



# Gelligaer Times

Newsletter

of the Gelligaer Historical Society

No. 13

[www.gelligaerhistoricalsociety.com](http://www.gelligaerhistoricalsociety.com)

February 2009

Ah yes, a real winter at least! A freezing December, a mixed, but generally cold January and then came February with snow from day 1. The Gelligaer area has not suffered quite as much as some, nevertheless, snow on almost every day of the first week dislocated transport, schools, rubbish collections and a host of other activities. The media, of course, look for records, but so far the best they can say is that for London and the South East it has been the worst snowfall since 1991. No records have been broken in Gelligaer, but February is still young and there have been instances of winters really getting going at this time – some suggest 1947 as an example.

Despite winter's best efforts, the Society has not been standing still. At the end of January 27 of us enjoyed our first annual Society dinner. Judging by the amount of preparatory information flowing from Annie Owen, the Golden Jubilee history of Bargoed and Gilfach is getting off to a flying start. Furthermore, the first meeting of the Joint Annual conference organising group decided to go ahead with a Conference in 2009 and authorised the Chairman to start arranging the programme and begin preliminary publicity etc. With all this activity it is refreshing to know that we are only half way through the programme for 2008-09, and if the first half is anything to go by, there is much to look forward to.

## Meeting Reports

### **St. Christopher – interpreting a wall painting from Talybont Church, Llandeilo, Dr Madeline Gray – 26 November 2008 – Llancaiach Fawr.**

Following a brief mention of the origin of Talybont church Maddie explained that her aim was to pull out and explain a strand of mediaeval life that the wall painting represents. Saints helped people in the Middle Ages cope with life and during this period St. Christopher was portrayed in almost every church. Posing the question 'what did this picture mean?' she explained that while mediaeval peasants were illiterate they were not ignorant and indeed, had highly developed visual skills. The ideas conveyed in often rather crude works were greatly complex.

When the church 'moved' to St. Fagan's, the Museum made the challenging decision to put wall-paintings back into the church, similar to those which once existed. For contemporary observers it comes as a bit of a shock - mediaeval churches were usually bright, with happy vivid paintings. St. Christopher was often the first to be seen – greeting one's entrance into and creating an atmosphere for the church. The original, somewhat damaged and almost life size, was used as the basis for 'restoration, a process aided by examining the paintings in other churches ([www.paintedchurch.org](http://www.paintedchurch.org)). Over time, St. Christopher is often the most damaged painting, along with one of an archbishop (Thomas à Becket?). The latter was literally defaced by royal authority in the 1530s as it was seen to represent a challenge to royal authority. But why was St. Christopher similarly treated? St. Christopher is a legendary 4<sup>th</sup> century martyr of north African origins – a 'giant' from the Middle East. In several churches, e.g. Llantwit Major and Lllanynys he was depicted as a giant – big, strong yet simple. His desire was to serve the greatest ruler on earth and in his quest he carried the Christ-child across a river, whom he recognised as this 'greatest ruler'.

A 'good' death was important to mediaeval people, they practiced facing death and books were written on it. Death was a 'battleground' and St. Christopher helped one get it 'right'. It was recognised people had but one chance of making a 'good' death, helped by grace and the Church. The 'last rites' (extreme unction) were particularly important (if you survived you had to live a separate life!). Some left this until too late, but St. Christopher helped to make it 'alright'. The Church encouraged St. Christopher imagery, including wall-paintings, tomb carvings etc., proclaiming them 'permanent prayers'. During the Protestant Reformation this concept of death was swept away, consequently images of St. Christopher were 'eradicated' by the agents of reform.

St. Christopher was part of a sequence of paintings focussing up on the Crucifixion. Protestant and nonconformist traditions often misread such images – they made people feel 'guilt', whereas the main intention was to inspire 'hope'. Mediaeval peasants understood this message – St. Christopher was assuring them everything would be 'alright'.

Maddie's presentation proved enthralling, providing us with more than an account of a painting, but explaining the role such images had in the lives of our antecedents, thus helping us to understand them and their lives rather better. In addition, we were given an insight into the mind-set of some of those who authorised and promoted the Reformation, so providing an explanation for the wanton destruction of images that had previously meant so much.

