

FOREST OF DEAN LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

news
February 2025



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News

February 2025

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Editors Notes

By coincidence, Newnham on Severn is featured in two of the stories in this edition, so I thought I would include a photograph of Newnham on the cover. Yes, I know it shows just part of Newnham Church, but it is an unusual view, taking in part of the Larkhams' collection of boats and all things nautical at Collow Pill. Please don't try to replicate the shot! I took the photograph on the foreshore, at low tide, under the supervision of the late Fred Larkham. A dangerous place to be as the tide comes in!

The 'Snippet' inclusion has an apparently simple story of a tramp arrested for theft, but what drew my attention was that the tramp sold his stolen goods to Thomas Sharples, a 'marine dealer' of Coleford. You might have expected a 'marine dealer' (chandler??) to be found in Lydney perhaps, but not Coleford. There is an explanation. The term was commonly used at the time to refer to people of Romany origin. Other contemporary definitions are 'scrap man', and in one case 'a coal and wood dealer, farmer and postmaster'. Thomas Sharples does not appear in the 1861/71/81 censuses for Coleford, although there was a Thomas Sharples who was Town Crier in 1879. The mystery continues!

On the back cover, Averil Kear and Richard Holyhead have provided information from Grifit Cooper's will of 1734. Grifit lived in Littledean and owned mines in the Forest, so was a comparatively wealthy man for the time, as reflected in his will. The piece demonstrates how old wills can provide interesting information for family and social historians. Gloucester Archives have plenty of old wills in their collection, and more are available online via Ancestry and Findmypast.

Thanks also to Averil Kear for pointing me in the direction of Sir Kenhelm Digby and his association with Newnham on Severn.

The Society has organised a self drive trip to Cyfartha castle in June. This is your chance for a close up look at the Welsh home of the dynastic Crawshay family, so influential too in the industrial history of the Forest of Dean. Please book early as this trip is sure to 'sell out'!

Finally, please note the change of speakers for the February and March meetings. We will be hosting Sylvia Croker on 15th February to talk about 'Encroachments', and Nigel Costley will now be speaking about 'The Long Search for Tidal Power from the Severn' on 15th March.

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 Chair

Welcome to our first Newsletter of 2025 and to the exciting talks, events and publications that we can all enjoy this year.

As you will have seen in your Membership Card we have a wonderful range of indoor talks scheduled throughout the year at the West Dean Centre in Bream. By the time this newsletter is out we will have enjoyed learning about the River Severn – Chris Witts’ ‘My Life of the Severn’ and considering both the past and the future with Sylvia Croker talking about ‘Encroachments’. The following months include a diverse selection of topics covering the Prisoner of War camp, The Royal Progress, The Forest of Dean Writers Collection, Antiquarian Research and a Merry Tudor Christmas. Please spread the word and encourage any non-members to come along to listen to the talks. They can come as ‘guests’ for a fee on the door, but then hopefully they will think it is such a bargain to join for the annual membership (£12), that they will sign up for the year.



*Cyfartha Castle and Museum, once home to the coal and iron magnates, the Crawshay family
Photo by Keith Willoughby (CC0)*

One of the summer events will be the outing to Cyfartha Castle Museum and Art Gallery in Merthyr Tydfil and planning for other events is in progress. One of those other events is the possible ‘Schools History Day’ in the Summer Term which will be an opportunity for children to display the work that they have created as part of the Schools History Competition, now in its third year. We have been impressed by the amount of work that has gone into the production of entries and would like to provide the chance for everyone to see the various models, articles, films,

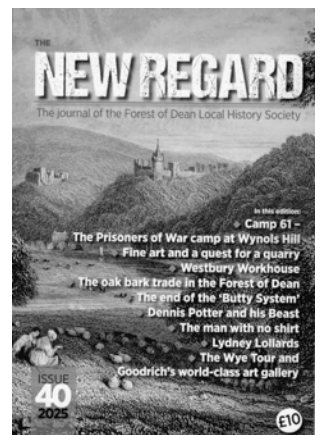
presentations etc that our budding historians have made. In the committee we only see the best entries in each category from each participating Primary School, but when I have visited the schools, I can see all the other items made by the children, so it would be good to provide the chance for a wider audience to congratulate them on their efforts.

