

**Cymdeithas Brycheiniog a Chyfeillion yr Amgueddfa**  
**Brecknock Society and Museum Friends**  
(Charity Number 518041)  
**Newsletter February 2021**

From the Chairman, John Gibbs (01874 730747 or [chair@brecknocksociety.co.uk](mailto:chair@brecknocksociety.co.uk))

**Introduction**

With the good news of the roll-out of vaccines being counter-balanced, to some extent, by information on the potential impact of new variants of the virus, I start this newsletter with the latest information on where we stand with plans for one of our premier events, the Sir John Lloyd lecture. I then move on to our other activities, including the production of our e-papers and our journal Brycheiniog. The second part of this newsletter provides information about our engagement with the Brecknock Museum & Art Gallery in y Gaer.

**2021 Sir John Lloyd Lecture**

Almost at the last minute, the 2020 lecture on Tretower Court and Castle had to be postponed because of the Covid epidemic. We were seeking to hold it in spring 2021 but that did not prove possible. However, we are glad to say that it has been rearranged for 2022.



Twelfth Century Font in Brecon Priory, now Brecon Cathedral

For 2021 we are delighted to announce that our lecturer will be Professor Janet Burton of Trinity Saint David, University of Wales, and her subject will be 'The monastic presence in medieval Brecknock'. Professor Burton is very well-known both as an authority on her subject and as an excellent speaker. How and when will the lecture take place? For some months we have been having discussions with David Wilson, the Director of Theatr Brycheiniog, about the idea of a 'hybrid event', in which a first-class 'streamed lecture' to people at home could be combined with a live audience in the theatre – the latter necessarily being quite small as 'social distancing' rules would apply. Alternatively, it might have to be a 'streamed only' event. Tickets would be available via the Theatr Box Office as usual. Our current date for the lecture is Friday April 23<sup>rd</sup> but details (including confirmation of the date) will have to await Welsh Government decisions and we are expecting to be able to make an announcement at the end of February. We will provide you with more information just as soon as we can!

**Other Events and Activities**

We were planning to act as a partner in respect of two conferences planned for the summer of 2021. Unfortunately, both have had to be postponed until 2022. The first of these is a conference to mark the 400th anniversary of the birth of Henry Vaughan and his brother Thomas. The second, the Convivium Conference at the Cathedral, has, as its theme, the importance of an understanding of local landscapes and heritage for spiritual well-being. This latter event has already been postponed from 2020, but the organiser, Mark Clavier, tells us that, given the nature of the topic, there is a very strong feeling among potential participants that it should be a real rather than a virtual event.

We have also mentioned to you, a special lecture to the BS&MF, 'The history of Welsh and English in Brycheiniog', due on July 9<sup>th</sup>: this to be given by David Willis, the recently-appointed Professor of Celtic at Jesus College, Oxford. We will bring you more information on this as soon as we can.

*Zoom lecture by William Gibbs: 'John Evan and William Meredith Thomas: two Brecon Sculptors and the works they created for local families and for wider Wales'.*

A number of pieces by these two sculptors are in y Gaer and so this lecture will fit well with our wish to focus on the collections there. It will take place on Tuesday March 9<sup>th</sup> at 4.00pm. Please register your interest by emailing Sophie Clubb at [Sophie.Clubb@outlook.com](mailto:Sophie.Clubb@outlook.com) and nearer the time she will send you a link to the event.

*Celebration of the Sister Bonaventure Kelleher Theatre Studentship.*

Jayne Gold has just started her second year of doctoral research on the history and impact of the theatre in Brecon during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. She is registered at Bristol University under a grant that is funded by the BS&MF and the Ursuline order. In addition to her academic work, she has helped Brecon Little Theatre to put in a successful bid for Heritage Lottery funding. The money has been granted for promenade performances that, later in the year, will link up the various buildings in Brecon that are connected with its theatre history.

In addition we are in discussion with Brecon Town Council, over plans for a possible event in the early autumn to celebrate Sister Bonaventure's commitment to the town and its history and, at the same time, to bring Jayne's research to the attention of the local community.

*Up-date on the Society's e-papers.*

You will know that back in April 2020, we started to produce a series of short, well-illustrated electronic papers with a Breconshire focus. After distributing them to Society members by e-mail, we post them on our website (<https://brecknocksociety.co.uk/brecknock-log-brecknock-society-and-museum-friends-occasional-papers/>).

We ended the year with a paper by Sophie Clubb on the King Charles bed, one of the key exhibits in the Brecon Gallery at y Gaer, and have recently circulated a paper by William Gibbs on John Lloyd Vaughan Watkins of Pennoyre. It features a splendid painting (also in y Gaer) of him as a young boy with his pet cockerel.

We have several papers in the pipeline, but do ask yourself whether you do not have a topic that would be suitable for a paper in the series. We very much welcome 'work in progress', and several of the papers distributed thus far, have stimulated a lively and productive correspondence!



