

# FOREST OF DEAN LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

*news*  
February 2024



Inside:

- “The Amazing Milo of Gloucester”
- Nesta of the Forest
- How the Blue Mound became a playing field

February 2024

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## Editors Notes

No doubt you will recognise Flaxley Abbey on the front cover, looking splendid in the January sunshine! The photo serves as a link to John Belcher's article "The Amazing Milo of Gloucester" which you will find in the centre pages.

Many years ago, the History Society organised a trip which included a call at Flaxley Abbey. At that time Bayden Watkins was the owner. He was a very well known Forest industrialist and iron mine owner. The problem was he was in his nineties when we came to visit and he had forgotten that he had agreed to the tour. After he got over the shock of seeing a coach on his drive, with 40 historians eagerly queuing at his front door, he led us through the Abbey throwing open door after door, providing an insightful commentary as we went. The highlight was the wonderful refectory (see the photo in John's article). Baden was not done, however, and insisted that we should visit the monk's mortuary, an ancient building located some distance from the Abbey buildings across a field. So, led by Bayden, we traipsed across said field, which was also populated by a herd of cows. At least that is what we first thought, until two of them stood up and starting taking an interest in our progress. To our horror they were bulls! Luckily they were pretty passive (or no one was wearing red!), and we all managed to get back to the coach in one piece.

Elsewhere you will find a short piece about the life of 'Nesta of the Forest', a lady who achieved some temporary notoriety in the national newspapers during the 1930's. Judge for yourself whether she was a 'White Witch' (her own epithet), or a charlatan.

Cecile Hunt continues her series about the history of Forest recreation grounds. This time she tells the fascinating story of how unemployed miners of Lydbrook worked together in a gargantuan joint enterprise to remove the enormous 'Blue Mound' to then be able to construct the playing field.

Finally, if you have a story you want to tell and share with your fellow members, please get in touch with me, my contact details are on this page.

*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.*

# Notes From The Vice-Chair

Although this is the first newsletter of 2024, I just want to mention a long-awaited event that took place at the end of 2023.

On Sat 16<sup>th</sup> Dec I was delighted to unveil the new interpretation panel at Ruardean Church which provides an illustration of how Ruardean Castle might have looked many years ago. This illustration was created by Phil Kenning, who worked closely with Robin Jackson of Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service, basing the appearance of the fortified manor house on the wide walls revealed during one of the Foresters' Forest Buried Heritage community digs. FODLHS member Christopher



*Vice-Chair Sue Middleton, together with other interested parties pictured at the unveiling of the new interpretation panel at Ruardean Church on 16<sup>th</sup> December last*

Hill was the crucial link in getting the interpretation panel delivered and installed in the grounds of Ruardean Church, with the church's blessing.

Phil Riches was also present at the unveiling, representing Dean Archaeology Group and the many volunteers who had laboured so hard to dig down and find both a remarkable chess piece and a small key, which are both visible on the panel. These items help to bring the site to life, as you can just imagine people playing chess in the window of the octagonal tower, looking out towards the River Wye, sitting by a locked treasure chest!



**FOREST OF DEAN LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY**  
Registered Charity 1094700

## HISTORY COMPETITION 2024

You could win a £25 pupil prize (KS2 only) and £100 for your school!

### CALLING ALL TEACHERS IN FOREST OF DEAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

There is an opportunity for KS2 pupils in your schools to enter a local history competition in the summer term. They need to create something which describes an element of Forest of Dean History and why it is important. It could mean something to them, or their family, or have a link to a local site or be something that they learnt about from the book "The Story of the Forest".

Categories are:

- Written text – 1 x A4 page
- A 3D constructed model
- A digital submission (could be PowerPoint, film)
- A video of a pupil speaking (max 3 mins)

Timing: Competition will run from 1st June to 30<sup>th</sup> June 2024

Submission of entries by 30<sup>th</sup> June to Sue Middleton, Vice Chair of Forest of Dean Local History Society  
Email: [vicechair@forestofdeanhistory.org.uk](mailto:vicechair@forestofdeanhistory.org.uk)

The competition is funded by the Dr John Junica legacy from the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society through the Gloucestershire Local History Association, providing £2,000 over five years, to be administered by the Forest of Dean Local History Society.





