Oswestry & Border History & Archaeology Group

Newsletter

Issue 21 Winter 2021

OBHAG members visiting the Tree House at Pitchford Hall

Many thanks to everyone who has contributed to this Newsletter.

OBHAG activities will continue in virtual form until restrictions ease.
Members will be updated well in advance of events.

Pitchford Hall Visit: Ruth Alcock, pictures David Stirling.

Central and East wing

Carved oak head

On a sunny September afternoon between lockdowns we paid our postponed visit to the Grade 1 listed 16th century Pitchford Hall near Shrewsbury. Pitchford takes its name from a local bitumen well, the contents of which would have been used to waterproof the timbers.

The house stands on the site of a former medieval manor house (though the site itself is much older). Considerable alteration and restoration was done in the late 1800s but in 1992 its then owner Caroline Coulthurst was forced to sell the house and contents due to financial difficulties. Neither the National Trust nor English Heritage would take it on and the Arabian princess who bought it used only the stables for her horses. The house was closed up and neglected.

The estate was retained and in 2016 the house was recovered by Rowena Coulthurst and James Nason who began a massive restoration project. Some parts have already been converted to holiday accommodation to provide much needed funds.

South end of central wing

A guided walk took us to the walled garden, the beautifully restored orangery and the famous tree house visited by Princess (later Queen) Victoria. This retains traces of beautiful internal decor and the view over the estate is worth the climb! Returning to the house we were guided through and saw some items which have generously been returned by people who bought them at the auction. The visit ended with a delicious cream tea which we enjoyed in the garden.

During World War II Pitchford hall was designated a “safe house” should the Royal Family need to be evacuated.

St Augustine's Church, Hippo: Tom Lerwill

In 2019 I was lucky enough to have 2 weeks in Algeria visiting the amazing Roman sites there.

This unprepossessing bit of wall is the apse from the church in Hippo Regius and, from somewhere around the site of that seat, preached the Bishop, sitting while the congregation stood.

In the early 5th century that Bishop was St Augustine - a man whose influence on Western Christianity cannot be exaggerated. His ideas of Grace, Original Sin, the Trinity and monasticism would come to dominate the Middle Ages and the Reformation. His 'Confessions' would set the template for the 'Spiritual Journey' up to today.

I was deeply moved to be able sit in the exact place where he preached the over 200 sermons that are still extant. Also nearby this spot was where, in 430, he lay dying while the Vandals besieged the town, heralding the end of the classical world.

Some thoughts upon the inn known as the Bowling Green, the Cross Foxes, or the Wynnstay Arms: John Pryce Jones

A recent email enquiry sought details of the principal coaching inns, or post houses, in Oswestry at the close of the eighteenth century. At that time, long distance coaches used either the Cross Keys in Leg Street (modern day Cross Street) or the Wynnstay Arms, which was also called the Bowling Green and sometimes the Cross Foxes, in Church Street.

The Wynnstay Hotel has given its restaurant the name '1727', with the hotel website explaining that "the Wynnstay Hotel and Spa has been an important part of the town of Oswestry since 1727 … the perfect resting place for those travelling between Liverpool and Cardiff or London and Holyhead". Reading Isaac Watkin's Oswestry revealed that in 1727 the Bowling Green, part of the Wynnstay estate, was held by John Simonds; also the parish registers of the time list "John Simonds of the Bowling Green" as one of the church wardens for the year 1727 and record his death in 1730.

John Simonds' will survives, at the National Library, with his assets bequeathed to his infant daughter Sarah (his wife Elizabeth having died three months before him). It includes a very detailed inventory of his possessions, listed room by room. This shows that the premises included a kitchen, a back kitchen, parlour, a room over the cellar, a "roome called the Dineing Roome", another room, a room over the small kitchen, "the new roome", the garret, the summer house and the void under it, the brewhouse, pigsties, a buttery, cellar, and "the mansion house".

