Notes from Local Interest Group 26th March 2026

Present in Hall: John Price, Mo Lloyd (ML), Lucy Ashton, Juliet & John Lewis, Cherry & Victor Williams, Avryl & Roy Lloyd, Jenny Francis, Elsa Harflett, Bronwen Jenkins, Rob Davies, Joan Clinkskel, Leonie Waithman, Grace Davies, Richard Thomas, Allison Joyce, Richard Harris.

Present on Zoom: Llewelyn Breese, Janet Russell, Sylvia Illingsworth, Margaret Price,

Apologies: Wendy Ozols, Iris Lloyd, Joan Lloyd

ML welcomed everyone to the meeting, which was in two parts, the first speaker was Lucy Ashton who has lived in Painscastle village for twelve years. Lucy would tell her story of where she came from and how she landed up in Painscastle. Then Juliet and John Lewis from Llanshiver would tell their story of growing up in Worcestershire and their various farming activities over the years and how they came to settle at Llanshiver. Local Interest Group has tried to encourage new-comers to share their stories and although neither speakers could legitimately be called newcomers to the area, their stories are no less interesting and haven't been told before.

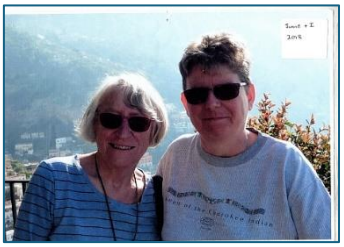
Lucy began her story first, setting the scene. She was born in Tunbridge Wells in November 1952, she mentioned a few things, now long forgotten, such as meat rationing being in place, Churchill Prime Minister and the Great London smog which was responsible for around 12,000 deaths. Her parents had married in 1946, and she was the third child, with an older brother David and sister Ginny. Her dad had been a prisoner of war, while she said her mother when she married, was 19 and hadn't even boiled an egg! They lived in a little rented cottage in Cousley Wood, Sussex. In 1954 Dad bought a piece of land, an orchard, at Lamberhurst and built a house appropriately called Orchard House. She remembered some very happy times, often with sister Ginny, including pumping the organ in the local church. Mother was involved in the local community while Dad commuted to London on weekdays, they enjoyed weekend trips to the seaside in the summer. They had great fun together Lucy playing with her two siblings. They went to school in Tunbridge Wells, while Lucy was in Nursery school with Nanny Buss with her great friend and playmate Martin who had Down's Syndrome. Lucy moved on to St Marks school in Tunbridge Wells which she loved, although shared some gruesome recollections of the toilets!

She told us of their family tragedy with the loss of two younger brothers, due to genetic heart defects. It was a time of sadness and illness throughout the family. Then in 1963 they moved to Devon, where Mum and Dad had a job as Cook, Butler and Chauffeur to Mr and Mrs Schuster, who acted the parts of a Lord and Lady! That was not a long stay. For Lucy there was plenty of adventures to be had, including a bus ride to Sidmouth for a day on the beach. Lucy talked of her experience in the Guides, which was short-lived and unpleasant. She and Ginny were ostracised because they didn't speak 'Devonish'! Then they moved to a house on Salcombe Hill overlooking Sidmouth, which Lucy described as 'magic'. Then Great Aunt Ivy came to stay, another time of anecdotes from the past. After a couple more moves, and making many lasting friendships, Lucy yearned to be 'independent and discover the world'. Birmingham University called, with a 3-year Combined Honours degree in P.E. and Social Administration. She could study and play sport, she had three brilliant years, enjoying big city life for the first time, enjoying University life with the weekends spent playing sport throughout England and Wales, while any spare time was devoted to Action Force Volunteers, where she and a mixed-race skinhead decorated bedsits and flats for people in need, a real eye-opener!

