened pastry cases that she had recently learnt to make filled with delicate small strawberries or chopped up fruit.

They were talking about her cousin James who was the same age as she was. He lived in one of the houses further up Cross Street towards the Market. Anne wanted James to go back with her to London to be apprenticed as a pastrycook in her Teashop. Walter said James should be apprenticed as a wine merchant like his father and not go off to far-off places. If his father wouldn't have him as an apprentice, he could go to Bristol, that was far enough. Or he could train as a brewer – look how well Walter's grandfather had done as a brewer, although Walter did agree that the brewery business was not doing well now. Cissie could see Mama's eyes going up to Heaven as she prayed for patience. Cissie had heard the arguments about the brewery business inherited from Richard her great-grandfather. The brewery just didn't seem to make a profit now, however hard everyone worked at the business.

Mama got up abruptly and said that she wanted to show Anne some of her new cooking equipment in the kitchen, and very quickly the room emptied. Cissie followed on, down the wooden spiral stair and through the passage. When she got to the kitchen, Anne had decided to put on her cloak and outside shoes and walk up to see James. Bravely, Cissie asked if she could go as well, to give her a chance to ask Anne to tell her something about life in London.

Anne smiled at her and said that, of course she could, and, as they walked the short distance, put up with all the questions. Yes, they did pay to have piped water to the house, something suggested for Abergavenny, but not yet provided. There was just as much horse manure on the roads, but underneath the roads were mostly paved and had a gutter at either side instead of down the middle. Anne said that it was pleasant to be able to walk along the street and not have to have someone with her to make sure that she was safe, something Cissie had not thought about. Seeing the worry on Cissie's face, Anne rapidly added that it was just that it was usual to have someone with you to help carry things, or you could hire a carriage or a cart, depending on what you had to carry. It was just that the men liked to wear a sword when they walked in the streets to look big – Cissie knew what she meant but she was still a little worried. Mostly, Anne said, she was delivering what they had made in the Teashop to other people's houses for them to eat, and she needed a lot of help with that – the ice cream, the pastries, the cakes. By the time she had finished telling her about the cooking, they were at her cousin's house, and Cissie was promptly sent out again to find James and bring him back to hear her Aunt's suggestion for James to become an apprentice pastrycook at her Teashop, while the grown-ups discussed the details of how it could be arranged.



Why don't you –

Visit the display in Plas Gunter Mansion on Cross Street. It's open Tuesday, Friday and Saturday 10.30am to 4pm, between March and December.

Look at the display and the plan of the building. Can you work out where the parlour, the stairs and the kitchen were?

Can you find out from the display where Anne Negri (Gunter before she married) lived and worked in London?

Why is this house important? There is more information on:

<https://www.plasguntermansion.org.uk/>

This story is made up and takes place in the eighteenth century. It's difficult to find out exactly what people did then. Few records still exist, and they rarely contain details of everyday life. Apprenticeships for young people to learn a trade usually started at around the age of twelve until the age of 21 years, although by this time they were becoming less popular than informal arrangements. Parents paid money to the Master tradesman (or sometimes woman), like a cook, brewer or tailor, for them to take on their son (or sometimes a daughter).

We do know that Anne Gunter and two of her sisters left Plas Gunter Mansion where they lived and went to London. Anne married Domenico Negri and they set up a Tea Shop called The Pot & Pineapple, later called Gunters Tea Shop (the same one as appears in the Bridgerton fictional series) in Berkeley Square, London.

Most of the records are things like wills written to give details of who should inherit what after someone's death. The will that Anne Negri left can be read and she left her Gunters Teashop to James Gunter (of Berkeley Square in London). Cecilia (called Cissie here) Gunter appears in the records for St Mary Priory Church, but not in enough detail to be sure that she lived at Plas Gunter Mansion, as there were many families of Gunters by that time.

The Old Abergavenny Library

known as the Carnegie Library

Most of you will know the new Abergavenny Library in the Town Hall. Did you know about or use the original free public library, often called the Carnegie Library, in Baker Street?

How did libraries become free for the people to use?

