

**Newsletter** – August 2023

**St John’s House in August**

For the past month we’ve been celebrating the fact that the Charitable Trust actually owns St John’s House.

We are ready plough ahead with repairs and improvements to ensure that this historic building remains at the heart of our community and we have launched our ongoing support scheme so that everyone has the chance to help maintain and improve the building for the benefit of Bridgend.

**For details of how to donate, please see click here**

In the meantime it’s business as usual and we have been engaging in some live archeology, knocking out the modern infill where we suspected there was a bread oven alongside the hearth in the Great Hall. Because St John’s House is a Grade ll\* listed building, before anyone could raise a hammer or chisel we had to apply to the Local Authority Conservation Team for listed building consent. They consulted a variety of relevant experts and agreed that we could go ahead. Even then we have to have an archeologst overseeing the work and all of the material removed has to be documented so that, if necessary, it could be replaced. It may seem a bit of a palaver but we are happy to comply because it means that unique historic structures, like St John’s House, are properly protected against ill-judged, inappropriate or unforeseen damage to the fabric of the building.

We’ll have photos of the results of the work in the next newsletter.

**Dates for your diary**

**Next open day** Sunday 13th August 2023 11am-3pm Saturday 26th August 2023 11am-3pm

Sunday 10th September 2023 11am-3pm Saturday 30th September 2023 11am-3pm

**Next two quiz dates** Friday 18th August 2023 7.30pm

Friday 15th September 2023 7.30pm

The Dissolution of the Monasteries

St John’s House dates from 1511/1512 and from the religious-themed stone plaques originally on the front of the house we think, in the absence of any written evidence to the contrary, that it was a hospice. In those days a hospice was a stopping off place for pilgrims on their way to St Davids, probably belonging to one of the major abbeys with property in this area. By this time the heyday of the abbeys had passed and there was a slow decline in the numbers of men and women dedicating themselves to the monastic life.

Henry Vlll declared himself Head of the Church of England in 1533 though he saw himself as heading up an essentially Catholic church. Thomas Cromwell, Henry’s vicar-general, vividly portrayed in Hilary Mantel’s Wolf Hall trilogy, saw the opportunity to balance the royal books and ordered enquiries to be made into the spiritual and financial state, of all monasteries and nunneries.

They found that a number were not living a properly monastic life and drew up the Suppression Act of 1536, effectively nationalizing any religious house with an income less than £200 per year. The Act was relatively generous, providing life pensions for those whose institutions were closed. However unrest gradually grew and this resulted in the larger abbeys being advised to ‘voluntarily’ surrender their property to the Crown. Those in charge of the institutions chose to do so in order to secure the best deal for themselves and their members. This created a kind of domino effect and by 1539 there were no religious houses remaining in England or Wales.

The rise of Protestantism in Germany in the early 1500s and the perception that the occupants of monasteries and nunneries were idle and dissolute led Henry Vlll to reject Catholicism. The 1536 Act had provided for the assets and funds of the religious houses to be redirected to better purposes but, in actual fact, all of the money went to the Crown and the religious items containing jewels and precious metals were confiscated by the Crown In many cases the buildings themselves were stripped of the lead from their roofs which was melted down to use as shot and this hastened their decay.

If St John’s House was indeed a hospice belonging to a large Monastery then it would have been sold off sometime around then. We know that by the 1770s it was a private house and it seems likely that its transition to domestic dwelling took place in the early 1540s, barely thirty years after it was built. It is possible that the extension at the front of the house, adding the two rooms above and alongside the porch date from somewhere around this period, altering the building to better fit its new role as a dwelling house. All this, of course, remains conjecture until we find some evidence of what happened to St John’s House at this time.

St John’s House is a charity, our charity number is 1147340

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