GWENT COUNTY HISTORY ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER SPRING/SUMMER 2024

THANKS FOR YOUR CONTINUED SUPPORT

We are now in the second round of renewals since we increased our subscription fees from £10 to £15. It was a decision the committee took reluctantly and with some trepidation, concerned that, particularly at a time of 'cost of living crisis' members would feel unable to renew. But with postage costs being increased three times this year alone, we felt we had little choice.

Fortunately our members have proved remarkably loyal and there has been no noticeable level of cancellation –although with an aging membership we do lose some members each year.

Many members who have email responded to an email message in January and renewed early. Others have renewed in April without being reminded. Best of all, many members have annual standing orders.

Where needed, renewal notices which normally go out in March/April are being sent with this newsletter.

So, many thanks for your continued support.

2024 AGM AND ANNUAL LECTURE

The GCHA AGM will take place on Saturday 17th August 2024 at Torfaen Museum, Park Road, Pontypool NP4 6JH. It will be preceded by the Annual Lecture which starts at 2.30**: Histories of Gwent: Past Present and Future - Professor Madeline Gray.**

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.

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

NEWS FROM ABERGAVENNY

The Abergavenny Local History Society has a new journal called the Gobannium Gazette! The people who work so hard in the Research Group were a little hesitant about publishing something about what they had done, feeling that it was not 'academic enough'. However, the purpose of research is to spread the knowledge to others and that cannot be done unless the results are in the public domain. 'Gobannium', thought to be derived from 'river of the blacksmiths or ironworking', is the name given to Abergavenny in the record of the Roman fort built here. It was felt it was a suitable title together with the more modern 'Gazette' derived from the Italian 'Gazetta', a name given to informal news sheets published in Venice in the mid-16th century - as well as being pleasingly alliterative. It's available on https://www.abergavennylocalhistorysociety.org.uk/

The announcement that Plas Gunter Mansion on Cross Street, Abergavenny had been awarded the first tranche of a Heritage Lottery Grant appeared in the last newsletter. Since then, it has been a maelstrom of activity, appointing firms, and individuals, to do the all-important work for the Development Phase over the next 12-14 months. We also need to gear up our activities to raise the money to 'match fund' the HLF grant. To keep up to date on what's happening look at https://www.plasguntermansion.org.uk/

GET INTO PRINT

We are always on the lookout for articles for our journal, *Gwent Local 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.

A FAKE PRINCE IN THE WYE VALLEY

In August 1975 an 'Imperial Russian Museum and Gallery' was opened in St Arvans in the Wye Valley. It was the brainchild of 'Prince Lvov', who claimed to be a descendent of Ivan the Terrible and grandson of the Prime Minister of the Provisional Government that had taken over after the overthrow of the Tsar in the Russian Revolution of March 1917. He was assisted in this project by his wife 'Her Royal Highness Maria Kivitorana,' a Spanish countess.

The 'Prince' told the press that the treasures in the museum had been shipped from Russia to safety in a destroyer loaned by the Czar and were now in a Swiss bank. His father had escaped from Russia in 1920.

He certainly cut an interesting figure. In his riding breeches, boots and Cossack dagger and his habit of 'proferring his hand to be kissed', he 'looked as though he had just wandered in from a Chekov play'.

The prince's story was taken at face value by the local press. There was nothing in it to suggest that the 'prince' was anything less than genuine.
A year later, in August 1976, however, the Western Daily Press carried a story headlined: 'Vanished: Reg, the prince of hoaxers'. It revealed that 'Prince Alexis Lvov, heir to the throne of all the Russias' **might** just be 'plain Reg Blain from Glasgow.

The museum had closed and Reg and his wife had disappeared, leaving unpaid debts behind. Furthermore 'many of the "priceless" Russian medals claimed to have been worth £50,000 were discovered to have been made to order in Wales on credit at a cost of £500.' Needless to say the prince subsequently vanished without paying the bill.

The Western Daily Press tracked down his former residence a two bedroom rented cottage in Church Road, Caldicot, and talked to his neighbour, who revealed that he was not only 'plain Reg Blain from Glasgow, but also not-so-plain Reginald de Whitney, late of Caldicot and Weston-super-Mare'.



Prince Alexis Lvov outside his Russian museum and gallery in St. Arvan's.

A neighbour reported, 'He used to carry a revolver and had something on the table like a gargoyle that he used to kiss every morning. There were hundreds of books in the house and a Russian flag.'

All of this was, of course, very embarrassing for John Stradling Thomas, the MP for Monmouth, who had opened the museum. He told the local press:
'He wrote to me saying some Russian aristocrat who was to open it couldn't and asked me to do it. I had no means of checking his credentials and went along and declared it open. He struck me as more of an eccentric than anything else...The prince proposed a toast in vodka … but found that his wife had forgotten to buy any. He broke down when the old Russian national anthem was played.'

A year later, in September 1976, the 'prince' appeared before magistrates in Great Yarmouth. Apparently, after fleeing from Monmouthshire he had spent a year in Norfolk conning a Mr Graham Gosling into giving him accommodation and lending him £1300 to set up a business selling Russian icons and prints. When the business failed he 'repaid' the loan with a cheque drawn on a Spanish bank which, of course, bounced. He was duly packed off to jail for fraud but there the trail goes cold. I suspect that after coming out he assumed yet another name and went on his swindling way.

(Photograph and information: Western Daily Press)

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.