



# Hanes :

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NEWSLETTER OF THE CYNON VALLEY HISTORY SOCIETY /  
CYLCHLYTHYR CYMDEITHAS HANES CWM CYNON.

## 'GOLDEN ERA' ENDS! — — NEW DAWN AHEAD!

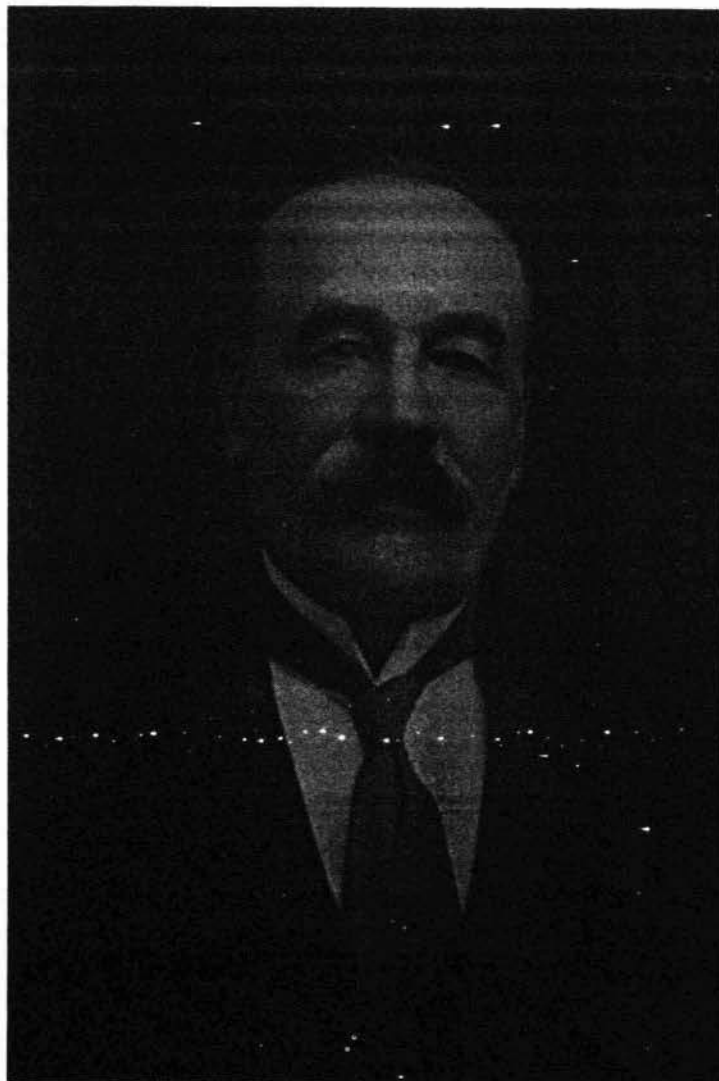
No apology is offered for opening this new issue of HANES with such a dramatic headline!

Although our lead does not refer to the passing of Reagan or the arrival of Gorbachev, it does allude to something very notable in the life of our own history society in the Cynon Valley: the voluntary retirement from office of John Mear, our founder-secretary who has been a mainstay of so much of our activity during the past eighteen years.

To anyone who has had anything at all to do with the Society since its inception in 1971 John Mear's name has been synonymous with diligence, highly efficient organisation and a bright sense of humour.

During all that time, John has both served and been a most active member of a committee that has built our Society into one of the most successful in Wales - no matter how one might wish to define success. Whether in terms of membership figures, publications and research or an uninterrupted array of guest-speakers each month during those eighteen years (barring each August), John has been at the heart of it all and often directly responsible for what has taken place. He fully deserves his place alongside those others who have given so much towards expanding our knowledge of the most interesting area in which we live. Well may it be said that John Davies, Pendar, (in whom 'our' John has taken a particular interest) would be proud of him - as, indeed, would Dai!!

Yet we are lucky that with John's retirement the lights are dimmed while but not extinguished. For in Geoffrey Evans of Plasdraw we have a worthy successor; and all Society members & friends join in wishing him well. It's a hard act to follow; but as Geoff himself has said, the first 18 years will be the worst! DLD.



OLD PHOTOGRAPHS NO.7: JOHN LEWIS (THE TAILOR), 1859 - 1952: merchant and man of letters who established one of Aberdare's best-known businesses of yesteryear. See main article within by Walter T. Morgan (ex-National Library of Wales and previously of Aberdare). SOURCE: John Lewis' family via Tom Evans, C.V.H.S committee.