### **Public Health in the 17<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries, Tony Hopkins – Wednesday 17 December 2008 – Llancaiach Fawr**

Public health is a service to the population as a whole. Older civilisations, e.g. the Romans, had a great interest in social health, but during the mediaeval period formal systems were lacking, thus health and sanitation caused problems. The Church frowned upon 'excessive' washing – too much like pleasure! Treatments were based on home-spun remedies and superstition. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century life expectancy was 30 years. Generally, people were unhealthy, as diets were nutritionally lacking.

The Industrial Revolution changed this, as many people were brought together in bad, overcrowded, insanitary housing, so major outbreaks of disease resulted, notably cholera, typhus and small-pox. Treating these new urban populations were two rival groups – physicians and apothecaries (the latter more akin to present-day G.Ps). Knowledge of how diseases spread was imperfect, e.g. Toshers (collectors of scraps of copper from sewers) were believed to catch illnesses by 'breathing'. Little connection was made between dirty water and disease. Investigations in London led to discoveries which changed knowledge of disease and its causes. Swansea was cited as an example of where urban growth was often based on conflicting interests – burgesses saw major prospects for copper refining as well as seeing itself as a spa/bathing centre. Incompatibilities like these made things complicated!

Urban problems came to the attention of governments. Royal Commissions concluded that growth was often too rapid, so legislation followed, e.g. Public Health Act, 1848, followed by others in 1858 and 1872. Being permissive Acts, which encouraged appointment of medical officers of health, etc., their inadequacy, plus increasing population pressure led to two major Local Government Acts, driven by health issues: 1888 Act established County Councils, that of 1894 established Urban/District Councils. Many employers welcomed this – they needed a healthy workforce. The Acts included powers to tackle a range of issues: poor housing, separation of livestock and humans. Workhouses began to specialise, providing a separation of needs. Tony proceeded to outline potential sources of information to illustrate the need for and progress towards better public health. These include school log-books and the sort of information exemplified in his handouts:

- 1) Extract from John Gwynn's Commonplace book, which illustrated the curious mix of old ideas and newer ones in medical health during the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century.
- 2) Monmouthshire – a 1780s map showed population patterns to reflect mediaeval ones, i.e. mainly in the east. Post 1780 industry began to develop (map 1843) mainly in western valleys, with increasing industry, population and urban settlements; the latter lacking structures such as law and order, water supply etc. Letters demonstrated that lack of responsibility for public health was an issue in the 1870s, as existing authorities either could not or would not deal with them. Ultimately, with the local government Acts 1888/1894, Medical Officers of Health were appointed and began to deal with the problems.
- 3) Chronology of 19<sup>th</sup> Century events and public health legislation. The first significant Acts – 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act (Guardians established) and 1848 Public Health Act. By 1900 a service was evolving which led to the National Health Service Act, 1947.

Following a few questions and discussion of this fascinating and fundamental topic, Tony was thanked for his discourse, whereupon the meeting broke-up to enjoy a pre-Christmas drink and mince pies etc.

### **Society Dinner – Wednesday 28 January – Llancaiach Fawr.**

Floated during the December meeting, a dinner concept soon became a concrete proposal. On the evening, our entrance was greeted by our musicians (Jean and Gerald Kember, plus John Poulson fro Llancaiach Fawr), whereupon we settled down to a 17<sup>th</sup> century meal of: onion soup, chicken cullis/mushroom & leek tart with fresh vegetables, followed by honey & cinnamon tart with cream. It was good and a credit to the kitchens at Llancaiach Fawr. Once tea and coffee had been taken, the Chairman offered a few words, recounting how the fortunes of the Society have improved over the past five or so years. He ended by proposing a toast to the Society's future, as well as thanking all members for their support for the Society and especially to Jean Kember, Hazel Waters and Marilyn Wayte (of Llancaiach Fawr) for organising the event.

After a brief musical interlude, the Chairman presented a history quiz, which kept those present 'on their toes' as well as entertained. Hazel had 15/20! However, the Chairman must come clean - two of 'his' answers were incorrect! All in all, a delightful evening, one which could/should become an annual event in the GHS calendar.

