

## **NEWSLETTER**

### **September 2006: Issue 33**

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#### **A Message from the Chairman**

As this year's Chairman of the Usk Civic Society I have pleasure in including this note to the Newsletter. To follow my predecessor, Stella Collard, is a daunting task. She has been an excellent Chairman for the past two years and has introduced many of the new initiatives in collaboration with John Barrow, the Secretary. Thanks are due to both Stella and John for all their hard work. Our appreciation is due to Geoff Mein who, once again, has produced an interesting and informative programme of lectures. The Society is also indebted to our Treasurer, Tony Fleming, the Editor of the Newsletter, Janice Cook, and all other members of the Committee who give their time and commitment to fulfil the aims of the Society. Finally, our grateful thanks to our President, the Lord Raglan, who has given us his full support and advice over many years and continues to do so.

Welcome to all our new members and thanks to those people who continue to remain and support the Society. I look forward to seeing you at the new season's lectures and, of course, at the Christmas Party to be held on 13<sup>th</sup> December. **Kath Collis**

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**Community Pride Plaques: Project completed**

In July, the 14 plaques scheduled for Phase 2 of this two year project were installed by Ned Heywood, the plaque designer and manufacturer working from the Workshop Gallery in Chepstow, and the Society Secretary John Barrow. The plaques in this stage are;

**Porthycarne Street:** Porthycarne Gate; and the site of the demolished Toll House;  
**Bridge Street:** site of Usk's second gaol; and the home of J H Clark;  
**New Market Street:** the Old Maltsters/The Nook; Usk Rural Life Museum; the Old House;  
**Old Market Street:** the Great House;  
**Maryport Street:** the Sessions House; the line of the medieval ditch;  
**Four Ash Street:** the Medieval House.

Pavement plaques have also been installed to denote the edges of the large and smaller Roman forts.

A total of 28 plaques have been installed in the two years.

Also in July, the **Plaque leaflet**, enclosed with this Newsletter, was published for addition to the Usk Town Trail (available for sale at the Rural Life Museum, H&R Paints, Lindwall's the Newsagent and Mandalay Books in Twyn Square).

As mentioned in the last Newsletter, the project was supported by an 80% grant from the Welsh Assembly Government and administered by the Welsh Development Agency under Article 33 of the Rural Development Plan for Wales. The Society's own funds contributed 20% of the total cost of £10,860, helped in the first year by support from the former Vale of Usk Tourist Association.

The Society has been extremely fortunate in having the plaques designed and manufactured by Ned Heywood. He has devised and refined a method of manufacture in ceramic that is unique and extremely attractive. We are grateful for his work and that of his assistants in completing the project. The plaques will certainly add to the enjoyment of Usk by residents and visitors alike and may well contribute to increased tourist numbers as they become more well-known.

The Society is also very appreciative of the contribution of Edward Holland, County Conservation Manager, whose advice and guidance on the location and installation of the wall plaques has always been positive; and to the officers of the County Highways Section for their help in installing the plaques in the pavements.

**John Barrow (JFB)**

### **The Wallace Day**

A significant event was held in Usk and Llanbadoc on Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> May to commemorate Alfred Russel Wallace, Victorian naturalist, and unveil a monument to him, the result of collaboration between the Usk Civic Society and Dr. George Beccaloni of the Natural History Museum, London. Seamlessly organised by Stella Collard, Anne Cluysenaar and John Barrow, the day started with a fascinating lecture on Wallace's achievements by Dr. Beccaloni, many of the audience members having travelled long distances to attend. A pleasant buffet lunch at the Three Salmons gave participants the energy to walk to Llanbadoc where Lord Raglan welcomed everybody before the memorial stone was unveiled by Wallace's grandson, Mr. Richard Wallace. This boulder, close to the churchyard in which two of Wallace's siblings are buried and near to his birthplace, Kensington Cottage, is made of Carboniferous limestone containing exposed fossils which can be seen to best advantage when wet. It was donated by Messrs. Hansons and the plaque with a portrait and information about his life was designed and installed by the generosity of Messrs Mossfords. All those involved thoroughly enjoyed the whole day and felt it to be a fitting tribute to our local hero.

