

# CYNON VALLEY HISTORY SOCIETY

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[www.cynonvalleyhistorysociety.org](http://www.cynonvalleyhistorysociety.org)

## HANES



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

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## INTRODUCTION

**I know death hath ten thousand several doors  
For men to take their exits.**

(John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, 1623.)

The Christmas and Spring editions of Hanes (49 and 50), and one or two earlier numbers have portrayed an Aberdare of concerts, pleasure fairs, roller skating rinks and pleasant outings. In case readers believe that the town was some kind of industrial Utopia the writer would like to re-adjust the balance in this rather grim number. In the eighteen forties and fifties the living conditions of Aberdare were unbelievably bad. In 1849 the Merthyr Union, which included Aberdare, registered the highest number of deaths from cholera and diarrhoea of any other Union in the United Kingdom – 1,779 deaths.<sup>1</sup> Conditions in the iron and coal industries were dangerous and men, women and children worked long hours. There were many furnace and boiler explosions. Mining disasters and industrial injuries were almost a daily occurrence; there were periods of unemployment, outbreaks of typhus (1847), small pox (1848), cholera (1849) and infant mortality was appalling. One only has to read the Rammell Report to be aware of the true conditions that prevailed.<sup>2</sup>

For example the Report records the number of deaths in 1849, the year of the cholera outbreak as,

Deaths under the age of 5	171
Deaths over 5 and under 10 years	23
Deaths aged 10 and 20	43
Deaths of those aged over 20	258
Deaths from epidemics, endemic and contagious diseases:	202.

The state of affairs relating to every-day mining and industrial accidents is brought home to us in the following comment written by the Rev. John Griffith, the vicar of Aberdare concerning death and injury in the Aberdare coalfield:

*“...Do they not descend into the earth every day of their lives, leaving wife and children behind, and no man can say whether they shall ever again see them? Have we not seen men killed by the scores and even hundreds at one swoop? Do not the annual returns of Her Majesty’s Inspector of Mines show that men are so killed every day in the year, of whom the public hear nothing? When a great explosion happens, and scores and hundreds are hurried into eternity at once, all England hears and shakes and pities. But the number killed annually as individuals nobody hears of, nobody cares for, nobody pities. And yet this number, so killed one by one, far exceeds the number killed wholesale.”<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Report of the Cholera Epidemic in 1866, p 15

<sup>2</sup> Old Aberdare Vol 1 (CVHS 1976)

<sup>3</sup> Wilton D. Wills, The Rev. John Griffith, and the Revival of the Established Church in Nineteenth-Century Glamorgan. *Morgannwg Vol.XIII*, 1969, p 100.

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# 1849

## ABERDARE AND THE CHOLERA

(A Snapshot)

The Cholera (as it was then described) broke out in Merthyr Tydfil on the 25<sup>th</sup> May 1849 and ceased on 22<sup>nd</sup>.September. During the course of the outbreak 1,780 people there were attacked (to use the contemporary term), and 746 died.

On the 24<sup>th</sup>.June the dreaded disease appeared in Aberdare, and raged until the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September. That particular summer had been abnormally dry and hot with only one inch of rain being recorded in July, and another in August - one half of the usual annual rainfall for that time of year. Its causes included lack of drainage, a deficiency of privy accommodation, no proper water supplies and bad sanitary conditions generally. In Aberdare the death toll was lighter - 104 deaths out of 364 attacked (28.5%)

The symptoms of the disease were violent and intractable - diarrhoea and vomiting, followed by dehydration, liver failure, collapse and early death. Many cases proved fatal within a few hours.

The first outbreak of the disease in Aberdare occurred at Cobblers Row (near the former vicarage in Abernant Road). This was acknowledged at the time to be one of the worse quarters of the town. The houses there always had an accumulation of liquid filth (probably raw sewage and other effluent) before them. *"The Cholera was very bad in Cobblers Row and in the neighbourhood of the low lodging houses. There was not a house there (Cobblers Row) without a case, and in one house three died. There were sixteen fatal cases in Big Row, Abernant and fifteen died in one day in the small village of Hirwaun."* (Rammell)

All we really know about the lodging houses is that there were still five in the middle of the village in 1853. These were *"Overcrowded to excess. In one, a small room contained five beds. As many as three people would occupy a bed- male and female and mostly quite naked. There were no privies in any of these lodging houses. The charge for living in such conditions was 3d a night for a single lodger, or 6d for a bed for a family who then crowd in as many as they can"* (Ibid.)

