

FOREST OF DEAN LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

news
February 2018

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The Forest of Dean
Local History
Society

News

February 2018

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Registered Charity
No: 1094700

Printed by
Inky Little Fingers

Editors Notes

In the middle pages of this edition you will find another of John Powell's remarkable essays. Forsaking the foreshore this time, John has found another quirky story about a local man who insisted on being buried in the middle of a field! Just add a frightened policeman into the mix and we have elements of a ghost story perhaps! Anyway read for yourself; just turn to the centre pages.

It is always encouraging when you edit a publication to find a new contributor. Paul Stephens-Wood told us about F.W Harvey and the Devil's Chapel in the November edition, and I am delighted to welcome another contribution from him. This time he writes about 'Listing the Forest's War Memorials'. Perhaps protecting our numerous war memorials is something you feel strongly about? If so, read Paul's article to see how you can get involved in helping protect these important memorials so they can continue to exist for many decades to come.

On the back cover, Ian Wright, another regular correspondent, reports on the Chartist Conference which took place in Newport last November. The tragic events which took place in Newport in 1839 still reverberate today, Many of our democratic freedoms we all enjoy now are at least in part due to those who stood up for their rights at the time. Ian manages to find a local Forest connection in his story, which makes his report even more compelling. By the way, Ian is a prolific writer and you find more of his work on the Bristol Radical History website: www.brh.org.uk/site/contributors/ian-wright/

Finally I have to thank once again our most regular contributor, Cecile Hunt, who in this issue starts a short series of articles on the local iron industry. Many of you will have been on the Society coach trip a few years ago which explored some of the sites associated with the industry, and I am sure you will find Cecile's articles informative and interesting.

Keith Walker

Short pieces of news, views, and opinions for the Newsletter are always very welcome. Every effort will be made to reproduce articles as presented but the Editor reserves the right to edit as necessary. The Editor will assume that all necessary authorisation for attachments, photographs etc has been obtained and the FODLHS will not be held liable in the case of a subsequent query.

News From The Chair - *with Mary Sullivan*

I would like to welcome all members to this first newsletter of 2018. It is exciting for me as it is not only my first full year as Chairman, but also our 70th year as a Society and we have an especially rich programme to mark this key event.

By the time you read this we will have already enjoyed Steve Blake's talk on medieval Gloucestershire Churches, on which Steve is something of an expert. He is also the Chairman of the Gloucestershire Local History Association. I value my link to the GLHA, as a committee member, because it keeps me in touch with local history events all around the County. On Saturday 28th April the GLHA will host another History Day at Churchdown Community Centre. This year the topic is "Between the Wars" and we plan to prepare a display on some of the playing fields and memorial halls that sprung up in the Forest in that period. Thank you to the few members who have offered material to help with that display. Last year, our display on Gardens for Fun, Food and Flowers won the prize. So we cannot win this year under the rules. Nevertheless, we still want to put on a fine display and we do provide one of the judges.



We have talks from four of our Vice Presidents to look forward to. Two are on events specific to the years around 1948, the privatisation of the railways and a school that moved to the Forest for safety. As I said at the AGM, I believe this was a fascinating time to look back to as so much was changing and developing in Britain soon after the War. I hope many of you are looking out photos and memorabilia from the 40s for our display at the end of this year. And those being trained to record oral history please take the chance to record memories from older Foresters of that time too. We will be working on the display with the Dean Heritage Centre, another of our key partners.

I want to thank all my committee members for the hard work they undertake to keep the society running and interesting. Currently, this includes working out the implications for the Society of



Whitecroft Memorial Hall erected "between the wars" in 1924

the new Data Protection Regulations that come into force in May. You will hear more of this soon. I have room for one or two more keen people to join the committee - if I can find them.

One job that I am seeking someone for is to manage the content on our website. The technical changes are made by our contractor, iLateral. But the website needs keeping up to date to make it interesting and useful for members and others. Anybody with a computer at home could undertake this task whenever it suited them. An hour a week would make all the difference. If you are interested please speak to me or Keith Walker.



MEMBERSHIP

Thank you all for your continued support of our Society, which continues to grow. We are pleased to offer a warm welcome to the following new members: Rosemary Humphries and Ray Pocock, Isabel Winstanley and Cynthia Rush,

William and Jeana Hall, Andrew Hoan, Helen Lee, Jonathan and Diane Cooke, Jan and Julian Stammers, Annette Davis and Kathleen Davis, Jo Connor, John Williams. We hope you all enjoy the benefits of being a member of our Society. Please note that if you change your email address and you still wish to receive the communications I send from time to time, please let me know the new one!

