

ABERGAVENNY LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY



NEWSLETTER No 17

AUGUST 2001

CASTLE FLOODLIGHTS

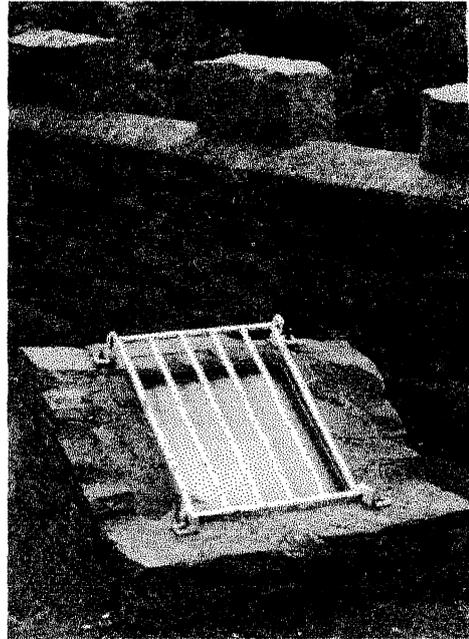
It must have been some 15 years ago that my wife Freda canvassed the businesses in town and raised enough money to install floodlighting of the castle. The County engineers and Howard Pullan were closely involved and obtained discounts on both labour and materials

Members of the Society sponsored weeks of floodlighting, as they still do now, for occasions like birthdays. Someone who shall be nameless suggested that it was one old ruin celebrating another old ruin!

It was not long before the lanterns attracted the attention of the local vandals. The Society arranged for stone walls to be constructed around each lantern with a massive iron grill on top which fortunately did not obscure too much of the light.

The real vandals now are the moles which fill the cavities with soil and the ants which make maintenance an extremely itchy business

It is amazing how long the system has survived and one lantern which recently failed obviously contained its original lamp. There have been three failures recently and unfortunately these have been the control systems and starters within the lanterns. It seems that when a lamp fails it must be replaced very quickly or



the starter fails in trying to start it. I think I shall have to institute a Floodlight Watch.

One lantern has been replaced at a cost of £105 + VAT and, as I write, some new pieces have just arrived costing only £40. I feel I owe it to Freda's memory to get it all working as soon as possible and keep it maintained so in the next few days I shall get out my screwdriver and soldering iron.

Two of the lanterns are controlled from the Lodge which the County has now sold, so it is not easy to get in to read the meter or adjust the times when the lights come on and off. The Society is trying to

get permission from all the bureaucracies like CADW and the County to reroute the cable so that everything is controlled from the Castle but this will take time and money. Howard Pullan is coordinating this.

Mary Pullan is arranging sponsorships and issues some very pretty official looking certificates. If you need to celebrate someone's birthday or other occasion your £5 will pay for the electricity and the expenses we are incurring for maintenance. Mary is usually at meetings but for the summer her phone number is 01981 240205.

Ken Key.

SUMMER VISITS 2000

Our summer visits programme took us first of all to see the newly built replica of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre by the side of the River Thames. A magnificent building beautifully decorated. We were sorry not to have time to stop for a show but Syon House beckoned. This house has Tudor origins and contains some of Robert Adam's finest interiors commissioned by the first Duke of Northumberland in the 1760's.

Arthur Peplow took us first around Tewkesbury's Norman Abbey. It is the second largest parish church in England and has the largest Norman tower and doorway at its western end. After lunch we visited Ripple church to look at the world famous collection of misericords and completed our day at Goodrich Castle. Built on a high crag the earliest part of the castle, the Norman Keep, dates from the middle of the 12th century.

A house at Much Marcle called Hellens was the venue for our evening visit. A manorial house built in the 13th century has Tudor, Jacobean and Stuart additions.

The numbers turning up for our guided town walks were a little disappointing with only about half of those who had booked actually turning up.

Everyone, however, did come on our half day visit to Clevedon Court, a 14th century manor house with a 12th century tower and a 13th century hall. It contained a beautiful collection of Nailsea glass.

Our last visit started at Longleat House, the home of the Marquis of Bath. It is regarded as the best example of high Elizabethan architecture in Britain and is one of the most beautiful stately homes.

In the afternoon we went to the first museum of American life to be opened in Britain. The furniture and exhibits have been brought from America. There are interesting items dealing with the art of the Red Indians with the religious sect called the Shakers and many aspects of American Folk Art including a beautiful collection of patchwork quilts.

As I write this there is still a little doubt about our programme of visits for this year due to the Foot & Mouth epidemic, but fingers crossed all will be well.

