

## Notes from Local Interest Group Meeting 27<sup>th</sup> March 2025

**Present (in Hall):** Elizabeth Bingham, John Price, Maureen Lloyd (ML), Allison Joyce, Roy & Avryl Lloyd, Joan Lloyd, Cherry Williams, Helen Barnett, Celia Jones, Jackie Mills, Joan Hughes, Gina Goodge, Sarah Cope, Leonie Weightman, Rob Davies, Lucy Trench, Tim Francis, Anita Bailkoski, Richard Harris, Grace Davies.

**On Zoom:** Wendy Ozols, Jennifer Lewis, Margaret Price, Llewelyn Breese, Robert Collingwood

**Apologies:** Dainis Ozols, Elsa Harflett, Marilyn Price, Bronwen Jenkins, Sylvia Bigglestone

ML welcomed everyone to the meeting, with a special welcome to our speaker, Elizabeth Bingham, who had agreed to come to talk to us at very short notice when the detectorists had had to cancel due to a double booking.

### **Local Marvels, Local Mysteries**

Elizabeth began by explaining that she had chosen some topics which were more or less local to Painscastle, and that she hoped that we would not mind if the subjects were from a little distance away. There would be a mix of “marvels” and “mysteries”.

### **The Battle of Painscastle 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1198**

Elizabeth began by saying that she had had to completely reconsider this part of her talk following a chance encounter that very morning in Hay with a very knowledgeable local historian. She started by giving us a little of the background to the battle.

Lord Rhys ap Gruffydd (1132-1197) ruled a vast swathe of Wales from Pembrokeshire to Powys. In 1197, when he realised he was dying, he named his eldest legitimate son, Gruffydd ap Rhys, as his heir. Maelgwn, his eldest but illegitimate son, refused to accept this and he captured Gruffydd and handed him over to Gwenwynwyn of Powys, his main supporter. Gwenwynwyn in turn handed Gruffydd over to the English, William de Braose of Hay, as a hostage.

William de Braose had recently fortified Painscastle castle and Gwenwynwyn’s forces swooped on the settlement in 1198. According to the Annales Cwmbriae, the English were “struck with terror” and Gruffydd was handed back to Gwenwynwyn. William de Braose asked Prince John (whose brother King Richard I was away on a crusade) for support and an English force was sent.

According to both English and Welsh records, this army attacked and Gwenwynwyn’s men (3700 of them) threw away their weapons and fled. The story goes that they were all killed and that the river Bachawy ran red with blood. No-one from the English army was killed or even wounded.

Elizabeth then posed the question, “What is the truth?”. Can we really believe that Gwenwynwyn’s army waited at Painscastle for three weeks? Or did he spend his time probing the limits of the opposing army’s power to the south? It is possible that he was warned by his spies about the strength of the newly arrived English force and that he slipped away before July 22<sup>nd</sup>. Up until now, no archaeological evidence has been found to support the massacre of 3700 men at Painscastle. There would surely be armour, bones, etc, buried in the ground after such a massacre. Additionally, there is no “folk evidence” of such a great massacre; one would expect something to exist that would

support this theory had the massacre taken place. (Near Brecon there is a place called Battle where the Normans had fought the Welsh in 1092.)

Could the story of the massacre simply be propaganda? The Welsh chroniclers were critical of Gwenwynwyn for not accepting Llewelyn the Great as his overlord. And, the English chroniclers wanted it to be known that the Welsh were easily defeated.

Elizabeth suggested, however, following the discussion she had had that morning with a well-informed local historian, that the number of deaths might have been exaggerated. If the leader of a clan was killed in a battle, his men would then withdraw. In the battle at Painscastle, four named Welsh fighters were killed. If these had been clan leaders, their men would have left the battlefield. They would not necessarily have been killed themselves and so the 3700 figure might include men who had simply withdrawn.

Is this a mystery or not? No-one really knows.

### **Rhulen Church**

Elizabeth's second topic was Rhulen Church, one of our local marvels and one which she thinks is "completely enchanting". Amongst its enchanting features are two arches. Builders in Rhulen in 1300 AD would never have seen an arch. But they must have been told by passing pedlars and drovers of this new way of creating doorways. So they decided to experiment with the door to the church. By building inwards and upwards from the door posts they succeeded in making an arch with a short lintel at the top. Clearly, they were so pleased with what they had achieved that they created a second 'Rhulen arch' by building a new east wall inside the church's existing east wall. Having made a ledge for the altar, they then built a large new arch above it, bulging inward and upward and capped with a short lintel. Architectural historians have described the Rhulen arches as 'oddly shouldered'; Rhulen parishioners take great pride in them. The other enchanting feature of this church used to be the leaning west wall. However, this was deemed to be in danger of collapsing and so the wall was rebuilt in the 1980s, with a slight lean in order to preserve its charm, but not so much as to make it vulnerable.

