

Notes from Local Interest Group Meeting 28th November 2024

Present (in Hall): Wendy & Chris Jones, John Price (JP) and Margaret Price, Maureen Lloyd (ML), Cherry and Victor Williams, Avryl and Roy Lloyd, Allison Joyce, Sarah Cope, Robert Davies, Grace Davies, Iris Lloyd, Helen Barnett, Lucy Trench, Robert Collingwood,

On Zoom: Mike and Val Head, Jennifer Lewis, Sylvia Illingsworth, Marilyn Price, Bronwen Jenkins, Elizabeth Passey, Juliet Lewis, Llewelyn Breeze (Wendy Ozols later)

Apologies: Dainis Ozols, Edwina Griffiths, Ann & Howard Dean, Joan Lloyd, Jenny Francis

ML welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced the speakers for the evening, Wendy and Chris Jones from Kington Museum.

Kington Museum and its Collection

Chris and Wendy Jones began by saying a little bit about the museum. It opened in 1986 and is situated opposite the Burton Hotel in Kington, and housed in a building owned by Herefordshire County Council. The museum is self-funding (mainly from donations and the sale of books); they do have to pay rent to the Council but this is only £1/pa. In return for this very generous gesture by the Council, the museum is responsible for the upkeep and any repairs that need to be done to the building. The building itself was originally the coach house for the King's Head Hotel.

Originally, the museum was called Kington Museum and History Society, but the museum took over the History Society and its archives when it ceased to function. The archives, including lots of paperwork, have had to be sorted and catalogued and this is an ongoing task for the volunteers. All of the artefacts have now been recorded and are stored, numbered and labelled.

At the moment, the museum is closed for the winter, but it will be open on 7th December for the Kington Food Festival, something which takes place every year. From March, it opens from 10am to 4pm on Tuesday, Friday and Saturday, but they do accommodate special groups outside of these times, by arrangement. The museum provides information about and has exhibits from Kington and District. Every exhibit has a story attached to it. (In response to a question from the audience, Chris said that donations are always welcome, but at the moment these would have to be by cheque.) There is a Facebook page, a website: www.kingtonmuseum.com and there is also an email address: kingtonmuseum@gmail.com

Chris and Wendy had brought along some artefacts from the museum to talk about. Chris began by saying something about the drovers and their importance to Kington. In the 1600s and 1700s, the town was on one of the main drovers' routes from Carmarthenshire and Mid Wales. In fact, five drovers' roads merged in the town. Animals were "driven" through Kington on their way to London and the Midlands. Cattle could be shod in the local blacksmiths and the museum does have a few examples of these shoes, although they are quite rare because they were made for single use only. Flocks of up to 4000 geese would also be walked to London and these too had boots made from hessian. To make these boots really roadworthy, the geese would be walked through tar to harden them up. Pigs were also shod, but the sheep were not. The drovers kept mainly to the high ground in order to avoid thieves and the routes that they took were marked by three pine trees where there were rest stops, roughly every 18 miles. There were 37 licensed premises in Kington and many of these had fields attached where the drovers could graze their animals overnight – penny or halfpenny plots. (On the outskirts of the cities where the markets were, there were also fields where

the animals could be fattened up again after their long journey in order to be ready to be sold.) Animals could not be driven on a Sunday and so these fields would have been very busy at times. The head drover had to be a property owner and he usually rode on a pony whilst the other drovers would walk with the animals. In the 1700s, to make things safer for the drovers and to prevent them from having to carry too much cash, the Bank of the Black Ox was set up in Llandovery. This meant that only paper money (cheques) needed to be carried and this was of no value to thieves, which made things much more secure and meant that there was less of a hurry for the drovers to return home, so the local hostelrys often did very well out of them! The bank later changed its name to the Black Horse and was subsequently taken over by Lloyds Bank which has a black horse as its logo to this day.

