GWENT COUNTY HISTORY ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER AUTUMN/WINTER 2023

APPROACHING FIFTY

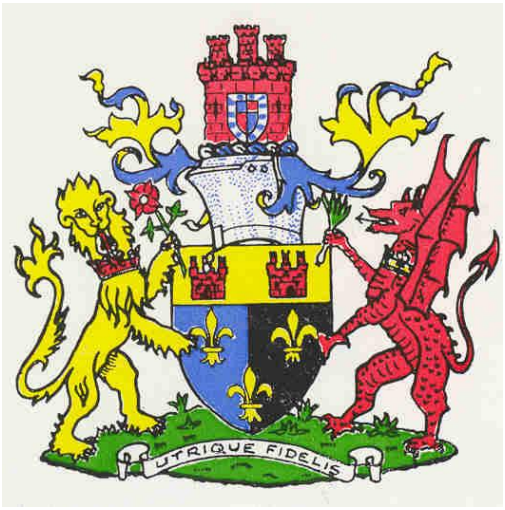
2024 marks the 50th anniversary of the creation of the county of Gwent.

The Local Government Act 1972 came into force on 1st April 1974, with the new county of Gwent replacing the historic county of Monmouthshire, along with some border changes which, for example brought in Brynmawr from the old county of Breconshire.

It swept away the old parish councils, replacing them with 'Community Councils'. In Caldicot the new community council took the opportunity to declare itself to be a town and elected its first mayor. Caldicot town council is planning a number of events to mark the anniversary and is encouraging community groups to organise its own events on a 1970s theme.

The 1972 Act included the brief but highly significant statement that "Wales includes the administrative county of Monmouthshire and the county borough of Newport". The ambiguous position of the old county ("Wales and Monmouthshire") was done away with. The citizens of "old Monmouthshire" were now unambiguously citizens of Wales.

Hopefully this significant anniversary will be marked around the whole of Gwent.



The coat of arms of "old Monmouthshire" was adopted by "new Monmouthshire" when it was created in 1996, but the motto "Faithful to Both" now seems to have little meaning.

FOR YOUR BOOKSHELF

THE COMMONPLACE BOOK OF JOHN GWIN
edited by Maddy Gray, Tony Hopkins and Alun Withey. (South Wales Record Society www.southwalesrecordsociety.co.uk). £18.00

T.A. & C.H. WALKER: SHIPBUILDERS, RAILWAY AND CIVIL ENGINEERING CONTRACTORS by Richard Clammer. £40.00. The story of the Walkers' work both at Sudbrook shipyard and in South America, where they built a sister village to Sudbrook.

IMPORTANT NOTICE: Our bank has informed us that in future cheques must include our full name: Gwent County History Association. GCHA etc will not be accepted.

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 GCHA and receiving the *Gwent Local History* journal for only £15 a year? Send us their name and address and we will send them a complimentary back issue of the journal with an invitation to join.

GET INTO PRINT

We are always on the lookout for articles for our journal, *Gwent County History*. There is no minimum length for articles and help will be given on matters such as style and editing. So don't hide that research under the bed, share it with the world! As well as being distributed to GCHA members and to interested purchasers, copies of our journal go to all four UK national libraries and to Harvard University Library in the USA.

CONTACT US: Correspondence should be sent to: Pete Strong, GCHA, 8 Deepweir, Caldicot, Mon. NP26 5JG strong@btinternet.com

DAY SCHOOL SUCCESS

The annual MAA/GCHA day school for 2023 was hosted by the Caldicot and District Local History Society and visited Rogiet. It was attended by an audience of 30.

Field archaeologist Tim Sandles kicked off with a presentation on 'The Devil's Quoit', a local standing stone He pointed out similarities with standing stones in other parts of Britain, many of which were given an association with the devil, possibly because the Christian Church wanted to warn people away from the remnants of paganism. Tim pointed to various theories and stories relating to the stone, many in common with stones elsewhere, but argued that more research and excavation was needed.

Pete Strong followed with an account of the enclosures of common land in and around Rogiet. He pointed out that the situation was complicated by the fact that much of the common land on that part of the Caldicot Levels was shared by farmers from several manors. An attempt to enclose land in the 1770s was only partially successful, partly because it failed to gain the support of the Morgans of Tredegar House, lords of several of the manors concerned. However, opinion was shifting in favour of enclosure in order to improve the quality of the land and in 1853 1300 acres of land, mainly on the Levels, were enclosed. Only about half went to farmers who previously had rights to use the common, with the rest being sold off to cover legal expenses and the cost of raising parts of the sea wall and building new roads.

Rob Wilsher from Caldicot gave us a personal history of Severn Tunnel Junction. The opening of the station and the marshalling yards in 1886 following the building of the Severn Tunnel turned Rogiet from a small agricultural village into a bustling railway community. Rob had had a lifelong fascination with railways, something which his father, a train driver who had decades of experience of the hard work it involved, could never understand. Rob mixed insights into the development of the Junction, with stories of a youth spent exploring and train spotting.

We then heard about two very different churchmen. Canon Arthur Edwards told as about Archdeacon Conybeare Bruce, one of Gwent's most respected figures, who having been Archdeacon of Monmouth, sought a quieter life as Rector of Rogiet. By contrast, Stephen Williams, Rector of Llanfihangel Rogiet from 1812 until his death in 1860, was something of a black sheep. Although generous to his parishioners and loved by many of them, he exasperated the bishop by frequently getting into debt and spent two spells in debtors' prison. He was subsequently removed from his livings in Magor, Undy and Rogiet, but was allowed to remain at Llanfihangel on the grounds that it was a very small parish and the people loved him.

Following an excellent lunch provided by the volunteers of "Rogiet Community Junction", a charity which holds a weekly café and other events in the Church and Community Hall as part of a long campaign to build a community shop in the village, we visited St Mary's Church, Rogiet, where churchwarden Fay Baxter, told us about its history and development.

Our final talk was a double header. Pete Strong spoke about the growth of Rogiet since 1886, concentrating on the different approaches to housing the growing population. The first railwaymen in the village often relied on overcrowded lodgings. Eventually Chepstow Rural District Council stepped in to build its first council houses in the village, which were occupied in 1921. The original plan was to build 100 houses but only 22 were erected before it was abandoned due to government cuts. At this point the Great Western Railway stepped in, helping its employees to set up the Severn Tunnel Utility Society, a cross between a building society and a housing association. Led by a committee of nine railwaymen it built 90 houses between 1923 and 1939. The growth in the Junction workforce during the Second World War meant there was an urgent need for more housing. Instead of building prefabs, the British Transport Commission built 55 "concrete houses". This proved to be a mistake. They were plagued by damp and demolished in 1955 to be replaced by council houses. The rundown of Severn Tunnel Junction from the 1960s and the closure of the marshalling yards in 1986, along with the large scale sale of council houses from 1979 and the building of large new estates of private housing meant that Rogiet changed from being a railway community to a commuter village. These changes were reflected in a talk by former Rogiet resident Bob Avery, who described how Rogiet once had no fewer than nine shops, all now closed.

All in all, the day was a great success: well attended and with talks which went beyond mere "village history" to look at how wider social and economic developments affected life in one Gwent community.