



Abergavenny Local History Society

NEWSLETTER No 21

AUGUST 2005



The tapestry is nearly finished and will shortly cross the newly dedicated courtyard to the restored tithe barn

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PROGRAMME

2005

Thurs. **Dr. John Davies**
22nd Sept. WALES AND QUEEN VICTORIA *

Thurs. **Mr. Richard Watson**
20th Oct. CARDIFF:
 THE ROOTS OF PRE-EMINENCE

Fri. QUIZ AND SUPPER NIGHT
28th Oct. at the Priory Centre, Abergavenny.

Thurs. **Prof. Mick Aston**
24th Nov. THE SHAPWICK PROJECT *

Mon. MEMBERS' CHRISTMAS DINNER
19th Dec. at the Priory Centre, Abergavenny.
 7.00pm for 7.30pm

Please bring your card with you to all meetings.
IMPORTANT Lectures marked with an asterisk are
by ticket only, obtainable at the Borough Theatre Box
Office. See note on page 3.

THE SOCIETY MEETS AT THE BOROUGH
THEATRE AT 7.30PM
Subscription is £6 per person p.a. payable by 1st May.

2006

Thurs. **Dr. George Nash**
26th Jan. EARLY PRE-HISTORIC ART:
 IS THERE A BRITISH TRADITION?

Thurs. Speakers from Caerleon Roman
9th Feb Legionary Museum: **Julia Reynolds**
 and **Mark Lewis**
 THE ROMANS IN GWENT

Fri. QUIZ AND SUPPER NIGHT
3rd March. at the Priory Centre. Abergavenny

Thurs. **Mr. Arthur Peplow**
16th March WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL ART

Thurs. Speakers from Llancaiach Fawr Manor
20th April THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE
 DOWN, 1645

Thurs. 29TH ANNUAL GENERAL
18th May MEETING ;
 Followed by: **Mr. Frank Olding**
 FAERIE LORE IN EIGHTEENTH
 CENTURY MONMOUTHSHIRE

IMPORTANT CHANGES

The opening lecture of the season given by the noted Welsh historian Dr John Davies is sponsored by the **Abergavenny Chronicle**. Please note that the date of this lecture is September 22nd 2005 and **not** the 15th as shown on your membership card.

Admission to the two lectures marked by an asterisk is by **ticket only**. Tickets are free and are available from the Box Office at the Borough Theatre, Abergavenny on production of your 2005/06 membership card.

If you can't get to the Box Office straightaway, please ring them on 01873 850805 to reserve your numbered seat and then claim your ticket in person before the night of the talk. We'd like to keep the number of members collecting their tickets on the night to a minimum but obviously 'out of town' members may need to do this. It might be as well to avoid contacting the Box Office in the busy run-up to the Abergavenny Food Festival.

If you need a current membership card – subscriptions are renewable each May – please contact our new membership secretary, Sue Smith, on 01873 850220.

In case of any difficulty please telephone the Secretary, Irena Morgan, on 01873 853957.

ABERGAVENTNY CHRONICLE ARCHIVES

Members of the society who want to search through back copies of the local newspaper, the Abergavenny Chronicle, will be pleased to know that the archives have been re-opened under a 'Paperwatch' scheme for a trial period.

Public access to the archives was stopped earlier this year, partly because of concern over the condition of the newspapers. Chronicle management has now agreed to the archives being opened to the three accredited groups on two days a week – our society, U3A's history group and Gwent Family History Society.

If anyone wants to carry out research please contact the Secretary so that a Local History Society session can be arranged between 10.00am and 4.00pm on Thursdays and Fridays. Individual researchers may be able to join another group's session by prior appointment if space is available. Group bookings for access have to be made in advance, researchers must sign in and membership cards must be shown at the newspaper offices.

For more information please contact the Secretary Irena Morgan on 01873 853957.

THE WEBSITE

The Abergavenny Local History Society's website is now in Welsh – thanks to a £600 grant to pay for the translation costs from Rural Community Action and we would like, again, to thank RCA for the funding. The website's pages on the town's history were based on the society's booklet for schools published around 20 years ago. Since then, a thriving Welsh-medium school Ysgol Gymraeg Y Fenni has been established in the town as well as popular Welsh language classes for adults. The school was among the many supporters of the application. As head teacher Bronwen Green said in her letter of support: "Most of our studies are carried out through the medium of Welsh and we would really value having this information in the Welsh language. We were extremely pleased therefore to hear that the society was hoping to have the information translated into Welsh..... We dare to hope therefore that our pupils..... will be able to glean information about their town in the language which they use daily in school."

