GWENT COUNTY HISTORY ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER AUTUMN/WINTER 2025/26

2025 AGM REPORT

The GCHA AGM was held at Risca Museum. The year's work was summarised by our Chair, Gill Wakley:

The GCHA continues to exist quietly, providing a valuable outlet for publishing the results of local history research. It is so important that local history research is published so that the results can be in the public domain. Research that is accessible to all encourages others, prevents duplication of effort and allows for revelations about past events and circumstances.

We remain open to the idea of monographs – more extensive accounts of new research or perhaps updating previous research or topics in the Gwent County History series – and would welcome any offers or suggestions.

The committee decided that there would be no organised day school this year as attendance had faltered and the work involved did not justify the results. We are very grateful to the local organisations with whom we have co-operated in the past, but recognise that perhaps day schools have, for the time being at least, ceased to be popular. The Monmouthshire Antiquarian Association, with whom we have shared the bulk of the organisation of these events in alternate years, feel that they wish to have more freedom to vary their offerings.

We continue to be solvent, and thanks are due both to the secretary and treasurer, who do the bulk of the work, as well as to the committee members who continue to be supportive and, when required, critical. We could not manage without the expertise of our editor, Tony Hopkins. David Hale has hosted our online meetings and arranged the venue for the AGM. We will miss the active participation of Christobel Hutchings following her untimely and sudden death.

Thank you, too, to all the members who continue to support the aims and objectives of the association. It would be very helpful if a few of the members could consider joining the committee to revitalise our discussions and activities!

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PLAS GUNTER MANSION ABERGAVENNY PROGRESS REPORT

The National Lottery Heritage Fund has approved our plans to develop and reuse Gunter Mansion! The total grant is just over £3,365,000. As part of the award, the Trust must raise just over £500,000 in match funding. To date, we have successfully secured £365,500 from Welsh Government Placemaking Grant, Monmouthshire County Council, UK Shared Prosperity Fund, Abergavenny Town Council, and individual donors. We must spend £300,000 of this match funding by the end of March 2026 and our architects, Purcell, have been gearing up to start work.

We also completed the purchase of the land (the garden) behind the house. This has access to Priory (or Beili) Lane that runs between the Tithe Barn at St Mary Priory Church and the car park at Swan Meadows by the Gavenny River (which flooded dramatically in Storm Claudia). Local Places for Nature gave a grant for the land purchase with help from the Town Council, the Civic Society and individuals. A public meeting attracted about 26 enthusiastic people who heard about the options for using this land and made proposals of their own. The Japanese Knotweed has been treated, and clearance of the dumped rubbish will be followed by the erection of a fence on which we can put information about what is happening while preventing further dumping. We hope to put up a temporary polytunnel so that we can grow plants to nurture them for later planting when the sniffer dogs (yes, you read that correctly!) have confirmed the absence of Knotweed.

You can follow the progress on plasguntermansion.org.uk or on social media.

GCHA SUBSCRIPTIONS

Subscriptions (£15 individuals, £20 societies etc) are normally payable from 1st April, although a few members choose to pay in January. If you think you may have overlooked to pay last April, please check with us.



MOSAIC COMMEMORATES RECORD- BREAKING USK SALMON

A life-size mosaic of a giant salmon netted at Llantrissant near Usk has been unveiled on Conigar Walk, near Usk Bridge. The salmon, which weighed 68.5 pounds and measured 57 inches, was caught in 1782 and was taken to Bath for display. Usk Civic Society commissioned Gwent artist Stephanie Roberts to work with children from Usk Primary School to produce the work. It is indeed a thing of beauty and well worth checking out.

On November 11th Redwick Local History Group held a ceremony to unveil a grave marker for Crimean War veteran Henry Davies. He acted heroically to rescue a wounded man during the Battle of the Alma. He left the army in 1860 and settled in Redwick in 1862, where he died in 1907 at the age of 97. He was buried with full military honours but the grave had remained unmarked.



ANNUAL LECTURE

Prior to the AGM Lord Paul Murphy, a longstanding member of GCHA, gave a very interesting talk on his life and career.

He came from an Irish Catholic background, with his grandfather coming to South Wales from County Cork to work in the steel industry in Abersychan and Pontnewynydd. While the village was still partially Welsh speaking, his grandfather spoke Irish and the local priest Italian. Paul's father started work as a miner aged 15, and had vivid memories of the horrible working conditions, including the rats. His mother worked for British Nylon Spinners at Mamhilad, which then had a workforce of more than 8,000.

He explained how an article he had written as a 17 year old in 1966 for 'Presenting Monmouthshire' (predecessor to 'Gwent Local History') while still a pupil at West Mon School helped to change his life because it stimulated interest from interviewers at Oxford University and helped him win a place at Oriel College. After Oxford he taught at Ebbw Vale College, recalling that one of his adult A Level history students was born in 1922.

Having joined the local Labour Party in 1964, he rejoined upon his return to Gwent in 1970 and was elected to Torfaen borough Council in 1973. Having fought the 'unwinnable' seat of Wells in Somerset he was elected as MP for Torfaen in 1987, following the retirement of Leo Abse. He was appointed to various shadow posts (Defence, Foreign Affairs, Wales) and following the election of 2010, to various government positions, including as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

He recalled the very difficult talks leading to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, bringing an end to 'The Troubles', including meetings with Ian Paisley and fish and chips with IRA Chief Martin McGuinness. The difficulties involved in bringing the different groups together was illustrated by the occasion when a meeting took place which included a paramilitary sitting next to the son of a man he had murdered.

As a member of the House of Lords he continues to play an active role, particularly championing educational causes.