

USK CIVIC SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

September 2004: Issue 31

Community Pride Plaques

It has always been the Society's policy and practice to be positive and to take the opportunity to invest in projects which fulfil the Society's aims of education, sustainability and the promotion of civic pride. That occurred late last year with the announcement that the Welsh Assembly Government had earmarked funds under Article 33 for which bids for grants could be submitted. The Society's outline bid for the installation of plaques on sites and buildings important in the historic development of Usk satisfied the criteria for acceptance in principle. We were invited to expand our submission to a fully worked out bid which, if approved, would enable work to start as soon as the money was authorised. One of the many requirements was that of a commitment to finding 20% of the total costs locally, another that the bid had to be with the County Council by the end of June.

The Society Committee thought that the best way to complete the necessary work and to involve those who could contribute effectively and knowledgeably was through a working party from the Committee, Usk Town Council, Usk Rural Life Museum and the Vale of Usk Tourist Association, all of whom were enthusiastic. We met in the library of the Glen yr Afon House Hotel (thanks to Peter Clark) and with the aid of the recently published *Usk Town Trail* (thanks to Geoff Mein and Angela Bowyer - the latter a member of the working party) we drew up a shortlist of potential sites and buildings mentioned, choosing those which seemed the most significant in the history of Usk. We also had to have regard to whether a plaque would be seen, its wording and the likely response of the building owner and occupier. This process gradually produced a list of twenty sites and buildings we thought suitable and acceptable for a wall plaque; and seven for a plaque in the pavement to identify the location of long-gone features such as the line of the walls of the Roman forts and the position of Porthycarne Gate.

As some of the buildings are statutorily listed as being of architectural or historic interest, the

advice of the County Conservation Officer - Edward Holland - was sought. He proved to be extremely helpful in indicating where listed building consent would or would not be needed and on the potential location of plaques on the buildings themselves (plaques would be about 18 inches in diameter in dark or slate blue recycled aluminium with white lettering and made locally).

The Principal Highways Engineer - Paul Keeble - was similarly extremely helpful in indicating where bronze plaques could be placed in the pavement and the installation requirements.

Approaches to potential manufacturers and suppliers enabled us to estimate those total costs plus delivery and instalment. The bid had to be specific about expenditure targets and outgoings. And we achieved the need for the local financial commitment of 20% by the generous contribution from the Vale of Usk Tourist Association (who were winding up their organisation) plus Society funds in the first year, 2005, and from Society funds (principally the sale of the booklet *Usk Town Trail*) in the second year.

We are assured that a WAG decision will be made in September. If we are successful in our bid, the working party will be concentrating from then on finalising designs, obtaining agreement to the wording which has to be bi-lingual, commissioning the manufacture from local craftsmen and seeking the necessary approvals to installation. One of the most notable of the total of 27 plaques would be the commemoration of the Battle of Pwll Melyn in 1405 for installation in July 2005 to coincide with the events presently planned for that month.

If all this works out as successfully as hoped, the Society and those from the organisations who have contributed to the project will rightly feel that the aims of education,

sustainability and the fostering of civic pride have been furthered.

GreenWeb membership

Details of the Society's aims and activities are now available on the website GreenWeb (monmouthshiregreenweb.co.uk), "the online community sharing environmental concern". GreenWeb is a voluntary body which provides internet exposure for groups with a variety of environmental concerns. It will give us a presence "on the net" without the complications of operating our own website

Awards

In last year's Newsletter we appealed for suggestions for the Society's Award for environmental management and improvement. Those of you who came to our very enjoyable Christmas Party at Cefn Tilla will know that five awards were made: the newly designed framed certificates were presented by Lord Raglan at the Party. Receiving the awards were: the Mayor of Usk, Councillor Alec Leathwood, for the Town Council's restoration of the Sessions House; Councillor John Harry, representative of the Memorial Hall Committee, for the Memorial Hall Garden; Paul and Elizabeth Milner for the renovation of their home at 10 Priory Street; Martin Evans, on behalf of David Cheshire, for his excellent management of Usk's Civic Amenities site and Robert Hamar who diligently keeps the town's streets clean with cheerfulness and good humour. As David Cheshire was on holiday at the time of the Party, Lord Raglan and some Committee members visited the Amenity site on a wet January day and gave David his certificate. The sun did come out for the photos which you may have seen on our display at the Usk Show.

