

Abergavenny Local History Society



St. John's, Abergavenny

NEWSLETTER No 10
August 1994

SUMMER VISITS 1993

Something unexpected often happens during our summer visits. In June on the first night of our stay at the hotel in Essex we had such a torrential storm that it set off the fire alarm and cut off the electricity. We had to evacuate our rooms and watch the Fire Brigade arrive to pump out the cellar. Fortunately the hotel cooked by gas so we were able to have our evening meal. In Harlow New Town there was five feet of water in places, but fortunately we were in Old Harlow where the flooding was not so bad. We had experienced another storm earlier in the day while we were in Hatfield House, the celebrated Jacobean house which was the childhood home of Queen Elizabeth I and is now the home of the Marquess of Salisbury.

The following day with everything drying out we went first to Copford Green church with its fantastic mediaeval frescos, and then to Colchester Castle and its museum of Roman finds. After lunch we travelled on to St. Osyth's Priory with its magnificent gateway and art collection including the world famous paintings by George Stubbs. Our final destination that day was the Saxon Church at Greenstead-Juxta-Ongar where in spite of having Arthur Peploe with us the vicar insisted on conducting us around and giving us not always accurate information.

We set off for home via St. Albans where, after visiting the cathedral we had time to see the Roman Museum and the site of the Roman Theatre. Our final stop was at another of Arthur's gems, South Newington Church with its interesting frescos.

Our first outing in May was to the Fleet Air Arm Museum at Yeovilton. There were interesting displays of aircraft and equipment from World War 1 up to and including Concorde. After lunch we carried on to Montacute House, a beautiful Elizabethan house and garden.

Our first evening visit was to Llancaich Fawr Manor for a visit which I can only describe as 'different'. The guides acted the parts of servants to the 'Maister' giving us a very amusing insight into the way of life in those days.

Our chairman acted as our guide around White Castle on two evenings. Its history can be traced back to Norman times when the castle would have been earth and timber. The present stone defences were built in the 13th. century.

At the end of July Ms Wheeler, an expert on Neath Abbey, gave us a fascinating tour of the ruins. After lunch we climbed up to look at Oystermouth Castle with its lovely views across Swansea Bay.

Our last visit in early September took us along the M4 to just south of Reading to visit Stratfield Saye House, the home of the Duke of Wellington. The house was originally presented to the Duke in 1817 after winning the battle of Waterloo in 1815. Further along the M4 near Windsor we visited Dorney Court. It has been described as one of the finest Tudor Manor Houses in England. It was built in 1440 and has been lived in by the present family for over 400 years. The house is often used for film and TV locations

I hope you enjoyed the visits as much as I did.

Alan Spink.

LECTURE PROGRAMME 1994-95

Meetings are at the Borough Theatre at 7.30. p. m.

1994

- 15 Sept. Mr David Egan EDWARDIAN WALES
- 20 Oct. Professor Dai Smith THE VIEW FROM SOUTH WALES
- 17 Nov. Mr Brian Davies PONTYPRIDD IN THE 19th CENTURY
Industrial Klondyke and Cultural Frontier
- 15 Dec. MEMBERS' CHRISTMAS DINNER AND SOCIAL EVENING
at the Lamb and Flag Hotel at 7.00 p. m.

1995

- 19 Jan. Mr Frank Olding PREHISTORIC ABERGAVENNY
- 2 Feb. Dr William Jones AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF COAL MINING
IN SOUTH WALES
- 16 Mar. Mr David Jenkins THE PORT OF CARDIFF
Shipowners and Seamen
- 6 April. Mr Richard Keen THE HORRID AND THE SUBLIME
Landscapes of South Wales
- 18 May. 18th ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
followed by
Mr Keith Underwood CHEPSTOW CASTLE
- 29 June. MIDSUMMER PARTY
Venue to be decided

Member's subscriptions are due after the A.G.M.

