

Abergavenny Local History Society



St. John's, Abergavenny

NEWSLETTER No 11
August 1995

SUMMER VISITS 1994

Certainly the grandest house we visited last year was Buckingham Palace. The beautiful rooms were designed mainly by John Nash, the same John Nash who much earlier in his career designed a new market for Abergavenny. Each room was filled with old masters and antique furniture all in top quality condition and beautifully displayed. It was a memorable visit. Our first visit however was to Powis Castle, the mediaeval stronghold of the Welsh princes of upper Powis and the home of the Herbert family since 1587. Its connection with Clive of India was demonstrated by the objects he brought back with him from India and put on display in the museum. Unfortunately the weather was not too kind to us and prevented much more than a cursory visit to the famous terraced gardens.

Sulgrave Manor, the English home of the ancestors of George Washington was our first stop on the three day visit. The house which was completed in 1558 was lived in by the descendants of the Washington family for over 120 years.

After lunch Arthur Peplow guided us around two world famous Saxon churches at Brixworth and Earls Barton to complete the first day.

Next morning our first stop was Fotheringhay where after visiting the church we went to the site of the castle where in 1587 Mary Queen of Scots was executed. The castle was the birthplace of the future King Richard III.

A tour of Ely Cathedral and its environs concluded the second day.

On our way home we stopped to look at one of the first surviving Eleanor Crosses at Beddington. These crosses were erected by King Edward I to mark each of the places where his wife's coffin rested overnight on its way back to London for burial after her death at Harby in Nottinghamshire in 1290.

Canons Aenby House was the final place we visited. Built in the 16th century it is the home of the Dryden family.

The first of our two evening visits was to Monnington Court near Hereford situated in a magnificent setting near a lake and its own Norman church. The house is owned by one of the Bulmer family. Parts of it date from 1230 and it is being carefully restored and filled with authentic period furniture.

On our second evening visit our chairman Mr Gwyn Jones acted as our guide at Skenfrith. He took us around the castle with its large circular keep within the castle walls, also the small church nearby.

Bristol was our final destination to look at the S.S. Great Britain. Built in 1843 and designed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel she was the first propeller driven iron ship in history. In the afternoon we boarded a boat for a tour of the docks to learn something of its history, and stopped at a riverside cafe for tea before returning home.

Alan Spink.

JOHN TYRRELL

We are sad to report the death of John Tyrrell. We knew him as a wonderful friend and gentleman who worked tirelessly for the Monuments Restoration Fund and enlivened our committee meetings with his sense of humour. Others knew him for his work with Abbeyfield and there were many other activities in which he played important parts. We offer our sympathy to Zelda and hope that she will find consolation and friendship in our society which many of us have found is concerned with much more than local history.

LECTURE PROGRAMME 1995-96

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

1995

- 7 Sept. Mr Michael Eastham MONUMENTS RESTORATION
at St Mary's church Abergavenny
- 19 Oct. Dr David Jenkins THE PORT OF CARDIFF
Shipowners and seamen
- 16 Nov. Dr Richard Brewer CAERWENT
The excavation of a Romano-British town
- 21 Dec. MEMBERS' CHRISTMAS DINNER AND SOCIAL EVENING
at the Lamb and Flag Hotel at 7.00 for 7.30 p.m.

1996

- 18 Jan. Mr Frank Olding ABERGAVENNY CASTLE
- 1 Feb. Dr Gwynfor Jones MONMOUTHSHIRE AND THE ACT OF UNION 1536
- 21 Mar. Mr Arthur Peplow THE PILGRIMS ROUTE TO SANTIAGO DE
COMPOSTELLA
- 18 April. Mr Richard Keen ASPECTS OF THE SLATE INDUSTRY IN
NORTH WALES
- 16 May. 19th ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING followed by
Dr R Howell ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES IN THE
SOUTHERN MARCHES

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

SHORT SHRIFT

Whilst on holiday in my home town, York, we bought a plastic replica of a street sign, Whip-ma-whop-ma Gate, the shortest street in the city, for our twelve year old grandson, Alyn.

He pinned this up in a prominent position on his bedroom wall where it attracted a lot of attention from his friends, none of whom believed him when, in answer to their questions, he told them what it was.

They firmly believed Alyn was teasing them and said "No one would be daft enough to give a street a name like that!"

Six months later we took a photograph of the actual place which Alyn now keeps in his bedroom to prove to his friends that there really is such a street.