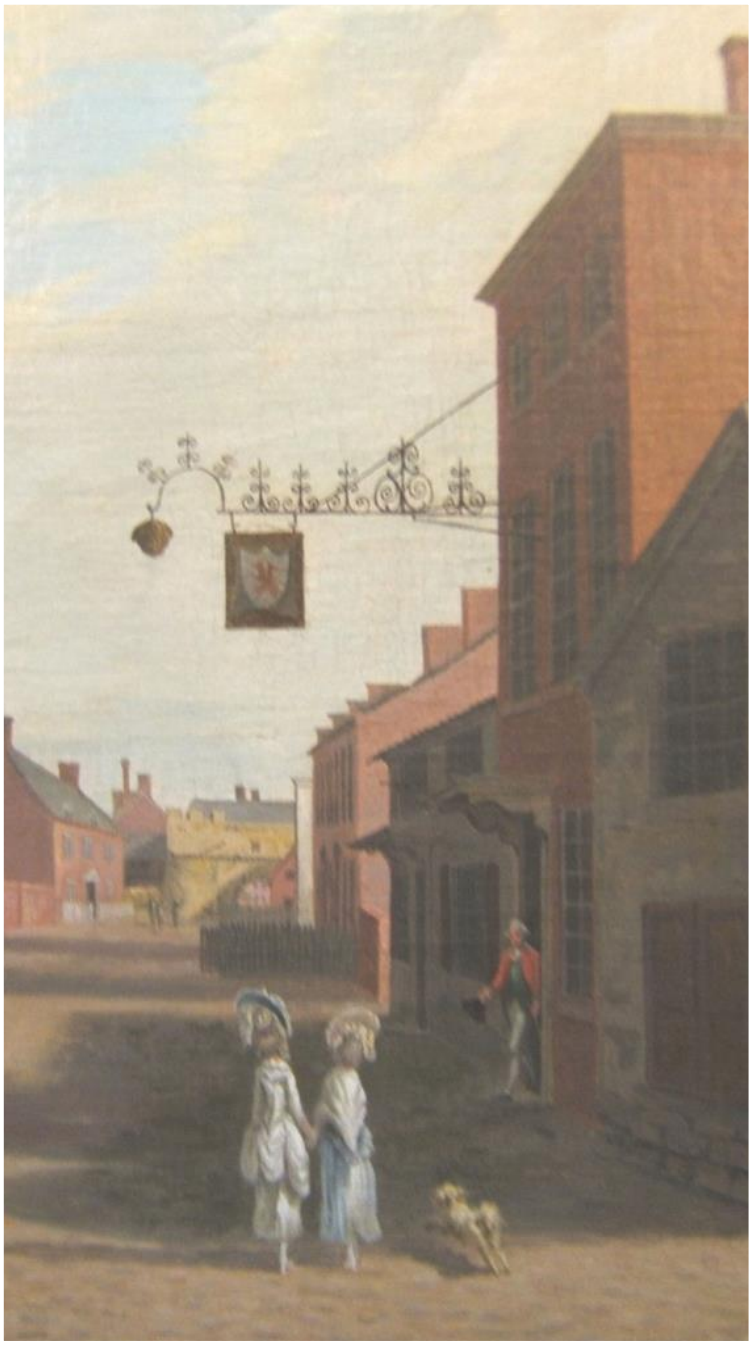
There was also a warehouse, land at Croft Willmott, and possessions held outdoors including "a gang of horses and the hackney belonging to them with [accoutrements] belonging to them" valued at £80, a kiln of bricks "on the mountain", a seat in the parish church, and a flitch of bacon. The cellar's contents are listed in great detail – beer, cider, brandy and wine. The list of in all 210 items includes one of "fifty-nine yards of printed paper to hang a room", valued at one pound three shillings; and, given the then name the Bowling Green, it is good to see an entry for eight pairs of bowls, and another entry for five pairs "and one odd one also" Everything had a value – except for the aforesaid bowls which were noted as 'owned' or 'claimed', presumably belonging to individuals who were regular users of the green, who kept their bowls on site ready for the next game.

The reference in his will to the 'new room' suggests that some changes at least had been made only recently, but might the innovator, the tenant who first saw the opportunity to develop the Bowling Green as one of Oswestry's premier inns, have been someone other than John Simonds? For the time being, at least, this question must remain unanswered, but it is worth noting that Oswestry's parish registers record the marriage, on May 16th 1721, of John Simonds "carrier", and Elizabeth Wright, widow, and they also record, a year earlier, on May 1st 1720, the burial of Elizabeth's husband George Wright. Town Council records for November 1712 list the admission as a burgess, in November 1712, of "George Wright, innkeeper", suggesting that John Simonds may well have taken on the lease of the Bowling Green as a result of his marriage to Elizabeth Wright.