Following the cholera outbreak a **Sanitary Committee** was promptly set up under the Chairmanship of Henry Austin Bruce. This met at 3.00. p.m. every Monday and Thursday in the porch (vestry) of St.John's Church. Two sub-committees were formed (John Smith, The Revd.John Griffith, vicar and Evan Evans, for the town) its duties included the supervision of the removal of persons from sick-houses to a shed that the Taff Vale Railway Company had put at the disposal of the parish. The other sub-Committee (Mr.Morgan of Abercwmboi, The Rev. Mr. David and Mr.Williams, Ynyscynon [Alaw Goch]) was responsible for similar arrangements in the districts of Aberaman and Abergwawr, where Mr. Roberts of Gadlys Uchaf had provided a refuge in the Old Plough Inn Tavern.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> June the main Committee authorised Police Supt. Wrenn to purchase twelve brushes and handles for the purpose of whitewashing, and to provide lime for necessary purposes (placing in the graves of the dead, disinfecting streets and houses, and lime washing the interiors of rooms.)

A Walter Williams was put in charge of the Gadlys House of Refuge "upon terms of remuneration to be fixed upon."

The outbreak affected all areas of the town. A study of the parish registers (no similar study could be made of non-conformist records) reveals clusters of deaths: 19 in the village. 10 in the Trap, 9 at Cwmbach, 7 at Tregibbon and Llwydcoed, 6 at Big Row, Abernant; 5 at Mill Street (Trecynon) and 5 at Aberaman.

Towards the end of November two cases with all the symptoms of cholera, and both of which proved fatal, took place near Llwydcoed. *"The place is very filthy and is in want of a good cleaning."* (**The Principality, November 23, 1849**)

There was a further outbreak of Cholera at Aberdare in 1866.

# CHOLERA AT MERTHYR-TYDFIL.

## RETURN OF CASES,

**Saturday, September 22, 1849.**

MERTHYR.	ATTACKED.	DEAD.
Total from commencement (May 25th), as per last Report, corrected by Registration Returns up to 10 A. M., Yesterday . . . . .	1779	745
New Cases, up to 10 A. M., To-day . . . . .	1	1
<b>PENYDARRAN.</b>		
Total from commencement (June 5th), up to 10 A. M., Yesterday . . . . .	272	170
New Cases, up to 10 A. M., To-day . . . . .	0	0
<b>DOWLAIS.</b>		
Total from commencement (June 10th), up to 10 A. M., Yesterday . . . . .	1196	499
New Cases, up to 10 A. M., To-day . . . . .	0	1
<b>ABERDARE.</b>		
Total from commencement (June 24th), up to 10 A. M., Yesterday . . . . .	364	104
New Cases, up to 10 A. M., To-day . . . . .	0	0
<b>TOTAL . . . . .</b>	<b>3612</b>	<b>1520</b>

**FRANK JAMES,**

*Clerk to the Guardians.*

I. W. WHITE, PRINTER, MERTHYR.

The Board of Guardians published frequent Bills of Mortality during the epidemic.

Old documents, No. 2

*"The visit of the cholera in 1849 was a reminder to men in the coalfield of their mortality and The Rev John Griffith, like his nonconformist colleagues, regarded it as divinely inspired to fill the chapels and improve the moral and religious tone of the community."*

Wilton D. Wills The Rev John Griffiths and the Revival of the Established Church in Nineteenth -Century Glamorgan. *Morgannwg* Volume XIII, 1969.



Cholera swept through Europe and America in 1849. This cartoon, from a French magazine, depicts death bringing the Cholera in.

## **THE PROGRESS OF THE CHOLERA**

### WALES

Several cases of cholera have taken place at Aberdare, most of which we regret to state, have proved fatal, the unfortunate victims dying with 24 hours after the first attack.

*From the Daily News July 18, 1849.*

### CHOLERA IN WALES.

At Merthyr Tydfil it continues to make fearful havoc; likewise at Dowlais and Aberdare.....Cases at Aberdare 107, deaths 15.

*Bristol Mercury July 21*

The cholera continues severe at Merthyr and Dowlais. At Aberdare the disease appeared to be subsiding, though there were still 20 cases and seven deaths during the week.

**Police Intelligence, Bristol Mercury, August 4.**

It is satisfactory to observe that the epidemic has this week somewhat decreased in severity at Merthyr, Dowlais and Aberdare. Reported 30 cases and 11 deaths at Aberdare.

