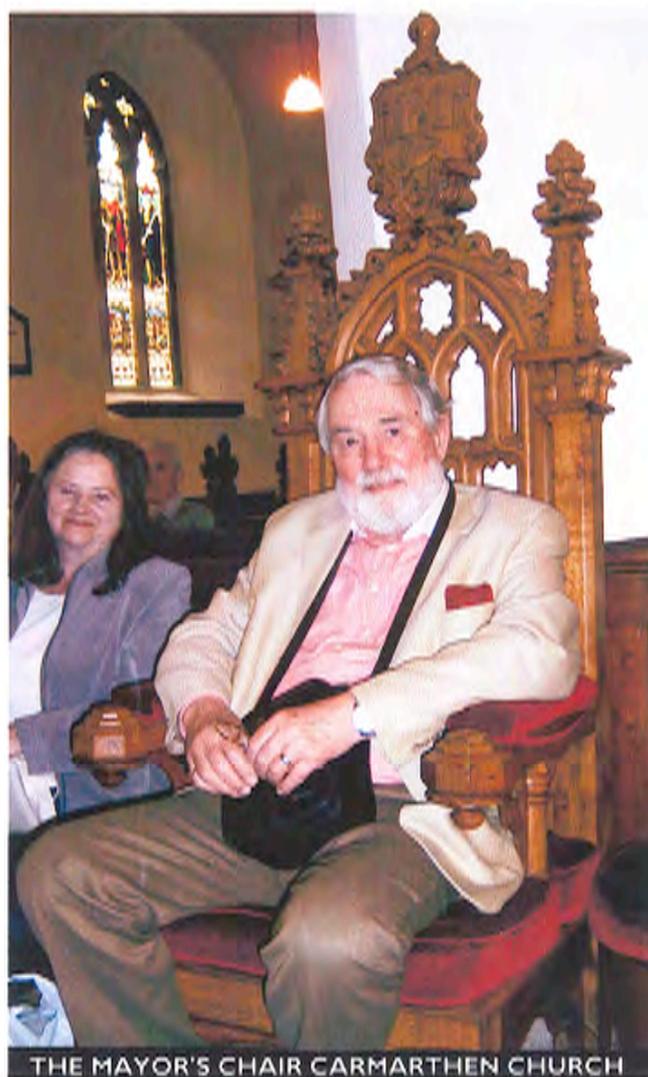




Abergavenny Local History Society



THE MAYOR'S CHAIR CARMARTHEN CHURCH

# NEWSLETTER No 24

## AUGUST 2008

[www.abergavennyhistory.co.uk](http://www.abergavennyhistory.co.uk)  
Charity registration number 1098582

**PROGRAMME****2008**

- Thurs.  
25th Sept. Mr Trevor Fishlock \*  
THE TREASURE TRAIL
- Thurs.  
16th Oct. Mr John Davies  
JOHN POYER - THE TRAGIC TALE  
OF A MAYOR OF PEMBROKE
- Tues.  
28th Oct. SKITTLES EVENING  
At the King of Prussia
- Thurs.  
27th Nov. Mr Michael Houlihan  
WORLD WAR ONE
- Mon.  
15th Dec. MEMBERS' CHRISTMAS DINNER  
At the Saint Michael's Centre,  
Abergavenny

**2009**

- Thurs.  
22nd Jan. Mr Tim Hoverd  
ROMAN ROADS IN HEREFORDSHIRE
- Thurs.  
26th Feb. Dr. Derek Bissell  
DR. SAMUEL JOHNSON AND HIS  
DICTIONARY
- Thurs.  
19th March Mr Arthur Peplow  
THE HIDDEN WORLD OF  
MISERICORDS
- Thurs.  
16th April Mr David Barnes  
WELSH REVIVALS OF 1859 AND 1904
- Thurs.  
21st May 32nd ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING  
Followed by: Mr Frank Olding  
ROMAN ABERGAVENNY - UPDATE

September 25<sup>th</sup>: Trevor Fishlock on "The Treasure Trail" You will need a ticket for this first talk of the winter season of lectures.

Take your new membership card for 2008-9 (the pale grey one!) to the Box Office, Abergavenny Borough Theatre, to request a free ticket.

If you have not yet renewed your membership, Please send your subscription (£10 per person) to the Membership Secretary as soon as you can so that your new card can be sent to you

THE SOCIETY MEETS AT THE BOROUGH THEATRE AT 7.30 pm

## NEW COMMITTEE MEMBERS

If you would like to volunteer as a committee member we would very much like to hear from you.

We are lucky to have a very hard working committee of 15 to make our society run as efficiently as possible but we are always on the look-out for more people to help out.

If you would like to join, please contact the chair, Irena (tel 01873 853957) or the Honorary Secretary, Gill (tel 01873 853324) for more information.