INQUIRIES:

The society does not carry out family history research – we leave that to the experts, the Gwent Family History Society – but we were able to help one recent inquirer who wanted to find out more about her grandfather, William Woodward, of Red Barn Farm in Llanwenarth Citra and whose son had died at Gallipoli during WWI. His granddaughter, who now lives in Bath, wanted to find out when he was chosen as the town's Mayor. She told us that her grandfather's nickname was 'Raspberry Bill' because his fortune was partly made through growing raspberries and selling them to a chocolate firm. Abergavenny Museum happened to have two photographs in the archives dating back to the early 1900s of harvest workers on Red Barn Farm- but unfortunately not of Mr Woodward. Then Ken Key found the family grave at St Peter's Church in Llanwenarth Citra and we were able to establish the date of Mr Woodward's death.

Through the engraved board at the Town Hall, we discovered that Mr Woodward was Mayor of Abergavenny in 1906. Our former treasurer, Doug Edwards, knew that Mr Woodward's photograph was one of the few missing in the Council Chamber's gallery of former mayors. Abergavenny Town Council is now writing to the family to see if a photograph, complete with mayoral chain, owned by a cousin living in the USA can be copied for display at the Town Hall. Another inquiry from America was from a minister of the Episcopal Church in California whose aunt had been stationed in Abergavenny during WWII and who had met her GI husband here. The Rev Stephen N. Brannon had grown up hearing how lovely the countryside was and was delighted to read that we had published a book *A Town Remembers: Memories of Wartime Abergavenny 1939-45*. He ordered two copies, for his aunt and himself and intends to visit the town in a year or two. Is anyone prepared to change \$30 into sterling?

Irena Morgan.

Family historians consult censuses frequently but even they must have found them to be curious data banks at first. Censuses which include addresses, names, marital status, age, sex, occupation and birthplace are extensive statistical surveys. As such they can be very useful to local historians too and can provide a picture of towns like Abergavenny in a particular year. The 1881 census tells us much about the economy and society of the Abergavenny of a century and a quarter ago. Here are just a few impressions.

Most of the streets had the same names and it is the occupations that really remind us of a different age and that lead us into the society of that time. Unusual ones are included: here there is a clogger, errand boys, a fly driver, a huckster, a silk winder, a skinner, a straw bonnet maker, staymakers, whitesmiths and a bright smith, a spade tree maker, a tripe shopkeeper and a whipperin! The numbers in more predictable occupations are far greater. Nearly 400 are in domestic service as general servants, maids etc. To this category must be added others like charwomen, farm and inn servants and gardeners. In the census too are over 70 washerwomen and laundresses as well as over 200 general and agricultural labourers. In a census of 7,915 entries these workers form a numerous and substantial group.

The town catered for the sick and the poor. There were a dispensary and a small cottage hospital in Castle Street, but the major town hospital at the time was Pen-y-fal Hospital which had opened in 1851 to serve four counties. Herefordshire had left when its own hospital was built in the 1860's, but the 1881 census showed that there were still over 600 patients at Pen-y-fal and it was a major employer. There were 158 inmates listed for the Union Workhouse in Union Road. The Abergavenny Poor Law Union included 25 other parishes as well as Abergavenny including many which are now in Blaenau Gwent.

As a railway town it is no surprise to see that nearly 400 railway workers lived in Abergavenny with others no doubt travelling in from outlying areas. The railway jobs met the transport demands of the industry. Over 100 were 'engine jobs' for drivers, firemen, cleaners, fitters and washers-out with many based at the engine yards off the Brecon Road. With stations at Brecon Road, Monmouth Road and the Junction there were clerks, booking clerks, porters and ticket collectors. A further group worked on the lines as railway labourers, platelayers or pointsmen.

In all there were over 40 different types of work

with the positions of station master, railway inspector or traffic manager beckoning, but probably eluding, the youngster who started out as a 'call boy in the railway engine house.' The railways were part of the commercial revolution that followed industrialization and both revolutions had revitalized Abergavenny. There were reminders of earlier means of transport in the census too. Matthew Godden was a turnpike toll collector at the Brecon Road tollgate whilst his son Robert manned the tollgate on the Monmouth Road. Over 30 people were employed as blacksmiths or their staff so horse power still prevailed. There was also a coachbuilding factory in Cross Street.

