

REPORT ON THE AUTUMN MEETING IN BRIDGEND 19th-21st SEPTEMBER 2025

This themed meeting based at the Heronston Hotel examined the ceramics industries of Glamorgan from the Middle Ages to today, looking both at the historical porcelains of Swansea and Nantgarw and the less exclusive pottery products of Swansea, Llanelly, Ewenny and Nantgarw. On Friday afternoon, 19 September, Gwyneth Evans told us the story of the Ewenny pottery industry by showing items from her personal collection. Together with Buckley, the Ewenny area was one of the main traditional pottery-production sites in Wales. 15 separate potteries are known to have existed, based around a bank of boulder clay and with easy access to coal for firing and galena ore for making lead glazes. Documentary evidence suggests potting in the area in the 15th century but the first firm evidence refers to the making of ridge tiles in 1715. Although individually very small with from two to six employees each, the potteries became well known after the growth of industry and population brought them a hugely expanded client base in the 19th century. The staple production of the factories consisted of useful vessels for farm dairies and kitchens, but they also were known for their wassail bowls, money-boxes and puzzle jugs with yellow-glazed sgraffito designs, often inscribed or bearing mottoes in English or Welsh. After 1850 the industry declined in the face of competition from mass-produced earthenware and tinplate, and by the 1920s only two potteries remained, Ewenny and Claypits. The last traditional kiln at Ewenny was dismantled in 1980 and re-erected at St Fagans and a new workshop built on its site. The Claypits pottery where Leonard Edger latterly made wall panels and sculptural work ceased operation a few years ago.

We then walked a short distance to **Ewenny Pottery** where we were welcomed by the eighth generation of the Jenkins family to run the business, Caitlin, who is helped by her father Alun. The modern workshop still exhibits a late Victorian sign, a bilingual quotation from the King James version of Romans 9:21, 'Hath not the potter power over the clay of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour and another unto dishonour', which has recently been professionally conserved; there is also a collection of the historic products of the pottery. Caitlin demonstrated the traditional method of throwing and forming a pot on the wheel and then discussed the making and applying of glazes in which she is particularly interested.



In the evening we were treated to two outstandingly well-illustrated lectures. Andrew Renton gave an overview of ceramic production in south Wales from the mid-18th century to about 1920. It was the decision of a local businessman, William Coles, to establish a new pottery on the site of an old copper works in 1764 that made Swansea's name as a centre for ceramics production. Swansea's golden age came with the Cambrian Pottery of 1789-1824. Pearlware and black basalt, copying Wedgwood, were the main products. Lewis Weston Dillwyn introduced new shapes from 1802, and with high-quality decoration by

Thomas Pardoe and William Weston Young turned the works into one of Britain's most innovative potteries. A new factory, the Glamorgan Pottery, next door, was producing by 1813, but Dillwyn was soon managing an expanding business again with new partners but produced little after 1817. The Nantgarw porcelain factory had a much shorter life. William Billingsley and Samuel Walker began production there in 1813 but most production was in the period 1817-20. Though the successful products were of the highest quality, firing losses made the operation unsustainable, and Billingsley and Walker left for Coalport. Most locally-decorated Nantgarw porcelain was actually enamelled by Pardoe after this, and with his death in 1823 the experiment came to an end. Thereafter the new Welsh factories such as Llanelly and Ynysmeudwy produced variations on pottery, much of it transfer-printed but with Llanelly finishing with hand-decorated cockerel plates and imitations of Wemyss decoration. Ultimately, despite its industrial wealth there was not a sufficiently large consumer base in south Wales to maintain a viable high-quality ceramics industry.

Andrew's lecture was followed by Jonathan Gray whose researches have promoted Horace Elliott (1851-1938) to a clearly rightful place as a polymathic Arts & Crafts pottery designer. A sewing-machine salesman before he became interested in design, he commissioned work from several potteries in England, including Denby and Brannam, as well as several in Germany, and three of the Ewenny factories. He visited these country potteries to acquire pots for his London showrooms and to show at the various arts and crafts exhibitions in which he was involved. He made annual visits to Ewenny from 1880 until 1913, often staying for a long time, and he designed many pieces for the Jenkins brothers to make. His fleur-de-lys mark was often applied to Ewenny and other wares, with his range varying from leaf-decorated vases to ornamental candlesticks and ceramic pigs of various forms.

On the Saturday morning we visited **Swansea Museum** where Andrew Green gave us a brief but comprehensive introduction to the history of the Royal Institution of South Wales and the first museum in Wales. Swansea had become the centre of a new industrial and commercial area with the expansion of coal mining and copper smelting in the area in the 18th and early 19th century. The combination of a distinctively diverse, cosmopolitan, rapidly expanding population, a flourishing provincial science movement and a strong commercial and industrial base secured its pre-eminent and unique status in the urban history of early 19th century Wales. In 1835 a group of local eminent men such as the geologist Sir Henry de la Beche; the industrialist J.H. Vivian; the conchologist John George Jeffreys; and the pioneer of fuel cell technology Sir William Grove, came together under the leadership of G. Grant Francis, antiquary, restorer of Oxwich Castle and founder member of the CAA, to create the Swansea Philosophical and Literary Society. Gaining Queen Victoria's patronage, the society was re-titled the Royal Society of South Wales in 1838. It then opened a museum, the first in Wales, in a neo-classical building completed fields and specialises in promoting Swansea and its history. The Museum galleries include the very fine chronologically-arranged display of local ceramics, and also house interesting collections of social history, archaeology and art, and a splendidly period display of natural history material.

