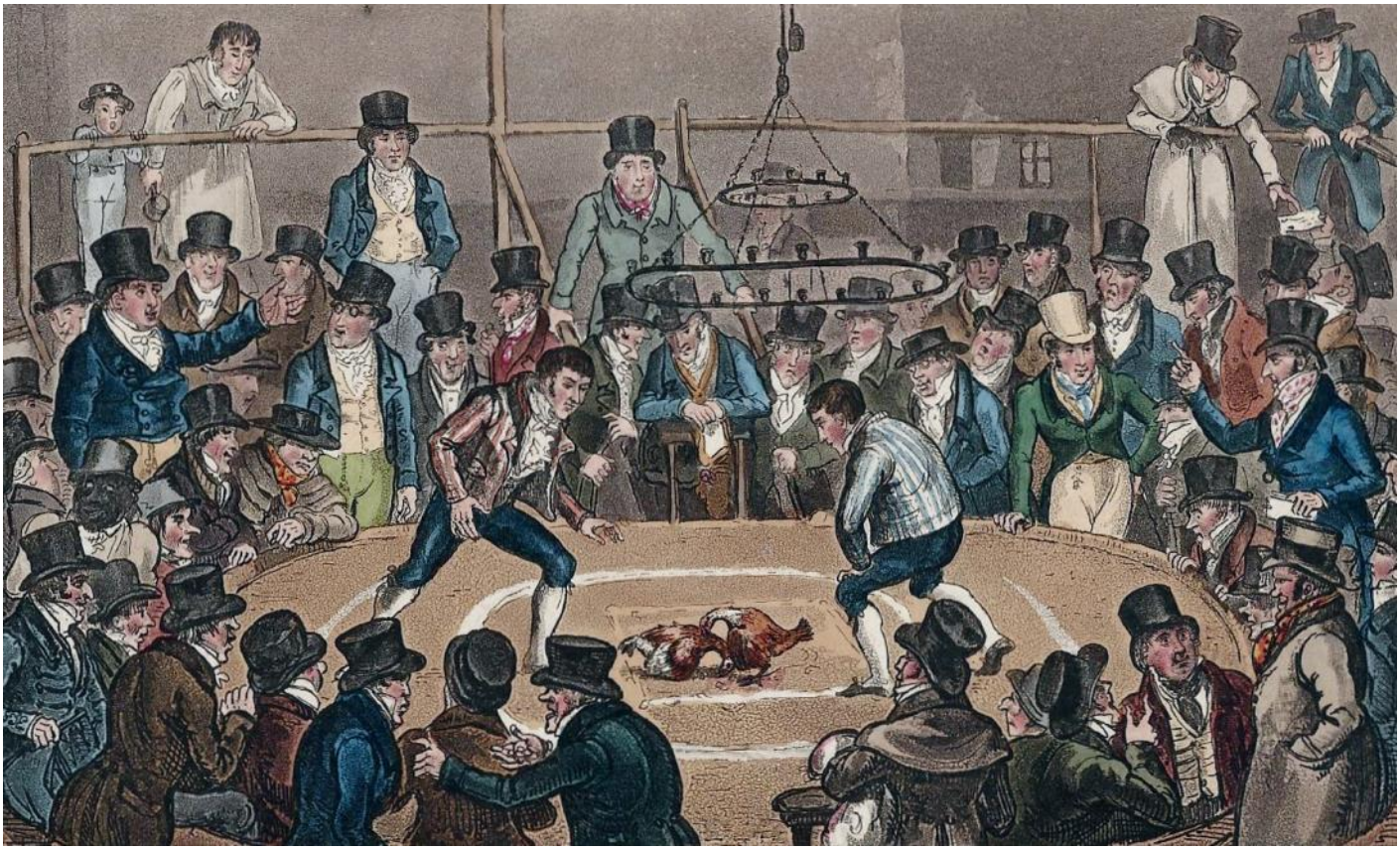
Oswestry & Border History & Archaeology Group

Newsletter

Issue 24 Summer 2022



Cockfighting: a nineteenth century view (John Pinfold's collection)

Many thanks to everyone who has contributed to this Newsletter.

OBHAG has now resumed normal activities
and members will continue to be updated well in advance of events.

Oswestry & Border History & Archaeology Group News

OBHAG has now resumed a programme 'live' talks and visits and, restrictions allowing, this will continue for the rest of the year. Members have continued their support throughout the epidemic and this is much appreciated. Especial thanks are due to outgoing chair John Pinfold who remained in post for an extra year and with John Pryce-Jones arranged several successful zoom presentations, including OBHAG's first history and archaeology quiz.

