THE CHEPSTOW SOCIETY

Members Bulletin **April 2026**

www.chepstowsociety.co.uk

Wednesday 15th April

The Morgans of Tredegar House



Talk by
Roger James

Wednesday 20th May

Annual General Meeting
followed by talk by
Prof. Ronald Hutton



Wednesday 17th June

Science and Archaeology

Talk by Dr Mark Lewis
of the National Roman Legion Museum, Caerleon

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

Chairman's Report

The good news is that Chepstow Society membership is still increasing, and we also have a good attendance at talks. We recognise that we need to do more for members who can't get in to Chepstow on winter evenings, and we have tried to set up some Zoom meetings but haven't succeeded yet. We do intend to run some talks on Zoom in addition to the main speaker programme, but we don't think we will be able put the monthly talks simultaneously on Zoom.

The President's lunch convened by Keith James was held on 31st January in the Beaufort Hotel's Florence Suite and was, as last year, very successful and attended by many members including many who find it difficult to attend evening events in the winter. This lunchtime opportunity was most welcome. The guest speaker, Andy Torbet, was highly entertaining, talking about his climbing, diving, and all kinds of outdoor activities that made James Bond look a bit of a wimp!

The Executive Committee met in January and March. We have been trying having meetings once every two months rather than once a month, given that many of the Exec members have many other volunteering commitments. There are some advantages but also disadvantages particularly if someone has to miss a meeting, although we do discuss urgent issues between meetings.

With the full support of his son John, we are pursuing a project to digitise the many books and pamphlets written between the 1940s and 1980s by the Society's founder, Ivor Waters. This will be a considerable asset to the town and help to those wanting to know more about the town's history.

We have also welcome two new members of our committee, Steve Spokes and Dave Johnson.

13 St Ann Street. There is a separate report on the controversial planning application to demolish the Georgian 13 St Ann Street, so here I will just deal with how we responded as a Society. The Executive took the view that MCC and Cadw were wrong to 'de-list' this important building back in 2024 without any publicity or consultation, and that the process, and the facts used, and the outcome were all wrong. We wrote to MCC's Chief Executive about this practice and the damage it has caused. The applicant, Monmouthshire Housing Association, has withdrawn the application, but we need to be extra vigilant that it does not return and that the frontage to the building is not allowed to fall into disrepair whilst decisions are being taken about future plans.

Old Wye Bridge. We have asked MCC to come to one of our meetings with their Consulting Engineers so that members can ask detailed questions of the engineers who are recommending that MCC keep the bridge closed until tests are finished – which could be as late as July or longer. We are also concerned that if the bridge isn't re-opened to light traffic it won't get the maintenance attention and investment needed to thrive as a fully functioning bridge and historic structure. At the moment MCC's position is that the bridge should be brought back into use for light traffic – which we would support – but we would like some dialogue with the County Council and local discussion of the ways forward to achieve this.

The bridge is of <u>world</u> importance. It is the world's largest surviving iron arch road bridge from the first 50 years (1780-1830) of using iron for construction – and now of course iron and steel dominate our cities and structures. It is a true piece of world heritage and hopefully one day will be recognised as such. It is vitally important that the Chepstow Society keeps the future of this historic bridge in the public eye and ensure that Monmouthshire County Council looks after it and talks to us about it.

AGM – Note that our **Annual General Meeting for 2026/7** will be on **Wednesday 20th May 2026 at 6.30 pm** before our 7pm monthly meeting and Professor Ron Hutton's talk on King Henry VIII.

John Burrows, Chairman

Chepstow's Old Wye Bridge - update



On 27th March 2026 Monmouthshire County Council (MCC) closed Chepstow Bridge to pedestrians. It had been closed to vehicles since last October. The problem is that there are some cracks in the supporting cast iron arches to the 1816 bridge.

The Chepstow Society has not had the opportunity to talk to and question MCC's consulting engineers, so we are not able to get a better picture than that which is on the MCC's website.