*Overall Competition Winner 2023  
3D Model of the Union Pit Disaster Memorial  
by Jessica Smith of Coalway Junior School*

#### Competition Rules:

1. All Primary Schools in Forest of Dean are eligible
2. All children in Key Stage 2 are eligible
3. There will be 4 categories:
  - Written text – 1 x A4 page
  - A 3D constructed model
  - A digital submission (could be PowerPoint, film)
  - A video of a pupil speaking (max 3 mins)
4. The winning pupil in each category will receive £25 (only 4 winners across whole Forest of Dean)
5. Each school has to judge their pupil's entries and only put their best entry in each category forward to FODLHS (Forest of Dean Local History Society)
6. FODLHS judges will then pick the overall winners in each category and award them a £25
7. FODLHS judges will pick the overall competition winner and award that pupil's school £100
8. The prize money for one year will be £200 and therefore the competition will run for 5 years.
9. FODLHS will have two weeks for judging so winners will be identified by Wed 10<sup>th</sup> July.

The start of 2024 provides the opportunity for us to get back in touch with local schools to promote the second year of the FODLHS History competition. This is where any Key Stage 2 pupils can be creative to produce a piece of writing, a 3D model, a PowerPoint presentation or a digital item, to represent something about our Forest's history. The winning pupil in each category will win £25 for themselves and the overall winner of the competition will gain £100 for their school. Last year Coalway Junior School won with an amazing model of Monument Mine. If you have children or grandchildren of the right age at junior school, please encourage them to take part in the competition!

I know there are all sorts of events coming up this year, but the biggest one for us will be the GLHA day on Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> June 2024, when Coleford will be hosting the county meeting. You can look forward to some interesting walks and talks on the day, followed by afternoon tea! Please put this date in your diaries now and look out for further details of enticing events on the day.

*Sue Middleton*



## MEMBERSHIP

A happy new year to all our members. We are now well into membership year 2023/24. Thank you to the vast majority of those who have renewed their subscriptions to the Society. If you have not previously received one, membership cards for those who have renewed their membership accompany this newsletter. For those who have not yet renewed, I have enclosed a renewal membership form with this newsletter. Alternatively, we have a new online joining and renewal process, whereby payment can be received through the online shop. Just go to the website [forestofdeanhistory.org.uk](http://forestofdeanhistory.org.uk) and follow the link: 'join the FoD Local History Society' and use the 'renewal' button.

As always, please keep a look out for emails from me informing you both of FoDLHS events and of upcoming presentations from other organisations such as the Heritage Hub which runs an excellent programme of events.

As well as renewals I am pleased to welcome the following new members to our Society: Roger and Norma Blowey, Kathleen Costley, Diane Watkins, Deborah Sturgess and Jan Partridge. We hope you enjoy your membership and look forward to seeing you at forthcoming meetings and events, which are now in full swing!

*Ian Gower* ([membership@forestofdeanhistory.org.uk](mailto:membership@forestofdeanhistory.org.uk))

### CHANGE OF DATE - Raglan Castle Walk with Dr Rob Jones

Please note the change of date for the Raglan Castle Walk with Dr Rob Jones. The event is 'self drive' and will now take place on **Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> May**.



Rob Jones is now well known for his erudite and knowledgeable talks and walks previously delivered to Society members. Join him at Raglan Castle as he unpacks the complicated history of this remarkable place.

To register your interest in this event please email Cecile Hunt: [meetings@forestofdeanhistory.org.uk](mailto:meetings@forestofdeanhistory.org.uk)

## FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Sat 17<sup>th</sup> February - 3pm  
West Dean Centre, Bream

“The History of Gloucestershire Constabulary” with Sue Webb

Sat 16<sup>th</sup> March 3pm  
West Dean Centre, Bream

John Lane describes a short walk through some of historic Gloucester

Sat 20<sup>th</sup> April 3pm  
West Dean Centre, Bream

“Newent Court and the people who lived there” with Dood Pearce

## The Tin Chapel at the Edge of Town



When Bilson Mission Rooms finally closed its doors in 2018 it had served the local community for over 130 years. For the past twelve months 'The Tin Chapel at the Edge of Town' project has been working with the Bilson community to record their memories of the Mission, its Sunday school, and the role it played in the life of Cinderford.