OBHAG's new chairman is Roger Cooper, the archaeologist who has headed the Oswestry Castle Community Research Project for the past eight years and has shared the findings with members on several occasions. The excavations at the Castle have now come to an end and the report is under preparation.

John Pryce Jones is continuing as President and the following people were elected to the committee, David Stirling (Vice-chair) Gill Barrow (Secretary) David Stirling (Treasurer) Margaret Harrison (Membership Secretary) Pierre Sarre (Minutes Secretary) Heather Hidden (Newsletter Editor) Tom Lerwill (Committee member) Margaret Ward (Committee member) Derek Williams (Committee member).

We still have vacancies on the committee and if you are interested in joining please contact Gill Barrow. gillbarrow246@gmail.com

Gwyneth Winter, long serving OBHAG secretary and widow of former OBHAG chairman Derrick Winter, passed away peacefully in March aged 89 years. One of the original members of the group Gwyneth gave her whole hearted support and over many years and attended meetings regularly until the Covid lockdown.

Oswestry Research Guide

Shropshire Archives working with Oswestry Town Council have published a very helpful research guide to Oswestry. Produced as part of Oswestry's High Streets Heritage Action Zone programme by Kerry Evans of Shropshire Archives, who maintains the Town Council's archives, the guide provides an introduction to the various archival resources for the town of Oswestry available at Oswestry Guildhall, Oswestry Library and at Shropshire Archives. It also gives brief details of other archives elsewhere in England and Wales which hold material relating to Oswestry.

It is available via the Town Council's website at https://www.oswestry-tc.gov.uk/oswestry-archives.html and is available in booklet form from both Oswestry Library and the Town Council.

The Welsh Marcher Lordships cont: *Philip Hume*

The first article introduced the Marcher Lordships - the series of medieval lordships that stretched from the north Wales coast to the Severn estuary in the south, and across south Wales to Pembrokeshire. Together they formed a distinctive border region that was defined by the fifty autonomous lordships that were neither politically in England nor Wales. The Marcher lords claimed and exercised within their lordships many of the powers which the English king exercised in his kingdom.
The first article briefly described those powers that defined a Marcher Lordship, and the historical context that shaped and created them. In this second article, I will describe the different ways in which the lordships evolved, with a focus on Oswestry.

Conquered by the sword or created by withdrawal from England

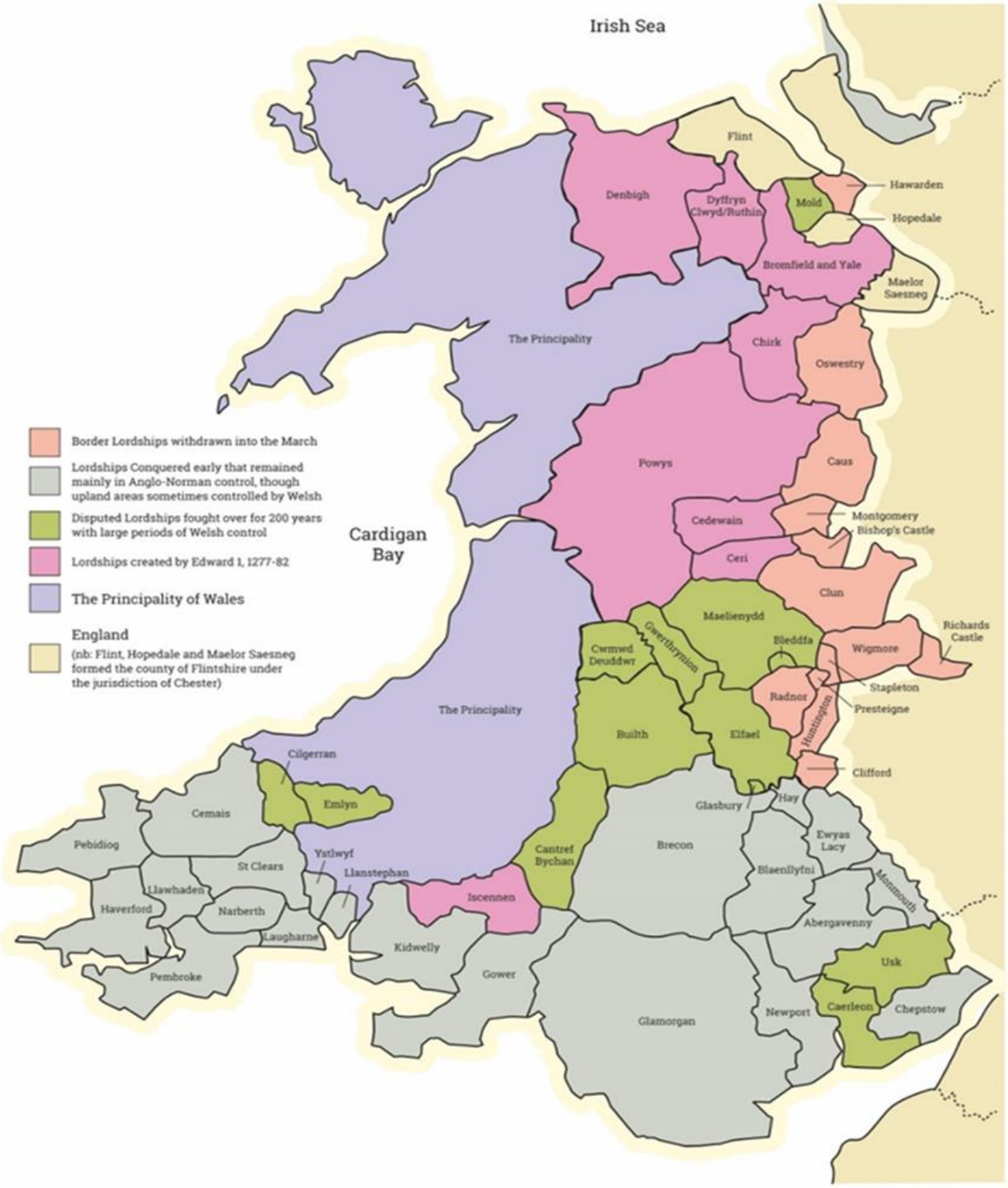
There is often an assumption that the Marcher lordships were created when the Normans seized lands from the Welsh native rulers in the late eleventh century and during the twelfth century. Whilst this is broadly true across south Wales from Gwent to Pembrokeshire, where the invaders conquered lands at the end of the eleventh century and the start of the twelfth, and which largely (some completely) remained in the control of the Normans and their successors for the whole period (the areas coloured grey on the map).
Elsewhere, the process was much more diverse and complicated, as can be seen in Oswestry and the surrounding area, which contains the widest diversity of Marcher lordships by type of origin:

- lordships that were claimed by the Normans during their expeditions into Wales in the last part of the eleventh century, but which were frequently retaken by the native Welsh rulers, with control moving back and forth until the first conquest of Wales by Edward I in 1277 (the areas on the map coloured green). This is typified by the cantrefs of Maelienydd and Elfael in modern-day Radnorshire; for example, Maelienydd was seized by the Mortimers of Wigmore towards the end of the eleventh century, but they exercised lordship there in about only 80 years out of the following 200. It was not until 1277 that Mortimer rule finally became secure and permanent.

- lands that had remained under native Welsh rule, but, having been seized during the Edwardian conquests, became Marcher lordships when Edward I granted them to his loyal commanders in the period 1277–83 (the areas coloured pink). The largest were in the north-east (Denbigh, Ruthin, Bromfield and Yale), though Montgomeryshire includes Ceri and Cedewain that were granted to Roger Mortimer (d.1282); and, just over the northern boundary in Denbighshire, Chirk was granted to his third son, Roger Mortimer (of Chirk, d.1326).

- lordships that were originally in England and were fully part of the royal shire administrative and judicial structures but were gradually withdrawn from England into the March (the areas coloured orange) – good examples in this area are the Fitzalan lordships of Oswestry and Clun, the Corbets in Caus, and slightly further afield the Mortimers in Wigmore and Radnor. This happened either during periods when royal authority in England was weak, or when the lord was in high favour.