The bridge was designed and built by railway engineer John Urpeth Rastrick between 1814 and 1816. It uses an iron structure designed by leading road bridge engineer Thomas Telford and Thomas Stanton for a bridge in Shrewsbury and for bridge spans of about 100 ft. Telford's longer span bridges use a different construction.

Each of the 5 arches of the bridge is made up of 5 ribs supporting the road deck, so there are 25 cast iron arches supporting the bridge. Each of the 5 ribs is made up of two halves, so 50 half ribs were cast at Bridgnorth and delivered by river to the site. Each of the 50 half ribs incorporates a distinctive lattice work structure.

The bridge was well designed and has stood the test of time well, although like most cast iron arch road bridges it has been reinforced with steel in the late C19th and in the C20th. Ove Arup worked on the bridge in the 1980s and the arches have steel reinforcement. In 2015, the year before the bridge's bicentenary, the bridge was carefully inspected by Parsons Brickerhoff,. It has been in use for light traffic in the 10 years since then.

Chepstow bridge has been the joint responsibility of Monmouthshire and Gloucestershire since the 1580s. MCC now leads on the work on the bridge, although both counties share the cost.

The bridge is being monitored but of course there is no traffic going over it. The iron bridge itself is very heavy, as are its railings, so monitoring will show how the bridge is bearing its own weight and whether there are changes. This could take a long time.

It is not clear why the bridge cannot be used either for one way traffic or even just pedestrians using the centre of the bridge whilst monitoring is taking place, but no-one in MCC seems to be able to answer such questions, as they don't have their own bridge engineers and we have not been able to speak to the Consulting Engineers.

It is difficult to accelerate any action on this situation, but pressure does need to be kept on the County Council to do their best to move matters forward to reopen the bridge or they will slip back, and this will not be good for local communications or the future of the bridge.

John Burrows

More information about the closure is at **www.monmouthshire.gov.uk/old-wye-bridge-chepstow/** and on our website at **www.chepstowsociety.co.uk/planning/**

Protecting Chepstow's History

13 ST. ANN STREET



The contentious planning application by the Monmouthshire Housing Association (MHA) to demolish the Georgian building at 13 St Ann Street has been withdrawn for the time being, following opposition by many local residents, and by the Chepstow Society.

The proposal had been to replace the building by a new one, with an increased number of apartments for housing. It follows the de-listing of the property which was carried out, without consultation, in 2024.

John Burrows, chairman of the Society, wrote to express our strong opposition to the application, and to criticise Monmouthshire County Council (MCC), and Cadw, for their handling of the matter, including the removal of listed building status without consultation and apparently based on incorrect information. The letter is at https://www.chepstowsociety.co.uk/planning/

The building at 13 St Ann Street, near the riverside, is one of the most prominent in the area. It was built in the 18th century and for some decades was an inn, the Sailors Tavern and later the Old England Tavern. It was owned in the early 19th century by John Hatton, who had fought at the Battle of the Nile and was thanked personally by Nelson for his services.

Later that century it was Thomas Atkins' factory, making patented charcoal water filters used by both the military and domestic households.

In recent years the building has been divided into six apartments, and its physical fabric has been neglected. In 1975 it was listed, with its neighbouring buildings, as being of historic importance and worthy of protection as an integral part of the streetscape of the area.

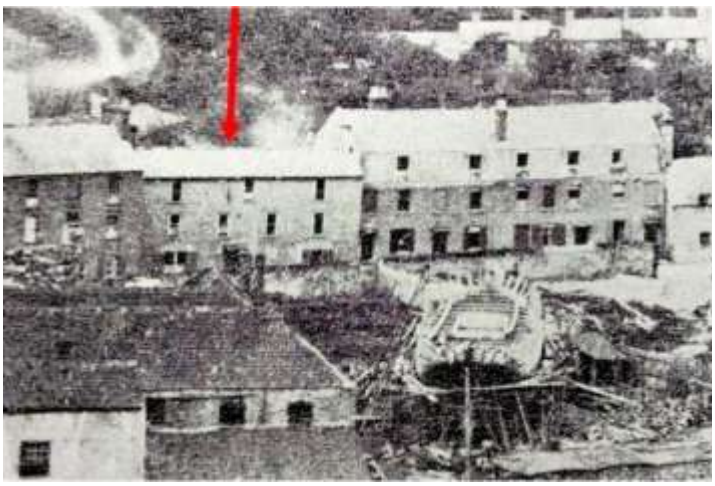
In December 2025, a notice for the demolition of the building, and its redevelopment to form 9 apartments, surprised local residents. Monmouthshire Housing Association, the building's owners, had successfully applied to de-list it in 2023 without public consultation, alleging that no original structure remained.