This new exhibition at the Dean Heritage Centre showcases the work of the project and tells the remarkable story of the Bilson Mission, its origins, and the many people who made it such an important centre for the social and spiritual life of the Bilson neighbourhood.

**Event details: Open from 6<sup>th</sup> January until 28<sup>th</sup> April, excluding the first two weeks of March**

### New Fancy Pit Head Memorial Stone Mystery Scrub Clearance



*Whilst your Committee was resolving insurance issues around working on Forestry England land, some kind person(s) (not Forestry) set about clearing the vegetation around the New Fancy memorial (see before and after photos). Many thanks to them!*



### Can You Help?

Our industrious Enquiries Officer & Vice President, Averil Kear, has recently received a query from Andrew Stuart for which she would like your help. If you have any information please contact the Editor in the first instance ([newslettereditor@forestofdeanhistory.org.uk](mailto:newslettereditor@forestofdeanhistory.org.uk)). Thanks!

*In 1978/9 I worked on an open cast mine in the forest as a tyre repairer for the machines there and lived on site in a caravan.. only temporary, just looking after the job due to the permanent fitter having a bad accident in a car. The entrance from the main road was at Brierley. Not far inside the forest, off to the left and set back fifty yards maybe was a cottage. There lived a little middle-aged lady with either her husband or boyfriend, her name was Minnie.. whether that was her real name I don't know for sure.*

*Since I left there in 1980, I've always wondered how the site went on and if Minnie still lived there. The road down into the forest that led to the site and various compounds and workshops was also used to carry the coal trucks and sometimes some coal chunks were dropped off at the side of the road for Minnie.*

*The wife and I got engaged at the Saracens head (unofficially.) Back then I was 19, now coming to retirement. Please.... if you have any information or know anyone who does I would be very grateful.*



# The Amazing Milo of Gloucester *by John Belcher*



*Image of Miles Fitzwalter of Gloucester on a 12<sup>th</sup> century coin*

One of the great, but almost forgotten giants of Dean history could be described as a superhero of his time; but he was a real person and not the product of a pulp fiction writer's imagination. This superhero consorted with kings and queens, rescued damsels in distress and fought great battles.

He was an influential figure in national politics - and even had an abbey built in his memory. He wasn't perfect. He suppressed the peasantry, alienated the church establishment, and met a violent end. His name was Milo Fitzwalter of Gloucester, a protege of King William I, the 'Conqueror' of Saxon England; counsellor to King Henry I and supporter and confidante of the Empress Matilda, Henry's daughter, in the first English Civil War in the 12th Century.

Milo was raised in the Conqueror's court in London in the late 11th Century. In adulthood he served Henry I; and in 1121AD married into the Welsh nobility when he wed Sibia, daughter of Bernard, Earl of Brecknock and Nesa, daughter of Gruffudd ap Llewelyn, great Welsh Prince of the Silures nation.

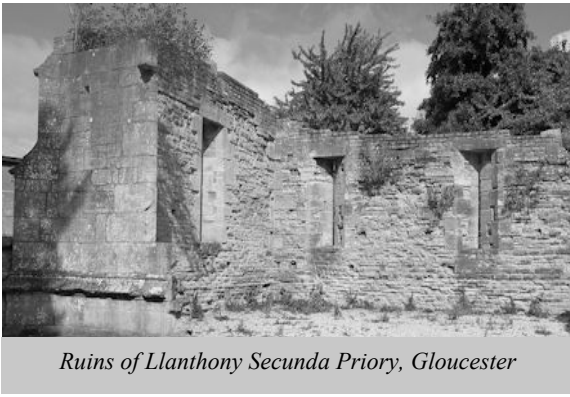
In 1131 AD his rise continued when he was appointed the Constable and Sheriff of St Briavels, which gave full control of the Royal Forest of Dean. It was while stationed at St Briavels Castle that Milo showed his mettle in one of the most legendary adventures in Forest history.