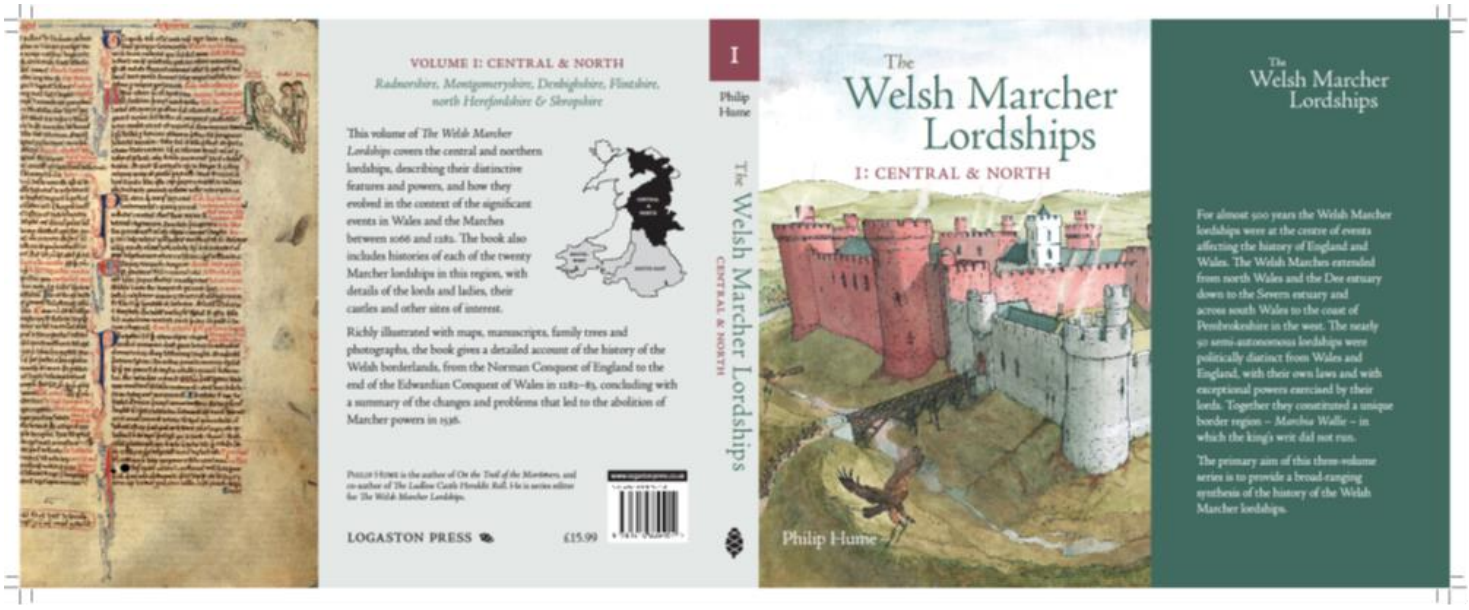
Map 2: The diverse origins of the Marcher lordships



This last process can be seen clearly from a closer examination of the lordship of Oswestry. Before 1066, the lands known as Mersete belonged to King Edward the Confessor and at the time of Domesday Book in 1086 were clearly part of the county of Shropshire. The lordship was granted to Alan Fitz Flaad in c.1104, and during the twelfth century his descendants, the Fitzalan family, gradually withdrew more and more of their lands from county administration and royal governance. They will have drawn on the precedent set by the powers given by William the Conqueror to the first Montgomery earl of Shrewsbury, the military requirements of a frontier area, and their lengthy tenure as sheriffs of Shropshire. Significantly, during the anarchy of the civil wars of the reign of King Stephen (1135-54), William Fitzalan was a steadfast supporter of the Empress Matilda and her son, Henry. When Henry became king after the death of Stephen in 1154, the Fitzalans were duly rewarded and retained a close relationship with Henry II. By 1203 the process was complete when it was recognised that Oswestry was outside of the jurisdiction of the sheriff of Shropshire, of visiting justices, the king's writ, and it was the lord who exercised the regal-like powers of a Marcher lord.

Although there were periodic challenges to this status by the Crown, Oswestry retained its status as a Marcher lordship until those powers were abolished by the Laws in Wales Acts in 1536 and 1542. The Acts removed their powers and independence, and instead incorporated the lordships into the governance and jurisdictional structures of the new counties of Wales or the border counties of England, and for the first time defined a border between Wales and England. Having been removed from the county some four centuries earlier, Oswestry was incorporated back into the county of Shropshire.

The Welsh Marcher Lordships I: Central & North was published in March 2021. The book covers the unique characteristics of the Marcher lordships, the historical context in which they formed, and brief histories of all the lordships in the central and northern marches, including Oswestry. It can be purchased at Booka Bookshop in Oswestry or direct, post free from Logaston press.

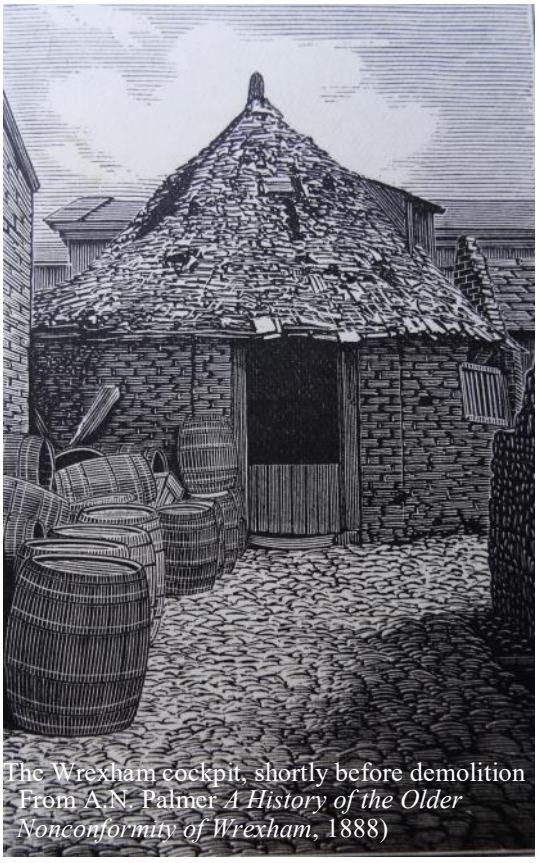


Tracing a Hidden History: Cockfighting in North Shropshire and the Border. *John Pinfold*

