

The story of Mulberry – a talk for Denbigh and District Probus Club

At the June meeting of the Denbigh and District Probus Club, members were delighted to welcome Vicky Macdonald who gave a talk about the Mulberry Harbour secret project in Conwy.

Vicky is the Secretary and Programme Coordinator for the Deganwy History Group. It was her membership with that group that started her many journeys into local history. She spent 5 years researching and writing a book about the now lost Deganwy Bathing Pool and Vicky's new project is to revive the name of one of Conwy's finest men, Archbishop John Williams. She has started giving talks about him, has started a Friends of AJW and is currently trying to name a road in Conwy after him. Vicky has also been Mayor of Conwy twice and started the Conwy Orchestra.

Vicky's interest in the Mulberry Harbour is because she lives on the opposite bank of the river Conwy from the construction location. She has also been in contact with the family of the engineer in charge of the design and construction and was able to show the group many photographs and drawings that are not in public circulation.

'Mulberry' was the codename for a project during the Second World War to build parts for two temporary portable harbours/structures that would be floated to northern France to aid the re-occupation in 1944, facilitating the rapid offloading of cargo onto beaches during the Allied invasion of Normandy.

The unsung hero was revealed in the talk, a gentleman named H. Iorlys Hughes. He came up with the idea of a floating harbour for the D-Day landings in France in 1944.

Iorlys was born in Bangor in 1902, and he lived in a house at the end of Bangor pier. He went to Friars School before studying engineering at Sheffield University. His family were keen sailors and he often raced on the Menai Strait with his father and two brothers and he was a competent diver.

After graduating, he established himself as a civil engineer in London. He designed the Hyde Park Underpass and Wembley Stadium. He also designed the dry dock that housed the clipper Cutty Sark until the terrible fire in 2007.

Early in the Second World War, Iorvys had the thought that a floating harbour might be needed later in the war, to help land soldiers and supplies on European soil without the problem and difficulty of capturing a heavily defended port first.

He sent his idea and drawings to the War Office but his idea was not taken up until his brother Sior Hughes, a Commander in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, promoted the scheme to a senior colleague and the idea was reconsidered.

In June 1942, Iorvys was asked to design plans for a prototype of a landing pier that could be towed to Normandy and installed on the shallow beaches. His plans were accepted and in October 1942 Morfa land was requisitioned. The whole project was top secret and locals had no idea what was being constructed and for what purpose. This was confirmed by a Probus club visitor, who remembered seeing the structures being built as he waited in Deganwy for the train to take him to school and he and his fellow pupils were oblivious to the significance of the work.

From 1942 to 1944, almost 1,000 men worked at Morfa Conwy, the beach and dune area north of the town where the estuary meets the sea and the three prototypes were built and launched quite close together at the mouth of the river Conwy. The locals were given sandbags to protect their properties but, in the event, they were not required!!

The constructions were the height of 3 houses (60 feet high) and the size of a football pitch with "hippos" (each one weighing 6,000 tonnes) being built first then the roads on top called "crops". Huge concrete caissons had to be submerged and needed to be stable and anchored. Each one had a plimsoll line to measure the depth of immersion.

These prototypes, together with two others, were tested in south-west Scotland having been towed there by tugs. The War Office decided that its own design was the best. The design selected – the TN5, was

designed by a Brigadier White. They had pierheads and poles and Morfa land was re-requisitioned to build the them.

lorys was kept on as a consultant. He worked on the calculations for a breakwater (called Phoenix), a set of reinforced concrete caissons to protect the piers known as the Mulberry Harbour.

Eventually, 2 Mulberry harbours were built for D-Day June 6, 1944.

Mulberry A was constructed off Omaha Beach to supply US forces.

Mulberry B was built off Gold Beach at Arromanches to supply British and Canadian troops. Mulberry A was destroyed in a storm a few days after it was built. Mulberry B was operational for 10 months after the landings.

After the war, lorys continued to practise from his London offices, designing many buildings and transport infrastructure for the city.

He never received the recognition for his wartime service that he deserved and he lost a lot of money having used his own office and staff to put the project together. He died in 1977 and his ashes were scattered on the Menai Strait.

He was not forgotten in Conwy however, and there is a memorial stone on the Morfa for him to remember what he did helping the war efforts.

Denbigh and District Probus Club welcomes new members to join their group for monthly meetings (held at the Oriel Hotel, St Asaph) where they enjoy lunch, friendship, and a talk from a guest speaker.

For further information have a look at the club web site **denbighprobus.com** or contact –

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Our next club meeting will be on Monday 3rd July followed by the meeting on Monday August 7th.

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