THE CHEPSTOW SOCIETY

Members Bulletin **October 2025**

www.chepstowsociety.co.uk

Wednesday 15th October



Two hundred years of the Railways

- and the part played by South Wales

Talk by John Burrows

Wednesday 19th November

Talk by Prof. Mark Horton

The Vikings and the Severn





Our meetings and talks are usually held on the third Wednesday of each month at The Drill Hall, Lower Church Street, Chepstow NP16 5HJ

Tea and coffee from 7 pm. Talk from 7 30 pm

All welcome - Members £1 - Non-members £4

GEOFF SUMNER

1944 - 2025



Our much respected former Chairman, Geoff Sumner, passed away in August, at the age of 81.

Geoff became involved in the Chepstow Society after he and his wife Susan retired to the area. He brought a wealth of knowledge and expertise, and a love of history, to the Society, and chaired our committee with great authority for an almost unprecedented 13 years, from 2009 until 2022. Sadly, after lockdowns ended and our monthly meetings restarted, he was unable to attend as regularly as he would have liked.

Geoffrey Charles Ernest Sumner was born at the Lydia Beynon maternity hospital at Coldra – now part of the Celtic Manor Resort – and grew up in Pontypool where he attended West Monmouth School. He won a place at Oriel College, Oxford, and graduated with an MA in Law.

He practised as a solicitor at first in London, from 1969, and then at Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire, where he joined a law firm – eventually becoming a senior partner – and met his wife Susan.

Geoff returned to Monmouthshire after he retired, and settled in Chepstow.

His memories of the town dated back to his childhood, when he visited local hospitals with his father, a schools dental officer. He said that he remembered "driving down Bridge Street in our Austin 16 on the way to the ferry, and each time he would explain to me the meaning of the 'Five Alls' on the pub sign in Hocker Hill street." He also shared his memories of waiting at Beachley for the ferry.

Susan said: "We shared a love of history (his real passion) and travel which we were fortunate enough to do for many years, with the family and later, together. We had planned to do more when he retired but, sadly, that was not to be. He was a great supporter of the monarchy and I think we only ever missed one or two Trooping the Colour celebrations - only standing in the Mall and enjoying the spectacle of course, but we enjoyed it."

He joined the Chepstow Society in the 2000s, and in 2009 was elected as its Chairman, with the responsibility of chairing the monthly Drill Hall meetings as well as the committee. He drafted the Society's widely read introductory history guide, *The Chepstow Story*, and spoke knowledgeably on the famous mediaeval knight and statesman William Marshal.

Geoff loved being part of the local community, and for many years – here and earlier in Hertfordshire – was actively involved with Rotary. He told Susan how much he enjoyed being part of the Chepstow Society, and how distressed he was when his deteriorating health meant he could no longer attend meetings.

His enthusiasm, dedication and expertise will be greatly missed by the Society. A commemorative plaque, which the Society had commissioned for Geoff, will now be presented to Susan, with our grateful thanks.

THE ROMAN CROSSING OF THE WYE AT CHEPSTOW

*or **What's that in the river?***

Since its location was first shown on a turn of the last century OS map, people have been questioning if, and exactly where, was there another crossing of the Wye at Chepstow.

In our June talk **Simon Maddison** attempted to clear up this conundrum.





This crossing of the Wye, which is just upstream of the existing bridge, had been investigated in 1911 by Dr Orville Owen.

More field work was done in 1962. In 2003, in perhaps Dr Alice Roberts' first television appearance, a TV programme "*Extreme Archaeology*" took a look. Unfortunately, there are very few written records from these earlier studies.

In 2023 Simon and his team took up the challenge, analysing museum drawings and GIS mapping to reveal exactly what and why, and maybe how, this crossing came into being.

Why the crossing is there can probably be explained by investigating the archaeology on both sides of the river. There is good evidence of a substantial trackway on the Welsh side which leads from the river towards Kingsmark and on the other side a trace of a track down from Tutshill can be clearly seen

What? Access to the river bed is only available for very short inter-tidal times and is made more difficult by deep mud and gravel. However, a total of four hours of investigation has yielded spectacular results.