If you don't want to join in an official capacity but would still like to help out in any way from stuffing envelopes when we're doing a mail-shot; becoming a fire-marshal, helping out on Ken's rota for Churchwatch at St Mary's Priory Church; or in any way, we would be very pleased to hear from you.

The vacant roles are:-

### **Publications Organiser**

**Social Secretary** - to organise events that are neither lectures nor visits.

**Present committee roles** in addition to committee activity are

Irena Morgan	Chair; Town Guide, Publicity & Press, Website. Acting Social Secretary.
Stephen Morgan	Treasurer, Acting Social Secretary.
Gill Wakley	Secretary; Powerpoint Projectionist; Town Guide, Publicity & Press.
Paddy Beynon	Floodlighting Treasurer; Victorian Garden at the Museum; Town Guide.
Jeanette Butt	Refreshments at Lectures.
Ken Key	Floodlighting Maintenance; Audiovisual Equipment; Town Guide; Newsletter Editor; Church Stewarding Rota.
Barbara & David Powell	Lecture Programme.
Bryn Seabourne	Assists at Lectures with Foyer Activities; Town Guide.
Margot Seabourne	Visits Treasurer.
Marian Senior	Assists at Lectures with Foyer Activities.
John Skinner	Visits Organiser; Town Guide.
Sue Smith	Membership Secretary.
Jane White	Schools Liaison; Refreshments at Lectures; Town Guide.

## TOWN WALLS – defence, status or commerce?

Mark Lewis, at his lecture to the Society in April, told us about modern interpretations of Caerwent. The walls are of particular note with a mile-long circuit still standing. The stone defences date from around the end of the second century AD and replaced earlier earth ramparts that once stood around 7.5m (25ft) in height and were further protected by a double ditch. The north and south walls (the south being the best preserved) are studded with polygonal towers that were added in the fourth century.



The Town Wall of Caerwent

Mark Lewis pointed out that Roman towns were *not* usually walled, unlike Roman Forts. Special dispensation had to be obtained from the Emperor to erect walls around towns, as walls might have been used to *keep out* those collecting tax on behalf of the Roman Empire. Mark thought that the walls were added later (as they wiggle around existing houses) and were put up to defend the town from marauders – perhaps invading up the rivers from the Irish Sea or the Severn Estuary. Some authorities believe that inter-tribal warfare escalated after the withdrawal of Roman troops, requiring additional fortifications. This set me thinking about what town walls were for.

Most of us will be aware of the impressive town walls built by the conquering Edward 1<sup>st</sup> in conjunction with his equally imposing castles. Edward ordered the building of the castles as a demonstration of his power and of his mastery of warfare, as they incorporate many new and effective features such as triple arrow slots to cover the whole range of fire along the wall. What is not so often appreciated is that he also built towns next to the castles, importing the inhabitants (often the artisans and clerks involved with building the castle) and expelling the native Welsh. The walls for these towns were built together with the defences of the castle. These town walls are still very impressive, especially those at Conway, which can still be walked. The section between the Mill Gate and the next tower has twelve projections – public privies that were built in 1286 at a cost of £15, directly behind the medieval administrative headquarters!

The walls, like many other town walls, were ineffective against determined attack, as Owain Glyn Dwr sacked the town and burnt those buildings down.



Exterior of Millgate Conway Town Walls, the privies are just beyond the left hand tower, overhanging the wall.

The walls of the towns attached to Edward's castles were clearly there to impress and to protect the inhabitants from the rebellious and excluded Welsh. At Caernarfon, at the end of the first building phase, the north wall of the castle was defended only by the town walls and a wide rock cut ditch. Madog ap Llywelyn over-ran the castle through this ditch in his revolt of 1294, and succeeded in burning part of the castle and damaging the town walls. The English retook the castle next summer and orders were given to make the castle defensible again by 1295. The town walls and castle were repaired, and the north wall of the castle was finally added, including the King's Gate. By 1330, the building payments ceased. Again here, the town walls were clearly defensive and a demonstration of the English King's power.

What of the walls at Cardiff? In 1111, it is said that Robert Fitzhamon built a wall around the fortified town of Cardiff. In 1184, this was described as a timber palisade with four gates – the West and South gates giving access to the river. Not a very effective defence, as the Normans denied the Welsh access to the river, provoking an attack when the defences were burnt down the following year.



A similar palisade town wall at Hereford,

In 1270 Gilbert de Clare had the wooden palisades replaced by stone. A chequered history ensued over the years with much building and rebuilding and changes to the gates as the River Taff changed its course. It is interesting to read, however, that following Owain Glyn Dwr's attack and burning of the town, the walls were not restored for twenty-five years. Was this because of the destruction in the town, so that no funds were available or because it was judged safer to leave the town open and not a target for attack, or because no authority for collecting taxes was established?

