

## Local Interest Group Visit to Aberystwyth December 2015

On December 14<sup>th</sup>, nine members of the Local Interest Group gathered at Painscastle hall for our trip to Aberystwyth. Mo Lloyd had arranged for us to visit the National Library of Wales in the morning and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales in the afternoon.

On arrival at the National Library, Mo's first priority was a cup of coffee which we had in the very welcoming cafe. Once this mission was accomplished, we were shown the North Reading Room. This has recently been refurbished and has four storeys of galleries around it where all of the printed material is housed. Our guide, Beryl, told us that a new catalogue had been launched in December 2015 and that this is the best place to start when one is searching for any item; it includes all digital records, subscriptions, photos, maps, manuscripts, etc. As long as you have a Welsh postcode, you can register online as a reader and this will enable you to have access to the online catalogue. A catalogue search will show you what is available but you would need to go to the Library to view the items. This would mean obtaining a reader's ticket – a very easy process which you initiate by obtaining a special number online, followed by a short registration process actually at the Library itself. Once you are registered as a reader you can access newspapers and other online subscriptions from home. Free access is also possible for sites such as Ancestry, Find My Past and the Census records whilst working from the Library. Beryl also told us that it is possible to go on a "Behind the Scenes" tour; these happen at 11am on a Monday and 2.15pm on a Wednesday and are apparently very good.

Beryl then showed us how to actually search the catalogue by entering Painscastle in the search box; this showed us what sorts of items the Library holds that relate to the area. Once the list appears, you can look at each entry individually. There is often a very detailed description of what the documents actually contain, and this is very helpful. You can request to see any item held, either online or when you are actually at the Library, although they do ask for an hour's notice to find the document and bring it to you.

A very useful resource that Beryl told us about is the People's Collection Wales site. This includes lots of digital images of things that are NOT held in the Library. These items have been uploaded to the site by the general public, and groups like ours are actively encouraged to contribute. Beryl said that this is also a very good place for the storing of information and other items by collectors such as our local interest group. Amongst the most interesting items on this site are oral histories.

It is possible to view probate records held by the Library at home, online, free of charge, and copies of any will can be purchased for £3.50 per will. Beryl said that wills can be very interesting as they often mention properties; however, they can be difficult to search as they have not been transcribed.

Whilst showing us how to search the records, Beryl found some wonderful photographs of Rhosgoch Mill, taken in 1953, and featuring Mrs Powell in the pictures.

Beryl told us that Kilvert's Diary is also digitised and available online. In addition, over one million pages of Welsh newspapers have been digitised, up to about 1919 in order to cover World War One. A map allows you to search for newspapers from specific areas in Wales, but she said that it would be useful to do a general search because places can often be mentioned in newspapers from different regions. Copies of papers are available in the Library itself because, obviously, not all have been digitised.

Another very useful resource is the Cynefin project. This is an ongoing project, due to be completed in September 2016, and involves the digitisation of tithe maps. About 1100 maps and schedules have already been digitised and one can volunteer to transcribe the maps online. In order to do this, you have to register as a volunteer and then simply sign in to work on transcriptions.

Various other collections are available in the Library, including State, Manorial, Map, Picture and Photo collections. The Archives Wales website is a good starting point when you are looking for items as this will tell you where they are held. Some could be in local archives, or other libraries and museums for example.

We were then taken into the South Reading Room where Beryl had put out some items from the archive that related to Painscastle. There were two sales documents dating from 1919, one for the Painscastle estate and the other for the Maesllwch estate both at that time owned by the De Winton family. There was also an indenture, dated 1825, which mentioned New House Farm as the Black Ox, and a final item which dated from 1638 and which was a sales document mentioning Llanbedr Painscastle and the Baskerville estate. Mo had photocopies of the latter two made so that we could look at these at our leisure; the second of the two is going to take some time to transcribe as it is quite hard to read.

We then had a delicious lunch in the cafe before having some time to ourselves to explore the Library further (once we had all been issued with our reader's tickets).

After lunch we headed off to the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales. We were somewhat surprised to see that an organisation associated with some wonderful buildings and ruins should be housed in a rather ugly 1960s block! We were given a very friendly welcome and a short introduction about the organisation. It was set up in 1908 in order to make an inventory of the ancient and historic buildings in Wales. This work was done by field workers into the 1960s and 1970s. It is still a recording body with archaeologists and other workers and nowadays they do a lot of "emergency" work for CADW. They have also changed their emphasis from making inventories to producing thematic records. There are only thirty employees for the whole of Wales and so the Commission makes good use of volunteers and community groups when gathering information. The Commission holds huge archives, both paper and digital records.