Significant timber remains of what looks very like the base of one of the supporting piers has been uncovered.

The timbers have undergone a series of scientific tests which are still continuing. These have resulted in the wood being dated back to the 1st century AD – so, certainly Roman.



How- There are several hypotheses as to how the bridge was built and what it looked like. Perhaps other bridge piers will reveal the answer to this puzzle.

Simon's meticulous blend of archival detective work, GIS mapping, brave tidal archaeology (assisted by SARA) and detailed sampling has transformed what were fragmentary notes into a reconstructed Roman crossing.

He delivered a fascinating talk attempting to answer all these and more uncertainties and an understanding on the infrastructure bridging the border, He explained ongoing investigations using up-to-date techniques, including one which will reveal when the wood was last exposed to sunlight. Who knew that there was such a thing! As is often the case in explorations such as this "there are more questions than answers".

To be continued - and we await with interest

The episode of *Extreme Archaeology* is available to watch on Amazon Prime.

Angela Middleditch

CHEPSTOW'S SHIPYARDS

At our July meeting, **Guy Hamilton** gave a fully illustrated presentation on the history of Chepstow's shipbuilding industry and shipyards, as they changed over time.

Wooden ships such as trows – shallow boats for carrying river freight – were built at Chepstow from early times, but the details of individual ships were not recorded until the 19th century.

There were several small shipyards along the river, from just below the old bridge down to beyond the Port Wall in the south. But the first major change came when Brunel's tubular suspension railway bridge was built, and Edward Finch set up his engineering yard to construct its components.

After the bridge was opened in 1852, Finch built one iron ship in his yard – the *Alma* – but then turned to other engineering work, including the assembly of iron masts, bridges and dock gates. Although Finch himself died in Chepstow in 1873, the company continued under the management of James Rowe.

At the same time, wooden ships continued to be built. These included the *Clara* – shown here being built on the site of the current bandstand - and the *Spry* – rescued from disrepair in Worcester, restored and now housed at Ironbridge.



The onset of the First World War brought huge changes to Chepstow. J.H. Silley – once an apprentice at Finch's – persuaded leading shipowners in London, such as Lord Inchcape, that Chepstow was an ideal location to assemble and launch large cargo ships to replace those being lost to U-boat attacks in the western approaches. The Standard Shipbuilding Company was set up, bought large areas of mostly open land – the Meads – south of the railway, and started building new works including rail lines and slipways.

They also started the process of building new houses for incoming workers, in the "garden city" style at Hardwick (now Garden City), Bulwark and Sedbury. But, the Government nationalised the shipyard in 1917 – as National Shipyard No.1 – and the process slowed down under the bureaucracy. By the end of the war, only one ship – the *War Forest* – had been launched at Chepstow.



Work continued for several years on the ships that had already been commissioned, such as the *War Glory*, and, in 1921, the tanker *Cynthiana* - the last large ship built at Chepstow. But, in 1925, the site was bought by the Fairfield company. Their shipbuilding was based at their yard on the Clyde in Glasgow, but the company continued with major engineering projects such as bridges and electricity pylons at the Chepstow yard.

During the Second World War, vessels were again launched at Chepstow – tank landing craft used in the D-Day landings and elsewhere, along with sections of the Mulberry harbours which allowed the landings to take place. After the war, the Fairfield yard concentrated mainly on building bridges, for locations worldwide. Components of the first Severn Bridge were assembled there and floated downstream, to be raised to form the decks of the motorway crossing.

In 1966 the site was taken over by the Mabey bridge company, becoming Fairfield Mabey. The assembly of steel bridges, and other major engineering work, continued, and the company was the largest employer in Chepstow. Delays to road traffic were frequent, as huge girders and other components of major works were transported through the town. But, in 1970, disaster struck – six local men died when a heavy steel lifting rig, being tested for its strength, collapsed at the yard.

With a diminishing demand for prefabricated bridges, and competition from elsewhere, the Fairfield Mabey yard eventually closed in 2015. Now, it has become the Brunel Quarter, home to many of Chepstow's incoming residents. But there are still reminders, on information boards there and elsewhere, of Chepstow's shipbuilding past, as well as the outline of one of the old First World War slipways preserved as an open space.