THE DAY WAR BROKE OUT

Last year a man came into my shop and told the following story:-

I was a server at the Roman Catholic church and my friend and I used to pump the organ. He was more experienced than I and knew how much to pump to last the whole of the last hymn so that we could go home early. At the beginning of the last war we were pumping the organ but unfortunately on that day the regular organist was absent and a lady took his place. We pumped up the organ as usual and as she started the last hymn we bunked off. Unfortunately she put in some twiddley bits which used up more air than my friend had bargained for and before the hymn had finished the organ ran out of air.

My friend and I came through the town and at the town hall we noticed a queue of people which was unusual for a Sunday. I joined the queue and the people in the queue told me that the army were giving away free beef. Only that morning the Territorial Army which had come down to carry out manoeuvres had been ordered back to barracks. Meat which had been ordered for their Sunday lunch was now being offered to the people of Abergavenny. When I got to the head of the queue the Sergeant Major shouted "How many are there in your family?". There were three in my family. I was a very nervous only child and I answered "S..S..S..Sir" but before I had got it out the Sergeant Major shouted "Six" and the butcher cut off about four pounds of beef and wrapped it in a piece of white paper. I clutched it to my chest and ran off home.

In the meantime the priest had reported to my mother my absence at the end of the service so she was anxiously waiting for me. When I pushed open the gate she fainted. When she recovered she told me she thought I had been struck by a shell from a German aircraft because it seemed to her that I was holding a wound from which much blood was flowing!

Bill Craze.

MONUMENTS RESTORATION - ST MARY'S CHURCH

On a cold miserable evening in November 1991 the late Rev. Colin Sykes announced the formation of the Monuments Restoration Fund to an invited audience in St Mary's church. Its committee members consisted of ten volunteers whose only qualification for the task was their enthusiasm and an indomitable determination to complete it.

It was indeed a formidable undertaking which faced them; to raise a quarter of a million pounds to restore the superb collection of mediaeval monuments and effigies which had, as early as the first 'Elizabethan Age', caused St Mary's to be referred to as the Westminster Abbey of Wales but which had, for over two hundred years, been neglected and allowed to deteriorate until their very existence was in jeopardy.

In the months that followed, hope, misgivings, confidence and despair alternated frequently in the minds of those involved, but determination, endless research and tremendous local support eventually paid off. Gradually, with the help and guidance of Claude Blair, M.A., V.P.S.A., an expert in mediaeval armour, and several other art historians, sympathetic sources of funding were discovered and money became available. This enabled the restoration of the magnificent painting of the Queen Anne Royal Coat of Arms and the commencement of work on the alabaster effigy of William ap Thomas. Sadly, Colin Sykes did not live to witness this achievement but his successor, the Rev. Jeremy Winston, inherited his enthusiasm and is now an active member of the restoration committee.

Success, it is said, breeds success and the Monuments Restoration Fund, under the chairmanship of Mr Peter Williams, is now widely accepted as a well run, qualified organisation which has attracted active support from, amongst several other charities, H.R.H. The Prince of Wales, The Earl of Powis who is our patron, C.A.D.W., The National Heritage Memorial Fund, The Foundation for Sport and the Arts, Jesus College Oxford, The University of Wales and the Welsh Arts Council. What is most encouraging, however, is the support given by so many local individuals and companies. Of the £78,000 raised so far, over £31,000 has come from local sources. A truly remarkable achievement which reflects the enormous pride and generosity of 'Abergavennians', too numerous to name individually, especially during a period of crippling recession. To say we are grateful seems almost inadequate.

Optimism is now the order of the day and with the support of C.A.D.W., who have promised to match pound for pound monies raised for restoring the stone/alabaster effigies, and other promises of financial support, restoration work on the Sir Richard Herbert of Coldbrook monument, the wooden knight effigy and a hatchment has been commissioned. Providing alterations to the church fabric in the Herbert Chapel do not reveal any obstacles, it should be completed by the autumn.