Next Wendy showed us a smock, the typical item that the drovers (and in fact all workers) would have worn. Each region would have its own pattern for the smocking. On the garment that she showed us, there were five different stitches making up the pattern of the smocking. This was intricate and skilled work. The flaps on the shoulders were for protection from things like tools which had to be carried, and also provided some protection from rain. Even these are smocked beautifully. The needlework on the backs of the garments is of the same quality as that on the front. The buttons were usually made from horn. The smock that Wendy had brought along is a replica that the museum has had made for demonstration purposes; the original is housed in the museum but it is very delicate. Wendy made the point that the actual design of the smock is very similar to that of the frock coats which would have been worn at the time. Most working people would only have had one smock and so they were seldom washed and became very discoloured.



Chris then took over and told us about the Kington Elephant! From about 1890, Chapman's Circus would travel from town to town putting on shows. In 1932, they came to Kington and they had four elephants with them; sadly, one of these died. The circus people took 3 days to dig a big hole in which to bury the animal in a field behind Victoria Road. At a later date, the bones were dug up so that a housing estate could be built on the site and so the entire elephant skeleton is now housed in the museum. Chris showed us one of the exhibits – one of the elephant's teeth – which is usually on display. Then, just before the War, Chapman's Circus only had one family member left, a Miss Chapman, and she had no desire to continue running the circus and so the animals were sold to Dublin Zoo. However, there were some that she could not bear to be parted from, two young elephants that she called her "babies". They were taken to live on a farm near Bromyard where they would help with the farm work, pulling carts and the plough, etc. The museum has some wonderful photos of the animals, a couple of which were passed around for the audience to see. In one photo, an elephant can be seen walking down a street in Kington.

Next Wendy told us about Kington Camp (which had been the subject of a talk given to LIG by Mari Fforde in April 2018). The camp was a hospital for US servicemen during WW2 and the museum has been given two Purple Hearts, which were given to personnel who were wounded or killed. They also have numerous packets of sweets which came from the camp, many of which still have the sweets inside, and lots of badges. In fact, they have a good display about the camp in the museum, which also includes films with some of the servicemen talking about their experiences.

In terms of ancient artefacts, the museum has two axes, which Wendy and Chris had brought along for people to see. One is Neolithic in age and was found near Offa's Dyke Path. The other was found in a garden in Lyonshall. Many Roman coins are on display as well; a Roman road came through the area and so items will have been dropped along this routeway.

One of the last items that Wendy had brought along was an old wash tub dolly. She said that they also have a very large mangle on display which they always show to the children on school visits because they are most unlikely to know what it would have been used for. The mangle was made at the Meredith Foundry in the town. The Merediths had originally come from Presteigne and had been wool staplers. The family can trace its origins back to 700AD and their family tree is in the National Library in Aberystwyth.

Kington had once had a tram road for horse drawn vehicles; it was a toll road. Stone from the quarries at Dolyhir was taken along this tramroad to the Brecon Canal and thence to South Wales where the limestone was used in the iron industry. (Cast iron from the Meredith Foundry was also transported along this route.) Later on, the railway arrived in the town and so the tram road closed, and then in the 1960s the railway was also closed in the Beeching cuts. As a result, there were large numbers of quarry lorries using the roads and they were so large and the streets so narrow that traffic jams lasting many hours became common in the town. Eventually, in the 1970s, the by-pass was built and this problem was solved.

Chris thought that the fact that Kington had gas lights quite early on meant that the town became an important centre for watch making. Because large quantities of stone were being transported to South Wales for iron making, it made sense to bring the vehicles back full of coal, rather than empty. This meant that a fuel was available to light the town.

At the very end of their talk, Wendy showed the audience a mystery item that someone had donated to the museum and asked whether anyone knew what it was. Allison Joyce did some searching on

the internet and discovered that it was a vegetable slicer dating from the early 20th century. She had even found a photograph of a very similar item on the internet – mystery solved!

ML thanked Wendy and Chris for their most interesting and informative talk and said how wonderful it was to see and handle some of the museum's artefacts. She went on to say that a visit to the museum, once it is open again in the spring, would obviously make an extremely enjoyable visit.

Refreshments were enjoyed at the end of the meeting, and ML thanked Avryl Lloyd and her team for providing these. Many thanks as always go to John Price for setting up the Zoom link so that the talk could be enjoyed by those unable to get to the hall, including our one regular attendee who lives in Canada!

There will be no meeting in December. In January, Allison Joyce will be entertaining us.