Cheryl Mayo

Like other charities big and small, your Committee are thinking what we need to do about the new “GDPR”, data protection regulations that take effect in May.

We will put on our Website a “Privacy Statement” about what we do with your data and why. We’ll reproduce it on our Membership Forms both for new and renewing members. We will also add to those forms some explicit confirmations about whether or not you want to be communicated to electronically about Society or other local history activity.

We have to do this, and it will look a bit bureaucratic. But it’s an opportunity to reassure you that we take the security of your data very seriously.

**GENERAL DATA
PROTECTION
REGULATION**

“CHURCHES OF THE DEAN” - SELF DRIVE TOUR SATURDAY 19th MAY

Anyone who attended Steve Clarke’s excellent talk on local mediaeval churches in January will have had their appetite whetted for Simon Moore’s self drive tour of “Churches of the Dean” on Saturday 19th May. However, for various reasons, the numbers of those going on the tour will have to be limited. Therefore if you are interested in going on the tour, could you please let Simon Moore know as soon as possible:

Email: conservation@forestofdeanhistory.org.uk

Telephone: 01594 840521

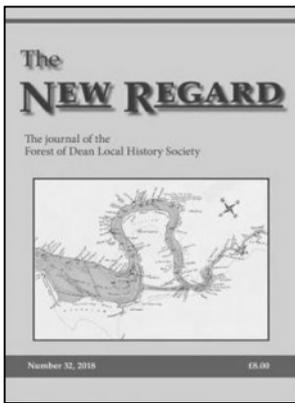
FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Saturday February 10th - 3pm - West Dean Centre, Bream, GL15 6JW
Ian Pope - “1948, A Year of Change for Forest Railways”

Saturday March 10th - 3pm - West Dean Centre, Bream, GL15 6JW
Averil Kear - “The School at Lydney Park 1939 - 1947”

Friday March 23rd - 7’30pm - Coleford Baptist Hall, GL16 8AN
Andrew Taylor - “Writing a Historical Novel”

Saturday April 7th- 3pm - West Dean Centre, Bream, GL15 6JW
Stuart Wilson - “The Lost City of Trellech”



Members are reminded that our latest journal **New Regard Number 32** is available, and contains the usual disparate mixture of intriguing articles.

John Powell tells of an unfulfilled Victorian plan to divert the River Severn across the Arlingham peninsula. Averil Kear picks up the maritime theme, writing about the WWI National Dockyard at Beachley.

Mining gets some focus through Dean Baxter's account of William Davis's tragic death whilst he was 'Standing the Gaff'. David Cranstone explores the Forest's role in finery steelmaking during the period 1560 to 1700, whilst David Mullin describes

the search for old furnaces and steelworks in the local area. Paul Morgan illustrates the work of the last Home Office Mining Surveyors in the Dean. Keith Walker tells 'the rather short story of Blakeney Hill Galena Mine.'

The links with the Russian revolution of former Forest MP Morgan Philips-Price are explained by Nigel Costley, and Ian standing continues his ongoing series about Interesting and Notable Trees of Dean.

Members can order in print issues of the New Regard at our meetings, or from the online 'eshop', simply select the 'New Regard' tab at **forestofdeanhistory.org.uk**

BUILT HERITAGE

Over the past several months, members of the Committee have been in discussion with the Forestry Commission to help better protect some of the Forest's mining industry remains. As a result, the Commission has erected new signs at three old tramway sites - Wimberly, Bixslade and Howlers - to encourage foot-only traffic.

Following on from this, in December we had a very fruitful meeting with the Deputy Surveyor, Kevin Stannard, to discuss various issues which had come up while revising our very popular Mines Trails maps. As well as specific actions which will make the trails more user-friendly, the wider outcome of this meeting is that the Society will be actively involved in developing a 'Built Heritage' strategy for the Commission as part of the Foresters' Forest programme. The strategy will facilitate the prioritisation of conservation works on built heritage sites, but could also identify sites where tree-felling needs to be carried out in a particularly sensitive way, and integrate with developing recreational and cycling strategies. This is good news for what is left of our mining heritage in the depths of the Forest - a surprising amount if you know where to look and can scramble through the undergrowth - and we would like to thank the Commission for their support. (The revised Mines Trails maps will be out shortly.)

