

Abergavenny Local History Society



CHAPTER MEETING AT TINTERN 2003

NEWSLETTER No 23

AUGUST 2007

www.abergavennyhistory.co.uk
Charity registration number 1098582

PROGRAMME**2007**

Thurs. * 20th Sept.	Dr. Julian Richards STONEHENGE
Thurs. 18th Oct.	Dr. David Wyatt THE ANTI-SLAVERY MOVEMENT IN SOUTH WALES
Fri. 16th Nov.	QUIZ AND SUPPER The Priory Centre
Thurs. 29th Nov.	Mr. Jon Gruffydd PATAGONIA
Fri. 14th Dec.	MEMBERS' CHRISTMAS DINNER At Ty 'r Morwydd/ Mulberry House, Park Crescent, Abergavenny

THE SOCIETY MEETS AT THE BOROUGH THEATRE AT
7.30PM

2008

Thurs 24th Jan.	Prof. Simon Haslett TSUNAMI-THE BRISTOL CHANNEL TIDAL WAVE OF 1607
Thurs. 21st Feb.	Prof. Miranda Aldhouse-Green BOUDICA- HEROINE, TERRORIST OR FREEDOM FIGHTER?
Thurs. 20th March	Mr. Arthur Peplow THE CASTLES OF GWENT AND GLAMORGAN. COMMEMORATION OF THE SOCIETY'S 30th LECTURE SEASON
Thurs. 17th April	Mr. Mark Lewis RETHINKING ROMAN CAERWENT
Thurs. 15th May	ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING Followed by: Mr. Frank Olding ARCHAEOLOGY'S "C" WORD

* **Please remember to book your tickets** at the Borough Theatre Box Office for the opening lecture of the 2007 / 2008 season in September when Julian Richards (*from BBC2 TV's Meet the Ancestors and Blood of the Vikings*) talks about 'Stonehenge'. Unfortunately the asterisk denoting the need to book tickets has been omitted from the membership card.

This will be the only ticketed lecture of the season which also happens to be our 30th anniversary year.

There is no charge when you book your tickets at the Box Office. You can choose your seat but do show your membership card. Members can also reserve a seat by phoning the Box Office on 01873 850805, but again please show your membership card when picking up your ticket.

The society has always encouraged students to attend lectures and we have publicised the talk at King Henry School. A limited number of seats has been reserved for a party of older schoolchildren.

If members want to bring along their children or grandchildren then please book a ticket for them at the Box Office at the same time as booking your own.

Next season is again packed full of interesting and varied talks and the society has asked popular speaker Arthur Peplow in March to celebrate our 30th anniversary with his lecture on the Castles of Gwent and Glamorgan.

PLEASE BRING YOUR MEMBERSHIP CARD WITH YOU TO ALL MEETINGS

SUBSCRIPTIONS FOR YEAR £6 PER PERSON PAYABLE BY 1st. MAY

CHARITY REGISTRATION NUMBER -1098582

THE SOCIETY WEBSITE IS:
www.abergavennyhistory.co.uk

COMMUNITY EXPO 07

Our new computer equipment and notice-boards were put to good use at the recent Community Expo 07 on Saturday, June 30th, with a stall staffed by Secretary Gill Wakley, Chair Irena Morgan and Treasurer Stephen Morgan. Also there (inset but not in the main photograph) was new committee member Marian Senior.



The community exhibition was organised by Rural Community Action in conjunction with the Bryn y Cwm Forum to showcase activities and services provided by voluntary and community organisations in Abergavenny and the villages of North West Monmouthshire. It was officially opened by the Rev Canon Jeremy Winston. Councillor Chris Woodhouse, Chairman of Monmouthshire County Council, launched a series of leaflets on village halls.



SUMMER VISITS

As in 2004, last year's summer visits kicked off with a trip to Tynesfield near Bristol. Arthur Peplow's guided tour of Dunster Castle and Cleve Abbey in Somerset, then on to Wells Cathedral, preceded a day at Llancaiach Manor and St Fagans. Following an Abergavenny town-walk with supper at The Angel, we visited Warwick Castle en route to our Peterborough hotel before visiting Elton Hall, Ely Cathedral and Burghley House. The programme ended with Rev. Bill Rutter's third conducted tour of six more of Herefordshire's notable, tucked-away, easy-to-miss churches.