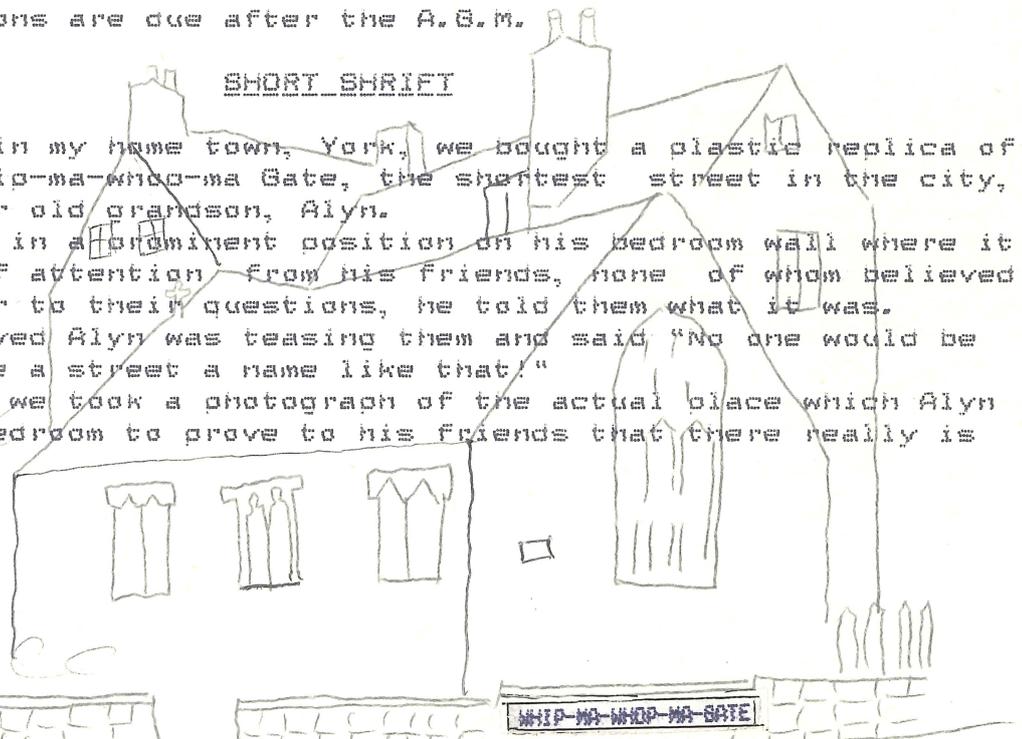
It is the most photographed street nameplate in York and is of comparatively recent origin.

In the sixteenth

century it appeared as Whipnam-whapnamgate, Whipney-Whatneygate and Whitman-Whitmangate. 'Whitna' and 'Whatna' are Yorkshire dialect words for 'What kind of'.

It could have been the place where the then local custom of dog-whipping took place on St Luke's Day, but it is more likely that it refers to the whipping post and pillory which stood nearby.

E. Lewis.



THE OLD CIDER PRESS

Early in 1939 my husband and I moved to Abergavenny. It was not easy to find anywhere to live, but we stayed for two years in a flat.

The war was at its height and our menfolk going to Ebbw Vale Steel Works shared their cars as petrol was rationed. For recreation we explored the lovely countryside on our bicycles.

For a long time we had our eye on a lovely house called 'Gaywood' in Chapel Road. Eventually we bought it and when the sitting tenants passed away we moved in.

When 'Gaywood' was built the old stone wall fronting the garden was left intact. Inside the wall were the most beautiful great trees, copper beeches, chestnuts and oaks. The garden was lovely but a large patch of ground inside the wall from the entrance gate was a mass of uncultivated stones and weeds and we wondered what to do with it.

One day we were cycling along the Brecon Road. About half way to Crickhowell we explored a narrow road winding as we thought to the slopes of the Sugar Loaf. We parked our bicycles and walked up the hill into a most beautiful valley. On our left was the river which rose in the black mountains and ran into the Usk across the Brecon Road.

Through the trees on the river bank we saw several ruined buildings. A narrow lane led across a bridge to the other side of the river to a large ruin which looked as if it had been some sort of factory. There were other ruins but beside the bridge were some cottages which were still occupied. Further up the hill near another ruin was a large granite boulder the middle of which had been carved out. I remarked to my husband that it would be nice to have that old boulder in our garden but my husband and his friend laughed and said it would be far too heavy to move.

I was determined to have that lovely old boulder in our garden. We knocked on one of the cottages and asked the woman who came out to tell us the history of the ruin. She told us that it had been a cider factory and the boulder had been a cider press. The centre was filled with cider apples and the large flat stone which lay beside the press was fitted over the top of the apples. A horse pulled the stone around, crushing the apples and the juice ran out of the bottom. She told us that when she was a child her great grandmother would take a cup to the factory and fill it with the juice running out of the hole. How primitive it must have been.

