

ABERGAVENNY LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY



NEWSLETTER No 15

AUGUST 1999

JOHN OGILBY IN MONMOUTHSHIRE

John Ogilby (1600-1675) was a dancing impresario in Ireland in the 1640's and 50's. The banning of all forms of revelry under the Commonwealth ended that career and, after studying classics, he again lost his property in the Great Fire of 1666. However, he was restored as Master of Revels by Charles II and also undertook a survey of damage caused by the fire. This led to his appointment as 'King's Cosmographer' with the task of surveying the principal roads of England and Wales, the first project of this kind. It resulted in the publication of 'BRITANNIA', the main part comprising an atlas of strip maps portraying some 25000 miles of roads on a scale of 1" to the mile. Despite a few errors in names and occasionally a few degrees in orientation, the maps are remarkably reliable, especially the distances (measured by the wheel rather than the chain).

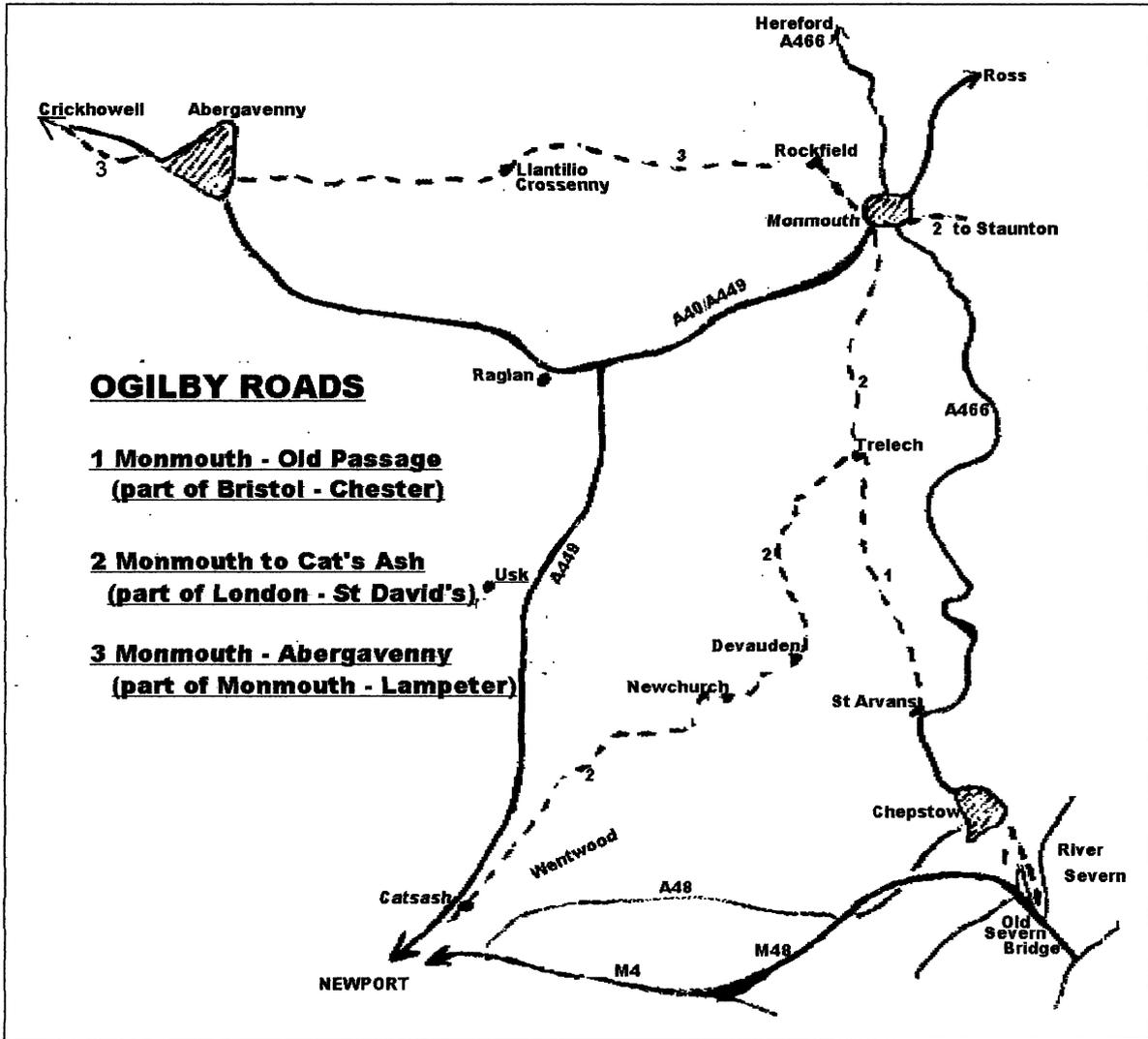
Ogilby included three routes that pass through Monmouthshire. They form parts of the roads from Bristol to Chester, London to St. David's and Monmouth to Lanbedr (i.e. Lampeter or Llanbedr-Pont Steffan). Taking the North-South direction, the Chester-Bristol route enters Monmouth from Hereford virtually on the line of the A466. In the town it is joined near the church by the London-St.David's road, which has arrived from Staunton over the shoulder of the Kymin. The roads can still be walked and the route is a mile shorter than the twisty A4136. Together the two routes proceed to Trelech, largely along B4293 but with short cuts through Lydiart farm and approaching the Gocket Inn. The two roads diverge at the north end of Trelech churchyard, the Bristol road passing through the village and then via Parkhouse, the Fountain Inn and a present day bridleway to Angiddy. From Cross Farm it continues by bridleway to Fair oak, then by tarmac lane past Penterry Church to St.Arvars and Chepstow. The final stretch to Old Passage (Under the first Severn Bridge) is on the Gloucestershire side of the Wye via Sedbury, Beachley and through the Army Apprentice College.

