

GWENT COUNTY HISTORY ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER AUTUMN 2016

FILM DAY SCHOOL SUCCESS

The day school held jointly by Gwent County History Association and the Monmouthshire Antiquarian Association on 15th October was a great success. More than 50 people attended at the St Michael's Centre in Abergavenny to watch a series of early documentary films relating to the history of Gwent.

The day began with *The Fair Land of Gwent* made by the old Monmouthshire County Council in 1967 as a means of attracting industry and tourism. The film, which has a commentary by Wynford Vaughan Thomas, was first shown in the Little Theatre in Newport in January 1968. A VHS tape version, held by Gwent Archives, had been transferred to DVD for the occasion. Unbeknown to us Chris Barber, who attended the day school, actually appeared in the film with an Outward Bound Group.

Our next film was a remarkable promotional movie made by the Ebbw Vale Iron, Steel and Coal Company in 1919. The silent movie was rescued from its rusting canister by members of the Ebbw Vale Works Archival Trust. Mel Warrender, Chair of the Trust, gave a commentary on the film. DVD versions can be purchased from the Ebbw Vale Works Museum.

John Evans then presented some short clips on the destruction of the village of Pwll Ddu, near Blaenavon. The houses were demolished in the 1960s by the local authority as part of a slum clearance scheme. In spite of the isolated and harsh conditions in which they lived, many villagers deeply resented being forcibly removed from the only homes they had known and the loss of community that this entailed.

This was followed by *Eastern Valley*, made in 1937 about attempts to deal with mass unemployment in South Wales by forming what would now be called social enterprises. A farm was established near Cwmbran and workshops in a disused brewery in Cwmavon. John Evans explained that the Quakers, who were behind several such schemes, did useful work but their 'interference' wasn't always welcome.

A Time to Heal (1963) dealt with the miners' rehabilitation centre at Talygarn near Pontyclun.

The unit had been created in a fine house previously owned by surgeon turned industrialist, George Clark, and opened in 1923. Many Gwent miners received treatment there following accidents in the pits. John Evans pointed out that most of the patients were either young, and more likely to suffer accidents due to inexperience or bravado, or relatively old and lacking the dexterity to avoid dangers.

Peter Strong introduced *Night Shift*, filmed in a Newport munitions factory in 1941, by putting it in the context of the Ministry of Information's attempts to encourage the concept of 'People's War' in which the kitchen front and the factory front would be as important as the battle front.

Byron Grubb introduced two short film made in Ebbw Vale in 1958 –*Whitsun Walks* and *The 1958 National Eisteddfod*. He pointed out that at that time the town was thriving –“the town was steel and steel was the town”- with impressive department stores such as Bonmarche and six Italian cafes. Paul Robeson came to Ebbw vale in 1958 but was not allowed to sing at the Eisteddfod itself because he could not sing in Welsh, so sang three songs at a service in the Eisteddfod Hall after the festival had closed.

We were treated to first class hospitality by the St Michael's Centre, including an excellent buffet lunch.

AGM AND ANNUAL LECTURE 2016

Our 2017 AGM will be held on Saturday 10th June 2.30 pm. (Venue to be announced.). It will be preceded by a lecture by Dr Ann Benson on the Troy House estate. Dr Benson is a landscape historian and last year published a book on Troy House. She has also written a book on Coton Manor in Northamptonshire and its garden. For details of Dr Benson and her work see www.annbenison.co.uk.

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**HENRY VINCENT IN THE WYE
VALLEY
—NOT YOUR NORMAL
TRAVELOGUE**

The 'Wye Tour' has been the subject of many memoirs, usually from members of the aristocracy or gentry who had undertaken the tour for pleasure. In 1839 the Chartist orator Henry Vincent travelled from Monmouth down the Wye Valley on business —as part of a speaking tour. His observations, which were published in his Chartist newspaper, the *Western Vindicator*, on 30th March 1839, combine an appreciation of the picturesque with his own brand of political analysis.

SATURDAY MARCH 16 -We were unable to get up a meeting in Monmouth this day. The town is very Torified, being under the influence of the Duke of Beaufort. The Tories played us a clever trick. We engaged a bellman to cry a meeting for the Bell Inn, at 7 o'clock, but when we went to the place of meeting we found he had not cried it, having been bribed by the Tories. At the Bell we met about fifty of them who pretended to receive us friendly, and congratulated us on our prospects of a good meeting. We were not to be caught. So we told them they had been mistaken; the night for our meeting was to be held on Monday evening; in fact we had not yet convened it. They expressed their fear that we should not be able to remain until Monday — but we assured them time was of no consequence to us, and that perhaps we might stay a month. They looked surprised, and one after another vanished from our sight. We agreed to call the meeting for Monday night.

SUNDAY, March 17 -Passed the day in Monmouth. The weather cold and stormy. Walked out a short way in the country and retired to bed early.

TUESDAY, March 19 -Took coach for Newport. The scenery between Monmouth and Newport is very delightful. The coach runs about four miles by the side of the river Wye. The scenery within three miles of Chepstow is the finest in the three kingdoms. Ascending a hill, by the side of the Wind Cliff the traveller has a view of the Wye winding its way between rocks covered at their summits with luxuriant foliage. In the distance may be seen the river Severn at seven points, which by a pleasing illusion, appears to overhang the Wye several hundred feet. Birds were singing — trees budding, and all vegetation putting on its virgin dress.

Delightful spot! and yet to think that nearly the whole of this portion of the county of Monmouth belongs to one tyrant, *the Duke of Beaufort*. We passed the ruins of Tintern Abbey.

What cunning dogs the priests have ever been! Let but the ruin of an Abbey be seen, and there we witness the most beautiful portion of a country. So it is with Tintern! I could not help thinking of the time when the priests paid more attention to the poor than they now do. They lived well themselves, but they gave more to the poor than the avaricious body of atheistical parsons connected with our Established Church. Passed the ruins of Chepstow Castle — old Cromwell seems to have played the devil with the aristocratic strongholds in these parts. Passed through the town of Chepstow, and arrived in Newport at 1 o'clock.

AWARD FOR LOCAL HISTORY

The Association's Award for Services to Local History has been presented to the Ebbw Vale Works Archival Trust. The trust runs the Works Museum at Ebbw Vale. The award was received by Mel Warrender at our recent day school on behalf of the trust.

CONGRATULATIONS (1) to Canon Arthur Edwards on the award of his Ph.D (University of Wales Cardiff). His thesis on the Religious and Social History of Monmouthshire 1840-1880 will be of interest to many of our members. We hope to see it made available to a wider audience.

CONGRATULATIONS (2) to the Welsh Georgian Trust which has raised sufficient funds to acquire Gunter Mansion and its secret 17th Century Catholic chapel in Abergavenny thanks to grants from the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF) and the Pilgrim Trust. Having gained ownership the trust will now begin restoring the building.

RECOMMEND A FRIEND

To keep on an even keel financially we need to increase our membership. Do you have a friend or colleague who might be interested in joining the Gwent County History Association and receiving the *Gwent Local History* journal?

If so please send us their name and address and we will send them a complimentary back issue of the journal with an invitation to join. Send details to Peter Strong, GCHA, 8 Deepweir, Caldicot, Mon NP26 5JG or strong@btinternet.com.