**Barbara Daniels.**

*Pictured from left to right Richard Wallace, Lord Raglan, John Barrow, Anne Cluysenaar, Audrey Wallace*

*Barbara Daniels is a member of the Society and the author of “**Usk: Origin of a Thinker. The Story of Alfred Russel Wallace**”. This brief biography is available from Lindwall’s, Usk Rural Life Museum and Mandalay Books. Price £2.50*

### **Alfred Russel Wallace**

Alfred Russel Wallace is now receiving greater recognition for his contribution to Natural Science than, perhaps, he achieved in his lifetime. Born to a relatively obscure family living in Llanbadoc, Usk, he arrived at the same hypothesis as did Darwin to explain the evolution of species by natural selection and the survival of the fittest. Although this insight pre-dated “on the Origin of Species” and certainly hastened the publication of the famous tome, Wallace has been overshadowed by his more illustrious and well-connected contemporary. He made two voyages of biological discovery, one to the Amazon and one to Malaysia, where his name lives on in the term “The Wallace Line” which divides islands in the archipelago according to the differing creatures that live on either side of it. This seals his reputation as a biogeographer who realised, even more clearly than Darwin, the vital importance of geographical divisions to the distribution of animals. As a man he was modest, decent and a highly original thinker.

**Barbara Daniels**

### **SOCIETY MATTERS**

#### **From the Honorary Treasurer**

The arrangements following our change of Bank, and increase in subscriptions, last year appear to be working pretty satisfactorily with only a few minor hiccups to overcome! One of the intentions has been to seek to ensure that members of the Civic Society are properly

paid-up at the time of the Annual General Meeting in April – so that, in accordance with the Constitution, they are then entitled to participate fully there and vote!

To this end, as our financial year is the calendar year, subscriptions for the forthcoming year are due by 1<sup>st</sup> January! As a concession to those who pay by Standing Order only, we are prepared to accept payment from them at any convenient time between 1<sup>st</sup> January and 31<sup>st</sup> March. This is, of course, also to our advantage as it minimises administration in banking cheques, etc. Anyone not already signed-up with a Standing Order mandate is invited to consider this for the future. The appropriate form is available from Tony Fleming [telephone: 01291 671199 or e-mail: [tony@jacfleming.freeseve.co.uk](mailto:tony@jacfleming.freeseve.co.uk)].

**Tony Fleming**

### **From the Membership Secretary**

In spite of, or maybe because of, the increase in the subscription, membership is strong with nearly 200 fully paid up members. A New Year membership drive in the Castle Oak area, leaflets about the Society were posted through the letter boxes of non-members, resulted in 8 new members – welcome to you all. We hope to have a similar drive in another area of Usk, probably Priory Gardens, in the Autumn. If someone new moves into your vicinity please let me know the address so that I can put a leaflet about the Society through the letter box.

**Stella Collard**

### **Social Events**

#### **Christmas Party 2005**

This was held at Porthycarne House by kind invitation of Tom and Felicity Crawley who are long-standing members of the Society. Good food, wine and company in a lovely setting made this a very enjoyable party. As usual we used the occasion to present the Society's Awards for Environmental Management and Improvement, this year's Awards going to Usk in Bloom Chairman David Gale and, for the restoration of Allt-y-Bela, to Morris Higham, architect and to Warren Marsh, surveyor.

**Stella Collard**

#### **Summer Party "006**

Our Summer Party was held in June again at Porthycarne House. It was a lovely summer's evening and we were able to make full use of the beautiful garden leading down to the river. Prior to the event a number of people took advantage of a tour of the Plaques now in place around the town. This was led by John Barrow, Secretary of the Society, and during the evening we were able to express our appreciation for all the hard work carried out by all those involved in this interesting and worthwhile Project.

**Kath Collis**

### **2006 – 2007 Programme of Lectures**

The usual varied and hopefully interesting programme of lectures for the forth coming winter season has been arranged and details will be circulated soon and will also be available in our tent at the Usk Show. One of the unusual features of this year's programme is represented by the first meeting on Wednesday, October 11<sup>th</sup> when we will hear a talk by the Secretary of the national Elgar Society on "Elgar and the Malvern Connection". This musical excursion is a direct result of the wealth of music, theatre and opera which is available to us here in Usk, in the town itself and within a reasonable drive be it to Malvern, Monmouth, Abergavenny, Cheltenham, Llantilio Crossenny, Newport, Cardiff, Bristol, Westonbirt and the rotating centres for the annual Three Choirs Festival. This lecture is also the result of a response to my annual request to members for suggestions of interesting speakers for future talks. To illustrate the diversity of speakers this season the talk on Elgar will be followed by one on a recent mountaineering expedition by some local enthusiasts to Tibet. No, not another Everest story!. The season will conclude with a talk by our Treasurer on a local family and their gift to the town.

**Geoff Mein**

## Other decisions and actions: Who goes there?

Society members may have spotted that our Notices about the Autumn/Winter talks invite non-members to come along at a cost of £2 (members are free). It has been apparent at some of the meetings last season that visitors have not been aware of this or have forgotten on arrival.