Alan Spink

CROSS STREET

Cross Street is getting some old peoples' flats just below the castle in the vacant space which some of us will remember was next to W.H.Smith. It turns out that this site has been fallow since the 12th century. . During the war it was used for a civil defence post and some quite interesting artefacts relating to this use were described in an article some years ago. Sally from the museum - always a remarkable help and fund of knowledge - tells me that the archeological investigation carried out just before building work started revealed a Roman ditch. She thinks this could quite probably have been a corral for cattle but a report is due in the near future.

Ken Key

2001

Thurs. 20th Sept	Mr Chris Barber IN SEARCH OF OWAIN GLYNDWR.
Thurs. 18th Oct.	Mr Paul Remfrey FROM BANFF TO PLYMOUTH -THE MEMORABILIA OF A 19TH CENTURY SAILOR.
Friday. 2nd Nov.	SOCIAL & QUIZ NIGHT. The Priory Rooms
Thurs. 15th Nov.	Mr Ken Palmer 10.000 YEARS OF PREHISTORIC OCCUPATION OF THE MOUNTAINS OF SOUTH EAST WALES.
Thurs. 20th Dec.	MEMBERS CHRISTMAS DINNER at the Lamb & Flag Hotel, Abergavenny 7 for 7.30pm

2002

Thurs. 17th Jan.	Mr Frank Olding THE PUBS OF ABERGAVENTNY
Thurs. 28th Feb.	Mr Tony Hopkins ABERGAVENTNY THROUGH THE AGES.
Thurs. 14th Mar.	Mr Arthur Peplow THE BAYEUX TAPESTRY -A NEW INTERPRETATION
Thurs. 4th Apr.	Mr John Evans THE LIFE AND TIMES OF LEWIS EDMONDS - PLASTERER AND TILER.
Thurs. 23rd May	The 25th Annual General Meeting followed by WARTIME ABERGAVENTNY: THE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

MEMBERS SUBSCRIPTIONS DUE AFTER THE A.G.M.

MEMBERSHIP

Are you an active member?
The kind that would be missed,
Or are you just contented
That your name is on the list?

Do you attend the functions
And mingle with the flock?
Or do you sit at home
And criticise and knock?

Do you ever go and visit
A member who is sick?
Or leave the work to just a few
And talk about the clique?

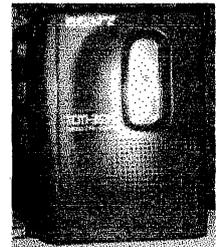
Come to the functions often,
Help with hand and heart.
Don't be just a member,
Please, take an active part.

Think this over, members,
You do know right from wrong.
Are you an active member
Or do you just belong?

Ted Waller

**THE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:
LIFE IN WARTIME ABERGAVENTNY.**

The project is developing well. The team, allowing for summer breaks, has now interviewed over 20 people. Some have also been researching the background in the wartime editions of the Chronicle and in some school log-books in Cwmbran. The tricky part will come when we try to edit the originals and categorise them under headings like evacuees, civil defence, troops stationed here etc., but I'm sure we'll rise to the challenge!



It is still not too late for any members who wish to take part as interviewers, interviewees or researchers to join in. We are quite happy to write up the interview if you would prefer not to be taped. We are also on the lookout for any pictures or other items from those days. If you can help in any way do ring Richard on 890266 or Rena on 853957.

Richard Davies

ETHEL LINA WHITE

Author Ethel Lina White was born in Frogmore Street, Abergavenny, in 1876, and was one of the best known crime writers in Britain and the USA during the 1930s and 40s. One of her most famous books, *The Wheel Spins*, was even adapted as the acclaimed 1938 Hitchcock film, *The Lady Vanishes*.

Yet today she is almost unknown in her hometown, which, considering the film title, is somewhat ironic.

This year, however, has seen a revival of interest in her work. A stage adaptation of *The Lady Vanishes* starring Victor Spinetti toured Britain from March to July. Our society has agreed to put up a plaque at the house where her family lived in Frogmore Street. And she is to be mentioned in *Timepiece*, a community play written by local reporter Liz Davies, who was one of the few people who knew about her.

My own interest began when I happened to read a newspaper feature in March on Victor Spinetti, the Cwm-born actor, revealing that the play had been written by an Abergavenny author he had not known before.

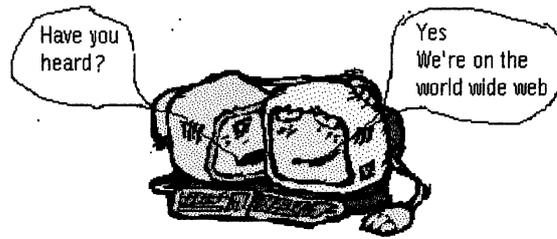
I was intrigued by this because only days before I had decided to include a page on well-known people from Abergavenny as part of the web-site I planned to create for the society this summer. I also adore crime books and whodunnits and could scarcely believe there was someone so close to home that I did not know about. Even Abergavenny Library did not have any of her books.

