



**JUNE
2020**

Usk Civic Society

NEW COMMITTEE MEMBER

We are delighted to welcome Simon Wigglesworth to the committee. Simon is familiarising himself with UCS business online and we hope to be able to meet with him at 'proper' committee meetings in the Sessions House in the near future.

A resident was recently intrigued by the number of old cut stones to be found in the field adjacent to Olway Cottage. He contacted Barry to ask about the history of this part of Usk.

**See pages 2 & 3
for the full story**



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Monmouth County Council

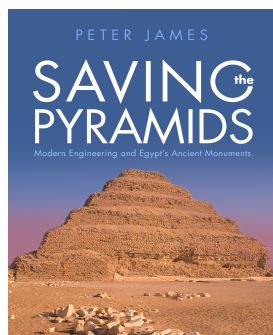
Replacement Local Development Plan :

An initial response from our Planning Sub Committee

CINTEC WORLDWIDE

You will remember the fascinating lecture given by Peter James in February of last year. Peter's structural

engineering firm Cintec has used its patented anchoring system to restore and strengthen buildings around the world including some of the oldest pyramids in Egypt.



The Civic Society recently sought Peter's advice on a structural issue concerning the stone plinth that is to hold the Alfred Russel Wallace bronze in Twyn Square. We were astounded by his subsequent offer of the free services of a top engineer to examine the problem.



Not only is the problem solved but Peter has offered Cintec's services to complete much of the installation free of charge. His incredible generosity has brought the completion of this long standing project much closer and we are enormously grateful.

New Website

Our new website is up and running thanks to the efforts of Jon Prince, assisted by Stella who provided the artwork for the header.



Click on the following link to view:

www.uskcivicsociety.org.uk

The Magdalene Chapel and the Holy Well of Usk by Barry Morse

Most histories of Usk refer to the existence of a holy well associated with a chapel dedicated to St Mary Magdalene, to which pilgrimages were still being made as late as the mid-16th century. However, many sources are vague, or even mutually contradictory, about where the well and the chapel actually were. I believe that we are now closer to an answer – at least, as to the well's location.

Usk Civic Society was recently sent an email by Tim Longworth, son of the late George Longworth, who had come back to Usk from his home in Sicily to visit his mother in Olway Cottage. (He has been here ever since because of Covid-19 travel restrictions.) Tim had discovered the remains of a well in the field behind Olway Cottage. He asked the Society for more information.

According to Geoff Mein, in *Norman Usk - the Birth of a Town*, the marshy fields between the mill race of the upper corn mill and the Olway Brook were known as the 'Chappel Lands', "while to the east lies the Chapel Well" (this sentence is annoyingly vague about the precise location of the Well!). Mein believed that there was a wooden bridge or bridges, just beyond the present Meadow Cottages, over the three ponds which still survive, closer to Usk than the present stone bridge over the brook, which would have been part of the road to Striguil (modern Chepstow).

There is a meticulous chapter in *Usk Castle, Priory and Town* (Logaston Press, 2008) by Madeleine Gray and Siân Rees, entitled "The Mediaeval Priory and its Community." This draws attention to the juxtaposition in Usk Priory of a cult of St Radegund ("The cult of a royal saint who became an enclosed nun was appropriate for an enclosed community of Benedictine nuns") and, perhaps more surprisingly, a chapel with a cult image of St Mary Magdalene, widely regarded in religious tradition as a reformed prostitute and conflated with Mary the sister of Lazarus, who was raised from the dead by Jesus in St John's gospel.

(Lazarus himself was also conflated in mediaeval religious literature with the leper in Jesus' story of Dives and Lazarus, hence Mary Magdalene's connection with lepers and *leprosaria* (leper-, or Lazar-houses). Gray & Rees observe, "The chapel and statue of Mary Magdalene were a focal point of pilgrimage for the region around Usk in the later middle ages. An anonymous early 16th century poem, *Mair fadlen mawr yw dwrthie*, was written to the saint at her shrine there." The poem gives no indication of where the shrine was located, but "it must have been at some distance from the priory enclosure, possibly on the marshes. In 1543 the priest Henry Morgan left money to repair the causeway "between the town of Usk and Mary Magdalene's Chapel." Gray and Rees draw two inferences from this - (a) that the chapel was outside the town bounds and (b) that it had survived the Dissolution [of the Monasteries] (In fact, this second inference is unsurprising, since chantry chapels were not included in the Dissolution). They continue, "The chapel may have had some connection with the Leprosarium in 'Elwithstrete'. It is possible that the chapel survived when the hospice went out of use as leprosy became less common."



