GWENT COUNTY HISTORY ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER SPRING/SUMMER 2025

FROM ABERSYCHAN TO CABINET ROOM

LORD PAUL MURPHY TO SPEAK AT AGM

Back in 1966, a 17 year old pupil at West Monmouth School wrote an article for *Presenting Monmouthshire*, forerunner of our journal, *Gwent Local History*, about Catholics in Monmouthshire 1533-1689. The 'Notes on Contributors' explained that he was Secretary of the school's Local History Society and editor of its journal, *Review*.

Those who at the time said, "That lad will go far" were proved correct. Young Paul Murphy moved from writing about history to making history.

A devout Catholic, Paul was born in Abersychan in 1948, son of a miner of Irish descent and an English mother. From school he went to Oriel College Oxford to study history (what else!).

Having been active in politics since he was 15, he became a Torfaen councillor at 24, serving until 1987, when he was elected MP for Torfaen.

From 1997 until 1999 he served as Minister of State for Northern Ireland, then Secretary of State for Wales (1999-2002) then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland(2002-2005). After leaving parliament in 2025 he was created Lord Murphy of Torfaen.

As Minister of State for Northern Ireland he gained widespread praise for his role in negotiating key elements of the Good Friday Agreement (1998), which brought an end to 'The Troubles'.

Throughout that time he has retained his interest in local history and has been a longstanding member of GCHA n its different incarnations.

We re delighted that Paul will be joining us to share memories of his life and career in our annual lecture. The lecture will start at 2.30 on Saturday 4th October at Risca Museum.

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.

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.

CHECK YOUR SUBSCRIPTION

Many members who have email responded to an email message in January and responded early. Other have renewed in April without being reminded. Best of all, many members have an annual standing order. Please check you bank statement to ensure you are paying the right amount (£15).

Where needed, renewal reminders will be included with this newsletter.

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

FOR YOUR BOOKSHELF

***This Stolen Land: a People's History of the Gwent Levels,* by Marsha O'Mahoney (Seren £9.99).**

The history and ecology of the Gwent Levels has attracted a lot of attention of late. The 'Living Levels' project, funded by the National Lottery, has raised the profile of the area, while proposals for large scale solar farms to be built on agricultural land has given rise to public campaigns in opposition.

Marsha O'Mahoney's book, mixing travelogue, narrative and oral history, is therefore a timely offering.

Marsha is an oral historian and she certainly demonstrates a tremendous knack of tracking down and extracting stories from a wide range of interesting people, preserving their memories for posterity and recording lifestyles that have already largely disappeared. On the other hand, oral history can lead to an over sentimentalised 'world we have lost' approach. The levels have, in part, been stolen, but industrial developments, pylons, housing etc have provided jobs , fuel and homes for many thousands of people.

The book would have benefitted from more vigorous fact checking. The Severn Bridge was opened in 1966, not 1967. The 'Great Flood' was in 1607 not 1609. The South Wales Railway crossed the River Usk at Newport, not the Wye. The Severn Tunnel begins at Sudbrook/Caldicot, not Chepstow, and the claim that "there was not a single house in Sudbrook" at the time of the opening of the tunnel ignores the fact that a whole village had already been built to accommodate the tunnel workforce and their families.

Nevertheless, it remains a useful addition to the literature on a landscape that in the past has not received the attention it deserves.

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



Councillor Peter Strong, Chair of Monmouthshire County Council (and Secretary of GCHA!) at the opening of a new gallery at Chepstow Museum.

The gallery, 'Changing Faces of Chepstow' charts ways in which the development of the town has been influenced by the town's involvement in the rise and fall of the British Empire and arrivals from other countries.

THAT COULD HAVE BEEEN EMBARRASSING

When the Duke of Beaufort recently came down from Badminton house to visit Chepstow for an event celebrating the 500th anniversary of the rebuilding of the town gate, he admitted that he didn't know much about his family's history.

He would probably have been pleased had he popped down the road to Chepstow Bookshop To see a volume on the shelves entitled 'The Beauforts' by Nathan Amin, at the very reasonable price of £11.99.

It is less clear how he would have felt about the subtitle of the book: 'the bastard line that captured the crown'!