As I cycled home I formed a plan in my mind. I would ask my brother in law to help me. Many lorries went in and out of the slag works and perhaps he could hire two men and a lorry with lifting tackle to move the press for me in their spare time. First I had to find out who owned the land where the press lay. I had saved a few petrol coupons so I set forth to the lost valley. I saw the same woman who told me that the land belonged to a Mr Sandeman, head of the firm of Sandeman's Port. He owned a large estate on the banks of the river Usk and most of the land around. She said Mr Sandeman came out to the valley each week and she would ask him if I could buy the cider press. I called the next week. Mr Sandeman did not want any money for the cider press but I must arrange to take it away.

My brother in law hired two men and a lorry with lifting tackle who were on their way to Scotland and had spare time and were most interested and helpful. I kept all this secret from my husband. I used my saved petrol coupons to lead the way in my car with my father who was most excited.

The lane to the factory was very narrow and although we nearly got stuck the men backed the lorry close to a large tree and fixed the lifting tackle to a large branch growing out over the press. They fixed chains round the press and slowly it began to move after lying in that spot for some sixty or seventy years. I cannot describe my excitement as after two attempts it was on the lorry.

Slowly we made our way, hoping the bridge was strong enough. Soon we were at Gaywood and with an inch to spare we squeezed through the gate. The men fixed the tackle to a branch of one of our beech trees and lifted the press but it landed on its side. The men suggested we built a concrete platform just the size of the press and they would fix the tackle and pull the press on to it. This was eventually achieved.

I met my husband and his scornful friend at the gate in the evening and told them to shut their eyes while I led them to the press. They were astonished and could hardly believe their eyes.

My husband put crazy paving round the press. He left a space which we filled with snowdrops, crocuses and forgetmenots. We stopped the hole where the apple juice ran out and filled the press with water. We put in two water lillies and grew water plants round the edge. We put in five goldfish and three shubunkins. It looked lovely and we spent many happy hours sitting under the trees by the old cider press.

We were very sad to sell Gaywood. I told this story to the new owners. I wonder if it has come down to the present owners?

Mildred Pearson (Author and niece of the actress Athene Seyler)
Contributed by Ann Waller.

NOTE I had some difficulty finding Gaywood. The press is still there surrounded by its crazy paving although many of the trees were dangerous and were cut down. Strangely, so is the mass of uncultivated weeds and stones! When the press fell on its side it may have been broken since it is now semicircular and the straight side is not granite but a conglomerate. The pretty valley is almost certainly Grwyne Fawr and the factory probably at Llangenny. The story has now come down to the present owners. They are fascinated! K.A.K.

CHURCHWATCHING

This week is the twentyfirst 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.

Several of the monuments have now been beautifully restored and we should be proud to show them to our visitors. Often the visitors are quite interesting as well! If no one comes, I am sure most people can spend two hours profitably, even if in meditation.

I have managed to fill the rota 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. 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. If you would like to join us, please ring me on 852512.

Ken Key.

THE USK BRIDGE ABERGAVENNY

The original mediaeval bridge probably dates to the 15th century and its remains can be clearly seen on the eastern (or downstream) side of the present structure. It needed constant repair and in 1645 Rees ap Rees bequeathed ten shillings "towards the repairacon of the stone bridge lying over the river of Uske and serving to the saide towne of Bergavenny."

Much of the original bridge was hidden by the addition of further bridges in the 19th century, a watercolour of 1784 by Joshua Gosselin in Abergavenny museum (A.4520-4523.0) shows a narrow bridge with V-shaped parapets very similar to the bridge at Crickhowell.

In 1814 a tramroad was built against the western (upstream side) of the mediaeval bridge to carry horse-drawn trams of coal, iron, lime and other goods from the Govilon wharf on the Brecknock and Abergavenny Canal. The tramroad ran as far as Blaengavenny in Llanfihangel Crucorney where it joined with the 1819 Grosmont Tramroad and the 1829 Hereford Tramroad. It was also used to transport iron from the Blaenavon Ironworks and Barnddyrys Forge via the Llanfoist inclines.

In 1853 the line from Abergavenny to Hereford was closed to make way for the Newport, Abergavenny and Hereford Railway which opened in 1854, though the tramroad bridge continued in use. It was converted to railway track in 1857 when the Merthyr, Tredegar and Abergavenny Railway took over. A new iron railway bridge was built when the track was doubled by the London and North Western Railway in October 1868. The old mediaeval bridge and the tramroad bridge were partially demolished (down to road level) and rebuilt to form a wider road bridge which still stands and is in effect two bridges joined together. This accounts for the fact that the downstream side of the bridge is a mediaeval structure while the upstream side dates to 1814.

The new railway bridge was supported by metal columns and was finally demolished (leaving its foundations and abutments) in 1962.

Frank Olding.



The Llanfoist Bridge in July, 1784 – a watercolour by Joshua Gosselin (1739-1813). This shows the original mediaeval bridge before much of it was hidden by the addition of further bridges to carry the Llanfihangel tramroad in the early 19th century.