Trevor Scott, our visits treasurer, had by Christmas handed over to Rachael Rogers. The Society's thanks went to Trevor for all his hard work and we welcomed Rachael aboard the summer visits roller-coaster. Our first job together, not relished, involved balloting out over a hundred members, as this year's tours with Arthur Peplow, Frank Olding and Bill Rutter each had to be restricted to one coach load to avoid difficulties with hearing the guides and seeing what they describe. When visits are over-booked and there are no limits on numbers, whenever possible two coaches will be used.

So far this year we have toured several Oxford colleges (the Society's third such tour) and then visited Wigmore Abbey and Ludlow with Arthur Peplow as our guide. Both proved enjoyable, according to the much appreciated feed-back from many members. When you read this, we shall have been to Pembroke Castle and St David's Cathedral, experienced an historical archaeology evening with Frank Olding -followed by a pub supper -and spent a weekend visiting Winchester Cathedral, Portchester Castle, Gosport Submarine Museum. Portsmouth's Historic Dockyard (Mary Rose, HMS Victory, HMS Warrior, etc.) and Salisbury Cathedral on the way back. This year's programme concludes with Rev. Bill Rutter's fourth conducted tour of another five Herefordshire churches: Hoarwithy, Brockhampton, Fownhope, Eaton Bishop and Madley.

2008 tentative programme: 24th May Carmarthen area (all day); 10th June Berkeley Castle and Chavenage House with Arthur Peplow (day); 26th June Newport medieval ship (afternoon); 8th July a repeat of Frank Olding's 2007 tour (evening); 14th August Fairford, Cirencester and other Cotswolds churches with Rev. Bill Rutter (day).

IMPORTANT

The weekend trip to York Minster, Durham Cathedral and Hadrian's Wall is planned to take place from 25th -28th July 2008. Would members who are interested in going kindly ring me on or around 1st October 2007.

(I hope to know the approximate cost by then, based on 40 coach seats filled; the more seats filled, the lower the cost, and vice versa)

John Skinner, Visits Organiser (01873-853998)

FRANK ON THE DUKE'S TABLE

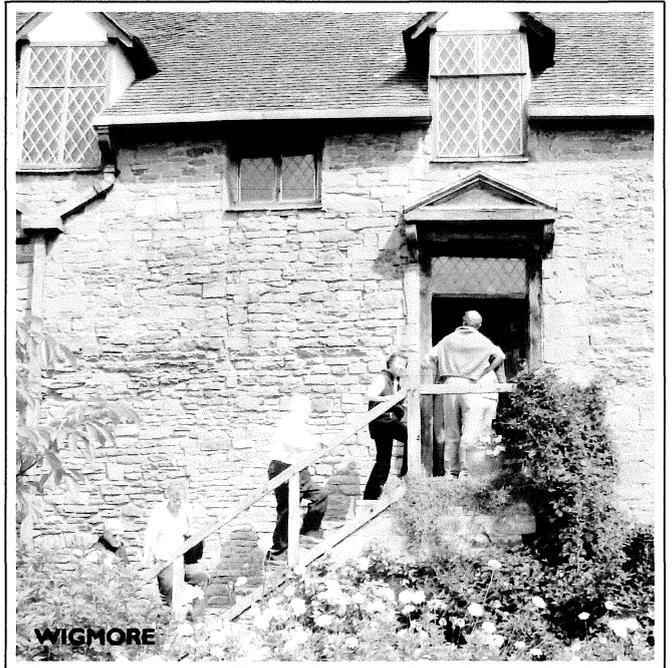


THE TWO LADIES OF WIGMORE

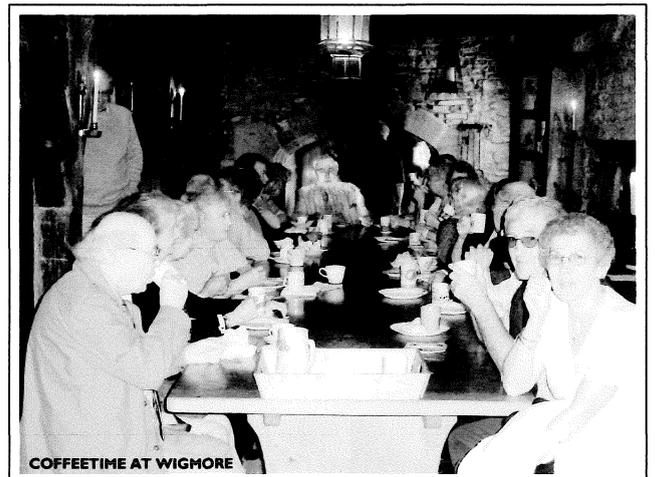
WIGMORE ABBEY



DRAWDA GARDEN, THE QUEEN'S COLLEGE, OXFORD.



