

OLD MEMBERS' TRIP TO THE TOMB OF THE FIRST PRINCIPAL OF JESUS COLLEGE OXFORD

In June 2013 22 Old Members and partners visited Abergavenny. Why? We were in search of good fellowship, fine dining, and the tomb of the first Principal of the College. This quasi pilgrimage was curated by raconteur and historian Clive Jenkins (1966), whose ancestors are buried in the area

Who was the first Principal?

Most people answer Sir Leoline Jenkins or Hugh Price, both of whom are buried in the College Chapel. Sir Leoline was a Principal but not the first. He left most of his estate to College and built the Library. Hugh Price initiated the foundation of the College by petitioning Elizabeth I to establish it. As we all know she did this in 1571 and Jesus was the first Protestant College to be founded in the University.

So who is the forgotten man? He is David Lewis. Born in Abergavenny, he graduated from All Souls in 1540 with a BCL. He became both an MP and a Judge of the High Court of Admiralty and was appointed Principal of Jesus in 1571. He died unmarried in 1584 and is buried in St Mary's Church Abergavenny. He is not to be confused with Sir David Lewis, the former Lord Mayor of the City of London (1966), nor with David Lewis the Martyr, who was also born in Abergavenny and was executed in Usk in 1679 for being an alleged accessory to the Popish Plot. He was in fact the great great nephew of the Principal but through the female line.



Abergavenny is an ancient market town of Roman origin now promoted as the Gateway to Wales. A foodie mecca holding a Food Festival every September its surrounding area has been described as the new Cotswolds, which of course are Notting Hill in exile. Evidence of cappuccino drift is everywhere but it is still a traditional Welsh Marches town. Walking round the thriving market hall is like being abroad

in a country where you know only a few words of the language.

Clive chose the Angel Hotel as our base in Abergavenny because his family has drunk there since it opened in 1829. It is a former coaching Inn turned into a traditional 3-star hotel. Gregory Peck had lunch here when filming *Moby Dick*. Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor also lunched on the steak-and-kidney pudding with two bottles of claret at £2.10. It is an elegant well-restored Georgian building. They do excellent breakfasts but insist on serving leaf tea with

individual pots and tea strainers that overcrowd the tabletops. A board outside announced "The Crayfish Risotto is back". Good news because it is excellent and would more than hold its own in Notting Hill.

Clive had arranged a series of guided visits which went very smoothly.. This was in large part due to Julian and Janet Le Patourel who had made a reconnaissance visit to the area shortly before the trip and passed on much high -i grade intelligence on a diverse range of subjects from parking arrangements, toilet stops and real time journey times. They received our warmest thanks..

We made an early visit to St Mary' Church and were guided around by the erudite Sir Trevor Morris who enthusiastically shared his learning with us. A rival attraction to the tomb of David Lewis – [see photo below] – was the Jesse Tree, described , according to Sit Trevor, by Andrew Graham-Dixon as the finest example of medieval wood carving in Europe. The statute is hugely impressive but how such comparisons can be made remains unclear.



We were also treated to an engrossing account of the making of the 24 foot long Millennium Tapestry containing 400 shades of wool by one of the 60 people who had made it. They undertook the project because nothing was being done in Abergavenny to mark the Millennium.

The following day was full of good things. We visited the Three Castles: White Castle, Skenfrith, and Grosmont. The White Castle was particularly impressive. The sun shone and there was a lot of well-restored stonework to climb all over. A bonus was the Norman church of St Bridget's, at Skenfrith where the vicar, Janet Prosser, took us round and observed that in retirement we find life a lot more fulfilling and filled than when in work. Pews of grey heads nodded assent.

Lunch at the renowned Bell turned out to be the gastronomic low point of the trip with charmless staff and sandwiches that seemed to have been made out of spare bricks from the restoration works judging by the thickness and texture of the bread. Things improved as we journeyed to Herefordshire and visited the gem that is Kilpeck Church. Our guide, James Bailey,(BNC) was outstanding. His eyes bright with zealotry, and pointing his nine-foot cane at the masonry he challenged us to decide whether the Agnus Dei was in fact an Equus Dei. This had fundamental implications, he said, for our understanding of the building and the Templars' influence. There was no clear consensus. Bemused but impressed we

moved on made to Dore Abbey, a former medieval Cistercian abbey restored as a parish church of Laudian design. Our appreciation was heightened by the refreshments that our guide, Peter Rostron, had organised. After a learned exposition of the great achievements of the Cistercians and the even greater achievements of her four sons from Esther De Waal we sought respite at the Gwatkin Cider Farm. A tasting took place with all the enjoyment and none of the self-conscious honking of a wine tasting. Many purchases were made.

On our final morning we visited Raglan Castle, a palace-fortress that was besieged by Fairfax in 1646 and turned in to a ruin as by mortar batteries including Roaring Meg. As with the White Castle there is still plenty to see and clamber over. Our last site was the most iconic and best known – Tintern Abbey. Founded in 1131 it was the first Cistercian monastery to be built in Wales. Thanks to Gilpin, Turner and Wordsworth it became a tourist attraction 250 years ago and remains one but does live up to its billing.

We were in search of fine dining and we found some at the Angel Hotel, and its sister, the Walnut Tree Restaurant. This Michelin-starred restaurant enjoyed a stellar reputation under its founder Franco Taruschio but closed after being impaled by Gordon Ramsay. Shaun Hill of the Merchant House in Ludlow has reopened it and is taking it to another level. He still has a few stairs to climb. Opinions on the set menu were divided. One experienced patron of London restaurants described the meal as dismal while other trenchermen enthused. Much more successful was the final lunch at the Anchor at Tintern. Hearty hot fare at very reasonable prices. The Ham Hock and the home smoked chocolate pudding were particularly fine.

The original 22 were joined by five Old Members who lived locally. The largest occupational group was lawyers and the largest subject group was historians. Notwithstanding this, everyone got one well together and a call has gone out for a cellist to complete the quartet that was founded in the bar of the Angel.

The trip to an undervalued part of the country, which has a particular resonance for the College, was a great success. Clive Jenkins and Malcolm McIvor are to be warmly thanked and congratulated for putting it on.

Stephen Walker (History 1968)