A survey of walled towns in Britain makes the case for considering each of them individually. The majority of towns in medieval Britain were not walled. The authors of the survey estimate that of 640 towns in England, 211 were defended. In Wales, the proportion was higher; of 91 towns, 55 were walled. Many of the towns in Wales came into existence after the Norman invasion. They housed the supporting retinue and artisans of the lord given that territory by the king and were defended against the local Welsh. Abergavenny received murage grants in 1241-6 and 1259-64<sup>2</sup> to provide a bank and ditch. By 1300, only 7 per cent of the inhabitants of Abergavenny were Welsh. The curfew bell in St John's church tower was sounded to warn people that the town gates would be shut – the Welsh outside and the "foreigners" inside. Abergavenny was walled in stone with the help of a series of grants in 1295-1301 and again in 1314-19, enclosing a greater area than before. Sometimes town walls were built as part of a political or military plan, like Edward's castles and accompanying towns, but his buildings were also to impress and subdue – symbols of power and authority. Initiatives to build walls around towns controlled by ecclesiastical bodies seemed generally less successful. For example, the proposal to encircle Wells in Somerset just faded away. In other cases, it seems that the purpose of the walls, and the gates through them, was more of a commercial enterprise. If you have a gate, especially an impressive one to show your power, you can control and levy a tax on everything coming in through it. For example, permission to enclose the town of Great Yarmouth was granted by Henry III in 1261. The wall was not started until 1285 and was paid for by a tax on goods brought into the town. Many citizens made a voluntary contribution. The work took many years, continuing until around 1400, and had ten gates. Restricting and controlling the access made it easier to regulate traders and make sure all tolls were paid. Monmouth's defences were rebuilt in stone over a hundred year period from 1250. It was the responsibility of the townspeople to build the walls which they did as a symbol of civic pride, a deterrent to attack and to be able to charge a toll on people bringing goods, produce and animals through the gates. Monmouth even charged a murage toll (to pay for the walls) on the boats carrying stone along the Monnow. In conclusion, town walls were as much about demonstrating power and control, and generating

income from taxes, as about providing defence. In fact, they rarely seemed to be effective against a sustained attack – especially against the Welsh, perhaps because of the sympathisers within the walls!

Creighton O & Higham R. *Medieval Town Walls: An Archaeology and Social History of Urban Defence*. Tempus Books, Stroud, 2005.

Griffiths RA, Hopkins T & Howell R (Eds) *The Age of the Marcher Lords, c1070-1536*. Vol 2 of *The Gwent County History*. Univ of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2008.

**Gill Wakely**

## **GUNTER MANSION; LOWER CROSS STREET**

Readers of the newsletter will remember that this important house is under threat from deterioration. The house of Thomas Gunter was well known in Abergavenny as a meeting place for Catholic worshippers during the late 17th Century. At this time, Catholics were persecuted in Britain and to be associated with them could be dangerous. The magistrates were pressed into arresting two local priests, David Lewis, a son of the headmaster of the Abergavenny Grammar School and Phillip Evans who both said Mass in the secret chapel in Gunter House.

In 1907, whilst renovating the interior of the house, the attic chapel was discovered with graffiti and a representation of 'The Adoration of the Magi', now in Abergavenny museum. The first floor has a fine plaster ceiling

Following pressure from our Society, this house has now been surveyed together with the conservation officer for Monmouthshire County Council. A schedule of remedial work has been drawn up and the owners are being pressed to complete this work, especially to make the building water tight and prevent further dry rot occurring.



## ALLAN PROBERT

The Abergavenny Local History Society evolved from small beginnings in the early 1960s and thrives today with some 400 members owing a tremendous debt to Allan Probert who died recently aged 75



Gwyn Jones, Ruth White and my late wife Freda Key, needing a project when the County took over the museum, started the Abergavenny Archaeology Group and engaged Allan Probert, a local builder, to do some decorating in the Archaeology room in the Castle. He became so interested in what we were doing that Archaeology took over his life and he achieved great acclaim in his new chosen profession.

Members spent many happy hours with him on the Twyn-y-Gaer hill fort. When the group wanted a second dig in the town, Allan found the 'Ewer's Garden' site which I directed in a very amateur way.

Allan, Jeremy Knight, Father Fabian Radcliffe, George Boon and others gave us immense opportunities as amateurs which would not be available to us today.

Our Active Local History Society evolved from this group and acknowledges its debt to Allan Probert, a truly remarkable man.