Had opinion polls existed in the eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries, and a survey been carried out as to what was the most popular sport in Britain, there is a fair chance that the answer would not have been cricket or horse racing, or even local forms of football, but cock-fighting, which was popular with all classes – 'from Parliament men … to the poorest, 'prentices, bakers, brewers, butchers, draymen and what not' as Pepys put it - and ubiquitous across all parts of Britain. It had a long history, having probably first been introduced to Britain by the Romans, and had close links with many aspects of British society and life, including inns and ale houses, horse racing, the theatre, and perhaps more surprisingly, churches and schools. Abolished by Statute in 1849 ostensibly on grounds of animal cruelty, but perhaps also because the authorities were becoming increasingly alarmed both at the level of betting and gaming amongst the poor and the degree of drunkenness and disorder associated with the sport, cockfighting survived clandestinely for many years, and was largely tolerated, at least in rural areas until the First, and in some localities, the Second World War; and even today cases of illegal cockfighting are still occasionally reported in the press. However, the combination of abolition and a changing attitude toward animal welfare from the late 18th century onwards has meant that cockfighting has to a large degree been written out of sporting and social history, and traces of it are rare. This article is a first, very preliminary, attempt to try and track down what remains today in north Shropshire and the Border.

Four cockpits from this area are still in existence, but only two – those at Welshpool and at Lydbury North – are still in their original location. That from Denbigh was dismantled and moved to what was then the Welsh Folk Museum (now the National Museum of Wales) at St Fagans in 1965, whilst the former Bridgnorth cockpit is now at the Avoncroft Museum of Historic Buildings near Bromsgrove; of this only the roof timbers are original, the remainder having been reconstructed using historic bricks in the 1970s.

The cockpit at Lydbury North (author's photograph)



The Wrexham cockpit, shortly before demolition From A.N. Palmer *A History of the Older Nonconformity of Wrexham*, 1888)

The four have been variously dated to the late 17th century (Denbigh and Lydbury North), the mid-18th century (Welshpool) and the late 18th century (Bridgnorth). Denbigh is circular, Lydbury North and Welshpool octagonal and Bridgnorth, more unusually, square.

All would have originally had a pit or stage at the centre, and this has been reconstructed in the Denbigh pit at St Fagans. Denbigh also retains its thatched roof, giving it a more rural air, although it should be noted that thatch was only replaced by slates on the Lydbury North cockpit in 1908. All four are notable examples of buildings of their type and enable one to gain some idea of what it was like to attend a cockfighting meet. Visually, the most impressive, perhaps because of its remote location, is that at Lydbury North; it is also probably the least altered.

The cockpit at Denbigh, photographed in 1962 before removal to St Fagans (author's photograph)

Unsurprisingly, all four were also linked with inns or ale houses, Denbigh with the Hawk & Buckle, Welshpool with the Castle Inn, Lydbury North with the Red House (now a farm-house), and Bridgnorth with the Raven (now Crown) Inn. Other local towns known to have cockpits include Wrexham (demolished in 1884), where the cockpit was in the yard of the Red Lion in Chester Street, and Whitchurch where it was similarly located in the yard of the Red Lion on the High Street (the yard is still there but there is no sign of any building which could have housed the cockpit). There were no doubt more, but it is also worth considering that in many cases pubs or inns which staged cockfighting matches did so indoors. The best example of this is the well-known Cockpit pub on St Andew's Hill in London, but locally both the Hand at Chirk and the Red Lion at Myddle are known to have staged cockfighting indoors.

As a medium for betting and gambling, it is also unsurprising that cockfighting was closely linked to horse racing. Early examples from our area include races at Montgomery and Whitchurch, both from 1696, In the latter case the association of the two sports was to last until at least 1790, with almost every year the notice for the race meeting being accompanied by an announcement that there would be a Main of Cocks between the gentlemen of Shropshire and those of either Cheshire or Flintshire fought at the time of the races.