In 1973 Lucy started work as an unqualified Social Worker at Monyhull Colony for "subnormals" the term then used for people with Learning Disabilities. With later training she became a qualified Social Worker and was glad to see society moving forward with the care of these people some of whom should never have been locked away from society. Aged 25 Lucy took the job of Residential Home Manager at The Firs Home, although there were long hours especially at first with few staff, she enjoyed 6 very happy years there. It was at this time that she bought her first home, a terraced house close to Aston Villa, for under £10,000. It was just like Coronation St! She spent the next 35 years with Birmingham Social Services progressing to senior management and working across a whole range of client groups. Her final role was as Project Director for planning and implementing a new model of service for Older people across Birmingham. This involved closing the old outdated care homes and day centres and replacing them with brand new services more fitting to the 21st century. This ambitious project was a massive amount of work, involving consultations with citizens, staff and trades unions, partnerships with the NHS and the voluntary sector. Her reward, 3 years later – retirement with pension, at the age of 56.

Lucy with some of her team at The Firs 1978

Julie her partner was also a social worker and senior manager and together they have travelled extensively, to Japan, Vietnam, Cambodia, the USA and much of Europe and plan to explore as much as possible while they are still fit. Lucy was a country girl who worked in the city and Julie was a city girl who yearned for the countryside, so when they saw Roy's field, it was ideal for them to build their new home. They have been in Painscastle nearly twelve years and have settled into the community making new friends while retaining old ones.



In the second part of the evening Juliet and John Lewis from Llanshiver told their story.

Juliet started the story, she was brought up at Pershore Horticultural College which sadly is now a small imitation of its previous existence. John was brought up at Walcot Farm, Drakes Broughton a few miles away. His father had bought the farm in 1946. He had married a farmer's daughter and worked up the farming ladder and managed to find enough money to buy the 90 acre farm, a third of the money was his, the rest from the bank. He was a dairy man and was born in Canada, the grandson of a vicar. His father had worked in a bank but joined the wave of enthusiasm for farming in the overseas dominions and first worked on Canadian Pacific Railway before getting a free section, about 160 acres if he undertook to clear it. It was in Saskatchewan, right in the middle of Canada where the winters were about 8 months long, they stuck it for 4 years. During WW1 the family came back to England and John's grandfather became a small subsistence farmer in Somerset with 12 acres and a milk round, pigs and chickens and John's father grew up in that environment and loved the farming. After farm college and several jobs he started at Walcot Farm with a herd of 40 cows, 4 acre plum orchard, pigs and chickens. The break came in 1952, the year John was born, when the farm next door 260 acres came up for rent. He was successful in getting the tenancy, it was on Lord Coventry's Croome estate. John left school at 18 and went abroad with VSO. He had a year in the Solomon Islands and then 9 months in New Zealand, on his way home, milking cows and doing some

Lower Walcot – Lady Coventry's divorce settlement

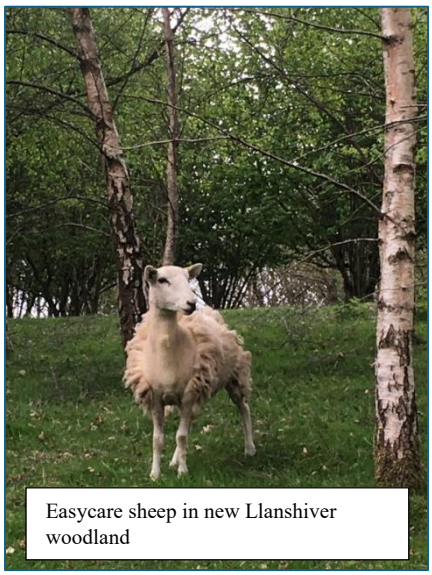
lab work. Then he started farming with his parents. He joined the Pershore Young Farmers and met Juliet and they started going out together. John was living in the rented house, which was very draughty with few conveniences. In order to generate some money, he had lodgers in the house and horses in the redundant pig sheds. His father didn't like sheep, but John took to them and liked driving machinery, so gradually they built up the farm to be more arable and sheep. They also had a big pig unit and finished about 1000 bacon pigs a year for FMC in Birmingham. They started with Clun Forest sheep then crossed them with Suffolks, then moved to North Country Mules. They started with a labour force of 5 on the 350 acres but as time went on, they grew to 500 acres, with just John and 1 man. This was common within the area, anything that could be ploughed, was, and the only grass was on the flood meadows. Grandfather had told his father when he started farming to plant damson trees in the hedges and that provided an extra crop. The damsons along with the plums from the orchard were despatched to Pershore station nearby to be transported all over mainland Britain. In 1982 Lord Coventry was divorcing his third wife, and the farm was her divorce settlement, so they were left with no alternative but to buy it, borrowing the lot! In the 1980's interest rates were between 15 and 18%. John and Juliet married and, after selling some land and the old house, they built a new one, which was warm, so they could abandon the extra warm layers of clothes, and that was much appreciated, especially when their children were born.