In 1136AD a band of wild Welsh robbers carried off the wife of Richard Fitzgilbert, a retainer of Milo's, from Llanthony Prima Monastery in the Black Mountains, after she had sought refuge there. They also desecrated and looted the holy places and attacked the monks. The monastery was on Milo's land, his father Walter was the founder and was buried there.

Milo was outraged. The Chronicler Henry of Huntingdon recorded that 'such was the valour' of Lord Milo that he 'rode out from St Briavels and tracking his way through the enemy's posts, among the gloomy recesses of the woods and mountain tops' he traced the bandits to their lair and rescued the poor woman still alive; no doubt putting many of them to the sword at the same time. Quite a feat for a 56-year-old man, a considerable age for the times; especially for a battle-hardened knight in full armour and heavily armed.

Also in 1136, to show his piety and support for the Cistercian monks of Llanthony, Milo funded and built another abbey in Gloucester, named Llanthony Secundus. The monks of the Benedictine Order of St Peter's in the city, were put out to see a new establishment to rival theirs and would use their resentment against Milo in the future.

The previous year King Henry had died. The powerful king left no living male heir, so had decreed that his daughter Matilda would inherit the throne of England. The very thought of a woman in charge horrified many of the nobles; and a close relative Stephen of Blois, seized the crown, starting a brutal 15-year civil war. In 1139AD found Matilda invading England from Normandy to claim her throne. Milo joined her and Robert, Earl of Gloucester to raise an army of 10,000 men. The war raged throughout the land, but Milo's iron grip kept the Forest and Gloucester in comparative peace to the relief of the inhabitants.



*Ruins of Llanthony Secunda Priory, Gloucester*

In 1143, Matilda created Milo the Earl of Hereford for his loyalty and feats of arms. He was now an Earl but he antagonised the Bishop of Hereford, Robert De Betvne when he exercised his right to raise taxes for the maintenance of his troops. The Bishop was so incensed that he threatened Milo with ex-communication. The Earl was unimpressed and invaded to take what he believed was his right. The Bishop reacted by excommunicating him. To be excommunicated was the worst punishment a vengeful Church could inflict. It entailed being cast out from the protection of the Church; a virtual

condemnation of death and everlasting damnation thereafter. Once a poor soul was thus cursed, he or she was open to any retribution the perpetrators chose to inflict.

Milo wasn't intimidated. He rejected the Church's corrupt practices, endemic in its upper echelons at the time, with contempt; but dark rumours were abroad. On a fateful Christmas Eve in 1143, the Earl and his companions set out from Gloucester Castle for the traditional deer and boar hunt in the Dean Forest, to provide venison for the festive celebrations. His wife, Sabilia, had begged him not to go into the Forest 'for treachery awaits thee'. She had been warned of suspicious meetings and rumours emanating from the Abbey of St Peter's. Milo, however, was resolved to hunt. His party followed the old way via Westbury into the depths of the Vale of Castiard, a herd of deer was spotted and the chase began. In the excitement of the hunt Milo became separated from the others: An arrow suddenly pierced his heart, and he fell mortally wounded from his horse. His bowman heard his cries and rushed to the scene in time to see a shadowy figure escaping into dense undergrowth.

The Earl's corpse was loaded onto a horse-drawn cart and carried back to Gloucester to be met by a stunned and sorrowing populace. The monks of St Peter's hailed Milo's death as a 'Judgement of God', but thousands of the people came from everywhere to pay homage to their dead hero. Instead of insisting that Milo be buried outside consecrated ground, the craven monks saw a great monetary opportunity, and changing their tune, demanded that he would be buried inside their monastery instead. The Earl's family were mortified, but political expediency prevailed, and Milo was entombed in the house of his enemies.

So was Milo murdered? Individuals were implicated, including his intended son-in-law who mysteriously vanished on that day, but there were no positive identifications. Murder will always be suspected. It was too much of a co- incidence that Milo was killed so soon after his excommunication. Also in a civil war, his enemies wouldn't be unhappy to see him dead.

