THE CHEPSTOW SOCIETY

Members Bulletin **January 2026**

www.chepstowsociety.co.uk

Wednesday 21st January
The Anglo-Saxons In This Area

Talk by
Alex Knight





Wednesday 18th February

Talk by Will Davies

Tintern Abbey

Wednesday 18th March

The Newport Medieval Ship

Talk by Toby Jones



Our meetings and talks take place 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



Andy Torbet, the speaker at our Spring Lunch, is a cave diver, TV presenter, skydiver and stuntman known for his daring exploits in extreme environments. Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and The Explorers Club, he has featured on BBC, CBBC, Discovery, and the History Channel, and was a stunt performer in the James Bond film "No Time to Die."

For ticket information, contact Keith and Sallie James, sallie_james@btinternet.com

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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 popular programme of excursions has run for many years.

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.



A packed Drill Hall in November, for Mark Horton's talk on the Vikings

The temporary closure of Chepstow's Old Wye Bridge



I wrote to the Chief Executives of Monmouthshire and Gloucestershire County Councils in early November regarding the temporary closure of the old Wye bridge - and the importance of the 1816 bridge and its preservation to Chepstow, both as a piece of world heritage and as a means of moving around the town and the area.

At present, the iron bridge is closed to all traffic, owing to a crack that was identified in part of one of its arch ribs in October 2025. The Chepstow Society is very concerned about this closure, and its impact on Chepstow and the Forest of Dean. Our view is that it should be appropriately protected, as well as reopened for light traffic as soon as possible.

The historic bridge is not only a Grade 1 Listed structure, but is the world's largest iron arch road bridge of the first 50 years of iron construction (1780-1830). Ironbridge, the road bridge completed in 1780, was the world's first iron structure of any kind (bridge or building), and Chepstow Bridge 36 years later is the largest surviving iron arch road bridge from that same period. Now all the world's major cities are dominated by skyscrapers of iron and steel frame, or steel reinforced concrete structures, so Chepstow Bridge holds a significant position in the global history of 'iron in construction'.

The bridge between Gloucestershire and Monmouthshire has been the joint responsibility of the riparian authorities since the time of Queen Elizabeth I (1575).

The Chief Executives of Monmouthshire and Gloucestershire were both very quick to respond and very helpful to the Society's request for a speaker for our November meeting. Whilst the responsibility is shared between the two counties, the lead role for Chepstow Bridge is Monmouthshire County Council (MCC), while Gloucestershire has the lead role for Bigsweir Bridge.

MCC provided a speaker for the Society's meeting. He gave some information about the situation – including how and when the bridge might be reopened for light traffic, and the measures that would need to be taken to continue its use and preservation. The speaker came straight from flood protection works at Monmouth (still in his hi-vis jacket) and gave information which was much appreciated and in difficult circumstances only days after the Monmouth floods.

Though he was most helpful, he was not the structural engineer for the bridge, so it wasn't possible to get more information on why a crack in one part of one of the 25 cast iron arches supporting the 5 arch bridge (each main arch has 5 supporting arches) would be sufficient to lead the consultants to recommend that MCC close the bridge even to one way light traffic. Further information from the consulting engineers would be helpful.

Chepstow Bridge's importance in early iron construction is such that it should deserve 'world heritage' status, but its UK 'Grade 1 Listed Structure' status should be sufficient to protect its vital historic significance. I will be giving my talk on ***'Chepstow Bridge (1816) – the case for World Heritage Status'*** to the Chepstow U3A History Group on 21st January at 2.30pm, at Bulwark Community Centre, and U3A members are welcome to come along.

The Chepstow Society needs to keep up and promote our interest in the appropriate repair, preservation, and timely re-use of Chepstow Bridge, for single file, alternating direction, light traffic, as it was before its temporary closure in October.

John W Burrows
Chairman – The Chepstow Society

More information about the closure is at **www.monmouthshire.gov.uk/old-wye-bridge-chepstow/**

VIKINGS ON THE SEVERN

The Society's talk at the November meeting took us back to the era of the Vikings as we welcomed back **Professor Mark Horton**. Did the Vikings actually camp on the Severn? This was the theme for Mark's lively and thoroughly illustrated talk, which was lapped up by a very full audience.