Over 60 objections to the planning application were submitted.

The Society's response argued that the de-listing in 2024 was unnecessary and undermines conservation laws, setting a dangerous precedent for neglecting historic buildings. The building retains its original façade and distinctive window placement, and its listing highlighted its importance in the overall streetscape within the conservation area. The de-listing was unusual, seems to have been based on inaccurate information about the building's history provided by its owners, and seems to have been undertaken without any public consultation. The Society emphasised the lack of public consultation and the failure to involve local stakeholders in the decision-making process.

The Society's letter urged MCC to reject the demolition proposal and work with MHA to develop a plan that preserves the historic façade while accommodating social housing needs. It called for the re-listing of the building and a thorough investigation into the de-listing process.

Contd.



The building in about 1873, behind Fryer's boatyard – now the Gardens and bandstand.

13 ST ANN ST – ***contd.***

The letter concludes by emphasizing the impact that demolition would have on Chepstow's heritage, and urging MCC to take action to preserve the building and its historic façade.

A Freedom of Information request by local residents resulted in two emails emerging. In the first, on 15 December 2023, Cadw wrote to MCC stating their understanding that MCC were now *"persuaded that the building does not meet the criteria for listing".* The same day, an MCC officer responded that *"..the interior has been stripped …there is no historic fabric left in it at all….All that remains are the exterior walls to the front (on ground and first floor only) top floor has breeze block and possibly one gable…"*

Cadw duly de-listed the building in 2024. MCC had not checked out for themselves the frontage of the building, and the basis for listing. MHA tried to hoodwink them, and succeeded. No-one was consulted. No independent source like the Chepstow Society, or the Museum, or Town Council, was asked about the accuracy of the applicants' arguments.

It was quickly shown that MHA's claims were false. Drawings and a photograph from 1873 show clearly that the frontage of the building is original.

MHA subsequently withdrew their application to demolish and replace the building.

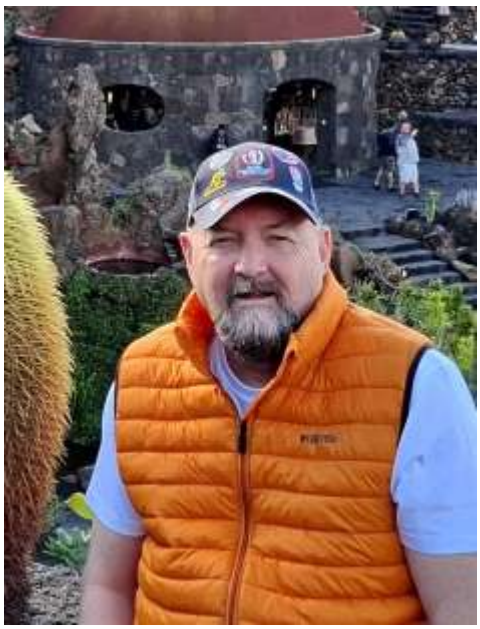
In subsequent correspondence, MCC have thanked the Society for our *"continued contributions to placemaking within the town and to the ongoing conversation about the management of Chepstow's historic built environment."*

This secretive back door 'delisting' process, with MCC and Cadw 'colluding' with the applicant without any public consultation, totally undermines the whole legal process for Listed Building Consent.

