

THE VISION OF '96 DRAWS NEAR

At our last Annual General Meeting, held on 17th November in the Centenary Hall Usk, Chairman Martin Culliford recalled how back in 1996 Usk had been the venue for the first meeting of what was to become the Gwent County History Association. Just four people met to discuss the project, which had arisen out of an idea discussed at the Gwent Local History Council.

Now, after many years of work and numerous setbacks and frustrations, the vision will soon become a reality, with the publication of the final volume.

Volume 5 is scheduled to be published in June 2013. General Editor, Professor Ralph Griffiths was able to report that the volume would follow the format described in the last issue of the newsletter. He pointed out that the period covered would end 'severely' in the year 2000, with historians 75 years hence perhaps being able to decide the most appropriate cut-off point for a study of the 20th century.

Treasurer Andrew Morgan was able to report that we now have 111 members. Sales figures were as follows:
Volume 1 (published 2003): 513
Volume 2 (published 2007): 393
Volume 3 (published 2008): 271
Volume 4 (published 2011): up-to-date figures awaited.

The financial situation was very healthy and once all costs for Volume 5 had been paid a significant surplus would be available for future projects.

As with previous volumes, the University of Wales Press will be contacting members with a pre-publication offer.

A celebration of the publication of the final volume is planned for September at the Gwent Archives in Ebbw Vale.

NEW BOOK

'The Place Names of Eastern and Western Gwent', which combines material from the previously published separate volumes by Graham Osborne and Graham Hobbs, is shortly to be published by Old Bakehouse Publications.

CONTACT US

All general correspondence should be sent to:

Kathleen Norton, Secretary GCHA, 2
Brunel Avenue, High Cross, Rogerstone,
Newport, South Wales. NP10 0DN
kathleen.norton@ntlworld.com

Correspondence relating to finance and membership should be sent to:

Andrew Morgan, Treasurer, GCHA, 72
Risca Road, Newport, NP20 4JA Tel:
01633 547475 andrew.m1@talktalk.net

NEW RESEARCH INTO CHARTIST LETTERS

At the annual 'Chartist Convention' held in Newport on November 3rd 2012, Les James reported on a research project being carried out in partnership with Colin Gibson of Gwent Archives. The project will investigate the letters written on board the prison ship 'Mandarin' which took the Chartists to Van Diemen's Land, looking particularly at how the letters were written and how and why they survived.

Les reported that the three Chartist leaders, Frost, Williams and Jones, were treated as passengers on the ship, sharing a cabin 8ft by 12ft, with each having a sleeping bunk. They had frequent access to the ship's doctor, Doctor McKechnie, who supplied them with books, pens, ink and paper. He encouraged all three to write, but kept a close eye on what they wrote and where their letters went. Frost, especially, needed little encouragement, having always been a prolific letter writer. All three praised the doctor for the help he gave them.

Six letters are known to have been written on the 'Mandarin': one by Jones, two by Williams and three by Frost. These are known either through printed versions in newspapers or through copies made by Home Office officials. More were written but don't seem to have survived.

The most famous of the letters is the 'confession letter' written by Zephaniah Williams, in which he claims that the Newport Rising was planned as the trigger for a nationwide rising aimed at overthrowing the government and creating a Chartist Republic. There has been considerable debate over whether these claims were genuine. Les pointed out that it was written when the 'Mandarin' was in the middle of the Indian Ocean, at a point

when many prisoners were at breaking point, giving up all hope of seeing their homes and families ever again. This state of mind sometimes led to confessions, suggesting that Williams may well have been telling the truth.

GWENT STATION TO ST FAGANS

The old railway buildings from Raglan have been taken to St Fagans for re-erection as part of the National History Museum. The station, which was visible from the A449 just south of Raglan, opened in 1876 and closed in 1955. It contains many original features such as a platform canopy and wrought iron brackets for paraffin lamps.

THE DEAD PARROT SKETCH!

'On Sunday last, two servant men at Llanvihangel Mill, near Rhyd-y-blew (Beaufort), were carelessly playing with a blunderbuss, not knowing it to be loaded, when the piece suddenly went off and killed a favourite parrot belonging to Mr Davis, the occupier of the mill. The parrot was in a cage which was blown to atoms.'

- 'Monmouthshire Merlin'

- 17th September 1831



REVIEW OF VOLUME 3

A long and highly favourable review by Dr Perry Gauci of Lincoln College Oxford of *The Gwent County History* Volume 3 was published in the *English Historical Review* (October 2012).

Extracts are printed below.

