



# Celebrating the Chartists

## NEWSLETTER

### A report by Les James

The 7th Chartist Convention was held at the University City Campus, Newport on Saturday 2nd November 2013 and at least 150 people participated in the day's proceedings. This annual event is a forum intended to discuss the history and heritage of Chartism and is currently organised and funded on a voluntary basis by the Chartist Anniversary Committee. We are grateful for the continued support given by Accent Newport Trust, Gwent Archives and the University of South Wales, which generously provided use of campus facilities. In particular, we wish to thank Dr. Carl Peters, Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Life Sciences and Education for his longstanding interest in our work and we look forward to a developing relationship with SWCHIR - the South Wales Centre for Historical and Interdisciplinary Research at the University.

The arrival of Michael Sheen during the Convention afternoon session was very welcome – and his message timely. The Argus (03/11/2013) summed up his brilliant speech in its front page headline "Time to Move On! – stop rows and build new Chartist symbol, says star". He very definitely asserted the 'spirit of Chartism'. There always was more to Chartism than simply the right to vote and Sheen caught the mood – His challenge "let



us live as if they are all living again through us". We anticipate and hope that we will see more of Michael Sheen in Newport over the next twelve months as we approach the 175th Anniversary. It is good to know that we have a dramatic artist of great international reputation

taking such a direct interest in our activities, and so determined that we abide by the 'spirit of Chartism'

There has undoubtedly been a renewed interest this autumn in the Chartist story. Other events in the week following the Convention have been equally successful in attracting interest – such as the several Blaenau Gwent events, as well as a variety of activities in Newport. The remembrance ceremony at St. Woolos churchyard had a doubling of attendance to fifty. The 'Night Out' performance at St. Mary's Institute was a full house; our thanks to South Wales Arts for their support yet again. Most importantly the Children's March down Stow Hill to Westgate Square (organised by Annette Wells, Pat Drewett and drama teacher, Jamie Jarvis) involved seven local schools and attracted much public attention.

The Children's March requires big organisation and finance, and was rescued this year late in the day by Community First agreeing funding. If this event is to involve more schools and comply with increased health and safety regulations then Newport CC has got to take command and planning must begin immediately before 2014 – volunteers and freelance people can play vital supportive roles, but the core organisers should be City Council employees.

The sixth Annual Merthyr Chartist Lecture *The Chartist Endurance at Merthyr* was delivered by Huw Williams at Dowlais Library on Wednesday 16th October. The new University of South Wales is a product of the merger of the University of Wales, Newport and the University of Glamorgan and it is envisaged that next year's 175th Chartist Rising Anniversary programme will encompass the popular 'rising' that occurred during the weekend 2nd- 5th November 1839 throughout south east Wales. Events at Newport and the Gwent Valleys must remain the core of

our weekend programme, but we also plan to create a longer period programme that includes events at Merthyr, Pontypridd and Cardiff.

**Please Note:** The University City Campus, Newport is booked for the Convention to be held there on Saturday 1st November 2014.

## Historical Research

Although it makes no decisions, the Convention exists so ideas can flourish and community based activities take off. The press chose to ignore the great news announced at this year's Convention - the start up in 2014 of the digital 'Trials to Trails' project. This project will provide opportunities for people worldwide to connect with our celebrations of the 175th Anniversary Year of the South Wales Rising and if they wish, engage in transcribing documents that reveal fascinating details of the 1839 Rising. Colin Gibson (Gwent Archives) is waiting to hear from all who are interested in taking part in this innovative project, which seeks to democratise the study of Chartism. ([colin.gibson@gwentarchives.gov.uk](mailto:colin.gibson@gwentarchives.gov.uk))

The Committee took a very important step forward when we invited Professor Angela John (Aberystwyth University) to deliver this year's keynote lecture. She spoke about Margaret Thomas, militant suffragette, of Llanwern House, who attempted before the First World War to incinerate a post box in Newport and was subjected to 'forced feeding' during her time at Usk prison. In 1918 at the death of her father, she inherited the title, Viscountess Rhondda, and during the 1920s, through the pages of *Time and Tide* magazine, which she owned and edited, she promoted a new Six Point Charter for Women's rights. During the lunch break, brisk sales were reported of Angela's new biography of this remarkable woman who lived from 1883 to 1958 (*'Turning the Tide'* Parthian Books 2013, hardback £20). Future Conventions will need to take account of this hitherto 'forgotten' feminist heritage and ensure that the legacy of Chartism is given as much attention in our proceedings as the Rising of 1839.