The Bridgnorth cockpit illustrates the link between cockpits and the theatre, which goes back to Tudor times, and is expressly referred to by Shakespeare in the prologue to *Henry V*. Existing cockpits, like bear baiting pits, provided a ready-made performance space, and it was not unusual for buildings to be used for both purposes. Thus, in Bridgnorth the cockpit became a theatre in 1811, but reverted to being a venue for cockfighting after the construction of a new theatre in the town in 1824. It is interesting to note that here, as mentioned above, the cockpit building was not circular or octagonal, but square, which allowed for greater flexibility in the use of the space and permitted the construction of additional seating, although, of course, the pit itself was always circular. This was also the form taken by Inigo Jones's Cockpit Theatre in Whitehall (1629), which, excitingly, is to be recreated by the Shakespeare North Playhouse in Prescot, scheduled to open this summer; here too the outer shell of the building is rectangular but the auditorium is octagonal, with the pit in the centre. By a nice coincidence the new theatre is adjacent to the eighteenth century Cockpit House.

However, the history of these buildings tells only a part of the story, for cockfighting took place in the open air as much as it did indoors. The outdoor pit was easy to construct, being simply a circular pit dug out of the ground and surrounded by a low wall or turfed embankment. These must at one time have been present in very many rural communities, and the very ease of their construction has meant that very few have survived, as they were equally easy to level when no longer needed. By far the best preserved one that I have found in Shropshire is that at Bitterley, a few miles to the east of Ludlow, which is thought to date from the Tudor period. Close examination of the grass bank which surrounds the pit suggests that underneath it are remains of a stone wall; if so this would link it to the open air cockpit at Stonesfield in Oxfordshire and perhaps also to the one at Upton-by-Chester where a stone wall survived until around sixty years ago.

Bitterley was linked to a local manor house, of which only the moat now survives, but many open air cockpits were located in churchyards; examples from our area include Pennant Melangell and Llanfechain, where a careful examination of the ground reveals slight traces of them. It may seem a surprising place to stage cockfighting, but of course the north side of churchyards was a traditional venue for many local sports, including archery and football, and there may also have been another reason; at Llanfechain it was recalled by one inhabitant that there was a belief that the battles which took place in consecrated ground were honestly carried out, and that spells and charms could have no effect there

. The cockpit at Bitterley (author's photograph)

In other places, cockpits were sited so as to make use of the local topography to create a natural amphitheatre. The best example from our area is at Lee Bridge, just off the A49 between Preston Brockhurst and Prees. In 1799 this was the location of perhaps the most famous cockfight ever to take place in Shropshire, so famous indeed that it was commemorated in a ballad, the first verse of which reads:

> You Cock-masters all, both far and near,
> I will tell you of a Cocking, when and where,
> At Lee Bridge I have heard them say,
> Old Pell Head beat The Bonny Gray.

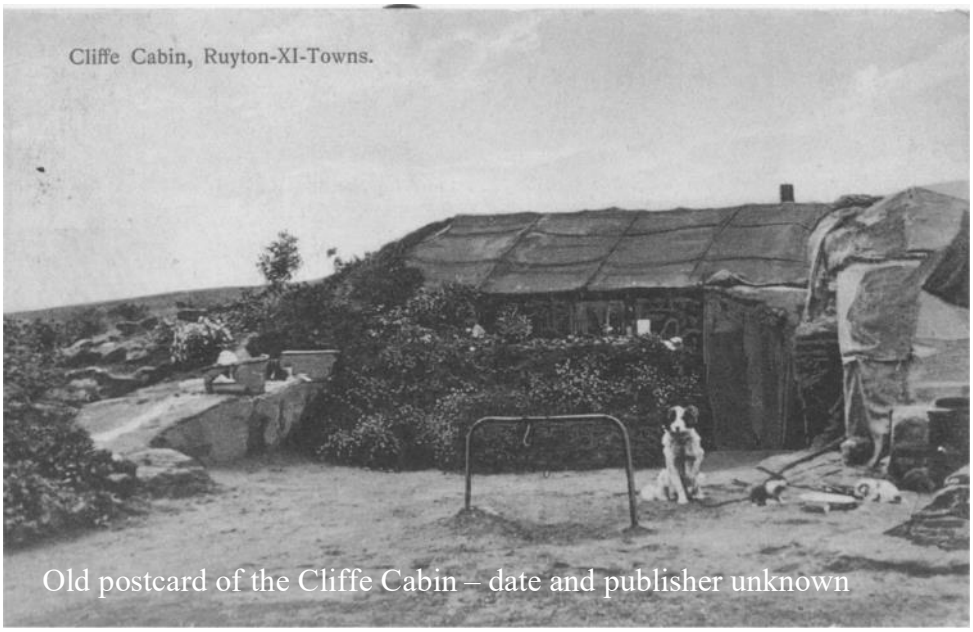
The site of the 1799 cockfight at Lee Bridge (author's photograph)

There is much more that can be written about the history of cockfighting in Shropshire and the Border – I am conscious that I have said nothing about the connection with schools and particularly Oswestry School, but I hope to return to the subject in a subsequent article. Cockfighting will always be controversial, but it formed an integral part of British society for many centuries and its history should not be ignored simply because it is unpalatable.