# John Lewis: tailor and man of letters.

By Walter T. Morgan.

John Lewis, 1859 - 1952, was a remarkable man who deserves to be remembered by all those interested in the literary and cultural history of Aberdare.

He was born at 105, Cemetery Road, Trecynon, on the 2nd May, 1859, the son of Henry Lewis - himself a tailor and draper in Trecynon although a native of Pant-y-ffynnon near Ammanford, Carmarthenshire.

The headmaster at Ysgol Comin in Trecynon between 1858 and 1867 was Dan Isaac Davies, the pioneer of using Welsh as a medium of instruction. However, there is no record that John Lewis ever attended his school. He might of course have gone for a while to Rees Jenkin Jones's seminary in Trecynon; but according to family sources he spent a period (how long is not known) at Rhuthin School - one of the most well-known of the old grammar schools in Wales at that time.

Before the passing of the Welsh Intermediate Education Act of 1889, such old foundations were the main providers of grammar school education in the Principality. At Rhuthin he would have received a sound general and classical education superior to that given the majority of his contemporaries. Such an education would serve to carry forward his catholic interests and stimulate his voluminous reading in later life.

But where did he acquire his knowledge of Welsh grammar and prosody which later became his chief intellectual interests? I think he must have owed much in this regard to the friendship and tuition of David Watkin Jones (Dafydd Morganwg) who lived for a while during John Lewis's youth at Hirwaun and Cwmdare. Besides his famous Hanes Morganwg, Dafydd Morganwg wrote Yr Ysgol Gymreig, a useful Welsh grammar; and also Yr Ysgol Farddol, a manual for poets writing in the ancient strict metres, the 1st edition of which was printed at Aberdare by Jenkin Howell in 1869.

He was first apprenticed as a tailor to his father. The late Rev. Jacob Davies (then minister at Hen Dy Cwrdd) relates how he would sit in traditional tailor's fashion cross-legged on a table, studying the cynghaneddion (bardic metres) until he heard his father's footsteps coming up the stairs at which he would sit on the book and resume his sewing. To complete his apprenticeship

he was sent to a first-class tailoring establishment at 93-94 Drury Lane, London; and in July, 1883 he was awarded a certificate confirming him as a master tailor.

He was always a splendid craftsman, though his main interest was in his literary pursuits. It is said that Dafydd Morganwg & others suggested he follow a full-time literary career, but such a course would have been too precarious. The first shop he opened was at the bottom of Windsor St, Trecynon, & then he established businesses successfully at Ynysybwl, Lewis St in Aberaman, and then in Market St, Aberdare, where he opened in 1908.

His main poetic effort concerned the composition of englynion - terse, epigrammatic verses written in the old, strict metres. In the course of a long life he must have published hundreds of them in the local press, and he continued sending them to the Leader right up to the time of his death under the nom-de-plume 'Glanynys'.

He was all his life interested in drama, a taste which his sojourn in London must have done much to foster. He is said to have tried his hand at writing a Welsh play but if so it has not survived. He was a close friend of the Rev. E.R. Dennis (Hen Dy Cwrdd) who was the producer at the Little Theatre; and I am told he would travel with the company to British Drama League competitions.

Probably his most notable literary endeavour was the publication in 1893 (while resident at Ynysybwl) of a monthly periodical, Gwreichion (Sparks), modelled on the English paper Tit-Bits. It was printed at Aberdare by Mills & Evans in Cardiff St, at 1d. per copy. John Lewis himself edited the paper under the pseudonym 'Ap Gwalia' and wrote extensively within it. The first issue appeared on 15th January, 1893 and the last in May of that year.

In his first issue, John Lewis set out his somewhat ambitious aims for the paper. It was not his object to propagate 'transient trivia', but to make Gwreichion educational as well as interesting, humorous but not frivolous, with a fresh and progressive viewpoint on the questions of the day. It contained tit-bits of very miscellaneous information such as (to quote at random): the Irish language was taught at only four schools in Ireland; the House of Commons, to date, had sat only eleven times on a Sunday; only one man in 203 was more than 6 feet tall; the number of curates in the Church of England was

12,000; the skin of a whale was thicker than that of any other creature.

There were also jokes, items of eisteddfod gossip & articles & correspondence of a more serious vein. Much attention was given to industrial relations in the south Wales coalfield affecting, for example, revision of the 'Sliding Scale'; agitation for the 'Eight Hour Day', and the amalgamation of district unions which resulted in 1898 in the formation of the South Wales Miners Federation.

