

HANES



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Newsletter of the Cynon Valley History Society Cylchlythur Cymdeithas Hanes Cwm Cynon.

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Third attempt at Murder in Aberdare Wife and three young children unscathed

Another murderous outrage has been perpetrated at Aberdare, although again without any positively fatal result. The diabolical *will* has not been wanting, but Providence has thrown obstacles in the *way*. Our readers may recollect that the former attempts to murder innocent men – whose only crime it was to have preferred honest labour to idleness and beggary – were made by shooting at them at night through their windows. Both escapes were narrow – In the first case, the slugs struck the wall immediately above the bed in which the man and his wife were sleeping. In the second, the bullet must have passed through the head of the intended victim, had he not fortunately stooped at the moment the shot was fired, while he was sitting surrounded by his wife and four children, either of whom might easily have been killed.

On Friday night, or rather Saturday morning last, about one o'clock, JOHN THOMAS, a very steady, respectable collier in the employ of the Messrs. Wayne & Co., at Cwmbach, had retired to rest, and fallen asleep, when he was suddenly awoken by a noise. On the floor of the room he saw something burning, and immediately got up to extinguish it. Before he could do so, it exploded with immense violence, so that his escape seems almost miraculous. The roof of the house was completely lifted off its fastenings, though it subsided again into nearly its right position. All the partitions in the house were blown down. Wonderful to relate, although severely burned, he was not seriously injured.

This is the first time that Welsh soil has been sullied by these barbarities – not unusual, indeed, in England, where Strikes and Unions have frequently terminated in murders – but it was reserved for the Colliers of Aberdare to deprive the Principality of its bloodless and honourable distinction. It has been reserved for them to display passions as vile, and cruelty as atrocious, as the wildest savages, or the Cannibals of the South Sea Islands.

The outrages of the "Scotch Cattle" were brought to an end by the execution of one of the offenders. We echo but the general wish in hoping that the same fate may speedily overtake these would-be butchers of inoffensive men and sleeping children!

Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian. Friday, February 22, 1850

The Way We Were Then, No 11

RIGHT OF WAY BETWEEN ABERDARE AND CWMDARE

On Tuesday evening, at the Lower Park Gates, Aberdare, a meeting was held in connection with the closing of certain footpaths leading from Green Street, Aberdare, to the neighbourhood of Bwllfa, Cwmdare. The meeting was presided over by Mr. David Morris, who said that he remembered public paths as high up as Powell's pit. When the ventilator was erected, people took it for granted that they could travel along the T.V.R. The result was that some who walked the line for 30 years were now prosecuted by the Company and punished. The object of the meeting was to assert their claim to the public footpath which had been closed, and to discuss the best way of securing its re-opening.

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Mr. J. Prowle said that one time there was an access from all directions to Powell's pit and from the evidence of old residents it was clear that there was an indisputable right of way there. He would suggest that they appoint a committee to go into the matter, and also a deputation to wait upon the District Council. They had been too apathetic regarding their rights of way in that district. He understood that there was an old road leading to the Darran. The people were to be blamed because they did not continue to use it, but when the T.V.R. line came they naturally took to the line because it was equally as convenient. However, now during the fine weather there was a falling off in the number of those who took train tickets, and the Company were awakening to their interests, and using every effort to induce workmen to patronise the trains. He would move that they appoint a committee with full power to investigate and report.

Mr. T. Weston recollected walking Powell's pit as far back as 1874, along a path which was now closed.

Mr. J. Jenkins said that from what he could glean there were three paths closed to the public. One path led from Aberdare to Darran at the top of Cwmdare. "Hanes Morganwg" referred to one path, but its exact locale was not stated. There was another path which it was claimed by some was not a public one, but which it was permissible to walk. However, this condition had been disputed, and he believed that there was a right of way there. There was another path which came out into the road by Harrison's. They had fought for it when constructing the Park wall. The workmen had been sleeping too long. Now they must pay a shilling train fare per week to Bwllfa, or walk around the main road, which would take them about 90 minutes, whereas along the old paths they could go in about 20 minutes.