**Police Intelligence, Bristol Mercury, August 18<sup>th</sup>.**

### Cholera in Wales.

There is now a fair prospect of the epidemic leaving Merthyr Tydfil, Dowlais etc., where it has prevailed for many weeks with such fatal intensity. The returns for the week ending August 30<sup>th</sup> are as under;

..... Aberdare 14 new [cases], 9 deaths.

*Bristol Mercury, 1st September.*

### RETURNS FROM 31 AUGUST to 6 SEPTEMBER.

Aberdare 14 [cases], deaths, 4.

### RETURNS SEPTEMBER 7 - 13

18 new [cases], 6 deaths.

*Bristol Mercury, 8 &  
15 September*

RETURNS.

Aberdare. New Cases 0. Deaths 1.

*Daily News, 20<sup>th</sup> September.*

CHOLERA RETURNS.

Returns continue to be most favourable. Aberdare Attacked 0, Dead 1.

22 September.

CHOLERA IN SOUTH WALES. MERTHYR TYDFIL ETC.

We are glad to learn that the disease is declining in this neighbourhood.

*South Wales Chronicle 25<sup>th</sup> September.*

RETURNS.

Wednesday September 26<sup>th</sup>. Official Returns.

Aberdare, no cases.

*Daily News 28<sup>th</sup> September.*

**THE PIT EXPLOSION AT LLETTY SHENKIN COLLIERY  
CWMBACH ON FRIDAY 17 AUGUST 1849  
(THE SECOND WORST COLLIERY ACCIDENT IN WALES AT THAT  
DATE)\***

The Colliery Explosion in Wales.

Last Saturday se'nnight, 112 colliers descended the Lletty Shenkin Colliery, in the parish of Aberdare, the fireman having preceded them to ascertain the state of the pit. He found that though fire-damp was in some two or three parts, intimation of which he gave colliers by the accustomed signals, yet that the works were sufficiently free to allow the men to proceed with their work. It was not observed by those poor fellows however, nor by those appointed to inspect and "conduct" the colliery operations, that great atmospheric changes had that day taken place, which had an important influence upon the atmosphere in the pits, and about four in the afternoon, just at the time when the men were busily at work below, a cloud of smoke issuing from the mouth of the pit was the only indication that an explosion of fire-damp had taken place. Yet this simple indication - unaccompanied by any report or noise, unattended by the groans and cries which herald death from great accidents - was the sole announcement of the explosion which had just taken place in the bowels of the earth. In a few minutes afterwards, however, the whole neighbourhood was alarmed. The people had observed it, and the screams and cries of those who saw it immediately drew hundreds to the mouth of the pit, when horrible to relate, it was too quickly discovered that no less than 52 had fallen victims to the terrible fire-damp. The effect of this calamitous occurrence upon the neighbourhood is awful in the extreme. There was at first a frightful suspense; as mothers and wives awaited with torturing agony the bringing of the poor fellows who had been sacrificed to the surface. As soon as the first batch of bodies, blackened and scorched, almost beyond recognition, was brought up, the rush forward of the poor women and friends was a bitter spectacle for even a stranger to witness. It was almost a scramble - almost a struggle - as the wretched creatures tore one another aside to lay hold on each black corpse, to see if their worse fears were recognised, the screams of anguish were frightful to hear. Scarce a cottage in the neighbourhood that had not been forsaken by its inmates, all drawn out by fear and sickly hope. And scarce a cottage at night but contained one or more of the bodies of those who had that morning gone to their hazardous labour in the bowels of the earth, with their accustomed health and cheerfulness. The cause of the frightful occurrence may be briefly stated. The "old fire," which had not been beaten out by the earliest who had gone into the levels, had still lingered about; and when the men, with their usual indifference, believing all was right, took off the tops of their davy lamps, and worked by the light of the naked candle, which enabled them to add a little more to their earnings than they could have done by the dimmed light of the gauzed lamp, some of the "old fire" traversed that way, came into contact with the light of the candle, and instant explosion was the result.\*\* More frightful spectacles than some of the bodies presented it would be almost impossible to conceive. I saw one poor fellow whose skull was literally blown into two parts, the upper part, with some portions of his arms and legs, being still in the pit. Others presented the most frightfully mutilated features and blackened, scorched-up bodies. There were children too, of tender age, whose little frames were scorched up and shrivelled frightfully; while the hair was completely burnt off their heads leaving their skulls bare. Indeed so horrible a calamity has never occurred in Wales before, and I pray God I may never see its repetition. A Government Commissioner, who chanced to be in the neighbourhood, is now proceeding with an investigation of the occurrence. He is assisted by two or three expert surveyors of this locality. The whole of the unfortunate creatures who were thus suddenly cut off were decently interred

on Sunday at the expense of Mr. Thomas, the proprietor of the works, in the various burial places of the neighbourhood. Thousands of spectators were gathered together, and there was scarcely a dry eye present - *Times*.