I hope that many of you are now enjoying New Regard No. 40 which is again filled with fascinating articles created by excellent authors under the editorship of Nigel Costley. I particularly liked New Regard No. 39, as it was the Coleford Special and as that is my hometown, I must admit I am a little biased! Both are still selling well in various outlets in the Forest, but as members you can buy them online at forestofdeanhistory.org.uk at a discounted price of £7.50 (plus £3.50 P&P), or at our meetings.

When I attended some recent wildlife-based events in the Forest, they have started the meeting by asking the audience what examples of wildlife they have seen recently, to celebrate the diverse nature of our wildlife in the Forest. I propose that we could have a similar approach during the introduction to our talks at West Dean. So I intend to ask the audience what elements of our Forest History they have visited/seen/learnt about recently, to raise the profile of the wondrous things around us. If nobody says anything, the idea will quickly and quietly be killed off!

Looking forward to seeing lots of you in the forthcoming year.

Sue Middleton





MEMBERSHIP

A happy new year to all our members. We are now well into membership year 2024/2025. 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 letter. Alternatively, payment can be made through the online shop. Just go to the website forestofdeanhistory.org.uk and follow the link: 'join the FoD Local History Society' and use the 'renewal' button. Also, as previously, BACS payment is also very welcome, but please let me know you have paid by returning the renewal form.

As always, please keep a look out for emails from me informing you both of FoDLHS events and of upcoming presentations from other Local History organisations.

Since the last newsletter we have had a record number of members join the Society. We would like to welcome Janet and Andrew Thorpe, Julie and Ian Martingale, Stuart Cherry, Jason Griffiths, Robert Jones, Michael Jones, Melloney Smith, Philip and Heidi Sydor, Levi Beddis, Mike Penny, Gillian Christopher, and Christine Bryant. 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)



SPRING WEEKEND 2025

25th- 27th April

The Gloucester History Festival is back in the Spring with a programme of events featuring 40 of Britain's leading historians and broadcasters.

There will be three days of compelling talks and controversial debates under the magnificent beams of Blackfriars Priory built in 1239 and home to Britain's oldest surviving library.

Speakers at the Spring Festival in 2025 will include **Bettany Hughes, Tracy Borman, Hallie Rubenhold, Zeinab Badawi and Bendor Grosvenor.**

The full programme will be announced, and tickets will go on sale in February.

For more details go to www.gloucesterhistoryfestival.co.uk/spring-weekend-2025/

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Sat 15th February - 3pm
West Dean Centre, Bream

“Encroachments” with
Sylvia Croker

Sat 15th March 3pm
West Dean Centre, Bream

Nigel Costley on “The
Long Search for Tidal
Power from the Severn”

Sat 19th April 3pm
West Dean Centre, Bream

“The Prisoner of War
Camp at Wynols Hill”
with Owen McLaughlin



SELF DRIVE VISIT TO CYFARTHA CASTLE ON WEDNESDAY 4TH JUNE 2025

Come and visit the home of the powerful, dynastic Crawshay family, the South Wales and Forest of Dean ironmasters



Merthyr Tydfil, like the Forest of Dean, has a tradition of iron making going back to Roman times.

Industrialists from the Midlands arrived in the middle of the 18th century and began to establish ever bigger and more efficient ironworks, until Merthyr became the major centre of iron-making of Britain and its empire. Two of these ironworks, Dowlais built in 1759, and Cyfarthfa

founded in 1765, for some time enjoyed the accolade of being the largest ironworks in the world.

A certain Henry Crawshay, who was to make his home and fortune in the Forest of Dean was born into this dynamic, dirty, noisy world. As a scion of one of the most important dynasties of the industrial revolution, his destiny was a forgone conclusion.

