

Usk Castle Friends

Summer Newsletter 2022.



Chairman's report

As you'll see from this current newsletter, we are in the midst of another busy and well-supported year. Our Committee is fully encouraged by the owners, Henry and Rosie Humphreys, who don't turn a hair when we invade their home, but remain welcoming and generous. Our last two ventures, both at the castle, were beset with difficulties as the illness of some Committee members meant that work fell on a smaller band than usual. So I'm impressed that both events were a huge success socially and financially. Our plans for next year are well in hand but remember that we are always open to any of your suggestions for future meetings or activities. I look forward to seeing you all at our September event.

Elizabeth Baker.

Visiting the Castle

Members are reminded that the Castle is open on Monday, Thursday and Sunday from 10.30 am to 6.00pm.

After the clocks change the opening days will be Monday, Thursday and Saturday.



We have a small team of volunteers to welcome visitors. They may be recognised by their Gatekeeper Butterfly badges. The team would welcome other members. If you would like to join them please contact Stella Collard on 01291 673655 or me at this email address.

New construction in the Banqueting Hall

Visitors to the Castle must have noticed the wooden structure being erected in the Banqueting Hall. The Humphreys family have long wanted to make the Hall available for events, exhibitions by Usk Castle Friends and community projects. Events such as a concert by the Wurzels have already been held under the new structure which has a canvas cover to keep the rain out with windows to let the light

in. It functions as a marquee and is a traditional free-standing cruck frame construction. The sustainable timber (Larch, Western Red Cedar and Douglas Fir) is from the family farms. The cruck frame, using only traditional methods (so no nails or screws, just joinery and wooden pegs) was made by local timber framer Bart Bagnall. After ten weeks of preparation it was erected by a small team of family and friends. Usk Castle Friends welcome this handsome addition to the facilities available at the Castle.



Spring 2022. Margaret Beaufort Day.

This went very well indeed. Nicola Tallis, as previously announced, gave a lively account of Margaret Beaufort's long and eventful life, straddling the Houses of Lancaster and York. As mother of Henry VII she was a rich and powerful woman. Nathen Amin stepped in at short notice as our second speaker and posed the question of whether Henry was really a Welsh King. His conclusion was that although he made many Welsh appointments he had no distinctive Welsh policy. The two speakers worked well together and finished with a spontaneous questions session.

AGM

After the formal business Liz Brooker gave a talk based on a chapter of her thesis which has now been successfully submitted: her title was *Nineteenth Century Usk*. Congratulations Dr Brooker! Liz was until recently a member of our committee

Joint Meeting with the Mortimer Society.

This was a special meeting of the two societies to celebrate the life of John Grove who founded both the Usk Castle Friends and the Mortimer Society. We met in the Tythe Barn (thank you to Rosie and Henry for that). After the morning lectures a buffet lunch was provided by the Friends and we spilled out into the sunshine before going up to the Castle with our guide Will Davies. The event was a free one since it was a memorial to John but not loss-making due to generous donations from the visitors. This was the programme:

Appreciations of John Grove by the two Societies
 Will Davies. *Usk Castle, its History and Buildings*
 Kirsten-Lawton-Smith. *Give me back my Inheritance; the contested history of the Lordship of Usk*
 Conor Williams. *The Mortimers and Usk*.



Gazing up at the Keep

The meeting was a great success and we have received appreciative messages from the Mortimer Society. Philip Hume, secretary, has written:

“It was a brilliant day. A large number of people have contacted me to say how much they enjoyed it particularly the opportunity to see Rosie’s lovely garden whilst catching up with old friends. Szusza (John’s widow) was very appreciative of all our efforts and felt that it was a very fitting tribute to John.

Many thanks to you and your colleagues for the fantastic catering and for looking after us so well.

A huge thank you to Rosie and Henry. The barn was a superb setting for the talks. Everyone appreciated your kindness in allowing us to use the Castle for the day”.

