Summer has come and gone and autumn is passing quickly into winter. What a busy time we have had of it! The Conference duly took place and was very well received, by all who attended. The autumn has also brought another new year of lectures, two of which have already passed, in our new venue, Llancaiach Fawr. So with apologies for the almost customary tardiness of the ‘October’ issue of Gelligaer Times, this review of GHS progress will get under way!

Conference - Saturday 29 September 2007 – Llancaiach Fawr

With advanced tickets sales of 100, plus a number who paid at the door and a small number of guests tickets, we were delighted to see approximately 120 delegates at Llancaiach Fawr. Emma Wilson, of Llancaiach Fawr produced the accompanying report:

‘An inaugural “Autumn History Conference”, held jointly with the Museums & Heritage Service of Caerphilly CBC, was hosted by Llancaiach Fawr on 29th September.
It was organised by the Chairman of Gelligaer Historical Society, Mr Terry McCarthy and over 100 local historians and members of the public attended. The interesting and diverse programme of topics proved to be highly informative and thought-provoking. Speakers included Professor Bernard Jenkins and Wayne David, MP and topics varied from the development of the new County museum at Elliot Colliery Winding House, to Ruperra Castle Conservation Trust, the Milestones of Gwent and the tribal princes of Senghenydd Supra and their descendents.
It is hoped that this will be the first in a long line of annual local history conferences’.

A subsequent review considered feedback, both formal (on the sheets issued) and informal. Indications are that the day had proved very worthwhile for all concerned. Areas for improvement? Mostly being able to sit down to enjoy lunch. The lecture programme was well received, it seemed everyone found something of interest and the technology worked well!
As a result it was decided there should be another conference next year – Saturday 25 October 2008, again at Llancaiach Fawr. The programme is being compiled and arrangements made, while bearing in mind it is often more difficult to repeat something that was successful, but we shall ‘have a go’.
Many thanks to all those who made the day such a success including, Llancaiach Fawr, Chris Morgan and his Office, members of GHS and all those societies and organisations who enhanced the day with their displays, sales stands and conversations.

A prime aim of the conference was to bring organisations with broadly similar aims together to facilitate networking. I am delighted to say there is already evidence of this happening. Jean has made contact with Pontllanfraith Local History Society and a mutually beneficial exchange of speakers has taken place. The chairman is repeating his presentation at a Caerphilly Local History Society 50th Anniversary event at Caerphilly Castle. In addition, the Rhymney Valley Transport Society have invited us to have a stand at their event in Blackwood next April. It all helps us grow and widen our range of contacts within and beyond the local community.
Reports of meetings:

St. Cattwg’s church – Islwyn Hughes, 26 September 2007 – Llancaiach Fawr:

Islwyn, our president, returned to one of his favourite subjects – St. Cattwg’s church. Initially, we were given a summary of St. Cattwg, noting his family and Welsh (Llancarvan)/Irish/Breton links. Following was a potted biography of the present church building – records suggest a church being on the site in 1160, but the present building dates from 1260. Brief reference was made to the recent ‘repainting’ of the tower, in a controversial cream shade. Apparently, in the course of the work serious damage was found in the church tower. Rectification of this limited the work that could be undertaken, thus St. Cattwg’s did not get the full Bedwellty Church treatment.

We were given a photographic tour of the interior, mention being made of the Commonwealth baptistery, the soak way for which has been blocked-up, consequently it has to be emptied by bucket nowadays! St. Gwladys’ stone, a 10th century Celtic cross was shown, accompanied by a potted history of Capel Gwladys, on Bargoed mountain. The parish stocks, once located outside the church where miscreants spent time to ponder their ‘crimes’, a form of punishment instituted in the 14th century were shown. The First World War memorial was described and we were told of the World War II equivalent, out of sight, behind the altar. Traces of a doorway to a Lady Chapel was shown, but as Islwyn indicated, no one knows why it was blocked, or when.

Evidence of the first resident rector’s (Canon Harris) restorations in the 1890s were shown, besides the story of the roof collapse within 12 weeks of his arrival. Attention was drawn to the marble tablet dedicated to his wife and the memorial table to William Harris, after whom Treharris was named. The choir stalls, illustrated, were a product of a foundry downstream of Caerphilly.

