

# NEWSLETTER

of Cowbridge History Society



*It's that time of year again!  
A review of our Autumn activities PLUS  
a taste of what is yet to come*

## Recalling Christmases past

This image of an invitation sent to contacts of Cowbridge's mayor in 1958 is one of many such gems available online at People's Collection Wales, which now contains many items from the Cowbridge History Society archive. Our cover photo also comes from the archive and shows the High Street under snow in 1947. Were you one of the young snowballers?

The Mayor and Mayoress of the town in 1958 were Glyn McNeil and his wife, at that time the proprietors of the Horse & Groom public house. Their daughter Jennifer was married at Holy Cross in 1962. Mr McNeil would be mayor again in 1965, and in his second inaugural speech, he commented: "In the years ahead I foresee many changes in the Borough and surrounding area." He believed that the new bypass, which at the time was anticipated by some with dread, would prove to be a good thing for Cowbridge, and most of today's residents would probably agree that he was right.



## Cowbridge on Film now available

Great news! Copies of our best-selling DVD, *Cowbridge on Film*, are now available once again, at a price of £10. Pick up your copy at the Local History Studies Room in Old Hall. The room is normally open on Wednesdays from 10am to 12 noon.

The Cowbridge Bookshop has notified us that there is still demand for *Cowbridge Buildings and People* (1999) and *Llanblethian Buildings and People* (2001). When and if we reprint these, it will be in a revised edition (first instalment due for publication in 2024). In the meantime, second-hand copies still turn up on Amazon.co.uk and also on Abebooks.co.uk, and at reasonable prices too.

## Disappointment for CHS quiz team

On Friday 12th November, 2023, a team from Cowbridge History Society entered the annual Rotary Club Charity Quiz at the Town Hall. As always, we had some difficulty finding members willing and/or able to join the team, and the line-up on the night consisted of Betty Alden, Deb Fisher, Don Gerrard and Roger Barwick - who kindly substituted at the last minute. Unfortunately, on this occasion, we failed to finish in the first three. If we were to comment that the event seemed rather chaotic on this occasion, it would sound like sour grapes, so let's just settle for congratulating the winners - after all, every penny raised goes to charity.

## 50th Anniversary plans

Plans for the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the founding of Cowbridge Local History Society are continuing apace. Our first offering will be a new publication - a reprinting of a work first published in serial form in the *Glamorgan Gazette* in the 1930s. E W Miles's memoir of his youth in the Cowbridge area is acknowledged as an important historical source, but will also make entertaining reading because Mr Miles was a man of strong opinions (most of which nowadays sound rather old-fashioned) who did not hesitate to express them!

In the course of the year, there will be a guest lecture by Professor Chris Williams, BA, PhD, FRHist Soc, FSLW, of Cork University, as part of the celebrations. It will be open to CHS members and the general public and is likely to be held in the Town Hall. The title, date and time are yet to be agreed. Please look out for announcements.

You will know from previous newsletters that we have plans to revise both *Cowbridge Buildings and People* and *Llanblethian Buildings and People*, but this takes time. Already on our publishing schedule is a new publication focusing on Westgate - the first instalment in a series of new editions - which we plan to publish later in 2024.

## Talks of the season

The autumn talks were very well attended. We began the season on 6th October, not with the scheduled speaker Dr Elaine Davey, who was unavailable, but with a talk from Jeremy Konsbruck, who stepped in at the eleventh hour to give us a talk titled '*The Man be not exempted: Conscription and the Military Appeals Tribunals of the Great War*'. This turned out to be an excellent account, with many local examples, of conscription and volunteer armed service in the First World War with case histories of the applicants and the tribunals to which those unable or unwilling to serve had to apply for exemption.

On 3rd November, Dr Toby Jones, Curator of the Newport Medieval Ship Project, who was due to talk about the latest developments in this fascinating archaeological reconstruction project, was called on to make a television appearance and was replaced by Jeff Grosvenor, a trustee of the Newport Medieval Ship Project, who has worked on it for many years and gave a "stimulating and informative lecture" (to quote our Chair) on *The Newport Medieval Ship: Challenges of Conservation, Reassembly and Display*. Jeff also offers talks on the history of the Newport Transporter Bridge and the Society will be hearing from him on this in the 2024/25 Season.

In December, one of our members, Professor Tony Curtis, spoke about *Wales and the Second World War: poets, painters, pacifists and my parents*. He gave a fascinating and very well received account to a capacity audience of many of the great exemplars in these fields, from Dylan Thomas to Augustus and Gwen John, Lloyd George to Kyffin Williams, set against Swansea and Pembroke Dock in wartime and his family's experiences. December's meeting is traditionally the time for our annual celebration, with mince pies and wine replacing the usual hot beverages and cake, and this tradition continued in 2023.

Dick Tonkin  
Programme Secretary

# The Dictionary of Cowbridge Biography

The dictionary is a compendium of people born before 1900 who have a significant connection to Cowbridge and its district or who have made an important contribution to the life of the town or surrounding area.

Suggestions for inclusion are welcome and can be submitted to Chris Turner ([chrisbturner@live.com](mailto:chrisbturner@live.com)), who edits the Dictionary. Chris can also provide advice on relevance and word limits, but by way of example see earlier issues.

