



E-NEWSLETTER JANUARY 2026

ROATH LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

The Society was founded in 1978 by the late Alec Keir. Our focus is on the ancient parish of Roath - the modern-day suburbs of Adamsdown, Splott, Tremorfa, Pengam, Plasnewydd, Penylan, parts of Cathays and Cyncoed as well as Roath itself.

Our lively and interesting meetings are held at 7.30pm on the second Wednesday of the month from September through to May. See [Programme](#) for details. We meet at [St Edward's church](#), Westville Road, Pen-y-lan, Cardiff CF23 5DE. Annual membership is just £13 ([membership form](#)) and visitors are welcome to attend any meeting, in person or on Zoom for £3.

In May, June and July we undertake a series of trips to places of historic interest in Cardiff and the wider South Wales area.

Our Life President is Jeff Childs and our Life Members, appointed in recognition of the service they have given to the Society, are Dr Diane Brook, Gwyn Smith, Judith Hunt, Peter Gillard, Martin Sheldon and David Parry.

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EDITOR'S WELCOME

A very Happy New year to all our members! I'm not one for New Year's Resolutions, but on reading a newspaper from some years back, I had to admire the resolution of a 25 year-old Cardiff man to "go straight". One minute after midnight on New Year's Day, he handed himself in at a police station, where he was wanted for failing to answer bail. He was held overnight and brought before the Magistrates' Court the next morning. In view of his new-found good intentions, he was sentenced to one day in custody, to be spent sitting in the back of the court and was then was released on bail again on the original charge. I hope it was a resolution he managed to keep!

It's hard to believe that we are almost halfway through our 2025/2026 programme of talks – I have very much enjoyed our speakers' contributions to date, and look forward to the remaining talks of the year.

Lastly, I leave you with a puzzle. On what building in Roath might you find this crest? It's one that I have walked past hundreds, if not thousands of times, but I was oblivious to its content.



Jon Roberts
Newsletter Editor

DID THE NEANDERTHALS OCCUPY THE CARDIFF REGION?

The primary archaeological evidence of that species, separate from but closely related to *homo sapiens*, being in Wales came from caves in the north and south-west. At Pontnewydd in Denbighshire and the Coygan Cave in Carmarthenshire. The teeth and a jawbone fragment from five individuals dating to about 230,000 years ago were discovered in the river Elwy Valley site near St Asaph whilst at Coygan near Laugharne, two handaxes of Neanderthal technology dated between 60,000 and 35,000 years ago were found, but no trace of the remains of their owner. The limestone areas in the Gower are also of significance as Palaeolithic material of the Aurignacian period, including tools used by Neanderthals and *homo sapiens* have been discovered. The Paviland cave (between Port Eynon and Rhosilli), famous for its Red "Lady" (who turned out to be a 33,000 year-old male), was occupied by Neanderthals. Closer to Roath, an Acheulean era handaxe of quartzite from the Lower Palaeolithic period was discovered in an allotment at Pen-y-lan that had been used for butchery some 300,000 years ago during the Ice Age. Further away a flint handaxe of the Palaeolithic was unearthed at Blaenavon and evidence of Neanderthal settlement has also been found at Merthyr Mawr. I feel it safe, therefore, to believe that those hominins did occupy parts of southeast Wales.



The remains of the Paviland "Red Lady"
Credit: Ethan Doyle White at English Wikipedia, [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)

Who were the Neanderthals? First to set the scene. The Palaeolithic or early Stone Age period is the time popularly known as the Ice Age. Very cold periods known as glacials saw ice covering all of Wales. There were also interglacials, warm periods similar to today's climate. Against this backdrop of changing climate our earliest ancestors, the Neanderthals, evolved from their African origins and migrated across Europe and Asia. Evidence suggests that they arrived in Britain as far back as 400,000 years ago, linked to a warm interglacial period when a land bridge connected Britain to the European continent. With later returns and periods of absence as climates changed, they intermittently occupied Britain until about 42,000-35,000 years ago. More about their extinction later. *Homo sapiens* arrived around 40,000 years ago, with initial visits being sporadic until continuous settlement began about 12,000 years ago, evidenced by finds at Kent's Cavern in Devon. There is also good evidence to show that the Neanderthals not only lived peacefully alongside the modern man present but intermingled and bred.

