

# **CUTS BITE DEEP INTO LOCAL HISTORY**

The financial problems faced by local authorities in Gwent look set to have a major impact on museums and libraries.

There was shock at the news that councillors in Newport were considering the closure of the museum, art gallery and central library in John Frost Square. Following a spirited campaign by FONMAG (Friends of Newport Museum and Art Gallery) the council has made a partial retreat and, at time of writing, is considering plans to keep the facilities open within the same building but with a reduced service, including reduction of opening hours. Curatorial support will be reduced 'to a minimum'. Eight full time equivalent jobs are due to be lost, partly through the library and museum sharing front of house services. Richard Frame, Chair of FONMAG, has questioned whether the loss of so many staff will endanger the security of the collections. Newport council's consideration of its library service has focused largely on the lending libraries, with little being said about the reference library, which holds large collections of documents relating to local history.

Monmouthshire County Council has spent £30,000 on consultants to examine all its heritage attractions, including the museums at Monmouth, Abergavenny and Chepstow and the castle at Caldicot, and to suggest options for the future.

Although the authority has not ruled out keeping some or all of them under its own control, it seems unlikely that this will happen.

In Blaenau Gwent, Bedwellty House was taken over by a local trust in 2014, with job losses.

In Torfaen, Pontypool Museum has been placed in the hands of Torfaen Museum Trust and faces a £19,000 budget shortfall in spite of using a team of 20 volunteers in addition to paid staff. The museum has been energetically pursuing a membership scheme in an attempt to bring down the deficit. This includes a corporate membership scheme in which businesses and local organisations are invited to contribute £60 a year. For this they receive various benefits, including free entry for employees and discounts in the museum shop. Proposals to move the Cordell Museum into Blaenavon Workman's Hall have been accepted by the trustees of the museum but have met with objections that the loss of space at the Workman's Hall will lead to a cut in activities.

The museum at Risca, run by Oxford House House Industrial Archaeology Society, is under threat as Caerphilly County Borough Council is considering selling the building.

With local authorities facing more cuts in funding, it is likely that museums and libraries will come under further pressure.

# THE FUTURE OF MUSEUMS IN GWENT

In response to a call by Cymal (Museums, Archives and Libraries Wales) for views on the future, Jack Hanbury of Pontypool Park submitted a detailed response. Extracts from his letter are printed below. (N.B. Views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of GCHA.)

The debate about the future of local museums should reflect the whole county, and go beyond the status of any single local institute ... I can only comment on Monmouthshire, by which I mean the county (also sometimes called Gwent) not the recent and probably soon to be abolished local authority of the same name. Monmouthshire has some eighteen museums run by six different bodies: five local authorities and WAG (Caerleon and Big Pit). This may create a tension between the immediate demands of the institution (funding, employment etc) and wider issues including narrative, collaboration and duplication. Further, within each local authority, museums are a low priority; museum staff may work alone with little reward or recognition, and the various museums face budget cuts and ultimately the threat of closure.

But the county has a distinct history, as a whole, not as five unitary authorities ... So current local authority structures lie at the heart of the current status of local museums in the county.

I propose the creation of a single museum service for Monmouthshire, whether formal or informal depends on circumstances. But this proposal (if agreed) may not be applicable for other areas of Wales, which may have a more scattered population or less of a shared history. I therefore cannot propose how WAG would legislate, and suggest co-option may be better than coercion.

The role of local museums is inter alia to 1) tell the story of the locality and their collection and 2) display, care for and enhance their collection. But the collection and the story must have their context.

The effect of local government changes depends on what happens; I do not know, and perhaps neither does WAG. Local government uncertainty is now a fact, and the probable outcome may be a continued fragmentation of some kind, with various forms of

voluntary and statutory collaboration. In the debate, museums are likely to be a minor consideration for local or national politicians. Local authorities may also reasonably seek to protect their own patch, and have little incentive to support a unified programme. More detached parties such as Monmouthshire Antiquarians, Gwent County History, and Cymal/WAG may be helpful to balance local interests with a wider perspective.

The demise of any one local museum can be a loss, but need not be so significant, provided the collection can be displayed and the story told elsewhere. But it depends on the museum. The hierarchy of local museums in Monmouthshire was significantly changed many years ago, when the county museum in Newport, which has a collection of sometimes regional significance, was downgraded to be the museum, with a budget and aspiration, of a single local authority. If Newport does not tell the story of the county, which museum does? Or should for example the Chartists have one story in Torfaen and another in Blaenau Gwent? So the loss of Newport would be significant.

But more than their collections and their story, local museums also allow a local community to engage in its history. This must be done at a local level. County and regional museums also engage, but at different levels. Newport should ideally be engaging both 1) telling the story of Newport at a local level, and the story of Monmouthshire at a county level, and 2) regionally with its collections of the wider interest. As it is, Newport is no longer politically the county town, and its Council has little incentive to see its museum as anything other than of local interest ... But museums can usefully share resources and customers with other tourism institutions, such as libraries, art centres, or offices, and these clusters support themselves and are diminished if one component is removed.

Local museums can also provide a use for significant buildings which might otherwise be redundant, although CADW is a notorious exception to any such good practice.

The independence of local museums is likely to be illusory, at least in Monmouthshire. Whatever reasons for setting up trust structures, revenue and capital grant funding from national or local government may remain essential. There seems little opportunity for material trading income or bequests to retain the current local museum structure. But some local museums might reduce their service to largely static displays, in conjunction or sharing premises with another service provider or a profitable trading concern, and this might materially reduce the need for government funds.