In Wales many rich people had their own libraries in their private homes, like Cyfarthfa Castle in Merthyr Tydfil. Small libraries, paid for by the members, were found in the working men's clubs, welfare halls and miners' institutions, like at Blaenavon. From 1850 onwards the Government passed several Public Libraries Acts which meant libraries would be free to the public, although adults had to pay a tax of one old penny (less than half a new penny today). Andrew Carnegie, a wealthy man who loved reading, paid for 2,811 libraries all over the world, 35 of them are in Wales. One of them is the old library in Baker Street.

Who was Andrew Carnegie?

<https://www.abergavennylocalhistorysociety.org.uk/> Andrew Carnegie was born into a poor family on 25 November 1835 and lived in Dunfermline, Fife, in Scotland with his parents and younger brother. His father worked in a factory as a hand loom weaver. In 1848, they went to North America because there was no work in Scotland. Andrew (known as Andy), aged 13 years, worked as a bobbin-boy in a small weaving factory, although he went to school in the evenings, where he loved learning and studied hard. He quickly had other jobs, earned money and put his money into the iron, oil and steel industries. He became a very rich man and owned his own steel company. He moved to New York in 1868.

In 1901, he sold his steel company and with his money he became a philanthropist (someone who gives his/her time and money to help others and good causes).

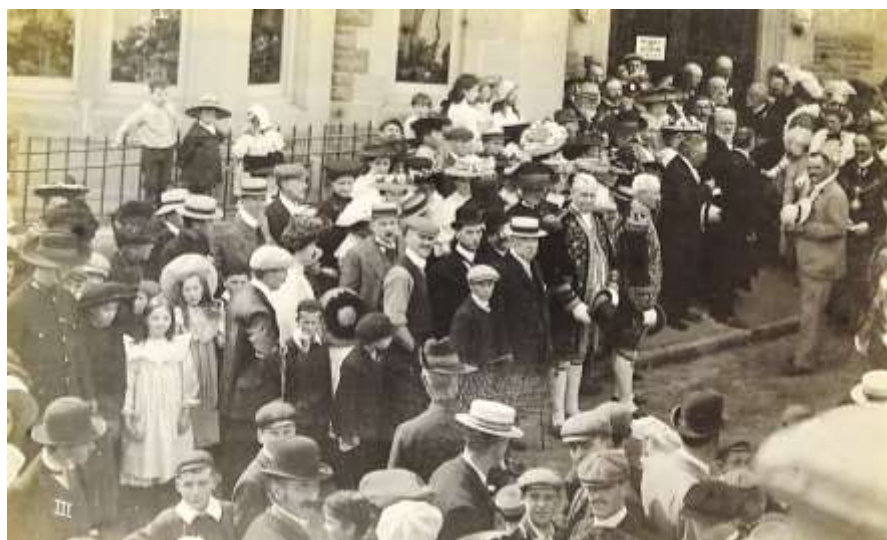
In 1902, Andrew Carnegie was asked by Abergavenny Town Council to pay for a library in the town. He offered the Council £2000 (about £205,400 today). In the same year he was invited to the National Eisteddfod in Bangor.



On the 6 April 1906 the Foundation Stone (a large block of stone with an inscription that is placed when work starts on a public building) was laid by the Mayor.
Photo showing the laying of the Foundation Stone



The library is built of sandstone blocks with Bath stone ashlar quoins (large horizontal decorative corner stone blocks), and a large bay window with battlements and a gable. On top of the gable is a statue of Minerva, the Roman goddess of learning, holding a book. Over the entrance archway is the inscription "Carnegie Public Library". Each side of the entrance porch and main door are two stone heads. On the left is Andrew Carnegie, who paid for the library, and on the right is the first Marquess of Abergavenny, William Nevill, who opened the library on 8 September 1906. The streets were decorated with flags and streamers. A procession of the Lord Mayor of London and members of the Town Council dressed in their fine robes walked from the Town Hall to the Library for the grand opening at 11.30am. Celebrations were held in Bailey Park in the afternoon, with sports, races, competitions, entertainment, dancing and fireworks.



Inside the library had a large entrance hall where bikes could be left, a hexagonal (a room with six sides) reading room to the right and to the left was a room for 6500 books which people could borrow. There was a museum on the first floor.

At one time a poster appeared in the library warning naughty boys to behave, otherwise as the poster said they would be 'taken at once before the Bench of Magistrates, and that punishment by Act of Parliament is "Whipping"!' Boys (and girls) you had better behave in the library!!