The members of the Restoration Fund's committee are conscious of the need for preservation after restoration. In order to complete the work on all the monuments and establish a 'Preservation Fund', attention is now being directed towards gaining support from some of the major multinational companies and to this end a new brochure, sponsored entirely from local contributions, will shortly be published.

The vision of Colin Sykes and Gwyn Jones is now a reality. We have no doubt that restoration work is being carried out by the finest conservators available and that, once again, St Mary's Priory Church will soon justify its description as the Westminster Abbey of Wales.

John Tyrrell.

Hon Sec. Monuments Restoration Committee

NEVER MORE THAN A SHORT WALK TO GWENT'S PAST!

Since giving up membership of the Lower Rhondda Bungee Jumping Club, even my search for places of historical interest is more cautious and with energy conservation a predominant consideration. Each site must be on the same contour as, or within easy reach of, a conveniently parked car. So with apologies to those members of the Local History Society who, each week of the year, walk our delightful hills and lanes, I would like to recommend a car ride to my favourite place in Gwent on a ridge in the Black Mountains above Pandy.

The Skirrid Inn at Llanfihangel Crucorney is our starting point. It stands at the top of and close to the eastern limit of a bank of glacial moraine; a railway cutting slices through the same bank a few hundred yards to the west. Drive down the steep slope of the moraine and at the bottom turn right over the narrow stone bridge. After passing under the railway bridge, a Norman motte surmounted by trees is clearly visible over the hedge on the right. Take a right turn opposite, which takes you alongside Tre-fedw farm. The narrow lane climbs steeply past a converted barn and then a pair of cottages and then straight over a road crossing until it reaches a parking space on the right of a gateway which blocks the road beyond the gate.

Take the footpath, not the farm track, and head for the middle of the hill fort. On the way you should pass to the left of a misleading sign marked 'Offa's Dyke Path'. The actual line of the Dyke is Monmouth - Hereford, quite a way to the east; the path is really a link route for long distance walkers.

On a clear day the views towards Hereford, Monmouth and Abergavenny and the Sugar Loaf are spectacular.

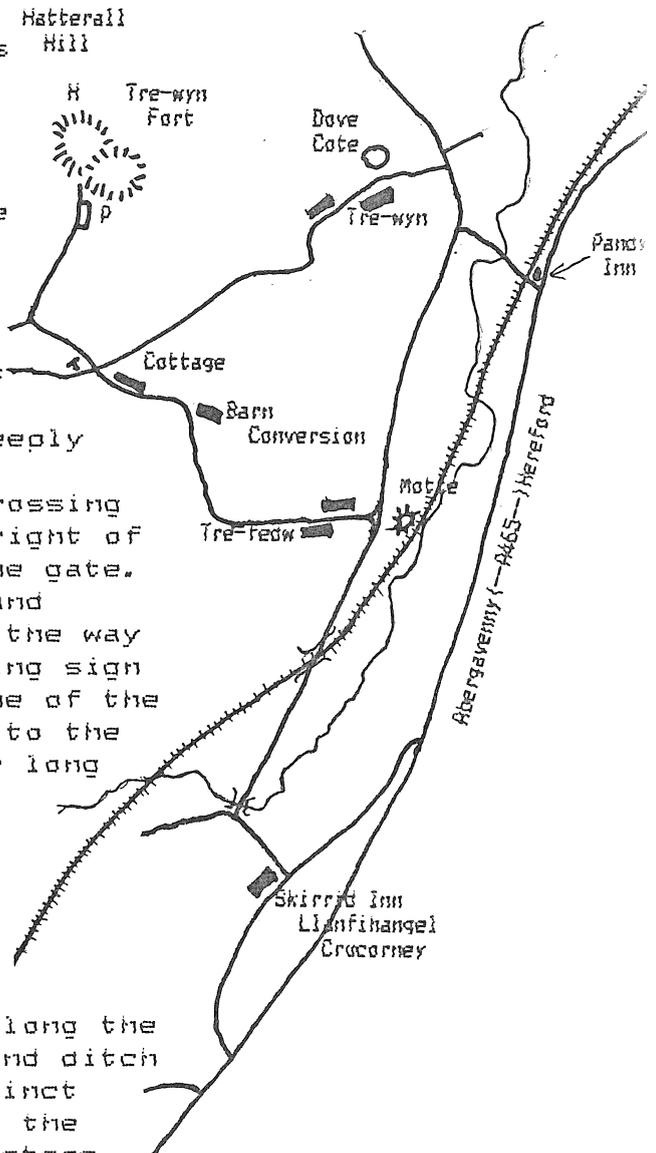
On a still summer evening the sounds of the valley seem to float up to this high vantage point on the steep edge of the Black Mountains. Walk northwards along the ridge to point H on the map. This bank and ditch of the fort's defences shows up as a distinct V in the skyline and is clearly seen from the Pontrilas-Abergavenny road. Retrace your steps along the ridge and continue until you reach a group of fir trees which mark the southern limit of the camp and are close to the once strongly fortified southern entrance.