Cheryl Mayo

Grave Events in a Forest Field - by John Powell



*The author at the grave site,
searching for signs of life!*

One hundred and thirteen years ago Joseph Wheatley was, with little ceremony, laid to rest in the middle of a Forest field. His funeral took just two minutes. But to this day the spot is still marked by iron railings and a small headstone. Here's the story of an event that enthralled the residents of a local village.

Call it what you will —gossip, tittle-tattle, rumour — but the death of Joseph Wheatley at his home in a hamlet on the outskirts of Blakeney late on Wednesday January 18, 1905, created an avalanche of chatter.

Stories were soon circulating in village shops and pubs. The chit-chat was eagerly devoured and with the arrival of Friday's edition of *The Citizen* the substance of the wagging tongues proved to be true. It was right, most of the information being exchanged was spot on. There it was, in black and white!

'Courtesy of Special Citizen telegram' the newspaper announced: **'Blakeney resident's death. Remarkable funeral arrangements. To be buried in a field'**

The story told how Mr Wheatley had died at his home in nearby Etloe, in a property he had purchased some five years earlier. Previous to farming, he had been the manager of the Capital and Counties Bank in Lydney, and also across the Severn at Berkeley.

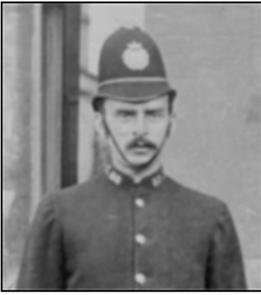
The report stated that the funeral arrangements were of "unusual character" and that interment would take place in a deeply dug grave in a field 500 yards from the nearest road. The coffin would be of the plainest possible description and no religious rites would be observed.

The story concluded: "Public feeling is very much exercised in regard to the matter, but it is understood that no action can be taken to stay it provided sanitary conditions are complied with."

The only missing fact was the date and time the funeral would take place, and if *The Citizen* didn't know then it was down to local information. The most popular village opinion was that at the stroke of 12 o'clock that very night Mr Wheatley would be buried in a field known as Sydvals. It was too good an opportunity to miss.

The following day (January 21) *The Citizen* was back on the story and reported: "On Friday night several groups of persons haunted Sydvals...they were led there by the report that the burial would be during the night. Shortly after midnight the vigil was given up and the scores of men and women returned home disappointed."

The following Monday the full facts emerged and again *The Citizen's* local newshound was on the case reporting that the unusual nature of the arrangements was an excuse for the great local interest. He wrote: "The corpse was enclosed in an elm black-painted coffin which was without furniture or name plate. Extending the lengths of both sides of the coffin had been cut out a number of elongated holes.



“The coffin was placed upon a bier and carried upon the shoulders of Messrs Edwin and Arthur Fryer, Richard Grinnell and James Smyth. It was covered with a black pall. Some 15 persons were present, and two were ladies, including Miss Fewings, deceased’s housekeeper. Mr Arthur Fryer was the undertaker.

“The grave was dug seven feet deep at a spot deceased had marked out. It was lovely situation being upon a gentle slope looking full East. Several groups of people ranged themselves round the field and some climbed into high trees to get a better view. The company were at the graveside exactly two minutes.”

A friend, Mr Reginald Banks, added that Mr Wheatley’s wishes had been carried out. Those, he said, who had enjoyed his friendship and confidence would not easily forget him.

But that was far from the end of the story and for decades to follow details of the ‘Remarkable funeral arrangements’ continued to surface. Over 80 years later all the threads were drawn together by local historian George Yorke and published in *The Review*. He separated fact from fiction, lifting the veil on the remarkable story of Joseph Wheatley, a man who, quite simply, was an atheist. But an atheist, it seems, with two fears.

The first was that he might be buried alive when in a coma which was the reason he wanted pieces cut out of the sides of his coffin to provide air holes. The second was that his grave might be desecrated, thus he directed that tall, spiked iron railings enclose the spot.

His final wish — and one that was faithfully carried out — was a request that for a period, until interest had died down, his housekeeper and a maid should visit the grave every evening before sunset and leave on it a long business envelope. This would stay until midnight when it would be retrieved by the village constable and brought to his house thus proving that the arm of the law had the grave under surveillance after dark.