We are pleased to invite you to a visit to Cyfarthfa Castle, the Crawshay family home, which will include a guided tour of the Museum, a picnic lunch and a range of optional activities in the afternoon. During the visit we will hear about the history of the family, and their contribution to the region's iron working heritage. You will get a sense of the major players in the industry and their influence in the Victorian world.

After lunch (included in the price), you will be able to choose to stay at the castle and enjoy the gardens and extensive grounds. Or you could go to nearby Hirwaun where you can enjoy a guided walk at Hirwaun Ironworks; Henry Crawshay was sent by his father, William, to manage the brand-new Hirwaun Works when he was just 19 years old. Note this walk is across uneven ground and is not suitable for those with limited mobility. Alternatively, you can follow a self-drive treasure hunt style journey around some of the major industrial sites around the town.

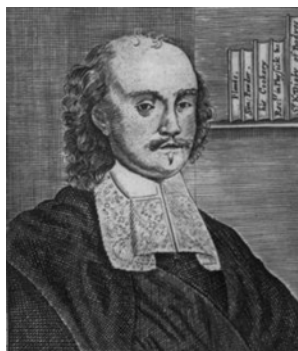


Visit fee is £12 which includes entry to the castle and lunch.

A maximum of 20 places are available. To secure yours please email Mary on publications@forestofdeanhistory.org.uk.

If you are successful you will be given details of how and when to pay.

The Pirate, ‘Verre Anglais’, and Newnham on Severn



Sir Kenhelm Digby, aged 62

The oblique title of this short piece relates to the glass works which were an important part of the history of Newnham on Severn.

The rapid development of glass making in England can probably be attributed to the administration of Elizabeth I. Continental glass blowers were encouraged to come to our shores to spread their knowledge amongst the native glass specialists. Huguenot glass workers escaping persecution in France arrived in the early 1570's and settled first in the southeast of England. As they exhausted essential local wood supplies, they moved on from location to location, moving slowly across the country, producing ‘Forest Glass’.

Eventually the amount of wood consumed in the glass making process became a national concern. On 3rd May 1615, James I issued ‘A Proclamation touching glass’; “there hath been discovered and perfected a way and means to make Glasse with sea-cole, pit-coal and other Fewell, without

any manner of wood, and that in as good perfection for beauty and use as formerly was made by wood”. Essentially, timber was banned as a fuel for glass making.

Thus the imperative was to seek sites for ‘glass houses’ where sufficient supplies of coal could be provided, adjacent to a good means of transport. Newnham on Severn met the requirements, with coal from the Forest of Dean, and the adjacent River Severn.

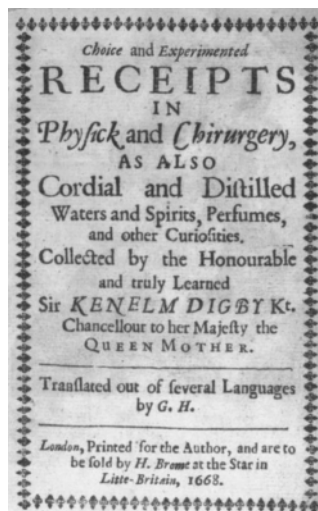
Samuel Rudder, in his *New History of Gloucestershire* (1779), wrote “Sir Robert Mansell, in the reign of Charles I, erected here (Newnham) the first glasshouse in England which was worked with stone-coal”. Mansell was an admiral of the Royal Navy, a Member of Parliament, and a businessman. In 1615 he obtained a monopoly on the manufacture of glass, and established glass factories in various places, one of which was Newnham.

Now our story evolves to include an extraordinary man, Sir Kenhelm Digby. By turns, a privateer (pirate in other words!), a writer of recipes – with a published cookbook, a speaker of multiple languages, a student of philosophy, alchemy, and magic. In short a kind of polymath, but who was also probably ‘mad, bad and dangerous to know’!

