

SEVERN SIDE SEARCH

RESEARCHED AND WRITTEN

BY

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INTRODUCTION

My name is Maureen May Webb (formally Pearce) and I am standing outside the bungalow where I was born 60 years ago, and I am still living there today with my husband Chris. I have five children: Christopher, Angela, Janet, Robert and Caroline, who were all born and bred in Portskewett. I have a granddaughter, Katie, and grandsons Ryan, Jack and David.

I married Chris 39 years ago, he was formerly from Magor. Chris after this length of time has established himself as a Portskewett person.

People come and go in Portskewett, but the Pearce family have lived here for hundreds of years. When it comes to making a documentary on our local history I will do my best by telling you what I know, what my ancestors have handed down, and a little help from the text books.

REFERENCE TO PORTSKEWETT AND THE START OF MY JOURNEY

If you look on the map you will see that Portskewett is situated between the Severn Bridge (old) and the Severn tunnel, and is on the banks of the river Severn.

You will be surprised to know that it is more important than you think, because Portskewett was one of the three chief ports of Britain more than a thousand years ago. In ancient manuscripts the name is mentioned as port ysgewydd and porth yskewydd and probably means the harbour of the elder wood.

In more recent times it was commonly known as porth-ys-coed.

If I go on my afternoon walk I can complete a circle by visiting Portskewett and the neighbouring village of Sudbrook which is also steeped in history, so I will set off on my wide-awake trail and tell you step by step what I will see.

RAILWAY BRIDGES OF BLACK ROCK

Just down the road I cross the railway bridge, underneath is the main south Wales to Gloucester line. It is also an alternative route to London when the Severn tunnel is under repair. This line has been here since railways started and as a child I spent many an hour on this same bridge pursuing my favourite pastime of train spotting.

Just a few steps way I cross another railway bridge. I pause and look over. Down there is a siding, no longer in use. At one time the royal train stayed there overnight, when any member of the royal family visited Wales. It was to be secret, but news leaked out because railway men were to know about it.

My father was a fitter at Severn tunnel and he often worked on stand-by engines in case the royal engine broke down. Soon after the queen came to the throne, while she was staying here, “a neighbour” was allowed to present the queen with a bunch of roses out of the garden and it is said that the queen was delighted. Winston Churchill stayed in the same siding during the second world war, whether it is true or not, Churchill was said to have taken a walk to Black Rock and even have a pint in the local pub.

By the side of the bridge is a picket gate, much the worse for wear, but the path which led to the station is now overgrown. I can't get down there, so I will have to go another way. I will tell you about it when I come to it.

BLACK ROCK

Our next port of call is Black Rock, after travelling along the road which the stage coaches took hundreds of years ago, stopping at Black Rock hotel for refreshment before crossing the river by ferry boat.

I stare into the empty space where the hotel once stood. It dated back to the 1600's but it was pulled down in 1972. Many people would have liked it to have stayed as an ancient monument, but with children in mind, safety came first. Only half of the big house stood there because the best part which had three storeys' was destroyed by fire in 1948. The cause of the fire was unknown.

I walk through the little gate and I am on the banks of the river Severn. There is not a ship in sight; unlike it was a thousand years ago, when it was one of the chief ports in Britain. There is a huge metal ring on the quayside which tied up the old ferry boats. It is wearing thin but is a reminder of long ago. The river has always been important for fish and its commercial value, and men still fish the river for salmon today.

It was not until 1645 that we find mention of a definite passage of ferry, but from that date until regular travel through the Severn tunnel began, the ferry was much in use. On July 24th 1645 Charles the 1st intended to cross from Black Rock to the Bristol side, but for some reason did not do so. Reference to this was made in the law suit between the duke of Beaufort who owned Aust to Beachley ferry and Thomas Lewis of St Pierre who owned the new passage.

It appears that a toll was levied on cattle passing to Beachley from Monmouth, by the duke, at Chepstow Bridge; and if they used the Black Rock passage the tolls could be avoided. However, the Lewis family were in possession of the new ferry, and a regular service was established in the eighteenth century. The Beachley to Aust ferry no longer ran. The first Severn bridge opened in 1966 and links Wales and England.

BRIDLE PATH TO SUDBROOK

I will leave Black Rock and take the bridle path to Sudbrook along the cliff top. A lot of the cliff has been washed away, therefore the path has got narrower and narrower, but the bad patch has been fenced for safety. I pass by the old jetties that jut out into the sea, and looking further over the water I see the drilling rigs for the second crossing. A new bridge is to be built; easing the congestion of traffic on the old Severn Bridge.