TOWN WALKS

We organised a series of town walks over the summer, raising some £300 for the Society.

Led by Tim Ryan, Simon Maddison, Jackie Neal, Keith James and myself, several of the walks took groups around the historic town centre and riverside area.

The most popular were those led by Tim to show off the restoration work on the historic *Severn Princess* ferry, and with Simon covering the archaeological and historic heritage of the Piercefield estate.

More walks will of course be organised next year, and we would welcome ideas from members on additional areas or themes to be covered. Thanks go to all those involved.

We will continue to lead groups around the town, on request.

Guy Hamilton



Simon Maddison with a group at Piercefield

EXCURSIONS

The Society is looking for someone – a member, or perhaps a potential member – who would like to organise some excursions for Society members, to places of historic or perhaps local interest.
Of course, the role could be shared between two or more people.

Our programme of excursions has run for many years, and is popular.

If anyone wants to know more, and might be interested in organising some visits or a programme of visits, please contact Marion Huckle – *secretary@chepstowsociety.co.uk*
– or Sallie James - *sallie_james@btinternet.com* – for a discussion and more information.

Don't be the last to know!

Please help us to keep you up to date about Society meetings and events, by making sure you let Angela Middleditch, our membership secretary, know if you change your email address and/or home address between renewals.

Please contact:
membership@chepstowsociety.co.uk
with any change of details.

Also, please check that any recent subscription payments you have made have been cleared by your bank, and contact membership@ … if you think there is a problem with your payment.

Thank you.

DONATED BOOKS

We are very grateful to have recently received a substantial donation of old books and booklets about (or relevant to) Chepstow, given by Henry Sullivan whose father Harry was a friend of local historian and Society founder, Ivor Waters.

These have now been added to our selected list of available secondhand books, below. Please note that we only have single copies of some of these. Prices take account of condition and scarcity. Other items are available.

If you would like to purchase any, please contact Guy Hamilton, ghmyrtle@gmail.com or text 07786 500609

As at October 2025

£25 each – Ivor Waters hardback books

- **Inns and Taverns of the Chepstow District (1949)**
- **Chepstow Parish Records (1955)**
- **The Unfortunate Valentine Morris (1964)**
- **The Prisoner of Chepstow Castle (1976)**
- **Chepstow Notebook (1980)**
- **Folklore and Dialect of the Lower Wye Valley (1982)**
- **Chepstow Packets (1983)**
- **The Moss Rose Press (1985)**
- **Poems (1987)**
- **Wye Into Severn (1989)**
- **Chepstow Street Literature (1989)**
- **The Port of Chepstow (1989)**

£12 each

- Ivor Waters: A Chepstow and Tintern Anthology (hardback, 1948)
- : About Chepstow (1952)
- Mercedes Waters: Changing Chepstow (1970)
- : Chepstow Sketches (1973)
- T.T. Birbeck – The History of Chepstow Rural District Council (1974)
- Robert Gibbings – Coming Down the Wye (1942)
- Rev. Edward Davies: Chepstow, A Poem (1992 reprint of 1786 poem, hardback)