An abbey was subsequently raised on the very spot where Milo was killed and is still standing. It is called Flaxley Abbey, built by his son Roger of Hereford in his father's memory and an everlasting memorial to the Forest of Dean's often violent history.



*The refectory at Flaxley Abbey, part of the original buildings*

## Forest Recreation Grounds Part 2 by Cecile Hunt



Did the last article on Forest Recreation Grounds inspire you to find out how your local Rec came into existence? A good place to start is the Victoria County History Vol 5; Forest of Dean. It is available at libraries or online at: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/glos/vol5>

One recreation ground in the Forest that took an awful lot of work to get it ready for use and involved many, many volunteers was Lydbrook Recreation Ground.

Previous to how you see the site now, nice and flat. The 'Blue Mound' had to be removed. It was made up of slag from Lydbrook Deep Mine. In addition before work could commence a brook on the site had to be culverted.

Work started on clearing the site on Saturday, 28<sup>th</sup> July 1934 after a public meeting three days previously on July 25<sup>th</sup>. The meeting had been arranged by a Mr Sydney Miles, headmaster of Lydbrook Council Schools.. The site earmarked for the Rec was covered by slag dumped whilst extracting coal. The 'old pit mound' that had to be removed consisted of some 30,000 tons of debris. Mr Miles at the meeting said: *'...a blue pit mound, which was an eyesore to the village could be levelled by volunteer labour and a recreation ground provided on the site...'*. Three days later a start was made by local unemployed men.

Picks and shovels were paid for by The British Legion. Cannop Colliery and Waterloo colliery loaned carts together with rails that were used to build a spiral mini railway to the top of the mound to facilitate bringing the slag down in carts. Clearance was steadily carried out until winter set-in then it was agreed to start again, *'with renewed and increased vigour in the spring...'* Work recommenced in Spring of 1935 until winter weather started. Then, as reported in the Gloucester Journal, date June 27, 1936, *'...Work was renewed with increased vigour in spring of this year, and women with barrows assisted motor lorries and various means of locomotion to remove the last few tons of earth.'*

The playing field was a much-needed amenity in the village. Many volunteers over several weeks, months & years helped to move the debris. On one occasion a record was set when 400 tons of dirt were moved in one day by wheelbarrow and shovel!

A report in The Citizen newspaper dated September 17, 1934, at the start of the clearance, said: *'...work started on July 28 last, and a constant stream of voluntary helpers, both young and old, employed and unemployed is bringing this splendid scheme of self-help nearer to completion every day... the enthusiasm of the villagers has reached such a high level that arrangements are being made for the work to continue after sunset by artificial light. The Union Jack which flies proudly over the site of this great enterprise is a symbol of the unity which the scheme has engendered.'*

On September 17<sup>th</sup> 1934 visitors came to Lydbrook as part of an 'Official Tour' by officials of the National Council of Social Services (NCSS).

At Lydbrook their guides were committee members of Lydbrook Memorial Hall. One volunteer introduced to the officials was...*Mr Charles Childs, in his 85<sup>th</sup> year was the oldest worker at the site. He confessed that he assisted in the creation of the mound when he was engaged at the Lydbrook Deep Level Colliery many years ago.'* (The pit closed, 1933). After this visit by the officials from NCSS a grant was given, with immediate effect, of £250 to assist the scheme at Lydbrook (£250 in 1934 worth £22,440 in 2024).



# Nesta of the Forest

## *White Witch or Charlatan?*



'Nesta of the Forest' was born as Elsie Anne Elizabeth Ashton in Newport, Monmouthshire on 13<sup>th</sup> June 1893. She practised as a clairvoyant and psychic medium in Newport and Lydney before moving to Gloucester in June 1932. Along the way she dropped 'Elsie' as her first name, and started using 'Nesta', presumably a psychic 'tag' (meaning 'messenger').

She married David Thomas Lewis in 1915 in Newport. The 1921 census shows him as an unemployed bricklayer, but over time he apparently doubled up on the day job by working with her as a 'powerful deep-trance medium'.

