

Notes from Local Interest Group 29th March 2018

Present: Maureen Lloyd (ML), Wendy and Dainis Ozols, Avryl and Roy Lloyd, Deri Jones, Hannah and Edward Shaw, Stephen Mullard, Chris Ledbury, Judith Coles, Elaine Curtis, Nick Myhill, Peter and Pauline Spode, Christine and Jeremy Rose, John and Evelyn Bally, Carole Gibbs, Richard Thomas, Edwina Griffiths, Jenny Francis, Debbie Jones, Helen Barnett, John and Juliet Lewis, Joan Lloyd, John and Margaret Price, Sylvia Illingsworth, Grace Davies, Barbara Lloyd, Bill and Ruth Johnson.

ML welcomed everyone to the meeting and Painscastle Village Hall, explaining that our meetings are usually held at the Adullam Hall, and always on the last Thursday of the month. She said how wonderful it was to see such a large audience for what promised to be two extremely interesting talks.

Curlew Monitoring



The Curlew - *Numenius arquata* – image by courtesy of the RSPB

ML introduced Stephen Mullard and Chris Ledbury, from Radnorshire Wildlife Trust, and Hannah Shaw, from the Freshwater Habitats Trust, who would be covering the first item of the evening – Monitoring Curlew. Chris thanked the Local Interest Group for inviting them to speak about this iconic farmland bird. He, Stephen and Hannah had recently attended a conference about the plight of the curlew and they are hoping to enlist the help of local people in monitoring these threatened birds. He told us that there is a very real risk that there will be no more breeding curlew in Wales by the mid-2020s.

We were shown a video of a project that has been set up in Shropshire, “Curlew Country”, which has encouraged local farmers and others within the community to become involved in trying to save the curlew in the Shropshire Hills and Marches. The project recognises the very important role that farmers have in making the scheme a success.

Stephen then gave us some facts and figures. The rate of decline of the curlew has increased recently, both nationally and locally. In Wales, an 81% decline was recorded between 1993 and 2006 (in England the decline was 31% and in the Republic of Ireland, which used to be a stronghold of the bird, a staggering 96%). We still get migrant curlew coming in for the winter from places like Russia and Scandinavia, but they tend to stay around the coasts. It is our native curlew that are the issue. Stephen then showed us some data relating to curlew numbers in Wales. Mid Wales has

recorded a loss of 82.5%, North Wales 49.8% and South Wales 77.8%. In fact, the only place in Wales recording an increase is Anglesey. In terms of Mid Wales, a decline of 87% has taken place in Radnorshire and in Brecknock the figure is 90%. The Welsh breeding population is now estimated to be around 400 pairs.

Stephen went on to explain that the reasons for the decline in the birds' numbers are complex. Certainly, changes in farming practices, for example the loss of hay meadows which are their breeding habitat, play a role. There has also been a sharp decline (75% decrease) in the number of invertebrates, which form the chicks' diet. Predation is another major issue with foxes, badgers and corvids being known to take both eggs and chicks. The birds nest on the ground and so are easy prey. Another problem is disturbance; farming activities and leisure related factors (walkers and dogs) can scare birds off their nests leaving them vulnerable. Most nest failures tend to occur at the egg stage and this is probably caused by predation by foxes and badgers.

There are still curlew on the Begwns. They are long-lived birds (they can live to 30 years old) and they are also very loyal to their territory, but our local birds are failing to breed successfully. Chris told us that a local group has been set up with the aim, this year, of monitoring the curlew on the Begwns. They would like to enlist the help of local farmers and others, and to encourage them to report any evidence of curlew that they may find. Next year, the aim is to take the project further, perhaps by employing similar strategies to those that have been so successful in the "Curlew Country" project. There is an article about the plight of the curlew in the March/April 2018 issue of The Gossip if anyone would like to know more about the bird and the project and the findings of the project will be disseminated to the local community.

If anyone has sightings to report, they can use the following contact details:

Chris Ledbury: theffawydd@btinternet.com or 01982 560469

Stephen Mullard: stephen-mullard@hotmail.com

ML thanked Stephen and Chris for coming to talk to us. It was a most interesting and illuminating, if very worrying, presentation.

The Maesllwch Estate and the Wilkins Family

ML welcomed the second speaker of the evening, Ken Jones. Ken is a well-known local historian, who has served as chairman and then president of the Brecknock Society for nearly 30 years. He has specialised in studying the local men who made their fortunes with the East India Company, one of whom was Walter Wilkins from Maesllwch.

Ken began his talk by saying that he had been given access to a huge archive of around 5000 documents still housed at Maesllwch Castle and that he is most grateful to the Wilkins family for their help and co-operation whilst he was researching this topic. Sadly, Walter VII and his wife were unwell and unable to attend the meeting as they had wanted to; they had sent their apologies.