£10 each

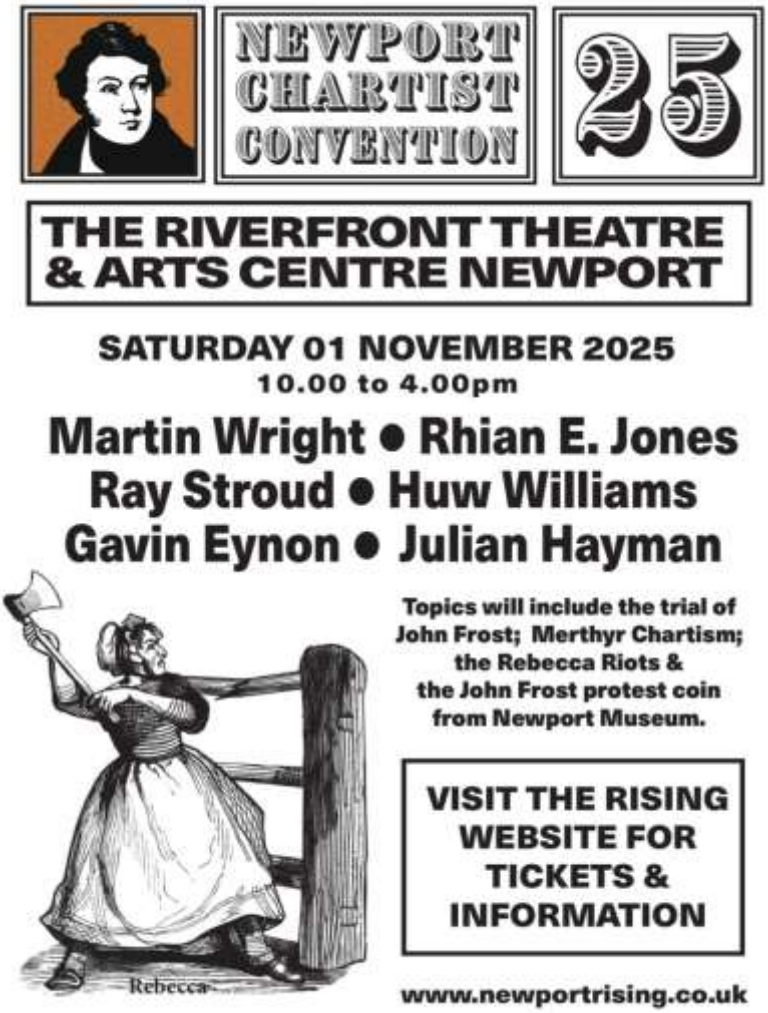
- Ivor Waters (trans.): Sunlight and Scarlet: selected poems by Antonio Machado (1973)
- : Inns and Taverns of Chepstow and the Lower Wye Valley, Part 1 (inc. map, 1976)
- The Severn Bridge Souvenir Handbook (1966)
- S B Rogers: An Early Victorian Severn Bridge (Merlin Bookshop, 1974 reprint of 1845 pamphlet)

£8 each

- Ivor Waters: Impressions and Versions (poems, Chepstow, 1973)
- : There was a young lady from Gwent (poem, Chepstow, 1976)
- E. T. Davies – A History of Mathern (Chep Soc, 1950)
- Rev. K M Denison: Mathern – History from the Parish Registers (Chep Soc, 1977)
- T. T. Birbeck – The Foudroyant (1966)
- T. T. Birbeck – Caldicot Castle (n.d.)
- Christopher Jordan – Severn Enterprise (1977)
- Between the Severn and the Wye – poems selected by Johnny Coppin (1993)

£6 each

- Ivor Waters: The Wine Trade of the Port of Chepstow (1967)
- : Chepstow Churchwardens (1967)
- : The Town of Chepstow Part 5 – Station Road to Town Gate
- : The Town of Chepstow Part 6 – High Street (1974)
- : Chepstow Theatres (1975)
- : A List of Vicars of Chepstow (1975)
- : Inns and Taverns of Chepstow and the Lower Wye Valley, Part 4 (1976)
- : Inns and Taverns of Chepstow and the Lower Wye Valley, Part 5 (1976)
- : Chepstow Printers and Newspapers (1977)
- : Chepstow Clock and Watch Makers (1978)
- : Mounton Valley Paper Mills (1980)
- Selections from "Chepstow: A Poem" by Edward Davies 1718-1789 (Chep Soc, 1967)
- W H Greene: Jack o' Kent and the Devil (Chep Soc, 1974)
- Arthur Clark: The Castle of St Briavels (1949)



DIARY DATES 2026

MONTHLY TALKS:

21 January
The Anglo Saxons in our area
Alex Knight

18 February
Speaker to be confirmed

18 March
The Newport Ship
Toby Jones

15 April
The Morgans of Tredegar House
Roger James

20 May
Henry VIII
Prof. Ronald Hutton

more to follow...

AND...

Saturday 31 January **President's Lunch** at the Beaufort Hotel
– details to be confirmed