His father, Sir Everard Digby, was a Catholic, and a co-conspirator in the Gunpowder Plot. He paid the ultimate price for his actions being hung, drawn and quartered on 30th January 1606. Kenhelm Digby also followed the Catholic faith and had to tread carefully to avoid antagonising the authorities. He attended Oxford University but could not matriculate because he actively practised his faith.

The Digby family had sufficient wealth to be able to send Kenhelm abroad (between 1620 and 1623). Along the way he first went to Paris to study, but the arrival of the plague in the city drove him to move to Angers. There at a masqued ball he met Marie de Medici, the widow of Henry IV of France and then Regent of France. She apparently fell passionately in love with Kenhelm who supposedly fled from her attentions, as his heart belonged to Venetia Stanley who remained in England during his travels.

Kenhelm moved on to Italy, where in Florence he met and became close friends with the painter Van Dyck. His journeys next took him to Spain, where in Madrid he became involved in attempts to secure the marriage of Prince Charles (of England) to the Infanta of Spain. These negotiations failed, and he returned to England with Charles in September



Frontispiece of one of Digby's books, as originally published in 1668

1623. Presumably for his help in attempting to arrange Charles' marriage, King James subsequently knighted Kenhelm in October 1623. Now accepted at court, in 1627 Kenhelm persuaded the King to give him command of a privateering expedition. He sailed to the eastern side of the Mediterranean, where eventually he attacked French and Venetian ships at anchor in the then Venetian port of Scanderoon (now known as Iskenderun). He won a remarkable victory and on his return after thirteen months away "received gracious entertainment from the King and a happy welcome from all his friends". However, the government had to distance themselves from his actions for fear of reprisals on English merchants sailing in the Mediterranean.

Kenhelm then retreated to Gresham College where he furthered his interests in science and alchemy. He developed the 'Powder of Sympathy', which was supposed to possess magical healing properties. Allegedly he gave some to his wife, Lady Venetia, when she was ill. However, she died, to her husband's great distress.

By 1633 Kenhelm was experimenting with glass production. He was visited by a former manager of Mansell's glassworks, James Howell. Howell wanted Digby to apply the "Powder of Sympathy" on a wound he had sustained breaking up a duel. The powder apparently worked, and the two became friends.



'Glass onion' bottle made under the Digby process. CC BY-SA 2.0

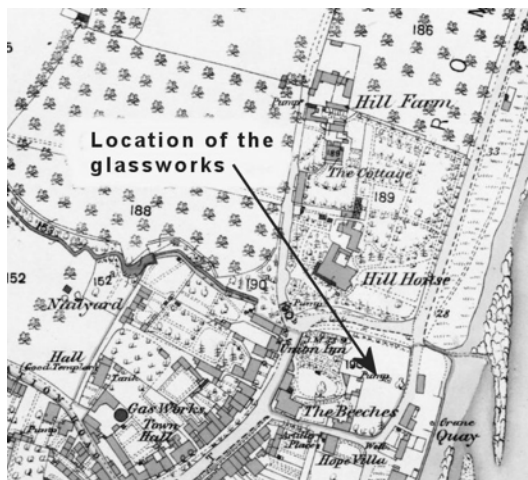
Digby's knowledge of alchemy together with Mansell's experience in glass production led them to work together. They found that the heat of a furnace could be increased by using tunnels to draw in oxygen. They noticed that the higher the temperature, the stronger and thicker the glass. Within a short time, they managed to produce bottles that were coloured dark green or brown (which helped protect the contents from ultraviolet rays), with thick glass walls, and a 'punt', the conical depression at the bottom of the bottle which provides strength at its weakest point. Digby and Mansell's early experiments were carried out in London, but the process was perfected at the glass house in Newnham. A later patent inquiry conducted by the Attorney General confirmed that the inventor of the manufacturing process was Sir Kenhelm Digby in or about 1632.

These early bottles were known as "shaft and globe" bottles. By the 1670's development led to the onion bottle shape, which was stouter with a broad

base and short neck. Bottle necks were later more elongated. Collars were applied to the tops for corks to be tied down. By the 17th century the consumption of cider and perry was increasing. The new stronger bottles manufactured using the Kenhelm Digby process meant that cider or perry could be kept in the bottle for a potential gentle secondary fermentation. The new bottles were also strong enough to store sparkling wines with high internal pressure, such as champagne. The type of glass used in these strong bottles is still known as *verre Anglais* in France.