Yet again the Convention continued the

mission it has pursued since its inauguration in 2007 of bringing 'hidden histories' to light. Sarah Richards, who lives in the north-east of England, added to our knowledge of the movements after the Rising of her ancestor William Davies, a Blackwood Chartist when she revealed the contents of letters, she discovered four years ago amongst papers passed down by a great-great-great aunt. And although the evidence is not conclusive, she is convinced that they support the longstanding claim that he and Ellen, Frost's daughter, did go to Australia sometime following their marriage.

Christabel Hutchings, a member of the Anniversary Committee, analysed the contents of a letter sent by a boy, aged seven, living in Cardiff to his older cousin, the son of the principal of the Baptist College in Pontypool. This is an important find that offers a glimpse of Cardiff Chartism and the fears that Chartists were experiencing in the wake of the 1839 Rising. Many were wrestling with their moral consciences as to how they could maintain their non-violent principles and yet resist tyrannous and unjust laws.

Both articles will appear in the Gwent Local History Journal. Tony Hopkins (Chief Archivist, Gwent Archives and editor of the Journal) has agreed, with the support of Prof. Ray Howell (Director of SWCHIR), to produce a Special Chartist Edition next year.

## 175th Anniversary

I do hope that during this coming year we can add to the collection of 'memorabilia' and documents associated with Chartist remembrance and celebration that David Osmond and Richard Frame assembled and displayed at this year's Convention. Also the three of us ask you to check out the 'Do you remember 1989?' chronology we put together and circulated at the Convention - hopefully we will get responses of events to add, stories to tell - if you need a copy, contact [les.james22@gmail.com](mailto:les.james22@gmail.com)

As we approach the 175th Anniversary, it is important that we look back to the past for inspiration and I am willing to deliver at other venues and to other organisations

in south Wales an updated version of my opening lecture at the convention *'The spirit of Chartism': a short history of activism, remembrance and commemoration since 1839'*. In that lecture, I attempted to set the historical background for an informed and open discussion as to where we go now that Newport CC is proposing to set up a committee to consider a replacement Chartist art work. The Chartist Anniversary Committee has yet to consider the findings of the questionnaire circulated at the 7th Convention. Pat Drewett (Accent Newport Trust [pat.drewett@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:pat.drewett@hotmail.co.uk)) has been busily consulting as many interested parties as possible and is identifying all available proposals. It is essential in this process that the Committee collaborates with other organisations, such as the Newport Civic Society and the Civic Trust for Wales, as well as with Newport C.C. and the Arts Council Wales, to get a feasibility study underway.

My view, as expressed in my lecture, is that we should start from the premise that the City already has a Chartist memorial, which Newport Borough Council, with the advice of the Arts Council and the Welsh Sculpture Trust, commissioned from the sculptor Chris Kelly. His bronzes (1991) stand in Westgate Square - the 'heartland of Chartist heritage' - and represent Newport's first attempt to go beyond the narrative of Chartism and tackle its meaning. Kelly embraced the 'spirit of Chartism' and argued that "everything the Chartists strove for is still relevant today". Kelly saw his work as "more than an adornment". His sculptures not only remember the Chartist dead from whom victory rises, but celebrate present day community and gender equality. This is a work that challenges complacency about the meaning of Chartism and insists that 'change comes through smashing up whole values'.

There are I think three main directions in which our deliberations might best proceed. Firstly, there is the educational imperative. Kenneth Budd's mural, never a memorial, was hugely important as an educational tool and in its 'virtual form' it can continue to perform this role as a digital 'art installation'. Ideally it could be placed inside the old Westgate hotel or a neighbouring building. As well as honouring

Budd's pictorial vindication of the Charter - a celebration of the five Chartist demands that were enacted by Parliament, held aloft by the marchers as they advance towards the Westgate hotel - it will provide a context for public appreciation of Kelly's sculptures and all the other Chartist art works and heritage locations within the City.

Secondly, there is a shorter and more immediate term project - attention could be given to adding to the existing memorial - Westgate square is where the Chartists shed their blood and here a floor mosaic inscribed with the twenty known names would be a very fitting way of giving greater meaning to the sculptures. This could surely be ready for Tuesday November 4th 2014 when the school children march down Stow Hill and unveil the twenty known names of the Chartists who died there - with a suitable dedication such as to '*all who have suffered death, injury, imprisonment, exile and deprivation in the struggle for greater democracy*'.

And thirdly, during the 175th Anniversary Year, there is going to be great scope for a variety of community based art and performance projects. Suggestions are many and varied and without prejudging the outcome, I think that one of the most exciting proposals that must be considered is a tapestry/embroidery. This idea has great potential and I ask why not a set of tapestries to be hanged in different locations such as St. Woolos Cathedral, St. Mary's Church, the University City Campus, Civic Centre, the Railway Station etc. - all made by the various communities that live in the City. Without doubt, the 175th Anniversary will hopefully be a very creative year for Newport - if we are prepared to be imaginative and collaborative.