MHA, MCC, and Cadw were all wrong in participating in such a process without full public consultation, and were wrong in fact anyway. This is a good example of bad practice – wrong in process without consultation; wrong in fact; potentially disastrous in outcome. Were it not for public vigilance at the last moment, and the importance of there being public consultation for planning applications, we would never have known.

The frontage of the building should be relisted, or it will happen again.

John Burrows



Introducing… **Steve Spokes**
- the Society's new Excursions organiser

Hi Society Members!

I'm Steve Spokes and I'm delighted to be your new Trips and Tours organiser.

One of the best parts of being a member of the Chepstow Society is the memories we can all make outside the usual monthly meeting. Whether it's a quick day trip to a hidden gem or a long weekend away, my goal is to get us out and about exploring as much as possible. I'm already scouting out a few ideas both locally and regionally but I want these days out to be trips you're actually excited about and will enjoy.

If you have a "bucket list" idea, destination or activity you've been dying to try, please come and chat with me at the next meeting or drop me an email - stevespokes@hotmail.co.uk. I will update you in the newsletter as the trips and tours develop.

All the best, I can't wait to get on the road with you all.

Steve

Introducing…

Dave Johnson – the Society's new lead on civic and amenity issues



I was born and grew up in Pontypridd and I have been living in Chepstow for just over a year. I lived for over 40 years in Bristol and had a short spell living in Hornsey on the east coast of Yorkshire before moving back to Wales.

I studied town planning at Bristol Polytechnic and went on to work for the National Union of Students; as a local government economic development officer; a manager of a number of environmental projects for a sustainable development charity in Bristol; and as a policy officer for English Heritage; before taking up a lecturing post in town planning at UWE, Bristol. My main teaching focus at UWE was on planning and conservation.

I have always been interested in heritage, conservation and the built environment. I have been a member of the National Trust for 40 years. I was also an Avon County Councillor and a Bristol City Councillor for 12 years, mostly being involved in transport, planning, leisure, culture and environmental issues. I am particularly proud of playing a leading role in the restoration of Queen Square in Bristol, if you know that. I was also a Parish Councillor for six years in Long Ashton, where we used to live before moving to Yorkshire.

I am a member of the Royal Town Planning Institute, the Woodland Trust, CADW and a number of local groups here in Chepstow.

I'm hoping my experience and enthusiasm will be useful to the Society where I am pleased to be taking a lead on civic and amenity matters.

Chepstow Station needs some good friends!!

I have recently become involved in trying to set up a local group to "befriend" Chepstow's railway station. I know that people have been pressing for much improved access for people who currently cannot access one of the platforms, and supporting this campaign would be one of the group's main priorities.

There are also many other issues that need addressing at the station and its forecourt, and as the building is a listed structure with much history, the Chepstow Society can hopefully get behind the efforts of the group to improve the station and its setting.

An exploratory meeting / gathering was held at the station recently and was well attended, so there is considerable interest in getting



something positive done. An initial Facebook site has been set up - see Chepstow Station Group - or if you would like to become involved in some way in the group then please email: chepstow.station.group@gmail.com

Dave Johnson

MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS 2026/27

The time has come around again to renew your membership of the Chepstow Society.

Thanks to all those who have renewed already.

If you are intending to renew, please do so by April 30th.

If you are not planning to renew, it would be very helpful if you could email to let me know, so that I can remove your name from our lists.

The annual membership rate is £12 per person.

Any member who has joined since January 2026 has membership until April 2027.

If you have any difficulties or queries, please let me know.

Thank you very much.

Angela Middleditch, Membership Secretary
chepsocmemb@gmail.com

- **Standing Order** (please check the amount is correct)
- **BACS payment**
  Account Name:
  Chepstow Society
  Sort Code: 30-98-90
  Account Number: 18173668
  Reference:
  Your membership name
- **Card** payments are possible at monthly meetings
- **Cheque** by post sent to
  Angela Middleditch,
  Pen y Morfa,
  Mathern,
  Chepstow NP16 6J
- Payment can be made at a meeting with cash, card or cheque (please put the exact cash amount in an envelope with your name on it).