By 1715 glass production had ceased in Newnham, with Bristol becoming established as the regional centre of glass making. All we are left with today is the known site of the glass house, in the triangle between Church Road, Beeches Road and High Street.

After more extraordinary adventures, Sir Kenhelm Digby died on 11th June 1665, apparently from kidney stones.



Location of the 'glass house' (works) in Newnham Gloucestershire XXXII.13 CC-BY (BL)

Newnham Pill or Creek - Part 2 *by Cecile Hunt*

The previous newsletter (November 2024) introduced this story and described how Newnham Pill was originally a tidal stream with a wide entrance and deep sides.

The River Severn has the 2nd highest tidal range in the world and flooding of the road from Broadoak to Newnham had been happening for centuries. In 1954 flooding was reported in Broadoak at a depth of four feet – deeper than normal floods. In the years before roads were tarmacked, the regular flooding would have made travelling along the dirt road from Broadoak to Newnham virtually impossible; then there was the Pill to negotiate with its grey, glutinous sides of mud!

Circa 1703 the town was described as one long entire street... “The main road from Gloucester to Chepstow turns away from the river bank immediately before Newnham Pill (mouth of Whetstones brook) and quickly turns back again across the brook...”, a bridge? In 1779 Rudge wrote “... the town is extremely well situated upon a fine river, where ships of burthen [abt 160 -200 tons] may safely come to anchor... many ships of large burthen have been built here” Newnham was a very busy port during the 18th century. This is reflected in the large merchant houses with their Georgian upgrades shouting out the wealth of their owners on Lower High Street. Goods came into Newnham’s large quays and great warehouses, down river from Birmingham and its surrounding areas by shallow draft vessels (Trows etc) and locally by pack horse and wagon from the Forest down the Dean Road. Sea going ships came upriver to Newnham with goods from London, Cardiff and Ireland. Loads would be swapped at Newnham Quays then carried upriver in the shallow draft vessels or down river in the sea going vessels. The Pill itself had in 1775 a small quay belonging to the Newnham Pill Co.

It has been calculated by Newnham’s History Group (NHG), using readings and a 1764 map, that at mean high tide the pill was around 30 yds wide at its mouth (Riverside carpark) with a suggested depth of 14 feet. At the narrow end of the pill width would have dwindled to that of the stream, probably 6ft below current road level. (Page 133, “The Newnham Historical Collection Vol 2”). For more information see: <https://newnhamonsevern.co.uk/living/groups/history-groupintro/>

The bottom step to Union Cottage, previously the Union Inn, on the corner of Acacia Close, is taken to be the historical road level. It lies 10 feet above the bed of the stream.

NHG did other on the ground investigations, and in Broadoak, beside the Railway bridge, there is a dead-end road called The Strood, it takes you away from the river on a line across country using firm ground; a possible route that disappears under the Railway (1852) which may follow the old way into Newnham. Near the Railway, in the fields in Hyde farm area, is apparently a substantial bridge, was this part of the line of a road long since gone?

The tythe map of 1839 appears to show a bridge over the Pill near the Union Inn; the ‘narrow end’. In 1850 the pill was culverted and a road built over it; a joint effort between Local Boards and the Chepstow Turnpike Trust. In the 1930s the road was widened and straightened

My theory/question is, did a road go around Newnham and perhaps give access to Newnham via Hyde Lane/Station Road coming out by the clock tower? NHG was, in 2017, still trying to work out a feasible alternative route to crossing Newnham Pill. Can you find the route?



1839 tithe map of Newnham showing the Pill bridged at the narrow (west) end

NLHF grant

We have secured a grant from the NLHF to build the foundations for a longer term project to improve the site, make DHC more sustainable and refurbish the galleries. This project will run from March to December to carry out a business appraisal, audience development, a topographical survey, a hydrogeological survey, a biodiversity survey and a collections review. The work this year will give us a series of recommendations to feed into improving DHC and a future larger NLHF application.