Since then I've discovered that a member of the history society, Mrs Mary White, is related by marriage to Ethel Lina and she was fortunately able to provide many background and census details about her. And after searching through newspaper archives, electoral registers, other census returns, and asking people and getting friends to ask people, have narrowed down Ethel Lina's possible birthplace to two houses in a terrace called Derry View in Frogmore Street.

Ethel Lina wrote a number of books, and some of her work has been likened to that of Edgar Allen Poe's for their tense atmosphere. Another one of her best known works was the suspense thriller *Some Must Watch*, which was turned into the 1946 film *The Spiral Staircase*.

Ethel Lina was a daughter of the inventor and builder William White and his second wife Charlotte Eliza, who both came from Clifton. The family first lived in the Merthyr Road or Brecon Road area and moved to Frogmore Street before settling in Belmont Road where her father had built an innovative house incorporating his own patented damp-proofing process. She lived in the town until after World War I and then moved to London. She died in 1944.

Irena Morgan



Abergavenny Local History Society will go global this summer with the launch of a site on the World Wide Web.

This means that anyone in the town or anywhere in the world will be able to keep in touch with what's happening in the society through the Internet and also add their own contribution to it if they wish – as long as they have access to an online computer. These days, there's a computer somewhere near you even if you haven't got one at home.

For those who aren't too sure what the Internet is, it can be explained as an international network of computers able to exchange vast amounts of information in an instant. On a smaller scale it also enables anyone to launch a site on a subject of their choice and helps people to keep in touch by e-mail with relatives and friends. Although getting to grips with the Net can seem daunting, it's a short, steep learning curve which can ultimately be very rewarding.

The history society's web-site started as an end-of-term summer project for a web design course at the Hill College with tutor Paula Bowyer. It seemed like a good idea at the time! But it has proved to be very demanding - and enjoyable.

The society has been very active over the last 24 years and there was a lot of information to collate. In particular I would like to thank society members Gwyn Jones, for providing information; Ken Key for help with the photographs; Michael Blackmore for use of his illustrations; and Richard Davies, Doug Edwards, Edna Lewis, Ted Waller and Mary White among others.

The web-site contains a brief history of the town, the castle and the Priory Church, drawn from the booklet the society published for schools. There is a page detailing the history of the society itself and the projects we have undertaken. The winter lecture programme and summer visits are also included.

There is a *Your Say* section, as I've already mentioned, which will allow anyone to include their own memories and photographs of growing up or living in Abergavenny. I hope that this page will attract many contributions from the town and from all over the world to enable the web-site to develop.

Perhaps the page that has caused the most comment is the *People* page which details those who were born or lived in the town and who have made a contribution to Wales, Britain and even on an international level. The page includes today's rising stars, the poet Owen Sheers and musician Matthew Jay, and currently goes back to Victorian times.

This page – and Victor Spinetti – led me to undertake research on a long-forgotten Abergavenny author, Ethel Lina White, who wrote *The Wheel Spins*. That title might not be familiar but it was turned into the cult 1938 film *The Lady Vanishes*, widely regarded as Hitchcock's best film from his British period.

The Victor Spinetti connection occurred when he starred in a stage production of *The Lady Vanishes* which toured Britain this year. He revealed in a newspaper article that it was written by an Abergavenny-born author he hadn't heard of before. Neither had I. So I tried to find out more about her.

Ethel Lina White also wrote *Some Must Watch*, which was turned into *The Spiral Staircase*, again regarded as a classic film.

The web-site is scheduled to be launched in July and the URL (that's the web address to locate it) will be announced shortly.

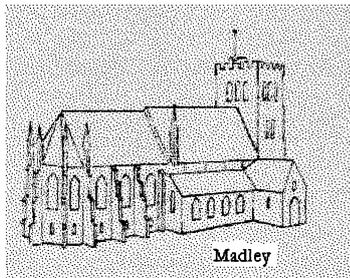
Irena Morgan

ON OUR DOORSTEP: SOME CHURCHES OF THE BORDER COUNTRY.

Inspired by Arthur Peplow's talks, Carolyn and I have visited recently some churches in Shropshire, Herefordshire and Gloucestershire. Some have been included in the Society's programme of visits over the years and it is easy to see why they were chosen. You may decide to follow Simon Jenkins' star ratings in his 'England's Thousand Best Churches' and go to the 5 star ones only, but very often there are other very interesting ones just off the beaten track.