ROBERT KING AND FRIEND AT PEMBROKE CASTLE



COFFEETIME AT WIGMORE

HISTORIC DAFFODILS

Daffodils

That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty
(Shakespeare: The Winters Tale)

The ancestors of garden daffodils originated from around the Mediterranean, from Spain and Portugal, and also from the Middle East in Turkey.

Mohammed wrote about daffodils in the 6th century AD and they were referred to in medieval herbals and illustrated in tapestries and paintings. Between Mohammed and the 16th century daffodils remained in the wild. About 1629, some Englishmen started to cultivate them as garden plants, and in the middle of the 19th century Dutch enthusiasts also started collecting them from the wild and, by hybridisation, bred new garden varieties. The landmark trumpet Emperor and Empress were introduced in 1865. Size and form were improved and diversified and colours were intensified to produce the large garden daffodils and varied narcissi we are familiar with today.

The botanical name of the genus is *Narcissus*. Daffodil is the common English name for all *Narcissus* species, so called because it was mistakenly linked with asphodel.

In Greek mythology, Narcissus was the son of a river god who lost his immortality when he disobeyed the rules, looked at his reflection in a lake and fell in love with his own beauty. In his place sprang up a golden narcissus.

The wild daffodil native to England and Wales and parts of Europe is *Narcissus pseudonarcissus*, of which there are several sub species, one being *Narcissus obvalaris*, the Tenby daffodil, the national emblem of Wales.

Wild narcissi grow in woodland, hedgerows and grasslands. Grazing animals avoid them, as they are poisonous if eaten. Locally they can be seen in a field on the Deri. In the UK, mature populations have decreased substantially since the 19th century due to the intensification of agriculture, clearance of woodland and uprooting of bulbs for gardens.

It was *Narcissus pseudonarcissus* that Dorothy Wordsworth wrote about in her journal in April 1802, and William Wordsworth described in his poem 'Daffodils' published in 1804. Modern hybrids do not dance -their stems are too thick. Wild daffodils are small with slender leaves, and look their best naturalised in grass. They have fragrant flowers of great variety and not always perfect form. The flowers may be double or single; there may be one on each stem or several.

Recently there has been an upsurge of interest in old daffodils. There are specialist nurseries here and in the Netherlands that are collecting and building up stocks of historic cultivars. They are found in hedgerows, old gardens and churchyards that have been undisturbed over the years.

We planted two varieties in the Museum garden last autumn, *Narcissus* 'Rip Van Winkle' and *Narcissus pseudonarcissus* subsp. 'Obvalaris', and *Narcissus poeticus recurvus* 'Pheasants Eye' in 2005. We intend to plant more in the future.

FAIRTRADE COFFEETIME



New members might like to know that we serve tea and coffee after each of the talks in the Borough Theatre's coffee bar – this gives members a chance to have a chat and catch up with events before the journey home.

For several months now we have served Fairtrade tea and coffee so helping Abergavenny to achieve the status of a Fairtrade town. We were among a number of societies and groups who were invited to attend the Abergavenny Fairtrade Forum's first birthday party in February at the Lamb and Flag hotel. The Chairwoman, Irena Morgan, was presented with the certificate by the then Mayor of Abergavenny Councillor Tony Donovan.

Pictured are Jane White and Jeanette Butt with the certificate after one of our talks.

HONORARY MEMBERS

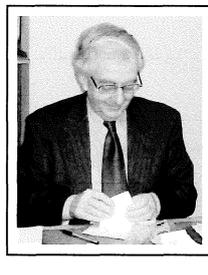
Our society has five new honorary members this year in recognition of long and dedicated service. They are: Richard and Carolyn Davies, Douglas and Edna Edwards, and Ken Key.