**Glasgow Herald, Monday 20 August 1849.**

The incident happened on Friday 17 August 1849. The dead included 14 boys under 16 years old, of which one was 10 and another 8.

The verdict of the inquest, which was attended by Kenson Blackwell on behalf of the Government, was Accidental Death, with a rider that the old workings should be separately ventilated and never be connected with the colliery air intake. As Llety Siencin was not below the general standard of ventilation of other collieries in the district no other verdict would have seemed just."

**Morris J.H. and Williams L.J. *The South Wales Coal Industry 1841 - 1875*. (Cardiff, UWP, 1958) p.183.**

Note. The colliery remained in production until 1913.

\* In 1825 fifty nine men were killed in an explosion at an anthracite mine in Cwmllynfell in the Swansea Valley.

\*\* Following an explosion at Powell's Duffryn Colliery in 1845 when 28 lives were lost, the jury did not criticize the use of naked lights, even though John Nixon expressed his belief that this would be the first of a series of accidents in the Aberdare valley (MG. 8 August, 1845) His prophetic foreboding was justified following the incident at Llety Siencin.

## **OTHER COLLIERY ACCIDENTS IN THE CYNON VALLEY**

In the chapter on Safety in Morris & Williams, *The South Wales Coal Industry 1841-1875*, the writers state, 'Efforts to reduce the death roll in the South Wales coalfield were also retarded by the prevalence of fiery seams and unsafe roofs. In the Aberdare valley the Upper Four Feet seam was particularly dangerous, being liable to sudden 'blowers' or excessive discharges of gas which normal ventilation could not sufficiently dilute, and here alone, between 1845 and 1852, in four explosions at the collieries of Upper Duffryn, Llety Siencin and Middle Duffryn 159 lives had been lost.' (Source: *Mines, Inspectors' Reports*, Mackworth's Report for 1855, p.136.)

The various explosions and other fatalities are listed below and are taken from a list compiled by the Rev. Ivor Parry.

1852-1853. June-June, 95 colliers were killed in Aberdare. Greatest number of these fatalities caused by explosions.

Year.	Pit	Number killed.
1845	Cwmbach	28 *
1849	Llety siencyn	53
1850	Middle Duffryn	13
1852	Middle Duffryn	68
1852	Cwmbach	2
1853	Blaengwawr	2
1853	Llety siencyn	4
1855	Aberaman	5
1856	Ysguborwen	3
1856	Werfa	2
1856	Abercwmboi	2
1856	Cwmaman	12
1858	Lower Duffryn	19
1858	Aberaman	2
1858	Ysguborwen	3
1860	Cwmdare	1
1860	Cwmpennar	12
1861	Blaengwawr	13
1862	Llety siencyn	4
1863	Mountain Ash	2

1863	Abernantygroes	1
1863	Abernant	1
1864	Abernant	3
1868	Fforchaman	3
1871	Gadlys	4

\* Deaths within 3 weeks of explosion. James Thomas aged 44, David Thomas his son, aged 10, John Edwards aged 5, Wm. Edwards, his son, aged 9

\* \* \* \* \*

**1873.** A pitman named David Thomas working at Navigation Colliery fell a distance of 276 yards (252.4 metres) through the pit, death being of course instantaneous. For the purpose of examining the brattice in the pit, Mr. Thomas descended the shaft alone by means of a sling rope. When he had descended some hundred yards, he tied a chair which he had taken with him, with a cord to the rope, and on taking his seat in the chair the cord broke, and he was precipitated headlong to the bottom. The deceased was the father of a large family. He was a sober and industrious man, and respected both by his employers and fellow workmen.

**From Mountain Ash of Past Days by Ap Pennar. *The Aberdare Leader*, February 11 1922.**

**Narrow Escape** - while exploring the workings of the Cynan (sic) Pennar Colliery, Nr. Duffryn, last week, Mr. Bruce M.P., Mrs. Bruce, their eldest son, and the Countess Teleki (daughter of the late Lord Langdale), who was on a visit to them, had a narrow escape from being killed. Part of the roof fell in not far from the spot they were standing. One of the colliers, a man aged sixty years, was killed on the spot, a second had his leg broken, and a third his arm. As may be supposed, the unfortunate accident caused the visitors much consternation.