Meanwhile, the St.David's road passes on the west side of Trelech churchyard, past Terret Tump and on to the B4293 as far as Devauden (there is a minor 'dog leg' at Llanishen). It then heads off to Newchurch and Gaerllwyd (again with a couple of bridleway diversions) to Cas Troggy at the north end of Wentwood. A modern bridleway then follows the old route along the north west scarp of Wentwood, eventually passing Kemeys Folly and into Cat's Ash. Ogilby then follows the Roman road into Christchurch but the route then becomes untraceable through modern road, housing and industrial development into Newport (though a clue remains in the Fair Oak area of the town- this is indicated on the Ogilby map).

The third route (Monmouth to Lanbedr) heads for Rockfield and follows most of the course of the B4233 (Old Monmouth Road) to Abergavenny. There are interesting variations which can still be seen, e.g. a short cut across the hairpin bend just N.W. of Rockfield, a direct route through Crossenny (the 'by pass' dates from the 1790's) and a straighter approach to Lower Monk Street just south of B4233, reaching Abergavenny via Coed Glas Lane.

Space precludes an account of the history of routes through Abergavenny, but on leaving the town at Nevill Hall the mediaeval road proceeded via Llanwenarth Lane along the boundary between Pysgodlyn Farm and Duffryn/Mardy Farms and across the riverside meadow to Woodlea and the Llanwenarth Arms (formerly the Pantrhiwgoch Inn), passing under the caravan sales area where landfill has raised and levelled the site. As the border with Powys is approached, the earlier route can be seen through a gate by the hotel, emerging at the layby over the hill on the county boundary. The new higher route dates from about 1930, and resulted from slippage of the old road.

Of the 66 miles covered by these Ogilby routes, less than half a mile is lost. the remainder may be traced by car or on foot,



FLOODLIGHTING

If you have an anniversary or some special celebration, you can floodlight the castle for £4 for a week. Kath Spink will provide you with a special certificate to mark the occasion.



GEOPHYSICAL SURVEYING

The Abergavenny Local History Society is providing £500 for Archeophysica to survey the ground between the castle curtain wall and the lodge and the ground behind 29 Castle Street. This area is shown on the cover and on page 3.

It is an interesting area since the Roman and Mediaeval walls may traverse it and many other things may be revealed. The survey will extend our knowledge of the 'Orchard Site' excavated by Patrick Ashmore in 1972 and my own excavation of the 'Ewer's Garden' site for the Abergavenny Archaeology Group in the late 1960's.

It is important to know something about what lies under the ground before any expensive and destructive excavation is attempted and there are several ways in which this might be done.

