

# ***GWENT COUNTY HISTORY ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER SUMMER/AUTUMN 2013***

# **COMPLETION**

The publication of the fifth volume of the Gwent County History in June marked the completion of a major publishing project by the University of Wales Press and a massive achievement for the Gwent County History Association.

As Martin Culliford, GCHA Chair, pointed out in his forward to the final volume, it was seventeen years ago, at a meeting of Gwent Local History Council, that he put forward the idea of producing a county history. At the time, many doubted whether this was anything more than a pipedream, yet once it was established that Professor Ralph Griffiths had agreed to become General Editor, it was quickly accepted that the dream would become reality.

Inevitably, there were setbacks and frustrations along the way, but the dedicated work of editors and contributors meant that, piece by piece, the jigsaw came together. We can now look back with pride on an achievement that will serve the people of Gwent and beyond for generations to come.

The achievement was all the greater given that it was competed with very little direct public funding, although with the cooperation of universities and libraries and other local institutions.

Although the initial publication project is complete, the work does not stop. As Professor Griffiths pointed out in his preface, the *History* does not cover every significant aspect of Gwent's history. 'Like all good history books, it whets the appetite and draws the reader's attention to subjects that merit further research.'

There is plenty for present and future generations of local historians, professional and amateur, to discover, explain, reinterpret and publish. Central to this will be the continued work of the county's two highly respected journals, *Gwent Local History* and the *Monmouthshire Antiquary*. Everything should be done to support these journals and the organisations that publish them.

## **TREDEGAR FIGURES HONOURED**

Steel plaques have been unveiled in Tredegar to commemorate two important local figures who made major contributions to the development of the USA. Rhys Davies helped to build the Tredegar Ironworks in Richmond, Virginia, while Daniel Gooch developed a trans-atlantic telephone cable. Member of the Blaenau Heritage Forum raised £600 for the plaques.

# DRESSING A POSTBOX



In some rural parts of England, particularly the Peak District of Derbyshire, the ancient summer custom of well dressing still takes place each year. Some suggest this originated as thanks for the purity of the water during the period of the Black Death. It involves decorating wells and springs with designs created from flowers. This summer in Newport, by contrast, a post box was decorated.

On 2 June 2013 a group of residents and politicians gathered on the pavement beside a small George V post box set in the stone wall on Risca Road. The purpose was to commemorate the occasion, 100 years ago, when a suffragette attempted to blow up the post box with a home made bomb as part of the militant campaign for women's right to vote and to decorate the post box with flags and flowers in the purple, white and green colours of the suffragette movement. The suffragette was Margaret Mackworth 2<sup>nd</sup> Viscountess Rhondda (12<sup>th</sup> June 1883 - 20 July 1958) daughter of David Alfred Thomas 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Rhondda of Llanwern, a Liberal politician with coal and shipping interests, and Sybil Haig.

In 1908 Margaret married Sir Humphrey Mackworth and in the same year joined the Women's Social and Political Union. Subsequently she became secretary of the Newport branch and campaigned across South Wales. Her action at the post box resulted in her arrest and trial at the Sessions House in Usk. On being sentenced she refused an offer to pay her fine and was imprisoned in Usk gaol from where she was released after a five day hunger strike.



At the outbreak of the first world war the suffragettes' militant campaign was wound down and Viscountess Rhondda worked with her father who was sent to the United States of America by Lloyd George to help secure the supply of munitions for the British forces . On their return journey in 1915 they were travelling on RMS Lusitania when it was hit by a torpedo from a German submarine. Fortunately they survived and Viscountess Rhondda, who took her father's title on his death in 1918, continued to work and campaign all her life for women's rights. She died in 1958 just a month or so before women were first allowed to sit in the House of Lords.

-Kath Norton

# PROFUMO: THE GWENT CONNECTION

This year marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the infamous ‘Profumo Scandal’ which led to the resignation of John Profumo, Minister for War in the Conservative Government, following his association with ‘calls girls’ Mandy Rice-Davies and Christine Keeler.

What is less well known is that the Profumo family’s first incursion into British politics was in Gwent. Joseph Alexander Profumo, grandfather of John, stood as Liberal candidate for South Monmouthshire in the General Election of 1892

Profumo was an Italian nobleman (3<sup>rd</sup> Baron Profumo of the Kingdom of Sardinia), born during the revolutionary upheavals of 1848, who came to England in 1864 at the age of 16.