Richard



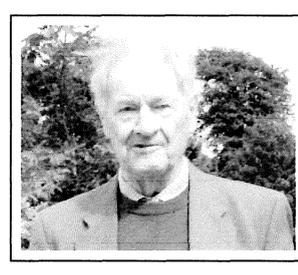
Caroline



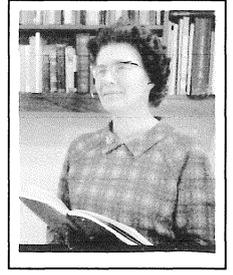
Douglas



Edna



Ken



Freda

Richard was a distinguished Chairman for six years and was instrumental in many projects such as the Memories of wartime Abergavenny oral recording and book. He resigned from the committee in 2006.

Douglas had two challenging jobs. He was both an efficient Treasurer and Membership Secretary during the time when the society almost doubled in size. Douglas resigned from the committee in 2005

Ken has been a much valued committee member for many years. He helps to set up equipment before each talk and organises 'Churchwatch', in which volunteers from our society act as stewards at St Mary's Priory Church in a rota for the Wednesday afternoon sessions. He is the editor of this newsletter and for many years looked after the floodlighting system at Abergavenny Castle.

Ken would add that this honour really belongs to his late wife Freda who was one of the founders of the Society. She started the newsletter and the church stewarding and begged the money for the floodlighting among a great many other things.

FORTIFIED MANOR HOUSE DISCOVERED

Excavations are currently under way at a site near Penpergwym next to the site of a deserted medieval village (now ploughed out). A fortified manor house, probably dating from around 1200, with a double ditch (they must have offended their neighbours!) is being excavated on Saturdays and Thursdays. It is hoped to evaluate speculation about earlier use of the site, as it is close to the possible line of a Roman Road and might even correspond to the site of Sitsyllt's castle in 1175.

If anyone would like to be involved, excavators are needed. There is no age bar, nor is previous experience needed, as training will be given. Contact the Director of Excavations, Sue Jenkins on 02920 869575, or Geoff Mein on 01291 672729 if you want to volunteer.

Gleaned from Geoff Mein by Gill Wakley

Y Bryn (The Hill): Was your granddad a gardener here?

A volunteer, Julie Annetts, is working on a project to try to restore the Edwardian glasshouse on the site, which is part of the Victorian walled garden, Gardd Y Bryn, that has been restored over the last 10 years. She is looking for information about the glasshouse and wonders if History Society members have any information – perhaps from someone who used to work there?

We know that William Lloyd Powell built the present house after he bought the estate in 1849. Before that, there was a house on the site for at least 300 years. The Lloyd family owned it in the eighteenth century. Then it passed to William Morgan in 1776 and remained in his family until it was sold to William Powell.

Edward Pritchard Martin, JP, purchased The Hill on his retirement from his involvement in iron working in 1901. (He provided Gilchrist Thomas with the financial backing and support to develop the Bessemer process and was President of the Iron and Steel Institute in 1897.) The alterations and extensions he carried out resulted in a house not much different from the one we can see today.

Herbert Lewis purchased The Hill in 1916 for his three unmarried sisters. The last survivor, Lillian Lewis, died in 1964 and the house became a residential educational centre, run by Monmouthshire County Council.

If you have any information about the glasshouse, or know anyone who has, contact the secretary or chairman.

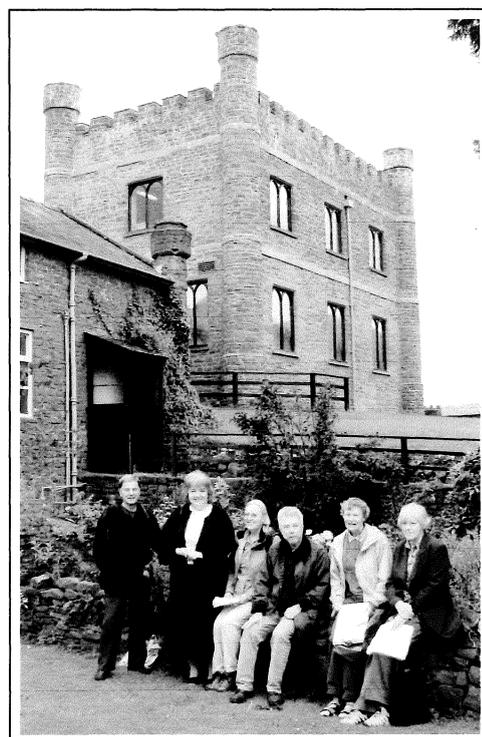
TOWN TOURS

A big thank you to all those who have joined our pool of Town Tour guides. Four committee members and three members of the society have volunteered to become guides and most have undergone training sessions to prepare them for a busy season.