Any disturbance of the soil will alter its granular properties and therefore its water retention. Vegetation will reveal its success in getting water by 'Crop Marks' visible from the air at certain periods in its growth.

Television viewers will have seen the 'Time Team' carry out 'Resistivity Surveys'. Disturbance of the soil changes its ability to pass electrical current. However, there are difficulties. Two electrodes in the soil have a variable contact resistance of their own and also constitute a battery which, with stray currents from other electrical systems can confuse the measurements. The use of four electrodes and alternating current provides some measure of compensation. The method is not good in wet conditions and in fact the ideal conditions occur when a farmer has growing crops and is unlikely to want them trampled on. Computers have reduced the formidable task of processing thousands of results and using various forms of image processing can print out a map showing anomalies on the ground.

The earth's magnetic field will magnetise the slightly magnetic substances in the soil. The disturbed soil in a pit will then consist of small magnets pointing in random directions which will weaken the the magnetic field in that area. Conversely the earth's field will magnetise more strongly the components of a kiln or fire which has slowly cooled down which will strengthen the magnetic field in that area. Measuring such small changes is very difficult but one method relies on the fact that water when suitably treated is slightly magnetic. A coil of wire wound round a bottle of water and carrying an electric current will magnetise the water in one direction. When this current suddenly stops, the dipoles or little magnets of water will swing round like compass needles to align themselves with the local magnetic field. In fact they will overshoot and oscillate back and forth with a frequency depending on the strength of the local field. The clever trick is to put this bottle very near the ground and to place a similar bottle at the end of a pole high up where the soil anomalies do not affect the earth's field. The difference between the signals from the two bottles will cause a 'beat' which suitable electronics can measure and record.

I still have the two polythene bottles which I wound with wire in 1972. We were going to look for pits on Alan Probert's excavations on Twyn-y-Gaer. Sadly I was made redundant and never got round to building the electronics. I shudder to think how, with the primitive state of electronic computing at the time, we would ever have got round to processing the results!

Ken Key.

SUMMER VISITS 1998

Fortunately my illness did not prevent me from arranging the programme for our summer visits in 1998.

On our first visit Arthur Peplow took us to Cleeve Abbey, a 13th century monastic site. Some of the remains were remarkably complete including a timber roof of outstanding workmanship in the dining hall and fragments of pavements, tiles and wall paintings. In the afternoon we visited Dunster Castle which dates from the 13th century and has a Norman motte.

On our evening visit our chairman, Frank Olding, guided us around Dingestow Castle and the nearby church and the church at Raglan.

Boscobel House, a timber framed hunting lodge, is famous for being one of the refuges of the future king Charles II after his defeat at Worcester in 1651. The oak tree, or its successor, in which he reputedly hid, is in the grounds. After lunch we went on to Buildwas Abbey. It was a Cistercian abbey begun in 1135 and the well preserved west front typifies the austere style favoured by the Cistercians.

Our final visit took us firstly to Eastnor Castle, built in 1812. It is an excellent example of castellated architecture set in a lovely setting overlooking the Malvern Hills. Our day ended at Madresfield. Begun in the 12th century, it was added to in succeeding centuries. The house was made ready in World War II to accommodate the Royal Family if the Germans had invaded.

Alan Spink

PROGRAMME 1999-2000

The Society meets at the Borough Theatre at 7.30 p.m.

1999

Thurs.
23rd Sept. Dr Keith Strange.
WALES AND THE FIRST WORLD
WAR

Thurs.
28th Oct. Elizabeth Whittle
GARDENS OF GLAMORGAN
AND GWENT

Thurs.
25th Nov. Dr Maddy Gray
THE CISTERCIAN WAY

Thurs.
16th Dec. MEMBERS CHRISTMAS DINNER
At the Lamb & Flag Hotel
Abergavenny. 7 for 7.30 p.m

2000

Thurs.
20th Jan. Mr Nick Hacket Pain
MONMOUTHSHIRE'S MARCHER LORDS

Thurs.
24th Feb. Mr Brian Davies
CASTELL MORGRAIG
a 13th century Welsh Castle?

Thurs.
23rd March Mr Arthur Peplow
ART AND ARCHITECTURE
IN 12TH CENTURY ENGLAND

Thurs.
27th April Mr Richard Keen
COAL FACES

Thurs.
25th May THE 23rd ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
followed by Mr Frank Olding
THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE
EASTERN BLACK MOUNTAINS

Members subscriptions are due after the A.G.M.