But physically they were different. The Neanderthals were fairly short and stocky, had ridges under their eyebrows, big square jaws and teeth larger than ours are today. They were also characterised by barrel chests and large brains. They were hunters and their tools show that they had to get close to their prey to kill. And some of their food sources were of daunting size and it is believed that they may have been drawn to Britain by mammoth and rhino herds. The very large number of broken bones from skeletons excavated across Europe suggest that they may have often come off worse from their encounters with their prey.

A site near Pulborough in West Sussex has thrown remarkable new light on the life of northern Europe's last Neanderthals, and there is no reason to believe that those who inhabited south-east Wales were any different. Dr Matthew Pope of Archaeology South East, based at the University College of London's Institute of Archaeology, recorded the following about what he described as a thriving developing population rather than communities on the verge of extinction. *"The impression given is of a population in complete command of both landscape and natural raw materials with a flourishing technology. The exceptional collection of tools appears to represent the sophisticated hunting kit of a Neanderthal population which was only a few millennia from complete disappearance in the region."*

A further site, also in West Sussex, in a quarry at Boxgrove has also revealed unexpected information about our ancestors and again it seems to me is applicable to what was happening in the Cardiff region. It provides direct evidence of hunting and butchering by the early Neanderthals. The site was discovered by archaeologist Andrew Woodcock and geologist Roy Shephard-Thorn in 1974, Woodcock recording exceptionally well-preserved Acheulean artefacts of the same period as the Pen-y-lan axehead.



Reconstruction of a Neanderthal butchering his prey

Credit: Neanderthal-Museum, Mettmann, CC BY-SA 4.0, [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)



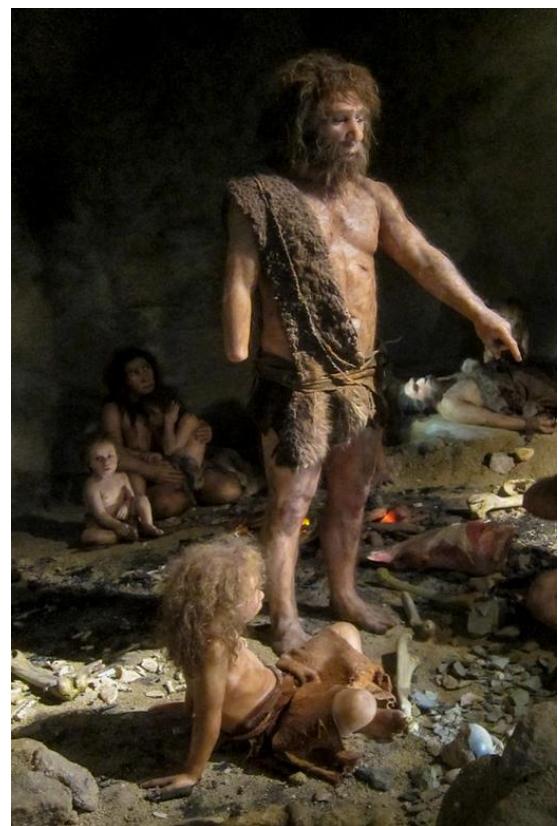
Some of the Boxgrove flints, kept in the British Museum

Credit: User Fae on English Wikipedia [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)

Finds from the Boxgrove excavations include two lower incisor teeth from an early Neanderthal which show cut-marks, potentially from a food processing activity where the mouth was used as a third hand. There was also clear evidence at Boxgrove of Neanderthals making their stone tools to butcher animals. From the flakes they were chipping to make handaxes and their location it was clear that they were working systematically and co-operatively. Were those hominins in south-east Wales living a similar lifestyle? I conjecture that they were. Mike Pitts and Mark Roberts's book "Fairweather Eden - Life in Britain half a million years ago as revealed by the excavations at Boxgrove" is the story through the eyes of those involved in over ten years of archaeological excavation at Boxgrove. It makes for very interesting reading.