In 1907, Andrew Carnegie travelled from America to visit the new library and was given the "Freedom of the Town". This is the highest honour a Town Council can give someone. Unfortunately, you cannot go inside the library now, as it closed in 2020 when the new library opened.

Why don't you –

Pretend to be in the Lord Mayor's procession and walk from the Town Hall to the Carnegie Library in Baker Street.

Then see if you can:

Discover the Foundation Stone. Look carefully at the Foundation Stone. Can you find a spelling mistake in the bottom left corner? (Hint: how many 'n's in Abergavenny?)

See the statue of Minerva holding a book at the top of the gable.

Read the inscription 'Carnegie Public Library' over the main door.

Find the two stone heads either side of the door. Andrew Carnegie is on the left. On the right is the head of the first Marquess of Abergavenny.

Find out where Dunfermline in Scotland is.

As you look at the building just stop and think: Andrew Carnegie was poor, but he studied and worked hard and became very rich. He gave his money to build the library.

The Marquess was born into money. He gave his money to build Abergavenny's cricket ground, bowling green and pavilion, for example. Both men gave their time and money to help others less fortunate than themselves.

The Incline Plane on the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal

If you stand by the steps leading up to the canal in Llanfoist, listen for sounds of the birds, or the wind in the trees. Then look at the tunnel. It was built to go under the canal. Two hundred years ago the sounds would have been of men shouting, digging, moving stone for building.

The canal was built to transport large quantities of coal, iron, limestone and lime to and from the quarries and coal mines that once covered the valleys of south-east Wales. In the UK, the end of the 18th century, and into the 19th century, was known as the Industrial Revolution. South Wales was at the heart of this Revolution.

The canal was like a motorway but lorries and cars did not exist. It was like a railway but steam trains were nearly-but-not-quite invented. It would not be long before trains became the main type of transport in Britain, a technology that spread around the world.

So on this mountain outside Abergavenny, tram roads were needed to get the coal, the iron, the limestone and the lime, down the mountain to the newly-built canal, where barges were waiting to carry the loads to ships waiting in the docks of Cardiff and Newport.

Walk through the tunnel. It is 7 feet high (just over 2metres), so you don't have to duck, but be careful, there is often a lot of water running down the hill.



Try and imagine what it was like to be building the tunnel. In the rain or snow.



At the other end of the tunnel, look up towards the beginning of a steep slope known as an incline plane. This was originally built in three sections. A bit further on, you may see large flat stones with holes in them. They were known as stone sleeper blocks and provided a way of fixing the rails securely to the ground underneath. A little further on there are two replica trams, standing on a "railway" – which at that time

was called a plateway. A display board nearby has more information and pictures of how the place where you are standing would have looked. It is quite hard to imagine now.



When the trams were working, the weight of a tram loaded with coal at the top of the incline would force it to descend under gravity. Each of the three inclines had a “brake wheel” at the top, someone had to be responsible for making sure the tram did not run away! There were two sets of rails, side-by-side. As the full tram went down, the empty tram went up, and the cycle could start again. It was hard, heavy and often very dangerous work.

Why don't you:

Return to the bottom of the steps. Climb the steps to the canal, look for the third step from the top. It is inscribed with the words “B&A Canal Co”. This is a reminder that the canal was built by the Brecknock & Abergavenny Canal Company.

Head Hunters

In Abergavenny there are lots of interesting historical sites to see but as you wander around, take the time to glance upwards. Start in Cross street look for a Boar's head.



It has been painted and stands out.

If you look through the door you can see a passage way which is private now, so you cannot go through, but in the past things were different. This is Number **29 Cross Street** and it was believed that there was a row of cottages here at right angles to Cross Street called: Boar's Head Yard where there was a Boar's Head pub in the 18th century and there may have been Butcher's shops.

Walk down Cross street and walk up the side of the old Swan Inn up the lane (Beili Lane) past the Tithe Barn and you will come out opposite **Laburnum Cottage**. This little Cottage stands proud at No. 6 Monk Street a driveway at the right and a car park at the left. It is believed that part of the town wall is included in one of the walls of the house. It is believed that the front of the house was a toll house in the past.



