

Abergavenny Local History Society



St. John's, Abergavenny

NEWSLETTER No. 4

AUGUST 1988

ABERGAVENNY LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY
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THE GUNTER HOUSE CROSS STREET

This house, built about 1600, is now occupied by five businesses, between El Greco cafe and Trekkitt.

A typical Tudor house with a projecting wing at either end, it is much altered on the ground floor, but has a first floor room containing the original richly decorated plaster ceiling. By the 18th century the house had become the Parrot Inn and was renamed the Cardiff Arms in the 19th century.

About 1650, the house was occupied by Thomas Gunter, a lawyer, a Justice of the Peace and a Roman Catholic.

At this time Catholicism was discouraged, although wealthy Roman Catholics often had priests attached to their households. In Thomas Gunter's house mass was celebrated by two Jesuit priests of which one was David Lewis, a son of the Master of Abergavenny Grammar School. In 1678 it was claimed that there was a plot to kill king Charles II and reinstate Roman Catholicism as the official religion of the country. The House of Commons set up commissions to collect evidence of Catholic activities from local worthies.

John Scudamore of Kentchurch, John Arnold of Llanfihangel Court, William Jones of Caerleon and the vicar of Abergavenny all testified that David Lewis and Philip Evans said mass in the Gunter House for great numbers. Is it the vicar's voice that comes down the centuries, sounding distinctly miffed, when it was said that "100 attended when only 40 were in church!"?

As a result, David Lewis was arrested and found guilty of high treason at Monmouth assizes.

He was executed at Usk and his fellow priest suffered a similar fate in 1679. Both priests were canonised in 1977.

For over 200 years, this violent incident in Abergavenny's history was forgotten, until 1907 when the new owner of the Gunter House was making alterations to the building. When workmen broke through the lath and plaster wall of the little attic room in the right hand gable they found on one wall a mural depicting the Adoration of the Magi. Close by was the red green and gold symbol of the Society of Jesus. On another wall was "T.G." and several other marks. Here, plainly was the chapel in which mass had been celebrated by David Lewis and Philip Evans.

The mural was later cut from the wall and framed. It now hangs above the fireplace in Abergavenny Museum.

DEMOLISHING THE VOLUNTEERS' HALL

This account of the demolition, in the 1950's, of the Drill Hall, or Volunteers' Hall, which stood in Tudor Street opposite the Kings Arms, was given to me by Mr Reg Allison, formerly foreman of the Borough Council.

The building was strongly built with walls about two feet thick, and it was decided it could best be dealt with by blowing it up.

Mr Alison went to Brynmawr for the gelignite and on his return found everything had been prepared. The police had cleared the area, roads were roped off and everyone was waiting for the big bang. The charges were quickly placed, and on being fired many bricks were thrown about, some falling in Nevill Street.

A large hole in the shape of an arch was blown in the building, which was then very unstable. Examination showed that the removal of one

stone would complete the work and, on this being levered out, the remainder of the building came crashing down and covered everyone there in dust. However, the demolition was safely accomplished and all that remained was for the men to dust themselves down and to clean up the mess.

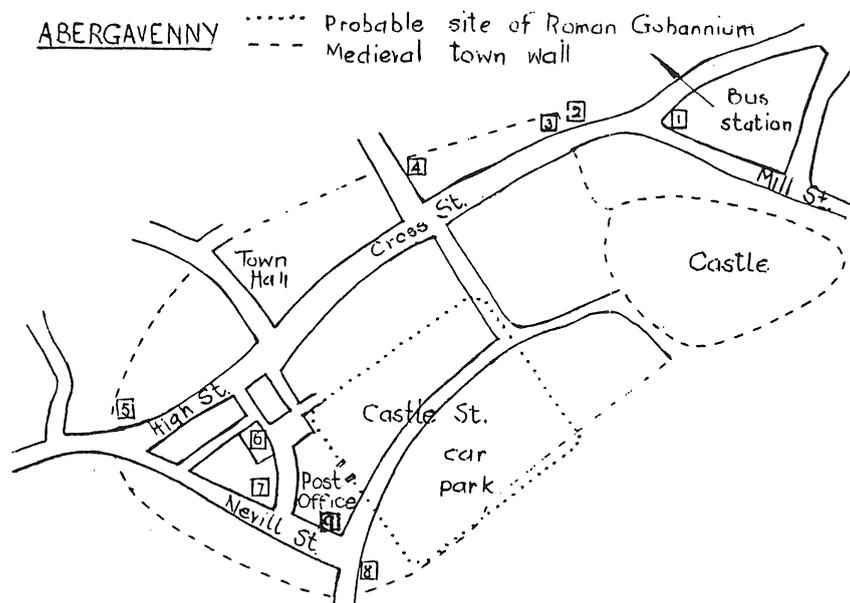
Arthur Fleet.