TOWN WALKS 2026



Each July and August, a few of us lead Chepstow Society walks around the old part of town, for small groups of local residents and visitors. This year's programme is now being finalised.

We would welcome one or two more walk leaders, who would be prepared to show off our historic town – usually taking a small group for a gentle and informative stroll around the town centre and riverside, and past the castle.

We would be happy to arrange a briefing session if necessary, and share notes with any members interested in helping with this.

Please contact Guy Hamilton – ghmyrtle@gmail.com – if you are interested in helping with this important work of promoting the town and informing people about its history.

And all Society members – walkers, or not - can help with publicising our walks programme, by distributing posters and flyers – expect an email to encourage you!

If you have not yet joined one of our walks, make sure that you see our Summer 2026 programme, when it comes out shortly, and book your places!

THE NEWPORT MEDIEVAL SHIP



There was another packed house in the Drill Hall on 18th March, to hear our guest speaker **Dr. Toby Jones** explain the story of Newport's medieval ship – one of the best preserved and most interesting ships in the world from that period.

The ship was discovered in 2002, during preparatory work for the building of Newport's Riverside Theatre. Buried under several metres of wet mud and clay, its importance was immediately recognised and steps were soon underway to protect it. Excavations had gone deeper than normal, in order that the theatre's orchestra pit could be built – a few metres either side and the ship may never have been found.



The ship turned out to have been about 35 metres long, and could have held perhaps 175 tonnes of wine – equivalent to up to 225,000 bottles. The evidence from examining the timbers was that it was built of oak from forests in the Basque region of northern Spain, and it was probably built on the shores of the Bay of Biscay in the late 1450s. However, it was clear that it had been used in the wine trade between Portugal and Britain which flourished in the period immediately after the Hundred Years' War between England and France.

It had probably sailed to Bristol on its annual trading voyage, and then transferred to Newport for maintenance. During the repairs, the wooden cradle which supported it must have collapsed. Anything valuable or reusable, such as its masts and guns, were then removed, leaving the oak substructure, which was eventually filled in and silted up, and forgotten for over 530 years.

Dr Jones explained the painstaking and labour–intensive way in which work was done to take apart, remove and clean the waterlogged, but beautifully preserved, timbers, and then to treat and protect them under carefully controlled and monitored conditions. Reconstructions showed how the ship would have looked, and the cramped and unhygienic conditions under which its crew must have lived.

Before taking questions, Dr Jones passed around pieces of the ship's timbers and expressed confidence that, one day, the ship would be put on permanent display in Newport. In the meantime the work, and an exhibition about the ship, can be visited – see **www.newportship.org** for more details.

A fascinating talk, much appreciated by Society members and visitors alike.

Guy Hamilton

CONSERVING TINTERN ABBEY

Will Davies, Cadw Inspector of Ancient Monuments - Wednesday 18th February 2026

Will is one of four Inspectors employed by Cadw, responsible for the guardianship of 130 monuments in Wales. His exciting, challenging, and varied role includes responsibility for a five-year project to conserve and restore Tintern Abbey.

The Abbey dates back to the 12th Century with construction continuing for four hundred years. The sandstone stonework is crumbling and badly eroded, and work is urgently needed to stabilise and conserve the structure. The single biggest cause of damage was the loss of the roof, which allowed water to filter down through the walls and into the foundations.

Will's talk focused on this project, which solely concerns the main structure of the Abbey.

Early attempts to 'tidy up' the Abbey ruins were initiated by the Duke of Beaufort in the eighteenth century. This was at the height of the Romantic movement and may have been inspired by a desire to create a picturesque setting rather than to preserve the archaeology. In the twentieth century the Abbey transferred to state ownership, originally under HM Office of Woods and Forests, passing through various successor bodies before Cadw took over guardianship.



Preliminary excavation work

The current project includes investigation of earlier intrusive and often brutal interventions. These have affected how teams prepare for and conduct current conservation work as the earlier work is not well documented. Recent research has revealed that what was thought to be original masonry were the result of twentieth century interventions. Although this work falls far short of modern conservation standards it has ensured that the structure remained standing.