Suggestions for this year's awards should reach a Committee member by the 31st of October 2004.

Social Events

As mentioned above we had a great Christmas Party at Cefn Tilla, attended by over 70 people, thanks to our host, Lord Raglan. The Summer Party at Trostrey Lodge, hosted by Frances and Roger Pemberton, was also most

enjoyable. A sunny evening enabled us to enjoy the lovely gardens, with a glass of wine, followed by a delicious buffet supper.

Our Social Secretary, Nora Evans, retired at the AGM. The Society is grateful to her for all the parties she has organised. We now have a new team who will take on this role, namely Kath Collis, Lynne Baldwin and Janice Cooke.

Obituaries

Mrs Dorothy Jupp who has died at a great age was one of our early members and a loyal supporter of our lectures.

Ken Richards who was a more recent member had an interest in planning at Woodside. He ran a haulage business and turned to car repairs and sales. He died after a short illness. We offer our condolences to his wife and family who, we understand, will be carrying on the business.

Miskey Sandison who recently died at the age of 59 will be remembered for her work with Right from the Start, the charity for parents and children in Caerphilly and for the beautiful garden at Llanllowell House. We offer our condolences to her husband Hamish and daughter Clementine.

Representation

Geoff Mein continues to represent us on the board of the Civic Trust for Wales whose main activity is not, as he originally assumed, the support of local civic societies in their planning battles but is much more directed towards improving the design of buildings and of open spaces. This aspect of their activities is well illustrated in the Spring 2004 edition of their magazine *About Wales*, an excellent and thoughtful production. For those whose sympathies do not often give credit to the Welsh Assembly, the article entitled "The Assembly, planning and design" could be recommended reading as it shows the effort the Assembly is making in these areas. To quote; "bad design leads not just to environmental ugliness and soulless places, but to social insecurity, poor health and high

crime; it is wasteful of resources and wasteful of people's lives. Everywhere in Wales, large or small, there is room to achieve good design. The opportunity has been missed too often. There is now a real chance of doing better".

The Civic Trust helped to organise two conferences this last year. The first was in Cardiff and dealt with current activities of civic societies in Wales at which our secretary, John Barrow, gave a short presentation on the outcome of the Woodside Appeal by Bovis. The second at Llandrindod Wells was attended by Geoff Mein and John Barrow. Geoff writes: "the Conference dealt with items of considerable interest to us, firstly the use of traditional materials in the conservation and restoration of historic buildings and secondly access for the disabled. The latter proved particularly worthwhile as we were able to discuss Usk problems with Monmouthshire County Council's representative dealing with this subject. He proved to be that most unusual local government officer, the one who applies and tempers the law with commonsense and, in particular the advice he gave us relating to the Rural Life Museum, which we have passed on to them, proved very sensible. Conversely, the Central Government and Welsh Assembly Departments dealing with this subject have proved unhelpful in one case and have fallen into terminal torpor in the other".

Footpaths and Cycleways

As part of its work for the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, Monmouthshire's Countryside Service is surveying all the footpaths, bridleways and green lanes with the help of volunteers. Your Chairman, assisted by her husband, has been doing her bit in the Gwehelog and Trostrey areas. So far we have surveyed about twenty and the main problem encountered is overgrowth some of it making the footpath completely impassable. We've also found two paths that exist on the map only with absolutely no trace of them on the ground! For each section surveyed there is a form to be filled in and sent to County Hall where they are entered on the database, thus allowing improvement work to proceed without waiting for the survey to be completed. If you have any concerns about local footpaths, hedges or trees please let me know.

As reported in the 2002 Newsletter, the proposed Wye Valley Cycleway was not approved due to objections on environmental and scenic grounds from local residents and their elected representatives. Sustrans, the cyclists' group, is now applying for the cycle-path in four separate sections. Wyesham to Symonds Yat has been approved. The section currently under consideration for approval is that from Redbrook to Wyesham. There is much local concern, particularly the prospect of a fenced, surfaced, path running across open fields beside the River Wye.