We then visited the **Glynn Vivian Art Gallery** which was built to house the collection offered to the Corporation of Swansea in 1905 by the philanthropist Glynn Vivian along with a sizeable bequest. He had inherited a quarter of the fortune of his father, the copper baron John Henry Vivian, when he was 19, and leaving his brothers to oversee the business Glynn chose to spend his life travelling and collecting an eclectic mix of art works. The building, in Edwardian Baroque style, was opened in 1911, added to in the 1970s, and extensively refurbished in a £6m project before reopening in 2016. In addition to extensive collections and displays of European and British ceramics the Gallery holds a fine collection of Welsh and other art and has a strong programme of temporary exhibitions and activities. We enjoyed particularly the current '*Tigers & Dragons*' exhibition displaying the historical links between Wales and India.



After lunch we moved to **Parc Howard Museum** in Llanelli, based in an Italianate mansion completed for James Buckley in 1886 succeeding the earlier Bryncaerau which belonged to the Stepney estate. The two-storey house with its belvedere and urn-topped balustrade hiding its low roof has square-headed windows to the ground floor and arch-headed ones above, and is fronted by a central three-arched *porte cochere*. The house and grounds were opened to the public by the Stepney heiress, Lady Katherine Howard, to celebrate her marriage in 1912, a situation ratified when Llanelli Borough Council bought the house and 24 acres of gardens and grounds from the Stepney estate in 1965. The house and its contents included a large collection of Llanelli pottery donated by Lady Katherine. The museum, operated by Carmarthenshire's CofGâr museum service, was recently extensively refurbished. A well-presented gallery on the ground floor traces the history of the pottery, laying stress on the workers and their lives as well as the products, with another gallery dedicated to art; upstairs galleries trace the



history of the town and local sportswomen, as well as an interactive exhibition of magic and trickery. We were met by Robert Pugh who gave us a comprehensive introduction to the products of the Llanelli Pottery. The closure of the Glamorgan Pottery in 1838 had created a gap in the market, and local businessman William Chambers started the South Wales Pottery in 1839 to meet the demand. By the 1850s the site was employing 120 people, some from Swansea but many from Staffordshire, making some 24,000 items every week. Everyday bowls, plates and transfer-printed decorative items were bought locally but also world-wide.

On Saturday evening Eurwyn Wiliam gave an introduction to the Nantgarw China Works. Between 1813 and 1823 the renowned porcelain factory established by William Billingsley made 'the finest porcelain in the world' (Henry Sandon). However, Billingsley's recipe was expensive and difficult to fire, and he took all the risks himself and failed to make a profit. Most of the products were shipped for decoration in London. The site was then turned by the Pardoe family into a country pottery making useful items to meet local needs, specialising in the production of clay smoking pipes and becoming the largest pipe factory in Wales. That activity ceased in 1920 and many of the buildings fell into ruin. In 1989 the site was saved and partly restored for the local authority, who operated it as a museum, an activity that carries on today under the auspices of the Nantgarw China Works Trust. The structures behind the house are a scarce and important survival – the only place in Wales with visible remains of a porcelain works, historical pottery or clay tobacco-pipe factory, and rare in the UK. Its bottle ovens are the only ones left in Wales: one was largely dismantled and rebuilt in 1996 and another consolidated and protected from the elements. The site is also base for three ceramicists who teach as well as producing their own wares; Sally Stubbings also makes items from Billingsley's recipe, recreated accurately after a crowd-funding campaign hosted by the Art Fund in 2017-18.

The lecture was followed by the presentation by our Chairman Sian Rees of the annual *Gwobr Archaeoleg Cambria/Cambrian Archaeological Prize* awarded to Fiona Gray-Davies.

Our last visit was to **Nantgarw China Works** on Sunday morning. Here David Higgins spoke about the history and technology of clay pipe-making, tracing the evolution of pipes from the earliest 16th-century ones with tiny bowls because tobacco was so expensive. Some early pipes were made in wooden moulds, using white 'ball clay' sourced from Devon and Dorset. In the early 17th century Bristol pipes dominated the south Wales market before local makers established themselves throughout the area, but Broseley became influential towards the end of the century: 30 Broseley makers were represented at Llanmaes, for example. Liverpool became influential from the 1770s before local production strengthened in the 19th century with larger businesses using Broseley forms, continuing until Nantgarw's closure in 1920 and a Canton (Cardiff) maker in 1929.



David's lecture was most usefully complemented by apprentice pipe-maker Aaron Mathews displaying the craft. Members were equally fascinated to hear Sally Stubbings explaining the difficulties of working with Billingsley's porcelain using modern machinery, and how remarkable it was that his firing losses were only 90%! The meeting, organised by Eurwyn Wiliam, closed at lunchtime.

Eurwyn Wiliam