He suggested that they should ask leave to see the Parish map in the possession of the Vicar of Aberdare. He would second Mr. Prowle's motion.

The motion was carried, and the following were appointed as committee to deal with the matter: Messrs. J. Prowle, Dd. Morris, T. Williams, J. Jenkins, T. Weston, J. E. Davies, D. Williams, Tom Davies, S. Roberts, David Jones, J. Griffiths, Wm. H. Morris.

Aberdare Leader 7th. July 1906.

CAN YOU TELL ME? No 9

Question. When was the Constitutional Club in Aberdare relieved of its wartime duties?

Answer. The Constitutional Club buildings at the top end of Canon Street, Aberdare, were converted into hush-hush emergency broadcasting studios by the B.B.C. during the war. It is thought that the actual broadcasting of programs did not take place from the club, but from a specially built transmitting station on part of the site upon which the Tan y Bryn Brickworks stood. Though empty and derelict, the transmitting building is still there today. The old Empire Theatre, which was part of the club's premises, was also taken over and converted by the B.B.C. into a concert studio with stage and control panel (where Aberdare Boys' County School Choir gave several broadcasts before audiences) and into a dramatic studio.

In early 1947 it became known that the club would return to their former home from the Compton House buildings in Victoria Square as soon as the necessary alterations had been completed. In addition the Empire Theatre was to come back into its own. This theatre is very centrally situated, and with the greater demand for entertainment which has come with the return of peace it is expected to attract considerable patronage. News of the "Empire"'s revival recalled to some of the older townspeople the vaudeville and variety shows which were staged there in years gone by. For an appreciable time the "Empire" was well known for its association with that famous pair of comedians, Ted and May Hopkins, as well as other "star turns".

At one time the building was on the property market, and the Aberdare District Council made definite approaches with a view of purchasing it for conversion into a new Central Library for the town (another amenity which was badly needed at the time). The sum of £17,000 was mentioned in negotiations, and as the District Valuer would not agree to this, the Council were forced to let the matter drop.

(Aberdare Leader, 1st Feb. 1947).

EDITORIAL

Your editor has not previously found it necessary to apologise for not one, but TWO issues of HANES being late in arriving. This was almost entirely due to concentration on the production of "Cynon Coal- History of a mining Valley". The body text of the book is ready, and the index is now being made. When the index is ready the book will be run off.

The next issue of HANES will refer to the opening of Aberdare Museum in which the work of two prominent local historians is commemorated. This is the result of representations made by your Society.

The following brief history of Aberdare is an edited version of an essay prepared by the late W.W.Price in connection with the holding of the National Eisteddfod in Aberdare in 1956.

ABERDARE is the town on the river Cynon situated towards the north east border of Glamorgan and adjoining the parish of Penderyn in Breconshire and with only the Merthyr Tydfil district separating it from Monmouthshire. On the west of it are the two densely populated valleys of the Rhondda Fach and Rhondda Fawr. To the south the River Cynon passes through Mountain Ash and Penrhiwceiber to join the River Taff at Abercynon on the way to its mouth at Cardiff. It well deserves its name of the "Queen of the Hills," from its wonderfully beautiful situation in a wide valley sheltered by high hills to the east and west but open both ends to the north west and the south east, yet easily communicating with the adjoining valleys over the hills by good roads with a low gradient.

A hundred years ago the Congregational Union of England and Wales, when they wanted to hold their first annual autumnal meetings in Wales, selected Aberdare in 1859 - not Cardiff, Swansea, Newport, Merthyr, Aberystwyth or Caernarvon - no - but Aberdare, the most go-ahead and rapidly-growing town in Wales at that time.

POPULATION

As fast as the population overflowed into the suburbs of Aberdare, some hundreds of public houses were erected while the four great denominations of Nonconformists, with little or no help from the wealthy, saw to it that their chapels should also be built to supply the religious and moral needs of the population, and this spurred the established Church to do likewise in building St Elvan's, with its beautiful spire and its sweet-toned bells, St. Mair, and St.Fagan's Church at Trecynon, and others at Hirwaun and later at Aberaman etc.