The Executive Committee have decided that for a trial period, say the first three talks this autumn, a **Committee member will be seated at the door to inquire diplomatically whether those entering are paid up members and then to ask accordingly.** The Committee will view this introduction in December to decide whether it should be a permanent arrangement in the light of reactions and experience.

**JFB**

## Awards

### Usk in Bloom Awards for Best House without a front garden

These awards – a special certificate – are sponsored each year by the Society with the choices made by the Usk in Bloom judges. They are presented each year at the Glen yr Afon House Hotel at the ceremony in October. Awards this year were as follows:

Gold: 19 Woodside, Llanbadoc  
Silver: 4 Mill Street  
20 Woodside, Llanbadoc  
11 Woodside, Llanbadoc  
Clemendy Cottage, Usk  
Bronze: Old Surgery, New Market Street, Usk  
9 Mill Street, Usk  
6 Sunnyside, Usk

### Congratulations to all the recipients

**JFB**

### Society Awards for Environmental Management or Improvement

These specially printed and gold framed awards are presented each year by our President Lord Raglan at the annual Christmas Party. This year's awards went to Spitalfields Historic Buildings Trust: (Chief Executive, Oliver Leigh Wood); Architect Morris Higham and Quantity Surveyor Warren Marsh for the restoration of **Allt y Bella**. It also gave great pleasure for the President to present an award to **Chairman David Gale and the Usk in Bloom Committee** for the magnificent result of winners of Wales in Bloom, Britain in Bloom and an invitation to take part in the Entente Florale this year.

The Executive Committee have, with the owner's consent, nominated Bertholi House and Allt y Bella for **Local Design Awards by the Civic Trust for Wales**, the results of which are to be announced shortly (but the indications are that awards will be made). This is the first occasion when such nominations have been made and we hope that the resulting publicity will spur others to greater design awareness and success.

Now is the time for Society members to **nominate projects** or activities for the Society Awards for Environmental Improvement and Management. Nominations should reach an Executive Committee member by 31 October 2006 at the latest.

**JFB**

## Obituaries

One of our members, **Max Harding**, her 'real' name was Marjorie, died in September 2005 at the age of 93. She and her husband came to Usk more than thirty years ago, but he died shortly afterwards. She had a daughter in Southampton, another in China and a son in Cornwall. All have children of their own and great grandchildren were beginning to emerge. She frequently visited and was visited by this large family. Among her many journeys, in her eighties she went to a grandson's wedding in Greece and travelled to China to see her daughter. She was very much involved with the life of Usk and had at one time been active in

the Drama Society and the Church Guild. She was an experienced painter, mostly in watercolours, and she carried on painting right up to the end. Despite her growing frailty in later years she remained clear in her mind and was always good company. Her last few months were unfortunately spent in hospital in Southampton where her struggle with cancer finally ended.

**David**

**Young**

**Norma Leathwood**, who died recently, was a long-standing member of the Society. She was twice Mayoress of Usk and will be remembered for her work alongside her husband Alec in all his civic and community activities, in particular raising money for kidney research and supporting the Primary School. We offer our condolences to Alec and the family.

**Stella Collard**

It is with sadness that I refer to the recent death of **Mary Goodall**, another long-standing member of the Society. Mary was a well-known personality in Usk and was a supporter of many local and national charities. She will be missed by many of us.

**Kath Collis**

### **Planning Matters**

*John Barrow, the Society Secretary, is a retired County Planning Officer and Planning Inspector. His knowledge on planning issues is invaluable to the Society. He reports:*

### **Planning Applications**

The Planning Sub-Committee continues to peruse the weekly schedule of planning applications when the County produces them. Unfortunately, none has been published since February, because of the difficulty of setting up a computer based system. Assurances have been received that the system will be up and running from July.

When the schedules were available, over 30 planning applications were scrutinised but only one in Usk was the subject of observation. We supported the **proposed improvements at the Kings Head, adjoining cottages and the White House** in Old Market Street, the latter building being in dire need of restoration for some years. We thought however that these three buildings should be treated separately in colour (two are listed) so as to keep their distinctiveness whilst at the same time ensuring that early restoration could go ahead. We understand that the County Council has reservations about some of the proposals and that negotiations are continuing to resolve the differences. Although we do not intend to intervene except to state our continued support, we must express the hope of a swift resolution even if compromises have to be made to obtain refurbishment in the very near future – we are reminded of the phrase ‘the best is the enemy of the good’.