Listed Buildings

CADW has in the last year or so got around to doing a review of the listing of buildings in the Usk area, deputed to a consultant architectural historian. She contacted the Civic Society, and Ruth Stride and Geoff Mein were asked to deal with the matter. They made a number of suggestions as to which buildings to include. Nothing further has been heard of this although we understand that a new listing has been produced. Certainly Geoff, whose house was listed 25 years ago, received a notice to the effect that it was now listed. One or two people have been surprised to receive notices with respect to houses that have not previously been listed. Geoff says there are two points to remember if your house becomes listed:

1. planning control over alterations is somewhat stricter than for a non-listed building.
2. if you get permission for an extension this work does not bear VAT so this saves you some money.

Unfortunately, in spite of years of pressure, the Government will not extend this to repairs, even though the maintenance of a listed building is more expensive. While on this topic, Geoff warns "beware the plastic window man! An elegantly dressed young man may call on you and attempt to persuade you to replace your existing windows with plastic. We hope you will resist his blandishments as you may well fall foul of the planners and be forced to take them out. Certainly you will be in trouble if you're in a listed building".

Rural Phone Boxes

Efforts to get the public phone box at Llancayo replaced after it was demolished by a motorist have revealed that BT now have a policy of getting rid of rural phone boxes, their argument being that most people have mobile phones. This overlooks the fact that some boxes are in a blank spot for reception. The only way to preserve a rural phone box is to get it listed. We would like to thank David Davies, our AM, for his co-operation and efforts in this connection.

Recent Publications

Usk Town Trail

It's good to see the publication of this new Guide to Usk with the help of a £1000 grant from the County Council's Community Pride Scheme. Thanks to our President, Lord Raglan, for securing this grant and to Geoff Mein and Angela Bowyer for writing and producing the Guide. An invaluable aid to exploring Usk, it gives a good account, not only of its general history, but of the origins of many of its houses and public buildings. It is available from the Usk Rural Life Museum, Lindwall's Newsagents and the H&R Shop in Bridge Street and is priced at £3.00. The Guide would make a good easy-to-post present to send to friends and relations and the profits will be shared by the Society and the Rural Life Museum.

From Dawn to Dusk

This is the latest book by Jan Barrow whose work is already well-known to Society members. From dawn to dusk were the hours for working people for centuries: up at the crack of dawn to serve their masters and their community, with only rush lights and candles to light their homes after their long day's work. The book is an attempt to investigate some of the trades and occupations in Usk since it was established by the Normans in the 12th century until the end of Queen Victoria's reign in 1901. The book is full of interesting illustrations and maps, mainly by John Barrow, and is priced at £10.

County History

The Gwent County History Committee, of which Geoff Mein is a founder member, is working towards the production of an up-to-

date County History. Volume I which deals with the pre-history of Gwent has recently been published by the University of Wales Press, price £45, available at local bookshops. Further volumes are planned as and when funds allow.

Usk Castle Friends

Conference on 9th October 2004.

"Usk Visitors in Shakespeare Plays" is the intriguing title of the first lecture which will be given by Dr Paul Edmondson of the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford on Avon. Almost no one realises that several important people who either lived at Usk or visited Usk in medieval times actually appear briefly in Shakespeare's plays.

The second lecture is entitled "Adam of Usk". Professor Chris Given-Wilson from St Andrew's University is editor and translator of *The Chronicle of Adam of Usk* (OUP) and therefore the world authority on Adam.

Both lectures promise to be very interesting. The Conference will be held at the Memorial Hall, 10 am to 12.30 and tickets may be obtained from Lindwall's or at the door.

Foxhole

On land near Usk are the remains of a "Foxhole" more properly called an operational base from World War II. These bases formed the headquarters for auxiliary units of 7/8 men in the British Resistance, a highly secret organisation created by the Government in 1940 to harass a German occupation régime if invasion, as was then deemed more than likely had succeeded.

At present the Foxhole is just a dangerous hole in a field but Henry Humphreys on whose land it lies is working to restore it, to which end he has applied for a grant from CADW's Civic Initiatives (Heritage) Scheme, supported by the Civic Society and the knowledge of our Vice-Chairman, Peter Rennie, whose brother and brother-in-law were Unit leaders. It is intended that information about the base will be on show at the Rural Life Museum and those interested will be able to obtain the key from Castle House. The secrets of these OB's

in many cases died with their users and the availability of an original that can be

examined by the general public is very rare or even unique.

Don't miss our first meeting on Wednesday 13th October when Jan Barrow will tell us something of the story revealed by her research for her latest book *From Dawn Till Dusk*.