Music in the Summer



Debs Hancock (Welsh Dragons) gave one of her popular jazz concerts on June 26th. Her singing has been described as cool sophistication with chocolaty, velvety tones. Debs is a keen promoter of the Black Mountains Jazz Club and is involved in popularising the annual wall2wall Festival. The Friends were happy to help out with the humble task of overseeing the car parking.

A week later, on 17th July Usk Castle Friends invited Opera in a Box (based in Bristol) to perform Puccini’s opera **Tosca**. Your secretary wrote a brief review for **The Diary**.



On a lovely summer afternoon in July we were treated to a powerful and moving production of Puccini’s opera *Tosca* by Opera in a Box, a small company of singers based in Bristol. The staging was cleverly arranged by the Director in the limited space available in the Tythe Barn. As anyone familiar with the barn will know, there are two large doors and a huge window so the environment was relatively virus-safe. The performance was at 4.00 pm and the audience were encouraged to picnic on Castle House lawn.

Puccini’s *Tosca* was set in the Napoleonic Wars. Opera in a Box set their production in the 1920s with a rising women’s liberation movement and post-war fascism. The plot is simple and dramatic. The young painter Cavaradossi passes food to his escaped friend Angelotti who is hiding in his well. The police chief Scarpia is suspicious of Cavaradossi and questions his girlfriend Tosca, an opera singer. Scarpia extracts Angelotti’s whereabouts from Tosca and Cavaradossi is arrested and is to be executed. Scarpia proposes to Tosca that it will be only a mock execution if she agrees to give herself to him. She agrees so Scarpia signs a safe conduct pass. She then stabs him but when she finds that Scarpia has tricked her she jumps

over the battlements and dies. We did discuss with the Director whether Tosca could jump off the Castle battlements but this proved to be impractical!

All of the principals had powerful voices that could be heard without difficulty. Hannah Coleman, as Tosca, was very versatile. She could be jealous, angry, tempestuous and murderous but also loving and tender. Thomas Wood, as the hero, provided the energy and dynamic required to sustain the plot and Charlie Morris, as Scarpia, managed to be controlled and darkly menacing. Sam Baker was a tour-de-force at the keyboard. The production was a sell-out so we more than covered our costs and we very much hope to see this vibrant young company again.

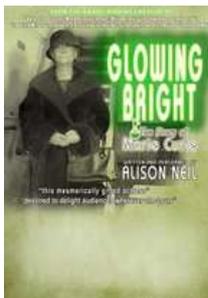


The cast, photographed by Barry Morse, with Tosca still in costume.

Reminder of September meeting

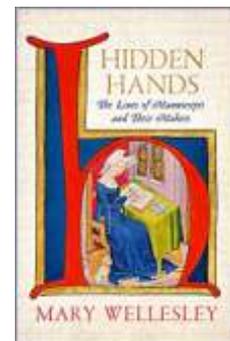
We are having one of our popular history sessions on the morning of Saturday 24th September. We are happy to be back at our traditional meeting place, the Memorial Hall, with its refurbished car park. As previously announced our two principal speakers will be **Professor James Clark** and **Professor Maddy Gray**. James has recently produced a much acclaimed book on the contentious topic of the Dissolution of the Monasteries and Maddy, who is an expert on all things ecclesiastical and monastic, will already be well-known to many of you. A fuller notice of this meeting with booking details will be sent out in early September.

Looking forward to 2023



Alison Neil will be giving one of her popular one person shows on 24th February. In the past she has based her shows on a wide variety of characters from Katherine Parr to ES Nesbit. This time her subject is Marie Curie. Working with her husband Pierre she isolated the elements polonium and radium. She died of leukemia, probably as a result of exposure to radiation.

Mary Wellesley, the author of *Hidden Hands: The Lives of Manuscripts and their Makers* has agreed to talk to us about medieval manuscripts at our 2023 Autumn event. Mary is a Research Affiliate of the British Library and writes regularly for the Times Literary Supplement, the London Review of Books etc. Her book *Hidden Hands* which has fifty lavish illustrations, puts particular emphasis on the early role of women as authors and artists.



More events to follow!