LEEDS MERCURY 12 AUGUST 1863.

## **THE RELIGIOUS, MORAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF THE CHOLERA AND OTHER DISASTERS**

1849. Many of the local inhabitants regarded the (cholera) epidemic as Divine Vengeance for public and private sins, and many sought the shelter and consolations of religion. Nearly two hundred people became members of Ebenezer Church, Trecynon during the latter half of this year.

(ACL. IP/PH1/3/2.)

The Rev. Daniel Jones, once a minister at Hirwaun, observed "Drunkeness ceased and gave place to a deep sobriety. The swearing was silenced by the sound of grief, and the most thoughtless wretches flocked into churches, seeking shelter in the day of adversity. But the storm has abated and the shower be passed. They returned in forgetfulness within old bad habits."

Following an explosion at middle Duffryn colliery in 1858 when 20 people lost their lives, the Rev. John Griffith addressing a large congregation of working men at St. Elvan's church based his sermon on the text "The fall of the Tower that fell at Siloam"\*, and his discourse was based on the theme of death and destruction and the overriding need to seek God immediately. [Christopher B. Turner, *Religious Revivalism and Welsh Industrial Society: Aberdare in 1859. Welsh History Journal*, Vol. IV, 1 (1984)]

\*The tower fell killing eighteen people, an event some interpreted as punishment on the guilty. However Jesus explained that death can come upon anyone, regardless of how sinful they are and that the need for all people to repent is the true lesson of such tragedies.

During this same period many prayer meetings were held underground to thank God for the mercies of the week. Men were suddenly reminded that they had been spared while colleagues had been struck down.

*"The worse times for the people have been the best times for the church."* – comment by The Rev. John Griffith, vicar of Aberdare.

**FATAL ACCIDENT** - A melancholy accident occurred on the 5<sup>th</sup> instant, at the Aberdare Iron Works; John Reynolds, a confidential servant of the company, was precipitated into a balance-pit, nearly forty yards deep, and from the state in which he was taken out, it is supposed he was killed before he reached the bottom, both thighs being broken, and being dreadfully mangled. He was a native of Cowbridge, and has left a wife and four children. (From *The Cambrian*.)

BRISTOL MERCURY, TUESDAY, JUNE 16 1829.

**A MAN ROLLED TO DEATH** - A fearful accident occurred at Aberdare in Glamorganshire, last week, resulting in the instantaneous death of a young man, named Robert Thomas, who was employed at the Gadlys Iron Works. The unfortunate deceased was engaged in the forge; and the rollers which are used in the making of bar iron had been changed for a fresh set, and were just started, when the deceased, for the purpose of adjusting a portion of the machinery, stepped too near, and his garments being caught by the revolving machinery, he was dragged between the rollers and whirled round and round through a space of but a few inches in diameter. Before the machinery could be stopped he had been carried round at least twenty times, and his remains were so fearfully mangled as to be almost undistinguishable. He uttered but one exclamation as he was drawn in, and the next instant he was dead. The poor fellow was a promising young man of about 20 years of age, and bore an excellent character.

Jackson's Oxford Journal, 26, January 1856.

#### IN MEMORIAM

It is our sad duty to record the death of Mr. Glan Davies of Clifton Street, Aberdare. Mr. Davies had been a member of the Society for very many years and attended regularly until our recent move to Green Street. Mr. Davies was a well known and respected businessman in the town having worked for Messrs. Runge the Jewellers for very many years. The Society extends its sympathy to Mrs. Davies who is also a member of Cynon Valley History Society.

#### GIFT AID

The Society is trying to raise additional revenue to meet its running costs. YOU could assist by participating in the HMR & C GIFT AID scheme. Under the Gift Aid Scheme the CVHS as a Registered Charity can reclaim 25% of your annual subscription and will also, until 5 April 2011, receive a further 3% back from the government. As an Associate Member you may wish to take part in the scheme. Many of our Full Members already participate and if you would also like to make a GIFT AID DECLARATION the necessary form is enclosed with this Edition of Hanes. Please return it to the Hon. Treasurer. We would be glad to hear from any member who wishes to participate and has not yet signed a Declaration.

#### MEMBERSHIP SUBSCRIPTIONS

**N.B. The 2009-2010 Season is now drawing to a close and the Treasurer would therefore be glad to receive any outstanding subscriptions.**

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[www.cynonvalleyhistorysociety.org](http://www.cynonvalleyhistorysociety.org)

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