

## Notes About the Status of Local History Societies in North Montgomeryshire

I venture to offer these few notes in case they are of benefit to the deliberations at The Future of Historical Societies conference at Aberystwyth this coming weekend.

There are several small local history societies clustered in north-east Montgomeryshire, including:

- Llansilin Local History society
- Rhydycroesau History Group
- Meifod History Group
- Llanfyllin Civic Society
- Llanymynech Historical Society

and just over the border in Shropshire:

- Oswestry and Border History and Archaeology Group.

Two more-recently formed societies are:

- Llansantffraidd History Society
- Llanfihangel-yng-Ngwynfa Social History Group

.All these groups seem to be active and thriving, though of course they have their low and high patches as key activators leave and join. I would suggest that nearly all of them would be classed as recreational rather than academic, but I will touch on this point later.

Llansilin Local History Society was formed in 1984 with about twenty members, and is now in its 23rd year with about sixty paid-up members. Llansilin is quite a small village with a church, four chapels, one pub, a garage and garage shop, and is very widespread thinly populated. The local area is considered to be quite rich in history (Owain Glyndwr, for example) and surviving buildings (many hall houses, for example) and family links. The original objective of the society was to study these matters while they were still accessible. Membership has grown steadily to a peak of seventy members a few years ago and has remained at the present level for the last six years. Half the membership could be regarded as local to Llansilin, the remainder coming from further afield including Llanrhaeadr ym Mochnant, Oswestry, Wrexham and Baschurch. This wide catchment is taken to imply that the annual talks and visits programme holds the interest of the members. There is a preponderance of retired people in the membership. Typically twenty-five to thirty-five members turn up to meetings, though exceptionally at the last meeting there were a record 85 present with more than half being visiting guests having family connections with the speaker and topic.

Llansilin is unusual in having its programme over the summer, from Easter to mid-September. This facilitates evening visits. Meetings are held on Monday evenings, with occasional all-day visits on Saturdays. Some very long excursions have been made for example to the Palace of Westminster, to Aberglasney in south Wales, and to the National Library. About ten to twelve meetings are held during the season, but this is quite a burden to arrange and efforts will be made to reduce the number to a more manageable eight. It does seem that our programme is fuller than other local societies.

Some items in the programme of meetings might be classed as recreational or educational, in that they are not revealing new material to the world. Excursions typically come into this class. On the other hand some speakers do bring together new material, for example research into local

connections of Archdeacon Thomas, and results of digs at Sycharth. In addition to the programme, Llansilin has carried out the following activities:

Hosting visits to the village by other societies, typically all day Saturday.

Monuments surveys-of two local chapel burial grounds

In progress, provision of a village signboard reciting highlights in the career of Owain Glyndwr and nearby Sycharth.

Setting up local history exhibitions to which other societies contribute, and contributing to other societies' exhibitions.

Publication of two books, one by a member ("State, Church and Chapel", an account of the local dramatic events surrounding disestablishment), and the other by a local team actually largely outside the Society ("Changing Times in Llansilin", a photographic history).

Photographic histories have been produced by other groups (Llanfyllin, Meifod, Rhydycroesau, Llanfihangel), often associated with the millennium celebrations.

I think as an initiative of Powys County Council, most of the local societies support a four monthly newsletter, "Hanes Maldwyn", issued from Newtown Library. This cites 23 subscribing societies.

Llansilin Local History Society does not have a web site (largely because of lack of time of the secretary!), but Oswestry and I think one or two others do have sites.

A few members of the Society have a private ambition to set up a "Llansilin Local Heritage Centre" in one of the underused village chapel buildings. Apart from substantial archives, this could include relics of Llansilin's former telephone exchange and its early hydro-electric power scheme, as well as explanations of Owain Glyndwr's local connections. The problem is finding an endowment to cover running costs.

In these notes I have only described the activities of our own Society, but I get the impression that the other neighbouring societies operate similarly, though perhaps not with as large a membership. The overall impression is one of continued interest and enthusiasm for local history, though the topics are tending to become more far-ranging.

Chris P Burton, Sec, Llansilin Local History Society [cpb@envex.demon.co.uk](mailto:cpb@envex.demon.co.uk)  
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