Ken Key

## TOWN TOURS AND OTHER ACTIVITIES

We are increasingly asked to provide guided tours and would like more volunteers to join our team. Each year, we run two or three 'Town Tours' around the time of the former Abergavenny Festival in late July and the beginning of August and on average two groups a year ask us to conduct guided walks around the town. The Farmers' Market Association has now asked us to have a tour focussing on the history of Abergavenny the Market Town which we have organised for July 24th, August 28th and possibly September 25th. If you would like to volunteer as a guide, please contact Irena Morgan (tel 01873 853957) for more information..

Others are arranged from time to time. They usually start from the castle and take about 1 ½ hours. Look out for notices about activities of the Society in the local press and on notice boards throughout the summer.

## BOOKS AND LEAFLETS ON OUR LOCAL HISTORY

We should soon be celebrating the publication of two books, one by our Honorary President Gwyn Jones and the other by an Honorary Member of the Society, Frank Olding, the Heritage Officer for Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council, and former curator of Abergavenny Museum.

We will be reprinting Gwyn's book '**Medieval Abergavenny**', one of the highly successful series he has written about the town's history and which have been out of print for some years. All his books have proved to be very popular as have his leaflets of '**A Walk Around Abergavenny**' which are still on sale. In the last two years we have sold 600 to outlets around the town.

Frank's new book will be '**Roman Abergavenny**' which, some of you will have already noticed in next year's programme, he will follow-up with a talk prior to the next AGM in May.

This is the second of Frank's books that we have been privileged to publish. The previous one, **Abergavenny: The Urban Archaeology**, has almost sold out.

## MEMORIES OF SUMMER VISITS

I have many special memories of events that happened during the 23 years I managed the Summer Visits Programme.

We were usually lucky with the weather, but I remember the time when Richard Keen took us, as part of a visit, to see the Cholera Graveyard on the hills above Tredegar. It was a terrible day with the rain coming down horizontally. Richard told us all about it from inside the coach, but he hadn't bargained for some of our intrepid members who insisted on walking in the driving rain across about 400 yards of moorland to the site. He, of course, had to accompany them. I didn't!

In 1983 our weekend visit was centered on Canterbury and included a guided walk around Sandwich. We had four guides and split the group between them. Unfortunately, the guide with our party was hopeless and I am sure she had never been round Sandwich before. We started off with 12 members but gradually people got bored and drifted off and we finished up with the guide and two members. We all knew little more about Sandwich than when we started.

For the first twelve years, in order to keep costs down, we stayed in University accommodation on our weekend visits. Probably the best accommodation was at Nottingham University where the door off the main corridor led into a small hall with one single bedroom either side with a bathroom in between. One of our lady members was a doctor and I listed her name as Doctor X. Unfortunately, the University assumed that she was male and allocated the other room to a single male. The lady was having none of this and had to be resettled elsewhere.

The first hotel we stayed in was at Old Harlow where we had a terrible storm which flooded the cellar of the hotel and fused all the electricity. The Fire Brigade soon put things to rights but dinner was a little late and we couldn't get a drink because the tills were connected to the power and wouldn't work.

Only twice during the 23 years did the coach break down. The first occasion was on our way to Norwich when a leaking exhaust let fumes into the coach, most unpleasant, but fortunately the driver managed to get it repaired overnight.

The second occasion was at Alsager when on the Sunday morning the coach just would not start. I had to hire another local coach to take us into Nantwich but again the original coach was repaired in time to bring us home on the Sunday afternoon.

On one occasion I had ordered a 52 seater coach for the day visit but the coach company only sent a 49 seater. I was eternally grateful to the four members who volunteered to stay behind. That was the end of that coach company and I changed to the one we still use today.

In 2002 we paid a second visit to Stanton Harcourt Manor only to find that a few days earlier the house had been ram-raided and £250,000 of silver had been stolen.

On our visit to Stanway House we were shown round by the owner Lord Needpath. He was accompanied by his young son who was armed with the largest water pistol I have ever seen, which he was only too happy to demonstrate on us.

I have been asked which place I enjoyed the most. I cannot pick just one out of over 200 places we visited but five come especially to mind. These are Buckingham Palace, The Mary Rose, Escomb Saxon Church, Battle Abbey and the site of the Battle of Hastings in 1066. It looked a very peaceful place but it was there that the whole future history of England was changed in a day.

Lastly, and on reflection, the best was the Abbots Lodging at Much Wenlock. The Society was allowed to be one of the first groups ever to look over it thanks to a chance meeting I had with the owner. He had come down to St Mary's church to look at the restoration work on the monuments. I was on Churchwatch that day and we talked about the History Society and Abergavenny history and he mentioned the work which he and his actress wife Gabrielle Drake were doing on the property in Much Wenlock. They were spending a fortune on the restoration work and I eventually persuaded him to allow us to pay a visit.

I miss organising the Summer Visits but I am now quite happy to leave all the arranging to the very capable John Skinner and I now enjoy the visits without having to worry if I have left anyone behind.

Alan Spink