THE PLAQUE SUBCOMMITTEE

The Newsletter of August 1985 gave an account of the activities of a subcommittee set up to affix ornamental plaques to the Town's most interesting historical sites.

This subcommittee, consisting of Bill Farley (chairman), Peter Campbell, John Cook, Arthur Hinshellwood and Gwyn Jones has now, after a great deal of hard work, completed its original project.

The Town Gates and Abergavenny's oldest remaining inns and houses, as the map below shows, now bear plaques to remind everyone of the roles they played in the past.



- 1) Tan House, Monmouth Road. Formerly the Tanmaster's House. A tannery once existed to the south of it.
- 2) The Gunter House Cross Street. Occupied by the Gunters in the mid 17th century. Here, Father David Lewis (now St. David.) said mass in a secret Catholic chapel in an attic.
- 3) Site of the Mediaeval South Gate of the town now occupied by the Coach and Horses Inn.
- 4) Site of the mediaeval gate leading to St Mary's Priory.
- 5) The North Gate in the town wall. Now the site of the Midland Bank.
- 6) King Henry VIII Grammar School. Established originally in what was then St. John's church in 1542.
- 7) The Cow Inn Nevill Street. Now Charles Price's shop. It was in the 16th century a substantial town house.
- 8) Old Court, Castle Street. Site of the mediaeval West Gate.
- 9) The Bull Inn Nevill Street. The Post Office now occupies the site of the rear premises of the inn.

SUMMER VISITS 1987

The highlight of last year's visits was, perhaps, the one made to the Jorvik Viking Exhibition at York. It was opened especially for us on the Friday evening, thus avoiding the long queues. Everyone enjoyed our journey in a "time car" through the superbly presented exhibition and reconstruction of the finds from the archaeological dig. Our guides at Fountains Abbey brought to life the magnificent monastery ruins. Unfortunately, it was too far to go back to see them floodlit in the evening, but if you are ever near the ruins on an evening in July or August, they are a breathtaking sight. The ruins of Helmsley Castle were a stark contrast.

The highlight of the weekend, for at least one member, was the visit to the Bronte Parsonage at Howarth, with the wild countryside around obviously providing the background for the sisters' books.

In complete contrast was our visit to Llanwern Steelworks, which was enlivened by seeing the strip mill run amok. I assure you it was not specially laid on.

We cannot, unfortunately, guarantee the weather which somewhat spoiled the visit to Penhow Castle. In fine weather there is a lovely view from the top of the tower.

A careful count was made of the numbers in the coach after our visit to Harvington Hall to ensure that no-one had been left behind in one of the numerous "priest holes" carefully concealed in this old building.

These are just some of the memories of last year's summer visits.

Let's hope we are enjoying this year's, and if you have any suggestions to make 1989 equally memorable, please let us have them.

WAS SAINT PATRICK BORN IN ABERGAVENNY?

Did you know that St Patrick was born in Abergavenny? American friends sent us the following magazine article:-

Who was St Patrick and why do the Irish make such a fuss about him? To begin with, St Patrick was not Irish. He was a Roman of noble birth and, according to the Irish scholar Eoin MacNeil, was born in Abergavenny Wales at the beginning of the 5th century and died about 480 A.D.

