

Abergavenny Local History Society



St. John's, Abergavenny

NEWSLETTER No. 3

AUGUST 1987

MEDIAEVAL BITS AND PIECES

Alan Spink's well organised summer programmes have taken us considerable distances from Abergavenny - as far north as York, to Pembroke in the west and Portsmouth in the south. The sites we visited have covered all periods from Prehistory to the Industrial Revolution, but because Britain is a land of magnificent castles and churches these have figured prominently on his booking forms.

This collection of 'bits from the Middle Ages' is a tribute to those guides who have taught us to look with greater understanding at the Mediaeval period.

Heraldry on shields and banners originated as an essentially practical method of identification in the confusion of hand-to-hand combat and when faces were increasingly obscured by head armour. The 'coat of arms' (from its appearance on surcoats when shields became small and insignificant) became a badge of nobility. Banners and badges were also hung outside inns when occupied by a lord or his retinue. This is the origin of many inn signs e.g. The Somerset Arms.

Castle assault As direct assault cost lives, a beleaguered castle was asked to surrender honourably. If it refused, efforts were made to breach its defences. A breach was followed by a second call to surrender and if defiance forced the attacker to an all-out assault they were liable, if successful, to execute the surviving garrison in retaliation.

Chemical warfare In castle defence, materials used included super-heated sand which penetrated the joints of armour. More common materials were boiling water, animal fat and quick-lime, but there is no evidence for boiling oil or lead - they were too expensive and rare.

Salt An important commodity which had to be carefully looked after. Apart from the flavouring, it was an important preservative (others were pickling and smoking). Because of the problems of winter feeding much stock was killed off or preserved either by dry salting (buried in a bed of salt pounded to fine powder) or brine - curing in a strong salt solution. Later it would have, in great households, a worthy table container called 'the salt' which acted as a social demarcation at a banquet. (Hence 'below the salt').

The Old and New Testaments Almost every event and personage in the Old Testament was seen as a prefiguration ('type') of persons and events in the New. Thus Noah's flood was a type of baptism. Abraham's would-be sacrifice of Isaac foreshadowed God's offering of His only-begotten Son. The Burning Bush could symbolise the Virgin Birth.

Chantry An endowment maintaining a priest to chant Mass for the founder of a church or others after their death. This institution rapidly developed after the terror of the Black Death (mid 14th century).

Animals occur in a variety of contexts in churches as emblems, attributes or as characters in popular fables; Satan is sometimes

represented as an ape; a camel stands for temperance (St. John the Baptist was clothed in camel skin); a dog, often used as a footrest of female recumbent effigies, portrays fidelity; the lion, perhaps the most frequently occurring animal in imagery, symbolised Christ (Lion of Judah). As a foot supporter on recumbent effigies it symbolises courage.

Emblems of the Evangelists (those who preached or wrote the Gospels). At the height of their development the mediaeval church would have been full of colour: walls, roof, woodwork and stone painted and gilded with harmonious stained glass in all the windows.

Often portrayed in wood, glass or stone were the emblems of the evangelists: Matthew as a winged man; Mark as a winged lion; Luke as a winged ox; John as an eagle.

SUMMER VISITS, 1986

I have three especial memories of the 1986 Summer Visits. My first was at the Manor House at Stanton Harcourt where the owner Mrs. Crispin Gasgoigne allowed us to see and handle the miniature paintings which until quite recently had just hung on a wall in the house. Visiting experts had seen and examined them and declared them to be part of a larger set and worth about half a million pounds. My second was the sight of the remains of the hull of King Henry VIII's warship the Mary Rose raised from the Solent in 1982. Lying there still in its special cradle being sprayed continuously with water to remove the salt from its timbers, it appeared almost ghostly through the mist. And last but certainly not least, who will ever forget the terrible weather we had on our day out up the heads of the valleys. Above Tredegar we went to see the Cholera Graveyard where victims of the disease were buried away from the normal cemetery. When the coach pulled up, about 200 yards from the graveyard, the rain was coming down like stair rods, horizontal stair rods, but were most of our intrepid members deterred, not they, out of the coach they got and followed the guide across boggy ground to the site itself. As I said, three especial memories out of many from our 1986 visits. Let's hope we have equally fond memories from this year's visits.

ST. JOHN'S CHURCH AND GRAMMAR SCHOOL

Although the name St. John's suggests a Norman dedication, there was probably an earlier church on this site, as it was the Norman's usual practice to clear away any previous dwelling or church on a site before building their new township. Not all of the old church survives, and the tower is a 1750 copy of an earlier one. The church was in a central position within the walled Norman town, with the town's market at its western end. Its graveyard may well have stretched across the present High Street to the town wall at the rear of Woolworths.

After the dissolution of the monasteries, King Henry VIII turned the chapel of the local Priory into the parish church, and St. John's, which until 1542 had been the parish church, became the town's first grammar school. He gave some local tithes, which had previously supported the priory, for the upkeep of the school. The burgesses of the town were given control of the school, but when

they refused to swear allegiance to William and Mary in 1689, they lost the Royal Charter and consequently the right to administer the 'royal school'. In addition several tenants took advantage of the situation and did not pay their tithes, so in 1719 the Court of Chancery appointed a Receiver to recover them. In the meantime the running and support of the school was in the hands of Jesus College Oxford.

In 1898 a new school, called King Henry VIII Grammar School, was built in Pen-y-Pound and soon after St. John's was bought by the Freemasons for their lodge.