Isaac Watkin wrote that Simonds was succeeded at the Bowling Green by Richard Salisbury, and after Salisbury's death, "his widow continued the tenancy up to the date

of her death in 1785". We have seen that Simonds died in 1730, and records suggest that Salisbury took on the premises in the late 1740s, so there is a gap when someone unknown to us was at the helm. Mrs Salisbury was followed by her son Richard (Oswestry's mayor in 1786) who ran the business for only a short time before handing it on to a sister, after which the premises were held by others including Thomas Moody and a Mr Slade.

Isaac Watkin believed that prior to the 1790s, the Wynnstay was "only an ordinary public house", noting that "about 1800 the coaching traffic between London and Holyhead increased very much, and Oswestry being upon the highroad between these places, considerable additions and improvements were then carried out to the premises". However, John Simonds' inventory suggests otherwise, and a notice in the Shrewsbury Chronicle for May 18th 1776, placed by Mrs Mary Salisbury, indicates that the inn had lately been rebuilt "upon a very commodious Plan, having had the addition of a large elegant Assembly-Room, several Lodging-Rooms and Parlours, with exceeding good Stabling for a great number of Horses". Other press reports of the time tell us that the premises were the venue for hunt dinners, balls linked to Oswestry Races, auctions and official meetings. The establishment, indicated clearly by the sign of the Cross Foxes, the arms of the Williams Wynns, is depicted on a painting of Church Street, of 1779, which belongs to Oswestry Town Council. The image, reproduced here, shows that, at that time, the premises had, as now, two upper floors. Not yet expanded to its present dimensions, the inn displayed three large windows on its first floor, facing the street.



Further improvements were made for the Irish mail. Watkin referred to a notice placed in a Shrewsbury newspaper in 1801, advertising "A capital Inn to be let upon the great road from London to Holyhead. The Cross Foxes, Oswestry, in the county of Salop". The notice boasted that there was "a large Assembly-Room, Tea-Room, three large and two small parlours, a very commodious kitchen and bar, excellent Lodging-Rooms, a Bowling-Green, good stabling, and very spacious cellaring, well calculated for carrying on the liquor business". The following year, in April 1802, newspapers included a notice headed "The Bowling Green (or Sir Watkin Williams Wynn's Arms), Oswestry". Readers were advised that "William Leigh (from Hockley House) begs leave to acquaint the nobility, gentry, and others travelling from Ireland to London, Bath, Bristol &c., that he has taken and entered upon the above Inn, on the great road from Holyhead to London, through Shrewsbury (which avoids Conway Ferry)". *cont...*

Mr Leigh had “fitted up the same in a superior stile of neatness, with new Beds, and every other requisite for the accommodation of families and the public in general, whose patronage and support he humbly solicits, and will endeavour to merit by every attention to his power”. A house warming had been arranged for April 26th, with the ceremony presided over by Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, baronet, and his son Charles Watkin Williams Wynn, esquire. A grand affair indeed.

Seeing Where They Went: David Stirling

The Cambrian Railways were based at Oswestry and, like any other railway, they offered a train service, for both passengers and goods, that was what they considered met the needs of the local population. A railway is provided to transport passengers or freight from one place to another, but how much do we know about who or what was actually transported? The timetable gives some clues in that we may presume that routes or stations with more trains had more traffic than those with fewer trains, but the timetable is really only a statement of the transport opportunities that the railway offered. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the railways were the main form of transport and they laid on extra facilities for special events, and these do tell us much about who was going where. There were trains for football matches, eisteddfods, political and religious events, even a few for the movements of the better off households whose “establishments” moved family, servants and chattels between their summer and winter quarters. In May of the year for which we have the data the Newtown branch of the Good Templars travelled for a picnic to the tiny station of Pontdolgoch west of Caersws, where the railway crossed the main Welshpool – Machynlleth road, seen here with a glimpse of the nearby village.