A GRANDMONTINE MONASTERY

Just a few miles from Hay on Wye, along a winding country lane, leading through spectacular scenery, is the only example in England of the unusual architecture of a Grandmontine Monastery.

The Order of Grandmont was founded in France by St. Stephen of Muret (1045-1124) and dictated a life of contemplation and extreme poverty. For over a hundred years the monks of Craswall pursued their devotions undisturbed, but in 1337, the outbreak of the Hundred Years war between England and France led to Edward III seizing all foreign priories for the crown.

For over a hundred years thereafter, the status of the Priory remained uncertain until in 1441 Henry VI finally expelled the monks and disposed of the property. And so over the next five centuries this rare example of a Grandmontine church fell into ruin.

Happily, through the efforts of the Craswall Grandmontine Society, and with the support of English Heritage, the remains are being consolidated and made accessible to the public.

There is also an annual pilgrimage to Craswall to commemorate the lives and dedication of the monks who made it their home. This follows the old paths across the hills, from the Cistercian monastery at Abbey Dore, and is open to all who wish to experience some part of the religious life of 12th Century England.

Lorraine Steele.

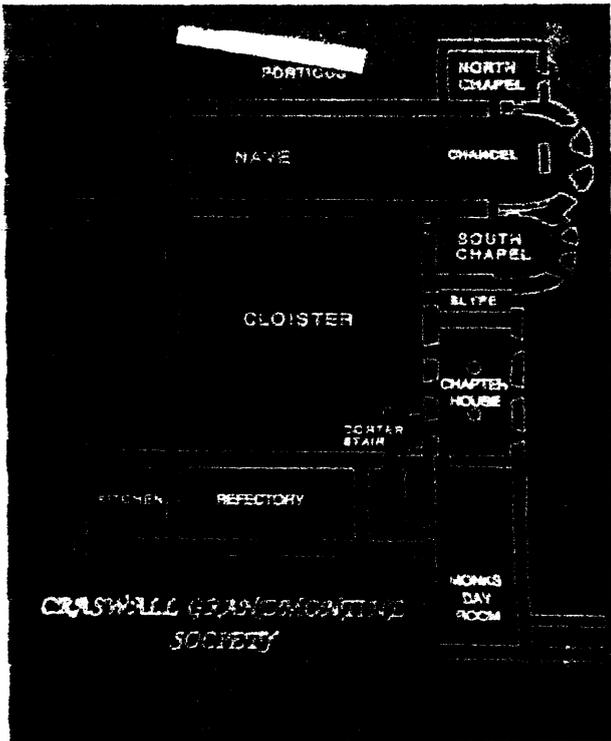
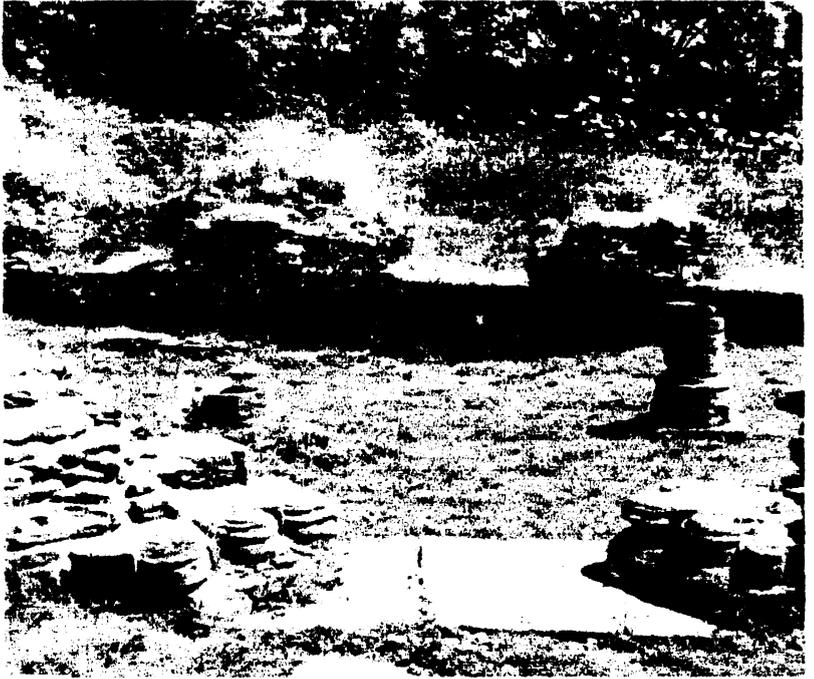
PILGRIMAGE TO CRASWALL