After moving to Gloucester, she ran the 'Pilgrims Restaurant' at 19 Worcester Street. It was here that she first achieved a certain national notoriety, being prosecuted under the Vagrancy Act of 1824 for 'fortune telling, with deceiving and imposing on His Majesty's subjects'. She claimed in her defence that she had been a trained nurse, was a journalist, a Fellow of the Supernatural League, a member of the Spiritualist's National Union, a psychic medium, a psychoanalyst, and a mental healer. Her defence was she did not practise deception or imposition. She also stated that for years she had "lived in Newport without any interference from the police. At the request of the Lydney people she then went to that town, where they never interfered". The Gloucester Magistrates were unimpressed and convicted Nesta and fined her £2 8s.

Her reputation in Gloucester now ruined she moved to Bournemouth, where, in the period 1933 – 1939 she carried out weekly seances and private consultations with her husband. Whilst in Bournemouth she was twice more indicted under the Vagrancy Act for fortune telling, being fined £7 in 1934 and £25 in March 1935. During this time, she took a libel case to court against Odham's Press, owners of the John Bull Magazine, in which an article had accused her of being a charlatan who made her living by fraud. During the trial Nesta claimed she was from the Forest of Dean, hence her epithet 'Nesta of the Forest'. Gilbert Feyfus the King's Counsel for Odham's at one point asked Nesta; "Can you foretell the verdict of the jury in this case?", to which she answered to laughter in the court, "Is not this case sub judice?". Nesta's ready wit notwithstanding, she still lost the case and faced paying Odham's costs.

Loss of reputation presumably lay behind her next move to Bath, where by 1939 she was recorded as a housewife (unpaid domestic duties), whilst husband David's day job was 'Acetylene Welder'. By 1946 she was living in Gloucester Road, Tutshill, when she obtained a divorce from her husband on the grounds of desertion.

**Accurately predicted Dartmoor Mutiny**

**"Located" Missing Submarine M2 week before found.**

**Saved Eddystone Lighthouse and South Coast, Jan., 1833.**

**Saved Gloucester Farmers' Cattle from Foot & Mouth Disease Outbreak, 1832.**

**"Located" dead Lindbergh Baby 8 Weeks before found.**

**Accurately predicted Death of King Feisal of Iraq and Accession of new King, Sept. 1933.**

**" NESTA OF THE FOREST "**

F.S.L.I. M.B.P.A.

*The Famous Clairvoyant*

**29 Commercial Rd., BOURNEMOUTH**

**Between Marks & Spencers and the Electric Theatre.**

**Nesta will "know" and "understand" your problem and advise you. . . .**

**strictest confidence**

**Forwarned (Jly. 23rd, 1898) and saved client from being involved in Rouse blazing car murder (Nov. 5th, 1898).**

A final move followed to Cheltenham, where she allegedly married twice more; to Mr Lane (no record of the marriage could be found), and then in 1954 to Michael Swales.

During this time her belief in the paranormal apparently waned, as in a letter date 7<sup>th</sup> November 1862, she wrote "... now in my 70<sup>th</sup> year, I know for certain that all 'witchcraft' and 'spiritualism' is no more and no less that the sound waves and light waves and electricity which we now call radio, television etc.'.

She died in Cheltenham on 9<sup>th</sup> February 1982 from bronchopneumonia.

## Meetings in Review *with Chris Sullivan & Keith Walker*



On Saturday December 9<sup>th</sup> Keith Walker gave his talk ‘Oh Mr Office of Woods – Make Us A Road’. Keith spoke to a big audience about why the Forest of Dean came late to having roads, and how roads eventually came to be built. He spoke using a wide range of maps, accounts, advertisements, and photographs. The talk was unfortunately affected by issues with the sound system, which your Committee is currently seeking solutions for.

The basic problem with the road system was that the Forest had long been Crown land, and people weren’t supposed to be there. Through the period of Keith’s talk, the Forest was run by the Office of Woods (‘the Office’), now Forestry

England. The Office was ambivalent about roads, as a way to extract stolen timber. It felt that squatters who had stolen its land weren’t entitled to free roads of no benefit to the Crown.