By way of introduction, Mark swiftly reviewed the popular television series that have been shown recently, some based on the books of Bernard Cornwell in particular – which had some basis in the known facts; and then his own personal involvement during school holidays in archaeological digs at Repton in Derbyshire. The Repton dig from the 1970s by St Wythans Church, established that there had been a significant "D-shaped" campsite alongside the river in about 870, at the time of the first of the Viking wars against King Alfred. As a result of the original dig and also more recent ones, it seems that the Vikings were more numerous in the camp than may have been previously thought and also the presence of metalwork indicated that ship repairs may have involved metal. Additionally, the dig found gaming dice and counters, as well as coins and weaponry. Many of the coins derived from the Ottomans, the Vikings engaged in slave trading with the Ottoman empire. Mark also confirmed that this evidence of a large Viking army presence also confirmed that women formed part of the make up of the army.

As Mark warmed to his theme, he explained that Viking armies were larger than often imagined, and that with England and Wales having so many rivers, navigation for that army by boat made it certain that the Viking armies moved across the kingdoms of Mercia, Wessex, Northumbria with relative ease. The time period that Mark concentrated his talk on spanned from 790 – 903AD but most particularly the period of the Viking Great Heathen Army invasion and the three wars between the Vikings and Alfred between 865 and 900. Although the first two campaigns primarily focussed on York and East Anglia, the armies under firstly Guthrum and then Hastein advanced and also camped in what is now Wiltshire, Dorset, Somerset and Devon and then up to the River Severn, with much of the Viking army camped in Cirencester for a year after the Treaty of Wedmore. Certainly in 877/878 there was clear evidence of the Viking army moving and fighting between Exeter, Gloucester and Chippenham, mainly fighting in Wessex, but also in Mercia.

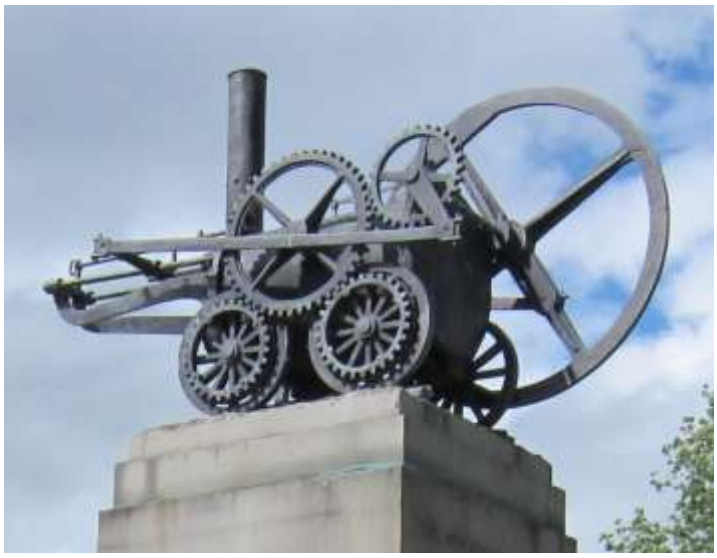
Mark read extracts from contemporary reports in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles which recorded Alfred's victories, the fortifications at Athelney, and the capture of hostages from Hastein's family whom were held as sureties for the dispersal of the Great Heathen Army. However, there was to be a further battle after the besieged Vikings at Exeter broke free and sailed up the coast to the Severn to meet up with the rest of Hastein's army. Alfred's son-in-law, Ethelred of Mercia led an army of combined forces from Wales, Mercia and Wessex and the forces met at a place called Buttington on the River Severn. The place was a well-fortified Viking encampment, however, the siege laid by Ethelred's army eventually forced the Vikings, who were reportedly reduced to eating their horses, to try to break out at what was reportedly a ferocious battle. As the Chronicles reported: "Many fell there on both sides; however, with God's help the Christians won the victory and the Danes were put to flight".

But where was Buttington? Seventeenth century historians gravitated to the idea that the location was at the more modern village of Buttington in Powys near Welshpool. However, modern digs have shown that the bones found there don't date from Viking times. In more recent times, opinion has gathered around the location as being at Buttington Tump at what is now Beachley, with the location actually being on the Wye rather than the Severn as indicated by the Chronicles. The location makes more sense as a location that could be fortified, as being a more logical meeting point, and supported by recent digs in the Forest of Dean which show evidence of Viking bones and coins at a location in Earthens field, which could easily be so named after the designation of the Heathen army. As Mark cheerfully acknowledged, nothing can as yet be established with certainty, but the society's members at the talk, sitting in the Drill Hall, may well have been on the site of the Battle of Buttington.