The stained glass windows were briefly explained, one telling of St. Cattwg and other commemorating Jesse Jones, excavator of the adjoining Roman site in Edwardian times. Sadly, these windows, and the church too, have been victims of recent, mindless vandalism (broken panes) and theft (stone path).

Islwyn then proceeded to Brittany, retracing St. Cattwg’s footsteps, a venture made with other past members of the Society approximately 30 years ago. Views of St. Cattwg’s church were shown including women wearing traditional Breton dress to Mass. Also shown were scenes at an outdoor service commemorating St. Cattwg, which served to confirm the strong cultural and religious links that existed between south Wales, Ireland and Brittany during the so-called ‘Dark Ages’. All in all, a pleasant evening, on a subject appropriate in view of the Society’s move nearer to the source of the name contained in our title. Thanks, Islwyn.

Pirates of the Bristol Channel – Alan Thorne – 24 October 2007 – Llancaiach Fawr:

Alan Thorne treated us to a most interesting discourse on the pirates who congregated in the Cardiff-Penarth area of the Bristol Channel. Such was the area’s notoriety that the Time-Life publication on ‘Global Piracy’, describes Wales as the ‘global principality of piracy’ and elsewhere Penarth Harbour (not Cardiff Bay) is described as the ‘most piratical place in Britain’. Furthermore, he emphasised that unlike the romanticised Victorian/Hollywood impression, pirates were actually uncouth, homicidal gangsters.

How did the area get this fearsome reputation? Three reasons were offered:

1) The autonomous state of the Marcher lords, distant from London’s authority.
2) Proximity of Britain’s second port, Bristol.
3) Geography of the Bristol channel - prevailing winds and tides, made passage up the Channel difficult, plus presence of islands (notably Lundy) which provided places of ambush and sanctuary.

Records relating to piracy date from 13th century. 1233 several ships (galleys) of Cardiff, Newport and Bristol were armed for self protection, while in 1226 Henry II advised ships coming into the Bristol Channel to move in convoy. Soon after Lundy Island was reported to be fortified and a base for galleys preying on shipping. In 1242 Lundy was attacked and its’ prates hanged in London. Subsequent legislation to suppress piracy, unsuccessful as it was locally policed and most of those doing the ‘policing’ were involved.

1444 a pirate vessel sailed from Ely Ooze, to Minehead, where a rich merchant ship had run aground.
It was seized, the crew killed, refloated and sailed to Cardiff where the cargo was sold. One local pirate; Colin Dolpin, captured Sir Henry Stradling and ransomed him. Dolpin was later captured and executed.

After 1500 most pirates from S.W. England moved to south Wales., e.g. Cole and Stephens from Cornwall who moved to Lundy and traded in south Wales.

A vessel was seized in Ely in the 1540s, taken to Chepstow and sold by William Herbert for his kinsman, the Earl of Worcester. Its owner, named Hoare, from London was released by Thomas Cromwell and proceeded to bring a case against the Herbets – it failed. Witnesses (Herbert acquaintances) claimed the ship attacked them first. 1565 piracy commissioners were appointed, but in the 1570s piracy was rampant. John Challis (illegitimate son of a Herbert), regularly sailed into Penarth, worked with ‘Brother Bates’. In 1576 they captured a ship at Belle Isle (U.S.A.), sailed it to Cardiff, where they sold the cargo. The following year a Portuguese ship carrying 100 barrels of sugar was brought into Cardiff and the cargo sold. Challis was captured in 1577, turned Queen’s Evidence and many were taken and hanged, including Brother Bates. Following this the commissioner for piracy was ‘roughed-up’ by prominent Cardiff citizens (including William Herbert). More commissioners were appointed, thereafter, but many of those involved e.g. William Herbert (High Sheriff 1587) achieved high positions. Many of Cardiff’s ‘great and good’ were consorting with pirates and receiving goods from them. Some known pirates continued to have the favour of local lords, e.g. Tom Clark. Others did not, e.g. Captain Henry Moore, captured in Swansea and hanged.

Tenby was a pirate port, too, but under the protection of the local lord. Pirates there included: Ap Price and ‘Jones the Pirate’!

