

The History of Abergavenny Art Group

Abergavenny Art Group was founded in April 1937 by Mrs Agnes Beverley-Burton whom some of our members still remember, together with Miss Grace Gethin-Davies, Headmistress of Abergavenny County High School for Girls, and Mr and Mrs Bulman who taught science at King Henry VIII Grammar School in Abergavenny. Their purpose was to provide an opportunity for young people to continue art activities after leaving school.

Mrs Beverley-Burton said, *"Children had a little art tuition at school, but when they left it was like having a door slammed in their faces, so the art group was founded as a sort of missionary effort among the young."* She was a diminutive woman, but energetic and practical. *"The queen bee in a hive of paint daubing activity"*. She was strong minded and a force to be reckoned with, slightly intimidating, but dedicated to art and very talented painter, happy to use a number of different media.

The Art Group continued to operate throughout the Second World War in spite of difficulties, which included severe penalties if you accidentally sketched a military object as happened to Mr Bulman, the Group's secretary. As well as the practical sessions the Group ran courses in Art history and hosted artists who gave demonstrations. There were regular exhibitions held at many different venues around Abergavenny.

The Art Group has met in many different places during its eighty years, starting with a room on the top floor of Miss Gethin-Davies' house in Llanfoist. After a year it moved to the famous studio in Castle Street. This studio was above a coach house, a very old building belonging to Dr Gilbert Humphrey of Old Court, and was occupied until 1962.

In his report to the Annual General Meeting in 1940 the secretary, Mr Bulman, comments that members had been distracted from art by the gift of a table tennis table and the introduction of tea and biscuits! One has to wonder how they got the table in because *"to gain access, one first passed through the doorway directly off the pavement and then pushed a fairly heavy wooden trapdoor upwards whilst climbing an open tread staircase and carrying painting materials. The Art Group thrived. Its wooden beamed roof space, low windows, creaking planked floor and the curling blue cigarette smoke, oil paint and strong pure turpentine all combined to create the illusion that nothing could ever change"*.

Sadly the foundations of that studio now lie beneath the Byfield car park. Afterwards the Group moved to a building owned by Mrs Beverley-Burton next door to her house in Nevill Street and then to other places in the town including the studio at The Hill, Penypound, which also had an awkward narrow staircase.

The Art Group now meets twice a month at the Abergavenny Community Centre (the former Park Street School) in Abergavenny and it is always happy to welcome new members.

(updated Jan 2017)