Unless there is some co-operation, whether through a recreated single local authority or through a single funder, it is difficult to see how the museums of Monmouthshire will not continue to close, reduce capacity and to fragment their narrative, and so seriously diminish their significance.

But it would be unfortunate if local museum restructuring in Monmouthshire did not include a new museum in Newport, comprising both the existing collection and the undisplayed maritime discoveries. Newport Council seems uncomfortable with its existing museum, and has shown little belief in its heritage or obviously sought to increase its heritage revenue stream ... Newport should be the location for a new county museum and library building, but it would be unreasonable to expect the Council to manage a new asset any better than it has the previous. An independent museum structure therefore seems helpful if Newport were to have the credibility to apply for funding for a new building and service, as it deserves.

The final structure might therefore be a new county museum and library in Newport, to match to the County Record Office in Ebbw Vale, staffed local museums perhaps in Pontypool, Abergavenny, and Chepstow, and largely static displays managed by volunteers in smaller institutes such as Monmouth,

Abertillery or Risca. The whole might be managed and funded centrally, pooling resources such as conservation and outreach, allowing greater validation of and career mobility for staff, and with local political representation on the governing trust. The ownership of the artefacts and buildings may be less relevant; museums currently borrow or share items, and a new county museum service perhaps need not own the artefacts in its collections...

While local government reorganisation seems inevitable, and may be a good thing, it also seems too political and unpredictable to let it determine the future of local museums. Monmouthshire's museums may wish now to collaborate with an independent structure, freeing them from political uncertainty. If the local museums do nothing, and continue to rely separately on local government, they may be faced with continuing reduced funding, and ultimately closure...

***We would like to hear your views on these issues.  
(See contact details on page 4.)***

### **COPIES OF GWENT COUNTY HISTORY STILL AVAILABLE AT DISCOUNTED PRICES**

Volume 5 of the *Gwent County History* is still available at the discounted price of £45 plus £4.50 postage and packing), a reduction of £20 on the list price from:

University of Wales Shop  
12 High Street  
Cardiff  
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**Quoting reference GWENT2013**

Make cheques payable to Awen Cymru Ltd.

Look out for 'artefact of the week' in the *South Wales Argus*. An artefact from Newport Museum will be featured every Monday.

## GENERAL ELECTION -1847

(from the *Monmouthshire Merlin* 14<sup>th</sup>  
August 1847)

POLLING AT CHEPSTOW -The scene of a contested election being a novelty in the town, it excited considerable emotion. Hustings having been erected in Beaufort Square, for the accommodation of voters, clerks &c., the poll commenced at nine o'clock in the morning. The business at first proceeded slowly; at about ten o'clock, however, some excitement was caused by the arrival of a considerable number of partisans of Captain Somerset and Mr Morgan, preceded by a band of music, together with several men with bludgeons half concealed. This was injudicious, as appeared by the result. The party made a good show on entering the town, and proceeded at once to the hustings, where they were received with a mixture of hissing and applause. Some boys having joined in remarks of disappropriation, an active gentleman seized upon one of them and chastised him. This was resented by the crowd, and the gentleman was felled to the ground. Another boy having been laid hold of, he was soon rescued; and now the mob became riotous. Many persons were assaulted on their return from giving their votes ... particularly a gentleman named Norris, of Shirenewton, who was so bedaubed with mud, that he was taken by many to be a scavenger, ere he reached his quarters.

We regret to state that from ten o'clock to one in the morning, the town was kept in alarm by the riotous proceedings of some persons, who demolished every pane of glass at the Beaufort Arms, broke the door and window frames into pieces, and also wreaked their vengeance on several obnoxious individuals, by breaking their windows. Many of the ringleaders have been apprehended.

**CONTACT US:** Correspondence should be sent to: Kathleen Norton, Secretary GCHA, 2 Brunel Avenue, High Cross, Rogerstone, Newport, South Wales. NP10 0DN kathleen.norton@ntlworld.com.

## 2015 DAY SCHOOL

Our 2014 day school on Gwent in the Great War, held in conjunction with the Monmouthshire Antiquarian Association and the Western Front Association, was a great success, with 70 people attending.

This year we are continuing the collaboration with the Monmouthshire Antiquarians. The joint day school will be held at Caerwent Church on Saturday June 20<sup>th</sup> 10 a.m. – 4 p.m. It will focus on the archaeological discoveries at Caerwent. Further details will be issued shortly.

### GCHA AGM

Our AGM will be held on Saturday June 6<sup>th</sup> at 2.30 at St Michaels Centre, Pen-y-pound Road, Abergavenny.

This will be our first AGM following the merging of Gwent County History Association and Gwent Local History Council. It will therefore be a good chance to take stock on the challenges and opportunities that have emerged from the merger and to contribute your views on the future of the organisation and the content of the *Gwent Local History* journal.

We hope you will make every effort to attend. Further details will be issued shortly.

### GWENT IN THE GREAT WAR EXHIBITION

A 'pop-up exhibition' comprising 20 free-standing banners is available free of charge to any organisation wishing to use it. The exhibition was prepared jointly by Gwent Archives and Gwent Branch of the Western Front Association.

The exhibition is particularly suitable for libraries, museums, schools, village halls. It is normally bookable for a fortnight, although longer and shorter periods are possible. We will deliver, set up and collect.

For details contact Pete Strong on [strong@btinternet.com](mailto:strong@btinternet.com) or 01291 425638.

