

A statue for Lady Charlotte Guest?

Members of the Denbigh and District Probus Club enjoyed a wonderful lunch at the Oriol Hotel, St Asaph recently at their October meeting followed by an excellent talk on Lady Charlotte Guest – another suggestion for a statue of a woman in Wales, from the Ven. E. Bernard Thomas.

Bernard Thomas, who was born in Pontardawe, Swansea Valley, attended Ysgol Ramadeg Pontardawe and Swansea University where he read Chemistry. He then studied for a post graduate degree in Theology at Cardiff and was ordained in 1971 at Llandaff Cathedral. He served in the curacies in Aberdare and Barry, and then was Rector of Dowlais and Vicar of Maesteg. In 1999, he moved to the diocese of St Asaph as Archdeacon and was also, Rector of Llandyrnog and Llangwyfan retiring in 2014.

Bernard told members how after his 51 years in public ministry, he reflected that things are very different now and society in general, and the Church in particular, has changed enormously, especially in regard to women.

The Church he grew up in was totally male dominated and remained so for many decades afterwards and he reflected on how, with some pride he set out his credentials as a very early rebel and challenger to these accepted norms and he shared many examples of when he tried to vote in changes in favour of women.

When he became Rector of the Parish of Dowlais in 1976 he was greatly inspired by one of the heroines of that place who succeeded in establishing herself as a formidable contributor to many aspects of life in mid nineteenth century Britain, Lady Charlotte Guest. He told of her marriage to widowed industrialist and Member of Parliament for Merthyr Tydfil, who was twenty-seven years her senior, John Josiah Guest whose father had started iron making in Dowlais and how John Guest had built it up to be the iron capital of the world.

Lady Charlotte bore John Guest ten children, five boys and five girls and their names are immortalized in the street names of Dowlais, streets which under the encouragement of Lady Charlotte were renovated and re named to improve the lot of the workers.

She also began to immerse herself in the local culture and decided to learn Welsh, making rapid progress. Just a month after arriving in Dowlais she penned her own translation of part of Mark's gospel.

Her other achievements included the translation of the enormously important Mabinogion, (these are the earliest British prose stories compiled in Middle Welsh in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries), into readable English, a version which remains the official and received translation of this enormously important part of Welsh culture and literary tradition.

She also learnt about the intricacies of the steam engine through a detailed examination of a static engine used to emboss the railway line pieces with the letters DIC and iron making through the use of a hot air blast in the process, becoming more of an expert than anyone else in this.

Following her husband's death, Lady Charlotte set about running the iron making business herself and it prospered even more. She obtained lucrative contracts the world over to supply railway lines, and vastly improved the water supply to the works and to the community, virtually ending cholera outbreaks.

Poor eyesight in her later years made it difficult for her to maintain her daily diary entries which she had done unbroken since the age of ten. Her precious beautifully crafted diary writings are in the National Library in Aberystwyth, including many favourite poems and sonnets of her favourite authors written in her own hand, many in Italian with her own translations.

Lady Charlotte died on the 15th January 1895 at the age of 82. Members were certainly convinced that she deserves a statue in Wales - perhaps outside the Guest Memorial Library in Dowlais and maybe it will depict her holding a copy of the Mabinogion!

Denbigh and District Probus Club welcomes new members to join our group for monthly meetings (held at the Oriel House, St Asaph) where we enjoy lunch, friendship and a stimulating guest speaker. For further information contact Keith Lester, Secretary, kl@6fl.net or call 07388 084361