In Gloucestershire, NORTHLEACH just off the A40 was a wealthy Cotswold wool town in medieval times but is now a little village. The church of St Peter and St Paul is a monument to the wealth of the wool merchants. It has a huge tower, a porch with a priest's chamber over it and the best brasses in the county - not of knights but of the wool merchants. (Having gone this far you may as well cross the county boundary to Burford!) In contrast St Mary's KEMPLEY on the Herefordshire border is a smaller 'redundant' church maintained by English Heritage. It is an early Norman church complete with wooden porch. Its real claim to fame is its wall paintings, the earliest being from the 12th Century. Simon Jenkins wanted to see it 'lit by the original candles and hung with icons' but the paintings themselves are enough to exercise the historical imagination and return to the 12th century. Indeed the cell type church building itself is atmospheric to say the least!

In Herefordshire, St Michael and All Angels in EATON BISHOP is a jewel for its stained glass. The east window and the adjoining north and south windows have early 14th century glass of very rich colours. Pevsner talks of 'the unmistakable decorated colour harmony of brown, green and yellow with little red, and less blue and of the sophisticated highly emotional draftsmanship more familiar from illuminated manuscripts which belong to the same style.' In 1940 the east window was removed and stored in the rectory and replaced at the end of the War. This contrasts with the parish church at MADLEY. Here, as in a number of churches, there are windows which have attractive pieces of glass which are re-arranged fragments from the 1250-1500 period. The guidebook asks whether 'anyone is good at jigsaw puzzles?' Simon Jenkins puts it more artistically. Whilst he ranks Madley's glass as



second only to Eaton Bishop in the county, he says of the fragmented glass that 'located in the chancel windows it is a reinstatement and not coherent, but the colours are vivid and create a pleasing sense of modernist collage.' He comments favourably too on Madley's decorated tracery and rare polygonal apse, but describes it as 'an austere place, even on the sunniest day'. This seems to be harsh. On the day of our visit the church was full of people setting out stalls for the summer festival. Whilst the church has a high sided family pew for a rich 17th and 18th Century family which gave them privacy, the modern congregation offered a warm welcome!

For a 5 star finish Shropshire's St Laurence Church in LUDLOW, 'the cathedral of the Marches', just over the Herefordshire border, takes some beating. It was a Norman foundation rebuilt in 1199 and added to over 300 years as the cloth making town became ever more wealthy. The end product is breathtaking, especially the stained glass. The 15th Century east window tells the story of St Laurence and there is a medieval tree of Jesse window. Simon Jenkins chose the Palmers' Window for the cover of his book, a window named after a Palmers or Pilgrims' Guild of the 13th Century. They were to Simon Jenkins the 'jetset travellers of their day' who could afford pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Here too there are impressive monuments from the 16th and 17th centuries in particular. The 32 stalls, which we have heard about from Arthur Peplow, have beautifully carved bench ends or poppy heads and misericords from the 14th and 15th centuries. There is much more to see as befits a town which was once such an important political and commercial centre. There is also an excellent history and guide written by a local historian David Lloyd.

There are lots more Border churches on our doorstep with many like Abbey Dore, Kilpeck and Ledbury which are better known than many of the 5 churches mentioned. Nevertheless all reflect centuries of social life and spiritual investment and a visit can offer at the very least a moving picture of the local history of particular places and a glimpse of incomparable art and architecture.

Richard Davies.

"A TOUCH OF GOLD." An exhibition of calligraphy and illumination at the Abergavenny Castle Museum. July and August 2001.

'CALLIGRAPHY' from the Greek means elegant writing.

'ILLUMINATION' is the decoration of writing and lettering with gold, silver and bright colours.

The work on display is not primarily concerned with fine craftsmanship where legibility and fitness of purpose are essential. The variety of exhibits illustrate how the art of the scribe has developed from the purely functional to the creative sphere of self expression, experimenting with the use of texture and movement through the use of space, colour and gold over the surface of the vellum with the calligrapher in sympathy with his materials from long practise and usage. The images make use of formal writing using a chisel edged quill-pen often contrasting with the free, swiftly written informal cursive writing.



A TOUCH OF GOLD

CALLIGRAPHY by HARRY MEADOWS

Much of the work is illuminated with a variety of gilding techniques. One small example is of an individually designed lettering alphabet which the artist has named 'Gwent' and is printed out from a line-block, painted on goat skin and cut in Welsh slate with the play of light on carved and incised forms. Writing has been responsible for the transmission of culture through the ages. Without it, many laws of government, religion, trade, poetry and history generally would have been very much limited to succeeding generations. We are now in the age of electronics and computers. Records are kept on micro-film. All this will undoubtedly change the dependence on writing. Today the computer has revolutionised the concept of typography. Perhaps the viewers at the exhibition are looking at history and collectable antiques of the future!

Harry Meadows
July 2001.