With the new guides we can run two Town Tours this summer as well as hosting a tour for a visiting group from Hereford. The walks start with a tour around Abergavenny Castle followed by a walk through the town ending at the bottom of Cross Street. They take about one and a half hours.

The first guided walk of the summer is on Sunday, July 29th, starting at 4.00pm and the second is on Wednesday, August 1st, starting at 2.30pm. Meet at Abergavenny Castle.

Just turn up – there's no need to book.



HELP FOR SCHOOLCHILDREN

Our society has given two donations to local schools to help with history projects and for the first time, we have given £200 in sponsorship to the Abergavenny Eisteddfod.

In June, a dozen King Henry schoolchildren received prizes for exceptional work in history projects such as Titanic and WWI diaries. The awards, amounting to a total of £100, were presented by the Chairwoman, Irena Morgan at a special assembly attended by the Lower School and parents of the prize-winners. She said, "I'm sure the society's president, Gwyn Jones, who taught history at KHS for many years, will be delighted to know that the school's tradition of excellence is being carried on".

In June also, we gave a £350 donation to help with Cantref School's Choir trip to Berlin. The money went towards paying for transport so that the choir could get around to see as many historic sites as possible. In Berlin, they saw the Story of Berlin Museum and a nuclear bunker, the Kaiser Wilhelm church, the Brandenburg Gate, Unter den Linden, the Reichstag, the East Side Gallery (a renovated section of the Berlin Wall) and Checkpoint Charlie.

The group also visited a school that they have linked with to share Welsh and German culture and to sing and dance. The children had breakfast and took part in activities to get to know each other and make friends. The school raised more than £1,000 themselves to subsidise the trip.

Cantref schoolchildren also went on an end of year trip to London to visit the Cabinet War Rooms and the Imperial War Museum. "By the time we've been on both trips, the children should have a better understanding of life during World War II," said one of the organisers, teacher and committee member Jane White.

TREDEGAR CIRCLE PROJECT

The Heritage Lottery Fund has awarded a grant of £50,000 to a Tredegar project with links to Aneurin Bevan and the NHS, following a campaign which you may remember was featured in last year's newsletter.

The project to restore a building, 10 The Circle, was started by Tredegar Development Trust and our Chair, Irena Morgan, was commissioned as the Press and Publicity Officer, and also prepared the application for Heritage Lottery Funding.



The grant was awarded as part of the HLF Project Planning Grant initiative last autumn. This is the first step in the programme of restoration to bring the building back into community use.

The building, which has undergone a temporary facelift, once housed the offices of the Tredegar Medical Aid Society. The work of the society inspired the town's own Aneurin Bevan when he created Britain's National Health Service in 1948 as the Minister for Health and Housing in the post World War II Labour Government.

www.cradleofnhs.org.uk

TWENTIETH CENTURY MILITARY SITES

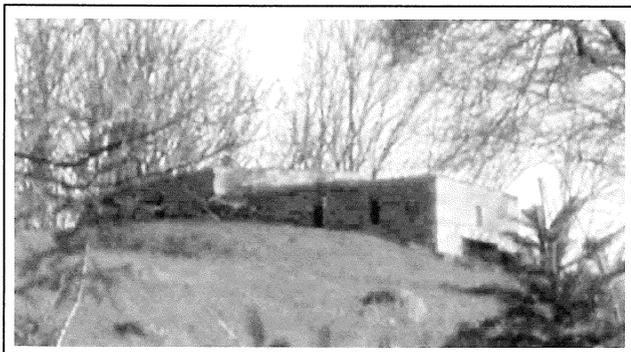
The Abergavenny Pillboxes

reported on by Gill Wakley

Have you noticed the pillboxes protecting the previous Junction Station at Abergavenny? If you walk along Ross Road from the town and look up behind the New Junction Cottages by the river bridge, you will see the single pillbox overlooking the Ross Road and the bridge over the Gavenny River. A further group of three nearer the town overlook Tredilion Road and Ross Road. These covered the junction of the line between Hereford and Newport and the now defunct line to Merthyr Tydfil. The view from the three pillboxes is across the north east side of Abergavenny towards the Sugar Loaf as well – an excellent vantage point. An air raid shelter on the edge of the slope, near where the station used to be, is well protected by a tree that has fallen across the entrance, but has the typical dogleg entrance that I remember from my childhood. The shelter was provided for the workers at the Junction Station. They are all on private land, so you will need to view them from the adjoining Tredilion and Ross Roads.



