
CAERWENT HISTORIC TRUST

By the time this Newsletter reaches you the hottest local news may well be the Time Team visit which unfortunately could not be publicised. Meanwhile however, an article in *British Archaeology* has presented “new” thinking about prehistoric sites which fits in with what we have known for ages about Gray Hill. Also, the pending residential development by Barratts, together with the reappearance of photographs documenting the Dinham Factory, has focussed attention on the Factory and the community that was associated with it.

Gray Hill Ritual Landscape

Saturday July 19th 2.30pm

The standing stones which mark the position of midwinter sunrise were set up possibly as long ago as 5000 years. For the following 2000 years this Sanctuary of the Sun served as a focus around which further developments of a religious or ritual nature occurred. Although we may never know what beliefs were associated, there are still remnants of some of the structures, which extend over the greater proportion of the hilltop. We shall meet at the Foresters' Oaks car park (overlooking Wentwood Reservoir MR 428939) at 2.30 pm, duration about 2 hours.

Walk around Llanvaches

Saturday August 16th 2.30pm

There's a lot of history to the widely scattered village of Llanvaches, which took its name from a member of St Tathan's Community who was murdered there. We will meet at the Tabernacle Chapel, at the top of the hill on the A48 opposite the Pen y Lan Kennels, and proceed on foot to the Parish Church and thence to Bethany Chapel. We will continue to the Pike and its Toll House before returning to the Tabernacle for refreshments and to view the chapel as the icing on the cake. Led by Mark Lewis, distance about 1½ miles.

Caerwent Show

Saturday September 6th

We shall have our usual collection of booklets etc documenting the history of our area but a particular theme this year will be the Caerwent Factory and the community which was set up to serve it along the north side of the A48. We did hold a Dinham Reunion a few years ago but the show plus our little tour tomorrow are perhaps the nearest we can get to a reunion in the future. Bring memories and old photographs (which can be copied on the spot). We shall be there 11.00am to 4.00pm.

Merton Green, Welfare Centre and the Factory

Sunday September 7th 2.30pm

This will be a short tour for which a car would be useful if you do the whole of it. We can meet on Merton Green (drive into Dinham Road, then along Ash Tree Road to the end). If Barratts have already started work there we'll put a notice on Dinham Road saying where to go. After a few minutes we can drive along to the Welfare Centre, then look over a part of the former Factory, possibly ending up at the Cafeteria for a cuppa. Bring memories and photos as yesterday. This may be a last chance to examine Merton Green and the Welfare Centre, and it's a quite rare chance to see the Factory due to it being in heavy demand as a military training area for the last few years.

N.B. we take every care with our preparation of walks etc but you take part at your own risk

MERTON GREEN

My earliest memory of Merton Green is from spring 1942 when twin girls Maisie and Myrtle Tubb came to Caerwent School. They had just moved into no.8 the Nissen Quarters, as it was known then, and were one of the first families to come from Holton Heath. I lived in Museum Cottage at the time and they used to call for me on their way to school.

There were 14 Nissen Huts, 9 backing onto the factory fence and 5 backing onto the A48. Each hut was subdivided into two homes with no.1 being the Llanfair end of the back row and no.28 the one nearest Llanvair road on the A48 side. Some homes had only two bedrooms and some had three. I have a friend who was born in no.18 in 1943 and moved to no.28 when her brother was born, presumably to have one with three bedrooms.

In the middle was the huge oval of green with a red brick air raid shelter at each end. The bases of these can still be seen. Even with the air raid shelters there was plenty of room for a full size cricket pitch and enough of us children to make two teams. After the War a couple of the boys hit a few bricks out of one of the shelters so that we could climb in and play hospitals. In our midst we had one of the older girls who wanted to be a nurse and the long benches allowed us all to lie out and be her patients. Our Florence Nightingale later became nurse of the year at Bristol Royal Infirmary.



The 14 barrack blocks had been built in 1941 for the men who had come to set up the Factory and they were divided into single rooms plus a common room. There were 31 men in each block who had all their main meals provided in the Cafeteria (now Old Gym) on Lawrence Crescent. After the war these were no longer needed as accommodation for single men and were converted into the flats we know today. The first one was ready in July 1946 and some of the families from the Nissen huts decided to move into them. There always seemed to be families wanting to take their place in the huts because I don't remember any of them being empty at that time.

In the late 1940s the residents said how much they disliked their addresses being the Nissen Quarters and Barrack Blocks. There was a meeting where they chose the names Merton Green, Ash Tree Road and Lawrence Crescent. In 1962 the residents of Merton Green were told that the huts had only four more years when they could be kept in good repair and gradually the families moved to Council accommodation in Caerwent or Caldicot. By 1968 only 3 huts were still occupied.

Shirley Nettleship June 2008
The Welfare Centre will be covered in the next issue.

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