INCONSEQUENTIAL MUSINGS

Living in Llwynu Lane, I fell to thinking about its derivation. Upon making enquiries, I found that in the neighbourhood near where the half a dozen shops, off Llwynu Lane are now, stood Llwynu Farm. The farm was demolished and gave way to the present large housing estate.

But someone with some sensitivity and historical sense kept the link with the farm, by some well chosen street names where once were farm fields.

e.g. i) Barn Way and ii) Ysguborwen (Welsh for White Barn) - the barn was probably lime washed.

But later, looking at a large scale survey map and following Llwynu Lane northwards across the Old Hereford Road, one spotted Llwyndu Woods (Dark black woods) probably because of the tree density; and nearby Llwyndu House.

Is there a connection between Llwynu and Llwyndu? Is Llwynu a contraction of Llwyndu? Is there a history of, or any distinction attached to Llwyndu House?

Gwyn Smith

EISTEDDFODAU

When Mr R.H. Jackson of 11 Priory Road Abergavenny sent out preliminary programmes for the Abergavenny Eisteddfod on Easter Monday 1910 he desired, he said, "to direct your earnest attention to the contents which would remain true to the standards of progressive thought and efficiency".

He assured the competitors in a host of classes, ranging from choral singing to photography, from instrumental solos to essays, of fair conditions, most expert adjudicators and, best of all, £300 in prizes - no mean sum in 1910.

The main prize in the 20th eisteddfod in 1853 amounted to £70 donated by some of the local gentry. Lady Hall of Llanover, Sir John Guest, Colonel Kemys Tynte all stumped up their five or ten guineas. Even one Adam Gordon of Knockespoth and His Excellency the Chevalier Bunsen were prevailed upon to give a few guineas. It was the latter gentleman who proposed the formidable subject of the competition, "for the best essay on the origin and progress of trial by jury in Wales, to be written in Welsh, French or English".

Anyone capable of dashing off an essay on "the best analysis of the Remains of the Welsh poets, to contain as much Bardic biography as possible" stood a chance of winning £30. An English prose translation of "The Gododin", not forgetting the explanatory notes, brought the lucky winner twelve guineas.

If your talents were better suited to a Welsh ode on the destruction

of the Druids of Mona in A.D. 60 by the Roman army or an elegy in Welsh on Taliesin, you not only received a few pounds in prize money, but also a medal of one pound (in weight?) from Lady Hall of Llanover.

For singers and harpists the prizes were numerous, although not so valuable as for the dauntingly intellectual subjects. Blind harpists were not left out, nor penillion singers "after the manner of North Wales".

If one could neither sing nor play, skill in spinning and weaving could win £3 donated by Viscountess Nevill "for the best specimen of Welsh dyed Blue Cloth, five yards long", although the class for Welsh dyed scarlet cloth carried a prize of £10.

Welsh Rodnay Woollen and Welsh Woollen Whittle were also featured - does anyone now remember what they were?

Manufacturing a Welsh Hat, knitting gloves and stockings of Welsh black sheep's wool all stood to win prizes. There was even a special judge of Welsh hats - one Mr. Thompson of Abergavenny.

The judge of "the Great Prize" was none other than His Excellency Chevalier Bunsen, he of the trial by jury dissertation. The professor of the harp at the Royal Academy lent his august presence to judge the music.

One hopes that 60 years later, Mr Jackson was able to secure equally 'expert adjudicators' for his eisteddfod!

All these articles, except one, were contributed by members of the committee. While no Eisteddfod prizes are offered, the editor would be grateful for more historical jottings from other members.

MEMBERS PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPETITION 1987

Two competitions will be held, one for the best three colour slides and the other for the best three colour prints. The subject material is to have an historical theme or be connected with the activities of the society, not necessarily taken this year. All entries will be considered, be they serious, topical or amusing and judged on their photographic content, composition and skill displayed by the person taking the pictures. The closing date will be the October 1987 meeting.

PRIZES

Slides	1st - £15	2nd - £10	3rd - £5
Prints	1st - £15	2nd - £10	3rd - £5

The above prizes will be awarded for groups of three pictures in each category, judged by a panel, to be appointed by the society's committee, whose decision will be final. Multiple entries are acceptable but prizes will be limited to one per member per category. Entries are to be clearly marked with names, addresses and subject title.

A selection of slides and prints, together with the winning groups will be shown at future meetings.

All material submitted will be returned but no responsibility can be accepted.

LECTURES 1987 - 1988

- 17th Sept - Mr Arthur Peplow -Welsh Castles.
- 15th Oct - Mr John Petts -Painting with coloured light - the art of stained glass.
- 12th Nov - Mr S Coates. - Navigable Inland Waterways
(N.B. 2nd Thursday)
- 17th Dec - Members' Social Evening
- 21st Jan - Mr D Upton -Prehistoric finds in the Severn Estuary
- 18th Feb - Dr M Gray -The Earls of Worcester
- 17th Mar - Mr B Scott -The struggle between good and evil in Mediaeval Art
- 21st April - Dr R Howell -Gwent and the creation of the Welsh March.
- 20th May - The eleventh Annual General Meeting
- Mr W Farley -A lighter vein of Copper

OFFICERS

Chairman	Mr Gwyn Jones,	6 Belmont Crescent,	Tel 2505
Treasurer	Mrs Freda Key,	105 Chapel Road,	Tel 2512
Secretary	Mr Alan Spink,	74 Brecon Road,	Tel 4101