*Chris Turner*

## Subscriptions

For those who have not yet paid their subs for 2023/24, we would appreciate it if you could either send a cheque, payable to "Cowbridge History Society", to Beverly Tonkin at Porth y Felin, Town Mill Road, Cowbridge, CF71 7BE, or transfer the fees by BACS to Cowbridge History Society account no.00034614 at Barclays Bank UK PLC, sort code 20-12-25, using their surname and first initial as a reference. A standing order could be set up if preferred.

At the 2023 AGM on 5th May, it was agreed to raise the annual subscription rate from £7.50 to £10.

## Nos Galan and the Cowbridge Mari Lwyd

“Nos Galan” is the term for New Year’s Eve/Day in Wales. Nowadays a major celebration is the annual road race held at Mountain Ash in memory of the legendary Welsh runner Guto Nyth Brân, an event founded in 1958. The race is normally launched by the appearance of a “mystery runner” or runners. This year there were two, both Bridgend natives - rugby and panto favourite Gareth Thomas and Professor Laura McAllister, a former Wales international footballer.

However, Wales has an alternative New Year celebration on 13th January - “Hen Galan”, perhaps with its origins in an ancient pagan festival. This is when the Mari Lwyd, a horse’s head, is paraded around on a pole, decorated with ribbons. Some communities have shied away from the tradition of using a real horse’s skull, but Cowbridge still has the real thing, which the much-missed Steve Harkett used to



take pride in looking after at the museum throughout the year when not in use. The image shown here is a detail from a painting by Tony John, showing the Mari Lwyd in Cowbridge High Street.

*Deb Fisher  
Publications Officer*

## Obituary: Brian Wynne Davies (1950-2023)

“A considerable loss to the community of historians in South Wales” is how our Chair summed up the death of Brian Davies, former curator of Pontypridd Museum (which he had a major role in establishing). It is unusual for us to feature the obituary of someone who neither lived in Cowbridge nor belonged to this society. However, members of CHS will agree that Brian, whose passing on 6th December came as a shock to his many friends and colleagues, was one of our liveliest and most interesting speakers, always guaranteed to draw a crowd when he appeared at our monthly meetings.

Brian had served for many years as the Secretary of Pontypridd History Society, and one of his chief interests was industrial history, as can be seen from the photo. Brian (centre) is shown meeting Dafydd Elis



Thomas at the Hetty Winding House in 2018, as a representative of the Great Western Colliery Preservation Trust. Brian was one of the volunteers who spent nearly ten years working on restoring the winding engine. Readers may also recall when he talked to us about his large collection of miners’ safety lamps and explained how they worked and the history of their development.

Indeed, Brian spoke to us on so many occasions, on so many different topics, that it is difficult to bring all of them to mind. Among his areas of expertise were William Edwards, who built the famous bridge at Pontypridd; artist J. C. Ibbetson, and 18th century Welsh painting in general; Iolo Morganwg and the Celtic crosses at Llantwit Major; the statues in Cardiff City Hall’s Marble Hall; the history of the “Rocking Stone”; the career of industrial inventor John Nixon; and “A walk around the Dyffryn Estate” (not to mention the history of the miners’ safety lamp). So wide was his learning that Cowbridge’s U3A History Group (often confused with Cowbridge History Society) was in the habit of inviting him to speak at their pre-Christmas meeting every year; his ready wit would have been enough to put everyone in a festive frame of mind. Curiously, whereas other speakers have sometimes gone over time and had people looking at their watches, Brian’s talks could go on indefinitely without the audience losing interest. As our own Programme Secretary commented, “he never disappointed”. You are probably picturing him now, at the front of our hall, with his distinctive gait and leisurely delivery, as he expounded some impressive piece of historical research as though it were really nothing much, with the audience hanging on his every word. We won’t quickly forget him.

## **PROGRAMME FOR Spring 2024**

Talks take place on the first Friday of each month at 7.30pm (unless otherwise advised) in person at Maendy Hall, Ramoth Chapel

### **Friday 5th January**

MARION and GLEN SWEENEY: *The Tongwynlais Tollhouse: Origins, Occupants and Restoration*

### **Friday 2nd February**

TERRY KANE: *The Ragged Schools Movement in Cardiff*

### **Friday 8th March**

BILL JONES: *Letter from America: Welsh Emigrants and their Correspondence in the 19th Century*

### **Sunday 13th March**

**CHARTER DAY CELEBRATION:** The Porthcawl Museum – Tour, Talk and Lunch

### **Friday 5th April**

ED CLOUTMAN: *“Henry Williams of Lancarvan” – C18th Master Clockmaker*

### **Friday 3rd May**

AGM of Cowbridge History Society at 7pm, followed at approximately 7.30pm by a talk

DEB FISHER: *The Travels of Frank Brangwyn*

TO PROTECT YOURSELF AND OTHERS, PLEASE attend in-person meetings ONLY if you have no Covid-19 symptoms (e.g. cough, temperature, loss of sense of taste/smell etc.) and you have been vaccinated.

This newsletter is issued approximately three times a year. Local history news items can be sent to [cowbridgehistsoc@gmail.com](mailto:cowbridgehistsoc@gmail.com) for potential publication in the next newsletter.