He had made his fortune in life assurance as founder of the Provident Association of London (later the Provident Life Association), which he founded in 1877 and which by 1892 employed 5000 agents. The firm remained in his family until it was sold in the 1980s for £6 million.

Profumo’s business methods came in for some criticism, leading to questions in the House of Commons and accusations in the press that he was exploiting ‘poor and thrifty widows’.

Having failed to win the nomination for North Islington, he sought the nomination for South Monmouthshire, where Colonel F C Morgan would be defending one of the largest Conservative majorities in the country. The local Liberals were no doubt attracted by the fact that he promised to meet the whole cost of the campaign, estimated at £1500, from his own pocket.

During the campaign he openly sought to attract the working class vote, calling for a land tax, an Eight Hours Bill to restrict the working hours of miners and condemning mineowners’ attempts to cut wages. He also supported Home rule for Ireland and, if the people demanded it, Wales.

Throughout the campaign he faced vicious opposition from the pro-Conservative *Western Mail* which, having initially referred to him ‘a German baron’, continued to highlight his foreign origins and on one occasion published a cartoon depicting him as a organ grinder complete with monkey. It gave prominence to a group of the Provident Life Association’s disgruntled shareholders from Cardiff, leaving the impression that Profumo was not to be trusted. It consistently referred to him as the ‘Radical candidate’ rather than the Liberal candidate.

Following a vigorous campaign, in the election he polled 4700 votes, but was defeated by Morgan, who received 5421.

His business career continued to flourish, making him a very wealthy man, although it continued to attract controversy. In 1911 he was plaintiff in a major libel case in which he successfully sued a former employee who had distributed leaflets calling him a ‘swindler’. In this case he was defended by his son, Albert (father of John), who was to go on to enjoy a successful legal career, becoming a KC in 1916. Baron Profumo died in Paris later in 1911.

(Sources: *Western Mail* 9.11.1891, 22.11.1891, 27.11.1891, 3.12.1892, 8.12.1891, 5.2.1892  
*Pall Mall Gazette* 6.5.1889. *Daily Telegraph* 20.7.2013.

-Peter Strong

# OBITUARY: PAUL COURTNEY

## 1955-2013

The editors of the County History have been saddened to hear of the death of Paul Courtney, who made a major contribution to volume 2 and volume 3, both his own chapters and in research which was used by others.

After studying Archaeology and Local History at Cardiff and Leicester, Paul returned to Cardiff to work on a Ph. D. on the rural landscape of southern and eastern Gwent in the medieval and early modern period. This was pioneering work in many ways. It introduced the Leicester discipline of landscape history to the study of Wales, and it began the plugging of the 'Gwent-shaped hole' that marked the study of our region's history until recently. He went on to lead an excavation in the outer court of Tintern Abbey and to work on the excavation of medieval Usk, both research projects which have made a major contribution to the understanding of our county. His study of the Usk excavations went beyond the usual limits of archaeological excavation reports, offering a ground-breaking analysis of the development of Gwent's urban framework.

Paul was awarded a Ph. D. in 1984 but for some reason never secured the academic appointment his intellectual achievements merited – possibly, some said, because of his youthful involvement in radical politics. Instead, he was one of that declining breed, the independent scholars, working as a freelance on a range of historical and archaeological projects. He became one of the country's leading experts on ceramics and appeared on Time Team, identifying minuscule fragments of pot with amazing confidence. This led to

an interest in the more theoretical aspects of material culture, across Europe and in northern America, in which he had a very distinguished record of publication: though as he himself said, this tended to upset his archaeological employers 'by making life more complicated'. He was for some years co-editor of the journal *Post-Medieval Archaeology* and was much in demand as a conference speaker.

Paul's wife Yolanda is also a distinguished archaeologist and was until recently head of museums in Leicestershire. We send her our sincere condolences: Paul was one of the pioneers of our county's history, and he will be much missed.

-Madeleine Gray

The Trustees of Usk Rural Life Museum are hoping to buy the 16<sup>th</sup> century malt barn and adjoining buildings, which house the museum, from Monmouthshire County Council. Owning the building will allow the museum to expand through greater use of grants.

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