### **Joint Autumn Conference – Saturday 24 October 2009 – Llancaiach Fawr**

On 28/01/2009, the Chairman attended a meeting at the Winding House, with Helen Willson and Emma Wilson of CCBC(Museum), plus Diane Walker of Llancaiach Fawr, where the conference of 2008 was reviewed and it was confirmed there would be a conference in 2009. Most administrative arrangements will be as previously, viz. the venue will be Llancaiach Fawr, Chairman will organise the programme (maximum 6 presentations), cost will be the same as 2008 - £10 per delegate, which will include tea/coffee and a buffet lunch and up to 10 exhibitors/displays will be arranged. Noting the feedback comments it is hoped there will be more time for networking factored into the schedule.

At present the programme is being negotiated – this aims to be balanced chronologically and in terms of topics and publicity materials and letters of invitation are being prepared.

### **Bargoed Project**

Annie Owen has started the task of planning the process of producing a History of Bargoed and Gilfach, our principal contribution to the Society's Golden Jubilee celebrations in 2011. Several members have been incorporated into a working group, which had its initial meeting on Wednesday 12 February. The group will co-ordinate research and final articles on the range of issues it is felt comprise a definitive history of Bargoed and Gilfach. Leaders for specific topics were confirmed and a number of issues, notably funding, were discussed. More helpers are needed, so anyone wishing to help with a task would be welcome – see Annie Owen.

### **Gelligaer Historical Society**

|   |                                |                   |
|---|--------------------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Society Officers</b><br><b>2008-09</b> | President                      | Mr Islwyn Hughes  |
|   | Chairman                       | Mr Terry McCarthy |
|   | Meetings Secretary             | Mr David Mills    |
|   | Treasurer                      | Mrs Hazel Waters  |
|   | Publicity & Membership Officer | Mrs Jean Kember   |
|   | Web master                     | Mr Greg Buick     |
|   | Journal Sales Manager          | Mr Gerald Kember  |

Membership - **£8 per year** –Non members welcome - a contribution £1 per lecture would be appreciated to defray expenses.

### **Meetings Scheduled for 2008-09:**

|             |             |  |                 |
|-------------|-------------|--|-----------------|
| <b>2009</b> | 25 February | The Ancestry of Dr. William Price                                  | Dr Tony Jukes   |
|             | 25 March    | Morgraig Castle  | Mr Brian Davies |
|             | 29 April    | Lord Tredegar – Death or Glory                                     | Mr Paul Busby   |
|             | 27 May      | Recent findings relating to the early history of South east Wales. | Dr. Ray Howells |
|             | 24 June     | A.G.M.   |                 |

### **Outdoor Event**

|         |   |                  |
|---------|---|------------------|
| 10 June | Walk over part of historic Gelligaer Common | Mrs Judith Jones |
|         | – details to be confirmed.                  |                  |

### News

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|--|--|
| <b><i>Winding House Museum</i></b>       | •Open Tuesdays to Sundays inclusive (closed Mondays), 10.00 – 17.00. Members are encouraged to go along and see the exhibits. Display of Arthur Wright's photographs worth visiting.   |
| <b><i>Bargoed Library</i></b>            | •Lending library has moved temporarily in St. Gwladys's Church Hall and some Local/Family history resources to the Winding House. If you wish to undertake research it would be advisable to telephone to book – 01443 875548  |
| <b><i>Caerphilly History Society</i></b> | •Open Day – 25 April 2009, Twyn, 10.00 – 16.00. GHS invited to have a stall there – volunteers? 'Road Show'-service for historical artefacts to be available.  |
| <b><i>LEARN Cardiff University</i></b>   | •Free conference – History, Archaeology & Identity – exploring the dynamics of the past. Saturday 9 May 2009, Senghenydd Road, Cardiff. Interdisciplinary perspectives – papers on history, archaeology, literature and music. |

### **Gelligaer – Journals - Volume XVI and Anthology**

Volume XVI, published in 2007 – cost £5. Anthology of Vol XI – XV inclusive, produced by Dr. Fred Holley for the Society, available for £6.99. Index for Vols. I-XVI, £1.

**Gelligaer Journal Vol. XVII:** Dr Fred Holley is preparing contributions on disk for printing. Publication, Autumn 2009, in readiness for the Autumn Conference on Saturday 24 October 2009.

### **Gwent Family History Society Research Trips 2009:**

|          |          |   |
|----------|----------|---|
| 21 March | Saturday | National Archives & Family Records Kew            |
| 16 April | Thursday | Bristol City & Somerset Record Offices at Taunton |

GHS Members welcome – details 01495 223995 or [trips@gwentfhs.info](mailto:trips@gwentfhs.info)

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