Back to Wales. That little of the Palaeolithic period has been found in the Cardiff region may be due to several factors. First, the two main Paleolithic sites are caves where the Neanderthals sought shelter in glacial times and there is only one cave in the immediate region which may contribute to the lack of finds. The Lesser Garth cave has given up archaeological artefacts but not from as far back as the Palaeolithic. Secondly, coastal erosion may have destroyed cave sites used by those hominins. Any dwellings in the open would have been constructed with wooden frames and animal skins and have not survived. Thirdly, given the extremes of climate the Neanderthals may not have resided permanently in the area but sought warmer climes. Why they became extinct is still the subject of much debate. Climate change may have made their specialised ice age life difficult and intense competition with homo sapiens for resources could have contributed to their demise. A further cause may have been a potentially genetic assimilation through interbreeding leading to smaller fragmented groups unable to cope with pressures like disease or resource scarcity.

What is certain is that, in a way, they live on as those of non-African ancestry living in Cardiff or nearby today carry 1-2% Neanderthal DNA, inherited from interbreeding between homo sapiens and Neanderthals in Eurasia tens of thousands of years ago.



A recreation of Neanderthal fossil remains

Credit: [Michael \(a.k.a. moik\) McCullough](#) on Flickr [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#)

Addendum

A recently excavated site near the village of Barnham in Suffolk gives further insight into the lives of those hominins. Evidence of deliberate fire making and its control was found. Two fragments of iron pyrite also known as "fool's gold" were discovered and when struck with flint the mineral produces sparks. As iron pyrite is not naturally found in the local geology it is felt that it must have been deliberately taken to the site for the purpose of making fire. Several flint handaxes were found to be shattered by intense heat, suggesting that they were deliberately placed by the fire, possibly for heat treatment to improve tool making. Those Neandertals were clearly skilled at tool making and may well have been seeking ways of improving their tool producing ability. While no human remains were found at Barnham, fossil evidence from a nearby site at Swancombe in Kent from the same period suggests that the inhabitants were likely early Neanderthals.

The discovery not only pushes back considerably the timeline for deliberate fire making by some 350,000 years from previous estimates but throws light on the cognitive skills as well as social capabilities of those early occupants of Britain. I see no reason to believe that those who occupied south-east Wales were not also so well endowed. Controlled use of fire was a landmark in human evolution for several reasons. It importantly provided warmth essential for survival in those extremely harsh conditions. Cooking enabled vastly improved diets and easier and safer digestion of meat. Also very significantly those fires may have provided a kind of social hub Rob Davis of the British Museum suggests. Not only providing safety and comfort but allowing the people to possibly feed and gather as communities.

Les Phillips

As usual I'm very grateful to Jon Roberts for searching and securing appropriate illustrations.

As I have written several archaeological articles for the Newsletter it might be helpful to add my archaeological credentials. I took an honours degree in archaeology at the then University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire 65 years ago, with Professor Richard Atkinson, Leslie Alcock and Mike Jarrett as my lecturers. There were three of us undergraduates. Due to the then paucity of jobs in archaeology I joined The British Council: the other two eventually secured jobs in museums and made their mark. As an undergraduate I was involved in excavations of the Roman fort at Corbridge, just south of Hadrian's Wall, and at a smaller fort at Llanio near Lampeter, a dig in front of the wall of Cardiff Castle, excavations of a motte and bailey in the Gower and platform houses and a Bronze age barrow in then Radnorshire. After graduation my fellow class mate, Gareth Davies, and I excavated two early Bronze age cairns at Cefn Rhigos, Hirwaun.