School holidays

We will be running various activities for children and families over February half term 17th-21st February 11-3. On Sat 22nd February there will be a craft hut activity using recycled materials and natural fleece. For Easter 14th-25th April, there will also be a range of family activities. A great way to keep grandchildren entertained! See our website for further details: www.deanheritagecentre.org

Backstage in the Gage

Backstage in the Gage 2-2.30pm is every third Wednesday of the month, March to November. Wednesday 18th March, 16th April, 21st May, 18th June, 16th July, 20th August, 17th September Heritage Open Day, 15th October, 19th November. Free session included in the price of admission. Why not have lunch before or tea and cake after?

Short talks will be given by one of our collections team on a range of objects from our stores. This is a great opportunity to see and hear about objects that are not on display and engage with the collection up close. An informal session in our Gage collections room, where we are happy to chat and answer questions. More detail on our website.

Spring Equinox Fayre

Saturday 22nd March; entry is **FREE** to the whole site on the day, but we would really appreciate a donation. We are a charity, so please pay what you can, and help support us! Shop from a variety of unique and handmade gifts created by local crafters and businesses. Indulge in delicious food at The Heritage Coffee Shop. Enjoy live music as you visit. Spring Crafts in The Craft Hut.



Snippets

Tuesday 24th April 1860
at Coleford Petty Sessions

“William Jones, alias Greenhouse, a tramp, was charged with stealing a quantity of tools from an outbuilding at Lane End on the 12th instant, the property of Edward Dickinson of Berry-hill. The prisoner sold the tools to a marine-store dealer of Coleford, named Thos. Sharples, for one shilling, and in his possession they were found by police. The prisoner was apprehended at Mitcheldean, on the 13th last, by P.C. Hopkins of the Coleford Station.

He pleaded guilty, and was committed to Gloucester County Gaol for six week's hard labour.”



Meetings in Review *with Chris Sullivan & Keith Walker*



The talk 'Groundbreakers' on 16th November was presented by Chantelle Lyons, a naturalist and writer, and was based on her book of the same name.

Wild boar lived alongside humans in Britain from the end of the ice-age until the late 13th century AD when they became extinct. After that date there is no further mention of wild boar until the 1990s when they made an unexpected return.

By the 1980s boar farming had become established and when the great storm of 1987 destroyed fences some enterprising boar voted with their trotters and headed back to the wild. Small groups popped up here and there and by 1999 they were once again living in the Forest. Their reappearance generated huge press interest in and almost visceral reactions from people. In some they provoked deep fear but others loved these exotic creatures. People and boar had not mixed in in Britain for over 700 years so there was a steep learning curve.

Chantelle dispelled some myths and prejudices. Boar family life is complex. Contrary to popular belief the sows do not have multiple litters in a year, usually just one. This belief may have arisen because sows are often seen with large numbers of young. In fact, boars practice child-minding where sows will look after young that are not their own. Males are ejected from family groups at around 8 months and then sometimes form unruly bachelor groups before eventually becoming solitary. They are intelligent and sometimes behave altruistically. Boars do have a big impact on the landscape. Their digging can be destructive, but ground disturbance is also beneficial by disrupting monocultures such as bracken. Boar create deep mud wallows which are colonised by many other animals and which can be a lifeline in times of drought. Through their dung they spread seeds as well as micro rhizoids from fungi which enhance the diversity of the forest. Dung beetles are pleased to see them back.

The secret of peaceful co-existence seems to lie in achieving the right population level. The target set by the Forestry Commission is 400 individuals. In 2018 the number was 1600, today it is around 440. Over time, the fear factor has also diminished with only 2 minor injuries directly attributed to boar reported in the UK. In mainland Europe the story is the same and the attitude to wild boar has become more casual. Some smaller boar populations in England have disappeared but elsewhere numbers are steady. Are they here to stay? Chantelle hoped so. They have been a missing piece of our forest environment and play an important role. They reconnect us to our own wild origins, never more so than in the surge of adrenaline when we meet one face to face on a narrow path in the woods.

