

## SAUNDERSFOOT AND DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

At its October meeting the Society welcomed Daphne Gwyther from East Williamston where the community is exploring setting up its own historical society.

The guest speaker for the evening was Dr. Simon Hancock whose theme was 'The port and town of Haverfordwest.' While it was suggested that the town was a Flemish foundation of 1110 it appears more probable that a Roman settlement, possibly from the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, would have claim to an earlier settlement. Haverfordwest is one of the Welsh towns, together with Caernarfon and Carmarthen, associated in folk memory and legend with Macsen Wledig (Magnus Maximus), the Roman general and later emperor whose wife, Elen, was Welsh. Archaeology may well provide some answers here but the town's site, on the first secure ford of the western Cleddau, with tidal access to the sea, was clearly of strategic importance.

The town and port grew rapidly from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries; it traded widely throughout the Bristol Channel, to Gascony, with Dublin and as far afield as the Mediterranean. The river was substantially wider and deeper than today and while the coastal traders using the many quays were small they could cover large distances. Its range of goods though was limited, largely processed wool from Flemish weavers in their plantation within the cantref of Rhos and rabbit meat and pelts from the offshore islands such as Skomer, which were subject to the Lordship of Haverford. Imports were of a general kind but wine from Bordeaux figured prominently and close links to Bristol were developed.

It was not wholly clear why the port and town went into decline but the arrival of the bubonic plague in 1348-49, and with several later outbreaks, would have been significant. It has been estimated that around half the population died and even as late as the 1470's a third of the town's burgage plots lay empty, a strong signifier commercial decline. The port, and hence the town, would also have suffered from the turmoil and uncertainties associated with the Hundred Years War, and by 1453 with the defeat of the English army by the French at Castillon trade with Bordeaux would have been heavily disrupted.

Activities within the port would have contributed to the development of ancillary industries: the ironworks at Marychurch, ship repair and chandlery, a paper mill at Prendegast, lime kilns and a leather tannery. Nevertheless, the town did not develop a specialisation or dominance in any particular product or manufacture and it seems that in competition with the rival ports of Tenby, Pembroke, Carmarthen and Kidwelly it gradually lost out. By 1530, for example, the customs ports for the head or legal port of Milford (that is, the coastline from Worms Head to Barmouth) were Pembroke and Carmarthen. With the coming of the railways Haverfordwest had largely ceased trading as a port of any significance.

The next meeting of the Society will take place at the Regency Hall on 18 November at 7.30 when Richard Davies will speak on 'Last Invasion of Britain.' Non members are very welcome to attend.