I walk further along and at the end of the path I approach the shipyard. It isn't a shipyard now, but it still carries the name. It is now used for waste disposal.

SUDBROOK PUMPING STATION

After passing the shipyard I face rows of terraced houses. These houses were built at the same time as the Severn tunnel. That is how we know Sudbrook today. The tunnel commenced in 1873, but during the building of it, workmen struck a spring which flooded the tunnel, water has to be pumped out continuously at the pumping station, which I am passing. The pumping station stands some feet above the Severn tunnel. It is only in the past 30 years that the pumping station has been pumped by electricity, before that it was operated by hand. Most of the spring water is put into good use. The

paper mill at the other end of Sudbrook uses gallons of the tunnel water every day. During the drought in 1976 we were connected to the tunnel water, so we were well supplied with water. At one time residents of Sudbrook drew tunnel water and other industries were supplied, long before the paper mill came. The water gushed into the sea, now there is only a trickle.

SUDBROOK SCHOOL

Opposite the pumping station is a school still in use today. My children went there before going to comprehensive school. The school was built in 1881 and in 1981 school children went to school in Victorian dress to celebrate its centenary. Next door used to stand the mission hall, but it fast deteriorated when community spirit disappeared from Sudbrook. It was a massive building, built at the time of the tunnel in only 7 days for all the denominations. At one time there was something on each night of the week, and a resident minister lived in the manse next door. Before the building was taken down the minister had long left the community, the manse deteriorated and was boarded up for a long time. It has now been done up and is owned privately. A small chapel has been built in place of the mission hall.

SUDBROOK CLUB - POST OFFICE - SHOP - WALKER FLATS

Although Sudbrook has a chapel it hasn't a church as such and there's no pub, only a non-political club. I have never heard of a village before not having a church or pub. Sudbrook is right off the map and anyone wanting to catch a bus has to walk a mile if living at the top end. There are a few bus services now, but at one time there weren't any. I can remember some time ago when the "T.V." series "The Survivors" began, a helicopter flew over Sudbrook to film it. At the opening scene of the programme, which showed a dead place because most of the population had been wiped out by the plague, they showed one of the rows of houses at Sudbrook and there wasn't a sign of life. They certainly chose the right place and had probably come miles to find it. I will now take a short cut over to the "camp" passing the Walker flats, which was once a hospital built for patients who were injured during the building of the tunnel. After that it became "the institute" where

dances, socials, films etc took place. As I mentioned earlier, community spirit faded and so did the institute. After that it was turned into flats accommodating several families. The walker flats are named after the contractor of the Severn tunnel, Thomas Walker. There is a sub post office here and a small shop and that is all the amenities they have in Sudbrook.

THE CAMP AND OLD CHAPEL

Many think “the camp” was called so because soldiers were stationed there during the Second World War but “the camp” was occupied by the romans. It is hard to imagine what Sudbrook was like before the tunnel, but Sudbrook was a parish with a church dedicated to the blessed trinity. Most of ancient Sudbrook has been washed away by the sea, and only ruins of its church remain. We call it the old chapel.

Since 1271 records are available concerning the many transactions in land at Sudbrook, and the registers sometimes mention names of people who lived here, but as the water encroached upon the land the people seemed to have deserted the parish. The old church gradually fell in to ruin and there is no trace of the manor house. The lord of the manor in 1271 was John de Southbrook, and we can tell where Sudbrook got its name. The first rector of Sudbrook was Roger Gunter. Many followed and one priest, Thomas Kerneys left 6d in his will to the blessed trinity of Sudbrook. I will leave “the camp” now and get back on the road that leads to the paper mill.

ST REGIS PAPER MILL

The paper mill was formally known as “Ashton Paper Mill”. It was built in the late 1950’s. My husband worked there for 25 years. The people of Sudbrook objected at the time, especially residents of “Sea View” whose view of the sea was completely blocked out, also there was the smell and the noise that this monstrosity brought, but it made a lot of work around the area and it was accepted. People have got used to the noise of the chipping logs, the steam and occasional smell. It started as a pulp mill and then it was expanded when the giant paper machine was installed. I have visited the mill on open days and have seen the whole process from start to finish.

The roads are not suitable for the heavy loads that carry the logs and paper. A new road was planned many years ago but I don't know how long we will need to wait. The narrow road goes over a small humped railway bridge which was considered dangerous for children walking from Portskewett to Sudbrook school, so after heated arguments at meetings, free bus travel was granted. Sudbrook school takes juniors 7-11.