During my posting in Spain I enjoyed the very good friendship of the Deputy Director of the National Museum of Archaeology, Juan Zozaya Stabel-Hansen, and I was a member of the Joint Spanish-British team that dug annually at the Moorish Gormaz Castle in the Province of Soria. In my six years in Pakistan although I was not involved in any excavations, I spent much time with Pakistani archaeologists and

through the British Council brought out a British consultant to advise on conservation work. My farewell event given by the Archaeological Society of Pakistan was held in the Mughal Gardens at Wah near Islamabad and the fountains were turned on for the first time in centuries. The doyen of Pakistani archaeologists and another good friend of mine, Dr AH Dani, and I co-starred in a film about Sir John Marshall, the British archaeologist who led major excavations at ancient Taxila uncovering its vast Buddhist ruins and Gandhara art in the early 20th century. Surprisingly we were never nominated for Oscars and I doubt if the film made the Cardiff cinema circuit. After retirement in 2000 I have read widely on British prehistory here on the stoep (patio) of our house in Joburg with the Cradle of Mankind just a few miles up the road.

I was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London in the early 90's and a Fellow of Cardiff University in the late 80's not for anything to do with archaeology but for helping promote my alma mater overseas. To complete the honours, I was awarded an OBE in 1994, as were many of us British Council officers who did a good job and reached a certain grade. I received an honorary Doctorate of Letters from de Montfort University in 1998, again for my role in promoting British higher education. Finally, I'm a very proud member of the Shinwari tribe of the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan, though unlike many Pathans, I do not shoulder an AK47.

New Year's Day in Cardiff Docks

by Jon Roberts

Although the docks are not part of the old parish of Roath, many of those who lived in Roath owed their livelihoods to the dock trade – shipowners, agents, brokers, insurers, repairers, dock workers, coal trimmers etc, etc., so Roath was very much dependent on the docks trade. Cardiff daily newspapers used to report on “*shipping intelligence*”, the arrivals and departures of ships in Cardiff Docks, announcing their names, tonnage, port of origin or destination, cargo type and sometimes the customer