A novel feature was the introduction of a cartoon in each issue dealing with contemporary mining affairs. The paper also contained poetry & articles on the lives of eisteddfod figures such as Gwilym Teilo, Dewi Wyn o Eryllt and Telynog. There were also articles on the development of English political parties by J Ifano Jones (a native of Gadlys & later Welsh librarian at Cardiff City Library) and on aspects of English literature by J. Morgan Jones of Cardiff College.

It was a pity Gwreichion had to die after only five issues. It had to compete with the established Tarian-y-Gweithiwr which drew upon a similar readership, not to speak of the large denominational press and the flood of popular English periodicals which first came into south Wales at that time. Though priced at only 1d., this was not an insignificant sum when we recall that the weekly wage of a miner barely exceeded £1 per week.

There are few extant copies of Gwreichion. The late Rev. Jacob Davies possessed a complete file, as does Cardiff City Library - photostat copies of which have now been acquired by the National Library of Wales.

John Lewis was always an omnivorous reader with a keen brain & retentive memory. He was widely read in both English & Welsh literature and in philosophy. He also evinced a great interest in spiritualism. He was keenly interested in politics & social problems, especially as they affected Wales.

In 1895 he stood for the Ynysyawl ward in the Glamorgan county council election. Most interestingly, he stood as a representative of the local branch of Cymru Fydd. He was not elected, but received an illuminated address by his supporters in recognition of his efforts on behalf of the cause.

In the 1930s he wrote extensively to Y Faner on subjects close to his heart, and at the same time became a convert to the theory of Social Credit. He and the Rev. Colin Gibb were the main protagonists of the movement at Aberdare. His enthusiasm for the new creed was indicative of the range of his mind & of his readiness to explore new ideas even at an advanced age. I remember discussing the subject on one of my brief encounters with him as a student in the thirties. Finding that I was not quite in agreement he induced me, with great reluctance on my part, to write a letter to the

## Membership of the CVHS:

NEW MEMBERS ARE ALWAYS WELCOME. PLEASE CONTACT MR. GEOFFREY EVANS, SECRETARY, 5, PLASDRAW PLACE, ABERDARE (871840) (OR ANY MEMBER KNOWN TO YOU. PUBLICATIONS (AS AVAILABLE) FROM DOUG WILLIAMS, 29, TUDOR TCE, ABERDARE (877398). ITEMS FOR HANGS ARE ALWAYS INVITED & SHOULD BE SENT TO D.L. DAVIES, 5, MILTON ST, CWMAMAN, ABERDARE (873226). THE CYNON VALLEY HISTORY SOCIETY MEETS AT THE PARISH HALL, MONK ST, ABERDARE, ON THE THIRD THURSDAY OF EACH MONTH (EXCEPT DURING AUGUST)\*\*\*\*\*

.../...JOHN LEWIS THE TAILOR (CONTINUED):

Leader 'stating my objections in order to 'get a discussion going' as he said.

He was always a magnificent talker and was glad to meet anybody whom he thought would be interested in discussing his ideas. He liked talking to students who came into his shop, particularly if they showed an interest in Welsh language, literature, history & politics. It was at his shop that I first heard the name of my friend, the late R.J. Thomas, later editor of Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru (The University of Wales Dictionary of the Welsh Language), then resident at Treorchy & a research student at Cardiff university.

John Lewis delighted in the society of fellow-poets such as the Rev. Gwilym Tilsley (Seion, Aberdare), later the Archdruid of Wales; the Rev. Jacob Davies (Hen Dy Cwrdd) and especially his long-time friend the excellent poet Henry Lloyd, 'Ap Hefin'. Yet he did not belong to any poetic group. Here are some of the enlynion (stanzas) composed by Tilsley which appeared in the Aberdare Leader on the occasion of his 90th birthday:

Nawdeg oed yw'r glandeg wr - ond ifanc  
Ei dafod a'i gyflwr;  
Yn ein dydd fe'i cawn yn dwr  
O diguro wladgarwr.

Y gwron sydd a'i gariad - yn fawr iawn  
Dros ei fro a'i henwlad;  
Am wir les i Gymru'i wlad  
Da ei sel, dwys ei alwad.

Yr hogyn dewr a hygar - rhoes ei draul  
Dros ei dref yn gynnar;  
Brwd ei lef, brwd ei lafar,  
Brwd ei waith yn Aber Dar.