CDS

On 14th December 2024 Richard Clammer told us about 'John Cabot and The 'Matthew''

John Cabot is believed to have led the first ships to reach North America since Viking times, yet he and his voyages are little-documented. Old hand Richard Clammer told us how Cabot was born in Genoa around 1450, moving to another spice trade port, Venice. There, he seems to have been a general entrepreneur with sailing galley experience, who failed to successfully deliver civil engineering works. 'The Del Boy of Venice', in Richard's phrase. Running from debts in Venice, he failed again in Valencia and Lisbon and tried Nicholas Street, Bristol and new Tudor King Henry VII.

In the mid-1400s, Bristol had a triangular trade – dried cod from Iceland to Portugal and Spain, wine back to Bristol. By the end of the century, Bristol's Merchant Venturers had other fish to fry, as new politics meant new Iberian trading opportunities. Bristol sailors would thus know of tales of the Grand Banks fishery, and thus be plugged in to the maps of the Age of Discovery. Exactly what Cabot was doing where and when remains unclear.

Cabot got his own monopoly and political protection from Henry VII in 1496. Bristol financial backers included Richard Amerike (note the name). Italian bankers based in England, and even the Pope's tax

collector here, may have been involved. Cabot planned a northerly route, principally seeking China and Japan, but also hoping for the mythical Brazil and its 'dye-wood'.

Cabot's boat 'The Matthew' was small even by the standards of the day, with cargo space only equivalent to 50 large wine barrels. His first voyage in 1496 was beaten by bad weather. His 1497 voyage got to Newfoundland in 35 days. King Henry's mind was occupied by the Perkin Warbeck insurrection that year, and Cabot's 1498 expedition was scaled back to five ships. What happened to them is almost unknown. Richard showed de la Cosa's 1500 Spanish map, recording English flags, implying that Cabot's charts had forcibly or peaceably been acquired by his competitors further south. In the next few years, Cabot's Bristol associates like John Weston explored America /Amerike further. They concluded that little good would come out of North America and left it for the fishermen.



*An image purporting to show
Cabot landing in
Newfoundland in 1497*

The 500th anniversary of the 1497 landing was marked in Bristol by the building of a replica 'Matthew', and its subsequent sailing to Newfoundland. Yachtsman Clammer wangled a berth on the Canadian leg of the voyage to Newfoundland. The replica was feted around the coast, including Cape Bonavista as claimed landing place. Richard told us of dirty smelly men trying to get a sailing ship to dock on time for the Queen and visiting dignitaries, of the 'tea towel salute' (wadding in the cannon) to an Italian warship, all part of festivities.

CDS

On Saturday 18th January we embarked on a very enjoyable virtual voyage or two on the River Severn with the inimitable Chris Witts, to learn about his 'Life on the River Severn'. Taught at Central Boys School in Gloucester, Chris avoided school rugby sessions by taking himself off to Gloucester Docks, where the passing tanker vessels fired his imagination. Leaving school aged 16, Chris presented himself at the offices of tanker owners John Harker, where through persistence he got a job as a 'lad' on the 'Shell Steelmaker'. He turned up at the docks at the appointed hour (8am) on his first day of employment to be told he was late, with the consequence of later missing the return tide (trip) at Swansea being blamed on him!

It was imperative to keep vessels constantly on the move to earn 'trip' money. Apparently Chris's earnings exceeded that of his father, an engineer by trade, to the extent that his father would not speak to him for a while! For vessels with a crew of four, to keep the vessel on the move, they would operate 'two up, two down', with two on deck operating the vessel and two resting. A crew of four would be skipper, mate, engineer, and lad (deck hand).