His instruction was carried out, a fact proved by a story told by the daughter of the housekeeper who related that one midnight a constable arrived at the house shaking with fear. He had put an arm through the railings to gather the envelope and caused a bird resting there to fly up in front of him.

He thought he had seen the ghost of Mr Wheatley and had to be calmed down with liberal glasses of whisky!

With thanks to History Society member Ernie Hale, a font of knowledge on all things ‘Blakeney’, and also the landowner for permission to visit the site.



The gravestone of Joseph Wheatley

Iron Production in the Dean (Part 1) by *Cecile Hunt*

A couple of years ago on the society's now traditional coach trip around the Forest, we gave an insight into the iron industry of the Forest of Dean, in the hope it would give members inspiration to explore this vast and fascinating subject. This and the following articles will only scratch the surface of iron production in the Forest; the articles follow the coach trip route and cover many centuries of history, but not in chronological order.

The approximate dates of the Iron Age were from 450 BC until AD45. It was after the Norman conquest that the mining of ore and production of goods from iron was at its height; but was carried on in varying degrees until the early twentieth century. The Forest retained its place as the chief seat of the English iron trade well into the 14th century.

On the corner of Swan Road, Lydney, was the site of Lydney Foundry. In 1856 it was known as Severn and Wye Foundry Co, but the company was bankrupt by 1857; Keeling engineer of the Severn railway bridge obtained the lease of the premises and by 1859 a 'new foundry was apparently in progress'; by 1892 the buildings were a depot for beer, wine and aerated waters until at least 1904; all buildings were demolished in 1969.

Shortly before 1600 Sir Edward Winter, son of William Winter, built an iron furnace and a forge on the Newerne stream, which he dammed to create large ponds. The forges, furnaces and mills along Newerne Stream or River Lyd or Cannop Brook, take your pick! became known as Lydney Ironworks. In 1640 the whole of the forest and all its ironworks and mines were leased to Sir John Winter of Lydney. Son of William, Sir John abandoned Whitecross Manor during the English Civil War, and the House of Commons granted the ironworks to Colonel Massey, who leased them in 1647 to John Gifford, who subsequently destroyed much of the timber in the Lydney woods. From 1653 the ironworks were worked by John Wade, the parliamentary administrator of the Forest.

Sir John Winter resumed ironworking after the Civil War; forges on the Newerne stream between River Severn and Whitecroft were: Pill forge (later Lower forge), near the head of Lydney Pill, New forge (later Middle forge), and Slitting Mill forge (later Upper forge). In 1714 an agreement was made to supply 80 tons of iron a year to a Bristol ironmonger. In 1723 the Wintour estate was sold to the Bathurst family. Lydney Iron works continued on under the Bathurst ownership and was leased out several times in the years 1723 to 1957.

From Middle Forge up to Upper Forge is a swampy, marshy area. There were large ponds here holding the water needed for all the forges. Proof of iron workings in an area can also be found in local field names such as Cinder hill and Cinder mead.

During the life of Lydney Ironworks the main way in and out of the forest to the River Severn through Lydney was via Bream Road, otherwise it was by forest tracks. There is a right of way at Middle Forge that will take you up to Bream Road - a pathway now but used for transporting goods originally.

To ease transport a canal was constructed in the late 1770s from Upper Forge all the way down the Cannop Valley to Lower Forge, but more about that in the next newsletter.

Listing The Forest's War Memorials *by Paul Stephens-Wood*

One hundred years ago all, except a few 'Blessed Villages' were mourning their dead in World War I. Their communal grief was expressed in the building of war memorials throughout Britain. There are twenty in the Forest. The peace of 1919 was short lived, and within 30 years, more names were added after World War II.

To commemorate the centenary, Historic England has been running a project to add as many war memorials as possible to the National Heritage List for England (NHLE) because of architectural or historic interest. Almost all war memorials will meet the test. Listing is intended to ensure that a structure's essential character and interest is maintained, and listed building consent is needed for changes that might affect its special interest. In this way its long-term future is safeguarded. At the beginning of 2014 only about 1,700 of England's war memorials were listed, a small percentage of the total. Each year between 2014 and 2018 English Heritage are adding memorials this tally. How many they add will depend on the contributions they receive from the public. They are aiming for at least 2,500 new listings. We can help them. Anyone can apply for listing, either groups or individuals. Last year volunteers at Bream Community Library applied successfully for Bream Cenotaph to be listed. The process was done online and took about three months. We were very grateful for Ian Hendy's book on the monument that provided all the information needed.