Our thanks go to Mark Horton on a lively talk and we look forward to welcoming him back to the Society on a future occasion.

Marcus Keppel-Palmer

THE 200TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE WORLD'S RAILWAYS - and the part played by South Wales



In October, to mark the bicentenary of the opening of the Stockton and Darlington Railway on 27 September 1825, **John Burrows** gave a talk on that historic event - its impact on rail travel ever since across the whole world, and the important part played by South Wales in the development of the world's earliest railways.

The talk looked at the earliest wooden waggon-ways for the transport of coal from inland collieries in England to the coast, from the 1600s onwards, and in particular those in the North East of England. But it was in South Wales where the first two major initiatives of the modern railway era took place, two decades before the opening of the Stockton and Darlington railway in 1825.

The very first steam locomotive in the world to move on rails and to haul a train (of passengers and freight) was built at the Penydarren Ironworks at Merthyr Tydfil. In February 1804 it travelled 10 miles from Merthyr to Abercynon with the world's first train to be hauled by a steam locomotive (only 30 miles from Chepstow). The locomotive was built by Richard Trevithick. It would be another 10 years before steam engines began pulling trains of coal waggons in the collieries of the North East, and another 20 years before passenger trains were pulled by steam engines.

The second major initiative was the establishment of a public passenger railway, which happened at Swansea in 1807. It was a horse drawn carriage on rails from Swansea to Oystermouth and Mumbles, and was a publicly accessible passenger service. Even the pioneering Stockton and Darlington Railway in 1825 continued to use horses to pull passenger carriages until 1830 (but used steam engines for coal trains), so Swansea's Oystermouth Railway was 20 years ahead of the generally accepted birth of the modern railways of 1825.

On further examination, John argued that the true birth of the world's modern railways wasn't 1825, but 1830 with the full operation of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway which like the S&DR was masterminded by George Stephenson and his son Robert. The L&MR did not use horses at all, but all trains were steam locomotive-hauled and operated on a set timetable between the two cities, with intermediate stations, on tracks 4ft 8½ inches wide.

The principles of the world's modern railways were established by the Rainhill Steam Trials of October 1829 on the Liverpool and Manchester Railway. The trials, one year before opening, were won by Stephenson's '*Rocket*'. The Chair of the Judging Panel of those momentous and far-reaching steam engine trials was John Urpeth Rastrick – the same engineer who designed and built Chepstow Bridge in 1816 - the elegant five arch iron Regency bridge which we still have today.

Rastrick had also worked with Richard Trevithick on a steam engine demonstration in London in 1808 to try to promote steam engine hauled passenger railways – again, 20 years before it was eventually introduced on the world's first railways. The engine, built by Rastrick to Trevithick's design, was built at the same foundry at Bridgnorth as the iron arches of Chepstow Bridge.

From 1830 to 1860 railways 'took off' not just in the UK but around the world. They have gone on from strength to strength ever since, still using the standard gauge of 4ft 8½ inches (1.435 metres) which George and Robert Stephenson promoted for the S&DR and L&MR, and accepted by Rastrick and the Rainhill judges in 1829.

The size of railway carriages and the space for passengers on trains on most of the world's mainline and subway lines from South America to USA to Europe and China and Japan was determined 200 years ago by the Stephensons, and by the builder of Chepstow Bridge - John Urpeth Rastrick!

SIR JOHN AP ADAM

Our honorary and much respected member **Keith Underwood** celebrated his 90th birthday in 2024, but has not been resting on his laurels.

He has recently written, illustrated and had published a new 80-page book on the life and times of John ap Adam, a mediaeval knight whose story is intimately bound up with those of Chepstow and Sedbury.

John ap Adam lived in the late thirteenth century, and was associated with Roger Bigod, Earl of Norfolk, who inherited Chepstow Castle, extended its defences, built the town's Port Wall, and gave Chepstow its market charter.

He gave his name to Badhams Court at Sedbury, and married Elizabeth de Gurney, of the family who gave their name to Barrow Gurney and Farrington Gurney in Somerset.

Copies of Keith's book detailing John ap Adam's life and times are available, price £15, from Chepstow Books and Gifts – chepstowbooks.co.uk



Keith Underwood has called this area home since his childhood in the 1930s.