Barry and Tim examine the well

Gray & Rees mention the suggestion by Paul Courtney (*Report on the Excavations at Usk, 1965-1976*) that 'Elwithstrete' was the modern Four Ash Street, but Four Ash Street lies entirely within the bounds of the Norman town, whereas it would be much more usual to have a leper hospice outside it (as was the case with Usk's other leper hospital near Usk Bridge). The late Ruth Stride, an architect (and one of the earliest female members of that profession), used to live at 1 Black Barn Lane, a cottage which despite a later makeover is clearly of great age - and whose finished floor level is well below that of Black Barn Lane itself, suggesting considerable age. Mrs Stride believed that the cottage had been the original leper hospice, and various internal architectural features, along with its location just outside the town boundary of the Norman ditch and on Black Barn Lane, the old exit from Usk to Monmouth, Raglan and the now lost village of Elwith (somewhere towards Gwehelog along the line of Factory Lane), seem to provide strong evidence in favour of her idea. Black Barn Lane, of course, used to be known as Elwith Street. Geoff Mein was also responsible for the first edition of Usk Civic Society's *Usk Town Trail*, which has been revised in a second edition but preserves much of his original content. On page 4, he says, " [The road] to the left, now Black Barn Lane, originally went to Raglan and Monmouth... Across from the Greyhound Inn was the probable site of the Chapel of St Mary Magdalene with its reputedly curative and holy well still in the field to the rear." Once again, Mein is frustratingly vague as to location: taken at face value this sentence would suggest that the chapel is much closer to Usk. However, a flat field, subject to regular flooding, is an unlikely site for a chapel, let alone a well: it seems much more logical to assume a site on a higher level, where a well might occur naturally on the springline. Later conversations with Geoff Mein made it clear that he believed the chapel and well to have been on the rising ground behind Olway Cottage, but he seems never to have committed this to paper. Further evidence for the chapel being near the well may be inferred from the old local name for the Olway Bridge, Pont-y-Cleifion ("Bridge of the sick").

Around 1985, the Usk Almshouses Charity (of which I have been Clerk since 1997 and whose minute book goes back to its re-foundation in 1891) undertook the sale of "Land at Llangeview". This land is referred to in the minutes as "Nuns' Well Field" and lies behind Olway Cottage and the Olway Inn. The land, recorded as 3.69 acres, was sold for £8,000 to a Mr Bunning, who had previously rented the land for grass-keep.

Recent editions of the 1:25,000 Ordnance Survey Map for the area show a "Chapel Well" in the field behind Olway Cottage, with a track approaching it. This is consistent with the records of the Almshouses Charity.

We may conclude that the chapel and well were both to the east of Usk, outside the boundary of the Norman town. A well on rising ground and on (or near) the springline seems much more probable than in a flat, marshy field subject to periodic flooding. One mystery still remains, however: precisely where was the Chapel? Would it have been close to the leper-hospice in Elwith Street, somewhere in the marshy fields between the current Chepstow Road and the Olway Brook, or nearer the hillside and closer to the Nuns' Well?

Berkley Castle Trip

Following the corona virus outbreak this trip was postponed to 22nd September, but it has now been cancelled owing to the difficulty of ensuring adequate social distancing. Would members who paid for this trip and require a refund please contact Barry.

Monmouth County Council Replacement Local Development Plan – The Preferred Strategy

<https://www.monmouthshire.gov.uk/app/uploads/2020/03/RLDP-Preferred-Strategy-March-2020-1.pdf>

Monmouthshire County Council (MCC) is producing a Replacement Local Development Plan which will identify where and how much new development will take place in Monmouthshire till 2033. It will allocate land for development, identify areas to be protected and contain policies to guide decisions on applications for planning permission. A “Preferred Strategy” has now been produced and is open for comments. These comments will then feed in to developing the final Local Development Plan.

New Housing and Employment Numbers. The plan proposes approx. 8200 new houses by 2033. There are existing planning commitments for approx 4700 houses; the remaining 3500 are approx. 1700 new plus 1800 affordable houses (50% tenanted and 50% private). These figures come from an analysis by consultants Edge Analytics based on their forecast of a Monmouthshire population increase till 2033 of 10.1% (9500 people). The figures also reflect MCC's aim to change the County population structure.

This aim is to create economic and population growth by building housing for young adults coming new to the County. The analysis of the current state of the County says that the population is ageing and new younger residents are needed. According to the analysis, these new inhabitants will need 4,700 additional jobs, for which a minimum of 42ha of employment land will be allocated. This employment land will aim to be accessible to housing, thus reducing the need for commuting.

There are a number of questions about this preferred strategy. In 2018 Welsh Government predicted a need of up to 1500 houses in Monmouthshire by 2033. This plan is for approx 8200; are all these new houses needed? There is no clear argument in the Preferred Strategy on whether this increase in housing stock will achieve the goal of population restructuring. MCC has no control over house prices, rent levels or who ends up living in the houses. It is therefore questionable whether the intended sort of people will move in. Will new jobs appear? MCC has little control over employers' decisions. The inhabitants of the new houses may join the commute to the Cardiff or Bristol regions. Public transport is weak in Monmouthshire. How will this be improved or will car numbers go up? Is there any need to exceed the 4700 houses already allocated until there is evidence of a prospective increase in local employment?

Housing in Usk. The Preferred Strategy allocates housing growth to regions within the County. Housing is to be distributed proportionately to urban and rural areas. Usk is grouped with Raglan and Penperlleni and assuming the Preferred Strategy plans are accepted, allocated 7%, which is 450 houses. Some of these houses will already have planning provision.

The MCC Preferred Strategy quotes Welsh Government Planning Policy Wales 2010 (PPW 10) which “requires development plans to include a spatial strategy covering the lifetime of the plan which establishes a pattern of development improving social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being” (PPW 10, 2018, para 3.38). It says “it is important to minimise the need to travel, reduce private car reliance and increase opportunities for cycling, walking and the use of public transport.”

The Preferred Strategy notes that while incomes of Monmouthshire residents are above the Welsh average, those of people who work locally tend to be below it. This is likely to be true of Usk, where prices and rents are above average; therefore it is unlikely that people with local jobs could afford to live here. Out-commuters on higher salaries are more likely occupiers. If the new MCC LDP is going to fit with Welsh government planning policy requirements then it is hard to see a justification for substantial new housing development in Usk and Raglan. The strategy suggests no nearby employment sites or improvement to our poor public transport.