Conservation is being conducted in line with Cadw's Conservations Principles for the sustainable management of historic environment in Wales. These require a research-led approach to conservation, ensuring that knowledge gained during the distinct phases of the project informs the work going forward. The Conservation Principles are available to read on the Cadw website: Conservation Principles Doc ENG



Severely eroded stonework

Before any work could be undertaken a thorough and detailed archaeological inspection and evaluation of the Abbey was carried out. The long and complex history of the Abbey made it highly likely that work would uncover burials and artefacts, all of which would have to be treated with the greatest care and respect: burials must be preserved without spoiling the archaeology. As work progressed teams uncovered many more burials of women and children than were expected: reasons for this are still being discussed.

From the earliest stages experts and specialists were appointed to manage specific aspects of the project. The work of the specialist partners is explained on the Cadw website. Click on Five-year conservation project gets underway at Tintern Abbey | Cadw and follow the links on project partners to get more information.

Work done to date includes grassing the wall heads to aid preservation, micro-pinning in places using basalt pins, and the replacement of missing and badly degraded stones. Some of the better-preserved fragments of masonry have been used to painstakingly reconstruct detailed and delicate stonework. At every stage more is being learnt about the construction of the Abbey, all of which is being meticulously documented. The next step, and one of the biggest challenges of the project, is the conservation of the magnificent Great East Window, the largest in the Abbey.

A key outcome from the project is the widespread and accessible dissemination of findings, which will contribute to a much better understanding of life and work within the Abbey throughout its history, as well as help us to understand the building itself. Cadw hopes to publish an interim report in *Monmouthshire Antiquarian* in 2027 with a much more comprehensive monograph scheduled for publication following completion of the project.

Lots for our enthusiastic and knowledgeable speaker to share during a future visit!

Marion Huckle

Local historian Alex Knight sheds light on the Dark Ages

January's meeting saw a stimulating talk by local historian Alex Knight on the migrations of the Anglo-Saxons towards the Chepstow and Forest of Dean area in the centuries following the departure of the Romans from Britain.

Roman rule of Britain ended in the early 400s and as the speaker made clear, there are few written sources from this period (the so called 'Dark Ages' up to the Norman conquest) so the archaeological evidence that exists is especially important. The main written sources were Gildas (a heavily biased account called *The Ruin of Britain* written in the 540s), Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the British People (written in 731) and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (written in the late ninth century).

So while much of Alex's talk was based on his extensive research, he made clear there was also a degree of informed speculation, leading to the audience having to think for themselves at times, which wasn't a bad thing!

The talk started with the departure of the Romans from Britain around 409/10. Local leaders, such as Vortigern, might have hired Anglo-Saxons from the continent to help defend the native British from incursions by the Picts and the Irish. It is not clear whether those early warriors arrived in the south east of England area by peaceful or violent means. There is some limited archaeological evidence but no sign of any violent destruction of existing settlements.

Having settled in the east of England by the 440s the Anglo-Saxons moved along river valleys such as the Thames throughout the sixth century. and by 577 had reached the Forest of Dean area. There was a mention of a battle, possibly at Dyrham, in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle around this time.

It appeared that the Anglo-Saxons did not cross the Wye; a King Meurig of Gwent might have fought a battle at Tintern, but again the evidence was limited and it could have been a legend. Alex did point out that there was often a grain of truth in these old legends and it was the historian's job to try to separate fact from fiction, however difficult that might be!

By the year 700 the kingdom of Mercia had begun to emerge, and in the 780s Offa's Dyke was constructed as a border with the lands of the Welsh to the west. This impressive earthwork was around 140 miles in length and meant that by this period the Forest of Dean was fully incorporated into Mercia.