‘This handsome volume ... tackles a host of social, political and cultural themes to trace the area’s varied responses to its new status as an English county after the Union of 1536. With no less than sixteen contributors, ranging from senior academics to independent historians, the book makes a substantial contribution to the history of the region, and highlights important avenues for future research.

Although the book is not formally divided into two parts, the first eight chapters take the reader through the religious and political history of the county, leaving the other eleven chapters to cover social, economic and cultural themes. This structure is generally well-advised, although those unfamiliar with the county

might have wished for a stronger overall introduction to acclimatise themselves to the county’s geography and historical development before the Act of Union. The early chapters on Tudor Monmouthshire do indeed highlight the artificiality of the new county unit, and the essential continuities of its early history are recognised by most of the contributors. Even at elite level, the dominant aristocratic families would retain a strong Welsh character into the Stuart period, although after the civil wars they would migrate into a more national orbit. For those lower down the social ladder, the pace of change was even less dramatic, for the county remained largely rural in character until the onset of rural development in the later eighteenth century...

...The contributors’ use of unpublished studies underlines their determination to provide a comprehensive county history and the accessibility of the writing will attract a wider audience ... It is clear that Monmouthshire will soon boast a series to rival any of its Welsh or English counterparts.’

LIFE AFTER VOLUME 5

The publication of Volume 5 this year will see the completion of the initial Gwent County History project. But after all these years of work we are just getting into our stride!

It is anticipated that, once all expenses have been paid, there will be a significant sum of money remaining in our account and available for future projects. We would like to hear suggestions from our members for such projects.

Articles from all past issues of *Gwent Local History*, journal of the Gwent Local History Council can be viewed on the Welsh Journals Online website produced by the National Library of Wales.

VISIT SADBROOK HISTORY CENTRE

Home of the Severn Tunnel
Open 11am-3pm Sat, Sun
May-September
(or at other times for pre-booked groups)

FREE ENTRY
(Group tours of Sudbrook available)

IN CASE YOU WONDERED...

One problem faced by the writers of chapters in the Gwent County History is that strict word limits mean that on occasion they are unable to elaborate on points they make. This column aims to provide such elaboration on points that have aroused our curiosity. (But please be aware that the original writers are in no way responsible for what follows!)

In his chapter on 'Popular Movements 1780-1850' in Volume 4, Professor Chris Williams refers to the Scotch Cattle as using 'ritual humiliation in the manner of *ceffyl pren*'. An explanation of *ceffyl pren* ('wooden horse') appeared in 'The Times' on August 12th 1843 in a report from a special correspondent investigating the Rebecca Riots:

'In a long conversation with a gentleman well informed on the character and habits of the people relative to the peculiarity of the nocturnal meetings of the Rebeccaites, which, held in England, would be looked on with great alarm, he attributed it to the still existing remnant of an ancient custom among the Welch, and to which they still cling. They formerly had a kind of social law for the correction of moral offences, called the "ceffil pren". All the neighbours would assemble at night, and carry a wooden horse before the door of the offender, making hideous noises. If this did not effect a remedy, the offending party was again visited, and forcibly mounted upon the horse, and carried about amidst jeers and derision. The same custom existed in Glamorganshire, under the name of 'Scotch cattle'; and some remnants may still be found in the northern parts of England of a similar custom, there called 'rough music' and 'riding stang'.

In Wales, on these social visits for correcting moral delinquencies, it was customary, while the 'ceffil pren' was going on, to fire guns, and blow horns, and make all manner of noises. Sometimes when a party was forcibly mounted on the wooden horse, violent resistance was met with, and often bloodshed ensued, and this led to several severe sentences by Mr Baron Gurney, which in some degree checked the practice. But it is thought by many who know Welsh habits and character that the 'ceffil pren' is an old custom revived, the wrong to be remedied being changed to turnpike-gates; for there are the same secret meetings at night, and the same firing of guns and noises while they are engaged knocking down the gates.'

NEWS IN BRIEF

Blaenavon Walking Festival (6th-12th April 2013) will offer an opportunity to explore the landscapes of the Blaenavon World Heritage Site. The programme of walks can be found on www.visitblaenavon.co.uk.

Caxton Tower, a former hunting lodge near Monmouth is to be restored after Monmouthshire County Council gave planning permission to the owner, Mr Graham Long. The tower was formerly part of the Hendre Estate, owned by the Rolls family and later became an observation post used by the Forestry Commission.

A plaque commemorating John Williams of Cwm, the most highly decorated Welsh soldier of the Great War, is to be hung in the General Offices at the old Ebbw Vale Steelworks after being restored.