Keith started with the Highways Act of 1555, which put the burden of road maintenance on the parish, with later duties to provide labour. Nationally, this funding model continued for centuries. But the Forest was extra-parochial until 1844, so it was of no help. The next national idea was to put the burden on road users, with heavy vehicles paying more. This was the turnpike model, funded by tolls and tollgates. The Dean had a Turnpike Trust, ever more in debt. Post-1844, some parishioners had to pay rates, including for maintenance of main roads elsewhere in the County. The County had no authority to spend on Crown land.

The Dean Turnpike Trust was abolished in 1888, with the County Council taking on some of the larger roads. But many communities had no roads whatsoever, only rough tracks like in Saxon times. By then, the Office was starting to accept some social responsibilities, under 1883 legislation setting up East and West Dean Sanitary Authorities with powers to make new roads. The Office would fund them if these Authorities then took responsibility for maintenance.

Having run South Africa before the Office, Sir Henry Loch got on with proposing thirteen short road schemes in 1884. These were built, with cost over-runs modest by today’s standards, but of concern to the Treasury. The 1896 schemes faced harder Treasury scrutiny, and interfaces with railways pushed up costs. A number of the 1896 stretches were marked by cast-iron plaques at the Forest boundary. Keith and Simon Moore had been instrumental in getting four of these Listed, and Keith finished by showing us pictures of these plaques. And the Office of Woods finished in 1919, becoming the Forestry Commission.

After the interval, Cecile Hunt talked about hedgerows. How field boundaries could be pre-historic, or wavy-edged from woodland assarted to agriculture; or big straight fields from the various ages of Enclosures; or big for big new machinery; or replanted with ‘native hedgerow mix’ of dubious botanical ancestry, these fooling the simple idea that hedges acquired a new species a century. Look at the hedgerow (Saxon hegeraewe) base for plants like bluebells and primroses, relicts of ancient woodland. And look at maps!

**C.S.**



*Sketch of the former toll house at Lydney (long since demolished), which was located opposite Bream Road adjacent to Tesco petrol station*

Vice Chair Sue Middleton gave the talk on Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> January. Sue is of course our newest Verderer of the Forest of Dean, being elected during a memorable ceremony at Gloucester Cathedral in March 2022. It was this aspect of her work that she concentrated on first, reminding us that the Verderers' have continued their functions for over eight centuries. Originally having powers like a magistrate's court to protect the Vert and the Verd within the bounds of the Forest of Dean, they ceded these rights in the nineteenth century, and now act as advisors to Forestry England, concerning themselves with the environment, wildlife, conservation, and character and traditions of the Forest.

Sue revealed that the Verderers are undertaking specific projects, with Rich Daniels and Ian Standing working on a lowered road speed limit of 40 mph for the Forest roads. Ian is also working with his wife Di on improving the Verderer's web site, whilst Sue is in the process of recording illegal mountain bike trails to help Forestry England deal with issue. Forestry England have a three-pronged approach to deal with the problem, with some illegal trails now being fenced at each end. They are also removing 'bike trail features' in some instances and are putting up 'shared woodland' signs in appropriate locations to remind cyclists of their responsibilities towards the other creatures who either live in or (in the case of us humans) use the woodland in other ways.

Some of the other concerns that the Verderers share with Forestry England were then discussed, including the troubling issue of tree disease, which has led to some large areas of the Forest being clear felled. Following on from this is a massive tree planting programme with 31,000 trees being planted near Yorkley for example. Selection of the species of tree for replanting in specific locations is a difficult exercise, requiring climate change, soil type, light demand, and growth rate to be factored in.

Sue also touched on tree damage caused by animals, primarily grey squirrels, and deer. In the former case pine martins have been released into the Forest as natural predators of squirrels. The beavers at Great Haugh Brook enclosure near Lydbrook also got a mention, as Sue described how their activities had introduced a wetland where once a narrow stream flowed, hopefully helping to reduce the risk of flooding in Upper Lydbrook.