The Cliffe Cabin, The Cliffe Common Ruyton XI Towns.

Zia Robins

The Cliffe was home to many in the past. Quarry workers built houses cut into the rocks, gipsies camped there whilst they worked on local farms, and there were a number of squatters' cottages. One of these was the Cliffe Cabin. The remains of this Cabin are passed unrecognised by many on their walks. I found it just down from the top ridge to the west side of the bridleway that runs from the top cottage at the Ruyton XI Towns end down the northeast boundary. Grid Ref: 339651 321321



Old postcard of the Cliffe Cabin – date and publisher unknown

The remains of the turf walls are still clear to see and some of the cut stone revetment wall is still visible to the left of the photo below. The fireplace at the back is no longer evident, but a lady who lived nearby, remembered it from when she was a child. It is thought that there was another room built to the north side of it, and that a man who repaired pots and pans once occupied this cabin.

Photograph of the site of the Cliffe Cabin by ZCR February 2009

I have had the site recorded on Shropshire Council's Monument Record no 28387.

Zia Robins email robins.mike.zia@gmail.com

‘[A] very odd Case’ noted by Edward Lhuyd in Cornwall in 1700.

Derek Williams

In reiterating to Martin Lister in the early 1690s his desire to visit Cornwall, the Welsh botanist, geologist, antiquary and philologist, Edward Lhuyd, gave its customs as one of three areas he wished to investigate and record.[1] On the surface, given his failure to publish after the *Glossography* of 1707 any further volumes of his projected *Archaeologia Britannica*, evidence of his findings in the area of folklore and customs seems scanty. However, judicious examination of his notes on Cornish parishes[2] can provide us with some examples. ‘Of ye Parishes’, which is the list of headings with which Lhuyd provided his team in Cornwall, pinpoints thirty subjects on which they – and he – were to focus. Most of these are essentially the same as the *Parochial Queries* of December 1696 and the list of ‘observables’ to be found in a pocket book that Lhuyd used in Wales.[3] The latter has a section called ‘Any odd thing, as toads, etc. in stone’, and the ‘very odd Case’ that he encountered when, on the final stage of his epic four-year tour of the Celtic territories, he was weather-bound in Falmouth waiting for transport to Brittany certainly falls into that category, as well as being, for Lhuyd, unusually detailed – and pretty graphic:

> A poor woman aged about 65 after some days sicknesse upon application of a Clister [an enema], voyded some living creature which the people that saw it compared to a shrew mouse but when they came to a particular description, I knew not whither to referr it: For they said it had the mouth and four feet of a frog and had no tayl, but on each side of it a row of Buds of feathers. The women that saw it put it in a Bason of water where it sprawled about an houre and then dyed, colouring the water as yellow as saffron. Some days after, she voyded two smal Fishes, which (her husband the onely person that saw them) called shots i.e. Trout-Fry & soon after dyed, but was not opened. The woman that attended her when she voyded the first animal were examined upon Oath by one Justice Hicks of Tre Vidhik who directed me to them for further satisfaction and they gave me so particular an Account that I fully believe the matter to be fact, but for the solution of it I must leave it to your self &c.[4]

While the presence of ticks and other parasites in the human body and other kinds of animal infestation might seem to belong more to the field of clinical medicine than to folk medicine, variants of what is now described as the ‘Bosom serpent legend complex’ have been in circulation since at least the 12th century. Indeed, Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith describe as ‘medical orthodoxy’ from Ancient Greece and Rome onwards the belief that certain types of animal (usually frogs, toads, newts or snakes) could get into the human body and live there, causing pain, disease and death.[5] Allegedly true reports include the account by David Calderwood of one of the ‘prodigious works and rare accidents’ that occurred in March or April 1612 when ‘[o]ne of the Erle of Argyle’s servants being sicke, vomited two toades and a serpent, and so convalesced; but vomited after a number of little toades’. The contributor of this snippet to *Notes and Queries* in 1901 also drew attention of the journal’s readers to Daniel Le Clerc’s *A Natural and Medicinal History of Worms Bred in the Bodies of Men and other Animals…*, describing it as ‘most exhaustive and frankly horrible’![6]

Lhuyd followed his account of the poor Cornishwoman with another – verified this time by the Bishop of ‘Kil Alley’ [Killala, Co. Mayo or Killaloe, Co. Clare?] and others – that of a man who had excreted ‘two Kitlings [kittens]’.[7] Justice Hicks of Trevithick was John Hick(e)s,

one of Lhuyd's staunchest supporters, and the fact that the Cornish witness had been examined by him clearly had much to do with Lhuyd's acceptance of the truth of the case. He believed in 'the study of the totality of evidence, and… in the study of evidence in the field'[8] just as much in connection with folklore or oral culture as with archaeology, although, without good corroborative evidence, such beliefs might be dismissed as absurd and ridiculous.