To start with, Ken explained how the Maesllwch estate had come into the ownership of the Wilkins family. In the 16th century, the Maesllwch house and estate belonged to the Vaughan family. Maesllwch is Welsh for "the field by the pool" and has been spelled a number of different ways in the past, including Maeslough. (The estate has always included land in both Breconshire and Radnorshire.) When William Vaughan died, in 1582, the house and about 600 acres passed to his daughters Katherine and Sybil. In 1670 Maesllwch was owned by Henry Havard, then Morgan

Vaughan, whose daughter married Charles Lloyd of Crickadarn. Lloyd's daughter married Humphrey Howorth of Cabalva and it was he who knocked down the original house and built a second, on the same site as the 16th century original, in 1715, in the Queen Anne style. The estate then passed to his son Humphrey Howarth who was MP for Radnorshire 1727-1755. Unusually for the times, he had to fight five elections; it was common in those days for candidates to be unopposed. Elections were an expensive business for the candidates because they involved a great deal of entertaining. In order to boost his support at the polls, Howarth made 150 cottagers in the Hundred of Painscastle, "forty shilling freeholders"; freeholders had the vote and so Howarth was more or less guaranteed support from these men. However, the electioneering drove Howarth into debt and he was forced to mortgage the estate for £26 000 to William Barnsley of Eardisley, Herefordshire. When Howarth died, Barnsley's widow wanted the money returned and so, after a long period of debate in the Chancery Division of the High Court, in 1766 the estate was acquired by Lord Edward Bentick MP, who subsequently sold it to Robert Clive (Clive of India). Clive was, at the time, in the process of acquiring a number of estates throughout the Marches. Then, in 1771, Clive's agents sold the estate to John Wilkins, a solicitor from Brecon, who was the father of Walter Wilkins I; in fact, John bought the estate for Walter. John Wilkins became Lord of Is Mynydd, as did his son Walter. John was also secretary to the Court of Great Sessions and therefore very influential. John paid £34 000, the modern-day equivalent of £4 million, for the house and estate, which included 1400 acres in the Painscastle district, 150 acres in Colwyn, 670 acres in Breconshire, plus 270 acres of common land and some more land in Herefordshire. (The estate was added to in later years, by both the Wilkins family and through inheritance.) By 1775 the estate was about 2500 acres. Walter I, between 1775-1795, completed a further 166 land deals amounting to about another 3000 acres. So, by the time Walter entered parliament in 1796, the Maesllwch estate consisted of some 5000 acres. In 1784 Walter and his brother Jeffreys inherited some land in the Aberdare-Hirwaun area which John Wilkins and Walter Mayberry had acquired to establish the Hirwaun ironworks.



Maesllwch House in Queen Anne style and the Wye Valley

Walter Wilkins I (1741-1828) was the second son of John Wilkins (1713 – 1784) and his wife Sybil Jeffreys (1718 – 1777), who came from a well-connected local family. He had a number of siblings, including an older brother, Thomas, and another called Jeffreys. The Wilkins were a scholarly family and were classed as “third tier gentry”, which meant that they had the right to be called Esquire. They wanted the best for their sons and especially Walter who, as a second son, would not inherit his Father’s property. Walter was educated at Christ’s College, Brecon, and then later at Winchester School. Rather than going on to Oxford or Cambridge as was the tradition at the time, Walter was sent to London for training in merchant accounting. His parents’ wish was that he should gain a position in the East India Company, probably the largest shareholder company that there has ever been. This company was incredibly wealthy, having enormous power over a huge area and large population in Bengal and so he would have very good prospects if he could secure a position with them. Once his merchant accounting training was complete, he had to go through a rigorous selection process; in addition, his application had to be endorsed by an important person, and Walter was fortunate enough to have his relation Charles Pratt the Attorney General. It has been estimated that the Wilkins family invested the equivalent of £90 000 in training and other expenditure in order to secure Walter his post as a “writer” with the East India Company.

Walter made his way to India in 1762 and he was appointed to work in Chittagong under a very good and honest mentor called Harry Verelst who established a private trading company in which he offered Walter a one sixteenth share, at a price. Walter accepted the invitation, although he must have borrowed the money to enable him to do so. When this company was disbanded, Walter made a great deal of money, possibly as much as £3 million in present day value.

In the meantime, Walter’s career was advancing and he went up the hierarchy in the East India Company, eventually becoming Chief of Chittagong and later becoming a member of the Governing Council of Bengal. By this time, he was very wealthy and his thoughts turned to returning home. Unfortunately, at the time, the East India Company had a very bad reputation in Britain because of the way it had responded to a devastating famine in Bengal, when one third of the population died. Word of this had got back to Britain and there was a great deal of hostility to those returning who had worked for the company, “nabobs” as they were called. Chittagong had not been affected by the famine and had, in fact, helped by providing food at affordable prices to the victims. However, Walter still received a less than enthusiastic welcome from the gentry back in Britain. It was not going to be easy to establish himself as an English gentleman. However, he was High Sheriff of Radnorshire in 1774 and Breconshire in 1778. He became a Justice of the Peace in 1775 and later a Member of the Quarter Sessions.