Two proposals mentioned in the last Newsletter have been the subject of decision. Our strong objection (along with that of the Usk Town Council and the County Council) to the proposed **Activity area at the rear of Usk Prison** was dealt with by written representations by an Inspector. His recommendations were accepted by a Welsh Assembly Government Minister who observed that strictly speaking the proposal was for the removal of an existing fence and the provision of a new standard security fence. The Minister agreed that the fence would have a neutral affect on the conservation area, not harm the setting of a listed building, not impair the living conditions of neighbours or infringe the well being of those who pass the site. He accepted that there would be no obstruction on the flood plain nor any harm to an ancient monument or its setting. The Minister allowed the proposed fence with conditions that it had to be erected within 5 years, its colour has to be agreed with the Local Planning Authority, and the Prison Authorities have to allow reasonable access for archaeological investigation.

The second planning application to which the Society had earlier objected concerned the demolition of **Railway Cottages, Raglan Road** and the building of a pair of semi-detached houses. The Town Council had also objected and the County Council refused. After an

Appeal dealt with by written representations, the Inspector allowed the demolition and replacement by a pair of semi detached houses.

We also objected to an application for a **proposed stable block and ménage at Penyrheol** on the edge of Wentwood, a proposal almost identical to that dismissed on Appeal. The application remains undetermined by the County Council and the authorised enforcement action against the structures built without planning permission seems to have foundered!

We brought to the attention of the County Enforcement Section, the unauthorised installation of an illuminated sign at the **One Stop Shop** at the corner of Church Street and Maryport Street. This was subsequently removed.

At the invitation of Caerleon Civic Society to support their case, we submitted objection to Newport City Planning Department about a proposal for **blocks of flats on the site of the former Hanbury Garage, Caerleon** on the town side of Caerleon Bridge. The Design Commission became involved and commented adversely on the proposal which the applicant subsequently withdrew.

### **Other Planning Matters**

We studied the Inspector's recommendations arising from the inquiry into objections to the **Monmouthshire Deposit Unitary Development Plan** and subsequently the County Council's proposed modifications and decisions. We decided that as all the matters to which we had earlier made objections had been fully aired and in most cases resolved, the Society should not intervene any further. We were informed that the UDP was adopted by the County Council on 22<sup>nd</sup> June

**The Coleg Gwent Estate Strategy** (published in outline in May) was the subject of discussion with the Director of the Campus, Mr Keith Backhouse, and the Vice Chairman Peter Rennie and Secretary John Barrow. The Director explained that the strategy was one of principle and much more remained to be done, including the securing of finance from the Welsh Assembly Government. However, the general direction would be to concentrate most of the teaching and administration to the rear of the present equine centre, in purpose built buildings; retaining the sports facilities and plant centre to the east of the Pontypool Road. This could mean that several buildings there would be surplus and there would need to be consideration and discussion of alternative uses whilst acknowledging that they are on the flood plain. It would be at least a year until details were developed as proposals at Cross Ash had priority.

### **Usk Priory and Gatehouse**

The content of the Newsletter last year on the state and future of Usk Priory and Gatehouse prompted a letter to the Executive Committee from Mr David Price on behalf of the owner Mr Brian Lewis, expressing dismay about the tone and content. Mr Price stated that in the three months up to September 2005 Mr Lewis had carried out a programme of site clearance, scaffolding and building stabilisation with the involvement of his architect, surveyor and Mr Price himself as representative and agent; and County Council architects, conservation officers and engineers. A County Councillor had been invited to visit and inspect the Priory in August, and the meeting took place. Continual maintenance was being carried out to the Gatehouse, an Ancient Monument not in the care of CADW which gave grant aid to works to the structure about 25 years ago.

Mr Price went on to say that no statutory notice, whether relating to required works or time scale has been served on the owner who is cooperating fully with the County Council. The Priory grounds are maintained to an impeccable standard.

He asserted that the Civic Society had committed a grave breach of common courtesy in not having approached Mr Lewis before it decided (in ignorance of his commitment to the long term future of the Priory) to take up the matter with the County Council.

The Executive Committee decided to seek the views of the County Conservation Officer, Mr Edward Holland on the degree of cooperation and his conclusion on what is happening there. Mr Holland's account does not entirely tally with that presented by Mr Price. The Secretary replied to Mr Price giving the reasons why it is inappropriate for a voluntary organisation with no statutory powers to approach owners about their proposals and plan unless invited by them to do so.

Further correspondence has taken place including a request from the Executive Committee for a few members to meet on site with Mr Lewis and his advisors. The Secretary has spoken twice to Mr Lewis who appeared to have no objection in principle but thought the timing should be carefully chosen. Mr Lewis revealed that he was having drawn up plans for the conversion of the Priory to three dwellings. The most recent letter from the Secretary to Mr Price again suggesting a meeting has evinced no reply. The Executive Committee retains the hope that Mr Lewis will meet a few of its members on site to see what is happening and what is proposed in order to answer authoratively the enquiries occasionally received from Society members about the state of the buildings and the owner's future intentions.