Tom, Rupert, Juliet and John Lewis at Walcot Farm nr Pershore Worcs

When John's father died in 1993 they settled the farm finances with his two older sisters. Then they moved to the Pontrilas area, Skirrid Farm which was not near the Skirrid, but you could just see the mountain from the topmost field, it was an organic farm and John fancied a new challenge. The farm was mostly grass, while John was more interested in arable, so he grew organic potatoes, they were picked by hand. A travelling family came and stayed on the neighbouring farm, after they had picked the Pembroke potatoes, they moved on to pick theirs. They also grew wheat, oats, carrots, and hemp with a licence from the Home Office. That was when they started to sell direct to the public, with organic meat boxes and veg boxes. They had Dexter cattle, and Juliet's favourite was Charlotte.

At this time John did his back in, so they started to look for some hill land where they could just run sheep and bought Graig Farm, near Llanwrda. It was a rundown hill farm with a rundown house, they were able to get planning permission on the barns and sold them off. That started a trend and they gradually bought more blocks of land in Wales. After the sale of Skirrid farm they also bought a rundown vineyard near Gisborne on North Island, New Zealand. John is a passionate fly-fisherman and New Zealand has some of the best trout fishing in the world! In 2001 the pound was strong against the New Zealand dollar so John bought the 20 acre vineyard, it had been in grapes for bulk wine blending. Then they bought a block of bare land next door and then another block which was a citrus orchard. The exchange rate changed in favour of the dollar and the wine business became less profitable, so within three years the land was sold off at a profit. That's when they came back and rented a place near Tenbury Wells. The farmhouses around there had mostly been sold off and land sold separately, so they started looking further west and found Llanshiver. They were also running 300 ewes on Graig Farm, with a neighbour doing the daily checks and they went down at weekends. At the top of the mountain there is the site of an old cottage. The oldest son, who is a tree surgeon, decided to build a one room log cabin there. Juliet said she would not stay until there was a shower and toilet facilities! A toilet there is, with three walls, but no door – a loo with a view! It is a beautiful view, which looks to the Black Mountain, the western part of the Brecon Beacons. They planted a lot of broadleaf and conifers in 2012 and, unfortunately had ash dieback soon afterwards and lost a lot

and when there has been replanting, deer have added to the problems. When they first bought it there were no deer but now there is a resident population of about 20, they have a stalker who takes out some to keep a stable population.



Easycare sheep in new Llanshiver woodland

When they moved to Llanshiver 20 years ago they planted broadleaf trees and had Dexter cattle, but with all the TB testing, etc. they gave them up after a few years. They now have Easycare sheep, which graze in the woodland, now it is established. They don't need shearing they just moult and the wool disappears from the ground. They also have a complete farm near Llansawel, which they farmed until 2016 and is now let to a young family. It is next to Brechfa forest alongside the Melinddwr river which runs into the Cothi at Llansawel.
At Esgair Owen in Carmarthenshire they also have land, where they have sold wildflower seed for several years.

Many thanks to Lucy as well as Juliet and John for sharing their stories with us. It is fascinating to hear how people have landed in our area, and so enrich our community when they become our friends. Thanks go to John for his technical wizardry and to Avril for our refreshments, another entertaining evening.