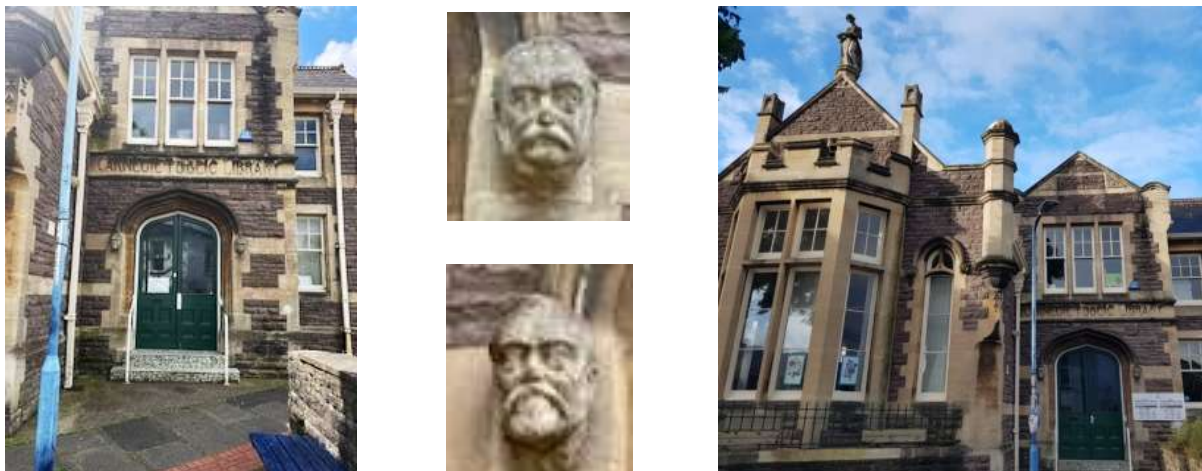
The first head above the door on the key stone looks as if it is wearing a crown. The second head, tucked in the corner between the front wall and the porch is clearly a male head fashioned as a spout.

Make your way through town towards Nevill Street **No 14 Nevill Street** to be precise. A very impressive building believed to have been the home of the Vaughn family 1500-1600. **The triangular area made up of Nevill Street - which was called Rother Street (Rother meaning long horned cattle) until the nineteenth century, High Street and St John's Lane (called Chicken Street on the 1834 map) was the original market of the town. Cattle were sold here until 1795.** This building continues the animal head theme with six cow heads positioned just beneath the guttering.



They were arranged there when a floor was added to the building and it became the Cow Inn in 1787. The original beam was cut up and placed above the windows. This beam shows us the goat heads. Significant because Abergavenny was well known for the manufacture of white periwigs in the 17th and 18th centuries from their hair and the milk from those goats was considered good treatment for consumption.

Walk down High street to Frogmore Street and take the seven corners lane passing some remains of the old town wall through the car park to Baker Street and Library Square. Here is the Carnegie Library.



It was built in 1906 by Andrew Carnegie. Sadly no longer in use. His head is the one on the left and the head on the right is of the Marquis of Abergavenny William Neville

Now to our final mystery.....

Turn left into Baker Street and go left towards the end of Frogmore Street. Here you will find **No. 35 Frogmore Street.**



This is now a Kebab shop, but look up and you will see a very strange statue. We have been finding Heads, but here we have a Headless body!



I don't know how this got here and I am not sure what the statue depicts but I think it is a labourer. The arm on the left holds a hammer and the one on the right holds some kind of tool. It would be good to find out where the statue was originally and what he was doing. There aren't many statues of working people.

The Story-tellers

Marilyn Diosi
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Christina Maciejewski
Sue Smith

Bianca Emberson
Denise Kenyon
David Smith
Gill Wakley

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Anne Negri returns for a Visit to Abergavenny

<https://www.plasguntermansion.org.uk/>

Abergavenny Library

The information about Andrew Carnegie and the Library can be found in a book called *Free and Public: Andrew Carnegie and the Libraries of Wales* written by Ralph A. Griffiths in 2021, printed by the University of Wales Press. It can be ordered from the Library. Other information can be found on the internet.

A Headhunting Walk

ALHS Street Survey - <https://www.abergavennystreetsurvey.co.uk/>

Visit Monmouthshire - www.visitmonmouthshire.com

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