A large public hall was built in Aberdare for Temperance meetings an 1858, which later became a theatre and now is a cinema.

What a busy hive was Aberdare in the sixties and seventies! Then, as the late Rev. Ben Davies, Panteg, declared, Aberdare was the literary and musical capital of Wales.

Budding writers and bards were helped by the "Colofn Farddol" of Caledfryn, Dafydd Morgannwg, Brynfab, and others. Here was the training-ground, the academy for J. Ifano Jones to become the Welsh Librarian of Cardiff.

GLEES AND TENDER VERSES

Here Gwilym Gwent and Telynog collaborated with their glees and tender verses. Lew Llwyfor thrilled the crowds with his songs and delightful stories. Welsh harps were in almost all the pubs, and again the famous Cor Mawr of Caradog and his lieutenants Cochyn Bach, Silas Evans, Daniel Griffiths and others had Aberdare as its centre in

1872 and 1873, followed by the Aberdare Choral Union with its two or three oratorios every Christmas and Boxing Day under Rhys Evans, and later his son, W J. Evans.

And when the National Eisteddfod of Aberdare was held in 1885, the first National Eisteddfod to provide a profit for the National Eisteddfod Association, it was lit by electric light, the first to be so lit in Wales, by power from the Gadlys Colliery.

KLONDYKE OF WALES

During that period, it was the Klondyke of Wales, then doubling its population every 10 years, and all the incoming Anglo-Saxons, Scotch and Irish, becoming merged in the predominant Welsh population and becoming more Welsh in language and sentiment almost than the native Welsh people. At the beginning of the last century it was the Iron Works of Hirwaun, Llwydcoed and Abernant, that was the magnet but from about 1840 onwards the collieries drew people from every county in Wales and from the neighbouring counties of England, Somerset, Gloucestershire etc.

But so strong was the religious sentiment of Aberdare, with its admixture of population, that the Lord Mayor of London, who was to present the clock on behalf of the Congregational Union of England and Wales, for the wonderful cordial reception they had had at Aberdare, had to postpone his visit to allow prayer meetings to be held during the first week of 1860.

Eisteddfodau, Choir Practices, Ysgol Gan, Penny readings, Bands of Hope, with the busy printing offices turning out Welsh newspapers and magazines, and the *Cyrdau Mawr*, and the *Gymanfaoedd Canu*, provided all the entertainment and literary and musical instruction that the people of that time wished for, while weekly prayer and society meetings were well attended.

Here the *Gymanfa Ganu* was born in 1859, with Ieuan Gwyllt as its father.

LITERARY CAPITAL

Here the press of Josiah Thomas Jones was turning out the weekly "Gwron." and numerous books and pamphlets followed soon after by Walter Lloyd with the "Gwlad-garwr" and the famous ballads sung in the streets and fairs. The "Gwladgarwr" became the most popular and widely read newspaper in South Wales until John Mills brought out the "Tarian Gweithiwr" in 1875, and Jenkin Howell the "Gweithiwr Cymreig" in 1885 and "Yr

Ymofynydd," "Yr Hauwr," "Seren Gomer," etc. The official accompanist of the National Eisteddfod for many years was Richard Howells (Dic Howells) while Eos Dar thrilled the Gorsedd with his "Canu Penillion" year after year, and famous conductors of the Mid-Rhondda and Treorchy Male Voice parties, who won laurels at the World Fair In Chicago, Tom Stephens and William Thomas, were born and bred in the Cynon Valley.

The "Tarian y Gweithiwr" of Aberdare, at the time the National Eisteddfod of 1885 had a circulation of about 12 to 14 thousand weekly, while the denominational monthlies of the Congregational, Calvinistic Methodists, and Baptist denominations, were sold by the hundreds.