Bream cenotaph

To list your local memorial, check online to see if it is already been listed. If not you can then apply online. The key information needed is the date the memorial was unveiled along with its designer, and the materials used. A brief description is required with the number of individuals commemorated, who owns the monument and how it was paid for. Finally any sources of further information and some photographs are included.

In this final centenary year of World War I, you can make an important contribution to the preservation of the structures that commemorate all those who sacrificed their lives. You can help ensure that in the future they will not be forgotten. More information can be found at the Heritage England website:

<https://historicengland.org.uk/whats-new/listing/war-memorials-listing-project/>



Unsung Heroes of the History Society!

This occasional series will feature History Society members who do largely unseen work, and are therefore the unsung heroes of our Society.

So let us introduce the new tea team! Teresa Powell (left) with friends Joyce Baxter and Sheila Merrett have taken on the role for 2018. Here they are in festive spirits for our pre-Christmas meeting at the West Dean Centre, Bream, in December.

Meetings in Review *with John Powell*

As bread goes with cheese and cider with song, so headstones go with history. It's a peculiarity that the dead can occasionally tell you more about the past than the living!

Step forward then Dr Nicholas Herbert, speaker at our November meeting held at Bream's West Dean Centre. Here was an immaculate Gloucestershire historian and a man given to recognising what facts can be gleaned from the stark carvings on the stones which lean somewhat drunkenly in dozens upon dozens of churchyards.



Aylburton Church

Dr Herbert became interested in the carvings as he worked as editor of the Victoria County History of Gloucestershire, a post he held from 1970 until 2003. His task involved many a trip to churchyards and he quickly realised there was more to see than names and dates. Indeed, the dead lying beneath plain headstones often had more to say than those mouldering under elaborate tombs. But you had to know what to look for. Some things were easy enough. A plough for farmers, a ship for sailors; anchors, hour glasses and angels. All had parts to play and told stories of families and how they fitted into their communities. In the period of the late 17th and early 18th centuries masons developed a form of 'folk-art' and headstones completed by the same hand were often very local, only occurring within small groups in adjoining parishes. Later, in the Georgian period, headstones began to reflect wider influences and neo-classical styles with examples of fine workmanship and strong regional identity.

This was an inspiring talk which will no doubt encourage many a Forest historian to take a fresh look at his local memorials and in particular standing stones.

The 20-minute spot fell to Pete Ralph, as keen a Forest historian as you will find, and a man who, over the years, has used his camera to good effect and recorded lots of goings on involving his employers, the Forestry Commission. But there was a sting in the story and a sour taste to it all as it became clear how many beauty spots and assets have been ruined, gutted by fire, or simply wrecked by vandals. This was, for sure, a reality check, with many a point to ponder.

The question was not 'if' but 'when' it would snow. It really was a bleak midwinter day as a great slate-grey snow-laden sky settled over Bream and — in any direction — as far as one could see.

The more cautious and prudent of us, those who perhaps thought that the onset of darkness would signal the coming of the first snow of winter, stayed put, feet up by the fire or perhaps wrapping presents, rather than journey to the outback. In the event the snow did not arrive until late in the evening thus enabling the 40 or so members who made it to the West Dean Centre to enjoy an engaging afternoon designed by speaker Mary Dutton to lead us in a happy frame of mind towards the big day.

Mary, a former chair of the Trustees at the Dean Heritage Centre, Soudley, took 'A Victorian Christmas' as her theme and, complete in a fetching Victorian dress, romped along, eating up an hour with a light-hearted but informative and knowledgeable talk.



Mary Dutson, speaker at the December meeting

While explaining how the Victorians led the way in introducing us to Christmas trees and cards, it was also, she said, the beginning of the commercialisation of Christmas. Mary talked toys, cards and puds with lots of items to examine during the break when, naturally enough, the first Christmas cake of the year was cut and enjoyed with a cuppa.

To close the December meeting Keith Walker brought us up to date with a quality film showing the building of the second Severn bridge (the third really!). Examining the huge and varied engineering obstacles that had to be overcome, the magnitude of the project was mind-blowing. But it was achieved without the loss of a single life. Staggering then to think that the following morning the Forest was virtually cut off by a couple of inches of snow!

“I wonder how old that church is?” How many times do we ponder the thought while journeying in and around the county and especially driving or walking around our own Forest of Dean patch... Lucky us. We are fortunate to enjoy the best of two worlds!