Patrick was a victim of the many raids on the coasts of England and Wales and he was captured and taken to North Connacht where he tended sheep and learned to love Irish ways.

After many years he escaped to Gaul where he studied at the monastery at Auxerre.

On his return to Britain, he was made a bishop and eventually the church allowed him to return to Ireland to teach and preach.

Contrary to myth, St Patrick did not drive the snakes out of Ireland, for the very good reason that there never had been any snakes there.

The Vikings, frequent raiders of the Irish coast, called Patrick "Pandrig". This means "Expeller of toads" but there were none of these in Ireland either!

All of which poses the question "What, if anything, did St Patrick expel from Ireland?" and more importantly, "Why did Eoin MacNeil think he was born in Abergavenny?".

Beryl Jones

CASTLE FLOODLIGHTING

There may be new members who are unaware of the sponsoring scheme run by the Society to floodlight Abergavenny Castle. For £3 anyone can sponsor a week's floodlighting. Most people celebrate family weddings, birthdays (as someone said "It's one old ruin celebrating another old ruin!") or any other special occasion. The money to install floodlights, was raised not only by our members' own efforts, but from donations by the Town Council, societies, townspeople and local businesses. The floodlights were switched on in 1985 and since then the castle has been floodlit every night of the year.

STUDY GROUPS

This autumn a study group is being set up to investigate the history of some features of St Mary's Church. The research will be fairly simple, probably involving delving into local histories, old directories and newspapers and library collections of local material. If anyone would like to help, the chairman would be pleased to hear from you.

ACTIVITIES

MIDSUMMER EVENING

Thanks to the wonderful support from many of our members £427 was raised for our funds. Everyone went home laden with cakes, books, bottles and bric-a-brac, having enjoyed a supper of cheese and pate' and the first of the season's strawberries. The Society is grateful to everyone who helped the event in any way.

ST MARY'S CHURCH

During the Summer Festival several of our members, together with members of St Mary's congregation, acted as stewards while the church was open. Preliminary talks on the history of the church by Gwyn Jones and Eric Finney made sure that the stewards were able to answer visitors' questions knowledgeably. It is hoped that from this beginning, a panel of stewards will evolve so that this fine church can be open to the public regularly.

TOWN WALKS

Once again, the Society's guides ran several walks during the Summer Festival. Both routes, the one around St Mary's and the other around the town have made an excellent introduction to the town's history for visitors and townspeople.

CASTLE GARDEN

The garden lying below the museum is cared for by the Society. Shrubs and heathers have been bought and other plants donated by members. Arthur Hinshellwood is our volunteer head gardener and it is he who looks after the colourful display which so enhances the approach to the museum.

ABERGAVENNY 900

The Society expects to be playing a significant part in the run up to the "Abergavenny 900" celebrations in 1990. The help of many members will be needed.

A very warm welcome awaits any members who would like to take part in what might be called these "Fringe Activities" of our society. Please contact any of the Society's 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

MEMBERS' PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPETITION 1988

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 1988 meeting.

	<u>PRIZES</u>		
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 will be 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 1988 - 1989

15th Sept -	Mr Arthur Peplow	-	The Albigensian Crusade
20th Oct -	Mr K Kissack	-	To be announced
17th Nov -	Mr David Zienkiewicz	-	The Roman Legionary Fortress at Caerleon
15th Dec -	Members Social Evening		
1989			
19th Jan -	Rev Gregory Cameron	-	The Science of Heraldry
16th Feb -	Mr David Whitehead	-	The Port of Hereford
16th Mar -	Mr Brian Scott	-	Knights, Merchants and Peasants in Mediaeval Art
20th Apl -	Mr Adrian Babbage	-	Llanyravon Farm, Cwmbran
18th May -	The Twelfth Annual General Meeting		
	Miss E.M. Bidder	-	Scotch Cattle in Monmouthshire