By this time, Walter was in his early 30s and he wanted to marry. He eventually proposed to and married, in 1777, Catherine Hayward from Gloucester (1745-1784); she was an only surviving child from a wealthy and influential family who lived at Wallsworth Hall. On his return from India, Walter, with his brother Jeffreys and two other men, established the Brecon Old Bank, a private bank with no limited liability. It became a force in developing the iron industry and canal infra-structure in South Wales, as well as supporting the agricultural development of mid-Wales. It was Walter’s not inconsiderable wealth that gave the bank its standing and eventually there were seven branches in southern Wales. Because it had Walter’s money behind it, the bank continued to do well when other banks were going bust. In 1890 it merged with Lloyds.

Soon, Walter decided that he would like to go into politics, but he was aware that there might be opposition to his candidature within the county. In 1780 Walter stood against Thomas Johnes Junior

but was defeated. However, he was eventually nominated, following the death of the Earl of Oxford, and he was elected, unopposed in 1796. In 1802, he fought another election, this time being opposed by John MacNamara. This was a nasty election and canvassing went on for 7-8 months. Eventually, after five days of voting, Walter was duly elected by 577 votes to 57. MacNamara challenged the result and took his case to the House of Commons for adjudication, accusing Wilkins of bribery, but the case went against him and Walter took his seat in Parliament and continued to serve as a Whig MP for Radnorshire until his death, in 1828. Little is known about his attendance in the House, but there are records of how he voted in certain cases. For example, he voted: for the increase in seaman's pay; on parliamentary reform; on the removal of restrictions on Roman Catholics holding public office; against the Corn Laws; and, in 1815, against the War with Napoleon (in fact he voted against the War on three occasions). After the War (1815-1821), he became active in Parliament during what was a difficult time for Britain. During this period, he endorsed three anti-slavery petitions.

Walter and Catherine had two children, a son and a daughter. His son, Walter II (1778-1830), was very different from his father. Whilst Walter I was frugal and very clever with money, his son was quite the opposite. However, Walter I wanted his family to be accepted into the upper echelons of society and so he was delighted when his son married Catherine Devereux (1793-1885), the daughter of George Devereux, 13th Viscount of Hereford. This marriage enabled the Wilkins family to "move up the social ladder" – the grandchildren of Walter Wilkins I would now be related to one of the most important families in the country. (Robert Devereux was the 2nd Earl of Essex and a favourite of Elizabeth I.)

Walter II moved into Woodlands House on the edge of the Maesllwch estate and Walter I gave him generous amounts of money in order to help him set up home there. However, Walter II soon amassed very large debts. He had no interest in industry and although he was a partner in the bank he used it as a private overdraft facility rather than as an investment. To his Father's horror, he decided to leave his wife, Catherine, after she had given birth to their fifth child and he built a house in Llanstephan (Fern Hill Villa) for him and his mistress, Elizabeth Walker of Hay, with whom he had four children. Whilst his Father, Walter, was still alive, there was no question of his divorcing Catherine because she was very close to her Father-in-law.

Walter I died in 1828 and he was buried in Brecon, but there is no indication of exactly where his grave is located. Walter I had left the Maesllwch estate to his nephews, the Rev. Walter Wilkins and Thomas Mayberry, in trust for his son as life tenant, so that Walter II could not dispose of it. However, he did leave about £23 million in today's value in liquid assets to his son. Nine months after the death of his Father, Walter II legally separated from Catherine and she went to live in Llangattock, with Lt Richard Stretton. On Walter II's death, in 1831, Catherine was able to marry Stretton.

Whilst Walter II was still alive, he commissioned an architect, William Lugar, to draw up plans for a new castellated house to replace Maesllwch House. This new "castle" was eventually built over a period of years, the first phase completed in the early 1840s and the second part in the 1870s. When Walter II died, his son, Walter III (1809-1840), inherited. Walter III married Julia Collinson (1812-1878); she was a successful writer and the author of nine books. Walter III decided to expand the estate and he bought the Boughrood estate (1500 acres) for £22 000, as well as some more land, totalling 2000 acres in all. Because he had spent so much money, when he died (1840) the estate was in financial difficulties. He was succeeded by his son, Walter IV (1832-1878), who was only 8

years old. Whilst he was still not “of age”, the estate was managed by a number of trustees, including Julia Collinson and Richard Stretton.



Walter Wilkins II Riding to Hounds

By 1850, the estate was even bigger (11 425 acres) and it is recorded in the 1878 Welsh “Domesday Book” that it was 9 898 acres in total. The amount of land in Radnorshire that it owned had gone down, the amount held in Breconshire was about the same, but the main increase had been as a result of the acquisition of land in Glamorgan, especially in the Rhondda Valley. Here the Wilkins family also owned the mineral rights and this, being the South Wales coalfield, was the source of a great deal of income.

As a postscript, Ken told us that it was Walter III who had wanted to change the family name to de Winton. The family had claimed descent from a Norman lord, de Wintona, whose lands were located in Glamorgan. On 1st August, 1839, he was granted permission, by Royal Licence, to change the family name for all of the descendants of Walter I and Jeffreys Wilkins.

ML thanked Ken for coming to give us such a fascinating and informative talk about one of our local families. A phenomenal amount of research was evident in his very detailed presentation, which included some excellent illustrations.

Afterwards, there was an opportunity to look at the many documents that Ken had brought with him for our perusal, whilst we enjoyed refreshments kindly made by Avryl Lloyd.