Chris then described the legendary night of 25th October 1960, when he was on the Wyedale in the company of thirteen other vessels sailing on the tide upstream to Sharpness. Whilst Chris and his fellow crewmen managed to lock into Sharpness without incident, it was a very different story for the tankers Arkendale H and Wastdale H. As they approached Berkeley Power Station, they separately turned to face into the tide, as usual, to gain entrance to Sharpness Docks. A very dense fog had enveloped the area, and both skippers had sent crew to the bow of the tankers to listen for the foghorn at Sharpness. Both vessels missed the entrance and eventually became locked together in the fast 8 knot tidal current, drifting sideways out of control towards the Severn Railway Bridge. They collided with one of the piers of the bridge, which dislodged two of the spans onto the stricken vessels. An enormous explosion followed with the escaping petrol and oil causing the Severn itself to be on fire. Five men died in the terrible accident, only the two skippers and an engineer survived, illustrating the dangers that the crews of the tankers faced daily.

Chris later enjoyed happier times sailing in the company of George Thompson (one of the skippers who survived the Severn Bridge tragedy), and Mike Meredith Edwards, who was a Forester. After a spell working for the Fire Service, Chris returned to the Severn in the 1990's, working first as mate then skipper of the 'Tirley', a grain barge running between Sharpness and Tewkesbury.

KW

Grifit Cooper's Will *by Averil Kear & Richard Holyhead*

Historic wills can be a good source of information for both family and social historians. Gloucester Archives have a fair number of wills in their collection, more are accessible through the Ancestry and Findmypast web sites.

Thanks to Richard Holyhead and Averil Kear for the 'interpreted' extract from Grifit Cooper's will (shown below). Grifit Cooper lived at Littledean along with many others of the Cooper family. Richard Holyhead is a descendant of Grifit Cooper.

"In the name of God Amen I Grifit Cooper of Little Deane in the County of Gloucester, Coal Miner, being of sound and perfect memory and understanding thanks be given to Almighty God for the same, do make and ordain this my last will and testament..... I give and bequeath to Mary my beloved all my part of that coal works called by the name of the Rocky Delf near the place called SerridgeGate.....I give and bequeath to my son Grifit that part of the coal works or level which belong to me near the Sally Valets called by the name of Church Way and all other mines and coalworks and also my four horses and all the tacklings to them belonging..... I give to my daughter Mary the sum of twenty pounds.....I give to my son Anthony the sum of ten pounds to be paid to him at the end of his apprenticeship...the Rocky Delf coal works to provide all his wearing apparel during his apprenticeship. I give to my beloved wife my five cow beasts and twenty seven sheep and five pigs and a third part of my household goods.

I have here to set my hand and made seal this sixteenth day of July in the seventh year of the reign of our sovereign lord King George the second over Great Britain, France and Ireland anno domini 1734."

Grifit Cooper died in 1736, and was buried in the churchyard of St Etherbert, Littledean on 8th May. Clearly, by the time of his death he was a relatively wealthy man. The sum of £20 (gifted to his daughter Mary under his will), would be worth about £1800 today.

We know more of the long history of Churchway Colliery. By about 1833 was in the hands of the Bennett family, who worked it at least until the 1850s. It worked the Rocky and Churchway High Delf Seams of the Supra-Pennant Group, the latter seam being 4 ft 6 in. thick and at a depth of 336 ft. There were two steam engines (20 in. and 36 in.) at work in 1841, when 2,299



The Church of St Ethelbert, Littledean, where Gift Cooper was buried on 8th May 1736

tons of coal were produced, rising to 12,756 tons in 1845.

Coal seems to have been dispatched over the Severn and Wye Railway's tramroad during this period, but there were tramroad connections to sidings on the Forest of Dean Railway's Churchway Branch by 1856. Production had ceased by the 1850s or 1860s, but the Churchway gale (as well as the Nelson gale) was acquired by the Bilson and Crump Meadow Collieries Co. Ltd, who continued to use the 40 inch Cornish pumping engine until 1896 to protect their other collieries from flooding.



The remains of Churchway Collier, seen as disturbed ground in the photograph above (SO 6379 1536)