**John Barrow**

### **Light Pollution**

*Geoff Mein , a founder member of the Society and former Chairman, continues to take an active interest in all aspects of our local environment. He writes:*

Those of us who used to take pleasure in the glory of the night sky on a dark night have for several years now been deprived of that pleasure here in Usk and regrettably in the greater part of urban Britain by the proliferation of over-bright and badly angled street lights of ever increasing brilliance. On behalf of the Civic Society I wrote some time ago to the appropriate member of the Welsh Assembly and was gratified to learn that he shared my views about sky glow and the loss of our dark skies. Unfortunately since then the County Council have installed even more and even brighter lights around the town so that one cannot now even see the Pole Star! However we may just have an answer in S.102 of the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005 which came into force in April 2005 whereby exterior lighting has become subject to the law of nuisance. Clearly intended to control individual lights such as security lights the law does not affect the lights of docks, railway stations or bus depots. Whether it can be applied to street lighting has yet to be tested. The process to try to do something about the over-bright and badly angled lights has to start with a complaint to the Environmental Protection Unit of the local Council who may then initiate proceedings. For those who want to be reminded of the glory of the Milky Way I suggest dining at night in the desert outside Alice Springs.

**Geoff Mein**

*The issue of car parking charges has been a major talking point in Usk in the last twelve months. The Society has actively supported the Town Council in its opposition to parking charges and has agreed to contribute up to £200 to the Mayor's Fighting Fund. Tony Fleming, the Society's Treasurer brings us up to date:*

### **Car Parking**

As members will be aware from press reports, in 2005 Monmouthshire County Council decided to introduce car parking charges to the car parks in Usk, and to other car parks in the County that had hitherto been free. When these proposals were formally advertised for consultation and then agreed, Usk Town Council, supported by Abergavenny and Chepstow Town Councils, decided to seek a Judicial Review. This was on the basis that this claimed consultation had been a sham as the decision had effectively already been made, the anticipated income from these proposals having already been included in the County Council's budget for 2005/06, together with the absence of traffic management considerations.

The Civic Society had also objected to the proposals. As part of the Town Councils' litigation, it was necessary, in view of the possible cost liability to seek financial support, and the Civic Society was happy to make a contribution as an expression of its concerns at the likely

environmental, etc. repercussions and detriment to the town, through resultant on-street parking, were the car park charges to be introduced.

In the event, following preliminary consideration by a High Court Judge who agreed that the Judicial Review proceeding could be pursued, the County Council decided not to defend the action and, at the time of writing, negotiations are taking place between the Town Councils' Solicitor and the County Solicitor as to the most appropriate manner by which the charging proposals should be withdrawn, yet maintaining those aspects of the proposals that are not the subject of dispute e.g. dealing with anti-social activity in car parts, etc. The County Council has also agreed to pay the Town Councils' approved costs, which should mean that most of the Civic Society's contribution will be returned.

Needless to say the Civic Society is delighted at this outcome. **Tony Fleming**

### The Town Trail

Copies of the Town Trail, now incorporating the Plaque Trail leaflet, are selling well, particularly in our excellent and hopefully flourishing bookshop in Twyn Square and in the Museum. Why not buy one to send to friends living elsewhere - possibly as a Christmas gift? In the past few weeks my archaeological and other activities have produced some real historical surprises which will feature in the next edition of the Trail. The surprises relate to the date and structure of the King's Head, Old Bank House and the Toll House in Castle Street

**Geoff Mein**

**USK CIVIC SOCIETY: President:** The Lord Raglan

**Chairman:** Kath Collis Tel:672774

**Vice Chairman:** Peter Rennie Tel: 672598

**Secretary:** John Barrow Tel:673623

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**Membership Secretary:** Stella Collard Tel: 673655

**Programme Secretary:** Geoff Mein Tel: 672729

**Newsletter Editor:** Janice Cook Tel 672985

**Committee Members:** Peter Anthony, Angela Bowyer, Martyn Evans, Ann Morse  
Fred Olsen, Roger Pemberton, Rosemary Trump.

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### **USK TOWN TRAIL**

-including new plaques leaflet

available for sale at  
**Usk Rural Life Museum**

Only £3  
Ideal stocking fillers

The Museum is open  
Monday to Friday 10am to 5pm  
Saturday & Sunday 2pm to 5pm