There is the central Forest, much of which was for centuries sparsely populated and extra parochial thus out of bounds for ancient churches, but an area now rich in distinctive more modern places of worship often dating from Victorian times. To them we can add an abundance of chapels each with its own unique history. We must turn to the fringes of the Dean for most (but not all) of the ancient gems.

And how fortunate we were to have a renowned expert in Dr Steven Blake to tell us the story of the medieval architecture still surviving and, if you know where to look, easy to see!

Dr Blake, chairman of the county History Association, was the guest speaker at January's meeting held, as usual, at Bream's West Dean Centre. He was greeted by a full house and held an attentive audience enthralled with his excellent and splendidly illustrated talk.

If you have yet to visit the ruin of Llancaut church on the bank of the Wye, this was the motivating talk to make you get your walking boots on!

And, of course, you now have to find time to visit the churches at St Briavels, Newland, Staunton, near Coleford, Newnham and, unquestionably, Kempsey, plus a dozen or so more.

Dr Blake's talk was inspiring and informative, and he deftly baited his audience with enough facts and photographs to make further investigations a must. Leave the lawnmower in the shed for another day!

The meeting was rounded off with a short film showing the five methods once used to capture salmon in the Severn estuary and concluded with a look at elver fishing a quarter of a century ago.



Dr Steven Blake, our January 2018 speaker

Newport Chartist Conference - by Ian Wright

The People's Charter of 1838 included a demand for universal manhood suffrage, equal electoral districts, secret ballots, annual elections, payment of MPs and the abolition of the property qualification for MPs. On 4th November 1839, nearly 10,000 Chartist sympathisers armed with home-made weapons marched on Newport, intent on demanding the six points of the Charter. Among the marchers was 19 year old Richard Benfield, a miner from Tredegar, who was born in Wollaston. In his book, *The Last Rising: the Newport Insurrection of 1839*, David Jones reveals that in October 1838 the organisers held meetings in the Forest of Dean where Foresters promised assistance and that two men from the Forest were among the 35 delegates attending one of the final planning meetings at Blackwood on 1st November.

The rebellion failed when troops opened fire killing 22 Chartists. Benfield was among the men captured. In the aftermath, 200 or more Chartists were arrested, and 14, including Benfield, were indicted for high treason. All three main leaders, John Frost, Zephaniah Williams, and William Jones, were found guilty and were sentenced at the Shire Hall in Monmouth to be hung, drawn and quartered. Following a huge public outcry, the executions were commuted to transportation for life. Benfield and four others were sentenced to transportation for life, later commuted to three years imprisonment with hard labour. Thirteen others were imprisoned with hard labour for up to a year. The event is now commemorated every Autumn in Newport. On 25th October, the Newport mayor led school pupils on a re-enactment of the historic Chartist March through the town. On 4th November, a convention was held in the cathedral which dwelt upon other aspects of popular 19th century radicalism. A more detailed summary of the talks can be found here:

<http://thechartists.org/13-chartist-convention-2017.html>

The Keynote Speaker, Rhian Jones, based her talk on her book *Petticoat Heroes: Rethinking the Rebecca Riots*. Les James and Roger Ball gave an account of the disturbances of 1831, in particular the Merthyr Rising and the Warren James Riots in June, the Bristol Reform Riots in October and others including the rural incendiarism and clandestine actions associated with Captain Swing and The Scotch Cattle. They argued that the bitterness caused by the slaughter of demonstrators, hangings and transportations in 1831 meant that an extensive popular movement reverberated on both sides of the Bristol Channel and contributed to the idea of a chartist insurrection later in the decade.



Part of the Newport Chartist Mural which was controversially destroyed in 2013 to make way for the Friars Walk redevelopment

The fate of Richard Benfield and his comrades was highlighted by Ray Stroud. He explained that they were transferred from Monmouth to Millbank Penitentiary. Benfield was granted an early release after a year and returned to Wollaston where he married and tried to scratch a living on a 6 acre plot of land. He then returned to Tredegar to work in the mines where he continued to agitate for the Charter. The family, including six children, emigrated to America in 1866 where he died in 1885.

Following the Convention the annual Chartist Commemoration Ceremony was led by the Dean of Monmouth, the Rev Lister Tonge, just outside the Cathedral doors at the Chartist Memorial Stone.