Before industrialization the main industry was agriculture. Even in 1881 there were some 25 farmers and graziers in the Abergavenny census. The 23 farmers had land ranging from 4½ acres to Dobson's Farm of 198 acres and one of the graziers had 264½ acres. There were far fewer houses at that time and many of the farms would have been quite close to the town centre. (As the population grew some of these farmers no doubt sold land for housing development.) On many days animals from these farms and those in the surrounding villages would have been driven into town on foot. Some of the farmers with the smallest holdings were millers too or had other jobs whilst the farmers with most land would employ labourers, many chosen at the town's hiring fairs.

There was an increasingly prosperous 'shopocracy'. The most successful of these tradesmen had their own housekeepers and domestic servants and employed many staff in their stores. Twenty six butchers were named who employed assistants, boys and apprentices. The nineteen drapers called on apprentices, assistants, shopmen and errand boys. The thirty five grocers had assistants, apprentices, porters, shopmen, warehousemen and errand boys. The 7 ironmongers had assistants, apprentices, clerks and porters. It suggests town streets and shops that were hives of activity. This variety of establishments provided individual displays and a singular service of a very different kind to the uniformity of the supermarkets and DIY stores of today. There was also a growing professional class of accountants, architects, bankers and solicitors. The number of teachers was also rising following the introduction of State elementary schools though there were not yet State secondary schools. There were many private schools in the town like Hannah Malcolm's

boarding school at 13 Nevill Street with its 10 boarders and 2 teachers.

People who had prospered in industry too were here. At The Brooks lived Eliza Hill, an industrialist's widow, with her 2 cousins and 4 servants. (In 1890 the house was to be bought by the Nevill family and re-named Nevill Hall.) At Coalbrook House a retired brewer Rowland Bent had 8 domestic servants. Such staff numbers were no doubt common in other country houses in the area. There were some 60 tailors and over 100 dressmakers in the Abergavenny Census, many of whom no doubt would provide a personal service for such wealthy households.

There was obviously building work going on as various craftsmen lived in the town - some as lodgers for as long as work was available. There were 9 builders and there was work for brickmakers, carpenters, painters, glaziers, labourers, plasterers and tilers. Wood was in plentiful supply and there were several timber hauliers and merchants.

There were many public houses and inns. Some of the publicans like the Delafield family at the King's Arms and John Harry at the White Horse were brewers as well. Samuel Facey, a Devon man living in Belmont Road was a wine merchant and brewer who employed 8 people. The Hen and Chicks' publican was Theophilus T Jones. Some publicans had other jobs too - John Howells at the Grofield Inn, for instance, was also a cattle dealer. The leading inns were The Angel and The Double Greyhound. John Prichard at The Angel had 9 servants, though with a young family only four of these seemed to have been employed as inn servants - including a billiard marker. The Greyhound was a bigger establishment with 9 servants and a visiting clerk and a book-keeper. The servants' ranks suggest a bigger establishment with, for example, Boots and Under Boots, Waitress and Underwaitress and Chambermaid and, yes, an Under Chambermaid.

So, even in a time of industrial and agricultural depression, Abergavenny seems to have been a bustling market town and shopping centre. Though the Town Hall, that symbol of civic pride, had been recently built redevelopment had not yet taken hold and there were more houses in streets like Tudor Street and Chicken Street than we see now and a sense of a long established settled country town. The pollution of motor traffic had not yet arrived but the greater number of animals, the three railway stations' steam traffic, the candle factory and the remaining tanners ensured that the town of 1881 made its own distinctive impression on the senses.

Richard Davies

DOUGLAS EDWARDS

Councillor Douglas Edwards has retired after nine years as Treasurer of Abergavenny Local History Society.

At the Annual General Meeting, Richard Davies, who was re-elected as the society's chairman, thanked Councillor Edwards for all his work on behalf of the society, and presented him with a print by artist David Haswell. "We appreciate very much Douglas Edwards' financial management and his overall contribution to the Committee which will be missed, not least an ability to get things done".



Douglas' management of the finances has maintained the modest subscription of £6 for the last 15 years and has enabled the Society to make grants to further Local History in the town.

FLOODLIGHTING

Someone has stolen the lantern on the Mill Street side of the castle. The new regulations mean that Ken Key cannot fix it because he is only a Chartered Electrical Engineer and not an electrician. This invasion of civil liberty is going to cost the Society money and we are awaiting the decision of the County Council as to what should be done.

Meanwhile the other three lights are functioning and anyone who wishes to floodlight the castle for a week for some special occasion should contact Anne Morgan on 01873 856275. She will send you a rather nice certificate. The cost is £5 and we are probably going to need the money.