John Lewis died on 12th March, 1952, shortly before his 93rd birthday. His wife Gwendoline (nee Powell, a native of Aberdare) had died on 31st January, 1947. They had four children: Mrs W. Hughes of College St, Abernant; Mrs M. Rowlands of Bryngwyn, Abernant Rd, wife of J.L. Rowlands, founder & managing-director of the Aberdare Leader; Mrs Emrys Jones, Cafe

.../...JOHN LEWIS THE TAILOR (CONTINUED):

Mona; and Mr Bertie Lewis who was associated with his father in the business for many years.

In writing these notes I am indebted to the section concerning John Lewis in Cyfoeth Cwm, by Jacob Davies; and also to the article on him by Gwyn Prosser in the Aberdare Leader after his death. I also wish to thank his daughter, Mrs Emrys Jones, and his granddaughter, Mrs Marion Davies, for the valuable help & information they gave me. W.T.M.

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:**

Several points of interest arise from Mr Morgan's article above which it might be useful to note.

Mention is made of extant copies of Gwreichion. Unfortunately, much doubt exists as to the whereabouts of some of the late Rev. Jacob Davies' papers, while recent information on the Cardiff City Library file of the paper suggests that it has been mislaid during that Library's move from its old to its new premises. The only copies readily available, therefore, appear to be the NLW's photocopies. (Blessed be Rank Xerox!).

The Ynysybwll branch of Cymru Fydd which Mr Morgan mentions alludes to an early 'Nationalist' society within the British Liberal Party which aimed at achieving what was then called 'Home Rule' for Wales. Its leading-light was David Lloyd George, M.P.

Having read Mr Morgan's article, I looked up some of my own records and found family notices detailing many interesting particulars. These relate especially to two of John Lewis' children: Mrs Ann Hughes (ref. Aberdare Leader, 21.03.1975) and Mrs Mary Rowlands (ref. Leader, 12.08.1976 and also 17.08.1978).

Finally, one should note that John Lewis very well-known town-centre shop was situated in Market St, where the 'Arcade' newsagent is now located. D.L.D.

## NEW PUBLICATION BY THE SOCIETY TO APPEAR SOON...

A new volume - the sixth - in the series 'OLD ABERDARE' will be published before Christmas. Like previous volumes in the series, it will sell very quickly and will make an excellent Christmas present for anyone in the family who is interested in the history of this district. As yet, the price has not been determined since a final statement of the printer's costs is still to be received by the Society. The hoped-for publication date is the 1st December.

Included in this volume will be articles by Geoffrey Hill on William Haggart, the cinema pioneer; by Stephen Cooke on the truck-shop system at Aberdare; by Dr Alun C. Davies (born at Aberdare now at Queen's University, Belfast) on the Aberdare Canal; and by the late Rev. Ifor Parry on religion in the Aberdare district prior to the religious upheavals of the 16 & 17th centuries.

Be sure to place an early order for the title when it appears - especially if you already have the other five volumes in the series. If you do not already have the others, then this is as good a time as any to start collecting them!

## TWO NEW LIFE- MEMBERS MADE:

At its A.G.M. in September two new life-members of the Society were made by the unanimous vote of those present.

The new recipients are John Mear, in recognition of 18 years faithful service as Secretary, and Doug Williams, for his diligent work as our long-suffering publications officer. This brings to four the number of life-members declared since the Society was formed in March, 1971. The two others are Tom Evans & D.L. Davies.

Doug Williams has also been chosen as our new Chairman for 1989-90, while John Mear remains a member of the committee. Others elected to serve this year are: Edward Williams (Vice-chairman); Ken Collins (Treasurer); Ann Jones; Victor Evans; Phil Davies; Elfed Bowen; Stephen Graham; Tom Evans; Elwyn Evans & Ian Rees.

As noted on page one, John's successor as Secretary is Geoffrey Evans of Plasdraw. We wish them all well!

## NEWS... NEWS... NEWS... NEWS...

\*NOTES WRITTEN BY JOHN DAVIES, PNDAR, ON OLD ballads sung at Aberdare during the 19th Cent. have recently been donated by John Mear to the National Library at Aberystwyth.

\*THE N.L.W. IS ALSO TO RECEIVE ON DEPOSIT FROM the congregation of Siloa Chapel, Aberdare, an oil-painting of Rees Evans, their longtime precentor and local choirmaster.

\*MRS. TYDFIL THOMAS, PREVIOUSLY HEADMISTRESS OF Aberdare Girls' Comprehensive School, is busy at work with the Glamorgan Archive Service on a new book focusing on the working of the Poor Law after 1834, with particular reference to the Merthyr Union (which included Aberdare).