If you wish to drive home along a different route, take a left at the crossing and drop steeply down a very narrow lane past Tre-wyn with its elegant manor house and a superb dove cote opposite.

Gwyn Jones.

Editor's Warning

I have just tried this lovely drive. An old bus completely occupied the parking spot and the lanes are extremely narrow so be prepared to use reverse gear. You won't regret making the effort.
K. A. K.



THE VINE TREE

Abergavenny lost one more historical name last year when the Vine Tree in St John's Square became the Grasshopper's Cocktail Bar.

The earliest recorded licensee of the Vine Tree is Elizabeth Thomas in 1835. By 1839, John Hockey had taken over as landlord but the pub was owned by William Ellis, a local brewer. He had originally started business in 1827 by leasing a brewery in Lion Street. This building stood on a site now covered by the Horsington's Yard car park. By 1839 he was building his own brewery, The Royal Victoria brewery, in what is now Baker Street (It is currently a glazier's workshop). William Ellis lived at the Lower Pentre and one night, on the way home, he fell off his horse, broke his neck and was killed.

In 1860, when a Mrs Meredith was licensee, the rateable value of the pub was reckoned at £19.10s. By 1868, William Morse was the publican and the rateable value had dropped to £12.10s., though it had gone up again to £12.15s. by 1873. By 1880, the rateable value had dropped to below £12.

Before the demolition of a substantial part of St. John's Square in the early 1960's, a small alley led through the Vine Tree from St. John's Square into Chicken Street and St. John's Street. As a consequence, the pub was variously listed in nineteenth century trade directories as being in St. John's Square, Chicken Street and St. John's Lane! In 1902 the licensee, Frederick William Walters doubled as a carpenter and undertaker!

The pub was taken over by Whitbread in 1966.

Licencees: Elizabeth Thomas (1835), John Hockey (1839-1842-1844), Ann Maria Prosser (1850), Watkin Prosser (1851), R. Purslow (1852), William Meredith (1858-59), Mrs Meredith (1860), Mrs Rachel Kennedy (1862), William Morse (1865-1875, listed as "Moss" in 1871), Mrs Ann Walters (1906), Mrs Janet Ann Harries (1910), Cornelius Harries (1914), David Jones (1923), Albert James (1926), Evan Charles Howells (1934), Tom Tomlin (1937).

Frank Olding

CHURCHWATCHING

Last week was the eighteenth occasion on which I have rung around a band of volunteers to act as stewards in St Mary's Church each Wednesday afternoon from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. This was one of the tasks which my wife Freda left behind and I am glad to be taking it on and even more glad to add to the list of volunteers.

St Mary's is a most interesting building with many historical features, some in course of restoration and quite often the visitors are also interesting. If no one comes, I am sure most people can spend two hours profitably, even if in meditation.

The rota is full until November but people sometimes have to drop out and it is useful to have replacements.

You do not need to be a guide but I can foresee a time when people who know something about the church will be in demand. If you would like to join us, please ring me on 852512.

Ken Key.