Melon bulb on decorated column supporting the front of the canopy on the King Charles bed

*Brycheiniog*

Under Editor Mike Williams, our journal *Brycheiniog* goes from strength to strength. The 2020 issue, which came out last March was very well received but the lack of BS&MF meetings greatly reduced the opportunities for sales and we still have a number of copies left. Mike reports that the next issue, out this March, will be bumper one, with more pages than usual and a number of particularly well-illustrated articles. He is especially excited to bring us a paper on Hay Castle by leading historian Richard Suggett: "I am delighted that Richard agreed to work with us on publishing his lecture to the Hay Festival in 2019 and the result has exceeded expectations. Richard does not just explore the castle and the subsequent Jacobean house that was built in its ruins, but also puts the buildings in context, showing how the unique geographical position of Hay meant that it was a place that many significant families sought to own and control". If you are a subscriber, why not show your support for the society by ordering an extra copy for a friend? If you are not, do consider taking out a subscription now. As a subscriber, you get your copy post free (£12 instead of £14) and indeed you can get the 2020 and 2021 copies together for the special price of £20 with a subscription. For details, see

<https://brecknocksociety.co.uk/resources/brycheiniog/>

### *Poetry Anthology: Tribute to Roland Mathias*

The Roland Mathias Prize was set up under the aegis of the Brecknock Society & Museum Friends and ran for 15 years, with 2019 being the last year. Each of the winning poets was invited to perform their work at an event in Brecon, and these performances drew in a considerable audience and helped to enrich the cultural life of the area. A welcome consequence of the Prize is the prospect of an anthology of Welsh poetry, to be published by Seren around May 2021. It will draw on the prize-winning volumes and as such will represent some of the very best of this century's Welsh poetry in English. It is provisionally entitled *A Last Respect*: this a tribute to the literary career of Roland Mathias and also the title of one of his poems.

The collection is being jointly edited by Glyn Mathias and by Daniel Williams, Professor of English and Creative Writing at Swansea University. Included in the volume will be a tribute to the work of Roland Mathias by Jane Aaron, a former professor of English, who knew him well and gave a talk to the Brecknock Society last year.

### **Engagement with y Gaer (Brecknock Museum & Art Gallery and Brecon Library)**

#### *Opening arrangements during 2020*

As many of you will know, a limited re-opening of y Gaer occurred from 31 July 2020. With the exception of the October 'All Wales lockdown', some visiting remained possible until just before Christmas. It may be noted that, undoubtedly because of the link with Brecon Library, this situation was better than that encountered in many 'stand-alone' UK museums. However, lack of public awareness that the building was open kept visitor numbers low.

#### *Completion of the Conservation, Display & Interpretation Project*

It is very good to record the successful completion of this project, which represented a major contribution made by the Brecknock Society and Museum Friends (BS&MF) and its local partner, the Brecknock Art Trust, to the displays in the Brecknock Museum & Art Gallery. The Interpretation element of the project depended upon an award of £50,000 made by the Garfield Weston Foundation to the BS&MF in late January 2018; this to be used principally for the purchase of specialist computer terminals and software.

Under the terms of our arrangement with the Foundation, the cash funding was complemented by a great deal of volunteer work on researching and writing 50-word 'primary digital labels' to appear on the terminals, and also by work on much more detailed 'secondary digital labels' for some of the items. The exemplary 'End of Grant Report' submitted to the Foundation in December 2020 by the Project

Leader Mervyn Bramley includes a concise description of the way in which the Covid epidemic made necessary the temporary removal of the 'touch screen' function from the terminals. Instead, the primary labels with their associated images appear in a rotating display. The report is supplemented by a wealth of more detailed information that Mervyn has placed on the relevant pages of our website.

The Society owes a great debt of gratitude to Mervyn for his management of the project, not least in respect of the way in



Computer terminals purchased with the Garfield Weston grant beside the Llangors log boat

which he liaised with the Garfield Weston team over the difficulties that we have faced, firstly as occasioned by the delayed opening of y Gaer and more recently as a result of Covid. He also spent a lot of time interacting with the Blackbox audio-visual company of Port Talbot, suppliers of the equipment; they were themselves breaking new ground with this particular exercise.

All this has depended upon the 30 or so volunteers who conducted such sterling research work on the exhibits. Glyn Mathias reviewed all the primary labels to ensure that they were suitably and clearly written and we also owe great thanks to Liz Bickerton who co-ordinated the work on the labels and arranged for their submission to Nigel Blackmore at y Gaer. In addition to the files on the primary labels, there is a wealth of secondary label information: a tremendous resource! Some of this has found expression in the BS&MF e-papers mentioned above.

#### *'Signing off' on the y Gaer construction work*

As a local funding partner in the project to create y Gaer, its completion and 'signing off' has been a major concern to us. As 2020 came to a close, there were still outstanding issues in respect of some features of the building itself and, in consequence, we are still retaining some of the funding that we have committed.

#### *Future operation of y Gaer*

We fully recognise that the Covid pandemic has created uncertain and demanding times for Powys County Council (PCC) but, at the same time, we consider it to be vital that steps are taken to put in place a partnership system that will allow us, along with other local champions and volunteers, to assist y Gaer staff in the operation of the building and in ensuring that it achieves its potential. When, during 2020, PCC called for Expressions of Interest (EOI) from potential partners in the commercial operation of y Gaer, we felt it appropriate to submit our own EOI. Our paper drew on the agreed Vision Statement which concludes by stating that '*y Gaer is a model partnership project with many other funders supporting this nationally important development and with local partners and volunteers working alongside council staff to deliver services for the community and provide a welcome to visitors from near and far*'. It is our expectation that we will be assisting with both income generation and with contributions in kind. We hope that, before long, the relationship will be reflected in a Memorandum of Understanding between ourselves and PCC.

#### *BS&MF Subcommittee on y Gaer*

I should also record that we have established a *BS&MF y Gaer subcommittee* in order to help us deal with a major part of the Society's overall activity. Membership is comprised of members of the Council, plus some other members of the Society who have a special interest in the Museum & Art Gallery. Libby Rees has kindly agreed to act as secretary of this sub-committee

#### **A look ahead to the AGM**

We have decided that the AGM should be held on-line again this year – probably in late April or May. You will receive details in due course.

With very best wishes

Yours