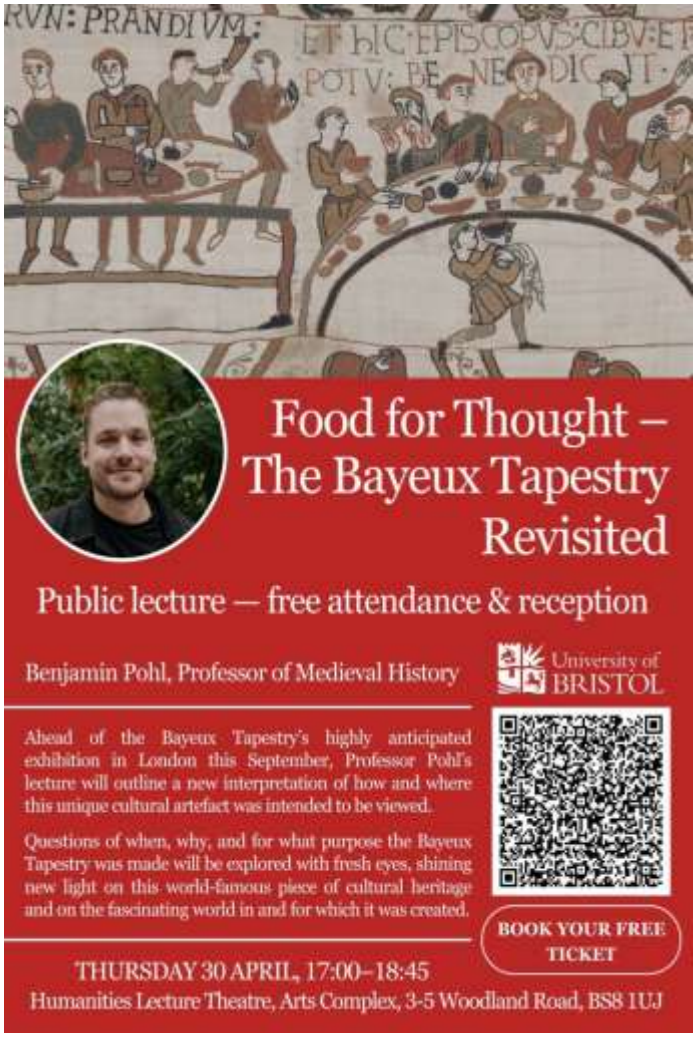
In 926 King Athelstan established the River Wye as the border, thus cementing the Anglo-Saxon's settlement of the area to the east of the river. It appeared that Chepstow was still "British" at this time, being under the control of King Morgan of what became known as Glamorgan.

But did the Anglo-Saxons achieve a complete takeover of the Forest of Dean, displacing the native inhabitants, or was it more of a gradual assimilation, as modern DNA studies might be suggesting? By this time the inhabitants might better be described as Anglo-British rather than Anglo-Saxon.

Alex concluded by saying that whoever they were, the culture of the Anglo-Saxons had a big impact on the area, as shown in many of the place names that still exist today.

There followed a number of questions and a lively discussion, with Alex concluding that in the absence of a time machine our knowledge of the period is limited - there were still lots of if's and possibilities, unanswered questions and informed speculation, all of which summed up an informative and lively talk, shedding much light on what used to be known as the Dark Ages!

Dave Johnson





THE CHEPSTOW SOCIETY

NOTICE OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2026

Pursuant to Clause 7(a) of the Chepstow Society's Constitution, notice is hereby given that **the Annual General Meeting of the Society will be held in the Drill Hall, Chepstow, on Wednesday 20th May at 7:00 pm.**

Members are advised that at this meeting the business will include the election of Officers of the Society, the appointment of appropriate auditors, and the consideration of annual reports of the work done by or under the auspices of the Society, and of the audited accounts.

A President and Vice President for the year 2026/27 will also be elected at this meeting. For those positions, nominations must be received by the Secretary - secretary@chepstowsociety.co.uk – no later than Wednesday 29th April.

Nominations for officers of the Society - that is, Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary and Treasurer - as well as for other committee members, and for auditors - are welcomed in advance, but may be made at the meeting.

A full agenda for the AGM will be circulated to members nearer the time.