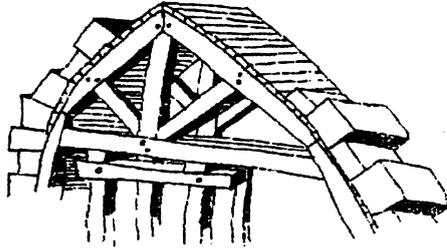
The pilgrimage from Abbeydore was on July 10th 1999 - an impossible date for me - so I made my own pilgrimage by car a few days earlier. My route passed through Longtown which is an incredibly long town and boasts a castle. At the top of the Golden Valley there is a magnificent view of the Wye Valley but I needed to turn back a little way and descend a rough narrow track leading to Abbey Farm and on the right the monastery. Sadly not much of it is left. The apsidal end of the church is present with a double piscina on the right once used at mass for washing the chalice. There is a token altar which I suspect is not original. The chapel on the right is completely overgrown and inaccessible. The Chapter House still has two short columns and an impressive entrance from the cloister. The map shows many buildings which are just not there. The monastery is a lonely secluded place in the middle of nowhere and I found myself thinking deeply about the lives of the monks who once lived there.

I made my way over Hay Bluff down the winding narrow road towards the Wye but picked up the road signposted Capel-y-Ffin. I remembered the crab apple tree which produced a load of fruit with which we made some quite inedible jelly. I also remembered the confluence of streams where my young children played so happily. At the top which used to be populated only by ponies there was a helicopter, a dozen hang gliders and an ice cream van! A little further on I ate my lunch with a magnificent view of the Brecon Beacons. The road up and over the Gospel Pass was still as thrilling as ever and I descended into the Lanthony Valley with its tiny crooked chapel and its two priories, through Brynarw, Pantygelli and down the side of the Deri to my home in Chapel Road. I had been out for just three hours including lunch and I had to ask myself why I was bothering to go to France in August. Well- the food and wine are much cheaper and it's different isn't it?

Ken Key.

ORDER OF GRANDMONT
CRASWALL PRIORY
1225-1441



ARCHES

Edna Lewis sent me a most interesting article on York minster illustrating mediaeval construction methods. One of these involved building an arch. The picture on the right by Blackmore shows the entrance to St John's church, later the Grammar school and now a Masonic hall. The Local History Society had not yet installed its Plaque and the arch was in a bad shape. I wonder how many people remember the way in which it was reconstructed. The builders first made a wooden arch and cemented the stones on top as in the left hand picture. When the arch was complete they removed the wooden framework and hoped that the stone arch would remain in place.

Building methods have changed very little since mediaeval times!

PONTYPOOL GROTTO AND FOLLY

Mr & Mrs Craze have sent me a newspaper article on these items which have recently been renovated and are worth a visit. I used to look out of my laboratory window at ICI towards the beautiful hillside where people told me there once was a tower which was demolished during the war because it was a landmark for the nearby Ordnance Factory. I watched it rise again in 1994 and last year I visited it with the U3A Walkers Group. The views from the top are magnificent and show Llandegfedd Reservoir and Llanwern steelworks which the folly's builder John Hanbury the ironmaster would not have seen in 1765. I have not visited the grotto but I understand that the roof is fan vaulted and the interior lavishly decorated with shells, bones and stalactites.

The Hanbury family used these places in their park for picnics and shooting parties. There is no shooting nowadays but civic events as well as private picnics are quite popular.

ST. MARY'S CHURCH STEWARDS

I am grateful to the stalwart band of people who so willingly steward the church on Wednesday afternoons. I have usually been able to fill the sheet with names without having to ask anyone to do it more than once in 20 weeks but this is becoming more difficult. I am grateful to those who do double duty but if I could have more volunteers this would be unnecessary. Father Jeremy and the parishioners join me in thanks.

Ken Key. (852512)