Single pillbox above the Ross Road B4521 & bridge over Gavenny River. There is an air raid shelter for the station above to the right, hidden in the trees



The three pillboxes above New Junction Cottages, guarding the roads (Tredilion Road and Ross Road) and the railway junction.

The Junction Station was on the flat land above and the lines were between Hereford and Newport and the old line to Merthyr.



The Abergavenny to Merthyr Line

The Junction station was constructed where the Abergavenny to Hereford and Abergavenny to Merthyr lines merged. The Merthyr, Tredegar and Abergavenny Railway used part of Bailey's Tramroad, which was built by Crawshay Bailey in 1829 and ran from his ironworks at Nantyglo to Govilon Wharf on the Brecknock & Abergavenny Canal. Crawshay Bailey of Nantyglo, James Hill of Blaenavon and Thomas Brown of Ebbw Vale backed the railway financially. The engineer was John Gardner and the line was started in 1860.

In 1866, the London and North Western Railway bought the line. Construction had reached from Abergavenny to Brynmawr and they extended it to Merthyr as part of their push into South Wales. In 1867, the engine shed at Brecon Road Station opened and ten years later the line was doubled, requiring new tunnels at Clydach and Gelli Felen. In 1922, it was absorbed into the Great Western Railway Company.

The line was expensive to run because of the gradients – down from Junction Station to the Usk River, across and rising to Govilon. Then up again to Gilwern, followed by the steep climb up through the Clydach Gorge to Brynmawr. The line then followed an undulating course as the 'Heads of the Valley Line' to Merthyr. In 1927, 14 locomotives were snowed in along the length of the line. The line was closed to through freight in 1954 and to passengers in 1958. In 1971, the short remaining part of the line between the Junction station and Brecon Road station was closed to freight.¹

Fortifications in World War II

In 1940 and 41, a large scale programme of military and civilian mobilisation was organised as part of British anti-invasion preparations in response to a perceived threat of invasion by German armed forces. In May of 1940, the directorate of Fortifications and Works (FW3) was set up at the War Office under the direction of Major-General G. B. O. Taylor. It provided a number of basic pillbox designs which could be constructed by soldiers and civilian local labour at appropriate defensive locations.

The degree of protection offered by a pillbox varied considerably: the thickness of the walls and roof generally varied from just 12 inches (30 cm) to 3.5 feet (1 metre) or more. They have proved remarkably difficult to demolish! Internally, pillboxes are generally cramped and spartan. Some internal concrete shelves and tables were provided to support weapons and some were whitewashed inside. Only the Type 28s provided a sufficient space for a few home comforts.

The basic designs were adapted to local circumstances and available building materials so that two pillboxes of the same basic design could look quite different. The height of a pillbox could vary significantly according to local needs; some were half buried so that the embrasures (the holes you shoot through) might be as low as ground level, others were raised up to give a better view; those built into hillsides might lack embrasures on some walls. The entrance could be moved and its size varied as might be convenient and there can be additional walls to protect the entrance, a freestanding blast wall or a steel door.

Appearance also varied due to the building materials used, although all the FW3 designs are formed from reinforced concrete. Where brick was used as a shuttering, the bricks essentially formed a mould into which concrete was poured, the bricks being left in place. Otherwise, the pillbox was formed using shuttering of wood and/or corrugated iron. Wood shuttering was removed, whereas corrugated iron was sometimes left in place. Construction often took advantage of whatever materials were available locally with the added advantage of aiding camouflage. Local commanders introduced modifications to the standard FW3 designs or introduced designs of their own.^{2,3}

Protection of pillboxes for the future

Since 2003, CADW has been collecting and reviewing twentieth century military sites in Wales, together with the Royal Commission for Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales (RCAHMW) and the Welsh Archaeological Trusts. CADW are identifying the most important sites so that they can be considered for statutory protection. CADW are aware of the importance of these pillboxes in Abergavenny⁴. If you know of other relics, let CADW know!