APPROACH TO PORTSKEWETT

After leaving the terraced houses of Sudbrook behind me I approach "Southbrook farm", obviously it was named after John de Southbrook. Before the tunnel was built there were no houses at Sudbrook, Southbrook farm and its cottages were the only houses between Portskewett church (which I will be coming to shortly) and Black Rock hotel. No story would be complete without the reference to Harold's Castle. The building was opposite Southbrook farm. There is no trace of it now and the ground has never been excavated.

In the year 1064 Harold, soon afterwards king of England, built what has been described as a castle or hunting lodge in Portskewett near the church. Whatever the building was, it is a point of much interest and it is pleasing to think that both Harold and Edward the Confessor, whom some say he entertained there, probably worshipped in the church. The "castle" however did not last long, for it was destroyed in 1065 by Caradoc of Caerleon; a Welsh chieftain.

I now walk over the humped railway bridge into Portskewett, I look over the wall at Portskewett church. I see the graves of my ancestors. How many Thomas Pearces were there? I see those of my father, grandfather, great grandfather and my great great grandfather. The later dated 1829. People come and go in Portskewett, but it seems as if the Pearce family (my father's side) have been around for a long time. The parish church of St Mary is mostly Norman with its massive walls and its chancel arch. It consists of nave and chancel, a tower at the west end and a large porch on the south side. It is considered to be one of the best examples of early architecture in South Wales. In the north wall is the remains of what is thought to have been a priest's door, and over it is a massive stone with a Greek shaped cross cut in

to it. This might be Saxon, or at least Norman. There is also a built-in doorway in the north wall of the chancel. The east window and another on the south side of the chancel were built by an unskilled man who was trying to imitate something better. Some people suppose the church to have been built by Harold, its turrets, and its proximity to the traditional site, Harold's Castle lend credence to this view. The list of rectors date back to 1427. They were first written in Latin on parchment paper and in spite of their age are still legible.

The first record of baptism is that of twin girls Elizabeth and Margaret from 1756 to 1836. The church wardens accounts have been preserved and one or two references to them will be of interest. It appears that land owners and house owners were required to pay a church rate, a poor rate and highway rate, which varied year by year. The church was a very old custom and a writer in 1340 says "every parishioner" is bound to repair the church accordingly to the position of the land he possesses. An assessment was made at the vestry meeting when accounts were passed, and the new rate fixed accordingly to estimates. Total receipts in 1750 were £3.0.3d and expenditure amounted to £3.9.3d. Included in the disbursements were 8d for killing a badger, 4d for a polecat, 1s.6d for a bell rope and 1s.1d for bread and wine for communion at Easter and Christmas. In 1752 one shilling was payed to Martha Davies for cleaning the churchyard, and the mason earned 3s.9d for four days work on the churchyard wall. Ale at the parish meeting in 1755 cost 1s.0d but 5s.0d in 1768, and in 1811 lime to whitewash the church cost 1s.0d and 9s.0d was paid for doing it. A new gallery was made for the church in 1818 at the cost £19. And new seats cost £7.13d. The prayer and commandments on the east wall of the chancel were put up in 1833 for 12s.0d. There was a meeting held in 1850 at which it was decided to put a pair of stocks in a convenient place, outside the church. They were removed in 1948 because children were meddling with them. I worked it out that I was ten years old at the time. Who knows, maybe I was one of the culprits. The stocks were put in the forecourt of a Chepstow bank then a few years ago moved to the museum.

MANOR FARM

I will go slightly off my route in the other direction to have a look at Manor farm before my walk back through the village of Portskewett. Manor farm is the oldest house in Portskewett dating back to the 1200's. It has been preserved over the years and is in tip top condition. It is divided into two and two families live there. Charles the second slept there and there is a sign on the wall to indicate this.

THE VILLAGE OF PORTSKEWETT

I turn back, as I walk through the village I imagine what it used to look like. The village must have been very picturesque with its thatched cottages, its pond, and the village pump. It probably didn't change very much for many years. Memories revive the police station, which later and until only a few years ago, was the doctors surgery. A new one has been built behind the village pub. The old surgery was privately owned, and the doctor rented a room to hold his surgery twice a week. Some people complained when they had to wait outside in the pouring rain when the surgery was packed but it had its good advantages because the people of Portskewett didn't have to pay fares to go elsewhere, and there was also a lovely coal fire in winter in the living room where patients waited their turn to see the doctor in the front room, which was turned into a consulting room. There was also the added bonus of watching colour tv whilst one was waiting. A doctors bill survived from the late 1800's and some of its items are as follows; visit 5s.0d, pills 1s.0d, draught 1s.0d, mixture 3s.6d, lotion at 2s.0d, fermentation herbs 1s.06d, leeches 3s.0d and linseed meal 1s.0d. Referring back to the police station: a pair of handcuffs in 1832 cost 4s.6d