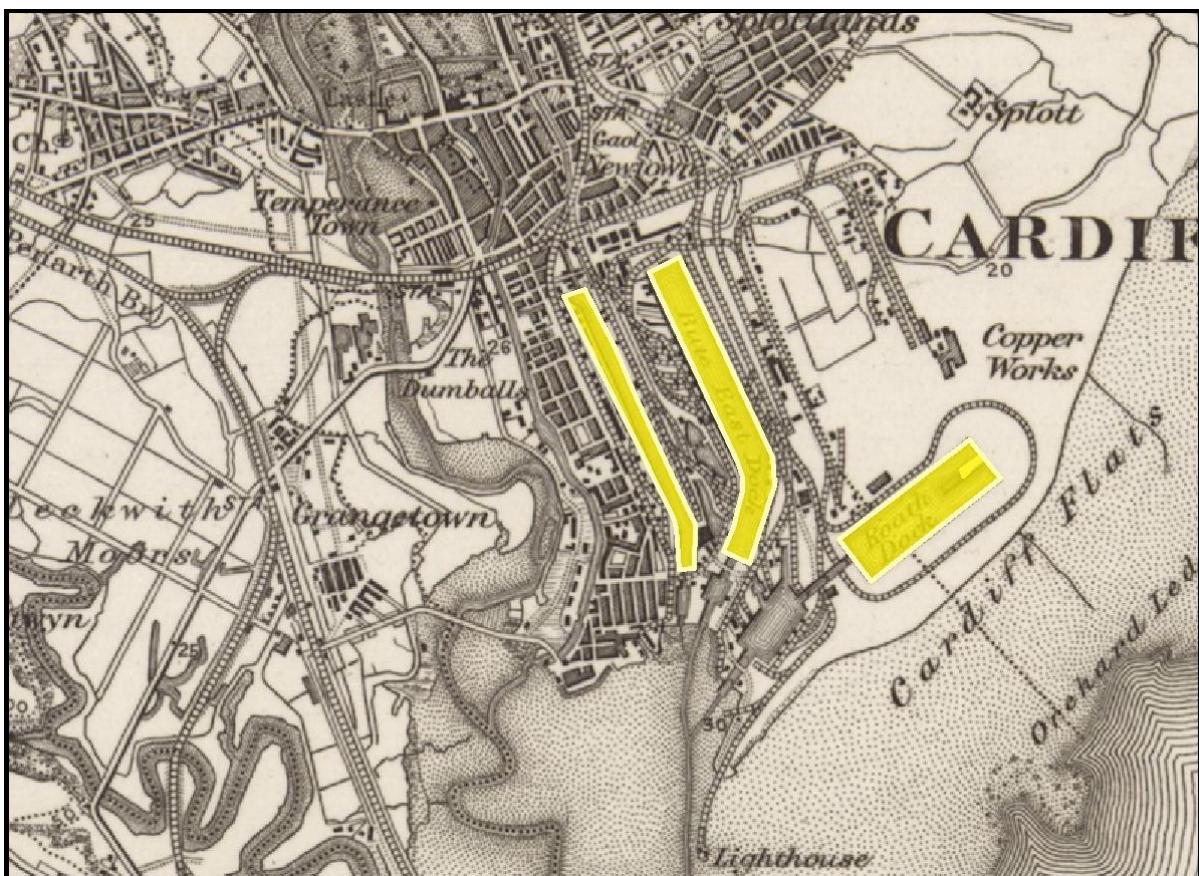
Taking one day as an example, 1 January 1883, there were 39 ships that arrived in the three Cardiff Docks on that day – no New Year's Day holiday for their crews, or the dockers handling their cargo. It will come as no surprise that every ship leaving Cardiff Docks on that day had but one cargo – coal. But the incoming cargo was more varied.

The split for the docks was as follows:

East Bute Dock – 19 ships

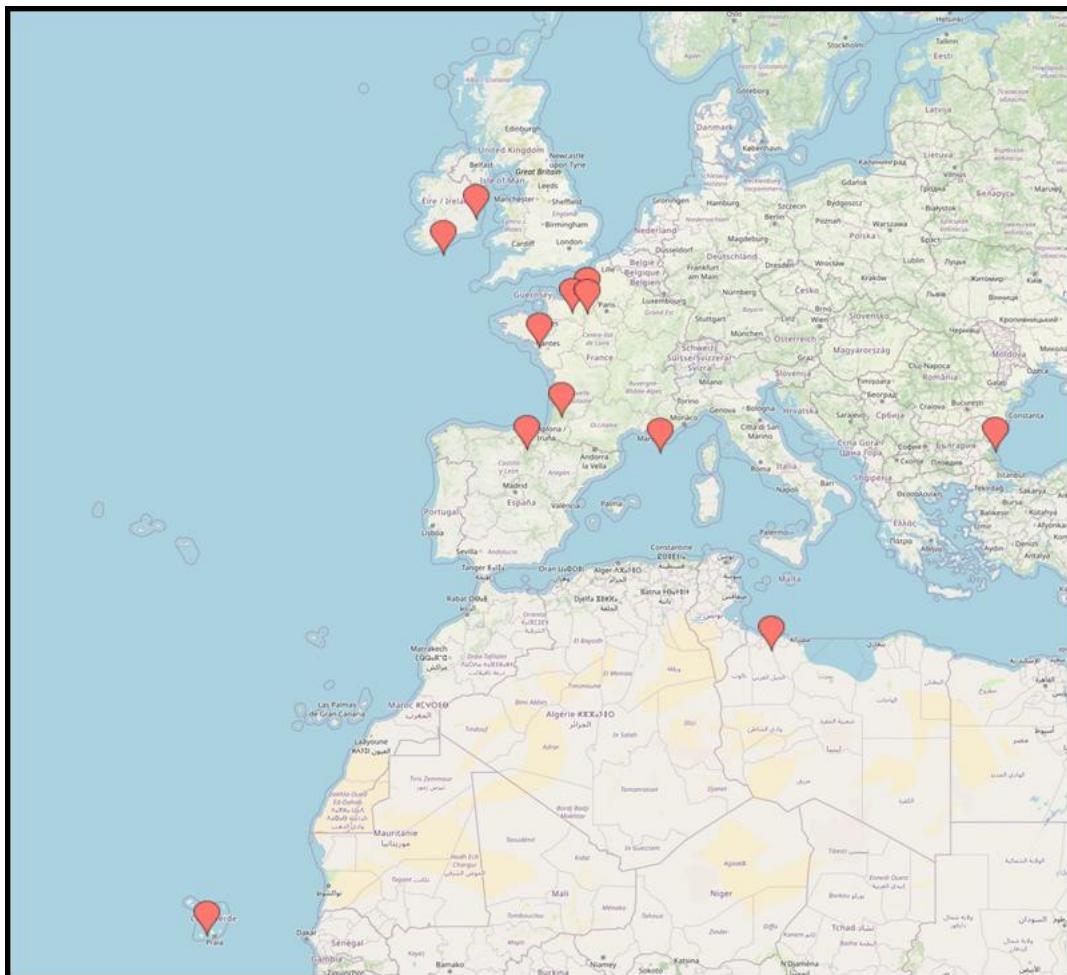
West Bute Docks – 16 ships

Roath Basin – 4 ships



The vast majority of the incoming voyages were from UK ports, carrying “light goods”, about which we know no more. Of those, many were local to Cardiff – Newport, Bristol, Avonmouth, Bridgwater, Gloucester and Highbridge, whilst more distant domestic ports included London, Liverpool and Glasgow. The most common foreign country of origin was

France – potatoes and onions from the Brittany ports of St Malo, Roscoff, and St Brieux, pitprops from Marseilles and Bordeaux, and a smattering of light goods from the Channel ports of Dieppe and Le Havre. Spain was the next most common exporter – iron ore for the Dowlais Works in Merthyr from Bilbao, and pitprops from Sada (in Galicia).



Goods also came from more far-flung ports – esparto (a kind of grass used for making baskets – a new one on me) came from Tripoli in Libya, wheat made the long voyage via the Black Sea and the Dardanelles from Varna in Bulgaria, and ballast made the return journey from Cape Verde. More light goods came from Cork and Dublin.

Most of the ships were fairly small – 17 were under 100 tons, whilst 20 were between 100 and 1000 tons, with only 2 being over 1000 tons.

One entry puzzled me, described as “Excel, 22, Roads, 5 anchors and chains”. My guess is that this refers to a salvage vessel (only 22 tons) which recovered anchors and chains lost from ships at anchorage in the Bristol Channel (the “roads”). My rudimentary research revealed that there were a great many vessels which became separated from their anchors and chains in the Channel due to its very high tidal range and because of the large number of wrecks littering the seabed, which would regularly snag anchors. A nice catch!

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Elizabeth Morgan, RLHS Programme and Events Organiser

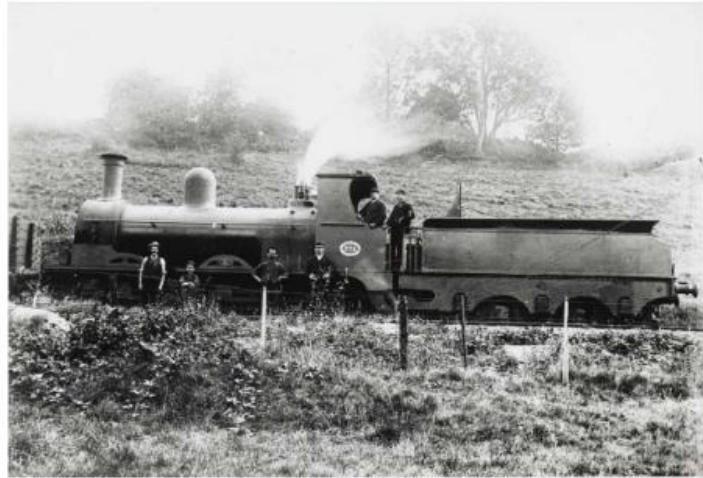
ROATH LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