Some notes on Llanfechain: David Stephenson

The charming village of Llanfechain is one of the most important sites of twelfth-century Powys. In the 1160s Mechain – the surrounding cantref, was the base for the realm of Owain Fychan, one of the sons of the greatest of medieval Powysian rulers, Madog ap Maredudd. At the height of is power, Owain Fychan would rule over Cynllaith, Mochnant is Rhaeadr and other parts of Powys, as well as Mechain. His power was shaken after he clashed with another member of Madog's family, his nephew Owain Cyfeiliog, in 1167 and twenty years later Owain Fychan was killed by Owain Cyfeiliog's sons, Gwenwynwyn and Caswallon.

But it seems that it was at Llanfechain that Owain Fychan began to construct what was intended to be the central point of a polity that he perhaps intended to encompass all of southern Powys – the land which was to become the main part of Montgomeryshire. What we have today to recall the ambitions of Owain Fychan is a complex of a court, castle and church, which is of a type that we see elsewhere in Wales, and particularly in Powys. This complex signals the central part of a lordship. The court, (llys) is recalled in the llys-names (Llys, Llys Uchaf) which survive west north-west of the village. The castle is represented by Domen Gastell, the significant earthwork motte and bailey structure overlooking the village to the west, and the church is of course St Garmon's with its striking Romanesque elements near to the heart of Llanfechain.

The Coflein assessment of the church is that 'the majority of the building dates from the mid-twelfth century'. I should date it to the 1160s. It is perhaps the most beautiful example of Romanesque in mid-Wales, with the possible exception of elements in the structure of Meifod church. With the combination of the court, for political events and for festivities, the castle, for defence and for political 'impact' and the church, for spiritual sustenance and to display the largesse of the ruler who patronised it, we have at Llanfechain a precious example of a twelfth-century Welsh political centre – in this case the hub of the realm of Owain Fychan ap Madog.

Although it's too early to say if the OBHAG trip to Llanfechain can be rearranged when lock down restrictions allow members may wish to visit independently.

The motte of Domen Gastell can be seen from the Llanfyllin road, just outside the village on the right hand side, the 16th century Plas yn Dinas Inn is now an excellent restaurant, and the pretty River Cain runs nearby. It is advisable to check on church opening arrangements.

The Dig: A film to look out for

Shelagh Hampton

Sutton Hoo ship burial site
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The large mound in the distance is the reconstructed Mound No.2 that contained a plundered ship grave. The more famous burial was closer, in the relatively inconspicuous Mound No. 1.
Tranmer House, Edith Pretty's home , in the background.

The excavation of Sutton Hoo's Mound 1 on the eve of World War II is one of the most familiar archaeological success stories. A good synopsis can be found in the National Trust handbook.

I knew several of the original team – Stuart Piggott, Peggy Piggott (later Margaret Guido) and W F "Peter" Grimes so I was intrigued to hear of a 2007 novel, based on the discoveries, written by John Preston who is Margaret Guido's nephew although he apparently knew nothing of her involvement in the excavation until 2004 – ten years after her death. I found the novel somewhat disappointing both from an archaeological point of view and in terms of the portraits painted of people I knew.

However I was delighted to see that the gloom of lockdown will shortly be lifted slightly by a film version of the novel. It will be released by Netflix in February 2021 and – fear not – I am assured by my tech-savvy children that it will "certainly" be issued on DVD soon after so that we stick-in-the-muds who don't subscribe to any streaming services will be able to watch it.

I do have reservations about it. The cast, including Carey Mulligan, Lily James and Ralph Fiennes, seems impossibly glamorous to portray the people I remember and those I have read about. It hints at completely invented romantic attachments and definitely slants some facts. However, it's got to be worth watching. Perhaps a future *Newsletter* could include a section covering members' reactions to it? It's not often that real-life archaeology gets the big screen treatment!

OBHAG Membership

As the 2020 programme was curtailed due to the pandemic current members subscriptions will be carried over for 2021 and become renewable in January 2022.

If you are would like to join OBHAG or if you have membership queries please contact the Membership Secretary by post or by email

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'Illustration p5. The Cross Foxes, in Church Street; in the distance is shown the New Gate. From a painting of 1779 by W. Williams. Reproduced here with permission of Oswestry Town Council'