As well as painting the mural at the back of the Drill Hall, he designed many of the plaques around the town, and the heraldic device added to the west side of the Arch in the 1980s. He has also prepared many illustrated manuscripts.

He helped organise the Society's excursions for many years, assisted with the town's impressive pageants in the early 2000s, and led groups of his own, in costume, around Chepstow and Tintern.





The Chepstow Wassail and Mari Lwyd event will take place on <u>Saturday 24 January</u>



This will begin at 12 noon with a number of Morris dancing sides in the High Street and Cormeilles Square until 2.30pm, processing to the Castle Dell to Wassail the orchard at 3pm. Followed by the Mari Lwyd attempting to get into Chepstow Castle.

Wassailers from the Gloucestershire side of the river will meet up with the Welsh Mari Lwyds and Morris teams for singing of traditional English and Welsh songs at the Bandstand, before the Mari Lwyd outside the Museum at 5.45pm.

This year there will also be a Ceilidh at the Drill Hall at 7.30pm

NEW ART HISTORY AND APPRECIATION COURSES BEGINNING IN JANUARY

Book online: <u>https://chepstow-arts-culture-and-entertainment-society.square.site/</u>

WITH CHACE – Chepstow Arts, Culture & Entertainment and popular Monmouthshire lecturer Eleanor Bird.

Looking to learn something new, be inspired, or simply enjoy looking at wonderful images of art and discovering intriguing facts and stories? These courses will also put the artistic world in context with history and social history.



Whether you choose live in person lectures at the Drill Hall Chepstow or online via Zoom, you don't have to worry about missing any, as there will be catch up recordings available online via Zoom.

MEDIEVAL MYSTERIES

In person at the Drill Hall, Chepstow, Mondays 2-4pm from 19th January to 30th March (no lecture 16th February) OR Online via Zoom, Wednesdays from 21st January to 1st April 10.30am -12.30pm (no lecture 18th February). Catch-up recordings available for several weeks.

Shining a light on the Dark Ages, this series of art appreciation lectures explores the artistic world from the 5th to the 15th centuries. What happened after Rome fell and classical art and architecture disappeared for a thousand years? Discover the shimmering golden Byzantine mosaics, intricate patterns and pictures of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts and the powerful sculpture and architecture of the Norman Romanesque to the glories of Gothic with its soaring cathedrals, rich tapestries and glittering stained glass. This is a chance to dive into the lesser known delights of the medieval world, all set in their historical and social context.

INTRODUCTION TO ART HISTORY: THE EARLY RENAISSANCE

10 one hour weekly lectures on Monday evenings live online via Zoom exploring this innovative period defining artistic development in the Western world for the next 400 years. This course introduces the wonderful art and architecture of the Quattrocento in Italy, with its exciting new realism and brilliant colour and the contrasting art of Northern Europe in all its intricacy and emotional intensity.

Starting Jan 19 – March 30, 7-8pm (Break on 18 February) Catch-up recordings available for several weeks.

THE CHEPSTOW SOCIETY

MEETINGS 2026



The Chepstow Society is a local volunteer-run charity, formed in 1948 to explore and promote the remarkable history of the town and to keep an eye on changes affecting it.

We are a friendly and socially active group, and welcome new members.

We meet monthly in the Drill Hall, to hear a talk of local and/or historical interest, and also discuss changes in the town and surrounding area.

We have been active in placing pavement and wall plaques around the town, and have published many books and pamphlets on its history.

We also run walks and excursions, and organise other initiatives to raise awareness of the history and character of our area.

Do join us!

Wednesday evenings, 7 pm (for 7 30 start)
The Drill Hall, Lower Church St.,
Chepstow NP16 5HJ

TALKS:

21st January – The Anglo-Saxons in this area – *Alex Knight*
18th February – Tintern Abbey – *Will Davies*
18th March – The Newport Ship – *Toby Jones*
15th April – The Morgans of Tredegar House – *Roger James*
20th May – AGM – Henry VIII – *Prof. Ronald Hutton*
17th June – Science and Archaeology – *Dr Mark Lewis*
15th July – History of Chepstow's Roads – *Guy Hamilton*
16th September – The Gwent Wetlands – *Nicky Bailey*
21st October – 100 Years of Chepstow Racecourse – *tbc*
15th November – tbc– *Anne Rainsbury*

All dates and details are subject to final confirmation

All welcome

Members £1 - Non-members £4

Annual membership - £12

www.chepstowsociety.co.uk