By 1600s piracy almost stamped out, apart from Bristol Channel, but their days were numbered and they moved to open waters. Warships were based in Bristol 1613-20, but on their removal Moorish pirates moved-in to fill the ‘vacuum’, raping, pillaging and capturing young men for galley slaves, mainly along the English coast. In 1629 reported all large ships in Cardiff were taken by Moorish pirates.

In 1656 French pirates appeared, basing themselves at Lundy., e.g. Rene de Gray Forin, who took over 200 ships – statues to him raised in St. Malo and in Paris and Versailles by the King.

By the late 18th century, the Royal Navy was formidable thus piracy declined.

Smuggling was rife, 1700- 1800 and based on Penarth. Large ships from U.S.A. anchored in Penarth Bay en route for Bristol. These were ‘approached’ by small, local vessels, who took cargo into Cardiff for immediate sale. Flat Holme was a notorious smugglers’ base, e.g. Richard Robinson and his son, Pascoe. Eventually, armed, the customs men swept the organised smugglers away.

Overall, a fascinating evening. South Wales was evidently a veritable pirates den for several hundred years and a base for global piracy. Of Black Bart’s crew, 50% were Welsh, as was Black Beard (Edward Teach) who terrorised the American coast before being killed by the Royal Navy. Thanks Alan.

Gelligaer – Journal Volume XVI
Cost £5. Have you your copy? The task now is to sell as many as we can.


Chris Morgan – Museums & Heritage Officer:
Chris will be leaving CCBC’s employ at Christmas to take-up a position in southern England. I am sure we all wish him well and extend our grateful thanks for all he has done to promote the historical heritage of the CCBC area. The Winding House Museum and developments to open-up the Roman Fort site owe much to his drive and enthusiasm. All the best and thanks., Chris.
Gelligaer Historical Society

Society Officers
President Mr Islwyn Hughes
Chairman Mr Terry McCarthy
Secretary Mrs Jean Kember
Treasurer Mrs Hazel Waters

Membership £6 per year – non members are welcome, but a contribution of £1 per lecture would be appreciated to defray expenses.

Meetings Scheduled for 2007-08.

2007
28 November Conservation Karen Murdoch
12 December Inca Way or Incapable Way? Terry McCarthy

2008
27 February Bedwellty David Mills
26 March Sir Francis Drake, Part III Tudor Fisher
30 April The Silures Ray Howells
28 May The Management of the Gelligaer Estates in the 1600s Annie Owen
25 June A.G.M.

Web site & ICT Equipment:

Following our successful Communities@One grant application to set-up a Society web site, progress has slightly stalled. Insurance was secured, but with the autumn being so busy, little progress has yet been made in acquiring the equipment needed (also explains the tardiness of this publication). However, the first piece of hardware has been ordered – a Dell laptop and by the time you read this an order for software should have been placed.

This tardiness serves to show that there is only so much individuals can do. There are many tasks which require our attention, but we need help to get them all done. Two of the most pressing tasks are: publicity and publications. Jean and Gerald Kember have worked hard to produce posters for meetings and deliver them, but with secretarial duties to perform, Jean cannot do it all. Likewise, there are a lot of Vol. XVI of the Journal to needing to be sold, but help to explore alternative outlets would be gratefully received. Can you help … please?

Our success at securing funding to consider the possibilities for developing the Roman sites in Gelligaer has enabled the consultant to produce her report. This shows a range of ways forward, which have been considered by the consultative group. The next step will be an application for further funding (not through GHS!) to start a phased project to open-up the site.

Llancaiach Fawr – Family & Local History Day – Sunday 7 October.

Possibly overshadowed by the conference, the annual Family and Local History Day proved somewhat disappointing in terms of numbers attending. A lot of effort had been put into setting-up stands by a number of groups, including GHS. They were all of great interest to those who came and it is a pity that such efforts were not better rewarded by the local community.

Gwent Family History Society Research Trips 2008:

National Archives, Kew and Family Record Centre visited in 2007. GHS Members welcome – details 01495 223995 or trips@gwentfhs.info

Published - Gelligaer Historical Society, 34 Gwerthonor Road, Gilfach, Bargoed, CF81 8JS.