WEDNESDAY, 14th JANUARY, 2026 TAFF VALE RAILWAY BOB PRICE

Did you know that a busy railway once ran along the edge of Roath Park? For decades, this line transported thousands of tonnes of Welsh coal to Cardiff Docks - yet today almost no trace of it remains.

Join local railway history YouTuber Bob Price as we uncover the story of this forgotten branch line: why it was built, how it operated, and what became of it.

We'll also explore the clues still visible in the landscape today, if you know where to look.



Taff Vale loco at Ynysybwl circa 1900.
People's Collection Wales © Pontypridd Library.



Remains of a bridge, in Wedel Road,
that went over the Taff Vale branch line.

SAINT EDWARD'S MUSIC & ARTS CENTRE

Westville Road, Roath, Cardiff. CF23 5DE.

EVERYBODY WELCOME!

Doors open at **7.00pm** - Meeting starts at **7.30pm**.

For live-stream Zoom Link contact **Jon Roberts** on:

RLHSZoom@gmail.com

GUESTS *in-person, or online* £3.00

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP £13.00

OTHER LOCAL HISTORY LINKS



Rumney and District Local History Society

Their meetings are held at 7:30pm on the second Thursday of every month (excepting January and August) at Rumney Baptist Church Hall, Tyr-Y-Sarn Road, Rumney, CF3 3BD.

There will be no talk in January – the annual luncheon takes place on 8 January.

The annual subscription is £20 and visitors can pay £3 per meeting.

Find the Rumney and District Local History Society on Facebook at
<https://www.facebook.com/rumneyhistory>

Grangetown Local History Society



At the time of going to press, no details of their future talks were available, but have a look at their [website](#).

British Association for Local History

The Roath Local History Society is a member of the British Association for Local History. Their website www.balh.org.uk/ offers a varied collection of local history stories, 10-minute videos and loads of helpful ways of researching local history. Some is of general relevance, but there are also pieces on very specialised subjects. Have a look at back issues of *The Local Historian* at <https://www.balh.org.uk/thelocalhistorian>. Members of the BALH are also entitled to a [discount on](#) courses. If you'd like the code to obtain the discount, please email me.



If you wish to be kept up to date on events held by BALH, please subscribe to their mailing list at <https://www.balh.org.uk/#subscribe>

Roath Local History Society on the web

There's also lots of Roath history on the [RLHS website](#), and in the excellent blog posts – do subscribe. There is also the re-energised [Facebook group](#) which has lots of interesting posts and comments. You need merely to answer 2 simple questions to join. And find us at [roath_history](#) on Instagram.

Latest blog stories are:

- [Memories of a Steelworks Electrician](#)
- [Preswylfa School, 82 Pen-y-lan Road](#)
- [Confessions, Opinions and Autographs of my Friends: The Story of an Autograph Album owned by Alice Tovey](#)
- [Mary Traynor](#)

Louvain Rees | [hellohistoria](#)

Louvain Rees's [Hellohistoria](#) blogposts are well worth a follow. She is a BBC Award-winning social historian, specialising in Bridgend and her primary research interests are paupers, poor law, lunacy, and poverty between 1790 and 1921. She confesses to a taste for death and graveyards.

[GET IN TOUCH](#)

For newsletter feedback and submissions contact:

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To request loans from the R.L.H.S. Archive, contact:

Geraint at Denison-Kurg@outlook.com or  (029) 2048 8358.

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