We were then introduced to Richard Suggett and he gave us a most interesting talk about important sites in Radnorshire. He started by explaining that Radnorshire is interesting because it is basically a timber-built county. An inventory of buildings was done originally in 1913 and so they decided to do another, a thematic study. This resulted in the publication, in 2005, of "Houses and History in the March of Wales: Radnorshire 1400-1800". He told us that the surveying had been done at a time when many of the important houses were "sliding into oblivion" and so it was important to record as many buildings as possible.

Cruck trusses are very distinctive in Radnorshire; they combine wall post and rafter in one structure extending from just above the ground to the ridge of the building. They are constructed in pairs, very often from splitting a single large angled branch of oak. Many crucks are quite sophisticated with additional arch-shaped bracing and ornamental mouldings. He went on to explain that crucks seem to be imitating the pointed Gothic arch (dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> century) and so their origin is probably of a similar date. Crucks are not found everywhere in England and Wales and we were shown a map of their distribution; from this we could see that the heart of their distribution is the Welsh Marches, with Radnorshire at the centre. Hardly any crucks are found in the east of England, probably because there are more box-frame buildings there. By 1500, this box-frame construction method also took over in Radnorshire.

Richard continued by explaining that wood is a great material for preserving items, such as paper and fabrics, and so interesting artefacts have been found within wooden construction material. Furthermore, as a result of dendrochronology (using tree rings), wood can be used for dating buildings. This process can often give a fairly close date for the building and, if the bark survives, perhaps even the precise year and season that the tree was felled. The 1980s Radnorshire study was the first one where tree ring dating was used and the Commission have since been able to construct a chronology for the houses in the county.

The study identified three types of house within Radnorshire: lordship status houses (1400-1450); gentry houses (1450-1500); and, ordinary farmhouses (1550s).

The earliest houses were those of lordship status and these were built following Owain Glyndwr's revolt. Richard illustrated this type of dwelling by showing us a slide of Upper House in Painscastle. This was a large, triple-unit court house, having a hall flanked by cross wings, and was built very close to the entrance to the former castle, i.e. on an important site. Because Upper House has a timber frame, it was possible to draw a construction diagram. Inside the house, there is evidence of very dramatic timber work, deliberately theatrical in style. Although they did not tree-ring date the house, it probably dates from around 1450, possibly a little earlier.

Richard then went on to describe the gentry houses and showed us some pictures of examples. The people who lived in these would have had influence at the local level and there would probably have been one or two in each parish. A good local example is Great House in Newchurch. Gentry houses usually had an ornate roof truss, acting as the central truss in a hall of two bays. Great House has one of the largest cruck trusses in Wales, although it is now partially obscured by later alterations. All houses had an open fire hearth and the fire would have burned all day. It is clear from documentation that these houses contained very little furniture in medieval times; the most important pieces were a long fixed bench and trestle table at one end of the hall for the master of the house and important guests (the original 'top table').

The ordinary farmhouses that the Commission surveyed in the county also often contained crucks. These buildings are usually located on a line dividing the enclosed land from the common on the hillside. The most usual form is that of a long narrow house, one room deep, with the living area at one end and the cattle byre at the other. The main date of construction of these dwellings is around 1550. The houses were about half the size of the gentry houses with the hall only of one bay. They were actually miniature versions of the greater halls which indicates that the farmers were exerting their free status through their buildings.

Richard finished his talk about historic Radnorshire buildings by telling us that there was ample evidence that the carpenters in the county displayed a great pride in their work. We were shown examples of their signing of their work. In one case, at Upper Dolau, near Presteigne, the carpenter had traced around his hand and in another, at Old Impton, Norton, the craftsman had carved images of his tools into the woodwork of the porch. Richard said that there was still a great deal of work to be done and that not every medieval house has been dated. More may yet be discovered. From about 1525, it is probable that most of the houses had been built of stone and are, therefore, not so easy to date.

After his talk we were given the opportunity to search the many documents relating to the local area that the archivists had put on display for us. The staff could not have been more helpful and there is obviously a wealth of material in the Commission's possession that can be viewed by appointment.

As we left, the real reason that we had made the trip to Aberystwyth became apparent! Mo led the way down to the sea front, in the failing light, in search of an ice cream and she was not disappointed. Some of us preferred to go looking for a hot drink, but we all enjoyed watching the daylight ending over the bay and listening to the waves breaking on the beach. It had been a fascinating and most illuminating visit and many of us resolved to return to do further research on our local area. Many thanks to Mo for making it all possible; her organisational skills are legendary and there is no doubt that without her initiative we probably would not have made the trip!