Welsh was spoken by the children of Trecynon and outlying areas in the streets and in the playgrounds, while those of Aberdare and Aberaman were turning to English.

Grocery and other shops were kept open very long hours - up to 9 p.m. on Saturday nights, and horse-carts

delivered goods up to midnight. No Welsh was taught in the schools, although the teachers were nearly all Welsh-speaking, until the Society for Utilising the Welsh Language was formed during the National Eisteddfod in 1885, and was then only introduced as a specific subject to the upper classes of the primary schools - no secondary schools of any kind were then in existence.

HARD TIMES

Aberdare at that time had all its eggs in one basket. Colliery companies were thriving while the miners slogged away on very low wages during long hours. Most of the boys as soon as they reached 12 years of age, and some even at 11, followed their fathers underground, who were allowed extra trams to fill if they had so-called helpers to assist. Colliers injured or killed had to be carried home by their mates on stretchers or biers. By 1889, Aberdare Collieries were raising over 3,000,000 tons of coal per annum from 24 pits, levels and slants, and the thousands of dirty, coal-dusty bodies had to be washed in their tubs in the kitchens.

ENTERED SERVICE

Young girls leaving school entered service as house-maids or were apprenticed to the numerous dressmakers throughout the Valley, or as milliners in the drapers' shops, while the mothers toiled late mending and patching their husbands' and sons' clothes or drying their wet and sweaty garments.

New clothes for the children were only bought for special occasions - especially for the great annual 'turnout' of practically the whole youth of the Valley for the Sunday Schools processions and tea-parties on August Bank Holiday, with the "kiss in the ring" on the local fields to follow.

The era of cheap excursions and holidays at the sea-side had not dawned, while pastors and deacons spent a week or two at the Wells, Llanwrtyd, Bujlth and Llangamarch with a prayer-meeting following every morning visit to the springs.

Great competition existed between all the chapel choirs, then very strong, to regale with catchy, marching choruses, the onlookers along the road or the other choirs lined along the route awaiting their turn to join in.

Singing practices, or ysgol gan were taken very seriously and often the tonic-solfa modulator was in evidence. Rehearsals were regularly held before the great day of the annual Cymanfa, and no choristers would be allowed on the gallery unless they could show their cards for regular attendance at the rehearsals.

The Calvinistic Methodists at Aberdare often had famous musical conductors like John Thomas, Llanwrtyd or Prof. David Jenkins, Mus.Bac., and later Prof. David Evans to conduct, while the Congregationalists had the famous Rhys of Siloa, alternating with Hywel Cynon of Aberaman, year after year...

All theatrical performances were frowned upon by the chapel authorities, who were strongly entrenched in the Valley. When the "Empire Theatre," in a wooden building with iron roofing was erected on the Rock Grounds in 1892 for repertory theatrical companies, chapel members were warned that there would be spies at the entrance gates, and any member seen attending would be cut out of membership - ostracism which all young people were afraid of.

Continued in the next issue of HANES

DIARY EXTRACTS.

(ABERDARE LEADER 14.4.1917)

1837.

25.1: Heard that the wife of William John Rhdderch and two of the grandchildren were bitten by a cat labouring under hydrophobia.

10.7: An infant found in Aberdare Churchyard: buried; nobody knows how long ago.

24.7: Heard three men were killed at the Merthyr Nomination Day for a Member to be sent to Parliament. Candidates, J. B. Bruce and J. J. Guest.

1838.

9.1: John Llewelyn, of Llwydcoed, died in consequence of drinking arsenic in his ale.

1841.

2.4: Saw the phrenologist Marriot - a fool!

1842

2.4: Came down from Hirwaun on the engine.

16.10: Funeral of Jenkin Rhys, Esq., of Llwydcoed, father of blind Rhys.

1845

10.4: T Thomas hanged for shooting David Lewis, carrier, near treacastle.

**DIARY OF REV. JOHN JONES,
MINISTER OF HEN DY CWRDD
TRECYNON, FROM 1833 TO 1863.**