Of course, Sue is also well known as the former Project Manager of the very successful £2.5 million 'Foresters Forest' project which ran between April 2017 and March 2022, during which period 32 partner organisations delivered 38 projects, of which some 26 projects are continuing. The History Society was a major partner in the Foresters' Forest programme, and Sue highlighted a few of the projects that the Society was involved with. These included the production of the 'Story of the Forest' book; every primary school in the Dean area received ten copies courtesy of the Society. The green and blue plaque scheme was also outlined.

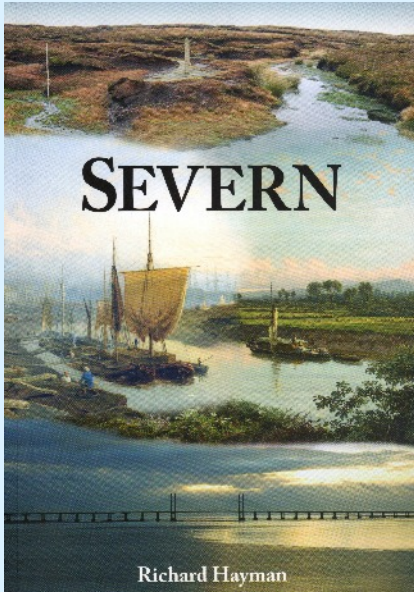
A legacy organisation 'Our Forest' has been created to continue the work, holding two stakeholder forums a year, with the ultimate aim of applying for more major grant aid in the future.

After the tea break, Sue finished her talk by showing three short Foresters' Forest films; concerning the three 'Hidden Heritage' and 'GeoHeritage' mobile phone Apps, and also the 'Tramper' (mobility access to the Forest).



*Sue Middleton (right), with Ian Standing (Verderer & Vice President of FODLHS, Mary Sullivan (Publications Officer) and Simon Moore (Conservation Officer) at the Whitecliff Furnace plaque unveiling.*

## Book Review by Keith Walker



Originally published in 2012, reprinted in 2018 but still available, your reviewer was not aware of Richard Hayman's book 'Severn' until spotting it recently in a book shop in Monmouth. Having a personal connection with the river, (my great, great grandfather was born in Buildwas, a small Shropshire Severnside community), obviously I bought the book!

The Severn, that brutish silver snake, by turns a placid landscape beauty, often turbulent, sometimes downright dangerous, but a river which has a place in our cultural, economic, and social history. The bald facts are that the Severn is Britain's longest river (220 miles), has a catchment at 3820 square miles, and an average flow rate of 107 cubic metres per second. Rising in the Cambrian Mountains on Plynlimon at 2000 feet above sea level, it flows through Montgomeryshire, Shropshire, Worcestershire, and Gloucestershire to reach the sea.

Richard Hayman's book is no coffee table travelogue, although very well illustrated with photographs (Hayman was also a freelance photographer), maps and other relevant

images. The book is authoritative but easy to read, with endnotes and a decent index.

After an overarching introduction, the book is written around themes, The Natural River, The Sacred River, The River as Frontier, The Working River, Life and Death on the River, and From the River to the Sea. The chapters within the themes are full of interesting facts which are linked together to provide a compelling narrative. For example, the word 'lode' is unique to the Severn and usually indicates a ferrying or embarkation point. An early reference to the 'passage de Overlode' (1300) probably refers to the causeway over marshy ground, now known as Alney Island; Awre Church has a chest, possibly dating to as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century, reputedly used for laying out bodies recovered from the Severn; in Gloucester by the 11<sup>th</sup> century the river had moved 36 metres westwards of the Roman Quay. Gloucester's first medieval bridge was constructed across this channel in 1119, but by 1370 it was named 'Little Stream' and was finally culverted in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Who knew?!!

Richard Hayman is a buildings historian, archaeologist, and currently mainly works as a heritage consultant. He has previously worked for the Ironbridge Gorge Museums and lives in Shrewsbury, so his connection with the river is real and very evident as you read 'Severn'. In this book he set out to demonstrate that the Severn was sufficiently vital to engender its own culture. I think he has succeeded. A recommended book!

**'Severn' by Richard  
Hayman,**

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Press - £15.00**

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