References

1. Edge D. Country Railway Routes: Abergavenny to Merthyr. Middleton Press, Midhurst, Sussex. 2002.
2. <http://www.pillbox-study-group.org.uk> copyright Graham G Matthews@PSG2001.
3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_hardened_field_defences_of_World_War_II
4. jonathan.berry@wales.gsi.gov.uk

THE THOMAS GUNTER HOUSE 1

In the eighteen years since Freda died I have not had the heart to look at many of her papers. She must have written or taped the following account which I typed out and which was probably destined for Newsletter No 5 in 1989. On her sudden death it was mislaid and, although I edited NL5, it never made it! I wonder what Freda had in mind for "THE THOMAS GUNTER HOUSE 2"? The house has recently been upgraded from GRADE II to GRADE II * but is sadly in need of attention.

I hope that Helen Jenkins will not mind my including her account in this newsletter.

Ken Key.

My husband, myself and my 11 year old son moved into the Thomas Gunter House in February 1951, to manage the shop and cafe as it was at that time for the High Court.

The owner of the business was in the hands of the High Court receivers owing to the previous manageress, a Miss Enoch, having had a mental breakdown and taken her own life.

We were to reopen the business on March 1st 1951.

My husband being a painter and decorator was in the process of preparing the front staircase when he found a hollow sounding piece of wall which he took down.

Inside we found a small closet room about just big enough for someone to stand in with a piece of board about 18" from the floor and 10" wide set into the mortar on each side of the small room..

This we took for someone to sit or kneel on and thought maybe it was a hiding hole for someone (a priest maybe) .

We closed it back up and papered over it.

From the top of this staircase we went into the sitting room which went from back to front of the building.

This room had the original plaster ceiling which was very ornamental in plaster relief, all done many years ago by hand as there were no two pieces exactly alike.

The pattern was of roses and pineapples thistles and 47 cherubs' heads and it was beautiful.

During our stay which lasted for only three years we had many parties of nuns and priests, even from the Vatican City, to see this ceiling and all said their rosary and prayed there.

This came about because we had a Roman Catholic friend who was living in Christchurch, near Newport who used to visit us and he had a cousin who was a priest in the Vatican City and once our friend had seen the ceiling and heard the story of the house, he wrote to his cousin and word soon spread.

I never refused anyone the free access to this lovely ceiling and groups came from all over the world, as well as W. I. and Ladies' groups from all over the British Isles who had read about the history of the house from books.

The Roman Catholic groups looked upon it as a Chapel and it gave me great pleasure to show them all around.

There was one group from Canterbury, mainly ladies, who had read a book from their library, who asked about the monk who was supposed to haunt the house, especially the sitting room.

I used not to answer these questions for personal reasons.

The attic, which is now over No 41 Cross Street, had the plaster markings on the wall which were found in 1907-8 by the firm of Mr T.S.Foster who was the owner of the property and were builders in the town, (and who, incidentally, my uncle and father worked for).

As a girl I was taken over the building and understood from Mr Foster that these were Marriage Lines, made out at a wedding of a Roman Catholic couple in the years that they were forbidden to hold masses of any kind.

It was presumed. therefore, that at that time, only the more educated could read and write and Priests were among these.

So the markings, the X. T. G pp his mark, the initials and crosses with a heart, an arrow and a drawing of a man and woman had been done by the priest after Thomas Gunter had witnessed the wedding of this unknown Roman Catholic couple: M and M. S.

The fresco of the 'Magi' was also found at the same time in this same attic.

Mr Foster had put it in a glass case and it was standing against a wall when I took over. So with the help of a group of men (as it was heavy) my husband put it in an alcove over an old oak sideboard in the part of the house which was a cafe. I kept it there with flowers arranged around all the time I was there, and many of the tourists who came to the cafe asked the history of it, which they were told to the best of my ability.

The business was sold to Mrs Parry in July 1954, because my mother became terminally ill, and I had to look after her. But the Thomas Gunter House, after the first few forbidding months, became a very warm and happy house to live in, and I regretted having to leave it.

E.F.P.Jenkins. (Helen)