### **The Brute Family of Stonemasons**

Elizabeth hoped that we would not mind her extending the local area to include the Black Mountains so that she could talk about the Brute family. She told us about four generations of the family, all of whom were stonemasons with a particular style of carving and who can be regarded as "folk artists". The first stonemason was John Brute, 1665-1730. He was followed into the family trade by his son Thomas (1698-1767), grandson Aaron (1731-1801), and great grandson John (1752-1834). They were all known for using cherubs as a motif on their memorials. Thomas always featured a fat-cheeked, curly-haired cherub with wings starting under the chin and enclosing the face. Aaron always carved his cherub at the top of the memorial and he liked to enclose the inscription in a garland of flowers. He became a real master of his craft and Elizabeth showed us a photo of one of his memorials where he had made his signature part of the decoration. This memorial also had a vase of tulips beneath the cherub. Aaron's son, John, further developed the family theme and we were shown a photo of one of his memorials with two dancing one-legged cherubs playing trumpets. Memorials carved by members of the family can be seen in churches around the Black Mountains. Not everyone admired the decorations on the memorials and the Reverend F E Paget, writing in 1843, was disparaging about them, calling them "forms of ugliness, with puffy faces of pink and white, black eyes, gilt hair and wings...". In Elizabeth's view, the carvings are marvels. Overleaf is a photo of one of the memorials, that of a midwife called Ann Lewis, in Llangattock Church.



**Brute Memorial in Llangattock Church**

### **Llanbadarn-y-garreg Church**

The church in Llanbadarn-y-garreg is dedicated to St Padarn. It is situated on the banks of the River Edw. Behind the church is a high and steep cliff and, when it rains, water flows down the cliff and straight into the church. It has been known to flood up to two feet deep. When this happens, the parishioners simply open the church door to let the water out.

In the past, it was the custom to put the royal coat of arms on a wall in a church and Elizabeth showed us some photos of other fairly local churches where these can be seen – Monnington in Herefordshire and Colva in Radnorshire. In St Padarn's church, the royal coat of arms was painted on the north wall but was lost to damp. A second attempt was made on a large plaque set in the roof beams, but this also is almost unrecognisable. Damp is not the cause, since a little fresco on the back of the plaque - instructing the priest, in the words of St Paul, to preach salvation not damnation – has not suffered in the same way. The mystery is why an expensive painting was commissioned and then rubbed off? No written records survive so it is a mystery without an explanation.

## Moccas Organ

For her last subject, Elizabeth had chosen to tell us about the organ in Moccas church which is definitely a marvel. The church itself is a long way from the village and is nicely located, surrounded by fields. It is a 12<sup>th</sup> century, Romanesque church. When the church was under threat of being closed, the villagers raised the necessary money to renovate it and to keep it open. A particularly interesting feature in the church is its organ, which was originally powered by water. The organ case was designed by Giles Gilbert Scott and decorated by Charles Eamer Kempe; it is very colourful and all of the decoration has been beautifully restored. Electricity is now usually used to power the organ, but occasionally water is pumped between containers and the sound of lapping water can just be heard through the organ music. The organ pipes look incredibly impressive, but they are not genuine, simply decorative. The actual pipes are hidden behind green boxes on the wall behind. Apparently, the lowest note that can be played is so low that it cannot be heard by the human ear, but it is possible to feel the vibrations made.



**Moccas Organ**

At the end of the meeting, ML asked whether there were any questions or comments.

Lucy Trench told us about a “mystery” that can be seen in the church in Presteigne. Here there is a tapestry depicting Christ entering Jerusalem on a donkey. He is wearing a silver robe. However, if you look at the back of the tapestry, the robe is red. It is possible that the weaver used a cheap red

thread in order to save money and that after so many years the colour has faded making the robe look silver on the front.

When ML told Elizabeth that the Local Interest Group would be visiting Rhulen Church and Llanowen Farm in May, there was a short discussion about Llanowen Farm. In the 1830s, the farm had built a mill and mill house and they had dug out a leat. This mill was still in business on the 1851 census but the census of 1861 showed that there was no longer anyone living there. What had happened? Why has the leat completely vanished? The 1905 map shows a stone track leading to the mill and this would have been parallel to the leat, but there is no record of the leat. Now, the stone track has also vanished and there is nothing left of the mill building, although some stone walls from the site do remain. Is this is mystery worth investigation?

ML thanked Elizabeth for a most interesting and informative talk, and reiterated her gratitude that Elizabeth had been willing to step into the breach at such short notice. She also thanked the refreshment team and John Price for his technical wizardry.

Elizabeth said that she had brought booklets about some of the local churches and memorials for people to see and to buy if they wish. All proceeds go to support the Boughrood Church roof restoration project. These booklets can also be bought at local outlets. Whilst on the subject of Boughrood Church, she told us that it is the only one in Wales that has a parish "dead house". This was built in 1855 for the bodies of people who had died of cholera, although it was later discovered that the disease was spread through sewage in the drinking water rather than from infected people. Until 1927 the coffins of those who were to be buried in the churchyard would be brought to the dead house the day before their funeral.

ML reminded everyone about next month's meeting (on Thursday April 24<sup>th</sup>) when the speakers will be Joan Hughes and Ann Dean. They will be talking about Mona Morgan's book, "Growing up in Kilvert Country".