PORTSKEWETT SCHOOL

Next door to the surgery is the school, the one I went to as a child, also so did my ancestors, my children and my grandchildren. It was built in 1870 and the centenary was celebrated whilst my children were at the school. Lots of memories flooded back as old photographs and souvenirs were put on display. I remembered the old hand bell which was rung outside the gate to call the children in to the school. The first one there used to have the privilege of ringing the bell. I remember running all the way to school to

have that honour. Amongst the photos was one of my old headmistress at a school party pouring tea from a huge urn. Another photo, although before my time, drew my attention as it was one of my father's cousins who was a teacher at this school in 1912. I imagine the school mistress with her curls and black cap and the long tables and forms.

PORTSKEWETT INN

Next door to the school is the Portskewett Inn, formerly called the Portskewett hotel. I can imagine gentlemen farmers meeting in the parlour for their ale and smoking their churchwarden pipes, and placing them in the rack until they called again. It isn't very old like some old inns you hear about and no history is attached to it. It is the one and only pub in Portskewett hardly big enough to cope with the increased population.

Next stop is the post office, not very old, but there was an original one not far away now called the old post office which is a private house. The large window which touches the ground, and easy to look in to if not for the net curtains, indicates that it was used for display, probably it was post office come shop like the present one. The present post office is friendly and sells groceries. There is only one other shop at the other end of the village, quite modern, taking the place of the old grocery shop next door which is now the hairdressers, another mod con for Portskewett. With all the new houses popping up I think that a small row of attractively designed shops would be welcome. There are thousands of people in Portskewett compared to the 200 people early in this century. The church hall has been eased by the erection of a recreational hall which provides more activities to people of all ages.

As I approach the top of the village I come to these pretty little cottages, appropriately named "Jasmine cottages", it is hard to believe that these renovated cottages were only a few years ago tumble-down old shacks.

These cottages are the second oldest houses in Portskewett and were once the village shop and everything was sold from bread to sweets.

Nearly every piece of land has been taken for building houses in Portskewett and peoples' gardens have been sold for building plots. Houses are

expensive here because of the area. It is still a nice area and I feel proud to live here. As an “oldie” though, I still reminiscent of the past. I still remember the bowling green where my father played and then later when a cobblers shop was erected on that spot. I can still smell the leather when I remember taking shoes to be mended on my way to school. Houses are now on that spot. Also, on the spot where a small box factory stood (where my aunts worked) is covered by a small estate of houses.

RAILWAY STATION

I will take a short cut down a little lane which takes me to the railway station, or should I say the railway station that was. There still stands the footbridge which took you over to the other platform but now both platforms and booking office have been removed. Our station closed over twenty years ago but petitions have been passed around to try and re-open it. There are a lot of retired railwaymen in Portskewett who are still eligible to free passes and privilege tickets, who would most benefit from rail transport

HESTON BRAKE

I have one more interesting place to visit before I take the Black Rock road home, and that is Heston brake tumulus. It was opened up in 1888 and was found to be a chambered grave which was originally placed upon a natural mound then covered with earth. There were two chambers connected internally, and three pieces of broken pottery were discovered together with a piece of burnt bone. The pottery was of different make and suggested different periods of burial from British to roman times. It is quiet here and, if there is any truth in the story that “the little people” hide here, I will leave them alone and go home. It is said that they came out at night and danced around the stones.

I leave Heston brake to pause at Pike house. This was the Pearce home for many generations and the last one to occupy it was my second cousin Dorothy who lived there all her life 1906-1980. Her mother Kate owned a small grocery shop, erected in the grounds, which later became a garden shed. Dorothy still referred to it as “the shop”. My father owned the house at the time and rented it to Kate for 7s.6d a week. This was paid in groceries. Eventually my father sold the house to her for a measly £90. My father still

owned the bungalow "Ingleside" left by his parents and also owned the land leading to it. He sold it to a builder for £60 some time later. Twenty year hence a bungalow was built and later Dorothy sold her garden for building. There are now two bungalows between Pike house and Ingleside, and another the other side of us which was once our garden. My father sold the ground in 1964 for £300.

I have many happy memories of Pike house, the family parties and musical evenings. The original Pike house was destroyed by fire, this house was used for collecting the tolls for the ferry crossing. A new house was on the same site and was renamed Pyke house, that is with a "y".

I head home tired but happy after taking a trip into the past and completing my Severn side search.