The belief in animal infestation was clearly widespread in Lhuyd's day. Indeed, examples may be found down to Victorian times when the story of Jane Rowe of Marazion, who vomited a four or five-inch living lizard, did the rounds of the newspapers.[9]

Notes

1. Lhuyd to Martin Lister, 18 February 1692, Bodleian Library MS. Lister 3, f.154; R.T. Gunther, *Early Science in Oxford, vol xiv, Life and Letters of Edward Lhwyd*, Oxford: O.U.P., 1945, p.156.
2. Bodleian Library, Rawlinson MS. D997, f.1.
3. National Library of Wales, Llanstephan MS. 185, p.123; see also Gunther, op. cit., pp. 31-32.
4. Lhuyd to [? Richard Richardson], 8 December 1700, Royal Society Library, London, LBO/14, pp362-365; *Early Modern Letters Online*, http://emlo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk, Record ID 401054.
5. Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith (eds.), *Urban Legends: A Collection of International Tall Tales and Terrors,* Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2007, p.115. See also Wayland D. Hand, 'Animal Intrusion in the Human Body…', in Wayland D. Hand, *Magical Medicine: the Folkloric Component of Medicine in the Folk Belief, Custom, and Ritual of the Peoples of Europe and America…*, Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 1980, pp. 255-257; Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud, *A Dictionary of English Folklore*, Oxford: O.U.P., 2000, p..6.
6. 'Animals in People's Insides', *Notes and Queries*, 9th series, viii, 27 July 1901, p.90. The topic was repeatedly debated in this journal in the 1850s, and again in the early 1900s.
7. Lhuyd to [? Richard Richardson], op. cit.
8. Glyn Daniel, 'Edward Lhwyd: Antiquary and Archaeologist', *Welsh History Review*, vol. 3, no. 4, December 1967, p. 353.
9. COM. EBOR., 'Folk-Lore: Lizard', *Notes and Queries*, 8th series, i, 12 March 1892, p. 207.

Theodorus Döderlein of southern Germany vomiting
21 newts and 4 frogs
(from Georg Abraham Mercklin's De Incantamentis, 1715)

This short piece forms part of *At the signe of the 4 Hurlers*, a new, detailed and - as yet - unpublished study of Lhuyd's survey of Cornwall. (First published in *Old Cornwall* (Vol.XV. No. 5), the journal of the Federation of 'Old Cornwall' Societies).

OBHAG Programme 2022

Friday 8th July 7.30pm.
"**Old Oswestry and Its Landscape"**
Tim Malim , Principal archaeological officer CPAT

Friday 12th August 11.15 am.
Visit to Nesscliffe Iron Age Fort Excavation. *There will be a charge of £2 for members and £3 for non-members for this visit. Places must be booked in advance with Gill Barrow gillbarrow246@gmail.com (or by post to Hafan,2 Aston Square, Oswestry SY11 4LR)*

Sunday 4th September 2.00pm.
John Pryce-Jones will lead a guided Oswestry town walk. Meet at the Bailey Head

Friday 9th September 7.30pm.
Talk by Professor Gary Lock. Title to be announced

Friday 14th October 7.30pm.
"The Battle of Shrewsbury in 1403"
Justin Soper Local Historian and Re-enactor

Friday 11th November 7.30pm.
"The History of the Poor laws"
John Slowley, Ruyton XI Towns Historical Society.

Friday 9th.Dec.
The OBHAG Quiz and Seasonal Refreshments

OBHAG Membership

Adult .....……...£12.00
Senior Citizen/Full Time Student...£10.00 Junior(5-17years)……. Free

Subscriptions are due annually on January 1st and should be paid at the January meeting or sent to the membership secretary. Cheques are to be made payable to 'OBHAG' Please do not send cash in the post. For details of payment by bank transfer (preferred method) please see the membership form which is available on the website or from the membership secretary.

Margaret Harrison: Email: harrisonm-r@tiscali.co.uk
54 Llanforda Rise. Oswestry, SY11 1SY